



DEMONMASTER

JIM

Night of Dreams

There was a time when raiders plundered the Earth, evil walked everywhere, and justice was chained, helpless in an abandoned dungeon... then the dark times came.

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Jim shot straight up. He had no idea why he was laying down, or where.

“Be calm, sir. Be calm you are safe.” A woman hovered over him in a common worker’s shift, stained from greasy foods cooked in a kitchen.

Jim’s head was spinning, he’d obviously been drinking, but as usual, he couldn’t remember much of what had transpired the night before. He rose slowly to a sitting position. His head throbbed. There was a distinctive creak. The rope bed he was on seemed to be of sturdy construction. It also appeared to be the only piece of furniture in the room fitting this description. There was a table, old and well used. A few rickety chairs in need of serious repair. He glanced about. The man who joined the timbers of this one-room house was either half-blind or had a genuine inability to hit a nail without bending it. The one definite thing he did notice was... he couldn’t have been drinking in this room last night, the place smelled too clean.

“How did I...”

“We found you outside in the street and we carried you in.”

“You shouldn’t have,” he remarked. He reached for his belt and was satisfied to find the coin purse still attached. He fished out a silver coin and tossed it to the woman. “For your trouble.” He immediately started looking for an exit. Jim didn’t do well with poor people. He simply couldn’t understand why they accepted being poor. Poor meant you were using your skills correctly. Even being around poor peasants made him uncomfortable.

A small boy even more poorly dressed than his mother, if such a thing was possible, peeked out from behind her. “You’re the Ozymandias aren’t you. I’ve heard about you from the stories.” His eyes were lit up with a glow that only dwelled in boys of his age. It was a glow of delight.

Jim cradled his head. “My head hurts too much for me to say it’s an honor, so let me simply say... yeah, it’s me.”

The boy whole face seemed like it was glowing. “You’re the one who hunts monsters. The one who has the demon living inside him.”

Jim tried to say something, but he was struck by the woman’s face. It displayed a grimace of both alarm and horror. She held the boy back and he tried to walk around her to approach him. “We don’t want any trouble,” she muttered.

He adjusted his attire. Many people had described him as half leather and half buckle. There was a buckle at his left shoulder and a dozen more holding the jacket closed across the front. The bottom one almost ran into the larger buckle holding on his sword belt. It was a pleasant brown shade with matching boots running up over his knees. A white sash of a swordmaster was draped below his last buckle, it was probably what made the boy recognize him. It certainly featured in all the stories people told about him. The White Sword Master.

“There won’t be any trouble, I assure you,” Jim remarked. He held his head with both hands as if he was expecting it to split open any moment. “You’re perfectly safe in the daylight... and I intend to be out of here long before the sun goes down.” He picked up his sword and using it almost as an old man would a

cane, staggered to his feet. The woman backpaddled to the far side of the room, dragging the boy by the arm, even as he struggled to escape her grasp.

Jim reached down into his purse and removed a gold Talen. Staggering, he left it on a chair and proceeded toward the front door. He almost didn't manage to open it. It was so poorly constructed he couldn't seem to make both the latch and the hinges work at the same time. Finally, the door surrendered and swung open. There, in the street, was a welcoming committee already awaiting him. From their appearance, they seemed to be the town fathers.

One of them, dressed in fine raiment's, stepped forward. "My lord Ozymandias of House Issicar... " he began.

"It just Swordmaster Ozymandias," he quickly corrected him, "I hold no lands and no title."

"We'd like to know when you plan on completing the assignment. Perhaps you can enlighten us?"

Jim's eyes squinted to narrow slits. "Have we discussed payment?"

A more corpulent man stepped forward. He had the grim look and the attitude of a shopkeeper. "We already paid you the first half last night in the tavern. Not that you would remember since you spent almost all of it on drink."

The events were clouded over in Jim's mind, but he had some recollection of a tavern. The owner made a nice little ale. The reference to nighttime helped color in the rest. Jim was often forced to stay drunk at night. It kept him in control and kept his demon, Reaper. Forced him to stay in his cage. Otherwise, his business with the town would have been over before it had begun. The plan generally worked as only his demon passed out from drinking. But sadly, Jim was always left to pay for the affair the next morning.

"Boris, Boris," The well-dressed man, the town's chief magistrate, shook his head, "Let's give our guest a little room to breathe this morning, shall me? No reason to be offensive."

