

An Excerpt from *Prospero Regained* by L. Jagi Lamplighter

Chapter One: Once More Unto The Swamp

“What we need now is a cheer weasel!” My brother Erasmus pulled his boot out of the thick ooze with a sucking *pop*. Mud splattered across his dark green breeches, his justaucorps, and the hem of Mab’s trench coat. Erasmus winced. “Sorry about that, Company Detective. This not-letting-go-of-each-other business makes things rather cramped.” He lifted Mab’s right hand, which he held in his own. “Still, beats being led astray by demonic illusions, I suppose.”

“What in Tarna...” Mab muttered in his Bronx accent. He glanced nervously at the infernal landscape that stretched around us in all directions: the dreary swamps, the cypresses dripping with dead moss, the lurid red sky, the Wall of Flame burning in the far distance. His left palm, slick with sweat, was slippery in my grasp. “What in Creation is a ‘cheer weasel?’”

“It’s something Mephisto says when people are glum: ‘Nothing a good whack with a cheer weasel won’t fix!’” Erasmus tentatively stepped onto a shaggy gray hummock. The lump of dead grass sank beneath his weight. Pulling his foot back, now dripping with more goo, he made a face. “I have no idea if it’s a modern pop culture reference or an invention of my brother’s deranged brain. Either way, I think I might benefit from a whack of the old cheer weasel about now. Might increase the appeal of being trapped in Hell, searching for my lost family members with my brother the former pope, an Aerie One trapped in a human body who thinks he’s Humphrey Bogart, and the sister I hate.”

“Not Bogart,” Mab glanced up at his fedora—he would have pulled it low over his eyes, but he did not have a free hand. Under his breath, he muttered, “Well...maybe Philip Marlow.”

Erasmus, Mab, Gregor, and I moved slowly through the Swamp of Uncleaness—where dwelt the souls of those who had fallen prey to the sin of lust. Walking hand-in-hand was easy enough on a paved road. When the ground underfoot was spongy and sinking, it became both treacherous and aggravating, particularly for those of us who were in the middle. We could not wipe sweat from our faces, nor pinch our noses to block out the horrendous stench.

It was so hot here that steam rose from beneath our feet. Apparently, there was a reason why this place was called the Inferno.

Worse than the stench were the sinners themselves. Yet, we could not lower our eyes and ignore them, as if wearing imaginary blinders. Instead, we had to peer into every nook and cranny, searching for our missing brother.

And our presence here was entirely my fault.

On my other side, my brother Gregor stuck his staff, a length of ebony carved with blood red runes, under his arm, and gave my hand a comforting squeeze. His crimson cardinal’s robes, with their billowing half-cape, stood out against the landscape, a bright spot in the literally God-forsaken gloom.

For most of his life, Gregor had been a bulky, almost brutish, bully of a man, consumed by hatred, mainly toward the Protestants. Our youngest brother Ulysses, to save himself from the

demon Abaddon, imprisoned Gregor for many years. Yesterday, we discovered this and rescued him. We found him a changed man. The new more contemplative Gregor was slender. He had dark, shoulder-length wavy hair and a calm, almost saintly, expression.

Gregor slipped his arm up so that our elbows were hooked together. This freed his hands, which he cupped around his mouth with its close-trimmed black beard.

“Mephisto!” Gregor shouted for the umpteenth time. Lowering his hands, he spoke, his voice hoarse and breathy due to a magical mishap in his youth. “I do not see him anywhere. Are you certain he is here, Miranda?” Then, looking across the swamp, he called out again, “Mephisto! Mephistopheles Prospero!”

“No sign of him, Ma’am. I’m with Father Gregor, here. Are we sure this is where the Harebrain landed?” Mab muttered. His “this” sounded like “dis.”

“In the vision the angel showed me, his besetting sin was lust.” Sweat ran into my eyes. I blinked rapidly. The heat still was oppressive, but the memory of the angel and the sense of peace she brought momentarily lifted my spirits. “That means the Hellwind would have dropped him here. So, he’s here...somewhere. Unless he’s found his way out on his own.”

We glanced across the tremendous expanse of swamp that stretched out in every direction as far as the eye could see.

“It’s hopeless,” sighed Erasmus.

