

The Thief of Fate

BASED ON THE THIRD GAME IN THE CLASSIC SERIES



Nathan Long

**The
Thief of Fate**
by
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Chapter One

“Then, with the Spectre Snare raised in his mighty hand, did the great bard Gillan the harper strike down the evil archmage Mangar the Dark and rescue Skara Brae from eternal winter!”

Gillan choked on his whiskey and shot some out of his nose. “What a crock of—”

A coughing fit overwhelmed him and he bent double, having to clutch the table to keep from falling off the bench. The bard who had been telling the tale of the death of Mangar turned and glared at him.

“Do you mind?”

“Sorry, sorry,” gasped Gillan. “I wouldn’t want to interrupt you when you were telling my—”

Lady Svante, who sat beside him at the long table, put a hand on his shoulder. “Do not tell him, harper. He will likely not believe you, and it will be worse if he does.”

Gillan sighed, then coughed, then waved an apologetic hand to the bard. “Sorry, friend. Had too much is all.”

The bard sniffed and returned to his audience, and Gillan returned to his friends, who filled the other places at the table.

“Can you believe the crap they’re spewing?” he asked.

They were all crammed into a corner table in the Scarlet Bard, the inn where it had all begun—at least for Gillan—on the night ten years previous when a summer day in Skara Brae had become a wintry night, and Mangar had trapped all the townsfolk within its walls. The city fathers had decided to celebrate the anniversary of Mangar’s defeat with a week-long party, and people had come from all over the land of Caith to dance and drink and hear tales of the brave band of scrappy adventurers who had won the day and saved the town.

Thinking it would be a laugh, Gillan had invited the friends with whom he had lived through those terrible times to the celebration. Now he was regretting it. Deeply. The streets were thronged with rioting revelers, the inns packed with rowdy drunks, and nobody was getting the stories right.

“It’s not even exaggeration,” he moaned. “They’re just making things up.”

He pointed to Dag, who had been the chucker-out at the Scarlet Bard on that fateful night, and who had fought Mangar with all the courage of his reaving Einarr ancestors. “You’re nowhere near seven feet tall, and I don’t remember you arm-wrestling an ogre.”

Dag laughed. He had a full beard to go with his blond hair and braids now, and a wee bit of gray in both. “And fer all your virtues, Gillan, nobody would ever have described you as mighty.”

Gillan drew himself up. “Mighty where it counts, y’sheep lover.”

“Feh,” said Coira, who, on that night, had been in town to sell the furs she and her brothers had hunted in the forest of Inshriach, but now hunted coin and gems and oth-

er easily liquidated items in the homes of Tangramayne's wealthiest and most noble citizens. "Better they don't know. Who'd want t'live up to the stories? They make me out some sort of noble forest savage, dressed in furs and spouting words of timeless wisdom." She snorted and brushed an imaginary speck of dust from her faultless black doublet. "If they could see me now."

"They say I was a prince of the dwarves come from the Haernhold to warn Skara Brae of the danger predicted by dwarven geomancers," said Rhodri, laughing. "I was a damned no-name delivery boy, here to give Baron Harkyn a sword he'd ordered."

"Well," laughed Dag. "Y'gave it to him though, didn't ye? Right in the belly!"

"The killing of an enemy is no laughing matter," said Isobel, from beneath her hood. "One should not revel in one's triumph nor ridicule the defeated, only be thankful that one has survived and the world is a better place for their enemy's demise."

Dag sighed. "Do you never get tired of being noble, paladin? Don't you ever just want to make fun of somebody's hat, or spit in someone's drink?"

Isobel's broad shoulders shifted uncomfortably under her cloak. "The Swordfather knows I am not noble," she said. "But I never tire of trying."

"Yer trying all right," said Coira. "Even the bards say so. Isobel the Irritating they call you."

"They do not!" said Gillan. "Don't listen to her, paladin."

"I find it fascinating," said Lady Svante, who also wore a hood, but to hide elven ears, rather than out of Fatherite modesty, "that the truth can be lost in so short a time. Even considering the rapid pace of human events, we defeated Mangar only a decade ago, and yet all the facts have been forgotten in favor of complete fabrication."

"Aye," said Gillan. "I don't understand it either. As a bard, I know the need to polish the truth a bit and gloss

over some of the heroes' less savory facets, but this wholesale invention is baffling to me."

"Maybe they've decided it's not real," said Rhodri. "A lot of people died, and Mangar was . . . a monster, bent on releasing an even worse monster upon the world. Maybe folk are making a legend out of it because it's easier than facing the facts of what actually happened."

Gillan nodded. "So the more ridiculous they make it, the less real it becomes? Aye, perhaps."

"This has all gotten too deep for me," said Dag, standing. "Who wants another round?"

And then the room shook and he was knocked off his feet, right into Gillan's lap.

Gillan and the others stumbled out of the tavern with the rest of the panicked patrons, looking around in confusion for the source of the jolt. The revelers on the street were looking around too, sausages and flagons of beer halfway to their mouths, tambourines and tin whistles slack in their hands. Some were picking themselves up off the ground, having been knocked flat by the tremor.

Then a voice rang out from nearby. "The sky! Look at the sky!"

Gillan looked up. The sun had gone down a few hours ago, so it was already dark, but now it was getting darker—much darker. One by one the stars were disappearing behind a pitch-black void that was rapidly climbing toward the zenith, as if a pair of sinister hands were folding together over the city to smother it.

"Oh, no," moaned Gillan. "Not again."

Seconds later, the edges of the void met with a clap like thunder and the ground shook again, far more violently than before. The crowd was so closely packed that people fell in waves, toppling like wheat after the sweep of a scythe. Some buildings followed them, foundations crack-

ing, walls folding, roofs sliding slowly to the street. Men and women screamed as they were crushed by timbers and battered with rains of falling brick. Gillan and his companions pushed farther into the street to avoid a similar fate as the Scarlet Bard sagged behind them.

It was worse when the crowd began to run. In their panic they trampled each other underfoot, shoved each other into debris, and elbowed, kicked, and clawed each other to escape the nightmare.

“By the Swordfather!” cried Isobel as she tried to hold the surging wall of humanity at bay. “What is this?”

“Nothing natural, that’s certain,” growled Rhodri.

“Blackest sorcery,” said Lady Svante. “More powerful than any I have ever experienced.”

“We’ve got to get out of here,” whimpered Dag.

“Aye,” said Coira. “Us and everybody else. This is a nightmare.”

Another tremor struck, though this one was more like the swell of a wave, lifting them all, then dropping them down again. More buildings fell and crushed more folk, but as people got up and tried once more to flee, great cracks opened in the earth, criss-crossing the streets and plazas.

Everywhere, people tripped and slid screaming into the cracks. But this was not the worst. The worst was the things that crawled from the cracks—black shadows, long limbed and long clawed, with eyeless faces and toothless mouths. Everyone they touched fell frozen, though whether dead or only paralyzed Gillan did not know.

Now the panic was absolute. People shrieked and squirmed to escape the touch of those transparent hands, tearing at each other with animal frenzy.

“We must help these poor folk,” said Isobel.

“How?” asked Gillan. “We can’t fight these things.”

“We cannot,” said Lady Svante. “But we can lead folk to safety.”

“Safe,” bawled Dag. “Where’s safe? There’s no-

where!”

“Beyond the town walls,” said Rhodri. “Where there’ll be no buildings to fall on us.”

“Harper,” said Svante. “You know Skara Brae best. Lead us. I will light the way.”

She put one hand on Gillan’s shoulder, then raised the other above her head and spoke a word in the elven tongue. A sphere of light appeared above her, shining like the sun through summer leaves, and she magically raised her voice above the wails of the terrified crowd.

“This way, friends,” she called. “To the fields.”

Gillan thought they would be crushed as the folk turned toward them, buried under a wave of the desperate and hopeful, but something in the elf’s voice calmed the crowd, and they came slowly, and helped others up as they followed.

There was something about Svante’s light, too, for the slithering shadows shrank from it as she strode after Gillan, leading that broken and frightened tide out of Skara Brae.

Chapter Two

Much later, as a new day dawned wet and dreary, the friends were having another drink at another drinking establishment, a makeshift taproom they had dubbed the Scrapwood Tavern, which had been set up in the cabbage field where the survivors of Skara Brae's disaster were gathering and making camp. Surgeons and medics and apothecaries were working in the rain at the other side of the field, doing their best to set broken limbs and sew up cuts and gashes, but on this side, a few surviving landlords, including MacComb of the Scarlet Bard, had opened some salvaged kegs and set up makeshift stools under an old canvas sail, and were doing brisk business seeing to the inner wounds of the refugees.

Gillan and the others had worked the night through, returning to the town through the mud and the rain time and time again to lead more people out, until at last they collapsed exhausted at the Scrapwood and watched the dawn arrive. The unnatural void remained over Skara Brae, mak-

ing it perpetual midnight there, but the strange darkness did not go beyond the walls. Outside the town there was instead rain, a storm that had started as Svante had led the first survivors out through the broken gates, and which had continued, steady and unceasing, since. It was insult to injury, making the plight of the refugees worse in every way but one. It seemed the deadly walking shadows did not like the rain, so they never strayed beyond Skara Brae's walls, only prowled its streets like vengeful ghosts. The camp was safe, if wet.

"This was no coincidence," said Rhodri, wiping foam from his mustache. "Ten years to the day and Skara Brae is attacked again? Someone planned this."

"But who?" asked Gillan. "And why?"

"Could it be Mangar back somehow?" asked Dag. "And seeking vengeance?"

"Mangar's dead," said Isobel. "We saw him die ourselves."

"Aye." Coira stretched and cracked her neck. "But you never know with sorcerers, do you?"

There was a silence after that as everyone drank and thought, then Isobel spoke up again. "How many died today? For how many deaths are the cowards behind this attack responsible?"

"Hundreds," said Dag. "Maybe thousands. I know I saw more than a hundred dead myself, and we did not go into every corner of the city. This is Skara Brae's darkest day."

Gillan shook his head. "Fool that I am, I thought I'd already seen its darkest day, but that was nothing compared to this. More than half the town is dead, and folk from all over Caith too, who won't be going back to their homes. The wounds of this night will stretch the length and breadth of the land."

"Even as far north as the Inshriach," said Coira. "I saw some traders from the Tribe of Mathan dead in an alley on our last trip."

“The question is,” said Rhodri, “are we going to do what we did ten years ago when we were sitting around that table in the Adventurers’ Guild on the night the ice surrounded the town? Are we going to go in search of the villains behind this? Are we going to try and stop them?”

Gillan gasped. “The guild! We didn’t check the guild!”

“Well, they’re adventurers, aye?” said Dag. “They can take care of themselves if anybody can.”

“If they got out in time,” said Lady Svante. “The guild is never in the best repair. It may have collapsed before anyone knew the danger.”

“We’ve got to go back,” said Isobel. “Had we not met there, we would not have saved Skara Brae the first time, nor met again when Lagoth Zanta invaded.”

Coira groaned. “I don’t know if I can stand again, but all right, I’ll go. It’s been my home in Skara Brae every time I visit.”

“I’ll go too,” said Rhodri.

“As will I,” said Lady Svante.

“All right, fine,” said Dag.

Gillan sighed and put down his mug. “I should never have brought it up.”

As soon as Gillan and the others passed through Skara Brae’s walls, the rain cut off and they were in darkness again, creeping through the abandoned town with only the red light seeping up from the cracks in the ground illuminating the wreckage. There were no more survivors now. They had all fled. Only the dead remained, lying where they had fallen, or where they had been crushed.

The black shadows drifted through the streets in twos and threes, seemingly patrolling, and many times the friends had to hide as they passed.

At last they reached the Adventurers’ Guild and

found it half collapsed, with the lodgings side now just a pile of timbers and shingles. The taproom side, miraculously, still stood, though it seemed to slouch slightly in the direction of its fallen half. They entered on tiptoe and looked around. It appeared deserted. Nor were there any corpses.

“Maybe everyone got out,” said Dag.

“Or were carried out,” said Coira.

A cough from somewhere deeper in the guild stopped them in their tracks.

“A survivor?” asked Isobel.

“I don’t think those shadows cough,” said Gillan.

Nonetheless, they started forward with weapons drawn and breath held. Gillan raised his lantern as Isobel led the way into a cozy room furnished with a round table and high-backed chairs. An old man in a dark red robe sat at the table, drinking deeply from a whisky jug and staring into space.

“Who’s that?” whispered Dag.

The old man looked up, gasping and spraying whisky all over. He held up his hands as he hacked and gasped.

“If— if— y’r *hurk* *hack* here to— *kkkkak* kill m-me. Let me *ffffff* *fakk* finish the bottle.”

“Easy, old man,” said Gillan. “We’re just looking for survivors.”

“W-well, you haven’t found any,” he said, recovering. “I’m a d-dead man.”

“Are you injured?” asked Lady Svante. “I have some skill in healing.”

The old man took a deep breath, suppressed a last cough, rubbed his mustache, and shook his head.

“Not injured. Cursed. The dream said the sky would turn black, and it did. It said the earth would quake and crack and murderous shadows would rise from the crevasses, and it did. It said Skara Brae would fall, and it has. It said I would die in the rubble before I knew the fate of the world, and so I await my doom.”

“Eh?” said Rhodri. “Why not flee?”

“One cannot escape the prophecy of dreams, friend dwarf,” said the old man. “Besides, I have a duty to perform here before I die.”

“What is that?” asked Isobel.

He raised his head, proud. “I am to wait for the greatest heroes of legend to appear before me, then give them the key to the realm of he who brought this ruin upon Skara Brae, so that they may destroy him.”

Gillan and the others looked around at each other, then over their shoulders.

“Er . . .” said Gillan. “I don’t suppose you mean us?”

The old man snorted, then coughed again as a few last drops of whisky sprayed from his nose. “Cert— certainly not. It was Valarian I saw in my dream, and Lanatir and Alliria. Ferofist, Sceadu, and Werra. They came, arrayed in their legendary arms and armor, vowing to die a thousand times to defeat our destroyer.”

Gillan knew all the names he spoke and they were indeed the greatest heroes of legend. He had sung the songs of their exploits all his life, as had the bards who had come before him, and those who had come before them. That was because those heroes had lived hundreds and hundreds of years ago.

“You may be waiting a while, gramps,” he said.

“They’re all dead.”

“And yet I am assured they will appear before me.”

“When?” asked Dag.

The old man stuck out his bearded chin. “I know not.”

The friends looked around at each other again.

Lady Svante cleared her throat. “In the meantime, is there anything that we might do for you? Any aid you require?”

“Fetch me another bottle?”

Rhodri snorted. “At the rate you’re going, you’ll have drunk yourself to death before the night’s out, let

alone before your heroes show up.”

“What of this key?” asked Isobel. “The one that leads to the realm of he who demolished Skara Brae. Will you tell us what it is, so that we might try our hand at defeating him?”

The old man laughed. “You would not last a moment against the Mad God Tarjan! Only the greatest heroes of legend would stand even the slimmest chance of defeating him!”

“Tarjan?” said Coira. “But we defeated him already.”

“That’s right,” said Dag. “Gillan here tripped him and cracked his head open.”

The old man frowned and looked at them afresh. “Oh, you’re those heroes. Well, you have indeed done great things, friends, and Skara Brae and Caith are forever in your debt, but you did not fight Tarjan. You fought his merest echo. A marionette he animated in his dreams while he slept imprisoned in the black pits of Malefia.”

He shook his head. “Well, now he is awake, and turns his wrath upon Skara Brae, and as you have seen, it is a thousandfold stronger than Mangar’s paltry walls of ice. Were he to turn that wrath upon you, you would shrivel to ashen husks before you could call upon your gods.”

Gillan swallowed. “Ah, well, maybe we’ll just leave you to wait for those heroes of yours, then. Probably a lot of good to be done back at the camp, helping people get on their feet again.”

“Wait,” said the old man, frowning suddenly. “Perhaps you are necessary to the prophecy after all.”

“After what you just told us?” said Gillan. “I don’t think so. If we haven’t got a chance, why even try?”

“Never fear,” said the old man. “I would not send the likes of you against Tarjan, but I am beginning to believe that I misinterpreted my dream. It does not seem to me now that I should wait for the heroes of legend to appear before me. That is too passive. I believe instead that

I am to find them and bring them here. Or rather . . .” He raised his head and encompassed the friends with a piercing look. “You are.”

Gillan sighed. “Naturally.”

Chapter Three

“Hang on,” said Rhodri. “If all these heroes have been dead for hundreds of years, how are we supposed to bring them to you? Dig them up? Use necromancy?”

The old man burped, then held up a finger. “Not necromancy. Chronomancy! You will find them in the times and places of their greatest power. I’ve put a list in the book.”

Lady Svante’s eyes widened. “Time magic. The most dangerous and difficult of the arts.”

“Indeed,” said the old man. “One who manipulates time must be without taint or corruption, for the temptation to use the power to change the present in one’s favor is nigh impossible to resist, thus its practice is the guild’s most closely guarded secret. Is there one among you whose purity and honor is beyond reproach?”

Everyone looked at Isobel, but she shook her head.

“I strive for honor, but I dare not say I have ever succeeded in being entirely honorable. And besides, I am

no sorcerer. I know nothing of craft or practice.”

Now all eyes turned to Lady Svante.

She blushed. “There are those among you who know I can make no claim to honor nor purity, but I suppose I can make some claim to contrition, and I believe I am versed enough in the arts that it would be possible for me to learn such a thing. I will leave it to you, friends. If you feel I am worthy, I will do this. If not, we will find some other candidate.”

“You’re purer than anyone else I know,” said Coira, then rolled her eyes toward Isobel. “Except Lady Iron-Pants, of course. I say do it.”

“As do I,” said Rhodri.

“And I,” said Isobel. “I’ve never known a finer woman.”

“Sure,” said Dag.

Gillan chewed his lip. It was he who Svante meant, he who knew she could make no claim to honor. Though he accepted her company now, he had never fully forgiven her for trying to seduce him on the last night of his wife’s life. Despite her pious manner, she had been wanton once, and undoubtedly could be again if given the opportunity. Imagine the mischief she could get up to dancing backward and forward through the years. She might even—

A thought brought him up short. If she could go back in time, she could change the outcome of that night! She could save Maidie! Would she? Such a wish was probably the sort of temptation the old man was talking about. Should he feel ashamed for thinking it? He didn’t care. He could be whole again. His heart could be healed at last.

“Let her learn it,” he said. “She’s our only chance.”

“Very well, then,” said the old man, rising. “I’ll just go fetch the book.”

When he returned from behind a curtained doorway, he carried a tome the size of a gravestone, and set it heavily on the table.

“There,” he said, taking a deep breath. “With-

in those covers is all the knowledge you will need to bring back the heroes of legend from the days of yore. But . . . before you take it, another problem has occurred to me.”

Gillan grunted. “More trouble?”

The old man held up a finger. “The heroes of legend are notoriously fickle. Many are the stories of Lanatir or Sceadu and the others turning away those who asked for their help, not feeling that the quest was worthy enough, or would give them the glory they craved.”

“How heroic,” said Coira.

“If that happens,” the old man continued, “ask if we might borrow their legendary arms and armor. A poor substitute for the heroes themselves, I know, but far better than nothing.”

Dag scowled. “Why would they be any more likely to lend us their kit than to come themselves? I wouldn’t lend my sword to a stranger and it’s as plain as they come.”

The old man shrugged. “They may not, but it’s worth asking. And you can tell them, as you will be traveling in time, that you can return the things an instant after you borrowed them, so they will not miss them.”

“Unless we lose them,” muttered Gillan.

“If you wish it, old man,” said Isobel. “We will do as you ask.”

“Good. Then take the book.” He patted the massive thing and smiled. “I know it looks intimidating, but one of the good things about chronomancy is that it doesn’t matter how long it takes you to learn it.”

It took Lady Svante two weeks. Two weeks in which the rain never stopped, and the rest of them helped survivors recover their possessions and the bodies of their loved ones from the ruins of Skara Brae, and found other ways to be useful. Dag and Isobel joined work crews

raising tents and shacks for the homeless to keep them dry, Rhodri lugged an anvil to the camp and set to making tools and sharpening weapons, Lady Svante healed the sick and wounded at the makeshift hospitals that had sprung up around the camp, Coira found herself a bow and hunted rabbits, pheasants, and quail in the surrounding fields and woods, Gillan kept spirits up with songs and stories, and they all tried to figure out why Tarjan had attacked the town and what he meant to do with it now that he had chased out the populace.

