

HEROES

WANTED

(Series Edition)

Kyle Crocco

Books in the *Heroes, Inc.* series

- 1) *Heroes, Inc.*
- 2) *Heroes Wanted*
- 3) *Heroes Divided*

HEROES WANTED (SERIES EDITION)

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For Jenn

*“Do not meddle in the affairs of wizards, for they are subtle
and quick to anger.”*

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of The Rings*

Note to the Reader of *Heroes Wanted* (Series Edition)

Dear Reader,

Thank you for choosing *Heroes Wanted (Series Edition)* for your reading enjoyment.

If you are a fan of the original *Heroes Wanted*, published in 1991, please note 1) you are awesome, and 2) this novel is NOT the ebook version of the 1991 print edition.

Heroes Wanted (Series Edition) has been completely reimagined. While the basic premise of Grover and Cilla taking on new identities in a barbarian territory remains, the plot, events, and characters are different than the original.

This has been done in order to make the books and characters more consistent throughout the series.

If you are a fan of the original *Heroes Wanted*, that novel still exists in used copies and will be brought out as an ebook edition in the future.

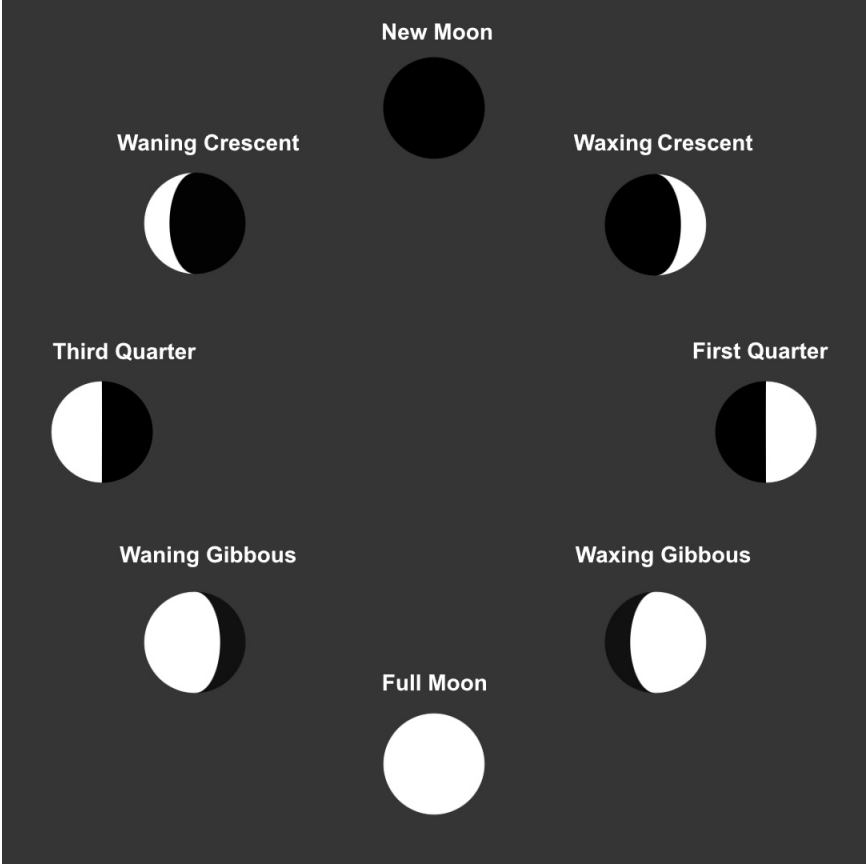
Enjoy.

Kyle Crocco

VARDAN REPUBLIC



PHASES OF THE MOON



Prologue

The Daily Scroll

Heroes Ink: Who's Hot and Who's Not in Heroes — by **Citizen Fama**

It's been three years since the hero team of Grover and Cilla burst onto the scene.

Before they met, neither of these heroes seemed destined for success. Cilla had been rejected by fifteen hero companies. And Grover was a neo-master duelist with small political prospects in the province of Jolinstive.

In fact, you're probably more familiar with Cilla's famous sister, Callista, who won Hero of the Year.

However, these two heroes' fortunes changed three years ago— with a chance meeting in the town of Parda on the northern edge of the republic. After killing two villains, Grover was marked for revenge by Villains R Us, and their team was sought out as hero prospects by Heroes, Inc.

Once believed to be the team that could help Heroes, Inc. earn their second Hero Cup, they've recently fallen into a slump, losing six missions in a row (tying a very unwanted record).

You probably know these two heroes better as the face of Argh knives (Cilla) and Pointu blades (Grover).

Grover, of course, has become widely known for his shirtless hero calendar. I must admit I am a huge fan and have a copy hanging in my office.

So it was with some pleasure I sat down to interview him about his recent hero troubles in his new townhouse in Varda, right before their latest mission.

I had my quick scribe with me, who helped transcribe the interview.

Fama: Great to finally meet you, Grover.

Grover: Yes, nice to meet you Fama. We've been busy. Cilla and I just got back from our latest mission.

Fama: I heard it didn't go well.

Grover (looks uncomfortable, glances toward his agent, Ballah): I thought this was a fluff interview?

Ballah (agent of Grover steps in): Please stick to the approved topics, Fama.

Fama: Sorry. I'm a big fan of your hero team. And I love the new shirtless calendar.

Grover (smiling): Thank you. Would you like me to take off my shirt? (Grover takes off his shirt without any prompting).

Fama: Wow! They don't embellish anything at all. That's your real physique in the calendar.

Grover: Yes, I've been working with a trainer so I can wear a loin cloth.

Fama: Very nice. What's your next mission?

Grover: I can't talk details, of course, but it's smacking down evil again.

Fama: I noticed Cilla isn't here. So, how's the partnership going?

Grover (looking strained, turns to Ballah): I thought this interview was about my new townhouse. Isn't this the Hero Homes interview?

Ballah (coming up): Sorry, I got the schedule wrong. This is *The Daily Scroll* interview for their Heroes Ink column.

Fama: Is there a problem here?

Grover: No, no problem. We just got our schedule mixed up. Did you want to see my master bedroom? I got a deluxe tub with hot—and cold—running water.

Fama: Maybe later. Your team was once reckoned to be the missing piece for Heroes, Inc. The team that would help them win their second Hero Cup. But now you've lost six missions in a row. And there are reports of tensions with your partner.

Grover: Is that a question?

Fama: Any comment?

Grover: Yeah, I have a comment. You can bite my— (Grover is pulled out of the room by Ballah).

Ballah (returning to the room): I'm sorry, Fama. That's all the time Grover can spare. Would you like a free shirtless calendar?

Part 1
The Hero Problem

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1

In the Autumn of 424 of the Vardan Republic

The Lair of the Lich

Nivalis Mountains

Late Afternoon on the day of the New Moon

Cilla ignored their groans and prayers for salvation.

They're just unnerved by the skulls, she thought.

Followers are always unnerved by skulls. She cast a disappointed glance at them, then pushed on into the cave until their party arrived at a mysterious symbol carved on the wall.

Behind her stood a tall man, thick of chest but girly of hair. He placed a calloused hand on the rune and said, "I don't understand."

Cilla pursed her lips. "That's because you don't read ancient runes, Grover."

"No. I mean, you wanting to move on. This rune obviously means '*Death to all who walk on from here.*'"

The followers gasped.

"Or, it might mean '*Death to all who've walked this far.*' I can't be sure." Grover traced the old rune etching with his forefinger. "On the other hand, it might mean '*Water closet.*'"

There were more groans from the followers.

"Stop complaining!" snapped Grover. "You knew death was in the offing when you signed up to defeat evil on this mission."

"No, we didn't," protested one of them.

Grover shrugged. "Well, you should have. It was all in the mission contract you signed."

"We can't read," said another one. "We're what you call

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‘literary’ types.”

“You mean *illiterate*?”

“No, we’re pretty sure we mean *literary*.”