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Around us, fetid quagmires, dotted by bracken-covered islands, stretched beneath a lurid sky crisscrossed with bands of steely gray. Souls damned for excessive lust floundered in the muck, crying out for succor—until they were dragged down by their more licentious compatriots. On the larger islands, groups of the damned engaged in massive orgies, resembling a battle more than any erotic acts. Others clambered onto smaller islands, upon which great corpulent demons disported with them. On one nearby isle, a six-horned demon whipped the damned until they dropped to their knees and performed acts of obscene obeisance.

The whole sordid scene, with its noxious gases that left the four of us reeling and retching, was made even worse because we now knew that the liquid in the swamp was not water but the accumulated drippings of the wanton desires of those on earth. Qualities that were merely spiritual upon earth had a physical nature here. Just the memory of having had to swim through the stuff left me queasy, and here I was, voluntarily walking into it again.

I would not have done it, not for any price, had there been another way to find my missing siblings and rescue our father. But there was not, and I could not leave my family stranded in Hell forever!

Gritting my teeth, I choked back my gag reflex and forced myself to scour the unseemly landscape, searching each passion-contorted face for the features of my brother Mephisto...the brother who held the crystal ball that could lead us to the others and to Father.

Beside me, Gregor bent his head in low, breathy prayer, “Lord Jesus, hear my prayer. Help us in our hour of need.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Erasmus scoffed. He stood ankle deep in reddish mud waiting for the rest of us to jump onto the next hummock. His staff was strapped diagonally across his back. His Urim gauntlet hung on his belt. When we first set out, he had worn it in order to be ready in case of attack. But since he could not use the Staff of Decay while standing so close to the rest of us, he eventually decided there was no point in wearing the hot, unyielding gauntlet. “God does not heed the prayers of those in Hell.”

“Why shouldn’t He heed ours?” I countered. “We are not damned. We’re still alive.”

“Gregor may not be damned,” Erasmus granted, “but sisters who betray their family are another issue.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Surely you don’t expect me to believe you summoned up the Hellwind by mistake? I will remind you that Abaddon warned us there was a traitor in our family.”

“Careful, Professor Prospero!” Mab jerked his head, trying to push back the brim of his fedora which was now falling across his eyes, “it does not pay to listen to demons!”

“That’s what you told us,” my brother replied mildly, “right before your Miss Miranda, here, scattered our family to the four quarters of Hell. Or perhaps I should say to the Nine Circles of Hell.”

“It’s not like she did it on purpose,” Mab countered.

“I fear, Spirit Detective, my dear sister has deceived you as to her nature and intent. Either that, or you plotted with her.” Erasmus turned his head and regarded our other brother through his lank dark hair. “Really, Gregor. Out of our whole family, the only other person you managed to save was Miranda? Couldn’t you have given her a push and rescued someone worthwhile?”

The terrible regret that had tormented me ever since I accidentally summoned up the Hellwind, which caused us to lose six of my siblings—seven if one counted Caliban—gave way to wrath. Anger rushed through me like a tidal wave beating against an unprotected shore.

Surely, there was no one in all the world as horrible as Erasmus! It seemed a cruel irony that Theophrastus, whom I loved so dearly, had been ripped from my grasp and carried away, while Erasmus, of all people, had been saved.

On the other hand, Erasmus clearly felt the same way about me.

“I saved whomever I could,” Gregor replied gravelly. He nodded towards Mab and me, his silky black hair spilling over his crimson-clad shoulders. “Clearly the hand of Providence was upon us. Without Miranda, we would be lost. She is the only one who can see through the illusionary pleasure garden that lies over this Circle of Hell. It befuddles us whenever we are not touching her, leading us astray. Without her, we would have lost our way an hour ago.”

“I like the pleasure garden,” Erasmus grumbled. He released Mab’s hand and gazed around at the alternate landscape. Mab quickly took the opportunity to use his free hand to adjust his hat and wipe his face with a monogrammed handkerchief.

Erasmus smiled and drew a deep breath, as if inhaling fresh garden air. “It’s pleasant, with cool fountains and dancing girls wearing veils and harem outfits. The air smells like…” he sniffed again, “cherry petals.”

I sighed, wishing that I, too, could experience that false utopia. I disliked volunteering to be fooled, but I was bone-weary and soul-tired. A few breaths of something that did not smell noxious—even if it was actually noxious—would have been a welcome relief.