Jim was sure he didn't look at all well. He might even appear a little green around the edges. "Let us go over our arrangement one more time if you please." Jim straightened up and with a flourish, dropped his sword back into his scabbard. The fine silver-inlaid finials of the handguard reflected the morning light. "You know, so we are all on the same page."

The leader leaned back and whispered to his associates. When the conference was completed, he swung around. "You'd agreed to venture into the Forest of Tears. There is something... " he choked slightly "inside the forest letting forth creatures of all descriptions who are laying waste to...

"Land, homes, making livestock sick, withering crops..." Jim recited for them.

"No," the chief magistrate corrected him, "They are interfering with business."

"Scaring away the customers," the rotund merchant added.

Jim's shoulders dropped. "Well, you are right," he responded, "as the town fathers, you shouldn't allow those kinds of things."

The gaggle of civic leaders all nodded their agreement vigorously.

“Last night, did we discuss the cause of these events?”

The chief magistrate shrugged. “How would we know? the Forest of Tears is far too dangerous for us to venture into.”

The portly merchant shook his head. “Especially now. That’s what we hired you to do.”

Jim sighed. “Naturally.” He’d met these kinds of town dignitary’s before. They were never going to get their feet wet. And never paid attention to anything people were telling them unless it revolved around the price of corn, the daily output of the peasants, or how many goods still needed to be sold. Jim straightened his sword belt. “And which way is the Forest of Tears?”

The group, as if made of one mind, pointed to the north side of town. Except for one small gentleman with a prodigious beard, who Jim guessed was a dwarf. He was pointing the other way. His associates gave him a curious stare and he quickly adjusted and pointed in the opposite direction. “Sorry,” he remarked. Looking mostly at the council members and not addressing his remarks to Jim at all. “I always get my directions mixed up when I’m not underground.”

The White Sword Master tried to kick some of the dust off his boots. A small cloud appeared and then settled on the road. “Well then, I’ll be off. Is there anything else I should know before I set off?”

The group glanced at each other and then, in unison, shook their heads. Jim turned with a flourish and sauntered off to the east. The whole group seemed to clear their throats at once. Jim skidded to a stop and then changed direction. “Right, north. Almost forgot. I’ll just be off then.”

It didn’t take long for Jim to get out of town. He passed by several small farms which seemed to be struggling, their crops seemed stunted as if they were lethargic. Jim got the distinct impression they would almost prefer to have been planted anywhere else. It wasn’t long before he discovered the reason why. The trees in the forest were warped, twisted versions of foliage. Even though the trees were not overly crowded with leaves, it seemed particularly dark beneath their distorted branches.

As he approached, he passed the mutilated corpse of a cow, its entrails spilled out upon the ground. But the scary part was its eyes. Whatever had killed it, had terrified it first.

Most woodlands have a peculiar smell to them. The whiff of pinecones, the aroma of apples, the scent of bark peeling off the trunks. But this wrenched copse of trees had more of an odor of rotting vegetation. A scent more of familiar in a swamp than in a living forest. The ground seemed dry, but the air was full of the signs of rotting vegetation. In fact, everything inside the trees seems wrong. It was deathly quiet. No sounds of insects and even the gazouillis of birds were missing. Due to the odor, Jim naturally expected to hear the deep drumbeats of bullfrogs, but even this was absent.

There was one surprisingly well-traveled road which bisected the wood. Jim decided to follow it. At least it gave him the illusion of being safer. *I like it. It has a certain ambiance to it.* Jim heard Reaper’s grinding tones in his mind.

Jim’s face turned red. “What are you doing up? It’s still the middle of the day.”

Darkness is darkness, it knows no time of day.

“Does that mean you are going to help?”

Jim heard a spasm of laughter in his head. *Why would I do that? Demons aren't known... let's be honest... for their helping qualities.*

Jim often worried he was acquiring too many of Reaper's less reputable habits. He'd only been in a forest a few minutes and he already was tired of searching for whatever was supposed to be out here. There were times when he regretted killing the demon who made his reputation. If he had known he would acquire the demon's soul, he would have dropped his sword and run in the opposite direction.

Let's go to the nearest tavern and interrogate the locals. Get one of them to tell us where this thing is. Save all this tedious walking around.

Jim snarled. “Shut up, Reaper.”

We could torture one of the locals, that would be fun.

“I said, shut up.”

Why do you always go looking for trouble? Reaper's voice had a grating quality, like someone speaking with a mouthful of sharp rocks. *You should be looking for luxury... not trouble.*

“I don't know why I keep you around,” Jim remarked.