Cilla nodded to Grover. “Speaking of which, partner, when did you learn to read ancient rune?”

“Never. I just have this helpful guide.” Grover waved his copy of *Ancient Runes for Idiots*. “So, was it something I said, Cilla? Was it something I did? What made you want to abandon our team at the very altar of fame?”

Cilla pointed to herself. “It’s not you. I just need some space to grow as a hero.”

Grover stared. “Are you sure? Because it feels like it’s me.”

“Can we talk about this after we defeat the undead evil wizard? We really need to win this mission. We can’t afford another loss.”

Grover gestured to the mountain guide and baggage carriers that cowered behind them in the tunnel. “What about our support team? Are you going to leave them too?”

Cilla glanced back. “Of course. After the mission is won.”

“You’re *so* cold,” said Grover.

“What? You want me to cuddle with them afterward?”

The mountain guide raised his hand.

Cilla glared. “What now?”

“If it’s all the same to you, Cilla, we’d prefer to return home and forget the cuddling.”

Cilla scowled. “So, I’m not good enough to spoon with now? It’s just help me all day and all night, at my beck and whim, then duck out of the camp afterward with no awkward silences over breakfast?”

“I don’t want to die,” said the guide.

Cilla scowled. “Then you’ll never see your bonus.”

The guide hesitated. “Maybe half now and half when we’ve killed the undead wizard?”

Cilla waved dismissively. “As agreed, come all the way, and you get it. No halvesies.”

The mountain guide and baggage carriers huddled together, mumbling softly, casting furtive glances. Suddenly, they raised

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their hands in agreement. Then, as one, they cast their packs down and bolted out of the cavern.

Their cries of joy could be heard echoing long after Cilla held up her lantern and scowled at Grover. “I told you not to talk about it.”

“Our *partnership*?”

“No. The whole part about ‘death being in the offing.’ You always mention that part too early. Now we have to carry our stuff.”

Grover grunted, picked up a bag, then followed Cilla deeper into the dark tunnel.

A few moments later, they came upon a chamber door. Set in the wall, the stone door was hexagonal in shape but didn’t have anything so conventional as a doorknob. Of course, doors to undead wizard lairs rarely did.

Grover examined the hexagonal door for a moment, then turned to his partner. “Maybe we should just take a break. You know, think stuff over. Then, after you think about it, we could go to some—”

Cilla put down her pack. “Step aside.”

Grover stepped to his right.

Cilla raised her lantern, examining the markings on the door. Someone had inscribed various arcane symbols in the rock, almost like claw marks. Cilla pulled out an ancient, yellowing manuscript from her pack. The crumbling vellum contained symbols similar to those inscribed on the door. Cilla compared the two.

“Is it the right address?” asked Grover, throwing down his pack.

Cilla nodded.

“What does it say?”

Cilla spoke slowly. “*Do Not Disturb Unless You Want to Die.*”

“Message seems clear enough.” Grover turned to leave.

Cilla yanked him back. “Not so fast, partner. We have a job to do. Defeat evil and all that.”

Cilla pulled out her Argh knife (which, according to her sponsor, made people go “argh” when you stabbed them). Holding the knife like a painter, she considered, then cut around the seal

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that surrounded the door. It was the same seal that had protected the undead wizard's body (sometimes called a Lich) for years while its evil spirit roamed the countryside, inhabiting lone travelers, casting terrible curses, and tipping cows. Grover and Cilla had been hired by the local residents to end the evil Lich's reign forever. Or, at the very least, ask it to relocate.

Grover watched as Cilla cut through the seal. "Maybe we could go to a wizard therapist. You know, air out our feelings."

"We tried that. You cried too much."

Grover wiped away a tear. "You said some pretty mean things."

At last, the final pieces of mortar fell away, breaking the seal. There was a loud hiss of air. Both of them stepped back.

But nothing happened. There were no flashes of light, falling rocks, or sprung traps.

The two heroes exchanged puzzled looks.

Cilla stepped forward, pushing the heavy door with one hand, but it did not yield. She stepped back and considered. "Your turn to do something manly, Grover."

"Oh, right." Grover ripped off his shirt and started flexing.

Cilla pointed. "To the door, Grover. To the door."

"Fine." Grover put his shirt back on. "You know, I'm required to rip off my shirt at least once during a quest. It's in my contract with the hero calendar sponsor."

"You passed that mark on day one when we were trying to hire our support team."

"No need to body shame, Cilla." Then he leaned on the hexagonal door, pressing with his shoulder, sending the door crashing inward with a resounding boom.

Cilla lifted up her lantern. Beyond the threshold, the light revealed the fallen door and the edges of a wide stone chamber. Beyond that was darkness.

Then she turned to her partner. "We need to be quick about our business. The new moon is about to rise—when the Lich has its greatest power. And the scroll says once we cross its threshold, the wizard will awake in a hundred heartbeats, give or take twenty or so."

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Grover nodded, then pulled out his Pointu rapier. “Let’s do this then.”

Together, they ran through the entrance, tripping over the door, falling to the ground.

Cilla dusted herself off. “Let’s try that again, shall we?”

“You first,” said Grover.

Cilla stepped over the door, counting down. “...ninety, eighty-nine, eighty-eight, eighty-sev—”

Suddenly, the lantern went out.

“Where’s the wizard?” asked Grover.

Then, on the far side of the stone chamber, there was a burst of energy. A red, fiery, glowing light, like a ball of fire suspended in the air, shot sparks from its sides.

The crimson light illuminated the hexagonal chamber in a bloody glow, revealing stone diagrams etched on the floor and, finally, the Lich’s mummified body. It was dressed in robes and lay spread eagle on a rectangular granite slab.

As they watched, the circle of fire grew brighter until it was as huge as a wagon wheel.

Grover and Cilla exchanged looks, then took a step back.

“What’s the count?” asked Grover. “Is he awake now?”

“It’s too soon,” said Cilla. “This shouldn’t be happening.”

Suddenly, there was a crack of thunder and a blinding glare of jagged light. A force of wind tore their weapons from their hands, sending them crashing to the floor.

Grover’s eyes grew wide. “Well, we tried our best.” He turned on his heel.

Cilla snatched his sleeve, staring daggers. “This, this is exactly why I’m leaving.”

“Me, too. When you hear thunder cracking, it’s time to hit the road, Cilla.”

“No, the partnership. You just don’t give me the support I—”

There was another loud crack.

Suddenly, a man and a woman appeared, stepping through the bright crimson light into the chamber.

The man was tall, thick of chest, but short of hair, wearing a

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leather vest that only covered the top half of his chest and a pair of leather leggings. The woman, on the other hand, was long of hair, big of chest, and curvaceous of body. She wore trousers and a shirt that revealed every curve of her form. She flipped her long mane of hair and winked at Cilla and Grover. “Feel free to watch how the pros do it.”

Cilla waved her Argh knife. “Wait a moment, sister. This is our undead wizard. Our mission. Our win.”

The curvaceous woman drew back and snapped, “Not anymore, Priscilla.”

Cilla growled. “Of all the people, in all the evil wizard lairs of Vardan, it had to be you to ruin my mission.”

Grover glanced from Cilla to the curvaceous woman. “Just a guess, but do you two know each other?”

The woman sauntered over and held out her hand. “My name is —”

“Bitch!” said Cilla.

The woman frowned. “Callista, actually.” Then she turned to Grover. “Nice to meet you—”

“Bastard!” muttered Cilla.

“It’s Grover, actually.” Grover took Callista’s soft hand in his own. “Bastard is the name my brother gave me so he could disown me from my inheritance. But that’s another story, which you may have read about in our first scroll series. Your skin is very soft, by the way. Do you use—”

Cilla stepped between them, pushing them apart. “Stop! Stop it! The both of you. I refuse to hear you discuss lotion tips with my sister.”

“Fine,” said Grover, glancing at his chafed hands, which needed some lotion. “So this other guy is your brother, I take it?”

