

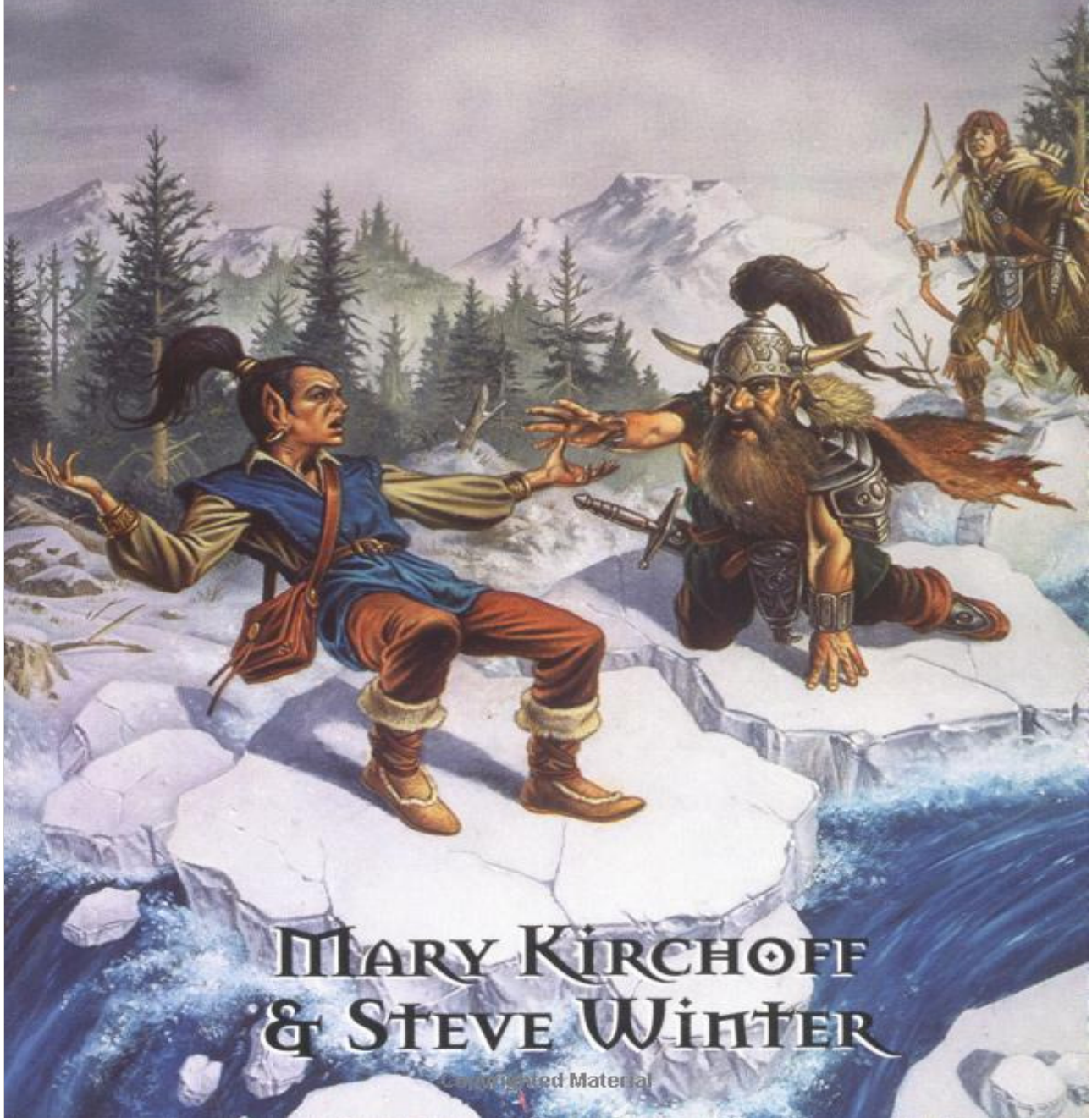
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DragonLance®

Saga

WANDERLUST

The Meetings Sextet • Volume II



MARY KIRCHOFF
& STEVE WINTER

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DragonLance

The Meetings Sextet Volume 02

Wanderlust

Mary Kirchoff and Steve Winter

Prologue

A still, dense mist prevailed in Wayreth Forest on a cool autumn day. The light that filtered through the thick canopy was gray and dull, so that the forest, too, looked flat and pallid. Occasionally a leaf bounced and shook as if brushed by unseen hands when collected moisture dripped off.

Two dwarves moved through the obscuring vapor, struggling with the weight of a lifeless body sagging between them. They were dressed plainly in woolen shirts, wide belts, and trousers tucked into heavy boots. They carried their burden to a clump of young birches and dumped it among the damp grasses, then leaned on the shovels they carried along.

"We should dig a grave," said the first, scraping thoughtlessly at his bare chin. He was still young and wore his long hair, cropped short at the bangs, like an apprentice.

The second dwarf shook his long beard. "There's hardly enough left of him to bother. His kin didn't care enough to claim him. I'm not going to break my back over his carcass.

"Give the ravens a treat—he'll be naught but bones by morning, and no one will miss him." After wiping bloodstained hands on his trousers, the bearded dwarf rooted through a baggy pocket and withdrew a pipe and a plum-sized stone. Deft fingers snapped the stone open along a concealed hinge. A few quick puffs of breath brought a smoldering ember inside to rosy life and with it he lit his pipe. Moments later, rings of smoke wafted through the heavy air and blended into the mist.

"This is the third this week," observed the younger dwarf. "What do you suppose brings them here, knowing the price of failure?"

The older dwarf considered the body through curls of smoke. Its chest had burst open, and sharp edges of snapped ribs poked through the blood-soaked robe. The right eye and much of that side of the face was clawed away. The right arm curled unnaturally, obviously broken in several places, and the thumb was gone from the right hand.

"Do they really know?" he wondered aloud. "If we propped this fellow up by the entrance instead of hiding him out here, then they might know the real price of failure.

"Most of them that come here to the Tower of High Sorcery are apprentice wizards, young and full of themselves. They've got a hard choice. They can remain apprentices for the rest of their lives, running, fetching, and practicing minor spells, or they can come here, face death, and earn the right to wear the robes of a full wizard.

"It's a hard system, lad, but the Conclave of Wizards knows its business. Magic is the mightiest force in the world. The conclave can't control magic, so instead it controls who uses it. Every wizard on Ansalon who wishes to perform more than minor spells must come to the tower and face the test, else he'll be branded a renegade and hunted by his brethren. If he's capable—and lucky—he passes. If not. . ." With a nod the dwarf indicated the ruined body lying in the weeds. He then snatched up his shovel and led the way back through the mist toward Wayreth and the Tower of High Sorcery.

As day faded into twilight in Wayreth Forest, a cold breeze whipped the parched autumn leaves into a small whirlpool. On the ground beneath the whirlpool rested the dead wizard's pale remains. As if created from the leaves themselves, a large golden coin appeared. It spun in the air, so fast it looked almost like a golden ball. Neither rising nor falling, nor moving from side to side, it twirled in the heart of the small maelstrom.

Then, as suddenly as it began, the wind vanished, leaves tumbled to the earth, and the coin dropped

into the cold, thumbless hand of the dead mage. An eerie, whispering wind settled over the misty land as darkness descended.

Under the light of the waning moon, bloody fingers twitched, flexed, and closed over the coin. New life pulsed through collapsed veins, spasmodically at first, then steadily. The ravaged body writhed among the leaves in torment as its gaping wounds spurted fresh blood. Jagged edges of flesh on the man's chest closed together. A hoarse moan parted his lips, rising to an anguished wail that rent the damp evening air. The body lay tense and waiting, breathing raggedly.

"What price for your life, mage?"

The wizard's only good eye flew open at the sound of the croaking voice coming from his palm. Although it was a torment, he forced himself into a sitting position and regarded the coin in his hand. On one side it bore a smiling, heavy-jowled face; on the other side, the same face, but leering and angry. Its mouth was a hole that pierced the metal. He raised the coin to look through the hole, but recoiled in horror. Leering, shredded faces atop rotted bodies danced among licking tongues of flame.

"First you experienced death and now you have seen Hell, all in a single day," the smiling face said. "Perhaps you are willing to discuss the terms of your rebirth."

Bewildered and in pain, the young mage tried to speak. "Who are you?" he rasped. "How have you done this to me?"

"Do you not recognize the countenance of your god Hiddukel, master of contracts, broker of souls?"

The young mage shivered and pulled the tattered remnants of his robe closer at the name of the ancient, evil god. "But I follow the neutral god, Sirrion."

The coin flipped in his hand, revealing the frowning face. "Where is he now?" it cried. "I have restored your life. How will you serve me?"

"I did not ask for your help," the young man said softly.

"So be it!" Hiddukel's angry face roared.

Suddenly the young mage felt his ribs crack anew. A scream of pain, mingled with blood, escaped his lips. "What is it you want?"

"I want only what you want," soothed the coin's smiling face. "Vengeance for your treatment in the tower . . . power and prestige for my follower. These things I can grant you. In exchange, I ask only for souls."

Still gasping, the mage shot back, "What good is my life if my soul is yours?"

The coin laughed darkly. "'Tis not your black-stained spirit I want. Any will do. Each one you send me will increase your power and decrease your debt to me. I will grant your desires, further your schemes, in exchange for something you do not value. Is it not a fair bargain?"

The young mage lay very still, propped against a tree, strange thoughts crowding his mind. He had felt death, and the cold horror of it was still vivid in his mind. The golden coin's evil offer promised new life. Even better, it promised power that the Conclave of Wizards had denied him. The offer drew him, enfolded him, and finally embraced him. He closed his eye, and through cracked lips whispered, "I accept."

"Splendid!" said the smiling, pudgy face. "Shall we begin our work?"

The wizard tried to stand but collapsed against the tree, his head still spinning. "I must have rest. And what about my eye and thumb? I'm still injured."

The coin squinted at the bedraggled youth. "Our bargain was to restore your life, not to make you whole again. But if that is what you wish, I'm sure we could revise our agreement. Shall I replace

your eye and thumb?"

The mage declined with a weary shake of his head. Staring at the leering, moonlit coin in his blood-splashed palm, he knew that one pact with the god of bargains was enough.

PART I

Chapter 1

A Thing of Beauty

Ten years later. . .

The hillside was slippery with early spring mud. Tasslehoff Burrfoot carefully picked his way along the driest spots, using his forked kender hoopak staff for balance. At times he paused and probed ahead with the pole to test the depth of the sludge puddles. He knew from experience that mud could be deceptive as well as uncomfortable.

Two days earlier he had given up the idea of catching a ride on a farmer's or merchant's wagon. No vehicles could move on the roads in their present condition. Still, in another day or two the roads would solidify nicely, and traffic would again start rumbling and jolting along them. In the meantime, there was nothing to do but walk.

Tasslehoff was sure this trip would be worthwhile, in spite of the wet feet, spattered clothes, and sputtering evening fires at damp campsites. The treetop village of Solace lay just ahead, and by all accounts it was a sight to see. Centuries earlier, following the great Cataclysm, the citizens of Solace had sought protection from marauders and prowling monsters by moving into the giant vallenwood trees. Now, fanciful descriptions of their lofty homes and graceful rope bridges, perched high above the valley floor, were spoken of throughout Krynn.

Pausing on a ridge overlooking the fabled village, the kender could not suppress an indrawn breath of wonder. Quaint thatched roofs poked through the tip-tops of budding trees, looking both magical and homey all at once. Wisps of smoke from cook-fires trailed off into the blue afternoon sky.

A fluttering of excitement filled his lungs, like one hundred pairs of butterfly wings tickling him from the inside. He couldn't decide whether to skip, hop, or run down that muddy road, so he did all three in an overlapping sort of way and in no time at all reached the edge of Solace.

Tas paused at the edge of town to gaze up at the homes overhead. From his height of less than four feet, they seemed to tower extraordinarily high. Wide-eyed gazes darted from one tree to the next, taking in every detail: how the structures were anchored in the trees, how many doors and windows each had, the trim and paint, locations of ladders and stairways. He also noticed, however, that not all the houses were in the trees. Several homes and the village stable sat very mundanely on the ground.

Tas was both disappointed and delighted at that. No one had ever mentioned it before. On the one hand, the town seemed somehow less wonderful if the horses had to stay on the ground.

But it was also a new piece of information, certainly important enough to merit recording. He fished through the pouch slung from his shoulder and drew out a tightly rolled parchment, a small jar of ink, and a battered quill. The parchment was covered with notes, diagrams, and partial, half, and nearly completed maps of every size and orientation. Quickly locating an unused corner, Tas jotted down a few important observations and sketched out a small diagram of the area. Replacing the items in his pouch, he marched into town.

The quiet was most seductive. The vallenwoods' new spring leaves rustled in the breeze as small insects buzzed and chirped. There were no braying donkeys or shrieking children or crashing wagons. There seemed, in fact, to be no people at all.

Tas's eyes suddenly narrowed and darted suspiciously from side to side. He had not seen a single person since his arrival. Surely something was amiss. His mind careened wildly through the

possibilities. The people could have been captured by slavers, or eaten by scaly monsters who crept into town during the night. Perhaps everyone just moved away, or perhaps they were carried off by giant goatsucker birds. That notion sent a shiver up his spine as he cast a nervous glance across his shoulder.

Determined to find an answer, Tas singled out a nearby tree and scampered up the steep walkway circling the trunk. The tree held a cozy-looking cottage and a small shed, connected by suspended walkways. He peered through the smoky window of the house, but couldn't make out much detail in the darkened interior. A knock on the front door brought no response, so he tried the latch—it was locked. From one of his many pockets Tas produced an oilcloth wrapped around an astounding collection of bent and shaped wires, files, and keys of every description. With his nose almost touching the door, he peered into the keyhole for several thoughtful moments, then selected one of the picks. He was about to apply it to the lock when he heard a noise from below.

Tas looked down in time to see a group of several people carrying baskets and talking and laughing as they walked along the main road through town. Moments later they turned off onto a smaller road and disappeared from view.

As suddenly as it had appeared, the oilcloth bundle disappeared again, and Tasslehoff scurried to the ground.

"Hey, wait for me!" he called, but they were too far away to hear. The kender's short legs pumped furiously as he raced down the road in pursuit of the basket carriers. Around the bend he flew and over a low rise, before skidding to a halt.

Below the small knob where Tasslehoff stood lay a fair! The area was choked with sellers' stalls, tents, booths, performers, beggars, and people in general. Lots of people—certainly all of Solace and probably quite a few more, Tasslehoff concluded.

He rushed down the slope into the throng. On every side he heard the cries of merchants hawking their wares and services. Wide-eyed, the kender looked this way and that, and then back again. He dodged around a donkey when two men carrying a rolled tapestry on their shoulders appeared from nowhere. Tas slipped between them and found himself in a tiny open space, a stationary island in a roiling sea. Twisting right and left, forward and back, he peered from here to there, trying vainly to see everything at once. In fact, he could see very little of anything except arms and torsos flowing past, pushing, touching, gesturing, carrying, buying and selling.

A frantic warning shout from behind came just in time for Tas to sidestep an enormous barrel before it thundered past. The juggernaut gouged a trough through the mud and doused the lower half of Tasslehoff's body with a sheet of brown water. Two men, both looking frightfully concerned, splashed and galloped after it, one shouting warnings as the other screamed curses and epithets. Tas giggled as he watched the barrel's progress, people leaping and scrambling out of the way along its route. The show ended when the runaway barrel crashed into a furniture maker's stall, bringing a colorful canopy flapping down across the debris.

The crowd quickly returned to its business. As Tas turned back to the festival, a stabbing pain shot up through his leg. He swallowed a yelp and then landed a quick punch against the hip of a burly man in a long canvas coat who was standing on Tas's foot. Whether the punch actually hurt the man is hard to say, but it drew his attention. His head snapped to one side and he scanned the crowd darkly, but it was several moments before he noticed the diminutive kender at his waist. A growl welled up from somewhere deep inside the man's cavernous chest. He placed one hand on Tas's left shoulder, lifted his foot, and gave a mighty shove that sent the hapless kender crashing through the crowd.

Hopping backward and windmilling furiously to regain his balance, Tasslehoff tumbled into a pile of rugs. He scrambled to safety at the top and sat, looking over the crowd and rubbing his throbbing foot.

Rough hands grabbed him from behind. "Get your muddy feet off my merchandise, you little urchin!" Tasslehoff was spun around and found himself face to angry face with a slim, bearded man wearing a large satin hat.

Tas glanced down at his mud-soaked leggings and the trail of dirty, wet footprints leading across the carpets to where he now stood. He giggled, which was certainly a mistake. The words "I'm sorry," were barely formed on his lips when the merchant realized his mistake, too.

"A kender! And I mistook you for an innocent child. Away!" he roared.

"But I was pushed," protested Tasslehoff. "It wasn't my fault—"

"Away!" The rug merchant's face turned purple with anger. His hands flew across Tas's upper body, probing and poking the kender's woolen vest and pockets, which only made Tasslehoff giggle again. When the merchant was satisfied that nothing of his was secreted on Tas's body, he whirled the little fellow around and pushed him away, back into the milling crowd.

It would be natural to think Tasslehoff was discouraged by all the manhandling he'd been subjected to, but kender are not so easily put off. It was all part and parcel of the fair, and Tas had a taste for excitement. He was also partial to the crispy-fried spiral cakes sprinkled with sugar, which he purchased from a toothless but jolly, red-cheeked old woman. Absently sucking the sugar from his fingers, he set off to explore the grounds.

Strains of exotic music drifted across the festival grounds, sounds of long-stringed instruments and tiny cymbals, which wrapped Tasslehoff up in their pulsing rhythm. Like a dog on a scent, the kender threaded through the seething crowd and found his way to the stage. On it, a dark-skinned woman shivered and whirled, her silk veils floating like gossamer petals. Steel coins jangled on her wrists, ankles, and hips. The music, strange and wonderful, seemed filled with color and faraway scents.

But even that wasn't enough to hold Tas's attention when the magic show started up in the next stall.

Foul-smelling smoke drifted across the stage. With a whoosh, a man appeared in the smoke, grimacing. The crowd swayed in awe, though Tas was quite certain he saw the curtain move just before the man "materialized."

The fellow was dressed in a floor-length forest green tunic, so dark it almost appeared black. A fur-trimmed robe of the same color reached just below his waist. Both items were decorated with cabalistic symbols of every size and color.

"I am the great and potent Fozgoz Mithrohir," announced the wizard, "grandson and only surviving heir of the equally great and potent Fozgond Mithrohir, the Eternal High Light and Grand Mustard of the Imperial Order of Green Wizards! Stand back!"

With that, he produced a wand from his left sleeve and flourished it menacingly toward the crowd, which stepped back respectfully.

"I shall now summon here, to this spot, before you, with great authority and power, a creature of the nether planes, a dread beast from whence you cannot imagine, for only I, Fozgoz, have ever ventured there to return again. Do not be alarmed, for it is completely within my power and under my control. I am master of this dire creature, having established my authority in wizardly combat against the nemesis in its own magical world! Now, silence, and stand back!"

Tasslehoff, like everyone else, stared unblinking and dry-eyed as Fozgoz waved his wand in complex and mystic convolutions through the air. Sparks sputtered from its tip as it traced its sulfurous pattern. Then, with a bang, another cloud of acrid smoke burst across the crowd. Tasslehoff and other spectators who stood in the front rows staggered back, blinking their stinging eyes and coughing. The first to rush forward afterward was Tas, who stared intently into the swirling cloud. Emerging from it, looking somewhat dazed and hardly ferocious, was . . . Tas could see it was about the size and shape of a goat, but hairless and apparently covered with orange scales.

It had only one horn. As the crowd gasped and gaped in astonishment, the creature stood placidly chewing. Just as Tas reached out to touch it, an assistant rushed forward and led the incredible monster away behind the curtain.

With his eyebrows twisted to an unnatural posture, Fozgoz glared at Tasslehoff.

"You are certainly a brave and adventurous fellow, little traveler," he announced. "That creature would have torn off your arm and swallowed it whole, then lapped up your blood for dessert, had I not been here to contain its bestial urges."

"It looked like a billy goat," said Tas, suspicious.

"You noticed that, did you?" Fozgoz's smile was patronizing. "That is because the universe contains only a finite number of forms. To grant existence to all creatures, some forms must be used twice, or even more, on the many planes of existence. Do not be fooled. It merely resembled a goat in outward shape." The astonished crowd murmured over its new enlightenment.

Turning to the man next to him, Tasslehoff muttered, "It sure looked like a goat. Didn't you think it looked like a goat?"

Before the man could answer, Fozgoz interrupted. "Tell me, little traveler. You are a kender?"

"Tasslehoff Burrfoot, of the Kendermore Burrfoots. Have you heard of us?"

"Thankfully, no," Fozgoz said, drawing laughter from the crowd, "but I'm certain everyone here knows of the strange and wonderful things kender carry in their pouches. Perhaps you would allow me?" The magician extended a hand to Tasslehoff, his eyebrow raised questioningly.

Tasslehoff's face lit up. "Sure, I'd love to!" He stepped forward and slipped the pouch from his shoulder. As he began unknitting the drawstring, Fozgoz stopped him.

"Please," he said, "I am a wizard, after all. There is no need to open the purse. I can divine, yes, even extract, its contents while it is still tightly drawn. Stand here."

Tasslehoff stepped obediently to the place next to Fozgoz. The magician placed his left hand lightly against the pouch. In his right he waved the wand.

"Now relax, my valiant friend," he cautioned. His eyes grew narrow, his lips pursed tightly together, and he passed the wand close to the pouch. "*Radorum, Radorae, Radorix, Radorostrum!*" A shower of sparks burst from the end of the wand and rained over Tasslehoff. Fozgoz stepped back triumphantly, holding his left hand aloft. The crowd gasped. Slowly he lowered his palm to Tasslehoff's eye level, and the kender saw that it held the dried foot and beak of a raven.

Tasslehoff peered at the objects. "Wow, I'd forgotten all about those. But hey, you missed the best stuff. Here, let me show you." Before Fozgoz could object, Tas popped open his pouch and pulled out a beautiful orange and green feather. "Here's a harpy's tail feather. And a minotaur's tusk, and a lock of somebody-or-other's hair, though he was important at the time, and some moon dust from Lunitari—or is it Solinari? Well, anyway, Uncle Trapspringer brought it back from some moon or other. Where's that powdered pegasus hoof? Oh, and I have maps of everywhere I've ever gone, which is just about everywhere, and lots of places I haven't gone, too."

By now the crowd was pressing in, trying to get a look at the strange and wonderful things Tasslehoff held in his small fists. Fozgoz waved his arms against the pressing crowd, but it was no use.

Just as Fozgoz was about to give up on the rest of the show, he heard the kender's voice calling his name. "Mighty Fozgoz! Look!"

The spectators parted far enough so Fozgoz could see Tasslehoff. In his outstretched palm he held a raven's beak and two dried feet. "Look, I found them. They were back in my pouch. How'd you do that, without waving your wand, I mean?"

Caught off guard, Fozgoz looked down to his own hand to see whether his props were still there. They were. Unfortunately, at least sixteen members of his audience saw them, too.

"Say, what sort of a double-dealing trick is that?" asked one of the larger members of the audience, stepping toward Fozgoz.

"What do you take us for, a pack of fools?" asked another. "I'd say we ought to know phony magic when we see it.

Fozgoz bristled. "Phony magic! I'd hold my tongue if I were you. I shall overlook your brazen words this time, but do not test me! I warn you all, even a wizard of my wisdom can be pushed only so far."

"If you're such a great mage, what are you doing playing a festival?"

By now, Fozgoz was encircled on three sides and his threats and warnings were not having any marked effect. Onlookers loudly and satirically called for some demonstration of real power.

"C'mon, Fozgoz, plant a lightning bolt right here," snorted one man, thumping his chest, much to the crowd's amusement.

"All right, I warned you," blustered Fozgoz. "Now step back or I just might do something you will regret for a long time! I just might . . . Oh, dear. Now where's my wand?"

Several yards from the beleaguered magician but hidden by the thronging humans, Tasslehoff retied and shouldered his pouch. His naturally lined face was further creased with disappointment over the meager magic show. As he threaded his way out through the onlookers, a brief flurry of sparks sputtered unnoticed from his pouch.

"You're insulting me. Is that why you came here, just to insult me?"

Tasslehoff was readying to apologize to whomever he had insulted—not that he could remember insulting anyone lately—when another voice stopped him. "Insult? I'm insulting you? You're the insulting one, with prices like this."

Tasslehoff quickly spotted the source of the argument. A human, obviously a wanderer, judging from his worn, practical clothing, was in a heated debate with a dwarf over a piece of merchandise. Past middle age, the dwarf had graying hair above bushy eyebrows, a red bulb of a nose, and a practiced snarl beneath his mustache.

"Merchandise? You call this merchandise? You should be thanking me for even stopping to look at it."

The two were obviously not agreeing on either the quality or the value of the jewelry the dwarf was selling. Tasslehoff watched as the red-faced dwarf, holding a silver brooch and a fine neck chain, placed them next to a small bracelet in a glass display case. He dusted off his thick hands on the front of his blue tunic, as if he could brush away the rude customer.

"Excuse me, stranger," he said, his tone brittle, "but the quality of my work is excellent—I am the only dwarven metalworker to ever have worked for the Speaker of the Sun himself. My prices are more than fair. I'm selling jewelry here, not fish. If you're looking to barter, then it's fish you want and you should walk down to the market." With that, the annoyed dwarf turned to answer another customer's question. But the surly human would not be ignored.

"Fish," snorted the man. "Now *there's* a respectable business. Everyone can smell when your merchandise is bad. But with jewelry it's different." The man leaned over the case and peered inside, tracing items with his finger. "You do have one piece that's interesting, if only you'd be reasonable and bargain. . . ."

The dwarf whirled on the man. "I've told you, the bracelet isn't for sale! How thick are you? It's not for sale at any price and especially not for the fish-market figures you've been tossing around." To emphasize his point, the dwarf took a small key from a chain on his thick waist and locked the

display case that housed the bracelet in question. "Now, if you're done wasting my time . . ."

Tasslehoff lost track of the verbal joust as he edged closer with his attention focused on the disputed bracelet. It was a rather simply forged copper bracelet with several mounted stones and just enough detail to fascinate a kender—Tasslehoff, in particular. While no such thought passed through his mind, clearly Tasslehoff wanted to see how it felt on his wrist.

In moments he stood next to the dwarven jeweler's stall. It was a rough structure, like most of those at the fair, made of planks laid across barrels or sawhorses on three sides and with a curtain or tent at the back.

This particular stall was no tidier or messier than most, though the racial mix at the festival apparently created some problems for the proprietor. Being a dwarf and about four feet tall, he was most comfortable with his plank counters about two feet off the ground. But most of his customers were human. To get a good look at his wares, they needed the counters considerably higher, which put them just about at the jeweler's nose. In the spirit of compromise, the smith had positioned the planks a little less than three feet up, making them equally unhandy for everyone.

Tasslehoff stood almost exactly one head taller than the plank and could have comfortably rested his chin on it, if his head had been tired and he had wanted to. But it wasn't, and he didn't. What he really wanted was a very close look at that bracelet.

It's obviously here to be admired, said Tas to himself.

The dwarf had only locked the display case to discourage the rude human. Taking a long, thin needle from his pack, he reached at last across the table, quite unnoticed, and sprang the tiny lock on the case, which the dwarf would have done himself if he were not otherwise engaged, Tas reasoned. Slipping his hand under the glass on one side of the case, his fingers met the bracelet's cool metal. Tas quickly turned away to examine the item, because the light was much better from the other side.

The copper bracelet had an exquisite simplicity that the kender found most appealing. And he was very happy to discover four semiprecious stones, just as he'd suspected. Better yet, they were odd stones, of a variety he'd not seen before. Their color was pale amber. Each was a slightly different shape, but no more than a quarter-inch in diameter. The bracelet was quite small, not meant for a human's or dwarf's thick wrist. Slipping it over his hand, he was delighted to see that it fit perfectly and was as light as a feather.

Tasslehoff turned back to the booth to ask the proprietor a few questions, but, to Tas's surprise, the dwarf was gone. The crowd that had gathered was drifting away, the rude customer having departed.

"Excuse me, but could you . . . Pardon me, but do you know where the . . ." Darting from one person to another as the knot of onlookers swiftly broke up and dispersed, Tasslehoff could not get the attention of anyone who might have seen where the dwarf went. In moments he found himself standing alone in front of the jeweler's booth.

Tas plucked a silver brooch from an open display box on the plank counter. Turning it over in his hand, he could see plainly that it was made by a master. Other pieces in the box bore the same distinctive style, but the bracelet, while apparently made by the same person, was leaner and simpler. It had none of the typical characteristics of dwarven jewelry: heavy filigree, large stones, colorful metallic and mineral inlays, or exotic alloys.

As Tas placed the brooch and several other items back in the display box, he reached a resolve. The bracelet was obviously too wonderful to trust its safety to the meager locks on the dwarf's display boxes. Actually, to do so would be most irresponsible. Instead, Tas would keep it safe on his wrist until he could find the dwarf and return it.

With a light step Tasslehoff turned away from the booth to set out in search of the dwarf jeweler. He

expected a difficult pursuit; after all, the spring festival was a large affair, and the dwarf could be anywhere. He had gone about five paces when a thunderous bellow halted his steps.

"Thief! Stop that little thief!"

Quickly Tas scanned around, hoping to catch sight of the dastard, perhaps even bring him down with a quick shot from his hoopak sling. But he saw no one fleeing in panic. He saw no one who looked like a "little thief," though that could have been a figure of speech, he decided. It dawned on Tas that what he *did* see was a lot of people staring at him.

Tasslehoff glanced over his shoulder in time to see the dwarf jeweler, red faced and steaming mad, charging toward him. The kender deftly stepped out of the dwarf's way to let him pass and catch the thief, but the dwarf snapped to a halt and a powerful arm shot out and grabbed the kender by the throat all in one smooth motion; a surprisingly agile maneuver for a dwarf, Tas thought.

Having moved his hands into a tight grip on Tasslehoff's shoulders, the dwarf shook him roughly, until the kender's tongue lolled in his head. The dwarf sputtered and fumed, so furious was he that he could barely speak.

"Hand over my merchandise, you little ... I could just . . . Your race should have been wiped out during the Cataclysm . . . Guards! Guards! I ought to . . . Guards!"

"Merchandise?" Tas's look of complete puzzlement only sent the smoldering dwarf further into apoplexy. "You think that I stole something?" Tas stood, one hand behind his back, the other pointing at himself as if to say, "Me? All this excitement is about me?"

"Ooohh!" screamed the dwarf through his quivering beard. His rage was so intense that he let go of Tasslehoff because he could barely control his shaking fists. Finally he stamped his foot and spun around in a circle until he calmed down enough to speak again.

"How can you deny it? Guards! I saw it right there, on your wrist!"

"I don't believe there's anything on my wrist," said Tas, looking at his left one.

"Not that one!" shrieked the dwarf. "Tour other wrist, you doorknob! The one you're hiding behind your back!" He seized Tas's hand and tried to wrench the bracelet from it. "It's right there, on your wrist!" he repeated. Still tugging, he looked about frantically. "Where are those guards!"

By now an enormous crowd had gathered around the stall again, milling and bobbing to get a look at the ruckus. The dwarf's temper was well known in town, and no one wanted to miss the consequences (though no one wanted to get too close, either). A tall, wiry young man, looking slightly agitated, forced his way through the throng.

"Well, here's the guard," sighed Tasslehoff. "I hope he can clear things up, because I couldn't be more confused."

"Thank the gods you're here, Tanis," breathed the dwarf to the newcomer, ignoring the kender's commentary. "Please, go fetch a guard, quickly."

"Why don't you tell me what's going on first," said the one called Tanis.

Tasslehoff thrust his small chest out defiantly. "I'd like to know that, myself."

Flint gave a snort at the kender. "Isn't it obvious? This black-hearted imp stole my bracelet and was sneaking away with it." The dwarf wrenched Tas's right arm out into view, then pushed back the cuff to reveal the copper bracelet around the kender's wrist. "There. Right there where he hid it."

"You mean this?" Tasslehoff was genuinely surprised. "I didn't steal that. I was protecting it for you. I was just now going to find you to return it. You left it lying on the table where anyone who came along could have snatched it." Tasslehoff wagged his finger reprovingly at the dwarf. "You really should be more careful with your things."

"It was locked in a display box!" exclaimed the dwarf, rudely poking Tasslehoff in the chest.

"It was awfully imprudent," admonished Tas, completely unruffled. "And you might as well leave those display boxes unlocked for all the good they do."

The kender's calmness only served to further enrage the dwarf. "I'll not fall for that innocent kender act of yours." He looked about desperately for some support from the crowd. "I want this thief carted away."

Tanis leaned toward the dwarf and whispered behind his hand, "I really don't think that's necessary, Flint. I'm sure he didn't mean any harm."

Turning to the kender, Tanis continued. "If you give the bracelet back—and anything else you picked up—we can just forget this whole thing."

Tasslehoff was impressed by the man's sense of fairness—something he'd seen too little of since arriving in Solace. "I'd be happy to," said Tas. "That's what I was trying to do all along." With one quick motion the bracelet was off his wrist and being returned to its owner. With a grumble, the dwarf snatched it and immediately stuffed it in his vest pocket.

"You're welcome," said the kender pointedly. The dwarf did not meet his gaze.

Facing the crowd, the young man waved his hands and dismissed their curiosity. "That's all folks, there's nothing happening here anymore. Go on back to your business." Turning to the kender, he offered his hand. "My name is Tanthalas, but everyone calls me Tanis. This fellow, who'd have you believe you've deeply offended him, is my good friend and hearthmate, Flint Fireforge. His bark is much worse than his bite."

Tasslehoff reached up and clasped the man's hand warmly. "I can't begin to say how happy I am to meet you, Tanis. You're the first person I've met here who's spoken kindly to me. I'm Tasslehoff Burrfoot, of the Kendermore Burrfoots. Maybe you've heard of us?"

"Happy to make your acquaintance, too, Flint Fireforge. I'm sorry you misunderstood my intentions about the bracelet. It's a beautiful piece of work." Tas extended his hand to the dwarf, who folded his arms and stared at the sky until a jab from Tanis's elbow nearly knocked him over. After firing a simmering glance at Tanis, Flint finally—grudgingly—accepted Tasslehoff's handshake and "apology."

Tanis watched Flint's scowling face, amused. "Well, Tasslehoff," he said, "I'm glad that's settled. I wish you a pleasant journey, wherever it is you're going."

"Actually," the kender said thoughtfully, "now that I have some friends here in Solace, I believe I might stay for a while."

"Actually," said Flint hastily, "we don't live—"

The heel of Tanis's boot crunched Flint's toes, cutting off the dwarf's words. "What Flint meant to say was, even though we live here," explained Tanis, "we'll be leaving in a day or two, as soon as the highways dry up again. The Spring Festival only lasts two more days, and then we'll be taking our goods on the road, south to Qualinost, probably."

Tas's face lit up. "Really? I've never seen the ancient elf capital, but I hear it's breathtaking. My uncle Trapspringer met the Speaker of the Sun once. I was thinking of going there myself." His expectant gaze traveled from Tanis to Flint and quickly back to Tanis again.

Tanis shifted his weight uncomfortably. "Well, a trip to Qualinost isn't definite. Not yet, that is. We might, umm, head north into Abanasinia first. We still haven't decided. It all depends."

"What does it depend on?" the kender asked innocently.

Flint folded his arms and smirked at Tanis, then said smugly, "I'm interested, too, Tanis. Exactly what *does* this depend on?"

Tanis shuffled his feet and cleared his throat awkwardly, then tried to swallow the dry lump forming there. "The usual things. The condition of the roads, and what we hear from other merchants about those areas, and whether we can get good directions, and—" he blushed—"things like that."

Tasslehoff beamed. "You don't have to worry about directions. I have wonderfully accurate maps of the whole area. They show where the roads come from and where they're going—mostly, anyway. Plus where there are bad bridges and high taxes and monsters and good food. They show lots of things." The kender set his shoulders resolutely. "You're going to be awfully glad you met me."

Chapter 2

Among Friends

The Inn of the Last Home was perched high in the branches of one of the mightiest vallenwood trees in Solace. This was only fitting, as the inn was one of the largest buildings in town. Even on the ground it would have looked inviting. Nestled there in the branches of that powerful tree, the two-story inn seemed enchanted.

The one drawback to its location was reaching it. A long and winding ramp spiraled round and round the great trunk until it finally deposited the unprepared visitor, puffing and very ready for a drink, at the door of the inn, forty feet above the ground. (Needless to say, this ramp had a stout railing for the sake of those customers who might have trouble negotiating the path back down.)

This evening found Tanis and Flint snaking their way up the torturous incline.

Pausing for a moment to lean against the trunk, Flint ruffled his moustache. "I swear that rascal Otik moves this inn just a little bit higher every year. Besides, what idiot makes his business taxing to get to and easy to leave?"

"It's only hard when you start from the ground. I never hear you complain when we come in on the bridge-walks," replied Tanis. "I think the real problem is that you're getting old."

"And I think you're getting stupid," grumbled the dwarf as he resumed the pace. "Only a hare-brain would meet a kender for a drink, and only a doomed idiot would invite one along on a trip."

Tanis, who was accustomed to the dwarf's bile after years of exposure, took no offense. "Nobody says you have to come along, Flint. I know your wares well enough to sell them for you. Somebody your age probably shouldn't travel much, anyway."

Flint poked a short, stubby finger at his nettlesome young friend. "Just you remember that even at my age I could still snap you in half like a greasy chicken bone. It's only my short reach that's kept you alive this long."

Tanis chuckled and wrapped his arm around the dwarf's thick shoulders. "Anyway," he said, "nobody says he has to come along, either. He'll probably forget we even suggested it. If he really does have maps of the whole region we can look at and perhaps copy, he could save us enormous amounts of time and wasted effort. You know what a maze the Kharolis Mountains can be."

"Yes, I know," the dwarf grumbled. "And I also know I could be sitting before my own hearth with my feet up, eating my own smoked ham and drinking good dwarf spirits."

The half-elf sighed. "It'll do you good to get out. I swear," he said with a shake of his russet head, "you'd be a regular hermit, Flint Fireforge, if I let you."

"So why don't you?"

Tanis clapped Flint's shoulder fondly. "It's a shame I'm the only one who knows what a pushover you are." He gave the dwarf's shoulder a firm, warning squeeze. "Now, please at least *try* to be nice to Tasslehoff. He seems like a pleasant enough little fellow."

A skeptical snort was Hint's only answer, his heavy boots clapping noisily on the wooden bridgewalks.

They arrived at the landing before the entrance to the inn. Bright lights from inside shone warmly through the colorful stained glass windows. Sounds of laughter and song drifted out to welcome the new arrivals. Tanis closed his eyes, pulled open the door, and drew a deep breath as he stepped into

the room.

The inn had an aroma that Tanis found irresistible: pipe and hearth smoke mingled in the air, along with the scents of Otik's spiced potatoes, sizzling sausages, roasting fowl, and fresh bread from the kitchen, and the inescapable smell of spring from the mighty vallenwood trunk that grew right through the midst of the common room.

As Tanis opened his eyes again, the pleasant air caught in his throat. The crowd at the inn was often boisterous. This night, several dozen patrons stood or sat throughout the room, clapping and banging their mugs on the tables in time to an embarrassingly bawdy song. And in the center of it all, leading the singing as he leaped from table to table and even walked on the shoulders of his audience, was the person they had come to meet, the irrepressible kender himself, Tasslehoff Burrfoot.

Flint's elbow jabbed into Tanis's ribs, releasing the air that had caught in the taller man's throat. Tanis glanced at Flint, but could only shrug in response to the dwarf's glare. With studied patience, Tanis began to thread his way through the noisy, stomping crowd.

The song ended moments before the two new arrivals reached an empty table along the room's farthest wall. Seemingly from nowhere, a body launched itself toward Tanis, who reflexively put out his arms to catch it.

Tas smiled up at his new friend. "Hey, Tanis, I'm glad you made it!" He crawled from the half-elf's lap, twisted his vest back into place, and settled himself into a chair. "What a crowd!" He took a sip from a half-empty mug of ale left over from the previous patrons. Foam coated his upper lip in a golden mustache. "This is a great town. I can see why you guys live here." He settled back with a satisfied belch.

"Did you hear the song?" he asked, leaning forward again. "It almost became the kender national anthem, but it's a hard one to sing correctly, what with those four octaves in it and all. Still, bad renditions are real popular at inns in Kendermore. At least they were when I was last home."

"When was that?" Tanis asked conversationally. He yanked the reluctant, grim-faced dwarf onto the bench next to him.

With a long-suffering sigh, Flint wiggled three fingers above his head at a serving girl and settled in for the night. The fair-haired lass bounced over quickly, three large, overfull mugs slopping over in her cradled arms.

"Thanks!" Tasslehoff threw back the contents of the half-filled mug he'd found, then traded it for one of the full ones in the girl's arms.

"Now, what was your question? Oh, yes, Kendermore," Tasslehoff recalled. He scratched his head. "What year is it now?"

"Year?" Tanis asked, incredulous. "Have you been gone so very long?"

"I haven't really given it much thought," said the kender, screwing up his wrinkled face in concentration. "Let's see, I left just after my sixteenth day of life-gift, which was the second of the month of Blessings, 341. I remember having two birthdays since then—one spent with some very nasty wizards who wanted this really neat teleporting ring I had, and the other talking to some very nice ladies in a pleasant bordello in Khuri-khan, or was it Valkinord? I always get them confused. Have you been?"

Oblivious to Hint's blush and Tanis's laughter, Tas pressed on. "I guess that means I've been on wanderlust for two and a half years, so far. Hmm," he muttered, "I didn't realize it had been that long. . . ."

"Good lords," breathed Flint apprehensively, "what on Krynn is 'wanderlust'?"

Tasslehoff looked surprised at the question. "Why, it's when you wander around, learning about life

and making maps. When you've learned enough, or made enough maps, you're ready to return to your hometown and begin life as an adult. Doesn't everyone do it?"

"Good heavens, no," snorted the dwarf, compelled to call on the gods yet again. "What a ridiculous notion."

Tanis remarked with a shrug, "I guess it's no different than any culture's rite of passage. The elves have one, I know." He flinched at the memory of his humiliation at being forbidden to take the elven rite in Qualinost years ago because he was a half-breed. "And I'll bet the dwarves have one, too."

"So," Tanis continued, filling in the dwarf's gloomy silence, "have you learned enough to return home yet?"

"Not yet, but I'll tell you," the kender said as he leaned in, his little face serious, "I made some really great maps of that bordello."

Blushing anew, the straitlaced dwarf swallowed the last of his amber ale in another big gulp. "Speaking of maps, let's have another drink and take a look at yours."

"You want to see the bordello one?" asked Tas eagerly.

"No!" exploded Flint, flustered further by Tanis's laughter. Flint heaved a sigh of relief just then, when the serving girl returned with another round. "You said you had some maps of Abanasinia, which is the only reason I'm here. So let's see 'em," he ordered.

Of course, there were few things in the world Tasslehoff liked better than talking about and showing off his maps. In a trice he had ordered a plate of fried sausages and settled into his chair near the wall. Across from him, Tanis stretched out his legs along the bench, Flint still sitting stiffly next to him.

"I don't think you'll be able to see well way over there," Tas said frankly to the bushy-haired dwarf, "what with the light so dim and your eyes so old."

"My eyes are fine! You just worry about your maps being a waste of my time," said Flint, poking a finger at the kender.

With a hurt glance at the dwarf, Tas untied the flap on his shoulder bag. "Making maps is my life, you know," he announced to no one in particular. "I suppose you could say I can't help myself. I see something interesting, and I've just got to jot it down. I don't sell them, though I'm sure such beautiful and exact maps would draw a terrific sum. I just make them for me. And sometimes I give one to somebody I like, if it's really special."

Reaching into the bag with both hands, Tasslehoff dragged out what could only be called a wad of items: parchment rolls, folded parchment, squares of paper and vellum, a few small sheets of bark, the soft leather upper from a luxurious riding boot, several scraps of linen, a bone tube sealed with wax at both ends, and a straight black stick about fourteen inches long.

Tas picked up the stick and turned it around in his hands. "What in the world is this?" he mused aloud. He rapped it on the table edge and nearly dropped it in surprise when a shower of sparks burst from the end. Sudden recognition lit up his face.

"Hey, Fozgoz's wand!" he squealed. "Watch, Tanis, I can do magic with this!"

Leaping to his feet, Tas shook the wand at Flint and intoned, "I command you to become a hairless goat, *now!*"

Arms and legs flailing wildly, the hefty dwarf scrambled desperately to escape from the sizzling, smoking fusillade that erupted over him. His beer mug crashed to the floor to create a spreading pool of foam. The bench nearly tipped over before Flint could plant his hobnailed boot firmly on the floorboards.

Meanwhile Tanis's arm shot up and his strong fingers locked around Tas's wrist. With his free left hand Tanis snatched the wand from the kender and dunked it, still spewing sparks, into one of the full mugs on the table.

"What's the matter with your brain?" Finally on his feet, with his back to the wall, Flint bellowed at the kender. "You all saw it," he said to the gaping crowd, "he's completely crazy!" He pointed an accusing finger at the half-elf. "This is your fault, Tanis. You shouldn't have stopped me from having him arrested this morning. Maybe it's not too late."

Tasslehoff slipped his wrist out of Tanis's grasp. "Gee whiz," he muttered sheepishly, "it was just a joke. It's a silly old fake wizard's wand. There's no magic in it, just sparks."

"How is any sane person supposed to know that?" blustered Flint. Aggravated, he brushed himself off and resettled on his bench, mumbling the whole time about "crazy kender." Gradually the rest of the inn's customers went back about their business. The serving girl slipped in and placed a pewter plate of sizzling sausages on the table next to Tasslehoff's sundry valuables. Flint snatched one of the hot links and munched it angrily, oblivious to the burns it inflicted in his mouth.

Tas looked for some support in Tanis's face but found only stern admonishment. "It was just a joke," he muttered again. He picked at a sausage. "I don't know how the wand ended up in my bag in the first place. That phony wizard must have dropped it there somehow when I wasn't looking."

Flint and Tanis exchanged knowing glances.

"Your maps?" Tanis prompted.

Tasslehoff bounced up in his seat, and he pushed the sausage plate to the side. "Right." His nimble fingers flew across the heap of documents, sorting and examining and sifting at lightning speed. He selected a sheet of parchment and flipped it open under Tanis's nose. "Here's the Bay of Balifor. That's close to Kendermore, my home. I came through there at the start of my journey."

Another map unfolded, this one much larger. "And here's the Laughing Lands. This is near my home, too. See, there's the Hollow Lands to the north, and the Somber Coast, which is no more fun than it sounds, and this bay here is the Gullet, and the Wendlewrithing River, and the Writhing Wreak between the two. I made that map myself."

"It's very nice, Tasslehoff, but we're interested in something a little closer to Solace," Tanis said.

"Of course you are," agreed the kender, "I have maps of every place I've been, and I've definitely been here." He continued pawing through his assortment, glancing at each item, occasionally opening one for a closer look. "Here's the . . . no, that won't help. Here's a secret cave near Bloten—no, that's way across the Newsea. What's this? Schallsea Island—we're getting closer. Now, this is a map of Ergoth. How'd that get here? It belongs down near the bottom of the pile.

"Look at this! It's not really a map at all. It's a lock of hair from Contessa Darbiana. I met her at the western edge of Silvanesti. She was fleeing from a band of outlaws—well, they weren't actually outlaws, they were more like rebels, only there weren't enough of them to have a real rebellion, so they just robbed people and caused lots of trouble. They were chasing her because they wanted to kidnap her and use her politically somehow. At least, that's what she said."

Tasslehoff bent over his maps and continued shuffling through them.

After several minutes, Flint pushed his hat back from his eyes. He reached across the table and picked up the lock of hair. "Well?"

Tas's head jerked up. "Well what?" he asked, aimlessly shuffling the maps.

"What happened to Contessa Darbell, you doorknob?"

"Darbiana. The bandits got her. I barely managed to escape myself. A military patrol found me a few days later, and the officer told me that they'd tracked and ambushed the bandits and killed all of

them. They never found a trace of Darbiana. It's kind of sad, I guess, when you think about it."

Flint's mouth dropped open. "That's a terrible story," he objected.

Tasslehoff defended himself as only a kender could. "I never claimed it was a good story. You asked *me*, remember?" Tas leaned forward, snatched back the lock of hair, and stuffed it in his bag. "If you don't want to hear sad stories, don't ask me to tell them."

Flint rolled his eyes and crossed his thick arms.

Leaning forward on his elbows, Tanis was getting drawn into the bewildering assortment of scrawled maps laid before him. He picked up one of the bark scraps to examine. It looked nothing like a map, but was instead covered with strange, twisted scratches. "What's this?"

Tasslehoff bent close and squinted at the squiggles as he tried to read them. "That's a rescue message," he stated, "written in the script of Zhakar."

"Dare we ask?" mumbled Flint through his mustache.

"It's not sad, if that's what you mean. I got caught in a wizard's keep and . . ."

"After breaking in, no doubt," interrupted Flint.

"No, I did not break in. I just went in."

"Were you invited?"

"No, but nobody told me to stay out. If that wizard was so concerned about privacy, he should have locked his door. So I walked in to have a look around, because I'd never been in a wizard's keep before, and this shriveled old stick of a man got all excited and had his guards, who were just about the ugliest things I've ever seen on three legs, lock me in a cell.

"I stayed there for a few days, thinking the wizard would cool off and let me go, only he didn't seem like the forgiving type. So finally I scratched out this rescue message on a piece of bark, figuring maybe I could slip it to one of the locals and get myself rescued."

"Good thinking," said Tanis. "Obviously it worked."

Tas shook his head. "No locals ever came around to get it. I had to trick my way out.

"The wizard came to check on me one day because he needed some rendered hobgoblin fat and he was having a hard time getting any. I suspect he was wondering whether rendered kender would work as well. Not being so curious about that myself, I persuaded him that I knew where I could get some of what he needed—even the chunky kind. So he let me go, on the condition that I come back with the grease as soon as possible. I think he tried to put some sort of spell on me to guarantee I would come back, but it didn't work.

"Which reminds me," he added, holding up a small, blue glass vial with a cork in the mouth, "don't ever open this in a closed room. It's awful-smelling stuff."

Tanis and Flint exchanged glances again, and Flint ordered another round.

"Here it is!" announced Tas. Triumphant he spread out a tattered piece of vellum, frayed around the edges and stained in the middle. "I'm afraid I was running low on mapping material when I did this. Still, it's perfectly readable."

Tanis cocked his head this way and that, then turned the map slightly, then turned it a bit more. Finally he turned it around completely, but he was still puzzled. "Without wanting to sound too stupid, Tasslehoff, umm, what is it?"

"It's Abanasinia." Tas held out his hands as if to say, "Of course." Still Tanis drew a blank. Tas grabbed the map and rotated it about seventy degrees. "See? There's the Eastwall Mountains."

Tanis scratched his head.

"And the coast. There are the Straits of Schallsea across the north, and Newsea on the east."

At last Tanis caught on. "Oh, I see. This is the coastline, here. I thought that was part of the stain."

"That *is* part of the stain," corrected Tas, pointing with a thin finger. "*This* is the coast."

"Right," said Tanis. "I see it now."

"I told you this would be nothing but trouble," Flint sang out softly.

Tanis ignored the dwarf as he pressed his face close to the map, pausing occasionally to take swigs from his mug. Tasslehoff sat quietly waiting for words of appreciation or admiration.

He sat still as long as he could, which was about fifteen seconds. When the lack of conversation became unbearable, he blurted, "Isn't Tanthalas an elf name?"

"That's right," said Tanis, still studying the map.

"So how come you're not an elf?"

Tanis looked up slowly. "It's kind of a long story."

But Tasslehoff would not be put off. He crossed his arms expectantly. "I'm in no hurry."

"You might as well tell him now," Flint ordered, "because he's not going to let up until he gets it out of you."

Tasslehoff squirmed up to the edge of his seat as Tanis swallowed another mouthful of beer. "Well, a long time ago . . . oh, what the hell," he said, annoyed that he was making his heritage sound like a bedtime story. The half-elf set down his mug and then, using both hands, swept the long, reddish brown hair back on both sides of his head. Tasslehoff gasped on seeing the elongated, slightly pointed ears.

"I don't get it," he said. "They're not elf ears, but they sure aren't human ears, either. They look like my ears, only twice as big. What are you, a giant kender?" Tas snickered behind his hand.

That remark brought an explosion of laughter from Flint. The dwarf lurched forward, spraying beer all across Tanis's back. "A giant kender! He's assayed you, my boy!" Wiping tears from his face, Flint was able to stop laughing only by looking away from Tanis. Just as he calmed down, Flint looked back again and the sight of his friend, with hair pulled back and ears sticking up, started the whole uproar over again.

More than slightly irritated, Tanis pulled his hair back across his ears. Tasslehoff tried hard to look concerned, but he could not keep his mouth from crinkling.

"No," stated Tanis, "I am not a 'giant kender'."

Tas snorted indelicately through his nose.

Piqued, Tanis's almond-shaped eyes narrowed. "My mother was an elf and my father was a human warrior. My mother never even knew his name. All he left me was mixed blood and no people to call mine," he concluded somberly.

"With those ears, you'd be welcome in Kendermore,"

said Tasslehoff, slapping his knee in merriment. Feeling the effects of too much ale, both he and Flint promptly doubled up, shrieking with laughter. Tas kicked the table leg, while Flint pounded the top with his fist. Beer mugs danced and skittered across the surface, splashing foam on everyone.

