

Begin
By Eric Kay

She chopped the wood with more intensity than the typical peasant girl, probably because she was not a typical peasant girl. Her strong arms and back had grown with her brothers' through the lessons of their father.

She paused for a moment to wipe her long dark-brown hair from her brow. She gazed around at the beautiful fields of wild wheat and early autumn wildflowers. The small thatch shack was a far cry from what she was used to, but she was happy to simply be alive on a day like this.

She spit into her hands, rubbed them together, and began to swing the heavy axe again. The sun was hot and she could feel the sweat stream down her back. She welcomed the obstinate breeze but knew better than to count on its presence.

He had just finished gathering wild blueberries on the side of the hill. The sun was high and he enjoyed its heat. The warm smell of pine permeated the air and sounds of birds and insects made him forget, if only for a moment, the gravity of the situation he was in. He dropped the mass of berries into a pile, their deep purple skin staining his sweaty hands. He paused as he came around the corner of the small hut, hearing the choppy of the wood.

"Are you through yet, my lady?" the plain young boy asked with an awkward bow, almost fumbling over his rusty short sword tucked through his wide leather belt. He had been watching her from around the corner and could tell she was not finished but knew no other way to approach her.

"Two things," she began with her beautiful smile. "First, don't call me 'my lady.' It does not fit well here. Secondly, no, I am not quite finished, but if you would help me by picking up the split logs, I could be done much sooner."

"Yes, my la--ma'am," he sputtered as he began to pick up the split hickory and maple. Soon he had a neat pile next to the shack, and she had set the axe inside the doorway.

"Let's go to the river and cool off," she said as she re-tied her long tresses with a thin leather thong.

"I was commanded by my lord to look after you, and I feel that I would be allowing you to walk into danger if I let you go to the river, my lady."

"Two things," she began again. "Try calling me Elvraine, and secondly, I will have nothing to fear at the river because I will have you to protect me," she finished with a spin and began walking toward the river. "Are you coming, Timothy?"

Timothy stumbled to catch up, wondering if he could really call his queen by her first name.

At the river, Elvraine sat in the shade of an ancient birch tree, her back against its white bark and her feet dangling into the cool water. A small black bird sat quietly above as Timothy kept watch. She could feel his eyes on her slender white neck.

"Do you think I am too pale for all of this sun?" she asked.

"No lady Elvraine, I think you are still very beautiful," Timothy stated then began turning crimson himself.

"Flattery, my young friend, will get you everywhere," she smiled, secretly enjoying the attention. She may be his queen and he may have been very innocent, but they weren't really all that far apart in age, only in station.

"I'm sorry, my lady. I did not mean to be so forward," he stammered, again.

"Shall we swim?" she asked in an off-hand manner.

"I don't know how. I, we, are not dressed properly either, my lady."

Elvraine stated, "I have been chopping wood all afternoon. I'm going to rinse off, at least." With that, Elvraine went behind the tree, slid out of her cotton shift, and dove into the slow moving current. She was not prepared for its temperature, and he was not prepared for her boldness.

"By the gods, that is cold!" she gasped.

"My lady," he started. He averted his eyes, but could think of nothing else to say. "It is not deep here. You would not need to swim, only keep your balance. I am here to help you," she offered as if to a child.

"I, ahh, must keep a watch," he said, still crimson. He turned his eyes to the woods on the far bank.

"Suit yourself, it is quite refreshing."

Suddenly, out of the woods, the sound of many horses could be heard. Timothy shouted, "My lady, quickly, you must get out!" He could see large shapes moving toward them among the trees.

Elvraine leapt up the bank as quickly as she could, as Timothy tossed her dress to her with one hand, his rusty sword in his other. "We must be away!" he whispered hoarsely to her as she took his hand. "This way."

Elvraine did not know it, but she could not have picked a better guide. Timothy, having grown up along the river, knew every creek, deer trail, and hollow tree within a day's run. They did not make it that far, however.

A sharp pain exploded through Timothy's left shoulder. He stumbled and fell.

"Oh my goodness!" Elvraine exclaimed, "Timothy, you've been shot!"

Timothy had trouble realizing it at first, but it made sense. His left arm was going numb and his heart beat loudly in his chest. Things seemed to be moving very quickly, too quickly. Timothy looked around, a bit light-headed.

Three horsemen were coming up behind them, one with a small double crossbow, one side spent. The leader, the largest in his heavy chain-mail shirt and long gauntlets, stopped his horse and dismounted, all in one fluid move. Timothy marveled at his beautiful war horse and broad-sword, then...

Timothy woke alone. Night had fallen and the damp cold of the forest was seeping into his bones. With the deep forest smell of loam, heavy in his nostrils, he sat up and his head began to swim. A dull ache throbbed in his shoulder, and Timothy could see the arrow still protruding. He braced himself and pulled the shaft out. He almost passed out as the tip scraped against his bone. He applied a kerchief.

He looked around and could see eerie shadows dancing in the trees. The moon was on the horizon and its glow was Timothy's only light. He touched his shoulder. The blood was still oozing but slower now. It seemed to have only penetrated the outer muscle, not as deep as he had thought.

Timothy stood and began looking for wood. He did not know what time it was, but he knew he was cold and had lost a great deal of blood. He needed a fire.

In a few minutes, through agonizing pain, Timothy had a small fire burning. "I need a plan," he said quietly. "I know I'm not far from home but the forest is too twisting at night. I don't want to go there anyway. I must find my queen," he said to the flames. He had an idea as to where she had been taken but would have to wait until morning to properly track them. With that, he tossed a thick limb into the fire. As the embers erupted, Timothy fell into a fitful sleep.

He woke several times during the night to feed the fire, but finally, just before dawn, he kicked out the glowing embers, wrapped his arm in a make-shift sling, and headed off in the direction of the horse's hoof-marks.

Soon he could see well enough to properly track the horsemen. He knew he was gambling by starting off so soon, but it had paid off. His arm ached but thoughts of his queen, kidnapped, drove him on.

As he walked, he collected certain berries, roots, and leaves. After several hours of walking, Timothy stopped by a small creek and made a poultice for his shoulder. It stung at first but Timothy could feel it going to work.

Shortly before dusk, Timothy came to the end of the forest. He had rarely been this far before but could see where the men had taken Elvraine. A tremendous castle rose from the middle of a shallow bowl-like valley. Several turrets rose from deep walls to over look the valley for what must have been miles.

Timothy felt sick. How could he, a relatively small, wounded, country boy, rescue his queen from such a fortress?

Elvraine screamed. Millikan's men had found her, and now she was paying for having escaped. It would not happen again.

"Thought you could hide out, did you?" Millikan said to Elvraine, as his men shackled her to the tower wall. "Clever disguise though, poor country girl! But, no one hides in my realm."

"It is not your realm and never will be as long as my husband is on the throne," she growled through clenched teeth. "He trusted you, the people trusted you, and now you enslave their queen. What's next?"

Millikan, smiling like a cat with a bird, glanced at one of his men. The man turned and left the round tower room through the narrow door. He and another man returned in a moment carrying a very large bundle between them. They threw it to the floor and it rolled open.

The head and body of the king lay at Elvraine's feet.

"He thought he could save you, but you, my dear queen, are next. My instruments!" Millikan shouted. The same guard handed Millikan a leather satchel. "Leave us," he finished in a

cold voice, never taking his eye from the wide-eyed queen. When they left, he said, as if to the walls, "Abscarc, my pet, come to me."

