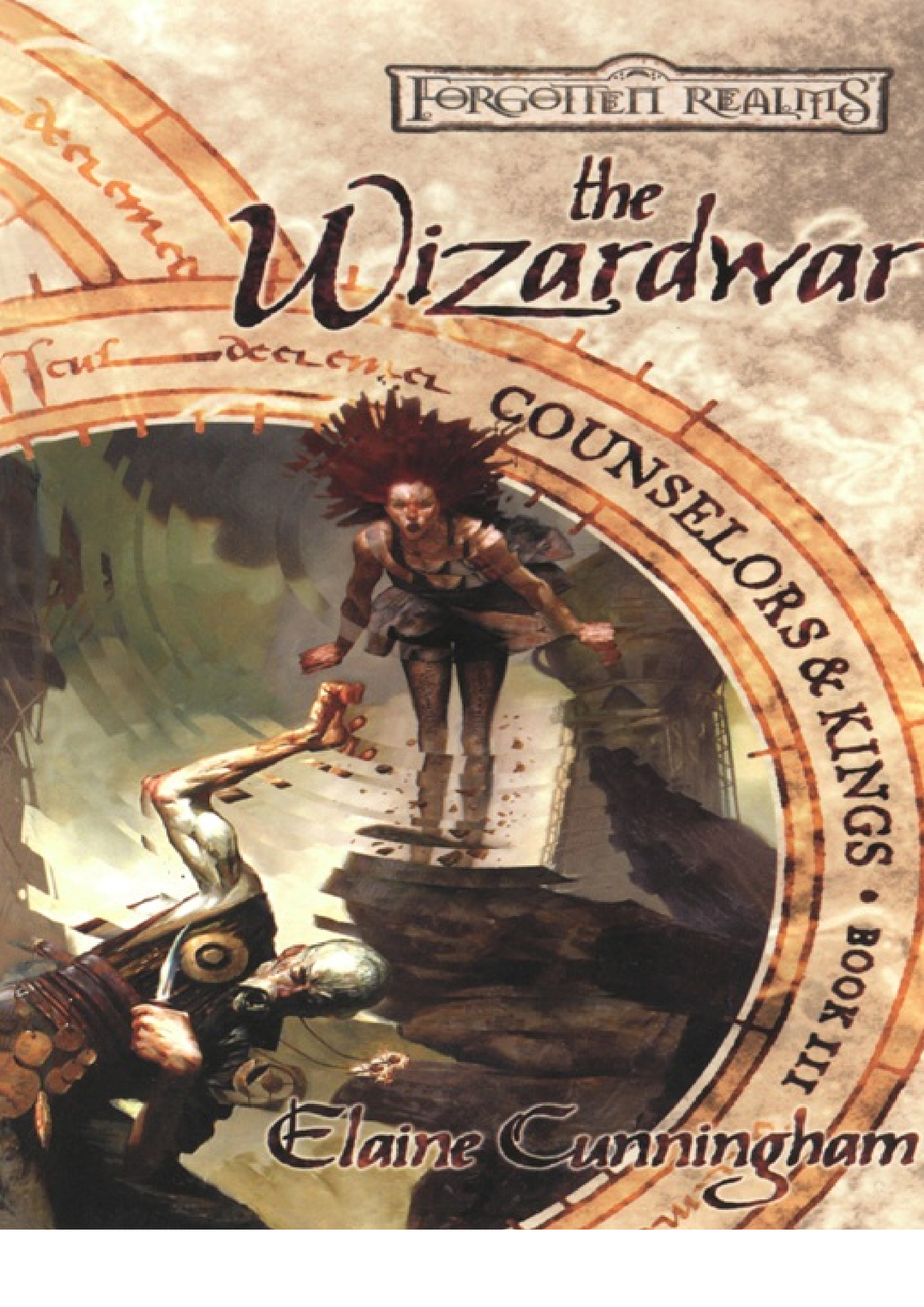


FORGOTTEN REALMS

the Wizardwar

COUNSELORS & KINGS • BOOK III

Elaine Cunningham



“Grow a backbone, Dhamari!” Tzigone snapped. “Thanks to you and Kiva, I can tell you from experience that it’s possible to survive almost anything.”

The wizard responded with a shriek of agony. Tzigone muttered a phrase she’d picked up on the streets and stooped beside him. Quickly she tucked her mother’s talisman back into his hand. His screams immediately subsided to a pathetic whimper.

“I want you to survive,” she told him. Her voice was cold and her eyes utterly devoid of the playful humor that had become both her trademark and her shield. “I’ll find a way out of this place for both of us—and when this is all over, I’m going to kill you myself.”

Songs and Swords

Elfshadow

Elfsong

Silver Shadows

Thornhold

The Dream Spheres

Starlight and Shadows

Daughter of the Drow

Tangled Webs

Counselors and Kings

The Magehound

The Floodgate

The Wizardwar

Evermeet: Island of Elves



The Wizardwar

Counselors and Kings • Book III

Elaine Cunningham



THE WIZARDWAR

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For customer service, contact:

U.S., Canada, Asia Pacific, & Latin America: Wizards of the Coast LLC, P.O. Box 707, Renton, WA 98057-0707, +1-800-324-6496, www.wizards.com/customerservice

U.K., Eire, & South Africa: Wizards of the Coast LLC, c/o Hasbro UK Ltd., P.O. Box 43, Newport, NP19 4YD, UK, Tel: +08457 12 55 99, Email: wizards@hasbro.co.uk

Europe: Wizards of the Coast p/a Hasbro Belgium NV/SA, Industrialaan 1, 1702 Groot-Bijgaarden, Belgium, Tel: +32.70.233.277, Email: wizards@hasbro.be



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Dedication

To Peter Archer, who has the patience angle nailed but is still two miracles short of sainthood.

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halruaa



Entered into

The King's Lorebook,
on this the 22nd day
of the Redtide Moon,
in the 73rd year
of Zalathorm's Reign.

If *cattle were bards, butchers would be villains*. This jordaini proverb reminds us that every tale is shaped by the teller. I am Matteo, King Zalathorm's newly appointed counselor, a jordain sworn to the service of truth, and Halruaa, and the wizardlords who rule.

Once, not long ago, I would have said these three masters speak with one voice. Now a hundred voices call my name, all of them compelling, many of them contradictory. Be that as it may. This is no time for introspection or philosophy—too many tasks lie before me. I will present my tale in straightforward fashion.