The half-elf leaped to his feet. "Sargonnas take both of you!"

He whirled and pushed his way through the crowd to the blazing hearth at the back wall. There he stood, staring into the roaring flames, feeling their warmth rapidly baking through his leggings and tunic. In his own ale-numbed state, he did not mind when the heat became uncomfortable, almost

scorching. Still Tanis stood there, one hand on the mantel, the other clenching and unclenching at his side.

Back at the table, the kender looked at the half-elf and chirped, "Gee, he's really mad. Is he overly sensitive or something?"

Startled by the kender's insight, and dismayed that he had not realized it first, Flint quickly brought himself under control again. Tanis had always been uncomfortable with his mixed heritage, but Flint knew that it was the memory of the rape of his mother that had truly up-Bet him. "I'll be right back," he muttered to Tas, redfaced.

Swaying from the ale, the powerful dwarf shouldered his way across the tavern to where Tanis fumed. He stood silently alongside the furious half-elf for several moments, as they shared the warmth of the fire. Then he thrust his great hands into his tunic before clearing his throat.

"Come back to the table, pup. We were out of line there, and, well, the kender's real sorry. Me, too."

Tanis hesitated, then glared at Flint for a brief moment. "Tasslehoff didn't know, Flint, but I expected better from you."

Flint coughed guiltily, and spat into the fire. "And you deserve it. Like I said, I'm real sorry about that. We've all had a few drinks. Come back to the table." Flint extended his hand, and after a few moments, the younger half-elf took it. Flint pressed it affectionately.

The pair turned and shuffled back to where Tasslehoff waited. The trio sat silently for several long moments, everyone staring self-consciously into his beer mug— except Tasslehoff, of course, who was incapable of feeling self-conscious.

"Now that I know something about Tanis, what about you, Flint?" the kender prompted. "Where did you learn to make such beautiful jewelry? You're quite good, and I should know. I've been all over Ansalon and seen a lot of things."

Flint swelled under the praise. Like Tasslehoff with his maps, the dwarf was always willing to discuss his craft. "My kin have always been metalsmiths or warriors," he said. He told the kender about his youth in the hills near the dwarven fortress-city of Thorbardin and his decision to leave the hill dwarves of Hillhome and move to the human settlement of Solace so long ago. His pride was unmistakable when he spoke of his summons to the court of the Speaker of the Sun.

"I would have to say that was where I honed my skills to their highest point, during my time in Qualinost," he said in conclusion. "Even the Speaker of the Sun said so. That's also where I met Tanis."

"Is that where you made that splendid bracelet I saw today?" asked Tas. "The copper one with the gems that you weren't even willing to discuss selling?"

Flint shook his head. "No, that's a very new item. It sure is a beautiful piece of work, though, isn't it?" As he spoke he reached into his pocket and drew out the bracelet. He turned it over and around in his hands, stroking the filigree and buffing the stones on his sleeve.

Impulsively, Tasslehoff stretched across the table to look at the item more closely. But as his hand shot forward, Flint's beer mug crashed onto the table, gouging out a dent as large as a walnut. Only Tas's remarkable reflexes saved his hand from being smashed by the heavy crockery. Tas shoved his hands into the protective recesses of his pockets, looking profoundly hurt. "I only wanted to look at it."

"May I?" asked Tanis. Flint eyed him suspiciously for just a moment, then sheepishly handed over the piece. "Sorry, Tanis," he muttered, "I forgot myself for a second."

Tanis examined the bracelet minutely as the other two watched. When he spoke, he addressed Flint without taking his eyes from the jewelry.

"This is exquisite, Flint," he admitted. "But why do such gorgeous work in copper? These stones look valuable—why mount them in such a relatively inexpensive metal?"

Flint rocked back on the bench and said mysteriously, "That's the way *she* wanted it."

"Somebody commissioned it?" asked Tas.

Flint nodded, looking uncomfortable.

"You didn't tell me about any commissioned piece," said Tanis. "Was it somebody local?"

"I didn't tell you," confessed Flint, "because the whole thing happened so fast, and the woman was very strange and mysterious."

"A strange woman?" Tasslehoff looked intrigued.

Flint settled himself forward on the bench again and dropped his deep voice to a whisper. "One day last week this woman showed up and claimed she knew my work from the time Tanis and I spent in Qualinost.

"Now, I took it from that that she was an elf, but she didn't look like any elf I ever met, not a healthy one, anyway. She was close to being the palest creature I ever saw—almost translucent as death itself—and all wrapped up in silk cloaks."

"Maybe she was an undead creature, or a succubus, come to seduce you and drain your life away!" Tasslehoff suggested eagerly.

"She looked too nervous to be seducing anyone," Flint said.

"A succubus would be nervous," reasoned Tas.

"Tasslehoff, would you let him finish?" implored Tanis, silencing the kender's wild guessing.

"Anyway," Flint continued, "she said she needed this bracelet, only it had to be made according to very strict instructions. I told her I could make anything, any way she wanted it. So she handed me a sheaf of papers and said, 'Make it this way, exactly.'"

"Well I've made things for folks who were obsessed with details before, but this was incredible. Every bit of that bracelet was designed and sketched out on those papers. And as if all that weren't enough, she handed me a sack full of copper ingots, gems, powders, and little jars of liquid that had to be mixed into the metal just so. She said, 'You'll find everything you need in this sack.' She even expressly asked me not to put my usual trademark on it."

Flint leaned back. "Naturally, I was a bit put off by that. I thought to myself, 'Why does she want an original Flint Forge if she doesn't want the signature?'"

Tanis was taken aback. "That *is* strange. I hope she paid you well for it."

"That's just it," said Flint, a puzzled expression on his face. "The whole thing was so fishy that I quoted her what I thought was an outrageous fee. She paid it, plus half as much again, up front, without flinching! I couldn't turn it down!"

Flint looked at the dregs of his ale, then pushed it away. "I followed those instructions to the letter, right down to burning them when I was finished. I kept the bracelet at my booth because she said she would come back to pick it up during the Spring Festival. I expect she'll be by any day now." At last the dwarf sat back on the bench again, satisfied that his story was finished.

Tasslehoff stared intently at the bracelet, now lying on the table. "No wonder you were so touchy about it. Who do you suppose she is, and what's the bracelet for?"

"I'm no clairvoyant," said Flint. "There's certainly something unusual about the bracelet, though, I'll grant you that. I'll just be happy to have it off my hands."

Tanis nodded. "It's obviously very important to this woman, whoever she is." He stretched and

looked at the dying embers in the hearth. The inn's common room had nearly emptied. A sleepy-eyed Otik glared at them from behind the bar. "Anyone care for a last round?"

Following Tanis's example, Flint threw his arms back and stretched his face in a ferocious, jaw-breaking yawn. "No, I drank at least three too many already," he said, pushing himself away from the table. "Let's stagger home, Tanis, or I'll fall asleep here."

"What about my maps?" asked Tasslehoff. "You've hardly looked at them."

Tanis frowned, but his ale-fogged brain was unable to choose between going home and to bed, or staying to study the maps.

Fortunately, Tasslehoff provided a solution for him. "I'm staying at the inn tonight. How about if I stop by Hint's stall tomorrow and you can look at them there?"

Tanis was relieved to see that Flint had already shuffled toward the door and had not heard the suggestion. Tanis hastily accepted the idea, said his good-byes to the kender, and dashed after the drunken dwarf to keep him from falling off the bridgewalks.

Left alone in the stillness and smoke of the common room, Tas made his way up the narrow stairway to the sleeping floor in the inn. It had been a long, tiring day.

"I'll just rest a few minutes before I go to sleep," he mumbled to himself, collapsing onto the feather mattress in his small but tidy room. Though his eyes were closed, the bed spun dizzily. He was vaguely aware of something hard pressed against his breast in a most uncomfortable way. Propping himself up on his side, he fished his hand into his pocket and pulled out Flint's copper bracelet.

"How in the world did that get in my pocket?" he mused. Viewing it through half-closed eyes, he harrumphed in amazement. "I must remember to return it."

Unconsciously stuffing the bracelet back into his pocket, he rolled over and fell into the deep sleep of the innocent and inebriated.

Chapter 3

Inn and Out

A tooth-rattling snore popped Flint's bloodshot eyes open in bewilderment. He lay on his back in his bed, wearing a single heavy leather boot and just one leg of his muddy breeches. Craning his head around, he saw the familiar cupboards and chairs of his home in the hollowed-out trunk of a vallenwood. How did I get here? he wondered.

The last thing he remembered was sitting on one of Otik's comfortable benches at the Inn of the Last Home. It had been dark then. The muted light filtering through his parchment windows told him it was now daytime, and had been for some hours. Frowning, he sat up suddenly, then collapsed back onto the bed. His throbbing temples explained the lapse in his memory. He'd really tied one on last night.

Then he saw Tanis. Still fully clothed in breeches, boots, tunic, and wool vest, the half-elf lay face-down on the plank floor near the fireplace. A small puddle of drool spread from his splayed lips with each drawn and exhaled breath. The old dwarf chortled heartily, in spite of the pain it sent through his head.

Startled, the younger half-elf woke, wiping spittle from his lips with the back of his hand. The ever-present feathered headband that held back his unruly, long russet hair had slipped down over his eyes, and he pushed it back to his forehead in annoyance. Spotting the amused dwarf, Tanis scowled. He rolled over slowly and sat up, cradling his head in his hands.

"Otik's ale sure tasted smooth going down," he moaned.

Nodding his head, more slowly this time, Flint pulled on the one pant leg that he'd managed to pull off before collapsing the night before. "Kicks like a mule the next morning, though," he said, adding "especially when you drink twice your weight of it!" He located his other boot under the bed and stuffed his foot into it, then straightened his fur-lined vest and tucked his rough-spun tunic back into his pants. "At least I managed to crawl into bed and get *half* my clothes off."

Tanis jibed him right back. "That's because you're older and have more experience at this. Not to mention that your greater weight allows you to hold more ale . . ." he finished, eyeing Flint's round girth.

"Have some respect for your elders, pup!" Flint growled, cuffing Tanis's dark-haired head. He walked to the larder, across from the fireplace in the hollowed-out base of the giant vallenwood. "I've got two pickled eggs, three strips of jerky, and a slightly moldy sole of bread." He took a large carving knife and deftly trimmed the green fuzz from the bread. "There, that looks fine." He looked at Tanis. "What'll it be?"

Tanis's fine-boned elven nose wrinkled in distaste. "Some of Otik's spiced potatoes, if he's serving yet." He stood and pushed back one of the parchment windows flanking the heavy wooden front door. "What time do you suppose it is?"

Frowning, Flint peered out the open window. "Good gods, it's late, from the looks of the deserted streets. Everyone's working the festival already." He hastily scooped the eggs and jerky into a square cloth and tied up the corners. "My customer could be coming to the booth any time for her bracelet." With more than a little pride, he patted the pocket inside his vest. His face froze. He patted it again. This time his face contorted into a mixture of horror, disbelief, and fury. "It's gone!" he shrieked.

Still at the window, Tanis winced at the noise and looked over his shoulder at his friend. "What's gone?"

"The bracelet, of course!" he shouted. Panic clawed at his stomach. "I put it in the inside pocket of my vest and it's not there! I know I put it in my vest!"

Tanis strode over to the disheveled bed and began poking through the covers. "It probably fell out of your pocket while you slept."

Flint's face brightened with hope. "I bet you're right!" He helped Tanis strip the bed, but they found nothing. Flint flapped the sheets, then flapped them harder, and finally clawed his way through them like an animal. Then he turned back to the bed and poked his nose into every cranny of the mattress and the frame. Finally he dropped to his knees and glared under it, peering into every dust ball and pushing aside old shoes. But he came up empty-handed. Flint felt panic rising past his stomach, reaching up to his throat, threatening to strangle him unless he controlled it.

"When do you last remember seeing it?" Tanis asked calmly.

Flint exploded. "I don't know!" He flailed his arms uselessly and paced between the bed and the hearth. "I don't remember much at all from last night." He tugged at the corners of his mustache until Tanis thought he would pull it right off.

"That's it!" Tanis said, snapping his fingers. "Last night at the Inn—you showed it to us while you talked about it. You probably just forgot it on the table. I'll bet Otik found it and is wondering right this minute who it belongs to." Tanis looked pleased with himself. "Well, what are we waiting for? Let's go get your bracelet and a couple plates of potatoes for breakfast!"

Flint looked marginally calmer as he followed Tanis's slender form out the door. "I hope you're right. . . ." he said, his voice trailing off with doubt as he glanced back over his shoulder. "I've had a strange feeling about that bracelet from the moment I read those instructions." He shuddered, remembering. "There's something very odd about someone being willing to pay that much for a copper bracelet."

Knowing his friend's superstitious nature, Tanis felt compelled to ask, "Then why did you agree to make it?"

Flint's ample cheeks grew crimson under his salt-and-pepper beard. "I'll admit, at first I fell for her flattery. She said she'd heard I was the greatest metalsmith around." Suddenly, he frowned and scratched his graying head above the right ear. "Given her praise, I was surprised to see how simple it was in design—nowhere near as difficult as my usual work, and that's my professional opinion, not just ego." He shrugged. "Anyway, it was a long, cold winter, and I couldn't pass up the money."

Tanis stretched in the sunshine as Flint pulled shut the heavy, ornately carved door. He fished a heavy key from his pocket, jammed it in the brass lock, and gave it a twist. The bolt shot home with a satisfying thunk. Tanis looked back with raised eyebrows. "Why'd you do that? You never lock your house."

"I don't know, at the rate I've been losing things lately, I'd better start," mumbled Flint. He pocketed the key and patted it. "I thought you were hungry. What are you gawking at me for?" Tanis shrugged and smiled reassuringly, then the pair set off across Solace.

With the streets empty because of the festival, Tanis and Flint quickly covered the short distance to the inn. They fairly ran up the bridgeway circling the massive tree trunk that held the inn aloft. With the weather so unseasonably warm, the door to the eatery was propped open with a keg. Otik stood behind the bar, polishing stoneware mugs with a soiled rag. He looked up as Flint clomped in, noted the dwarf's agitated expression, and nodded as Tanis followed him in.

"Hullo! I didn't expect to see you two again until the festival closed down for the evening. Back so soon for more of the dog that bit you?" the hearty innkeeper asked, smirking. He held the mug he was wiping under the ale spigot until a thick finger of foam curled down the outside, then offered it

to Flint.

Flint scowled at the mug, but didn't reach for it. "Otik, tell me you've found a copper bracelet," he demanded without preamble.

Never one to hurry, Otik pursed his lips and absently gazed across the room thoughtfully. "A copper bracelet, you say? Hmm. . . . That's a hard one."

Flint's eyes blazed. "Look, either you have found one or you haven't!"

Otik was unperturbed. "I once found a ring . . ."

Flint rolled his eyes impatiently and blew out his mustache. "I meant last night. Did you find a bracelet here, last night, when you cleaned up?"

"Oh, that's different, let me think. . . . I didn't clean up last night—waited until this morning. That's right, I came downstairs early to ready the inn for breaking fast. Took a bowl of gruel from the porridge pot—not a good batch at all, though, all lumpy and gluey." Otik's eyes narrowed, and he scrubbed overzealously at a spot on the bar. "I'll be speaking to Amos Cartney. He can't go on selling grains that choke a man."

"Otik, the bracelet," Tanis reminded the innkeeper before Flint exploded.

"Oh, yes." Otik shook his head. "No, no bracelet. I'm sure I didn't find a bracelet. I could ask one of the serving girls, or you could check around your table yourself . . ."

Before the innkeeper could finish the sentence, Flint ran to the table and dropped to his knees, pushing chairs and benches out of his way. He gave up the search after only a few minutes, falling back on his haunches with a resigned, hopeless sigh, his arms folded across his knees.

"That doesn't look good," Otik muttered to Tanis. "What's so important about this bracelet?"

"It was commissioned by a lady from out of town, and she's coming to fetch it at the festival." Tanis remembered something and chuckled. "He lost it once already, yesterday, to a kender . . ." Tanis's voice trailed off as an awful idea took form in his head.

Tanis stepped away from the bar and approached his friend cautiously. The dwarf still sat on the floor, back against the wall, muttering incomprehensibly to himself. "Say, Flint, you don't suppose the bracelet could be with Tasslehoff—?"

"Burrfoot!" Flint spurted. His eyes shot open and his hands twisted into tight fists. "I should have thought of that. I knew he was just another thieving, scheming little—" The dwarf cut his verbal tirade short when he noticed a young serving girl, eyes wide and staring, as she lugged ashes from the fireplace.

"Well, that's simple, then," Tanis said. "The kender said he intended to stay here at the inn for a few days. Let's just find him and get it back," he finished reasonably.

"Yeah, I'll get it back." Flint rose to his feet, an evil glint in his eyes.

Otik leaned across the bar on his elbows. "You talking about that little kender fellow you two were drinking with last night?" Flint nodded. Otik shook his balding head. "You won't find him here. He bounced down the stairs early, ate breakfast—and a mighty big one, I'll add, for such a little fellow—then left, that little sling-stick over his shoulder."

Flint seized Otik's arm. "He was just going out for the day, right?"

Otik shook his head again. "I don't think so . . . He paid off his bill." Otik's expression turned to wonder. "Can you imagine, a kender actually paying his bill? Of course, I had to remind him several times—once he was all the way out the door—but he paid it, all right."

"Did he say where he was headed? The festival, perhaps?" Tanis asked.

Otik eased his bulk onto a stool and tapped his chin in thought. "Festival, hmm. I don't recollect . . ."

no, I'm sure not, come to think of it. Just making conversation, I asked him that very question myself. He said he'd had his fill the day before, said he was going to lick his finger, stick it in the air, and go wherever the wind was blowing."

Tanis shook his head sadly and clapped Flint's hunched shoulder sympathetically. "That about clinches it, Flint. You'll just have to tell this lady the truth and give her money back. She'll probably understand."

Flint had been staring silently at some distant point in space, absorbed in thoughts of revenge and kender hunting. Suddenly he spun, grabbed Tanis by the lapels, and shook him. "You don't understand! I don't have the money to give back to her! I spent it on supplies for our trading trip! I can't very well explain that, can I?"

Tanis struggled to pry Flint's hands from his clothing, but couldn't break the dwarf's grip. "So, offer to make her another one."

"Didn't you hear anything I said last night?" he bellowed. "She gave me special ingredients, and there was only enough for one bracelet! She told me specifically to make only one! She came to me because she trusted me—and me alone—to get it right the first time. What am I supposed to say?" he moaned, his face screwing up into a sarcastic grimace. "'Yes, ma'am, I made it, all right. It was beautiful. I'm sorry I let a fast-fingered kender walk off with it.' I'd be humiliated. Worse still, if word spreads, my reputation as a metalsmith will be ruined!"

Still grasping Tanis's lapels, Flint looked toward the door. "Otik, how long ago would you say the kender left?"

"Four hours, maybe."

"You're not thinking of trying to follow him, are you?" Tanis asked, incredulous. "You don't even know what direction he was headed."

"Sure I do. He's walking with the wind." Flint released Tanis only to shove his finger in his mouth, then stare at it as he held it in front of his face. "This will tell me where he went." Tanis's skeptical expression irritated the desperate dwarf. "What other choice do I have? He's only four hours ahead at most. The way kender travel, stopping to talk to bugs and clouds and Reorx knows what other foolish claptrap, I can probably catch up to him, throttle the bracelet out of him, and be back before dark, with average luck."

"What if this lady customer shows up at the booth looking for the bracelet while you're gone?"

Flint thought about that one for a long moment. "You know my wares well enough that you could stay behind and open the booth. Stall her if she shows up—tell her I'm still working on it or something."

Tanis held his hands up defensively and backed away. "Oh, no, you don't. I'm not staying behind to blow your smoke—besides, I'm a terrible liar—you know I am." Tanis shook his head emphatically. "No, if you're doing this, I'm coming with you. We can easily put a sign up at the booth that says 'Open Tomorrow,' or some such thing."

Flint dared an optimistic look. "That would work. Good, then. Let's be off, before that kender gets another mile ahead of us. And when we find him, I'm going to wrap my fingers around his scrawny little neck and squeeze until—"

"Until he gives back the bracelet, and then you're going to let him go," warned Tanis. "I'm coming along to prevent a murder as much as anything else."

"We'll see," murmured Flint.

Chapter 4

Darken Way

Tas's clear, lilting alto cut through the morning mist, heralding his passage down the Southway Road. Since leaving the Inn of the Last Home at daybreak, Tas was sure he had hiked four or five miles, singing the Kender Trailsong to pass the time.

*Your one true love's a sailing ship
That anchors at our pier.
We lift her sails, we man her decks,
We scrub the portholes clear.*

*And yes, our lighthouse shines for her,
And yes, our shores are warm.
We steer her into harbor—
Any port in a storm.*

*The sailors stand upon the docks,
The sailors stand in line,
As thirsty as a dwarf for gold
Or centaurs for cheap wine.*

*For all the sailors love her
And flock to where she's moored,
Each man hoping that he might
Go down, all hands on board.*

It was an uncommonly pleasant morning, one of the kender's favorite sort. He had awakened to the affable rays of the sun pouring through the colorful stained glass windows of his room. The gay sunshine had made it quite impossible for him to linger in bed. The best breakfast he'd had for months, consisting of spiced potatoes, poached duck eggs, and chokeberry muffins with freshly churned butter, was made even better by the amusing stories of the innkeeper, Otik.

Tas vowed that someday he'd be back through Solace; it was too fine a place not to visit at least twice. In the meantime—well, there was a reason why this phase of a kender's life was called "wanderlust."

No kender could bear the thought of an empty stomach, so before leaving town he had, of course, purchased lunch. Tucked under his arm like a ball was a long, pale loaf of crusty bread; in his pack

was a wheel of orange cheese and a flask of fresh milk. Yet he was puzzled by the appearance in his pack of three shiny red apples; he recalled admiring them while he was paying for his other purchases, but how did he inherit them?

The kender shrugged happily.

"Perhaps the merchant had a special—buy cheese, get free apples," he concluded aloud. "Or maybe they just rolled off the cart and fell into my pouch." It was all very curious, the sort of mystery and intrigue kender loved.

On the trail the sun was warm, though the breeze still had a nip to it. Verdant blades of new grass, wild purple crocuses, and hyacinths regularly poked through the few remaining clumps of dirty snow, suggesting that something other than mud existed beneath. The heavy, musty-fresh scent of thawed earth and worms and wet thatch tickled Tasslehoff's heart as much as good food and ale. The kender barely noticed the thick mud that sucked at his newly cleaned deerhide boots and splashed his bright blue leggings as he skipped, topknot dancing, down the road.

Cresting a small hill, Tasslehoff gazed in delight at the panorama stretching around him. Driving the point of his hoopak into the soft ground, Tasslehoff lowered himself onto a chilly but dry slab of exposed rock. He popped open the cylindrical leather case on his belt and pulled out a map of Abanasinia. Along with it came a bracelet, which clinked on the rock and rolled in ever-narrowing circles until it came to a stop next to Tas's feet.

"What's this?" he wondered, but the moment he picked it up he recognized it as Flint's special copper bracelet. "Goodness, that Flint Fireforge is careless with his things. Why would he put this in my map case?" After a moment's reflection, Tas slipped the bracelet onto his wrist. "I need to get this back to Solace as soon as possible, and there's no better way to remind myself than to keep it here on my wrist, where I'll see it. Flint must be terribly worried. Well, won't he be happy to see me again!"

But first, there were more immediate matters. The entire region of Abanasinia was laced with low, narrow mountain ranges and wooded valleys. Three peaks to the west dominated the landscape: the largest was just several miles from Tas, and a smaller pair lay some distance beyond it. He was curious to see whether they had names. The closest one was a magnificent sight, with green, jagged slopes rising up and gradually turning white near the peak. A few small clouds clung to the summit. If it had no name marked down, Tas thought he might be tempted to give it one of his own.

Unrolling the map and spreading it across his lap, Tas traced his progress from Solace with his finger. "Hmm, must be Prayer's Eye Peak," he muttered aloud. "What a strange name. I wonder what it means? I'd bet there's an interesting story behind it." Tas noted with disappointment that the crowns beyond Prayer's Eye bore the unimaginative name of Double Peaks.

Overall the map was rather sketchy, showing only the coastline, major roadways, and other significant features of interest to travelers. The new road to the south of Solace, on which Tasslehoff walked, was appropriately named Southway Road, a fact that was duly registered on Tas's map. It followed a stream that wound its way through the foothills defining Darken Wood's northeast border.

Darken Wood, southwest of Tas's position, earned its name from the haunted spirits residing there. The large, mountainous forest would have been foreboding even without its reputation, for Tas knew such forests were filled with twisting gullies, bramble thickets, bogs, and dark caves. He knew that Darken Wood probably was home to more benign forest creatures, too, such as dryads, centaurs, and pegasi, but that did not make its shadowy recesses any more inviting.

Haven, the capital city of the fanatical religious group known as Seekers, and Haven's Vale marked the western border of the forest. On the northwest were Double Peaks and Starlight Canyon, home of the pegasi. And twenty-five miles from Double Peaks, the White-rage River marked both the southern boundary of Darken Wood and the northern edge of the elven nation of Qualinesti.

For this map to be truly useful, Tas decided, it needed many more landmarks: small streams, valleys, farms, unusually shaped trees or rocks, and good camping spots. Drawing a quill, a vial of ink, and a small knife from his map case, Tas carefully carved a new, sharp tip on the quill. With his leather pouch under the map for support, he sketched a grove of dogwood trees; their distinctive white and pink blooms were too attractive to be overlooked.

After several minutes of this very precise work, Tasslehoff reached for the pack on his left side. Among other things, it held the flask of fresh water he had filled earlier that morning. Mapping always made him thirsty. But he was distracted by an unaccustomed sensation on his wrist; the ornate copper bracelet there felt uncomfortably warm. It must be from the sun shining on it, he decided. As he moved to pull off the jewelry, the world swam around him and Tas felt as if he was about to tumble straight into the sky. Spiced potatoes and duck eggs rose in his throat. He wanted to flatten himself against the rock, but was unsure in which direction it lay. In this state of complete disorientation, something flashed unbidden into his mind. For just a moment, he saw himself reaching into his pack, then, feeling a sharp sting, his hand jerked in pain and a red welt grew on the ink-stained tip of his middle finger.

As suddenly as it came, the vertigo and the vision were gone. Tasslehoff blinked and looked around. His pack was behind him, closed, and his finger was unharmed. He rubbed and flexed it a few times, just to be sure. This was a fine mystery. Almost beside himself with curiosity, the kender dumped the contents of his pack onto the cold stone at his feet. From under the flask, some string, and two pieces of dried meat, poked the hairy legs of a poisonous spider!

"Wow!" Tas exclaimed aloud. "If I had put my hand in there, I'd have been bitten.

"That was like a pre . . . permon ... I saw what was about to happen! I've heard of people who could do that, but I never thought I was one." He shrugged and tapped at his breastbone. "I wonder if it was those three helpings of spiced potatoes. I've never eaten that many at one sitting before." Using the frayed, feathery end of his quill, Tasslehoff flicked the spider from his pile of belongings and watched it scurry away to the safety of another rock. As he scooped his things back into his pack, he couldn't help but admire the bracelet on his wrist.

"I really must return this to that Flint fellow. It gets terribly hot in the sun, and the copper will probably turn my wrist green." With that, Tasslehoff completed his map notes (adding "Spider Rock" alongside the road), recapped his ink bottle, took a long swig from his water flask, repacked and slung his belongings, and set off south once again, trudging merrily away from Solace and Flint Fireforge.

As Tas marched, he noticed that the road was turning in toward the shadowy wood to avoid a range of rugged hills ahead. This did not alarm him—kender in general were remarkable for their complete lack of fear—but it did occur to him that, if any evil was afoot on the road, here was where it would strike. Just in case, he tightened his belt and pack straps and selected a smooth, palm-sized stone from the road. He was quite a good shot with his hoopak sling. Such a stone could shatter a larger rock, or break an arm or leg. Hefting the impromptu missile, for just a moment he felt genuinely sorry for anything that might try molesting him.

That thought quickly faded from his mind as Tas noticed that, once again, Flint's copper bracelet was uncomfortably warm on his wrist. "If you keep annoying me, I'm going to put you back in my pouch, where I will surely forget about you," he scolded, as if to threaten the item. "Then see if you ever get back to your owner!"

Before he could slip the bothersome ornament from his wrist, Tas took two stumbling steps to the right before recovering his balance by leaning on his staff. The world spun past him again as his stomach seemed to turn upside down. Then he heard the jingling of bells and, forcing himself to look up, he saw a wagon rounding a bend in the road ahead. It was the sort of two-wheeled wagon commonly used by tinkers and peddlers, fully enclosed with brightly painted wooden sides and a canvas top. Tas blinked and rubbed his swirling eyes. When he opened them again, he saw the

wagon tipped on its side, one wheel spinning crazily, the horse and driver cruelly slain. The startled kender closed his eyes and shook his head to clear his vision. When he again looked down the road, it was empty.

Then his heart thumped as the wind carried the sound of bells to his ears. He watched in amazement as a wagon, very similar to the one he had just foreseen, rounded the bend. It lurched and rocked along the soft road, pulled by a whiskery gray nag. A human, slightly built, sat on the driver's bench, humming absentmindedly to himself.

Tasslehoff was certain something awful was about to happen.

Waving his hoopak above his head, he hollered, "Watch out! There's danger!" Even as he spoke, several things happened. The horse, startled by the shouting and commotion, backed up in its harness and pushed the wagon off the soft edge of the road into a broad, water-filled rut. The wagon tipped dangerously, then settled in the mud and stuck. Tasslehoff heard a loud "thunk" and a rustling noise. Looking up, he saw a massive log at least the size of a man swinging down through the branches on the end of a rope. It swept across the road, precisely where the wagon would have been if the horse had not panicked.

Guttural whoops and croaks rang through the crisp air as several large, ugly creatures broke from cover in the woods and charged toward the wagon. Hobgoblins! Tas had tangled with these savage brutes often enough in his travels to recognize them instantly. Smelly, dirty, sadistic, dressed in uncured hides and brandishing clubs or captured axes, they specialized in ambushing travelers and raiding isolated farms.

Flailing their long, hairy arms and splashing through the muck, they closed rapidly on the wagon, now hopelessly mired. The horse screamed and kicked and somehow managed to connect with the lead hobgoblin. The beast collapsed face-down in the muck, hiding its shattered ribs.

Quickly Tas fitted his stone into the sling of his hoopak. Taking only a moment to aim, he let fly at the closest creature. The stone thudded solidly into its back, drawing a tremendous yelp of pain. The furious hobgoblin turned and its red eyes locked on Tasslehoff. Flashing a greasy yellow-toothed grin, it squealed something unintelligible at another hobgoblin. Thinking they had found easy prey, both rushed toward the kender.

Tas calmly scooped up another stone from the road. This one was small and jagged, just what he wanted. Loading it, he took his time and aimed carefully. As the hoopak snapped forward, the second hobgoblin's head snapped backward. The beast spun partway around, then crashed to the road, dead. Tas resisted the urge to whoop, knowing there was still plenty of danger ahead.

Unaware of its partner's fate, the first hobgoblin ran headlong toward the unarmed kender. Tas planted his feet wide apart and held the sling in front of him like a quarterstaff. The hobgoblin roared brutally, raised its club with both of its gnarled hands, and lunged.

In the last possible moment, so quickly the movement could hardly be seen, Tas whipped the hoopak staff sideways so its metal-shod point faced the onrushing monster and then he drove it forward with all his might. He felt the wood shiver and groan as his weapon punched through the hobgoblin's thick hide and tore a grisly path through its vitals. Hot, rancid breath, stinking like rotted meat, swept over Tas as the hobgoblin rattled out its dying gasp. Tasslehoff leaped aside as the lumbering body plunged past him and crashed to the ground. The kender chuckled loudly, remembering the final look of disbelief in the creature's jaundiced eyes.

The mingled screams of a horse and a man quickly brought Tas back to his senses. One remaining hobgoblin struggled to grab the horse's bridle while another fought, almost playfully, with the human, who was defending himself rather badly with a large mallet.

Tas crouched and snatched a thin, straight dagger from his legging, then sprinted toward the fight. Without slowing, he ran straight by the first hobgoblin. As he passed, the dagger flicked out and sliced through the knotted flesh inches below the creature's buttock. The monster howled in pain

and shock, then stumbled as the now useless muscles of its hamstrung leg gave out. Dragging its leg and yelping horribly, it staggered into the forest and disappeared.

The last of the creatures, toying with the human, was distracted by the sound. What it saw made its jaw drop. Three of its companions lay dead in the mud, a fourth was critically wounded and fleeing, and a kender with a bloody dagger was smirking at it.

The kender winced as the human's mallet crashed into the back of the hobgoblin's skull. Its eyes rolled back and the body flopped to the soft ground. The human, foaming and hysterical, hammered on the limp form until its head disappeared in a churning froth of blood, mud, and bone.

"I think it's pretty well dead," Tas concluded.

Looking in horror at what he'd done, the man dropped the mallet and leaned against the tree behind him, panting and shaking for several minutes. "Thanks for your help, stranger," he managed at last. "I knew it was too early in the season to hit the roads, I knew it was. Did I listen to myself? No, I gave in to Hepsiba. 'We need money. It's springtime! Get out on the road, you lazy fool.' That's what she said. So I left, mostly to get away from her nagging, I'll admit. And now here I am, in the middle of nowhere, fighting for my life, my wagon up to its axle in mud. This trip is surely cursed by the gods!" He gave a vague snarl skyward.

"What are you complaining about?" Tas wondered. "You're alive and they're not." He nodded toward the carnage behind him. "I would say you've had a spectacular day, aside from what's happened to your wagon." Tas skipped across the muddy potholes to the side of the wagon. Tugging up his leggings, he hunkered over and peered under the vehicle.

"She looks stuck, all right. But I once saw Beetleater Thugwart—he was a half-ogre who lived in Kendermore—heft a wagon out of mud like this all by himself. It was too bad he broke the axle doing it, but his heart was in the right place. Anyway, he just turned it over and Willie Wontori—he was the wainwright in Kendermore—fixed it right up, good as new."

"Who in blazes are you, anyway?" the man finally managed to squeeze in.

The kender pulled himself up proudly to his full four feet and extended his fine-boned hand. "Tasslehoff Burr-foot, at your service. And who might you be?"

"I might be the Speaker of the Sun," the man sighed, still leaning against the tree, "but don't count on it."

"Oh, I wouldn't," Tasslehoff said, casually slipping his unshaken hand into the pocket of his leggings. "He's an elf, and you're a human. Besides, why would someone as important as the leader of the Qualinesti elves drive a broken-down old trader's wagon himself? Surely he'd have servants for that."

The man's parchment-colored face wrinkled up in a frown. "Did my wife send you after me, or is it your own idea to make me feel worse?" he asked rhetorically.

Tasslehoff shook his head. "I'm sure I don't know your wife, unless she was at the inn in Solace last night. I'm not from around here."

"My wife at an inn? No, that would cost money and be too much fun. Lord, even when I'm on the road, I am hounded," muttered the human.

Tas crossed from the wagon back to where the dead hobgoblin lay, impaled on the kender's hoopak. "Yuck," he pronounced, his lips drawing up in disgust. Propping the body on its side, he placed one foot against its ribs and pulled the weapon out. He held it by his fingertips at arm's length, then carried it to the side of the road and proceeded to scrape it clean in a small patch of snow.

The man snorted at the sight and turned his attention to his wagon. Carefully he picked his way past the body at his feet. "What are these things, anyway?" he asked, frowning at the grisly sight.

"Hobgoblins. Don't feel bad about killing one. They're evil from ears to brisket. They rarely listen to reason. I avoid them when I can, because otherwise you pretty much have to kill them. And once they get their smell on something, it never comes off. I can see I'm going to have to spend this evening making a new hoopak—this one will never be the same again."

Tasslehoff returned to the wagon and climbed onto the driver's seat. "What's so bad about your wife?" he asked.

"These creatures remind me of her: evil, scheming, unreasonable. She's going to make my life a living hell when she finds out about this costly fiasco, too."

"Why tell her about it?" Tasslehoff asked.

"Because she'll know by how much money I didn't make on this trip that something went wrong. And then in that nagging way of hers she'll wheedle the truth out of me, like a butcher tugging the gizzard from a chicken!" The man closed his eyes and gave a long shudder.

"She doesn't sound very nice," Tas said, bouncing on the seat. "Surely she can't blame you for the nasty things hobgoblins do, or for the roads being mired in mud."

The man sighed and ran a hand through his thinning hair. "You don't know my wife. She'll say I drove into that ambush on purpose, just to spite her, or some such nonsense."

"We'll just have to get you out of the mud and on your way, then. What is it that you do, anyway?"

"I'm a tinker," he replied. "I fix pots and pans, sharpen knives, clean lamps. I do just about everything."

Tasslehoff jumped down and stepped back from the wagon, then leaned against his hoopak to study the situation. He watched the old nag chew brown grass. "Why don't you just use your horse to pull the wagon out?"

The tinker chuckled. "That old thing? Bella hardly has the strength to pull her own weight on a straightaway anymore, let alone get this wagon out of a rut. And she hates mud, always has. Soon as she feels it on her hooves, she stops cold."

"Why don't you replace her?"

"Hepsiba says she's good enough. Besides, I'm kinda fond of the old girl. The horse, that is."

Tasslehoff jumped off the wagon and drove the end of his hoopak down through the muck in the rut until he found solid ground. "Hmm, about the length of my forearm. That's not too deep. I'll bet if you push the wagon from behind, I can coax Bella into taking a couple of steps."

The man leaned against the side of the wagon. "I can't see why anyone should spend so much effort fighting fate. If this is where providence wants me, this is where I'll stay, in spite of your efforts or mine."

Tas looked at him for a moment before speaking. "That's nonsense. Why would fate want your wagon stuck in a muddy ditch?"

"I don't know, but here I am! I don't make a practice of trying to change my destiny." As if the matter was settled, the tinker pulled a small knife from his pocket and began cleaning his fingernails.

The kender considered that for a moment but then shook his head as if to clear the thoughts away. He decided to try a fresh approach. "Look, let's say it is your destiny to get stuck in this ditch. But it is also your destiny to have me come by and get you out, because I refuse to walk away and leave you here. What do you say to that?"

The tinker scratched his chin. "I suppose if you can get her to move, that would be a pretty convincing argument for your view."

"Of course it would!" Tas exclaimed. "Now, you get behind the wagon and push," he instructed, demonstrating the technique. "Hunker down and put your shoulder into it, uh—I still don't know your name," the kender suddenly realized.

"Gaesil Bishop."

Tas extended his hand again, and this time the tinker shook it heartily. "Pleased to meet you." Gaesil took his position behind the wagon.

Dipping his hand into the largest of the packs on his belt, Tasslehoff poked around, searching for the remainder of a lump of beet sugar. "This ought to get Bella moving," he said, holding the lump up for inspection.

Tas moved to stand at the old nag's head. The diminutive kender stretched up to grasp her bridle in one hand, his other holding the lump of sugar under her hairy nostrils, from which wisps of white breath escaped. Still edgy from the fight, her eyes were wide and bloodshot. But her furry lips ruffled happily as she tried to take the cube, revealing only two yellowed front teeth.

"Come on, old girl," Tas said softly, pulling his hand back before she could get the sugar. "You've a job to do, and then this nice treat will be yours."

"You'll have to shout—she's pretty near deaf," Gaesil yelled from his position behind the wagon.

"When I say 'Now,' push!" Tas screamed to Gaesil.

"Bella's deaf, not me," Gaesil reminded the kender.

Holding the bridle firmly, Tas kept the cube in his open palm about four inches from Bella's nose, out of range of her greedy lips. He counted to three. "Now!" he cried, giving the bridle a tug. Blinking her milky eyes in surprise, Bella stumbled forward slightly, mud sucking at her hooves. Behind her, the wagon gave a jolt, rocked up to the edge of the rut, then rolled and settled back stubbornly into the muck.

"We almost had it!" Tas cried excitedly. "Push harder next time, and longer."

Gaesil looked morosely at his mud-spattered tunic. Dirty, wet specks were hardening on his face. Cold mud oozed over the tops of his boots. He'd be lucky if he didn't slide under the wheels of the wagon the next time. "OK," he responded.

They repeated the process, Tas tugging harder, Gaesil pushing longer. Creaking and groaning, the wagon rolled up and out of the rut with a violent lurch, sending Tasslehoff flying, right after Bella managed to wrap her lips around the proffered piece of sugar.

Tasslehoff found Gaesil on his chest in the mud where the wagon had been. "Oh, dear, how did that happen?" Tasslehoff asked, helping Gaesil to his feet. "You should be more careful. You're quite a mess."

In response, Gaesil opened the back door of his wagon and extracted a clean tunic and breeches. Setting them on the back step, he shrugged off the frigid, muddy ones, shivering. Transferring valuables between pockets, he quickly slipped on the freshly laundered clothing. "That's better, but I'm going to need a bath before anyone will hire me in Solace."

"Solace?" Tasslehoff exclaimed. "Why, I left there just this morning! You really must go to the Spring Festival—I'm sure you'd make a lot of money there."

"That's where I was headed," Gaesil said. "I was hoping to draw a lot of business, but I'm afraid I've missed most of the festival. It's undoubtedly too late for me to find a booth."

"Say, one of my best friends has a booth there!" Tas boasted. "Well, perhaps he's not my best friend, but I don't think he hates me anymore. We met when I was safeguarding some merchandise for him, but there was a little misunderstanding about that. He might share some of his space with you, for a small fee."

Tasslehoff pulled off the bracelet and bounced it in his palm. "Actually, this bracelet is his, and he needs it back rather badly. Darned if I know how it got into my pouch again this morning, but here it is. Since you're going that way, you could take it back for me. My friend seemed awfully distraught when he lost it the last time. He made it for a customer who's coming to pick it up real soon, so I'm sure he'd be very grateful to you for bringing it back. He might even share his booth with you for nothing!"

Though grateful for the kender's help, Gaesil listened to Tas's tale with suspicion. "I don't know . . ." he hedged. He was not keen on protecting or transporting someone else's valuables, especially after they'd passed through a kender's hands. As Tas himself had pointed out, people tend to misunderstand the intentions of kender. Besides, Gaesil made it his policy not to get involved with anything that did not concern him.

"But why not?" Tasslehoff asked. "You need booth space. My friend needs his bracelet back. And I need to go that way, away from Solace. This solution couldn't be better." Tasslehoff was puzzled by the tinker's hesitation, but then added, "Your wife would never need to know about any of this if it didn't cost any money, would she?"

He had unwittingly stumbled on the one thing that could persuade Gaesil. Just to be sure, he drew from the pocket of his pants one small, four-sided die and tossed it on the back step of the wagon. Obviously satisfied with the answer, he replaced the die, looked up, and said, "I'll do it!"

"Great! His name is Flint Fireforge," Tas said, pulling his writing equipment and a scrap of parchment from his scroll case. He sketched a map of the festival grounds, marking Flint's booth with an "X." "You should have no trouble finding him, but if you do, try the Inn of the Last Home. He seems to be a regular customer there, and I'm sure you could get a bath as well."

Tas took one last look at the bracelet. He would miss its alluring beauty and unusual features. But with no regrets, he extended it to the tinker. Gaesil slipped it into the pocket of his breeches and without further ado, hopped onto the driver's seat of his wagon.

"Farewell," the tinker called. "You saved my life. I guess I never thanked you for that."

Tas waved and replied, "It was my pleasure. Good luck. Say hello to Flint for me."

The tinker gave the reins a snap, and Bella lumbered forward. The wagon lurched northward toward Solace, detouring around the corpses lying in the road and leaving Tas to continue his travels.

Chapter 5

Something Borrowed

Gaesil Bishop was a man with little zest for life.

He had long ago surrendered his life to fate. Gaesil's fatalism could be traced to his upbringing in the province of Throt, on the eastern border of Solamnia in the north. Throtians as a whole were a superstitious, vagabond lot, their culture ripe with wives-tales and sayings. As a result, there wasn't an incident in his past that he could not, upon reflection and review, attribute to some outside force. Everything that came in life was the result of luck. For example, people who had money were lucky. Gaesil, who had none, was unlucky. Worst of all, luck—whether good, bad, or indifferent—was nothing more than supernatural whim, as far as he was concerned.

When a man does not believe that hard work is rewarded with prosperity and sloth is punished with poverty, he usually is not a hard worker. But however indifferent life might be, Gaesil knew that reward and retribution (especially retribution) did flow freely from his wife.

He had met her some years before while traveling and working in the town of Dern, where Hepsiba now lived in the ample cottage where she had been reared. She was an only child, and her father was a successful merchant by Dern's standards. Hepsiba had been spoiled beyond redemption, and her husband was now paying the price.

Gaesil had been conducting business with her father in his grocery when Hepsiba stepped in. At that moment, thunder rolled out of a clear sky and a bolt of lightning struck the village bell. Clearly this was a sign of some sort, and Gaesil was moved. Still, he never made a decision, at least not an important one, without throwing the Eye.

Some people carried rabbit's feet. Throtians rolled an unusual, four-sided die called the Eye, which served basically the same function as reading one's fortune in cards, only it was quicker. Each side of the Eye represented a facet of fate. Good luck was symbolized by the element of Earth, steady and fertile; bad luck, by Water, heavy and restrictive; and chance, by Air, meaning ever-changing. Fire represented death. Gaesil had never rolled Fire, though he once knew a man who did. The poor fellow panicked and threw himself off a cliff, making the prophecy come true.

On the day he asked for Hepsiba's hand in marriage, Gaesil had rolled the symbol for Earth—good luck. With no other suitors of any kind and growing older, she accepted at once. They were married that afternoon.

Within hours of the marriage, Gaesil began to wonder if perhaps he had not somehow misread the Eye, for Hepsiba revealed herself to be homely in both body and spirit: suspicious, selfish, and conceited. But much worse than these, as far as Gaesil was concerned, was her ability to sour any mood, to make any splendid thing seem ugly. He had no illusions about his looks, with his dishwater hair, knobby bones, and big feet, but he had a good heart and a ready smile. She would have seen his virtues, he was certain, if she was capable of appreciating anything besides money.

Despite his unhappiness, Gaesil felt certain there was some reason fate had thrown him together with Hepsiba. He hoped only that she would let him live long enough to discover what it was.

And so he spent a lot of time on the road, fixing what needed fixing wherever it needed to be fixed. He traveled along the festival route, and Solace held the first, and possibly the best, festival of the year. He would stay in each town along the way up to a week if business warranted it. Sometimes he was gone for as long as six months at a stretch, especially if the weather was good and the people were friendly, like the chatty little kender who had saved him from the hobgoblins and helped him

free his wagon from the ditch. That fellow was the least annoying kender Gaesil had ever met.

Just after midday, Gaesil reached the turn to Solace at the south end of Crystalmir Lake. A snap of the reins guided Bella to the right and the wagon rolled on toward the ancient stone bridge that crossed Solace Stream. Here traffic picked up. Gaesil nodded his head in greeting at the driver of a wagon passing from the other direction.

Ahead, just stepping onto the bridge, were two travelers on foot. They appeared to be in quite a hurry. Their agitated pace was being set by the shorter of the two, a dwarf with a goodly amount of gray in his hair and a large scowl on his face. The other, with the soft good looks of a young elf, moved more calmly, his longer strides seeming slower and more deliberate. He walked with his face turned toward the dwarf and sounded as if he were trying in vain to calm down his companion. The dwarf's expression remained stony, his gaze locked straight ahead.

"Here's someone coming from the road through Darken Wood. Perhaps this fellow's seen him and can tell us if we're even headed in the right direction," Gaesil heard the dwarf say before running up to the tinker's wagon. Gaesil tugged on Bella's reins until she stopped.

"Excuse me," the dwarf called up, "but have you seen a kender on the road this morning?"

Gaesil looked surprised. "Why, yes, I have. A helpful little fellow—"

"Ah, ha!" the dwarf interrupted, slamming a fist into his hand in smug satisfaction. His eyes narrowed to slits. "Where did you spot the little gadfly?"

The young elf stepped before the dwarf. "What my friend means is, were you traveling from the south on the new road or north on Haven Road?"

Gaesil was a bit flustered by the dwarf's animosity. "Why, I left him about two hours ago on Southway Road, but I doubt it's the same kender you're looking for. The one I met was a cheerful little fellow in blue leggings. His name was Tasslehouse, or Tusslehauf, or some such thing."

"That's him!" the dwarf shouted, grabbing the elf by the arm and breaking into a run. "Come on, Tanis, time's a-wasting!"

"Thanks for your help, sir," the elf managed to call back as he was pulled away behind the dwarf.

"Certainly," Gaesil said from habit, though the two were out of earshot. He shook his shaggy head. What could such a nice kender have done to inspire such anger? Giving Bella's reins another sharp tug, he set off again across the bridge and toward Solace. He dared waste no more time. As it was, he was in a hurry to track down that kender's friend, Flint Fireforge, to return the bracelet and, he hoped, beg or buy some festival booth space from him.

* * * * *

"Yeah, I know Flint Fireforge, but you just missed him," the jowly barkeep at the Inn of the Last Home told Gaesil a half-hour later. "He and Tanis tore out of here more than an hour ago." The innkeeper, whose name was Otik, balanced two plates of fried potatoes and sausage on his forearm, having just come through the swinging kitchen door. "Do you mind?" he asked, nodding his head from the plates to the patrons who awaited them.

"Oh, not at all," Gaesil said. He sat down absently on a stool to wait for the innkeeper's return, while he pondered Otik's comment. Tanis . . . where had he heard that name before?

"Now, you were asking?" Otik said, returning, his arms free. He wiped his hands on his dingy white apron and moved behind the bar.

"Flint Fireforge. You said he'd left. Will I find him at the festival?"

Otik chuckled. "You might, but I doubt it. He and Tanis were hot on the trail of a kender. He'd stolen a very important bracelet from Flint."

Gaesil's eyes went as wide and round as two steel pieces and his mouth fell open. He remembered the dwarf and the elf on the bridge! That's where he'd heard of Tanis. But the dwarf had never been called by name. How could he have known? The kender hadn't mentioned that the dwarf would have a friend with him, an elf at that.

"Something wrong?" the barkeep asked him, noting the tinker's startled expression.

Gaesil put his knobby hand into the pocket of his breeches and his fingers closed around the bracelet. "I have—" But the tinker stopped short. He was about to give the bracelet to the innkeeper to return to Flint the next time the dwarf visited the inn, but he was having second thoughts. "You say Flint left town and won't be running his booth at the festival?"

"Not until he finds that kender. And the festival will only last another couple of days."

"I see." Gaesil was already mulling the situation. With the dwarf out of town and unable to sell his wares anyway, his booth would be vacant. Gaesil could borrow it and no one would be put out, though there might be trouble if the dwarf caught up to the kender, returned before the festival ended, and found a stranger using his business space. Judging from what Gaesil had seen, Flint Fireforge didn't seem the affable kind.

On the other hand, Gaesil could claim he was waiting at the booth to return the bracelet to its rightful owner, the dwarf. If he conducted a little business to pay his expenses while waiting, no one could hold that against him. If the festival closed up before the dwarf returned, why, then, Gaesil could hand the bracelet over to the innkeeper and skedaddle. It wasn't dishonest, he reasoned, just good business.

"I'm a little busy, friend. Is there anything else I can do for you?" Otik's mild voice interrupted Gaesil's thoughts.

"I'm sorry," the tinker said, bouncing back to the present. He scratched ruefully at his mud-caked skin. "Actually, I could use a bath before I head over to the festival grounds. Do you have a bathtub on the premises?"

* * * * *

A pink and scrubbed Gaesil emerged from the inn an hour later and wound his way down the bridgewalk to the ground, his hair freshly washed, his road clothing in his hand newly clean and ready to hang to dry. He had put on his best tunic and trousers—not too plain, so as to make customers think him a novice at his trade, and not too fancy, so as to make them think him too high-priced. He had removed the dwarf's bracelet from his breeches before washing them and placed it in the pocket of his clean trousers for safekeeping.

The tinker hiked the short distance to the stables, where he had left Bella and his wagon in the care of a young hand, a well-fed, red-haired boy of thirteen. Paying one steel piece for Bella's food and grooming, he clambered onto the seat of his wagon and leaned back through the small front opening to hang his clothing inside. A quick glance told him nothing was missing—the lad had done a good job.

Turning back, he pulled the kender's map of the festival grounds from a box under the seat. He knew from previous years that the fair was held on the west edge of town, within sight of Crystalmir Lake. He was currently on the northeast side of Solace. There was no direct route to the festival, so he set Bella's head back down the road to the south, turning right to pass the town square's north side. The road narrowed and turned into a quagmire.

He heard the festival before he saw it, sprawled across the land to the west dipping down behind the cover of the vallenwoods. Fairs, no matter the season, were always noisy, bawdy events, mucky swamps in spring and fall, choking clouds of dust in summer. And of course, in snowy regions like Abanasinia, they were seldom held during winter.

Gaesil consulted the kender's map, locating the "X" that marked the dwarf's stall. Instead of taking the direct route, down the main, mired thoroughfare on which the fairgoers walked, he traced a path to the back of the stalls with his index finger, calloused from years of sharpening dull knives to razor points and other exciting tinker tasks. The wagons and carts of countless merchants had dug trenches in the newly thawed thatch, but the going was still easier.

