J.W. ZAREK

THE DEVIL PULLS THE STRINGS

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Prologue
Prophecy

This scroll better be worth dying for plays on repeat in Laureus's head.

A bead of sweat trickles down Laureus's temple, down his neck, the scroll clenched between his teeth. Deep in the underground caverns beneath the Lavender and Roses Society Headquarters in New York City, his muscles strain in the damp darkness. He climbs up steep earthen walls. Grunts, shrieks, hisses below him. He peers down, and there's a blur of bluish-orange shapes. *Damn those domovoi.*

Professor Stone claims they're friendly and docile. But Laureus knows otherwise, especially when you steal something they're guarding—like a scroll. When piranha are done, they leave bones. The domovoi do not..

Laureus digs his fingers deeper into the pit's wall of dirt and climbs faster.

Finally, at the top edge, Laureus heaves himself up and over and takes the scroll from his mouth.

Four, then five, blue-haired, blue-bearded domovoi emerge from the pit, and their eyes lock on the scroll. The closest holds out a hand, puffs his orange chest.

Laureus waves the scroll. "Damn it, Papa Pip, it's me, Laureus. I've been down in the pits a thousand and one times. I took this for Professor Stone, I'll bring it back."

Papa Pip still holds out a hand, cheeks an angry red, his mouth flashes rows of razor-sharp teeth. Teeth meant for tearing, slashing, slicing, and thick enough to gnash and grind bones. Laureus's bones.

Six more domovoi appear, their primal, guttural gurgling grinding the air molecules.

Laureus pulls a domovoi-sized wool sweater from his pocket. "Stay back. You know I'll use this." *Professor Stone better be right about his newly found information about the domovoi's deadly allergy to wool.*

The domovoi are fixated on the sweater.

Laureus smiles, swings the scroll in a large arc.

Domovoi heads follow the scroll.

Laureus places it in the same hand holding the sweater, crams his free hand into his pocket, and retrieves a clear bag of M&M's.

"Oooh," the domovoi utter with emphatic enthusiasm.

Forget the sweater allergy. Sweet treats work almost every time. "You can have these"—he shakes the bag—"if I can have the scroll."

The domovoi dart their gaze from the bag to the scroll to the bag.

"Do we have a deal?" *Me and my bones pray their answer is yes.*

The domovoi gazes now shift between one another, and then they all nod in unison. *Weird, but good.*

Laureus tosses the M&M's bag, "I promise, Papa Pip, I'll bring the scroll back."

The domovoi drag their trade away, disappearing back into the pit.

Laureus runs up the well-worn sloping path through the cavern's carved, arched, obsidian entrance. Lavender-and-roses emblems are etched into the arch. Through another hallway, he navigates his way to the research room.

Inside, Professor Stone sits on a simple wooden stool at a table piled with old books, a pair of wooden stakes, and other strange artifacts. He's reading with deep concentration from one of the old books.

"Professor, I found your scroll."

The professor's back is to Laureus, and he doesn't answer. Laureus scans the room, satisfied they're alone. "Professor Stone." Laureus raises his voice, moves in front of him, and softly lobs the scroll on the table. "I hope this is worth it. As you well know, the domovoi don't like folks taking their treasures or mucking about in their caves and tunnels." *A hundred years ago, this was a lot easier on my bones and joints, and the professor knows this.*

"Thank you, Laureus." The professor doesn't look up but opens the scroll and sighs.

"It's the prophecy, isn't it?" Laureus smacks the table, and the books jump.

"Yes. It says the warrior bard shall bring down the cursed one. You know what to do." He tosses Laureus a small horn.

Laureus catches it. "But you're asking me to take out one of our own."

Professor Stone punches air out his nose in a loud exhale. "These are trying times. It was Mr. Michaels' suggestion. He said the warrior bard's name is Boone Daniels."

"This was Flynn's idea? I don't believe you. Flynn's my best friend, sacrifices more than any of us within the society. He took on Koschei the Deathless. He agreed to this? Unthinkable."

Stone turns his focus back on Laureus. "Believe what you will, but be careful. Alabaster Graves and his men could try to interfere."

"Members of the Dragons and Nymphs and their coven of steampunk bloodsuckers don't scare me." Laureus grabs a wooden stake from the table and slashes the air. *My battle-thirsty heart roars more, more, more, and my silver-haired head and weary bones scream more, more, more Bengay and Biofreeze.*

Professor Stone taps the table. "Sound the horn when at the joust and their lance tips cross. Our man in the joust said it's the only way."

"But that means . . . Flynn's to die? Flynn's saved my hide too many times." *And Stone knows this.*

"Sound the horn during the joust." The professor's voice rings firm.

