

# *Orem Goes to Hell*

*By Brett A. Contreras*

Baronet Selendron Frener of Urnst pitched through the magical mirror with a cry of alarm. One moment he had been standing there, extending his sabre to break the mirror, the next he was gone, pulled through the swirling vortex of color.

Orem whirled in horror as Selendron's brother, and Orem's lord, cried out in horror.

"SELENDRON!!!" Kendron cried, charging towards the mirror.

"Master Kendron, no!!!" Orem yelled, reaching for the young duelist, just as he plunged through the magical portal.

Orem stood dumfounded for a half a second before charging after the youngest Frener brother. He was dimly aware of cries of alarm from the other members of the party, but did not heed them. It was his sworn duty to protect Kendron, and he would not mimic the shoddy job that Captain Foris had performed.

"Orem! Wait!" Rathmar yelled. "Tie a rope around his waist first!" Khâzad quickly lashed a thick, hemp rope around the Frener soldier's waist and tied it off.

Orem nodded his thanks and leaped through the mirror...

Orem felt sluggish, and had the vague notion of sliding through a slippery tunnel. The tunnel seemed to have many forks. Something told him that that did not bode well.

There was a loud roaring, and the feeling of falling. A moment later, Orem came charging through the other side of the portal...

Orem came up short as soon as his vision cleared. He stood on hard, unfinished rock overlooking what he assumed was some sort of plain or field. But there was no vegetation on the rise upon which he stood, nor upon the field. All about him was barren, unfriendly rock. It rose in small spires to his right and behind him. To his front and left, the rock fell away in some mad, uneven terracing.

The sky was a dark, angry red, and Orem could see fires everywhere. The very air itself seems to burn in places. The stalwart soldier began to shake uncontrollably; he knew he had made a very dangerous decision by following Lord Kendron...

A sudden explosion behind Orem caused him to dive to the ground, covering his head with his arms. As the light and heat faded, he chanced a look...

He was uninjured, but he noticed with great trepidation that the rope which had anchored him back in Grond-Khazadheim now lay severed and burning on the ground behind him. He glanced frantically back the way he had come for signs of the portal.

There were none.

"Lord Kendron?!" Orem called, scrambling to his feet. He looked around with mounting anxiety at this alien world. Almost as an afterthought, he untied the burning rope from his waist, letting it fall to the ground.

"Lord Kendron?!" he called again, louder, more desperate. "Lord Selendron?!" But his cries went unanswered. Taking in his surroundings, Orem concluded that this was the most unfriendly place he had ever been. It was even worse than the Underdark. At least there, there had been signs of life, indications of living things enduring. Here, he could see nothing alive. The rock itself was blasted and blackened; it looked almost *wounded*.

Orem was not an educated man, not very well-read. But he had a terrifying suspicion of where he had ended up. The blood-red sky, the fires everywhere, the stink of sulfur...it could only mean...

He heard voices!

There was a constant crackle in the air, accompanied by a creaking noise that was nearly beyond his range of hearing. Above that, he could now hear horrible, ugly voices, barking and cackling to one another. Voices, and beating wings...

Orem looked up fearfully, quickly picking out the dark forms silhouetted against the red sky. They resembled bat-winged humanoids, maybe a dozen of them, and they were calling out to one another as they flew towards him. Orem could not understand the language, but he *knew* they were saying horrible things. They were about twenty or thirty feet above his ledge, and many of them were carrying long weapons. It also looked like a few of them had large bags or chests.

Orem looked around, hoping desperately to find a hiding place. But even a cursory examination of the ledge revealed that there was no place to go, unless he decided to dash off down the terracing. He backpedaled,

trying to get near the wall. Even so, he doubted he would avoid detection. With his shield-hand, he fished out one of the ceramic *Continual Light* vials; with his right, he drew 'Angband'.

Trying to suppress a mounting feeling of panic, Orem stumbled backwards and struck the stone wall, making more noise than he had intended. The devilish creatures, now mere yards away, finally spotted him, and began shrieking and cackling in delight.

"Who's that on the Onderous Ridge?!"

"Oh, look at 'im! Looks like a little lost lamb!"

"Yah, he didn't come with no team!"

"We're eatin' well tonight, Boys!"

Orem knew he could not understand the words coming from their mouths but, in his head, they were as plain as Common.