“This is my partner,” said Callista. “Alcander.” She gestured to the man behind her, who was studying the prone body of the Lich, making notes on a scroll, and calculating the limb span with some measuring tape.

Alcander gave Grover a knowing wink. “If you’re wondering if the two of us do it, the answer is—”

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“Stop—all of you!” Cilla pointed. “What are you doing here, Callista? I told you I hated you and never wanted to see you again.”

Callista shook her head sadly, holding her heart. “Silly, you know by now I don’t listen to you. In fact, I don’t even know what you’re saying right now. Oh, and we’re taking the Lich, of course.”

Cilla stamped her foot. “No, you can’t take our Lich. Grover and I have marched too many miles, negotiated countless deadly mountain passes, and spent a week wandering in the cold, searching for the cave entrance that led to this hidden chamber, having to fight off a horde of mountain trolls.”

“And your point is?”

Cilla waved a scroll. “We have a contract. This is our Named Quest, sister.”

“Oh, Silly. Your Named Quest expired the day before the new moon, per your contract expiry date. So you’re done. Out. Over. This Named Quest belongs to Heroes for Hire now.” Then she looked at Alcander. “Time?”

Across the room, Alcander finished tying the last knot to secure the Lich, then checked his hourglass timer. At that moment, the last drops of sand were spilling to the bottom of the glass. “Done with a few grains to spare.” Then Alcander threw the Lich over his manly shoulder and struck a pose. “How’s that for timing?”

“Well done.” Callista smiled, then turned to Cilla. “You know, I’d love to catch up with you, sis, and tell you how much you disappoint our parents. But we have to get this Lich destroyed before the new moon rises. You know, for humanity’s sake and for the Hero Cup.” She glanced at Grover. “As for you, stud, maybe we’ll be seeing each other naked someday.”

Grover held out his hand. “I look forward to it.”

Cilla slapped Grover’s forearm.

“Ow!” Grover rubbed his arm.

Cilla picked up her Argh knife from the floor. “You cannot take our Lich. We need this win.”

“So do we. And I don’t see your name on it, Silly.” Callista turned to Alcander. “Does it say Silly on the Lich?”

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Alcander glanced at the undead wizard's body. The exposed skin was completely covered in runic tattoos. "Nope. But this rune on his thigh does say, '*Don't touch me unless you want to be cursed for eternity.*' Or maybe it means '*I love Mom.*' I'm not sure about the translation."

"You want to use my copy of *Ancient Runes for Idiots*? Third edition." Grover waved a blue codex.

"Got my own." Alcander waved a red codex. "Fourth edition."

Cilla stamped her foot again. "You're not doing this, Callista. Not again. And my name's not Silly. It's—"

"Prissy, I know." Callista roughed up Cilla's short, dark hair. "Ta' for now, sis. And Grover, don't forget to think about me."

Grover waved farewell. "I'm already doing it."

There was a crackling explosion of red light, and Callista and Alcander disappeared through their magic portal.

Grover turned to Cilla. "Why didn't we take a magic portal to this lair?"

Cilla looked exasperated. "You know why." Then Cilla counted off on her fingers. "Because I hate wizards, it costs too much, and I hate wizards. Not to mention, you have to know the exact location of the lair before you can transport to it through a magic portal. Which she obviously does because she keeps tracking me. Did you see just now how she plucked some of my hair? She always does that so wizards can stalk me with their spells."

"I liked your sister. She seemed nice."

Cilla frowned.

"What?" asked Grover.

Cilla jabbed a finger. "That. Right there. That's why we need to break up."

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2

The Town Called Final Rest

Nivalis Mountains

10 Days Later

After three years together, the hero partnership was on the brink.

But Cilla wouldn't discuss her feelings with Grover.

In fact, the whole journey back through the mountains after losing the mission, she said nothing. Beyond a few grunts, she didn't mention the mission failure or the sudden arrival of her sister. Which was strange because Cilla was never this quiet.

Something was off.

And it wasn't just Cilla.

The feeling remained with Grover as the two heroes arrived at the inn of Final Rest, nestled in a small valley below the Nivalis mountains.

The feeling stayed in the back of his head as he took a long hot bath in a tiled tub filled with water from the local hot springs.

But Grover couldn't put his finger on what the feeling was until he was walking down the lamp-lit hallway to his room.

His room door had been disturbed. The long blond hair he had placed in the crack of the door was now resting on the hallway carpet.

Someone had entered his room uninvited.

Grover sighed, suspecting what awaited him.

He placed his hand on his sword hilt and opened the door inward.

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The room appeared normal. Everything was where he had left it. His canvas pack lay on the scuffed wood floor. His dirty clothes were scattered across a red armchair. And a fire crackled in the brick hearth.

So he walked over to check the wardrobe and peeked inside.

Empty.

Then he noticed the heavy curtains by the window and pulled them back.

Nothing but dust bunnies.

Finally, he checked under his four-poster bed.

Bingo!

A bearded villain. And he was sound asleep. Head resting on his black cloak.

Grover nudged the man with his foot.

The villain snorted, eyes flashing open. When he saw Grover holding a sword, he lifted up his head and banged it on the bottom of the bed.

“Don’t panic,” said Grover. “I’ll let you come out before we fight.”

“This is so embarrassing,” said the villain, crawling from under the bed. “But you took so long in the bath. The room was warm. I fell asleep.”

“It happens,” said Grover, stepping into the middle of the room. “But if you spent a couple of weeks hiking in the mountains, you would want a long, hot bath too.”

“The hot springs are famous here at Final Rest.” Then, the villain sniffed. “Are those bath oils?”

Grover nodded. “Lavender.”

The villain nodded, running a hand through his dark beard. “I guess you know why I’ve come.”

Grover sighed. “The Revenge Trip?”

The villain pulled out a scroll and cleared his throat. “*Villains R Us has declared—*”

“Stop!”

The villain looked confused. “But ... I’m supposed to read ... they told me ...”

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“You and every other villain they sent out after me.”

“There’ve been others?” asked the villain, surprised. “How many?”

Grover looked away. “I don’t like to talk numbers.”

“More than ten?”

“It’s been three years. How many villains do you think I’ve been with?”

The villain’s eyes opened wide. “That’s disgusting.”

“You’re telling me.” Grover shook his head sadly.

“Well, this time, it’s your doom,” said the villain, recovering his composure. He pulled out his rapier. “No more failures. No more missed opportunities. They sent a master duelist to do the job. That’s me, by the way. You can call me ‘The Maestro.’”

“And you can call me Grover. I’m a—”

“Neo-master duelist,” said The Maestro, checking another scroll. “I have your file right here. I know everything about you, Grover Soovo.”

“Except for the fact I’m no longer a neo-master duelist.”

“*What!*” cried The Maestro, scanning the scroll. “When did that change?”

“Practically speaking, I’m a master now,” explained Grover. “I passed the dueling practicum last season. Never thought I would get this far, to be honest. Always thought I would be a gentleman-class dueler. And now, here I am, working on my master’s project for the theory portion. Most people devise a tactic or try to solve a defense problem.”

“That’s what I did. I came up with The Maestro Defense to counter the Delphi Attack.”

“I read about that defense in *Dueling Monthly*,” said Grover. “Very intricate. But for my project, I thought I would come up with a new dueling move. Something as impressive as the *en garde* or *riposte*.”

“That’s insane. No one’s come up with a decent move in decades.”

“Well, I’m going to. I’ve been working on it for months.”

“Show me this move,” said the villain, putting away his scrolls.

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Grover moved his wrist in a circular motion as if using the rapier to draw a circle. “I like to call it the whirly-whirl. But I’m not sure if it’s better to go in a circle leftways or rightways.”

The villain scoffed. “You call *that* a move, Grover? That’s stupid. For a moment there, I thought you might be a threat.”

“I’ll show you how stupid it is.” Grover whirled his sword again.

The villain clutched his stomach. “Please, stop. You’re making me laugh.”

“You won’t laugh when this move kills you.”