The tinker located the dwarf's booth without trouble and reined in his wagon as close as possible. A simple, drab curtain hung at the back and sides of the stall, beyond which was a small, grass-covered square with three crude chairs, a clean pile of hay covered by a coarse blanket, an empty ale flask, and a short series of empty shelves. The dwarf probably used them to store additional merchandise, but had taken his wares home for safekeeping at night, Gaesil decided. Beyond another curtain was the actual front of the booth, three simple planks on sawhorses, open to the skies. They were set lower than Gaesil would have liked, but he certainly wouldn't feel comfortable rearranging the booth without permission. A narrow entrance at the front allowed customers to walk inside among the wares. Hay was sprinkled on the ground to allay the mud.

Crude but usable, the tinker concluded. Unhitching Bella from her harness, he gathered up his tools and carted them into the stall in three or four trips. On his last he fetched his sign, "Honing, Soldering, Repairs on Anything," then stood on a chair to hang the sign from the front curtain.

He was bending over to move the chair when he felt something drop from his pocket. In the hay at his feet was the copper bracelet. Gaesil stooped to retrieve it, thinking to place it in the box under the seat of his wagon, but the wagon was unguarded behind the stall. A safer place still, he reasoned, was his own wrist. He slid the cool piece of orange metal over his hand and settled it on his bony joint.

Before long, fairgoers were aware of his presence. A number bemoaned that they were without their broken and mendable items, but many promised to return with their dull knives, leaking pots, and a host of other minor travesties, locals fetching from their homes and other merchants from their wagons. Soon, Gaesil had as much work as he could manage. The thick needle and coarse thread fairly flew in his hands as he cobbled old, worn leather to new. Blades big and small gleamed in the sunlight after quick, expert passes over Gaesil's whetstone. He mended three leaking wooden buckets, added straw to one spartan broom, and sold out of nearly half of his forty-bottle supply of pine oil soap in just three hours.

He was oiling his whetstone for the next wave of knife sharpenings when the greasy jar slipped from his hands, splashing globules of smelly, dark tallow up into his face and over his hands. Snatching up a clean rag, he mopped up the mess as best he could without water and soap. Seeing several drops on the bracelet, he wiped them off on his trousers and pushed the bracelet up under the gathered cuff of his tunic.

It was late afternoon, several hours before the festival would shut down for the night. Gaesil sat on a chair and propped his chin up on his palm, watching the crowds drift by the stall. Out of the corner of his eye he became aware of the hooded figure of a young woman standing across the main thoroughfare to the right, watching him. Realizing she'd been spotted, the woman cut through the flow of traffic and approached the stall.

Large eyes the color of the sea regarded Gaesil from beneath a generous silk scarf, wrapped so intricately about her head that only her pale, almost milk-colored, unlined face was exposed. The merest wisp of silver-white hair escaped at her right temple. Drawn with a string at the neck, her finely woven cloak flowed from shoulders to ankles in a soft indigo cloud.

"Excuse me for staring," she began, her low voice as soothing as waves lapping at the shore, "but isn't this Flint Fireforge's stall?"

Gaesil stopped his own scrutiny. "Yes, it was—I mean, is, but Flint was, um, called out of town unexpectedly."

The woman looked very concerned. "Out of town? For how long?"

Gaesil looked embarrassed. "Well, I don't know. He could be back today, or perhaps not for some time . . ." In truth, the tinker had no idea how soon, if ever, the dwarf would catch up to the kender.

"Not for some time?" The woman's eyes darkened angrily. "But he was supposed to meet me here." She looked near to panicking.

"Are you a friend of his? Maybe I can help you," Gaesil offered kindly, feeling pity for her obvious distress.

The unusual-looking woman turned aside and brushed dust from her pale face with a gloved hand. "No, I'm not. And I don't think you can help . . . No one can, except Master Fireforge. I'll come back later." Before Gaesil could respond, the woman turned and disappeared into the throng of people before the stall.

Gaesil stood, shaking his head sadly. Something about the exotic-looking woman touched his heart.

Something also touched his wrist. For no apparent reason, Gaesil felt the bracelet growing warm on his wrist. He also felt dizzy, for no apparent reason. Then his stomach felt upset, and then he felt positively ill. But the feeling passed within moments.

Much to his astonishment, Gaesil realized that he was looking at his wagon, even though it was behind him, on the far side of a curtain, and his eyes were closed! He had no idea what was happening, but he noticed that a piece of merchandise was missing from his wagon—an oxen yoke that he kept lashed beneath the box was gone.

When Gaesil opened his eyes, the wagon had vanished. Once again he was seated in a borrowed booth at Solace's festival.

Of course, Gaesil immediately began wondering what had caused his strange manifestation. He was just curious enough to thrust his head through the curtain and check the wagon. Sure enough, there was the yoke, right where it was kept. So what had the vision meant? Was someone going to steal it from the wagon?

This oxen yoke was a particular sore spot to Gaesil. Hepsiba had bought it from a neighbor who was critically short on cash during hard times a year ago last fall. She'd paid almost nothing for it, telling Gaesil that he could resell it for much more. But resale was not Gaesil's business and he resented both the meddling in his work and the way she had taken advantage of a neighbor. Still, the yoke was dutifully hauled from show to show and put on display, only to be lashed beneath the wagon again when the show ended.

Now he had clearly seen the wagon with no oxen yoke, and that was the only thing outstanding about it. He decided that this had to mean one of two things: either he would sell it here—which he doubted—or someone intended to steal it here—which he doubted even more. In either case, he decided he should bring the yoke into the booth, both for display and protection.

It took him only a few moments to move the ugly thing into the booth. Just as he propped it against the corner barrel, a customer approached. The man was obviously a farmer, judging from his calloused hands and rough clothing. He eyed the yoke carefully and expertly, then spat and asked, "How much?"

The question caught Gaesil badly off guard. Since he never really expected anyone to buy the yoke, he had never considered how much it might be worth. He decided to try the age-old dodge: "Make me an offer."

The farmer examined the yoke again, handled it, turned it over, then spat again. "I'll give you one steel and three copper."

The tinker had sworn long ago to take the first offer he received on the yoke, just to be rid of it. He was about to say, "Sold!" when a different thought struck him. He noticed how warm the bracelet had grown on his wrist.

He pulled the Eye from his pocket and tossed it onto the sawhorse table: Earth. Good luck!

Feeling cocky, Gaesil decided to haggle. "Two steel, one copper," he countered. The farmer considered that, weighed the coin pouch in his hand thoughtfully, then said, "Got to get at the planting. I'll go as high as one steel, eight copper."

"Sold!" Gaesil announced. Grinning like he hadn't in years, he cheerfully passed the yoke over the counter and accepted the man's money. No sooner was the farmer gone than Gaesil disappeared behind the curtain to examine the bracelet more carefully.

Was it lucky, he wondered? That could have been a coincidence, or just normal luck. Nothing could prove the unlikely transaction had been influenced by the bracelet. As these thoughts raced through Gaesil's mind, they were suddenly pushed aside by a keen awareness of customers turning away from his booth.

He pushed the curtain aside and stepped out front. Three ladies, each carrying a basket full of knives, broken needles, and cracked hinges, and wearing three sad faces, were about to leave the front counter. On spotting Gaesil, their faces brightened. In minutes, Gaesil had enough work from those three to fill his afternoon.

Two more times that day, the tinker picked up business by acting on hunches. Watching the last of the crowd leaving the festival at day's end, Gaesil marveled at the weight of the coins in the pouch at his waist. He had never had such a good business day, ever. And though he could not explain it, he was certain he owed it all to the dwarf's lucky bracelet. What a powerful talisman it must be; it could make any man rich! It would be a shame to return it to the dwarf, but Gaesil was an honest man, and give it back he would. He only hoped the dwarf did not return until after the fair ended.

Quickly the tinker collected his tools and paraphernalia and returned them to their proper places in his neatly organized wagon. His growling stomach reminded him he had eaten nothing since dawn. He contemplated a supper of dried meat and stale crackers in the wagon, prepared by Hepsiba in Dern the day before. But after such a day as this, he wanted laughter and good food. He knew from customers that there was an ale tent that stayed open long after the other merchants had closed down for the night. Locking the door of his wagon behind him, he set off to follow the sounds of merriment.

The tent was run by the owner of the Trough, a disreputable drinking house Gaesil remembered passing on the southern road into Solace, and the only competition for the Inn of the Last Home. If the main pub was anything like the tent, it wasn't much competition, after all.

Two dingy, flickering oil lanterns hung on poles before the opening to a sand-colored, square canvas tent with an angled roof, peaked in the center with a pole. One corner had collapsed and not been repaired. Thin, knotty planks were placed over the muddy walkways between the tables and makeshift bar, but they had long since sunk into the mud. Cold, dirty water lapped at the patrons' boots, to a depth that even straw or sawdust would not have helped.

The patrons themselves reminded Gaesil of the sewer rats who frequented the dingy, low-ceilinged ale dens so common along the waterfronts in port cities. Although he doubted he would find either good food or laughter here, he was too tired even to contemplate the long walk across town to the Inn of the Last Home. Dinner was here or in his wagon. Here, at least, he wouldn't be bored. He wanted to celebrate his new good fortune, so he decided to stay for a few mugs.

He made his way over the planks to an open table at the back of the tent, near the sagging corner.

Waving his arm, he eventually caught the attention of someone behind the bar. A short, dumpy young man in an overly tight, mud-spattered tunic waded at a leisurely pace through the tables to Gaesil's.

He scowled down with piggish eyes. "Yeah?"

"I would like a mug of your best ale," Gaesil said pleasantly.

"That it? We only got one kind, and you coulda ordered it at the bar. I only come around for food orders. You gotta order food if you're staying for the entertainment."

Gaesil's eyebrows arched in surprise. He vaguely remembered seeing a sign attached to the outside of the tent that read "Amateur Night at the Trough. First prize, free dinner. Come one, come all." Gaesil decided the evening might prove diverting, after all. "All right, what are you serving?"

Not meeting Gaesil's eyes, the unpleasant young man jerked his head impatiently toward the door of the tent. "Menu's up there."

Squinting across the considerable distance in the dim light, Gaesil saw a small, ill-lettered sign propped on the bar that read, "Two eggs—one copper; Bread—one copper; Ale—three copper. Tonight's special: eggs, bread, and ale—five copper."

"Uh, I'll have the special," Gaesil said with a gulp.

The young man left, yanked a filled mug from the bar, and waddled back to slap it down on Gaesil's table, splashing out a foamy shower. "Food'll be up eventually," he said, slogging off to wait on another patron.

Even the rude waiter could not spoil Gaesil's good humor. Taking a pull on his ale, he winced; it was, without a doubt, the worst ale he had ever had, tasting more like ditch water mixed with vinegar. Still, it made his head buzz after just a few sips, which was something to recommend it. In fact, the more the ale tugged at his senses, the better it tasted. Even the tent began to look, if not cheerful, at least less swamplike.

By the time the surly young waiter brought Gaesil's eggs, their broken yolks swimming in watery, uncooked whites, the tinker was ready for another mug. He ordered two at once, to minimize his interaction with the waiter.

"When does the entertainment start?" Gaesil asked.

"I don't care." The youth marched back to the bar.

Gaesil looked at his plate. A crust of moldy brown bread floated in the eggs. He snapped off the fuzzy part and used the good portions to mop up the egg whites. Popping a bite into his mouth, he swallowed after minimal chewing so as not to taste it for too long. Fortunately, he had an iron constitution and was accustomed to lousy cooking. The culinary arts were not Hepsiba's strong suit, as if she had one. Gaesil snorted, and ale foam stung his nostrils. He hadn't imbibed at any sort of drinking establishment since shortly after his marriage. Hepsiba definitely would not approve, if she could see him now. That thought, and the ale, made him feel very good.

While he was reflecting on his situation, a short, obese man wearing a fancy green velvet coat with gold piping and buttons stretched to bursting climbed up on several bales of hay near the bar. His pug nose looked right in place on his jowly face and reflected as much light as his hairless scalp. He tugged constantly on the facing edges of his coat, belying an otherwise haughty pose.

With no introduction, the man launched into a story. He got very little attention from the crowd—not because it was difficult to hear in the noisy tent, though it was, but because the story seemed to make no sense.

"I was *talking* with the *pig*," he concluded with an expectant look, botching the punch line of the centuries-old joke. The noise level rose to a crescendo as boos, whistles, and hoots chased the

fellow from his makeshift stage.

The unfortunate bard held his head high as he walked back to his table, just one over from Gaesil's, his thinning pate ducking the chunks of moldy bread that whistled past him. "A bunch of ruffians and malcontents," Sir Delbridge muttered, rings flashing on nearly all of his pudgy fingers as he scraped his belongings from the table and into his pack. The jeers turned to whistles as a comely young woman in a tight gingham dress took her turn and began singing an off-key and off-color tune.

"Buy you a drink, sir?" Gaesil called to him over the noise. "You look like you could use one."

Delbridge Fidington made it a policy never to turn away anything free. "Thank you, good sir," he said with a nod. He eased his sizable form into the chair nearest the tinker. "I am feeling a bit parched. Performing drains one so."

"Was this your first time on stage?" Gaesil asked, struggling to chew a bit of the stale, moldy bread. He hadn't thought the bard's act as bad as the rest of the crowd, but then bards weren't his area of expertise.

Delbridge looked insulted. "Good heavens, no. Surely you've heard of Sir Delbridge Fidington? I received my title from Queen Wilhelmina of Tarryn herself, for service faithfully rendered as court bard."

"Uh," Gaesil gulped, "I don't leave Abanasinia much, and seldom hear bards. I don't believe I've ever heard of Tarryn, let alone Queen Wilhelmina."

"It's a small but vital kingdom in, uh, the eastern Plains of Dust." Delbridge dismissed the point with a wave of his hand, which also brought the waiter over.

"My new friend here has insisted upon buying me refreshment," Delbridge said happily to the same fleshy youth who had waited on Gaesil. "A cup of your best mulled wine, my good man." To save himself work, the waiter had taken to carrying filled mugs; he dropped one before the bard.

Delbridge peered with disdain over the rim of the mug. "But this looks like—"

"—ale. It is." With that, the youth left.

Gaesil smirked ruefully. "I'm afraid it's all they have. It's not so bad after the first couple of sips."

Delbridge looked skeptical, took a sip, and nearly choked. "Say, you're right," he said after a moment, downing another gulp. They sat in companionable silence for a few moments, nursing their drinks.

"So why aren't you still court bard for Wilhelmina?"

"Who?" Delbridge was beginning to feel the effects of the alcohol. "Oh, her. I grew weary of telling the same old tales. Bards need to hit the road, I mean, experience the common life every so often to refresh their repertoire." He glanced around with disdain at the muddy tent and its coarse patrons.

"This, however, is a little more common than I had anticipated."

Delbridge brushed a piece of lint from his velvet lapel, then straightened all of his many finger rings. "I'll be heading someplace where you won't find such riffraff, I'll wager." He blew his pug nose with a great honking sound into a large, threadbare silk scarf. "I won't be sorry to see the last of this town, I can tell you."

"Gee, I've had great luck here," Gaesil said, taking a swig of his ale. "Did more work today at the festival than any five last year." The tinker was having a difficult time staying on his chair. Or maybe the table was shifting; he wasn't sure.

"Swell," Delbridge muttered, forgetting himself.

"It's because of the dwarf's lucky bracelet, you know." He looked down at the legs of his chair,

clutching the edge of the table to keep from falling. "Have you noticed the furniture moving in here?"

"Lucky bracelet?"

"What? Oh, the bracelet." He wagged his finger at the bard almost accusingly. "I saw it happen!" He drew back his cuff and held the bracelet up for inspection. "Four times today this very item got hot just before I had these strange notions, visions almost, and then customers showed up!"

Delbridge peered closely at the piece of jewelry. "You mean you predicted the future?" he asked skeptically.

"I guess you could say that." Gaesil peered at him through bleary eyes. "That would make a good story, wouldn't it? Do you suppose it's an omen?" Quickly he tossed the Eye behind his hand. He thought he saw Water, the sign of ill luck; he blinked to clear his vision, but he could barely make out the symbol in the dimly lit tent.

Watching him, Delbridge laughed and rose to his stubby feet. "I think it's a sign that you've had too much to drink and your mind is playing tricks. Perhaps I should help you home."

The tinker shook his head until it lolled, and waved off the offer. "No need. I'm staying in my wagon on the grounds here and can do jus' fine."

"Then I'll say good night." The bard patted his round stomach and clapped Gaesil on the back good-naturedly. "My thanks for the drink and the talk. I hope your luck continues and mine improves." With that, he turned up his lapels in anticipation of a brisk spring breeze and left the noisy tent.

Gaesil downed the last of his ale and decided to head home as well. He fumbled through his coin purse and paid his bill, leaving a copper for the rude waiter out of habit. Stepping from the tent, he was confused about the direction to his wagon. Spotting a familiar sign above a booth near his, he hunched his shoulders against the wind and staggered toward home.

He was pulling his boots off inside his wagon when he felt a now-familiar warming sensation in the skin under the bracelet. Too tipsy to focus and too tired to care, he squeezed his eyes tightly shut. But they flew open as he felt the copper bracelet being wrenched from his limp and bloody wrist. Shocked upright, he felt something hard crash upon his skull, and he wasn't sure if it was vision or reality. And then he saw nothing at all.

"Funny thing," said Sir Delbridge Fidington over Gaesil's collapsed body. "I may not be a good storyteller, but I do seem to excel at thievery."

Chapter 6

Lady in Waiting

"Honestly, Flint, it's not my fault," said Tasslehoff, skipping along to keep up with the pounding pace set by the angry hill dwarf. Even Tanis had to take long strides to stay next to Flint as they hurried along in the darkness of very early morning.

"*All* of this is your fault, kender!" the dwarf growled. "If you hadn't lifted the bracelet to begin with, I wouldn't be on this wild-goose chase in the dregs of the night!"

"But I've told you, I don't know how the bracelet got into my pocket the second time. And I was trying to return it. . . . Why else would I give it to the tinker? You've got to believe me, Flint."

"I don't have to do anything but get my bracelet back," the dwarf said, turning his bulbous nose on the kender. "And stop calling me Flint. It makes us sound like friends."

"What should I call you, then?" asked the kender innocently.

"I'd rather you didn't call me anything at all! I'd rather you didn't speak to me!"

"You're awfully testy. You're probably just tired from all this walking, what with those stubby legs of yours," Tasslehoff said. "Speaking of wild geese, my Uncle Trapspringer used to chase them—for the feathers, that is. Oh yes, it's true. Goose feathers were all the rage among the rich in Kendermore. Males and females alike would wear them in their hair, put them in their pillows. Uncle Trapspringer made quite a tidy sum, he did. Spent it all on a trip to the moon.

"I almost went to the moon once myself, with a magic teleporting ring—"

"Stop that infernal chattering!" Flint screamed, clapping his thick hands to his ears.

Tanis struggled to keep a solemn face. "You were the one who insisted he come back with us when we found him in Windy Vale."

"As a hostage, not as a torturer! I wanted him with us in case he was lying about giving that infernal bracelet to the tinker." Flint's eyes narrowed maliciously. "Say, aren't hostages usually bound and gagged?"

"Yeah, but then you'd have to carry him." Tanis laughed, then pointed ahead. "Besides, that's the bridge over Solace Stream. We'll be in town shortly, and soon after we'll find that tinker and you'll have your bracelet back."

"I only hope Selana hasn't come looking for it yet," Flint muttered.

"If she has, I'll tell her it wasn't really anyone's fault, but that somehow—"

Flint whirled on the kender and hoisted him up by the collar of his furry vest. "You say one word to her about this," he threatened, "and I'll cut out your tongue, fry it, and make you eat it!" He released Tasslehoff's vest and continued his march.

"Well," Tasslehoff huffed, giving Flint a haughty glance. He brushed his clothing back into place as he trotted after the dwarf. "That certainly isn't friendly of you. I was just offering to help."

Tanis patted the kender on the shoulder. "I believe Flint feels you've helped enough for one lifetime, Tasslehoff."

Flint just snorted.

They reached the south edge of Solace just as the thin edge of daybreak showed in the east. Tanis

was all for going home first to wash away the grime from a day on the trail. A faint stubble of beard that no elf could grow covered his cheeks, an inheritance from his human father. Flint would have none of it.

"You can wash and change all day long *after* I get my bracelet back." If the tinker was using Hint's stall, as the kender had predicted, then he probably had spent the night there in his wagon like most out-of-town merchants, the dwarf reasoned. He marched the kender and half-elf to the festival grounds on the west edge of town. A few of the fair workers were up and moving about, collecting water and starting breakfast fires. Flint ignored their friendly calls and marched the bedraggled party straightaway to his booth.

"He was here, all right," the dwarf said, noting the sign above the planks, as well as some tools inside the curtained area. Flint pushed his way through the curtains and emerged out back to find the tinker's wagon.

"That's it! That's Bella!" Tasslehoff crowed as he pushed his way through the curtains and around Flint. The horse was tethered to one of the stall's supports.

Shoulders set, Flint stomped toward the door at the back of the wagon. Tanis grabbed at his belt and yanked him to a stop.

"You can't just barge in on a sleeping man at the crack of dawn and demand your bracelet like a lout," the half-elf cautioned.

"Whyever not?" Flint demanded, eyes narrowed. "It's my bracelet and I want it back, and he's sleeping in my stall and I want *it* back as well."

"OK," Tanis said, conceding his points, "but at least try to be civil with him. It's not his fault he has the bracelet." Two sets of eyes, one furious, the other mildly amused, turned toward the kender.

Seeing the conversation taking an ugly spin, Tasslehoff danced to the wagon's door. "He knows me. I'll go first. It's probably locked, so I'll just—" Most people would have said "knock," but Tasslehoff was about to say "pick the lock" when he noticed that the door was already ajar.

"That's strange," Tas said softly. "You'd think he'd be more careful. I don't mean to sound unkind, but people who work fairs are not considered to be the most trustworthy types."

"Something they have in common with kender," Flint muttered. Tas's little face glared down at him. "But you're right, something seems amiss here." Frowning, Flint climbed the two crates used as steps, elbowed his way past the kender, and pushed the door open gingerly. Peeking under Flint's arm, Tas gasped.

The lanky tinker lay on the floor amid his tools, his head, and the floor around it, caked in thick blood. The dwarf scrambled through the door and dropped to one knee to check the human for a pulse.

"Is he dead?" both Tas and Tanis asked.

A fairly strong throbbing met the two fingers Flint pressed to the man's wrist. "No, luckily. It must look worse than it is. Kender, go find some water," he instructed without looking up. Tasslehoff grabbed a copper pan from a hook on the wall and dashed out the door, for once without a question.

Tanis located a passably clean cloth and ripped it into strips, while Flint raised the tinker's head onto his lap and cautiously examined the wound. "He has a lump the size of a harpy egg." The man groaned and stirred when Flint gently probed the tender spot.

The man's bloodshot eyes fluttered open, and he looked up at Flint's ruddy cheeks in confusion.

"Don't I know you? . . . yes . . . What are you doing in my wagon?" He winced, raising a hand to the lump on his head; he shivered when he saw the blood. "Good heavens, I feel like a sausage. What happened?"

"We're hoping you can tell us that," Tanis said at his side. He handed Flint one strip of cloth and mopped at the blood on the floor with another.

"I'm not sure . . . wait. . . The last thing I remember was the ale tent. I was celebrating something . . . drank too much of that rot-gut. . . ." He rubbed his temples. "That's it! I'd had a good sales day, because of . . . the bracelet."

"The bracelet is why we're here," cut in Flint. "Where is it?"

"Oh, yes, the kender . . ." Still a bit groggy, Gaesil shook his head to clear it, then groaned from the throbbing pain. "I would have given it to you on the bridge if I'd known who you were. . . It's right here on my wrist, for safekeeping." Gaesil groped around on his right arm, his eyes growing wide in confusion, then concern. "Why, it was right here!"

Flint's own eyes narrowed with displeasure. "Where is it?" He ran his hands up both of Gaesil's arms. "You're lying to me!"

"Wait, Flint," Tanis said softly. "He seems genuinely bewildered."

"I am! I swear to you!" Gaesil's expression changed suddenly. "I remember now! The bard! He was the one! He came in here last night. He must have hit me on the head and taken the bracelet."

"Now why would someone take a little copper bracelet like that? Surely there are more valuable things in here," Flint said, not convinced.

Gaesil looked scornful. "You think I own something more valuable than a bracelet with magical power? Look around. Everything you see is exactly what it looks like."

"What power?" Flint demanded. "That bracelet has no magical power. What are you talking about? Speak up, man!"

Gaesil struggled out of Flint's lap and sat up. "I don't know how to explain it, really. Suddenly and without warning it gets warm—almost hot—and then, instantly, you know something, like you had just remembered it. Only you never knew it before because it hasn't happened yet! It's very strange."

"You mean you hallucinate?" Tanis asked, confused.

Gaesil shook his head. "No, . . . well, sort of. What I mean is, it's like a memory, only you know that it's completely new. Sometimes it's like a vision, something you see in your mind. Sometimes it's long, other times it's just a single picture or thought. But whatever it is, it actually comes true shortly after you see it."

"The bracelet I made foresees the future? Bah!" Flint snorted. He rolled his eyes at such a silly notion.

"I bet it does," Tasslehoff called from the door. He had returned with the water and stopped at the entrance, listening. "Hi, Gaesil. Sorry about your head. But the same thing happened to me—seeing the future, I mean. Once I saw a spider in my pack before I even opened it. Good thing, too. And then there was that nasty little encounter with the hobgoblins. . . ." Tas quickly went on to explain to Tanis and Flint what had happened when he wore the bracelet before meeting the tinker.

Flint still looked skeptical. "You're the last one I'd believe about such nonsense, kender."

"Wait a minute, Flint," Tanis said again, scratching his chin. "Didn't you say this woman—Selana—gave you special elements and ingredients to blend into the metal? Components you had never seen before? You said yourself she was very mysterious about the request and secretive about herself. It would explain why she paid you so handsomely."

Flint could no longer dismiss the evidence. He sat and held his head in his hands. "Now what do I do? It was bad enough when I thought I had lost an ordinary bracelet. But if this thing can do what you say it can, Selana is going to be even more upset about its loss."

"A woman, you say?" Gaesil asked. "An odd-looking woman with pale skin and incredible blue-green eyes stopped by the booth yesterday looking for you. She seemed perturbed when I told her you were gone."

"Oh, gods, that's her!" Flint moaned, tearing at the wisps of his graying hair. "I've just got to get that bracelet back before she finds me!" He whirled on Gaesil. "Did she say where she was staying? If she'd come back? Did she seem angry?"

"Never mind her," Tanis said. "How do you propose to find the bracelet when it was stolen by someone we can't begin to trace, or even identify?"

"I'm sure it was the bard," Gaesil said firmly. "And I'm afraid I brought it upon myself." Face glowing in embarrassment, the tinker recounted what he could of his conversation with the storyteller, including a description.

"How hard can it be to find someone named Delbridge Fidington?" wondered Tasslehoff.

"Near to impossible," moaned Flint, "if we don't know which direction he went. Besides, a weird name like that

must be an alias." The dwarf paced to and fro in the cramped interior, his heavy footfalls shaking the wagon and rattling the pans and tools hanging on the walls.

"I might have a vague idea what direction he went," said Gaesil. All eyes turned toward him, and he continued. "Before I mentioned the bracelet to him, he spoke to me about how hard it was finding steady work as a bard. Then he said he was headed north, looking for someplace where he didn't have to perform for low-paying 'riffraff'."

"That settles that," announced Flint. "We're heading north. And when I catch that thieving rascal, I'll rattle his head right off his shoulders."

Tanis grabbed the dwarf by the arm before he could bound through the door. "We can't just charge off like this. Do you even know where you're going or how to get there?"

"I'm going north," the dwarf blustered, "and I'll get there by putting one boot in front of the other, not by sitting here."

Tanis tried to reason with his friend. "This trip will take several days, Flint, maybe longer. We can't just charge off like this. We've been walking all night, we haven't eaten, and we have no supplies of any kind."

Flint slammed his fist into the doorjamb of the wagon. "I can't just sit idle, Tanis. This was important before, and it's doubly so now that we know there's sorcery involved." He closed his eyes and shuddered at the thought—dwarves had an innate distrust of all things magical. "Mind you," he said, looking out of the corner of his eyes, "I have a few choice words for any customer who just happens to forget to mention such things."

He set his jaw firmly, his expression resigned. "Still, I'm a man of my word. If this mysterious woman comes back and I haven't got the bracelet, her components, or even the money she advanced me, even a kender," he said with a glance toward a glowering Tasslehoff, "could see there'll be dishonor to my name. Now what do you propose I do?"

Tanis stood up, twisting his body forward slightly in the low-ceilinged wagon. "We'll go home, get a few hours' sleep, pick up food and clothing, and then start."

"No, we can't delay," the gruff dwarf said with a shake of his shaggy gray head. "I'll grant you we need supplies, but then we'll set out again immediately."

Now Tanis objected. "Flint, I'm exhausted! It's been a long night."

Flint pinched the tender flesh on Tanis's upper arm. "You've grown soft over winter," he chided his young friend. "Stay home and get your beauty sleep if you must," he said. "I'll be gone, however,

before the morning sun crests the trees, with or without you."

Sighing, the half-elf adjusted his feathered headband, retying the leather thongs behind his head. "All right," he sighed, knowing full well he would never change the stubborn old adventurer's mind. "We'll do it your way."

"Fine." Flint's head bobbed once in satisfaction. "Get what you need and be at my house in twenty minutes."

With that, the short and tall figures scrambled out of the wagon and set off down the muddy lane at a trot.

Tasslehoff, still busy applying layer after layer of bandages to Gaesil's sore head, glanced impatiently around the wagon, looking for something with which to secure the cloth. Seeing nothing within reach, he finally snatched Gaesil's hand and slapped it onto the carefully folded wad of cloth covering his laceration. "Hold that here," Tas instructed briskly, then he leaped to his feet and sprang out the door after the rapidly disappearing companions.

"But wait!" cried Gaesil, reaching lamely after the kender. "What about me?" His voice trailed off, and then he was alone, except for Bella, who was mewling for her breakfast.

Tasslehoff caught up with Flint and Tanis about fifty yards down the road. "Boy, this is exciting," he chirped. "A chase! What fun!"

Flint stopped dead in the road. "What makes you think you're coming? I didn't invite you, and I don't want you tagging along, so get lost."

But the tenacious kender had no intention of staying behind. "You need me. I have the maps of the north—I think."

Flint looked to Tanis for support, but found none. "If he's got maps, he could be a big help, Flint," said the half-elf.

"It was looking at his maps that got us into this trouble in the first place." The exasperated dwarf flung his arms in the air. "But fine, let him come. Let's invite everyone we meet. By the time we get to wherever we're going, we'll have a whole army. We can lay siege to the town. But let's do it now!" he shouted as he resumed his charge down the road.

Two steps later, Flint stopped again. "Wait a minute! What are we doing? I can't go home." A look of panic crossed his face. "If Selana's in town somewhere, she'll undoubtedly come by my house looking for me. I know it might sound cowardly, but I can't face her without the bracelet!" He looked sheepish. "I just want a chance to set things right first. You'll have to fetch my things, Tanis."

"But what if she sees me?" he objected.

"Back up that tinker's tale—tell her I was unexpectedly called out of town for a few days. Or tell her I was kidnapped. I don't care, tell her anything, just stall her off!"

Tanis rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I'm not going to lie to her, Flint. You know I'm no good at it anyway. We need a better story than this."

"Look, it's not a lie," pleaded Flint. "I am leaving town unexpectedly for a few days. I'll go right now and wait for you along the road, if that would make you feel better."

With a shrug, Tanis gave in. "With luck, I won't run into her and it'll never come up. I'll go, but you'll have to stop at my place and put together what I need," he said. "I'll meet you there when I'm finished." The lanky half-elf turned to leave, then added, "You'll find plenty of foodstuffs in the pantry—just don't pack any of those awful beans you like," he warned, shaking his finger at the rotund dwarf.

"I've never seen a dwarf's house," the kender, nearly forgotten, piped up. "I'll go with Tanis," he announced happily.

Flint turned on the scrappy little fellow and poked him in the chest. "Oh, no you don't," he said emphatically. "The last thing I need is a big-mouthed, sticky-fingered kender poking around in my house when I'm not there. That's how this whole mess started." He took the kender firmly by the elbow. "You'll come with me so I can keep an eye on you."

"Goodness, Flint," Tasslehoff huffed, his feelings obviously bruised, his wrinkled little face puckered into a large frown. "I'd think you, of all people, would understand that my smaller-than-average size doesn't make me a child."

Flint flushed bright red, and his head bobbed around as he tried to force some unaccustomed words from his lips. "Oh, all right, I'm sorry," he grumbled.

"That's OK," the kender said, with a kender's uncanny ability to shed sadness in the space of an eye blink. He brightened as a new thought struck him. "Say, do you dwarves have special little furniture for your homes, or do you hop up into human-sized chairs there, too?"

Flint nearly roared some favorite profanity at the kender but settled for a blistering glance and a shove toward the nearest staircase up into the vallenwood trees.

"Move!" he snapped. Flint glanced over his shoulder nervously. If Selana *was* still in town (and the way his luck was going, he had every reason to expect so), Flint hoped she would stay to the ground, as most visitors did not climb up to the bridgewalks. Even though the walks functioned as roadways and were considered public property in Solace, strangers tended to feel like they were intruding if they ascended, since the majority led to private homes.

"These swaying bridges are wonderful!" Tas exclaimed. "How do you build them up in the air like this?" He darted from one side of the bridgewalk to the other, throwing twigs over the edge and watching them pirouette to the ground.

"Stop that!" Flint said, barely resisting the temptation to slap the kender's hands like he would a child's. "You're going to hit someone with those sticks. That's why there's quite a large fine for littering on the walks."

Tas pulled his hands back and looked momentarily subdued. "So how do they build them?" he pressed again. "Stilts? In Kendermore, where I'm from, they stand in pyramids to change signs and that sort of thing, but this—" he swept his hand at the bridgewalk below his booted feet—"this would be far more difficult to build while standing on someone's shoulders."

The dwarf closed his eyes and set his teeth against the kender's incessant chatter. "They build them on the ground and then hang them afterward," he responded at last with forced patience. Within minutes, dwarf and kender were at the door to Tanis's house, where above them stretched the budding branches of the middle-aged vallenwood tree that supported the structure.

Tanis's home looked like most of the other tree-houses in Solace, except perhaps it was a bit smaller and more modestly appointed. With a grunt, Flint bent over and flipped up the seagrass mat beneath the door. "Damnation! What's that half-elf gone and done with his key now?"

"Are you looking for this?" Tasslehoff asked. Flint looked behind him and saw the kender with a notched key held aloft by his thumb and forefinger.

Flint scowled. "Give me that!" he said, snatching the key from the kender's hand. "Where did you get it?"

"Under the mat." Tasslehoff shook his head in disbelief. "Tanis really shouldn't keep his key where just anyone can find it. You never know who might help himself to his home." He wagged his finger at Flint. "It's a good thing I came along, you know."

Harrumphing, Flint slipped the key into the lock and gave the door a shove and the kender a yank. They stood in Tanis's cozy entryway, its outside wall cleverly carved into the vallenwood itself. Shafts of yellow sunlight puddled around their feet from small windows in the ceiling, which Tanis

called skyloops, an elvish invention he brought with him from his childhood in Qualinesti.

Much of Tanis's home reflected his upbringing. There was a soothing, sylvan quality to its design, even apart from its placement in a vallenwood. Potted plants abounded. Like most houses in Solace, it had a common room, bed chamber, and kitchen. The hearth was the focal point in the common room, and around it were piled immense, fluffy feather pillows for sitting. In deference to his old dwarven friend, Flint, Tanis also had one sturdy chair. The only other furniture were floor-to-ceiling bookshelves carved into the nooks provided by the vallenwood that ran through the house. Tanis was an inveterate reader of anything and everything. He also collected rare, finely crafted bows, which he displayed on the wall opposite the hearth.

Flint saw the kender's eyes light up when they came upon the elven weapons. "Keep your hands to yourself," the dwarf cautioned. "If I see just one bowstring out of place, I'll—"

"You don't have to constantly threaten me," Tas interrupted wearily. "I won't touch anything."

Flint looked dubious. "It's taking, not touching, that I'm worried about."

"Why, I never—"

Flint held up a hand to silence the indignant kender. "I know, you've never stolen anything, and it's not your fault that the bracelet is missing," he said, his voice laced with sarcasm. "Now, may we get on with collecting Tanis's things, so we can go find the bracelet that just *mysteriously* ended up in your possession not once but twice?"

"Be my guest." Tasslehoff waved Flint forward. "I must say, I'm glad to see that you're beginning to see my side in this thing."

Shaking his head incredulously, Flint stomped into Tanis's bedchamber and headed straight for the heavy wooden clothes chest at the bottom of the foot-high feather-stuffed ticking the half-elf used as a bed. He took out an undershirt, several pairs of hose, a tunic, two blankets, a woolen shirt, and heavy woolen socks. He quickly rolled the clothing inside the blankets, tied the two ends of the roll together with a leather thong, and slipped it over his shoulder.

Digging to the bottom of the chest, Flint found a large canvas sack and headed for the kitchen. As he passed the common room, Flint saw Tasslehoff quickly withdraw his hand from the bows.

"I was just looking!" He followed Flint to the kitchen.

The room was very small, really just a storeroom, or pantry, since the cooking was done in the hearth in the common room. The ceiling stretched up higher than in the other rooms, and vallenwood branches grew freely through holes poked and caulked in the side wall. Tanis utilized every available space with shelves. Smoked hams, bunches of dried herbs, bags of potatoes, squash, dried fruit, and garlic cloves hung from thick cords on dark beams. A small drop-leaf table folded down from a cupboard in the wall across from the archway, with two cane-backed chairs tucked beneath it.

Working quickly, Flint grabbed a haunch of ham, an acorn squash, and two handfuls of dried apples and stuffed them into the sack. As he turned to leave, he spotted Tasslehoff inspecting several raisin buns from the local bakery, which Flint knew to be among Tanis's favorite foods. Though usually generous to a fault, Tanis could be downright possessive about his buns.

"Get away from those. We have what we need," growled the dwarf.

"I was just thinking," Tas mused. "We could be gone for several days. These buns are already a day or two old." He poked one to demonstrate, licking his finger afterward. "By the time we get back, they'll be too stale to eat. It just seems like a shame, that's all."

Flint glanced at the buns, then scowled at the kender, then looked back to the buns again. They were thick and shiny with glaze, and each had a star-shaped pattern laid out on top with raisins. Now Flint was staring at them, his empty stomach growling and churning after their all-night march.

They *did* look quite tasty.

"Just one," mumbled Flint, grabbing a bun for himself. Half of it disappeared in the first enormous bite. With his cheeks puffed out like a squirrel's and crumbs tumbling into his beard, he led the way back into Tanis's common room. Tasslehoff followed, popping raisins into his mouth.

Just as Flint raised the bun for a second bite, the door flew open and in strode Tanis. He carried a red-and-gray blanket, rolled lengthwise and slung over his shoulder. Bulges in the roll showed where other items were packed inside. Tanis lifted it over his head and dropped it onto the floor, saying, "You'll have to re-roll this, Flint. If I'd made it your size, I never could have slung it over my shoulder. Did you find everything we need?"

Flint tried to speak, but his voice was muffled by a mouthful of raisin bun. He nodded, crumbs tumbling from his beard.

"What's that?" Tanis peered closely at Flint. "That's not a raisin bun, is it?"

"Want one?" answered Tas. He reached into his pouch and produced another of the sticky buns and handed it to Tanis. "Don't wolf it like Flint," he cautioned. "They're a little dry."

Tanis looked from Flint's sheepish face to Tas's satisfied one, then snatched the sweet from the kender's hand. "Let's go, before you two eat me out of house and home."

"I found enough to keep us going for at least a couple of days," Flint told him. "But what about my things? Did you remember my warm hat? How about those woolen socks that fit so nicely inside my leather hiking boots? And what about my axe?"

Tanis clapped his friend on the shoulder. "Don't worry, I got everything." He held out a pack containing the items Flint had asked for, including the dwarf's beloved old axe. Over the years, its smooth wooden haft had developed two grooves in the shape of Hint's meaty hands; it was as comfortable in his grip as a pair of old shoes on his feet.

Anxious to be on the road, Flint took up the pack and the axe and marched toward the door, then suddenly looked apprehensive as he remembered something. "What about Selana? Did you see a tightly hooded woman with unusually pale skin anywhere?"

Tanis shook his auburn head. "I saw no one."

Flint looked measurably relieved, and the tension seemed to slip from his thickset shoulders.

"Wonderful. Now maybe we'll see some good luck for once." Settling the blanket pack into a more comfortable position, Flint opened the half-elf's front door and called to his companions over his shoulder as he stepped over the threshold. "The sooner we leave, the sooner we'll be coming home," he said, popping the last bite of raisin bun past his lips. Flint turned back around to watch his step. Suddenly, bits of dry, sticky bun flew out of his mouth with a gasp of surprise.

"Hello, Master Fireforge," said the extremely fair-skinned, green-eyed woman in the blue robe, wisps of whitish hair escaping the confines of her cornflower-colored scarf.

"I've been looking for you."

PART II

Chapter 7

The Crashing Boar

The paunchy human born Waldo Didlebaum some thirty-five years earlier, took pride in his ability to recognize and seize opportunity. Consider his newest occupation, now barely twelve hours old—prognostication. Actually, it had a lot in common with his previous profession, which lasted two weeks: barding.

Both had potential for great prestige and an accompanying lifestyle; they sometimes secured wealthy patrons or received court appointments. At the least they made good money in the streets and inns among the common folk. A comfortable life was all Waldo sought. After all, wasn't that his right?

The avaricious former pickpocket/juggler/brick-maker/sailor/blackmailer had recently entered the bard's profession after seeing a smartly dressed bard perform to rave reviews and bags of coins at Thelgaard Keep in the north. Waldo was newly employed there (and underutilized, in his humble opinion), as third household steward. He saw the position as a temporary setback, the result of some bad judgment and even worse luck as a blackmailer—he'd put the squeeze on the burgher of Clonnisborough over a romantic indiscretion, only to discover the man was also the overlord of the most ruthless smuggling ring in Solamnia. In the interest of prolonging his life, Waldo had dropped everything and fled to Thelgaard.

For all the years of his common life he had watched with envy the deference granted to those of noble birth. To simply dress and speak like nobility might get him the respect he desired; unfortunately, respect doesn't fill a man's empty belly. But professional respect, coupled with high financial rewards, Waldo had thought, would give him all that he desired from life.

Some fancy clothes, a high-falutin' name, and a story or two, he decided, were the only requirements for a successful career as a minstrel. That very night Sir Delbridge Fidington was born, and the name he'd assumed as steward, Hector Smithson, was lost forever.

Using skills vaguely learned during one of his earlier professions, Waldo lifted some fine clothing from his employer, including the green jacket and breeches he now wore. He also had helped himself to a number of priceless items from the manor, knowing that proceeds from their sale would allow him to live comfortably until he established himself as a bard.

Unfortunately, that process took much longer than he had expected or budgeted for. He repeated the stories he'd heard from the bard at Thelgaard Keep, but they never went over quite as well for him. He blamed that on the crowds. The farmers and other riffraff he was obliged to entertain certainly weren't sophisticated enough to appreciate the sort of stories that amused nobles at Thelgaard Keep. Still he was certain that success would come as soon as he managed to tell the right story in front of the right crowd.

In recent days, however, Waldo had begun suspecting that perhaps a bard's job was not as easy as it looked. Perhaps it actually required talent; perhaps he had none. Indeed, perhaps he stank. He couldn't even draw applause in an ale tent in a backwater such as Solace.

And then, like a gift from the blue, he met a tinker with a magical bracelet and a loose tongue.

After knocking out the tinker the night before, Waldo had slipped posthaste from Solace, walked the five miles east to Que-kiri in moonlight, then camped alongside the road on the north edge of the village. Hitting the trail early, he was headed for the nearest port on New Sea, to put as much ground between him and the conked-out tinker as possible. But the first ride he got was with a

farmer who was not going to the sea. Instead, he was headed for his hometown, with a stop along the way, a remote village called Tantallon, high in the Eastwall Mountains, which, not coincidentally, was also as far as the road went.

Having no love for sailing ships—actually, he was frightened of them—Waldo decided a remote village was as good a place as any for a prognosticator who wanted a comfortable life *and* anonymity, at least temporarily. Besides, his motto was "Never turn down anything free," and that included rides.

There was room on the wagon's front bench for only one, so Waldo rode in back atop heaped burlap sacks filled with rutabagas. In spite of the lumpy bed, he clasped the lucky copper bracelet and thought smugly, "I think my luck is about to change." He slipped the bracelet into his pack for safekeeping. Reclining on the rutabagas, he silently thanked the unfortunate tinker for his new good fortune.

One bumpy, bruised hour later, the wagon rattled into a small village.

"Ravenvale," called the farmer as he reined in the wagon before the grocer's shop on the village square.

Delbridge hopped down to stretch his short legs. Brushing road dust from the hem of his green jacket, he asked, "'How far to Tantallon?"

The farmer squinted as he hefted a rutabaga sack over his shoulder. "Don't know for sure. Eight—no, probably ten miles north. The trail gets a bit rough from here on, and it's slow going." With that, the farmer stepped into the store and began negotiating a price for his wares with the greengrocer.

The sight of fresh produce made Delbridge's stomach rumble, and he smacked his thick lips. Remembering the adage by which he ran his life—"Never buy what you can steal—" he looked quickly about and snatched up a wedge of yellow cheese from a vending cart outside the store. Passing the potent-smelling chunk under his pug nose for approval, he dropped it in his meager pack for a snack along the trail. Next he plucked two shiny red Goodlundian apples and gulped them in three hungry bites each.

Before long, the farmer emerged from the store and clambered back onto the buckboard. Delbridge lowered himself onto the somewhat smaller but still lumpy heap of rutabaga bags and contemplated his immediate future as they rattled northward out of town. Delbridge glanced ruefully at what the farmer had optimistically called a road; it could easily have been mistaken for a goat path, and a well-churned one at that.

First thing in Tantallon, Delbridge decided, he would need to purchase himself a new look. Fortune-tellers wore flowing, colorful robes and those odd little hat things, which were really just bits of cloth wrapped around their heads.

Fortune-tellers also had unusual-sounding names, like Omardicar or Hosni. He settled on Omardicar. Omardicar the Omnipotent.

The trees were budding, tiny green leaves poking out around the bark-covered limbs, which were still bleak and gray from winter. Dotting the foothills that climbed up toward the mountains were fluffy clumps of white and pink crab apple and plum trees in full bloom. Their soft-looking branches scraped along the sides of the wooden wagon as it jolted along the narrow trail, showering Delbridge and the rutabagas with fragrant, multicolored petals.

The pastoral beauty was wasted on Delbridge. Lulled by the warm spring sun on his face and the swaying and bumping of the wagon on the rutted road, the bard-turned-soothsayer leaned back on the filthy bags and fell asleep.

He was rudely awakened some time later when the hard wheels of the wagon struck a very large rock in the road and sent the cart bouncing high into the air. Delbridge spun about to look ahead of the wagon but could only see the back of the farmer's head. He struggled to raise himself to his

knees among the bags.

From where they perched at the crest of a hill, he could see that they were past the foothills and well into the mountains. Below them, nestled in a small valley already in shadows from the surrounding mountains, was a town about the size of Solace—Tantallon. Although it was not yet dusk, lanterns were winking through the trees and the wind was tinged with the smell of wood smoke from home fires. A swift, cold stream ran from the west, where the largest mountains of the range lay.

And there, rising majestically out of a rocky outcropping beyond the stream was an imposing stone facade,

its tall turrets, towers, and defensive barbican reflecting purple in the fading light.

"What's that?" Delbridge called ahead to the farmer, who had signaled the horses to continue on the road, which spiraled down into the valley.

"Castle Tantallon."

Delbridge was intrigued. "Who lives there?"

"As the story goes," said the farmer, warming up to gossip, "it's owned by a Knight of Solamnia whose family, if one believes the tales one is told, left Solamnia in the north shortly after the Cataclysm, when the persecution of the knights was just beginning.

"Our province of Abanasinia, as you may remember from your history lessons, was in chaos as well. So when the current knight's ancestor and his armed retinue arrived in exile here, they brought a bit of law and order with them. Such survivors of the Cataclysm as they found were organized and well led so that the family and everyone under it prospered. Even through hard times, the family fortune remained intact."

The farmer beamed with community pride. "The Curston line has since lived, uninterrupted, in that castle above the town that the first Lord Curston established more than three hundred years ago."

Riding down into the town now, Delbridge was surprised to find such an isolated village so prosperous; the roads were skillfully cobbled, and not a scrap of waste littered them. The buildings were whitewashed, their stones neatly tuck-pointed with mortar, thatched roofs thick and in good repair. Very few businesses or homes had oiled paper for windows—expensive stained or opaque glass was the norm. It looked like a storybook village. Such prosperity could only be a good omen, Delbridge decided.

Abruptly, the wagon rattled to a stop on the south edge of town before a cheery-looking inn whose shingle identified it as The Crashing Boar: A large, snorting boar smashed through a gate while a man snoozed peacefully on its back. Newly planted flower boxes graced the two windows, whose interiors were framed by ruffled white curtains.

"End of the line," called the farmer.

Delbridge thanked him and hopped off the wagon to look at the inn. Certainly it was as good a place as any to find out what was happening in Tantallon, and Delbridge needed a meal and a place to sleep. But while people would often give away information for free, room and board cost money.

This was also a good a place to test the abilities of the bracelet, he decided, which he must certainly do before investing money in a new ensemble. He reached into his shabby pouch and pulled out the bracelet. Cupping his hand, he forced the slim copper band over his fingers and onto his pudgy wrist. "Who was this made for, a pixie?" he snarled as it pinched his soft flesh. He needn't have worried about losing it, for he doubted that it would ever come off his wrist.

As he pulled the door open, he paused to examine an obviously new piece of parchment nailed to the door. It was an official announcement of some sort. Delbridge stepped close to read it in the fading light.

Royal Court

His Lordship Sir Curston will, on the third day of Yurthgreen, 344, hear and judge the grievances, pleas, and boon requests of his loyal subjects. All those wishing an audience with His Lordship must appear in the hours between sunup and the beginning of the evening watch.

"Quit blockin' the door, you great hog. Are you comin' or goin'?"

Delbridge blinked and stepped back. His sight fell on an angry, hawk-nosed fellow wearing a sparkling white apron: the barkeep, apparently.

"Huh? That is . . . Pardon me, I was just reading the door," Delbridge stammered.

The owner frowned. "Well, shut it. I'll not be heatin' the outdoors."

Delbridge remembered himself. "My apologies, good sir." He straightened his back and smoothed the bulging front of his velvet jacket, but the man had already returned to his work inside.

Delbridge waddled his way inside before the door closed fully. The room was cozy and warm with a haze of smoke in the air. Eight other patrons sat around several tables. Most appeared to be laborers or craftsmen, but two were obviously soldiers. A small fire burned in the hearth, just right for the warming season. All eight stopped their conversation to see who had rushed in.

The barkeep had barely stepped behind the bar when he looked up and saw the man he had just spoken to in the doorway already standing at the rail. He glanced back toward the door, then squinted at Delbridge. "What do you want, stranger?"

"Nothing, I'm sure," replied Delbridge, trying to look surprised. "I only wanted to discuss a simple business arrangement with you."

"I don't give out no free rooms." Having settled the matter, the barkeep turned back to his work behind the bar.

A hand flew to Delbridge's breast. "Heavens, I never expect anything for free! Did I say free? I don't believe so.

"No, what I propose is a legitimate business transaction. I get something, you get something. As you so insightfully guessed, all I want is supper and a room for the night. But you . . . you get my services for the evening."

The barkeep snorted. "And what is it you do? Wait, let me guess. Sing? Dance? Tell stories? And for that, I get to feed and house someone who eats like a pig and snores like a siege engine."

He blew his hawk nose into the hem of his white apron. "Sorry, stranger, we don't need any entertaining. Why don't you try the Stumbling Goose Inn, down the street."

Several of the other guests laughed out loud at the bar-keep's insults, but Delbridge was unperturbed. Instead of bristling, he drew himself up as tall as possible.

"I am no common entertainer. I am an oracle. The future is mine to see and predict."

A chorus of snickers and guffaws rattled the room. The barkeep leaned in close and said, "I can predict your future, stranger. I predict that if you don't haul your shifty, fat carcass out of here yourself, it's going to get tossed out." The volume of laughter rose, and Delbridge noticed for the first time that it had a distinctly unpleasant edge.

Bracelet or no bracelet, Delbridge knew it was time to plunge in and either sink or swim. In the past this sort of life-and-death pressure had always sharpened his wits wonderfully. He closed his eyes and placed one hand against his forehead while gripping the counter with the other. His mind raced ahead, searching for some sort of vague prediction that he could make and then verify moments

later.

He was lucky that he had one hand on the counter, otherwise he would have fallen when the stream of images burst into his mind. As it was, he reeled sideways and prevented a fall only by clutching the bar reflexively.

In his mind Delbridge saw one of the other patrons, a balding, middle-aged gent with arthritic hands, gulping an enormous mouthful of baked trout. Instantly he began choking and gasping for breath. His eyes bulged out, his hands circled his own throat, and his tongue swelled obscenely until, within moments, he fell from his bench to the floor. There he kicked and squirmed several moments more before lying still.

A stumble was not what Delbridge's hecklers expected. They watched with genuine curiosity now, wondering what this apparent con artist would try next. When he stood and wiped the cold sweat from his forehead, he saw them staring, half amused, half bewildered.

If this was the work of the bracelet, thought Delbridge, the tinker from whom he had stolen it was prone to gross understatement. But, as he liked to remind himself with pride, years of experience had taught him to seize opportunity immediately whenever it presented itself. Hesitation was a luxury he could ill afford.