As they swooped in towards the ledge, Orem saw that they were of various sizes and colors. They ranged from as small as around four feet tall to well over seven feet. Colors were black, blue, red, green and white. Several landed on the far end of the ledge, setting down sacks and a couple of chests. A few remained in the air, swooping past Orem and showering him with threats and curses.

Knowing in his heart that there was no chance here for parlay, the Frener soldier swallowed hard and threw the vial. It struck the stone ledge, right at the feet of the front rank, shattering. The *Continual Light* spell flared, dazzling the winged fiends. The devilish creatures screamed in surprise and anger, many of them throwing their clawed hands up over dog-like or reptilian faces. Those in the air hurled curses as well, winging outward in a wide arc.

Orem, his face covered by his shield, fished out a second vial, flung it, then charged. He tried to belt out an Urnst battle cry, but it caught in his throat; all he managed was a strangled grunt. The vial shattered at the feet of a blue devil armed with a trident, eliciting more cries of anger.

Orem charged, shield up, right into the thick of them. The fiend at the center of the front line was a towering, black-skinned beast, nearly two feet taller than even the stalwart Urnst soldier. Orem swung the vorpal sword and felt a warm buzz from 'Angband', which drew his attack upwards towards the creature's head. Due to the height difference, the attack connected low, hacking into the scaly chest. The beast screamed in pain and recoiled; blood squirted from the rent and, if possible, the air grew even more rank.

Now, in close with the things, Orem saw that they truly looked as if they had been taken from storybooks or religious texts. They were bipedal, with thick, scaly skin, pupil-less eyes and hair like greasy snakes. Horns sprouted from their heads, long, forked tails from their hindquarters. Their wings were leathery and bat-like, their hands and feet ended in twisted claws and their mouths were full of sharp, pointed teeth.

They were the 'devils' of Hell.

Orem's *Continual Light* grenades had thrown the half dozen on his ledge into disarray; a diminutive red creature in the back leaped into the air, beating its wings to escape the unexpected lights. A white devil, larger than Orem, stumbled back and lost its balance, plummeting over the edge with a cry.

Orem dropped into a defensive posture, fending off ungainly attacks by three of the remaining beasts. Trident, halberd and polearm all hammered at him, but his shield and armor took the brunt. Sweeping his shield to the left, he swatted away the weapons and lashed out again, this time catching the black devil right across the neck. Halfway into a crouch, likely in an effort to get under Orem's shield, the beast's eyes widened in shock. Blood sprayed from the gaping wound, showering Orem's legs.

Even as the black creature dropped, Orem was already rocking back with a backhanded chop at the green demon. 'Angband' buzzed with delight, nearly yanking Orem off balance. The blade flashed over the clumsy guard of the green monster, cleaving neatly through its exposed neck. The ugly head leaped off its shoulders and bounced to the deck, still screaming obscenities.

Surprised that he was still on his feet, Orem paused as the two bodies fell away from him, then was forced to bring his shield up as one of the remaining blue devils lunged in. The thing attacked with its trident, a double-handed thrust aimed at Orem's neck. The soldier deflected the shot with his shield, then lunged towards his enemy, using his shoulder to force the shield and the trident higher. He intended to thrust under the trident's guard, but 'Angband' buzzed again, pulling his arm along in a wider, clumsier strike. The vorpal weapon found a hole that Orem had not seen, taking the blue beast right in the side of the neck and severing *its* head.

Orem swore in surprise, staggering as he regained his balance. Only one blue demon remained on the platform; he could hear the others calling out and swearing from the air, but they were out of reach. One problem at a time, he told himself.

He waded in, feinting with his shield. The blue devil did not bite on the feint, bringing its trident up in time to deflect 'Angband'. It turned the trident over in its hands, forcing Orem's arm across his own body and downwards, then bringing the haft around for a strike at Orem's head.

Orem did not fight the parry, instead rolling with it and allowing his arm to be guided by his enemy. He bobbed his head, dodging the butt swipe by mere inches. Then, using the momentum of the parry, he brought his arm back around in a windmilling motion, right through a gaping hole in the demon's defenses. 'Angband' took over and, with an angry buzz, decapitated yet another foe.

Orem's heart was pounding. He glanced around quickly and saw that the ledge was now clear of enemies. He looked skyward, and saw the others. He counted five, no wait, *six* left, as they were rejoined by the white devil that had tumbled over the ledge.

