

PROLEGOMENON THE FIRST

The garden, normally full of the sounds of life, is ominously quiet. The colors, usually vivid, are tinged with gray. Even the clear, warm light of the golden sun seems watery and lacking heat. The animals, instead of conversing, brood silently. Along a wide, grassy path through the trees walks the gardener, his steps heavy and slow as he converses with the tall, dark, menacing figure of Malthazzar. They pass a young doe, who, from her place in the trees, watches and strains to hear their words even though she feels an oppressive maelstrom of emotions engendered by the presence of the Lord of Evil.

The gardener shakes his head. “No. I know my people. They will not war.”

Malthazzar speaks, his cold tones cutting through the air like a sharp winter breeze. “Ha! Only because you protect them. If you withdrew your presence they would soon fall into my ways. You give them no freedom of choice, that is why they follow you: because they can choose no other way.”

They take several more steps before the gardener halts abruptly and looks his enemy in the eye. “That is not true. I have faith in my creatures. If I were to leave them, still they would not come under your dominion.”

Malthazzar’s mouth opens in a hideous, yellow smile. “Then I have a proposition for you. Let neither of us be present in

the Three Lands. Let us each send only a few emissaries to do our bidding. Let us make a pact, you and I, that our chosen instruments shall be given free reign, and then let us see which of us the creatures of Palindor choose for their master.”

“You would challenge me, Malthazzar? What right have you?”

“No right, Lord Olvensar, save that you know that your creatures are weak, and that without you they would quickly become my servants instead of your own. It nearly happened once before, if you remember.”

The gardener nods slowly. “I remember, but then you and I were both abroad in the land. This time we will be absent?”

Malthazzar nods his assent.

“Then I agree. You are wrong. My people are strong. You can fool them for a time, but ultimately their love will win through. This is what I’ll do: I will send two creatures from the world of humans. No harm is to come to them, or I will seek you to the very ends of the worlds, and you will wish that you had never been created.”

“There is no need to threaten me. It is their weakness that will undo them, not my strength. For my part, I will instruct carefully the one whom I choose. No harm will come to your... humans” — he sneered as he said this word — “unless they cause harm first. And you will not permit any harm to come to the one I send?”

“Agreed. You have your pact. Now, go!”

The ground trembles and the air fills with loud, sneering laughter. “I leave, Olvensar. But when I return it will be as victor.” And with a thunderclap and a burning stench in the air, Malthazzar is gone.

Slowly, the colors return, the air feels clean again, the garden reverts to normality. But the nearby doe sees the gardener shake his head and say under his breath: “And so the test begins....”

PROLEGOMENON THE SECOND

It is night in Sheol.

The burning, blood-red sun has set, its place taken by the black of utter voidance. There are neither moon nor stars; the sky is black with the nothingness of death. Yet there is light of a sort: an evil, burning light cast by the pools of smoldering brimstone that pockmark the dark land and exude their acrid stench over the landscape.

It is night in Sheol.

We stand, formless, shallowly breathing the rasping air, and peer into the depths of a valley. Here, at the very heart of Sheol, is the castle of its lord and master. Here, but a short distance from where we stand, is the castle of one whose name is rarely spoken in this, his kingdom. Here, its dark rock reflecting the burning sheen from its moat of molten sulphur, stands the castle of Malthazzar.

It is night in Sheol.

Trembling, we enter the castle, our senses barely surviving the assault. Worse than the aching black redness that greets our eyes, worse than the foul odor of living, rotting meat, worse by far than the hideous cacophony of the beasts that serve the master of this place, is the sense of loss, of despair, of hatred, of unalloyed evil. For here, this night, Lord Malthazzar has

called together in one place his most trusted generals, his most powerful soldiers, his most deceptive spies.

