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ROBIN W. BAILEY



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From the direction of the ruins came the sound of shifting debris and a great roar. Anesi whirled around as Fidget's hands clutched at him. Crouched atop the wreckage of the house was the largest, ugliest hellhound Anesi had ever imagined. It was a giant, a monster, almost as large as the house itself. Its motley fur stood out in all directions in thick mangy patches as it whipped its shaggy tail back and forth and clacked its claws menacingly on the devastated rooftop. Its eyes burned red, and its jaws snapped open to reveal fangs and jagged teeth.

Suddenly its muscles bunched and it leaped at them, mouth gaping and claws reaching.

Anesi froze. He saw his death in those jaws.

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ENCHANTER

ROBIN W. BAILEY

A BYRON PREISS BOOK

AN INFOCOM™ BOOK

AVON BOOKS  NEW YORK

**For Bob A.,
For all my friends who haunt The Other Side,
For David Harris for putting up with all my idiosyncrasies,
And, of course, for Diana.**

ENCHANTER: THE NOVEL is an original publication of Avon Books. This work has never before appeared in book form. This work is a novel. Any similarity to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

Special thanks to Joel Berez, Mike Dornbrook, Marc Blank, Dave Lebling, John Douglas, Michael Kazan, Richard Curtis, Leslie Skolnik, and Mary Higgins.

AVON BOOKS

A division of

The Hearst Corporation

105 Madison Avenue

New York, New York 10016

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 88-91365

ISBN: 0-380-75386-3

Cover and book design by Alex Jay/Studio J.

Cover painting by Walter Velez

Edited by David M. Harris

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First Avon Books Printing: May 1989

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Printed in the U.S.A.

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CHAPTER ONE

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HE HUGE FLEECY clouds slowly shifted from one form to another as they paraded across the deepening morning. Red-bellied dragons with blue-tipped tails became pink and orange unicorns with flaming manes. In turn, the unicorns flowed into great golden-winged rokks, and the rokks into the beautiful rainbow turtles that dwelled in the warm waters of the southlands.

It was a magical day, and Anesi smiled as he folded his thin legs under himself and settled down upon the sandy shore. He watched the clouds with big round eyes, and listened to the breeze and all the secrets it whispered, to the rich surf and all the tales it told of times long ago. Before him the Flathead Ocean shimmered like liquid fire, and far out great burning waves took form and rolled toward the beach, changing colors in the dancing light, blue, orange, red, pink, white, and blue again, until they crashed upon the beach at his feet.

The sun, poised in perfect balance on the edge of the world, seemed to him a brilliant doorway to still another world with a heart of pure aching white.

What might he find in that other world, he wondered, what lands, what creatures to stir his imagination?

He closed his eyes and reached out slowly with his left hand. His heart skipped a beat, then quickened, as he

searched for a special place within his mind and found it. It was a secret place, dark even to his inner eyes, yet he could see in that darkness the secret thing he stored there. He looked and memorized what he saw, a word written deep in the patterns of his being, a word he had discovered that no one else knew. His word.

His spell.

He spoke it in his mind, not needing to give it voice, and smiled again with a pleasure that rose from somewhere deep inside and tingled on his skin with a tickle of joy that made him laugh, a pleasure that crackled all about him before it flowed down his outstretched arm into his fingers and leaped with an invisible spark to touch the surface of the sea.

Anesi opened his eyes. He gave a short laugh and clapped his hands with glee at what he'd made. A long-eared rabbit, shaped from the water itself, bobbed nervously upon the waves like an exquisite piece of swirling liquid crystal.

"Your sculptures are getting better and better." A hand brushed playfully in his hair.

Anesi knew the voice. "Hi, Fidget," he said eagerly, as he pushed a mop of thick brown curls back from his forehead. He shielded his eyes against the glare to look up at his friend. "You're getting better, too. I didn't hear you come up behind me."

Fidget put on a big grin as he unslung the quiver of arrows from his shoulder and dropped the bow on the sand. He sat down beside Anesi. "Someday, I'm gonna hunt a dragon."

Anesi smiled to himself. Fidget was a few years younger than he was and was always talking about what he was going to do *someday*.

"Have you told your father yet?" Fidget asked, pointing toward the rabbit. The rising sun had turned one of its ears a bright red-orange.

Anesi got to his feet and brushed the sand from his clothes. "No," he muttered, refusing to meet Fidget's gaze. "He'd just get mad."

Fidget frowned and shook his head sympathetically.

He got up, too, and picked up his bow. "Watch this," he said suddenly, selecting an arrow from his quiver. He set it to the string, drew the nock back to the corner of his mouth, and let the arrow fly. As it streaked through the rabbit's heart, Anesi's delicate water sculpture collapsed. The arrow struck the sea, submerged for an instant, then floated to the surface.

"It was held together by magic," Anesi explained to his chagrined friend. "The touch of something real broke the spell."

"I didn't really think I could hit it," Fidget admitted sheepishly.

Anesi shrugged and put his arm around Fidget's shoulder. Fidget was not only his closest friend, he was his only friend. Except for their parents and Fidget's baby sister and one or two hunters who chose to live alone in these isolated northern parts, there wasn't another soul around for miles. "That's all right," he said. "Waste of a good arrow, though."

"Oh, I've got plenty," Fidget answered, shouldering his quiver. "And I can always make more. Old Felbor over by Caper's Hill showed me how to improve my points."

They started walking southward along the beach toward Anesi's home. Off to the west the woods grew thicker and closer to the shoreline. The breeze rustled the leaves and shivered the branches as it blew inland. Even in the daytime the woods were dark and gloomy, and Anesi hated them. He missed the teeming streets and markets of Galepath, all the people in their colorful clothes, all the street games, all the noise and laughter, and the energy of a busy city.

Not that he didn't like his new home. He loved living by the Great Sea, loved the quiet beach and the chattering sea birds and the constant smell of salt in the air. Even the woods, which frightened him, had a kind of strange silent beauty. There was Fidget, too. He'd never had a friend like Fidget.

"Look," Fidget said suddenly as they climbed the side

of a dune. He pointed out to sea, and Anesi's gaze followed.

Perhaps thirty yards from the shore the thick coils of a sea serpent rippled gracefully above the water. It cut a wide wake through the sea, and the sunrise cast an emerald gleam on its scales as it dipped and rose in a smooth motion. When its head broke the surface Anesi's heart skipped. The scales around its face puffed out like feathers as it drew a great breath, and the three sets of long whisker-like fins around its mouth quivered. The monster's fangs glinted in the sunlight. It yawned and seemed to glance shoreward for a moment with huge round lidless eyes before it glided away.

"It saw us," Fidget said quietly as he stared at the fading wake. "It's bad luck if a sea serpent sees you."

"It didn't see us," Anesi reassured him uncertainly. "It was too far away, and they're real near-sighted."

"It saw us," Fidget repeated firmly. His hand tightened around his bow until his knuckles turned white. He kicked a small spray of sand with his toe. "I've got some chores to do," he said suddenly. "I'll see you later."

"After lunch," Anesi shouted at his friend's back.

He walked on alone. A piece of bleached driftwood lay in his path. He picked it up and brushed the sand away. After a while, he paused, bent down, and used the end of it to write a few symbols in the sand, but they weren't correct, and he wiped them out with a sweep of his foot. Idly, he cast the bit of wood far out onto the waves.

There was a sail out there.

Anesi raised his hand again to shield his eyes. The glare on the water made it hard to see things so far away, but there was no mistaking the tiny distant patch of whiteness. Yet, why would anyone sail so far northward? Thriff, the nearest city, was three days' journey to the south, and Borphée Harbor another week's travel beyond that. There was no port up here, no place to dock. The ship couldn't be lost, either. There hadn't been a storm in weeks.

There was a good breeze, though. If it intended to land it would make shore soon.

He quickened his pace. Pirates had never sailed this far north before, but he thought it best to warn his parents anyway. He cut inland into the woods. He'd make better time than if he followed the coastline.

He hated the woods, though. No matter how warm the day might be they always made him shiver. Fidget laughed at him. Fidget loved the woods and moved about the old trees like one of the forest animals, perfectly at home. But Anesi hated the way the branches reached out for him, the way the leaves tried to shut out the sun. The ground always felt so spongy, like weird flesh that grew green mold instead of hair. A little cold vibration tingled up and down his spine every time he went into the woods, and it refused to go away.

The sun had not yet risen high enough to penetrate the dense canopy of leaves and vines. Anesi picked his path carefully, relying on familiar landmarks to show him the way: a huge old tree whose thick bole was hollow and cracked wide enough to hide a grown man, a lichen-covered boulder where he had once sat in a braver moment and read a book by the philosopher Helfax, a patch of wild dragondils whose golden petals shimmered even in the thick gloom. He had picked one once and given it to Fidget, and together they had watched its light slowly fade and die and resolved never to pick another.

The wind gusted suddenly, and a swirl of dead leaves rose up and danced along the pathway.

He smelled his mother's pies and the smoke of her oven long before he spied his home through the trees. He emerged into a clearing that his father had made with his own two hands, tree by tree, hurried past the woodpile and the compost heap, and through the front door of their snug log cottage.

"Father!" he cried.

His father's hand paused in mid-stroke as he worked a whet stone along the blade of his axe. The look on his face was not a pleasant one. "Where've you been, boy?" He set the axe and the stone on the wooden table at his

back as he glared at his son. "Off dreaming again, I suppose? I could use some help around here. This is your home, too."

I'd rather go back to Galepath, Anesi thought silently, though he was uncertain anymore if that was true. "Father, there's a ship."

"What?" His father leaned forward. His mother poked her head around the doorway that led into the kitchen, her look of surprise visible even through the mask of flour that covered her face. "What was that, Choboz?" she said to her husband.

"There's a ship," Anesi repeated, feeling the excitement return as he said it. "It's coming our way."

His mother smiled sweetly and wiped her hands on her apron. "You mean it's coming up the coast, dear?" she said.

"No, Mamma," he answered as patiently as he could. "Its prow is pointed straight toward the shore."

His father leaped to his feet, snatched up the axe, and headed out the door, nearly knocking Anesi over as he brushed shoulders with his son. He pulled the door open and slammed it again on his way out. Anesi turned to follow, but his mother called out.

"No, no, I need you here," she said with brimming enthusiasm. She swiftly untied her apron, wadded it into a ball and rubbed it briskly over the candlesticks on the fireplace mantel. "If we're going to have guests, then we have to clean up." She finished the mantel before she finished her sentence and reached for the broom that rested by the hearth.

Anesi shot a look around the cottage. It was crammed with furniture, every piece and stick made by his overachieving father. Every piece, that was, except for the carpet, which his mother had patiently braided and woven from the diligently split fibers of a vine called Dryad's Hair, which grew from the highest trees in the woods. The carpet, though, was in bad need of a good beating.

"I don't think these guests are going to care how the house looks, Mamma," he said.

"Why, Anesi, what do you mean?" she said as she pulled the silverware case from a deep oaken chest, opened it, and began polishing the spoons.

Anesi drew a thumb in a sharp motion across his throat as he made a retching sound. His mother hesitated, then turned pale as she caught his meaning. He took the opportunity to dart out the door and after his father.

Though the cottage was surrounded by the woods, the shore was very close. At night he could lie awake and hear the surf as it pounded the narrow beach. All he could hear now was the pounding of his heart as he ran around the side of the cottage and down to the grassy bank of a tiny stream that flowed between the trees and into the sea. His father would have come this way. Anesi splashed along, slipping on the stony bottom in his haste, until he reached the shore.

"Get out of there! You'll ruin your sandals, and I just made them!"

Choboz stood about ten yards down the beach, clutching his axe in both hands as he glowered at his son. He waited just long enough to see that Anesi obeyed, then turned back toward the sea.

Anesi crept up beside his father. He always felt like a dwarf in the man's shadow. Choboz might have been a warrior of old Quendor if he'd been born a hundred years earlier. He was broad and powerful, and though his belly had gone a little soft, the muscles of his arms and shoulders and back stood out impressively. Anesi, on the other hand, was thin and willowy and possessed nothing that anyone would ever mistake for muscle. He took entirely too much after his mother's side of the family. His father had often told him so.

He searched the horizon for the sail. "There it is," he said, pointing. They'd built their home on a point of land that jutted into the ocean, so they had an unobstructed view of the water from where they stood. The ship was much closer now. "I told you it was coming our way. Do you think they're really pirates?"

Choboz said nothing. A deep crease formed between his brows, and he slid one hand slowly up and down the

haft of his axe. "Let's go back," was all he said, and he turned and strode up the stream bed toward the cottage. Anesi hurried after.

His mother was waiting for them. While they were gone she'd tied the ends of a tablecloth together and stuffed it with food. She also had Choboz's hunting knife. She held it out to him, and he gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. "Do we hide?" she said, with barely concealed worry.

"The smoke hole," Choboz answered curtly as he strapped the knife around his waist. He lifted the tablecloth, slung it over his shoulder, and pointed them toward the door with the axe.

Anesi led the way into the woods, following a narrow path among the trees and through tall grass to a hidden knoll that nestled among a grove of young elms. A pair of weathered wooden doors lay on the hillside. He gripped one of the curled iron handles and lifted the door open.

Turning, he looked past his mother and father. Neither the cottage nor the sea could be seen from here, and the unobtrusive path provided only a small clue. Someone would have to know about the smoke hole to suspect its location, he felt sure.

"Down," his father directed, setting his axe aside long enough to lift the other door. A ray of sunlight, spilling through the leaves, revealed the small wooden stairs that descended into the darkness.

Anesi hesitated. That strange shivery feeling crept up his spine again, and he looked around. The trees swayed in a sudden breeze that rustled the branches overhead. A swirl of dead leaves leaped up in his face. Then everything was still again, but the feeling remained.

His mother went down first, and he followed, hugging himself. The darkness closed around him. He didn't like the dark and fought an urge to run back up the stairs. But it was hard to breathe. The stale, heavy air smelled of smoke and death and old blood. His father had hollowed this small hill himself to use as a slaughterhouse and smoke house, but Anesi seldom came here.

A match flared suddenly. Its small warming light shone between his mother's cupped hands as she bent over a lamp that sat on a brown-stained worktable. An instant later, a bright golden glow pushed out the darkness. His mother, however, looked around, frowned, and turned the wick lower. The light dimmed considerably.

It dimmed even more as his father shut the doors above and slid the heavy bolt into place. They were sealed in now.

The old wooden stairs creaked under his father's weight as he descended. Choboz might have been a troll as he stood there in the faint orange light. His cheeks glowed, but shadow filled his deep-set eyes. The lamp cast an eerie sheen on the ends of his dark beard, too, and on the round smoothness of his huge biceps and thighs. The keen edge of his axe caught a gleam as he bent and set his treasure sack on the floor. He looked at his family. "Now, we wait," he said, with quiet grimness.

Anesi crawled into a corner, sat down on the hard-packed earthen floor, and put his back to the wall. He drew his knees up and rested his chin on them and watched his parents huddle together in a separate corner. Choboz put one arm around his wife and kept his axe close. Anesi and his father exchanged glances, but said nothing. There was too much danger of sound traveling up the smoke shaft to the outside world.

Anesi tried to divert himself by remembering the beach that morning, the way the bright sun had slowly spread its light upon the ocean, the way the waves had sparkled as it climbed higher above the horizon. He glanced at the lamp on the worktable. It was a poor contrast. He could have made a better light even without a match, but his father would certainly beat him if he dared to cast a spell.

He rubbed his nose and made a face. The smell was awful. How could his father stand to work down here? He glanced toward the dead fireplace where Choboz cured and smoked the game he occasionally caught in his traps or the fish he dragged from the sea. A sudden fear

caught in his heart. The woodpile up above from which Choboz built his fires! Someone might see it!

"They'd have to wander back here, first," his father whispered when he mentioned it. "We're pretty far into the woods. If they're pirates, they'll just take what they want from our home and go."

His mother sat up and looked at her husband. "But what if they're not pirates, dear? What if they're nice people just come for a visit?"

Choboz put his arm around her again and smiled patiently. "Nice people don't come this far north just to visit."

Anesi crawled over to the tablecloth and began to untie the knots. He wasn't really hungry, but an apple or a piece of cheese might taste good. He cast back the corners and stared at this mother's silverware case.

"It was my mother's," she said defensively when Choboz frowned at her. "I couldn't leave it."

Fortunately, there were also two loaves of fresh-baked bread, a jar of spenseweed jam, a large cheese, several apples, and a variety of nuts. Anesi took one of the apples and returned to his corner.

Just as he raised it to his mouth, something scraped against the doors. Anesi froze, his gaze on his father as Choboz's grip tightened on the axe. His father rose into a crouch, shuffled toward the bottom of the steps, and stared up toward the doors. The scraping sounded again. Then someone tried to lift the doors, but the bolt held fast.

A light creeping tingle raised goosebumps on Anesi's arms, and, too late, he leaped up to warn his father.

A bright corruscating radiance oozed through the spaces around the doors, through the cracks, then through the wood itself. It crackled and flowed as it sought out the bolt and found it. Like an unnatural sponge, the bolt began to soak up the strange energy. Abruptly, it flared with a blue-white brilliance and exploded in a shower of sparks.

Choboz cried out and threw himself backward, though the sparks dissolved with a twinkling long before

they touched him. "What was that?" he shouted, snatching his axe up again and clambering to his feet.

"A *rezrov* spell!" Anesi supplied, taking his father's place at the foot of the stairs. He raised his hands in a gesture, and searched his mind for some spell that might save his family. But what did he have that could help? He only had a few mostly useless spells committed to memory. In fact, he realized, he had nothing. If only his father hadn't destroyed his spell book.

His father batted him aside. "Get down, boy!" he growled, gripping his axe in both hands and bracing himself for whatever came down the stairs.

Anesi rubbed his cheek where Choboz's blow had landed and crawled a pace off as a bright shaft of sunlight poured down the stairs and lit his father's angry face. Anesi again felt a familiar tingle of magic in the air.

The anger vanished from his father's face, replaced by a broad smile. Choboz set his axe aside and extended a friendly hand as he mounted the stairs. "Well, hello there, sailor!" he said loudly as he rose toward the light. "Welcome, friends! Welcome all!"

Anesi shot a horrified look at his fear-eyed mother, snatched up his father's axe and raced up the stairs. The bright sunlight stung his eyes as he raised the heavy weapon and stared at six robed and hooded figures who surrounded his stupidly grinning father. Immediately he realized how small and useless his efforts were, and the red heat of anger, embarrassment, and fear burned in his face. Still he tried to bluster, brandishing the axe. "Who are you?" he shouted. "What have you done to my father?"

"Now, now, son!" his father scolded good-naturedly, his eyes twinkling as he clapped one of the figures on the back. "That's no way to treat good friends!"

The nearest figure pushed back its hood. A kindly old face regarded him with gentle round eyes of bright blue that floated on either side of the most bulbous red nose Anesi had ever seen. "A simple *vaxum* spell," the old man said, with the barest of shrugs and more than a hint of amusement. "It makes a hostile creature very friendly,

that's all. Your father's quite all right." He ran a hand over his bald head. "You must be Anesi, old Stribel Wartworth's grandson. Too bad about him. But it's awfully warm out here for this time of year, isn't it? Got anything to drink?"

"Drink?" his father said enthusiastically. "You want a drink? Let's go back up to the house. Drinks for everybody! On me!" He clapped the shoulder of the hooded man next to him again, nearly knocking him over. The figure recovered and gave his father a look of careful annoyance. Choboz didn't notice. He cupped a hand to his mouth and called down into the smoke hole. "Hey, Mildi, come on up. We got visitors!"

His mother crept uncertainly up the stairs, wiping her hands on the front of her dress as she looked at the strangers, at her son, and at her husband. "You ruined Choboz's lock," she said, but her accusation sounded more like an apology, as if she had done the deed herself.

"Sorry about that," said the old man with the bulbous nose. He jerked his thumb at one of the other figures behind him and sneered. "Some people just can't resist the urge to show off."

That figure pushed back its hood and strode forward. Anesi stared. The man had the largest pair of ears he'd ever seen. He elbowed his big-nosed companion as he smiled at Anesi. "And some people just can't resist trying to run the show. You'd think somebody appointed you the leader, or something." He extended his hand. "My name is Glee. Isthur Glee. You've heard of me, maybe?"

Anesi apologized, but he hadn't. Isthur Glee looked crestfallen and bit his lip.

The man with the big nose stepped forward again. "Please, put your axe down, boy. We haven't come to hurt anyone. In fact, we all knew your grandfather before he disappeared, and we know quite a bit about you." He turned to his comrades, frowned, and motioned for them all to push back their hoods. "You look like a bunch of executioners!" he scolded. "No wonder they're frightened. The lot of you could scare the hair off a gruel!" He looked back to Anesi and made a curt bow in Mildi's

direction. "Let me introduce everybody. My name is Khare. Some call me the Watcher." One by one, the remaining four pushed back their concealing hoods, exposing their faces, and as they did, Anesi learned their names.

"Shad Treeskimmer," said a spritely little old man with beet-red cheeks and a thin gray-white beard that reached to his belly. He made a deep bow, and his hood fell back over his face. He pushed it off again as he straightened. "Master of *izyuk* and other new, improved flying spells."

"Grimbol the Great," said the next man. He had a stern look, and his awesome voice resonated with power. He regarded Anesi with a stony glare and folded his arms under his cloak. "Grimbol Grumble, we've renamed him," Isthur Glee whispered, leaning close to Anesi's ear and quickly straightening again.

"I'm just Finister," drawled a rather sleepy-looking oldster. Dark circles ringed the puffy bags under his eyes. He had the gaunt, half-starved appearance of a southlander, possibly an Orexic. "I don't much care for this silly custom northern wizards have of taking additional names whenever it suits them."

The last man, the shortest of the group and indisputably the pudgiest, pushed back his hood, leaped into the air, and clicked his heels. He landed with a big smile on his face and a snap of his fingers. "Raskil Worrysnot," he declared. "Once, Raskil the Happy-go-lucky. But that was a mouthful." His round, bright eyes grew wider suddenly as he took a step closer. "It's an ill wind that blows no dog a new trick. And if it's tricks you want, I got a million of 'em!" He flung open his cloak. Sewn into the lining were dozens of pockets, each containing a rolled scroll or a stoppered vial with a colored potion or powder.

Anesi's eyes widened suddenly. In one of those pockets he recognized the fine Mithican leather binding of a Chevaux Spell Book. Raskil Worrysnot was not only happy-go-lucky, but rich!

"There's one other member of our company," Khare the Watcher announced when the introductions were

complete, "but I'm afraid he's feeling a bit queasy after our sea-voyage, so he's waiting for us back at your cottage. Shall we join him?"

"Let's!" Choboz cried gleefully as he threw his arms around Grimbol the Great, hugged him fiercely, and clapped him with burly force on the shoulder for the third time. Grimbol stumbled, then glared at Choboz. A dark light smoldered in his gaze, and Anesi thought he detected a small spark of power at the tip of the wizard's little finger.

But Khare caught Grimbol's hand. "It's your own fault!" Khare snapped in a harsh whisper. "Next time don't put so much Presence in your *vaxum* spell. If he's *too* friendly, blame yourself!"

Grimbol muttered something incoherent and started up the path toward the cottage at a brisk pace, his cloak and his dark robes aflutter. Anesi watched him uneasily, deciding that *Grimbol Grumble* fit the man perfectly. He glanced at Khare the Watcher and the others and bit his lip. He felt small and impotent in the company of so many wizards, for certainly that's what they were.

When the *vaxum* spell wore off, his father was really going to be pissed.

"Shall we?" Khare repeated, smiling, bowing as he indicated the way to the cottage.

Anesi lowered the axe and sighed. What was he to do? These men knew his name. They claimed they'd known his grandfather, too, and they'd sailed up the coast apparently just to find him. Fidget was never going to believe this!

Cautiously, he reached out and took his mother's hand in his. Mildt gave him a worried, quizzical look and a weak smile but said nothing. Together they moved up the path ahead of Khare and his band of wizards. His father had already hurried in pursuit of Grimbol.

Who else, he wondered, was waiting for them back at the house? And what did they want with him? He drew another deep breath and let it slowly out.

It was certainly a magical day.

CHAPTER TWO

A NESI'S FATHER'S FA-

vorite chair had been dragged in front of the fireplace, and a roaring fire crackled in the hearth. No wood fueled the flames; they seemed to dance and burn on the air alone. More magic, Anesi realized. Probably the fire-creating *radnog* spell. Added to the heat from his mother's kitchen oven and an already warm day, the cottage was stifling.

But the old man who sat there hugged himself and shivered as if it were the deep of winter. Somehow, he had found one of Mildri's cook pans and filled it with steaming hot water—more magic, Anesi didn't doubt. He soaked his feet and oohed and ahhhed as he rubbed the soles together.

He was altogether the strangest figure Anesi had ever seen. Snow-white hair flowed back over his shoulders, and his snow-white beard was parted and flung back on either side of his neck. His face was a map of lines and cracks, and his cheeks and brows seemed little more than a bony framework for the purpose of containing his huge round eyes. Though he hugged his cloak around himself for extra warmth, a portion of an expensive red velvet robe showed at the throat, and on his lap rested a pair of purple velvet slippers with large silver buckles that sparkled in the firelight.

"Just can't get warm!" he grumbled irritably as he shifted in the chair. A little water splashed over the side of his foot bath onto his mother's Dryad's Hair carpet. "Too many *resurrection* spells to keep life and limb together," he continued. "The cold of the grave starts to creep up on you, no matter what." He rubbed his nose with a finger.

Khare went to the old man and adjusted the cloak more comfortably around him. "The only thing creeping up on you, master," he said with affectionate mirth, "is your breech clout."

"Hummmph!" the old man responded. Then he pointed a quavering finger at Anesi. "Is that the boy?"

"Stribel's grandson, yes," Khare answered. He beckoned Anesi to come closer. It was plain that the old master was quite near-sighted. "This," Khare the Watcher said to Anesi by way of introduction, "is the great and all-powerful Shuboz Shuboz."

Anesi caught his breath. Two first names was a sign of great respect and high honor. He stared at Shuboz Shuboz and suddenly put a hand to his mouth and stepped back a pace, wide-eyed. "I know you!" he said. "You spoke at Galepath University during the months I was there. You're the Grand Master of the Thriff Guild of Enchanters, Sorcerers, and Wizards! Shuboz the Necromancer!"

"It must be wonderful to be famous," Isthur Glee sighed wistfully.

"It's The Great Shuboz Shuboz now," Raskil Worrys-not corrected gently.

Anesi swallowed as he took two steps closer and made a deep bow. "I'm Anesi," he said, glancing down into the steaming pan of water. Shuboz Shuboz had the largest feet he'd ever seen. The big toes curled back against the sides of the pan.

"Of course you are, boy," answered Shuboz with a sympathetic nod. "We're all uneasy. These are dangerous times. That's why we've come to you, the grandson of Stribel Wartsworth."

"Master," said Khare the Watcher as he bent closer to Shuboz's ear, "he means his name is Anesi."

Shuboz Shuboz waved his hand in front of his face and rolled his eyes. "Well of course it is. I knew that! The brain hasn't gone yet, you know. I'm only one hundred and eighty-six, and that's far from senile!" He leaned forward in his seat and whispered to Anesi. "Got to keep them in their places, you know. Hungry bunch. They're all after my seat."

Mildi looked shocked. "You mean, they're all—*that* way?" She blushed suddenly and the palms of her hands became the most fascinating things in the room to her.

"Drinks!" Choboz shouted, coming out of the kitchen with a big tray and tall mugs of phlog and tonic. "Drinks for everybody. It's the good stuff, too, but not too good for our illustrious guests!" He passed a foaming mug to each of the wizards and grabbed the last for himself, setting the tray on the table. He raised his mug high into the air, grinning like a wild nabiz at lunchtime. "A toast!" Choboz proclaimed.

"Could you make it a croissant?" Raskil Worrysnot asked over the rim of his mug. "I'm starving."

Choboz apparently didn't hear. He brought his glass nearer to his mouth, speaking cheerily. "Over the stomach and past the gums. Look out stomach, here's a bunch of loony wizards sitting around my house, and I haven't thrown 'em out yet? What's wrong with me? Get out! Get out, right now!" He slammed his glass down on the edge of the table, and a menacing look came over his face.

"I think the *vaxum* wore off," Shad Treeskimmer whispered to his comrade Grimbol, who stood beside him. "You better cast it again fast."

Grimbol Grumble swallowed and fumbled inside his many-pocketed cloak. "My spell book!" He searched frantically, pulling out scrolls and vials and strange odds and ends and dropping them about his feet. "Where'd I put it? I don't have the blasted spell memorized!" He gulped and stared at Choboz. A small, meek breath of air escaped his lips, sounding suspiciously like the word *help*.

Choboz advanced on him angrily. "So it was you! You put a spell on me! Where's my axe?"

Grimbol Grumble backed away slowly, then broke into a run for the door. Choboz got there first and blocked his way. Grimbol shot a look around the room. "Uh, guys...?"

His comrades looked sheepish.

"Gee, Grimy..."

"Hey, tough spot!"

"Wish I could help, but..."

"Know my spell book's here somewhere!"

Shuboz Shuboz gave a weighty sigh of annoyance as he slipped his own spell book from a fold of his cloak. "Oh, Grimy, you're such a noodge!" he said distractedly. He touched the book's cover, and it opened automatically to just the spell the old wizard wanted. Shuboz studied the page for the briefest instant, closed the book, closed his eyes, and waved a hand.

Choboz's grimace instantly turned into a smile. He grabbed Grimbol and hugged him around the neck and clapped him on the arm like they were best of friends. "Grimmie!" Choboz laughed good-naturedly. "Or, how about Grimy! Mind if I call you Grimy, old buddy? I just love wizards and sorcerers and enchanters, you know. Great people! A little crazy, but great people!"

Khare whispered to Shad Treeskimmer, "Now that's what I call a *vaxum!*"

Grimbol Grumble glared at Anesi. With Choboz's arm nearly cutting off his breath, he gurgled, "You sure this is your father? Maybe you were adopted?"

A loud snore from the other side of the room interrupted them. Everyone turned toward the sound. Finister had slumped over the table and fallen asleep. One hand still curled around the handle of his half-empty mug.

"Wake him up!" Shuboz commanded disgustedly. "You just can't take him anywhere! We came here on business!"

Mildi took a hesitant step forward. In a quiet little voice she asked, "If you don't mind, sir, what business is that?"

"Glad you asked, madam," Shuboz Shuboz answered, with a polite nod of his head. "And we apologize

for invading your home in such a chaotic manner and for, no doubt, frightening the wits out of all of you. But believe me, only the direst emergency could make Shuboz Shuboz set forth on a sailing ship. Hate the sea, I do, all that tossing and rolling." He clutched his stomach and made an unpleasant face. "But never mind that." He reached into a pocket of his cloak and took out what looked like a child's toy pinwheel. "A great danger even now is creeping up out of the southlands and spreading slowly across the land of Frobozz." His voice quivered and cracked as he spoke, and he swallowed with effort as if it pained him to form words. "The *infotater* will explain it better."

Shuboz Shuboz blew gently on the pinwheel. The delicate blades began to spin, and the red, blue, and yellow colors began to blur and merge as its magic started to work and it picked up speed, whirling faster and faster until it became a rainbow glow of light. In the vortex of color, images began to form, and a voice spoke in low, calm tones.

In an age before the Four Great Ages, before even the rise of the Great Underground Empire of which the Land of Frobozz was once a part, a shapeless and formless manifestation of evil was disturbed from millennia of sleep. This evil was so powerful that it required the combined wisdom of the leading enchanters of that age to conquer it, and they did so by luring it to a specially created recess deep within the earth where they had placed a scroll containing a potent magic. When the Great Terror sought out the scroll, as they knew it would, the enchanters trapped it within a room of living rock, where it finally returned to a deep sleep.

Among those enchanters who helped defeat the Great Terror was Entharion the Wise, the most potent mage of his time, and he built a great castle called Largoneth upon the spot where the Terror slept, that he might serve as the guardian of its tomb. Entharion's day passed, however, and in time the Great Terror came to be remembered in Frobozz only as a legend.

Then, in 956 GUE, as we date our calendar from the rise of the Great Underground Empire, another evil in the form of

the renegade sorcerer, Krill, threatened Frobozz and took the Castle Largoneth as his seat of power. An apprentice of the Great Belboz the Necromancer, whose name is not recorded, was sent to destroy Krill. He succeeded, but in the process unwittingly disturbed the Great Terror by breaking into the tomb and stealing the scroll that originally lured it there.

Some years passed, and the Great Terror bided its time, mindful of its first defeat. It moved slowly and secretly into the southlands and settled in the swamps of Miznia near the border of Oresia. There it waits and gains strength while its influence creeps slowly and inexorably across the world, corrupting all it touches.

The voice stopped, and the *infotater* began to slow as the last images faded. The blaze of color gradually separated once more into thin blades of blue, red, and yellow as its magic wore off.

"I love it! I love it!" Choboz cried, releasing Grimbol and clapping his hands delightedly. "Could I get a dozen for the yard?"

"Are you *sure* he's not adopted?" Grimbol grumbled again. He bent over and began to collect his magical treasures from the floor. He stuffed them, without any apparent order, back into his cloak pockets.

"Begging your pardon, sir," Mildi interrupted nervously. "But what does all this have to do with us?"

"Not so much with you, madam," Shuboz Shuboz answered. It pleased Anesi to see such a great wizard treat his mother with so much courtesy. "At least, not yet. It is the grandson of your father, the great Stribel Warts-worth, to whom we must turn." A gleam twinkled in his huge dark pupils as he turned his gaze on Anesi.

Mildi moved protectively to her son and gripped his shoulders in her small hands, pulling him closer to her. "My boy?" she said. "He has nothing to do with any of this! He's never even been to Miznia or Oresia!"

Shuboz Shuboz held up a hand. "We know, madam," he said patiently. "But he has been to Galepath University, something unheard-of for one so young. We've had our eye—or rather, our crystal ball—on him for some

time. He's very talented, though untrained. It's a shame you pulled him out of the university so soon."

Mildi studied the top of her son's head as she put her arms around his neck. "It was my husband's decision," she answered.

"Had to get him out of that damned place!" Choboz broke in cheerily with a grin that promised him a sore jaw in the morning. Grimbol had wisely moved to the other side of the room, so it was Shad Treeskimmer who caught the slap on the back this time. "You perverts were teaching my boy bad things! Trying to make him an enchanter! Trying to make him better than his father! Couldn't have that, couldn't allow it! So we packed up and moved up here to the wildlands. No wizards. No sorcerers. Just people."

"Not many people," Raskil Worrysnot muttered half under his breath as he rolled his eyes at Anesi.

Choboz pretended not to hear, and his grin stretched even wider as he put his arm around Treeskimmer. "You guys are great people, though. No offense, right? Do anything you want, just not with my son. Still friends? Want some more phlog?"

"Stribel Wartsworth was my father," Mildi said, glancing at her husband with a worried expression. "But we never saw him much. He was always off wandering somewhere."

Shuboz Shuboz looked on sympathetically. "Nevertheless, he pulled a few strings to get young Anesi into the University when he recognized his grandson's potential. No one so young had ever been accepted before. It's too bad he spent only a couple of months there. There's so little time now to teach him what he needs to know."

Choboz strode across the room and leaned on the back of Shuboz's chair. He patted the old wizard affectionately on the top of his head as he leaned over him. "Aw, he's just a boy," Choboz laughed. "He can't do anything for you!"

Shuboz smiled indulgently. "Young Anesi is a magical genius, my good man. He has already discovered a spell that no one else knows. That's unheard-of at his age."

Many enchanters and sorcerers spend their entire lives searching for one original spell and never find it."

Anesi caught his breath and stared fearfully at his father. Shuboz Shuboz knew about the water-shaping spell, and now he'd told Choboz. When the *vaxum* spell wore off, his parent would beat him for sure.

Shuboz beckoned him closer with a quivering finger and peered straight into his eyes. "Do you have courage, boy?" he asked in deadly earnest. A tremble coursed through Anesi's body; there was something in Shuboz's expression that suddenly filled him with apprehension. Slowly, he nodded. "Good. You may be the only hope Frobozz has left. We'll teach you as much as we can in a short time. You're bright, and I know you'll learn quickly. Here, I brought you a special gift."

Shuboz reached into another pocket of his cloak and pulled out a brand new Chevaux-quality spell book. Its binding was a bright blue dyed leather, and the elaborate symbol of the Thriff Enchanters' Guild, an inverted triangle framing a thumbs-up fist, all surrounded by glyphs and runes, had been worked into the cover in rich, shining gold. The pages, too, were gilt-edged.

It was the most beautiful gift anyone had ever given him, and Anesi's trembling increased as he reached out to accept it. He ran one finger admiringly over the binding. Once before he had owned a spell book, a shabby little dog-eared volume the professors had given him at the university, but his father had taken it from him and burned it. He glanced surreptitiously over his shoulder at Choboz now, and swore he would never let that happen to this book.

Choboz sat down suddenly on the bench at the table and draped his arm over the gaunt, sleeping form of Finister. He gave a short laugh as he drummed his fingers rhythmically on the unconscious wizard's grizzled skull. "You guys are better than a barrel of brogmoids!" he said, resting his chin in the palm of one hand. "What do you expect a kid like him to do against something like the Great Terror? I mean, he's a boy!"

Shuboz sighed patiently, took out his own spell book,

and placed it on his lap. It opened automatically to a place near the middle. Then it closed again. "A boy in *your* eyes, sir." Shuboz straightened a bit in his chair. "To me, however, he knocks at the doorstep of manhood. His youth will be his greatest advantage, for he still has his innocence. That may count for more than all the spells we can teach him."

"His innocence?" Mildi remarked, wide-eyed.

Khare moved a bit closer to her, leaving his master's side. "His innocence," he repeated. "Because the power of the Great Terror is magical in nature, and magicians and all things magical are more sensitive to it—more vulnerable, if you will. An enchanter can tell when another enchanter has cast a spell even when others cannot. He may feel it as a vibration in the air or a tingle on his body."

"You just cast a spell, sir," Anesi said, looking at Shuboz Shuboz, then at his mother. "I felt it."

The great Shuboz Shuboz winked and put a finger to his lips, giving a secret shake of his head.

Khare the Watcher pretended not to notice. He continued with his explanation to Mildi. "The Terror's power corrupts everything it touches." He frowned as he gestured to Finister, who was oblivious to everything happening in the room. "Our brother enchanter there just escaped before the Orexic guild succumbed entirely. At least, he claims he escaped." He shot a glance toward Shuboz Shuboz. "As lazy as he seems, I suspect he must have received at least a taste of the Terror's influence."

Choboz gave a whoop, leaned back against the wall and clutched his belly. He shook with laughter. "Oh, my! By the scraggly beard of Dimwit Flathead, himself. You mean, there's likely to be evil enchanters running around now, too?"

Isthur Glee looked serious as he took up the narrative. "The farther south they are, the more likely it is they have fallen under the Terror's power."

"And the older they are," Shad Treeskimmer added. "Who among us hasn't wished for more money, or a better position with more authority, or for a more beautiful

companion? Who among us hasn't experienced some dissatisfaction with our lives, or envied something that belonged to someone else? These are all cracks and cran-ies that the Terror can sink its claws into."

"Who among us," Shuboz Shuboz repeated, looking at Anesi, "except one who has not had time to develop such desires."

Mildi gave a choked cry and clutched Anesi to her skirts. "No! You'd send him alone against the Great Terror? I won't let him go!"

"Hey, Mildi!" Choboz chided, giving her a double wink. "Now don't be rude. They're our guests, after all, and they're just..." His grin flickered, faded, returned, then faded again. Then he pounded his fist on the table so hard that old Finister's head bounced on the smooth wood and his mug tipped over. Half a glass of phlog ran out and into the Orexic's hair. He looked up in surprise, then jumped to his feet to escape the spill.

"...just going to get their faces pounded into bread dough!" Choboz continued. He made a grab for Finister, but the sleepy wizard had moved out of reach. Choboz leaped to his feet, but to his surprise the heavy bench lifted with him a few inches, then pulled him back down. "Hey! What is this?" he roared. "I can't get up!"

A tiny smile danced mischievously over Shuboz's face as he put his spell book back inside his cloak. "It's a *job-lub* spell," he explained with a hint of amusement. "Usually I cast it during my lectures, just to make sure no one walks out. It keeps them glued to their seats. And it works nicely on you, too, sir." He grinned at Anesi. "Hadn't had much use for it lately and had to look the darned thing up."

But Anesi looked sadly upon his father. After all, Choboz *was* his father, and he didn't like to see him abused in such a manner. No matter how much he deserved it. "Please, sir," he said to Shuboz Shuboz, "this is no way to treat him in his own house."

Mildi interrupted again. "Are you kidnapping my son?"

"Certainly not, madam," Shuboz Shuboz assured her,

adjusting his brittle old bones uncomfortably in the hard chair. "And young Anesi is also correct. I have overstepped the bounds of courtesy." He turned to a red-faced Choboz, who sat with his fists curled in anger and frustration on the tabletop. "Please, I beg you to listen." Shuboz continued. "Frobozz is doomed unless your son helps us. But we have no intention of forcing him. The choice must be his and made freely. We can't force him, for then he'd resent it, and that resentment would be a chink where sooner or later the Terror could take hold."

Choboz scowled at his son. "This is all your fault!" he charged. "Yours and your accursed grandfather's, may his bones rot! Magic, phooey! Just tell these loonies you're not going and send them on their way!"

Anesi looked at his father and mother, and finally all around the cottage that was their home. Actually, he kind of loved the Dryad's Hair rug and the way it felt against his skin when he curled up on it with the fireplace burning. He loved the soft bed his father had made for him, too, up in the loft where he slept. But as silly as these enchanters seemed, he sensed where his future had to lead him.

It was as if Shuboz Shuboz had read his mind, and that was entirely possible if the old man had committed the *yomin* spell to memory. "Yes, we are a silly lot," Shuboz said kind-heartedly. "But when you learn the things a wizard knows, you, too, will come to view the world with some amusement and a sense of humor. Otherwise, that knowledge would simply crush your spirit."

"I know that, sir," Anesi said with a nod. "My favorite course at the university was Pranks Practicum 101. I learned the *filfre* spell there, and how to create gratuitous fireworks."

Isthur Glee gave a low chuckle. "Yes," he admitted. "We all learned that one."

"Please, let my father up," Anesi asked again. Then he turned to his mother and took her hand. "Let's all go down to the ocean," he begged. "I want to show you something."

Shuboz took out his spell book once again. It opened

automatically to exactly the enchantment he needed to cancel the *foblub* spell. Sullenly, his father stood up. Choboz didn't say a word. He just stared accusingly at his son.

Anesi opened the door, and they all filed out into the sunlight and cooler air. Shuboz carried his velvet slippers in his hands as they trooped along the bank of the stream to the beach. There, Anesi took his parents' hands and pulled them both to the edge of the surf. The breeze ruffled his hair as he spoke to them.

"I know you don't like magic, Poppa," he said, "but watch what I can do."

He closed his eyes and searched for that dark place in his mind where he kept all his secrets, and there he found his word, the one spell that he, himself, alone in all the world, knew. He raised his arm and felt the energy pour from that dark place, crackle all around his body and flow into his fingers. From there it leaped outward to the surface of the water.

He heard his mother's gasp as he opened his eyes. Riding upon the waves stood perfect water sculptures of Choboz and Mildi. The sun gleamed upon them, and they sparkled, jewel-like, as the white seafoam rushed around their feet.

"They're beautiful!" Mildi exclaimed, covering her mouth with her hands as she stared.

Choboz didn't say anything.

"I have to help them, Mamma," Anesi said quietly. "I didn't know Grandpa Stribel very well. I remember he could do wonderful things, though. I can do wonderful things, too, but I have to be taught."

Mildi kneeled down in the sand beside her son. From there she had to look up at him, and she wrapped her arms about his waist. "But the Great Terror they speak of," she said, the first tear blossoming in the corner of her right eye. "What can you do against that?"

"I don't know," Anesi admitted. "I guess they'll teach me."

"You're too young," his father grumbled, refusing to look at him.

"They think I'm old enough," Anesi answered defensively. "And though the Terror's power is affecting magic and magicians first, it'll affect everybody as it grows stronger. That means you and Mamma and Fidget, too. I read the legend in those books Grandpa left me when I was little, the ones you burned with my spell book."

"We'll conduct his training right here," Shuboz Shuboz said, hobbling forward through the sand. "He won't have to leave immediately."

Choboz turned away suddenly and strode back up the stream toward the cottage. Mildy watched him with a pained expression as she fluttered her hands uncertainly. "Oh!" she muttered. "I'd better go see about him. He has such moods!" She gave her son a hug and kissed his cheek. "You don't have to go yet, anyway!" She got up and hurried after her husband, her skirts bouncing about her ankles.

Anesi looked up at Shuboz Shuboz as the other masters of the Thriff Guild of Enchanters gathered around. Anesi suddenly felt very small. He rubbed his hands on his thighs and swallowed as he touched the spell book, which he had tucked into his waistband. "Well," he said hesitantly, "what do we do now?"

Shuboz Shuboz folded his hands, and his eyes were full of that deep gleaming seriousness again. "You have much to learn," Shuboz told him. "And much to do. How sharp are your senses, boy? You sensed my spell when I cast the *foblub*. Is there anything else you sense?"

Anesi looked back curiously and frowned. Slowly, he shook his head.

"Think, boy," Khare urged. "Anything? Anything at all?"

Anesi trembled inside. Was he failing his first test, already? He tried to look around, but they stood so close to him, all watching him so expectantly.

"You mean the woods?" he asked meekly.

CHAPTER THREE

A NESI SAT CROSS-

legged on the ground beneath the bole of a huge ancient oak tree. The sunlight streamed down through the spaces between the leaves, casting patches of radiance here and there upon the leaf-strewn ground. His spell book lay unopened upon his lap. Khare the Watcher sat similarly, if somewhat stiffly, considering his age, before him.

"Now, your spell book is empty," Khare said, placing his own spell book on the ground along with three other scrolls, which he removed from the inner pockets of his cloak. Though it was warm he wore the garmet anyway, preferring not to be without the magical treasures it contained. "Do you remember the *gnusto* spell from your studies at the university?"

Anesi nodded. The spell by which an enchanter wrote another spell into his book was the most fundamental one, and every student was required to practice and practice it until it was committed to permanent memory.

"Good," Khare commented. "The spell book is important because most magical spells cannot be retained for long by the human mind. We may memorize them quickly by glancing at our book, but we cannot keep them long in memory. And if we cast them they fade away completely, and we must memorize them again to

use them again. A few of the simpler spells may stay with us, but only a few. *Gnusto* is one of the easier ones."

"I've memorized the *rezrov* spell," Anesi supplied eagerly. "That was an easy one. And my water-shaping spell."

"Yes, yes," Khare went on patiently with an indulgent smile. "Shuboz Shuboz will talk with you later about your water-shaping spell, so let's set that aside for now. I'm glad you know *rezrov*, though. Not all enchanters can memorize that one permanently. That you did so is no doubt a mark of the genius that comes to you through your grandfather."

Anesi picked up a leaf and shredded it vein by vein. "I didn't know Grandpa Stribel very well, I'm afraid," he said softly. "He left when I was very small, and nobody ever saw him again." He looked up suddenly and brightened a little. "Do you know any stories about him?"

Khare's smile broadened a little. "I know he was the guildmaster of the Mithicus chapter for half a term before he swore off guilds altogether. But that was years and years ago. Maybe Shuboz will tell you more." He reached for one of the three scrolls and unrolled it on his lap. "Now pay attention," he said. "What are the three Principles of Thaumaturgy?"

Anesi sighed. He'd learned all this at the university. "Presence, Incantation, and Unusual Effect."

"Quite right," Khare affirmed. "Now there was always the problem of memorizing a spell until Davmar Scrollmaker, working in the reign of King Mumberthrax Flathead, discovered a way to transfer not just the written incantation to paper, but the presence or the actual power of the scriptor as well. And presence is the real key. That's why Grimbol Grumble's *vaxum* spell behaves somewhat differently from Shuboz's. Do you see?"

Anesi nodded, picked up another leaf, and began to shred it. He wanted to get to the real neat stuff.

"The problem with Davmar's scrolls, however, was that once the spells written upon them were cast, the scrolls dissolved. So the next great step in magical technology came some fifty years later, when a little-known

enchanter named Berzio developed a simple spell that would transfer both incantation and presence from a scroll to a specially impregnated paper that didn't dissolve after one use. He named the spell *gnusto*, after his dog, and of course became quite famous, not to mention rich." He tapped the slender volume on his lap. "The next logical step, of course, was the spell book, without which no self-respecting enchanter would be caught dead." He leaned closer and put on a cautionary expression. "Now, this special paper is *gnusto*-proof. Whatever you copy into it is there for keeps. It can't be *gnusto'd* out again. So don't fill it up with a lot of useless magicks unless you've got a spare book lying around."

In no time at all Anesi had made a bare patch around himself, and there were no more leaves at hand to strip. He began to think of Fidget and wondered what his friend might be up to. He had a lot to tell Fidget.

Khare rapped him smartly on the knee with a twig. "Wake up!" he snapped. "Finister does enough of that for everyone, and we have very little time."

Anesi frowned and rubbed the place where the branch had stung him. "If there's so little time, sir, then why are we bothering with history? I learned all this at the university. I know about Davmar and Berzio and the Three Principles. Teach me things I don't know!"

"Hummmph!" Khare commented. "How am I supposed to know just what you do and don't know? Should I *yomin* your mind? All right then, little genius." He indicated the scroll he had spread on his lap. "This is the *frotz* spell, which causes things to give off light. A particularly useful spell, believe me, since darkness takes up half our lives, or even more if you happen to live in a cave, or a castle that has poor lighting." He leaned forward and spread the scroll on Anesi's lap. "You know so much? Transfer this into your spell book."

Anesi accepted the challenge. He only glanced at the spell written on the scroll. Years before he'd gone to the university his mother, at his grandpa Stribel's insistence, had put him through the Birnam Woods Speed Reading course. He'd graduated number one in his class. His study

habits were excellent. He brushed his hand over the words once more as he read the spell a second time.

Then he closed his eyes and reached into that dark place in his mind and found the *gnusto* spell. He didn't need to speak the words out loud. Without hesitation he opened his expensive Chevaux spell book to the first blank page and cast the *gnusto* spell on the open scroll.

A bright golden light burned across the page of the spell book as letters of arcane fire seared into the paper. In an instant the flames died, leaving behind the words of the *frotz* spell. An instant later the original scroll crumbled to a fine, powdery ash.

"Hummmm," Khare uttered as he rubbed his eyes and leaned forward to examine Anesi's work. "You have a flair for *gnusto*." He straightened again, looked stern, then let the sternness ebb away. "You did that very well, Anesi, very well indeed. Here, then." He spread the next scroll upon his student's knees. "Turn your book to the next page. We have two more scrolls. Shuboz says you must learn the *nitfol* spell, which allows you to converse with animals, and the *blorb* spell, by which you may safely protect a small object from harm or discovery."

Anesi bent over the scroll and began to study it. This was sure better than shredding leaves.

After a delicious lunch of seafood bisque and hard bread, Anesi retired to another part of the forest with Shad Treeskimmer, his second instructor of the day. He found a comfortable tree, sat down, and began to munch the handful of pringleberries he'd brought along to snack on during the lesson.

The little old wizard sat spryly down. He had disdained to bring his cloak. Instead he carried but one scroll, which he spread upon the grass between them. The old wizard leaned forward and ran the tip of one finger along the elaborate, airy script that flowed across the page. He said, "This is *izyuk*."

"The flying spell!" Anesi nearly dropped his pringleberries as he bent forward excitedly to study the scroll.

"Not *the* flying spell!" Shad Treeskimmer said with

wounded pride. "Just a flying spell. I myself have discovered at least six better versions." He tapped the top of the scroll. "This, however, is the most basic, and all you can be expected to handle at this stage of your training."

"Can I put it in my spell book?"

The Treeskimmer nodded. Anesi opened his own book, and moments later flaming letters burned the words of *izyuk* into a previously blank page. Anesi looked up, beaming, expecting praise.

Such was not forthcoming from the Treeskimmer. He sat up straight as a breeze blew through the gray ash that once had been the scroll. "It's not enough to cast *izyuk*," he cautioned. "This spell requires control and practice, and that's what we're here for today. When we're done, then will come the praise. And we won't leave here until you are done. The Great Shuboz wants you to have this spell."

Anesi nodded enthusiastically. He'd seen older enchanters at the university practicing this spell in gym class, and he was eager to try it. "What do I do?" he asked.

"You tell me, young enchanter," Shad Treeskimmer responded with a shrug. A sly look flickered upon his face. "What's the first thing you think you should do?"

"Memorize the spell," Anesi said without hesitation, and he instantly did so, glancing down at the page of his book. "Okay, I'm ready."

The Treeskimmer shrugged again, but he watched Anesi intently as he stroked his belly-length beard. "You're the enchanter," he said quietly. "Show me your power, O Wise One."

He thinks I'm going to waste it by just casting it away, Anesi thought. That was the reason for the Treeskimmer's sly look. *But I've seen how it's done. I know I have to cast this spell on myself.*

With a self-assured smirk, Anesi cast the *izyuk* spell. Immediately all sense of weight left him. He rose quickly off the ground from his seated position and smacked his head on the lowest stout limb of the tree under which he sat. "Ouch!" he cried, but the impact sent him sideways

into yet another limb. "Ow! Help!" He shot out an arm, grabbed the branch with both hands, and floated there with his legs flailing.

Terrified, he looked down at Shad Treeskimmer, who sat calmly on the ground, a bemused grin on his face. "I can do nothing, O Wise One, until the spell wears off. Fortunately for you, that only takes a few minutes. I will wait." The wizard folded his arms and began to hum to himself.

A few minutes later, it did indeed wear off. His grip on the branch, though adequate while he could fly, proved too weak to support his suddenly returned weight. Anesi gave a yelp and made a most undignified landing on his backside.

"Plop!" said Shad Treeskimmer, throwing up his hands in mock surprise. "The prodigal enchanter returns!" His instructor grew serious again. "Pick yourself up, boy. Leave the pringleberries, though. Those are ruined."

Red-faced, Anesi got up, brushed himself off, and looked around for his brand-new Chevaux spell book. He found it close by, picked it up, and took his seat again before his teacher.

Shad Treeskimmer leaned forward and used the tip of his beard to wipe a smudge of dirt from his student's chin. When he sat back he tapped his index finger against his temple. "You showed me your power, young enchanter," he chided, "but not your wisdom."

"I forgot to look up," Anesi mumbled in shame. He stared down at the patch of grass between his knees, pulled up a blade, and shredded it into green strips.

"At least you learn quick," the Treeskimmer offered. "I've had students crack their noggins five or ten times before they finally learned to look up and see what's above then before they cast that spell." He leaned forward conspiratorially. "It's provided many a good chortle at the faculty meetings, I can tell you." He tapped Anesi's knee encouragingly. "But I know you'll do better." He rose to his feet. "Now step out here into this clear space and try again. You won't go very high. And remember,

once you're up, just *think* of the direction you want to go."

"You said there are other variations," Anesi said, getting up. "Like what?"

Shad Treeskimmer grinned like a man who enjoyed discussing his work. "Oh, spells to make you go faster, or higher, or let you fly vertically or horizontally, and a few other things. *Izyuk* is really outdated now. More of a floating spell, actually, or directed levitation. It only lasts a short time, and once you land, that's it until you cast it again." He clapped his hands together, and the sound echoed among the trunks of the old trees. "However, it is easy to learn, and that's what we're here to do. Come on, now, up you go."

Anesi spread his arms and reached into his dark place for the incantation. It wasn't there!

"Remember," the Treeskimmer reminded him. "You have to memorize it all over again. Most spells will not stay in your memory after you cast them."

Anesi nodded sheepishly. He knew that. But his earlier embarrassment had flustered him, and now this only added to his embarrassment. Shad Treeskimmer would think his knock-about with the tree limbs had caused some brain damage.

He determined to make no more mistakes. He looked down at his book, and it opened automatically to the proper place. *Izyuk*, he thought privately, disgusted with his own performance, *is yuck*.

The silence at dinner that night cast a pall over the excitement of the day. Choboz sat glumly at the head of the table while Mildy, with the kind assistance of Isthur Glee, served a meal of roasted fish, boiled wild greens, and fresh hot bread with honey and jam. His father had not spoken a word to him all day.

The usually ebullient wizards, out of regard for their host's sullen mood, also ate in silence. Only Finister dared to break the quiet, and that was with a single loud snore as he slumped back against the wall behind the bench where he sat.

Shuboz Shuboz sighed and sipped from his glass of water. Khare exchanged looks with an irritated Grimbol Grumble. Raskil Worrysnot softly drummed his fingers on the table beside his plate and stared at his food.

Choboz glared around the table as he crammed the last bite of fish into his mouth and washed it down with phlog. Without so much as an *excuse me, please*, he got up and left the cottage.

Coming out of the kitchen, Mildi stared at her departing husband's back, sighed, set down the pitcher she carried, and went to close the door after him. "It's not his fault," she said wearily, returning to the table and settling into Choboz's empty chair. She rested her head in her hands.