With all the dignity at his command, Delbridge took two bold steps away from the bar, then he swept his arm up and pointed toward the group. "I have seen what is to be. Death is watching over this room and stalking one of you right now. I could tell you who—or I could hold my tongue and let the man die, since no one believes me anyway." He dropped his arm to his side again and looked at them sadly. "I pity you."

Several members of his audience blanched, which filled Delbridge with enormous satisfaction. The man who had appeared in the vision waved his arm as if to brush Delbridge away, then turned back to his meal. Delbridge saw with mixed elation and horror that it was indeed a plate of baked trout!

One of the soldiers spoke up. "All right, oracle, at least tell us who it is. I'd like to know which of us is about to keel over so I can buy him a drink before he goes."

Even without this facetious invitation, Delbridge would have acted. As the man from the vision raised a forkful of fish to his mouth, Delbridge lunged forward and seized the man's wrist. The customer recoiled in anger, trying to twist his arm away, but he didn't have the strength or the leverage to get free. Delbridge pushed the man's plate away and then dumped the contents of the fork onto the table. Turning to the next fellow on the bench and inwardly praying for all he was worth that this was the fatal bite, he asked, "Examine this closely, and tell us what you find."

The man looked to his companions for support of some sort, then shrugged and picked up the dropped fork. He used it to poke through the crumbling meat on the table and within seconds found something. With his fingers he picked out a sliver of bone about as long as his fingernail, shaped and sharpened to a point. It was a broken bit of a handmade fish hook. With a look of amazement, the customer held it out in his palm for all to see.

The man whose dinner had contained the bone hook swallowed a large lump in his throat and massaged his neck. "I guess we don't need any oracle to tell us what would have happened if I'd swallowed that." The rest of the onlookers were silent. Delbridge struggled to look appropriately smug.

The man whose life had been spared addressed the barkeep. "Shanus, I don't know whether you intend to offer this man a room, but I'd like to buy him supper. What'll you have, friend?"

Delbridge didn't hesitate. "Anything but fish," he replied, filling the room with good-hearted laughter.

Reclining in his free room after the meal, Delbridge finally had time to think. He was hardly a wise man, but he was far from stupid. That this was magic he was certain, just as he knew it had to be the

work of the bracelet. It was also the biggest thing he had ever gotten his hands on.

He had no idea what the bracelet's limits or capabilities might be, but its potential for turning a profit was huge. Assembling a stage show would be simple, once he knew how to control the item.

Control was a problem, however. Delbridge knew next to nothing about magic. He did know that a reputable wizard would charge an exorbitant fee to analyze the bracelet, and taking it to a disreputable wizard was out of the question. That left experimenting with it himself, learning its uses through trial and error. That path seemed crowded with peril, but Delbridge could think of no other alternative.

In the meantime, word of what had happened that evening would spread through the town like a fire. Better yet, it was likely that the two soldiers who'd been in the taproom during his display would carry the tale to the garrison in the castle, where eventually even the knight—what was his name, Curston?—would hear it.

Delbridge sat upright. This could be much bigger than any traveling mystic show, he realized. The service of a legitimate seer would be invaluable to a ruler. That could mean appointment to a royal court, which would bring to Delbridge everything he'd always wanted: leisure, respect, dignity, and wealth.

Delbridge's mind flashed back to the note on the taproom door: tomorrow was court day! Delbridge resolved to seek an audience with the knight and offer his service. But that left very little time to master the bracelet.

I have a long night ahead, Delbridge realized.

Chapter 8

Audience Day

"Straight up this road," said *Shanus*, *pointing* with his thumb. "Take the first right, just after the milliner's shop, and then a sharp left. You can't miss it, Master Omardicar—"

"—Omardicar is sufficient."

"Yes, sir. It's the first drawbridge over the river."

Already, thought Delbridge, people acted differently toward him. In preparing for today, he had sent a page from the inn to purchase a new suit of clothes more suitable to an oracle: a long purple gown trimmed with white rabbit fur and decorated with abstract designs, topped by a tall rabbit fur hat. *Shanus* even offered to lend Delbridge the money to pay for it, to be repaid after his royal appointment.

Greatly encouraged, Delbridge hurried up the street to the right, and then to the river. A large stone bridge with a removable plank roadway spanned the water. Beyond it loomed the castle, towering in the midmorning sun. Delbridge's footsteps on the bridge were drowned out by the thunderous, swiftly flowing waters below.

Again, Delbridge straightened his outfit and extended his hand to a guard. "Omardicar the Omnipotent, prognosticator extraordinaire, at your service. Perhaps you've heard of me?" The grim-faced guard, of the Solamnic order, judging from his drooping mustache, said nothing. "Yes, well, I seek an audience with Lord Curston. Good sir, kindly direct me to the proper hall."

The guard gave Delbridge an appraising look and a dubious snort, then shook his head. "If you had gotten here earlier, you could have passed through with everyone else. Pay attention, because I won't repeat this. You are standing at the outer south gatehouse. Go straight past me, then pass through the outer bailey to the inner south gatehouse. Someone there will direct you through the antechamber to the Lesser Hall in the keep, next to the West Chamber."

Delbridge's head reeled at the complex directions. "Tantallon seems peaceful enough. Why the elaborate defenses?"

"Tantallon is at peace because the castle is well fortified and we are always vigilant," the guard explained with obvious pride. "Lord Curston believes in being prepared. He employs many local tradesmen to continually improve the castle's defenses. His most recent addition, requiring the full-time services of thirty artisans, are the stone soldiers on the battlements, placed there to trick enemy scouts into thinking our numbers are even greater than they are."

The lord-knight's expenditures on defenses explained the town's prosperity, thought Delbridge. Let's hope the fellow believes in spreading the wealth.

"You'd better hurry, though," said the mustached guard. "There is quite a line ahead of you."

Delbridge thanked the guard abruptly as he passed him. Quickly crossing the outer courtyard, he went directly to the inner gatehouse as instructed, but no one was there as promised.

With a shrug, Delbridge let himself into the inner courtyard of the castle. In the courtyard, which was extraordinarily spacious, were hundreds of neatly kept merchants' stalls, many of them permanent structures of wood or wattle complete with thatched roofs and shuttered windows. They faced military barracks and parade grounds on the opposite side of the area. The cooking fires in the massive kitchens that serviced the keep filled the area with mouth-watering aromas. Mingled with smells from the stables and small food stalls, the ambience was unlike anything Delbridge had

encountered before. Shaggy dogs and children romped freely among the carts in the cobbled inner area, scattering flapping chickens, who squawked their disapproval.

Delbridge tried to recall the guard's directions. If he remembered correctly, the entrance to the keep was next to the west chamber. He looked to his left, above the merchant stalls shutting their doors and windows in preparation for their noontime breaks. Squinting in the bright sun glaring off distant walls that circled the courtyard, he gave the large, rectangular keep his first real appraising glance.

At least five stories high, the keep was flanked on all four corners by round towers, one line of windows in each. Merlons and crenels encircled the roof, as they did on the outer walls, surrounding a jumble of chimneys. An occasional balcony jutted from slightly longer windows on the third floor, suggesting the locations of bedchambers or meeting rooms.

Delbridge stepped through the arched portico to the carved teakwood door and gave it a shove. Although twice as tall as he and perhaps five times as heavy, it swung open easily on well-oiled black iron hinges.

Delbridge was instantly enveloped by a familiar scent he had not smelled since leaving Thelgaard Keep, a fragrance of wealth and someone else's sweat: it was lemon-oil wax, commonly used to polish the great quantities of expensive wood found in wealthy homes. Delbridge had spent hours rubbing the slick, pungent paste into the banisters at Thelgaard during his demeaning time spent as third assistant steward. Toward the end of his tenure, he could no longer even smell the beeswax polish.

When his eyes adjusted to the dim torchlight, he discovered that he stood in an antechamber two stories high. The base of the walls was lined with stands of polished armor of every description, from leather to chain mail to full suits of plate mail. Filling the walls up to the two-story ceiling were weapons, hung so closely together they almost touched (and did in the case of several rosettes formed by swords). Long swords, short swords, maces, spears, halberds, axes, bows, crossbows, daggers, flails, and a host of other weapons Delbridge didn't even recognize decorated the entire hall. Every one appeared made of steel and that alone, if true, meant that this knight held a fortune in precious metal. Not to mention that he could equip a sizable army with quality weapons from this room. Delbridge's envy of the man was growing.

Suddenly a wrinkled old face beneath grizzled hair popped through the gold brocade curtain opposite Delbridge's position. Delbridge could see by the crest on the man's shoulder that he wore the livery of a Curston family retainer, though it hung limply on his shrunken frame. Looking past Delbridge, he snapped, his voice old and irascible, "You alone? If you're here for audience day, come along, come along. They're waiting for you. Say," he added, looking over Delbridge's attire with a frown, "you wouldn't be that fortune-teller we've been hearing about?" Delbridge bowed deeply. "Well, come on then."

Unaccustomed to wearing a formal robe, Delbridge dashed through the curtain and followed the bobbing, bent form down a long, polished marble hallway. The ceiling was two stories high here as well, making the hall a gallery of sorts. A very narrow balcony ran the length of the hall on both sides of the second floor, supported by two rows of delicate pillars on the ground floor. Beyond the pillars on each side were three arched doorways, evenly spaced, with exquisite, expensive tapestries hanging between them.

Several dozen people, presumably those awaiting their audience with the knight, stood in various poses of respect along the walls.

The stoop-shouldered old man scuttled right past those waiting in the hall and passed through a curtain at the far end of the hallway. He held its gold-corded edge back for Delbridge, tapping his foot with ill-concealed impatience.

"Well, come along."

Delbridge could not contain a haughty smile as he trooped past the assemblage, who stared after

him curiously. The robed seer burst into a large, carpeted room, empty except for the three irritable-looking men seated at a long table at the far end, at least sixty feet from where Delbridge stood at the entrance.

"Your Lordship," announced the old man, "Onardicar the Omnipotent, the seer from the tavern."

Delbridge bent close to the old man and whispered, "Who are the other two?"

The retainer rolled his eyes at the bother. "Seated behind the table on the velvet corner chair is Lord Curston.

Next to him is his son, Squire Rostrevor. The fellow there—" The retainer pointed to a tall human with a bald pate, a red cape over his muscular frame, standing to the right of the Lord's chair—"he's Balcombe, Lord Curston's mage and chief adviser."

With this minimal bit of information, Delbridge strode forward confidently to stand before the table. He did not wait for introductions or an invitation to speak.

"Lord Curston, I have an offer most valuable to a knight of such obvious power and wealth as yourself." Delbridge heard his words echo in the nearly empty chamber.

The knight, who was obviously once a fit man now gone soft, wore a silk tunic, a cap upon his graying head, and a look of boredom on his lined and weathered face. His son, an almost pretty, tow-headed lad in his late teens, stood to the left of the seated knight, his hand on his hip in an insolent pose. A thin blond mustache revealed his knightly ambition. He seemed more amused than the others by the sight of the oddly dressed, obese man before them.

Up close, the most riveting of the three, to Delbridge's mind, was the wizard. Delbridge had not noticed from the door, but the man had a hideous scar across the side of his face where his right eye should have been. The lid was sealed shut by scar tissue, but Delbridge could tell by its sunken look that no eye remained in the socket. The left one stared with dark intent, devoid of warmth or even interest. His head was not bald, but shaved. Short, colorless stubble cast a gray shadow over the visible blue veins. The only hair of any length was a black mustache and goatee that completely encircled his thick liver-red lips.

Feeling distinctly uncomfortable under the wizard's intense gaze, Delbridge shifted his attention back to the knight.

"We have heard of you, and I must admit I am curious," said the knight at last, his voice low and aristocratic. "But be quick. I have heard many pleas this audience day and have grown weary."

Delbridge waved his arm for effect, fluttering his billowy sleeves. "I possess a gift, my lord, which the stars of my birth saw fit to bestow upon me. It is simply the ability to see the future. I am ready to place this power at your disposal. You would be warned in advance of dangers posed against yourself, your family, and your subjects."

The knight frowned. "I already have a mage who fulfills very nearly that role now."

"And I mean no slight or disrespect to him," cut in Delbridge quickly, "but even the greatest wizard's spells are limited in their ability to divine what will be and are restricted to a certain number per day. My power is not subject to the normal limitations of magic. It functions continuously, whenever I choose to exercise it."

"Do not disregard this out of hand, Father," advised the youth with a brief glance at the mage. "His words bear consideration." He turned his blue eyes on Delbridge. "Perhaps a little demonstration is in order, Mister—?"

"Onardicar the Omnipotent, young sir," Delbridge supplied quickly, boldly adding, "Omni to clients and friends."

"I should like a demonstration as well," said Balcombe in a low, detached tone, his gaze

unwavering.

"I would be happy to oblige," said Delbridge. "However, you must understand that my gift does have its peculiarities. I must concentrate on a particular event or person, and if anything unusual or of interest lies in its future, I experience a vision detailing it. If there is nothing of interest—" He shrugged.

"How conveniently simple," said Balcombe. "Do you expect His Lordship to simply accept what you say and put you on the payroll?"

"He said he would try to demonstrate," said Rostrevor tersely.

Balcombe bowed his head slightly.

Frowning again, Lord Curston looked from Rostrevor to Balcombe. "I wish, as always, that my beloved son and my most trusted adviser were not perpetually at odds," he sighed.

"We are not at odds, my lord," said the mage. "We both desire a demonstration of this man's supposed power. We disagree only in how rigorous such a test ought to be."

The room fell uncomfortably silent. Sensing that this tension did not bode well for his prospects, Delbridge said, "With your permission, I will demonstrate as much as I am able right now, and you can then decide whether any additional trial is warranted."

Closing his eyes, absently brushing the bracelet with the fingers of his left hand, Delbridge concentrated on the people before him one at a time. First, he pictured the knight. Suddenly his stomach churned, and his head throbbed. He felt as though he were plunging through incredibly thick fog, then as if the fog were whipped away. This sensation was replaced by a vision of the elderly knight on his knees in a chamber of the castle. Somber draperies covered the walls. The once stoic man wailed and sobbed in unspeakable despair at what appeared to be a funeral, yet there was neither bier nor body. The tragic image was such a shock to Delbridge that a small cry escaped his lips, and his eyes flew open. The vision abruptly ended.

"What was it?" asked the knight, leaning forward. He was startled by the look of uncertainty and pity in Delbridge's eyes. "What did you see?"

"I—nothing," said Delbridge quickly, flustered. He could not tell a ruling Knight of Solamnia that he had seen him bawling like a baby! "I saw nothing."

He changed the subject quickly. "I will focus on the young squire next."

Delbridge thought of Rostrevor's boyish face, dotted with freckles and pale yellow hair. Again the fog enfolded him and rushed past. Bile rose in his throat, and he fought back the feeling that he was about to be sick as the fog evaporated.

What he saw made him stumble backward. Again, instead of the audience hall he had closed his eyes on, he saw a candle-lit room somewhere in the castle. The knight's son, Rostrevor, lay in his bed. But suddenly, a red light burst over him, spinning and growing until it enveloped the young man. Then he was falling, drawn into the source of the light, screaming and frightened and hurt. Finally, the squire cowered against a pulsing red wall, shrinking away from something Delbridge could not see but whose scorching evil he felt.

Delbridge's eyes flew open, and he gasped for air. Immediately the vision disappeared, but his heart still pounded wildly and sweat stung his eyes. He tried unsuccessfully to flex his shaking fingers, only to realize that the bracelet was unbearably hot. In anger and awe he slapped the burning hand against his thigh. Needles of pain tore up his arm and forced a wail from his lips.

Quickly he became aware of Rostrevor standing in front of him, grasping his shoulders and shaking him slightly. "Are you quite all right? Stand up to it now, and get a grip."

Delbridge wiped his face on the sleeve of his gown, took several deep breaths, and began massaging

his hand. The squire had returned to his position behind his father, who regarded Delbridge curiously. Balcombe, on the other hand, seemed unmoved as usual.

Lord Curston leaned forward slightly in his seat. "You cannot tell me that you saw nothing that time. If you saw something concerning my son, I'll know what it is. Speak!"

How could he tell them what he saw?

Delbridge swallowed hard. "My lord, well do I realize that you already half think me a charlatan, but what I have just seen I can barely begin to describe. It was unlike anything I have ever experienced. Other visions have been brief and distinct, showing me what actually is to happen. But this was almost like ... a nightmare. As if I was seeing hints or symbols of what might happen but not the events themselves. I beg you to believe that this is not just an act intended to frighten you. Squire Rostrevor is in great danger.

Delbridge quickly relayed what he had seen, including the earlier vision of the grief-stricken knight. "I cannot explain it further or better, but I know it to be true," he concluded.

To Delbridge's surprise, Rostrevor was the only one to scoff. "Father, this is nonsense. Abducted by a red light! I am far too strong—you've trained me yourself—to allow such a thing to happen. Besides, our family, and you in particular, are much beloved by your subjects. Who would do such a thing?"

The elder knight's face showed his concern. "There are always malcontents who might seek to hurt me through you. I have lived a long life and made more than enough enemies to disturb my rest."

Scowling, the young knight stepped around the table and took Delbridge firmly by the arm. "I think you've wasted enough of my father's time. Be off!"

"Wait," interjected Balcombe, raising a restraining hand. "What has this fellow to gain by making a fraudulent prediction of such a serious nature? I admit I have reservations, but if he's fabricated this tale, time will quickly reveal the truth." The red-robed mage turned his one eye on Delbridge. "Is this danger imminent?"

"I believe so, yes," blurted Delbridge. "That's how my power works." Feeling a bit awkward, like a bug under glass, Delbridge scratched his jowls.

"Then, my lord, I suggest we err on the side of caution," said Balcombe in his baritone, "by securing Rostrevor in his chambers and out of harm's way, for this evening at least. Station guards outside his door and windows. I will provide additional security by placing magical seals and protective wards on the doors and windows. No one will be able to enter his room, physically or otherwise, without triggering my spells, nor could Rostrevor be removed by any means. If any attempt is made, we will know immediately. In fact, if we act prudently, no one but the four of us in this room will know or suspect that my magical seals exist."

The elder knight seized on it. "An excellent idea! That will certainly thwart any kidnapping attempts, physical or magical."

"But, Father—" protested Rostrevor.

Lord Curston waved away his son's protests. "You will indulge an old man who loves his only son too well."

The young knight glowered. "But if we cut off even the possibility of an attempt, how will we know if anyone had ever even planned such a thing?"

"We will keep Omardicar here, as a guest. If nothing happens concerning this matter, he may try again to prove his claims. In the meantime, we will take no chances. Rostrevor, you are confined to your chambers until dawn tomorrow. We will go immediately with Balcombe and see you safely secured." His expression firm, the knight stood, wincing as gout sent waves of pain shooting through his legs.

"Froeder!" he shouted through gritted teeth. The wizened old retainer hastened through the curtain at the far end of the room. "Our audiences for today are at an end.

Please extend my apologies to those who wait outside and tell them they will have another opportunity, then see that this man is accommodated within the keep. With your pardon, Omardicar, until we know fully what is happening, I wish you to remain in your rooms as well. Froeder, see that it is so." With that, leaning heavily on his resigned son, the knight was helped from the room. Balcombe, with his hands tucked into the full cuffs of his robe and his expression as unreadable as ever, followed at a proper distance.

Left behind with Froeder, Delbridge shook his head in bewilderment. This was turning out well enough, but certainly different than he had planned. Still, who could argue with a sumptuous dinner served by a fireplace lit only for his comfort, followed by a sound sleep in a clean feather bed?

A slight tingling at Delbridge's wrist grabbed his attention. He clapped a hand over the copper bracelet. The metal was quite warm. Delbridge was not in the mood for any more visions that day, especially not in front of Froeder. He tried slipping the bracelet off, but the fit was too tight. After much tugging and prying that left the flesh and bones of his hand bruised, he finally wrenched it from his thick wrist and dropped it into his pouch. Feeling quite good about himself, he followed the impatient retainer from the audience hall and into the luxurious keep, anticipating the fruits of his labors.

Perhaps he had at last reached his true station in life.

* * * * *

Delbridge awoke when a rough hand shook his shoulder until his teeth rattled in his head.

"Omardicar the Omnipotent?"

"Who? Oh, yes," he mumbled, momentarily confused. Blinking against the lamplight, it took Delbridge a moment to remember where he was. He sat up slowly, and an empty wine bottle from the night before rolled off his chest and shattered on the stone floor. "Who are you, and what is it you want?"

Standing above him, a burly man in chain mail laughed, his thick red beard and mustache dancing in the wavering light. "I'll answer no scoundrel's questions. You're under arrest." A second soldier wrenched back the curtains from across the room's window, adding thin dawn light to the scene. The red-bearded man grabbed Delbridge by the upper arm and yanked him from under the feather tick and out of bed.

"What are you talking about?" Delbridge squealed, trying to slip from the man's strong fingers. "I'm a guest of Lord Curston's! He'll be most displeased by your rude treatment of me. I demand to see him at once!"

The sergeant maintained his hold but said nothing.

Delbridge knew he'd had too much to drink the night before, but he'd been in his room the whole time and could not possibly have caused any trouble.

"Perhaps you need a little incentive," hinted Delbridge, reaching toward the table for a small stack of coins, but the guard jerked Delbridge's arm behind his back.

"Don't try any of yer magic on me, cur." The armored guard dragged Delbridge from his sleeping chamber on the second floor, down a narrow flight of stairs, and out the east entrance to the keep. Two more guards holding pikes joined them as they crossed the bailey, headed for an archway bearing the sign, "Gaol."

Delbridge laughed a bit hysterically. "Can't you see? You've confused me with someone else, an easy mistake with all of the strangers about for audience day." He tried slipping his arms from the hands of his captors. "If you'll just let me go now, I'll forget about this indignity."

Instead, the hands tightened. Delbridge instinctively dragged his heels as they crossed the threshold and entered the dark, chilly, foul-smelling recesses of the jail. Tugging the ring latch of a heavy wooden door, the red-haired guard swung it open, its hinges creaking. Sobbing his innocence to an unknown crime, Delbridge was thrust through the door and thrown to his knees in a dank, lightless cell; the door clanged shut behind the departing guards.

Rusty iron hinges echoed in the darkness.

Chapter 9

Dancing in the Woods

The young woman's slight frame was draped in a dark blue cloak of the finest weave. A silk scarf the color of cornflowers completely surrounded her face, crossed under her chin, and flowed over her shoulders to her waist. Her features were nearly perfect, her full lips unusually red against the pale, angular planes of her face.

"If I didn't know better, Master Fireforge," she said in her deep, even voice, "I might think you were trying to avoid me." Her sea-green eyes, as wide as two steel pieces, took in his downcast ones.

Flint dragged his eyes up, his cheeks blushing crimson. "Certainly not . . . Oh, Great Reorx," he swore, "I can't lie to save my soul. I was avoiding you, but not for the reasons you think."

Tanis noticed that pedestrians on the bridgeway were stopping to stare at the exotic-looking woman and the flustered dwarf. "Let's talk in here," he said quickly, pushing Flint and Tasslehoff ahead of him through the door to his home. The woman followed, her carriage regal. Tanis's breath caught in his throat at her beauty; she reminded him of waves lapping at the shore.

Inside Tanis's house in the trees, Flint collapsed dejectedly into the bent-willow rocker Tanis had placed near the cold hearth just for him. He held his shaggy head in his hands. "I don't know where to begin . . ."

"You could start by introducing us," Tasslehoff sang. Without waiting, he propped his hoopak up in a corner and thrust his delicate hand forward. "Tasslehoff Burr-foot, at your service." The woman looked at his hand as if unsure what to do, then clasped it awkwardly.

Just then Tanis came forward with four glasses and a dusty bottle of mulled ale he had been saving. He smiled at the woman and said, "Tanis Half-Elven."

She regarded his fine facial features, the slightly slanted eyes, and the suggestion of a tip to the ears beneath his thick reddish brown hair. "I thought you looked too rugged to be full elf, yet too beautiful to be human. . . ." she mused.

It was Tanis's turn to blush. "All we know is your given name from Flint," he said hastily. "Selana, isn't it?" He offered her one of the glasses. She extended a slim, almost translucent hand to accept it, which shook slightly as Tanis poured the pale-colored ale into the vessel.

"Yes, I am called Selana." She took a hasty gulp of the ale, coughing as she swallowed. Tasslehoff clapped her on the back. "I thought it was water," she gasped.

"Water?" The kender slapped his knee as he laughed. "Why, only an ogre would drink water that looked like swamp juice."

"Tasslehoff." Tanis spoke the warning low in his throat after he saw Selana's flustered expression. She took another slow swallow of the ale. Tears sprang to her eyes, but she did not cough again. Chin set determinedly, she addressed Flint in the rocker.

"Flint Fireforge, I am here for my bracelet. I am not such a fool that I can't see something is amiss. Were you unable to make it? Perhaps you will tell me now."

Flint shook his head. "No, I made it, all right, and a beautiful bracelet it was—is," he corrected himself hastily, rubbing his face in distress as he tried to think of the best way to explain the situation.

Tasslehoff dropped to the floor to sit cross-legged at her booted feet. "Look, this whole thing is my

fault. Well, not entirely my fault. It was just a silly bit of strange fortune that the bracelet found its way onto my wrist in the first place. Of course I knew how much the bracelet meant to Flint, after he got so mad when he lost it the first time, that I knew he'd be furious and frantic when he discovered he'd been careless enough to lose it a second time."

"That's enough!" Flint roared at the kender. "I don't need your brand of help." The dwarf proceeded to piece together the events of the last several days, from the crafting of the bracelet, through its "pocketing" by Tasslehoff, to the robbery of the tinker's wagon.

"We were on our way to find this thieving bard and get your bracelet back, when we, uh, met you outside. I'm as sorry as I've ever been about anything," said Flint, hanging his head. "And even though I'd like to throttle this kender," the dwarf said through gritted teeth, his eyes narrow as slits, "this whole blasted mess is still my responsibility. I'd gladly return your money if I could, but I've already spent it on supplies," he admitted sheepishly.

"I don't want the money," the young woman said. "It's the bracelet I need, and I insist that you retrieve it immediately."

Her imperious tone made Flint flush further in embarrassment, but it only annoyed the half-elf. "Certainly the bracelet should not have been mislaid," Tanis said stiffly, "but it wouldn't hurt you to show some patience and understanding. Flint told you he was trying to get it back."

"You know, Flint, I've been thinking," the kender interjected. "It's a good thing I came along when I did. Reorx alone knows who could have picked it up from where you'd carelessly left it, if I hadn't taken steps to keep it safe."

"Carelessly left it?" Flint barked, jumping to his feet. "That bracelet was safely in my display box! And you weren't taking steps to do anything but steal it, you thieving little—"

"—thief!" Tas cried indignantly, his fists clenched as he faced off against the sputtering dwarf. "I am sick to death of taking the blame for other people's carelessness. Listen, you old—ouch, Tanis!" Tasslehoff glared at the half-elf, who had wedged himself between them and was pinching the muscle on the kender's right shoulder.

"Stop it, both of you," Tanis admonished them. "This isn't helping us find the bracelet." He turned to the pale woman, who had been silently appalled during the exchange, her face now a study in vexation. "If it's the bracelet you want, why can't Flint just make another?"

"You don't understand!" Selana cried, stamping her booted foot petulantly. "Even if there were time for that, the special components were the only ones of their kind. You have no idea what I went through to get them." A sob escaped her at the memory.

"Why don't you tell us?" Tanis insisted. Her reaction confirmed his growing suspicion that there was more at stake here than a missing bracelet. "While you're at it, why don't you tell us why a slip of a girl needs a magical bracelet that divines the future?"

A slender hand flew to her mouth. "You know?"

Tanis shook his head. "Until now, we only had the ramblings of a superstitious tinker and Tas's suspicions."

Angry, her eyes flashed from sea green to storm black. "What right is it of yours to know? You tricked me!" She raised her hand to strike him.

Almond eyes narrowed, Tanis caught her by the wrist. "No more than you did when you commissioned Flint to make an 'ordinary' bracelet. You must know how much dwarves distrust magic. What right had you to conceal the bracelet's magical nature from him?"

"I never said it was ordinary," she retorted. "I sought a noted craftsman to perform a task for which he was handsomely paid. Do you tell your tailor every occasion for which you might wear the clothing he makes you?"

"That's not the same thing!" Tanis snapped.

It was Flint's turn to step between combatants. Tanis dropped Selana's wrist as Flint glared at him. "What's gotten into you? Whatever the bracelet is or might have been, it was my responsibility. I shouldn't have let it leave my sight. Now I just have to get it back, no matter what it takes."

His statement, meant to be reassuring, brought only a cry of alarm from Selana. "How long will it take?"

Flint looked surprised. "If this Delbridge fellow headed north, and *if* we can find him—" He shrugged— "three days . . . less with good luck, maybe a week with bad."

"And if you can't find him? Or if he's somehow lost the bracelet? What then?" Her usually low voice was rising in agitation.

"Why is this bracelet so important, Selana?" Tanis asked faintly. "Who are you that you must cover yourself so?" Although tears glistened in her lovely eyes, narrow with fury, she did not resist as he reached out and loosened the blue-green scarf from her face. It fluttered back and settled in soft folds to her shoulders.

"A sea elf!" Tanis gasped as shimmering silver-white hair sprang about her face in soft waves. He had but heard of the reclusive sea elves, distant cousins to his elven kin in Qualinesti. He'd been told their skin was so translucent as to be blue, yet Selana's was milky-white. Her eyes were perfectly round and very large, unlike the almond shape of land-living elves. Though possessing human form, sea elves lived underwater. Tanis had never heard of one leaving the sea to travel on land.

Unwanted tears pooled in Selana's eyes. Vexed, she brushed them away. "Yes, I am a Dargonesti elf." She snatched at the end of her scarf and twisted it anxiously as she began to pace.

Flint forgot about his own shame as fatherly concern grew for the obviously tormented girl. "Tell us what troubles you so much that you have left the sea?"

Selana stopped to examine the faces of the three in the small room, then sighed in resignation. "Forgive me, but I am not used to trusting strangers. Actually, I've led a sheltered life and have met very few."

She held her chin up high. "In the Dargonesti language, my name would sound like little more than unpronounceable squeaks to you. In your tongue, my name is Selana of the Reefs Where Sea Fronds Dance and Eels Dart, Shark Chaser, Moonbeam Laughter." She paused but received only puzzled looks. "Princess Selana Sonluanaau. My father was Solunatuaau, the Speaker of the Moons."

She gave them time to gasp in astonishment before continuing. "I say *was*, because he died quite suddenly at the time of the last full moon." She waved away their pitying glances. "Although I miss him terribly, he lived a fruitful life. It was his time. That is our way."

She dried the last of her tears on the back of her hand.

"It is also our way that the ruler of our people must possess, by nature, the ability to foresee the future. My father could. He knew of his own impending death, though he kept it a secret until it was too late."

"I get it!" cried Tasslehoff. "You need the bracelet so that you can become queen of your people!"

Selana frowned at the kender and shook her iridescent head. "No, I do not seek the crown for myself, but for my elder brother."

Tasslehoff's brow knit in deliberation. "Now I'm really confused. If he has the natural ability to see the future, why do you need a bracelet?"

A look of unbearable despair settled upon the sea elf's comely face. "My brother Semunel is good

and wise and strong, but for reasons only the benevolent god Habbakuk knows," she sighed, "he has not the natural ability. Semunel will rule well and long, but only if he ascends the throne. This he cannot do unless he demonstrates to the regents of the House of Law that he possesses the ability to see what will be. Without the bracelet, he will surely fail the test."

Selana resumed her pacing. "Semunel's deficiency was a secret shared between my father, brother, and myself—secret even from my mother. There are factions that would see House Sonluanaau end."

Trying to calm the roiling emotions inside her, the princess focused her attention on a book from the carved shelf and fingered its spine. "We hoped that perhaps the skill was latent and would eventually develop, but it never did. . . . Now Father has died, and there is no more time to wait."

Tanis cleared his throat. "I don't mean to appear impertinent, but isn't it dishonest to deceive the regents— and ultimately the people—if your brother does not possess the skill your customs require? Perhaps Habbakuk had reason for not granting Semunel the ability."

Selana slammed the book down on the shelf at Tanis's effrontery. "Is it wrong to want to rule the people fairly, rather than hand rulership over to those who would misuse the power?" At that moment, she found the half-elf bucolic, with his homespun clothing and disheveled hair. The sea elf laughed contemptuously. "What would you know of court politics, anyway, half-elf?"

Tanis gave a humorless laugh of his own. "More than I care to, my dear *princess*" he said dryly. Tanis's face was flushed with fury as he left the room and went into the kitchen.

"Gee, what's eating him?" asked Tas.

Flint noted the bewildered expression on Selana's face as well. He alone knew the reason for Tanis's strong reaction, but she could not have guessed the deep wounds her defensive words had opened. Flint didn't feel it his place to tell the sea elf that no one knew court politics better than Tanis, a victim of their viciousness.

The half-breed had survived a tortured upbringing in the court of the Qualinesti, as ward of the Speaker of the Sun himself. Many, many years had passed since the dwarf had met the unhappy young elf there. He had found in him a kindred spirit, another who could not live comfortably among his people. Tanis had suffered a terrible confrontation with his guardian—actually, an accusation of murder. Although vindicated, Tanis had decided he would fit in better as the only half-elf to live in the human village of Solace, with the only resident dwarf, Flint.

"Tanis, or Tanthalas as he is known among the Qualinesti elves, is much more complex than he appears on the surface," was the old dwarf's only explanation.

Selana looked flustered. "I'm sorry if I offended him, but I am preoccupied with finding my bracelet and unused to your customs." She smoothed her indigo robe and headed for the door. "Now, if we may, I'd like to begin our search for this bard person."

"Yeah, I'm getting bored, too. Let's go," said Tas, standing up and heading for the door.

Taken aback, Flint almost choked on the last swallow of his drink. "Princess, I don't think you understand what we're about to undertake. Life on the trail is rough, uncomfortable, filthy—not at all civilized," he added, hoping to strike the right note. "You'd be more comfortable and much safer in Solace, while we go and retrieve the bracelet."

"Absolutely not," she said. "I'm neither helpless nor unskilled," she defended. "I got as far as Solace by myself."

Flint shook his head vigorously. "I'm sure you'd do just fine on the trip, but once we find him we'll be up against a desperate thief."

Tanis, who had been listening from the kitchen, added, "You'd only slow us down, Princess. Just let us handle this."

"Please, don't either of you patronize me," she said stiffly. She addressed Flint. "No offense, Master Fire-forged, but I left things in another's hands once before, and I'll not do it again." Selana noted Flint's embarrassed scowl. "I'll go with or without you."

Flint had not known her long, but he had played at cards enough to recognize a bluff when he saw one, and headstrong Princess Selana was not bluffing. He could not have her traipsing about by herself. With a deep, rumbling sigh, he gave in. "All right, you win."

Selana allowed herself a smile. "You'll see. I'll be quite a help."

Standing in the archway to the kitchen, arms folded, Tanis clucked his disbelief.

Flint clapped his hands and pulled a cap over his salt-and-pepper hair. "Well," he said, ignoring Tanis, "what are we waiting for?"

* * * * *

It was not, by anyone's account, turning out to be a good day, even for Tasslehoff. In the rolling foothills of the Eastwall Mountains, they had stopped to rest. Selana sat demurely on a dry stump; Tanis was on the ground at her feet, his back against it. Flint paced angrily before the kender, who lay on his stomach on the soft earth, his head propped up by his elbows, his eyes on the map spread before him.

"How do we know that mountain isn't new?" he asked defensively. "They were springing up left, right, and center during the Cataclysm, you know—couldn't hardly spit without hitting a new one. This map of mine is perfectly good." The kender gave it a thump for emphasis.

Having consulted one of Tasslehoff's many guides before leaving Solace, the companions saw that there were only three villages of any size to the north: Que-taw, Ravenvale, and Tantallon, and the only established route to the north went farther east than it needed before actually turning north. They thought they would save time by going cross-country, then cutting east in terrain that looked free and clear on Tas's map. They had traveled north out of Solace along the eastern shore of Crystalmir Lake and crossed into an area known as the Near Fields. For the entire overcast afternoon they walked north at the base of the Eastwall Mountains, looking for the range to stop so they could cut east. They had long ago passed the point on the map where the mountains should have ended.

"Tasslehoff," Flint began patiently, "have you ever, honestly, been to this area before? Did you make this map yourself?"

Tasslehoff looked sheepish. "Not entirely. One day I just sort of found it in my pack, so I'm not exactly sure where it came from." His eyebrows lifted in thought, and

he took a quill and bottle of ink out of his pack. "I've been adding to it, though, and now would be a good time to mark in the rest of that mountain range, wouldn't it?" He scratched at the paper with his quill, biting his lip in concentration.

"There's no point in a lecture now, Flint," said Tanis wearily, handing the dwarf a chunk of hard bread and a slice of jerky from his pack of supplies. "Let's just eat something and press on."

Flint took the food, dropped to the grass, and chewed. He looked up at the fading sunlight. "This looks as good as anyplace to make camp for the night. Besides, I'm sure Selana's feet have swelled up like hams, now that she's been off them for ten minutes."

All eyes turned to the bedraggled princess, who was munching on a crust of bread, having declined the offer of meat with a disdainful wrinkle of her nose.

Selana was, without a doubt, having the worst time of it. Her cheeks were speckled with dried,

crusty mud from the numerous times she had slipped on the trail or tripped over her robe and fallen. Her beautiful blue robe was ripped at the hem, where merciless shrubs had latched onto it. Her soft leather boots were downright mud-caked and provided no cushion against the unyielding terrain. No doubt partly as a consequence, she had been most irritable and was keeping to herself and speaking only in response to direct questions, while refusing any offers of help.

"I'll be fine, really," she protested weakly. "I'm just unused to all this walking."

"That's right!" exclaimed Tasslehoff. "You probably swim mostly, considering where you're from. But don't you ever walk on the bottom of the sea?"

Selana looked at his curious face and became self-conscious. "Sometimes," she responded in a clipped voice.

"I'm glad you brought the subject up, because I have a number of very important questions," said the kender, who was poised to take notes. "Is there sunlight underwater? I'll bet not, so how do you see? Do your fingers and toes get all pruny, too? Are there doors, or even buildings? If not, how do you keep things from getting stolen?"

"And what about talking? Anytime I've tried to speak underwater, all I get is bubbles and a snootful of water. So you probably have to put up with that all the time. What I really wonder is, how *do* you breath underwater? Perhaps you could show me how in a bucket sometime."

"Tasslehoff!" Tanis shrieked, aghast.

"What?" asked the kender, his eyes wide with innocence.

Instead of being offended, Selana laughed for the first time. "I don't blame Tasslehoff for being inquisitive about someone who's different—I confess to a curiosity about land dwellers, as well," she said to Tanis, before turning to the kender. "I don't know about the bucket, but I'll be happy to answer your questions, if you answer mine and help me to learn your customs."

"With pleasure!" Beaming, Tasslehoff looped his arm for her to take hold of, escorting the sea elf princess from the stump to a more secluded spot near a blooming crab tree. "Let's continue our talk in private." He sniffed over his shoulder for Tanis's benefit.

Flint and Tanis watched the two go.

"Well, if that isn't rich." Tanis scowled after them. "I ask a few intelligent questions—defend her privacy, for gods' sake—and I'm an impertinent jerk who doesn't deserve to live." The exasperated half-elf wagged his hand at the kender, who was happily seated next to the sea elf, engaged in conversation. "He openly insults her, and they become the greatest of friends. She probably finds his precociousness cute or something."

"Not jealous of a kender now, are you?" teased Flint, watching the half-elf out of the corner of his eye.

"Certainly not!" huffed Tanis. "I'd just like to understand the rules, that's all."

Still giving Selana a puzzled glance, Tanis set off in search of firewood. Feeling suddenly cold, he looked to the darkening sky and pulled down the sleeves of his deerskin jerkin for extra warmth. But the half-elf knew his chill had nothing to do with the weather.

Dinner, served two hours later, was braised ham steak, more bread, and dried p as soaked in ham juice until moist, then heated through. Flint soaked up the last of the tasty gravy with his bread, popped it into his mouth, and downed it with one satisfied gulp. He leaned back against a boulder rolled near the fire, patted his full stomach, and belched contentedly.

"Nobody can say you're not a good cook, Tasslehoff," he said. The dwarf locked his fingers behind his head. "Why doesn't someone tell a story?"

Tanis put up his hands. "You've heard all of mine a thousands times over."

"Selana knows a good one," blurted Tas.

The sea elf blushed. "I'm sure they wouldn't want to hear it." She was looking at Tanis.

"Sure they would!" exclaimed Tas. "Tell her *you* want to hear it, Tanis!"

Flint noticed the half-elf's chagrined expression. "We're interested in hearing anything about your people that you're willing to tell us," he said kindly.

"I'm always intrigued to hear of other customs and cultures," Tanis finally managed to say. He turned to the kender with a grin. "Since you've heard this story already, Tas, I vote it's your turn to go find some wood for the fire."

"It's dark beyond the firelight," said Selana. "Here,

take this, Tasslehoff." She reached into the depths of her robe and withdrew a small, curved sea shell. "It's a special conch shell. Hold it right here—" she placed Tasslehoffs hand on the rounded edge "—and point it anywhere you need illumination." Tas and the others were startled as muted yellow light poured from the opening in the shell.

"Wow! How does it do that?" asked Tas. "Is that how everyone sees underwater?"

"No, it's my own invention," the sea elf admitted vaguely.

"You mean, it's magical," cut in Tanis. "You didn't mention you were a mage."

"I am a spellcaster of some ability, yes," admitted Selana. "You never asked. Besides, after your comment back in Solace, I thought it might make Flint uncomfortable."

"You thought he might not let you go with us!"

"I don't believe he *let* me go, anyway," she said evenly. "I told him I'd go with or without him."

"Would you both stop talking about me as if I weren't here?" interrupted Flint. "I'll admit, Tanis, I don't care much for magic, but it hasn't caused any problems yet."

"And it won't," Selana stated firmly. "In fact, I was wondering how I would bring the subject up, but I cast a locate object spell earlier over Tasslehoffs map and have determined that the bracelet is in the village called Tantallon. That should speed things up for us."

Flint and Tanis exchanged looks. That was good news—Tantallon wasn't far away. They could find their way there with or without Tasslehoffs maps. But magic made them nervous, and both remained silent.

Anxious to change the subject, Selana turned to the kender. Fascinated by the shell light, Tas was busy turning it on and off by shifting his grip.

"If you run into any trouble, Tasslehoff," Selana said,

"just blow into the shell." The sea elf demonstrated by pressing her lips to the shell. Curious, Tas imitated her pose and let loose a great burst of air.

"That's terrific!" the happy kender crowed. "It sounds just like a trumpet!" He moved to blow it again, but Flint's hand pulled the shell from his lips.

"Remember, Tasslehoff, you're only to blow it if you're in trouble. And, believe me, you'll need help if I catch you tooting it for pleasure." The dwarf wasn't sure his warning sank in, for the kender, happy as a bumblebee, headed for the thicket of trees just beyond the fire's glow to gather wood and test the light's range.

Tanis settled back and tried to get comfortable. "You have an interesting name, Princess. What do those honorifics mean, 'Shark Chaser' and 'Moonbeam Laughter'?"

Selana looked at Tanis intently for just a moment, as if deciding whether his question was sincere or some kind of trick.

"Every Dargonesti child receives two special names, what you called honorifics, one from his mother and the other from his father. Only members of the family use them, though everyone knows them.

"Moonbeam Laughter is my mother-name, and a fairly common one. On bright nights, moonbeams filtering down through the waves delight small children, who chase them to and fro until their parents send them off to sleep.

"Shark Chaser is my father-name. He gave it to me when I was fourteen, and I am very proud of it."

Warming to the subject, Selana began to relax. "The Day of Redemption," she continued, "is a very important holiday to my people. It commemorates the day when Nakaro Silverwake, one of our greatest heroes, completed his quest to recover the lost sword, Tideripper. This was the weapon of Drudarch Takalurion, the founder of our nation and the very first Speaker of the Moons. Nakaro had to travel far into the realm of the koalinths and lacedons—the fish-goblins and sea ghouls—and face many terrors to recover the lost sword. Every year we celebrate this great day with feasts and excursions.

"When I was fourteen, to commemorate the Day of Redemption, my family traveled to Armach uQuoob, 'the Dry Land in the Sea.' Your ancestors knew this city as Hoorward, which was on the island of Kosketh Minor, before the Cataclysm sank it into the ocean. In long ago days it served as our capital, but in my childhood it was an outpost, on the frontier of our lands. There we kept watch against the evil sea creatures who would invade our realm: koalinths, lacedons, and their allies, the scraggs, octopuses, and sharks. You who live on land assume these are nothing more than animals, but you are mistaken. In the deeps of the oceans they are intelligent and cunning, and in their dark caves and sunken ruins they plot against my people in languages of their own."

During this discourse, Tasslehoff had returned bearing an armload of wood, shining the light through the trees and playfully putting the horn to his lips. He dumped the wood unceremoniously to the ground and plopped down on a log beside Flint. He drew his knees up close to his chest and wrapped his arms around them, resting his chin on his knees. "Don't stop on my account," he said, "I'm listening."

The fire crackled and spit sparks into the air as Selana resumed her tale of the sea. "On this Day of Redemption, we assembled in the sand plain outside the city for ceremonies and festivities. I was to sit at my father's side on the coral sled as he greeted the citizens. But when the time came, I was nowhere to be found. My father could not delay the ceremony, though he was furious with my irresponsibility. He dispatched the captain of his bodyguard to search for me."

Wide-eyed, Tas blurted, "Where were you? I bet you were in danger!"

Selana smiled wistfully. "Yes, but not so much as my cousin, Trudarquo. He was only eight years old and had wandered off before the ceremony. My aunt, sister of my father, was distraught and sought my help in finding him. This was some hours before the ceremony was scheduled. We searched widely for him in the coral shelves where he had been playing, but found nothing. On a hunch, I swam back to the city, to a deserted region where we were forbidden to go. Like children everywhere, of course, young Dargonesti are drawn to such prohibited places. And there I found him, exploring and playing at being Nakaro Silverwake on his epic quest."

Almost in spite of himself, Tanis was being drawn into her tale. Selana reminded him much of Laurana, the daughter of the Speaker of the Sun, with whom he'd been raised. There was genuine warmth in her, behind the haughty, selfish demeanor.

"By this time, I knew the ceremonies had begun, and that I would be scolded by my father. We hurried to return, but as we passed an abandoned building, I smelled the unmistakable odor of sharks, our mortal enemies. I peeked into the building and saw there three great white monsters, gathering no doubt to waylay and kill some Dargonesti and stain our holiday. But they had spotted Trudarquo as well, and burst from their cover bent on killing.

"With their awful teeth slashing and their massive tails pumping the waves, they thrashed through the water after the terrified child. They hadn't seen me, and that gave me a tremendous advantage. With my most powerful spell, I created six images of myself and surrounded the creatures with them. I made myself look as ferocious as possible and moved as if to attack them. Thinking themselves outnumbered, the sharks fled—directly toward the celebration!

"I chased them the whole way, and when they burst into the festival ground, pandemonium ensued. My people are not warlike, and the sharks, in their frenzy, dove into the crowd for cover. Fortunately, my father's bodyguard is very well trained, and they immediately closed in. Within minutes the sharks were driven away from the crowd and killed. No one was seriously hurt.

"With the bodies of our enemies dragged away to the kitchens, my father resumed the ceremony with me at his side. During his address, he publicly proclaimed me 'Shark Chaser.' It was the proudest moment of my young life."

"Wow, what a story! Can't you just see it, Tanis?" Tasslehoff nearly burst with excitement. "Sharks thrashing through the crowd as the soldiers close in, images of Selana darting everywhere. That would have been something to see."

"It certainly would, Tas," agreed Tanis, stretching his limbs. "You're quite the adventuress, Princess."

Though it was hard to tell in the flickering firelight, and all the harder because of Selana's fair complexion, Tanis thought he saw the sea elf princess blush. "Life beneath the sea is beautiful and majestic, but often harsh as well."

There was a brief, almost awkward silence, then Tanis volunteered, "I'll keep first watch." The night was warm, but a gentle spring breeze, blowing from the still snow-covered mountains to the east, gave a slight chill to the air. Tas climbed into the low limbs of an aspen tree and fell fast asleep inside his furry vest, hugging his hoopak. Flint curled up before the fire, his shaggy head on a mossy rock, cap pulled over his eyes. Selana turned her back to everyone, drew her cape about her, and slept in a protective cross-legged position that looked downright

uncomfortable. Tanis pulled his blankets around his shoulders and settled in for the watch.

The moon was nearly overhead two hours later when Tanis tossed a handful of pebbles up into the tree to wake the kender. Tas sputtered awake and slipped good-naturedly from the tree to take his turn standing watch over the group.

Two hours after that, Flint awoke less cheerfully, and the remainder of the night passed uneventfully.

Little was said during the morning march. It seemed to Tanis that Selana was even more withdrawn than before. He had hoped that telling her tale last night would make her feel more a part of the group, but she seemed less inclined to share anything, as if she were embarrassed by her self-revelation. While he knew the endless walking was very tiring for her, the half-elf found her snooty attitude annoying.

When they paused for lunch, Selana settled herself wordlessly several yards from the group.

"Excuse me, Princess," Tanis called stiffly, "but do you think you could rouse yourself and fetch some water for our lunch?"

"If there's one thing I know, it's water," she retorted. Glowering, she snatched the small pan from his hand and half stomped, half limped toward the sound of rushing water.

Flint put a hand on the half-elf's forearm. Gray eyes probed the young elf's troubled face. "What's gotten into you, Tanis? You don't usually have such trouble getting along with people. You've been downright rude to the princess on several occasions."

Tanis shook his head. "I know, Flint, but sometimes she reminds me so much of Laurana and her

stuck-up, royal ways." Laurana, Flint knew, was the daughter of Tanis's guardian, Solostaran. Her selfish love for Tanis had caused the trouble that made him leave his native Qualinost. "After so many years, I'm surprised that type of woman can still make me angry." He rubbed his face wearily.

"Someday you'll resolve your differences with Laurana," predicted Flint. "Selana and Laurana do have a great deal in common, not the least of which is an aristocratic elven upbringing," he agreed. "But don't punish one for the other's mistakes."

Lunch was assembled and waiting twenty minutes later, but Selana had not returned. After another twenty minutes, Tanis was irritated, but the elder dwarf was growing concerned.

"I'm sure she's fine, Flint," said Tanis. "She'd give a blast on the conch shell if she weren't."

Working on his maps in the warmth of the sun, Tasslehoff's head snapped up. "Uh, she probably would if she had it. I meant to give it back last night, really I did, but then we all fell asleep and it slipped my mind. I'll give it back first thing when I see her."

"If any of us ever sees her again," muttered Flint, frantically scouring the landscape with his eyes. "It doesn't take this long to get water. Come on, we've got to look for her."

"She probably got near the stream and just couldn't resist taking a swim," Tanis suggested reasonably, trying to quell his own growing concern. He trotted over the uneven, hilly turf next to Flint and Tasslehoff as they followed the sound of running water. "Haven't you noticed the way she's been splashing her face with water from her wineskin?"

They pressed through some prickly shrubs and burst upon the stream bank. Selana was nowhere to be seen.

"Maybe she came upon the creek at a different point," suggested Flint. Without being asked, Tasslehoff ran some distance down the stream to the right, Tanis to the left. They rejoined Flint but could report nothing.

The dwarf was on one knee, examining the marshy ground near the stream. "Look at these," he said, pointing. "Here are footprints the size of Selana's."

"What are those?" Tas asked, directing their gaze to a confusion of animal prints surrounding hers. "They look cloven hoofed." He glanced up, puzzled. "Goats? Selana ran off with a herd of goats?"

Flint and Tanis's glances met and locked knowingly. "Not goats. Satyrs. They like elves and women and, especially, elven women."

Instantly, off in the near distance could be heard the melancholy wailing of reed pipes. Tanis tried to issue a warning, to clap his hands over his own ears, but the gesture came too late. He had heard the tune of a satyr pipe and was instantly charmed.

"What's that exquisite melody, and where is it coming from?" asked the bewitched half-elf, his eyes glazed over.

Smiling serenely, his keen dwarven ears cocked, Flint pointed his thick finger to a grove of aspen trees downstream along the river's edge. "I believe the music is coming from over there."

"Let's go!" hollered Tasslehoff happily, leading the way as the three companions skipped like children over the awakening landscape toward the plaintive sound of the pipes. Shrieking with delight, Tasslehoff plucked a milkweed pod and blew the silky down into Flint's face. Giggling, the red-faced dwarf gave Tas a playful shove that sent him tumbling in a merry ball down the slope. Head thrown back in laughter, Tanis scooped up the hapless kender and tossed him onto his broad shoulders.

They all pressed on toward the grove.

Stumbling through the ring of trees, they spotted Selana, her robe thrown open, revealing a tight tunic that came past her knees. Head thrown back joyously, she was dancing a jig in the center of a

circle of six goat-men.

One of them poured a mixture of white and red wine into her open mouth, which she gulped happily.

Spotting the companions, the wild and frolicking half-man, half-goats waved them forward with their human arms, kicking up their hooves. In moments, the three travelers joined in the revelry, linking arms with their hosts and capering through the woods.

"Tasslehoff, Flint, Tanis, my good friends!" cried Selana, drawing them all up in a heartening embrace. She waved her hand to include the satyrs. "Meet my new friends, Enfield, Bomaris, Gillam, Pendenis, Kel, and Monaghan! Isn't their music enchanting?" she asked, her expression dreamy. "Play that little welcoming ditty again," she pleaded.