“No, I’ll laugh when I kill you, Grover Soovo. And I’ll spare the world the embarrassment of your new move. But not before telling people about it in my memoirs.”

“So be it,” said Grover. “Prepare for the whirly-whirl.” He whirled his sword.

The villain took a step back toward the chamber door. “Really, you have to stop, or I’m going to die from—”

Suddenly, Grover’s chamber door opened inward, slamming into the villain’s back. The Maestro was flung forward, impaling himself on Grover’s blade.

“Nooooooooo ...” screamed the Maestro, sliding down the sword. “You slayed me with your stupid move.”

“Damn,” swore Grover, yanking his sword from the Maestro’s body. “Which way was I whirling when I slayed him?”

“My bad,” said Cilla, walking in. She glanced down at the villain bleeding on the carpet. “I didn’t see a ‘Do Not Disturb While Dueling’ sign.”

“Do you know which way I was whirling when I impaled him?”

“Do you mean when I knocked him into your sword?”

“Either way.”

“I don’t remember.” Cilla looked at the dark clothing, the scroll with the Villains R Us logo. “Another Revenge Trip?”

“You’d think after three years they might give up,” said Grover, gazing down at the bearded villain. Villains R Us had been after him for years—ever since he had killed two villains back in Parda: Brutus the Brute and Hart. “I’m tired of having to look under the

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bed every time I check into an inn.”

“Well, you have to give it to the Head Villain,” said Cilla, prodding the Maestro with her boot. “She really knows how to hold a grudge.”

Grover whirled his sword to the left and the right. “Which way was it? I need more data for my thesis.” Grover lowered his sword. “Oh well ... do you have news about the magic carpet ride home?”

“Yeah, we can’t leave for two more days. Inclement weather conditions, apparently. But that’s not why I dropped by.”

“You wanted to apologize for how mean you were the past week?”

“No!” snapped Cilla. “I had an epiphany in the baths.”

“Nothing to be ashamed of. Everybody does it. I took a whiz too.”

“Gross. I mean, I had a sudden realization while I was bathing. The reason why we failed on our mission.”

“Let me guess. It wasn’t your fault. It was me, or your sister, or —”

“The System.”

“It’s not The System!” snapped Grover. He walked over to his pack and pulled out a cloth. “There’s no worldwide conspiracy trying to ruin our missions. I’ve been telling you that for years.”

Cilla stared at Grover. “I don’t know why I *try* to talk to you anymore. You never listen.”

“What?” asked Grover, cleaning the blood off his rapier.

Cilla stormed out of the room, slamming the door.

Grover ran to the door, yanking it wide. “Wait! Cilla. Don’t go.”

Cilla stopped short in the hallway.

Grover stared deep into her eyes. “Could you please send housekeeping to remove this villain?”

Cilla snorted and turned around.

Grover yelled. “Was that a yes?”

But Cilla was already stomping down the steps to the common room.

Grover hefted his rapier again, then whirled to the left and to the right. “Damn it all. I’ll never finish my thesis this season.”

3

The Final Rest Inn

Common Room

A Few Moments Later

Cilla stormed down the steps to the common room.

After three years together, the working relationship with Grover had become strained. Grover seemed oblivious to the problems they were facing. Not just with villains. But with their team. They weren't communicating well, cooperating, or supporting each other. There was a time when Grover would have listened to every theory of how The System was behind their mission failures. Now, all Grover was focused on was his shirtless calendar sales, promoting Pointu rapiers ("*Pointu: For When You Want to Make A Point*"), and gathering data on his new dueling move for his master's thesis.

It was time for Cilla to look at her options. Now that they were finishing their hero season, their three-year contract would be up, and they would be free agents. She could sign with another hero company or find a new partner at Heroes, Inc. Someone who would support her and listen to her ideas.

As she entered the common room, the bartender glanced over, pulling her hair back.

"Cilla, I wanted to thank you for saving our village from the curse of the Lich." The bartender slid a mug of beer across the counter. "Drinks are on the house."

Just then, the cook stepped out of the kitchen and whispered in the bartender's ear. The bartender nodded, then yanked the beer

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away. “Oh, my mistake.”

“I was about to save your town from the Lich,” protested Cilla. “Then we were interrupted.”

The bartender shrugged. “We should have hired Callista in the first place. Your sister is the way better hero.”

“But I got there first,” said Cilla. “She stole the Lich from us.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said the bartender. “Save it for your memoirs. There’s someone here to see you, by the way.”

“Who?”

The bartender nodded to the back of the common room.

Cilla gazed across the tables, filled with citizens of the small village.

She didn’t see anyone familiar.

Then she spotted a man in a heavy cloak sitting in the shadows, far from the fire, his brown hood pulled low over his features.

Cilla was about to reach for her Argh knife when the man pulled up his hood.

Cilla smiled, then turned to the bartender. “Please send a pitcher of ale with two mugs to the table.”

“You pay first,” said the bartender. “No freebies here.”

“Fine,” said Cilla, tossing over a few coppers. “And my sister isn’t nice, by the way. She just has a good publicist.”

The bartender rolled her eyes as she swiped up the coppers, then began to pour a pitcher of ale.

Cilla walked to the man in the corner. When she reached the table, he kicked out a chair.

Cilla took a seat. “I can’t believe you’re here. How long has it been? Years?”

The man shrugged. “Who keeps track of time?”

“Most people,” said Cilla. “But I should have known I’d see you around after running into Callista. What the monkey are you doing all the way out in the Nivalis Mountains?”

“Rumor is you’re unhappy with your current situation.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

The man slid a scroll over. “You want a chance to do some real good in this world, Cilla?”

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“Hells, yeah.” Cilla opened the scroll, then looked up in disbelief. “You can’t be serious?”

The man cocked an eyebrow. “It’s the real deal. Want to see more?”

The bartender set a pitcher of ale on the table with two mugs. She glanced at the man and made a face of recognition. “You two aren’t ...?”

“No, we’re not,” said the man.

“Right,” said the bartender and walked off.

Cilla noticed people glancing at their table. “Yeah, we might be seen here. And Grover could come down at any moment after he lotions up. Let’s go talk shop somewhere more private. I need to study this before I return to Heroes, Inc.”

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4

Magic Carpet

En Route to Varda

2 Days Later

After the weather cleared, Grover and Cilla took a magic carpet flight back to the city of Varda.

The partners hadn't spoken more than two words since the night the Maestro had attacked Grover in his room.

Finally, after riding silently on the carpet for hours, Grover couldn't take it anymore, asking, "What's going on? Are you planning on leaving the team? Did you get a better deal somewhere?"

In reply, Cilla thrust a scroll in Grover's face. "Did you see the latest hero company rankings?"

"Only the last dozen times you slipped them under my door."

"Our last mission loss means Heroes, Inc. has fallen into a tie for first place with Heroes for Hire for the championship."

"Rankings don't determine our self-worth," said Grover, looking down at the sparkling river winding its way to the city.

"They do in my family."

"Besides, we helped the people by finding the Lich's liar. We just didn't get our happy ending this time."

"What about the other six times?"

Grover turned to Cilla, his long blond hair whipping around his face. "The most important thing to remember here is that the mountain people were saved from the undead evil wizard. Does it really matter who gets official credit for saving the people? Us or

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your sister's company?"

"I'm not sure that deserves a response."

"We'll do better next time."

"That's what you said the other six times," said Cilla, turning her back. "And now it's the end of the season. What we need is a change in leadership. I need to be a leader of my own team."

Grover's head snapped up. "*What?*"

"We're about to descend," cried the magic carpet pilot. "Please secure your personal belongings before landing."

Grover grabbed his pack and looked over the edge of the carpet. He took in the view of the beautiful city of Varda below them, with its red terracotta roofs, wide cobblestoned boulevards, and a river running through the middle of the city with its many bridges. It was a fine autumn day. The leaves in the city parks were multicolored, golden light filled the sky, and the people of the city meandered down the streets and bridges.