Timothy could see almost the entire castle from his vantage point in the forest. He had moved around toward the front of the fortress to watch for traffic going in and coming out. Nothing had presented itself. The castle itself was built ingeniously on a natural crag that was dead center in the valley. Whatever giant had scraped the valley floor flat had left a perfect sized foundation on which to build a castle.

After another night of sleeping on the ground, Timothy realized that saving the queen could take awhile. He set about making a lean-to and lining it with pine boughs.

For three more days Timothy doctored his shoulder, set snares when he could, and kept watch over the castle. He hoped that he was not too late to save his queen. Too late for what, he did not know.

Finally, on the fourth day, a small caravan came into view. Timothy kicked out his fire and ran through the woods. He was in time. He simply followed along behind the wagons and horsemen as if he belonged there. No one seemed to notice.

It was almost noon when the group reached the gates, flung fully open. They crossed the drawbridge and entered the yard inside the walls. Timothy immediately found another group to follow and did so, right into the main tower.

The castle's keep was, by far, the largest building Timothy had ever been in. He had no idea where to start. He was afraid of being caught or recognized, so he decided to get away from the majority of people. He headed toward the dungeons.

Timothy found a little used staircase and descended. The next floor of the keep seemed deserted, so he decided to begin his search there. He slipped down a quiet, poorly lit passage.

Timothy had gained no more than twenty paces when he heard footsteps coming toward him. He ducked into the shadow of a small cove. He pressed into the corner with a door on either side of him. Deep voices continued to get louder for a moment then began to fall away. Timothy realized that the men must have gone down another passage.

Just as he moved toward the hallway, one of the doors began to open. Timothy's shoulder hit the stone wall as he quickly flung himself back into the dark cove, stars swimming in his vision.

A petite silhouette peeked around the opened door. It looked directly at Timothy. Timothy stared in disbelief. A small girl smiled shyly and waved him into the room she was in. Timothy couldn't help but follow.

The room was lit by several large candle-trees and decorated with thick wool tapestries with delicately sewn visions of nature. Trees, brooks, birds and other animals of all types peered at him from every wall. The girl bade Timothy to a group of large pillows in the far corner as she closed and locked the door. His intrigue and curiosity out-weighed his fear and suspicion.

She sat next to him and offered him a glass of deep burgundy wine. He declined.

"Who are you?" he asked. She simply smiled. "How did you know I was in the cove outside your door?"

With that she pointed at her ear and then to the door. She had heard him. "Are you mute?" he asked, feeling a little embarrassed at being so blunt. She looked down but nodded. Now he understood her silence. He lifted her chin and looked deeply into her endlessly black eyes. He

found a wisdom there far beyond her apparent years that chilled him. "Who are you?" he asked again but more to himself than her.

She was small and demure. Her blue-black hair was a sharp contrast to her clear white skin. She was not pale, just light. She smiled then, growing embarrassed at his scrutiny. She pointed at him and looked puzzled.

"Who am I?" he asked for her. She nodded. "I am Timothy," was all he could think to say. She smiled again and his heart fluttered for a beat or two. She pointed at the door, looking puzzled again.

"Why was I outside?" She nodded. "I'm looking for someone." He did not know this girl but for some reason he felt he could confide in her. "I am looking for the queen. She has been kidnapped, and I believe she is somewhere in this keep." She looked surprised.

"Will you help me find her?" he asked, on a whim. She nodded. "Do you have any idea where she might be?" She nodded again, very seriously. Timothy rubbed his shoulder. It was bleeding again.

The girl jumped up and grabbed a small bottle from a cluttered wooden shelf. She gently unbuttoned Timothy's shirt and examined the wound. It was infected, and he blanched at her touch. She very carefully applied the thick liquid to the oozing wound. Timothy began to grow sleepy.

He woke sometime later, covered, still on the cushion. He opened his eyes but remained still, watching the girl busily working at a small table by the cluttered shelf. He realized then that she was not a girl but a woman. She was developed and proportioned as a woman, only in

miniature. Her long raven tresses fell to her waist like wings, and her skin lit the corner of the room like sun through a cloud. To Timothy she appeared angelic. Still, he could not take his eyes from her. She felt his eyes then and turned. Her smile ignited his heart.

She moved to him and examined his shoulder. It was healed. Only a small pink scar existed where the wound had been. She truly was an angel, of mercy. He gazed at her in disbelief. He longed to know who this woman was.

He had never met a woman like her, not even the queen. He loved his queen like no other could, no other subject. But this woman, he could see himself waking every morning to gaze upon her silky countenance.

Suddenly a thought struck him--the queen.

He sat up quickly and said, "I still need to find the queen," She helped him into a clean shirt, not noticing in his excitement. "Will you, can you, help me?"

She regarded him with her night black eyes for a moment and Timothy felt as if his heart would break. Did she care about him? Was she jealous of the queen for having his heart already? He didn't have the nerve to ask.

She nodded as she looked away and rose to don her thick slippers. He climbed to his feet and his head began to swim; she was at his side. He did not know if he had risen too fast or if it was the drug she had given him, but he did not mind her proximity at all.

They, very quietly, left the room and headed for the stairs. The keep was a tomb. Not only was the hectic din now silent but all was also dark. How long had he been asleep?

She led him up the stairs, through the central hall, and through a small door on the far side of the keep. The door led to an ever-ascending spiral stair. After several minutes of

relentless climbing, Timothy felt the cool night draft and realized that they were in the keep tower itself.

After what seemed like half the night, they finally reached another small door. She opened it for him and he entered the darkness. The meager light from the stair was then cut off as the door closed quietly behind him. A sickening odor met his nostrils.

"Is there a torch or brazier in here somewhere?" he asked the darkness. He chuckled at his shortsightedness. "Sorry, I forgot. Please light something if you can." He finished a little nervously.

Timothy felt around in the darkness for the door and found it, locked. The girl, however, was not there. He pounded on the door until his hands ached. Where was she? What was she doing? He sat against the door and peered into the darkness. He could make out a small sliver in the wall where he could see starlight. The cool night breeze stirred the musty, almost rotting, stillness of the room. Timothy began to grow afraid. He was not afraid of the darkness but what might be living there.

He huddled against the door and tried to think clearly, more pleasantly. When he found her, how would he rescue his queen? What would the reward be? Would the king return personally from the war to thank him?

The bright morning sun blinded him as he opened his sand filled eyes. He rubbed them and squinted at the nightmare scene. He could not believe what he saw.

His queen, barely recognizable, swung from chains attached to the wall and ceiling of the round tower room. A deep gash exposed her breast bone and vital organs. She no longer bled. A brown trail of dried blood ran into a small drain in the center of the room. Timothy vomited.

It was almost an hour before he could look again on the atrocity before him. He noticed her wrists and legs were gouged deeply from the long struggle before she died. Timothy wept as he thought about his queen, who he had sworn to protect, fighting against some butcher who slaughtered her like some spirited swine. He spoke a vow of vengeance under his breath

Timothy also noticed a small chest and several barrels on the opposite end of the room. The chest contained several pairs of shackles, a small box with spikes inside, two wool blankets and a spiked hammer. The barrels all contained water. Timothy was surprised that this room was used for not only torture but also, ironically, for storing rain water.

Wiping the tears from his eyes, Timothy rolled one of the barrels under his queen. Then, biting his lip, he climbed up and removed her from the cuffs around her arms and legs. He gently wrapped her in one of the blankets and placed her body in the now empty chest. He washed her blood from the floor.

