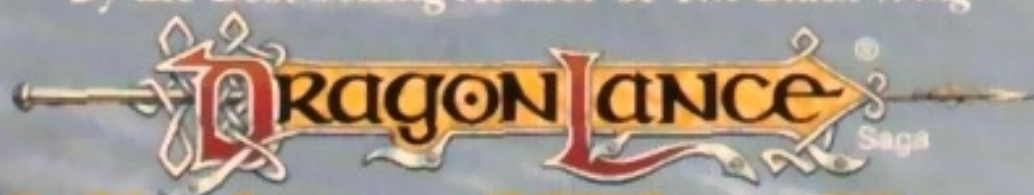
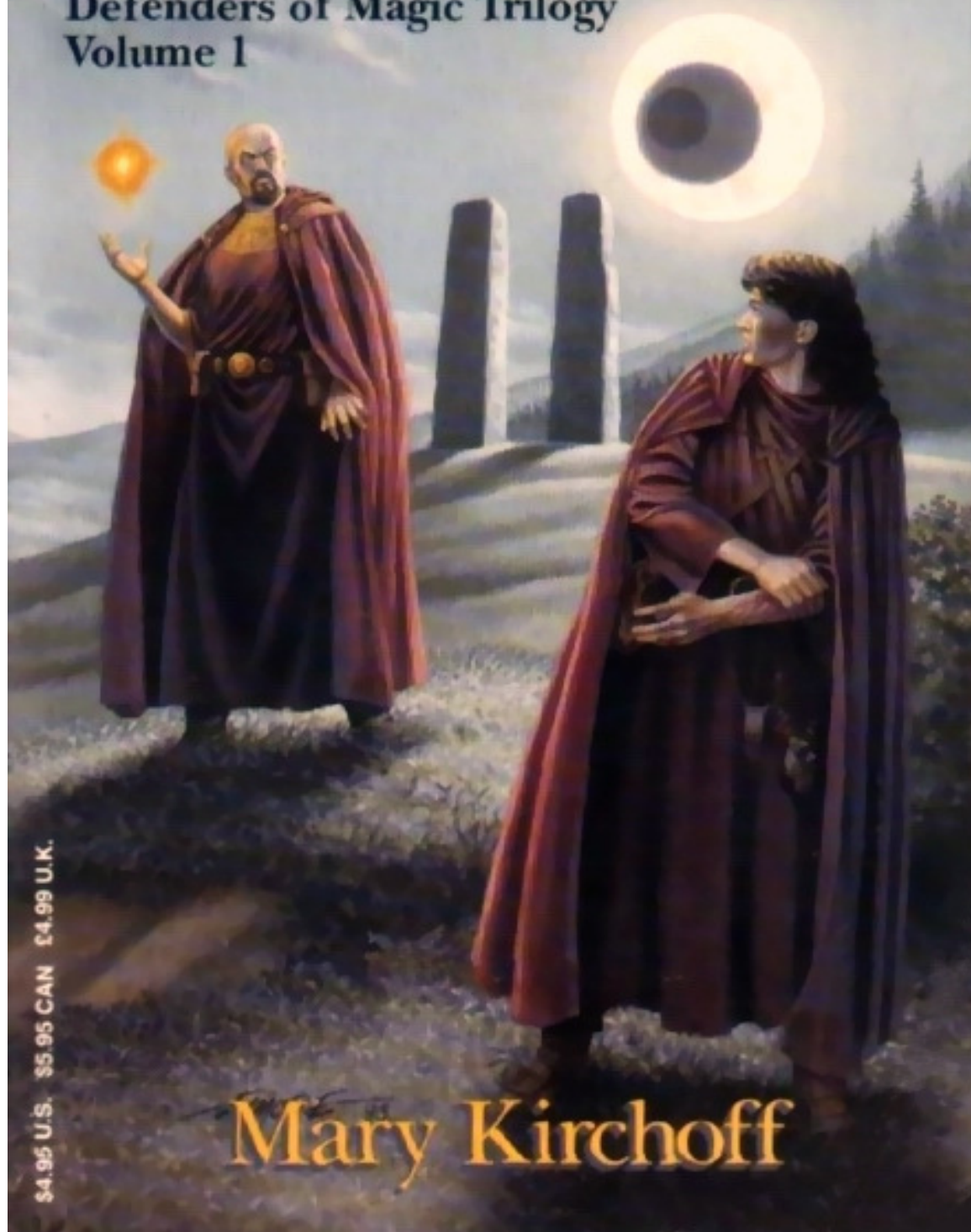


By the Best-Selling Author of *The Black Wing*



Night of The Eye

Defenders of Magic Trilogy
Volume 1



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Mary Kirchoff

Dragonlance Saga

DEFENDERS OF MAGIC Volume One

NIGHT OF THE EYE

Mary Kirchoff

Chapter One

Two men were stoning a witch in the village square of Thonvil. The first rocks dropped the beggar woman to her knees. Her bony hands waved wildly in a pathetic attempt to fend off the missiles. Another rock hit the ground in front of her, splashing mud and dirty water into her face.

Guerrand DiThon, brother of the local lord, watched in horror. The woman was no witch. An eyesore in the village, perhaps. Demented, certainly, even possessed, but Guerrand thought her condition more likely the result of harsh street life, or even a diet of tainted flour or fermented grain mash, too common on the bleak, unyielding southern coast of Northern Ergoth. But a witch she was not. No one knew better the signs of a mage than one who secretly wielded magic himself.

A crowd had gathered. Guerrand knew nearly all of those present since the village was small and family lines stretched back to well before the Cataclysm. The nobleman felt he had to do something to stop the shameful persecution.

"Evard, Wint, drop those stones." He put a knobby hand to the thick shoulder of the bully nearest him. "Malvia has done no wrong, certainly nothing to warrant this treatment."

Evard started at the touch. Scowling, the paunchy, red-faced man craned his thick neck around to examine the interloper. Seeing the tall, lanky younger brother of Lord DiThon, Evard's eyebrows raised, and he turned around to face Guerrand. The man's fingers relaxed around the rock in his hand, but he didn't let it drop. Instead, he juggled it lightly in his rough palm. A surly smile raised his fleshy cheeks. "Would your brother approve of you releasing a witch?"

Guerrand sighed inwardly. He, above all, knew Cormac's obsessive hatred for magic. "I'm sure he wouldn't, but I'm also sure he wouldn't let one of his subjects be tormented for no good reason. Even Lord DiThon could see this woman is no witch." He jerked his head toward the cowed, ragged woman. "Would *you* live as a beggar if you could grant yourself wealth?"

The rock fell still in Evard's hands. Wint dropped his own rocks and tugged on the other man's sleeve. "Let 'er be, Ev," he muttered, stepping away, his face averted. Evard cast one last glance between the beggar woman and Guerrand, almost in puzzlement that the young noble should stop their sport. With a slight shrug, the middle-aged rummy, who looked twice his actual age, let the rock tumble from his coarse fingers to the dust. Evard and Wint drifted down the narrow, winding road to the pale, cobblestone structure that served as Thonvil's inn. With the excitement gone, the rest of the crowd began to disperse.

Guerrand's thoughts were not on any of them as he stepped forward to help the woman to her feet. Her wounds were not severe, mostly bruises to her arms, though her left cheek bore a nasty gash that Guerrand knew would mark her for the rest of her days.

Malvia's gnarled old hands clutched the ones that helped her to her feet. Her dull eyes regarded the young noble with reverence that made him uneasy. "You saved me," she breathed through rotted teeth.

Turning his dark head from the smell, Guerrand brushed her hands away gently. "I think not, Malvia. Those two had simply drunk too much and were looking for some cruel sport. They wouldn't have seriously harmed you." Secretly, Guerrand doubted his own words.

The woman tugged out the pockets of her tattered skirt. "Would that I had anything to give you in exchange for my life," she said, as if he hadn't spoken.

At that Guerrand reached into his own fine silk pouch, which hung at his waist, and withdrew two steel pieces. He pressed them into her dirty palm and folded her thin fingers back over the cool metal. "This should help you to live more comfortably, so that no one will have cause to call you a witch again."

Guerrand passed his hand across her face as he mumbled a soft incantation beneath his breath. The mud and caked dirt there fell away. The woman's cheeks and forehead were brown and weathered, but clean.

"After you've purchased some clothing, make your way to the castle kitchen and tell Gildee that I sent you. She'll give you a hot meal and perhaps might even find work for you." As an

afterthought he reluctantly added, "Uh, Malvia, it would be better for both of us if you didn't speak to anyone of this incident, or what we've just discussed."

The beggar woman gave him a nearly toothless smile. "You have a kind heart, sir, kinder by far than your brother's. Everyone in the village thinks so."

Guerrand was fully aware of the villagers' contempt for his brother. Cormac offered largesse with one hand while emptying their pockets by taxation with the other. There was discontent among the merchants and the peasants, but they were kept far too poor to do more than grumble to themselves.

Guerrand chuckled softly at the intended compliment. "You'd be wise not to repeat that at the castle, either," he said to Malvia. "Now, good luck to you."

Bobbing her head, the woman hobbled down the street toward the heart of the village, where the buildings were clustered together. A number were timbered and plastered structures owned by some of Thonvil's wealthier merchants and craftsmen. Out here on the edge of town the thatched, wattle-and-daub houses were farther apart, each surrounded by a vegetable garden and small livestock pen.

Guerrand started to follow behind Malvia, to complete the errands he'd been about when he'd happened upon the stoning, but a voice from behind stopped him short.

"If she had been a witch, would you still have let her go?" asked the strong, commanding voice.

The young man's heart seized up in his chest. Just as he'd feared, his defense of the woman had drawn notice. Without turning, Guerrand responded: "I am sympathetic to weaklings who are preyed upon by bullies, that's all." That said, Guerrand began walking down the street to end the discussion.

But the speaker followed behind him. "Do you possess any magical skill yourself?"

Guerrand whirled around angrily. Standing there was a man of indeterminate age, dressed for the cool day in a heavy brown cloak, the red fabric of a robe beneath it brushing his boot tops. A thick cowl was bunched up around his neck and ears, and a floppy hood concealed much of his face. Guerrand could see a nicely trimmed goatee and a sharp nose, but no other details. "I don't know who you are, and I don't care. And I am definitely not going to answer your impertinent question."

The man's eyebrows raised. "Your defensiveness is answer enough, in this part of the world."

Guerrand forced an unconcerned shrug and turned away. "Think what you will, stranger."

Again, the man's words followed him. "Your anger at me is misdirected, young Master DiThon. We're on the same side in regard to magic."

Guerrand scowled darkly. "I'm not on any side. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've errands to run." As Guerrand DiThon stormed down the narrow street, he could feel the man's overly observant eyes on him. The entire incident in the square, from first stone to this disconcerting conversation, made him wish he'd left his errands in the village to another day.

Guerrand took the long way home, through the heath along the Strait of Ergoth. It was springtime, in the month of Chislmont; the heather for which the landscape was named was starting to bloom, dotting the otherwise scrubby seaside with pinkish-purple flowers. He didn't notice that the stiff, woody stems scratched at his calves.

The young man felt a kinship with this bleak land. He loved the sound of pounding surf. He liked how the heath met the sea at the horizon and formed a gentle line, unbroken by trees or hills, like one precise stroke of an artist's brush. Today, with the heather blooming and the sky typically cloudy, the line to the south was the color of new heliotrope.

Guerrand often wondered if someone like him stood across the gray water looking north, contemplating where earth met sky. In all his nearly twenty years he'd never left the island of Northern Ergoth, had ventured little farther than Hillfort, not even ten leagues to the east. Once Guerrand had hoped to study in Gwynned, the capital to the north, but Cormac had forbidden it.

The memory of that age-old argument slowed Guerrand's steps. He settled himself on a

boulder worn flat by centuries of slapping seawater. Guerrand was in no hurry to return to Castle DiThon. He felt no kinship with those cold stone walls. He looked to the east, to the promontory on which the centuries-old fortress rested.

The castle rose up between blue sea and green earth like a lone, wicked mountain of stone, as if the first DiThon meant to correct a mistake of nature. It seemed to Guerrand that there was no place he could go where the stone structure didn't dominate the view. It drew the eye as a flame draws moths. But, unlike a flame, the castle was cold and bleak even in the brightest sunshine.

Guerrand had never liked it, not even before his father, Rejik, died. Guerrand had been but nine years of age then. He scarcely remembered him, a distant bear of a man. Or perhaps it was that he confused the memories of Rejik with Cormac, who so resembled their father.

Nineteen full years Guerrand's senior, Lord Cormac of Castle DiThon had always seemed more a father than a brother to Guerrand, anyway. Their family tree had tangled limbs, which was not unusual, considering that childbirth and rampant disease took many so early in life. Cormac's mother, Rejik's first wife, had died of Baliforian influenza at thirty, with young Cormac just eight years of age. In the bleak isolation of Northern Ergoth, ten years passed before Rejik defied convention and married Zena, a local lass less than half his age and just two years older than his son Cormac.

Rejik's second family arrived seven months later with the birth of Guerrand. As soon as physically possible came a third son, Quinn. And then, at three and fifty, Rejik received the news of the birth of his first daughter and the death of his second wife in childbirth. Guerrand, Quinn, and Kirah's young mother had seen the seasons change only twenty-eight times. Rejik survived two heartbroken years without her.

And so it was that cold and distant, critical and demanding Cormac inherited his father's holdings in the summer of his twenty-eighth year. Having married at twenty and already the father of two, Cormac was not happy about taking on his father's young second family as well.

Unfortunately, Cormac had not inherited their father's business acumen. Thousands of hectares had been passed down from generation to generation. Even ten years before, the DiThon lands had stretched beyond where the eye could see, to within less than two leagues of the Berwick family's manor house at Hillfort. Guerrand remembered his father boasting that if he stood on the easternmost edge of DiThon lands, he could watch the uppity merchant Berwick sputter in anger and jealousy at his dining table.

It was not a boast Cormac could make. In fact, Rejik's eldest son was the one sputtering in jealousy now. Cormac had been forced to sell off parcels of land to pay the debts he claimed could be laid at the feet of both Rejik and the fickle gods. One of those parcels was the land their father had so coveted, the hilly coastlands and fertile grasslands that bordered Hillfort. The purchaser had been the merchant himself, Anton Berwick.

But Cormac had a plan to get that land back. In fact, his usual sour mood had been considerably lighter of late in anticipation of its return. Cormac had arranged a political marriage between Berwick's daughter and Quinn DiThon, Guerrand's younger, adventurous brother. The merchant was desperate for his daughter to marry a title, and Cormac wanted money. Cormac had negotiated as dowry the land he'd once sold. That the land would be in Quinn's name, not Cormac's, was a minor detail to the lord.

Still looking at the world across the Strait of Ergoth, Guerrand thought of his younger brother somewhere out there, a cavalier questing for experience. He hadn't seen Quinn in nearly two years. Only ten months apart in age, as children they'd been confused as twins until Quinn had begun to follow with a passion the vocation Cormac had chosen for both of them. Quinn is likely so muscular and bronzed after two years on the road that we scarcely resemble each other anymore, Guerrand chuckled to himself. He missed him sorely, missed the cheerful optimism Quinn's presence inspired at Castle DiThon. Everyone liked the charming Quinn—even Cormac, who seemed as willing to forget that Quinn was only half blue-blooded as he was possessed to remember it of Guerrand. Guerrand looked forward to Quinn's return at month's end for the marriage.

"Rand! There you are at last!" a young girl's high-pitched voice called above the pounding of

the surf. The sound startled Guerrand, despite the fact that he recognized the voice. His head jerked up, and his dark eyes fell on his youngest sibling, twelve-year-old Kirah. A smile creased his face. She was one of only two people he allowed to use the nickname he preferred.

Poor, motherless Kirah. He'd heard it whispered in the dark and drafty corners of the castle by well-meaning servants. Blond and blue-eyed, as fair as the boys were dark, she was the only one of them to look like Rejik's second wife. Guerrand secretly wondered if the resemblance hadn't deepened the despair Rejik had felt, rather than offering comfort. Kirah was a living reminder that Rejik's second marriage was to a woman beneath his station, a pale-skinned, common "newcomer." Her family had settled in Northern Ergoth just after the Cataclysm, some three hundred years before. But prejudice ran high, especially among the nobility. Those who were not of the old, darker-skinned stock that had lived in Ergoth proper, before the Cataclysm split the region into two islands, were considered newcomers.

While Rejik had loved the fair-haired Zena, he never seemed able to hug the baby daughter for whom he'd longed. Seven-year-old Guerrand and six-year-old Quinn, who looked tanned enough to pass as blue-bloods, had supplied the affection to young Kirah. Cormac, with two pure-blooded children of his own by the time of Kirah's birth, suffered from his own prejudice regarding his half siblings.

"What are you staring at?" Kirah demanded now, filthy hands on her boyish hips. She pushed her stringy blond hair back from her face impatiently.

"You," he said, smiling in obvious delight. "You're a mess."

Kirah and I should not even get along, thought Guerrand. It was not in looks alone that they were different. Guerrand was cautious; Kirah was adventure itself. He was neat and organized; she looked like a walking whirlwind, everything about her askew. He was silent and contemplative; she was opinionated and outspoken.

"I'm always a mess," she said brightly. "But if anyone is to blame today, it's you. I've been running hither and yon looking for you. I followed your trail."

Guerrand chuckled. "I wasn't aware I'd left one."

Kirah playfully poked him in the chest. "For me, you did. You know you can't hide from me, Rand. I know your haunts. Besides, I asked Zagarus."

"I'll have to speak with that traitorous sea gull!" Guerrand laughed. "I wasn't trying to hide; I just wasn't in a hurry to get home. Why did you follow me, anyway?"

"Cormac wants to see you. He sent several servants out to find you. I thought I should warn you that he's lost much of the good mood we've all benefited from since he sold Quinn to that buck-toothed biddy from Hillfort."

"However did you get so cynical, child?" He ruffled her hair. "Cormac didn't sell him—he wrote to Quinn, who agreed to the marriage."

"That's because he hasn't seen her since she got her second teeth. I'm telling you, if Quinn could see her tusks—" the young girl flapped a hand before her mouth to demonstrate, "—he'd stay in Solace, or Solamnia, or wherever she isn't!"

Guerrand stifled a smile. "You're very uncharitable, Kirah. Surely they're not *that* big. Besides, Ingrid Berwick sounds pleasant enough to me."

"Pleasant enough for a sister-in-law, you mean. Lucky for you, Cormac and Rietta deemed you unworthy of the Bucker Princess."

"She's not a princess."

Kirah shrugged. "She acts like one."

Guerrand sighed. "What does Cormac want?"

"Oh, yes." She sniffed. "I was getting to that. He wants to talk to you about how long you're taking with your training as a knight."

"Again?"

"Did you think he would just forget you've spent ten years as a squire?"

Guerrand sighed once more and tossed a small stone into the surf. "I was hoping with all the excitement of Quinn's return and wedding that Cormac might have other things on his mind."

"He'll never be happy about your interest in magic, and he'll never allow you to become a real mage," Kirah said softly, her tone uncharacteristically serious.

Guerrand scowled. "He doesn't even know I still want to be one. Only you do, Kirah." He looked at her intently, almost pleadingly. "It must stay that way."

Kirah nodded her blond head decisively. "We should do it, Rand. We should just run away so that you can become a mage."

Guerrand rubbed his face. "Kirah, you think too fast. You hope too hard."

His sister crossed her arms. "What's going to change then, to end this stalemate of yours and Cormac's? Are you hoping he'll drop dead and you'll inherit everything?"

"No!" Guerrand said too vehemently. "No, of course not," he added more softly. "Besides, I wouldn't get anything, nor would you. Castle DiThon would go to Bram now. He's a good kid, despite his parentage. He deserves it." His voice was distant, his thoughts far beyond the DiThon family lands.

Guerrand ran his hands through his hair in agitation. "Honestly, I don't know what I'm hoping will happen, Kirah. There aren't many options for the second son of a noble family whose fortune is on the decline. I only know what I don't want, and that's to become a warrior."

"Well, you'd better think of something, because Cormac intends to grill you the instant you return home."

"Why now?"

"Why not now?" she asked. "The arrangements with Berwick are complete. If he can get you through your training and out on crusade like Quinn, he'll have one less mouth to feed around here."

Kirah's pale eyebrows lifted as a thought struck her. "Frankly, if you ask me, Rietta brought you to his mind. You know little-miss-my-father-was-a-Knight-of-Solamnia can never stand to have anyone happy around her, least of all her husband. Rietta doesn't like you, you know."

Guerrand snorted. "Thank you. She doesn't like you either."

"Oh, fie," said Kirah with a toss of her pale head. She skipped barefoot along the shore. "Rietta would marry me off tomorrow if she didn't fear that I would do something to ruin her own simpering Honora's chances for a suitable match. I think she suspects I'm the one who puts the frogs in her bed."

"Perhaps you shouldn't giggle every time Rietta mentions it at table," suggested Guerrand. He looked up suddenly, as a breeze, cool and damp and smelling of rain, tickled his nostrils. "The wind's changed." He stared across the water to the south and frowned. "The sky's black. There's a storm brewing." The lanky young man slapped his thighs and stood. "Time to face the lion, I guess."

"What are you going to say?"

Guerrand shrugged. "What I always say—that I'm working as fast as I can, but swordplay and such doesn't come as easily to me as to Quinn."

Lightning suddenly jagged across the southern sky. Guerrand waited three seconds for the accompanying crack of thunder, then grabbed his sister's arm and pulled her after him down the sandy beach. "Come on, Kirah. If we run hard, we can beat the rain."

Guerrand and Kirah raced up the last green, gentle slope just as the first drops of cool rain began to fall. Winded, they strode arm in arm through the open portcullis on the northern curtain wall. At the inner gatehouse, both nodded to the lone guard clothed in well-worn ceremonial garb. Old Wizler, his eyes clouded over with cataracts, gave a toothless smile and waved them through. Loyal, if ineffectual, Wizler had served the DiThon family since before Guerrand was born. During Cormac's rule, staff had been cut back to bare bones. Since these were relatively calm times in Northern Ergoth, there was little need to guard the entrance to the castle.

Just past Wizler's station, in the shadows of the temple to the god Habbakuk, Kirah slipped away from Guerrand's side like a pale, luminous shade. "Good luck, Rand," he heard her whisper.

Guerrand knew well her penchant for traversing the castle through the network of tunnels and secret passageways that she'd spent her young life discovering. It was a great measure of her trust that she'd shown a number of them only to him.

Wishing he could slink into one of those dark, musty stone tunnels himself, Guerrand instead set his spine and strode across the inner ward toward the chiseled and sculpted entrance to the rectangular four-story keep. The moment he stepped inside, he felt the old, familiar tightening of muscles in his neck. His senses narrowed in the dark confines of the cold stone walls. A serving woman scurried by with buckets on her shoulders, headed up the broad, sweeping staircase. Squinting furtively in the dim light of the torches, she visibly brightened when she saw who was there.

"Hello, Master Guerrand. How be you today?"

His own smile was warm. "I've had an... interesting day, Juel." Thunder cracked outside. Guerrand looked reflexively toward the wooden door. "But I suspect there are more clouds in my future." His eyes shifted upward to the ceiling. "My brother is waiting for me."

Juel shook her head. She well knew Cormac's stiff nature, and was aware of the conflict between the brothers. Few secrets could be kept from servants. She gave the lord's younger brother a sympathetic look before continuing up the staircase, the heavy load on her shoulders swaying gently in tempo to her steps.

Guerrand was two steps up the staircase when a voice stopped him from behind.

"Befriending the servants again, *Uncle* Guerrand?"

The muscles in his neck tightened even more. Honora. Cormac and Rietta's eldest child, just three years younger than he. Hand still on the polished wooden rail, he turned to face her. Gods, he thought, how could such an angelic-looking creature sound so vicious? In Guerrand's charitable estimation, his niece seemed to embody the worst of her parent's traits in all areas but appearance. Who would guess that behind her perfect curvaceous figure and raven hair, which glistened even in the dim light of torches, beat the heart of a viper?

"You're mistaking common civility for friendship, Honora," he said calmly. "That's understandable, considering that you're unfamiliar with both concepts."

Honora's vivid green cat-eyes narrowed. "You've been talking to your ragamuffin sister again."

Guerrand snorted. "I'd love to stand here and exchange barbs, Honora, but I'll leave that to my ragamuffin sister. She enjoys it so much more than I. Right now your father would like to discuss something with me." He continued up the stairs.

"You mean Father wants to give you another dressing-down."

Guerrand stopped, but didn't turn around. His hand gripped the railing more tightly. "Tell me, Honora, does your spitefulness come naturally, or is it a symptom of spinsterhood?"

"I am *not* a spinster!" she shrieked. Guerrand gave a secret little smile at the direct hit to her pride. "My mother is searching for the best match to a Knight of Solamnia. She's already found one for Bram to squire under. But she'll not be satisfied to marry her daughter to just any cavalier, Ergoth's pathetic excuse for knights." She arched a thin brow. "Which, I might add, you haven't managed to become in ten years of trying."

To Honora's great irritation, Guerrand threw back his head and laughed. "I'd be offended, if I cared for your opinion, or even to become a cavalier." He continued up the staircase. "I'd wish you a good day, Honora, but I don't think you could have one if you tried."

Guerrand ignored her sputtering response. His foot came to the first landing. He looked to the second door on the right—Cormac's study. It seemed at once stiflingly close and leagues away. He hadn't had a pleasant conversation there since before his father died. Steeling himself one last time for the inevitable confrontation, Guerrand took two steps forward.

Suddenly, to his great surprise, the door to Cormac's study burst open. Cormac's arm thrust through the doorway, his bejewelled fingers pointing.

"Get out! I do not deal with mages!" his baritone voice boomed.

Guerrand's eyes went wide, and he instinctively pressed himself up against the tapestry-

covered wall. His jaw dropped in amazement when the persistent stranger from the village calmly stepped through the portal. Guerrand had never suspected the man was a mage! Instantly the man's dark eyes fell on Guerrand, as if he'd known the younger man was there all along. To Guerrand's great relief, the mage merely nodded toward him, without any outward sign of recognition.

"I'm an excellent ally, but a terrifying foe," the mage said calmly, his back to the doorway and Cormac. "You're making a grave mistake, DiThon."

"Not as grave as yours!" Watching Cormac's booted foot rise in the doorway, Guerrand was horrified to see that Cormac meant to add injury to insult. His foot was in midair to the mage's posterior when it seemed to jerk sideways, missing the target completely. Cormac was thrown so badly off balance that he collapsed onto the floor.

Guerrand was simultaneously shocked and amused. He quickly looked back to the stranger. It had to be a magical effect of some sort, but Guerrand was sure the man hadn't so much as twitched, hadn't whispered a sound. No one had ever made a fool of Cormac without regretting it. Especially not in his own home.

"You may loathe and distrust magic, DiThon, but you make a bigger mistake yet by underestimating it." Standing in Cormac's line of sight, he looked directly, pointedly, at Guerrand. "One never knows when there is magic about."

Red-faced, Cormac scrambled back to his feet. "I may not be able to control its vile presence beyond these walls, but in my castle there will be no magic or magic-wielders." Though he had lost some of his bluster, Cormac would not be cowed. "I'll tell you one last time to get out."

The mage bowed his head in acknowledgment. He walked past Guerrand without a look and took to the stairs, his cloak softly brushing over the cold stones. "I leave because I choose to. You may soon regret this day."

"I regret only that my servants gave you entrance!" Cormac hollered after the disappearing figure. But the mage had already faded into the darkness at the bottom of the steps.

Still pressed to the wall, unnoticed by Cormac, Guerrand held his breath as his brother slammed shut the door to his study. He waited a number of heartbeats for Cormac to move away from the door to his desk. Then, creeping ever so quietly, he sneaked past the door and down the hall to his own chambers, getting safely inside.

Like most of the family quarters in the keep, Guerrand's room was small and simple. A wood-frame bed with several feather mattresses was the centerpiece. Two large chests provided storage for his clothing and other belongings, doubling as seats if needed. A small table against the wall held a basin and pitcher of fresh water. The walls were hung with rugs and painted sheets to add some warmth and to still drafts. During the day, a thin stream of light filtered through the narrow window in the outer wall. At night, candles and the fireplace provided the only illumination.

In spite of his proximity to Cormac's study, Guerrand felt safe here. Generally, no one bothered him in his room. Within the castle walls, it was the best place to rest. He had covered a lot of ground that morning, and his legs ached. Guerrand sank onto the bed and closed his eyes.

Rain was still falling softly, but the light outside his window was nearly gone when Guerrand awakened to the sound of someone fumbling with the latch to his door. By the time he was fully awake, the door had swung inward abruptly, revealing Cormac in the doorway. He swayed slightly as he looked around the room, then focused on Guerrand. "Get yourself to my study. I've been searching for you all afternoon."

Guerrand's heart sank. Cormac had obviously been drinking since his encounter with the strange mage. Guerrand knew the signs too well. This would be a bad time to speak with him about anything. "You have?" he asked evasively. "Been looking for me, I mean."

"Didn't Pytr or Horat find you?"

"No." That was true enough.

"I'll tan their lazy hides!" Cormac struggled visibly to keep his thoughts on track. "Never mind that. I've found you. Now come along." Cormac stomped back down the hall with Guerrand trailing reluctantly behind.

Cormac's study was cluttered and smoky. Books, both ancient and new, lined the walls from

floor to ceiling. Guerrand recognized many of the dull-colored spines, since he'd read most of them as a child. He'd learned all that he knew of the world from those tomes. They were dusty now from lack of use; Cormac neither read them himself, nor allowed anyone else to. No one was permitted into Cormac's study without him, and Guerrand never felt like browsing while he was there.

In spite of the books, the room was clearly Cormac's.

Shields and weapons and pieces of armor leaned against the walls or stood in corners. Spiders crawled over a stack of wood near the fireplace. The bread crumbs on the floor would attract mice, Guerrand knew, if one of Cormac's dogs didn't lap the scraps up first.

"Sit." It was more a command than an invitation. Guerrand dropped onto an uneven stool near the cold fireplace. He regarded his elder brother, who was edging himself through the now too-narrow space between his ornate desk and high-backed chair.

Cormac was a very tall man, the tallest Guerrand knew. His once lanky frame was now more than filled out, obese in fact. Strangely, his arms and legs were almost spindly, like four sticks poked into a large potato. His faded clothing was about ten years—and two stone—out of date. He had never cared much for appearance. Many of the ties that should have held his breeches to his doublet hung loose on his hips; he couldn't be bothered either to tie them or yank them off. Cormac's wife saw to it that his clothes were clean, although no one seemed able to remove the stains that slowly accumulated down the front of every shirt and doublet the man owned.

The cause—or actually, a symptom—of the enlarged waist and the veiny, crimson nose was the very thing Cormac was pursuing at the moment. A bottle of brandy in one hand, Cormac was pouring the amber liquid into a pear-shaped cut glass snifter. He swirled it around once, twice, staring at it intently before throwing the entire contents to the back of his throat with a satisfied, calming sigh. Only then did Cormac look at his younger brother.

"We need to discuss the intolerably long time you're taking to complete your training." After considering the brandy bottle, which was nearly two-thirds empty, Cormac poured himself another snifter and turned to look out the very rare and expensive glass window to the right of the desk.

Over Cormac's shoulder, Guerrand could see through the window. The view to the east, where land met sea, was magnificent: dark, pounding storm-tossed sea to the right, the gently rolling heath on the left. Twilight and rain clouds drew a gray curtain across the strait. He was surprised and grateful that his brother sounded more reasonable than he had expected.

Suddenly, something about the view seemed to make Cormac explode. Whirling about, he slammed the glass down on the desk, his expression as stormy as the sky behind him.

"Damnation, Guerrand, I can't afford it! I've had to sell off valuable DiThon land—my heritage—to pay for your shilly-shallying."

You mean for your drinking and mismanagement of affairs, Guerrand thought, but he held his tongue. As the son who inherited little, he was at Cormac's mercy in every conceivable way.

"Then stop paying for my training," the younger sibling suggested calmly. "Knighthood has always been your ambition for me, not mine."

Cormac snorted. "I should leave you untrained, instead? My sense of charity and family honor would force me to support you still. This lazy streak of yours must be the result of your mother's pale blood." Guerrand noticed that his brother's eyes were not focusing entirely; the drink affected his senses.

"Why couldn't you have taken to it as Quinn did?" slurred Cormac. "He's a year younger than you and has a self-supporting vocation already! Not only that, his marriage will return to the DiThon family what is rightfully ours—Stonecliff."

Guerrand now knew why the view had set Cormac off—it took in the promontory overlooking the bay, the land he so coveted. Stonecliff would be his again within the month, as part of the dowry agreed upon between Berwick and Cormac. Quinn had done this for him, while Guerrand drained him of funds.

Guerrand wouldn't be shamed. "As I've said before, I am not Quinn. The training comes hard to me, because my interests are not the same as his."

"If you're going to bring up going to Gwynned to study damnable magic again, I won't hear

it!" Both of them were obviously thinking of Cormac's previous visitor. "I'll not have one of those sneaky wielders of witchery in my home, let alone my family, even if we are only half-blooded brothers!"

"You've made that abundantly clear, Cormac. I never thought to suggest it." Guerrand twined his fingers together in his lap and flexed them. "If you'd like my promise to work harder at my training, you have it. More than that I cannot do."

Looking beyond Cormac now, to the view through the glass, Guerrand absently took note of three distant, dark spots, as of riders approaching in the gloom. Merchants were always arriving from Thonvil to sell something to their lord. Strange, thought Guerrand, that they should approach from the east, when the village was to the north and west.

"I suppose you think I'm at your mercy, since I can't force you to learn faster," growled Cormac. Guerrand had to chuckle at the irony of Cormac feeling powerless. It was so like him to feel the victim.

Guerrand felt some relief when a knock at the door interrupted Cormac's self-pity. The large man swaggered impatiently across the room and yanked open the door. In the hallway stood a cluster of five men: two household servants carrying torches, two rain-soaked men-at-arms, and another soggy herald wearing Quinn's colors. Guerrand's heart leaped at the sight, as he realized that this meant Quinn must be in the castle.

The men in the hallway stared at Cormac for several moments, until he prodded one of the servants to life with a question. "Well, what is it?"

"Sir," blurted one of the servants, "these men have brought Master Quinn."

He *is* here, thought Guerrand. Still, the servants seemed very uneasy and stared fearfully at Cormac. The other men shifted uncomfortably in their dripping clothing.

Oblivious to the awkwardness of the messengers, Cormac's face lit up like a child's on his birthday. "And about time, too," he thundered. "Where is my great, conquering champion? Drying his hair? Fetch him and send him in! I would see him at once."

The men exchanged nervous glances. The servants with the torches seemed about to turn and flee. After an uncomfortable silence of several heartbeats, the herald stepped forward and spoke. "Master Quinn is dead."

"Dead?" roared Cormac. He stepped menacingly into the knot of retainers, fists clenched. "If this is someone's sick idea of a joke, I'll crack his thick skull. Where is my brother?"

Guerrand did not hear the answer to the desperate question, if indeed one was given. He had shifted his gaze back out the window, to the dim, starless night and the pattering rain. The study had grown very dark during their conversation, and no servant had come in to make a fire. His mouth was dry, his hands and feet suddenly so cold he could not move them.

To Guerrand, a pall seemed to cover the entire castle. It grew outward from his own heart and then hung, sodden and tattered, over every room and corridor and building. Guerrand was certain the gloom would never lift—the rain would fall forever, and the sun would never again shine on Castle DiThon.

Chapter Two

In the stale, windowless great hall of Castle DiThon, Guerrand shivered. He had not been able to get warm since the messengers arrived with the news. No amount of hot tea or fur wraps or fuel on the fire could warm this coldness of the soul.

Guerrand blamed the chill on the weather, which had steadily worsened since he and Kirah outran the black clouds on the heath. Gale winds and fierce rain pounded the coast relentlessly for days, damaging crops and dropping mighty limbs. Moving about like zombies, the villagers seemed to lack the energy to remove the debris. The winds continued, adding loose bricks to the wreckage outside, while the stifling stillness of the funereal viewing wrought devastation inside.

Guerrand had seen too much of death in his nineteen years. At seven he was not permitted even to say farewell to his mother, whose own life had ebbed away at the same time she gave it to Kirah. He hadn't understood death fully then, half expecting his mother to return as if on holiday. But she never did.

So, by the time their father died just two short years later, the nine-year-old boy understood too well that Rejik would not be returning, that life would never be the same. In his anger and his sorrow, he'd stood as still and pale as white marble next to his father's coffin for the entire two days of viewing. Day and night, no one could move him, not even to tears. He'd had a job to do.

Guerrand had held a secret to himself in those dark days, one he'd not even told Kirah in the time since. On his last day of life, Rejik DiThon had summoned his children, one by one, to his bedside. Scrawny nine-year-old Guerrand stood in the dark and fetid air of Rejik's death room, the father's once-fleshy hand clutching the son's small, sweaty one. "Don't leave me, Guerrand," Rejik had pleaded. "The way is dark, my eyesight is failing, and I'm frightened."

Guerrand's breath had caught for a moment. The once mighty and terrifying Rejik DiThon was afraid of death. Guerrand, growing frightened himself, said the only thing he could think of. "I'll not leave you, Father. Not until Habbakuk comes to take you home."

"I fear I've not been as faithful as some, but it's a comforting thought anyway. You're a good lad, Guerrand." Rejik's frail hand, cool and death-dry, suddenly wrapped around Guerrand's like a hawk's talon on a perch. "Promise you won't leave until I see the Blue Phoenix's face at last. Promise me!"

"I promise, Father!" Young Guerrand had kept his promise, staying at Rejik's side until his coffin was placed upon its pedestal in the family crypt. He'd had no way of knowing when Habbakuk would come for his father, but he would take no chances. Guerrand DiThon kept his promises.

Standing next to the bier that held his younger brother Quinn now, Guerrand searched his memory for promises made to Quinn. There were the little ones between close brothers—"Don't tell Father I broke the leaded window in his study." The great, unspoken oath to defend each other, no matter the cause or cost. But, unlike Rejik's death, there had been no warning, no way for Guerrand to help Quinn when he needed him most. The young cavalier had survived two years on the road only to be slain by bandits mere leagues from his home and family.

The day Quinn had left on his crusade seeking life's adventures, he'd not spoken of mortality. Quinn had been too full of hope, of possibilities to think dark thoughts. But a last, long solemn glance between the brothers had reaffirmed the unspoken vow.

Guerrand had not been able to defend his brother against death, but he would stay by him until Habbakuk came, as much for his own sake as for Quinn's. The young lad of sixteen had grown into a deeply tanned, thickly muscled man of eighteen. His raven-black hair, longer than Guerrand remembered it, in death curled below the neckline of his surcoat. Beneath the tunic, he'd been dressed in royal blue leggings and a warm silk shirt. Across his breast was laid his gleaming sword, polished, no doubt, by some faceless servant for the young cavalier's final appearance.

Guerrand forced shallow breaths. The scents of bergamot and balsam, used to wash and perfume the decaying body, smelled overpoweringly of death. After the viewing, Quinn's body

would be sewn inside deerskin, along with the cloying scent. There was no death chamber to drape with black serge, so the drab woolen cloth was hung about the vast great hall, which now held the body for viewing.

The last three days had been the worst Guerrand could remember. The entire village of Thonvil had gone into mourning for the immensely popular Quinn DiThon. Guerrand knew why. Quinn had been the kindest and most noble of the family. A steady stream of mourners had traveled between town and castle from the moment the public crier announced Quinn's death in the square. The village bell tolled endlessly, plaintively, until the distant sound felt like a dull, ever-present thudding at the back of the skull.

Wearily rubbing the knotted muscles there, Guerrand looked among the throng of mourners for the wan face of his sister, not really expecting to spot her. No one had seen hide or hair of Kirah since Cormac had called her into his study to deliver the news. Guerrand would never forget his young sister's reaction. She'd given one great, slow blink of her blue eyes. Then, in a remote voice that sounded far older than her twelve years, she'd said, "Death follows this family like some hungry hound." She'd turned on her tiny heels and walked from Cormac's study, leaving the adults in an awkward silence of agreement.

Guerrand thought it somehow fitting, given their opposing natures, that as committed to staying by Quinn as he was, Kirah had not shown up once. He knew from the servants' gossip that Cormac and Rietta were furious at her days-long disappearance and absence from the viewing. Not for Quinn's sake, but because people would think Cormac couldn't control his wayward half sister. Which he couldn't. Guerrand was certain that, wherever she was, Kirah knew of their humiliation and received some small measure of comfort from the couple's anger. When all this ceremony was done, he would find her and help her cope.

Looking about the dark mourning chamber, Guerrand could see Rietta and her daughter Honora weeping appropriately while accepting the condolences of some neighboring nobles. Among them were the wife of the merchant Berwick and her daughter Ingrid, the betrothed of the dead young cavalier. Guerrand knew who she was only because he had been told—he'd never before seen young Ingrid Berwick himself.

Squinting now in the dim light of the oil lamps, he had to agree with Kirah's assessment of the young woman's appearance. Ingrid's looks hadn't been aided by the weeping she must have done since the news of her betrothed's death. Still, he could scarcely summon a twinge of pity for her. She could only be crying for the lost opportunity, not Quinn. To Guerrand's knowledge, she and Quinn had not met in recent years, if ever. Ingrid looked up just then, across the vast hall, as if she felt his assessing eyes on her. Guerrand nodded briefly, a grim, stiff gesture, and looked away.

Despite the milling crowd, Cormac and Anton Berwick were conspicuously absent. No doubt they had retired to Cormac's study to smoke cigars or sip port, or whatever noblemen did when they felt "uncomfortable." That was the most passionate word Guerrand could come up with to describe Cormac's emotion regarding their brother's death. "Inconvenienced" also came to mind, but nothing approaching grief.

That's not quite true, Guerrand had to correct himself. Several times in the past few days, he had caught Cormac's eyes on him, vaguely angry, yet not focused on the present, as if his thoughts were far away in time and space. Guerrand recalled the look his brother had not even known he witnessed: it said clearly, "Why the useful one, and not you?"

Guerrand winced, but not because of Cormac's incredible cruelty. That did not surprise him. He flinched because he could see how the thought might occur to persons far more charitable than Cormac. He was, in his own estimation and in all senses of the phrase, less useful than his noble younger brother had been. His worst crime, if a malaise of the spirit could be called that, was that he had no idea what he could do to rectify that situation.

At that moment, Cormac DiThon was trying to find, in the haze provided by good port wine, a

solution to a situation of his own. He'd been suffering from a burning ache, low in the belly, since the news of Quinn's death. The gentle sloshing of the port soothed his stomach in a way brandy could not, and its ability to narrow the senses dimmed the edges of the pain. Drink could not, however, make his problems disappear, no matter how many opportunities he gave it.

Damned inconvenient, Quinn dying before the wedding. It was a minor annoyance that his half brother had met an ignominious death at the hands of bandits, rather than in the blazing glory of battle more suited to a cavalier. That mattered little to Cormac, because it seemed to matter not at all to the copious mourners who had been trooping through his castle for days. Quinn had been well liked, that was obvious. It was the reason he'd been an easy sell when Berwick had come looking for a titled son-in-law.

Stonecliff had been within Cormac's grasp. The conversation he had just concluded with Anton Berwick had done nothing to bring it near again. Yet Cormac refused to let its return slip away so easily. He could not afford to buy the land back—if anything, his finances were worse than when he'd sold it to Berwick.

"Damn those bandits!" Cormac cursed aloud. No matter what he did, or how hard he worked, the fates seemed to conspire against him. How many times had the answer to his problems been within arm's reach, only to be pulled away at the last instant? When his father had arranged his marriage to Rietta, Cormac had believed he was getting a handsome woman of high blood whose name and demeanor would raise his own standing. Instead, he got a supercilious, stiff-necked shrew who was raising their daughter Honora in her own disdainful image and assailing their son Bram with stories of pompous Knights of Solamnia, but who seemed at the same time too much like Cormac's own wastrel of a brother, Guerrand.

Then again, when Rejik died and Cormac had at last become lord of Castle DiThon, he'd believed he actually had a chance to get ahead. He had hoped to pay off the gambling debts he'd run up in expectation of his inheritance. But he discovered soon enough that there was barely enough money to keep the castle running, and little more. Cormac's own creditors had forced him to sell off lands, among them Stonecliff.

Once again, the fates prevented him from getting what he wanted. Cormac slammed the port glass to the desk a little harder than he'd intended. The stem snapped from the pear-shaped bottom, splashing the dark red liquid onto his hand. Growling in irritation, he wiped his hand on the thigh of his breeches.

"You'll ruin the only suit that still fits you, Cormac, and you can't afford another, unless it's of that dreadful brocatelle the merchants are passing off as genuine brocade."

Cormac looked up to see his wife Rietta strolling into the room. Her presence caused his mood to sour more than the wine spill had. "Can't a man have some peace in his own castle?"

"Not during his brother's funeral."

Through eyes just beginning to fog with port, Cormac considered his wife. In her late thirties, Rietta had that tight-lipped, smooth-skinned look of a woman who never smiled much for fear it would cause wrinkles. Her severity was emphasized by wearing her dark, thin hair in a tight chignon covered by a strong veil of lace netting. She was too thin for Cormac's taste, her bosom a sunken thing thankfully covered by the long gorget she wore around her neck. Rietta's silent, lithe grace brought to mind a cat, a black, sneaky creature that appeared only when she wanted something and left bad luck in her wake.

"You left me alone to deal with all those wailing old women from the village, not to mention Dame Berwick and her toothsome daughter." Rietta shivered. "If you ask me, Quinn escaped a fate worse than death with that one."

Cormac thought he knew such a fate firsthand, even thought of remarking on the pot calling the kettle black, but Rietta never seemed to catch his irony, especially when it was at her expense. He was definitely not in a mood to joust with her. "If you've come just to pull me back into that dank abyss with you, I've more important things to deal with now."

"It's bad enough that scalawag sister of yours hasn't blessed us with her presence," sniffed Rietta as if Cormac hadn't spoken. "What will everyone think if the lord himself isn't there to greet

the mourners?"

Cormac poured himself a new glass of port and tossed it down in one gulp. "They'll think I've gone on with the business of running a vast estate. I made an appearance and accepted more condolences than I could stomach, anyway." He gave her a sly look. "However, they *will* wonder where the lady of the manor is."

Rietta was too smart to rise to the bait. "I watched you leave with Berwick. What have you done with him?" She glanced about the room artlessly, though it was obvious the other man was gone.

Cormac sighed heavily. "We finished our business, such as it was, and he left. I assumed he'd returned to the great hall."

"You've not given up on getting back Stonecliff already, have you?"

"Through marriage, yes. I can see no other lawful option, since Quinn had the ill-timed bad luck to be slain." Cormac fiddled pensively with a dry quill pen that lay on his desk. "More's the shame that he induced in me a brilliant idea for using Stonecliff to recover the family fortunes. It would be a perfect place to establish a fortress from which we could extort a toll on the vessels that traverse the river, including Berwick's own ships from Hillfort." Cormac sighed again and tossed back more port. "But it's not to be."

With a disapproving eye, Rietta watched his drinking. "As usual, Cormac, you're not using your head."

"I endeavor to, whenever possible." Cormac's perpetual scowl at his wife deepened. "Should I infer from your tone that you have the answer that has eluded me?"

"As usual." She strode to his desk and removed the nearly empty bottle of port to a distant shelf. "And, as usual, it's right under your cherry-red nose." He scowled again at her inference. "Propose another union between the families."

"Of course I thought of that, but you can't possibly mean Honora," Cormac said. "You have loftier ambitions for your daughter than to marry her into a merchant family."

Rietta raised one thin, dark brow. "Don't be absurd."

"I know you look forward to the day, but you can't mean to offer up Kirah," he said, tapping the desk with the quill. "Even if she weren't too young, her marriage would mean that I'd *pay* a dowry, not receive one. That goes for Honora, too." Scratching his temple, he thought for a moment more. "Bram is also too young. Even Berwick, desperate as he is for a noble connection, would not promise Ingard for a marriage to one so much younger than she."

"Ingrid," Rietta corrected. "You're right. Bram is out of the question. He's going to become a Knight of the Rose, like my father, and his father before him, and—"

"Yes, I know, like all male Cuissets, back to Vinas Solamnus," interrupted Cormac in an unflattering imitation of Rietta's own haughty voice. "A bunch of pansy-assed, overdressed, magic-wielding charlatans."

If Rietta had had any respect for Cormac, his words might have angered her. They didn't. "You're such a peasant, Cormac. But that's an old argument I don't wish to pursue now." She straightened her skirts needlessly. "You've forgotten Guerrand."

Cormac threw his head back and laughed at the absurd suggestion. "Don't you remember? We eliminated Guerrand as a possibility before we offered up Quinn. The reason hasn't changed. He's a wastrel."

Rietta leaned over the desk toward her husband, her expression intent. "It's true the reason hasn't changed, but the circumstances have. Now he's the only son available. You said yourself that Berwick is desperate. You simply have to persuade him that Guerrand *has* changed." Rietta snickered unkindly. "That tradesman hasn't many options with a daughter like his."

"What if Guerrand doesn't agree?"

Rietta sighed with exasperation. "You'll have to help him see that he hasn't many—any—options. Threaten to cut him off. He hasn't any means of support besides you, has he? He hasn't completed his training as a cavalier, so he's not likely to run off and join a crusade. Appeal to his sense of DiThon family loyalty. Make him see that he'd be doing it for family and castle—and to

make himself more comfortable."

Rietta's words sounded surprisingly reasonable to Cormac, yet he doubted the comfort argument would gain him ground with his indolent half brother. Guerrand seemed unconcerned about material things. Cormac had never been able to use that as leverage to get Guerrand to do anything he didn't already want to do.

"For Kiri-Jolith's sake, Cormac, you're the lord and master here!" Rietta cut into his musings. "Don't ask him, just tell him he has to do it. Guerrand wanted to become a mage, not a cavalier. Yet you forced him to train as the latter, and he seems to have forgotten the former."

Secretly, Cormac did not consider that subject a victory, since Guerrand was taking the longest time in history to advance from squire to knight.

"If you're as wise as I think," said Rietta slickly, nearly choking on the words, "you'll insist that the marriage take place in a fortnight, on the same day you'd set aside for Quinn and Ingrid."

Cormac looked scandalized. "Without a proper mourning period? Such a rush will make the whole thing look like—well, exactly like what it is, a marriage of political convenience."

Rietta laughed. "Don't fool yourself that it's ever appeared to be anything else. No one is more aware of propriety than I," she said. "Yet, in this case, what is proper is less important than that we not give Guerrand time to change his mind or flee."

A small sound from near the fireplace punctuated Rietta's comment. "What was that?" she asked, looking toward the section of wall from which the noise had come.

Cormac dismissed it with a toss of his head. "Rodents. I hear them all the time in here. Likely they have thousands of hidey-holes in this old castle."

"I'll have the chamberlain put out traps." A small sigh escaped Rietta's patrician nostrils. "I fear I've been gone too long for propriety and must return to the great hall. Concerning Guerrand, you must do as you think best, my husband."

Rietta wore a tight-lipped, triumphant smile as she watched her husband's port-fogged mind ponder her words. She knew he would do it, had already decided to, but would not admit it to her so readily. She knew all too well how to persuade her husband to do what she wanted. She had but to provide and plant the seed. Cormac himself, with the aid of port as fertilizer and desperation as sunshine, would make the notion grow.

As she slipped from the room and donned her well-rehearsed expression of grief, Rietta only hoped Cormac would do it soon, before Berwick had time to pursue other avenues.

Hurry, hurry, hurry! Kirah screamed inwardly, as if willing her feet to move faster in the cramped confines of the crawl space outside Cormac's study. Kirah knew as Rietta did that Cormac would do as his wife suggested. The young girl had gasped aloud when she'd realized it. Thank Habbakuk they'd attributed the sound to rats. She'd started crawling when Cormac headed with purpose toward the door of his study. She knew with certainty that he was not en route to the privy.

This is a thousand times worse than I'd feared! Kirah's fevered brain cried. I'd hoped he'd be safe because he was still unsuitable. Grieving, guileless Guerrand wouldn't even suspect why he was being summoned to Cormac's study again until it was too late to escape.

Scrappy Kirah had known from the moment she'd heard of Quinn's death that it was only a matter of time before Cormac and Rietta cooked up some other plot to regain Stonecliff. That was why, even more than her overwhelming grief, she'd disappeared. She'd spent as much of the last three days as possible in the tunnel outside Cormac's study, listening, leaving only to filch food from the kitchen.

Kirah had hoped that Berwick would produce an unheard-of son to marry to Honora. She knew now that she'd only fooled herself, because it was what she wanted to think. Besides, she hadn't thought about Cormac having to pay a dowry.

It had been a most informative, if uncomfortable, couple of days. Cormac had allowed the DiThon finances to decline further than he'd led anyone to believe. A lot further. The normal costs

of running a castle were high enough, but Cormac's taste for fine wines and brandies, and the wedding preparations, had stretched the household budget even more. Only yesterday, Kirah had heard Cormac in a dreadful argument with the chamberlain over the cost of Quinn's funeral.

Scrambling on her hands and knees around a turn, still in the same clothes she'd been wearing when the news of Quinn's death arrived, Kirah caught her shift on a sharp rock. Cursing, she gave the loose-fitting dress a yank, heard it tear free, and she was off again. Three days in the tunnels had left her feeling grubbier than even she found comfortable. Her nails were torn, the cuticles bloodied by scraping along the stone tunnels. She could scarcely imagine what she must look like with wisps of cobwebs poking from her greasy mop of hair and her smudged face. A fright doll came to mind. She didn't care.

Right now, Kirah cared only about reaching the viewing room before Cormac, or his messenger, could get there. The problem was, no direct route led through the network of tunnels within the castle. The stairway outside Cormac's study dropped almost directly into the foyer near the great hall, but the tunnels wound around the outside walls before exiting beneath the main staircase.

Reviewing the maze in her mind, Kirah decided to take a chance. She could cut the time significantly if she exited in the dining room, crossed that room in the open—even though there was a chance she might be spotted—then entered a second passage that led to the great hall.

Scrambling quickly down the narrow chimney that passed between floors, Kirah planned what she would do when she got to the great hall. First, she'd pull Guerrand into the tunnel, kicking and screaming if necessary. She knew he hated the small, spider-filled tunnels. Kirah didn't care about that now, either. She had to get him out of that death room.

After that she resolved to tell him what she'd overheard. It would not be difficult to persuade him to run away with her to Gwynned, like he'd always wanted to. Guerrand could finally study his magic, and she would, well, she'd do something! Learn to pick pockets, if I have to, Kirah thought. The young woman had a talent for it, and a certain amount of skill at thievery already. Possessions had been disappearing from the rooms of visitors to Castle DiThon for years. Thus far, it had only been a bored girl's game, but she felt certain it could easily become a profession.

The more Kirah thought about it, the more she liked the idea. Guerrand could even use his magic to help her pilfer the biggest purses. She and Guerrand would become runaways like the characters in her favorite tales. Guerrand himself had sent her off to sleep countless times with bedtime stories about notorious mountebanks and swindlers and rogues, traveling adventurers who lived by their wits and magical skills rather than force of arms. Even honest, moral Guerrand couldn't help but see that it was their fate.

She knew the highest hurdle to overcome would be Guerrand's ever-ready sense of guilt. He would definitely feel guilty about running away. Kirah wouldn't. She had no time for such a useless emotion. Guilt was an excuse used by people who were afraid to do what they wanted. She'd learned the hard way that if you didn't grab what you wanted, no one was likely to give it to you. She'd told Guerrand that before, and she'd tell him again and again until he finally understood it.

Kirah came to a section of tunnel that was taller than average, though still narrow. She raised up from her crablike position and took off at a shambling run, trying to gain time. But then she came to a skidding stop. Abruptly, as she'd expected, the tunnel took a sharp left around a chimney. Ten more steps and she'd have to leave the tunnel through an air grate between the legs of a ponderous sideboard and take the chance of crossing the formal dining room. With any luck there would be only servants present, preparing the hall for the funeral feast later that day.

Castle DiThon's servants had witnessed her comings and goings for years and never spoken of it beyond the kitchen, far preferring the scrappy little miss to their lord. They would not have lied directly for her—punishment for that would be swift and brutal for the servant's entire family. But Cormac never thought to ask them. He considered the servants to be as mute and mindless as mice, further evidence of Cormac's unsuitability to run a castle. As if she needed proof. Kirah scoffed, amused that she knew more about what went on in the keep than did her brother, Rietta, or their doddering old chamberlain.