Halruaa's history begins in Netheril, an ancient northern realm famous for extravagant magic. Before Netheril's glory become her downfall, a group of wizards left their homeland and traveled far south, settling in a beautiful haven protected by mountains and sea. In this, our Halruaa, we have avoided the excesses of lost Netheril through elaborate laws and protocols, and through a series of safeguards. The jordaini, counselors to the wizard-lords, provide one of these safeguards.

We are an order of warrior sages, strong of mind and body, vessels destined to remain forever empty of Mystra's Art. The Lady of Magic has granted us no arcane talent whatsoever but rather has imbued us with a strong resistance to magic. Jordaini are identified before birth, taken from our families, and raised to know the art of warfare and the lore of our land. Lacking magic, we can advise our wizard patrons but can never coerce them. Nor can any wizard compel us. The secrets entrusted to us cannot be stolen or altered through magical means.

Additional laws and customs ensure the jordaini's faithful service. Ambition cannot tempt us, for we possess neither land nor title. We are forbidden indulgences that cloud the mind and discouraged from forming personal ties that might bias our judgment. Among the most powerful guardians of jordaini purity are the magehounds, wizards who serve as Inquisitors in the church of Azuth, Lord of Wizards.

Magehounds are granted spells and magical items powerful enough to pierce even a jordain's resistance. If a magehound declares a jordain unfit to serve, that jordain's service is over. If a magehound claims that a jordain is tainted by magic, this pronouncement is a sentence of death. Harsh indeed, but the trust between wizard and counselor demands absolute certainty.

Last spring a magehound, an elf woman known as Kiva, visited the Jordaini College. She passed judgment on Andris, the most promising student in recent memory. His "death" was carried out on the spot Kiva, though, proved false. She spirited Andris away and used her position to secretly gather an army of magic-resistant warriors. She led them into the Swamp of Akhlaur, so named for the infamous necromancer who disappeared there two centuries past. Here lurked the laraken, a monster that fed upon magic. In my opinion, Kiva's intention was not to destroy the laraken but to unleash it upon the land. Her purpose, insofar as I can ascertain, was to wreak havoc upon Halruaa's wizards.

Kiva might have succeeded but for a young woman named Tzigone, a street waif untrained in magical arts. Tzigone possessed a powerful raw talent for evocation. Her voice was the lure intended to draw the laraken away from its magical sustenance: a bubbling spring originating in a leak from the Elemental Plane of Water. Where Tzigone is concerned, however, things seldom go according to expectations!

Tzigone called the laraken and held it in her sway while we fighters attacked. We might have destroyed the monster, but it escaped through the gate leading into the Plane of Water just before Kiva moved this gate to some

unknown place. This effort was greater than Kiva's strength, and by battle's end she clung to life by the thinnest of threads. I myself delivered her to the fastness of Azuth's temple, hoping the priests might revive her and learn the gate's secret location.

Kiva revived indeed. She escaped and gathered allies for a renewed attack upon Halruaa. She and the elves of the Mhair Jungle raided the Lady's Mirror, an Azuthan shrine and a treasury of rare spellbooks and artifacts. Other magical treasures were collected for her by a band of Crinti raiders—the “shadow amazons” of Dambrath, female warriors descended from human barbarians and drow elves.

Although it pains me to write this, Kiva's allies also included Andris, who learned of his distant elven heritage shortly after the battle of Akhlaur's Swamp. We jordaini know no family, and Andris was overwhelmed by the prospect of kinship. This, perhaps, led him to see honor in Kiva's actions where nothing of the sort existed.

Kiva must have had contact with wizards in neighboring lands, for her plans moved in concert with theirs. Though I hesitate to suggest Halruaan wizards were also in collusion with her, the actions of Dhamari Exchelsor, a wizard who befriended Tzigone, undoubtedly added to the chaos. (Let it be noted that Azuth's Inquisitors have examined Dhamari and have found him not guilty of conspiracy with Kiva.)

While these diverse events were unfolding, I searched for Kiva, fearing that the elf woman might open the gate and unleash the laraken. Andris, who awaits trial for treason, insists that Kiva's purpose was to destroy the ancient necromancer Akhlaur. She followed him into the Plane of Water expecting to prevail but not to return.

So Andris swears. I wish I could believe him. To Andris, Kiva was a hero who sacrificed her life to destroy every vestige of Akhlaur's dark reign. I have seen Kiva at work, and I do not believe anything good can be born of such hatred, such evil.

Whatever the truth of the matter, the former magehound was defeated. Once again, Tzigone thwarted Kiva's designs. Two doors were closed by the magic Tzigone triggered: the gate to the Plane of Water and a veil between our world and the Unseelie Court. As I write, Tzigone is trapped in that dark and unknowable realm. May Lady Mystra grant Tzigone grace and strength to survive until a way can be found to free her!

Despite our victories and our sacrifices, the turmoil Kiva set in motion was not easily quelled. The Crinti attacked in force from the north, and the fighters who engaged them were further harried by the Unseelie folk. An army of clockwork warriors was unleashed upon the royal city of Halarahh.

Any one of these foes might have easily been put down, but our strength was diminished by Kiva's earlier ploys. Divisions of militia were diverted to the western borders to guard against further incursions of hostile elves. As word of the laraken's defeat spread, many doughty wizards and adventurers disappeared into Akhlaur's swamp to search for treasure the necromancer reputedly left behind.

Even the season conspired to aid Kiva, for in the early summer, before the coming of the monsoons, piracy reaches its height Halruaa's ships set sail to protect seagoing commerce and coastal towns, taking many of our best fighters. Halruaa's might is considerable, but it was thinly spread and sorely tested.

Now came the truly stunning blow. An invasion force from Mulhorand passed over the eastern mountains into Halruaa itself—*undetected by Halruaan magic*.

For the first time in nearly a century, King Zalathorm, the greatest diviner in the land, failed to foresee a coming threat. I cannot express how profound and devastating a blow this dealt to the Halruaan mind. Perhaps this was what Kiva had intended all along.

If this notion strains credulity, consider this: One of Kiva's allies, the creator of the devastating clockwork army, was Queen Beatrix, Zalathorm's deeply beloved wife.

I have nothing but admiration for my king, but in truth I must name Beatrix as Zalathorm's greatest weakness. Whatever she once might have been, she is no longer Halruaa's queen. Scarred within and without by terrible suffering, she has been steadily withdrawing from the world, seeking companionship only from the clockwork creatures whose creation she oversees.

