

The Bard's Tale

BASED ON THE FIRST GAME IN THE CLASSIC SERIES



Nathan Long

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by

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Chapter One

On the night the ice encircled Skara Brae, a beautiful woman came to the Scarlet Bard to hear Gillan the harper sing and play. Though she hid herself in a cloak of green, her face, peeking out from beneath her hood, was fairer than any Gillan had ever seen, even—though he dared not say it—that of his wife.

She stood at the back, guarded by two stern-faced fellows in brigandine, and seemed to hang on every word of every song, calling neither for wine nor ale, but paying coin to MacComb the landlord to be left alone to listen.

And when Gillan had sung his last song and joined his wife Maidie for a well-deserved pint and pastie, the lady came to their table and begged to join them, though, in truth, she looked only at Gillan when she asked.

“Y’ may do as you like,” said Gillan, then looked past her at her guards. “But ’tis a little tight for three more.”

“Oh, my men will stand,” said she, then sat and held his gaze with eyes as green as spring leaves. “I was told, harper, that you had the most beautiful voice in all of Caith,

and, faith, it was no tale. Never have I heard a singer such as you. Never has my heart been so touched by a song.”

“Yer most kind, I’m sure,” Gillan murmured, then had to stare very hard at the ale in his cup to break the spell of her eyes, which seemed to be promising him both a love as pure and eternal as a mother’s, and another, wilder love, quite a lot less pure. Even with his wife sitting right beside him, it was hard not to imagine lying back on summer grass and gazing up as the lady, no longer in her green cloak, sank down upon him.

Her slim hand on his sleeve sent shivers to his every extremity and he pulled away, but her voice made him tremble too, a low, soft purr as intimate as a kiss on the neck. There was no escaping.

A glossy coil of auburn hair escaped her hood as she leaned closer. “I’d fain my sisters heard you sing, but they are not so free to travel. Would you come and sing for us in our hall? I shall take you there myself, and pay you a purse of gold for the pleasure.”

Stirred as he was by her charms, it was all Gillan could do not to leap from his chair and tell her to lead the way. The most beautiful woman in the world and her sisters, no doubt just as fair, wanted him to give them pleasure? It would take a stronger man than he to say no to that.

A sharp pain in the shin woke him from this dream, and he suddenly remembered Maidie, and the particular pointiness of her shoes.

“Er, well,” said he. “It sounds lovely, mistress. But I’ll have t’ask my wife. She travels with me wherever I play.”

The lady in green looked surprised. “You have a wife? Does she sing and play as well?”

“No, she does not,” said Maidie, crossing her arms. “What she does is keep the landlords honest, the tips safe, and Gillan out of trouble. And you, my dainty darling, look like trouble by the bushel-load.”

Gillan frowned at Maidie. In her own way, she too was a beauty—a full-lipped, full-hipped Einarr lass, with all

the blonde hair, blue eyes, buxom health, and broad shoulders that went with it, and a flashing wit besides. But compared side by side with the lady in green, she suddenly seemed a rough catch—crude, over-ripe, and sunburnt, where the lady was delicate, fine, and as pale as moonlight.

“Oh, but I could not impose *two* guests upon my sisters,” said the lady, and Gillan noted she still had not looked once upon Maidie. “You would have to come alone, dearest harper, or not at all.”

Maidie snorted. “And there it is, husband, laid bare before my face. The choice every man makes at least once in a marriage, and bards more than once. Wife or fancy. Her or me.”

“Why, there’s no need to make a choice,” said the lady. “You shall play for us for but a night, harper, and return to your wife in the morning, as much her husband as you ever were.”

“Meaning, my love,” said Maidie, “that it will be for you to be strong, for she and her sisters shall do their best to discover just how much of a husband you have been to me until now.”

“Time grows short, harper,” said the lady in green. “I must soon away. Make your decision.”

Gillan’s head spun. The lady’s unspoken promises aroused his passions like they hadn’t risen since he was half his age and twice as handsome. She was the dream of perfect love that had driven him to write every ballad he’d ever sung. She was the spirit of romance embodied. What did Maidie have to offer compared to that?

Well, loyalty, he supposed. Constancy. Affection and companionship. A pleasant bit of rough and tumble every now and then. But that was all so familiar. So uninspiring. Not at all the sort of thing bards wrote ballads about. And it had been a long time since he’d written a truly great ballad.

He was about to tell his wife he would see her in the morning when a voice in the back of his head reminded him that all the truly great ballads were about unrequited love,

and perhaps what the two women thought of *him* might be just as important as what he thought of *them*.

"If I must make a decision," he said at last, "then I must first have an answer from each of you."

"And the question?" asked the lady.

"The definition of love," said Gillan.

The lady smiled and touched his arm again and looked deep into his eyes. "Love is the flame undying, the eternal bond, the ache of wanting that drives one to do anything—*anything*—to be with one's lover. For love, one would forsake family, honor, duty, and life itself, for within love are all those things, and without it, none."

Gillan's heart thudded like a drum in his chest at the poetry and passion of her words. It took all his will to tear his eyes from her and turn to Maidie.

"Wife?" he asked.

She leaned back in her chair and rolled her eyes. "I'll tell you what love is, y'poor besotted fool. Love is you farting in bed and me still wanting to have a go—after ten years of it! That's what love is. Now make up your mind. Her ladyship's horses are waiting."

Gillan laughed, and woke a little. The lady was beautiful, and no doubt a deep and sensitive soul, but could she have made a joke like that at a time like this? Could she joke at all?

He looked back at her, and her eyes caught him once again. Did jokes matter? Were they even appropriate when love was sacred? Was a sacred love complete without them?

He had not been expecting to make such an important decision that evening, and he suddenly found it was making him angry. Who was forcing this on him?

Ah. Yes.

He sat back and faced them both. "I've made my decision. I choose—"

A sound at the edge of his hearing made him pause. A cracking, like wood breaking or bones snapping, and the air turned suddenly cold.

Gillan looked toward the inn door, wondering if someone had opened it and let in a draft, but what was he thinking? It was high summer. Even after sunset the night breezes were balmy. At least they had been. Now a chill filled the tavern from every open window, and the wind moaned outside them. Everyone in the place had gone silent, staring around in confusion as the cracking sound grew rapidly to thunder, then stopped with a final shuddering crash.

“Smith’s hammer, what was that?” asked Maidie.

“A door closing,” said the lady in green. She stood and pulled her cloak more tightly around her shoulders, then turned to her men. “Come. We must go.”

It seemed she’d forgotten Gillan and his singing in an instant.

Before she’d made it more than halfway to the door, there were screams in the distance and the ring of steel on steel. This seemed only to speed her steps, while it brought the rest of the tavern to its feet and broke the spell of silence that had held it since the crash. The patrons began jabbering uneasily at each other.

“Are we being attacked?”

“No one’s rung the bell.”

“Sounded like it came from the plaz.”

“I’m home t’fetch my helm and spear.”

“A sip for courage, lads, then we’re off.”

And with that, there was a general downing of drinks and hurrying toward the door.

Maidie picked up the iron-headed cudgel she kept to guard the cash box and motioned to Gillan.

“Come, husband. Let’s see what the trouble is.”

Gillan thought this a terrible idea. It had been his lifelong instinct to get as far away from trouble as he could. Trouble made him break out in sweats and stutter like a lovestruck schoolboy. But Maidie wasn’t stopping, so how could he? He hurried after her, his dinner knife in his hand and a whimper in his throat.

Chapter Two

Outside in the street, the patrons of the Scarlet Bard were scattering this way and that, some for home, some for the front gate, some for the Gran Plaz. A few, however, seemed rooted to the spot. Dag, the big Einarr chucker-out, stood staring, wonderstruck, up into the night sky as snowflakes dry as ash spun down and settled in his blond beard.

“Snow,” he said. “Snow with the wheat stalks still green.”

Maidie nudged him as she passed. “Come on, y’big oaf. Yer always on about wanting adventures. Seems there’s one just down the street.”

“But . . . but I haven’t my armor or sword,” he said.

Nevertheless, he fell in beside Gillan and they followed Maidie through the dark streets to the town gate. The sounds of fighting grew louder with each step, and the air colder, making them shiver and stumble and wring their numbing hands.

Then they rounded a last corner and Gillan forgot all about the cold. There was a fight of some sort happening

close by the gates, but what commanded his attention—what commanded the attention of all who stood around him in the street—was the great moon-white cliff of ice that towered above the town walls as far as he could see in either direction, curving in over them like a brace of dagger-sharp ice fingers reaching up to crush Skara Brae in their frigid grasp.

“Isbjorn’s tits,” said Maidie. “What is that?”

“Where did it come from?” asked Gillan.

“Is it all around the town?” asked Dag.

“S-someone’s got to tell Baron Harkyn,” said a man to their left, and he took off running back the way they’d come. A few others followed.

Gillan was about to suggest they go with them when Maidie pointed toward the fight at the gate.

“Looks like your lady love didn’t get out before the door closed.”

Gillan looked closer. It was true. The lady in green and her guards were fighting for their lives in the middle of a swirling swarm of sword and spear men—a dozen, at least.

But . . . *were* they men?

The lady’s opponents were short and hunched and clad in lumpy gray armor or—no. That was their skin. And the flapping ears and obscene noses weren’t the hardware of some weird helmets. Those were their actual noses and ears.

“Trow!” cried Gillan.

“Just like from the stories,” said Dag.

All around them people were gasping at the sight.

Maidie strode forward, readying her cudgel. “Well, come on, then.”

Some of the crowd edged after her, but Gillan hesitated, feeling that his little dinner knife was perhaps not equal to a fight with otherworldly creatures. Then he saw a sword on the ground, dark against the thin dusting of snow that already covered the streets. He hurried toward it, but balked as he noticed the bloody corpse clutching it.

“T-that’s old man Brude!”

“And here’s Mare from the market,” said Dag,

who had run for a spear and found himself surrounded by butchered bodies. “And Rory and Haf. Sentry protect us, there’s a dozen dead here. The little bastards have killed them all!”

The sight of so many friends and neighbors dead nearly paralyzed Gillan, but fear spurred him on again as he saw Maidie wading into the trow as if she were head to toe in armor and had an army at her back instead of a few poorly armed townsfolk. He snatched the sword from Brude’s corpse and raced after her, howling what he hoped was a terrifying war cry. Dag was only a step behind him, stabbing with his spear as he called on Dagsjar, the Einarr god of the day, for strength and courage.

Gillan had never killed before, not even when he’d served in the baron’s muster. He’d finagled a job in the mess tent cooking porridge and had never seen action. The few lessons he’d been given back then on how to use a sword were twenty years gone now, and even had they been fresh in his mind and muscles, seeing the blade you’re swinging chop into the neck of an unsuspecting enemy and having its blood spray in your face as its screams batter your ears is an unsettling experience the first time it happens, and Gillan felt his ale and half-finished pastie rising in his throat as the trow’s blood dripped from his chin.

But there was no time for nausea. The first trow had had its back to him. The second was turning and leaping, shrieking and stabbing. Gillan knocked its spear aside with a panicked backhand, and the trow slammed into him, shoulder to shoulder, sending him stumbling sideways.

Someone behind him kicked the thing’s teeth in, and Gillan faced the next trow, slashing wildly to keep it at arm’s length. Ahead of him, Maidie was bashing right and left with her cudgel like a hero out of some old Gotten sea saga, crushing trow skulls and sending trow teeth flying with every swipe. Dag had a trow spitted on his spear and was trying to wrench it free before another attacked him. Beyond him, one of the green lady’s guards was down, and the other

was fighting only with his left arm, as his right dangled limp and laid-open at his side.

The lady herself was doing some kind of sinuous dance, spinning and moving her hands in graceful patterns, which somehow seemed to stop the trow from hurting her. Though the little monsters struck straight for her, their attacks always skewed aside, and they seemed slower and more clumsy around her.

“More are coming!” shrieked a woman behind Gillan.

He glanced over his shoulder. Out of the streets and back alleys of Skara Brae boiled a tide of gibbering shadows. More trow. Dozens more. Just when it had seemed they might finish off the ones who had been terrorizing the lady.

“Where are they all coming from?” wailed a man.

“And where are the town guards?” asked another.

In his fear and confusion, Gillan hadn’t noticed, but the fellow was right. He hadn’t seen any of the baron’s guards since they’d left the tavern—not even among the dead. Where were they? Why weren’t they protecting the town? Had they fallen back to the castle?

The trow reinforcements swarmed the knot of villagers, hacking and stabbing at them in a crazed frenzy. Blood crusted their weapons, armor, and teeth, and one of them wore a rawhide cord around its neck, strung with human ears. They must have been roaming the city, slaughtering anyone they could find.

Gillan found himself fighting with his wife on his left and a stout young dwarf with a long red plaited beard on his right. The dwarf wore a sheathed sword strapped to his back, but instead of drawing it, he swung a long-handled axe. No battle cries or angry oaths from him—just sure strokes and silent savagery.

The same could not be said for Gillan. His years of easy living were showing in the weariness of his arms and the sloppiness of his sword work. He nearly nicked Maidie with a wild parry, then took a cut to the shoulder as the trow

he had been trying to gut slipped its spear past his guard.

He cried out and thrust unsteadily at the little monster, but a hand on his collar yanked him back behind the front line. He stabbed blindly behind him, fearing it another throw, but it was the lady in green, hissing in his ear.

“Desist, harper! Stop fighting and start singing!”

“Singing?” Gillan struggled to free himself from her grip. “This is no time for singing! I must—”

“You must leave the fighting to the fighters. You are a singer. Encourage them with song!”

“What difference will that make? I—”

“It will make all the difference in the world. Did I not say that you have a voice to touch hearts? Now sing!”

Gillan looked around. Though his friends and neighbors—and the strangers among them—were fighting valiantly, the throw outnumbered them two to one, and pressed them back on all sides. It felt wrong not to fight beside them, but perhaps the lady was right. If nothing else, staying out of the way might keep the others safe from his incompetent flailing, so why not sing?

With a guilty shrug he cleared his throat and started singing the old camp song “Falkentyne’s Fury,” about a hero who held a door against a thousand foes. His voice faltered at first, and he wished he had a drink to loosen his tongue, but it came clearer as he continued, and to his wonder, it seemed to help. The townsfolk, who a moment ago had looked as weary and hopeless as Gillan felt, were now standing straighter and fighting harder. Some were even singing along.

Still, it wasn’t going to be enough. Though the throw fell more often than they had before, more always filled in the gaps, and they didn’t seem to tire. Indeed, they seemed driven by some unnatural goad that made them mad with rage, like cats with flaming brands tied to their tails. No amount of singing was going to keep the townsfolk alive long enough to outlast them.

Then, just as Gillan was coming around to the last chorus and wondering if he had enough spit left to sing it all

over again, a miracle happened—or possibly two miracles, as they didn't seem to be working in concert. First, from the alley that led to Dilvish Street, arrows sped into the backs of the trow, causing them to squawk and turn and stumble, and giving those who fought them openings to cut them down. Second, pounding out of Archer Street like an iron juggernaut was a woman in the tabard and plate of a knight who made Maidie look petite.

“Mighty Father! Blessed Daughter! Give me strength!”

She plowed into the trow, swinging a stone-headed warhammer that looked like it weighed as much as Gillan. It knocked trow flying in twos and threes, and the rest turned, snarling and stabbing, to face her. But caught between the woman and the townsfolk and the arrows from the alley, they did not last long, and the battle that Gillan had feared would last the rest of his life was suddenly over.

Around him, survivors fell to their knees in weary relief, while others shrieked and wept and clutched the bodies of fallen husbands, wives, sons, and daughters. Gillan squeezed through them to where Maidie stood hunched, hands on her knees, moaning and sucking air like a bellows.

“Maidie,” he said, putting a hand on her shoulder. “Ye were magnificent. Had ye a sword, I swear y’could have taken ’em all down by yer—”

She looked up at him and his blather faltered. Her normally ruddy face was ghost white but for her lips, which were blue and flecked with blood.

“Maidie! What’s the matter? Are ye—?”

“I’m all right, husband,” she breathed. “I’m all right.”

She tried to straighten up but wobbled on her feet. Gillan caught her and helped her to sit.

“Of course y’are,” he said sharply. “How could ye be anything but all right? There’s never been a time when y’weren’t all right. You—”

He stopped as he saw her front for the first time. A deep gash had opened her up from ribs to hip, and the blood

from it had soaked her skirts to her knees.

She reached for him. "Gillan. Listen."

He caught her hands. "Aye, Maidie?"

She closed her eyes and sighed and said nothing more.

"Maidie?" said Gillan. "Maidie!"

He shook her, but she did not wake, and suddenly felt twice as heavy in his arms.

"Maidie!"

A slim hand touched his shoulder. "I am sorry, harper."

Gillan slapped the hand away and stood to face the lady in green. "Don't touch me, witch! It was you pulled me away from her! I could have saved her!"

"You could not," said she. "She had the wound before you fought at her side."

"Liar!" Gillan balled his fist. "Y'only say it to absolve yourself. Yer still trying to woo me to—"

A great sob stopped him as the thought reminded him of what had come before, and he put his hands over his face. "I . . . I never told her. I never—"

He dropped to his knees and pulled Maidie's dead weight again into his arms. "Maidie, I chose you. Do you hear me? You! I would never have left you! Never!"

The lady in green had the sense not to intrude. It didn't save her from Gillan's wrath. He looked up, snarling.

"My last moments with my wife, forever sullied by some stupid game with you! Get out of my sight, witch! Go back to yer damned sisters!"

The lady backed away, an unreadable look on her perfect face, then turned and looked up at the wall of ice that loomed over the city walls.

"Would that I could, harper," she said. "Would that I could."

Chapter Three

“Hundreds dead. Perhaps a thousand. The old. The young. Babes in their cribs. They spared no one.”

“And they’re still patrolling the town. Seem to be more of them every time I peek out the window.”

“This must not go unanswered.”

“Aye, but who’s t’do the answering? ’Tain’t trow behind this. And whoever sicced them on us hasn’t shown their face.”

“A sorcerer, that’s certain. This ice is an enchantment beyond any I have seen.”

“Someone said a black tower appeared in the southwest corner of the town overnight. Thirty houses vanished. All the folk too, and this tower suddenly in their place.”

“What I want to know is, where’s the baron in all of this? Where is Sage Kylearan? Skara Brae attacked, and no one to defend it but townsfolk and travelers. It’s not right.”

“We must pray to the Swordfather for guidance.”

“You pray all you want, lass. I’m for knocking on the

door of this baron and calling him a coward to his face.”

