

Part 1

1

Somewhere outside of Jolinstive

Grover lay asleep on a small cot in a dirty inn room unaware of what was about to happen. Outside the door there was the sound of muffled voices and sandaled shoes shifting around on bare wood. Grover did not jump out of bed, rapier in hand, ready to confront the malignant entities that waited a mere ten feet away on the other side of the pine frame. Instead, he merely rolled to his side, his breath still heavy with the rhythm of sleep.

Nearby, a goat made a goat noise and sniffed the air in fear.

The shuffling outside suddenly stopped. There was a rapid, heated discussion in muffled tones that stopped almost as soon as it started, followed by a long, ominous silence. Then one solid creak on the wood as someone's weight shifted.

The goat made a goat noise again. But softer this time. All seemed well and serene.

A moment later there was a forceful knock at the door.

2

Somewhere in Jolinstive

The wooden door burst open and bright sunlight streamed into the dark room where a man with long dark wavy hair and wearing all black sat at a long table filled with shiny gold coins.

The light was temporarily blotted out, as a man stepped forward in the doorway. "A-ha, at last, your day has come," the man bellowed.

The villain at the table raised his hand up slowly and shielded his eyes from the intrusion of the sunlight. "Will you close that damn door!"

"No," he said, for the man was a hero and not just the paperboy come to collect his two dollars. "Your activities will be exposed to the light of day, so that all will know you for the evil man that you are."

The villain shook his head and yawned. He put out his hand and immediately a servant handed him a pair of dark sunglasses. There was a long moment as he properly placed the glasses on his face to achieve the right look of coolness. Time seem to suspend itself until he was done. "Okay," he said when he was finished. "We'll play it your way. I suppose I could offer you some of this money to go away." He gestured dismissively at the gold.

"Your money is tainted," the hero said. "Stolen from children and orphans."

"Well, I sure hope so," the villain replied.

"It's blood money," the hero went on. "Paid to you for the death of good men."

"Not that good," the villain said. "Or they would be alive."

"Oh, you know what I mean," the hero said, a bit flustered.

"Yeah, yeah," the villain said laconically. "I know. I suppose you wouldn't just overlook the fact that I'm evil?"

"Never," swore the hero, regaining some of his former bluster.

"Or would you believe that I was going to change my ways?" the villain offered.

"Maybe," the hero said after a moment.

"And that I was going to donate all this money to the church and devote my life to the sick and the poor and the lepers?"

"Yes, I would," the hero said. "Except for one thing..."

"And that is?" the villain inquired.

"There are no lepers in Jolinstive," the hero declared.

"Oh dear," the villain said. "Did I forget to mention moving to the capital?"

"No lepers there either," the hero said.

"How about if I found some lepers?" the villain suggested.

"Not good enough," the hero declared. "I have pledged to bring you to justice or die in the pursuit there of. Page three, paragraph six." He brandished a scroll.

"All for free?" the villain asked.

"Well, of course, there is a certain remuneration involved," the hero said, tucking the scroll back into his vest. "But it isn't the money that counts."

"Of course not," the villain agreed. "We are artists after all."

"Ah, yes," the hero said, trying to get on track again. "Which brings me to the issue at hand. I have you surrounded."

"With just yourself?" the villain asked. "I know I'm wearing dark glasses but I was sure you weren't that large."

"No," said the hero. "My faithful sidekick."

There was a sudden silence in the room as the clerks and the villain's henchmen looked around the dark room, peering into dark crevices, raising up table clothes, and opening kitchen cabinets.

The hero cleared his throat and spoke louder. "No, my faithful sidekick is with me."

The villain looked around the room, even going so far as to lower the glasses down the bridge of his aquiline nose, and then pulled them back up and started to drum his fingers along the table, while humming an old Debbie Gibson tune, most likely Shake Your Love from the sound of it.

The hero stomped his foot impatiently. "No, my faithful servant -"

"Doesn't sound so faithful," the villain observed.

"Well, maybe he isn't that faithful, but he was cheap," the hero said defensively.

The villain pulled out his pocket watch and gave a sparing glance to the time face. "I haven't got all day."

"Just give me a moment," the hero said.

"I'm afraid you've annoyed me for too long," the villain said, snapping the watch cover back in place. "I'll have to kill you, of course. It's the way us villains do things. Nasty part of the job, have to work up a sweat and all that, but I rather enjoy it, especially waiting for the final words."