"It's all right, madam," Shuboz said gently. "We'll make our stay as short as possible."

Mildi looked up and tilted her head quizzically. "Oh, it's not you, gentlemen. Not really. It's him. I mean, it's not his fault, but it is, sort of, you see?" Her gaze darted to Choboz's mug beside his plate. It was still half full. She picked it up quickly and tossed it back, draining it in one gulp. When she set the empty vessel down again she wiped her lips and glanced around apologetically.

"Mamma?" Anesi said uncertainly. He'd never seen his mother touch phlog before, let alone chug it like that.

She waved him off. "I used to think he only married me to get close to Stribel," she said, shaking her head in confusion. She looked at her son across the table. "He really wanted to be an enchanter, too, you know?" She ran the tip of her finger around the moist rim of the empty glass. "But he just didn't have it. The spells just wouldn't stay in his head, no matter how hard he tried or how hard he studied. He couldn't get into the university; he couldn't even apprentice himself out to the independent enchanters. Even Stribel gave up on him." She sighed heavily and leaned back in her chair. "He just didn't have it, whatever it was."

"Imagination, madam," Shuboz Shuboz supplied. "That's the key. There can be no magic without imagination. An enchanter must be a dreamer, a storyteller. He

has to see shapes in the clouds and hear voices in the wind, fear the darkness a little, and passionately love everything that he doesn't passionately hate."

Mildi wiped her hands on her white apron as she stood up and prepared to clear the table. "Maybe that's it," she agreed. "Choboz never could see further than the woodpile."

Isthur Glee had appeared some moments before from the kitchen and had listened sympathetically. "He has his own kind of magic, though," he told her. He pointed to the table and several pieces of furniture about the room. "With all our magic, none of us could ever build a chair like that or a fine home like this cottage. If it's made of wood and it's in this house, Choboz's hand created it. That's a special gift. Everybody has a gift if they could just recognize it."

"Maybe we couldn't build the chair," Grimbol Grumble said mischievously, "but Choboz couldn't do this."

Anesi felt a tingle on the back of his neck as Grimbol cast a spell and slammed closed the book he'd opened secretly under the table. On the other side of the room the chair that Isthur Glee had indicated came suddenly to life and began to chase the poor big-eared wizard around the room. An appreciative whoop went up from the Treeskimmer and Raskil Worrysnot as they rose from their seats to get a better view.

"*Malyon!*" Anesi cried in delighted surprise, recognizing a spell he'd only seen once at the university.

Shuboz Shuboz slammed his gnarly old fist on the table. "Cancel it!" he hissed at Grimbol. Shuboz's eyes burned with a terrible fire, and Grimbol Grumble paled. A moment later the chair returned to its former inanimate state.

"We've troubled this household enough!" Shuboz scolded, glaring at all his wizards. His old creaking voice was suddenly full of hard iron, and the barest hint of his true power crackled through the aging facade. "There will be no more pranks or practical jokes."

"Grimbol can't help himself," Khare commented drily. "He's always been a little over-hexed."

Shuboz slammed his fist down again, preventing any argument. "I said, no more!" He stared around the room, making sure they understood. More quietly, he continued. "We will sleep on the ship tonight. These folks need a little time alone without our antics to disturb them." He rose stiffly from the table. "But first, everyone will help with the dishes." He smiled at Mildi. "Everyone except this good woman. She's worked hard enough preparing this splendid repast."

A collective groan went up around the room, but the wizards unfastened their cloaks, folded them neatly, and placed them on their seats, then rolled up the sleeves of their robes and got to work. In no time at all the dishes were done and put away and the cottage put back in order.

Perhaps it was the labor that put everyone in a better mood. "Walk down to the beach with us, madam," Shuboz Shuboz requested when the table and kitchen were clean again. "And you, too, boy. You've treated us with gracious hospitality. Allow us to offer a small entertainment before we all retire."

Mildi looked around uncertainly and finally shrugged. "Why not?" she said, forcing a weak smile. She held out her hand to her son. Anesi took it, and they went out together into the cool night air.

The Great Shuboz Shuboz wrapped his cloak tighter about his body and hugged himself as he gave a powerful shiver. He looked up at the dark sky through the trees, then stared deep into the forest. "Just can't stay warm anymore," he complained good-naturedly. But Anesi had the strangest feeling the master wizard's remark was just an effort to cover something else. He turned and tried to guess what Shuboz had seen in the gloomy woods.

"This way, young enchanter," the Treeskimmer urged, touching Anesi's shoulder and steering him toward the stream and the beach.

The wind had picked up with the setting of the sun, and the tide carried the ocean surf within yards of the forest edge. Only a narrow white strip of beach ran in either direction, patched here and there by the swaying

shadows of the trees as a thin moon shone down through them.

Farther out from shore the dark water churned. Foamy whitecaps rose and folded over with a roar, and the waves surged up on the beach, roiling with sand and seaweed, which it deposited on the beach.

Anesi pulled his hand from his mother's and walked forward until the cold sea rushed over the tips of his toes. "Where is your ship?" he asked.

"Just down the beach," Khare answered, coming forward with his slippers in his hands to stand in the surf with Anesi. "A version of the *blorb* spell keeps it protected and safe and also invisible." Though the hem of his robe trailed into the water, he'd draped the length of his cloak over one arm. He rummaged in its folds until he found his spell book. It opened at his touch to just the spell he wanted. Khare closed the book again and waved his hand in a simple gesture.

"Look," he said.

Off to the right the air seemed to shimmer and waver like heat rising from the sand on a really hot day. At first, just the ghost of an image danced upon the water, but gradually it took on shape and solidity.

Then a beautiful single-masted sail caught the moonlight. From the way it shone as it billowed in the wind, Anesi knew it must be pure silk. It rocked gently on the water, and the waves lapped its sides. The spell had blocked not only vision, but sound and smell as well. Now, though, the ropes and rigging hummed in the breeze, and the sail snapped smartly. The wet bulkhead gave off a rich woody odor.

"Shouldn't the sail be lowered?" Anesi asked. "Why doesn't the wind drive it up on the shore?"

Khare smiled down at his young pupil. "That is the personal vessel of the Great Shuboz. Wind or no wind, sail or no sail, it goes nowhere unless he directs it."

A sudden explosion made them look up. The darkness burst into thousands of fiery fragments that shot upward and outward. Each fragment exploded again, and

each of those again in a series of rapid blue and white flashes that reflected on the surface of the sea.

On the beach, Mildy and the other wizards clapped appreciatively.

"That was Raskil," Khare whispered to Anesi. "He has a nice *filfre* spell. Every enchanter learns *filfre*. We all love fireworks! It's not good for anything, but we all love *filfre*."

"What we don't passionately hate, we passionately love," Anesi said, remembering the words of Shuboz Shuboz. "Will I learn it, too?"

"Of course," Khare answered. He rumped his student's hair and pointed as another explosion shivered the air. "Now watch."

A bright red rose blossomed high in the night, so brilliant it eclipsed the stars and turned the white sail of Shuboz's ship a shimmering crimson. Another blossomed beside it, and another, until the sky became an elegant magical garden.

"Shad," Khare whispered. "He has a thing for roses. He loves them, but doesn't dare get close to real ones." The wizard touched the side of his nose. "Allergies."

Isthur Glee, Finister, and Grimbol Grumble cast their *filfres* at the same time. A series of geometric shapes burned with spectacular colors. Slowly, they began to spin, gathering speed. Sparks shot out from all possible tangents, and each spark formed a new shape. Each shape became part of a pattern of movement that Anesi found, somehow, familiar. He turned around and stared back at the three sorcerers. What were they doing with their hands?

"They're juggling!" he cried suddenly, answering his own question. He glanced up at the display again and back at the three. As they moved their empty hands the shapes moved overhead. Abruptly, all the shapes winked out.

"You oaf!" Grimbol Grumble shouted at Finister. "You dropped one!"

Just down the beach something else, a small movement at the edge of the woods, caught Anesi's eye. He

squinted to see in the darkness and just made out the shape of his father watching the sky from the shadow of a tree.

Shuboz Shuboz walked a little apart from the others and pushed up his sleeves.

"Aren't you going to cast *filfre*, too?" Anesi asked his instructor with one eye still on his father.

"Not tonight," Khare answered. "I'll just stand here and watch with you." He nodded toward Shuboz, who seemed to make a great show of getting ready. "Now pay attention," Khare said. "Shuboz has taken the gold medal in the Frobozz *filfre* olympics fifty-six years straight."

"Fifty-six years?" Anesi repeated in disbelief.

Khare nodded solemnly and put a finger to his lips.

A deep boom shattered the moment of silence, and the sound rolled far out over the water. An instant later a pinpoint of golden light, no more at first than a dim star, exploded outward at an exhilarating rate and formed itself into a giant sparkling phoenix whose incredible wings stretched to the far horizons.

Anesi caught his breath. Never had he seen a more incredible sight! He applauded wildly.

But Khare shushed him. "It's not over yet," he warned.

In a transformation almost too swift for the eye to follow the phoenix became a sea serpent whose scintillant coils seemed to enwrap the world. Its mouth gaped wide as it loomed above them. Its glittering red eyes fixed upon them, and its silver fangs flashed. It lunged downward...

... and swiftly transformed once more, this time into a twinkling white unicorn, whose mane of golden flame swept down to its golden hooves, whose beautiful twisted horn glimmered with millions of tiny stars. The creature regarded them indifferently with eyes of pale blue fire, then turned and meandered higher and higher into the night until at last it disappeared.

Anesi stood in stunned silence, his jaw agape, his arms limp at his sides. A small, distant cluster of milky

stars was all that marked the spot where the unicorn had finally faded.

"You've still got it, old man," Khare said in quiet admiration.

Shuboz Shuboz sighed as he let his sleeves back down. "I have, haven't I," he agreed. He sighed again. "Now, why don't you escort our young enchanter and his mother back to their cottage. It's time to sleep, now. There's another hard day of lessons ahead tomorrow."

The other wizards crept down to the edge of the sea. They all had their spell books open, and at a word from Shuboz, they rose into the air and flew slowly out to the ship.

"Shad tells me you did quite well with your flying lesson," Khare said with a grin. He gave a slow wink, then, and added from the corner of his mouth, "After the usual bump or two on the old mushroom."

Anesi rubbed his hand over a sore place on the back of his head. "I think I did more damage to the tree than it did to me," he said, matching his instructor's grin. "But aren't you going out to the ship to sleep, too?"

"Khare never sleeps," he answered. "Why do you think they call me *the Watcher*? Get it?"

Anesi nodded. "Got it."

"Good."

As they moved back to the drier sand where Mildi waited, Anesi glanced toward the tree and the shadows where he'd seen his father. Choboz was gone. He hoped, though, that his father had at least seen the unicorn.

CHAPTER FOUR

A NESI WOKE FROM A sound sleep, vaguely aware of a troublesome dream in which something dark and threatening had loomed over him. He felt under his pillow for the blue Chevaux spell book, assuring himself it was still there.

The yellow light of a candle flickered dimly in the main room below. Anesi slipped quietly from his comfortable bed and crept to the edge of his loft perch above the dining room. His mother sat in her favorite chair near the candle, working needle and thread in some bit of sea-colored cloth. It was very unusual for her to be up so late.

Noiselessly, he slipped down the ladder in his night-shirt and padded barefoot across the floor to her side. "Is Poppa home yet?" he asked.

Needle, thread, and blue material all went up in the air, and Mildy followed halfway. She clutched her hands to her heart as she settled back down again and stared, pale and wide-eyed, at her son. "Don't sneak up on a person like that!" she scolded breathlessly, crushing the cloth into a tight ball on her lap and touching her heart again. "You might have been a grue, you scared me so!"

"Your candle would have kept a grue away," Anesi answered reasonably. "They hate light, even faint light. But I'm sorry, Mamma."

She pushed the material down in the space between

her leg and the side of the chair and smiled weakly at him. Her eyes were reddened from long work by the candle, and a strand of hair hung down over her eyes. She pushed it back idly with one hand. "Now what are you doing up at this hour?" she inquired, with proper motherly concern.

Anesi sighed and looked around the room. The light from the single candle cast shadows everywhere. The cottage was full of dark patches and gloomy corners. "Oh, nothing," he said, sitting on the arm of the chair and draping an arm around her shoulders. "Just a dream. It woke me up, and I saw the light. Is Poppa asleep?"

She shook her head and leaned back as she looked toward the door. "He's still out there, somewhere. He'll come in when he's ready."

He knew by the tone of her voice, though, that she was worried. He stood up again, bent, and kissed her on the top of the head. "I'll look around a little bit for him."

She caught his arm as he turned to go. "It's too dark out there," she said. She glanced toward the door again, and this time she bit her lip.

Anesi thought he saw something flicker in her eyes, but she quickly glanced away. He couldn't dismiss a sudden uneasiness, though. He dropped to his knees beside her and took one of her hands in his. "What's wrong, Mamma?" he said. "What is it?"

She forced a smile as she freed her hand and took up her needlework again. "Oh..." She shrugged and buried her hands in the bundle of blue cloth. "Nothing. It's nothing." She reached out and patted one of his hands. "Take a look outside for your father if you want." She picked up the needle and began to rethread it, for the thread had slipped out. Then she added, "But don't go far from the house."

He kneeled there a moment longer until it became clear that, whatever was troubling her, she didn't intend to share it with him. He kissed her again, went to the door, and closed it softly behind him.

The air was still and unseasonably warm. The woods, though, were alive with the sounds of insects and tree

frogs doing whatever it was they did in the darkness, and the boom of the constant surf could be heard, too. The tangy smell of sea salt hovered, ever-present, as did the odor of the rich damp earth and old bark and dead leaves.

Anesi moved from the small porch a little further into the yard. He didn't see his father anywhere.

He gazed upward through the looming trees. The stars glittered like tiny shards of ice in the blue-black heaven, cold and distant and impersonal and utterly empty of any fire. He thought he had never seen them so unfriendly before. He shivered and hugged himself. Turning, he spied the moon behind another patch of tall trees. It seemed to be hiding.

Maybe his father was by the woodpile. Choboz sometimes went there to be alone and think. It was one of his workplaces, and he always seemed to feel most comfortable surrounded by his work. Sometimes he would sit by the great cords of wood, or maybe perch on his chopping stump, and stare for hours into the forest or up at the sky, and never say a word. Sometimes, but not too often, he'd tell stories, always the old familiar stories that Anesi had heard a hundred times, but he listened politely, anyway, for Choboz was his father, and it was never good to remind a father that the old stories were old when *he* first heard them and couldn't they have a rousing good ghost story tonight instead of that boring business about beautiful maidens and handsome princes, because everyone in Frobozz knew that the princes looked like toads and maidens were creatures of myth.

The woodpile, though, was behind the house, and it was dark back there. Up here in front some of the candle-light bled through the open shutters and under the door. The moon was on this side, too. There were no windows in the back except for the kitchen window, and that would be shut. The house, itself, would hide the moon.

He swallowed, and crept around the side of the house.

The chopping stump squatted in the middle of the back yard. Choboz's axe rose up from it like a crooked

flower, the edge of the blade rooted deeply in the rough surface. Three cords of wood stood like old battlements to hold back the encroaching forest. Anesi avoided them, though, particularly in the dark. The rough logs always seemed to be crawling with grubs and spiders.

His father wasn't there.

He walked around the other end of the cottage and stood in the front yard.

A sudden light wind blew across the back of his neck, startling him. It had done that in his dream, too, but it had been the breath of a lipless mouth coming down on him out of the blackness, brushing on the place where his spine and skull joined. Or had it? He couldn't remember clearly. The details all seemed so vague.

He hugged himself again. Maybe his father was at the smoke hole. But to get there, Anesi had to go through the woods. As he stared into the trees, the leaves began to rustle in a breeze he couldn't feel, and the branches undulated. The rattle-music of the insects grew insistent.

Anesi's lips were suddenly dry.

Choboz would come home when he was ready. Hadn't Mother said so? He'd probably get mad, anyway, if someone came looking for him.

He wished suddenly that Fidget were with him. He wouldn't be afraid with his friend close by. Fidget didn't fear the woods like he did, or the darkness. As long as he had his bow, Fidget would go anywhere.

Funny, now that he thought of it, that Fidget hadn't come by today. Or the day before, either. Anesi had been so busy with the wizards and their lessons that he'd forgotten his friend. But Fidget came by every day, didn't he?

The leaves rustled again as if something huge and invisible moved among them. He stared at the lofty swaying tops, and a strange prickly sensation crept up his arms, raising gooseflesh.

There was something in the woods.

"You feel it, too."

Anesi gave a yelp that stuck halfway up his throat and emerged as a choked gasp as he spun around. A huge

black bird floated just behind him, its stygian wings fluttering ever so slightly to keep it aloft. Slowly, it settled to the ground and peered at him.

Only then did he recognize Khare the Watcher. The wings had been the ends of the wizard's cloak as he drifted down on an *izyuk* spell or one of its variations. Anesi's imagination had provided the rest of the illusion.

"Why don't you just walk like a normal person?" Anesi scolded his instructor. "You scared the hair right off my head!"

"Sorry," Khare said unsympathetically. "I thought footsteps might wake up your mother and father." He stared beyond Anesi into the woods. There was something stern, almost frightening, in his demeanor.

"Well, you certainly woke me up!" Anesi continued uncertainly. "I had this weird dream, and I was tingling all over like I do when magic is being used close by. I guess that I was sensing you in my sleep, huh?"

"No."

Anesi felt like a door had closed quietly. He'd never seen his instructor so serious before. In fact, he'd never seen him serious at all. The change frightened him. Why did he stare so into the woods? What was there?

"You do sense it, don't you?" Khare said again in a whisper as his dark gaze searched the blackness among the old trunks.

Anesi stared where the old wizard stared. He did sense something, something that had colored his dreams and disturbed his sleep, something that had made him even more afraid of the woods and the dark than he usually was. He had gone to the smoke hole at night before. Yet tonight he had hesitated at the edge of his yard.

"I don't understand," he said meekly, with a sudden acute awareness of his youth.

Khare didn't speak for a moment as he continued his search, moving his gaze slowly back and forth along the perimeter of the clearing. "You've never liked the woods, have you?"

Anesi shook his head as a trembling coursed through him. "I don't want to talk about it. It scares me."

"I know. So we didn't press you when you mentioned it before. But you sense something," the wizard told him, "even though you don't know you're sensing it."

"Sensing what?" Anesi asked, his small voice quivering. Though it was warm, an unnatural cold seemed to pierce right through his thin nightshirt.

Khare took his hand and pulled him closer to the edge of the woods. Anesi hesitated, hanging back, fearful, his feet scuffling in the dirt, but the wizard kept a firm grip, and they passed in among the old trees. The darkness thickened, and the cottage with its lonely candle shedding light through the shutters and under the door was quickly lost to sight.

"The Great Terror," Khare intoned softly, "had certain..." He paused. To listen? Or to choose the right word? "...allies," he continued, "which slept hidden during the Terror's entrapment. Now they, too, have finally awakened after generations, to serve the Terror again. This woods has been the resting place of one such servant. You've probably always sensed it, even in its sleeping state. That's why the woods frightened you."

Anesi didn't know what to say. But a feeling of fear swelled up in him. They rounded the trunk of a towering black oak whose gnarled branches seemed to reach down for him, and he ducked instinctively with a quiet, unvoiced cry.

They were back in the clearing again just beside the woodpile.

Khare guided him toward the front of the house. "Either you or we seven from Thriff have attracted its attention." He brushed the curls of Anesi's head. "Go now, and get your spell book, and after this, never be without it."

Anesi swallowed the hard lump in his throat, then ran to obey. He burst through the cottage door, just remembering to catch it before it thumped against the inner wall and knocked all the pictures askew.

"Did you find your father?" Mildy asked worriedly over her needlework. "Is something wrong?"

He didn't know what to tell her, so he didn't stop, but

ran past her and up the ladder to his loft bedroom. His hand shot under the pillow on his bed and withdrew his Chevaux spell book. He clutched it to his chest for an instant and squeezed his eyes shut while he caught his breath. Then he rushed back down and out of the house under the apprehensive eye of his mother, who followed him as far as the edge of the porch.

Khare waited in the center of the yard, his gaze directed skyward. Reaching his side, Anesi looked up, too, in time to see the vague, fluttering shadows of the other six wizards as they flew over the trees and descended soundlessly.

"A perfect ten-point landing," Raskil Worrysnot softly giggled. Only the tips of his toes touched the earth, a sure sign that, whatever flying spell he employed, it wasn't a normal *izyuk*.

"How about a perfect five-point takeoff?" Grimbol Grumble muttered, and lifting up the front of his robes, he dealt a swift kick to the pudgy little wizard's posterior. Raskil's face lit up with surprise as he rose an extra two feet into the air and bounced a few times before catching his balance enough to settle down again.

"Enough!" the Great Shuboz Shuboz warned with a scowl. "You've all felt the danger in these woods, felt it since the day we arrived. Now it's awake and on the move, so none of your antics!"

"I'm not a member of the Thriff Guild," Finister whined thinly. "I'm an Orexic! You can't tell me what to do."

"Yes, you're an Orexic!" Shuboz shot back, "and your whole guild, except for you, has already fallen to the Great Terror!"

Finister replied stiffly, "Are you calling me a coward?"

Shuboz Shuboz held his spell book in his hand. He shook it under the Orexic wizard's long nose. "I can turn an egg to ripe guano," he boasted menacingly. "Want to see what I can do to a full-grown chicken?"

Finister knew better than to accept a challenge from a sorcerer of Shuboz's reputation. He threw up his hands

and backed a pace. "Hey, boss! I'm on your team, right? You and me?"

Shuboz forced a generous smile that seemed somehow even more threatening than his anger. He stared at Finister a moment longer than necessary, then glanced at the spell book in his hand. It fluttered open to a page in the middle. He ran his gaze quickly down the page, then shut it again. "Choose whatever flying spell you prefer," he said to all of them in a calmer voice. "Scour the woods. We don't know what this servant of the Terror looks like, so be on your guard. But find it." He turned to Khare. "We call you the Watcher," he continued. "So keep with the boy and watch him."

"Please, sir," Anesi said, stepping forward. "I want to go too. My father is missing."

"Go?" Shuboz wrinkled his nose as he put his spell book back inside his cloak. "Don't be silly, boy, of course you're going. But Khare will still keep an eye on you." He gave a meaningful nod to the other wizards. "And we'll all keep an eye out for Choboz. Now, fly. We meet back here at dawn."

"And the last one back's an old maid," Grimbol grumbled.

One by one, the rest of the wizards opened their spell books, glanced at the proper pages, and lifted soundlessly into the night sky where, in their black cloaks, they disappeared.

Only Khare and Anesi remained on the ground. Anesi touched the blue cover of his book, and it opened immediately to the page where he had recorded the incantation for the *izyuk* spell. He ran a finger swiftly over the ornate lettering, memorizing the words, then shut it. He had no cloak, though, with pockets, nor even a waistband in which to carry the book. At last, he simply clutched it as tightly as he could and prepared to lift.

But Khare stopped him. "Wait," the wizard said quietly, kneeling, and bringing his big nose close to Anesi's as he pulled something from another of the many pockets in the cloak he wore. "I made this for you in the early evening before this evil disturbed everyone's sleep."

He held up what in the darkness looked to be a zorkmid coin, but he'd made a hole near the edge and passed a thin chain through it. He put it around Anesi's neck and down the front of his nightshirt.

"What is it?" Anesi asked curiously, feeling the warm shape of it against his skin.

"It's a zorkmid," Khare answered with a wink.

Anesi frowned. "But what's it do?"

Khare winked again as he opened his own spell book, studied a page, and closed it. "In any decent-sized town, it'll get you five sticks of bubble gum, a comic book, and a pan of fudge that'll melt you right down to your socks."

Anesi frowned again and touched the outline of the coin under his thin garment. There had to be more to it than that, he reasoned, surely. "But what's it . . ."

Khare cut him off with a stern look and a wagging finger. "Didn't your mother teach you never to question a gift? Particularly if it's money?" A hint of eldritch energy crackled in the air, and Khare lifted. Three feet off the ground, however, he halted his ascent. "Coming?" he said impatiently.

Anesi muttered an apology as he glanced back over his shoulder toward his mother. She remained on the porch, watching and wringing her hands worriedly. He waved to her and flashed a reassuring smile, then formed the words of the *izyuk* spell in his head. At once all sensation of weight left him, and he floated up to his instructor's level.

Without a word, Khare climbed above the treetops. Again, he stopped and waited.

Anesi swallowed. That was higher than he had gone under the Treeskimmer's tutelage. *Izyuk* really didn't last that long, either, compared to other flying spells. It was a long way to fall if it wore off unexpectedly. Still, he called on his courage and drifted up to join Khare. "Can we wait one moment more?" he asked sheepishly, bunching his shoulders up around his ears as if he expected a blow in return for his question.

Khare only looked at him and waited patiently while

Anesi opened his spell book and once again memorized the words of the *izyuk* incantation. Now, if he started to fall he had only to speak them again. "Just in case," he said, closing the book to signify that he was ready.

A big grin spread slowly over Khare's face. "You're learning," he said approvingly. Then, together, they flew northward over the tops of the trees.

CHAPTER FIVE

A NESI TINGLED ALL over as he sailed through the night. The sensations of magic made an unseen vibration in the air. He could feel his own power crackling about him, but he could feel Khare, too, and the other wizards of Thriff as they maintained the spells that kept them aloft. Far below, crawling about somewhere in the deep woods, he could feel something else, something dark and chilling—the servant of the Great Terror.

He thought little of that evil, though. A greater sense of wonder filled him as he stared right and left, up and down. The stars burned brighter than he had ever seen them, and the slender moon poured random streams of liquid silver on the swaying treetops below. The wood seemed to him like a strange kind of ocean as it rolled wavelike over high hills and cascaded into narrow valleys, stretching as far into the westward darkness as the eye could see. Each time the wind blew, thousands upon thousands of tiny little flutters added to the vast illusion of watery motion: the leaves, he realized, catching the wind, scattering the moonlight.

He looked up, and the wind of his flight stung his eyes. Still, he smiled. He had never known such freedom. He spread his arms as if he could embrace the world and everything in it. Ahead, two shadows emerged out of the

dark and criss-crossed in a stray moonbeam. Shad Tree-skimmer, he guessed. The fat little man had a way of creating a feathery vapor trail that none of the others had demonstrated. And Raskil Worrysnot. They flew at a pace Anesi could not yet achieve. One of them flew a loop-the-loop around the other before both disappeared again.

The sensation of heaviness grew upon him slowly, and he began to sink downward. At his side, Khare noted his problem and pointed to an opening in the forest canopy where they could safely land. Anesi had already used his flying spell twice. Try as he might, he could not remember the incantation. The words simply escaped him, but that was the nature of magic. Once on the ground he would have to consult his spell book again.

He touched gently down on the summit of a treeless hill, and Khare landed a moment later. "It's fantastic!" Anesi said breathlessly. "I've never flown so far!"

"Not bad for a kid," Khare answered. "But maybe we'd better walk for a while."

Anesi protested. "No, I can handle it, really I can! I was way up there, wasn't I? Really high!"

Khare came closer and bent down to peer at Anesi's face. He lifted the boy's eyelids with the balls of his thumbs and frowned. "You were high, all right," he remarked wryly, "and you still are. Don't worry, it happens sometimes to first-time flyers. You think you don't feel anything, but you do. The effects are easy to spot."

"What are you mumbling about?" Anesi spoke rapidly through a broad grin. "I'm fine, I tell you, just fine. Let's go!"

Khare straightened and folded his arms into his sleeves, a gesture of infinite patience. "Don't you think you should consult your spell book first?"

"Oh yeah!" Anesi agreed. He looked down at the book in his hand and felt it open to the proper place. "Hey, I can't see the words!" he exclaimed suddenly. "It's too dark to read here!"

"That's my bright young enchanter," Khare answered sardonically, taking his hand in a firm grip. "The middle

of the woods at night, and it's too dark to read! Come on, boy, I think we'll walk a while. It'll clear your head."

Anesi shrugged and closed his spell book. A simple *frotz* spell would have provided light to read by. But then, there still was no light by which to look up the *frotz* spell. He bit his lip, confused, but went along.

The woods quickly closed around them as they reached the bottom of the hill. The argent moonlight, which had appeared so beautiful from above, failed to penetrate to the forest floor. Huge dark trunks rose starkly all around. Bushes and brambles made a treacherous tangle in the spaces between. The beauty and wonder of the world above the trees was replaced below by creeping fear and shivering.

Khare stopped, bent down, and groped along the ground. When he stood up again he held something that Anesi couldn't see clearly. A blinding flash of light made him stagger back. He squeezed his eyes shut and covered them with an arm until the pain faded. Slowly, he lowered the arm and peeked out.

"Sorry about that," Khare said apologetically. In one hand he held a length of twig. Under the influence of his *frotz* spell it glowed with a pure white radiance. The initial intensity had subsided somewhat. "A little too much *presence* in the incantation," Khare explained with some embarrassment. "Nerves, I guess. I've never cared much for dark woods either."

"But how did you see to read your spell book?" Anesi asked as he looked around. The twig provided a rich, bright circle that pierced between the nearest trees and into the bushes and high into the branches above.

"Don't need the book for that one," the wizard answered easily. He tapped his temple and winked. "The older you get, the more experienced, the easier it is to store some of the simpler ones away permanently. It takes time, though. You've got a few locked in up there in your head already, and you'll learn more."

With their light they soon found a trail through the thick undergrowth. It led them around the base of the hill and took a sudden turn into the heart of the woods. It

was just a narrow footpath, a beaten ribbon of hard-packed earth where grass no longer grew. With the twig held high they followed it.

A sudden shushing sound made them stop and look up. Through a gap in the trees they saw the Great Shuboz Shuboz himself, hovering over the spot where they stood, attracted, no doubt, by their light. He folded his arms and looked down at them, and Khare waved. At last, assured they were all right, the master mage of the Thriff Guild back-flipped in mid-air and zipped away.

"Why didn't the Treeskimmer teach me a flight spell like that?" Anesi muttered half under his breath.

Khare overheard. "Because it takes much more control, boy," he said. "A baby walks before it runs, and you learn *izyuk* before *izwow*."

They walked on. For a while they didn't speak, and the noise of the insects swelled eerily in the trees. The round pale eyes of an owl peered down at them from an overhanging branch. It didn't bother to ask their names, just blinked and waited in silence for them to pass.

Anesi shivered in his nightshirt and walked closer beside his companion. A cool sweat beaded lightly on his forehead. He made a swipe at it with his sleeve as a drop-let rolled down the corner of his eye. Nervously, he peered from side to side, straining to identify shadows. Every fluttering leaf made him jump.

"I feel it, too," the wizard whispered quietly. "Whatever it is, this servant, it has passed this way. We must be very careful."

Anesi tiptoed as he listened suspiciously to every sound the night made. He thought of his nice safe bed in the loft above the dining room and of his mother waiting on the porch, and he began to wish he'd never left home. The tingling of his skin became an itch that grew worse with every step he took along the narrow path, and he began to hang back.

Suddenly, a long, bone-chilling howl rose out of the forest, a cold, knife-edged cry that soared up and down an inhuman scale and set even the leaves to shivering. Anesi caught his mentor's sleeve. Khare caught Anesi

around the shoulders and drew him close and tight. Together they stared into the darkness ahead, trembling.

"Somebody has a serious throat problem," Anesi suggested, swallowing hard, when the last echoes of that terrible sound had faded.

"Adenoids," Khare volunteered in a whisper.

Hand in hand, they crept forward along the narrow path. Khare held the shining branch higher, but the enchanted light seemed suddenly small and weak against a newly reinforced night. Anesi wondered if they shouldn't extinguish it altogether. It made them an easy target for anything with a curiosity greater than a rock's. On the other hand, without a light they would be quickly lost in this woods. He glanced upward nervously. The branches were too thick to let them fly.

Anesi bit his lip, feeling quietly trapped.

The path ended abruptly on the edge of a large clearing. A bit of moonlight spilled over the tops of the trees, exposing the shattered ruins of a cottage. The dust of its destruction had not yet settled, and as they watched, a portion of the only standing wall caved inward. Off to the left from the cottage lay the wreckage of a small barn. Among the scattered debris, the wet, gleaming rib cages of three half-eaten cows jutted obscenely.

"Oh no," Anesi uttered in sudden horror, clapping a hand over his mouth, then running toward the cottage ruins. "This is Fidget's house!" he called over his shoulder. "Fidget! Fidget!" He began to scramble over the rubble, seizing pieces with his hands and hurling them away as he called his friend's name.

Khare wrapped his arms around the boy and pulled him back from the destruction while Anesi kicked and squirmed and cried hot, angry tears. "Be quiet!" the wizard hissed. "Be quiet! You want to bring the evil down on us unprepared? You can't help your friend now! Look, you've dropped your spell book. Where is it?"

Anesi wiped his eyes and stared into Khare's stern face as the old man knelt down before him. "Fidget was my friend," he explained sadly. "His parents lived here, and a baby sister. Where are they?"

"I don't know," Khare answered sympathetically. "The servant has been here. You can feel it, can't you?"

Anesi was quiet for a moment. Yes, he tingled all over, an unpleasant tingle like one itch that covered his whole body. He nodded, tight-lipped.

Khare squeezed both of Anesi's hands in his. "Now, where is your spell book?"

"I must have dropped it over there," Anesi said, pointing to the path at the edge of the clearing. He freed himself from Khare's grip and went to the spot. Dropping to his hands and knees, he began to feel along the ground. "It's got to be here someplace," he said.

"Wait," Khare muttered. "I'll bring the light."

Before the wizard could join him, though, Anesi reached under a bush. Something shot out and caught his wrist. With a startled yelp, he wrenched his arm free and hurled himself backward into an equally surprised Khare. The slender glowing branch went flying as the two of them fell to the ground in a tangle of arms and legs, cloak and robes and nightshirt entwining them as they struggled to separate.

Khare sputtered indignantly as he clambered to his feet and brushed himself off. His thin hair stood up in five different directions on the back of his head, and his cloak had twisted around to cover the front of his body. "What in the world, boy?" he yammered as he adjusted the garment and refastened the clasp. "This is a Stepotz Fizbin design original from the finest shop in Thriff. You might have ruined it!"

"Something grabbed me!" Anesi explained in a rush. "There's something under that bush!" He snatched up the lighted branch that Khare had dropped.

"Are you sure it wasn't your imagination?" the wizard questioned. "Maybe a leaf brushed your hand." But even as he said it he crept forward with Anesi and peered into the shrubbery. Side by side, they got down on their knees and pushed the glowing branch before them.

"My spell book!" Anesi said suddenly, snatching the blue Chevaux leather volume out of the dirt, glad that he

had found it. He brushed some filth from the spine, then winnowed into the thicket.

From the deep foliage two wide glowing eyes peered back at them. Whatever it was in there, however, it made no threatening move, and Anesi slid the light a bit closer. Someone huddled among the thickest branches, hugging knees to chest. The face was nearly hidden under dirt, and the arms were scored with dark scratches. But the figure clutched the end of a small bow, and a quiver full of arrows lay at his feet.

"Fidget!" Anesi cried, scrambling in after his friend. Fidget looked at him with a sad, moist look, but there was no real recognition in his eyes, no reaction in his body.

"Let's get him out of there," Khare said. Despite his claims about the expense of his cloak, the wizard had dropped to his belly to thrust his head among the bushes the better to see.

"What's wrong with him?" Anesi asked worriedly. He took Fidget's limp hand and urged his friend out of the thicket. When Fidget didn't cooperate, he began gently to drag him. "Why won't he talk to us?"

"He probably recognizes you," Khare answered. "That's why he made a grab for your hand. But sometimes when one sees a great horror or a terrible event the mind shuts off for a while." They got Fidget into the open at last, and Anesi burrowed back in after the bow and arrows. He knew how proud his friend was of them.

"You mean he saw the servant?" Anesi asked as he emerged with Fidget's weapons.

"Maybe more than that," Khare replied with a nod toward the poor battered boy.

Fidget stared at the ruins of his house, and huge tears rolled thickly and silently down his cheeks and over his chin. He didn't say a word or make a sound, but his thin body began to shiver and shake. Then, a sob issued from his lips, and he began to cry in earnest.

Anesi put his arms around his friend, and looked with utter confusion at his instructor.

"You say his parents lived here with him?" When

Anesi nodded, Khare's brows furrowed, and he gave a meaningful nod toward the house.

Anesi felt the blood drain from his face as he glanced at the rubble. He hugged Fidget harder than ever, and he began to cry, too, for his friend.

"There's no time for that now," Khare said, laying a hand on Anesi's shoulder. "We'd better tell the others." He reached for the glowing branch. Its light was beginning to dim as the *frotz* enchantment slowly dissipated, but there was still enough to see by. "Let's see, I'm sure a *filfre* spell should get their attention."

He reached for his spell book and drew it out. On his hand it opened automatically to the desired spell. Khare bent closer to the light and began to read silently, moving his lips ever so slightly as he did.

Then from the direction of the ruins came the sound of shifting debris and a great roar. Anesi whirled around as Fidget's hands clutched at him. Crouched atop the wreckage of the house was the largest, ugliest hellhound Anesi had ever imagined. It was a giant, a monster, almost as large as the house itself. Its motley fur stood out in all directions in thick mangy patches as it whipped its shaggy tail back and forth and clacked its claws menacingly on the devastated rooftop. Its eyes burned red, and its jaws snapped open to reveal fangs and jagged teeth.

Suddenly its muscles bunched and it leaped at them, mouth gaping and claws reaching.

Anesi froze. He saw his death in those jaws.

But just as suddenly, at the apex of its leap, a shower of brightly colored sparks exploded in the creature's face. A horrible cry of surprise and pain ripped the night as the hellhound twisted in mid-air.

At the same time Anesi felt the wind knocked from him as Khare thrust him and Fidget out of harm's way. The old wizard barely saved himself, however. The squirming bulk of the enraged hellhound caught him a glancing blow, slamming him flat on his face as it crashed to the ground with an impact that raised a thick cloud of dust where the boys had previously been.

Khare scrambled groggily to his feet. Not so the hell-

hound. The beast whirled around on him. The wizard lunged out of the way, but those snapping jaws snagged his cloak. With a jerk of its powerful neck Khare was flung off his feet and through the air. But the hound didn't let go of the cloak. Instead it jerked the other way. Khare's feet never even touched the ground as he changed direction. Through tightly clenched teeth the monster let go an angry growl. It gave another ferocious shake, whipping Khare the other way again.

Then Fidget was on his feet. The boy made a diving roll past the hellhound and snatched up his bow and quiver. On the beast's blind side, he nocked an arrow and sent it deep into the hound's left haunch. The monster let go a yelp, but kept its grip on Khare. It spun, though, to face Fidget, and its claws raked the earth, sending a roiling cloud of particles and dust into the air. Anesi flung up an arm to protect his eyes, but as he did so he spied something else on the ground.

Khare's spell book! He must have dropped it when the hound knocked him over or when it grabbed him. The old wizard was defenseless!

Fidget ran to another spot, paused, nocked an arrow and shot. The hound gave another growl as it whipped Khare in a circle over its head and the wizard let go a wild moan. The arrow sank into the beast's side, hung there for a moment, then fell out. Of course, the hide was too tough, and Fidget's small bow too weak. Nevertheless, it lunged at Fidget and took a swipe at him with one front paw. Fidget danced lithely out of the way as Khare crashed to the ground. The wizard's ride wasn't over yet, though. The hound still had him by the cloak, and in an instant he was once again haplessly airborne.

Anesi knew he had to do something. But what? He had no weapons of his own, and none of the spells he knew were of any use here. He looked around frantically and found a rock. He picked it up and flung it. The hound didn't even notice when it struck its flank. At least Fidget's arrows got its attention. That was what they needed, a bigger arrow or a spear or something.

Yes, that was it! Maybe he did have a spell that would help!

He ran to the ruins of the house. Yes, there were plenty of splintered planks and logs. He found a huge cornerpost with a sharp jagged break at one end. It was far too heavy for him to move, let alone lift and hurl.

But maybe, if he cast an *izyuk* spell . . .

He took out his spell book and it opened at once. But damn, he'd forgotten the silly light! He ran back, snatched up the branch where it lay by the bushes, and dashed back to the cornerpost. In no time at all he memorized the enchantment. But in a flash of inspiration he cast it on himself, instead. All sense of weight left him and he floated a few feet off the ground. Then, still grasping the light and his spell book, he memorized the incantation again. This time he cast it on the cornerpost. It shifted a bit on the pile, and a few pieces of debris went skittering. Then, ever so slowly, it drifted upward.

When it was completely clear of the ground, Anesi wrapped his arms around it, careful at the same time not to lose his spell book or the branch. He could never have moved the post before, but now its weight meant nothing. He climbed higher, pulling the post along.

Below, Fidget fired two more shafts. One bounced off the bony ridge between the hound's eyes. The other lodged in its throat and stayed there. The beast let go a scream of pain and it lunged at Fidget again. The boy moved too slowly and caromed off a huge shoulder, but he rolled as he hit the ground and got to his feet again without losing either the bow or the quiver.

Fidget had its complete attention at last, though. The hound turned toward him, dragging Khare on the ground as the poor dazed wizard struggled with the cloak's clasp at his throat.

The hellhound gave a terrible growl, spread its feet wide, and lowered its head as it glared at Fidget. It clacked its jaws and slapped its tongue over its fangs as Fidget nocked another arrow and took careful aim.

Free from his cloak at last, Khare the Watcher rose dizzily to his feet, stumbled, recovered his balance, and

stumbled again. Just as he finally caught himself, a swish of the hellhound's tail toppled him back to the dust.

Anesi positioned himself high in the air directly above the hellhound. He knew he had to hurry. Fidget was in deadly danger, as if he didn't yet realize his arrows were too small to slay the beast. His friend just stood there, taking aim, and the hound prepared to spring.

The post had to do the job. It had to! He centered it carefully, splintered end groundward, directly over the hound as he repeated the three principles of enchantment over and over. *Incantation, presence, and unnatural effect.* Over and over, like a prayer, he repeated them. And if he removed his *presence* from the spell, the magic dissolved.

He took careful aim, sighting down the post's thick length. Then closed his eyes ever so briefly as he cancelled the spell that held it aloft. The sudden weight of the post surprised him, and splinters pierced his arms as the post plummeted out of his grip. He cried out in pain. Spell book and light went spinning away. Suddenly he was falling too.

The ground rushed up at him as he tumbled crazily, and the wind knifed past his face and hissed in his ears. Stars and trees whirled in a jumble. The world became a cacophony of screams and cries, but he couldn't tell which came from below and which were his own. He saw the ground again suddenly and flung out his arms to catch himself, knowing the bones would shatter.

Mere inches above the earth, he stopped with a scream still on his lips. Upside-down, he floated unharmed. Relieved, surprised, he drew a breath and peered up past his feet into the fat smiling face of a hovering Shad Treeskimmer, self-proclaimed Master of Flying Spells.

"Fantastic!" exclaimed another voice. Isthur Glee settled lightly down to the ground at the edge of Anesi's view and walked over to the corpse of the hellhound. The cornerpost jutted up from the monster's oozing skull. Anesi's shot had been right on target. It had pierced and pinned the horrible beast like a schoolroom science dis-

play. Not so much as a twitch came from the hound. It was quite dead.

Raskil Worrysnout and Grimbol Grumble landed moments later and helped Khare to his feet. The unfortunate wizard's eyes practically spun in their sockets, and his expensive designer sorcerer's cloak was a tattered rag. Still, he beamed proudly when he saw Anesi.

"You did it, my boy!" Khare proclaimed. "You defeated the servant!"

The Great Shuboz Shuboz drifted down ever so gently on a cushion of tiny twinkling stars, which sprang upward and dissipated as he touched the earth. "Indeed, I am very impressed, youngster," he said. "Or I should say, 'young enchanter,' for there's no doubt that you've certainly earned that rank."

"Thank you, sir," Anesi said humbly. "But could someone please turn me rightside-up? My head's starting to feel kind of thick."

"Maybe we should give him a spin first," the Tree-skimmer suggested. "What do you say, Kharie? Think he'd like that?"

Khare rolled his eyes and clutched his stomach. "Don't mention spinning," he pleaded. "I feel like an infotater with no glow."

"I think we should let him down," Shuboz Shuboz said. "That's no way to treat our hero. And we must do something about his arms. Those splinters look quite unpleasant."

Shad Treeskimmer made a gesture with the tip of a finger. Anesi rotated to a more proper orientation and settled to the ground. It was easy to forget about the splinters. He was alive, no bones broken. And the hellhound was dead.

He walked closer to it. Its eyes were still open, though one hung half out of its socket. A pool of blood and gray matter had formed under it, and its tongue lolled out as if to lap it up. "I didn't know they got this big," he said meekly.

"True hellhounds don't," said Shuboz, coming to his side. "But this is a servant of the Great Terror."

"Just a shadow of what you will face later," Grimbol Grumble said morosely from behind him.

Khare came to Anesi's side and slipped an arm protectively around his shoulders. "Let's not think about that now," he said. "We have to find out where this beast has been sleeping. Our young enchanter has won the right to claim its treasures."

"Treasures?" Anesi asked.

"You'll see," Khare told him, rumpling his hair. "But it can wait until morning light. Something this big will have left an easy trail to follow. Right now, let's get you home and bandage those arms."

"Fidget!" Anesi said, looking around for his friend. Then, with sudden remembrance, "And my father!"

"Your friend is right here," said Isthur Glee, and Fidget, indeed, stood by the wizard's side.

"And your father will have to wait until morning, too, if he hasn't already wandered home." Suddenly Shuboz Shuboz turned in a circle. "Speaking of missing people, where's Finister?"

CHAPTER SIX

HALFWAY HOME

they found the wizard from Orexia asleep beneath a tree. A *filfre* spell from Raskil Worrysnot and a miniature fireworks display right under Finister's nose brought him awake quickly enough. Sheepish and sleepy-eyed, he cast a hasty flying spell and chased along after them.

Anesi and Fidget flew along with the aid of Shad Treeskimmer's magic. Shuboz Shuboz forbade Anesi to fly under his own power, explaining that fatigue, or the pain in his arms, or simple overuse of a spell by one so young could weaken it and lead to a repeat of the disaster he had so nearly experienced. An enchanter he was, but still inexperienced and with much to learn.

Mildi was still waiting anxiously on the porch when they returned. As soon as Anesi's feet touched the ground again he ran to her and threw his arms around her, but he recoiled at once as the sudden contact reminded him of the splinters.

Mildi heard his sharp intake of breath, and her face wrinkled in fearful concern as she saw his arms. Then her features recomposed themselves into a familiar resolve as she took his hand gently but firmly in her own and drew him inside, where she sat him down at the table. "Stay right there," she instructed, as she headed for the kitchen, "and don't move."

One by one, the wizards of Thriff filed into the house. Khare and Shuboz Shuboz took seats at the other end of the table and began to whisper together. When Mildi returned from the kitchen she gave them a withering look and set down the pan of water, the soft cloths, and the tweezers she carried.

"What in the world have you gotten my son into?" she scolded, as she dipped one of the cloths into the water and dabbed away the dried trails of blood that covered Anesi's arms. Anesi tried to flinch away, but her free hand held both his wrists.

"He has done a great deed, madam," Shuboz Shuboz answered sternly. "Single-handedly, he killed a servant of the Great Terror."

"I'm an enchanter, Mamma." Anesi said, the words hissing sharply between his teeth as he bore the pain of her ministrations.

"You're a mess!" she snapped. She wiped away the last tracks of blood and reached for the tweezers. "I want you all out of here in the morning," she continued, without looking up from her fork. With a tug she pulled free the first long sliver of black wood. Anesi's mouth flew open in soundless surprise, but she pushed his chin back up with the knuckle of an index finger and probed for the next one. "There's been no peace in this house since you came. I don't care if you were all friends of my father. You've overstayed your welcome by trying to draw my son into your silly schemes. You'll please be gone when the sun comes up." She drew out another long splinter, and Anesi gave a little cry, which she only pretended to ignore. "I'll give you breakfast to send you on your way."

Khare looked warily at Shuboz Shuboz. The other wizards stopped milling about and stood stock still, all eyes on their leader. There was a long tense pause.

"Silly schemes?" said the master of the Thrift Guild in a strangely quiet voice. The Great Shuboz Shuboz arched one eyebrow as he glared at Mildi.

Mildi's hand darted out suddenly, and she clacked her tweezers twice under Shuboz's very nose. The old wizard turned pale. Then his face clouded in anger. But

Anesi's mother was having none of it. "You don't scare me, you old fool!" she said easily. "I'm just a housewife. You want to turn me into a toad? Well, do it. But you still better be gone by morning, or I'll give you warts."

Before Shuboz Shuboz could reply, the door opened again. Fidget stood framed in the doorway for an instant as he looked around, sad-eyed. He still carried his bow and quiver in one hand.

"Good heavens, child!" Mildi exclaimed, abandoning the argument when she saw her son's friend. "What are you doing here this time of night? The woods aren't safe!"

"I almost forgot, Mamma," Anesi said meekly, taking the opportunity to draw his arms away and cradle them on the spell book in his lap. "The hellhound—that servant thing—wrecked his house. His parents are dead, Mamma."

Mildi's jaw fell open, and her eyes misted over as she looked back at the unfortunate boy in her doorway. "Oh, Fidget!" she said softly, wiping her hands on her apron as she got up and went to him. She touched his shoulder and drew him into the house and looked around for a place to give him to sit. She steered him toward the plushiest chair in the house—Choboz's chair—but Grimbol Grumble was in it. "Get up!" she hissed in a whisper. "Get up, I say!" she hissed again, and when the disgruntled wizard failed to move fast enough to suit her she gave him a kick in the ankle to hurry him along, and didn't even see his threatening scowl as she eased Fidget into the chair and patted his head. "You poor child!" she cooed. "You just let me finish with Anesi, and I'll take care of your scratches and get you a small something to eat. I know you must be hungry."

Fidget said nothing. He met her worried stare coolly, and then his gaze left her face and wandered about the room.

Mildi's brows furrowed, and she looked to her son.

"He hasn't said anything since we found him, Mamma," Anesi told her.

"Here it is!" Isthur Glee exclaimed suddenly, beam-

ing. For some time he'd been rummaging through the inner pockets of his sorcerer's cloak, taking things out and putting them back, frowning and scratching his head, pursing his lips and giving thoughtful looks as he rummaged some more. Now he held up a tiny vial of reddish-orange liquid and squinted as he read the label in the faint candlelight. "Yes, this is it! Right here on the label it says, *Govake—heal minor wounds. Not to be taken internally.* This will really help his arms. Works in no time!"

Mildi looked around and sighed. Ever so gently, she pried the bow and quiver from Fidget's hands and set them against the wall. Then she patted his head again. "You'll stay with us, and everything will be all right. We'll be your family now," she said. She returned to the table and picked up the tweezers. Reluctantly, Anesi gave her his arms again, and she went to work.

Isthur Glee tiptoed across the room and set the vial at her elbow, then slipped quietly out. The others followed wordlessly. Shuboz Shuboz was the last to leave, but he hesitated at the door. "I'm sorry, madam, that we have abused your hospitality. But we can't leave just yet." He closed the door as he went out.

Mildi pretended not to notice. She worried at a particularly deep splinter, causing her son no little pain, though he bit his lip to keep from crying out. "Sorry," she mumbled. "If there was just a little more light."

Anesi glanced down at his spell book. "I could cast a *frotz* spell . . ."

Mildi slammed the tweezers down with enough force to shake the table, and water splashed over the side of the pan as she glared at him with genuine anger. "Don't you dare!" she shouted, rising to lean over him in her fury. "Your father was right! You're not to cast any more spells ever again. We're going to forget this, and we're never going to talk about it. You're going to grow up normal, do you hear me? You're going to be a normal boy, and we're going to be a normal family!"

Anesi stared at her, stunned. His mouth opened, then closed, and he forgot the pain and the splinters. His hands

slipped from the table and into his lap and closed on the blue Chevaux spell book. "No," he told her quietly, rising to meet his mother's gaze. "I'm not." His breathing quickened and he felt his own anger growing, though he tried to control it. "I know what I am now. I've always known it."

"You don't know anything!" his mother said with disdain. "You're a child!"

"I'm exactly what I am!" Anesi shouted back. "Maybe that's not what you and Papa want me to be, but Grandpa Stribel knew! I'm not going to pretend anymore!"

She slapped his face. "You'll do what your father tells you," she said in a lowered voice, "and that's the end of it."

Anesi felt the place where she'd struck him. His cheek stung, and his eyes burned as they misted over. Though his father had done so, Mildi had never hit him before. It was the unfairest betrayal. He stepped away from the table as he stared at her, and the spell book opened in his hand.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, leaning toward him. "Give me that book!"

He only needed to glance at the spell on the page. His heart thundered, and the rage built within him as he drew back from her and looked about the room. Then he pointed at the pan of water and silently unleashed a magic bolt.

A burst of blinding light exploded right under his mother's nose, and she gave a startled cry and threw up a hand to shield her eyes. An instant later, the *frotz* spell softened somewhat and stabilized. A pure white light filled the dining area.

But the book hadn't closed, and Anesi hadn't finished. He read the spell again and fired it again and again. He *frotzed* the tweezers, the cloths, the table itself. He turned toward the living area and *frotzed* the carpet, the paintings on the wall, the broom in the corner. He *frotzed* the pans that hung by the fireplace and the stool by the hearth, the bow and quiver leaning by the wall. No dark

corner or crack remained. He filled the house with light, a pure light that turned harsh in its plenitude.

"You'd rather pull my splinters by the dim candle-glow, even if you hurt me, when I can do this?" he shouted as he slammed the spell book closed and shook it at his mother. "I don't *want* to be normal!"

He turned and ran out of the house. The last thing he saw was a pair of brightly glowing eyes looking his way as he slammed the door. He'd even *frotzed* his friend Fidget.

He ran deep into the woods. When he finally stopped, he curled up among the moss-covered roots of a huge old tree and cried. It was the pain in his arms, he told himself. But that had subsided somewhat, and he knew that what hurt him most was the look on his mother's face as she struck him and the words she had said to him.

After a while, his tears stopped. He lay still for a long time in the shelter of the roots and clutched his spell book to his chest. He was cool in his thin nightshirt, and he shivered a little when the wind blew over him, but he was not uncomfortable. In fact, he realized, he'd never felt more at home in the woods.

That was because the hellhound was dead. The magic that had permeated the woods and that, even in its hibernating state, he had unconsciously sensed, was gone. The tingle was gone. The itch was gone. The woods was only a woods.

The night, though, was still the night, and it was very dark. He listened to every sound of the forest, every insect, and every stirring leaf. After turning everything in his house into a source of light, he had neglected to bring a light with him. He couldn't even see to read his spell book. Well, no matter. He was in no danger. He would just stay curled up where he was and wait for dawn. He sat up a bit, leaned against the boll of the tree, drew his knees up, and pulled his nightshirt down over his legs as far as it would go.

But try as he might, he couldn't sleep. The owls were

too loud, the crickets too lusty, free limbs creaked and leaves rattled in the breeze. The moss where he lay gave off a tangy odor that crept up his nostrils, where it mingled with the smell of bark and dust. He nodded off a time or two, but never for more than a nap. Each time some sound or half-perceived motion would make him snap awake.

He wasn't sure when he first saw it. In the beginning, he thought it was part of a dream from which he hadn't quite awakened. From deep in the woods came the faintest glimmer, a fairy light that moved among the trees and thickets, eclipsed or distorted sometimes by swaying branches or the trunks of the trees it wandered among. As it came nearer his hiding place, its ethereal glow illumined the undersides of leaves and stout patches of tree bark.

Anesi sat up nervously and marked its progress through the woods. It was beautiful and frightening, yet he watched with awe as it came closer and closer, as he cowered back among the thick old roots. It was directly before him now. He could see the strange radiance through the thicket. Anesi drew his feet under himself and prepared to run. The bushes quivered, then parted.

Fidget stepped out of the foliage, still aglow with the power of Anesi's incantation. His bow and quiver of arrows also retained the enchantment. Against the forest darkness Fidget seemed almost spirit-like, but Anesi laughed with self-conscious relief when he recognized his friend. He leaped up and flung his arms around his comrade, then recoiled, mindful of the splinters that remained in his flesh.

Fidget said nothing, but he opened his hand. On the palm were Mildi's tweezers and Isthur Glee's vial of healing potion.

"Thanks, Fidget," Anesi said, sitting down among the roots again and gesturing for his friend to join him. He held out his arms. There was plenty of light to see the dark slivers under his skin. "Would you do the honors?"

Fidget nodded and sat down cross-legged before Anesi. He went silently to work, and in no time the last of

the splinters was removed. Anesi's arms felt raw and sore, but he breathed a sigh of gratitude. Fidget looked up for a moment with wide, shining eyes. It was hard for Anesi to meet that gaze, so bright was the light that surrounded Fidget, and though he tried, he finally blinked and looked away.

"Let me remove that stupid spell," Anesi said. But Fidget clapped a shimmering hand over the blue Chevaux book in Anesi's lap, not realizing Anesi didn't need to read the enchantment again to cancel it, and he shook his head. Then he held up the vial, unscrewed the lid, and reached for Anesi's right arm.

