

## CHAPTER 1

# GROBENNAR

THE HIGH SEEKER'S VOICE RECITED the litany of rules yet again, but his words were drowned out by the thumping of Grobennar's pulse in his ears. The jitters of excitement strangled the young seeker's calm as he waited for the Annual Seekers Competition to begin.

*Come on,* pleaded Grobennar silently.

Hands at his side, he fluttered his fingers and shifted from one foot to the other in anticipation as he attempted to shake out the nervous tightness pulling at the back of each leg. Nothing helped. *This redundancy insults us all. Just blow the horn already,* thought Grobennar to himself. He attempted to release some of his tension through a series of measured breaths. Closing his eyes, he inhaled slowly, drawing in the cool morning air. *I am in control.* He repeated this process, relaxing as the tension melted away. *I am in control.* He opened his eyes as a gentle breeze blew across the city square, the robes of the other seekers billowing like banners set in tribute to the great God Klerós. The sun pierced the gaps between the surrounding city structures and the red fabric worn by Grobennar's competitors shimmered. It was beautiful. It was—

A nasally voice to Grobennar's left shattered his calm. The tall, slender priest named Rajuban snickered and said, "As if repeating these rules will be of any consequence."

*I couldn't agree more,* thought Grobennar, surprised to be in agreement with his long-standing adversary.

Rajuban continued, "This competition is already mine, after all."

*And there it is.*

“I’ll have captured three of the hideous wretches before anyone else has sensed their first.” Rajuban referred to tazamines, foul users of dark magic that had been staged throughout the city for the sake of the competition.

Grobennar was careful to keep his voice low as he furtively replied, “Your humility . . . such an endearing quality. It’s a wonder you don’t have more friends.”

Rajuban turned his nose up even higher than was common for a one such as he. “A lecture on humility? How could I be anything but humble in the presence of *the* Grobennar? Rumor has it you gave birth to the God-king yourself. Isn’t that right?” He forced a few puffs from his lungs that loosely resembled laughter. Then added, “Don’t you worry, I’ll have plenty of friends once I wear the sash. Everyone else will merely *wish* they were my friends.”

*Oh, you could not be more wrong about that,* thought Grobennar as he feigned curiosity about what the High Seeker had to say about the prohibition on employing magic against fellow priests during the competition.

Rajuban sniffed the air obnoxiously. “Ugh. What is that? It reeks. The scent of tazamines already? No—nope.” He waved his hand in front of his face and wrinkled his nose. “Worse. It’s the stench of your fear.”

The stakes were indeed high. The best seekers-in-training from the Tathirean were assembled for a chance to earn the sash. This distinct honor would mean instantaneous graduation from the most prestigious academy in the Empire, as well as a one-year position as the first attendant to the High Seeker himself. Furthermore, it was well known that winners continued this trajectory within the Kleról, often earning positions within The Assembly.

Grobennar remained facing forward as he said, “You know, I hardly care to win for my own sake. But watching your smug expression melt away as tears of defeat streak your face . . . now that’s a worthy cause.”

Before Rajuban could respond, the horn blew and the competition was under way.

Blinding pain struck Grobennar’s right knee and he stumbled to the ground, howling. Rajuban took off past him. “The rules don’t prohibit attacks of the mundane, do they? I’m afraid I wasn’t really listening.” He continued to cackle as he disappeared into the crowd of competitors rushing forward.

“You worm!” yelled Grobennar after him.

An ethereal voice resounded within Grobennar's mind. *"Shall I heal you?"*

"Yes," whined Grobennar.

*"Very well,"* said Jaween, the spirit within the red multifaceted gemstone worn around Grobennar's neck.

The sixteen-year-old priest sighed in relief as the pain in his knee dissipated.

*"You know, we could always just kill him. Accidents happen all the time, especially during the chaos of organized competition. No one would have to—"*

"We're not killing anyone. I'm late to my rendezvous." Grobennar scrambled to his feet and sprinted toward the place where he and his team of compatriots would join forces to locate the tazamines.

He was panting when he arrived at the alley just off the main bazaar of Sire Karth's mercantile district.

Grobennar was the youngest priest in the academy by several years, but he was a known prodigy and his plan to win was simple: convince others to help. In exchange, he had promised reciprocation once in a position of power. With Grobennar having already proven himself more skilled than the rest, save perhaps Rajuban, it was wise for those with political ambitions to accept his offer of alliance.

Nine out of the twenty-four priests in their cohort were waiting for him in the alley.

"What happened? Get lost?" asked Penden, a friend since their first post in the priesthood together. "I figured your little legs would only be a few paces behind my own."

Grobennar was beginning to catch his breath. "Never mind that. We've got a competition to win."

He wasted no time in extending his hands. The others did the same, forming a human chain in the shape of an oval within the narrow alleyway.

Grobennar felt the flows of energy grow even as he extended his mind to take hold of them. It was like standing outside as the sun peeked out from behind the clouds. The power grew rapidly and he drank in as much as he could safely handle. Then he set it to work, a net of sensitivity far stronger and detailed than what any one of them could have cast alone. Grobennar soon held in his mind's eye a detailed mental map of every expulsion of dark magic within the city. A limited number of tazamines were kept alive for the sole purpose of training seekers. Twenty-three had been positioned around the city today, coerced into using their magic as

part of the competition. Grobennar could sense their presence as distinctly as if each was a blazing fire in the darkness of night.

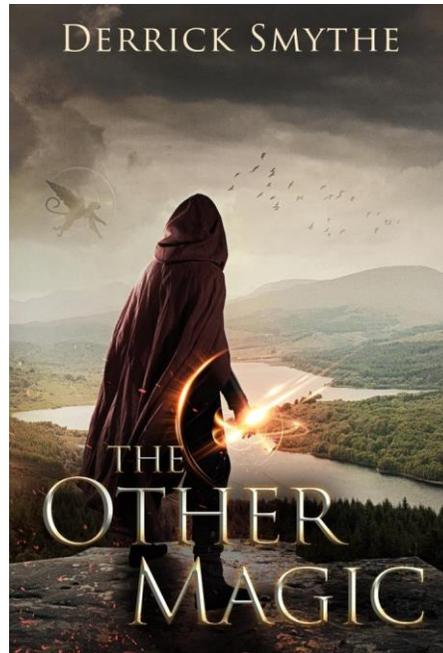
Grobennar shared their locations with the members of his assemblage, then split the four weakest priests into two teams of two, while he and the rest went individually to recover their prey.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



[Derrick Smythe](#) has been fascinated with all things elvish, dwarvish, and magical since his days of running through the woods with sharpened sticks in defense of whatever fortification he and his brothers had built that summer. After consuming nearly every fantasy book he could find, he was driven to begin work on one of his own. When he isn't dreaming up new stories, he can be spotted hiking in the Adirondack Mountains or traveling the world. He currently resides near his hometown in upstate New York with his enchanting wife, ethereal daughters, and his faithful-if-neurotic Australian Shepherd, Magnus.

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