"I'll do it." Laureus doesn't like it, but he trusts Flynn and secures the horn in his inside jacket pocket. Laureus treks down a passageway stacked with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves filled with more ancient books. Six or seven domovoi are responsible for the library dust and pay him no heed. Their job is to dust, not guard the scroll, so they leave Laureus be.

At the end of the passage, he stops in front of a painting of Belvedere Castle. He runs his fingers along the frame decorated with intertwined lavender and rose patterns. Laureus presses and says, "North to south, east to west, let my journey see me through and back again."

The design glows, and the painting transforms into a Renaissance faire joust. Bright light and the din of a rowdy crowd streams into the passageway. Laureus steps out into the sunshine.

At his feet, popcorn, a half-eaten turkey leg, a torn map, and other rubbish. Above, sounds of thumps, plonks, plunks, and cheers. In front, the back of a stadium stand. Through the stand steps, he can see folks dressed as steampunk minstrels, a fellow dressed as a gypsy cracks jokes, then swallows a flaming

dagger. "Oohs" and "ahhs" from the crowd of busty giggling girls and strapping lads in leather boots and off-white poet shirts.

Past the stadium stands, through the crowd, Laureus spots the man in charge of announcing the joust, the Marshal of the Field. Everything as it should be. Laureus is under the wooden stands, exactly where he's supposed to be. The Renaissance faire has begun.

"Speak of the Devil." The words leap out of Laureus' mouth.

A cold blade presses against his neck. "You're getting slow, Laureus." The sharp edge pushes deeper, nicks into his skin. "Mind telling me what the Lavender and Roses Society is doing at a Ren faire joust in Missouri? Tell me before I spill more of your blood, you traitor."

Laureus knows that grating raspy voice and growling snarl anywhere—Lahash.

"Only if you tell me what the Dragons and Nymphs are doing here." Laureus leans forward, jerks back, quick, off both feet, arches with his full weight, and throws both of them to the ground.

Wham. Concrete smacks Laureus' spine. "Ugh." Laureus slams an elbow into Lahash's groin, then rolls and blocks the blade thrust at his face. Laureus plants a solid right hook to Lahash's chin. The blade flies.

Laureus pulls out the wooden stake from Professor Stone and plunges it deep into Lahash's chest. Blood spurts. "You need to stop interfering with prophecies." His mouth gapes wide.

Laureus twists the stake.

Lahash struggles to suck in a breath and manages to speak. "You need to stop interfering with Dragons and Nymphs' business."

Alabaster Graves never sends Lahash alone. "Where's Zakun? He's never far behind you." Laureus' fingers tighten around the stake, and he stirs it in Lahash's chest, slow, deliberate.

"This isn't over." Lahash's eyes roll back. He falls silent and still.

"Stay dead this time," Laureus says.

The spectators remain clueless to the century-old feud between the societies, beneath the stands.

Laureus' eyes focus in and out. He grabs his head to steady the swaying. *I'm getting too old for this.* He struggles to spring to his feet. He struggles to stay upright. He struggles to find the Marshal of the Field.

His eyes burn. His vision blurs. His knees fold.

Damnit, Lahash. A poisoned blade?

Laureus rubs the cut from Lahash's knife. He tries but can't squint away the burning mist coating his eyes.

Through the blur and pain, Laureus scans the arena field and spies Flynn and the other rider readying for the joust—Boone Daniels, the warrior bard.

But Laureus senses he's not alone. He senses Alabaster Graves has sent another to stop him. "Zakun, come out. Damn you." The agony of pain hammers his skull. "You crafty-bloodsucking-steampunk vampire. You're not getting the drop on me this time."

Laureus waits for Zakun's assault.

And waits.

He doesn't come.

Laureus shifts his attention back to the jousting field. "May Flynn, Boone, and God have mercy on my soul for what I'm about to do," Laureus says, swallowing the bitter lump in his throat.

He shuts his eyes, shakes his head. Fire rips through his gut and chest. *Argh.* Despite the pain from the poison, he must find the energy to carry out the prophecy. He must sound the horn to set everything in motion. He must force his eyes open.

Laureus takes out the horn with shaking hands. "You better be right, Stone." Laureus sucks in a mouthful of air, leans against the stand steps, lifts the horn to his lips, and then—Laureus spots Zakun.

Zakun leaps, the flash of Lahash's poisoned blade in his hand.

His slash rips the air, barely misses Laureus's cheek.

Laureus catches Zakun's wrist, grabs his collar, and twists hard.

They tumble onto scattered trash.

The horn flies from Laureus' hand.

Zakun gives a throaty laugh, a razor-sharp fang smile, and barrels down on Laureus's throat.