He wanted to vomit again but steeled himself against it.

Timothy climbed to the window and tried the thick iron bars. He then beat on the door and screamed until his hands ached. He screamed out the window, he cried furiously out of frustration, and finally passed out.

He woke to a grating sound at the door. He resumed his frenzy upon the wooden barrier, to no avail. He stepped back and listened to the sound. Scrap, thump, scrap, thump, repeated over and over. What was it? Timothy thought he would go mad!

He sat against the far wall and continued listening. Gradually, the noise grew higher and higher up the door but continued its slow but relentless pace. Again, Timothy screamed and beat on the door.

Suddenly, he had an idea. He grabbed the spiked hammer from the wooden chest and beat on the door. It made small divots but the door was too stout for the hammer. The lock, however, looked more fragile. Timothy pounded on the iron mechanism for over an hour. When he finally took a break, from near exhaustion, the grating and thumping had stopped.

His excitement helped him continue. Within another hour, the lock fell away and Timothy opened the door with a sigh of incredible relief.

An immovable wall of brick glared back at him. He wept.

Timothy had no idea how long he had been confined. The hair on his face and the amount of work he had done attested to the fact that it had been long. One of the barrels of water was gone and burned to ash, as was the door. He had used the torture box to capture birds, pigeons mostly, but the meat was scanty and ill-nourishing.

He had also chipped away at the damp stone around the small window. One bar was out but the hole was still too tight. He had devised a way of linking the chains that had held the queen aloft. He would use these to climb down the wall once he could get through the window. He continued chipping.

The small hammer did little damage initially, but Timothy's hands and arms had toughened with the effort and persistence. He felt like giving up day after day. Removing the first

bar had been encouraging. Being able to link the chains had helped as well. Small victories seemed to be the only way Timothy kept his sanity.

The thought of finding the king and seeking revenge on the people who had betrayed the queen, also pushed him on. The thought of the girl also occupied his thoughts more often than he liked. Why had she healed him only to betray him? Who was she? Was she real? Timothy found that pondering these questions helped pass the time a bit faster, but not much.

The birds seemed to be on to him. He hadn't eaten for days. Only one bird taunted him, always out of reach. He vowed to kill it or escape, whichever came first. It would be the latter.

Late one night, Timothy finally pulled the second bar free. As he did, the small black bird flew in the window. Timothy knew it was in the room with him but he could not see it in the darkness. He readied the chains and shackles for the sun's first light and curled up against the doorway to rest.

She came to him then, the girl, dressed in a plain satin cloak. She never took her bottomless eyes from his as she touched him, kissed him. As they began to make love he looked above him to see a single candle burning low in its holder...

He woke to see the first violet whispers of dawn. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes to clear the dream, then hoisted the chest to the window, slid the shackle through its lock, and lowered it to the ground outside. He crept through the window then, and escaped.

The freshly turned dirt shone outside the small thatch shack. The sky was threatening rain, and Timothy knew the roof leaked, but he did not care. He sat outside the shack watching

the sunset, hoping for the rain. It came, warm and pleasant and Timothy bathed in its purity. He scrubbed his body with thick, harsh soap and shaved the hair from his face and head with a sharp knife.

He checked a rabbit he'd trapped in the woods. After placing more wood on the fire, he turned the spit and returned to the gentle rain. He thought of the queen, splitting the wood so long ago. He now burned that wood and looked at her grave in the growing moonlight.

With his stomach full, his body clean, and a warm fire banked for the night, Timothy retired to a clean, dry bed and slept.

The next day, Timothy set off to find his king. He wasn't sure where to begin, but he did know he wanted to stay as far away from the keep as possible. The closest town was only ten miles, so he decided to start his search there. If the king wasn't there, maybe Timothy could at least find news.

He set off in the early morning, packing what little of value he had in a small backpack. He hadn't bothered fixing the hut. He knew he would not return.

Walking across the deep fields, Timothy reflected back over the time he had lost. He considered it lost because it had served no purpose. He could never regain that time, but more importantly, it had taken something from him. His innocence, maybe, or a part of his life that was now forever gone.

He felt angry, alone, and confused. He was looking for the king to find answers, in part. He also knew he needed to do something. Too much had happened since the queen was taken. Timothy needed a plan, a goal to work from for now.

Before the queen, his beautiful Elvraine, was left in his charge, he had been a simple boy, content to fish the river and raise a garden. He had learned the way of the woods and its animals from his mother, before her death. His father he had never known, and his mother had never spoken of him. It may have been a simple life, but Timothy had felt content.

All was different now. The girl, his imprisonment, the horrible death of the queen, all of it had forced Timothy to grow, to move on, or give up. He knew he couldn't give up, so he endured the pain.

He felt lonely now. He had always been alone, since his mother's death. As a young boy, he had made a life for himself, gradually, moving from village to village, learning to survive.

And he had.

The king's troops had been moving through and had stopped close by for the night. Timothy remembered all of the shining armor and great swords, the tall prancing horses, but above all he remembered his first glimpse of the queen. She overshadowed it all.

The man at the head of the column seemed like a strong man, even for a king, but he asked Timothy if he could entrust the queen to him until he returned. All but the queen had left early the next morning.

The queen had said little except that they were being followed. If she were to live, it would have to be as something other than a queen for a while. Timothy didn't mind.

As the sun began to sink, Timothy turned his thoughts toward dinner and camp.

Late morning of the following day, Timothy arrived in the town of Led. It was a good sized town, certainly the largest in the area. Right away, Timothy noticed that the town was completely deserted.

He passed through the open gates of the town and into the deserted streets. He walked along the line of shops and inns, taverns and dwellings, but saw nothing living, not even a cat or a dog. He found the provisions he needed: food, clothing, a well made knife, and even a sword. He could find no horses, or any other living thing, however.

Timothy went to the town's church. The ancient structure held many books, none of which were any interest to Timothy. He could not read. He could pray, however, and he did so.

No sooner did he ask for help, when it was provided. An amazingly fat man in a simple home-spun robe approached the altar. He did not see Timothy kneeling in the second pew.

"Father, where are all the people?" Timothy asked.

The priest dropped the small tray and a yelp escaped his thick lips. "I am a man of peace!"

"I doubt that not, father. I come in peace, as well. I have traveled far, in search of our king, but I am confused as to where the inhabitants of this once bustling town have gone."

"My young friend, why do you search for that evil man, once called King?"

"It is a long story," Timothy replied in confusion.

"Then forgive my manners, come below with me, and let me hear your story after you have eaten and washed."

Timothy followed the obese priest down a narrow staircase. After he had eaten some cheese and fruit, Timothy told the man his story of being entrusted with the queen. He did not speak of the keep.

The priest sat for a long moment. Timothy wondered if he had nodded off. He raised his head and inquired, "Why would the king of all the land entrust a poor whelp like yourself with the beautiful Elvraine?"

"I do not rightly know. I assumed that it was for her safety."

The fat jiggled as if it was filled with water, as the priest chuckled. "Safety! What could you possibly provide that which the King's army could not?"

Timothy felt his face flush. He did not know the answer, nor did he care. He was on a quest, and he planned on continuing. "I did not come to be insulted," he said through clenched teeth. "Simply tell me where I can find the king, and I will be off."

"You are a young fool!" the priest exclaimed. "Your precious King has taken all of the people. The only reason you and I have been spared is because they have simply not found us yet! He is a blood-thirsty viper of a man who enslaves the people he should be governing! He uses them and their off-spring for his vile rights. It gives him more evil power than any mortal should have. You have been warned!"

