

The Destiny Knight

BASED ON THE SECOND GAME IN THE CLASSIC SERIES



Nathan Long

**The
Destiny Knight**
by
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Chapter One

Gillan eased off the back of the distiller's wagon and flipped the driver a silver skeatt.

"Thanks for the ride, friend."

The man scowled. "Told ye I weren't gonna charge ye."

"Aye," said Gillan. "But I had a little nip from yer Twelve-Year Spey to ease my bones, and fair's fair."

"Serves me right for pickin' up a bard."

The driver stuck the coin in his pouch and started unstrapping his casks as Gillan pulled his cloak around his shoulders and limped to the door of the Pig and Flagon.

He hadn't been lying about easing his bones. Though he was still a young man if he counted his birthdays, he felt as old and frail as his grandfather. In the space of three years he had gone from hale and hardy to weak and weary, with a hitch in his step and a tremor in his hands that had forced

him to stop playing his preferred instrument. Once he'd been known as Gillan the harper. Now he was Gillan the singer, and even that was questionable these days. There was a quaver in his voice that had never been there before, and his wind was so bad he sometimes had to inhale in the middle of a line. At least he could still carry a tune and tell a tale.

He stepped through the door into the taproom and looked around. The Pig and Flagon was the finest inn in Tillicolt, the ancient seat of Caith's Council of Lords, and he'd come all the way from Skara Brae on the strength of a letter he'd received saying they wanted to pay him a fortune to sing here.

He crossed to the barman. "Is the landlord in?"

"In the cellar. He'll be up in—"

"Is that Gillan the harper?" said a voice behind him.

Gillan turned. A big Einarr fellow with a blond beard and plaited sidelocks was stepping toward him, grinning from ear to ear.

"D-dag?" said Gillan. "As I live and breathe. What are you doing here?"

"That I couldn't tell you," said he. "But I can tell you that whatever reason you *thought* you came here, it was a lie. I had a letter saying I'd inherited a bag of skeatt from an old auntie I didn't know I had. Got here to find no aunt and no gold."

He jerked a thumb behind him. "And Rhodri—"

Gillan blinked. "Rhodri? The dwarf? He's here too?"

"And Coira. And Isobel. All called here by false letters."

Gillan looked beyond Dag and saw what he hadn't before. The dwarf smith, the Fichti hunter, and the Lestradae paladin of the Swordfather, all sitting at a table in a shadowed corner, raising their mugs to him. He raised a hand back, then turned again to the barman.

"Never mind about the landlord. Just give me a whisky. Better yet, I'll have a bottle."

The man filled a bottle from a cask and took his

money, then Gillan and Dag crossed to the table.

Coira, the wiry Fichti woman, raised an eyebrow as he lowered himself into a chair. "Oak and Hazel, harper. You look like death warmed over."

"Nothing warm about it," said Gillan. "I'm cold all the time these days. Even in the sun."

"I'd swear you'd aged ten years," said Isobel. The powerful paladin was out of her armor, but still wore the white robes of an initiate of the Swordfather. "Maybe twenty."

"Thanks for noticing," said Gillan, uncorking the bottle. "Yer all doin' wonders for my self-regard."

"It's the touch of the wight, is it not?" asked Rhodri.

Gillan shivered as he remembered the terrifying fight with the undead mage in the sewers beneath Skara Brae, and the unnatural cold that had dropped him to his knees as its ethereal claws swept through his chest and heart. The others had said that touch would kill him before his time, but he'd tried to put the thought out of his head. He still didn't care to acknowledge it.

"Don't know what it is," he said at last. "At first I thought it was the gripe, but it never left. Sometimes I wonder if it's my drinkin'. Whatever it is, I wish it wasn't."

"As do I," said the dwarf. The only thing different about him since the last time Gillan had seen him was the length of his beard. Before it had flowed down to the middle button of his doublet. Now it reached his belt. "It's an unjust fate."

Gillan took a swig from the bottle and waved that away. "Enough about me. What about the rest of ye? What've y'been doing with yerselves since we saved the world?"

"I've been keeping the peace at a tavern in Camnag," said Dag. "Couldn't bear to stay in Skara Brae after what happened. Too many ghosts."

"Wish I'd done the same," said Gillan, then shook his head. "I never left my ghosts."

"Got my own forge now," said Rhodri. "In the port

of Wyre, in the Stennish Isles. Not many of my folk out that way, so I do a good business.”

“I’ll bet,” said Dag. “We Einarr like our axes and swords.”

“I too could not live with the ghosts in Skara Brae,” said Isobel, looking into her beer. “To atone for my sins, I took a vow of errantry and have been wandering the land, doing what good deeds I may, and giving away all I make to the poor.”

“Three years of that?” asked Gillan, noticing that she was leaner and more sunburned than before. “That’s a fair amount of atoning.”

“Not nearly enough,” said the paladin. “Not nearly.”

Gillan looked at Coira, who had traded her Fichti buckskins for doublet and hose, both midnight black. “And you, hunter? Doesn’t look like y’returned to the forests of Inshriach. What’re y’doin’ these days?”

Coira shrugged. “I make a living. Odd jobs. You know. Tillicolt’s been my home since I left Skara Brae. Stayed the night on my way back home, and never left again. Turns out I like city life.”

Gillan nodded, keeping his face blank. He had a good idea what sort of odd jobs Coira might be doing. The dark clothes, the soft-soled boots, and the stiletto at her belt were a dead giveaway. “Well, glad y’ve found a calling.”

She chuckled, and he looked around.

“The only one of our old fellowship we seem t’be missin’ is Lady Svante. Perhaps she’s beyond the reach of mysterious letters with lyin’—”

“I am here.” The elf woman stepped out of a shadow that Gillan would have sworn was unoccupied and threw back her hood to reveal her angular beauty—unchanged from three years ago. “I had hoped to discover the identity and intent of whoever assembled us here, but no one is watching us, and there are no glamours or hidden magics around us.”

Gillan eyed the elf with a queer mixture of nostalgia and loathing. She had been a powerful ally during the

troubles in Skara Brae, but he could not forget that she had tried to seduce him on the last night of his wife's life, making his final moments with Maidie fraught with guilt and argument and disloyal thoughts. He'd at least had a chance to tell Maidie he loved her before she died, but his memories of her death were ever marred by the knowledge that Lady Svante had nearly succeeded in tricking him into betraying her in the time she needed him most. His guilt had hung like an anchor around his neck ever since.

"But we must have been brought together on purpose," the elf continued. "This cannot be a coincidence."

"No," said Rhodri. "It cannot. The question is, who has brought us together, and for what reason?"

"Maybe someone wants vengeance on us," said Isobel. "One of Mangar's followers, or Tarjan's."

"Wouldn't it have been smarter to kill us one by one?" asked Dag. "I don't like to boast, but if I remember correctly, together we were pretty formidable."

"Or it could be someone wants to give us a reward," said Coira. "I don't remember us getting more than a round of drinks and a hearty handshake from the good folk of Skara Brae."

"One should not ask for more," said Isobel, stiffly. "It offends—"

The bang of the tavern door interrupted her, and they all looked up. A man in filthy robes and a caved-in hat was stumbling in, bent over as if with nausea. He looked around and saw their table, then staggered toward it.

"Are you . . ." he rasped, "the heroes of Skara . . . Brae?"

Then he fell flat on his face.

Chapter Two

“Ullmaen’s tide, he’s all over blood,” said Dag as they turned the man over.

“The wound is days old,” said Lady Svante, pulling aside the man’s robes and placing a hand on the crusted gash beneath. “Deep and poisoned. I fear I cannot save him.”

“Can you wake him long enough that we can hear what he wanted of us?” asked Rhodri.

“It would be kinder to let his suffering end,” said the elf.

“Would it?” asked Isobel. “He went to great lengths to bring us here. Surely he would want to tell us . . . whatever it was he wanted to tell us.”

Lady Svante thought, then nodded. She added her other hand to her first and began to whisper in her own tongue. The whisper seemed to be answered by invisible entities all around them, and light began to pulse within the

elf's fingers, as if her bones were glowing. After a while, an answering pulse shone from the man's chest—weaker, faltering, but a light nonetheless. A moment later his eyes flew open and he gasped and coughed.

Lady Svante helped him sit up, then looked around at the others. "The poisons are already unraveling all I have knitted up. He has moments—an hour at most. Ask your questions."

Gillan knelt beside the man, knees creaking. "My friend, y've found the heroes of Skara Brae, such as we are. What did you want of us?"

The man turned to him. "You . . . you are Gillan the harper. It is you who wrote the song."

Gillan raised an eyebrow. "Which song would that be?"

"‘The Battle of Skara Brae.’ It is from that song that I learned of your heroism and prowess, how you defeated Mangar and banished Tarjan from this plane. Without that song I would not have known to whom I should turn."

Gillan exchanged an uneasy glance with the others. "I . . . I may have embroidered our exploits a wee bit in that little ode, my friend, purely for the sake of rhyme and meter, of course. I hope yer not disappointed with the reality."

The man groaned, then coughed again. "I pray you plead modesty, harper. For only true heroes can aid me. Only true heroes can save our land from the evil that threatens it."

Rhodri grunted. "Tell your tale, friend. You haven't much time."

"Yes," said the man. "I must. My name is Saradon, a wizard of some fame but little fortune. It was my honor to be one of the guardians chosen by the Council of Lords to protect the Destiny Wand, Caith's greatest relic. Do you know it?"

Coira, Dag, and Isobel shook their heads, but Rhodri and Lady Svante nodded. So did Gillan.

"An ancient staff," he said. "The old songs say it's the reason there's been no successful invasion of Caith in

seven hundred years. I always thought it was just a tale.”

“It is real,” said Rhodri. “Forged by the great dwarf archmage Turin, in the molten depths of Mount Krontor, in the realm of the dwarves, and given to the lords of Caith as a token of the eternal bond of friendship between dwarf and man.”

Saradon nodded. Already he was looking worse than when Lady Svante had healed him, but he persevered. “It has been sealed in a great vault beneath the chambers of the council for centuries, protected by mages and warriors of great bravery and honor, and at the same time protecting us all with its mighty magics. But . . .” He coughed and hung his head. “But to my shame, the wand was taken while I was guarding it—the guards slaughtered, my magics ripped apart. The door of the vault melted from its hinges.”

“I have not heard of this crime,” said Isobel. “When did it occur?”

“A week gone,” said Saradon. “The council swore us all to silence. They feared to frighten Caith’s citizens. Instead, they sent us to recover it.” He looked down at his wounds and trembling hands. “You can see how we fared. But at least I have learned something of the thieves and their intent.”

“Tell us,” said Lady Svante.

“They are from Lestras,” said Saradon, “and are led by a powerful archmage named Lagoth Zanta. He has thwarted all my attempts to find him or learn his plans, but I can only assume he is preparing the ground for an invasion, for he has broken the Destiny Wand into seven pieces and placed them in seven locations around Caith.”

“Why do you think that means he’s planning an invasion?” asked Coira.

“Whole,” said Saradon, then doubled over with coughing. When he recovered he wiped blood from his mouth and continued. “Whole, the wand unifies the land and invigorates its people. Broken into its component parts, its magics fight against each other and sow discord, causing

the people to turn against each other and encouraging petty bickering and shortsightedness, a perfect environment for an invasion.”

“A Lestradae invasion?” asked Isobel, and the unease in her voice reminded Gillan that she was born in Lestras.

“The mercenaries who accompany Zanta were Lestradae,” said Saradon. “So . . . so it seems likely.”

The paladin frowned. “An unprovoked attack? This is not the Lestras I know. I hope it is not true. I hope they are renegades only.”

“Whoever they are,” said Saradon. “The surest way to stop them and save the realm is to find the pieces of the wand and reforge it, but it won’t be easy. The pieces will be hidden, guarded with magic and other menaces—of that you may be certain. And reforging it . . .” He shook his head. “There is only one place in Caith with fires hot enough. The—” He coughed again. “The—”

“The temple of Narn,” said Rhodri. “Built over a river of lava in the south.”

“Yes,” said Saradon. “That is the place. And to find a smith who can do the work.”

Rhodri cleared his throat and looked modest. “Well . . .”

“Where’re these pieces hidden?” asked Gillan.

“I . . . I learned of only one location before I was discovered,” said Saradon. “The old tombs of Earrann. But I can guess another. Lord Fanskar’s castle holds the largest force of men in Caith, and it is strategically placed so they can reach any part of the land within three days. Any invading army would have to neutralize Fanskar before . . . before proceeding, so sowing discord among his troops would be vital.”

Dag nodded. “Yes, you’d have to take Fanskar out of the picture, or you wouldn’t get north of Fettercairn, but do you truly think a piece of this wand could—”

The wizard suddenly threw his head forward, hacking and wheezing and spraying blood across the floorboards.

It seemed he couldn't stop. Lady Svante put a hand on his shoulder.

"Mage, you have told your tale. Let me ease your passage. There is no need for this pain."

Saradon shrugged her off. "No, no," he rasped. "You must hear me. I was so intent on telling you Zanta's plan, I forgot the more immediate news."

"What news is that?" asked Rhodri.

"I . . ." His eyes closed and he sank back. "I was . . . followed."

Gillan's heart thudded. "Followed? By who? By Zanta?"

Lady Svante put her fingers to Saradon's neck. She shook her head. "I'm sorry. He is gone."

The companions looked up. All seemed as it had in the tavern, but outside, the sounds of the street had faded to nothing.

Coira rolled to a shuttered window and peeked through the slats. "Can't see anybody. And I mean anybody. The street is empty."

Lady Svante turned in a slow circle, arms outstretched and eyes closed. "There are thirteen minds focused on the inn and ourselves. Four outside the front door, four at the yard door, the rest in surrounding alleys waiting for any who try to flee."

They all stood, then looked down at themselves. None of them were dressed for battle. Most of them weren't armed.

"My hammer and armor are in my room," said Isobel.

"As are mine," said Rhodri. "I thought I was here to discuss a jewelry commission."

"My bow's at home," said Coira. She drew two throwing daggers from her coat. "These will have to do."

Dag drew his sword. "Looks like I'm protecting the lot of you."

"Barkeep!" called Gillan. "Any weapons behind the—" He stopped as he realized the barman was nowhere

to be seen. “Now where did he get to?”

Isobel flipped the table they had been sitting at and tore away three of its sturdy legs as easily as a kitchen maid might pull the drumsticks off a chicken. She tossed one to Rhodri and kept two for herself.

“We need to split up,” she said. “Half to the front door. Half to the—”

Before she could finish, the front door slammed open and four men in studded leather jacks barged in, swords drawn.

“Oh, look,” said the first. “The wizard’s dead. That’s half our job done. Get ’em, la—*aack!*”

One of Coira’s knives gashed his cheek and ear as it flew past, and he flinched back into his men. Isobel took this as her cue and roared toward them, calling on the Swordfather and whirling her table legs over her head like they were the axes of a berserker.

The others made to follow her, but a crash from behind turned them around. Four more men were pouring out of the kitchen door, one lofting a bottle with a burning rag sticking from the top.

It landed between Dag and Rhodri and exploded, covering them and Lady Svante in a spray of broken glass and fire. Gillan would have been caught too, but Coira grabbed him with uncanny swiftness and pulled him over the bar. They crashed down on top of the cowering barkeep just as the attackers from the kitchen charged their comrades.

Coira was back up again in an instant, hurling mugs and bottles left and right, but Gillan’s bones felt like brittle twigs these days, and it took him longer to stand. When he did, he saw Dag on the floor, his clothes still on fire, crabbing backward from one attacker, while Rhodri defended himself against two more as his beard and his doublet smoldered. Beyond them, Lady Svante had thrown aside her flaming cloak and was halfway up the stairs to the bedrooms, eyes closed and lips moving, while the last of the kitchen attackers crept toward her, afraid but intent.

On the far side of the room, Isobel stood over the bodies of two attackers and battled furiously with two others, two-handing her remaining table leg.

“Come on, harper!” cried Coira. “Throw something!”

Gillan snatched up some empty bottles and started hurling them at the man who was threatening Lady Svante. One cracked him on the head and he turned, just in time to take the last of Coira’s daggers in the neck.

Another bottle hit Dag’s attacker square in the forehead and knocked him back long enough for Dag to jump up and stab him with his belt knife. Gillan threw an entire tray full of mugs at Rhodri’s attackers. They all fell short, but one man slipped on one as it rolled under his foot, and he fell sideways into his companion. That was all Rhodri needed. He brained the first man with his table-leg club, then crushed the other man’s knee.

The first man crumpled, unconscious, while the second fled, limping back into the kitchen. At the front door, the two who had been battling Isobel did the same, running into the street with lumps on their heads the size of hen’s eggs.

The friends had won the first round, but they were not unscathed. Isobel had gashes all over her arms and a swiftly blackening eye. Half of Rhodri’s beard was gone, and he had blistered burns on both hands, while Dag’s clothes were charred and the skin underneath red and crisscrossed with cuts. Even Lady Svante had been touched, her beautiful auburn hair singed, and blisters on one cheek and wrist.

Not to mention that the tavern was still on fire.

“My place!” cried the barman, finally peeking over the bar. “No!”

With a word and a gesture, Lady Svante conjured a cold fog that snuffed the flames and left them all shivering as it cleared.

Gillan trembled and sank into a chair, pulling his cloak tighter around him. “I’m glad the man who thought us the heroes o’ Skara Brae didn’t live t’see that.”

“Why?” asked Coira, as she took more of the bottle bombs from the satchel of the man who had tried to burn them and stuffed them in her own. “We won, didn’t we?”

Isobel stepped to the window again and peeked through the shutters. “Have we? The lady said there were still more out there, and . . .” She broke off with a sigh of relief. “It’s the watch. We’re saved.”

The others clustered around her and looked out too. A squad of men in the cloaks and breastplates of Tillicolt’s city guards were marching down the high street toward the tavern. Gillan could see one of the ambushers watching their approach.

“That’ll send ’em scurrying,” said he.

But it didn’t. Instead, the man in the shadows stepped into the street, revealing himself by the symbol of the hand and upraised sword on his breast to be a paladin of the Swordfather, then walked toward the watch, flagging them down with a raised hand.

Isobel inhaled a shocked breath at the sight. “A Fatherite! I—I don’t understand.”

“Are they all Fatherites?” asked Rhodri. “They did not wear the seal.”

“Please quiet yourselves,” said Lady Svante. “I will try to hear their words.”

The companions fell silent as the elf focused her senses forward, eyes closed, hands splayed. After a moment she stepped back and looked up.

“The paladin claims he and his men are tracking the thieves who stole the Destiny Wand, and have them trapped inside the inn.”

“The thieves who . . .” said Dag. “Does he mean us?”

“A paladin of the Swordfather, lying,” said Gillan. “Well, now.”

“He might have been lied to,” said Isobel stiffly. “He might not know the truth.”

“That’s very charitable of you,” said Coira.

“He is asking the watch for help capturing us,” Lady

Svante continued. "But he warns them that we have already killed the wizard Saradon, one of the defenders of the wand, and are desperate and dangerous villains."

Gillan shook his head. "Clever bastard. He'll have the whole city after us."

"Indeed," said the elf. "He calls us by name. All six of us."

"Wanted for a crime I didn't commit," sighed Coira. "That's novel."

"I do not wish to fight the watch," said Rhodri. "They are not our enemy."

"Nor do I," said Dag.

Gillan looked through the shutters again. The guards and the paladin's men were spreading out to encircle the tavern. He turned back to the barkeep, who this time was peeking over his counter. "Hoy, barkeep. Is there a secret way out of here?"

The barkeep stuck his chin out. "Why should I tell you, you wreckers. Look at this mess!"

"Because if y'don't," said Gillan, "there'll be a fight in here t'rival the last stand of Kirkalden, and the mess'll be even bigger."

"Place might even burn down," said Coira. "Never can tell."

The barkeep swallowed, then pointed to the floor behind the bar. "Through this hatch. There's a door in the cellar that leads to the sewers."

"Isn't there always," said Gillan. He waved to the others, then limped toward the bar. "Gather yer things and let's go before they work up the courage t'storm the place."

Chapter Three

Two hours later, in a narrow ravine overhung with willows and scrub, the companions rested and drank from a stream while Lady Svante used her magics to see to their wounds and Coira washed herself fastidiously and cleaned her soft black boots with a rag.

“If I never see the inside of a sewer again, it will be too soon,” said she.

“Occupational hazard in your new line of work, isn’t it?” asked Dag.

Coira curled a lip. “I prefer rooftops.”

Gillan shivered and sat in a spot where the sun shone through the treetops. It was the middle of summer and he was cold and stiff.

“So,” he said. “Do we do this thing? Do we follow the wishes of a dead wizard and go on a likely fatal wild goose chase across Caith after bits and pieces of a broken

stick?”

“Do we have any choice?” asked Dag. “We’re wanted fugitives now, thanks to that lying paladin. We’ve got to do it just to clear our name.”

Coira snorted. “I don’t need t’do anything of the kind. If I went back to the Inshriach, they’d never find me. Baedish law doesn’t go far in the greenwood.”

“I thought y’ didn’t want t’go back,” said Gillan.

Coira shrugged.

“Running won’t work for me,” said Rhodri. “The Stennish Isles may be far away, but their ties with Baedish lands are strong. I would be found out and my business would be lost. I will do as we have been bid.”

“I will not run and I will not hide!” said Isobel, slapping her leg. “That this Lagoth Zanta has somehow tricked men of my faith into helping him is an affront to the precepts of the temple. I must stop his scheme and expose his duplicity to the patriarchs.”

“Neither will I run,” said Lady Svante. “Though I could easily return to the realm of Coill and never set foot again in the lands of men, I have a great love of Caith and its people, and I will not stand by and see it violated.”

“Unless you were the violator,” muttered Gillan. “Y’just want it for yer private hunting preserve.”

The elf looked down at that. “I am not so careless with human hearts now, harper. I have learned my lesson.”

Gillan gave her a sour sideways look. Maybe she *had* learned, but one heartbreak too late, as far as he was concerned.

“What about you, Gil?” asked Dag, breaking the awkward silence.

Gillan chewed his lip. The last adventure he’d had with these lunatics had been an endless nightmare of running and hiding and freezing and fighting horrors beyond the ken of mortal men, and he had hated every second of it. It had killed his wife, and it had turned his life into a long, lonely winter that would end him before his time.

That decided him.

“The way I’ve been feeling lately, it’s short odds I live out the year no matter what I do. So, if I’m t’die anyway, I suppose I’d rather die fightin’ than shiverin’ and alone. And I love Caith too. I don’t want t’tthink she might be gone after I’ve died because I didn’t stand up and defend her. I’ll go to Earrann—and wherever else this foolishness leads us.”

“That’s all of us but Coira, then,” said Dag.

She looked up. “Did I say I wasn’t coming?”

Dag blinked. “But I thought . . .”

“I said I didn’t *have* to go,” said Coira. “Not that I wouldn’t.”

“Well, then?” asked Gillan.

Coira looked at the ground for a long moment, then finally sighed. “I just can’t give these boots up and go back to buckskin. I’m in.”

Three nights later, the companions stood in the shadows of an alley looking across the square of Earrann, where all the cults, both popular and obscure, had their temples. According to Saradon, a piece of the Destiny Wand was hidden somewhere in the tombs beneath those temples. Unfortunately, he had said nothing about where in the tombs it might be, or how they would find it, or what traps or guardians might keep them from it. They knew the first step was reaching the tombs, but that looked like it might be a problem.

Just as in Skara Brae, the tombs of one temple connected to the tombs of all the others through a maze of catacombs, so getting into any of the temples would give them the access they needed. But it looked doubtful that they would be able to enter any of them undetected, for there was a rally going on in the square, with people streaming in from all directions, and the priests of the temples out on their steps to watch it with uneasy eyes.