He wanted to shout at them, call them out. Call them cowards and dare them to taste his righteous wrath...but he could barely summon the saliva to swallow, much less shout. He noted with dismay that the globes of light caused by his shattered vials was slowly dimming. He took a trembling step towards the chests and bags and began fishing out one of the *Continual Light* coins from his wrist pouch.

The devils continued to fly around with little urgency, watching him. They seemed more surprised than anything. To be honest, Orem was just as surprised at his success, if not more so. Four denizens of this dark place lay dead at his feet; when he had spotted them coming, he had not expected to live a minute longer.

As he moved across the ledge, he could again hear their evil voices in his head.

"*You have quite a bite, Lost One.*"

"*We underestimated your strength.*"

"*We're still eating tonight, right?*"

"*Take him, Boys.*"

With that, the two largest beat their wings and swooped towards him. All six raised their hands and gestured to different points on or around the ledge. In a huge conflagration, the numerous fires burning on rocks or in the air exploded, sending showers of scintillating sparks and streamers of smoke in every direction. Now dazzled himself, Orem cast the *Continual Light* coin onto the ground, hoping to cause some more distress among the fiendish ranks.

Orem skipped backwards a few steps, then hacked at the swooping black devil. Unfortunately, he lost track of it at the last moment, trying to blink away the flashing spots in his eyes. He recoiled as its halberd hammered his shield against his side, then he picked up the white devil just in time to duck its attack with a spiked flail.

Behind him, Orem could hear the two land, their bare feet slapping on the rock. Ahead, he could see the others massing to rush him. He danced aside, backpedaling further in an attempt to get a wall at his back. Even so, one of the smaller red devils was closing impossibly fast. It swooped in, wings fanned in a braking maneuver, taloned feet extended. One clawed hand reached for Orem's neck; the other held a wicked-looking dagger.

'Angband' licked out as Orem retreated, catching the imp right across its chest. It flailed at him, but was unable to connect with the blade or any of its clawed limbs. Failing to land on him, it fell to the ground with a cry. At the last moment, Orem caught sight of the towering white devil coming in from his other side, and ducked just in time to avoid the spiked flail-head. Grunting with the effort, Orem once again danced clear, moving towards the wall.

The Frener soldier paused then, hearing a pair of sibilant voices in his head, "*Miss...miss...miss...miss...*"

"To blazes," Orem growled, ignoring them.

There was a sudden detonation, a fireball out of midair, on the far end of the ledge. The chests and sacks brought by the devils flew into the air, scattering in flaming pieces. Those fiends that remained cried out in genuine distress, and the two that were still airborne flew quickly towards the edge of the precipice.

Orem took advantage of the distraction, hacking down at the imp, nearly taking its arm off at the elbow. He then switched his weight to his other foot and lunged at the tall, white creature, stabbing it in the side. A second red beast flew in, angling high for Orem's head, but the soldier spun and brought up the shield, upon which the thing landed. It hacked at Orem with its dagger, but succeeded only in scratching up the top of his helmet. The black and white demons both attacked with their weapons, but both deflected harmlessly off the spinning man's armor.

Orem dodged and bucked, avoiding or parrying a half dozen strikes from all quarters. The small red devil on his shield was sufficiently blocked by the shield to be largely ineffective, but the additional weight was starting to tax his shoulder. He imagined that, had he not still been benefiting from the *Strength* spell cast on him by Ki'ira in Grond-Khazâdheim, he probably would not have been able to even hold the thing up.

Orem ducked under a wild flail attack and tried to gut the white devil. The two of them came together with a thud, and the sword stroke went wide. The soldier felt his skin crawl as the scaly, white flesh scraped against his faceplate. He shoved with his forearm and knee, forcing the demon back, then felt his shield buck as the red one leaped off into the air. Orem lashed out with 'Angband' just as the imp descended, blade leading, and took it right in the throat. The sword buzzed in delight, severing the leering head, then seemed to take off on its own, crossing Orem's body. The white devil, poised for another strike, dodged the wrong way, meeting 'Angband' head-on. Two more heads bounced onto the dark stone of the ledge.

Orem was forced to give some ground as the black devil came on, halberd twirling. He blocked the attack with his shield, then slashed at his enemy, cutting a mean groove across his upper arm. The huge beast continued to lunge, driving the shaft of the halberd against Orem and taking him right off his feet and into the wall. The young soldier felt his breath knocked out of him, as well as some of the hubris that had been building during this fight. The devil continued its relentless attack, taking a half-step back and spinning the halberd over its head and bringing down the blade right at Orem's head.