"Anything for you, dear Princess," rumbled the satyr named Enfield, his voice a beautiful bass. As one, the gathering of six goat-men tilted their short-horned heads and pressed wooden pipes to their lips. A lilting jig issued forth.

Happily entranced, Flint snatched a proffered jug of wine and raised it on his arm, smacking his stained lips as the rosy liquid dribbled through his beard. He passed the jug to Tanis, who sent it along to Tas.

Pendenis clapped the kender's small shoulder. "Life is too short to be serious, eh, little friend? Come, climb upon my back, and I will show you the merriment that awaits us in the heart of the woods."

"Let's all go!" cried Flint, swinging himself onto Kel's back. Although he was usually suspicious of riding any beast, at that moment the dwarf could not imagine a more lively mode of travel. Ducking, Gillam charged Tanis playfully from behind and tossed the laughing half-elf onto his goat posterior. Selana, astride Enfield, led the way.

Singing all the bawdy songs they could remember, they rollicked like children, carefree and uninhibited in

nature's nursery. Dancing, drinking, and romping as they had never done before, they immersed themselves in the satyrs' world of joy and pleasure, free of remorse, guilt, and conscience. They vanished into the woods behind a curtain of privacy.

* * * * *

Tanis was the first to awaken in the stillness of the grove. Ashes smoldered in the firepits, and a sliver of pink sunlight was rising on the eastern horizon. He could not for the life of him remember what he was doing here, but something about the scene felt very, very wrong.

For one thing, his noggin felt like an overripe tomato. And for another, Tasslehoff was sprawled across his legs. The half-elf gently shook the kender. The kender just blubbered in his sleep, rolled away, and curled his slender frame around a large rock.

Several feet away, the dwarf lay on his back, snoring loudly, an empty wineskin dangling from his whiskery lips. "Flint!" Tanis hissed.

Flint snorted into wakefulness and spit out the skin. "Huh? Who's there?" Wincing, he put a hand to his temples and squeezed his eyes shut again. "Whoever you are, please saw off my head, and be quick about it!"

"This is serious," chided Tanis.

"So who's joking?" Flint grumbled, opening his eyes at last and sitting up. "What happened? Where

are we?"

Tanis shook his head. "I don't know." He squinted in thought and spoke slowly. "From the looks of the sun, it's morning, though how much time has passed I'm not sure. The last thing I remember was standing by the creek in afternoon. We were looking for Selana and found—"

"Satyr hoofprints!" groaned Flint. "We were bewitched by the pipes!" He looked around the grove frantically and spotted the kender's curled form. "There's Tasslehoff, but where's the princess? Do you suppose they kidnapped her?"

Both men jumped to their feet and raced around until they found the sea elf princess behind a shrub. She was still breathing; in fact, she was smiling broadly in her sleep, her indigo robe spread out beneath her. Her tunic was twisted around on her body, and her hair was disheveled, with sticks and dried grass poking from it.

"Thank the gods she's safe," sighed Flint.

Tanis rubbed his face wearily. "I don't know about you, but I have no memory of what happened." He looked at the sleeping princess. "We'd better wake her up and get going. The gods alone know how much time we've lost."

"Time isn't the only thing we've lost," piped up Tasslehoff, suddenly behind them. "Check your pockets. Selana's shell light is gone."

Tanis and Flint both pulled out their pockets and opened their pouches: empty. "Blast it!" cried the dwarf. He looked at the dagger on Tanis's hip, and felt the axe strapped to his own and gave a sigh of resignation. "At least they left our weapons."

"With those magical pipes, they probably don't have much need for defense," said Tanis, finding his bow and quiver of arrows in the low branches of a tree.

Oddly, it was the kender, his pouches of valuables untouched, whose face burned with fury. He stomped his foot. "They may throw a good party," he stormed, "but I'm not very impressed with satyrs as a race, I'll tell you! Imagine the nerve of taking what doesn't belong to you!"

"Imagine that." Flint whistled softly.

Chapter 10

The Ultimate Betrayal

The thing that annoyed Delbridge most about the tiny cell he was in was the damp, putrid smell of rot that even fresh straw could not overcome. He tried inhaling in small gulps through his mouth for a while, which helped, but also gave him a sore throat.

He hated the boredom, too. The cell was dark, as there was no window, not even a crack around the door, so he had long since lost track of time. For a while he kept busy counting the stone blocks on the floor by feeling them with his fingers, but he also encountered other things—things that disgusted him by the very touch—so he stopped and lost count at thirty-three. He listened to the sound of water dripping in the distance and counted drips, too, but he gave up at nine-hundred-seventy-two when it began to rain and the drips turned into an indistinguishable torrent.

Eventually someone opened the huge wooden door, but Delbridge's eyes were so unused to light that he could make out no more than a vague, man-shaped outline in the glaring doorway. He tried questioning the person, to crawl after him, but whoever it was only growled and flung something on the floor and slammed the door in Delbridge's face. On the cold stone blocks he found a piece of stale, fuzzy bread and a water skin whose contents smelled like the inside of the animal the container was made from. Even the corpulent Delbridge was not hungry enough for that.

Just keeping his mind on the petty things that annoyed him became his chief occupation, because the alternative was thinking about the really big things, like his predicament. His sheer helplessness left him panicky. He had never before been caught in a situation out of which he could not lie, cheat, steal, or wheedle; he simply did not know how to respond to a crisis where he had no apparent options.

When would someone come so he could explain away this terrible mistake? The day before, he had appeared before Lord Curston and seen a vision of disaster befalling the knight's only son. This imprisonment had to be related to that, because he had done nothing else since coming to Tantallon.

Why was he being punished? If Delbridge's vision had been averted, everyone should be happy; they should be showering him with rewards. And if nothing had happened to threaten Lord Curston's son, they should be even happier. Surely he was not being treated this way because they thought him a charlatan?

Suddenly it hit him that there was another possibility. What if something unspeakable had happened to Squire Rostrevor? Delbridge gulped. The possibility had seemed so remote yesterday. Surely, between the knight's guards and the wizard Balcombe's spells, the boy was safe from whatever threatened him.

But what if he wasn't? Something had certainly gotten him in the vision. Perhaps the vision had come true, and now Delbridge was in prison.

They thought he was involved somehow! It was the only reasonable explanation. The boy had disappeared and the knight was blaming Delbridge. He sank to the stone floor of his cell with his arms wrapped around his head. Why on Krynn would he want the boy—or anyone else, for that matter? He had enough trouble taking care of himself.

Even if he didn't do the deed himself, it certainly looked as if he knew about it beforehand.

Delbridge tried to think more positively. Maybe his vision was only *similar* to what happened to Rostrevor. Maybe he could reinforce the notion that he only predicted the disaster, but did not bring

it about. The tragedy happened because Curston and his mage were unable to protect the boy adequately. Maybe he could persuade someone, if someone ever came to talk to him. He sighed.

Delbridge looked toward the door. When would it open again?

This whole mess was the fault of that damned bracelet! Delbridge dug his hand in his pocket, wrenched the cold metal from its depths, and caught and ripped the pocket lining as he did. "What a miserable piece of rotten luck," he blurted, flinging the bracelet across the acrid chamber. It clanked against the stone and landed with a dull rustle in the straw. He thrust his hands into the pockets of his gown and paced.

If Lord Curston didn't kill him, this waiting would.

Eventually he found a dry patch of straw and fell asleep. Some time later, light streaming in the open door awakened him.

"Take your wretched food away," the prisoner muttered without looking or getting up. "I did not eat the garbage you brought earlier, and I will not eat the garbage you are bringing now, you unwashed, unschooled ape of a turnkey." Struggling to sit up, Delbridge decided to push his luck. "I demand to see whomever is responsible for my wrongful incarceration, at once!"

"You are in no position to demand anything," rumbled a baritone voice. "Perhaps you don't realize the serious charges facing you."

"That's just it! I don't know what the charges are!" whined Delbridge, forgetting his high-brow antics. "Who are you, anyway? I can't see your face. Could we have a light in here, a torch maybe? Or better yet, why don't we go somewhere else—"

"Shala delarz."

Delbridge leaped back as flames shot up before his eyes, scorching his brow. When he could focus again, he was horrified to see that the flames engulfed the man's left hand. Even stranger still, the fellow stood calmly, regarding Delbridge, his flaming hand held upright like a torch. Instinctively, Delbridge reached out to smother the fire. The man stopped him with a wave of his blazing limb.

"Don't touch me. I have invoked a simple burning spell to illuminate the darkness. I find it less bothersome than carrying a torch." He turned his hand this way and that, admiring it. "It makes a vivid impression, don't you agree?"

"Yes, certainly. . . ." Delbridge stepped back and eyed him warily in the light of the unnatural fire.

Delbridge saw that this was Balcombe, the wizard he had met the day before, Lord Curston's adviser. Standing this close, Delbridge realized he had to look up at Balcombe, as the man was taller than average. He wore a long, shiny red cape and hood with a black lining over powerful, broad shoulders. The cape was fastened with a large gem brooch. The wizard's facial skin seemed almost translucent and paper-thin, blue veins pulsing beneath the unnaturally smooth surface, like the flesh of a ripe honey dew melon. Unlike the day before, he wore a dark red, embroidered silk patch over his right eye.

Smiling slightly to himself at Delbridge's discomfort, the man blew out the flames and then, with his hand still smoking, drew forth a slim wand from the depths of his cape. With a whispered command, a dim light grew from within the wand until it cast a soft illumination across the room.

"That was an interesting tale you told yesterday," Balcombe said conversationally in his even baritone voice.

"Thank you. I'm delighted you thought so," Delbridge said, his voice laced with sarcasm. "Perhaps you would be good enough to tell me why I've been imprisoned, then."

The mage folded his arms beneath the sleeves of his robe and rocked back on his heels. "All in good time. Your story made a great impression on Lord Curston. How did you come by your

information?"

Sensing an opportunity for salvation and self-promotion, Delbridge's fear and uncertainty faded, but did not disappear entirely. He straightened to his full if unimposing height of five feet, two inches. "It was an authentic vision of the future. I told you, I am an oracle, a seer. If my ability has earned me a position on the court, I must assert that I do not like the way you deliver the news. In fact, I may have to reconsider my interest in the position—or at the very least revise my salary expectations." Delbridge waved his arms to indicate the surroundings. "This little charade, obviously meant to test my mettle, is not the least bit amusing."

"It is meant neither as a test nor any type of amusement."

The mage's voice had the timbre of heavy iron doors clanging shut. Balcombe began to pace slowly, calmly, the hem of his robe making a gentle "swish-swish" sound against the cold stone floor. He stopped and considered Delbridge over steepled fingertips pressed contemplatively to his lips.

"Omar dicar . . . I'm not familiar with the name. You aren't from this area, are you?"

Delbridge shook his head. "I only came to Castle Tantallon to offer my services to Lord Curston. I'm from—" Delbridge remembered his ignominious departure from Thelgaard Keep—"let's just say I travel a lot."

"A nobleman's son abducted and imprisoned somehow, spirited away to face an overwhelming evil, his family left in sorrow and bereavement. . . Such a tragic fate." Balcombe fished something from one of his pockets and toyed with it in his palm. "Is that everything you know, or did you see something more in that 'vision'?"

Delbridge did not like being reminded of the revelation, and his shoulders slumped again. "No. I told you everything." He certainly did not like the turn the conversation was taking.

The prisoner's eyes narrowed. He decided to try one last time to learn what was going on. "I seem to be answering a lot of questions on the basis of very little information. I don't even know why I'm here. Why should I tell you anything?"

The mage fiddled absently with his wand and the other object in his hand, which Delbridge realized was a large blue gem. Then Balcombe turned to face Delbridge directly. "You should tell me what I ask, because I am the person who has been sent to interview you. If you satisfy my legal and professional curiosity, I can arrange your release from this cell. If you do not—if, instead, you create more questions or raise disturbing doubts about your intentions or motives—then you could find yourself staying here for a very, very long time." Leaning close to Delbridge, he added, "Or, even worse, a very, very short time."

The mage straightened, his expression noncommittal. "In either event, I think, perhaps, you do know why you are here. I will tell you anyway, to be sure we are both discussing the same thing."

He paced, worrying the blue gem between thumb and forefinger. "This morning, when we opened Squire Rostrevor's room, it was empty. The squire was gone, vanished without a trace. With the guards and my magical protections in place, nothing I know of could have entered or exited that room undetected. Yet the squire was removed."

Delbridge's eyes were buggy with surprise. His worst fear had been realized: Squire Rostrevor *had* been abducted, and he *was* to blame.

The one-eyed mage stopped before Delbridge. "Only someone who knew about our plan could have executed such a bold infiltration."

Delbridge shivered uncontrollably. He'd foreseen tragedy for someone else and was now becoming its victim.

These melancholy thoughts were interrupted by Balcombe's smooth baritone. "You, of course, are very badly implicated. If you tell me what has become of the squire and how the crime was carried

out, your execution will be merciful."

"Execution!" The threat of death wakened Delbridge like a slap in the face. "I had nothing to do with that boy's disappearance! I didn't even know Lord Curst on had a son until yesterday at my audience. How could I have kidnapped him? Why would I have kidnapped him?"

"That is precisely what I intend to find out."

Even through his panic, Delbridge could see that he was fighting a losing battle. Undoubtedly there was sorcery involved, something much darker than the bracelet. He had seen such witch-hunts before. If this went the way he feared, the less evidence anyone could find against him, the guiltier he would look. At the same time, he dared not say anything that could be interpreted as a confession or an admission of guilt.

"Your grace, I beg you to consider what you're accusing me of. If I was involved, why would I have announced my intention to commit the crime beforehand?"

Balcombe carefully wedged his illuminating wand into a crack in the wall, then grasped the gem between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand. He held it up so the light from his wand could refract from it, spilling tiny motes across the cell walls. "A gem in the wild is an odd thing. Have you ever seen one?"

Delbridge shook his head apathetically, and Balcombe continued. "They look nothing like the finished beauties we value so much. Rough, dark, shapeless. An untrained eye would readily discard a priceless gem as a worthless rock.

"But the trained eye, the eye that is wise in the ways of gems, sees the innocent-looking rock for what it is, however much it tries to hide its nature." He dropped the gem to his right palm and snapped his fingers over it. Delbridge vaguely recalled noticing that the man had no thumb on his right hand. "Like an uncut gem, the motives of evil persons are never clear or straightforward."

"How could I have spirited away Curston's son?" squealed Delbridge. "I'm no mage. I could never have overcome your magic."

"Come now," Balcombe replied in his most condescending tone, "we are not fools. Surely you had accomplices in this. If you do not wish to confess yourself, simply give me their names. Your cooperation will be considered when sentence is handed down."

"I am innocent!" screamed Delbridge, collapsing against the stone wall. "How can I defend myself? If I admit guilt, then you will believe me and I'm doomed. If I say I'm innocent, you tell me I'm lying. Why are you even here? To torment me? I've done nothing wrong!"

Balcombe stood passively and watched Delbridge as he hugged himself, rocking back and forth against the cold stones.

"I am here because Lord Curston sent me."

Delbridge regarded the mage coldly, but said nothing.

"I am also here to satisfy my own curiosity. Obviously, magic of some sort was involved. That concerns me."

Balcombe stroked his goatee. "Just for a moment, let's look at the possibility that you had nothing to do with this crime. Even if we presume your innocence, there are unanswered questions. Chief among them is, how did you know what would happen before it happened? Perhaps, if you could answer that question to my satisfaction, your outlook would improve.

"If, however, you continue to defy me and avoid my questions, I shall leave immediately and proffer my report to my liege. It will be a very negative one."

Certainly Delbridge had not intended to forfeit the upper hand in this debate, but he was boxed in. He saw very clearly that this mage had nothing to lose and everything to gain by framing him for

the crime, whatever might actually have happened.

"I have told you what I know," he sighed. "I have the ability to foretell the future. It's a miraculous gift, really, something I've always strived not to exploit. Instead, I try to help people through dark times, inasmuch as I can. I was trying to help your Lord Curston yesterday."

The stout human twisted an ornate ring on his finger nervously. "What I said yesterday was what I saw. I wasn't certain how to interpret it. It was so vivid and frightening. And I certainly had no notion that the forces at work were beyond even your power to stop."

Tenaciously, Delbridge plowed forward. "If only I had full mastery over my power I'm sure that I could bring tremendous good—"

"That is quite enough," interrupted Balcombe. His fiery gaze put the lid on anything further Delbridge might have said. Balcombe clasped his hands behind his back and paced across the width of the cell. All the while his gaze fixed Delbridge in place until every bit of confidence that the ersatz mage had built up for himself had eroded.

After ten or twelve traversals of the cell, Balcombe stopped and stood, facing Delbridge directly. The prisoner noted with some alarm that Balcombe was awfully close to the bracelet, where it lay concealed in the moldy straw.

"I believe that some of your story is true," Balcombe began. "Not most of it, not even a third of it, but some. For example, I believe you can sense bits of the near future. I also believe that you have difficulty understanding what you experience.

"The rest of your story . . . no, I don't believe any of that. For example, I don't believe it is a natural ability you've always had. If that were true, you should be good at it by now. I also don't believe you have ever used it to benefit anyone but yourself.

"So let's try again and see if we can get a little closer to the truth. Tell me exactly what you 'saw' in this vision you had. In particular, do you have any notion who was behind the squire's disappearance?"

This line of questioning was much more to Delbridge's liking. He considered, for the first time in his life, that perhaps telling the truth was the best thing he could do. Unfortunately, he was afraid the answers would disappoint Balcombe.

"The first time I knew anything about this was when I was standing before you yesterday." Delbridge's voice wavered, unaccustomed to speaking the truth. "I stood there, completely blank. I had nothing prepared to say. I was counting on the moment, hoping I would be inspired. I just wasn't ready for what came."

Balcombe had paid close attention throughout Delbridge's account. Now he stepped back, as if affronted. "That's it? There is nothing more: no names, no faces, no motives?"

"No, sir," Delbridge apologized.

"That's not much."

Balcombe stood near the doorway, pondering Delbridge's story. The light from the wand made his pale flesh look gray and unearthly. For a moment, Delbridge felt as if he were in the presence of death. He quickly shook off the notion, reminding himself that this man was his only hope, though an incredibly thin hope, for redemption.

At last Balcombe spoke, the gaze of his one eye, cold and unblinking, fixed on the mage. "If I take this story to Lord Curston, he will not be convinced. While it has some feel of truth, there is nothing to back it up. It is far easier for a man of Curston's disposition to believe you were privy to an evil conspiracy than that some benevolent magical force visited you for no particular reason."

The mage's tone shifted slightly during this speech. He was no longer the inquisitor or prosecutor.

Instead he began sounding like a confidant, a counselor. He resumed his pacing. "Lord Curston is a Knight of Solamnia. His faith is in the power of his sword. He understands and believes in things he can touch, things he can defeat with his sword. Things he cannot touch, like the ability to foresee the future, he will not trust for long. He may not believe such a story at all.

"If there is any more to your ability, I recommend that you tell me now, because if I tell Lord Curston what you have told me and he does not believe it, he will pass sentence immediately."

Balcombe turned so that he faced the cell door, his back to Delbridge. "I'm sure the sentence will be hanging."

Delbridge considered his options. He vaguely remembered once hearing an old soldier in a tavern telling everyone gathered round that the threat of imminent death sharpened his wits remarkably—that was how he'd managed to survive so long. Delbridge himself had experienced that on occasion. Now his head was a muddled mess. He shook it violently, hoping to clear away the fog. Still he had trouble concentrating.

Sweat beaded on his forehead. It trickled into his eyes and stung, making him blink. His thoughts wandered, then settled on the bracelet. It was the source of his trouble. If he got rid of it, would his problems go away, too?

"Would Lord Curston believe my story if he could see some proof? Touch something tangible? I have proof. You could show it to him."

Balcombe turned to face Delbridge again, his eyebrow arched. "What sort of proof?"

"A magical device," blurted Delbridge, "a copper bracelet. I don't know where it came from. I got it from a tinker only two days ago ... or was it three?"

"Where is this bracelet?" Balcombe probed. "Have you still got it?"

A shaky hand pointed to the corner where Delbridge had flung the copper band. Balcombe snatched the illuminating wand from the wall and eagerly stepped to the corner. He kicked aside the limp, blackened straw until a glint caught his eye. Slowly he bent and picked up the bracelet. The precious stones caught light from Balcombe's wand and reflected it into hundreds of points that danced along the rough walls.

Balcombe examined it closely but did not put it on. Still dangling it from his fingers, he turned to Delbridge. "If this device is what you say, I believe there is some chance Lord Curston will relent in his prosecution against you. I will speak to him in your defense."

Having concluded his business, Balcombe rapped on the cell door with his light wand. It swung open heavily on protesting hinges. As the mage stepped out, darkness fell across the room and the door shut with a bang.

* * * * *

The clack of a door bolt and screeching hinges awakened Delbridge. He recoiled like a snake from the bright torchlight streaming in through the doorway, shielding his eyes against the far wall of his cell. As he came fully awake, he remembered where he was.

Turning slowly, still shading his eyes with his hand, he squinted at the opening. Someone stood there, backlit by a flaring torch. Delbridge saw the outline of a peaked helmet and a spear held upright.

"Come on, now, you've business with Lord Curston." The voice was rough and tinged with sarcasm.

Delbridge shrank away to cower in the corner. "What is it? Has he sent for me? Am I to be

released?"

"It's not my job to answer questions. Don't make me drag you out of here."

A second shape stepped into the light. "All right, Toseph, wait in the hall," it spoke softly. Then louder, "You, prisoner, on your feet. It's time to see Lord Curston."

"Have I been pardoned? Where is Balcombe?"

The guards both ignored his question. Slowly Delbridge rose from his knees and stepped tentatively toward the door. By now his eyes were adjusting to the torchlight. In the hall he saw three more soldiers, besides the one in his cell, all apparently waiting to escort him to Lord Curston. He stumbled slightly as he crossed the threshold.

As Delbridge stepped into the hall, the soldiers closed around him. They walked without speaking down long hallways beneath the castle, past closed doors and open archways. Finally they ascended a winding flight of stone steps and passed through a wooden door.

Expecting to emerge in an inner chamber, Delbridge was stunned to see that he was outside in the castle courtyard. The sky was pink and cold, streaked with thin, angry black clouds. The courtyard was shrouded in gray, the rising sun still hidden behind massive, fortified walls.

Delbridge looked all around in panic. He saw no sign of either Curston or the mage, Balcombe. The courtyard was divided, half being occupied with merchants' and craftsmen's stalls, the other half reserved for the castle's military use. Delbridge and his escort passed between a barracks building and the commercial area, and he could see they were headed toward a large, open court. As they rounded the corner, Delbridge's knees buckled.

A gallows was just beginning to catch the morning sun.

Two soldiers grabbed his sinking arms and propped him up, half aiding, half dragging him forward. Delbridge's eyes were tightly closed; his feet flailed uselessly at the ground.

The troop stopped in front of a line of men-at-arms, all standing at attention. Behind them were arrayed a hundred or more citizens from the town, and beyond them, within sight but out of hearing of the gallows—to the right of the castle gate—Lord Curston sat astride a powerful chestnut gelding. The elderly knight was splendid in his Solamnic armor, his helmet slung across the saddle pommel. Alongside Curston and slightly behind him was Balcombe, mounted on a black mare.

In an even voice, the sergeant-at-arms declared, "Omardicar the Omnipotent, you stand before this court accused of conspiracy, abduction, and sorcerous evil. You have pled innocence of these charges. Do you wish to change that plea now, in the presence of His Lordship, Sir Curston of Tantallon?"

Delbridge forced his eyes open. Although welling tears clouded his vision, he could see the knight in the distance on his horse, watching, his face haggard and grim. Delbridge's jaw moved up and down, but no sound came out. After several moments, he croaked rather than spoke the only words he could manage: "I am innocent."

The sergeant's eyes were cold and merciless as he looked down on the condemned man. He said in a clear voice: "Then Lord Curston finds you guilty."

He looked at the soldiers before him. "Guards, do your duty."

The crowd from the town cheered. Delbridge struggled against the arms that held him and cried out to the distant mage, "Balcombe! You promised to help me!" but the cheering throng drowned out his words to even those near him.

Delbridge's legs failed him completely as he was dragged to the gibbet and hauled up a ladder. As the noose was fitted over his head, he twisted to face Balcombe again. His voice was thick with fear as he screamed one final time, "The bracelet! What about the bracelet?"

Delbridge's last memory in life, before soldiers jerked the ladder away, was Balcombe, smiling and stroking his goatee, the morning sun glinting coppery and cold from his wrist.

Chapter 11

Meeting at Last

"Are you sure your spells are working right?" asked Tasslehoff, squinting against the sunlight that streamed over Selana's shoulders. Sitting cross-legged, he looked back down to study his game of "Exes and Ohs" in the dirt. "I mean, we've asked all over town and at the castle, and no one has heard of this Delbridge guy." Using his finger, the kender traced the third "X" in a line, then drew through it once again, declaring himself the winner of the solitary game.

"*I know* my bracelet is somewhere inside this keep," Selana said stubbornly, standing above him, her arms folded across the torn and filthy front of her dark blue robe. Her face, beneath the loosely tied light-blue scarf, was scratched and tinged red from exposure to sun.

"My first spell indicated that Delbridge was going to Tantallon, and the one I just cast reveals indisputably that the bracelet is here." The sea elf's blue-green eyes took in the vast, rectangular keep made of foot-square blocks of gray, ribbed granite.

Seated on a stone watering trough, Tanis leaned back against the cold wall of the small pump house in the central courtyard and swung one leg indolently over the other. Dipping a cupped hand into the trough, he splashed his sweat-and grime-covered face with cool water and dried it on his sleeve. He closed his eyes and held his face up to the warmth of the late-afternoon sun.

Next to him on the ground, back against the wall, the old dwarf snored softly into his tipped hat. As he frequently reminded his half-elf friend, he was not as young as he used to be; even though his mind could not recall the night spent under the satyrs' charm spell, doing gods knew what, his body surely remembered. Flint's barrel-shaped body shuddered at the aches and pains.

Things had been a bit more strained between the small group in the eight or so hours since they had awakened among the wreckage of the satyr camp. If possible, the encounter had made the sea elf more headstrong and willful, more driven to retrieve her bracelet and return to the sea, than before.

Most humbling of all, the satyrs had taken nearly everything of value from everyone but Tas. The kender had been almost insulted that they'd overlooked his alabaster ink stopper and the tiny, engraved portrait of his parents, and they'd not taken even a single one of his maps. The sorry quartet barely had enough coinage left between them to purchase one serving of bubble and squeak, and none of them liked that bland cabbage-and-potato dish anyway.

"Well?"

Startled, Tanis popped one eye open. "Well, what?"

"Shouldn't someone go ask if this Delbridge person is in there?"

Tanis laughed. "It's not an alehouse, Selana," he said. "It's the home of the most influential person in this village, to which we are strangers. Perhaps our thief is his guest. You can't just march up and say 'hand over the chubby cheat in the green jacket.' "

"Why not?" asked Tas.

Only half-asleep and listening, Flint laughed himself awake.

"I'm not some little fool from the sea, Tanis Half-Elven," said Selana, glaring the dwarf into uncomfortable silence. "I'll simply tell them the truth, that I've come a long way to find a thief who stole a valuable bracelet of mine, and that I believe he is somewhere in the keep. Curston is a Knight of Solamnia, surely an honorable man. He'll listen with an open mind."

Tanis nodded, surprised to find that he agreed.

Tas jumped to his feet. "I'll come with you, Selana," he offered, having grown bored with winning "Exes and Ohs." Flint yanked him back to the ground.

"I don't like sending her to the door alone," he said, shaking his shaggy salt-and-pepper head, "but knowing the knighthood's distrust of anything not human, she'll have trouble enough without a kender, dwarf, or half-elf at her side. Cinch up your scarf, at least," he advised Selana, giving her hand a fatherly pat.

The sea elf frowned at the necessity, but nonetheless artfully rewrapped her dirty silk scarf about her head. She rehearsed a few lines as she passed through the arched portico and stepped up to the carved door. Taking the brass knocker ring firmly in hand, she slammed it again and again into the metal plate on the stout door.

Suddenly a wrinkled old face popped around the edge of the door, sporting an odd combination of ratty gray and corn-yellow hair. His eyes, slightly milked over with

early cataracts, were red-rimmed. Momentarily startled by the sea elf's unexpected countenance, he wedged himself between the massive door and the jam. Selana could see a black band around the thin biceps of his right arm.

"Excuse me, sir," she began as sweetly as she could manage. "My name is Selana, and I'm looking for a human named Delbridge Fid—"

"Never heard of him. Go away." The stoop-shouldered old servant moved to un wedge himself.

"Wait!" Selana cried. "It's very important that I find him, and I have good reason to believe he's in the keep. Perhaps I could speak with Lord Curston?" She batted her eyelids sweetly.

"Don't try that stuff on me, young lady," the old man said gruffly. "His Lordship isn't seeing anyone. Now, go away."

Selana placed her hand through the door and held onto the jam. "Perhaps he would make one small exception."

The man shook his head sadly, the bite seemingly knocked from him. "Not for Takhisis herself, I'm afraid. Young Rostrevor is missing, kidnapped two nights ago from his bedchamber, right under his father's nose. The keep is in a state, and I have strict orders not to disturb Lord Curston."

The servant looked newly agitated. "I'm a sad old man who's revealed more than he should. Leave us to our grief."

Selana shook her head mutely. "I'm—sorry, I didn't know," she managed to mumble at last, stumbling backward down the steps. Meeting her companions' questioning glances, the sea elf quickly relayed the news.

"A bit of bad luck and timing on our part," said Tanis.

"Is it?" Flint cut in quickly, scratching his beard in thought. "An opportunistic swindler arrives in town, the knight's son is kidnapped, and now there's no trace of either of them, but the bracelet is somewhere inside the keep. Coincidence?"

"Are you saying that you think the bumbling bard Gaesil described to us kidnapped the knight's son for some strange reason, then, for some equally unfathomable cause, left the bracelet behind?" Tanis asked, incredulous.

The dwarf ignored his friend's skepticism, tapping his whiskered chin. "I'm saying I have a hunch that unusual events traveling in pairs may be related, that's all."

Tanis frowned in dismay; the dwarf's hunches were often on the mark. If the bracelet was somehow tied up in the young man's disappearance, this whole escapade was going to be a lot more

complicated than just finding Delbridge and shaking him down for the stolen jewelry.

"Well," said Selana, "we aren't going to find the bracelet out here in the courtyard."

"There's another sure thing," pointed out Tas, looking at the closed wooden door. "We aren't going to be invited in to look for it."

"If you're thinking about sneaking in," said Flint, "we'll have to wait for cover of darkness."

"That's what everyone thinks," began Tasslehoff, shaking his finger, "but I've had different experiences. I know you won't believe this, but several times during my travels I've looked up and found myself someplace other than where I'd thought I was. I'm thinking mostly about this magical ring that teleported me to the lair of some giants, but those were special circumstances.

"Anyway," he continued, dismissing the ring story with a wave of his fine-boned hand, "the funny thing is, if you look like you belong somewhere, people tend to think you do. *Belong* there, that is."

"You're suggesting we just boldly stroll in the front door?" squealed Flint in disbelief.

Tas shrugged, twirling his topknot nonchalantly. "If you prefer, we could find a side entrance. I still have my tools, so these locks would be a snap—" he snapped his fingers "—to open."

"Pick, you mean," sighed Tanis, running a hand wearily through his thick hair. "I hate to think we've sunk to breaking in—it puts us at Delbridge's level of thievery."

"What's this talk about thievery?" scoffed Tas. "Just because we let ourselves in?"

"It does not lower us!" agreed Selana, her nose wrinkling. "He stole something that did not belong to him. We're simply retrieving what is rightfully ours."

Tanis held up his hands in mock defense, then waved everyone ahead of him. "Lead the way, Tas."

Tasslehoff stepped brightly out of the pump house's shade, then paused with his hands on his hips, studying the keep. Flint fidgeted next to him, nervously clutching the head of his axe and glancing over his shoulder. Selana and Tanis stood nearby. Within seconds, Tas spotted what he wanted and was hiking briskly toward the keep with his friends bustling behind.

At the spot Tas had chosen, a smaller building abutted the keep. Where the two structures met, a deeply recessed doorway led into the tower. The kender strode straight into it and nearly disappeared in its shadows. The door was set back six or seven feet from the keep's outer wall, so all four travelers could easily crowd into its space.

Selana watched in fascination as Tas pulled an oilcloth bundle from his pouch. He extracted a bent wire and a handleless knife blade with deep notches filed into it. Within moments, a solid "thunk" told everyone that the lock was open.

"After you," said Tas, pushing the door open and stepping aside. The three others filed past into a narrow corridor temporarily lit by sunlight, then Tas gently closed the door.

After several moments of waiting for his eyes to adjust, Tas spoke up. "I can't see a blasted thing in here."

"We dare not strike a light," whispered Tanis, and Selana and Flint mumbled soft agreement.

"Sure, you dwarves and elves can see in the dark. What about me? It's pitch black in here."

"You'll just have to do the best you can," said Tanis. "Just hang on to the person ahead of you. I'll lead, then Selana, Tas, and Flint in the rear. What do you make of this place, Flint?"

The dwarf was peering ahead into the darkness, tuning his innate ability to see outlines in the dark. "I don't have much of an answer, Tanis. It looks like a blind passage: no doors or connecting hallways in sight, though what's farther ahead than about twenty feet I can't say. The whole thing seems to curve to the left, and it's mighty narrow."

Tanis agreed. "The only way to go is forward until we cross an intersection."

They moved slowly along the corridor, footsteps echoing softly in the damp air. Tas hobbled along with one hand on the rough stone wall, the other clutching a corner of Selana's scarf.

"Where should we look first?" whispered Tas to no one in particular. "Say, come to think of it, why don't you just cast that spell again, Selana? You know, the one that tells you where the bracelet is."

"It's not like a divining rod, Tasslehoff," the sea elf explained. "It gives me only vague directions, though they can be narrowed down by asking the right questions. But I can cast that spell only once a day, and I've already done my quota for today."

Bringing up the rear, Flint cleared his throat softly. "The old fellow at the gate said the knight's son had been kidnapped from his bedchambers. I say we look there. If Delbridge *is* responsible for the abduction, he may have dropped the bracelet in his haste to leave."

"The only problem with that suggestion," whispered Tanis, "is that this hallway seems to be spiraling sharply down, not up, and if we turn around we'll only end up back at the dead-end door we came in."

Flint, trying desperately to clomp quietly over the stone-block floor in his heavy leather, hobnailed boots, gave Tasslehoff's shoulder a shove. "Nice job, doorknob. You probably picked the only entrance in this castle that didn't lead up into the keep. Instead, we're tromping to gods know where down this endless corkscrew hall. Haven't even seen one doorway yet."

"We're inside, aren't we?" Tas shot back. "Besides, I didn't see you—"

Tanis clapped his hands over his pointed ears. "Enough!" he hissed, whirling on them. Selana skittered to the side. "Your bickering could make a half-elf's head split in two, not to mention alerting anyone within a hundred yards of our presence."

Dwarf and kender fell into a sheepish silence.

"Is that a door, ahead on the left?" asked Selana, pointing around the half-elf's shoulder.

Tanis squinted and saw a vague outline about twenty feet down the spiraling hallway. Taking a half-dozen quick steps, he reached out a hand to touch the wooden surface. He groped around the left side for a knob.

"Wait!" whispered Tasslehoff, elbowing his way past Selana to Tanis's side. "You never just walk up and rattle a strange door, especially not in a place like this. It could be trapped or rigged with an alarm or all kinds of things." The kender rifled through a pouch and quickly found what he needed, then set about the delicate task of searching for springs, wires, latches, balance points, and a host of other hazards his companions could barely guess at.

Tanis was glad for the darkness, because he was blushing with embarrassment. He had been so anxious to get somewhere, anywhere, that he'd forgotten his common sense. Only a rank amateur charged through a door under such foreboding circumstances.

"I think it's clean," pronounced Tas at last, "but it was locked. You never can be too careful. Why, once my mother's eldest brother's eldest boy, Old Uncle Latchlifter—actually, that would make him my cousin, wouldn't it? Why do you suppose we called him uncle, then? Anyway, Old Uncle Latchlifter—not Uncle Trapspringer, who's far too clever about such things—Uncle Latchlifter got careless picking a lock. Kablooney! Of course, you only have to do that sort of thing once, don't you?"

"Open the door, Tas," Tanis ordered in a monotone.

"Certainly." Tas pushed it open and stepped through. "Before he died, Old Uncle Latchlifter was a great one for giving advice. 'Never hit your mother with a shovel,' he used to tell me. 'It leaves a big impression on her mind.'" Moved by the memory, Tasslehoff shook his topknot. "Poor Uncle

Latchlifter. He was as crazy as a bugbear, you know."

Beyond the doorway was a small room, not more than ten feet by fifteen, with a ceiling so low as to make even the dwarf feel he should duck his head. Another, smaller door was set into the far wall. The room was very nearly empty, with only several large urns and some scrap lumber piled neatly in one corner and a crudely built, closed box the size of a very large trunk on the floor in the corner near the other door.

Selana wrinkled her nose in distaste. "It smells like something died in here."

"Probably rats," said Tanis, his breath lingering before him in moist, white wisps.

Selena unconsciously moved a bit closer to the half-elf. "*Bes schedal*," she whispered, and a dim glow, its source undetectable, immediately filled the room with amber fog. The sea elf shivered under her thin cloak as she scanned the floor for movement. "We must be quite far underground."

Flint shuddered as well, though not from the cold or the thought of rodents. "This place gives me the willies," he confessed. "The bracelet's obviously not down here, so let's—"

"Great Reorx!"

Tanis, Flint, and Selana all jumped at Tasslehoff's curse. Spinning about, they saw him at the wooden box, his hand on the now half-opened lid.

"This is where that awful stench is coming from." Throwing his shoulder into the task, the kender was working at prying the lid the rest of the way off.

"Wait, Tas—" Tanis began, but his warning came too late.

Grunting with exertion, Tasslehoff flung the wooden cover back and looked into the box. His eyes went wide with wonder, then watered up from the smell, until he had to blink back tears to see.

"A body!" he coughed. "Boy, is it disgusting, all blue and puffy-looking. Come and take a look."

Flint and Tanis both glanced at Selana, who was holding her stomach and looking more pale than usual.

"Tas, shut the lid. We're getting out of here *now*!" the half elf ordered, taking Selana by the arm and steering her back to the door.

Tas was peering intently at the body inside the box. "Something about this guy seems very familiar, Tanis," he muttered. "Short, fat, pug-nosed—"

Flint, who was about to severely chastise the kender, recognized the description, too. Taking a deep breath and holding it, he stepped to within three feet of the stinking box, looked in, and nodded firmly. "I'd bet my favorite axe that he's our man."

Despite her revulsion, Selana's ears perked up. "Someone check for the bracelet!"

Tas leaned into the box eagerly.

"Oh, no you don't," warned Flint in a low voice. He took the kender by the arm and escorted him back to the door through which they had entered the room. "You're not going to touch that bracelet again, if I have anything to say about it. And I do. You stay out of trouble here and stand watch with Selana." He gulped before adding, "Tanis and I will check out the stiff."

Flint and Tanis approached the box warily. They converged on opposite sides, both looking down distastefully.

"I'd been expecting all along that it would be us giving him a rough time when we finally met up, but he's turned the tables on us, eh, Tanis?"

Tanis smirked at his friend's dark humor. "He might not see it that way. Let's get this over with." Tanis crouched down on one knee and reached into the box, then withdrew his hand and wiped it

furtively on his leather legging. Irritated, he stared at the hand as if it had betrayed him and reached again, this time grasping the shirt sleeve on the dead man's left arm. He tugged, but the hand was twisted and pinned under the body. He tugged harder and pulled it free. The arm bent forward stiffly at the shoulder. Using both hands, he slid the sleeve back from the wrist, but found nothing but puffy ashen flesh.

Flint, working on the right arm, had similar luck. "What do you suppose our boy died from?" he wondered. "No wounds on the body that I can see."

Flint's comments were cut off by a gasp from Tanis. He looked across the box and his blood nearly stopped in his veins.

The dead man's hand, rings sparkling on the gray fingers, was locked around Tanis's left forearm, his lifeless eyes wide open but unseeing. The body struggled into a sitting position and its pallid head lolled hideously on an overly long neck, as if it were now just a stretched and broken spring.

"Zombie!" the half-elf cried, desperately fumbling with his right hand for the dagger on his left hip. His fingers locked around the hilt and whisked it free, then brought it slashing down on Delbridge's cold, dead forearm, but the zombie seemed hardly to react as the blade sawed through its toughened hide.

Flint was there in a flash, chopping at the arm with his axe. Tanis stumbled away from the box as the zombie crashed back into it, minus its left hand. The quivering, severed hand of the dead man maintained its grip on the half-elf, but Tanis frantically pried up the ringed fingers one at a time with the blade of his dagger until the hand fell to the ground with a dull thud.

The zombie did not hesitate or even cry out, but continued struggling to grasp the edge of the box with its oozing stump.

Flint was ready. The hearty dwarf raised his axe high and swung it down again and again with the rhythm of a practiced woodcutter, mindless of the ichor that splattered with each blow, or even of Tanis standing next to him, slashing with his dagger. He knew that a zombie never veered from its single obsession until destroyed, turned back by a priest, or called off by its master.

"I think you can stop now, Flint," Tanis panted at his side, gripping the dwarf's shoulder. The undead creature, or what was left of it, twitched reflexively twice more, then stopped moving.

Ears ringing with the thunderous pounding of his own blood, Flint's gore-spattered hands clenched and unclenched the haft of his gruesome axe.

Selana and Tas stared with unabashed horror and shock. The room, still bathed in the soft amber light of the sea elf's spell, fell quiet between the ragged breaths of its occupants.

Almost clinically, Tasslehoff watched a little red mote dance in the rafters. It seemed to grow before his eyes, a weaving scarlet swirl containing infinite gradations of red, until it was at least as big as his head.

By now the others had noticed the spiraling, growing mote and knew that in a room that housed a zombie, it could not be good news.

"Run!" cried Tanis and Flint, almost in unison.

But before anyone could move, the air in the tiny room was rent with a flash of lightning that singed Flint's beard and sizzled Tas's topknot, leaving behind a cloud of choking, oily smoke.

Amongst the roiling clouds stood a hulking figure, well over six feet tall. Selana screamed at the sight of its horned head and dark, leathery wings. Then Tas was at her side, shouting, "It's a man, not a monster!" and she realized that the horns were a cap fashioned from a ram's skull and the wings were a cape that was supported beyond his shoulders by a frame.

An enormous scar ruined the right side of his face and sealed his eye socket. His remaining eye

blazed with fury.

"Who have we here?" The magician focused his lone eye on the red-faced half-elf and dwarf standing over the hashed zombie, then on the wide-eyed kender and trembling woman standing on the far side of the catacomb. "What have you done to poor Omardicar the Omnipotent?"

His tone was light and mocking, but his left eye had an angry, hard glint as it returned to Tanis and Flint. In a flash, the wizard raised his arms and mumbled a single, indistinct word. A gigantic web materialized, extending from floor to ceiling, and wrapped itself around Flint and Tanis. Sticky goo dripped from the strands and adhered to the struggling victims. The more they twisted and fought to break free, the more the web tangled around them, until they could hardly move at all and finally collapsed to the floor.

Then, with practiced precision, the wizard snapped his attention to the two by the door. Again he muttered his magic word and the twisting strands appeared to engulf Tas and Selana. But instead of wrapping around them, the web splattered against an invisible barrier and slid to the floor, then glowed briefly and disappeared. Selana grinned grimly at her opponent.

"You surprise me, woman," the mage said in his imposing baritone, a mixed look of admiration and irritation on his hideous countenance, "but I won't be surprised twice."

Selana was already preparing her next spell, and surprise Balcombe is exactly what she did. The sea elf extended her hands with the fingers spread and shouted, "*Dasen filinda!*" A spray of colors burst from her fingers and splashed across the wizard, streaking round his body and spinning him in a half-circle. As he staggered back toward the wall, he tripped over a broken plank on the floor and sprawled into the dirt. The hideous ram's skull cap fell from the mage's head and rolled into a dark corner, and the cape's wing frame snapped. The dazzling colors continued flashing around his thrashing form as he struggled to remove the ruined cape.

"Don't mess with Selana, or she'll turn you into a bug!" crowed Tasslehoff, running up with the sea elf to untangle Tanis and Flint. But Balcombe's webs were tough and sticky. Tas yanked the dagger from his legging and sawed through enough strands to free Tanis's knife hand. As the elf worked to cut himself out, Tas switched to Flint.

"Hurry the spell won't last long," urged Selana. But the sticky strands of web wrapped around the blades of the knives and clung tightly to Tanis's and Flint's arms and legs.

"I was very lucky that my spells worked against him," she whispered to the half-elf. "Whoever he is, he's far more powerful than I am. I have no spells or herbal components left."

Even as she spoke, Balcombe's thumbless right fist thrust through the swirling colors into the air. A ring on one of his fingers glowed.

"Run!" shouted both Flint and Tanis in unison. Balcombe's hands traced patterns in the air as he mumbled, still lying on his back. Sparks crackled around him, and his hands grew red and hot.

Wrenching his dagger free from the clinging webs, Tasslehoff leaped forward and slashed at the wizard. But the blade turned aside inches from the mage's throat, as if knocked away by an invisible hand. Balcombe smiled an evil grin and reached with his left hand for Tas's arm, blue sparks, like miniature bolts of lightning, racing across his fingers.

Tas jumped up and away, narrowly avoiding the glowing hand. As he backed up, he bumped into the urn in the corner. With both hands he toppled it onto Balcombe, then kicked the mage stoutly in the stomach. The urn shattered when it touched Balcombe's hand, and Tas's kick slid away the same as the dagger had, but left the mage off balance.

Tanis screamed, "Run, Tas, and don't stop!" while Flint swore and kicked against the webs.

Acting on instinct, the kender grabbed Selana by the waist and pushed her toward the door. He paused for just a moment and looked back into the faintly lit room. Balcombe was shaking off the

broken pottery and preparing a new spell. The kender looked to where Tanis and Flint still fought against the snarled web.

"Don't worry about us, you doorknob! Just get Selana to safety!"

Tas turned and raced down the dark hallway after Selana. Suddenly, a bolt of lightning from Balcombe's fists smashed into the wall just inside the corridor. With a horrendous crashing, it ricocheted down the narrow corridor after the fleeing pair. Tasslehoff glanced over his shoulder and saw the blazing blue light zigzagging toward him, tearing huge chunks from the wall wherever it alighted. He had nearly caught up to Selana by then and with an enormous leap, he tackled her to the cold floor. The magical bolt sizzled past them, showering them with debris from the walls. A moment later Tasslehoff was on his feet again and dragging Selana forward.

By the time Balcombe peered around the corner, there was nothing to see but rubble cluttering the narrow hallway floor. The crisp smell of ozone filtered with dust filled his nostrils, but he detected no trace of the distinctive odor of singed flesh.

With a snarl the raging mage turned back to his two captives in the web. "Your friends have escaped, so far. It would have been better for them if they'd died in the tunnel."

Balcombe withdrew a scroll from the recesses of his cloak. Breaking its wax seal and unrolling it, he began reading aloud, twisting his lips and tongue to form the unnatural, magical sounds. As he recited, wisps of smoke curled up from the scroll. Tanis could see brown splotches forming, as if some great heat was burning the parchment from the other side. Reaching the end of the spell, Balcombe released the scroll and let it flutter from his hands. Before it had fallen a foot, it burst into flames and was consumed, showering the floor with fine, powdery black ash. The room became very hot and still, and then a great burst of wind blew clouds of dust into Flint's and Tanis's faces and snapped Balcombe's cape. The

mage stood straight and undaunted, staring directly ahead.

The hair on the back of Tanis's neck stood up as a black spot appeared in the room, swirling and growing, forming monstrous shapes and then dissolving, only to reform into something larger and more hideous than before. When it reached full size, it stood eye to eye with Balcombe. It was a giant cat of some sort, a panther or cougar, but it was not real. To Tanis it seemed a thing of solid shadow, shifting and pulsing to some strange, internal rhythm.

Balcombe addressed the mysterious force. "A male kender and a female elf have displeased me. Kill them." He cast a sly, sideways glance toward his prisoners.

An ominous swishing sound resonated through the room and then faded up the tunnel as the shadow beast leaped after its prey.

* * * * *

Tas flung the door open at the end of the sloping hallway, and he and Selana fell out into the sheltered alcove, blinking at the bright sun.

"Where can we hide?" cried Selana, wiping dust and sweat from her face.

"We can't," Tas answered, "not yet anyway. That wizard is bound to be after us. We have to get far away from here before we go to ground. Let's hurry."

He tried pulling Selana back to her feet, but the elf maid resisted. "Where?"

"The marketplace. I can lose anybody in a market, especially if it's busy." A mighty jerk brought Selana to her feet, and then both were running toward the market.

That's when they heard the crash behind them. Looking back, they saw that the door they had just exited was torn off its hinges and skidding across the ground. It had

been raked by enormous claws that cracked and split the thick wood planks and even sliced through a reinforcing iron band. Then it burst from the shadow, a hulking magical phantom charging toward them in great bounds.

"What is it?"

"Trouble!" cried Tas, pushing the fear-frozen sea elf again. Driven by terror and grit, the kender and the princess raced at breakneck speed across the open ground to the crowded bazaar. When he braved a backward glance, Tas saw the black shape and the rising ribbon of dust that marked the monster's trail as it gained steadily.

They rounded a corner and ran straight into a farmer's wagon. It was loaded with spring onions and garlic bunches. Tas dropped to his knees and scrambled underneath, Selana following his lead.

Panting, Selana asked, "What is it? Has the wizard become that thing?"

"No point in that. My guess is that he conjured up some magical monster, like an invisible stalker, only you can see this thing as a shadow. Wizards pull them from another plane to do their bidding. They're horrid things, but short-lived. We've got to keep moving." Tas scanned the narrow avenues and quickly picked the best possible escape. As soon as Selana was up, they were off again.

Behind them, the onion wagon exploded. The beast had smashed into and slivered it, showering the area with onions and garlic. The screaming and shouting of the merchants was mixed with a terrifying roar from the beast, which paused momentarily in the wagon's wreckage to scatter the obstructing people.

The fugitives wasted no time. They twisted and turned their way through the market in a dizzying path, right, then left, then left again, until Selana had lost track of how long they'd been running. She could barely hear his directions for the pounding of her heart, when Tas began to weave a trail through the curving and twisting alleys.

When it seemed to Selana that her ribs would puncture her stomach and she would choke on her heart, Tas finally slowed, and then stopped in a narrow alley. "I think we've lost the shadow monster," he panted, resting his hands on his knees, "for now. . . ."

Chest heaving so hard she couldn't speak, Selana looked at Tas, then finally managed to gasp, "You don't think it's expired?"

"No, we haven't been running half as long as it feels like. I suspect it's still around somewhere."

"What can a shadow do to us?" she asked.

"You're a spellcaster and you ask that?" He shook his head. "I respect anything conjured from another plane."

Groaning, Selana was about to sink to the ground when Tas grabbed her arm. "Do you smell that?" He looked at her intently. "Garlic and onions. . . ."

Holding each other's gaze in fear, they both looked around. Suddenly a dark, swirling head peered around the corner at them. A clawed spectral hand slashed out, and Selana screamed. Once again they were fleeing, Tas holding onto Selana by her sleeve, the creature pounding on their trail.

Tas negotiated several turns, then looked back to see—the shadow monster, but not Selana! He still held a piece of her sleeve but she was not attached to it.

With the creature close on his tail, Tas dove through the rapidly scattering onlookers. Turning another corner, Tas tumbled over a pile of baskets. He sprawled across a rug spread with boots and slippers and slammed into a post. The impact knocked the wind from his lungs and left him gasping. Trying to shake off the pain, he scrambled to his feet. Peering across the pile of baskets

was the shadow monster, black teeth glimmering beneath its black eyes. Behind him Tas was horrified to spot a dead end. The locals scrambled for safety and Tas heard bolts and bars slamming across the few doors and windows adjoining this cul-de-sac.

Heart pounding with adrenaline, Tas turned to face the monster. He made a quick but futile attempt to scrape the wads of magical webbing off the blade of his dagger onto a wooden post. Holding the gobby weapon in front of him, he awaited the attack.

The shadow monster crouched and hissed, snapping an inky tail. Then it leaped, covering the distance to where Tas stood in one bound. Even though he knew his reflexes were no match for the magical beast, Tas threw himself to the side, hoping to escape the brunt of the impact.

One swiping paw sent the kender crashing through a pile of hides. He rolled away and jumped to his feet, expecting to be slashed to ribbons, but no slash came. The shadowy beast throbbed and flickered and then dissolved into dozens of rapidly shrinking wisps of darkness.

Bruised and puffing, Tas threw his arms out and whooped. The wizard's spell had expired! The jubilant kender banged on doors and shutters with the pommel of his dagger, shouting, "I killed it! Hey! You can come out now!"

Dancing and strutting, he picked his way through the scattered merchandise back toward the main avenue. Slowly people emerged from their buildings.

Where was Selana? Tas wondered suddenly. Panting, pouches tangling on his hips, Tas climbed out of the narrow alley and onto a main street again. Moving at a steady trot, he spotted a baker's unattended street-vending cart. A long, pale loaf of crusty bread caught his eye. He snatched it up and tucked it under his arm like a ball as he continued running, ever watchful for Selana's indigo robe.