Together, they have eaten and drunk until sated, gorged with the black, nameless, undead meat and drunk with the dark, oily liquid contained in their goblets. If these were mortals, they would now be sleeping off their excesses, but for these minions of darkness there is no rest, merely a dragging, loathsome tiredness, a fatigue from which there is no relief. For it is true that there is no rest for the wicked, and here, gathered together in one place, are the most wicked of creatures ever to serve the Lord of Evil.

But there are two here tonight who stand apart even from this loathsome crowd. The first is obvious: Malthazzar himself, the Lord of Sheol, seated at the head of the immense table at which the meal just concluded took place. Tonight he appears in all his diabolical glory, the red light from the torches in the sconces on the walls of the Great Hall seemingly swallowed by his black form. Slowly, he looks around the table, his eyes reflecting the red light. Creature by creature, he weighs what he sees before passing on to the next of his minions.

His soldiers, his generals, his spies do not observe their master. They are too busy talking and arguing amongst themselves, some still drinking of the fruit of the bitter dark vines that grow in the parched, baked soil of Sheol. Here and there, arguments have broken out: who is the greatest of Malthazzar's army? for what reason have they been summoned? Contemptuously, Malthazzar's eyes pass over these creatures, searching for the one who will do his bidding, the one on whom he must depend to bring his plan to fruition.

It is night in Sheol.

His eyes settle on a single creature unlike the others gathered before him. This is the second one who stands out from this gathering: a small creature, shorter than a man, taller than dwarf.

Yet, even as we look at him — if, indeed, the creature is male — we find that we cannot be sure even of his height. His shape seems indeterminate: one moment he appears as a short, dark

mouselike creature, the next a tall, well-built human. But even as he undergoes these metamorphoses, one thing remains constant: black as his companions around the table are, this creature has an altogether different quality of blackness. His blackness seems, surprisingly, less complete — perhaps, we may hope, less evil — a dark grayness rather than a complete blackness, a mere absence of light rather than a destructive swallowing of it.

But there is something else about this creature, some other quality that causes Malthazzar's eyes to cease searching. Alone of his subjects, this creature is not engaged in conversation; alone of his subjects, this creature has not touched the goblet before him; alone of his subjects, this creature is looking fixedly towards the head of the table, meeting the eyes of his lord.

Malthazzar stands hugely to his feet. He bellows a command: "Cease! Be quiet!" Silence descends on the chamber as all eyes now turn toward him. "Begone, all of you, back to your dominions. I have no further need of you." The stones of the castle reverberate with the power of his voice.

For a few moments, there is confusion as the creatures make for the room's exit. Soon only two creatures remain in the hall. For a long moment, they lock eyes, then one lowers his head in submission.

Quietly now, Malthazzar speaks to the remaining creature. "You! Shadow! Why did you not leave when I bid everyone depart?"

The creature's head rises again. For a moment, Malthazzar seems unsure whether there might not be a touch of haughty arrogance in this creature's bearing, but even as he watches, the gray shadow flickers and becomes smaller, the eyes that momentarily locked with his own dropping submissively to gaze at the dark, slimy flagstones.

"Did you not desire that I remain behind, my lord? For so I thought I saw in your eyes."

"Indeed, it is so. You may raise your eyes and look on me, for I have chosen you for a task. You will be the instrument through which I gain my greatest victory. You, Shadow, have

been chosen from all my generals to be the one whose name shall be revered throughout the ages as the greatest of all those who serve me. Because of you, the minions of the hated High Lord will be destroyed and deliver Palindor to me. Come closer, and I will explain your task.”

The gray body lifts itself from the crude bench on which it has been seated. Without hesitation, the creature walks towards his lord, ignoring the movement and the muffled sounds coming from the remains of the half-alive, half-dead meat that formed their meal. Shadow bows his head in supplication and drops to one knee before Malthazzar. “I am honored above all others this night, my lord. Tell me thy will and it shall be done.”

Malthazzar smiles to himself. He has chosen well; he has chosen well indeed. This time, Palindor will be his.

Truly, it is night in Sheol.