Early last moon cycle, one of Beatrix's warrior constructs went amok. I fought and destroyed it but not before one worker was killed and several more were injured. In the time it took me to report this to the king, the clockwork monsters magically disappeared. The family of the slain worker was offered resurrection, the wounded given healing and redress. The matter might have been dropped, had not Tzigone intervened once again.

Tzigone can mimic voices with uncanny clarity and hold an audience in her hand with skill a bard might envy. Lately she left behind her life as a street performer to play the role of apprentice wizard, but her unsettled life has honed other, more questionable skills. Her fingers are light and nimble. She conjures entertaining half-truths as easily as a behir spits lightning. She walks like a shadow, climbs like a lizard, and smirks at the most formidable locks. Even the palace wards and safeguards could not deny her.

Tzigone slipped into Beatrix's workroom and with a magic mouth statue she recorded a most disturbing interview between the queen and Kiva. The elf woman came to Beatrix, commended her for her efforts, and took the metal monsters in preparation for the coming battle.

When Tzigone brought the statue to me, duty compelled me to inform Zalathorm of his wife's treachery. The queen awaits trial. This tragedy destroyed what might otherwise have been regarded as one of Halruaa's greatest triumphs.

Destroyed? Yes, I fear so. The invaders were repelled, and the floodgate was closed both in fact and metaphor. But the queen stands accused of treason. Although no one dares speak the words, everyone knows King Zalathorm is likewise on trial.

If the king knew of his queen's perfidy, he is as guilty as she. How could the most powerful diviner in all of Halruaa not see what was happening in his very palace? On the other hand, what if he truly could not? Is his power gone? Is this why he knew nothing of the invasion until Mulhorandi forces stood upon Halruaan soil?

All of Halruaa whispers these questions. If the cycle of history turns true, soon powerful and ambitious wizards will do more than whisper. No one has challenged Zalathorm's crown for nearly three generations, and the land has been at peace. In past times, though, Halruaa has known terrible wars of ambition, wars in which wizard fought wizard with spells of astonishing art and devastating power.

This brings my tale full circle and to another safeguard we jordanians provide. We are the keepers of the lore, and we spend the first twenty years of our lives committing Halruaan history to memory. Stories of wizard wars are the most fearsome we know. I pray daily to Lady Mystra that we Halruaans have learned from these oft-told tales and grown wise enough to avoid war.

Yet I cannot ignore this disturbing truth: if these prayers are granted, then we will be the first truly wise men in history.

In a dark moment of Halruaa's past, some two hundred years ago, a black tower stood near the edge of an ancient swamp.

Cages lined the walls of the great hall, a vast circular chamber encompassing the entire ground floor of the tower, which in turn was far bigger than its black marble exterior suggested. In these cages a bewildering variety of prisoners paced in frustration or slumped despairingly against the bars. Their mingled cries filled the tower, reverberating like echoes rising from the Abysmal pits. Red-robed apprentices calmly went about their business, either oblivious or uncaring.

In one cage huddled a small, bedraggled female, clad in a brief shift that did little to hide her scars left by repeated magical experiments. She stared fixedly past the dwarf-forged bars, her eyes glazed with the knowledge of certain death.

Once known as Akivaria, a proud elf maid of the Crimson Tree clan, now she was simply Kiva, the necromancer's favorite captive and toy. Her heart had died the day the necromancer slaughtered her clan, but an unexpectedly deep reserve of stubbornness and cunning sustained her life. She had even survived the laraken's birth, a feat that surprised both her and her human tormenter. But today, at long last, it would end.

Kiva ventured a glance at the large, oval glass set into the bars of her cage, a window into a world of water and magic. Behind it raged a fearsome monster, a demon lured to the Plane of Water from the primordial depths of the Abyss. Twice the height of a man and as heavily muscled as a dwarf, it was purest evil encased in powerful flesh. Kiva knew the demon well—the wizard had captured and tormented it before—and memories of past encounters with the fiend filled her with terror and loathing.

The demon's massive fists pounded soundlessly on the portal. Like a water-bound Medusa, it was crowned with eels, which writhed furiously about a hideous, asymmetrical face. The tiny fangs gnashed and snapped in counterpoint to the demon's silent screams. The necromancer commonly kept the demon imprisoned in magical limbo until the point of frenzy. Kiva never knew when the demon might erupt into her cage. This waiting was one of the wizard's crueller torments.

Kiva reminded herself of the experiment planned for that very night, one she could never survive, but even the promise of death brought little comfort. The joys of an elven afterlife were as far beyond her reach as her dreams of putting a knife in the necromancer's heart!

She craned her head, looking for the necromancer's favorite toy—a crimson gem that imprisoned the captured spirits of her clan. To Akhlaur, an elf's lifeforce was a source of energy, a thing no more highly regarded than the sticks of deadwood a kitchen wench might use to stoke a cook fire. For one of Akhlaur's elves, death offered nothing more than a new kind of enslavement.

The gem was not in its usual place. That meant that Akhlaur and his laraken were out hunting again.

A long, strident creak ripped through the cacophony. Kiva sat up, suddenly alert, and her resilient spirit grew bright with hope. The stone sentinels had awakened at last!

The necromancer's tower was guarded by undead armies, warded about with terrible traps

and protected from wizardly incursion by the magic-draining hunger of the laraken. Never before had anyone fought through these defenses and triggered the twin gargoyles protecting the tower door.

Kiva struggled to her feet and pushed aside the mat of hair that once had been a lustrous jade. She clung to the bars and strained her ears for the sounds of battle. A distant clamor grew steadily louder until it settled around the stone warehouses imprisoning most of the necromancer's captives. The elf maid's heart leaped—many of her people languished in those prisons!

She heard the warehouses' stout oaken doors explode like lightning-struck trees. A chorus of elven song surged, then faded as freed prisoners fled into the surrounding forest. Joyous tears spilled from Kiva's eyes, though she herself did not hold much hope of rescue.

The tower's doors flew open and crashed into the wall. Two enormous gargoyles, similar in appearance to the water demon, stalked into the room. They took up ambush positions on either side of the open door.