"You ... you're revolting," the hero said.

"No, I happen to believe in our government," the villain said.

"You know what I mean," the hero said. "You should be banished from this planet, wiped away from its surface, put away from all decent people."

"Well, you may very well be correct," the villain said, stepping away from the table and sliding his rapier free from its sheath in one smooth gliding moment that was so cool he had to pause for just a second to admire it. "But I can live with myself. Something you won't have to do very much longer."

The hero stepped into the room and removed his rapier in one fluid motion but not as cool, so there was no time lost in self-admiration. "I happen to be a master duelist."

The villain lowered his blade and placed it casually on the table next to the gold coins. "I wasn't aware of that." He snapped his fingers.

"So you give up?" the hero asked eagerly. "You realize you can't defeat me by the blade so you have no choice but to capitulate?"

"On the contrary," the villain said, taking the loaded crossbow from the henchman. "I'll resort to cheating."

"But," the hero declared, his face a mask of dismay.

"No 'buts'," the villain said, casually taking aim and squeezing the trigger.

The bolt impacted squarely into the hero's chest with a solid thud type sound. The impact carried the hero back into the far wall, where he slid down to his knees, the rapier dropping from his numb fingers and clattering to the dirt floor. The hero put a hand to the feathered bolt that was sticking out of his chest, caressing the feathers absently. Then he raised his head slowly, a stunned expression on his features. "No fair," he finally gasped.

"Exactly," the villain said, handing the crossbow back to the henchman.

The hero swayed back and forth, and finally fell onto his side.

"I always love this part," the villain said stalking forward across the room.

"Scribe."

A scribe scurried up to him.

The hero managed to prop himself up on one beefy arm and looked directly at the villain. "There will be others. I will be avenged. Good will always triumph over evil."

"Damn," the villain swore in disgust, whipping off his sunglasses. "Do all you heroes learn the same pat speech to give right before you die?"

"Oh and one more thing," the hero said, his voice barely a whisper.

The villain leaned in closer, bending down to hear the final words.

"You suck," the hero said.

The villain's expression froze. There was a tenseness in the room in which all the workers and henchmen silently covered any exposed vital areas. Then a small crease passed over the villain's face in what one might generously call a smile. "Now that's better. That's more like it."

The hero's eyes closed and he collapsed to the earth, dead.

There was a hush in the room. Then suddenly, almost spontaneously, there was the sound of clapping. A few hands at first, scattered across the room, steadily gaining crescendo until everyone in the room was on their feet pounding their palms together in earnest.

"Thank you, thank you," the villain said, bowing from the waist. "But it's really not necessary."

"Speech, speech," a few henchmen cried out.

"No, no thank you," the villain said. And then he turned to his scribe. "Did you get all that?"

"Every last word, your all mighty, inconceivable, uncontested, evilness."

"Excellent," the villain said. "There's nothing like the death of a hero to put you into a good mood." He leaned out the door then, breathing in deeply. "The only thing that would make it better was if it rained. Damn sunny days bring me down."

And almost at once, as if on cue, there was the sound of thunder in the distance.

3

Somewhere still outside of Jolinstive

The rain began to fall softly outside the window. The wind picked up, blowing the stream of rain into the room, so that the floor looked stained by some drink spillage.

Near the open window the massive form of Grover did not move under his sheet. He lay still, motionless. He made a snorting noise and seemed on the verge of waking.

Outside, in the hallway, there was the jangling sound of metal as keys were finally produced.

And then, once again, there was a thunderous knocking at the door.

4

Somewhere, heck in that same place as before, in Jolinstive

"What is it?" the henchman inquired.

Cancer looked long and curiously at the dead and still bleeding body of the nameless hero on the floor. "I'm troubled by this nameless and still bleeding hero on the floor. How did he know to come here, to this counting room, for Ragnar's campaign fund?"

"Ah, a puzzle," the henchman purred, rubbing his hands together. "Let's study it for a few weeks and then write a few reports on it."

"No, you damn bureaucrat," Cancer said, slapping him on the arm with the back of his hand. "We don't need to make a graph to show that this is a betrayal. Any fool can see that. Except for you, of course."

"An exceptional fool," the scribe observed, nodding his head knowingly.