Orem ducked, and the halberd crashed into the dark stone, scattering several fragments. This maneuver put him in perfect position to finish off the wounded imp with a thrust to its chest, ending its annoying assault on his greaves. The black beast yanked the halberd back and brought it around again, but Orem was quicker, lashing out and delivering yet another critical strike to the throat.

Orem accepted the halberd stroke on his shield; the force of the blow took him off his feet for a second. He landed soundly, sliding in the thick blood and detritus that was beginning to cover the ledge; the huge black creature collapsed with a splat, its furious assault finally ended.

*"Miss...miss...miss...miss..."*

Orem shook his head violently, trying to throw the voices out. There were two of the fiends left, one white and one blue, hovering a few yards above the ledge on the far side. Orem moved away from the wall and the pile of dead bodies, giving himself room to maneuver. He made it to a clear area in the center of the ledge just as the seven-foot-tall white demon swooped in. The thing fanned its wings, then unleashed a flurry of attacks with its flail. One, two, three attacks, all parried by Orem. He came back with his own, stabbing and slashing at his enemy, but his attacks were parried as well. The demon twisted, and its forked tail came whipping around, spines pointed right at Orem's face. He brought 'Angband' and his shield together, catching and pinning the tail less than a foot from his faceplate.

The devil roared at him, trying to first pull him off balance, then to push him backwards. Orem struggled to hang on, then shoved back with both arms. Too late, he saw the blue devil swooping in, and felt the impact of its trident against his right side. Again, his wind was forced out, and he felt his field plate dent in and bruise his ribs.

He gasped and brought his shield up, just in time to deflect the first in a frenzied barrage of attacks from the white devil. Giving ground to the bigger fiend, he struck out to his right, letting 'Angband' do the work. Yet again, the vorpal blade found its mark, cleaving deep into the neck of the blue beast. It coughed up a gout of blood, then collapsed on the ledge.

The last devil struck again, bouncing the flail-head off Orem's shield. Orem countered, stabbing him just below the collarbone. They exchanged another flurry of attacks, and then the larger and stronger fiend was upon him, using its height and leverage to grapple with him. Tiring quickly and trying to catch his breath, Orem began to worry that he had made it so far only to fail at this last...

The beast brought its knee up into Orem's midsection; the armor absorbed most of the impact, but he still found what little breath he had caught forced back out of him. This was followed by the flail haft hammered into his back; Orem gasped and could see lines of saliva spray through the faceguard of his helmet.

Bent half over, with the creature beating him down, Orem lashed out desperately with the shortsword, slashing his attacker across the groin. The devil screamed in rage, shouting horrific curses at him. Orem could not be sure, but he thought he saw live, squirming grubs falling from the puckering wound.

Biting back his horror, Orem fought back to a standing position, slashing madly at his opponent. The white devil fought just as furiously, scoring a lucky stroke with a backhanded shot from the flail. The spiked ball glanced off Orem's shoulder, then connected soundly with the side of his helmet, causing his ears to ring and his vision to blur. Staggered, Orem left a huge hole in his guard, which the devil moved quickly to exploit. It reached back, clutching the flail in both hands, winding up for a killing strike.

But Orem was quicker. Even dazed, he managed to step forward, executing a lightning-fast wrist shot. 'Angband's' point pierced the fiend's chest easily, sinking deep into its vitals. It gasped in surprise and pain as it died, its attack losing its strength and bouncing harmlessly off Orem's shield.

Orem stumbled backwards as the creature fell, and shook his head to clear it. He was gasping for breath and could already feel the pain from his new wounds beginning to creep through his body. Ten dead devils lay scattered about, clattering up the ledge. Where their bodies or severed heads did not lie, their thick, sticky blood was forming expanding pools; there were few places left for him to stand.

He looked down at himself and sighed despondently. He was covered, nearly head-to-toe, in their foul fluids. The stink was almost unbearable, and he felt...*unclean*. He made an attempt to wipe himself off, but soon gave up.

He made his way over to the far end of the ledge, where the devils had dropped their sacks and chests. Both chests had gone over the side after the fiery detonation, but there was still a tattered bag remaining. Its contents had spilled and it looked like some now-melted coinage and some pieces of jewelry. All of which Orem would trade at this moment to be reunited with his lords.

Orem walked back to where he thought the portal had been and began probing the air with his hands. Certainly he had not been deposited in this foul place with no means of return!

