

AUTHORS OF BRING ME THE HEAD OF PRINCE CHARMING

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If at Faust You Don't Succeed

THE EPIC BATTLE BETWEEN
GOOD AND EVIL AINT WHAT IT
USED TO BE....



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THE CONTEST

CHAPTER 1

The two representatives of Dark and Light had agreed to meet at the Halfway Tavern in Limbo, there to set in motion the Contest that had been agreed between them.

Limbo was a gray sort of place with very even lighting. It existed between the Abode of Light and the Abode of Dark, a nebulous waiting-room sort of a place, vague at the best of times, but not entirely devoid of qualities.

There was the Halfway Tavern, for example, situated right in the middle of Limbo. The tavern was a queer, rickety old wooden building with a crazy tilted roof. It had been built on the line that separates the part of Limbo nearest Heaven from the part nearest Hell. This place didn't get much business, but it was supported by equal contributions from Light and Dark. It was maintained for the succor of those spirits who happened to find themselves passing through on their way to somewhere else.

"So this is the famous Halfway Tavern!" said the Archangel Michael. "I've never been here before. Do they have a decent sort of a kitchen?"

"It is reputed to be quite good," said Mephistopheles. "But half an hour later, you don't know that you've eaten anything. Persuasive but insubstantial, like the rest of Limbo."

"What's that region down there?" Michael asked, pointing.

Mephistopheles peered. "Oh, that's the waiting area. In the old days, that's where they sent virtuous pagans and unbaptized babies, to wait until something could be done with them. That's not important nowadays, but a lot of people still find their way there for one reason or another."

"I wonder if this is the best place for our meeting," Michael said, for he didn't like the look of some of the things he could see going on in the waiting area.

"It was agreed beforehand between your people and mine," Mephistopheles said. "Limbo is neutral territory, neither fish nor fowl, and certainly not good red meat. What better place for us to meet and begin the contest? Come, shall we go in?"

Michael nodded a little reluctantly, but proceeded into the tavern.

Michael was tall even for an archangel, and well made, since heavenly bodies tended toward athleticism. He had black kinky hair and a hooked nose and olive skin,

souvenirs of his Semitic and Persian ancestors. In the old days, Michael had been the guardian angel of Israel, back when there were still local deities who had not been subsumed into the One God system that had proven so popular on Earth. Michael could have had divine cosmetic surgery, since in Heaven you can look any way you want, as long as you don't use your looks for your personal advantage, but he kept his features in memory of the old time, even though he could have been a blue-eyed blond like the other archangels. He thought wiry black hair and aquiline features lent him an air of distinction.

"It's chilly out there," Mephistopheles said, rubbing his hands together briskly. He was of average height for a high officer in the ranks of Darkness, lean, with a long, narrow face, long-fingered hands, and small, shapely feet that he kept in patent-leather pumps. His hair was jet black, sleeked straight back, with a natural part in the middle. He wore a small moustache and a pointed beard of the type known as an imperial because he had been told it made him look untrustworthy.

"But how could it be cold?" Michael asked. "In Limbo there is neither hot nor cold."

"People say that," Mephistopheles said, "but it's not true. That stuff about Limbo having no qualities is patently false. There's enough light to see by, isn't there? And if you can have light, why not cold?"

"In Limbo," Michael said, somewhat pompously, "one sees by the inner vision."

"And shivers with the internal cold, I suppose," Mephistopheles said. "No, you're wrong about this one, Michael. The wind that blows through Limbo can sometimes be exceedingly biting, blowing as it does from the direction of Despair."

"I'm not wrong," Michael said. "But I suppose it's part of the scheme of things that you and I should disagree, representing, as we do, two glorious but opposed viewpoints. And that is how it should be, of course."

"I think that's my line," Mephistopheles said cheerfully, sitting down in the booth opposite Michael and drawing off his gray silk gloves. "I suppose we can agree that we disagree on almost everything."

"Especially on the matter of cities versus country."

"Yes. Our last contest left that inconclusive, didn't it?"

Mephistopheles was referring to the recent .great Millennial contest in which the forces of Dark and Light had contested for control of mankind's destiny for the next thousand years. That contest had centered on the conceit proposed by a young demon named Azzie, who had reenacted the Prince Charming legend, intending to bring it this time to a dolorous conclusion, and to do so through no machinations of his own, but solely through the spirit of Failure expressing itself through Prince Charming's concocted body. Good had gone for the bet, although the contest appeared to be biased in favor of Dark. But Good always enters such contests, assuming that the pull of Good is so great among mankind, a sentimental lot, that someone has to weigh the scales in favor of Evil for there to be anything of an agonal nature going on at all.

The Dark side, for its part, delighted in putting forth schemes of an involved nature, since the Dark side of things feels at home only in complications. Light, being simple, albeit in a doctrinaire way, was pleased to confront the dubious inventions of Dark, oftentimes losing because you can only weight a scale so far before it comes crashing down on one side, which is then considered preordained.

The proprietor of the tavern came over. He was an indistinct fellow, as are all who stay for any length of time in Limbo, and the only definite things about him were the cast in one eye and his large and clumsy feet.

"Yes, my lord," he said to Mephistopheles, louting low. "What can I bring you?"

"An ichor daiquiri will do very nicely," Mephistopheles said.

"Yes, lord. And could I interest you in a slice of devil's food cake? Fresh today!"

"All right. And what else have you got?"

"The ham is very nice today. We have a place in Purgatory that devils it for us especially."

"No blood sausages?"

"That's only on Thursdays."

"Well, bring along the deviled ham," Mephistopheles said. To Michael he remarked, "Can't let the side down, can we?"

"Certainly not. But isn't it time we got down to business?"

"I'm ready," Mephistopheles said. "Did you bring along an agenda?"

"No need," Michael said. "It's all in my head. It has fallen to our lot to decide upon the next Millennial contest. Hopefully, also, we will settle the question of the Goodness or Badness of cities this time around."