"I, I don't know what to say," the henchman said.

"You just said it," Cancer said, smacking him on the arm again.

"What?" the henchman asked, rubbing his arm where he had been smacked.

"No, *who* - is the question we should be asking," Cancer said, chewing on his lip in concentration.

"Asking *who*?" the henchman asked.

"You mean *whom*," the scribe chimed in again.

"I do?" the henchman asked, confused and his arm still smarting from the blows.

"You're both wrong," Cancer said, hitting the henchman again.

"We are?" the scribe and the henchman said in unison.

"We aren't asking anybody a question. The whole question was rhetorical."

"Oh," the henchman and the scribe said together, hanging their heads.

"We must deal with the *who* first," Cancer said.

"Why?" The henchman asked, taking a step out of smacking range.

"Not why, *who*," Cancer said, smacking reflexively, but finding no one was there, quickly turned the action into a dramatic rhetorical gesture. "*Who* would betray me? *Who* would hire a hero to kill me? And *who* knew about this counting room? And lastly, *who* knew I would be in this counting room and would betray me by hiring a hero to kill me?"

"Only the head villain knows you come here personally to count the money," the henchman said.

"Betrayed by the head villain," Cancer cried. "I knew it. But how can we be sure?"

"We?" the henchmen asked.

"Yes, you and I."

"Us," the scribe added, happy to participate in the game.

"Exactly," Cancer said, and smacked the scribe who was now not so happy.

The henchman smirked at the scribe.

Cancer paced the room; taking off his wide brimmed black hat and talking aloud.

"But how can we be sure it's the head villain? I mean, what did I do to him? I mean, besides the fact that I'm plotting to do him in and become the new head of Villain's R Us myself and thus become Ragnar's lieutenant governor, just a well placed stab away from true power?"

"Hmmm," the henchman said. "He might not like the way you dress."

"No, no. That couldn't be it," Cancer said, looking at his fashionable trousers and shirt.

"Your eating habits, perhaps. Sometimes you eat like a rabid, foaming pig."

"I do?" Cancer asked, stopping in mid-pace. "No one told me that."

"You would kill us if we did," the henchman said.

"Thanks for reminding me," Cancer said. He pulled out a knife from his belt and slipped it between the ribs of the henchman and twisted it. The henchman gasped in surprise and fell to the floor, collapsing on top of the dead hero's body.

The scribe gladly noted that the henchman was no longer smirking.

"Anyone else think I eat like a pig?" Cancer shouted to everyone in the counting room.

There was a chorus of 'no's' as the counting clerks and the couriers scuttled for cover, once more covering over exposed vital areas.

"Good," Cancer said. "I mean evil." He looked around the room with an anxious cast to his features until he spotted his rapier lying on the money table. He took the blade and sheathed it. "Betrayed," he said. "And just when I thought things were getting boring."

The rain did not cover up the sound of a key being inserted into the lock. There were a few moments of fumbling and scrapping as the key was turned from side to side in an attempt to get the old, rusting lock to respond. After each attempt, there would be silence and then once again the door would shake as someone pulled at it in frustration and then once again the key would scrap against the tumblers of the lock.

After a few minutes of this a frustrated voice cried, "Oh, just let me do it."

A moment later there was a sharp click. The key was withdrawn from the lock.

And then quickly, the door was thrown open.

6

The headquarters of Villains R Us

"Ah Cancer," the head villain crooned when Cancer entered the room. "How awful to see you."

"It's an intestinal discomfort to see you as well," Cancer replied. He no longer wore the black wig of curly hair. His real hair was blond, cut close to the skull.

"I just acquired a new torture device," the head villain said. The head villain was somewhat older, his face lined with years of evil. Age had turned his hair a distinguished gray, giving him the look of a compassionate elder statesman, or a kindly grandfather.

"Would you like to try it out with me?"

"Absolutely," Cancer said.

They stepped through a curtain into an adjacent room where Cancer observed a man who had been strapped down to a wooden table with broad, black leather straps. The man looked healthy, the muscles well defined, the stomach level enough to play a game of checkers on. In fact, two torturers who had painted red and black squares on the man's stomach abruptly ended their game as they walked in.

"This is a hero we captured recently," the head villain explained, "who we promised that we would release if he told us all that he knew."

Cancer looked down at the hero, the short dark hair, the blue eyes, and the defiant cast of his features. "Did he?" Cancer asked.