Gillan groaned and pried his eyes open. There was a ceiling of beams and smoke-darkened plaster above him, and hard wood beneath him. He raised his head and felt his stomach rising with it. With a violent convulsion he rolled over and vomited off the side of the trestle table he was lying on—then fell off the table into the spreading pool. It reeked of undigested whisky.

“Ah,” said a deep voice. “Your friend is up.”

Gillan heard the scrape of a stool, and then a pair of boots appeared beside him. A hand patted his arm.

“Back with us, Gillan?” It was Dag the bouncer’s voice.

“Where’m I?” Gillan croaked. His shoulder hurt horribly. He could almost remember why.

“The Adventurers’ Guild. I brought you here after you, uh . . . couldn’t walk.”

Gillan forced himself to think back through the swirling murk clogging his head, and immediately regretted it.

The ice. The battle. Maidie. Asking Dag to help him carry her to his house, then packing her in the knee-high snow of the yard to keep her until they could get to the cemetery, which lay outside the town walls.

After that, things got blurry, but he recalled tearing the house apart, looking for a bottle. He supposed he must have found it.

Dag’s big hands caught him under the arms and set him on his feet. “Come join us. We’re trying to make a plan, and you know Skara Brae better than any of us.”

Gillan looked around as Dag led him toward a crowded table littered with dirty plates and empty mugs. He’d been in the Adventurers’ Guild once or twice before, when someone had hired him for a song or a story, but it lost some of its rough glamour with the light of a gloomy dawn lancing through the cracks in the winter shutters. The ogre and troll heads mounted on the walls were dry and moth

eaten, and the swords and helms of the heroes of legend could have used some dusting, as could Mother Grim, the ancient and tiny landlady, who was tending the hearth, and who looked brittle enough that a harsh word would snap her in half. Gillan had always thought the place a clubhouse for tale-tellers better than he. Now it looked more like a garden shed made over as a castle by someone's dotty grandmother.

Dag pulled out a stool for him. "Here. I'll get you some hair of the dog."

Gillan glanced at his table-mates as he gingerly lowered himself to the stool. There was a wiry, dark-haired Fichti woman in furs and barbaric plaids, a bow propped against the wall behind her. The young dwarf Gillan had fought beside in the battle with the trow. The towering female paladin who had turned the tide of the fight with her hammer. And a lady in green, who—

Gillan staggered up again and pointed an accusing finger at her. "I'll not share any table with that witch! I told her to get out of my sight! I—"

Two things stopped him. The first was that she did not look the same as she had before. She was still a rare beauty, but it was a thinner, sharper beauty than she had shown him the night before, far less dreamlike and perfect, far less heart-thuddingly enthralling. Second, the hood of her cloak was down upon her shoulders, and he could now see that she had the delicate pointed ears of an elf.

His rage boiled afresh. "A night, y'said. Come sing for yer sisters for a night! Do y'think a harper doesn't know the songs of men who sang to the fair folk for a night and returned to their village to find a hundred years had passed? Y'meant worse than y'claimed, monster. Y'would have taken me from Maidie forever!"

The elf hung her head. "Not forever. I swear it."

Gillan sneered. "Y'll forgive me if I don't trust the pledge of an elf."

Dag came back with a mug of ale and a cold meat pie and set them before him. "Come on, Gillan. Lady Svante

isn't the one who sent those trow against us, and she can help us fight whoever did. We need her. She can do magic."

"Aye," said Gillan, shuddering. "I've felt it. Lady Svante indeed. Get her away from me."

"The ice traps us all," said the elf. "The sooner we defeat he who caused it, the sooner I shall leave you. And such a defeat will be more certain if we join together."

Gillan glared at her, trying to find fault with her words. Was she still beglamouring him? He couldn't tell. Finally, with an angry grunt, he dropped onto the stool and slumped against the table edge.

"Haven't changed my mind," he mumbled. "Just need t'sit."

The others watched in silence as he raised the mug of ale in both hands and took a greedy pull, then they turned back to their planning.

"The first thing we must do," said the big woman, "is to take stock of our situation—who still lives, where they are, where our enemies are, their numbers, our allies, if any, and whether there is a way out of Skara Brae the ice has not closed."

She was still wearing the armor she had fought in the night before, and the design on her tabard of a woman's hand raising a sword told Gillan she was a follower of the Swordfather and his daughter, the Blessed Lady, the religion of Lestras, the kingdom to the south of Caith. The cult had recently erected a temple in Skara Brae's square and had been trying to attract followers, though without much success. Their tenet that the Swordfather was the only god and all other gods and religions were heathen superstitions had not sat well with Baedish folk, who worshipped five gods of their own and acknowledged the existence of hundreds more.

Gillan took another swig. "Yer with the Fatherites, then? I thought you lot didn't believe in things like magical ice."

The woman pursed her lips. "Sister Isobel at your service, harper. And it isn't that we disbelieve in magic, but

that we find its practice an abomination.”

Lady Svante raised an eyebrow. “Then perhaps you do not wish to sit with me either.”

Sister Isobel looked uncomfortable. “The Swordfather says, ‘Take your allies where you find them.’”

Dag chuckled. “Isn’t the second half of that saying, ‘And keep them where you can see them?’”

Isobel flushed. “There is wisdom in it, is there not?”

The young Fichti woman threw a chicken bone into the fire and grabbed another to gnaw. She had a chin as sharp as an axe blade, and eyes to match. “Less talk about gods, and more about finding a way out of this trap. I’m late to join my kin at Tillicolt. Let’s do something!”

The dwarf nodded. “Aye. My business in Skara Brae is with Baron Harkyn. Until I complete it, I cannot return home. Let us go to his castle.”

Gillan leaned forward and pointed an unsteady finger at him. “You fought beside my wife last night. Did y’see which of those vermin cut her?”

The dwarf stiffened. “Rhodri, son of Berwyn, friend. And are you suggesting more vigilance on my part could have saved her? We fought our own battles. We made no pact to protect each other.”

Gillan frowned. “I never said y’did. I just want t’know that it died, that somebody killed it.”

“I believe I may have,” said the dwarf, then raised his hand. “But you must understand I owed her nothing. Nor she me.”

Gillan sighed. Dwarves were particular about debts, both of honor and business, and did not like to owe or be owed anything without contracts and handshakes. “Of course not, master dwarf. Of course not.”

He turned to the Fichti woman. “And yer the one who peppered the trow with arrows last night?”

The woman slapped her chest and gave him a wolfish grin. “Coira of Clan Red Deer, from the forest of Inshriach, and my arrows saved more lives than did the paladin’s

hammer and all her prayers. Took more lives too. Filthy, blackhearted trow.”

Sister Isobel raised her chin. “The Swordfather says, ‘Only the fearful boast.’”

“And would you like to know what I say to the Swordfather?” asked Coira, standing.

Dag banged the table. “No fighting!”

Gillan clutched his head and hissed through the pain. “Please. Dag. M’poor skull can’t stand it.”

“Sorry, Gil.”

Gillan squinted around at them all.

“I really, really, really need to stick my head in some snow, so what say we do as Sister Isobel suggested and take stock of the town, then go knock on the baron’s gate as Master Rhodri proposed?”

The others looked around at each other, then nodded. “Just a minute, dearies,” said Mother Grim from behind the bar. “There’s some cold-weather clothes in the stores. You don’t want to catch your deaths.”

“I doubt a cloak will make one bit of difference in that,” muttered Coira.

Nonetheless she took one, as did everyone else, when Mother Grim returned, tottering under a pile of cloaks larger than herself. They all pulled them on, shouldered their gear, and started for the front door.

Gillan thought he saw Maidie watching him from the bar as he followed them out, and he turned and looked back. It was just a line of daylight shining on a support post. It still broke his heart.

Chapter Four

Every house they peered into, every corner they turned, was another dagger in Gillan's heart. Though a few villagers had barricaded themselves inside the Scarlet Bard, and others hid in their homes, many houses had been put to the torch with the families inside, and most of Skara Brae's population was out in the street, half buried in the snow and very much dead.

He couldn't take it. He'd been born and raised here. He knew everyone in the town by name, and so many were dead. Here was Farmer Halsup, who came every market day to sell geese and eggs. There was Mistress Anne, the candle maker, and there her husband, Will, who braided ship rope. Children he saw every day, playing in the streets, begging him for songs and dirty jokes, were now dead in the corners they had hidden in.

The party had started their trek by crossing the street to Garth's Equipment Shop, hoping to augment their meager collection of weapons. The place was sacked—the front door smashed in, and the armor and weapons usually on display stolen, but when Garth heard their voices, he opened up the

strongroom where he'd weathered the assault and showed them what he still had.

"Not going to bother cleaning up until things get back t'normal," he said, "but I'll stay open if you need anything else. Just knock three times so I know who it is."

They walked from there to the Scarlet Bard, where MacComb the landlord shouted from behind the barricades that all inside were as safe and well as could be expected. Then they started a circuit of the walls, looking for gaps in the ice. They found none. Nor did they meet any trow, though their footprints were everywhere, fresh atop the impossible midsummer snow.

In the northeast corner of the town they stopped before Kylearan's tower, the gate of which was locked tight. Kylearan was the great sage employed by Baron Harkyn to keep the town safe from sorcerous attacks of just this kind, but no one the party talked to had seen him since the walls of ice had risen, and there was no sign of him here either. The tower was silent and dark, with no lights in the windows, no smoke from its chimney, and no answer when they pounded on the heavy door at the base. Even stranger, they saw no evidence that the trow had even attempted to sack it.

It was the same at Baron Harkyn's castle in the northwest corner. The windows were dark, the gates locked tight, the high walls unmanned, and no one answered a knock or hail. And much to the dismay of Gillan's aching morning head, Rhodri did his absolute best, pounding on the gate with the butt of his axe and shouting up to the walls.

"I am Rhodri Forgesworn of the Haernhold, bound by Master Armorer Arnall to deliver the sword that Baron Harkyn bid him make. I am not free of this duty until the baron has taken the sword. I beg you, allow me to show him the sword!"

He growled when there was no answer. "But for this baron's refusal to see me yester-morn, I would have completed the transaction and been away before any of this happened."

“Then I thank the fates his lordship spurned you,” said Lady Svante. “For it is unlikely we who fought at the gate last night would have survived without your help.”

The dwarf grunted. “Like I told the bard, I fought to protect myself. No one else. I owe no one, and no one owes me. Is that clear?”

The elf inclined her head. “Perfectly, master dwarf.”

Coira laughed. “At least you’re stuck here for a good reason. My kin and I sold all our pelts yesterday and they all set off back to the Inshriach, but I met a likely lad at the inn and told ’em I’d catch up tomorrow.” She hung her head. “Now that likely lad has a trow spear through his heart, and I’m stuck in a nightmare.”

Isobel sniffed. “It is as the Swordfather teaches. Weaknesses of the flesh lead only to misery.”

Coira’s hackles rose. “Listen, you overgrown prude, I don’t ask you what you do with your hammer when you’re alone, so don’t tell me—”

“How dare you speak such filth in my presence?” shouted Isobel. “You will withdraw that calumny—”

“Ladies, please,” said Gillan, stepping between them. “Save it for the trow, eh?”

The wiry Fichti and the big Fatherite stared each other down for a long moment, then turned away.

“Fine,” said Isobel.

“I will if she will,” said Coira.

“Good,” said Gillan. “Then what do we do now?”

Dag looked up at the castle. “Do you suppose Kylearan and the baron were attacked before the rest of us? Maybe they’re all dead in there, killed before we even knew anything was afoot.”

“That’s a more charitable explanation than the one I had in mind,” said Gillan.

“You think they hide from their duties?” asked Rhodri.

Gillan shrugged. “I know I would.”

Isobel gave him a cold look. “I will remember not to

ask you to watch my back, then.”

“There is dark magic at work within,” said Svante. “Here and in Sage Kylearan’s tower. I sense it.”

“Can you sense who is wielding this magic?” asked Coira. “Or what it is?”

The elf shook her head. “That is hidden.”

“The answer,” said the dwarf, “is likely to be found in the tower that appeared on Tempest Street overnight, if that is not just a rumor.”

Gillan sighed. “Let’s go see, then.”

The tower was no rumor. Surrounded by a palisade of black stone walls, it loomed high above Tempest Street like a dark sentinel, a great crenelated stronghold with a red beacon burning behind the arrow slits at the top. Other than that, however, it was as monolithic and impassive as the baron’s castle and Kylearan’s tower. No troops guarded it. No one answered Gillan’s halloos. Both Rhodri and Isobel hacked and hammered at the locked gates in the surrounding wall, but they didn’t even make a dent.

“Dark magic here as well,” said Svante. “And stronger. This is the source of it all.”

“So how do we get in?” asked Coira.

“Wait for someone to come out?” suggested Dag.

Coira pointed to the snow in front of the gates. It was unblemished. “Nobody comes out. If this is where the trow live, they use another gate.”

“Maybe underground,” said Rhodri, stroking his beard.

“And how do we get underground?” asked Isobel.

“There’s a door to the old sewers in the cellar of the Scarlet Bard,” said Dag. “We throw the table scraps and cracked cups through it.” He smiled. “And sometimes a young lady will follow me down there and—”

“Please,” said Isobel. “Spare us. Let’s go.”

The rest of the party started away from the tower and trudged back toward the tavern, but Gillan couldn't stop looking at it. "This was a neighborhood," he said to no one in particular. "A score of families. My cousin Aiden . . . Standing in this spot yesterday, I would have been at his front door. And now . . ."

He shivered, then turned after the others.

MacComb the landlord unbarred the door of the Scarlet Bard and waved them in.

"Hurry! Hurry! Yer fools t'be out there. I'm glad y've come to yer senses."

"We haven't though, Coll," said Gillan, rubbing his hands. "These fine folk want t'go through yer cellar door and see if we can find where the trow are coming from."

MacComb stared at him, as did the frightened townsfolk huddled around the tables.

"Yer mad," said MacComb. "We put all the ale casks in front of that door so the vicious little bastards couldn't get in, and now y'want to open it?"

"You can close it behind us," said Isobel. "We'll find another way out."

"Or," sighed Coira, "we'll be killed."

MacComb shook his bald head. "'Tis your own lives, I suppose, but if y'ask me, ye'd be better off waiting for the baron."

"Don't think he's coming," said Dag.

As Dag led the way to the cellar, the landlord stepped in front of Gillan. He held Gillan's harp, which he'd left there the night before, when he and everyone else had run out into the street to see what all the noise was. "Come, harper, yer not a fighting man. Y'don't need to go with them. Play us a song instead."

Gillan took the harp and looked around the room. It was a tempting offer, staying here and giving aid and comfort

to these frightened folk, but at last he shook his head. "I'd like to, Coll, but the trow took Maidie from me. I can't let that stand."

Chapter Five

Holding aloft a lantern on the cellar steps with MacComb hovering uneasily at his shoulder, Gillan marveled at the strength of Rhodri and Isobel, who were heaving aside heavy ale casks as if they weighed no more than loaves of bread. The landlord and his crew had stacked them along the back wall of the cold room, completely hiding the low door that opened into the sewers, but now, as the dwarf and the paladin worked, it was slowly revealed again.

No one at the Scarlet Bard knew why the door was there. It had just always been, used, as Dag had said, for tossing out scraps or furtive fumblings in the dark. Gillan and Maidie had used it more than a few times between sets for just that purpose.

Gillan sighed. Everything was going to remind him of Maidie, wasn't it?

Yes. Yes, it was.

With two more rows of casks to clear, Svante held up a hand. "Hold. Do you hear it?"

Isobel set a cask down as quietly as she could and

paused as they all listened. A muffled clank, like an echo of her action, followed almost immediately. It sounded like it was coming from behind the door.

Dag, who was closest, put an ear to the door, then frowned. "Someone's knocking around out there," he whispered. "I can hear them shushing each other. And giggling."

Beside Gillan, MacComb squeaked. "Put the barrels back! Hurry!"

Rhodri shook his head and picked up another cask. "Not a chance. This means we're on the right track." He looked up at Isobel, who loomed beside him. "Paladin, do you think you can hold one of these over your head?"

"For a moment, perhaps," said she.

The dwarf grinned. "A moment will be enough. Let's clear the rest, and you and I will keep a barrel each."

As they resumed, MacComb whimpered and ran back up the stairs, then slammed the cellar door and locked it.

"We've been left to our fates, friends," said Gillan.

Coira sneered. "Typical Baedish cowardice."

She joined Gillan on the stairs and readied an arrow while Svante backed into the shadows of the cellar, murmuring under her breath and making motions with her hands.

"Do you know any Fichti songs, harper?" asked Coira. "'The Bear in the Woods?' 'Mother Hazel and Father Oak?'"

"Er, I know 'The Traveler's Tune.'"

"Aye, that's a good one. Sing it out, then. Cover our noise so they can't guess what we're about."

"If you insist."

Gillan pulled his harp around to his chest and began to pluck out the steady walking rhythm of the old tune. Then he sang, "A traveler am I, on the road to Anglesby, with a pack upon my back, and a teardrop in my eye . . ."

Rhodri and Isobel picked up the last two kegs, then

stepped back from the door and raised them above their heads.

“Dag,” said the dwarf. “Open it.”

Dag drew the sword he’d bought from Garth and stepped softly to the door, then grabbed the handle, took a deep breath, and yanked it open.

A cold wind blew into the cellar, followed immediately by a scrum of trow, all clawing to get through the narrow door at once.

“For Tarjan!” they shrilled. “For Mangar!”

“Now, paladin!” called Rhodri.

With a grunt, Isobel heaved her upraised cask at the first trow. It caught it high in the chest, knocking it back into the sewers with a squawk, and bowled down half a dozen of its fellows as well.

Dag laughed and started for the door, but Rhodri barked at him. “Wait!”

Dag held back, and more trow surged for the door, again jamming up as they tried to squirm through. Now Rhodri threw his cask. It caught the first trow in the head, knocking it cold, and smashing through the rest like a ball through nine-pins.

“Now, let ’em come to us,” said Rhodri, picking up his axe.

And in they came, shrieking and bloodied, but as they did, from the shadows, Lady Svante raised her hands and spoke a word in the elven tongue, and suddenly it was as if the trow were wading hip deep through molasses. Their steps and slashes were slowed, and they couldn’t keep their balance.

With foes so battered and beglamoured, it wasn’t a battle, it was a massacre. Rhodri, Isobel, and Dag cut them down like so much grass, and painted the cellar floor with their blood.

“That wasn’t much of a scrap,” said Coira, stepping down the stairs again. “I didn’t even get a shaft off.”