Narrow, flickering swatches of torchlight danced across the tunnel before her. Kneeling within the light, Kirah wrapped her thin, pale fingers around the bars of the grate and pushed gently. Feeling the weight of the heavy bars as they came loose from their resting place, she struggled the grate to the side, to lean against a leg of the sideboard. Doubled up into a ball, Kirah thrust her head through the very narrow opening between two ornately carved legs. She hated to take the time to replace the grate, but she couldn't bear to leave a trail.

Kirah gritted her teeth as she swung the heavy iron vent back into place. Swiveling around on the ball of one foot, she peered out from beneath the sideboard. No one looked to be about. The servants must be between deliveries of platters, she thought. Kirah sighed heavily at the scent of food already placed above her for the feast. Her stomach reminded her painfully that she'd eaten too little for several days.

Don't think, just run fast, Kirah told herself. Sighting her goal—another vent—across the room, she made a mad dash through the row of banquet tables, not bothering to keep low or quiet. If anyone had seen the darting figure with tangled hair and torn shift, they would have sworn the castle had a wraith in residence.

Kirah was in the tunnel and replacing the second grate when she heard a gasp and a flurry of activity in the dining room, but she couldn't wait to listen. She had to cross the length of two more rooms within the keep before she reached the great hall.

She scrambled through the long, straight length of tunnel that paralleled the east wall of the great room. Rounding the last left turn, she could see the grate ahead, aware that the air grew hotter with each step. This particular tunnel abutted the enormous fireplace that provided heat for the hall. The walls of carved stone block were too hot to touch, and she was careful to keep from bumping them.

Still, Kirah was sweating like a blacksmith when she made it to the final grate. She squinted through the narrow slits. Set before the fire, Quinn's ornate bier dominated her limited view. Placing the dead near a fire was a local custom—a superstition, really—meant to keep the beloved's soul warm on the long journey to the afterlife. It had never seemed a wise custom to the young girl. She wrinkled her nose in distaste. The hot, still air was heavy with the smell of death that no amount of fragrant herbs could disguise. In vain, she tried to push the scent from her nostrils.

Squinting into the brighter light of the torches, she at last spotted Guerrand in the crowd. He stood on the far right side of Quinn. His back was to her, his shoulders slumped with fatigue. Her heart leaped in her chest. He was still there. He was alone.

"Guerrand!" she hissed through the bars. No response. "Guerrand!" she called more loudly. Still no sign that he'd heard her over the roar of the fire or the clamor of his own thoughts. She decided to risk it all.

"Rand!" she hollered aloud, as if calling to him at the distant stables. She saw him jump. His head snapped around, looking for the familiar face that went with that voice. She bellowed again. Guerrand's gaze closed on the sound, eyes searching the shadows to the right of the fireplace.

"Kirah?" He easily recognized her voice, though he still couldn't locate her. "Where are you?"

"Down here!" she cried. "Behind the grate, next to the fireplace!"

His eyes finally located the outline of the grate. "What are you doing in there? I've been worried about you. Why don't you just come out? You should, you know, for Quinn—"

"Forget all that!" she hissed. "Right now, you've got to get out of that room! Cormac is coming, and he's going to tell you—"

"Master Guerrand?"

Kirah's heart missed two beats at the sound of the servant's voice. "Don't listen to him, Rand! There's still time! Get into the tunnel with me!"

But Guerrand didn't know he had reason to fear the servant. Frowning down at his sister's hysterical voice, he turned about. "What is it, Pytr?"

"Lord DiThon requests your immediate presence in his study."

Guerrand looked puzzled. "Now? During the viewing?" He shook his dark head. "Please tell my brother I'll join him shortly, when the viewing is over and the feasting has begun."

To Guerrand's surprise, Cormac's servant placed a firm hand on his arm. "My instructions were to bring you to him directly." The grip tightened.

"Let go of me, Pytr," said Guerrand, his voice as tight as the fingers on his arm. He tried to shake them off, but to no avail.

"I told you, Rand!" hissed Kirah, mindless of the servant's ears. "Now, come on!"

Confused, Guerrand was not of a temperament to simply break free and dash into the tunnel as the impetuous Kirah would have him do. Besides, he didn't want to leave Quinn's side. "Not now, Kirah," he said sharply, dashing his sister's last hope.

Guerrand's anger, however, was directed at the impudent servant. "I'm warning you, Pytr," he said, his voice low and threatening, "release my arm. Even Cormac cannot wish to cause a scene just to ensure my obedience to his commands."

"I have my orders, sir."

Guerrand's eyes narrowed with fury. Angry enough to throw a punch, he made to tear his arm away. Then he caught sight of two more burly servants, eyes on him as they moved through the crowd to reinforce Pytr. Guerrand could not imagine what would cause Cormac to take such measures, but he held himself still against Pytr's grip, turning his eyes to Quinn's closed ones. Do I do you more dishonor by leaving you reluctantly or brawling before your bier? It did not take Guerrand long to decide that the solemnity of the occasion could not be shattered. He silently promised Quinn's still form that he would return as soon as possible.

"I'll go now, Pytr, but you'll regret your tactics." Guerrand would not be escorted like a damned prisoner. He gave one last vicious shake of his arm. Pytr's hand flew free. Guerrand settled his shoulders and set off for the door ahead of the unrepentant servant.

Behind the grate, Kirah gave a silent cry of anguish as she sank her face into her filthy hands. She had failed Guerrand. The young girl who had already given over so many to death knew in her bones that she was witnessing the loss of her second brother in three days.

Chapter Three

Seated in a merlon, his back against a crenel, Guerrand stared blankly at the book propped against his bent knees. "So, what do you think I should do, Zagarus?" he asked his companion on the southern ramparts of Castle DiThon. The view, looking out over the strait of Ergoth, was breathtaking, but today Guerrand scarcely saw the sea.

You're asking me? I'm a sea gull, remember?

The bird's squawk echoed directly inside Guerrand's head. He looked up from the book. "Who else can I ask? Kirah has told me what she thinks." He sighed. He'd had one conversation with his sister since the viewing. They'd disagreed about running away, and Kirah hadn't spoken to him since. "Besides, Zagarus, you're not an ordinary sea gull."

You don't have to tell me that! snapped the gull. I'm a hooded, black-backed Ergothian sea gull, the largest, most strikingly beautiful of all seabirds.

Guerrand's lids drooped slowly at the gull's modest assessment. Zagarus was impressive to look at. His head was brown-black in a diagonal from the base of his small skull to his throat. His entire underside, save for his yellow legs, was snow-white. Edged with a mere sliver of white, his wings and back were the purest black. "I meant that you're my familiar."

Zagarus screeched aloud, a harsh, deep "kyeow." In the silent language of familiars, he said, *How well I know my servitude.*

"You know," said Guerrand slyly, "I don't believe familiars are supposed to be so ill-humored. If it were up to me, I might have chosen a sweet-tempered toad—"

Now there's a useful creature, snorted the bird, his flat beak bobbing. *Easily eaten by predators, they do nothing but croak and p—*

"Or," interrupted Guerrand with a chuckle, "some usefully vicious predator, like a hawk."

Trustworthy, to be sure, Zagarus said with a roll of his beady eyes.

"Or a cat."

Too sneaky. Zagarus jumped from a high, flat merlon down to the lower level. *Face it, Guerrand, we're stuck with each other, 'till death do us part,' as they say in magic circles.*

Guerrand laughed again. He'd never tell Zagarus the truth—that he wouldn't have it any other way. If the crotchety sea gull had been a dog, Guerrand would have said his bark was worse than his bite. Zagarus had been Guerrand's companion for some years, since the young would-be wizard had first stumbled upon the incantation for summoning a familiar in one of his father's books. That casting had been his first successful attempt to wield magic.

If I could have chosen my master, said the sea gull, pausing to nibble at an itch beneath one wing, *believe me, it would have been someone who took less than ten years to become a cavalier.*

"You know the reason for that," said Guerrand softly.

Zagarus felt a decidedly uncharacteristic twinge of regret. *We always tease each other, Guerrand. What's wrong with you today?*

Guerrand set down his book and stood, looking vacantly out to sea. "I guess I'm confused and more than a little sensitive these days."

The gull's gaze fell on to the book of tactical combat Guerrand had been reading. *Confused? It looks like you've already made your decision.*

Guerrand's eyes filled with anguish. "The whole situation is so tangled, I can hardly sort through it sometimes. What I know is this: Cormac has vowed to throw me out if I refuse. For myself, rank poverty doesn't concern me overmuch, but Kirah would insist on going with me, and I have no means of supporting us. I won't have her picking pockets in Gwynned."

Guerrand rubbed his face wearily. "There is also the question of family honor." He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his breeches and began to pace. "The family needs me. How can I *not* agree to Cormac's ultimatum? I am honor bound to help the family."

Even if you're not responsible for its decline?

Guerrand's dark head bobbed. "It must be hard, perhaps impossible, for a sea gull to

understand family loyalty. You leave your clutch mates at a tender age and never see them again." The human knew from the silence that he was right.

Explain to me once more why it's so important for Cormac to get this land in the dowry.

Guerrand shrugged. "Part of it, I guess, is pride. He gave over Stonecliff once, and he doesn't want to let it slip through his grasp again. Beyond that, the land is very valuable for its position at the mouth of the river."

So he's marrying you off for land.

Guerrand scowled. "Now you sound like Kirah. The Berwick's are tremendously wealthy. Though part of the bargain is that I become a full-fledged knight, I'll likely never have to raise a sword thereafter. I'll be joining the Berwick's family business as an officer at one of their trading stations somewhere. I should think of it as gaining comfort and an opportunity to travel."

Now you sound like Cormac.

There was a stony silence as both realized the truth of that.

What happens to me? asked Zagarus, breaking the silence at last.

Surprised by the question, Guerrand turned to look at the bird. "Why, you'll come with me, of course. You well know the reality about familiars. We'd both probably die if we were separated for more than a few days."

So I'm to live inland.

Guerrand looked exasperated. "Hillfort is on the river. It's a major inland port. Besides, it hasn't been decided where we'll live, but all the Berwick holdings, by necessity, are near ports." His glance traveled the outline of the grim castle. "I'd be happy enough to get away from here, though."

Zagarus abruptly squawked and flapped into the air to perch atop the roof of the keep. Guerrand spun around quickly and saw Milford, Cormac's weapon master and Guerrand's tutor in the fine art of hacking people to bits. Had the man heard him speaking aloud to his familiar? Guerrand swore silently to himself, irritated that Cormac chose this time to dispatch his man for a lesson. But there was no escaping Milford now.

The burly, bearded warrior planted himself in front of Guerrand. "It's a fine view from here, young squire, but you can't sit about enjoying the air all day. You've got a piece of work ahead if you're to wear a cavalier's sword before your wedding."

So Cormac is already spreading the word, even before I've given him an official response, Guerrand thought. He had bent to Cormac's will for so long that Guerrand knew he should have expected it. With a feeling of defeat he could not shake, Guerrand dutifully stood and followed the veteran.

Guerrand was in an uncharacteristically foul mood. He kicked a large stone in the road that led to Thonvil. First he'd had a miserable session with Milford, and had seemed unable to fend off the easiest of blows. He'd actually been grateful when the session came to a premature end by a summons from Rietta.

Unbelievably, things took a downturn from there.

He was on his way to the silversmith's. Rietta had taken it upon herself to order a wedding present from him to Ingrid, his "intended." If that wasn't bad enough, he hadn't the money to pay for it.

This ploy was a common trick of Rietta's. She would commission some piece of work from a local craftsman. It was considered quite an honor to be doing work for the lord or his lady. She would send a servant to retrieve the piece, with a promise that the bill would be paid the first of the month. The first would come and go without an exchange of money.

Occasionally a merchant would send a bill to the castle, but it was always ignored. The more aggressive ones would journey in person to the castle, only to be turned away at the door and never used again, a bit of a mixed blessing. The merchants didn't talk about it among themselves, for the shame, and for fear that Rietta would somehow persuade Cormac to shut down their businesses.

Guerrand knew the ploy too well. Several merchants had confided in him, knowing they could trust the lord's brother. Some even hoped he might be able to help them, but Guerrand was certain that Rietta would only deny blame, and Cormac cared too little for the welfare of the villagers to intervene.

Why does it have to be Wilor? Guerrand thought. He had known the silversmith as long as he'd known anyone. Wilor and Rejik DiThon had been of an age. Unlike Cormac, Rejik had treated his subjects with respect and even befriended many of them. Both men had told Guerrand stories of their youthful exploits.

He hated that he was being forced to participate in a scheme he felt powerless to stop. At first when Rietta had asked him to go to the silversmith's he had refused, insisting that if she wanted the trinket, she should go herself or send a servant.

"You're not showing the proper gratitude for my thoughtfulness, Guerrand," Rietta had said. "Placing an order is one thing. However, it would be most unseemly for the lady of the castle to be seen in the village, purchasing items like a common woman. What's more," she had sniffed, "I have no servants to spare, what with the preparations for your wedding. All you have to do is show up for the ceremony. The least you can do is help out in this small way."

In the end, Guerrand agreed to go so that he could admit to Wilor the silversmith that he had no money, but he would pay him in full after his marriage.

Guerrand snorted now, remembering her words. Yes, all I have to do is be married to the Bucker Princess for a lifetime, such a small thing for the family. She and Cormac, despite their fighting, are well suited, he thought.

The day was warm, hot even, and far too moist. Guerrand's skintight hose clung to his bony legs, made sweat run down his thighs in tiny rivulets. He'd never cared much about his attire; clothes never seemed to fit him very well anyway. He was all knobby bones and strange angles. He particularly hated hose, far preferring the baggier trousers worn by the lower classes—and by him until he'd agreed to be married.

"You're nobility, Guerrand," Cormac had said, tossing him an armful of new, expensive-looking clothing. "If you can't act the part, the least you can do is look like a lord and a cavalier. Rietta went to a great deal of trouble on your behalf for these clothes."

Not half as much as the unpaid tailor, Guerrand mused. He shuddered now to think of the amount of coin Rietta had cheated from some unfortunate workman, probably Bartholamin, whose shop stood next to the mill. Guerrand unconsciously circumvented that part of town on his way to the silversmith's.

Winding his way along the twisted streets between the thatched houses and gardens, Guerrand was surprised at the number of villagers still wearing mourning clothes. He began to feel very self-conscious, as he and everyone else at the castle had ended their outward mourning the day before, at Rietta's order. She felt it was inappropriate to prepare for a wedding while shrouds still hung in the castle. Yet these townsfolk still grieved for his brother. Perhaps they understood better what had been lost.

Guerrand knew the way to Wilor's too well these days. He'd been there just a week before to help retrieve the impossibly heavy, elaborately decorated casket cover for Quinn. Hammered into the likeness of his brother, the beauty of the silver cover would have taken Guerrand's breath away if its necessity hadn't brought such sorrow.

Wilor didn't need a sign to advertise his product; the heavy door bearing its silver unicorn signified Wilor's trade and set his stall apart from the much more practical doors of the other merchants. Next to the door, a pair of shutters were opened up and down. Serving as an awning, the upper shutter was supported by two posts. A display counter by day, the lower shutter dropped down to rest on two short legs.

Guerrand could see Wilor's wife at a workbench inside the shop, polishing some recent pieces of work with a tan scrap of chamois. Guerrand counted eleven anvils of various size about the modest, hazy shop. Next to a small furnace, one of Wilor's two apprentices held a glowing piece of metal on an anvil, while the master hammered it with incredible speed and accuracy, never once

missing the metal. The other young apprentice, his face red and glowing with sweat, held a crucible of softened silver in the furnace with a long pair of tongs, waiting for Wilor's practiced hammer.

Guerrand tugged at the ornate door and slipped into the stiflingly hot shop. Wilor looked up from his anvil and smiled at Guerrand. Sweat ran down his beet-red face, detouring around his upturned lips.

Wilor was a short but sturdy man who had developed immense strength from his vigorous life. His hairline had receded to the midpoint of his scalp, as if to get away from the ever-present heat of the furnace. The thick, red forearms exposed below his rolled sleeves took on a gruesome sheen that always reminded Guerrand of the film that formed over the fatty sections of roasted meat. What teeth Wilor still possessed looked white against the cooked expanse of his face. Whatever his troubles, Guerrand was instantly reminded that a tradesman's life was far harder than his. He was annoyed anew at a society that allowed Rietta to indulge in common thievery.

Guerrand would have been surprised to read the returned pity in the smith's mind at the moment. Guerrand, his sister Kirah, and their dead brother Quinn were too good for their family, thought the smith. Guerrand!" he cried, stepping forward to heartily clap him on the shoulder. "How are you holding up, lad?"

"Well enough, Wilor," said Guerrand with a smile more rueful than he realized. "What with the wedding preparations, we haven't had much time to think of other things."

"I've been wanting to tell you how sorry we all were about Quinn." The old smith's salt-and-pepper head shook sadly. "A finer lad you'd be hard-pressed to find."

"Thank you," Guerrand said softly, his head bowed slightly at the tribute. "I've been wanting to talk to you as well. About that coffin cover you made... It was... incredible. There's no one who can fashion metal like you, Wilor."

Wilor chuckled, his flush of pleasure unnoticeable in the ruddy, round face. "I know what you're here for today." Wilor rushed over to his wife, who was still polishing pieces of jewelry and several chalices. He held out his hand; she knew just what he was looking for. Wilor came back and unfurled his fingers. In his moist, fleshy palm lay the most exquisite piece of craftsmanship Guerrand had ever seen. Wilor smiled at the young man's indrawn breath.

"Do you like it?"

"Like it?" exclaimed Guerrand. "It's far too good for Ingr—for me," he quickly amended.

Ingrid's flaws would only be accentuated next to this exquisite necklace. The pendant was in the shape of a swooping falcon. Beneath it, a crescent moon was suspended by nearly invisible silver strands, so that the moon seemed to be floating by itself. The whole thing shone with the pale luster of moonlight.

"I took some liberties with the design," explained Wilor. "I hope Lady DiThon won't mind overmuch. She wanted the moon to be full and for the birdie to be attached to it solidlike, but I thought that would spoil the delicateness of it, don't you see. Other than them things, it's mainly the same as Lady DiThon requested."

"Don't worry, I won't let Rietta say a word against it," vowed Guerrand. He looked intently at Wilor. "That brings me to what I wanted to speak to you about. Have you been paid for the... for the work you did for Quinn?"

He knew the answer before he saw Wilor's shaggy head shake. "I'll see that you are, as well as for this stunning necklace, after the wedding." Guerrand flushed with embarrassment. "I wish I could pay you now, Wilor, but, well, I just can't." His voice trailed off. They both knew he had no funds of his own under Cormac.

Wilor's expression contained both relief and pity. "The promise of Rejik DiThon's second son will always be good enough for me." With a sly wink, he took the necklace from Guerrand's hand. "Marthe will wrap this securely for you. I'll not have my handiwork marred before it's delivered to the bride."

Guerrand smiled his thanks, but could not suppress a slight shudder at Wilor's last word. While Wilor and Marthe fussed over wrapping the gift Rietta would insist on rewrapping, the young man looked at Wilor's display of uncommissioned pieces available for sale. There were delicate

necklaces, heavy armbands in the shape of intertwined serpents, brooches, and cloak fasteners. He picked up a dagger pommel in the shape of a boar's head.

"He has a way with metal, has he not?"

Guerrand jumped at the sound of the strange, yet somehow familiar, voice at his shoulder. He could hide neither his surprise nor his dismay at the sight of the man he'd last encountered outside Cormac's study.

Shorter and thicker than Guerrand, the mage was clothed entirely in blood-red robes from neck to booted feet. In the darkness of the keep's hallway, Guerrand hadn't noticed how deeply pocked was the man's face; nature had not been kind to him, nor likely his peers in adolescence. His complexion was ruddy, only several shades lighter than his robe; the skin hung loose upon the bones. The irises of his eyes were so large and dark they seemed to blot out any white, making them look as beady as a bird's. Above them were two thick, black, short, straight brows, like dashes. His chin was covered with the small, perfect triangle of a goatee. His pearl-shaped head was shaved smooth, though a shadowy stubble ringed his head in a perfect wreath.

"It's amazing what he's able to accomplish through skill and craft alone." Thin, tapered fingers with inch-long, red-tipped nails took the pommel from Guerrand's sweaty palm. "One can only imagine what Wilor could make if he could wield the powers we do."

The mage's voice was almost too soft for even Guerrand to hear. Still, the youth looked about the shop anxiously. "I don't know what you mean—I know nothing about magic," he hissed.

The mage's thick eyebrows raised. "Strange that you should assume I was speaking of magic."

Guerrand flushed. He hadn't meant to sound defensive. He knew he shouldn't be speaking to the mage at all. Guerrand looked toward Wilor and frowned. The smith and his wife were still fussing over his package. "I've some other errands to run, Wilor," he called, heading for the door before the smith could respond. "I'll just stop back later."

"I hear congratulations are in order, Guerrand," the mage pressed.

The young man paused long enough to say, "Thank you."

"You must be sorry to give up your dreams of magic to become a knight. I expect you're not very good at soldiering."

Guerrand whirled on the mage, his face livid. "I don't know who you are or why you think you know so much about me, but you're wrong."

"About you being a lackluster cavalier?" The mage shook his shaved head mildly. "I don't think so."

"You know what I'm talking about!"

"Yes, but do you?"

The conversation was quickly getting out of control. Guerrand had to end it. The apprentices were starting to take notice. "If I was interested in speaking with you, which I'm not, I couldn't do it here in the middle of a village shop."

"Yes, your brother is not enamored of mages, is he? Word would surely get back to him." He tapped his whiskered chin in thought. "That's easily taken care of." The mage snapped his finger. In the blink of an eye, Wilor, his wife, and the apprentices all fell absolutely still, as if frozen in time. With a loud crash, the awnings dropped and slammed closed, cutting off the view to the street. A length of wood banged down, bolting both the door and the awnings from the inside.

"There," said the mage with satisfaction. "That ought to keep the gossips at bay for a while."

Guerrand was intrigued and annoyed at the same time. But he was more intrigued. "How did you do that?"

"Don't be coy with me, Guerrand. I'm quite certain you know the answer." He replaced the pommel in the empty space on the shelf. "You're capable of mastering such simple spells, if you haven't already."

Guerrand's eyes narrowed. "How do you know so much about me—and why?"

The mage's eyebrows raised in obvious amusement. "Those are two entirely different questions. Which would you have me answer first?"

Guerrand shrugged, feeling decidedly uncomfortable. "I guess you've used magic to learn

about me. What I can't figure out is why."

"As you wish." He looked about the small, hot shop with undisguised disgust and wiped his brow on a long, red cuff. "Why do people work in such unpleasant conditions, when there is magic? But then, one might ask why, when there is magic, they work at all."

"Magic can't do everything!" spat Guerrand, feeling strangely defensive for the honest shopkeepers of Thonvil.

"Can't it?" The mage looked surprised, as if the possibility had never occurred to him. Brushing his hands together, he said, "Well, if we're to converse here, let's be comfortable."

With a mumbled word and a wave of his hand, the fire in the furnace dropped away to the tiniest of glows and a cool, refreshing breeze wafted through the shop. Reflexively Guerrand looked back over his shoulder. The door and shutters were still closed and barred, yet the breeze was unmistakably coming from that direction. At the same time, a bench slid out from beneath one of Wilor's apprentices and skittered across the floor to where the two men stood. The apprentice hung in the air in an impossible posture, suspended over nothing.

The magic only added to Guerrand's discomfort. He gave a glance to the mannequin-stiff silversmith and his wife, their expressions unchanged. He relaxed slightly and lowered himself onto the bench opposite the mage.

"I feel at a disadvantage in more ways than one. I don't even know your name."

"Belize."

Guerrand waited for him to continue, but the mage simply sat, staring over steepled fingernails. "All right, I'll ask again. Why have you sought me out? What do you want from me?" His eyes narrowed still further as a dark thought dawned on him. "Do you mean to blackmail me, to tell my brother I secretly practice magic?" Guerrand leaned forward angrily. "If so, I'll simply deny it! You'll get nothing from me!"

The mage threw back his head and laughed, a hideous, hiccupping sound, as if his throat were unused to the activity. "That's too absurd! I know the DiThons are penniless. As if I needed coin."

"Then why were you speaking to Cormac?"

Instantly, the mage's expression turned angry-black. "That was other business. Do not speak of it again."

"Let's stop boxing," said Guerrand. "Just tell me, what do you want from me?"

"What I want *for* you would be a more accurate question."

Gritting his teeth, Guerrand willed patience. After an interminable amount of time, it paid off.

"You must go to the Tower of Wayreth."

Guerrand could not have been more stunned by the pronouncement. He knew the place to which Belize referred. What hopeful mage did not? In order to learn any advanced magic, one had to go to Wayreth, enter his name on the roll of apprentices, and eventually take the Test. It was rumored to be dangerous. Yet, following any other path branded a mage as an outlaw who could be hunted and destroyed with the endorsement of a ruling council of mages. Once, years ago, Guerrand had considered making the trip. That was when he still thought there was a chance he might study in Gwynned. That hope had long since died.

"Now *you're* being absurd," said Guerrand. At that moment, he didn't care if Belize struck him dead for his impudence.

But the mage was unmoved by the response. "My... observations tell me you have learned as much as you can without a proper master."

"Do you think so?" The long overdue praise dropped the last vestiges of Guerrand's guard, even made him overlook the intrusion of being the subject of Belize's scrutiny. He could scarcely keep the butterflies of excitement from fluttering in his chest. He leaned forward eagerly. "I haven't had a proper teacher, or any, even." He laughed giddily. "I've taught myself from several spellbooks I found in my father's library, before he died. Cormac scarcely reads—he never even knew they were there."

"It's not uncommon for hopeful mages to come to the tower with very little training. Few have learned as much as you, however. But if you go to Wayreth, you'll be apprenticed to a learned mage

who would teach you more than you can even imagine now."

Belize was speaking as if the deed were as good as done! Guerrand had seen apprentices all his life, like those here in Wilor's shop. As a squire, he was an apprentice of sorts. But he knew little about magical apprenticeship, and even less about the Test.

"What's the Test like?" he asked, now that he had the chance to learn of it. "Is it as dangerous as I've heard? Long? Costly?"

Chuckling, Belize held up his hands as if to fend off the barrage of questions. "Slow down. First, the Test is different for everyone, tailored to the entrant. Second, it is always difficult. Third, it can last for days, or minutes, depending on the ability of the mage. Fourth, the cost is only that the mage must pledge his life to magic."

"Mages have passed the Test in minutes?"

"I did not say they passed."

Guerrand looked for Belize to continue, but the mage did not. "What happens to those who fail?"

"Failure means death."

Guerrand blinked. "Do many fail?"

"Only the weak and unready."

Guerrand stood to pace around his chair. "Why me?"

"You might think of me as a recruiter," said Belize. "I seek to increase the role and status of magic in the world by finding and nurturing worthwhile mages. It is my way of giving something back to the art that has been my entire life. And I have some influence with the council. I could certainly put in a good word for you."

"Do you take apprentices?"

Belize responded with no hint of apology. "No, I'm not well suited to it. I have many other responsibilities, and I spend too much time ... traveling."

Guerrand was not sure what he had expected, but he felt somehow let down, awkward for having asked. "Well, then," he stumbled, "where and when must I go to apprentice to a learned mage?"

"Immediately."

"You mean immediately after my wedding."

"I mean today—tomorrow at the latest."

The shock on Guerrand's face was clear. "But that's impossible!" he gasped. "You know I'm to be wed in four days. Surely it can wait until after that."

"You will be starting a completely new life, and the life you now live will be wiped away. As an apprentice, you would have no way to support a wife and no time to spend with her. From what I've heard of your betrothed, she would not even consider working in a scullery to pay her own way. And what would be the point of marrying, just so you could immediately abandon your new wife?" A slight smile creased Belize's face. "Besides, I doubt your brother Cormac would stand for that."

"As for your family," Belize continued, folding his arms across his chest, "think how much more valuable to them you might be, returning home as a skilled wielder of magic. Marrying this woman from Hillfort will ease your brother's problems only temporarily. If you marry for Cormac's sake, are you providing him with a permanent solution or simply curing a symptom? Like a tourniquet around the neck of a beheaded man."

Guerrand winced at the inevitable image. "You know nothing of Cormac's problems!"

Belize arched a thick brow. "Do you?"

Guerrand sighed. "So you're telling me that I would do my family a greater service by backing out of my pledge to marry?"

"I've said only that you should go to Wayreth and become apprenticed to a real master. It is the only way you will advance."

The mage leaned forward, putting his face quite close to Guerrand's. "The Tower of Wayreth is a powerfully enchanted place. It is in the southwestern forests of the Qualinesti elves, but it can be found only by those who have been specifically invited. I am inviting you. That is a privilege

that will not last indefinitely, and it may not be extended again." Belize paused, expressionless, and sat back. "But your life path is for you to choose. Many men are happy as merchants."

Guerrand could see easily what Belize was doing, and he resented it. Belize had reawakened a hope that Guerrand had long ago suppressed. Yet, it was all as impossibly far from his grasp as ever—farther, even. Cormac would never release him from the agreement to marry, and he could not simply slip away afterward or take Ingrid along.

Guerrand felt crushed, as if he had reached the mountaintop only to slip and fall all the way back to the valley. He had felt the exhilaration, but it could never really be his. "Thank you for your interest in me, Belize, but what you suggest is not possible." He stood, his head hanging.

"Nothing is impossible where magic is concerned," said Belize. "You simply have to open your eyes to the possibilities."

Depressed and confused, Guerrand waved away the mage's latest riddle. "This affects too many people for me to decide now, by myself."

Instantly, Belize's ruddy face darkened. He stood abruptly, knocking over the bench. "You must discuss this with no one! Especially not your family. Use your head!" He turned and strode impatiently into the shop, then spun back to Guerrand. "Your brother would actively prevent you from going. For your own sake, talk to no one."

Guerrand turned to leave, then remembered the necklace. He moved to take the wrapped package from the frozen hands of Marthe. The delicate present to his bride-to-be felt like a lead weight. "Good day," Guerrand mumbled as he passed Belize on the way to the still-barred door.

Belize bowed his shaved head curtly. "I would like to lighten your mood by adding a gift of my own, to show you that I mean you only good fortune. This is for you and, indirectly, your family, not your intended."

"That's not necessary—" Guerrand interrupted, only to be cut off himself.

"You're not interested in justice for your murdered brother?"

Guerrand stopped in his tracks. "You can't know how to find those bandits." His frown deepened, and he turned slowly. "Unless—"

"You're a suspicious lad, aren't you?" Belize seemed amused. "No, I'm not secretly the ringleader of a band of cutthroats. I have far more interesting ways to spend my time." The mage pulled something from the depths of his red robe and held it up to the flickering light. A palm-sized fragment of mirror caught a beam shining through the smoke hole and reflected a shaft of light painfully into Guerrand's eyes.

"Magical glass. It's a useful little item, one that I'm sure any master wizard could acquaint you with. It will show you the location of your brother's killers."

"Could it be true?" wondered Guerrand. Even if it was, how could he tell Cormac where the robbers were, without revealing where he'd gotten the information? If Guerrand said someone in the village gave him a tip, Cormac would either discount it as rumor or demand Guerrand produce the informants. As if impatient, the mirror glinted in Guerrand's eye again.

He had to look, if only for Quinn.

Belize tipped the mirror slightly toward Guerrand, to afford him a better view. At first he saw only the reflection of his own eyes and nose in the small glass. He stared, but the image didn't change.

Embarrassed, Guerrand finally asked, "Do I have to say or do something special? It doesn't seem to be working."

"Just concentrate," Belize murmured. "Concentrate on your memory of your brother."

Guerrand renewed his effort, this time trying to think of nothing but Quinn as he looked into the mirror. He envisioned his brother as he had last seen him alive, two years before, wearing his gleaming armor and sitting astride his gaily decorated horse as he set out for war, adventure, and plunder. Slowly an image swirled in the mirror, forming a picture of a small campsite. Three vague figures sat around a low, smokeless fire, eating provisions or tending their weapons. He recognized the spot as a pleasant hilltop in the woods, only a few leagues from Thonvil. But as his thoughts strayed from Quinn, the vision swirled away.

"H-how do I know they're really the ones who killed Quinn?"

Belize slipped the small mirror into Guerrand's palm. "I've commanded it to continue showing you where they are. Use it to track them down and get proof. Give it to someone else if you're afraid.

"And now, I bid you farewell." With a quick wave of his arms, Belize released the spells on the shop and its occupants. In that one gesture, the breeze stopped, the fire came back to life, the awnings and doors flew open, and Wilor, his wife, and apprentices began to move again. Belize was gone.

Wilor looked slightly puzzled until he saw the package in Guerrand's hands. "There it is! Strange, I don't remember handing it to you." He shook his head and smiled to himself. "Must be getting old." With that, Wilor returned to the apprentice and the anvil to finish the work he'd been at when Guerrand arrived.

As Guerrand hurried from the shop, he couldn't decide which item in his hands weighed him down more, the mirror or the wedding present.

Chapter Four

"What am I doing?" Kirah heard Guerrand mumble. Yes, what on Krynn *was* Guerrand doing, she wondered from her hiding place behind a haystack in the stable. It was all very mysterious. Why was Guerrand, who didn't even like horses, saddling one in the middle of the night?

Guerrand had seemed unusually distant this afternoon. Though they weren't exactly speaking, she'd watched him through the tunnels, seen that he'd gone to the village that afternoon to retrieve a trinket for his bride. Hoping that there was still a chance she could talk him into running away, she'd hidden in the tunnel outside his room earlier. She'd been trying to screw up the courage to go in and make peace with him, when he had launched into a very mysterious sequence of activities.

First, he donned his leather and mail armor, then, apparently changing his mind, took it off again, very thoughtfully. Next he pulled on a baggy tunic and trousers and a pair of stiff, high boots. Dressed, he recited some quick prayers to Habbakuk, took his sword and dagger down from the wall, and slipped out the door.

Intrigued, Kirah had followed him, creeping around in darkened corners, slipping silently down the staircase after him. The keep was dimly lit, everyone else asleep, or at least retired for the night. She'd been more than a little surprised to find that the stable was his destination. Now Kirah settled back to watch her brother struggle the headstall of a bridle over the horse's head and set the bit in its mouth.

"I must be crazy," Guerrand growled to himself, "but what else can I do?" With a soul-felt grunt, he tossed the saddle over the roan's back. Once the saddle was cinched in place, he hung a small, round shield from the pommel and buckled on his swordbelt and dagger.

The sword looked as proper on Guerrand as a third arm, mused Kirah. Her brother was no knight, despite his best efforts and Cormac's insistence. Where in the Abyss was he going in the middle of the night with weapons? Worse still, how was she to follow with him on horseback? Kirah was puzzling through that while Guerrand put the finishing touches on his gear and then swung lightly up onto the horse.

Suddenly Guerrand fell still in the saddle. His eyes misted over and closed gently. Grasping his right eyelashes between thumb and forefinger, he gave a tug. Guerrand pulled from his pouch a sticky wad of gum into which he pressed the eyelashes. The young girl's heart constricted. She alone in Castle DiThon, save Zagarus the sea gull, recognized when Guerrand was about to cast a spell. She had no idea what it would be, but if the spell took him away from the stables, she might never know.

Watching her brother closely, guessing when he'd progressed too far to halt the spell, Kirah silently sprang from her place behind the bales and launched herself onto the rump of the startled horse. Guerrand and the horse beneath them both disappeared from her sight, though she could feel them. Looking for her own arms, she realized she couldn't see herself, either!

"What—who's there?" squealed a startled Guerrand.

Before Kirah could respond, she became disoriented and nearly toppled from the horse. Her spindly young arms flailed and finally latched around Guerrand's waist.

"Kirah?" he demanded. "In the name of Habbakuk, what are you doing here?"

For once in her young life, Kirah didn't know how to answer. She'd never heard Guerrand sound so angry. "I—I'm sorry, Rand. I didn't mean to startle you," she said as meekly as she was capable. "I was worried about you and was simply trying to find out what *you're* doing."

"Don't use that innocent, little-lost-girl tone on me," Guerrand snarled. "You have no idea what you may have done by interrupting me."

"Then why don't you just tell me. Where are you going? Why the invisibility spell?"

"I should dump you off here," Guerrand muttered, ignoring her questions. He shifted in the saddle. "In fact I think I'll do just that. It would serve you right."

"If you do, I'll tell the entire keep you turned yourself invisible and ran off into the night!"

"You wouldn't dare!" Guerrand gasped. He thought it unlikely Kirah would betray him, and

yet she *was* willful enough to suggest the blackmail. Guerrand twisted around painfully to look in the direction of her voice, though he couldn't see her, either. "Someone should have spanked you years ago, Kirah."

"They tried. It didn't help." Kirah's voice had regained its normal lilt, edged with smugness. "So, are you going to tell me what you're up to or not?"

Frustration burned behind his eyes. He'd slipped away without telling Zagarus of his plans, because he knew the bird would somehow let them slip to Kirah. And here he still had to deal with his wayward sister. He loved Kirah too well to just dump her, unprotected, in the dark and run, though he was annoyed enough with her to do just that. She deserved worse. The snoopy little scamp deserved to be dipped in honey and tied to a tree. She had no idea how she was wasting precious time and fouling up his plans. Yet, she could be reasoned with. Perhaps if she knew what she was ruining, she'd see the wisdom of returning quietly.

"Please, Kirah, don't ask any more questions," he pleaded softly. "For once, just do as I ask and go home."

"You're up to something strange, Guerrand DiThon, and I intend to know what it is." Kirah locked her spindly arms more tightly around his waist.

Guerrand laughed, despite himself. "I wish I could stay angry with you. You give me ample opportunity." He fell serious. "I want to get away from the castle before anyone else overhears us. I'll tell you then." With that, Guerrand spurred his roan out of the stable and into the moonlit night, holding fast to the reins.

Kirah clutched her brother's waist and snuggled her face into the soft fabric of the tunic on his back. She was delighted with herself, thrilled with the adventure of the moment. Solinari was nearly full, but hidden behind thin clouds that glowed a ghostly blue-black where the bright orb tried to shine through them. The crashing sea and the horse's hooves created a thrilling rhythm as they galloped away from the darkened castle and across the damp, earthy moor.

Guerrand abruptly pulled the horse to a dead stop and without preamble announced, "I'm going to find the men who killed Quinn."

Kirah gasped. "How?"

Guerrand reached into the cuff of his gauntlet and a small fragment of mirror simply appeared before him, as if suspended in air.

"What's that?" she breathed.

"Someone in the village gave me this mirror. It can reveal the location of Quinn's slayers," he explained vaguely.

"Someone?" she repeated with a squeal. "Who in Thonvil would have anything magical, let alone a mirror that knows the whereabouts of Quinn's killers? That just doesn't make sense, Rand."

Guerrand sighed heavily. Obviously Kirah wasn't going to let him off easily. "He was a mage, a stranger here, but he seemed genuine. His spells were incredible—" Guerrand quieted abruptly. Belize had warned him to tell no one of their discussion about leaving for the Tower of High Sorcery. For Kirah's sake, he would mention nothing of that. Besides, he knew it would only get her talking again about running away.

"So what was a mage doing in Thonvil? And why did he give this mirror to you instead of Cormac?"

"I suspect that he tried, but you know Cormac and magic." Guerrand found himself thinking again about the argument between Belize and Cormac, about the timing. They hadn't learned yet of Quinn's death. Belize and Cormac couldn't have been speaking about that, then. Kirah's chatter pulled him away from his musings.

"How do you know the mirror can do what he says? Maybe this mage is just trying to get you into trouble by sending you on a merry chase."

"That's why I didn't tell Cormac. I couldn't very well walk up to him and say, 'See what a mage gave me?' could I?" Guerrand felt her curious fingers on the mirror.

He instinctively jerked it away and gently slipped the palm-sized glass back into the safety of the loose cuff of his left gauntlet.

"If you want to know the truth, I can't shake the feeling that I've let Quinn down." He thought of his vow to stay near Quinn, broken to prevent a dishonorable brawl before his brother's bier. He didn't mention the painful memory to Kirah, even though guilt over it was the reason for his quest. "I owe it to Quinn to personally follow any lead on his killers."

"You'll eventually have to explain to Cormac how you found them, won't you? Besides, what are you going to do with them? Drag them back to the keep? Kill them?"

Guerrand snorted. "If Quinn and the cavaliers with him couldn't fend them off, I hardly think I'd stand a chance against them. No," he said, "I intend only to retrieve physical evidence of their responsibility for Quinn's death. I'll find some way to tell Cormac when the time comes."

"Now you know everything," he announced, readjusting himself in the saddle. "Surely you can see why you need to go back. I cast the invisibility spell to slip away unnoticed, thinking it would last until I got to where I was going. I've already lost precious time, and I've a lot of ground to cover before the sun rises or the men in the mirror move on."

Kirah hugged his waist more tightly. "Then we'd better get moving, hadn't we?"

Guerrand pushed her hands down. "Kirah, don't be absurd! I'm not about to gallop across the countryside to spy on some ruffians with a chit of a girl wearing only her night shift. Even you *must* see how dangerous this is."

"Which is why you need me along," Kirah said brightly. "Besides, what difference does it make what I'm wearing if we're invisible? I could be stark naked for all anyone would know! I won't need weapons since you don't intend to fight them, though that makes me wonder why you're all decked out with your best weapons. Still, you obviously need my eyes. I notice details better than you. I won't take no for an answer. You know I won't."

"This is blackmail."

"For your own good. Now, kick this horse into a gallop and don't waste any more of our time."

"Don't push your luck by getting imperious, Kirah," Guerrand said stiffly. "I don't think you realize how furious I am with you."

"You know you can't stay mad at me, Rand. We always forgive each other."

Kirah was right about that. They had only each other. "Against my better judgment, I'll let you come along. Just remember, keep quiet and, for once, do what I say, when I say it."

Kirah could scarcely contain her pleasure at the victory. "Just think. This may be our last adventure before you're an old married man."

"I don't like adventure," Guerrand snapped.

They rode east, following the coast. Though the moonlight was bright when it broke through the clouds, neither horse, man, nor girl cast a shadow. Clouds of dirt kicked up by invisible hooves revealed their course across the moor.

Before long Guerrand sighted his destination in the distance, could feel the ground beneath them rising, marking the end of flat DiThon land and the beginning of sloping Berwick land. In the blue light of the nearly full moon two ancient, carved pillars dominated the night sky. Stonecliff. They seemed to hang upon the cliff face, like joint figureheads on a ship.

The young mage had been here only twice in his memory, many years ago, before the property had been sold to Anton Berwick. It would belong to the DiThons again in just four days. Three now, he corrected himself with another glance at Solinari.

Guerrand knew from rumor that most people were uneasy when near the two stone pillars perched in the clearing at the top of the bluff. Everyone believed it was a magical place. Perhaps because of that, Guerrand found the spot intriguing. The plinths were massive and tall, carved with images of grinning and sneering faces and symbols whose meaning no one seemed to know. Superstitious folk thought the symbols were missives to evil gods, and Cormac in particular reviled the carved columns as an affront to all decent deities. But Guerrand sensed their potency was untainted by human emotion or ambition; Stonecliff's power was of Krynn itself, natural and uncorrupted.

Sensing Guerrand's thoughts, Kirah said softly, "You know Cormac is going to tear down the

pillars once he gets his hands on the land again."

"How do you know that?" he snapped.

"How do I know anything? By listening in tunnels," she said simply "It's the truth, Rand. I heard him tell Rietta. It makes sense, given his hatred of magic. Besides, I'll bet he's doing it to make room for the fortress."

"What fortress?"

"The one he's going to build as a tollbooth to tax the ships that travel to Hillfort on the river just beyond Stonecliff, the new boundary between Berwick and DiThon land."

"But most of those are Berwick's ships! Cormac would be taxing the very person who gave him the land!"

"And your father-in-law," Kirah added smugly. "Despicable, isn't it?"

Guerrand shook his head slowly. "I can scarcely believe it, even of Cormac."

"Ask him!"

The young man clapped his hands to his ears. "I will, but I can't think about that now, Kirah. Right now I have to think about Quinn's killers."

"Do you know where these men are?" she asked. "I couldn't see anything in the mirror."

Guerrand knew exactly where they were. He'd been studying the mirror constantly for the half day he'd had it. He now pondered the irony of the men's location. "Up there." Though Kirah couldn't see him point, his meaning was obvious.

"They're hiding out at Stonecliff?" she gasped.

For an answer, Guerrand pulled out the mirror and held it over his shoulder for Kirah to examine. Though the outline of the mirror was invisible, the image it projected hovered in midair before her face. Kirah could see one of the men leaning against a carved pillar three times his height. All three men were seated between the twin columns, a small fire burning at their feet.

Kirah looked away from the mirror, toward the pillars on the hill that ended at a cliff above the sea. She saw firelight flickering between the carved columns. Guerrand was right.

"They sure match the description given by the men who brought Quinn's body back," she whispered. "Awfully gutsy of them to camp so near our home."

"They may have no idea who they murdered," said Guerrand, "or that anyone who cares lives nearby."

"With a magic mirror," giggled Kirah.

"Sshhh!" Guerrand hissed. "For the gods' sake, Kirah, this is no joke. These men killed a fit, heavily armed cavalier and wounded two others. They won't hesitate to do the same to a slip of a girl and a barely competent warrior. They can't see us, but they'll be able to hear us soon, so say nothing, do nothing from here on out."

"Yes, Guerrand," she muttered meekly, properly chastised.

Guerrand, fearing the horse's labored breathing would draw the bandits' attention, reined the creature in on the far side of a cypress tree, some twenty rods from the stone pillars. The horse would become visible as soon as Guerrand moved away from it, but the young mage hoped the branches of the cypress would hide the roan. Now, if he could only similarly stash Kirah. Guerrand slid down quietly and looped the reins around a low branch.

"Kirah," he whispered softly, "I need you to stay here and keep the horse still. You'll both become visible, but you'll be in deep shadow under the cypress."

"You're not going to leave me behind that easily," she said. Guerrand winced. "How am I going to keep a horse quiet—clap a hand over its mouth? It's going to make noise, whether I'm with it or not. You need my eyes up there," she insisted, pointing toward the fire. But then she decided to soften her approach. "I promise I'll be quiet and careful."

Knowing this was neither the time nor the place to argue, Guerrand whispered firmly, "See that you do."

He could hear her slide off the horse, felt her hand groping for his. "You won't be sorry."

"I already am." He searched with one hand for the shield he'd lashed to the horse's saddle, then thought better of it. He was already wearing his sword, and the metal shield would be

cumbersome to carry. He didn't intend to engage the men in battle anyway.

"What exactly are we looking for?" whispered Kirah, straining at his side to be off.

"I've been watching them closely in the mirror since I got it, but I've not seen them holding anything of Quinn's so far. I want to search their packs." Holding her hand firmly in his, Guerrand led her up the grassy hillside. It was difficult to remember that they didn't have to crouch to keep from being seen. His footfalls sounded as loud as thunder to his own ears.

They came to the crest of the hill, well within earshot of the three men. Guerrand could scarcely hear them talking for the hammering of his heart. He had Kirah firmly by the wrist and could feel her own pulse beat rapid-fire under his fingers. Though still invisible, he could not resist the urge to crouch behind a boulder to observe, peering left, while Kirah leaned right.

The men were dirty and poorly dressed, with the look of old soldiers about them. They wore odd and mismatched pieces of armor that bore patches of rust. One of the men was missing an ear; another limped noticeably; the third was a dwarf with a tremendous beard tied into numerous tiny braids.

There *had* to be something of Quinn's here, reasoned Guerrand. He heard a horse whinny nearby. His heart stopped, and then flooded with relief when he spotted three horses illuminated by moonlight, grazing on the far side of the pillars. Their saddlebags lay on the ground near them. Apparently these bandits were too confident to worry about security. Guerrand tugged Kirah's hand and pulled her away from the camp to circle quietly to the other side.

The horses' backs were bare, stripped down for the night. Guerrand's eyes fell on the bags, several paces from the mounts.

"Pick a bag and start searching through it," he whispered. "Quiet now, we don't want to startle the horses. As it is, they'll be able to smell us, so we'll have to move quickly." Kirah started to scamper away. Guerrand's hand reached out at the last second and yanked her back. "Remember, you can't go farther than about four paces from me, or you'll become visible."

"Then hurry up," Kirah hissed impatiently. They moved up to the horses, more quickly than Guerrand liked, but Kirah could not be restrained.

Guerrand knelt by the first bag. Biting the fingers of his right glove, he pulled it off and quickly tossed back the bag's heavy flap. He rummaged almost blindly, pulling out tattered clothing, gloves, cheap jewelry, and a few goblets and other trinkets. They would become invisible only if he tucked them into his clothing, so he held them up to the moonlight for inspection. If any of the items had been Quinn's, there was no marking to prove it. Discouraged, he moved on to the second bag, nearer Kirah.

Hearing noise and smelling human sweat, the horses began to get nervous. Their snorts turned to loud whickers. Guerrand looked anxiously to the men at the firepit between the pillars. They were oblivious so far.

Guerrand looked back to the bag beneath him in time to see a large medallion dangling from a shiny gold chain above the pack Kirah was searching. Though he could not see her, he could tell from the pause that she was peering at it, obviously having trouble placing it.

Sucking in a quick breath, Guerrand knew instantly why it seemed familiar. Quinn had been given the medal by Milford, who had loved Quinn dearly, to mark the day he had officially progressed from squire to cavalier. Quinn had been inordinately proud of the piece, polishing it as regularly as his armor.

Like a river of fire, a rush of rage replaced the numbness Guerrand had felt since Quinn's death. Somehow the futility of his brother's death was made real by seeing Quinn's property in their possession, in a way that seeing his dead body had not. Quinn loved that medallion, would have wanted it on his journey to Habbakuk.

"That's Quinn's!" Guerrand whispered hoarsely. He reached out angrily to snatch it from the air.

What he did was bump the invisible Kirah, knocking her over. "Hey!" she cried without thinking. They both dropped the medallion. The horses whinnied and pawed the air. Guerrand looked anxiously toward the firepit. The men had noticed. The earless one stood and peered through

the gloom in their direction.

"Must be animals rummaging for food in our packs," both Guerrand and Kirah heard him say. The man pulled up the waist of his trousers and began heading their way.

"Come on, Kirah," Guerrand whispered frantically standing to a crouch. "We've got to go, now!"

The man was halfway to them.

Guerrand couldn't see Kirah, but she was on her hands and knees, looking for the medal. "One second. I've got to get Quinn's medallion." She struggled to push the heavy pack aside and look beneath, but it wasn't there. Suddenly the shiny gold coin simultaneously caught the moonlight and her eye in some low scrub between the packs and the horses. "I see it!" she whispered. "The thing really flew."

"Kirah, no!" he gasped, hearing the words too late to stop her or even run nearer. Suddenly, the young girl in the ratty shift blinked into view, as if a light had been turned on her. She, too, instantly knew her mistake; she'd stepped too far from Guerrand.

"It ain't no animal! It's a girl!" brother and sister heard the bandit say. He closed rapidly on Kirah.

Blinking in the light like a cornered deer, Kirah looked left and right for escape. Now clutching the medal in her hand, she darted toward the darkness behind the horses. Anticipating that, the man launched himself in a flying tackle, grabbed her skinny ankles, and dropped her to the ground before him. The maneuver knocked the wind from both of them.

Guerrand felt like he was watching a dream, a very bad dream. Kirah was kicking the man as he tried to pin her to the ground. Guerrand had to do something. His hands went to his sword, but then froze. How could he fight three men, experienced killers, without even a shield for protection? He was invisible for the moment, but Guerrand knew that as soon as he attacked, the fragile spell would be broken and he would appear. It would be suicide for him, and then they would certainly kill Kirah as well.

Yet what else could he do? Guerrand was already walking toward the man who struggled with Kirah before he was conscious of his own resolve to fight. Guerrand glided forward, noiselessly sliding the heavy, well-oiled sword from its scabbard. Silent, invisible, he stood above the man who was on his knees above Kirah and swung the heavy pommel down onto the man's head. It hit with a low *thunk*. The bandit swayed, stunned, but was still conscious. Surprised, Guerrand struck again, harder this time. The sword handle hit with a loud *crack*, and the bandit collapsed immediately, landing on top of Kirah.

"Thanks a lot," she gasped, struggling to wiggle out from underneath the heavy man. "Now you're visible, too." Grinning, she rolled away and rubbed her wrist with one hand, hanging on to the medallion with the other.

Brother and sister were both visible now. Guerrand doubted they could outrun the bandits who were fast approaching. This is a nightmare, he found himself thinking. I'm asleep and having a nightmare.

"Asleep!" he cried aloud. He hadn't time to warn Kirah. Waiting for the bandits to close the distance a bit more, Guerrand stooped down and scraped at the hard soil. He needed dust! A few quick stabs with his sword loosened enough for his purpose. Dropping the blade, he snatched up a handful and tossed it in the air before him.

Kirah succumbed first, being the smallest and nearest. Guerrand saw her legs buckle and her eyes sink shut. Looking up, he saw the steps of the two approaching bandits slow noticeably. First, the limping man yawned and sank to the ground near the bandit Guerrand had clubbed unconscious. The dwarf looked in surprise at his fallen companions, then tumbled, rubbery-legged, next to them, fast asleep.

Guerrand closed his eyes, dropped his face into his hands, and muttered a prayer of thanks to Habbakuk. He knew with certainty in that moment that he could never be a cavalier. He'd heard Quinn speak of the incredible blood-rush brought on by the heat of battle. His brother had said it was thrilling, that nothing compared with it. Looking at the thin trail of blood and the welt rising on

the bandit's scalp, Guerrand was sure he could never learn to enjoy beating someone over the head.

He couldn't remember how long the sleep spell was supposed to last, but he knew it couldn't be long. Guerrand took a loop of strong rope from one of the bandit's saddles. He started to tie up the one nearest him, then decided he'd make better time with help. Using his toe, he nudged Kirah gently in the ribs. She grumbled in her sleep but didn't awaken. He shook her shoulder hard; she mumbled for him to go away. Hating what he knew he had to do, Guerrand raised his hand and slapped her pale cheek, hard. Kirah's eyes blinked open in confusion, and a hand went up to rub her face. Guerrand could see the red imprint of his own fingers.

"What the—?" Kirah sat up stiffly and looked around at the unconscious men.

"I'm sorry, Kirah," said Guerrand, and he was, "but it was the only way to awaken you before the others. I put everyone to sleep with a spell. I'll tell you about it as we tie up these scoundrels. Hurry, now," he said, handing her some rope. "I don't think we want them to wake up before they're securely bound."

"Gods, no." Kirah shuddered. She snatched up the length of rope and began looping it around one of the men, while Guerrand held him up.

"Won't that wake him up?" she asked, worried.

"No, they've got to be roughed up quite a bit before they'll wake up. That's why I had to slap you. Or wait for the spell to wear out, which could happen at any time." He pushed the man's arms behind his back. After Kirah looped them together, he tied a sturdy knot and sliced the rope.

They quickly trussed up the other two. Guerrand saddled the bandits' horses, adding the bags for inspection back at Castle DiThon. Kirah held the horses still, while Guerrand struggled each of the unconscious men onto their stomachs over the horses' backs. He put the wounded man on one horse, and had the other two share one, leaving the third horse for Kirah. He would collect the roan from the cypress for himself.

Reviewing their work, Kirah still looked uneasy. "Let's tie them to the horses, too—just in case they wake up before we get back."

Guerrand complied, feeling a little apprehensive himself. The men most certainly would waken before they reached the castle. Anticipating the abuse they would hurl upon waking and finding themselves trussed, Guerrand stuffed some dirty clothing from their saddlebags into each of their mouths for good measure.

He instructed Kirah to ride in back, to watch them closely. He rode lead, setting a quick pace. Still, as much as he wanted to be rid of these men, for other reasons Guerrand wasn't anxious to reach the castle.

"What are you going to tell Cormac?" Kirah called from the back of the line, as if reading his thoughts.

"Frankly, I don't know. If we were going to get there before dawn, I'd consider leaving them tied in the courtyard with a note attached to Quinn's medallion." He looked to the sky lightening over the strait to the southeast. "Besides it being cowardly, I'm afraid it won't be possible."

Guerrand rubbed his tired eyes, sighing. "Truthfully, I'm hoping Cormac will be so overjoyed at having Quinn's killers delivered to him that he won't think to ask many questions."

Riding in weary silence, both brother and sister knew that was as unlikely as stopping the sun from rising behind them.

The courtyard was filled with gawkers as the scraggly, unlikely quintet filed in. Guerrand glared at Kirah, who was waving happily to the crowd, obviously thrilled by the attention. She's not the one who's going to have to answer for all this, he grumbled to himself.

The absurdity of the situation struck him. He should have been rejoicing like Kirah. But all he could think about was having to face Cormac's anger and his questions. Guerrand began to resent his older brother's attitudes in a way he never had before. Belize had said something about choosing which path his life would follow. Guerrand felt as if he were walking someone else's path, and

could find no forks in the road.