Far above, Orem thought he saw a flash of light, much like lightning, but bronze in color. It was far above, and was not repeated so, after a moment, he looked back down. After only a minute, he realized he did not even know what he was looking for. Such matters were beyond him, he admitted to himself.

Orem's heart almost leaped into his throat then, as he heard a booming horn. It came from the plains below and echoed up through the rocky area that he now occupied. He moved quickly to the precipice, looking down past the terracing, to the fiery landscape below. After a moment, he picked out movement near a large formation of spired rock, which he now realized was a hideous-looking fortress. The horn sounded again, then was followed by three crashes of a gong.

Orem did not know what the signal meant, but he knew it was not going to be good news. He crouched down, looking towards the fortress, and felt the sting in his new wounds. He was able to better discern the movement after a moment, picking out more airborne creatures. They were flying in a circular pattern, climbing higher and higher, and seemed to be forming into three distinct groups. Squads, Orem guessed.

He watched for a long minute...two minutes. The flying creatures cleared the upper spires of the fortress and were now definitely in three separate groups. And they *were* flying towards him. The fortress was maybe a half mile away on the plain below; if these new enemies moved with any considerable speed, he did not have much time.

Orem shuddered and fought back his fear, saying a quick prayer for courage. With a grunt, he pushed himself to his feet, then made his way through the carnage, moving towards the wall. He picked out a clear area where he would make his final stand, then adjusted his shield and settled 'Angband' into his right hand.

The flying creatures had closed to within fifty yards now, and Orem could better make them out. They were not the same as the group he had just fought, though they were similar. They were winged and lizard-like humanoids, and carried an assortment of weapons as had the others, but they were armored as well.

"And so it ends," Orem said to himself, clenching his jaw.

He was distracted then, by a bronze blur above him. His head snapped up and he spotted an orb, possibly a foot in diameter, hurtling down through the sky towards the ledge. It was not a projectile; its movement was too irregular. It reminded Orem of nothing so much as a giant, bronze eye. It glowed with something of a warmth, though an odd, metallic one. Orem was baffled and frozen into inaction.

The orb zipped downwards, slowing as it approached the ledge. It swiveled as it moved, and Orem saw that there was, in fact, a glowing red spot...or pupil...on one side. It seemed to look at Orem, slowed further, then stopped, hovering about eight feet above the ledge.

Orem gaped silently.

After a moment, a voice sounded from the orb. "*You are not supposed to be here. Is that right?*"

"Ummm...yes."

The orb's voice was tinny and a bit alarming, considering its source, but it was speaking understandable Common. "*How did you end up in such an awful place against your will? Were you banished by your god?*"

Orem shook his head. "I'm not sure...I stepped through a mirror."

"*So it was a mistake. I knew it. You don't belong here.*" It seemed somewhat satisfied with itself. It swiveled in midair, seeming to look at the approaching creatures. Orem guessed they were about thirty yards away now. There were far more than the group he had just finished fighting.

The orb swiveled back. "*Your name, and quickly!*"

Orem jumped a bit. "Orem Maverick."

*“Orem Maverick, I am from another plane of existence...not yours most likely, but certainly not from here. I can get you out of here. You fought like a champion just now and you do not deserve the death that comes for you.”*

Orem looked back out over the plane. The flying humanoids were now a mere twenty yards away and were fanning out and deploying. He could clearly see their armor and weapons. He looked back at the orb and nodded, “Yes, if you can, please do!”

*“I require a token...”*

“What?!”

Orem barely noticed, but there was a grand flash of white light in the distant sky above. But he was too caught up in what the orb was saying.

*“That sword. That sword you used. That is a vorpal weapon, is it not?”*

“Yes.”

*“If you agree to give me that weapon, I can get you to the portal to the Astral Plane that exists a mile above the surface. All such portals out of Hell exist thusly. I’m afraid you’ll have to navigate the Astral Plane by yourself, but it is more of a chance than you’ll have if you remain here.”*

The flying creatures had approached within fifteen yards and were spreading out, surrounding the ledge. They were remaining airborne, weapons drawn, but did not seem ready to attack.

“Done!” Orem said, turning ‘Angband’ over and holding it out, handle-first. “Get me out of here.”

Immediately, there was a flash of bronze-tinged light, and Orem was engulfed. He knew he was still there on the ledge; he was vaguely aware of the winged creatures yelling angrily. But he felt...protected. His vision was badly blurred and he felt numb; a humming, vibrating feeling coursed through him. He was aware then that he was floating, rising away from the fiery plane.