“Fatherites again,” said Rhodri.

“At least I don’t see any of the fellows we fought back in Tillicolt,” said Dag as he peered over the heads of the crowd.

“They’re certainly spoutin’ the same message, though,” said Gillan.

A tall Fatherite priest stood on a torchlit wooden platform outside the temple of the Swordfather, rallying his eager followers.

“The Council of Lords has failed us, friends!” he cried. “They have let the greatest treasure of Caith slip through their fingers and into the hands of our enemies. The Destiny Wand has been stolen!”

“Eh?” said Dag. “How do they know of the theft when Saradon told us the council had sworn all the guardians to silence?”

“Perhaps they are the ones who took it,” said Lady Svante.

“I refuse to believe it!” snapped Isobel.

In the square, the priest continued. “Now, some may claim it was corruption on the part of the council that allowed the wand to be taken. Others may say it was incompetence on the part of the wand’s guardians. I say it was neither of those things. I say it was the weakness of their faith!”

“And what does he mean by that, pray tell?” asked Gillan.

“Shall I amaze you, friends?” the priest asked the crowd. “Would it shock you to know that there were no Fatherites guarding the Destiny Wand? No Fatherite priests, whose powers are greater than those of the greatest wizards. No Fatherite paladins, whose strength is the strength of ten.”

The crowd gasped at this, and the priest raised his hand.

“It is true! We sons and daughters of the one true god are considered newcomers to Caith, and therefore ‘not fit’ to guard its most sacred treasures. Though we are strong and the followers of the old gods—those fading, fraudulent totems of hedge-wives and farmers—are weak in spirit and

sinew, we are kept out of the ranks of the council guardians, as those lords who have converted to the true faith are barred from the council itself. They don't trust us. They don't trust our loyalty to Caith. And for that lack of trust, the wand was lost."

Dag looked at Isobel. "This is true? No Fatherites guarded the wand?"

Isobel's brow furrowed. "I know not, but would a priest lie about something so easily disproved? I can't believe it."

"And all that stuff about us Baedish bein' weak in spirit and sinew?" asked Gillan. "Is that the official view of the temple?"

The paladin squirmed, uncomfortable, then started forward. "I would have words with this priest, about who told him these things. How he knows of the theft of the wand."

Gillan caught her arm. "Now is perhaps not the time. We are fugitives, if you recall."

"And have other work," added Rhodri. "Though how we're to get through that mess to do it, I don't know."

"There," said Coira, pointing down one of the streets that led to the square. "That's our way in."

The others turned. A procession of mourners, all in hooded black robes, was approaching. The first six carried a casket, while another dozen or so followed behind, singing a sonorous song.

"Hoods up, head down," Coira continued. "And we shuffle along at the end of their line."

"As long as they're not Fatherites," said Gillan. "Tonight's not the night t'go anywhere near a temple of the Swordfather."

"They're Einarr," said Dag. "That's the 'Song of Moon and Waves,' which we sing to our dead. They're going to the temple of Ullmaen, the Moon Goddess."

"Which temple?" asked Coira. "Oh, you mean the temple of Darkness."

Dag gave her a dirty look. "Don't repeat such Baedish slurs. Ullmaen is a welcoming goddess. There's nothing dark about her."

"Then why do you build her temples out of black stone and hang black banners around them and—"

"Enough, Mistress Coira," said Isobel. "Your plan is a good one. Let us put it into action."

They all put up their hoods and made sure their weapons weren't sticking out from under their cloaks.

"People might think me a trifle short for an Einarr," Rhodri grumbled.

"The ruse has worked before," said Dag.

"Aye," said Rhodri. "In a castle full of mind-controlled sleepwalkers. This is not the same."

"Don't worry," said Coira. "No one looks twice at a funeral procession. Off we go."

As the mourners passed their alley, the companions slipped out and started pushing through the crowd after them, but before they had taken five steps, an old crone who had been standing among the watchers grabbed Isobel by the wrist.

"You! Knight!" she rasped. "You have a destiny! A destiny!"

Isobel jerked back, trying to free herself. "Let me be, old woman. I know you not."

The crone clung on. Her eyes were white as milk, and she was frothing at the mouth. "The land is in danger! You shall save it!"

"Everybody's looking!" hissed Coira. "Can't you shut her up?"

"Hush, old mother," said Isobel. "Please. I must—"

"Your blood will betray you!" shrilled the old woman, and let go at last. "But your heart will save you!"

Fortunately there was so much noise in the square that only those surrounding the scene had noticed it, and Isobel and the others were able to fall in behind the mourners without arousing any comment.

“What was that about?” whispered Dag.

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” Isobel whispered back.
“The Swordfather does not condone prophecy.”

They walked into the square, hanging their heads and wringing their hands in a pantomime of grief, expecting to be exposed at any moment, but no one paid them the slightest attention, not even the other mourners.

That didn’t last, however. The temple of Ullmaen was on the far side of the temple of the Swordfather, and as they began to edge past the crowd that clustered around the torchlit platform, and as the “Song of Moon and Waves” began to compete with the loud declamations of the hectoring priest, some of the Fatherites began to turn and stare at the procession. And then to mock and curse it.

“Stop that heathen noise!”

“Look, it’s one of the weak cults.”

“Your goddess is a lie! There is no afterlife for your dead!”

“You are all damned!”

“Is that a dwarf with you?”

Gillan saw Rhodri’s hand reaching under his cloak for his axe. He snatched the dwarf’s wrist and pulled him close.

“You leave my daughter alone!” he snapped. “She can’t help how she was born!”

The Fatherites laughed and pointed.

“Did you fuck a pig to have such a daughter, Einarr scum?”

“I thought Einarr only fucked sheep!”

“If I had a daughter that ugly, I’d put her out of her misery.”

Then they were beyond the heckling crowd and breathing sighs of relief as they started up the basalt steps of the temple of Ullmaen, with its round, white moon window shining above its black oak door.

“Your daughter?” growled Rhodri.

Gillan shrugged. “It worked, didn’t it?”

Isobel was seething. “How dare they? True Fatherites do not speak this way!”

“Aye,” said Coira. “But do they think that way?”

“Of course not!” snapped the paladin. But her cheeks were flushed and her brow troubled.

Inside the temple, the casket bearers stopped briefly to pray before a towering statue of Ullmaen, an imperious woman with long braided hair, a pitcher in her left hand, and a glowing white sphere in her right, standing in a pool of dark, lapping water. Then they continued to a wide door behind the altar. A priestess unlocked the door with an iron key and hauled it open, and the bearers squeezed the casket through, then began down the stairs beyond it.

Gillan held his breath as he and the others followed, praying the priestess wouldn’t recognize them as interlopers. Apparently his prayers were answered, for she didn’t give them a second look. Indeed, her attention seemed almost entirely focused on the chants and cheers coming from the Fatherite rally outside.

At the bottom of the stairs, an antechamber opened into several large, low-ceilinged crypts with grave receptacles built into thick square columns decorated with Einarr knotwork. In the crypt directly in front of them, three priestesses waited at one of the columns, an open receptacle behind them and lamps to either side.

Rhodri held up a hand and drew the others back into the antechamber as the rest of the mourners proceeded into the crypt.

“Right,” said he. “Mistress Coira’s got us in, but there are miles of these crypts. How do we proceed?”

“One moment,” said Lady Svante, closing her eyes as she murmured a spell. She turned in a slow circle, holding out her hands, but after a moment she shook her head. “If the piece of the wand is guarded by magical means, it is not nearby, for I would be able to sense it. We must go farther in. I will try again at intervals.”

And so, after Gillan found a lantern and Coira picking

the locked door that led from the Einarr crypts into the connecting tunnels, they continued through the catacombs, following branching tunnels, finding dead ends, doubling back, and starting again. They found the crypts of the noble and the wealthy and the mass graves of the nameless poor. They found family crypts with twenty generations of dead, and monuments so old all the writing was worn away, and everywhere they went, Lady Svante would pause, whisper her spell, turn, and then shake her head again. Nor did any normal searching turn up anything. Nowhere did they find any traps or guards or hints of where the piece of the Destiny Wand might be.

After a fruitless hunt through another crypt, Coira sagged against the wall. "Do you think maybe this Saradon was having us on? That maybe he made up this wand of his, and the villains who stole it, and all the rest?"

"The Fatherites know about it too," said Dag. "It must be real."

"I know, I know," she sighed. "I suppose I'm just starting to doubt the existence of anything outside these damned dusty tunnels. I feel like we've been here forever."

Isobel grunted. "Come on. On to the next."

"Wait," said Lady Svante.

They all turned back.

"Y'found something?" asked Gillan hopefully.

"No," said the elf. "But . . ." She frowned. "But I have just realized there is a place I haven't been looking."

"Eh?" said Dag. "What do you mean? Where?"

"I don't know."

Gillan exchanged a look with the others. Whatever else she might be, the elf had always been the most level-headed of companions, and now she was babbling.

"Lady," he said. "Yer not making sense."

"I will try to explain," said she. "Every time I have searched, I have believed that I searched everywhere, but I am realizing now that this has not been the case. Instead it seems that, each time, I have dismissed a particular direction

as not worth searching, and ignored it.”

“What?” said Coira. “Why?”

“A spell, I think,” said Lady Svante. “A very subtle one. Its sole purpose is to make one think there is nothing worth looking for in its direction, or that one has already looked where it is.”

“So where is it?” asked Gillan.

She held up a hand and once again murmured and spun, then opened her eyes and pointed west.

“I have a vague impression that there is nothing worth looking for in that direction.”

The others stared at her for a long moment.

“Uh . . .” said Gillan at last. “So yer sayin’ we should go that way?”

She nodded. “I believe so.”

Rhodri shrugged. “Some direction is better than no direction, I suppose. We may as well give it a try. This way.”

Chapter Four

And so they again moved through the catacombs by stages, down steep inclines and spiral stairs, through narrow passages and vaulted crypts, always turning in the direction that Lady Svante felt was the least likely to be the right one.

Gillan continued to think she was insane until they found the first body.

It was a city guardsman, and at first it looked like he had been stabbed somewhere else and crawled here to die, but the trail of blood was more complicated than that.

“Something strange about this,” said Coira, examining the floor. “You can see he crawled here from that archway, but when he gets to this point, he stops, turns around, crawls back, crawls here again, then back, then here. Why would he go in circles like that?”

“Maybe he triggered some trap that blocked his way,” said Rhodri. He stroked the remains of his burned

beard. "Let us go carefully."

They continued through the arch, and after a few more rooms, came out in another corridor and saw another body.

"One more," said Dag. "And it looks like he died in the same way."

"It is the same body," said Lady Svante. "The body of the guardsman."

"Don't be daft," said Gillan. "The guardsman's behind us, back through that—" He stopped dead. He was pointing at the same arch they had noticed the first time they saw the guardsman. "How—?"

"This is why the poor man crawled in circles until he died," said Svante. "A master of deceptive magics has created a snare here, and we are in it."

"In what?" asked Coira, looking around. "I don't see anything."

"When we were outside the snare," said the elf, "it did its best to keep us from finding it. Now that we are in it, it does its best to keep us from leaving it." She pointed away from the arch and then back to it. "No matter which direction one goes, one turns around without knowing it, and walks back to the center."

"Shepherd and Smith," said Gillan, looking down at the body. "What a horrible way t'die. Trapped by his own mind."

"It's like a nightmare I always have," said Coira, shivering.

Dag swallowed. "Can you get us out? Can you break it?"

"I think so," said Lady Svante. "But this trap must hold the first piece of the wand. I suggest we find it before we try to leave."

The others nodded.

"Right," said Rhodri. "In we go."

"Just a minute," said Coira, and took a piece of chalk from one of her pouches. She marked an arrow on the wall,

pointing away from the snare, and wrote “out” under it. “There will be more of this nonsense,” she said. “I’m going to keep track.”

As she predicted, after working through a handful of rooms, they ended up back at the chalk mark and the body.

“So,” said Dag. “They don’t even want us going forward. They want us to stay trapped in *just these rooms!*”

“Easy now, lad,” said Gillan. “You’re shouting.”

“Let us walk it again,” said Lady Svante.

It took them two more tries before she found where they were being turned around. A room they passed through had three doors, but somehow they always took the one that led back to the corridor with the body.

The third time, Lady Svante stopped as they entered the room. “One of you stand at the door we just came through.”

Gillan went back to the door, then faced her. “All right.”

“Good,” said the elf. “The rest of you stay where you are. I will back toward the door in the opposite wall. Harper, look in my eyes.”

Gillan held her gaze as she took a step backward and then another, and another. As she reached the middle of the room, he saw her flinch and lose eye contact for a moment, then force herself not to turn around. After a moment’s struggle, she looked at him again, and resumed walking backward until at last she stood in the opposite door.

“Y’made it,” said Gillan.

“Yes,” she said, then drew a breath. “Now, harper, I want you and the others to join hands in a chain. Then you will walk toward me, always looking in my eyes. Do you understand? Do not look away.”

“I won’t,” said Gillan. “I hope.”

He took Coira’s hand, and she linked hands with Isobel and so on until they were all in a line, then, his gaze fixed on the spring green of Lady Svante’s eyes, he stepped forward, one foot in front of the other until he was looking

back at Coira and the rest.

“Harper!” came the elf’s voice from behind him.
“Turn around. Look at me!”

A prickle of embarrassed sweat tickled his ribs and slicked his forehead as he realized he had fallen for the spell yet again. He turned around and once again found Lady Svante’s eyes.

“One step, harper.”

Gillan took a step. The urge to swivel aside was almost impossible to ignore, but he did it.

“Another.”

The next step was easier, and the one after that even more so, until at last he took Lady Svante’s hand and she led him and the others through the door—which Coira marked on the way through.

Then, as they started across the next room, Gillan heard a sound ahead he couldn’t identify. “What’s that?”

The companions stopped, everyone straining their ears.

“It sounds like . . . digging?” said Dag.

“Another guardsman? Caught in another trap?”

At the end of a corridor they found an oak door. The noise came from behind it. Coira checked it for traps while Lady Svante extended her senses, looking for any signs of magic. They looked at each other and shook their heads. Nothing.

The noise stopped.

Isobel took her stone-headed hammer off her back and stepped to the fore, with Dag and Rhodri right behind her, hefting sword and ax. Coira drew a throwing dagger. Lady Svante readied a spell. Gillan cowered at the back and held the lantern high so it shone over their heads.

Isobel threw open the door and stepped in with Dag and Rhodri, all brandishing their weapons. Coira went in behind them and rolled to one side for a clear field of fire. Gillan stuck the lantern through the door. The light wasn’t very bright, but it was bright enough to show that the

cavernous octagonal room was empty.

Isobel let out a breath. "After all that . . ."

"Wait," said Coira. "Harper, shield your light."

Gillan tucked the lantern under his cloak and they looked into the room again. In an alcove in the far wall, a faintly glowing sphere bobbed in the air a few feet above an altar table. Inside the sphere floated a cylinder of gold about a foot long, covered in geometric designs.

"That's it," said Rhodri. "A section of the wand. I'd recognize Turin's work anywhere."

"It can't be," said Coira. "It's just sitting there. It's too easy."

"Aren't you forgetting everything we've been through so far?" asked Dag.

"Exactly," said Gillan. "Let's be careful."

He uncovered the lantern and looked around the room again. There were no exits but for the one behind them, and the stone floor they were standing on extended only a few feet into the room before ending at a raised lip. Beyond the lip, where one might have expected a pool of water, was instead an expanse of sand that stretched all the way to the alcove with the wand.

"And what will happen when we walk out on this?" Gillan muttered. "Will we sink into it, never t'be seen again? Will it turn t'molten slag? Will it whirl up into dust devils and choke us all?"

"What's that?" asked Dag, pointing.

Something dark and lumpy was sticking up out of the sand, an arm's length from the lip. Isobel reached out with the haft of her great hammer and hooked it, then lifted it.

"A breastplate," said Rhodri.

"A crushed breastplate," said Coira. "And crusted in blood."

"'Tis of the same design as the one worn by the dead guardsman in the corridor," said Lady Svante.

Isobel nodded. "This is where he was wounded. But what wounded him?"

A low rumble shook the room, and the sand seemed to shimmer and shift in the lantern light.

“Out!” yelled Gillan. “Everybody out!”

He turned to run but a heavy tremor knocked him to the floor and the lantern tumbled from his hand. In the flickering light he caught a glimpse of something huge bursting up from the sand and slamming into Isobel and Dag, knocking them back into the wall.

Gillan rolled onto his back and saw that somehow Coira had fallen off the stone lip and was sliding down into the hole the thing had come out of as the sand crumbled away below her. But even that nightmare was blasted out of his head when he finally was able to focus on what they were up against.

There were a few old songs that mentioned them, but he had never seen one before, never even thought they were more than a figment of some crazed bard’s drunken imagination. A Uilepheist, a species of giant worm that ate its way through the earth and hid beneath the surface to hunt.

This one was enormous. It reared a good twenty feet out of the sand, covered in thick, overlapping plates, and its mouth was a gaping black hole that opened and closed like a sphincter. Row upon row of teeth the size and shape of gardening trowels ringed the opening, all moving back and forth like oars in water. Anything caught in that giant maw would be minced like pie filling. And it was turning toward Coira, poised to strike.

“Coira!” shouted Gillan.

She saw the gaping maw, but she was still fighting to keep her head above the sand. There was little she could do.

Gillan looked around. Isobel and Rhodri were still shaking off the worm’s attack, and the others were picking themselves up. He was the only one standing. He would have to—

The lantern!

He snatched it up and threw it at the worm’s mouth. It missed and hit the plating instead, shattering the glass and

spraying the creature's head with flaming oil. The worm howled, a weird booming sound, and flinched away.

That was enough for Coira to squirm around in the sand and catch at the monster's plates as she fell against its flank. It rose up, shaking its head in agony, and she rose with it, then clambered on its smoldering back and clung for dear life.

"Kill it!" she shouted. "Hurry!"

The others were up now and ran forward, slashing at it, but none of them dared step into the uncertain sand, so they missed as its flaming head whipped by.

"Jump!" shouted Gillan, though he had no idea how she'd manage it.

Coira screamed. "My hand! My hand!"

Gillan groaned as he saw what had happened. The worm's plates had a tendency to flex away from its body as it twisted and turned, and Coira's hand had been pinched between two of them as they had opened and closed.

Lady Svante stepped forward and thrust out her hands, bathing the worm in a cold blue light. Its writhing slowed and stiffened, and Coira got her hand free.

"Now!" shouted Gillan. "Come on! We'll catch you!"

But Coira wasn't trying to get away. Instead she held on with her knees and dug in her satchel.

"Fool!" cried Dag. "What is she doing?"

As they watched, she pulled out one of the bottle bombs she had taken from their attackers in the tavern back in Tillicolt, then held it up toward the few flames that were still dancing around the worm's head. The rag caught fire and she stuffed the thing under one of its plates as it twisted to try to pull her off its back.

"Madwoman!" cried Isobel. "You'll get yourself—"

As the worm whipped its head around, Coira kicked off, letting its motion throw her to the stone lip. It would have been a thing of beauty if she hadn't landed wrong and skidded into the wall.

The rest of them joined her, turning away and covering up as they waited for the bomb to explode.

They needn't have worried. The worm's scales were so strong that they did an excellent job of shielding the party from the blast. And that meant the force of it had nowhere to go but in. Gillan heard a muffled "whump," and the worm's neck swelled up like a bagpipe.

They watched in trepidation as the monster howled again, bucking and swaying. Gillan knew it was hurt. It had to be. But was it hurt enough?

Then, with a groan, its head flopped onto the stone lip and its mouth disgorged its shredded and bloody viscera all over Gillan and the others—but mostly Gillan.

Blood and guts covered him from head to toe. It was in his ears, eyes, and mouth. It stank like a grave pit, a meaty, rotting reek. It was too much. He sat up, stomach rebelling, and vomited all over himself.

"Well . . ." he began, then heaved again as the others stared and inched away. "Well, that was pleasant. Thank ye for that."

"For saving your life?" asked Coira, picking herself up. "My pleasure."

Gillan made a futile attempt to wipe away some of the muck. It was pointless. "Death might've been preferable."

Dag helped him up while trying not to touch him, and they all stepped to the edge of the sand pit and looked at the corpse of the worm.

"What a horror," said Isobel. "Will each of the pieces of the wand have such a guardian?"

"If not something worse," said Rhodri.

Lady Svante pointed at the pit. The worm's advent had stirred it up, and now there were many more breastplates sticking up out of the sand, as well as skulls and bones and weapons. "What we heard before, I think, was the beast burying its last meal so its next victims would not see the evidence."

"And we disturbed it before it was finished," said

Rhodri.

“Imagine if we hadn’t seen that breastplate,” said Dag.
“Imagine if we’d started across the sand all unknowing.”

Gillan shivered, and not just with his usual chill.

“Do you think it’s safe now?” asked Coira.

“I don’t think there’s another worm,” said Rhodri.
“But that doesn’t mean it’s safe.”

With hesitant feet they stepped into the pit and tiptoed around the stinking bulk of the hideous corpse. Their feet sank to the ankles in the sand, but it did not give way under them, and they reached the other side without incident. They stepped up into the alcove and stared at the golden cylinder floating in the pale blue sphere.

“That’s it, then?” asked Coira. “Do we just reach in and take it?”

“I would not advise it,” said Lady Svante. “Allow me.”

She raised her hands to encompass the sphere and chanted in her own tongue. With each word, the sphere grew brighter, and the elf struggled harder to speak the next. Soon it was so bright it hurt the eye to look at, and Gillan and the others stepped back into the sand for fear it might explode. Lady Svante shook with effort now, her hands like claws, pushing each word through bared teeth.

Finally, with a whump of air that made Gillan’s ears pop, the sphere dissolved like a bubble bursting, and the golden rod dropped to the altar with a bright clang. Lady Svante followed it a second later, her head falling back and her knees buckling.

If Isobel hadn’t caught her, she would have hit the stone floor in a heap. Instead the paladin lowered her to the ground and chafed her wrists until the elf’s eyes fluttered and opened and she looked around.

“My apologies,” she said, sitting up. “That was more difficult than I anticipated.”

Rhodri looked toward the golden rod. “Is it safe now to take it?”

The elf nodded. "I believe so."

He turned and reached for the rod, then hesitated.

Gillan stepped forward. "Let me. I'm gonna die anyway. Won't be much of a loss if I go a few months early."

"Gillan!" cried Dag, but the harper had already picked the thing up. Nothing happened. It was heavy, solid, and sheared off ragged at both ends, and—

"Someone has taken one of the pieces of the wand," said a voice behind them. "How exciting."

They whipped around, hands on their weapons. A shimmering apparition floated above the sand behind them, a tall man in long robes with a bald head that was decorated with strange swirling scars. He was smiling almost but not quite in their direction.

"I don't know who you are, or where you are, but I congratulate you. I designed the seven snares to be as devious and deadly as I could make them, and I thought it would take someone far longer to penetrate one. It seems I have a worthy opponent."

"Who are you?" asked Gillan.

The apparition did not seem to take any notice. "I assume you are trying to reunite the pieces of the wand in some futile attempt to restore the unity of Caith. Well, I welcome you to try. Indeed, it is better for me if you do, for it will keep you occupied while I attend to other matters. So carry on, and good luck."

"I said, who are you?" Gillan shouted as the apparition faded away.

"He could not hear you," said Lady Svante. "It was a projection only."

"Do you suppose it was that Zagoth Lanta that Saradon mentioned?" asked Dag.

"Lagoth Zanta," said Isobel.

Rhodri shrugged. "Who else would it have been?"

"Odd he seems happy that we recovered one of the pieces," said Gillan.

"How can a man feel clever about his defenses if

nobody storms his castle?” said Coira. “I’ve known rich men to shout about their fortunes in the street so thieves will come and test their traps and dogs and guards. Easy work, usually. Too clever for their own good.”