Just then, Cormac stormed into the courtyard with Milford at his side. "Guerrand, Kirah!" he bellowed, taking in Kirah's attire in particular. "What's the meaning of this?" Cormac unpinned the dark plaid cloak drawn around his shoulders and tossed it over the girl.

"We captured Quinn's killers!" Kirah bumbled before Guerrand could form an answer.

"You what?" Cormac looked stricken with apoplexy; his fleshy face instantly turned a hideous purple-red.

"Look!" Kirah held up Quinn's medallion eagerly.

Cormac nearly yanked the chain from her hands and turned it over in his thick fingers. "It's Quinn's, all right." His glare traveled from the bound-and-gagged men to Guerrand. "How do you know they didn't simply acquire it from his real killers?"

Guerrand was puzzled. He'd expected anger and questions, but not disbelief. "Because they match the description we got from the men who brought Quinn

in," Guerrand said, more reasonably than he felt. "Call them back to identify these men. Check their bags—I'm sure you'll find more of Quinn's things."

With a nod of his head, Cormac instructed Milford to do just that. In moments the warrior's massive hands were filled with a standing-bowl bearing the DiThon crest and a book of poems and reflections with Quinn's name inked on the flyleaf.

Milford beamed at Guerrand with wide-eyed wonder. "Congratulations, young squire. You obviously perform better under pressure than you do in the training room. I'm sure the presiding cavaliers will want to discuss it, but I suspect this will qualify you for immediate knighthood. And on the eve of your wedding!" He turned to address Cormac. "What do you think, Lord DiThon?"

Cormac's smile was unnaturally tight. "I think we could not have hoped for more. Good work, Guerrand."

With that, Cormac began to fire orders. First, he told Kirah to get into the keep and dress properly; knowing his tone too well, Kirah scampered away with a pitying glance at Guerrand. Next he instructed several men-at-arms to take the still gagged and squirming bandits into the dungeon, where they would be questioned momentarily.

Then Cormac's angry eyes locked on to Guerrand, who swallowed hard under the scrutiny, his Adam's apple bobbing. "I'll speak to you shortly in my study, Guerrand," his brother said crisply. "I would like to privately discuss just what your unexpected actions mean to me."

Chapter Five

"You made me look like a fool before all my servants, Guerrand." Cormac's voice was low, threatening.

"So *that's* what made you so angry in the courtyard." Guerrand still wore his sword, hoping a martial appearance might soften his brother's fury. He stood, rather than sat, to get the full benefit from the prop.

"Of course," said Cormac. "My men and I—seasoned cavaliers, all—have been searching for these bandits for days. You and a string bean of a girl—"

"That string bean is our sister."

"Half sister." Cormac glowered at Guerrand's interruption. "You ride into the courtyard with them all trussed up, as if it were as easy as... as... magic." Cormac's eyes widened in sudden understanding. "You used magic somehow, didn't you?"

Guerrand flinched at the accusation. Not that he hadn't expected it, but it came sooner than he hoped.

"You look like you were dressed for battle, but I'll wager..." Cormac bounded to his feet and prodded Guerrand in the ribs. A look that mixed satisfaction with disgust crossed his face. "You're not even wearing armor under that tunic, as I suspected. You never had any intention of fighting."

Cormac shook his head and paced across the room. "It all makes sense now. The bandit I questioned said you threw dirt at them, and then they fell unconscious."

Guerrand was incredulous. "Quinn's killers have been found, and you're more concerned about how I did it?" He shook his head in disbelief.

Cormac drained a goblet of wine in one gulp, then held the glass up to Guerrand in a mock toast. "Congratulations," he said, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "What dark sorcerer's spell did you use to find and bring them here, Guerrand?"

"What does it matter?" asked Guerrand. "Isn't it enough that magic accomplished what ordinary measures could not?"

"Any good cavalier could have done the same thing! You could have called on those skills, instead of the evil secrets of magic."

Guerrand sneered. "We both know I'm not a good cavalier. Besides, you said yourself, well-trained knights already tried to defeat those bandits and failed."

"I've really tried to understand your hatred of magic, Cormac," he continued softly after a pause, "and now I finally do. It came to me suddenly that you're no different than me or anyone else. Behind your bluster, you're afraid of what you don't understand."

"I'm not afraid of anything!"

Guerrand arched one brow. "You don't sound fearless."

Cormac whirled on him. "How dare you? You know nothing of fear! Have you watched men die on your sword in battle? Have you struggled to maintain the lifestyle expected of a lord with more debt than income? No, you haven't." He thumped his chest. "I have. And because I've struggled for this family—for you—your life has been easy."

"Maybe I haven't killed a man, or even tried to understand your struggles," said Guerrand, "but neither do you know what my life has been like."

The young man stood, his face glowing. "Since Father died, I've toed the line—" he poked his brother's beefy shoulder—"your line—as best I could for the sake of family honor, because that's what Father taught me I must do. And I've been at your mercy because you held the purse strings, such as they are. I've even given up pursuing the one thing I always wanted, the only thing I've ever been good at."

Guerrand's expression was beyond bitter. "I've learned a valuable lesson this morning, Cormac—maybe the most important thing I've ever understood." He stood straight and tall before his brother for the first time. "Now that Quinn's dead, I'm the only male DiThon with a sense of family honor—or any honor at all." Guerrand unbuckled his sword belt and threw it on the floor.

Cormac's eyes narrowed in barely contained anger. "I will overlook your impudent remarks because soon our differences will no longer matter. You'll be living at one of Berwick's lavish estates, and I'll still be here, scraping along as best I can. I feel certain that one day, perhaps when you have children of your own, you will understand the sacrifices I've made on your behalf.

"And now, we'll speak no more in anger," Cormac announced with forced brightness. "So that we may peaceably draw to a close the years we have lived together, I forgive you the night's indiscretion. In an oddly convenient twist, you've provided the Council of Cavaliers with an excuse to knight you. In a matter of days you'll be married, and all this magic nonsense will be behind you." Cormac poured more of the ruby-colored wine into his glass, then splashed some into another snifter. Turning with a strained smile, he held out the second glass to his half brother.

Guerrand stared at it for a moment. Cormac nudged the glass closer to Guerrand's face, until the crimson wine was all that the youth could see.

"Take it, Guerrand. Let's drink a toast to your impending wedding—and knighthood." When Guerrand hesitated, Cormac pressed the wine on him one last time. "Drink this, you'll feel better."

Guerrand came to life and slapped away the glass and with it the patronizing suggestion. The crystal crashed to the floor and shattered, splashing Cormac's boots with the blood-red liquid. "You'll forgive me?" Guerrand shrieked. "You haven't heard a thing I've said! Well, hear this. I *won't* feel better just because you say so. I'll no longer do *anything* just because you say so." Guerrand snatched up his sword and stomped toward the door, kicking the broken glass from his path. "I'm done with bowing and scraping for some misplaced sense of duty."

"Wh-What do you mean?"

Hearing the fear and desperation in Cormac's voice, Guerrand howled with laughter. Poor, pathetic, deluded Cormac. As if the return of some rocky land could restore all that he'd lost through incompetence. "I'm not sure what I mean, Brother." Giving the door a satisfying slam in Cormac's red face, Guerrand strode down the corridor toward his room.

He was whistling.

Something darted out of the shadows and grabbed the young man's hand, startling him. "Rand!" he heard his nephew's voice cry softly. "Kirah says you captured Quinn's killers. I knew you were a better cavalier than my father said."

Guerrand gave Bram a warm smile. "You're half right, Bram. It's true we captured the rotters, but I'll forever be a lousy cavalier."

How a couple could produce such different children as Bram and Honora was beyond Guerrand's comprehension. He was just glad they had. He had long suspected Bram had a bit of magical talent in the area of herbs, so he'd intentionally stayed away from him, for Bram's own sake. He knew that Cormac and Rietta saw more similarities to Guerrand in Bram than they liked, and he did not wish to make the boy's life harder. The boy ... Guerrand realized with a start that Bram was nearly the age Quinn had been when he'd left on crusade. Just a half decade younger than Guerrand, Bram was closer in age to his uncle than Guerrand was to his own brother Cormac. The gulf seemed much wider, somehow.

Bram was puzzled by his uncle's obtuse answer. "Then how did you and Kirah catch them?"

"It's a long story better told when we're both older." Guerrand found himself hugging his nephew's already broad shoulders fiercely, which surprised them both. He realized now that he'd spoken incorrectly about being the only male DiThon with a sense of honor. He only hoped Bram would be able to hold on to his. "You're a good person, Bram. Remember to always do what you know in your heart is right."

This strangely timed advice confused Bram even more. He looked at the older man oddly as they separated, then strode down the hallway toward the staircase. "I'll remember, Rand," he called just before disappearing from sight.

Guerrand hastened toward his room. The hand he placed on the latch was shaking. By the time he got inside, the anger that had held him up before Cormac had burned away like fuel oil. He felt weak-kneed and wanted only to collapse; he would have if his armor had not been still spread across his bed, where he had left it the night before.

Guerrand slipped off his gauntlets. He shook the left one gently, letting the shard of magical glass slide onto a free space on the bed. His fingers met with the cool, smooth surface of Belize's mirror. For reasons he didn't quite understand, he avoided looking into the glass, placing the shard behind the washing bowl on his table.

He quickly cleared the bed and pulled off his tunic, breeches, and boots. Then Guerrand sank into the down quilt on his bed. His exhaustion was less of the body than of the mind, and yet the body was beyond tired, too, having skulked around and ridden on horseback all night. He half suspected Cormac would come pound on the door and try to continue the argument. Perhaps his elder brother was trying out some new-found wisdom. Guerrand thought it more likely that Cormac didn't know what to do and was discussing Guerrand's "abominable behavior" with Rietta, who would likely arrive any moment to set him straight.

The problem is, he thought, unable to stifle a groggy yawn, I'm no longer sure which way is straight.

"Kyeow!" *You look like something out of the Abyss!*

Guerrand's eyes flew open. Propping himself up on one elbow, he squinted toward the tall, narrow window that overlooked the strait. Guerrand held a hand up to shield his eyes from the orange light he knew meant it was early evening; he'd slept the day away. His familiar stood on the sill, as if outlined by fire.

"Oh, hello, Zagarus." Guerrand rubbed the sleep from his eyes, more than a little surprised that Cormac had left him alone all day.

The black-backed sea gull leaped from the sill in one bound and strode across the room on his sticklike yellow legs. Hopping onto the bed, he took one step across the feather tick and, with a webbed foot, kicked Guerrand in the ribs.

"Oww!" cried Guerrand as he rolled away, more startled than hurt by the rubbery little foot. He glared at the sea gull. "What in Habbakuk's name is the matter with you?"

That, said the sea gull with an imperious tilt to his beak, *is for having the biggest adventure since I've been your familiar and not telling me about it.* He looked almost petulant, with his wings folded before him. *I had to hear it from those preposterous pelicans who live out on Full Moon Point. It was humiliating!*

"Let me assure you, my evening wasn't fun either." For Zagarus's sake, he swallowed a smile. "I'm sorry, Zag. I didn't tell you last night because I intended only to get proof that these men were Quinn's killers. Besides, I was afraid you'd tell Kirah and you'd both want to come along."

So you took Kirah!

"That wasn't *my* idea. She was spying and followed me to the stable. I either had to leave her on the moor or take her along to keep her quiet." Guerrand swung his legs out of bed and sat up, rubbing his neck. "I should have left her, too, because she almost got us killed!"

Zagarus's wings lifted in a shrug. *Sounds to me like you should thank her. Now you're going to be a knight after all, just as you'd agreed.*

"I don't want to be a knight!" Guerrand said furiously. He was tired of living a lie. The lie would just continue in a different place, with different people. He snatched up Ingrid's silver necklace from the small table on which it lay and squeezed it as if to crush it. "And I don't want to be married to Ingrid Berwick."

What do you want? Zagarus asked, his voice unnaturally soft inside the human's head.

The question surprised Guerrand. In recent years he'd spent more time thinking about what he *didn't* want. He sucked in a breath. Had he used Cormac's hatred of magic as an excuse to protect himself from failing? Guerrand had long ago convinced himself it wasn't *his* fault he'd not been allowed to study as a mage. And if he never tried, he'd never fail.

Guerrand picked up the small fragment of mirror behind the washbowl. "I want to be a mage. I want to become apprenticed to a mighty wizard and eventually take the Test at Wayreth."

What? It was more an exclamation of startlement than a question.

Guerrand told Zagarus of his meeting with Belize. He described his wonderment at the spells the mage had used so casually, told him of the thrill he'd felt when Belize invited him to Wayreth. Last, he set the mirror on the table and explained its role in capturing Quinn's killers.

The bird flapped over to the table and pushed the mirror with his foot. *This little thing showed you where the bandits were?*

"Easy, now," admonished Guerrand, extending his hand. "I don't want it broken."

Zagarus cocked his feathered brown-black head to the left and closed one eye. *Does it do anything else?*

"Frankly, it hadn't occurred to me that it could," Guerrand admitted. The young man peered at the mirror closely. "Do you suppose I can use it to see anything I want?"

You're the mage-in-waiting, replied Zagarus. His attention was riveted on a beetle crawling across the table toward the mirror. Tentatively, the insect felt its way onto the glass. As it approached the center, Zagarus struck, his head darting down to snatch up the hapless bug.

But instead of striking the glass, as he expected, Zagarus's beak closed around the beetle and kept on going. He froze, wide-eyed. Zagarus could feel the beetle squirming slightly against his tongue, and so he swallowed the tasty morsel. He could see his eyes reflected clearly in the mirror, which was practically touching his forehead. But he couldn't see his beak; it was *inside* the mirror!

The curious bird pushed his head forward and completely through the mirror. He looked right and left, up and down. The view was the same: gray and featureless. He could see only a few rods in any direction before even that view was obscured by a thin, dry, multicolored mist.

Without removing his head from the mirror, he called to Guerrand. *Guerrand, can you still see me?*

For an answer, Guerrand, a look of horror on his face, grabbed the bird by the wings and hauled his small head from the even smaller mirror. "What have you done, Zagarus?"

Zagarus blinked. *I just pecked at the beetle, and there I was with my head in the mirror.*

Guerrand could scarcely believe what he had seen. The bird's head looked to have disappeared into the impossibly small looking glass. "Were you really 'inside' it, Zagarus? What did it look like in there?"

It's hard to say, replied the sea gull. *I can tell you that this mirror is a lot bigger on the inside than it looks from out here.* Zag flexed his wings and tilted his head. *I'll just take another look. Be right back!*

"Wait!" cried Guerrand, but he was too late to stop his familiar from wiggling forward to push his neck through the mirror. There was a pause. Zagarus flipped his tail into the air the way Guerrand had seen him do countless times diving for food in the strait. It seemed quite impossible, but the bird's body, at least four times wider than the mirror, slipped between the edges and disappeared!

Guerrand lurched forward and stared, breathless, down at the mirror. He was afraid to touch it. All he saw was the reflection of his own eyes, big as shields. But the image in his mind was his last view of Zagarus, wiggling as he disappeared. Guerrand still could not understand how the much larger bird had fit through the tiny mirror, even though he'd seen it happen. Somehow, when it was happening, it made sense; the perspectives and proportions seemed right.

Zagarus had been gone some time, and Guerrand was beginning to get concerned. He called the bird mentally. *Zagarus! Come out of there this minute!*

Suddenly the shiny dark head popped straight up through the mirror. *What now?*

"Good gods, Zag, you terrified me!"

With a wiggle and a hop, Zagarus popped back out of the mirror and stood on the table. Guerrand shook his head in disbelief.

You're a mage, said Zagarus. *How does it work?*

"I'm not really a mage, and I don't know how the mirror works." Guerrand sat down heavily on the bed. "That pretty much sums up my whole problem, Zag. I'll never be a mage or know more about such magic if I stay here."

He dug the heels of his hands into his eyes. "I can't shake the feeling that this is my last chance to decide how I'll spend the rest of my life," he said. "If I'm still here when the sun comes up, Cormac will have me. I'll be married to Ingrid Berwick and become a merchant lord and be miserably responsible forever."

So what are you waiting for? demanded Zagarus. *You said before that it was your greatest wish to travel to Wayreth and become a real mage.* He hopped toward the window and onto the sill, where soon the nearly full white moon, Solinari, would be visible.

"It's not that simple, and you know it. There's just so much to consider. What would I tell Cormac?"

That's simple, snorted the gull. *Nothing. You tell him nothing. He'd stop you for sure, probably lock you up until the ceremony.*

Guerrand frowned. "He's not a cruel man."

"Maybe not, but he's a desperate one."

Guerrand's frown deepened, knowing Zagarus was right. He knew, too, what he had to do. He couldn't stay for all the reasons he'd told Cormac; he'd stomached all he could of his older brother. Taxing the locals was an accepted way of life for nobles. Enabling Cormac to rob the Berwicks was entirely another thing.

But more important than the reasons Guerrand couldn't stay was the reason he had to go. This was his last chance to change his life. If he didn't leave to study magic now, then he never would.

"We're going to leave tonight," Guerrand said aloud.

Does that 'we' include Kirah?

Guerrand gave Zagarus a haunted look. How could he drag Kirah cross-country? Even if he did take her and was lucky enough to be given an apprenticeship, what would he do with her then? Belize had made the point about Ingrid, and it applied to his little sister as well. She would be safer at Castle DiThon.

"No, it doesn't include Kirah." Once the words were out, Guerrand felt a wave of guilt wash over him. He and Kirah and Quinn had been a team since they were children. Quinn had broken up the team when he'd left on crusade, and death had made that split permanent. How could he divide its last two members? A memory in Kirah's own voice supplied the answer to that. "Guilt is an excuse used by people who are afraid to do what they want. I am never afraid to do what I want."

Guerrand squeezed his eyes shut. It was even more difficult to take her advice now, when she was the one who would be most hurt by it. And yet he knew now he had to leave. In recent days he had witnessed respect for him fading in his sister's eyes. Guerrand only hoped anger wouldn't prevent her from being proud of him for following his dream.

He could no more tell her he was leaving than he could Cormac. A note to both would have to do. After fumbling in one of his trunks for several moments, Guerrand pulled out a writing case containing several quills, some ink, and parchment.

With a hand that shook, he began to pen: *Dear Cormac...*

Guerrand looked at the words and stopped, pushing the parchment aside. Cormac was not his dear anything. He started again on another piece: *Cormac...*

Guerrand tapped the end of the quill against his lips, searching his mind for words to explain to Cormac why he was leaving. When it came to him that Cormac would know the answer, that there was nothing else he could tell his elder brother, Guerrand pulled the candlestick on his desk closer. He held the piece of parchment above the flames. It danced briefly in the rising heat until the fire caught it, curled it, and shriveled it to ash.

Blowing the ash of the already forgotten missive from his desk, he pulled forth another piece and quickly scrawled:

My Dearest Kirah,

There's no easy way to tell you this, but here it is. I've gone. You know why. As usual, you were right all along. Where I'm going, you can't follow. I promise I'll send for you when my future has some pattern to it. Please know this, too: you'll always be in my thoughts. If ever you need me,

I'll know, and I will find a way to come back.
Your faithful brother,
Rand

Guerrand rolled the parchment tightly, sealed it with a gob of wax from his candle, and then stared at it before getting on his knees to lift the air grate from the wall behind his desk. Pushing it to the side, he set the letter in the tunnel beyond. Kirah might not find it immediately, he thought, but within a day or two, when they've searched everywhere for me, she's certain to crawl through here looking for some clue.

Guerrand set the grate back in place. Remember, Kirah, he prayed, it was you who said we can never stay mad at each other.

Zagarus had returned to the sill, reading Guerrand's tormented thoughts. *I'll meet you at Stonecliff after I've fed*, he said, waiting for a response.

For a long moment, Guerrand could not reply, his voice trapped by teeth clenched to hold back tears. "Yes, all right, I'll be there," he managed at last, needing to hear the finality of the words. Zagarus sprang from the ledge and took wing into the dark night sky.

Wordlessly, Guerrand packed one small bag, in which he included the beginnings of a spellbook, collected his sword and dagger, and slipped out of Castle DiThon. He did not look back at the cold stone walls before he headed west over the moors for Stonecliff, where he'd meet Zagarus. Together, they would continue on to the port town of Lusid and the ship that would take them south to Wayreth and a new life.

Chapter Six

Guerrand took a drink from his waterskin, let the warm liquid run down his face and pool in his collar. He had no idea where to direct his next step on this hot summer afternoon. He'd been wandering for days in the magical Forest of Wayreth, looking for the tower whose position no map revealed. Belize had told him that the tower could "be found only by those who have been specifically invited." Guerrand felt foolish now for having assumed that, invited, he'd have no trouble finding it. He'd even allowed the belief to comfort him on the long and tedious voyage from Northern Ergoth to Alsip, the port town nearest the tower.

In reflection, the backbreaking weeks he'd spent as a ship hand to pay for his passage were nothing compared to the days of fear and frustration he'd already spent in search of the Tower of High Sorcery. Wayreth

Forest was thick, tangled, and difficult to traverse, with few discernable paths. The trees and bushes were twisted into weird, creepy shapes, made more frightening by the ever-present, distant sounds of wolves and bears.

Guerrand opened the flap on his leather pack and retrieved the magic mirror. "Zag," he called toward the glassy surface. Zagarus had traveled overland from Alsip in the mirror. Guerrand had to call two more times before the sea gull's head popped through the small glass surface.

Yes? Zagarus craned his neck around. Say, there's no tower here.

"No kidding," snorted Guerrand. "I'd like you to fly overhead and look for the Tower of High Sorcery. I've been stumbling around for days without a clue."

Zagarus bobbed his head and hopped out of the mirror. With a loud "kyeow" the sea gull's white wings spread and he disappeared into the sliver of blue sky between the trees overhead.

Guerrand settled himself against a tree stump and nibbled the last of his provisions while he waited for the gull to return. Before long, Zagarus dropped from the sky and landed on the stump behind him.

"Well? Which way is it?"

I'm sorry, Guerrand. I flew far and wide, but all I saw was a few mountains and more trees. Can I get back into the mirror now? This forest is eerie.

Guerrand held up the mirror wordlessly and didn't even watch as the sea gull slipped inside, afraid he might be tempted to follow. He'd already spent two hair-raising nights in the pitch-black woods and was not anxious for a third. Zagarus's news made him downright angry. What was the point of making the damned thing so difficult to find?

Guerrand forced himself to review his options. He had no food left and would have to begin foraging if he didn't find the tower soon. Zagarus was an excellent scout; if the gull said they were nowhere near the tower, Guerrand knew they weren't.

The young man was contemplating finding his way back to the coast to return to Thonvil with his tail between his legs, when he heard a new sound, very faint and melodic. Singing, perhaps? He looked around, trying to fix the direction, and saw a trail he hadn't noticed before.

Not knowing what else to do, Guerrand shouldered his pack and followed the sound to a clearing. To his surprise, he found a crystal fountain, more than a bit incongruous in the forest setting. The crystal carving of a unicorn spouted cool, clear water from its upturned horn. From its mouth came the lilting voice Guerrand had followed through the woods.

Guerrand strode carefully around the fountain, admiring it cautiously. Suddenly the unicorn spoke to him. "Follow the sun," it said in its singsong voice.

"Me?" Guerrand jumped back, startled. He circled around again, looking for signs of a spell on the statue.

"Follow the sun," said the unicorn again.

Guerrand found his voice. "But the sun moves," he objected.

The unicorn simply repeated its message a third time.

With no better plan, Guerrand did as the figure bade, until at sundown he literally stumbled

into a clearing where twin towers pierced the forest roof. He'd had no clue the towers or the clearing were ahead until he stood at the gold and silver gates, so masterfully crafted they looked as thin as a cobweb.

Though the sky was dark, Guerrand could see that the Tower of High Sorcery actually consisted of two towers of polished black obsidian. The spires were enclosed in a wall-shaped equilateral triangle, with a small guard tower at each point of the triangle. There were no battlements on the obsidian walls. Guerrand presumed wizards had little use for earthly protection.

He felt weak with awe as he strode slowly through the delicate gates, eyes looking everywhere at once. He was only distantly aware that the flagstone courtyard led to a small foretower between the twin columns. A door flew back. Though no one appeared, he instinctively knew he was expected to step inside the foretower.

Sitting in the entry chamber, Guerrand could scarcely believe he was there. He felt like he'd already passed some minor, though important, test. By showing him the way to the tower, the forest itself had deemed him worthy to seek an audience. Now if he could only quell his nerves enough to express his ambitions to the venerable mages to whom he would soon speak.

He wished he could talk over his fears with someone, even Zagarus, but he dared not. If he gave the bird half a chance to speak, Zagarus would undoubtedly push Guerrand to let him out to poke his beak around the Tower of High Sorcery. That was a bad idea, under the best of circumstances.

Guerrand had seen little of the inside of the tower. The foretower in which he waited with three other hopefuls was a simple, dimly lit, circular room. Three doors led from the room at equidistant points in the circle. He sat in a curved row of chairs that faced the door through which he'd arrived, between the two doors whose destinations he could only guess at.

Actually, Guerrand could do better than guess. No one had used the door to his left, but the other two mages with whom he sat had already gone through the door to his right for their interviews with the heads of the orders of magic and returned to their seats; a third was still inside.

Guerrand's sweaty palms unconsciously squeezed the armrests of his chair. He considered the others in the room, too nervous to ask them any questions. Sitting in the darkest shadows between the left and front doors was a man whose gently pointed ears revealed his elven heritage, though his huddled pose made it difficult to determine his years. Guessing the age of long-lived elves was a pretty pointless exercise, anyway.

He looked to the other person in the room, a handsome young human man with perfectly chiseled features, who was sitting two chairs down from Guerrand. Dressed in an elaborate, flowing costume with slashed and puffed sleeves, multicolored breeches, and a cap with a huge feather plume, the flamboyant man had a casual, almost insolent posture. His long legs were sprawled before him, arms folded over his chest, eyes closed in sleep. Guerrand envied both his good looks and relaxed attitude.

Suddenly the man's eyes flew open, and he caught Guerrand staring. Blushing furiously, Guerrand looked away. To his surprise, the other man merely smiled and extended his hand over the chairs that separated them.

"Lyim Rhistadt," he said in a loud voice, pronouncing the last syllable with an odd, hard *sch* sound.

Guerrand cringed at the abrupt noise, but lifted his hand. "Guerrand DiThon," he whispered back. Lyim pumped his hand furiously with a firm grip. Guerrand gave in to his curiosity. "Say, what goes on in there?" he asked the man with a nod toward the door to their right.

Lyim shrugged. "That's the Hall of Mages. The interview is a snap, really. You meet the Council of Three—they're the heads of the orders—and you declare an ali—"

Suddenly the door in question burst open, and the fourth hopeful mage, a dark-skinned elf, emerged. To everyone's surprise he passed the chairs and fled through the front door with one frightened look over his shoulder.

"Step forward, Guerrand DiThon."

Guerrand's eyes jerked from the sight of the fleeing mage to the door through which his own

name had just been called. With a nervous glance at Lyim, Guerrand drew in a deep breath and pushed himself from his seat. He could feel beads of sweat springing from his forehead. "It's a snap," Lyim called after him again, though Guerrand could barely hear over the pounding of his heart.

Stepping through the doorway, Guerrand stood in a vast chamber carved of obsidian. He suspected it, too, was round, like the foretower, though much, much larger, since the walls and ceiling were beyond his sight, obscured in shadow. The room was lit by a pale white light, cold, cheerless, and yet there were no torches or candles. Guerrand stopped without intending to and shivered.

He could see no one, and yet he knew he was not alone. The Council of Three were there, Lyim had told him. Guerrand waited, too frightened to call to them, even had he known their names.

"Be seated," a voice said at long last. Puzzled, Guerrand looked around and was surprised to find that a heavy, carved, oaken chair stood beside him. He slipped into it quickly, as if it could conceal him.

"You wish to become a mage."

It was not a question, and yet Guerrand felt compelled to answer the unseen man's soft, aged voice. Yes. It has always been my heart's desire."

"I sense other desires there," put in another voice from the darkness, a woman's sultry tones that made Guerrand long to see its owner.

He squinted into the darkness. "Would it be too impertinent to ask that I be allowed to see those who question me?"

"Impertinent, yes," said yet another man's voice, younger and robust with unspoken humor. "But not unreasonable."

Abruptly those present in the chamber revealed themselves. Guerrand was certain the light had not increased or crept farther into the shadows, and yet he could now see a semicircle of mostly empty chairs; a quick count revealed twenty-one. Seated in the very center, in a great throne of carved stone, was an extremely distinguished though frail-looking man. He had piercing blue eyes and long, gray-white hair, beard, and mustache that nearly matched his white robe.

Following Guerrand's eyes, the old man said, "I am Par-Salian of the White Robes, Head of the Conclave of Wizards. This enchanting creature," he said with a nod to the woman in black seated at his right, "is LaDonna, Mistress of the Black Robes."

Guerrand's eyes fixed on the striking woman whose iron-gray hair was woven into an intricate braid coiled about her head. Her beauty and age defied definition; Guerrand wondered if both were magically altered.

"I need no illusions to embellish my looks or diminish my age," LaDonna said abruptly. Guerrand jumped, blushing.

A small smile at Guerrand's embarrassment further creased Par-Salian's weathered face. With his eyes, he directed the young man's gaze to the man seated on his left. "I would have you meet the Master of the Red Robes, but he is unavailable, locked in study in his laboratory. Serving in his stead today is Justarius of the Red Robes."

The dark-haired man with neat mustache and beard resting on his white ruff nodded at Guerrand, who returned the gesture. Guerrand judged him to be in his late thirties, though he knew with a mage he could be off by decades.

"We are today's Council of Three," Par-Salian explained. "We convene at the Tower of Wayreth primarily to conduct these interviews, devise Tests, and deal with everyday problems of the orders that do not require the attention of the full conclave of twenty-one members, seven from each order."

Par-Salian brushed a wisp of white hair from his eyes. "The day has been a long one," he said with an edge of tired impatience in his voice. "Declare an alignment, young man, and let us draw today's interviews to a close."

Guerrand shook his head quickly. "I've chosen no alignment."

"Then why did you come here today?" demanded LaDonna with an peevish frown.

"I came to begin my training as a mage. Frankly, I did not know what that entailed."

"Your master didn't tell you before he sent you? What color robe did he wear?"

"I've had no master," Guerrand explained, feeling more and more like an ignorant rube. "A mage came to me recently and encouraged me to come to Wayreth and seek a master who could teach me." Guerrand tapped his chin in thought. "He wore a red robe, come to think of it."

"You've had no master?" repeated Justarius. "Each of us has probed your mind and found within it enough talent and skill to have brought you before us. Are you saying no master instructed you in magic?"

"No, sir. All that I've learned has come from books I found in my father's library."

"Interesting," muttered Justarius.

Guerrand was both embarrassed and desperate to persuade them he could quickly overcome his deficiencies. "If you would be kind enough to explain the different philosophies of the disciplines, I would happily and swiftly choose one."

The three revered mages exchanged surprised looks. "This is most unusual," said Par-Salian. Justarius leaned to whisper something in his ear, and the old mage shrugged. "You are right, Justarius. If it brings even one more mage to our dwindling ranks, the time is well spent." Par-Salian looked directly at Guerrand. "We will make an exception. Listen closely. I'll not repeat what you already should know."

"Yes... yes, thank you," Guerrand said, his head bobbing eagerly. He leaned forward in his chair.

"Wizards of the White Robes," began Par-Salian, "embrace the cause of Good, and we use our magic to further the predominance of Good in the world. We believe that a world in which there are only good deeds and thoughts would benefit all races and end much suffering."

LaDonna leaned back in her chair indolently. "Wizards of the Black Robes," she said in her husky voice, "believe the darker side that all creatures possess is their most productive. Therefore, we believe that magic should be pursued without ethical or moral restraints. It is beyond such considerations."

Justarius sat forward in his chair, his left leg stretched out and twisted awkwardly, as if it pained him. "We mages of the Red Robes recognize that elements of both Good and Evil—"

"We prefer the nonpejorative term 'dark side,' " interrupted LaDonna.

Justarius nodded in respect to the black-robed woman's request, but under his mustache his lip curled up in a slight smirk. "Both Good and Evil exist in all creatures. We believe that to try to eliminate one or the other is not only futile, but an undesirable goal. It is when these two opposing elements are balanced in an individual—or in a society—that life has the richness we all seek. Wizards of the Red Robes use their magic to encourage and maintain that balance."

"Realize this, too," added Par-Salian, "before you make your decision. Every wizard, no matter the color

of his robe, vows his primary allegiance to magic. All wizards are brothers in their order. All orders are brothers in the power. Though we may disagree on method, particularly during important conclaves, the places of High Wizardry, such as this tower, are held in common among us. No sorcery will be suffered here in anger against fellow wizards." Par-Salian shifted a bushy white brow.

Guerrand pondered all that they had said, conscious not to take too much time in his evaluation. Finally, he said, with a nod to Par-Salian and LaDonna, "With all due respect to your disciplines, I believe the philosophy of the Red Robes, as outlined by Justarius, most closely aligns with my own outlook on life."

"You are certain?" asked Par-Salian. "Are you prepared to declare loyalty to that order?"

Guerrand nodded solemnly. Clearing his throat, he said with great formality, "I, Guerrand DiThon, do hereby pledge my loyalty to the Order of the Red Robes." He was rewarded with a warm smile from Justarius.

"That is done." Par-Salian's ringed fingers slapped the arm of his stone chair in satisfaction.

"There is one last piece of business to conclude today's interviews." The door behind Guerrand flew open abruptly, and the same disembodied voice that had called Guerrand forth from the foretower drew in the two young mages still waiting there.

"Welcome once more," said the white-haired wizard as the other young mages seated themselves next to Guerrand. "Our last bit of business is to ascertain or assign masters so that you may all begin your apprenticeships.

"Stand, Nieulorr of Swansea Valley," called the head of the conclave. The shrouded elf slid gracefully from the chair, almond-shaped eyes fixed on the elderly mage. "You have declared your allegiance to the White

Robes. Have you a master, or are you in need of placement with a suitable archmage? The council has a number of approved wizards who are currently without apprentices."

"With respect, Great One," the elf said humbly, "I have regarded Karst Karstior of Frenost, of the White Robes, as a mentor for nearly two decades. He has kindly agreed to accept me as his apprentice."

"Karst Karstior," repeated Par-Salian, tapping his chin as he pondered. "Ah, yes. I remember. He is a good mage and a better person." The head of the conclave nodded decisively. "I approve." Par-Salian withdrew a coarse, white robe from the shadows behind his chair and held it toward the slender elf. "Return to your village and begin your apprenticeship. We look forward to adjudicating at your Test in the future."

The elf nodded, took the white robe in his thin-boned fingers, and quickly fled the scrutiny of the powerful wizards in the Hall of Mages.

Justarius's eyes demanded Guerrand's attention. "Guerrand DiThon, as representative of your chosen order, I give to you a novitiate's red robe." Guerrand stood and approached the circle of chairs, nodded reverently, and accepted the rough-spun garment. "You've already stated that you've had no master but books. Have you considered to whom you might apprentice yourself?"

Guerrand's thoughts flew to the wizard in Northern Ergoth. "No," muttered Guerrand. "I've known only one mage, the one who suggested I come here, but he seemed uninterested in taking an apprentice. I would ask if you have any suggestions."

"As a matter of fact, I do," said Justarius, considering Guerrand closely. "I already have one apprentice under my tutelage, but my home is large and my patience considerably larger. I would be willing to take on another who seems determined to overcome ignorance to realize his talent."

"Thank you." Guerrand smiled awkwardly at the half compliment. When one reached Justarius's level of skill, Guerrand supposed diplomacy was a secondary concern. Besides, of the mages he'd met—and that now numbered a mere four—Guerrand felt most comfortable with this mage of the Red Robes. He could scarcely believe the second-ranking mage of his order would consider him. "I am honored, master, and humbly accept the position."

"Good," approved Par-Salian. "You are a fortunate young man," he said, wagging a finger at Guerrand. "You two may speak afterward about—"

Suddenly a door banged in the shadows behind the semicircle of chairs. There was much bustling and shuffling, and a voice said, "I am sorry to be late again. I got involved in research and the time slipped away from me, I fear."

A muscle in Par-Salian's jaw twitched. "Well enough, today, but you would do well to remember your duty to your order in the future. As it turned out, we scarcely missed you. Justarius has done a fine job in your stead."

Par-Salian's warning was not lost on anyone in the Hall of Mages. Guerrand had frozen at the familiar voice coming from the darkness. He gasped as the mage himself emerged. Belize! He was the Master of the Red Robes. Considering their last conversation, Guerrand could not decide whether he should call attention to himself or pretend to not recognize the man. In the end, it wasn't his decision to make.

Justarius leaped from his chair beside Par-Salian, stumbling over his own left leg. Scowling, Guerrand's master dragged the limb back next to his other, the first outward sign that Justarius had a

game leg. He waved Belize toward the seat, in deference to his rank. Belize lowered himself into the warmed seat with a baleful look at his substitute. "The Great One is too kind," said Justarius. "I did little enough, though I found a new and challenging apprentice."

Belize's shiny pate shifted up almost grudgingly, and he squinted toward the two remaining mage hopefuls. His dark eyes lingered on Guerrand, probing for placement.

Feeling like a bug in a web, Guerrand felt forced to said, "Good day, master." He cursed his quivering voice. "It seems I must thank you for encouraging me to come here."

Justarius looked from Belize to Guerrand. "You two are acquainted?" Guerrand alone nodded. "Well, then, Belize, since you knew of Guerrand first, perhaps you wish to take him as a student."

Belize merely looked puzzled, obviously still trying to place Guerrand. "I'm not looking for an apprentice—"

"How long has it been since you've had one, Belize?" cut in Par-Salian. "Twenty years?"

Guerrand felt his chest tightening. He had no wish to study under the frightening mage. It was obvious their encounter had meant little to Belize, since the mage didn't even remember him. Yet Guerrand could think of no way to voice his objections without insulting the master of his order.

"I've done my duty to magic and its advancement," snapped Belize. "I've lost count of the spellbooks I've written so that scores of young mages have ready reference works."

Beside Guerrand, Lyim jumped to his feet. "Excuse me, but *I* am one of the scores of mages who've read those books," he said boldly, his eyes scanning the council and resting on Belize's ruddy, pock-marked face. "You have been my mentor. It is because of you that I wish to become a mage."

Belize brightened at this break in what was beginning to sound like an inquisition. "Is that so?"

Lyim's handsome face was earnest. "Yes." He closed his eyes as if summoning courage. "I never thought to have this chance, and it makes me bold. If ever you would take an apprentice, I would ask that you consider me."

"Lyim Rhistadt has an excellent natural talent," prompted Justarius.

Belize's eyes traveled from Justarius above him, to Par-Salian seated to his right, then to Lyim's hopeful face. "Yes, yes, all right," he muttered irritably. "Am I right in assuming this concludes today's business?" Par-Salian nodded. "Good," said Belize. He squinted one last time at Guerrand, then shook his head.

Standing, he addressed Lyim over his shoulder as he walked into the darkness again. "Justarius will give you a robe and fill you in on the traditional initiation challenge to apprentices of the Red Robes. I can scarcely remember it." With that indifferent line, Belize was gone, leaving two relieved apprentices in his wake.

Chapter Seven

With a wave of his arm, Belize swept the beakers and vials off his laboratory table onto the slate-gray floor. The enraged mage didn't hear the glass shatter, didn't even feel the combustible preservative liquid splash the hem of his crimson robe, where it began to eat through the expensive brocade. Hen hearts bounced at his feet like fish out of water. Powdered diamond flew up in a sparkling cloud. Had he noticed the loss of components that had taken years to collect, Belize still wouldn't have cared. He was too furious at circumstances that had caused him to be doubly duped. The hue of his pocked face surpassed the color of his crimson robe, all the way past the shady ring of stubble that surrounded his head.

Something about the lanky apprentice in the Hall of Mages at Wayreth Tower had nagged at Belize, unsettled him. Seeking supernatural guidance, the mage, upon returning to his domed villa in Palanthas, had immediately cast a vision spell. The spell finally revealed to him what his memory had been unable to conjure. Justarius's new apprentice was the brother of that wretched Ergothian who intended to tear down the magical pillars, thereby sealing a portal he didn't even know existed. The bigoted bastard! The red mage pushed another beaker to the floor.

Belize had scarcely looked at the boy the few times he'd spoken to him; this Guerrand was just a piece in a much bigger puzzle. Besides, he'd sent the young man on his way to the tower, certain the youth was so inept and bucolic that he'd either die from the rigors of shipboard life, or be killed shortly after by wild animals in Wayreth Forest. Either fate mattered little to Belize. His only purpose in speaking to Guerrand had been to remove the youth from his environment so that the wedding between the two families, which would place Stonecliff in the local lord's hands, would not occur.

Belize had thought that arranging the death of the first brother, the strapping young cavalier, would be sufficient to prevent Stonecliff from reverting to the hands of a magic-hating oaf. The possibility that the magical portal would be torn down was so grave that Belize might have called in the Conclave to prevent it, had he not had very specific and secret plans for the plinths of Stonecliff himself.

Belize's gaze fell on his spellbook, open to the page he'd been studying when he'd recalled the appointment at the Hall of Mages in Wayreth. Remember the coal, he told himself now. The rest is incidental. He only wished the Night of the Eye, when the three moons—white Solinari, red Lunitari, and black Nuitari—were to align was sooner than five months hence. Magic would be at its most powerful that night, and Belize would need every jot of power conceivable.

He had already waited over two years for this singular event, which happened only once every half decade.

Belize shook his bald head in disbelief. He could scarcely accept that it had been only two years since he'd come into possession of the millennium-old spell-book of Harz-Takta the Senseless. It had lain undisturbed in the submerged ruins of blasphemous Itzan Klertal. No mortal could have recovered it, including Belize. Even the fiend Belize had enslaved to perform the task barely escaped with its sanity, such as that was. Belize had feared so many possibilities: the book might have been destroyed along with the city, or disintegrated over the centuries; maybe it never existed at all; perhaps even its horrific master was only a rumor. But the creature had returned with the tome, as commanded. And then the real work had begun.

At first Belize had been unable to even open the book. Neutralizing the magical seals had taken three weeks, and that was only the first hurdle. The book had opened to reveal a magical script that was completely unknown to modern scholars. That mind-twisting grammar, for it was not truly a language, had to be deciphered and then painstakingly translated.

The writings told of an ancient place Belize had heard of long ago, in the history lessons of his apprenticeship. The Lost Citadel was the first bastion of magical knowledge. In PC 2645, at the end of the Second Dragon War, the dragons had returned to Krynn against their queen's vow and were ravaging the land. Three wild mages summoned potent magic and commanded the ground to

swallow the dragons for all time. The dragons were defeated, but the magic ran amuck and thousands died. The three mages, fearful for their lives, called upon the gods for help. Solinari, Lunitari, and Nunitari heard their cries. They seized the tower in which the mages stood and moved it beyond the circles of the universe, where the gods could teach the three mages the foundations of wizardry in peace. The tower became known as the Lost Citadel.

For one hundred years, the gods trained their disciples in the ways of magic. At last, the three mages returned to Krynn to lead other wild mages out of hiding. They constructed five bastions in remote regions to shelter all mages from the hostile world; these became known as the Towers of High Sorcery. The gods then closed the way to the Lost Citadel, believing the knowledge it harbored was too powerful to fall into the hands of ordinary mages or mortals.

In the centuries since then, the role of magic in the world had changed greatly. Not the least of these changes was that three of the five Towers of High Sorcery had been abandoned or decimated during the Cataclysm. Only one, Wayreth, was inhabitable. The stories of the Lost Citadel had slipped away into the category of legend among mages, much like dragons had to the population of Krynn.

Except to Harz-Takta the Senseless. One thousand years before, he had devised and recorded in his spell-book a means of entering the Lost Citadel. The brilliance of the mind that formulated the process was astounding. According to Harz-Takta, more than a dozen magical portals existed across the face of Krynn for the primary purpose of interplanar travel. Harz-Takta searched for a secondary purpose and claimed to find it. His writings proposed that, during a Night of the Eye, just one of these portals, a different one each time, would gain the caster entry into the Lost Citadel when combined with the appropriate spell.

Even Belize had doubted it would work until he broke through the conceptual barrier of standard magical thought. The process was so nonconventional, even counter-rational, that it required relearning a tremendous amount of what Belize had been taught and what most mages simply took for granted. Harz-Takta posited a completely alternate view of reality, one unrelated to the known senses. Step by step, for almost two years, Belize had tested those hypotheses, and so far, they seemed wholly valid.

Belize had no way of knowing what had happened to Harz-Takta. His writings stopped just prior to his attempt to pass through a portal during the triple eclipse on a Night of the Eye one thousand years before. History had recorded nothing of the outcome. A pessimist, or even a realist, would have assumed that he'd failed.

But Belize had grasped Harz-Takta's brilliance, and now he would follow in that great man's footsteps. He risked everything, but would gain a universe. When Belize entered the Lost Citadel he would have the knowledge of the gods. For two years he had worked with only that goal in mind. To hone his gating skills—the ability to pass from one place to another by way of an extradimensional gate—he secured a spellbook on the subject by the great wizard Fistantilus.

Next he searched the continents for maps or other clues to the whereabouts of the ancient magical portals referenced by Harz-Takta. Then he'd spent a year reviewing lunar probabilities to determine which of the portals was most likely to open a gate to the Lost Citadel during the next Night of the Eye, which was then a half year away.

That led him, just a month before, to the plinths known as Stonecliff. He'd quickly determined the current owner, a merchant named Berwick, and offered to buy the land to ensure that he could carry out his research there whenever he wished. Unfortunately, the man would not sell to him, having promised the land as part of a dowry to a titled lord to the west. That lord, Cormac DiThon, had proven even more intractable. First, he'd rejected a ridiculously generous offer of money for the land, when it was obvious from the shabby state of his castle that his fortunes were severely diminished. What was worse, the man was a terrible bigot about mages. Though he knew nothing of Belize's intentions, the lord viciously vowed to tear down the plinths, which were reputed to be magical in nature, just to spite all mages. Then he'd thrown Belize out.

The Abyss had no fury like a mage scorned. An answer, and an image, came immediately to mind with a spell cast on the nobleman that revealed what his surface thoughts had been during

their encounter. If the land was to be exchanged as part of a marriage, the marriage had to be prevented. It was simple work for Belize to track down the bridegroom and arrange for his death within minutes of Belize's confrontation with the lord. The wedding had been stopped.

Until the brother with illusions of wizardry, the one who'd been deemed unacceptable, was substituted. Belize learned that the wedding was back on, which meant the land would still revert to the impoverished lord. Belize's first thought had been to simply kill the second groom. Then he remembered the stoning he'd witnessed in the village and the young man's sympathy for magic. This obvious conflict between the lord and his younger brother provided Belize with a way to prevent the marriage without further bloodshed. He was, after all, still a mage of Neutrality.

And it had worked; the young man ran away before his wedding like a thief in the night. With the transfer of land stopped, Belize had forgotten entirely about the wretched Ergothian lord and his family. Until the scene in the Hall of Mages. If only he'd remembered the young mage while he still had a chance to claim him as an apprentice, he would have had control over him.

Belize felt himself tensing up again. He had difficulty now determining which part of this foolishness angered him more—that he'd arrived at the Hall of Mages late, or that he'd gone there at all. The latter had caused him to be saddled with an apprentice he neither knew nor wanted. He cursed himself for letting the eager young man's flattery go to his head. Belize had accepted him before he had time to recall why the other young man seemed familiar.

And now, the young mage who could possibly discover his secret was in the hands of his greatest rival, Justarius. What was worse, Belize himself had supplied the rube with the tool to do so. He'd given Guerrand DiThon a portion of his magical mirror, the one he'd created from notes in Harz-Takta's tome, to persuade the young man of his authenticity. Back then, it had seemed an expedient and safe thing to do—he'd been so sure the varlet would die!

I should have killed him—killed the whole family—when I had the chance, instead of simply sending him away! I left too much to chance. Belize squeezed a vial of silica until the thin glass shattered in his hand. Beads of red blood mingled with the grains of beige sand.

The pain in his hand began to throb enough to penetrate his cloud of rage. Spying an untouched, dusty, half-filled bottle of dandelion spirits, he removed the cork, rubbed the lip clean, and took a long swallow to ease the pain. The pale yellow wine had a calming affect and narrowed his mental vision until he could think clearly again. The Master of the Order of Red Mages rinsed the sand from the cut and bound it with a scrap of cloth.

What has this development changed, really? he asked himself. All he'd wanted was to get the knave out of Thonvil so that the wedding could not take place, and that had happened. For now, the portal was safe.

There was still the question of what Cormac had told his brother about their visit. Did he know Belize wanted Stonecliff? Belize thought that unlikely, since Guerrand had asked *him* what he and Cormac had fought about. He waved that concern away.

The fool still had his mirror, though. Belize couldn't openly make a move against Justarius's apprentice without drawing suspicion to himself. What's more, now that Guerrand wore the red robes, an unprovoked attack would be a violation of his vows. For the time being, those vows still meant something to Belize. Besides, he didn't need Guerrand dead—although the idea had appeal—just too far away to interfere.

Maybe Guerrand left the mirror behind, Belize told himself. He couldn't inquire about it directly, for fear of bringing attention to it. Belize discounted using the mirror to scry for fear of being noticed, which would definitely draw attention to the mirror's abilities. If only there was some way he could keep an undetected eye on Guerrand DiThon, to ascertain whether the apprentice was snooping into things Belize wanted left alone.

Suddenly, the Red Mage slapped his forehead. I've been so caught up in anger that I forgot the obvious! I can learn in an instant if the apprentice left the mirror behind, or if he carries it with him. Belize could find out exactly where the apprentice was. He tattooed every one of his possessions with an invisible sigil of his own devising that allowed him to track their whereabouts. It wasn't that he was particularly possessive or territorial. In fact, it was well known that he didn't even bother to

magically protect his villa in Palanthas like most powerful mages did.

No. Belize wasn't possessive. But he was vindictive. He did not trap his home, because the tattoos allowed him to track down unwitting thieves and kill them personally. It was so much more satisfying than coming home to the charred remains of some thief caught in the act.

Belize was certain the young apprentice must still be in or near the Tower of Wayreth. He vaguely recalled Justarius informing him before leaving for Palanthas that their two apprentices had decided to travel north together.

Still, he wanted to be sure. Belize paced between the rows of standing shelves that filled the back half of his laboratory. His collection of magical equipment and components was immense, but he knew precisely where to find everything. He quickly retrieved a large, shallow pewter bowl and an urn of extremely fine sand. Working quickly with practiced gestures, he filled the bowl with clear wine, then sprinkled several pinches of sand across the surface. As Belize moved his hands in a slow circle above the bowl, blowing gently on the liquid, the floating sand swirled and coalesced into an outline. The mage recognized the coastline west of the Wayreth. Slowly, more details appeared inland: the forest edge, the location of the tower, the crude road leading south from it.

Satisfied with the map, Belize turned his hands palm up and held them still. A tiny, glowing orange point of light appeared in the center of the map, marking the mirror's location. It was approximately halfway between the Tower of Wayreth and the port city of Alsip. This was only a rough divination; Belize could eventually pinpoint the item very precisely by repeating the process with increasing detail each time. But for his current needs, this was sufficient.

Belize leaned back, satisfied, feeling as if he were in control of things again. That realization gave him another idea. He reached for the massive, brown leather book on the shelf behind him and leafed gingerly through the fragile pages until he found the spell entry he sought.

"Burning incense and horn carved into a crescent shape," he mumbled aloud. He needed both items to cast the spell, and he found them near each other on a shelf. With the components tucked inside his robe, Belize continued reading the spell notes, following along with a red-tipped fingernail.

Once given a task, this creature from the elemental plane of air is relentless. It pursues its assigned duty until it either fulfills its summoner's command or is defeated and driven back to its home plane. It is a faultless tracker, able to detect any trail less than a day old or follow directions that take it hundreds or even thousands of leagues away. It is invisible, noiseless, scentless.

Perfect. Belize gingerly closed the spellbook. He would return to Wayreth to be nearer the apprentice when he cast the spell. He would need to leave the sanctity of the tower to summon the invisible stalker. Belize would instruct the creature to do what it must to retrieve the mirror in Guerrand's possession. If that meant it had to kill him, fine. Traveling with Guerrand, his own apprentice—was Lyim his name?—would come under suspicion, not Belize. It all fell into place.

Belize was feeling downright joyous as he prepared to travel through the mirror and return briefly to the Tower of High Sorcery at Wayreth. Abruptly his stomach rumbled, reminding him that he'd eaten nothing this day and had drunk only dandelion spirits. The spell allowed him one day to send the stalker after its quarry. There was plenty of time, then, for dinner before he summoned the relentless creature to terrorize the apprentices.

Chapter Eight

"Get ourselves to Palanthas?" growled Lyim, glaring across the courtyard at the closed door of the foretower. He and Guerrand had been escorted outside the tower's gold and silver entry gates. "What does that mean? We've already found our way here, which was no small task. Where's the reward for that?"

Just then, the door of the foretower opened again. A dwarf, dragging a charred body by the armpits, crossed the flagstone courtyard of the tower complex and elbowed past Guerrand and Lyim to get through the gates.

Startled, the two apprentices jumped back and watched as the dwarf turned left and followed the outer wall to the north. Just past the small guard tower on the northernmost point of the triangle, the dwarf dropped the dead mage, who'd obviously failed his Test, within the shelter of the trees. Dusting off his hands, the dwarf snatched a shovel propped against a trunk and began to dig at a furious pace, sending earth flying to twice his height.

"The reward was that we were allowed to live to find the Tower of High Sorcery," Guerrand said quietly. Shivering, he watched the ignominious burial. He deliberately looked away; his glance fell on the trail the dead mage's heels had left in the dirt. "I suspect that our apprenticeships will simply be a warm-up for the Test. Let's just hope we don't suffer the same fate when we return to take ours."

Having just spent a fortnight making his way to Wayreth, Guerrand was neither surprised nor disturbed by the order to travel to Palanthas. With such a short deadline—a scant month—he wasn't going to waste any time. To determine the time, Guerrand looked toward the sun above the twin towers that comprised Wayreth. It was early afternoon, though he didn't know the day, had no idea how long he'd actually been in the tower.

The newly appointed apprentice adjusted his pack more comfortably on his left shoulder and set off, tripping over the hem of his unfamiliar, coarsely spun red robe. Red-faced, accustomed to the ease of the trousers he still wore beneath the robe, Guerrand hitched up the heavy garment with one hand and took smaller strides to the south, following the eastern wall.

"Where are you going?" demanded Lyim, jogging after him, his own pack slapping his back.

"To Palanthas, of course."

"I know that! But how are you going to get there? Do you have a map? A ring of teleportation, perhaps?"

Guerrand laughed. "No, I haven't either of those things. I traveled most of the way here by ship. While on board, I got a look at the captain's map. If I remember correctly, Palanthas is far to the north, above Solamnia."

"Then why are we walking south?"

The two novice mages came to the southern corner of the triangle. The forest rose up like a tall, green wall. "I don't know why *you* are, but I intend to retrace my steps to Alsip." Guerrand angled off slightly to the southwest and entered the line of trees, where the canopy was highest. "From there," he continued, "I hope to take a ship all the way to Palanthas."

"Then I'll accompany you," announced Lyim, quickening his steps to match Guerrand's pace. The path allowed only single-file travel. The grass was ankle deep and thick with dew that quickly soaked the hems of their robes. "We can travel together and watch each other's backs. You know what they say—two heads are better than one."

"Is that what they say?" Guerrand asked archly, tossing a half grin over his shoulder. Truthfully, he welcomed the plan, thinking it might be good to have company. Besides, it would seem foolhardy to traverse wilderness and over seas to the same city and not travel together.

"Well, that's settled then," said Lyim. "Do you mind if I sing? It will help to pass the time." Without waiting for an answer, he began to sing in a voice that was deep and clear, his song the sounds of the forest itself:

*Easeful the forest, easeful its mansions perfected
Where we grow and decay no longer, our trees ever green,
Ripe fruit never falling, streams still and transparent
As glass, as the heart in repose this lasting day.*

*Beneath these branches the willing surrender of movement,
The business of birdsong, of love, left on the borders
With all of the fevers, the failures of memory.
Easeful the forest, easeful its mansions perfected.*

*And light upon light, light as dismissal of darkness,
Beneath these branches no shade, for shade is forgotten
In the warmth of the light and the cool smell of the leaves
Where we grow and decay no longer, our trees ever green.*

*Here there is quiet, where music turns in upon silence,
Here at the world's imagined edge, where clarity
Completes the senses, at long last where we behold
Ripe fruit never falling, streams still and transparent.*

*Where the tears are dried from our faces, or settle,
Still as a stream in accomplished countries of peace,
And the traveler opens, permitting the voyage of light
As air, as the heart in repose this lasting day.*

*Easeful the forest, easeful its mansions perfected
Where we grow and decay no longer, our trees ever green,
Ripe fruit never falling, streams still and transparent
As air, as the heart in repose this lasting day.*

"That was... perfect," breathed Guerrand. "It was as if you captured the essence of the forest."