Somehow, even with his future so uncertain, still so full of danger, Orem experienced one of the greatest feelings of exultation of his life. He felt as if every weight was being lifted from his shoulders. Like he was returning from...oblivion.

And then, in the midst of joy, a loud clap sounded, accompanied by a white flash. Orem was reminded of a door being slammed, and felt a seizing in his chest. He gasped and, fearing the worst, opened his eyes wide. He was not back on the ledge, but he could plainly see it only about fifty feet below. All around the ledge, looking up at him, floated the swarm of flying creatures.

The bronze orb was a few feet away. The bronze field was still evident, but it was now cut and lit up by a harsh, blue-white glow. This was quite obviously caused by the newest arrival, who hovered in midair to Orem’s left.

It looked like a man, though a man about eight feet tall, and was both the most beautiful and the most terrifying being that Orem had ever seen. He was completely hairless, with pupil-less white eyes and flawlessly formed features. His blue-white skin was without blemish or imperfection. His wings were broad and white and with feathers like a swan. His face was stern and terrible and without compromise. In his right hand, he held a thin, perfectly-forged sword. Orem believed that even the slightest touch from that sword would kill him instantly.

Without preamble,

“You have no claim to him, you Elysium mercenary!” the newcomer boomed at the orb.

“I offered him a chance to escape this realm!” the orb protested, its voice sounding even more tinny after the newcomer’s stentorian declaration. “I offered a deal, and he accepted! There is no dishonor!”

“You’d leave him to wander the Astral alone!”

Orem was wide-eyed.

“And what of your timing?!” scoffed the orb. “A choice between the Astral Plane or the hordes of Tiamat is a FINE choice, if you ask me! And, I’ll wager, he’d agree!”

“He ended up here by free will. His choices led him here. A violent death, to be sure. But his soul would not have remained.”

“Bah!”

“Hey!” came the shout from below.

Orem, the orb, and the angelic being all looked down. Surprisingly, the winged creatures had not fled the scene. In fact, to Orem, they looked fairly unimpressed.

“It may come as a shock to you Upper Planes types, but you really don’t call the damn shots here,” said one of the flying things. These creatures, or at least this one, appeared much more intelligent than the devils that Orem

had defeated. They looked more like dragons than the others had, but as if a dragon had been crossbred with a man or an elf. Its voice was thick, and slightly accented, but it too spoke perfect Common.

"I have never been in less control of my fate than right now," Orem thought to himself.

"We apologize for the intrusion," said the angelic being with little sincerity and a look of barely-concealed disdain on his face. "This business will be concluded quickly."

"Now, hold on one second," said the dragonman, flying higher.

"*This is getting out of control here!*" protested the orb. "*Orem Maverick and I have an arrangement, and I am taking him...*"

"You shut up and shut up NOW!" barked the dragonman, pointing a very cruel-looking sword at the orb. Much to Orem's shock, the orb shuddered and fell silent.

Orem suddenly realized he had not taken a breath since the arrival of the angelic being. His chest was excruciatingly tight and spots were beginning to flash before his eyes. With an effort, he unclenched himself and inhaled, gasping loudly.

"Hey, take it easy there," the dragonman said to him. After a moment for Orem to gather himself, "Listen, you might not be in as much trouble as you think."

Orem was still trying to control his breathing, and said nothing.

"You actually did us a favor on that ledge. Those abishai were porting booty across our dominion, without permission, from one enemy to another. Those were NOT friends of ours. I won't go so far as to say we owe you anything, but let's just say that you've caught our interest."

The dragonman flew higher, then continued, "Now then, whether or not you inferred it from my previous statements, this area is currently in contention. There is a war on. From an objective standpoint, your presence is *not* appreciated. You have the stink of the Prime Material on you." This last he said with a derisive sneer.

Orem just blinked.

"However, from a subjective standpoint, we could use your sword. I mean that literally as well as figuratively."

Orem was trying to keep up, but he thought he had the gist of things.

"*His sword is mine!*" protested the orb. "*It was the deal!*"

"Not if he breaks the deal," the dragonman countered, with what looked like a sly smirk. He turned back to Orem. "If you agree to come back and help us, we'll take care of getting you home. And not dumping you off on the Astral to wander for months. We'll take you to a color pool that will get you right back where you left. Or, somewhere else on your plane, if you prefer. An armed escort. Can your friend from Elysium beat that deal?"