Timothy sat dumbfounded.

"I must get back to my work. If we are to survive all your king has done, someone must pray to the gods for mercy." With that, he stood and rolled from the small room. Timothy sat thinking for a long time.

He knew the priest was right. There was no logical reason for the king entrusting him with the queen's safety. If she sought anonymity, why with him? If it was for protection, why him? He now had twice as many questions than when he had arrived, and fewer answers.

Where should he go now? What was this "evil power" the priest had spoken of? The king he had seen had not looked evil. Would they come looking for him? Were the people taken and used for some evil purpose?

He didn't like the priest, but he seemed to be the only one who could give him the answers he needed, not to mention the only one around. He rose in search of the fat man.

The priest was rising from prayer as Timothy approached. "Sir, what is this "evil power" you claim the king possesses? I do not know why the queen was left in my custody. What should I do now? I thought the king would answer my questions," Timothy sputtered, almost in tears.

"My son, please sit," the priest began, a bit more patiently. After they were seated on the pew, the priest said, "My son, I cannot help you. I'm sorry I seemed rough on you below, but I did it so that you would see the folly of your plan.

"The king is an evil man. If you still do not believe that, look around you. It was his personal guard who took the town. We are very lucky to be where we are. As far as his powers, I cannot help you there either. Because of my sacred vows, I cannot speak of the ways he worships his gods or whatever it is he worships. I believe it to be evil power, and it is strong."

The priest sat back for a minute then looked long into Timothy's stubborn eyes, as if evaluating the strength there.

At last he spoke, "It goes against all that I stand for, but I will tell you this. If you are going to help those who are taken and answer your questions, you must seek someone else." At this, the priest hesitated, and Timothy was afraid that was all he was going to say.

With a weak smile, the priest finished, "To the south, there is a deep wood. A path follows a stream in that forest, and it is said that there is a seerer who lives far in amongst the trees. If any have survived, it will be him. If any can help you in your quest for answers, it will be him. Go with my blessing, my son," and with that he touched Timothy's forehead, rose, and descended the stairs again.

Timothy left then, heading south. He wasn't sure how he felt about this seerer business, but he wasn't sure what else to do. So, he followed the stream until he found a well-worn path. By evening, Timothy was just within the forest. He made camp amongst the trees and ate.

He was lonely. The days with his queen had awakened in him feelings that he had never had. Just being around another person felt so good. He thought about the girl from the keep and about his long stay in the tower again. With those thoughts shuffling around in his mind, he slipped into the darkness of sleep.

A small black bird sat silently above his camp.

In the morning, over breakfast, Timothy's thoughts began to return to the past. Suddenly, he became very frustrated. He did not know what to do next. His past seemed a solitary fog that only held questions.

His future held the answers, so Timothy made a vow to stop looking to the past and move quickly toward the future. With a strong feeling of resolve, he extinguished his fire, broke camp, and headed south along the trail.

The path ran due south for several miles. Timothy wasn't sure what to look for but he hoped he'd know when he saw it. The path wound through deeper and deeper forest, often snaking around hillocks and through small valleys.

By midday, Timothy was exhausted. He stopped by the small stream and washed the sweat from his brow. He also refilled his water skin. The sun was high but the path stayed mostly in the shade. The path itself was now little more than a game trail, and he was so deep in the forest now that the air was thick and sticky from the humid summer afternoon.

A mile or so after stopping at the stream Timothy entered a large clearing. He could see the cloudless cerulean sky above. Further south Timothy spotted a faint wisp of dark smoke like that from a church or oracle. He took a small piece of black bread from his pack and took off to find the seer.

Within an hour Timothy saw a very curious sight. A beautiful home stood among the trees. The house, Timothy felt, would look perfectly at home in any city of size, but here in the middle of the woods it looked quite queer.

Timothy approached the house slowly, taking in its odd splendor. It was made almost completely of a quarried stone, smooth and gray. The roof was shingled with cedar bark and stood at least two stories above him. The windows held paned glass.

The front door appeared to be a single, stout piece of oak. Its polished shine gleamed in the late afternoon sun. A large brass knocker stared at Timothy with demonic eyes of onyx.

Timothy hesitated a moment, then used the knocker. A muffled thud answered the knock as if the door was incredibly thick.

Timothy waited. He could hear nothing from inside. He was just about to knock again, when the door opened. An older man or indeterminable age peered through the darkness from inside. "Yes?"

"Hello, sir, my name is Timothy. I was sent to you by a priest from Led."

"From the look of you, you need all the help you can get, son," the old man said with a warm smile.

The humor helped Timothy relax. The old man invited Timothy into his house. "My name is Simkin. I assume your priestly friend told you I was a man of some power?" the man stated as a fact without a trace of boast.

"Yes. He said that you were a seer and that although he didn't approve of such things, he still sent me to you."

"Is this priest a rather rotund gentleman of middle years?"

"Yes, he is," Timothy said, amazed by the seer's knowledge.

"That would be Brother Jowlse. Don't think that I'm reading your mind boy. Brother Jowlse used to frequent this establishment many years ago." Timothy could only look surprised. The old man laughed. "It's true. But that is the past; let us look to the future. Your future. You came to me for a reason, and if the good Brother sent you it must be for a good reason. Let's see what we can do."

Simkin led the way up a wide staircase made of cherry wood. The banister was one long piece of black marble. Timothy thought to himself that the palace was not even this richly decorated.

At the top of the stairs the two men came to a long hallway with many doors. All of which were closed. Simkin led Timothy to the end of the hall and opened the last door. Inside was a medium sized room completely walled in book-shelves. A large messy desk occupied one entire corner and was covered with scrolls, small paper-weights and other objects that Timothy could not identify.

Simkin pointed to a chair in front of the desk and then sat himself behind, rearranging several objects. He then took out a piece of paper and began to jot notes upon it in a flowing script that entranced Timothy.

"You cannot read, son?" Timothy liked the way Simkin called him son and did not hesitate to tell him of his inability to read or write.

"No sir, I never learned."

"Well, that's okay I guess. Just depends on what you want to do with your life." Simkin set his pen on its blotter and looked at the younger man. "Tell me your story."

Again, without hesitation, Timothy told Simkin about his life, why he never learned to read, about the queen and his stay in the tower and about his ill fated trip to Led. Occasionally, Simkin would stop him and probe deeper with a question or two and then scribble some notes.

"...and that's when I ended up coming to see you."

"Did you see anyone or anything at all out of the ordinary on your journey here?"

Timothy thought for a moment, smiled, then said, "Yes, one very strange thing."

"What was that," Simkin said, looking up from his paper.

"This house! How in the world did it get here?" Timothy asked.

The old man chuckled softly, took out a pipe and tobacco pouch and explained, "I am a bit older than I look, you see. When I was a much younger man, I built this house with my own hands. I have also crafted just about all of the objects in it as well, from the rugs and tapestries to the floors and stairs, even this desk. It took me a very long time, but I am quite proud of it."

"Well you should be, sir. It is easily the nicest dwelling I have ever had the honor of being in," Timothy said sincerely.

"Thank you. We still have a couple of problems, however. You have many questions with no answers, and I am hungry and do not have any food. Are you as hungry as I?"

Timothy nodded, not having realized until then how long it had been since he had eaten, and that had only been a small piece of black bread.

