

Reubin shuffled to the serving counter, careful to avoid the haphazard piles of magical oddities and artefacts that lay stacked around the floor. Capes, tunics and assorted garments were randomly draped over anything that didn't move. Swords and daggers vied for floor space with armour, cuirasses and helms. Flimsy racks, full to overflowing with various bottles, jars and boxes threatened to buckle under the weight. In short, it was a right bloody mess.

To Reubin, however, it was an organised mess. He knew where everything was and could find any item in under a...

He glanced around the store and grimaced. Perhaps he should tidy up a little, when he had a little more time to spare. He turned to peer at the timepiece on the wall behind him. However, all he saw was a white blur. With it being hung between the demon-blessed blade, Orcsbane, and the perpetually shifting colours of the Shroud of Joeseff, the clock was difficult to see at the best of times, but he didn't think his eyesight had gone that bad. He removed his half moon spectacles from his tunic pocket and shoved them onto the bridge of his nose, then peered at the clock again. The reason for the blurring became apparent.

Oscar, his pet owl and soul-mate, was using the protruding central pinion of the clock-face as a perch again. How many times had he told him it was not a bunk-bed? But the damned bird would insist on sleeping there.

As if realising he was an object of displeasure, Oscar shifted in his sleep to allow Reubin a clearer view.

Reubin swore. It was ten past three. His customer was late. Didn't these people know he had a tight timetable to keep? If everyone kept him waiting before they deigned to show, there would be chaos throughout the multiverse.

He leaned against the stout wooden stand and rested an elbow on its timeworn surface, then cupped his chin while impatiently drumming the fingers of his free hand against the scarred top. If this was the gods' idea of a joke, he didn't find it amusing. Running W & M was hard enough without Them playing Their stupid little pranks. This job was certainly not turning out to be the cushy number he'd expected when he'd volunteered for the post, after old Wally Martin had passed on. Not that Wally had died, he'd decided to pass on responsibility for the shop to someone else and run off with some young slapper from Garthvalen.

In his ignorance, Reubin thought he would be sent to far-flung worlds, mysterious places, have time for sightseeing trips, mingle with heroes and demi-gods. In short, he would have a ball. However, as often happens, reality reared up and kicked him in the orbs of life, and completely bugged his fantasies.

Instead, for the past two hundred years he'd been sent hither and thither at the whim of the gods, to dim and gloomy worlds only They could dream of, supplying magical goodies and artefacts to Their *supposed* favourites. He'd just about had enough. They could find someone else to do their errands. It was way past time he should have retired, anyway.

Reubin sighed and ran an aged hand through his thinning hair. There was no way the gods would let him. The senile old duffers were testy at the best of times and wouldn't view his resignation too kindly, especially as he'd practically begged for the job in the first place.

The bell above the entrance tinkled as the door opened. Curiosity overcame annoyance as Reubin peered across the room to see who his customer was. He hoped it was someone interesting. He was in need of cheering up.

A young man poked his head around the door and nervously peered in. His clear blue eyes went wide as he gazed at the mass of junk before him. Then, his head slowly withdrew and the door started to close.

With the speed and grace of a geriatric tortoise on steroids, Reubin sprinted around the counter and hurtled for the door. He'd never lost a customer before and he'd be damned if he would lose one now. Come to think of it, he probably would be if he lost him. The gods did not look too kindly on failure. Increasing his pace to athletic proportions, he managed to reach the door before it closed, and yanked it open.

His hand still on the outer handle, the youth catapulted into the room and went crashing into a rack of state-of-the-art, dead-accurate flinging spears, snapping the shafts of at least half of them.

Woken by the commotion, Oscar took off from his perch and flew around the room, screeching his annoyance and dropping splatter bombs all over the place.

Reubin cursed and glared at the airborne frenzy as he wiped dollops of sticky white goo off his shoulder. Then, muttering under his breath, he closed the door and hobbled over to help the lad up.

Now that order had been restored, Oscar glided over to the clock with an unconcerned hoot, and retook his place. Within moments, he was fast asleep.

When Reubin stretched an arm toward the toga-dressed youth, the lad shrunk back. Reubin's eyes narrowed as he heard the snap of yet more spear shafts. It would cost him a fortune to replace that lot - if he could find the itinerant tinker who he'd bought them from or remember which world the senile old coot lived on.

He pushed the disparaging thoughts from his mind and gave the lad a friendly smile then offered his hand again. “Don’t worry. Old Reubin won’t harm ye. Let’s be havin’ ye up” - he eyed the splintered spears - “afore ye cause any more damage.”

Hesitantly, the lad raised an arm and grasped Reubin’s hand, allowing himself to be hoisted to his feet. Once standing, he proved to be tall – very tall. He was at least three hands taller than Reubin. Not that that was too difficult a thing to achieve. Most people older than ten cycles were taller than Reubin, unless they were lying down.

“That’s better. Now, what can I do fer ye?” Reubin asked.

Instead of answering, the youth dipped his head in embarrassment and scuffed the toe of a sandal on the floor.

Reubin scowled. Not only was the lad tardy, he appeared dense as well. At this rate he would be late for his next appointment, and that would never do. “Come on. Don’t be afeared. Ye must be after somethin’ or ye wouldn’t have found yer way here. First off, I’m Reubin, manager of this fine establishment, at yer service.” Reubin dipped his head, swearing as his spectacles slipped off his nose and fell to the floor.

The youth stooped down and picked them up, then shyly offered them to Reubin who took them with a grateful smile. “Why, thank ye. That’s most kind of yer.”

A blush tinged the cheeks of the youth as he looked away, and whispered, “My name is Achilles.”