“Only a fool wants a fight.” said Rhodri, mopping

the gore from his boots with a rag. “A wise man wants only victory.”

And with that he squeezed into the sewers and began methodically dispatching all the groaning trow that had been broken by the casks he and Isobel had thrown.

“Cold-blooded little specimen, isn’t he?” murmured Gillan as he joined Coira at the edge of the coagulating lake of trow blood.

“It is the dwarf way,” sniffed Lady Svante, coming up behind them. “They care little for heroism.”

Gillan curled his lip. “And elves do?”

He ducked through the door without waiting for a reply, and joined Rhodri. The tunnel was wide and low, built of rough-cut stone, with twisted roots poking down through the cracks from above. It was also bone dry.

“Why does Skara Brae have sewers?” asked Coira. “You seem to throw all your shit in the street.”

“No one knows,” said Dag. “The tunnels don’t even go to the river, as far as I’ve heard.”

“The old stories say that some mad king had them built, long ago,” said Gillan. “But they were abandoned when he died and never finished.”

“Well, now they’re a high street for trow,” said Rhodri. “Let’s follow their spoor and kill them in their lair.”

“And maybe also find a way out of this stinking city,” muttered Coira.

Coira took the lead, using her skills as a hunter to follow the trail of the trow through the maze of tunnels, while the rest followed along, weapons out, straining their senses for any signs of danger lurking beyond the lantern glow.

The more he traveled through the tunnels, the less Gillan could see them as sewers. Though he had called them that all his life, now that Coira had reminded him of the tale of the king who had dug them, it seemed obvious they had been meant to serve some other purpose. But what? Why

were there carved stone snakes everywhere? Why the fancy arches and weird stone faces? They certainly served no useful purpose as plumbing.

His ruminations were interrupted by a sudden sob from Dag, who walked beside him.

“What’s the matter, lad?” Gillan asked.

Dag shook his head and wiped his nose on his sleeve. “I . . . I was just thinking how I’d tell my uncle about this, as he’s always loved stories about brave deeds and all. Then I remembered we found him dead in the street last night when I was helping you carry Maidie home.”

With so many horrors clamoring for his attention, Gillan had forgotten, but now it came back. “Aye. That’s right. Old Sven loved it when I sang the hero songs. ‘Grand,’ he’d say. ‘That’s a grand tale, harper. Sing it again.’”

Dag wiped his eyes. “They’re not so grand when you’re living ’em, are they? They never talk so much about people’s uncles and wives dying. Or how you just want to . . . to cry all the time.”

Gillan put a hand on the big man’s arm, then swallowed so he wouldn’t start crying too. “That’s the thing about adventures. Generally, nobody has one unless something really horrible has happened. Oh, the bards will sing that the hero rode off to fight the dragon or rescue the princess because he was noble and valiant and it was the right thing to do, but really, people don’t go charging into dangerous situations unless they have no other choice, or unless the dragon or giant or whatever it was killed their uncle or . . . or wife, or . . .”

At that he did choke up, and Dag put a hand on *his* arm. It was almost a relief when Coira waved urgently from the front.

“Quiet,” she said. “Trow ahead.”

“And behind,” said Lady Svante, looking back. “We have been found.”

“Quick,” said Rhodri. “Find a side tunnel.”

“We just passed a room on the right,” said Isobel.

“Back to it!”

They hurried back to the room, which was really more of an alcove. It had a crumbling bas relief of a stone face in the back wall, and shards of broken pottery all over the floor. They barely fit inside.

“This isn’t a room, paladin!” said Gillan. “This is a closet!”

“It looked bigger when I—”

“Hush!” snapped Lady Svante. “Let me work.”

Gillan was tempted to ask her if she intended to invite all the trow back to her hall to sing for her sisters, but he kept quiet and watched as, while the shuffle of trow boots got louder from both directions, the elf murmured to herself and sifted light through her fingers like it was sand. Finally, just as Gillan and the others were starting to mutter and ready their weapons because the footsteps were getting so close, she stepped out of the alcove and spread her hands to the right and left, sending a ripple of glittering light spreading up and down the corridor.

Instantly, the trow in both directions roared and started charging forward.

Gillan squealed in terror. “What have you done, you mad witch? You’ve enraged them!”

“Ready yourselves!” called Rhodri.

“Be silent and wait!” said the elf.

Before the words were fully out of her mouth, the howling trow appeared before the door of the alcove, but to the wonder of Gillan and the rest, they did not pour in. Instead, the two groups clashed together like mortal enemies, hacking and slashing and biting at each other in a savage frenzy, and screaming once again, “For Tarjan! For Mangar!”

“What are they doing?” asked Isobel, dumbfounded.

“A simple illusion,” said Lady Svante. “They each think the other is us. But it won’t last long. You must strike while they remain confused.”

“Sorcery,” the paladin muttered, but when Rhodri

called the charge, she smashed into the flanks of the trow battle right beside Dag and the dwarf, while Coira stood back and fired arrows into trow heads and necks from almost point-blank range.

It didn't seem like they needed a song, but Gillan gave them one anyway, just so he wouldn't feel like he was standing around doing nothing—another chorus of “The Traveler’s Tune.”

The trow woke to the real enemy as soon as the party attacked, but by then it was far too late. Already wounded and engaged, they could not even begin to defend themselves, and they fell by the handful.

A few, however, managed to squirm behind the party’s front line and stab at them from behind. Coira shot two of them, and Gillan kicked the last in the small of the back so it bungled its swing. Isobel stomped its head flat with an iron-shod boot. And then it was over, with everyone standing knee deep in dead trow and catching their breath.

“A neat trick, elf,” said Rhodri, nodding to Svante.

She shrugged. “It is not much to make those who hate hate a little more.”

“Who is this Tarjan they keep calling on?” asked Dag. “And the other name. Mangar, was it? I’ve never—”

“KNOW THIS!” boomed a voice from behind them, and Gillan and the others jumped like scalded cats.

It was the stone face in the alcove’s back wall talking, its lips opening and closing like the jaws of a nutcracker. “THAT A MAN CALLED TARJAN, THOUGHT BY MANY TO BE INSANE, HAD, THROUGH WIZARDLY POWERS, PROCLAIMED HIMSELF A GOD IN SKARA BRAE A HUNDRED YEARS AGO!”

The party stared at the face as the echoes of its speech rolled away through the tunnels.

Dag blinked. “Did . . . did it just answer me?”

“I nearly soiled myself,” said Coira.

Gillan shook his head. “These faces are all over down here. I’ve never heard one speak before.”

“How did it talk in the first place?” asked Dag.

“The dark magic that brought the tower and the trow has awoken many things,” said Lady Svante. “This will not be the last.”

“What about its words?” asked Rhodri. “Did it speak truly about this Tarjan?”

Gillan nodded. “It’s an old tale in Skara Brae. There’s a song about it—‘Digging Down t’Heaven’—which tells how this Tarjan tricked everybody in town into worshipping him, then told ’em all they’d achieve salvation by digging out these old tunnels, which had long ago filled with mud.”

Rhodri looked up and down the tunnel, which was not filled with mud. “Must have worked.”

“For a time,” said Gillan. “But then a fellowship of heroes woke from his spell and brought him down—or drove him out of town. The song isn’t clear on that.”

“But why did he do it?” asked Coira. “If I was a god, I wouldn’t have people diggin’ ditches. I’d have them build me a castle or some such. Seems a waste of divine—”

The head of Isobel’s hammer clanked on the floor. “Tarjan,” she said. “I knew I knew that name. When Father Bedlow purchased the building that became our temple, he was told it had once been consecrated to a god named Tarjan.”

Gillan turned to her. “That’s right. I remember thinking when I heard the Fatherites were moving into the old place, that y’were the first to occupy it for as long as anyone could remember. In fact, it might have stood empty since Tarjan was sent packing.”

Dag nodded. “My ma and da always said it was haunted.”

“You don’t suppose,” said Coira, chewing her lip, “that these trow who spout this Tarjan’s name might’ve taken offense that his old place has been occupied?”

Isobel, who was already pale, went as white as a sheet. She turned back the way they had come. “I must return to the temple. Now!”

Chapter Six

Having spent a mischievous and dissolute youth in Skara Brae, Gillan knew a more direct tunnel route to the Gran Plaz than going all the way back to the cellar of the Scarlet Bard and then taking the streets, so he led the way. They ended up in the catacombs of the temple of the Weaver, where Gillan used to hide after one of his stunts had the town watch after him. Coming up to the ground floor, they found it deserted, with the candles on the altar out and the snow swirling in through the open doors, but little else damaged.

The same could not be said for most of the other temples that ringed the central square. The snow that covered the central fountain and clung in drifts to the walls of the buildings was dusted black with soot from the fires that still smoldered in several of them. Others had had their doors smashed in and obscene graffiti smeared all over their exterior walls. The worst, however, was the temple of the Fatherites. Isobel stopped dead in her tracks at the sight of it, and the rest of the party slowed behind her.

At first Gillan thought the place had been painted red,

and in a way it had. Pale corpses hung upside down from the temple's every buttress and archway, and it was clear that their blood had been drained from their throats and used to cover the walls and columns in crimson.

"No," said Isobel, starting forward. "No, no, no."

"Paladin," said Gillan, catching her arm. "Isobel, let's make a plan first, eh? Like Rhodri says, only a fool wants a fight."

She shook off his hand and picked up speed, drawing her hammer from her back as she went.

"Isobel!"

Dag started after her, then Rhodri, and after some hesitation and a curse or two, Coira too. That left Gillan and Lady Svante standing in the middle of the square, knee deep in snow, and staring after the others.

"Humans are fools," said the elf. "Stirred by base emotions."

Gillan swallowed. "Or paralyzed by cowardice."

She shrugged. "We elves call it caution."

"And what d'ye call shame?"

"We have no word for it."

"Lucky bastards," said Gillan, and with a whimper, he ran for the temple. The lady sighed and followed.

When Gillan entered, the others weren't fighting. There were no enemies to fight. Instead they were staring at the slaughter within. Priests and priestesses had been strung up and flayed, their skinless corpses contorted in attitudes of agony. The paladins had died fighting, limbs hacked and broken, heads savaged by teeth and claws. Parishioners—men, women, and children—had hidden in side rooms and closets. They had not escaped the butchery and lay together in families, dead.

Isobel went from corpse to corpse, kneeling before each and bowing her head in prayer. The rest of the party

watched, uncomfortable and unsure where to look.

Finally she raised her head and turned to them, her face a grim mask. "When this is over," she said, "if any of you could assist me in burying my dead, I would welcome your help."

The others nodded. Gillan hesitated. He wasn't a Fatherite. He didn't know anything about their traditions. Still, he could handle a shovel as well as the next fellow, he supposed. He nodded too.

"Thank you," said Isobel. "You are most kind. I . . . I . . ." She broke off and buried her face in one gauntleted hand. "Why didn't I come back? I should have come back!"

"Then you would be dead too," said Rhodri.

"I *should* be dead!" she cried. "I should have died defending my god! My people!"

"Come, Isobel," said Gillan.

She turned away from him and looked down at the body of an aged and kindly looking priest. "When this all began, Father Bedlow sent myself and a few of the other paladins out to help the city—"

"And y'did," said Gillan. "Without yer help at the gate, I don't think we would have survived."

"But I should have returned after!" she cried. "I . . . I thought those here would be strong enough to . . ." She dropped to her knees and reached to the shattered sword altar in the nave. "Father, forgive me! I am worthless! I have let your temple fall!"

Gillan grunted. What kind of god was the Swordfather if a woman as strong and selfless as Isobel didn't feel herself worthy of him? He stepped forward.

"Now, lass. Listen—"

A scream, faint and muffled, interrupted him. He paused. It came again, from somewhere below them. He looked up. Everyone had heard it.

"The crypt," said Isobel. "Are they desecrating our tombs?"

She started for the back of the temple, and the rest

followed. A spiral stair screwed down into darkness. Gillan took his lantern from his belt and raised it, illuminating blood-smeared stone.

At the base of the stairs was a vaulted chamber with a pair of large, iron-banded oak doors set into the far wall. Three dead paladins lay before them, surrounded by dead trow, and the doors were heavily scarred from recent battle, but still closed and unbroken. Nevertheless, screams continued to come from behind them.

Isobel stepped to the iron pull rings and hauled on them with all her might. They didn't budge.

"Barred from the inside," said Coira.

"Is there another door?" asked Rhodri. "It does not seem the villains entered here."

"There may be," said Isobel. "The crypts held many mysteries. It is certainly possible we did not discover them all."

"Well, we're not getting through this way," said Gillan. "Those doors would stop an army."

"They will not stop me," Isobel said, stepping back and taking her hammer off her back.

"Don't be a fool," said Dag. "It would take a hundred men and a battering ram."

"You do not understand the power of the Swordfather," said Isobel. Then she held her hammer over her head and began to whisper a prayer.

Gillan scowled, incredulous. The gods didn't answer prayers in this way. They worked gradually, with the turn of the seasons, bringing rain or sun, fertile cattle or abundant crops.

"Swordfather," called Isobel, "I beg you, invest this, the sacred Hammer of Arc, with your power, and grant thy humble servant the strength to wield it in your service."

As she repeated the prayer, the head of the hammer began to glow with a white light. Gillan felt a strange charge in the air, like a tingle on the skin right before a thunderstorm.

"Back," said Svante, from behind them. "To the

stairs. This is wild magic. Foolish. Uncontrolled.”

The party edged back as the dust on the floor began to rise and swirl around Isobel, and a fitful wind blew it in their faces.

Finally, with the hammer as bright as the sun, Isobel spun toward the doors and smashed them with all her might. They exploded. Shattered planks and twisted shards of metal flew as splinters and dust filled the air.

Gillan shielded his eyes as a shock wave hit him like the slap of a giant. His ears rang so loud he couldn’t hear the world beyond them. Finally the wind died and he raised his eyes. Isobel collapsed before the demolished doors as three men in red robes came running at her from the shadows of the crypt, knives flashing. Gillan was surprised to see that they were human.

One screamed, “Defiler! Tarjan take you!” but was cut short by an arrow from Coira through his throat.

Dag and Rhodri sprinted forward to intercept the other two. Dag gutted his, but Rhodri bashed the knife out of the other’s hand with the butt of his axe, then tripped him and sat on his chest.

“Time to learn a few things,” he growled, then placed the haft of his axe across the robed man’s throat. “How many more of you?”

“T-Tarjan wither your—”

The dwarf pressed on the axe haft and the man let out a strangled gurgle. “Answer my question or I’ll kill you and find out for myself.”

“N-none here,” he rasped.

“Then where?”

The man again looked like he was going to refuse to speak.

Rhodri leaned on his throat. “Where?”

“In the catacombs with High Priest Bashar!”

“What are they doing down there?” asked Gillan.

The man looked up at him, then cackled, as if he suddenly found the whole situation hilarious. “They search

for the Witch King!” he cried. “We will steal his eye so that Mangar the Dark can bring the great god Tarjan back to the world of the living! Then you will all die! All of you!”

“And you won’t live to see it,” said Rhodri, raising his axe for a final strike.

“Wait! No!” cried the man. “You said you’d kill me unless I talked! Did I not talk? Did I not tell you—”

Isobel’s hammer dropped square on his face, mashing it flat. Everyone looked up at her. She was still unsteady from her god-inspired feat of strength, but she was standing and pointing.

“Look,” she said. “Look what they were doing.”

The party peered further into the crypt, beyond the first ranks of stone caskets. There, lit by the faint red glow of a coal brazier, hung a boy of no more than ten, throat cut and head-down in an archway like the others they had seen, a basin below brimming with his blood. It looked like he was still twitching.

Dag and Gillan cried out and ran forward. Gillan cradled the boy in his arms and took his weight while Dag sawed through the ropes around his ankles. Gillan laid him on a stone casket. The boy was as white as snow, but still his eyelids fluttered.

“Lady,” Gillan called, raising his head and searching for Svante among the others. “I beg you. If you have healing magics, use them now. The boy still lives.”

The elf frowned. “There is very little hope, but—”

“No,” said Isobel, cutting her off. “This place is sacred to the Swordfather, as is that boy. There will be no sorcery here.”

Lady Svante raised an eyebrow. “You already used sorcery to break down the door. You would deny a more gentle—”

Isobel turned on her. “That was not sorcery! That was the divine will of god!”

“And I call upon *my* gods for *my* spells,” said Svante. “I see no difference.”

“Your gods are not gods,” insisted the paladin. “They are demons and monsters. The only true gods are the Swordfather and—”

Gillan couldn’t stand any more. “This boy is dying and yer arguing theology? Work your magic!”

But it was too late. The boy’s eyes stared, lifeless, up toward the ceiling, and his thin, bare chest was still.

Gillan slammed his fists on the top of the coffin. “Y’let him die!” he shouted. “Y’let him die!”

Isobel raised her chin, defiant. “He died in the presence of the Swordfather. His salvation is assured.”

Gillan wanted to punch her, but he knew he’d only hurt his hand. Instead he pointed a finger at her. “I was feeling pretty sorry for you just now, but . . .”

He turned away in disgust.

There was an awkward silence, then Dag cleared his throat. “Do any of us know who this Bashar might be?”

Everyone shook their heads.

“What about the Witch King?”

Gillan grunted, still almost too angry to talk. “I already told y’about him. He’s the one that built the sewers. King Aildrek, who ruled these lands a few centuries ago. A cruel, crazed bastard who killed hundreds in the name of his *god*,” he said, looking pointedly at Isobel. “Which was a serpent, if I recall correctly.”

“And he’s buried down here?” asked Coira.

Gillan shrugged. “There’s an old song that says he was walled up in the old catacombs by his enemies and left t’die, so it’s possible.”

“The catacombs?” asked Svante.

“Old stronghouses and vaults built below the sewers by the various temples to protect their people and holy relics during the days of the Gotten raids,” said Gillan. “Most of their entrances have been sealed up since. I suppose these Tarjan madmen must have found one.”

“There is such an entrance in the lowest level of this crypt,” said Isobel.

“Then,” said Rhodri, “for the sake of your vengeance, and to question this Bashar about Mangar and Tarjan, I say we seek it out.”

The others nodded and followed the paladin as she led them farther into the crypt.

Gillan closed the dead boy’s eyes, then joined them.

Chapter Seven

“Tarjan, Mangar, Bashar,” said Coira, as they trudged through the catacombs. “Where do these lunatics get their names? They all sound the same.”

“They are names from before the Gotterdammerung,” said Rhodri.

“Evil names,” said Lady Svante, curling her lip. “Borrowed by idiot children who wish to be feared.”