But, it was not to be. I could not see the infernal illusions. I was not sure why, but I suspected that it had something to do with the two wings of emerald light—like impressionistic brushstrokes—that stretched from the shoulders of my enchanted tea gown. Perhaps, if I stripped off my emerald dress and donned a garment not steeped in protective enchantments, I, too, could have fallen prey to the deceits of Hell. But I was not about to pull off my gown in the midst of the prison for the torment of the overly lustful.

Besides, it was not in my nature to deliberately fool myself. I had not served Eurynome, the White Lady of Spiral Wisdom, for five hundred years, just to throw away all the wisdom I had learned for a few moments of relief.

The memory of my years as a Handmaiden to the Unicorn, and the reason for my having been demoted from those honored ranks, returned to me. A tear trickled down my cheek, but I could not free my hand to wipe it away.

Erasmus grabbed Mab again, smiling regretfully. “The real picture is far less rosy, of course. What appears to be a fountain is actually oozing sewage. The dancing girl is a giant, bloated spider dripping with poison.” He pointed at another island where a creature such as he described hung upon a gigantic web. “As to the smell...” he started to sniff the real air and coughed, nearly gagging, “...I will not even begin to elaborate.”

“By Titania! Why a pleasure garden?” Mab scratched his eternal five-o’clock shadow with the hand that clasped Erasmus’s. “It makes no sense!”

“Wish I knew,” Erasmus responded wistfully.

“Ma’am,” Mab pointed my hand at the horizon. “What’s that?”

In the distance, a single point of light shone above the swamp waters. Unlike the steely gray bands amidst the lurid reds of the sky, it was pure and silvery, like starlight. A spark of hope stirred within me, as if I beheld some fragile and heavenly thing that gave wings to my heart.

“Beware,” Mab growled. “Could be a trick.”

“It is no trick,” Gregor replied. “It is holy.”

“How could there be something holy in Hell?” Erasmus scoffed, peering into the gloom. “It’s a will-o-the-wisp, sent to lead us to our doom.”

“We’re already in Hell, how much more doomed could we be?” muttered Mab.

“There are worse places than this one.” Erasmus kicked the water. It splashed thickly, clinging to his shoe like gelatin.

“It is a holy light,” Gregor repeated, and he began to walk.

“How do you know?” asked Erasmus, as we waded back into the swamp, all still holding hands.

Gregor gave him a grave, contemplative look. “What worries me is how you could not know.”

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Warily, we approached the tiny silver star, sometimes walking along narrow islets, sometimes wading through mud, sometimes swimming in the awful goop itself. The silvery light proved to be farther away than it had first looked. After a time, it winked out.

“Told you,” Erasmus murmured, faintly amused. Gregor merely continued walking in the same direction.

The longer we walked, the heavier my heart became, until it seemed that my flagging spirits were physically dragging me deeper into the mire. I hated the putrid smell, the eerie green fires burning above the marshes, the gray light cast by the bands of steely luminescent clouds streaked across the ruddy skies, the acts of crudity taking place around us, all of which seemed to involve violence rather than pleasure. I, who so hated rapists—who had been robbed of all that was dearest to me by that violent crime—was trapped in the country of eternal rape. I felt like a claustrophobe whose path to salvation lay through a narrow closet the length of the Grand Canyon. I tried to avert my gaze, to look only at faces and not see what the bodies were doing,

but it was a futile effort. Each time I failed, it was as if I came face-to-face again with the monster Osae and all that he had taken from me.

My fists clenched, making Mab and Gregor, whose hands I was holding, grunt in surprise. How it galled me to know that my attacker, this same Osae the Red, currently lay with his head resting upon the knee of Lilith, the demon Queen of Air and Darkness. She fed him dainty morsels from her own hand as a reward for his treatment of me—for having successfully robbed the Prospero Family of my Lady's counsel.

Without my Lady's help, how were we ever going to find Mephisto in this vast place?

But even that was easier to face than the subject that truly worried me—what had happen to the others? Erasmus spoke the truth when he said that there were far worse places in Hell than this swamp. Where was Theo, and what awful torture was he suffering? And what condition would he be in when we found him?

To keep from dwelling on such painful matters, I let my mind roam, leaping from subject to subject. I considered briefly a dozen topics: the fate of my father, what was happening back on earth, how Prospero, Inc. was doing back home, et cetera. Eventually, all my thoughts drifted to the Elf Lord, Astreus Stormwind.