"How quickly time passes when you're immortal!" said Mephistopheles. "Being a master of one-pointed concentration has something to do with it too, of course. Well then, let the cities rise like mushrooms."

"Like flowers is an apter image," Michael said.

"Which is the truer image remains to be seen," Mephistopheles said. "So, trot out one of your urban saints and my merry crew of demons and I will have him forswearing Good in no time."

"No, he needn't be a saint," Michael said, demonstrating again Good's irresistible tendency to give up advantages. "And anyhow, we have something more elaborate in mind. Something with a bit of sweep and grandeur to it to be held in a variety of times and places throughout the new millennium. But I'll tell you about that later. For now, are you acquainted with our servant Faust?"

"Of course," Mephistopheles said, though here he committed a typical error of the Dark side, pretending to knowledge that he didn't have. "You mean Johann Faust, of course, the well-known magician and mountebank who resides in—where was it now?"

—Koenigsberg?"

"Whether or not Faust is a mountebank is still under discussion," Michael said. "But he's not in Koenigsberg. You'll find him in Cracow."

"Of course, I knew that all along," Mephistopheles said. "He's got a little place near the Jagiellonian University, does he not?"

"Not at all," Michael said. "He resides in chambers in Little Casimir Street near the Florian Gate."

"It was on the tip of my tongue," Mephistopheles said. "I'll go to him at once and put the scheme to him. What is the scheme, by the way?"

"Here comes your deviled ham," Michael said. "While you eat it, I'll explain."

CHAPTER 2

Johann Faust was alone in his chambers in Cracow, that city in distant Poland where his peripatetic scholar's path had taken him. The officials of the Jagiellonian University had been glad to have him, for Faust was a considerable scholar who had by heart the most important writings in the world—those of Paracelsus, and Cornelius Agrippa before him, and, before him, the secret writings of Virgil, supreme magician of the Roman days. Faust's chambers were simple—a bare wooden-planked floor, swept clean each morning by the serving girl, who muttered a prayer each time she entered Faust's oval-headed door, and spit between her fingers for good luck, because you need all your luck when you clean up after a man as uncanny as Faust. She had crossed herself when she saw, there on the floor, the pentagram, chalked afresh each morning, with its spaces filled with wriggly Hebrew letters, and with symbols that not even the Masons understood.

The furnishings of the room never changed. In a corner was Faust's alembic. The coal fire in the small fireplace burned faintly but hotly; Faust kept it stoked up night and day, summer and winter, for he suffered from chilblains that never entirely went away. There was a window, but heavy velvet drapes generally kept out the light of the day. Faust liked an even lighting, and his eyes were accustomed to the flicker of the fire and the yellow flames of the candles burning in pewter holders in a dozen places around the room. They were tall candles of good beeswax that common citizens could not afford. But some of the wealthy citizens of Cracow kept Faust supplied with these tapers, which were finer than any seen anywhere but the cathedral. They were scented, these candles, with balsam and myrrh, and with rare floral essences distilled from the brilliant flowers of spring. Their odors in part overcame the vapors of mercury and gold and other metals, whose fumes rendered the closed chamber unfit for any but an alchemist long practiced in his art.

Faust was walking up and down his chamber, ten paces in one direction to the wall with its portrait of Agrippa, ten paces to the cabinet with its marble bust of Virgil. His long gray scholar's gown flapped around his spindly legs as he marched, the candles wavering in the slight breeze of his passing. As he walked he talked to himself aloud, because long familiarity with that inner solitude that only the learned know had accustomed him to this form of social intercourse.

"Learning! Wisdom! Knowledge! The music of the spheres! The knowledge of what lies at the bottom of the uttermost seas, the certainty of being able to say what the great cham of China eats for his breakfast, and what the emperor of the Franks says to his mistress in the stygian dark of the night! These are fine things, no doubt! Yet what do they mean to me?"

The blank-eyed bust of Virgil seemed to watch him as he paced, and on the Roman's thin, pale lips a slight expression of surprise might have been noticed, because this discourse by the learned doctor was unlike any that had come from his lips heretofore.

"Yes, of course," Faust went on, "I know these things, and many others besides." He chuckled ironically. "I can detect the-harmony of the divine spheres that Pythagoras knew. In my investigations I have found that still point from which Archimedes claimed the ability to move the terrestrial globe itself. And I know that the lever is the self, extended to infinity, and the fulcrum is the esoteric knowledge that it has been my lifetime task to learn. And yet, what does it mean to me, this confabulation of miracles to which I have given countless hours of study? Do I live any better than the most ignorant village swain, who seeks his love among the haystacks? True, I have honor among the old men of the cities, and am renowned among the so-called wise ones, of this country and many others. The king of Czechoslovakia has put a golden circlet on my forehead and declared me peerless among men. Does this cause my ague to diminish when I awaken on a chilly morning? Do the fawning ministrations of the king of France, resplendent in his lynx ruff and soft boots of Spanish leather, with the circlet of Clovis on his narrow head, bring any relief to my dyspepsia, my morning sweats, my evening despair? What have I in fact achieved in my attempts to encompass the ever-expanding sphere of knowledge? What is knowledge to me, what is power, when my body shrivels daily, and my skin draws tight around my features, presaging the skull beneath the mottled flesh, which must in time come out?"

There was a sound outside, but at first Faust heeded it not, so full of his lament was he.

"This pursuit of knowledge is all very well. At one time, when I was a youth, ages, decades ago, I thought that all my heart's yearnings would be satisfied if I could capture that divine essence and distillation of knowledge that only the angels know. Yet how satisfying is knowledge, really? What would I not give for a sound digestion? I sit here and eat my daily gruel, since it is all my stomach can digest, while outside the rude red world bustles on, sweaty and unthinking! What is it to me, this piling up of knowledge upon knowledge, amassing a dungheap of wisdom in which I burrow like a beetle? Is this all there is? Would a man not be better offending it all? With this slender dagger, for example?"