Ever since he left his home city of Jolinstive—betrayed by his brother and marked for revenge by Villains R Us—the capital city had been his home. He and Cilla had spent the past three years living in Varda, working for one of the top hero companies, Heroes, Inc. Grover even had purchased a lovely new townhouse with his mission fees, located within walking distance of the headquarters.

Before Grover could point out his new digs to Cilla, the magic carpet plummeted in a steep dive, heading for a stone chateau on the edge of the city near the river. The expansive 100-room chateau had once belonged to a wealthy merchant before being converted into a training facility and headquarters by Heroes, Inc.

The pilot came to an abrupt stop in the street, hovering above the ground in the shadow of the statue of the unknown hero.

As the carpet came to a rest, the pilot turned back. "Thank you for flying Rapid Rugs. We understand you have many choices for flying carpets. Don't forget to give your pilot a five-star rating."

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5

Heroes, Inc. Headquarters

Front Gate

Late Morning

Cilla jumped off the magic carpet without saying a word to Grover.

“Wait!” cried Grover.

But before he could follow, the Rapid Rugs pilot grabbed his arm. “Not so quick, friend. There’s the small matter of payment for services rendered. Two gold crowns—each.”

Grover stared. “*What!* It used to be a crown and a half each, my friend.”

“The price of magic has gone up everywhere, Grover. You don’t like it, you can walk to your next mission. You’re lucky I don’t charge for luggage like the other carpet carriers do.”

Grover gestured to their packs. “We only had carry-ons.”

The pilot just frowned.

“Fine. Take it.” Grover slapped four gold crowns into the man’s grubby palm. Then he grabbed the packs.

He saw Cilla by the Heroes, Inc. gate, handing out a few coppers to the paupers who waited there. “Hey! Wait up, partner.”

Cilla’s back tensed. Then she turned around. “You know, hero teams break up all the time, Grover. It’s no one’s fault. I mean, it’s your fault we’re on a losing streak. But sometimes people grow apart. They need different things. Like a winning career and a better partner they can rely on. It happens all the time. You can find someone else to hold your—”

“But—”

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“Hand, butt, whatever you need to be held. I don’t need to know the details.” Then she noticed Grover staring, mouth agape. “Hello, are you even listening to me? I’m opening myself up here.” She waved a hand before Grover’s eyes, then saw where he was gawking.

A curvaceous woman stood in the street facing Ballah. Ballah was the former talent-recruiting agent for Heroes, Inc. After recruiting Grover and Cilla to the company three years ago, he had decided to go freelance, opening his own hero talent agency, representing many popular heroes, Grover included.

The curvaceous woman stood with her back to them and was fingering Ballah’s finely tailored robes, laughing at his jokes. Ballah, as usual, was fitted out in his richest-colored fabrics and most ostentatious rings. The most ostentatious of all was his Hero Cup ring, for the year Heroes, Inc. won the championship. As for the woman, she was outfitted in tight trousers, thigh-high boots, and a midriff-bearing top.

“I don’t believe you!” snapped Cilla. “You never listen.”

“What?” asked Grover, still staring at the curvaceous woman.

“Cilla went inside,” said a young pauper, tugging on Grover’s sleeve.

“Oh,” said Grover, handing a copper to the child. Then he spotted Cilla walking in the château. “Wait! I can look and listen at the same time. Just tell me what you said.”

The pauper shook her head sadly, having heard this excuse many times before.

Cilla snorted and continued walking through the front gate into the courtyard.

“I mean, I heard what you said. I just don’t remember it exactly.”

“Maybe try being ‘present’ next time,” suggested the pauper.

Cilla walked deeper into the courtyard, where novice heroes were running the obstacle course.

“I’m sorry,” shouted Grover. “Don’t leave. I need you as my wingman. I mean, wingwoman. Wing *person*?” Grover looked at the pauper for confirmation, and the girl just shrugged. “Right-

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hand wing? No, that isn't it." He thought for a few moments more, then shouted. "If you leave our team, I'll miss you, Cilla."

Cilla paused mid-step in the Heroes, Inc. obstacle course, sending a novice screaming into a pit. She almost turned back, then lurched forward, muttering, "No time to get sentimental, Cilla. Remember to focus on what's best for you and your legend."

At the same time, Ballah waved to Grover. "Grover, come over here. This is ..."

"Ballah, I don't have the time to talk to—"

The woman turned.

Grover stopped looking at Cilla when he recognized the curvaceous woman from the cave of the Lich. Immediately, he jogged over. "You know, I thought about you a lot over the past two weeks."

Ballah blushed. "Why ... uh ... thank you, Grover. I thought about you, too. But in a professional way. I mean, you look great on the shirtless calendar, but I have that calendar in my office for marketing purposes only."

"He means me," said Callista, slapping Ballah's arm. "But I thought of you, also. Naked, of course."

"Why thank you," said Ballah. "I'm really flat—"

Grover interjected, "She means me, B-man."

Callista laughed. "No, I meant Ballah."

Ballah looked flabbergasted and stammered. "Why ... uh ... thank you. That's very nice of you, Callista. But you know I'm married ... to your twenty percent."

Callista's eyes flashed angrily. "Ten!"

"Fifteen."

Callista flipped her hair. "Twelve."

"Deal." Ballah and Callista shook hands, then Callista ran her hand up Ballah's bicep. "Eleven."

"What kind of agent do you take me for? Twelve!"

"You can't fault a woman for trying."

Grover glanced from one to the other. "What's going on here?"

Ballah smiled. "Your ticket to the Hero Cup, my friend."

Grover's eyes lit up. "She's getting us tickets to the Hero Cup

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awards ceremony? At the Opera House? Fantastic. Are they front row or balcony? I heard balcony is better.”

Ballah coughed. “No. Umh, Callista is going to be joining Heroes, Inc.”

Callista winked. “I’m *thinking* about it.”

“Heroes, Inc. has made a very attractive offer to her while you were in the Nivalis Mountains,” said Ballah. “As you might know, she used to work for Heroes for Hire. And they won the Cup—”

“Five years running.” Grover nodded. “Cilla tells me about it all the time.”

“Callista’s recently become a free agent, and she’s exploring her options.”

“Wait! Then how is she going to score us tickets to the awards ceremony?”

Ballah sighed. “This one is fine in a fight but sometimes not as sharp as his blade.”

“But so pretty,” said Callista, caressing Grover’s bicep. “And so strong.”

“Anyway ...” said Ballah. “Now that Callista’s sidekick, Alcander, was put on a year’s probation for using performance-enhancing—”

Grover said, “I knew he wasn’t as buff as all that.”

“Sexual performance-enhancing drugs,” explained Callista.

“Oh.” Grover frowned. “That’s *illegal*? I mean, I don’t need drugs for that. No matter what you read in the scroll detailing our first adventures. That chapter was a typo. I’m great in bed.”

Callista chuckled. “Sex in bed. How quaint. I can’t remember the last time I had sex in a bed.”

“Me too,” said Grover. “I mean, I get freaky all over. Hang from ceilings and all that. It’s all in my scroll about my first mission.”

“I’m sure it is, big boy.”

Ballah coughed. “Anyway. Callista’s going to meet with the Head Hero to finalize the details. She might be the hero you need to win the championship.”

“Great, I’ll see you inside,” said Grover, grabbing his packs. “Maybe we can have a latte sometime?”

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“Or sex.”

“I’m flexible.”

Callista winked. “You’d better be.”

6

Head Hero's Office

A Quarter Hour Later

Grover heard the yelling as soon as he passed through the château gate.

It echoed throughout the courtyard, where sweaty novice heroes were rescuing a comrade from the obstacle pit.

It resounded down the ballroom, where a dueling instructor was demonstrating the proper defense for the Delphi Attack.

Grover wagered you could even hear it down by the river where they were doing underwater combat training this morning.

And the voices grew in volume as Grover hefted his packs down the long hall leading to the Head Hero's office.