"Ummm, this is a lesson for me," Anesi said, as Fidget poured a small amount of the red-orange potion onto the tip of one finger and prepared to apply it to the worst of his cuts. "My spell only affected the bottle and lid, not the contents."

Fidget merely shrugged and dabbed on the colorful medicine. It left a bright stain as he smeared it over the injury. At first, Anesi felt nothing but a cool wetness. Then, he jerked his arm away and shook it excitedly as his breath hissed between his teeth. "Ow, that stings!"

Fidget waited patiently until Anesi gathered his courage and held out his arm again. Each time Fidget applied the potion Anesi gave a sharp whistle and made a face, but soon enough the job was done. Fidget scooted over beside Anesi, and the two of them settled with their backs to the tree.

"At least you've got your clothes," Anesi said after a while, breaking a long silence as he tugged his nightshirt down around his ankles again. He looked sideways at his friend. The light surrounding Fidget seemed just beginning to weaken. The bow and the arrows, however, and the bottle and tweezers still shone as brightly as ever. Perhaps that particular spell didn't last as long on a person.

"What do you think we should do now?" Anesi asked after another long silence. Fidget didn't respond. He sat with his bow on his lap and the quiver of arrows between his knees. Every now and then he raised a single

shaft half out of the quiver, rotated it a few times between his fingers, and let it fall back with the others.

Anesi frowned as he tried to think. He stared into the woods in the direction of his house. He didn't want to go back there, not now. He closed his eyes and thought and thought. He opened them again and stared in a different direction. At last he tapped Fidget on the shoulder.

"You tracked me here, didn't you?" he said as an idea took form in his head. Fidget nodded without looking back at him. "Even in the darkness?" Anesi continued. "I knew you were good in the woods, but that's better than good." He hesitated again and got to his feet. Moving a few paces away from the tree, but still well within the circle of Fidget's glow, he turned in a slow circle. "Do you think we could find the hellhound's secret lair, the place where it slept all these years?"

Fidget drew an arrow half out of his quiver and let it slide back. Slowly, he slipped the quiver's strap over one shoulder. When it was settled in place between his shoulder blades he picked up his bow and rose and moved languorously off into the woods.

Anesi made another face as he grabbed up his spell book, the empty vial, and his mother's tweezers and set off after his friend. Fortunately, bathed in light as he was, Fidget was easy to follow. But was Fidget searching for the hellhound's trail, or simply walking away in disgust? A moment later, he got his answer as Fidget paused, turned around, and waited for him to catch up.

Fidget knew the woods better than anyone except, maybe, old Felbor the Hermit, who had taught him. Felbor was a legend in these parts. Nobody knew exactly how old he was or where he originally came from, but he kept to himself up on Caper's Hill and tolerated no visitors at all, except for Fidget. The two of them shared a particular bond because years ago Felbor had pulled Fidget from the jaws of a deadly nabiz, an ugly creature, mostly mouth and teeth. They had become fast friends after that, and Felbor had taught Fidget every bit of woodcraft he knew.

That knowledge served them well now. Fidget picked

the way carefully and with confidence, his light revealing familiar landmarks. Soon they found themselves on a well-trod path. Dry leaves rasped and cracked underfoot. They brushed aside overhanging limbs that threatened to scratch their faces. Anesi began to whisper and mutter, mostly to himself, but also in the hope of drawing some response from his friend. Fidget, though, kept his silence.

A stench began to ride the night wind. Anesi lifted his nose and sniffed as he walked behind Fidget. The odor wafted in his nostrils, then faded before he could identify it. It came again as the breeze picked up, strong enough to fill his senses. An instant later the path emerged into a clearing. At the center of the clearing lay an all-too-familiar ruin.

Fidget stopped and stared at the wreckage of his home. Wordlessly, Anesi crept to his side and took his hand. He could feel Fidget's trembling, but still his friend said nothing. He put an arm around Fidget's shoulders. Fidget looked sideways at him, then looked away. Finally he shrugged free of Anesi's embrace. Slowly, never looking again at the debris, he began to search around the clearing's circumference.

Anesi, however, couldn't resist a look at the huge corpse of the monster hellhound. The cornerpost still jutted from its skull, and its black tongue still lolled between its teeth. Its feet splayed in the four directions, and a thick ichorous pool had congealed around the beast. Maybe he should have felt some pride that he had killed such a creature, but all he felt was the same familiar fear as when he had faced it alive. There were other servants, the wizards had said, and there was the Great Terror waiting for him.

On the side by the barn, or what was left of the barn, they found a wide trail of destruction that led deeper into the forest. Branches had been snapped from their trees, and bushes had been trampled flat. Small saplings had been broken in half. A few paces along the trail lay the chewed remains of yet another of the family's milk cows, its ribs cracked open, its entrails spilled over the earth.

Anesi felt suddenly ashamed for bringing his friend

back to a place of such grief. "We don't have to do this," he said abruptly. "We can go back."

But Fidget shook his head and continued deeper into the woods along the path of destruction the hellhound had made.

They made better time, too, for the trail would have been obvious even in complete darkness. Anesi, though, made sure he stayed well within Fidget's circle of radiance. Unlike his friend, his feet were bare, and he was all too mindful of splinters from shattered branches and twigs with sharp ends.

When Fidget stopped, Anesi almost bumped into him. A gaping hole opened in the earth, and the path descended into it at a steep angle. Plainly the beast had risen from this pit, for a wall of trees loomed on the hole's far side and the thickets grew unbroken.

Anesi swallowed and clutched his spell book against his heart. Khare had said something about a treasure, and about it being his because he'd killed the hound. Standing on the lip of the creature's lair, though, and peering down into the place where it had slept for unknown ages, he wondered whether he really wanted a treasure.

"Maybe we should wait for the wizards," Anesi suggested uneasily.

Fidget just looked at him as he drew an arrow from his quiver. The shaft shone like a dazzling beam of solid radiance as he set it to the shimmering string of the bow. He looked like a sad woodland godling as he started down into the darkness.

Anesi sighed. "Ring around the rosie," he muttered, rolling his eyes skyward. The first hint of dawn filtered down through the leaves. "The pig is in the pen. Cook it up and carve it up. All fall in." It was only a nursery rhyme, he told himself. So why did it come to mind now? And why did it sound so appropriate?

CHAPTER SEVEN

T

HE TUNNEL LED DEEP-er and deeper into the ground. The smells of damp earth and mold hung in the air, almost as potent as the lingering reek of the hellhound. Anesi held his nose until his mouth grew dry from breathing through it and he remembered they had brought nothing to drink. For that matter, they'd brought nothing to eat, though this was no time to think of food.

Fidget still provided plenty of light, though his glow had faded noticeably. His bow and arrows, however, and the quiver and the bottle and the tweezers still shone as bright as ever.

Unexpectedly, the ground turned slick. Anesi gave a whoop and found himself briefly airborne before he landed roughly on his backside. "Yuck!" he cried, shaking filth from his hands. "Mud! How did this get down here?" He wiped his hands on his nightshirt as he glanced upward. The roof of the tunnel was now a twisted mass of roots, which, no doubt, had carried water down from the surface. He started to get up. "Oh no," he cried again, suddenly realizing his hands were empty. He got to his feet and turned frantically. "Look at my book!" he said despairingly, snatching the volume up out of the muck. He grabbed a handful of his shirttail and did his best to clean the fine blue leather. "It'll be stained forever,

curse it!" He shot an angry look at his friend as he continued to rub at the binding. "You managed to avoid it! Why didn't you warn me?"

Fidget just looked at him, then turned and walked on.

Exasperated, Anesi grabbed up his mother's tweezers. The bottle, however, had become half buried in the mud. He spotted it by its glow, hastily snatched it up, and wiped it clean as he hurried after his friend.

"Look, Fidget," Anesi said when they walked side by side again. "We're a team. You have to talk to me!"

But Fidget wouldn't talk.

The path turned dry, and no more roots protruded through the roof. The tunnel, though, took a sudden turn, and a smaller tunnel forked off to the left. They hesitated. The new tunnel was small enough that Fidget had to bend over to shine his light down into it. There was nothing as far as they could see.

"Let's stay with the big tunnel," Anesi said, tugging at his friend's sleeve. "The hellhound couldn't possibly have come that way."

They moved on, and the walls and roof of the tunnel began to recede beyond the range of Fidget's light. No longer were the walls made of earth, either, but of cool, rough stone that sparkled as if it were embedded with tiny shards of glass or miniature gems. Anesi brushed his hand over it and marveled. He'd never seen stone quite like it.

The tunnel curved again. With a start, Anesi realized it was, in fact, no longer a tunnel.

A thousand objects caught and returned the gleam of Fidget's light. Open wooden casks teemed with jewels and coins. Necklaces and bracelets and brooches lay scattered about. Weapons of fantastic craftsmanship hung upon the walls or leaned in the corners or against the casks. Everywhere there were great and small swords and axes and shields, many also draped with long, precious strands of pearls. At the very center of the chamber lay a great heap of diamonds and emeralds, rubies and sap-

phires, and amethysts. It was twice as tall as Anesi and covered much of the floor.

"I bet that's where the hellhound slept," Anesi said, as he and Fidget stared in awe at the glittering wonder of it all. "I want to just sit and look at it for a while!" He closed the lid on the nearest cask and did just that, plopping down, clutching his spell book in his hands between his knees.

Fidget sat down beside him and drummed his heels absentmindedly against the old wood. Every time he swung his leg, every time he turned his head or moved an arm, the chamber came alive with a dancing shimmering as his light rippled over the copious treasure. Anesi watched in delight. On impulse, he leaned over and grabbed his friend, dug his fingers into Fidget's ribs, and tickled him.

Though Fidget kept his silence, he squirmed wildly as he fought to get away from Anesi, and the effect was incredible. The chamber transformed into a liquid dazzle of fiery sparks and scintillant color. The two boys tumbled off the cask as they wrestled, and gems and coins shifted in their wake, throwing bolts of radiance all about them. Anesi watched it all over Fidget's shoulder, and his laughter echoed from the walls. He tickled his comrade all the harder, trying to draw laughter from him, too.

As they rolled across the floor, a cascade of precious stones slithered down from the great heap and half buried their thrashing feet. But something else fluttered down as well, something that didn't shimmer or gleam, something that unfurled as it fell and draped itself over the back of Fidget's head and made Anesi stop in surprise.

"It's a scroll," he said, untangling himself from his friend, sitting up, and straightening his nightshirt before he picked up the old parchment. "It's a *vaxum* spell!" he shouted with sudden excitement, fighting the corners as the paper tried to roll up on him. Fidget eyed him questioningly. "It makes a hostile creature become friendly," he explained. "At least for a short time."

Anesi stared at the page a moment longer, studying

the thin, delicate script and the beautiful illuminations that decorated the edges, then scrambled to his feet. His spell book lay on top of the old cask where he'd set it before his attack on Fidget. He went straight to it, opened it to the first blank page, and spread the scroll beside it. Still it tried to curl up, so he reached down and scooped up a handful of gems and placed small weighty piles at the top and bottom to hold it open. Then he cast the *gnusto* spell, which he knew by heart, upon the parchment.

The words on the parchment began to glow. Then the letters burst suddenly into bright silver-and-gold flame. Simultaneously, fiery letters began to burn themselves into the blank page of Anesi's spell book, duplicating the same swift, spidery scrawl on the scroll. The flames on the scroll dimmed briefly as the words vanished, then flared once more as even the illuminations began to transfer. When the process was complete Anesi had a lovely new page in his Chevaux book. He picked it up and ran one fingertip over it while, on the cask, the parchment crumbled suddenly into powdery ash.

Then he closed the book and looked around. "We've got to dig through all this stuff," he told his friend. "Look for any other scrolls or funny vials, anything you think is curious or unusual." He tucked the book under his arm and began to dig in the nearest mound of treasure. Fidget knelt down by him. "No, you start over there," Anesi suggested, pointing to the far side of the chamber. But when Fidget went, the best light went with him. Anesi found himself with the tweezers and a tiny empty bottle whose combined magical glow cut only a small hole in the darkness that closed around him. "Uh, Fidget?" he muttered, chagrined. "Never mind."

Fidget returned with something like a smirk on his face, but he promptly knelt down and began to work beside his friend. They scattered gems and jewelry everywhere, digging like playful pups in a sandbox, and when that pile was done they moved on to the next. They threw open trunks and broke open casks, searching through each. As they opened one such trunk a huge

metal shield leaning against it pitched over with a loud clang, striking a pike, which leaned against the wall. The pike, in turn, fell sideways, striking another pike which toppled a row of leaf-pointed spears, and a loud rattle and clatter filled the chamber.

When the noise finally faded Anesi and Fidget looked at each other. Each cocked his eyebrows and allowed a weak grin and started into the trunk. But suddenly Fidget stopped. Anesi stopped too, and noticed where his comrade was staring.

Stuck into the armstraps of the big shield was another scroll. Anesi gave a shout and snatched it up. "*Krebs!*" he screamed with glee as he unrolled the parchment. Like the previous scroll, it was artfully illuminated with green vining flowers and gold spiraled patterns. Anesi opened his spell book again and transferred it immediately to a blank page. When the magic fire subsided, the parchment crumbled in his hand. Grinning, he tucked the blue Chevaux book under his arm and brushed the ash from his palms. "This is a wonderful treasure!" he remarked. "Keep digging."

Fidget, though, gave him a questioning look and drew a finger through a bit of the ash that had fallen on the trunk. He held up the fingertip and pointed to the book.

"What's it do?" Anesi asked, trying to interpret his friend's meaning. "Oh, this one's great," he exclaimed. "Watch." He picked up one of the spears that had fallen by the wall, gripped it in both hands and slammed it down over his knee. "Ow!" he yelled in surprise when his knee came closer to breaking than the shaft of the spear. The spell book slipped from under his arm. Embarrassed, he tossed the spear aside and picked up his book. "Give me one of your arrows," he demanded, holding out his hand. "Come on, I won't hurt it."

Reluctantly, Fidget complied.

Anesi snapped the smaller shaft easily as Fidget's jaw dropped and a betrayed look crossed his face. "Don't worry," Anesi assured him. "This is great." He knelt down again and set the two pieces of the arrow end to

end on the floor. Next, opening his book to the new *Krebs* spell, he memorized it and cast it on the arrow. When he picked it up an instant later no evidence of any break or imperfection remained. "It repairs willful damage," he told Fidget with a smile.

Fidget grinned, and as he did so, a large ruby fell out of his cheek. He caught it, and his grin widened. Then, he slipped an equally large diamond from the other cheek. He held them out to Anesi.

"Oh no, they're yours," Anesi said. "You're right. We should take some of this other stuff, too. Help yourself. There's more than we can carry. You pick the jewels, and I'll watch for magical goodies."

Fidget slipped off his quiver. Then he slipped his tunic over his head and knotted the sleeves and began filling them with the largest stones and the brightest coins he could find. He quickly had a bundle of considerable weight, which he slung over one shoulder.

Anesi sighed. He found no more scrolls in the hellhound's hoard, though he was sure there was at least two tons of it he hadn't yet dug through. There was just so much! He kicked a small coronet with the tip of a toe and sent it flying toward the middle of the room. That trinket alone would have kept his family secure for a year. Now it meant nothing to him.

Fidget came to his side. A jeweled crown sat crookedly on his head, and his bare chest was hidden under necklaces and gold chains and strings of pearls. Bracelets adorned both his arms up to the elbows, and every finger wore a ring. Besides jewelry, several daggers and a small sword hung on ornamented belts at his waist. He clinked and rattled with every step he took.

"How can you walk with all that!" Anesi laughed. He scooped up the nearest necklace he could find, a choker band of blue sapphires in gold settings, and fastened it around his neck. It was a bit large, but very pretty. He tossed a couple more around his neck, then added a few bracelets and rings of his own. Decked out, he looked at Fidget. Between them, they wore enough wealth to finance their own small kingdom.

But Fidget, he noticed, was looking at his hands and wearing a small frown. The glow of the *frotz* spell had faded considerably. Half the chamber was filled with shadow. Anesi whirled around, searching for his mother's tweezers or the empty vial, but they were nowhere in sight, buried, no doubt, in the mounds of treasure. He cursed himself for his carelessness.

Fidget gave off enough light to get them through the passage and back to the surface, and his quiver still glowed, and his bow. But just in case, Anesi opened his book and memorized the *frotz* spell again. He didn't want to be caught in darkness. Particularly in a hole deep in the earth. "I think we've got enough," he muttered to his friend as he shut the book. "Let's go."

Fidget scooped up one more ruby and popped it into his mouth as he followed Anesi toward the tunnel.

"Whew!" Anesi remarked when the tunnel took a bend and they started up a small grade. "In all the excitement I forgot how much it stinks!"

Suddenly, Fidget gripped his arm, and they stopped absolutely still.

Six pairs of shining red eyes blinked at them from the darkness ahead. Then seven pairs. Then eight. Then more. Anesi remembered the small side tunnel that lay just ahead, and he bit his lip. "Big trouble," he whispered over his shoulder. "Kobolds."

"I told you it was bad luck when that sea serpent looked at us," Fidget whispered back.

Anesi almost jumped at the sound, thinking someone else had sneaked up behind him. But it was, indeed, Fidget, and those were the first words he'd said since the death of his parents. "Nice to hear from you at last," Anesi softly commented, never taking his eyes from the threat before them, "but shut up now, and move very slowly back toward the treasure chamber. Maybe we can hold them off with a couple of those spears."

"They'll eat the spears for breakfast," Fidget answered, his breath warm on Anesi's neck as the two crept backward, "and us for dessert."

"Nobody eats dessert with breakfast," Anesi replied.

The glowing eyes followed them as they retreated. The first kobold stepped out of the darkness into the circle of Fidget's light. It was an ugly black little furball, perhaps three feet high and just as round. It blinked at them with close-set eyes, and clacked its jaws to show rows of tiny sharp teeth. It spread its thin, stick-like arms and made a threatening gesture with the miniature trident it carried in one hand.

"Then they'll eat us for breakfast and save the spears for later," Fidget continued, picking up the pace. The kobold stayed at the perimeter of the light, and another joined it there. Six pairs of eyes still hovered in the darkness.

They made it back to the treasure chamber. Anesi immediately grabbed the nearest spear and positioned himself so he could watch the tunnel. Fidget nocked an arrow to his bow string. "I don't see them anymore," he whispered. "Maybe they'll leave us alone."

"Kobolds are capable fighters," Anesi answered, shaking his head. "If attacked, they'll fight. If not attacked, they'll fight anyway. I'm afraid we're snack food."

Almost before he finished, a fuzzy black ball came rolling down the tunnel at tremendous speed. No arms or legs or weapons were visible, but there was no doubt it was a kobold. Anesi gave a yelp as it crossed into the light and came straight at him. Then, suddenly, its three-toed feet appeared from the mass of fur and dug into the ground, and a tiny hand shot out and buried the points of a trident exactly where Anesi's foot had been a moment before.

Anesi lunged with the spear, but the kobold's arms and feet disappeared instantly, and it rolled sideways and stood up again. A big smile split the furry mass nearly in half. Then its jaws snapped shut on the shaft of the spear, and the sound of splintering wood filled the tunnel, followed by the sound of crunching and a loud gulp.

"It ate my spear!" Anesi cried.

"I'll get him," Fidget swore, and he drew back his bow string. A streak of pure white light shot through the air, just missing the creature and embedding itself in the

tunnel wall. The kobold gave a glance at Fidget as he nocked another arrow, and it gave a cry that sounded like, "Uh oh!" and rolled back up the tunnel into the darkness where its companions waited. Not, however, before snatching the first arrow from the wall in a swift, smooth motion and swallowing it whole.

A moment later a gibbering and chittering filled the tunnel as the kobolds conferred. Anesi picked up the tiny trident near his foot and broke it. That was one weapon they wouldn't use on him again. He tossed the two pieces down with disgust and reached for a huge sword that leaned against the wall close by. It was far too heavy for him, though, so he settled for another spear.

"What about that *vaxum* spell you found," Fidget asked hopefully, "you know, *make a hostile creature friendly?*"

"Great idea!" Anesi shouted, realizing he should have thought of it himself. The spell book opened for him automatically, and he memorized the incantation at a glance. "I'm ready!" he said as he shut the book and put it back under his arm. His breathing came faster, and the gibbering in the tunnel grew louder.

All at once, eight kobolds came rolling into the light, fur flying in their swift wake. Fidget fired an arrow and missed. At the same time, Anesi cast the *vaxum* spell. Immediately, two of the creatures stood up and smiled. One of them waved a twig-like hand. "Hi guys!" it chirped. "Nice day, eh?"

The other six were on them. Anesi felt the shaft of his spear snap just as the other had, and heard the loud gulp that followed. Cursing, he swung the half he still held in a low arc and caught the munching kobold by surprise as he batted it ten feet back up the tunnel. But the sudden motion, of course, caused him to drop his precious spell book. "Damn!" he screamed, and just managed to kick it desperately aside before another kobold tried to sample the blue Chevaux leather. The kobold grinned up at him. "Suppertime!" it muttered, deep-voiced. "Feed me!"

It made a teasing jab at him with its trident, but Anesi countered with the broken spear. "I'll feed you, all right!"

Anesi shouted, growing angry and frightened. "Eat this!" He waved the broken end of the spear toward the kobold's face, and the kobold, true to form, bit down on it. But this time, before it bit off a piece, Anesi moved quickly, levered the little beast into the air, and flung it across the chamber. With a startled high-pitched cry it bounced off the wall, sat up with a dazed look, and checked its mouth for loose teeth.

Grabbing up his spell book, Anesi ran to the center of the room and scrambled to the top of the huge pile of jewels the hellhound had used for a bed. Two kobolds tried to follow, but one slipped in the loose stones and rolled back down. The other nearly made it to the top, only to be pelted with a handful of diamonds and rubies. Folding up its arms and legs, it rolled back down again.

But another made it up the back side almost undetected. Only a slight shifting of gems underfoot warned Anesi in time. Clutching his spell book in both hands, he smashed it down on the kobold's head as it drew back with its small weapon, and before it could recover, he booted it toward the tunnel mouth.

"Goal!" cried one of the friendly kobolds as it watched the action perched atop a treasure cask. It applauded gleefully and banged its heels against the old wood. "You're some fighter, big guy. But blondie there's in a bit of trouble."

Anesi shot a look around for Fidget. His friend had climbed on top of a trunk. Four kobolds danced around below him, lunging upward with their tridents while he swung his bow in a wide arc to keep them back. His arrows were scattered all about, and his quiver was empty. Behind, unseen by Fidget, two more kobolds had joined forces to lift one of the many spears scattered about. It was almost more than their spindly arms could manage, but they stole toward Fidget's back with malicious determination.

"Look out!" Anesi cried, and even as he shouted his warning, his spell book opened in his hand. He glanced hurriedly at the page, memorized the incantation, and cast it. Fidget's next swing arced high into the air, and so

did Fidget. He caromed into the ceiling with a wide-eyed, startled yell, and shot toward the floor again. Equally wide-eyed, the kobolds looked up, then scattered in all directions as the wildly thrashing boy fell toward them. Anesi watched, horrified, realizing the mistake he'd made.

Fortunately, one of the kobolds didn't move fast enough. Fidget landed right on top of him. There was a squishing sound, and a little trickle of black blood formed under Fidget.

"What the hell was that!" Fidget yelled, rolling off the dead kobold who had broken his fall.

"They were at your back!" Anesi shouted. "So I cast an *izyuk* spell to fly you out of reach. Only the minute you touched the ground it cancels out, and down here the ceiling is the same as the ground."

Fidget got up and rubbed his head and left elbow. "Well, thanks, I think." Quickly he scrambled up the huge pile of jewels to join Anesi. "What now?"

Anesi eyed the regrouped kobolds as he reached down and scooped up a handful of jewels. The two friendly kobolds stood with the rest around the body of their squashed comrade, so he had to assume that the *vaxum* spell had worn off. "Throw something," he said to Fidget when the kobolds turned their way again.

They filled the air with glittering missiles, but the kobolds reached the bottom of the pile and began to climb. The stones shifted under their tiny feet, pitching them backward in small avalanches, but they only renewed their efforts, ignoring the hailstorm of wealth that pelted their heads.

Then, from far up the tunnel came a sonorous voice that lifted in throaty, off-key song. *May all acquaintance be forgot, come the words, so forget me while you may. Your cheatin' heart's a gutter drain that's suckin' me away.*

"I know that voice!" Fidget shouted excitedly. "That's the Borphee Technical University Fight Song!"

Anesi lifted a brow as he threw another stone. "That's a fight song?"

Fidget shrugged. "Well, he thinks it is!" He pointed a

finger at the tunnel mouth as a great hulking creature appeared there.

Actually, it only gave the impression of being great or hulking. It was both, but neither, for though it was squat and powerful, it was only about four feet tall. The span of its shoulders, however, nearly equalled that, and its thickly muscled arms, gray as stone, reached nearly to the knees of its very short legs. Two fangs curled from its lower jaw over its upper lip, and the mohawk strip of purple hair on its heavily jowled head added an impression of toughness that was lessened only a little by the red sweater the creature wore over pink trousers. On his chest were printed the words, *Borphee is for lovers*.

"What is it?" Anesi asked doubtfully. Even the kobolds had turned around to stare.

"Felbor's pet brogmoid," Fidget answered gleefully. "We'll have some fun now."

The brogmoid looked around, and a thick pink tongue slipped out between the upward curling fangs and slurped over the lips. He leaned forward only a little, and the knuckles of his three thick fingers swept the tops of his boots. "Yo, Fidge!" the brogmoid called. "You bring the mustard?" He grinned at the kobolds as he rubbed his hands together.

"Sic 'em, Cubby!" Fidget cried, as he grabbed up another handful of jewels and flung them at the kobolds.

Cubby the brogmoid glanced at the floor and picked up the broken half of the spear Anesi had used earlier. He tapped it on his palm. "Kobold soup and kobold stew, we'll mix 'em in a gravy," he sang in a low voice as he strode into the chamber. "And then we'll blend 'em in a brew and serve 'em to the baby."

The kobolds looked uncertainly at each other. With a collective shrug, they drew in their arms and legs and rolled as quickly as they could toward the exit. But Cubby backed up a step and blocked the way. The spear shaft, a perfectly effective club in his huge hands, swung up and down. Hair flew, and the kobolds scattered, clutching their heads. Their gibbering and chattering took

on a new tone, and they cast uncertain glances at the brogmoid.

Again they regrouped. Forming a single line, they rushed Cubby. He swung the spear shaft like a bat, driving kobolds right, left, right, left before they dodged away and fled into the corners. The gibbering increased, and a moment later, the surviving kobolds marched to the center of the chamber with their hands up.

"You win, big guy!" the kobold leader said. Slowly, he lowered his right hand in an offer to shake with Cubby. "Buddies forever?"

Cubby tapped the club on his palm and glared at the kobold who addressed him. At last, he leaned forward and took the tiny hand between a thumb and forefinger and gently shook it. "Kobolds okay," he said in a strangely softened voice. "Nice playmates. Good times, eh?"

The kobold leader nodded agreement, then beckoned to his comrades. One by one, each kobold shook hands with Cubby and filed out and up the tunnel. When they were all gone, Anesi and Fidget slid down the pile of gems and ran to Cubby's side.

"That was terrific, Cubby!" Fidget cheered, rumpling the purple mohawk and bending down to hug the brogmoid. "You saved our lives!"

But the brogmoid only looked up at him, and his arms went limp. Huge tears welled up in his eyes and oozed in streams down his gray jowls. A massive shudder passed through him. His shoulders slumped suddenly, and he sank down to the floor and blubbered like a child.

Anesi and Fidget exchanged mystified glances, then knelt down beside the miserable creature. Fidget took one of the huge hands in his and patted it sympathetically. "Cubby!" he said. "What's wrong? What is it?"

The brogmoid wiped the tears from one eye and sniffed. Then he rubbed the sleeve of his red sweater over his nose and sniffed again. "Oh, Fidge!" he cried, reaching out to hug Fidget. "Felbor's dead!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

"CUBBY IN THE

woods to..." Cubby gave Anesi a look, then pulled Fidget close and whispered in his ear. Fidget nodded and grinned at Anesi. "Fidge know," the brogmoid continued sheepishly, wiping his nose again before going on with his story. "Suddenly comes horrible howl and crash. When Cubby hurry back, find cabin crushed. Find Felbor under rubble." Tears spilled afresh down his cheeks. The front of his sweater was already soggy. "After a while," he said, "sad Cubby get angry and decide to follow stink-trail of bad-thing that kill Felbor. Choke thing's neck. Crush bones. But trail lead Cubby straight to Fidge's house!" He threw his arms around Fidget and hugged him fiercely. "Bad-thing get Fidge's house, too! So glad Fidge get away! Then I find dead bad-thing that look like hellhound but couldn't be, and I find Fidge's stink-trail. So I follow Fidge here!"

"We're glad you did," Anesi said, patting the brogmoid on the shoulder. "You saved our lives."

Cubby the brogmoid nodded. "Beat up silly kobolds good."

Anesi frowned and made a secret gesture for Fidget to join him a little way off. Under the pretext of picking up Fidget's arrows, they held a private chat away from the brogmoid's ears. "What happened to his speech?"

Anesi whispered. "He sounded so tough before. Now, he's like a child!"

Fidget glanced back over his shoulder as he slipped a couple of shafts into his quiver. "He is a child, sort of," he explained. "You've never been around a brogmoid before, have you?"

Anesi shook his head.

"They mostly keep to themselves in these northern parts, and you've only been up here a few years or so." They looked back at Cubby. The brogmoid sat with his legs open and splayed out before him. His hands hung limply folded in his lap, and his shoulders slumped. He looked thoroughly miserable. "They're about as intelligent as an average three-year-old. In fact, Cubby's pretty advanced for a brogmoid. He manages to make sense."

"But the tough-talk!" Anesi persisted.

"Well, Cubby's had kind of a strange history." Fidget worried the point of one of his shafts out of the wood of an old trunk. "Apparently, he spent a few years as the mascot of one of the street gangs that roam the docks of Port Borphée. Now, brogmoids are great imitators, and as near as old Felbor could ever guess, Cubby must have picked up their slang. He can imitate it perfectly, but he only ever resorts to it in fight situations. Otherwise, he's like that, like a child. It's like there's two people inside him." Fidget leaned on the trunk for a moment and looked thoughtful as he remembered the old man. "Felbor used to tease him about it and call him "Clubby" when the tough side came out. Now that Felbor's gone, I guess I'll have to take care of him."

Anesi picked up the last of Fidget's arrows and dropped it in the quiver for his friend. "You didn't seem to hit much," he mused wryly. "Was your aim a little off?"

"Damned furballs moved too fast," Fidget said defensively. "And I dropped my shirt with all the treasure, too. Where's that?" He looked around until he found his bundle and slung it over his shoulder. Retrieving his bow from the floor, he went back to Cubby. "Come on, Cubby. We'll look after each other now."

The brogmoid got to his feet and curled his fingers around Fidget's arm near the elbow. "Fidge's friend?" he inquired, inclining his large head toward Anesi.

"That's right," Fidget agreed. "He's Anesi."

"Don't be," Cubby said sympathetically. "Kobolds all gone."

"Anesi," Fidget repeated, pronouncing the name carefully, "not *uneasy*. He killed the hellhound."

Cubby looked suddenly impressed and let go of Fidget's arm. He went to Anesi instead and slipped his fingers into Anesi's hand and clung with a firm grip. "Kill monster, 'Nisi?" He bobbed his head up and down approvingly. "Cubby's friend."

"Buddies forever," Anesi agreed with a faint smile, remembering the kobold's expression. "Now, I think we'd better get out of here."

They started up the tunnel again, and this time nothing prevented them from reaching the surface. Emerging from the darkness, they blinked in the too-bright sun of morning, and Fidget sneezed uncontrollably until his vision adjusted.

A shadow crossed the sun. Shielding his eyes, Anesi glanced upward as a dark figure descended feet-first toward them. The brogmoid bristled and drew himself erect, but Fidget laid a hand on the top of his head to calm him. Obviously, Fidget recognized the wizard just as Anesi did.

"I see you found the servant's treasure," Khare said with a grin to Fidget, and to Anesi he added, "and I trust you found something more valuable than a bauble and a bit of gold?"

Anesi nodded and tapped his spell book, but he said no more. He would give his mentor the details of their adventure later.

"And I further trust this creature is some friend of yours," Khare ventured, leaning toward Cubby with the intent of petting his ears.

"Watch it, needle-nose!" Cubby growled, slipping into his street-gang attitude, backing a step, and spread-

ing his hands in a wrestler's pose as he glared at the wizard. "You gonna pay for a piece o' this meat!"

"Relax, Cubbo!" Fidget said, rapping his knuckles on the brogmoid's skull. "He's on our side! He helped kill the hellhound, too."

Khare's grin broadened into a smile of true delight as he looked at Fidget. "You can speak again! I'm glad, my boy, though I knew it was just a matter of time."

Cubby's features immediately softened, and he meekly presented himself for scratching. "Cubby sorry," he mumbled. "No offense?"

Khare delivered a scratch between the brogmoid's ears with the tip of one nail. "No offense at all," he assured Cubby. He looked at Anesi as he spoke. "Quite a bodyguard you've got here. I haven't seen a brogmoid in years." He let go an abrupt sigh, stepped back, and clapped his hands briskly. "But no more time to waste. Your journey has begun, young enchanter."

Anesi stared at the Thriff wizard. "What?"

"It would be unwise for you to return home," Khare told him. "You must lose yourself in the woods as quickly as you can, but take a southerly course and head always for Miznia."

"Miznia?" Fidget snapped in doubtful surprise.

Anesi clutched at his nightshirt. "But I can't leave this way!" he shouted. "I haven't got any clothes! And my father's still lost!" His gaze darted back and forth between Fidget and Khare, and a kind of panic overcame him. "I've got to talk to Mamma. We had an argument! And there's all this gold to take care of now."

Khare's stern expression melted somewhat as he regarded his pupil. "Are you afraid, boy?"

Anesi met the old man's gaze as best he could and he bit his trembling lower lip. He wasn't afraid. He just needed more time, more time to practice, to learn more spells. He only had a handful of spells. There was lots he had to learn, yet. There had to be. How could they expect him to fight the Great Terror with only a handful of spells?

"Yes," he admitted shamefacedly, in a barely audible whisper.

Khare reached out and rumbled his dark hair. "Well, of course you are," he said sympathetically. "This is the Great Terror we're talking about. We're all afraid as the first vestiges of his power begin to seep even into this far northern land. It affects everyone, and wizards and enchanters are more susceptible to it because it's magic."

"But I don't have any clothes," Anesi said weakly, one hand clutching the neck of his nightshirt.

Khare reached into several of the pockets of his wizard's cloak and pulled out familiar items: Anesi's boots, a favorite blue tunic with white embroidery around the throat and cuffs, and a pair of trousers. "I took the liberty of snatching a few things for you," he said as he passed them to his young student. "Can't have you off questing half dressed, can we? Though properly, this is a task, not a quest. So few people know the difference, these days." He gave a long sigh as Anesi pulled off all the necklaces and bracelets and jewelry he wore, with the exception of the sapphire choker, to which he had taken quite a liking, and shinnied out of his dirty nightshirt. In truth, after their adventure in the tunnel, the nightshirt was good for little more than a floor rag now.

When Anesi had dressed and pulled on his last boot, Khare tugged one more item from the endless pockets of his cloak. "This is from your mother," he announced, holding up a beautiful bright blue cloak just Anesi's size. Like Khare's own cloak, the inside was a maze of pockets.

Anesi grabbed it with a gasp of delight and flung it around his shoulders. "A wizard's cloak!" he cried, picking up his spell book and slipping it into first one pocket then another as he tried to decide which gave him the easiest access to it.

"Well, not quite," Khare answered patiently. "An enchanter's cloak. Let's see how you handle yourself before we promote you." He straightened the garment on the boy's shoulders and adjusted the clasp at his throat. "Now, one more thing for all those pockets, all right?" He reached into his own cloak again and came up with an

infotater. "You might find this helpful," he said. "It can provide you with all sorts of wonderful information."

"More spells?" asked Anesi hopefully.

Khare shook his head as he got up from the ground. "No, I'm afraid not. But your enchantments should be adequate to see you on your way, and you never know what you may find along the journey if you keep a sharp eye out." He ran a long, thin finger over the sapphire choker around Anesi's neck. "Do you still have the zorkmid medallion I gave you?" he inquired.

Anesi nodded, feeling the ornament under the material of his tunic.

"Good," his teacher said. "You mustn't lose it. It may give you courage, and as long as you wear it I will always be near. Be especially sure to wear it when you face the Great Terror, all right?"

Anesi nodded again and peered off into the surrounding woods. They seemed suddenly vast and menacing, though the sun shone down richly through the aging leaves. "But what's the hurry?" he asked suddenly. "Poppa's still missing, isn't he? And I need to apologize to Mamma. We had an awful argument!"

Khare laid a hand on his shoulder consolatorily as he looked him in the eye. "Your mother told me about it when she asked me to give you the cloak. She sat up all night finishing it. And she asked me to tell you how sorry she was. But she is Stribel Wartsworth's daughter, and she knows how important this is. Your father hasn't returned yet, I'm afraid. I promise you this, though, young enchanter. We will take care of your mother and stay here with her. We daren't go back south to Thriff for fear of the Terror's Power. Our experience and years of magic make us even more susceptible than you." He patted Anesi's shoulder again and drew him close. "She'll be in good hands."

Anesi drew back and put the infotater into a pocket of his cloak. "Will you take her these jewels?" he asked his teacher, indicating the bracelets and necklaces and rings he had slipped off, "and protect the treasure down below. Give it all to her." He pursed his lips together for a

moment as he remembered his mother's loving touch and pretty face, and the fear crept up on him once more, and he thought he might never see her again. "She always wanted a new kitchen," he told the wizard in sudden earnest. "All white with lots and lots of light and lots of cabinets and a fireplace." He pointed to the small pile of gems again. "Use what it takes, but see that she gets it, please!"

"I'll see to it personally," Khare assured him. "But there are two more things you need to know before you start, and these are lessons, so listen closely." He held up one finger. "First, the more you use your magic, the more susceptible you'll become to the influence of the Great Terror. So don't play. Use your spell book only when you have to." He held up a second finger, then more. "Second," he said, "and third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh. The hellhound was not the Terror's only servant. There were originally six more, and we have to assume that if this one woke up, the rest are awake, and by now, they will know that one of their number is dead." He folded his arms, and his eyes darkened. "They'll be looking for the killer."

"Six more hellhounds?" Fidget blurted, shooting a glance at Anesi.

"Maybe not hellhounds," Khare warned. "The servants of the Terror can assume a variety of shapes. But because they are magical in nature, Anesi will sense them just as he did this beast. Trust your instincts, and be wary."

Anesi looked around. The idea that behind any tree might lurk another servant of the Great Terror did not please him. It was only by pure luck, he thought, that he had managed to kill the first one. In fact, the poor beast had probably been stumbling around still half asleep from its long hibernation. He shivered again suddenly with fear, feeling as if a tremendous burden were being lowered slowly, sadistically onto his shoulders.

"They're coming here, aren't they?" he guessed. "They're already looking for me. That's why you want me to leave now so quickly."

Khare drew in a long breath, and his nostrils flared ever so slightly as he considered his young student. At last, he let the breath go. "We think so," he answered honestly. "Shuboz Shuboz cast the powerful *vezza* spell late last night in order to glimpse what the future held. Such visions are always uncertain and subject to interpretation . . ."

"But?" Anesi prodded, grasping the hems of his cloak.

"But we clearly saw six huge dark figures flying over the remains of the hellhound, hovering over it like great carrion birds."

It was Anesi's turn to draw a long breath. He felt trapped with nowhere to turn. With this news all his options had been taken away. He had no choice but to go, no choice at all. If he stayed the servants would surely find him. And they might find his father and mother, too. The wreckage of Fidget's home was still a sharp image in his mind, and the deaths of his friend's parents a bitter memory. It almost made him laugh, now, when he thought of how eager and cocksure he'd felt when the Thriff wizards first asked for his help. That seemed like such a long time ago.

"I guess I'd better go, then," he said limply and without enthusiasm.

Khare looked at him with great sad eyes as if he wanted to say something more, and Anesi wanted him to say more, to tell him on second thought he really didn't need to go, they'd work something else out, that it would all be all right, just don't worry, go home and have some hot chocolate. *Say it, Anesi pleaded with his gaze, please, say it!*

Khare forced a thin, tight smile, all the encouragement he had to offer.

Fidget threw down his bag of treasure, untied the sleeves, and emptied his wealth upon the path. He slipped the shirt over his head again. "Well, I'm going with you," he announced.

"Yo, 'Nes!" Cubby barked, stepping forward with a fierce look on his gray face. "Me, too. I'm your man!"

A measure of hope flared briefly in Anesi's breast, but he quickly extinguished it. Neither Fidget nor Cubby knew what they were getting into. There hadn't been time to explain it to them. He couldn't drag them along into such danger anyway. They were his friends! "You can't," he said simply.

Fidget winked at him as he continued to shed the necklaces and bracelets he wore and cast them about on the grass. "I didn't ask, chum," he said gently. "I'm going. That hellhound didn't just kill my parents. You think they were buried under the rubble? It ate them. I saw it. Now you tell me there's six more?" He tapped his bow. "And maybe a chance to get their master, too?" He nodded toward Khare. "I already heard the old guy say 'Miznia.' So either I go with you, or I go alone."

Khare cocked an eyebrow at the way Fidget referred to him as "the old guy," but he kept his peace.

Cubby hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his pink trousers and sauntered up in his best tough-guy pose. "And where he goes, I go," he said through clenched teeth. "And where you go, he goes. So, I go where you go cause he goes, got it?" The brogmoid shrugged. "Now, let's go."

"Maybe you'd better take one of these," Fidget said, handing Anesi one of the sheathed and belted daggers he'd brought up from the treasure tunnel. He kept the sword for himself, strapping it over the left shoulder of his brown woodland-colored tunic, where it rode next to his quiver of arrows.

"I'm grateful," Anesi said to his friends as he accepted the small blade. "Thank you, both. But are you sure?"

"Shut up," Fidget chided. "It's decided. The only thing that bothers me is the lack of provisions. No food, no water, no nothing. No way to start a trip."

Khare touched his temple with an index finger and nodded. "Ah, I can help there," he said, reaching into his cloak. He rummaged about in a pocket, then frowned and dug into another pocket. Then another. "It's here someplace," he assured them. "I know I have it." Sud-

denly he came up with a small ochre vial. He had to squint as he read the tiny label. "*Berzio*," he read, "*Obviate need for food or drink. Be sparing with it, though*," he cautioned them. "There's only a small amount, and you'll have to share. If there's anything else to eat, save this."

Anesi accepted the vial and put it in one of the many pockets of his blue enchanter's cloak, determined to remember exactly which one he stored it in. It shouldn't be hard. So far, he had only his spell book, the infotater, and the vial.

"Maybe we'd better take a few of these trinkets, too," Fidget suggested, bending down to the pile of treasures he'd emptied from his shirt. He sorted through it quickly, choosing the gold and silver coins, a few rings, and a choice bracelet of diamonds and emeralds. "These ought to buy us a meal or two if we stumble across a decent inn." He deposited everything in Anesi's cloak pockets.

"They ought to buy us a decent inn," Anesi corrected. He drew another long breath and let it out. "I guess we'd better go now," he said, turning to Khare. "Say goodbye to everyone for me?"

The wizard nodded, then embraced Anesi warmly. "Good luck, young student," he whispered in a voice choked with emotion. "May the shadow of a serpent's smile never cross your path." Khare stepped back and grinned a little. "And may your spell book grow full as a drunkard's glass."

Anesi matched his teacher's grin and raised his hand in an invisible toast. "Go for the *gnusto*," he said, "that's my motto."

Khare's smile widened as he began to lift slowly into the air. Higher and higher he climbed, waving as he rose into the sun, while Cubby danced below him, waving back. "Goodbye," the brogmoid shouted in a high-pitched voice. "Goodbye, goodbye!"

"Take care of Mamma!" Anesi called after the rapidly diminishing figure, uncertain of whether Khare actually heard him. Then he called in a smaller voice, "And maybe find my poppa." But he knew Khare hadn't heard that.

When the wizard was beyond sight, Anesi turned and faced his friends. Quietly, Cubby slipped his hand into Anesi's. Fidget just folded his arms and cocked one eyebrow. "Well?" he said.

Anesi felt his mouth draw into a thin line. Two boys and a brogmoid with the brain of a three-year-old. Why did he feel like a bug under a giant fly swatter? He closed his eyes and rubbed his lids with his fingertips until all he saw was a red haze. It was time to pull himself together. They weren't just two boys and a brogmoid at all. They were an enchanter, an archer, and a creature that could rip someone's arm off and use it for a toothpick.

He thought briefly of his grandfather. Everyone made such a big deal out of his being Stribel Wartsworth's grandson. But what good did that do him? He didn't have his grandfather's spell book. No one even knew what had ever become of old Stribel. *But wherever you are, this world or the next, Anesi thought silently, I wish you were here now.*

"Fidget," Anesi said, giving his first order. "You know woodcraft best, so keep a sharp eye out for water and anything edible." His friend nodded.

That settled, Anesi turned in a slow circle, surveying the woods around them. He scratched his chin, then ran a finger idly along the neck of his tunic. "All right, then," he said at last. "It's south for us." He started off the path into the woods.

But Fidget called to him. "We're going to Miznia," he reminded him, with something approaching a smirk.

"Right," Anesi agreed, starting toward the trees again. "Miznia is south."

"South," Fidget said firmly, and with a definite smirk now as he pointed, "is this way."

CHAPTER NINE

NOON FOUND THEM deeper in the woods than they had ever been before. The trees grew tall and mighty, and the branches spread such a canopy of leaves that a perpetual twilight hugged the ground. There was little new growth to impede their way. They meandered among the huge old trunks, always moving to the south.

After a while they found a small trickling stream of clear water and stopped to rest. Fidget wandered off by himself for a bit while Anesi and Cubby cooled their feet by wading along the moss-covered rocks that lined the stream's bottom. When Fidget finally returned, he carried a handful of fresh mushrooms and berries, which he assured them were safe to eat. Cubby gulped his share in a single swallow and gave a loud burp. Anesi, however, eyed the mushrooms dubiously. Only after Fidget began to nibble his did Anesi dare to eat. Even then, he spent a few uncertain moments wondering if he'd poisoned himself.

The sun slipped past the zenith. Taking a last drink from the stream, they continued on.

The forest seemed endless. Everywhere they looked were trees whose branches swept the sky. The earth was soft and spongy and carpeted with short green grass and patches of the first autumn leaves. Birds flew singing

among the highest branches, and now and then they glimpsed a squirrel or rabbit or deer. But there was still about the land an overwhelming sense of loneliness that made them walk with a gentle step and speak in whispers.

When they came to another small brook Anesi suggested they should stop for the night. The sun was far over their right shoulders, but there was still enough light to gather food. Mushrooms grew in abundance, and Fidget pointed out the good ones. There were several varieties of green plants too, which they pulled from the ground and rinsed in the stream. On these they made their dinner.

"We should make a fire," Fidget said, as he leaned back against a tree and patted his stomach. "It'll be dark soon, and there may be wild animals."

Anesi leaned back beside him. "Don't worry," he said, closing his eyes. "We'll have enough light. I'll just *frotz* something."

Fidget punched him on the side of the leg. "No, you won't, either. Remember what Khare told you. No magic unless it's necessary." He picked up a twig from the ground between his feet and held it up significantly. "We'll make it the old-fashioned way. We'll burn it."

"A single twig won't last very long, rockbrain," Anesi scoffed with a yawn.

"But a bunch of them will," Fidget countered, punching his friend in the side of the leg again. "Start gathering."

Anesi gave a look of annoyance as he stretched. "I was afraid you were going to say that." Despite his grumbling, he got up and began to look for kindling and stuff that would burn. Cubby and Fidget did the same, and soon they had a supply to last them through the night.

"Now the hard part," Fidget announced, as he positioned a piece of dry bark between his feet. He made a small hole in it with the point of his dagger, then set the narrow end of a reasonably straight twig in that. Taking the twig between his palms, he began to roll it rapidly

back and forth. He worked diligently, but all he got for his effort was raw palms.

"Let Cubby, Fidge," Cubby said finally. Fidget willingly moved aside and licked his hands. "Cubby see Felbor make fire many times."

The brogmoid worked the stick between his powerful hands, and sure enough, the old bark began to smoulder. Fidget was beside Cubby at once, nursing the tiny spark with bits of dry leaves and dead grass. Just as the last of the sun faded from the sky, the first tiny flame erupted.

Cubby gave a shout of joy, cast the twig aside, and clapped his hands. Fidget quickly caught him by the wrists. "Don't fan it out!" he warned, and the brogmoid reddened with embarrassment, a peculiar sight given the gray pallor of his skin.

"Oops," came the brogmoid's sheepish reply as he shoved the fingers of one hand into his mouth. "Cubby sorry."

"No harm done," Anesi assured. "It's only a small flame, but it should last us through the night. We should post a watch, though."

"I'll go first," Fidget volunteered. "Then I'll wake Cubby. You go last, Anesi."

Anesi had doubts about the brogmoid taking a turn. After all, Fidget had said he was only as smart as a three-year-old. Still, he couldn't think of any way to bring it up without hurting Cubby's feelings, and possibly Fidget's too. He decided instead just to sleep the entire night with one eye open.

But none of them slept. The insects chirped too loudly, and the owls hooted. The wind in the dying leaves made an unnerving rattle like the dry bones of dead men walking in the night. Anesi also feared the fire would go out if he didn't watch it every minute. He huddled as close as he dared to the flames and hugged his cloak about his shoulders.

Cubby curled up close to the fire, too. Lying on his side, one arm folded under his head, he watched the dancing flames with wide, unblinking eyes. "Cubby thinks of Felbor," he announced quietly. Neither Anesi

nor Fidget said anything, but Fidget moved from his place against a tree and sat cross-legged near the brogmoid. Idly, he began to run his fingers through the stubby purple mohawk that crowned Cubby's head.

Anesi watched them, feeling strangely alone. He wondered if his father had come home yet, and what his mother was doing. Normally she'd be sitting in the candlelight right now, sewing, or rocking in her favorite chair and staring out the open doorway into the cool, dark night, relaxing for a bit before she went to bed.

Khare had promised to watch after his mother, but was he in the house with her now, or on Shuboz's strange ship off the coast with his fellow Thriff wizards? Anesi felt through the cloth of his tunic for the zorkmid medallion that his teacher had given him. The thin gold disc was warm next to his skin. He missed the wizard—all the wizards, in fact. He missed their antics and the funny things they said and did to each other. He glanced up at the small spots of starry sky he could see through the leaves and remembered a night on the beach near home and a wonderful display of fireworks. Someday he'd make such fireworks too.

Maybe. He hugged his ankles and rested his chin on his knees. But first he had a task to complete, and he didn't have the slightest idea how. He stared into the fire as if he might find an answer there.

A loud snore gave him a sudden start. Cubby, at least, had managed to fall asleep. Grinning, Fidget gave a wink while he continued to stroke the brogmoid's hair, and Anesi relaxed again. After a while he got up and added a few more twigs to the fire. The flames crackled hungrily as he bent over to feed them, and the heat felt good on his face. He held his hands up before the flickering light. The bones and knuckles of his fingers showed faintly through the glow of his skin, and he thought of himself suddenly as a skeleton in a costume, a very small and insignificant skeleton in a very delicate costume.

He felt for his spell book in a pocket of his cloak, reassuring himself it was still there, drawing courage from it as he went to lean against a tree. He turned away

from the fire and stared into the darkness as he fancied his mother might be doing from her rocking chair by the door. It seemed to draw a link between him and her, a tenuous link that he needed just then, knowing they stared into the same night, felt the same wind on their faces. He could almost see her before him, her hair, her eyes.

Eyes! He jumped away from the tree, tripped on a large exposed root, and fell backward on his rump. His heart thundered. High on a stout branch just overhead, round, palely glowing green eyes blinked slowly as they regarded him, and the softest giggle floated in the air.

"Boyeee?" came a faint voice from above. "Hoooman boyeee?" Another giggle followed close on the last word.

Anesi rose clumsily to his feet, never taking his gaze from the pair of eyes in the branches, all he could see of whatever creature addressed him. Slowly he backed toward the safety of the fire. If it were a wild beast the flames would keep it at bay. He risked a quick glance at Fidget. His friend had finally fallen asleep.

"Yesssie!" The voice was feathery soft and feminine, a whisper, a bare rasp like the sound the breeze made as it slithered over grasses and through leaves, like the gentle scrape of the clouds as the wind pushed them across the sky. "Tyrillee ssee thee nowww!" it said, with a kind of muted awe. "Howww wonderful!"

Anesi swallowed hard, his throat suddenly dry. "Who's there?" he whispered back, as he nudged Fidget with the toe of his boot. "Who are you?"

Fidget's head snapped up. "Huh?" he mumbled, coming to alertness. "What's up?"

"Company," Anesi answered quietly without looking at him.

Fidget leaped up, forgetting Cubby's head in his lap. The brogmoid's head thumped on the ground, waking him instantly and rudely, and he gave a low growl of displeasure as his eyes popped open.

"One of the Terror's servants?" Fidget asked, ignoring Cubby as he went to Anesi's side.

Anesi shook his head uncertainly. "For a moment I

thought so," he admitted. "It scared the hair right off my head at first. I don't know what it is!"

"Oooooo," came the rapturous voice again. "Twooo hooman boyeeesss!" The eyes blinked again, then moved and disappeared altogether. A moment later a shadow stirred in the branches overhead, and a form swung gracefully down from one limb to another and dropped to the earth. Lambent eyes winked again, and something came toward them. "Hoomannn friennndsss!"

Cubby pressed between Anesi and Fidget and took both their hands as the creature moved into the light.

She was as tall as Anesi or Fidget, but slender as a spring willow. Her merry face, ruddy from the fire's glow, was nevertheless bright and sparkling and framed with a flowing mane of snow-white hair that cascaded over her shoulders and down her back to her waist. A crown of braided dragonil blossoms adorned her head, and she wore several necklaces made from the same flower. Her feet were bare, and her only garment was a bright red poncho whose hem was embroidered with threads of gray and green. She giggled shyly behind one hand as she crept toward them.

"Who are you?" Anesi repeated, the fear he had previously experienced began to ebb, and curiosity took its place.

"Tyrillee isss my name," she said lightly, stopping a few paces away. She tilted her head quizzically. "Are thee not hooman boyeeesss?"

Fidget jabbed Anesi with an elbow. "She's a dryad!"

"Dyriadnaiad," she corrected with a tinkling laugh, making a brief curtsy. "But hoomansss misssspeak usss dryadsss! Thee musst beee hoomansss! Tyrillee knewww it!" She clapped her hands together with glee and did a quick pirouette. Then, with an astounding leap, she caught the nearest limb, swung up in a swift, agile movement, and crouched upon it. She gave a sweet, high-pitched howl that the night breeze caught and carried through the forest, a sound that degenerated into

another peal of giggles. She looked down at them again. "Ready to go, hoomanss?"

Anesi glanced at Fidget from the corner of his eye, but Fidget looked equally puzzled. Cubby tugged at their fingers and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "Too weird for Cubby," the brogmoid grumbled.

"What do you mean?" Anesi demanded indignantly. "Are you ordering us to leave?"

Tyrillee stood up, executed a neat backflip, and caught the limb with her hands. She swung gently back and forth as she spoke. "Orrrderrr?" she sang. "What beee orrrderrr? Tyrillee go with hooman friennndsss and pretty-pet."

Cubby bristled instantly. He stepped away from Anesi and Fidget and folded his arms across his broad, sweat-ered chest. He clacked his fangs once as he looked up. "Who you callin' a pretty-pet, bimbo?"

Tyrillee giggled again. Letting go of the limb with one hand, she snatched the garland of dragondils from her head and dropped it with targeted ease right on Cubby's brow, where it settled haphazardly across one of his eyes. "Thee are cuddly-cute, little friennnd!" she purred, swinging gently. "Love thee I will. Love hooman friennndsss, tooo!"

"What do you mean you're coming with us?" Fidget called distrustfully as he pulled a sputtering brogmoid back into line. "You don't even know where we're going."

"Not matterr," Tyrillee answered, swinging up onto her limb again. Her face turned strangely serious. "Not care. Tyrillee hasss no one, no one tooo talk tooo, no one tooo laugh with Tyrillee, tooo love Tyrillee." She hesitated and gazed upward through the thick leaves. "Lone-lee here," she whispered.

She drew out the sounds of her words until they were tenuous as the air, but they gripped Anesi's heart. He had looked into the woods on lots of occasions and sensed the loneliness, the emptiness that lurked everywhere in the shadows behind the endless trees. "Where's your family?" he asked.