I pictured Astreus: his joyful triumphant laugh when I accepted the *Book of the Sibyl* from his hand; the outrage I had felt when he asked me to kill him and then would not explain himself; and the way his irises had burned with a golden fire when he admitted that, before the Fall, he had been an angel, and not just any angel but of the Eighth Choir of Cherubim; how eerie his gaze had been – that wild yet calculating fierceness – when we flew above his palace in Hyperboria, and he offered to drop me from a great height, so that, when my brains were dashed upon the ground, my soul might be sped upon its way to Heaven. Most of all, I recalled his parting words, as I stood before the storm playing my flute.

Because I would have my last memory be of the two things I most loved.

Surely, he did not mean me?

He was an elf. I was merely a mortal maid. Such a pairing was, in his own words, as likely as a hawk wedding a dove. He loathed me for being a slave owner—because I would not break my magic flute and set free the Aerie Ones, Mab's race. He despised me so much for this—even though setting the Aerie Ones free would mean the death of millions of human beings—that he decided I was not worthy to slay him.

He could not have meant me.

If he did not, then to which two things did he refer: the sky and my flute? The sky and music?

The mere thought that he might have intended the words to include me caused my cheeks to burn. How foolish could I be? For five hundred years, I had remained distant, pure, and virginal. Osae the Red had seen to it that I was no longer the latter but that did not excuse a flurry of foolish girlish emotions. That I might allow myself to become enamored again, so soon after my humiliation at the hands of the fake Ferdinand—which led to Osea's attack, to the loss of my Lady's patronage, of the Water of Life that keeps my family immortal, and, ultimately, to the destruction of the Family Prospero and all that we stand for—was shameful.

Of course, the fake Ferdinand had actually been Astreus, too, but in his demonic guise.

My only consolation was that, since I would never see Astreus again, this foolishness would soon pass. Surely, the image of the smiling elf, currently constantly reoccurring in my thoughts, must be caused by the influence of this swamp. As soon as we departed from this horrible place of torture for the lustful, my mind would grow calm again.

And yet, as I remembered the tone of his voice when he had spoken those parting words, a strange and glorious tingle spread through me that reminded me strangely of joy. It did much to drive back the gloom.

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Ahead stretched one last narrow island and then an expanse of oily murk dotted here and there by large rocks occupied by fat spiders or ugly lizards. A series of hummocks formed a bridge between our current location and this last isle. To cross them, we had to let go of each other and leap from one to another in single file.

My heart dropped at the thought that at the end of this next island, we would have to climb back into the swamp. I shivered at the memory of that awful slime oozing along my skin. Muttering darkly under my breath, I leapt onto a hummock that stood between me and the island, cursing when I slipped and landed hard on my knee. As my other leg dropped into the slimy mire, something snaked out of the water and grabbed it, dragging me backwards into the mire.

Greasy ooze slid over my face and skin. Grasping hands reached underneath my gown, groping at my thighs and tugging at my underclothes. I twisted angrily, my motions made awkward by the viscous liquid, and kicked free.

Through the semi-transparent murk, I faced three leering dead men. The damned souls grabbed at me hungrily. Something ugly burned in their dead eyes. Behind them, a fat, grinning demon floated naked in the filth. I averted my eyes at once, but the brief horrifying glimpse remained burned in my mind, causing me to squirm and retch.

The demon wielded a cat-o-nine, with which he scoured the men. Whenever they approached me, the demon trembled with pleasure. Whenever the men lost their grip on me, he hissed, dismayed. When he cracked his whip, the men convulsed, crying out with pain and greater hunger. This, too, caused the demon convulsions of pleasure.

They came at me from three sides, seeking to crush me between their naked bodies. I kicked and punched, struck at them with my four-foot long pinewood flute – the same instrument that had so recently betrayed me by accidentally summoning the Hellwind. I grabbed for my fighting fan, but, the gunk around me kept drawing my shoulder bag away from my grasp, and I could not reach the weapon.

My attackers were weak, but my blows merely passed through them. Wherever the cloth of my enchanted emerald tea gown brushed them, however, they were repelled, making my elbows and knees better weapons than my fist or foot. I turned, and the mysterious wing-like brushstrokes of emerald light coming from the shoulders of my dress touched the spirit-flesh of one of my attackers, causing him to reel back, screaming in pain.

I had a new weapon!