“Easy like this was?” asked Gillan dryly.

Gillan handed the rod to Rhodri. “If all the pieces are this long, it’ll be more of a staff than a wand when it’s all put together, won’t it?”

Rhodri shrugged as he wrapped the piece in a cloth and slid it into his pack. “Humans are remarkably imprecise when it comes to naming things.”

“Six more to go,” said Isobel, shaking her head.

“Don’t worry, paladin,” said Coira. “You’ll get them all.”

“Eh?” said Isobel, looking up. “How can you know that?”

Coira grabbed her wrist and gave her a wild-eyed stare. “It is your *destiny*!”

“Leave off!” Isobel wrenched away as the thief burst out laughing. “You should not make mock of the mad.”

“Was she mad, though?” asked Dag. “Seemed as if she knew we were trying to save Caith.”

“A coincidence,” said Isobel. “Nothing more.”

“Well, I for one hope she’s right,” said Rhodri. “It’s what we want, isn’t it?”

The paladin shivered and turned for the door, clearly uncomfortable. “Come. Let us leave this place.”

Gillan looked down at his viscera-caked clothes and cleared his throat. “Would y’mind very much if I cleaned myself up first?”

Chapter Five

It was early morning by the time they found their way out of the tombs again. The temple square was empty in the pink light of dawn, but evidence of last night's rally remained. The platform from which the priest had inflamed the crowd still stood before the temple of the Swordfather, and the cobbles were littered with the stub ends of torches and candles. Here and there Gillan also saw spatters of blood, suggesting that the Fatherites had not remained content to just insult passersby.

"Was this the work of the piece of the wand?" asked Dag. "Saradon said they sowed discord when not together."

"Or was it merely human nature," muttered Rhodri.

"What do you mean by that, dwarf?" asked Isobel.

Lady Svante answered for him. "Humans have a distressing tendency to be swayed by fear and demagoguery."

Gillan snorted. "Shall I sing ye a song about elves

and dwarves followin' bad leaders? There are more than a few, and written by elves and dwarves too."

Rhodri scowled and Lady Svante sniffed, but neither spoke. The party started across the square.

Two nights later they were within sight of the towers of Lord Fanskar's castle. Gillan, Rhodri, Dag, Lady Svante, and Isobel ate around a low fire while waiting uneasily for Coira to return.

The castle, when they had arrived that afternoon, had seemed disarmingly normal, at least from a distance. Patrols patrolled, watches came and went from the walls, deliveries were made, and servants came out to tend the fields outside the walls. It had been almost tempting to walk up to the front gate and ask if they happened to have a piece of the Destiny Wand the party might borrow, but their experience with the city guards in Tillicolt had made them suspicious of those tasked with upholding the law. Besides, it was possible that their fugitive status was already known here. They might be arrested as soon as they showed their faces, so Coira had gone forward to spy out the lay of the land. That had been at sunset. It was now more than two hours later and she had not returned.

"She can't have been caught, can she?" asked Dag.

"It is within the realm of possibility," said Lady Svante.

"So is a dragon landin' on us," snapped Gillan. "But it's not likely, is it? And neither is Coira gettin' pinched."

Rhodri raised an eyebrow. "Who's put a bee in your bonnet, harper?"

Gillan wrapped his cloak more tightly around him and huddled closer to the fire. "I'm just cold. It makes me cranky."

Dag shook his head. "Poor Gil. It's the middle of summer. You should be sweltering like the rest of us."

Gillan shrugged. "Maybe I should be grateful. I'll

likely end up burnin' in the flames of Malefia when I die. I should enjoy the cold while I—”

A rustling in the undergrowth brought their heads up and their hands to their weapons.

Coira stepped from the trees. “Easy. It’s me, and I’ve brought a friend.”

The companions maintained their vigilance as Coira and her friend approached the fire. He was a young man dressed in Fanskar’s colors and wearing the insignia of a sergeant on the shoulders of his armor, but with the dark hair and blue tattoos of a Fichti on his face and arms.

Coira motioned for him to sit beside her. “You can let go of your knives,” she said. “Lachan is from my tribe, come to seek his fortune among the Baedish, and when I saw him from my hiding place, I gave him the old owl whistle and he came and found me. We had a little chat about recent events in the castle.” Her smile faded. “It’s not good.”

“In what way?” asked Rhodri.

Coira nodded to Lachan. “You tell it.”

Lachan swallowed. “It was a week ago. A representative of the Council of Lords came to the castle with his retinue, asking to see Lord Fanskar. None of us knows for sure what they talked about, but rumor is the representative asked my lord to guard something by order of the council.”

The companions exchanged a look.

“A piece of the wand, I’ll wager,” said Gillan.

“Aye,” said Rhodri. “But what of this representative? Was he an impostor?”

“We started to wonder about that,” said Lachan, “when messengers began arriving at the castle with news of trouble at the border and in the southern cities, but Lord Fanskar did nothing. We expected to be marching, but instead my lord said we must stay and guard the castle with our lives, and that duty was more important than anything else.”

“You didn’t believe him?” asked Isobel.

Lachan hesitated. “He . . . he didn’t seem himself. At

least some of us thought so. Lord Fanskar is pretty matey as far as commanders go. Likes to joke with the men, always out in the yard, taking a personal interest. But since this order's come in, he's stayed in his quarters except to make commands, and when he does, he barks them out like we've all done something wrong. Furious, he seems."

"And this representative," said Lady Svante. "Is he with Lord Fanskar when he speaks?"

Lachan nodded. "Him or the priest. Always."

Gillan's head came up. "Priest? What sort of priest?"

"He's a Fatherite," said the sergeant.

The others looked around at each other, knowing. All but Isobel, who was balling her fists.

"If you blame all Fatherites for this," she said, "then you are blaming me as well."

"We're not, paladin," said Gillan. "But it's been Fatherites dogging us since we met. You'll admit that, at least."

Isobel's jaw worked like she was chewing gristle. "I have been much on the road these past years," she said at last. "So I have not spoken often to my fellow believers, but I refuse to accept that this is the official policy of the temple. Perhaps . . . perhaps some faction within it."

"Or maybe you just don't know the temple as well as you think," said Coira dryly.

The paladin raised hot eyes to her, but Rhodri turned back to Lachan before she could say anything. "And how has this order to remain been received?"

The sergeant hung his head. "We love Lord Fanskar, so at first we accepted it without complaint. But as more and more messengers have come pleading for help, and my lord still will not send relief, well . . ." He spread his hands. "There are some who feel we must obey him no matter what, that any whisper of worry is the same as mutiny. There are others, myself among them, who feel that this representative and his retinue have some unnatural hold on my lord. There have been a few scuffles between the two groups, and I fear

things will only get worse as we continue to just . . . sit here.”

Gillan looked around at the others, then turned back to the sergeant. “What if we promised t’free Fanskar from the influence of these intruders? Could y’get us in t’do it?”

Lachan rubbed his chin, then turned to Coira. “Can you vouch for these outlanders?”

Coira smirked. “They’re more honorable than I am, that’s certain.”

The sergeant did a little more chin rubbing. Finally he looked at Gillan. “You must promise not to kill Lord Fanskar. All of you.”

“We have no quarrel with him,” said Isobel. “We want the impostors and what they brought to the castle.”

“And he has sworn to protect it,” said Lachan. “Which means that, though you may have no quarrel with him, he will have one with you. It is not enough to say that you do not *want* to kill him. You must promise that you *won’t*.”

The companions exchanged a look. Nobody wanted to make the promise. They all knew that anything might happen in a fight. But they had to get into the castle. They had to get the second piece of the wand. What else could they do?

“I promise,” said Gillan.

“As do I,” said Dag.

“And I,” said Coira.

“I promise as well,” said Lady Svante.

“By my ancestors I swear it,” said Rhodri.

“And by the Swordfather and the Blessed Lady I swear it,” said Isobel.

“Very well,” said Lachan. “But understand this. If you break this promise, you will not leave the castle alive. That is the promise I and the rest of Lord Fanskar’s men make to you.”

Gillan swallowed. “Understood.”

Chapter Six

An hour later they were lying prone in the meadow that surrounded the castle moat, just opposite the postern gate, waiting. Almost a half hour before, Lachan had crossed the moat by swift-footing it along a pole as narrow a pikestaff, then drawing it up behind him. He had gone, he said, to clear the way to Fanskar's quarters and to gather his allies to protect the party should they be discovered.

Gillan was very much afraid the young man might have second thoughts while inside and send out the troops to kill them for lunatics and traitors, but then, just as the cool of the evening earth had begun to sink into his bones, the postern door reopened. Lachan and another soldier stepped out with a sturdy ladder between them and began to raise it to the sky. Once it was vertical, they hooked a rope to a middle rung and lowered it toward the party.

Dag caught it and set it on a bit of the bank that

showed grooves where the ladder had been placed many times before, then motioned for the others to cross. Coira went over it as if it were solid ground, and Lady Svante seemed to float along it as if she weren't touching it at all. Rhodri stepped along it slowly but steadily, while Dag went wobbling and waving his hands, but arrived safely all the same. Isobel didn't seem to like the ladder at all and took twice as much time as even Rhodri had, pausing for a long moment as it creaked under her weight in the middle before continuing. Gillan went last, on his hands and knees. His arms were jelly by the time he made it to the far side, and Isobel had to help him to his feet.

"Useless," he said, sucking in a breath. "I'm useless."

"Not at all," said the paladin. "You hold the rest of us together, harper. Don't forget it."

Lachan led them through the postern gate, then locked it behind them. A dozen soldiers waited for them, Baedish, Fichti, and Einarr all together, and all giving them skeptical looks.

"They don't look like much," said a burly spearman.

"These are the heroes who saved Skara Brae when the wizard Mangar trapped it in ice," said Lachan. "You know, from the song."

"Maybe he wasn't such a dangerous wizard," said another soldier.

"Enough," said an older man with a captain's insignia on his shoulder. "If they can save our lord from these vermin, I don't care who they are. Let's get them to the door."

They were in a tight corner of the courtyard, wedged between the back of the stables and the wall of the keep. The captain sent a pair of men forward to the next corner, where the courtyard opened up. The men looked around, then waved the rest forward.

There was another pause at the corner as the two scouts went forward again to a set of broad steps that led to the entrance of the keep. When they gave the all clear, the companions and their escort started across the yard for

the stairs. Before they reached it, however, another group of soldiers burst from a dark barracks and hurried forward to block them.

“Captain Colmac!” came a voice. “Who is that with you? Tarnent says you are bringing saboteurs into the castle to do your dirty work for you.”

“Betrayed, by the gods!” muttered the captain, then raised his voice. “Nothing of the sort, Gerhalt. We have caught some saboteurs and are bringing them before Lord Fanskar so he may question them.”

Gerhalt, who Gillan saw now was also a captain, gave a harsh laugh. “Do you think I’ll fall for the oldest trick in the book? You’ll have to try another. Now let me see your ‘prisoners.’”

He was a towering Einarr with a braided blond beard, and twice as many men at his back as Colmac had. He looked the companions over, then curled his lip.

“A dwarf? An elf? Wait a moment—these are the ones we were warned about.” He raised blazing eyes to Colmac. “The councilor said these villains would come to steal what we have been ordered to guard, and you, you traitor, have brought them within the walls!”

It looked like a fight was inevitable and the companions would be caught in the middle of it, killing innocent men when they had been trying so desperately to avoid it. But then, with a laugh so out of character that Gillan couldn’t believe at first it was her, Lady Svante stepped beside Captain Colmac and spread her hands toward Gerhalt and his men.

“Fools!” she cried. “You have fallen for it just as have these trusting clods. So intent on catching the thief sneaking in your back door that you failed to notice the army at your front gate. Can you not hear the ram? You are besieged, and your walls will be ours in moments!”

Gerhalt and his men looked around, confused, but then seemed to hear something, for they all gasped and pointed toward the front gates. And though Gillan knew

there was no army without, he almost thought he could hear the pounding too, as well as the shouts and trumpets of an encircling force. Not just that, but he thought he could see arrows arcing over the walls, hear men calling for aid, see them waving on the parapet.

“A trap!” bellowed Gerhalt. “A trick! To the walls, lads! Stop them before it’s too late!”

With a thunder of boots they raced for the walls, and some of Colmac’s men ran after them. The captain himself, however, put his sword to Lady Svante’s neck.

“So you are assassins after all. And to think I was fooled into—”

“Captain,” said the elf. “You are fooled *now*. Listen, there is no ram. No shouts for help. I only made your fellows believe it to draw them off. Please, let us hurry to Lord Fanskar’s quarters before they realize the ruse.”

Colmac raised his head, listening and looking around, as did his men. He gaped as he realized there was nothing to see or hear. “Witchcraft! You conjure a whole army out of nothing, and then it’s gone.”

“It never was,” said Lady Svante. “Now, please. We have seconds.”

The captain recovered himself and nodded. “Right. This way. Hurry.”

He and his remaining men led the companions to the keep steps and up to the doors.

“That was astounding,” said Dag as Lady Svante fell in beside him.

“It is easy to make men believe a thing they already fear,” she said.

The captain opened the door and ushered them into a large entryway, then pointed up a curved staircase to the second floor.

“We will lock the doors and defend this hall,” he said. “My lord’s quarters are at the end of the corridor at the top of the stairs. He is guarded by the councilor’s men.”

“And remember,” said Lachan. “If you kill him, you

will not leave this place alive.”

“Then you’d better come with us as a witness,” said Gillan. “In case he’s already dead, or some such.”

Lachan looked to the captain for approval and got a nod.

“Lead on, then.”

They started up the stairs, Isobel, Rhodri, and Dag to the fore, Coira, Gillan, Lady Svante, and Lachan behind. At the top, as Colmac had said, was a long, broad hallway with four men at the end, backs to a heavy door. They wore cloaks and helms that identified them as guardians of the Council of Lords.

Dag swallowed. “Look damned official, don’t they? You don’t suppose—?”

“Halt!” said one of the guards. “Who goes there?”

Gillan cocked his head, then turned to Isobel. “That’s a Lestradae accent, isn’t it? What would a guardian of Caith’s Council of Lords be doing with a Lestradae accent?”

As they started forward, he called out to the guards. “Where are you lads from? Northshire? Camber? Littlechester?”

“Stay back,” said the guard. “Lord Fanskar is meeting with his advisors and is not to be disturbed!”

“Harkley,” sighed Isobel. “He’s from Harkley. I was born not a mile from there. That my countrymen would—” She shook her head and hefted her hammer. “Stand aside, impostors. We will ask Lord Fanskar himself if he wishes to be disturbed.”

The four soldiers drew their swords and went on guard.

It was over in seconds. With Lachan adding his blade to the rest and Lady Svante’s spells of befuddlement, the men were on the floor after a single pass.

Gillan found a key in the leader’s belt pouch and tried the door. It opened into a long, dark chamber with arched windows running down the right-hand wall, maps of Caith framed on the left, a council table dividing the center, and,

on a dais at the far end, another floating sphere containing another piece of the wand—this one apparently made of iron.

Muffled voices and flickering light came from a half-open door in the left-hand wall, but the main room was empty.

“Doesn’t seem like much of a snare.” said Dag. “Is it really going to be this easy?”

“Remember the last time we asked that?” growled Coira.

They crept through the chamber, parting around the council table and passing the open door. The voices became clearer the closer they got to it.

“It does not feel right that I guard but one piece of it,” said a deep voice. “The Destiny Wand must be whole.”

“That’s Lord Fanskar,” whispered Lachan.

“My lord, we have been over this,” said another, softer voice. “With these traitors seeking it, the council thought it best to separate it, so they would have a harder time taking it.”

“And that is the representative of the council,” whispered Lachan.

“But . . . but separated, the wand does not protect us,” came Fanskar’s voice again.

“Sadly, my son,” said a third voice, “you are correct. That is why now is the time for *us* to protect *it*.”

“And that’s the priest of the Fatherites,” said Lachan.

Gillan shook his head. “What a lot of rubbish they’re feeding him.”

“His mind is not his own,” said Lachan. “I swear it.”

They reached the sphere and Lady Svante took a deep breath. “I know better now what I face, but it will still be an ordeal. Please do not interrupt me until I have finished.”

“Go on, then,” said Rhodri. “We’ll watch your back.”

The party faced out as the elf spread her hands and began to mumble over the sphere. As it grew brighter, the light illuminated the near end of the council table, and Gillan

saw a leather folio on it under a few books. He stepped to the table.

The books were histories of Caith. The folio was locked with a tiny padlock.

“Hsst! Coira.”

Coira crossed to the table and inspected the lock. “Tsk. Nothing to it.”

She pulled a set of thieves’ picks from her belt and, a moment later, opened the covers of the folio. “There you are.”

Gillan pulled out the few papers within and flipped through them. One was a letter of introduction from the chair of the Council of Lords.

“A forgery?” he asked.

“Or stolen,” said Coira.

Another was a list of names with notations beside them. “Ephesus - Tomb, Thessalonica - Maze, Philippi - Tower,” and four more.

“Ephesus? Thessalonica? Colosse?” muttered Coira as she looked over Gillan’s shoulder. “Are these places? I’ve never heard of any of them.”

“Neither have I,” said Gillan. “At least . . .”

He paused as a memory flickered in the depths of his mind. An old song about soldiers marching through Caith from town to town. *In Ephesus I did meet a maid, and in Corinth was I truly laid. In Colosse something something paid.*

“Wait. I do remember. They’re town names from long ago.”

Coira looked skeptical. “Town names? In Caith?”

“Aye. There was a king back then. King Cranford. A great reader of the Attian epics and an admirer of their empire. He thought Caith would be more civilized if all the towns had Attian names, so he renamed ’em all. Didn’t last, of course. As soon as he passed, people went back t’the old names, and now Colosse and Corinth and all the rest are forgotten.”

“So these conspirators are being clever. Using Cranford’s names as a code to hide the real names of the towns.”

“But why?” asked Gillan.

“Hmmm,” Coira pointed to the page. “There are seven place names, and seven sections of the wand, aye? And here, ‘Ephesus - Tomb.’ We found the first piece of the wand in the tombs beneath Earrann, aye? Ephesus, Earrann? Maybe this is a list of where all the pieces of the wand are.”

“Brilliant,” said Gillan. “Now I just have t’remember which old names go with which towns.”

“Leave it for later,” said Coira. “What else is there?”

The next sheet was a letter, addressed only to “Master,” which read, “Fanskar’s mind will be ours within the week. Know that when your forces cross the border, no one will oppose them.”

Behind that was one last sheet. A small hand-drawn map of Caith and northern Lestras with arrows sweeping north across the border, and names written beside them.

“An invasion plan!” gasped Gillan. “If we could get this t’the council, we—”

A shattering crash interrupted him. He looked up. Glass and leading were raining to the floor from a window at the far end of the room. More followed it as something smashed through another panel. A grappling hook! It hooked to the sill and was swiftly followed by more.

“Seems this piece of the wand has a human snare,” muttered Gillan.

He stuffed the papers from the folio into his doublet and backed up with Coira to the others. Lady Svante was still struggling with the sphere, which was glowing like a summer moon now. Sweat stood out on her brow.

“It must be Gerhalt,” said Lachan. “Couldn’t get through Colmac and the door, so he snuck around to the window.”

“Fanskar and his friends are sure to have heard that,” said Dag.

They had indeed. Out of the door on the left-hand wall came three men. The first was a slight, fair-haired man in the colors of the Council of Lords. The second was a graybeard in the white robes of a Fatherite priest. The last could have been no one but Fanskar—a giant of a man with an Einarr’s long-plaited hair and mustache, who wore a breastplate over his tunic and a sword at his belt.

The three men looked left and right, taking in the broken window and the party surrounding the sphere and the rod.

“What is the meaning of this?” barked Fanskar.

“My lord,” came a voice from the end of the room. Captain Gerhalt was pulling himself through the window with a handful of men clambering in after him. “My lord, these villains are here to steal that which we guard. And Captain Colmac has turned traitor and is abetting them.”

“Lord, please,” cried Lachan. “Don’t listen to him. Captain Colmac is loyal! Loyal to *you*, not these deceivers who try to turn you from your duty. You said it yourself. The Destiny Wand must be whole. These heroes are trying to reunite it! Help them!”

Fanskar looked back and forth, glowering and shaking his head. “I gave orders not to be disturbed. I must not be disturbed!”

The false councilor put a hand on Fanskar’s shoulder and pointed at Gillan and the others. “These thieves threaten the wand, my lord. Join your men and stop them.”

“Join *us*, my lord!” called Lachan. “Order Gerhalt to arrest the fraud and the priest!”

Fanskar put his hands to his head. “I . . . I . . .”

The priest spoke in Fanskar’s other ear. “Are you not a sworn defender of the Destiny Wand, lord?”

Fanskar moaned. “I . . . am.”

“Then defend it! Attack them!”

With a howl that sounded as much like anguish as anger, Fanskar ripped his sword from its scabbard and charged toward the dais. Gerhalt and his men answered that

howl and raced forward as well, thundering down one side of the council table while their lord raced along the other.

“How soon, lady?” asked Rhodri, squinting in the light of the sphere, but the elf was shaking with effort and could not answer.

Not soon enough, Gillan knew. And even if Lady Svante pierced the sphere now, she would be too weak afterward to be of any use in the fight. They would have to survive without her magics. He didn’t see how it was possible.

“Swordfather protect me!” cried Isobel, and leapt to meet Fanskar.

Lachan hurried after her. “Paladin, please! Don’t kill him!”

That left Dag and Rhodri to face Gerhalt and his six men on the other side of the table, and it didn’t look good. These were trained troops, and they moved in formation to protect one another’s flanks. Without support, Dag and Rhodri would be overwhelmed in seconds.

“Sing ‘The Archer’s Tune,’ harper,” said Coira. “It’ll help me aim.”

And with that she leapt up on the table between the two fights and drew her two daggers.

Gillan stepped back beside Lady Svante and began to sing—or croak—the old bowman’s song. “Rosin the string and slip the ring, and straighten all your feathers, the foe is nigh and begging to die, so shoot him in the nethers.”

Perhaps it worked, for Coira’s daggers found their mark—one catching Fanskar in the leg and staggering him just as he and Isobel slammed together, and the other dropping a soldier in Gerhalt’s front line, causing the men behind him to stumble over him and into Rhodri’s axe.

Behind the fight, the Fatherite priest was chanting an incantation and gathering light between his hands, but Coira lobbed one of her bottle bombs in his direction, and a second later he and the fraudulent councilor had more light—and heat—than they could deal with. They fell back into the

room they had emerged from, screaming and beating at the flames that engulfed their robes.

Elsewhere, however, things were not going well. Despite the gash in his leg from Coira's dagger and a dent in his breastplate from Isobel's hammer, Fanskar was fighting with a strength that was almost inhuman. Isobel was one of the strongest warriors Gillan knew, but Fanskar, a head taller and a hundred weight heavier, was knocking her back on her heels with every stroke of his sword, and he had kicked Lachan back to the steps of the dais in a crumpled heap.

On Rhodri and Dag's side of the table, the two had downed three of Gerhalt's men, but Gerhalt himself blocked everything they threw at him, while his men backed him up and kept them away from his flanks. Dag was already wearying, and Rhodri had a gash on his forehead and another on his shoulder.

Coira looked both ways and chose Rhodri and Dag's fight, leaping from the table to snatch up a thrown dagger and stab one of Gerhalt's men in the back. Another elbowed her in the face and she stumbled back, rubber legged, then sat down.

In the light of the sphere, Gillan looked around for something to throw, but then the sphere vanished, and Lady Svante sagged to her knees in the sudden darkness as the section of the wand clanged to the floor in front of her. Gillan eased her down, then snatched up the segment.

"I've got it!"