Her round green eyes blinked, and for an instant the rest of her disappeared as she shifted on her limb. "Alll gone," she sighed, reappearing. "Once, Dyriadnaiad had alll thesse woodsss tooo calll hommme, but hoomansss come up the coasstt innn pretty shipsss. Dyriadnaiad move away from pretty waterrr deeperrr intooo great woodsss, always deeperrr and deeperrr." She shifted again to sit on the limb, perfectly balanced. Her feet swung back and forth like pendulums in opposition. "But whennn Dyriadnaiad moved last, Tyrillee's grandmotherrr, Old Sylba, wasss tooo sick. Such isss ourrr way that Dyriadnaiad left Sylba behind. Onlee Tyrillee stayed tooo care forrr herrr."

Anesi guessed the answer to his next question before he asked it. "Where's Sylba now?"

Tyrillee's form faded again until only an eerie pair of saddened eyes remained. "Sheee isss one with the Great Tree of Alll," the dryad answered at last.

Cubby wrapped an arm around Anesi's leg and hugged him, but he looked up to where Tyrillee's eyes could still be seen. "Felbor dead, too," the brogmoid told her.

"Felborrr?" she purred, her voice rising and falling. "Tyrillee doesss not know Felborrr. No hoomansss come here. Only groooo and koboldsss that don't seee mee."

Fidget stiffened somewhat and shot a look around the camp. "Grue?" he said. "There are grue around here?"

The dryad reappeared as she swung down to the ground and landed in a lithe crouch. "Sometimesss," she answered, straightening. "They neverrr catch mee. Thee fearsss grooo?"

"No!" Fidget said with a not-so-subtle lift in his voice. He slipped his sword half out of its sheath and slammed it back. "What's to fear?"

Tyrillee hung her head shyly, and her hair spilled forward as she sidled up to Fidget. "Thennn, Tyrillee willl walk with thee, hoomannn friennnd. Thee must beee brave." When she looked up again her gaze was full of adoration for Fidget. A sweet smile parted her lips.

"Uh..." Fidget backed up a pace, nearly stepped in the fire, and stumbled to avoid it. "Uh, you can't come with us," he mumbled. "We've got a task to complete, a dangerous task." He looked to Anesi for help.

"He's right, Tyrillee," Anesi said. "It is dangerous."

"You'd be in the way," Fidget added hastily as the dryad moved closer to him again.

"Tyrillee help thee," she said, taking Fidget's hand and pressing it to her cheek. "Tyrillee protect hoomannn friennndsss."

Fidget snatched his hand away and moved to the far side of the fire. "Anesi, tell her! She can't come. This is our quest!"

"Task," Anesi corrected absently. But he wasn't really listening to his friend. The loneliness of the woods was a tangible thing to him. He felt it now and every night like a beast skulking behind the next bush waiting to devour him. The breeze made a soft rush through the leaves and in his ears, and it brought him the echoes of Tyrillee's story.

"We have to take her," he said at last.

Fidget whirled. "What?"

"We can't just leave her here alone," Anesi told him in calmly measured tones. He'd made up his mind, and Fidget's protests wouldn't change it. Slowly, he settled back against the tree where he'd rested earlier and leaned his head on the rough bark. "Nobody can live alone in these cursed woods."

"Felbor did!" Fidget snapped.

"Felbor's dead," Anesi answered pointedly. "When we come to a town or village, somewhere where there's people, we'll leave her. But for now, if she wants to, she can come."

Fidget gave in reluctantly. "Well, if it's just to the first town." He sank back down to the ground near the fire and put a few more twigs on the flames. "Come on, Cubbo," he called. "Let's get some sleep."

As if the suggestion were enough, the brogmoid gave a yawn and ambled over to Fidget. Cubby lay down just

as he had before with his head in Fidget's lap. Moments later, he began to snore.

Tyrillee giggled quietly and leaped up into the tree above Anesi's head, where she balanced on a low limb. She watched them for a time, then stretched out on her belly, one arm folded under her head, the other arm...

The other arm had become invisible. Anesi grinned to himself. Dryads were obviously strange creatures. He thought of asking the infotater for more information about the Dyriadnaiads, but decided against it. She wouldn't be with them long, and right now, he really needed to get some sleep. Dawn couldn't be far off.

He just couldn't sleep, though. He shifted and turned, lay on his right side, then on his left, then on his back. He envied the way Fidget seemed to be able to sleep sitting up, so he tried that. Nothing worked. His shoulders ached and his neck hurt. Finally he gave up. Pulling off his boots, he crept down to the side of the brook and dipped his feet in the water. It had been cool in the afternoon. It was quite cold now. Still, it felt good and relaxing.

A leaf brushed his nose and settled in his lap. He looked at it for a moment, then set it on the water and watched it flow away. Another fell, brushing his cheek, causing him to glance up. Tyrillee had taken a perch above him, her feet swinging. In her hand she clutched a bouquet of leaves, and, like flowers, she dropped them on him one by one. Each time, he picked the leaf up and set it on the water and away it went into the darkness downstream.

"Thee hass a name, hoomannn?" she asked quietly.

"I'm Anesi," he answered, looking up at her.

Her face took on a very tender expression. "Don't beee. I will protect thee when thee ssssleepsss."

She dropped another leaf. It bounced off the end of his nose. Collecting it, he tossed it on the water and sighed. "Not *uneasy*," he stressed, "Anesi."

Sometime just before dawn the leaf game ended. When he looked up again, Tyrillee too had gone to sleep. Some protector, he thought. Her pale hair fluttered

loosely, and one leg lolled in mid-air, but the boughs seemed to cradle her as they swayed in the breeze as if, willfully, they would not let her fall.

He lay back on the grassy bank while the brook purred over his feet and toes. A patch of stars shone through an opening in the leafy canopy. He hadn't had time to study astronomy at the university, but he wondered what their names were. Not knowing, he gave them names. The bright one was Shuboz, and the one beside it was Khare the Watcher. That one twinkling to the left, the icy one, that was Grimbol Grumble, and the tiny dim one Isthur Glee. He looked harder, trying to find stars for the Treeskimmer and Raskil Worrysnot, but the leaves were too thick, and he felt as though he had betrayed them by not succeeding.

He touched the zorkmid medallion under his tunic and thought of Khare and his wizard teachers. Above, a huge winged shadow passed over the starry opening. No, not so huge. Only a bird. But it made his heart beat faster, and it filled him with visions of the Great Terror and its servants, and he rolled over on his side and softly cried into the grass.

The last time, he told himself, biting his lip. This is the last time.

CHAPTER TEN

F

OR TWO MORE DAYS they followed the narrow brook southward. They drank often from its banks, and when they tired of the plentiful mushrooms Tyrillee showed them other things to eat, roots from the ground, seeds, and certain leaves and flower petals to vary their diet. Twice Fidget tried to shoot squirrels for meat, but he lost two good arrows, and none of them knew how to clean and gut game anyhow.

"If only the arrows still glowed," he grumbled, "they'd be easy to find." But the *frotz* spells on his weapons had worn off before their first night on the road.

Anesi's feet and legs ached terribly. He kept quiet about it, though, and pushed doggedly onward with the aid of a stout, knarly branch that Cubby had urged him to use as a walking stick. Silently, he wished that he could cast an *izyuk* spell and fly and give his poor feet a rest, but he remembered Khare's admonition against the needless use of magic. Besides, even if he enchanted his comrades and took the time to teach them to fly, too, the continual effort to keep them all aloft would swiftly exhaust him. So, grimly, he kept his mouth shut and put one foot after another, but he pulled off his boots and soaked his feet in the stream every chance he got.

Finally, as the sun sank behind them on the evening of the third day, they came to the end of the woods. Be-

fore them, as far as they could see, sprawled a vast plain of dust and half-dead grass that grew in thick spiny clumps. The change was sudden and abrupt, as if some god had drawn an arbitrary line beyond which the trees could not grow.

That's silly, Anesi thought, chiding himself for the observation. We're a rational society. There are no such things as gods.

Still, the change was almost a shock. Anesi looked out from the shelter of the trees and felt a surprising reluctance to venture out. It was too open to please him, too exposed. As much as he thought he hated the woods, there was still a certain safety under the concealing leaves.

To make matters worse, the brook curved away to the left, following the line of the forest as it made a sudden break for the sea. When they started, across the plain they would do so without water.

"We'll make camp here for tonight," he decided, leaning on his stick as he eyed the others, "and start out fresh tomorrow. The eastern coastline cuts in a bit, I think. I'll bet Thriff is just on the other side of that... that..."

"Desert?" Fidget supplied. "Wasteland?" He wore a dubious expression as he stared ahead. Fidget had been born in the woods and lived his life there. "I've watched the ocean hundreds of times, so I know openness," he said quietly. "But I've never seen land so empty."

Cubby came up from behind and tugged on Fidget's sleeve. "Fidge want fire?" he asked, holding up a ready twig and a piece of usable bark.

"Sure," Fidget agreed, "but let's look around for some stones to make a fire ring this time. Things look awfully dry around here."

They found plenty of large stones lining the bottom of the brook and along its banks and made a little circle of them close to the water's edge. Cubby sat down at once and went to work with the twig and bark while Fidget and Anesi gathered leaves and dry grass, kindling, and bigger pieces of firewood.

"Where'd Tyrillee go?" Fidget asked, when their arms were full and they started back toward Cubby.

Anesi glanced around and over the top of his burden. He didn't see their dryad companion anywhere. Somehow, though, that didn't surprise him. "Have you noticed anything funny about her?" he asked Fidget.

"Everything's funny about her," his friend shot back.

"No, I mean the way she disappears sometimes." He turned his gaze up into the trees, searching the limbs and branches for some sign of her, wondering if she might be listening to them. "Sometimes it's only part of her, an arm or a leg." He tried to rub the tip of his nose with his shoulder and nearly dropped his load.

"Let me do that," Fidget offered. Anesi stopped walking. Fidget balanced his burden in his arms and managed to reach out with one fingertip and scratch Anesi's nose.

"Thanks," Anesi said gratefully. "I couldn't help but notice it over the past few nights, the way she sort of slips in and out of view. I didn't want to mention it to her, though. It might be rude. Still, it's strange."

Fidget gave him a curious look and rolled his eyes skyward. "This whole thing is strange!" he laughed. "I mean, it was one thing to watch you shape water, but look at all the things you can do now! And this whole quest business.

"Task," Anesi corrected.

"Whatever," Fidget countered with a shake of his head.

Cubby's voice reached out to them through the trees. "Frobozz, Frobozz," the brogmoid sang loudly as he twirled the point of his stick on the dry bark. "Your beauty fills our hearts. Your quiet hills and somber vales—we love your private parts!"

A particularly shrill note set the limbs above his head to shivering, and a cascade of leaves fell around his shoulders. He ignored it, though, and repeated the line with even greater passion, striking the same note again. From overhead came a pair of loud cracks, and two branches hung at new angles.

Cubby stopped suddenly and looked up at the two boys who flanked him. "National anthem," he explained innocently. "Makes Cubby's work easier."

Anesi dropped his armload of wood and braced his hands on his hips as he threw his head back to study the pair of broken branches. "I think we have a serious environmental threat on our hands," he said to Fidget.

Fidget grinned as he added his own burden to the woodpile. He straightened and brushed the dirt from his sleeves. "Maybe I should have warned you. Cubby's voice is registered as a deadly weapon."

Cubby whacked Fidget across the shins with his stick. "Fidge tell lie," he accused, with a toothy pout. He drew his shoulders back proudly. "In Borphee, Cubby sing to ships leaving harbor to speed them on way."

"I'll bet," Fidget teased, as Cubby returned to his slow task of fire building. "They couldn't get away fast enough."

Cubby stood up suddenly and handed Fidget the stick. "Fidge twirl on it," he said in a huff. The brogmoid straightened his red sweater and pulled up the waistband of his trousers, then marched with great dignity into the woods and turned behind a large tree.

Anesi, thinking Fidget had hurt Cubby's feelings, started after him, but Fidget caught his arm. "Uh uh," he warned. "Not unless you want the Mark of the Brogmoid upon you."

Anesi thought about that for a moment. "Oh," he said, with abrupt understanding.

Fidget sat down with the piece of bark between his feet, set the point of the stick in the small hole Cubby had made, and started to work. For a while Anesi knelt down and watched, but it was slow, boring work Fidget did, and no spark offered itself to the small mound of tinder. At last he got up and followed the brook to the edge of the plain.

The sun was nearly gone from the sky. Darkness nibbled at the few remaining streamers of pink and purple. Black clouds gathered in the east, and in the south the first stars appeared. A light breeze lifted a veil of dust

from the plain and swept it into the air. An instant later, the same breeze rattled the leaves above his head.

Anesi bent down, cupped his hands, and drank from the clear water. A thin rivulet purred down his chin. He wiped it with the back of his hand as he glanced at his own rippling reflection on the stream's darkening surface. He knew the face, he thought. Same dark hair and eyes, same narrow nose and full mouth, same skinny neck. He hadn't changed, then, on the outside. Yet he felt so different, languid, as if the things that were happening weren't *really* happening to *him*.

He rose and looked southward across the plain again. The darkness there made a steady advance.

"Ssssooo beautiful and ssstrange."

He turned slightly to find Tyrillee leaning against a tree behind him. She ran one hand up and down the rough bark as she spoke. It seemed almost a caress.

"Nooo treeesss," she crooned softly, her wide green eyes staring unfocused. "Nooo treeesss, Aneeessee."

He smiled inwardly at the way she said his name. "Where'd you go?" he asked, following her southward gaze.

"Tyrillee hasss never been thissss farr," she answered, arching her back as she drew one leg up against the tree she leaned on. "Never wanderred the worldsss in thesse treeesss. Sssweet, prettee worldsss!"

Her right arm disappeared from the elbow down. "I don't understand," Anesi said, regarding her with a mixture of fear and awe. "Worlds?"

Tyrillee smiled strangely and closed her eyes. "Beeecausee thee are hooman," she answered. "Theee seesss only the outssside of treeesss." She opened her eyes suddenly and fixed them on him. They were full of a kind of sparkling contagious wonder. "But eeeach one hasss a world withinnn, with treee-hillsss and treee-riversss and treee-skiesss, eeeach unlike anotheerrr, eeeach oooneeeque. Dyriadnaiad play in thesse prettee worldsss."

Anesi listened with fascination. "How do you go to these worlds?" he asked.

She said nothing, but leaned further into the tree, her upper body disappearing, then the rest of her as she simply stepped from the world Anesi knew and merged into the tree. He covered his mouth with one hand, his eyes wide as he stared at the place where Tyrillee had been.

An instant later, she reappeared, stepping through the old bark as if it were no more to her than air.

An entire world beyond his senses. Thousands of worlds, millions, if as she said each tree contained a realm totally unique. "Can you take me?" he begged eagerly.

She shook her head sadly. "Onleee Dyriadnaiad cann go."

"But why?" he protested unreasonably.

Tyrillee made a broad gesture with one arm as she looked at him with pity. "Why iss day?" she responded. "Why iss night?"

Why am I discussing philosophy with a dryad? he wondered irritably, scratching the back of his neck. Still, the idea that such worlds might actually exist captivated him. If trees contained entire worlds, then what of rocks? What of rivers? What of clouds? His head swam with the possibilities. He would have to discuss it with Khare and with the Great Shuboz Shuboz. Did they know? He scratched again, then again. What ever was itching him?

"Seeeee, hooman," Tyrillee said suddenly, pointing toward the distant southern horizon. She left the tree and went to stand at the very edge of the woods, her body tense and alert as she stared at the sky.

Anesi hurried to her side.

Fidget came running up behind them. "We've got a fire," he said. "Cubbo got it going."

"Put it out," Anesi told him grimly.

Fidget reacted with surprise. "What?"

"Put it out!" Anesi shouted, gripping his friend's arm and spinning him around. "Quick!"

Fidget gave Anesi a hard look, then ran back along the bank of the stream to Cubby and the fire where, much to the brogmoid's consternation, he swiftly tramped out the flames.

Anesi turned back to watch the sky. Six huge black shapes winged out of the clouds in the south. The final fading colors of the sunset lent a crimson glow to the tips of six pairs of leathery pinions. The creatures flew swiftly. Nearer and nearer they came, straight for the woodland. The rhythmic beat of terrible wings, impossible to hear at first, made a muffled drumming on the air, a drumming that grew steadily louder.

"Hide!" Anesi warned, his voice a croaking whisper as he crouched down behind the nearest tree and peered around it.

Tyrillee reacted at once, making an awesome leap and swinging up into the high branches of another tree. Fidget dived behind a tree close to Anesi. Cubby, however, stood his ground boldly at the forest edge, his hands on his hips, a glaring expression on his face as if it were beneath his dignity to hide from anybody. Fidget gave a curse, moved from his place of concealment, grabbed the brogmoid by his purple haircut, and dragged him back to shelter. A whispered argument ensued. Anesi cut it short with a sharp gesture.

The beat of those wings became a thunder that rocked the land. Anesi listened and watched, petrified. He fumbled in his cloak, drew out his spell book, and clutched it in his hands, knowing that, especially now, he must not open it or use it, for these servants of the Great Terror would sense him immediately if he worked any kind of magic.

Khare had said that the Terror's servants could take any form, but these bird shapes were more frightening even than the hellhound. He squeezed his eyes shut and cowered down behind his tree, his hands clapped over his ears to drown out the thunder.

A sudden wind screamed through the woods. Trees bent perilously, and limbs cracked. Leaves ripped free and slashed through the air. Anesi flattened himself on the ground as the creatures passed overhead, and an icy chill touched him as an immense shadow glided over his body.

The beasts were gone as swiftly as they came. Only the sounds of their passage lingered, the wind-wail and a

distant shattering of branches and old trunks, and that too quickly faded.

Anesi rose on shaky legs and brushed the dirt from his blue tunic. Nearby, Fidget lifted his head and placed his chin in one palm, pursing his lips as he regarded Anesi. Beside Fidget, Cubby spread the fingers that covered his eyes and peeked carefully out.

Overhead, the trees had been stripped bare of leaves. Limbs and branches as thick as Anesi's body had been snapped and twisted. A wake of destruction cut through the forest as far as they could see, and debris littered the earth.

"Fidge," Anesi breathed, "how do we fight them?"

Fidget got up and brushed himself off. "We don't," he answered firmly as he helped Cubby to his feet. "We avoid them. We keep quiet and move fast."

Cubby clacked his fangs and put on a fierce look. "Yo, 'Nisi," he snapped. "Buck up. You croaked one, you can croak another," He shook his fist in the direction the servants had gone. "Good eatin', birds."

Fidget came to Anesi's side. "Where'd Tyrillee go?"

Anesi looked around. There was no sign of the dryad. "Into the trees, I guess," he answered.

Fidget tilted his head back. "I don't see her anywhere," he announced. "Maybe she was blown away."

Anesi put his spell book back in its pocket and sighed. Fidget didn't know he meant *into* the trees—literally—and he didn't feel like explaining it right now. But he thought about Tyrillee and wondered where she'd gone, and how nice it must be to escape into another world when the going got rough in the real one.

"I think we'd better do without a fire tonight," he said when he saw Cubby stirring around the ashes of the fire he'd built earlier.

"What about animals?" Fidget asked reasonably.

Anesi was in no mood to be reasonable. "I'd rather fight a grue than have those things come back," he said.

The three of them sat down against a tree, shoulder to shoulder, on the bank of the brook. Out over the wasteland the stars made a spectacular panorama. An

unnatural quiet hung over everything, as if the passage of the Terror's servants had scared away even the insects and birds. Not even the breeze uttered a whisper. Far to the east the moon began to rise.

Fidget and Cubby finally fell asleep. Anesi slipped an arm around each of their shoulders, and they curled into him and leaned their heads against him. He leaned his back against the tree and let go a long sigh as he closed his eyes.

A small bit of bark bounced off the end of his nose. "Hi, Tyrillee," he whispered without opening his eyes. "Welcome back."

Her voice, like the susurrus of the wind, brushed against his ears. "Sssleeeep, hoomannn friennnd. I will protectt theeeeee."

"I wish we had something to carry water in," Anesi fretted, as he knelt down to take a final drink from the brook. He cupped his hands and lifted water to his lips, then bent even lower and thrust his head under the stream. The cold brought him to instant alertness. He gasped and shook his head, flinging spray in all directions.

They had slept well past dawn and awakened to a breakfast of berries and wildflowers, which Tyrillee had gathered. With the passing of the servants they had forgotten about dinner the night before. Now they were grateful for anything to fill their stomachs.

Fidget also knelt and drank. When he'd had enough, he fetched his bow from where it leaned beside a tree and slung the quiver of arrows over his shoulder. "We should be heading out," he said. "We slept too late." He looked around. "Cubby?"

Caught in the middle of his morning routine of calisthenics, the brogmoid glanced up at Fidget from a push-up position. Fidget merely jerked his head toward the wasted plain and Cubby jumped up, pulled on his red sweater, and indicated that he was ready to go.

Only Tyrillee seemed reluctant. She ran around touching each of the trees, stroking them and rubbing her

body against the rough bark. At each tree she paused and shot a glance back at them, her thin brows knitting together in an expression of worry, before advancing to another tree.

Anesi looked around for his walking stick and found that it had gotten mixed with the rest of the wood they had gathered but not used. He retrieved it with a sigh of relief. His feet and ankles still ached annoyingly. "Do you think she'll come?" he asked, watching the dryad. "Do you think she *can* come?"

Fidget only shrugged as he watched her, too. At last, though, he shook his head and beckoned for the three of them to go.

Tyrillee gave a little cry and chased after them, her red poncho flying around her delicate limbs, her white hair streaming. But when they stopped to allow her to catch up, she stopped, too, turned, and stared back at the trees.

It went like that until the trees could no longer be seen. They'd walk away, and Tyrillee would chase until they stopped to wait for her. Then she'd stop and look back. So they'd go on, and she'd give chase. Only when there was nothing to see but the wasteland did she finally join them, head bowed, and dried tear-tracks showing in the dust that caked her face.

The sun rose higher and higher, and its heat beat down upon their bare heads. Long before noon Anesi and Fidget had removed their tunics. Fidget stuffed his down his quiver while Anesi pushed his into a pocket of his cloak; that he refused to remove because his spell book, safe in its own particular pocket, was close at hand while he wore it. Nevertheless, as he wiped sweat from his brow, he counted himself lucky that it was the start of autumn. Without water, the summer temperature would have been unbearable.

"It looks scorched," Fidget grumbled as they walked. His face was almost black with the fine powdery dust that rose in little clouds around their footsteps. "Like a great fire swept through and things are just starting to grow back."

Anesi didn't bother to answer. He saved his energy for walking. His mouth was like spenseweed, and his tongue felt too thick to fit inside. He tried not to think about it, though. He kept his eyes straight ahead and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other.

Cubby and Tyrillee walked together, sometimes hand in hand behind the two boys. Cubby carried his sweater in one hand, and the sun had lent a dangerous shade of pink to the gray pallor of his chest, arms, and shoulders. The dryad, fortunately, had her poncho for protection. Neither had spoken for some time, but Anesi could see the weariness on their faces.

Every time a wind blew it swirled the dust around them, filling their nostrils, mouths, and eyes. Anesi could hardly draw a breath. His face felt swollen and sun-burned.

At last he stopped and leaned on his walking stick. He thought for a moment, then making a decision, reached into a pocket of his cloak and came out with a pearl necklace. "Wrong pocket," he mumbled. He tried again and found the small vial of ochre-colored potion labeled *Berzio*. "Dinner time," he announced, unscrewing the cap. "But no seconds for anybody. Just a tiny sip. No telling how long this will have to last."

He tipped the tiny bottle up and let just a drop slide past his parched lip. His eyes widened, and a broad smile lit up his face. At once all sensation of thirst and hunger left him, and he felt refreshed. "Chocolate," he declared, as he passed the vial to Fidget, "the fifth element of nature."

Fidget raised an eyebrow and the vial paused at his lips. "What?"

"The fifth element," Anesi explained. "Earth, air, fire, water, and chocolate."

"But it's red," Fidget protested, peering down the opening at the contents with a cautious face, "sort of."

"It still tastes like chocolate," Anesi insisted, gesturing for Fidget to drink. "What's the point of being a magician if you can't at least make medicine taste good?"

Fidget hesitated only a moment more, then tipped

the vial to his lips. His face brightened instantly. "Delicious!" he said, passing the vial to Tyrillee. "But not chocolate. It's cherry!"

"Noooo," Tyrillee moaned with sudden pleasure. She handed the vial to Cubby. "It iss nectar of the dragondill flowerrrr! Vereee sweet!"

"Sauerkraut!" the brogmoid snapped. He put a finger to his lips and gave a satisfied little burp. "My favorite."

Anesi took the vial back and screwed on the cap. "That must be part of the magic," he marveled. "It tastes like your favorite, whatever that is!"

Fidget gestured with the tip of his bow. "Well, let's get going," he said. "I feel like I could walk all day now."

"Fidge walk all day anyway," Cubby pointed out reasonably. The brogmoid took Tyrillee's hand, then, and the two took the lead. Anesi put the vial back in a cloak pocket, determined to remember which one this time, and set off after them with Fidget close behind.

To everyone's regret, Cubby began to sing. "The road goes ever on and on..." he intoned, his voice rising and falling like an axe in a packing house. At his side, Tyrillee gave him a horrified look and fell back with the others. The brogmoid trundled on, lurching from side to side on his squat legs, oblivious to anything but his music.

They didn't even see the gorge until they were almost at its edge. Cubby stopped singing. Anesi and Fidget stared down at the distant bottom and at each other. Tyrillee put a hand to her mouth and leaned as far out as she dared.

"How do we get across?" Fidget asked quietly.

Anesi shook his head. The gorge was a huge crack in the earth, a fissure that directly dissected their path. Boulders and stone rubble lay strewn upon the bottom, and a narrow channel indicated that once a stream might have run there. The sheer rock walls rose layer upon earth-hued layer, and on the other side of the chasm the flat, powdery wasteland continued.

At last, Anesi pointed eastward. "That way," he said. "Let's head toward the sea. There's got to be a place to cross somewhere."

"The seaeeee," Tyrillee echoed. "Treeees grow by the seaeeee!"

Fidget frowned. "That's a good day's walk out of our way." He looked at Anesi with a troubled expression. "You could fly over," he said.

"I could," Anesi affirmed, "and by myself I might risk it. But remember what happened in the hellhound's tunnel when I cast a flying spell on you? There isn't time to teach all of you the control you need to fly. And the magic it would take might attract the remaining servants. I can't carry you, either." He shook his head again. "No, we'll have to find another way across, even if that means walking to the sea and swimming around."

They started eastward, following the edge of the gorge, gaining some small hope when it seemed for a little while to become more shallow. Still, it was a long way to the bottom. There was no way they could scale down and back up the other side, so they continued along the rim, kicking little clouds of ash and dust over the side.

In the distance something caught the sun's gleam.

Despite themselves, they slowed their pace. With trepidation they crept toward what appeared to be a bridge. Yet clearly it was like no bridge they had ever seen before.

They stopped, face to face with a huge, flat skull. The white, bleached bone shimmered with the sun's heat, and they shielded their eyes as they stared. White fangs curled upward from the lower jaw, while the upper fangs were embedded deep in the earth. Rows of smaller teeth gleamed, weathered smooth by the elements. Fidget jumped up into the empty eye socket. Standing on tiptoe, he couldn't reach the top of the socket, nor touch the sides if he held out his arms.

Tyrillee leaped up on the snout and looked in all directions. Carefully, she walked up the nasal ridge to the top of the skull and gazed across the chasm. "Ooooo, it'sss horrible!" she moaned, clutching her hands to her bosom.

Anesi and Fidget clambered up as quickly as they

could, nearly slipping on the smooth bone as they ran to her side. "It wasss a dragonnn!" she wailed, tears streaming down her cheeks as she pointed along the spinal column, which spanned the chasm. Then she pointed downward. The bottom was perhaps fifty feet away, and rusted manacles of immense size encircled the bony remains of four huge legs. Two ribs also lay on the bottom: the other seven hung attached in mid-air like mighty curving scimitars.

"Sssomeone captured the poooor thinggg and chainned it and killlled it tooo make thiss bridge!" Tyrillee covered her eyes and turned in to Anesi's embrace as she wept. "Howww cruelll!"

"Who could do this," Anesi said, full of disgust. "Dragons are so rare." On the far side, he could see the sectioned remains of the creature's tail, half-curved on the ground, anchored by chains. "I wish I'd flown us all across, rather than see this."

"Well," said Fidget, looking kind of pale, "at least we can get across."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"FIDGE! YO, FIDGE!"

Fidge and Anesi turned at the brogmoid's call, but they didn't see him anywhere. Walking carefully back down the dragon skull's smooth snout, they peered over the bony end between the huge fangs that curled upward. A gray head thrust suddenly out from the darkness of the dead beast's left nostril, and a hand waved a piece of parchment at them.

"Nes'!" Cubby called to Anesi, beaming. "Look!"

The two boys jumped down excitedly, ran to Cubby, and took the yellowed parchment from him. While each held the corners flat, Anesi read. Standing in the circle of the nostril, Cubby read over their shoulders, or pretended to. "Important scroll, huh?" he said enthusiastically. "Big find?"

But the corners of Anesi's mouth drooped suddenly as he finished reading.

"What's it say?" Fidget urged, making no pretense of literacy. Anesi already knew he couldn't read.

Anesi's frown deepened as he pointed to a word with his fingertip. "*Tansey*, it says." He slid his finger across the page. "*Predict weather with fifty percent accuracy.*"

"Important, huh?" Cubby said, bouncing up and down on his perch.

Fidget stared at the page, then let go of the corners he

held. They snapped once in the breeze and rolled inward. Then, raising his eyebrows ever so slightly, he said, "Tansy strikes me as absolutely useless."

"Me, too," agreed Anesi, crumpling the parchment into a ball and casting it into the chasm. "But like all other scientists, enchanters make a lot of little discoveries on their way to the big ones. It does make me wonder, though. Who left it here?"

They looked at each other for a moment as two pairs of eyebrows slowly rose.

"Not important, huh?" Cubby said, crestfallen.

They grinned at him and helped him up to the top of the skull, and both boys followed. Tyrillee waited for them where they'd left her. Her tears had finally dried, but she looked so sad. "Pooor dragonnn," she muttered. "Tyrillee wondersss what happenned tooo itsss mate?"

"Probably flew off somewhere and died from grief and loneliness," Fidget said unsympathetically. "When they mate, they mate just once for life." Suddenly he looked back the way they had come. "You know, I thought this place had a scorched look."

Anesi looked too. "Dragonfire?"

Fidget smirked. "You don't think this baby went down without a fight, do you?"

Anesi pursed his lips and considered. "Let's go across," he said at last.

Fidget led the way, followed by Cubby, then Tyrillee and Anesi. The sectioned vertebrae were broad enough, but the bone had been worn smooth, and it was slippery going. Halfway across, the wind picked up, and the ribs that hung beneath them began to sway ever so slightly. The spine began to ripple and undulate.

"It's coming alive!" Fidget screamed, dropping to his hands and knees.

Anesi fought to keep his balance. "Don't be silly!" he shouted. He caught Tyrillee's arm as she started to pitch sideways, but his walking stick somehow tangled in his legs, and they both went down and slid toward the rounded edge of doom.

Cubby's hand locked on his wrist barely in time to

stop their fall. "Got you, Nes'!" the brogmoid shouted, bracing himself as best he could between two sections of bone as he used his terrific strength to drag them back to safety.

"Thanks, Cubby!" Anesi gasped. He craned his neck to watch his walking stick tumble toward the bottom of the chasm, and swallowed when it struck the stony floor and cracked in two.

Tyrillee put an arm around Cubby's shoulder and hugged him. "Brogmoid ssave Tyrillee'sss life!" She kissed him squarely on the lips.

Cubby blushed, his already sunburned skin turning a deeper shade as he stumbled back. "Hey, bimbo!" he barked, falling defensively into his street-tough character. "I saved his life. You were just along for the ride."

The dryad clapped her hands together and smiled. "Ooooh, but yoooo give Tyrillee good ride!"

"I think we'd better get across," Anesi interrupted. The swaying had abated somewhat. It was best to move fast before the wind blew again.

"What took you so long?" Fidget asked ruefully, leaning on his unstrung bow, when they reached the other side. He had beaten them there, having crawled on his hands and knees without witnessing their near-accident.

"Sight-seeing," Anesi answered, leaping down from the skeletal remains of the dragon's tail. Tyrillee jumped after him and landed neatly at his side. The height was a bit too much for Cubby, however, and the brogmoid ran the coiled length of the bony appendage until at last it tapered down to the ground.

"Hiya!" he said with a wave and a grin as he rejoined them. "Good time, eh? Do again?"

"Maybe on the way back," Anesi responded doubtfully, rubbing the place where the brogmoid had caught his wrist. The bruises left by Cubby's powerful fingers already glowed lividly on his flesh. He flexed experimentally, dismayed by the stiffness in the joint.

"Go," Tyrillee suggested. "Thiss iss vereee sssad place. Pooorr dragonn."

"Sad it may be," Anesi agreed, "but I think we'd bet-

ter rest a bit in the shade of those coils. It's only going to get hotter as the sun moves through afternoon."

When they had rested out of the heat for a while, Anesi gave them each another brief sip of the *berzio* potion. The vial still remained half full, he noted, as he screwed on the cap and returned it to a pocket of his cloak. He had no idea, though, how long it would have to last.

As the sun started its downward slide they started off again. The landscape remained flat and featureless, except for random clumps of stiff, sharp-edged sabre grass and the occasional blighted shrub. Beetles and ants were the only life they found. Even birds apparently avoided this part of the country.

"Looks like another night without a fire," Fidget commented drily. "No wood, no twigs, no kindling."

He was right, of course, so they didn't bother to watch for a place to make camp. When the sun touched the horizon they kept walking. A gray twilight colored the world, and darkness rapidly closed in from the east. One by one, stars began to dot the sky, and a slender moon started its slow, graceful climb.

The air turned cold as night leached the heat from the wasteland. The boys put their wrinkled tunics back on, and Cubby struggled into his red sweater while Tyrillee hugged her poncho closer around her willowy body. She seemed least affected by the temperatures, though. Her wide eyes turned upward to the stars, and her face beamed with delight and wonder.

"Tyrillee hasss sseen ssstarlightsss," she sang lightly, her voice trilling up and down, "sseen themmm throoough leavess and branchesss. But neverrr sso man-eee prettee lightsss. Ssoo bright prettee ssstarsss!" She twirled as she spoke, throwing her arms up and her head back as she turned. Her hair flew outward, and her poncho parasolled around her, revealing her lithe, naked form.

"Where does she get the energy?" Fidget grumbled. He slumped around his bow, using it as a walking stick, as he watched Tyrillee from the corner of his eye.

"From a post office box in East Borphee," Anesi an-

swered wearily. His feet dragged in the dust, leaving long streaks and scars to mark his passage. He barely gave the dryad a notice. He was too tired. The tip of his nose was cold, and so were his fingers. He wanted to rest, to sleep, but movement was all that kept him warm.

Slowly, though, fatigue took its toll. Cubby couldn't walk a straight line, and his head kept snapping forward as he fell asleep on his feet. Fidget relied more and more on his bow to keep up and grew more sullen with each step. Even Tyrillee wearied of the stars and of talking. She hummed a little to herself for a while, then even that stopped as she concentrated on placing one foot before the other.

Anesi thought of pulling out the vial of *berzio* potion once more, but admitted to himself the senselessness of that. They couldn't keep relying on a magical pick-me-up. Sooner or later, they'd pay for it. No, they needed rest, real rest, with or without shelter.

"Enough," he said finally, stopping, looking around in the darkness for any bush or boulder that might serve as a windbreak. Tyrillee came to his side and looked, too. Fidget stopped, hesitated, then sat down on the ground. Cubby simply went stiff and fell face forward into the dust. Tyrillee bent immediately beside the brogmoid, rolled him limply over, and cradled his head in her lap.

Anesi gave a long, weary sigh. Absolutely nothing in this flat, dull desert offered itself as shelter or protection. He gazed up at the moon, now high in the night sky, and cursed it. "Fuddle on it," he mumbled. "Fuddle on everything!" He sat down heavily and hung his head. A long sigh issued from his lips. A moment later, he threw himself backward, sprawled in the dust, and shut his eyes.

"Sssleeptime?" Tyrillee asked quietly.

"Fuddle!" Anesi answered gruffly.

Fidget shifted his position and stretched out beside his friend. "Should we take turns posting watch?" he asked.

"Fuddle on it," the young enchanter answered.

"But what about the Great Terror, or the Terror's servants?" Fidget argued unenthusiastically.

"Fuddle on him, fuddle on them, fuddle on it all!" Anesi responded, rolling over on his side and tucking one arm under his head. His body ached and throbbed all over, but he sat up suddenly and yanked his boots off, then resumed his previous position and fell asleep.

The first time he woke up he found Fidget's arm draped across his waist and his friend curled up against him like a matching spoon. Carefully, he freed himself and pulled his boots back on. The cold was sticking tiny needles in his toes! He wiggled them inside the leather until they warmed again. Not far away, Tyrillee and Cubby were also curled up next to each other for warmth. The brogmoid's snoring seemed not to bother Tyrillee in the least. She slept, unmoving, with her hair spilled across her face.

The next time Anesi awoke, the moon had drifted almost to the horizon. The darkness seemed almost to be smiling at him, the way the bright slender crescent lay with both points turned upward. He removed himself from Fidget's embrace again and sat up as he shook his head and tried to remember what had disturbed him. Some dream about dragon bridges coming to life and scorching all the land while he ran and tried to avoid their fiery breath.

He hugged himself and shivered. It was so cold he'd almost welcome a dragon's breath. He looked at his friends. They'd formed a pack in their sleep, Cubby around Tyrillee who curled against Fidget who curled around him. The cold had driven them together. Tyrillee had even removed her poncho sometime in the night and done her best to spread it over all of them. After a bit of hesitation, Anesi touched the clasp of his enchanter's cloak and removed it. Like Tyrillee's poncho, it wasn't much cover, but it would warm them a little, maybe. He tossed it and spread it as fairly as he could and lay back down with just a corner to pull over himself.

Fidget's arm quickly found its place again.

Anesi didn't fall right back to sleep this time. He lay

awake and tried to listen to the desert. How different it was from the forest, which seemed to come alive at night. It depressed him. The silence solidified around him like a stone, and he felt its weight until he thought he couldn't breathe.

His hand went to his throat, and he found the zorkmid medallion that Khare had given him. He thought of the old wizard and all the other Thriff wizards. That eased his fear a bit and made him smile, and he finally slept again.

The sun woke them with its warmth. Yawning, they untangled themselves. Tyrillee shyly recovered her poncho and slipped it over her head while Anesi reclaimed his cloak. Fidget looked around for his bow and quiver and for the sword he had taken from the hellhound's cave. Cubby looked around sleepy-eyed, cracked his knuckles, got up, and began his morning calisthenics.

"No time for that, Cubbo," Anesi said, getting to his feet and facing southward. "Let's get a good start, and maybe we can get across this blasted place today."

The brogmoid straightened from his toe-touches and made a face. "Taskmaster," he grumbled.

"Questmaster," Fidget quipped, settling the sword and quiver over his shoulders and brushing the dust from his garments. The sunlight glinted in his blond hair and on the tips of his weapons, and he looked more than ever like a young warrior as he drew a breath and swelled out his chest.

Anesi grinned to himself as he studied the change in his companion. Unfortunately, he knew that Fidget had never held a sword before in his life and that he still couldn't hit the broad side of a barn with his bow.

"I will be a warrior someday," Fidget said defensively, taking note of Anesi's grin. With a swift maneuver, he drew his sword from the sheath on his back and brandished it, testing its weight and getting the feel of it.

"There've been no wars in Frobozz for years," Anesi reminded him, "or any of the kingdoms for nearly a century. Even the Great Underground Empire of which we

were once part didn't so much collapse as it hanged itself with red tape."

"Oh yeah?" Fidget described a figure eight with his blade and lunged at an imaginary opponent. "Well, somebody had to cut the corpse down. I'm going to learn how to use this thing." He made a couple more thrusts before he tried to return the weapon to the sheath on his back. He couldn't quite manage to find the opening with the point.

Anesi turned away to hide his smile as his friend struggled with growing embarrassment to sheathe the sword. Fidget cursed and stamped his foot and nearly stabbed himself in the buttock. "This isn't as easy as it looks," he grumbled, finally removing the sheath altogether, pushing the blade into it, and putting it back over his shoulder with as much red-faced dignity as he could muster. "Are we going or not?"

Tyrillee laughed. "Thee are blussshing, hooman friennnd!"

Fidget stiffened. "It's sunburn," he snapped. He turned indignantly and started off, leaving them to follow.

By noon, the boys were out of their tunics again. Sweat ran in rivulets down their faces and necks. Cubby chucked off his sweater and tied the sleeves around his waist. His gray skin had a definite pink cast to it. Tyrillee, however, proved as temperature-tolerant as before. Neither heat nor cold seemed to greatly bother her.

Shortly after noon they took sips of the *berzio* potion.

In the early afternoon, a pair of doves winged up from the south and cavorted in the sky overhead before fluttering back the way they had come. Cubby spotted them first and jumped up and down, pointing. The others stopped in their tracks and stared. It was the first animal life they had seen in the wasteland except for insects, and an indication that perhaps this part of their trek was nearing an end. Encouraged, they quickened their pace.

Soon Anesi stopped again, but not because they had reached the end of the wasteland.

A tall pinnacle of black stone rose in the distance like a sharp splinter in the blue sky. At its base, a high wall of

the same black stone extended for some distance in both directions before curving out of sight, presumably to form a defensive bastion. The structure lay directly in their path. Anesi felt an unsettling apprehension, and yet the possibility of obtaining water and perhaps a meal compelled him onward.

As they drew closer they realized there was not just one pinnacle but two identical towers joined by embattled turrets on at least two levels. Further on, huge jagged cracks, visible even at some distance, marred the walls of both towers and gave the place the appearance of a ruin.

"It looks abandoned," Fidget observed. There was a note of trepidation in his voice, though, and he paused long enough to bend his bow and slip the bowstring into place.

"There may still be a well," Anesi answered quietly as he led them forward. Secretly, he felt for his spell book, assuring himself it was still in the pocket close at hand. What was such a keep as this doing in the middle of nowhere, he wondered, and who had built it? The architecture was strange to him, possibly predating even the Underground Empire.

When they reached the walls they found yet another surprise. Cubby reached out and rubbed one finger against the rough-cut blocks that made the barrier. The tip came away blackened with a sooty substance. "Burn stuff," he said firmly.

"Scorched," Fidget agreed as he paced back and forth, pausing here and there to rub at the stone himself. "Just like the land. Everything's scorched."

Tyrillee folded her arms under her poncho and put on a pout. "Pooooorr dragonnn!"

Anesi gave her a look from the corner of his eye. "Poor dragon?" he said sarcastically. "Think about the poor people who might have been inside. The whole place has been scorched. Look how these blocks are cracked. Heat did that." He braced his hands on his hips, and stared upward toward the top of the wall far above his head. "This place was deliberately attacked."

Tyrillee shook her head stubbornly. "Dragonnnss are peacefull creaturesss!"

"The only *peace* this dragon was interested in," Fidget said firmly, "was a *piece* of someone's hide."

They wandered around the wall, seeking a way inside. In some places they found cracks in the stone wide enough to let them peer inside. All they got, however, were tantalizing glimpses of a wide courtyard and an old fountain with lots of rubble strewn about, and the shriveled remains of what might once have been a rose garden.

On the eastern side they found a gate. Two huge iron doors loomed over them. Heavy red rust scarred the plain metal and the massive knocker that hung in the center, which someone had fashioned to resemble the face of a horrible nabiz. Fidget reached out and tried to lift the knocker's ring, but it was rusted in place and refused to move.

"Nobody's been here in ages, I'll bet," Fidget said, giving one of the doors a kick.

"You'd lose," Anesi said, and he pointed to one of the hinges. Though rust indeed covered much of the gate, bright shiny scrapes and scratches showed all along the hinges, indicating that the doors were actually opened and closed with some regularity.

Fidget's eyes lit up suddenly. "Maybe there's treasure inside!" He slipped the sword from its sheath again and pressed a hand against the gate. "Maybe this is a hide-out for thieves and outlaws and they bring their booty here to store!"

Cubby crept up behind Fidget and gave him a kick in the seat of his trousers. "There's booty," the brogmoid chided, as Fidget yelped and danced away. "Fidge talk silly talk."

"He's right about that," Anesi agreed, running a hand up and down the iron door. He tried the knocker ring himself. Again, it refused to budge, rusted tight. "We've got treasure enough. It's water I'm interested in. And maybe food. We've got to get inside."

"I could climb over the wall if I had a rope," Fidget suggested, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"Why not try knocking?" Anesi said, folding his arms and cocking one eyebrow. "Somebody might be home."

Fidget frowned. "I used to think you had some imagination, 'Nes," he grumbled, as he slammed the pommel of his sword three times against the metal. "See? No one's home."

Anesi wasn't ready to concede that so easily. He backed up a few paces and raised his eyes to the top of the gate. Cupping his hands around his mouth, he called out.

No answer.

"I told you," Fidget insisted. "It's abandoned." He rolled his head way back to follow Anesi's upward gaze. "I know I could get in with a rope."

Anesi bit his lip and thought. After a moment, he said, "I've got something better."

He closed his eyes and searched for that dark private place at the center of his mind where he hid the few spells he had permanently memorized. His water-shaping spell was there, a tiny liquid light in the darkness, and the *gnusto* spell, and one other that he hadn't used for a very long time. His father had forbidden him to use it, but his father wasn't around now. He examined it very carefully, reacquainting himself with its subtleties. When he was ready, he opened his eyes again.

He raised his hand toward the gate, and a blue spark leaped from his fingertips to strike the old metal. At once the spark divided and divided again, and the new sparks raced in all directions like tiny glowing maddened insects, gradually elongating into scintillating lines of azure force as they sought out whatever mechanism held the gate locked against them, until suddenly the lines converged on one point.

A soundless, blue-white eruption of light made them cover their eyes.

"What was that!" Fidget shouted excitedly. "How'd you do that?"

"A *rezrov* spell," Anesi said, answering the first question. He didn't bother with the second. He rubbed his temple instead, and waited for a momentary weakness to pass. He hadn't used that one in a long time.

"Pretteee," Tyrillee commented helpfully.

Only Cubby frowned. "No magic," he warned sternly. "Bring bad servants. Old magic man say so!"

Anesi hadn't forgotten Khare's caution. "He said to be careful with it and not use it needlessly. I don't think one spell will bring danger on us. If there's a chance of finding water inside I think we needed to take it. We don't know where this wasteland ends, and the *berzio* potion won't last forever."

Cubby didn't look convinced. "Just don't bring bad things!" he warned again.

Anesi turned away from the brogmoid and placed his palms on both doors. He strained, and one door creaked open the barest crack. He put his shoulder to it and pushed with all his strength. Fidget and Cubby lent their shoulders, too. The door inched open, then suddenly gave way, and all three tumbled gracelessly across the threshold.

"Do you ever feel like you weren't cut out to be a hero?" Anesi grumbled, as he picked himself up and examined a scrape on his elbow. *Perfect*, he thought to himself. *Bruised wrist yesterday, bruised elbow today. At this rate by the time I reach Miznia I'll look like a rutabaga. The Terror will laugh itself to death.*

Side by side they moved across the old courtyard toward the fountain they had glimpsed through the wall. Chunks of blasted rock and mortar littered the cobbled pavement. The fountain's blackened basin had even cracked. It shifted precariously under Cubby's weight when the brogmoid leaned on it. He leaped clear and growled deep in his throat, however, and the old stone resettled in its familiar place.

There was no water in the fountain, nor had there been for a very long time.

"There's a doorway," Fidget said, pointing up a shallow flight of broad steps to the base of the north tower. "As long as we're here, let's explore."

Close as they were to the towers now they could see narrow windows and open niches cut out of the smooth

walls. They climbed the flight of stairs to the door and found it, surprisingly, unlocked. It opened at a push.

A dim light filtered inside, lighting shimmering dust motes that floated in the stale air. On either side of the door stood hideous, leering sculptures, the likes of which Anesi had never seen.

"Basssilissksss," Tyrillee muttered in a low voice, averting her gaze from the statues and stepping quickly past them.

They moved farther inside and found themselves in a vast vault. A single lamp burned there, hollowed from an immense emerald, suspended by a long chain, and fed by a queer-smelling oil that gave off wisps of thin gray smoke.

"Okay, okay," Fidget admitted in a hushed whisper under Anesi's sullen stare, "someone's home. Feel better?"

They tiptoed to the center of the vault, their steps leaving little scars in the thick white dust that blanketed the floor. Under the emerald lamp, they turned and surveyed their surroundings.

In a darkened corner, sprawled languidly upon a throne of gilt and ivory, a shadowed figure watched them. Thick robes clothed its form, and a crown balanced on its brow. It looked neither left nor right, nor made any movement. Nor did it speak. Yet Anesi knew it was not a sculpture like the basilisks by the door. Chill bumps rippled under the flesh of his arms as he felt the glow of strange eyes upon him. Somehow he found the courage to take a step forward.

"Hello," he said weakly, with a short bow.

The figure made no answer, but it lifted one arm and beckoned him closer with a crooked finger.

CHAPTER TWELVE

A NESI SWALLOWED

hard and took a hesitant step forward. Inside he lashed himself for carelessly leading his friends into a dangerous situation. At the same time he learned an important lesson. The *vaxum* incantation was recorded in his spell book, a potent piece of magic with the power to compel friendship in a hostile being. If he had simply used his head instead of rushing forward he would have memorized that spell and had it ready in case he needed it.

It was too late now. The thing on the throne crooked its finger again, beckoning him. He swallowed again, then resolutely lifted his chin and strode forward.

He could see the creature better now. It was horrible, ugly. The skin was shrunken around its face, and its hair hung in dark wisps like the smoke that exuded from the emerald lamp. It shook its head slowly as it regarded him, its eyes glowing red with a penetrating, hypnotic gaze. It leered at him and beckoned yet again. It was more than a man he approached, he was sure. A wizard, perhaps even a necromancer.

Again, that gnarled hand lifted and that finger crooked. The thing grinned at him, and Anesi's heart skipped a beat. Why didn't it speak?

Then, despite the dim light, he saw the strings, slender black lines, silk perhaps, that disappeared into the

darkness above the throne. He froze for a moment, genuinely puzzled. Puzzlement, though, gave way to anger. With an outraged cry, he whipped out his dagger. In one smooth motion he leaped forward and sliced through the lines. The thing on the throne sagged sideways against one of the great carven arms. Its head rolled forward onto its chest.

"A puppet!" Anesi shouted in anger and disgust. "I was afraid of a puppet!"

"We were all afraid!" Fidget admitted, running forward with his drawn sword. He raised his sword and slammed it downward with all his might, striking the head from the life-sized simulacrum, sending head and golden crown spinning on the floor.

"Here now!" cried a voice from overhead. "That's private property yer choppin' up there with that sticker, mate!" A thick black rope dropped suddenly out of the gloom. An instant later, a tiny little man in dark clothes and a blue cloak shinnied down into their midst.

He stood no taller than Cubby, though he was plainly human. His head and trunk seemed the proper size, but his legs and feet and hands were much too small, and he waddled from side to side as he walked. A short black beard covered most of his face, and black hair hung down to his shoulders. Even in the faint lamplight, his bulbous nose burned with an irritated redness, and his dark eyes glimmered suspiciously.

"That there crown's real gold, an' so are the rubies in them eyes!" The little man bent down and retrieved both head and crown and dropped them in his puppet's velvet-covered lap before he turned back to them. "What kind o' way is that to treat a man's things in his own home? Who invited ye, anyway? Who be ye?"

"I'm Anesi, sir..."

The little man blustered, shaking a finger. "I'd be uneasy, too, about breakin' into a body's home the way ye done, ye an' yer friends!"

He tried again, rankling at his host's tone of voice. "No, sir. Not *uneasy*. Anesi, A-N-E-S-I. That's simple enough. It's not like I have an accent or anything!"

The little man glared at him for a long moment, then said in a low voice full of menace, "Smart mouth on ye fer a boy. Maybe I oughta turn ye into a lizard or somethin'. I can do it. I got the power, I do!" He raised his hands and made a dramatic gesture and wiggled his fingers.

A red and gray streak flashed by Anesi and knocked the little wizard down with bone-jarring force. Their diminutive host gave a cry of surprise and a *whuff* as the wind rushed from him and his head bounced on the floor. His eyes squeezed shut with pain. When he opened them, again, an angry brogmoid straddled his chest.

Cubby clacked his fangs just inches from the wizard's face as he trapped both of their host's hands in one powerful fist. He made a show, then, of pretending to study those hands as the wizard sputtered. "Nice fingers," he observed in his best street-tough voice. "Plump and juicy. Good to eat." He clacked his fangs again. "Yo, Fidge, you bring the mustard?"

"Wait!" the little wizard squeaked, his eyes widening as Cubby's mouth opened and descended toward his twitching digits. "Just kiddin'! Really! Magic, schmagic, what do I know? I'm jus' the servant 'round here!"

Tyrillee clapped a hand to her mouth. "Ssservant!" she shrieked in panic.

Her shrill exclamation shocked them all, and all eyes turned toward her. Even the wizard stopped struggling and craned his neck to see the dryad better. "What's her problem, mates?" he said, adopting a more genial tone.

Anesi went to Tyrille's side and slipped an arm around her shoulders. "Not that kind of servant," he assured her patiently. He took her hand and pulled her closer. "Now, then," he said to the little wizard as he leaned over Cubby's shoulder. "You were saying?"

Their host made a face as he looked up at Anesi. "Well now, I'm not sayin' much o' anything with this lunk here squashin' out all me innards an' not bein' able to draw a decent breath!"

"You're really not a wizard, are you?" Anesi said, rubbing his chin as he watched the little man squirm.

"'Fraid not, bub, though when me master gets home yer gonna wish it was me you were dealin' with. Bad temper on that one. Nasty boyo. How 'bout lettin' me up now?"

Anesi thought a moment, then turned his back, took out his spell book as secretly as he could, and read and memorized the *vaxum* spell. When he put the book away again and turned back, he felt much more confident. "Let him up, Cubby," he said, tapping the brogmoid's shoulder.

Cubby gave a low growl and snapped his jaws before letting his captive up. The little man clambered to his feet and brushed himself off with a great show of dignity, adjusted his garments, straightened his posture, and politely offered his hand. "Humble Bellows, at yer service, young gentleman," he said to Anesi. "An' who be yer mates, here?"

Anesi made the introductions.

Humble Bellows' eyes narrowed when he saw Tyrillee, and he combed his fingers through his beard. "Hmmm," he said thoughtfully, "a dryad. I'd get her out o' here, if I was ye, mates. Me master's liable to take a real interest in her, he is, an' that's not good. Not good fer her, that is."

Fidget leaned on his sword. "What's he got against dryads?"

A big grin split the face of Humble Bellows, showing a mouthful of chipped yellow teeth. "Oh, nothin', mates. Likes 'em he does, I'm sure. Fancies himself a collector o' strange things, he does, an' she's just strange enough to catch his eye, if ye take me meanin'."

Anesi didn't like the sound of that, nor did he doubt the little fellow. He cast a furtive glance around the vault, trying to see through the shadows and the gloom. He'd felt a chill ever since he came here. It just didn't *look* like the kind of place a nice guy would live.

"Look," he said reasonably. "We've come a long walk across the wastes. If you could just spare a little water and maybe a bit of bread we'll be off and out of your way."

Humble Bellows rubbed his chin, and his mouth

drew into a taut line. "Well, I can do that much," he answered. "It's good-hearted o' me, considerin' the way yer young mate there treated ol' King Dimwit. Me favorite puppet, he was. Me only puppet, too. It's not like there's much time fer hobbies 'round here."

"King Dimwit?" Fidget said, suddenly interested. "Dimwit Flathead?"

"The very same," Humble Bellows answered, his eyes lighting up. "Dimwit the Excessive, they called him. Taxed the starch right out o' people's shorts. So vain he ordered the Great Sea renamed the Flathead Ocean." Humble Bellows rubbed his hands together and inched closer to Fidget. "Ye be a student o' history? Don't get many folks 'round these parts to talk to intellectual-like."

"I read a little," Fidget lied. He glanced furtively at Anesi, then away. Anesi didn't say anything. If Fidget couldn't read, he'd still learned plenty from old Felbor.

"Then it's double-blasted bad we don't have time to conversate on a proper subject," Bellows added, with a frown that made his whole face look as if he'd turned it inside out. "But we best get on an' get ye out o' here 'fore trouble comes home."

He picked up King Dimwit's head and balanced it as best he could on the puppet's shoulders. A barely audible sigh escaped his lips as he patted its brow. "This way, mates." He led them through a tapestry-covered doorway in a dark corner into a poorly lit corridor that took them to the kitchen.

"Ye don't have a proper pack," Humble Bellows noted with a nod, "an' neither do I have one to lend ye. This potato sack will have to do, then." He opened an oven door and pulled out two fresh loaves of bread with a large flat wooden utensil. The smell of it almost made Anesi giddy as his knees turned rubbery and his mouth began to water. Not all the chocolate *berzio* in the world could match the smell and taste of fresh, home-baked bread.