I spun about. The three men recoiled, their arms and faces burnt where my wings had caught them. Eagerly, I sought to take advantage of my momentary freedom and rise. My meager supply of air was nearly depleted. When I swam in the direction I thought was up, I found only more water and more copulating pairs, one or two of whom caught sight of my struggle and left their ravaged partners to pursue me.

Desperate for air, I circled in the murky slime, hoping for some glimpse of the lurid red of the sky. Spinning kept the damned souls at bay, for they quickly learned to fear the wings of emerald light, but out of the corner of my eye, I saw the demon itself approaching.

It floated forward, leering lasciviously. A twelve-foot tongue protruded from its wide mouth and snaked through the water. Slipping beneath my gown, the black tongue slithered up my stomach with its forked tip. I jerked backward, resisting the urge to cry out.

I turned to my Lady for help...but of course, She was no longer there.

The urge to scream grew stronger, but I dared not open my mouth. The memory of the taste – like fat drippings mixed with rotting corpses and feces – still filled me with horror.

Desperate, my heart pounding, I struck out. I struggled and swirled, badgering the crude horror with my wings. The glowing emerald light seared its skin\ as it had the dead men's, but this merely excited the demon. Again and again, it lashed out with its terrible whip, causing the dead souls to twitch and dance. Despite the pain my wings had caused them, they clawed at the slime to get back to where I swam, as if only by doing so could they sate some terrible inner hunger that tormented them.

The curling tongue, prodding my flesh, sent shivers of revulsion across my body. It triggered memories of Osae's attack. That, combined with lack of oxygen, was too much. I panicked, thrashing wildly, my limbs flailing. I was sure I was about to lose consciousness and die, drowned in the discarded sludge of human lusts.

In my delirium, I dreamt that Mab hovered above the demon's head, his lead pipe rebounding off the creature's thick skull. Then everything went red, and the demon's face twisted and decayed before my hallucinating eyes.

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Strong arms, unharmed by my wings, hauled me through the ooze. Gasping, I kicked and punched, determined to win my way to freedom. My elbow slammed into something, causing a loud crack and a scream.

Dumping me unceremoniously on the bracken, my brother Erasmus howled with pain, holding his bloody nose. His humming staff fell to one side, and all the bracken for ten feet in every direction turned gray and withered away to dust. I quickly jumped away from where the *Staff of Decay* buzzed unattended.

"You see what comes from helping her?" Erasmus shouted when he could speak. "I told you we should have left her down there! Would have served her right, ending her days as the doxy of a demon! She would have been following in her dam's footsteps!"

Behind him, Mab and Gregor emerged from the swamp, dripping with dead vegetable matter and scum. They both came over and touched me. Gregor gagged and let go again. He tried to wipe off the scum he could not see.

"Ugh, but that's foul!" Mab swore, squatting beside me. "Don't listen to him, Ma'am. He didn't say any such thing – about leaving you in there, I mean. He just screamed like a banshee and leapt right in after you."

"Oh, don't tell her that! It will go to her head," moaned Erasmus. He gingerly poked the swollen bridge of his nose with his pinky fingers. "Well," he added presently, "I guess every cloud has its silver lining. When I came out of that...stuff, I thought I would be ill again. But the pain in my nose had put that entirely out of my mind."

"That was...horrible," I gasped for lack of a better word, shaking with revulsion. Frantically, I brushed at my body, trying to rid myself of the lingering goo. As I wrung the slime out of my hair, its shining black color gave me a shock. I had forgotten Erasmus had restored its original color. I had expected to see the silver-blond locks that had been mine for so many centuries.

Erasmus glanced over at me, his mouth and chin bloody, his eyes accusing.

“Thank you, Erasmus. You saved my life,” I gushed, overwhelmed by gratitude for both my brothers and Mab. “I’m so very sorry about your nose. I thought you were another one of them.”

I reached out to touch his arm as I talked, but he pushed me away.

“Humph!” Turning his back, my brother used his white Urim gauntlet, which had once been part of an angel’s armor, to pick up the humming length of his staff. The gauntlet would not wither, though it was pitted and dull. All other Urim I had ever seen shone like living moonlight. Once back in Erasmus’s hand, the *Staff of Decay* stopped its deadly humming. Its whirling gray length slowed and fell still, becoming a long, rectangular staff, the sides of which were painted alternately black and white.

