

1. HIRAM'S OBSESSIONS

There would seem little reason for a demon to take notice of Hiram bin Saar. As a stoop-shouldered boy of fourteen, he was less likely to stand out from a crowd as to sulk behind it. And the party his parents were hosting held little attraction for him. It was the second one this month to celebrate his brother Malik's nineteenth birthday. *The perfect one, the handsome, the anointed Malik—always a party for the firstborn. A Mal-function.* Hiram snorted. He and his friends ignored the sounds and smells that wafted through the kitchen as they crouched outside in the garden, concealed more by the tumult inside the manor house than by the blue shadows of late afternoon.

"Pass it back. You've had it long enough!"

"Shh! Half the guilds are in there."

Another voice, loudly whispering: "You keep quiet! It's my turn next, anyway."

A boy retched and said in a choked voice, "Here, take it."

"That bad?"

"No, no—it's great. Really! Great. I just have a cough." Some snickering from the others. "I ought to leave, though. My mother would kill me if she found me out here."

"She won't. Not unless she gets cosy with the help. Hey, Hiram—here's to your brother staying single, eh?"

"Yeah—if Malik doesn't find a bride, we'll be out here again next week!"

Music and laughter from inside cavorted through the kitchen and mingled with strong cooking smells before all continued onward, wafting faintly through casement windows that opened onto the back gardens, above a group of adolescent boys that huddled around their leader. And that's where Hiram's father found him: behind the servant's pantry, passing among

his friends a long-stemmed pipe full of deadweed that Hiram had bought from the family gardener.

“Out! All of you! Now!” Saar bellowed, as Hiram’s friends scattered like pigeons out into the twilight. “Not you!” he barked at his son, who had started to get up but fell backwards into the dirt with fright.

Saar shouted at his son about the “evils of the weed” and something about “weak willed idiots,” although Hiram continued to protest that he had not smoked the smelly pipe himself—having used the other boys as test subjects first—and despite the fact that Saar was known to sneak the occasional pipe of cut leaf tobacco out beyond the hedges in the ornamental garden. But Saar bin Raanan, normally a solemn, high-ranking member of the Lecolline Merchant Guild, was scary and imposing when angered, and he brooked no argument from his cowering young son as he dashed the pipe and its smelly contents to the pavestones, crushing the smoldering mess under his boot heel.

“But you do it!” Hiram squeaked, and realized his error even before his red-faced father had hauled him to his feet by his lapels and shoved him up against the towering stone wall of the house.

Saar’s bull-like grimace came so close that the boy felt the heat from his father’s breath as a fleck of spittle escaped the clenched jaw and grazed Hiram’s cheek. “What I do is none of your business, boy,” he growled. “A pipe of tobacco is nothing compared to deadweed. If I ever find you with that stuff again I’ll give you such a tan you won’t sit for a week.” Saar blew out his cheeks in disgust and let go of his son, who slumped back against the wall for support.

“Deadweed’s a drug for fools and wastrels. It dulls the senses and rots the will. And it’s one of the few things the damnable wizards have got right: there’s no better way to lose control of your

mind than from smoking that foul weed.” Saar thumped his thick forefinger on his son’s head.

“Do you want a demon to take up residence in that skull of yours?”

Hiram shook his head, torn between his father’s skewering gaze and an overpowering desire to look away, and he mumbled, “No, sir.” He repeated it more loudly at his father’s insistence while forcing his head upward to look, if not entirely into his father’s angry eyes, at least at the gray-whiskered chin.

“Good. Because that’s what can happen to people who smoke that poison.”

“Y-yes, sir,” Hiram stammered.

Saar recognized the pipe of course, and stormed away to find the gardener after ordering his son to stay in his quarters for the remainder of the party. Hiram later found out that his father had sacked the man on the spot, kicked him off the property and had him run out of the city for selling the drug to his son.

“That’s not fair, it’s stupid—I didn’t do anything,” Hiram grumbled to himself as he stalked off through the kitchens and into the crowded main rooms of the house, forgetting in his angry embarrassment to maintain the cool façade that usually made him seem older than his fourteen years. He had heard stories about deadweed before but considered most of them farfetched. *Just a bunch of old sailor’s tales.* The simpleton gardener certainly wasn’t possessed by any demon. Besides, his parents’ aversion to magicians tainted whatever they said on the subject.