"Now I can let ye have just one skin 'fer to carry water," Humble Bellows continued, as he slid the bread loaves into the sack he had taken from under a counter.

"Any more an' me master'd notice. We'll have to go into the next room fer that, though."

Grabbing up the sack with the bread, their host led them into a dark connecting room next to the kitchen. The air felt damp, and the soft steady *drip drip* of water was a welcome sound.

"Where does it come from?" Anesi asked, as his vision began to adjust to the darkness that filled the little room. A huge stone basin filled the center of the room, and a small formless sculpture rose up from the middle of it. A long slender pipe, also of stone or perhaps of ceramic, pushed through the far wall and ended just above the basin. The precious droplets fell from it with a rhythm that matched the beat of Anesi's heart.

"Oh, the master was once quite the architect, he was," Humble Bellows explained, as he took down one of several empty drinking botas that hung from pegs along the near wall. "Got quite an aqueduct system, he has, that runs all the way to the end o' the wastes." With both hands he pressed the bota down into the water that had collected in the stone basin. It wasn't the proper way to fill it, but it was the fastest. A burbling sound issued from the small opening as water replaced the air in the bota.

Then, another sound rose up from the bowels of the keep, a dim rumble that might have been a growl or one of Cubby's snores. It slithered up between the cracks in the floor's stone tiles and vibrated the walls. Anesi felt the hairs on his neck stand up, and unconsciously he grabbed Fidget's hand.

"What was *that*?" he demanded of Humble Bellows when the sound faded. He let go of Fidget sheepishly and glanced at his other two comrades. Cubby's jaw hung slackly, and the brogmoid's shoulders were hunched up around his ears as he returned Anesi's stare. Tyrillee appeared unruffled, but there was an odd gleam in her eye and a curious slant to her mouth.

"That?" Humble Bellows answered in a strained voice. "Oh that. Just the foundation. This place is pretty old, ye know. From before the time o' the Great Empire, even. Settling, it is. Creaks like me ol' bones sometimes."

He pulled the waterskin out of the basin, splashing water carelessly on the floor, and hurriedly capped it.

Anesi and Fidget exchanged dubious looks. "The foundation?" Anesi said, disbelievingly.

Humble Bellows pushed the bota into his hands and ushered them to the doorway that led to the kitchen. "Course," he said, with an uncomfortable laugh. "What else could it be? Now ye best be hurryin' along 'fore me master gets home."

But Anesi didn't like being pushed, and he stopped stubbornly when they reached the kitchen again. "Who is he, anyway?" he insisted, as he slipped the bota's shoulder strap over his head. "You act like you're afraid of him!"

Humble Bellows narrowed his eyes, and the tips of his eyebrows nearly met over his nose as he glared. "Afraid, aye!" he admitted. "Dispoz is his name, an' ye be none the better for knowin' it. This way," he said, leading them from the kitchen into the corridor and back to the huge vaulted chamber where they had originally entered. King Dimwit Flathead still sat on his throne, but his head had rolled forward into his lap, and the crown lay on the floor at the puppet's feet.

Then the rumble came again, but louder this time, angrier and more fierce. The walls shook, and a thin cascade of dust fell from a crack in the ceiling right in front of Anesi. He made a grab for his spell book, but this time Fidget intercepted his hand and held it tight. There was a look of terror on his friend's face that Anesi knew mirrored his own.

"Too late!" Humble Bellows cried suddenly, flinging up his arms. "He's home!"

Anesi whirled around expectantly, anticipating the bright warning glow of an *aimfiz* teleportation spell or something equally dramatic. But the emerald lamp remained the only source of light until a moment later when the door opened, admitting a slender ray of sunlight from the outside.

A shadow crossed the threshold, followed by an average looking man of average height and average build.

His clothes were covered with a fine layer of gray dust, and his face betrayed signs of weariness as he strode toward the center of the vault. If this was Dispoz, he didn't look at all dangerous or deserving of Humble Bellow's fear. He did, however, carry a large cloak draped over one arm. A wizard's cloak.

Anesi considered the safety of his friends. Their lives were in his hands, he figured, and he couldn't take any chances. Recalling the incantation he had just memorized, he cast the *vaxum* spell.

Dispoz looked up immediately and smiled as he saw them for the first time. "I felt that!" he said pleasantly as he changed course and came toward Anesi. He extended his hand to shake. "When it wears off, you're going to be in big trouble, boy. I'll boil the flesh from your bones and make a soup to feed my pets for this insult." He smiled with genuine affection and leaned forward to seize Anesi's hand when the boy hesitated. "For now, though, I'm delighted to see such a young enchanter! And of course, your friends are welcome too. It's been a long time since we've had company to entertain." He turned to Humble Bellows and gave the little man a friendly pat on the head. Humble cowered away, bringing up his hands as if to ward off a blow. "Bring us some tea, good man!" Dispoz requested mirthfully, "and some crackers if they haven't all gone stale." He turned back to Anesi. "It's not much for a last meal, but we're simple people out here. You do like crackers, don't you?"

Anesi swallowed. "Yes, sir," he said finally, not wishing to argue the matter. Then he added, "Excuse me, but would you mind if I took out my spell book first?"

Dispoz waved his hand in a grandiose gesture. "Not at all," he said. "Going to memorize your *vaxum* spell again so you can have it ready? I see you've learned your lessons, not that it will do you any good, and you will certainly regret this later." He folded his arms and smiled indulgently. "But go on, memorize it. We'll all wait."

Fidget jarred his arm as he reached inside his cloak. "What are you doing?" Fidget hissed. "Let's get the fuddle out of hmmmph!"

Anesi shot a hand out and clamped it tight over Fidget's mouth. "Shut up!" he whispered. "You've got to act polite or you'll break the spell! Every incantation has its counter. Like the flying spell—remember what happened when you touched the ground? Or when your arrow touched my water-shaping spell?" Cautiously, he took his hand away.

"You mean I've got to be nice to this guy?" Fidget said, incredulously.

"He means you only have to *act* nice," Dispoz interrupted engagingly. "You can say anything to me as long as you couch it in a polite manner. Of course, I shouldn't have told you that, or you might have been rude enough to free me. What the hey, though. We're friends for now, right?" He offered his hand to Fidget.

Fidget shook hands with Dispoz the way he might have carried a dead mouse by its tail, and with a similar expression on his face. "Right," he echoed doubtfully.

"And a brogmoid, too!" Dispoz bent down to shake Cubby's hand. "I haven't seen one of these stupid little beasts in years. You certainly have some interesting companions, young enchanter. What did you say your name was?"

Anesi breathed a small sigh of relief when Dispoz's barb failed to draw a response from Cubby. Even a growl could have broken the enchantment he'd put on the wizard. But Cubby had understood the rules.

"I'm Anesi," he said slowly, taking out his spell book.

Dispoz nodded. "No harm in admitting it. I would be, too, in your boots. You've really bitten off more than you can chew, you know."

Anesi forced a patient smile. "Yes, I know," he said. "I really haven't a chance of outwitting you, and you'll get me later for trying. But my name is Anesi." He spelled it aloud for his host. "And this is Fidget and Cubby and..."

He realized suddenly that Tyrillee was gone.

"...and we're very pleased to meet the Great Dispoz!" Fidget said quickly to fill the abrupt silence.

Anesi stared about. She couldn't have gotten to the door without his seeing her. Where had she gone? Back through the corridor, perhaps, toward the kitchen. But why? Another few moments and they could have taken a polite leave of Dispoz and gotten away.

"So you know my name, then?" Dispoz laughed kind-heartedly. "My servant Bellows must have been talking. I'll have to lash him for that, I'm afraid, the silly little man. Good help is so hard to find out here."

"Anywhere," Anesi sympathized. He glanced down at his book, and it opened on his palm to the page with the *vaxum* spell. He memorized it quickly and carefully.

"Chevaux!" Dispoz exclaimed appreciatively. "And a lovely shade of blue."

"I see you know your spell books," Anesi said, closing his again and returning it to its pocket.

"I'm something of an expert," Dispoz continued with a nod. "Would you like to see mine?" He reached into the folds of the cloak he still carried over his arm and came out with a beautiful red leather volume. The front cover was edged with gold, and a most unusual eye all encircled with runes was embossed into the leather.

Anesi caught his breath. Only once before, in the hands of the dean of Galepath University, had he seen another like it. They were the finest, most prized products in all of Frobozz, very expensive and very rare.

"Westmarch!" he cried, barely restraining the urge to touch it.

"Yes, the Red Books of Westmarch are nearly legendary." Dispoz grinned from ear to ear, and he patted Anesi on the shoulder. "I see you, too, know your spell books. Quite surprising for one so young. Maybe I won't boil you too quickly, but keep you around for conversation and amusement." He returned his book to the folds of his cloak.

"You're very kind," Anesi said agreeably. "But you offered tea and crackers, I believe. Why don't you show me around while my friends help your servant in the kitchen?"

"A splendid idea!" Dispoz turned to Humble Bellows. "Hop to it, man. We'll be on the turret."

Before they went their separate ways, Anesi nudged Fidget and whispered to him in a tight voice, "Find Tyril-lee!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

T

HE SUN WAS A BLOATED white creature that struggled precariously for life on the rim of the world. Desperate fingers of light slipped on the clouds, leaving bloodied streaks that made a smear across the sky as darkness crept relentlessly in to push it down and hold it under. Two early stars watched from far off, unwilling to get involved, while the wind made a low, rattling sigh of despair and the air began to cool.

Anesi shivered. His third cup of tea did nothing to warm him as he watched the sun go down. He swirled the strong dark liquid round and round the earthen vessel as he leaned against the battlements. The wastes extended in all directions as far as he could see. Far below in the deepening gloom he could just make out the thin black ribbon of piping that brought water from the west.

"Have another, young enchanter."

Dispoz lifted a delicate painted plate laden with crackers from the small folding table Humble Bellows had brought out to them and carried it to Anesi. He looked older in the outside light. His hair had grayed, and the wrinkled flesh under his chin hung like raw red liver. To be polite, Anesi chose one wafer and nibbled the corner of it. "Thank you," he said absently as he turned back to watch the sun's defeat.

He hadn't expected it to get so late so quickly. Night

was falling, and he had no desire to spend it in this place of shadows and mysteries. He never should have come here. The keep had *looked* wrong from the start. Khare had told him to trust his instincts, and he should have remembered that. Now he was in a spot again, and he'd dragged his friends into it, too.

Unconsciously, he felt for his spell book in its pocket and wondered if Fidget or Cubby had found Tyrillee yet. Why had the dryad slipped away without a word? What was she up to?

Dispoz set the plate of crackers on the battlement near his elbow and reached for the teapot on the table. He poured slowly, refilling his cup. "More?" he said to Anesi.

Anesi shook his head.

"I found this place when I came here years ago," Dispoz continued conversationally as he set the teapot aside and turned to stare outward. "I was tired of the cities and weary of people, so I came north." He turned again, walked to the other side of the turret, and looked out in a new direction. "It predates even the Great Underground Empire, you know, but there's no indication who originally built it. I call it Arbroneth."

Anesi took a sip of his tea and set his cracker down on the stone wall. "That's the Old Tongue," he said. "It means *refuge*, doesn't it?"

The old sorcerer leaned against the wall and regarded Anesi with a big grin. "That's right, boy. Where did you study? Not many people remember the Old Tongue."

He had to bide time until Fidget found Tyrillee, so he tried to relax. It was his job to keep Dispoz occupied. "Galepath University," he answered, neglecting to mention that he'd attended for less than half a term before his father jerked him out.

Dispoz looked impressed. "Galepath!" he exclaimed. "What a shame that when your *vaxum* spell wears off I'll have to roast a fellow alumnus. Will you forgive me in advance?"

Anesi made a short mocking bow. "Forgiveness seems to be a commodity in short supply around . . ."

The lid on the teapot began to rattle ever so slightly, and the pile of crackers shifted on the plate. A low roar echoed up from far below, increasing in volume. The crackers slid off the plate and spilled over the side of the turret, and the plate itself crept trembling toward the brink and plummeted over. A deep rumble shook the stones. Mortar cracked.

The roar became a bestial cry of incredible power that shook Arbroneth to its foundations. Anesi grabbed the nearest battlement and held on for dear life as the stones under his feet began to quake. Another sound followed that cry, like nothing he'd ever heard before—the ripping of stone. Terrified, he glanced to his left toward Arbroneth's south tower and watched a long crack open near its top. A cloud of stone dust and mortar flakes plumed upward.

"What is that?" Anesi cried, looking desperately around for his host.

But all he saw of Dispoz was the sorcerer's fluttering cloak as he ran back along the turret and vanished through the shadowed entrance to the north tower. Anesi leaped to his feet and gave chase. He didn't dare lose Dispoz. There was no telling when the *vaxum* spell might wear off. He had to stay close to cast it again, or Dispoz would have a chance to strike back.

He plunged through the entrance and into darkness. No lamps or torches burned to light the keep's interior, unless the emerald lamp still burned in the vault, but that did him no good where he was. Swiftly he backed to the turret and took out his spell book. It opened in his hand, and he twisted to catch the last dying rays of the sun on the page.

His concentration was shattered, though, as that horrible roar swelled upward again from Arbroneth's bowels and the floor lurched under his feet. He fell sideways against the door jamb, and the blue Chevaux spell book tumbled from his hands out onto the turret. As he bent down to retrieve it, a lacework of fine fractures appeared in the turret's floor and raced toward him with a loud crackling. He gave a panicked cry, snatched up his pre-

cious book, and leaped back through the door as the turret crumbled away and fell crashing to the ruined turret below. The weight of the plummeting blocks completely demolished it, leaving no bridge at all between the two towers.

Anesi forced movement into his fear-paralyzed limbs and pushed himself back toward the door. Only a small jut of stone remained where the turret had joined the tower, and he didn't dare step out upon it. He bit his lip and opened his book again, then leaned out as far as he dared to catch the swiftly diminishing sunlight.

It proved just enough to read by, and he quickly memorized the *frotz* incantation. He needed light to find his way through the keep and catch up with Dispoz. But he also needed something to cast the spell upon. He searched around frantically, and at last drew his dagger from its sheath on his belt and unleashed the enchantment.

A blinding flash surrounded the blade, causing him to throw up his other arm to shield his eyes. The intense glow settled rapidly, however, to a usable light. Anesi hesitated only long enough to return his spell book to its pocket, and he started off at a loping run in the direction he thought Dispoz had gone.

A long, winding staircase led down to the level of the vault. He took the stairs two at a time. The steps shivered under his feet as the terrible roar that shook Arbroneth grew angrier and more desperate. What beast was it that threatened to destroy this ancient keep? What had Dispoz imprisoned in his basements?

He reached the bottom of the stairs and raced down a short corridor and into the vault. The emerald lamp swung back and forth on its chain, casting its light in wild patterns, spawning shadows that twisted and writhed like pain-wracked and tormented beings. King Dimwit Flat-head had slumped from his royal seat and lay unceremoniously in a tangle of his own strings, prone upon the floor, while the tremors tossed his crownless head to and fro over the stone tiles. His outstretched right hand trem-

bled and shook too, as if he groped blindly for that which rolled just beyond his reach.

The door to the outside hung open on twisted hinges. Anesi ran to it as a panic-stricken Humble Bellows came charging through. The two collided. Anesi's dagger went skittering, and starlights burst in his head as he hit the floor.

"Sorry! Sorry!" Humble Bellows hurriedly pulled Anesi up and leaned him against the broken door, patted the boy's tunic into place again, and tried to straighten the cloak, which had twisted nearly around to the front.

Then, Anesi gave a cry and locked both his hands around Humble Bellow's wrist. "My book!" he shouted, trying to force Bellows to let go of the precious volume which he had already slipped half out of its cloak pocket. He squeezed with all his young strength. "You thief! Pick-pocket!"

"Now, an' that's no way to be talkin' to yer elders, boy! Gimme that book!" He jumped on Anesi's toes and tried to wrench the book free. Anesi's scream, however, was more anger than pain, and he brought his own foot smashing down on the tips of Bellows's toes. Bellows's eyes snapped wide in surprise, and a roar came out of his mouth that nearly rivaled whatever Dispoz had trapped in Arbroneth's bowels. He grabbed his injured toes and bit his lip while hopping up and down on his good foot. "Damn! Damn, ye hurt me!"

"Where's Dispoz?" Anesi demanded, clutching his spell book firmly in both hands. "Where are my friends?"

"In the cell, fer all the good ye'll get o' knowin'!" Bellows answered, with a pained expression. He sucked air between his teeth and exhaled loudly. "An' yer mates, too, an' somethin' else that's been wantin' out fer a long time!"

"How do I get there? Tell me!"

But instead Bellows lunged at him again, his gnarly hands reaching for the blue Chevaux book. Anesi, though, moved quicker and brought the book down on top of Bellows's head. Bellows gave a moan, then cowered back, but Anesi followed, pummeling him about

the head and shoulders with the spell book until the little man tripped on the strings of his own puppet and fell backward.

"All right!" he shouted, holding up a hand to ward off the next blow. "I didn't want to hurt ye! All I wanted was the book!" He lowered his hand hesitantly, then wiped it over his lips. He looked suddenly sheepish and embarrassed. "Ye can't git there from here. The passage collapsed with all this shakin'. Ye got to go through the South Tower."

A loud splintering crack made them both turn. The emerald lamp swung wildly on its chain. Suddenly the overhead beam to which it was attached groaned again and broke apart. The halves crashed to the floor. The lamp shattered. Flames shot up from the swiftly spreading oil, found the beam, and slithered, serpent-like and flickering, up the old dry wood toward the rafters.

"I'll show ye!" Humble Bellows volunteered, as he leaped to his feet.

They raced out the door, pausing long enough for Anesi to snatch up the glowing dagger from where he'd dropped it, then across the dark courtyard to the south tower and through another door. It was black as pitch, and though the dagger made a bright pool of light around them, it penetrated very little into the deeper darkness. Anesi remembered the huge cracks in the outer walls and held his breath. The air was full of stone dust.

Humble Bellows seemed to know his way even in the darkness. He led the way forthrightly through a series of passages, then down a set of stairs that went far below the earth. The steps were narrow and treacherous, and Anesi put his spell book back in its pocket so he could use one hand to feel along the wall.

The bestial cries that shook Arbroneth had not stopped. Now they intensified, tormented scream upon scream until the blocks in the walls began to scream, too, as they slid and shifted one on top of the other.

"We'll be buried!" Humble Bellows shouted fearfully.

"Go on!" Anesi urged, pushing him from behind as they wound deeper and deeper, and he sensed that by

now they were someplace not exactly under the south tower, but between both towers.

Suddenly, in a space between the beast's terrible roars, he heard shouting. That was Fidget's voice! And Tyrillee's! The dryad screamed, and the beast gave its fiercest roar yet. The stones quaked and rippled underfoot, and Bellows and Anesi found themselves tumbling head over heels down the steps. Red stars exploded behind Anesi's eyes and a ringing filled his ears as the wind rushed out of him.

He stopped in a heap on a flat landing. It was moments before he could get up, and when he did he tripped on the hem of his cloak and fell again. "Bellows!" he cried, rising painfully to his knees.

Humble Bellows was nowhere to be seen.

A cascade of dust feathered down his cheek and into his collar, and the beast roared again. Anesi heard a sudden groan that made him look up. Barely in time he jumped out of the way as a chunk of stone plunged down upon the spot where he had stood.

Forgetting Bellows, he raced on. The fall had brought him to the bottom of the steps and to a corridor. The air stank suddenly with a powerful animal smell of filth and urine and worse. His heart hammered as he heard Tyrillee scream yet again, shrill and angry. Then a shout from Dispoz that was drowned by the roar of the beast.

Impossibly, a harsh hot wind came blowing up the corridor, nearly knocking him over. He caught his balance and leaned into it, and rushed on toward a light he hadn't seen moments before. He had rounded some kind of corner. Ahead, shadows danced and darted before the light. Something huge moved. He ran toward it as fast as he could and emerged into an immense chamber that only magic could have carved.

A *cell*, Humble Bellows had called it. Anesi felt a hysterical laugh burbling up in his throat as he stared at the prisoner.

Its legs alone were taller than the tallest trees he had ever seen, and its leathery membranous wings, all shades of red and gold, arched to the very top of the chamber

and brushed the roof. There was not room to spread them, though the beast flapped and fluttered furiously as it cried in bitter pain and lashed and pounded its great sinuous tail against the fire-blackened walls. Its scales glittered like rubies as it struggled, and its eyes burned with a fierce diamond fire that shamed the sun. It raked the air with the ivory claws of its short front feet as it reared upward, and when it opened its mouth to scream, white crackling fury boiled in its throat.

But the beast was held by massive chains that wound around its powerful hind legs, chains that were anchored to mighty iron rings embedded deep within the north and south walls. But strain showed in those walls now, and in all the walls and ceiling, fat cracks and fissures that radiated outward from those rings, which showed rapid signs of giving way as the beast fought against its bonds.

"Dragonnnn!" Tyrillee screamed, suddenly seeing him, and her voice snapped him out of his paralysis. "Hoomannn friennnd! Annneessee!" She didn't finish. She swung the smoking end of a recently extinguished torch at Dispoz's face as the sorcerer lunged suddenly at her from a corner, wielding Fidget's sword. Then she made an incredible leap over his head and landed lithely in the corner he'd just vacated, crouching there with her weapon ready.

He stared at the torch, at the vaporous gray wisp that curled around it, and realized that Dispoz had *frotzed* the entire ceiling. But spreading the enchantment over so vast an area had caused its magic to diffuse as well. Only a dim and sporadic illumination filled the cell.

"Yo, 'Nes!"

Anesi turned at the brogmoid's shout and spied Cubby crouched behind one of the dragon's chained legs. In his three-fingered hands he gripped Dispoz's red Westmarch spell book. One of Fidget's arrows sprouted from the front cover.

Fidget stuck his head out from behind the dragon's other leg. "I shot it right out of his hand!" he cried proudly. "I actually hit something!"

"He's not helpless without that!" Anesi warned. But

neither of his friends were listening. They both glanced up in time and jumped away as the dragon lifted one of its chained feet and stamped. The entire room shook, and new cracks shot out across the floor.

Dispoz advanced on Tyrillee.

Anesi slammed his dagger back into its sheath and shut his eyes. He had the *vaxum* spell memorized. He could use it now to calm the sorcerer again. He searched for that inner place where he stored his remembered incantations. It had been a while, hours, but he still had it. He was certain of it.

With a gesture he flung *vaxum* across the chamber.

Dispoz lowered the sword and turned away from the dryad. A big smile spread across his face as he saw Anesi and strode toward him. "How nice to see you again!" he called pleasantly. "That's quite an efficient little spell you have there! Very handy! Please accept my compliments?"

Anesi remembered to be polite in return, and he made a little bow. "Accepted," he said.

"And speaking of hands..." Dispoz continued. He lifted his and brought it crashing down against Anesi's face, a stunning slap that drove Anesi to the floor. Anesi barely rolled out of the way as the sword slashed down and struck the stone where he had fallen. He scrambled to his feet and backed away.

"Allow me to politely inform you," Dispoz shouted over the dragon's roaring as he whipped the air with Fidget's blade, "that your first spell wore off long ago, while we shared the sunset." His smile broadened, but there was a hint of mockery there now. "Did you think you had the *presence* to make it last all night? One little spell? One little boy?" He swung the point of the sword toward Anesi's face, forcing him back further. "Well. I've got spells, too, and wards against your *vaxum*. It's useless against me now. And I'll teach you to come here and try to steal my dragon! My prize! My precious!" With each word he swung the sword, forcing Anesi to retreat further and further until his heel brushed something and he nearly tripped. He risked a glance and found Fidget's bow at his foot.

So Fidget had disarmed the sorcerer, but the sorcerer had somehow disarmed the warrior.

Dispoz raised the sword again, and Anesi reached for his own blue spell book as he danced sideways. The tip of the blade, rushing down, however, caught it a glancing blow as he whipped it out, and it went fluttering out of his hand.

The sword flashed up again, poised to take his life. The dragon screamed in rage and jerked on its chains. Barely in time, Anesi heard the links snap and rattle and threw himself to the floor as the chain snapped taut over his head. Dispoz cried out and ducked, too, but then Tyrillee appeared out of mid-air, swung her torch, and knocked the sword from Dispoz's grip as the chain went slack again.

"Damn you!" Dispoz shrieked, clutching his arm where the torch had struck him. His face contorted, and he glared at them, enraged. Then his eyes narrowed dangerously. "I've got a few surprises even without my book!" He raised a hand toward Tyrillee, and a fountain of fire shot forth. She screamed and leaped out of its path, but the back of her poncho smouldered. Frantically, she attempted to beat it out, and Dispoz closed in on her.

But it was the sorcerer's turn to leap out of the way as he came nearly within range of the dragon's tail. It smashed down at him in a deliberate, murderous attempt, and the dragon roared in frustrated rage as it missed.

"Get out of here!" Anesi shouted, looking around for his friends. He couldn't see Fidget and Cubby anywhere. "Run for the corridor!"

"No, Anesi! We're staying!"

That was Fidget's voice, but where was his friend? He spied him then in the dimness, halfway up the chain that held the dragon's left leg. What did he think he was doing! If he was pinched between those massive links he'd be crushed!

Fidget waved to him with a dagger in his hand, one of those he'd taken from the hellhound's tunnel. "We've decided, all of us! We're going to free this thing!"

He saw it now. That's what they'd been up to all along. Tyrillee, with her greater speed and agility, had kept Dispoz occupied while Fidget and Cubby, apparent cowards to the sorcerer, had worked and worried around the chains.

But they couldn't do it. It would take more than daggers or Cubby's teeth and fangs to undo those chains.

"Get away!" he shouted again. "Trust me! Run!"

The brogmoid seemed to hesitate. Then he shrugged and jumped to the floor and moved as swiftly as he could on his short legs to the corridor entrance. Fidget, seeing Cubby's retreat, jumped clear and raced after him.

Again, fire crackled across the room, and Tyrillee's torch was instantly consumed by the flames in mid-air. She'd flung it at him as she somersaulted over his head, and she, too, ran for the exit. "Trusst thee, hoomannn boyeee!" she called, as she reached the corridor and stopped there, clearly intending to go no further. Cubby and Fidget joined her too and waited.

A blast of fire suddenly lit up the entire chamber. The rush and heat set up a wind that snapped Anesi's cloak straight back. The clasp choked him painfully, and the heat stung his face as he flung his hands up protectively. Still, he stared between his fingers and watched as the dragon's flames engulfed the sorcerer.

Despite the searing heat, he shivered. The barest silhouette of a figure could be seen within the fire, but it stood straight and tall and did not yield. Instead it bent back its head as a man might under a fall of water.

When the dragon ceased, Dispoz stood unharmed. He laughed and called to Anesi.

"She's all I have in the world, my dragon, my precious! All I desire! I killed her mate to have her for myself, and you crossed the bridge I made of his bones to come here. But you won't steal her from me. I won't let you! I have spells enough without my book. Fire spells! For in my heart I am a dragon, too!"

He raised his hands, and Anesi felt fire lick at his face as he flung himself sideways and stumbled. His skin tingled strangely, and he feared he had been burned, but he

blocked that out and concentrated on what he had to do. He'd hurled himself this way for a reason.

His hand brushed the great length of chain behind him. He'd had enough of being polite. Now he sneered. "No, you're just a drag!"

Eldritch energy shot crackling up the chains as he released a *rezrov* enchantment. The spell slithered over and around the links, climbing higher and higher as it sought out the locks.

"No!" Dispoz shrieked in sudden fear, his eyes wide, his double chins quivering as he watched the blue sparks work. "You can't have *memorized* that one! Not that one!" He bit the knuckles of one fist.

Anesi said nothing. Grimly, he prepared the same spell again and cast it on the other chain. He didn't need to touch it. It was close enough.

The first lock exploded like a blue-white star.

"My precious!" the sorcerer howled.

An instant later, the second lock burst apart, and the chains clattered to the cracked and broken floor.

The dragon was free. It threw back its head on its long, undulating neck and cried, a sound that shook the ceiling apart. Stone and mortar came crashing down. The dragon drew itself erect and clawed at the roof with its ivory talons, intent on digging its way to the sky. It beat at its prison walls with its wings, with its tail, and the room quaked under its unstoppable assault.

"My precious!" Dispoz sank to his knees as rubble smashed down around him. The tears that ran down his cheeks shimmered red with the dragon's fire as the fire burned its way through layers of earth to freedom.

"Run!" Anesi ordered, retrieving his spell book. He shot a desperate look around. Maybe he could snatch Dispoz's book, too. But it was nowhere to be seen. Maybe Cubby still had it, though he couldn't remember if he'd last seen it in the brogmoid's hands. He gave up and ran to catch up with his friends. He pulled out his dagger. It still shone with the light of his *frotz* spell. Portions of the stairway had crumbled, but together they raced up it, leaping blocks and pieces of stone that obstructed their

way, dashing across the rapidly buckling floor of the south tower, and winning the courtyard.

Fidget and Cubby stopped to draw a breath.

"No!" Anesi shouted, urging them on. "Don't you feel it? The heat in the ground? The quaking? The whole courtyard is the roof, and it's all coming down! Get outside the walls, quick!"

They ran with the earth heaving and swelling like an ocean surf, toward the same gate they had come through. Accommodatingly enough, the tremors reached the gate first and smashed it. They clambered up over the iron doors and rubble and jumped to the ground.

A sudden thunderous roar of destruction made them all stop and turn. Both towers teetered uncertainly on their foundations, then toppled in toward each other and crumbled utterly to ruin. The great wall, too, that surrounded the keep rippled and waved and collapsed on itself.

For an instant, the horrible sound drifted in the air like an aimless echo with nothing to bounce against. Then it faded, and there was nothing but silence and dust.

"Dragonnn!" Tyrillee sighed. But her voice was a bare whisper, a wind without a heart, a song without notes.

"Well, I guess its over," Fidget said sadly. He had his arm draped around Cubby as he stared teary-eyed at the ruin. "At least I managed to retrieve my bow and my sword."

"Poor dragon," Cubby said. He sat down on the ground and crossed his legs, hung his head, and traced in the dirt with a finger.

But Anesi waited, tense with expectation.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

T

HERE WAS A LONG moment of quiet. Then the ground trembled and shook with a force that knocked them down. Anesi scrambled to his knees again as a red glow spread over the ruins of Arbroneth, as a pillar of white-hot flame shot up into the black night, as earth and stone exploded outward.

The dragon roared its joy as it sprang into the sky, its mighty wings beating with a grace and power that tumbled the broken stones below it and whipped clouds of dust into a furious maelstrom. Its tail lashed the stars as it arched its sleek neck and hurled a fiery blast earthward, engulfing Arbroneth.

"Look!" Fidget cried, pointing.

Oblivious to the flames, the shadowed figure of Dispoz raced along the rubble of the shattered wall and climbed to the highest remaining point. Anesi had no doubt at all it was the sorcerer, for the figure paused, and a book opened in its hand.

"I don't suppose you still have his spell book, do you Cubby?" Anesi said quietly, as he watched Dispoz.

Cubby looked at his empty three-fingered hands, then patted his waistband under his sweater. Sheepishly, he gazed up and shook his head.

Anesi felt a tickling along the back of his neck. A potent enchantment had been cast.

High upon the wall, Dispoz let the spell book tumble from his hand as he began to transform. His body elongated and thickened, and he threw back his head and screamed. Then the section of wall on which he stood crumbled under him, and he fell among the debris out of Anesi's sight.

Overhead, the dragon sent another fiery blast earthward, scorching the spot where Dispoz had stood. But a new silhouette stirred inside that inferno, and suddenly another roar rocked the night. A new plume of flame jetted upward against the first, and a pair of vast wings began to flex and shimmer at the heart of the fireglow.

"Doesss thee seee!" Tyrillee cried excitedly, jumping up and down.

Fidget crawled close to Anesi. "He's turned himself into a dragon!"

"Blue dragon!" Cubby observed.

Anesi bit his lip worriedly. "I saw something else," he told them quietly. "He dropped his spell book. I don't think he can change back."

Dispoz glittered as if the scales of his body were pure sapphires traced here and there with pieces of limning silver. He arched his elegant neck and on powerfully beating pinions leaped into the sky and let go a roar and a gush of flame that lit up the land.

The two beasts crashed together in mid-air, and the night became a tangle of slashing claws and drumming wings as each tried to destroy the other. Fireblast after fireblast razed the darkness, and the gray, powdery earth turned black wherever that deadly breath touched. The shattered pile of stones that had once been Arbroneth began to glow with red-orange heat as the dragons fought above it.

"Let's get further away," Anesi suggested. The air was turning hot, causing him to sweat and sting. Worse, the fight was throwing up roiling clouds of dust that made it hard to see or breathe. The others didn't argue. They got up and ran, but they watched over their shoulders, unable to tear their eyes away.

Dispoz climbed on top of the red dragon somehow

and cried mightily as he flexed and hurled his "precious" to the ground. The red dragon plummeted in a stream of crackling flame like a star flung to earth, but at the last moment it arched its pinions and swooped skyward, its tail carving a long trench to mark its close call. It rose up and up in a widening loop, and the dragons met again.

"They will kill eeach otherrr!" Tyrillee murmured when they stopped again a safer distance away. She clenched her fists at her sides, and her tears shimmered in the glow from the distant fireblasts.

"Yep. They probably will," said a familiar voice off to their left. "Stupid critters, both o' 'em."

Humble Bellows sat cross-legged on the ground not far away. They might have run right by him if he hadn't spoken, or stopped and never seen him in the dark. A half-full bag rested near his right knee, and he held something between his thighs that Anesi couldn't identify.

"I thought you'd run away," Anesi said.

Humble Bellows looked away and stared back at the battle in the sky. "Well now, that was me intent, it was. But how could ye not stop and watch somethin' like that. Never seed nothin' like it in me life an' never will again."

"He's right, there," Fidget whispered in awe.

"Tyrillee'sss tooo blammme!" the dryad sobbed softly. "Tyrillee'sss faullt! Onlee wanted tooo freee dragonnn!"

Cubby went to her and took her hand in his and tried to console her.

"Naw," Humble Bellows said. "This was bound to happen sooner or later. He loves that critter, me master does, but he never should've tried to cage an' keep it. They had all sorts o' go-rounds down in the cell, they did. Master called it his 'precious,' like it was the most valuable thing he owned, like it was a ring or somethin'."

The frantic beating of wings reached them over the distance as the dragons entwined in mid-flight. A fiery blast lit up the devastated slag heap that had been Ar-broneth.

"How did he ever capture it?" Fidget wondered aloud.

Humble Bellows grabbed his knees and rocked back

suddenly and cackled. "Ah, that was the easy part," he laughed. "Keepin' it was somethin' else. Very powerful, me master was. Called hisself a sorcerer, but he was wizard-class, you bet." He sat up straight suddenly as the two beasts sprang apart. Twin streams of flame shot across the space that separated them, and the entire world lit up red as if two strange new suns had risen in the sky. With terrible roars they rushed at each other again.

Bellows relaxed a little. "Thought that was it, I did. Anyway, the critters—there was two originally—had been flyin' over the countryside for days. Don't know exactly where they came from. But me master took a real fancy to the red one. The other was green as emeralds."

Anesi suddenly remembered the lamp that had hung suspended in the vault of the north tower. He had thought it *was* an emerald, a really large one. Now he wondered, and wondering, grimaced.

"Now, he had this real potent teleportation spell he'd been workin' on in private for some time. A new, improved version of *aimfizzle*, or somethin' like that..."

"*Aimfiz*," Anesi supplied.

"Whatever." Bellows shrugged and continued with his story. "Anyway, master spent two days conjurin' up the cell an' the chains an' everthin'. Then he just went out an' teleported the poor red critter into prison."

Anesi prodded, "And the green dragon?"

"Didn't like it a bit, he didn't," Humble Bellows answered. "Damn near burned the place to the ground before Dispoz lured him away. They fought for days. Master said he learned more 'bout fire spells in those few days than he had in all his studies. Scorched the land for miles around, they did, before it was finally over."

"Whyyy did heee killl dragonnn?" Tyrillee asked quietly. Her tears, at least, had stopped, and she sat on the ground in Cubby's arms. "Whyyy didn'ttt heee just senddd it awaaaay?"

"Teleport it?" Humble Bellows cackled again. "Now, I respect me master," he explained, "but he makes mistakes now an again, ye know? Like capturin' the silly beast in the first place? Well, in his haste an' eagerness to

catch it, he reads the spell directly from the scroll he'd researched and written it on, an' as yer young enchanter here'll tell ye, that means it crumbled up fine as the ash yer parked on right now." He grabbed a handful of dust from the ground and threw it up in the air. "An' he couldn't remember it after usin' it, o' course. Them things go right outa yer head, ye know. All that research an' work lost. Shoulda made some copies o' the scroll, he shoulda, since he said it was too powerful to *gnusto* into his spell book. But then, Dispoz never was one fer lookin' too far ahead. An' after he caught that damn beastie, he jus' sorta fergot about everthin' else." He tapped his temple and gave a meaningful look.

The dragons climbed higher and higher until everyone had to crane their heads back to see. Sometimes there were two creatures and sometimes one with four mighty wings that beat with a maddening rhythm. Sometimes two streams of fire ruptured the darkness. Sometimes there was just one bright fireball with a single twisted shadow writhing at its heart.

Anesi listened to them roar, and the fury of the sound ripped at his heart.

"Ye know," said Humble Bellows suddenly, "I really don't want to see how this comes out."

The dryad freed herself from Cubby's embrace and stood up. "Tyrilleee doesn'ttt eeeither."

Anesi closed his eyes. Only when the vision of the battle was shut out did he find the will to turn his back on it. It was hard, though. It was so hard. "Let's go," he sighed.

"I want to see," Fidget whispered.

Anesi gripped his friend's shoulders and pulled him gently away. "No, you don't," he said.

"Cubby never want to watch. Keep eyes covered," the brogmoid said, rising and brushing the dust from his red pants. "Well, most of time."

Humble Bellows, the first to speak of leaving, was the last to stand. He grabbed the bag by his knee with his left hand and rose slowly, his gaze still on the combatting

dragons. Anesi saw, then, what it was Bellows had held in his right hand, and let go a laugh of his own.

"Your Majesty," he said, grinning as he made a mock bow.

Bellows held up the head of his puppet king by its hair. The crown gleamed on its brow, and its eyes still burned red. "I told ye," Bellows said, cocking one eyebrow and glancing from Dimwit Flathead to Anesi and the others. "Real gold an' real rubies. Real valuable. 'Sides, I made it with me own hands, an' I'm as fond o' Flathead here as me master is his critter."

"I wouldn't say that's very fond right now," Fidget said, still watching the battle.

Humble Bellows shrugged. "The course o' true love," he said. "Never runs smooth, never runs straight. Stay away from it, boy, stay 'way."

Fidget couldn't take his gaze from the dragons. "Couldn't you cast that *vaxum* spell again and make them stop fighting?" he said.

Humble Bellows sneered. "Ye want to get yer mate scorched? Lookit all that fire! 'Fore he could get close he'd be a crisper, he would."

"Not stay," Cubby said, tugging at Tyrillee's hand. "Go."

With a collective sigh they began to walk. The light of Anesi's dagger guided them as they cut a wide arc around the melting ruins of Arbroneth, kicking dust as they dragged their feet. Anesi felt a physical ache in his chest as he turned his back on the combatting dragons, but there was nothing in his small power he could do. Still, as each red-orange blast lit the sky, he jerked around to see. Just as forcefully, though, he compelled himself to look away again and put the next foot forward.

They found the twisted remains of Dispoz's aqueduct system. The ceramic pipes ran south to water and forestland, Anesi remembered the sorcerer saying. They could follow them in the darkness.

To help himself forget the battle, Anesi turned his attention to Humble Bellows. He fell in step beside the dwarf-like little man, and they walked in silence for some

time. Bellows moved more like a brogmoid than like a human, lurching from side to side on his short legs, constantly correcting and recorrecting his balance as the bag he carried over his shoulder shifted and rolled on his broad back. He walked with his head down, kind of bent over, and looked at no one, but watched instead the place where his next step would go, as if he feared stepping on something.

When the others were strung out enough along the pipeline that they wouldn't overhear, Anesi whispered to Bellows. "Why'd you try to take my spell book?"

The little man shrugged without bothering to look up. "Tried to run away twice a long time ago," he answered glumly. "That was after he bought me out o' the mines o' Antharia."

"The marble mines?" Anesi interrupted. "You were a criminal?"

"Stole a little bit here an' there, nothin' major," Bellows confessed, without apparent shame. "An' got caught, o' course, an' sent to the mines. Anyway, he bought me an' brought me to Arbroneth, an' I tried twice to run away, an' twice he brought me back by magic."

Anesi thought about that. "Still, why try to grab my spell book?"

"Logic, of course," Bellows said reasonably. "Takes magic to fight magic, right? Well, me master looked like he was 'bout to have his hands full with the dragon, an' it looked to me like a good enough time to take it on the lam, an' if I could get me hands on somethin' good maybe I'd have time to figure out how to make it work 'fore he came after me again. That was 'fore I realized 'bout how full his hands were gonna be." He stopped abruptly, swung the bag off his shoulder, and set it on the ground. He'd tied a string tight around the top to keep it closed. He untied it carefully now and reached inside. There was a dry rattle of parchment. "Here, a little present fer ye. Fer disposin' o' Dispoz."

Two scrolls came out of the bag. Anesi bent closer with the dagger-light to see as Humble Bellows unrolled the first one and struggled to hold it flat enough to read.

The lettering swirled and flowed in a blaze of red and gold ink that dazzled the eye.

"If I remember right," Bellows said, as he wrestled with the corners, "this one's his fire-throwin' spell. He was real good at that one."

"*Radnog*," Anesi told him, recalling the name of the spell from his university days. "I've heard of it, but never seen the incantation."

"Well, yer seein' it now," Bellows responded, letting the scroll curl itself up. "An' its yers, mate, fer gettin' me out o' that dump. 'Tween ye an' me, I'd rather o' stayed in the mines."

Radnog was a very potent bit of magic, Anesi knew. More powerful than anything he'd ever handled as far as its destructive capabilities went. He'd have to be very careful with it if he tried to cast it. He accepted the parchment from Bellow's hand and held it gingerly, as if the scroll itself might burn his fingers. "What's the other?" he asked with interest.

"I think it's called *yonk*." Bellows unrolled the second parchment and held it up to Anesi's light. The ink this time was blue, and the letters made a strong, fast, powerful flow across the page. An illuminated border framed the text, triangular gold designs aswirl with big red S's. "An' it should augment the power of any other spell." Bellows looked up suddenly and grinned for the first time. "I figured if I could figure out how to work the fire-thrower thing, then I could boost it with this, I could, an' beat him at his own game." The scroll rolled back up with a crisp snap, and he handed it to Anesi.

"Do you know anything about magic?" the young enchanter asked. An absolute amateur might learn to handle some of the simpler spells quickly enough, assuming they had the will and the force of personality—the *presence*—to make them work. But these spells?

"Next to nothin', which is to say, nothin'," Bellows admitted. "I'm a fast learner, though, I am. An' I'll tell ye, mate, I was damn tired o' spendin' me weekends scrapin' dragon shit out o' that cell, if ye hear me. Desperate, I was. 'Sides, I figured if I made a clean getaway an' didn't

need 'em, they'd fetch a pretty zorkmid in Thriff or Borphée or any other town along the way." He tapped his temple and the side of his trousers. "Always keep an eye to the pocket, mate."

Anesi handed the dagger-light to Bellows to hold as he took out his spell book and opened it to the first blank page. It took little or no effort for him now to recall the *gnusto* spell, and he cast it on the first scroll. The red-and-gold script of *radnog* seemed to leap off the parchment as the letters took fire. A crackling light surrounded the parchment. Suddenly, a force like a thunderclap struck the spell book, hurling it from his hand and knocking Anesi on his backside. Scrambling to his knees, however, he saw to his relief that the book had fallen open. A bright finger of flame wrote across the page as the *gnusto* enchantment worked its magic, then flickered out. The parchment crumbled to fine ashes in his hand and became part of the dust.

"Got a bit of a kick to it, does it?" Bellows commented wryly as Anesi picked himself up and rubbed his rump. He recovered his spell book. The incantation had transferred without fault.

He took the second scroll and prepared to add it to his growing grimoire. The words of *gnusto* formed in his mind. Before he could cast the enchantment, however, Fidget jerked on his arm, breaking his concentration.

"Don't you remember what Khare told you?" His face was screwed up in a tight mask of worry as he shook a finger under Anesi's nose. "You're using too much magic! All those spells you cast on Dispoz, the spells that broke the dragon's chains, the light on your dagger, now this. Stop!"

Anesi frowned as he shook his head. "I have to copy these," he insisted. "They're too valuable to risk damaging or losing. You heard what happened to Dispoz's teleportation spell." He opened his book again and again prepared to cast *gnusto*.

But Fidget once again jerked his arm. "How valuable is your life," he persisted, "all our lives, if you attract the Terror's servants?" He made a broad, sweeping gesture.

"Do you see any shelter here, any place to hide?" He let go of his friend's arm as his frown deepened. "I'm not saying don't copy it. Just wait a little bit. You've cast a lot of spells in a short period. I'm just thinking it might be safer if you spread them out a little."

Anesi rubbed his temples and gave in. Without further protest he closed his spell book and put it in its pocket. He reached out and patted Fidget's shoulder. "You're right," he said, his voice thick with weariness. "Of course, you're right. I'm not thinking clearly. It's probably the excitement of the escape and the dragons and finding these scrolls."

"More likely the fatigue, you mean," Fidget corrected.

Anesi shrugged and slipped the uncopied *yonk* scroll into yet another pocket of his enchanter's cloak. He looked up the pipeline to where Cubby and Tyrillee had stopped to wait for them. He couldn't see their faces clearly, in fact, in the darkness he could barely see them at all. But the way they huddled together made him bite his lip. They looked nervous, frightened, and he was to blame.

He drew a deep breath and gazed back the way they had come. It had been some time since they'd last heard the dragons' roars, but the firefight had been visible from a distance. The northern sky, though, was finally dark except for a dim reddish glow that he took to be the heat sheen from Arbroneth's ruins.

"Let's go," he said to Bellows and Fidget, and he started to walk again, delaying just long enough for the little man to shoulder his bag again. "A little further," he added, draping one arm around Fidget's shoulder, "then we'd better find a place to rest."

They caught up with Cubby and Tyrillee. To Anesi's surprise they didn't seem nervous at all, but excited. Cubby grinned and hopped from one leg to the other.

"Want drink?" he asked in his little kid's voice, his eyes big and round with merriment. He lifted his foot and smashed it down sharply on a jointed section of the pipe. "Real stuff, not magic goop," he said, as a thin trickle of

water began to pour into the dust through the break he had made.

Fidget dropped immediately to his knees and caught a few drops in his cupped hands. "It's great!" he declared, as he lapped them up. "The next time I drink your potion," he said to Anesi as he tossed a handful of water on his friend, "I bet it tastes like this!"

Tyrillee also bent over the pipe and prepared to drink, but as she did her red poncho slipped forward, exposing her bare posterior.

"Rare night," Humble Bellows said drily, "when shines two full moons." He glanced up at the sky, then back at Tyrillee as he cocked an eyebrow. "A man's eye barely knows which to follow, mates." He dropped his bag again, untied it, and reached inside. "Maybe ye'd find it easier to drink from this." He pulled out a waterskin, perhaps the one he'd filled for them earlier. Certainly one like it and just as full.

Cubby started to reach for it, but Anesi waved a hand. "No," he said. "We've got water here for everyone. Let's save the bota in case we need it later." He looked around suddenly and sighed. "In fact, let's just make our camp here. We can drink our fill and wash our faces, too, and have another drink before we start out in the morning." He raked his nails down his right cheek. They came away black underneath. "I feel like I'm wearing two skins."

Cubby sidled over to him and tugged his sleeve. "Uh, 'Nes," he said, looking skyward past Anesi's shoulder. "Got company."

"Dragonnn!" Tyrillee shripped, leaping up and down as she clapped her hands excitedly.

Anesi whirled around in time to catch a faceful of dust as a wind whipped suddenly across the wastes. Quickly he rubbed a knuckle in each eye and stared again. A huge dark shape sailed toward them, eclipsing the stars as it came out of the north, its massive pinions drumming the air with a rhythmic sound that grew increasingly louder as it drew nearer. At first he bit his lip with a shivery fear that it was a servant of the Terror that

had found them. But then a short blast of scarlet fire left no doubt that it was, indeed, a dragon.

Cubby tugged on his sleeve again. "Good dragon, or pesky wizard?" he asked uncertainly.

"Good dragonnn!" Tyrillee answered with authority.

"How can you tell?" Anesi asked, without taking his eyes from the shadowed creature.

Tyrillee purred as she moved to the forefront of their group and stared upward. "Tyrilleee seee farrri!" she sang. "Seee glow of firre onnn prettee reddd scalesss!" She jumped up and down with increasing excitement, clearing their heads fantastically with each easy leap. "It seeesss usss! It'sss commming!"

The red dragon let go another short burst of flame as it wheeled overhead. Slowly it settled down to earth, folded its wings, and curled up on the ground facing them.

It opened its great cavernous mouth and spoke.

"Too bad we don't speak dragon," Fidget muttered, as they regarded the beast.

Tyrillee bounded forward eagerly and began to stroke the dragon's chin. It was an utterly silly sight to Anesi, for the creature was many, many times her size. She looked like a red gnat buzzing around its mouth as she jumped around, cooing and making her funny sounds of pleasure.

"Actually," he whispered to the others, "we could speak dragonese." He slipped out his spell book again and gave it a meaningful look. It opened on his palm to the *nitfol* spell. "Or it could speak peoplese." He exchanged looks with Fidget and waited. "It's up to you, though."

Fidget frowned, the corners of his mouth taking deep downward turns, and he made a little sound by sucking air between his teeth. "What the fuddle," he said at last. "Besides, dragons are supposed to be very wise, much wiser than we are. Maybe he'll say something important, something that'll change our whole lives!"

Humble Bellows scratched his stubbled chin. "I could use a change, mate," he grumbled. "But that beastie

never did say nothin' to me master in all the time he had him."

Anesi memorized the *nitfol* incantation and cast it upon the dragon as Bellows spoke.

The dragon lifted its head slightly as understanding took hold, and it grinned a grin that showed all its several hundreds of gleaming teeth. It spoke again, and Tyrillee was bowled off her feet by the thundrous force of its speech. She rolled head over heels, tangled in her poncho, and sat up with a look of utter bewilderment on her face.

The voice they heard was deep, gruff, and masculine, but with an odd purr hidden somewhere in it. It batted long silken eyelashes at them and stared strangely at Anesi. "Well, hello there, sailors!" it said breathily. "New in port?"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"**A**ND I TELL YOU,

honey," the dragon said to them all, "when Little Miss Dryad there came dancing in, why, I just thought I'd die! I mean, did you ever see such a tacky little poncho in your life? I just went crazy!" The dragon flapped one wing effusively as it spoke. "Red! I hate red!"

"But you're red," Fidget pointed out reasonably.

The dragon lifted its chin disdainfully. "I'm different," it insisted.

Fidget nodded. "You sure are."

"Nearly pulled the damn place down on our heads, ye did," Humble Bellows muttered unpleasantly. "Ye never talked before, ye damn critter. Not so much as a thank ye for all the times I shoveled yer filthy cell."

The dragon folded its wings back indignantly. "So what could I possibly have had to say to the man who killed my best friend, or his servant, for that matter? I mean, forget that you held me against my will, and forget that you murdered Chet. We are not talking first-class accommodations, here! What a dump!"

"Who's Chet?" Anesi interrupted.

The dragon batted its eyelashes. "My friend," it answered. "Or former friend, whatever. One of the cutest dragons that ever chased a cloud until Dispoz made a bridge out of him." It laid its chin down flat on the

ground again and let go a sigh that raised a small dust storm. Then it forced a weak grin. "By the way, sailors, I'm Chuck."

"I'm Anesi," Anesi answered.

"Don't be," Chuck replied sympathetically. "I'm the friendly type."

"What, do I have an accent or something?" Anesi said irritably. Fidget only gave an amused shrug. Anesi turned back to Chuck, slowly spelled his name, and pronounced it again, exaggerating each sound until the dragon got it right. Then, he continued the introductions until they all knew each other by name.

"Dispoz," Cubby said suddenly. He folded his arms across his red Borphee-Is-For-Lovers sweater and tapped his foot impatiently. "Where Dispoz?"

The dragon turned its nose up and snorted, pushing a gush of fire skyward. The darkness lit up for an instant as the flame balled and rolled in on itself and faded out. Twin wisps of smoke curled up from Chuck's nostrils and wafted away. "Crashed and burned," it answered finally. As if to emphasize its meaning, it held up one set of claws each as long as Anesi was tall. They glistened wetly, darkly, with a fluid that had to be blood. "Silly wizard," the dragon continued haughtily. "Kept referring to me as *she* for years. Really! The old boy had quite a problem, I tell you. Well, his problems are over now."

Fidget scratched his chin and knitted his brows together as he studied the beast before him. "Uh, how do you tell?" he asked hesitantly.

Chuck lifted his chin ever so slightly from the ground and narrowed his eyes to scrutinize Fidget. One set of claws, the bloodied ones, began to rap rhythmically in the dust, raising tiny clouds. "Ummm?" Chuck purred, "What's that, blondie? Tell what?"

Fidget swallowed hard, then gathered his courage. "A dragon's sex," he finished. "How do you tell?"

Chuck lowered his chin again and resumed his prone position. He closed his heavy scarlet eyelids and opened them again. "There's only one sure-fire way, if you'll par-

don my choice of words." He paused a moment for effect, never diverting his gaze from Fidget. "Ask it—politely."

"Did you kill him?" Anesi asked quietly, returning to the subject of Dispoz.

The dragon flapped a wing limply in his direction. "No, I took him home to mother, but she didn't approve, so it's over between us." He folded the wing back against his body again. "Of course, I killed him. After all, he killed Chet, didn't he? Though I can't guess how. Lucky punch, I guess, or whatever. Usually the only way you can do us in, you know, is to rip out our hearts." He stood up suddenly and reared on his massive hind legs. "Look," he said pointing to his chest.

Anesi caught his breath. Blood oozed from scores of scratches, some quite deep, and ran thickly down the dragon's underbelly. He hadn't realized Chuck was wounded. Maybe that was why he seemed to be having trouble with that left wing; maybe it was damaged, too.

"Fool kept trying to rip out my heart, all right, but he obviously didn't know scat about a dragon's anatomy." He rapped his chest again just under the breast bone. "It's just not in the same place as a human's."

"Where is it, then?" Humble Bellows asked gruffly.

But Chuck shook his head and clucked his tongue in a chiding manner as he curled up again on the ground. Then he looked at Tyrillee, who stood a little apart from the rest of them, still marveling and cooing about the "prettee dragonnnn."

"Hey, chippie," Chuck said, abruptly changing the subject, "I'm just teasing about your *accoutrements*. Really. A sight never looked so good to this big baby's eyes as when you walked through that door." A long red tongue snaked suddenly out between the dragon's lips and brushed up against Tyrillee's body, nearly lifting her from the ground.

"Oooooooh!" the dryad trilled, blushing as she grinned from ear to ear.

"Smooches, babe," Chuck added. "You got the thanks of a dragon, and some say that's good for a little luck." He turned his immense head toward the others

again. "You've all got my thanks, especially you, you cute little enchanter."

"Don't lick me," Anesi warned, taking a step back and shaking his finger.

"Me neither," Humble Bellows joined in, also retreating a step.

The dragon grinned slyly. "Oh, I haven't the stomach for that, servant of Dispoz. I know what you do for a living. I know where your hands have been."

Cubby ignored the banter and ambled forward. "Wounded dragon," he reminded in a scolding tone. "Help wounds, 'Nes! Help, Fidge!"

Chuck swept one wing low and forward, scooping up a lot of dust as he scooped up Cubby and lifted the brogmoid high and closer to his eyes. He squinted as he brought Cubby close to his nose and finally set him there.

"At ease, little fellow," the dragon said, as Cubby spread-eagled himself and hung on for dear life. "We heal rather quickly, and there's no real harm done." He paused, looked to his left, and flapped that wing experimentally. "No lasting harm, anyway. Now tell me, who is your tailor, and *where* did you find those colors?"

"Borphee!" Fidget shouted unnecessarily. His concern for the brogmoid deepened as Cubby slipped toward the end of the dragon's snout. "He spent some time there."

"And where, pray, is Borphee?" Chuck asked patiently.

Fidget moved closer, for it looked as if Cubby were about to fall. His three-fingered hands found no purchase on the dragon's slick scales, and he inched closer and closer toward the upper lip as the dragon spoke.

"It's a big port town over on the coast, it is," Humble Bellows answered irritably. "Now put the broggie down 'fore ye hurt him!"

"Ummm," the dragon continued thoughtfully. "Red and pink. Borphee. Big port town." Cubby slipped suddenly as Chuck finished the last word, but he didn't fall far before Chuck's big red tongue flashed out and gently

caught the tumbling brogmoid and allowed him to slide, spinning on an easy slope, to the ground.