“Don’t know what possessed me,” Erasmus continued. “Amazingly stupid idea, traveling around here with a woman. What were we thinking? We should have left her on the bridge, taken our chances without her.”

“We would never find Mephistopheles that way,” Gregor observed. “We would have been sucked in by some pleasant-looking evil, or perhaps walked right past him, his face hidden from us behind a dream.”

“True,” Mab said, mopping his craggy brow. “When she fell in, everything turned nice again. Made it kind of hard to find the baddies who were attacking her. I had to bonk a dapper gentleman in a tuxedo on the head with my trusty lead pipe, and punch a couple of swains who were offering her flowers and chocolates right in their kissers.”

“Dapper gentleman!” I cried, “That horrible bloated...well, on second thought, maybe it’s better you didn’t see it.” I shivered again, suddenly cold.

“Wish it could have been me instead of you who saw him, Ma’am,” Mab replied humbly.

“We won’t find Mephisto this way either,” Erasmus complained. “All this walking around on the surface. We’re only seeing a small percentage of this place. When we first came through the gate, it seemed to Miranda as if we were under the swamp, slime and ooze in all directions. What if Mephisto is down there, like the things that tried to drag her into the depth? We’ll never find him if we’re up here!”

“What else can we do?” I countered. “Without Mephisto, we can’t rescue any of the others.

“So that’s it.” Erasmus plopped down and folded his arms behind his head. “This is how I shall end my days, slogging through the Swamp of Uncleaness, searching aimlessly for my brother who had the Ball of Getting-Us-the-Hell-Out-Of-Hell, in the company of the sister I hate more than any other – whose fault it is we’re stuck here to begin with – until I die, most likely from complications stemming from an infected broken nose. Appropriate way to go, I suppose, killed by Miranda.”

“Enough.” Gregor’s head had been bowed in prayer. Now, he straightened, his voice calm yet stern. “We are in Hell, Brother, where the malicious burn upon the fires of their wrath and envy. One might hope their example would teach you civility.”

“I have proven remarkably hard to teach,” Erasmus replied blithely.

“That is not a trait of which I would boast,” Gregor said, his voice again stern.

Much to my surprise, Erasmus looked chagrined.

“You’re probably right,” he murmured, wiping his face on his sleeve. The red of his blood showed brightly against the subdued landscape. From the left, there came a *kerplunk*, as if something large had slid into the water.

Mab frowned. "There are things down here that feed on blood. Wraiths, demons, and servants of demons! Vile things! Maybe we'd better get moving!"

Hopping back across the hummocks, he stooped and picked up his fedora. Apparently, he had thrown it aside when he leapt in to save me. Frowning down at the water, to make certain no demon waited to grab his foot, he hopped back.

We held hands again and started walking, slower than before. We were thirsty and tired. It was hot here, and it stank. The vile acts and general repulsiveness worsened as we continued. Demons, some hideous, some gorgeous to behold, moved among the damned souls, inciting them to yet greater excesses. Nearby, an emaciated man moaned pitifully as he tried to sate some burning hunger upon a fat lizard.

In the distance rose a vast cylindrical tower with a round mushroom-like cap, constructed from something living that writhed and squirmed. I decided not to examine it any more closely, but Erasmus did and, apparently, regretted it. With a grunt of sympathetic pain, he drew his legs together and cupped his free hand protectively over his groin.

"Oh, that's ghastly!" he said.

"Don't look, Ma'am," Mab advised. "It's not a sight for ladies."

"Nothing here is fit for ladies." Gregor's voice sounded even more gravelly than usual.

"Good thing our dear sister isn't one," Erasmus replied, a note of cheerfulness in his weary voice. When Gregor gave him a quelling look, he pointed at his swollen nose with his free hand. "Would a lady do this?"

"No true lady yields her virtue without a fight." Gregor used his ebony staff as a walking stick, swinging it, planting it, striding forward, and swinging it again. Its blood red runes glittered eerily as it swung.

"But our good sister already lost her virtue to a demon," objected Erasmus. "Why bring my nose into it?"

"It was an accident," I snapped back, more harshly than I had intended. "I already apologized. No one 'brought your nose into it'. I thought you were a demon."

"A likely story," muttered Erasmus.

Gregor halted and leaned heavily upon his staff. With his free hand, he wiped sweat from his face. "Is it my imagination, or have we been walking for hours?"

"Certainly seems like hours," replied Mab.