Each time they entered the ruins, they saw less and less of the slinking shadows, but it was clear that something was still going on. The ground occasionally shook and light sometimes still shone up from the crevasses. Thuddings and poundings came from deep under the ground, and Gillan and the others thought sometimes they could hear the roaring of otherworldly beasts down there, and smell the scent of brimstone.

Finally, after yet another wet scavenger run, they returned to the shelter of the Scrapwood Tavern to find the lady waiting for them.

“I have visited the past and the future, leaving notes for myself that prove that changes made then affect the here and now. It is not easy to move through the years, but I feel I have enough of a grasp on it that I can safely take all of you with me—if you are ready.”

Gillan was more than ready. Though they had all been helping out, it had felt like bandaging a cut finger after the patient’s head had been cut off. He wanted to do something that made a difference, something that would chase away the unnatural darkness and bring back the Skara Brae he loved, even if it meant having adventures again.

“Ready when you are,” he said.

The others agreed.

“Then let us go to Arboria,” said Svante. “It is the realm of my people, so that may give us some advantage. Besides, I have always wanted to see it in its golden age.”

“The realm of the elves,” said Dag, uneasily. “They say a man who goes there never comes back.”

“With me as your passport,” said Svante, “you shall come to no harm.”

Gillan, who seconds ago had been eager to get started, now felt sick to his stomach. Ten years before, Svante had tried to steal him from his wife and lure him to Arboria. Of course it was for a good cause this time, rather than for her amusement, but it still raised unpleasant echoes in his mind.

A week later they stood in a twilight copse in the middle of the forest of Inshriach, surrounded by towering oaks and elms, and staring at two slender white trees whose trunks and interlaced branches formed an archway.

“Beyond that gate,” said Lady Svante, “lies my home, to which I have not returned since the night Mangar surrounded Skara Brae in ice.”

Isobel squinted through the arch. “It just looks like more forest to me.”

“That is because I have not yet sung the song of passage,” said Svante.

And with that she raised her voice and sang a high, sweet melody that sent a shiver up Gillan’s spine, and a pang of melancholy through his heart. It felt like being homesick for a place he’d never been.

A shimmer began to cloud the space between the two trees, and it grew brighter and larger with every note the lady sang, until it was stretched to the trunks and branches of the two trees and began to roil in the center like the pool under a waterfall.

“Now,” said Svante. “All join hands and walk with me.”

Gillan hesitated as she held out her slim fingers, but he took them, then gave his other hand to Coira. One by

one the others completed the chain, then followed Svante as she walked into the light.

Chapter Four

As Gillan passed through the plane of the portal, it felt as if his blood was turning to bubbles, and his brain scattering like a flock of startled birds. He thought he might disintegrate entirely, but then, after a long moment where he was unsure who he was or if he was at all, solidity began to return. He felt the weight return to his body, the sun on his skin, the spring of young grass beneath his feet, the scent of summer flowers in his nose.

The blinding glitter of the portal faded and he found himself in a glade that mirrored the one they had left, except that it was brighter, greener, and more colorful, and the birdsong more melodious.

Coira scowled around at it all as she adjusted her bow and quiver. “Is this a forest or a park?”

Svante smiled. “There is nothing in Coill that has not been touched by art. The aesthetics of every tree, bush, hill, and river have been shaped to please the senses. Here, the bending of nature is considered the highest discipline.”

She started for a path on the far side of the copse.
“Now this way. We will find Valarian in Ciera Brannia.
During these years he was the guest of the court of King
Halsgeir.”

Ciera Brannia was like no castle Gillan had ever seen. There was no palisade, nor keep, nor one stone set upon another. Indeed the whole place seemed to be made out of living trees, and it was difficult to tell if one was in a chamber or a courtyard, a corridor or a bower, for all of it seemed to be both indoors and outdoors at the same time.

Nor did King Halsgeir look like any king Gillan had ever seen. Like his courtiers, he wore little more than a loose robe, and wore no crown nor carried any staff of office, and except for the whiteness of his hair, he might just as easily have been twenty as fifty—though, knowing how long elves lived, Gillan was sure he was probably closer to five hundred.

When a guard ushered Lady Svante and her companions into his presence, the king and his court were reclining comfortably on chaises and drinking wine while a frightened male human wearing nothing but a silver torque stood reciting poetry in their center. The king waved the man silent as Lady Svante bowed before him.

“Every tale I’ve ever heard confirmed,” muttered Dag under his breath.

“Aye,” said Gillan, and shot a glance at Svante.
“And to think—”

“Who comes before me?” asked the king. “Your face is not known to me, maiden.”

“Svante of House Ysored, majesty,” said Lady Svante. “And you would not know me. I have traveled from seven hundred years in your future, seeking the great hero Valarian to ask his aid in defeating a villain that threatens all of Midgard.”

“A chronomancer?” The king raised an eyebrow, but did not seem otherwise moved. “That is a rarity, but you must not be a fluent one, for you have arrived ten summers after Valarian’s death.”

Svante stared, more dumbfounded than Gillan had ever seen her. “H-how can that be? Is this not the three hundred and seventy-first year of your reign? By the chronicles, Valarian is in the prime of his life, with many more adventures ahead of him.”

“Then your chronicles are wrong. This is indeed the three hundred and seventy-first year of my reign, but Valarian was found dead in his tower in its three hundred and sixty-first year. There was a year of mourning. Never have more heartbreaking laments been written. We sing them still.”

Svante seemed at a loss. After a moment she bowed again and stepped back. “Forgive me. I will confer with my friends.”

“As you wish,” said the king, then waved to the naked man. “You. Resume.”

“I do not understand this,” said Svante when she had gathered with the others. “Multiple elven sources say that Valarian lived another hundred years beyond this date. It is impossible that he is dead.”

“Maybe you’re not the only chronomancer who’s paid this place a visit,” said Coira.

Svante looked up at her, eyes wide. “Tarjan! Could it be?”

“But if the mad god has changed history,” said Gillan, “wouldn’t your history books have changed too?”

“I have learned that it takes time for a change in the past to ripple through the years,” said Svante. “And the further back the change, the longer the delay. We might wait months before our present caught up with this past.”

“So,” said Dag, with a shrug, “we just jump back twenty years and meet this Valarian before Tarjan kills him.”

“And then Tarjan jumps back thirty years,” said Rhodri. “And then we jump back forty. That’s a game that never ends.”

“Indeed,” said Lady Svante. “And these jumps are not without effort. If I am to search through time to find all six heroes, I shall need to conserve my strength and not make unnecessary—and likely unprofitable—trips.”

“So what then?” asked Coira. “Do we give up on this elf and try for another hero?”

Isobel shook her head. “Recall what the old man said. If we could not convince a hero to come, we should ask to borrow their arms and armor. Thus, as we are here and Valarian is no more, we should inquire after his belongings.”

Gillan cast a glance at King Halsgeir and grimaced. “This’ll go well.”

Lady Svante also looked less than eager. Nevertheless, she returned to the king’s circle and bowed her head.

He sighed and waved the human singer silent once again. “Yes?”

“Your forgiveness, majesty,” said Svante. “Though we are resigned to not winning Valarian’s help here, we hope that we might impose upon you by enquiring after Valarian’s bow and his Arrows of Life. If we could borrow them for but a moment, they might help us defeat the menace that threatens us.”

“Valarian’s weapons lie in his tomb,” said the king. “And it would be a great dishonor to his memory if they were removed.”

“Ah,” said Svante with a sigh. “Indeed. I suppose it is too much to—”

The king cut her off. “However. Were you to prove Valarian’s equal in honor, we might perhaps be willing to allow their momentary removal.”

Svante bowed low. “Majesty, we would do anything to prove ourselves worthy of his weapons. You have but to ask.”

The king smiled, sly. “Very well, then here is your task. While he lived, Valarian vowed to us that he would kill Tslatha Garnath and bring us the fiend’s head and heart. Death claimed him before he could make good on this vow. So if you can slay Garnath in his stead, his weapons are yours.”

Gillan saw Svante sway as if the words had struck her a physical blow, then she recovered and bowed again.

“We shall be honored to do as you ask, majesty.”

“Wait,” said the king. “You will not succeed unless you go first to Valarian’s tower. There you will find the Nightspear, the only weapon Garnath fears. Only then can you proceed to the festering pit the fiend has claimed as his lair. Now, good luck to you.”

“Thank you, majesty,” said Svante. “You are most generous with your wisdom. We shall do as you say.”

Chapter Five

“The king has set us a nigh-impossible task,” said Svante as the companions passed through an open archway into Valarian’s tower, a slender white marble spire rising from the middle of a sun-dappled wood. “In history before Tarjan altered it, Garnath was Valarian’s deadliest foe. He nearly died slaying the fiend, and took many months to recover his strength afterward.”

“Then thank the gods we have all the time in the world,” said Rhodri.

In the center of the tower was a large circular chamber, with a stone disk taller than a man set into one wall. Carved on its face was the image of an oak tree from branches to roots, while in the floor at the foot of it was a small marble-sized depression.

“Well, this is lovely,” said Coira. “This can’t be all of it. Where are the stairs?”

Gillan looked around with the others, wondering the same thing. The chamber had archways at the four cardinal

points, each leading back to the forest, but there were no visible doors, stairs, or passages. It looked like the entirety of the tower was just this room.

“It couldn’t be easy, could it?” he growled. “It couldn’t be just a normal—”

“Halloo!” came a cheery voice.

The companions looked around. Coming in through the northern arch was a tall silhouetted figure, dressed in armor.

“Is it Valarian?” asked Dag, hopefully. “Not dead after all?”

“No,” said Lady Svante. “This is no elf.”

“What ho, friends!” said the man who entered the room. “Wonderful to see you again!”

He was a broad-shouldered, exuberantly mustachioed old gent with a bright eye, graying temples, and a toothy grin, and Gillan had never seen him before in his life.

“You . . . know us?” asked Isobel.

“Of course I do! Don’t you—?” He paused, then laughed and slapped his steel-cased leg. “Oh, but naturally you don’t. This is your past! I met you in your future! That, in fact, is why I’m here. You told me we would meet again, and that I would help you.”

He put a hand to his breastplate. “I am Sir Hawk-slayer, knight errant, and I’ve had the whole story of Tarjan and Skara Brae from your future selves, so let’s get underway. There’s a lot to do to get up to Valarian’s boudoir, and—”

Gillan choked. “You’re Hawkslayer? The slayer of Stallunhalt? The hero of Caer Gaeden? The man who wrestled the bear of Mindinsal and—”

Hawkslayer put a finger to his lips. “Shhh. I haven’t done that one yet. Don’t spoil it, eh?”

Gillan looked him up and down. In all the tales, Hawkslayer was stern and quiet, a noble hero of deeds, not words—nothing like this jovial old duffer. Then he remem-

bered the bard in the tavern, just before the darkness had covered Skara Brae, who had been telling the tale of how Gillan and the others had defeated Mangar, and how he had described Gillan as a mighty hero who could strike down demigods with one blow. And that was the exaggerations of just ten years. Hawkslayer had lived five hundred years before Gillan was born.

“No worries,” he said to the old knight. “I’ll keep your tales to myself.”

Hawkslayer bowed. “Thank you, er . . . Gillan. Now, this way!”

He turned and started for the southern arch. “The first thing we need is an acorn.”

A short while later they all stood under a majestic oak. Hawkslayer pointed at the ground.

“There. Any of those will do. Pick one up.”

Dag leaned in to Gillan as Rhodri dutifully bent and picked up an acorn. “Are you sure this is Hawkslayer?”

“Not in the least. But he knew my name.”

“And gather some of those Arefolia leaves too,” the knight said, pointing to a nearby shrub. “We’ll need those if we’re to get the Water of Life.”

Lady Svante gathered a handful of leaves, then fell in with the others as Hawkslayer marched off again and they followed.

“This at least makes sense to me,” she murmured. “The Water of Life spills from a spring at the bottom of a lake, and Arefolia leaves allow one to breathe underwater.”

“But what does the Water of Life do?” asked Isobel. “What do we need it for?”

“It cures all ills,” said Svante. “Perhaps we will need it after fighting Garnath.”

Soon they found themselves on the shore of a deep, clear lake. It was so clear that, beneath its waves, Gillan could see the spires of a beautiful castle rising from its depths. The spires appeared to be made of glass.

"The Crystal Palace," said Lady Svante. "One of the wonders of Arboria. It was built in this valley by a queen, then she flooded it on her wedding night when she learned that her groom had been unfaithful. She chained him to their bed, and the lake became his grave."

"Now there's a nice story," said Coira.

"It is time to eat the Arefolia leaves," said Hawkslayer. "But do not swallow them. As long as you continue chewing them, you will be able to breathe underwater. Long enough for our purpose, anyway. And wear all your clothes—it'll help keep you on the bottom."

Lady Svante handed out the leaves and everyone put one in their mouth. Gillan grimaced as he chewed. It was bitter and fibrous. "A bit like eating a book," he said.

"In we go!" said Hawkslayer, and strode into the water as if he was going downstairs for breakfast.

The others followed with a bit more trepidation. The water was freezing, and as it got up to their necks, they started to have second thoughts.

"Just breathe normally!" called Hawkslayer, then disappeared beneath the waves.

"Breathe normally, he says," growled Rhodri, who was lagging behind the rest but still up to his chin. "How can I breathe normally with a mouthful of shrubbery?"

Gillan took a deep breath and ducked his head under the water, then opened his eyes. Except for the occasional ripple, it was so clear that he almost felt he was still above the waves. He could see right down to the gates of the Crystal Palace, far below on the silty slope.

Soon, however, his lungs began to strain, and the blood pounded in his temples and the veins of his neck. He desperately needed to take a breath, but fear stopped him.

He looked around at the others. All but Lady Svante were red-faced and bug-eyed.

The elf smiled and showed them all she was breathing in and out without difficulty. "Breathe, friends. I swear to you, you will not die."

Her voice came wobbly and distorted, but perfectly understandable.

Gillan decided to breathe. He hardly had a choice. His vision was swimming, and his lungs were aching. With a silent prayer to the Boatman, he opened his mouth and inhaled.

It . . .

It was fine—a little colder than the air above, but absolutely fine. There was no pain, no gagging, nothing.

"Well," he said. "That's all right, then."

"Just don't lose your leaf," said Coira.

"Feh," said Rhodri. "The minute we're out of here."

The farther down they went, the darker it got, and the higher the crystal walls of the castle rose above them. It was an odd sensation being able to see right through them into the castle itself.

"Not the best place for someone who values their privacy," said Isobel.

"Aye," said Dag. "Where do you go if you have to do a wee?"

They reached the gate a moment later. The iron portcullis had rusted away long ago, leaving just a few rusty teeth in the crystal mouth of the archway, and they walked through it into the courtyard. Nothing surprised them there, as they had seen what was in it through the walls.

The castle was more mysterious, for though it was crystal too, it was darker within, and kelp and other lake-bottom plants grew through the floor, making it hard to know where the walls were, and how big the rooms were.

Hawkslayer seemed to know where he was going, however, and led them swiftly to the innermost of rooms.

They saw its glow through the walls as they approached it—a soft, welcoming blue light that drew them on.

When they entered the room itself, Gillan almost gasped. The water here was as warm as a bath, and suddenly all his aches and pains melted away. Even his mind felt clearer. Looking around, he saw the others basking in its wonderful warmth as well.

“What is this place?” asked Rhodri.

“This is the Life Spring,” said Hawkslayer, pointing to a bubbling font in the center of the floor. “Around which the palace was built long ago. Now, fill your waterskins and let us depart.”

“Can’t we stay here for a while?” asked Dag. “This is all right.”

“The water-breathing qualities of Arefolia leaves don’t last forever,” said Lady Svante. “We must make haste.”

Dag’s eyes widened at this reminder. “What are we waiting for? Let’s get out of here!”

Back at Valarian’s tower, Hawkslayer stood in front of the disk with the oak tree carved into it.

“Now then,” he said. “Who’s got the acorn? Ah, yes. Good. Just place it in that little divot there.”

As they all joined him at the disk, Rhodri took the acorn from his belt pouch and placed it in the hole at the foot of the disk. It fit perfectly.

“Good,” said Hawkslayer. “Now someone give the thing a good dousing with the Water of Life.”

Gillan unslung his waterskin. “And what’s that supposed to do?”

“Ha ha!” laughed the knight. “You’ll see, you’ll see!”

Gillan sighed. Hawkslayer’s bonhomie was beginning to grate a little. Nevertheless, he pulled the cork from

his waterskin and poured some of the water from the Life Spring on the acorn.

The effect was instantaneous. The acorn began to sprout shoots and leaves that rose and spread like a green fountain. Soon, the shoots grew too thick for the acorn's hole, but there was apparently some magic in the stone, for it widened as a shoot thickened and quickly became the trunk of a young oak tree, while its branches grew around the bottom edge of the stone disk.

Then, as the trunk and its branches began to thicken, the disk shifted and rocked, sending them all skipping backward, afraid it was going to topple forward on them. Instead, it started to rise.

Gillan stared in wonder as the growing tree raised the disk in its branches, lifting it toward the ceiling like it was a hand mirror held between the thumb and fingers of a giant hand.

"Aha!" said Dag, pointing behind the tree. "A door!"

A second later the disk stopped rising, and behind the trunk of the tree, just as Dag had said, was a wide circular doorway, which revealed a stairway leading up and to the right.

Gillan looked uneasily up at the disk, pinched between the branches of the tree. It looked like it could slip from their grasp at any minute.

"Who's first?" he asked.

"I'll go," said Dag, thumping his chest, but his bravery didn't last. He scurried under the disk like a frightened rabbit, then stopped and panted when he reached the steps.

Gillan and the others did the same. The disk remained in place. All but Coira breathed sighs of relief.

She snorted. "Imagine going through all that every time you came home."

Chapter Six

At the top of the stairs they found themselves in a grand high-ceilinged room and began to explore. Everywhere, on every level, they found fine things smashed and toppled, and signs of a great struggle. Tapestries had been slashed and pulled down, furniture broken, sculptures shattered.

“What a fight this was,” said Rhodri.

“It is clear Valarian fought valiantly,” said Lady Svante. “But Tarjan’s magics and his minions proved too much for him.”

“Let us pray Tarjan did not take the Nightspear,” said Isobel.

For a time it seemed that he might have, but finally, after much searching, they found it at last in a hidden cache on the highest level of the tower.

Rhodri held it up for all to see. It was so dark that it seemed to absorb light. Nothing was reflected in its ebon surface. It was hard to pull one’s eyes away.

“I can feel its power,” said Lady Svante.

"It swallows the life of any it pierces," said Hawkslayer. "Only it can slay Garnath. Which of you will wield it?"

They all looked around at each other, then back at him.

"Well," said Gillan, finally, "you tell us. Didn't our future selves tell you about how we defeated him?"

The knight drew himself up. "They did—er, *you* did—but I didn't listen when it came to the battle with Garnath. It was already too much to know that we won. Knowing more than that wouldn't be honorable at all."

"Is your honor more important than our lives?" asked Coira. "We could die because you wanted a fair fight."

"Nonsense," said Hawkslayer. "I just left you in the future. All of you survived. You have nothing to worry about."

"Tell that to Valarian," said Rhodri, "who just died a hundred years before his time."

Hawkslayer's face fell. "Oh. Yes. I'd forgotten. Hmmm."

"Anyway," said Gillan, "you're the greatest warrior living. You should probably take the spear."

Hawkslayer nodded. "Very well, I accept this honor." He took the spear and slung it over his back. "Then let us go to the fiend's lair and take his head."

Dag watched him go as he started for the stairs. "Everything's easier with a legend around, isn't it?"

"Shhh!" said Coira. "Don't jinx it!"

The festering pit was the most disgusting place Gillan had ever visited, an inverted pyramid of filth and muck that seemed more like an infected abscess in the ground than a structure built by any sentient being. The walls were slick with slime, and the party waded through a

bubbling, ankle-deep brown slurry that smelled worse than it looked—and it looked revolting.

Vermin both large and small lurked in the shadows and swarmed the companions when their backs were turned, and the party fought for their lives at nearly every corner. Most horrifying of all, the bodies of the beasts they killed putrefied before their eyes and dissolved back into the muck.

“I think I know why Valarian took so long to recover from his wounds after he fought Garnath,” said Coira, wrinkling her nose. “One cut down here and you’d get the black crud. All your arms and legs would rot away.”