And so saying he took up a thin-bladed, keenly pointed stiletto that had been presented to him by a student of the great Nicolas Flamel, who was now buried in Paris at the church of Saint-Jacques-la-Boucherie. Faust held it up to the flickering candlelight and watched the reflections play up and down its narrow blade. Turning it this way and that, he said, "Is it in vain, then, that I have learned the several arts of

calcination, sublimation, condensation, and crystallization? What good now does my understanding of albification and solidification do for me, when the inner man, Faust the homunculus, the ageless spirit of myself who resides within this aging flesh, is sorrowful and confused, purposeless and adrift? Might it not be better to end it all with this well-made bodkin, inserting it into the pit of my stomach, for example, and ripping upwards, as I have seen the gorgeously costumed Orientals of a distant eastern island do in my visions?"

He turned the stiletto again and again, fascinated by the play of light upon the blade, and the wavering candles seemed to cast a disapproving expression across the white face of Virgil. And there came again that sound that had barely ruffled the surface of his attention: it was the sound of church bells, and Faust remembered belatedly that this was Easter Sunday.

Suddenly, as quickly as it had arisen, his black mood began to dissipate. He moved to the window and opened the drapes.

"I've been breathing too deeply of the fumes of mercury," he said to himself. "I must remember, the Great Work is dangerous to the practitioner, and carries with it on one side the danger of failure, on the other, success and the risk of premature despair. Better for me to go out into the air this fine morning, walk about on the newly sprung grass, even take for myself a glass of beer at the corner tavern, aye, and perhaps a toasted sausage, too, for my digestion feels better this morning. The vapors from the alembic have their counterpart in the vapors of the mind. I'll go forth this instant to dispel them."

And so saying, Faust slipped into his cloak with the ermine trim, a cloak that an emperor might not have scorned, and, making sure he had his wallet, though his credit was high, left his chamber, heading out the front door into the bright sunshine and uncertainties of the new day, uncertainties that even the most skilled of alchemists might not foresee.

CHAPTER 3

The bells from the many churches of Cracow were sounding their Te Deums as Faust walked along Little Casimir Street, away from the Florian Gate, in the direction of Drapers' Hall in the big market square. He could tell each church's bells by their sound: the high and heavenly carillon from the convent of Mogila, the brilliant steely middle tones of St. Wenceslas, the great rolling voice of St. Stanislaw, and, dominating all, the thrilling bass from the deep bells of the great Church of Our Lady at the corner of the market square. It was a brilliant Easter Sunday, and the sun's golden light seemed to penetrate into every corner of the steep-roofed old city. The sky overhead was a bright blue, and there were soft-edged, puffy little white clouds of the sort painters like to depict as fitting resting-places for cherubs and allegorical figures. So fine a day could not help but cheer Faust's spirits, and so he took the shortcut to the market square along the noisome little alley called the Devil's Walk. Here the buildings bulged out like fat-bellied men in a steam bath, and there was not room for two people to walk abreast. The alley, with the steep overhanging roofs blocking the light, was a place of deep shadow on even the finest day. Faust had not gone ten yards

before he began to regret his decision. Should he not have taken the high street, even if it would take a few minutes longer? After all, what did time matter to an alchemist and a philosopher?

He almost turned back, but some stubbornness in his nature decided him to persevere. The final turning of the alley was just ahead, and after that it would give out to the noisy bustle of the market square.

He approached the corner, walking more rapidly now, his scholar's gown rustling as he urged his thin shanks to greater speed. He went by a darkened doorway on his right and another on his left. There was light ahead.

And then there was a voice at his shoulder, saying, "Excuse me, sir, a moment of your time..."

Faust stopped and turned, prepared to chastise the importunate wretch who had the temerity to delay him. He looked into the doorway but could see no person. He was about to go on when he heard a whirring sound in the air. His rapid brain told him that something was amiss; but the insight came to him almost simultaneous with the crashing of a blunt object of considerable hardness against his temple. He saw stars for a moment, and great shooting comets, and then knew nothing as black Unconsciousness gathered him into her dark mantle.

CHAPTER 4

While this was going on, in another part of town, at the little tavern called the Pied Cow, a tall, yellow-haired jackanapes of a fellow was having a morning bowl of borscht at one of the rustic tables set outside. He was a tall, thin fellow, cleanshaven in the new Italian fashion, his clothing a gentleman's cast-offs, his head o'er-topped by a mass of unruly curls. He sat now, thin features intent, red lips pursed as he surveyed the street.

The tavern was situated across the street from Faust's chambers. The Pied Cow was a homely place of no great pretensions, an abode favored by sturdy vagabonds from the four corners of Europe, who had come to Cracow in these years of its prosperity, in that brief golden time between the Hunnish invasions and the ferocious onslaught of the Hungarians, when the city was noted far and wide, not just for its learning, which had attracted Dr. Faust, but also for the prosperity of its citizenry, and for the great merchants who journeyed to this place from Germany and Italy with precious wares.

This jackanapes, whose name was Mack, and whose sobriquet was the Club, a reference to the instrument that he carried in his belt, and used more often than an honest man would, had come to Cracow, some say from Troyes in Frankland, others from the stews of Londontown in distant England, to seek his fortune. Mack the Club was not prepared to let his fortune wait its own sweet time to call. He was an enterprising rogue, quick-witted and not unintelligent, who had spent a year in a monastery learning the scrivener's trade before deciding to follow more direct methods of making his fortune.

Hearing of Faust, he had spied upon the learned doctor, well aware of Faust's

reputation as a necromancer who had won great wealth in this world in the form of precious metals used in his alchemical pursuits, and gifts and souvenirs from grateful kings who had found the doctor's remedies efficacious in the treatment of their myriad woes.