“This’d be a backwater village without magecraft,” Hiram muttered, grabbing a canapé from a liveried servant as he stormed through the solarium. *They’re fearful, all of them. Even the king.*

Most of the rich and powerful in the capital city of Lecolline spoke poorly of the magicians, at least behind their backs. *Bunch of hypocrites. Use magic but shun the magicians.* In Califar, as with many Rim countries, the noble classes and the merchants avoided using or learning magic,

and feared to allow the mages to become overly powerful. Stability had been reached between the hereditary nobles, the merchants, the wizard guilds and the priesthood. Out of concern for this balance, the merchants and nobles took great care to avoid giving up any political power to the mages.

Hiram wasn't paying attention and ran headlong into Magister Ravi bin Jabril, a well-known scholar of Saar's acquaintance, invited so he would bring to the party his beautiful and available daughter.

"Look where you're going!" protested the academic as he clutched his wife's arm to keep his balance, but the scowling Hiram had already brushed past them. "Rowdy young man..." The older man self-consciously brushed the brocade on his ornately gilded jacket—still deemed acceptable by his wife, though dark European tail coats had lately overtaken the midworld styles.

His wife Raisa sniffed disapprovingly at the hunched shoulders of the disappearing teen and muttered to her husband, "That one is so unlike his brother," as she turned to grab a handful of grapes from one of the many tables of piled-high sweetmeats and fruits. Yurova saw the exchange and quickly approached the magister and his wife. She mollified them by praising their daughter Helena's many virtues, and isn't she a darling young woman, and wouldn't it be lovely to see Helena and Malik become close?

Raisa turned her sour expression into a broad smile that emphasized the gap between her two front teeth. "Oh, yes, that would be splendid—your Malik is such a good young man," she agreed, thinking of the difference between Ravi's paltry salary at the university and the much expanded financial circles of Saar and Yurova. "We really should encourage Helena and Malik to get to know each other better." Raisa and Yurova strode off arm in bangled arm to find their favored children, their layered gowns a rolling sea of foam green and black.

Ignoring his mother's brief but stern glare, Hiram sullenly huffed past his oblivious older brother, past clusters of young women in bodices and hoop skirts and young men in dark tail coats and trousers, and up the stone stairs to his rooms, banging the ornately carved banisters with a clenched fist as he went and wondering how *those people* could be his family.

His busy parents treated him decently, at times with tenderness and—though Hiram was in no mood to admit it—occasionally with fleeting expressions of parental love, but in general he was ignored and left to his own devices. He had all the advantages of the second children of the wealthy: an expensive home, fancy clothing, attendants to tutor him in the arts and sciences. *As long as I stay out of the way. They'd never even talk to me if I didn't disturb their fawning over Malik.* He picked up an embroidered cushion from a chair and hurled it across his bedroom. *Why couldn't I have been firstborn?*

It didn't take much brooding in his room before Hiram left off disparaging his parentage and returned to fixating about his father denying him a chance at the pipe. Hiram didn't even like the smell of deadweed, which burned greasily and smelled worse than a dead sewer rat. But he'd always liked tobacco pipes—redolent of chimneys and the fires of industry and exotic stories of Afarian factory towns—and pacing in his room worked Hiram into a frenzy. He had to have a pipe of his own, and he fumed and railed at the unfairness of it all.

This fixation had caused him grief before. For many years, Hiram had recognized that this tendency toward obsession needed to be hidden and controlled to maintain the trust and influence he had carefully nurtured among his peers. But occasionally he would become consumed with desire until he could not stop himself from plotting to obtain what he sought: another child's toy, a polished ram's horn, books on magic carefully concealed from his parents, or some dusty relic on a store shelf which Hiram contrived to steal and hide away.

He told himself to calm down. He could find another pipe. There were smoke shops that displayed carved clay ones imported from overseas. Hiram tried to get the thought out of his head.

Pipe.

He grabbed a book off his shelf, opened to a random place and plopped down on his bed to read. After several minutes, he noticed that the book was upside down.

Pipe. Brown stem. White bowl.

Frustrated with himself, Hiram splashed some water on his face from the basin that the maid filled each morning and night. He lied down and closed his eyes, but he saw pipes—long stem, short stem, carved or smooth bowls, smoke curling up to the ceiling and pooling in fantastic shapes before dissipating into thickened and scented air.

Pipe.