If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, we go together.

Around the bend, Jim spotted a building. His heart leaped into his throat. He hadn't expected to find what he was looking for so quickly. Drawing his sword, he crept up to it.

Craning his neck to see around the dense, twisted trees, he noticed it was no simple log cabin of a woodcutter. It was constructed with several floors and a tower peeking through the main roof. A grand, but evil, wizard's tower no doubt. He crept closer.

His brow furrowed. “Great dragon droppings, no. It can't be.”

Yes, it is.

Out here in the forest, a Citadel of the Faithful. Jim supposed this was a good a place as any to put it. Outside of town away from temptation. Away from the evils of town life. Now, Jim thought to himself, how do I get around it without being seen?

The tell-tale sound of a door hinge creaking dispelled the silence. Jim froze, but even now he knew it was too late. “Damn and blast it. A curse upon... well, everybody.”

There was a cry... and a soft giggle. “Crap,” Jim spat. “Don't tell me.”

Yes, oh, yes. All nine levels of Hell favor us, my friend.

“A temple of healing virgins.” Jim looked frantically for an escape route. Jim had always believed the structure of holy garments was designed to make it hard to remove them. Yet these girls managed not only to make themselves naked, but they did it while running full tilt toward him. At least some part of him was impressed.

Sheathing his sword, he tried to make a break for it. But before he could make more than a dozen steps, they were all over him caressing him with their bare bodies. "Reaper will you knock it off?"

Is it my fault they find you irresistibly handsome?

The girls continued to pay no attention to Jim's ranting. "But you're making them do this." He protested.

Relax and enjoy the experience.

Jim's face blushed as the girls rubbed him with a very non-ascetic glow in their eyes. He struggled to buckle the straps back up on the front of his jerkin. One of the reasons why he wore this specific style of leatherware was because it was time-consuming to remove. But with these girls had a certain skill at undressing, and he suddenly found the buckles to be a limited deterrent. It was a losing battle. The girls were unbuckling him faster than he could do them up again. "Reaper, I have no intention of debauching an entire holy order!" he shouted.

Suit yourself, but you don't know what you're missing.

The girls got a shocked and then formed an embarrassed expression on their faces, almost in mid-grope. They took a few tentative steps backward, covering themselves. Once they got out of arm's reach, they bolted back to the door at a high speed. Most of them managed to scoop up their clothes on the way in. A few missed but were so panicked they simply continued running. The door slammed and the forest when back to its usual silence.

Jim finished buckling himself back up. "You surprised me, Reaper," he remarked. "I didn't think you give in so easily."

I'll give you a break this one time.

His face grew an annoyed scowl. "What's the catch?"

No catch, honest.

"You're never nice. NEVER. And I know you are always lying when you use the word honest. What's the catch?"

You'll have to come back this way to return to town.

"You bastard."

Count on it.



Forests tend not to be too extensive. There were always some woodcutters at the edges nibbling away at them. Jim imagined these trees grabbing anyone approaching them with an ax and strangling the life out of them violently. At least, it seemed this way to him. The expanse of the trees seemed endless. It was a maze and tangle of briars and undergrowth with the trees so misshapen they might have been

undead. Occasionally he'd glance at one, thinking it to be a regular maple or an oak. But on closer inspection, it turned out to be a deformed as all the others.

Jim's reserve of energy was beginning to give out. His feet were aching, the muscles in his thighs were cramping, his eyes were watering from the vile smell, and his knees felt like they were ready to split open like a ripe melon. His trek seemed no closer to a conclusion than when he started it... over an hour ago. Reaper had been no help, keeping up an endless diatribe on the most grotesque of subjects.

"Don't you ever think of anything else?" he muttered.

Yes, Reaper announced, but we can pick up those discussions when we get back to the girls.

Jim held his finger up to silence the demon. It didn't make any difference; Reaper only spoke in his head. He slapped his hand down, disgusted at his own foolishness. Turning a corner, his eyes laid on a hollow. Buried among some moss-covered boulders and the remains of a tree trunk was a cave. It appeared used recently. Vines growing near the opening were snapped off, broken by whatever unnatural creature used the entrance. "What do you think is inside?"

Hard to say. Smell the air.

Jim held his nose up and sniffed taking in a whiff of the local fragrances. "I can't tell."

You have no nose for anything, do you? No matter, it's nothing to get excited over. It the average stink of you worthless humans.