“Achilles, huh?” Reubin nodded. Such a pretty name for a boy. And such a pretty boy for the name, he mused. If Reubin were that way inclined, which he wasn’t, he could quite fancy him. With the mass of blond ringlets adorning his head, his clear, sun-browned complexion and striking blue eyes, Achilles was the prettiest looking young man Reubin had seen for years. Such perfection.

Realising that the silence between them had stretched beyond politeness, Reubin cleared his throat. “So, er, how can we help ye?”

Achilles shrugged while smoothing a stray lock of hair from his eyes.

This was going to be a difficult one. Reubin would have to try another tack. “Did ye have a dream, maybe? Of something ye needed? Then felt drawn to this spot to meet with someone?”

The smile that lit Achilles face showed Reubin that he’d guessed correctly. He clasped his hands together and enquired, “And just what was this dream that drew ye?”

Achilles gazed at the space above Reubin’s head, his eyes misting in memory. “I was on a field of battle. I was bloodied, but the blood was not mine. The Twojans were wouted and Hector was dead. I was the hewo.”

“Huh?”

Achilles shook his head, as if coming out of a trance, and gave Reubin a puzzled look. “Pardon?”

Reubin smiled. “Er, run that past me once more. If ye don’t mind?”

A glazed look crossed Achilles face as he stared to the point above Reubin’s head again. “I was on a…”

“Yes, yes. I be understanding that bit. It were the rest that were a bit confusing.” Reubin glanced at the clock again. It was now twenty past three and time was moving on.

“The Twojans were wouted and Hector was dead. I was the hewo. They couldn’t kill me. I was invincible!”

Reubin breathed a sigh of relief. A cream of invulnerability. That was what Achilles was after. He scuttled over to the counter to search for the ointment. He knew he had some somewhere, if only he could remember where he’d put it.

“Oh, Weubin?”

Reubin paused in the act of rummaging through the shelves beneath the counter and popped his head up. “The name’s Reubin.”

Achilles frowned. “That’s what I said.”

Reubin pursed his lips and shook his head. “What is it, Achilles?”

“What are you wummaging for?”

Reubin smiled. “The answer to yer dreams, young man. The answer to yer dreams.”

Ducking down, he began to explore the shelves again. After discarding jar after jar of various concoctions such as Dr. Morphine’s Paineeze and Methuselah’s Longevity Capsules, he found the one he was looking for and rose to his feet, a green-tinged pot clutched in one hand. He placed the vessel on the counter and gave Achilles a triumphant smile, which quickly faded as he saw the look of disappointment on the lad’s face. “What be the matter? Ye don’t look right pleased.”

Achilles stepped up to the counter and picked up his ‘prize’ between a finger and thumb. He raised it to eye level and peered at it in disbelief. “Is this it?”

Bloody hell! What did the lad expect, a faloukin army? “*That*,” Reubin pointed out, stabbing a finger at the jar, “is one of the last in stock: The cream of invulnerability, as used by the legendary George the Dragonslayer.”

Reubin folded his arms across his chest, daring Achilles to contradict him.

Instead, Achilles placed the pot back on the counter and gave him a frown. “Who?”

“Never mind, lad. Never mind. Let’s just be saying that one covering of this over yer whole body and nothing can harm ye.” Reubin picked up the pot and tapped the top with the index finger of his free hand. “And it carries a lifetime guarantee.”

Achilles still didn’t look impressed.

Reubin scowled. “Look, if ye don’t believe me, let me prove it.” So saying, he opened the pot and dipped a finger in the sickly looking goo it contained, then wiped a thin smear on the back of his other hand. “Now stab me!”

Achilles gaped in shock.

“Go on, stab the back of my hand. I promise ye, ye’ll be amazed.”

“Wh-wh-what do I use?”

“A short, sharp, pointy thing, like one of those daggers that be in the box behind you.”

Achilles swivelled, then reached out to grasp one of the weapons from the box labelled: Exceptionally Sharp Pointy Things. Turning back to face Reubin, he asked, “Are you sure?”

Reubin gritted his teeth and nodded.

Lightning fast, Achilles struck.

Reubin yelped as the dagger skidded off the back of his hand to plunge into the timber counter.

Achilles gasped.

The owl snored.

Reubin grinned. “Told yer.”

“Th-th-that was amazing. I would never have believed it if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes.”

“Smear’d in this stuff, there be nothin’ that can harm ye. And I mean nothin’.”

Achilles reached out and grasped the pot in trembling hands. “How much?”

Reubin folded his arms, partly to hide the bruise that was starting to come up on his hand, but mostly in smug satisfaction. “Nothin’, son. Absolutely nothin’. Think of it as a gift from the gods. Now, be on yer way. Don’t ye have some Trojans to beat?”

Achilles nodded, then snatched the stopper from the counter and rammed it into the pot before beating a hasty retreat. He paused at the door and turned to give Reubin a cheery wave. “Wish me luck, Weubin. Wish me luck.”

Reubin chuckled as Achilles disappeared. Wearing that stuff he wouldn't need any luck, just a strong disposition. The green ick stank worse than a Mangovetian sewer skunk's* armpit. After wiping the back of his bruised hand on a rag he'd found beneath the counter, Reubin wandered through to the back room and the control panel. It was time to leave this world and make haste to his next appointment.

As the swirling mists of the void wrapped around the small blue kiosk that passed for W& M, a worrying thought struck Reubin. Each jar contained enough cream to completely cover the body of an average-size human. Being as Achilles was a tall lad, and that Reubin had used a finger-full to demonstrate its properties, Achilles would not have enough to completely protect his body. He would end up with a small patch of vulnerability.

Reubin gave an unconcerned shrug and punched the *ready* code into the console. As long as Achilles started at the top, he shouldn't have anything to worry about.

* Mangovetian sewer skunk: A rather small, long-bodied, short-legged species of skunk from the world of Mangovia that is commonly found around sewer outlets.