"I didn't, but Quivalen Sath did." Guerrand recognized the name of the renowned bard, though he had never heard this song. "It's called, appropriately enough, 'The Bird Song of Wayreth Forest.' I've known it for years—it was a particular favorite of a bard who spent a great deal of time at the inns along the King's Road back home. Growing up in a near-desert, I never really thought I'd have the chance to sing it in a forest, let alone here."

"The desert? Where's that?"

"The northern Plains of Dust, in the east," said Lyim. "It's not far from the lands of the Silvanesti elves."

"The closest I've ever been to an elf was the one with us in the tower," remarked Guerrand. The second the admission was out of his mouth, he wished he could take it back. He didn't want the other mage to know what a sheltered life he'd led.

The road forked once, and they bore left. After some time they came through the edge of the forest. Ahead lay a village, a cluster of huts on the west side of the path.

"Windkeep," announced Guerrand, pushing their pace. The two red-robed mages hastened past the wondering eyes of the children of the small village. Just south of the last hut, the road forked again, the southerly path leading into rolling land of intermittent forest. The westerly branch skirted fields of nodding, golden grain to the south, and tall, wild grasses to the north. Guerrand turned to the westerly path.

"How far is this Alsip, anyway?" asked Lyim.

"It's at least a five-day hike to the coast." Guerrand squinted toward the sun, low in the sky now. "If we hurry, we can make Pensdale before darkness falls."

"Five days?" Lyim stopped in his tracks. "That'll use up nearly a third of the time we have to get to Palanthas!"

Guerrand stopped and shrugged his red-draped shoulders. "I know, but there's nothing to be done about it. We haven't horses, only feet."

Lyim tapped his chin in thought. "Yes, but maybe we can make our feet move faster." He slipped his pack from his shoulder and rummaged around in it. Pulling a thin book from the depths, he licked the ball of his thumb and flipped through the pages. Stopping on one, he ran his finger down the edge until he found what he was looking for. Lyim read the paragraph with great concentration, tapped it once, then closed the spellbook with a decisive snap.

Lyim replaced the book in his pack and retrieved something he held in his closed palm. Parting and pushing back his robe, Lyim slipped a small knife from a leather strap on the inside of his left thigh.

"What are you doing?" asked Guerrand. The other apprentice appeared to be whittling on a fuzzy piece of root, his eyes closed in concentration. "Lyim, what spell are you casting?"

Before Guerrand could press him further, Lyim's eyes flew open. A satisfied smile raised his perfectly shaped lips. "There. It's done."

Guerrand frowned; he could scarcely understand Lyim, he spoke so fast. "What's done?" His own voice startled him; it, too, was impossibly fast.

"The haste spell." Lyim replaced the pack on his shoulder. "This way?" He snapped his head toward the southwest. "Hurry now, the spell won't last forever." With that, Lyim set off at a run and within heartbeats was a crimson blur.

Guerrand found himself running at an impossibly swift speed after the other red-robed apprentice. The wind whistled past his ears and whipped his hair as if he were on horseback. This is what it must feel like to be a horse, thought Guerrand. He felt anxious, restless, driven, as if he'd drunk too much chicory. He had to run to release the energy.

Dust kicked up by Lyim's fleet heels stung Guerrand's eyes and made him choke. He angled off slightly to avoid Lyim's trail of dirt. He felt none of the usual side effects of running, like a stitch in the side or cramped legs, or even labored breathing. Adrenalin drove his legs up and down with the even, measured pace of a long-distance message runner. Guerrand got a mental picture of the bird's-eye view of the two young mages sprinting down the road like fleeing deer, red robes hitched up, packs slapping their backs.

Guerrand craned his neck around to look at the village of Windkeep receding in the distance. They had traveled perhaps a half league in mere minutes. At this rate, they'd pass Pensdale and make it to the coast in two days, instead of five. He'd seen more magic in these—he still didn't know how many—days, than in all his years before. He wondered if his awe for it would ever fade. This haste spell was simply amazing! Guerrand resolved to ask Lyim to teach it to him the first chance they had.

They had not been running long when Guerrand noticed he was closing the gap with Lyim. He pushed himself harder, as if it were a game, until he was nearly abreast with the other apprentice. Abruptly the incredible feeling of energy drained away, and he was seized with the very pain in his right side he'd been surprised not to feel before. His feet slowed to the last kicking, dragging steps of a marathon runner and he stopped, clutching his side. Guerrand bent over double, and the breath rushed from his lungs in great heaving gulps. Sweat popped out in beads on his forehead and between his shoulder blades. He couldn't seem to catch his breath for long minutes.

Finally, Guerrand stood, red-faced, and gave Lyim, who was similarly distressed, a questioning glance. "That's it?" he gasped. "That's all the longer the spell lasts?"

Lyim looked rueful. "I believe so, yes." Wincing, he rubbed the stitch in his own side.

"By the gods, I feel awful!" Guerrand dropped to the ground in a heap and put his head between his knees to keep from fainting.

"Urn," muttered Lyim awkwardly, "that would be because you've aged a year."

Guerrand's sweat-drenched head snapped up. "What did you say?"

Lyim scratched his temple. "The haste spell ages you by a year... because of sped-up

maturation processes," he explained stiffly.

Eyes dark with anger, Guerrand looked over his shoulder to Windkeep, still visible behind them, then back to his fellow apprentice mage. "You took away a year of my life for half a league?"

"I'd never cast the haste spell before and wasn't really sure how far we'd get," Lyim explained sheepishly.

"So you thought you'd just try it out on me?"

"At least I did something," he said with a sidelong look at Guerrand. "I *still* think it was a good idea. I could see in your face you thought so, too, until we stopped running."

"That was before I knew the price!" Guerrand poked Lyim in the shoulder. "Don't ever cast a spell on me again without asking me first." They fell into an awkward silence, catching their breath.

After a time, Lyim withdrew a waterskin from his pack, took a pull, then handed it to Guerrand in a conciliatory gesture. "Now what?" he asked, wiping his mouth while Guerrand took a swallow.

"Now we walk to Pensdale," said Guerrand, standing. "With a little luck, we'll be there by Highmoon." He dusted off his robe. "I have no desire to make camp out here in the grasslands. There's scarcely even a tree to be seen." With that, Guerrand eased the cramps from his calves, then set off down the road again.

"Am I supposed to tell people I'm now twenty years old?" he called over his shoulder, presuming that Lyim was following.

"Tell them what you like," the other apprentice called back, following at his own pace. "Your date of birth hasn't changed. You simply feel a year older."

The muscles in Guerrand's legs throbbed. "Boy, do I ever."

As luck would have it, before long the two apprentices met up with a farmer from Hamlet who was driving his wagonload of potatoes to the port of Alsip. Stopping in Pensdale for the night, they agreed to stand guard atop his lumpy produce while he slept at an inn, in exchange for a ride to the coast in the morning.

Trying unsuccessfully to get comfortable, Lyim raked a mound of the tubers as flat as possible. "A bed of potatoes! Somehow I expected life as a mage to be a bit more luxurious." Lyim jabbed his shoulder into the mound, then frowned and sat back up.

"At least it's not dung."

Lyim tossed Guerrand a grudging glare, then gave up on the potatoes in favor of the narrow buckboard.

In the morning, the farmer and the mages continued on toward the coast. The pace atop the swaying wagon seemed agonizingly slow, yet was still faster and less tiring than walking. Lyim occupied his time sleeping, or staring vacantly over the side of the crude wagon at the passing grasslands.

Guerrand studied his meager spellbook, making notes in it with a small quill pen and clay inkpot he'd brought from Castle DiThon. He was anxious to begin addressing the deficiencies in his magical education. His penmanship was poor under the best of circumstances, so Guerrand took his time forming the letters in the teetering wagon. The naturally laborious process was slowed even further by the need to recap the inkpot after each dip of the quill to prevent ink from sloshing out.

Guerrand noted down his reflections on Lyim's haste spell. *In spite of its poor performance yesterday, I can see how useful it might be in the right circumstances*, he wrote. *I will still ask Lyim to teach it to me, after he's had a few days to forget my angry reaction.*

I think of Kirah constantly. I trust she's found my note by now, and I pray that she forgives me. It may be years before I can return to Thonvil. I wonder, did Quinn experience the same kind of homesickness when he left on crusade?

It was dusk when the landscape beyond the horses' heads sloped gently down to the blue Sirrion Sea. The small fishing port of Alsip came into view, cradled between green, grassy hills and

sun-streaked azure water. The sun, sitting on the line between sea and sky, sent orange-red rays toward the heavens.

Guerrand shielded his eyes against the glare. He'd been so intent on reaching the tower at Wayreth, he hadn't spent a second looking at Alsip. Heading downhill, they rolled by the first row of houses and passed a noisy inn. Being a port town, Alsip was perhaps twice as large as his own village of Thonvil. Like the outlying buildings in Thonvil, most of the homes and shops here were built primarily of wattle and daub supported by pitch-stained beams. Flower boxes adorned every window on every level. The night was warm, and little smoke rose from the sea of chimneys surrounded by thatch. It was well past suppertime, and cookfires had likely been reduced to a minimum until the breaking of fast in the morning.

Guerrand turned his eyes toward the harbor. Numerous skiffs, small fishing boats, and even a midsized coaster bobbed in the gentle waves there. Pointing, Guerrand directed Lyim's attention to a masted ship as the wagon rattled into the unwalled village. "Looks like we may be in luck, Lyim. There's a merchant ship docked."

The farmer turned his head. "That's the one I've been hurrying to meet. *Ingrid*, on the Berwick line. Looks like I've made it just in time, too. I'll take you all the way down to the wharf if you like, since that's where I'm headed. I could even introduce you to the mate."

Guerrand shrank at the name of the ship. It was obvious Anton Berwick had christened it after his daughter. "We'd appreciate that," he managed to say. "Let's just hope it's headed north and looking for hands. A merchant is far more likely to be traveling as far as Palanthas. It would really slow us down to have to hop from coaster to coaster, waiting in port."

"You seem to know a lot about traveling on ships," remarked Lyim. "Were you a sailor?"

"No!" Guerrand laughed. "Let me assure you, it's newly acquired knowledge. I spent nearly two weeks on a ship getting to the tower. Before that, I was, uh, well, let's just say I nearly married into a shipping family."

Guerrand left it at that, having divulged more than he'd intended. He thought it likely that either Cormac or the Berwicks were looking for him; if they'd put up a wanted poster, he might be recognized on one of their ships. It was better that Lyim knew nothing of it and couldn't accidentally betray his identity. He thought about that for a moment.

"Perhaps you should call me Rand from now on," he said, aware that the request sounded incongruous. He needed it settled before their voices reached the ears of villagers. "My friends do."

Lyim lifted one eyebrow in mild surprise. "Sure," was his only vague comment, his attention already on the buxom maids scurrying home for the night on the darkening street. He called to one suggestively. The young woman glanced at him in his odd robes, reclining on the swaying mound of tubers. She ducked her head and scurried away, leaving high, tinkling laughter in her wake.

"Damn!" cursed Lyim. "I've never had a woman laugh at me before." He tugged angrily at his robe and brushed at some dried mud from the hem. "If I weren't on this lumbering potato wagon, I'd —"

"You'd be walking in the grasslands by Pensdale, where there aren't even any women to look at."

"That might be better than the indignity of—" Lyim scowled and waved his hand at their conveyance "— this! I tell you, I'm just not used to this kind of reaction from women!"

Guerrand could believe it of the flawlessly handsome man. "You're losing sight of the goal, Lyim," he said gently. "We have little more than a fortnight left to get to Palanthas. This wagon has been a godsend."

Lyim was only marginally pacified. "Well I, for one, will be grateful to get off this godsend."

Removing a potato that had been lodged in the small of his back for too long, Guerrand had to agree.

"Yer in luck on two counts, lads," said Guthrie, the mate on duty this night. The farmer had

just concluded his transaction, received payment for his produce, and left for an inn, happily counting his coin.

"Palanthas is a port o' call for the *Ingrid*. We'll make it in three weeks, if Habbakuk's luck shines on us. We'll also be needin' at least two more hands by mornin'." He bent slightly and spit bright yellow nut juice onto the deck. "Lost four hands to the salt-sea blight this last trip on the far side of Enstar Island." Guthrie shrugged and spat again. "Truth be told to all but their mothers, they weren't much good anyways. Only a weaklin' gives in to that sickness.

"Ye look like sturdy lads, though." The mate pinched Guerrand's bicep through the fabric of his robe. "Ye'll need to take off these gowns. They'll just weigh ya down durin' a gale. 'Sides, Captain Aldous distrusts anyone in a robe—thinks they're dirty users of magic." The mate squinted at the two men closely, suddenly suspicious. "Ye wouldn't be dirty users of magic, would ye?"

"Absolutely not!" cried Lyim. "We're, uh, novitiates in a religious order to, uh, Gilean. The coarse-spun robes symbolize our dedication to a simple way of life. We can take them off instantly, if they make Captain Aldous uncomfortable." To demonstrate his honest intentions.

Lyim loosened his robe and began slipping it over his head. "There!" Frowning, he nudged Guerrand, who was watching him with eyes agog.

"Oh, yes," muttered Guerrand. He, too, removed his robe and began to roll it to a size that would fit in his pack. Looking in the leather sack, he caught sight of the shard of mirror and remembered with a start that Zagarus was still inside and had been for days. He certainly couldn't release him now, with the mate and Lyim watching. Closing the flap quickly before Zagarus could squawk, he resolved to make an opportunity the second the negotiations were over.

"Well, then, that be settled," said Guthrie. "Ye can get started on yer work straight away." He kicked an empty wooden crate forward and nodded toward the wagon upon which they'd ridden. "Start loadin' these spuds so's we can get 'em on deck and the farmer'll get his cart back by mornin'."

"Now?" gulped Lyim. "You want us to load potatoes yet tonight?" He looked wistfully toward the well-lit inn the fanner had entered.

"Do ye know another way to get 'em on deck by sunup?" asked the mate, weatherworn hands on his hips.

"Yes," Lyim muttered under his breath for Guerrand's ears alone.

Afraid that the impulsive apprentice might be driven to a foolish display of magic, Guerrand grabbed a handful of potatoes and tossed them into the crate. "We'll happily get right at it, Guthrie, sir." He tossed another armload of spuds into the box. "Be done in no time."

"Gentle now," warned the mate. "We don't want to be bruisin' the stock afore we sell it." He watched Guerrand for a moment until satisfied with his touch, then walked up the gangplank and boarded the ship.

"Happily, *sir*," mimicked Lyim, at last joining in. "I didn't know you were a bootlicker, Guerrand. You don't seem the type."

Guerrand looked about anxiously. "Remember, call me Rand." He glared at the other apprentice. "And I'm *not* the type, Lyim. But I had to do something to reassure him after your gaffs. We're going to be on this ship day and night for more than a fortnight, and the mate can make our lives very easy or very difficult." He arched a brow. "I know which of those *I'd* prefer."

"I was the one who explained away our robes," sniffed Lyim.

"Yes," agreed Guerrand, "and now we have to remember the details of that lie. Which god was it?"

"Gilean, one of the old gods." Lyim chuckled, ignoring the implied criticism in Guerrand's tone. "I'll take that as a thank-you."

Bent over a crate, Guerrand peered under his arm at Lyim. "Let's just hurry and get these things loaded."

They made short work of the task, filling sixteen crates. Guerrand called to the mate, who showed the young men where to put the crates on the deck. It was long, tedious work, and even patient Guerrand thought he might lose his mind by the time Guthrie released them for the night, with a reminder to report for duty just before sunup.

Lyim wasted no time heading for the light and mirth of the Laughing Lynx Inn, a rambling structure of weathered stone, with wooden cross braces bleached gray by many seasons exposed to the sea. Guerrand begged off, saying he needed to stretch his legs before retiring.

The second he saw Lyim's back disappear into the Laughing Lynx, Guerrand hastened down the shore to a rocky jut of land. Sitting on a boulder, he flipped open the pack.

What on Krynn are you doing, Guerrand? He could hear Zagarus's angry thoughts directly inside his head.

Let me out of here!

Though he knew no one else could hear the sea gull, he couldn't resist the temptation to hiss, "Ssshhh!" He carefully withdrew the mirror, glaring into the glassy surface. There, he could see the shadow-shrouded image of his familiar.

Zagarus sprang forth with a squawk, nearly crashing into Guerrand's face. Before the bird could speak, Guerrand said wearily, "Don't ask. All you need to know is that I found the tower and have a master—"

I figured that, since we're not dead.

"And we're traveling with another mage, so we'll have to be careful. No one can know you're my familiar."

The more things change, the more they stay the same, said Zagarus. *Including that I need to eat. How many days was I in there?*

Guerrand shook his head. "I'm not sure. Two, maybe? I'm sorry it was so long, but it couldn't be helped."

No wonder I'm starving! With that, Zagarus lifted his wings and soared seaward to find food.

"Stay close!" called Guerrand, knowing it was unnecessary. Zagarus understood the rules better than anyone. Guerrand thought that was strange, when he was on the threshold of learning a whole new set of rules himself.

Chapter Nine

Nineteen days out of Alsip, in the narrows known as the Gates of Paladine, at the mouth of the Bay of Branchala, the *Ingrid* was besieged by pirates. If that weren't bad enough, Lyim saved the entire crew by casting a web spell and trapping the flailing and frightened pirates aboard their own ship, before they could board the *Ingrid*.

That was why Guerrand and Lyim spent the evening of the twentieth day out of Alsip in the wastelands of the Palanthas Plains. Without a map, Guerrand couldn't be sure how far Palanthas lay to the south, but he suspected it was at least fifteen leagues, two very long days' walk.

"We're lucky they didn't set us adrift in a skiff without water or food, or, worse still, make us walk the plank with the pirates," said Guerrand, trying to warm himself before the fire. His robes and trousers were soaked, and the night was unseasonably cool.

"Instead, they put us ashore with neither food nor water," snorted Lyim. "Some thanks for saving their miserable lives!"

"I suspect they felt they were showing their appreciation by not killing us."

"You think I was wrong to cast the spell, don't you?"

"Wrong?" Guerrand had to think for a moment about that. "No," he concluded, "I don't believe you were wrong to save everyone before there was bloodshed." In fact, Guerrand admired Lyim's facility with magic. He felt awkward in comparison. "I, however, might have chosen a less flamboyant way of doing it."

Lyim was nonplussed, proud, in fact. "That's because I believe anything worth doing is worth doing with flair." He stood and thumped his chest. "If you ask me, it's just as well that we got kicked off the ship. The work! The confinement! I thought I might lose my mind. I much prefer to have my time my own, my feet planted firmly on the ground, not some rocking ship." Both knew Lyim had spent some green moments on stormy days aboard ship, though Guerrand was kind enough not to mention it to the proud apprentice.

He, too, had suffered from the hard life of a sailor. He feared that several newfound muscles would ache until his last living day. But secretly, he'd welcomed the back-breaking labor. It gave him the opportunity to think. In the evening he'd wait on the bow of the ship for Zagarus, one of dozens of gulls who would hitch rides on the gunwales there. Late at night, when he was finally allowed to retire, he'd read in secret from his spellbook and take notes by moonlight. Despite his servitude, he felt more in control of his life than he ever had at Castle DiThon. In short, he felt like a new person.

He looked like a new person, too. His uncombed hair was longer, and he'd let his beard grow coarse to avoid recognition. Despite his fears, he'd seen no picture of himself from Castle DiThon on the Berwick's ship.

Thinking of the castle always brought one regretful subject to mind: Kirah. Guerrand was consumed with guilt. He missed her desperately. The memory of her wan little face increased his resolve to complete his apprenticeship in record time so that he could send for her. He only hoped she would forgive him. Perhaps he would send her another note, once he got settled in Palanthas.

"Ignorant and fearful," Lyim continued his tirade, "the whole rotten lot of them. What intelligent folk would do work of any sort when there's magic, I ask you?"

His words reminded Guerrand of the conversation he'd had at the silversmith's with Lyim's new master, the mage Belize.

"You and Belize seem well suited as teacher and pupil," remarked Guerrand, snugging his damp robe around his knees to dry it before the fire. Secretly, Guerrand was grateful to the fates who'd seen fit to delay Belize so that Justarius could offer him a position first. He'd felt an instant kinship with the second-ranked mage; their temperaments, as well as their philosophies about the role of magic in the world, seemed to be in sync. The only thing Belize had ever made Guerrand feel was uncomfortable. His behavior at the Tower of High Sorcery had been particularly unsettling.

"Master Belize and I are well suited because having him as my teacher has been my goal since

the moment I cast my first cantrip." Lyim stooped to stir the fire with a bent branch.

"Did he... recruit you, too?"

Lyim gave Guerrand a strange look. "That's an odd way of putting it. I guess you could say that, in a manner of speaking. I've read and memorized everything Master of the Red Robes Belize ever wrote, all twenty-three volumes."

"And you've got them all? Wherever did you find them?"

"I've never actually owned them, no." Lyim dismissed that notion with a wave of his hand. "As I've said, my homeland in the eastern Plains of Dust bordered the lands of the Silvanesti elves. Elves are far more open about magic than most humans." He chuckled. "Actually, they like magic quite a lot more than they like humans. I worked long and hard to befriend, then bribe, a particularly unscrupulous elf into lending me the tomes from the library in his city. I transcribed some of the more interesting passages into my spell-book. Through them Belize taught me that magic is power, and power is ... well," Lyim explained, shrugging, "power is everything."

Lyim sat back down. "Where did *you* learn enough magic to qualify as an apprentice?"

Guerrand shrugged. "My father's library was filled to the brim with books, some predating the Cataclysm."

"Your father's *library*?" scoffed Lyim, his nose elevated. "Born with a silver spoon in your mouth, eh?"

Guerrand gave a wintry laugh. "More title than substance. Anyway," he said, anxious to change the subject, "when I was quite young, I found some books with interesting symbols. I read them over and over, and before I knew it, I'd performed my first cantrip—I made my little sister's hair glow as if it were on fire."

"These books predated the Cataclysm, you say?" Lyim whistled. "Would I like to get my hands on some of those. I bet they contain some long-forgotten spells."

Guerrand eyes widened. "I never thought of that. They just seemed old and dusty to me." He pulled up his pack to serve as a pillow. "It sounds like we couldn't have taken more different paths to the same place. We must both utter a prayer of thanks to Habbakuk or whatever luck allowed us to survive the trip through Wayreth, as well as being accepted by the highest mages in our order."

Lyim's eyes turned dark in the firelight. "I don't believe in luck." His voice was brittle. "I've earned everything I've ever achieved. By myself. *Despite* the fates, you might say. And I've only just begun."

Guerrand held up a hand. "I meant no offense, Lyim—"

"I know what you meant," said Lyim, his jaw tightening. "I've seen the attitude all my life." He screwed up his face, as if imitating someone. "Rule number one: Without exception, nobles are better than common folk." He ticked the concept off on a finger. "Rule number two: A man of modest means has made nothing of himself—he's lazy and hasn't used his skills to advance his lot. But if that same man is successful, he was simply lucky."

Guerrand fell silent. He could not dispute that what Lyim said was true. He had witnessed Lyim's rule number one. Why were Cormac and Rietta, by birthright, permitted to live in the luxury of the privileged class, while far more productive people, like Wilor the silversmith, were simply common workmen? Looking at Lyim's angry face, Guerrand realized that some men harbored greater burdens than a wicked sister-in-law's tongue.

"Well," Lyim finished, angrily grinding a smoldering ash outside the fire circle under his boot, "I intend to be the luckiest man ever to live." With that, he stomped into a small ring of trees beyond the firelight.

Lyim had been gone only a few minutes, when Guerrand heard a rustling noise in the trees. He looked up, expecting to see Lyim returning from the darkness in an improved mood. But there was no one, nothing. Guerrand shrugged off the sound, attributing it to a small animal.

Moments later, he heard the sound again. It was definitely something moving through the underbrush, beyond the reach of the fire's light. Guerrand stood and kept the flames between himself and the noise. The light shone annoyingly in his eyes, and he could see no shapes or movement that did not belong in the woods.

"Lyim, is that you?" he called, trying to appear brave, but succeeding only in turning paler than a mushroom. No reply came to reassure him.

Then Guerrand heard the sound again, behind him this time. He spun around and saw his pack, which he had been using as a pillow just moments before, rising roughly through the air, its flap opening and the whole thing bulging and moving as though someone was rummaging inside. The sight made his jaw drop, but an instant later it clenched tight in anger. If a stupid little cantrip was Lyim's idea of a joke ... Everything of value that Guerrand owned was in that pack, including his spellbook and the magical mirror containing Zagarus. He scooped a large piece of flaming wood from the fire and stepped menacingly toward the strange scene.

"Lyim, just stop right now," Guerrand called. "You're going way too far this time." But the invisible intruder paid no heed, continuing instead to rifle Guerrand's pack.

Growing angrier by the second, the young mage prodded the stick toward where he suspected Lyim was standing. But the weak thrust was struck aside. The force of the blow surprised Guerrand. The torch had nearly been knocked from his hand. Guerrand knew the rules of this spell. If Lyim were invisible, the blow would have made him visible again.

An icy chill ran up Guerrand's spine. "Who are you? What are you?" he bellowed. There was no response. Fear squeezed his heart. Where in the Abyss was Lyim, and why wasn't he coming out of the woods?

With all his strength behind it, Guerrand swung the flaming log. It traveled through the air with a thick, whooshing sound before cracking into something solid. Sparks showered the area and Guerrand's pack tumbled to the ground. Still completely unsure what he was fighting, but reassured that it was physical, Guerrand swung the burning club again. This time his blow swished harmlessly through the air.

Guerrand gasped suddenly, unable to breathe. The air spun around him, raising clouds of dirt. His body was being squeezed, as if the air itself were pressing in so tightly that it might crush him. The brand dropped to the ground and rolled away while the young mage kicked and struggled against the invisible foe.

Just as suddenly, Guerrand was released. He collapsed to his hands and knees, gasping for breath. Scurrying away, he saw small whirlwinds of dust weaving toward him.

"Lyim!" Guerrand yelled toward the thicket, and still there was no answer. Touching his fingers together tip-to-tip, Guerrand mumbled the words of a spell. The air about him shimmered, and then he rolled quickly to the left. As he moved, he appeared to split in half, leaving an exact image of himself in his wake. Then both Guerrands split again, creating four, and again, until there were eight Guerrands crouching around the fire. Each was identical to the original. Each one moved in exactly the same manner. There was no way for an observer to tell which, if any of them, was the real Guerrand and which were magical duplicates.

The horde of small whirlwinds paused momentarily, unsure which enemy to attack. Then they chose one, apparently at random. Again the air smashed in, swirling and crushing, until the first counterfeit Guerrand disappeared without a sound, taking with it the whirlwinds of dust.

Frantically, the seven remaining images scanned the area, trying to locate the invisible creature. When a stick snapped, all heads turned toward it, but not soon enough. A second image was crushed and destroyed before Guerrand could reach it.

The six images would last until they were destroyed, but Guerrand knew that was only a matter of time. Eventually this thing would get lucky and attack the real Guerrand. He had a dagger to fight it with, but Guerrand doubted he could survive getting close to his assailant again.

A third image was being pinned and squeezed. All five of the others turned toward the scene and pointed. Guerrand mentally prepared to cast another spell. Unable to actually see his foe, he was taking a big chance. Again he shouted the memorized words that triggered a magical release.

"*Sula vigis dolibix!*" Two tiny, glowing arrows appeared next to each image's outstretched finger and streaked toward the assumed target. Simultaneously the arrows disappeared in a burst of light, and a sound, like air being forced through a long tube, reverberated around the campfire. A hit! Guerrand rejoiced that the creature could be hurt, though he had run out of ideas about how to

attack it.

A fourth image was crumbling when, to his utter relief, Guerrand noticed the robed figure of the other apprentice standing at the edge of the woods. "Lyim!" he cried.

The other mage held up his hand for silence. He'd ripped a small square of cloth from the hem of his robe. Lyim tossed it onto the ground. There it flopped and writhed before a stream of rats burst forth and rushed toward where the fourth image of Guerrand had disappeared. The rats' tiny eyes glowed red in the firelight as they swarmed forward. Guerrand couldn't begin to count them; dozens rushed into the light, and still more poured out from the thrashing cloth, until there might have been hundreds charging ahead.

The rats found the invisible creature as surely as Guerrand's magical missiles had. They ran into it, up it, around it, defining its outline. The creature was tall, not quite twice Guerrand's height, and vaguely human shaped. As the rats sank their teeth into its invisible flesh, if it was flesh, the creature's haunting wail filled the night, drowning out the raucous squeaking of the rodents. Rats were crushed and squeezed and pulped, flung into the fire or away into the shadows, but still more streamed out, until the scene was a seething mound of biting rats. Guerrand stepped back, aghast. Aside from his simple magical missile spell, which was clean and brief, he had never seen violent magic turned loose against a living thing. The ground was thick with the crushed and lifeless bodies of rats, and still the mound thrashed and squirmed beneath them. Rat corpses hissed and sizzled in the fire, while maimed rats dragged their wounded bodies around in circles or attacked each other.

Finally the heaving mound was still. As the invisible thing's struggles ceased, the heap collapsed, as if the enemy beneath had suddenly slipped away. Their foe destroyed, the surviving rats turned and streamed back toward the cloth square, disappearing beneath it and returning to whatever magical stuff they had been summoned from. The bodies of the dead rats crumbled into dust and then were gone. As the last rat disappeared, so did the bit of cloth.

Lyim surveyed the scene with a look of incredible satisfaction on his face. "Now, which of you should I be addressing...? I bet you're, oh, that one right there. Am I right?"

Guerrand realized he was still surrounded by several images of himself. "Wrong." With a mental command, the extra Guerrands disappeared. He plunked down by the fire and peered through his pack. Everything seemed to be there. Most importantly, the mirror that contained Zagarus was still safe beneath Guerrand's spare socks.

"What was that thing, anyway?" he asked when Lyim strode over to join him.

"I'm not exactly sure." Lyim examined the torn hem of his robe. "I felt bad about the way I stormed off, so I was on my way back when I heard you call out. By the time I got to the edge of the woods, it looked like an invisible bear or something was squeezing the life out of you. I couldn't figure out what was going on, so I hunkered down and watched for just a moment, trying to get some idea of how to help."

Lyim snapped his fingers. "That image trick was a good idea, by the way. I'd say it saved your life while I was working up the rat spell."

Guerrand shivered, remembering the feel of all the air being crushed from his lungs. "I'd say so, too." Both men sat quietly for several moments. Guerrand poked through the fire with a stick. "Thanks, Lyim."

"It was nothing." The other apprentice clapped Guerrand on the back. "Let's just hope that whatever that thing was, it doesn't have any relatives in the area." With that, Lyim rolled out his blanket, curled into it, and was fast asleep in moments.

Guerrand knew that sleep would not come to him tonight. He stared into the fire until the sun rose in the east.

Walking along the coast of the bay, Guerrand and Lyim made it to the foothills late the next day. The weather was hot. Both mages kept their heavy, coarse robes rolled up in their packs. Though the landscape was barren, seemingly devoid of people, a mage could never be sure when

he'd come upon someone who feared magic.

"The coast here reminds me of where I grew up on Northern Ergoth," Guerrand remarked. "Few cliffs and dunes, mostly flatlands that roll right into the sea. The waters here are calmer, though, being a bay."

"Northern Ergoth..." muttered Lyim. "Isn't that just a backwater, mostly inhabited by those awful little kender creatures?"

Guerrand felt himself bristle. "They occupy a small portion of it in the eastern woodlands, yes. The western half is quite civilized. We even have an emperor. Mercador Redic V is his name."

"Really?"

"Yes," said Guerrand. "Why, just last month, someone in my village discovered how to make fire."

"All right, all right, I get it!" cried Lyim, laughing. "Sorry."

Guerrand nodded. He wasn't sure why he'd felt so defensive of his homeland—he'd never felt much affinity for it before. Perhaps, he reasoned, it's because I already feel like such a rube compared to Lyim. It didn't sit well to be reminded that he came from a "backwater." The realization reinforced Guerrand's resolve to study hard and learn his master's lessons quickly.

At noon on the second day, the northern foothills turned to mountains. It took the apprentice mages two and one half long, hot days to reach the crest of the second mountain. To their great surprise and relief, the mages looked down upon a wondrous, sprawling city. It was their first view of Palanthas, the city that would be their home, and their classroom, for years to come.

Guerrand sucked in his breath at the view. Blindingly white against the blue, late-summer sky, the city of mages was laid out like a wheel. Like the spokes of that wheel, eight major thoroughfares radiated in perfectly straight, perfectly spaced lines from a central courtyard. Each road passed through the city wall beneath impressive gates flanked by twin minarets. The city had obviously been constructed over a long period of time, since the central portion within the city gates appeared older. Still, the architect of the newer section beyond the walls had gone to great extremes to match the old in both style and materials, some granite, though mainly extremely expensive and impressive polished white marble. Guerrand had not seen such marble except for the carved plinths at Stonecliff. Well-maintained homes of simpler design continued on into the surrounding hillsides.

"Did Justarius give you any clue as to where to go?"

Guerrand shook his head. "He gave me a riddle. He told me that getting to Palanthas and locating his home was a crucial, first step in my training. How about Belize?"

Lyim frowned his frustration. "Not really. Just before he left the tower he said something like, 'If you make it to Palanthas—' "

"He said 'if'?"

"Maybe he said when, I don't know. Let me think." Lyim closed his eyes to concentrate. "What he said was, 'My house is in Palanthas. If you get that far, knock on the door and wait.'"

"That's it?"

Lyim snorted good-naturedly. "Hey, at least it's not a riddle. Let's hear your great clue."

Guerrand, with an exaggerated, imperious lift of his eyebrows and a mischievous gleam in his eyes, stepped back and recited, " 'At morning's midlife, mark the hour, the eye is the sun, the keyhole's the tower.' "

"Oh, really useful, that," guffawed Lyim. "I bet I can bribe someone into leading me to Belize's place before you figure out that one."

With joyous shouts, the two mages donned their robes and broke into a run toward the city of mages and their futures. The rugged mountain road gave way to a beautiful tree-lined avenue. Straight as an arrow, it sloped sharply downward, headed directly through a gate topped by minarets. It appeared to end at a palatial estate in the center of the city. Guerrand and Lyim stood at the gate of the outer wall, with a stunning view of the city laid out before them.

"Home was never like this, eh?" Lyim declared.

"It still isn't." Both apprentices looked at each other, wondering who had spoken.

A tall, slim young woman stepped forward from behind a tree. She wore a sleeveless,

shimmering gown of rose, gathered just beneath her breasts in the classic style. Curly tendrils of shiny golden-red hair ringed her face, its bulk caught up in a coil high on the back of her head. A thick silver arm bracelet in the shape of a snake encircled the flawlessly tanned flesh of her right bicep. Guerrand found himself thinking she was as perfectly beautiful as Lyim.

"I am Esme. Justarius sent me to introduce one apprentice mage named Guerrand to Palanthas."

"How did you know we were here?" asked Lyim.

The young woman looked amused. "Magic." She glanced from one gaping man to the next, an exquisitely shaped brow arched in question. "Which of you would be Guerrand?"

Both apprentices seemed to find their voices at the same time. "Me!" Looking at each other, they laughed.

Esme, however, did not seem to find them amusing now. Maintaining a solemn expression, she asked, "Shall I be forced to guess? Justarius would be most displeased if I chose incorrectly. He despises tomfoolery."

The smile dropped instantly from Guerrand's face. Pushing back his hood, his head hanging slightly, he stepped forward. "I am Guerrand. Please excuse us if we seem a bit giddy. We've traveled long and hard to get here."

She seemed to consider that for a moment. "Who is he?" Esme's auburn head jerked toward the other mage.

Lyim stepped up boldly, gave his name and a slight bow of his head. "I have come to apprentice with the Master of the Red Robes, Belize himself," he said proudly. To his surprise, Esme looked less than impressed. Guerrand detected a flash of pity, but the expression was gone in the blink of a long-lashed eye.

"I see." Esme turned on a soft-booted heel and without another word set off down the smoothly paved avenue. Guerrand and Lyim glanced at each other again, then trotted after the rosy robe that seemed to float like a windswept cloud above the paving stones.

Lyim jogged up to her left side. "I am most anxious to get acquainted with my new home and would appreciate the opportunity to tour it with a guide even more lovely than this most beautiful of cities."

Esme looked at him out of the corner of one eye. "As you will." She waved an arm to the left. "We pass through the area known as Nobles' Hill." Striking, expensive white marble mansions were nestled into the hillside on the eastern edge of the city just beyond the city wall. Esme led them under the twin minarets. "This is still Nobles' Hill, but only the wealthier, higher-placed nobles live within the Old City."

Knowing that, Guerrand could detect slight differences here; the architecture was even more elaborate, the landscaped lawns longer, columns more intricately carved.

"Is this where Justarius lives, then?" he asked.

Esme smiled. "Now, what use would a mage have for living among snobbish nobles?"

Guerrand reddened. Lyim seized the opportunity. "I couldn't agree with you more. However, Guerrand here is a nobleman in his own lands and has a hard time understanding the plight of the toiling classes. I myself have tried to help him in that regard during our travels."

Guerrand sucked in a breath.

Esme, however, looked bemused. "Don't be ridiculous. It's an occupational consideration, not a class one. I, too, am considered to be of noble birth in my homeland."

"Amazing!" said Lyim, trying desperately to recover. "And yet you're willing to serve as a guide for two hopeful apprentice mages here in Palanthas."

Her eyes narrowed angrily. "I am no more a servant than you, sir, and likely your superior at that. I am senior apprentice to Justarius and am preparing to take the Test at the Tower of High Sorcery within the year, which is more than you can say, I'm sure."

Guerrand was stunned into silence. Though he'd said nothing, he, too, had assumed Esme was a servant in Justarius's household.

Lyim found his voice first. "A female mage?" he cried. "What a wonderful notion."

Esme's honey-colored eyes narrowed to mere slits. "Are you too bigoted to believe that LaDonna, the woman you both surely met at Wayreth, is the mistress of the Order of Black Robes?" Then, in a gesture both apprentices were beginning to expect, Esme lifted her chin and stormed away from them.

Guerrand could see from his expression that Lyim was considering going after her, likely to explain his position in some way that would only get him further into trouble. Guerrand laid a firm hand on his friend's arm. "I'd let it drop if I were you, Lyim. We both seem to have trouble saying the right thing to her. Perhaps we'd be wiser to listen more and talk less."

Frowning, Lyim shrugged. "I've tried everything else," he agreed. The gaze he locked on Esme's swaying back was half irritation, half admiration. "I tell you truthfully, Guerrand, I am not accustomed to such opinionated, standoffish maids." He gave a devilish grin. "She's a spicy challenge, that one. What was her name again?"

"Esme," Guerrand supplied quietly. Considering Lyim's good looks, he was quite certain his friend was indeed more used to fending off women than pursuing them. For some reason he couldn't explain, Guerrand felt his mood sink as once more he was forced to follow Lyim in pursuit of Esme.

The rest of the tour went a little better. After allowing the starving apprentices to stop and purchase hot pasties from a street vendor, Esme led them to the Central Plaza before the palace of the lord of Palanthas. The square, though meticulously landscaped with hedges and perennial flowers, was not unlike others of its kind. It was more remarkable for the buildings that flanked it. To the north on a small rise nearer the bay stood the palace Guerrand and Lyim had first noticed from the mountains above the city.

Guerrand could hardly compare the palace to Castle DiThon. It was like contrasting a rose with a dandelion. Though of a comparable size—at least one hundred rods wide—the masonry was a work of art. Whereas DiThon's walls were rough-cut stones, all approximately the same size, linked by crumbling mortar, the marble stones in the walls of the palace were obviously cut with careful precision. Each fit perfectly next to its neighbor, without gaps or fill.

Esme took note of his wondrous examination. "Dwarven made," she offered. "From buildings to brooms, no other race pays such attention to detail in its craftsmanship."

The palace rose up more than four stories. Its gracefully vaulted roof doubled that height and was capped off by a delicate-looking turret room and spire.

"The owner must be obscenely wealthy," observed Lyim.

"Amothus, lord of Palanthas, resides there, as have the lords of Palanthas for centuries. Its upkeep is the responsibility of the city."

"What does a 'lord of Palanthas' do to deserve to live in such splendor?" asked Lyim.

"He and the city senate rule Palanthas. During public events, festivals, emergencies, he speaks to the citizenry from that velvet-draped balcony facing the plaza on the third floor."

Esme gave them a few moments to gaze before directing their attention to an ancient building on the southern edge of the plaza. "That is the Great Library of Palanthas. If you are wise and study hard, it will be as much your home as the residence of your respective masters—once you're able to find them." One side of her lip pulled up into a smug smile.

The library was an immense, relatively simple building of marble. A short, wide, half circle of steps led to a glass-paned entry way in the center. Lengthy annexes jutted back from the square on both ends.

Esme pointed a slender finger to the left wing. "That's the only section open to the public. The rest is the private library of Astinus, who, as even you two neophytes must know, is the ageless chronicler of Krynn's history. He is most unforgiving of intrusion, so do us all a favor and remember to use the smaller entrance on the east wing."

Lyim's attention had already been diverted to the far right of the plaza. "What is *that*?" he gasped.

"That, my good apprentices, is what is left of one of the Towers of High Sorcery." Rocking back on her heels, Esme shivered. "Hideous, isn't it?"

Guerrand thought that, and about one hundred other ugly words. Amidst the shimmering white radiance of buildings stood a single tower of black marble. It fairly radiated a feeling of foreboding. Minarets to match those of the city gates must once have adorned the sides of the central tower like miniature flames. They were now crumbled and caved in, like empty eye sockets. The main tower was surrounded by a similarly black fence. Something fluttered like a huge bird from the fence's gate.

"What happened to it?" breathed Guerrand.

"I've already lost precious study time to this tour," sighed Esme, at last explaining her demeanor. "It may as well include a history lesson. It's not a story any mage likes to tell—or to hear. But it is necessary to understand the place of magic in the world today. You do, of course, know what caused the Cataclysm."

"Of course!" said Lyim. "As the power of mages grew and threatened to overshadow that of priests, the gods became jealous of mortal wizards. The wizards were too proud of their might to curb it themselves, as the gods demanded, so the gods nearly destroyed the world, completely disrupting the study and progress of magic, and withdrawing power from their priests, as well, to hinder the world's recovery as much as possible."

Esme frowned. "Many believe that. Let me try to repeat what I was told by Astinus himself, shortly after I came to Palanthas." She drew a deep breath, then took a seat on the steps of the palace, indicating with a wave of her hand that Guerrand and Lyim should do the same.

"During the Age of Might, nearly three hundred fifty years ago, the kingpriest of Istar became suspicious of everything. He gave his fears a name: magic-users. He didn't understand their powers—more vast than anything we can even imagine now—and he felt threatened.

"Already striving to purge the world of what he considered to be all but followers of Good, the kingpriest's fear of mages was further fueled by the fact that they allowed among their ranks representatives of all three powers in the universe—the White, Red, and Black Robes. The kingpriest did not understand what the orders knew best—as Astinus put it, "The universe swings in a balance between Good, Neutral, and Evil; to disturb the balance is to invite destruction."

"So he used his most powerful weapon—his ability to mesmerize and incite the populace. The people rose against the most obvious manifestations of the power of mages—their towers. There were five once, you know. Here were taken the Tests, which dark rumors said were evil. The heads of the orders—all mages—sought to explain that these were centers of learning, where they kept the most valuable spellbooks and devices. But the stories of strange rituals persisted and grew, until, for only the second time in the history of the orders of magic, all three orders of robes convened to protect their own."

"When was the first time?" interrupted Lyim.

"To create the dragon orbs," said Esme, then quickly amended herself. "Actually, there was another time, when the orders were established at the Lost Citadel. But that information will all be part of your studies," she said offhandedly.

"Anyway, the mages voted to destroy two of their own towers, rather than let ignorant mobs overrun them and unleash magic they couldn't control or understand. However, the destruction of the towers in Daltigoth and Goodlund caused such devastation, it served only to further frighten the kingpriest."

"He got what he wanted!" exclaimed Lyim. "What did he expect them to do?"

"He wanted their tower in his own city of Istar, as well as the one here in heavily populated Palanthas. He cared not at all what happened in far-off Wayreth, and so he gave them the choice to leave the others intact and withdraw to Wayreth quietly."

"If these mages were so powerful the kingpriest was afraid of them, why didn't they fight him?" asked Guerrand.

"You'll know the answer to that when you have a better understanding of what casting a spell drains from a mage. Suffice it to say, the mages, despite their reputation, could not condone

destroying their own people."

"So," Lyim interrupted, "if they did as you say, why is this tower of sorcery in ruins? The Cataclysm?"

"That can't be," answered Guerrand, shaking his head. "If that were true, other buildings in Palanthas would have been similarly destroyed."

"You're right, Guerrand, the tower fell to its current state prior to the Cataclysm, though not long before," said Esme.

Her soft face darkened. "To truly understand the horror of the day it happened, one should hear Astinus tell the story of what is now known as the Curse. He was there; he saw it happen." Esme looked across the plaza to the library, as if, through the walls, she could see the chronicler at his desk.

She shook her head. "The day the mages were to leave the tower, they realized they had far more books and scrolls than they could carry or store in one tower. The masters of each order brought them to Astinus, knowing he alone could guard their secrets.

"The last act in Palanthas of the head of all orders was the ceremony to close the tower's slender gates of gold. The people had gathered to watch the Wizard of the White Robes hand the silver key to the lord of Palanthas. The citizenry was as eager as the man who was then lord to explore the legendary halls of the mages.

"In the very second the wizard leaned over to place the key in the lord's hand, a member of the Black Robes appeared in a window in the upper stories of the tower. While everyone below gaped in horror, the mage shouted, 'The gates will remain closed and the halls empty until the day comes when the master of both the past and the present returns with power!' To everyone's ultimate horror, the evil mage then leaped out, hurling himself down upon the gates. As the barbs of silver and gold pierced his black robes, he sealed his curse upon the tower. His blood stained the ground, the silver and gold gates instantly withered and twisted and turned to black. The most beautiful tower of white and red faded to gray, then black stone. No one has approached the tower since, so powerful is the Curse."

Feeling suddenly chilled on this warm, late-summer day, Guerrand's eyes traveled back to the black thing fluttering on the gate. The remains of the mage. He'd thought it a bird before. But now it had a much more ghastly and sinister appearance.

"That was all so long ago. Things have changed. The kingpriest is dead. I would not be afraid of the tower," boasted Lyim.

Both Guerrand and Esme looked askance.

"The pity is, some things haven't changed much," Guerrand said, thinking of Cormac. "Mages are still persecuted by those who fear what they don't understand. We saw that on the ship from Alsip," he reminded Lyim.

"Perhaps the prejudice still exists," conceded Lyim, "but our order's response to it would be different now."

"You think the mages were wrong to retreat?" asked Esme.

Lyim nodded vigorously. "Never explain, never retreat—those are words that have served me well. I would certainly never throw myself from a tower," he scoffed. "Better to stay alive to thwart your enemies."

Guerrand fell silent. He felt suddenly very weary and alone, despite Esme and Lyim's presence. Because of it, perhaps. "Esme," he said faintly, "could you please take me to our master's home now? I've... enjoyed the tour, but I'm anxious to begin my training."

"What about me?" chimed in Lyim. "Do you know where Belize resides?"

With lazy eyes, Esme smiled. She looked first at Guerrand, "I could," then at Lyim, "I do. But I can't. Justarius has instructed me to remind you of your clue,

Guerrand, but that is all. As for you, Lyim, I've not been instructed to help you."

"Wait a minute!" Lyim reached out a hand to grasp Esme's fragile shoulder. Suddenly the air sizzled, tendrils of smoke erupted, and Lyim was thrown backward almost two paces. He landed flat on his back with an ignominious "*Whooff!*" as the air was knocked from his lungs. His robe flew up

to his face, exposing more than just a little length of bare legs.

Esme looked mildly distressed, and a touch embarrassed, as she considered the stunned mage. Even Guerrand took one limping step backward from her.

She touched a finger to the metal ring around her arm. "My bracelet is a protective device. I didn't want it, but Justarius insists that I wear it whenever I travel in the city. You can see how it would deter the unwanted attentions of beggars or suitors..." Her voice trailed off. Smothering a slight smile, she watched the proud Lyim pull himself to his feet.

"I really must be off, or Justarius will start to wonder," she said lightly. "Do you remember your clue, Guerrand? 'At morning's midlife, mark the hour, the eye is the sun, the keyhole's the tower.'"

"Wait!" cried Guerrand, stopping himself at the last second from reaching for her as Lyim had done. Esme was gone, leaving behind a curvaceous puff of rosy smoke.

"What a spitfire," sighed Lyim, brushing the dust of the sidewalk from his robes. "I could do without that bracelet, but I do enjoy a challenge."

Lyim clapped his hands together, Esme abruptly forgotten. "Now, where do you suppose Belize and Justarius live?"

Guerrand looked to the bleak tower and said wryly, "I think we can rule out the Tower of High Sorcery."

Chapter Ten

Guerrand was on his knees in the summer dining room of Villa Rosad, Justarius's palatial home. Though the morning was warm, the mosaic tile felt cold even through the rough weave of his robe. Beads of sweat dripped from his brow and splashed onto the colorful squares before him.

"Thirty-three, thirty-four," he muttered aloud to help himself focus.

Three days. He'd been counting the number of differently shaped and colored tiles in this octagonal section of star-shaped mosaic for three days. Guerrand supposed he should consider it a blessing that Justarius hadn't told him to count every tile in the room, which was covered, floor, walls, and ceiling with the cool little ceramic pieces. It was the most pleasant room in the villa on a hot, late summer day in the month of Sirrimont.

Today, however, the room seemed anything but pleasant. Guerrand's knees throbbed; his lower back ached; his neck muscles burned. He could scarcely see to count through the sweat that dripped in his eyes and ran down his face. Sighing, he brushed the wet hair back from his forehead and tried to remember where he'd left off.

"Thirty-three, thirty-four..."

Guerrand heard the irregular rustle of a robe sweeping across the tiled floor and knew without looking who approached. When the sound stopped, he felt the weight of a thick hem brush his left arm. Neck held rigid, Guerrand looked out of the corner of his eyes and caught sight of a sweaty-cold metal tankard being lowered.

"Here, Guerrand." Justarius's robust voice echoed against the hard surfaces in the room. "I believe you need this more than I."

Guerrand sank back on his haunches and wiped his brow with the cuff of one sleeve. Accepting the tankard, the apprentice took a long sip of the sweetened lemon verbena water. "Thank you, master."

"How many times must I tell you to call me Justarius? Or sir, if you're so very uncomfortable with my name." He clapped the apprentice on the back. "Master makes me sound old and crotchety. That isn't how you regard me, is it?" Guerrand couldn't see the smile on Justarius's face.

"Oh, no, sir!" exclaimed the apprentice, flustered.

"You're so serious, Guerrand," said Justarius, dragging his crippled left leg behind him as he made for a chair. With a sigh, he eased himself into the straight-backed wooden seat and loosened the starched white ruff he wore at the neck of his red robe. "You must learn to find the joy in life where you can. The gods know, there is little enough of it in this world."

Guerrand took another sip of the lemon herbal tonic. "If I'm overly serious, sir," he said, "it's only because I wish to apply myself to study and learn all that I can as quickly as possible. I feel that I've lost precious time and have much to make up for."

"I applaud your determination, but what's your hurry? By declaring loyalty to the Red Robes, you've pledged your lifetime to the study of magic."

Guerrand shifted uncomfortably. "It's just that, in going to Wayreth to find a master, I had to leave behind someone who needs me, and—"

Justarius's open, friendly face hardened instantly, and his hand went self-consciously to rub his left leg. "We've all had to give up things for magic, Guerrand."

Guerrand nodded quickly at Justarius's serious tone. "Yes, I'm certain that's true." He had wondered about Justarius's limp. Esme had told him the archmage had suffered the injury during his Test, when spectral foes magically tore his left leg. According to her, Justarius had been very proud of his physical abilities and was forced to choose between prowess and magic. Guerrand had to admit that fear of failure, and not just concern for Kirah, drove him in his studies.

"Perhaps I'm a little worried th-that, well .. ." he stuttered, wondering how much he should reveal. "The truth is, I've failed at a previous apprenticeship."

Justarius looked momentarily startled. "To which mage were you previously apprenticed? At Wayreth you told us that you'd had no master."

Guerrand shook his dark, shaggy head vigorously. "No mage. He was a cavalier—I was training to be a cavalier. For nearly ten years." He could feel his cheeks grow crimson with shame.

To Guerrand's surprise, Justarius threw back his head and laughed. "Was it your wish to become a cavalier?"

"Not for a heartbeat."

"Then I would say you succeeded admirably in your apprenticeship, if you were able to put off your master for nearly ten years and still remain his student."

"My brother paid him to remain so."

Justarius arched a brow. "Should I expect your brother to pay me similarly?"

It was Guerrand's turn to laugh. Realizing it might sound disrespectful, he stopped, though with great difficulty. "No, sir. If my brother learned I had apprenticed myself to a mage, he'd, well... I don't know what he'd do, but it wouldn't be pleasant for me." Guerrand's mind flashed to a campfire in the foothills north of Palanthas, where he and Lyim had been attacked by the invisible creature. "He'd be more inclined to pay someone to kill me than anything else."

"That bad, eh?" Justarius gave Guerrand a sympathetic look and shook his head. "Who would have thought that such prejudice against magic would still exist so long after the persecution by the kingpriest? Well," he sighed, "I suppose there will always be ignorance. It's as important to maintaining the balance between Good and Evil as anything else."

Justarius looked to the star pattern on the tile before Guerrand. "How is your counting coming?"

The apprentice bit his lip and screwed up his courage. "Sir," he began, "I know an apprentice is not supposed to question his master's instructions, but I've counted these tiles for three days now, and I always come up with the same number of blue, red, and yellow pieces. I'm not sure what answer I'm expected to arrive at."

"And you can't see how any of this has anything to do with learning new spells, am I right?"

Guerrand's face brightened. Justarius *did* understand how he felt!

"I will tell you what my master told me when I did the tile exercise and asked the same question."

"Your master gave you this same exercise during your apprenticeship?"

"Of course. As Merick had been subjected to it by his master, and so on. In a proper apprenticeship you inherit long-held traditions, as in any family. This particular tradition is always held in this very room." Seeing Guerrand's confusion, Justarius briefly explained, "I inherited Villa Rosad upon my master's untimely death some years ago, but that's another story." He looked frustrated at having strayed from the topic. "Would you like to hear the explanation or not?"

Guerrand nodded eagerly and leaned forward.

"You will know the answer to the latter when you understand the former."

Guerrand could not keep his expression from deflating.

"How many green tiles are there?"

The question startled Guerrand. "One hundred thirty-three."

"Red?"

"Two hundred ten."

"Yellow?"

"Thirty-five, if you count the ones that have faded or worn down to beige."

Justarius nodded his approval, which sent a wave of happiness fluttering in Guerrand's chest.

"Now, close your eyes."

Guerrand slammed his eyes shut before thinking.

"Now, tell me how many of the two hundred ten red pieces are triangular-shaped? Keep your eyes closed!" Justarius barked, seeing Guerrand's lids flutter in confusion.

Not knowing what else to do, Guerrand squeezed his eyes tighter, leaned forward again, and pressed the tips of his fingers to the mosaic. How could he possibly tell the difference between colors with his eyes shut? Think, he prompted himself. Red formed the center of the star, before the points jutted out. Using the tips of his fingers to find cracks, he tried to determine the outline of the

star. He even managed to find some triangular pieces, but he gave it up before long, unable to remember which tiles he'd already counted. Guerrand's fingers curled into a frustrated fist.

"Have you determined yet what relevance this exercise has for spellcasting?"

Guerrand chanced opening his eyes to meet Justarius's. His master's were dark, patient, nonjudgmental. "I presume you're trying to teach me to memorize."

Justarius wagged a finger and shook his head. "Unh-unh, but you're close. I'm trying to get you to visualize."

Guerrand's expression told Justarius that the apprentice saw little distinction between the two.

"Guerrand," he murmured, "the difference is as wide as an ocean! Your understanding of it will determine whether you'll progress beyond the simple spells that can be cast by anyone who can read, like the ones you knew when you came here."