Mack had devised a scheme to rob the prominent doctor, figuring that a magician like Faust who has piled up goods in Heaven has little need for the dross of this Earth. Mack had accordingly taken unto himself a confederate, a loutish Lett who had no skill but the ability to waylay passersby by knocking them over the head with his cudgel. Mack had determined that this was the very day on which he would divest Faust of his more portable worldly goods.

For a week Mack and the Lett had scouted out the territory and noted the movements of the good doctor. Faust was a moody sort and not given to those regularities of habit that make honest men so easy to steal from. For one thing, he stayed indoors a lot, pursuing his magical experiments. But even Faust had to come out occasionally, and when he did, his footsteps always moved in a preordained direction, down Little Casimir Street and into the Devil's Walk, the shortcut to the great Jagiellonian University.

When at last Faust emerged on this Easter Sunday, Mack's scheme was set and all was in readiness. The Lett had been stationed in a dark doorway in the alley, and Mack took up his position at the Tavern of the Pied Cow opposite Faust's dwelling place. And now the time had come, for the Lett had agreed to rush back to the tavern to warn Mack if anything went wrong at his end. Mack finished his borscht, laid down a copper coin for payment, and, moving in a leisurely way that belied his inner excitement, strolled over to the doctor's residence. A glance up and down the street ascertained that the good folk of the neighborhood were away for Easter services. Under his arm Mack had a parcel of books purporting to give magical formulas. He had picked them up at no cost from a monastery library in Czvniez. If the unexpected should occur and someone should enquire as to his purpose in the doctor's house, Mack could say he was delivering these books, or offering them to the doctor for sale; for Faust was known to collect such things in his quest for the formula for the Philosopher's Stone.

Mack strolled to Faust's house. He knocked at the door for form's sake. No one responded. He had seen the landlady leave earlier for services, her wimple somewhat askew, for she was known to be a tippler, and a basket of herbs and simples on her arm, since the good woman was much given to visiting her sick aunt and plying her with country remedies.

Mack tried the door. It was latched with a big iron key of simple design. Mack had its counterpart in his pocket, and he took it out now and fitted it to the lock-hole. The key at first would not budge, and Mack wiggled it back and forth, then withdrew it and greased the key from a small container of badger's fat, a sovereign remedy for sticking locks. The key turned, and he pushed the door open.

The high old house was gloomy within. Mack entered, closing the door behind him. A turn to the left brought him to the door he had long since ascertained led to the

doctor's study. He pushed it. It was not locked.

It was twilight in the doctor's room, for the bright sunlight had no direct means of ingress, but rather filtered in after due reflection on the shadowy wall. Virgil's pale bust seemed to watch him as he stepped noiselessly through the room, the floorboards forbearing to creak, so light was his passage. The room still held fumes of mercury and sulphur and burnt candles and mouse droppings. The glass bottles and retorts of the doctor's alchemical equipment stood on a nearby table, stray glints of light reflected from their glassy surfaces. There in one corner was the doctor's sleeping cot, two planks laid across two low trestles, yet with an ermine mantle thrown over it that revealed the doctor's luxurious tastes.

Mack paid no attention to these. They were but the stage settings for his deed, which was to find that which was small, valuable, and—since he was in his own way a connoisseur—beautiful as well. For example, that single emerald lying carelessly by itself on the big deal table that was the doctor's work space, next to the crystal ball with the skull lying next to it. The emerald would do very nicely for openers. Mack made his way toward it. His hand, with its long fingers not too clean around the knuckles, was about to close on the object, when suddenly there was a very loud sound from within the room.

Mack was frozen in midflinch, for that sound, coming as a crash of thunder in the high mountains when the autumn storms come rushing down from the north, seemed to presage a reversal of the natural order of things, for how else explain why Nature's loud hurrah had come from within the room rather than outside where it belonged? And how explain the sudden coruscation of fire that appeared spontaneously in the middle of that dark-walled room, leaping up from the floorboards in great licking tongues of red and orange flame?

Still frozen, his mouth agape with wonder, Mack saw a figure form up, mistily at first and then with sharp definition, in the middle of the flames. It had the appearance of a man, a longheaded man with sleek black hair with a natural part in the middle, with a thin moustache and that short, pointed beard known as an imperial. He was dressed in dark clothing of somber magnificence, and bore with him a roll of parchment tied with a red ribbon.

"Greetings, Dr. Faust," said the figure, stepping out of the flames that then extinguished themselves. "I am Mephistopheles, a prince in the forces of Darkness, thrice holder of the Bad Deed of the Year award from Standard Demonics, one of our great multitemporal corporations."

Mack came unfrozen sufficiently to say, in a clumsy stutter unlike his usual glibness, "Oh. Hello. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"You are surprised, perhaps, by my somewhat unorthodox entrance?"

"Oh, no, not at all," Mack said, for whatever else he would think when his brain unfroze sufficiently to permit cerebration, he knew it would not be well to offend this being. "I mean, whatever seems suitable."

"I made the Little Grand Entrance—there not being room here for the Grand Grand

Entrance, involving as it does timed explosions of rockets and barrels of gunpowder—to offer, in a moment and in a compact metaphor, my bona fides. I am indeed Mephistopheles, a prince of demons, and I do indeed come from The Other Side with an offer I think you'll be unable to turn down."

Mack had by now recovered his sangfroid, for he had grown accustomed, in his way of life, to sudden changes of fortune. True, he had never encountered a devil before, but this sort of thing was only to be expected in that day and age when miracles took place daily from one end of Europe to another, and the effects of witchcraft were a matter for continual comment.

"Now tell me, Dr. Faust," Mephistopheles said, "would you care to listen to my proposition?"

Mack was aware, of course, that this great demon Mephistopheles had made a mistake, thinking he was the learned doctor Faust. So even demons could be in the wrong! But he wasn't about to correct him. For one thing, it probably wouldn't be safe, not after Mephistopheles had gone to all the trouble of staging a Little Grand Entrance; and for another, it sounded as if some profit might be gleaned from this fortuitous encounter.