"And will die with it in your hand, I fear," murmured Lady Svante.

The situation was indeed bleak—and got even worse a moment later, as more of Gerhalt's men climbed through the broken window.

"Oh, no," moaned Gillan.

Before he could warn the others, however, a deafening clang turned him toward Lord Fanskar. Isobel was on the floor in front of him, helm dented and hands groping for her hammer, which lay at her side. Fanskar was raising

his sword above her for the killing blow, eyes red with rage.

“My lord!” cried Lachan, staggering to his feet. “Stop! You know not what you do!”

“I am killing traitors, boy!” Fanskar growled, and began his swing.

With a yelp, Lachan leapt forward and blocked the blow, though the force of it sent him staggering sideways and only deflected it a mere handspan from Isobel’s head, where it struck sparks from the stone floor.

“Turncoat!” roared Fanskar, and he rushed at Lachan, swinging wildly. Lachan ducked and threw up his blade in a desperate block, cutting Fanskar across the neck.

In the next instant Fanskar smashed him to the ground with a backhand, but the damage was done. Blood was pumping from the lord’s neck in great gouts, and he clutched at the wound with a frightened look in his eyes.

From the floor, Lachan wailed and tried to stand. “What have I done? What have I done?”

Every soldier in the room howled as Fanskar toppled across the table and fought feebly to turn over, and for a moment, Dag and Rhodri were able to drive back the men they faced, but then they came on with renewed fury, and the men from the window joined them, roaring their rage as Coira rolled under the table to escape their charge.

Isobel found her feet and wove unsteadily to stand beside Dag just as the fresh reinforcements reached the line, but it was too little, too late. She and the others were far too wounded.

Then, just as it seemed the end was inevitable, the door from the corridor burst open. Captain Colmac ran in at the head of his troops, charging the backs of Gerhalt’s men.

After that it was quickly over. Attacked on two fronts—three, if you count Coira stabbing toes from under the table—Gerhalt and his men soon lost heart and surrendered, and they were led off to the brig.

Then came the reckoning.

Captain Colmac rounded on the party where they sat,

panting and bleeding and mopping their brows.

"You killed our lord when you promised that you wouldn't," he said. "For that you must die, no matter how noble your cause."

"No, Captain," said Lachan. "It was I. I defended the paladin when Lord Fanskar meant to kill her, and as he turned to strike me, I . . ." He hung his head. "The fault is entirely mine. They are blameless."

Colmac didn't look like he was willing to go that far, but he lowered his sword. "This is a dark day for our garrison, and you were at the center of it. Take what it was you came here for and begone."

"But," said Gillan, "you will move against the invaders, won't ye? Y'll defend the southern border as Lord Fanskar would have done if—"

Colmac cut him off. "Do *not* tell me what Lord Fanskar would have done had he lived! I am in no mood to hear it. In fact—"

"You have a second piece of the wand? Already?"

Everyone looked around. The apparition of Lagoth Zanta hovered upon the dais, looking less cheerful than it had when it had appeared to them in the tombs beneath Earrann.

"What is that?" asked Colmac.

"The mastermind behind those who stole Fanskar's mind," said Rhodri. "Lagoth Zanta, a sorcerer from Lestras."

Colmac was going to speak, but the apparition began talking again.

"I did not think you would collect them so quickly. This is not acceptable. I am afraid I will have to cheat and apprehend you outside the snares. You will not take a third piece, heroes. I guarantee it."

The apparition faded.

Lachan turned to Colmac. "You see, Captain? We must ride south. This treachery threatens all of Caith."

Colmac nodded. "Perhaps you are right. But we will first put our own house in order and bury our dead."

He turned and stared at Fanskar's corpse, then looked up at Gillan and the others. "See to your wounds and be gone before dawn or I may change my mind about who was at fault for what."

Chapter Seven

At noon the next day, Gillan awoke in the deep ravine where they had made a hasty camp just before dawn. Even though he had hardly participated in the previous night's fighting, he felt as stiff as a board. Every muscle and bone ached.

He groaned as he sat up, and saw that Coira was already awake and cooking a brace of rabbits. He chuckled, then coughed, then couldn't stop coughing.

"Y'haven't lost yer forest ways after all," he said, when at last he'd recovered himself.

She shrugged. "Hunger inspires the hunter, they say."

The others woke in ones and twos as the smell of cooking reached them, and got up groaning and rubbing their arms, legs, shoulders, and skulls. Lady Svante's healing spells could do much, but one still knew one had been in a fight the next day.

As they munched on rabbit and mushrooms cooked

in Isobel's helmet, Gillan passed around the papers he and Coira had taken the night before.

He kept looking at the list of old town names, poring over it as he hummed the old tune. The soldiers in the song had been marching from south to north, off to fight the Fichti, so Corinth, Thessalonica, Philippi, Tangramayne, Colosse, and Ephesus must be roughly along that route. The southernmost town that started with a "C" was Camnag, then Thuath for Thessalonica, perhaps. Philippi was . . . Fettercairn? He got out his ink and quill and scribbled the new names down next to the old.

"I think I've got it," he said. "The locations of all the pieces of the wand—"

"Ah, no," moaned Isobel, cutting him off.

Everyone looked up.

"What is it, paladin?" asked Rhodri.

She was staring at the map with the Lestradae invasion routes drawn on it and put a finger on one. "This," she said. "Ingrim. This is my brother's name."

"You have a brother?" asked Dag.

She sighed. "He too is a paladin of the Swordfather and has risen high in the ranks of the church."

"He's leading one of Zanta's armies?" asked Gillan.

"So it seems."

"I'm sorry, paladin," said Rhodri.

She folded the map, then opened it again, unable to stop looking at it. "Am I in the wrong on this? My brother is an honorable man. How could he be involved in villainy?"

"You think we're the villains?" asked Dag.

"Not at all," said Isobel. "But we have wondered if the Fatherites have been led astray. Is it possible that *we* have been led astray? We have only the word of a wizard that none of us had ever met before that we are on the side of right."

Gillan and the others exchanged glances.

Coira looked up from where she was honing her daggers. "Are you changing sides on us, paladin?"

Isobel shook her head. "I have seen nothing of this Lestradae plot that suggests any noble purpose. I just . . . I just wish my brother was here. I'd like to hear from his own mouth his reasons for coming to Caith."

There was an uncomfortable silence after that, broken at last by Rhodri.

"You say you figured out the list, harper? Then where to next?"

Gillan chewed his lip. "I say we go south before we go north. If we do it the other way, the southern towns may be Lestradae territory by the time we reach 'em."

"Sound reasoning," said Rhodri. "So . . . ?"

"Well, Philippi is due south of here. Let's go there."

"Where?" asked Dag.

"Sorry," said Gillan. "Philippi's the old name. Fettercairn. I meant Fettercairn."

The next evening, as they approached the gates of Fettercairn, Gillan frowned at the crenelated top of a black tower that rose up over the walls and rooftops.

"Was that there before?" he asked. "I was in Fettercairn only last year and I don't remember that."

Isobel shook her head. "I was here two months ago. There was no tower."

"Fast work," said Rhodri. "Maybe they hired dwarves to build it."

Gillan shivered. "I hope that's what it is—"

"Hsst!" said Coira. "They're expecting us."

The party stopped and looked ahead. There were twice as many guards at the gate as Gillan would have expected, along with some men in dark cloaks who were doing their best to look like innocent bystanders.

"Zanta's making good on his promise," said Rhodri. "Tryin' to stop us before we reach his snares."

Gillan looked at Coira. "I don't suppose you know

another way to get in?"

Coira smirked and motioned them off the road.
"Always."

As they climbed from the sewers and started through the town, they could not help but hear the whispers of the townsfolk, all talking about the black tower that had appeared overnight in the market ward. Twenty-three houses and tenements—and the families who had lived within them—gone as if they had never been, replaced by the ominous tower.

"It's like Mangar's tower all over again," said Dag.

"Aye," growled Gillan. "Exactly like."

He thought back to the night the ice had encased Skara Brae, sealing it off from the outside world. On that same night, a dark tower had appeared in the southern part of the city, occupying the space that had previously been several blocks of houses. Gillan and Dag had friends and kin from that neighborhood who had vanished that night. Three years later, the tower was still there, a black cancer on the town, and the people who had lived there hadn't been seen since.

"It can't be Mangar again, can it?" asked Dag.

"Mangar's dead," said Rhodri. "We killed him."

"If a man like that can truly die," muttered Coira.

As they neared the town square, they saw a crowd gathered outside the mayor's house, shouting and pressing against a line of guards who protected it.

"Where's the duke?" the people cried. "Where are his men?"

"What are you doing about this?"

"Where are my little boys!"

"My house is gone!"

In the center of the square, a Fatherite priest had attracted the attention of a handful of townsfolk. "Don't look to the mayor or the duke for aid, friends! They are behind

this! You notice the tower didn't drop on *their* homes. It's not *their* children who are missing. It's all part of a great conspiracy! The lords of this land no longer answer to the gods! They are in the thrall of demons! Only faith and fire can burn out this evil influence!"

"Are these sermonizing crows everywhere?" asked Coira.

"Everywhere there's a piece of the wand, at least," said Gillan. "Doin' their best to stir the discontent the separated segments are creating."

Isobel muttered under her breath.

They edged around the square and into a dark alley. At the end of it were three more guards, all looking nervously over their shoulders at the yawning stone archway behind them—the entrance to the tower.

"An open door," said Rhodri.

"Though not exactly a welcoming one," said Dag, swallowing. "Looks like a hungry mouth. Are we sure the piece of the wand is in there?"

"Where else would it be?" said Coira.

"How do we pass these guards?" asked Isobel. "We hurt too many good men at Fanskar's castle. I'd not do it again."

"Dag's just given me an idea about that," said Gillan.

"I did?"

Gillan smirked. "Keep out of sight a moment."

He limped toward the door as the others stepped into the shadows. Three paces on, he winced as a smell like a coop full of chicken droppings hit him. No wonder the guards disliked their duty. The stench was wafting out of the open door like bad breath, and that wasn't all. Strange groans and shifting noises came from the dark interior as well. All to the good for his plan.

"Are y'stoppin' folk from going in?" he asked as he neared the guards. "Or protectin' us from things coming out?"

"Stay back, fellow," said a sergeant. "The duke's

orders.”

Gillan ignored him. “Have y’been inside yet? Peeked around? Seen any weird beasties?”

“I said stay back,” said the sergeant.

“Oh come now, I’m just making conversa—” Gillan cut off and stared behind the men. “What was that?”

They looked behind.

“What? Where?”

“I thought I saw somethin’. I . . .” Gillan gasped and pointed. “A . . . a tongue!”

The sergeant glared at him. “Are you making fun?”

“Y’can’t see it?” cried Gillan. “It’s red and as long as a snake! It’s reachin’ for us!”

“I can’t see a thing!” said the guard, stepping back.

“Are y’blind?” Gillan backed up. “Run! Run while you can! It—”

Suddenly he froze and clutched at himself, then went up on tiptoe. “It’s got me! Help me! It’s draggin’ me in!”

The guards recoiled from him, then stared in terror as he mimed being pulled toward the archway, dragging his heels and reaching out to them. “Help me! For pity’s sake, help me!”

He clawed at the stones as he reached the opening, then dragged his nails across them as he backed into the shadow of the interior.

“Help . . . me . . .”

That was the last straw. With whimpers and oaths, the guards turned and fled down the alley toward the town square.

When they were gone, Gillan caught his breath, popped his head out again, and beckoned to the others.

“All right. Come on.”

They stepped into the light and started forward.

Dag shook his head. “You might have warned us. I was half believing you.”

“Well played, harper,” said Coira. “You’re a born rogue.”

“Just don’t ask me t’do it again,” said Gillan. “I’m wrung out.”

They entered the tower and drew their weapons.

Chapter Eight

Even before the whispers started, it was an unnerving place. There were no lamps or braziers, and the darkness seemed to swallow the light from Gillan's lantern, making every step a stumble, and every turn a dead end. They were constantly getting turned around, walking down hallways they had already walked down before, taking stairs down that led up to the floor they had just left—and always, everywhere they went, a reeking animal stench, and a sense that things were moving in the darkness, just out of range of their vision.

Then, the whispers.

“Who enters Dargoth's tower?” asked a sibilant voice. “Who seeks what Dargoth hides?”

Gillan nearly jumped out of his skin, and the others faced out, weapons ready. There was no one. The voice seemed to come from thin air.

“Who's asking?” asked Coira.

“He who you trespass against.”

Gillan recovered himself and spoke up. “If yer hiding somethin’, why’d y’leave yer front door open?”

The voice laughed—a horrible hissing sound. “How else to lure brave heroes to their deaths?”

“You don’t scare us!” quavered Dag. “Come out and show yourself!”

This time there was no response.

“Coward!” shouted Dag. “Cow—oh, look. A door.”

Gillan raised his lantern. Before them was a tall bronze door, green with verdigris, with a bas-relief of six snake-headed warriors bowing to an enthroned and snake-headed ruler.

“The god heroes of ancient Lemor,” said Lady Svante. “They are not of this realm, but of Coill, my home. Strange to see them depicted here.”

“Were . . . were they snakes?” stuttered Gillan.

“Saurians,” said Svante. “Related to dragons.”

Isobel pulled at the bronze ring fixed to the door and it creaked open, revealing a narrow, high-ceilinged room, flanked left and right with rows of two-story columns that rose to a jutting ledge. Atop each column, a glowing, man-high globe cast a poisonous green light down on the room below—and its decor.

“And there they are,” said Coira.

Between the globe-topped columns were six larger-than-life bronze statues, three on each side, representing the six saurian heroes from the door, each holding spears and halberds taller than themselves. At the end, standing with arms outstretched as if giving a blessing, was a seventh statue depicting their king—or queen, perhaps, thought Gillan. It was hard to tell with lizards. There appeared to be another door on the wall behind him—or her.

“Onward?” Gillan asked.

“This is the first room in this tower that I can tell from any other room,” said Dag. “So maybe we’re getting somewhere.”

Gillan stepped in with the others following, then waved nervously at the statues. “Don’t mind us. Just passing through.”

The eyes of the statues glittered green in the light of the globes. Gems, no doubt, but they had a malevolent look.

Then Isobel gasped. “The door ahead. It’s gone.”

Gillan looked forward. There was nothing now behind the statue at the far end of the room but a blank wall. He looked back. The door they had entered was gone too.

“Curse it!” he said. “Trapped.”

The hissing laugh returned. “Did I not say I was luring you to your deaths?”

“So this is a prison,” said Rhodri.

“Oh, no. Something far more spectacular.”

And as the echo of the whisper faded, a new sound filled their ears. A booming, ringing sound, like someone striking a metal pipe with a hammer.

“What is—?” began Gillan, then cut off as he looked up. The statues were stepping stiffly and slowly off their pedestals and looking around. Their armor and helms had hidden the fact that they were jointed, like huge puppets, and could move and turn as if they were alive.

“But what’s pullin’ their strings?” he murmured, backing toward the door that was no longer there.

“Magic,” said Lady Svante, joining him. “It swirls around them. Its source seems to be their eyes.”

The others edged back too.

“So we have to pop their eyes out to stop them?” asked Coira. “I did it once with the skeleton of the Witch King, but there was only one of him. How do we manage seven?”

“Decapitation may also work,” said the elf.

“Oh, yes,” drawled Rhodri. “That’ll be much easier.”

After a moment of seeming confusion, the statues all turned toward the party and began striding slowly toward them, titanic spears and halberds raised to strike.

“Gods of my fathers,” said Dag. “We’re all going to

die.”

“Scatter!” shouted Coira.

The others dove swiftly behind pillars and pedestals, but Gillan moved with the speed of an old man, and just barely got to cover before the statues’ weapons slammed down, cracking the flagstones where he had just stood. Rhodri and Dag recovered quickest and darted out to hack at the ankle of the nearest statue. Rhodri’s axe rang it like a gong and scraped a bright line in the green patina of its skin, but that was all. Dag’s sword snapped off at the hilt.

“Oh, bollocks,” he cursed.

“They’re slow, at least,” said Coira. “But I’ll wager we get tired of running before they get tired of chasing.”

“I’m already tired,” wheezed Gillan, as they jogged to the other end of the room.

“Aye,” said Isobel. “They’ll catch us in the end, no matter what.”

“Perhaps not,” said Lady Svante, as the statues started for them again.

“You have an idea?” asked Gillan.

She stepped behind a pillar. “I must prepare a spell. Lead them away, then run back. When you return it will be ready.”

“What spell?” asked Dag. “Will it repair my sword?”

But her eyes were closed and she was murmuring under her breath.

“Run!” cried Rhodri.

Once again the statues slashed their ponderous weapons at them, and once again the party dodged wide and ran to the other end of the room. Gillan was afraid the statues might stay and stab at Svante behind her pillar, but motion seemed to goad them, and they stomped back down the room as if she wasn’t there.

After repeating the frightening wait-and-dodge routine at the other end, they started back to the elf, but Gillan slowed before they were halfway.

“Come on, old man!” shouted Dag, and dragged him

forward by the elbow, stumbling after the rest.

Lady Svante stepped out onto the floor to meet them, now surrounded by a large, shimmering bubble of light. She beckoned them to step within it, then raised her voice so that her murmur became a song.

Gillan turned, panting, to face the statues. They were getting closer and nothing was happening.

“What is the spell, Lady?” he called. “What are you going to—”

His heart dropped into his guts. But it wasn’t fear. Or, rather, no more fear than he was already feeling. Something was lifting him up into the air. He looked around. They were all rising, Lady Svante included, somehow held in the air by the shimmer that surrounded her.

Rhodri yelled and Dag squealed. Gillan whimpered. It was the strangest feeling, hanging above the floor with his feet dangling free.

The seven statues leapt and swiped and stabbed, but the bubble rose out of their reach just ahead of their weapons, and they whistled past, missing by inches.

At the top of the columns, the bubble pressed toward the wide ledge that ran around the entire circumference of the room. Without stopping her singing, Lady Svante indicated that they should step onto it. Coira went first, then pulled Dag and Isobel after her. Rhodri came next, then Gillan, flailing like he was treading water, and falling to his knees as soon as he felt stone beneath his feet. Strange how he had felt little fear floating in thin air, but now that he was perched on a ledge two stories above the ground, he was terrified.

Finally, Lady Svante stepped onto the ledge and ended her song. The bubble dissipated.

“Now we may breathe and think,” she said.

“Y-you may,” said Gillan, heaving. “I’m gonna shiver and puke.”

The statues milled below, mindlessly swatting at them with their spears and halberds at their longest reach. One clashed against the stone a foot from Gillan, spraying

him with sharp shards of marble.

"I'm not sure how this helps us," said Dag, creeping back from the edge. "They may never catch us, but we'll starve to death eventually."

"You need to develop your imagination, lad," said Rhodri. He stepped out to one of the big glowing globes, which sat atop an extension of the ledge that stretched from the wall to the top of one of the pillars. "If this is hollow, we'll have to think of something else, but I've a feeling it's glowstone, and solid all the way through. Let's just see."

He took his axe off his back and whacked the globe. It rang like granite, and Rhodri flexed his fingers from the sting of it. "Ha! Now we're getting somewhere."

"You mean to drop the sphere on them?" asked Lady Svante.

Dag snorted. "You won't even move it."

Rhodri stepped back as a spearhead thrust up at his knees. "Of course I will. That is, *we* will."

"Oh, no," said Gillan. "There'll be no heave-ho for me. I'll be too busy heavin'."

"It won't come to that," said Rhodri.

The statues were clashing their weapons against the underside of the ledge in an unceasing barrage of noise, so the dwarf raised his voice to be heard.

"You see this!" He pointed to the bottom of the globe, where it was ringed by a low coping of stones. "That holds it in place. All we have to do is break that on one side, and it should roll off."

"This is the most dwarfish solution to a problem I've ever heard," said Coira.

Rhodri ignored her and beckoned Isobel forward. "Paladin. I'm going to set my axe like a chisel. Strike the heel of it with your hammer."

"Right."

There wasn't much room to maneuver on the ledge, and it made Gillan queasy to watch Rhodri and Isobel edging around each other to get into position. The dwarf had to lie

flat, his arms outstretched, to hold the axe in the proper place without getting in Isobel's way. And Isobel had to stand on top of him, one foot by his waist and the other at his shoulder. And of course the statues' blades clanged all around them the whole time, covering them in a white dust of marble.

"Now!" shouted Rhodri. "Strike!"

Isobel swung and struck true, and a crack appeared in the stone coping, but it nearly cost her her footing, and she had to clutch the globe to keep from going over.

Gillan's heart pounded. He could hardly bear to watch.

"One more will do it!" called Rhodri. "Someone get those things' attention! Keep them gathered below!"

"That's me." Coira stepped around Lady Svante and began strutting at the very edge, as sure-footed as if she was on the floor, waving and hallooing down at the statues, then dancing back as the blades clattered all around her feet. It reminded Gillan of a mouse on a high shelf dodging the brooms of a gaggle of angry housemaids.

At the globe, Rhodri and Isobel had reset, and the paladin once again struck the heel of the axe a mighty blow. This time the coping exploded into chunks and fell away, and she nearly fell after it, but windmilled her arms and backed to the wall, panting. Rhodri got to his knees and looked up at the globe, expectantly.

There was a groan and a grinding of rock on rock, but Gillan couldn't see any movement.

"Come on, you cursed thing," said Rhodri, hacking at the rubble of the coping.

A few more chunks spun away and the groaning suddenly got louder. Rhodri laughed and backed up.

"Hold on!" he called. "Tight!"

With a crunch like iron wheels on gravel, the huge globe rolled sideways, then pitched off the ledge and dropped toward the statues. Had it dropped straight down, it would have crushed all of them. Sadly, it arced out just enough that it missed all but two. It crushed those two flat,

however, and shook the whole room in the process, causing the ledge to move under Gillan's huddled arms and legs in the most alarming way.

And that was only the beginning. The globe rolled and careened into the next pillar, shattering the lowest section and knocking it out of the stack.

As Gillan and the others looked on in terror, the pillar collapsed in pieces, leaving the ledge and globe above it unsupported. For a full two seconds they stood on their own, then the weight of the globe crushed the ledge beneath it and dropped straight down.

Three more of the saurian statues were smashed flat under the second globe, and the last two knocked halfway across the room by flying rubble—a spearman and the king.

The party cheered as a cloud of dust rose from the carnage. Coira danced along the edge, calling down insults, then yelped and leapt clear as the length of ledge she'd been standing on peeled off the wall and followed the rest to the floor.

"Down the other end!" called Rhodri. "Hurry. It's not stable here anymore."

"And whose fault is that?" growled Dag. But he got up and took Gillan's arm. "Come on, old man. Time t'be moving."

Gillan fumbled his lantern as he stood, then overbalanced as he tried to grab it again.

Dag pulled him back. "I've got you."

The lantern smashed on the marble floor below.

Gillan whimpered. "Don't let go."

They side-shuffled after the others, backs to the wall, and ended up in the corner where Rhodri, Coira, and Isobel were looking down through the dust, trying to see the remaining statues.

"Five down," chuckled Rhodri. "Two to go."

"He's enjoying this," said Gillan.

"Dwarves," said Dag, as if that explained it all.

"One more globe should do it," said Rhodri. "If we

can lure 'em—”

“Friends,” said Lady Svante, pointing back the way they had come. “I fear we will need a fresh strategy.”

Everyone turned. The king statue was still lost in the roiling dust, but the other had cast aside its spear and was climbing the rubble of the broken pillars, its bronze hands clamping like vises to the stonework.

“Surely it won’t fit on the ledge,” said Dag.

“I’ll not wait to find out,” said Isobel, and ran back toward it, hammer high and mumbling a prayer to the Swordfather.

“I can’t look,” said Gillan, but he did, through his fingers.