“Gotterdammerung,” said Gillan, frowning. “I’ve heard that word in old dwarf songs. The war of the gods, yes? The All War, which covered the world in ice.”

“Has that come again?” asked Dag. “Does the ice that surrounds Skara Brae cover the whole world?”

Coira shook her head. “It is a wall only. I could smell the fields of summer beyond it when we walked near it.”

“Then what is it for?” asked Isobel.

Rhodri shrugged. “To isolate us? To keep folk out until this Mangar’s found what he’s looking for?”

Gillan nodded. “Maybe so. If the Council in Tangramayne got wind of this, they’d send out the army to

investigate. Maybe they're outside right now, trying t'figure out how t'get in."

"Do you think so?" asked Dag. "Do you think they'll save us?"

"We must continue as if they will not," said Lady Svante. "We must continue as if we were Skara Brae's only hope."

"As we may well be," said Rhodri.

The catacombs were built of red brick, with vaulted ceilings arching up into the darkness above, and they smelled of old earth and dust, a refreshing change from the rotting garbage stench of the sewers. The torches in sconces along the walls were long ago burnt out, so they relied on Gillan's lantern to light the way.

He held it up to look in the elf's face. "And speaking of idiot children. Should we trust history to that wise and dignified race who think it the height of hilarity t'seduce a man away from his wife? We may be children, but I wouldn't care t'wager who was more childish."

"Quiet," said Isobel, holding up a hand. "There are restless dead ahead. I can sense them."

"I can smell them," said Coira.

They drew their weapons and crept down the hall. At the next intersection, a pair of animated corpses bumped aimlessly off the walls. Each had a bloody handprint in the center of its chest and a crude eye glyph painted on its forehead.

"What are they painted up for?" asked Coira. "They were ugly enough already."

"The bloody hands allow them to be manipulated from afar," said Lady Svante. "And the painted eyes let those who manipulate them see what they see."

"So," said Gillan. "No matter what we do, they'll know we're coming."

"It is possible I could distract them," said Svante, beginning to weave her fingers.

"No," said Isobel, striding forward. "I want these

defilers to know I am coming for them.”

Gillan yelled and tried to call her back, but it was too late. The undead were turning the paladin’s way.

Dag groaned. “I’m beginning to think fanatics are worse than villains.”

“Amen,” said Gillan.

“It is a particularly human condition,” said Rhodri.

Coira put an arrow on her string. “We’d better go after her.”

There was no need. The two corpses went down under Isobel’s hammer like dandelions beneath a boot, their heads exploding as they toppled to their sides.

“She closed their eyes,” said Dag.

“Not before she was seen, I’ll warrant,” said Svante. “More will come.”

And so they did.

The party had just descended a treacherous and crumbling stairway into a large chamber when the moaning and stench of more undead reached them. Many more. From every shadow they came, closing in behind the group, and this time there was no alcove or side room to hide in.

“A trap,” said Dag.

“Ain’t you the quick one,” drawled Coira. She glared at Isobel. “I hope you’re happy now, paladin.”

Isobel stood proud. “I welcome the task of putting to rest the despoiled dead.”

“If there was a way out of here, I’d leave you to it,” said Gillan.

The party faced out in a ring in the center of the chamber and readied their weapons as the dead shambled toward them from all sides. Terrifying as it was to face reanimated corpses, the true horror was that Gillan knew most of them. They were the grocers and carpenters and fisherfolk he saw every day on the streets of Skara Brae and every night in its taverns. Folk he had seen dead in the snow the night before were now reaching for him with tattered fingers. Mother Schow, who sold fried fish from a stall down

on Fargoer Street, Herrik the knife sharpener, Baird the tanner—all crowding in, blind-eyed and hungry.

Dag wept as he chopped at their hands. Isobel swung her hammer in great looping circles and prayed continuously. Coira cursed with every arrow, putting one right in the middle of each painted eye. Rhodri fought them as he did everything else, calmly and methodically, never letting them past his flanks. Svante slowed them as she had the trow. Gillan decided to sing them a lullaby, to remind them, possibly, that they were once human, and to give them peace. He chose “Wayland’s Watch” and sang it loud to be heard over the horrible cracking and thudding of steel breaking bone and biting into flesh.

“When night is dark and wind is high, when spirits walk and death is nigh, fear you not for here I keep, watching while you sleep, my son, watching while you sleep.”

If it had any effect, he could not tell, but perhaps it did, for no corpse pierced the circle and none of the party took a grievous wound. At least not at first.

Then, just when it seemed the tide of the dead was slowing, the chamber suddenly grew bitterly cold, and the light from Gillan’s lantern did not seem to shine as far into the darkness.

“What’s happened?” asked Dag. “What’s coming?”

Gillan looked around, still singing. A pale gray light, like moonlight seen through a wall of ice, shone from the corridor directly across from the stairs. Then the source appeared, a skeletal figure in winding robes, floating and incorporeal, glowing with its own sickly light.

Gillan’s song died in his throat. Rhodri and Lady Svante cursed in their native tongues.

“A wight,” said the dwarf. “Honor of my ancestors, if they’ve bent a wight to their will, is there any stopping them?”

Gillan had heard of wights before but never seen one—and never hoped to see one. Wights were the spirits of dead sorcerers, kept alive by black arts and their own

undying will, filled with an implacable rage at everything that still lived.

“What do we do?” he asked.

“Pray,” said Isobel.

Gillan doubted that would be enough. The wight brought with it not just cold light but true cold as well, as biting and bitter as the north wind, and it reeked of death. It sent tendrils of ice into Gillan’s soul, freezing his thoughts, and making everything seem confusing and hopeless. They were just six misfits, unprepared, under-armed. They didn’t even like each other. They certainly couldn’t trust each other. There was no way they could win. No way.

Lady Svante shook him, hard. She looked as frightened as he felt. “Sing, harper. Loud as you can! Your most human song. Your most mundane. Something that is the antithesis of sorcery and dread. Before the vile spirit saps all our hope! Sing!”

Gillan could hardly think enough to remember a song, but at last one came to him, an idiotic ditty, one of the first he had learned, as monotonous and mundane as any he knew.

“We’re mending the nets at Loch Laran,” he sang through chattering teeth. “We’re mending the nets at Loch Laran, we’re mending the nets at Loch Laran, early in the morning. We’re netting the fish on Loch Laran, we’re netting the fish on Loch Laran . . .”

“Good,” said Lady Svante. “Its grip loosens. Now perhaps I can hold a thought long enough to—”

But then the wight was upon them, shrieking as it slashed with incorporeal claws. The others dodged left and right, hacking at it with weapons that passed right through it, but Gillan, still disoriented, did not move in time, and an icy talon passed through his chest. It did not matter that the attack was as insubstantial as mist—it still somehow touched him, turning his heart to a frozen lump of iron that pumped poison ice through his veins. His knees buckled at the pain of it, and his sight dimmed. He fell to the floor.

Through agony and blurred vision he saw Lady Svante thrust her palms at the wight as it turned for another attack. All that seemed to happen was that it became more solid, more real, but perhaps that was the point, for now, as Isobel stepped in front of it and swung her glowing hammer, she connected, shattering its bones, and sending it fluttering and wailing to the side.

Coira's arrows followed it, and they must have found their mark, for there were fresh shrieks beyond Gillan's field of vision. Then the others ran from where they stood above him, all charging and shouting, and all he could do was listen to the roaring and screaming and smashing as darkness and cold closed in around him.

The last thing he saw before blackness swallowed him completely was Lady Svante again, looking down at him, bloody and grim, but smiling.

"We slew it, harper. And it was your song that did it. You broke its hold for the moment we needed to prepare our defense."

"Oh, good," murmured Gillan as his eyes closed.

Chapter Eight

“Drink,” said Rhodri, tilting Gillan’s head up and squirting a waterskin into his mouth. He coughed and gasped, then swallowed painfully and looked around.

They were still in the chamber with the remains of the wight and all the restless dead, but they had moved to the wall, away from the carnage. Lady Svante was bandaging Coira’s wounds and murmuring what sounded like a prayer. Isobel was doing the same for Dag, though she looked in worse shape than he did.

“How long was I out?”

“Er . . . not long,” said Rhodri. He was bandaged too.

“So it wasn’t as bad as it felt?”

Rhodri and the others exchanged an uneasy glance.

“We almost lost you, harper,” said the dwarf. “The wight’s claws touched your heart. If it weren’t for Lady Svante’s magic and the paladin’s prayers . . .”

A shiver went up Gillan’s spine. He nodded gratefully to the two women. “Thank ye both. Y’saved my life.”

There was another awkward pause.

Gillan shivered again. He swallowed. “What is this silence?”

Lady Svante cleared her throat. “We have *prolonged* your life, harper, but the poison of the wight’s touch is still in you, eating at you. You may not feel it for some time, but, unless a true cure can be found—and I admit I know of none—you . . . you will die long before your time.”

“Oh.”

He knew he should feel something at that pronouncement, but it didn’t seem real. He didn’t know how to react to it, any more than he had known how to react to Maidie’s death. He just felt numb.

They were all looking at him, waiting for some kind of response.

“Well . . . well, I won’t die today, eh?”

“Not from that,” said Rhodri.

Gillan shrugged. “That’s all right, then. Let’s get on.”

He tried to stand, but the room dipped and tilted under his feet. Rhodri steadied him and gave him a curious look.

“We’ll take it slow for a while, shall we?”

“Fine,” said Gillan.

As the party gathered its things, Lady Svante stood beside him but didn’t quite look at him. “I . . . I will search my library for a cure, harper. Do not give up hope.”

He squirmed, unsure of what to say. “Er . . . much obliged, I’m sure.”

They found Bashar and his followers in a round, polished-marble chamber behind a massive vault door that appeared smashed open by magical means. A few corpses had guarded the shattered entrance, but Coira’s arrows and Lady Svante’s spells had put them down without a sound, and the party had crept into the chamber without raising any alarm.

Bashar—at least Gillan assumed it was he, for he was

the one shouting orders and not doing any work—stood in the middle of the room, a pile of books and papers at his feet, while the other cultists inched their way around the walls, pressing and pulling at the stones and bricks.

“The entrance is here!” Bashar cried. “Every source I’ve read says so! Find it!”

As silent as a shadow, Coira pulled an arrow from her quiver and fitted it to her bow, but the creak of the string as she drew it back gave her away.

Bashar whipped around, then gaped. “You! How can you be—*aiee!*”

He ducked as Coira loosed her arrow, and the point glanced off the metal skullcap he wore over his bald head.

“No, no, no!” he cried, as his followers turned at the commotion. “Too soon! Too soon! You can’t be here yet!”

“Ah, but we are,” said Dag, cleverly.

And then, with the wave of a hand from Bashar, the lights went out.

There should have been some lingering light, a few last flickers from the torches, a glow from the wicks of the candles. But this was just blackness, instant and complete.

“Get them!” came Bashar’s voice.

“Beware!” called Rhodri. “They can still see us!”

Gillan backed up, swinging his harp and his knife in front of him in a panic.

Behind him, Lady Svante shouted something in Elvish and there was a hiss of extinguishing torches and candles.

“No longer,” said she. “The blind are now fighting the blind.”

Gillan would have laughed at how terrible an idea this was, but he didn’t want to give his position away.

“Stay together!” hissed Isobel, as Bashar shouted something similar across the room. “Shoulder to shoulder! We must not kill each other!”

Gillan felt someone edge against him on his left and he nearly lashed out, but he recognized the musk of Coira’s

furs in time. She, on the other hand, elbowed him in the cheek.

“It’s me!” he hissed. “It’s me!”

“Sorry, harper,” she said. “Stay to my back, will you? Hand on my shoulder.”

Gillan did as he was told and backed into the hip-high pauldrons of Rhodri. The dwarf pushed ahead of him and Gillan put a hand on his shoulder too. He felt the dwarf ready his axe and the archer select an arrow and place it on the string.

From the other side of the room, similar whisperings and rustlings reached them, and then a louder hiss.

“Right.” It was Bashar. “Now advance. I’ll banish this dark—”

Before he could finish, Coira raised, pulled, and fired her bow in one smooth motion, and suddenly the high priest was screaming and, by the sound of it, floundering.

“I’m hit! Tarjan curse it, I’m hit!”

Another arrow followed the first, and the screaming became a low groan that faded to nothing.

“Southern fools,” grunted Coira. “Have they never heard of night hunting?”

An instant later, the darkness became a little less complete. It still was not light enough to move or fight with any confidence, but there was depth to it, variation.

“Friends,” breathed Lady Svante. “When next I rhyme, you shall have light. Prepare.”

They waited as the sound of shuffling and muttering from the far side of the room got louder and closer. Gillan heard one yelp and the sound of someone going ass over teakettle to the floor.

As if she had been waiting for just such an occurrence, Lady Svante began her rhyme. “Sla eld med flinta och tillkalla flanna, som far tandveden att branna!”

All at once the torches and candles she had earlier snuffed rekindled, bathing the room in a yellow glow.

Warned in advance, Isobel, Dag, and Rhodri charged

forward almost instantly, while the cultists were still blinking and shielding their eyes and standing on one foot.

Needless to say, it was a massacre, and if Gillan hadn't seen what these human monsters had done to the people who had hidden in the temple of the Swordfather, he might have felt sorry for them. As it was, he was just glad it was over quickly.

"Now," said Isobel, turning from the last of them. "Where is this Bashar?"

She found him among the bodies and hauled him up by the front of his robe. "Now, 'priest,' we will talk. Where is your master, Mangar? What does he want in Skara Brae?"

Bashar's head slumped to the side. His arms hung slack.

Gillan cleared his throat. "I don't think you'll get much out of him," he said. "He's dead."

The paladin grunted with frustration and looked toward Coira as she let the priest drop. "You robbed me of my vengeance, archer."

"If I hadn't, we'd still be in the dark," said Coira.

"There may be something here," said Lady Svante, stepping toward Bashar's pile of books and scrolls. "Let us see."

Gillan watched as she sifted through maps, books of magic, some sort of holy book dedicated to Tarjan, and a well-worn and much dog-eared ledger.

"His personal journal," said Lady Svante. She flipped through it, then made a face. "He scrawls like a drunk child. I cannot read this."

Gillan took it and had a look. She was right. Whatever Bashar's powers, penmanship was not one of them. Each page was a tangled mess of cross-outs, ink blots, and crabbed script, but after studying it a bit Gillan began to understand what Bashar had written.

The first two thirds of the book focused mostly on his initiation and advancement in the cult of Tarjan, and many of those pages were devoted to angry rants about others in the

cult who he considered his rivals. There was also a lot of ink spent on plans to murder those rivals, and a little on gloating after he had apparently followed through on these plans.

“Well?” asked Coira, after the harper had read awhile. “Anything?”

“Hang on,” said Gillan. “Just getting to recent history.”

He continued, narrating as he went. “Seems a year or so ago he was approached by this Mangar the Dark, who also seems to be a cultist of Tarjan. Mangar asked him for help searching for something in Skara Brae.”

“Something?” asked Rhodri.

Gillan shrugged. “I don’t know. For all his other indiscretions in this book, Bashar is maddeningly vague about that.”

“Perhaps Mangar didn’t tell him,” said Dag.

“I know I wouldn’t,” said Gillan. “The fool writes everything down.”

“So what *does* he say?” asked Rhodri.

Gillan flipped ahead. “Just a moment. Just a moment. I’m getting to—” He paused as he read, then re-read a passage. It said the same thing the second time. His heart sank. “Oh, no.”

“What is it?” Isobel asked.

“Let me just make sure,” said Gillan, flipping back and forth. “I’m hoping I read it wrong.”

“Stop keeping us in suspense,” growled Coira.

Gillan swallowed. He suddenly needed a drink. “Well,” he said at last. “Bashar says that he and Mangar aren’t working alone. They have somehow won the confidence of Baron Harkyn. Harkyn . . . is helping them.”

There was a long silence. Finally Dag broke it.

“So,” said he, slowly. “That’s why we haven’t seen the city guards?”

“That’s why his castle is locked up tight?” asked Coira.

“That’s why the people of the town have been left

undefended?” said Isobel, disgusted.

Gillan nodded. “Apparently Mangar has promised Harkyn great power if he helps him find whatever he’s looking for.”

“And he fell for it,” said Rhodri. “Humans are fools.”

“Greedy fools,” said Lady Svante.

“But what about Kylearan?” asked Dag. “He is Harkyn’s court mage. Isn’t he supposed to protect the baron from lunatics like this? Don’t tell me he’s helping Mangar too?”

“Kylearan isn’t with them,” said Gillan, reading on. “But the news is bad. Mangar has trapped the sage in his tower and hurt him badly, though in what way, it isn’t clear.”

“Poor old man,” said Dag. “I always liked him. Can we save him?”

“It would likely be a benefit to all if we could,” said Lady Svante. “He would be a great ally.”

“Then let’s find him,” said Coira.

“Wait,” said Isobel. “We are not done here. Under orders from Mangar, this Bashar killed and raised my comrades from the dead to help him find the eye of some dead king, correct?”

“The eye is Tarjan’s, apparently,” said Gillan, frowning as he checked Bashar’s journal again. “Though . . . though how the eye of a man who made trouble in Skara Brae a century ago ended up buried with a king who died in Skara Brae *five* centuries ago, I’m not sure.”

“Perhaps Tarjan is as immortal as he claimed,” said Dag.

“Perhaps he was,” said Gillan. “But it seems he’s dead now.”

“How do you know that?” asked Rhodri.

“Because, according to Bashar, the whole point of finding the Eye of Tarjan was to bring him back to life. Once they found it, they were going to use it in a ritual in Harkyn’s castle.”

“And the Witch King and this eye are somewhere

here?” asked Isobel.

Lady Svante nodded and held up a map. “According to this, we stand atop the vault in which he was sealed.”

“Then maybe we should just leave it sealed,” said Coira. “Better for everyone, aye?”

“No,” said Isobel. “It is not. What is to stop Harkyn or Mangar from coming here and retrieving the eye themselves after we’ve moved on? They have been waiting for Bashar to bring it to them. Once they learn he’s dead, they’ll send their own men.”

Rhodri sighed. “The paladin is right. Caution demands that we destroy this ‘eye’ before it falls into the hands of our enemies.”

“But Bashar couldn’t find the entrance,” said Gillan. “Maybe they won’t either.”

“Whoever or whatever he is,” said Lady Svante, “this Mangar the Dark has already proved himself many times the sorcerer Bashar was. He will surely be able to pierce the illusion that hides the entrance of the vault.”

“There’s an illusion here?” asked Dag. “I don’t see anything.”