"We already knew everything from his sidekick," the head villain said. "An excellent chap actually, who was more than willing to sell out his friend."

"He would never betray me," the hero cried, the veins in his neck protruding as he strained against the straps. "You lie."

"Of course we do, we're evil," the head villain said. "You would think they would learn that by now. Besides no one wants to hear the truth anyway."

"I'll never tell, I'll never talk," the hero snarled, his blue eyes challenging them to try.

"You're talking now," Cancer pointed out.

"Oh, you know what I mean," the hero said. "I won't betray anyone."

"That's just fine by us," the head villain said. "For we don't really care. We just came here to senselessly torture you until you want to die, and then of course you won't."

"You're madmen," the hero cried, a trace of fear in his voice.

"Actually, I'm not angry. I feel fine," Cancer said.

"As do I," the head villain said.

The hero pushed up against the leather straps and then fell back against the hard table. "I'll be avenged. Others will follow."

"Yeah, yeah, we know," the head villain said. "And we'll torture them too. We already killed off your family."

"No," the hero gasped, his face frantic.

"Yes, just this morning," the head villain said. "Do you want to see their bodies. I mean what's left of their bodies. Of course, we dismembered them."

"Ahh," the hero cried.

"And I've already slept with your girlfriend," Cancer said. "And she didn't even charge me like she did with your father."

"Not Sunshine, no," the hero cried. His chest heaved against the restraints, sweat breaking out on his brow and his face turning red. "I'll kill you if I get free."

"Oh yes and we killed your pet bunny rabbit," the head villain said.

"Not Fluffy," the hero gasped.

"Yes, Fluffy was part of your meal yesterday," the head villain said. "I recall you said the meal was rather tasty."

"Ahhhhhh," the hero cried, tears streaming down his cheeks. "I have nothing to live for."

"Don't you just love those words?" Cancer asked rhetorically. "I get goose bumps every time I hear them."

"It's what being a villain is all about," the head villain said. "That and the power and the money and the loose women of course."

"Of course," Cancer said. "After all, we don't do this for our health."

"Torture me, torture me," the hero begged. "I have nothing left to live for. I don't care anymore."

"Sorry," the head villain said. "We don't take requests. Cancer." The head villain gestured for Cancer to follow. "We're done for the day."

"Wait. Where are you going?" the hero demanded. "You can't just leave me. You're supposed to torture me. You promised. Why are you leaving?"

Cancer and the head villain paid no heed to the hero's pleas as they returned to the head villain's office.

"So what was the new torture device?" Cancer asked.

"Lack of torture," the head villain said. "Make him contemplate it, anticipate it, want it and then deny it."

"Ah, very evil," Cancer said approvingly.

"Yes, it is," the head villain said. "And much cheaper too. Don't have to buy any new equipment, or hire another torturer to handle it because their unions demand it. Cuts way down on overhead."

"Brilliant," Cancer said.

"I thought so," the head villain said. "So how are we coming along with Ragnar's campaign. Will he win?"

"Well," Cancer said. "We've infiltrated Silus's campaign, stolen money from his campaign funds, rewrote his speeches, spread slander throughout the city, along with the usual rumors of him wanting to clean up this town. The way I see it Ragnar should win very easily. On Election Day we spread a rumor that anyone who votes for Silus will be poisoned or at least kicked repeatedly in the shins."

"Very evil, very evil," the head villain replied. "I like it. No, I love it. Dare I say it's great."

"Dare you?"

"I dare," the head villain said. "It's great. Never let it be said I wouldn't take a dare." And he pulled out a knife and placed the tip at Cancer's throat.

Cancer gulped and looked down at the shiny blade. "I won't ever say it, ever."

The head villain removed the knife and placed it back in his sleeve and went on talking as if nothing had happened. "Soon Ragnar will be governor of Jolinstive and we will have free reign. From there it's only one step to the whole empire. And then evil will reign supreme." The head villain seemed caught up in rapture. "And you'll be there by my side."

"What for?" Cancer asked suspiciously. "So you can knife me in the back after all I've done for you?"

"No, no," the head villain said feigning horror. "So we can share in the glory together."

"And the money?" Cancer inquired.

"Of course, we'll divide it fairly. I'll get 99% and you'll get 1%."