"A bit odd, leaving a cart of food like that," he muttered to himself, "but lucky for me. I've been a bit short of cash recently. I must remember to find and pay that baker when I get the chance."

Tas looked behind him, in case Selana had emerged from an alley in his wake. He saw no one but an old woman sorting out her disheveled produce. He rounded another corner.

Suddenly, desperate fingers seized him by the upper arm. He spun about, and more fingers closed over his mouth, then he was yanked into the shadows of a recessed entryway. Immediately Tasslehoff bit through the fingers and slammed his elbow into his attacker's stomach as he wrenched his arm away. Spinning about, he spread his legs in a defensive stance, loaf of bread raised and at the ready.

"Selana!"

Groaning and on her knees, the sea elf alternately clutched her aching abdomen and tried to squeeze off the trickle of blood from her lacerated fingers. Mortified, the kender pulled a cotton swatch from his pack and went to work binding her hand.

"Gods, Selana, I'm awfully sorry. I didn't know it was you," the kender muttered. "It's a very bad idea, sneaking up on a guy like that. I might have killed you!" He peered around her in the dark doorway, then helped her to stand upright again. "You'll be all right, won't you?"

The sea elf was obviously shaken, one arm still folded across her stomach. She stood up straight with great effort and nodded once. "I decided to run a different direction back there, since it could only follow one of us," she wheezed, breathing still difficult.

Tasslehoff crossed his arms and thrust his chin into the air. "I could have protected you," he said, miffed. "It's gone now anyway."

The sea elf's cornflower-blue scarf had fallen to her shoulders, and she shrugged it back over her pale hair wearily. "What do we do now?"

Not one to run willingly from a fight, the usually easygoing kender found himself growing angry at their predicament. He shook the long loaf of bread at Selana. "We left friends back in that keep. We can't turn our backs on Tanis and Flint. I say we should go right back in and get them." Tasslehoff stepped into the street, but Selana's hand snatched the strap of his shoulder pouch and dragged him back. "Let me go!" he hissed, deftly twisting away from her grip.

"Think, Tasslehoff!" Selana's eyes blazed, and for the first time Tas saw her as she must be in her own land— not confused and foolishly headstrong, but regal and commanding. He listened.

"Everyone in this castle must have seen us being chased by that monster," she said. "If you manage to make it to the keep without being noticed again, what will you say? That you were prowling around in the basement of the keep, found a zombie, and got chased away by a mage—*their* mage? All you'll manage is to get yourself arrested and that won't do anyone a lick of good, especially Tanis and Flint."

Tas jammed his hands into his armpits and shrugged his shoulders up around his ears. "We can't leave Tanis and Flint in there," he said darkly.

Selana glared at him. "Of course not." The sea elf frowned, nibbling on a nail as she thought. "Something really odd is going on at the keep, and I think we stumbled upon a small part of it. If only we could get back in and do a bit more exploring. . . ."

"I wish I still had my magical teleporting ring," interjected Tasslehoff. "Then we could just pop in anywhere we wanted to. Have I told you about my teleporting ring?"

Of course he had. Tasslehoff eventually told everyone he met about that most mystical of devices. But the mention of it brought something to Selana's mind. Pursing her lips, she reached into the depths of her voluminous robe, dug around, and pulled out a long, thin vial made of smooth purple glass, a cloudy crystal stopper shaped like a sea fern in its mouth. She held it up in contemplation, then made an immediate decision. "We'll drink this!"

Chapter 12

Birds of a Feather

"What's that?" quizzed Tasslehoff, instinctively reaching for the small purple vessel Selana held in her hand.

The sea elf whirled away, evading his grasp. "A potion."

"What does it do?"

"It is a potion of polymorphing," she replied, still holding it protectively.

Tasslehoff's face contorted in bewilderment. "Poly what?"

"Polymorphing. It allows the person who drinks it to change his shape at will."

"You mean you could become fat or thin or short or tall, or change the color of your hair, and things like that?" Tas asked. "Nobody would recognize us then. We could walk right into the castle."

Selana smiled. "You could do all those things and much more. You could even change yourself into something else entirely—a dog, perhaps, or a pony, or even a fish."

Tas's eyes grew wide with wonder as he stared at the slim vial, unbelievable possibilities racing through his mind. "What are we waiting for?" He grabbed at the potion again impulsively, but Selana pushed him away.

"Be careful," she scolded. "This is all I have."

Tas stepped back sheepishly, but his eyes never left the potion in Selana's hand. "It's just that the sooner we get started, the sooner we get Flint and Tanis out of trouble."

"And the sooner I can get my bracelet. There's just one problem," Selana continued slowly. "This is only a single dose. I'm afraid that only I should use it."

Tas's face went flat. "You can't leave me behind! You'll need my help. You don't know anything about castles. That keep is an incredible maze, not to mention all the nooks and crannies in the surrounding buildings. I can help you find your way through it."

Selana lifted her shoulders feebly. "I'm afraid I can't help it, Tasslehoff. I have only one potion."

"But if you don't take me along, that mage will send goons who will certainly catch me and torture me and make me tell them about you and the potion. Think of the danger you'll be in!"

The sea elf concealed her amused smile.

"Say, I have an idea," Tas pressed on. "What would happen if we split the potion?"

Selana considered the question for several moments before replying. She knew that the kender would surely do something rash and get himself captured if left to his own devices. What was more, the only other castle she had ever been in was a keep that had sunk beneath the sea during the Cataclysm and was now fallen in ruin. The everyday buildings of surface people seemed strange to her; how much more daunting would a castle be? Perhaps she *did* need Tasslehoff's help.

"If we split the potion," she said slowly, "it will last only half as long for both of us. I know that if one of us were to drink all of it, the effect would last four to five hours, depending on our weight, and we're both pretty light."

Selana looked squarely into the kender's eyes. "I am going to ask you an important question,

Tasslehoff. Do you honestly think the two of us could find our way through the keep and the rest of the castle, locate and free Flint and Tanis, find my bracelet, and get away again in under two hours?"

Tasslehoff puffed out his chest. "I know I could. I've been in dozens of castles from the Blood Sea to Darken Wood. I have a knack for finding my way in and out of them. With me along, this will be as easy as spearing fish in a puddle."

"I wish we could walk up to the castle and take this at the last minute," she muttered to herself, "but we can't risk being seen. We must pick a form that travels fast."

"You mean like a horse?" Tasslehoff suggested.

"I *mean* something inconspicuous." Selana nibbled on a fingernail again as she thought. "A bird, perhaps."

"Great!" cried Tas. "I've always wanted to fly. A falcon—say, how about a condor? They're really tough. Or maybe a giant goatsucker bird. . . ."

"I don't even know what that is. Look, Tasslehoff," Selana said with great patience, "we're trying to keep from being seen. We have to pick a common bird, so we'll blend in."

Just then, a small brown-and-gray bird swooped into their stoop, searching for crumbs. "Like this one right here," added Selana.

"A sparrow? They're awfully small and unimpressive," Tas pouted.

"They're perfect," said Selana, unstopping the vial. She touched it to her lips, but before swallowing she looked intently at the kender's eager face. Selana had never even heard of kender before coming to the land. Tasslehoff, the only kender in her acquaintance, seemed true and sincere enough, but unpredictable. She paused. "This is not a game, Tasslehoff. This could be a dangerous thing we're about to do. Promise me that you'll stay close to me and not waste time."

"Now who's wasting time?" the kender said archly, tapping his foot with impatience.

Selana rolled her eyes, then tilted the vial again and sipped just a little less than half of its contents. Eyeballing what remained, she took one last, small sip, then handed the potion to Tasslehoff.

Eyes as round as full moons, the kender absently set down the loaf of bread and tossed back the remainder of the acrid potion without hesitation.

"I don't feel any different," he said straightaway, running his hands over his slender frame for confirmation. Then his throat began tingling, as if his tongue were falling asleep. The sensation spread quickly, down his throat, pooling in his stomach, then raced through every portion of his body, ending with what felt like a tiny, swirling "pop" in his fingers and toes. Then the tingling was gone, replaced by a feeling of great awareness.

"I feel fantastic! What do we do now?"

"Just think about being a bird," Selana said. "There's no better way to explain it in your language. You must relax, and just picture it. If you try too hard, you will fail."

Tasslehoff watched in amazement as delicate trails of sparkling amber raced around Selana. In a wink the sea elf was gone, replaced by a tiny bird with unusually large eyes, fluttering in her place.

"Selana?" Tas asked, grinning enormously. "That was really neat! I—"

The little bird landed on Tas's shoulder and chirped impatiently.

"OK, I get it, I'll hurry," said the kender. Shutting his eyes tightly to focus, he strained to imagine his arms covered with feathers and flapping at his sides. Popping one eye open, he gasped upon seeing the speckled gray wings where his arms used to be. Looking down, he saw—feet! He wasn't a bird, he was a kender with wings! Something chirped and flapped frantically around his head.

Without pausing to see who might be watching, Tas closed his eyes again. He remembered Selana's advice and breathed deeply, visualizing a sparrow.

Absorbed in this activity, Tas suddenly realized that the world sounded larger and more full of echoes, that his nostrils were filled with scents he had never noticed before—stones and earth and pollen mingled with buzzing insects and crashing footsteps. A sudden, strong breeze buffeted him and lifted him off his feet. Startled, his eyes flew open. All the colors were gone from the world, leaving only black and white.

"Hey, Selana!" he tried to say, but the sound that came out of his mouth was clicks and chirps. Fluttering above the brick walk, he peered down his nose and saw the reason: he had a beak! He stretched out his arms and felt feathers catch the wind. This is even better than teleporting, he thought to himself.

Tasslehoff raised his wings and soared upward. He dipped one wing and swooped across the stoop, misjudged the distance, and brushed his wing tip across the bricks of the wall. Steadying himself as he turned toward open space, he worked at learning to control his new body by testing its features. Just when he thought he understood how everything worked, the wind rushed up across the side of a building and tossed him about like a leaf.

"Tasslehoff, don't fight the currents," said a voice vaguely like Selana's but with a strange accent. Tas scanned around until he spotted the sea elf-turned-sparrow flying circles several dozen yards away. Her voice had seemed much closer than that, he thought.

"Yes, it's me you're hearing," the little bird said, her feathered crown bobbing, "but I'm not actually speaking. I've cast a spell that will allow us to 'think' at each other, otherwise we couldn't communicate at all. If birds speak to each other, I don't know how, and we haven't got the time to learn.

"We don't have time to enjoy ourselves, either," her soft voice continued inside Tas's head. "Work with the currents—let them lift you. It's a lot like swimming."

Tasslehoff found that comparison little help, since he had done almost as little swimming as flying in his eighteen years. Still, he followed the advice and found that the air tides were less troublesome.

Selana let him experiment for a few more minutes before asking, "Do you feel confident enough to set off for the castle yet? We really must hurry."

Tasslehoff bobbed his tufted head eagerly. With a wave of her wing signaling Tas to follow, Selana darted up into the sky above the pristine streets of Tantallon. Hot in pursuit, Tas flapped along behind her, feeling much, he thought, like a baby bird on its first flight from the nest.

Ah, the world looks much different through the eyes of a bird, said Tas to himself. He saw everything in vivid shades of gray—more shades of gray than he'd ever suspected existed. His vision was so sharp that he could make out bugs on leaves far below him. One caterpillar in particular caught his eye, looking so fat and juicy, and Tas found himself circling back, savoring the notion of a tasty snack. Seconds before diving on the hapless worm and gulping it down his eager beak, Tasslehoff realized what he was about to do and shuddered, ruffling his feathers.

"Yuk! Selana, I almost ate a bug!" he howled.

Seeing the distress on his brown and black face, Selana spoke directly to his mind again. "You're acting on instinct," she told him. "Remember, you're a bird now."

"How can I forget?" he said. The thrill of flying was better than he had ever imagined, and he had imagined it a lot in his short life. Whenever he had thought about it in the past, though, he had pictured himself in his own body, flapping his arms, or in the body of some majestic bird of prey, like an owl.

Suddenly he felt heavier, more massive. The wind had not changed, but it tossed him around much less. His wings had tremendous power, his vision was unbelievably keen. He spotted a mouse skittering among some barrels in an alley and circled, watching the succulent tidbit going about its business, unaware it was being watched.

A mental scream jarred Tasslehoff. Looking up, he saw Selana swooping near.

"Tasslehoff! Stop fooling around and keep your mind on sparrows!"

Suddenly Tas understood why he felt differently; he had become an owl. He pumped his outstretched wings twice and shot forward, then spiraled upward on a pillar of warm air. The power and grace of this body was exhilarating. "Let me stay like this, Selana, just until we reach the castle." Tas's voice pleaded in Selana's mind.

"We'll be noticed for sure," she replied sharply. "Sparrow!"

Reluctantly, Tas focused on the tinier bird form again. In a moment he felt lighter once more.

"That's better," he heard Selana say. "Look down, and you'll see that we've flown over the stream." Indeed, within seconds they were past the ramparts with their stone sentries.

"I've gotten us as far as my knowledge will take us," said Selana. "Where should we look now?"

Earlier, Tasslehoff had spotted a building with a "Gaol" sign over the door. He suspected the mage would have moved Flint and Tanis there, because it would be more secure. Still, it never hurt to look around, study the lay of the castle. "Come on," he said, waving Selana down beside him as he swooped low across the crenelated roof of a guard tower, centrally located to afford a view of comings and goings at the keep, across the courtyard.

Tas settled down next to a few other birds—mostly other sparrows with a few fat pigeons, all of which edged away, instinctively suspicious. The sun felt good warming his feathers, and Tas's eyes drooped lethargically.

"Don't get lazy and start snoozing in the sun," warned his companion in her low voice. She pecked him lightly with her beak.

"Ow!" Tasslehoff's dark, beady eyes flew open. "I wasn't! I was squinting, to see better in this bright light." He ruffled up his feathers and slid a bird's width away.

"Never mind," Selana responded. "Where do we go from here?"

"See the building with the 'Gaol' sign on it?" he asked. The building abutted the curtain wall and was joined to the keep by a cloister, an open-sided, covered walkway. "If we're lucky, they've been taken there. If not, they're still far underground, which will be much harder to get in and out of." Tas scanned the jail building for bird-sized entrances. "Let's fly to that high window near the back wall. We can get inside from there."

Seconds later they had crossed the open space and were perched on the window ledge. Tas peered into the gloom and was surprised at how quickly his eyes adjusted to the dim light. The room was obviously a cell. A heavy wooden door with a metal grate closed off the entrance. The window where they stood was too narrow for any human to squeeze through and would have been tight even for Tasslehoff, at his usual size.

"There's no one here," thought Selana. "How many more rooms like this are there, do you suppose?"

"Probably two or three," Tas replied, cocking his head to the side. A fat beetle scurried up the stones on the side of the window, heading for a small crack in the mortar. Tas peered closely at it, which obviously alarmed the beetle as it sped away to the safety of the crack.

Tas spread his wings. "We'd better keep moving."

"Wait!"

Selana's warning caught Tas halfway through his takeoff. Trying to stop himself, he wound up instead tumbling off the window ledge inside the jail. He flapped frantically but to no avail, thumping harmlessly into a pile of moldy straw on the floor.

"Hurry," cried Selana, "you must see this!"

With straw still stuck in his feathers and more than a little irritated, Tas flitted back up to the ledge. "What is it?"

Selana's voice, even though transmitted directly to Tas's mind, still shook with excitement. "Look down in the cloisters leading back to the main tower. The bald-headed man in red robes. It's the mage! And do you see what's on his wrist?"

Tas's sharpened eyes locked onto the fellow at once. He had pulled a warm vest over his robes.

"He's probably returning from taking Flint and Tanis to the dungeon," muttered Tas. The kender-bird's sight traveled down the man's arm. As it swung, the sleeve drew back, revealing a coppery band.

"You're right! It *is* the bracelet!" cried Tas. Even at this distance, he was certain it was the piece of jewelry Flint had crafted for the sea elf; he could see every line and stone on it. "Let's fly over and get it from him!"

"How?"

Tas thought for only a second. "We'll turn into bears and bite his hand off!"

Selana shuddered. "That's disgusting. And dangerous. Although we may look like bears, we would still have just the strength of a sea elf and a kender, and we would be forced to fight many guards, not to mention his magic." She shook her head. "No, we have to follow him and find a more subtle way of getting the bracelet from him, in a more private place." Selana had no idea where that might be or how it might happen, especially since the effects of the potion could run out at any time.

"We can't just go flying around inside the castle," argued Tas. "Someone would try to catch us or chase us out." He glanced down at the mage, who was rapidly disappearing. "We'd better think of something fast."

"Do as I do," instructed Selana quickly. "And don't even *think* about eating me." Amid a tiny shower of purple sparks, the sparrow turned into a fly.

"There's something I hadn't thought about being!" exclaimed Tas. It might be interesting, he said to himself. The kender-bird closed his eyes tightly and concentrated. Sparks flew and suddenly he felt very tiny indeed. As he opened his eyes, he felt dizzy, seeing dozens of images across his line of sight. He might have stumbled, if not for the six legs holding him up. He spent several moments sorting out his vision. The first thing he managed to focus on was Selana buzzing away toward where the mage was headed. Breezes dashed him about as he launched himself into the air.

"Slow down, Selana," Tas complained, straining to keep his sight on her ahead of him. "I can barely see where I'm going, and I sure can't see very far."

"I hadn't counted on this vision problem," agreed Selana. "We're bound to get used to it eventually. In the meantime, try to stay close. And whatever you do, don't think about being something else now."

"All right, but if we don't catch up to him soon, we'll lose him in the keep."

The massive, central stone structure/which was no more than a dark blob in the background of Tas's vision, was nevertheless getting steadily larger. Suddenly, the featureless gray shape resolved into stones. "We're too far to the left," cried Selana. "The door from the cloister is over there, to our right." Both flies veered sharply to the right, paralleling the wall while keeping it within sight.

It dawned on Tas that with his eyes looking straight ahead (which seemed to be the only way they could point), he could see the stone wall to his left, Selana straight ahead, and the blurry outlines of the jail and courtyard to his right. He could concentrate on any portion of that field of vision without turning his head or eyes. "Once you get the knack of it, this isn't so bad," he said to himself.

Then he began wondering what to do with his legs. As a bird, it had seemed natural to tuck them under his body. At the moment, all six were dangling beneath him, swaying uselessly. Tas pulled them up tight against his abdomen. No, he thought, this doesn't feel right either. He resolved to pay more attention to flying insects in the future.

"Please stop that," begged Selana. "You're distracting me terribly. Remember that everything you think is echoing in my mind."

"Well, pardon me for thinking," Tas muttered, realizing too late that this comment, too, was being broadcast to Selana.

"Have you noticed how fast we're traveling?" Now that he had a good visual reference along the wall, Tas was amazed at how quickly they flew. Before Selana could answer, Tas realized they were in the cloister, right next to the door where the wizard had headed.

"It's closed," thought Selana. "Can we squeeze around it or under it?"

"We don't need to. Look behind you."

Out of the blurred distance strode their man, bald and wearing a robe. Tas shivered at the hideous sight of the wizard's missing right eye, the lid forever sealed shut by scar tissue.

"We beat him!" the kender whooped. "We were moving a lot faster than I thought."

"Quick, get to the wall by the door. When he opens it, we'll follow him through."

Both flies settled onto the stone wall at waist height moments before the heavy door was dragged open. A blast of cool air washed across them, then the mage was past and through the door. Both flies streaked in, Selana colliding with the human's robe as he stopped and turned to pull the door shut. With a thud it sealed out the light, leaving the trio in a dimly lit hallway.

Selana thrashed from side to side, trying to escape from the heavy folds of the wizard's robe. At last she broke free, but clung to the outside edge, riding along unnoticed as the human strode down the hall, past doorways flanked by dripping candles. Tasslehoff buzzed along behind, trying to count the doors he passed in case he needed to follow this route again.

His count was disturbed by Selana's mental urging. "Tasslehoff, land on his back. Then you can't get lost."

While this seemed like a good idea to the kender, he quickly realized it was easier thought than done. The fly's form was not nearly as graceful as the sparrow's, and the mage's back was constantly in motion. His clothing flexed and heaved with every step. Tas's first pass missed by many inches. On his second approach, he rammed into the churning surface and was knocked away. "It's too hard," he protested. "I'm losing count of the doors."

The wizard stepped through a doorway and onto a set of stairs that wound up and to the left. As they climbed, Tasslehoff became aware of how tired he was growing. Obviously, he thought, flies don't have much stamina. His wings ached, and he was very hungry. The hunger, he realized, was something new; flies must burn up food awfully fast. He considered looking for something to eat, but his recollection of the things he had seen flies eating quickly changed his mind. He decided to wait until something palatable appeared, then he would turn into something that could eat it.

Now they neared the top of the stairs. The mage stepped through the open doorway and turned left. As Tas raced after him, he collided with something invisible and stopped dead. He tried to move his wings, but the right one was stuck. The left one buzzed futilely, then it, too, brushed against something and stuck fast.

Selana's voice rang in his mind. "What's the matter? Why have you stopped?"

"I'm not sure," Tas responded. "I'm stuck in something, but . . . oh, my."

"What is it?"

Tas's voice was thick with apprehension. "It's a spider web, and I'm all tangled up in it. My legs and wings are caught, and the more I struggle, the more I get tangled."

"Wait there." Selana launched herself off the mage's back and headed back toward the doorway. She had just gotten the web in sight when Tas, who was working on freeing his legs, heard the mental equivalent of a scream. "Above you, Tas—the spider!"

The kender looked up in time to see a brown, hairy, murderous monster with venom-coated fangs racing across the sticky web toward him. Before he could do anything, it was on top of him, spinning web line as it whipped the trapped fly between its back legs. Tas felt the strands tightening with each revolution.

He wasn't frightened—kender rarely were—but the situation did seem grave. At the same time he was fascinated, marveling at the spider's efficiency and speed. Each time it turned him around he could see his own dark face reflected in the multifaceted eyes of the spider.

Selana buzzed helplessly past the web, too frightened to get close and too upset to think clearly. The webs began lapping over Tas's face. The spider's unblinking eyes hovered near Tas's neck, poised before driving its paralyzing fangs into its prey. Tas abruptly closed his eyes and relaxed. A moment later, surrounded by tiny, sparkling flashes, the fly became a little brown mouse. The web strands encircling him burst apart, the web itself shredded, and Tas plummeted to the floor as a mouse, twisting in the air to land on his four feet. The spider fell away, then caught itself on a hastily spun web, which it climbed as quickly as possible to the safety of the ceiling.

Laughing almost hysterically with relief, Selana landed next to Tas and metamorphosed into a mouse herself. She stood on shaking legs as Tas stretched his bruised limbs.

"Why didn't you think to do that right away?" she asked.

"I didn't hear *you* thinking to suggest it," he retorted. "Anyway, everything turned out OK. Why are you so upset?"

Selana ignored the question.

"There's old One Eye now," said Tas. They saw their quarry standing before a door at the end of a long hall lit by candles. The two mice skittered down the hall, hugging the base of the wall, staying in shadows until they were across from the door. The mage opened the plain wooden door and stepped through. Tas, ahead of Selana, could see there was a room beyond, not more hallway. But the door shut before they could reach it.

The two mice approached the door cautiously. Their sharp mouse ears could detect him moving around on the other side. The bottom edge of the door cleared the stone floor by at least an inch, plenty of room for two mice to squeeze through.

"After you," thought Tas, motioning with his whiskered snout. Selana slipped noiselessly under the door, followed by the kender, both of them wondering what horrors they would encounter on the other side.

Chapter 13

A Two-Sided Coin

Using his good hand, Balcombe shook fragments of a squirrel's brain from a pair of calipers into a stoneware bowl. His work area was a waist-high wooden table in the laboratory that adjoined his apartment in Castle Tantallon. The room was small, as magical labs were measured, but quite generous by the standards of normal castle chambers. One narrow loophole in the outside wall let in a small amount of light, though torches were still needed for full illumination.

Frowning, he licked the last, tart droplets from the porcelain bowl in the palm of his right hand. The spellcasting draft made from a snow-white pearl and an owl feather steeped in wine sharpened his senses in an unpleasant way. Noises took on a jarring quality, filling his head with sharp reverberations; smell brought with it an unsettling sense of time and the sequence of past events; worst of all, colors and shapes became more distinct, as if the two were no longer associated but could be separated and examined individually. Of course, that was the point. The elixir empowered him to identify the characteristics of a magical item. He could, quite literally, see, feel, hear, and smell the magical capabilities of an item he was handling. Currently he was examining the copper bracelet on his wrist.

Balcombe ran his fingers over the bracelet as one would stroke a lover. He liked the feel of heavy jewelry, took an almost sensual pleasure in certain pieces. This one was particularly stimulating in that regard, with the added benefit of the gems on its face; he coveted faceted stones of any sort.

Balcombe could see that the bracelet revealed the future through visions to its wearer, just as the pathetic little con man had said. Far more curious was its background. It appeared that it had been fashioned by a dwarf but it also bore the unmistakable signs of elvish influence. He could not identify the specific elf kingdom involved, but it was neither Silvanesti nor Qualinesti, of that he was sure. A faint but persistent saline odor clung to it that he had never encountered before. It could have come from the Isle of Sancrist, perhaps, or even beyond.

Regardless of its origin, Balcombe suspected that a practiced wearer could, in any twenty-four-hour period, seek answers to a set number of specific questions about the near future. Its potential was enormous in the hands of a skilled user, though mastery required much practice. He resolved to wear it for a full day sometime in the coming week, but now he was too tired to experiment with it, so he struggled to slip the bracelet over his hand and off his wrist; the fit was quite tight. Finally he wrestled it off and set it on the counter.

The mage's shoulders slumped in exhaustion. This spell had been ten hours in the casting; the first eight were consumed by purifying the bracelet, as the identification spell required, and removing influences that could corrupt and blur his magical sensitivity. He had been just going to finish it, when he had been interrupted by the awakening in the dungeon of his newest zombie, formerly Omardicar the Omnipotent.

He had been most annoyed to find the four oddly allied strangers there, doubly so for what they'd done to a zombie he'd not even had a chance to use yet. The captured dwarf and half-elf had provided little truly useful information, except that they'd been after the bracelet, though he had been unable to ascertain why.

Balcombe thought about the two who were safely behind bars. More intelligent and perceptive by far than the seer had been, they had proved a greater challenge to the mage's mind. He had probed them, both verbally and magically; the dwarf had given him little information, being naturally resistant to magic. The half-elf had provided little more, being magical himself.

They had a tenuous connection to the one they called Delbridge, Balcombe's short-lived zombie—claimed, in fact, never to have met him, which a detect lie spell revealed to the mage to be the truth. By the end of the interrogation, Balcombe felt quite confident they knew nothing of his connection to Rostrevor's disappearance.

They would make excellent zombies.

He anxiously awaited word that the two who had escaped, the oddly pale young woman and the kender, had had their deaths meted out by his shadow monster. He was taking no chances, now that he was so close to his ultimate goal.

Balcombe yawned and blinked heavy eyelids. The strain of the spell preparation had drained him physically, but the events in the dungeon and jail left him mentally keyed up. He desperately felt the need to relax. From a sideboard he picked up a blue bowl and the straight razor he used to shave his head. He carried the two items across the stained stone floor of the lab to a door and passed through it into his richly carpeted and appointed bedchamber. There he settled in a mauve, velvet-covered divan and reclined among a mound of feather pillows.

Balcombe placed the bowl on the floor. Extending his left arm off the edge of the couch and over the bowl, he opened the razor and positioned its keen edge against the ball of his palm. He lingered like that for several moments, savoring the anticipation of what he was about to do. A fine lattice of hairline scars paralleled the shining blade. With a glint of dementia in his eyes, he applied just enough pressure on the blade to push a shallow crease in his palm. Then, smiling tightly, he drew the blade slowly toward himself. As it slid, the parting flesh rose slowly up the side of the blade as the metal sank into the skin. A thin trickle of blood flowed out from beneath the steel, then ran in a warm red stream across his tilted palm to drip into the bowl on the floor. The flow surged in rhythm with his pulse, and his head nodded in time with the soothing beat. Soon tiny streams of blood crisscrossed his hand, following the minute network of lines etched there. A few moments after that his palm was drenched and growing sticky as the crimson fluid began to coagulate.

The discovery that the sight of his own blood calmed him, that the sensation of his own pain thrilled him, had come on a horror-filled night ten long years ago. On that damp, moonlit night a broken apprentice mage had teetered on the brink of the Abyss only to ultimately cheat death by striking a deal with the devil himself.

Balcombe had learned much since then. The former initiate had secured a position as court mage to a paranoid and disenfranchised Knight of Solamnia in a forgotten corner of Abanasinia. He had become free— even paid—to hone his magical skills in the lap of luxury, without interference, without unwanted attention. He was free to stoke the flames of bitterness toward those he held responsible for his failure of the Test in the Tower-, the Conclave of Wizards, which had administered the Test and then left him for dead.

He never could decide which of the three orders he hated most for participating in his humiliation. The head of the conclave, Par-Salian, was a powerful wizard of the White Robes. The one time Balcombe had met him— when Balcombe had received his first assignment as an apprentice—the middle-aged archmage of Good had acted distant, as if the conversation were a distraction keeping him from his real work, which seemed too caught up in theory. Balcombe thought it likely that Par-Salian had designed the Test.

At the time of Balcombe's Test, Justarius had recently been appointed head of the Red Robes, the order Balcombe had sought to join. Now Balcombe found that order's neutrality infuriating, especially since it likely kept Justarius from intervening on behalf of the young Balcombe in his time of need during the Test.

That left LaDonna. Also middle-aged, the dun-haired wizardess was head of the Order of Black Robes. Balcombe knew less about her than the others, because during his formal training he had never considered wearing the Black Robes. In truth, he held her the least responsible of all because

of her alignment toward evil.

That was why he sought to replace her in the conclave.

What greater revenge against Par-Salian and Justarius than to call Balcombe, a failure of their impossible test, their peer? He would achieve far greater power than he had ever dreamed possible when he made that first journey to Wayreth Forest.

If only Hiddukel held up his end of the deal.

Balcombe had learned much about bargaining since falling into this arrangement. Ten years and countless souls after he had struck his deal with the evil god in the darkness of Wayreth Forest, the mage had a plan that would help him reach his goal and stop his indenture to Hiddukel all at once. He would offer the god of deals, the dealer of souls, a spirit so pristine and priceless that the god would be willing to nullify his verbal contract with Balcombe just to get it.

But Balcombe intended to ask a higher price than even that. Hiddukel had long ago promised him both power and revenge. The former had been delivered, as Balcombe was certainly the most powerful wizard in the region. Now he would also have his revenge by claiming LaDonna's position on the conclave.

As he thought about how he would approach the subject with the god, Balcombe compressed the wound on his palm until the flow of blood stopped, then he wrapped it tightly with a clean strip of silk from an enameled box near the foot of the divan. He returned with the small bowl to his laboratory. There he mixed sweet-smelling powders with the thickening blood to make a paste. This he placed over a red-hot brazier, then thrust his head into the billowing cloud of smoke that streamed up from the bowl. This cloying vapor cleared away the exhaustion of the previous ten hours and left Balcombe feeling quick and sharp-minded.

It was a ritual he had performed countless times before invoking Hiddukel. Each encounter with the sharp-tongued god was a contest of wills. Hiddukel was the immortal sovereign of contracts. Anything said during a conversation with him, no matter how insignificant it might seem, could become eternally binding. Balcombe had long ago realized that any degree of caution was justified when dealing with such a being.

Feeling clarified and invigorated, Balcombe strode from his worktable to a heavily ornate floor cabinet standing in the corner. Inside were symmetrical shelves top and bottom, with an array of small drawers in the middle. The mage selected one drawer and pulled it completely out from its slot. He then reached back into the empty space and withdrew a smaller, square, completely closed box made of highly polished gray slate, approximately two inches on a side. He pulled a second drawer from its slot and nimbly popped open a hidden panel along its back edge and withdrew a tiny bronze key from the secret compartment thus revealed. Returning to the slate box, he turned it round and round in his hands until he found the side he sought. As he carefully passed the bronze key over that side of the box, an impression appeared in the shape of the key. Balcombe pressed the key into the notch and instantly the box folded itself open to reveal a small, royal blue velvet pouch.

Balcombe carefully unfolded the pouch, which appeared to be empty. Its most striking features were six tiny, steel hands, which held the mouth of the pouch tightly shut. The wizard spoke the sounds, "*buldi vetivich*," releasing the magical wards protecting the bag and causing the six tiny hands to disappear.

Tingling with anticipation, Balcombe tipped up the apparently empty bag and from it tumbled a perfectly cut, fist-sized ruby. Holding the gem up to the light of one of the many candles in the room, Balcombe could barely make out the frightened young face deep inside the gem's wine-colored facets, looking this way and that, trying in vain to see what was happening outside the magical prison.

They'd made it so easy for him, the knight and his son, and most especially the unwitting Delbridge, who by revealing the secret plan had provided everyone but himself with an alibi. Placing the gem

in Rostrevor's sheets while supposedly casting magical seals on the area was child's play. The instant the squire touched the gem, he was drawn into it and trapped like a genie in a bottle. When Balcombe unsealed the room in the morning, he simply pocketed the gem unnoticed. Everyone else was too preoccupied with the inexplicable disappearance of the squire to notice anything.

But trapping a soul was no small task, even for a wizard of Balcombe's advanced skill. First the wizard had to prepare the vault, which had to be a gem of extraordinary value or it would shatter when the soul was forced into it. Next it was necessary to ensorcel the gem, making it receptive to magical effects. Then the wizard had to create an enchanted maze inside the gem, thereby forming a prison capable of containing a soul. All of these steps were necessary prior to the magical casting that actually trapped the soul and had to be performed ritually each and every time Balcombe sought a victim to soothe Hiddukel's hunger.

In fact, hunger may have been the wrong word. Balcombe wondered, as he often did, precisely what use Hiddukel had for the souls he received from his faithful. Did he consume them as food, or was he beyond the need for nourishment of any kind? Perhaps they became slaves in some nightmare realm mortals could never imagine. Or, what Balcombe considered the most interesting possibility, perhaps Hiddukel used them as a form of currency in dealings with beings even more loathsome than himself. Ultimately, Balcombe did not care what became of the souls; his curiosity was completely academic.

Balcombe hesitated, staring at the enormous, nightmare gem for many minutes before reaching into the depths of his black robe. He loathed conversations with Hiddukel. Still, it was the only way to get what he desired.

The mage's fingertips met with the slight, almost un-detectable seam located just above his left breast. He tapped it four times—two quick taps followed by two slow ones. The secret pocket he had magically placed there opened, and he extracted from it a large golden coin, cold to the touch. For a time after he had received the conduit to the evil god Hiddukel from the swirling whirlpool of autumn leaves in Wayreth Forest, he had absently carried it with his other coins. Until the mind-boggling day he nearly—absently—traded it for a chicken at a local market. For the first time he began to think of the potential consequences of such carelessness. That very afternoon he had created a secret pocket in his robes; the coin never left his person again.

Balcombe reached for the lit candle standing nearby on the counter, then hesitated again. He examined the coin in his hand. Each of the two faces had a distinct personality, a fact that he had initially found both intriguing and useful. Often, a deal that could not be struck with one would appeal to the other. He frequently switched from one to the other several times during a single conversation. But more and more he found both aspects of Hiddukel odious and his demands intolerable.

At last, after selecting the more severe face, Balcombe held the coin by the edges between his thumb and forefinger. Slowly he passed it over the candle flame, feeling the metal grow hot in his grasp. As the temperature of the coin rose, Balcombe felt his fingers burn. Just as the heat became deliriously unbearable, the face on the coin suddenly sprang to life. The animated mouth gaped and the candle's flame leaped through it; the eyes popped open and scanned the room, locking onto Balcombe.

"You! I was in the midst of an extraordinary transaction," snarled the stout face. "It is too early in the moon's cycle for your usual delivery. Tell me instantly why you have summoned me, or I will flay the flesh from your frame and let the fiends suck the marrow from your bones!"

"No, you won't," Balcombe said, having learned long ago that Hiddukel valued bravado more highly than true conviction. "You still need me for the souls I provide you."

"I need no mortal!" bellowed the wrathful face.

Balcombe placed his thumbless hand to his chest in mock astonishment. "Has my knowledge been

faulty all these years? I thought the true gods could enter Krynn only through avatars, such as this coin, and without their powers. If you can, in fact, enter this World and gather souls for yourself," he said, beginning the bluff, "I will happily declare our deal completed and deliver no more souls."

"Our score will be settled when I deem it so!" Both faces on the coin suddenly gave a hiccupping laugh that was annoyingly out of synch. "Besides, you dare call souls those wretched things you have sent me of late? Rabid dogs and goblins would better satisfy my needs. You are dangerously close to forfeiture of contract, human."

Balcombe forced his voice to remain even. "Just how many worthwhile bodies and souls do you think can disappear unnoticed in a village the size of Tantallon? I take what I can get away with."

Hiddukel's eyes bulged. "Your petty problems are no concern of mine, mage! I made you what you are, and I expect little enough in return."

"Then you will be extraordinarily pleased to hear what I have for you this time." Crimson shafts flashed from the large ruby as it caught the light of a torch on the wall. Biting his lip in rapturous anticipation, Balcombe caressed the ruby's faceted surface before lifting it up to the level of the coin.

Hiddukel's expression was stormy. "I have seen gems before, mage. Why do you waste my time with games?"

"Look inside, my lord," Balcombe said smoothly. He swung the enchanted prison gem closer to the face on the coin.

The golden trinket flipped itself over in Balcombe's open palm. Hiddukel's wily face squinted into the depths of the gem. "I see the visage of a pretty young man. It is not unlike others you have sent me and tells me nothing of his soul," he said skeptically.

"Ah, but look into his eyes," Balcombe intoned. "His is not the face of an ordinary cobbler or street loiterer. He is Rostrevor, the sole offspring of Lord Curston. Raised by the Code and Measure of the Knights of Solamnia, his soul is as pure and steadfast as a mountain stream. I'll wager there are few less sullied on the whole of Krynn." He paused for effect. "This I give to you—"

Even Hiddukel's crafty side could scarcely disguise his lust at the prospect.

"—in exchange for one last service."

"Remember who is the master here."

"I have never forgotten."

Balcombe's gaze was locked with the image on the coin. Show no weakness, he reminded himself. "For ten years I have served you faithfully, exchanging souls for the life you restored to me. In the shadows of the towers, you vowed to help me exact revenge for my treatment in the Tower of High Sorcery during my test. Now I ask to see that promise fulfilled. Grant me LaDonna's position in the Conclave of Wizards."

Hiddukel was aghast. "That's impossible!"

"Nothing is impossible for a god."

Hiddukel recognized that he stood on the brink of a trap; the animated face on the coin fell still in reflection.

"You are a god of evil. LaDonna is the highest wizard of the black robes. Think of a way."

Balcombe held the gem up to Hiddukel's eyes again, scarlet shafts of light dancing crazily on the walls.

"When?"

Balcombe swallowed an ecstatic smile. "I will summon you from the temple, as usual. We will

make the exchange then."

The coin flipped back to the defiant side. "Time is needed to prepare! LaDonna is no fool."

"Surely she is no match for a god." As the words slipped out, Balcombe gasped inwardly at his own effrontery. Had he pushed too hard, overestimated Hiddukel's conceit, when he was so close to getting what he wanted?

"Have a care, mortal," warned the coin in rigid tones. "I am not easily moved to true anger, but you have pushed me long and hard. I am not in your debt. You are in mine. As long as that condition persists, all I have granted to you can be withdrawn, including your life. Consider that well before next you question my power."

Balcombe had never truly tested Hiddukel's power on Krynn, but what he had seen in the past was impressive. It was entirely possible, he knew, that Hiddukel could enforce his threat, if not directly then through other followers. Few people openly worshiped the cunning god of bargaining, but Balcombe had good reason to suspect that many people, like himself, served Hiddukel secretly. More than once in the past, Hiddukel had demanded that Balcombe deliver a specific person's soul. While Hiddukel had never said it directly, Balcombe had no doubt that those victims were also followers of Hiddukel who had either betrayed or displeased the god. The thought that such assassins could be stalking in his own shadow chilled Balcombe, especially as it meant that his soul would be forfeit to Hiddukel's evil pleasures.

"I beg pardon, Hiddukel. The thought of my ultimate vengeance drawing so close made my words rash. You know I have served you faithfully for ten years. I ask only for what you have promised me.

"And consider what it would mean to you to have a loyal servant in such a high position as the Conclave of Wizards," he continued. "We can both profit by this." Balcombe knew that the best way to shield himself from Hiddukel's wrath was to turn the god's attention to something else. In this case, as usual, the best lure was what the god craved most after souls: profit and power.

"Indeed," mouthed the coin's jovial face, "I have given much thought to your case over the years. You are a very interesting prospect." But then the coin flipped over, revealing the stern face. Balcombe knew from experience that this meant the dealing would get harsh. The stern face drove much harder bargains than the jovial face, but it also bargained for significantly higher stakes.

"Do not deceive yourself, however," it snarled. "There are others who also crave LaDonna's post. Some may be more deserving than you. Some are more faithful than you, others more deferential. Then there is LaDonna herself. Why should I favor you over any of them?"

As always when he spoke with Hiddukel, Balcombe's mind raced ahead, sharp and focused. "Others may crave the post, but I was promised revenge. Both of us know that once drawn, you must uphold your contracts. I have been patient, Hiddukel, but I have waited a long time. And now I'm bringing you a soul such as you've not seen for a long time."

The coin cut Balcombe off before he could continue. "What do you know of time, human? I have lived through ages you could not imagine. I have been banned from your world, denied the souls I crave, for such a time that years are not sufficient to measure it. What is your wait, compared to mine? These pathetic pleas do not impress me."

"But your scale of time does not apply to me," responded Balcombe. "Unlike you, I grow old. My time in this world is limited. The longer you wait to grant my request, the less time I will have to serve you from a position of ultimate power. Consider the souls I could send you if I were seated on the conclave. The feast would be like nothing you've ever known, and could begin with LaDonna. We would both have what we want most."

Years of experience had taught Balcombe how to play on Hiddukel's greed most effectively. If this appeal failed, there would be others. Balcombe had not burned any bridges behind him, but he

could not imagine an argument that might be more effective against the patron god of soul stealing. The coin flipped back to its jovial side. Vainly Balcombe tried to catch it and force the stern face to remain up, but he was too slow. Now he knew the jovial face, unwilling to seal a pact of this magnitude, would cut off the negotiation.

"Bring the soul to the appointed place, where I can examine it more closely," the coin said with a smile. "We will consider this issue in more detail at that time." Then the mouth sealed itself shut and once again the item in Balcombe's hand was nothing but a grotesque coin.

Not sure whether he should be frustrated or elated, Balcombe snapped his fist shut over the coin. He had extracted no new promises from the god, nor had he received any assurances. At the same time, he had not been turned down, and that alone was some encouragement. As long as Hiddukel was willing to entertain a possibility, there was reason to be hopeful.

Standing and stretching his muscular, six-foot frame, Balcombe returned the coin to its secret pocket, then carefully replaced the soul gem in its elaborate hiding place.

The next step, he told himself, was to prepare the altar for the ceremony that would relinquish the squire's soul to Hiddukel. It must be carried out flawlessly, Balcombe knew, because another soul this attractive might never fall into his hands.

There was difficulty, however, because the altar was not at the castle. The risk of accidental discovery was too great for the altar to be anywhere near the town. If his horrid practices or even his devotion to Hiddukel ever became known publicly or revealed to Lord Curston, Balcombe's career, and probably his life, would be over. For that reason, the altar was well hidden, miles from town in a rugged area of the Eastwall Mountains.

Getting there on foot would take Balcombe at least a day, probably more, of hard traveling. But he could be there in little over an hour by using a spell of flying.

Still it was a difficult and dangerous trip. The higher regions of the mountains were inhabited by hostile creatures. The ceremony of transference itself was time-consuming, which meant that he needed a good excuse to avoid suspicion over his absence from the court. True to his Solamnic heritage, Curston was mistrustful of magic and its practitioners. He kept a court mage only because a person in his powerful position had an obvious need for one and because Balcombe had proven his usefulness many times. None of that meant Curston completely trusted his mage.

Balcombe turned around and studied the chart of lunar cycles on the wall. The three moons of Krynn—Lunitari, Solinari, and Nunitari—controlled the power of magic in the world with their phases. Being an evil god, Hiddukel was at the height of his power when Nunitari, the black moon, was in high sanction. The same applied to Hiddukel's followers. The only time Balcombe could transfer souls to Hiddukel was during the high sanction of Nunitari, a condition that existed for a stretch of seven days out of every twenty-eight.

Balcombe knew that tomorrow night was the first night of high sanction for Nunitari. The day after that, Nunitari and Lunitari would be aligned for one day. During that time, the power of all wizards on Ansalon would be increased, but particularly black and red-robed mages. Veins stood out on Balcombe's neck as he thought back to the failed Test that had kept him out of the Order of Red Robes and thrust him into Hiddukel's service. Because he served Hiddukel, he received the same benefits from Nunitari as any black-robed wizard.

Still thinking about his approaching appointment at the altar, Balcombe became vaguely aware of a small, furry rodent scurrying about on his work counter. The castle was full of mice and rats, and Balcombe had, in fact, befriended a number of them over the years, though he might just as easily use them in his experiments. They liked to nibble at fallen bits of spell components and drink the dregs of liquids in his mortar bowls.

Balcombe was certain he had never seen this particular mouse in his laboratory before; he would

have remembered such a slight, bright-eyed little creature. He watched as it darted among the surgical tools and bowls, snuffling its delicate whiskers at crumbs.

Suddenly its vision fastened onto something at the end of the counter. The furry brown rodent lunged forward, struggling to stretch its jaws enough to snatch up the bracelet in its sharp little teeth.

"Why, you little—" Balcombe began, angry and puzzled at the same time. He reached out to seize the audacious mouse as it struggled to drag the heavy bracelet to the counter's edge.

Just then, another mouse, smaller but wiry, leaped out from behind the blue bowl and fastened its razor teeth onto Balcombe's hand. Crying out in pain and fury, the mage flung the mouse from his finger and dashed it to the floor, where it staggered around, dazed.

Meanwhile, the mouse on the counter was still trying to drag the bracelet to the edge, but getting nowhere. Looking up at Balcombe's enraged visage as his hand reached toward it, the rodent gave one last desperate look at the bracelet and threw itself off the counter.

But the mouse never landed. In mid-flight, it changed before Balcombe's startled eyes into a hummingbird and flittered away through the narrow loophole and out of the castle. Balcombe felt his stomach lurch.

These were not mice.

Frantic, the mage looked around on the floor for the other mouse. "Who are you really? What do you want?"

He finally spotted the mouse as it skittered under the doorway to Balcombe's chamber and the castle beyond, disappearing from the mage's sight. He had no hope of catching the frightened mouse.

Unless the dwarf and half-elf had somehow escaped and taken the form of mice, two others now knew he had the bracelet. But there *were* two others: the woman and the kender who had escaped his web! The dwarf and half-elf were safely locked away in the castle jail. Balcombe had assumed his shadow monster had done its work on the other two. Could they be powerful enough or lucky enough to have escaped it?

Worse still, they undoubtedly heard his conversation with Hiddukel. Though they could have no clear idea where the altar was, beings with the power to poly-morph could undoubtedly discover its location. To be safe, he must get to the altar, make the transfer, and take LaDonna's place on the conclave immediately, thereby raising himself above the influence of any provincial mage in Tantallon or beyond.

Balcombe prepared for his departure as hastily as possible, but two questions burned in his thoughts like a flame that could not be extinguished.

Who were the woman and the kender, and how much did they know?

PART III

Chapter 14

The Chase

After turning into a sparrow once again, Selana hovered out of sight and observed Balcombe as he leaped from a parapet outside his window, the bracelet plainly visible on his wrist. Obviously employing a spell of flying, he soared just above the treetops north of the village, mingling among the gray clouds that had descended since morning. He seemed headed deeper into the mountains, following the banks of the large mountain stream that cut between the castle and the pristine town of Tantallon.

Selana counted the passage of two minutes, then flew after him, maintaining a distance she hoped was beyond the range of any detection spells he might have cast.

So close! She'd held the bracelet in her teeth! Her heart ached at the memory.

The sea elf felt a momentary twinge of guilt over leaving Flint and Tanis behind in the jail. The dwarf, a fatherly sort, seemed as kind as anyone she'd met since coming to the surface, in spite of his occasional grumpiness. She suspected much of it was bluff and bluster, since he seemed sincerely anxious to make amends and retrieve the bracelet. She was sorry to cast him to the fates.

The half-elf was a different sort. . . . She had never met anyone like him before. Fire and ice. Infuriating. Impatient. Intriguing. ... A great flame, stoked from the soul, burned in his elongated eyes. He was a young man driven by extremes, by the best and worst passions. For some reason she could not fathom, she seemed to bring out the worst in him, which saddened her.

She knew that her real responsibility was to her brother and her kingdom, and if she did not follow Balcombe immediately, before the potion wore off and the evil mage got away, the cause for which they all had struggled would be lost.

With any luck, the kender would manage to rescue his friends. Under any circumstance, he seemed the type to always land on his feet, no matter how dire the situation. The kender was resourceful and undaunted, though this was tempered by a streak of . . . irresponsibility wasn't quite the right word, she thought. He was easily distracted. Still, she had a flicker of hope that he could help his friends, and she felt there was little more she could do on that score than hope.

Hope, it seemed, was the mainstay of her strategy now. She could only hope that her potion would last long enough to track Balcombe. She could hope that when the potion did expire, she would have enough warning to reach the ground without getting killed. She had to hope that Balcombe was not aware he was being followed. And she had to hope that, if and when she found Balcombe in his lair, she could retrieve the bracelet and escape.

As they traveled, they seemed to be following the same valley consistently. They had not yet veered away from the main branch of the stream that ran through Tantallon. If I do lose him for some reason, Selana decided, I will continue following this stream. It seems to be Balcombe's navigator, and at least I won't get lost.

She found herself watching the mountains more and more. Selana had never seen peaks like this before. In her native kingdom, anyone could swim above the undersea mountains easily, but they were largely barren and their peaks and ridges were worn smooth by the tireless motion of the water. These were bold, jagged, and vibrant with life. Still, more than anything else since leaving the sea, this curious flight reminded her of home.

Castle Tantallon was perhaps thirty minutes behind her when Selana began to feel oddly heavy and

her vision grew clouded. The potion! She knew in a flash that it must be wearing off. Unable to still a stab of fear, a pulse pounding in her ears, the sea elf immediately dipped her feathered head, tucked her wings, and nosedived straight toward the moss-covered earth.

She nearly made it.

Past the top branches of firs and budding aspens, just above a grassy glen near the banks of the stream, the sparrow turned back into a panic-stricken sea elf. She tumbled more than eight feet through the air, indigo cloak fluttering behind her, and crashed into a large, prickly thicket.

With a scream of searing pain, Selana sprang from the shrubbery, but her robe was caught up in pointy thorns. Tears streaming from her eyes, nearly hysterical, she tugged frantically at her robe, which was already in tatters from the encounter with the satyrs and the chase through Tantallon. She managed to finish the job and tear it beyond repair. Flailing, thrashing, yanking on the shredded cloth, she screamed with the frustration and exhaustion that came from days on the road with little sleep and even less food. The small bit of cape that remained around her neck she tore loose and flung into the malevolent bush, venting her anger slightly.

Her silver-pale hair was tangled and hung in limp strands about her sweaty, dirty, scratched face. Wearing nothing but a thin, dun-colored tunic that came to mid-calf, the princess of the Dargonesti elves dropped to her knees and wept great sobs.

"*Now* what am I to do?" she wailed skyward. Balcombe was long out of sight, and she had only a slim idea of where he was headed: a hideaway upstream, though it could be miles and miles away. Curled into a ball, her head cradled in her scratched hands, Selana cried until her tears were spent and she felt an eerie calmness overtake her.

She had no food, no shelter, and no magic spells left to cast; weary to the bone, she needed sleep to restore her magic. If she had any hope of reaching Balcombe before it was too late to either retrieve the bracelet or save Rostrevor, she would have to travel overland on foot. She could scarcely face the prospect. Vexed, Selana snatched up a fistful of pebbles and hurled them into the stream with tremendous frustration.

The young sea elf felt lost, far from her people, farther still from anything the least familiar to her life beneath the sea.

Selana touched her tongue to a salty tear that pooled above her lips and smiled sadly, remembering the days spent frolicking in the sea with her family, especially her elder brother. Semunel loved to tease her; just as she got close in a game of tag, he would shapechange into a dolphin, the form all Dargonesti had the natural ability to assume, but used mostly to flee from predators. He always swam faster than she, dodging through coral reefs and the many shipwrecks that littered the sea floor, always one length ahead, eluding her grasp.

When she was a very young sea elf, she would cry and complain to their father, the Speaker of the Moons, who would chastise Semunel.

"All members of the Dargonesti royal house must be above ridicule or defeat, even from each other," he would say sternly.

Afterward, Semunel would poke her when their father wasn't looking. "You are a spoiled princess, little sister. One day Father will not be around to fight your battles for you," he would goad. Just when she thought she would go mad with fury, he would grin and seize her in a fierce hug and say, "But I will always be there for you, Selana."

The corners of Selana's mouth turned up in a bittersweet smile. "Perhaps Semunel was right—maybe I am a wee bit headstrong and used to having my way," she mumbled reflectively. "I wish he were here to help me now."

She remembered showing him the formula she had found for the bracelet. When she told him of her intentions on his behalf, he all but ordered her to abandon the plan.

"Stay away from land dwellers, they are nothing but trouble," he said, literally shaking his finger at her. "We'll resolve this problem without their interference."