"I'd very much like to hear your offer," Mack said. "Do take a seat—that trestle chair should serve you well enough if you don't burn through it—and tell me what you had in mind."

"I thank you for your courtesy," said Mephistopheles, sweeping back his coattails as he sat, and causing the tallow candle in its charred oaken container to burst spontaneously into flame. Several more candles followed suit. At last getting the lighting as he wanted it, so that it cast long, sinister shadows across his face, Mephistopheles said, "How would you like, for openers, wealth of an extent and a greatness undreamed of since the days when Fabius Cunctator sacked Carthage? This wealth would be in the form of many well-made caskets full of gold coins of a purity undreamed of in earthly coinages. And it would be accompanied by barrels of the most precious stones, pearls the size of hens' eggs, diamonds as large as pomegranates, and an emerald large enough to form a dining table for six persons. And there would also be a perfect set often matched rubies of deepest fire, each the size of a horse's turd. And there would be much more besides, the detailing of which would tax even supernatural vocal cords and which may well be left to the imagination."

"I get the idea," Mack said. That sounds very good indeed. It would be churlish of me to ask you to specify the exact number of barrels of gems and caskets of gold. Even if it were only one of each it would be a most excellent present."

"These are not presents," Mephistopheles said. "They may be considered payment for a service I shall require of you, and for one thing more."

"It's that one thing more I'm afraid of," Mack said. "No offense meant, of course."

"None taken. It is a pleasure to be able to speak frankly. But there is no trick here, Faust. Do you think the Dark Powers would go to all the trouble of hiring my services and staging a Little Grand Entrance all for the purpose of duping you? Your credulity

might be tested at far less expense!"

"Hey, don't get me wrong, the wealth thing sounds very good. But was there anything else? Like, who am I supposed to enjoy this wealth with?"

"As for that," said Mephistopheles, his eyes sparkling as the thought of concupiscence entered his mind, "we will also provide you with a bevy, or even two be vies, of such beauteous maidens as the world has seen only in its fevered dreams of hopeless longing. These young ladies, Faust, each of them fit for a potentate, come in a variety of delectable shapes and colors, with hairstyles to suit every mood. In addition to their pulchritude, they also excel in the arts of love, possessing deliciously soothing skills as well as intoxicatingly exciting ones. Some of these ladies can give you intellectual companionship, Faust, while others will suit your brutish or childish moods, while still others will just be around to bring you your morning borscht. They also have the advantage of loving, next to you, nothing so well as lying in a cool chamber in a cataleptic sleep until their services are required again. And not only are they a practically inexhaustible gift of sensuality in themselves, they all have best friends, sisters, and mothers, who can provide piquancy by standing by to be seduced."

"That is indeed wonderful," Mack said. "I am in awe of the way you have solved one of mankind's oldest dilemmas." He wanted to add, Mephistopheles, you have convinced me, go bring on the dancing girls, just tell me who you want me to kill. But native caution rose again in him and he said; "And where am I to enjoy my new lifestyle with unlimited wealth 'and boundless women?"

"Why, where you please," Mephistopheles said. "But if none of the present divisions of the world please you, we can take you elsewhere in time, to any moment in any place anywhere, even the ones that do not yet exist, because there is a law that says that that which is conceived must exist from the moment of its conception. And we can set you up in such a place as a great doctor of learning, or a prince of your own state, or a wealthy churchman, or what you please. We like to think of ourselves as occupational therapists, too, so you may do what you will in this new place, and if the job does not exist, we create it for you. We can find you a purpose in life that will suit you down to a T, no matter what kind of a T you are. And, with potions and simples that we supply free with our offer, we ensure you a long, happy life and a decline so gradual that you don't even notice it."

"Until the end, of course," Mack said.

"Of course. You could hardly miss noticing that."

Mack considered for a moment and then said, "You don't by any chance offer immortality, do you?"

"You drive a hard bargain, Faust! No, we don't offer immortality. Why should we? This new enhanced package of ours, limited as it may be in terms of what is possible to the imagination, is still enough to buy a trillion like you for the least part of it."

"How well you know us!" said Mack. "How wise you are!" But actually he thought that Mephistopheles was pompous, stuck-up, and more than a little silly. Mack felt he could handle this spirit, not knowing, of course, that he was falling for one of Hell's

subtlest delusions.

"I just thought, if you had some immortality left over—I gather you don't need it yourself—how nice that must be—well, that you could throw some my way."

"But that would- defeat the whole purpose of my making you an offer. What profit is there for me unless I get your soul in the end?"

"You're right, of course, looking at it that way. Longevity is plenty good enough."

"That we offer, and rejuvenation as well."

"There is the matter of my soul."

"Bear in mind, the soul clause is a contingency deal. It comes into effect only if I fail to satisfy you completely over the course of our working together. Then you keep your soul, we shake hands, and go away friends. Can't say fairer than that, can I?"

"Hey, I'm not arguing," Mack said. "Now, what is it you want me to do?"

"We want you to play a part in a little contest my friends and I have devised."

"What sort of a contest is it?"

"One of the temporal-moral variety. We will put you into a series of situations in which you will play a part. Each episode will take place in its own distinct time and place. We will move to past or future, as the dictates of the game require. You will play a part in each episode. You will have a choice in each episode. How you make your choice, for what reasons, and with what end in mind, will be watched and judged. We will judge you, Faust, but not as you yourself, rather as a champion and exemplar of mankind, the one chosen by both of us to provide a reading on human morality, ethics, and other near-imponderable subjects. I say this very clearly to you, Faust, because I expect you to understand it before we begin. But once we start, you will not think much of the underlying awesomeness of the premises upon which this operates, for you will be too busy trying to watch out for your own skin."

"I see," said Mack, trying to grasp it.

"That is the bargain, Faust. The cast is ready, the scene is set behind the curtain, the players are all frozen into place, and the play is about to begin. We only wait for you to say the word."