Justarius thrust the tip of his walking stick to the center of the star. "Most masters will tell you that memorization is everything—Belize would say that. They're all wrong. Or at least only partially right. It is true that anyone who is able to memorize the right combination of words, gestures, and materials can cast a spell. Your brother who loathes magic could do it, if he chose to."

The archmage used both hands to shift his crippled leg. "But if you wish to rise above those who practice magic by rote, you must have more than a cursory understanding of how magic works. Let me give you an example: You can mindlessly repeat the words of a ballad, or you can truly hear their meaning. You must have a passion for that understanding, not just for the power such magic can provide. Only then can you tap into the extradimensional source of energy from which true magic springs."

Guerrand's head was starting to reel, yet he was fascinated. Justarius looked into his eyes and judged that he could take still more.

"The proper performance of magic—even one spell—is as taxing to the mind as rowing a longship alone would be to the body. Illogical mathematics, alchemical chemistry, structured linguistics... The mage must use these disciplines to shape specific, twisted mental patterns that are so complicated and alien to normal thought that they defy the conventional process of memorization. Confounding this further, he must account for subtle changes like seasons, time of day, planetary motions, position of the moons, that sort of thing. Rote memorization cannot accommodate these changes. But a passionate understanding of the workings of magic, achieved through the use of visualization, can. The reward after years of study—the advantage of this discipline—is the ability to combine disparate elements to create new spells."

"I had no idea it was so complicated," said Guerrand faintly.

Standing with difficulty, Justarius scratched his head. "I must be slipping in my advancing age," he said, backing away one faltering step. "I can see I've given you almost too much to think about."

"I *will* think about it—all of it," Guerrand promised. "Passion for the magic, not the power," he repeated solemnly.

"That's the key," nodded Justarius. "And now I've turned you all somber again. Think about it for a while if you must, then go row a longship or something to balance out your mind and body." With that, Justarius limped toward the archway of the summer dining room. Suddenly he snapped his fingers, stopped, and turned.

"One last thing, Guerrand," said the mage. "Please instruct your familiar to not treat the villa like the bottom of a bird cage. Denbigh has been complaining."

Guerrand's eyes went wide. How did Justarius know about Zagarus? Sea gulls circled and strutted about the villa constantly, and he'd been extremely careful not to single Zagarus out in any way. In fact, Zag spent most of his time in the mirror, except when Guerrand let him out in the confines of his room. Zagarus would then fly out the window to feed.

"How did you know?"

Justarius had been watching with amusement as Guerrand deliberated. "If a mage wishes for a long life, there is very little that happens in his home about which he is unaware," he said, idly twisting the plain gold band around his right index finger. "You would be wise to remember that."

Noting Guerrand's expression of shame, the mage added, "Buck up, lad. I'm not criticizing. You were right to not tell me about your bird. A mage should protect the identity of his familiar, since it makes him vulnerable. Frankly, I was impressed that you were able to master the spell that summons a familiar in the first place. It reaffirms my initial opinion of you."

Justarius turned again to the archway, dragging his left leg behind him. "Before you get too full of yourself, just remember the droppings, or Denbigh will have both our heads."

Guerrand chuckled, managing at last to find the humor in the situation. But then he remembered his promise to Justarius. He stared more intently than ever at the mosaic star, noticing and noting details he'd not seen before. He was just about to close his eyes to see how well he could visualize the colorful image in his head, when he heard another set of footsteps, light and even, in the doorway behind him.

"You'll have to forgive our master. He always forgets food," Guerrand heard Esme say. "Justarius lives on lemon water alone and thinks everyone else can, as well. I brought you a bit of cheese, cured pig, and an apricot fresh from the garden." The young woman came around to stand beside his kneeling form.

"Ah, the tile exercise," she said sympathetically, taking note of his posture and closed eyes.

Guerrand slowly opened one eye, then the other to regard her. "How long did it take you?"

The smooth, flawless skin of her cheeks flushed. "One day. But it took me five to find the villa," she added quickly.

Guerrand smiled gratefully at the nod to his ego. He'd managed to stumble upon Justarius's unmarked home in a day and a half. It had taken him a while to realize that the references to "eye" and "keyhole" in the riddle were setting up a straight line. When the "eye" of the sun was placed to the "keyhole" of the tower—the summit of the Tower of High Sorcery—the eye would be looking where the tower's shadow fell. The trick was following the tower's shadow as it moved across the city until the right time — midmorning, "morning's midlife."

"Can you give me your secrets for understanding the memorization versus visualization riddle?"

Esme smiled ruefully. "None that would really help you. I liken it to that parlor game, where you're shown a picture and asked whether you see the oil lamp or the two ladies in profile. One day the clouds seem to open up and you simply stop seeing the lamp and start seeing the ladies." She shrugged. "Or whichever way it's supposed to be."

Sighing, Guerrand took a spiritless bite of the cheese. "I fear I'll always see the lamp."

'Justarius would not have chosen you if you weren't capable of seeing both.'

Guerrand studied her beautiful, guileless face for a moment and realized she spoke truthfully. "Tell me about yourself, Esme," he prompted.

"Shouldn't you still be counting tiles?"

"If I count one more ceramic square my head will explode!" Guerrand stood and lifted the tray of food she'd brought him. "I need a break," he announced. "Will you join me for lunch in the peristyle, the atrium—I don't care if we talk in the kitchen fireplace! I've got to get away from these tiles."

Laughing, Esme looped her hand through Guerrand's arm as they passed through the doorway. Villa Rosad was laid out in a rectangle, with all rooms overlooking the large open-air garden the Palanthians called a peristyle. Instantly, the feeling of closed-in coolness gave way to the warmth of the summer day in the courtyard. A colonnade of unblemished white marble entirely ringed the formal garden in the center of the villa. Through the pillars, over planters of vibrant orange and yellow wallflowers and minty lotus vine, came the sound of running water, adding to the tranquility of the setting. The air smelled moist, refreshingly green. Moss crawled between cracks in the worn-smooth paving stones beneath their feet.

Guerrand went to his favorite table, a cool, circular piece of green-veined marble supported at equidistant points by three white marble statues of lions. Tucking his long legs beneath the table, Guerrand bumped his knee against the maned head of one of the leonine figures.

"Watch out," he admonished Esme with a mischievous smile as she sat down opposite him.

"The lions bite." He rubbed his knee for effect.

"It's good to see you smiling," the lovely young woman said kindly. "I believe that's one of the first smiles I've seen in the months since you arrived."

"I guess I'm out of practice," Guerrand said distantly, staring at the stream of water spewing from the mouth of a pale cherub fountain in the fishpond. "There wasn't much laughter in the castle where I grew up, at least not in the last ten years or so."

"A castle? That doesn't sound like such a bad place to grow up."

Her tone made him aware of how he'd sounded, and he was ashamed. "I never meant to imply ... What I mean is, it was a comfortable enough place, just not very happy. No one in it was very happy." Especially now, after I backed out of Cormac's plans.

"You, neither?"

"Me, especially."

"And you're happier here?"

Guerrand's gaze penetrated Esme's golden eyes. "I can honestly say that I've never been happier in my life. I'm thrilled with my tiny cell of a room. I love hunkering over thick, dusty tomes in the library, and I delight in arguing with the bizarre ascetics who run it." He paused, reflecting. "But I'm happiest when I'm bent over the same ceramic tiles I've counted for days and I begin to understand why I'm doing it."

She smiled her agreement. "It's a marvelous feeling, succeeding at something everyone always told you you'd never be able to do."

Guerrand sat back, startled. "Did Justarius tell you that?"

Esme looked equally puzzled. "Why would I need Justarius to tell me my own life?"

"I don't understand—"

Esme frowned and began nibbling a nail. "What's to understand? Like most men, my father's ambitions for me began with marriage and ended with babies. Becoming a mage was a worthy enough goal, but only for his sons."

"So did they?"

"Become mages? No..." Esme looked as if she were about to explain, then thought better of it and shook her head. "No, they didn't."

Guerrand took a bite of cheese. "At least your father didn't believe that mages should be wiped from the face of the land."

Esme gave an unladylike snort. "My life might have been easier if he had." Looking at him, she asked, "I presume from your tone that your father didn't approve of mages?"

"No, it's my elder brother who thinks mages are the lowest form of life." He sank his teeth into a fuzzy apricot and swallowed a bite before continuing. "As for my father, I suspect from his library that he had more than a passing interest in magic. But it doesn't really matter now. He's been dead for ten years."

Esme's fine eyebrows raised. "About the time people stopped smiling in your castle."

Guerrand smirked with dark humor. "Kirah and I spent a fair amount of time laughing behind the backs of Cormac and his nasty wife. Does that count as smiling?"

"Kirah?" A strange look came across Esme's face. "It depends on who she is. If she's a pet, then no. However, if she's a sweetheart, or a wife perhaps?"

Guerrand threw back his dark head and laughed out loud. "A wife?" He snickered. "It's hard to imagine Kirah ever being a wife, which is a pronouncement she'd be happy to hear. Pet would come a lot closer to describing her...."

Esme's gaze was stony.

"She's my kid sister," Guerrand chortled at last, ducking from the square of cheese she threw at him for teasing her. "You'd like her, I'm certain. In an odd sort of way, you remind me of her. You're both blond. She's willful, independent, impulsive, and despises it when someone underestimates her because she's a girl. She's a scrappy little thing who looks more ragamuffin than ladylike—or even human—most of the time."

"Are you implying I don't look like a lady?"

Esme was baiting him, and he knew it. The look he gave her was so deadly serious she couldn't look away. He said the first thing that came to mind. "I think you're the most beautiful lady I've ever seen in my life." Abruptly he wished he could bite off his tongue.

When at last Esme was able to tear her gaze away, her cheeks were flushed. She tried to think of something witty, something kind to say in return, but her thoughts refused to settle. "I think I would like your sister Kirah quite a lot, Rand," she managed at last.

Just then, Justarius's disconcerting manservant approached them from the kitchens. Even after several months, Guerrand could scarcely suppress a shudder at the sight of the hideous owlbear. The name was appropriate enough for the nearly eight-foot-tall creature that looked like a cross between a giant owl and a bear. Denbigh had a thick coat of ocher-colored feathers and fur. The eyes above his sharp, ivory beak were red-rimmed and heavy-lidded. Around his neck hung a string of shrunk skulls separated by threaded fangs.

Denbigh reached a sharp claw toward Esme. She calmly took the tankard the manservant offered her. "Thank you, Denbigh. How did you know I needed a drink?"

"Denbigh not," snarled the owlbear in a voice that sounded like a nail on ice. "Orders."

"Well, thank you just the same," Esme said, unfazed. She leaned back in her chair and sipped her drink.

Seeing the claw reach for his own tankard on the table, Guerrand quickly put his hand over the top. "Don't worry, Denbigh. I have enough."

"Denbigh not worry," he snapped. The owlbear shuffled away, looking horribly out of place in the perfectly manicured garden. Guerrand shuddered again, watching him depart for the kitchens.

"You still don't feel comfortable around Denbigh, do you?"

"No, I must confess I don't. The servants I'm accustomed to don't have fur or snap at you."

Esme shrugged. "Considering that owlbears aren't known for their courteous natures, Denbigh does pretty well, I think."

"What kind of name is that for an owlbear, anyway?"

"It's the name given to every manservant who's ever worked here. I suspect Denbigh's owlbear name would be pretty unpronounceable to us anyway."

Guerrand frowned. "Why doesn't Justarius hire something, well, a little more human-looking?"

"Three reasons, I think. Believe it or not, Denbigh runs the villa quite efficiently. If he were more pleasant to look at, all of the other mages would try to buy him away. I think you can guess the third reason, after doing the tile exercise. Justarius doesn't judge something's worth by the outer package; he visualizes the inner owlbear."

"Frankly, I can't see that the inside of an owlbear looks any better than the outside," said Guerrand with a playful grin, "but I know what you mean."

"Speaking of judging the inside of a person," said Esme, artlessly twirling her tankard between her hands, "how well do you know Lyim Rhistadt?"

"Lyim?" Guerrand repeated stupidly, startled by the abrupt change in subject. "Not well. Well enough. Why?"

"I was just wondering," she said. "You two seem to spend a fair amount of your free time together, yet you seem so different."

"I'll grant you we're opposites," he said, leaning back to ponder. "At first our friendship was based on convenience; we were two apprentices headed for Palanthas. But I've come to admire Lyim. He has a great deal of natural talent. And he seems to draw excitement to him, like a moth to a flame."

Esme nodded her agreement. "I'll admit he's intriguing. Lyim has an air of reckless danger about him."

Did he detect more than a casual interest in her voice? Guerrand felt his chest tighten. What difference does it make if Esme is interested in Lyim, he scolded himself. I've got but one thing to do here in Palanthas, and that's learn magic. I can't allow myself to be distracted.

Suddenly, both Esme and Guerrand's heads shot up as they heard Denbigh's long claws

scraping over the paving stones toward them again. Behind the shuffling, vicious-looking owlbear was the very apprentice mage of whom they'd been speaking.

Guerrand felt his mood dip further. Lyim was impeccably dressed in an outfit Guerrand had not seen before. Lyim reminded him of a strutting peacock, a comparison he'd bet Lyim would enjoy.

The other apprentice had traded his enveloping robe for a crimson velvet cape that splashed over his shoulders and flowed to the floor like a waterfall of blood. Beneath the cape was a black and crimson tunic heavily embroidered with thick silver and gold threads. The tunic was gathered into the waistband of lacquered black leather trousers. They were, in turn, tucked into calf-high cuffed leather boots that had been inlaid with bright crimson-dyed leather in the shape of two, great, stretching dragons.

"Understated, but I like it," pronounced Guerrand with a smirk. Lyim looked more like a dashing cavalier than a typically dowdy mage.

"Good day, fellow apprentices." Bowing, Lyim swept the feathered cap from his wavy, shoulder-length dark hair, displaying a fashionable thick braid down the back. He preened and spun in a circle for their benefit. "It's a far cry from those dreadful burlap robes I must wear at Belize's when studying." Blinking, he finally noticed Esme and Guerrand in the plain garb they were required to wear at Villa Rosad. "It looks perfectly fine for you, Guerrand," he managed without a blush. "As for Esme, she would look enchanting in a barrel."

"Thank you... I think," said Esme with a frown.

"That costume must have cost a fortune," murmured Guerrand, his eyes taking in the detail and craftsmanship. There was no note of envy in his voice; Guerrand knew better than to try to compete with Lyim—or anyone—in the category of *haute couture*.

"Spoken like the noble who would know," said Lyim, still preening. At last he pulled out a chair and carefully lowered himself into it so as not to crease anything. He leaned forward abruptly on his elbow. "Actually, it cost me not one steel piece," he whispered conspiratorially. "It's amazing what shopkeepers are willing to give you when you mention that you're apprentice to the Master of the Red Robes. You should try it," he said, nodding his head at both of them. "Justarius isn't as important, of course, but I'd wager you'd get something."

Guerrand shook his head. Lyim's tactics might have amused him, if it didn't remind him so painfully of the way Rietta did business. He should have been indignant at Lyim's own form of extortion, yet he wasn't. It was difficult to explain, but there was a difference in intent between Lyim and Rietta.

If the flamboyant apprentice was unaware of the insult he'd leveled against their master, Esme wasn't. Guerrand could see her bristling, forming a scathing reply. Suddenly, her expression softened and she looked at Lyim with exaggerated pleasantness.

"Speaking of the great Belize," she said, "how are your lessons progressing, Lyim? Learn how to polymorph yet?" Guerrand swallowed a laugh—it was a spell years beyond any of their abilities.

Predictably, Lyim was oblivious to her sarcasm. He slipped a piece of cured ham from Guerrand's plate and held it high to nibble while he spoke. "The instruction is going quite well, I believe. Well enough for Belize to let me alone with his spellbooks, anyway. You remember me mentioning his published works, don't you Guerrand?" His friend nodded. "I finally have a set at my disposal. Before Belize left, he instructed me to spend a minimum of two hours each day memorizing specific spells."

"Left?" squealed Esme. "You mean he's not even home with you?"

Lyim unconcernedly munched the ham. "He's gone more and more these days. Even when he's at home, he's frequently locked away doing research." Lyim shrugged. "The Master of the Red Robes is a busy man."

"He just hands you manuals?"

Lyim grinned. "A beautiful arrangement, isn't it? Who said apprenticing was difficult? I get to live in a gorgeous villa and read the master's books, and my afternoons and evenings are my own." He put his booted feet up on the marble table and leaned back lazily with his hands behind his head.

"It certainly fits in well with my style."

Esme merely shook her head in disbelief.

"I've already added three new entries to my own spellbook," said Lyim. "I'll demonstrate one for you both tonight, if you're good and come along with me to this wonderful little inn I know on the waterfront. It's a bit seedy, but aren't most truly interesting places? It's quite safe enough, at least for mages. Still, Esme, you should wear your arm bracelet."

Guerrand waved him off. "I'd really like to, Lyim, but I've too much studying to do. I've an exercise that's taken me two days too long already, and—"

Lyim looked around the peristyle. "I don't even see you reading a spellbook. What's so important that it can't wait until morning?"

"It's this tile thing, and—"

"I'll go with you, Lyim," cut in Esme, surprising Guerrand, "if we can stop at the library on the way."

Lyim's handsome face lit up. "The library isn't really on the way, but for you, dear lady," he said as he stood and bowed deeply, "I would circle Palanthas twice on foot, if that were your desire."

To Guerrand's amusement, Esme rolled her eyes. "Fortunately for you, Lyim, it isn't." Still, a smile lit her face, bespeaking her pleasure at the compliment.

"Esme, don't you have studying to do as well?" Guerrand could not stop himself from asking her hastily.

"If keeping Lyim occupied will prevent him from bothering you," she said lightly, "I'm happy to do it. I was intending to make a trip to the library, anyway."

Esme stood and pushed back her chair. "Goodness, the sun is all the way across the peristyle already. I'll meet you momentarily in the atrium," she said to Lyim, "after I change into a barrel." The young woman was smirking as she strode on light feet from the room.

"Good luck with the tiles, Rand," she called over her shoulder. "Perhaps we can discuss ladies and oil lamps further, if you're still awake when I get home." With that, she was gone, leaving Guerrand mightily confused.

"She's a delight!" cried Lyim, looking after her with a lecherous grin. "I swear, Rand, I don't know how you get a thing done here with her to distract you all the time."

"Unlike Belize," ground out Guerrand with thinly veiled annoyance, "Justarius expects his apprentices to study continuously. Esme and I really don't have much opportunity to see each other." Feeling the onset of an ugly mood, Guerrand touched a hand to his throbbing temples.

"What a shame," murmured Lyim, his tone suggesting he thought it anything but. He stood with a satisfied sigh. Using the lily pond for a mirror, Lyim straightened his clothing and smoothed his hair with a hand he'd dipped into the water. "Well, I'm off. Wish me luck." Looking at his reflection in the water, he placed his feathered hat at a jaunty angle, preparing to leave.

I wish you'd trip in a hole, Guerrand thought darkly. "You don't need luck," he snarled instead. "You're just going to an inn."

"With a pretty lass, I might add," Lyim said brightly. He appeared at last to notice Guerrand's mood. "You seem out of sorts, chum. You know what they say, 'all work and no play makes Rand a grumpy man.' Or something like that."

Scowling, Guerrand watched with a mixture of envy and annoyance as the other apprentice left. Of course Esme would find him more interesting. Lyim was as handsome as Esme was beautiful. He had committed to memory three new spells, while Guerrand had not yet solved the stupid tile exercise. Esme had obviously been so embarrassed for him she'd thought it necessary to cut off his explanation. He felt his cheeks grow hot at the memory.

Before even he knew what was happening, Guerrand swept the plate and tankards from the table in rage. The heavy marble plate cracked along a vein and fell into pieces. Fragments flew into the lily pond, scattering the large orange fish. The tankards bounced to a stop, the liquid inside splashing everywhere.

Guerrand's hand flew to his mouth. He could scarcely believe what he'd done. It was so unlike

him to succumb to anger. The sheepish apprentice stooped to collect the pieces of the broken plate, glad no one had witnessed his passionate display. Guerrand's fingers met with the cool, jagged shapes. Almost out of habit, his eyes sank shut, and he visualized each piece by gingerly tracing its edges.

Guerrand's eyes flew open. Something inside him had changed. His mind felt clear, refreshed. He was ready to return to counting tiles. Jumping to his feet, Guerrand raced from the peristyle. This time he was certain he would see the two ladies instead of the lamp.

Chapter Eleven

The gilt-edged porcelain teacup and saucer lifted in scant, jerky motions from the top of the crowded desk. The delicate cup chattered against the saucer. Hearing it, Guerrand squeezed his eyes shut more tightly against distraction and grasped the small leather loop that was the material component for the spell that would lift the cup. He held the loop, had already spoken the magical words. The hitch had to be in his memorization of the spell.

Guerrand forced his mind to focus on the mathematical equation, visualized the pattern in his mind, followed by the mental picture of a floating cup. He could almost hear a cosmic *ping* as all elements of the spell came together. When he opened his eyes, he wasn't surprised to see the cup and saucer floating smoothly above the table for the first time. He was, however, delighted.

"Look, Zag! I've finally done it!"

Perched on the sill of Guerrand's small room in the villa, the sea gull lazily opened one beady eye. *Congratulations. You've managed to lift a teacup, something you've been able to do with your hands since you were in short pants, I'll wager.*

Guerrand frowned and snatched the cup from the air to press his lips to the golden rim. "That's not the point," he said after taking a sip. "Justarius says the levitate spell can be one of the most useful in a mage's repertoire."

Zagarus opened both eyes. *It's good to know that if you ever lose both arms, the bird said wryly, you'll still be able to take tea.*

"I don't know why I ever let you out of that mirror," said Guerrand with a good-natured chuckle. "It seems you're always either making fun of me or causing trouble." Guerrand set aside the teacup and saucer. "What does it look like in there, anyway?"

In the mirror? repeated Zagarus dully. *Like a foggy cave, only without walls. I've made it a little nicer, taken in some twigs and such for a nest.*

Belize's tiny mirror had turned out to be more useful to Guerrand than even that venerable mage could have anticipated. Zagarus had made it his home, claiming it was quite comfortable, warm, and dry. It also made a perfect hiding place for the familiar when he didn't want to be seen or disturbed.

"Can you look out of it and see me?" asked Guerrand.

Afraid I'm spying on you, eh? Zagarus scratched beneath his wing with his beak. *You needn't worry. There's just a flat, shimmery wall, like a mirror that's lost its silver. At best I see fuzzy outlines moving around. Most of the time you have the mirror in a sack or pocket or drawer, so I can't see even that much.*

"That's it? Is there weather or light or sound?"

Zagarus blinked, thinking. *It is surprisingly noisy at times, like someone walking or talking in the back of the, well, cave. I've thought about exploring, but—*

"Don't," said Guerrand firmly. "I don't need you poking around in there and getting us both into trouble. We have no idea what's in there. In fact, if you hear any more noise, we'll keep you out entirely."

I've been going in and out of it for months and nothing has happened, said Zagarus. *I think it's safe enough.*

"Perhaps you could go back in now," suggested Guerrand curtly, "or fly down to the harbor and eat and visit with friends. I really do need to concentrate."

It was more important than ever that Guerrand be able to study quietly. The concept of visualization was slowly coming to him. It had been nearly two months since Justarius had first explained the discipline that, with perseverance, would one day allow him to tailor his own spells. Late that same night—near early morning—he'd finally made the change from seeing only the "lamp" to the "ladies," as Esme had likened it.

The pace of his study had accelerated rapidly from that moment on. He still was not casting very many new spells, however. Due partly to the season, early autumn, Justarius had him cutting,

drying, and measuring herbs and other components. He knew the name of every hillside weed and root and vegetable.

Hanging from his ceiling were drying clumps of sumac berries, poison oak leaves, and licorice root. Lining the narrow shelf that circled the room were marble apothecary bowls of split dried peas, red rose petals, powdered herring scales, and talc. On his small wooden study desk were liquid-filled glass beakers of grasshoppers and slugs, owl feathers in wine, the tongue of a snake, and the heart of a hen. Under his rope — and — straw bed were stored bags of colored sand, coarse sea salt, ground mica, powdered sulfur and garlic, and powdered rhubarb leaf. Lying about were various sticks of beeswax and pine tar, crystal rods, animal horns, magnets, and scrolls.

Being a magic-user certainly is a messy job, remarked Zagarus. I remember when there used to be room for a bird to sit down in here. Do you really need all this horrid-looking stuff?

"Horrid-looking stuff?" Guerrand snorted. "That's rich, coming from a creature who will, I've seen with my own eyes, eat an old dead fish off the beach!"

Zagarus lifted his yellow beak imperiously. *That's different.*

Guerrand rolled his eyes. "To answer your question, I don't use all of these spell components now, but Justarius says I'll need them eventually. Many mages simply buy what they need from alchemists and apothecaries, but Justarius says that, aside from the exorbitant cost, a mage can never be quite sure of the quality of what he's buying."

Justarius says, Justarius says, mimicked the bird. I don't think in all the years you were a squire I ever heard you say 'Milford says.'

"That's because I never once cared what he said." Guerrand was absorbed in crumbling dried violets into a bowl. "Oh, Milford was a decent enough fellow, probably a good teacher, too. I simply was never very interested in the proper way to stab another man with a lance."

It could be useful some day, Zagarus replied. Suddenly, he craned his neck to look over his wing and out the window. Do you hear that? The festival has begun.

Guerrand strode over to the window. He could hear chimes ringing all over the city of Palanthas. Neighbors in nearby villas in the surrounding hills were ringing bells of their own. Brightly colored pennants fluttered all over the plaza, visible even from Villa Rosad beyond the old city wall.

"Yes, I guess you're right," Guerrand said mildly, returning to his study desk. Jabbing his quill into a dark inkpot, he began to carefully scratch a few notes next to the levitate entry in his open spellbook.

Held loop, recited mathematical and verbal equations, with little success. Repeated pattern, adding somatic visualization; teacup and saucer rose with the steadiness of a suspended bucket. Again, the key seems to be visualization. Dated Boreadai, the twelfth day of Hiddumont in the year AC—

Guerrand's writing hand was abruptly pushed across the spellbook as Zagarus's great weight descended on his right shoulder.

"What do you think you're doing, you great oaf?" the apprentice demanded angrily. "You nearly ruined my entry!" Pushing the bird unceremoniously from his shoulder, he snatched up a pinch of clean white sand from a bowl and sprinkled it over the ink to aid in drying. "Lucky for you, the quill was nearly dry."

I want to go to the Festival of Knights.

"So go!"

Don't you want to?

"Not particularly."

Why not? Because you're afraid you'll run into Esme? Or worse still, that you'll see her and she'll be with Lyim?

Guerrand scowled at the bird. "What are you now, a mind reader?"

I'm right, aren't I?

"No!" Guerrand brushed away the sand. "And even if you were, it's a big city. It's very unlikely that I'd run into anyone I know."

Zagarus flew back to the sill. *So, what's stopping you from going? You used to enjoy the village festivals in Thonvil, as I recall. You're becoming a regular recluse here. And whether you admit it or not, you've been avoiding Esme like the plague.*

Guerrand snatched up the quill again. "I have not!"

She's asked you to accompany her to the library and a dozen other places, and you've said no every time. Yet you gad about frequently with that rascal, Lyim.

Guerrand's brows knit together in a dark, angry line over his eyes. "You never did tell me how well you could hear inside that mirror, did you? From now on I'll remember to leave it in my room."

With that angry retort, Guerrand turned his back on Zagarus, pointedly ignoring the bird. Zag merely remained silent, waiting.

His silence only annoyed his master. "Look, Zag," Guerrand said at last, whirling around, "you know full well that I came to Palanthas to study, not to dance attendance on some flighty, fickle girl whose head gets turned by every other apprentice—" Where had that bitter nonsense come from? Guerrand asked himself. That didn't describe Esme at all.

He held his breath a moment, then let it out slowly. "If you must know the truth, I suspect that Cormac—or possibly the Berwicks—have sent someone after me to, well, I don't think they've come to fetch me." Guerrand turned back to his desk, though he really didn't feel like studying anymore.

"Remember that thing that attacked us in the mountains north of Palanthas? I know, you were in the mirror when it happened and missed all the excitement, but I told you all about it." Zagarus's feathered head nodded.

"Before that, there were those pirates. . . ." Guerrand tapped his chin in thought. "I know there are pirates everywhere, but in the mouth of the Bay of Branchala? Even Captain Aldous said it was odd, that he'd never seen pirates so brazen. We were on a Berwick ship; it's not inconceivable someone could have found me."

That's it? That's why you think someone is after you?

Guerrand shook his head vigorously. "No. One day, Lyim and I went to the library, then to the marketplace to price components, and—"

I don't remember that.

Guerrand scratched his head. "I never told you about it. You must have been in the mirror, or you were free, scouring the waterfront. Lyim and I were leaving a dyed-goods stall; I remember it because the proprietor seemed to be staring at me strangely, almost fearfully. We weren't ten paces out of his stall when we were jumped by a pair of sailors. I remembered enough of my cavalier training to drive one off with my dagger. Lyim reacted quickly enough to frighten away the other with a spell, and we escaped into the throng of people.

Guerrand shook his head. "Ever since that day, though, I get the distinct feeling someone—or something—is watching me whenever I leave the villa. I'm not overly concerned for myself, nor for Lyim. He'd probably like the intrigue, if I told him what I suspect."

Guerrand paused momentarily as he fiddled with the quill. "But I can't take that chance around Esme."

What are you going to do about it?

"What can I do? Just be observant, and be careful, until the day when I can magically determine who's after me."

Have you told Justarius?

"I can't run to Justarius every time I see someone in the shadows," said Guerrand. "I also don't want him to think I'm more trouble than I'm worth. And since I'm fairly certain no one is in danger at Villa Rosad, I don't see any real need to tell him."

Guerrand set the quill down. "Besides, I left Cormac's home to get control of my own life. I can take care of this myself."

A sharp rap drew their attention to Justarius standing in the doorway. His calm expression suggested he'd not heard their conversation. The mage glanced around the room. "Hello, Guerrand. Zagarus," he added with a nod. "I came to tell you that you're going to the festival now."

Guerrand raised his hands plaintively from his notes. "Oh, Justarius, I was just beginning to make some progress here. I'd really rather stay—"

"No," the mage interrupted, "you're coming to the festival. No one is allowed to miss it, another tradition here at Villa Rosad. Rest assured, your notes will still be on your desk when you return."

Seeing there was no recourse, with a sigh Guerrand closed his notebook, wiped the quill clean, then stood obediently.

"Esme has gone ahead," explained the older mage, "but you and I will have a fine—or at least interesting—time. You'll see."

Master and apprentice walked through the cool marble vestibule and into the terraced gardens that enhanced the entrance to Villa Rosad. The view from the winding mountain road that connected Justarius's home with the city below was deceptive. Nestled into the scrubby hillside, the villa looked narrow, not much wider than a primitive cottage. The similarity ended there.

The facade of the building was supported by two twenty-foot statues intricately carved of rose marble. The statue to the right of the double door was a curvaceous woman dressed in the same type of soft-flowing gown Esme favored. The left statue was of a well-defined man, muscles bulging under his artfully draped toga. Both statues had regal, aquiline features and wore jewel-studded crowns. As Guerrand watched, the perfectly formed lips of the woman moved.

"Are you going to the Festival of Knights, Justarius?"

Justarius turned around with a salute and flourish at

the sound of the statue's high-pitched monotone. "Yes, Mitild, I thought we might. It's a lovely day, isn't it?"

Mitild's marble eyes shifted in their hard sockets. "Yes, the garden is quite perfect now. I prefer the autumn flowers, chrysanthemums and sedum."

"I do wish we could go to the festival," said the male statue wistfully, his tone deeper, yet still mechanical. "It sounds so fascinating from up here."

"Now, Harlin," said Justarius in a stern voice, "I've offered you and Mitild your freedom more times than either of us can remember."

"Thirty-seven," supplied Harlin. "We couldn't possibly go free, Justarius. You know you'd be lost without us guarding the villa."

"Yes, that's true enough," the mage agreed kindly.

"Besides, what would we do with our freedom?" said Mitild in that high, hard-edged voice. "Walk through the city, frightening children?"

"Couldn't you go live with other stone giants?" Guerrand suggested innocently. Suddenly he could feel the hot stares of two sets of cold marble eyes.

"Harlin and I are *not* stone giants," Mitild said icily. "Justarius's master, Merick, brought some of *those* here a century or so ago. An ignorant, ugly bunch."

"I'm sorry," said Guerrand quickly, flushing hotly. "I just assumed—"

"Why, because we're as tall as buildings and made of marble?"

"Well... yes."

"Let up on the boy," admonished Justarius. "It was a logical assumption. He lacks your broad experience of stone giants, after all." The statues seemed mildly pacified.

Mitild's eyelids narrowed as she peered intently at Justarius. "Oh, would you look at that? Please hold this, Harlin," she said with a quick glance to the cornice above her. To Guerrand's amazement, the perfectly sculpted male took one arduous step into the tiny doorway between the two statues. He twisted slightly, revealing a perfectly flat back, since only his front had been carved. Harlin reached up with his smoothly crafted left arm to support the portion of the roof above Mitild's crowned head.

With the sluggish grace and grinding noises one would expect from moving marble, Mitild

lifted the hem of her gown and stepped slowly down the stairs toward Justarius. Towering more than three times the height of the unperturbed mage, the giant statue reached down with her enormous, pale hand and tugged at the ever-present white ruff around the mage's throat. "Who would straighten your attire whenever you leave the villa?"

"Certainly no one could do it as well as you, Mitild. It's become crystal clear to me that I could not run Villa Rosad without you, so wipe the thought from your heads," Justarius said firmly, pleased at the slight smiles his words brought to the lips of the statues. "And now, good day."

With that, the mage grasped Guerrand by the elbow and propelled him through the garden. They could still hear the statues' cries of farewell from below on the winding road that led through the kettles to the valley in which Palanthas sat.

Finally out of earshot, Guerrand ventured to ask, "If they're not stone giants, what are they?"

Justarius shrugged. "I haven't the faintest idea," he confessed. "Never have been able to figure it out. Mitild and Harlin came with Villa Rosad. They do a superb job screening and scaring off intruders. In exchange, I must spend a few minutes every now and then making them feel indispensable. It's a small enough price to pay."

"They certainly frightened me sufficiently when I arrived for the first time." Guerrand recalled clearly the day he had followed the tower's shadow to Justarius's villa. "I was so thrilled at having found the place that I strolled straight in as if I owned it—until a pair of marble hands as big as my torso picked me up by the shoulders and made me introduce myself."

Justarius laughed. "And they had orders to give you the hospitable treatment!"

Despite having changed into a summer-weight robe of light linen, Guerrand was perspiring heavily by the time they reached the bottom of the hill. Justarius's road fed into one of the spokes leading to the city's southwest gate. Master and apprentice passed under the twin, golden minarets that soared above each gate in the Old City Wall. The Tower of High Sorcery loomed to the left, commanding their attention. As usual, Guerrand shuddered.

"The tower is an important part of our heritage as wizards," said Justarius, noting Guerrand's reaction. "However hideous it looks, however grim the stories surrounding its downfall, it is a constant reminder to us all how precarious is our position among nonmages. We must be ever-vigilant not to abuse our powers in the eyes of others. It is vital, not only for the survival of the orders, but more importantly to maintain the delicate balance between Good and Evil."

"Frankly, in my little corner of the globe, I never thought of the world as locked in any sort of eternal struggle," admitted Guerrand. "If I had, I might have concluded that the best world is one entirely dominated by Good."

Justarius looked deeply puzzled. "Then why did you declare allegiance to the Red Robes, instead of the White?"

"I listened carefully to all three descriptions of the orders given at the tower," said Guerrand, then paused. He looked at Justarius with concern. "Can I be frank, without retribution?"

Guerrand's master frowned. "I expect nothing less from my apprentices."

"Since you've asked, I thought Par-Salian's definition of the philosophy of the White Robes too simplistic and idealistic to be possible. Simply telling everyone they should be good doesn't make it happen."

Guerrand drew in a breath. "As for LaDonna's explanation of the Black Robes... it sounded like a rationalization for them to do whatever they want, the consequences be damned. That's just immoral."

Justarius lifted one brow. "So you chose the Red Robes by default?"

"No!" cried Guerrand. "I—I liked what you said about the importance of maintaining a balance between Good and Evil. I confess I didn't entirely understand it," he admitted sheepishly, "but at least I didn't disagree with it. Besides," the apprentice blurted, "I admired you."

Justarius overlooked the admission and frowned. "I see we've neglected a critical part of your education."

He stopped and pointed to the twisted, black Tower of High Sorcery. "Look there, and you will see the clearest example of what happens when the balance is upset and one force or another

gains the upper hand."

Guerrand shook his head. "Now I really don't understand. From all accounts, the kingpriest was evil. Wouldn't the outcome have been different if he had been good?"

"Historians have labeled him evil since the Cataclysm." Justarius stroked his pointed beard. "But in his time, he was, with the exception of the insightful elves, considered by all to epitomize the qualities of goodness."

They were walking slowly, still some distance from the city's inner circle, where the festivities appeared to be centered. Drove of people, grinning broadly in anticipation, were passing them up on the roadway.

"Are you certain you want to hear this lecture now?"

"If you'll recall, I was not the one so keen to come to the festival in the first place," jibed Guerrand.

"Then, for my sake, let us sit while I give you the shortened version." Justarius gestured them toward some golden bales of hay stacked along the roadside for seats during the festival's many parades.

"We use that title, 'kingpriest'," he began, once settled, "as if there has been only one. But centuries of humans held the title, and corrupted the office, before the ego of the last to hold it brought on the Cataclysm.

"Nearly five hundred years before that great catastrophe, the city of Istar reigned as the center of commerce and art. As time went on, the citizens began to believe their own publicity too well. Claiming also to be the moral center, they went on to build a temple and install a kingpriest who would proclaim the glory of righteous Istar. The next logical step for such arrogance was to repress the opinions, independence, and talent of those who did not agree. The elves, with their artistic temperaments and infinite wisdom, withdrew from the world of arrogant humans.

"Conditions dissolved rapidly," Justarius continued, "particularly without the temperance of the elves. A kingpriest declared that the rampant evil in the world was an affront to both gods and mortals. A list of evil acts was created, and the punishment for violation was swift. High on the list of evil acts was the execution of magic, but I think you know the story from there."

The venerable mage winced suddenly and rubbed his withered leg. "The point is, Guerrand, these people thought they had a clear grasp of what was Good. They believed fervently that a world where their interpretation of Good prevailed would be best. Among the greatest misconceptions of this assumption is that everyone *must* agree upon what is good for mankind. But how *can* everyone agree, when two men can seldom concur about what is good for dinner?

Justarius's gaze turned toward the blackened tower. "That," he concluded, "is why there will always be — why there *must* be — strife between Evil and Good. To maintain the neutral balance."

Climbing stiffly to his feet, Justarius wriggled his nose as the scent of roasted meat wafted past. He looked toward the nearby stall of a food vendor and smacked his lips. "Enough somber talk on such a festive day," he announced. "This talk of dinner has made me hungry." Justarius forged ahead through the crowd, undaunted by his severe limp.

Behind him, Guerrand weaved and dodged through the streams of people, trying to keep up with his master. As Justarius had promised, the trip was proving worthwhile. They hadn't even made it to the heart of the festival yet. Guerrand reflected that if the rest of the day was even half as interesting, it would surely be a fair to remember.

Chapter Twelve

The tall mage's head was clearly visible, always bouncing, just two arm-lengths ahead in the press of people. Try as he might, Guerrand could not catch up to him, even when Justarius stopped at a stall to purchase roasted venison. Is he trying to lose me in the crowd? the apprentice wondered in irritation. Is this part of some new lesson or test?

Suddenly the trees lining the avenue were gone, and the mob spilled into Palanthas's Central Plaza, the heart of the festival. Guerrand momentarily forgot his annoyance as he gaped in wonder at the sea of multicolored awnings, fluttering pennants, and flapping banners. A forest of feathers in every color of the rainbow waved above a field of wool. Solamnic knights, the patrons of this festival, sat in gleaming armor atop their horses all around the plaza, adding a martial atmosphere to the scene.

A group of young boys pushed past Guerrand, shouting and laughing with enjoyment. They carried small wooden swords and shields, which they swung with abandon, bashing companions and bystanders alike. Guerrand dodged to the side as a man in baggy trousers thumped past on towering stilts, all the while juggling a trio of gleaming, spinning scimitars above the crowd.

Guerrand advanced warily into the churning mass, stretching his neck this way and that, trying to see everything at once. Shop fronts were open with the usual wares for sale. In addition, merchants from far-flung lands had arrived and set up tents around the perimeter of the central plaza. Exotic rugs, furs, and wall tapestries were piled high on makeshift tables. Men hawked containers of powdered spice they pledged would polish floors, cure the common cold, *and* properly spice a ham loaf. One merchant had an entire tent filled with a vast selection of ready-made windows comprised of multicolored shards of glass welded together with beads of cooled lead.

The Festival of Knights was a far bigger event than the little country fairs he was used to. Guerrand realized that he hadn't blinked for some time and his mouth was hanging open. He slammed it shut, feeling self-conscious. Don't act like such a rube, he thought angrily.

The apprentice started. Where was Justarius? Guerrand looked around frantically but saw no sign of his mentor's black hair and white ruff among the thousands of heads moving to and fro.

"Guerrand! Guerrand, come here, lad!"

The young apprentice's head shot up at the sound of his mentor's voice, but he could not sight Justarius anywhere in the impossibly packed throng.

"Over *here*, Guerrand!"

Guerrand followed the sound of Justarius's voice and finally caught sight of him just beyond where several old men played draughts on an upended barrel, oblivious to the noise and press of bodies around them. Justarius waved Guerrand toward him, where a thick line of people stood with their backs to Guerrand, apparently watching something. Every now and then the crowd hissed, cheered, and hollered. Guerrand at last squeezed his way to Justarius's side.

"You really must try to keep up if you intend not to get lost," chided Justarius. "You've missed the most humorous exhibition, though I suppose they'll have another when they find two more contestants."

Bouncing from side to side for a clearer view, Guerrand stood at the southern edge of the Central Plaza. A rectangular swath, thirty by fifty paces, of the neatly manicured lawn had been covered with a knee-high layer of moist, golden sand. Stomping about in a fluster on tall, scrawny legs were two of the largest birds Guerrand had ever seen. Their wide, flat bodies were covered with coarse black feathers. Tiny heads capped off ridiculously long, featherless necks. Overall, the birds stood taller than a man. Their wings, being very small, were useless for flying. On their backs were equestrian saddles, modified somewhat to fit the birds' odd anatomy.

"What are they?" the apprentice gulped. "The result of a wizard's misfired spell?"

Justarius's eyebrows shot up, as if the idea had just occurred to him. "Quite possibly that was the origin of austritches. They live on open plains, like those in southern Kharolis. They can't get off the ground with those great, thick bodies and insignificant wings, so they're used as pack animals."

"What are they doing here?"

"The Knights' Jest. Watch." Justarius nodded his head toward the bird opposite them. A rotund, red-faced man overdressed in red-trimmed forest-green togs put a hammered metal bucket on his head, stuffing the handle under the rolls of his chin. A square had been cut in the front for visibility in the mockery of a knight's helm. After a thickly padded cuirass was buckled around his torso, he was handed a shield. Guerrand laughed when he saw that it bore the arms of a chicken rampant over crossed drumsticks. The long, thin neck of his austritch had been decorated with a strip of green cloth.

At the near end of the rectangular field of sand was a slight, wiry young man, similarly attired in a bucket, his austritch draped in royal blue. His arms consisted of a runny nose quartered with an onion. Each of the men was helped onto the back of a bird by a young man in matching livery, though they looked more like jesters than squires. Bearing the unaccustomed burdens, both birds pranced and fidgeted, their enormous feet sinking into the soft sand.

As the two squires handed their respective knights long brooms in place of lances, sections of the crowd were being whipped into a frenzy by retainers. Half of the crowd had been assigned to cheer for the fat man in blue; Guerrand's section was to root for the wiry youth in green.

"The Knights' Jest is the most anticipated event of the festival," explained Justarius, yelling to be heard above the crowd. "It's probably the only place you'll ever see the Knights of Solamnia allowing others to make sport of them without there being trouble. Of course, most of them detest it—won't even watch—but at least they don't stop the event."

Guerrand looked around and could see no true knights in attendance. "Then why did they start it, or continue to allow it at their festival?"

"They didn't start it, actually." Justarius laughed as one of the austritches lurched, nearly toppling the portly green knight from his saddle. "Years ago, even before my time, it was called the Knights' Joust, an actual demonstration of skills, a real tournament. Over the years, it simply evolved into today's event, with the modified name. Attendance soared, until it is now the most popular event at the festival, more popular than the demonstrations the true knights continue to give. Demand makes it nearly impossible for them to stop *it without spoiling the festival*, or at least increasing their reputation as an unbearably stuffy bunch. And so they tolerate it. Knowing the knights, I dare say most of them simply refuse to acknowledge that it still goes on."

Justarius suddenly broke off speaking, pointing toward the arena. "Look, the jest is starting up again." Guerrand could hear bets being placed between the spectators around him.

Having settled the contestants upon the prancing birds, the attendants jumped back and cried, "Let the tournament begin!"

The two hapless men dug their heels into their birds' ribs, trying desperately to get them to move forward—or in any direction at all. The slight boy's austritch finally began to half hop, half walk in a circle, causing his section to cheer wildly. He nudged the bird in the ribs more confidently and tugged on the blue banner about its long neck. Reluctantly the bird stumbled forward in the sand.

For his part, the older man was having considerably more trouble getting his overburdened austritch to move. Its skinny legs bowed, and it stumbled and staggered around, sinking in the sandy field. The green knight's crowd went wild with laughter, but he was not amused. Ignoring the catcalls and boos from the crowd, the man in green waited for his lighter opponent to come to him.

Seeing his adversary give up the struggle, egged on by the crowd's support, the youth flushed with confidence and exhilaration. The blue knight nudged his bird to within a length of his opponent's bird, confident that his foe was helpless.

He didn't even see the long broom that swept out with all the power of the fat man's weight... until it connected with the left side of the bucket on his head. The stunned young man was easily knocked from his austritch like a bird from a clothesline. He stumbled to his feet, spitting out mouthfuls of sand as the audience roared. Scowling, the contestant who'd once smelled victory ripped the bucket from his head and stomped into the fickle crowd.

The fat man slid from his austritch and was beginning to strut when the master of the jest

leaped forward to thrust his arm skyward, announcing him the winner.

The crowd seemed unsure whether the entertainment was over or not and was beginning to thin. Guerrand, only mildly amused by the antics of the Knights' jest, had already turned his back on the field. The apprentice was looking around for interesting fair food, when he heard the master of the jest behind him. "Here we have an interesting contestant, the great mage Belize!"

Surprised, Guerrand spun around to look to the far side of the arena. Belize's shiny pate and elegant red robe were now visible in the wake of the thinning crowd. To Guerrand's surprise, he could see that the mage was regarding him as well. He'd not seen Lyim's master since his arrival in Palanthas, not since the interview in the Tower of High Sorcery in Wayreth. No, he's not looking *at* me, realized Guerrand. He seems to *be* looking *through* me, as if I weren't here. The young apprentice shivered, despite the heat of the day.

"Come now, Belize," the unwitting barker called to Belize over the noise of the crowd. "Have you no sense of Huma? Get it? Huma... humor?"

Belize abruptly looked away from Guerrand. His coal-black eyes locked, in a piercing, bone-chilling stare, on to the barker who'd called his name.

"That fellow is lucky Belize didn't change him into a snake... or worse," chuckled Justarius under his breath to Guerrand.

"Yes, uh, well," said the barker, anxiously casting his glance about for another familiar, if less intimidating, face in the crowd. He didn't have to look far.

"I'll fight in the name of Belize, the greatest mage to ever have lived."

Guerrand knew the voice without seeing the face: Lyim.

The flamboyant apprentice wore his favorite purple padded-and-slashed doublet, puffed-out breeches, striped hose, and enormous feathered cap. He strode forward across the sand, bowing to the quickly returning crowd. Standing to their cheers, he settled his dark hair, with its thick overbraid, upon his shoulders. Lyim's handsome face was alight with pleasure at being the center of attention. He called to many of the spectators by name, inquiring as to their health. There were more than a few swooning maidens in the crowd. Guerrand found himself chuckling at Lyim's antics, then cheering him on.

"Have we no one courageous enough to challenge this would-be knight?" bellowed the barker through cupped hands. But no one stepped forward to confront the strutting youth.

"I see one who would meet the challenge!" cried Lyim. His laughing eyes locked on to Guerrand. "The apprentice of the great Justarius!"

Speechless, Guerrand merely shook his head, his lips opening and closing in silent denial. Before he knew what was happening, hands from all around pushed him forward, through the first line of spectators and onto the sandy field.

"I-I don't wish to play," he heard himself mumble ineffectually as he turned, preparing to scramble back into the crowd. The spectators would have none of it and blocked his passage. Peering over their heads, Guerrand looked helplessly toward Justarius. That venerable mage simply lifted his red-cloaked shoulders in a shrug that seemed to say, "Make the best of it, lad—it's only sport."

Just minutes ago, Guerrand had felt like a nameless face in the crowd. Now, the world seemed to be closing in on him. The noise inside his head was thunderous. He desperately searched his mind for a way to escape the attention. Unlike Lyim, he hated being at the center of things. His reluctance had nothing to do with fear of losing, but everything to do with looking ridiculous before a cast of thousands.

"It would appear that the apprentice of the house of Justarius fears the house of Belize!" taunted Lyim, drawing both cheers and boos from the crowd.

The hot sun slashed through the cloud cover and rained down upon a section of the crowd, drawing Guerrand's eyes. They widened, and his heart skipped two beats.

Esme. Her flawless face seemed to hold both pity and disgust. He knew in that instant he would chance looking ridiculous to escape appearing cowardly before Esme. Gritting his teeth, Guerrand tore his gaze away from her loveliness and stomped toward Lyim.

The second he hit the sand he stumbled, tripping over the hem of his robe. A barker snatched his arm, spun him around, and slammed the bucket on his head. Don't think about how asinine you look, Guerrand told himself. Just visualize yourself somewhere else, a peaceful, private place. In a flash—in his mind's eye—he was alone in the silent rare-books section of the nearby library, poring over the brittle pages of some old spellbook. The crowd noise was gone. His heartbeat slowed. He could very nearly pretend this public humiliation wasn't happening.

Then the friend who'd engineered it spoke. "Come on, Guerrand," said Lyim, adjusting his own bucket. "It's all in good fun." Guerrand glared at him with a single eye. "One of us is having a lot more fun than the other," he muttered, then sighed in resignation. "All right, Lyim. I don't have much choice but to go along with this little attention-getting stunt of yours. Let's just not carry it on too long. We'll whack each other a couple of times, then both fall off. With any luck we'll be drinking a pint at your favorite pub before the barkers can gather another two contestants."

Allowing himself to be helped onto the austritch wearing the green banner, Lyim laughed aloud. "I'll be drinking a pint, all right, but with Esme, while you're still picking broom straws out of your teeth, hayseed!"

Guerrand winced as if physically struck. "Why does everything have to be a contest with you, Lyim?"

Lyim jammed a hand on one hip. "Why are *you* always so serious? You make it sound like a personal attack. But since you asked, life is a contest of power, and power is everything." He tossed his head in a gesture that said he was tired of such serious talk. "Besides, it's fun. Have you lost the ability to have fun in your all-consuming quest for knowledge?"

Frowning, Guerrand considered Lyim's words. Was it true? Was he obsessed with his studies to the exclusion of everything else? Justarius had warned him about keeping his focus while maintaining a balance. Perhaps he *was* taking this too seriously. After all, he'd been laughing during the previous show. If there was anything Guerrand prided himself on, it was his ability to recognize his own shortcomings and correct them. Setting his mind to it, he tried desperately to banish the dark clouds from his thoughts and to find the "Huma" in the situation. Still, it all seemed a lot funnier when someone else wore a bucket on his head and looked foolish.

Guerrand hitched up his robe to climb onto the back of his skittish austritch. The cheers and whistles of the crowd abruptly swelled. The young apprentice discovered why, when Esme darted through the crowd and crossed the sand to his side, holding a length of rose-colored scarf.

Smiling almost shyly at Guerrand, the young woman tied her shimmering silk next to the blue banner already about the austritch's neck. "For good luck," she explained. Suddenly, she sprang up on her toes and planted an impulsive kiss on his cheek through the face-opening cut in his bucket. Getting tangled in the handle, she extricated herself with a nervous laugh.

Guerrand's ire and embarrassment slipped away like fog in sunshine. The former squire understood, better than anyone, the significance of Esme's gesture. He was her favorite, her champion. Guerrand gulped down the lump in his throat and managed a grateful smile, but before he could gather his wits to thank her, Esme alighted back into the crowd, leaving the apprentice to wonder what the unpredictable woman's gesture really meant....

Lyim watched the exchange with eyebrows knitted into a dark, angry line. "Esme knows I don't need luck," he snapped. Still, he scowled at the rose scarf fluttering from the neck of Guerrand's austritch as if he intended to strangle the bird with it.

Lyim pranced impatiently about on the back of his own bird. "Come on, Guerrand. Everyone is waiting. Either get on the damned austritch and show us your mettle, or run back to your books and let someone with courage fight me."

Guerrand's mouth pulled into a tight, angry slash at the vicious taunt. "I'll fight you, Lyim, if it's that important to you."

The former squire jumped up and slammed his weight into the modified saddle. Something about this whole situation struck a painfully familiar chord and stirred up old resentments. The saddle swayed and slopped from side to side so badly he nearly fell from the bird. His robe was tangled about his lanky legs, so he wrestled it closed above his knees. All the while, the flighty bird

twirled in place until Guerrand was as dizzy as a top. The faces in the crowd passed in a colorful blur, their cheers and jeers a dissonant blend. Sweat trickled in thin fingers down his neck. The unyielding metal bucket banged against his shoulders with each of the bird's steps. Though he couldn't hear clearly, Guerrand suspected bets were being placed against him by the crowd.

By rugging the ends of the blue banner, he managed at last to keep the bird from spinning. Guerrand righted his blurred sight by focusing on his opponent. With a sinking heart, he could see instantly why the crowd would choose Lyim as the victor. From the first time he'd met Lyim, Guerrand had thought he looked more like the dashing cavalier of a bard's story than a mage. Tall, muscular, with the perfect proportions of a classical statue, Lyim did not seem like someone who spent his time in dark rooms reading books. Guerrand wondered if Lyim had any training in combat.

He had little time to ponder the answer, as the two attendants came forward and tugged the austriches to opposite ends of the field. Guerrand's man asked for his name and homeland, nodded, then skipped away to the middle of the field, where he was joined by Lyim's squire.

"On the blue bird, we have Guerrand of Northern Ergoth, apprentice in the House of Justarius!" His half of the crowd dutifully cheered.

"And on the green bird is Lyim of Rowley, apprentice to Belize!" Lyim preened and put on airs, and the entire crowd roared its support.

"Just one rule, gentle mages," said the barker. "This is a festival supported by the Knights of Solamnia. Though we make light of their pride, we respect their tradition of honor. Therefore, you will fight fairly and refrain from using magic in your contest."

Guerrand could see disappointment in Lyim's face, but he himself felt nothing. It hadn't occurred to him to use magic anyway.

Waiting for the signal to start, Guerrand felt the cold sweat on his neck again, an achingly familiar feeling. Hot day, blue sky, sunshine beating metal, the jeering crowds, the waiting. The waiting. Guerrand finally was able to place it.

The tournament during Guerrand's fourteenth year. Milford, Guerrand's weapon master, had insisted despite the youth's protests that the only way to train at jousting was to plunge right into a tournament. "You'll come through in the heat of battle. This will make a man out of you. It worked for your brother Quinn."

The difference was that Quinn, a true-born cavalier, had welcomed the chance, as Lyim did now, while Guerrand dreaded it. Milford had not even bothered to hide his disgust when Guerrand had been knocked from his horse by his opponent before he'd even managed to secure his own lance. Milford had even robbed him of the joy of saying, "I told you so," by suggesting first that Guerrand had defeated himself. In the end, Guerrand had the ultimate victory: he was never again entered in a tournament.

He was snapped away from the thought when he saw Lyim charging directly at him. Before Guerrand could move, Lyim swung the broom around. The austritch lurched a little past Guerrand, and Lyim's broom connected with Guerrand's back. The blow to the kidneys nearly knocked Guerrand from his bird and chased the wind from his lungs. Struggling for breath, he wrapped his fingers around the bird's neck and hung on.

Laughing, Lyim pranced away to his end of the field, rousing his section of the crowd. He turned his bird and charged again, broom held tight to his side.