"I thought it was fifty-fifty?"

The head villain snapped his fingers. "Oh yes. That's right. Except if you die, then I get everything."

"Or if you die," Cancer said. "And then I get everything."

Cancer and the head villain regarded each other for a long moment. Each visualizing the other's mangled and bloody corpse before them.

"There's one more thing," the head villain said.

"Yes."

"About your partner," the head villain said.

"Oh, that betraying, conniving, son of a goat violator, the best partner I ever had," Cancer said. "May he writhe in agony in the company of angels. What about him?"

"You need a new one," the head villain said. "You can't do all this work alone."

"I'm a loner. I like to work alone," Cancer said. "Besides I get to keep all the money that way."

"This is a new recruit," the head villain said. "I want you to break her in."

"Rough her up?" Cancer asked.

"No train her to be like you, think like you, be as evil as you," the head villain said.

"So she can turn around and kill me off?" Cancer asked.

"Maybe," the head villain said without sympathy. "It's always a risk of the profession. Still, you are the best."

"At being worst," Cancer finished the traditional villain phrase. "And what do I get out of the deal?"

"Someone to help you plot against me," the head villain said.

"Oh, so you know about that?"

"Of course," the head villain replied.

"Then this new partner could be a spy against me."

"Would it make you feel better if I said she was?" the head villain asked.

"No," Cancer said.

"Then she is," the head villain said.

"I knew it," Cancer said. "I'll turn her against you. You'll regret ever plotting against me."

"That's the spirit," the head villain said. "So you'll do it?"

"But why a new partner now? After all this time?"

"It's only been a week since you pushed your old partner in front of that wagon," the head villain said. "And besides, everyone else thinks you're an asshole."

"So, when do I get to kill – ur, meet her?" Cancer asked.

"Now," the head villain said.

"Now!" Cancer declared in surprise.

"Yes, now," the head villain said, snapping his fingers. "But I think you should know that she was a hero just until recently when we recruited her."

"A hero?" Cancer asked suspiciously.

"Yes," the head villain said. "Must you repeat everything I say."

"It's not really a compulsion," Cancer said.

"You might have heard of her," the head villain said. "We had a death contract out on her and her partner a few years ago. Does the name Cilla ring a bell."

"I don't know, does it?" Cancer asked.

"You always were so literal," the head villain said.

"Cilla," Cancer said. "What kind of villain name is that?"

"It isn't," Cilla said, entering the room suddenly. "But you can call me Psycho. All my friends do."

The face before him was pale and Grover was afraid to touch it.

The lips moved. Little red ones. The whole face was angular, with two small ears shooting out from either side. The eyes were brown and insistent.

"Wake up! Wake up! You must wake up," cried the servant boy.

Grover stared at the insistent face yelling at him over the expanse of his white pillow. A large hand suddenly came out and grabbed the boy by the neck. The boy gasped, his face turning an interesting shade of purple. Grover realized it was his own hand that was strangling the boy.

"I told you I didn't want to be disturbed."

The words were harsh. Grover wondered where they came from. Then he realized they were his words.

"I'd say it was already too late," an old familiar voice purred.

Grover's hand let go and the boy fell from his sight, beneath the bed. Grover's eyes focused on a large, fat black man who wore ostentatious clothing that didn't match.

It could only be one man. "Ballah, I should have known," Grover growled.

The boy reappeared suddenly, standing beside the bed, rubbing his throat. "I tried to wake him," the boy said. "But after he drinks he becomes difficult and smells bad. Sometimes he grabs me and pinches my butt and..."

"Shut up," Grover growled.

The boy cast a frightened glance at Grover and then turned to Ballah. "Did I ever tell you that I wanted to be a hero?"

"Yes, several times," Ballah said. "Now shoo, shoo." He waved his hand disdainfully.

"Do I have to?" the boy whined. "I promise I won't say a word. I'll just sit and watch, still as a statue." The boy promptly struck a pose, the faint strands of Vogue were heard in the distance, as the boy held out his hands in supplication and stared vacantly, lips pursed.

Ballah looked at the boy quizzically, raising one eyebrow. And then he pointed to the goat in the corner. He was about to say something when Grover interrupted him.

"Don't ask me," Grover replied, rubbing his temple and sitting on the edge of the bed. "I just pay my bills when I get the eviction notice and don't ask any questions."