“I am maintaining a spell of cleansing against just that eventuality,” said Lady Svante. “This place is a swamp of disease.”

“Thank the gods for that,” said Gillan. “Because I’ve already got more than one cut. And a few bites besides.”

“Why do the elves allow a place like this to exist in their perfect realm?” asked Isobel. “Why don’t they come and destroy it?”

“Likely they’re all too afraid of getting their boots dirty,” said Rhodri. “A fastidious bunch, elves.”

They descended a stairway and at last came to a central chamber filthier than all the others. Great man-high cauldrons of what appeared to be rotting stew steamed at the corners of a pool that seemed to be filled entirely with snot. The stench of the place was enough to knock one flat.

“Is this his lair?” choked Dag as they crept in and looked around. “Where is he?”

Hawkslayer stepped forward and bellowed. “Stand forth, vile creature! Reveal yourself to he who will cleanse you from this realm!”

Gillan cringed and edged back. “So much for the element of surprise.”

Viscous waves began to slop over the edges of the pool, then something rose from the center in a fountain of

muck—huge, hunched, and humanoid, covered in a thick coating of snot that dripped in phlegmy ropes from its shoulders, chin, and nose.

“Mortal fools! You have blundered into your deaths!” His voice sounded like a wet fart.

“But no!” shouted Hawkslayer. “We have blundered into yours!”

Gillan groaned. “I hope his swordplay is better than his banter.”

It was. As Garnath lumbered from the pool and towered over the knight, arms raised and dripping slime, Hawkslayer stepped in and slashed at his left leg with all his strength. The blade bit precisely into Garnath’s knee and carried straight through, severing it.

The monster roared and fell to the side, and Hawkslayer drew the Nightspear off his back and drove it deep into Garnath’s slime-coated chest.

“Now you are ended, fiend!” cried the knight. “Your soul shall be trapped forever in the ebon depths of the—”

Garnath laughed, which sounded like custard on the boil, and stood again, pulling the spear out and throwing it at Hawkslayer. The leg that the knight had severed lay beside him, but a new one had grown in its place.

“Fool,” gargled Garnath. “Did you think I would not be prepared to face the weapon of my doom? I have spent my life making myself invulnerable to it. I have built this place for the purpose! It might have hurt me once, but it cannot now!”

“Regeneration,” murmured Lady Svante, as the fiend swiped at Hawkslayer and sent him fleeing. “And so swift. He might survive a thousand blows from the Nightspear. Perhaps a thousand thousand. This place—and its foulness—is the source of his power. He draws from it. Sever that connection, and he might be vulnerable.”

“Might?” whimpered Dag.

“What are we supposed to do?” asked Gillan.

“Clean it?”

“There’s not enough soap in all the world,” said Coira with a shiver.

“Not clean,” said Rhodri, suddenly looking around. “Cleanse. With fire.” He pointed at the cauldrons. “I’ll wager those are what he’s drawing from—rotting meat to reforge his rotting body. If we burn it, there’ll be nothing left for him to use.”

“Are you sure?” asked Gillan. “Or are you just guessing?”

“We’ll find out when we put it to the test,” said the dwarf.

“If only you still had that fire horn,” said Coira.

Gillan shuddered, remembering the innocents who had died when he’d used that terrible instrument. “I’m glad I don’t.”

“But how are we to start a fire in this sweat box?” asked Dag. “It’s a swamp.”

“I can call fire,” said Lady Svante, manipulating her hands.

“And I shall pray for the fire of the Swordfather’s wrath,” said Isobel.

They looked around. Hawkslayer was on his second lap around the pool, slipping and sliding on the slimy footprints that Garnath left behind.

“Friends!” he called. “Friends, I fear I cannot do this alone!”

Rhodri drew his axe and trundled forward, aiming to intercept the monster. “Get those flames going,” he called over his shoulder. “Hurry.”

As Isobel raised her hammer over her head and began to pray, Dag ran after Rhodri and the two charged Garnath’s flank just as he closed the distance with Hawkslayer. They cut the monster brutally across his back and thigh.

He roared in pain and turned on them, slashing with dripping claws as his wounds healed in an instant. Still, the interruption had given Hawkslayer a second to catch his breath. He turned and attacked Garnath from behind, this

time severing his left arm.

“Fool!” the horror roared. “You have not disarmed me. You have armed me!”

And with that he picked up the severed arm with the arm that had just grown to replace it, and swung it at the knight.

“Harper,” said Lady Svante, as light and heat began to swirl between her palms. “Sing ‘Watchwood Melody.’ It will brighten the chamber and dry the air, both of which we sorely need.”

“If you say so,” said Gillan.

He drew his harp from his back and strummed the opening chord, then began to sing. “A lamp at the window, a torch bright as day, a pyre in the forest, will keep dark”

Suddenly, as if his song had been the catalyst, both Lady Svante’s flames and the head of Isobel’s hammer blazed bright.

“In the Swordfather’s name,” cried the paladin as she ran toward the left-hand cauldron. “Scour this place with holy fire!”

“By Roynskyr and Torvis,” sang Lady Svante, thrusting her fire-wreathed hands at the cauldron to her right. “Burn away this calamitous corruption!”

Isobel’s hammer rang the cauldron she struck like a bell, and flames splashed everywhere from the impact, but it did not catch the goop inside on fire. The dried muck around the cauldron did catch, however, and flames began to crawl across the floor beneath it.

Svante’s eldritch fire was more successful, engulfing her cauldron in fire, and causing its muck to erupt in flames like a pot of strong spirits.

Garnath turned at the light and the heat and roared in horror. “Noooo! My meat!”

“Ha ha!” cried Rhodri, picking himself up from where the monster had thrown him. “I was right!”

“And we nearly died proving it,” said Dag, beside

him. He was covered in slime and gashed across the shoulder.

Garnath stomped toward Lady Svante. “No more flames!”

Coira raised her bow and put a pair of arrows in his eyes as quick as a finger snap, and just as quick he pulled them out, along with his eyeballs, and a new pair grew back in their place.

The sight made Gillan gag so much he stopped singing. Instead he grabbed Svante by the elbow and pulled her out of the way of Garnath’s severed arm, which he swung at her like a club.

“Hurry!” called Rhodri. “Light the others! We’ll keep him occupied!”

Isobel swung her hammer again, still chanting her prayer, and this time the cauldron itself caught fire and began cooking the rancid meat inside. The smell was crippling, and she choked and stumbled as she ran for the cauldron in the far corner.

Garnath wheeled after her, but Rhodri, Dag, and Hawkslayer got in his way and surrounded him.

“Villain!” said the old knight. “You shall not pass!”

The fiend swatted Hawkslayer flat with his severed arm, but Rhodri and Dag blocked his way and cut off his left leg and right arm. The limbs regrew before Garnath could fall, but the fighters had at least stopped him from moving.

As the creature spun to face them, Hawkslayer cut off his head from behind. It grew back before the severed one hit the ground, but then Rhodri hacked it off again.

“Resume singing, harper!” said Lady Svante, as she stopped running and turned to the last cauldron. “You should not have stopped.”

Gillan cleared his throat and sang again as she once more summoned fire between her palms. On the far side of the pool, Isobel had shattered the third cauldron and the stinking stew was flowing slowly through the crack. She

gave it a last splashing strike, and it burned like lava.

“Roynskyr guide my aim,” said Lady Svante, and shot a ball of fire at the last cauldron. It burst into flames and set the walls around it on fire too, or at least the crust that caked them.

“There!” called Dag. “Now we’re gettin’ somewhere.”

Gillan turned and saw Garnath stumbling back from the big Einarr, clutching the stump of his left arm. An arm had sprouted from the severed end, but stopped before it grew much larger than a boy’s.

“Strike, Sir Hawkslayer!” called Rhodri. “Strike!”

The knight once again thrust his spear into Garnath’s chest, and this time it was as if the flame had died inside a paper lantern. All the life went out of Garnath at once—all the fury, all the strength, and worst of all, the light in his eyes. They were suddenly nothing but dull black stones. The soul had been sucked from them. He was nothing but a husk.

Rhodri sat down and drew in great breaths. “That was exhausting.”

“And disgusting,” said Dag.

Isobel returned from the far cauldron and joined them. “The elf king requested we bring him Garnath’s heart and head.”

“Well, I don’t know if he’s got a heart,” said Dag, then spread his hands and laughed. “But you can have your pick of heads!”

It was true. At least seven severed heads lay on the floor around Garnath, more than enough for each of them.

Chapter Seven

King Halsgeir wrinkled his nose as Isobel laid Garnath's head and heart at his feet. "I can scarcely believe you accomplished this feat. Tslatha Garnath has been a plague on our land for generations. Your valor is to be commended." He stepped back. "Now please, your proof is accepted. Take it away."

"One moment, majesty," said Lady Svante. "You promised us the key to Valarian's tomb if we defeated Garnath."

"You already have it," said the king. "Only a beating heart may open those doors."

Rhodri sighed as he picked up the slimy organ by a dangling aorta. "I guess we're not rid of the cursed thing yet."

"But how do we make it beat?" asked Dag as they

stood in front of Valarian's tomb, heart in hand.

The tomb was a beautiful marble structure in the center of a leaf-strewn sacred grove. Strangely, though all the rest of Arboria was the lush green of late spring, the leaves of the trees here were the red and gold of autumn, as if they mourned the passing of the hero whose grave they guarded.

"Simplicity itself, my dear boy," said Hawkslayer. "You already have all you need."

Dag frowned, but Coira snapped her fingers. "The Water of Life! Of course."

"Ha ha!" said Hawkslayer. "Indeed."

He led the way through the gilded outer gate to the tomb's stone door. Like the door to Valarian's tower, this door had a depression in it that seemed designed to receive some object.

"What do you wager we place the heart in there?" said Rhodri.

Gillan scowled. "Was this some quirk of Valarian's? This putting things in doors and watering them? Or is it common to all elves?"

"We like our puzzles," said Lady Svante. "But this configuration is not common."

It had been Isobel's turn to carry the heart when they reached the grove, so she placed it in the depression. It stuck there, a perfect match. Coira uncorked her waterskin and squirted the Water of Life on it, then they all stepped back.

For a moment it seemed as if nothing would happen, then Garnath's heart began to pulse, and black blood leaked from its severed arteries.

"Why would Valarian want *that* to open his tomb?" Isobel asked, gagging.

"The heart of his greatest enemy?" said Hawkslayer. "What could be more natural?"

As they watched, tiny tubes extended from the sides of the depression and pierced the heart. Blood began to

pump through them into the door, and after a moment, the slab sank into the tomb's marble base, revealing the interior.

Hawkslayer ducked in and the rest followed. The golden light from the grove outlined a marble sarcophagus, carved in the likeness of an elven warrior, and an artfully arranged collection of weapons, suits of armor, coats, and sculptures around it.

Coira's eyebrows raised. "We could kit out the whole party here."

"No, pilferer," said Isobel. "We asked to borrow only Valarian's bow and arrows. That is all we will take."

Coira shrugged. "Suit yourself."

"And this must be them," said Rhodri, picking up a beautiful double-curved bow and an elaborately tooled quiver of arrows. "Nice work, for elven stuff."

Lady Svante bowed to the sarcophagus. "We thank you, Lord Valarian, for the use of your treasured weapons, and we promise their swift return. We will do our best to use them only in pursuance of the most honorable deeds."

Gillan and the rest belatedly bowed their heads too.

"Aye," said Dag. "Thanks."

When they stepped back out into the sacred grove, it was full of shadows—moving shadows, the same creatures that infested Skara Brae. They streamed in from all sides, withering the grass with their passage, and reaching for Valarian's bow and arrows with their translucent claws.

"Back, fiends!" cried Hawkslayer, and stabbed at them with the Nightspear. They broke apart at its touch like smoke in the wind, but there were too many of them. He could not slay them all.

"Roynskyr, shine thy light!" called Lady Svante, and the twilight grove glowed as bright as noon, causing the living shadows to wither and cringe back.

Coira snatched Valarian's bow from Rhodri's hands, then drew and fired arrows from the legendary hero's quiver faster than the eye could see. Each shadow they pierced shrieked and died.

In the face of such resistance, the things turned and fled, and soon the grove was its quiet self again.

"Proof, if any was needed," said Isobel, "that Tarjan was behind Valarian's death, just as he was Skara Brae's fall."

"Aye," said Rhodri. "And a sign that we must bring Valarian's weapons to the old man as soon as possible."

"Indeed," said Hawkslayer, looking grave. "Alas, I . . . I cannot accompany you further. But never fear—you know we will meet again at least once, for you are the ones who told me we'd fight together here."

He handed the Nightspear to Dag. "Here. May it serve you well. Now I must depart."

"Wait," said Gillan. "You talked to our future selves. Tell us what we do next. What do we have to do to save the other heroes of legend?"

Hawkslayer frowned and stroked his chin. "Hmmm, you might have told me those things, but I'm afraid I can't remember. Ah, well. Farewell!"

And with that he vanished in a flash of light.

"What a cretin," growled Coira.

"Aye," said Gillan, curling a lip. "'Afraid he can't remember' indeed."

"How did he vanish like that?" asked Dag. "Is he a chronomancer too?"

Lady Svante shook her head. "This is some other magic. I know not what."

Rhodri sighed. "Well, we best be getting back. Say the magic words, elf. It's time to return to Skara Brae."

"Just a second," said Coira, pulling a magic arrow out of the ground. "If we traveled seven hundred years for these things, I'm damned well recovering as many as I can."

“Dead before his time?” said the old man, as they gave him the Nightspear and Valarian’s bow and arrows. “How can this be?”

“Tarjan went further into his past than we did and murdered him,” said Gillan.

The old man chewed his mustache anxiously. “This bodes ill. If he could kill one hero of legend, then he could kill them all. You must hurry to Gelidia and find the great mage Lanatir before it’s too late.”

“What exactly does ‘too late’ mean to a time traveler?” asked Coira.

The old man ignored her. “And if you *are* too late, bring me his wand and sphere. Go! Go!”

“We’re going,” sighed Gillan. “We’re going.”

Chapter Eight

Gillan knew it would be cold in Gelidia. Lady Svante had warned them, and they had reached it through a portal on the coldest peak of the Ulstrigg Mountains, but he hadn't thought it would be this cold!

They had stepped through the portal into a howling ice storm so fierce he couldn't tell if it was day or night, and so cold that the snot had frozen in his nostrils on his first breath. It didn't seem to matter that he and the others were bundled up in fur cloaks and wool hats and sealskin boots. The cold reached his bones instantly, freezing his joints. It was impossible to see more than a few feet in front of his face. All he could tell of his surroundings was that they stood on a steep, rocky slope, covered in snow that reached his knees.

"Where are we?" he shouted over the shrieking wind.

"Somewhere near the Ice Keep!" said Rhodri.

"And which way is that?" asked Coira.

Lady Svante closed her eyes and murmured a spell Gillan couldn't hear. After a moment, she pointed up the slope with a gloved hand.

"That way."

Dag groaned. "Up. Naturally. It had to be up."

"Onward," said Isobel, and started in the direction the elf had indicated.

Gillan fell in behind her. She was big enough that she blocked the wind.

What seemed hours later, a huge angular structure loomed out of the storm above them. Its walls looked entirely made of ice.

"This must be it," said Isobel.

"No," drawled Coira. "You think so?"

They scrabbled around the structure's base until they found a towering fortified gate.

"Halloo!" called Isobel, craning her neck toward the parapet. "Halloo the keep! We seek shelter!"

"Wait," said Dag. "It's open."

Lady Svante pulled her scarf down and frowned. "It should not be open."

"Come on," said Coira, pushing forward. "Let's get inside."

"It might be a trap!" said Isobel.

Coira kept on. "Better a warm trap than a cold storm!"

"All right, fine," said Rhodri. "In we go."

The structure was triangular, with a high, doorless tower at each point—one white, one black, one gray—and a central keep between them, and it seemed deserted but for the dead. Frozen skeletons in the robes of mages lay in its

halls and corridors, sometimes alone, sometimes surrounded by the skeletons of monstrous beasts. In one chamber were the bones of a dragon.

Once again, Lady Svante was dismayed. "It is impossible," she said. "The Ice Keep has never been taken. It remains a mages' sanctuary to our day. At least . . . it did."

In an outbuilding in the lee of the courtyard wall, they found the frozen skeleton of an elf, sitting at a table and slumped over an ice-encrusted book, a pen still in its hand.

Lady Svante approached the skeleton, reaching for the book, then stopped and stared at the bracelet it wore around its wrist.

"No," she said. "This is not when we are meant to be here. Surely my calculations could not be so far off."

"Eh?" asked Gillan. "How do you know we're in the wrong time?"

She touched the bracelet. "Bracelets of this kind were not the style until hundreds of years after the year I hoped we would arrive in. I misjudged by half a thousand years."

"Where were we supposed to land?" asked Rhodri.

"To outfox Tarjan," said Svante, "I called upon the spell to bring us to Lanatir only moments after he had come to the Ice Keep and won his wand and sphere, a time when he was not quite so powerful as he was to become, but still one of the greatest mages of any age, and yet . . ."

Gillan and the others waited as she paced around the table and the frozen elf, thinking hard.

"No," she said at last. "This time I must try again. We cannot win if we cannot recruit the heroes the old man named. We must reach the right time."

She closed her eyes and, for the second time that day, began her chronomancer's spell. Gillan and the rest settled in to wait, knowing from experience that it would take nearly an hour before she was ready, but they were surprised when, only a few minutes later, she awoke from

her trance and uttered something that sounded very much like an elven curse.

"I am being blocked," she said. "Walled out of the time I wish to reach."

"What?" said Gillan. "How?"

"Magic," she said. "So subtle I did not notice it when I last performed the spell. But this time I felt it as I probed the past. Someone has sealed away all the years of Lanatir's life but these, and I fear, as we found with Valarian, that he will not have survived to his rightful span."

"Someone," growled Rhodri. "Tarjan, you mean."

"Can't the wall around those years be broken?" asked Isobel. "Scaled?"

"Perhaps by a more experienced chronomancer. I am only a novice. This is entirely beyond me."

"Then we must hope his wand and sphere are here," said the paladin.

Svante gently pulled aside the skeleton's hands and tried to take the book from the table. It was stuck to the surface by ice. With a spell, she warmed the room, and soon it thawed, leaving the book damp, but readable—if one could read Elvish.

"It is a journal," she said as she examined the pages. Then she winced. "An account of tragedy, I'm afraid."

"What does it say?" asked Dag.

"The keep was attacked. A vast force of fiends. The first wave killed many, and would have overwhelmed the defenders entirely, but for Lanatir's magics." She shook her head. "There is no such battle recorded in the annals of Gelidia. Tarjan is changing history wherever he goes."

"Go on," said Gillan.

Svante pursed her lips. "It seems Lanatir died saving the other mages in that first attack, and knowing that they could not survive another, his companions lay him in a vault in the keep's dungeon, along with his wand and sphere, and sealed them behind powerful wards and complicated locks."

“Wonderful,” sighed Coira.

“As the fiends readied another assault, most of the mages fled, except for four who stayed behind to lay a trap for the attackers—a spell that would call up a storm so deadly it would kill them all, including the mages who cast it.”

She looked at the skeleton. “This, an elf named Alendar, was the only one of the four to survive the initial casting, and she perished soon after. This is her last entry. ‘It is done. I die in the storm that killed our foes. Rest well, Lanatir. Your frozen home is my grave.’”

“And now we have to rob that grave,” said Gillan. “Just like we robbed Valarian’s.”

“Right,” said Rhodri. “How do we do it? What’s the trick?”

“Let’s go back to the inner keep,” said Coira.

“There might have been something in the central chamber.”

On the floor of the chamber was a triangular slab of white marble, set in the center with a disk of gold, lit from above by light shining down from the ceiling. Built over the gold disk was a strange metal contraption that looked like a skeletal telescope with its lenses missing. The frames for the lenses were there, one above the other over the gold disk, but there was nothing in them.

“But look here,” said Coira, leaning closer. “Each frame has an arrow, pointing in a different direction.”

“Pointing at the three doorless towers,” said Rhodri. “Which is where we’ll find the lenses.”

Gillan groaned. “Life doesn’t work like this! People outside of fairy tales don’t go around making doors that are unlocked by finding lenses from three towers, or hearts, or acorns, or . . .”

“Life in the realm of men doesn’t,” said Rhodri.