Laureus's free hand stabs frantic in the trash. His fingers latch on to a sticky finger-width stick. He crams it full force into Zakun's mouth. "Uh-uh, no biting," Laureus says with a hint of sarcasm.

Crunch. Zakun's face crinkles in contempt.

Laureus can't contain his smile.

Zakun spits out mangled bits of stick and caramel apple.

Lahash's unmoving body lies next to them.

Laureus knees Zakun in his groin and rolls over Lahash.

Zakun flies at Laureus. Lahash's blade guides his aim.

Laureus yanks out the stake buried in Lahash's chest, turns onto his back. His arms burn, shake, but his grip stays tight on the stake, and he forces the stake up.

Zakun lands hard, impaled. His smirk slips away. His eyebrows fall into a frown. He hisses in rage. The blade in his hand falls. His body stills.

The earth rumbles and shakes. The crowd roars. The joust has begun.

Laureus searches and finds Stone's horn. He draws it to his lips. He sucks in as much air as possible and blows.

Glossary

Belvedere Castle. An architectural hybrid of Gothic and Romanesque styles. Belvedere Castle is more ornamental then functional. Located in Central Park in Manhattan, New York City. It contains exhibit rooms and an observation deck, and since 1919, housed the New York Meteorological Observatory, and now the United States Weather Bureau.

Boone Daniels. Small-town Missouri musician suffers from panic attacks since he lost his parents when he was six. Boone lives in a trailer park with his Aunt and cousin in Wentzville, MO. He works as a handyman at his aunt's trailer park, seasonally at the area Ren Faire, and also plays some nights and weekends in his friend's band the Village Idiots.

Domovoi. Are similar to brownies and house elves, and found throughout Slavic culture. In the *Devil Pulls the Strings* they guard the Lavender and Roses Society's caverns, tunnels and libraries. Domovoi are six-inch tall, friendly and docile blue-haired, orange-skinned shapeshifters from the Eastern Domovoi Clan. Domovoi remain friendly and docile until you steal anything they guard. Then they track you down and swarm-attack you until what's stolen is retrieved, and whereas piranha leave bones, the domovoi do not leave bones when they are finish with you.

Dragons and Nymphs Society. Unholy Ancient Order of Dragons and Nymphs Society is an ancient secret society that has been around since before recorded history. Rumors persist members of the Dragons and Nymphs are vampires and werewolves and other supernatural beings who covet rare and magical items of power to open portals into the netherworld, summon demons and trap the souls of mortals.

Graves. Alabaster Graves is a steampunk vampire who rules his vampire coven and is also the current leader of the Dragons and Nymphs Society.

Lahash and Zakun. Steampunk vampire assassins.

Laureus. A Scottish Warrior and Lavender and Roses Society Guardian.

Lavender and Roses Society. Protects antiquities and sacred, magical, mystical relics, ruins, and objects from falling into the wrong hands. Be those the hands of misguided mortals, otherworldly beings, or hordes of demons. The most powerful artifacts are hidden away in pocket dimensions in their headquarters and in their caverns and tunnels.

Flynn Michaels. St. Louis Ren Faire knight and creator of the band the Village Idiots. Best friends with Boone Daniels.

Papa Pip. Leader of the Domovoi Clan at the Lavender and Roses Society.

Sinti. Ambrozij Serafin Sinti is a self-serving, shrewd, soulless sociopath and cursed immortal. Sinti is a tall, thin, ebony-eyed, jet black-haired Romani.

Stone. Professor Abel Solomon Stone, a balding, white-bearded man, thin, bookish frame, youthful wrinkles, a smile that crinkles, a pipe and drab tweed jacket and vest. Stone's also a scientist, inventor, and New York University (NYU) Professor teaching strings, music theory, and higher-level mathematics to advanced students. He's also the last remaining Archivist at the Lavender and Roses Secret Society.

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Author Biography

Joseph helps catch naughty folks for the Government. He's successfully run in the Walt Disney World Marathon as a woman. He's climbed to the top of Mount Fuji and been kicked off Mount Rainier. Sailed through the Suez Canal. Taught English Conversation in Japan. He can analyze anyone's handwriting. And he's on a mission to save the world through cheesecake, one-slice-at-a-time. When he worked at the FBI, his thesis *Red Flag Behaviors Found in Relationships*, earned him an invitation to present a paper at the First Annual Forensics Congress in China. Which led him to write his award-winning non-fiction book *Naughty or Nice - Whose List Are You On?* is available as a hand out item during lectures. And his other non-fiction book, a best seller, *The Happiness Code*, he co-authored with Ray Brehm and other authors who all share and show you their happiness hacks they use you can use too.