Outside the office, the Head Hero's executive assistant sat at a sleek and neatly arranged desk. The well-groomed assistant didn't seem bothered by the yelling. He continued to make notes on a ledger while adjusting his ear protectors. Nearby, two men were seated on a divan in the waiting area, an old gray-haired man smoking a pipe and a pudgy man fidgeting with the folds of his robe.

Grover threw down his packs and went to sit on one of the empty chairs in the waiting area, but the executive assistant waved him over.

"You can go right in," said the executive assistant. "She's waiting for you."

Grover glanced once more at the two men on the divan, left his packs, then knocked on the Head Hero's door.

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Once he did, the yelling stopped.

“Come in,” barked the Head Hero.

Grover opened the door. The Head Hero was seated at the far end of the room behind a huge mahogany desk. Golden light streamed in from arched windows behind her. A fire burned in the hearth, filling the room with a smoky scent.

A former hero herself, the Head Hero still looked imposing and heroic, with piercing gray eyes, short brown hair, and a lithe figure. Even with ink stains on her fingers from all the paperwork, she could still make a villain quiver with a glance.

Grover saw Cilla was in the room, seated on a divan.

As Grover walked in, the Head Hero pushed some papers aside on her desk and gestured to the divan. “Have a seat, Grover. Cilla and I were just discussing your ... uh ... situation.”

“What *situation*?”

“And your failed mission.”

“That wasn’t our fault,” explained Grover, running a hand through his hair. “It was a fluke.”

The Head Hero sighed. “For the *sixth* time?”

“Seventh,” added Cilla.

“Not helping,” said the Head Hero.

“I admit we’re in a bit of a slump,” said Grover, fiddling with his hair. “It happens to everybody.” Then he plumped down in the middle of the divan. As he did, Cilla made a point of getting up and walking over to an armchair on the other side of the room, closer to the fire.

The Head Hero shook her head and pointed to the divan. “The comfy chair is for VIPs only, Cilla. So, sit next to your partner.”

Cilla muttered. “Not for long.”

“What was *that*?” asked Grover.

“See how he doesn’t listen.”

“She was muttering,” said Grover. “She’s always muttering these days.”

“Scooch,” said Cilla, waving her hand.

Grover moved to one side of the divan. Cilla sat at the far end with an ample space between them.

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The Head Hero shook her head. She had seen this happen many times before. Hero teams all started out as fun and kills. But after a year or two on the road, doing quest after quest, mission after mission, most partnerships were in need of serious wizard therapy—or at least a serious bath. Throw in a prolonged slump, and all bets were off. Cilla and Grover were a classic case. After losing several missions in a row, they had begun to turn on each other. Blaming the other for their failures. Saying the other was the problem. Then, someone would start talking ‘solo’ career.

Cilla drummed her fingers on the armrest. “So, when does legal get here so we can do this thing?”

Grover stared. “Are you really going to go through with this?”

There was a knock at the door, and the executive assistant announced the head of legal had arrived.

The Head Hero smiled and waved to the lawyer. “Come in, *Advocatus*. Did you bring the paperwork?”

“Finally!” Cilla bounced up from the divan, reaching for a quill from the Head Hero’s desk. “Just show me where to sign, lawyer, so I can go into free agency.”

The Head Hero held up her hands. “Just wait one moment, Cilla.”

Cilla stopped her celebration dance in mid-step. “What do you mean?”

The Head Hero nodded to *Advocatus*. “It would be better if *Advocatus* explained so he can look like the bad person. And you won’t yell at me.”

Advocatus was dressed in his thick autumn robes, with pockets full of handkerchiefs to wipe his nose, which constantly ran in cool weather. He adjusted his glasses, coughed uncomfortably, then unrolled a parchment. “According to the terms of your employment contract with Heroes, Inc., the one you both signed, you can only become a free agent after—

“Three years,” said Cilla. Then she looked at Grover. “After three *long* years.”

“No,” said *Advocatus*. “After *ten* successful missions within three years.”

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“*What!*” A look of shock crossed Cilla’s face. She jammed a finger toward Advocatus. “Wait a moment here! Did you say *ten* successful missions?”

Advocatus cringed, pulling out a handkerchief to wipe his nose. “Please, don’t stab me. I just do the paperwork here.”

“What are you telling us?” asked Grover, swiveling his head from the Head Hero to Advocatus.

Advocatus sneezed and wiped his nose again. “If you would please allow me to—”

Cilla pulled out her Argh knife. “Just cut to the punchline, joker.”

Advocatus stepped closer to the Head Hero. “Umh ... according to our records, you have *nine* successful missions within three years. You need *ten* to complete the terms of your contract. That’s one more.”

“That seems fair,” said Grover, nodding his head. “We’ll just win another next season.”

Advocatus took a deep breath, sniffing. “Likewise, if you earn a losing record anytime within three years, we can terminate the contract. With prejudice.” He eyed Cilla’s Argh knife. “Well, not prejudice, actually. But you would be—”

“Fired,” said the Head Hero in her stern voice.

Head Hero's Office

Moments Later

As Cilla's scream of despair echoed throughout the château, there was a soft knock at the office door.

Everyone turned their heads slowly.

The executive assistant poked his head back in. "The VIP is here. Would you like to have her wait or ..."

"No, send her in," said the Head Hero. "She should be here for this meeting."

Cilla frowned. "Who are you talking about?"

The executive assistant stepped aside, revealing Callista.

Callista walked in, taking in the office. On the walls were oil paintings of past heroes, shards of legendary swords, battered shields with famous crests, and a framed copy of *Hero Monthly* with the Head Hero's face on it. And behind the desk of the Head Hero sat a singular gold Hero Cup trophy, gleaming in the sunlight.

"Well." Callista clapped her hands. "Sounds like you were all having fun in here. Was that you screaming, Silly?"

The Head Hero smiled. "So, I guess there's no need for introductions. You all know Callista."

Cilla pointed and stuttered, "What is *she* doing here? *She* ruined our last mission with the Lich."

"As I was going to say—before you screamed—we need a few more wins here at Heroes, Inc. You and Grover need one more win to complete your contract successfully, and our company needs one more win this season to earn the Hero Cup. We've come close too

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many times to miss out now. Callista is going to help us with that. Specifically, help *you*.”

Cilla stomped her foot. “No way. If she joins our team! I quit.”

Advocatus wiped his nose. “Quitting would be a breach of—”

Cilla waved her Argh knife. “Breach this, Advocatus.”

Advocatus retreated a few steps, dropping his handkerchief into the fire.

The Head Hero pounded her desk. “Stop it, Cilla! You can’t breach our lawyers. You have no idea what that would cost us in insurance fees. Besides, if you let me finish, Callista is not joining your hero team. She’s going to work as a consultant for Heroes, Inc., helping hero teams like yours improve. And to ensure there are no more incidents like what happened on your last adventure with the Lich.”

Cilla jabbed her knife in Callista’s direction. “*She’s* what happened on our last adventure with the Lich.”

Callista folded her arms. “Which is why I would consult with you on how to ensure I don’t do something like that again.”

“How about if I show you how you won’t do something like that again?” Cilla dove for her sister. Too quickly, unfortunately, as she didn’t see Grover’s foot and fell forward, landing face-first in front of her sister’s thigh-high boots.

Callista chuckled. “You don’t have to kiss my boots, Silly. A simple ‘thank you’ will suffice.”

Cilla tried to get up to attack Callista again, but her foot caught in the carpet, and she fell face first once more.

Callista made some notes on a scroll while making ‘tsking’ sounds. “Same old agility issues, I see. We can work on that.”

Cilla jumped up. “You’re going to regret that, sister!”

The Head Hero forcefully clapped her hands together.

Everyone stopped and turned.

“Hey! Big boss here. I speak. You listen. *Remember?* Unless you two heroes want to lose your jobs and be banned from the professional hero leagues.”

“No, we don’t,” said Grover, pulling Cilla away from Callista. “We like being heroes and saving people from evil. Right, Cilla?”