"Let us sup first, and find answers after," Simkin said, while lighting his pipe. He then stood and left the room, Timothy trailing behind in a fragrant haze of smoke.

They went to the kitchen and Simkin made them sandwiches of thinly sliced venison and mild cheese. He also heated a pot of stew and dished it into deep bowls for them both.

Once they were almost finished with their meal, Simkin said, "I must tell you that I am confident that we are about to find the answers that you seek. They may make little to no sense now, but they will come from the voices of the future. Those voices do not want us to know their language. I will try my best to translate for you, but I cannot promise anything.

"You are more than welcome to stay here as long as you like because I enjoy your company, but I will understand if you choose to look elsewhere. It is your future and only you can live it or see it the way you will."

"I am very frustrated right now because I do not know what to do next. I feel the need to find my answers, but if you can only steer me toward those answers I will be happy."

Simkin placed the now empty bowls and plates into a basin and said, "then let us consult the boxes."

Simkin and Timothy climbed the stairs again but went into the next to last room. Simkin lit a fragrant beeswax candle upon their entrance and then lit several lamps once inside. He closed the door behind Timothy and told him to stand in the corner. Timothy looked around the room and saw what appeared to be hundreds of small boxes on several counters and shelves. Some of the boxes were enameled with deep speckled colors, others were made of exotic wood and gilded with gold and silver.

"You will pick three boxes. Take them to the counter after you have chosen, but do not open them, whatever you do. Each box contains one of those voices I spoke of earlier and if you do not know what it is saying it could drive you mad. Once you have picked a box, place it here and do not put it back. My suggestion to you is look at all of the boxes, pick your three, then place them on the counter. Take your time and trust your instinct. I will be in my study. You can find me there," with that Simkin turned and left the room.

Timothy started at the nearest end of the lowest counter and worked his way across. All of the boxes were beautiful, ornate, and interesting to look at. Timothy realized why Simkin had left; he knew this would take Timothy quite awhile.

By the end of the first shelf Timothy realized that he liked the wooden boxes the best. Their beauty seemed more natural to Timothy, and he preferred that to the shiny, artificial beauty of the enameled and metal boxes.

The first box that he thought about picking was of birch wood. Its pale white wood reminded him of the tree he sat against while guarding his queen and the skin of the woman from the keep. How a single wood could conjure that many memories had to mean something. Timothy placed a small piece of copper in front of the box to mark it.

The next box that caught his eye was in the shape of a dragon. Timothy had never really seen a dragon and doubted that they even existed, but they fascinated him nonetheless. Timothy did not recognize the wood that the box was carved from but its grain held the appearance of tiny scales. Two blood-red rubies stared at him and seemed to follow him as he approached and retreated. Timothy placed another marker by the dragon.

Timothy continued searching the shelves and was almost finished when he found the last one. He knew it would be a box he should pick, but he wasn't entirely sure why. It was made solely from a piece of stone. The stone, like the dragon's eyes, responded to his proximity. The closer he came to it, the more beautifully it glowed. It gave off a light like a full moon on fresh snow. Timothy placed a coin by it but knew as he did that he was finished looking. To be sure however, he finished the last shelf.

A strong rain was beating on the near dark windows when Timothy entered Simkin's study. "I have finished, sir. The choice was very difficult."

"I assumed as much. You have been searching for many hours," Simkin replied.

"How can that be? I was only alone a short while."

"I have finished several troublesome projects in your "short while." The effect the Room of Boxes has on the individual can be very interesting. Shall we see which boxes you have decided upon?"

"Yes, please," Timothy said with tired enthusiasm. It had been a long day, but the excitement of Simkin and his strange house still made his heart beat quicker.

Simkin opened the door to the Room of Boxes and pointed to the wax candle. "See how low it burns, my friend?"

Simkin was right. The long candle was now only a short stub. He turned the wicks up in several lamps and went to the counter. He examined each box carefully without touching any of them.

"Interesting choices," he mumbled quietly.

"Will you get on with it!" Timothy almost shouted with excitement.

"Oh, sorry. Certainly, certainly. I was just thinking about these boxes in the past, also about your story from earlier." With that he picked up all three boxes and led Timothy across the hall to a new room. "We will be more comfortable in here."

The new room was small but contained few furnishings. Two large pillowed chairs predominated the floor. The light from the rising moon slipped through running clouds and the wind blew the trees.

"Have a seat," Simkin said. "I will put a protective spell around you so it will be very important that you do not get up once seated. It may get a bit tempestuous in here so just sit tight."

Timothy sat in the chair Simkin had indicated and the old man faced him. Simkin closed his eyes and began to speak under his breath. A short time later he looked up at Timothy and said, "Okay, remember, don't move from the chair no matter what you see. Let's begin."

He set two of the boxes on a small table at his elbow and examined the one remaining. It was the birch box. Timothy thought again of the color.

Simkin opened it. Without warning, a scream tore from the box. Timothy gripped the arms of his chair as tightly as he could as a wind came tearing at him from the box. It was a wind that belonged on the sea not from the small box.

Through the sound of the wind Timothy began to hear an eerie wail, the wail of a spirit. He could not make out any words, but Simkin's expressions told him that at least one of them understood. The wail continued for several more minutes and then Simkin simply replaced the box lid.

"Interesting," was all that he said as he set the birch box down and picked up the box with the dragon on it. The eyes stared at them both as Simkin removed the lid. A warm peace quickly overcame Timothy. Relaxing his grip, he slid down further in his chair and without warning, fell asleep.

He had no idea how long he had slept, but the dawning sun woke him, and he was covered with a thick wool blanket. He rose and left the room. He could smell pipe smoke down the hall, and he found Simkin working at his desk.

"A fine morning, my young friend. Sorry you were so bored with last night's proceedings," Simkin said with a good natured smile. "Have a seat. I brought some rolls and tea up; help yourself." He motioned to Timothy to help himself.

"Thank you, sir. I am a bit embarrassed and quite sorry about falling asleep so quickly. I don't know what came over me."

"I do. The first voice may have wanted to awaken you, but the second voice had other plans. I myself became drowsy before I realized what was happening. I had my hands full with it and should apologize to you for not waking you. You did, however, look tired so I simply let you sleep."

Changing the subject after realizing what had happened the night before, Timothy asked, "So what did the voices tell you?"

"Well, like I told you last night, this may not make much sense. Then again, it may make more sense to you than it did to me." Simkin sat back in his chair for a moment, re-lit his pipe, and collected his thoughts. "The first box did not give its message up willingly, as you could probably have guessed. It simply said that you were heading into a great deal of danger, and very possibly your death, if you continue this quest.

"The second box said a great deal but little of it made any real sense. The voice seemed to like you. It was not hostile, unless you call the sleep spell hostile. It spoke willingly but said only this, 'Beware of the angel, the bird, the cat, and the demon. Their aid has and will cause you pain.' That's basically it. I've been doing a little research for you since I know a little about demons, but I'll get to that here in a moment.

"The last box, and I'll think you'll like this, said that you are the center of a great change. Can you read a map?"

"Kind of. I have seen them before if that is what you mean. Why?"

Simkin produced a large scroll which he unrolled on the desk. "You are here. This is the boundary of the forest you entered along the path, and this is Led. Now, knowing how long you traveled from your home to Led and then Led to here, where is your home located on this map?"

It took a long time for Timothy to reason it out. He had traveled for ??????? days just to get to Led but did not know where he had begun. So he measured from Led to Simkin's house and backtracked. He could also see the river so he followed its bends as best he could also and narrowed down the location. "Here, I think."