Guerrand grasped the ends of the blue ribbon like reins. Instinct kicked in. He dug his heels into the austritch as he would a horse, then yanked the stunned bird's head around at the last moment to dodge the blow from

Lyim's broom-lance. Squawking, the austritch could only comply with Guerrand's confident commands.

Lyim's broom swept over Guerrand's ducked head, causing the crowd to hiss and cheer. Guerrand straightened in the saddle and waved.

Lyim pulled his charging bird around and gave Guerrand a grudging nod of respect through the opening cut in his bucket. Whooping, Lyim drove his heels into his bird's ribs and charged

again. Guerrand was ready for him and raised his own lance, parrying Lyim's blow easily. Instead of the usual loud *ting* of metal against metal, the long broom handles collided with a dull *thwack*. The recoil sent both apprentices shaking. Guerrand let the tremors run through him without resisting and recovered more quickly than Lyim, who was obviously still shaking in the corner to which he'd withdrawn.

Lyim's look of cocky overconfidence dimmed to grim determination when he began the next charge. Guerrand's cavalier training, however ineffective against a true knight, allowed him to easily parry Lyim's attempts to reach him with the broom. Belize's frustrated apprentice dashed by him again, red-faced, weapon flailing. Guerrand's retainers led his section in a riotous cheer.

Guerrand surprised himself with how much he remembered about jousting, when he'd never really paid much attention to the lessons. For his part, Lyim had demonstrated more determination than skill. Guerrand was certain he could continue to dodge Lyim's ill-timed blows all day, eventually wearing him out. While he had no interest in defeating and humiliating his friend, he knew Lyim would never be satisfied with anything less than total victory. Guerrand was hard-pressed to visualize a happy ending to this for both of them.

Guerrand wasn't the only one surprised by his knowledge. Lyim was regarding Guerrand with what could only be interpreted as a look of betrayal, as if Guerrand, and not Lyim, had somehow instigated the situation. It was obvious things weren't going as Lyim had expected.

In that instant, Guerrand finally understood what he should have realized from the start. Lyim had pulled him from the crowd, not because he believed he offered a true challenge, or even to teach Guerrand to take himself less seriously. The truth was, Lyim had seen his friend as an easy mark, someone he could easily defeat. Strangely, Guerrand felt more anger at himself for being so naive, than at Lyim, who made no pretense of what he was.

The crowd was beginning to turn against Lyim, and both apprentices knew it. A half-chewed apple core sailed through the air and bounced off Lyim's bucket. The proud apprentice felt it and watched the core fall to the sand beneath his feathered mount. He looked first to Esme at the edge of the field, who gave him a pitying stare. Lyim's gaze traveled to Guerrand, and his expression changed in a blink from humiliation to hate.

The atmosphere in the ring altered in that instant. It became still, deathly still, as if no one in the crowd even dared breathe. A lone locust buzzed in a nearby treetop. Time seemed to stop. Guerrand could see Lyim exchanging glances with Belize, who looked greatly displeased with his apprentice. The tension vibrating between them appeared to give off a visual heat wave.

Knowing Lyim's need for approval from his revered master, Guerrand felt his first flicker of pity for the friend he had envied so often. Guerrand waited, unsure how to draw this display to an end without simply falling from his bird. What was he waiting for? A sign of resignation from Lyim? Perhaps, Guerrand told himself, the ever-resourceful young mage would find a way to joke them both out of this.

Guerrand didn't have long to wait. The crowd erupted again as Lyim launched another charge, his expression anything but humorous. His handsome lips were drawn back in a feral grimace. There was no light of recognition, no light at all, behind his eyes. Hunkered over the austritch, with his long, dark hair escaping the confines of the bucket, Lyim looked like a charging bull.

He reached Guerrand, who parried with his broom-lance and easily fended off Lyim's attack. This time, the blows packed a much greater punch. Instead of riding past, he stopped his bird in front of Guerrand's and began to feverishly pummel Guerrand with the broom. Front, back, shoulders, he moved twice as swiftly, though not more skillfully, than before. Lyim seemed to have found an overlooked store of strength and was drawing heavily on it.

Stunned by the viciousness of the attack, Guerrand bent low and clung to the austritch's neck, just trying to stay on the creature. One well-placed blow landed square on his right shoulder and knocked him halfway off the austritch, but Guerrand's determination kept him clinging by his heels. Between swings, he slithered back into the saddle, yanked the bird's head to the right with the blue scarf, and managed to spur his mount beyond the reach of Lyim's broom-lance.

"Now who's taking this too seriously?" gasped Guerrand, his breathing ragged from his efforts

to stay on the austritch. "This is supposed to be a game, not a fight to the death!"

Lyim considered Guerrand through narrowed, unfocused eyes. Spurring his animal, he reached out with the broom and deliberately swatted Guerrand's bird on the thigh. Feathers flying, squawking wildly, the austritch ran off like a beheaded chicken. It took all of Guerrand's riding skill to stay on the beast and calm it down.

Even the attendants seemed concerned by Lyim's unscrupulous action. One hastened over to within earshot of Belize's apprentice. "This is a friendly contest of honor, sir. Please refrain from blows to the birds, if you will."

Lyim's answer was to swing out with his long-handled broom and smash the attendant in the side of his unprotected head, dropping him, unconscious, to the sand.

"Lyim!" gasped Guerrand, "what's the matter with you?" His friend's expression was blank, totally devoid of emotion or recognition. He simply sat, as if waiting for instructions.

A horrified gasp rose from the crowd. The other attendant scrambled out on his haunches and dragged his fallen comrade to the sidelines, anxiously watching the motionless Lyim all the while.

Looking at his friend's face, Guerrand concluded that Lyim's excessive pride had robbed him of self-control. Guerrand was past pleading or compromise; he had to stop the other apprentice before anyone else was hurt.

Guerrand nudged his austritch backward, his face set as grimly as his opponent's. Couching the broom under his right arm the way he'd been taught to use a lance, Guerrand lowered his head, leaned forward, and charged straight at Lyim. Unfazed, Lyim urged his own mount toward Guerrand, swinging his broom wildly. Guerrand dipped his broom beneath Lyim's and rammed it squarely into his opponent's right shoulder. The broom splintered, sending Lyim to the ground.

Guerrand stopped his austritch immediately and yanked off the bucket helm. Throwing it and the broken broom far away, he slid from the bird and ran to where Lyim lay, moaning and rolling in the sand. The noise of the crowd had raised to a fever pitch.

Kneeling in the sand, Guerrand was relieved to see no blood where his broom had struck Lyim. Still, Guerrand was worried. He knew from experience just how hard Lyim had been hit, with little protection. He plucked the metal bucket from his friend's head and cradled him in his lap.

Lyim's eyes cleared of confusion, and he appeared to recognize Guerrand again. The apprentice sounded stunned. "What happened?" he muttered, shaking his head. Wincing, Lyim reached up with his left hand and massaged his sore shoulder.

"You don't remember?" gasped Guerrand. "You tried to kill me, and nearly succeeded with your own attendant!"

Guerrand would have continued the recounting, concluding with a good tongue-lashing, if he hadn't felt a booted foot on his fingers in the sand. Guerrand's gaze followed the foot up, past the neck of the red robe, and he shivered.

"I'll take my apprentice now, if you're quite finished batting him around," Belize said quietly. "He needs my immediate care."

It was Guerrand's first meeting with Belize since the tower at Wayreth. Flustered as usual in the wizard's presence, the young man merely gulped, "Yes, of course," without even thinking to correct the master of the order's interpretation of events.

Esme rushed up at that moment and saw the stare Belize gave Guerrand. Watching anxiously as the master mage lifted their friend, her voice was a high squeak. "Is Lyim's wound serious? He'll be fine, won't he?"

Belize's frightful stare remained on Guerrand, as if that apprentice had asked the question. "I hardly see how that's your concern," he said, his purple lips barely moving in the circle of his tiny mustache and goatee. "I had high hopes for you, young man," he said to Guerrand, "but you're proving to be a terrible disappointment." With that, he hitched Lyim more securely in his arms, closed his coal-black eyes, and was gone. The space where he and Lyim had been was filled with red, sulphurous smoke.

"By the gods, he's creepy," whispered Esme, squinting as she waved away the acrid-smelling smoke. "Don't let him bother you, Guerrand. Belize has no idea the progress you've made in your

studies. He's just embarrassed that Lyim lost, after making such a big deal of fighting for him." She took Guerrand's arm in both her hands and began to steer them through the crowds. "It's natural for him to blame you, though it was clearly all Lyim's idea."

Guerrand nodded absently, though he secretly wondered if there wasn't something else he could have done to stop his friend.

"If Belize is that condescending as an instructor," continued Esme, "I can't fathom how Lyim tolerates him. No wonder he never seems displeased that Belize is gone so often."

Guerrand only half heard her. Belize's parting words had sent a chill running up his spine, a chill that Esme's consoling chatter could not discharge. Hadn't old Nahampkin from Thonvil often said that such a chill meant someone was walking on your grave? Guerrand couldn't describe the feeling as fear, but more as a vague apprehension. It did not speak well for his future in the Order of the Red Robes to be disliked, however unfairly, by the master of the order.

Suddenly the milling spectators reached him, and he was yanked from Esme's side, tossed high on the shoulders of the crowd, and passed around. The faces beneath him were a smiling, indistinguishable blur. Their joy began to work at the edges of his distraction, until it overwhelmed his feelings of apprehension. His heart lighter, Guerrand actually started to enjoy being the center of attention.

Then, like a beacon in the crowd, one face demanded his notice. Arms folded before him, hands tucked into the bells of his red cuffs, his master, Justarius, was regarding him with an uncharacteristic expression of deep concern. Guerrand's apprehension returned in a flash.

Chapter Thirteen

"No, Justarius." Guerrand gulped hoarsely, twirling the delicate stem of his half-filled wineglass between cold fingers. "I can't—I won't—believe Lyim was actually trying to kill me." His hand shook as he lifted the glass to his lips and swallowed the acrid, blood-red liquid.

If the subject was not enough to jangle Guerrand's nerves, the audience in Justarius's private laboratory was. Guerrand had been in Justarius's lab only twice before. The first time had been part of an orientation tour when he arrived at the villa.

The second trip had been less auspicious. Denbigh had escorted him here after the master discovered that Guerrand, in his impatience to progress, was trying to cast a spell beyond his ability. Justarius never told Guerrand how he'd learned of his attempts, or even allowed Guerrand to explain his actions. The archmage simply, curtly ordered his apprentice to stop at once and scrub the kitchen as punishment. Ever after, Guerrand remembered his master's pronouncement that very little occurred in Villa Rosad of which Justarius was unaware.

Both times Guerrand had been awed by the number of scrolls, books, and other paraphernalia Justarius managed to keep in this relatively small room. Everything was meticulously organized and catalogued in the wizard's head.

The room was more enclosed than others in the villa. It lacked the big windows and skylights so common elsewhere. There was only one small window, and the space would have been very dark if not for the floating glass globes that emitted a soft light. They hovered effortlessly in the air and could be positioned anywhere, creating perfect lighting conditions for whatever task was at hand. The room could easily be made totally lightless as well, a useful condition for some types of spell research.

The master of the villa refilled Guerrand's wineglass, then strode to the small chest-high window that overlooked the peristyle. "You misunderstood me, Guerrand. I said nothing about someone trying to kill you." Justarius's elbow was propped on the high windowsill, but his tone belied the casual pose.

"You asked me if I knew my enemies from my friends," accused Guerrand, "then what I knew about Lyim. I just assumed you meant..."

"Do you have reason to assume Lyim wants you dead?"

"Lyim? No!"

"Someone else, perhaps?"

"No!"

Justarius arched one brow. "Your tone suggests otherwise."

"I'm sorry, Justarius. My tone suggests that this discussion is making me uneasy."

"I could use a spell to determine the truth, and you wouldn't even be aware of it." Justarius sounded more apologetic than threatening. "I don't think you want me to do that."

Guerrand shook his head mutely torn with indecision. He jumped up and fidgeted with some of Justarius's component beakers on a nearby table. "If you don't think someone is after me," he asked abruptly, "why did you ask about my enemies?"

"Again, you misunderstand me."

"Then why don't you stop this cat-and-mouse game," demanded Guerrand, "and tell me what you suspect. Just what do you want from me?" He stopped, and his hand flew to his mouth in horror. "I'm sorry, master. I should not—"

"Never mind, Guerrand." Justarius moved to sit on the corner of his ornately carved mahogany desk. "Passion—anger, even—is part of a balanced character. Just guard against its becoming impertinence."

He motioned for Guerrand to sit again. "I did not intend to play cat to your mouse," he explained. "I simply wished to learn what you knew without biasing it with my own observations. I will share those with you first, if it makes it easier for you to speak."

Justarius hesitated, then spoke softly over steepled fingers. "There was magic at play in your

jest with Lyim—"

"Magic?" exclaimed Guerrand. "But we were forbidden to use it! Lyim knew that as well as I." He found himself getting angry at his friend all over again. "When next I see him, I'll—"

"I don't believe Lyim was at fault," interrupted Justarius. He frowned as he hopped off the desk, then came back to the table. "You have a most unfortunate habit of jumping to conclusions, Guerrand. You would do well to curb the tendency, for that is the sort of thing that might one day lead you into a dire dilemma."

Guerrand, though still confused, had the grace to hang his head at the observation. "I will endeavor to correct it, Justarius. Please continue. I promise not to speak until you're finished."

Justarius swirled the herbs and slices of lemon in the acrid drink he favored. "As I said, I'm nearly certain Lyim was not the spellcaster. In fact, the spell was cast *on* him."

Justarius looked up as a sound blurted from Guerrand, who had obviously begun a question, then remembered his vow of silence.

"My guess is that the spell affected his emotions," Justarius supplied, accurately guessing the nature of Guerrand's unspoken question. "Didn't you notice the change in Lyim's attitude during the jest, his sudden burst of strength?"

Guerrand blinked. "Of course, but I attributed it to anger over not winning as easily as he'd expected. Lyim does not like to appear the fool."

"Who but a court jester does?" Justarius shook his dark head briefly. "No, it was a spell. The questions that remain are why it was cast, and who cast it? In a city of mages, it could have been anyone. I was there, as was Esme, and every other apprentice in the city. Perhaps it was simply a mage who'd bet on the outcome and wished to guarantee victory for his favorite."

"If you truly believed that, we wouldn't be here," said Guerrand.

"Who do *you* think cast the spell?" asked Justarius.

Guerrand felt that cold chill up his spine as he remembered his conversation with Lyim's master and Esme. "The obvious answer is Belize. He clearly doesn't like me. Esme thinks the mage was mad because Lyim lost after he'd made such a fuss about fighting for his master."

"Highly unlikely." Justarius chuckled out loud

"Belize cares less for what others think of him than anyone I know. Frankly, I was surprised to see him at the fair at all." He shook his head firmly again. "I find it difficult to believe that Belize would risk a spell on his own apprentice, or try to kill one of his order, for such a petty emotion as pride. Still, we will not eliminate anyone from our list of suspects."

"Who else is on the list?"

"Who, indeed?" asked Justarius archly.

Guerrand drew a big breath and let it out in a rush. "Perhaps it's my family."

The answer surprised even Justarius. "Your family? You told me your brother disapproved of magic."

"Despises it," corrected Guerrand. "I believe I told you Cormac would be furious if he found out I had joined the order." Guerrand set down his wineglass. "What I didn't say was that he might be angry enough to kill me because I ran out on an arranged political marriage."

"I see."

The two men fell silent. "I have difficulty envisioning Cormac hiring a mage to track me down, but it's possible," Guerrand said at length, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "I've wondered, too, if it wasn't the father of the woman I was to marry. The Berwicks run the biggest shipping line on the Sirrion Sea. I paid passage on one of their ships to Wayreth, and then to Palanthas, before Lyim and I got tossed off."

"You're saying this sort of thing has happened before?"

Guerrand nodded. He told Justarius what he'd revealed to Zagarus earlier in the day about the ambush in the hills and the incident in the alley. "I didn't mention it to you," he added quickly "because nothing ever seemed to happen at the villa, and—"

"You were afraid I would throw you out," supplied Justarius.

Guerrand looked sheepish. "The thought *had* occurred to me." He paused before whispering,

"Will you, Justarius? Ask me to leave, that is?"

The archmage gave Guerrand a sidelong glance. "Young man, you underestimate me if you think me so easily threatened or distressed."

He stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Do you honestly think your brother or this Berwick fellow would go so far as to harm you over this collapsed betrothal?"

"I don't know Anton Berwick," said Guerrand, "so I can't guess at his response."

Pondering Cormac's attitudes, he grimaced. "My brother is given to deep, emotional extremes, especially when he's been drinking. And his wife is definitely the vengeful sort. I could believe that she would suggest this sort of retribution, and he would comply. Cormac probably would regret it when he sobered up, but by then it might be too late."

Justarius gave a shrug. "We can fashion all manner of guesses, or we can conjure the truth in a heartbeat," said Justarius, taking a last sip of his lemon water. "Would you like to see what's happening back at your... Thonvil, is it?"

"Yes!" exclaimed Guerrand, jumping to his feet. He knocked over his chair in his haste.

Frowning slightly, the distinguished mage waved his apprentice forward, around the chair. "Then come with me now. Do exactly as I say, and make no untoward step or gesture. Few have seen the elaborate magical ritual that I am about to reveal to you."

Scarcely breathing, Guerrand followed Justarius in silent wonder to the narrow velvet curtain Guerrand had assumed covered an alcove or bookshelf. The master's hands swept back the heavy fabric, revealing a simple, seamless birchwood door. There was no handle, knob, or knocker. Instead, at eye-height hung a recessed carving of a hideous face, very like a gargoyle's, about the size of an ogre's fist. Suddenly the eyes of the carving snapped to life.

Passage to the crystal device

Demands that entrants pay the price.

Bring the guard its sacrifice:

Fish of gold, once, twice, thrice!

While Guerrand watched, Justarius reached into his robe and withdrew three live, wiggling goldfish. The archmage popped the little orange creatures into the door guard's open, waiting mouth. Chewing noisily, with much slurping and splashing, it gulped one last time, burped loudly, then gave a delicious, sated, though still hideous, grin. The face disappeared entirely from view as the birchwood door slid into a pocket in the left wall, granting the mages passage to whatever lay behind it.

Guerrand took two steps into darkness behind Justarius before the archmage stopped them both. Slowly Guerrand's eyes adjusted, and he determined that the room was circular and exceedingly small, no wider than three men abreast. Justarius was so close to him that he obscured most of the view.

A dim light filtered down from high above. Looking up, the apprentice mage caught his breath at the sight of the most intricately pieced pane of stained glass he had ever seen. The narrow chamber felt like a life-size kaleidoscope. At first Guerrand thought it a colorful model of the lacy petals of the wild carrot flower, but the pattern was not that random. In fact, it was somehow familiar.

"The constellations," supplied Justarius, following his gaze to the colored glass some two stories above them. "See Gilean, there in the middle?" Justarius tried to raise his arm to point, a difficult move in the cramped silo. "He's the book-shaped constellation."

Gilean is the patriarch of maintaining a balance in the universe. That's why he's between Paladine and the Black Queen. Gilean holds the Book of Tobril, which contains all the knowledge possessed by the gods.

"Of course, you can see Solinari, of Good magic. By now your magical skills should be developed enough to easily reveal the red moon, Lunitari, to you, as well. We can only hope that you'll never have the sight for the black moon, evil Nuitari."

"But if I'm to be truly neutral, shouldn't I be able to see both sides, Evil and Good?"

"Seeing both sides of an issue and viewing the gods are two different things," explained Justarius. "Only mages who wear the black robes can see Nuitari in the night sky." Justarius hitched up his robes, sat down, and slid around a half-circle bench that followed the curve of the far wall. Jerking his head, Justarius indicated Guerrand should follow him. The apprentice quickly complied.

Guerrand could now see a murky glass ball of enormous proportion cradled between the points of an odd pedestal of antlers. He estimated the diameter of the globe to be nearly the length of his arm.

"Before the Cataclysm," said Justarius, "crystal balls were to mages what picklocks are to thieves. But, like most things of great value, the Cataclysm reduced nearly all of them to rubble. In the years shortly after my own apprenticeship, I rescued this one from the flower garden of a nymph. She obviously had no idea of its value, calling it her 'gazing ball' She was just as happy to gaze at the steel piece I gave her in exchange."

"What do you have to do to make it work?" breathed Guerrand, staring wide-eyed into the pastel mists that roiled within the large glass ball.

"I don't have to do anything this time. You do."

Guerrand's blue eyes snapped away from the mesmerizing mist. "I know nothing of crystal balls!"

"But you know everything about your brother Cormac and the castle in which you were raised. That's all the ball requires of you."

Noting Guerrand's skeptical look, Justarius continued. "To use the ball, simply peer into it with open eyes and concentrate on that which you want to see. It can be a person, place, or thing, but places are usually easier for beginners. With some practice, you'll be able to look for whatever you want."

Justarius held up two fingers. "Keep in mind several things, Guerrand. The more familiar the sought thing is, the easier it is to locate. It's even more important to remember that the globe feeds on your energy. If you are skeptical or fearful or distracted, it won't respond to you as well as it otherwise might."

Eager to succeed in Justarius's eyes and learn what he could of his own family, Guerrand closed his eyes briefly to chase away all distractions. Opening them again, he rubbed the orb and stared into its depths. He envisioned Cormac's study as he'd last seen it, floor-to-ceiling shelves of books, the path of worn carpeting from the door to Cormac's cluttered desk, the bright windows that overlooked the sea.

Gradually, within the mists, Guerrand caught glimpses of the image he sought, hazy at first, but slowly clearing. Anxious, he squeezed his eyes shut to concentrate as he did when spellcasting. Instantly he knew his mistake.

"You lose the image when you close your eyes," said Justarius, confirming Guerrand's suspicion. "You'll have to start all over."

Heaving a disheartened sigh, Guerrand chased away his frustration and tried again with open eyes. To his delight, the image of Cormac's study blinked into sight almost instantly. He was getting the hang of it! Unfortunately, the study was empty.

"I don't understand," muttered Guerrand. "Cormac is almost always holed up in his study."

"Try focusing on Cormac himself," suggested Justarius. "I think you can do it."

Guerrand nodded once and then tried to summon a mental picture of his brother. He was surprised to realize that, despite having lived his entire life with him, he could recall few details of Cormac's face. When he remembered their encounters in recent years, Guerrand saw his own feet, or the bottom of a port glass. It had probably been years since Guerrand had been able to meet his brother's gaze. Was Cormac's nose long or short? Eyes close- or wide-set? Guerrand had no answers. In the end, he focused his thoughts on memories of Cormac's size and stance, of his disapproving stare, of the clothing he was prone to wear.

The memory was apparently enough. With a sizzling electrical snap, Cormac's visage parted the mists, and he leaped into view inside the crystal ball. He was seated at the head of the table in

Castle DiThon's seldom-used council room. A thick layer of dust coated the tabletop, except where lines had recently been traced.

Gradually Guerrand could see whose fingers and elbows had sliced through the dust. Gathered around the long table were Cormac's council of cavaliers, all the important warriors who served the lord, including Guerrand's old weapon master, Milford. While Guerrand watched, his brother leaned forward in his chair and thumped the table. A cloud of dust puffed into the air around his fist.

"Didn't I say I could take the land like that—" he snapped his fingers "—from those pompous merchants?" He pushed back his chair and stood. "I didn't need either of my brothers—the one who was foolish enough to get himself killed, or the coward who ran away. I didn't need to further taint my family's bloodlines, either. My only regret is that I didn't think of it sooner." Cormac sat again and leaned back, laced his fingers behind his head, and slapped his boots up on the table in a gesture of supreme confidence and satisfaction.

"In fact, the day Guerrand ran away like a thief in the night was very likely the best in the DiThon family history!" Watching, Guerrand winced. "I hereby decree that day a half year ago as a local holiday!"

Milford coughed uncomfortably, his scar pulling at his cheek. "I would advise you, sir, not to get too complacent about the seizure of Berwick land."

"Don't be ridiculous!" barked Cormac, leaning forward again with the disapproving eyes that Guerrand remembered too well. Cormac looked drunk, his nose red, his movements slow. "We snatched that land from right under their noses. They're merchants, not warriors. We needn't fear anyone we can best so easily."

"Too easily, if you ask me," said Milford under his breath.

"I didn't," snapped Cormac.

"Excuse me, Lord Cormac," said a knight named Rees. Guerrand recognized him; he lived in a village northeast of Thonvil. "It is no measure of an enemy's strength to succeed at seizing his unprotected land, leagues from their manor house, when they are away in Solamnia attending their daughter's wedding."

"Perhaps not, Rees," growled Cormac, "but it is a measure of my resolve. No one ignores Cormac DiThon and gets away with it. I was still negotiating in good faith with that fat bastard Berwick when he simply announced that all deals were off. He'd already betrothed his bucked-toothed daughter to some pretentious Knight of Solamnia!" Cormac visibly shuddered. "I simply could not let the insult go unchecked." Guerrand could also guess from Cormac's sullen expression that Rietta had chewed his ear thoroughly about the Berwicks landing a Solamnic title, while she was stuck with a petty cavalier.

"In any event," said Dalric, an old soldier Guerrand knew Cormac despised, "Berwick will almost certainly try to take back his land."

"Let him try!" barked Cormac. "Who could that bloated merchant get to fight his battle? Are the sailors from his shipping lines going to tie us in knots? Will his gardeners attack us with pitchforks?" Cormac nearly laughed himself apoplectic. He tossed back a drink.

None of his advisors raised a *Up* in humor.

Cormac finally realized that he was the only one laughing. Scowling, he snorted to a stop. "If you're so damned concerned, Milford, then take some men to reinforce those already posted at Stonecliff. When Berwick's sailors come to fight, we'll bloody their noses. They'll run back to their little boats, and that will be the last we ever see of them."

Milford coughed again, his face red. "Cormac, I feel compelled to point out that it's unlikely Anton Berwick will lead an attack on the land you've seized—it's worth little, anyway."

"Worthless? To him, perhaps!" cried Cormac. "That land was in my family for years! It has the best view of the strait. A fort on that location would command the bay and control all traffic up and down the river. We could make a rich living collecting tolls from that traffic, and I intend to do just that."

Milford colored further, highlighting the white scar on his face. "I meant it had little monetary

value by itself. What you propose is a different matter entirely."

Cormac slammed a hammy fist on the table. "There you have it, then. Berwick won't waste the money trying to get it back. Stop frowning so, Milford."

The weapon master leaned forward, placing his elbow on the table. "We've all agreed—" Milford tossed his head to include the other cavaliers at the long table, all of whom looked down at their hands "—Berwick will not tolerate either the insult, after what happened with Quinn and Guerrand, or the placement of a toll on river traffic. He'll demand retribution. It is our collective opinion that he'll lead an attack against the village of Thonvil, or, more likely, Castle DiThon itself."

Cormac's eyes turned black with anger. "You've all agreed?" He jumped to his feet. "Perhaps you'd all like to join his forces—if you haven't already!" Cormac's hands clenched into fists, and he swept an arm across the table, scattering wine-filled glasses to the floor. "All of you be damned!" With that the lord stormed from the room, leaving his council in a cloud of newly raised dust.

Guerrand's concentration dissolved with Cormac's angry departure, and the images in the crystal ball slipped into pastel mist. He couldn't have watched more, anyway. The apprentice turned worried eyes to Justarius.

The master's eyebrows raised appreciatively. "As you say, he is ... emotional. But why the frown? Apparently your brother has been too busy to send an assassin after you. In fact, he sounds delighted you're gone."

"The assassin concerns me less than my family," Guerrand said softly. "I'm afraid Cormac's obsession with Stonecliff is blinding him to the safety of his family and the people under his protection. I'd hoped that my leaving would force him to abandon his plan to extort tolls from the Berwicks. Clearly he's going ahead with it in the most disastrous manner possible."

Guerrand snapped around suddenly and turned his eyes on Justarius. "Will the globe show me Anton Berwick?"

"If you can picture him, perhaps."

"I've only seen him once or twice, but I've got to try," said Guerrand. "I must know if he's planning to retaliate."

"You might also learn if Berwick has sent anyone after you," suggested Justarius.

Guerrand wrapped his arms around the cool crystal globe and bade his mind recall the brief glimpses of Anton Berwick he'd gotten across the dim mourning chamber on the day of Quinn's viewing: short and round, balding, a scarlet tunic edged in green, leggings bagging at the knees.

Guerrand looked between his outstretched arms as a fuzzy image began to form. He could scarcely see the face, but from the general body shape, Guerrand knew it was Berwick. The squat merchant stood with a tail, armored man whose upper lip bore the unmistakable mustache of a Knight of Solamnia. Though Guerrand could see little more in the mists, their voices were clear.

"The plans are moving apace, sir," said the knight to Berwick. "Notices have been posted in all the ports in which your ships dock. Within a fortnight, we can expect mercenaries to begin arriving. After a short training period, we'll be in a position to lure the DiThons into defending the land they've pilfered, then we'll attack their castle while it's lightly defended."

"When will your comrades be arriving from Solamnia?"

"Any day now," said the knight.

Guerrand, his worst fear confirmed, had heard enough. He let the image in the crystal ball lapse, scarcely able to believe the danger in which Cormac had so blithely placed his family. And all for pride and money. Cormac had but a handful of cavaliers to defend against hired men-at-arms and who knew how many knights? Chances were, it would be a slaughter.

Kirah... Visions of his little sister came unbidden to mind. His arms were still on the ball. Guerrand turned his head slightly and looked into the shimmering globe. He saw his scrappy sister huddled among the pillows on the window seat in her room. She'd never looked so forlorn. In her hand, she clutched a twisted scrap of parchment.

"Who's that?"

"My sister," gulped Guerrand. "She's the one I promised I'd return for."

"What's that she's holding?"

Guerrand knew, without seeing his own script, that

it must be the note he'd left her on the night of his departure for the Tower of High Sorcery. He stared, unblinking, at her crystal-clear image, wishing he could touch her for a moment and reassure her.

"Justarius, I've got to go back and warn them of the Berwick's plans," Guerrand said softly, his eyes focused on Kirah's image.

"Look away from the crystal ball, Guerrand," his master said gently, lifting the apprentice's arms from its surface. "You're suffering mental strain from having watched too long. I told you it draws its power from the viewer, especially a novice. For your own sake, you must look away now or risk losing your mind to the globe."

Reluctantly, Guerrand let his arms be pulled from the cool, leaded glass globe. He felt a physical pain when the image of Kirah disappeared. Guerrand dug his fists into his eyes. "Thank you, I didn't realize."

He turned bleary eyes on his master. "This doesn't change my need to warn them. I must ask you for a short recess from my studies—a month, perhaps. I know it's a great deal to ask, but surely you can understand."

Justarius rubbed his own face wearily. Guerrand could see that he was carefully weighing his response. "I understand the desire, but I cannot grant your request."

"What?"

Justarius didn't blink. "You recall when first I selected you to be my apprentice?" Guerrand nodded grudgingly. "I informed you when you accepted my offer to join the Order of the Red Robes that you were pledging yourself to magic, and magic alone. Magic will not tolerate distractions in the minds of its wielders, particularly during the critical apprentice years."

Guerrand's anger flared. "You mean *you* won't tolerate it! You can't stand the thought that I am loyal to anyone but you!"

Justarius's eyes narrowed just slightly. "If you think that, then you have much to learn about me, and even more about the commitment you made to magic. I am but a facilitator for learning the Art, Guerrand. I gain no personal prestige, no additional power for teaching you. I do it *for* magic, to increase its presence in our world, because my loyalty is to magic."

"You may forbid me to return and warn my family," said Guerrand, "but you can't stop me from doing it."

"I've forbidden you nothing, Guerrand," the archmage said evenly. "Your apprenticeship is not a prison sentence. You still have free will. But I can, and I would, stop you from returning here. If you choose to leave, your spot would be immediately and irrevocably filled."

"How can you ask me to forsake my family?" Guerrand demanded, his body shaking with frustration.

"Didn't you make that choice when you left for the tower?" When Guerrand winced, Justarius added more gently, "I ask you only to remain loyal to magic, and your study of it."

"But it's the same thing!" cried Guerrand, his fingers gripping the table edge. "I swore an oath to Kirah—if ever she needed me—I would know it and return."

Justarius heaved a sigh. "Only you can decide which vow is more important to you. In your guilty deliberations, I suggest you consider these things, as well. Would Cormac believe you if you returned with news that, through magical means, you've learned of a surprise raid by the Berwicks? He has already heard of that possibility proposed by his own advisors and rejected it. Would he listen more closely to you, after the way you left?"

"He's not mad about that." Guerrand looked defensive. "You heard him—he's almost happy that I left."

"Only because he believes he's got his coveted land anyway. I suspect that your brother's ire would quickly return once he remembered that your departure necessitated its seizure. Under any circumstances, he would not welcome your magical assistance."

Guerrand frowned his frustration. "Are you trying to dissuade me from going?"

"We have all had to make sacrifices for our art, Guerrand." Justarius gave his apprentice's arm a reassuring pat. "Lest you think you are casting your family to the wolves, realize, too, that the gods have plans that we mortals may never know or understand."

"Are you saying that it doesn't really matter what we decide, the gods will do as they like with us?"

"Not at all," said Justarius, with a single shake of his dark head. "I've said I believe in free will. But I also believe that everything happens for a reason. Sometimes the outcome is in our favor, sometimes against. Frequently we never see the result at all." He stood and pulled Guerrand to his feet. "Right now, we are seeing the result of too much to think about all at once. Go rest, and I'll have Denbigh send some food to your room."

As Guerrand shuffled, numb, through the birch-wood door, he heard Justarius mumble behind him, "That leaves one other question unanswered, the one we initially sought. If neither your brother nor Berwick has sent someone after you, then who rigged the joust? More important, why?"

Guerrand stopped in Justarius's study and turned, surprised that he had forgotten all about that. "Do you suspect someone?"

Justarius calmly swallowed the last of his lemon tonic. "I suspect everyone and I suspect no one. Which is why, for your own safety, you mustn't tell a soul that we suspect someone wants you harmed."

That's easy, Guerrand thought as he left the room. I understand little enough to tell.

Dispirited, Guerrand toed a seashell lodged in the fieldstone-and-dirt quay. He'd taken Justarius's advice, returned to his room, and tried to eat the roast groundhog and fresh pomegranate Denbigh had brought him on a tray. Though it had smelled delicious, Guerrand found he had as little appetite as answers to his dilemma. And so he'd wandered down to the waterfront to watch the ships come and go, as he often had back in Northern Ergoth.

When Guerrand pondered the choices before him, his chest felt as if a huge cord encircled it and was being pulled ever tighter, until he could scarcely breathe. There was no answer that allowed him to emerge whole. If he left to warn his family, he was again sacrificing his desires—his future—to his family, when only Kirah seemed to care for his wishes. It had taken him a score of years to summon the courage to escape that intolerable situation. Justarius would never take him back, and it was most unlikely he would secure another master, let alone one as respected as the archmage.

Just then, a familiar-looking sea gull skidded across the dirt road with a harsh, deep "kyeow."

"Oh, hello, Zagarus," Guerrand said lifelessly.

And a cheery hello to you, too, said the bird, springing on webbed, yellow-green feet to Guerrand's side. *Is Justarius working you too hard?*

"If only that were the problem. I could just stay up later, work a little harder. No," he said with a rueful shake of his shaggy head, "it's not that simple."

Tell me about it. Maybe I can think of a solution. He ruffled up his chest feathers. *I am, after all, a hooded, black-backed Ergothian sea gull, the largest, most strikingly beautiful and intelligent of all seabirds.*

In no mood for the gull's ego or humor, Guerrand nevertheless noted drolly the addition of the word "intelligent" to Zagarus's favorite description of himself. Still, he knew the bird would want to know if Kirah were in danger, and so he told Zagarus of the visions in the crystal ball and the choice he had to make.

You're right. It's not simple. What do you think you'll do?

Guerrand sighed. "I wish I knew."

Say, Zagarus said suddenly. I could fly back and tell—

"Who? Cormac?" scoffed Guerrand.

No, the sea gull said, annoyed at the interruption. *I could tell Kirah. She'd believe me.*

"And who would believe *her*? Besides, you know the rules regarding separation of familiar

and master. You can't possibly fly fast enough to get there and return within a week, which is the longest we could survive a separation."

The gull reluctantly nodded his black-and-white head.

Angry, frustrated, Guerrand kicked a shell he'd worked loose, and it flew into the hull of an upturned fishing boat.

"Guerrand!" The apprentice mage's head snapped up at the familiar voice. He nodded a silent, edgy greeting to Lyim. Zagarus squawked a hasty retreat.

"What a surprise to find you at the waterfront," said the other apprentice. "I thought you preferred the solitude of your tiny room in the hills."

"You'd be surprised to learn that I come to the quay frequently for the familiar sound and scent of the sea. Not—" Guerrand smirked as he continued "—for the clamor of bawdy barmaids and the smell of stale ale."

Lyim shrugged good-naturedly. "To each his own familiarity." He nodded toward where the shell had struck the boat. "And why is Palanthas's most composed apprentice so agitated today? Could this anger be residual from the Knight's Jest?"

Guerrand waved the question away. "Truth to tell, that fiasco had nearly slipped my mind."

Lyim touched a hand gingerly to his posterior. "Would that I could forget it." He jerked his head toward the Lonely Mermaid Tavern. "I was just about to speed the process with the aid of the aforementioned ale. Care to join me?"

Guerrand shook his head. "No, thanks. I've too much to ponder to confuse things with ale."

Lyim squinted closely at his friend. "You aren't still angry with me, are you, Guerrand? Look, I have no idea what came over me on that field, truly I don't." Lyim pulled off his feathered cap. "I've been asleep these hours since Belize took me back to Villa Nova. You'll be happy to know I received quite a tongue-lashing from him upon waking, too."

"That doesn't make me happy, Lyim."

The other apprentice, staring out to sea, appeared not to hear him. "I've tried since to sort through it, Guerrand, but still it makes little sense to me. Frankly, it seems more dreamlike than real." He shook his head as if to send the confused images away on the salty sea breeze.

Guerrand considered his friend with mixed feelings. He could answer a part of Lyim's confusion with one simple sentence: someone cast a spell on you. But he remembered Justarius's warnings to tell no one. Though Guerrand trusted Lyim, answering his question would only raise more complicated ones. He didn't know what to say, so Guerrand said nothing.

The two friends stood in an awkward, guilty silence. Lyim took a shuffling step toward the tavern. Both men looked over suddenly at the sound of three boisterous sailors, dressed in baggy trousers and sleeveless tunics, striding down the quay. One sailor, older than his companions, held a roll of parchment. The others, both young and fresh-faced, hustled along at his side, trying to get a look at the document in his hand. The sailors came to a stop at a nearby lantern post by the busiest pier on the waterfront. Pushing back his eager cronies, the first sailor held the parchment up and secured it with square nails, top and bottom, to the rough beam.

One of the young sailors whistled shrilly. "Four steel pieces a day for mercenary work in Northern Ergoth! How hard can it be to squash some local lord there? Nothing but kender and dark-skinned peasants, I hear tell. A fortnight's easy work, and you're fifty steel richer!"

His head was slapped by the other youth. "That's fifty-six steel, you moron!"

The older sailor who'd posted the notice added, "I hear the Berwicks are prompt payers, too." He thumped his chest. "I'm going to sign on. Can't make that kind of money at sea." With that, the three men scurried off toward the Lonely Mermaid, still talking about the notice.

With a sharp ache in his chest, Guerrand watched them go. He wondered darkly, distantly, if they would be the ones to slay his family.

"Northern Ergoth," muttered Lyim, scratching his head. "Isn't that where you're from?" Guerrand squeezed his eyes shut and nodded numbly. "Do you know anything about the notice?"

"Too much," Guerrand acknowledged wearily without thinking.

"The local lord... wouldn't that be your brother?" asked the other apprentice.

"Look, Lyim," Guerrand said, backing away, "I really can't talk about this."

Lyim's hand flew up to clasp his friend's arm, holding him tight. "All right, I'll do the talking. Your family is in trouble, and you're angry. That's understandable. What's not is why you're still in Palanthas. When are you returning to help them?"

"Help who?" Guerrand asked, avoiding Lyim's eyes.

"Come on, Guerrand, I'm not stupid. I understand why you feel you can't trust me, but..." He regarded his friend through one eye.

Lyim's tactics crumbled Guerrand's resolve. "I can't go back!" he confessed.

"What do you mean? Your family won't let you?"

Guerrand shook his head miserably. "They don't know where I am, or that Berwick means to attack them."

Lyim caught on quickly. "It's Justarius, isn't it? He won't let you leave to help them." Incredulous, Lyim shook his head. "Does he mean to tear you in two, choosing between him and your family?"

Guerrand found himself in the odd position of defending his master. "He requires me to be true to my vow. Besides, he hasn't forbidden me to go, only told me what the consequences would be for me here."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know." Guerrand looked to the notice on the post. "And I haven't much time to decide."

Lyim's eyes shifted from side to side as he considered something. He snapped his fingers. "Let me go to Northern Ergoth and at least warn your family. I could help them, if it came to that."

"What?" exclaimed Guerrand, scarcely believing his ears. "What would you tell Belize?"

Lyim's expression turned eager with enthusiasm as he warmed to the idea. "I'll tell him nothing. Then I won't be violating any rule like Justarius's, will I? Besides, Belize won't even notice I'm gone. He told me after my tongue-lashing that he's retreating for weeks of meditation and work on his newest book of spells." Lyim waved it away. "He does that all the time."

"But what'll you do at Castle DiThon? Who'll you talk to? You're a stranger! Why would they listen to you?"

"Give me some credit, will you?" said Lyim. "I'll come up with some convincing story about, I don't know, being in the Berwick's hire, then defecting out of a sense of justice, or some such rot. They'll have no choice but to believe me." He shrugged. "If they don't, I'll be there to help your family magically. You know my magic is better than yours."

Guerrand snorted. "Cormac would no sooner let you employ magic than kiss him."

Lyim grabbed Guerrand by the shoulders. "That's the beauty of this whole plot! They don't know me from the great wizard Fistantilus. No one has to know I'm using magic!" He frowned at his friend. "Now stop trying to think of reasons it *won't* work and tell me what I need to know to *make* it work."

Guerrand shook his head vigorously. "It's more than I can ask of you, Lyim."

"You didn't ask. I offered." Lyim looked at him slyly from the corners of his eyes. "You got a better plan, or are you just going to let them die?"

Guerrand stopped shaking his head, slowly softening to the idea. Lyim was right about them believing a stranger over him, and also about his spellcasting abilities. Under the circumstances, it seemed like the perfect solution, when moments ago there had been none. Guerrand would be able to keep his apprenticeship, *and* his family stood a better chance with Lyim. Guerrand peered closely at the other apprentice. "Why would you do this for me?"

"I'd be doing it for me," he corrected Guerrand, his tone unusually earnest. "Maybe it'll help me feel like I've atoned for my behavior at the Jest." He shrugged, trying to lighten the mood. "Besides, I could use the field practice—it's tiresome learning spells I have no occasion to use."

Awash with relief and affection, Guerrand gave his friend a grateful smile. "Then I accept your offer."

Whooping his victory, Lyim slapped an arm around Guerrand's shoulders and hustled him

toward the tavern. "You can buy me a drink while we come up with a plan of action. It would help to devise a quicker means of travel than the mercenaries who are signing up, but that seems unlikely. Is there anyone I could trust with the truth? A servant, a sibling...?"

Chapter Fourteen

Lyim waited with growing impatience in the chilly seaside cove, listening to the gentle crash of waves from the Strait of Ergoth. The fresh white tunic he'd donned two days ago to meet Guerrand's sister had turned yellow under the arms and was stained with damp red clay. Yet he couldn't leave. Kirah might show up at any time. And after having spent more than two weeks aboard ship with sweaty, lice-ridden mercenaries headed for the Berwick shipping line's port of Hillfort, he'd be damned if a chit of a girl would keep him from his promise to his friend.

"This is all Guerrand's fault," Lyim growled aloud in his growing frustration. "He was the one who told me to wait in Kirah's usual refuge, instead of seeking her at the keep." If he hadn't listened to Guerrand, Lyim would have thought of some pretext upon which to call for Kirah at the castle. I'd be talking with her now," he said, "instead of sitting in this damp, dark cave."

You could still do that, the young mage reminded himself. And yet Lyim hesitated, feeling like he'd invested too much time here to leave just as Kirah might finally show.

Pushing himself up with a sigh, Lyim stepped through the mouth of the cove to find distraction in the sea. Even its too-steady rhythm would break the monotony. The apprentice felt the tide lapping at his boots as he watched the seabirds wheeling overhead. Among their screeches he thought he heard a faint gasp.

Lyim held himself still, listening. Something was nearby. He heard a second gasp, the rustling of stiff cloth, and then someone scuttling away overhead. Lyim spun around and looked on the rock shelf above the cave, shading his eyes from the sun.

Curled in upon herself against a rocky crevice, like some enormous cornered spider, was a slip of a girl with stringy, shoulder-length blond hair. She wore the tattered remains of a once-fine dress, and was barefoot.

"Kirah?" Lyim called, incredulous.

The girl's eyes went dark with fear, and she would have scabbled back farther if her spine weren't already pressed against the rocks. "Wh-Who are you? Leave me alone, or I'll scream!"

Lyim was surprised. This was not the spunky tiger Guerrand had described, but more a scared rabbit. He put on his most disarming smile, the one that showed his dimples and the sparkle in his eyes. "I was told you were a girl, not a lovely young lady"

Kirah wrapped her arms around her bent knees and seemed to pull into herself even further, until all that was visible among the shadows of the rocks were her wide, white eyes.

"I am Lyim. Your brother sent me to find you."

"Cormac?"

"No, your other sibling. Guerrand."

The young girl shook her head vigorously, limp hair swinging in pale yellow ropes. "I no longer have a brother by that name."

Lyim's eyebrows rose in mild amusement. "Guerrand said you might be angry."

"Angry!" scoffed Kirah. "That's an understatement." She abruptly pinched her lips into a tight, pale line, unwilling to be drawn further into the subject.

"I can see you're more than angry," Lyim continued in his most soothing tone. "And I know that seeing me is nothing like having your brother back again. But he did send me; I was with him less than three weeks ago."

This line of approach didn't seem to be getting Lyim very far, although Kirah hadn't turned and run, which he counted as a victory of sorts. "You don't look anything like your brother," he said at last.

"I'm told I favor our mother." Kirah eyed his attire suspiciously from the ledge. "And you don't look like a friend of Rand's—a pirate, maybe."

Remembering the prejudice he'd encountered when last on board ship, Lyim had left his trademark red robe in Palanthas. He'd been on the wretched, rocking boat for over two weeks and had grown a thick beard and mustache, well trimmed, the same glistening blue-black as his

shoulder-length hair. His clothing was unusually subtle for Lyim: undyed chamois, a jerkin with short, flared sleeves over a white linen shirt. Lyim's breeches were of the same soft leather, tucked into high boots. Kirah was right—no one would mistake him for a mage.

Lyim laughed. "Your brother tells me that all the time." An awkward silence fell.

"So... is Guerrand a mage now?" Kirah asked at last.

"We're apprentices, actually."

Kirah shrugged, signifying the distinction was unimportant to her. "Where is he?"

Lyim coughed at the inevitable question. "Guerrand asked me not to tell you that, for your own sake."

Kirah pursed her lips in disgust but didn't press him on the point. "So, did he send you merely to tell me he's still alive?"

"No," said Lyim, "he sent me to warn you." He was squinting into the sunlight above her. "Say, can you come down off there? I'm nearly going blind." Kirah hesitated to get any closer.

"You realize, of course, that if I were here to hurt you," said Lyim, his handsome face smirking, "a little thing like a ledge wouldn't stop me."

Kirah seemed to consider that, then extended her hand for him to help her down. Lyim took the pale little thing, like fragile bird bones, and steadied her as she jumped to the tide-washed sand at the mouth of the cove. "Much better," he sighed, settling himself onto a knee-high shelf of rock.

"Warn me about what?" Kirah asked, skipping back in the conversation. "The furor over Guerrand's leaving has finally passed. Cormac simply seized the land he wanted from Berwick, and the mood in Castle DiThon is, for once, almost ridiculously happy—particularly since Cormac left to defend Stonecliff against retaliation from Berwick. He also wanted to use the time to draw up plans for the fort he intends to build there."

Lyim snapped his fingers. "That's just it. Berwick intends to strike back, and soon, but not at Stonecliff. He's gathering an army of mercenaries and Knights of Solamnia to besiege Castle DiThon."

Kirah's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "How would you know that? Perhaps you're really a spy in the employ of Berwick, sent here to cause trouble and learn whatever you can by lying to young girls." She stepped away from him, waves lapping up to fill her sandy footprints.

Lyim shook his head sadly. "Your suspicions are misplaced, Kirah," he said. "How can I prove to you that I am truly your brother's friend sent to help you, and not some spy for a man on whom I've never laid eyes?"

She jutted her chin defiantly. "Tell me where Guerrand is, so I can ask him myself."

"You couldn't reach him in time to prevent the Berwick attack, even with the fastest ship."

Kirah arched a pale brow. "So he's not on Northern Ergoth?"

Lyim chuckled. "Guerrand told me you were clever, but I'm not foolish. You'll have to think of another way to be reassured I am who I say. Quickly now, before I lose my considerable patience," he finished, his sarcasm evident to Kirah even through her own frustration.

"So tell me how you learned of this plot."

Lyim looked relieved. "I can tell you that much safely. Guerrand and I saw the recruitment notices, and I traveled here with many of the responding mercenaries." Lyim plucked at his shirt. "That's why I'm not wearing my usual wizardly garb. Anyway, unless I miss my guess, we have just a matter of days before they attack—the time it takes to march an army from Hillfort to here."

Kirah pondered that for a while. At length she said, "Let's say I believe you. What would you have me do about it? Cormac's at least a day away, even if he would listen to me, which he wouldn't."

"You could never explain where you'd learned it," agreed Lyim. "From what Guerrand has said, your elder brother isn't as *tolerant of magic as you are*."

Kirah chuckled without humor. "Tolerant isn't a word I would use to describe Cormac under any circumstance."

"We'll have to tread carefully, then," said Lyim. "I have an idea that just might work, but you'll have to give me some information on the Berwick family," he said mysteriously, piquing

Kirah's interest.

Lyim looked about the cove with disdain. "We've got to work fast. I need to prepare some spells. Can you sneak me into the keep where I can work in relative comfort—" he brushed at the moist clay on his tunic "—or at least under drier conditions?"

Kirah smiled broadly. Here, at last, was something she understood. Lyim was very charming. If she was making a mistake in trusting him, at least life would be interesting for the first time since Guerrand left.

"If it's a sneak you need, then you've come to the right person."

One hundred mercenaries and men-at-arms stretched across the heath behind Sir Morris Whetfeld. For three days, the Knight of the Rose had ridden before them from Hillfort, leading them to the castle of his father-in-law's nemesis. To the family his new wife had twice nearly joined. The Berwicks had been thrice betrayed by the DiThons. Morris's mailed fists curled in anger. These barbarians from Northern Ergoth had no sense of honor. No wonder they were merely cavaliers, instead of true Knights of Solamnia.

The Knight of the Rose shuddered at the thought of the misfits behind him who'd answered the notices the Berwicks had placed in every port of call. They were a scruffy lot, the dregs of society no doubt. Sir Morris would be happy when this siege was over and he could pay them and send them back to whatever holes they'd crawled from. He had no illusions about the honor of these swords-for-hire, but at least their loyalty could be purchased temporarily.

From the looks of things at Castle DiThon, Sir Morris would not need to purchase it for long. Aside from some sheep grazing on a nearby hillside, the place looked nearly deserted. Advance word of the attack had obviously not leaked to Cormac DiThon. It was doubtful, even, that anyone inside had yet noticed that an army stood at the ready beyond the eastern walls. Morris had expected at least some sort of nominal, everyday castle defenses to be in place. The closed northern and eastern gates, from the knight's vantage point, appeared to be the extent of its security.

Could it be a trap? Was DiThon more clever than Morris anticipated, or as foolish as he appeared? The knight could hear the men behind him getting restless, their horses prancing. Sir Morris was about to force an answer to his question by preparing his men for the initial charge when a lone figure appeared on the eastern battlements.

Wearing a tabard bearing what Morris knew to be the DiThon coat-of-arms and a helmet that was much too big, the smallish man called out nervously, "Yes? What is it? May I help you?"

Sir Morris Whetfeld was thunderstruck! "Good heavens, man," he roared, "have you truly no idea we've come to siege your castle? Tell your master to come forth. I would speak with the blackguard before I lay waste to his moldering keep." Even at such a distance, Sir Morris could see the man's fear and indecision.

"I-I'm sorry, sir," the quivering man said. "I'm just the chamberlain. The lord, hmm, isn't in residence today," he blundered.

Sir Morris could scarcely believe his luck. "All the better, then. Direct whatever men-at-arms you have to open the eastern gates, and we'll have a minimum of bloodshed and damage."

The chamberlain wrung his hands. "That would mean surrendering, wouldn't it? I don't believe I can do that, sir. I'm just the chamberlain."

"You're about to be a dead chamberlain!" shouted Sir Morris, growing frustrated with the man's timidity. He rubbed his face beneath the uplifted visor of his

helm. "Go and fetch the lady of the keep, if you must," he ordered briskly. "And be quick about it, man, or we'll open the gates for you from the outside."

"One moment, please," the chamberlain called, as if speaking to an unexpected guest at the door.

Not knowing what else to do, Sir Morris crossed his arms and waited, amazed at the odd turn of events. Many minutes passed, and still no one returned. Hearing his commanders behind him

whispering among themselves, Morris began to feel foolish, which made him angry. Even the mercenaries began to joke loudly.

Sir Morris's cheeks grew hot in his helm, until he could no longer stand it. "Time's up!" he bellowed. Morris signaled to the men behind him. A group moved forward, carrying a massive tree trunk between them. Positioning themselves in front of the main gate, they began battering their way through.

Three times the huge ram crashed like thunder into the stout gate, and each time the timbers cracked and splintered a bit more. But the portal was built to withstand such punishment and undoubtedly would for some time.

Sir Morris shifted in his saddle. Surely these fools would just let them in. Even the pretense of resistance was foolhardy under these conditions. Another crash resounded. After a few more strokes, Morris would order a fresh crew to the ram; swinging the enormous log was a tiring job.

As his eyes ran along the parapets, Morris caught a movement several dozen paces to the right of where the chamberlain had been. Perhaps a sniper with a bow, waiting to pick off a juicy target like a knight on horseback. He waved several of the mercenary archers to his side and was in the process of pointing out the potential danger spot to them when the flutter turned into a figure of a young man Morris estimated to be approximately a score of years in age. He appeared unarmed, and had more the look of a pirate than a soldier about him.

Cupping a hand to his mouth, the young man hollered down to the assembled warriors, "Halloo! I wish to speak with Master Berwick."

Morris frowned. What was this distraction all about? "Who are you?" the knight demanded. "I sent the chamberlain for the mistress of the castle."

"Lady DiThon is, ahem, indisposed," said the man. "I represent the family's concerns."

Morris spurred his mount slightly, just enough to make it prance in place. "Any missive you have for Master Berwick you may deliver to me. I am Sir Morris Whetfeld, an honorable Knight of the Rose and Berwick's son-in-law, as well as commander of this host. Speak your message, quickly."

The figure on the wall studied Morris for a moment, then replied. "I have something here of yours." Crash! "Tell your monkeys to stop their hammering, and I will show you something I'm certain you'll find of particular interest."

"There'll be much to pay if this is just some delaying tactic," warned Sir Morris. At length he extended his left arm, palm side down, and lowered it, whereupon the battering ram crew dropped the tree trunk. This fellow on the wall seemed entirely too cocky for someone in his position, Morris thought, and he did not like cocky young men. He had seen his fill of those among the knights back in Solamnia. He would hear out the chap's message, but at the first hint of stalling, the attack would resume. Morris could not let this arrogant young man forget who held the upper hand.

The speaker reached behind the adjacent merlon and drew out a young woman with dark hair and downcast eyes. Even at this distance, she was remarkably familiar to Morris. He blinked in disbelief.

"Ingrid?" Morris stood in his stirrups now, blood pounding angrily in his ears as his eyes searched the face of his new wife. "How is this possible?"

"Did you think us so provincial that we'd remain unaware of your plot?" snorted the man who stood next to the woman on the battlements. "You posted notices over the entire continent of Ansalon! It was not a difficult thing after your departure to snatch your comely wife from the manor house in Hillfort. You left it shamefully underprotected." The man stroked Ingrid's cheek. "Your tender wife has learned many an interesting thing during the trip here with ruffians and miscreants, haven't you, my dear?" With a shudder, Lady Ingrid Berwick Whetfeld drew away from the man.