He really is a long-winded devil, Mack thought. And Mephistopheles seemed something of an idealist despite his pretensions to cynicism. But there was no doubting the genuineness of the offer, nor was there any sense procrastinating with the dictates of his soul.

"I'm your man," he said. "Let's begin."

"Sign right here," Mephistopheles said, unrolling the slightly scorched parchment that he carried, proffering a quill and pointing his long sharpened fingernail at a vein in Mack's forearm.

CHAPTER 5

The protagonists of the drama in Faust's chambers might, had they not been so involved in their own situation, have noticed a face that appeared momentarily at the one uncovered chamber window, then ducked down out of sight. It was Faust himself.

He had picked himself up in the Devil's Walk, his scalp bleeding from the Lett's powerful but clumsily directed blow. He had tottered for a moment, then sat down upon a curbstone to regain his senses. The Lett came out of the doorway then, and had raised his oaken cudgel to ensure a really deep unconsciousness, or perhaps death—whatever. A man couldn't be too finicky about these things, not in this day and age, not with the plague, ghastly in its gray ceremonies, raging in the south of Europe, not with Moslem warriors, bearing curved swords and imbued with an inexhaustible fanaticism, boiling up from Andalusia and threatening to break out again through the Pyrenees as in the days of Charlemagne, to wreak havoc on the soft cities of Languedoc and Aquitaine. These matters concerned the Lett not at all. But before he had a chance to strike again there was a sound of full-throated men's voices lifted in lively dispute, and he knew it was university students, natural enemies to the caste that the Lett, all unknowingly, represented. They spotted him and raised the cry. The Lett took to his heels and raced away, to live to hit people over the head another day, and continued running until he was well clear of Cracow, at which time, seeing that he was on the road to Bohemia, he continued to the south, and so moved out of our story forever.

Faust was lifted to his feet by the students and brushed clean of the dirt and chicken entrails he had fallen into. Sewers in those days were no more than the dream-children of the most impractical of those architects who created our dark, cramped, smelly but friendly cities of the Dark Ages.

As soon as he could walk, Faust shook himself free of the students and, head still reeling, hurried home. He saw that his front door was ajar. Approaching cautiously, he went around to the side, where his unshrouded window was, peered in, and was astounded to see two figures, one of them quite plainly Mephistopheles, whom Faust had seen many times in the pictures in the grimoires that were the chemistry books of the time, but never in person. He ducked his head and listened.

The voices wafted out the window, and insinuated themselves into Faust's ear.

It was at the point where Mack was about to sign his name in blood to the parchment Mephistopheles had brought that Faust came unglued. There was an impostor in his house! The devil was tempting the wrong man!

Faust turned from the window and raced around the house to the front. He entered, throwing back the heavy oak door so that it banged against the wall. Faust raced down the hallway, braked at his door, and threw it open.

He was just in time to catch Mack's final flourish as he signed the parchment. Then the devil rolled up the parchment, saying, "Now, my dear doctor, we will proceed to the Witches' Kitchen, where our expert cosmeticians will put you into condition for the adventures that lie ahead."

And then Mephistopheles raised his hands, flames sprang up, bright iris and violet flames, tinged here and there with sinister heliotrope, and flared in glory around the

two figures. When they subsided the figures were gone.

"Damn!" Faust cried, running into the room, stopping, and pounding his fist into his palm. "One minute too late!"

CHAPTER 6

Faust glared around into the gloom-shaded corners of his room. For a moment he thought he detected a presence among the bat-winged shapes in the ceiling. No, there was no one here. They had gone, the two of them, the impostor and Mephistopheles. Nothing remained but a faint smell of brimstone.

It was apparent to him what had happened. Through some miserable concatenation of circumstances, a stranger had broken into his chambers. It was that tall, yellow-haired zany whom he had glimpsed through the window. And Mephistopheles, that silly demon with the grandiose name, had somehow mistaken the fellow for him.

He frowned and shook his head. Faust had overheard enough to know that Mephistopheles had proposed some fine adventure, and was even now carrying the impostor away to it, and to rewards that belonged by right to Faust. And Faust was left alone in this dreary room, in this mundane city of Cracow, where he was supposed to carry on his life as though nothing had happened.

Well, damn it, he wasn't going to have it! He would go after them, if necessary to the nethermost realms of space and time, find Mephistopheles, expose the stranger for the impostor that he was, and take his rightful place in the glorious unfolding of things.

Faust flung himself into a chair. His brain was exploding with ideas. First he had to go to where Mephistopheles and the impostor were. They had vanished in a flash of flame and fire. That argued that they were not on the Earth. This meant that he would have to conjure himself past Earth and its mundane provenance, into the aethereal realm where spirits hold sway, where the dead perform their mournful revels, where the elves, pixies, kobolds, dwarves, and other creatures from the pagan past have their true home.

But then he considered for a moment. Was he ready for this? It would be a supreme test for any magician. And Faust, though he counted himself among the first rank in the controlling of the magical arts and the acquisition of esoteric knowledge, was not in his first youth. It might be beyond his powers. He might get himself killed...

And then he remembered that only hours ago he had been considering killing himself! And why? Because nothing had seemed very interesting to him anymore. Life had stretched ahead of him in its tedious regularity, scarce in pleasures, replete with pain, devoid of meaningful accomplishment. Now he was interested again, to put it mildly! The adventure that was his by right of fame and accomplishment had been taken from him. That he would not countenance. If it must, let this adventure kill him. Nobody was going to steal his offer from the devil!

He rose and kicked up the fire, which had burned down to glowing embers. He

added wood and got a nice blaze going. He washed his face in the basin of almost fresh water the servant had left just two days ago. He found a piece of dried smoked beef, and washed it down with a tumbler of barley ale. And all the time he was planning out his next steps.