"You look good," Ballah lied.

"You want something, I can tell," Grover said. "Leave me alone. I quit Heroes, Inc. years ago. I quit the whole hero business, in fact. And I don't care about your bonus fee for finding me. I'm done with the whole thing."

"I'm shocked and I'm surprised," Ballah said, a hand grasping the fabric over his heart, "that you would think I came here on behalf of Heroes, Inc."

"Did you?" Grover growled.

"Well, yes," Ballah admitted. "But I'm still shocked and surprised. We were friends once."

"When?" Grover asked.

Ballah paused in memory. "Well, never actually. But I think of you as a friend."

"Like when you want to borrow money or ask for a favor with nothing in return?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean," Ballah said. "But don't think of it as a favor."

"What as a favor?" Grover asked.

"What I'm going to ask you," Ballah replied, pulling out a tightly wound scroll from the satchel at his side.

"Not another contract," Grover cried in horror, raising his head suddenly which didn't do a thing for his hangover. His head reeled and it was hard to keep focus on anything for a moment.

"Is everything all right?" Ballah asked.

"The economy is going down the drain," Grover replied. "The market is tanking, and lastly, I'm not certain but fairly sure I married that goat last night."

"I mean, are you feeling all right?" Ballah asked.

Grover cradled his skull between his hands and pressed hard on his temples. After a few moments he let go and looked around his empty bed and stared at a pillow with a sunken depression in it. "I swore I went to bed with someone last night," Grover said.

"She left," the boy said, still maintaining his pose. "Said you left a lot to be desired."

"I don't believe it," Grover said. "Unless I see it in writing."

"It's right here," the boy said, breaking his pose and pulling out a card. "On our comments card." Under service, in bold graceful letters was written 'leaves a lot to be desired'.

"Same old ... you know?" Ballah asked, gesturing towards Grover's crotch and making a limp motion with his wrist.

"She meant the room service," Grover said.

Ballah fiddled with the contract scroll.

"I'm not signing another contract," Grover said. "No way."

"We need you," Ballah said.

"No you don't," Grover said. "Get someone else. Take the boy."

"I'll do it. Oh please, oh please," he begged.

"The empire needs you," Ballah said.

"I don't care," Grover said. "I'm busy. I have to be intoxicated this year. See my appointment calendar." Grover pulled out a Far Side appointment calendar. "Just look."

Ballah flipped through the pages. "Tuesday, April 9th. Have to be drunk today. Saturday, October 3rd. Have to be drunk today. Monday, November 6th. Have to be drunk today. Thursday, December 3rd. Have to - *wait a second* - have to wash clothes."

"Well, not everyday," Grover said. "But as you can see, it takes a lot of time and energy, and I'm booked for the rest of the year."

"You need you," Ballah said.

"What was that?" Grover asked.

"Look at you," Ballah said, placing the Far Side calendar back on the night table.

"You reek of wine."

"Fine wine," Grover said.

"You reek of fine wine," Ballah said. "You're out of shape. You're co-habiting with a goat. You'll be dead in ten years or married to someone who is co-dependent. You need psychotherapy, years of counseling and maybe even a hobby like making those sailboats inside those glass bottles to get you on the right track again. And even then you might just end up a drooling idiot or have your own talk show."

"So what are you saying?" Grover asked.

"I'm not sure," Ballah said and then looked down at the scroll in his hands. "We have a mission only you can do?"

"Surely you jest," Grover said.

"Ah ha, ha, ha, ha," Ballah bellowed, grabbing his ample sides. "No, not really."

"I can't believe I'm the only one who can do it," Grover said. "There's other heroes that are better than me."

Ballah nodded.

"Smarter than me," Grover suggested.

"Yep," Ballah said.

"And faster than me," Grover added.

"I agree with you there," Ballah said.

"And don't forget better looking than you," the boy piped in.

"Yeah," Grover cried. "And better looking than—" Suddenly he scowled at the boy. "Anyway, why don't you get one of them."

"Because only you can do it," Ballah said.

"Why me?" Grover asked.

"Because it's suicidal and you have nothing else to live for," Ballah shouted, and then clamped a hand over his mouth and looked worried. "Did I say that out loud?"

Grover nodded.

"I heard it too," the boy said.

"I mean," Ballah said, "only you are eminently qualified."