Sir Morris cursed himself for his carelessness. "This is an outrage!" he shrieked. "Preying upon innocent women in time of war is cowardly and dishonorable! If so much as a hair on her head is harmed, I shall topple this castle stone from stone and bury you all inside."

The speaker on the wall seemed more amused than threatened by Morris's histrionics. He hollered in reply, "I would keep a civil attitude, Solamnic. You really can't afford to offend me right

now."

Sir Morris snarled at the man, his eyes on the woman. She said nothing. "Wife, don't you know me? What have these base villains done to you? Why don't you speak?"

"I am afraid, my husband," she whimpered. "Please just do as they ask, so that we may be together again."

"If you hurt her—" threatened Sir Morris again, shaking his mailed fist in impotent rage.

"She's not been harmed," the man interrupted, "and she won't be, provided you stop this siege nonsense."

Morris was ruffling up for a further barrage of insults and threats when he felt a restraining hand on his shoulder. He looked back to see the lined face of Anton Berwick, his father-in-law, peering intently up toward the wall. The merchant had insisted upon joining the expedition, but Morris had managed to persuade him to maintain a safe distance in the rear. The unexpected sight of his daughter on the parapet had obviously drawn Berwick forward. The merchant shook his head silently now, and the knight dropped reluctantly back into his saddle.

"My dear Ingrid, are you all right?" Though he tried to mask it, the old man's concern for his daughter was clear in his strong voice. He looked stiff and awkward in his new armor, and his considerable bulk seemed to overfill his poor horse's saddle.

"I'm fine, Father," replied the woman faintly, brushing a strand of windblown hair from her face. "They have treated me well enough. This one," she said with a glance to the man next to her, "has been quite gallant, really."

"Gallant? I hardly think so," snorted the knight, but a strong look from Berwick silenced him.

The knight moved close to his father-in-law. "Father, how can we trust these villains? They are kidnappers and deceivers, completely without honor. If we redouble our efforts with the ram, their gate will crumble very soon. Then we shall have Ingrid back, and revenge for this outrage."

But Morris could see the reply in Berwick's eyes even before any words were spoken. "If they truly are dishonorable deceivers, as you say, then we cannot risk continuing the attack. Of course the gate would fall, but revenge is all we would claim inside, and we would both lose Ingrid. I cannot allow that."

"But," pressed the knight, suddenly struck with a thought, "how do we know that is really Ingrid? This could be an elaborate trick of magic."

Berwick's jowls shook. "You don't know Cormac DiThon. However villainous he might be, he would never suffer the use of magic within his walls."

Sir Morris would not be dismissed so lightly. "You must admit, then, that at this distance, any young woman of a similar size with dark hair might pass for our Ingrid."

Berwick thought for a moment, then addressed the castle again. "Young man, you are a goodly distance removed from my tired old eyes. How can I be certain that the woman standing with you there truly is my daughter, Ingrid?"

The man seemed prepared for the possibility of such a question. He leaned in close to the merchant's daughter, as if in whispered conversation. After several moments, they separated and he replied, "This simple demonstration ought to be sufficient to persuade you." In a faint but clear voice, Ingrid said, "It is me, Morris." She then recited a simple rhyme:

*My hand do hold, my love, my light,
My hand do hold, my dearest treasure;
Your love I clasp inside so tight,
As dear to me as Oath and Measure.*

It was a poem Morris had written for Ingrid during their brief courtship, and they alone knew of it. A deep, crimson flush colored Sir Morris's face. That was enough to tell Anton Berwick the poem was authentic.

The rotund merchant turned back to the castle. "What do you want from us?"

"I already told you," the man replied. "Stop all this nonsense immediately and return to

Hillfort."

Morris raised his armored fist into the air, pointing at the man. "We will leave when Ingrid is returned to us!"

The kidnapper snorted loudly. "Do you think I just fell off the turnip wagon? If I hand her over now, you'll simply resume your attack."

"I give you my solemn word as a Knight of the Rose that we will not," vowed Sir Morris.

"The word of a knight means naught to me," said the man. "I believe only that which I can see with my own eyes. Your lady wife will remain here for two days.

That should give you time to get halfway to Hillfort. At that point we will return her the same way we fetched her. I assure you, Ingrid will be there waiting, as you left her, when you arrive.

"And don't even think about doubling back," the kidnapper added menacingly. "It should be pretty clear to you by now that we are aware of your every move."

There was silence for several moments, as all parties considered the transaction. Then Sir Morris spoke again. "And what of the land you stole from us, with plans to extort our ships with tolls? That injustice cannot be allowed to stand. Especially now, considering what you have done to our Ingrid."

"The land? Oh, yes, that," the man muttered. "Uh, have your representatives contact ours concerning negotiations for the land." With that, he turned quickly to leave.

Baffled, Sir Morris, gloved hands on the tassets covering his hips, glanced up. "Are you not Cormac DiThon's representative?"

"I think I made that clear," said the man.

Sir Morris bristled. "Then we will discuss possession of Stonecliff now, or we will not leave."

The kidnapper rolled his eyes in vexation. "All right, then. If ownership of that small piece of land is to forever be a cause for war between us, we will retire from occupying it."

"And that is acceptable to Lord DiThon?" asked Berwick, astonished.

"I said so, didn't I?"

Both Sir Morris and Anton Berwick eyed the snappish representative on the wall one last, lingering time. "It is done, and we will leave in peace," Berwick announced at length. His glance turned once more on his daughter before he rode awkwardly away through the ranks of disappointed knights and mercenaries who would see no fighting today.

Sir Morris Whetfeld also spun about, and his army followed him. "Have courage, my love," he called to Ingrid with a last longing look over his shoulder at the woman on the wall. "Soon we will be together again."

Ingrid waved a handkerchief at the retreating army.

"We did it!" squealed Kirah, crouching behind the protection of the merlon as the army noisily departed across the heath. "Gods, can you believe he actually said that to me?" She wiggled her newly bent front teeth and tugged at the elaborate frock with disdain. "Hurry up and make me look like myself again," she pleaded.

Lyim dispelled the disguise with a wave of his hand. Kirah stood before him once more in her dirty yellow frock and hair.

"You have no idea how difficult it is to speak around those teeth!" she laughed. "Fooling the Berwicks was easy by comparison."

"Speak for yourself," muttered Lyim, rubbing his temples. He was unused to casting so many spells at once, not to mention the pressure of negotiating peace. Still and all, this good deed had been easy enough to accomplish.

He'd not admit it to Kirah, but he'd expected more of a fight from the Berwicks. All it took to convince them was a poem he'd plucked from the befuddled knight's memory. "We were fortunate you were close enough in size to Ingrid Berwick and remembered her features in enough detail for me to superimpose them on you."

"Who could forget those teeth?" Kirah chortled once more. "I'll tell you who's really lucky—Guerrand, for not marrying into that family!" Kirah almost felt like herself again. The tension she'd held in her shoulders since Lyim had suggested the ruse eased away.

Lyim saw it. "Don't get too relaxed, Kirah. There's much work to be done yet."

"Like what?"

"Like releasing your sister-in-law, Rietta, from the binding spell that kept her out of sight while we addressed the knights."

"Must we?" Kirah pouted, then rolled her eyes. "Oh, I suppose you're right. Someone will surely notice that she hasn't issued a shrewish order for a least an hour."

Lyim laughed, then grew serious. "We also must send a missive immediately to Cormac at Stonecliff, apprising him of the attack, before Berwick finds out he's been duped and returns."

Remembering Lyim's promise, Kirah clapped a hand over her mouth. "What's he going to say when he finds out someone promised to return Stonecliff?"

"He's going to be furious, particularly when he can't find the man who promised it." He shrugged. "Under the circumstances, I had no choice. Besides, it occurred to me later that forfeiture of the land will happen as a matter of course. I didn't really lie about 'retiring from occupying the land.' " Kirah looked puzzled.

Lyim glanced over the battlement to check the retreat's progress. "As I figure it, once your brother hears that his castle is being sieged, he'll return immediately with every man he's got, leaving Stonecliff undefended. If Berwick is smart, he'll take measures to ensure that Stonecliff is not so easily taken from him again. Things will return to normal, unless your brother is foolish enough to start the whole cycle up again."

"I can't wait to see Cormac's face when he returns and discovers some mystery man chased away the Berwicks!" With the impulsiveness of a happy child, Kirah threw her arms around Lyim's neck and kissed his cheek.

Red-faced, the apprentice gripped her by the shoulders and set her back down. He looked intently at the young girl. "You know, Kirah, that you can never tell anyone what we did today. Can I trust you to keep our secret after I'm gone?"

Kirah felt suddenly deflated, and it had nothing to do with their secret. Of course Lyim would leave, she chided herself. How could he stay? He had a life somewhere else ... with Guerrand. It was just that, for a day, she'd had someone to confide in again. She would miss it more than ever now. More than Lyim knew, things would, indeed, return to normal again. And normal was nearly death to Kirah.

The young girl sighed. "Of course I can keep our secret," she murmured. Struck with a thought, Kirah gave him a penetrating look. "Why did you do all this?"

Lyim held his palms up. "Never explain, never defend, that's my motto," he said.

Kirah's expression was pure envy. "Rand is very lucky to have a friend who would risk life and limb for his family."

Lyim's dark head shook from side to side, his hair brushing Kirah's cheek. "Rand would do the same for me," said the mage kindly, steering her back down the stairs.

The task done, Lyim felt the pressure to return to Palanthas. It had taken twice as long to reach Guerrand's homeland as they'd planned for, and Lyim was afraid even inattentive Belize would begin to wonder where he was. The faster he released Rietta and sent the missive to Cormac, the sooner he could return to Palanthas and tell Guerrand the good news. Saving his friend's family, Lyim felt certain, more than made up for his behavior at the Jest.

Lyim watched his friend's kid sister scamper happily down the steps and smiled affectionately. He liked Kirah, and it was obvious she had grown more than a little fond of him. He liked that, too. He was used to females falling for his charms. One never knew when life paths would cross again, and it never hurt to have friends in many ports. Just like it never hurt to have friends in your debt.

Chapter Fifteen

Peering through wooden louvers in the vestibule, Guerrand watched Esme speak to Harlin and Mitild, the guardian statues, then depart the formal garden for the road that led into the city. Guerrand crept through the atrium like a hapless thief with a guilty secret. Thank the gods Justarius was proxy for Belize at tonight's meeting of the Council of Three. With Esme having just left for the Library of Palanthas, he would have all the time he needed to search her small room.

Lyim had been gone for nearly three weeks. Guerrand thought it likely the apprentice had made it to Northern Ergoth by now, if he hadn't been thrown overboard for casting spells. Had he spoken with Kirah yet? Had he been able to stop the siege on the castle? Guerrand wondered about these things often, envying the other apprentice's freedom. He would give anything, except his apprenticeship, to see his little sister for even a moment.

At the far right corner of the peristyle was the formal dining room that separated Guerrand's room from Esme's. Justarius's two apprentices kept different hours—Esme rose early, Guerrand stayed up late—so their paths didn't cross often. He had never been in her room, but he always paused outside his own to glance through the ornate archway into her antechamber. He liked to picture her at work inside, bent over a spell-book, chewing at the end of her braid in concentration.

After looking over both shoulders for Denbigh, Guerrand slipped through the arch. The antechamber was dark, but as his eyes adjusted, he saw that its curved walls were elaborately painted with bright reds, yellows, and blues, outlined in gold. A smaller archway, curtained off with heavy velvet, lay before him.

Guerrand moved quickly toward the curtain and pulled it back, hoping that Esme was more trusting than she ought to be. So far, so good, Guerrand thought when no spell-sprung thing leaped out or pinned him down. A light blinked on. Guerrand froze.

He spotted the source and slowly released his breath. A small glass globe, much like those in Justarius's lab, rested on a three-legged vallenwood table polished to a high gloss. Esme must have enchanted it to light the room whenever she passed through the curtain. It was a clever trick, which Guerrand resolved to remember.

Esme's sleeping room was very like his own, though the decorations bore a woman's touch. All about were bowls of sweet-smelling rose and lavender petals. Ever the mage, she, too, had shelves of pickled creatures, but she had far more dried herbs arranged in eye-pleasing wreaths and swags woven with strands of pearls and semiprecious gems. Skeins of ribbon and woolen yarn hung from a peg on the wall, waiting to tie up more drying bundles of herbs.

Guerrand was impressed. Where his room looked dim, stuffed, and cluttered, Esme's was well lit, neat, and inviting. There was something interesting to look at on every surface and in every corner.

Tucked into the harp-shaped back of her desk was a small cameo, black-inked on golden parchment. The subject's profile looked so familiar that Guerrand was drawn in for a closer glimpse. Strong patrician nose and chin—it could have been Esme, save for the long, curling mustache above the full lips. Her father, Guerrand concluded.

The realization touched off new feelings of guilt. He was violating her privacy, and to what end? He honestly didn't believe she had anything to do with the threats on his life. Guerrand was forced to admit that curiosity about the young woman had driven him here, kept him here now.

Guerrand turned and scrambled through the soft, heavy curtain into the antechamber. The glow from the globe flowed under the curtain and splashed his feet with light. He waited a few moments to see if it would turn off of its own accord. It didn't.

"Damnation!" he grumbled under his breath. If Esme came back and the light was glowing, she'd know someone had been in her room. Swearing again, Guerrand swept back the curtain and approached the globe. He peered at it closer, not really expecting to find a switch or directions.

Not knowing what else to do, Guerrand reached out and wrapped his fingers over its surface, as if he could blot out the annoying glow. Beams leaked in thin strips between his fingers. Perhaps

covering it briefly with a thick piece of cloth would trip some lever and turn off the light. Guerrand dropped the top of his robe to his waist and began to pull the cotton tunic beneath it over his head.

Contorted thus, he could neither see nor hear the loops of ribbon and yarn lifting from the wall, straining toward him. They wrapped whisper-light in layers around his upraised arms and robe-covered legs, then stretched tight. Startled, Guerrand struggled against the unseen bonds, but only succeeded in tightening them further. He wiggled his face through the opening of the tunic and spied the ribbons. Exasperated, he wrestled against them and lost his balance. Unable to grasp the edge of the table, Guerrand crashed to the ground, dropping and smashing the globe. The light abruptly winked out.

"Now it goes out," Guerrand groaned, lying on his side in the midst of the shards of broken glass. He would have rubbed his face in his usual gesture of frustration, if only he could have reached it. He had no components, no hands with which to gesture an incantation that would get him out of this mess. He couldn't even reach his limbs to bite them off like a coyote in a trap.

Yes, Guerrand thought, Esme is very clever.

"It worked! My spell worked!"

Guerrand started awake at the sound of Esme's excited cry. He could hear her fumbling to light a candle.

A flame grew. "Guerrand! What are you doing in here?" Esme's delight turned to confusion. "You picked an odd time for your first visit. I told you I was going to the library." Her eyes narrowed abruptly as her confusion turned at last to angry understanding.

The apprentice on the floor looked sheepish. "Would you please let me loose so I can explain?"

"No," she snapped, turning her back on him. "I'm quite certain I don't want to do that."

"I'm bleeding."

"I hope you bleed to death. You broke my globe."

"I know. I—I'm sorry." Guerrand's apology sounded lame even to his own ears. "Please, Esme," he pleaded, "I know this looks bad. It *is* bad, but I can explain."

"Let me guess," she said, running a strand of pearls through her fingers. "You needed to wear these with a very special outfit."

Guerrand sighed heavily. "You're not making this any easier for me."

Her beautiful honey-colored eyes narrowed in the candlelight. "You made it hard for yourself when you broke into my room. You know Justarius's rule about privacy." She flung the pearls back onto the table. "I've a mind to tell him about this and demand he expel you from the order!"

"I wouldn't blame you if you did," Guerrand said softly.

Esme jammed her hands on her hips. "I won't go easier on you, just because you sound contrite now." Her softening tone belied her harsh words. "Were you here to steal my components? Scrolls? My spellbook?" She shook her head sadly. "You were coming along quickly enough in your studies, Guerrand, without resorting to this."

"Gods, Esme!" he cried. "I may be an unprincipled snoop, but I'm no thief!"

"Interesting distinction."

Guerrand laid his head down and closed his eyes in frustration. "This is coming out all wrong."

She eyed his arms tangled in the sleeves of the tunic that was half over his head. "If I weren't so angry, I might laugh. You look ridiculous."

"I feel ridiculous. Will you please untie me so that I can at least pull my tunic down? I promise I'll explain then."

Esme looked at him briefly, then bent down and slipped a stiletto next to Guerrand's skin, slicing through the yarn and ribbons that held his limbs. Sitting up, he rearranged his tunic and settled his robes back onto his shoulders.

"I'm waiting."

Rubbing his wrists, Guerrand looked her square in the eyes. "Justarius and I believe someone is trying to kill me."

Shock registered on Esme's beautiful face. "But why?"

Guerrand sighed. "I don't know. I thought for a time it was my family, but we've ruled them out." He told her of the first attacks against him. "It's obvious whoever it is has magical abilities. This mage used magic on Lyim, which is why he tried to kill me at the Jest."

"But how can you rule out Lyim?" asked Esme. "He's the only person who's been present when these things occurred."

"Justarius is certain that the spell cast during the Jest was beyond Lyim's skill. Besides, Lyim was the one who saved me during the ambush north of Palanthas."

Esme nodded thoughtfully. "Could be a clever cover."

"Too clever."

Esme shook her golden head. "I still don't understand what any of this has to do with you searching my room." Her eyes snapped up suddenly, and a hand flew to her throat. "You suspect me!"

Guerrand winced at her anguish. "I suspect no one, and I suspect everyone, Esme. Palanthas is filled with mages, many of whom were at the Jest. Anyone could have learned I was traveling here from Wayreth, or even seen me leave that stall in the marketplace with Lyim."

"But what possible reason could I have for wanting you dead—" she scowled "—until *now*, that is?"

"None," he said honestly. "I told myself I was coming here to eliminate you as a suspect." Guerrand lowered his eyes, and his heart raced along with his words. "I know now that was just an excuse to justify my curiosity about you. You're so aloof and mysterious. Ever since you gave me your scarf at the Jest, I've tried to envision you sitting in here, studying at night, while I'm across the dining room doing the same thing."

"You have?"

"I think I'd better go now," he muttered thickly. Guerrand picked himself up from the floor and turned to leave.

"If I've been aloof," she said to hold him, "it's because I'm reluctant to trust. I withheld nothing from my father, and he disowned me for my honesty. So perhaps you can understand why I don't warm up to many people."

An awkward silence fell as neither apprentice knew what to say. Esme stooped to sweep up the shards of her globe. Guerrand reached down to help, then noticed the blood on his fingers. He wiped the digits self-consciously on his red robe.

"Here, let me see that," said Esme, taking his bloody hand in both of hers. Locating the cut on his thumb, she applied pressure at the base until the bleeding stopped.

"Thanks." Embarrassed, Guerrand yanked his arm back more forcefully than he'd meant. The mirror he kept in the folds of a wide sleeve cuff tumbled forth. His hand raked out, and he caught the magical shard in midair.

"What's that?" demanded Esme, clutching it before Guerrand could slip the shard back into his cuff. She held its jagged edges gingerly in her fingers. "This isn't part of my globe. It's a looking glass. Vanity, Rand?" She looked at him in amusement.

"Belize gifted me with it to inspire my trip to the Tower of High Sorcery."

Esme looked truly shocked. "I got the impression that the only thing the Master of the Red Order felt for you was contempt. But why a mirror? Does it do anything interesting?"

"It can scry, though I don't know how to activate that ability." Guerrand thought he could see Zagarus's misty image in the glass. "I accidentally—or rather, my familiar—discovered that you can slip inside it. That's where Zagarus is now." He extended a hand. "May I have it back, please?"

"A familiar? How impressive." Esme gently handed the mirror to him. Her eyes snapped open wide with an idea. "Say, what about Belize? He was at the Jest. He was particularly angry at you for defeating Lyim, if I remember correctly."

Guerrand frowned. "I suggested that to Justarius, but he thinks it's highly unlikely. Belize has far bigger fish to fry than me."

"Does Justarius know that you knew Belize before, or that he gave you this mirror?"

"He knows that I'd met Belize, but he's unaware of the mirror. I can't see that either matters. Why would Belize want to kill me, when he was the one who gave me the resolve to pursue magic?"

"Then why does he hate you so now?"

Guerrand's shoulders raised.

"It's no coincidence Belize's name keeps cropping up, Rand," Esme said firmly. "Our master said the red mage was an unlikely, not impossible, suspect, and Justarius didn't even know about the mirror. I have a hunch that you've overlooked the real villain."

"So what do I do," snapped Guerrand, "march up to Belize and ask if he's trying to kill me?"

Esme gave a dry, brittle little laugh. "That would be one solution. Not the best one, however. No, as I see it, you have two options. You can voice your suspicions to Justarius again and have him represent you before the Council of Mages. They may, or may not, believe an apprentice over one of their own. Or you can seek some real evidence against Belize."

Guerrand frowned his disapproval. "You mean break into his villa and search it."

Esme looked at the mess around her and said archly, "You didn't seem to mind breaking into my room. Nevertheless, I was also going to suggest you explore the world inside his mirror."

"Which would you do?"

Esme's thin shoulders raised. "Considering that Belize is the most powerful mage of our order, it would be safer to take your chances with the Council of Mages."

"Then I'll search Villa Nova," said Guerrand. Esme looked surprised but pleased. "I'll no longer seek the easy road, and I won't have someone else fight my battles," he added resolutely. "The mirror is a second option, but I prefer to face what I understand first."

"We can leave whenever you say," said Esme, her tone eager. "Just let me change into more practical clothing first."

"We?" he asked in disbelief.

"I can't let you go stumbling alone into someone else's traps, can I?"

Guerrand smirked. "Well, when you put it so nicely..." He dashed through the curtain and into the antechamber. "I'll meet you outside in two shakes."

"You're certain both of them are gone?"

The two apprentices passed under the first arch into Belize's villa.

"Lyim told me Belize was going to be away, penning his next work, for more than a fortnight," Guerrand whispered back. "I know for sure that Lyim is, uh, doing field work."

They stepped inside a vast rotunda that was so large they felt like ants. Both apprentices gasped in wonder.

The circular, domed room looked more like a guild hall or temple than a home. Square recesses adorned the inside of the dome, leading to a large, perfectly circular opening at the peak. The floor was cold gray marble, except in the very center of the room. There, sunlight streamed in a narrow column from the hole above and splashed across an elaborate parquet of red and black marble triangles, squares, and circles. The majority of the room was empty, except along the walls; Guerrand thought there was not enough furniture in all of Palanthas to fill it, anyway.

Four arched doorways at equidistant points around the rotunda led to unseen rooms beyond. Between these portals were elaborately mantled alcoves that contained gilded mirrors, chairs and small tables, or marble statues on pedestals. Guerrand recognized one of the busts, of the great wizard Fistantilus, from a book he'd read frequently in his father's library.

The two apprentices walked a third of the way in, slowly turning to survey the surroundings. Esme watched her reflection in six mirrors.

"This place looks like a maze at a festival fun house, with all these mirrors," the young woman whispered. Even so, her voice echoed in the rotunda. "They make me feel as if we're being watched."

"I wouldn't rule it out," muttered Guerrand with a shiver. "Let's just find his laboratory and some evidence so we can get out of here."

Esme nodded. "It's a sure bet he didn't leave a checklist lying around that says: 'Ways to Kill Guerrand.'" Her gaze traveled to each of the four large doorways. "Should we just start turning knobs?"

"I have a less risky idea," said Guerrand, rummaging around in the pouch that hung over his shoulder. He withdrew the mirror, brushing away flecks of lint, and mentally summoned his familiar. Zagarus tumbled out, startling both bird and woman.

She knows about me? asked Zag. Guerrand nodded his head.

"A sea gull!" cried Esme. "And such a magnificent one. I love the black-and-white markings on its head."

"Zagarus is a he. Uh," Guerrand continued hastily as Esme reached out a hand, "Zag doesn't like to be pet—" To Guerrand's surprise, Zag preened happily under the hand on his feathered head.

Such an observant judge of avian superiority can pet me anytime, the sea gull nearly purred.

"If you two are finished admiring each other," Guerrand said aloud so both could hear him, "I have a job for Zag." The bird was instantly alert. "First, get back into the mirror."

Hey!

Frowning, Guerrand clamped a hand around his familiar's beak. "Just do as I say, Zag. We don't have time for petulance."

Zagarus blinked at the hand on his beak. Guerrand quickly withdrew it and held out the mirror. Zagarus dipped his head, as if trolling for fish, and disappeared inside the shard's glassy surface.

"Good," said Guerrand. He strode to within two paces before the door to his left, knelt down, and set the mirror on the cold marble floor. Esme had trailed him. She watched, curious but silent as he took a wad of gum arabic from his pouch. Closing his eyes, Guerrand conjured a mental picture of the bones and muscles of his right arm stretching like hot taffy. "*Voli-gar et,*" he said firmly. Instantly, even before he opened his eyes, came the gentle tearing in his limb that told him his spell had worked.

He reached out with the elongated limb and pushed the mirror three-quarters under the door, keeping his fingers on the jagged edge. "I've sent the mirror across the threshold, Zag. Pop your head up on the other side and tell me what you see."

I'm in a wide, empty hallway, said the bird. *It looks like it leads to the kitchen.*

"All right, get back in the mirror," he said, sensing Zag's desire to explore. "I'll pull you over."

I'm inside. Zag's disappointment was obvious.

Guerrand reeled back his three-foot-long arm, bringing with it the mirror. He turned to Esme, who looked impressed with his tactics. "Zag says this one goes to the kitchen. We'll have to keep trying."

She nodded. "While you're doing that, I'll look around, see if I can find something odd," she suggested.

"Don't touch anything," he warned, watching her take tentative steps toward the center of the room.

Guerrand turned back to his own task. Scooping up the mirror, he followed the curve of the rotunda to the right, stopping a safe distance before the next door, where he repeated the process.

"What do you see?" he prompted Zag.

I'm not sure, he mumbled. *It's another hallway, darker than the last, but I think I can make out a staircase.*

Guerrand felt hope flutter in his chest. "Back in you go," he commanded, then waited a few moments before drawing the mirror back, taking it up in his long fingers.

Suddenly he heard a scream behind him. Esme! He whirled about and spied her on a shield-

sized platform that was rapidly rising skyward from a shaft in the center of the rotunda's floor. She clamped off a second terrified scream with one hand. Dropping into a crouch, the young woman used the other hand to grip the side of the circle of marble as it brought her ever closer to the sunlit opening in the peak of the rotunda.

Guerrand ran to the base of the shaft. "Hang on!" he called up. Stuffing the mirror in his pack, he looked desperately for some lever on the thick metal column that rose several stories above on the platform of marble. He found none. Guerrand began to fear she'd be shot out of the opening like a stone from a catapult.

Near the top, the shaft ground to a stop. "I'll think of some way to get you down!" he called lamely.

"Do you think this thing will lower itself? Oh, bother," he heard her mutter. "I won't wait for that. Stand back," she called, kneeling at the edge of the platform to address him directly.

"Esme, no!" Guerrand yelled, but he was too late.

Esme threw herself from the platform. Horrified, Guerrand ran beneath her, expecting to catch her, or at least break her fall. The young mage plunged for a heartbeat, but then her decent slowed until she was floating gently like a feather to the floor. Smiling, Esme did a dramatic one-foot landing.

"Feather fall spell," she explained calmly, considering the mixture of horror and relief on Guerrand's face.

"Next time tell someone what you're about to do," her companion growled.

"I'm fine, if you're wondering," Esme said lightly, ignoring his anger.

Abruptly both apprentices jumped away from the parquetry marble as the shaft began to move again, sinking soundlessly back into the floor. The platform looked once more to be a seamless circle of inlaid black marble.

Hey, that looked like fun, said Zagarus, who'd left the confines of the mirror.

"Everyone, stay away from the parquetry shapes," commanded Guerrand, scowling at Zag's response. "Standing on that inner circle must have activated a trap."

As traps go, it seemed harmless enough, said Zagarus. *Aren't you the least bit curious to learn what the other shapes do?*

"What if they release an army of bugbears or wraiths, or kill intruders instantly?" Guerrand asked aloud, snorting. "I think I can live without knowing any of that."

If Belize was concerned about anyone getting in, posed Zagarus, *why didn't he trap the doors? We've encountered nothing the least bit threatening.*

"That's what worries me," said Guerrand, scratching his head. "I just don't understand why he's made it so easy for strangers to get in."

"Maybe," suggested Esme, "he assumes everyone is cowed by his position and wouldn't dare break in."

Guerrand gave a humorless smile and a shake of his head. "All the guessing in the world won't give us those answers. The second door seems like it might lead to Belize's laboratory. Let's get back to the task, while luck is still on our side. Zag? Hey, where are you?"

Guerrand turned around just as the curious sea gull stretched out a webbed foot, placing it on a red triangle in the parquetry pattern.

"Zagarus!"

The cry came too late. The marble floor abruptly opened beneath them all. Man, woman, and bird tumbled through dark, fetid air. Squawking his startlement, Zagarus took to wing. The sea gull floated up, looking for a way out, or at least a crack of light.

Beneath him, Guerrand and Esme plummeted like rocks, without even time to think of a saving spell. In a tangle of limbs, they crashed onto a hard flagstone floor. Wincing, Guerrand rolled off his right side and away from Esme. He did a quick check and felt badly bruised but otherwise unhurt.

Guerrand looked over his shoulder at Esme. She was on her side in a motionless heap, her face turned away. Then he saw her left leg and gasped. It was twisted at an impossible angle,

obviously broken. She's lucky she's unconscious, he thought. That leg's going to hurt like the Abyss when she comes to. Biting his lip, he forced himself to very gently realign the leg. Unconscious, Esme groaned.

What should I do now? Splint it? With what? Guerrand looked about anxiously. Though it was dark, he could see that they were on the edge of a raised stone platform in some vast, cavernous room. Behind him was a wall of fieldstone and mortar.

Just then he heard his familiar plop to a landing nearby. "Zag!" Guerrand cried in relief, then remembered how they'd got here. He glowered. "Thanks to you, Esme's leg is broken."

Really? The sea gull waddled over to look closely. *Oh, my.* For once, the gull was speechless.

"You can make up for it by flying back out of here and getting a strong, straight limb to use as a splint."

The bird's feathered head shook from side to side. *I'm afraid I can't do that. The floor closed right after we fell. Zagarus looked up. Worse still, we fell down a shaft. The ceiling in here looks normal, but the shaft is about three times your height, I'd guess. You'd have to stack up a lot of crates to get back up that way. I've looked for another opening, but I haven't found one yet. You're a mage. Can't you just blip us out of here, or at least fix her leg?"*

Guerrand frowned his frustration. "Teleporting is far beyond my skill. And wizards aren't healers. Come to think of it, though," he said, reaching into his pack, I've got some herbs, that, when combined are supposed to be a great analgesic." He pulled out several small burlap sacks. "I only hope we won't be needing the spell for which the peppermint was intended."

Guerrand lifted Esme's head. "This would be better in tea, but she'll just have to choke down the leaves." He parted her lips with a finger. On her tongue he placed a pinch of the crushed, dried peppermint and cream-colored meadowsweet flowers soaked in oil of clove.

The taste of the acrid leaves must have penetrated

her foggy slumber, because at that moment Esme's eyes popped open. Struggling to sit up, she let out a strangled scream at the stab of pain in her leg. Guerrand quickly pinched her lips shut to keep the herbs inside. Her honey eyes puddled, then rivers of tears flowed down her cheeks, splashing Guerrand's hand.

"You've broken your leg," Guerrand explained hastily, releasing her lips. "The herbs are bitter, but you must swallow them. They'll ease the pain." She gulped down the bitter concoction.

"We need to splint the break," he explained gently, then came upon an idea. Once again, he fished around in his pack and retrieved two items. Closing his eyes intently for several moments, he opened them and sprinkled powdered iron onto a small wood shim. "*Silas sular.*"

With a slight snapping sound, the shim thickened and lengthened until it was nearly the size of a cane. Guerrand then used some strong cord from his pack to lash it securely to the outside of Esme's leg. The lines of pain in her brow eased noticeably once the limb was immobilized.

Esme brushed the tears from her cheeks. "That's much better. Help me sit up, please." Guerrand complied, sliding her gently from the platform to prop her back against the fieldstone wall.

"Do you know where we are?" she asked weakly. She could see only the suggestion of a table ahead and below in a dark, wide expanse.

"Zag says we fell down a shaft and the floor closed back up," supplied Guerrand, still kneeling at her side. He lifted his head to gaze about, then wrinkled his nose. "Something smells awful, though."

A single dim torch provided the only light in the cavernous room, though Guerrand could see that other unlit torches were spaced all along the walls. He stood and reached up to pluck the torch from its sconce, noticing the flame emitted no smoke. Curious, he held his hand nearer and felt no heat. He brashly passed his fingers through the fire. Flames danced about his flesh. but the sensation was mild, like water flowing over his hand.

Esme, who had been watching, said, "It must light magically. Perhaps the others will, too, when you get close to them."

Guerrand glanced at her. "Will you be all right by yourself for a few minutes?"

Esme looked half exasperated, half touched by his concern. "Of course," she said, the piqued side winning out.

Guerrand took three steps down to a slate floor. The other torches throughout the room sparked to life. Guerrand looked back, and Esme shot him a knowing smile.

Returning his gaze to the room, Guerrand gasped. They'd found Belize's laboratory. The room was large and overfilled, yet seemed somehow neat and organized. Near the stairs stood a trestle table. A padded stool appeared to be the only item of comfort. Guerrand scanned the table and saw two books. The closed one was thin, and on the spine in faded gold lettering was the title, *Observations on the Structure of Reality* by Fistantilus.

The other book, face open, was very thick and old; ancient scratchings at the top suggested it was the spellbook of one Harz-Takta. Beyond that, Guerrand couldn't read the language of the text, but he recognized an illustration of the triple lunar eclipse known as the Night of the Eye, when all three moons, white Solinari, red Lunitari, and black Nunitari were lined up in descending order and resembled a huge eye in the night sky.

Surrounding the spellbook were papers and parchments—none of which mentioned him—quills, pots of colored inks, compasses and protractors, and other writing and drawing implements. The rug beneath the table was spotted with stains and small bum holes.

Shelves lined the walls and stood freely throughout the room, just like in Cormac's wine cellar back in Castle DiThon. But instead of wine casks, these were filled with books and scroll cases and loose or bundled papers. Around and between these were a bewildering array of magical and mundane items: boxes and bits of bones and stones and minerals and ores, toad skins, nautilus shells, turtles' claws, a quartz-filled lobster carapace, fungi and plants, crystals and coins, paper polygons of pyramids, spheres and cubes, candles, bells, glass and wood rods, beakers, decanters, distilling equipment, evaporators, purifiers, rarifiers, and crucibles. The scope made Guerrand's head spin, and he knew he could never remember every detail.

Then his eye caught a flash of reflected light through one of the shelves. He stepped around the end of the rack and saw a cleared space before the back wall. Leaning against the massive, square-cut stones was a mirror, nearly as tall as Guerrand. It was framed in stiffened leather dyed a very dark hue. Several pieces had been broken from the edges of the mirror. But what drew the apprentice's attention was the upper right corner, or what should have been the upper right corner. A section was missing that looked identical to the mirror Belize had given Guerrand. Very interesting, he thought. I've found the original mirror. He reached out to touch its dusty surface, and his hand slipped inside as Zagarus did in Guerrand's own mirror.

"Guerrand," he heard Esme call. "What have you found?"

He withdrew his hand. "We're in Belize's laboratory," he answered without turning. "If you're all right, I'd like to look around a bit more, see if I can't find what we came for, or even a way out."

"Go ahead."

Some distance to the left of the mirror, Guerrand noticed a doorway to another chamber, still dark. Guerrand cautiously approached the opening, where he noticed a strong smell of alcohol and formaldehyde. As he stepped through, torches flickered to life.

Guerrand reeled backward in horror and disgust. His back slammed against the wall, and he stood there silently for several moments, too overcome to move. His eyes darted across the room, glancing from one ghastly sight to another, never staying on any single thing too long. Now he knew the source of the awful stench.

The room was filled with corpses, bodies of things Guerrand had never imagined in his worst nightmares. They floated in gigantic jars of pale blue liquid with their hair and limbs drifting eerily around them. Others were stuffed and mounted or strapped upright to boards. Two were laid out on tables, while a third—Guerrand could barely stand to glance at it—was flayed open on a table with its organs pulled out and spread around it like the petals of a hideous flower.

None of the creatures was recognizable, though all had familiar features: one was clearly part dog, another had the face and paws of a cat, a third seemed vaguely goatlike. Birds, snakes, even humans and elves, appeared in these monstrous shapes. Their bodies were twisted and misshapen,

with distended limbs, exposed craniums, bloated eyes. But even these were not the worst. Others had tongues protruding directly from their stomachs, ears and mouths where they didn't belong, eyes horribly combined with other organs.

Guerrand's mouth was as dry as dust. He blathered under his breath. He turned to run and tripped over a heavy, cast-iron rod that looked like a bootjack near the door, pressing it to the ground in his fall. Scrambling back onto his feet, he heard a noise, like gears turning, at the far end of the chamber. Guerrand jumped back and hid behind the doorframe. Peering around it, he looked toward the sound and waited, heart hammering.

Pushing its way through the darkness beyond the torchlight was a living monstrosity. The bloody, one-eyed, six-limbed creature groped its way into the light. Countless more of the creatures followed behind. Within seconds, the far half of the room had filled with the living creatures. They slithered over the floor and flowed over the rotted corpses on the tables.

Beyond horrified, Guerrand could taste bile. Wanting only to get away before these things he'd unwittingly released saw him, he turned again to flee. His foot met squarely with Zagarus's feathered breast.

"Squawk!"

Both bird and man went sprawling. Stunned, Guerrand scrambled to his feet once more and looked hastily over his shoulder.

"Damn it, Zag," he muttered. "Why didn't you tell me you were there? Now they've seen us." Dozens of gore-covered eyes were rivetted on Guerrand's pale face. The apprentice turned yet again and ran, Zagarus flying after him.

I thought you would sense me. Besides, I was too stunned to speak. What are they?

Guerrand dashed through the laboratory. "I'm not sure, Zag," he said, still looking over his shoulder, "but I know I don't want them to catch me." He took the steps to the platform in one leap. Esme still lay against the wall, dozing fitfully, in shock from her broken leg. He shook her gently, then desperately, until her eyes finally rolled open.

They snapped wide at his frightened expression. "What's wrong? Did you find something?"

Guerrand looked over his shoulder and directed her gaze to the laboratory below the platform. The first hideous creature was just passing into the torchlight.

The thing stretched a fingerless limb toward them, then heaved itself forward again on oozing stumps. Its circular mouth opened and shut, revealing a pulsating gullet lined with teeth. Another shape appeared behind it, and tentacles reached around the first one to grip the doorway.

Esme pulled back instinctively, though her back was already against the wall. "What are they?" she gasped, repeating Zagarus's question.

"Failed experiments, maybe? They were trapped inside another room, and I literally tripped a lever that released them." Two of them had now advanced into the room, their mouths working soundlessly as they dragged themselves across the floor, eyes focused on the humans crouched in the corner. They circled around Belize's table, more joining them every moment. One crawled upon the table, snatched up an ink pot, and stuffed it into its horrid maw, crushing it. Another, a half-headed human with the hind legs of a dog, took up a quill and scratched at Belize's spellbook. Not one made a move toward Guerrand and Esme.

"I don't get it." Guerrand's brow was furrowed as he watched the creatures swarming over magical equipment, sending beakers and books crashing. "They don't seem to be interested in us, only in destroying Belize's laboratory."

"Are we just going to wait for them to remember us?" asked Esme. "Maybe we should make a move to get around them now, since I can't run with this stupid leg." She tested it anyway, sending bolts of pain to the break beneath her knee.

Guerrand's lips pursed. "We'd have to wade through them."

Excuse me, Rand, said Zagarus at his shoulder. *I think I'd like to get back into my mirror now, where it's safe.*

"Yeah, sure," Guerrand said distractedly, reaching into his pouch. His fingers froze around the mirror's cool surface, and he let it drop back into the bag. Leaping to his feet, he leaned over the

steps at the edge of the platform, eyes searching for the large mirror from which Belize had broken his shard. They would be safe in there.

Guerrand moved back to where Esme and his familiar waited. "Zag," he said softly, "what do you think about when you enter my shard?"

The sea gull was startled by the question. *I just dip my head and push my way in.*

Esme grabbed at Guerrand's trouser leg. "What are you thinking, Rand?"

Guerrand swept the young woman up, arms under her legs, mindful of her broken one. His heart skipped a beat at her cry of pain. "We're all going into the mirror," he said. "Please, Esme, just close your eyes and trust me."

She searched Guerrand's face for only a moment before she hugged his neck and did as he asked.

Pulling Esme tight to his chest, Zagarus at his feet, Guerrand rushed down the steps. He followed the right wall, behind the shelves, until he came to the dusty, leather-edged looking glass. Mumbling a prayer to Lunitari, he instructed his reflected image to lift his right leg toward the mirror. His limb slipped through more easily than through water, and his foot found the ground within the mirror world. Straddling the glass, a foot on each side, Guerrand could see the milling monstrosities reflected behind him. Nestling Esme more tightly, he held his breath and stepped into the mirror without further hesitation.

His left foot landed on solid ground next to his right one. Cold, chilling mists roiled in semidarkness just past his waist, tickling at Esme's nose near Guerrand's chest. He settled her higher and began walking forward blindly, afraid the creatures might understand how to follow into the mirror, afraid to tell Esme of the fear.

"Zag?"

I'm here, Rand, the bird said reassuringly.

"Where are we?" Esme whispered.

"I don't know."

The young woman stiffened in his arms. "The herbs are wearing off. My leg aches like it's on fire."

Guerrand shifted her again. "I'll get you out of here soon," he promised, not sure how he would keep the vow.

What do you suppose would happen if we leaped into the shard in your pack? proposed Zagarus.

"Is this," Guerrand asked, "what it looks like inside my mirror?" Zag's beak bobbed. "Then I suspect we'd end up right back here. Belize's magical looking glass seems to be a portal to a mirror world."

So how do we get out?

"How do you get out?"

Zag cocked his head, as if in exasperation. *You know how—you call to me. I simply follow your voice through the mist to the wall where it sounds the loudest. Then I just step through, knowing I'll come out of the shard.*

Guerrand sighed. "We don't have anyone to call to us."

Esme was getting only half the conversation, since she couldn't hear Zagarus, so she was looking at Guerrand in frustration. He quickly told her what Zag had said.

Her brows knit. "You called this a 'mirror world,' which implies a vastness of scope. If your voice acts as a kind of map marker for Zag to follow, we'll just have to make our own sign that marks the way out."

An idea began to form in Guerrand's mind. "You visualize the shard as you step out, knowing you'll exit there?" he asked Zag for confirmation; the bird nodded. Hope fluttered in Guerrand's chest. He mentally ran his theory through from beginning to end and could find no real flaws. The apprentice had the same confident feeling as he did whenever he mastered a new spell.

"Esme, apply our lessons on visualization to the mirror in the peristyle of Villa Rosad. It's one even Zag has seen." She looked puzzled. "If the idea works, you'll understand."

"My leg hurts enough to try almost anything," she said weakly, her cheek on his shoulder.

"Picture the mirror in your mind, every detail," he continued. "You, too, Zag. Let your memory take you beyond the mirror to the walls around it. Keep it there. Think of nothing else."

Man, woman, and bird stood in the mist with closed eyes, every thought, every nerve on the task. Within moments, a high droning sound, like the steady thrumming of gnomish machinery, rose nearby. Locating the exact spot on the mist-shrouded wall from which the noise rose, Guerrand held his breath and stepped forward.

His foot met with no wall. The grayness simply vanished, and Guerrand and Esme leaped into the peristyle of Villa Rosad. The cool marble walls and greenery surrounded them, reflected in the full-length mirror behind them. Guerrand nearly swooned with relief.

A heartbeat behind the apprentices, Zagarus emerged through the looking glass. *Well, I'll be a pelican's beak!*

Chapter Sixteen

Justarius stood near the small reflecting pool in the peristyle, plucking the dead heads from his prized hibiscus plants. He was having a little trouble with spots on the peach-colored flowers, but was hoping for a second blooming from the reds. He slipped the withered, trumpet-shaped blossoms into a burlap sack. They would be made into a bitter tea that he found greatly aided his digestion.

Tugging the sack's strings to close it, he turned unconsciously toward the southeast doorway that led to the villa's bakery, where he would dry the hibiscus flowers. To his mild surprise, his apprentices burst forth from the mirror near the doorway at the end of the row of columns that comprised the colonnade. Justarius had been master to enough apprentices to be unfazed by their unusual modes of travel. However, he was concerned to see that the young woman in Guerrand's arms was obviously injured. They both looked frightened and more than a little disheveled, standing in the midst of the potted palms on either side of the mirror. Guerrand's sea gull familiar squawked a hasty arrival on their heels. Upon seeing Justarius, the bird took wing and flew into the blue sky above the peristyle.

"That was quite an entrance," Justarius said calmly. "What, may I ask, have you two been at?"

Guerrand's face burned as he kicked a path through the thick palms to set Esme gingerly in a chair near Justarius.

"I can explain—" began Guerrand.

"No, let me," interrupted Esme.

Justarius silenced her with a look. "I would like to hear Guerrand's explanation first, Esme." He tapped his bearded chin, then glanced at her broken leg in the makeshift splint. "That needs immediate attention. You may go with Denbigh now." Justarius snapped his fingers, and the enormous, shaggy owlbear shuffled into view as if by magic, which it very likely was.

"Denbigh," Justarius said, "please take Esme to my study and apply a proper splint. Then give her three and a half pinches—no more, no less—of the elixir marked 'restorative' from the second shelf on the right. She may have as much to eat and drink as she desires. The potion will no doubt make her hungry, and eating will help the healing process." Justarius returned his piercing gaze to Esme. "Elevate your leg and keep it as still as you can while the elixir is working. I think you'll find it gives great relief."

Esme, aware of Justarius's veil of patience, nodded her acquiescence to his order. Her leg throbbed so much that she could scarcely keep from retching, so she was willing enough to let the owlbear carry her away. The young woman gave Guerrand a sympathetic look and pumped her fist once to symbolize courage as she passed through the colonnade and out the archway to Justarius's study.

Guerrand half turned away, then forced himself to face Justarius. He coughed nervously, noticing Justarius's expectant stare. "Let me say first that this adventure to Belize's villa was all my idea, all my fault."

"You went to Villa Nova?" Justarius turned dark eyes on his remaining apprentice.

Guerrand felt as if he were back in Cormac's study, facing down his brother's disapproving scrutiny. He had a brief, childish impulse to concoct a story about visiting Lyim when the accident happened, but discarded the idea because it wasn't in him to lie. Besides, there were simply too many ways he could get caught in the prevarication.

"It's a complicated story," Guerrand began, shifting uneasily from foot to foot.

Jaw clenched, Justarius plucked off a healthy red bloom. "I'm in no hurry." He black eyes were riveted on Guerrand's as he crushed the petals to a pulp, a sign of his rising temper.

The apprentice could feel the muscles in his neck tighten into ropes. He pulled at the collar of his robe. "I went to Belize's to learn if he's trying to kill me."

"You were going to come right out and ask him?"

Guerrand looked horrified. "No! You told me he was going to be away for a time, so it

seemed like a good opportunity—"

"To break into his villa?"

"Well, yes," Guerrand conceded.

Justarius set his burlap sack on the table and began to pace slowly, pondering. "I won't ask why Esme was along," he said, "even though we'd agreed to tell no one of our suspicions. I'm more interested in how she broke her leg and you came to travel through a mirror."

Before Guerrand could answer, the master stopped and crossed his arms, his expression pensive as he continued. "I'm certain the break wasn't inflicted by

Belize, because you'd both have suffered far more than a fractured limb if he caught you in his home. So it must have been someone else. Lyim, perhaps?"

"No," Guerrand replied slowly. "Neither Lyim nor Belize were home."

"Didn't you find it a bit odd that you were able to so easily enter the home of the Master of the Red Order?"

Guerrand looked uneasy. "I'd hoped it was because we were careful."

Justarius looked bemused. "It might interest you to know that Belize does not place wizard traps because he hates to be deprived of killing would-be thieves himself. He prefers to mark each and every possession with his own magical sigil, so that if he suspects anything is missing, he can track down and kill the thief directly."

Justarius gave a bitter chuckle. "He despises coming home to a pile of dust that was once a man, when he could have had the pleasure of watching the thief die painfully." He peered at Guerrand. "You didn't take anything, did you?"

"Not from his home, no," Guerrand said quickly, thinking of the mirror Belize had given him.

Justarius dismissed the subject. "It matters very little. There are myriad ways Belize could learn the identity of intruders, if he wished." He waved Guerrand on impatiently. "Get on with telling me about Esme's leg."

"Yes, sir. Zagarus activated a trap, and the floor dropped out from underneath us. Esme broke her leg when we fell into Belize's laboratory."

Remembering the gruesome things they'd seen there, Guerrand shuddered. "Belize has a despicable hobby, if you can call it that." He proceeded to tell Justarius about the creatures that had chased them in the underground lab, leading to their leap through the mirror.

"How did you know of the mirror's abilities?" Guerrand's jaw tightened. The telling was probably long overdue. He reached into his pack and withdrew his palm-sized shard. "Belize gave this magical fragment to me as encouragement to leave for the Tower of High Sorcery. It was Zagarus who discovered he could slip inside, and I've been carrying him in it ever since."

Guerrand lowered himself wearily into a chair. "The mirror from which Belize took my shard is in his laboratory. Zag gave me the idea to jump inside when those monstrosities closed us in." He massaged his forehead. "We were just lucky it worked."

"You have no idea how fortunate you were," Justarius said sternly. "I've heard of mirrors such as the one you describe, but they're as rare now as crystal balls. They employ the same principle as teleportation, only the user needn't memorize an incantation. If I remember correctly, the bearer can pass through the magical mirror and reenter our world through any nonmagical mirror he can remember. To reenter the mirror world, he must carry a portion of the magical mirror."

Guerrand looked alarmed. "What keeps Belize from stepping through his mirror and exiting here, as we did?"

"You needn't worry," said Justarius with a shake of his head. "There are wards and protections on Villa Rosad that prevent *unauthorized* visitors."

Just then, Denbigh strode out of the bakery bearing a tray full of steaming food. The enormous monster lowered the tray to the table before the men. Wheezing and grunting in the manner of owlbears, he began to set the table for a meal.

Justarius took the plates from the owlbear's paws and sat by Guerrand. "That will be all, Denbigh, thank you," he said by way of dismissal. Nodding his enormous head once, Denbigh shuffled out of the lush peristyle.

"I haven't eaten for days, and you look in need of sustenance as well." Justarius looked pensive as he spread gooseberry preserves upon a piece of crusty bread. "Where were we? Oh, yes. You were describing what you saw in the lab."

Guerrand eyed the steaming food and realized he was starving. Taking a few bites of cracker, he summoned the memory of the groping limbs and soundless mouths. The cracker suddenly felt as dry as dust in his mouth, and he choked it down with great effort before answering. "Most seemed to be a mixture of transplanted human and animal body parts. Fleshless skeletons, exposed brains, human limbs replaced with an animal's—"

"That will do." Justarius wiped a bit of preserves from the dark triangular beard on his chin. He squinted thoughtfully at Guerrand. "Perchance did you see any works by Fistandantilus? Spellbooks, that sort of thing?"

Guerrand's eyes widened in surprise. "As a matter of fact, I did. There were two books. One was a very old spellbook by some wizard named—" Guerrand searched for the vague memory "—Harz-Takta, I think. The language of the spells was way beyond my ability, though I recognized a diagram of the Night of the Eye.

"The other book was by Fistandantilus, though all I saw was the title: *Observations on the Structure of Reality*." Guerrand snapped his fingers, remembering something else. "Above the lab, in the rotunda, was a bust of Fistandantilus, too. Does it mean something?"

"The name Harz-Takta is vaguely familiar, though I remember nothing specific." Justarius swallowed a mouthful of food, chasing it with lemon water before continuing. "But Fistandantilus's book leads me to believe that our friend Belize is pursuing an interest in gating, for which Fistandantilus was notorious."

Noting Guerrand's puzzled look, Justarius explained, "Gating is a means of traveling from one place to another by passing instantaneously through an extradimensional place. He must be using creatures to test the gates he creates. The creatures, unfortunately, are gating partially, or imperfectly, or combining with other things as they transport. The Night of the Eye diagram means he's anticipating the additional boost tomorrow's triple eclipse will bring to his magical experiments."

Justarius looked displeased as he helped himself to sliced pears. "These gating creations are not new. However, the practice of using test subjects, particularly nonanimals, has been banned by the Red and White Orders. I will have to report this," he mused.

"Are you're going to tell the conclave what he's doing there?" asked Guerrand.

"Yes, are you?" repeated Esme from the doorway. Guerrand looked up, shocked to see her leg expertly splinted. She stood easily with the support of one of Justarius's elaborate walking sticks.

"You're healed!" he cried.

"No, but I feel much better, thanks to Justarius's elixir and Denbigh's ministrations." Her eyes were on their master. "Will you, Justarius?" she pressed once more.

"I'll not address this to the entire conclave of twenty-one just yet. I must first consider how best to raise the issue of these gating experiments to Par-Salian and LaDonna, lest I give Belize the chance to destroy the evidence."

Justarius sighed heavily. "But it appears I'll be speaking to them about another issue first," he said, his grave tone commanding their attention. "Whether you realize it or not, your actions today were a serious breach of your vows to the order."

"What?" the apprentices cried.

"Breaking into Belize's home," explained Justarius, "violated the rule to never raise a hand in magic to one of the Red Robes. You also broke the laws of the city. Worse still, your tryst was just plain naive."

Justarius peered at them over steeped fingers. "Even the most lenient interpretation of the rules of our order demands that I report your transgressions to the respective heads of the robes."

Esme's face was pale as she stammered. "Wh-What will they do?"

Justarius rubbed his face wearily. "Considering that the transgression was against a member of the Council of Three, it's likely they will vote to suggest the other red representatives evict you

both from the order."

Guerrand found his tongue at last, while Esme merely managed a gasp. "That's so unfair!" he shouted, fists clenched in rage. "I was just trying to defend myself. Belize is the criminal here, not Esme and me!"

"That is an issue I intend to take up," Justarius said. "However, it does not change the fact that you and Esme acted improperly, no matter how just your intentions."

The anger lines in Justarius's brow eased slightly. "You needn't look so crestfallen yet. It may be a minor disadvantage that everyone knows there is no love lost between Belize and myself. However, I will speak to the council on your behalf to prevent the Council of Three from voting to bring the issue to the Red Robes."

"Will that help?" Esme asked, choking back tears.

Justarius stroked his goatee thoughtfully. "I believe Par-Salian will weigh my support heavily. LaDonna's vote will be determined almost entirely by her mood at that moment." He frowned. "We know how Belize will vote."

The archmage tossed back the dregs of his lemon tonic. Dabbing his lips one last time, he dropped the napkin on the table and stood. "Enough said of these events. I'll be leaving for Wayreth immediately to address Par-Salian. I expect you're tired from the day's adventures and will want to retire to your rooms until I return." It was not a suggestion.

After Justarius left, Esme pulled Guerrand along toward her chamber. She pushed him through the antechamber into her sleeping quarters. He collapsed into the chair, pinning his pouch behind him.

"What are we going to do?" Esme demanded. She began to tidy the room compulsively, snatching a folded blanket from the cot, then refolding it.

Guerrand gave a listless shrug. "Wait for Justarius to summon us, I guess."

She threw the blanket on the cot. "You're not going to give up that easily, are you?"

Giving her a strange look, he removed the pouch from the small of his back and set it on the floor. "It's not a question of giving up, Esme. We're guilty. That's done."

She smashed a fist into her palm and began pacing with the aid of Justarius's staff. "I can't just sit here and wait for our execution!"

Guerrand frowned. "Don't be melodramatic. The council isn't going to kill us."

She crossed her arms and regarded him wryly. "You think Belize is going to let either of us live after we broke into his villa?"

Guerrand looked alarmed. "After what we told him about Belize, Justarius wouldn't let him kill us."

"That's just wishful thinking, Rand," she said, wagging a finger. "You're not that naive. Is Justarius going to follow us around and protect us after we're expelled from the order and no longer his apprentices?"

Guerrand flopped onto the cot, an arm over his eyes. Gods, I'm sorry I got you into this. I should have listened to Justarius and never told you about my problems."

"I'm not sorry," she said kindly. "You didn't kidnap me. I never do anything I don't want to do." Esme set her chin. "Which is why I'm not leaving the order without a fight."

"What do you have in mind?" he asked, sitting up.