After a moment of stunned disbelief, the apprentices quickly armed themselves with wand or fireball spells. One young man conjured a crimson lightning bolt and held it aloft like a ready javelin. Even the tower itself prepared for invasion. Bright lines of fire raced through the cracks between the marble ties, gathering power that would erupt in geysers of random killing flame. Stone carvings stirred to life. Winged serpents peeled away from the ceiling bas-relief and spiraled heavily downward. Black marble skeletons wrenched free of their grimly sculpted tangles that passed for art.

A hush fell over the tower as the captives awaited the coming battle with a mixture of dread and hope.

Up, and quickly!

The silent command rang in Kiva's mind like an elven battle cry. Perplexed expressions on the faces of the other captives suggested the message had come to all. There was powerful magic in the silent voice, magic untouched by the necromancer's malevolent amusement. That was enough for Kiva.

Hope lent her strength. She leaped and seized a crossbar, swung her feet up and hooked them over the bar, then pulled herself up and reached for the next handhold. Around the room other captives scrambled upward as best they could.

An angry gray cloud erupted in the midst of the tower with a roar like a captive dragon. It exploded into a torrent of rain. The force of the downpour threatened to tear Kiva from her perch, but she climbed doggedly, and a small, unfamiliar curve lifted the corners of her mouth as she perceived the attacker's strategy.

Steam rose from the floor with a searing hiss as the arcane waters met the necromancer's lurking flames. The apprentices stumbled back, screaming, throwing aside their magic weapons as they tried to shield their faces from the rising, scalding mist.

Instantly the cloud changed, compressing into an enormous, ice-blue blanket. It swept over Kiva like a ghostly embrace, then drove down into the scalding mist. Steam changed into delicate webs of ice crystals, which in turn crunched down into a thick, solid sheet of ice.

Stone and marble guardians froze, their feet encased in ice, the magic that animated them gone. One winged snake had not yet landed. Its wings locked in place as the ice-cloud passed over it, and it plunged down, exploding on impact and sending shards of black marble

skittering across the frozen floor.

Only the twin gargoyles shrugged off the magic-killing rain. They thrashed about frantically, but they could not break themselves free of the icy trap. Someone else, apparently, could.

Neat cracks appeared in the ice around them, and the stone monsters rose into the air on small frozen squares like monstrous sultans on tiny flying carpets. Still struggling, they soared through the open door and landed with thunderous finality back in their accustomed places.

Kiva dropped back to the floor of her cage, ignoring the burning chill beneath her bare feet. She darted a quick look around for more defenses.

Several of the apprentice wizards lay dead, their bodies covered with a thick shroud of ice. Others were captured in ankle-deep ice, some shrieking in agony, others already falling in shock and silence. One young wizard had had the presence of mind to climb above the rising steam. He sat upon the shoulders of a marble skeleton, staring with stupid amazement at the limp crimson rope in his hand—all that remained of his splendid lightning bolt. A wild-eyed female apprentice stood halfway up the spiral stairs, frantically peeled away the budding twigs that had appeared on her wand, as if denuding the branches could restore the magic lost to the rain. She glanced up, briefly, as the invaders entered, then returned her attention to her ruined wand.

Several men in warrior's garb stalked into the room, their eyes scanning for further resistance. When they perceived none, they set about freeing the captives. A tall, strong-built man came to Kiva's cage, a man with a scimitar nose and a single long braid of dark chestnut hair. He took a small wand from his belt and lowered it to the skull-shaped lock securing her door.

"Don't!" croaked Kiva in a voice left raw by too many screams, too little song. She reached through the bars and seized the wizard's wrist. With her free hand she pointed toward the "mirror" and the suddenly calm and watchful demon.

The monster grinned in anticipation. Bloody saliva hung from its fangs in long strings.

"You cannot," Kiva repeated. "Disturb the lock, and you unleash the demon."

The wizard glanced at the drooling fiend. "Don't fear, child. We will not let it harm you."

"Lord Akhlaur will soon return! You cannot fight him and the demon both," she argued.

"Neither can Akhlaur fight two such battles. Has the demon any loyalty to him?"

Loyalty to Akhlaur? she echoed, silently and incredulously. "The demon is a prisoner."

"Then you need not fear its release. It will not be you or me whom the creature seeks. You must be ready to flee as soon as the door opens."

Suddenly the wizard's eyes clouded, as if he were listening to distant voices. After a moment his gaze sharpened, hardened. He spun toward his comrades. "Akhlaur comes."

They formed ranks, their wands held like ready swords or their hands filled with bright globes that coursed with the snap and shudder of contained power.

A tall, black-haired man strode into the tower. Rich black and crimson robes swirled around him, and he gazed about with the faint interest a courtier might display upon entering a ballroom. Behind him came Noor, his favorite apprentice, a doe-eyed young woman of so much beauty and ironclad ambition.

Cradled in Noor's hands was a ruby-colored crystal nearly as large as a man's head, sparkling with thousands of facets and shaped like a many-pointed star. It glowed, quiet

literally, with life. Kiva's gaze clung to the crimson gem with a mixture of longing and despair.

"Well met, Zalathorm," Akhlaur said with a hint of amusement.

The name startled Kiva. Even here, a prisoner in an isolated estate, she knew that name. She had heard stories of the wizard who was slowly bringing peace and order out of the killing chaos spawned by Akhlaur's rise to power.

A second shock jolted through her when one of the wizards broke from the group and strode forward. The great Zalathorm was a man of middle years and middling height. His hair and beard were a soft brown, a pallid color by Halruaan standards. Nothing in his face or garb suggested power. His hands were empty of weapons or magic. He stood a full head shorter than Akhlaur, and his somber, plain-featured face provided sharp contrast to the necromancer's aristocratic features. An image flooded Kiva's mind of a jousting match between a farmer's dun pony and a raven-black pegasus.

"I wondered when you'd get around to visiting," Akhlaur said. His gaze moved from Zalathorm and slid dismissively over the battle-ready wizards. His smirk sharpened into a contemptuous sneer. "*This* was the best you could do? Transformation into mindless undead could only improve this lot!"

A white-haired wizard spat out a curse and lifted his wand to avenge this insult. As he leveled it at Akhlaur, Kiva noted the expression of pure panic flooding Noor's face. The apprentice uttered a strangled little cry and flung out a hand as if to stave off the magical assault.

Light burst from the old wizard's wand. It veered sharply away from Akhlaur and streaked toward Noor like lightning to a lodestone. As magical energy flowed into the crimson gem, Noor's black hair rose and writhed about her contorted face. The old wizard's wand quickly spent itself, blackened, and withered to a thin line of falling ashes.