"How so?" Grover asked. "You said I'm out of shape. Which is code word for fat if my feminine intuition isn't mistaken."

"You're not a woman," Ballah pointed out.

"In this time off I had time to accept my feminine side and truly appreciate beauty and art and some of that other stuff."

"That doesn't matter," Ballah said. "You're the only one experienced enough to pull off the job. We asked others, many others, big names in fact. Conan said -"

"Wait, you asked Conan?" Grover asked.

"Sure and Fafhrd too," Ballah said. "But nobody was insane enough even to try, even when we offered them money."

"And so I'm insane?" Asked Grover.

"You said it, I didn't," Ballah said. "But this comes straight from the emperor."

"The emperor," the boy squeaked, his arms falling to his side and his mouth gaping.

"The emperor," Grover said. "That drunken sod. He's even worse than I am. I'm surprised he even knew he had an empire."

"Well, the chancellor anyway," Ballah said. "He contracted us because he needs our help. The empire is at stake."

"Why, did the emperor bet it?" Grover asked.

"No," Ballah said. "Not this time, but there's an election in your old home town of Jolinstive."

"Jolinstive," Grover said becoming interested instantly. "Who's running? The Quintains?"

"No, you're brother - Ragnar Soovo," Ballah said. "He's running for governor of the province."

"Ragnar," Grover said. "I haven't seen him since he tried to kill me. And he doesn't write either. How's he doing?"

"Well in fact," Ballah said. "So well that-

"Did he say he got my Christmas cards?" Grover asked. "He never sends me any."

"I didn't actually talk to him personally," Ballah said.

"So how do you know he's doing well?" Grover asked.

"Because he's well enough that he's planning on living long enough to become the emperor."

"But we already have an emperor," Grover said.

"Exactly," Ballah said.

"I don't get it," Grover said.

"Well, that's your business," Ballah said. "Maybe you should try being yourself with women."

"I don't understand," Grover said.

"I didn't think you would," Ballah said. "Maybe I should paint you a picture."

"I didn't know you painted," Grover said. "Take it up as a hobby? If you have anything nice, I could use it to fill up that wall space." Grover pointed at a plaster wall with a crack running through it. The goat made a goat noise in agreement.

"No, no," Ballah cried. "I mean explain better. Ragnar is in collusion with Villains R Us. The head villain is on the ballot as lieutenant governor with him and he's using the villains to help him win the election."

"Good move," Grover said approvingly. "I on the other hand wouldn't have appealed to any small interest groups because then you owe too many favors, but Ragnar and I always did differ on political philosophy."

"No, you don't see the whole picture," Ballah said.

"You haven't painted it yet," Grover said. "But as I said before - I'll put it on my wall. I'll even lie and say I like it since you were good to me once."

"No," Ballah cried. "Ragnar is in collusion with the head villain and once he becomes governor he plans to call up the armies in his province and help him take over the empire. Civil war, Grover."

"A coup," Grover said. "Brilliant. Can he pull it off?"

"Not if you help," Ballah said.

"What kind of snide remark is that?" Grover asked. "Are you saying that if I help Ragnar he would lose?"

"No," Ballah said. "Besides we don't want you to help him. We want you to destroy him."

"My own brother?" Grover asked.

"Your own brother," Ballah said.

"I couldn't," Grover said. "He's my only brother. It's not like he's replaceable."

"Then what about saving the empire?" Ballah asked.

"What about it?" Grover asked. "Maybe if my brother's in control things will work better. Maybe he'll save the poor or something. And hey, maybe I'll get to live in the palace. Yeah, and I'll have a royal title and everything."

"No you won't," Ballah said. "Because once Ragnar takes over he'll be deposed, or ruled through Villains R Us. Evil will reign forever. They'll put Heroes, Inc. out of business. We won't be able to get jobs anywhere."

"That's too bad," Grover said. "I sympathize, I really do, with all you heroes soon to be out of work but maybe you can find your feminine side too."

"And if Heroes, Inc. is out of business your residuals will be cut off," Ballah said.

Grover stood up suddenly and looked straight at Ballah. "We have to do something about this."

Ballah smiled and unrolled the vellum scroll, a finger pointing at the dotted line.

"Then sign right here."

8

Same place, not much later

Grover signed the scroll in an awkward hand with a pen that Ballah had provided. After he was done Grover said. "Well, there's my John Hancock."