“Exactly.” The elf smiled and spoke a rhyme in her own tongue.

Though the dimensions of the room did not change, the walls, which had appeared marble, dulled to granite, and the back wall, which had been featureless, now held a massive iron-and-rune-bound door.

“This was all illusion?” asked Dag, staring around in wonder. “How can that be? I saw a man clawing at the wall, right where that door is.”

“The greatest illusions fool not just the eye,” said Lady Svante, “but all the other senses as well.”

“And yer living proof,” muttered Gillan.

Chapter Nine

When Lady Svante had dispelled the wards that protected the door and Coira had picked its lock, they descended the stairs behind it with weapons out and spells and prayers at the ready, unsure of what to expect. The stairway ended at a wide archway leading into a torchlit, snake-carved room beyond.

“Hasn’t this chamber been sealed for centuries?” asked Coira.

“That’s what Bashar’s journal said,” said Gillan. “Why d’ye ask?”

“Who lit the torches?”

The question made Gillan stumble as they stepped over the threshold into the room. It was true. They had come down here expecting to find a dark vault with a crumbled skeleton in it, and here it was, bright with torchlight, and no skeleton to be seen, just rows of basalt pillars carved like snakes poised to strike, and a statue of an even larger snake at the far end, the mouth of which was continuously pouring water into a pool.

“And where is King Aildrek?” asked Dag.

“He is here,” said Isobel. “At least, something is. Something undead . . . and powerful.”

“Again?” groaned Gillan. “We barely—”

“After five hundred years,” hissed a voice like branches burning, “someone opens my prison door.”

The party froze and looked around. Then they saw him, sauntering from behind the spitting snake statue with a sword as tall as Coira resting on one armored shoulder. It was the skeleton of King Aildrek, seven feet if it was an inch, dressed in rusted plate mail and the tattered remains of royal purple raiment, an intricate gold crown set with an immense red gem cocked at a rakish angle on his bare skull.

“Are you here to free me, mortals, or to end me?”

Isobel stepped forward and brandished her warhammer at him. “Abomination! You will never leave this chamber!”

“Five hundred years,” sighed Aildrek, shaking his head. “And the peasants still haven’t learned any manners.”

He leapt forward with an agility Gillan found surprising in an ancient skeleton and swept his giant sword at the whole party.

Isobel and Rhodri tried to parry the blow but were knocked flat by the force of it as everyone else dove back and away. Rhodri’s axe clanged across the flagstones and ended behind Aildrek. The dwarf scrambled up, cursing, and started looking for an opportunity to get around the skeleton.

“You’ve got a sword on your back!” called Gillan.

“Are you mad?” barked Rhodri. “I am honor bound to bring that sword to the buyer unused and in perfect condition.”

“But isn’t the buyer Baron Harkyn?” asked Dag.

“A promise is a promise,” said the dwarf.

“And what if you die first?” asked Coira.

“Then I would have died without dishonoring my name.”

And as the others attacked the skeleton, Rhodri

scurried under another of its massive swings and snatched up the axe with a sigh of relief.

Sadly, choice of weapon didn't seem to matter. Coira's arrows splintered against Aildrek's bones as if they were pieces of straw. He didn't even notice Isobel's hammer, or Dag and Rhodri's sword and axe, and sent the companions sprawling again and again.

"Fools!" the Witch King boomed as the red gem in his crown glowed like fire. "Why do you think they trapped me in this prison? Because they could not kill me!"

"That is because the world then had not yet been blessed with the holy power of the Swordfather!" cried Isobel, rising again, this time with a broken nose and blood all down her lips and chin. She started praying and, as before at the great doors, her hammer began to glow.

The skeleton laughed. It sounded like sawdust sifting down a drainpipe. "The who? Another petty human god? Do you not understand that I am granted life by the devourers of a *thousand* gods? Nothing can touch me! Nothing!"

And it appeared that he might be right, for though Isobel's glowing hammer drove him back, and Dag and Rhodri's combined attacks kept him busy, they did not seem to hurt him in the least, while he was hurting them with every swing.

Coira threw down her bow in disgust and ran to join them, drawing two long daggers from her back.

"Coira, no!" Gillan called after her.

"If you want to save her, harper," said Lady Svante. "Then sing. 'The Festival of Badh'r,' if you know it."

Gillan knew it, enough to fake it at least—an old elven song about a pottery festival that had some other hidden meaning only the fair folk knew. Still, if the sorceress thought it would help, he'd give it a try.

She made a face as he attempted the tongue-twisting Elvish words but was too busy weaving a spell to comment. Well, no matter how badly he was murdering the song, it appeared to give the fighters some heart. They fought with

renewed vigor and seemed to more easily shrug off their wounds.

A moment later, the elf's spell was complete, and she spread her hands before her. Whatever Gillan had expected to happen, a giant ogre, complete with tree-trunk club, stepping out of thin air was not it.

"Go!" Lady Svante called to it. "The skeleton! Kill it!"

The big brute swung its heavy head toward the fight, then lowered its shelf-like brow.

"Kill," it said, and lumbered forward.

"I-is that real?" asked Gillan, between verses.

She nodded. "And it takes all my concentration to control it, so speak not to me."

The ogre's club nearly knocked the Witch King to the flagstones, but even such a colossal weapon couldn't damage him. He just picked up and kept fighting.

"Send an army!" he crowed. "You will still not win!"

A second later, Coira flew back from the melee, knocking into Gillan and sending them both sprawling.

"Thanks, harper," she said. "You're softer than the floor."

As he sat up, Gillan saw he'd somehow cracked his harp. All its strings were slack. He groaned.

"Ach! Y've broken my harp."

"Sorry," she growled. "I wasn't exactly . . ."

She trailed off as she stared at the fight, frowning.

"What?" asked Gillan.

"Do you notice that the Witch King's gem glows brighter every time he's hit?"

Gillan nodded. "Aye. What of it?"

She put one of her daggers back in its sheath, then started forward again. "Keep singing, harper. I have an idea."

"But my harp is . . ." He sighed. "A cappella, then. Fine."

As Gillan sang "The Festival of Badh'r" again, Coira cut wide and ran behind the melee, then started creeping up

on the Witch King's back. He was too busy fighting the ogre and Isobel and the others to pay any attention.

Finally, just as the skeleton knocked the ogre to its knees, she clambered up Aildrek's back, wrapping her legs around his skeletal neck and holding on to his head for support. He reached up to dislodge her, but she was quicker and levered her dagger into his crown's jewel socket, popping out the gem to send it skittering across the floor.

And just like that, halfway through hurling Coira across the room, the Witch King stopped moving.

He froze in place, holding her in one hand with his arm fully extended, and she dangled there, hooked in his claws, until Isobel, Dag, Rhodri, and the ogre, who were none of them willing to take any chances, smashed his bones to pieces, and she toppled with them to the ground.

"Well done, lass," said Rhodri as he helped Coira up.

"Aye," said Dag. "Quick thinking."

Gillan nodded. "Y'saved the day."

A second later, the ogre stepped backward and vanished just as it had appeared, and Lady Svante joined the others, stumbling a bit, and sweating for the first time since Gillan had met her.

She picked up the gem. "This must be the Eye of Tarjan that Bashar sought. I . . ."

Her voice trailed off as she looked into its red depths. The others waited, expecting her to continue speaking, but she just kept staring, mouth slightly open.

After a long moment, Gillan cleared his throat. Er . . . Lady? Lady, are you—?"

Svante shuddered violently and tore her eyes away from the gem. She held it away from her. "Take it from me. It is too powerful, too tempting. Destroy it. Here and now."

Isobel placed the gem on the floor, raised her hammer, and struck as hard as she could. The flagstones cracked, but the eye just spun away, unharmed.

She stepped after it, muttering, then held her hammer over her head and began to pray.

“Back,” said Rhodri. “Back to the stairs.”

But though the paladin prayed just as hard, and her hammer glowed just as bright as when she had smashed the doors to the crypts, and though the shock wave when she struck made all the flagstones in the chamber buckle into shattered ripples like she had dropped a pebble into the water of a pond, the gem still did not break.

“It is what gave the Witch King life after death,” said Lady Svante as Isobel knelt with her head down and drew deep breaths. “Perhaps it isn’t surprising that it seems immortal.”

“Let me try,” said Rhodri. “A gem always has its weak points, and a jeweler knows how to find them.”

But though he examined the eye with a lens from every angle, though he tapped and struck its facets and edges with a chisel he just happened to be carrying with him, nothing he did even blemished the gem, let alone cracked it. In the end he conceded defeat.

“No natural stone is too hard for a dwarf to crack,” he said, mopping his brow. “It is protected by powerful magics.”

“Powerful *corrupting* magics,” said Lady Svante. She stared at the gem with both loathing and longing. “It is too powerful to leave here, for our enemies will find it, but too dangerous to hold onto, for what it might make of us.”

“So what should we do with it?” asked Dag.

“We must keep it with us until we can find a safe way to dispose of it,” said the elf. “But I will not be the one to hold it.”

“Nor I,” said Rhodri, licking his lips as he looked at the gem. “The price such a thing would fetch . . . I . . .” He tossed it on the floor. “Keep it away from me.”

“Nothing can corrupt the power of the Swordfather,” said Isobel. “But I am an imperfect vessel of that power, as I have already proved. I do not wish to be tempted.”

That left Dag, Coira, and Gillan, who looked at each other awkwardly, none of them wanting to volunteer, or to

decline. Finally Gillan sighed.

“Give it to me,” said he. “I’m doomed already, apparently. What’ll it matter if I’m corrupted too?”

The others had the decency to look guilty as he picked it up and put it in his pouch.

“So,” said he, leaning wearily against the wall of the chamber. “What now? Where do we go from here?”

“To Harkyn’s castle,” said Isobel, pushing herself to her feet. “He will answer for his betrayal of his people. And perhaps we can free him from Mangar’s evil influence.”

“Tomorrow,” said Rhodri. “Whatever we do, we do it tomorrow.”

Isobel glared at him. “Tomorrow? How can we rest when evil is afoot? When the lives of our friends hang in the balance? We must go on!”

“Without rest we’ll be no help to anyone,” said the dwarf. “’Tis night now, and we started out at dawn. We’ve been fighting the whole day long. Do you think you could summon your god’s divine power again without sleep and a meal? You probably can’t even lift your hammer over your head.”

“The Swordfather will give me strength.”

“Maybe he will,” said Coira. “But what about the rest of us? I’m spent.”

“Aye,” said Dag. “I hurt from head to toe.”

“I need a drink,” said Gillan.

“No one doubts your bravery, paladin,” said Lady Svante. “Nor your virtue. If, however, you insist on facing Harkyn tonight, we might doubt your sanity.”

Isobel remained tensed for a long moment, then hung her head. “Forgive me, Swordfather. I am too weak. I will redeem myself in your eyes on the morrow.”

Gillan breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank the gods.”

“Truth be told,” said Coira. “I don’t want t’go back to the Inshriach. I just don’t want to be stuck *here*.”

Dag raised his head. "So you're not one of those Fichti who sneer at 'soft southern ways?'"

Coira grinned. "I'm as hard as they come, but I've had twenty-five years of smoky lodges and deer meat. I'm ready for a change. Linen sheets, fitted clothes, wine from Ambardy."

They were all slumped around a table at the Adventurers' Guild, dinner plates shoved back, mugs half empty, and eyes half closed.

"Aye," said Rhodri. "I know how you feel. I am only ten years into my apprenticeship, with another ten or so ahead of me—and I *will* complete it. I must. My father was a smith, and his father before him, on and on to the dawn of time, but . . ." He motioned around him with his cup. "The human world is wider than I imagined, and more full of wonderful things. It will be harder to go back to the forge than I anticipated."

"Y'should see the Stennish Isles before you go back," said Dag. "The home of the Einarr. Most beautiful place in the world. Islands, mist, sea, it's . . . it's . . ."

"It's time for bed," said Isobel. "We must rise as early as we can to confront the baron."

The others groaned but otherwise made no complaint. Instead they stood and stretched and emptied their mugs, then staggered off to the sleeping rooms.

If Gillan had had any sense he would have followed them, but his thoughts were so tangled that he knew sleep wouldn't come without more help, so he took another jug of whisky from Mother Grim and sat by the fire, waiting for the amber balm to work its soporific magic.

Unfortunately, he'd always been a bit of a maudlin drunk, and tonight he was worse, for he had good reason for melancholy. No matter where he turned his mind, Maidie was there, still waiting for him to tell her that she'd been the one he'd chosen, and never hearing it, no matter how many times he shouted it into the gulf that separated them.

He couldn't even turn to his harp for solace, as he

often did, for it was broken. And he didn't feel like singing. It would wake the others, and besides, every lyric seemed a reminder of Maidie or a condemnation of himself.

As he poured his fourth whisky, he saw Lady Svante watching him from the common room door.

He put down the jug. "Keeping you up?"

She crossed and took the seat beside him. "Harper."

He ground his teeth and shifted away from her. She was a greater reminder even than thoughts or songs of the great wrong he'd done to Maidie and the cruel fate that had made it impossible to repair the fault.

"What do you want?"

She hesitated, looking at the arm of her chair as if it were the most fascinating thing in the world. Finally she took a breath.

"When this is over, if we triumph—or just survive—I . . . I wish you to know that you would still be welcome in my sisters' hall, and that—"

He laughed. Or it might have been a snarl. "Y'still try to seduce me? After all that's happened? Are you a fool? Do y'think *I* am? Don't y'know how much I despise you? If it weren't for our great necessity, I—"

"I am not a fool," said the elf. "And I know full well what you think of me. That is part of why I ask."

Gillan scowled at her. "What are you talking about?"

She looked away again. "I . . . I know you think of me as heartless, but . . . but I feel a terrible guilt for what I have done to you, and the pain you are suffering because of me is causing me pain as well."

"Then why don't y'leave me alone," said Gillan. "Yer only making it worse."

"Because, within my sisters' hall, I . . . I can offer you oblivion. You could live in comfort and safety for as long as you have left, untroubled by any memory of what had gone before. You would forget all pain and live only for pleasure and song."

Gillan stared at her, choking with emotion.

“You . . . you *are* a fool! How can y’not understand that I never want to forget her? Never! I want to hold all of her, everything I remember, everything I ever felt for her, all my joy, my shame, all of it, for as long as I can. When all that goes, she is gone from the world. I am her reliquary. If you empty me, y’kill her again.”

She looked at Gillan, eyes wide and uncertain, then stumbled to her feet, uncharacteristically awkward.

“Forgive me,” she said. “I have not often been among men. I . . . I see I have much to learn.”

And with that she turned and hurried back toward the sleeping room.

Gillan didn’t watch her go. He sat and drank his whisky and stared into the fire. Every flame was Maidie—bright, flashing, beautiful, and gone before it had truly lived.

Chapter Ten

“Here, dearie,” said Mother Grim, pressing what looked like a hunting horn into Gillan’s hands the next morning as they were all getting ready to go. “I noticed y’came back without yer harp last e’en, and I found y’somethin’ from the stores. The Flame Horn, I think it’s called. Supposed to be able to set things on fire.”

Gillan squinted at the thing dubiously. After last night’s excesses, he was in no condition to accept gifts, or talk, or even stand up straight, and he found the presence of cheery old ladies at the crack of dawn more than he was ready to bear.

“Th-thank you,” he managed, then slung the horn around his neck by its strap and hoped she would go away. Unfortunately, she wasn’t the only one in his vicinity who was far too lively. “Set things on fire?” said Rhodri. “That could be very useful. You should see what it can do.”

“Yes,” said Gillan, though he wasn’t even sure he remembered how to blow a horn. The last time had been when he’d blown a war horn as a conscript. “I suppose.”

He put the horn to his lips, then staggered as Rhodri swatted at it.

“Not in here, fool! You’ll burn the place down. Are you still asleep?”

Gillan lowered the horn, sheepish. “Something like that, yes. Sorry.”

“Come on. Let’s try it outside.”

Gillan stood dozing in the street as Rhodri dragged a hay bale from the stable and the others gathered around.

“What’s happening?” asked Dag.

“Rhodri wants Gillan to set some hay on fire with his new horn,” said Coira.

Dag chuckled. “Well, I know he’s full of hot air.”

“Right, then, harper,” said Rhodri, when he’d left the hay in the middle of the street. “Give it a try.”

Gillan sighed. “If I must.”

He raised the horn in the general direction of the bale, then tried to remember how to shape his lips to blow. His first two attempts were nothing but hisses, but the third was moderately better, a sad little toot.

Everybody looked at the bale. It was not burning.

“Try again,” said Rhodri. “Louder!”

Gillan took a deep breath and blew through the horn. This time it emitted a piercing blast, and he dropped it immediately to clutch his throbbing head.

“Ow ow ow . . .”

“Ah!” cried Dag. “Put it out!”

“Throw snow on it!” called Coira.

Gillan looked up. The hay bale was ablaze, flames shooting up ten feet into the air and bits of burning straw wafting off in every direction.

“Quick!” cried Isobel. “Before we burn down the town!”

The party rushed forward, scooping up snow and slush and throwing it at the inferno, and after a few chaotic minutes it

was out, a soggy black mess in the middle of the street.

“Well,” said Lady Svante, shaking snow off her delicate hands, “I suppose that could be deemed a success.”

Gillan looked in horror at the horn in his hands. He had never held anything so destructive before in his life. Imagine if he had blown it inside the Guild. Imagine blowing it toward a living being!

He started to lift the strap over his head. “I think I’d rather sing unaccompanied, if it’s all the same to—”

“No, no!” said Dag.

“You have to keep it,” said Rhodri. “Imagine if we meet another wight. Or something worse.”

Gillan grimaced. The very thought of the thing made him sick to his stomach. On the other hand, he had spent the previous day bemoaning how useless he was in a fight. Not anymore.

“Fine,” he said at last. “I’ll keep it.”

A little while later they marched off to confront Baron Harkyn. Gillan wasn’t sure what this was meant to accomplish. Did Isobel think he would change his ways if they confronted him with his misdeeds? Did she think she could call upon the Swordfather to banish Harkyn’s corruption? Did she think he was Mangar’s prisoner, and that he would weep tears of joy at their rescue? None of these things seemed likely to Gillan. What did seem likely was that the baron’s guards would slaughter them before they got anywhere near the man himself.

At least it was a nice day for it.

As it had yesterday, the castle appeared deserted, the walls unmanned and no noise coming from the yard. This time, however, the outer gate stood wide open.

"It's a trap," Gillan grunted. "It has to be a trap."

Isobel shrugged and kept walking. "Then we will fight our way free of it."