Jim leaned back. "Men? What would someone be doing living in a cave way out here?"

Don't ask me to understand human motivations. It's not my forte. I tend to work much better at corrupting those motivations. Realigning their desires for more purposeful pursuits.

He rested his hand on his sword hilt. "You mean corrupting people."

Don't knock it, Reaper protested. Without us demons, you people would never get anywhere. You have no ambition.

"I still don't get why someone would live all the way out here." Jim ducked behind some bushes as the sole inhabitant ventured forth.

Does that answer your question?

The old woman was dressed in dirty rags which once must have been... well, less dirty rags. Her corpse-like frame ended in nails which appear to never have been trimmed in three lifetimes. Her gray hair, what there was of it, was a tangle appearing more like a mesh of thorns than tresses. Half her teeth were missing, and her eyes glowed an ominous red. Native to these woods or not, she seemed more a citizen of the underworld than of these climes.

Not my type at all, Reaper declared, much too much sag for my tastes.

"Bottle it." Jim didn't even realize he said it out loud until the creature turned to face him.

Jim rolled his eyes. “Clap. Well, let’s get this over with.” He stepped forward, drawing his sword. The steel sang as it vibrated in the wind, dancing its way from out the scabbard.

“Have you come here to die?” the old crone asked.

He took a step forward, his weapon at the ready. “It’s more the other way around.” he waved his sword with a flourish, ending the great sweeping gesture with the point directed toward her heart. As he finished his hands went numb and then his wrist felt a burning pain. Unable to hold his sword, it clattered to the forest floor.

Jim’s face was a knot of anger. “What in the name of all the Hells are you doing?” Without any will of his own, Jim’s hands flew up in the air, an abject sign of surrender.

Are you kidding, Reaper protested, we could get hurt.

“Coward.”

The old hag cackled with fierce pleasure. “Your demon is wise.”

“You can hear him?”

“Do you not hear the voices of your fellow men?” She waited for a reply, but not receiving one, continued. “Yes, I can hear him, foolish mortal. Tell me, how would you like to die? I’ll let you choose the method. Although it will happen slowly no matter what you decide.”

The White Sword Master could hear Reaper laugh again. *Besides, there is nothing to worry about.*

“What do you mean?”

The old woman gesticulated wildly with her hands. “You’re wrong demon. Tremble before me. Quake in your very boots.”

She can’t hurt us.

Jim dropped his hands. “Explain.”

She is a creature of the night, a thing of dreams.

“Dreams usually mutilate cows?”

The night creatures reach into men’s souls, invading their dreams. They make manifest whatever they find there.

Jim shrugged. “So why isn’t she reaching into my mind, to attack me with my imagined terrors?”

All she finds when she reaches into your head is me. And even this one cannot fathom the depths of my depravity.

Jim put his hands down. “Okay. How is she killing things with their dreams?”

She just uses their dreams, idiot. Whatever she sees she has the power to make real.

“So, if you’re dreaming of a dragon, the next thing you know...”

One is eating you for lunch. Jim thought he heard a tinge of respect in Reaper's voice. *It's a nice gig. We might be able to put her to use.*

The hag let out a... well, I guess it would be best described as an unearthly scream. Or at least it would have been if she took it down a few notches. The frown on her face was one of pure distaste. "I, serve a mere mortal with a disembodied demon stuck in his skull? Don't make me laugh."

You will serve when I tell you to serve, animal.

She let out a blood-curdling scream. "This is my valley. Everything that lives here... everything that dies here, belongs to me." She stormed around, walking in a circle as if she was insane.

Kneel.

"Never."

You're about to have a medical problem.

The old hag stopped in her tracks and glanced at Jim as if he was the one playing with only a few of his cards. There was a hatred in her eyes which burned with the intensity of a flame in a smith's forge. Her mouth was frozen open. Her face was contorted. It was at this moment, she burst into flames.

Jim stepped back as the old woman let loose a shriek which could be heard several duchies away. Mercifully the affair was brief, and she was consumed before the last of her screeches finished reverberating off the trees.

Jim's face boiled with anger. "Are you kidding me? You could have done that from the start?" He fumed, kicking the dirt with his feet. "What took you so long?"

She might have been useful. If she'd have been more cooperative.

"Useful?"

You need to get a grip on yourself. The best way to dispatch your enemy is to make them your ally. Anything else is a waste of resources.