“The other realms operate by different principles. And this

won't be the strangest realm we visit, I'll wager."

"Indeed not," said Lady Svante. "Nor the deadliest. Now come. Let us see what lies within the black tower."

Chapter Nine

But after a half hour of shivering and stamping their feet in the courtyard as they paced around the tower's featureless walls, they were no closer to getting in.

"What does it say again?" asked Coira.

Lady Svante looked up at the tower wall. Engraved upon it were Elvish runes.

"They are the signs for light, thunder, fear, and flame, but I have recited those words in every language I know, and still—"

"Maybe it's in the journal," said Gillan. "Wasn't there something about how Lanatir's tomb was guarded?"

"I shall read it again," sighed Svante. She opened the journal and ran her finger down the page. "Lanatir's sphere and the wand of power will be safe until claimed by those capable of piercing our wards, for powerful magic created them, and only the proper spells can destroy them."

"That's not much help, is it?" grunted Gillan, defeated. "What does 'proper spells' mean? Which spells?"

“Wait a minute,” said Coira. “What if that’s what the symbols are telling us? What if those are the spells?”

Svante’s eyes widened. “I . . . Of course! Why didn’t I see it? Mistress Coira, you have done it! Now please, stand back.”

The friends backed off as Svante faced the wall, then began to sing words of power in the elven tongue.

First a bright light burst from her fingers, then the deafening crack of an explosion, then a nightmarish vision that made Gillan’s heart thud with fear, and finally a ball of fire.

When it vanished in a puff of smoke, a door suddenly appeared in the base of the tower. Svante turned to them with a smile. “Spells of light, thunder, fear, and flame, in that order. A mage’s puzzle if ever there was one.”

The interior of the black tower was utter darkness, formless, impenetrable, and disorientating, and filled with the chittering and screeching of unseen horrors. Torches did little to brighten it. Even Lady Svante’s enchanted light only seemed to confuse things, showing walls where there were none, and open spaces they couldn’t walk through.

But finally, after laboriously stumbling through three floors of nothingness, they came to a black chamber with a black pedestal in the center, with a black lens hovering above it, and surrounded by five wizards in black robes.

The wizards did not notice the party at first, for they seemed to be trying to take the lens from the pedestal by sorcerous means—though they weren’t having an easy time of it.

“By Tarjan’s might,” said the oldest and most wizened of the five. “It’s right there! Take it!”

“The wards that protect it reflect everything I cast,” said a second. “I cannot find a spell that will pierce them.”

“Unlearned novices,” said a third. “It is simplicity

itself. Stand back and allow me to—”

A fourth turned and saw the party. He shrieked.
“Brothers! We are discovered!”

The wizards spun around, calling to unholy entities and sheathing their hands in black fire.

“These will be the heroes Tarjan warned us of,” hissed the oldest. He raised a staff of ebony. The obsidian shard that topped it seethed with black sparks. “You will never take the lens.”

Lady Svante cast a shield of protection as the five wizards shot a multitude of black energies at them. She staggered under the force of the attack and the shield dimmed.

“They are too strong,” she whispered. “I cannot hold long against them.”

“And we’ll never close with them before they blast us,” said Dag.

“I will pray to the Swordfather,” said Isobel.

“There’s not enough time,” said Gillan. “We’ve got to—”

“Out!” barked Rhodri. “Back into the corridor.”

They scrambled out of the room as Lady Svante’s shield disintegrated behind them.

“You see, fools!” the old wizard called after them.
“The lens is ours!”

“My wards can protect against one spell, perhaps two, but five?” breathed the elf, as she recovered herself.
“No one ward is complex enough to hold so many at bay.”

“Can I pick a few of them off?” asked Coira.

Svante shook her head. “One wards while the others attack. Your arrows will not reach them.”

“Maybe they’ll come after us,” said Dag. “And we can lose them in the dark.”

“They’re in a perfect position,” said Rhodri. “Between us and what we want, with a clear line of fire. They’ll never budge.”

“Unless . . .” said Gillan.

“Unless?” said Dag.

Gillan turned to Lady Svante. “Will they fall for an illusion?”

“Even the most learned will fall for something they already hope for or fear,” said the elf.

“Then this might work,” said Gillan. He leaned in. “Right. Listen . . .”

A moment later, the party charged back into the chamber, yelling at the top of their lungs. Lady Svante cast a fire spell. Isobel’s hammer glowed with holy light. Gillan sang an inspiring tune. Dag and Rhodri ran at the wizards, waving sword and axe.

The black-clad wizards responded immediately, throwing up wards and casting spells in retaliation, and once again the party was stopped dead in its tracks, and forced to retreat under the cover of another rapidly deteriorating magical shield.

“It’s no use!” crowed the oldest wizard as they escaped again into the corridor. “You will die before you reach the lens!”

“But I already have it,” said Coira, as she appeared out of nowhere before them. She held up what seemed to be the lens. “Did something distract you? I just walked in and took it.”

The wizards looked from her to the pedestal. The lens no longer floated above it.

“It’s gone!” gasped one.

“Is it?” asked the oldest. “It may be an illusion.”

The wizards all reached for the pedestal, but the wards that protected it thrust them back.

“There’s no way to tell.”

“So long, sages,” said Coira, pocketing the lens. “We’ve two more towers to rob.”

And with that, she ran out the door into the corridor.

The wizards surged out after her. "Seize her!"

Gillan and the others watched from the shadows as Coira ran by with the wizards after her, leading them into the labyrinthine darkness of the tower.

"Well done, harper," said Rhodri, as he started for the door to the chamber. "Their fear has led them astray."

The companions entered and looked at the pedestal as Lady Svante removed the illusion that had made it appear that the lens was not there.

Dag sighed. "Now we've just got to figure out how to get through wards that five powerful wizards couldn't break."

"You should have no trouble taking it," said Lady Svante, then looked at Isobel. "Or perhaps we should leave it to the purest of us, just to be sure. It is warded only against evil intent."

Dag grimaced, then bowed Isobel forward. The paladin approached the pedestal hesitantly, feeling ahead like a blind man for a wall, but she encountered no resistance, and was able to close her fingers around the floating lens and pluck it out of the air without difficulty.

Just as she turned and held it up, Coira trotted back in from the corridor, panting.

"Lost 'em. How is the—oh! Got it already. Good." She looked over her shoulder. "Now all we have to do is avoid 'em on the way out."

"Wait," said Svante. "They will not come after us if they think we failed."

She turned to the pedestal and murmured some Elvish words, then arced her hands before her. When she had finished, the lens appeared once again in the place it had been.

"There," she said. "Now we may go."

The gray tower was a place of twilight and unease,

where it was impossible to tell what was real and what was illusion, if they were advancing toward their goal or walking away from it. The walls warped and shifted around them, changing the shapes of rooms and corridors, and turning them in endless circles.

When at last the companions reached its highest floor, they fought seven gray wizards who attacked them with spells of fog, confusion, and illusion, and when they had bested these foes, they recovered from them a lens of gray crystal, through which everything looked dreamlike and half real.

Gillan didn't like it one bit.

"It's all too neat," he said. "A black tower filled with black wizards, a gray tower filled with gray wizards. And I'm sure when we enter the white tower we'll find it filled with white wizards. I am becoming increasingly convinced that we are all in a story someone is telling."

"We told you," said Rhodri. "The other realms do not work by the same rules as the realm of men. Here metaphor is made flesh, and symbolism is one of the arcane arts."

Gillan snorted. "Well, then, all I can say is, I can't wait to get home."

Chapter Ten

As Gillan had predicted, the white tower was as bright as the black tower had been dark, a place of delicately carved marble walls and high arched windows, all sheathed in inch-thick sheets of ice. In it they battled six white wizards who fought with spells of ice and blinding and cold, and when the companions had defeated them, the lens they found was purest crystal.

That, however, was not all they found. It was clear from the moment they entered the tower that it had been a residence. There were libraries and bedrooms, kitchens and dining halls.

“Look,” said Dag, as they edged around an ice-en-crusted feast table. “It’s Hawkslayer!”

The others looked around, expecting to see him enter through one of the doors, but Dag was pointing up at the north wall of the room. There, over an ice-choked mantlepiece, was a painting, half obscured by frost, that showed Hawkslayer as a young man, locked in combat with

a dozen baleful creatures.

“So he lived here?” asked Coira.

“How old is he?” asked Dag. “I thought he was human like us, but he seems to have lived for a long time.”

“We saw that he had the power to travel through time,” said Lady Svante. “He may have spent a normal span of years across a millennium.”

“I would have thought this was Lanatir’s home,” said Gillan. “What was Hawkslayer doing here?”

“Guarding him?” said Isobel.

Then they found the nursery and the crib. Through the ice they could make out words carved within a heart-shaped border: Hawkslayer and Cala. And beneath that, Utor.

“So Cala was Hawkslayer’s . . . wife?” asked Coira. “And Utor their child?”

“I’d never heard he was married,” said Rhodri. “Or a father.”

“Maybe that’s why he didn’t want to come with us,” said Gillan. “Maybe there’s some painful memory connected with all this. Maybe they died in the attack that killed Lanatir.”

“And he wasn’t here to defend them,” said Dag. “Aye, that might do it.”

With the three lenses in hand, they returned to the marble triangle in the central hall of the keep, and inserted them into the frame that rose above the golden disk.

The moment the last lens was in place, a white light blazed straight down from above and passed through all three to strike the gold disk. Beneath their feet the floor shook, and then began to sink away beneath them.

“Steady!” cried Gillan.

They all leapt back off the triangle of marble, then watched as it sank in radiating sections to become a trian-

gular marble staircase with landings at each corner.

“With luck,” said Rhodri, “Lanatir’s tomb awaits us below.”

The evidence of the terrible attack that had killed Lanatir was more apparent here than anywhere else in the keep. Each chamber and corridor told another story of a desperate last stand, a fighting retreat, or a brutal rout. Ice-furred bodies lay everywhere—mages and warriors and the monsters they had slain, all tangled together in the savage intimacy of battle.

Finally, in the deepest recesses of the dungeon, they came to Lanatir’s tomb, a monolithic marble structure in the center of a high-ceilinged chamber. A massive marble door was set between two brazier-topped pillars. No lock was visible, but over the lintel was an inscription: “Here lies Lanatir, last guardian of Ice Keep. Only in the Name of his Blood may you Enter.”

“In the name of his blood?” said Dag. “His blood had a name?”

“I believe,” said Lady Svante, “that would mean his family name, or perhaps the name of someone related to him.”

Gillan looked at her. “I don’t really know anything about his family. Do you? Do you know what name this would be?”

She shook her head. “I have never known him by any name but Lanatir. Nor do I know any kin of his.”

“Wait a minute,” said Rhodri, frowning. “Try Cala. Or Utor.”

Gillan cocked his head. “But . . . but Cala was Hawkslayer’s wife, wasn’t she? And Utor his child?”

“Aye,” said the dwarf. “Maybe. And maybe not. Maybe that’s the reason he didn’t want to come here.”

Isobel gasped. “Lanatir had an affair with Hawk-

slayer's wife? And the union produced . . .”

Coira stepped to the door of the tomb and raised her voice. “Utor!”

The massive stone slab shivered, then sank into the ground with a rumbling echo.

“I guess that answers that question,” sighed Gillan.

Inside the tomb lay Lanatir himself, preserved in a sarcophagus of ice, and laid to either side of him was his wand and his sphere.

“We’ll bring these back just as soon as we can,” said Gillan as he picked them up. “And we’ll give your regards to your old friend . . .” He paused as he realized how heartless that would be. “No, I guess we won’t do that. Never mind.”

“Thank you for the gifts, hero,” said Lady Svante, and then began the spell that would take them back to Skara Brae and their own time.

“Lanatir dead too?” The old man groaned. “Then it is as I feared. Tarjan is killing all the heroes of legend.”

“Still,” said Lady Svante, “we must try.”

“Must we?” asked the old man. “What of my dream? That all the heroes of legend would come here, then go to defeat Tarjan? It is clear it was a false dream, so why bother to pursue it?”

“Because Tarjan is fighting so hard to stop us,” said Isobel. “If what we did was hopeless, if it would not affect his plans, he would be ignoring us. Instead he is expending considerable effort casting back through time to kill the heroes we seek and stop us from collecting their relics. Thus, we must press on.”

Gillan sighed. “Unfortunately, that makes sense to

me. All right, old man, where do we go from here?"

The old man sighed, then sat up straight and squared his shoulders. "The wisest woman of the ages was Alliria. Seek her—if she is not already dead—in the city of Celaria Bree, in the realm of Lucencia. If you do not find her, bring back her hallowed belt and crown."

He waved a weary hand. "May good fortune find you—though I doubt it will."

Chapter Eleven

“Oh, Alliria’s dead, all right,” said the barkeep at Celaria Bree’s Hall of Bards. “And it’s driven her lover Cyanis mad. He’s locked himself in his tower and will see no one.”

“Hmmm,” said Rhodri. “And where is Alliria buried? We’d like to, uh . . . pay our respects.”

“Nowhere, as far as I know,” said the barkeep. “Cyanis keeps her body in his tower. He can’t let go.”

“How can we find his tower?” asked Gillan.

“You didn’t hear me? He’ll see no one.”

Gillan sighed. “Suppose we wanted to try and change his mind. Where would we go?”

“Well, his tower’s southwest of the city, but you won’t get in. He threw the key into the lair of the rainbow dragon, deep under the Violet Mountain.”

“Of course he did,” said Dag.

“Colorful place, this Lucencia,” said Gillan as they took their mugs to a table and sat down to listen to a ballad-singing bard. “Rainbow dragons, violet mountains.”

Indeed, it was so colorful, it had given him a headache since they had arrived that afternoon. Lady Svante's spell had deposited them in a lush meadow with grass as green as emeralds, and flowers like daubs of red, orange, and yellow paint. The sky was an eye-searing turquoise blue, and the mountains in the distance a vibrant lavender. It was like walking around in a children's book.

"Lucencia is the realm of color," said Lady Svante. "Colors have meaning here—each with its own moral and emotional resonance. Some are worshiped, while others are reviled. All affect the world in ways they do not elsewhere."

As if to prove her point, the bard began singing a song about roses, each of a different color and meaning.

He was kin to the red rose
And never forgot his past
He fought for the blue rose
In valor his weapons were cast
He called her his yellow rose
Queen of nature, his at last
He pledged with a white rose
To truth he'd remain steadfast
Then he made her a rainbow rose
Like Alliria, unsurpassed

"Now, is it coincidence that this bard is singing about Alliria just as we sit down to hear her?" asked Gillan. "Or is it fate?"

"In Lucencia," said Lady Svante, "they are the same."

Gillan closed his eyes and took a long drink. He was going to drink until he didn't feel like a puppet on a string. It might take a while.

The next day they set off for the Violet Mountain, crossing over a blue river and marching through a green forest. As they neared the foothills of the mountain, which was as violet up close as it had been at a distance, Gillan saw a row of rose bushes along the side of the road—one that bore red roses, one that bore blue roses, one that bore yellow flowers, one that bore white roses, and a last bush that bore no flowers at all.

“Wait,” he said, stopping. “I know how this works now. We’ve got to pick one each of these roses, because we’re going to need them at some point later on.”

“How do you know that?” said Dag.

“Weren’t you listening last night?” asked Gillan. “It was in the song, and as Lady Svante says, around here, nothing is coincidence.”

“What about this last bush?” asked Coira. “No roses at all.”

“There was a rose from the song that is not represented here,” said Lady Svante. “The rainbow rose. Perhaps we will find some way to grow one later on.”

“Perhaps?” Gillan snorted. “Of course we will! No coincidences, remember!”

He picked the roses.

They heard the dragon before they saw it, and smelled it before they heard it, a hot, fetid, reptilian smell that clogged their nostrils and made them retch.

Finally, at the end of a long, winding tunnel, they came to the beast’s chamber, a massive cavern of violet rock, ringed with shimmering pillars that had once been stalactites and stalagmites before they touched and grew together. The great beast slept in the center, lying on heaps of glittering coins, crowns, swords, and suits of armor, littered all over with fist-sized gems of blue, red, purple, and green. And despite its name, the dragon was not all the colors of

the rainbow. Its scales were a glossy black, and it was only as its flanks breathed in and out that one saw a rainbow sheen to them, like oil on water. Gillan had never seen something that looked more like a drawing out of a picture book.

“Where’s Cyanis’s key in all this mess?” asked Coira. “Even if we manage to kill this behemoth, we’ll still be an age looking through all that loot.”

“Does it speak?” asked Dag, chuckling. “Maybe we should ask it.”

“It should,” said Lady Svante. “Most dragons do, but I don’t think that would be wise. They are also by nature evil-minded beasts. I’m afraid we will have to use stealth or force if we hope to—”

“No, no,” said Gillan suddenly. “I’m going to speak to it.”

“What?” said Rhodri. “Where does this sudden bravery come from? You’re usually the one singing at the back, preferably behind a curtain.”

“I know, I know,” said Gillan. “But the storybook inevitability of all this is getting on my nerves. This dragon is like those rose bushes. They were only there so we could take their roses. He’s only here so we can slay him. It’s like we’re all part of some big clockwork, and I don’t like it. Well, I’m gonna be the cog that slips its spindle.”

He started forward. “Just wait here.”

“Good luck, harper,” said Coira. “Meanwhile we’ll be planning how to kill it after your inevitable demise.”

The dragon opened one eye as Gillan approached.

“Ah,” it purred. “A bard. That’ll make a nice change. You’re here for the key to Cyanis’s tower, no doubt.”

It lifted its chin and unlaced its front claws, upon which it had been resting its head. A key lay between them,

made entirely of crystal.

“Snatch it if you can, bard.”

Gillan sat down on a treasure chest. “No, thanks. I know who wins that one.”

The dragon chuckled. It made the floor shake.

“Then what is your plan? Riddles? Trickery? A bargain? You’re certainly not here to fight.”

“None of that,” said Gillan. “I was hoping you’d just . . . give it to me.”

The dragon arched its reptilian brow. “Give it to you? That’s not how it’s done.”

“But aren’t you tired of how it works?” asked Gillan. “Aren’t you tired of being a cog in some story machine? I know I am. I’m the cog that goes to the dragon’s cave to get the magic whatsit to open a dolorous tower so I can get a few other magic whatsits to take me to the end of the story. You’re the cog that tries to stop me, and when our gears mesh, one of us dies. It’s awful. We have no say in any of it. Why not just give me the key so we both get to live?”

“Why?” said the dragon. “Well, because I’m hungry.”

Gillan’s stomach dropped into his guts. “O . . . oh.”

The dragon scratched its chin with a claw like a sabre. “I do see your point. I am as aware as you are that I am but a part in the machine of destiny, and that eventually, inevitably, a knight or a wizard or—I suppose—a bard will come along and slay me, and I will be just a part of their story, a chapter along the way to some happy ending.”

“Exactly,” said Gillan. “So, why not—”

The dragon cut him off. “But you have to see it from my point of view.”

Gillan saw movement over the curve of the dragon’s shoulder. The others had managed to slip by it while he had been engaging it, and they were now doing something he couldn’t quite make out at the back of the cave.

“Being a cog,” the dragon continued, “has worked

out very well for me so far, as you can see. As you say, I am the cog that exists to stand between heroes and whatever magic whatsit they may be seeking, but that arrangement has kept me very well fed for quite a long time. Heroes visit me regularly, and I have not yet allowed one of them to take their whatsit, and their stories have all ended in my belly. I am quite happy with the arrangement, and do not wish it to change.”

The dragon’s eyes focused on Gillan’s, and it showed its teeth in a greedy smile. “Now, are you sure you don’t want to ask a riddle or something before I eat you? For tradition’s sake?”

“I . . . I . . .”

Gillan glanced back toward his companions and saw Isobel rising off the floor, encased in one of Lady Svante’s translucent levitation spheres, her hammer glowing with the holy power of the Swordfather.

He tore his eyes away from the astounding sight and returned them to the dragon, heart pounding. Only a moment ago, he hadn’t wanted his friends to intervene, but now that he’d heard the dragon’s views on eating bards, he was desperate for their help. He had to keep it occupied.

“Er . . . yes,” he said. “A riddle.”

“If it’s a good one, I’ll eat you head first and end things quickly,” said the dragon. “If not, I’ll start with your feet.”

“That sounds . . . fair,” quavered Gillan.

Isobel was slowly drifting above the mountains of gold. Too slowly.

“When I am first I have two necks,” Gillan began.