She seized his hands in both of hers, eyes pleading. "Let's go back to Belize's lab right now. We could get those spellbooks before he realizes we're on to him and destroys the evidence. Justarius will be able to read the spell language and have the proof he needs to persuade Par-Salian and LaDonna of Belize's guilt. Then Belize will be the one expelled from the Order of Red Robes, not us."

Guerrand's brow creased. "I don't see how Belize's guilt or innocence will change the fact that we broke into his villa."

Esme dropped his hands. "Of course it will!" she snapped, her frustration mounting. "In the first place, we wouldn't have gone there if he weren't trying to kill you—"

"You sound awfully sure about his guilt in that."

"Aren't you?"

He gave a nod.

Esme looked smug. "In the second place," she continued, "if Belize is expelled before the Council of Three discusses our situation, then we have nothing to fear. Justarius will undoubtedly take his place on the council, and Par-Salian will vote with him. That's two votes out of three, which is all we need!" Warming quickly to the idea, Esme could scarcely contain her excitement.

"It would be like playing double or nothing in a game of bones," said Guerrand, shaking his head. "It's just too risky, and not at all like the level-headed Esme I know."

"What's so wrong about taking charge of your life?" she demanded.

"Until recently, I would have said 'nothing.' Now I'm not so sure." Guerrand's dark eyes were focused on a faraway place. "I've lived most of my life doing what others wanted, and the only one I hurt was myself. But since I left Castle DiThon to study magic, it seems I've done nothing *but* hurt people. I deserted Kirah and reneged on a promise so that I could follow magic, and now my family and castle are under siege. I allowed Lyim to go to Ergoth and fight my battles, so that I could continue as Justarius's apprentice."

Guerrand buried his head in his hands as the list of his transgressions mounted. "Last, but not least, it's my fault that we both stand to be expelled." He gave Esme a dark, bitter stare. "You tell me what good has come of indulging my selfish ambitions?"

Esme sat next to him and squeezed his hand. "I know it's difficult now to think of anything good, but not long ago you said you'd never been happier."

He snatched his hand back. "That was before everything went wrong!"

Esme moved away to stare out her small window. "I know what it's like to have everything go wrong." She said nothing more for many moments. Guerrand just waited.

"It pains me even now to think of those days, when I thought it important to prove that a mere girl could follow in the great Melar's footsteps." Esme gave a sad, humorless smile.

She looked away from the window, at Guerrand. "My father had magical ambitions only for my brothers. Each, in his turn, rejected magic, afraid to tell Father that he had caused them to hate, not love, it. My father disowned them, leaving them without money or connections or training. No one would even speak to them on the streets of Fangoth for fear of suffering a wizard's wrath."

Esme brushed the bangs from her eyes. "Left without sons, my father's eyes at last turned to me. I was thrilled by the attention and studied hard to satisfy him." She sighed deeply. "It wasn't long before I understood why my brothers had all fled. The great Melar was never satisfied."

Esme moved to stare silently out the window again. "The difference between my brothers and me was that I stayed with Father because I had grown to love magic. To impress him, or escape him—I don't know which—I suggested I was ready to declare an alignment to properly begin training for the Test. 'You're a girl!' he'd thundered. 'You'll be fortunate if you're ever ready to take the Test.'"

A tear rolled down Esme's cheek, and she dashed it away. "I knew that he was just afraid to lose control of me. What he didn't know was that he already had. I slipped away that night and traveled to Wayreth. I never sent word." Her thin shoulders lifted in a shrug. "He had ways of finding me if he cared to know where I went."

Esme fiercely wiped away the last of her tears. "So, you see, if I'm expelled, I've nowhere to go. I can't return to Fangoth. My father would know I've failed, as he'd predicted." She pounded a fist on the sill. "I couldn't abide that, Rand!"

"You wouldn't have to go home," Guerrand said, standing close behind her. His arms went about her shoulders, and she let him pull her back against his chest. "We could start again someplace else. Together."

"I would always know the truth," she whispered so softly he couldn't be sure he heard her. A huge, shuddering sigh racked her body, as if she were resigning herself to her fate. She turned suddenly in Guerrand's embrace, gave a trembling smile, and pressed tear-streaked lips to his cheek. "Thank you."

His eyes, so near her own, went wide. "For what?"

"For... saying that," Esme said simply. She stirred in the embrace, and Guerrand reluctantly let her go. Grimacing, she lowered herself gingerly onto her cot, dragging her left leg up to rest. "Justarius's elixir seems to be wearing off. I'd ask him for more, but he's likely left for Wayreth, and I hate to ask Denbigh. Do you have any more of those herbs that helped me in the lab?"

Guerrand knelt by her solicitously. "You took all I had, but there are more in my chamber." He jumped to his feet. "It'll take me a few moments to mix them."

Esme looked at him sweetly. "Would you mind?"

Guerrand hastened to the door, happy to help ease her suffering. "I'll be back before you know it," he said. She smiled her appreciation as he disappeared into the antechamber.

Guerrand dashed through the formal dining area that bridged their rooms. It took him ten minutes to collect and crush a sufficient amount of dried peppermint and meadowsweet and steep it in oil of cloves.

Vial in hand, Guerrand dashed toward the door. On impulse, he checked his appearance in his looking glass, then wished he hadn't. He looked like he'd been dragged through a knothole, but he hadn't time even to change. Esme was in pain and waiting for his herbs.

Slicking a moistened hand over his mop of dark hair, Guerrand hastened back through the dining room. He forced his steps and breathing to slow in the antechamber. A sense of propriety suggested he knock at the door to her sleeping chamber. There was no answer. He waited and knocked again. When still there was no response, he poked his head through the curtain that hung in the doorway.

"Esme?" he whispered, wondering if she had fallen asleep after the day's travails. What he found in the sleeping chamber nearly made him drop the vial he carried.

"Zagarus!"

The familiar was strutting back and forth on Esme's cot. Guerrand saw his own pack at the bird's feet, the flap open. The young woman herself was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Esme?" the apprentice demanded, his fingers growing cold about the vial of herbs when he saw the fragment of mirror on the chest by the cot.

She's gone! She stepped into the mirror! Zag pointed his beak at the glistening glass.

I flew to her window, looking for you so that I could slip into my nest in the mirror. Esme saw me but was busy stuffing her pack with components. Suddenly, she slung the pack over her shoulder and said, "I don't know if you can understand me, but tell Rand I'll be back in the time it takes to leap from the mirror, grab the spellbooks, and jump back here." Those were her exact words. Zagarus heaved a sigh of relief at having got through it all. What did she mean, Rand?

"It means she went back to Belize's," Guerrand said numbly. He snatched up the mirror and felt the jagged edges press his flesh.

What are we going to do?

Guerrand sank down next to the bird and considered the question. He wasn't so much angry at Esme as anxious. "Wait for her to return," he said at last. "If everything goes well, she should be able to return in under ten minutes. She could be back any moment, then." He remembered her splinted limb with a frustrated sigh. "I'll give her a little more time for her leg."

Guerrand let twenty minutes pass before he allowed the fear to pound at his temples. Where *was* she? He looked futilely at the mirror and closed his eyes. Something was wrong. He would not let his mind conjure possibilities. Only one thing was clear: he had to go and find her.

"Come on, Zag," he said, mirror in hand as he raced back to his room. Guerrand snatched up herbs and other items he used for his best spells and added them to the spellbook he placed in his pack.

The apprentice glanced once more around his chamber and spied his swordbelt with sword and dagger, long unused, hanging from a wall peg. Whether due to a premonition or the memory of Belize's monstrosities, Guerrand pulled it down and buckled it around his waist.

Guerrand set the mirror on his desk, then waved Zagarus into the glass first. Stretching his arms above his head as if swan-diving into the Strait of Ergoth, Guerrand slipped into the shiny surface of the magical mirror.

A heartbeat later in the foggy mirror world, Guerrand envisioned the looking glass in Belize's laboratory and stepped through it. Instantly he sensed an unnatural stillness, like the calm after a violent thunderstorm. Holding

his breath, Guerrand walked around the shelves. His booted feet crunched over glass. The floor was covered with shattered beakers, colored preserving liquids, and assorted organ components. The shelves that had so recently been neatly stacked were now bare, swept clean. The stench was worse than he'd remembered.

Guerrand kicked a hen heart out of his path. "Esme?" he called softly.

She's not here, Rand, Zagarus said. I'm by Belize's table. You've got to see this.

Blood hammering at his temples, Guerrand raced past the steps to the platform. Only one torch lit the area containing the table that Guerrand knew had held Belize's spellbooks. That lone light revealed enough to raise Guerrand's gorge. The entire floor and much of the walls were covered with spattered gore. The nauseating blotches were broken by scorch marks Guerrand knew came only from the intense heat of magical fireballs. Severed limbs and heads, obliterated torsos, and oozing organs were everywhere. Much of the carnage had been blasted beyond recognition.

Guerrand pinched his nose shut and began breathing through his mouth before wading toward Zagarus. The bird was perched upon the table, trying desperately to put space between himself and the grisly remains of a dead male dwarf who had the head of a large house cat. Between the bird and the dwarf on the table there were only dusty outlines where once spell-books had been.

Esme took the books and left the lab before Belize returned, Guerrand told himself. Seeing them gone, the archmage flew into a fury and destroyed everything he saw.

If that's true, why hasn't Esme emerged from the mirror? demanded Zagarus, reading Guerrand's thoughts.

"I don't know!" snapped Guerrand, his mind racing out of control. Had Belize caught her stealing his books and ... Closing his eyes, the apprentice said with agonizing surety, "He's taken Esme somewhere."

Well, where do we look—"Kyeow!" Zagarus sprang from the table as the head of the dead dwarf-cat began to stir. Though the right side of its furry face was gone, the one remaining green cat's eye struggled to open. Guerrand was at once riveted and repulsed. His hand went impulsively to his dagger and stayed there while he waited, watching.

The creature seemed to give up trying to raise its head, though the eye remained open, focused on Guerrand. The blood-matted fur beneath the orb began to move up and down, and Guerrand realized that it was trying to speak with what was left of its mouth. A high-pitched keening erupted from the cat's face. Though modulated, the sounds made no sense to Guerrand.

"I can't understand you," growled Guerrand in frustration. "Are you asking me to end your suffering?"

The gruesome creature seemed to understand Guerrand, for it stopped wailing and unmistakably shook what remained of its head. A mangled dwarven hand came up with agonizing slowness. It trembled above the tabletop briefly. Then one stubby digit, the only one left, began to push around the dwarf's own blood and ichor until an outline emerged of tall, etched pillars that Guerrand could not mistake: Stonecliff.

"You're telling me this is where Belize has taken my friend?"

The pathetic creature began to nod, then gave one short, violent shudder before falling still in the blessed peace of death.

Guerrand reached out a trembling hand and closed its eye.

Chapter Seventeen

The archmage Belize touched a fingernail, yellow and hideously twisted, to the throbbing slash across his right cheek. He would have to wash the gash before it festered, considering the foul, decayed claw that had caused the injury.

It was all the young chit's fault, Belize fumed. She'd unleashed the creatures who caused the cut, the monstrosities he kept locked in his back room. It did not help his mood to admit that he'd never believed his creations to be more threatening than starved fleas; he should have killed them long ago, anyway.

When Belize thought of the young woman whose hands he'd caught upon Fistantilus's *Observations on the Structure of Reality*, his temper flared anew. The mage had returned to Villa Nova to retrieve his spell-books and some personal affects before leaving for Stonecliff. The second his foot hit the floor of the lab the creatures had been upon him. He'd easily obliterated them all with a few well-placed magic missiles, but not before one had managed to slice his cheek. That one he'd blasted beyond matter with a fireball. Then he'd collected his spellbooks and teleported the woman to his chamber for questioning.

Belize knew she must be a spy, for he'd instantly recognized her as Justarius's apprentice. Besides, the fact that he'd caught her with her hands on his books made it obvious she was no casual thief. How much did she know of his plans, and how much had she already told Justarius? How did she know enough about his mirror to try to escape through it? Most puzzling of all to Belize was why Justarius would send a clumsy apprentice to do his sleuthing.

The young woman now sat stiffly in Belize's spartan bedchamber in the level above the lab, still under the control of the bind spell. The archmage squinted at her. Despite her unfeminine attire, she stirred some vague memory beyond Justarius. Belize's purple-tinged lips pulled back in a slow smile of recognition: the Jest.

"You put your colors on Guerrand DiThon," he said, watching her reaction closely. "So the jackanapes discovered the mirror's abilities. It's unfortunate for you that he shared the knowledge."

The woman looked at him mutely, but she could not keep the fear from flickering in her amber eyes, confirming Belize's words.

"All that remains to be answered is what he intends to do with the knowledge."

Esme dug her nails into the armrests, her lips a tight line.

The mage raised his clawlike hand to slap some sound from her. His pale palm got to within one length of her face when Esme's protective armband sent a shock through the wizard. Belize recoiled several steps. His normally ruddy face was now crimson with rage. He spat a short phrase, and two tiny, blazing points of light shot out from his eyes, circling Esme at dizzying speed. The beams flashed through her pouches and pack, through her pockets and trousers, and up and down the entire length of her body like tiny bloodhounds. They stopped momentarily at the armband. Before Esme realized what was happening, the metal gadget was off her arm and floating through the air to Belize. He regarded it poisonously, then extended his hand. Belize curled the fingers into a fist, and the suspended bracelet crumpled, then fell to the cold granite floor.

Belize looked at her coldly. "You know, of course, that I could rip any information from your skull with a spell. However, I shan't waste another moment on Guerrand DiThon. He's no more a threat to me than those demented creatures in the laboratory.

"Speaking of them," the mage said, wagging his finger, "take warning, if you wish to live through this day. I'll not tolerate any more defiance from you. I should slay you right now for loosing my experiments to rise against me. That little battle cost me precious time—" he touched his cheek "—not to mention blood."

"I didn't need to inspire those pathetic things," snapped Esme. "Is it any wonder they hated you after what you did to them?"

Belize cocked a brow. "I should feel chastened by a common spy?" He touched an alcohol-soaked patch of cotton to the cut on his face, then threw the swab away. "Perhaps I should describe

to you the punishment I normally mote out to spies and thieves. It's been compared to being turned inside out, though I suspect it is actually much worse."

Belize turned with an evil grin from the pile of personal papers he was sorting. "But I've thought of a new punishment for you. Since you seem to have such sympathy for my experiments, perhaps you'll appreciate sharing their unfortunate experiences. I'll be sending you through my magical gate first, to clear the path of any foul debris accumulated over the centuries. I had thought to use my apprentice, but I haven't been able to find that useless dandy, so I suppose I must thank you for saving me time."

"Justarius will bring you up before a full conclave when he finds out you've kidnapped me," she hissed.

Belize regarded her with lazy-lidded contempt. "After tonight no mortal mage will be able to touch me. I'll be beyond the circles of the universe."

Adding the last of his things to the chest, Belize slammed its heavy lid shut. "Time to go," he announced. Scratching his goatee, he said, "I really must think of a more convenient way to travel with you." Belize abruptly snapped his fingers, nails clicking. "I have it!"

The mage reached toward Esme and slowly closed his fingers. "*Ligir*."

Esme screamed as her bones began to contract, snapping and popping in protest. Her heart thundered like the steps of a giant in pursuit, then reversed its pace and steadily slowed. Beyond the excruciating pain, she felt her pulse's last terrified, fluttering beats as the world grew larger, then silent as snow.

When Belize uncurled his fingers, on his pasty palm lay a ceramic statue of a golden-haired woman in trousers and tunic.

Castle DiThon was as near the magical plinths as he could get through the mirror world. Guerrand had no idea if he was walking into the middle of a siege, or even if the castle still stood. Assuming it did, Guerrand knew instantly which mirror to summon to mind. He instructed Zagarus to stay inside the mirror until he called him forth, knowing the bird's presence would only make the meeting he anticipated more difficult.

Standing knee-deep in the pastel mist, Guerrand recalled a polished cherrywood, freestanding frame. Dried heather and wild geranium, treasures of happier days, were slipped between the frame and the silvered glass of the mirror. Guerrand took a step, and the mist gave way.

Kirah's room looked virtually unchanged since last he'd seen it—frilly feather bed, milk-paint armoire, unused dollhouse — reassuring him that somehow the Berwick threat had been prevented. To his greater relief, Guerrand saw his sister at the window seat, gazing through the leaded windowpanes at the weed patches where gardens once grew. It was late, past the middle of the night, judging from the angle of the moonbeams that framed Kirah's golden hair. Her face was colorless and wan. She was dressed in the palest of yellow, a hue that only emphasized her pallor, and her hands lay thin and lifeless in her lap. If she heard his entrance, she made no sign.

"Hello, Kirah," he said softly.

Her head swung around slowly. Kirah looked first stunned, then annoyed. Guerrand could see the great effort it took her to resume an impassive expression. "Hello, Guerrand," she said at last, her unusual use of his full name cutting him to the bone. "You've come too late with your grown-up beard and mage's red robe."

Guerrand could stand the distance between them no longer. He rushed across the room and dropped to his knees beside the window seat, taking her cool, limp hands in both of his. "I'm sorry I didn't come sooner." She shrugged disinterestedly.

Guerrand gripped her frail shoulders and shook them gently. "Be angry if you must, I deserve that, but please talk to me. Tell me what's happened here."

"Oh, nothing much." Kirah arched one brow listlessly. "The Berwicks attacked the castle."

He frowned. "Didn't Lyim get here in time to warn you?"

"Oh, yes," she said, a spark of life just beginning to show in her eyes at the mention of the apprentice. "He's the reason I'm still in the castle, along with the rest of the family. Without him, the Berwicks would have captured it, and who knows what would have happened then."

"Is everyone—" Guerrand began haltingly "is everyone else... all right?" Kirah nodded, and Guerrand heaved a huge sigh of relief. He was suddenly struck with a distressing thought. "Where is Lyim? He wasn't hurt, was he?"

Kirah shook her head. "He left for the coast yesterday, or was it the day before?" She shrugged again.

Guerrand twisted to search her face. "I expected you to be mad, but why are you acting like this, Kirah?"

A glimmer of her old fire sparked. "You expected me to be angry, so that, as usual, you could protect yourself in a cloak of guilt. Well, I won't make it easier for you to avoid responsibility for what you've done."

"What I did was follow your advice to run away before the wedding and study magic!"

"You have a selective memory," she accused. "The advice included taking me with you, so that we could both escape this prison."

Guerrand felt the weight of her accusations. He reached a hand to her cheek. "You're the one who said we can never stay mad at each other."

Kirah slapped the hand away. "Things have changed, Guerrand. You changed them." Her eyes narrowed with remembered pain. "Mother, Father, Quinn... then you." Tears welled and sparkled against her lashes, making her look even younger than she was.

"I'd hoped my note would explain..." Guerrand's voice trailed off.

"A note is a poor substitute for a brother." Kirah pulled the much-folded piece of parchment from the sleeve of her butter-yellow frock and fanned herself with it. "Lyim said you were unable to leave your master."

"Apprentice mages aren't supposed to have families," Guerrand explained bitterly. "When Lyim offered to come here in my stead, I thought maybe I could have it both ways."

Kirah's bitter expression eased momentarily at the mention of the other apprentice. "So why are you here now?"

"The world is a lot different, a lot more difficult than I'd thought." Guerrand stood and ran a hand through his hair, turning away. "I was wrong not to come myself before. I was wrong about a lot of things."

He turned back to her, his shoulders set with determination. "But I've come to put things right."

"Does that mean you're back to stay?"

"I can't, Kirah. You know it's too late for me here."

Kirah took the news with a bowed head. "I hoped... but I knew," she said at last.

Guerrand's gaze wandered above Kirah's head to the window, where bright Solinari and murky red Lunitari moved ever closer to each other. Invisible Nuitari could not be far behind. When the moons rose again, a half day hence, they would align on the Night of the Eye.

"I need your help, Kirah." Guerrand cleared his throat and put up a hand to still the protest he knew would come. "I know I've forfeited the right to expect it, but before you say no, realize I don't ask for myself. There's another person I pray I haven't lost, but I need a horse to get to Stonecliff immediately. Please, do me this one last favor."

Kirah threw up her arms in disgust. "Stonecliff! That's what's caused this pain from beginning to end. I'm sick to death of hearing about that land! No wonder Berwick was willing to give it back in the first place. I think Cormac is right about those pillars being created by pagan magic—they make people crazy!"

What insanity did Belize have in store for Esme at Stonecliff? Guerrand had asked himself that a hundred times since he'd left the mage's lab.

"Please, Kirah," he breathed again, clasping her cold hands tightly in desperation, "get me a horse before it's too late."

Guerrand rode, his body bent low to the animal's sweat-lathered back. The sun was setting behind his shoulder, pushing the craggy shadows of the heath far ahead of the plunging horse. An interminable half day had passed since Kirah smuggled him from the castle and helped him saddle a horse and slip away. Guerrand knew her cooperation, however reluctant, was a sign that she might forgive him in time.

Unfortunately, time was something of which he had too little. Guerrand rode the animal hard, strands of froth spraying around the bit in its mouth, but he couldn't stop. By the time the plinths came into view atop a hill ahead, his own sides ached from the arduous ride. Guerrand reined in the horse briefly to catch his breath.

Zagarus alighted on the horse's rear and followed Guerrand's gaze skyward. *The Night of Three Eyeballs can't be far off.*

Guerrand nodded. Shining brightly through shreds of dark clouds, the red moon already half lapped the larger white one, adding a sense of wonder to Guerrand's ever-present fear. Any hour now, all three moons would align briefly. By itself, the unusual triple conjunction would be a fearsome spectacle. More important, though, the event would amplify the power of all magic on Kryn. The thought of what that might mean for Esme brought Guerrand's heels into the flanks of the horse. Startled, Zagarus took wing while Guerrand pushed his mount over the last stretch to Stonecliff.

At the base of the last rolling hill before the plinths, the apprentice reined in his horse in a small copse of dogwoods. Springing lightly from the saddle, he secured the horse to a branch. The landscape rolled upward, and tall seaside grasses made it difficult to determine if anyone stood on the plateau near the ancient carved pillars. Settling his small leather pack of components over his shoulder, Guerrand crouched low into the shadows and moved forward cautiously on foot.

He squatted behind a small, jutting boulder and craned his neck around for a view. Limned in the light of two moons, the plateau was silent, vacant. Shaking his head in disbelief, Guerrand crept nearer, looking for the shadows of people behind the plinths. The surrounding grass was not even trampled.

Guerrand rocked back on his heels, bewildered. He'd been so sure the creature in the lab had traced these magical plinths. Were there others like these to which Belize had taken Esme? If so, Guerrand had no hope of finding them before the conjunction. Before the archmage harmed Esme. One thing was certain: Esme and Belize were not here now.

Stymied, Guerrand strode up the hill to the plateau and circled around the plinths, studying their carvings. He had never been frightened by their magical aura. Still, his "kinship" with Stonecliff had never helped him understand the plinths' magical symbols. He reached up a hand and traced a finger over the smooth grooves in the weathered marble. It was almost second nature now for the apprentice to notice and commit to memory minute details. Guerrand closed his eyes and visualized the symbols he had traced; a distinct and complex mystical pattern blossomed before his mind's eye.

The still night erupted when a chill breeze whipped off the Strait of Ergoth. Cinching the sash of his coarse robe, Guerrand cocked his head, hearing a distant rustling, tearing sound. Before he could locate the source of the noise, the earth shook beneath his feet and cracked open in a dozen places around him. Thick black tentacles, each thicker than a human leg and covered with suckers, burst from the earth and shot skyward to form a slithering, shifting cage that surrounded him. His hands reached out instinctively to move or bend the makeshift bars. Moist, greedy suckers pulled at his clothing and the exposed flesh above his collar. Howling in revulsion, the apprentice sought the safety of the very center of the repulsive cage. The harsh wind died away.

"Well, well," Guerrand heard a voice say over the hammering of his heart. "The intrusive knight-mage returns."

Guerrand's gaze followed the sound of the familiar voice to the top of the cage. He crouched

down in horror. Belize's head swayed atop the end of a tentacle, like a jester on the end of a child's toy. But the red mage's expression was anything but comical. Belize's tentacle snapped toward Guerrand again and again, bringing the mage's yellow-toothed sneer of elation within inches of Guerrand's face. The apprentice backed away from the archmage's hideous visage until there was nowhere else to go.

Belize frowned suddenly. "This form is annoying." He sucked in a deep breath and held it, his ruddy pocked face growing darker. Suddenly, his head sprang from the tentacle. The mage's red-robed body appeared beneath it as he floated gently to earth nearby. He snapped his fingers, and a large, ironbound chest materialized behind him.

"Where's Esme?" demanded Guerrand from the confines of the tentacle cage.

Belize reached into the neckline of his gold-embroidered robe and extracted a chain from which dangled a small figure. The mage held the figurine out to the apprentice as if tempting a horse with a carrot.

Even in the dim light, Guerrand could see that the figure was identical to Esme as he had last seen her, right down to the splint on the left leg. The figurine was too minutely detailed, its likeness too perfect, to have been carved by any craftsman. Guerrand knew at once that it was, indeed, Esme.

"Is she—"

"Dead?" supplied Belize. "Not yet."

Guerrand lurched forward to reach through the bars for the leering mage. Rows of grasping suckers drew him back and held him fast against the tentacles. Another of the hideous appendages flicked its tip and slipped beneath the flap of Guerrand's pouch, obviously searching for something. Guerrand struggled against the rubbery limb to no avail.

"Where have you hidden the mirror?" Belize demanded when the tentacle pulled back without it. "I should have had it back long ago when I dispatched the invisible stalker after you and that wretched apprentice Par-Salian saddled me with."

"So you *have* been trying to kill me!" exclaimed Guerrand. "The invisible creature, the thugs in the marketplace... But why?" he breathed. "Why did you encourage me to go to the tower if you wanted me dead?"

"I fanned your magical desires because my plans required you to disappear. If you had married, your brother would have torn down these plinths before tonight. Your death would simply have been a happy accident." Dismissing Guerrand as a threat, the mage turned to the chest on the ground behind him.

Enraged, Guerrand seized the hilt of his sword and slashed through a swath of tentacles, severing them. Blood and ichor splashed everywhere. He charged through the gruesome opening in the cage, sword held toward Belize's back.

Without looking up, the archmage held a hand over his shoulder. Guerrand felt a tingling in his right hand. He dropped the sword just as it turned into a leafy green stick.

"Are you a knight today or a wizard?" Belize inquired, chuckling. "We both know you have no talent for either."

"You know nothing of me," Guerrand said evenly. "I'm not the same rube you sent to Wayreth."

"Perhaps I *have* misjudged your skills." Belize appeared to be considering the possibility. "For instance, I didn't expect a witless first-time traveler to survive the long trip to the tower, and yet you did."

Guerrand gritted his teeth. Belize was toying with him, like he would a fly in a web, baiting him into attacking again to increase the thrill of the kill. But Guerrand would not give him the satisfaction of reacting.

"Frankly," Belize continued, his tone artless, "my greatest underestimation of you came earlier, when I gave you the mirror. I fully expected you to track down the men it revealed, but I was equally certain you would get yourself killed by them. After all, they had murdered your brother, and he was a fine cavalier." The mage shrugged. "Then again, I had ensorcelled the thugs to

slay him to prevent the first union."

Guerrand's every muscle went taut as the words sank in. Belize killed Quinn... The apprentice's head felt like it was exploding. He was so dizzy he could hardly stay on his feet.

"I can see I've surprised you," the mage said slickly. He looked toward the sky and moved to push back the heavy lid of his trunk. "But then, life is full of surprises."

Guerrand's head instantly cleared of everything but thoughts of revenge. The archmage was tall, but not well muscled; if Guerrand could drive him to the ground and quickly pin Belize's arms, he might be able to protect himself from the terrible spells at the wizard's command and plunge his dagger through the man's heart. Possessed by the vision, Guerrand charged again at the mage's back.

But Guerrand's speed was not equal to his enemy's cunning and experience. Belize spun and faced him, then thrust his left hand forward. Guerrand stopped and ducked, expecting an attack spell. But the breeze only kicked up on the hilltop again, bending the tall grasses, dashing Guerrand's hair into his eyes. The apprentice brushed it back in time to see Belize throw a dingy gray cloth between them. The cold wind blew from all directions, tossing the glove about. Suddenly the thing leaped into the air and hung there, jerking and pulsing with a pale, inner light. In a heartbeat the glove became a hand, stretched to the size of a man, and continued growing until it loomed high above the apprentice.

Guerrand stepped to his left. The hand shifted smoothly with him. He jumped to the right, but again the enormous hand mirrored his movement, keeping itself exactly between Guerrand and Belize. However Guerrand moved, he could not get around the monstrous palm.

Guerrand snatched the dagger from his belt and plunged it hilt-deep into the giant palm. When he drew it back the shining blade was darkened with blood, which streamed down the hand and dripped to the grass. But the magical thing seemed in no way diminished.

"The Night of the Eye is upon us," Guerrand heard Belize say. "I can waste no more time sparring."

Guerrand dropped to his stomach and steeled himself for the spell that would finally kill him. To the amazement of both mages, there came instead a nerve-shattering squawk as a white bird flashed out of the dark sky and smashed against Belize's ribs. The startled wizard stumbled backward, nearly tripping over his trunk. The bird flapped about Belize's head, then shot away, upward into the sky.

Guerrand would recognize that squawk anywhere. Zagarus! The apprentice leaped to his feet and waved the bird toward him. His heart soared when he saw the figurine of Esme clenched between his familiar's webbed feet.

However startled, the older wizard was far from stunned. Even as he fought to maintain his balance, Belize sent a sizzling arrow of light shooting from his extended fingertip. Sparks flashed in the sky, the sea gull shrieked in pain, and Belize knew the missile had hit its mark.

But Zagarus was not the only victim. Guerrand's fate was magically linked to his familiar's. Clutching his side in agony, the apprentice tumbled to the ground.

Chapter Eighteen

Hiking along the moonlit shore of the strait, Lyim whistled "Three Sheets to the Wind." He'd just learned the ditty from a sailor at the Dorcestars, a two-room guest house along the route between Thonvil and Hillfort. The apprentice had spent several enjoyable days there since the victory at Castle DiThon, locked in the pale, fleshy arms of the host's daughter, waiting for word of the next merchant ship headed south. Flushed with ale and passion and victory, the apprentice erupted in song:

*Sing as the spirits move you,
Sing to your doubling eye,
Plain Jane becomes Lovable Linda
When six moons shine in the sky.*

Taking the last swig from the bottle Nivi had tearfully sent to keep him warm, Lyim turned bleary eyes skyward to the white and red moons, remembering distantly that the black one would align with them tonight. Strange, he thought, that I should learn this song on a Night of the Eye. Art *did* imitate life. Lyim's voice rose again in the chill night air:

*Sing to a sailor's courage,
Sing while the elbows bend,
A ruby port your harbor,
Hoist three sheets to the wind.*

Lyim certainly was three sheets to the wind, and it felt marvelous. He had certainly earned such indulgence. Unlike the song, though, his harbor was no longer port wine, but Hillfort. He would soon sign upon another rocking ship, where there would be no wine at all until Palanthas.

The prospect threatened to depress him, so he cast it aside. Instead, he threw back his head to bellow out another verse, but a flash of unnatural light farther down the coast, up where the moors turned into cliffs, made him pause.

A trick of the wine? Of the aligning moons? Lyim shook his head and blinked fiercely. The lights remained. Curiosity, and a willingness to postpone the start of the dreaded sea voyage, brought Lyim to veer left from the shore. It took only minutes to cross the heath to where the hills began. He scrabbled, loose-jointed, up the rolling slope, closing on the odd, colorful flashes. The frigid breeze that rose instantly, inexplicably, went unnoticed in the warmth of drunkenness.

In the peculiar brightness of the moons, Lyim could make out several moving figures farther up the hill, near what looked to be a pair of enormous, rectangular boulders. He squinted, but his vision would not clear sufficiently, forcing him to creep closer. Lyim hid behind a trampled shrub, unsure if he was approaching magical friends or foes.

The apprentice was close enough now to hear heated conversation. "... dispatched the invisible stalker after you and that wretched apprentice Par-Salian saddled me with."

"So you *have* been trying to kill me...."

The voices were familiar, yet incongruous here. As if in a dream, Lyim peered around the shrub. What he saw turned the wine in his veins to ice and sobered him instantly.

Belize stood guard over Guerrand, who was trapped inside a bizarre cage of tentacles. The scene was too unexpected, too shocking, to believe. What were they doing here... and together? Was it possible Belize had learned of the trip made on Guerrand's account and was exacting punishment? The reasoning was too ridiculous, and yet it was the only connection he could draw between his master and his friend. Something warned Lyim to listen just a little longer before stepping forward to demand an explanation.

The apprentice's horror mounted as Belize revealed that he'd arranged the death of Guerrand's

brother. Lyim still could make no sense of these events, could find no cause for Belize's actions. But he could no longer deny Belize's opinion of him, which made it easy to decide where his own loyalty lay.

Events on the hillside only spiralled further out of control. Lyim watched Guerrand abruptly slash through the tentacles and escape his cage. Charging at Belize with his sword, Guerrand was stopped when his weapon turned into a branch of wood. A massive, interposing hand rose up before his friend, and still no useful idea came to Lyim's mind. Then, in an even more bizarre turn of events, a bird smashed into Belize, but it was Guerrand who inexplicably crumpled to the ground, holding his side.

The impetuous apprentice believed any spell would be better than this peculiar indecisiveness. Needing no components for the one that came to mind, Lyim muttered, "*Boli sular*," and held his breath against Belize's reaction.

Guerrand held his ribs and fought against the horrible burning in his right side. The pain spread through his chest and did not stop until it reached his right shoulder. He knew the torment he felt was an exact reflection of Zagarus's injury, so he twisted around painfully until he could see where Zag had fallen to earth. Guerrand's familiar lay in a crumpled heap, but his wings fluttered fitfully as he struggled to right himself. After a few awkward attempts, the gull simply fell back and lay still. Guerrand looked inward, expecting an emptiness of the soul. He sighed in relief; Zag lived. The bond—the inexplicable presence—he'd felt since conjuring the familiar was still there.

Then Guerrand noticed the small statuette of Esme, lying on the ground next to the sea gull. She was away from Belize, safe at least for the moment.

The ache in Guerrand's side was beginning to throb so that it took all his reserves to turn and look back toward the plinths. The gigantic hand still stood between him and Belize. Lying prone, the apprentice got glimpses of Belize poring over his trunk again.

Just then, an unaccountable scream of rage burst from Belize. Guerrand saw the archmage frantically clawing at his face. When Belize pulled back his hands, his eyes were entirely black, like olives, lifeless and unseeing.

"Who dares blind me?" Belize roared, turning slowly as if he could yet see.

Guerrand was confused. Who, indeed, had cast a blindness spell on Belize?

Snarling his frustration, the archmage resigned himself to the consequences of the simplest spell he could use to restore his sight. He knew the radius of the dispelling magic would remove all of his ongoing enchantments, but he cast it quickly anyway. A bright light he could not yet see grew to burn the darkness from his eyes. In a blink, the small shaft of radiance flew away from the archmage and struck the gigantic magical palm; the hand dissipated into swirling smoke and then was gone. The light raced on, over the empty cage of tentacles, sending them slithering without a trace back into the ground.

But the magical dispel was not finished yet. The bright shaft switched directions and streaked nearby to where the statuette of Esme lay. The figure shifted, then grew instantly, until the woman herself lay upon the hillside. She remained deathly still, as if yet a figurine, men blessedly coughed and convulsed and stirred to life. Shaking her head to clear it, Esme struggled to her knees and looked about in confusion.

"Esme," hissed Guerrand. "Over here!"

Spotting Guerrand, the young woman, hindered by her splinted leg, pulled herself slowly to his side. She touched his whiskered cheek tenderly, a weak, relieved smile her only greeting. "What happened to Zagarus, and how did I get away from Belize?"

"You couldn't see anything as a statue?" Esme's head shook. "Zag saved both our lives. He swooped on Belize and yanked you from the mage's neck to distract him from killing me." Guerrand winced as he shifted his wounded side. "It worked pretty well, too, except Belize hit Zag with a magic missile—and me, since we're linked. I'm afraid my right arm is pretty useless."

Esme looked fretfully from Guerrand's arm to the still sea gull. "He's not—"

"No, just unconscious. Zag doesn't deal well with pain."

"Belize is trying to open a gate that will let him into the Lost Citadel," she told Guerrand without preamble. Tearing two wide strips from the hem of her tunic, she hastily wrapped Zag's right side and wing. "I don't think we can kill a mage of his ability, but perhaps we can delay him until the convergence is past."

Guerrand frowned. "There seems to be another mage—"

"Digas ne vimi!"

Both apprentices looked up in fear at the sound of Belize uttering another incantation. But his spell was not for them. The archmage's red-robed arms were stretched wide in the direction of the sea. A strangled gasp reached their ears from the other side of the plinths.

Guerrand and Esme both dragged themselves to their feet in time to see Lyim Rhistadt being yanked by some invisible force from a copse of shrubs.

"How did *he* get here?" asked Esme.

Guerrand shook his head, gaze never leaving Lyim. "It's a long story."

Suspended ten feet above the ground, Belize's apprentice kicked and writhed against some monstrous, invisible grip. Despite his struggles, Lyim was lifted higher still, then floated helplessly toward Belize.

"Y-You're crushing me," rasped Lyim. The apprentice's ribs contracted perceptibly beneath the invisible grip, making it nearly impossible for him to draw a new breath. The young mage hovered just above his master. Belize regarded his apprentice with an expression more triumphant than surprised.

"It seems I have a wealth of visitors tonight." The archmage's eyes narrowed to malicious slits. "You, of all people, should have known better than to strike against me."

"I've revered you all my life!" Lyim gasped, struggling for air. "You're the greatest, most powerful mage to ever have lived. Why risk your position as Master of the Red Order?"

"The regard of lesser humans is *this*—" Belize spat viciously "—compared to gaining the magical knowledge of the gods."

With that, Belize checked the positions of the moons and hastily turned to plunge his hands into the ironbound chest. Slowly, as if lifting something of great value and fragility, he drew forth a swirling sphere of flame. The ball writhed between his fingers, twisting, flickering, uncontained by anything save Belize's will. With intense concentration the mage turned and extended his arms so that the ball of energy hovered between the stone pillars.

"What are we going to do?" whispered Esme. "He's preparing his portal."

Guerrand nodded, equally concerned with the bluing pallor of Lyim's complexion. If they could distract Belize, he might forget Lyim in his irritation...

"I have an idea that's certain to infuriate Belize," Guerrand said. "How's your shield spell?"

She grinned at the prospect. "Good as ever."

"Fine. It'll take me a few moments to prepare my spell. If you'll just get the dried peas from my pouch..." he said with a nod toward his useless arm. Esme slipped the peas into his hand, and Guerrand closed his eyes, struggling to recall the exact symbols of the seldom-used spell he sought.

Waiting with the words of her own spell at the ready, Esme watched Belize anxiously as the flickering globe he'd placed between the plinths flared angrily and swelled to twice its previous size. Its eerie light shimmered on the carved surfaces of the plinths.

Next, Belize drew a succession of vials and containers from the chest, tossing each into the swirling inferno while muttering arcane phrases and gesturing

in the air. The fiery globe grew steadily larger until its blue tongues licked against the gray stones. Its shape began to change, to flatten and stretch into an oval.

"Estivas nom," Guerrand pronounced at last to Esme's relief. A wall of fog, heavy and thick, appeared out of thin air and positioned itself between the archmage and the moons. Esme hastily called forth the invisible shield.

Belize whirled on them in a flash, his face as dark as a thundercloud. "Dispel the fog at once,"

he demanded.

"Do it yourself if you're so desperate to see the moons align," Guerrand jeered.

"I'll not waste time or energy on a spell. But I *will* send your friend through the unfinished portal." The invisible grip shook Lyim like a rag doll. "You've seen what happens then."

"Rand, don't do it—" Lyim gasped with great effort.

Guerrand and Esme exchanged a horrified glance. She gave a slight nod, and Guerrand immediately tossed the last of his peas into the air, summoning a gust of wind that blew the fog over the strait.

Belize threw back his balding head and roared with laughter. "Gullible rubes!" He raised his arm, and Lyim was yanked as if on a leash to the swirling ball of fire between the plinths. Belize plunged his apprentice's arm, right up to the shoulder, through the wall of whirling hues. Lyim screamed, struggling with the last of his strength to twist away, but the grip was unrelenting. Eyes bulging, he kicked and thrashed vainly against the invisible forces that held him and worked tortures on his arm.

Guerrand covered his ears, but still he heard the hideous scream, seeming to rise from Lyim's soul. The unbroken wail cut through the night, cut through Guerrand's nerves until he was searching his mind frantically for some spell that would help Lyim.

Then the torture was over. Suddenly released from the invisible grip, Lyim staggered back from the portal and collapsed unconscious from the torment he'd endured.

Both Guerrand and Esme looked at their friend's arm and gasped. The sleeve was shredded, revealing an appendage that was no longer an arm. Instead of flesh, the limb was a writhing thing covered in scales of brown, red, and gold, patterned symmetrically in rings and swirls. And at the end of the limb, where a hand should have been, was the head of a snake, its eyes inky black and malevolent. The hideous creature hissed and flicked its tongue.

Belize looked at the snake arm in relief. "These portals frequently contain the undead remains of centuries of unsuccessful adventurers," he explained conversationally. "They jump like starving fleas upon the first fresh traveler they meet. Your friend generously cleared the path for me."

Belize chuckled, a cruel, mirthless sound that lasted only a moment before he telekinetically flung aside Lyim's limp body to reach one last time into his ironbound chest. He pulled forth a thin, fragile book, opened it, and held it up to compare its drawing to the positions of the three moons above.

Following the mage's gaze, Guerrand could see that the "eye" seemed perfectly aligned: black shadowy circle, red, then yellow-white moons. At that precise moment, the swirling mass Belize had created between the plinths yawned open with an unbearable purplish light. The marble pillars seemed to throb in the portal's radiance. The effect spread swiftly outward until the entire plateau wavered and shifted like the deck of a ship. A column of twisting, intertwined white, red, and black light shot skyward and split into three cords, linking the carved marble pillars to each of the moons.

But proximity to such an awesome occurrence had frozen both students of magic. They were watching something indescribably ancient, a form of magic so old it had been forgotten long before the Cataclysm.

Guerrand's eyes followed the heavenly beam to where hundreds of bright white veins of light broke away and linked with the stars to form an interstellar suspension bridge, as if the light were tracing the outline of a whole new constellation.

Belize took slow steps toward the heavenly bridge.

"It's too late to stop him," Esme whispered, clenching and unclenching her fists in frustration.

"Not if I can still see him," Guerrand spat, shaking off his fascination so that he could visualize the sigils on the plinths. Once again he recognized patterns in what had been random scrawls. Beneath the light of the three moons, Guerrand pushed his mind harder than Justarius had ever demanded.

Under Guerrand's scrutiny, the sigils seemed to shift and twist and contort. Their relative order remained constant but suggested motion, coiling through a subtle progression of new configurations.

Understanding came to Guerrand with all the impact of an opponent's lance in the tilting yard. The pulsating lights, the swirling portal, the bridge were all woven from the same pattern, and Guerrand could read it as easily as a textbook.

But before the apprentice could use the knowledge, Belize took one last, calculating glance skyward, then stepped boldly through the curtain of color swirling between the pillars and onto the mighty, glittering suspension bridge of light that stretched to the moons. It rocked and swayed beneath his feet, but the archmage clung to the luminous railings and continued upward, a red streak against the dark, starry sky. He seemed almost to grow in size with each step that brought him nearer the Lost Citadel.

Guerrand raced to the plinths, as if he could pull Belize back with his bare hands. The view through the pillars looked more like a tunnel than an open-sided bridge. Belize was nearing the halfway point to the Lost Citadel, backlit by a glow more blinding than a thousand candles.

Guerrand closed his eyes against it, but the light burned through his lids and etched there a multisensory image. He would never know for sure if it actually happened, or if he'd conjured some mirage. But the vision felt more real, more vivid than his own life.

Glowing gates of gold, not unlike those at Wayreth, rose up from a knee-high warm, moist fog. Behind them was the source of the radiance that burned Guerrand's eyes. Like raw, uncut minerals, three immense diamond spires sliced through the billowing fog and rose to penetrate the blackness of space. The faceted surfaces reflected the foundation upon which all earthly things were built, as if a mirror had been held to the universe and revealed a skeleton complex beyond compare. Somehow the citadel conveyed that it had acquired its knowledge honestly, that its mineral walls had risen from the mire of Krynn itself and had been long ago transported beyond the circles of the universe by the gods of magic themselves.

The citadel's pull was strong. It would have been an easy thing to step into the tunnel and join Belize in acquiring the knowledge of the gods. But witnessing the citadel's magnificence had made it all the more important to prevent Belize from entering there. The red archmage was not worthy, if any mortal could be.

Badly shaken, Guerrand jerked away from the influence of the tunnel. He composed himself with a breath before probing the corners of his mind again. The spells he memorized daily were imprinted patterns, the keys for unlocking all magical energies. Guerrand read those simple spell patterns and tapped the energy, but then combined them with the more complex symbols on the plinths, reshaping the whole to a new purpose, a spell of his own making.

At his direction, a new pillar of twisting red light shot from his fingertips and entered Belize's portal. Racing over the bridge, the bright column overtook a surprised Belize and continued on until it reached the point where the bridge was anchored to the moons. Guerrand's column of energy sliced like a knife through the ends of Belize's bridge, severing the link. The archmage's howl of fear and rage shook the stars. He clung desperately to the railings when the bridge whipped like a snake's tail. Guerrand's chord of light rerouted the bridge back to the moonlit hilltop so that it looked like an enormous, star-bright horseshoe.

Guerrand dropped to his knees at last, his energy exhausted, head and wounded side aching. The apprentice looked skyward through rivulets of sweat just as dark Nunitari slid off-center from red Lunitari. The trio of light strands that formed the bridge abruptly rejoined into one column, then snapped in half. The lower portion collapsed upon the earthbound marble plinths, while the upper half shot away to disappear among the stars. Spiralling slowly inward, the gate itself began to darken and shrink, until the vibrant colors which had been almost too bright to look at faded to the dark red-orange of a smith's furnace.

The hilltop grew eerily silent.

"How did you do that, Rand?" Esme breathed, regarding him with new respect. "And what did you do with Belize?"

"I hope he's rotting in the Abyss for what he's done to me," snarled Lyim, then winced from the effort of sending air through his badly bruised lungs.

"Your arm—" Guerrand began, reaching out.

"Is a snake," Lyim finished viciously. "It disgusts me, but no more than the thought of your pity. I couldn't bear that, too."

Guerrand knew no other way to help his friend than to spare his pride, and so he looked away. Just then, the colors about the dwindling gate flared briefly, drawing the trio's attention. A shape tumbled with a loud popping sound through the plinths and onto the beaten grass, rolling to a stop against Belize's trunk. The ground began to shake, and the carved plinths swayed and rocked. Guerrand jumped back to Esme and Lyim just as the marble columns cracked and crashed to the ground, striking the mysterious shape as they tumbled. The swirling colors of the gate dissipated entirely, casting the hilltop back into the dimmer light of the moons.

"What is it?" gasped Esme, nodding toward the amorphous shape.

Steeling himself, Guerrand walked through the shattered blocks of marble and approached the trunk. The young mage's stomach churned as he stared down into the face of Belize, set in the middle of an oozing, flabby, ulcerous body like those Guerrand had seen in the archmage's lab. A shapeless flipper groped up toward the lid of the trunk. What remained of his mouth quivered, lidless eyes rolling from side to side, revealing his agony. Guerrand clapped a hand to his own mouth to keep from retching.

"It appears that the Master of the Red Robes has been following the ways of the Black Robes for some time."

Guerrand's head snapped up at the sound of a familiar voice. Justarius stooped to pick up the burned and tattered sheafs of Harz-Takta's spellbook near what remained of Belize. "Some knowledge is better left unrecovered."

Justarius's gaze upon Belize's body was grim. "He made the frequently fatal conceit of allowing love of himself to supersede his passion for magic. Magic must always come first."

"Wh-When did you get here?" stammered Guerrand, holding fast to Esme.

Justarius eased himself onto a blasted block of the marble plinths, closing his robe against the crisp wind that blew off the strait. "It was quite simple, really. Your comments about Belize's research practices plagued me, until, by the time I teleported to Wayreth, I was certain these were no idle experiments he was performing. Par-Salian agreed that they sounded like the result of gating experiments."

He blew the chill from his hands. "LaDonna recognized the name Harz-Takta. He was a Black Robe a millennium ago, considered too nefarious even for that order."

"That," explained Justarius, "concerned me enough to immediately scry in my crystal ball for Belize's whereabouts, which revealed this place. Hearing Belize's plans, I teleported here, but you had already prevented him from entering the Lost Citadel." The red archmage raised an ironic brow with a look that took in both his apprentices. "By the way, weren't you two supposed to wait in your chambers for my return?"

Esme's face burned crimson. "What's going to happen to us?" she whispered from the circle of Guerrand's arm.

"Considering that Belize's crimes motivated your actions, Par-Salian and LaDonna have agreed to let the matter of your transgressions drop. Under the circumstances, however, I think we must terminate your apprenticeships," he finished gruffly.

"You mean you're kicking us out?" Guerrand cried indignantly.

"I mean," said Justarius with heavy emphasis, "I have taught you all that I can. You both handled yourselves admirably against great odds." He nodded his head toward the vast emptiness where Belize's gate had been. "The spell Guerrand devised to defeat Belize was truly inspired."

Guerrand's relief blew out in a breath, and he gave a self-deprecating chuckle. "You mean inspired by desperation."

Justarius shrugged. "The result still demonstrates that you have mastered the visualization technique." He smiled. "Besides, you have a bad habit of bending the rules, a trait you seem to have passed on to Esme." He smiled fondly at the young woman. "It is a quality that makes for difficult apprentices but formidable mages."

"What will happen to Belize?" whispered Esme, regarding what remained of him with

undisguised revulsion.

"He'll be given a tribunal to determine his status," explained Justarius. "If found to be a renegade, he'll be executed immediately in keeping with our order's policies. A renegade's unpredictability threatens the delicate balance between Good and Evil." Justarius toed the monstrosity that was Belize. "Frankly, I don't think he'll live long enough for a tribunal. But that is his due."

From the protection of darkness, Lyim asked, "What will happen to his disfigured apprentice?" A snake's soft hiss told that Lyim had lost the most for his part in tonight's battle. "I have no master, no hand—" his voice caught "—and nowhere to go."

"That's not true!" cried Guerrand. "You can go with me—" he glanced at the young woman, who nodded "—with us. I owe you so much, Lyim."

"Then I'll take your hand as payment." Lyim gave an eerie, humorless laugh at Guerrand's stunned expression. "Ah, Rand, will you ever conquer your ever-ready sense of guilt?"

Justarius sliced through the awkward silence. "Lyim needs more aid than you can give him now. The choice, of course, is his."

"What are you offering me?" Lyim asked. The snake that was his hand hissed again in the dark shadows of the broken pillars.

"What I would offer any aspiring mage," Justarius said simply. "A chamber at Wayreth to rest and heal until you can secure a new master. That is one of the tower's primary functions, a benefit of belonging to a guild, if you will."

"Can you restore my hand?"

Justarius bowed his dark head. "That I cannot promise. I have no personal knowledge of the forces that caused the mutation. But I'd try to help you find someone who does."

Lyim looked to his fellow apprentices, locked in embrace, and closed his eyes for a long moment. "I would speak with Guerrand and Esme alone," he said, tucking his snake-head into the bell of his cuff selfconsciously. Justarius stepped away and concerned himself with the contents of Belize's ironbound chest.

Guerrand faced his friend, unsure how to deal with a blusterless Lyim. He reached out to clasp the man's shoulder, then drew back clumsily. "Lyim, I'm sorry. It's gratitude, not pity I feel—" Guerrand cursed himself for his awkward drivel. "This is coming out all wrong!"

"Forget it," Lyim said gruffly, struggling to regain his old bravado. "Never explain, never defend, that's what I always say."

Esme overcame her own revulsion to loop a hand through Lyim's good arm, but he pulled away in embarrassment. "Justarius is a good man," she tried to reassure him. "If he says he'll help you, he will."

"I hope so," Lyim said wearily. "He may be the only chance I have." With that, Lyim moved back into the protection of the shadows to wait for Justarius's departure.

The archmage returned to say good-bye. "Give Lyim time to come to terms with all that he has lost," he said gently, noting Guerrand's concerned expression.

"Hopefully he'll be cured by the time Esme and I get to Wayreth for the Test," said Guerrand. "That will take several months, I should guess."

Justarius considered Lyim's mutated hand. "Perhaps." Nodding respectfully to Guerrand and Esme, he said "Gods' speed to you both," then moved nearer the ruined plinths. "*Nal igira.*" Archmage, apprentice, wooden chest, and the monstrous mutation that was Belize disappeared from the face of the cold, moonlit hillside.

Guerrand and Esme stood alone in the silence.

Well, not quite alone. Suddenly a sea gull's familiar squawk cut the air.

"Zagarus!" cried Esme, rushing to the bird's side.

Rand?

The young man followed Esme. "I'm here, Zag." Guerrand gently pulled back the edge of the makeshift bandage Esme had applied to the sea gull's burned side. To Guerrand's relief, the wound looked better already. "You're a tough old bird, aren't you?"

Zagarus's tiny black eyes rolled open with a glint of humor. *I'm a hooded, black-backed Ergothian sea gull, the largest, most strikingly beautiful of all seabirds.*

Guerrand threw back his head and laughed until tears of joy and relief and hope sprang to his eyes. Picking up the sea gull tenderly, he tucked Esme's hand in the crook of his arm. "Come on, you two. We have a long journey ahead of us."

Epilogue

Bathed in the radiance of the Lost Citadel's diamond spires, three comrades of old watched, with a dismay bordering on irritation, as the strands of light dropped from their moons.

"Belize of the Red Robes came too close," the ancient, white-robed man said, his aged hands about the golden bars before him. "He actually opened these before he was turned back by one of his own." Solinari shivered from the chill his human form felt in the coldness of the cosmos.

"It's been a thousand years, Solinari," Nuitari pointed out reasonably. He was an intense young man with jet-black hair who did not entirely share the concerns of his companions. But that was not uncommon. His goal, after all, was to bring more and better magic to Krynn. Black magic.

"Only a thousand?" Lunitari's eyebrows rose in surprise. Time had no meaning here in the citadel she'd helped raise among the stars.

"We must do something to prevent it from happening again," said Solinari firmly.

Nuitari cast an accusing glance at the old man. "You know I don't like to interfere in their day-to-day activities."

"I do," said the woman coolly, "but we're not talking about that." She held her face up to be warmed by the crimson light of her 'witching moon.' "A mortal in the citadel has farther-reaching consequences. Gilean, Paladine, and Takhisis would be most displeased if we allowed the infinite powers of the universe to be unleashed on their world."

Nuitari looked at the caustic beauty archly. "He was one of yours, you know."

"Not for some time." Lunitari tossed aside the notion with a wave of her tapered fingers, liking the feel of the utterly human gesture. "*You* should have had your eye on him."

"Stop bickering like siblings," Solinari chided them both. "Surely we all agree it would be disastrous if one of these mortals finally succeeded."

"Of course." Nuitari frowned, tiring of the subject. Solinari did love to go on. "Why don't we seal it off and be done with it?"

"What happens to mortals when you tell them something is unattainable?" asked Lunitari. "They only want it the more. Besides," she added, "the citadel represents magical perfection. It *is* perfection. We'd be telling them to no longer strive for excellence in the Art. I certainly don't want that for *my* followers."

"Well," sniffed Nuitari, "I'm not going to stand here at the gate forever to keep them out."

"No one was suggesting that," said Solinari with infinite patience. "These mortal mages must not come to depend too much on our help. Dependence breeds laziness. The next thing you know, they'll expect us to fight their battles for them." His companions could think of nothing more tedious.

"We gave them all the knowledge they needed more than three millennia ago before we banned them from the citadel," said Solinari. "Have they lost it? More important, have they lost their fear of our wrath?" Stroking his chin, he said, "Perhaps a test is in order."

"I have it," Nuitari said. "Isn't your man Par-Salian their leader?" Solinari nodded. "Let him know we're displeased and that they must appease us. It's always worked before."

"If you want cattle slaughtered for sacrifice," Lunitari said caustically. The dark young man gave her a hateful stare.

"We need a greater demonstration of their loyalty than the usual supplication," announced the white-haired man. "Let them prove their fear and obedience to our rules. We will tell them to build their own bastion against further attempts to gain entrance here." He glanced once more through the gold gate at the mortals on the murky planet below. "They must learn to police themselves or suffer the consequences."