He would need a really strong spell to transport him where he needed to go. It would have to combine the potency of a Sending with the puissance of a Visitation. Transportation Spells were notoriously difficult, involving, as they did, the sending forth of a corporeal substance, in this case himself, to regions where creatures usually walked around in subtler bodies. The sheer amount of spiritual energy required for this was daunting.

He went to his bookcase and rummaged through his grimoires. He found a formula in Hermes Trismegistus' *Surefire Travel to the Stars*. But it was too complicated, calling for ingredients difficult to obtain, such as a Chinaman's left great toe, which was an item almost impossible to procure in Eastern Europe at that time, though in Venice they had a goodly supply of them. He searched on. In his *Concordance to the Malleus Mallificarum* he found a simpler formula with fewer ingredients. He set to making it.

Batwort... He had a whole vial of that around somewhere. And the recipe called for toad's stools, four of them entire, but luckily he had some, nicely dried and stored in a thimble. Hellebore was never any problem, white willow was common, mercury he had on hand, he was out of blackened wormwood but could pick up some more at his neighborhood pharmacy. But what was this? "Will not work without a fragment of the True Cross"!

Damnation! He had used up his last fragment last month!

Wasting no time, Faust picked up his wallet, put his emerald into it for unexpected emergencies, and went out into the street.

The corner pharmacy was closed for Easter Sunday, but by pounding on the shutters he managed to bring forth the pharmacist, who, grumbling, told him he had no True Cross in stock, and didn't know when the next shipment would arrive from Rome. He did, however, have a supply of blackened wormwood, which Faust purchased.

He slammed out of the place then and proceeded as fast as his thin shanks would take him to the bishop's palace on Paternoster Row. The servants let Faust in, for he and the bishop were old cronies and often exchanged learned quips late into the night over a bowl of porridge (because the bishop's stomach was, like Faust's, not what it should have been).

The bishop, lounging back in his great armchair in comfortable corpulence, shook his head uncertainly.

"I am so sorry, my dear Faust. The most recent Advice from Rome is that we are not to permit bits of the True Cross to be used for idolatrous purposes."

"Who's talking idolatry?" Faust demanded. "This is the science of alchemy we're

talking about here."

"But to what end do you want to use it, my son? To gain great treasures, for example?"

"Not at all! I want it to right a great injustice!"

"Well, I guess that's all right," the bishop said. "But I warn you in advance, True Cross has gone up in price, which is only to be expected since it is a substance in limited supply."

"All I need is a fingernail-sized fragment. Charge it to my account."

The bishop took out a small japanned box containing True Cross fragments. "I was meaning to speak to you about your account."

Faust reached into his wallet and set down the emerald. "There's my down payment!" He wrapped the fragment of True Cross in birchbark and then rolled it into an old altar cloth while the bishop admired the shine of the emerald.

With the fragment wrapped securely, Faust hurried home. He started up a coal fire beneath his alchemist's furnace, and pumped the groaning leather bellows until the fire glowed red and white and gave off streams of tiny diamond sparks. Then he gathered the ingredients together. He put the jug of aqua ardens on a table near him, taking care not to spill it, since it could eat through anything not coated with aqua ardens repellent, powdered the sublimated antimony in a little brass bowl, laid out floral essences on one side, and, on the other, the toad turds, the calcified bat dung, the crystallized woodchuck's piss, and the fortified graveyard mold. He took care to keep them separate. It wouldn't do to mix them prematurely! Over here were his tartar, alum, and yeast. Here was the nigredo, which he had made just last week. He hated to sacrifice it, for with the right process it could produce a phoenix, and the phoenix was the loveliest of allegorical birds. But there was no time for aesthetics now! He was ready to begin.

And there came a knock at the door. Faust tried to ignore it, but it was repeated, and then repeated again, and behind it he could hear a babble of voices. In a very bad humor he stomped to the door and opened it.

Standing outside were four or five young men—it was hard to be sure of their exact number because they hobbled around so.

"Dr. Faust, sir! Don't you recognize us? We are students from your class in Origins of Alchemy 1b at the University. We need some advice on why the feminine anima image is always found in the changeable hermaphroditic body of Mercurius. They're bound to ask it at finals, sir, and we can't find a thing about it in our Introduction to Alchemy textbooks."

"Why, damn it," Faust said, "the entire subject of hermaphroditism and the sexual imagery of alchemy is covered in *New Directions in an Old Science*, by Nicholas Flamel, which I assigned you at the beginning of the year."

"But it's written in French, sir!"

"You are supposed to know French!"

"But it makes no sense, sir, because if the principle of hermaphroditism according to Aristotle can be subsumed—"

Faust held up his hand, commanding silence. "Students," he said, "I am embarking on a difficult and complex experiment that will probably go down as a landmark in the annals of alchemy. I cannot permit the slightest interruption. Go to one of the other professors. Or go to the devil! Just get away from here now!"

The students left. Faust gave another bellowsing to the fire, checked to make sure his descensories, with their hair-thin crosslets, were clean and in working order. The alembics were already heated and ready to go, the sublimatory was in satisfactory condition, and the cucurbit was finally balanced to his satisfaction. He began.

As the elements entered the crucible they changed colors in a satisfying manner. Reds and greens swirled in the gleaming liquid, layers of vapor were let out and condensed into a mist that rose to the ceiling and hung there like a transparent gray serpent. Faust put in the True Cross fragment. The substance lighted up for a moment and then turned black.

It is very bad when an alchemical reaction turns black. Luckily, Faust had noted the double flash of silver that occurred just before the blackening. He turned to his *Alchemist's Trouble-Shooting Manual*, produced by the wizards of Cairo University and translated by Moses Maimonides, and looked up the reaction. He read: "A double silver flash before the materia confusa goes to black means that the fragment of Cross used in the reaction was not True Cross. Check it with your religious assayer before going any further."