Orem looked down at his right hand to see if he still held 'Angband', but was dismayed to see that it now floated, point downward, about a foot and a half in front of the orb, engulfed in a soft, bronze light.

Orem turned, as best he could in midair, and looked between the orb and the angelic being. The winged man looked amused; the orb was unreadable.

Not even attempting to hide his confusion, Orem asked the angelic being, "What do you think I should do?"

Almost as if ignoring the question, he said, "If you are all quite finished with your deal offering..."

"*Orem Maverick and I HAVE a deal!*" protested the orb. "*We are no longer in the offering stages! I am escorting him out of Avernus and to a more safe location!*"

"And I repeat, you have no claim to him!" snapped the winged man, all traces of amusement gone.

"He is already *here!*" barked the dragonman. "His soul belongs to *us* until it's bought back with service!"

"*His soul was never in question!*" piped the orb.

"He will come with me," said the angelic being calmly. "It is the best way."

The orb whirled on him. "*Have you taken a good look at his aura?! He is hardly lawful enough for your Seven Heavens! He belongs in Elysium!*"

"He is a servant of Heironeous! He can be instructed in the ways of Law and is not so neutrally aligned as you want to believe!"

Looking at the angelic man, Orem was very much reminded of Luinil, the powerful spirit of good that had once been trapped in Lord Kendron's sabre. This being was not quite the same, but there were some very striking similarities. Though its power and anger were frightful, Orem found himself comforted beyond reservation.

Calmly, Orem turned to the orb. "You tricked me."

"*I did not.*"

"What choice did I have?"

*"I told you exactly what I offered and what the cost was. There was no trick. I even went so far as to tell you that you would have to navigate the Astral Plane alone."*

"Yes, but you knew I had no other choice."

*"You could have chosen to stay and die. You would have died a warrior's death, albeit an unpleasant one. Your soul would have traveled...well, it seems we are divided on that. But you would enter your afterlife as you will eventually anyhow."*

Orem was silent, overwhelmed.

"Excuse me..." drawled the dragonman, sounding mostly irritated. "I think we established that we weren't going to kill him."

*"Dead NOW or dead when you fight off Mammon's army!!"* yelled the orb. *"What's the difference?!"*

Orem turned to the angelic being. "I would choose to go with you."

He regarded Orem silently for a moment, then turned to the orb. "Had you even offered to take him to Elysium, I would not have intervened. That would be a fitting fate for this one. But leave him wandering the Astral Plane?"

The orb was silent.

The angelic being looked back at Orem. "Your lord calls you home, Orem. You have called on Heironeous the Invincible many times, and far more often of late. Your services to him have been somewhat lacking in comparison to your petitions. Even so, he sees the loyalty with which you served your lords in the land of Urnst.

"You are called now to account for yourself. You will come with me, if you choose so willingly, and you will assume a place among the Guardian Watchers of Lunia. You shall man the ramparts of Heaven against the enemies of Law and Good. You will stand among the first defenders on the Silver Sea. You will serve at this post for seven years.

"Fear not the passing of years, for you shall not age. At the conclusion of your service, you will be released to continue your mortal life. You will enter the Silver Sea and be returned to your home lands, to take up your life as you left it.

"This is the choice I offer you. A choice of servitude. What is your choice?"

Overwhelmed, it took Orem nearly a minute to respond. Finally, "I choose to serve Heironeous, my lord."

"Let it be done."

The angelic being reached out and there was another clap, and another white flash. The orb jerked back, and 'Angband' flew to Orem.

As the weapon settled back into Orem's hand, he regarded the orb. Despite its being thwarted, Orem could feel that it seemed...content.

*"Good journey to you, Orem Maverick. I regret any ill feelings my offer caused. I hope at least that I helped get you out of the clutches of those fiends below. Fare well."*

With that, the orb flew off, traveling upwards at great speed. Orem lost sight of it almost immediately.

From below, the dragonmen unleashed a chorus of cries. There was anger, but also a palpable feeling of irretrievable loss.

The angel looked at Orem and nearly smiled. "Let's leave this infernal place."

"Yes, thank you," Orem said.

He fanned his wings and, engulfed in a column of white light, the angel and the man lanced upwards, piercing the top layer of Avernus, leaving the Nine Hells behind. With any luck, forever.

And Orem experienced *the* greatest feeling of exultation of his life.