"Interesting. If what I feel is true, your home is directly in the center of these two structures. This one is the keep you "stayed" in, and this is the castle of Millikan, the king's wizard." Simkin slipped into thought for a moment and then said, "that makes me curious. Let's check something."

With that he left the room and bade Timothy to follow. Simkin led Timothy into yet another new room. This room was obviously the library. Where Simkin's study was filled with volumes of his own writing, this room was completely filled with scrolls, books and stacks of papers by other hands.

Simkin took down two small volumes and sat by the window. The morning light was seeping into the room through the closed window and offered perfect light for reading. Timothy found himself staring at the pages longing to be able to read.

"It is handy, but it would take you many years to learn this language."

Timothy looked askance. "How did you know?"

"It is pretty obvious from your look. I would be very happy to teach you someday if you would like."

Without hesitation, Timothy replied, "Yes, please. Would you? I never realized how valuable a skill it was until now. I'd even like to write down my thoughts from the past to help me remember."

Simkin, seeing the young man's enthusiasm said encouragingly, "and your adventures in the wild and in the castle would be a delight to read. When you are finished with this quest, return and I will make good my offer."

Simkin could not help but feel the irony in his words but tried to disguise them for his friend's sake. "If you return," was all he could think.

"For now, I will read to you. These books are from a wizard of great renown in his own time. Most of what he knew has been lost or only remains here in this room, safe. He was very powerful and could do many things. His main magical passion was the summoning of demons. His work may shed some light on what the voices have told us. Also, I believe that Millikan may dabble a bit in demonology. It is a dangerous sport but can yield many valuable things."

"What kind of things?" Timothy asked.

"Demons are capable of almost anything in our world because they do not come from here. They are brought here by people who know the proper magic. They can bring riches, people, information, rare objects, almost anything a person could desire."

"Is this demon summoning difficult? Why don't we hear of more people doing it?"

"Well, several reasons. One, the church frowns upon it and considers it a capital offence. The other thing is, most of the people who dabble in it are devoured by the demons they release. Demons, you see, require blood, human blood. The purer the better. If they are not given this

blood, they will simply take it. If they cannot get it here for some reason, they return to where they came from and cannot be summoned by the same person again."

"So if a person could supply enough blood, they would be as powerful as the demon they have released."

"Exactly. More importantly to you, however, is this," he said as he pointed to a passage. "It says here that demons can take many forms and are bound in form by the magical words of the summoner. It is usually easiest to hold a demon in forms that run in a certain order or pattern, such as demons of related colors or with certain characteristics. Different forms that run consecutively in the alphabet, or that run numerically, are often easier to conjure as well.

"A-B-C-D, are the first four letters of the alphabet. My guess is that you must beware of a demon with angel, bird, cat and pure demon forms."

"My god, I'm being hunted by a demon!"

"Not necessarily," Simkin said, trying to calm the boy. "You probably are not hunted by the demon or it would have devoured you by now. More likely, your path will cross a demon's in the near future."

"I think I want to learn to read now. That should take a very long time, don't you think?"

"It is going to happen sooner or later. It will be best to find it before it finds you," Simkin told Timothy.

Timothy lapsed into thought while Simkin continued to look through the two books. He was certainly finding answers, but for every answer he found two more questions could be asked. He didn't like some of the answers either.

He liked Simkin. He was one of the only really nice people that Timothy had ever met. He did not want to put Simkin in any danger, and he knew the demon would cross his path eventually. Going in search of his own destiny seemed like much better advice than waiting for it to come to him.

Now, if he was going to leave where would he go? The voice said that he was in the center of something important and this Millikan person's name kept coming up. It was time to investigate another keep.

So, he knew where he was going. What was he going to do when he got there, other than avoid being devoured by a demon? He still needed to find his king. He couldn't believe the king was a murderer. That didn't make sense. He would just have to go to Millikan's keep and hope that he figured out what to do along the way.

The next morning, as the sun began its webbed journey through the forest, Timothy said good-bye to his new friend and promised to return.

He followed the same path back toward Led, but this time he walked with a purpose. For some reason the voices had picked him and something had brought him to Simkin's house. He didn't put much stock in the things he couldn't see but he knew how he felt. After leaving Simkin's, Timothy felt better than he had for a very long time.

He liked to walk, if the weather was nice, because it gave him time to think. He was growing up whether he wanted to or not. That was a fact. Along with his new maturity he had begun to feel uncertain about where he was going. He had been alone for so long that when the

queen was with him she had shone him a whole new world of companionship. He already missed that.

He felt it again with Simkin. Simkin also showed him how wonderful the world of learning could be. There was something about Simkin that ignited Timothy's imagination. Timothy found that he liked that and knew he would miss it on his journey.

And so he began his trek back to the beginning, or so Timothy felt. He had directions from Simkin, and he would stop in Led again to see if his priestly friend was still around. Maybe Father Jowlse could give him some advice or direction; he doubted it.

By late afternoon, Timothy was to the edge of the forest. He knew he could make it to Led in one day, but there was no need to push that hard. Besides, if he was destined to cross the path of a demon, he wanted it to be in the daylight, if possible. He ate a few bites then continued along the path. He remembered a small copse of oak that would make a perfect camping spot, another couple hours along the path.

The next day he made it through Led with no trouble. He could not find Father Jowlse, or anyone else for that matter. Where had all of the people gone? He remembered the old priest saying that the king had taken them away, but that didn't make any sense. What would the king do with an entire village worth of people? Why would the village be left in such an odd condition? The priest had believed that the king was involved in some ritual. Was it the king or Millikan? Could Millikan have taken the villagers for demonic blood-rites? Timothy shivered at the thought. All of them?

He just kept walking. He didn't plan on stopping at his shack, there was no need, and by cutting across the country Timothy could arrive at Millikan's keep much sooner. He wanted to get this over.

Millikan's keep was even more imposing than the king's had been. Timothy waited again as he had before, until a small caravan presented itself.

If the outside seemed larger, the inside was almost a mockery. The sheds and store-houses were in ill repair and the courtyard was bare dirt. Piles of animal dung lay where they had fallen and in the heat of the late afternoon, the smell was nauseating.

Timothy followed the caravan right into the keep itself and then parted company. He was not sure what he was looking for this time either, but he had the suspicion that it would present itself momentarily.

As before, Timothy headed down. He picked what seemed to be a little used corridor and moved quietly along it until he came to stairs leading down. There were two more floors off the stairs, but Timothy continued his descent. At the bottom of the stairs Timothy found a thick, iron bound door. It was dark at the bottom of the stairs, but Timothy could see faint light coming from beyond the door. He figured if his hunch about the villagers was true, they would be found in the dungeons.

He began to hear footfalls. He ducked into a dark cove and waited. He couldn't help thinking of the woman-child. He heard a cat purring. It rubbed against his leg. While Timothy was distracted by the cat, the footfalls stopped on the other side of the door.

"I'll go find the numbskull. He's 'round here somewheres," said a husky voice. "Leave the door for a minute or two; I'll be right back."

Suddenly, a man appeared through the door. It never opened; the man simply walked through it! He went up the stairs and whoever had been inside, walked away. Timothy tried the door. It creaked slowly open. The cat followed him into the lit corridor. Timothy looked down as a sleek black cat crept along beside him.