The magic came on, flowing until the wizard's outstretched hand was little more than skin wrapped bone. Where there was life, there was magic, and Akhlaur's crimson star drained swiftly and deeply of both. The brave man died quickly, and his desiccated shell fell to the ice-covered floor with a faint, brittle clatter.

Stunned silence fell over the wizards. Only Zalathorm maintained presence of mind. He beckoned to the crimson star. The gem lifted out of Noor's slack hands and floated over to him. To Kiva's astonishment, Akhlaur did not intervene.

"You cannot harm me with that," the necromancer said, still with a hint of amusement in his voice.

"Nor you me," Zalathorm returned grimly. "With this gem, we entrusted our lives to each other's keeping."

The necromancer lifted raven-wing brows in mock surprise. "Why, Zalathorm! Take care or I shall suspect you of harboring doubts about our friendship!"

"Doubts? I don't know which is the greater perversion: the use you have made of this gem or the monster you made of the man I once called friend."

Akhlaur sent a droll glance toward his apprentice. Noor stood over the slain wizard, both hands clasped over her mouth and tears streaming down her lovely face. The necromancer took no notice of her distress.

"Tiresome, isn't he?" he said, tipping his head in Zalathorm's direction. "What can one

expect of a man whose family motto is Too stupid to die?’ ”

Zalathorm lifted the gem as if in challenge, then swiftly traced a spell with his free hand. Every wizard in the room mirrored his deft gestures.

The room exploded into white light and shrieking power. Kiva dropped and hugged the floor of her cage as the tower wrenched free of its moorings and soared above the forest canopy.

Again she smiled, for the power of this casting was as great as any magic she'd endured in Akhlaur's hands. Moving an entire tower, a wizard's tower—*Akhlaur's* tower!—was an astonishing feat! Immediately she sensed Zalathorm's intent, and again she dared to hope.

When the tower shuddered to a stop, Kiva closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, as if she could draw the forest into herself. Senses she could never describe to a human told her where the tower now rested. Deep in the swamp was a rift carved into the land by a long-ago cataclysm known to the elves as the Sundering. The rift was a hidden place, a suitable tomb for Akhlaur's tower—and a place far from the laraken and its magic-draining power.

Kiva hauled herself to her knees and looked about for the necromancer. He stood crouched in guard position, brandishing a skull-headed scepter and an ebony wand like a pair of swords. Her throat clenched in dread, for she knew the spells stored in these weapons and knew Akhlaur could hold off magical attacks for a very long time.

Yet he did not strike.

Her gaze slid to the necromancer's face. A puzzled moment passed before she understood his wild eyes, his twisted expression.

Akhlaur was afraid.

Of course! The magical rain had stripped away even these powerful weapons! Akhlaur's confidence had rested upon his laraken and its ability to strip spells from other wizards and transfer them to its master. Now the tower had been removed well beyond the laraken's hunting ground, and no new magic flowed to the waiting scepter and wand.

Akhlaur's frantic gaze sought out his apprentice. The laraken!" he howled to Noor, brandishing his scepter at the circling wizards in the manner of one who attempts to hold off wolves with a stick. "Summon the laraken!"

Kiva laughed. The sound was ragged, yet it rang with both hatred and triumph. Noor would not do as Akhlaur asked. The slain wizard had been her father—Kiva knew this in her blood and bones, just as she knew the spirit of the old wizard was now imprisoned in the crimson star, along with Kiva's kin. The anguish and guilt on Noor's face when the white-haired wizard died was as familiar to Kiva as the sound of her own heartbeat.

However, obedience to Akhlaur was a powerful habit. The girl's hands began to trace a summoning spell before she had time to consider her own will. She hesitated, and half-formed magic crackled in a shining nimbus around her as her uncertain gaze swept the room.

Several of the wizards had leveled their wands at her, ready to slay her if need be. All of them looked to Zalathorm, who held up a restraining hand and studied Noor with sympathetic and measuring eyes.

"Your father," he said softly, "was a hard man but a good one. He believed magic carries a stern price. He came here to pay his daughter's debts."

Noor's eyes clung to the crimson star in Zalathorm's hands. "You will free them?"

"Yes," the wizard said simply. In a softer voice, he added, "I will grant them rest and

respect”

Joy rose in Kiva like springtime. For a shining moment, she believed Zalathorm could actually free her, would free them all!

With a single, sharp gesture, Noor finished the summoning spell. Kiva had witnessed the laraken’s summoning many times, and she saw at once that the spell cast was not the spell Noor had begun.

Power crackled through the tower, and the roar of angry seas filled the air. Rising above the surge was a keening, vengeful shriek. A shriek Kiva knew well.

She frantically backed away from the portal, flattening herself against the bars as she awaited the demon’s release.

Stand clear!

Again the voice—the voice of the wizard who’d started to free her—sounded in her head. Kiva edged away from the bars. Bright energy jolted through them, and the lock’s skull-like jaw went slack as it melted. Kiva tore at the door, not caring that the heated metal burned her fingers.

She stumbled away from the cage. Her retreat was unheeded, for the wizards’ attention was fixed upon the creature bursting free of the shimmering oval and the open cage.

The water demon shielded its glowing red eyes with a dagger-taloned hand as its gaze swept the room. Red orbs focused upon the necromancer. Hatred burned in them like hellfire.

“Akhaur,” the demon said in a grating, watery voice, pronouncing the word like a foreshadowing curse. It sprung, impossibly quick, its massive hands arched into rending talons.

The wizard dropped his useless weapons and seized the creature’s wrists. He frantically chanted spells to summon preternatural strength and killing magic. Zalathorm’s wizards fell back as evil fought evil like two dark fires, each determined to consume the other.

Arcane power crackled like black lightning around the struggling pair. Akhaur’s luxuriant black hair singed away and drifted off in a cloud of ash. His handsome face blistered and contorted with pain—pain that fed his death-magic spells.

Suddenly the eels upon the demon’s head shrieked and flailed in agony. One by one, they burned and withered, then fell limp to the creature’s massive shoulders like lank strands of hair. Fetid steam rose from the demon’s body, and green-black scales lifted from its flesh like worn shingles. Too furious to meet death alone, the demon forced Akhaur inexorably back toward the portal.

The necromancer’s hate-filled eyes sought Noor’s face. He captured her gaze, then jerked one of the demon’s hands, pantomiming a slashing motion. The girl’s head snapped back, and four burning lines opened her throat.