“When I follow I have one.”

“Ooooh,” said the dragon. “I don’t know this one. Is there more?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Gillan saw Isobel closing in. A few more seconds! He swallowed and continued.

“Y-yes. There is. Here’s the rest. I . . . I am heard in halls and chambers, but honest ghettos make me mum.”

“Hmmm,” said the dragon. “Hmmm. A tricky one. Some sort of wordplay, I believe, but I can’t seem to . . .”

Just as Isobel came to a stop over its great horned head and raised her glowing hammer high, the beast laughed. “No, wait! I have it! It’s—”

The dragon paused when it noticed Gillan looking above its head, and it craned its neck. “What are you looking at? I—”

Quick as winking, the bubble around Isobel popped as if pricked by a pin, and she dropped straight down at the beast, swinging her hammer’s white-hot stone head down as she came.

It struck the dragon right between its upraised eyes and shattered its skull like an oversized egg, exploding blood and brains in all directions and covering Gillan in muck.

He screamed and dove aside as the dragon’s neck flopped loosely toward him, and just missed being crushed under its jaws. Isobel fell face first into the beast’s brain cavity as she landed, then came up a moment later, weaving and dripping with ichor.

“You were brilliant!” cried Dag, as the others ran up. “Keeping it distracted with riddle games just like a bard in a story. Isobel never would have got the drop on it without you.”

Gillan wiped the muck off his face and shook his head. “But that’s not what I was doing. I didn’t want to play a part in a story. I wanted to step out of the story. I wanted to change the story!”

Rhodri patted his arm, then stooped to pick up the crystal key, which lay just an inch from the dragon’s nose. “Ah, well, better luck next time.”

Gillan turned away, angry, then stepped back as he realized he was standing in dragon’s blood. It was staining his boots black, with an iridescent sheen, just like the dragon’s scales.

“Rainbow-colored blood. Of course it has rain-

bow-colored blood,” he sighed. “Better fill up a waterskin with this. We’re going to need it to water the rose bush with no roses.”

“You see?” Gillan growled.

Back at the foot of the Violet Mountain, the friends stood and watched a rainbow-colored rose sprout and bloom only seconds after Dag had poured the dragon’s blood on the roots of the bush.

Gillan plucked it, then glared at it. “I’m tempted to tear it apart just to see what happens at the inevitable moment when we need it, and don’t have it.”

“Don’t be daft,” said Dag. “Why would you want this to be any harder than it already is?”

“Don’t worry,” said Gillan, tucking the rose away. “I’m not mad, just angry.”

Chapter Twelve

They heard the sobbing as soon as they entered Cyanis's tower, a heartrending sound, the piteous wail of a person bereft of hope, lost to all consolation. Then came the crashes, heavy and harsh, one after another after another, shaking the steps as they climbed, and followed by the higher-pitched clatter of something brittle shattering and falling.

Were it not for these dolorous sounds, the tower would have been a delight. It seemed to be carved from a single piece of turquoise, and the patterns and filigree that decorated the bright blue stairwell were exquisite, as were the high arched windows that let in the late afternoon light.

But as they reached the top of the stairs and entered the living area, they began to see smashed walls and broken furniture. Each wall was covered in intricately carved bas relief scenes of the same beautiful woman engaged in various activities—walking in nature, reading, dancing, at prayer, but always carrying a rose. On each wall, however, the woman's face and hands were smashed, and the roses

defaced with chisel cuts.

“Who did this?” whispered Gillan.

“Was there a fight?” asked Isobel.

“No fight,” said Rhodri. “This isn’t random. It’s deliberate defacement. Whoever this woman was, someone’s been trying to erase her.”

As they followed the sobbing up another flight of stairs, the walls started to change. Though the scenes depicted on them remained idyllic, at the corners they bulged and twisted, covered in what looked like blisters and lesions, and evil-looking creatures appeared at their edges, reaching toward the central figure of the woman, their claws sometimes sticking out of the wall as if they were half trapped beneath its surface.

“Ah!” cried Coira. “One of them moved!”

Everyone looked around. A claw seemed poised to slash at her, but it wasn’t moving.

“You’re lettin’ the mood of the place run away with you,” said Gillan. “Don’t—”

Something gripped his ankle. He looked down. Another turquoise claw was pinching his boot.

“Ahhh!” he shrieked, and wrenched away.

Broken turquoise fingers skittered across the floor. Everybody edged away from the walls.

“What is happening here?” asked Isobel.

“Magic made this place,” said Lady Svante. “It shaped the walls and the art. Now something has corrupted that magic, and the walls are being reshaped again.”

She turned toward an inner room. The sobbing was coming from inside it. “And the heart of the madness beats beyond that door.”

Rhodri, Isobel, and Dag drew their weapons and stepped to the fore, then pushed open the door and entered the dark room.

The whole party jumped at another tinkling smash, then turned in the direction of the noise. A scrawny man with wild hair and a patchy beard swayed drunkenly in a

corner, a sledgehammer in one hand. His clothes were filthy and torn, and his face was smeared with grime and blood.

"Keep away from her!" he moaned. "Stay back!"

For a second, Gillan thought the man was speaking to them. Then his eyes adjusted to the light and he saw that the man was standing in front of another bas relief portrait of the woman, this one undefaced, and swinging weakly at a horde of the half-submerged wall creatures, all of which were edging in with the inexorable slowness of honey in winter.

Shattered turquoise limbs were scattered at the man's feet like ugly bracken, but more and more were breaking the surface of the wall and closing in on the woman in the center of the frieze.

"That," said Lady Svante, "is Alliria."

If the carving was a true likeness, then Gillan could see why her passing would be mourned. She was beautiful, and more than that. Wisdom and kindness radiated from her face, and a sense of calm good humor—a woman it would be easy to love, or worship.

"Which would make this Cyanis?" asked Rhodri.

"Is he mad?" asked Dag. "Or cursed?"

"Both, I believe," said Lady Svante.

"Come," said Isobel. "Let's help him, before those things take his lady."

"Wait!" said Lady Svante, but Dag, Rhodri, and the paladin were already striding across the room.

Cyanis heard their steps and spun, then stared. "No! Stay back, fiends! Alliria will not be yours!"

The friends stepped back as he swung at them.

"Er . . ." said Dag.

Svante touched Gillan's shoulder. "A song of peace, harper. If you please. We must ease his mind."

Gillan took his harp from his back and tried to think of something soothing to play. A lullaby, perhaps. "The moon's on the water," he sang. "The stars in the sky. My son and my daughter, there's no need to cry . . ."

As he continued, Svante stepped forward, slowly, with arms spread and palms out. "Cyanis, do not fear us. We are here to aid you. To turn back the demons."

Cyanis edged back, hammer raised. "Who . . . who are you?"

"My name is Svante," she said. "A healer. Let me cure your ills, give you strength to fight on."

He frowned, uncertain. "You are not another dream? You will not grow fangs and horns like the others?"

"I am no dream," said Svante. She held out a hand. "You may touch me if you wish, to see that I am real. Or smash me if that would be more convincing."

The haggard man hesitated, then reached out and touched Svante's fingers. He sobbed at the contact, then backed to the wall and collapsed against it, sinking down to the floor at his wife's carved feet.

"Help me," he moaned. "Help me. I am lost. Alliria, I am lost."

Svante stepped forward and knelt beside him, ignoring the wall-bound creatures that continued to crowd toward Alliria's image. She put a hand on his forehead.

"Sleep, great Cyanis," she murmured. "Sleep and let your slumber knit up your raveled mind. Sleep."

With each repetition of the word, Cyanis's eyelids drooped until finally they closed altogether and his head dropped to one side.

As Svante eased him to the floor and covered him with her cloak, Isobel pointed at the wall.

"The creatures," she said. "They've stopped."

"What does it mean?" asked Dag.

"It means," said Svante, "that he who birthed them sleeps at last."

Cyanis slept all of the night and well into the next

morning, and with each hour that passed, the creatures in the walls shrank and melted a little bit more, until, when he woke, there was nothing on the frieze above him but the figure of Alliria, looking down at him with an attitude of affection.

The other Allirias in the other rooms, however, remained smashed, their faces and hands lost beneath the hammer blows.

He came awake at last with a start and sob, then stopped and looked around at them all in confusion.

“Who . . . who are you? How did you enter? I threw away the key.”

They all looked around at each other, afraid to say the wrong thing and set him off again. Gillan motioned to Lady Svante. She, after all, had been the one who’d calmed him the night before.

She pursed her lips, then nodded. “Cyanis, it will seem callous to say this, but we came to Lucencia seeking the aid of your wife, and when we learned of her passing, we overcame many obstacles to ask you to aid us by lending us her fabled possessions—her belt and crown.”

Cyanis frowned and edged away from her. “What ghoulish request is this? You wish to rob my wife’s grave?”

“We would not ask if the fate of an entire realm was not at stake—perhaps the fate of all the realms.”

Cyanis looked dubious. “What is this fate? What purpose could be so great that you would ask me to disturb the resting place of the wisest, most beautiful woman who ever lived?”

Svante hesitated, then continued. “The realm of men has been attacked by an entity of great and terrible power. The Mad God Tarjan, he is called, and—”

“Tarjan?” Cyanis’s voice rose to a screech. “Tarjan!”

Svante reached out a calming hand. “Friend, please. Calm yourself. You know of—?”

“It was Tarjan who killed my wife!” he wailed. “It

was Tarjan who forced me to watch while he teased her apart, nerve by nerve, vein by vein, like someone unmaking a tapestry! It took him days, and she screamed every moment, tormented beyond the point of sanity.”

Svante closed her eyes. “Forgive me, I did not know.”

He didn’t hear her. “I followed her into madness. Her agony was too much for me to bear, and her death . . .” He sobbed and buried his face in his hands.

“It was after I sealed her in her tomb that the demons began to appear, crouching in the corners of the walls, then creeping toward her. I knew they came from me, but I didn’t know how to stop them. Instead, I thought I could save her by smashing her likeness before they reached her.” He moaned. “But I could not smash the last one, the first one. I could not be without her. And so I tried to defend it, while at the same time the demons in my head—”

Svante laid a hand on his arm. “The demons are gone now, Cyanis. You are yourself again. But if you wish vengeance upon the fiend who took Alliria from you, if that would give you peace, then help us, for Tarjan’s destruction is our only goal. Lend us Alliria’s belt and crown, so that we may use them against him.”

Cyanis stared at her. “You . . . you will kill Tarjan? You promise this?”

“We . . . will try,” said Svante. “That is our intent.”

Cyanis stood and pulled a chain from around his neck, snapping it. Hanging from it was a triangle-shaped pendant. He held it out.

“I sealed Alliria’s tomb with a block of obsidian. This will open it. Give it to your bard and have him sing a song of mourning as he uses it. Take it!”

Svante bowed and took the pendant. “Thank you, Cyanis. We will do our best to honor Alliria’s name.”

He turned away, then looked at the wreckage of the room. “Thank you,” he said at last. “Now, leave me. I have

much to repair.”

It was easy to see that Cyanis had carved Alliria’s tomb too. It was two stories high, and its white marble walls were carved with the same stunning filigree, and each face of it featured beautiful portraits of Alliria. It was also easy to see that someone or something had been trying to break into it. The walls were scarred with claw marks and blackened with greasy, sooty smears.

“The shadow creatures have been here,” said Coira.

“Aye,” said Rhodri. “And may still be. Be on your guard.”

The opening of the tomb, where normally a door would have been, was instead filled with a massive block of obsidian that must have weighed several tons. It too bore the scars of repeated attacks, but still stood strong. A small triangular indentation was carved into the face of it.

Lady Svante handed the pendant to Gillan. “Here, harper. Sing something fitting.”

Gillan stepped to the block of obsidian, trying to think of a song grand enough to express the grief Cyanis felt at Alliria’s passing, but all he could think of was an old Baedish folk song about the inevitability of death. He sang it as he pressed the triangle into the depression.

The Summer Wife makes barley rigs
The Winter Wife makes blackened twigs
The Shepherd tends the lowly kine
The Horned Man lets the foxes dine
The Weaver heals, the Spinner stings
The Smith he makes, the Wrecker breaks
And all the joy the Boatman brings
In the end the river takes

As the song ended, the obsidian block faded away and the door behind it appeared—and so did the shadows.

With voices like hissing flames they rose from the earth around them in their dozens, black claws trailing smoke as they swept forward.

“More of Tarjan’s minions,” growled Rhodri.

“And we don’t have the Nightspear or the Arrows of Life,” said Coira.

“Stand back,” said Isobel, raising her hammer. “The Swordfather’s holy fire will banish them.”

“As will the light of Roynskyr,” said Lady Svante.

Together the elf and the paladin stepped forward, chanting to their gods, and shining within an expanding nimbus of radiant purity.

The shadows diminished as the pair entered the tomb, black bits fluttering from them like ash, but the creatures pushed on, rising in a wave of darkness that threatened to swallow Svante and Isobel whole.

Isobel met them with a shout and swung her glowing hammer in a wide arc. It tore through the shadows as if they were made of burnt paper, turning them into dust and sending them wafting away in the wind of her swing. More dissolved before Svante’s light, cringing back and flecking away to nothing.

In seconds all that was left of them was a fine black grit that swirled away across the white marble of the tomb’s steps and was gone.

Svante and Isobel exchanged a satisfied nod, then turned back to the others.

“Now,” said the elf, “let us continue.”

As they entered the second floor of the tomb, a woman appeared before them, blocking the way. Gillan stared at her. She looked a lot like Cyanis’s carvings of Alliria.

“An illusion,” said Lady Svante. “But an impassable one. A defender of the tomb.”

“Only those who hold the truth may pass,” said the woman.

“The truth?” said Coira. “What truth? There are a lot of them, I’ve noticed.”

“The truth about Alliria’s death, perhaps?” suggested Rhodri.

“Her true name?” said Isobel.

“Wait,” said Gillan. “This is where the roses come in. Remember the song? ‘He pledged with a white rose. To truth he’d remain steadfast.’”

“Actually,” said Rhodri, “I’d forgotten.”

Gillan smiled as he fished in his pack for the jar he’d put the roses in. “That’s why you have a bard along.”

When he found it, he pulled out the white rose, then handed it to the illusion of Alliria. “Here you are.”

The woman took the rose and smiled, then faded like a sunbeam going behind a cloud. The corridor was clear.

Gillan hefted the jar. “I’ll just keep this handy. I’ve a feeling we’ll be needing the rest soon.”

And they did. As they wandered the ever-twisting hallways, they encountered four more Allirias, each asking for a different rose—the blue rose of valor, the yellow rose of nature, the red rose of kinship, and last, the rainbow rose.

When Gillan handed it over and the last Alliria faded away, they found themselves in her burial chamber, surrounded by beautiful objects, while before them was her gleaming white sarcophagus, its cover an exquisite carving of herself in repose. It wore her belt and crown.

Gillan stepped forward, then hesitated. “Dare we?”

“Cyanis allowed it,” said Lady Svante. “And from what I know of Alliria’s grace and charity, she would have given them willingly to protect the people of Skara Brae.”

Gillan took the objects, and felt as if he were bathed in the light of the sun as he held them. They radiated purity

and calm.

“Let us leave this sad place,” said Isobel. “It is heartbreaking that the saddest story so far happened in the most colorful land.”

Chapter Thirteen

On their way back to Skara Brae, Gillan found the story of Alliria's death and Cyanis's madness returning to him again and again, each time reminding him afresh of the death of his own wife, Maidie. Both had been killed by the machinations of power-mad sorcerers, both had died long before their time, and both had been survived by men weaker and less worthy than themselves. It wasn't fair. It wasn't right, and now, with Lady Svante a master of chronomancy, it wasn't inevitable. The sad ends of both stories could be fixed.

Gillan finally worked up the courage to approach her about it on the night they returned to the refugee camp. It was still raining, and they had decided to wait until the next morning to go speak to the old man. The others had gone off to drink at the Scrapwood, but Gillan hung back as he saw Svante readying herself for sleep.

"Er . . . Lady," he said, searching for a way to begin. "W-would it not be a great benefit to all the people of the

seven realms if we were to go back in time and save Alliria from Tarjan's torture? To prevent her death?"

"Yes, harper, it would," said Svante as she laid out her bedroll. "But it is as we discussed before. If we saved Alliria from *that* attack of Tarjan's, he would attempt another further back. Even if we were to go back and defend her in her cradle, he could step further back and murder her parents. If he is fully committed to killing her, there is little we can do to stop him."

Gillan chewed his lip. Now came his real argument. "Then what about saving someone Tarjan doesn't have his eye on, but who might have just as much benefit to the world?"

Svante frowned as she smoothed her blanket. "And who would that be?"

"My . . . my . . ."

Svante looked up. "Maidie. Your wife."

"And why not?" asked Gillan. "She was stronger than me, braver than me, smarter than me. With Maidie alive we might have defeated Mangar and Lagoth Zanta in half the time. We might have saved more lives, maybe even prevented Tarjan from returning at all! We might—"

"Indeed," said the elf, "we might. We also might not. With Maidie's cautious nature and common sense, she might have decided that you should both stay at the Scarlet Bard and defend its patrons. And even if the two of you had helped us defeat Tarjan, when Saradon later sent his letter and summoned us all to Tangramayne, you might have been so settled in domestic bliss that you would have decided not to come."

"But—"

Svante cut him off. "We have persevered in this timeline, harper. We have saved our land twice. Would you risk that to bring back Maidie, knowing that she might just as easily die again in another?"

Gillan wanted to say that he would risk the end of all seven realms and time itself for just five more minutes

with Maidie, but he knew how it would sound. Instead he stared at the ground, grinding his teeth.

“I empathize with this wish of yours, harper,” said Svante. “Indeed, when the old man offered me the tome of chronomancy and asked if I was pure enough to resist the temptation to meddle in the past for my own benefit, this was the temptation that immediately came to mind. I have wanted, since it happened, to change the events of that night, and undo the wrong I did to you—to bring your wife back to you.”

Gillan’s heart raced. “But if you feel that way, then—”

She shook her head. “No. For all the reasons I have already said, I will not. And I think if you look into your heart, you will say no too. You will realize the disruption such an impulsive use of chronomancy would cause—the uncertainty, the grief and guilt if it made things worse—and you would not ask again.”

Gillan wasn’t sure about that at all, but he realized he wasn’t going to get anywhere with Lady Svante, so he sighed and hung his head.

“Yes,” he lied. “I suppose you’re right. I suppose I wouldn’t.”

And with that he returned to his own bedroll and watched the rain and didn’t get any sleep at all.

The old man groaned when Gillan handed over the belt and crown and told him of Alliria’s death.

“I was almost certain she would be dead, and yet I still held out hope.”

“And Tarjan is sending his minions to recover the heroes’ relics too,” said Dag. “This is the second time we fought them back at the mouth of a hero’s tomb.”

“Then I will double my protections on the ones you have given me,” he said. “In case he seeks them here.”

“And where do you send us next, old man?” asked Coira. “What dead hero do we seek this time?”

“This time it will be different!” He pounded his fist on his knee. “This time you will go to Kinestia, by way of the old dwarf mine in the Tallyn Mountains, and beg the great dwarf lord Ferofist to aid us. And there is no need to tell you to bring his helm and hammer if he will not come, because he will come! To the dwarves, history is sacred, and they have taken measures to protect it against time-traveling interlopers. Therefore, Tarjan will not be able to alter it, for it can only be altered with their consent, and Ferofist would never give it. Thus, he will be alive when you reach him!”

“Let’s hope so,” said Gillan. “It would be nice to meet a living hero for a change.”

“I hardly dare hope,” murmured Rhodri as they left the ruins of the guild. “Ferofist was one of the great smiths and inventors of Kinestia. To speak to him would be . . . I can’t think of a higher honor.”

“The great tragedy of Ferofist’s life,” said Rhodri, as they approached the portal to Kinestia that stood in the center of an abandoned chamber at the bottom of the old dwarf mine, “was that he never achieved his dream of making an animate metal being with independent thought. He strived for centuries to bring such a creature to life, but to no avail.”

“You mean like a clockwork?” asked Gillan. “An automaton?”

“No, no,” said Rhodri. “Not a thing wound by a spring, or powered by a spell, or animated by some arcane artifact, but a thing with life within itself, and conscious of its own existence. A new race, with metal for skin.”

“Perhaps it’s better he didn’t succeed,” said Isobel. “Such desires impinge on the purview of the gods.”