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Cilla shirked off Grover's hand and sheathed her knife.

"Anyway," said the Head Hero. "I'm going to have Callista consult on your next mission. She'll accompany you, observe your actions, and help you understand your issues so you can complete your mission successfully."

"I don't have issues," said Cilla. "*Grover* is the problem."

"Like I said, she'll help you understand," repeated the Head Hero. "We really need her help. After five years of coming close, we're finally in the running to win the Hero Cup this season. We have the most successful winning record in our history. And just need one win to break our tie with Heroes For Hire."

"And we're tied with them because of Callista," remarked Cilla, sitting back down.

The Head Hero continued. "Which is why your next winning mission, Cilla, could be the one that gets us the Cup."

"Not to mention, make me Consultant of the Year," said Callista, thrusting out her chest. "I already won Most Valuable Hero, Most Valuable Coach, and Rookie Hero of the Year. Bringing back a team from failure will be the clincher for getting into the Hero Hall of Fame."

"Not to mention, Cilla," said the Head Hero. "If you're successful, you can become a free agent at the end of this season in two weeks. As a winner of the Hero Cup, you'll be in high demand by any hero company. Not just ours."

Cilla considered, fingering her blade. "Okay, that sounds great. As long as the next mission doesn't involve any magic or stupid wizards. They ruin everything."

There was a knock at the door.

The Head Hero's executive assistant poked his head in again. "Can the wizards come in now?"

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8

Head Hero's Office

Next Moment

When the door opened, a pair of wizards walked into the room.

They were a study in contrasts. One was a wiry old man with gray hair. The other was a young, pudgy fellow with a weasel face.

The older wizard looked around the room, smoked from a long curved pipe, and blew rainbow-colored smoke rings to the ceiling. Meanwhile, the pudgy fellow nervously wrung his hands.

The Head Hero coughed and pointed to a sign on her desk that said *No Smoke Ring Blowing*. The old man frowned, then extinguished his pipe with a wave of his hand.

The Head Hero gestured to the old man. "This is—"

"Beogot," said the wiry old man. He inclined his head to the Head Hero. "At your service. That is if you are paying me. Otherwise, you can go screw—"

Cilla cut in, "Any relation to Beowulf?"

The old wizard arched an eyebrow. "*Who?*"

Cilla looked shocked. "Famous warrior hero. Fought the monster, Grendel. Inspiration to aspiring heroes everywhere."

"Gretel is a monster?" asked Beogot. "She was so adorable in that story with her little brother."

"No," said Cilla. "*Grendel* is a monster."

Beogot furrowed his brow. "And this Beo-fox fought little Gretel?"

"No. *Beowulf* fought Grendel."

Beogot threw up his hands. "I'm sorry. I'm not current with

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your latest hipster scrolls.”

Cilla waved her hand in frustration. “Oh, forget it!”

“You’ll have to ignore my sister,” said Callista. “She’s a hero buff. If you do, she’ll eventually talk to someone else and leave you alone.”

The Head Hero coughed. “Anyway ... if we could listen to what the nice, potential client with lots of money has to say.”

Beogoat cleared his throat. “Thank you.” He then gestured to the young, pudgy wizard. “This is my assistant, Beo-Weasel. You can basically ignore him. We’ve come from the land of Hoven.”

“Hoven!” declared Grover. “That’s the barbarian state at the northern edge of the republic. I always thought you barbarian men would be hairier.”

“We’re not barbarians. We’re—”

“Wizards,” said Cilla. “We know. We saw your stupid smoke ring trick at the door.”

“We just work in Hoven,” explained Beogoat. “And we need your help.”

“I said no wizards,” said Cilla, folding her arms. “When you work with them, you never get credit for the win. And they always want to use some magic item. A One ring, a Shanara stone, a relic sword. Oh, they love their relic swords. Especially the swords that suck people’s—”

“*Cilla!*” snapped the Head Hero. “You haven’t heard the mission yet. And Advocatus assures me this job will give us full credit. This could be the big one. The one that puts us ahead and wins us the championship.” She flashed her jeweled ring to Cilla. “I know you want one.”

“Yes, Silly. You definitely want at least one.” Callista flashed her left hand, which had five championship rings on it. “I mean, you have to start somewhere.”

The Head Hero nodded. “Besides, the wizards requested you.”

“*Me?*” asked Cilla.

“No,” interjected Beogoat. “Actually, we wanted that big fella over there with the girly hair to help out.”

“Of course,” said Cilla.

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“And we also had a coupon for your services. One of those *Heroes Wanted?* ones. I have it right here.” Beogoat searched his pockets to show them but pulled out a rabbit instead.

“Gods forbid a wizard pays full price for a hero’s service,” said Cilla. “That’s why they always work with those amateurs, so they don’t have to pay pro rates. Of course, they charge us pro rates when we ask for help—if they help at all.”

“I was sure I had the coupon somewhere.” Beogoat pulled more odd objects from his pockets while his assistant Beo-Weasel collected them and placed them into a pouch.

“So why do you need Grover?” asked Cilla.

Beogoat stopped pulling things from his robe and drew back suddenly. “What’s with the interrogation all of a sudden? Am I on trial here? You know, I can cross the river to one of your rivals if you don’t want my business.”

Cilla looked flabbergasted. “I was just asking a simple—”

“You’ll have to forgive my sister,” said Callista, patting her on the shoulder. “Someone has to. She doesn’t have five rings and needs lots of affirmation because our father loves me more. And our mother, too.”

Cilla slapped the armrest of the divan. “They do not!”

The Head Hero stood up. “Does it matter why they asked for Grover? They want to hire your team, Cilla. Gods know I would suggest another team, otherwise. But everyone is out injured or done for the year. And we only have fifteen days left in the season to earn a win. Just think, Cilla. You can complete your contract—and put a Hero Cup on your resume. You know what that means. Bigger commissions, better missions, the respect of heroes, and the fear of villains. ”

“I was just asking a standard referral question,” muttered Cilla. “What if—*mmph*.”

Grover clamped his hand over Cilla’s mouth, then flipped his own mane of hair. “I was in for this mission when you said I had girly hair, old wizard man. Sign us up. Magic relics or even swords that suck. I don’t care.”

Beogoat rubbed his hands. “Fantastic. So now that we’re all

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agreed on this mission. And no one thinks I'm hiding anything or acting 'suspicious,' we can get on with this quest without any further ado about my ulterior motives."

The Head Hero coughed.

Beo-Weasel nudged the old man. "The mission. You need to explain the mission first."

"Oh, yes," said Beogoat, nodding. "Of course. The mission. How could I have forgotten?" He started chewing on his pipe and cleaning his long nails.

Beo-Weasel tapped the wizard's shoulder. "They're waiting."

"Oh, yes. Sometimes I forget where I am. Or who I am. I smoke a lot of divination weed—if you know what I mean. A whole lot. Maybe too much. Anyway ... as you know, the Hovenites are the barbarian allies defending our northern border. Their warriors are the only thing standing between us and the undead army that wants to eat our daughters and marry our brains."

Beo-Weasel coughed.

"Sorry." Beogoat slapped his forehead. "Or sons. Anyway, the point is the republic is on the brink of disaster." The wizard struck a dramatic pose. After a moment, he added, "This is where you're supposed to gasp in horror."

"Oh, my gods!" cried Grover, standing up. "We need to do something about this."

"Thank you," said Beogoat, nodding. "Anyway, about two weeks ago, things went sour. The barbarian Warlord Baldor was killed in an undead attack, along with his son and the Kapitan of the West Hoven province. This left the East and West Hoven provinces leaderless. And his only daughter, Winona, as the remaining heir."

"And so what's the catch?" asked Cilla. "Why do you need us? Or Grover?"

"I said the only remaining heir was his daughter, Winona," repeated Beogoat. "I thought I made that clear."

"I don't get it," said Cilla. "Why doesn't this Winona become Warlord of Hoven and leave us out of it?"