The paladin reached the statue just as it was pulling itself up onto the broken ledge. Both of its hands were supporting it, so it had no way to defend itself. She struck it high on the brow with her hammer, denting it with the force of the blow and popping one of its eye gems out.

The loss seemed to disturb it greatly. It began to spasm and thrash, tearing at the stone of the ledge and whipping its head back and forth in a frenzy. Isobel stepped back and swung again, a glancing, hesitant blow this time, but enough to knock the other eye free.

The effect was instantaneous. The statue froze and fell backward off the ledge like a stringless puppet to crash splayed in the rubble below.

The king statue rose up out of the settling dust. Isobel laughed and shook her hammer at it.

“Come get the same, automaton!”

It threw a chunk of marble the size of an ogre’s head at her. She dove aside to avoid it and landed too close to the edge. With a desperate flail she flipped off the ledge and landed hard among the broken and flattened statues. The remaining statue strode toward her, reaching with its green metal fingers.

“No, you don’t,” growled Rhodri, and charged down the ledge just as Isobel had done before.

“Hoy!” he shouted. “Puppet! Up here!”

The king statue looked up at the shout and rose to face the threat.

With a roar, Rhodri leapt off the ledge and flew straight at the thing, axe wide to one side. The statue caught him in its crushing hands, but Rhodri slashed with all his might and chopped at the gap between its head and shoulders, severing the linkage with one mighty blow.

The head spun away to bounce among the rocks as the body staggered backward, swiftly losing control of its limbs. Finally it crashed neck first into the far wall and smashed through it, ending half in, half out of the hole with Rhodri sliding off its metal chest.

Gillan tried to see through the dust. The dwarf wasn’t moving.

“Lady,” he said. “Can you—?”

She began the song of levitation before he could finish, and soon the whole party was touching down on the rubble-strewn floor.

Gillan and Dag ran to Rhodri as Lady Svante and Coira climbed over the statues to Isobel. The dwarf was sitting up.

“Rhodri,” asked Gillan. “Are y’hurt?”

He grimaced and massaged his side. “Put a few ribs out, but I don’t think I’m bleedin’.”

“Hsst,” said Dag. “We’re being watched.”

Gillan and Rhodri looked through the hole the statue had knocked in the wall. In the corridor beyond, a hunched figure stared at them, a figure with a lizard-like head—but not of bronze this time. This was a being of living, scaled flesh. It saw them looking at it, then turned and vanished into the darkness, revealing a tail.

Rhodri stood and called to the others. “More enemies ahead!”

Lady Svante looked up from Isobel. “The paladin requires my full attention, I’m afraid.”

Coira stood. “I’m with you, dwarf.”

“And I,” said Dag.

Gillan scowled at the dwarf, who was still clutching his ribs. “Can y’fight?”

“Can you, harper?”

“Er, I’ll just light the way.”

Gillan picked up a few chunks of shattered glowstone and led the others through the broken hole into the dark.

Chapter Nine

“It’s not far ahead,” said Coira. “I can hear it running.”

They could see nothing beyond the glowstone’s small circle of light, but Coira’s hearing seemed to be keeping them on track.

“Now it’s going upstairs,” she said.

They came upon the stairs only seconds later and started up them. Now even Gillan could hear its footsteps, and panicked breathing too. Whatever it was, it was afraid of them. Good. It was nice to be on the other side of that equation for once.

“It’s reached a door,” breathed Coira. “It’s closing it! Hurry!”

The others pounded up the stairs, leaving Gillan panting behind.

“Stop it!” came Rhodri’s voice. “Jam the door.”

“I’ve got it,” called Coira.

“Well done!” cried Dag. “Now, all together!”

Gillan reached the top of the stairs just in time to see the others throwing their shoulders against a door on the far side of a narrow hallway. After a second strike, it flew open, revealing a sorcerer’s lair, with instruments of conjuration and divination on the tables, weapons and helms and other trophies on the walls, and what appeared to be a saurian backing away from them, long robes flapping. Behind it, hovering above a pedestal, was another piece of the wand—this one silver—once again contained within a sphere of light.

“No one has ever escaped the statues before,” it hissed. In person its voice hadn’t quite the same menace as when it had come disembodied out of the dark.

“Give us the piece of the wand,” demanded Rhodri, edging forward with the others to either side of him.

“If I do, will you spare me?” asked the lizard.

“Will you bring back the people who vanished when your tower appeared?” asked Dag.

“The . . . who?” It blinked. “Oh. Yes. The people. Certainly. When my tower leaves, they will be where they always were.”

“It’s lying,” said Coira. “A thief knows.”

Gillan looked at the others. “Surrender and we’ll turn y’over to the local lord. That’s the best we can do.”

The lizard snarled. “*This* for your best!”

And with that it opened its mouth and sprayed noxious venom at them all.

Gillan fell back, choking and gagging, his eyes burning and his skin on fire, and the others did the same. The saurian bounded between Dag and Rhodri, slashing left and right with its claws, then raced for the door.

“Curse it!” Coira whipped a dagger after it, but blind and in agony, she missed by a mile.

“Stop it!” rasped Rhodri. “Somebody—”

There was a heavy thud and the saurian fell back from the door and skidded backward across the flagstones.

Through his stinging tears, Gillan saw Isobel and Lady Svante enter the room. The elf was pale and moved like she was made of dry twigs, and Isobel was hardly any better. Apparently, however, she'd had the strength to swing her hammer. The lizard lay stunned, limbs twitching and eyes blinking, and the paladin limped toward it, raising her maul once again.

"Please," it hissed. "Mercy. Merc—"

Isobel crushed its saurian skull like it was a melon.

"The wand," said Rhodri, coughing and pointing toward it. He collapsed, overcome by the poison. Coira, Dag, and Gillan were the same. The stuff got worse the longer it was on you, not better.

Lady Svante took a deep breath, then approached them. "I will need to rest before I attempt to pierce the sphere. And you must be attended to before that. First, we must wash away the poison."

An hour later, when at last the elf pierced the sphere and the piece of the wand dropped to the ground, she was so weakened by the effort and from healing the rest of the party that she crumpled to the ground and did not move.

Gillan and Isobel stepped to her, concerned, but before they could check on her, once again the apparition of Zanta appeared.

"Three!" it shouted. "Three pieces of the wand! Who are you? Where are you? I will have your heads! I will have your souls!"

It vanished as abruptly as it had appeared, leaving them all staring at the place where it had been.

Lady Svante groaned, and Gillan and Isobel rushed again to help her. Dag, recovered enough to look around, took a sword from the many that hung on the walls and unsheathed it, then read the inscription on the blade.

"In times of peace, in times of war," he read, "this

sword belonged to Zar.”

He nodded, then slipped both sheath and sword into his sword belt. “I’m having this,” he said. “Place owes me one.”

Gillan thought they looked like the walking dead as they finally exited the black tower. Lady Svante may have driven the poison from their bodies and healed their wounds, but they were staggering from weariness and ready to drop, and the lady herself was so weak that Isobel had to support her.

As they returned to the town square, however, they realized that they would have to leave town before they could sleep. The mayor’s house was on fire, and the Fatherite priest was leading the crowd in a chant of “Kings fail us! Swordfather save us!”

Isobel raised her head and stepped toward the square. “This is not right. We must—”

“Must what?” asked Coira. “Break the heads of a bunch of townsfolk because they’ve been led astray? I thought you didn’t want to hurt any more innocents.”

“You will more surely put things right by staying on the path we have been set,” said Lady Svante.

“Besides, paladin,” said Gillan. “Yer out on yer feet. Even a crippled bard could push y’over.”

Isobel sighed. Her shoulders slumped. “I am too weary to find a flaw in your arguments. Let us go.”

Slowly, cautiously, they crept away from the mob and back to the mazelike sewers that flowed out of Fettercairn.

Gillan heard Isobel praying the whole way.

Two nights later they crept just as carefully through the even more labyrinthian sewers of Thuath, which the note they had found in Fanskar’s castle named Thessalonica.

When they'd arrived just after sunset, the city gates had been closed, and men in strange black uniforms watched the road from the parapets.

"Is that all because of us?" asked Dag.

Coira looked around. Along both sides of the road, merchants and farmers were camped just out of bowshot of the walls, sleeping in the shelter of their wagons, which were brimming with produce. "Could be more to it than that." She nodded to a farmwife, huddled next to a cart full of squash and cucumbers. "What's going on? Why are the gates closed?"

"There's a curfew now," said the farmwife. "Started a week ago. If you ain't in by sundown, you ain't gettin' in. Y'll have t'wait till sunup, like the rest of us."

"Has there been unrest, then?" asked Gillan.

The woman shrugged. "They *say* so. They say sorcerers and witches ha' been killin' people with curses and enchantments, but nobody I know has heard o' any such business."

"Who are those men?" asked Coira, nodding toward the walls. "I've had my share of run-ins with the Thuath constabulary, and those aren't them."

"Don't know," said the merchant woman. "The mayor hired 'em when he ordered the curfew. Supposed to assist the watch. Seems now like they *are* the watch."

"The Graphnar Fist," said Isobel with a sigh. "Mercenaries from Lestras. I recognize the uniform. They'll work for anyone if the price is right."

"More Lestradae," said Dag. "Do you think they're working for the Fatherites, then?"

"I wouldn't bet against it," said Rhodri.

"How many are there?" Isobel asked the woman.

"Scores," she said. "They've taken over th'old Attian barracks in the center o'town." She patted her cart. "'S why it's worth waitin' overnight t'get in. Might rule with a heavy hand, but those lads eat a lot. Every farmer for miles around is gettin' rich off their appetite."

Dag frowned toward the gate. “So do we wait until morning?”

Isobel shook her head. “The Fist have a fearsome reputation as killers. Coira’s way will have the best chance of success here.”

“Same as it ever was,” said the thief. “Follow me.”

Chapter Ten

And so, half an hour later, Gillan was being helped out of an open sewer grate behind the stables of the Attian barracks by Isobel, as Coira, Dag, and Rhodri kept an eye out for patrols.

“What a maze that was,” he grunted.

“Dreadful,” agreed Lady Svante. “I—”

She stiffened and gasped as her feet touched the muddy ground.

“What is it?” asked Gillan.

“This place . . .” She wove unsteadily for a moment, then recovered herself. “It is cut off from the natural world. All the lines of earthly force from which I draw my power are blocked here by strong wards. I . . . I’m afraid I will be useless to you. I will not be able to pierce the sphere that guards the wand piece we seek.”

“But if there’s no magic here,” said Dag, “will there be a sphere? Isn’t it magic too?”

“That is possible,” said the elf. “It may be guarded only by physical means.”

“Either way,” said Coira, “we’ve still got to find it. Come on.”

They started through the camp, treading quietly between barracks buildings and past training yards and armories. At first they wandered randomly, but as they neared the center of the place, Lady Svante’s head came up and she looked around.

“They may be guarding the wand piece with magic after all,” she whispered. “I sense the presence of spellwork nearby. Without the background song of natural force that normally sings in my head, it stands out like a beacon.”

A few steps farther and she pointed across a wide yard to a fortified building set apart from the others. “There,” she said. “The wand piece is within.”

“The brig,” said Coira.

“Perfect,” said Gillan. “No long walk if they catch us. They’ll just open a cell.”

The party edged back from the perimeter of the yard as voices grew louder to the left. A pair of two-man patrols circled the brig in opposite directions, and one was nearing their position.

“Captain says the final cohort will be at the border before next week,” said one of the passing guards.

“Good,” said the other. “I’m sick of this waiting around. Time to be up and doing!”

“And looting,” said the first.

“If the Swordfather wills.”

They both chuckled as they moved on.

“More Lestradae,” growled Dag.

“And sounds like a Lestradae army massing on the border,” said Rhodri.

“Invasion within a week,” said Gillan.

Isobel ground her teeth. “Let us get this wand and be gone.”

“Stay here until I open the door,” said Coira, and she

started across the open ground as swift and low as a spider.

There was a bench beside the brig door, and Coira rolled under it as the other patrol hove into view. She waited until they disappeared again, then rolled out and crossed to the door, whipping out her lockpicks as she went.

The other patrol reemerged from behind the building as she reached it, and Gillan held his breath.

“Does she see ’em?” he asked.

“She’s going to get—” Dag started, but before he could finish, Coira was through the door and closing it behind her.

Dag gaped. “That was fast.”

“Admirable skill,” said Rhodri. “I’ll have to put more care into my locksmithing from now on.”

They waited until both patrols were behind the building again and raced across the yard to the door, then piled through and closed it behind them.

Gillan sucked in deep breaths as the others listened for any sounds of alarm. The guards’ conversation continued as before—a low murmur of crude jokes and dirty chuckles. Behind them, Coira pushed open a door of iron bars and gave them a mocking bow. The sphere with the wand piece was floating in the cell beyond. It appeared to be made of steel.

“Here it is,” she said. “Served up on a silver platter.”

Lady Svante stepped forward. “Ah. The wards have been relaxed here, so that the wand piece can be protected in its usual way.”

“I hope that means y’have yer magic back,” said Gillan, “and can undo it.”

“I do,” said the elf. “And I can—”

But as she crossed the threshold, a high and horrible wailing battered their ears, deafeningly loud, as if a thousand seagulls were screeching at them.

“A spell of warning!” shouted Rhodri, as he clapped his hands over his ears.

“Embarrassing,” said Lady Svante. “I should have . . .”

With a few mumbled words and a few quick motions of her hands, the wailing stopped, but the damage was done. Outside the brig they could hear soldiers shouting to each other.

“Step aside!” snapped Coira.

She hurried to the brig door and crouched by the lock, working feverishly, first using her picks, then jamming something black and soft into it that Gillan couldn’t make out. Before she was finished, heavy hands were banging on it from the other side.

“I’ve locked it and gummed it with pitch, but it won’t hold them for long.”

“Then do the same for the cell door,” said Gillan, and motioned the others to enter the chamber with the floating sphere. “And Lady, get the wand piece.”

“But how will we escape?” asked Dag.

Isobel sighed. “I don’t think we will.”

Rhodri pointed at the floor of the cell as Coira got to work locking the inner door and Lady Svante began to mumble to the floating sphere. “There’s a drain here.”

Gillan looked at it. It was bigger than it needed to be for water, as if it might have been used for disposing of dead prisoners at some point in the past, but it was still too narrow for Isobel’s broad shoulders or Rhodri’s girth—or at least the frame that held the grate was.

“I’ll be through that in no time,” said Rhodri, dragging aside the grate and drawing his axe. “Just let me—”

With a clang like an anvil being dropped on top of another anvil, the door to the brig flew open in a spray of stone chips and rivets, and a towering soldier squeezed through it, wielding a hammer even bigger than Isobel’s.

“Strewth,” said Coira as she stood from plugging the cell door lock. “They grow ’em big down south, don’t they?”

“Don’t let ’im swing that hammer!” shouted Gillan. “And, Rhodri, start swingin’ yer axe.”

“Aye,” said the dwarf, and began hacking at the stone frame of the drain.

Coira threw a dagger through the bars of the door, but it glanced off the big man's armor. Dag jumped toward the bars to stab at his face with the Sword of Zar. The man jerked back, cursing, as more soldiers flooded in behind him, several armed with crossbows.

"Crossbows!" barked Coira. "Look out!"

Everyone but Lady Svante dove left and right and the bolts skipped harmlessly across the floor.

"Bollocks," said Dag. "We're doomed."

"Hang on," said Gillan. He stumbled toward the door as the men were reloading and pulled off his cloak. It was heavy, to keep the chill away from his poisoned bones. He hooked one side of the clasp over the left end of the door's top cross bar, and the other side to the right end, curtaining the door.

"Now, Dag," he said, backing away. "Whack the fingers of anybody who tries to pull it off."

"Right," said Dag, and immediately had to do that very thing as someone tried to pull the cloak through the bars.

He jumped back again as crossbow bolts thudded into the cloak from the far side, poking through. One got all the way through, but lost all its force and fell to the floor.

"Isobel!" called Gillan. "Help Rhodri!"

The paladin turned and added her hammer to the dwarf's axe, clashing and bashing, and the stone frame of the drain began to crack.

Gillan looked back at Lady Svante. She was shaking as she whispered her incantation, and the sphere was glowing as bright as molten iron. Only a few minutes more. They might just make it out of here after all—

Another deafening anvil clang, and the cell door juddered open as Gillan's cloak fluttered to the floor.

The big soldier filled the door.

Dag and Coira stabbed at him, but he swept them back with a swipe of his hammer and strode forward, with the rest pressing in behind him.

“Isobel!” Gillan squeaked.

She was already moving, calling to the Swordfather and swinging the stone head of her maul at the big man’s skull. He blocked it with the haft of his hammer and didn’t move an inch, until Dag stabbed him under his arm.

His yelp and flinch at the unexpected attack allowed Isobel to plant a boot in his gut that sent him stumbling back into his men.

He recovered an instant later and stood in the door, trading staggering swings with Isobel as his men stabbed at her from behind him and Dag and Coira did the same to him from behind Isobel.

“Hurry it up, can’t you?” called Coira.

With a final chop, the stone frame of the drain crumbled and fell away into the hole, revealing a round stone pipe that Gillan hoped was wide enough to descend through.

“Ready,” said Rhodri, then charged forward to help Isobel stem the tide.

Gillan took a coil of rope from his pack and tied it to an iron ring in the wall, then threw the rest of it down the hole. “Ready,” he said.

Behind him, the bright light of the magic sphere faded and the sound of the wand piece dropping to the floor reached his ears.

“Ready,” breathed Lady Svante, as she fell to her knees.

Gillan snatched up the wand piece and helped the elf to her feet, then looked around. Their escape route was open, but how were they going to use it? As soon as Isobel stepped back, the room would be flooded with soldiers, and they’d all get cut down as they tried to climb down the hole.

“Not to worry, harper,” said Coira, as if reading his mind. She held up one of the bottle bombs. “I’ve got one more of these left. Get the lady down the hole.”

Gillan guided Svante to the hole and put the rope in her hands. “Can you . . . do you have the strength to . . .”

“I will make it,” she said, and started lowering herself

into the hole.

“You next, harper,” said Coira.

“But—”

“Go!” said the thief. “I’ll get the rest in.”

Gillan grunted but did as he was told. Clutching the rope, he lowered himself hand under hand and braced with his feet as the sounds of the fighting echoed from above him. Then came a deafening bang and a bright flash. He looked up. Smoke roiled above the hole, obscuring the ceiling, and then a bulky armor-clad body filled it. Isobel. She started coming down much faster than he.

Gillan tried to pick up his pace, but his feeble muscles were cramping, and his feet slipped. He clamped desperately at the rope as he fell, and slid the rest of the way down, gloves shredded and smoking, to land knee deep in water. The sewers.

He threw himself aside just in time to avoid being crushed by Isobel, who landed with a splash and a curse. Rhodri was not far behind her. Next came Dag, flailing and spinning on the rope until Isobel steadied him and lifted him down. Last was Coira, skimming down with ease to land lightly on her feet just as the rope slithered down after her and hit her in the head.

“Ha! They cut it too late—”

She was cut off as a bottle bomb, very much like hers, dropped from the shaft and splashed in the sewer channel.

“Get down!”

Everyone dove into the water as the bomb exploded. Gillan felt the heat of it on his back and the bite of hot glass hitting his clothes, and then he was up again, gasping for air and looking around.

The rest were coming up too, all seemingly unharmed, peering through the smoke as it rose to the ceiling.

“Come on,” said Coira. “Before they find another rope and come down after us.”

Gillan groaned as he got to his feet. The sewer water was freezing, and the cold seeped into his bones again,

stiffening them. Three more pieces of the wand to find. He didn't know how he would make it.

As he was joining the rest, the apparition of Zanta appeared once more, floating above the water.

“Again?” it shrieked. “Again!”

He and the others slogged once more into the dark of the underground maze without waiting to hear the mage's threats.

Chapter Eleven

As the sun set, Gillan leaned against a weathered old statue that stood at the side of the road as the others paused to argue about a fork in the road. They were all spry and strong, fully healed by Lady Svante's magics, but the healing didn't work as well on him. Certainly, the spells closed his cuts and rope-burned hands, but his vigor did not return as it did for the others. He still felt the falls and the blows from their fights and chases days after the others forgot they'd even been hurt. He was dying by inches. The only question was, would he expire after they recovered the wand, or before?

"Friends," said a voice behind him. "I would speak to you."

The others drew their weapons and went on guard as they looked around for the source of the voice. Gillan peeked behind the statue.

"Who's there?" called Isobel. "Come out where we

can see you.”

“I am here,” said the voice, and this time Gillan felt the statue vibrate under his hand in time to the words.

He sprang back and looked up at it. It was most definitely a statue—an old man, stooped with age and leaning on a staff, but carved larger than life, with a strange rune emblazoned on the breast of its robe. The eyes were stone and gazed blankly into the night, but the mouth was open, and in it were what looked like real human teeth.

“I, Kazdek, have traveled many miles to find you this night,” said the voice, though the statue’s lips didn’t move. “Your journey to Camnag, yes?”

Gillan exchanged glances with the others. They were not letting down their guard.

“How are you speaking?” asked Rhodri.

“How do you mean ‘travel?’” asked Dag. “You look like you’ve been planted in this spot for a hundred years.”

“And how do you know where we’re going?” asked Coira.

“You ask unimportant questions,” said the statue. “I tell you, you will not take what you seek without my help.”

“You know what we seek?” asked Gillan.

“You seek a piece of the Destiny Wand in the town of Camnag, once known as Corinth,” said the statue. “It lies in the fortress of the lord there, Waldec, and is protected by his court sage, Oscon, a sorcerer of great cunning and power.”

“A moment,” said Lady Svante. “Lord Waldec is the scion of a great family, known for its everlasting loyalty to Caith. Surely he would not be part of this conspiracy.”

“He has been tricked by Oscon,” said the statue, “who is fully a creature of Lagoth Zanta.”

“We’ve been seeing a lot of that,” said Gillan.

“Oscon has locked the piece of the wand in the catacombs beneath Waldec’s fortress, and there is only one entrance to those catacombs, a door directly behind Lord Waldec’s throne. That door will not open except in the presence of this stone.”

Gillan jumped back as the others gasped. He'd been sure that both of the statue's hands had been clutching the staff that it leaned on, but now one of them was extended palm up, and a milky stone about the size of a walnut rested upon it.

"Did y'see it move?" Gillan asked the others.

They shook their heads.

"It is a stone foreign to these isles," said the statue, "and rare even in the places it is most common. Oscon thinks only he possesses a piece of it and therefore believes his locks are safe, but as I said, I traveled far to find you tonight—and bring you the stone. Take it."

Gillan reached out a hesitant hand, then plucked the stone from the statue's palm. It was warm to the touch.

"Know that opening the door is only the beginning. Oscon believes himself amusing. There will be more cleverness beyond it."

"Thank ye," said Gillan. "But why are y'helping us?"

"Who are you?" asked Isobel.

"How do you know what we're doing?" asked Dag.

"More unimportant questions," said the statue, and its hand was suddenly pointing toward the right-hand fork in the road. "Go. Your time is short. Caith's fate lies in your hands."

They went, scratching their heads and talking among themselves over the mystery of the statue and the stone.

Farther on, the road took a turn around a hill and Gillan looked back toward the statue. He couldn't see it. He wasn't sure if it had somehow moved on, or if the night had become too dark.

Lord Waldec must have known they were coming, for his fortress was locked up as tight as a miser's purse, with crossbowmen on the walls and double-strength squads of spearmen manning the gates.

“Never mind opening the door behind Waldec’s throne,” said Dag, from the tree-lined square where they watched the guards march this way and that. “We won’t even get into the courtyard.”

“We might,” said Lady Svante, thoughtful, “if one of us were to ask them to open the gates.”