Of course, stung by his patronizing tone, she inwardly belittled his objections and slipped away in the night to do things her way. She hated admitting that he had been right about land dwellers.

With a sigh, Selana sidled over to the stream's edge and sat cross-legged, contemplating her reflection in a calm, shallow pool, sheltered by a fallen log.

"What conceit made you think you could manage such an excursion by yourself?" she moaned at the pinched, pale face in the smooth water. What lunacy had turned a once lighthearted young princess into an abject, weeping fool in the shrubs of some faraway mountain range? She should be frolicking in the beautiful waves of the homeland she loved. If only she could swim again. . . .

Suddenly Selana's eyes went wide. She looked up quickly at the rushing stream. Was it deep enough? What if the current were too strong and she were swept downstream? The water would certainly be far colder than she was accustomed to. And it was fresh water, not salt water, but she could survive in it for a long time.

In spite of these doubts, the sea elf princess's mind was already set. She was awash with the desire to slip into familiar, enveloping water, no matter the consequences. She stood boldly, removing one of her soft leather boots to test the water's temperature with her big toe—it felt like barely melted snow. Replacing her boot, she shivered, only partly from the cold, and reminded herself that it would not feel so icy after she had adopted her thick blue-gray dolphin hide.

Selana closed her large sea-colored eyes. Clenching her teeth, she willed her feet to carry her into the swiftly moving, frigid water. Every nerve shrieked in protest against the assault on her pale, tender flesh. She stood, the waist-high water swelling around her, soaking her to the bone. The sound of rushing water pulsating down the mountainside steadied her nerves. Spreading her arms before her with practiced ease, she drew a deep breath, holding it in her lungs, and dove into the force of the currents.

Selana brought a memory from childhood to mind and centered her thoughts. Instantly the water coursing over her no longer felt icy. She perceived the familiar "joining," which was the only way she had ever been able to describe the sensation of her legs converting to one powerful tail. Her arms shaped into smaller flippers, and her vision spread as she sprouted a bottle-shaped snout with her eyes widely separated to either side.

She felt free!

Swinging her tail, she pressed upstream, carefully testing the depth of the riverbed as she progressed steadily in the current. When she needed her first breath, she couldn't resist the dangerous temptation to leap up in a graceful arc, snatching air in gulps, the way fish gobble flies. She did a barrel-roll and then another, one of the first tricks she had learned as a dolphin. Selana sprang from the water and leaped high in the air again, swishing her powerful tail in a defiant gesture of renewed confidence.

Her spirit sated, she turned her mind solely to the task and swam onward for a short time, trying to cover ground as quickly as possible. Soon she would have to look for signs of the fortress, though she was not at all sure what to look for. Would it be a building, like one from the town? She popped her snout above the surface and cruised along, her black eyes scouring the landscape for any sign of Balcombe.

Selana found negotiating the unpredictable changes in the stream the most difficult part of her journey. In fits and starts the stream would widen to twice its usual size, the bottom dropping quickly to form a calm, slow-moving pool. Just as suddenly it would narrow or the bottom would swoop up, turning it into a shallow, rushing torrent.

As she swam higher into the mountains, the tall fir and aspen trees gradually gave way to shorter

pinus and scrub. This far upstream she was having to negotiate around large jagged flows of ice and snow that were breaking from the shore. To make matters even more difficult, the stream varied in size, but the depth was decreasing steadily. Selana knew that unless she found Balcombe's hideout soon, she would simply be unable to proceed this way. As a dolphin, she simply could not swim in less than a few feet of water.

Straining against the strong current in a fast-flowing narrow stretch, Selana squawked in pain as her left flipper scraped across a sharp, submerged rock. She both heard and felt the tough hide tearing away. The icy water aggravated the raw wound, and she thrashed in momentary panic. Her spirit sank instantly as she realized she could not possibly control herself in the powerful current with just one usable flipper, let alone continue upstream. Quickly she pushed herself with her tail toward the bank, steering with just her right flipper.

Even more disheartening was the realization that she could not just bob at the stream's edge until her wound healed. She needed her hands to make a bandage and restful sleep to recover her wits. To fall asleep as a dolphin in this current was surely to drown. Accepting that she had no real choice, Selana sighed dejectedly and willed herself back to humanoid form.

She stood with the water lapping at her breasts. At once the wound beneath the sleeve of her soaked tunic, four inches long and deep enough to expose the bone, throbbed unbearably and pumped out a thick red trail of blood that swirled around her. Struggling to remain conscious, she hauled herself onto the bank using her good arm. Once there she lay on the frozen ground and shivered in the ice-cold breeze.

Selana could scarcely believe it was possible, but she was now in worse straits than before. The temperature in the stream had been nearly constant, but the air was much colder this high in the mountains. Now seriously injured, she was without food and shelter. She realized that she could very well die before the sun rose again.

I have to get dry, Selana thought faintly, her head spinning dizzily from loss of blood. Mustering every ounce of stubbornness in her makeup, she concentrated on the one spell left in her memory: a cantrip, nothing more than a practicing technique, so minor it was almost negligible. Once mastered, though, a cantrip could be extremely flexible, and Selana was counting on that. It took a great deal of effort, but with the cantrip she managed to squeeze the icy water from her skimpy tunic and blot it dry. The effort left her weaker still.

Acting largely on instinct and reflex, she ripped a two-inch strip of cloth from the ragged hem of her tunic and bound the oozing, burning wound tightly to close the gash and stop the flow of blood. The added pressure of the bandage hurt, but felt reassuring at the same time.

"You need to rest for a moment," she mumbled aloud, hoping the sound of a voice—even her own—would keep her awake. "Find some shelter from the wind." Selana half stumbled, half walked toward a dazzlingly white outcropping of rock in the face of the mountain. Surely she could find a nook or cranny and hide there from the merciless mountain gales.

At last she found a small, low ledge, barely deep enough for her slight form. She collapsed in a ball against the cold granite, her face turned outward. With the tattered tunic drawn up close, she blinked foggy eyes at the bleak scene before her.

She knew with frightening clarity that she was going to die . . . alone. As the wind howled, she would slip into eternal oblivion and never awaken—unless she believed the clerics who said there was an afterlife, if she believed in the true gods, whoever they were, but she didn't believe.

Thinking she had seen movement, Selana forced her eyes to focus once again for just a moment. A fallen branch, perhaps? Or a hallucination? She discarded the notion because whatever she had seen was much larger than a branch and blended perfectly into the grayness of the granite mountainside. She thought she saw a hulking minotaur, a savage man-cow hybrid, though this one was made of polished white granite. It was crossing the gap, headed toward her.

I really am hallucinating, she thought. I'll just close my eyes and sleep, and when I awaken it will be gone. But with her eyes closed she heard ragged, vicious snarling and breathing. I'll just close my ears, too, she thought groggily, and the sound will go away. Eyes tightly closed, fingers in her ears, she waited.

Then two great hands, icy as the granite itself, clasped her by the shoulders and hefted her into the air. A heartbeat from unconsciousness, Selana's eyes fluttered open briefly and saw the frightening, horn-headed granite minotaur again.

For one last, brief moment, she thought, almost gratefully, that she must already be dead.

Chapter 15

The Jailbreak

Tasslehoff stretched out beneath a small night-stand, licking his paws and smoothing out his fur. His tail flicked back and forth casually. It was an engaging feeling, and he was just a little rueful that kender had no tails.

He still could not believe what he and Selana had witnessed in the laboratory. A talking coin, who represented the evil god Hiddukel! He could hardly wait to tell Tanis and Flint about it, particularly now that Selana had flown away. She'd flashed him one more telepathic message before she'd disappeared through the loophole in the mage's chamber.

"Tas, I'm going to follow him and get my bracelet back," she'd said, giving Tasslehoff no chance to talk her out of it, since she flew from sight and range right after.

So, in a mouse-induced panic, Tas had skittered out of the evil mage's laboratory, run partway down the hall, then slipped under the first door he came to. He found himself in a bedchamber. Probably a spare, unused room, he decided, because the fireplace was cold and several leaves swirled about in the comers whenever a breeze gusted through the tiny window. Still, a few rugs on the floor made it cozy enough and it seemed like a good place to pause and decide what he should do next.

Tas's first decision had been to shed his mouse form for something the mage might not be looking for. Most people seemed to like cats, so Castle Tantallon now had a white, brown, and turquoise cat with an unusually long shock of hair at the back of its head.

He also thought he would do well to wait a minute or two before moving around too much, just in case someone was watching the hallway. Tas washed himself, cat style, wondering all the while if he really would be cleaner when he changed back to his normal shape.

He soon began considering his situation strategically. Few people realized that kender were capable of analytical thought. In fact, they were quite good at it under the right conditions but, because they were so easily distracted, they rarely managed to carry an argument through to a logical conclusion. Tas discovered that lying under a nightstand, licking one's paws, and purring softly were all conducive to clear thinking.

Tasslehoff posed himself a question: If I were an evil wizard in league with Hiddukel and I found myself in this situation, what would I do? The mage would be guarding the bracelet now, that much was certain. And they had lost a big advantage by revealing both that the bracelet was what they wanted and that they could change shape.

Tasslehoff decided it was time to switch plans. He and Selana had failed to get the bracelet back, but Flint and Tanis were still prisoners somewhere in the castle. The captives had seen things under the castle—the zombie, for instance, which the wizard undoubtedly wanted to keep quiet from the knight, at least. That put the dwarf and the half-elf in considerable danger. Tas was certain he would never have a better opportunity to rescue them than while the potion was still effective, so he had better hurry.

He remembered that after the shadow monster had expired, he and Selana had seen the mage walking to the keep from the jail, so Flint and Tanis probably were being held captive there.

Tas finished his washing, stood, stretched, and padded to the door. He eyed the space under it, gauging its height. As a mouse he'd slipped under with no trouble, but why be a mouse again when there were so many other diverting forms he had yet to try.

In the blink of an eye he transformed into a two-foot-long, tan, brown, and gold fox snake. The stone floor felt nicely cool under his belly. Tas flicked his tongue experimentally a few times, then poked his head under the door and swung it slowly to look both ways. The hallway was clear.

His first effort to move forward was less than successful. His body twisted and jerked and rolled over, and he banged his head on the bottom of the door, but did not move forward. This is not as easy as snakes make it look, Tas concluded. After a few more abortive efforts to master a crawl, he managed to roll right side up again, but still was not in the hallway.

At last he realized that he was taking an altogether wrong approach. Crawling required arms and legs. Instead, he had to figure out how to slither. He thought about how a snake wiggles its way through a meadow. Without really understanding how he did it, he suddenly found himself making swift progress sideways and forward at the same time, until he was under the door and right out into the hallway.

Tas's curiosity about snakes was quickly settled— besides, people tended to startle and shiver and try to chop snakes in half whenever they ran across them—so he transformed himself again as soon as he was clear of the doorway. This time he settled upon an orange-and-ivory spaniel. He trotted down the corridor with his tail in the air, sniffed under doors, scampered down a winding staircase and through an open doorway into the main corridor. The way out was just down the hall to his right.

Tasslehoff ran to the exit and leaped up to plant both front paws on it. He pushed the latch up with his nose, and the door swung open. Once outside, Tas ran straight toward the jail. The front door stood open, so he trotted inside.

Two soldiers straddled a bench in the front room, rolling dice between them. Tas knew he'd come to the right place when he recognized Tanis's bow and Flint's axe on the floor behind them.

On the other side of the room, a door made of riveted iron bands led to the jail cells. The spaces between the bands were large enough for Tas to walk through, but the door would have to be unlocked to let Flint and Tanis out.

During his travels, Tasslehoff had encountered very few locks that he couldn't open with his picks. He had enough experience to know that the locks on most jail cells were not very good. But just in case, he looked around for a ring of keys. He spotted one hanging on a large hook on the wall, behind the two dice rollers.

Tas assumed that the older-looking of the pair was winning, because the pile of copper coins in front of him was quite a bit larger than the other soldier's. They seemed preoccupied with their game, so Tas trotted past them toward the iron door. At that moment the losing player must have made a particularly bad dice roll because he swore loudly and flung the dice across the room. Both guards looked directly at Tas.

"Whose dog is that?" asked the older guard. "I've never seen it before."

"I don't know," the second replied, "but it sure is a strange color. And look at that ridiculous shock of hair on its head. Hand me your knife, Duncan. I'm going to cut some of it off."

Duncan pulled a small knife from a scabbard tucked in his belt and extended it to his companion, but a threatening growl made them both pause. Duncan remarked, "I don't think he likes your idea, Jules."

"I'm sure he doesn't have the slightest idea what we're talking about." Jules took the knife.

"Rrrrr, rowff!" Tas bared his teeth.

Jules and Duncan regarded the dog with raised eyebrows. Both guards kept their sight locked on Tasslehoff while Jules handed the knife back to Duncan. Tas wagged his tail and smiled as best he could. Duncan handed the knife to Jules, and Tas growled.

Duncan flashed a hearty grin. "He's a smart one. If I didn't know better, I'd wager he understands every word we say."

Tas barked and trotted forward. Both men petted him warmly, and Jules even drew a scrap of dried meat from his pocket and offered it. Tasslehoff had not eaten for some time, and he gobbled it hungrily. He was surprised to realize that its flavor wasn't as strong on his long dog tongue as it would have been on his sensitive kender taste buds. After another round of petting, the guards retrieved their dice and resumed their game.

The kender-spaniel lay on the floor beneath the bench. Tas stayed there for a minute or two, until he was sure the guards were absorbed in their gambling again, then he stood and, under the pretext of exploring the room, slipped through the iron door.

Tas saw immediately that the back area of the jail had five cells. Each was closed by a heavy wooden door reinforced with iron bands. A small, barred window in each door let the guards peer through and into the cells. There were two cells on each side of the building and a fifth at the end of the hall.

Slowly Tas walked past the doors, listening at each for the sound of familiar voices. He heard Flint grumbling behind the second one. "That wizard fellow is pure evil. He's not going to let us out of here alive, after what we've seen. Do you think there's a chance Tas and Selana escaped that vicious shadow thing?"

Good old Flint, Tas thought, wagging his tail happily. Tas checked the gap between the door and the floor. The paving stones were rough and uneven, leaving substantial gaps in places. He glanced back over his shoulder: Jules and Duncan were still absorbed in their game. In a sudden impulse, Tas swirled himself into a hermit crab. This ought to be fun, he mused as he scuttled beneath the door.

Flint Fireforge looked toward the door when he noticed a clicking sound coming from that direction. A crab, with its spidery legs and clacking claws, was not at all what he expected to see. "Great gods! What in Reorx's forge is that awful thing?"

Tanis, who sat on the floor with his back to the wall, was more down to earth. "It looks like an old crab to me, but if you leave it alone, it probably won't bother us." Nonetheless Tas was amused to see Tanis rise to his feet.

"It's already bothering me," muttered Flint. "Anyway, I'm not going to tease it, I'm going to step on it." As the dwarf approached, Tas paused and then charged forward with his claws raised and clacking ferociously. The surprised dwarf skipped back to where Tanis stood. "Did you see that? It rushed me!" The two men stared with slack jaws.

"That does it. No big bug is going to push me around, today of all days. Move over by the door, Tanis, and get ready to cut it off in case it tries to make a break for it."

As Flint closed in, trying to keep one hobnailed boot poised and ready to stomp at all times, Tas had all he could do just concentrating on becoming a kender again. But he managed it with inches to spare. Amidst a whirlwind of color, the tiny crab was transformed into Tasslehoff Burrfoot, lying on his back and laughing so hard he clutched his sides.

"Ooh, Flint, you should have seen your face when I charged you! It was worth your weight in steel!"

Flint was hardly amused. He grabbed Tasslehoff by his vest and yanked him onto his wobbly legs. "What's going on here, kender? What kind of tricks are you up to?"

"No tricks, Flint. I'm here to get you out." Tasslehoff smoothed out the rumpled front of his vest and stepped back. "How did you like my entrance?"

Tanis peered through the window in the door to see whether the guards had noticed the ruckus, but

nothing had changed in the outer room. He turned back to Tasslehoff. "What is going on, Tas? How did you do that?"

"Selana had a potion of poly-something-or-other, and we split it to keep from being recognized." Tas wiped the last remaining tear of laughter from his eye. "It's really great. You should try it sometime. I've been a bird and a spider and a mouse and all kinds of things."

"Where is Selana, anyway?" asked Tanis, peering through the small window in the door again, as if expecting her.

Tas became more somber. "It's a long, complicated story, but we were separated and now she's gone up into the mountains to follow that mage—he has the bracelet. I'd give you the details now, but I don't know how much longer this potion will last. Let's get away safely first. I'll tell you the whole story later, while we're on our way to rescue Selana."

Tanis and Flint nodded. "What's the plan?" Flint asked.

"Just watch." Once again Tas was immersed in swirling lights and turned back into an orange-and-ivory spaniel. He stepped up to the door and began barking, whining, and scratching at the heavy wood.

In the front room, Duncan and Jules interrupted their game and peered around, looking for the dog. "Sounds like he's back by the cells, Jules. Go see what the problem is and bring him out here." The younger guard got up reluctantly, but only after scooping the few remaining copper pieces he had left into a small purse, which he tucked into his belt. With the ring of keys from the wall, he unlocked the iron door and stepped back into the cell area. A moment later he was peering through the cell door and scratching his head.

"Hey, you two, how did that dog get in there with you?"

Flint said, "He crawled under the door." Tanis nodded and Tasslehoff kept right on barking.

"That's impossible," Jules stated flatly. "There's no way that dog could have gotten in there under the door. The crack isn't nearly big enough."

Flint's eyes narrowed down to tiny slits, and he waved his hands at the door. "You and I both know the door's locked, so *you* tell me how he got in here."

Duncan stepped back to join Jules. "How in hell did that dog get in there?" he wondered aloud, peering into the cell.

"We told you, he crawled under the door," Tanis repeated.

Flint added, "Get him out, would you? He's making an awful racket."

"If he crawled in, why doesn't he just crawl back out?" asked Jules.

"He's a dog, not a scholar—maybe he hasn't thought of it," Flint snorted. "It's obvious he doesn't want to be in here any more than I do. Can't you let him out so a fella could get a little sleep?"

"Yeah, sure."

Jules was reaching for the key when Duncan stopped him. The older guard drew his sword and stood opposite the cell door. "Now let him out."

Up to this point Tanis and Flint had no real idea what Tasslehoff had in mind, but they knew that the prospect of rushing two armed and armored men was not good. When the door opened, they stood placidly while Tas pranced out into the hall. Jules slammed the door shut and as he locked it, Duncan leaned in close to the window and said, "Enjoy your peace and quiet, boys."

While everyone's attention was focused on the door, Tanis noticed a pale flash of light behind the guards. A quick glance at Flint told the half-elf that his friend had seen it, too.

When Jules and Duncan turned to walk back to the front room, a pair of shrieks followed by a

tremendous growl confirmed what Tanis suspected. He rushed to the door and looked through the window. To the left he saw Jules and Duncan cowering against the last cell door, short swords held shakily in front of them. To the right he saw one of the most frightening sights on Krynn: a monstrous, green, stoop-shouldered, slaving troll. Black hair hung in greasy clumps across its wart-covered face and long, pointed nose. Two bulging eyes glowed like black coals. Spittle dripped from yellow fangs that were too long for the beast's mouth.

The nightmare creature extended one immensely long, knobby arm and plucked the key ring from Jules's white hand. It fumbled with the keys for a moment, two-inch-long black fingernails clacking against the metal. It found what it wanted and unlocked the prisoners' door. Flint and Tanis slipped into the hall. The troll pointed into the cell and snarled. Immediately the two guards rushed inside. The troll slammed the door behind them and locked it.

Tanis and Flint darted to the outer room. The troll shambled in after, bending its massive frame nearly double to get through the doorway. Stepping around the corner to get out of sight from the cell, Tas changed once more, this time returning to his normal shape. The iron door was locked and the keys neatly hung on their peg on the wall.

"Here," said Tas, scooping up their respective weapons from the floor behind the bench. With a satisfied sigh, Tanis slung his bow over his shoulder. Flint slipped his well-used axe into the loop on his belt and patted it tenderly, as if welcoming it home.

Tanis crept forward and peered out the front door. "It looks clear. Let's try not to look as if we just broke out of jail. And Tas, don't smirk so much."

The trio strolled out into the sunshine, hands in pockets. Stepping lively, they crossed the courtyard directly toward the gate in the inner bailey and from there to the outer, main gate. Within minutes, they were safely across the bridge and headed for the mountains.

Chapter 16

Winged Creatures of Flame

"Tasslehoff, you great doorknob!" thundered

Flint, clomping downstream along the snowy shoreline, dodging shrubs and boulders and potholes. "What are you doing on that floe? You're going the wrong way! Get off there and come back here right this minute!"

"I'd love to," yelled Tasslehoff over the sound of the rushing water, "but I'm not too clear on how to go about it." He skipped from side to side on the small slab of ice, peering over the edge, visually measuring the depth of the water and the distance to the shore as he floated down the river.

As they had followed the river up into the mountains, the landscape had turned gradually from the greening of spring back to the ice and snow of winter. Tasslehoff had gone down to the bank of the river to scoop up a quick drink of water, but the land under his feet had turned out to be snow-covered ice. He discovered that when, with a great creaking and groaning, it had broken away from the shore.

"It's too bad I don't have some of Selana's poly-waddle—polydoodle—you know, that potion I drank to become a bird. Then I could fly off this thing," Tas called to them conversationally. "Did I tell you about being a bug and turning into a mouse and falling from the web when that enormous, hairy spider was chasing me?" Tas rubbed his thigh at the memory.

"It's 'polymorph!' And you've told us only about a thousand times," huffed Flint, puffing with the exertion of trying not to slip in a snowbank while keeping apace with the floating slab of ice. "I mean it, Tasslehoff. Stop goofing around and get off that thing."

"Flint," called Tanis, springing lightly through calf-high snow after the dwarf, "I don't believe Tasslehoff is goofing around this time." Then, speaking quietly to Flint, he added, "He may not realize it either, since he's afraid of nothing, but he's in serious trouble."

"Great Reorx," snarled the old dwarf, stopping to cross his arms over his barrel chest, "we should just leave him there, for all the bother he's been to us."

Tanis came to a stop as well and jammed his hands on his hips. "Like when he got us out of jail?" he asked archly.

Flint scowled. "I was thinking of all the times he took the bracelet, which started this whole nightmare, but I concede he has been occasionally useful," he said, dipping his head. "Now, what are we going to do?"

They looked to the kender, whose slab of ice was temporarily caught up on a gathering of dead branches in the middle of the river.

"I don't know," said Tanis, scratching his head, "but we'd better think fast, because the river does get gradually wider farther downstream, and I seem to recall a small waterfall just about at the snow line."

Flint met Tanis's eyes with alarm.

The half-elf snapped his fingers. "I've got it! Find a long branch; we'll hold it out to him and tug him to shore." Gray head bobbing in agreement, the stout dwarf joined Tanis in the hasty search for a long, sturdy branch.

For his part, Tasslehoff was not exactly "goofing around," but he was not particularly unhappy with

his state of affairs either. Drifting along on the bobbing, shifting ice reminded him of the times he'd gone door-riding, a much-beloved winter sport for the fearless race of kender. Back in his hometown of Kendermore, on the first day of any measurable snowfall, kender young and old would pry the doors off their homes and ride them, standing up, down snowy hillsides. More adventurous kender were fond of door-riding down snow-covered staircases, as many of the buildings in Kendermore were roofless or missing walls, allowing for good interior snow cover. The heartiest kender were even known to shoosh off multistory buildings with sloping roofs. This practice was discouraged because so many passers-by— not to mention the door riders—were knocked unconscious or injured and neighboring structures were inevitable damaged.

The memory of watching a childhood friend, topknot flapping behind him as he sailed off a building, wrung a sigh of nostalgia from Tasslehoff. He had not been home for door riding or anything else in years. And this floe, though vaguely similar, moved quite a bit slower than a waxed door on a steep incline.

"Tasslehoff, grab the branch and we'll pull you to shore," called Flint. Tas saw the dwarf crouched a little downstream on the left bank, extending a long, slender branch to him. Tanis stood behind the dwarf, ready to lend his muscle to the task.

"Hurry up before you float past me!" said Flint. "Besides, I can't hold this branch up forever!"

Tas crawled to the edge of the floe and extended his hand as far as he dared, but several feet still separated him from the limb. Straining, he stretched his fingers for the thin tip of the branch. The current drove his floe nearer. If he could only get his fingers on the tip. ... He turned his head to the side to extend his reach, watching out of the corner of his eye for his chance.

He felt smooth bark against his fingertips! Excited, Tas wrapped his hand around the branch and held on. Flint and Tanis cheered.

"Don't let go, Tas," said Flint, starting to pull the branch toward himself, hand over hand.

"I won't!"

Suddenly, the land under the dwarf's straining form gave way with a shuddering crack and broke loose from the shore. The unexpected jolt caused the dwarf to yank on the branch. Old and dried from a winter on the forest floor, the limb snapped into two unequal, jagged parts. Tas, unprepared for the sudden extra weight, dropped the branch into the stream, where it disappeared between the two floes. Flint managed to retain his grip, but unfortunately he was left with just a useless four-inch stub.

Pointing, Tanis cried out from shore, "Flint, the falls!"

Floating helplessly downstream with the kender now, the dwarf looked ahead of Tas at the approaching falls. He could hear water crashing below. "It's no use!" he cried, throwing down his broken branch in disgust. No good *ever* came from water, he thought bitterly.

Tanis cupped his hands around his mouth and hollered above the noise of the pounding water to both dwarf and kender standing on the ice. "Flint, Tasslehoff, lie on your stomachs and hold on to the edges of the ice!" The half-elf knew it was only a slim chance to keep them from getting dashed on the rocks, but slim was better than none.

"What?" cried Tas, turning a pointed ear toward Tanis on the snowy shore.

"I said—Oh, see here!" Tanis threw himself on his stomach and splayed his arms out to demonstrate.

The falls were just ten feet away.

Flint was already down on the ice when Tasslehoff suddenly got the message. He flopped onto his stomach, arms and legs spread-eagled, when he saw something hovering behind Tanis's head. He squinted in puzzlement. Flame? Enormous gout of flame! Why was Tanis on fire?

Then Tasslehoff saw something that even he had a hard time accepting: three short, humanoid creatures wearing plain tunics, trousers, and boots, each sporting wings of flame on his back. Tas blinked twice and looked again. They were still there.

"Hey!" the kender cried excitedly, jumping to his feet and hopping up and down on the floe as he pointed. "Tanis, Flint, look behind you! There's a—yow!"

Tasslehoff's words were literally cut off as he bit his tongue in painful surprise. Powerful, small hands caught him up by the armpits and lifted him off the floe, just as it crested the brink of the waterfall. Looking down past his dangling feet, the kender watched the slab of ice smash into shards on the rocks below, then disappear in the churning water. He felt himself lifted higher and higher, until he rose above the treetops. His narrow escape from death was nearly forgotten in his exuberance over flying.

Finally Tasslehoff looked up. There he saw a pinched little face with almond-shaped eyes beneath coppery, curly hair and delicately pointed ears. Tas's eyes traveled in rapt fascination to the fluttering, crackling wings of flame over the fellow's narrow, fine-boned shoulders.

"What are *you*?" Tasslehoff asked, his eyes alight with curiosity. "Are those really wings, or just fire? I don't suppose if you were *on* fire you'd have the time to go around rescuing people from ice floes, would you?"

"I was once on fire," he continued. "Actually, my little sister lit my shoe on fire. It didn't help me to fly, though I must say I ran mighty fast to get it put out. But that's not the same thing at all, is it?" Tasslehoff waited for a response from the ruddy-complected creature, but it said nothing. His face was a mask of concentration as he flew with his burden toward some unknown destination.

"Can't speak the Common tongue, eh?" Tas concluded. "That's OK. Not every race is intelligent enough to master it. I'm not sure how we'll communicate, though. Say, I speak a bit of Troglodyte—I'm nearly fluent," the kender said proudly, "though I'm sure I couldn't read a word of it." He frowned. "Actually, I don't believe Troglodyte can be written down."

The creature's expression grew more pinched than before. "I speak and read six languages, as do all phaethons," he said stiffly at last, "though the clicks and whistles that pass for language among the pathetic race of troglodytes isn't one of them." With that, the phaethon snapped his mouth firmly shut.

"Where are we going?" Tas asked innocently. He noticed that not far away another winged creature carried Tanis above the treetops, and below them, two were lugging the hefty dwarf, who seemed to be struggling—rather foolishly, in Tasslehoff's opinion—against their grip. Tasslehoff's phaethon would not be goaded or offended into revealing any more information.

Flying under someone else's power certainly isn't as convenient as flying yourself, thought Tas, comparing this trip to the ones he had taken as a bird. His vision was less sharp as a kender than it had been as a sparrow, though he was more familiar with the operation of this equipment. One thing was sure—almost anything could see better than a fly.

They were heading higher into the mountains, up toward where the snow was deep and the trees were sparse. An icy breeze whistled past Tas's ears, making him think of a frost giant's breath. It mingled with the sound of fanned flames, like cloth snapping in a strong wind.

Tasslehoff's armpits were beginning to ache and chafe from the friction of his weight in the phaethon's hands. He twisted slightly to relieve the pressure, but the winged creature only tightened his grip more painfully and frowned down at the kender.

After what seemed like forever to the impatient kender, they approached the mountainside. Tasslehoff expected them to cruise up, decelerate, and land in a clearing, but the phaethon showed no sign of slowing his descent. He raced toward the craggy mountainside at a speed even the fearless kender found daunting. Where could they possibly land? There was nothing but sharp crags

of rock here, as far as Tas could see. Did the phaethon mean to smash him against the rocks? Tas discounted that possibility because the creature could have dropped him long ago, or left him on the ice for that matter. Finally Tas could contain himself no longer.

"Look out, you son of a goatsucker bird! You're going to slam us right into the rock!"

At the very last second, the phaethon swooped up and over the craggy mountain peak. Cresting the far side, they were greeted with a panorama like none Tasslehoff had ever seen. Spread before them, poking through tufts of white and gray clouds, were hundreds of spires of orange-brown rock. Tas looked down and saw a lush, green valley far below, neatly farmed in rows, winding past the bases of the towers of stone. Vegetation climbed the sides of the towers, reaching to within one hundred feet of the tops of each. There, each natural minaret flared out abruptly into a hollow onion shape, with openings—windows and doors, Tas presumed—carved into the round surfaces.

Tas's phaethon soared past quite a number of spires until he reached one that was larger than most. It was set in a noticeable kink in a cliff of the surrounding mountains. Slowing the beating of his wings, the phaethon hovered, carefully negotiating an arched doorway with his awkward cargo. Finally angling his wings, the phaethon lowered Tas until his feet touched ground inside the doorway. The phaethon followed.

"Wow! What a ride! This is incredible! Do you live up here? Are those really clouds, or just fog? How far is it to the ground?" Without waiting for answers, Tas immediately began inspecting his surroundings.

He stood in a small antechamber in the shape of a half-circle. The walls were entirely covered with simple text carvings and bas-relief images of what Tas interpreted as wingless phaethons working at various tasks: planting, tilling, toting water, harvesting crops, and a complete range of village crafts.

Two doorways pierced the flat side of the antechamber; both doors were propped open. One led to a large, open room with a fireplace set into the rounded outside wall; a low fire burned on the hearth and stone crocks and wooden chairs and stools were set before it. To the left was a bank of short cupboards that followed the curve of the wall. The second doorway led to a smaller chamber where several fluffy, feather pallets were laid out symmetrically on the floor.

Tasslehoff stepped into the room with the fireplace. The walls of that room were also covered with carvings, but these were violent scenes of phaethons borne on their flaming wings and battling hideous creatures, the likes of which Tas had never seen or heard described.

"Wait here," said the phaethon. He stepped through the outer doorway and into emptiness, disappearing from Tas's view. The kender leaped to one of the small windows and watched, amazed again, as flames in the form of wings burst from the plummeting phaethon's back and it soared away in a heart-stopping dive. Tas watched until the winged man disappeared in the clouds among the spires.

Wait here. Where can I go? the kender thought ironically. Outside was nothing but air and clouds. The only way to reach the ground was to jump, and that would be messy. Elbows propped on the sill, he gazed across the green valley—or what he could see of it through the drifting vapor—hundreds, maybe even thousands, of feet below.

Behind him, Tas suddenly heard the hiss of flames licking at air, followed by soft footsteps. Wheeling about, he saw that four unfamiliar phaethons had joined him. One was a female in loose pantaloons and tunic, a colorful sash wound round her waist. Apparently she was the mother of the young girl with long, curly red hair who stood behind her. The girl peeked around her mother's leg shyly at Tas. The third phaethon, obviously the father, was an adult male, standing in front of the others in a protective stance. He was dressed like the one who had carried Tas here, but he looked older; his skin was ruddier and more wind-burned and weathered. He held a stout staff in both hands and wore a heavy knife at his belt.

The fourth phaethon, if in fact that is what it was, looked to be the oldest of them all by far. He paid

little heed to the others or to Tasslehoff, but instead seated himself serenely before the low-burning hearth. Like the other phaethons Tas had seen, this one's hair was short and wavy, but it was pure white, not red. His heavily lined face was the color of copper and his eyes were jet black with no discernible pupils.

"What are you?" the father asked bluntly.

"I'm a kender, of course." Tas stepped forward eagerly and extended his hand. "Tasslehoff Burrfoot, at your service. I'd like to ask you a few questions if you don't mind. For instance, I've never heard of phaethons before." He peered at them all closely. "You look quite a bit like short half-elves. Is that how you think of yourselves, or do you prefer to think of half-elves as tall phaethons?" Suddenly Tas remembered something.

"Speaking of half-elves, where are my friends? Aren't they coming?" He ran to the window again and peered out. "Gosh, I got so caught up in flying over the mountains that I forgot all about them. Some of your people grabbed them from the stream in the nick of time, too— thank you, by the way." He giggled. "It took two of them to carry Flint."

"Your friends are safe," said the middle-aged male. "We, too, have some questions." At that, the mother stepped up to the hearth and swung out a small pot that had been heating over the fire. She filled a clay mug with steaming liquid from the pot and handed it to her mate, who in turn offered it to Tasslehoff.

"Drink this."

Tas sniffed the concoction, wrinkled up his nose, and bobbed his head. "I am a bit thirsty, thank you, but I'd prefer something cold if you have it."

The father thrust the mug into Tas's hand and pushed it to the kender's lips. "Drink it." The white-haired phaethon turned his head to peer at Tasslehoff with his black eyes.

"If you insist," Tas replied hastily. "Something warm might be good. What is it? Poison?" As usual, the kender was more fascinated than frightened by the thought of some warm venom working its way through his veins. Would his tongue turn purple and his eyes bulge out? Would he drop dead right away, or linger, begging for one last—

"It is tea," the phaethon cut into his machinations. "It will help you to answer our questions truthfully."

"Good heavens," said Tas, relieved despite himself. "You needn't drug me to get me to speak the truth. I'm happy to tell you whatever you'd like to know."

The phaethon frowned. "Just the same, we'd prefer you drink the tea. It will not harm you—" He clenched his quarterstaff—"nor will anyone here, unless you have something to hide."

"Hide? Not me," said Tas. "Why, once—I'm drinking," he said quickly, as the tip of the quarterstaff brushed his throat. Tasslehoff took the warm clay mug in his hands and drew a long pull of the steaming, pale green liquid into his mouth. Tas's eyebrows lifted in surprise. The truth tea was not nearly as hot as the steam suggested, and it tasted the way he imagined grass would if left to simmer for hours at a time—strong, bitter, yet refreshing.

"Who are you, and where are you from?"

Out of curiosity, Tas decided to test the tea by telling a lie. "My real name is Lipsmacker Droolbucket—that other one is an alias." The phaethons stared, stone-faced. "I'm the crown prince of Solamnia." Still no reaction, either from the phaethons or the tea.

He shook his head. "I've gotta tell you, I don't think this 'truth tea' stuff works very well," Tas confided. "I just told some real whoppers and nothing came of it—I didn't gag, and my nose didn't even grow long, like in the story." He decided to come clean, to avoid confusion.

"I'm not Lipsmacker Droolbucket," he confessed. "I really am Tasslehoff Burrfoot. And I'm no relation to the royal family of Solamnia, if there is one." Having told the truth, the kender felt strangely better, though he wasn't sure why.

His expression still blank, the male phaethon pointed to one of the chairs before the hearth and indicated Tas should sit in it, which he did gratefully. It seemed to the kender that these phaethons had a tendency to stare a bit too much, and it made him feel on the spot, which was usually something he enjoyed. This time, however, he was squirming uncomfortably.

The male phaethon pulled a chair up before Tas and looked squarely into the kender's eyes before speaking. "I would like to know why you are here."

"Actually, I'd like to know that myself," Tas responded. "You guys brought me here—how about filling me in?" He looked expectantly from face to face, but no one seemed disposed to offer any explanations. The little girl phaethon giggled, and the mother silenced her with a stern glance.

"I will ask that question again," said the man. "Why did you come to the mountains?"

Tasslehoff flashed a smile of understanding. "Oh, you don't mean 'here' here, you mean 'heeeere' here. It's sort of complicated, and I really should be getting back to my friends fairly soon, so I'll try to make this as short as possible.

"My friends and I—that's Tanis and Flint and Selana, only Selana isn't with us, 'cause she's up here somewhere looking for a bald wizard with a bracelet—but back to this bracelet Flint made. We need it for Selana's brother, only the wizard took it, as I said, and he's going to feed Rostrevor's soul to Hiddukel—I can't imagine what that would taste like. Anyway, the wizard got the bracelet from this zombie, only he wasn't a zombie at that point, just a guy named Delbridge who wasn't very honest — 'thief would describe him pretty well—and he'd gotten it from Gaesil, who seemed like a decent enough type, only I wouldn't want to be stranded way up here in one of these needle houses with his wife. She sounds like quite a shrew. And he'd gotten it from me, because I'd ended up with it after we left the Inn of the Last Home. Flint needs it back to give to Selana so she can give it to Semunel, who needs it because he can't see the future." Tasslehoff drew a breath. "There, I think that about covers it." He smacked his lips and looked around. "Do you have any more of that tea?"

"No!" the male phaethon said quickly. Both of the adult phaethons bent close to the white-haired one and conversed in low tones. Tas heard very little, and what he did pick up was in a language he could not understand.

"You're funny," the little girl said to Tas, tugging at her tunic and smiling demurely.

"Why, thank you," Tas said, a bit puzzled. He did not recall telling any jokes. But then, who knew what made phaethons laugh?

He nodded his head toward the three adults. "What are they talking about?"

The young girl shrugged. "They're deciding if you'll be allowed to live or not." Leaning in closer, she whispered, "Intruders usually aren't, but I think you have a better-than-average chance."

Tasslehoff swallowed slowly, watching their heated exchange. The white-haired phaethon seemed disturbed and shook his head after every comment made by the other two. They appeared to be trying to persuade him of something. Finally, the younger male slapped his fist into his palm, his expression firm. The elder shook his head one last time and looked out a window, as if absolving himself. The younger man turned away and stepped up to Tas, his expression as stoic as ever.

He placed a hand on his chest. "I am Nanda Lokir, potentate of our settlement. This—" He indicated the white-haired one—"is Hoto Lokir-Ulth, my greatgrandfather, in your language. My mate and adviser, Cele Lokir, and our daughter, Zeo."

Tas took the introductions as a good sign.

"You are a very fortunate kender. It is our custom, after interrogation, to eliminate deceitful

intruders to our valley. We are a peaceful race, but we value honesty and privacy above all else. You seem to have little regard for the absoluteness of truth and this weighs heavily against you in Hoto's eyes, but we all believe that you and your friends may perform an important service for us. I have sent for them to join us."

Nanda walked to the hearth. "Perhaps you are hungry?"

Tas nodded vigorously. He couldn't remember when he had last eaten. Before reaching Tantallon? Running through the market with Selana? Nanda's mate, Cele, opened a small pantry to the left of the hearth. From it she withdrew a wooden cutting board, on it a round loaf of golden-crust bread. She handed Nanda a large bowl of stew of some sort. He placed it among the coals for warming. From another cupboard she took a crock of freshly churned, creamy-white butter. Slicing the bread, dotted with whole chunks of chewy grain, she lathered on the spread and handed a piece to the wide-eyed kender.

"This is wonderful!" he mumbled between rich mouthfuls. "But living way up here, where do you get the churned butter, or even the cow for the milk?"

"We sleep and cook in our steeplehomes," Cele explained, "but we work the valley below. We do not wish to mingle with other cultures, so we are completely self-sufficient and produce no items for trade. We raise grains, fruits, and vegetables, herd sheep and goats, and keep rabbits and chickens, though Zeo continually tries to turn them into pets." Cele smiled fondly at the little girl, stroking her long, curly hair.

Nanda pulled the bowl of heated stew from the hearth and dished up a plateful, rich with orange carrots, green baby peas, whole pearl onions, and petite chunks of tender meat in a rich brown gravy.

Tasslehoff was in heaven. He considered himself a true connoisseur of food, being quite a good cook himself. The kender closed his eyes after each delicious spoonful, savoring the blending of flavors with just the right amount of fresh herbs.

"I might have known we'd find him eating," growled a familiar, deep voice. Tas opened his eyes and saw Flint and Tanis standing in the doorway, three more phaethons nearby. The dwarf's harsh words were contradicted by the obvious look of relief in his eyes. He was tugging his clothing back into place after his recent air trip.

"I'm glad to see you're OK, Tas," said Tanis, looking hesitantly from Tasslehoff to the phaethons standing near him. Nanda nodded to the flyers and they called forth their wings and flew from the doorway.

"You're free to move about. Come, join your friend at table," said Nanda, waving Tanis and Flint into the hearth room from the small antechamber. Smiling, Tanis squeezed the kender's shoulder, and Flint, frowning, gave his upper arm a soft punch.

"I am Nanda Lokir," said the leader of the phaethons, holding out his right arm to Tanis. The half-elf thrust out his hand, but the potentate slid his own hand past it to grasp the half-elf's forearm in an unusual variation on a handshake. Tanis quickly caught on and clasped the phaethon's arm in return.

"Tanis Half-Elven," he said, nodding his head toward the dwarf. "Flint Fireforge." Flint extended his hand, and Nanda introduced his family. The elder hung back, ignoring their offered hands and barely acknowledging their presence. Tas intercepted an uneasy glance between Flint and Tanis.

"They usually kill trespassers," the kender explained in a low voice behind his hand, "but they're making an exception in our case. Nanda wants us to help him somehow, and I get the impression the old fellow isn't pleased with the setup."

The half-elf addressed Nanda. "We're most grateful to you for rescuing us from the river," he began, "but could you please tell us why we're being held?"

"And without our weapons?" added Flint. Tas noticed for the first time that his hoopak and dagger had been spirited away; Tanis's bow and Flint's axe were missing as well.

Arms crossed, Nanda nodded. "All will be revealed in good time. First, eat. You are weak with hunger."

Though uneasy, the famished half-elf and dwarf couldn't deny the truth of that. They grabbed the plates Cele held out and ate while the phaethons watched. They washed the rich food down with a dark, full-bodied ale, as smooth as milk.

"Excellent ale, surpassed only by dwarf spirits," said Flint, pushing himself back from his empty plate with a belch that ruffled his mustache and sent crumbs flying. Thanking Cele, the trio from Solace looked at Nanda expectantly.

"We are a privacy-loving race," began the head of the family and the settlement. "It is phaethon law to kidnap and administer a truth draft to one of a group of trespassers and glean from him the group's origin, destination, and mission. If we do not approve of the answers, or if we detect any untruths, we are inclined to eliminate the intruders.

"However, under truth tea, the kender revealed a story so dizzyingly tangled that we knew it could not be a fabrication. Further, he made no mention of our valley, but instead said you were looking for a young woman and a wizard." Nanda paused for effect. "We know where both of them are and believe the young woman to be in great danger."

"You've seen them?" asked Tanis, leaning forward anxiously.

"Hoto has," said Nanda, looking at his copper-skinned grandfather, who remained aloof from the group. "First, I must explain something to you.

"Great-grandfather Hoto is *verda*, an elder. For reasons even we do not understand, some phaethons do not die of old age. Instead, around their ninetieth year—our life expectancy—some are overcome by a desire to fly toward the sun. They climb and climb ever higher, until either exhaustion or lack of oxygen or both causes them to lose consciousness. As they plummet back toward Krynn, a marvelous transformation takes place. Regaining their senses, still thousands of feet above ground, they discover that they have metamorphosed into *verda*. They have grown taller, their hair is snow white, their flaming wingspan, agility, and endurance are greatly increased while their need for food, water, and sleep are diminished. Barring accidents, they often live to be three hundred years old.

"Solitary by nature and living apart from the settlement, *verda* serve as sentries. The reason I tell you this is that, once a month for a number of years, Greatgrandfather Hoto has seen the bald-pated wizard fly into the mountains. His destination is just beyond the boundary of our valley. Hoto has long been certain his purpose here involves evil doings.

"Yesterday, knowing that the time was approaching for the wizard's arrival, Hoto watched and waited. As dusk descended, he was startled to see a very large, unusual fish swimming upstream in the same river from which you were rescued. As Hoto watched, the fish must have cut itself seriously, as it began to trail great whorls of blood. Even more startling, before his eyes the fish transformed into a ghostly pale, fair-haired young woman and climbed from the stream onto land!"

"That's Selana!" cried Tas.

"This Selana had a severe gash in her side," continued Nanda, "and she wore little but rags, which were wet and freezing in the cold air. Hoto quickly set out to rescue her, but she was very far away. Before he could reach her, something even more mysterious happened. Out of nowhere a creature appeared. Hoto claims this beast looked like a minotaur, but it was not truly a beast. It was a monstrous creation made of living white stone. This thing scooped up the woman and carried her away into the face of the mountain, at the place where the wizard comes each month."

"This is perfect," Tas declared. "We've got Balcombe, the bracelet, and Selana all together in one

place. Even Rostrevor, the squire, is there, I'm sure of it. We can rescue everyone at once."

For the first time, Hoto addressed the group. He did not move, but continued sitting on his stool and staring into the fire. "Anyone you plan to save must be rescued today."

Tanis turned to Nanda with raised eyebrows. The half-elf was completely unfamiliar with phaethon social patterns, but their hierarchy was obviously rigid. The last thing he wanted was to offend the people who could be their best allies. Nanda understood Tanis's silent plea and addressed him. "You may speak, Tanis Half-Elven, but be truthful in everything you say."

"Considering Hoto's statement," Tanis began, "I propose that we attack Balcombe's hideout tonight. We have had little success fighting this man before, but if we surprise him, we may be able to beat him."

"Tonight will be too late. This evening may be too late. Now is the only time." The elder phaethon's voice held no rancor, no sarcasm or criticism. With the exception of the Speaker of the Sun, Tanis had never heard anyone state a fact with such simple conviction.

Tanis did not want to offend the elder phaethon by questioning this information, but his memory of the battle against Balcombe beneath Tantallon Castle was still vivid. The thought of rushing into another fight without time to plan or prepare frightened him.

Again, Nanda sensed Tanis's uneasiness. "You may question Hoto if you wish. Remember, however, that this freedom is almost never allowed to strangers. Remember, too, that his truthfulness is unassailable. If Hoto says it is so, then it is so. You may ask him to clarify."

Those restrictions seemed to make questions superfluous, Tanis thought, but at least some further information could be gleaned. "Why is speed so important?" he asked.

"Last night, the moon Nuitari entered high sanction. This man always performs his rituals during Nuitari's high sanction. Tonight, Nuitari and Lunitari are aligned, making this a time of powerful magic. Such a combination will not recur for another thirty-three days. I have watched this man for years and know his patterns. He will perform his ritual tonight.

"After the ritual, there will be no one left to rescue."

Tasslehoff could hold his tongue no longer. "He's absolutely right. I don't know why anyone is balking. I heard Balcombe talk about how delighted he was to be able to offer up Rostrevor's soul, and he's just the son of a knight. Think what he must be planning now that he's caught a real princess! I vote that we get going right now."

Tanis shook his head. "No one brought it to a vote, Tas. I think our hosts will make this decision for us."

Nanda looked each squarely in the eyes in turn. "The woman, Selana, has no special value to us. We would protect her if we could, as Hoto tried to do, but she is not our real concern.

"The wizard, Balcombe, on the other hand, is a potential problem. We know he uses the mountains to hide his evil activity from people in Tantallon. By itself this does not concern us, either, because his actions, whatever they are, have brought no harm to our territory. We know from experience that eventually this will change. Even if he abandons this region and never returns, his empty lair will attract monsters that will try to prey on us. It is best that we remove him before he brings additional trouble.

"If this seems harsh to you, simply know that it is our way. By such means we have protected ourselves against the outside world for thousands of years, and we will continue doing so as long as we must. For the moment, your interests and ours coincide and we can work together. Your weapons have been brought up. Make yourselves ready and we will leave at once."

Tanis, Tas, and Flint turned around and saw that phaethons who had entered the room during Nanda's speech carried the trio's weapons. Flint picked up his long-handled, double-headed axe and

heavy fighting knife and thrust both through his belt. Tanis tossed his quiver of arrows over one shoulder, slung the long strap supporting his short sword scabbard over the other shoulder, and picked up his bow, rubbing the oiled leather grip and the smooth wooden curves. Tas snatched up his hoopak and dagger and stuffed several slices and chunks of Cele's delicious bread into his pouches. In moments, all were ready.

Nanda instructed Tanis, Tas, and Flint to step to the door. One phaethon stepped up behind each and wrapped his arms around his passenger. Then, before anyone had time to protest or panic, all three phaethons leaned forward and pushed themselves and their living cargo off the platform. Air whistled past Tas's ears and locks of his own hair flapped in his face as he plummeted toward the ground, then heard the distinctive whoosh of the phaethon's wings igniting and felt his weight pressing against the flyer's arms as they leveled off. As much as Tasslehoff wanted to rescue Selana, he hoped Balcombe's lair was a long way off.

Chapter 17

Blu

Selana awoke to the smell of burning dung, flames fanning her face. Still, she shivered from a cool dampness. Her blue-green eyes, dulled from exhaustion, fluttered open, then widened in astonishment.

The sea elf was alone, propped up on the dirt floor of a large, rectangular cavern lit by only the low-burning stick-and-dung fire smoldering in its center. The ceiling was low for a cavern so large, perhaps only twelve feet high. In the dim light she could barely discern the outlines of narrow openings to the far left and far right of her field of vision.

Where am I? she wondered. The last thing I remember is swimming ... in some ice-cold water ... I cut myself . . . and returned to elven form.

Selana winced as she remembered the hideous gash in her left arm—she had fainted from pain and exposure to the elements. She was surprised to realize the wound no longer ached. Had she been unconscious long enough to heal? She tried to touch the wound, to explore its extent, but discovered she could not move her hands.

Only then did Selana become aware of the feel of cool, weighty metal on her wrists. She saw that her arms were gripped by manacles on two-foot lengths of linked chain, attached to the rough pink granite walls. She had a hazy recollection of hallucinating about a stone minotaur, vibrant red veins defining its humanoid body and brutish bull's head. Had the creature been real? *Something* had brought her here. Where was it now?

Selana twisted futilely, relieved, at least, that the chains allowed her to stand. She wished to the gods she could make sense of her circumstances, but she could recall nothing after huddling among the rocks near the stream. Her injured arm was cured through some means, but every muscle in her body ached.

Suddenly the sea elf heard a heavy scraping, dragging sound from the narrow opening to the left, accompanied by low, guttural muttering. Her heart jumped in fear. With her hands restricted, she felt horribly vulnerable and cast about for a way to defend herself. All she could do was kick her feet, and not very far at that. The first syllables of a protection spell echoed through her mind, but she was too drained to remember the entire incantation.

The scraping-shuffling sound stopped and a huge head poked out of the opening and looked about, squinting in the dim light. A black-eyed gaze locked on Selana. The creature crept forward.

The sea elf could see that the thing was an enormous humanoid—a giant. Crawling on its knees in the tunnel, it was so large it could barely squeeze through the opening. Even in the larger cavern it was unable to stand to its full height and was forced to squat. Selana guessed it must have stood at least sixteen feet high and weighed several thousand pounds. It waddled toward the sea elf slowly in an awkward, swiveling gait, its long arms dragging on the ground. The sea elf cringed instinctively, but the giant stopped some five feet in front of her, as the cave pitched down sharply and the giant could not move in closer.

She could see enough now to realize it was a male giant. On his haunches, he regarded the pale-skinned sea elf, an enormous gap-toothed smile illuminating his light brown face and coal-black eyes. His frontal lobe sloped down to a thick, pointy brow bone. The muscles in his stooped shoulders and neck looked like corded rope and were thicker than she was wide. Selana became aware of the stench of rotted food and filth, though whether from his unwashed person, his

blackened teeth, or the matted hides he wore as clothing, she could not be sure. She breathed shallowly through her mouth to keep from being sick.

The sea elf princess knew little about giants, other than that there were many different kinds, just as there were many races of elves.

"Eat," he rumbled suddenly, pushing forward a chipped plate that looked like a child's toy in his massive, calloused hand. His nails were cracked and bleeding in spots, limned with dirt.

Selana regarded the pieces of unidentified roasted meat, charred bones protruding, unsure of what to do. She had no free hands with which to feed herself, even if she was inclined to eat something unknown and unidentifiable. Although she was starving, the princess of the Dargonesti elves was not about to press her face to the plate like an animal.

The giant sensed her hesitation. "Not eat, Blu get in trouble," he grunted, struggling with the words. "Blacome not let Blu go."