Then Akhaur was gone. In the mirror, the entwined figures of necromancer and demon rapidly diminished as they fell away from the glowing portal. Kiva felt a surge of triumph, then a sudden, gut-wrenching drop.

To her astonishment, she felt herself sucked into the Plane of Water with the necromancer.

Down she fell, sinking through a sea of magic, falling away from her forest, her clan and kin. Away from her past, her heritage. From *herself*. Falling too far to ever, ever return.

In some part of her mind, Kiva knew she was trapped in a dream. Two centuries had come and gone since Akhaur’s defeat. She awakened abruptly but not with the sudden jolt that usually followed an interrupted dream.

To her horror, she was falling still, tumbling helplessly through thin mountain air. The vision of Akhlaur's tower had been only a dream, but this nightmare was very, very real!

The elf flailed and tumbled, clawing at the empty darkness. Wind whistled past her and carried her shrieks away into the uncaring night. Stars whirled and spun overhead, mocking her with the long-lost memories of starlit dances in elven glades. Kiva felt no sorrow over her forgotten innocence—its loss was too old to mourn. As she fell toward certain death, her only regret was the unfinished revenge that had sustained her for two centuries.

A sudden blur of light and color flashed past her, circled, and dipped out of sight. Kiva struck something soft and yielding and felt herself received and cradled as if in strong, silken arms.

For several moments she lay facedown, too dazed to move, too stunned to make sense of either her fall or her rescue. After a while she raised her head and peered into the elaborate, swirling pattern of a carpet. The wind still whistled past her, but its passage no longer felt cold or mocking.

A flying carpet, then. Kiva felt about for the edges of the magical conveyance and rolled toward the safety of the middle. She cautiously sat up and found herself face to face with Akhlaur himself.

Two centuries of exile in the Plane of Water had taken its toll on Akhlaur. Lustrous black hair had given way to a pate covered with fine, faintly green scales. His long fingers were webbed, and rows of gills shaped like jagged lightning slashed the sides of his neck, but his expression of faint, derisive amusement was maddeningly familiar. For a moment Kiva heartily wished she'd left him in his watery prison.

"You are a restless sleeper, little Kiva," Akhlaur observed in an arch tone.

"Elves do not sleep," she reminded him, though she wondered why she bothered. Akhlaur was singularly uninterested in elven nature except as it pertained to his experiments.

"I trust you are unharmed by your little adventure?" he asked, his manner a blatant parody of a master's concern for his faithful servant.

Kiva managed a faint smile, though she suspected Akhlaur had nudged her off the carpet to the first place just to enjoy her fall and her terror!

"It was ... exhilarating," she said, imbuing her words with the dark irony Akhlaur so enjoyed. "All the same, I am grateful for rescue."

The necromancer inclined his head graciously, accepting her thanks as genuine. He had no reason to think Kiva sincere. There was a death-bond between them, forged two centuries past so she could survive the laraken's birth. Kiva could not harm Akhlaur without slaying herself, and she counted on this to convince the wizard of her sincerity.

"Sleep," he instructed her. "We have much to do upon the morrow."

Kiva obediently curled up on the carpet and pretended to drift back into reverie, but her dreams of the past dimmed before the great battle ahead.

During this battle, Akhlaur, the wizard who had come so close to conquering all of Halruaa, would fight not as her master but as her deadly and unwitting tool.

A small, swarthy young man glided like a brown shadow through a labyrinth of corridors far below King Zalathorm's palace. Dawn was hours away, and this deep place was lit only by the small blue globe in the young wizard's hand.

Moving with the assurance born of experience, he barely glanced at the ancient skeletons moldering in side corridors, silent testament both to the spirit of Halruaan adventurers and the wards guarding the land's deeply buried treasures.

He made his way to the center of the maze and stepped into a circle ringed with deeply etched runes. As he chanted in the ancient, secret language of Halruaan magic, the stone beneath his feet melted away, swirling downward like dense gray mist and reforming as a narrow, circling stairway.

Down he went, moving deeper and deeper into the heart of the land. With each step he intoned the specific arcane word required. He respectfully avoided treading upon the blackened spots marking the final resting places of wizards whose memories had faltered.

At the foot of the stairs was a great hall, lined on each side by a score of living guardians. Here gathered many of Halruaa's great necromancers, keeping watch over secrets long whispered by lips long ago faded to ash and memory. They nodded to the young man as he passed, giving the deference due to the king's messenger. None of them suspected the true identity of the black-eyed, brown-skinned youth.

The disguised wizard stopped before an enormous door and bowed to the ancient, cadaverous archmage who guarded it. He handed the old man a scroll.

"A writ from the king," he said in the lilting accents common to the coastal islands.

The archmage glanced at the missive, then lifted his rheumy gaze to the messenger. "By the king's command, we must answer your questions with the same candor we would offer him. I swear by my wizard-word oath it will be so."

The youth inclined his head in respectful thanks. "I would know who raised and commanded the undead army during the battle against the Mulhorandi invaders."

The guardians exchanged uncertain glances. "The king himself is acclaimed for that victory," the archmage ventured.

The messenger snorted. "When did the king become a master of necromancy? Tell me who among your ranks could have done such a thing."

The old man's lips thinned as if to hold back the answer he was sworn to give. "It is beyond my art," he admitted at last. "No one in this room could cast such a spell. We can all raise and command undead, certainly, but not in such numbers! If the king did not cast this spell, then his equal did."

"Who is equal to the king?" asked the disguised wizard, imbuing his voice with a mixture of indignation and concern, such as a faithful young messenger might express.

"I assume you speak rhetorically, as did I," the archmage hastened to add. "For who could be the king's equal?"

Who indeed? The wizard swallowed the wry smile that tugged at his lips. The old archmage's parry was as deft as any swordmaster's, but in truth many wizards were beginning to wonder if perhaps they might prove to be the king's equal. The guardians

question might have been rhetorical, but it would not long remain in the bloodless realm of rhetoric.

The wizard bowed his thanks and gestured toward the door. The archmage moved aside clearly eager to end this disturbing interview.

Massive, ironbound doors swung inward on silent hinges, untouched by mortal hands. Torches mounted on the walls flared into life, revealing a circular room with several doors but no floor other than a gaping pit. Faint but fearsome howls wafted up from untold depths carrying a faint charnel scent and the promise of oblivion.