"After I deliver the baron's sword," said Rhodri, following right behind her.

Gillan stared blearily after them. Their confidence made his head hurt, though, to be fair, at the moment, everything made his head hurt.

Isobel slowed as she reached the gate, and they all peered through. The courtyard was as deserted as the walls, and the doors to the keep were flung wide.

"That's open too," said Dag.

"So is a dragon's mouth before it burns you to a cinder," grumbled Gillan.

They crept across the courtyard, watching in all directions, then entered the keep's torchlit foyer. As soon as Coira, who was the last in line, stepped over the threshold, a deafening rattle sounded from the courtyard. They turned just in time to see the portcullis crash down.

Panic jolted Gillan's heart. "I knew it was a trap! I knew it!"

He turned back to the courtyard, but just as he reached the keep door it slammed in his face. He pushed at it, desperate.

"Come on!" he shouted to the others. "Help me!"

Rhodri put a hand on his shoulder. "Now, now, harper. We weren't going back anyway. The only way out is through, eh?"

"Now it is," Gillan grumbled, but followed the others across the foyer to a wide archway.

It opened into the baron's audience chamber, a high-ceilinged room with an ornate throne at the far end, a roaring fire in a fireplace larger than Gillan's bedroom, and four large and ugly statues in the four corners.

Gillan frowned at the statues. He'd been the guest of the baron many times, playing for banquets and ceremonies, and he didn't remember seeing them before. They were

giant figures of heavily muscled men, crudely sculpted, with heavy brows, bowl haircuts, and ancient writing in lines across their chests.

"These are new," Gillan said, looking up at one. "And not up to the baron's usual standards of—*yiee!*"

He screamed and leapt back as the statue looked down at him.

In all four corners of the room the statues were stepping down off their pedestals and leaving muddy footprints as they turned toward the party.

"Golems!" said Isobel.

"Beware," said Rhodri. "They feel no pain and cannot be stopped until the spell that animates them is taken from their body and burned."

"And how do we do that?" asked Dag, backing up.

"They have jars buried in their chests," said Lady Svante. "The spells are written on scrolls rolled up inside them. They must be dug out, taken from the jars, and burned."

"Arrows are going to be completely useless here, aren't they?" asked Coira.

"Everything but a damned shovel is going to be useless," growled Gillan.

"Back to the archway," said Rhodri. "We must keep them all in front of us."

The party dodged around the lumbering clay giants, then turned and faced out in the archway, Rhodri, Isobel, and Dag to the fore. The golems shambled after them, reaching great, blunt-fingered hands at them.

"Can you slow them?" Dag called to Lady Svante.

"Spells of confusion do not work on things with no minds," she said. "But . . ."

A spark of inspiration flickered in her eyes and she began chanting sibilant syllables.

In the meantime, Rhodri, Isobel, and Dag hacked at the golems that crowded the archway, to little effect. Isobel's hammer left square-shaped dents, while Rhodri and Dag's blades bit deep, leaving ragged cuts in the clay flesh, but

lessening the golems' strength and ability not one whit. Had the behemoths just stood still, it would have been easy to chop into their chests and retrieve the jars, but getting close enough to do this meant stepping into their reach, and that meant being clubbed to the floor by their boulder-sized hands.

It seemed an appropriate time to play "Falkentyne's Fury," so Gillan reached for his harp, then realized he had only the dreadful horn. He began to sing instead, and though it seemed to invigorate his companions and strengthen their strikes, they still were not making much progress.

Then Lady Svante stepped forward and thrust out her hands. With a melodious shout in Elvish, a blast of bitterly cold wind erupted from her palms and struck the golems, furring them in a thick pelt of frost. Instantly their movements slowed as the clay of their bodies grew colder and stiffer.

"Ha!" cried Rhodri, stepping between the two slowly closing arms of the first golem as Dag and Isobel kept the others busy. His axe bit into the thing's chest once, twice, thrice, and four times, cutting a diamond shape where its sternum would have been.

He started to reach for the clay within the cuts but Coira darted ahead of him.

"Cut the next!" she said. "I have this."

And as the dwarf sidestepped to the second golem, Coira dug a gloved hand into the cuts in the first golem's chest and pulled. A great square chunk of clay came away and she threw it aside, then had to duck as the golem finally closed its ponderous arms. When it spread them wide again she darted back in and reached into the gap, scrabbling with her hard archer's fingers until she came away with an earthenware jar, its mouth sealed with wax.

She dodged back as the construct tried to catch her, then smashed the jar on the floor, revealing a scroll within.

"Burn it!" she cried.

Lady Svante obliged with an arc of fire from her fingers. As the parchment curled to ash, the golem it had

been taken from slumped and fell apart, its arms and head breaking off from its body and thudding to the ground.

And so it continued. Thrice more Rhodri cut into the chests of the golems, while Dag and Isobel blocked them from entering the corridor. Thrice more Coira leapt into their arms, tore their crockery hearts out, and smashed the jars to the ground. And thrice more Lady Svante burned the scrolls within them.

Finally, all that was left of the mindless things were lumpy mounds of mud. Rhodri, Dag, and Coira sat on them, breathing heavily, while Isobel scraped clay from the head of her hammer. Mud caked them from head to foot, but at least they had taken no wounds.

“What a mess,” said Dag, wiping his hands on the tapestries that lined the corridor wall.

“Aye,” said Rhodri. “But a well-coordinated effort. We each played our part.” He looked around at them all. “Good work.”

“Let’s keep moving,” said Isobel. “There is still justice to be done.”

The others sighed, but followed her into the throne room. They stopped as six men in the uniforms of Baron Harkyn’s guards stepped out of a side door and looked around, weapons drawn.

“I swear I heard . . .” one of them was saying.

Their captain saw the companions and pointed. “Intruders!”

Coira readied an arrow as the guards ran forward, but Gillan held up his hand.

“Wait. I know that man. Let me speak to him.”

“Are you mad?” said the archer. “They’re coming for us.”

Gillan ignored her and shouted at the leader. “Captain Pruitt! I’d like to report that Skara Brae has been surrounded by ice and is being terrorized by trow and evil men! Hundreds of folk are dead, and more hide in fear in their houses. Help us, please! Do yer duty and protect the town!”

“Kill the intruders!” the captain replied. He didn’t seem to recognize Gillan. He hardly seemed to recognize that the harper had spoken.

The guards charged.

Gillan fell back, cursing, as Dag, Isobel, and Rhodri spread out to meet the howling men. Only four reached them. Coira dropped two before they could close, and a third stumbled on with an arrow in the meat of his thigh. The party made short work of the rest, cutting them down in a matter of seconds.

Gillan shook his head. “This is madness. I’ve known Pruitt since we were boys. And now he just . . .”

“Their minds were not their own,” said Lady Svante. “A will of great power controlled them.”

“Is it going to be like this until we reach Harkyn?” asked Dag. “A fight for every step we take?”

Coira squatted by the corpses. “Not if we look like we belong. Let’s take their cloaks and helms.”

Isobel looked offended. “You wish to win by deceit? That is without honor.”

Coira glared at her and opened her mouth, but Gillan beat her to it.

“What is without honor is killing men who have been magicked into fighting us. I for one will feel much more honorable if we can reach Harkyn without taking the lives of any more of my friends.”

Isobel hung her head. “You . . . you shame me, harper. I did not think.”

“Er, I doubt anyone will mistake me for one of Harkyn’s guards no matter what I wear,” said Rhodri.

“We’ll keep you in the middle,” said Dag.

The dwarf shrugged. “Fine. Just don’t trip over my hem.”

Amazingly, the ruse worked, though whether it was the

quality of their disguises or the muddled senses of the beglamoured guards, Gillan wasn't sure. Regardless, they marched unchallenged through the castle, searching high and low for Baron Harkyn, until they entered its lowest level. Then their luck ran out.

Within the castle dungeons, they found a huge chamber with all the flagstones pulled up and a wide, scaffolding-ringed hole dug into the floor that seemed to go down forever, and marching into and out of it with the mindless industry of ants were Harkyn's guards, out of their armor and armed only with picks, shovels, and wheelbarrows.

"So that's where they've all got to," whispered Dag. "But why are they working as diggers? No guard I know would lower himself to do such work."

"As I said," said Lady Svante. "They are ensorcelled. They do as they are bid."

Gillan shivered. It was an eerie scene. Men hard at work generally do so while cursing, calling to one another, singing songs, and grunting with effort. Not so the guards. Aside from the sounds of their picks and shovels and the squeaking of the barrow wheels as they trundled them up fully laden from the depths of the hole and dumped the dirt in another chamber, the men made not a sound, nor looked around, nor wiped their brows like normal men do. They just worked, dead-eyed and unceasing, like golems made of flesh.

"Can y' free them?" Gillan asked.

"The surest way," said the elf, "is to kill whoever enchanted them, but even then their release will not be instantaneous. The effects could take days to fade."

Gillan swallowed. "Then let's just tiptoe back out, shall we?"

"Aye," said Isobel. "Harkyn is not here. There is no need—"

She stopped and cursed, looking across the room. Gillan turned to follow her gaze. A man at the far edge of the hole was staring in their direction. He was dressed in black

robes and held a whip in one hand, and as Gillan watched, he raised it and pointed it at them while chanting in a harsh monotone.

“Who’s that?” asked Gillan. “Some sort of sorcerer?”

“An Einarr boar priest,” said Dag, trembling. “And that is the war chant of Vildsvin. The priests sing it to their berserkers before battle, to incite frenzy. Haven’t heard that sound since I left the isles.”

“Time to go, then,” said Gillan. “And shut the door behind us.”

But as they turned back to the door, they discovered more guards had come in behind them—and were closing the door and lowering the bar to lock it.

“Trapped,” said Dag.

Gillan looked over his shoulder. “And that’s not the worst of it.”

As the boar priest’s chant continued, the demeanor of the guards near him began to change from dull placidity to explosive rage. Their eyes bulged. The veins popped on their brows and their necks, and they began roaring and snorting like angry bulls. The rage spread like some sort of plague, reaching into the hole to possess the men on the lower levels of the scaffolding. Suddenly all the guards were shouting and hoisting their tools as if they were weapons, and storming up the scaffolding toward the surface.

It spread to the men behind the party too—the ones who were guarding the door.

“To the top of the scaffolding!” called Rhodri. “It’s our best chance!”

Gillan would have thought their best chance was to fight through the men at the door and raise the bar before the men from the hole reached them, but the dwarf’s tactical sense hadn’t failed them yet.

He and the others ran to where the square spiral of scaffolding reached the top of the pit, then turned. The men from the door slammed into them, trying to drive them off, but they stood firm—at least, Isobel, Dag, and Rhodri did. The paladin

swept three men off the edge with her hammer, sending them crashing down onto the guards who charged up from below. Dag and Rhodri sent more after them, but there were more behind, hacking wildly.

“Friends,” called Svante, huddling at the very edge with Gillan and Coira. “At my next rhyme, close your eyes for a second. It is but two words. Now! Solsken! Mansken!”

Gillan did as she asked, but even through his eyelids he could see the bright flash she summoned. When he opened his eyes again, their enemies were clutching their faces and stumbling back, stunned.

Dag, Rhodri, and Isobel did not hesitate to take advantage, shoving more men into the pit. But the effects of the flash didn’t last long, and soon the guards on the scaffolding charged up again. Dag, Rhodri, and Isobel turned to face them, while Gillan, Coira, and Lady Svante watched their backs. At least there was no one behind them now. All the men from the door were either dead on the ground or cast into the darkness below.

The boar priest was still alive, however, chanting some new prayer from the far side of the pit. Gillan could feel the hairs stand up on the back of his neck at the words, and fear started to gnaw at his insides, but then, beside him, he heard the thrum of Coira’s bowstring, and the priest fell backward, an arrow through his mouth. The abnormal fear subsided as swiftly as it had risen, and Gillan checked to see if the berserkers’ frenzy had cooled as well. It had not. They continued to charge for the surface as enraged as before. He cursed.

“There must be a hundred of them,” he said.

“I’d say four times that,” said Coira.

The tide roared up the last incline and slammed into the party, howling and flailing their picks and shovels and sledgehammers with the strength of supernatural rage. Dag, Isobel, and Rhodri staggered back at the impact but managed to block all the wild swings. Unfortunately, the pressure from the ever-pushing column behind the front line never stopped,

and the three were forced back.

Coira fired arrow after arrow into the side of the column, and each man she struck pitched into the pit, but it was clear she would run out of shafts long before she made a difference.

“The horn, harper!” she called. “The Flame Horn! Burn the scaffolding!”

Gillan’s heart lurched. It might work. One blast from the horrible instrument and it would all catch fire, but . . . all Harkyn’s guards? Dead? Men he had known all his life? He turned to Lady Svante, pleading. “Can’t y’clear their minds? Can’t y’wake them up?”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “There are too many, and their rage is too great.”

Gillan moaned. He didn’t want to do it, but the mass of men was pushing the party farther and farther back. Two more steps and the berserkers would be able to swarm around their flanks, and that would be the end.

“Do it, harper!” called Rhodri. “Hurry!”

With a sob, Gillan stepped to the edge of the pit and put the horn to his lips. His first attempt was a dry fart, but his second was an eagle’s cry—loud, long, and bright—and as hot as a poker. Little licks of flame started sprouting from the wood of the scaffolding, and the hair, beards, and breeches of the men began to smoke and blacken. A third blast and the blaze grew, the dry wood catching quickly, and fire creeping along the spars and crossbeams in all directions. Hair and cloth burst into flame.

Incredibly, this did not stop the berserkers, but it did slow them. They stumbled through sheets of flame, smoldering as they came. Some walked off the platform entirely, trailing smoke like comets as they fell. Some half-fell through blackened boards and became roadblocks for the rest. All of these things relieved the pressure at the front of the column, and Isobel, Rhodri, and Dag were able to edge forward as they chopped down more of the beglamoured soldiers.

From then on it was a slow and steady slaughter, as grim and inevitable as death itself. Gillan watched man after man, most of whom he knew, roar up, gnashing his teeth and flailing with the mad abandon of a berserker, only to fall before the steady and disciplined defense of the harper's companions.

The men behind that first wave were burning like torches, yet still fighting, still shouting, as if the pain of the flames meant nothing, but they fell too, and neither flame nor weapon touched Isobel, Rhodri, or Dag. Then, finally, as the tide of men began to slow to a trickle, the whole scaffolding peeled off the walls of the hole and fell away like a burning snake, taking more than a hundred men with it, all still screaming in mad and mindless rage.

Gillan swallowed and looked away, sobbing. Dag put an arm around his shoulder and sobbed too.

"There was nothing else to do, Gil," he said. "I'm sorry."

"We may have killed them," said Isobel. "But I put their deaths squarely on Harkyn, or this Mangar, or both. I . . . I just wish we had never entered this room."

Gillan hardly heard them speaking. He lifted the strap of the Flame Horn over his head and threw it into the pit. It had won the battle, but he never wanted to see it again.

Chapter Eleven

They finally found Baron Harkyn in a pillared, marble-floored room dominated by a giant gold statue that stood on a raised platform and gleamed in the warm glow of the oil lamps that flanked it. Twice the height of a man, the statue was a monstrously deformed parody of a warrior in heavy armor who held out his hands as if waiting to receive something. Its right eye was a bright red ruby. Its left was an empty socket.

Harkyn, fully armed and armored, was kneeling in prayer at the statue's oversized feet as the party entered.

"Bashar, is that you?" he said, rising. "Do you have the eye?" He paused as he saw who it was. "Oh. It's you. I thought the golems had dealt with you."

Rhodri stepped forward and took the sheathed sword off his back. "Baron Harkyn, before we turn to . . . other business, I must discharge my duty to Master Armorer Arnall of the Haernhold and deliver to you this sword, dubbed—as you asked—the Hawkblade, which you paid him to make. Please take it, that I may be free of my obligation."

The baron sniffed. Gillan had always thought him a cold man, aloof and distant, but he had never seemed cruel. That had changed. He looked at Rhodri as if he were a cockroach who'd had the temerity to crawl onto his dinner plate. "Fear not, dwarf. I will take the blade from your corpse."

"*If I die,*" said Rhodri, and shucked the sheath from the sword. It was a beauty. Dwarf work of the best quality, its pommel fashioned in the shape of a hawk's head, and etched hawk's wings stretching down the length of the blade. He held it in his off hand and brandished both it and his axe, then he grinned. "But while I live, I must make a good faith effort to deliver it."

As the baron put his hand to his hilt, Gillan stepped between them, hoping, even at this late hour, to avoid bloodshed.

"Baron," he called. "Why have y'done this? Why have y'given over the town to these monsters? Why have y'turned your back on the people y'were sworn to protect?"

The baron squared his shoulders, noble. "There was a time long ago when all men were immortal. If a few must die to return humanity to that blessed state, is it not worth it?"

He glanced over his shoulder at the statue. "Mangar the Dark has promised eternal life for myself and all who serve me when Tarjan awakens from his slumber. Who would not take that bargain, regardless of—"

He cut off suddenly and sniffed the air like a dog, then turned to Gillan. "You have the eye. Give it to me!"

Gillan edged back, his hand going instinctively to his belt pouch. "Please, Baron. It's not too late. Turn away from these tricksters. Remember who y'are. Remember—"

Harkyn motioned to the sides of the room. Guards who had been hidden among the pillars stepped out, swords at the ready. There were six. The baron extended his hand. "The eye, peasant! Now! It is all that is required to return Tarjan to this world. Give it to me!"

“Tarjan’s the big gold statue, is he?” asked Coira.

“That is merely a vessel for his spirit,” said the baron. “Sealed and perfect, without break or flaw—except for the eye.”

He drew his sword. Its blade was purest crystal and glinted red in the light of the lamps. “Now, enough talk. Give me the eye.”

Isobel moved Gillan behind her as she, Rhodri, and Dag stepped forward to meet the baron and his men.

“Start singing, harper,” she said. “Something the baron doesn’t like.”

Well, the dour bastard had sat stone-faced through every song Gillan had ever played him, so it was likely he didn’t care for music. Gillan began “The Ballad of the Seeker” and kept backing up, behind even Lady Svante and Coira. It seemed best to keep out of the way.

Weary and wounded as they were from fighting the berserk guards in the pit, Rhodri, Dag, and Isobel were not at their best. They were soon pressed on all sides, and doubly so at the front, where the baron’s crystal sword, which Gillan thought would have shattered at the first parry, beat back their weapons and made them cringe with each deafening chime. Even Lady Svante was struggling. She could not seem to form a spell.

“There is a force in this room,” she said through gritted teeth. “Fighting me. I cannot gather my wits.”