Hiram got up, grabbed his cap and a dark coat and padded down the back stairs of his parents' enormous house. He needn't have bothered being quiet: the party was going full force and a quartet had struck up a lively dance. He sneered at the thought of the beautiful children of wealthy socialites facing off in awkward lines of couples, prancing through pompous choreography. "Who needs it? Not me," he muttered, as he left through the back servant's door and marched down the hilly streets toward the shops.

Too late: the sun had disappeared behind the hills, and the shops were closing for the night. Nevertheless he continued walking. As the lamplighters lit the oil lamps street by street, filling the narrow walkways with their soft yellow glow, Hiram lowered his brimmed cap, turned up his collar against the growing chill and shrugged his shoulders for protection against the evening breezes that streamed over the hills.

“Evenin’, young sir!” one of the lamplighters called out. Hiram ignored the man and kept his head down.

He walked the streets aimlessly but found little of interest, until he felt as though the urge that had sent him on his quest had abated. He was thinking of turning back for home when he came upon a lively café he didn’t recognize, on a side street that he had not noticed before. Hiram stopped to peer over the low stone wall. The café had a small outdoor courtyard with a dozen or so small tables lit by twinkling candles. Servers headed in and out through a large and open wooden doorway to the inside of the café with plates of food and goblets of wine and ale. An intriguing mix of people milled about in the courtyard in front of a large open hearth; some standing, some sitting, and all talking and laughing.

Still slouching in the flickering darkness outside the wall, Hiram spotted a small group of young adults who looked out of place. They were far too elegantly dressed for such an ordinary café, clearly higher nobles out for an evening’s carefree entertainment with the commoners. There were four of them: three young women and one man—their escort, thought Hiram.

He shrank back into the shadows and watched as the nobles laughed at private jokes, envious of their poise and sophistication. Hiram, normally observant, later remembered nothing of importance about the man or the other two women, for all of his attention was riveted on the third woman in the group—a tall and exquisitely dressed beauty of perhaps seventeen or eighteen years, with dark skin, glossy black hair and strikingly large eyes that reflected sparks in the candles and fire light.

He watched her every movement in the way that only an infatuated young man can. The way her laughter made her dress shift back and forth, and how her bone-white lace sleeve cuffs accented her hands as she gestured, revealing her thin wrist and a hint of a sculpted lower arm.

Hiram sighed, painfully aware of the huge difference a few years made at his age.

He caught her name—Persis—and immediately jolted out of his reverie.

Persis? Persis bas Eloia, the king's daughter?

It was not a common name. King Dothan and First Lady Eloia had ruled Califar for many years, and of their children, only their daughter Persis had survived. Her older brother had died tragically in an accident at sea while on a trade mission, some years earlier.

He was entranced by Persis' calm and striking beauty, and unaware of his movements he edged around the break in the wall and into the café courtyard, closer and closer to where the group of young nobles stood.

They were tall—Hiram was not destined to be a tall man like his brother, and having just recently reached his fourteenth year, he desperately awaited a growth spurt. His secretive demeanor tended to make him slouch and appear shorter than he was, so his impression looking up at this esteemed group of nobles was that of staring up at the giant statues of heroes that lined the outer edge of the Corune temple.

He found himself close to the group and edging near the toweringly tall male, who appeared to be a few years older than Persis and carved out of a combination of hardened flesh, marble and iron. At least, that's the way it felt to Hiram as the young man made some expansive gesture with a gloved hand that held a large stein of ale while telling the end of a story that the three women must have already known, for they laughed in advance of the joke when his elbow connected solidly with Hiram's nose. Hiram sprawled to the flagstone pavement with a dizzying crunch, immediately followed by half a stein of ale that soaked his head and shoulders but did nothing to wash away the blood that had already started to drip from his nose.

He spluttered and cursed angrily from his vantage point on the floor—though a part of him

couldn't help noticing the edge of a thin slip peeking out from beneath Persis' silk dress. To the young nobles' credit, they were all apologetic and appalled to cause Hiram such distress. The tall young man helped Hiram to his feet and a server quickly brought a towel. Persis herself wiped the ale and blood from his face, and he immediately turned red with embarrassment and stuttered his thanks and his apologies for causing such a scene.

"Oh no, it's entirely our fault, isn't it, Harrod?" said Persis, turning to the young man who frowned a bit as if he couldn't decide whether Hiram merited further attention.

"What? Oh, yes, of course," Harrod responded. "Quite my fault—I didn't see you there at my elbow. You must have just come in. Listen, let me buy you some supper."