The wizard stepped into the empty air, counted off several paces to the left, and strode confidently across the void. He passed through three other magically trapped rooms before he came to the place he sought.

This final chamber was empty but for the ruby-hued crystal floating in the room's center. Shaped like a many-pointed star, it burned with its own inner light and filled the room with crimson glow.

The wizard let his disguise melt away, revealing the mild, middle-aged face of the man who had claimed the crimson star more than two hundred years ago. He dropped to one knee and began the difficult process each visit demanded: emptying his mind of thought, his heart of sorrow and guilt. When at last the silence within matched the profound stillness of the chamber, he rose, lifted his eyes to the gem, and spoke.

"The heart of Halruaa seeks counsel," King Zalathorm said softly.

In lean words Zalathorm described the battle spells that just two days before had siphoned the fluids from hundreds of living men to create an enormous water elemental, then raised the desiccated men into an undead army.

"What wizard, living or dead, might have cast such a spell?" he concluded.

He tuned his mind's ear for the silent response, the familiar, elfsong voices of sages long dead. They spoke in a single-note chorus of wordless, overwhelming terror. Waves of emotion swept over him like an icy storm, stealing his breath. Stopping his heart.

Crushing pain enveloped Zalathorm's chest, sending him staggering back. He fell heavily against the chamber's only door, unable to move or breathe. For long moments he believed he would die in this room.

Finally healing magic, more ancient even than the sages' remembered fear, pulsed from the crimson star.

The king's heart leaped painfully, then took up its normal rhythm. Slowly his agony receded. Once again, the crimson star had preserved its creator.

Once again, it had given Zalathorm an answer he could find nowhere else. The gem was undying history, centuries of experience preserved in eternal immediacy. In all of Halruaa's long history, Zalathorm knew of only one wizard who could inspire such terror in the time-frozen sages' hearts. Though no word had been given, Zalathorm had his answer all the same.

Somehow, Akhlaur had returned.

The streets below King Zalathorm's palace teemed with life, even though the sun barely crested the city's eastern wall. Matteo stood at the king's side, listening as Zalathorm received a seemingly endless line of supplicants.

It was Matteo's first day as King's Counselor, and already he was fighting off the urge to fidget like a schoolchild. The king had charged him with the defense of Queen Beatrix. Why not let him get on with it?

Matteo could not understand the king's insistence on honoring his custom of granting daily audience. In these extraordinary times, mundane routine seemed as out of place as a witley sheep among unicorns!

Reminders of the recent battles were everywhere. Laborers still cleared away the debris and rubble cluttering the king's city. The pyres in the burial gardens outside the city walls burned steadily. Professional mourners sang themselves into rasping silence, then yielded their places to others. Their keening songs soared up into the smoky clouds, commending the spirits of fallen Halruaans to the gods and their bodies to the sky.

The Halruaans were a proud and defiant people who mingled mourning rituals with extravagant victory celebrations. Students at the mage schools were sent home until after the new moon. Merchants and artisans closed their shops before highsun and did not reopen after the sunsleep hours were past. Street performers sang ballads and acted out tableaux. Fireworks dazzled the night skies. Somber, hardworking Halruaans, wizards and common folk alike, devoted themselves to defiant celebration, as if to thumb their noses at ubiquitous Death.

Outside the palace, the familiar song of the street began a swift crescendo and took on a faintly dissonant note. Zalathorm nodded to Matteo. Glad for the diversion, the young jordan went to the window to see what was going on.

As always, a throng waited outside, hoping for audience with the king. The scene had a festive air. Street vendors came to display their wares, and wandering performers kept the crowd entertained. Matteo quickly averted his eyes from a young juggler, for the lad's deft hands and carefree grin reminded him too painfully of his friend Tzigone.

His gaze slid over the dancing bear that plodded and whirled like a corpulent matron, and settled briefly upon the drovers hawking exotic beasts. Beaming parents handed their children up for rides upon camels from the Calimshan deserts or an enormous three-horned lizard from the jungles of Chult or an aged and rather threadbare unicorn. There was even a young elephant, an animal seldom seen in Halruaa. Two small, shrieking children clung to the gauzy red and yellow litter on the animal's broad, gray back.

Matteo's eyes darted back to the elephant. Its long trunk lashed back and forth, as if swatting away an attacking swarm. He looked closer and realized this was precisely what the animal was doing. Several people had taken to pelting the unfortunate creature with fruit and morning cakes.

He turned back to Zalathorm. "One of the drovers has brought an elephant. The crowd is attacking it, perhaps because the animal is native to Mulhorand and a reminder of the invaders."

A scowl darkened the king's face. He rose from his throne and stalked toward the window gesturing for Matteo to follow. Courtiers parted as the two passed, watching with furrowed brows as the king broke his own unbending custom.

Zalathorm led the way to a hidden stairwell, where narrow, winding steps spiraled down to the street. These he took at an astonishingly brisk pace.

"With respect, sire, may I ask your intentions?" Matteo called as he jogged after the king.

Zalathorm stopped and shot a glance back at his counselor. "The people outside the palace are waiting for me to settle disputes. This particular one isn't going to improve with age."

Matteo would have argued the wisdom of marching into the middle of a street disturbance but he assumed the king had his reasons. He followed quickly, loosening the peace-ties on his daggers as he went.

By the time they reached the street, the situation had devolved into chaos. The elephant whirled this way and that, lunging at its circle of tormenters with short and astonishingly swift charges. Two wizards had cast spells of levitation to lift the terrified children out of the boxlike litter. They were floating, kicking and wailing, toward the frantically outstretched arms of their parents.

Several more wizards advanced on the animal. Small balls of crackling, bluish energy flew from their outstretched hands and exploded against the elephant's hide with sharp, sizzling pops.

Matteo immediately sensed their strategy: Back the elephant into a walled garden, where it could be easily contained. The animal, though, was too panicked to cooperate. Emitting shrieking trumpeting cries, it began to rear and pitch like a bee-stung stallion.

"Idiots," muttered Zalathorm.

Since their miniature lightning shockballs were not putting the elephant into retreat, the wizards began to hurl larger missiles. A small barrage of many-colored lights hurtled toward the terrified animal.

The king lifted both hands and slammed his right fist against his left palm. Immediately the missiles struck an invisible wall and were deflected off at a sharply climbing angle, ascending the sky like festival fireworks.