The corridor was deserted, long, and narrow. It smelled of musty pent-up age and poor ventilation. There were small doors on either side of the hall, one directly across from another. As Timothy realized that he was truly in the dungeon, he heard returning footsteps behind him. One of the cell doors was slightly ajar. Timothy slipped in.

He sat in the dark for a long moment. Suddenly, he felt something warm and hairy on his arm. He realized it was the cat. He hoped it was the cat because if it wasn't, he didn't know what it was. It began to purr.

Timothy held his breath. Two sets of footsteps passed the door. Timothy exhaled then looked around the room. It was very small with no windows. Only a narrow shaft of torch light from the hall illuminated it. There was rotten straw scattered across the floor, and Timothy was amazed that the cat was happier at his side than chasing the large rats that were scampering about.

"You're an odd little animal," Timothy whispered to the feline as he got up and peered out the door. Timothy was alone. He crept into the hall and tried the next door. Much to Timothy's surprise, it was unlocked.

"Is anyone in here?" he queried.

"Only a weak and feeble man and his daughter, sir," came a reply from the blackness.

"I mean you no harm, friend. I want to help you escape. What is this place and why are you imprisoned here?" Timothy whispered.

"My family and I were from the town of Led. We were brought here with the rest of the town. We are slowly being killed for some evil purpose of which I am unsure. Who are you and how did you get here undetected?" the man asked.

"I am Timothy. I have been sent here on a mission. I have just these last days been to Led and there is no one left. Who brought you here, and did this to you?"

"At first we were told it was the king. I knew it could not be the king for I am one of his own guardsmen, and some have seen the evil magician, Millikan. He can invade our dreams, and cells. Our children are taken first. I first thought you were one of his minions. That is why I said I had a daughter, although I got her away in time. I was hoping to draw one in and kill him somehow. Shh, someone comes."

An eerie feeling that Timothy could not explain shuttered through him. This man's story explained a great deal, confirmed his feelings. His voice seemed somehow familiar. If Millikan had demons, he had to feed them. If he had taken the entire village of Led he either had many small demons or a few large ones. Timothy wasn't sure which was better.

Before he could finish his thought, the door flew open. "Who's in here?" came the husky voice from earlier.

"Only a weak and feeble man and his daughter, sir," came the reply from the blackness. Timothy realized what the man was up to and remained perfectly still. The husky voiced man came into the room to retrieve its contents. Timothy closed the door quickly, yet quietly.

"Heh, what the hel..." The words were cut off with a strangle.

"Club him or something. I can't hold him for long!" came a tight whisper.

Timothy reached for his knife and thinking only of their safety, stabbed the guard in the back. He slumped to the floor. Timothy heard his final gasp from the darkness.

"There is something else in here with us," the prisoner said.

Timothy remembered the cat. "It is only an odd little cat from the castle above. Pay it little mind. We must try to escape now. Help me search the body."

The two men rolled the dead weight over and patted it, rummaging for anything that could help them. There were no keys, only a large ring and a knife. The man put the ring on his finger and the knife on his belt. "Let's try the corridor."

Without a word, Timothy and the man peeked around the doorway, slithered through, and moved to the next room. They explained their plan to the prisoners there, then moved to the next room. Quietly, they worked their way down the hallway.

The plan was simple. On a certain signal--mass exodus. This dungeon contained hundreds of people. Few children remained but strong men and women did.

Timothy gave the signal.

He and the man, who had introduced himself as Elric somewhere around the fifth or sixth room, ran down the corridor the way Timothy had come in. Just as they got to the door, Elric stumbled. He fell headlong into, then through, the door.

Timothy stopped quickly, shocked. How was this possible? He tried the door but it was locked tight. Suddenly it opened from the outside. Timothy turned to run but a wave of swift, wild-eyed townspeople met him. He heard a voice though the den.

As he turned back toward the door he saw Elric, also wild-eyed, staring at the ring in amazement. Timothy realized what had happened. The door was not locked from outside, only from within. The guards moved easily through the doors. Strange magic indeed!

Timothy suddenly recognized that the man, Elric, was the king!

He tried to stay ahead of the riot he had caused but quickly got caught up in it. It was quite sometime before Timothy found Elric again.

"My king, forgive me, I did not realize it was you to which I spoke."

Elric had found or won a sword somehow. He looked down at Timothy. "What are you talking about? I am not the king. I have not seen him for sometime." Elric looked down at him, understanding. "It is you, the lonely waif in the fields with whom we left Lady Elvraine. How did you come to this place? Where is the queen? Has she met with foul-play?"

Timothy realized this man must not be the king. The queen had been left in his care by Elric, not the king. Timothy felt like a fool, a bumkin--a member of the king's guard.

Guards were coming. Elric grabbed Timothy by the arm and led him up the stairs and down a corridor. "Quickly, we will hide in here." They ducked quickly into a small doorway.

Behind the curtain things suddenly grew dark. It took a moment for the eyes of both men to adjust. They were in a large room that looked to be religious in nature.

Unexpectedly, from nowhere, a tall man appeared next to Timothy and Elric. "Good evening my rebellious friends," he said.

"Who the hell are you?" Elric questioned, catching his breath.

"I am the owner of this lavish palace. Maybe you have heard of me. My name is Millikan." The cat rubbed against Timothy's leg, startling him again. "Ahh, my pet." Millikan reached down and lovingly picked up the purring feline.

"What do you want with us? Why have you done these horrible things?" Elric asked, his surprise turning to anger.

"My demons get hungry. They must be fed. I would like to have you two gentlemen for dinner," Millikan invited with a disturbingly cool voice.

Without warning, the cat leapt to the ground and became a grotesque muscular mass of writhing flesh. Timothy recognized the situation immediately. Here before him was his demon; his time had come.

As Timothy began to ready himself for the final conflict, Elric spun, tackled Timothy around the waist and pushed him through the wall. Timothy felt a chill as they passed through the wall and then he was in a small well-lit chamber.

"Let's get out of here!" Elric shouted, letting Timothy go.

"No. It is my destiny to fight that thing. First it was a cat and then a demon. "C" to "D"--that must be the one."

Elric looked at Timothy as if he had become a demon as well. "What in hell's name are you talking about?" asked Elric.

"I don't have time to explain, trust me. Are you leaving or will you help me?"

"I hate to do it, but I got a family. Here, take the ring and this other knife. Maybe it's magic too. Good luck." With that, Elric quickly and quietly left the room, and Timothy. Timothy suddenly realized that he was alone with a demon hunting him.

"I must be insane," he said to himself, as he began searching the room for anything that might help him. Nothing presented itself. Timothy started to get nervous. How in the world was he going to defeat a creature of that size? He didn't even have a sword. He was scared now, very scared.

He braced himself and poked his head through the door. The hallway was deserted, but he could still hear commotion from all around. He pulled back into the room. He needed to take stock of the situation and calm down. What did he know?

There was a demon after him! That demon and probably more like it, fed on blood, human blood. Hopefully most of the town of Led was now on its way home. He had no idea how many had been sacrificed, or had escaped. The room that he was just in seemed to be where the sacrifices took place. Could he destroy that room? He could try. But the problem of the demon was still there; how could he defeat it?

What had Simkin told him? If the demons were cut off from their supply, they would simply go back from where they came. He would have to kill their master then. That didn't sound very promising either.

He slipped through the wall and looked into the sacrificial chamber. All was quiet. He moved in. The altar was made of stone and there were several enormous tapestries on the walls. Timothy pulled one down. It took four or five strong tugs, but the upper support finally gave way with a crash.