Hiram mumbled something in response and took a second towel from the café's owner, who had immediately rushed over to ensure that his wealthy patrons were not upset. At a nod from Persis, Harrod strode off into the interior of the café, calling out, "Be right back," and leaving Hiram alone with Persis and the two other young ladies who might as well have been gladiators in pleated skirts for all the notice he took of them.

The young women fawned over Hiram as one would over a child, embarrassing him further. "What's his name?" whispered one to another.

"He looks familiar."

"Are you all right?" asked Persis. "I'm sorry about this—we didn't see you there."

"I—I'm fine," stammered Hiram, who was having a hard time maintaining eye contact with Persis. He realized that the princesses' height and his shortness left him looking straight ahead at her chest, furthering his embarrassment. Silently he cursed himself and shook his head, but this only flung droplets of ale from his wet hair.

Forcing himself to stand as tall as he could and look into Persis' eyes—blue, deep and

warm—he began to introduce himself but was distracted by the unusual situation of having a beautiful woman pay attention to him, and so he only managed to blurt out in his reedy voice, “I’m Malik’s brother.”

One of the other ladies laughed. “Oh, and do you have a name yourself?”

“Hush now, Tara, be nice,” said Persis, but she was also smiling by this time.

This was not going well at all, thought Hiram, and he felt himself starting to deflate. “Hiram. Hiram bin Saar. Malik is my brother. Perhaps you know him.” Surprisingly, this caught their attention.

“Saar bin Raanan is your father, yes? Leader of the Merchant’s Guild—we’ve met him and your mother several times at the palace, haven’t we?” The other ladies agreed. “I’m Persis bas Eloia. These are my friends Tara and Lorelei.”

Hiram nodded and made a slight bow—less than perhaps he should, but he feared that his nose might start bleeding again. “Pleased to meet you, Lady Persis. And you both as well.” He nodded towards Tara and Lorelei, who giggled.

She smiled and responded, “Please call me Persis, and I’ll call you Hiram.” He blushed and nodded.

One of her friends leaned forward and whispered something in her ear that Hiram couldn’t quite hear. Something about his brother? Persis nodded and smiled again in Hiram’s direction, causing him to feel a little lightheaded. She put a hand on his arm, and he nearly shuddered. “We really must be going soon, but please accept our apologies for tonight. I’m having a gathering of friends at the palace this Saturday evening just after sundown. Please come and join us, and bring your brother Malik. I’m quite looking forward to having you introduce him to us, and of course to seeing you again under better circumstances.”

Hiram stopped, as if another half-stein of ale had splashed in his face. Of course—they weren't interested in him at all, just his older brother. How stupid of him to have imagined otherwise. But Hiram recovered quickly and gave a lopsided smile. It hurt, but perhaps he could use this to his advantage.

“Of course—thank you. Malik and I will be pleased to attend.” He bowed stiffly and backed away from the trio, bumping into an overladen Harrod, who came out into the courtyard balancing two plates of food and a couple of steins of ale. The platters clattered to the ground, spilling turkey, grapes, nuts and cheese all over the floor.

“Oh good heavens,” spat Harrod in irritation, as he set the steins down on a table and brushed ale from his doublet and waistcoat.

Feeling like a four-foot rodent, Hiram stammered another rapid apology and without waiting for further words from the obviously angered Harrod, he turned and picked his way around the plates and spilled food toward the courtyard exit and away from the nobles, as servers converged from all directions and patrons at the other tables turned to stare.

Something caught the corner of Hiram's eye—a thin plume of smoke rising from a table near the exit in the stone courtyard wall, where two elderly men had stood up, craning their necks to watch the spectacle unfold as the café owner and his staff stumbled around the feet of the patrons, bumping into them and each other as they hurriedly tried to clean up the mess.

Resting on the table was an old carved pipe, a thin bluish stream trickling from the bowl and twining upward in trails barely visible against the candles and hearth light. Hiram glanced quickly at the men, whose backs were to him, still watching the entertaining spectacle by the hearth. Without thinking or taking time to examine the pipe Hiram reached out his hand, grabbed it off the table and eased around the corner of the wall, forcing himself to walk—not run—back

up the café's narrow alley to the street. But as soon as he rounded a building corner and left the café's line of sight, he broke into a rapid and exhilarated run, clattering up the deserted streets past shuttered shops. Spilled sparks leapt like fireflies from the still-smoldering pipe and blinked briefly in the darkness between the pools of lamplight, as Hiram headed back through the town toward home.