Everyone laughed, and the elf smiled, but then spoke again. “Yes. A ridiculous statement on the face of it, but hear me. I have a plan.”

And so it was that, a short while later, Gillan walked up to the gates of the fortress, seemingly alone, but with his five companions close behind him, cloaked in a spell of invisibility that Lady Svante had spent the better part of a quarter hour crafting.

He had his thumbs in his belt, his cap at a jaunty angle, and tried to walk with the sprightly step of a man who hadn’t a care in the world, which wasn’t easy, considering he felt like death on a cold plate, the lord whose gate he was walking toward wanted him imprisoned and likely dead, and he had five invisible friends counting on him and watching his every move.

“Who goes there?” called the sergeant of the watch, as Gillan got within bowshot.

Gillan strode on, though his guts were churning like a stew on the boil. “A bard, Sergeant. A troubadour, a balladeer, with all the songs they’re singin’ in Skara Brae, and news from far and wide—Earrann, Fettercairn, Thuath, and everywhere in between. A bowl of soup and a berth in the hayloft pays for it all. What say you? Does yer lord need cheering? Does he wish t’dance? Hear rumors from the road? There’s strange things afoot in the land of Caith these days, and I know the truth of ’em all.”

The sergeant scowled and waved him off. “Get away, y’vagabond. No one gets in tonight. Take your begging somewhere else.”

Gillan was just about to try a second volley when a dark-bearded captain stepped out of a gatehouse and raised a

hand.

“Hold, Mallin. Come forward, rascal.”

Gillan swept off his cap and ducked his head respectfully as he stepped forward. “Aye, master. How may I serve?”

The captain stood foursquare and stared him up and down, chewing a piece of straw.

“Yer name?”

“Harald, master. Harald the harper.”

“Where’s yer harp?”

Gillan swallowed. “Ah . . . well, I’m savin’ up for a new one.”

“And ye truly have word from Fettercairn, Thuath, and Earrann?”

“Indeed I do.”

“News of the rogues who robbed and rampaged there?”

Gillan’s heart skipped. Was it going to work? “Aye, master. The very latest.”

The captain sucked on his straw for another moment, then cast it aside. “Well, if yer lyin’, you’ll be singing a tune y’might not like. Come on.” He motioned to the men at the gates. “Anson, open the sally port.”

Gillan’s heart stopped skipping. Instead, it sank like a stone. The sally port. This was bad. They weren’t going to open the main gate, just the little door set within it. There was no way all his invisible friends would get through it before the guards shut it in their faces. He was going to go into the fortress on his own, and that wouldn’t work at all.

The order was called over the wall and after a moment the little door opened, so small the captain had to duck his head to get through it. Gillan could feel his friends around him, trying to press as close as they could, so they could get through with him, but it just wasn’t going to work.

Unless . . .

As he stepped over the high threshold of the door, Gillan tripped and fell to the side, whacking his head—or at

least pretending to—on the frame. He dropped to his knees and clutched the door, miming dizziness and pain. “Ach, m’noggin.”

The captain sighed and waited for him, hands on hips. “Come on, clumsy. Are you a bard or a jester?”

Gillan took his time getting up as he felt his friends brush swiftly by him one after the other. Finally, he felt Lady Svante’s fingers tap him on the shoulder and he knew they were all in. He stood and staggered after the captain.

“Sorry, master. Haven’t had enough t’ drink.”

“Ha!”

The captain led him across the courtyard and into the keep without any escort but himself, and Gillan could hear his friends tiptoeing along behind him, trying to be as silent as possible. But then, after climbing a grand staircase and entering an area of paneled halls and gilded candle stands, Gillan heard Lady Svante draw in her breath beside him, then whisper softly in his ear.

“There is an area of no magic up ahead, just as it was in the barracks in Thuath. We will become visible if we continue forward.”

Gillan swallowed, heart thudding, but he dared not speak.

Next came Coira’s voice. “We’ll try to sneak after you by less sorcerous means. If you see us, try to keep everyone’s attention on you.”

The captain turned around. “You say something, bard?”

“Just rehearsing, master. Rememberin’ my rhymes.”

“Well, hurry it up. I cannae be long away from th’ gate.”

“Coming. Sorry.”

Gillan scuttled forward, praying the others could find a way.

The captain bowed as he entered the high-ceilinged

throne room, then motioned behind him.

"Forgive me, yer worships, I—"

"Is it the fiends?" said a stooped figure in heavy ermines who sat with another man by a fire on one side of the room. He was as twitchy as a cat. "Have they come? Have you defeated them?"

The captain hesitated, still bent at the waist. "Er . . . no, yer lordship, it's . . . a harper, come to . . ."

"Just a harper?" snapped the little man, who Gillan guessed was Lord Waldec. "Not a harper and a rogue and a paladin and a dwarf and an elf and a—"

The other man, a dignified, bearded fellow in rune-stitched robes who Gillan guessed was Oscon, the sage the strange statue had warned them of, put a hand on Waldec's arm. "Why don't we hear Captain Roote's announcement in full, your lordship. Then ask questions."

"Yes, yes, of course," said Waldec, squirming in his high-backed chair. "Speak, Roote! Get to the point!"

"Yes, yer lordship," said the captain. "May I present Harald the harper," he said as Gillan stepped between the two guards who stood at attention on either side of the door and bowed to the men at the fire. "Who claims to have news from Fettercairn and Thuath, among others."

"Does he?" said the sage. "Does he indeed?"

"You think he's heard of them?" asked Waldec. "The thieves? The traitors? The wand takers? You think he might know if they're coming for—"

"Calm yourself, your lordship," said Oscon. "I'm sure the fellow will tell us what he knows. That is, after all, why he's come, is it not?"

"Of course, Oscon," said Waldec. "Of course. Silly of me."

The sage beckoned to Gillan. "Come, harper. Warm yourself by the fire and tell us your news. Would you like some food? A drink?"

Gillan was about to refuse the drink. He wanted his head clear for whatever came next, but he realized that

would be a fatal mistake. Only a fool would trust a bard who turned down a tippie.

“A meal later, masters,” he said, “if I please you. But I’d not say no to a drink now. Tales always tell smoother with a wet throat, eh?”

As he crossed the room, he noted the gilded throne on the dais at the far end, and the tapestry behind it that must hide the door to the catacombs, and above it a high beamed ceiling hung with heavy iron chandeliers. Balconies ran along the sides of the room under stained glass windows, where guests might sit to hear his lordship’s proclamations—if he made any. The fireplace where the lord and the sage conversed was tucked under one such balcony, while an altar to the Swordfather sat under the other.

“So,” said the sage, half filling a goblet with brandy as Gillan put his back to the fire and faced him and Lord Waldec. “What news of the wide world, harper? What are these rumors we hear of thieves abroad in Thuath and Earrann and Fettercairn? Are they the same who raided Lord Fanskar’s castle and stole the Destiny Wand from the council crypt in Tillicolt?”

“Ach,” said Gillan, accepting the goblet and taking a long pull. “Now yer teasin’ a poor bard. Y’know all my news already!”

“Not at all, friend,” said Oscon. “Rumor only. We want details.”

“Yes!” cried Lord Waldec. “Details! We want to know these thieves’ every move and ploy. Is it true they are fiends in human shape? Is it true they walk through walls and can crush the strongest armor with their bare hands?”

“They’ve fiends among ’em, masters,” said Gillan. “That’s true enough. An elf and dwarf, as cunning as all their kind.”

His eye caught motion above him, and he glanced up to see Coira, crouched and swift, leading the others along the opposite balcony. Lady Svante moved after her with silent grace, but the others were not so nimble, crawling through

the benches like drunk bears. Should Oscon or Waldec or the two guards see or hear them, the jig was up.

Well, Gillan would just have to spellbind them—somehow.

“The elf now, a lady she calls herself. Don’t y’believe it. She’s a heartless harpy who practices the darkest sorceries and seductions upon men t’get her way. Why, she can drain a man’s vital essence with just a single sinful kiss, and leave him an empty skin on the floor, with naught but jelly for bones.”

“Horrifying!” cried Waldec, though he sounded more aroused than troubled by Gillan’s description.

“And the dwarf. A squat, murderous monster who can eat his way through solid rock faster than a man with a pickaxe could get through a plaster wall.” Gillan saw Rhodri wobble, and he pointed at the rug to draw his audience’s attention. “Why, in Fanskar’s castle he dug through ten feet o’ foundation t’come up in the duke’s private chamber, then strangled ’im t’death with his beard.”

“I heard Fanskar was killed by his own men,” said Oscon, frowning.

“Oh, aye, they hacked him t’pieces all right,” said Gillan. “Goaded to it by the elf witch’s glammers, but he was dead already, by the dwarf’s hand.”

“And isn’t there a giantess in the gang?” asked Lord Waldec, eagerly. “Twice the height of a man?”

“Not quite that tall, yer worship,” said Gillan. “But tall enough. A head taller than yon Captain Roote, and twice as broad in the shoulder. She’s fearsome strong, masters. A brutish she-bear of a woman. Why, she wields a hammer that the three of us couldn’t lift if we all tried together, and when she calls on her savage god, she can bash through a castle gate with it. Smash it t’flinders!”

Coira and the others had reached the far end of the balcony, and she was uncoiling rope down to the floor and tying it off. The altar to the Swordfather hid the swinging rope from the guards at the door, but as soon as anyone slid

down it, they would be in plain view. Gillan had to keep up his blather, or the guards would surely see them.

“Then there’s the Einarr. Nearly as tall and strong as the woman, but with the berserk bloodlust o’the boar god Vildsvin running through his veins. The merest whiff of blood sends him into a battle frenzy that turns him into a slaverin’ savage, killin’ a dozen men at a time, and shruggin’ off strikes of sword and axe on his bare skin that would cut another man asunder. Invulnerable, he is, unstoppable. A reaving god of the Gotten raiders come t’life, yer worships. I swear to ye.”

As he spoke, Coira and Svante slid smoothly down the rope, with Rhodri following, but there were still Dag and Isobel to go, the heaviest and most heavily armored of them all. He had to keep talking.

“But the most dangerous of them all, masters, is the rogue. A savage spear-daughter of the Fichti who traded the dark paths of the forest for the darker alleys o’Skara Brae and Tillicolt. But though she left the Inshriach behind, she’s kept her woodcraft, and can disappear into a shadow or tread a gravel roof as silent as a cat. And with her arsenal o’poisoned blades and bottle bombs, she can strike from nowhere. Why, the vile assassin could be under yer chair, my lord, this very moment, and y’d never know it ’til she hamstrung yer heels with her skinnin’ knife.”

Waldec squealed and pulled up his knees in terror, and Oscon stood.

“Here now, scoundrel! You frighten my lord! Men have died for less than that in this room!”

Gillan gulped and mimed fear, though it wasn’t hard. He was shaking in his boots already. “Sorry, yer worship. Forgive me. I got carried away. Sh-should I stop?”

“No, no!” called Waldec, fluttering a hand at him. “Continue. Tell us about the last one. The bard.”

“Ah,” said Gillan. “The bard. Well now, he’s the trickster o’the group, the mastermind! The smilin’ face that hides the others’ evil and fools their victims into thinking ’em

heroes. It was he who turned Fanskar's men against him. It was he who talked his way into the barracks of the Graphnar Fist and convinced 'em t'open the gates to his fellows. It was he who bluffed his way past the poor Fatherite priests of Earrann t'steal the treasures they kept locked in the crypts beneath their temple. Why, he could talk a wolf out of its skin and sell anvils to the dwarves. He could—"

"My lord!" called one of the men at the door. "There's someone behind your throne!"

Oscon and Waldec whipped around, then gaped as they saw Isobel slipping behind the tapestry at the back of the dais.

Gillan jumped up. "It's them! The fiends!" he shouted. "Get 'em!"

And with that he charged toward the throne, making sure to throw a shoulder into Oscon's back as he did.

He could hear Waldec shrieking in fear behind him and the pounding of the guards' boots getting closer. Ahead, Isobel, alerted by the commotion, parted the tapestries and beckoned furiously to Gillan.

He stumbled up onto the dais and veered around the throne with the guards just steps behind him. As he threw himself forward, Isobel grabbed his hand and dragged him through the door, then planted a boot into the first guard's chest. The last thing Gillan saw as she slammed the door in the second guard's face and dropped the bar to lock it was a dozen more pouring in from the corridor.

"I hope there's another way out," Gillan rasped, "because we're not gettin' back out this way."

He turned to find the others giving him a cold eye.

"What?" he asked.

"A brutish she-bear?" asked Isobel.

"A heartless harpy?" asked Lady Svante.

"A squat monster?" asked Rhodri.

"A slaving savage?" asked Dag.

"A vile assassin?" asked Coira.

Gillan swallowed. "I had to make 'em fear you, didn't

I? I wasn't gonna tell 'em how sweet and dainty y'were."

"Don't worry, harper," said Coira, turning toward a spiral stair. "We'll forgive you. Someday."

Lord Waldec's men began pounding on the door with something heavy as the party started down into darkness.

Chapter Twelve

After bumping around in a maze of confusing corridors for what seemed like hours but was probably only minutes, Lady Svante stopped them and pointed to a section of wall with a little statue mounted in a niche in the center of it.

“The wand piece is there. Behind this wall.”

“Is there a door?” asked Dag.

“Is it hidden?” asked Coira.

They searched, prodding at the statue and the wall behind it, poking at the mortar between the stones, and feeling on the ground for a pressure plate. Nothing. They spread out through the corridor, looking for other doors around corners and at intersections. Still nothing. And soon they heard marching feet in the distance. The lord’s men had broken into the labyrinth and were searching for them. They were running out of time.

They met back at the statue.

“We could try breaking through the wall,” said Isobel.

“Not before the guards get here,” said Rhodri.

“IF WONDROUS TREASURE THOU SEEK TO GAIN,” said a booming voice, “THEN THOU MUST PLAY THE OLDEST GAME!”

Gillan nearly jumped out of his skin at the noise, then looked around with the others. There was a magic mouth set in the wall opposite the statue.

“Was that there before?” asked Dag.

“It was not,” said Lady Svante.

“I hate those things,” said Coira.

“But what did it mean?” asked Isobel. “Oldest game? Which game is the oldest?”

“Rock, paper, shears,” said Gillan. “It’s said the gods played it before the world was born.”

“But how are we to play it?” asked Rhodri. “With each other? With the mouth?”

Gillan turned back to the statue. Now that he really looked at it, he saw that its right arm was raised in the traditional rock, paper, shears ready position. He faced it and raised his hand in turn.

“All right, then,” he said. “One, two, three.” And with that, he threw down his hand and made the flat-hand paper gesture.

With a whirring of gears, the statue retracted from the alcove and another took its place, this one with its hand down in the shears gesture.

“YOU LOSE!” said the magic mouth.

“Oy, that’s cheating!” said Gillan. “It threw its hand seconds after I threw mine. It had plenty of time t’pick a winner.”

“Try slower,” said Dag.

Gillan nodded. “One, two, three!”

But instead of throwing his hand, he waited until the statue had already started retracting, then threw stone.

The statue threw paper.

“YOU LOSE!” said the magic mouth.

“Try throwing after it’s chosen,” said Coira.

“You mean cheat?” said Isobel, shocked.

“It’s a statue, paladin,” said Coira. “And those guards are getting closer by the second.”

Gillan raised his arm again. “One, two, three!”

This time he waited until the statue had retracted and been replaced by one with its hand showing shears. He threw rock.

“YOU CHEAT!” said the magic mouth. “CHEATERS LOSE!”

“Augh!” said Dag. “What kind of madman guards his treasure with a child’s game?”

“A madman who wants to delay his enemies,” said Lady Svante.

“I’ve got an idea,” said Coira. “Dag. You and I will join the harper and all throw at once. I’ll throw shears, you throw stone, and Gillan throw paper. One of us will win. And perhaps—”

“It will call us cheats again,” said Isobel.

“Only if the enchanter who created the game anticipated someone trying the trick,” said Lady Svante. “That is the difficulty in enchanting. You must account for every possibility, and when it comes to humans, that is very hard to do.”

“All right,” said Gillan. “We’ll try it. Ready, you two? Then one, two, three!”

He, Dag, and Coira all threw at once. The statue retracted as before, but then the mechanism hesitated, advancing first one statue, then another, then the third. Finally, one was chosen—shears, as it happened—and clicked into the niche.

“YOU . . . WIN!” said the magic mouth, and the wall in which the statue was set parted, revealing a room beyond, and the piece of the wand—this one bronze.

Coira grinned. “Cheaters always prosper.”

There was a lever inside the room that closed the wall again, and Gillan pulled it as Lady Svante began the arduous task of piercing the sphere that protected the wand piece. There was also a second door in the far wall, far more mundane, with mundane but tricky locks, and heavy bars laid across it at the head and foot.

Coira immediately got to work on the locks while the rest of them paced, looking first at her, then at Lady Svante, then back at her, over and over.

Soon, however, they heard the soldiers arrive and begin playing rock, paper, shears to try to open the door. They were having a terrible time of it, with the magic mouth booming, “YOU LOSE!” at rapid intervals.

Coira got the second door open and crept into the passage beyond. She came back a moment later, wrinkling her nose.

“Must be the way out,” she said. “It smells of the sewers.”

“Naturally,” sighed Dag.

Finally, just as the sphere was glowing its brightest and Lady Svante was trembling with the effort of maintaining her spell, Gillan heard a familiar voice beyond the wall—Sage Oscon.

“Stand aside, fools! I made this door. I can open it.”

“Get ready,” said Isobel, and pulled her hammer off her back.

Rhodri and Dag lined up on either side of her while Gillan and Coira stood wide to the sides, ready to sing and stab, respectively. Just then, Lady Svante gave a gasp of relief and the piece of the wand clattered to the floor as the light of the sphere vanished.

Coira turned and scooped it up. “Quick! Out the other door.”

“Wait,” said Gillan. “We’ve a chance to—”

He cut off with a yelp as the apparition of Lagoth

Zanta popped into being right next to him, staring around with cold fury in its translucent eyes. “You will still be too late, you know.”

“Keep moving,” snapped Coira. “We’ve heard everything that ghost has to say.”

Gillan remained where he was while the rest of the party retreated toward the exit as the wall before them slowly opened.

Zanta’s apparition kept talking. “Even if you recover all seven pieces of the wand—WHICH YOU WON’T—Caith will already have fallen! You cannot repair a broken egg!”

“Come on, harper!” called Rhodri.

“Just a minute,” said Gillan. “I can throw ’em off our trail.”

“Are you mad?” said Dag. “We’ve got to run.”

“But they know what we’re doin’ now,” said Gillan. “They’ve been trackin’ us. They’ll be ready for us wherever we go unless we tell ’em where we’re going—then go elsewhere.”

“Then stop talking about it and do it!” barked Coira. “Hurry!”

Gillan stepped to the wall through which they entered. Behind it he could hear Oscon intoning an incantation. He raised his voice and shouted, as if he were fighting with the others.

“No, no! Colosse is Carradal! I’m sure of it! Now, no more argument! Let’s get there and get this over with!”

As he turned to run, the wall began to scrape open and he heard men shoving at it.

“There’s one! Get him!”

Gillan raced into the sewer passage as the guards squeezed through the gap. Rhodri slammed the sewer door in their faces, and it boomed with their blows. And over that thunder came Oscon’s voice, calling to someone.

“Tell my lord Waldec to send word! The fiends are heading for Carradal!”

Chapter Thirteen

“Truly?” asked Gillan, two days later in the depths of the Grey Crypt. “This is how they defend the piece of the wand? By forcing us to walk back and forth until we die o’boredom?”

“Quiet, harper,” said Rhodri. “You’ll make me lose count. We enter the third room, this time. Then . . .”

Gillan groaned as he trudged after the dwarf and the others. They had already fought golems and ghouls and run from an undead dragon in this cursed place, but Gillan thought this endless walking might kill him quicker than any of those. It was freezing down here in the depths of the crypt, and the cold seeped into his bones and made it feel like they were stabbing each other inside his arms and legs with every step he took.

The weakness that had been with him since his encounter with the wraith in Skara Brae was getting worse

now. He felt a hundred years old. He didn't want to do any more adventuring. He wanted to sit in a comfy chair by a fire and have a nice long nap.

Only one thing gave him a warm feeling—that his ruse had worked. By making Oscon and Waldec think he and his friends were heading for Carradal, they had walked into the Grey Crypt without any opposition. No ambush had been waiting for them. No guards had stood between them and the dungeon. Of course, that likely meant that when they got to Carradal to hunt for the last piece of the wand, there would be an army waiting for them, but they would burn that bridge when they came to it.

Three traversals of the same boring corridor later, Rhodri breathed a sigh of relief.

"There," he said. "We've opened all the rooms at last. The sphere with the piece of the wand is within the last. Lady?"

Lady Svante nodded and entered the room, escorted by the others. They needn't have bothered. This time there were no fiends waiting for them, no automatons or traps. Just the sphere and the piece of the wand—this one made from mothren steel.

"Seems too easy," said Dag.

"They were counting, perhaps," said Isobel, "on people giving up."

"I certainly would have," said Gillan.

"A dwarf's strength is his focus," said Rhodri. "We are not put off by repetition or routine."

"Then I," said Coira, yawning, "am decidedly not a dwarf."

As soon as Svante pierced the sphere, the apparition of Zanta appeared among them again.

"Six!" it shrieked. "Six pieces! You will not take another!"

"Speaking of repetition and routine," sighed Dag.

They turned before it stopped speaking and started for the exit of the room, but then Isobel stopped suddenly and looked back, mouth agape. The apparition was still shouting, but now its ire seemed to be directed at someone else.

“General Ingram! Attend me! Where are your spies? Why have they not caught these thieves? I certainly hope you lead your army with more skill, or we will be finished before we start!”

“Isobel?” asked Gillan. “What’s the matter?”

“Ingrim . . .” breathed Isobel. “General . . . Ingram.”

“Isn’t that the name of—?” asked Rhodri.

“Yes. It is my brother.”

Gillan sighed. “Ah, Isobel . . .”

“And not just a part of the Lestradae army, but in attendance upon Zanta himself. At his beck and call.” Her fists clenched. She turned toward the exit. “I must find him. I must speak to him.”

Gillan caught her arm and tried to slow her. It was like trying to stop a warship under sail. He hurried after her with the others following.

“Slow down, Isobel. Please.”

“Aye, lass,” said Rhodri. “You don’t even know where he is.”

“He . . . he’s been duped,” Isobel said. “He cannot believe . . . I refuse to think . . .”

Lady Svante caught up to her and put a hand on her shoulder. “You forget your sworn oath to recover the wand, paladin. Please. If you wish to prevent your brother from doing evil things in the name of the Swordfather, then help us find the last piece of the wand before this war begins.”

Whether it was the elf’s words or her touch, Isobel’s desperation abated at last and she slowed her steps.

“You’re right,” she sighed. “But I *will* speak to him of this. And I will hold him to the Swordfather’s law.”

“Fine,” said Gillan. “Fine. But now we’ve got t’get t’Carradal.”

“Only one more to go,” said Dag. “Maybe this

nightmare will be over soon.”

“Don’t jinx it,” said Rhodri. “We’ll be walking into the last snare with all six pieces on us. They could take them all back.”

“Aye,” said Coira, then shot a glance at Isobel. “Indeed, Isobel could give ’em all to her brother.”

“Rhodri makes a good point,” said Dag, before the paladin could respond. “Is there no place we could hide the pieces before we go? No one we could leave them with?”

Gillan looked around at the others. “Who could we trust? Anyone?”

No one spoke up.

The closer they got to Carradal, the more crowded the roads became. Merchants, farmers, rogues of every description, but mostly pilgrims—hundreds of them, often wearing the loosely woven robes of the followers of the Weaver, the Baedish goddess of foresight and destiny.