One of these missiles, a bolt of energy shaped like a slim crimson javelin, glanced off the magical barrier and came around in a tight turn, like a fish changing directions in a swiftly moving stream. It hurtled directly, unerringly, toward the spellcaster who had disrupted its course.

Matteo's response was part training, part instinct. He leapt in front of the king, his hands lunging for the shaft of the magical javelin. The weapon scorched through his clenched fist—only his deeply inbred resistance to magic kept the thing from burning down to bone.

Even as his fingers closed on the shaft, he twisted his wrist slightly, not trying to stop the weapon so much as to shift it off course. The magic weapon turned broadside but kept its course. Matteo's right arm jerked free of its shoulder joint in a searing, white-hot flash of pain. He hurtled backward, still holding the crimson bolt, and slammed into a courtyard wall.

Matteo tossed aside the dissipating weapon and reached for his left-handed dagger, ready to protect the king if need be, but in the brief moment it took him to blink away the dancing stars from his vision, Zalathorm had moved to stand beside the elephant.

The king stroked the animal's bristled gray hide in a soothing manner. When the drove

came up to take the reins, Zalathorm spoke a few quiet words. Matteo could not hear what was said, but he noted how the color leached from the drover's face. The man backed away, ducking his head repeatedly in quick, nervous bows.

Zalathorm's gaze swept the quiet, watchful throng. "Many are the tasks before us. Halruaa is equal to them all, so long as our energies are not distracted from the real work at hand. Those of you who require the king's judgment may wait in peace. Those who came seeking a spectacle have been satisfied and can go their way."

Though the king spoke calmly, his voice reached the outskirts of the crowd. Some of the morning revelers slipped away, others reclaimed their places in line with subdued faces.

Matteo returned to Zalathorm's side, cradling the elbow of his injured arm in his left hand. "Fine speech," he murmured. "Many are the tasks before us—and what better way to illustrate this than for the king and his counselor to tend the well-being of a pack animal?"

The king sent him a sharp glance. "If pain prompts you to sarcasm, by all means let me repair your shoulder immediately."

Matteo managed a small bow. "My apologies, sire. Though I thank you for your kind thought, healing spells and clerical prayers have about as much effect upon a jordanian—"

"As flattery has upon a mule," Zalathorm broke in. "An analogy, mind you, that I find surprisingly apt"

He took hold of Matteo's arm and gave it a sharp twist and a sudden, precise shove. Pain exploded in Matteo's shoulder and skittered along his limbs and spine. As suddenly as it came, it was gone but for a deep, dull ache.

Matteo rolled his shoulder experimentally. "Amazing. I doubt a jordanian battlemaster could have done better."

For some reason, Zalathorm found that amusing. "High praise indeed!"

He strode toward the palace wall and the stairs, which had suddenly reappeared in a new location. Matteo followed.

"If I may ask, what did you say to the elephant drover?"

"Jaharid? I told him I calmed the elephant by speaking with it mind to mind. I reminded him the elephant is an intelligent, perhaps even sentient beast, and suggested that since he could bear witness to many of Jaharid's less-than-legal activities, it behooved him to treat the animal with courtesy and respect."

Matteo took this in. "The elephant told you these things?"

The king sent a quick, amused look over his shoulder. "Our large, gray friend did not offer an opinion concerning Jaharid's business practices. Few elephants are well versed in Halruaa law."

"I see. You know this Jaharid, then."

"Never set eyes upon the man. A simple divination spell yielded his name, along with an interesting image: Jaharid bartering with a Mulhorand pirate for a baby elephant. If you had dealings with the Mulhorandi, would you want them brought to light? Mark me, Jaharid will treat the animal well and give it no cause for complaint"

Matteo considered this. "According to what I know of the Art of divination, this seems an unusual insight. Divination is the study of the future."

The king lifted one shoulder dismissively. "The seasons pass and return. The future can often be read in the patterns of the past."

Though the words were prosaic, they sent an image jolting into Matteo's mind: Tzigone deep in trance as she sought her own earliest memories, accidentally moving past her own experiences to witness events occurring long before her birth. Zalathorm, it seemed, had unconventional talents of his own.

"You are more than a diviner," Matteo observed.

Zalathorm stopped and turned. "I am king," he said simply. His lips twisted in a wry smile and he added, "At least for the moment."

He waved away Matteo's attempted protests. "No wizard has stepped forward with challenge, but it is only a matter of time. We both know this. Your former patron, Procopio Septus, stands tall amongst the waiting throng."

Matteo secretly agreed. Still, "Sire, you know I am sworn not to reveal one patron's secrets to another."

Zalathorm sent him an inquiring look. "Did I ask you to? Procopio is ambitious. I need a jordan to tell me what my own eyes perceive."

"Of course not, my lord." Matteo hesitated, then asked the question that had been harrying him since his appointment. "Forgive me, but why exactly *do* you need me? I have lived twenty-one summers, hardly enough time to gain the wisdom a king's counselor requires."

The king smiled faintly. "Surely you've heard the whispers questioning my fitness to rule. Do you agree with them?"

This question startled Matteo, and the answer that came to mind stunned him. Zalathorm waited for him to speak, studying him with eyes that needed no magic to measure a man.

"I'm not sure," Matteo said at last.

Zalathorm nodded. "Therein lays the answer to your question. An older, wiser jordan would have told me what he thought I wished to hear."

"If I offend, I beg pardon," Matteo began.

The king cut him off with an upraised hand. "If you apologize for each outbreak of candor we'll have little time to speak of other matters. Honesty is a laudable trait, but let's agree now that it's best appreciated long after the advice is given."

This blunt speech conjured in Matteo's mind an image of Tzigone's pert face, her expressive mouth twisted in exasperation at his inability to add "interesting color" to the truth, her brown eyes cast skyward. Matteo swallowed the sudden lump in his throat and banished the wistful smile from his lips.

"Perhaps you disagree?" the king inquired.

"Not at all, sire," he said, inclining his head in a small, respectful bow. "Indeed, I have heard that sentiment expressed before."



By highsun, all the petitioners had been heard. The street song dimmed to a somnolent murmur as the residents of Halarahh sought shelter from the midday heat. Sunsleep hours were both custom and necessity in this sultry land.

The king and his counselor, however, did not take time to rest Matteo followed Zalathorm through a maze of corridors and up winding stairs, past armed guards and magical wards guarding the high tower where Queen Beatrix was imprisoned.

Her small chamber was comfortably appointed but as starkly white as a greenmage

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