Somewhat dazed, Cubby stood up. He hesitated uncertainly for a moment, feeling for his balance. Soon he made a face, grabbed the end of his sweater, and pulled it out away from contact with his flesh. It was sopping with the dragon's saliva. So were his trousers. "Yuck!" he said simply.

"Oh, don't be a tushpah!" Chuck said with a wink. "It was fun, admit it."

Anesi went to Cubby and tugged the sweater off over the brogmoid's head. It would need to dry before he wore it again. But it was going to be cold once they lay down to sleep. In fact, it was already cold, but none of them had had time to notice. He'd have to give Cubby his cloak to keep warm.

"You have a peculiar sense of fun," Anesi admonished the dragon.

The dragon's mouth turned downward in a dismayed frown. "I know, and I really have no control at all." The frown turned once again to a toothy grin. "But then, as an enchanter, even a young enchanter, you must know the importance of a sense of humor. Without it, you'll wind up just like Dispoz."

Anesi drew Cubby close and put an arm around his gray-skinned friend. "But he could catch a chill out here, tonight," he protested, unwilling quite yet to let Chuck off the hook.

But Chuck clucked his tongue again. "With me around?" He shook his head from side to side without taking his eyes from Anesi. "Really." He arched his neck and blew a bright cloud of fire into the sky directly overhead. The immediate temperature rose by several comfortable degrees. "Now, don't get so steamed," Chuck continued. "That's a little dragon humor. Don't get steamed, get it?" He settled back to the ground again, neck, belly, and tail all stretched flat out, legs and wings folded in close to his great body. "Now relax. Let's all get some sleep. After all, it's been some day, huh?" He looked at each of them in turn, winking when he came to Cubby.

Obviously, he liked the little brogmoid. He sighed again, raising yet another little dust storm as his exhalation struck the ground. "Then, in the morning," he added, as his huge eyelids sagged dreamily closed, "I'll fly you to someplace with a little more panache."

Chuck seemed to fall asleep immediately. The others stood around for a few minutes. Finally, they too began to settle down for the night. Anesi waited until Cubby was down, then spread his cloak over the brogmoid and lay down beside him. The air was fine now, but if Chuck didn't happen to wake up to warm it again, they'd be shivering before dawn.

Tyrillee snuggled up close on the other side of Cubby and offered part of her poncho. "Dragonnnn pretteee," she said for the umpteenth time, adding, "but Tyrilleee hope heee doesn't snorrrr!"

"If he does, mates," Humble Bellows muttered, "then we're gonna be burned, buried, or blown away, takes yer choice."

Anesi was the last to awaken again. He rubbed a hand over his sleep-filled eyes and sat slowly up as the world reluctantly came into focus. Chuck must have done his job, Anesi realized, and kept them warm, for he'd completely discarded his cloak while he slept. It lay in a blue heap near his head.

The others were gathered around Humble Bellows and his bag. Cross-legged on the ground, they munched bread, cheese, and apples for breakfast. As Anesi watched, Bellows reached into the bag, pulled out a second loaf, and broke it in pieces.

"Save some for me," he begged, rising. He picked up his cloak and fastened it around his shoulders, feeling for his spell book to reassure himself it was still there. Instead he found a strange patch of wetness in another pocket.

"Oh no!" he cried, pulling out an empty vial. Only the slightest trace of the *berzio* potion ringed the bottom. The rest had leaked out during the night. "Someone must have rolled on it in their sleep and broken the stopper. It's all gone!"

Humble Bellows got up and came over to look. He took the small vial from Anesi and peered at it through squinting eyes. "Yep, sure is," he said. Then he gave the empty bottle a toss. It arched high into the sky and fell somewhere out of sight. "No point cryin' over spilled potion, I always say." He went back to his place on the ground and tossed Anesi a crust of bread. "Ye'll get more after ye wash up, dirty boy. We've each taken our turn. Now it's yers."

Anesi groaned and knelt down by them. The loss of the potion bothered him, but the empty sensation in his stomach bothered him more. "Let me eat first," he pleaded. "I'm starved."

Cubby grabbed the neck of the bag and scowled. "Dirty boy!" he said. Then he pinched his nose between two of his fingers and made a face.

"Dirteee hoomannn!" Tyrillee echoed. She giggled then and taunted him further by biting into a crisp, juicy apple.

"Of course, you could always try to suck what's left of the *berzio* potion out of your cloak," Fidget suggested. "You might get a little something out of it." He raised a thick piece of bread to his mouth and regarded Anesi over it. Slowly, ever so slowly, he opened his mouth and pushed the bread inside. All of it. He seemed to take forever to chew it before he swallowed, and he never looked away from his friend. He wiped a finger over his lips. "You won't need any of this stuff," Fidget added, as he accepted another fat chunk from Bellows. "You've got your magic."

Anesi's mouth watered. Maybe he could get a taste of the *berzio* potion. His cloak pocket was still wet. But he longed for real food in his belly, and the picnic laid out before him made his stomach grumble with anticipation. Sure, the potion tasted like chocolate to him, but too much chocolate was too much of a good thing. What he wanted most right now was a piece of that cheese!

"Sadists," he grumbled sourly, as he headed for the pipe Cubby had broken. Someone had scooped a small depression underneath the break to collect the water that

leaked out. Most of it quickly seeped into the ground, but the stream flowed just fast enough to keep the depression half full. He didn't want to drink it, but it was clean enough to wash his face in, and, laying his cloak neatly aside, he knelt down to do just that. Then he cupped his hands directly under the break and took a fresh drink from the pipe.

When he returned to his friends, all that remained was half an apple and a palm-sized chunk of bread. Anesi's jaw dropped. "You ate it all!" he cried aghast. "The cheese! Fidget!"

Fidget looked askance as he licked away the last few crumbs that clung to his fingers. The others turned big, guiltless eyes up at him. Except for Cubby. The brogmoid stretched his short legs out in front of him and bent forward to touch his toes, unwilling to look at Anesi at all.

"Shouldn't have slept so late, mate," Humble Bel-lows muttered with a shrug.

Tyrillee sat up straight and rubbed her hand in a circular motion over her stomach. "Hoooman food gooddd!" she sang, as a grin turned up the corners of her mouth. "Vereee gooddd cheeesse!"

Fidget got languidly to his feet, stretched his arms high over his head, and gave an exaggerated yawn. "Really sorry you missed it, Anesi." He thumped his friend lightly on the back. "But your potion should see us through a couple of days until we hit a town and can buy some supplies."

"A couple of days!" Anesi sputtered. He felt his cheeks reddening as he stamped his foot. He gazed down again at a scrap of oiled paper that had contained the cheese, and a cloth that had wrapped the bread and that now held only a few brown crumbs and a bit of crust. How could they have been so selfish? He clutched his stomach and turned away, his eyes burning.

"All right, guys," Cubby said, adopting his street-tough voice as he got to his feet. "Enough's enough. Joke's over." He folded his arms across his broad chest and tapped his foot in the dust as he glared at them. "Do I break heads, or do we break bread?"

Sheepish grins spread across all their faces, then uncontrollable smiles that blossomed into a full chorus of laughter. Tyrillee leaned over and reached deep into Humble Bellows's bag. "Seee?" she purred. "Plentee cheesse for hoooman friennnd." She pulled out a huge yellow block of the most delicious-looking cheese Anesi thought he'd ever seen. "Breadd, tooo," she added with a tinkling giggle. "Plentee everythinggg!"

"We wouldn't forgetcha, kid," Cubby said gruffly, as he gave Anesi a wink. "They just wanted a little fun, that's all." Then he sat back down on the ground, and his tough persona seemed to melt away. Even his posture seemed to change, and when he spoke again, his voice sounded softer, higher than before, childlike. "Like 'Nesi," he said, nodding his head up and down. "'Nesi good friend to Cubby."

"A joke, huh?" Anesi said, brightening. He joined them in their circle, crossing and folding his legs under himself as he sat down. With both hands he took the cheese from Tyrillee, balanced it on one knee and reached for the bread. He broke off a piece and stuffed it in his mouth. "Good joke," he continued, spewing crumbs. "Whose idea?"

"Fidgett friennnd!" Tyrillee volunteered before the others could stop her, though they waved their hands and made desperate faces to get her attention.

"Fidget's, huh?" Anesi deliberately kept his eye on the cheese as he broke off a bit of it and refused to look at his friend. He didn't have to look at him. He could feel Fidget tensing up. They'd been friends too long for him not to expect a payback. But let him sweat a little first.

"Oh, oh," Fidget said quietly. He leaned forward, putting his face as close as he could to Anesi's in an effort to make his friend look at him. "What's going on in there?" Fidget whispered nervously.

But Anesi wouldn't meet his gaze, though it meant turning aside to address Humble Bellows. He swallowed his first bite of cheese, rich and creamy cheese that melted on his tongue, the best he'd ever tasted in his life, and then he spoke ever so politely. "Where's the dragon, Mis-

ter Bellows?" he said, as if he were asking someone to pass the sugar at tea time. "I couldn't help but notice its absence."

"Left us early this morning, he did, Mister Enchanter," Bellows answered, in an equally genteel manner. "But if ye look, young sir, ye'll see here he comes."

The dragon came sweeping out of the northern sky, sliding low on extended wings. The sun shimmered on its sleek crimson body, causing unexpected flashes of such brilliance that the eye ached to watch, and as it approached the ground, the light scattered against its glistening scales and fell like tiny dazzling ruby-drops to the earth. A wake of dust rising from the wastes marked the creature's passage.

"Cover your faces," Humble Bellows warned sarcastically, and he tugged up the neck of his tunic to hide his mouth and nose.

When it was almost upon them, the dragon folded its wings and made a perfect two-point landing on its hind legs, then a four-point landing as its front feet came down. It looked around for the end of its tail, circled itself twice, and curled up in the dust with its head toward them.

"Good morning, Chuck!" Anesi called, waving a piece of cheese.

The dragon blinked at him. "Don't talk with your mouth full, handsome," it advised. "It's so *très déclassée!*"

"Sorry," Anesi answered. Hastily he finished chewing what was in his mouth and swallowed. He wiped a hand over his lips and gave a quiet burp. "Where've you been?"

Chuck shrugged and fluttered his wings, no doubt softly as far as dragons were concerned, but it set up quite a powdery cloud, and Anesi hugged the cheese and threw a corner of his cloak around it to keep it clean.

Chuck seemed not to notice what he'd done. "I thought about it all night," he sighed dramatically, "and decided that poor Chet needed a decent cremation." He blinked again and yawned a big yawn. The barest hint of a golden furnace glimmered deep in his cavernous throat.

"It just didn't seem right to leave him there like that, his ribs swinging in the wind, his bones creaking, his cute little vertebrae going *crack, crack, crack* every time someone walked on them."

"So you burned our bridge behind us," Fidget interrupted. His mouth twisted up on one side, and he cocked an eyebrow.

The dragon blinked one eye, then the other, then closed both eyes and opened them again. It licked its lips with just the tip of its tongue, a long slender red ribbon that made a lazy sweep across a forest of ivory teeth. "That is so well put, honey," Chuck answered finally. "I wish I'd said that, really I do." He sighed again, but this time he happened to glance aside as he did so, and his exhalation blew dust in a harmless direction. "Anyway," he continued with a sniff, "Chet's just history now, a little bit of smoke in my eye, and we all have to go forward with our lives." He sniffed again, lifting his head from the ground and arching his neck, then settled back again and stared at them with those great diamond-fired eyes. "But I promised to fly you out of this wasteland, didn't I? Ready to go?"

Anesi bit his lip dubiously. "You mean, ride us on your back?"

The dragon rolled its eyes. "All right, all right. So its not first class. But you can't beat the fare, can you?"

"What if we fall off?" Fidget asked uncertainly.

Chuck craned his neck forward until they were practically eye to eye. "Look," he said, "I only fly the friendly skies. No clouds, no rough weather. Just the deep blue and sunshine. Fall off? You'd have to jump off, honey. Look how broad my back is!" Slowly so as not to stir the dust, he spread one wing flat along the earth. "Come on, now. Climb aboard."

Tyrillee didn't wait. She ran the short distance, leaped up onto the tip of Chuck's wing, and raced merrily along its length and onto his body. From a spot approximately between his shoulder blades she waved to them. "Ooooooh, dragonnn!" she cried. "Feeelsss good onnn bare feet!"

"I ain't ridin' on no dragon," Humble Bellows swore, his face curdled into a sour grimace as he grabbed the cheese from Anesi's hand and thrust it into his bag. He quickly looped a piece of string around the bag's neck and threw it over his shoulder and made as if to leave. "Me an' King Dimwit in here will just walk it, thank ye an' farewell."

Fidget stepped up, grabbed his hand, and pumped it up and down a few times. "Well, 'bye, then, and thanks for the grub." He turned on his heel and sped as fast as he could in Tyrillee's tracks, climbed on the wingtip, and joined her on Chuck's back. The two of them linked hands.

The brogmoid stared up at them, then turned to Humble Bellows. "'Bye, guy!" he said quickly with a slight wave of the hand and a grin. Then he, too, ambled as fast as he could to the lowered wing.

Anesi felt far less enthusiastic than his friends and far more sympathetic to Humble Bellows. The idea of riding the dragon's back made him queasy. They had left him without a choice, however. He had to go with them. He turned to the short little man and extended his hand. "It was nice to meet you," he said.

Humble Bellows exploded.

"You mean yer just gonna leave me here to bake an' boil? Right here in the middle o' this desert? Me, what dragged ye safe out o' the jaws o' danger when Arbroneth was comin' down 'round yer ears? What saved ye from Dispoz an' his tender mercies? Me, what fed ye a good breakfast this very mornin'?" He shook a fist and stamped a foot on the ground as he glared angrily at Anesi. "An ingrate, that's what I call ye! An ingrate!"

Anesi recoiled from the force of the little man's rage, but there was nothing he could do. His friends were waiting for him, and Chuck was waiting. More importantly, he reminded himself, the wizards of Thriff were waiting. He had a job to do, a special task, and he couldn't do it if he died in this wasteland. Besides, he thought suddenly, Humble Bellows hadn't done any of the stuff he'd just claimed except feed them breakfast!

"We have to go," Anesi said uncomfortably, backing away a step.

Humble Bellows whipped open his bag suddenly and pushed one hand deep inside. "Dimwit's crown!" he shouted, bringing out the ornament. It sparkled richly in the sun. "Real gold, like I said. It's yers, if ye stay!"

Anesi backed another step, shrugging and shaking his head. "Sorry," he said.

Humble Bellows dropped the crown in the dust. Again he reached into the bag and this time hauled out the entire head of the puppet. "Real rubies!" he cried desperately, pointing to the eyes. "Yers!"

Anesi shrugged again and kept backing, but he reached both hands blindly into a pair of pockets in his cloak and pulled out two handfuls of treasure from the hellhound's lair. A few gemstones slipped through his fingers. He saw, but didn't bother to pick them up. "I've got enough already," Anesi told him apologetically. "Goodbye, Mister Bellows."

The little man just stared at Anesi as he retreated. Then, suddenly, he threw down the head in disgust and shouted. "All right then, damn ye! Have it yer own way! We'll ride the blasted dragon an' all tumble to our deaths, if that's the way ye want it! But yer not leavin' me to simmer an' stew out here in the middle o' nowhere, yer not! Not me!" He thrust his hands into his trouser pockets and hung his head as he walked muttering toward the dragon's wing. "Damn kids, nowadays! Got no respect!"

Anesi sighed and started after Bellows. But just as he caught up with the little man, he turned around again.

"Nearly forgot His Majesty!" Bellows grumbled. A moment later, crown and puppet-head were back in the bag, the bag was back on Bellows's shoulder, and Bellows was back at Anesi's side. "Ye can have another piece o' cheese later, if ye want, curse ye," he said to Anesi as he climbed onto the wing.

When they were safely on his back the dragon folded its wings. Massive shoulder blades rose on either side of them, making it highly unlikely that they would fall off as long as they remained where they were, but they sat

down anyway and all joined hands and held tight. Anesi held his breath for a long moment, and then, with sudden inspiration, pulled out his spell book and memorized the *izyuk* incantation for flying. He had no idea if it would work at great heights if someone fell, and he'd only be able to use it once, with little chance of memorizing it again. Still, it was a small precaution he could take. Feeling better, he put the book away.

The dragon watched him, its neck craned back over one wing so it could see. "You know, honey," it said, "I knew another kid like you once. Color-blind, though, and he had a terrible accent, I remember. Never could say my name right." The dragon blinked, looking thoughtful. "Used to bring me string and sealing wax and other fancy stuff, you know? Real sweet, but weird. A real weird kid." Chuck lowered his head until he was eye to eye above Anesi. "Like you."

"Sounds to me like you miss him," Anesi dared to observe.

Chuck flexed his wings and rose to stand on all four feet as he looked away. "Could be, honey," he murmured wistfully. "Could be."

Humble Bellows cleared his throat rudely. "I don't know about the rest of you," he complained, "but my bag is packed. I'm ready to go!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

T

HE DRAGON FLEW with his head high, blocking much of the wind so it did not whip them too forcefully. At first they sat huddled together in the small hollow between the creature's great shoulders, each holding on to someone else as the clouds and the blue sky rushed by.

Fidget was the first to try standing up. "It's easy!" he exclaimed, after a moment's uncertainty. Then he paced a circle around his friends. Cubby got up next. Experimentally, he hopped from one foot to the other. A big grin spread over his face.

Anesi and Tyrillee tested their sky-legs too. Only Humble Bellows refused to move. Stubbornly, he hunkered down over his bag and hugged it to his chest. His eyes were squeezed shut, and he muttered unintelligibly to himself. At last, the others gave up and left him alone.

"I can take you as far south as Mareilon in the Peltoid Valley," Chuck called back to them with a voice that boomed even over the roar of the wind. "Will that do?"

"That's over halfway to Miznia!" Anesi cried excitedly. He shouted because he wasn't sure Chuck could hear him as easily as he could hear Chuck. "That would be fantastic! Are you sure it's not too far?"

"We'll fly nonstop," Chuck answered, craning his neck just enough so that Anesi could see the dragon's left

eye. Anesi knew he was being watched. "And make landfall some time after midnight."

The dragon looked straight ahead, then, and spoke no more.

Anesi strode carefully to the base of Chuck's neck and stood there, like the captain of a ship, with his legs apart and hands clasped behind his back. There he could see over the dragon's head and feel the wind on his face, and his heart leaped suddenly with an overpowering sense of freedom and joy.

He forgot entirely how reluctant he had been to ride in this manner, as he forgot the fear he had experienced when the ground fell away. He spread his arms as if they were wings, closed his eyes, and felt the air currents swirl around his body. It was a glorious sensation, and for just an instant he thought, perhaps, that he had some insight into Dispoz's obsession with these beautiful creatures.

He opened his eyes again as Fidget came to his side, and the two friends joined hands and looked at each other. Nothing more needed to be said between them. From high above they watched the world flow by.

The pale gray desert below them glimmered in the sun like smooth bone-white ivory. An occasional random breeze raised a fine line of dust to remind the eye that the plain was not as flat and hard-packed as it appeared but was a subtle ocean of fine powder and ash that crashed suddenly upon a shore of blackened trees.

A forest of charred and splintered trunks reared starkly like a bastion against the wasteland, a palisade that extended to the east and west as far as they could see. No limbs grew on those thick boles, no leaves. Even the bark had been seared away, leaving only dead, fire-hardened wood.

Anesi wondered at the battle that could have caused such massive destruction. Or had it been only the battle between Dispoz and the dragon, Chet, that had caused it? Had Chet, in his rage, just unleashed his frustration on the land, burning everything in sight? Or was it the work of one dragon at all?

"Did Dispoz transform himself to fight the other dragon?" Anesi called to Humble Bellows.

The old man still cowered between Chuck's shoulder blades, but he'd taken out the head of the puppet Flat-head from his bag. He held it firmly between his knees and seemed to mumble things to it. At Anesi's call he looked up. "Course, he did, mate. Jus' like ye seen him, big an' blue an' mean. Only, I guess he was younger then, an' stronger, too. He an' that other one, they went at it fer days, they did."

Anesi bit his lip, and Humble Bellows went back to talking to his puppet.

Here and there, patches of green saplings began to spring up among the black trunks, then larger patches that were fully grown trees whose leaves were already edged with autumn's sunset colors. The dead forest began to merge with the living forest, and soon the living forest dominated. They had passed at last beyond the battleground of the dragons.

"Treeesss!" Tyrillee sighed. Her voice held a quality of awe, and her wide eyes sparkled with the light of excitement as she crept as far along the dragon's neck as she dared. "New treeesss!" she said again.

New worlds, Anesi realized, understanding her meaning. If every tree was a world to her, each different from another, then a totally new forest, one she had never seen before, would be a wondrous thing indeed for Tyrillee. The dryad stared left and right and clasped her hands together under her chin in an almost prayerful manner.

Anesi settled down again with Fidget and Cubby at his side. The flat land began to lift and roll in gentle swells and low hills. Tiny lakes dotted the valleys, and slender ribbons of silver meandered among the verdant slopes. At least, the lakes appeared to be tiny from the boys' high vantage.

One such ribbon began to widen as they followed it southward, and it lost its silver color, turning instead a muddy brown as its current gathered momentum and its swift waters cut away at the containing banks and churned its silt bottom. White caplets danced on its sur-

face. Cubby pointed out a black clump of wooden debris that by some trick of the water had formed a massive nest, where hundreds of thousands of birds gathered as it swept aimlessly along.

"That's the Frigid River," Anesi announced to his friends. "We'll probably follow it for a while before it turns southeast." He rubbed one finger over his lips thoughtfully as he studied the river and remembered half a dozen tales and legends about it. "It flows right by Castle Egreth," he continued, "where King Duncanthrax lived and from where he ruled ancient Quendor."

"That was the golden age of the Great Underground Empire," Fidget commented, without looking at Anesi. His gaze followed the river below. "They say he was quite eccentric."

"The Bellicose King," Anesi reminded his friend. "How'd you like that for a nickname?"

After a while Chuck turned away from the river. His great red-and-gold wings stilled for an instant as he banked ever so gently to the southwest. The great billowy clouds described lazy pirouettes in the sky, and the sun that had been so warm on their shoulders became an uncomfortable glare in the corners of their eyes.

Anesi, Fidget, and Cubby crawled on their hands and knees to sit on the other side of the dragon, where the sun fell once again on their shoulders. Humble Bel-lows had apparently made up his mind to remain safely where he was for the duration of the journey. Tyrillee, however, had worked her way far up along the dragon's neck. She sat now just behind his head, her legs straddling Chuck as she clung tightly with her knees. Her white hair streamed wildly in the wind of his flight, and her red poncho lashed the air as if her own small shoulders had sprouted crimson fairy wings of their own to match the dragon's.

Anesi caught his breath. It was a precarious position for her. Her legs did not go very far around the dragon, and she had nothing on which to hold. Yet he could hear the soft, excited tinkle of her laughter, could share some part of her joy as she flung out her arms to welcome the

wind as it caressed her. Chuck wouldn't let her fall, Anesi reassured himself. And he had an *izyuk* spell ready, just in case.

Several small towns and villages passed below. Ant-sized farmers paused in their fields and leaned on hoes or rakes to watch a dragon fly over their land. Some considered such a rare sight to be an omen of good luck, though Anesi, personally, discounted superstitions as foolishness. It was, after all, a rational world, he reminded himself. His teachers had taught him so.

Sometime in the late afternoon they reached the shore of the Shallow Sea, a great inland body of water surrounded by low cliffs and sharp crags. Tall spires and jagged pinnacles of stone rose up randomly from the surface. They glimmered whitely, covered with guano, for birds of all species had made the spires their homes. Legend claimed a tall man could walk across the sea's width without ever wetting his hair. No doubt many had drowned trying to prove the legend.

As they flew beyond the cliffs and the silver-capped surf the water took on a placid appearance that mirrored the indigo and amber of the sunset. Great flocks and coveys of birds wheeled below them, chasing playfully around the pinnacles or making sudden dives for fish that swam too close to the surface.

A pair of sea serpents rippled among the spires, trailing a gentle wake, tightly entwined in a mating embrace as they swam along, oblivious to all else.

A huge dark shape skimmed the water to their left. Chuck's shadow, Anesi realized with a self-conscious smile, but magnified many times by the angle of the sun on the dragon's wings. For an instant, though, he'd thought of the servants of the Terror, and feared they had found him.

He turned slowly to scan the wide horizon, and he felt that fear again. Near the sun, so near he had to squint and shield his eyes to see, three silhouettes looped and glided side by side. It was impossible to make out detail, but their tremendous wing spans were obvious, as was the peculiar whip-like motion those leathery pinions de-

scribed as they pumped air. Then there were four, as another shadow flew out of the sun's heart.

Anesi clapped a hand anxiously on Fidget's shoulder and jerked his friend around as he pointed.

Chuck's voice boomed back to them before Anesi could say anything. "I am home," the dragon told them joyfully, the first words he had spoken in a long while. His great sinuous neck craned toward Anesi's distant shapes, and he lifted his head proudly.

Fidget looked at Anesi and shrugged. "What do you mean, home?" he shouted.

"The western shore of the Shallow Sea belongs to the dragons," Chuck answered. "Those four are a little way from home, though. Not many venture from the hatching grounds these days."

"Why not?" Fidget called back. "You did."

The dragon arched its wings high overhead and pushed down, gaining altitude. "Well, honey, Chet and I weren't exactly accepted in the community, if you know what I mean. But that was quite a while ago. I'm hoping things have changed now, and if they haven't, well, I'll just have to change them, cause I'm going home, and nobody is stopping me."

Anesi bit his lip and continued to stare at the four dark shapes that climbed and dipped and gradually turned away and disappeared altogether. "You're sure those are dragons?" he called doubtfully.

"We'll reach Mareilon around midnight," Chuck continued, as if he hadn't heard. Then he turned quiet again, lost in dragon thoughts.

Slowly, the sun disappeared below the edge of the sea, and a blood-red stain spread across the water and into the sky as if the brilliant disc had dissolved and diffused. Anesi finally forgot his fears and the distant shapes as he allowed the sunset to work its enchantment on him. He trembled as he watched it, his hands cupped over his mouth, and marveled that he had never seen such wonderful sunsets in the forest around his home. The trees had always hidden them. In the wasteland, though, where the dust in the air scattered the light into

so many vibrant colors, and here, where the fading rays danced upon the silvery sea . . . He shook his head and bit his lip and thought nothing in the world could be more beautiful.

Before the sky had completely darkened, Humble Bellows called to them to come share some bread. Anesi hadn't given any thought at all to food. In fact, he wasn't truly hungry even now, so caught up was he in the majesty of the flight. But he realized that, as much as anything else, it was a call for company. The little bearded man hadn't ventured from his spot between Chuck's shoulder blades all day. He'd had no one at all to talk with except the puppet-head of King Dimwit Flathead.

Tyrillee seemed not to hear. She'd crawled far out along Chuck's neck and achieved a vantage right behind the dragon's head. All they could see was her flapping poncho and her streaming hair. Maybe she couldn't come back, Anesi thought; maybe she was afraid to brave the sharp wind. It wouldn't be as easy to scoot backward. But he didn't really believe that. He had the definite impression that the dryad wasn't afraid of anything.

He and Fidget, though, joined Humble Bellows long enough for the three of them to consume half a loaf of bread and an apple each. They washed it down with water from the bota in Bellows's bag.

"He's been flyin' with no rest fer an awful long time, don't ye think?" Humble Bellows said suddenly as he stoppered the bota. "I'm wonderin' if dragons crash very often."

"Never more than once," Fidget offered with a wink. He patted his belly and crawled back to his former vantage point near the left wing.

Anesi stayed with Bellows a while longer. The little man's face was all screwed up, and he hugged himself as he rocked lightly from side to side. "Are you all right?" Anesi finally asked. "You're not afraid of flying, are you?"

Humble Bellows frowned. "Hmmmph! 'Fraid? Course not! But I'm feelin' just a bit . . ." He hesitated and looked askance. "...uncomfortable, if ye take me meanin'. We've not seen a tree all day, so to speak." He

pursed his lips and busied himself putting away the bota and tying up his bag again.

"You think you're uncomfortable?" Anesi smirked. "Imagine any poor soul unlucky enough to look up as we pass. Chuck hasn't *stopped* for a tree, either." He winked at Bellows. "If you take my meaning."

Humble Bellows made a face. "Saw a man crushed by whale blubber once, I did," he said. "In me sailin' days around the south. Must o' been a ton o' it. Fell off a hook overhead, an he wasn't even lookin'." He winced again, then grinned as he looked back at Anesi. "Yer right, though. Pity the unlucky guy under Chuck."

Anesi nodded silently, then crawled back to rejoin Fidget. Inwardly, though, he wished Bellows had never mentioned his kidneys. The power of suggestion was a potent force, and enchanter or not, Anesi was as susceptible as anyone else, a fact brought home to him now. He gritted his teeth, however, and did his best to put it from his mind.

The first stars began to shine through the deepening gloom, and the moon, huge and still nearly full, crept up from the eastern horizon. Its color was a deep burnt orange, and it cast a wide shaft upon the darkening water. Anesi remembered the sunset and considered that perhaps there was something more beautiful after all.

"It's strange," Fidget said quietly beside him. "I don't think I've ever felt so at peace. This is the first day that I haven't thought about my parents."

Anesi didn't point out the contradiction. He gave his friend a sidelong glance. Fidget was the only true friend he'd ever had. He worried about what he was leading him into, yet he was so glad Fidge was here. He grinned suddenly. *Fidge*. He'd picked up Cubby's nickname.

"Cubby!" He cried suddenly. A terrible fear seized him. "Where's Cubby!" He shot a horrified look around. The brogmoid hadn't joined them for bread. In fact, he hadn't seen Cubby for quite a while. He didn't see him now.

Fidget caught his arm. "Relax," he told him, unconcerned. "He's with Tyrillee."

Anesi was unconvinced. He got to his hands and knees and stared at the dryad's back. In the growing dark, it was harder than ever to see anything but her whipping poncho and hair. "I don't see him!" Anesi shouted.

Fidget drew a deep breath and shouted. "You, Cubbo!"

A moment later a small gray hand waved back over the top of Tyrillee's head. "Yo, Fidget!" came the brogmoid's street voice. "Come on out!"

But Fidget just settled back again. "See?" he said to Anesi. He leaned back on his elbows and crossed one leg over one bent knee as he stared at the moon-brushed clouds.

A black, uneven line defined the southern coast of the Shallow Sea. In an instant they were across it, and the sea became a flat silver mirror behind them.

"Wait!" Anesi shouted. "Chuck!"

The dragon craned its neck around slowly and carefully so as not to dislodge Tyrillee and Cubby. He trained one eye on Anesi. "Yes, sweets?"

"Could we fly eastward along the shoreline for just a way?" he asked. "It shouldn't be far. There's something I want to see."

"Sight-seeing?" Fidget asked, sitting up with interest. "I thought we were on a quest?"

"Task," Anesi corrected automatically. "Please, Chuck? I'm sure it's not far. And could we fly a little lower?"

The wings steadied, and the dragon swung around in a wide, graceful arc that brought them much closer to the ground. Finding the shoreline again, Chuck turned in the specified direction. After a while, though, the coast itself swung once again to the south, forming an ever-narrowing point of water as the eastern coast pinched inward.

"There it is," Anesi said in a low voice, pointing to the narrow shore. He rose to stand carefully on the dragon's back, the better to see the black, looming structure below. Fidget also rose beside him to see. "Largoneth Castle," Anesi announced.

Chuck seemed to know without being told that this

was what Anesi had wanted to see. The dragon descended even lower, his great wings barely clearing the tallest towers as he skimmed them. Ever mindful of his riders, he glided twice across the castle grounds, then, gaining just a bit more height, he began to circle.

Smooth black stone gleamed in the moonlight, which was no longer burnt orange, but brilliant in its pure whiteness. Massive walls surrounded Largoneth Castle. Huge iron-barred gates stood shut at the east and west sides, each guarded by pairs of tall stone basilisks. An old road ran right up to the east gate, the legendary Long Road, that extended all the way to the Gray Mountains that once formed the western boundary of ancient Quendor, and some said even further, beyond to the Kovalli Desert itself.

Two tall towers with a bridging turret stood at the west end of the castle, and an even taller but isolated tower just beside them. A huge open courtyard lay in the center of the castle's four main wings, and a low, squat building, some kind of temple, had been built there. Two more smaller towers formed the corners of the eastern wall.

It was impressive and ominous. Castle Largoneth shimmered and shone with a quality of blackness that mere night could not conceal. There were no windows in the towers, no embrasures in the high walls. It proclaimed its purpose with a stark, terrifying harshness: that it was not built to keep enemies without, but to shut and seal a great enemy within.

"What place is that, mate?" Humble Bellows had crept up behind them on his hands and knees. He stared down over the dragon's side with his head between Anesi's legs. The strangeness of Largoneth had drawn even him from the safety of his former position, but Anesi barely noticed.

Absently he told them the castle's name. "It was built over nine hundred years ago by Entharion the Wise."

Wide-eyed, Fidget gave me a whistle. "The first king of Quendor!"

"More than just its king," Anesi continued. "Its

founder. He united the warring tribes to form Quendor and made it a powerful nation, and for many years he ruled from this same castle." He hesitated as he tried to recall the history he had learned at Galepath University.

"But the study and practice of magic was very crude in those distant days," he continued finally, "not the rigorous scientific endeavor it has become today. Somehow, some unknown practitioner or group of practitioners accidentally awakened an incredibly ancient and malevolent force, a shapeless creature that came to be known as the Great Terror, or the Unseen Terror. Along with its servants. It nearly destroyed our civilization.

"But Entharion, by then an old man, called together the mightiest enchanters and sorcerers and wizards in the land, and together, working day and night, they created a scroll of truly great power, which we now believe contained the *guncho* incantation, which can open gateways to new worlds and dimensions beyond our own. Working swiftly and with full urgency, they then constructed a maze-like series of chambers far beneath Largoneth Castle and placed the scroll at the very heart of it.

"Now, the Terror had power to sense a great work of magic, and as Entharion knew it would, It came seeking the scroll. Lurking in the shadows of the castle, the magicians waited for their foe to enter the maze. Then, acting in concert with all the powers at their command, they sealed the Terror deep within the rock that formed Largoneth's foundation."

Fidget whistled again. "They killed It?"

"It can't be killed," Anesi answered. "Only imprisoned. To that end, Entharion renounced the throne of Quendor and spent the rest of his days within this estate as guardian of the monster below. Eventually, however, Entharion died, and even Quendor faded from the pages of history. And to our shame and regret, what was fact was slowly allowed to become legend and fairy tale, and we forgot the truth of the Great Terror."

Anesi gave a sudden sigh as he finished his story.

"So now we have to face the truth again," Fidget added somberly.

Humble Bellows moved back from the boys and seated himself more comfortably away from the sight. "Well, what woke the silly beastie up is what I want to know, mates," he said. "How'd it git out now?"

"There was a battle here some years ago," Anesi explained, "between an evil wizard named Krill and a young enchanter apprenticed to Belboz the Necromancer. Probably neither of them knew of the menace sealed in the ground below. Why should they have known? Everyone else had forgotten. Somehow, though, in the course of that conflict, one of them cracked the seal. It took some time, but the Terror gradually worked its way through the maze and escaped." He reached into a pocket of his cloak, rummaged a moment, and at last came out with the infotater that had been the Great Shuboz Shuboz's gift to him. He handed it to Humble Bellows. "You might want to study the details before you decide just how far you want to go with us."

"It's not down there now, so far as ye know?" Bellows asked with a doubtful grimace, as he accepted the infotater.

Anesi shook his head.

"Miznia," Fidget volunteered to the little man. "That's why we're headed south."

When he had seen all he wanted to see, Anesi told Chuck. The dragon circled the castle once more to gain altitude, then put the tip of its left wing against the edge of the moon and flew away, leaving the towers and the black stones of Largoneth to stand once more in unremembered silence.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

W

HEN THE MOON BALANCED perfectly overhead and washed with silver all the world below, they reached the ruins of the first city of Mareilon. It sprawled at the edge of a dark forest whose autumn leaves swayed and rippled like water under the moon's dusty light. Shattered towers strained upward, the enigmatic night making beautiful what by day would turn to wreckage and decay.

Chuck spiraled downward with lazy grace and settled in the field between the trees and the city's broken walls. He lowered one wing to the earth. Anesi and his friends ran down as quickly as they could.

"Now, sweetums..." Chuck started when they were all down.

Anesi interrupted, however. "Be right back!" he shouted over his shoulder with a wave of his hand. "Don't go away!"

They took five separate paths as they all ran for the trees, leaving a puzzled Chuck to stare in amusement and shake his head. Anesi was the first to return. He wore a sheepish, if somewhat relieved, expression. "Sorry," he apologized. "I feel much better now."

The dragon smiled tolerantly. "No need to explain," he said.

One by one, the others emerged from the forest until

they formed a small half-circle before Chuck. The dragon blinked its huge golden eyes as Humble Bellows, the last to return, sidled up with his bag over his shoulder. Chuck curled up on the lawn and stretched his long neck until his head rested on the ground near Anesi.

"This is as far as I can take you, honey," the dragon said. "Doesn't do for a guy like me to be seen by too many humans, and there's a whole city of them just beyond those hills." He pointed at the ruins of Mareilon, but Anesi knew he meant the rebuilt city of the same name, which lay about a half day's walk beyond, on the other side of the Backbone Hills, which couldn't be seen in the dark. "They upset a bit too easily, you know. Too territorial. A dragon flies by once or twice, and the next thing you know some cute little would-be dragon-basher comes a-hunting, looking to make himself a hero." He blinked his eyes again. "Discrimination, if you ask me."

"So fry his ass," Humble Bellows snapped. "Ye're okay by me, Chuck. Thank ye fer the lift, even if I'd rather walk it next time."

Cubby the brogmoid extended a three-fingered hand as if to shake. "Buddies forever?" he called hopefully.

"Buddies forever," Chuck assured him.

Tyrillee strode forward, flung her arms as far around the dragon's snout as they would go, which wasn't very far, and rubbed her cheek against him. "Chuckkkk firriennnd," the dryad cooed with her eyes closed. "Kinnndred are weee. Drrragonn strrrange liiike Tyrillee!"

Chuck trained one eye dubiously on the dryad and arched one golden eyebrow. "I wouldn't go *that* far, dearie," Chuck answered. "I might be rare, unusual, a bit different, even a little queer." He winked. "But strange? That one's all yours, honey. And do change that poncho, please. I just hate that shade of red!"

She gave him a kiss, backed off a few steps, turned, bent forward a bit, and flipped the edge of her poncho under his nose. With a big grin and an air of haughty dignity she straightened and walked to Cubby's side. The

brogmoid, also grinning, shook her hand, and the two of them chuckled together.

Dryads, Anesi thought, frowning with embarrassment. Hesitantly he crept forward, uncertain of what he should say. In their short time together, he'd grown attached to Chuck, and he hated to see the dragon leave. "I suppose you have family to get back to," he said reluctantly.

"I owe you my freedom, you little enchanter you," Chuck answered solemnly. "You have a dragon's eternal gratitude, and some say that counts for something, a bit of luck, perhaps, when you most need it." Chuck lifted his head from the ground and folded his wings close to his body as he stood suddenly. He stretched his neck down again, though, until he was eye to eye with Anesi. "I wish I had something to give you," the dragon said wistfully, as if he, too, were reluctant to depart.

"You've already given me something," Anesi answered, reaching out to brush his hand along Chuck's snout.

"Oh?" Chuck responded with surprise. "And what might that be, sweets?"

Anesi answered simply, "A dragon's friendship."

Chuck dipped his head humbly. "Then we're evenly exchanged, friend."

"Not quite," Anesi said again. "Because I do want you to have these." He unfastened the necklace of sapphires from around his neck and held them up.

The dragon gasped. "But wherever will I wear them? Oh, I know!" He moved one claw forward and elevated it a bit. Anesi fastened the catch on the necklace and slid the encircling stones as far up the claw as they would go.

Chuck raised it before his eyes to admire it. "Oooh, I guess this means we're more than just friends now," he said, flapping one wing excitedly as he spoke. "I've never had a *fiancé* before!"

Anesi rolled his eyes. "Bye, Chuck."

The dragon rose again and spread his wings mightily, cutting a dramatic silhouette against the dark night with the moon glittering on his jeweled scales and new ring. "I

wish you well in your quest, Anesi," he called down to them. "Farewell all. Goodbye! Goodbye!"

"Task," Anesi whispered, as he watched Chuck fly away. The dragon climbed higher and higher, blotting stars with his great form as he spiraled up toward the moon. As a final departing gesture, he exhaled a great blast of fire that lit the sky and land for far around. Tilting on the tip of one wing, he wheeled northward and was gone.

They all stood silently for a long moment, staring at the empty sky, each adrift in private thoughts of Chuck and what lay behind them and what lay ahead. Humble Bellows at last picked up his bag and slung it over his shoulder, looked at the others, shrugged, and started toward the shadow-shrouded city behind them. Cubby and Tyrillee lingered a moment more, then followed.

Fidget touched Anesi's arm. "You look like you just lost your best friend," he said quietly.

Anesi pursed his lips and let go a small sigh as he turned and looked deep into Fidget's eyes. "You're my best friend," he said earnestly. "Chuck left, but you're still here."

The left side of Fidget's mouth curled up in a crooked grin. "Some say that counts for something," he said.

"If only for a bit of luck, perhaps, when I need it most," Anesi finished. The two friends clapped each other around the shoulders and patted each other's backs, then ran to catch up with the others.

Humble Bellows had found a gaping crack in the wall around Mareilon. They ventured in hesitantly. The moonlight cast foreboding shadows and made dark, fathomless pools of every nook and cranny. They found themselves on a road that ran to the left and right around the inside of the wall before it was swallowed in blackness. A row of low-roofed buildings stood before them. Broken shutters hung at odd angles; windows and doorways were uninviting pits of gloom.

"Maybe we oughta camp outside, mates, least 'til the sun comes up," Humble Bellows suggested, shuffling from foot to foot as he peered ahead. "I like to see what's

in me way, if ye know what I mean, an' this place don't do nothin' to raise the spirits."

"I'd just as soon let the spirits lie, if you know what I mean," Fidget muttered, staring around as he hugged himself.

Anesi walked a little ahead of the others until he stood in a bright beam of moonlight. Quietly, then, he took out his spell book and opened it. Barely readable in the silvery light were the words of the *frotz* incantation. He memorized them quickly, bent and picked up a palm-sized stone, and cast the spell. The initial flash made him wince and look away, but the brilliance settled into a quite usable light. He put his spell book back in its pocket and beckoned to his friends.

"Let's check a couple of these buildings," he said. "Maybe we can find one clean and sturdy enough to safely spend the night in."

"I'm not sure I'm ever going to get used to all this magic you can do," Fidget said as they moved toward the row of squat buildings. "You never did it before, except for your water spell."

Anesi didn't answer. He held the glowing stone high and pushed back the half-opened door of the nearest building. The light spilled inside as he stepped over the threshold. Immediately he gave a whoop!

"Beds!" he cried excitedly. "They're barracks!"

The others crowded in behind him, pushing him toward the center of the room. Eight pairs of bunk beds stood lengthwise against three of the walls. The mattresses on the rope frames were thick with dust but appeared plush enough.

"We're staying here!" Humble Bellows declared, dropping his bag on the floor at his feet.

"Not Cubby," the brogmoid said softly, his eyes wide as he pointed a stubby finger upward.

A huge hole gaped in the ceiling as if a great fist had punched through. Three large splintered beams hung precariously, waiting for the smallest excuse to collapse and bring the rest of the roof down with them. Anesi

frowned. Those beds looked very inviting. But it was stupid to stay.

They backed out and moved to the next barracks. Its roof seemed intact, but the doors and shutters had been ripped completely off their hinges. Several of the bunk beds had also been smashed, and the mattresses were smelly and damp with mold.

The third building, however, seemed satisfactory. After a cursory check they moved inside. "Home sweet home," Cubby muttered. The brogmoid seized the corner of a mattress and dragged it to the door. Fidget, realizing what Cubby was doing, set aside his bow, unslung his quiver, and lent a hand. Together, they carried it outside and began to beat the dust away. Tyrillee and Anesi grabbed another, and Humble Bellows managed one on his own. Working together, in no time at all they had five reasonably usable mattresses. Fidget slid the last one into place on a bottom bunk and collapsed upon it with a sigh.

"I'd forgotten what a bed felt like," he said to the others. He sat up suddenly, unstrapped his small sword, and leaned it near the head of his bed. Then he fell backward again and flung out his arms, welcoming the softness and the chance to rest.

Tyrillee moved about the room, leaving bare footprints in the thick carpet of dust on the floor. She ran her fingers curiously along the wood-paneled walls, pausing and making faces as she explored. "It'sss alll deaddd," she announced, with an expression of genuine surprise.

Anesi realized at once what she meant and knew she had never before been in a human dwelling. Well, except for Dispoz's keep, but his walls had all been of stone. "Humans cut trees down and make planks and logs of them," he explained to the dryad, wondering how she would react to the idea of killing whole worlds just to make a house.

She gave him a sadly tolerant look that made him quite uncomfortable. "Tyrillee knowsss thiss," she said, shaking her head as if she were talking to a child. "Alll Dryadniaid know thiss. Thee iss not tooo blaaame,

thoughhh, Aneesssi." Her voice slid up and down a soft musical scale that was almost a lullaby. "Hoooman senssesss beee so limmited. Theee knowsss not the lanndsss theee desstroeesss."

Anesi felt like a baby who'd just broken a glass and been forgiven by an infinitely patient parent. Still, if what she said about trees was true, then there was a major wrongness about wrecking a world to build a house. But how could he know? How could any human know? And if he didn't know, if a thing couldn't be *known*, then did it matter? He bit his lip and wished he could discuss it with the Great Shuboz Shuboz or Khare. They were far away, though.

He crept across the room and set the shining stone on the edge of an unused upper bunk. Its light filled the room. Then he went to his own bed, unfastened his cloak, placed it carefully on the foot of his mattress, and sat wearily down. It had been a long day.

Cubby pulled his sweater over his head, folded it, and laid it at one end of his own bunk to use as a pillow. After stretching out on his side, he propped up on one elbow. "Nesi?" he said in a small voice. There was no evidence of his street-tough persona now. "Why is destruction?"

Oh great, Anesi thought with an inward sigh. *Another philosophical problem*. But then he realized the true point of the brogmoid's question. "You mean Mareilon? What destroyed the city?"

The brogmoid nodded as he flicked a tongue over the tips of his fangs.

"I don't know the whole story," he admitted, but he rummaged around in the pockets of his cloak until he found the infotater that the Thriff Wizards had given him. He held it up. "I'll bet this can tell us," he said.

He blew a gentle stream of air on the thin, pinwheel-like blades, and they began to spin in a swirl of color. Faster and faster they went, and the colors began to melt and merge and glow. In the heart of that glow images began to form, and a voice spoke to them.

Seven hundred and thirty-two years after the founding of the Great Underground Empire, lectured the voice, *a civil*

servant whose shameful name has been stricken from all record books committed a most serious magical error. While attempting to cast the very complex zemdor spell, this fool accidentally cast the zimbor, a very advanced version of the radnog enchantment, which creates fire. In this instance, it created a nearly uncontrollable blaze that burned for four weeks and gutted the city of Mareilon.

Because of this incident, Lord Dimwit Flathead the Excessive, sometimes called the Thorough, sometimes called Dimwit, issued a series of five thousand five hundred and twenty-one edicts restricting the use of magic to various guilds and their members or agents.

The survivors of the Endless Fire, as the event became known, later rebuilt Mareilon on the south side of the Backbone Hills, though it has never regained the glory of the original metropolis.

The voice faded in a tiny, quavering echo, and the images of burning structures shimmered and merged into the general swirl of color, which also gradually faded as the infotater's blades slowed and stopped.

"Moral of the story," Humble Bellows commented with a leer. "Be safe: don't play with fire."

"Not at all," Fidget interjected. "The moral of the story is, *Leave it to a civil servant to really foul things up.*"

"Nottt fairrr," Tyrillee whispered, still running her hands along the walls, "to judggge all Dyriadnaiad by one orrr eeeven by one hunnndreddd. Orrr hoomansss. Orrr servvantsss."

"She's right," Anesi agreed, as he put away the infotater. He folded his cloak as neatly as possible and put it near the head of his bed. Drawing a slow breath, he stretched out on his back and folded his hands under his head as he watched Humble Bellows place his bag on the upper bunk where the glowing stone rested. The little man patiently climbed the end of the bunk to the top berth and arranged a fold of the bag to cover the stone partially, so that it shielded and greatly reduced the light.

"Any o' ye want somethin' to eat?" he called down. "There's still goodies left."

No one was interested in food. The softness of the

mattresses seemed to have sapped the last of their strength. Even Tyrillee had finally settled down upon one of the beds, drawn her knees up under her poncho, and wrapped her arms around them as she lay upon her side. Humble Bellows shrugged. He did, however, pull out a waterskin, unstopper it, and take a long pull before he climbed down again. He hung it over the bunk post for anyone else who might want it later.

Without sitting up Anesi wiggled out of his tunic, wadded it into a ball, and tucked it under his head for a pillow. Involuntarily he wrinkled his nose, for the garment smelled and needed a washing. Still, it was better than no pillow at all.

Idly he fingered the zorkmid medallion Khare had given him at the start of his journey. What were the wizards doing right now, he wondered? They'd promised to look after his mother. He missed her, he admitted to himself, and he wondered if his father had returned home yet. He squeezed the medallion in his fist and closed his eyes.

Fidget, Cubby, and Humble Bellows carried on a low conversation among themselves. To the gentle drone of their voices, Anesi fell asleep.

A sound woke him up. The room was nearly dark, and at first he thought that his *frotz* spell must have worn off the stone. The sound that had disturbed his sleep came from the other side of the room. He listened for a moment without moving, realizing it was Fidget sobbing softly.

Anesi slipped off his bunk and crept across the floor. The thick dust muffled the sound of his footsteps. The stone still glowed bright with his enchantment, but someone had pulled Humble Bellows' bag even closer around it to obscure most of its light. He eased himself down beside Fidget. His friend lay curled in a ball on his side, his face to the wall. His small body shook ever so slightly as he wept.

Anesi touched his shoulder and bent down close to his ear. "Fidge?"

Fidget's sobs ceased, and the boy lay still. After a mo-

ment, one hand moved from under his body and wiped his eyes. He sniffled. After another moment, he rolled over on his back and looked up. "I was dreaming about my parents," he whispered, unwilling to meet Anesi's gaze. Instead he stared at the bottom of the upper bunk, perhaps even through it into some dream-world where his family still lived and he was safe back home.

For all the magic in his spell book Anesi felt helpless. There was nothing to say, so neither of them spoke. But Anesi stayed, and Fidget didn't ask him to leave. After a while, Fidget's eyes slowly closed in sleep.

Suddenly they snapped wide open again. "What was that?" Fidget whispered tensely.

Anesi shot a glance at the door. He'd heard the scratching too, very faint on the rough wood. He waited for it to come again as the silence took on a sudden edge. At last the two boys looked at each other. Fidget sat up cautiously as Anesi rose to his feet. None of the others had heard anything. Cubby, Tyrillee, and Humble Bel-lows all slept undisturbed.

The door handle turned with a barely audible rattle. Anesi froze, his heart pounding like a drum against his ribs. From the corner of his eye he spied his folded cloak on the far side of the room and thought of lunging for his spell book.

A horrible roar came from outside. Suddenly the door smashed inward, bouncing against the wall with force enough to twist and snap the old hinges. It crashed to the floor, raising a cloud of dust.

A sinister shape filled the broken doorway, black as the shadows of night but for its eyes, which burned with a frightening yellow and red fire. It roared again, showing white fangs of razor sharpness, as it saw Anesi and moved toward him.

"A grue!" Fidget shouted, leaping up in his bed, bumping his head on the upper bunk hard enough to cause him to fall back in pain.

Anesi gave a fearful shout and tried to dodge the out-stretched grasping hand, but a black-furred arm batted him to the floor, knocking the wind from him. The grue

bent down. He could smell its fetid breath as its great jaws gaped.

A gray streak sailed feet-first through the air, landing on top of the grue's head. Cubby locked his stout legs around the monster's neck, grabbed its pointed ears, and twisted sharply. The grue roared angrily as it straightened, reached back with one hand, and caught the brogmoid by the throat. An instant later the stronger grue slammed him into the ceiling and flung him across the room.

"Get back, Anesi!" Fidget screamed, as he whipped his sword free and cast the sheath at the creature's eyes. The grue reached up to bat it away, and as it did, Fidget swung, drawing a shallow red line across the grue's hairy ribs. It howled, more in anger than in real pain, and its eyes blazed as it turned toward Fidget.

Anesi used his heels and elbows to crawl away, and none too soon, as the grue's huge foot came down in the space where he'd been instants before. Quickly he scrambled to his feet, and just as quickly he hit the floor again, colliding with Humble Bellows as the little man jumped out of his bed, landing hard on his back. "Out o' me way, mate!" Bellows shouted, untangling himself from Anesi. "Me bag! Get me bag!"

Anesi shoved free and got up again, ignoring Bellows. It wasn't Bellows' bag he wanted, but his spell book. He dared to glance over his shoulder as he dived for his bed. Fidget was in desperate straits, backed into a corner and swinging his blade in wide, artless arcs to keep the monster at bay. Worse, a second grue suddenly lumbered through the doorway!

He grabbed his cloak and plunged his hand into the pocket where he kept the blue Chevaux book. It wasn't there! Wrong pocket, he realized frantically, shaking the cloak open and finding the right one. He pulled out the book. But which spell? What did he have against a grue? The second grue turned to him.

A bright radiance flooded the barracks suddenly, and Humble Bellows shouted triumphantly. Instantly the grues staggered back, flinging up their arms to protect their eyes as they fled back into the night in a cacophony

of surprisingly shrill screams. An odor of charred fur filled the room, and a trace of smoke hovered in the air.

On an upper bunk Humble Bellows knelt breathing hard with his bag in one hand and the enchanted stone in the other. He'd had to clamber fast to achieve the high bunk and uncover the light, but he'd saved their lives. "They hates light, they does, grues," Humble Bellows gasped. "Burns 'em, it does."

"Too bad we couldn't have gotten the door closed, then," Fidget said, wiping sweat from his face as he moved out of the corner into which the grue had forced him. He leaned his sword within easy reach by his bed as he bent over Cubby's unconscious form. "We could have really crisped their hides."

Bellows shook his head as he turned around and swung his legs over the side. He continued to hold the stone in his hands, and it lit his craggy features strangely. "Uh uh," he answered Fidget. "They'd o' busted holes in the walls to get out o' here."

Anesi stared at the spell book in his hands and at the stone Bellows held, and he reflected on the lesson he'd just learned. Of course, grues couldn't stand light. He should have remembered. He knew all about the beasts from his time at the university and from stories his grandfather had told him. But faced with danger he'd thought of his spell book instead of the simpler, more practical solution. Magic, then, wasn't always the answer.

"Is Cubby all right?" he asked, putting the book back in its pocket and setting his cloak aside.

"Nasty bump on the head," Fidget answered, "but he's coming around." He glanced over his shoulder at Bellows. "Toss that water skin. He's earned a drink."

Bellows did as requested, bending forward as he threw the bota. "Hey, mates!" he said suddenly. "Where's yer dryad got herself to?"

"What!" Anesi moved to the bunk just under Bellows where Tyrillee's red poncho lay. In the gloom when he first got up he'd just assumed it was Tyrillee, but it was only the empty garment. Frowning with worry, he picked it up and wadded it in a ball.

Outside the howls of the grues shivered suddenly through the darkness. Not one, not two, but many, Anesi realized onimously. Lots of grues all around them.

"If she's out there, mates," Bellows croaked, "she's grue-food fer sure."

Anesi bit his lip and cursed himself for falling asleep. He squeezed his fists until he felt his nails sharp against his palms. The air hissed between his teeth. Then he forced himself to relax. If Tyrillee was outside she was either all right or she was not. There was nothing any of them could do to help her.

"Let's get that door back in place," he said abruptly. "We've got to look out for ourselves now. It's still a long time until dawn."

A monstrous chorus rose again, louder and closer, as the grues dared the edges of the darkness.

Anesi reached for his spell book once more. The stone still glowed with a potent radiance. Better, though, to be safe. He took a moment to memorize the *frotz* spell, then put the book away and lent a hand with the door.

Fidget made a disgusted face as he brushed a hand over the front of his trousers. "They shed," he muttered.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

T

HE HOWLING WENT ON throughout the night. Anesi and Fidget sat wide awake with the glowing stone on the floor between them, while Humble Bellows tossed fitfully on his bunk and snored and muttered occasional incoherent grumbles into his mattress. Cubby slept like a rock, but he clutched Tyrillee's poncho in his three-fingered hands.

When the stone's light began at last to fade, Anesi enchanted it again with the *frotz* spell. Rising then, he went to the door, which was only propped in place, and peered out through a gap. Black night still hung over the dead city, but dawn couldn't be far off. When it came, the grues would seek the deep shadows among the gloomiest interiors of the ruins to hide from the sun and sleep, unable to abide the daylight. Nevertheless, he took the precaution of memorizing the illumination spell once more and sat down again with his back propped against the foot of a bunk.