Timothy wasted no time. He pulled his flint and knife from his belt and went to work. Once a small flame had caught, he pulled the tapestry to the middle of the larger doorway. The draft through the orifice fanned the flames. Timothy went back for another tapestry, then another.

With sweat dripping down his face and back, Timothy surveyed his work. There were two large bonfires in each doorway. He then jumped upon the altar and leapt against the wooden symbol hanging above it. It was secured by chain to the ceiling, but only for a moment. With a gut-wrenching crash, Timothy rode the wooden fork to the ground.

He shook his head to clear it, then began breaking as much of it apart as he could and feeding the fires. He rolled the biggest share to the nearest fire and placed the smaller pieces in the other. Then he went to work on the altar.

He was stomping on the altar, trying to crack it with his weight when a voice startled him. "Step down from there at once!" Millikan cried.

"Kiss my a--" his words were cut off as several dozen guards came through the walls and surrounded the altar.

"Kill him!" shouted Millikan.

"Stop," quietly commanded a voice from the far side of the room. It was her! The woman-child!

"You..." was all Timothy could say in bewilderment.

"Yes, old friend. We meet again." Timothy's bewilderment intensified at the sound of her deep, dulcet voice. "Yes, I am capable of speech as well."

The guards held their position around Timothy but could not take their eyes from the woman as if she were a spirit. Millikan stayed where he was as well, a strong curiosity coming over him.

"My friend, it seems we were destined to meet again," she said to Timothy. "I have watched you many times since I healed your wound. You have come far, in miles and in your life. Why have you done this to my temple?"

Timothy looked at her uncomprehendingly. She understood his bewildered countenance. Suddenly a small bird hovered where she had been then flew around Millikan's head. Within a twitch of its wings, a cat appeared beneath Millikan's feet. He bent and stroked its long black back. Timothy began to see the pattern. Just as he realized what the next step was, the hideous thick muscled creature stood before him again. Its eyes were as black as a mine and its teeth as golden as its treasures. The guards backed away.

"Kill the boy...I command you!" Millikan shouted at the creature. It spun and rushed Timothy before he could react. As he put up his hands in a feeble attempt to ward off the creature, there was blackness all around. He fell to the ground confused.

"Wait here. You will be safe," came the soft lilt of the woman's voice. In the darkness, Timothy heard a brief silence and then an incredible tumult from above. The walls and ceiling began to shake. Timothy heard screams.

The uproar continued for many minutes. When all was silent again, a door opened and Timothy saw light. He was in some kind of large chamber. The demon-woman held a small lamp as she approached him.

"Will you help me?" she asked as she stood above Timothy. She was beautiful. Timothy remembered her creamy white skin and luxurious black hair.

"What do you mean? You are a demon. You can do whatever you want," Timothy replied.

"Whatever I want, except return to my home. The magician of this castle captured me many years ago. He has used me and many other lesser creatures. We cannot kill him, nor can we escape until he is dead. If you will aid us, we will help you in any way we can."

It took a moment or two for all of this to sink in. Things were moving too quickly. He did not know what to think of the demon's story. He was prepared to die at her hands, not help her.

"How could I kill Millikan? He is powerful enough to enslave the likes of you. I am not a powerful magician."

"No, but you are our best chance. Will you listen to my plan?"

Timothy was amazed at how simple it was. She had turned his likeness into that of the chambermaid. That took a little getting used to. He roamed around freely throughout the castle for the rest of the day, completely unnoticed.

He happened into the temple area. The tapestries were ash and the altar was as he had left it. There were no longer bodies, but Timothy could tell that many had died in this room. Dark smears of dried brown blood clung to the walls and fixtures. Some of the stains were over ten feet from the floor. The warmth of the room produced a putrid smell. What had happened here?

"Pretty gross, huh?" came a voice from behind. Timothy spun and saw a cute young girl looking around the room. She did not notice his surprise. "They said he came back with a blade six feet long and could not be touched. He didn't look that big to me, but he must be some kind of magician-warrior or something."

"Who?" Timothy couldn't help asking, startled by his new high voice.

"The young man who came to fight the guards. He wrecked this very temple before killing all of the guards. Millikan, the king's own wizard, could not even touch him. I hope the king will be safe from this young butcher."

Timothy realized she was speaking of him. But he had been alone in a dark room somewhere, not here killing the guards. She did not know about the king or Millikan's true intentions either. And he could not tell her.

"Well, I need to get to the kitchen. See ya," she said as she trotted out of the room and down the hallway, as oblivious as when she had entered.

Shortly after dark, another demon checked on him. "I was asked to escort you to a place where you can rest before tonight. I will wake you, then take you to carry out your mission."

The demon looked like any typical courtier, except for his eyes. He had the same deep set, black eyes. Timothy could tell immediately who was addressing him.

"I would also like to thank you for what you have agreed to do," the demon said, then left it at that.

Late in the night, the male demon came to Timothy again and shook him gently. "It is time, young sir. I will take you to the wizard's chamber."

The demon was true to his word. He transported Timothy into the magician's chamber and stood next to him. Timothy could easily see the man in the bed because of the moon light streaming in through the window over the bed. The demon was perfectly still, perfectly quiet.

Timothy felt alone. He looked at the sleeping form in the bed. He remembered all of the people who had been taken from their homes, the children who had been sacrificed first. He remembered his queen, hanging from the rafters. He thought about Elric and his family, even the pretty kitchen girl. Timothy stood over the magician and slid his knife silently from its sheath.

Timothy set the blade gently against the wizard's throat. Suddenly, his eyes sprang open! Timothy pushed hard.

Timothy lay in bed late. The sun was fully in the sky, but Timothy had a peculiar feeling. It was over. He had made it back to Simkin's house. He was safe.

A small black bird suddenly perched upon the window sill. It sang a strange song, quiet, even somber. Timothy recognized it right away and was not surprised to see the woman appear at the foot of his bed.

"Hello, old friend. I hope I may call you that. I also hope you did not think we had deserted you. I made a promise, and I will stick to it. You have done us a great service, your own people as well. You should be proud.

"I told you that I would help you in any way I could. A demon is bound by their name. It was Millikan who discovered our names, through his spells, and so enslaved us. But we can be summoned by other words as well." She tossed a small leather pouch to Timothy. "Inside that pouch is a small book. You will need Simkin's help to understand it, but it will allow you to summon any of the demons you saved, for almost anything you may desire. Beware however, you may only summon each of us once."

Timothy didn't know what to say. He gazed at her angelic face, her thick jet tresses. "Why me?" was all he could muster.

I was thinking about a plan one evening, quite some time ago now, for breaking free of Millikan. A young boy stumbled into my chamber, and I healed him. I knew he would be the missing link in my plan, but it was too soon to even start. I hope you can forgive me for using you the way I did.

"I can't give you back the past, but I can hopefully help you in some other way in the future. Thank you again," she finished quietly and then quickly became the bird, chirped a new song, and flew through the window.

Timothy thumbed through his gift, slowly comprehending its immense value. Simkin would help him. He was very glad they were friends. He realized though that what he was feeling was a kind of loneliness. He missed the thought that the beautiful, even angelic looking, girl could be his. He did not want to think of her as that golden toothed demon. He would miss her, but only her.

How wonderful it had been, in his shack, truly ignorant of what was going on. He was happy that he had gained the knowledge that he had but that information was like a knife cutting away a part of his life that he could never regain.