Gillan stopped one of the faithful on the road on the first afternoon. “Why are y’going to Carradal?” he asked. “Is there some sort of festival?”

“A miracle has happened,” said the man. “The door has opened in the Stone of Destiny. A sure sign the Weaver has returned to untangle our fates. The future looks bright, brother. The future looks bright!”

“What was all that?” asked Coira. “Never paid much attention to the Baedish gods. Sometimes forget they even exist.”

“The Weaver is the goddess who weaves folks’ destiny from birth to death,” said Gillan. “An old woman at her loom, choosing threads and throwing the shuttle back and forth across the warp to make the fabric of life. Her dark aspect is the Spinner, a fat spider who also weaves, but to trap folk in terrible fates.”

“And what’s that got to do with this stone?”

“There are tales that the Stone of Destiny is the Weaver’s home,” continued Gillan. “It’s a great gray boulder o’granite, big as a rich man’s house, with an indent in one side that looks like a door—at least, it’s supposed to. Never looked like much t’me. Anyway, pilgrims have always come to it t’touch the door. Supposed to unravel tangled fates and give answers to knotty problems. I’ve never given much credence to it.”

“Not a believer, then?” asked Dag.

“In the Fian?” said Gillan. “Oh, aye. A Baedish man knows his gods exist, but there are other stories o’the so-called ‘Destiny Stone’ that make me doubt its blessed power. Indeed, I’m more inclined t’fear it.”

“Why’s that?” asked Rhodri.

“The oldest tales of the site say it was a nest of evil,” said Gillan. “And a brave priestess of the Weaver rolled the stone over the mouth o’the nest t’keep its vileness from enterin’ the world.”

Coira snorted. “And you find the story of a woman rolling a stone as big as a house more believable than the one about a wise woman living inside it? They both sound like fairy stories t’me.”

Gillan shrugged and glanced at Isobel. “I’ve seen a woman smash open a door that three elephants couldn’ta pulled down. Easy t’believe lots of things after that.”

Dag laughed. “What are the odds that the last piece of the wand is in the nest of evil, under the rock?”

And of course it was.

They had passed through the gates of Carradal under the noses of Lord Waldec’s men, dressed in robes of the Weaver that Coira had “borrowed” from a party of pilgrims they’d shared a campfire with the night before. And as soon as they were within the walls, Lady Svante’s senses detected the presence of the last piece of the wand in the direction

of the center of town, and in the center of town was a great square built around the green upon which sat the Stone of Destiny.

“It is,” she said, “within.”

Dag laughed. “I knew it!”

Gillan didn’t think it was funny. The square was packed with pilgrims, all shaking their fists and demanding that they be allowed to enter the rock and pray to the Weaver, while Lord Waldec’s soldiers and Carradal’s city watch stood shoulder to shoulder behind barricades that encircled the massive rock, keeping the people at bay with weapons drawn. To him it felt like a riot might erupt at any moment—right between his friends and where they needed to be.

To Coira it looked like an opportunity. “Easy enough to get in,” she said. “Cause a ruckus, then have the Lady make us invisible and walk right in.”

The elf drew herself up. “Are you suggesting we start a riot? People will be hurt. They might be killed.”

“Indeed,” said Isobel. “We must not do this.”

“And you’d rather have the whole country go to war instead?” asked Coira.

“A fair point,” said Rhodri. “But if there’s another way, I’ll take it.”

“I have one,” said a voice. A man in dark robes stood beside the dwarf. Gillan could have sworn no one had been there a moment before. He had a black beard and a strange look in his eyes.

“Who . . . ?”

“You and your friends are not the only ones who have been alarmed by this secret incursion into our beloved Caith,” said the man. “Many mages have sensed the unnatural disharmony in the land brought upon by the sundering of the Destiny Wand, but with the Fatherites stirring up hatred against us, we have had to work secretly. Indeed, the others tried to dissuade me from revealing myself even now, but here you are so close, and the forces arrayed against you so great, that I could not stand by.”

“But who are you?” asked Isobel. “Who are these others?”

Gillan noticed a strange symbol emblazoned on the breast of his robe and realized he had seen its like before. “That rune! Yer with Kazdek! The statue we met on the road. He helped us too.”

The man smirked. “You have many friends. Now, give me a moment and your path to the stone will be clear.”

“Wait—” said Gillan, but the mage was vanishing, turning to mist as he closed his eyes and began to mutter in an ancient tongue.

“Placere rigéscant, placere rigéscant, placere rigéscant . . .”

“He’s gone,” said Isobel.

“And not a single question answered,” said Coira.

Rhodri grabbed his cap as a wind stirred up and almost whipped it off his head. “The question is, what will this help he’s promising be?”

“Will there be any at all?” asked Coira, then shivered and hugged her arms. “Gone cold suddenly, hasn’t it?”

Gillan looked up. All over the square, the flames of torches the protesters were holding whipped and snapped, and the sky above, which had been clear and full of stars a moment ago, was now gray and roiling with clouds.

“Storm coming up,” he said, then paused. “Y’don’t suppose . . . ?”

With a crack of thunder it started raining, for a few brief seconds just a light patter of drops, but then it was as if someone had dropped an ocean on the square. The rain came down in sheets, with a wind behind it that sent the drops beating against Gillan’s face as hard as hail. And then, a moment later, it *was* hail. Stones of ice the size of knuckle bones battered the crowd and the soldiers alike, and as one, everyone ran for cover, huddling under the overhangs of houses, diving through doors, and ducking into inns and taverns. Even the soldiers abandoned their posts, retreating in disarray and jogging through the streets with

their commanders bellowing behind them.

“Ha!” laughed Rhodri. “Whoever he is, the mage does good work. Our way, as he said, is clear.”

“No one mage could summon a storm so fierce,” said Lady Svante. “There must be many, working in concert.”

“Not the time to debate it,” said Coira. “Let’s take the opportunity they gave us.”

“Aye!” said Dag. “And get out of this cursed hail!”

They all ran as fast as they could across the now-empty square, heads low and shoulders hunched as the hailstones bludgeoned them mercilessly and made the footing treacherous.

“This ‘help’ is like t’kill us,” moaned Gillan as he took a stone to the temple and stumbled.

Isobel caught his arm and kept him upright, and a moment later they were in the lee of the Destiny Stone and looking for the opening in its flank.

“Here,” said Coira. “Around to the left.”

They followed her and found a vertical crack in the stone that revealed a steep slope of mud that descended into darkness below it.

“Sorcerous work,” said Lady Svante as she climbed down into the cleft. “Great energies were expended to split the rock like this.”

The crack was too narrow for Isobel to get through in her armor, and she had to stand out in the hail as she removed her breastplate, then passed it down in pieces, then squeezed down after it, scraping her hips and shoulders before ending up in the cramped, hollowed-out pit below the stone. There wasn’t enough room to stand up.

“Already beaten to a pulp,” she said as she knelt and strapped back in. “And we haven’t even started.”

They all took a moment to recover themselves as best they could, mopping their faces and wringing out their hats and cloaks, then started farther into the pit. At the very bottom was what looked like the roof of an old crypt, with a gaping black hole smashed through it.

Gillan dropped a chunk of broken glowstone through the hole, and they saw a rubble-covered floor far below. Coira fastened a rope to a stone and they descended into the cold gloom.

The walls and stonework of the place were like none Gillan had ever seen—greasy, glistening stone twisted into convoluted shapes that made him think of molds and cancers. He felt sick just looking at it.

“What sort of place is this?” he asked. “What sort of people made it?”

“This is the work of the Charn,” said Lady Svante. “The first men. Powerful, brilliant, and corrupt.”

“Aye,” said Rhodri. “No chisel ever shaped these stones. This was done with sorcery. They had such power, they could shape the world to their liking.”

Dag made a face. “And *this* is what they liked?”

“No accounting for taste,” said the dwarf. “And, like the lady said, they were corrupt—”

“And so,” said Zanta’s apparition as it appeared before them. “You seek the seventh piece of the wand under the Destiny Stone.”

Everyone jumped. Never had the illusion come to them before they had pierced the sphere that protected a wand piece.

“Is this really him this time?” asked Dag.

“It is not,” said Lady Svante.

“Quiet,” said Gillan. “Let’s hear ’im.”

The apparition was laughing, eyes dancing. “In honor of this feat I have created my most dangerous snare yet. Seven times must you pass through it. Seven times must you defeat the enemies within it. Seven times must you survive its traps. And if somehow you do the impossible and beat it, when you at last exit the snare, death will come to you by stone or by flame. One way or the other, you will die, and I will win!”

The apparition vanished, leaving only the echo of its voice ringing off the twisted stone walls of the catacombs.

“Nice of him to tell us what to expect,” said Rhodri.

“*If* he told us everything,” said Coira. “I know I wouldn’t, if I was him.”

“We shall see,” said Isobel, and they started into the depths.

Chapter Fourteen

Just as the apparition had said, the final snare was a maze they had to find their way through seven times, each successful traversal dumping them back at the beginning, weary, winded, and worse for wear. And each time they ran into new threats—conjured beasts, ghostly doppelgangers of themselves, fire-wielding demons, and more, and they had to fight tooth and nail to defeat them. Some areas swallowed them in darkness that neither torches nor magical light did anything to pierce, and they were forced to tie themselves together with Coira’s rope so as not to lose track of each other.

At the end of their seventh harrowing pass, they approached the maze’s exit with trepidation.

“Seven times,” growled Rhodri.

“Now to see if he was lying,” said Coira.

“If he had the power to trap us for eternity, why

wouldn't he use it?" asked Dag.

"A game that can't be won cannot be lost," said Lady Svante. "And it seems it is important to him that we lose."

"Are all wizards mad?" asked Gillan.

"It is indeed a hazard of the craft," said the elf. "Magic is inherently maddening."

As they stepped through the exit, this time they found themselves not back at the beginning again, but at the top of a long flight of stairs leading down to a large round chamber lit with a sickly fluorescence that seemed to shimmer from the greasy curves of the walls.

"The end at last," said Isobel, letting out a long-held breath.

Gillan breathed too. He hadn't realized how afraid he'd been that Zanta had lied to them. "About damned time," he grunted.

In the center of a circular floor of glistening black marble rose a pedestal holding the seventh piece of the wand, which, as the others had been, was surrounded by a magical sphere that suspended it in the air. On either side of the pedestal were two enormous stone statues. They looked like men in ancient armor, but their heads were mouthless, eyeless monstrosities with tentacles that hung from their chins down to their waists. Gillan thought there was something familiar about their pose but he couldn't remember what.

Dag started down the stairs. "Everything else has come to life and attacked us. What are the odds these do too?"

"I wouldn't bet against it," said Rhodri, as he and the rest followed.

Coira groaned. "I lost any enthusiasm I had for fighting ten fire-lords ago. My bruises have bruises."

Gillan chuckled. "My chipped tooth has—"

A loud click interrupted him and they all looked around. Dag stood frozen, one foot on the last tread of the steps, the other with a toe on the black marble floor.

He swallowed. "I think I might have set something—"

With a whump of hot air that hit them like a gust from an open furnace, sheets of fire roared up from the cracks between the marble slabs, starting at the pedestal and spreading out in all directions until they reached the walls. The party scrambled back up the steps just ahead of the circle of flames, then turned to watch. Before the flames died at the walls, another circle flared up at the pedestal and expanded again, creating a repeating wave, like an endlessly opening rose of flame.

“Back,” said Rhodri. “Everyone back to the maze.”

They all turned to find that the door at the top of the stairs was no longer there.

Dag hung his head in embarrassment. “I’m sorry. After all we’ve been through, I should have known better than to step on the damned floor.”

Gillan shrugged. “At least y’were wrong about the statues.”

A noise like trees snapping in half rose above the roar of the fire.

“You had to say something,” sighed Isobel.

The statues were stepping down from their bases and wading slowly through the flames toward the stairs, their arms outstretched like sleepwalkers.

“Well, this is it,” said Rhodri. “No retreat. No cover on the stairs. Fire all around. Let’s make it a good death, friends, for, as Zanta said, there will be no escaping it.”

“Lady,” said Gillan. “Can you float us again? Above the flames?”

“I know not,” said Svante. “I have little strength left. And if I am to pierce the sphere as well—”

Coira chuckled, cutting her off.

Svante frowned. “You find our predicament amusing?”

“I was laughing at Zanta,” said the thief. “He outsmarted himself. The flames alone might have stopped us, but he just had to add living statues.” She raised a questioning eyebrow at Lady Svante. “Can you pierce the

sphere from here?”

“I . . . I can,” said the elf. “Proximity is not important as long as I can see it.”

“Then get to it!” Coira started backing up the stairs. “Paladin. Lace your fingers together and get ready to heave me at the closer statue. The one on my left.”

“What d’ye think yer doin’?” called Gillan as Lady Svante started her murmuring. “Y’can’t pluck out their eyes this time. They don’t have any!”

“Who said anything about eyes?” said Coira. “I’m standing on the shoulders of giants!”

And with that she ran down the steps, put a foot in the stirrup formed by Isobel’s hands, and vaulted over her head toward the left-hand giant as the paladin heaved her with all her might.

Gillan was afraid she might actually overshoot, as Isobel’s throw had lofted her high, but Coira reached down as the statue blindly reached up, caught it around its blank face, then swung down onto its back to cling to its neck.

It grabbed for her, but its movements were clumsy and slow, and long before its fingers reached its head, she had kicked off and arced toward the second statue, which was five paces behind its brother.

This one was more prepared and nearly crushed her in its clutches, but she deftly avoided its fingers and instead caught its right arm, then scrambled up to its shoulder and once again launched herself into the air, over the flames and straight for the pedestal.

Her shoulder and side were licked by the first gout of flame as another wave began, and she shrieked and hit the steps of the pedestal hard.

Everyone held their breath as they watched her lie there, writhing, but after a moment she picked herself up and climbed toward the sphere. Unfortunately, it was still solid.

Gillan glanced at Lady Svante. She was shaking and sweating as she continued her chant. Then he looked toward the statues. It seemed they weren’t worried about Coira, for

they were continuing to advance toward the steps. Another three paces and the first one would be on them.

“Hurry, elf,” said Dag.

“Harper,” said Rhodri. “Lead the lady to the top of the stairs. Dag and the paladin and I will deal with these titans.”

Dag gulped. “We will?”

Gillan did as he was told, taking Lady Svante’s elbow and guiding her backward up the stairs as her murmurs grew louder and more insistent.

Isobel was chanting too now, eyes closed and hammer raised high. Its head was beginning to glow with holy light.

The first statue reached the stairs and slammed its fists down at the three warriors. Dag and Rhodri dodged aside and Isobel swung, smashing her hammer into its left hand, breaking off a few fingers and knocking its strike wide.

The stone hand still hit the steps, however, and sent dust and rubble rattling to the polished black floor. Gillan’s heart sank as he realized that was all the statues had to do. Destroy the steps, and the party would all fall into the fire with no way to escape.

Rhodri recovered and swung his axe heel-first at the knees of the second statue as it joined the first at the stairs. A few cracks appeared in the joint, but not enough to slow it. Dag slashed at it with his sword, but only shivered his arms.

At the central pedestal, Coira waited anxiously as the protective sphere grew brighter and brighter. Gillan wondered if, in the end, it would be only the thief who survived their ordeal and collected the seven pieces of the wand. He also wondered if she’d give them back.

Isobel swung again at her statue and this time struck its right arm off at the elbow, but once again its fingerless left smashed blocks out of the stairs, and the paladin had to backpedal to avoid tumbling with them to the floor.

On the right side of the stairs, Rhodri shattered the second statue’s knee and it fell into the steps, then started pulling itself up them hand over hand as he and Dag retreated

before it, hacking at its fingers.

Then, with a gasp, Lady Svante collapsed against Gillan, almost knocking him over, and his heart lurched. Had she failed? Had she passed out before—

He looked to the pedestal and breathed a sigh of relief. The sphere was gone, and Coira held the last piece in her hand—a shining section of dwarven adamast steel. Now all they had to do was survive.

But no, the fires died and the statues stopped, frozen in terrifying attitudes of attack with arms raised, broken hands reaching. Isobel, Rhodri, and Dag stumbled back from them and sank to the stairs, breathing hard. Gillan looked behind him. The door to the maze had opened. They could leave.

Again, as it had each time before, a ghostly apparition of Lagoth Zanta appeared before them.

“So you have bested me again! You have the final piece of the wand. Congratulations, but there is only one place to reforge it in the world of men, and that is the temple of Narn.” The apparition beckoned and smiled. “Come ahead then, heroes. I shall be waiting for you, as will your doom.”

“We cannot defeat Lagoth Zanta without first reforging the wand,” said Lady Svante. “But we cannot reforge the wand without first defeating Lagoth Zanta.”

“I hope you’re exaggerating,” said Coira. “Because, if not, I’m going to save myself a pointless death and welcome our new Lestradae overlords.”

They were peering from behind the outbuildings of a deserted silver mine in the foothills of the Ulstrigg Mountains, the range that served as the border between Caith and Lestradas, watching an endless red line of Lestradae infantry marching down from Garendon Pass and filing into a huge camp taking shape in the valley below.

Just on the far side of the camp, on the crest of a

rocky outcropping, was the temple of Narn, the god of an ancient civilization long forgotten by the common folk of Caith. Gillan only knew of the temple because it featured in a few of the oldest songs and sagas, and even in those it was called ancient. All he remembered of it was that a river of lava ran through its depths, and that its altar was said to be made of the same molten rock.

"I am merely presenting the problem as I see it," said the elf. "Zanta is an archmage, far more powerful than any threat we have yet faced. Surviving his attacks will be difficult. Striking him in any way will be impossible. His ability to protect himself is almost absolute. Only the wand will be able to pierce his defenses."

"And he'll be guarding the forge where it has to be fixed, aye?" asked Dag.

"Aye," said Rhodri. "And reforging the wand, doing it correctly, would take a week at least. Perhaps two."

"And it's not like we can ask Zanta if he'd mind waitin' while we were about it," said Gillan.

"Another snare," sighed Isobel.

"Can't you just stick the thing together temporarily?" asked Coira. "A bit of pitch, a bit of string?"

Dag and Gillan laughed at this, but Rhodri stroked his beard, frowning thoughtfully. "Out of the mouths of babes."

Gillan raised an eyebrow. "Come on, Rhodri. It was a joke."

"No, no," said the dwarf. "A temporary weld might be possible, though it would still have to be done at the temple, and . . . and there would be much preparation beforehand. Hmmm." He turned and looked at the mining camp, which appeared to have been abandoned recently, perhaps on the advent of the Lestradae army. "They must have a forge here. Let me see . . ."

The others watched him go, then Gillan waved a hand.

"Make a meal or get some sleep while he does

whatever it is he's going to do. We'll need t'be as rested as we can be."

Chapter Fifteen

Gillan jerked up out of a dream of being buried in snow to find Dag shaking his shoulder.

“He’s ready,” said Dag.

Gillan sat up and rubbed his face. “Wh-what’s he done?”

Dag shrugged. “He’s been bangin’ on the pieces, filin’ at the edges, bendin’ bits straight. Then he fitted ’em all end to end and wrapped the whole thing in thin sheets o’ tin or some such.”

They walked out of the stable where Gillan had taken his nap to find Rhodri and Lady Svante deep in conversation over what looked like a snake wrapped in bandages. He and Dag joined the others who were gathered around them.

Rhodri looked up. “I think we have a plan. We must hope that a temporary weld will be enough to return the wand to its full power.”

“Or we’re all dead,” said Coira.

“I’ve done what I can,” said the dwarf. “I have straightened and filed the edges of each section so they all touch cleanly, and I have primed them with flux and wrapped them with tin to hold everything in place in the fire. All we must do is get the staff to the altar, and the rest should take care of itself.” He paused and nodded to Lady Svante. “With a little help from the lady.”

The elf looked around at them all. “It will be I who wields the wand if the forging is successful, and I must perform several enchantments in preparation, so it will be your duty—and I do not envy you it—to hold Zanta’s attention until the wand is ready and in my hand.”

“Blast fodder, in other words,” said Coira.

“Same as it ever was,” said Dag.

“I’m ready,” said Gillan. “I suppose.”

“No, harper,” said the lady. “You will have another role, at least at first.”

“Uh oh.”

Rhodri grinned and handed Gillan the unforged staff, which was wrapped in burlap and string. “It’ll be your job to stay unnoticed and throw the staff on the altar while the rest of us are wavin’ our backsides at Zanta.”

“How is he not going t’notice me when I’m carryin’ the staff?” asked Gillan.

“Use it as a crutch,” said Coira. “Y’look so frail he’ll never guess it isn’t.”

Gillan sighed at this slight on his manhood, and turned to Lady Svante. “Can’t y’just turn me invisible? Y’did it before.”

“He will be looking for magic,” said the elf. “Were I to put a glamour on you, he would see it instantly.”

“Why are we talking about finding ways to sneak around Lagoth Zanta when we don’t even know how we’re going to get around his army?” said Dag. He motioned toward the mountains. “There’s a few thousand men between us and the temple, and I don’t see a way through ’em.”

Rhodri laughed. “Long before that hill was a temple to a human god, these mountains were home to a dwarven mining colony, and the lava flow beneath the temple was the site of a dwarven forge. And this”—he jerked his thumb at the entrance of the silver mine behind him—“was a dwarven mine. They’re connected below ground. We’ll walk right under those soldiers and they’ll never know it.”

He stood and strapped on his axe.

“Come on, then. Follow me.”

The dwarves built very tall for such a short race, with even their smallest corridors taller than houses and flaunting vaulted ceilings and high-arched doorways. The approach to the forge room beneath the temple of Narn was even more impressive—cathedral high, and supported by giant statues of dour-looking dwarves. Its great brass doors were so tall that they made the paladins who stood before them look like ants, though they were behemoths to a man, and their leader even bigger.

The paladins went on guard as Gillan and the others stepped out of the shadows of that great hall, and the leader stepped forward, sword brandished in one massive fist.

“Halt!” he said. “Who dares intrude on . . . on . . .” He stuttered to a stop as the party continued forward. “Isobel?”

Isobel grunted. “Ingrim.”

“And here’s where she hands us over and the wand too,” muttered Coira.

Gillan didn’t think so. Not from the tension between them. He looked from one to the other. The resemblance was striking—the height, the breadth of shoulder, the black hair, the piercing eyes and scowling brows—all the same. Even their stiffness of manner was shared.

“Can this be true?” asked Ingrim. “You are one of the saboteurs who have been stealing the pieces of the wand?”

“Stealing?” said Isobel. “It was Zanta stole the wand.

We recover the pieces so we may return it to its rightful place.”

Ingrim shook his head. “Sister, you have been deceived. The wand is a vile pagan relic, the unholy aura of which has stopped the true faith of the Swordfather from gaining a foothold in the heathen land of Caith. Now that it is divided, we may at last bring the light of the sword and the healing elixir of the cup to the poor benighted savages of the north and free them from the tyranny of their backward superstitions.”

“You are the one who is deceived, brother,” said Isobel. “And I find it hard to believe you cannot see it. This sorcerer you follow cares nothing for the Swordfather or his teachings. He seeks naught but power and has duped you and the temple into providing him with an army with which to win it.”

“We are well aware of Zanta’s failings,” said Ingrim. “But the Swordfather works in mysterious ways, and through the strangest of vessels. Whatever the sorcerer wants, he has opened these heathen lands to conversion, and all true Fatherites know that there is no greater work than converting the unsaved to the true faith.”

Isobel stamped her iron-shod foot. “There is no true conversion at the point of a sword! They who do not come to the Swordfather out of love do not come to him at all!”

“They will love him in the end,” said Ingrim. “When we raise beautiful temples in place of their filthy shrines, they will have no choice.”

Isobel sighed and hung her head. “Brother, you have lost the true way. You have fallen into heresy. You forget that the Swordfather’s blade is only wielded against the strong in defense of the weak. Now, will you stand aside and let us enter the forge, or will you face the wrath of the Swordfather?”