"You signed a false name?" Ballah asked, looking at the scroll closely.

"No, should I have?" Grover asked.

"No, no. Not at all," Ballah said and smiled. "Then it's all legal. I'll suppose you'll like to meet your associate now."

"Associate?" Grover asked. "You mean a lawyer?"

"Oh no," Ballah said. "Not a lawyer. We don't need any lawyers here. I guess you would call her a sidekick, but we don't use that term anymore. You've been away for

awhile. There's been a change in hero regulations. There were strikes, sit-ins, all those sidekick's tired of doing all the work and getting half the credit - if even that much. It's more of a fifty-fifty thing these days. Nobody gets top billing."

"I don't know if I need an associate," Grover said. "My last 'associate' was always trying to get me killed, or kill me herself."

"I assure you that your new associate is a consummate professional," Ballah said.

"Will you swear to that?" Grover asked.

"As long as it isn't legally binding," Ballah replied.

Grover shrugged in indifference.

"Then I swear to it," Ballah said. "You can come in now."

Grover focused his gaze on the doorframe, which was filled with a woman of medium height and build. She stood in the doorway for a second while Grover noted her firm chin and shoulder length blond hair, which was cut in a bob, leaving all the thickness intact. At her side she wore a rapier, the guard still shiny from lack of wear or anything resembling use.

"Hello, I'm Lilith," the woman said, nodding her head in greeting. "I've heard a lot about you."

Grover was on guard instantly. "I don't know what you heard, but none of it's true. I have an alibi. I was never there. I never met the girl before. I didn't know she was your younger sister."

"What?" Lilith asked. She patted the goat on the head. "Nice goat."

"That's his wife," the boy said.

"*May be* my wife," Grover corrected.

"I respect your work," Lilith said, taking in her surroundings, stepping over a pile of dirty laundry. "I've studied your adventures, read all the scroll versions two times."

"Why? Were you being punished or something?" Grover asked.

"No, it was a pleasure," Lilith said.

"Something's wrong with her," Grover accused Ballah. "I thought she was a consummate professional?"

"She is, she is" Ballah assured him. "But there's no accounting for taste."

"Grover," Lilith went on. "The one man that all of Villains R Us set out to kill and you escaped. You were legendary."

"I was?" Grover asked, and then thought about it. "Well, maybe I was a little legendary."

She stood forward and offered her hand. "It would be an honor to work with you."

Grover took her hand firmly and felt the strength there. He looked in her green eyes steadily and asked, "You aren't using any medication are you?"

"No," Lilith said.

"Given to fits of psychotic violence?" Grover asked.

"No," Lilith replied.

"She's a professional," Ballah said. "As I told you."

Grover still holding her hand went on. "And Lilith is your real name, your birth name?"

"Yes," she said, her voice a little uncertain this time.

"It's not just a name you made up on the spur of the moment?" Grover asked.

"I don't understand," Lilith said, glancing over at Ballah. "What do these questions have to do with-"

"And if faced with a superior force and odds all against you, and given a chance to escape or die like a martyr, would you still fight until you were hacked to bits?"

Grover asked.

"Of course not," Lilith said. "I'd retreat and come back later with a superior force. I'm a hero but I'm not stupid."

Grover turned to Ballah. "Okay, we can work together."

Lilith let go of Grover's hand and opened her mouth to ask Ballah what this was all about. Ballah just shrugged and then rolled his eyes as if to say these legends had to be humored.

"Do you have a blade?" Ballah asked.

"I hocked it," Grover said. "I had to feed the goat."

"Then it's good I brought this along," Ballah said. He went outside of the room for a second and came back with a rapier encased in a black leather sheath. The guard on this blade was also shiny, unblemished by any fingerprint, polished to the point of perfection.

Grover gripped the sheath firmly and pulled out the blade, testing its weight and balance. "A good blade."

"Cronin brand," Ballah said. "They're sponsoring your adventure."

"If it isn't a Cronin then you're just fighting with a dull blade," Lilith repeated.

"I heard that advertisement," Grover said. "But I thought that I was going in secretly."

"You are," Ballah said. "But it's Cronin's new blade and they wanted to test market it. If you come out alive, you'll be rich."

"And if not?" Grover asked.

"You'll be dead, of course," Ballah said.