Gillan retreated to the base of the golden statue and, as the others were pressed against it, climbed onto its golden feet, singing all the while.

And perhaps his singing was having some effect, for, in the space of a verse, Isobel bashed in the head of one guard, Dag gutted another, and Rhodri gashed the baron’s leg with the Hawkblade.

Still, it wasn’t enough to break the attackers’ press. Indeed, the death and blood seemed only to goad the baron to greater fury, and Rhodri quickly found himself unable to do anything more than defend against the whirling crystal

blade.

It was all too much for Gillan. He climbed farther up the statue until he hugged its neck like a child getting a piggyback ride from his father. As he took the eye of the Witch King from his bag, Dag and Rhodri together slew a third guard, and then a fourth, and as he fitted the gem into the statue's empty left socket, Isobel knocked the last two back.

But then the attention of everyone in the room swung toward Gillan, for, under his encircling arms, the statue began to shudder and groan, and its chest expand as if it was taking a breath.

"Forge and fire, harper!" roared Rhodri. "What have you done?"

Gillan stared at his hand, then at the red jewel in the statue's socket. "I . . . I don't know. I . . ."

It was as though a fog he hadn't known was blinding him had suddenly lifted. He'd had a perfectly good reason to back up to the statue and climb it, hadn't he? It had seemed entirely natural at the time, but why had he put the eye in the socket? There was no logical reason for that. What had he done?

"The statue compelled him," said Svante. "Twisted his mind just as it is disrupting mine. Its power is—"

"Get away!" cried Dag. "It's moving."

The statue's ruby eyes glowed crimson as it slowly lowered its arms and looked down. Dag, Rhodri, Isobel, Coira, and Lady Svante scattered toward the pillars, but Baron Harkyn and his two remaining guards stared upward at it with looks of religious awe.

The baron spread his arms. "Mighty Tarjan, I beg of thee! Grant me the blessing I was promised! Give me eternal life!"

The statue squashed the baron flat with one heavy gold foot, then slipped in the gore. The skid shook Gillan free and he slid down its back to land hard on the floor, face to shattered face with the broken baron. Harkyn's eyes

dimmed as he stared at Gillan.

"I . . . was . . . promised . . ." he said, then said no more.

His death broke the guards' spell of awe and they ran for the corners, screaming in terror, only to be cut down by Dag, Isobel, and Rhodri.

Then it was just Gillan and his comrades and the statue, and Gillan was the only one in the center of the room. The statue reached for him. It was stiff and slow, though not as slow as it had been a moment ago. Gillan rolled out of the way, knocking over one of the oil lamps, and half ran, half clawed his way to the pillars with the others.

"I'm so sorry," he gasped. "I am so very sorry."

"Never mind about that, harper," said Rhodri as the gold figure turned toward them. "Just keep singing. We're going to need every advantage."

Gillan sighed and cleared his throat. No song was going to affect the statue, that was clear, so he would have to encourage his companions instead. He sang the old traveler's song again as they spread out around it and attacked.

"A traveler am I, on the road to Anglesby . . ."

Coira's arrows spanged off the statue's gold skin in dangerously random directions. Dag and Rhodri and Isobel's strikes stung their hands and shivered their arms, but made not the least impression, not even when Dag snatched up the baron's crystal sword and tried that. Nor did Lady Svante's spells affect it. Indeed, she could barely cast them, so muddled was her head in the statue's presence.

Then a purple light began to glow between its palms. The elf groaned—the most human sound Gillan had ever heard her make. "The ancient fire. The slayer of the gods. We must flee."

"And leave that thing alive?" asked Isobel. "No."

"But we will die," said the elf.

It seemed she might be right. The glow was growing brighter with the statue's every step. It hurt the eyes.

"Wait a minute!" said Gillan. "The baron said,

uh . . . a vessel without break or flaw. Does that mean if we crack the thing, Tarjan will leak out and it'll die?"

"We've been trying to crack it!" said Rhodri. "If you hadn't noticed!"

"It's impervious!" said Coira.

"Maybe," Gillan said, then motioned to the other side of the room. "Quick, run around behind it."

With the statue bearing down on them and the purple light blinding them, it was an easy order to obey. The others scattered for the opposite pillars as the statue laboriously turned around.

Gillan, however, slowed as he reached the platform in the center and picked up the oil lamp he'd knocked over earlier, a wide copper basin with a flame in the center, now extinguished, mounted atop a conical reservoir. As the statue came on and the unnatural light grew brighter, he threw the lamp as hard as he could at its feet.

The reservoir split, just as he'd hoped, and sloshed oil all over the polished marble floor.

"Come on, y'big lummo!" shouted Gillan. "Slip."

The statue slipped, but only an inch, recovering instantly. Gillan scrambled aside as it thrust out its palms and a beam of purple light burned a flaming trench in the spot where he'd been standing. It had set the marble on fire!

"Foolish harper!" shouted Coira. "Run!"

But Gillan was too mad. These bastards had made monsters out of his friends and neighbors, had frozen Skara Brae to the marrow, had *killed his wife*! He wasn't going to let them get away with it. He wasn't going to let their ugly statue wreck the rest of his home town.

He grabbed the second oil lamp and heaved it too. It split just as the other had, and more oil gushed across the floor. Again, the statue barely stumbled as it stepped into the puddle, and the purple light grew once more between its palms, but then, on its second step, its gilded heel came down on the cracked basin of the lamp and shrieked across the slick marble.

The statue's hands flew apart as it fought for balance, but it could not recover. It fell backward in an awkward jumble of golden limbs and smashed the back of its head against the raised platform on which it had previously stood.

"Now!" shouted Gillan. "Strike it while it's down!"

The others rushed out from between the pillars, weapons raised, but as they neared the statue, they slowed. Its limbs were unmoving, frozen in ungainly attitudes of unbalance, and the light had faded behind its ruby eyes.

"Is . . . is it dead?" asked Dag.

"I don't know," said Gillan.

"It is dead," said Lady Svante, holding her temples. "The vile spirit that animated it has fled."

"But how?" asked Isobel.

Gillan stepped up on the platform and looked down at the statue's head. Where the back of its skull had struck the edge, there was a jagged crack in the gold skin that showed a hollow blackness within.

"Without break or flaw," he murmured.

Rhodri joined him and laughed. "You're a genius, harper. A genius!"

Gillan shrugged and looked at the floor, chagrined. "Had to make up for waking it up, didn't I?"

"Friends," came a frail voice from behind them. "This way."

The party turned. Between two pillars a glowing, undulating hole floated in the air, its edges shimmering and frothing like sea foam. Through it, as if through a window, Gillan saw a room he recognized, and an old man with a white beard reaching out to him with a shaking hand.

Gillan stared. "Kylearan!"

"Please, my boy. You must come through. It takes all my strength to . . ."

The old man grunted and staggered, and the circumference of the portal shrank, then gradually grew again.

"Hurry," the wizard gasped.

"This way!" Gillan called to the others. "Kylearan is

a friend.”

He ran for the portal as Isobel, Coira, Dag, and Lady Svante followed. Where was Rhodri? He looked back.

“Rhodri!” called Gillan. “Run!”

The dwarf stood over Harkyn’s corpse, the Hawkblade reversed in his hand. He stabbed it down through Harkyn’s chest.

“My duty is discharged,” he said, then pounded for the portal.

Gillan spared a last look at the fallen golden statue as he pulled the dwarf through. Had it really been Tarjan? Was it really dead? Could Mangar be even worse?

“Dear Kylearan,” said Gillan. “What has happened to you?”

Gillan and the others gathered around the bed where they had laid the old wizard. They were in the top room of his tower.

“The fiend Mangar has locked me in and leeches my power from his black tower, using it to maintain the walls of arcane ice he has placed around the town. I . . . cannot break the connection.”

He sank back into his pillow. “I have sensed your progress since you fought the wraith and wished I could aid you, but could not. Then you shattered Tarjan’s vessel and the loss shook Mangar to his core, loosening his grip on me long enough for me to open the portal. I am glad you made it through. I have much to tell you.”

“Rest first,” said Gillan. “Yer too weak.”

“No,” said the wizard. “There can be no rest while Mangar lives.”

“So what does he want?” asked Rhodri. “Why has this monster come to Skara Brae? Why did he set Harkyn’s men to digging in the catacombs?”

Kylearan sighed. “That I do not know. I can only tell you that he is but the latest in a long line of madmen who have done the same. Tarjan, Aildrek the Witch King, others

before and after them, all have sought something below Skara Brae. Whatever it is, all who have tried for it have been willing to kill and die for it, so it must be a very great thing indeed. Great, and terrible.”

“And for that reason, if no other, we must stop him,” said Isobel. “If a man will be a tyrant just to find an object, what will he be once he has found it? Certainly not a man of peace.”

“Agreed,” said Rhodri, and the others said the same.

“Then we’ve got to get into his tower,” said Coira. “Can you give us any help with that, old man?”

“Impatient girl,” said Kylearan. “That is precisely why I brought you here.” He recovered his breath for a moment, then continued. “I have in my possession an onyx key that will open any door. With it, you will certainly be able to enter the fiend’s lair. I also have a weapon that should help you defeat Mangar—a whip known as the Spectre Snare. Your main difficulty in fighting Mangar is that he exists half in shadow, and is nigh impossible to hit.”

“So he’s called Mangar the Dark for a reason,” growled Rhodri.

“Indeed,” said Kylearan. “But the Spectre Snare will make him solid and tangible, allowing you to strike him. It is yours to take, as well as any other useful treasures you find in my vault.” He gave a weak smile. “Unfortunately—”

“Here it comes,” said Dag. “There’s always an ‘unfortunately.’”

“Unfortunately,” the mage continued, “the vault is at the bottom of my tower, and Mangar has turned all my defenses against me. It is why I have not been able to leave.”

“Didn’t I say?” said Dag. “I knew it.”

“Can’t you just make a hole in the air like before?” asked Coira. “Take us directly to the vault?”

“Would that I could,” said Kylearan. “But bringing you here took the last of my power, and I fear I will not recover it until I am freed from Mangar’s influence. I’m afraid you will have to fight your way through to it, as if you

were an unwelcome guest.”

Gillan sighed. “Lovely.”

Chapter Twelve

Kylearan was too weak to guide them through his tower. Instead he remained in his bed while they fought their weary way through the bewildering maze of traps, monsters, and magical locks that barred their way, until at last they reached the treasure vault on the lowest level, and the guardian who defended it.

It was a towering golem, taller even than the ones that had guarded Harkyn's throne room, but instead of mud, this one was made of crystal, cut and chiseled into the shape of a heroic god. It did not act the hero, however. It came at them on chiming polished feet, gnashing diamond teeth and slashing razor-faceted claws.

"Did the old man say anything about how to defeat this thing?" asked Coira as they backed away.

Gillan shook his head. "He was too busy snoring."

"Looks as if a single strike would shatter it!" said Isobel, raising her voice to be heard over the deafening ringing of the golem's movements.

"That's what we thought about the crystal sword!"

said Rhodri. “Remember?”

“Wait a minute!” said Dag, and held up the sword in question. “You don’t suppose . . . ?”

And with that he charged straight for the golem.

“Dag!” shouted Gillan. “Don’t be a fool!”

The big Einarr ducked the crystal claws and swung the sword at the golem’s legs. The clang of crystal on crystal was deafening. It even seemed to make the golem wince. It did nothing, however, to its legs.

Dag struck again, and again the thing cringed, but this time it managed to knock him sprawling. He got back up again, bleeding from the forehead, and readied himself for another pointless charge.

“Dag!” called Rhodri. “Leave off! You’re not even marking it!”

“Make the noise again!” Gillan shouted.

Dag frowned as he backed from the golem. “What?”

“The sword! It doesn’t like the sound! Let it ring!”

“If you say so!” Dag rapped the flat of the crystal blade against the floor, then raised it over his head. It rang with a clear, high tone, but strangely, rather than fading away, the note grew louder, echoing off the walls.

Dag stared as the sword continued to sing. It was vibrating his hand now, and making his arm shake too.

The golem stopped stalking him and shook its head back and forth. Its hands clutched at the air, and its steps became irregular.

“Keep at it, lad!” called Gillan.

“What do you think I’m doing?” asked Dag.

The golem came on, but not as fast as Gillan had feared. It pushed ahead like a man fighting a strong wind, while Dag backed away before it, still holding the sword aloft.

Soon, however, the Einarr had to clutch the grip with both hands, for the blade’s vibrations continued to grow stronger and the ringing note louder with each passing second. All around the room, the companions collapsed to

the floor, clutching their ears.

Coira shouted something to Gillan, but he didn't hear her.

Dag, who couldn't cover his ears without letting go of the sword, stumbled blindly into a corner, then turned, horrified, as the golem inched closer, swiping clumsily with its arms.

Then, just as it looked as if it would club him to death, the golem stopped and shrieked and exploded in a burst of crystal shards.

Dag, being closest, got the worst of it, taking nasty lacerations to his arms, hands, and head, but even Gillan and the rest, who were in the far corners of the room, were cut up.

With the death of the golem, the sword's terrible note faded at last, and they were able to take their hands from their ears and stand again.

"Well done, Dag," said Lady Svante, tottering toward him. "So brave of you to hold the sword all the way to the end. I do not believe I would have had the fortitude."

Dag frowned. "What?"

"I said—"

"You'll have to speak up," said Dag, wiggling a finger in his ear. "I can't hear a thing."

Gillan patted him on the back, then turned to the others. "Let's find this key, then. And the Spectre Snare, whatever that may be."

They all started throwing open every chest and trunk they could find and examining all the armor stands, scroll cases, books, and weapons that were strewn around the room.

"I like these boots," said Coira, holding up a pair of sleek black boots with decorative wings stitched over the ankles.

"And this must be the onyx key," said Gillan, holding up a slim black key he'd found in a shallow bowl. "Let's see

if it really opens any lock.”

He found a locked chest and approached it. It sprang open before the key had even touched the lock.

“It works! Amaz—!” The graceful curve of an ancient harp caught his eye from the bottom of the open chest. “Helloooo.”

“The Shield of Ybarra,” said Rhodri, stepping past him to a heavy targe. “Never thought I’d see it in person.”

“A staff of conjuring,” said Lady Svante. “Most useful.”

“Look at this funny ring with a troll face carved in it,” said Dag. “And it fits!”

“Kylearan said we could take whatever we liked,” said Gillan, lifting the harp from the chest and looking around. “But we won’t beat Mangar without . . .”

He paused as he found himself facing a chest with the words “Spectre Snare” carved into its face. The lock that had guarded it was a twisted lump on the floor, and the lid and body were splintered. It looked like some being of unnatural strength had ripped the chest open. It was entirely empty.

“Oh, no,” groaned Gillan. “He hasn’t . . .”

The others gathered around and stared into the broken chest.

“Gone,” said Dag.

Lady Svante held her hands over the chest, then nodded.

“Taken by Mangar.”

“And destroyed by him?” asked Coira.

“Not here,” said the elf. “The destruction of so powerful a weapon would have left an . . . echo.”

“So it still exists?” asked Isobel.

Lady Svante shrugged. “I can follow its ‘scent.’ If it remains intact, we will find it.”

“Probably clutched in Mangar’s hot little hands,” grumbled Coira.

After a long trek following Lady Svante while she traced the scent of the Spectre Snare out of Kylearan’s tower and

through the sewers, the party stopped behind her as she examined a slime-encrusted wall that, to Gillan's eyes, looked exactly like all the rest of the slime-encrusted walls in that dismal labyrinth.

"The trail goes through this wall. There must be a door here."

Rhodri pulled the onyx key from his pouch. "Then this should open it."

"Wait," said Isobel, holding up a mailed hand. "If Mangar's tower lies beyond this door, then we must be on our guard. Ready your weapons, prepare your spells, and pray to your gods. Our greatest battle is before us."

"Nice of you to acknowledge gods other than your own," drawled Coira, but she bent to praying and tightening belts and straps like all the rest. For his part, Gillan turned up the wick of his lantern and tuned the ancient harp he had found in Kylearan's treasure room. It was heavy compared to his broken one, but it had a lovely mellow tone.

Finally they were all ready, and Rhodri pressed the key to the grimy stones. A section of the wall slid aside as if it were on greased rails, revealing a dusty, cobweb-filled corridor dimly lit with flickering, red-flamed torches.

"Didn't Mangar build this place overnight only a few days ago?" asked Dag. "And there are cobwebs and dust already?"

"It was not built," said Lady Svante. "It was moved. The dust of many realms and many ages lies at our feet. I can smell it."

"But can you still smell the snare?" asked Rhodri.

"Indeed," said the elf. "This way."

She led the way through a maze of narrow corridors with Isobel and Rhodri directly behind her, Gillan holding up the lantern in the middle, and Coira and Dag at the back. Gillan was glad she could sense the trail because he was soon completely lost. It was all the same corridor as far as he was concerned. He couldn't distinguish one bit of it from any other bit.

The elf stopped in the middle of an intersection, peering and sniffing in all directions. "It stops here," she said. "And yet it is not here. Where has it gone?"

"Wonderful," said Coira.

A distant growling echoed from the darkness. The others looked around. It was impossible to tell which corridor it had come from.

"I'd suggest you find it again as soon as you are able," said Rhodri, clearing his throat.

"Harper," called Lady Svante. "Come forward with the lamp. Perhaps footprints will tell us what magic cannot."

Gillan squeezed between Isobel and Rhodri and held up the lantern while the elf peered into each of the arms of the intersection.

"Hmmm." She motioned to him and he followed her as she crept into the left-hand corridor. "It seems—"

They were somewhere else.

There had been no flash or puff of smoke. Only a popping of Gillan's ears, and the jarring realization that he was suddenly in a room, not an intersection.

Lady Svante looked up, then around. "A spell of transportation. Most cunning." She turned to the others. "Friends, are we all—"

The others were not there. Only she and Gillan stood in the room.

"A trap," said the elf. "And fool that I am, I walked right into it. Now we are divided."

"Not for long," said Gillan. "Surely the others will follow us into the hall and be transported too."

Lady Svante shook her head. "I doubt it will work that way. It was meant to separate us."

"Well, it's certainly done that." Gillan took another look at the room. Calling it a room was generous. It was more of a closet—a closet without a door. "We're trapped."

"Perhaps," said the elf. "But whoever carried the Spectre Snare was in this room. The scent is strong here. There must be an exit. Hold."

Gillan waited as Lady Svante intoned a spell that, though it didn't brighten the room, seemed to make every detail of it clearer, and as he turned in a circle to look at it afresh, he saw a carved mouth in one wall where he had been certain nothing was before.