Jim stood for a moment in shock. The forest was dark and depressing. But what Reaper had said was truly terrifying. It was calm, reasoned, and worst of all... it made sense. How many kings and rulers had said the same thing? He's always thought such men wise, just and reasonable. Now... well, you tended to think differently when you share your skull with a demon from the lower pits. Jim's shoulders sank. "You could have at least saved me her head. How are we going to prove we completed our contract?"

The mortal generation... they just don't get us.

Jim stomped his feet. "What do you mean? You totally incinerated her?"

How else was I supposed to unlock my creativity?

"Reaper, I swear."

Swearing would be an improvement on your usual rhetoric. Would you like some assistance? A little advice from someone who can make a sailor blush.

Jim crossed his arms. "I'll be happy to curse for you if you tell me what we are going to do to convince the council we've completed the task. You usually have to bring something back to your employers to get the second half of the bounty."

Do you know your problem is?

Jim tapped his foot on the ground impatiently.

You have Restless Worrier Syndrome.



Jim forced his way through the undergrowth. He could see why people were respected as trailblazers. It wasn't a task he cared to repeat. It was slow going. He'd already have turned back if the forest didn't seem to close right behind him. But at least this time he knew where he was going.

All this work, just to avoid spending some time with those lovely girls... You know they'd probably thank you.

He pushed another branch of leaves away from his face. "We're not passing by the chapter house again. I told you I'm not debauching an entire religious order."

Don't you like girls?

Jim's face reddened. "Of course, I like girls."

So, you don't like it when they are naked?

"No, I find them especially attractive when they are naked." Jim stepped upon a rough stone and started hopping around on one foot. Rubbing the injured arch with his hands. "Look, I not talking to you about this."

You're mad at me because I destroyed your trophy. Your evidence for the council?

"Well, it wasn't your smartest move, but no."

Would you like me to reverse time for you, so we can go back and do it all again?

"Can you do that?"

No.

"You're a bastard."

Actually, I'm a demon... being a bastard doesn't have any perks.

"Yes, but you were an ugly mother..."

Even if you sweet talk me, I'm still not going to help.

Jim continued to push the vines and the branches out of the way. He'd simply have to keep going on his own. Unfortunately, it would be nightfall before we would be able to make it back into town. The council meeting would be quite interesting.

Setting a piece of cloth on the table before the council members, Jim unwrapped it carefully. Once it was open, Jim stood back and beamed proudly.

The corpulent shopkeeper leaned forward and sniffed. “What’s this?”

“You had a Night Hag. I took care of her.”

The shopkeeper shook his head. “This looks like nothing more than a pile of ash. How do we know this is more than simply the remains of a campfire?”

The Dwarf dignitary stepped forward. “Seems a little small for a pile of ashes from an old woman.” All the other council members nodded their heads in agreement.

“I thought you might say something along these lines.” Jim scooped up the couth and bundled it back up. “I guess there is nothing for it. You’ll have to follow me, and I’ll take you to her cave.”

The chief magistrate blinked several times in quick succession and cleared his throat. “Into the forest?”

The dwarf looked a Jim suspiciously. “How do we know you haven’t made a deal with this woman to lure us out there so we can be killed?” There was a rising chorus of agreement from the other council members. “No, no, no, no, absolutely not,” they concluded.

“And the second half of the bounty?”

The chief magistrate gave him a scornful look. “I’m afraid you’ll have to forgo the rest of your reward. There doesn’t seem sufficient evidence to warrant awarding you the second half.”

“I see.” Jim took a step back. “I was afraid you might take such a position.” He sighed. Jim spent a lot of time and energy trying to keep his demon under control. It was easy during the day when Reaper slept. Or when he was drunk. Funny how a fierce demon cannot hold his liquor. At night it took all of Jim’s strength, and he tended to tire quickly. But letting him out in a populated area was a terrible idea. There were still several towns where he was forbidden to return. “Reaper, you may have control.” Jim dropped his head and stared at the floor.

There was a moment of silence before the White Sword Master raised his head again. When he looked back at the council, his eyes were blood red and glowing with a fierce aura. He snarled and his voice sounded like steam escaping from a fissure deep in the earth. The council members struggled to make it to the door and then to get out of each other’s way. There was a small altercation involving a fair amount of pushing and shoving. At last, the door slammed, and Jim found himself in the room alone, his eyes returning to normal.

On the table before him was a pouch of coins. “Thanks for helping.”

Don’t mention it. Now, where is the nearest tavern?