Fidget sat cross-legged in the middle of the floor with his sword balanced across both knees, his left hand ready on the hilt. His gaze seldom strayed from the door, but now and then he glanced out of the corner of his eye toward Anesi and quickly and sheepishly glanced away.

Anesi knew his friend's embarrassment and tried to ease it somewhat. "I cried," he admitted in a low whisper

so as not to wake their comrades, "the first night we camped by the stream."

Fidget didn't say anything, but after a bit he laid the sword aside on the floor. A moment later he unfolded his legs and stretched them out before him. As he leaned back on his hands, the barest hint of a smile teased the corners of his lips.

"What?" Anesi prodded, nudging Fidget's leg with a bare toe, encouraging him to talk. He didn't always know how to cope with his friend's sullen moods.

"I was remembering the first time I met you," Fidget answered at last, as the bare smile became a mocking grin. "You were wearing a white linen tunic, and you were so *clean!*"

Anesi raised his eyebrow and the tip of his nose, feigning offense as he recalled their chance meeting in the woods near his house. "And you looked like a dirty little kobold," he responded, with an exaggerated air of indignation.

"Buddies forever?" Fidget asked, holding his arm out and pretending to shake an invisible hand. It was Cubby's favorite gesture.

Anesi didn't even hesitate. He shook air too. "Buddies forever," he grinned.

They grew quiet again, staring alternately at the bright stone, the broken door, and each other as the grues sang their terrible song. Sometimes they heard—or thought they heard—scratchings along the outside walls or soft, padding footsteps on the barracks roof. But the grues made no further attempt to get at them.

Suddenly, Cubby sat straight up in bed, his eyes wide and full of fear, his fanged mouth open in a soundless scream. For an instant he appeared completely disoriented. Then his gaze fixed on them and huge tears welled up and spilled down his cheeks, and he wept like a small child.

Fidget jumped up and went to embrace the brogmoid. He sat down on the old mattress, took Cubby in his arms, and rocked him back and forth as he held Cubby's head against his chest and rumples the purple mohawk

playfully. "What is it, Cubbo?" he whispered, trying to sound lighthearted, trying to pretend they were in no danger. "Come on, talk to me. Was it a dream?"

Cubby wiped a bare gray arm under his nose and blinked back his tears. "Bad dream," he answered, clinging to Fidget. He was completely the child now, frightened and quivering as he hugged Fidget's neck and sniffed. There was no sign of the street-tough personality. "Make nightmare go away, Fidge!" Cubby insisted, sniffing again.

"But Cubby," Fidget responded with quiet, reassuring laughter. "You made it go away. You made it go away by waking up."

Cubby looked around again, taking in the room and all its furnishings as if surprised by Fidget's revelation. "Oh, yeah," he agreed, with a look of puzzlement. "Dream gone."

Anesi crept a little closer and lowered his voice. Humble Bellows hadn't stirred, and Anesi thought it best to let him sleep as long as possible. At least one of them would be rested when they started out. "What was the dream, Cubby?" he asked, half bent over the brogmoid's bunk as he spoke.

The brogmoid thought a moment, then scratched his head. At last he looked at Anesi and shrugged. "Gone now," he answered with a curious tilt of his head. "Cubby forget. But real scary, 'Nes. Scare me good!"

Fidget patted the brogmoid's hand sympathetically and untangled himself from the arms that encircled his neck. "Well, it's all right now," he assured Cubby. "You try to go back to sleep. We're right here to keep an eye on you."

Cubby nodded and lay back down, scrunching his folded sweater under his head and hugging it with one arm as he turned on his side to face the wall.

Anesi and Fidget returned to the center of the room and sat down again with the stone between them. Instead of taking cross-legged positions, though, they stretched their legs on either side of the light until the soles of their feet touched and they pressed their toes together.

The howl of a grue came from the other side of the door, and a hairy shape moved just beyond the gap. It came no closer though, and eventually moved off. The next howl sounded farther away.

Anesi started to shiver. It began as a small tremor in his gut and spread rapidly through him. The muscles in his face drew tight, and his teeth threatened to chatter until he clamped his jaw closed. He listened to the howling and felt his heart shrink inside his chest. He thought of Tyrillee and feared that she was dead, feared they would all be dead long before morning. He squeezed his thighs, hoping to stop the trembling of his hands.

"Do you feel it?" he asked Fidget, leaning abruptly forward until the light shone upward from directly below his chin. He shielded his eyes from the intense light by covering it with his hands. The bones of his fingers showed darkly through the thin red flesh. "Of course you feel it," he said, answering his own question before Fidget could say anything. "That's why you were crying."

Fidget made a face as he peered back at Anesi. Slowly, he leaned even closer until their noses almost brushed, and he whispered tensely. "Feel what?"

"The fear," Anesi answered, as his gaze shifted from side to side, from the door to the shuttered windows to the roof. "It's the Great Terror's influence."

"It knows we're here?" Fidget asked, suspicious, frightened.

Anesi shook his head. "No," he answered, "I don't think so. At least, not yet. But the Terror radiates fear like the sun radiates heat and light. That's why you were crying. That's why Cubby had a nightmare, and probably why Tyrillee ran away."

"What about you?" Fidget prodded, pushing at Anesi's right foot with his left. "Are you immune?"

Anesi bit his lip and tried once more to stop the trembling of his hands. He clutched them in his lap and squeezed them into fists. "Uh-uh," he admitted honestly. "It's why I can't sleep. I'm too froggling scared."

Fidget nodded toward the bunk where Humble Bel-

lows slept with his legs drawn up in a tight fetal ball. "What about him?" he said.

Bellows lay still now, though earlier he had twisted and turned over and over on the mattress and muttered strange little nonsenses in his sleep. Anesi watched him for a moment and absently wiggled his toes against Fidget's. Finally he looked back to Fidget and said, "He can't sleep, either." Over his shoulder he added, "Can you, Mister Bellows?"

Humble Bellows didn't move at first. Then slowly he turned over on his side to face them. His eyes were dark and puffy, and the hair on one side of his head stuck out at strange angles because of the way he had lain on it. He folded one elbow under his head and draped the other arm across his ample belly. "How can a body sleep with ye brats mumblin' the night away, I ask ye?"

They looked at each other with strange looks, then they all looked at the door that only leaned in place with gaps on either side that let the night leak in, and no one spoke anymore.

Anesi listened to the howling of the grues, to their sometime scratching at the walls, to his own frightened, uneven breathing, and to the heart that pounded in his chest. He worried about Tyrillee, and he worried about his friends. *It only gets worse from here*, he reminded himself. *Only worse the closer we get to Miznia and the Great Terror*. His hand drifted slowly to the zorkmid medallion under his tunic, and he clutched it in his fingers for security and thought that dawn would never come.

Dawn did come, though. Outside, the city was quiet. The sun had silenced the grues and expelled them to the dark places among the ruins.

Anesi rubbed his eyes and the bridge of his nose before he closed his spell book and returned it to the pocket of his cloak. He'd thought it wise to memorize a few enchantments while he had the spare time in case there was trouble later. He rose slowly and stiffly to his feet and fastened the cloak about his shoulders. Every movement seemed a labor, and his eyes burned from lack of sleep.

They had to move on, though. They had to get out of the city.

Fidget strapped on his small sword, then slung his quiver of arrows over one shoulder. Next, taking his bow in hand, he placed one end against his left foot, bent it, and slipped the bowstring into place in the upper notch. He tested the pull. Satisfied, he extracted one arrow from the quiver and held it against the bow's grip, where he could get to it easily.

Cubby pulled on his red Borphee-Is-For-Lovers sweater and ran a hand absently through his mohawk haircut. Ambling to his feet, he took down Humble Bellows' bota of water and poured a dollop into his hand. Briskly, he rubbed it over his face while making a half-hearted "ahhhhh" sound deep in his throat. When that was done, he looked up and forced a smile. "Yo, Fidge," he called cheerily. "Just can't wait to get on the road again."

"It's the life I love, mates," Humble Bellows added sarcastically, rolling his eyes as he repacked his bag. The head of Dimwit Flathead perched on the side of the upper bunk watching them all with a smug gaze. The sunlight glittered on the gold crown balanced carefully upon his brow. "An' ye, too, eh, Dimwit?" Bellows added, giving the puppet an affectionate pat on the cheek. "Yeah, wizards chasin' us an' grues tryin' to chew our heads off."

There was a knock at the door. Everyone froze at the unexpected sound, except for Dimwit Flathead, who toppled sideways on the dusty mattress, losing his crown.

The knock came again. Outside someone bent down low, and a face peered through the widest part of the gap between the door and the broken frame.

"Aneeessee?" Tyrille called inside to them. "Arre yooo innn therrre, hoomannn friennndsss?"

Fidget and Cubby sprang to the door, and together they lifted it and moved it aside. Tyrillee grinned at them from the threshold, her hair blowing in a light breeze, the morning sun glinting on her thin, naked body.

Cubby flung his arms about her in his joy at seeing her. "Rilly!" he cried, in his child's voice. "Rilly not dead!

Not grue-food!" He let go of her, then took her hand again and pulled her inside the barracks.

Humble Bellows tossed her poncho across the room. Her features registered surprise, and she raised her hands to catch it an instant too late. It hit her in the face. "Put yer clothes on girlie!" the little man grinned. "There's them here that's not as mature 'bout such things as me."

She giggled as she slithered into the poncho and embraced them each one at a time.

"Where did you go?" Anesi asked, as she wrapped her arms around his neck and squeezed him last. "Why'd you leave last night?"

She gave a little sigh and brushed her hair back with one hand. Her cheeks colored a little with embarrassment as she answered. "Tyrilleee ssscared lassst niight. Tooo much dead treeesss mmmake thiss housse. Mmmake mee shivvverrr. Mmmake quivvverrr!" Her eyes grew wide as she talked, and she gestured wildly with her hands. Her gaze shot around the room as she reenacted for them the fear that must have gripped her. "Finalleee, Tyrilleee runnn tooo sssafetee of foresst beeyonnd walll. Therre, innn treeesss, Tyrilleee sssleep sssafe!"

"The Great Terror strikes again," Fidget muttered, picking up his bow. "Let's get out of here."

They filed outside and soon found a road that led deeper into the heart of the city. The yellow dust of ages was packed hard as brick, and rubble from a great fire lay strewn across the way. As they pressed farther into Mar-eilon, the evidence of the destruction the infotater had spoken of became plainer. Smoke and flame blackened every stone. Once-proud edifices were no more than teetering facades waiting for a stout wind or loud sneeze to knock them over. Anesi thought of Chuck and considered that the dragon could've probably flattened the entire city just by flying over it.

Wherever there was a shadow or an alley that the sun didn't penetrate, they moved with care. Fidget would nock the arrow that he carried constantly in his hand and creep on tiptoe until they were past. Sometimes, red-glowing eyes would watch them back, and a low growl

would issue from the sunless gloom. But the grues never ventured out from their darkness.

"Yer blue cloak helps some, too, ye know," Humble Bellows informed them. "If there's anythin' those critters hate more'n sunshine, it's the color blue."

"I think it's the nabiz that hates blue," Anesi said. He felt the cloak's fabric between his fingers, though, while his gaze roamed nervously from side to side, and he hugged the garment a little bit closer about himself.

"I think maybe ye're right," Bellows admitted, squinting as he peered about. He shrugged. "Well, I was jus' tryin' to reassure ye."

The hard-packed yellow road carried them straight through the center of the city. There, the ancient fire had burned its hottest. No single piece of rubble stood higher than Anesi's head. Heat-cracked stone and black mounds of petrified ash blocked their way. For a while, they lost the road entirely, but soon found it again. It led straight south, the direction they wanted to go.

Vacant facades began to rise around them again. From within the fire-gutted buildings they heard a shuffling. They stopped and listened, then moved on. The shuffling came again. At first they dismissed it as shifting rubble. But when they stopped, the sound stopped.

"Grues," Cubby said, lifting his nose and sniffing the air. He seemed almost to grow inside his clothes as he straightened his spine and drew back his shoulders, and his voice took on a deeper, threatening quality. "They're following us, 'Nes, keepin' to the shadows as they move. Looks like it's playtime." He clacked his fangs together, then bent down and picked up a large rock, which he tossed a few times in the air.

"No, it's not!" Anesi snapped. "As long as we keep to the center of the street we're safe. They won't attack us in the sunlight. Let's just move faster. We'll be long gone from this place before noon."

A fist-sized chunk of rubble whistled through the air and crashed beside Humble Bellows' foot. The little man jumped aside with a look of shock, dropping his bag on the ground. The shock quickly turned to anger, though.

He picked up his own piece of stone and sent it hurtling blindly in the direction of the first missile. It bounced harmlessly off a towering facade as he picked up his bag again.

A rain of stones clattered around them. Tyrillee gave a high-voiced yelp and clutched her shoulder, her face contorted in pain. Anesi threw an arm around her and tried to shield her with his own body. Fidget started to run for the cover of a nearby building.

"No!" Anesi screamed. "That's what they want, to force us inside, out of the sun where they can reach us! Stay in the street and run!" He pushed Tyrillee into the arms of Humble Bellows, who did his best to protect their heads by holding his bag as high as he could. Anesi sent them running with a push.

There was a pause in the deadly rain before another storm of rocks hurtled his way. He did his best to dodge and duck, taking one on the hip, another on his thigh. The thigh was the worst. With a cry he clutched his leg and fell to one knee.

But this time he'd pinpointed the building where many of the stones had come from, a burned-out old warehouse with several windows whose open shutters revealed the shapes within. Anesi pointed a finger and reached within himself for a spell he'd memorized that morning. He didn't know exactly how far he could cast his enchantments, but he intended to find out.

He aimed carefully and cast a *frotz* spell through the open window. Immediately the interior of the warehouse lit up, and a terrified howling issued forth. Black hairy forms raced through the door or hurled themselves through the windows to escape the light, screeching in panic, only to find themselves suddenly in the bright sunshine. Waving their arms in terror, they dived for whatever shadow they could find.

Another shape crashed through the door an instant later, howling pitifully. Its fur glowed as brightly as the sun itself as it raced into the street and dived for a shadow that suddenly wasn't there, smashed into a wall as it tried to cover its eyes with one arm, got up, and flung itself

into another shadow. But shadows disappeared instantly in the light that the grue gave off, and there was no shelter for it, no place to hide. Crazy, it began to run in circles.

Anesi watched it until another barrage of stones crashed down around him. Miraculously, none struck him. These came from behind him, from an alleyway he hadn't noticed before. Whirling as quickly as he could on his injured leg, he let go another spell.

Three grues sauntered up to the mouth of the alley, stopping at the very line where sun and shadow met. Suddenly friendly, they waved to him, grinning under the influence of the *vaxum* spell, and motioned for him to hurry on. The three picked up stones, then, and to the surprise of another pair of grues on the other side of the street, they began pelting their own kind.

He started to get up and run, but his leg folded under him and he stumbled with a cry of pain, spilling headlong on the street, bruising his forehead.

Someone pulled frantically at his arm. "Get up, Anesi!" Fidget shouted in his ear. "Come on, let's go!" Fidget continued to tug at him, and Cubby too, until he managed to rise to his feet. He looked down and felt his leg, where a sticky wet stain seeped through his trousers. His two comrades clamped his arms around their necks and took most of his weight, and they started off. But their trouble wasn't over.

A huge grue, tall and powerful even for its kind, showing incredible determination for such a beast, challenged the hated sunlight and charged them, reaching with its long, hirsute arms and taloned fingers. Its jaws gaped and slavered, and its gaze fixed on them with relentless purpose. It let go a howl of starved ferocity as it lumbered from a darkened ruin into the brightness of the street.

Fidget freed himself to draw his bow, but Anesi was faster, pointing his finger and releasing the last spell he had memorized that morning. He had meant it for himself in case he needed a quick escape, but there was no

escaping and leaving his friends to this monster. It was for the grue, then, and he grit his teeth as he cast it.

The *izyuk* enchantment caught the beast in full run, and Anesi discovered that even a monster's face could show startlement. They ducked as it shot over their heads into the air, flailing with its arms and legs, tumbling head over heels as it climbed higher and higher. A long howl of surprise and dismay trailed after it.

"It's a bird," Fidge muttered wryly, lowering his arrow.

"It's a pain," Anesi said, wincing and clutching his bloody thigh.

Cubby shielded his eyes against the sun with one hand as he stared at the point in the sky where he had last seen their attacker. "It's super-grue," he added, making a curt bow in the direction of the rapidly diminishing shape.

The rain of stones had abruptly ended, and if any more of the beasts lingered around, they were very quiet about it.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

BEYOND MAREILON'S

south gate the yellow road ended abruptly. A flat expanse stretched between them and the Backbone Hills, which rose darkly against the bright blue of the sky. Grass and weeds grew waist-high, and small trees dotted the land. The air was alive with insects and butterflies, and a pair of birds wheeled lazily overhead.

"I'm beginning to take an entirely different view of this questing business than I had when we began," Fidget commented, when they were safely away from Mareilon.

"Tasking business," an exasperated Anesi grumbled, trying not to put too much weight on his throbbing right leg as he moved between his two friends. "I've told you before, it's a *tasking* business."

"It certainly is," Fidget agreed lightheartedly. "I'm bone-tired and weary to the core."

Anesi gave up. His leg hurt too much to argue. Though his friends helped him along, it pained him every time he put his foot down. Cubby was actually too short to be of much use as a crutch, but he didn't tell the brogmoid that. Instead he bit his lip and did his best to hobble onward. He wanted to be well away from Mareilon before nightfall. Once it got dark there was nothing to keep the grues from stalking them if they chose to do so.

Ahead and off to the side, Humble Bellows and Tyril-

lee stood up suddenly from a concealment of bushes and waved to them. As they drew closer, Anesi saw that Tyrillee, though she smiled her usual smile, carried her right arm in a funny manner. Closer still, he realized that Bellows had torn a strip from her red poncho and made a sling to cradle the dryad's injured limb.

"How bad is it?" he asked, when the five were all together again.

"A bad bruise, mate," Humble Bellows supplied gruffly. "Maybe a sprain. She'll be all right, though, she will." He pointed to Anesi's leg and made a face. "How 'bout ye, boyo? That's a lot o' blood."

Anesi cast a glance back over his shoulder. Mareilon's blackened ruins squatted on the plain like a big, patient vulture waiting to pick his bones. "Let's look at it later when we're a little farther away," he said, trying to sound brave.

"Let's look now," Bellows insisted. "Them grues're not goin' to come chasin' this far from shade an' shadow, they're not. Not fer a scrawny piece o' meat like ye."

"Or a gristled old knob like you," Fidget cut in on his friend's behalf.

"There's too many bugs to stop here!" Anesi complained, as Humble Bellows knelt down before him. "And these weeds are too high. There must be a clear spot somewhere ahead." Bellows grabbed the material of Anesi's trousers in both hands. "Hey!" Anesi screamed. "Don't rip it!"

But the fabric separated easily right above his wound. "Yuck," Bellows commented, as he screwed up his face. "We'll have to cut it off, we will." The little man pulled out the dagger he wore at his belt.

"What!" Bellows's reaction made Anesi forget his protests. He bent down to see through the rent. It was all red and wet inside, and a terrible fear clutched him as Fidget and Cubby eased him down to the ground. "Don't cut my leg!" he screamed, trying to cover the wound with his hands.

Bellows rapped his knuckles with the flat of his blade. "Not yer leg, ye blamed silly scrubber! It's yer

trouser I'm talkin' 'bout! Now, do ye like long shorts or short shorts, cause that's what yer goin' to git."

Anesi's lip quivered, and he didn't answer fast enough. Bellows thrust the edge of his dagger into the tear he'd made and gave a long upward rip. Then he sawed the material in a rough circle and pulled the scrap of cloth away, exposing Anesi's thigh.

"Maybe ye'd like to leave the other trouser leg the way it is," he suggested, sheathing his dagger and unwrapping the thong that bound his bag closed. "No need to cut it off too. Might set a new fashion trend, it might."

Anesi wasn't listening. He stared at his leg. The wound, a long gash on the front of his thigh, only seeped a little now, but dark red blood made a smear over most of the leg below that. He pushed off his boot with the toe of his other foot and groaned a little when the red continued down to his ankle.

Bellows reached into his bag and pulled out the water bota. Taking up the scrap that had been Anesi's trouser leg, he dampened it and began to wash away the blood.

It only gets worse from here, Anesi thought to himself over and over, unable to tear his gaze away from the wound as he fought down a feeling of faintness. *It only gets worse from here!*

"Prettee sssap!" Tyrillee exclaimed, bending down for a closer look at Anesi's blood. Cubby took her hand and urged her back to give Bellows room to work.

"It's pretty deep, mate," Bellows said, as he poured a stream of water directly on the gash and probed it with a thumb. "But it could o'been worse."

Anesi winced at the probing but tried to keep his leg still. He'd never seen so much blood before, not his own, anyway. "It only gets worse from here," he mumbled under his breath.

"Ye'll have a scar there," Bellows continued, working intently, "but least nothin' major's been done, no arteries or nothin', so I guess ye'll live." He wrung out the scrap of cloth, wet it again, and washed away the last traces of

blood. A thin red line appeared moments later on the wound itself. Bellows folded the cloth neatly and pressed it directly over the cut.

Anesi gave a loud groan, and his eyes snapped wide.

"That's the bruise," bellows told him. "Yer goin to have a beaut, boyo. Must o' been a pretty good chunk that hit ye." He lifted up a corner of the cloth and peeked. "There now, that's comin' along fine." He nodded to Fidget and gave instructions. "Ye got a sticker on yer belt, mate," he said. "So cut another strip from Tyrillee's poncho, cause he'll need a bandage."

"Use my other trouser leg," Anesi suggested between clenched teeth.

Bellows shrugged and took out his own dagger again. "Short shorts it is, then," he muttered agreeably.

"What the well-dressed enchanter is wearing this year," Fidget contributed, trying to cheer Anesi up.

The other trouser leg came away. In no time at all, Bellows had it cut into strips and the strips bound tightly around his thigh. The little man held Anesi's boot while Anesi ever so gingerly pushed his way into it. Then, with Bellows's help, he stood.

"Ooooh!" Tyrillee sighed, her lips curling in a smirk. "Grrreat llllegsss!"

Fidget took Anesi's arm to steady him while Bellows bent down to attend his bag. "Any o' ye want some water while it's sittin' here?" he said, indicating the bota. "An' it minds me, we've not eaten a bite all mornin'. There's 'bout half a loaf o' bread an' some cheese left."

"Please," Anesi said, leaning his weight into Fidget's shoulder. "If nobody's starving, let's wait until we get into the hills. It's just too open out here."

Fidget shifted his arm to encircle Anesi's waist and took advantage of the opportunity to lean close to his friend's ear and whisper privately. "It's the Terror's influence making you afraid, 'Nes."

"That may be," Anesi answered, not bothering to lower his voice, meeting his friend's gaze unflinchingly. "But the fear's no less real. People, animals, even monsters feel it. Grues don't usually attack in daylight, re-

member? But that big one did. Strange things are happening, Fidge. We can't count on anything."

"Let's move on, then, mates," Bellows agreed, as he wrapped the thong around the top of his bag and tied it tight. "We'll make a picnic o' it in the hills." He stood up and tossed the bag over his shoulder. "Ye all right in there, Dimwit?" he said, and he leaned his ear against the rough cloth. He smiled suddenly as if he'd actually gotten an answer. "Let's go," he added, leading the way.

Hidden among the tall grasses they found the remnants of an old road, perhaps the same road they'd followed out of the city. The earth was still hard-packed, and only a particularly tough and stubborn kind of weed managed to crack through the ground and grow there. It led straight into the Backbone Hills.

Because of Anesi's leg wound they stopped several times to rest. Fidget took Humble Bellows' bag, and Humble Bellows took his place helping Anesi along. Anesi wished he'd hung on to his walking stick. A couple of times he looked hopefully at the tender young trees they passed, but none of the limbs seemed stout enough to serve him.

The sun climbed higher in the sky and warmed them. The insects buzzed about their faces, lighting and biting, a constant annoyance. Anesi slapped his neck repeatedly, and so did the others. At last he pulled up the hood of his cloak for the little protection it offered.

"No fair," Fidget commented, as he walked along beside him.

"At least your legs are covered," Anesi countered, waving his arms to shoo away the pesky creatures that seemed to find him so sweet. "These things are eating me alive!"

It was early afternoon when they finally reached the Backbone Hills. As eager as he'd been to get there, Anesi quickly regretted it. The ground rose steeply, forcing him to use his wounded leg more and more. The road turned into a rutted, crooked footpath that meandered among outcroppings of rock and copses of trees that grew on the

hillsides. Anesi looked down at the bandage on his thigh and saw that it was wet again with fresh blood.

At the next outcropping, Anesi sat wearily down and leaned his back against a large stone. "Lunchtime," he announced, refusing to utter another complaint. He knew he was already slowing them up too much. "What's on the menu, Mister Bellows?"

"Ahhh," said Bellows, plopping down with his bag between his legs. He untied the binding thong and peered inside. "Well, mates, fer the discernin' palate now we have the finest fresh-baked bread prepared by me own hands jus' fer yer tastes." He looked up and smiled, then stuck his head back in the bag again. "Or if it's a light snack ye want, then we have jus' the thing, that bein' fresh-baked bread. Or if it's yer waistline yer watchin', then ye'll find a little bit o' fresh-baked bread jus' hits the spot without fattenin' ye up too much." He pulled out the half-loaf that remained of yesterday's meal and passed it to Cubby to hold. "An' fer dessert, o' course, there's an excellent cheese to hand." He extracted the cloth-wrapped cheese with a flourish. "Now, mates," he continued, "who'll place their order first?"

They broke the bread into equal pieces and passed it around the circle. The cheese followed it, growing smaller and smaller as it moved from hand to hand. Humble Bellows placed the bota of water in the center for anyone who wanted it. "Drink up," he instructed. "With all these trees growin', there's water someplace 'round here, an' we'll find it."

They ate like starved children. In no time even the bread crumbs disappeared. "Finish the cheese too, boyos," Bellows told them, braking off another creamy chunk for himself. "No reason why we shouldn't reach Mareilon 'fore sundown. The new Mareilon, that is. We'll git more food there."

They ate everything and washed it down with the water from the bota. Cubby held the waterskin upside down above his head until the last drop rolled into his mouth. He smacked his lips joyfully and grinned. Then he gave a loud burp.

Tyrillee pointed at the brogmoid with her good arm. "Thunnderbelleee!" she cried, laughing so hard she fell backward off the rock she'd been sitting on. "Whooooopp!" she exclaimed, cradling her arm to protect it from the fall. Unhurt, she rolled over and peeked sheepishly at them over the top of the stone.

Anesi slipped his spell book from the pocket of his cloak and willed it to open. He glanced down at the incantation written in flamboyant letters on the page. Memorizing it instantly, he closed the book and put it away. "Time to go," he announced.

The others heaved a collective sigh and rose to their feet. Anesi just rose and grinned down at them. "*Izyuk*," he said, naming the spell he'd cast on himself. "A handy piece of magic for an injured man."

But Fidget frowned in disapproval. "You'd better be careful," he cautioned. "You're weak. You might not stay up as long as you think."

"Thank you, Mother," Anesi answered caustically, as he flew a circle above Fidget's head. Nevertheless, he pulled out his spell book once more and took the precaution of memorizing *izyuk* again, just in case he should start to fall.

They started up the path again. The hills rose all around them now, and they could no longer see the old ruins of the original Mareilon. The grass beneath their feet and the leaves on the trees were all tinged with vibrant autumn shades of brown and red and gold, and thick, fleecy clouds hugged the summits. They followed a natural wash down a steep incline, the ground turning soft as if it had rained recently.

In the lead, Humble Bellows stopped so suddenly that Cubby bumped into him. The little man pointed and gestured for silence.

Directly in their path a surmin wallowed playfully in a mudhole. The foul smell of the little beast polluted the air with a reek that human noses could barely tolerate. It squealed with a rodent-like glee as it buried its snout in the mud and jerked its head up sharply, showering itself with filth. Its thick, quilled fur was already caked. Small

clawed hands, almost human-like with five fingers, worried deep in the mud, scooping handful that it rubbed into its tiny mischievous face. It rolled on its back and smeared its belly, kicking its feet with gleeful abandonment. It didn't seem to notice that it was being watched. Maybe it didn't care.

Cubby pinched his nostrils shut. "Uggghhh!" he muttered. "Stinky surmin!"

"Let's go 'round, mates," Bellows suggested, covering his mouth and nose with his free hand. "It means climbin' a bit, though."

"Why bother?" Fidget said. Before anyone could stop him, he fitted an arrow to the string of his bow, aimed, and let fly at the unsuspecting creature. Of course, he missed. The arrow struck the ground at the edge of the mudhole, surprising the surmin who, caught unaware, jumped straight up, its quills standing straight on end, its round little eyes snapping wide as it glared at them and squealed.

"We're in for it now, boyos," Humble Bellows said, backing away slowly.

Cubby shook his head in wonderment. "Dumb, Fidge," he said quietly, "dumb."

Tyrillee didn't waste time with a comment. She scampered up the hillside, moving as fast as she could. Anesi exercised the same strategy, flying as high as the *izyuk* spell allowed, which, he feared, wouldn't be high enough.

The surmin advanced toward Fidget and stopped warily, its tiny eyes spinning with anger. It advanced again. Fidget took an uncertain step back. Again, the surmin stopped. The quills rippled along its spine, and a thin red tongue licked out. Suddenly the creature turned around and lifted its tail.

"Here it comes, Fidge!" Cubby shouted, horrified. "I'll get you for this!"

With a sound like cracking wood, the surmin broke wind. Instantly Fidget threw up his hands and gagged as a foul vapor enveloped him. Humble Bellows screamed a high-pitched, womanish scream and ran straight past the

surmin and down the wash. Cubby drew the neck of his sweater up over his face and ran too. Fidget swiftly passed them both.

Anesi got the barest whiff and flew after his friends as fast as he could. Below him, Tyrillee raced along the side of the hill, her red poncho and white hair flying. Straight for the nearest tree she ran and dived head first, launching herself like a javelin, and disappeared into the massive trunk, escaping the terrible odor in her own unique way.

Anesi followed his choking, gasping friends as they fled aimlessly downhill. Cubby stumbled and tumbled head over heels, caught his balance, and got up and ran. Bellows slipped in the muddy wash and slid on his backside a ways before he managed to recover.

They might have run on forever had it not been for a swift, deep stream that cut across their path at the bottom of the hill. Fidget didn't hesitate, but gave a leap for the center of the stream. He disappeared with a loud splash. Two more splashes followed in rapid succession, and three heads bobbed to the surface. Three bodies immediately began to scrub themselves. Weapons, then wet garments, were flung up on the grassy bank, followed by a large black bag.

Fidget ducked beneath the surface again and came up sputtering. "Oh fuddle!" he cried, gasping. "Oh frog it!" He scrubbed his hair, trying to get the stink out. "Fuddle, this water's cold!" He showed no inclination to get out, though.

Anesi settled as gently down to the shore as he could, careful not to hurt his leg as he sat down on the grass. "What were you thinking of, taking a shot at a surmin like that?" he said to Fidget, barely able to suppress his laughter. All three of them looked so pitiful as they stood waist deep in the icy stream, scrubbing at their flesh and hair.

"I thought I could hit it," Fidget answered lamely as he laved water over his shoulders.

"But why shoot it?" Anesi persisted. "You could have walked around. It was just a harmless surmin."

"Harmless!" Fidget argued. He stood up as he stared back at Anesi, and he hugged himself as he began to shiver. "I nearly lost my lunch!"

Cubby and Humble Bellows at last waded ashore. Bellows' teeth chattered uncontrollably, and Cubby's fangs clattered. They jumped up and down to warm themselves, flinging droplets of water everywhere. Anesi yelped in surprise and huddled down inside his cloak. Finally, Fidget climbed up on the bank, too. He squat down on his naked haunches and hugged his knees, shivering miserably.

Cubby came up behind and tapped Fidget on the shoulder. "Feel better, Fidget?" the brogmoid asked.

Without looking up Fidget answered grudgingly, "A little."

Cubby nodded. "Almost dry?"

Fidget hesitated and rubbed his palms up and down his forearms. "Getting there," he answered.

"That's good to know," the brogmoid said with a gruff sweetness that should have warned Fidget. Without another word, Cubby grabbed Fidget under the arms, and Bellows caught Fidget's feet. Together they lifted the protesting boy, heaved him into the cold stream again, and turned away, brushing their hands. Then they gathered their soaking garments. They still had to be scrubbed.

Fidget clambered ashore again, sputtering angrily, wiping his eyes, and pushing his hair back. His hands curled into fists and he beat his thighs. "I'm sorry!" he shouted. "I knew the risk, but I thought I could hit it. I was only trying to help!"

Humble Bellows stood up suddenly with a dripping tunic in his hands. "Ye don't help, boyo, by killing somethin'—anythin'—needlessly! Not even a smelly surmin! That's not help. That's stupid an' cruel! Ye risk yer neck an' yer friends' necks, I suppose, to save a dragon 'cause it's pretty an' all, but ye'd rather shoot a poor surmin 'cause yer too lazy to walk 'round it. What kind o' thinkin' is that?" Bellows glared at Fidget, then bent back down by the stream and submerged the tunic again.

"Felbor teach Fidge better!" Cubby scolded, shaking

a finger under Fidget's nose. "Teach Fidge woodcraft. Not teach to kill for fun."

Fidget stared at Cubby and at Humble Bellows's back for a long moment. Shame-faced, he hung his head. "I guess I didn't think," he admitted.

There was a long uncomfortable silence. "Well, it's not all bad now, mate," Humble Bellows finally said. "We all needed a bath, an' I'm frogged if I coulda brung meself to git into this cold drink without the surmin's encouragement."

"Yo, Nes!" Cubby called from the bank where he diligently scrubbed his red sweater. "Note the *we*?"

Anesi started, then swallowed hard as three pairs of stern eyes turned toward him. They wouldn't really throw him in, would they? "I'm wounded," he reminded them weakly.

None of the three moved. Their gazes never left him.

"It's cold," he protested. "You said so."

Bellows sighed and pulled his laundry into a wet pile on the grass. Cubby did the same and stood up slowly.

Anesi gulped. Slowly, he fumbled at the fastening of his cloak and began to strip.

CHAPTER TWENTY

SHIVERING, BUT CLEAN,

Anesi sat naked on the bank by the stream and emptied the pockets of his enchanter's cloak so that Fidget could wash it with his other garments. He set his blue Chevaux spell book aside first, then the infotater. A handful of jewels came out of one pocket. A fat fistful of gold coins emerged from another.

Humble Bellows whistled appreciatively as he hung his own laundry on tree limbs to dry. "Ye been holdin' out on us, mate!"

Anesi shrugged. "Help yourself, Mister Bellows, if there's something you like."

The little man considered, pursing his lips and studying the small treasure pile from where he stood. "Ye been holdin' it this long, boyo," he finally said, turning back to his laundry. "Ye may as well keep holdin' it. No place to spend it out here, anyway, there's not."

Anesi reached into the last pocket and pulled out the second scroll Bellows had given him after the destruction of Dispoz's keep. There'd never been time for him to copy it into his spell book. The parchment was dog-eared and wrinkled from the treatment it had received in the pocket, but the calligraphy was still vibrant and colorful, the letters elegantly swirled. "I'd almost forgotten this!" he exclaimed as he examined it. "Yonk," he said, reading

the spell's name aloud. He scanned the rest in silence, then looked up excitedly. "This is an incredibly powerful enchantment!"

He picked up his spell book as the others gathered around, opened it, and prepared to copy it into the book with the *gnusto* spell. But when he cast the magic that should have transferred the words, nothing happened.

"Uh-oh," he said quietly, chewing his lower lip. "This spell can't be transferred."

"You mean it's copy-protected?" Fidget said, wadding up his own half-washed tunic as he bent closer.

"Nah," Humble Bellows scoffed. He straightened up and scratched his beard, adopting an almost scholarly manner. "Some spells jus' can't be transferred, that's all. They have to be written out by hand, they do, on specially enchanted presence-imbued parchment. The words slide right off ordinary enchanters' parchment."

Anesi frowned as he allowed the scroll to roll up into a tight cylinder. "That means we can only use it once, then." He tapped it lightly on the palm of his right hand. "I'll have to be very cautious with it."

Cubby plopped down on the grass beside him, tilted his head quizzically, and pushed his jaw forward so that his lower fangs protruded. "Why, Nes?" he asked with childish interest. "What's it do?"

"Augments magic, it does," Humble Bellows answered before Anesi could. "If ye know a spell to make a little fire, like to light a candle or somethin'," he continued as he bent down by the stream and started scrubbing his socks, "then ye can use this, too, an' burn a whole house down in a flash." He snapped his fingers. "Like that, mates."

Anesi shifted his injured leg to a more comfortable position as Fidget took the cloak from him and carried it to the stream for washing. Beside him, Cubby began to sift the jewels and coins playfully through his fingers, making a single glittering pile of them.

"You seem to know an awful lot, Mister Bellows," Anesi said finally.

"An' why not?" the little man countered without

looking around. "I worked fer Dispoz fer, I guess, near twelve years. Ye'd have to be a fool or a fuddlehead not to learn *somethin'*, and I don't fancy I'm either, thank ye."

Anesi watched them work. Fidget had been kind enough to do Anesi's washing for him in deference to the injury. His tunic, shorts, and socks were already hanging in the sun to dry between Fidget's trousers and Cubby's sweater. Soon, Fidget tossed his dripping blue cloak over a branch, too. When he was finished, he came over beside Anesi and Cubby and stretched out on the grass with his hands folded under his head. Moments later, Humble Bellows joined them, too. He picked up a pair of large rubies from the treasure pile, placed them on his eyelids, and lay back. They all stretched out.

The clouds that floated serenely overhead reminded Anesi of another not-too-distant time when he had lain on the beach near his home and picked out shapes in the clouds. It was a favorite game with him, and he slipped into it easily now, finding unicorns and sea-serpents and other fantastic creatures in the sky. But the clouds shifted and reshaped themselves, becoming grues and kobolds.

Anesi closed his eyes. It wasn't the wind that reshaped the clouds, but his fear. When he concentrated, he could feel the Terror's power. It subtly permeated the air, affecting all his perceptions. Even now, he felt his muscles tensing up and forced them to relax.

"Helllooo, boyeeesss!"

Four naked bodies sprang up off the grass and into the icy stream. Safely submerged to the waist, Anesi turned around toward Tyrillee. Almost as an afterthought, he clutched his thigh and made a terrible face as pain shot through his leg. "Oh, fuddle!" he hissed.

"Frog it, girlie!" Humble Bellows shouted, "don't ye never warn nobody when ye creep up on 'em? We're not wearin' a stitch o' nothin'!"

"And this water is froggin' freezing!" Fidget added, slapping the water's surface with the palm of his hand.

Tyrillee stared at them with that unfading smile. She'd discarded her sling, and her arm seemed much better as she grabbed the hem of her poncho and whisked it

over her head. Naked as they, she strode down to the edge of the bank. "Ssswimm tiiimme!" she cried gleefully. She made a high leap into the air, somersaulted twice, and plunged feet-first into the center of them.

"No!" Cubby cried too late. "Not deep! Get hurt!"

But she surfaced laughing.

Fidget hugged his arms around his chest and frowned with disapproval. "Didn't you hear Mister Bellows?" he scolded. "We don't have anything on!"

Anesi waved a hand at him. "I don't think it matters to her," he said. "Or to me anymore." With that, he limped ashore and fell on the grass. He'd reopened his wound by moving so fast. A thin trickle of blood seeped down his thigh. "Fuddle," he muttered.

Forgetting modesty, Humble Bellows hurried to his side and knelt down to examine the gash. "We'd better bandage it again," he said, going to a limb where Fidget had hung the strips of cloth after washing the dust and blood out of them. "They're damp, but that won't hurt. At least they're clean now."

Tyrillee strode out of the water. "Wwwait!" she said.

"Tyrillee brrring sssomethinggg forrr thee, Aneess-see!" She hurried to her poncho. Inside were sewn some pockets much like the pockets in Anesi's enchanter's cloak. She reached into one and pulled out a handful of tiny white flower petals.

"Grrryphon'sss Brrreath!" she sang in her small musical voice. "Find onnn ssside off hill nnot farr frrommm sssurminnn." She knelt down beside Anesi and offered the flowers to Humble Bellows. "Mmmix innn waterrr," she instructed Bellows. She laid a soft hand on Anesi's shoulder. "Mmmake theee betterr, Aneesssee!"

Bellows carried the petals down to the side of the stream, squeezed them tightly in his hand so they wouldn't float away, and dipped them in the water. Returning, he knelt down beside Anesi, and Tyrillee showed him how to place them directly on the wound. The little man carefully bound the thigh with the damp strips.

"Rrrare flowerrr!" Tyrillee said, still excited. "Mmmake thee betterr ssssooonnn."

While no one was watching, Fidget had climbed out of the stream and into his wet garments. He drew his sword from its sheath. "I'll be back," he said, walking off along the stream bank.

Cubby pulled on his wet trousers, but left his sweater on a branch to dry. "Cubby build fire?" he suggested, rubbing his hands together. "Camp here tonight?"

Anesi shook his head as he flexed his leg slowly. It didn't hurt so bad now. "We'll go on," he said. "We can make Mareilon before nightfall if Fidget hasn't wandered off too far. Why don't you go keep an eye on him, Cubbo?"

The brogmoid nodded and ambled off the way Fidget had gone.

"The more ye rest that leg," Humble Bellows reminded him, "the faster it'll heal an' the lesss scarrin' there'll be, mate. It's not a bad idea he has to camp here a while."

Anesi was adamant. "Mareilon should be just over those hills. I don't know about you, Mister Bellows, but the bath has made me eager for a few more comforts, like a good cup of hot chocolate. I intend to have one before I sleep tonight. Now, wet or not, please hand me some clothes before embarrassment completely replaces my boldness."

While he was crawling into wet shorts, Fidget and Cubby returned. Anesi noticed first that Fidget was also in shorts. Then he noticed the wooden crutch around the top of which were wound the legs of Fidget's trousers. He handed it to Anesi.

"You were wearing out my shoulder," he said good-naturedly, pushing his sword back into the sheath. "You'll move easier and faster with that."

Anesi leaned experimentally on the crutch. It was a stout branch, and the trousers' legs made good padding under his arm. Best of all, it took most of the weight off his injured leg. "Thanks, Fidge," he said sincerely.

When everyone was dressed and all the various treasures returned to the pockets of Anesi's cloak, they started off. None of them had thought to cross the stream and

then dress, but since their garments were still wet anyway, no one complained. They carried their boots in hand with wet socks over their shoulders, and walked barefooted.

In the next valley they found a vast field of late-blooming flowers. A rainbow of blossoms blanketed the ground, pouring a sweet honey scent into the air. They stopped at the edge of the field, awed by such beauty, and Cubby bent down to pluck a yellow flower.

"Ssstop!" Tyrillee screamed, catching the brogmoid's hand before he could break the flower's stem. "Arre thee mmmad?"

Stung, Cubby stared up into the dryad's accusing eyes. An instant later, two thick tears oozed down his gray cheeks.

"It's only a flower," Fidget sneered, snatching Cubby's hand from Tyrillee's grip and pulling the brogmoid close against his side. He put an arm protectively around Cubby's shoulder and drew him away from her.

"They arre sssoulllsss!" she responded, looking at him as if he were some kind of monster. "Doesss thee nnot unnderssstand? Cannn thee nnot knowww?"

Anesi tried to calm her down. "What do you mean, souls?" he asked.

"Sssoulllsss!" she shrieked. "Whennn thee diesss, thy sssoulll, iff it isss beautifulll and pure, beecommmesss a flowerrr!"

"You mean dryad souls?" he asked, genuinely interested in such a curious belief.

But she rolled her eyes. "Alll sssoulllsss, ssstupid hooman!" She turned toward the field and made a sweeping gesture with one arm. "Mmmaneee kinndsss off peoplesss, mmmaneee kinndsss of flowersss!"

"You picked Gryphon's Breath petals for Anesi," Fidget pointed out.

She glowered at him. "Tyrillee assk permmissiionnn off flowerrr firrrsst! Assk it tooo mmmake himmm welll. Dooo flowerrr mmmuch honnnor. Nnot sssimpleee pick forrr nnoo good purrrposse!"

"But how can flowers be souls? They die, too," Anesi persisted.

"Anddd arre reeborrrn," Tyrillee countered reasonably, her eyes shining. "Weee mussst walllk carefullleee annnd with grrreat ressspect, annnd crusssh no blosssom."

She took the lead, setting a course that skirted the perimeter of the field rather than one that led through it. There were far fewer blossoms at the edge, but nevertheless she watched them carefully, scolding anyone who stepped too close to a random bloom.

Anesi humored her, but thought it all so much mumbo-jumbo. In a rational world, souls did not become flowers. He did find it, however, very interesting, and it, added to her story about trees containing whole worlds, made him eager to know much more about dryad philosophy, if there was such a thing. Why, he might even write a book!

They reached the valley's bottom and started up the far side. Suddenly, a cloud passed over the sun, and the temperature took a noticeable drop. Anesi stopped in his tracks. All the hairs on his neck suddenly stood on end, and his skin began to crawl. He turned slowly, stared up at the sky, and dropped to his knees. "Get down!" he hissed to the others.

Six dark, slate-colored clouds scraped across the blue sky, swallowing the sunlight and drinking the warmth from the air as they moved southward. A huge, black shadow crawled down the valley and up the side. Anesi felt its touch like a cool fire on his skin, and opened his mouth in a soundless scream.

"The ssservantsss offff Terror!" Tyrillee whispered fearfully.

Fidget answered her with a false bravado. "Do they think they can fool us with a cheap chameleon trick?" The polished metal of his bare blade reflected the clouds' progress.

"Count yer blessings, boyo," Humble Bellows sneered, clutching his bag close to his chest as he squat down. "They don't seem to be stoppin'. Maybe they fear yer sticker."

"Shut up!" Anesi snapped. "Just shut it up!"

Almost reluctantly, sunshine oozed back into the val-

ley, filling the clouds' wake. But there was little warmth in it, at least not for Anesi. He rose as quickly as he could, levering himself up with his new crutch, and hurried toward the top of the hill. At the summit, he watched the clouds drag across the next range and out of sight.

The others came up behind him.

"Why didn't they see us?" Anesi wondered out loud.

Humble Bellows moved to his right side and stared with him. "Maybe they can't, yet, mate," he answered. "Ye been usin' a lot o' magic, an' they're certainly becomin' more aware o' ye. But maybe not aware *enough* yet. Yer goin' to have to be careful."

Anesi thought about what Bellows said. Then he took out his spell book and opened.

Humble Bellows caught his arm. "Now, what do ye think ye're doin'?" he said. "Didn't ye hear me?"

"I heard you!" Anesi answered him angrily as he jerked his arm free. "But I'm still going to memorize a few spells while I've got time. We're not walking into a strange town unprepared." He opened the book again and chose three enchantments, the most he thought he could accurately remember. That done, he put the book away and started down the hill without another word to anyone.

"One spell's all it'll take boyo!" Humble Bellows shouted at him from the top of the hill. "They'll be on ye like stink on that surmin, they will!"

Anesi kept walking.

"Ye better listen, mate! I'm tellin' ye!"

Anesi was halfway down the hill. If he even heard Humble Bellows he gave no indication of it.

"He's crazy, that one is!" the little man grumbled, shouldering his bag, as Fidget started past him after his friend.

"Of course, he is," Fidget answered with equal gruffness. "That was a qualification for this job. One crazy, no experience necessary."

Just at dusk they descended the last of the Backbone Hills. Mareilon—the rebuilt Mareilon—rose before them. It was much smaller than the original city, no more

than a large village really, and the walls that surrounded it were only half completed. Most likely, they would stay that way, for no work had been done on them in years. After all, Frobozz was at peace, and the citizens of Mareilon were notoriously reluctant to raise taxes for anything but the most immediate and serious of concerns. They had a reputation throughout the kingdom for it.

Anesi's leg throbbed painfully, but he refused to utter a complaint. He really had nobody to blame but himself anyway. If he hadn't been so careless and lost that vial of *Govake* potion, his thigh would probably be healed by now. He bit his lip and kept his silence, leaning on the crutch as he led the way toward the city gate.

"Ho!" someone called from the guard tower as they approached. "Who goes there? Things from outer places?" A face leaned out of the high window. The fading light glinted off a metal helmet, and the tip of a bow showed.

"We're from far up north," Anesi called, speaking for the group. "If you'll kindly let us in we'd like to spend the night."

"Ho, I'll bet!" the guard cackled nastily. "And maybe mess around with a few of our fine girls, too, no doubt. Filthy-looking lot!" The guard spat out the window. "What's its name, thing?"

"Anesi."

The guard laughed again, a particularly unpleasant sound. "Well, it's got reason to be, I'll give it that. And I guess its friends are Nervous, and Jittery, and Jumpy, and Scared."

"And I guess you're a frogging brainless rotgrub with nothing better to do than harass poor tired travelers!" Anesi shouted back, livid with rage. His hands curled into fists, and he considered blasting open the gate with *rezrov*.

But the guard leaned further out the window and placed his chin in his hand as he studied them. "Well, oooh!" he said in a voice that dripped with mockery and sarcasm. "It has a temper! A nasty one, at that. It's going to do well in Mareilon then, I can tell." The guard pulled back from the window, and could be heard giving orders

to someone. Moments later, gears began to creak and chains began to clank and the gate started to rise.

The guard reappeared in the window without his bow. This time he leaned his chin in both hands as he addressed them. "Come in, things!" he called with a leer on his face. "Come in." He made a shooping motion with one hand, urging them toward the gate. "Good times await its in Mareilon. Good food, good beds, good times. Its are filthy things, but welcome."

"Things?" Fidget whispered. "Its? Is he trying to insult us?"

Anesi didn't answer, but he slipped a single gold coin from one of the pockets of his cloak and flung it up toward the window. It clanged roundly off the guard's helmet and caromed inside the tower. The guard bent down out of sight. When he reappeared he held the coin up and bit it with his front teeth.

"Buy something useful," Anesi suggested, "like a muzzle."

The guard made some gesture with his fingers that Anesi didn't understand, nor did he care to. He led the others through the gate, kicking up little clouds of dust as he scuffed the earth with each step.

Cubby came up beside him and slipped one hand into his. "Nes okay?" he asked quietly, worriedly.

"I'm fine, Cubbo," he answered, low-voiced. "Just fine."

A whir of chains filled the air, and the gate crashed down behind them. The guard they had spoken to appeared in another window and looked down at them with a crooked grin as he drummed the tips of his fingers rhythmically on the window sill and hummed a barely audible hum.

"Screw the bastard," Anesi muttered, turning away. It was the foulest bit of language he had used in his life, and it felt good.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

T

URNING THE FIRST corner, they found themselves on a busy thoroughfare. Though the sun was almost gone, shops remained open, and people hurried about. A solitary man worked his way down the road with a folding foot stool, lighting streetlamps.

"Why would they do that?" Fidget asked in wide-eyed wonderment.

Anesi reminded himself it was his friend's first time ever in a city. "Because some people have errands and work to do even after the sun goes down. They may not go to bed until midnight, and they might sleep until noon."

"Sleep 'til noon?" Fidget said, his voice full of awe and disbelief. "I tried that once, and Papa thrashed me!"

Tyrillee stared from side to side, her gaze taking in everything. Self-consciously, she wrapped her poncho closer about her shoulders and seemed to shrink into herself. "Citeee sstinksss," she declared sullenly. She shook her head and put on a disapproving frown. "Sssso mmmuch dead treeesss evvvereee wherre!"

She meant the houses and the shops and the carts that lumbered down the streets, Anesi knew. Still, he found her attitude irritating. He felt as if he'd come home after a long and very boring vacation. Mareilon was

nothing like Galepath, but at least it was a city, and he'd missed the city.

His stomach growled. Too much time had passed since he'd had a good meal, and he remembered his promise to himself to have a cup of chocolate before he slept that night. He needed an inn or a tavern that served good food. Since he was a stranger in town, however, the logical thing to do was to ask someone.

He confronted the next person they met, a tall man with the look of a farmer and the clothing to match. "Excuse me, sir," he began genially enough. "Could you direct..."

The man jumped a foot backward and cowered away, raising one fist to protect himself from some imagined attack. "Get away, things!" he railed unreasonably. The farmer slunk away down the street, keeping a careful watch over his shoulder, and finally broke into a run.

Anesi dismissed the man as some kind of fool and approached a merchant as he locked up his shop door and turned for home. Before he could say a word, the merchant drew a long knife from his waistband sheath. "If it values its miserable life, thing," the merchant hissed, "keep back!"

Fidget reacted instantly, whipping an arrow from his quiver and fitting it to his bowstring. But Anesi caught his arm before he could draw and let fly.

"No," Anesi ordered, "let him go."

Fidget lowered his bow, and the merchant backed suspiciously away, keeping his knife leveled until he disappeared around a corner.

"You should have let me shoot him," Fidget grumbled, taking the arrow from the string, but holding it against the grip where he could have it ready if he needed it.

"Even at that close range," Anesi answered unkindly, "what makes you think you'd have hit him?"

Fidget gave him a queer look that Anesi chose to ignore. He led the way further down the street and came to a wide crossroad. In the center of the intersection stood

the public well. The ground around it was quite muddy. Their thirst, however, was also quite powerful.

As he bent over the side of the well to peer down, Anesi got a strong whiff of roasted meat. His mouth immediately went moist, and he whirled around. "Where?" was all he had to say.

Humble Bellows spotted the sign first. It was a simple wooden board nailed to the front of an otherwise plain-fronted building. Painted on the board was a tree under seven stars and the words, *Elvenhome Bar and Grill, L. Rhonda, proprietor*. Then, under that, *Have it our way, or have it somewhere else!* And under that, *Rooms to let: completely unreasonable rates.*

Humble Bellows scratched his beard with one hand and adjusted his bag on his shoulder with the other. "Uh, maybe we should try a different place," he suggested uneasily.

"You kiddin', Mac?" Cubby ambled to the fore of the group and shoved his thumbs down the front of his pants. He swelled out his chest and clacked his fangs a couple of times as he looked across the street toward the inn. "You're on my turf now. Taverns I know. Don't worry about a thing." He adopted a greatly exaggerated walk as he led the way, and he beckoned them to follow with a wave of his hand and called, "Wagons, ho!"

"Wagons, ho?" Fidget said, casting a sideways glance at Anesi.

Anesi returned the look, then shrugged and started after Cubby. The smell of roasted meat was too powerful a magnet for him to care what a sign said or to waste time pondering the idiosyncrasies of a schizophrenic brogmoid.

Cubby pushed open the tavern door. A dim, yellowish light seeped out into the street. He paused on the threshold with his hands on his hips, looking tough, as he peered inside. "It's all right," he said to the others and led the way in.

Of course, his idea of *all right* was based on the wharveside bars and pestholes of Borphee, Anesi reminded himself as they entered the inn. Three dirty-looking men,

miners perhaps, who worked the hills, sat mumbling together in a far corner by a low-burning hearthfire. Another man and a woman sat huddled together over a shared bowl of soup in a different corner. The proprietess, a scruffy-looking woman whose thinning red hair shot up in all directions about her head, stood behind a counter filling two mugs from a keg tap.

They all ceased their activities and turned toward the strangers in the doorway.

"Beer!" Cubby exclaimed, clapping his hands together eagerly. Striding inside, he chose a table and beckoned impatiently to the others.

Anesi gazed warily around, placing his crutch against the wall close at hand as Fidget leaned his weapons against the wall and as Humble Bellows dropped his bag, and they all chose stools around a rough wooden table. The place gave him an uneasy feeling. The three by the fireplace turned sullenly away when he looked their direction, and the man and woman huddled closer together and determined to stare into their soup while watching from the corners of their eyes at the same time.

"She's a witch!" Fidget whispered, leaning close to Anesi's ear as they sat down and as the proprietess came toward them.

"Nonsense!" Anesi snapped. "I've told you before, there are no such things as witches. Magic follows specific laws and principles that have to be studied and learned. Nobody lives in gingerbread houses and nobody calls up demons! It just isn't done!" He turned sharply away and put on a smile as L. Rhonda leaned on the table with both hands. "Hello," he said sweetly, hoping she hadn't overheard.

She didn't return the smile. "What's it want, things?" she snapped unpleasantly. "This is a respectable joint. We don't want no trouble from outsiders, hear?" Her harsh gaze swept around the table.

Then her face lit up with surprise. "You!" she said.

Humble Bellows leaned back on his stool and cloaked himself in shadow. "Ye're mistaken, ma'am," he said. "We've never met before, we haven't."

She hesitated for an instant, confused, as she continued to stare at him, and she twisted a bright gold ring that encircled her finger. "Yes, of course," she muttered, turning surly again. "I don't have any traffic with things. Set that stool down on all four legs before it breaks it!"

Humble Bellows complied quietly as L. Rhonda looked over her shoulders at her other customers.

"What's the L. stand for?" Cubby asked, trying to change the tone of the conversation.