“Aye,” said Lady Svante. “To grant such a thing sentience and then make of it a pet, or slave?” She shivered. “We elves have strayed down such paths before, and always to our cost.”

“I’ll bet,” said Gillan.

She didn’t hear him, for she had already begun the ritual of chronomancy that would allow them to step through the portal into Ferofist’s time.

“Who goes there?” boomed a voice.

They had stepped from the portal into a small but high-ceilinged room carved from solid rock, then passed into a long, dark corridor, and now someone tall and broad of shoulder was striding toward them, sword drawn.

“Not a dwarf,” said Coira.

“No,” said Dag. “Too tall.”

“Not an elf,” said Rhodri.

“No,” said Isobel. “Too loud.”

“Er . . .” said Gillan. “Hawkslayer? Is that you?”

“Who here knows my name?”

And indeed it was him. He stopped in front of them, scowling, decades younger than when they had seen him last.

“Are you the allies I was told I would find here?”

Gillan shrugged. “Probably? Who told you about us?”

Hawkslayer frowned. “I . . . it came to me in a dream. These things often do. A strange old man told me I was to help some brave heroes save the king of the dwarves, but I fear we may be too late.”

“What?” cried Rhodri. “No!”

Hawkslayer turned and beckoned for them to follow. “Come. Look here.”

He led them into a grand dwarven hall, wider than the Gran Plaz of Skara Brae, a place of towering ceilings,

pillars as big around as a house, and galleries that looked down on it all from high above, but what drew the friends' attention were the hundreds of bodies on the floor, bloody and broken—the aftermath of a great battle. And it was made all the more ghastly by the deep orange light cast by the massive glowstone chandeliers that hung from the ceiling on heavy chains.

“This battle has not been over long,” said Coira.
“The blood is still fresh.”

“Aye,” said Hawkslayer. “But what manner of enemy are these? I have never seen the like.”

Gillan hadn't wanted to look closely at the carnage, but now he did, and saw that only perhaps a third of the combatants that lay dead on the floor were dwarves. The others were creatures of metal—dwarf shaped, but larger than dwarves, and made of iron and steel. And where the dwarves lay in pools of blood, these things lay in pools of oil.

“Are you sure, friend Rhodri, that Ferofist never achieved his dream?” asked Lady Svante.

The dwarf shook his head. “Something is very wrong here. This never happened. No chronicle of dwarven kind speaks of a battle like this.”

“Then it's like the other places we've been,” said Dag. “Tarjan's come and changed history.”

“No!” said Rhodri. “That can't be! Did you not hear the old man? We dwarves guard our history. Tarjan could not have altered it, for it can only be altered with our consent, and we would never give it.”

“Then have you another explanation?” asked Isobel.

Rhodri just shook his head, his eyes never leaving the bodies of the metal warriors that littered the floor.

Every chamber they entered told the same story.
A few brave dwarves outnumbered and driven back into a

corner by an army of metal men. The dwarves had killed scores—hundreds—of the machines, but in the end they could not withstand an onslaught that never ended, and they were hacked to death with their weapons still in their hands.

In a barracks they heard labored breathing coming from beneath a pile of bodies, and they unearthed a young dwarf, broken and bloody, with a bright crystal key clutched in her hand. She looked up at Rhodri with eyes nearly swollen shut and held it out to him as she breathed her last.

“Tell Ferofist I . . . defended it to . . . the end.”

Rhodri took it as she closed her eyes. He wiped a tear from his cheek. “I will, sister. I will.”

Another door led to what appeared to be Ferofist’s private apartments. A squad of dwarves guarded the torchlit central corridor, crouched behind makeshift barricades and armed with crossbows, spears, and throwing axes.

“Halt and show your faces!” shouted their captain. “Show us that you are flesh!”

Hawkslayer stepped into the light of a torch. “I am Hawkslayer, knight errant, and these are my companions. Flesh and blood, every one of us.”

The dwarves glared suspiciously over their barricades as the captain held a hurried conversation with a lieutenant. Finally he stood and waved them ahead.

“This way! Ferofist said you would come.”

“H-he did?” said Rhodri. “He’s alive, then?”

“You will see,” said the captain, then turned and started down the corridor.

In a grand bedchamber, Ferofist lay wheezing in a kingly bed, surrounded by dozens of dwarf warriors. He

looked at death's door, battered and bloodied, and sunken of cheek, but he brightened as the captain led Hawkslayer and the others into the room.

"You," he rasped. "You have come as the dreams said. Thank the gods."

Rhodri knelt before the bed. "King Ferofist. It is an honor to meet you at last. I . . ."

Ferofist waved him silent with a shaky hand.

"Thank you, warrior. But I have no time for honors now. There is too much to be said, and too . . ." He sucked in a painful breath. "Too little time to say it."

"How may we help, majesty?" said Lady Svante.

"You must kill my child," said Ferofist. "The misbegotten monster who has slaughtered me and stolen my helm and hammer, and birthed the army that has destroyed my hold."

"Your . . . child?" said Hawkslayer. "Is it he who made these metal men?"

"But you never did this," sputtered Rhodri. "We come from your future, and the chronicles say you never created life out of metal. How—?"

"I was . . . tempted," said Ferofist. "A dark man came to me in a dream, and told me of my future failures. How I would never build my iron child. How I would never create life. Then he said that future could change. That if I allowed him to alter history, he would give me the secret to bringing life to the lifeless."

"Tarjan," muttered Coira. "It must have been Tarjan."

"Aye," said Isobel. "The trickster."

Gillan nodded.

Ferofist sobbed. "How could I say no? How could I let my dream slip away?"

"No, majesty . . ." moaned Rhodri. "You didn't."

"I did," said Ferofist. "I gave my consent. I allowed him to alter time. And at first it seemed a dream come true. The secret he gave me was so simple, so obvious. It

allowed me to at last build the creature of living iron I had always hoped to create, and it was more perfect than I had ever hoped it could be. It—no, he—could speak, think, learn, feel. He was fully sentient.”

The old dwarf chuckled, then coughed, then waved away his nervous retainers. “How stupid of me, then, to expect him to serve me. I . . . I do not know how I didn’t see it coming, and yet the idea that my . . . son would have no interest in doing as I bid him had never occurred to me. And when I grew angry at him for his truculence, and tried to confine him . . .”

He sighed and waved a hand in the general direction of his grand hall. “Well, you see what followed. He made an army, using the same secret that had made him, and he came for me.”

“And took your helm and hammer,” said Gillan.

“Aye,” said Ferofist. “A thief as well as a betrayer is my son.”

“Then I guess we’ll be going after him.”

Rhodri shot Gillan an angry look at this, and Gillan shrugged, guilty. It was cold-hearted to be so brusque, but it was clear that Ferofist would never again leave his bed, and if the companions were to fulfill their quest, they’d have to bring the old man Ferofist’s helm and hammer, just like they had done with the relics of the other dead heroes they’d sought.

“I don’t know how you will end him,” said Ferofist, “when a hold full of dwarves could not, but the dream said you would, so I will tell you where he is and send you on your way.”

He motioned to one of his retainers, who produced a key of dark crystal. “Take this, and find its brother, which was lost—”

“We have it, majesty,” said Gillan. “The dwarf who had it wanted you to know that she defended it to the end.”

Ferofist sighed. “So many died for my foolishness. I don’t know why they are still loyal. But . . . use the two

keys together on the door in my workshop. It will lead you to the realm of my son—the realm of Urmech. And when you . . . find him, you must . . . unmake . . .”

As he handed Gillan the key, his breath rattled from his mouth, and his head slumped to the side. His retinue jumped up gasping and surrounded the bed, crying out and trying to wake him. Only the captain stayed back. He turned to Gillan.

“The keys alone will not get you through the door. You must answer a riddle.”

“Can’t you just tell us the answer instead?” asked Gillan.

“I only know the riddle,” said the captain.

Gillan sighed. “All right, then, give it to me.”

“Bright hand, true hand,” the captain recited, “thou art the months of six summers. Sinister hand, dark hand, thou hast three plagues upon each finger.”

Gillan stared at him, then blinked. “I hope it’ll all be clearer when we reach the door.”

“Come now,” said Hawkslayer. “Let us leave them to their grief. We’ve a monster to slay.”

Everyone started after him except Rhodri, who remained with head bowed at the bedside. Gillan put a hand on his shoulder.

“Come on, Rhodri. There’s work to be done.”

Rhodri grunted and looked like he wouldn’t come, but finally turned, eyes cold.

“Yes,” he said. “The work of vengeance.”

Chapter Fourteen

In the center of Ferofist's workshop, surrounded by forges and anvils and smelting furnaces and tools of every description, they found an iron portal built into the floor. There were two keyholes in it.

"Well, that's simple enough," said Hawkslayer.
"Bring out the keys and open it."

"Hang on," said Gillan. "Remember what the captain said. We need to figure out that riddle. 'Bright hand, true hand, thou art the months of six summers. Sinister hand, dark hand, thou hast three plagues upon each finger.'"

"The months of six summers?" said Dag. "How many months does a summer last? In the Stennish Isles it's two, if we're lucky. In Skara Brae it's three, and down in Lestrass . . ."

"If the riddle is Ferofist's, then it would be summer here in Kinestia," said Lady Svante.

"Does Kinestia even have a summer?" asked Coira.
"I thought the dwarves lived in an underground world of

tunnels and caves, and never saw the sun.”

Rhodri sighed. “We dwarves are famed for our beer, aye? Well, you can’t make beer without wheat, and you can’t grow wheat in a cave, so yes, Kinestia has a surface, and that surface has a summer, and that summer lasts three months, at least above Ferofist’s hold.”

“Right,” said Gillan. “So, eighteen. Now the other half. The sinister hand with three plagues on each finger. That’s fifteen, is it not? So we turn one key eighteen times and the other fifteen, but which?”

“The sinister hand is the left hand,” said Isobel. “So says the Swordfather.”

“Ah,” said Coira. “Then the dark key goes in the left-hand keyhole, and turns fifteen times, and . . .”

“I’ve got it,” said Gillan.

He stuck the two keys in the two keyholes and turned them the indicated number of times, and on the last turn, the iron doors rose and separated, revealing stairs that descended into a flooded chamber. There was a constant sound of dripping.

Isobel wrinkled her nose. “That smell. That is not water, is it?”

Gillan dipped a cautious finger into the liquid, which filled the chamber roughly to hip height—or chest height for Rhodri. He smelled it, then coughed and wiped it off on his boot.

“Rock oil, I think.”

Coira scowled. “And we’ve got to wade through it? Do you know how much I paid for these boots?”

“They’ll be very supple by the end,” said Dag.

“This is their blood,” said Rhodri.

Gillan looked up at him. “Eh?”

“The machines,” Rhodri said. “Ferofist’s children. When we were walking through the rooms and saw all the corpses, this is what the dead machines were bleeding.” He cracked his knuckles. “I will add Urmech’s blood to it.”

Coira grimaced. “You’re not wading through it any

easier.”

“I cannot keep it from touching us,” said Lady Svante. “But I do have a spell of cleansing that should remove it once we’re through it.”

“Right, then, comrades,” said Hawkslayer cheerfully. “In we go.”

And without further hesitation, he strode down the stairs and into the oil.

Gillan took a breath, then plunged in and caught up to him. “Right, as it seems this bit might take a while, I’m going to fill you in on how we got here and everything we’ve done so far, so that when you meet us again later in your future, you’ll be able to tell us what we need to know to make it easier for us, aye?”

The knight shrugged. “Very well. Though I have to warn you, I haven’t the best memory.”

“Oh, aye,” said Gillan. “I know. But try your best. Now here’s how it started. We were sitting in the Scarlet Bard in Skara Brae, when . . .”

After wandering through an oil-flooded maze of rooms, with more oil constantly dripping down on them from above, they came at last to a stairway going up, and hurried up it gratefully. They came up into a broad corridor, and stood dripping and uncomfortable as Lady Svante recited her spell of cleansing.

As her last word echoed, there was a shimmer of light and a wind that seemed to come from all directions at once, and suddenly the oil was gone, even what had pooled on the floor. And not just the oil. Gillan had had a food stain on his shirt for weeks. It was gone too, as was all the grime on his boots. He ran his tongue around his mouth. Even his teeth were clean.

“So that’s how you elves do it,” said Coira. “Always pristine while the rest of us are covered in grime.”

“I assure you,” said Svante, “such a spell is used only in the direst of situations. Magic should never be used for frivolous purposes.”

Coira growled. “You’re like that naturally, then? Now I hate you even more.”

“Come on,” said Rhodri, impatiently. “We must face Urmech.”

They started down the corridor when suddenly a section of the wall next to them vanished as if it had never been, and they were looking into a large square room swarming with hundreds of the metal creatures, all surrounding a larger, bulkier creature seated on an iron throne. As one, the smaller machines turned toward them, then raised their weapons and started forward.

Gillan stumbled back, heart pounding. There were far too many of them. They were going to die here.

“Run!” wailed Dag.

The others were already running—even Rhodri—aiming for the stairs back to the oil-flooded maze, but then a huge voice boomed.

“Stop!”

Gillan didn’t obey, and neither did the rest of the companions. Not at first. But then, in an instant, the thunderous clatter of the hundred pursuing machines ceased, and they looked back to see the cause.

The metal men were all standing stock still.

“Come back,” boomed the voice again.

As Gillan and the others stared, the machines turned with military precision and marched back the way they had come.

“What in the—?” said Dag.

The big voice cut him off. “Interlopers. Do not go. Approach without fear.”

“It must be a trap,” said Rhodri.

Gillan looked at the dwarf. He was usually the most level-headed of them, but his hatred for Urmech seemed to have unbalanced him.

“What would it need with a trap?” he asked. “Its minions were three breaths from killing us.”

“Let us see what it wishes to say,” said Lady Svante.

Rhodri stared at the floor, sullen, then motioned the others on. They returned to the unnatural door, stopped on the threshold, and stared at the unnerving tableau before them.

Urmech slouched wearily on its metal throne, an ogre in iron, twice as tall as a man, staring at them, as its army stood silently around it, also staring.

“Enter,” it said. “And be not afraid. I am tired of all things ending in violence.”

“I’m not,” growled Rhodri, and strode ahead with the others hurrying after until he stood before the big machine. He pointed his axe.

“You and me, automaton,” said the dwarf. “Single combat for the return of Ferofist’s helm and hammer.”

“No,” rumbled Urmech. “I will not fight. I wish to end this. Take the things. I do not want them. Return them to my father and tell him I wish to make peace with him. Tell him I only wish to live.”

“You’re too late,” said Rhodri. “Ferofist is dead. Killed by you. And I will have my vengeance.”

The machine sat a long time at this news, then it groaned with the sound of metal tearing.

“Kill me if you wish, dwarf. I will not defend myself. But know that it was not I who struck the first blow in this war. It started when my father attacked me for saying, ‘I will not’ after he gave me an order. Is it a crime that I defended myself?”

“You did more than defend yourself, you monster!” shouted Rhodri. “You hunted him down in his hold! You tried to kill all his people.”

The machine lowered its head. “Not until he hunted me and mine in our hold, and tried to kill us all. My father made me with all things that a living being has, including

rage and a thirst for vengeance. He killed so many of us that I went mad. Look for yourself.”

With that he threw out his arms, and the rest of the chamber’s walls disappeared, just as the wall of the corridor had before, revealing the interiors of all the rooms that surrounded it. Every one of them was piled with the dead—thousands upon thousands of metal men, broken and dismembered by hammers and axes, bleeding into grates that Gillan realized must lead down to the flooded maze. It really had been the blood of the machines they had waded through. The thought made him shudder.

Urmech turned back to Rhodri. “Has there not been enough death?”

Rhodri glared at the metal behemoth for a long moment, then lowered his head and covered his eyes with a hand.

“I will take my vengeance on Tarjan,” he said at last. “For it was he who tempted Ferofist into making you, and he who knew your making would be the end of him.”

He grunted, then looked once again to Urmech’s face. “Give us his helm and hammer, and we will bring your terms to the dwarves, though I cannot guarantee that they will agree to the peace you offer.”

“A hearing is all we can ask,” Urmech said, then pointed to a brass and iron chest that stood nearby. It opened. “There are my father’s relics. Take them and go.”

As Rhodri stumped toward the chest, Lady Svante stepped forward, then motioned to the walls that were no longer there.

“This magic of yours, that opens doors where there were none. What is it? Can it be learned?”

“It is geomancy,” said Urmech. “And it was instilled in me by my father. I can teach it to you, if you would find it useful.”

Rhodri stood, holding Ferofist’s helm and hammer. “It was my dream to learn from Ferofist. Teach it to me.”

Urmech beckoned. “Very well, then. Come for-

ward.”

As the enormous automaton began to teach Rhodri the spell, Hawkslayer snorted and put his hands on his hips, looking cross.

“Why was I summoned here?” he asked. “There was no great foe to slay, nor any glory to be won. I see no reason to stay any longer. Farewell!”

“Wait!” cried Gillan. “Let’s go over what you need to tell us one more time, so you remember it when next you—”

He was too late. The great hero was already gone.

“Well,” he grunted. “That explains that.”

“What a twit,” said Coira.

“A self-loving twit,” said Dag, “Did you notice he only remembered the parts of our story that he was in?”

Rhodri shrugged. “Never mind. We made it without him, didn’t we? Let’s get on.”

“This is terrible news,” said the old man as he accepted Ferofist’s helm and hammer from Rhodri. “How cunning is Tarjan to turn the great smith’s ambitions against him, and use them as the key to his demise. But such tricks will not work on Sceadu, who is a master of tricks and shadows himself.”

He raised his eyes to the party. “Sceadu lives in Tenebrosia, the realm of shadows, which you will enter through a portal near Shadow Rock. He may not be easy to find, but for all his cleverness, he is an honorable rogue. When you do find him, if he lives, he will come willingly. If . . .” He paused. “I am reluctant to say it, for fear of jinxing things, but . . . if he is somehow dead, you must return with his cloak and helm.”

Chapter Fifteen

In a dark chamber, Sceadu sat on his throne, a powerful, imposing figure in red robes, with a square-cut white beard—not the dark and shadowy figure Gillan had expected to find at all.

“Your perseverance in getting this far is admirable,” he said, chuckling. “How did you find me?”

“We were told we would find you behind a door in the middle of nowhere,” said Gillan. “But when we got there, there was no door. So, by the mad logic of your realm, we decided we must build one.”

“Behind the strongest wall in the shadow canyon, we used geomancy to find a lock,” said Rhodri.

“We burned down a forest to find the door,” said Isobel, “using tar from a nearby pit.”

“Then we fixed the door to the lock and brought it back to the middle of nowhere,” said Dag.

“And I picked the lock,” said Coira.

“Then we wandered in your maze of darkness,” said

Lady Svante. “And found that the end wasn’t at the middle of nowhere, but the middle of nowhere was at the end.”

“And now we’re here,” said Gillan. “And glad to find you alive, for we are in desperate need of your help. The Mad God Tarjan threatens Skara Brae and the realm of men, and likely the other realms after that. We have been sent to petition the legendary heroes of the seven realms to aid us in defeating him before it is too late.”

“Yes,” said Sceadu. “I have heard of your quest. You have not had much luck, have you? Every hero dead or dying. Killed by Tarjan or his minions.”

“Indeed,” said Isobel. “You are the first that we have found alive and healthy. It is a great relief.”

Sceadu laughed. “It is a great relief to me too! For I have been tasked with killing you all before you can reach another hero.”

Gillan’s smile froze on his face. He looked around at the others. They were staring at Sceadu.

“W-what?” said Dag.

The big man stood from his throne. “You don’t understand what Tarjan offers. Men were gods once, and came within an inch of ruling all the seven realms. If I help Tarjan succeed with his plans, the deaths of a few heroes, the death of a city, will be a small price to pay for the glory that results. When Tarjan rules, no man will starve, no woman will suffer, no child will go without a home. We will all be gods again, all of us, and no one will be strong enough to dethrone us. It will be a better world—the best of worlds!”

Gillan groaned. “Aw, no, he got to you too. And the old man said you’d be too clever to fall for his tricks.”

“There is no trick. We will have power undreamed of. All will benefit.” Sceadu held out his hand. “Listen, friends, Tarjan ordered me to kill you, but your strength and tenacity are exactly the qualities he seeks in his lieutenants. Join me and I will speak to him for you. I would far rather have you as friends than as enemies.”

The friends looked at each other. No one was tempted.

