

A Desperate Flight

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A loud knocking on the door to the shop downstairs awoke him from a restful sleep. In no particular hurry he cast a cantrip to light the lamp on the stand by his bed, found his spectacles, and put them on. He reached for a robe to cover his nightclothes, took up the lamp and, attempting to rub the grogginess out of his eyes, made his way down the stairs to answer the door. *Who could it be at this hour? Likely another mage, driven by thirst for arcane lore and looking for a rare tome*, he thought in wry amusement. He knew well the type, for he was one himself.

The knocking came again as he reached the door. “Just a moment!” he called out as he slid the bolt aside and cracked open the door as far as the chain would allow. Peering out into the night, he queried, “Yes? Can I help you?” He made out several shadowed figures, the closest of which turned a hooded head towards him and replied in a soft, feminine voice, “My apologies for waking you at such a late hour, good sir, but I am in search of a set of rare tomes. I heard that you might have them. I am prepared to pay you quite handsomely for your trouble.”

“A set of rare tomes, you say?” His curiosity was piqued, and the mention of gold didn’t hurt either. “Wait a moment while I unchain the door, good lady.” He promptly did so and opened the door wide, gesturing for the woman and her companions to enter. She was tall as he and slender, dressed in fine wizard’s robes of dark blue silk. As she walked into his little shop—the floor space and walls crowded with shelf upon shelf full of books—and into the lamplight, she pulled back the hood of her cloak. Hair the color of spun gold spilled in soft planes down her shoulders. She had a porcelain complexion and eyes that were icy blue. Her two companions entered close behind her. They were rather burly looking individuals. Telamar assumed they were her bodyguards. This far from the goblin kingdom of Urazor, the small city of Arengil was relatively peaceful. But even Arengil had its cutpurses, thugs, and ne’er-do-wells who would find a woman as beautiful and finely dressed as this a grand prize indeed.

With a mental shake, he dragged his attention back to the business at hand. “What specifically are you looking for, my lady. It may be that I have it, though I can make no promises.” She regarded him intently as she replied, “Oh, I’m sure you have it. My source is reliable.” He nodded sagely; that was not surprising. But her next words caused the blood to drain from his face and set him spluttering. “You have come into possession of the *Lost Essays of Sulaman of Ulantra* and I would have them. I am prepared to pay 100,000 gold pieces,” her tone as casual as if she were placing an order for the *Collected Works of Lassiter the Loquacious*. “What? How did you... 100,000 gold pieces?!...but...Madame, I could not possibly part with them, not even for such a large sum. Surely, you can understand.”

It was then that he noticed the silver brooch clasping the cloak around her shoulders, an eye set within the curves of a crescent moon on a field of midnight blue, marking her as a wizard of Volaria. Of course! How could he have been such a fool? He had been too open, too careless about the nature of his research. He should have known the Volarians would want to claim the lost art of oneiromancy for themselves. Dream magic was a subtle yet powerful art. And the Volarians acted like they still ran the continent, as if they still had a monopoly over the practice of magic from one end of Aurin to the other. Naturally, they would covet the ancient tomes of Sulaman, as would many other mages besides.

The woman sighed in resignation, but her look was resolute. “I had hoped to acquire the *Essays* peacefully, but you give me no choice. Such powerful secrets cannot be left in the hands an inexperienced mageling.” He started to utter a protest when she looked to his right. He had just enough time to glance in that direction to see the blurred motion of a large fist before he found himself crashing into a nearby bookshelf, his head ringing. One of her bodyguards! In his shock at the woman’s demand, he had missed the man moving into a good position to strike. As he attempted to regain his senses and scramble away, his head erupted in agony. He tried to scream, but no sound came from his throat. He could feel her ransacking his brain! The last thoughts that crossed his mind before he blacked out were that his mentor had died in vain and the lost art of oneiromancy would fall into unworthy hands.

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Telamar bolted upright in bed, horrified to instant wakefulness. His nightclothes were drenched in sweat and his heart was trying to pound its way out of his chest. *It was just a nightmare*, he thought as he

sat there wide-eyed and breathing hard, trying to calm the beating of his heart. Or was it? It had been so real. Too real. Since he had begun studying Sulaman's *Essays*, some of his dreams had a prophetic quality to them. The dreams only showed possible futures, he knew. But this dream had had a sense of certainty about it...and an urgency. He tossed the sheets carelessly aside and scrambled out of bed. In a frenzy of activity, Telamar got dressed and packed up as many of his most valued possessions as he could. He must not let the tomes fall into the wrong hands.

He was just slinging the strap of his magical satchel over his shoulder when he heard knocking on the front door of his shop. He froze for an instant, then rushed to the window of his second floor bedroom overlooking the street and looked out. There were three cloaked figures standing in front of his door.

He had reached the window just in time to catch a glimpse of more shadowy figures slipping around the sides of his shop, surrounding it. It was too late; he would not be able to get out on foot. And likely the Volarians had seen to it that the normal modes of magical travel were blocked as well. Nor was fighting an option, for his offensive spells were rather limited. Yet he could not allow them to have Sulaman's *Essays*. There had to be something he could do! Desperately, he racked his brain for something, anything that could get him out of this trap.

The knocking came again, exactly as it had in his dream. He was running out of time. If only he could *gate* himself out of here. They wouldn't be expecting that. That was precisely the problem, however; they weren't expecting it because they knew he wasn't capable of casting such a spell yet. But was a spell the only thing that could create a gate? A reckless grin crept onto his face, the kind that meant he was about to do something incredibly foolish...or ingenious. It was stupid, and it was dangerous, but it just might work.

As he turned from the window and rushed out of his bedroom, past the stairs, and into his mentor's alchemical laboratory he heard a loud crash and the sound of splintering wood as the door downstairs was kicked open. Hurriedly, he knelt before a large chest against the wall and worked a minor spell that would unlock it. He yanked off the lock, threw open the chest, and began to hunt through its contents. Extra beakers and vials went shattering to the floor behind him, followed by a set of tongs, a jar of mercury, a pair of insulating gloves, and a mundane burlap sack. Where were they? He knew they were in here somewhere.

"Ah hah!" he crowed as he lifted the two items he had been looking for out of the chest. A *portable hole* and a *bag of holding*; one looked like a simple circle of cloth and the other like a normal bag, but both were enchanted to be large extradimensional storage spaces that belied their size. Put the *bag of holding* into the *portable hole* and a rift to the Astral Plane would be torn inside, sending the bag and the hole into a void to be lost forever. But placing the *portable hole* in the *bag of holding* would tear open a gate, which should suck him into the Astral Plane. Well, in theory at least. People generally didn't attempt this sort of thing on purpose and those who did so on accident generally were not heard from again. But he was a wizard, and he had some knowledge of the planes. With any luck he would be able to navigate the Astral Plane and find his way back.

He could hear feet pounding up the stairs now, accompanied by angry shouts and curses. He took the time to adjust his spectacles, whispered a prayer to Voden, the patron deity of wizards, and carefully placed the *portable hole* into the *bag*. The next thing he knew he was sprawled inelegantly across the large oaken table in the center of the laboratory. Stars were dancing before his eyes and there was a loud roaring in his ears from the explosion that had sent him flying. He grabbed his aching head as he sat up and was relieved to find that his spectacles were still miraculously in place. No sooner had he done so than his body began to slide forward, faster and faster by the moment. He saw the gate; it looked more like a roiling vortex really. And it was pulling him forward, sucking him in. He wasn't so scared that he couldn't feel a little gratified that his theory had proven correct so far. By the time he reached the end of the long, rectangular table he had picked up enough momentum to hurtle through the air and into the gate.