"The Western Hovenites only want a man to lead," explained

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the Head Hero, shaking her head. “As sad as it sounds.”

“Exactly,” said Beogoat, snapping his fingers. “As I was saying before my monologue was interrupted, the Western barbarians are not as progressive as you city folk with your so-called animal equality and ethical treatment of vegetables. They are very conservative and will not follow a woman, no matter how hot she is.” Beogoat eyed Callista for a moment. “No offense, gorgeous.”

Callista winked. “None taken, you old goat.”

Beogoat was flustered for a moment. “Umh ... anyway since Baldor’s death, the barbarians have split into two factions, the East and the West. The Western Hoven faction has coalesced around a new leader that I brought in, who is called Philip. Because that’s his name. Meanwhile, the Eastern Hoven contingent doesn’t want to follow Philip because they are more progressive and are supporting Winona’s claim to leadership.”

Beo-Weasel whispered something in Beogoat’s ear.

“Oh yes,” said Beogoat. “And, if the two factions stay split, they won’t be able to stop the undead hoards when they invade from the Frozen Mountains during the Hunter New Moon—and eat us all. So you get it? Can we go now?”

“Umh,” said Cilla. “And why do you need Grover and me to help?”

“Didn’t I cover all that?” asked Beogoat, looking confused.

Beo-Weasel muttered something to the old wizard, and the two conferred for a moment. Finally, Beogoat snapped, “Fine, *you* tell them then.”

Beo-Weasel stepped forward, looking embarrassed and wringing his hands. “Sorry. What my boss, Beogoat, didn’t mention was that he—being a super-wise wizard (which I’m contractually obligated to mention)—found a brilliant solution to this leadership dilemma.”

Beogoat pushed his assistant aside and gestured dramatically. “After smoking some divination weed, I realized the answer was so obvious. It was staring me right in the face.”

Grover leaned forward. “What?”

Beogoat chuckled. “Philip and Winona should get married. It

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would satisfy both factions. Pretty clever, right? Not my first wizard rodeo, I can tell you. Even better, it's just the kind of wizard act that could win me the Most Valuable Wizard award this season. And earn my wizard company, the Wonder Wizards, their next Wizard Cup.”

Cilla frowned. “I’m still confused about why you need Grover ... or me.”

Beogoat mumbled and looked off into the distance.

“What was that?” asked Cilla.

Beo-Weasel looked at the old wizard, then turned to the group. “Then Philip went missing.”

“Cold feet?” asked Grover.

“No, they were actually kind of warm,” said Beo-Weasel. “At least, whenever he asked me to rub them.” Beo-Weasel suddenly realized everyone was staring and stopped talking.

“Ah, now I get it,” said Cilla, snapping her fingers. “You want us to track this Philip fellow down and get him to the altar. Not much of a mission, but—”

Callista stepped forward. “And you couldn’t have come to a better place, wizard man. I happen to be an excellent tracker. My sister, not so much. I got all the skills in the family. She got the clumsiness. But as a consultant, I can teach them to track down this Philip person and get him to the altar before you can wave your wand. And Grover, don’t worry, you just have to look pretty for the marketing posters.”

“Got that covered,” said Grover, tugging off his shirt.

The young wizard added, “We don’t need you to track him. We have good reason to believe Philip may be dead. We found blood. Lots of it.”

Beogoat snapped, “That’s an unconfirmed and malicious rumor!”

“It’s all so embarrassing,” said Beo-Weasel, wringing his hands. “Beogoat would prefer if we kept that information quiet.”

The old wizard nodded. “As in, don’t tell Wonder Wizards.”

“So ... do I keep my shirt off or what?” asked Grover.

“Put it on!” snapped Cilla.

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“Off,” said Beo-Weasel, then blushed.

Grover put his shirt back on.

Beogoat looked around the room. “Well, now that my assistant has blabbed out the big secret. Yes, Philip might be dead. He wandered off into the East Hoven Hills, and we’re not sure what happened. But we’re pretty sure it’s not my fault. No need to look at me as a suspect at all.” Beogoat noticed everyone staring. “Anyway ... his disappearance happened right before the wedding contract negotiations to unite the Eastern and Western factions. Now he’s gone, and we have two weeks until the Hunter New Moon. The darkest new moon of the year—when the forces of darkness are most powerful. That’s when we believe the full undead army will be unleashed from the Frozen Mountains. So we need someone to—”

“I know,” said Cilla. “Be a Warlord. Unite these backwater barbarians (who don’t recognize women as leaders) and lead them against the undead army before they destroy our republic.” Cilla rubbed her hands together. “You hired the right team, spell caster man. This sounds like a mission that will definitely win us the Hero Cup. In fact, it’s the kind of mission I’ve been training for my entire life. To lead a nation to victory over evil.”

The old wizard shook his head and waved his hands. “No, no, no. You can’t do it, Cilla.”

“What do you mean?” asked Cilla. “Because I’m a woman?”

“Exactly.”

There was a collective gasp in the room.

“Unless you want to marry Winona, of course,” added the old wizard.

“Might be your best chance at matrimony,” offered Callista. “You don’t exactly have a lot of suitors, from what Mom and Dad tell me.”

Cilla glared.

The Head Hero intervened. “I think Beogoat meant that Grover should do it. Right? You mean Grover should marry Winona.”

Beogoat nodded, smiling. “Yes. We need Grover to marry Winona so he can unite the factions before the Hunter New

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Moon.”

Grover slapped the divan. “No way am I getting married again. The last time I got married, my wife betrayed me to my brother. Then, they poisoned my junk, so it didn’t work.”

The pudgy wizard explained, “He means ‘pretend’ marry Winona.”

“Ohhhhh ... I can do that. I do that all the time.” Then Grover turned to his partner. “And when we win the Cup, I’m sure Cilla will want to remain a team. Winning heals all team problems. Right, Cilla?”

Cilla ignored Grover, then looked at Beogoat. “So you just want Grover to ‘pretend’ marry Winona? And that’s it?”

“Sure,” said Beogoat, nodding. “That should do it.”

“Why Grover? Why not some other hero?”

“Well ...” said Beogoat. “Our choices were limited. We need someone to take Philip’s place. Someone tall, with gorgeous hair, and who knows how to duel.”

Beo-Weasel whispered in Beogoat’s ear. “Oh, and someone smart.”

“And you wanted *Grover*?” asked Cilla.

“Well, not Grover, specifically,” said Beogoat. “But we’re on a tight budget, and we couldn’t afford Inigo Montoya, Percival, or any other of the top heroes on short notice since it’s the end of the season. And the new moon arrives in two weeks. Not to mention we had that coupon.”

“So what am I supposed to do?” asked Cilla. “What’s my role here?”

“Well, you could pose as Philip’s valet,” offered Beogoat.

“I’m no servant.”

“Philip has a concubine.”

“Do you take *me* for a concubine?”

Beo-Weasel whispered in the old man’s ear, then Beogoat said, “Or ... you could pose as Philip’s advisor.”

“So I don’t do anything? And Grover gets all the glory, leading the army to victory.”

“No, we just want him to get married to Winona,” said Beogoat.

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“That’s *it*?”

Beogoat nodded but wouldn’t meet Cilla’s eyes.

“And nothing *else*?” Cilla stared at the two wizards. “You two spell casters don’t have any tricks up your sleeve?”

Beogoat rolled up both sleeves. “See, nothing but my arms.” A rabbit popped out. “I’m not sure how he got there.”

“I don’t know,” said Cilla. “This mission sounds too easy. Like you’re leaving out important details that could get us into trouble later.”

Beogoat shrugged. “Well ... if you have a problem with the mission, we could always try our luck at Heroes For Hire. I heard they were tied with you in the race for the Cup. I’m sure they might give us a discount.”

“No need,” said the Head Hero, sticking out her hand to shake Beogoat’s. “Consider it a done deal. Now, let’s sign that contract.”

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