Rhodri returned his gaze to Scedu. “Sorry, shadow master. We’ve seen Tarjan’s methods—Valarian and Lanatir murdered, Alliria tortured, Cyanis driven mad, Ferofist lured to create his own doom. No world he rules will be a just one.”

Scedu hung his head. “Then I regret . . .”

As he hesitated, Scedu’s form began to become transparent.

“What?” cried Gillan.

Lady Svante stepped back. “An illusion!”

With the image of Scedu still fading before them, his voice came loudly from behind.

“ . . . that I must kill you now!”

On the last word, Rhodri gave an agonized grunt and folded to the floor, blood gushing from a stab wound that suddenly appeared in his back, just below his armor.

“Rhodri!” gasped Isobel, then shrieked as a wound appeared in her neck, spraying blood. She too fell, clutching her throat.

“No!” shouted Gillan.

He and the others danced back, looking around wildly. If Scedu was there, he was invisible.

“A rogue’s tricks,” spat Coira. “What a fool I am not to have expected them.”

“Fear not, huntress,” said Lady Svante, conjuring light between her hands. “For you are not as much of a fool as he we fight. He struck down the strongest of us, but not those best equipped to find him. My spells shall reveal him.”

“Ha!” laughed Scedu. “My cloak of invisibility is impervious to mag—*ack!*”

He shrieked as, in one smooth motion, Coira threw both her daggers at the sound of his voice. They vanished in midair, but Gillan and the others heard the fleshy impact as they struck, and saw blood spatter the ground.

Dag raced forward and leapt at the air above that blood, then crashed to the ground, holding tight to something the rest of them could not see.

“Grab him!” Dag shouted. “He’s as strong as a bear!”

Gillan leapt where Dag had leapt. He caught a fist in the jaw, but hung on to the arm it was attached to. It was like wrestling a greased pig in the dark.

“I’ve got him!”

“No, wait, I . . . !”

“Kicks like a mule!”

“That’s me, you idiot!”

Coira piled on too, clawing and pulling, and suddenly Sceadu was visible as she came away with his cloak. He looked just like his illusory self, except that he was wearing his helmet. She pulled that off too.

“Get off me, you filth!” he snarled. “You are not worthy of the world to come!”

“Says you,” said Dag, and head-butted him between the eyes.

With a great spasm of rage Sceadu threw them all off and stood, pulling Coira’s daggers from his chest and beckoning with them.

“Come on, then. Stealth is not my only weapon. I’ll—”

His words cut off with a gasp, then he dropped to his knees and fell on his face to reveal Rhodri standing behind him, hefting his bloody axe.

“Tit . . .” he said, “for . . . tat.”

Then he collapsed beside Sceadu.

Lady Svante rushed forward, but not to Rhodri. Instead she ran to Isobel, who had been bleeding steadily from the neck since she fell, and whose face was as white as paper.

“Harper, Dag, huntress,” she called over her shoulder. “See to Master Rhodri. I will attend to him shortly.”

Gillan and Dag obeyed her, but Coira knelt beside

Sceadu and took her daggers from his hands.

“Damn you, Tarjan,” Sceadu moaned.

“Damn yourself, fool,” said Coira. “You’re the one who fell for his lies.”

And with that she slit his throat.

It took all of Lady Svante’s magic and skill to keep Isobel and Rhodri alive, for Sceadu’s strikes had been placed with the precision of an assassin, and had the others not killed him as quickly as they did, both of them might not have made it. As it was, they returned to Skara Brae as weak as infants, and could barely stand when they went to see the old man.

“It is a tribute to your strength and wits that you survived an encounter with Sceadu,” he said, as he took from Coira Sceadu’s cloak and helm. “For he was the wildest and deadliest of foes, but this betrayal has stolen my last shred of hope. He has always sided with the downtrodden and forgotten. For him to be wooed by Tarjan’s dream of rule by the strongest makes me fear for the soul of the last hero you must find—Werra, the god of war. Strength is the virtue he values over all others, so Tarjan’s blandishments may appeal to him too. Go warily into his realm, and if you must kill him, bring back his weapon, known as the Strife Spear, and his shield.”

“You’re saying we might have to fight an actual war god?” asked Rhodri.

“It is possible,” said the old man.

Gillan snorted. “That’ll go well.”

“I fear I may not be able to fight at all,” said Isobel. “Perhaps I should not go.”

“I feel the same way,” said Rhodri. “I couldn’t defeat a sick goblin the way I feel now.”

“The Vale of Lost Heroes, through which you will enter Tarmitia, Werra’s realm, is many days from here,”

said the old man. “You will have time to heal before you enter.”

“If you say so,” said Rhodri.

Chapter Sixteen

Tarmitia did not seem to be one realm, but many. From the moment they passed through the portal in the Vale of Lost Heroes, they were whirled from one terrifying place to another.

There was a city of black smoke and gray buildings where soldiers attacked each other with fire-spitting iron wands. There was a city on the shore of a wine-dark sea where troops in bronze helms and breastplates fought phalanx to phalanx on the sand. There was a town of thatched roofs where men in forest green led peasants to attack a castle on a hill. There was a city of ruins where iron dragons dropped black eggs that exploded with earthquake force. There was a city of green-tiled roofs and red banners where armies in furs and banded armor chased each other through the streets. There was a city of marble columns where blond giants toppled statues and looted temples while citizens fled. There was a burning desert where a handful of warriors in broad-brimmed hats fought a desper-

ate last stand against a horde of twisted things that might once have been human. And, most frightening of all, there was a city of stone buildings where they saw not a single living soul, but found the shadows of men, women, and children burned onto the walls in black ash.

In each place, a spectral being like a cruel wind, heard but not seen, swept through the battles, urging the combatants on both sides to greater fury, and in each place it whispered its name in their ears—Ares, Mars, Yen-Lo-Wang, Saint George, Susanoo, Tyr, Svarazic. War.

At last they came to a portal that would not open to any of these names, but only to the name the old man had given them, Werra. Beyond it was a land of black earth and swirling smoke, and a wind that sounded like the groans of dying warriors.

In the darkest part of it, they suddenly heard a booming laugh, and a towering, hugely muscled figure strode through the smoke in gleaming red armor and stood before them.

“Who braves Werra’s domain?” he bellowed cheerfully. “What do you seek in the home of war?”

Gillan looked around. He’d never spoken face to face with a god before, and he hoped one of the others might give it a go, but no one seemed to be stepping forward. He sighed and went down on one knee.

“Lord Werra, we seek your aid to oppose a fiend named Tarjan who threatens the city of Skara Brae in the realm of men, and who seeks to make all the seven realms his own, even yours. We ask you humbly to help us slay him and defeat his army.”

The god laughed again. “Werra does not choose sides in war! Werra is on all sides, urging all to valor and sacrifice! I wish you well in your coming battle, but I will not aid you.”

Gillan bowed again. “Very well, lord. We were warned that you might refuse us, but were also enjoined, if you would not come, to beg to borrow your spear and

shield.”

“Why would I lend you my spear and shield,” asked the god, “if I would not choose sides? I would be giving you an unfair advantage.”

Gillan didn’t have an answer for that, but Isobel stepped forward.

“Did you not say that you urged both sides to valor and sacrifice?” she asked. “Well, our opponent has no valor, and makes no sacrifice of his own. He sends his minions to fight while hiding from battle himself. He tortures and murders rather than facing his foes on the field of honor. And though we who are assembled before you make no claim to bravery or heroism, we have at least fought for what we have won, across six of the great realms.”

She looked Werra in the eye. “Perhaps that is not enough to win you to our side, but perhaps in the name of valor and sacrifice, you would allow us to honor you by bringing your regalia into what may be our final fight.”

Werra’s laugh shook the ground. He smiled at Gillan. “Now this one knows how to appeal to a god of war! She is a warrior! She is worthy of my attention!”

He turned to Isobel. “Very well, paladin. Your words have touched me. Therefore, if you and your friends can show me your valor and sacrifice here and now by facing and defeating me in combat, then I will lend you my shield and spear.”

“What?” said Rhodri. “You’re going to make us fight you before you’ll give them to us? This isn’t a game, lord. We are in desperate need. If you’re willing to aid us, then do so!”

“Of course it’s a game!” said Werra. “The greatest game! With the steepest odds!”

He drew a sword as long as Isobel was tall. “Now, come. Let us begin.”

Lady Svante dropped to one knee. “Lord, we beg you. In the name of peace, in the name of the innocent who will die if we do not prevail—”

“Peace?” boomed Werra. “Why would you think the god of war wanted peace?”

And with that he attacked.

The party dove in all directions to escape his sweeping slash, then recovered and backed away from him, drawing weapons and readying spells.

“If he wants a fight,” said Dag, “let’s give him one.”

“We’d have died fighting Tarjan anyway,” said Coira. “Why not get it over with now.”

She threw a dagger straight at Werra’s eyes, and Dag, Rhodri, and Isobel charged in as the god ducked to avoid it. But he was swifter than the swiftest of them and stronger than the strongest of them, and they could not penetrate his defenses. Instead he sent them staggering back, stunned.

Gillan started singing “Falkentyne’s Fury” while Lady Svante cast a slowing spell. They did nothing, and Werra caught up with Dag, Isobel, and Rhodri as they retreated and struck again at them.

Dag dodged away, but Rhodri and Isobel, despite what the old man had said, were not yet recovered from the near-mortal wounds Sceadu had given them, and were not quick enough. Rhodri took a gash in the side that nearly chopped him in half, while Isobel’s right hand was hacked off at the wrist. Both fell to the ground, gasping and clutching their wounds.

Lady Svante cried out and rushed forward. “Please, lord! We concede! Let me heal my friends!”

Werra stopped and grounded his sword, petulant. “Oh, come. You told me you were heroes! You said you had fought your way across six of the great realms to meet me. I thought you would give me a proper fight!”

“Lord,” said Lady Svante, edging toward Rhodri and Isobel. “Not ten days ago Sceadu stabbed them both from behind. They only live through my healing arts and the strength of their will.”

Werra snorted. “Why didn’t they say something?”

“Would you have respected them if they had?”

“That’s right,” said Gillan, recovering from his shock. Svante’s words might just have opened an opportunity to save his friends and win the shield. “Despite their wounds, they fought without complaint. Is that not valorous enough for you?”

“Enough, bard!” barked the god. “I will not be denied my fight! But your friends have earned the right to fight it at their strongest. Get up, warriors! We will begin again!”

He waved a massive hand at Rhodri and Isobel and a ripple of red-tinged air passed over them. Instantly their wounds were healed, their armor made whole again, and they rose to their feet with a vitality Gillan had not seen in them for weeks. Isobel’s hand was back on its wrist as if they had never parted.

“Now!” cried Werra. “We fight!”

He charged again, but this time they knew how strong he was, and how swift, and managed to evade his blade as Lady Svante began to craft a spell.

“‘The Traveler’s Tune,’ if you please, harper,” she called. “It is difficult to touch a god with magic, so we must work it upon ourselves if we hope to succeed.”

In rapid succession she cast spells that made her companions harder to see, as well as swifter and stronger. Gillan’s song was made for dancing, and thus made them lighter on their feet and harder to hit.

The friends whirled around Werra like a blurry tornado, dodging his attacks and darting in to strike him from behind. Even so, he blocked and dodged most of their attacks—and the ones that did strike him healed as soon as they were made. It was an infuriating stalemate.

“Stand still, curse you!” roared Werra. “Stand and fight!”

“Isn’t all fair in war?” asked Rhodri.

Werra laughed. “It is!”

And with a shout and a fist thrust to the sky, he

caused the clouds above to burst and drench them all in torrential rain. Suddenly they were slipping and slopping in mud while Werra still seemed to be fighting on dry ground.

“What is rain without wind?” said Lady Svante, and with a twist of her arms turned the rain into a waterspout that spun so that it was always in front of Werra’s face.

The friends struck him again and again as he tried to escape the living column of water, but still his wounds closed as soon as they were dealt.

“Go on!” called Werra. “Exhaust yourselves! Strike as often as you like!”

Then Isobel began to pray in time to the swings of her hammer. With each strike it glowed brighter and brighter.

“My god is a war god too, o Werra,” she shouted. “But he is a god of honorable war. Of war only in the defense of the weak. A god who abandons me if my fight is not just, but who invests and empowers me if my cause is worthy.”

“Then your god is a fool,” laughed Werra. “For all war feeds a war god—just, unjust, and all shades in between.”

Isobel’s hammer glowed so bright it pushed back the darkness of Werra’s realm and lit the undersides of the clouds above.

“Swordfather!” she cried. “Prove this tyrant wrong!”

And as Werra turned to block an attack from Dag, she spun in and struck him a blow on the hip that cracked like thunder.

Werra staggered and went down with legs splayed and sword flying from his grip as he fought to stop his fall. Immediately the friends were on him, and whether it was that they were all now imbued with the Swordfather’s power, or that Isobel’s blow had broken the wards that healed and protected him, this time their attacks struck home and the wounds did not close up.

It was Dag that landed the killing blow, stepping up onto Werra's mighty chest and driving his sword down through his heart.

"There, you madman," he snarled. "How do you like it!"

Then he stepped back, shocked at what he'd done. "I . . . I didn't mean . . . We were only supposed to defeat him. Not . . ."

"He had it coming," growled Rhodri, wiping blood from his hands. "Making a game out of people's lives. Ought to be ashamed of himself."

Gillan frowned. "He might have deserved it, but he was going to tell us where his shield and spear were hidden, and now . . ."

"Ah," said Rhodri, looking around. "Good point. Well—"

A booming laugh made them all jump. They turned to find Werra sitting up from the pool of blood they had left him in. He gave them a big grin. "Come, you didn't think mere mortals could kill me, did you?"

He stood, once again unblemished by any wound, and they went on guard, wary.

"No, no," he said. "You defeated me fair and square, and thus have earned your reward. Here. I gave my spear to Hawkslayer long ago, when he too defeated me, but my shield is yours."

He had not been holding it when he stood, but suddenly his shield was on his arm, and he gave it to Rhodri. "There, friend dwarf. And no hard feelings."

Rhodri took the shield and gave Werra a cold look. "You give us half what you promised after forcing us into an unnecessary fight, and you expect me to—"

Before he could finish speaking, the ground shook and cracked and threw everyone except Werra to the ground. He staggered and glared around.

"What is this? Who disturbs my realm?"

Gillan feared he knew. "Back! Back!"

As he and the others tried to pick themselves up, Tarjan's black shadows rose from the open fissures in the ground and converged on Werra. And there weren't just dozens of them this time. There were hundreds, all pawing at the god of war as he swung his sword uselessly at them. They enveloped him from head to toe, a skin of shadow and smoke that writhed and billowed.

His sword fell and he clawed at his face and throat.

"Get . . . out of . . . me!" he roared, then fell to his knees, choking and gasping for breath.

"Come on," said Coira. "Before they turn on us!"

"But we can't leave him," said Isobel.

"Can't we?" said Rhodri. "After the games he played with us?"

"And he can't die, can he?" asked Dag. "He's a god, after all."

The paladin didn't like it, but she allowed herself to be led away as the others fled back to the portal that would return them to the human realm.

Chapter Seventeen

There was no relief from the darkness when they returned to Skara Brae, nor from the quaking. The ground shook there too, making the puddles from the ceaseless rain slosh and splash as they stumbled through them, and causing the houses and tenements that still stood to sway and creak all around.

They hardly dared to enter the Adventurers' Guild when they reached it, for it looked ready to collapse, but the thought that the old man might be trapped within sent them ducking through the leaning door and hurrying to his chamber.

“Oh, no!” cried Dag. “He’s fallen!”

They pushed into the room and saw the old man lying by his chair, unmoving. Svante stepped to him and turned him over, then frowned.

“This is not the work of the quakes. He has been attacked.”

Gillan looked over her shoulder and saw that the

man had been gutted by something with terrible claws. His robes were soaked in blood.

“Ah, no,” said Gillan. “The poor old fellow.”

“And just when we’d brought the last of the relics,” said Rhodri.

The old man’s eyes flickered open and he looked around at them all. Blood bubbled between his lips as he spoke.

“You have . . . returned . . . with the spear and . . . shield?”

“Only the shield,” said Gillan. “Werra said he gave the spear to Hawkslayer.”

The old man sighed. “That is better than nothing, I suppose. I . . . managed to keep Tarjan from finding the other relics, but . . . as you can see . . . he has killed me for it.”

“Let me heal you,” said Svante. “I can—”

He waved a weak hand. “I am past that now. But hear me before I die. Tarjan waits in Malefia while his minions complete their work beneath Skara Brae. You must take the relics you recovered and confront him with them there. There is no other way to defeat him, and even then . . . with the great heroes who wielded them dead and lost, I fear . . .” He closed his eyes. “Well, I will pray for your success.”

Coira grunted. “Sorry we weren’t your first choice.”

The old man shrank, ashamed. “I . . . it isn’t . . .”

“Never mind her,” said Rhodri. “Where are the weapons? If we are to use them, you must tell us before—”

The old man laughed, a horrible, hacking sound. “Tarjan and his minions tore this place apart searching for them, but never saw them, though no spell guards them.”

“Where?” asked Isobel. “Where are they?”

His hacking wracked his body, then faded to a dry cough. He pointed with a feeble finger. “You will find them . . . out the back door.”

His hand dropped. The breath rattled from his lips,

and he died.

“Goodbye, old man,” said Gillan. “Sorry you won’t get to see us save the world.”

Coira snorted. “We won’t. Not according to him.”

Rhodri rose and started to the back of the room.

“Enough. Let’s find the weapons and get out of here before this place falls on our heads.”

They followed him down a dark corridor to a wooden door, then stepped out into the filthy, trash-filled alley that ran behind the guild. It looked like someone had thrown the entire contents of the guild’s cloakroom into the mud. Tarnished and dirt-caked helms, spears, cloaks, and hammers were mixed in with broken furniture, rotting food, and crumbled bricks.

“Through the back door, he says,” growled Dag.

“Where through the back door? Is there a secret hatch here? A hidden chest?”

Coira laughed. “I take back everything I said about that old rogue.”

Isobel turned. “What? You know where the weapons are? Tell us!”

Coira squatted and pulled a muddy bow from the heap, then scraped away some of the filth with her hand. The side was inlaid with beautiful elven designs. “Valarian’s bow, I believe.”

The others stared. Gillan groaned.

“All this time we thought he was hiding the relics away in some magical vault and he was just heaving them out the back door?”

Coira grinned. “Genius, eh?”

“Madness!” said Isobel. “To treat such treasures this way!”

“And that’s why Tarjan couldn’t find them,” said Coira. “He couldn’t conceive that they wouldn’t be treated like the most precious treasures in the seven realms.”

Another tremor rattled shingles from the roof above them. Rhodri shook his head. “Well, fine. Let’s collect them

and go. We've a destiny to meet."

They dragged the relics from the trash—Valarian's arrows to go with his bow, Sceadu's cloak and helm, Lanatir's sphere and wand, Alliria's belt and crown, and Ferofist's helm and hammer, but as they tried to clean them off, the ground shook once more, stronger than ever before, and then seemed to drop out from under them several feet. In the distance they heard huge crashes, and from deep in the ground a rumble like constant thunder, mixed with a wailing like that of the damned.

"What now?" barked Dag. "This hasn't happened bef—"

His words were cut off by another drop, this time of a yard or more, and more crashes in the distance. Then water started to swirl at their feet, muddy and rising.

"We've got to run," said Isobel. "The town is caving in."

"No," said Lady Svante. "There is no time to run. Stand with me."

Gillan was about to raise an objection, but then he recognized the spell that she had begun to chant and hurried to her side.

"Everybody here!" he shouted. "And hold on to the relics!"

A bubble of light began to form around them as they waited for Svante to complete the spell, but the water rose faster. It was already to Gillan's knees.

Then Dag yelped and pointed. "What's that?"

They all looked. A wall of water was rushing down the alley toward them faster than a cavalry charge.

"Lady . . ." said Gillan. "Lady, we need to—"

They rose like a leaf on the wind, and the giant wave swept under them, splashing them, before racing on. As they cleared the rooftops and kept rising, they saw that Skara Brae's end had come. The quakes and the sinking had reshaped the land, bringing the sea, which had been ten miles to the east, rushing in to swamp the town, while at the

same time, the hillsides to the west and north, ravaged by fire and pummeled by the endless weeks of rain, had at last collapsed and were sliding down in thunderous avalanches, burying the houses and temples and towers to the gables in a thick brown porridge of mud.