Balcombe! The sea elf was both frightened and excited at the thought that she had unwittingly stumbled upon the mage's refuge in the mountains.

"Is that your name? Blu?" she asked the giant.

He nodded, revealing his decaying teeth.

"And you work for Balcombe?" she pressed.

The creature seemed to search his immense skull for the answer. "Blacome say if Blu find many shiny rocks in hole—" he pointed to the opening from which he'd come—"Blacome will make Blu teeny-tiny to get out of cave and back to hill giant home." As if to demonstrate, he pulled a large, jagged rock from the depths of his filthy skins; amidst the chunk of ordinary mineral was a dull, rosy streak of glasslike stone—a ruby in the rough.

"How long have you been mining gems for Balcombe?"

The giant shrugged his sloping shoulders. "Blacome bring baby Blu here very big time ago to work. Blu get stones, meanotars bring food. Blu work hard, but he bad and get many big." The giant's face drooped, and he slapped himself on the head angrily. "Now stuck." Blu looked at her forlornly. "Blu missing home, other hill giant friends."

"Where is Balcombe now?" she asked abruptly.

Blu shrugged again and looked toward the opening to the right. "He come from there. Sometime Blu hear things," he said, pointing to the stretch of cave wall opposite them, between the left and right openings.

Of course, she said to herself. The giant is too large to leave this cavern and knows nothing about what exists beyond it, except for vague memories of his home. She chose her next words carefully for maximum impact on the dull-witted giant.

"It wasn't your fault that you got trapped in here, Blu.

Balcombe lied to you, to keep you working. He uses the gems you mine to trap souls—" Too complicated, she thought—"to do very bad things. Right now he's using one of the gems you found to do something very bad to a human squire. The squire is trapped inside the gem, and Balcombe is going to give him to an evil god in exchange for, well—" She would never be able to sufficiently explain what Balcombe was doing, she decided.

Selana changed her approach. "He's an evil magician," she said staunchly, trying to hold the giant's gaze. "He puts people inside the gems and never lets them go."

"They can't get out? Blu can't get out, too. But Blacome let me out many soon, when Blu work good and find many stones."

"No, he won't," Selana said, shaking her head. "He never intends to let you go, Blu. In the end, he'll kill you, too."

Blu's eyes darkened with anger and he shook his head mutely. "Blacome good."

"He's an evil wizard!" she pressed, struggling against the manacles. "Why else would I be here, with my hands chained?"

"Blacome say mean woman."

The frail sea-elf held her arms as wide as the chains would allow. "Do I look like I could hurt someone as big as Balcombe?"

Confused, the giant waddled backward, pounding his own head and sobbing.

"Blu," she said gently but firmly, "I can help you. If you'll just let me loose, I'll set you free. You won't have to work anymore in the dark, and you can see your family again." She held her wrists out toward him. "Just do it, Blu." Heart thumping, she looked toward the entrance to the right. "Quickly!"

Blu was highly agitated. He pounded his head against the cavern ceiling and whined to himself. He reached for Selana's neck, as if he meant to snap it like a chicken's. Her breath caught in her throat, and she told herself that dying in the giant's immense hands would be a far better fate than whatever the mage had planned for her. At the last second, though, the indecisive Blu stepped back, sobbing in confusion, and planted his huge, thick toes smack into the fire. His stunned yelp reverberated through the cavern.

Abruptly his long face froze, and he cocked his head to the side, listening for something. His eyes filled with fear. "They come!" he cried. Wheeling on his knees, he fled, feet smoking, down the tunnel from which he had come.

Not knowing what to expect, Selana looked to the entrance to the right. Seconds after Blu had fled, she heard a thumping noise, then two minotaurs stepped into the room. They were white from horns to toes and covered with networks of pulsing red veins.

The beasts approached her mechanically, looking neither to the right nor the left. She realized they were not animals at all, but magical constructions of stone called golems. They walked directly toward her with outstretched arms, stone eyes unblinking. As the first closed in, Selana mustered her courage and strength and planted her right foot on its stomach and pushed with all her might. The golem did not budge, but seized Selana and pinned her arms firmly. The other construct grasped the chains in its fists and pulled them apart as easily as Selana might have broken a thread.

The automaton holding Selana slung her over its shoulder, face down, with one arm wrapped firmly around her legs.

"What are you doing?" she cried. "Where are you taking me? Let me go!" She kicked and pounded its back, but her blows had no effect other than bruising herself. The minotaur carried her down the tunnel to a roughly circular chamber. Selana watched in disbelief as the beings turned and strode straight toward a blank section of wall. Just when she thought they would collide with the rock, they passed right through it and she found herself in another tunnel.

As they marched down the passage, Selana noticed a faint illumination that grew slowly until she and her escorts reached the entrance to another chamber. This one was a far cry from Blu's squalid, unfinished cavern. The walls of the egg-shaped chamber were polished rosy granite. Spiraling pillars, apparently natural features of the cavern, reached from floor to ceiling around the perimeter; a torch flickered in a sconce on each. The ceiling was highest in the center and sloped down at all ends of the "egg." At the farthest point of the room an elaborate pedestal table had been chiseled from the mountain granite.

The golem carried her to the center of the chamber and set her on her feet.

"Hello, my magical little mouse."

The dreaded deep baritone was oily with conceit. Selana closed her eyes in defeat for a moment before she followed the voice to the right.

The mage stepped out from behind a pillar. He wore black robes now instead of red, and the ram's-skull cap was missing from his head. A black silk patch covered his hideously scarred eye socket.

"Welcome to my—hmm," he paused, searching for the right word.

"Lair?" she spat, struggling to control the quiver in her voice. "I see you've decided to stop mocking the red robes. At last you're wearing a color more suited to your vile nature."

His laughter was throaty and staccato as he walked up to her slowly. The heels of his boots clicked against the cold, smooth stone floor and echoed in the rigid chamber. "I would think a woman in your tenuous position might speak a little more deferentially," he said smoothly. His thumbless hand reached out to touch her tattered clothing; his fingers lingered on the pulse that throbbed in the hollow of her pale neck. Aghast, the sea elf princess pulled away. Balcombe only smiled.

"You might almost be presentable, with some soap and water and a decent gown," he said, eyeing her slight form in the torn clothing. "Actually, the rags are almost alluring, in a primitive sort of way."

Selana shrank back but could not evade his sight or his probing hands.

"You have not thanked me for healing your wound," the mage said, his fingertips trying to trace the outline of the new pink scar on the inside of her left upper arm. She wrenched away, but the motion was clumsy and painful because of the weight of the short lengths of chain still dangling from her wrists. Balcombe only laughed again, which made Selana shake with silent fury.

He paced before her, his shaved head bent in thought, his hands tucked into the bell-shaped sleeves of his black robe. "Of great curiosity to me is the fact that I still do not know the identity or the fate of your friend and fellow mouse, the little kender." He watched her closely. "Or your name . . . Princess." He was greatly satisfied to see her jump.

His thick red lips pulled back into a smile. "An educated guess on my part, one I'm gratified to see is true. The spell I cast to analyze your bracelet told me much about it and, by inference, about you. Most interesting was its elven origin, though at that time I could not identify the kingdom. That, of course, became more clear as soon as I saw you without your scarf and cloak."

Balcombe stood just out of her reach and pushed back the sleeve of his right hand, revealing the copper bracelet. He tilted it toward the low flames. "Lovely, the way the amber gems catch the firelight, isn't it? It is only a bauble to me, really, but I shall enjoy owning such a beautiful piece of work—the gray-haired dwarf's, I presume? It's unfortunate that such a skilled artisan won't be crafting any more." Balcombe's sleek pate shook slowly in mock mourning.

With the fury of the conquered, Selana tried to grab the bracelet, but her reach fell far short. Gazing close up, for the very first time, at the bracelet created for Semunel, frustration thickened in Selana's throat. Balcombe's outline wavered in her sight as she struggled futilely to keep from crying.

You were right, Sem, she said to herself. I was not made for this. I am not strong enough. In that instance, at least, you *could* predict the future. . . .

"Come now, Princess," Balcombe's unwelcome baritone cut into her thoughts. "Recent hardships have not caused you to grow soft and weepy, have they? I so admired your spirit. For instance, the spells you used in our fight beneath Castle Tantallon, though limited in power, were ingeniously chosen. I have not met someone so unexpectedly challenging in a very long time."

He let out a huge sigh and shook his head. "Again, 'tis a pity you will never cast another spell. If I didn't need you so immediately and so irrevocably for something else, I might apprentice you in my new position." Again Balcombe watched for her reaction, but Selana registered only confusion.

Balcombe was annoyed. He thrust out his chest and in stentorian tones announced, "As you overheard with your mouse ears, tonight I take LaDonna's place in the Conclave of Wizards."

The sea elf laughed.

Balcombe struck her.

Selana fell against a pillar and slid to the floor, wiping a thin trickle of blood from her lip with the back of her hand. Though stunned, the sea elf princess felt invigorated. She had discovered a chink in Balcombe's armor.

"Oh, that," she said lightly. "It seems to me, if I recall correctly, Hiddukel promised you nothing, except to consider your proposal." She smiled condescendingly. "Face it, Balcombe. It will never happen. Hiddukel is not going to disrupt the entire conclave for one petty squire's soul, no matter how pure."

Balcombe's repulsive face turned dark and stormy, and he looked about to strike Selana again. He stopped with his hand poised above her cheek and suddenly broke into an eerie grin. "Perhaps not, Princess. That is why he will be receiving another, more valuable soul."

Almost tenderly, Balcombe reached out and caught a drop of blood from the corner of her mouth. Watching Selana's horrified expression with obvious pleasure, he licked his finger, savoring the taste. "Blood is most toothsome, don't you think? I believe I enjoy its saltiness the most.

"But, I dally." Sighing as if bored, he took her slight arm in a grip as strong as iron and dragged her, stumbling and sobbing, to the pedestal table. She kicked at him, but he dodged her half-hearted blow easily. "Try to maintain some of your royal bearing and dignity, Princess," he taunted.

"Speaking of which, we cannot let you meet Hiddukel, broker of souls, looking like a street urchin." Balcombe muttered a word, and Selana's tattered clothing was replaced by an elegant gossamer gown of the same unusual blue-green shade as her eyes. Her white hair, magically washed and straightened, curled about her pale face in soft, radiant clouds. She shivered in the damp air.

Balcombe regarded her new appearance and smiled, clucking his tongue sadly. "Such a pity. You were a fetching princess."

Closing her eyes, the frightened sea elf tried one last time to remember a spell—any spell—that might help her escape, but her magical resources were exhausted.

Balcombe reached into the depths of his black robe and withdrew a large ruby. Looking among the facets, Selana thought she could almost make out the fair face of the young squire, Rostrevor.

The mage placed the sizable gem on the pedestal table. He looked up to a hole in the ceiling, about six feet around, through which muted moonlight poured into an oval-shaped, gem-sized cradle carved into the granite. "You cannot see Nuitari, Princess, but soon it will converge with Lunitari directly overhead. When that happens, you will be encased in this magnificent ruby, just as Rostrevor is trapped in his. I imagine it must be a pleasant prison—everything bathed in countless shades of crimson. Far more pleasant, certainly, than what awaits you in Hiddukel's tender embrace."

He moved his hand toward his robe again, then paused and regarded the wrist wearing the bracelet. The skin beneath the copper jewelry suddenly grew uncomfortably warm. He rubbed his wrist, but the skin did not feel hot to the touch. Still the sensation of heat was unmistakable.

Balcombe was about to remove the bracelet when something struck him softly on the back of the head. He reeled momentarily, then whirled on the attacker. Instead of seeing someone behind him, he saw several people, including the kender, the dwarf, and the half-elf who had traveled with Selana, stepping from the doorway to his magical laboratory. As they rushed toward him, three more people dropped down the opening above the altar and attacked him from behind.

Pulse pounding at his temples, Balcombe nearly cast a spell in his defense before he realized that

there were no attackers. He blinked repeatedly. The room was empty except for himself, Selana, and his golems. The others had been figments of his mind, just a . . . vision.

He realized almost instantly that this was indeed a prescient dream triggered by the bracelet; he had seen a forecast of the future.

Watching his face, Selana grew afraid. "What is it? What did you see?"

Quickly he cast a simple spell of holding on the sea elf. "Thanks to your bracelet, Princess," he said, "I've been alerted to an imminent event that I will easily prevent. Although I am at a loss to explain their escape from Tantallon, it seems your friends have decided to launch a rescue."

He removed the bracelet so as not to be distracted from his spellcasting, and set it on the altar.

"I must prepare a welcome for some uninvited guests."

Chapter 18

A Gem of a Solution

A grimacing Flint scratched at his beard. "I'll Never get all these bugs out of it," he grumbled to Tanis. "It's no wonder birds don't have hair."

"And no wonder you don't have wings," responded the half-elf. "You'd never use them for the sake of that precious beard. Watch your step on these loose rocks."

Just as Tanis uttered his warning, a melon-sized stone skidded under his foot and tumbled away down the scree-covered slope. Flint avoided it by leaning to the side. Just past his position, it struck a boulder with a solid *whack* and caromed clear over the heads of Tasslehoff and three phaethons, who brought up the rear of the group. It disappeared into the darkness below them, but the series of cracks signaled clearly each impact as it bounded to the base of the slope, three hundred yards below.

"Missed me again, Tanis. That's twice," said Tasslehoff, resuming his climb.

"Third time's the charm," Flint muttered.

Nanda Lokir, at the head of the string of climbers, turned back to the group. "We are nearing the crest. Everyone be quiet now, and be careful. The slope is steeper near the top."

They had flown as close to Balcombe's cave as the phaethons dared. Unfortunately, their flaming wings were like beacons in the fading light, and they thought it best to land behind a ridge that screened them from the entrance to the lair. The slope they climbed now was treacherous.

Nanda, Hoto, Cele, and the four other phaethons accompanying the group were accustomed to the terrain and the altitude. Their stiff-soled boots were well suited for scrambling over scree. Tasslehoff, Flint, and Tanis panted from the exertion, struggling to draw enough oxygen out of the thin air. Flint, at least, wore hobnailed boots. Tanis and Tas winced and stumbled over the sharp rocks poking through their thin-soled moccasins, which were more appropriate to grassy plains and dusty roads.

Everyone breathed easier as, one by one, they topped the ridge and paused just below the crest. It was much less steep on the opposite side. Ten faces peered across the crest.

Perhaps four hundred yards away, a cave opening could be seen in the opposite slope. A light shone invitingly from inside, casting a warm glow on the scrub trees outside the entrance. A coulee—an enormous gully—separated the intruders from the cave. The slopes on both sides were gradual and covered with scrub: thorny bushes and stunted trees.

"I can hardly believe it, but the entrance appears to be unguarded," observed Tanis.

Flint was skeptical. "Then don't you believe it, lad. You met Balcombe. He's a wizard of substantial ability and a tricky bastard to boot. He wouldn't just leave the front door open."

"He knows we're on his tail," added Tasslehoff. "We don't know what sort of information he's wrung out of Selana." Tanis shuddered, recalling his own interrogation.

Nanda peered toward the sky. Stars now twinkled in the darkness. Rising in the east, where the mountains fell away to the Newsea, was Lunitari, the fleet moon, streaking through the sky in its unending race. Above it was Nuitari, the unseen moon. Only wizards who adopted the black robes of evil could actually see the body of this satellite. To extremely perceptive others, on nights like this, it appeared as an ominous black disk occulting the stars behind it. "Look up, friends. Within

the hour Lunitari will overtake Nunitari. Hoto tells us that when they align, this Balcombe will work his magic. We have little time."

"Is there any other way in?" asked Tanis.

All eyes turned toward Hoto, who had been silent since leaving the phaethon village of spires. As usual, he paused for several moments before replying. "There is another opening, though it is not a good entrance. It is a chimney of sorts, chiseled through the rock. I have spied for many years and seen that this chimney opens into the chamber where your wizard performs his rite. It lets him see the moons during the ceremony."

"Is it wide enough to climb down?" asked Tanis.

"Too wide," replied Hoto. "The walls are smooth and steep and more than an arm's span apart. You could not descend that way without ropes."

Tanis sensed that Hoto was hinting at something. "But could a phaethon, with wings, fly down?"

"Yes, if he were careful and not heavily burdened."

Flint tossed a sly look to Tanis. "Are you thinking what I think you're thinking?"

The half-elf nodded. "Seven of us go in the front door. That's where the resistance is likely to be the heaviest, and we'll need some strength there. Nanda, three of your people find that chimney and wait. When we reach Balcombe's ceremonial chamber, he's bound to turn his attention on us.

"That's when the surprise comes down the chimney. With luck, someone should catch him from behind."

Nanda considered the proposal. He glanced toward Hoto. "You are not our leader, Great-grandfather, but you are our wisest adviser. Can Tanis's plan succeed?"

"It has as good a chance as any, I suspect." Hoto turned his gaze directly on Tanis, who noticed for the first time how the man's eyes blazed in the darkness. "Even success will not come cheaply. As the dwarf said, your enemy is a powerful wizard. He will kill more than one of us tonight. Is this elf woman worth that price, Nanda Lokir?"

Nanda had known this question would come, and his answer was ready. "No, Great-grandfather, the woman alone is nothing to us, but eventually this man's evil will threaten our families. That is what we must prevent."

The elder seemed satisfied with that answer.

Nanda turned to the other phaethons with the group. "Cele, take Jito and Satba to the chimney mouth. Hoto will tell you where it is. Wait there for our arrival.

"The rest of us will go in the main entrance. I will lead, with Hoto following me, then Kelu, Tanis, Tasslehoff, and Flint, and then Bajhi in the rear. We move as quickly and quietly as possible."

Suddenly Tasslehoff was next to Nanda. "Let me go first, Nanda. I'm the smallest, and I've done this sort of thing before."

"No. Take your place between Tanis and Flint. Everyone follow me." Immediately the leader of the phaethons was on his feet, creeping across the ridge. He blended into the scrub and picked his way carefully through the tangled brush. Crossing the coulee took the group nearly twenty minutes, but they arrived, scratched and sweating, before the cave entrance.

"Can anyone read these markings?" asked Nanda.

Tanis scanned the white rock around the cave mouth and noticed for the first time that there was indeed writing of some sort chiseled into the stone. He had no idea what it said or even in what language it was.

Again Tasslehoff sidled his way to the front. "It's religious script, some sort of ritual prayer. I saw

the same thing over a temple door south of Shalost, on the Silvanesti border, just before the elves burned it. I don't know what it says, but these are the same markings. This one here, at the apex," he said, pointing with his hoopak, "is Hiddukel's sigil."

Flint, handling his axe uneasily, asked, "What sort of a temple was the one near Shalost?"

"It was a cult of soul cannibals."

The group fell silent for a moment, until Tanis said, "Well, that fits in with what you and Selana overheard in Balcombe's laboratory. Let's get inside."

Crouching as if walking into a stiff wind, Nanda pressed into the cave mouth. The rest of the group followed in single file.

As Bajhi, the last of the phaethons, entered, he cast a quick glance over his shoulder. Satisfied that they were not being followed, he turned back and caught up with Flint.

If he had watched the entrance a bit longer, he might have seen two white, stone bodies, shaped like minotaurs and laced with pulsing red veins, flowing out of the rock face flanking the cave, slowly turn toward the entrance, and follow the line of intruders inside.

Nanda led the group slowly along the passage. Although it was a natural cavern, it showed signs of alteration—the walls and floor were partially smoothed and leveled. Dim illumination filtered down the tunnel from somewhere ahead, casting long shadows back toward the entrance.

The leader stepped cautiously and probed the ground ahead with his quarterstaff. Within seconds there was a telltale *snap-whoosh!* and Nanda collapsed to the floor. Everyone in the group froze momentarily, then Kelu and Tanis rushed to the stricken man.

Two inches of an iron dart protruded from his thigh, surrounded by a spreading red blossom. Kelu grasped it lightly between his thumb and forefinger and tried, very gently, to pull it from the wound. Immediately Nanda's neck muscles knotted up as he struggled not to cry out.

Kelu shook his head. "It is embedded in the bone, Nanda."

"And probably barbed as well," added Tanis. "We'll need magic to get this out safely. Can you walk at all?"

The white-faced leader of the phaethons nodded, muttering, "I think so." The two men helped him to his feet and then steadied him. Tasslehoff scooped up the dropped staff and handed it back. Using it as a support, Nanda was able to hobble on his own, though it was apparent to everyone that his pain was acute.

Tapping Nanda on the shoulder, Tasslehoff pointed out, "I could have spotted that. Let me go first." Seeing hesitation in Nanda's eyes, he insisted, "I'm good at this type of thing. It's sort of a hobby."

Nanda looked searchingly at Tanis. The half-elf explained, "I haven't known him much longer than you, but he does seem to be good at getting into and out of places where visitors aren't wanted. He has not steered me wrong on that score yet."

Nanda lowered his eyes and waved his hand forward.

"Go ahead," said Tanis. "Nanda will take your place between Flint and me."

Looking slightly relieved that someone else was stepping into his responsibility, Nanda slumped against his staff, taking much of the weight off his wounded leg.

Grinning from ear to ear, Tasslehoff readjusted his pouches and packs, then said, "Best decision you ever made. Watch me!" He turned and stepped lightly down the path to where Nanda had fallen. "Ready when you are, Tanis!" Then, without waiting for any go-ahead signal, he bent to his task.

Before advancing down the tunnel, the kender paused to examine the trigger mechanism of the trap that had injured Nanda. He poked at the rough stone floor with his dagger for only a few seconds

before muttering, "Ah ha!" One of the larger stones shifted slightly and made an audible click as it did so. Tas studied it for a few more seconds, then scanned the opposite wall. He quickly located the dart's small hole and nodded appreciatively.

"Someone really did first-class work in here," he announced over his shoulder, but a chorus of vehement shushes from behind reminded Tas where he was.

With a good idea of what he was up against, Tasslehoff resumed his search. He moved only a few feet farther down the tunnel before pausing and holding up his hand, signaling the others to stop. He pointed to the ceiling, where cobwebs and dust created a hairy blanket clinging to the stone roof. With everyone's attention on the ceiling, he poked the end of his hoopak into a patch of moss on the floor.

Several phaethons gasped as what looked like solid ceiling fell away in a cloud of dust. A stout net, weighted with chunks of stone the size of a man's head, crashed to the floor. The dust had not settled yet when Kelu stepped forward for a closer look, but Tas stopped him by barring the tunnel with his hoopak. Seconds later, a loud *clank* rang through the passage as sixteen metal spikes, each a foot long and barbed along the shaft, sprang from the floor and pierced upward through the net.

Tas lowered his hoopak. "Anyone under there would have been dragged to the ground by the weight of the net, then the spikes would have finished 'em off. Devilish," pronounced Tas, sounding like a philosopher expounding to his pupils. "You fellows had better stay on your toes in case I miss something," he said, adding modestly, "as unlikely as that may be."

With alarming nonchalance, Tasslehoff picked his way through the spikes and net. Although none of them were strangers to danger, the phaethons, Nanda in particular, gawked with mixed wonder and dread at the grisly fate the kender had so easily sidestepped.

Only a few paces beyond the trap, the corridor opened into a circular room. The walls and floor were polished granite, coral pink with veins of gray. Three magical light sources blazed softly on the walls, filling the room with clean white light. As everyone else filed in, they found Tasslehoff standing in the center of the room, toying with the long tail from his topknot.

Tanis and Flint moved next to the kender, who asked, "What do you make of this?" With a sweep of his arm he indicated the entire wall of the chamber. The wall was plain and unadorned, unremarkable in all respects save one.

"There aren't any exits," observed Tanis in wonder. The wall was featureless. The only doorway was the one from which the group had just emerged.

"None that we can see, you mean," corrected Tas. "I'd bet Flint's beard that there's at least one way out of here, aside from where we entered, probably more. We just have to find them." Quickly the kender went to work

searching for concealed doors. He groped along the walls and floor and across the ceiling: poking, prodding, knocking, twisting, and pulling.

While pushing against what appeared to be solid granite, Tasslehoff suddenly tumbled through, leaving only his ankles sticking out of the wall. What had looked like blank wall shimmered and faded away to reveal an arched doorway with an open space beyond. The kender, who was as surprised as everyone else, scrambled to his feet. Flint beamed.

"That's one, but as I said there's bound to be more. Now that we know what we're looking for, let's flush out the rest."

In less than a minute, two more doorways were found. All three opened into corridors, not rooms. Two were smooth and polished, like the chamber where all the passages met. The third, to the left, was rough, like the passage they had followed from the entrance.

Nanda turned to his great-grandfather. "Hoto, do you have any idea where these passages lead?"

The elder just shook his white-maned head. "I have never been inside this place, and I am unaccustomed to being underground. My sense of direction here is quite bad."

"Mine is excellent," said the dwarf, who had grown up in the underground tunnels that riddled the foothills of the Kharolis Mountains. "Based on the location you described for that chimney, one of these two finished passages should lead there. This third one is anybody's guess."

"With no clear choice between them," said Tanis. "I say we choose this one." He indicated the corridor farthest to the right and took several steps toward it.

"Wait a minute," ordered Tas. Stretching up as far as he could, he plucked one of the magical lights from its holder on the wall, then scooted in front of Tanis in the unexplored hallway. "OK, all set."

As they moved slowly down the corridor, Tasslehoff suddenly stopped, then motioned for the others to move forward. Tanis was about to ask what the problem was when he spotted it. It stood in shadows, only partly illuminated by Tas's light, but Tanis had no desire to get a better look.

"Father of creation!" exclaimed Flint as he stepped up behind Tanis. "What in all the Abyss is that?"

The thing before them, several yards down the hall, once had been a man. Now its flesh was mummified, shrunken, and cracked open. Brown bones showed through the tattered skin. It stood rigidly at attention in the middle of the passage and was clad in a spectacular suit of chain mail. Even ages of tarnish and a multitude of gashes could not hide the armor's splendor. The large shield lashed to the skeleton thing's left arm was split from the top to the central boss. Almost a dozen snapped-off arrow shafts jutted at crazy angles from the shield, a brown streak trailing down from each rusted iron arrowhead.

A bastard sword dangled loosely from the thing's right hand. The creature's studded leather gauntlet and the sword's decaying leather handle had become one indistinguishable, molding lump, but the sword showed only patches of rust. Most of its three-foot length was still shiny and keen. An uncomfortable lump rose in Tas's throat as he realized that the rust on the blade marked patches of blood that had never been wiped away.

"That's not just another zombie," offered Tas.

"It hasn't moved yet. Perhaps it's nothing, just a statue," offered Kelu.

Tasslehoff knew that wasn't the case. From his position at the head of the line, and being shorter than everyone else, he could see something they could not; the eye slits of the monster's helmet. Beyond those steel rims

were two black, hollow pits, and in each shone a tiny pinpoint of flickering light.

With a sickening creak the thing raised its head and swept those malevolent eyes across the cluster of intruders. Bones grated against bones as it lifted its shield and sword. Expecting to see the shambling gait typical of most undead creatures, Tas was shocked beyond words when the monster leaped gracefully toward him. The bright, heavy blade whisked through the air, neck high. The kender threw himself to the ground and rolled straight toward the monster, hoping to get past it.

Death had not dulled the thing's reflexes. The skeletal warrior sidestepped and kicked, solidly planting its steel-coated foot in Tas's stomach. The unfortunate kender skidded back across the smooth floor, left dazed and gasping for breath by the force of the blow. A vicious downstroke from the massive sword could have cut him in half, but the killing blow was knocked aside by Flint's axe. Tasslehoff felt friendly hands dragging him away while his ribs throbbed and his ears rang from the clash.

It was Flint's turn to face the creature. He shifted his heavy axe back to a ready position while the warrior studied him with its cold eyespecks. The sturdy dwarf was no stranger to life-or-death combat or undead monsters, but this thing was outside his experience. He was not the least bit confident that his mundane weapon could even hurt this obviously magical opponent.

The skeletal warrior offered the tip of its blade while keeping its shield at half an arm's length. Flint understood that it had fought axemen before, and whatever sort of undead brain it possessed, it could reason and remember. It was crafty, judging from the way it had attacked Tasslehoff.

Keeping his eyes locked on the thing's face plate, the powerful dwarf lunged forward and swept his heavy, two-edged blade across the sword. The ancient steel bit into the wall in a shower of sparks and stone chips, and Flint felt his axe springing off, no longer under control. He realized too late that the monster had lured him, knowing that its sword could absorb the blow. Its shield swept forward and turned in toward the axe. It struck the rebounding blade squarely and caught it, the way a stump catches the woodsplitter's axe. The shield twisted, wrenching the haft away from Flint's hands, and the sword blade sang through the dank air. Its tip sliced cleanly through the hardened leather plate covering Flint's left shoulder. A spreading stain darkened the shirt beneath the severed and dangling armor.

Flint tumbled backward, clutching his wounded arm. The skeletal warrior jumped forward to press the attack, but now its shield sagged under the weight of Flint's embedded axe. This was the opening Tanis had waited for. The half-elf fired a razor-tipped arrow straight into the creature's exposed breast. It punched completely through the mail shirt, front and back, and shattered against the far wall as severed chain mail links clattered to the floor. Far from being hurt, the creature barely seemed to notice the wound.

Kelu, seeing the danger to Flint, grabbed Nanda's quarterstaff and leaped forward. With cool precision, he landed two powerful blows against the monster's helmet, but without even appearing to change the direction of its attack, the skeletal warrior's bastard sword flashed once and severed the phaethon's right arm at the elbow. As Kelu stared in shock and horror, a second blow ripped across his midsection and a third split him from collarbone to navel. The phaethon's mutilated body tumbled to the floor amidst a spreading ruby pool.

As Tanis stared aghast at the carnage, the skeletal warrior pried the axe from its shield and tossed it aside. "Fall back, everyone, up the hallway!" called the half-elf as he retrieved the staff and returned it to Nanda. "We can't fight this thing. It's too dangerous." As the survivors scrambled back toward the chamber, Tanis nocked an arrow and guarded their rear, wondering what good another arrow could do if the monster decided to pursue them.

It did not seek them, but resumed its guard in the gruesome hallway.

Tanis's relief over the ease of their withdrawal was broken by a scream from behind. Spinning around, he saw that they were almost inside the chamber again. Blocking the door was an enormous golem, a living stone statue made of pure white granite covered with a network of pulsing red veins. It resembled a minotaur, having a bull's head on a man's body. One golem blocked the doorway and another stood behind it, inside the chamber.

The scream had come from Bajhi, who was being crushed in the golem's mighty arms. His feet dangled more than two feet off the floor, and the golem still towered a full head above him. After each scream, the golem's grip tightened, preventing the panicked phaethon from inhaling.

Tanis stood helpless. His arrow was nocked and ready, but he could not fire for fear of hitting Bajhi. Nanda struck the creature with his staff, but the wooden weapon had no effect against the stone. Moments later, Bajhi's struggles stopped and he was dropped into a ragdoll heap on the floor. Instantly Tanis's arrow struck the golem in the throat and glanced off, barely chipping the surface. A second arrow struck it in the forehead and shattered.

Tanis was nocking a third arrow when someone snatched it from his hands. Tasslehoff stood in front of him. "We can't fight these things either, Tanis. They're too strong. You're just wasting arrows. We have to break out of this corridor somehow."

Tanis lowered his bow. "If we all rush that skeletal thing at once, at least two or three of us should get past. I doubt whether it can kill all of us. It's not much of a plan, but . . ."

Hoto, who had been holding back the minotaur with crashing blows from his cudgel, shouted over his shoulder, "Perhaps I can clear the dead thing from the hallway. Let me go first." As he backed away and trotted down the hall, the minotaur golem ducked its head and moved into the hallway. Its arms groped ahead, grasping for anything it could catch, but the phaethons and their allies were already well ahead.

As they approached the skeletal warrior's position, Tas saw it once again raise the glistening blade and battered shield into position. He wondered what the aging phaethon, with a staff and a knife, could manage to do. Hoto motioned for the others to stay back as he approached the monster.

"The golem is still coming," shouted Tanis. "We can't hold him back for long."

Nanda gripped Tanis's arm. "This won't take much time. Shield your face and eyes."

"What about the golem?" demanded Flint. Wincing, he still clutched his wounded shoulder, trying to slow the bleeding. The sleeve was dark and matted. He knew that until they reached some sort of safety, pausing to make a bandage would only increase their danger.

"I can slow the golem," Nanda claimed, limping back down the hallway. Tasslehoff was turning to follow the injured phaethon when the dimly lit corridor erupted in flames. A blast of heat and light roared across where Hoto stood, and again from behind where Nanda faced the golem. The kender could feel his eyebrows curling from the heat, yet he knew this was only the merest hint of the force being turned against the stone minotaurs and the skeletal warrior.

Tas peered through his hands into the tunnel ahead. Hoto stood in an inferno, his magnificent wings of flame stretching ahead of him, wrapping around the warrior and pulling it into a killing embrace. The warrior slashed viciously through a wing only to see the sword pass harmlessly through the flame. The monster immediately sensed the futility of attacking the wings and rushed headlong into Hoto. Tas nearly turned away, not wanting to see the heroic phaethon impaled, when his eye caught a detail he had missed before: Hoto was not standing, but floating several inches above the floor, suspended by his wings. As the sword drove forward, he slipped instantly to the side and evaded it. The undead creature was carried by the force of its charge straight into the flaming wing, then pinned between both wings.

The creature flailed and thrashed against the trapping flames. Its scream was a horrid, grating sound. The sword bit into Hoto's leg, then sliced across his back, but the pinioned monster could not put any strength behind the blows. Within seconds, mummified flesh smoked and curled away from the scorching bones, then exploded into flame. The monster continued struggling until ligaments and cartilage burned away. The confined hallway filled with foul-smelling smoke. At last only blackened bones and fused chain mail remained in a heap on the floor. The shield was a vague outline of ashes, and the sword glowed softly in the dim light.

The wounded and exhausted phaethon elder extinguished his wings and sank to the floor. He tottered for a second and would have collapsed, but Tasslehoff rushed forward and threw his shoulder under Hoto's arm. Together they stumbled forward through the choking hallway. Tas glanced down as they stepped over the scorched remains of the warrior and was horrified to see the two tiny points of light still glowing in the eye sockets. He kicked the skull away, and it cracked into pieces as it skittered across the floor.

Some distance beyond Kelu's body was a door. Tas helped Hoto lean against the wall, then hurriedly checked the door for signs of a trap. While he worked, Flint retrieved his axe and, with Tanis and Nanda, caught up with the kender. Tasslehoff slipped the door open and stared into the room beyond in wonder.

Three heavy tables occupied the center of the room. Shelves lined the walls. Beakers, bottles, decanters, bowls, books, scrolls, and a multitude of items Tas could not even identify covered the tables and shelves. A second door along the left wall was closed.

He stepped briskly into the room and immediately started picking things up, looking inside covered

bowls, stirring solutions, shaking cruets, touching and investigating everything.

Tanis rushed in behind and collared the curious kender. "Are you trying to get us all killed? Don't touch this stuff. It could be dangerous." Seeing that everyone was inside the room, he added, "Help me bar this door. The golems are still coming."

"But, Tanis," Tas objected, "there might be something here that could help us."

"Then Flint or Hoto or Nanda will find it. You and I are the only two who aren't injured."

Reluctantly Tas put down the stoppered vial he'd been swirling and trotted to the door. Tanis was already leaning his shoulder against it, preparing for the golems' assault.

Tasslehoff eyed the door appraisingly. "Say, Tanis, this is a good, stout door. Why don't we just lock it?"

"I don't have the key."

"Who needs a key?" asked Tas. "You sure are narrow-minded sometimes." He put his eye to the keyhole. "Ooh, those golems are closing in fast. I'd brace myself if I were you, Tanis."

"Why don't you help?"

"I *am* helping." The door shuddered under a heavy impact. "I'll have this locked up tight in no time." As Tas inserted a piece of bent wire into the lock, a second smash shook the door. He pulled the wire out and scowled, then reshaped it gently with his fingers. "Can't you hold it any stiller than that?"

"I can barely hold it at all!"

Cursing under his breath, Flint pushed past Tas to put his good shoulder against the door. Tasslehoff waited until after the next slam, then slipped the wire back into the lock. Several seconds of probing were followed by the satisfying *thunk* of the bolt. The golems continued hammering on the door and each blow knocked loose another nail or rivet, but the door held and would continue to hold for several minutes, at least.

"Now let's have a look around. There's no place as interesting as a wizard's lab," said Tas.

"We still don't have time to browse," Tanis reprimanded the kender. "We can't waste time before finding Selana and Balcombe."

"Give me one minute, Tanis, and I guarantee it will be worthwhile."

Tanis looked inquiringly to Hoto, who nodded.

Tasslehoff dove into his work with glee. He scurried along the shelves, reading labels and scanning contents as he went: eye of crow, smoky quartz dust, heretic's ashes, fingernail of hanged man, mercury, hemp, powdered whelk shell, giant's wail—that one caught his eye—and so on down the line. Occasionally he snatched a bottle and stuffed it into his pocket.

Finally, his minute long expired, he grabbed a tall stool and ran back to the locked door. He set the stool a few inches in front of the door and placed four vials on top of it. Turning to Tanis, he announced, "I'm set. This should let us know when the varicose twins get through the door, and give them a little surprise, too," he finished, patting his vest pocket.

"Then let's see where that other door takes us," said Flint. Tanis had bandaged the dwarf's shoulder, which slowed the bleeding considerably, while Nanda had seen to Hoto's injuries.

They assembled in front of the side door. Flint held his axe ready and Tanis nocked an arrow, then Nanda pulled the door open—revealing another dark, polished hall.

Tanis lowered his bow. "Lead the way, Tas, and remember, we're working against time."

The kender set off at a slow trot, scanning the floor and walls as carefully as he could at that pace.

After a few dozen yards, the corridor turned slightly, and Tas could see a play of light along the outside wall that told him the way ahead was lit by torches. He paused just short of the bend and listened, detecting one voice for sure, with pauses where another, softer voice might have filled in, but Tas could not tell for sure.

Crouching near the floor, Tasslehoff slowly poked his head around the corner. Only a few yards ahead, the corridor spilled into a cavern. Torchlight danced along pink granite walls. A spiral pillar blocked most of his view through the door. He could not discern the extent of the cavern, but he guessed it was larger than anything they had seen so far, judging from the timbre and echoes of the drifting voice.

Stretched out on his hands and knees, Tas crept toward the opening. The closer he got, the more he could see, and the more he became convinced that this was what they sought. He heard the second voice, filling in the gaps between the first. He had heard it before and it was unmistakable: the voice of Hiddukel, speaking through Balcombe's coin!

Tas turned back and motioned Tanis forward. Soon the group had assembled just short of the doorway, sheltered from view by the pillar. Again Tasslehoff crept forward, into the chamber this time. Relying on the irregular spiraling of the pillar to camouflage his shape, he slowly peeked around the column.

At the far end of the chamber stood Balcombe, just as Tas expected. The mage's back was to the chamber. He was standing before a stone table or altar, blocking Tas's view of what was on the table. Moonlight streaming down from a portal in the ceiling bathed the mage and the altar. To Balcombe's left stood a beautiful white-haired woman dressed in a sea-blue gown. Her wrists were tied and her cheeks glistened with tears, but she held her head up regally. Tasslehoff realized in dismay that the woman was Selana.

He quickly ducked back and related in whispers what he had seen. Flint spoke to Tanis. "Here's your chance, lad—end it all with one shot. From behind that pillar you can put an arrow right between his shoulder blades."

Grim-faced, Tanis stood and nocked an arrow. The others prepared themselves to rush the altar and finish the job if necessary. Tanis leaned around the pillar, aimed carefully, and fired.

The arrow traveled true to its target. It struck Balcombe solidly in the upper back and buried itself to the fletchings. Tanis closed his eyes and held his breath, waiting for the thump of the collapsing body. Instead, he heard laughter and Selana's warning shout, "It's a trick!"

Opening his eyes, Tanis saw Balcombe still standing at the altar, frozen as he was before. Then he saw Balcombe step from behind a pillar to the side, laughing. The Balcombe in front of the altar shimmered, grew translucent, and disappeared, and Tanis's arrow clattered to the stone floor.

"Certainly you didn't think it would be that easy? You insult me!" Balcombe's laughing face grew dark and angry. "Have you forgotten so soon what it is you're after? A bracelet that foretells the future! I've known for hours that you were coming, perhaps even before you knew it."

Tasslehoff slapped himself in the head as Flint rolled his eyes, but Hoto acted. Igniting his wings, he screamed a phaethon war cry and streaked across the chamber. Balcombe stood his ground, unflinching. Acting on the signal, the three phaethons stationed atop the stone chute also ignited their wings and swooped into the cavern, closing directly on the wizard.

When they were nearly on top of him, Balcombe drew a pouch of fine sand from his gown and scattered it in a sweeping arc through the air, simultaneously moving his thumbless right hand in an arc across the phaethons' path while shouting, "*Ast tasarak sinuralan krynawi.*"

The wings of all four attackers disappeared and they tumbled roughly to the ground, unconscious. Hoto's momentum carried his body across the floor to skid to a stop at Balcombe's feet, where he was greeted with derisive laughter.

Balcombe, mindful of the danger he was in, gloated for only a moment. Tanis was nocking a second arrow and Flint preparing to charge when Balcombe pointed a small, straight piece of iron at them. He murmured "*Patcia et matahant!*"

Suddenly Tanis, Flint, and Nanda found themselves unable to move. They could hear and see as before, but their bodies were frozen in place. Tanis stared down the length of his drawn shaft, pointed directly at Balcombe's throat, but could not release it. Flint and Nanda stood ready to charge, but their movement was suspended.

From behind the pillar, Tasslehoff sat with eyes closed, licking the last bits of a potion from his lips. It was one he'd lifted from Balcombe's lab only minutes before, labeled "Free Action." He had no idea what it did, but it sounded useful and now seemed as good a time as any to give it a try. Glancing to the side, he saw his friends halted in midaction. Not bad, he thought as he looked back to the vial, but there's not enough to go around. He tucked the empty vial back into his pouch.

Now what? He listened for a moment as Balcombe's laughter died away. Was the mage still looking this way? Only one way to find out. Tas poked his head around the pillar. Reveling in victory, Balcombe strolled through the crumpled phaethon bodies scattered around his altar.

The voice of Hiddukel interrupted the mage's musings. "You missed one, mage." Only then did Tasslehoff spot the two-faced coin, propped on the altar between two impressive rubies. At the same time, Balcombe looked up and noticed the kender. His expression darkened considerably.

"So, you did return with your friends. You may as well come out where I can see you. That pillar won't protect you if I decide you should be harmed."

Tas scrambled to his feet and stepped into the open. His right hand was in his pouch. He knew that, among other things, he had taken from the lab at least one vial labeled "Big Boom."

Balcombe tilted his head slightly. "So you're the other mouse. I don't like that hand in your pouch, little mouse. Place your hands where I can see them."

With his fingers still debating between the three vials he had left, Tasslehoff shook his head. "No, thanks, I'd rather not."

"As you wish," replied Balcombe. Again he drew something from his gown, stretched it between his fingers, and mumbled words Tas could not hear. Instantly an enormous web wove itself between the two pillars flanking the kender, including him in its intricate pattern.

Tas recognized that this was the same spell Balcombe had used against them in the zombie chamber at the castle, and he remembered the horrid stickiness of the web. But now when he tried to move, he discovered that the web slid off him easily. Assuming that this, too, was a result of the potion, he quickly stepped forward and out of the strands.

Overcoming his momentary surprise at the kender's escape, Balcombe felt his patience was exhausted. The time for the transfer was nearly upon him and he could not afford any more distractions. He raised his hands, preparing a lightning spell to kill the kender.

Tasslehoff needed no more urging. He yanked a vial from his pouch and hurled it toward the altar, where it struck the stone and shattered. A deafening screech of pain and anguish reverberated through the chamber, echoing between the pillars, fanning the torch flames. It died, then rose again in great sobs, louder and more terrifying than anything Tas had ever heard. Balcombe, standing only feet from the sound's source, writhed against the wall with his hands clamped across his ears.

Suddenly Tasslehoff remembered—the giant's wail, which he thought he had left on the stool in front of the locked door in Balcombe's lab. For a moment he wondered, which spell did I leave on the stool?

Then the world shook under a massive impact. Tas stumbled across the floor as chunks of the ceiling crashed down around him. A few moments of silence followed, then another tremendous

crash brought down one of the pillars near the altar. A third crash caused the wall of the chamber across from where Tas stumbled to collapse into the chamber.

Through the dust and rubble of the wall charged a massive hulk. It moved clear of the debris, and Tas recognized a hill giant dressed in rags, coated in filth, and with hands torn and bloodied from smashing through the stone wall.

Mouth wide in shock, Balcombe raised his hands defensively and commanded, "Turn back, Blu!"

Blu spotted Balcombe instantly and rushed the altar. "Blacome trick Blu!" the lumbering giant roared, kicking boulders from his path as if they were tiny stones. He hesitated suddenly, seeing Selana chained to the wall nearby.

In the moment's reprieve, Balcombe loosed the lightning spell he had begun for Tas before Blu's appearance. The bolt of raw white energy slammed into the giant's immense chest, leaving the smell of singed flesh in the air.

"Blu!" Selana cried, straining against her bonds.

Howling in pain, Blu stumbled but did not fall. He crashed into the altar, sending the rubies and Hiddukel's coin bouncing to the floor. Rostrevor's gem shattered, releasing the stunned prince.

The tow-headed lad with the thin blond mustache looked around, trying to get his bearings. He took in the unconscious phaethons, the frozen dwarf and half-elf across the chamber, the kender near them, and the lavishly dressed white-haired elf tied to the wall.

His sight settled on his father's deformed mage. "Balcombe?" he asked of the only person he knew in the chamber. "What's happening? Why am I here?"

"He trapped you in the gem!" screamed Tas.

Selana saw the squire size up the kender dubiously. "It's true, Rostrevor. Help us!"

"They're lying, Rostrevor," said the mage in his oily voice.

But Rostrevor Curston had never liked or trusted his father's mage. He snatched up a jagged piece of the shattered wall and hurled it at Balcombe.

Dodging Rostrevor's rock, Balcombe did not see the wounded giant swing his great, hairy fist, then collapse to the floor. The blow knocked Balcombe against the wall, breathless and only semiconscious. He recovered quickly, but the lapse was enough to release Tanis, Flint, and Nanda from the grip of his spell.

In one motion Tanis realigned his arrow and released it. It arced across the room, as before, and struck the sagging wizard below the ribs. This time the real Balcombe shrieked, more in anger than pain, and stared with disbelief at the tuft of feathers protruding from his side. His right hand reached behind himself and found the arrowhead, wet with blood. With a mighty tug, he yanked the shaft cleanly through, then defiantly snapped it in half.

The wizard's body, though, was not as strong as his will, and he collapsed to one knee. Tanis nocked another arrow and took aim. Balcombe spied the soul gem he had prepared for the sea elf, miraculously still intact and ready to accept a person's essence. Perhaps he could still escape into the gem. . . .

As Tanis fired, Balcombe dived toward the gem. The arrow passed through the wizard's shoulder above the bone, then struck the wall beyond.

Shafts of red light lanced out of Balcombe's body, filling the chamber with a brilliant glow. Everyone turned away from the dazzling display, shielding their eyes. Within moments, the radiance faded away. When they looked back, Balcombe was gone.

"Where'd he go?" asked Tas, blinking. Cautiously, Tasslehoff, Flint, and Tanis approached the altar

area. Tas searched right and left, forward and back, looking for the corrupt mage. Aside from bloodstains and two broken arrows, there was no sign of Balcombe.

"It looks like we failed, and the fiend got away," snarled Flint angrily. "I would have enjoyed sending him to meet his vile god."

"I think we've done well to get this many of us out alive," said Tanis. Flint grudgingly agreed with a nod as he cut Selana loose.

The sea elf knelt next to the giant's scorched body, but Blu was dead, slain by the wizard's lightning bolt. Wiping away a salty tear, she touched it to his forehead in a traditional Dargonesti tribute to fallen warriors. Near his body she noticed the copper bracelet made for her brother and slipped it on her wrist.

Meanwhile, Tas had awakened the phaethons. As everyone prepared to leave, Tas poked through the scattered debris around the altar. He picked up the two-faced coin, now quiet. Then he hefted the ruby, one of the largest he'd ever seen; he almost thought he could see something inside its multifaceted surface. . . .

Selana directed them to the chamber's main entrance, which bypassed Balcombe's lab and the stone minotaurs. Everyone else was filing out of the chamber when Flint looked over his shoulder and saw the kender absorbed in something at the altar. The dwarf hollered, "Leave those things alone, you fool! Do you want to get killed?"

"Relax," called Tas. "What's the harm?"

"They're *evil*, you doorknob!"

"Oh, right. Good point," agreed Tas. He quickly set the ruby into its niche on the altar and turned to go, just as a shaft of moonlight touched the gem.

Tasslehoff thought he heard a faint scream, followed by distant, wicked laughter. Looking around he saw nothing and shrugged, chalking it up to the recent battle.

Minutes later, they were outside the cavern, watching the gathering glow on the eastern horizon. Suddenly the hillside trembled from an underground explosion and smoke billowed out of the cave mouth.

Tas smiled, remembering the missing vial. "I think, those golems finally got through that locked door."

Epilogue

The four companions stood on a sandy stretch of beach on Newsea's western shore, the setting sun at their backs. Standing at the waterline, Tanis idly skipped flat stones across the smooth expanse of water, stained pink and orange by the setting sun. Tasslehoff, his leggings rolled up to the knees, chased squawking sea gulls, stopping now and then to pick up interesting-looking seashells and place them in his pouch for later inspection.

A safe distance from the water, Flint sat next to Selana on a large section of gray driftwood, boots uncharacteristically off, thick, hairy toes buried in the moist white sand. His wounded shoulder, tightly bound in clean muslin under his loose blue tunic, throbbed only slightly now, thanks to an herbal poultice from the phaethons. In one hand was his carving knife; the other held a length of soft driftwood, which he was fashioning into the likeness of a gull.

Only two days had passed since the fateful battle with the mage. Tas, Flint, Tanis, Rostrevor, and Selana had returned with the surviving phaethons to their spire village. There, the winged creatures had cremated their dead warriors in the traditional twilight ceremony, their brave souls offered to the setting sun. After a night's rest, and with many rounds of thanks, they had left to escort Rostrevor back to town and Selana to the sea.

"Red sky at night, sailor's delight," mused the dwarf now, commenting on the reflection of the sky in the water. "Means tomorrow will be a beautiful day. Haven't seen it miss yet."

The sea elf watched her new friends. "I'm almost sorry I won't be seeing it," she said, her finger tracing the outline of the gems on the copper bracelet at her wrist. She thought of her brother, Semunel, and the joy she would bring to her family when she returned with the bracelet. There would be much to tell them. "Almost," she repeated.

"I must go soon," she said softly. "The tides and all . . ."

Flint stopped whittling. "Yes, I suppose you must." He held the driftwood seagull up for inspection. The dwarf flicked a loose shaving off and handed the piece to Selana.

"It's not much—not my best work by far—but I'd like you to have it, to remind you—" He stopped, thinking she might not like to remember the past days' events.

Smiling, Selana held the fragile little bird up in her palm. "I would be honored to have a genuine Fireforge of my own. I won't be keeping the bracelet myself, you know."

"Thank you, lass, for not—"

"No, thank you. You have taught me much in a short time." Selana further silenced the dwarf's apology of sorts for losing the bracelet with a kiss to his ruddy, whiskered cheek.

Sighing heavily, the sea elf pushed herself up from their makeshift bench and untied the too-short, coarse-spun cloak the phaethons had given her to replace Balcombe's flimsy gown, and let it drop to the ground. She tied the carving to the drawstring of her tunic.

Flint stood, wincing slightly at the jarring of his shoulder. "Tas, Tanis," he called, "Selana is leaving." Tanis turned and waited nearby at the shore.

Tasslehoff skipped up to where they stood, his expression sad. "Must you go so soon? We haven't had a chance to do much but kill monsters and escape death."

Selana smiled at the kender.

"Of course she must go, you doorknob. Her brother—the whole Dargonesti kingdom—is waiting for her," said the dwarf, his sadness making him even gruffer than usual.

"Say, maybe I could go with you!" said Tas, his face suddenly lighting up. "I could drink another potion!"

"I don't think so, Tas," said Selana. "I have a long, tiring trip ahead of me, and you could never keep up. Besides, it's a turbulent time in our kingdom." She saw the kender's wrinkled face fall.

"The world is a very small place sometimes, Tas," she said gently. "If anyone could just drop by for a visit, I have a hunch it would be you."

Tasslehoff beamed at the presumed compliment.

"Let's get you on your way," said the dwarf, taking her arm in a fatherly grip and leading her to where Tanis waited.

Half-elven and sea-elven eyes met. In the unspoken way of all elves, Tanis told her of his newfound admiration and asked her forgiveness of his earlier intolerance. Selana thanked him for helping her to see the error of her willfulness.

Impulsively she reached up and stroked his cheek. "So beautiful." Blushing profusely, Tanis took her hand in his and smiled.

Selana swallowed the lump in her throat, and, without looking back, stepped into the tepid water of the Newsea. She walked until the orange-and pink-stained water lapped over her head.

"Look!" cried Tas a few moments later. Flint and Tanis followed Tas's finger to a point near the horizon.

There, a dolphin arced high above the water.

The three newly met friends watched in silence until the dolphin disappeared, then one by one they turned away.

"Well, now where shall we go?" asked Tas abruptly, hands jammed into the pockets of his leggings. His fingers met with something cold and hard. Pulling it out, he held up a two-faced coin to the light of the setting sun.

"Where do you suppose this came from?" he muttered to himself.