"Lady," he said, pointing. "Look. It—"

"SPEAK THE SEVEN OF THE ONE AND FIND THE HIDDEN STAIR!" boomed the mouth.

"A riddle," said Lady Svante. "Though the meaning is obscure. What are the seven? What is the one?"

"I know it!" cried Gillan. "At least I used to. It's . . ." He pounded his temple with the heel of his hand. "It's a joke about . . . the inflexibility of the Fatherites' moral code, I think? A schoolyard thing. Let me think a moment."

"Take all the time you need," said the elf.

But when he hadn't said anything after five minutes, she cleared her throat. "May I remind you that our companions are likely fighting for their lives. We must escape this room as quickly as we can so that we can aid them."

"I know! I know!" snapped Gillan. "And I almost have it. Just wait!"

He muttered to himself as he ran it over in his head. "These are my commandments, learn them well. The first man is blessed and the last is . . . damned? Aye, that's right. Then it's . . . the second is . . . with the one god? For the one god? Hmmm. *With*, I think. But what's next? Er . . . Old are these riddles, but the sixth is . . . is . . . ancient? No, that's not right. Ancient are these riddles, but the sixth is . . . forever? Yes! Forever! And . . ."

He snapped his fingers and looked at Lady Svante. "I have it! The whole thing! I remember now!"

"Then speak it!" said the elf. "And quickly!"

Gillan turned to the magic mouth and cleared his throat. "Lay with passion and be forever damned!"

Nothing happened. Gillan and Lady Svante waited. Still nothing. Gillan looked behind him, just to make sure a door had not opened silently behind his back. Nothing.

“Are you sure you have it right?” she asked.

“Yes, yes. I’m sure! It’s a joke about the prissy, purse-mouthed morality of the Fatherites.”

“I don’t see anything particularly funny about it.”

“Then y’ve likely not met many Fatherites. Anything that suggests pleasure or joy they name a sin and scare their sons and daughters into fearing. Eternal damnation for a caress, but a place in heaven for righteous murder. What sort of god calls for such commandments?”

The elf shrugged. “Well, you must have some part of it wrong, for no door has been revealed.”

“I’ve got it right! I promise you! Why don’t y’reveal the door with yer magic?”

“If it could be revealed with magic, it would have appeared when the mouth did,” said the elf. “Please, think again.”

Gillan ground his teeth. *Did* he have it wrong? It seemed impossible. The answer had sprung into his head as if he’d read it off a page. But maybe his memory was playing tricks on him. Maybe one of the words was incorrect. But which one? Was “passion” “lust” instead? Was “damned” “cursed?” Was “forever” “ever?” He tried them all, and every combination of them he could think of. None worked.

Lady Svante coughed and stepped to him. “Harper, it is possible I have a way, but you may object.”

“What?” asked Gillan. “What is it?”

“If you let me, I can look into your memories and find the phrase as you first heard it, but it will mean you surrendering to my will for a few moments.”

Gillan stepped back, heart pounding. “Let you in my head? I think not, elf. Yer enchantments have already hurt me more than I can bear, and yer ‘kind and generous’ offer to make me forget *my wife* has not inspired me to trust you. I’ve buried my loathing for you for the good of the company and my city, but to let y’wander freely through my memories is one concession too many. Who knows what y’d tinker with?”

"I promise I will not harm you in any way," said Lady Svante. "I only want to get us out of this room."

"Never! There must be another way."

"Perhaps there is," said she. "But have we time to think of it? While we argue here, our friends may be dying."

Gillan turned away from her, clutching his head like he was afraid she was going to steal it off his shoulders. Which was a fair assessment, really. He didn't want her elven magics anywhere near his mind. At the same time, she was right. Every moment they spent trapped in this room was a moment they could not assist their companions, and while Gillan's contribution to the party's success had been minimal at best, Lady Svante's spells had aided them and hampered their enemies in every single engagement. Who knew how well the others might be doing without her?

Gillan turned to her, glaring. "I'll have y'swear on yer gods that y'll not make me forget Maidie, or her death, or your treachery. Nor will y'ease my pain over her passing, or alter my feelings for you for the better. D'ye hear me? D'ye swear it?"

"I swear it, harper," said she. "Your feeling for her will be untouched. I have learned my lesson in that regard."

Still he hesitated. "If y'change anything, I'll know. I don't know how, but I will. And I'll kill y'for it. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, harper. Now please . . ."

It was a struggle to do it, but Gillan lowered his arms to his sides and closed his eyes. "Fine, then. Do it. Be quick about it."

"Thank you, harper."

Lady Svante stepped to him and raised her hands to his head. He shivered and flinched as her fingers clasped over his temples and she began to whisper a spell. And then she stepped back and smiled.

"What?" he asked. "Why have y'stopped? Is something wrong?"

"I did not stop," said she. "You were asleep for

nearly a minute. But we have succeeded. It is done. I have the phrase.”

“Asleep? What did you—?”

She turned to the carved mouth and spoke. “Lie with passion and be forever damned!”

With a deep clunk of hidden counterweights and a grinding of stone on stone, the wall that the mouth was on rose to reveal a spiral stair beyond.

Gillan stared. “I . . . I don’t understand. Isn’t that what I said before? Why did it open for you?”

“You said *lay*,” said Lady Svante, starting for the stairs. “The correct word is apparently *lie*.”

Gillan smacked his forehead. “Of course! It is ‘lie’ that makes it a joke! For it is not laying passionately with someone that damns one forever, but *lying* passionately to someone—as hypocrite priests do—that is the unpardonable sin.”

“I have the scent again,” said the elf, cutting him off and starting up the stair. “But I must concentrate. Please.”

Well, that’s me told, thought Gillan. Then his mind turned back to what had just happened, and the excitement of learning the correct answer to the riddle and getting out of the room was undercut by fear. To him it had felt as if the elf’s probings had taken no time at all, and changed him not a whit, but had they? He had no way of knowing how long he’d been under her control, nor what she had done while she searched his mind. Frantically he scoured his memories, looking for something missing.

His wife was still where she should be, thank the gods, as was his love for her, and his grief and guilt at her death. Also intact was his hatred of Lady Svante for her meddling, and the horror he had felt when she offered to help him forget. Perhaps the elf had kept her promise after all. He breathed a tentative sigh of relief but could not relax entirely. Further reflection might show him something he’d missed. He was not ready to pronounce her guiltless just yet.

He followed her up the stair.

Chapter Thirteen

They moved quickly through corridors lit only by Gillan's lantern and guided only by Lady Svante's sense of the Spectre Snare. Far in the distance, perhaps above them, perhaps below, Gillan thought he could hear the sound of battle, but there were more immediate sounds around them that obscured it—the grunts and snorts of hidden beasts and monsters. The whispers of who-knew-what enemies.

Somehow they managed to avoid all these dangers and came at last to a broad ascending stair where the elf paused and looked around.

"The snare is near," she said. "And undestroyed. We must take care to—"

She was interrupted by a tremendous crash and the roaring of a monstrous throat that echoed down the stairs—and behind that, a cry of pain that Gillan recognized.

"That's Isobel! Hurry!"

They ran up the stairs and saw, at the end of a dark hall, an open door through which they could see violent movement and the flare of magical fire and lightning.

Gillan started forward, trembling but determined. “Come on.”

Lady Svante caught his elbow and pointed to a closed door between them and the end of the hall. “Wait. The Spectre Snare is in there.”

“To hell with that! They’re dying!”

“And we will die with them if we don’t have it.”

She started for the closed door. Gillan was tempted to leave her behind and race to the battle, but what good would he be alone? He just sang songs. He joined her at the door as she turned the latch and stepped in.

Inside was a small room with another carved mouth on the wall opposite the door, and a large stone sarcophagus on the floor below the mouth—and that was all.

Gillan raised an eyebrow. “I hope the snare is in that box, or otherwise y’ve led us wrong.”

“It is,” said the elf. “I can sense it. The question is, how to—”

“WHAT CAN BIND THE MIGHTIEST OF FOES?” boomed the magic mouth.

Gillan frowned, trying to think of a clever answer, but nothing came to him. Then he blinked and turned to Lady Svante. “Isn’t that what the snare is supposed to do?”

“Indeed,” said she. “But surely . . .”

Gillan faced the mouth. “Uh, the Spectre Snare?”

With a groan and a rattle of dust, the lid of the stone box lifted and split, revealing a shadowed interior. They looked inside. Curled upon a wooden pedestal was a thick silver rope. It had a handle at one end, while the other end was split like a cat o’ nine tails, with each strand ending in a strangely shaped and translucent hook. It glowed an eerie blue.

Gillan shook his head. “Truly? The answer to the riddle was the name of the thing we were looking for?”

Lady Svante lifted the relic from the chest, then turned to the door. “Be thankful at least one thing in this mad adventure was simple. Now come, and let us pray we are not

too late.”

They hurried into the hall and ran to the open door, where they found the remains of a sorcerer’s study, now in shambles. Broken tables and chairs smoked amid shattered glass. Craters pitted the walls and smoke hovered just below the ceiling from a multitude of small fires. The bodies of what appeared to be vampires—pale, fanged, and clawed—lay strewn across the floor, limbs shattered, chests caved in, and faces twisted in frozen agony.

Isobel’s work, thought Gillan. But where was she?

Then he saw her.

In a far corner Dag and Rhodri stood guarding her fallen and unmoving body, weapons out and blood on their faces. The head of her stone hammer was shattered, and its haft split. In another corner, Coira crouched behind an overturned table, firing arrows at a tall, indistinct figure in the center of the room. The arrows passed through him as if he wasn’t there.

Mangar the Dark.

“Come, harper,” whispered Lady Svante.

She raised the snare and crept toward the arch-fiend as Gillan hunched after her, scuttling from broken table to overturned chair to fallen cabinet like a frightened mouse.

“I concede you have done better than I expected,” Mangar was saying to the others. His voice buzzed with a strange, insect-like resonance that made Gillan cringe as if there were a wasp in the room. “The losses of Bashar and the baron were aggravating setbacks, and the destruction of Tarjan’s vessel a disaster from which it will be difficult to recover.”

Strangely, the wizard was as difficult to see up close as he had been from a distance. He seemed made of shadow, his form rippling like dark water disturbed by a stone. Indeed, Gillan couldn’t really say which way he was facing, or where his eyes were. It was unnerving.

“Fortunately, Tarjan does not need a vessel of gold to return to this world. A vessel of flesh will do. And what

a delicious irony it would be if the sainted Kylearan, who has for so long fought to deny him his resurrection, were to become the chalice into which I poured my master's immortal soul."

Lady Svante took another step and raised the Spectre Snare to strike, but before she could, a hand thrust out of Mangar's darkness and stabbed splayed fingers at her. Suddenly she clutched her head and collapsed to her knees, the snare falling to the ground beside her.

"Ah, the elf," said Mangar, as calmly as before. "Without whom the rest of you would have died a thousand times over."

Lady Svante struggled against the attack, stuttering a counterspell and moving her hands in jittery patterns, but to no avail. Blood seeped from her ears and eyes. She shook as if with fever.

Behind Mangar, Dag and Rhodri raced forward to save her. The arch-fiend backhanded them without turning, and they skidded across the floor to end beside Isobel.

"I know why you're here, elf," Mangar said. "Because the old races fear that men will rise and topple them once again. And we will. When Tarjan returns and welcomes mankind's true gods back to the world, your kind will not be safe in your hidden realms. We will find you and enslave you. Bend you to our wills! Just . . . like . . . this!"

Lady Svante made a horrible noise, then rose to her feet as if lifted by puppet strings.

"Now, sorceress," said Mangar. "You will use your magics for me. Kill these fools you call your friends. Destroy them."

Slowly, Lady Svante turned, as if fighting every movement of her own limbs. Nonetheless, the rhymes of her spells spilled from her lips and she reached glowing hands toward Rhodri and Dag, who were only now beginning to pick themselves up.

Gillan didn't know what to do. Should he tackle her? Should he try to wake her? No. It was Mangar who controlled

her. It was Mangar who must be attacked. But how?

The Spectre Snare!

The relic lay only feet from the table behind which he hid. Did he dare? Who else could? They were all down and broken. It had to be him.

With a whimper of fear, Gillan dove out of hiding, snatched up the snare and ran at Mangar, lashing it at him as if it were a whip. Like Coira's arrows, its hooked ends passed through his shadowy form, but unlike the arrows, Mangar felt them and seemed to grow more solid at their caress.

He screamed and turned, red eyes blazing, as Gillan scampered back, tripping over broken furniture and whimpering in fear.

"Who has touched me?" he roared. "The bard? The useless—" He cut off as Rhodri and Dag, seeing him coalescing, charged toward him.

"Elf!" he roared over his shoulder. "Take that fool's toy and destroy it."

As Mangar met Rhodri and Dag's attacks, Lady Svante faced Gillan and started toward him, and in the span of a single step, she became once again the perfect noble beauty who had come to hear him sing at the Scarlet Bard.

"Dearest harper," she whispered, looking deep into his eyes. "The tools of war are not for such as you. Put down this scourge and sing to me once again, I beg you."

As before, her voice was as warm and comforting as mulled wine, and her eyes green gems that drew him into their glittering depths. His head spun, his mind clouded, the aches of battle left his limbs, and he longed for nothing more than to curl into her arms like a sleepy kitten and purr against her breast.

"Forget your life," Lady Svante murmured. "Forget your wife. Think only of me, and oblivion I can give you."

Oblivion? His wife? Anger poked through the drowsy spell of the elf's seduction, pricking his heart and his guilt. What was he doing? This was no time to sleep.

He shoved away as Lady Svante reached for the snare, and wove unsteadily toward Mangar, who had Dag pinned under one semi-solid boot, and Rhodri held off the ground by his neck.

Once more Gillan lashed at the fiend, this time striking him square between the shoulders. He was afraid the strands would again pass through Mangar's body, but this time they caught, as if sinking into his bones.

Mangar screamed and convulsed and solidified even more, revealing himself to be a gaunt and ugly old man, with the strands of the snare embedded deep in his flesh. And he grew uglier by the second. His eyes swelled in their sockets. Boils blossomed all over his body.

A spasm of pain caused the fiend to throw Rhodri aside, and he landed on Gillan, sprawling them both across the floor. Mangar advanced on them, purple light glowing between his palms even as they cracked and dripped with pus.

"I will rend you limb from—"

Coira fired her last arrows, and, now that Mangar was solid, they thudded into his body with brutal force, staggering him sideways. He turned, snarling, and aimed his hands at the archer, but then Dag rose up and knocked him flat with a wild backhand.

Mangar landed on his back, cursing and struggling to stand.

"You dare touch me? You dare to assault my person? I who will rule the seven realms and—"

Suddenly, though Gillan hadn't seen her stand or approach, Isobel was standing over Mangar, favoring an obviously broken leg, and she swung down with the shattered head of her hammer. It caved in his chest like it was made of straw.

With a hiss like a sighing snake, the sorcerer's arms sank to his sides and his putrefaction continued, the boils on his body bursting and running with pus and blood, his eyes liquefied and drained, his nose turned black and rotten until there was nothing left but a gaping cavity in the center of his

face. Finally, the Spectre Snare released its hold on his bones and slid to the floor beside him.

Rhodri caught Isobel as she tottered, then looked up at Gillan and gave him a nod. “Well done, harper.”

The others murmured their agreement, then Gillan felt a hand on his arm. He looked around. Lady Svante bowed to him.

“Yes, harper,” she rasped. “You struck the telling blow.”

He raised an eyebrow. “And did you free me so I could strike it? The words you used. Speaking of oblivion, of my . . .”

The elf shrugged. “I could not resist Mangar’s command to take the snare from you, but I found I could choose the method, so I chose one that would surely fail.”

“Well, I . . .” said Gillan, and then he looked away, embarrassed. “Well, thanks.”

Coira cleared her throat. “Gotta be a better place than this to pat each other on the back. Let’s get out of here.”

And so they did.

Chapter Fourteen

With Mangar's death, the ice around Skara Brae cracked and collapsed, and the knee-deep snow melted, revealing the bodies of the fallen that the survivors had stored there until they had the chance to bury them. That time had come.

All through the graveyard outside the walls of the town, people laid their loved ones to rest, and sounds of weeping and singing could be heard on the gentle summer breeze in equal measure. As promised, Gillan and the others helped Isobel bury the followers of the Swordfather who had been slaughtered at her temple, a task that took two full days, and then stood with her and the rest of her congregation as they prayed and sang their solemn hymns in the small Fatherite graveyard near the river.

Finally, it was time for Gillan to bury his wife. He didn't think Isobel would come, for Maidie was sworn to the Weaver, the old Baedish goddess of handcraft and healing, and he'd decided to lay her down near the Weaver's Stone far out in the meadow wilds. The paladin came anyway, wielding a spade alongside Gillan, Dag, Rhodri, and Coira

as they dug her grave, then kept quiet as Gillan sang the old songs over her, and Lady Svante said a prayer in Elvish. Finally, Gillan pushed a simple wooden marker into the soft soil, wreathed it with summer flowers and gave it a kiss, and they all turned and started back to the city.

Looking at the walls far in the distance, Dag stopped. “I still can’t believe it was us that cracked all that ice and freed Skara Brae.”

“Nobody else believes it either,” said Coira. “They all just look at me like I’m mad when I try to tell it in the tavern.”

“The truth is ever lost quickly,” said Isobel.

“Especially with humans,” said Rhodri. “Memories like mayflies. Gone in a day.”

“Then it should be written down,” said Dag. He turned to Gillan with a grin. “That’s what you should do, Gil. You should make it all into a song. Tell the world about the brave deeds of Dag the daring, hero of Skara Brae.”

Gillan rubbed the tears from his cheeks and shivered. Though it was a summer day and he’d been digging, he felt cold to his bones. He looked back toward Maidie’s grave. “I—I don’t know if I could, lad.”

Dag’s face fell. “Oh, Gil. I should have thought. Forgive me. Here I am laughing and calling for tall tales while you’re . . .” He grunted. “What a turnip head.”

“No need to apologize,” said Gillan. “And there are a few bright spots among the misery, so it’s not all heartbreak.”

“Bright spots?” asked Dag.

“Aye,” said Gillan, and he turned a hard eye toward Lady Svante. “For one, I’m glad that, despite all of this one’s elven tricks and glamours, before Maidie died at the town gate, I was able t’tell her it was her I loved, and *no other*. At least I have that t’console me.”

The elf looked away at that as if ashamed, hiding her eyes beneath the shadow of her hood.

“Yes,” she murmured. “At least you have that.”

The End