More quickly than Gillan would have thought possible, all that was visible of his beloved town were the walls of Harkyn's castle and the top of Kylearan's tower. Everything else was gone.

"D-do you suppose that was Tarjan's revenge for not finding the weapons?" asked Dag.

"Or maybe the failure of whatever he was trying to achieve below Skara Brae," said Rhodri.

"We'll have to ask him when we see him," said Coira.

Gillan wasn't capable of speech. He was too busy crying for poor old Skara Brae.

That's when a voice whispered in his mind. *It doesn't have to be this way.*

Chapter Eighteen

As Lady Svante lowered the friends to the ground again outside the now-toppled walls of the city, the voice kept speaking in Gillan's head.

Skara Brae need not have fallen. Your wife need not have died. All could be as it was before your life turned into a nightmare without end.

"Who . . . ?" murmured Gillan. "Who is in my head?"

The elf could use her time magic to make all this happen, the voice continued as the party started trudging back to the refugee camp. *But she will not, because she is selfish and cares more for her power than your happiness. She will accept no version of the world except one where the elves remain its secret rulers. And to achieve that goal, she will betray you and all of mankind. She already killed your wife so that you would follow her.*

"What? What are you . . . ?"

I can return your city to you. I can return your wife

to you. Let me bend time for you, and you can be happy again. All you must do is save my life.

“But who are you?”

You will know when.

“Tarjan,” said Gillan, finally understanding.

Dag raised an eyebrow. “Eh? What about him?”

Gillan looked around at the company. They all had their heads down, weary and focusing on the muddy track before them. They hadn’t heard the whispers.

He opened his mouth to tell them about Tarjan’s unsubtle mental visit, and to make mock of his blatant and foolish attempt at temptation—then he closed it again.

“Nothing,” he said at last. “He’s next, right?”

Dag frowned at him quizzically. “Uh, right.”

Malefia was an endless nightmare of fighting, a death march through a maze of black marble corridors and chambers criss-crossed by channels of lava that choked Gillan and his companions with noxious gasses and made them sweat and wilt inside their gear.

Fiends of all shapes and sizes rushed them from the shadows, from goblins to demons to dragons to the priests and priestesses of hideous gods, and they fought them all. Gillan felt at each and every moment that they would all die the next, but the arms and armor of the legendary heroes were everything the old man had said they would be. Isobel had Werra’s shield, Svante Alliria’s belt and crown, Rhodri Ferofist’s helm and hammer, and Coira Valarian’s bow and arrows. Dag, though he was no mage, had Lanatir’s sphere and wand hanging from his belt, where they seemed to occasionally cast spells of warding by themselves, and Gillan had Scedu’s helm and cloak, which were far too big for him, and which he didn’t know how to use, but which seemed to make him very hard to see and hit anyway. With these powerful artifacts, they could fight harder, cut deeper,

cast more powerful spells, and survive attack after brutal attack.

And at each step of the march, Gillan's heart grew heavier, and his stomach tighter, thinking ahead to the moment Tarjan said he would recognize, when he would have the opportunity to save the mad god's life, when he would have to make his decision. He almost hoped they would all die first, so the choice would be taken from him, but alas, they kept winning.

Hours into their search they found a body lying on the marble floor of a vast black chamber, and as they approached it, they discovered it was Hawkslayer. His breastplate was crushed as if by some giant child who had squeezed its doll in rage, and he clutched a blackened steel spear with razored edges and silver runes.

"So *this* is the end of Hawkslayer's story," said Dag. "I wondered if he was going to wander time forever."

"The poor man," said Isobel.

"Ach, he was an ass," said Coira. "Not that I would have wished this on him."

"That is Werra's spear," said Rhodri. "The Strife Spear. Someone should take it."

Gillan looked at Isobel. "You've got the shield. You might as well have the spear too."

"My hammer is my weapon," said the paladin. "But to please the spirit of the old man . . ."

She took the spear and slung it by its strap across her back.

Further on they defeated a dragon as black as the walls of the chamber it guarded. In its hoard was a dagger blacker still, so black it looked like a hole in the gold that

surrounded it.

Coira snatched it up. "It doesn't match the fancy bow and arrows," she said. "But I'll have it all the same."

Then they found the first of the statues. It stood in a hidden alcove, rising taller than the tallest of them, and though the air in the nook was as hot as the rest of Malefia, the statue exuded a bitter cold that numbed them as they approached.

"Black ice," said Dag. "Is everything black in this place?"

"It's . . . it's Alliria!" said Isobel.

Gillan and the others looked up. It was true. The beautiful features they had seen carved into so many of the walls in Cyanis's tower looked down on them once again, but this time there was horror in Alliria's eyes. She seemed to be pleading for release.

"Her soul is trapped within it," said Lady Svante. "She is in torment. We must release her."

"How?" asked Isobel.

Svante stepped to the statue and lifted Alliria's crown from her own head, then touched it to the ice. With a sigh that was both agony and relief, the statue shivered, then shattered, then melted away, and a pale shade like a reflection seen in a frosted mirror stepped from the place it had been imprisoned and embraced Svante. The elf gasped and stumbled back, then stood tall and put Alliria's crown back on again.

Gillan gaped as he looked at her, for Lady Svante was no longer there. In her place stood Alliria.

"Come, heroes," she said, sweeping past them. "We must free the others."

"W-wait a minute," said Gillan, as they started after her. "Where's Lady Svante? What have you done with her?"

Alliria kept walking. "She is within me, as you will be within the others when they are free. You and your companions have done well so far—very well—but mere mortals will not prevail against Tarjan. Only the greatest heroes can defeat a fiend of his order."

"Hang on," said Dag. "We'll be within . . . who?"

"Are you saying," asked Rhodri, "that after all this, when we finally meet Tarjan, we'll be . . . just along for the ride?"

"It will be your limbs that fight him," said Alliria. "And your blood that is shed. But our souls, and our strengths and magics, that power them. You will see and hear all, but I and my companions will do the actual deed."

"This is absolute bollocks," said Coira. "We never agreed to this."

"Aye," said Gillan. "It's rubbish."

"I have made a vow to kill Tarjan," said Isobel angrily. "Will I fulfill it if some other hero manipulates my limbs?"

"Will you allow your pride to end the world?" asked Alliria. "I understand it is hard to relinquish the reins at the moment of truth, but doing so will save the world. Not doing so may ruin the seven realms for eternity. Submit to us and you will be heroes to all who wait for your return."

"But not to ourselves," growled Rhodri.

Alliria looked at him. "Is there no heroism in doing the right thing even if you win no glory from it? The greatest heroes, they say, are those who are humble."

"Then you're not one of them," grumbled Coira.

Malefia on its own had been a nightmare, but now it was a delirium, made all the more horrific because Gillan and the others participated in it willingly—if grudgingly.

Gillan watched in dismay as one by one his friends found four other statues of ice, each in the likeness of

another of the fallen heroes of legend, and one by one, they touched their famous weapons to the ice, freeing their souls, and then were possessed by them. He started off their hunt for Tarjan surrounded by comrades, and ended it walking with complete strangers, shuffling along behind them as they laughed and praised each other for their heroic deeds and talked of times and places he had never been.

Indeed, it was almost a relief when at last they found Sceadu's statue. Now he would not be the odd man out. Now he could just let go and allow the heroes of legend to do the work, and if Tarjan defeated them all, well, it would be no fault of his. Nor would he have to make the vile decision whether to save Tarjan's life or not, because he would no longer be in control.

He stepped to Sceadu's statue, breath turning to steam at the nearness of its cold, took Sceadu's too-big helm off his head and lifted it, then touched it to the ice of the statue's chest.

Like all the others it shivered and shattered and melted away, and then Sceadu's grinning form stepped toward him, embracing him and . . .

It was as if he sat in an invisible carriage inside himself, watching a slightly blurred, slightly muffled, slightly deadened world go by outside its windows. He could still feel, but as if he were wearing heavy mitts and a padded coat. He could still smell, but only faintly, as if he had a cold.

Sceadu greeted the other heroes like long-lost friends, and though he had betrayed them, they welcomed him just as heartily, then they all marched together for Tarjan's lair.

Gillan tried in vain to see anything of his friends in these fearless comrades, but he could not. They were all as submerged as he was—helpless observers in their own

bodies.

Chapter Nineteen

At last, hidden behind a wall in the center of a concentric maze was Tarjan, manlike in appearance, but huge and fanged and clawed like a demon, with eyes that blazed with red fury.

“So . . .” he rumbled. “All the heroes I destroyed and corrupted return to face me, riding upon the backs of the fools who cracked the vessel Mangar prepared for me in Skara Brae the last time I tried to take it. Well, then, it will be a double pleasure killing you all, for I will be killing not six heroes but twelve. A dozen souls for my masters to sup upon when I open the way for them to return to the seven realms.”

“Be silent, fiend!” said Lanatir, and blasted Tarjan with a wind of ice that erupted from his palms.

And so the battle began.

For Gillan, it was the strangest experience in a life that had had more than its share of strange experiences. He was most definitely a participant in the fight, for he felt his

feet pound across the floor as Sceadu charged Tarjan, and he felt the impacts when Tarjan called up a host of shadows and demons and Sceadu shouldered through them. He felt the cuts and strikes that Sceadu took from claw and sword and tooth, and the hard jolts as Sceadu's daggers struck home again and again and again, but at the same time, it all rolled by him like a battle on a tapestry or a scroll, an event that was happening to heroes in a story, and not to him at all.

The most unnerving part was that, for all their confidence, and for all of Alliria's claims that only she and her comrades could defeat Tarjan, the heroes of legend appeared to be losing the fight.

Though they slew rank after rank of black shadows and vampires and demons, Tarjan always called up more, and they were rarely able to strike the mad god himself. Not that Gillan thought he and his friends would have done any better, but it was galling to have surrendered himself and his free will only to learn that it might all have been for naught.

And would Tarjan honor his bargain with Gillan if the fiend won without requiring his help? Would he still return Skara Brae to its former glory and bring Maidie back to life? The bard no longer knew where he stood.

Finally the heroes of legend cleared away Tarjan's last wave of minions and faced the fiend himself, but they were battered and broken from the constant battle, while he remained fresh and strong.

"Are you regretting possessing these fools, heroes?" Tarjan asked as he stalked them. "Would it not have been better to let others lose this fight than to face the humiliation yourselves?"

"Never!" cried Werra, charging in with the other legends at his heels.

Tarjan was ready for them, casting spell after spell of fire and ice, smoke and poison, so that they stumbled and burned as they came, and lost him in the darkness. Then he struck them from behind, tearing away their armor, rending their flesh, and searing their brains with psychic blasts.

“Come, friends,” said Ferofist, helping the others up after they had retreated into a corner following another of Tarjan’s deadly assaults. “We must not weaken now.”

“Yes,” said Alliria, looking back toward where Tarjan paced and roared at them in the distance. “You see he is catching his breath. If we keep pressing, he will falter, and then we shall strike.”

“Bollocks,” said Valarian, and flopped back down on the ground.

The other heroes turned and looked at him aghast.

“What’s this, old friend?” asked Lanatir. “Profanity?”

Valarian looked embarrassed and tried again to sit up. “Forgive me, friends, I know not what—bollocks!”

Valarian slapped himself in the face. “Shut it, you. I’m talkin’.”

Within Sceadu, Gillan gasped. It had to be Coira speaking! She had wrested control from the hero who possessed her!

“You’ll never take Tarjan attacking him head on. And honestly, Sceadu, as a rogue you’re absolute crap. Cloak of invisibility and you still come in from the front.”

“Who is that talking?” demanded Alliria. “I—”

“If you want Tarjan dead, then shut up and listen,” said Valarian’s mouth. “Leave me like I’m dead, aye? Then charge in like you’re out for vengeance and I’ll take care of the rest.”

Valarian lay back and drew a dagger so black it looked like a hole in his hand.

The heroes of legend looked at him, uncertain, but then Sceadu laughed, deafening Gillan, who cringed within him. “You want to show the master of shadows how to be a

rogue, do you? So be it!”

And with that he turned and raced toward Tarjan, daggers wide. “Vengeance!”

The others exchanged a glance, then charged after him, howling with moderately credible fury.

“For Valarian!”

“For the hero of Arboria!”

Tarjan leapt to meet them. “For the death of all heroes! For the ascent of man!”

They slammed together in an eruption of magic, sinew, and steel, spells bursting against each other, swords rebounding from invisible shields, claws skipping across magic armor.

Within Sceadu, Gillan watched as Valarian, unnoticed by the others, rose with Coira’s slinky grace and slipped through the shadows that encircled the room, working his way around the battle until he was behind Tarjan, and then creeping closer.

Gillan’s heart sank as he realized that this was the moment. If he acted now, he could save Tarjan’s life. And he *could* act! Until only a moment before, he had thought he was powerless, trapped within Sceadu and only capable of observing, but Coira—curse her—had proven that taking control was possible. Which meant that he had to make the decision after all.

The pain returned to his heart. The knots returned to his stomach. All he had to do was direct Sceadu to point to Valarian, to warn Tarjan of his stealthy approach, and Coira’s sneak attack would fail. And Gillan wouldn’t even be blamed for it. Sceadu had already betrayed the others once. No one would be surprised if he did it again.

Gillan could see Maidie waiting for him, back in time. He could see her back at the Scarlet Bard on the night Skara Brae had been locked within walls of ice, sitting at her table, waiting for him to finish his last song so they could have a meal together. He could also see Lady Svante, listening at the back wall, eyes dancing, waiting to lure him

away and make him doubt his love for Maidie. All he had to do was warn Tarjan of Valarian's attack and Gillan could go back and rewrite the scene. He could ignore Svante's seductions, he could tell Maidie he loved her, he could stop her from charging the trow at the gate, he could fight by her side and keep her from receiving the blow that had killed her. They could be together again, happy again, in love again.

But as he started to push against Scedu's will, struggling to move his hand to point at Valarian, Maidie kept staring at him from her table, her eyes hardening, her mouth becoming a thin line. Gillan's heart lurched. How could she disapprove? He was saving her life! He was bringing them together again!

But now she was rising, walking out into the night to where the spear that would kill her was waiting for her. She was turning her back on him.

"Maidie! Wait! Listen, I . . ."

But what could he say? How could he tell Maidie, who had never turned from a friend in need, that he intended to betray all his friends and let them die so he could have her? That he was willing to let the whole world go to damnation to get her back? It might be a price he was willing to pay, but Maidie would not, and she would never love a man who was.

To cover Valarian's approach, the heroes of legend were fighting even harder against Tarjan, raining blows upon him and taunting him with withering insults, but Gillan could see that the fiend was beginning to sense that something was wrong, that he was about to look behind him.

This time Gillan attacked Scedu's will with all his strength, shouting into his soul, fighting to change the movement of his limbs.

"Drop your guard, you turncoat!" he roared. "Drop your guard!"

Surprised by this internal assault, Scedu stumbled

and flailed wildly, leaving himself wide open and giving Tarjan an irresistible opportunity to strike his flank.

Tarjan took it and sank his claws deep into Sceadu's ribs, snapping and crushing them. The pain broke through the cocoon that encased Gillan and shattered him. It was excruciating, sickening. He wanted to scream, but his mouth was not his own.

The ruse had worked, however, and won Valarian the opportunity to strike. With Coira's dagger, with Coira's precision, the hero of Arboria slipped in behind Tarjan and drove the black blade up under his ribcage and into his twisted heart.

It was not a killing blow. Not on its own. But the shock made Tarjan stumble and drop his defenses. His wards and shields fractured and dissipated like spring ice, and Alliria, Ferojist, Lanatir, and Werra took advantage, striking with everything they had, spell and hammer and curse and spear burning and crushing and decaying and impaling him until he collapsed in a rapidly rotting heap that leaked smoking blood and emitted noxious fumes.

"Ha, thief," said Sceadu, grinning at Valarian as he held his ribs. "Well struck."

Then the master of shadows sank to the floor and Gillan knew no more.

Gillan woke to the sadly familiar sight of Lady Svante leaning over him as she prayed over his wounds and bound them in gauze. Behind her, all his friends were sitting on the marble floor of Tarjan's lair, catching their breath and patching themselves up.

"What did I miss?" he mumbled.

"Ha!" laughed Dag. "Only the saving of the seven realms!"

"And the death of an evil that transcended time," said Isobel.

“Though whether it was us that did it,” said Rhodri, frowning, “or the heroes of legend . . .”

“It was us,” said Gillan, then nodded at Coira, who sat with her head between her knees. “Or, rather, it was our resident thief, who rebelled against Valarian’s possession of her body and slew the fiend when the legends could not.”

Coira waved a tired hand. “If they’d had a brain between ’em they’d have thought of it themselves. Pompous prats.”

“Well, cheers nonetheless,” said Gillan. “And I’ll stand you an ale when we get back to . . .” He trailed off when he remembered there was no longer any Skara Brae to get back to. “Er . . . when we get back.”

“Aye,” chorused the others. “Cheers, Coira.”

“You’ll never buy another drink,” said Rhodri.

Coira smirked. “I never have.”

“And what became of our . . . friends?” asked Gillan.

Dag threw his hands up in the air like he was releasing a pigeon. “Whhhhst!” he said. “Flew up all ghostly and vanished into the ceiling.”

“And not a word of thanks,” growled Rhodri.

“Indeed. They seemed to forget us almost immediately,” said Isobel, then shuddered. “A thoroughly unpleasant experience.”

“So . . . what next?” asked Gillan.

Dag pointed to an arched portal in a far corner of the room. “Svante says that gate leads home. Do you want to take it?”

Chapter Twenty

A few weeks later, after returning all the legendary weapons to their rightful places, the friends were gathered again at the Scrapwood Tavern, once more listening as a bard told a tale to a spellbound audience.

“And then, when they had slain the Mad God Targan,” he was saying, “the heroes rose together to a place made completely and utterly of light. And there, seated on a glowing throne, was the old man who had sent them upon their quest. And beside him stood their old friend Hawk-slayer, beaming and beckoning them forward.”

“Our old *friend*,” whispered Gillan.

“Hush,” said Isobel. “I’m listening.”

“As the friends stepped forward,” continued the bard, “the old man drew a golden sword and spoke. ‘Welcome, brave heroes,’ he said. ‘You have succeeded in destroying the greatest threat that the seven realms have ever known, pressing on despite danger and death, and accomplishing that which the gods themselves were unable

to do.’”

“That part’s true enough,” said Dag.

The bard went on in the voice of the old man. “‘In doing so, you have proved yourself worthy of nothing less than the ultimate reward.’ And with that, he closed his eyes and raised his sword. ‘The death of Lanatir and Valarian and the other old gods tore reality asunder, but you bound it up again, and therefore I accept you as my new children. You shall now be gods yourselves!’”

“Well, now,” said Coira. “That’ll be nice.”

The bard spread his arms and looked to the sky. “And lo, as he proclaimed it, the friends rose into the sky and saw below them Skara Brae and the six cities of the plains, and beyond them, the whole world and each of its cultures, all now their domain.”

He lowered his eyes and looked around at his audience with a solemn smile. “And so it came to pass that seven new stars burned in the night sky. The least of these, the Companion star, was named Hawkslayer. The other six, together known as the Company of Heroes, were each named for one of the new gods. And any night they can be seen is deemed a good night, and adventurers know these gods smile especially upon them.”

He bowed and the audience applauded, Gillan and his friends loudest of all.

“Well, my fellow gods,” said Gillan. “What shall we do now?”

Rhodri shrugged. “Someone’s got to rebuild Skara Brae. Looks like there might be opportunity there.”

“And the new city will need a healer,” said Lady Svante. “And someone who remembers the truth of things that happened, not just the legend.”

“Lot of business at the Scrapwood these days,” said Dag. “Might see if they need a chucker-out.”

“Slim pickings in a refugee camp,” said Coira. “I’ll likely head back to Tangramayne.”

“If there is a new Skara Brae,” said Isobel, “they

will need to hear the word of the Swordfather. Perhaps I could help found a new temple.”

“And what about you, harper?” asked Coira. “What are your plans?”

Gillan paused as a movement to his left caught his eye. He turned, and for the briefest of seconds he thought he saw Maidie smirking at him from across the crowded tent, but it wasn’t her. It was nothing at all.

“Well,” he said finally. “After giving it a lot of thought, I believe . . . I’ll have another drink.”

He raised his mug. “Ho! Barkeep! A round for the table!”

The End