"We must rest," Gregor replied. "We cannot continue as we are."

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Eventually, we found refuge on a sandy flat isle that to me seemed completely exposed, but which my brothers and Mab, when they released my arms, assured me was surrounded by high arbors of black roses.

"Does anyone have something to eat?" Erasmus asked sadly. "The food I brought has been ruined by the swamp."

I looked through the contents of my shoulder bag, but swamp water had soaked through it. Nothing remained edible. I carefully wiped off my mirrored fighting fan, my figurine of Astreus, and my tightly-sealed vial of Water of Life. A wistful action really; the bag would probably just get drenched again the next time we started moving.

To my great dismay, I discovered that the silver and horn circlet Father Christmas had given me, which I had lugged along just in case, was gone. Apparently, it had fallen out of my bag during the fray. That meant it now lay at the bottom of the Swamp of Uncleaness, if there

was a bottom. If not, it drifted ever downward, and, with it, my hope of ever seeing Astreus again.

For without it, even if the Elf Lord still lingered somewhere within the sooty depths of the demon Seir of the Shadows, I would never know.

Mab's food had fared better than the rest of ours. From the pockets of his trench coat, he pulled a number of Ziploc bags. Inside the sealed plastic, his bread and cheese was squashed but fresh. He shared the food among us. Hungry as we were, neither Erasmus nor I could bring ourselves to eat much. Erasmus shared some fresh water from a canteen.

"I'll never look at another woman again," murmured Erasmus. He was lying down with his head resting on some object that was invisible to me, so that his head seemed to be floating in mid-air. He covered his eyes with his hands. "Ever! My womanizing ways are a thing of the past! Oh, to think...ugh!"

"If you had not done so previously, you would not be in such a sorry state," Gregor observed. "I find the place no more wearing than any other unpleasant location."

Erasmus raised his head. His eyes glittered black with malice. "Forgive me if I don't happen to be a priest, a spirit, or an ex-virgin whose only experience with love has been demon-rape. Some of us are men and must live like men."

"And shall suffer, after death, like unto what you call 'men.'" Gregor thundered back in his preaching-from-the-pulpit voice, steady yet booming. "Had you chosen a virtuous life, you would not now be obliged to pay the wages of sin."

"Oh, and you'll do so well when we come to the country of one of your besetting sins, will you?" Erasmus snapped.

"The angel said Gregor was closest of all of us to overcoming his vice," I offered, my spirits again buoyed by the mere memory of the angelic encounter.

"You would come in on his side." Erasmus closed his eyes and let his head drop back until it again rested upon his invisible pillow. "You shouldn't have repeated that where Brother Gregor could hear you—the pride it engenders will mar his good record."

"He is right." Gregor nodded. "Pride is a difficult enemy to defeat, and those who succumb to it suffer in a far lower place than this."

Looking around, it was hard to imagine that there were places worse than this. But that was where my sins would have dragged me. I shivered, suddenly extraordinarily grateful for Gregor and his staff.

Erasmus looked out over the swamp, staring out at the dead cypress trees dripping with slimy gray moss. He murmured again, "It's hopeless."

"Rest, Brother." Gregor's voice was gentle despite its gruffness. "Let us examine the matter again when we are rested."

"Very well." He shut his eyes. "I'll rest, rise, and look forward to another day of looking for Mephisto on an empty stomach. We'll be lucky if we don't draw the attention of the other Mephistopheles with all this shouting...the demonic one."

Mab and I exchanged glances, but neither of us had the strength to speak, much less to explain to my brother that there was no other Mephistopheles, just our brother, the demon. Besides, we did not know how Gregor, the Catholic priest, would take it.

We took turns sleeping. For a time, the horrors of Hell were replaced by the terrors of nightmares. I awoke, sweating, to find reality worse than my dream, and sat, alone in the sweltering heat, in the squalor and stink of Hell.

Mab sat up suddenly, his motion rousing the rest of us. "Look, Ma'am! Our holy star is back!"

It was, and much closer now. Rousing the others, we had a brief discussion about what to do next. Erasmus and Mab were still wary of the star, and after my recent encounter, I was as well, but Gregor continued to insist that the light was holy. He started toward it, walking with long strides, and the rest of us were forced to abandon him or follow.

Pushing onward, we soon came upon a wide flat area, rather like a beach. There, we saw a strange sight.