Damn it! Stymied again! And this time there seemed no way out. Unless there was a substitute for True Cross? He raced to his library again, but found nothing of use on its groaning shelves. He felt like screaming, so deep was his frustration. And then his gaze fell upon the parcel of books brought by the man who had entered his apartments.

He looked through them and his lip curled with contempt. They were nothing but trumpery imitations of the real thing, fairground playthings to be sold to the ignorant. But here among them was one title he recognized, though he had never been able to obtain it. It was *The Marrow of Alchemy*, and was a German translation of certain key texts from Eirenaeus. How had that gotten inhere?

He flipped through it and came upon the following statement: "True Cross is in appearance almost indistinguishable from Almost True Cross. Unfortunately, it will not work in formulas of alchemy. However, Almost True Cross can be boosted in its power and so serve for the real thing by adding equal amounts of potassium and common lampblack."

Faust had his vial of potassium right to hand. He had no lampblack, but if, as he suspected, the serving girl hadn't cleaned the lamps recently... Yes, he was right, plenty of lampblack!

After the lampblack and potassium were added there were various changes of light

and color in the mass in the alchemist's furnace. A dense gray vapor arose and for a moment clouded Faust and his equipment. When the vapor had dissipated, Faust was no longer in the room, nor, for that matter, was he in Cracow.

CHAPTER 7

Faust's first impression was of a pearly grayness that suffused everything. That persisted only for a moment, however, as Spiritual Space accommodated itself to the novelty of having an earthly observer within it by expanding outwards on all sides. After that, Faust saw that he was standing just on the outskirts of a small city, very like in appearance to cities he had seen in his travels around Europe, though by no means identical.

He had certainly gotten to this place very quickly. But that stood to reason, since the Spiritual Realm, having no substance except for that imposed by the temporary rules of Solidification, can be shrunk down to a tiny compass by Nature, which abhors a vacuum and isn't about to leave a lot of unused space around, either. The learned doctors at the Jagiellonian taught that when the Spiritual Realm wasn't being used, it resided in a space no larger than a pinhead—to such an infinitesimal mass may the immaterial be reduced! The only thing that would cause it to expand was the presence of an observer. Then the space created itself, with the sort of scenery and personnel as might be expected in this place and at this time.

Faust entered the city and saw a row of storefronts. Above each was a sign. Faust could not decipher the lettering on them, by which he knew they were not for him to enter. At last he saw one sign that read, 'THE WITCHES' KITCHEN'. And he knew that was the place he was to go to. (So much is inherent in the Transportation Spell, which takes you unerringly to the threshold of your next adventure, though you're on your own after that.)

Faust approached the Witches' Kitchen. He walked up to the door and touched it with a gingerly gesture. He had been afraid that his hand would pass through it, since only spirit is supposed to exist in such a place, and spirit is well known for its ability to pass through other spirits. But the door felt solid and a moment's reflection told him that even if a body in this place were not solid, it would have to act as though it were in order for anything to happen; for as the ancient philosophers have pointed out, there's no drama unless things can bump into each other. But how, being aethereal, had they managed to become solid? Faust decided that it must be because the entities here had taken a formal oath to maintain solidness despite the comforts of intangibility, and above all not to melt into each other.

Faust entered the Witches' Kitchen and saw a whole host of small demons of not very frightening aspect attending to a group of patrons who sat in chairs with striped sheets over their bodies. It seemed to be a beauty salon of some kind. These demons were evidently barbers, or surgeons, for not only did they cut hair, they also scalloped away fat from obese bellies, trimmed beef from sausagelike thighs, and added strands of glistening red muscle to wasted arms and shrunken calves. They scrubbed dirt off the body and sandpapered blemishes out of the skin. Under their skilled claws, faces were reconstructed, the devils utilizing gobs of all-purpose flesh that they kept in vats

beside their barber chairs.

In a moment, however, it became obvious that the demons were mere assistants. Walking among them, supervising, and themselves performing the more delicate bits of reconstruction, were a dozen or so witches. They all wore the same ragged, rusty garments, and they had high peaked hats perched on their narrow heads, hats whose brims sloped uncannily over their glittering eyes. And they all had high lace-up boots around their skinny shanks, and most of them had a baleful black cat perched on a knobby shoulder.

"Well, what's this?" said a senior witch, whose rank could be told by the black crepe rose she wore pinned to her hat. "Are you the basic material package we requested? Step over here, dearie, and we'll have you dismembered in no time."

"I am nobody's package," Faust said proudly. "I am Johann Faust, a doctor of the Earth Realm."

"It seems to me we just had a person of that name passing through here," the witch said.

"Was he accompanied by a tall, skinny demon named Mephistopheles?"

"Why, yes, he was, though he wasn't skinny to *my* tastes."

"That man with him was not Faust! He was an impostor! I am Faust!"

The witch looked at him levelly. "I thought he was young to be a learned doctor! Do you have any identification?"

Faust rummaged through his wallet (which had been transported and spiritualized but otherwise was the same as back on Earth) and found an honorary sheriff-ship from the town of Lublin, a voter's registration shard from Paris, and a silver commemorative medal awarded to him at the Great Fair of Thaumaturgy that had taken place two years past in Prague.

"Well then, you *are* Faust," the witch said. "And that other fellow deceived me, and Mephistopheles, too, unless I miss my guess. It's too bad. We gave him such a nice rejuvenation. You would have wept to see how beautiful we made him."

"It was wrongly done!" Faust cried, gnashing his teeth. "Now you must do the same for me!"

"That will not be possible," the witch said. "We already used up most of the allotment for that rejuvenation. Still, let's see what we can do."

She guided Faust to a chair. There she called over one of her demon assistants, and the two conferred in low voices.

"The trouble is," the demon said, "we used up almost all the longevity serum on the other fellow."

"Strain out the dregs and use them. They're better than nothing."

"But his features!" The demon tilted Faust's head to one side and then to the other. His eyes, hard as agates, studied Faust's features and showed no sign of being