Ingrim stood tall. “It is I who has the Swordfather on his side, sister. You and your heathen friends will not prevail here. Now, give up the pieces of the wand, and I will let you

leave here alive. Otherwise . . .”

He drew his sword, and his men followed suit.

“Isobel,” said Gillan. “Y’don’t have to—”

“Leave me be, harper,” snarled the paladin, and she charged forward, calling on the Swordfather, the Blessed Lady, and all the heroes of Lestradae antiquity.

“Well, well,” said Coira.

Rhodri and Dag quickly hopped forward to guard Isobel’s flanks and crashed into Ingrim and his men with a sound like a foundry tipping over.

Gillan started singing “A Rhyme in Duotime,” hoping to spur his friends to speedier strikes, while Coira hung back as usual, flinging bits of rubble with astonishing accuracy, and Lady Svante chanted a spell.

It seemed, however, that neither song nor daggers nor spell had any effect on Ingrim’s troops. Everything Coira threw at them bounced off without a scratch, and Svante’s magic appeared to do nothing at all.

“They are protected by powerful wards, both sorcerous and holy,” said the elf. “It will take greater magic than mine to touch them.”

“Then protect our lot,” said Coira. “They’re taking a beating.”

It was true. Including Ingrim, there were six Lestradae fighting Coira, Dag, and Rhodri, and they were the cream of the crop—a general and his personal guard. The three friends were being knocked back with every exchange, battered with backhands and glancing blows.

All of this only seemed to make Isobel even more furious, and with each blow and backward step, her prayers got louder and her swings wilder. This made things worse for Dag and Rhodri, who had to watch out for hammer blows from the side as well as the front, but then, with an inhuman howl, Isobel’s chanting of names reached a deafening crescendo and suddenly the stone head of her hammer glowed as bright as the sun.

Gillan had seen Isobel do this before, but never in

the heat of battle. Always she'd had to stand still in prayer and meditation for long moments with her hammer held high over her head. This time, it seemed fury rather than reflection had inspired her holy strength, and the massive hall blazed with it.

Dag and Rhodri staggered aside, blinded, and left her sides exposed. She didn't need them. Against the holy light of her hammer, the wards and the armor of the paladins were as nothing, and they crumpled under her blows like aged parchment.

In a handful of seconds it was over, and the paladins lay on the stone floor, dead or broken. Isobel stood over Ingram, hammer raised to crush his head, but he was unmoving, and at last, with a heartbroken sob, she cast the weapon away and fell to her knees beside him.

"Brother," she moaned. "What have I done? What have I done."

The others recovered themselves as well as they could, then got ready to approach the door of the forge, but still Isobel wept over her brother.

"Isobel . . ." murmured Gillan.

Rhodri put a hand on his elbow. "Leave her, harper. She's done her bit. Let's go say hello to this archmage."

And with that, they started for the door.

Zanta was waiting for them in the center of the great pillared and vaulted red chamber, backlit by the molten altar forge, and he laughed as he saw them.

"Surely these are not the heroes who won the seven pieces. Surely you are the understudies and the real heroes will be along when I'm through with you. I heard you were all ten feet tall, with muscles like writhing pythons and powers beyond the comprehension of mortal men."

"That's it," said Coira. "Keep laughing. Keep underestimating us. You won't be the first."

“Undoubtedly not,” said Zanta, stepping forward. “But you may be certain I will be the last. Unless someone comes along and laughs at your graves.”

“Remember your part, harper,” said Rhodri out of the side of his mouth. “Stick to the shadows and get around him.”

“Aye,” said Gillan. “I’m going.”

He tucked the staff under his arm and started hobbling on it as if it were a crutch, edging behind a pillar while Dag, Rhodri, Coira, and Lady Svante marched straight toward the sorcerer. Sweat poured from his body, though he didn’t know if it was from fear or from the altar, which was a slow fountain of lava that roiled up and spilled over the sides of its square basin before disappearing again through slots in the marble floor. Probably both. Sadly, the heat did not seem to warm his bones. They still felt like icicles under his skin.

“Nobody will laugh at your grave, conjurer,” said Rhodri. “Because you won’t have one. You’re going in the fire.”

“We killed your pet general,” said Dag. “And now we’re going to kill you.”

Zanta laughed again, his gaping smile like a fissure in his strangely scarred face. “You are welcome to try, friends. Truly. I will give you the first blow. Do your worst. I will not stop you.”

He spread his arms and waited, still grinning. “Well? Come on.”

As he continued on his wide, slow arc in the shadows, Gillan saw the four companions look at each other, wary, then nod in agreement.

As one, Dag and Rhodri charged the sorcerer, weapons high, while behind them Coira lobbed a bottle bomb and Lady Svante sang out a phrase in the elven tongue that called glowing green energy into a ball between her palms, then shot it forward.

They might as well have been leaves on the wind for all the damage they did to Zanta. They didn’t even reach

him. Dag and Rhodri bounced off an invisible shield that surrounded him and fell clattering to the floor. Coira's bomb struck the same shield a second later and exploded in midair, raining flaming oil down on the fallen fighters, and Lady Svante's blast was absorbed by the shield, turning it briefly green before it once again became invisible.

"That was your best?" asked Zanta, as Rhodri and Dag rolled on the ground and flung off their cloaks to put themselves out. "That? Well, let me show you my least. The merest fraction of my power, so you know why I was not concerned by your successes."

"Not concerned?" said Coira. "You were pissing yourself. We saw you. Every time we stole another piece. Or are you going to tell us you were just acting?"

Zanta sneered. "You mistake rage for fear. And it was not rage at you, but at the underlings who failed to defeat such pathetic opponents."

He stopped twenty paces before them.

"Here," he said, raising a hand, "is what I can do."

And with that he thrust his palm out and flared his fingers. No fire, no lightning, no coruscating blue energy shot from his hand, just hard, invisible force that threw Dag, Rhodri, Coira, and Lady Svante back like the aforementioned leaves on the wind, rolling and flipping to smash against the door they had entered through. Even Gillan, who was far to the left of the blast and skulking behind a pillar, was staggered by it and found himself sitting on the ground.

Fortunately for Gillan, Zanta did not pay him the slightest attention. Instead the archmage sauntered toward the others, who were groaning and picking themselves up off the floor. It was clear even from where Gillan stood that they were truly hurt. Coira clutched her bleeding head, and Dag held his sword with only one hand, while Rhodri found it hard to regain his balance, and Lady Svante favored her left leg.

Gillan used the pillar to pull himself to his feet again and started forward more quickly as Zanta laughed at the

pain of his companions. The plan had gone as it was meant to so far. The others had distracted the sorcerer with their bluster and swagger, and Gillan remained forgotten, but if he did not get the wand to the altar immediately, his friends wouldn't be alive to perform the second part of the trick.

"There it is," chuckled Zanta, stopping before them. "There is the fear I was looking for. There is the fading hope. There is the realization that all your dreams have come to naught." He smiled. "How could I kill you before you were certain you were going to die? How could I deny you such delicious dread?"

The sorcerer raised a hand again as Gillan continued stumbling toward the altar. The heat of it was like a hot brand held close to his face, but he was still not near enough to be sure of his throw—not in the state he was in these days. He had to get closer.

"But now that you know this is the end," said Zanta, "well, I've wrung the last bit of fun there was to be had out of you, haven't I? I'm afraid there's nothing left for me to do but say—"

"Hoy! Blabbermouth!" shouted Gillan as he reached the altar. "Here's yer stick!"

Zanta turned just as Gillan heaved the burlap-covered Destiny Wand into the glowing roil of the forge altar. The wrapping caught fire immediately, charring to powder that sparked swiftly upward on the waves of heat rising from the lava. The tin sheeting was next, turning white hot before the rest of the wand had begun to glow, forming a molten glaze over the length of it.

"What are you *doing*?" screamed Zanta, stalking forward. "What was that?"

Now the wand was glowing, and the flux that Rhodri had set between the segments was spitting and flowing. The joins were disappearing.

"Was that . . . ?" said Zanta. "Is that . . . ?"

"Now, Lady!" shouted Rhodri. "Now!"

With a melodious cry, Lady Svante raised one hand

and the glowing wand whipped up out of the lava and arced over Zanta's head. Then, with her other hand, she shot a blast of pure cold at it so that as it landed, ringing, at her feet, it had ceased to glow.

Zanta stared as the elf picked it up. "You have not reformed the wand," he said. "It is not possible. It would take days!"

Lady Svante pointed the wand at him. "Wand of destiny, wand of harmony," she intoned. "Remove this irritant who has unbalanced the land and disturbed the peace."

"No!" shouted Zanta, raising his hand. "Die, you—"

"Rid the world of his corruption!" cried Lady Svante.

The wand leapt in her hands, emitting a pulse of shimmering air that expanded as it raced toward the sorcerer.

He shrieked and backed away from it, but it was too swift and hit him like a gust of wind. Unlike a gust of wind, however, it did not continue on. Instead it picked him up into the air, and, to Gillan's horror, seemed to quite literally shake him apart. Zanta began to blur with the vibration, and then the meat flew from his bones, slapping to the floor in little wet gobbets, sliding down pillars, and sizzling into the fire, until finally, the shimmer faded, and his bones clattered into a wet red heap.

"We did it," said Dag. "We killed him! And we're all still alive!"

"Some of us are," slurred Coira as she sat up. "I think I may not be."

Gillan looked at her as he limped toward them all. He hadn't been able to tell before, but her head wound was terrible, a bloody dent from hitting the wall.

"Fear not," said Lady Svante. "The Destiny Wand is an artifact of harmony and reunification. It can heal rifts and root out cancers not only in kingdoms, but in men and women as well. All who are wounded will be restored." She hobbled to Coira and knelt beside her. "Now, sister. Hold the wand as I speak."

Gillan sank down against the wall, groaning, as the

elf used the wand to heal Coira, then Rhodri, then Dag, and herself. Then she crossed to him.

“Now, harper,” she said. “It is your turn.”

“Me?” said Gillan. “But I’m not wounded. Zanta’s blast hardly touched me.”

“Harper,” said Lady Svante, gently. “You are wounded most deeply of all.”

“What wound?” asked Gillan. “Y’mean . . .”

“Yes, harper. The wound to your heart. The wound the wraith gave you. I told you once it was beyond healing, but very little is beyond the Destiny Wand. Now, please hold the wand in the middle.”

Gillan took it with uneasy hands. He wanted to be healed, certainly, but he had lived so long with the idea that all of the good in his life was behind him that it was hard to think what a healthy life would be like. He would have to make friends again. He might be able to . . . to love again.

Lady Svante closed her eyes and prayed as she held the wand on either side of his hands. It started to warm at his palms, and then the warmth spread up his arms to his shoulders and head and legs and stomach, and finally, his heart. The warmth filled it like honey filling a cup, thick, sweet, and golden, and as it poured slowly in, the dagger of ice that had lodged there for so long melted away, and the trembling that had afflicted his limbs grew still and he felt their strength return.

“I feel good,” he murmured. “I feel . . . young.”

“You *are* young,” said Lady Svante. “You have only forgotten.”

She helped him to his feet.

“Now let us go find the paladin.”

Chapter Sixteen

They found Isobel on her knees, leaning over her unconscious brother and doing her best to bandage his wounds.

“Isobel,” said Dag. “Are you—”

“Don’t ask after me,” she snapped. “Ask after my brother. He is dying.”

“He will not die,” said Lady Svante. “The Destiny Wand has healed us all. It can heal him too.”

She joined Isobel by her fallen brother and placed the wand in his hand, then prayed over him as she’d done for Gillan and the others.

A warm glow spread from the wand and enveloped him, and his brow, which had been furrowed with pain, smoothed, but his eyes remained shut.

“Will he wake?” Isobel asked.

“In time,” said Lady Svante. “But the magic of the wand has much to repair.”

Isobel stood and turned away, sobbing. “Was this the destiny that was foretold for me?” she asked bitterly. “Was it my destiny to batter my brother to a pulp?”

“Well,” said Dag. “If you hadn’t, we’d never have reached Lagoth Zanta, so you helped bring down the bastard behind all this. That’s a pretty good destiny.”

“The old woman said your blood would betray you,” said Lady Svante. “But your heart would save you. Both these things have come to pass.”

“And there was more to it,” said Gillan. He stepped toward Isobel. “D’ye remember, paladin? She said y’would save Caith, and it’s still t’be done.”

Isobel turned, frowning. “What do you mean? Did you not say Zanta was dead? And the wand reforged?”

“Not quite reforged,” said Rhodri. “That’s still got to be done properly.”

“And,” said Gillan, “there’s still an army of Lestradae soldiers massed on our border, hearts afire for conquest and plunder, and someone’s got t’tell ’em t’go home.”

“Me?” said Isobel.

“It’ll take a knight,” said Gillan. “A paladin, righteous and sure in their faith, t’bring those good but misled men back t’the light, and t’show ’em the villainy of those who deceived ’em. That person is you. *That* is yer destiny.”

Isobel swallowed. “It is if they don’t kill me first.”

Rhodri took the wand from Ingrim’s slack hands. “The rest of you go with the paladin. I’m going to get to work on the wand, and this time do the job right.”

Isobel nodded, then knelt and cradled her brother in her arms. Then she stood with him and turned to the exit.

“Lead on,” she said.

They came out of the temple of Narn to find it surrounded by the rest of Ingrim’s company, who turned and gasped as one when they saw their commander being carried

out. His lieutenants hurried forward, swords drawn.

“Fear not!” called Isobel. “General Ingrim lives!”

“But who wounded him?” asked a blond lieutenant. “Was it you?”

“Who are you?” asked another. “And who are these with you?”

“I am Paladin Isobel, General Ingrim’s sister, and these are my companions. The general was wounded by the treachery of Lagoth Zanta, and Zanta has died for that treachery. Please. I must speak to your leaders. It is imperative they hear of this.”

The lieutenants did not put down their swords.

“They certainly will,” said the blond one. “You are all under arrest.”

A while later, Gillan stood chained and disarmed with the others in a large tent with a campaign table in the center and chairs all around. The table had been cleared of maps, and General Ingrim had been laid upon it while army physicians examined him. Gillan, Coira, Dag, and Lady Svante huddled under guard against one cloth wall, while Isobel, also disarmed and shackled, had been led forward, and now stood before a large group of generals, priests, and lieutenants, who stood or sat in the chairs and stared at her with a grim intensity.

Their leader, a sallow, sunken-cheeked Fatherite lector with eyebrows like flying buttresses, leaned forward. “Now, paladin,” he said. “You’ve claimed Lagoth Zanta wounded your brother, and that he died for doing so. What proof can you give us that this is true?”

Isobel clenched her fists and stared at the carpet that covered the dirt over which the tent had been erected.

“Speak,” said the blond lieutenant who had brought her in. “Speak as if your life depended on it, paladin. For it surely does.”

Isobel raised her head. “I care nothing for my life,

so I will speak instead as if the *truth* depended on it, for it surely does.”

Gillan’s heart shriveled in his chest. “That’s the way to get ’em on yer side,” he muttered. “Good start.”

“The truth is, it will not matter if I tell the truth,” said Isobel. “Because you will not believe it.”

“Better and better,” sighed Gillan.

“There are good men and women in this tent,” Isobel continued, “who were led from the true path of the Swordfather’s teachings by the fiery rhetoric of corrupt leaders. But the rest of you knew precisely what Lagoth Zanta was, and you still backed him and his evil plan, because you knew it would give you land, power, and riches.”

An angry murmur rose at this. Isobel spoke over it.

“You knew that the stated reasons for this invasion—that the north was a land of pagans who must be led to the light, that Caith was a threat to Lestras’s northern border—you knew they were nothing but justifications for conquest, and that the true motives were land and plunder, and whatever twisted scheme Zanta kept hidden in his peevish little mind.”

“I’ve heard enough,” said a general.

Isobel ignored him. “You knew that Zanta’s power did not come from the divine! You knew he was a master of the darkest arts! And you were willing to overlook that for a chance at gold and glory and the expansion of church holdings.”

She sighed. “Those who already knew all that, I have no chance of swaying. So I must appeal instead to those among you who are still true Fatherites and beg you to turn from the poisoned council of corrupt priests. To see through their seductive suggestions that although Lagoth Zanta was not of the Swordfather, the Swordfather somehow still worked through him. That the evil you would do to Caith in the here and now would benefit its people in the long run. That it is better for a heathen to die in the name of the Swordfather than to live without knowing his light. These things are lies! Holy sounding, but wholly false! Meant to

convince you that bad is good!”

“Paladin,” said the lector. “We asked you to convince us of your innocence, not preach a—”

“My brother is a good man!” shouted Isobel. “And yet he spouted these very same lies to me when I faced him, and he believed them with all his heart. Thus, I do not blame the faithful among you for believing them too. But let me say to you what I said to him, and then I will speak no more.”

She paused and looked around at them all, meeting their gazes.

“You have fallen into heresy, brothers. You forget that the Swordfather’s blade is only wielded against the strong in defense of the weak. And this entire enterprise wields his blade against the weak for the benefit of the strong. I beg you, turn around and go home. There is nothing for you in Caith but shame and dishonor.”

There was silence until the old lector grunted.

“Is the sermon over, then?” he asked. “Well, that’s a relief. Now, let me ask again the question you did not answer. You claimed Lagoth Zanta treacherously wounded your brother, and that he died for that treachery. What proof can you give us that this is true?”

“Lagoth Zanta wounded my brother by poisoning his heart, just as he poisoned yours,” said Isobel. “The proof of that is that my ‘sermon,’ as you call it, has fallen on deaf ears. I have nothing more to say.”

“That’s it,” muttered Gillan. “We’re dead.”

The lector sighed, then stood and looked around at the generals. “I was willing to give this young woman the benefit of the doubt because she is a paladin and sister to General Ingram, but nothing I have heard from her has convinced me that she and her comrades are not the saboteurs we were told to expect, and that they have not killed our leader. I say we deal with them as all saboteurs are dealt with, and then continue as planned. Are there any objections?”

There was silence. Then, just as the lector was about to speak again, someone cleared their throat. The assembly

looked around. A young lieutenant squirmed in his seat.

"I . . . I admit that some of the paladin's words rang true to me. I too have wondered if we have allied ourselves with ungodly men for the sake of power. Never have I looked at Lagoth Zanta and thought, there stands a man of faith."

"I have felt the same," said an older man. "Often since we began this undertaking have I lain awake, wondering if we are sacrificing too much for victory."

There were nods from a few others among the group, but the lector was having none of it.

"The time to voice such concerns, brothers and sisters, was before we assembled our troops and marched them to the border. There is no turning back now! Our agents have softened the ground for us across the border. We must march while chaos still reigns!"

"You asked if there were any objections," said the young lieutenant. "And now you will not hear them?"

"I asked if anyone had any objections to executing the prisoners!" barked the lector. "I was not asking for a discussion on the merits of our mission!"

"But—"

The lector slammed his fist on the arm of his chair. "There are no buts! If you will not march, then you are a traitor, and you will join the paladin and her comrades on the gibbet."

"Wait," croaked a voice.

Everyone turned. Ingrim was sitting up on the table, clutching his head.

"Brother!" cried Isobel.

"General," said the lector. "I am relieved to see you recovered. We were just—"

"My sister and her comrades must go free," said Ingrim. "And we must not march."

The lector glared. "General, they killed Lagoth Zanta. They are the saboteurs—"

"They are the righteous," said Ingrim, lowering his feet to the floor. "And we are not."

“General,” said the lector. “As the temple’s representative, I must—”

Ingrim waved him silent as he stood and looked around at the assembled commanders. “When we faced each other earlier, my sister spoke to me as she did to you just now, and like you, I refused to listen. Indeed, to my eternal shame, I fought her. My men and I were stronger, better armed, better warded, and we outnumbered her and her friends, and yet she defeated us, not by trickery, or black magic, or stealing sacred relics, but by her faith in the Swordfather. She prayed to him as she fought and his power coursed through her, setting her hammer aglow and giving her inhuman strength.”

He faced the lector. “That is the proof you sought, lector. If the Swordfather gave Isobel strength against her own brother, if he allowed her and her companions to defeat the most powerful sorcerer of this age, then it is she and her cause he favors, and we and our cause that are wrong.”

The lector raised a pointed finger. “But—”

“There are, as you said earlier, no buts,” Ingrim said. “We often ask the Swordfather for a sign that we are doing the right thing. I do not believe he has ever given us a clearer sign that we are not.”

“This is madness!” cried the lector. “You are bewitched! Taken in by the pagan magics of your sister’s companions. Comrades, for his own good, we must subdue General Ingrim.” He raised his staff of office. “Help me, before his madness spreads to the troops.”

Two generals and one lieutenant cheered and crossed to his side, but they grew silent when they saw the rest of the commanders had stayed where they were.

“You see,” said Ingrim, calmly. “We are divided. No army can succeed when it is at war with itself. Let us return home and ask the Council of Bishops to convene. I feel it might be time to talk among ourselves about the state of the church.”

He bowed to the lector and his compatriots. “Brothers, I’m afraid I must ask for your weapons.”

Gillan thought there might be a brawl at that, but all the fight seemed to have gone out of the lector, and he handed over his staff without a word.

A moment later, the shackles had been taken off Isobel and the others, and Ingram bowed before her.

“Sister,” he said. “Forgive me for . . . everything. I have been beglamoured. And much harm has come of it.”

“I am only glad that you have returned to yourself before it was too late,” said Isobel.

“Will you join me?” Ingram asked. “You can see that I need a level head and a true heart at my side to keep me safe from the perils of heresy, and a strong right arm to keep me safe from . . .”

He trailed off and shot a meaningful glance at the other generals.

Isobel shook her head. “Thank you, brother, but I cannot. I took a vow of errantry, and I have not yet discharged it. There are many more good deeds yet to be done.”

Ingram gave her a quizzical look, then shrugged. “Very well, sister. You must follow your faith as you see fit. But please, before you go, let me make amends to you and your friends by inviting you to dinner.”

Isobel looked around at Gillan and the others, then smiled. “I can see by the hungry faces behind me that it would be cruel not to accept your offer. Thank you, brother.”

“Aye,” said Gillan. “Thank ye kindly.”

Two days later, the Lestradae armies finished packing up and started marching south once again. A week after that, Rhodri finally finished reforging the Destiny Wand properly. And a week after that, Gillan and the others walked into Fettercairn, halfway through their journey to Tillicolt to return the wand to the Council of Lords where it belonged.

When they had been there last, Dargoth’s tower had just appeared in the middle of the slums, and the Fatherites

had been trying to use the crisis to turn the mob against the mayor. It had looked like the city might destroy itself.

Now work crews were bashing at the evil tower with iron mattocks and the mayor was addressing a crowd in the town square, assuring them all that the crisis was over and that everything was being done to return things to normal as quickly as possible.

But the Fatherites were still in evidence. Outside a small temple, a Fatherite priest was speaking to a few parishioners. "It was a paladin of the Swordfather who saved Caith, you know. Despite what anyone else tells you, the Destiny Wand was restored and the Lestradae repelled by the Fatherites, and don't you forget it."

Gillan sighed as they continued on. "Canny bastards, aren't they? Be runnin' things before y'know it."

"Bollocks," said Dag. "In a hundred and fifty years, nobody'll even remember 'em."

"Do you wish evil upon us, friend Dag?" asked Isobel.

Dag ducked his head, sheepish. "Sorry. No offense."

"None taken."

"You know," said Coira, smirking toward Isobel's broad back. "If the sword priests do take over, it'll be because of our Izzy. She's the one the bards will be singing about when they've forgotten the rest of us."

"Aye," said Gillan. "Been composin' a song like that in my head as we've been walkin'. I just need a rhyme for *destiny*."

The End