But L. Rhonda was not in the mood for pleasantries. "None of your business, thing! Its want to order something or not? If not, get up and get out. Its're scaring my real customers."

"We're scaring them?" Fidget answered sarcastically. "Maybe it's your hair-do, lady. Ever heard of a comb, *ummmmpphhh*?"

Anesi clamped a hand over Fidget's mouth and pulled his friend tightly against him as he struggled. "Forgive him," he said to L. Rhonda. "No manners. His first time in a city, you know." He smiled again and ruffled Fidget's hair with his free hand until it stood up as spikey and wild as L. Rhonda's. He kept hold of Fidget as he ordered for them. "We smelled your delicious roasting meats all the way out by the well. Bring us two platters and whatever else goes with it."

"And beer!" Cubby added, slamming a fist down on the table.

Anesi looked at the brogmoid hesitantly as Fidget struggled in his headlock. "Beer, too," he added. "All around."

L. Rhonda looked dubious. "It's got coin? Nothing's free around here, especially for things."

Anesi frowned, but reached blindly with his free hand into one of the pockets of his cloak. A couple of ancient zorkmids and a small emerald came out, and he slapped them on the table. "Those do?" he asked.

She bit one of the coins with her front teeth, then picked up the emerald and held it toward the firelight. After a moment, she pushed one of the coins back at him.

"Don't want to cheat it," she remarked, pocketing the emerald and the other gold coin as she strode away.

Anesi released Fidget, and his friend stared at him red-faced with anger. "Who do you think you are, Anesi?" he said bitterly.

Anesi answered him with coolness. "Who do I have to be?"

"Aneesssee!" Tyrillee gasped with an exaggerated look of shock.

Fidget got up from the table. Tight-lipped, he picked up his bow and walked out the door into the the night.

Cubby stood up as the door closed. Then, leaning on the table, he glared at Anesi. "What's wrong with you, Nes? You're acting like a fuddlehead!"

Anesi didn't look up. "He'll walk it off and be back," he said. "He's as hungry as the rest of us."

L. Rhonda returned with a tray and five mugs of rich foaming beer which she set down at each of the places. "Lose something?" she sneered as she deposited a mug at Fidget's empty spot.

"Nothing we haven't already paid for," Anesi answered with a voice like ripping silk.

But L. Rhonda wasn't listening. Her gaze darted again to Humble Bellows, and she watched him from lowered lids as she moved around the table. When she placed his beer down, it seemed to Anesi she brushed against his side in a surreptitious manner and lingered there a little longer than it took to serve the other drinks.

"You sure you don't know her?" he said to Bellows when she was gone again.

Bellows shook his head as he raised the mug to his lips and took a long drought. A tiny rivulet of white creamy foam trickled down his beard and dripped onto the table as he leaned forward and set the mug down again. It was half-empty. He wiped his mouth with the back of one hand and sighed.

"That's nothing!" Cubby scoffed, picking up his own mug. The brogmoid tilted his head back. Because of his fangs he couldn't drink from it like a human. He distended his lower jaw and opened his mouth wide. Next,

lifting his mug high, he poured the entire contents in a thick stream down his throat. He slammed the empty vessel down on the table, wiped his mouth, and grinned broadly. "Now that's drinking!"

Tyrillee picked her mug up self-consciously, looked at each of them over the top of it, then took a delicate sip. The sound of disgust she made possessed none of her usual musicality. She set it down and pushed it back.

Cubby reached for it and downed the beverage in a gulp. L. Rhonda arrived with the platters of meat in each hand and another platter of steaming crisp vegetables balanced on her right forearm. She set them down on the table and collected the empty mugs. "Three more?" she inquired, trying unsuccessfully not to look at Humble Bellows.

"Sure!" Cubby answered quickly, and he clapped an arm around Humble Bellows's shoulders. "Bring three for my good friend, here, too!"

"Thank ye, ma'am," Bellows interrupted graciously, catching and holding her gaze. "One more'll do me jus' fine."

Anesi watched them both intently. "You sure you don't know her?" he asked again when she was gone.

Humble Bellows shrugged as he pulled his dagger from his belt and skewered a sizzling slice of roast beef. "I'm an attractive man, I am," he answered off-handedly, "in the prime of me vitality, so to speak. It's the same in every city I ever been in. Women come on to me." He gestured with the dagger, the piece of meat still dangling from its point, toward L. Rhonda where she eyed them from behind her counter. "It's not her fault, unless ye blame the lass fer not havin' a more imaginative line."

Anesi pulled out the dagger Fidget had given him ages ago it seemed, in the treasure cave, and stabbed a chunk of meat for himself. Cubby, having no dagger or other eating utensil, closed his three fingers around a fat chunk and lifted it, dripping grease, to his mouth. Tyrillee, likewise with no eating tool, looked uncertainly at the platters of meat, then reached instead for a steaming potato from the vegetable platter.

L. Rhonda returned moments later and lined up three beers before Cubby. A fourth she placed at Humble Bellows's elbow. She said nothing this time, but backed away, twisting the gold ring around her finger.

They busied themselves with eating after that. The contents of one meat platter disappeared in no time while Tyrillee worked on the vegetables. Humble Bellows finished the contents of his first mug and sipped at the fresh second one while Cubby downed two of his three.

"Don't ye like meat, girlie?" Bellows asked the dryad as he lifted another chunk with his thin blade. When Tyrillee frowned, he gave a little laugh. "Well, my teeth got points fer a reason, they do."

"Mine, too," Cubby added, running the tip of his tongue over the twin points of his lower fangs. He gave a burp and smiled. Then, showing off, he grabbed a whole, hot turnip from the vegetable tray and tossed it high in the air. As it came down he caught it neatly on the point of his left fang. In an amazing display of mandibular dexterity, he pulled his lower jaw in and covered fangs and turnip with his upper lip. With a loud gulp, the turnip vanished, and Cubby smiled again. "Now that's eating!" he cried, pounding the table. He picked up one of his beers and downed half.

For some time, the three miners by the fireplace had sat muttering among themselves. Anesi hadn't listened too closely because he was hungry and his back was to them. But increasingly, he felt the weight of their gazes. He determined to ignore them, however, and continued to enjoy his meal.

The sound of metal scraping on leather changed that. He turned around slowly as the biggest miner rose from his table with a drawn sword. The man was taller even than Anesi's father, and nearly as broad. Chest muscles and biceps rippled under the thin dirty tunic he wore. Dark hair covered most of his face, but what there was to see was lined from hard work and meanness.

The miner tapped the flat of his sword against his palm as he came closer. "Thing!" he said, his gaze fixed

on Cubby. "Its manners disgust me. Like all outsiders it needs a lesson on how to behave in proper company."

Humble Bellows reached subtly across the table and clamped a hand on Anesi's arm. "No magic, mate," he whispered tensely. "Remember yer clouds."

Anesi remembered and cursed silently as Cubby got to his feet. He glared at the miner for a moment and downed another full mug in a single gulp. "That one was for me, jacko," he said to the miner. Then he picked up the last full mug and raised it in salute. "This one's for you." Again, he drank the entire contents, only instead of swallowing it, he sprayed it back out in the miner's face.

Anesi groaned as the miner gave an angry roar and raised his sword. Like a gray flash, Cubby launched himself across the table and struck his foe head-first in the belly, and they both collapsed in a tangle. Cubby got up first and turned to face his friends. He wore a stupid grin as he took a staggering step toward them. "Howzat?" he asked, drunkenly.

Behind him, the infuriated miner rose again, and his two friends pushed their table out of the way and drew their own swords.

In one impossible motion, Tyrillee sprang off her stool, rebounded off the wall with a twisting back flip, and caught the first miner in the face with the heels of both her feet. She landed cat-like as the miner gave a startled moan and went down again.

"Fer sure, it's in the fryin' pan now," Humble Bellows muttered. He pushed their table out of the way with a strong thrust of his foot, clearing space, and turned to meet one of the miners with his small dagger. The miner prepared to swing his sword.

No magic, Anesi warned himself again. His hand closed on one of the mugs that had fallen off the table and rolled against his foot. Forgetting his injured leg, he stood up suddenly, kicked his stool out of the way, and flung the mug at Humble Bellows's attacker. The miner saw it from the corner of his eye and ducked. In that moment, Humble Bellows swung his knee as high as he

could, connecting with a stunning blow between the miner's legs.

The second miner's mouth fell open in a round *O* of surprise, and his eyes spun for a moment in their sockets. Then he sagged to his knees, clutching himself. A moment later, he toppled to his side and curled into a fetal position.

But the third miner slammed his blade down toward Cubby, who had made himself dizzy by turning to follow all the action. The brogmoid flung himself away at the last instant and crawled under a table. The miner chased him, flinging the table physically out of the way to expose Cubby. Still grinning, the brogmoid spat in the man's eye and crawled as fast as he could to another table.

The first miner got to his feet again. Anesi grabbed his crutch for balance and flung another mug. The miner dodged it. Anesi grabbed for something else on the table—the full platter of meats. With a quick second thought, he pushed it back and seized the half-full platter of vegetables. Tyrillee had a figure to watch anyway, he reasoned as he hurled it.

It splattered the front of the miner's tunic. The huge man gave an unpleasant growl and leaped across the room.

Anesi barely dodged, ducking under the brawny, outstretched arms. The miner sprawled on the table top and slid over it to crumple between it and the wall. He rose, enraged.

"Buddies forever?" Anesi offered, hobbling away as quickly as he could. He felt the counter suddenly against his back. No place else to run. His crutch was the only weapon he had, and he took it in both hands. *No magic*, he reminded himself again.

He saw his death come hurtling toward his head as the miner raised his blade in both hands and brought it whistling down. Anesi's knees gave way, barely saving his life. The edge of the sword bit deeply into the wood above his head.

"My good new counter!" a voice suddenly roared. "You stupid rotgrub!" A loud, splintering crash sounded

above. A cascade of beer, bits and pieces of a wooden keg, and the miner all tumbled down around Anesi. L. Rhonda leaned halfway over her precious counter, scowling.

"You must be quite a powerful woman," he said placatingly, pushing a mop of beer-soaked hair back from his face. He licked his fingers and grinned.

Before L. Rhonda could answer she looked up suddenly and ducked as an object went whizzing over her head.

"It's got more coins in its pockets?" she inquired sternly, reappearing.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered.

"Leave 'em." Standing then, she began to fling mugs and glasses and dishes right and left. Anything that moved became a target for her anger, and her careful aim scored on friend and foe alike.

Grasping his crutch, Anesi crawled away into a corner and discovered a man and woman huddled arm-in-arm behind a broken table. He'd almost forgotten them. "Hi there, thrill-seekers," he whispered.

The woman stared at him in terror, then gave a shrill scream, flung up her arms as she leaped to her feet and fled through the tavern door. An instant later, her par amour likewise gave a wide-eyed scream and fled.

"Nice to meet you, too," he shouted at their backs, wiggling a finger in his right ear to clear the ringing of their cries. "Nice town you have here! Warm people!"

A cup shattered just over his head.

For a brief time it looked as if they were holding their own, until Cubby blundered into the fray again. The brogmoid climbed up on the only table that remained upright, and looked around for someone to jump. Tyrillee scrambled on her hands and knees through a miner's legs, and he turned around to chase her. Cubby gave a fierce, if somewhat drunken growl, and flung himself at the unsuspecting man. He horribly miscalculated, however, arched over the miner's head, and crashed into the stone hearthplace.

A roar of laughter issued from the miner as Cubby

got to his feet, teetered over, and plopped senselessly down against the wall. "Well, I guess we got this one!" he shouted to his comrades as he raised his sword above the brogmoid.

Anesi leaped to his feet. Without thinking, he raised his hands. "No!" he cried desperately, unleashing a spell.

In an instant, all weapons clattered to the floor and everyone grew still. There was a moment of stunned silence, then friend and foe reached out for one another, shook hands and clapped each other on the back. Even L. Rhonda came from behind her counter and joined the camaraderie.

The lead miner turned toward Anesi and called across the room. "It must be some kind of wizard, right?"

Anesi bit his lip and looked over his shoulder. A dreadful sense of error filled him, and he wrung his hands. "Enchanter," he corrected in a low, worried voice. "Just a beginner." *Bumbling beginner*, he thought to himself.

The miner nodded appreciatively and rubbed his chin. The red marks of Tyrillee's heels were still vividly visible there. "What the fuddle did it hit us with?"

Anesi hesitated. His skin crawled, and gooseflesh began to cover his arms. "A *vaxum* spell," he confessed politely through his distraction, careful not to say the wrong thing and break the enchantment now that he'd cast it. "It just makes us all friends."

The lead miner helped his comrade off the floor, the one that Humble Bellows had kicked. Though the man smiled amiably enough, he still didn't look too well.

"Of course, it knows I'm going to cut its scuzzy throat when this wears off," the miner continued. "It does understand my position? I have an image to uphold."

Anesi wasn't listening. He'd had to cast that spell to save Cubby's life. But he may have thrown all their lives away. He closed his eyes, the better to use his other senses, and fought down the fear that threatened to overwhelm him.

They were coming. He felt their power like an icy heat wave that singed away the layers of his skin and

burned a path to his heart. He wanted to scream, to hide. There was no place he could hide, though. He had given himself away with that last spell, and now they knew where he was.

The door crashed inward. Fidget tripped over the threshold and sprawled on the floor. Dazed and pale-faced, he stared frantically around the inn and spotted Anesi. "They're coming!" he cried, scrambling to his hands and knees. Blood trickled down his shins from the scrapes the rough floor had dealt him. "The Servants of Terror!"

A huge black shadow moved in the doorway behind him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

F

IDGET MADE A GRAB for his arrows, which had spilled from his quiver when he fell. A tremendous blow struck the front of the inn, shaking the structure on its foundations. Streams of dust cascaded from a long crack that instantly formed in the ceiling. Whatever dishes remained on the shelves behind the counter crashed into broken shards as the shelves, themselves, gave way.

L. Rhonda picked up a mug from the counter, the last intact vessel in the house. She dashed it on the floor in disgust and shouted at Humble Bellows. "I knew it was you! I knew it! You never brought anybody anything but trouble!"

Humble Bellows made a sheepish face. "Not me this time, Rhonda," he explained as he waved a hand at Anesi. "It's him. Or It, as ye prefer around here, knowin' as how ye don't think o' outsiders as real *people*."

A huge mouth suddenly filled the inn's doorway, stretched open so wide they could see right down the pink and red lining of its throat. Huge upper and lower fangs gleamed moistly as did triple rows of tinier teeth, all razor sharp.

"It's a nabiz!" one of the miners screamed suddenly.

But the lead miner only grinned as if he were wit-

nessing an amusing play or a puppet show. "I've never seen a nabiz that size!" he shouted back.

Fidget nocked an arrow to his bow and let it fly. The shaft buried itself deep in the upper palate, and the beast reared back with a terrible panther-like cry that sent shivers up their spines.

"Did you see?" Fidget exclaimed excitedly, turning to face the others. "I hit it! I hit it!"

The first miner slapped his leader's arm. "Sounds like a nabiz!"

The leader slipped an arm around his friend good-naturedly and gave him a playful punch in the gut. "I tell you, it's no nabiz!"

Another blow struck the front of the inn, and the crack in the ceiling widened until they could see into the room above. A pale terrified face appeared in the crack. They could barely see the sheet the man clutched around himself.

"Oops," L. Rhonda remarked, covering her mouth with one hand and rolling her eyes. "Forgot about my tenant upstairs."

The frame around the door caved suddenly inward without giving way completely as the nabiz used its flat, scaly forehead as a battering ram. It gave a roar of triumph. Unexpectedly, a second blow smashed the right side of the inn where there was no door. The wall shivered under the impact, and one of the fireplace stones fell out. Sparks from the fire leaped up the chimney.

"How many are there?" L. Rhonda shrieked.

"Six, probably," Anesi answered matter-of-factly. "Is there a way out of here?"

The huge mouth appeared in the doorway again. This time, though, the monster nabiz twisted its serpentine neck sideways and gripped the frame between its great teeth. With a cracking and splintering of wood, it pulled away nearly half the facade. The wreckage disappeared down the creature's throat with a gulp.

"This way!" L. Rhonda screeched. She paused long enough to wave a hand and smile at the face of her up-

stairs tenant. "You're on your own, guy! Don't bother locking up!"

They raced behind the counter after the wild-haired woman and into the inn's kitchen. Pots and pans littered the grease-slick floor as did broken crockery. The few utensils that remained hanging on their hooks rattled and clattered under the force of still another attack.

"That ought to put at least one of them in the dining room," Humble Bellows muttered as he ran.

There was a second fireplace in the kitchen with pans and cauldrons hanging by the fire. They swayed wildly, slopping their contents into the flames, which popped and crackled and sent smoke roiling into the air.

"Remind me not to eat here," one of the miners remarked. "She burns the food."

A rear door stood shut in a darkened corner where it could barely be seen. L. Rhonda kicked a large round pot out of the way with her slippered toe and reached for the latch. Then she hesitated. "What if there's another one out there?"

Humble Bellows patted her hand sympathetically. By now it was quite plain that they somehow knew each other. "Don't worry, Rhonda," he said. "One little taste o' ye, an' the beastie will jus' spit ye right back up."

L. Rhonda relaxed a little. "In that case," she answered him sweetly, "you go first." She grabbed him by the collar as she jerked the door open and flung him out into the darkness. "All clear?" she called in the same sweet voice.

Anesi hadn't noticed before what a big woman L. Rhonda was, and the billowy flounces of her skirts didn't make her look any smaller, either. Of course, he should have realized it when she picked up the keg and crowned one of the miners with it, but he'd had other things on his mind at the time. He was now, however, quite impressed with her physicality.

The distinct sound of dry scales and massive weight shuffling through debris in the outer room spurred Anesi to action. "Sorry, ma'am," he said, squeezing past L. Rhonda, "but I don't see any teeth. That's clear enough for me."

He ran out into the night and tripped over a prone Humble Bellows, who was just attempting to rise. Instead, both fell on their faces. Someone stepped on Anesi's back as they fled out the door, and he collapsed again with a grunt.

"Sorry!" called the lead miner, turning long enough to doff an imaginary cap. "It's a nice kid, and I've had fun talking to it, but now it's time to run for its life!" He flashed a big friendly smile, then ran down the back street for all he was worth.

The mouth of another nabiz appeared at the end of the alley. It gave a wide yawning roar, the top of its jaw rising higher than the surrounding rooftops. The miner shouted a short, nasty curse before the monster made an appetizer of him.

"Say the secret word," Anesi muttered, as the others spilled out the doorway and helped him to his feet.

L. Rhonda bent down, pulled Humble Bellows up by his collar, and set him on his feet. "I'm sorry, darling!" she moaned, leaning over to hug him in her great arms, nearly smothering him in her breasts. "I was just so angry when you left me!"

"Later, later!" Bellows shouted, pushing himself free. He shot a glance back over his shoulder. The nabiz was trying to squeeze its girth up the narrow alley. The buildings on either side that held it back shivered and quaked and showed every sign of crumbling under the assault. The creature fixed its eyes on them as it strained and forced its way in.

"This way!" Fidget cried from the other end of the alley. Cubby was already at his side, and the brogmoid peered around another building into the broader street beyond. "Hurry!" Fidget insisted.

From the mouth of the alley they stared out into the square. Chaos had seized Mareilon. People ran screaming in fear through the streets, clutching weapons, belongings, or children. They ran without direction, like frantic mice from a terrible pursuing cat, and their screams of panic filled the night.

Another roar close by sent a tingle up Anesi's spine.

Off to his right the monstrous head of yet another nabiz rose above the rooftops and crashed down. The shattering of wood echoed above even the people's cries. He stared back at the front of the inn. An immense serpentine tail coiled up outside the ruined entrance. The rest of the nabiz was somewhere inside.

That made three, then. Where were the others?

"They will desstroy citeee!" Tyrillee said mournfully, tugging on Anesi's sleeve. "Theee cannot sstop it?"

"Not all of them!" Anesi answered her roughly. "I haven't got that kind of power!"

Fidget stood beside him with his bow drawn and an arrow on the string. "If you can take out even one of them, 'Nes, then do it. Now. Or Mareilon is doomed and us with it!"

Anesi hesitated. He could feel terror pulsing in the air, terror in the people's hearts, in his own heart. It burned in his veins, consuming him from the inside, eating away his soul. It was the Great Terror, he knew. All its force now bent this way. Through its servants it had found him, and he despaired.

Then Fidget gripped his arm. "One of those things killed my parents," he said hotly. "Give me the spell book if you can't do it. Show me how!"

Anesi fought down his fear and pulled his arm free. "No," he said, hating the quaver in his voice. "I'll do it. I'm the only one who can."

It was hard with so much fear inside him to remember the two remaining spells he had memorized that day, but the enchantments were still there in the secret place inside his mind. He concentrated to shut out every distracting thing, summoning his will and his courage, all his determination, those virtues that made up what his instructors called *presence*, the true power behind any magic.

He snapped his eyes open and without another word cast his first spell, his strongest *izyuk* enchantment. It had helped him kill one servant, the hellhound in the woods back home. He hoped the flight advantage would help him now.

He soared high into the darkness and saw at once

that it was already too late to save poor Mareilon. Destruction and ruin greeted him wherever he looked. The walls had been smashed down on three sides. Great swaths of wreckage marked the monsters' passage through the city as they converged on the Elvenhome Bar and Grill. Two of the beasts even now gnawed and worried their way deeper inside L. Rhonda's establishment. The roof had half collapsed upon them without hindering their efforts. From each of the cardinal directions the others came slithering through the streets, creating panic and radiating fear as they smashed shops and homes.

He could do nothing about those four. But for the two inside Elvenhome he had a nasty surprise.

He flew toward the square again. The wall around the well had been crushed. Only a dark hole in the ground marked where it was. Even as he positioned himself above it, some poor soul in panic fell blindly into it with a scream that would haunt Anesi's sleep for a long, long time.

He gritted his teeth, summoning all the fear that filled him, focusing it into a tight, hard ball, and reshaping it with his anger until the ball began to burn brighter and brighter in his mind, until it flamed and shimmered, first with a red radiance, then with a blue, and at last with a white-hot ferocity that stung even his mind's eye.

Incantation, he intoned to himself over and over, *presence, magical effect*. The three principles of magic: he used them like a chant to hone the only spell he had left, to make of it a weapon of devastating power. He built it up and held it back, then built it up to a new, higher peak and held it back, refusing to release it until he knew it was strong enough.

He had never tried to work a spell in such a manner before, and it frightened him as the magic attempted to turn back upon him. His body began to sweat, then to heat up and swelter. His flesh stung with heat, and his eyes filled with flame. But even that fear he mastered and reshaped and added to his power.

He clenched his fists rigidly against his chest as his own magic threatened to consume him. Then with a mighty cry

he thrust them out, hurling streams of searing white fire that struck the inn with explosive fury.

The flames lit up the square with a shining molten light and made a roaring inferno of the Elvenhome Bar and Grill. A pair of bestial screams issued from the heart of the blaze, and suddenly the burning roof shattered and sparks and ash shot swirling into the air. Two monstrous mouths, already full of fire, shrieked again in pain and anguish. Great serpentine bodies writhed helplessly in the burning wreckage.

Farther out in the city, the remaining four servants joined their screams with those of their dying brothers. They rolled and thrashed uncontrollably as if somehow they experienced the same pain, the same death. They crushed buildings beneath their squirming girth and leveled entire city blocks.

The horrible smell of burning flesh wafted over the city. The flames incinerated the beasts. Unfortunately, they didn't stop there. When nothing remained of the Elvenhome Bar or the two servants, the hungry fire spread to the next building and the next.

So the second Mareilon dies just like the first, Anesi thought sadly. He felt the slightest bobble and knew he had to land soon. He had poured too much effort into the radnog fire spell, and it had correspondingly weakened his izyuk.

But as he descended to the ground he thought with a strange ironic frown that he had gained some insight into whatever obsession had possessed Dispoz.

The streets were still full of panic-stricken citizens, but his friends quickly surrounded him. Fidget draped an arm around him, then gave him a look of worry. "Are you all right, 'Nes? I only said to get one of them. You got two."

"Beginner's luck," he answered weakly, tottering a little until Fidget caught him again. "Sorry about your bar, ma'am," he said to L. Rhonda.

"Wasn't its fault," she answered, pausing long enough to knock aside some shrieking townsman who was unfortunate enough to blunder into her. "Those snake things made a ruin of the place before its fireball

did, unless it counts that little fracas with Torin and his boys, which I don't. That kind of thing an innkeeper has to expect." She looked at the burning wreckage of her former establishment. "This...?" She shrugged, then jerked a thumb toward Humble Bellows. "Frog it, whenever he shows up a gal's got to expect anything."

Anesi grinned. "You do know each other, don't you?"

"Former lovers, ye might say we are," Humble Bellows answered, tugging at his beard.

L. Rhonda raised a fist, and the gold ring that Anesi had seen there before gleamed on her finger. "Former...! Why, I'll bean you, you...!"

Bellows put a finger to his lips. "Shhh. Not in front o' the children, woman!"

Anesi braced his hands on his hips and pouted, though he winked secretly at Humble Bellows. "Who are you calling *children*, sir?" he demanded.

There was no time for a response. A loud panther-roar ripped through the night again, uncomfortably near, a chilling reminder that there were still four servants alive and searching for them.

Humble Bellows caught L. Rhonda by the hand. "Do ye still live in that same squallid hole I built fer ye, darlin'? I don't think it's safe yet to linger 'round and chat up ol' times."

She narrowed one eye at him, then gave a theatrical sigh and clutched her breast. "Don't think you can fool me, little man. I can see right through you, no matter what disguise you're wearing. Always could. And I know why you want to know where I live!" She glared at him, but then she looked around at all the rest, her gaze especially settling upon Anesi. She sighed again. "But I guess you do have to get your young friends to safety, so let's get to it. Why they ever keep company with the likes of you, though, I can't figure!"

She led the way as they hurried across the square and down a dark, narrow street. The sounds of screaming and shattering houses soared around them. Frightened people, running in fear, stumbled blindly into them with bags

of belongings on their shoulders. Fire made a harsh red glow in the sky, and a rising wind blew waves of heat on their backs.

Only a few blocks away one of the nabiz-servants reared high above the burning buildings, opened its mouth, and let go one of its strangely feline cries. The flames glittered on its dark green scales and on its gigantic fangs and rows of teeth, making the monster a thing of horrific beauty. It undulated in the air as it voiced its anger, then crashed down with destructive force, sending ash and sparks and burning fragments shooting up into the night.

They turned down another narrow alleyway. The road was muddy and slippery, but except for themselves it was empty, and no one hindered their way. The destruction hadn't reached to this corner of the city yet, but doorways stood wide open, some ripped half off their hinges, and the homes within were dark and abandoned.

With L. Rhonda guiding them they turned still another corner and stared down a dead end. The top of the city wall could be seen in the glow of the flames. Men and women scurried atop it like crazed mice, flinging themselves and their treasures to the ground far below in a desperate attempt to save their lives.

The power of Terror, Anesi reflected grimly as he ran. How could he hope to combat it?

In the shadows at the base of the wall stood a small old house. L. Rhonda led them up onto the porch and pushed open the unlocked wooden door. A dim oil lamp sat on a low table, its flame wavering nervously in the draft that followed them inside. Humble Bellows slammed the door shut and barred it.

It was a quaint but comfortable little house with thick, hand-woven rugs, ruffled curtains, an old rocker, a writing table, and a few other pieces of furniture. The walls were covered with scores of marginally good paintings, and the easel and pigment jars in one corner revealed that L. Rhonda herself had painted them. It was a side of the feisty old woman Anesi never would have suspected, and he wanted a closer look at her work. He didn't get the chance, however. Pausing only long

enough to seize the lamp, she led them through a small dining room and into her bed chamber.

"Too bad we don't have more time, darlin'," Humble Bellows muttered, giving L. Rhonda a slap on the rump.

"Time was never an obstacle, Steppen Wildroz," she snapped, jerking open her closet door. "You never lasted that long, anyhow. Quick in the clench and short in the payoff."

Anesi and Fidget looked at each other questioningly. "Steppen Wildroz?" Fidget said.

Humble Bellows ignored them and shoved himself into the small closet. Scrambling down on hands and knees, he flung handfuls of shoes and scraps of dirty linen out onto the bedroom floor. L. Rhonda grabbed armfuls of skirts and blouses and tossed them on the bed while Tyrillee held her lamp.

Behind them, they heard a thump and a low giggle. Anesi peered over Fidget's shoulder to see what was going on. Cubby had slumped down against the wall with his legs splayed before him, a stupid grin on his face. His glassy gaze focused on Anesi, and he giggled again and waved three wiggly fingers. "Good beer!" he proclaimed, his speech slurring. "Good fight! Good times!"

Anesi glowered with displeasure. "With very little provocation," he said to Cubby, "I could strangle you."

"Nnnot hisss faullt, Aneeessee!" Tyrillee said, coming to Cubby's defense.

L. Rhonda tossed the last armload of clothes onto her bed. Half the pile slithered off suddenly between the bed and the wall, causing her to sigh. But she turned away. "Anybody or anything who deliberately drinks to excess," she said to Tyrillee, taking the lamp back, "is a plain fool. I serve the stuff, and I see it every day. I'm not proud of it, but a lady's got to live."

"Ye're no lady, darlin'," Humble Bellows called from inside the closet. "Don't be takin' on airs."

L. Rhonda lifted up the front of her dress and kicked the only part of Humble Bellows that showed through the doorway. "Shut up in there, rotgrub!" she snapped, "and get that door open!"

The creak of rusted hinges followed an indistinct mutter from Bellows. He backed out and stood up. "It's open," he announced.

"Then all you things better get out of here and to safety while you can," L. Rhonda ordered, handing him the oil lamp. "I've a feeling once you're gone those monsters will leave us alone."

"But the fire!" Anesi protested. "The whole city's burning. We can't leave you here!"

L. Rhonda bent down and patted his cheek. "That's sweet of it," she said, "but don't worry about old Rhonda. I've survived far worse than this, and that's without half the tricks I've got up my sleeve now, young thing." She ushered him toward the closet door.

Humble Bellows passed the lamp to Anesi, then went to her, hugged her around her ample waist, and laid his head against her belly. They were an oddly mismatched pair, yet they shared an obvious warmth, perhaps even love. "I'll come back fer ye this time, I will," he told her. "Ye have me promise on it."

She hugged him back, wrapping her great arms around his squat body. But she shook her head. "You said that last time, Steppen Wildroz," she whispered. "I won't be here."

He let her go and backed toward the closet door. "I'll find ye, then," he declared firmly. "When this is over I'll come find ye." He took the lamp back from Anesi and stepped into the closet. The tiny flame lit up his face with a yellowish glow, and his eyes glistened moistly. "Even if ye are still an ol' bat!"

"And ye're a brainless rotgrub!" she shouted back without animosity as Humble Bellows disappeared through a hole in the floor. No, not a hole, but a trap door, Anesi saw, as he moved closer. The glow from the lamp illumined the top of Bellows' head as he descended a set of rungs that led down into utter gloom. The stale odor of age seeped up from whatever lay below.

"Go ahead, young things," L. Rhonda urged. "Steppen knows what he's doing and where he's leading its.

But its take care of him, mind. He's a fuddleheaded frogger if ever I met one. Now go!"

Anesi set his foot down on the first rung and hesitated. "Thank you, ma'am," he said. "Sorry about your business."

"Tired of it anyway," she answered with a shrug. "It was time for Rhonda to move on."

Anesi climbed down, taking the rungs carefully as he stared at the light now far below him. He glanced up to see Tyrillee following him and quickly averted his eyes. He'd intended to buy her some decent clothes if they'd had more time in Mareilon. He had wealth enough for that.

"Stop!" he cried suddenly, and Tyrillee paused above him while he reached deep into his cloak's pockets and scraped out a handful of jewels. A few of the baubles slipped between his fingers and fell away into darkness. From below, he heard a muffled *ouch* and a curse.

Tyrillee stared down at him, and he passed the jewels up into her hands. "Give these to Rhonda," he told her. "They should get her a good start wherever she decides to go. And ask her maybe to toss down the closest thing she has to a pair of trousers, if she can spare them."

Tyrillee balanced carefully on the rungs and cupped the jewels in both hands. "Theee are verreeee kinnnd, Aneesssee." She climbed back up to the top, and a moment later something soft and silky fluttered down and draped itself over his face. It had a perfumy smell.

"Take those!" L. Rhonda called from above. "Something to remember me by!"

Tyrillee descended the ladder again, and Fidget came after her. Cubby came next, with Fidget's hand on his bottom to steady him. Above, the creak of hinges told him that L. Rhonda had closed the trap door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

A NESI DESCENDED

the close black shaft, taking the last few rungs of the ladder with great care. At the bottom, Humble Bellows reached out a hand to steady him as he stepped down into the yellowish light of the oil lamp, and they waited for the others to descend. Anesi took a deep breath and looked around. There was little to see. The lamp surrounded them with a shallow, wavering circle of smoky radiance, but the darkness beyond the lamp's glow seemed endless and complete.

He ran a hand experimentally over the bandage on his thigh. The wound there ached from his exertions, but the pain proved bearable, and he had Tyrillee and the Gryphon's Breath to thank for that, he guessed. He couldn't remember exactly where he had lost his crutch. No matter, he didn't think he needed it anymore. He flexed the leg a few times, then put his full weight on it, which was all needless silliness and worry since he'd run halfway through the town on it.

Tyrillee, then Fidget and Cubby, climbed down into the light. Anesi unfolded the silken pantaloons L. Rhonda had tossed down to him. Little bands of delicate lace encircled the legs and the waistband. He'd hoped the old woman might drop something more practical that he could give to the dryad with the suggestion that she pull

them on under her poncho, but he was too embarrassed to offer her these. Instead, he wadded them into a tight ball and when no one was looking tossed them behind his back into the blackness beyond the light's range. They were far too large for Tyrillee anyway.

"All right," Fidget said, taking his bow off his shoulder, bending it over his knee, and stringing it again. He checked the pull as he sighted down an imaginary arrow. "Where are we?"

"The Great Underground Highway," Humble Bellows answered quietly. The little man frowned, tapped his foot, then stared expectantly back up the ladder.

The answer surprised Anesi. He wandered to the edge of the light and stared into the blackness. "I thought it was just a legend!" he said excitedly.

"No legend, mate," Bellows told him, as he continued to stare up the shaft. His hands were folded across his chest now as he craned his neck. "I built that little house up there with me own hands years an' years ago when I found the tunnel, I did."

"How'd L. Rhonda come to own it, then?" Fidget asked, going to Bellows' side and staring up the shaft with him.

"She's me ex-wife," he said matter-of-factly. "The best o' a lot o' ex-wives." He rubbed the tip of his nose and scratched his throat as he spoke. "Always was a bit o' a wanderer, I was, an' never could stay in one place or with one woman too long. Not makin' any excuse fer it. Jus' the way I was." He laid a hand on Fidget's shoulder. "I'd step back if I was ye, boyo."

Following his own advice he moved away from the shaft. Fidget, in his own time, shrugged and did the same. A moment later there came a *whoosh* and a *thump*, and Bellows' black bag landed in a heap on the ground at their feet. "Knew she wouldn't ferget it, I did," Bellows said with pride. "She's a tidy one. Never liked me clutterin' up a place." He picked up the bag and slung it over his shoulder. "Let's go," he said.

"Which way?" Cubby muttered in confusion.

"Doesn't matter," Humble Bellows remarked off-

handedly. "One direction's good as another down here." He started off in the direction to his right, and the others followed. The pale light reflected on the smooth wall nearest them. They couldn't see the other wall or the ceiling. The road itself was made of cobbled clay bricks that looked smooth and new, though they were, in fact, incredibly ancient.

The wall was covered with symbols and writings in an ancient Quendorn language not spoken in Frobozz for centuries. Anesi insisted they pause while he examined some of it. Some of the plainer symbols looked like bottles, weapons, or books. A few looked like household items his mother might have owned. He'd seen similar script during his short time at Galepath University, but he didn't remember enough to even attempt a translation, and he knew nothing at all of such pictography.

"I'm sorry about walking out on you back there," Fidget whispered to Anesi when they were under way again. "I guess I just lost my temper."

"I apologize, too, for my rudeness," Anesi answered, "but neither of us was really at fault. Blame the Great Terror."

Fidget stopped abruptly and gripped his arm. The look on his friend's face was question enough.

Anesi explained it to all of them. "Remember, the Thriff wizards were already beginning to sense the Terror's influence way up north. This far south it is very strong, and has been for some time, so strong that even ordinary people with no magical sensitivities have been affected. The people of Mareilon have been living in the Shadow of Terror for years without even knowing it. That's why they're so rude. They fear strangers. They even fear each other—that's why they wouldn't talk to us on the streets, and why they all go armed, even to a tavern."

His voice took on a grimmer note. "And now we're subject to the same influence," he continued. "Especially me. Being an enchanter makes me more sensitive to magical forces than you are. That means more vulnerable. I was afraid up there, just as you were. But not all

people react to fear the same way." He pointed to the brogmoid, who showed signs of finally sobering up. "Cubby drinks too much. I guess I get belligerent."

Tyrillee wrapped herself in her poncho. "Wwwhat about the ressst offf usss?"

"Doesn't matter, mates," Humble Bellows interrupted. "Cause in the end, no matter how 'fraid ye were, ye each came through fer yer mates. That's what makes ye mates. Sure, ye might o' been scared, but that didn't stop ye. Ye're stronger than yer fear, ye are."

Anesi remembered how he'd felt as he'd prepared the *radnog* fire spell above the Elvenhome Bar and used it to destroy the nabiz. He'd taken his terror, shaped it, and used it as further fuel for his incantation. "It's the fear itself that makes us strong," he said thoughtfully. "Fear is the fire that tempers the steel."

They continued down the highway, pushing at the darkness with their small light. Fidget's stomach gave a small rumble, a wordless reminder that, unlike the others, he had eaten nothing at the tavern. Tyrillee pulled a cold potato from one of her inner pockets and handed it to him, and he accepted gratefully. It disappeared in a few noisy bites. The smile on his face as he wiped his lips was evidence enough of his satisfaction.

Something scuttled in the gloom, and tiny red eyes peered at them from near the floor. A shiver crept up Anesi's spine, but a moment later the light revealed only a family of rats who huddled together as afraid as he.

He hated the darkness and longed for the light of day. The bad things had all happened in darkness: his father's desertion and the deaths of Fidget's family, the destruction of Dispoz and his keep, the attack of the grues, and the burning of Mareilon. He longed for home, for sun on the white sea foam, and for the gentle voice of his mother.

But beyond the small yellow perimeter of their lamp there was only the dark before and behind them.

Your terror makes me strong.

Anesi felt the voice like an icy, chilling wind on his face. It came out of the darkness, and it came out of his

fear. It surrounded him and effused from him. There was no mistaking the speaker. He knew the voice at once. He had heard the tiniest echoes of it all his life in every shiver, every shadow that ever made him jump. Yet the actions and expressions of his friends told him that he alone heard it.

Liar, he answered the voice. You are strong, but my fear does not make you stronger.

The blackness began to swirl like a great vortex that threatened to suck him down, but he walked calmly on with his friends.

You did well in Mareilon, the voice said. I feast on the city's fear as I will feast on yours.

Anesi clutched the medallion Khare had given him and thought of his mentor. *You feast on nothing, he answered. You are old and lonely. There's no place for you in this world.*

The voice didn't answer. The darkness stilled its swirling, becoming once again just the gloom of the great underground highway. His friends chatted amongst themselves as they walked in the glow of the oil lamp. They knew nothing of what had transpired.

Suddenly, huge bats flapped out of the darkness ahead. Their leathery wings brushed against his face, and their chittering filled his ears with a painful noise. His heart skipped a beat, and his whole body shook. But again he took his cue from his friends, who behaved as if nothing were happening.

How easy it is to make you afraid, said the voice, returning.

You startled me, Anesi answered, continuing the silent communion. That is not the same as fear. I have fear of you, he admitted, but you don't increase it with parlor tricks. That breeds only contempt.

Does this breed contempt?

A faint blue luminescence formed far ahead. In the heart of that glow a figure took form, coalescing from thin veins of darkness that ruptured and spilled their liquid evil to feed the growing shape. Anesi stared, finding something vaguely familiar about the faceless silhouette,

something unsettling, disturbing. No matter how he tried to see it, though, it would not come clear to his eyes.

You lack imagination, he said to the Terror. "Go away."

Fidget and the others stopped suddenly and looked at him. "What did you say?" Fidget asked curiously.

He searched the faces of his friends for any hint that they had shared his experiences and found none. The Terror had sought him out and ignored them. He didn't know whether to tell them or not.

"Nothing," he answered finally. "I was talking to myself."

A low, cold laugh rattled in the darkness and faded away. The blue light with its embryonic creature also faded.

Anesi hugged himself and chewed his lower lip, and wished for sunshine. At last he took out his blue Chevaux spell book. It opened at once on the palm of his hand to just the spell he wanted. In the faint lamplight he had to squint to read the calligraphy, but he memorized it easily. In fact, the spells seemed easier to memorize the more he used them.

"What you doing, 'Nes?" Cubby was the first to take note of his actions. Though his voice was that of a child again, the brogmoid's speech no longer slurred, and the glaze was gone from his eyes.

The others saw the open book in his hand and stopped. "Are you crazy?" Fidget remarked. "What about the Terror? What about the servants?"

Humble Bellows held the light higher. "Maybe he's only memorizin' a few goodies to use later," he suggested.

Anesi closed the book with a *thump*. "The Terror already knows where we are," he told them quietly. "And its servants can't get at us down here. There's no point in wandering around in darkness any longer, especially when I finally think I know what that writing on the wall is for." He pointed his finger at a large patch of script and released his *frotz* spell.

A dazzling flash of light stung their eyes, making a few of them cry out in surprise as the letters began to

burn and glow. Then, to everyone's evident startlement but Anesi's, the next patch also flared to light, and the next, and the next. On both sides of the highway the ancient writings suddenly began to shimmer and shine. The endless corridor revealed itself in corruscations of white radiance and blue and red. Some began to blink on and off. Others began to twinkle and sparkle in elaborate eye-catching patterns. Still others merely gleamed with a steady lustre.

"Billboards," Anesi explained. "Every highway's got them."

Fidget looked up and down the road, his jaw agape as he rubbed his fists in his eye sockets. "But why did they *all* come on? You only cast one spell!"

Humble Bellows lifted the oil lamp's small glass window and blew out the flame. It wasn't needed anymore. Anesi thought he would simply cast it aside, but instead he untied his black bag and put the lamp in it. "Only the royalty o' ancient Quendor," Bellows said as he worked, "an' the great wizards o' the day used the underground highway. An', o' course, it was wizards an' their apprentices what put up these signs." He tied the leather thong around the top of his bag again and returned it to his shoulder. "Now, if ye're a wizard in the advertisin' business, ye don't want no other sign to show up brighter'n yer own, an' ye don't want yers burnin' out unexpectedly, either. So ye make a spell that turns yers on jus' as big an' bright as the one next to it when it's turned on, an' that's jus' as soon as *anybody* usin' the road casts a *frotz*."

He looked at Anesi then and frowned. "I'm not sayin' it was a smart thing to do, mind ye. Ye say the Terror knows we're here?"

Anesi related to them the conversation he'd had with the Great Terror and the visions he'd experienced while they'd spoken, leaving no detail out. That done, he apologized for not alerting them at once.

Humble Bellows tugged at the ends of his beard. "No, mate," he said. "It came to ye fer a purpose, to test ye.

Clearly it considers ye the biggest threat, an' that's good, cause it won't be so interested in us."

"But what can we do?" Fidget said bitterly. "We don't have any magic!"

Humble Bellows cuffed Fidget a surprising back-handed blow to his ribs. "Ye young numbskull!" he scolded. "Ye didn't need no magic when ye cut that grue with yer sticker in old Mareilon, did ye? Nor when ye shot that big nabiz in the mouth an' it reared back screamin' its head off? Why, ye might o' saved any o' our lives either o' those times!"

Fidget rubbed a hand over his side where Bellows had struck him, looking sullen and angry. But slowly, his face lit up.

"We all do our parts," Anesi told him, putting his arm around his friend. "Whatever we can do, we do."

"Aneesssee?"

They turned toward Tyrillee. She had moved a little apart from them to study some of the billboards on the walls, but had drifted back to hear their conversation. She stood before them now, her hands wrapped in the hems of her poncho or perhaps shoved into her inner pockets.

"Wwwhat beee the ssservantsss off Terrrorrr?"

"They were men," Anesi answered grimly, clutching his spell book to his chest. "Seven enchanters and wizards who lived before the age of the great mage guilds." He swallowed, pausing to recall the tale. "Khare said that when the Great Terror originally appeared in the First Great Age of Enchantment, these seven did not wait to succumb to its horrible power, but instead sought the Terror out and gave themselves willingly, hoping somehow to forge an alliance with it and gain more knowledge and power for themselves. But the Terror enslaved them completely, took from them their wills and their natural human forms, and sent them out as Instruments of Fear. To do the Terror's work they could assume whatever shape they desired after that, except that of men. They could never again be human."

"That's one reason, some say," Humble Bellows interjected, "for the rise o' the enchanters' guilds. Through

their bureaucracies an' institutes they keep a check on those magicians who might otherwise slide off into dark ways." He readjusted his bag on his shoulder. "Wizards like those seven an' like Dispoz."

"My grandfather belonged to the Mithicus guild," Anesi said defensively. "But he quit and went his own way. Too much politics, he claimed, and too little fun. Still, he never turned wrong. I think it's like Khare said: you have to keep a sense of humor about this business or it eats you up."

Cubby sidled closer and closed his three fingers around Anesi's hand. Looking up with his wide eyes, he said, "But they are always so big!"

"It's ego," Humble Bellows answered. "Fer all their power, they're stupid creatures, they are. After all, they gave themselves to the Terror. Now they think an ugly form is scary, an' a big ugly form is scarier. It's their way o' tryin' to instill fear. Like the bully on the block whose usually bigger'n' the other kids, they think o' size as a weapon."

"It works," Fidget commented wryly, leaning on his bow.

"Nah, it don't!" This time, Bellows reached out and tickled Fidget, who doubled up protectively and tried to jump away. The peal of his laughter echoed away down the highway. Grinning, Bellows let him go and wagged a finger under his nose. "Ye still shot the critter, didn't ye? Right in its ugly mouth!"

"And I hit it, too!" Fidget reminded everyone emphatically.

Humble Bellows turned away grinning and scratching his chin, and looking up curiously as he started down the road again, he said, "Wish I could read some o' these signs. Never know when ye might want to buy somethin'."

So they all began to study the signs, and they found true delight in some of them as they walked. The bright colors and flashing patterns offered a welcome and sometimes even humorous relief from the darkness that had cloaked the highway earlier. Tyrillee began to laugh at

what she saw, and the musical sound proved contagious. Soon they were all laughing.

Cubby began to sing. *What do you do with a drunken brogmoid, what do you do with a drunken brogmoid . . . ?*

A strange peace settled upon Anesi, and he moved a little apart to watch his friends. It was good to see them laugh again when they had been through so much, and good to hear them sing. Well, good at least to hear three of them sing. Cubby's voice grated like a rake on a chalkboard. Still, bad as it was for singing, it gave out merriment and filled the listening heart with mirth.

It was only the still before the storm, Anesi told himself, contemplating the peace he felt. He touched the zorkmid medallion under his tunic and thought of Khare. He thought he now knew why the old wizard had given it to him. *What's it do?* he had asked innocently, and Khare had answered, *It'll get you a comic book and a tray of fudge that'll knock your socks off.*

Of course, he'd believed at the time that the zorkmid was magic, that it really had more than mere purchasing power. And indeed it did. He understood now, he thought. Every time he touched the medallion—when he felt afraid or when he felt lonely—he thought of his instructor and the time they had shared together, and the lessons he had learned under the old man's tutelage. Then he drew courage, comfort even, from those memories.

That was the power of the medallion, and it was true magic. *Thank you, teacher,* he said silently, squeezing the zorkmid in his fist. *Even apart, you continue to teach me.*

He moved closer to his friends and slipped his arm around Fidget's shoulder, leaning on him. Tyrillee turned as she skipped playfully ahead. Her long hair bounced on her shoulders as she smiled at him. Humble Bellows gave him a wink.

"What do you do with a drunken brogmoid," Cubby sang at the top of his considerably powerful lungs, rocking back and forth on his stubby legs and swinging his arms jauntily as he gave forth, "What do you do with a drunken brogmoid . . . ?"

An icy wind not felt by the others brushed Anesi's face. The Terror was with him again. *Shred it into dogmeat for my servants*, it whispered right on rhythm. *Shred it into dogmeat for Anesi*.

You can't frighten me anymore, Anesi answered silently, raising his head in a stubborn show of resistance. But he gripped Fidget's shoulder so tightly that his friend turned and grinned at him as he sang on, oblivious to what was happening.

Shred it into dogmeat for Anesi, the Terror sang.

Anesi did not miss the implication, nor did he try to deny the shiver that crept up his spine. He looked down at the spell book he still carried in one hand, the precious gift that the Great Shuboz Shuboz had given him, and lifted it like a shield against the cruel voice inside his mind.

It was a useless gesture, however. The Terror was already gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

A FRESH WIND BLEW

suddenly up the highway. Anesi's first impulse was to see if his friends also felt it, and relief surged through him when they showed by their reactions that they did. He drew a deep breath, filling his lungs.

"An exit!" Fidget cried excitedly. "It must be an exit!"

"Not jus' any exit, boyo," Humble Bellows said more calmly. "Our exit. Miznia."

Tyrillee's hair swirled about her face as the wind blew again. "Mizzzneeeeah?"

Bellows nodded. "That's the way the underground highway works, mate. It's magic, it is. Always takes ye exactly where ye want to go."

Cubby tilted his head to the side and burrowed in his ear with a finger. "Like 'Nesi's book," he commented, as if he'd made a bright realization, "always opens where he wants it!"

"Somethin' like that," Bellows said, congratulating the brogmoid by shaking his hand with exaggerated politeness and making a short bow, which Cubby returned smartly.

At Fidget's suggestion they hurried onward. The wind whistled down the way now, cooling them, fluttering their clothing and hair, bringing with it an odor of dampness. A thin film began to coat the bricks under

their feet, making them slick, so everyone walked more carefully.

The walls of the highway corridor began to narrow, and the ceiling hung ever closer to their heads. The billboards became fewer, with more space between them, so there were patches of darkness for the company to pass through.

Tyrillee, with her sharp dryad's ears, heard the water first, no more than a thin, constant trickle falling on stone. They could not yet see the end of the highway, but an area of darkness grew in the distance before them where no billboards burned. Clearly they were making for that darkness. It was from there that the wind and the sound of water came.

Mud began to fill the spaces between the bricks, then to cover the road completely. They squished along now, and the air grew increasingly damp. Somewhere behind the curtain of blackness, the water made a steady, rhythmic sound.

Anesi's mouth felt very dry all of a sudden. It had been a long time since he'd had anything to drink. He kept moving, though, and ignored his thirst.

They came to the last billboard. In the yellow and red glow of its garish letters Anesi stopped and opened his spell book again. The others didn't question him this time. They waited quietly while he memorized three spells. When he was finished he slipped the book back into a pocket of his cloak and pulled up his hood.

While Anesi made his preparations, Humble Bellows untied his bag and took L. Rhonda's lamp. Rummaging around among the other contents, he found a small box that contained two tiny sticks. He opened the oil lamp's window and took one of the sticks out of the box.

"What's that?" Cubby asked, ambling over and bending close to see.

"Stole 'em from Dispoz, I did," Bellows answered, as he drew the end of the tiny stick against the wall with a sharp motion. It flared to crackling life, then settled down to a delicate dancing flame. He cupped one hand around

it to protect it from the wind and lit the oil lamp's wick. The flame died a moment later, and he threw down the stick.

Cubby picked it up and stared at the blackened tip. "Wow!" he said.

"Dispoz was a master of fire magic, mates," Humble Bellows explained, as he put the remaining stick and its box back in his bag. "He had lots o' funny things like this that made fire. Didn't see no harm in latchin' on to these 'fore I left his service, so to speak."

Anesi stared at the little man as he tied his bag shut again. The fire sticks were truly marvelous, and they would need the light soon. But something bothered him—in fact, had been bothering him for some little while. He bit his lip as he thought back over their journey, and he looked strangely at Humble Bellows.

"Who are you, sir?" he said abruptly, unable to fit all the pieces and elements together in his mind. "I mean, who are you really? Humble Bellows? Steppen Wildroz?" He folded his arms across his chest, feeling as if he were somehow betraying a friendship, but unable to halt the flow of words. "Or someone else?"

The little man avoided Anesi's gaze as long as he could as he wrapped the leather thong around and around the top of his bag and tied a neat knot. Slowly, then, he slung the bag over his right shoulder, grasped the bail of the lamp with his left hand, and rose.

The others stood a little apart, waiting for his answer.

"I'm all o' those names," he told them calmly. "Bellows an' Wildroz an' lots o' others." He looked up into each of their faces as he spoke in a relaxed voice, meeting their gazes unflinchingly. "Like I told ye, I used to move 'round in me younger days. Wizards an' the like change their names all the time." He fixed his gaze on Anesi now, and it was as if the two of them were addressing only each other.

"In fact, I've no doubt ye'll be thinkin' up a new one soon's all this is behind ye," Bellows continued. "Ye won't call yerself *Anesi* fer ever, boyo. Ye'll think up somethin' clever or amusin' like that Thriff bunch ye talk

so much about. Ye think they were born with nutty names like them? Frog it, mate, 'course not. They made 'em up—funny ones—to help 'em keep a sense o' humor 'bout this whole enchantin' business."

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, obviously drawing to his conclusion. "An' if they can do it, well, why shouldn't normal folk do the same? I got a right not to be stuck with the monicker me parents, rest their poor, well-meanin', but ignorant souls, tagged on me."

Anesi, however, wasn't satisfied. "But you know so much," he argued suspiciously. "You knew about the underground highway, how it worked and who used it, and you knew the legends about the Servants of Terror. I even found you with two scrolls in your possession. Powerful scrolls!"

Humble Bellows eyed him with barely contained amusement. "You think I'm an enchanter?"

Anesi frowned and scratched his head as he looked to the rest of his comrades for help. But they offered no help at all. They stayed out of the way and kept silent. This was plainly between the two of them.

"I don't know!" Anesi shouted in exasperation. Finally, though, he relented. "You could have learned all those things from Dispoz, I guess."

Humble Bellows grinned. "Well, ye take yer time thinkin' 'bout it, boyo," he said, turning toward the curtain of darkness, "but if we don't move along, the little bit o' oil left in this lamp is goin' to burn itself out fer nothin'."

Anesi exchanged troubled glances with Fidget as they fell into line behind the little man.

Gradually the light faded behind them and darkness closed in. Casting a look back over his shoulder, Anesi had the feeling that the billboards were all slowly turning themselves off. The smooth walls of the highway gave way to bare, moist earth, and the ceiling jugged with pinnacles of glistening stone. The wind blew around them, causing the lamp to flicker ever so slightly.

They were no longer on the underground highway of the Quendorns, or if they were, this section had deterio-

rated greatly with age. There was another possible explanation, of course, but Anesi hesitated to consider it. The highway was a construct of Quendorn magic. It was possible that the Great Terror's corrupting influence was to blame for the decline.

The mud slowly liquefied under their feet, and they found themselves splashing ankle-deep in brackish filth. The dim light of their lamp shone on small patches of black water, and the walls gleamed with slime and lichen.

Tyrillee held her nose, and Anesi carried the hem of his enchanter's cloak over one arm. Humble Bellows muttered and grumbled while Fidget and Cubby walked silently, holding on to each other's hands.

Not far ahead, they spied the faintest hint of daylight like a thin horizontal crack in the encompassing dark. The wind wailed around them, rippling the water at their feet, tearing at their clothes.

"Wwwhat beee thiss?" Tyrillee asked abruptly. She stopped and held one bare foot up to the light and pointed to something that looked like a bit of black mud. Unexpectedly, it moved.

"Ugh!" Anesi cried in disgust.

"Leeches!" Fidget shrieked, looking around for a safer place to stand.

Humble Bellows caught Fidget's arm. "Ye're wearin' boots, fuddlehead! Ye got nothin' to worry 'bout. She's the only one barefooted." He grabbed the leech between his short fingers and ripped it away, leaving a dark red mark on Tyrillee's ankle.

"That tickless!" was all she said as he pulled the repugnant creature off and hurled it away. An instant later, Humble Bellows lifted her out of the water and swung her up onto his shoulders. Her poncho settled over his face.

"Watch yer noggin, girlie," he told her, brushing the red cloth back over his neck and wrapping his hands and forearms around her thighs to balance her. "Ye can't be clearin' the roof by much."

They achieved the exit at last, finding themselves in

the low, rocky mouth of a cave. An overhanging shelf dripped a steady stream of water onto the stone floor. Anesi looked down at his feet and recoiled. Scores of earthworms wriggled on the stone, carried there from above by the run-off, all seeking desperately for some soft earth, trying not to drown in the water. It was impossible not to crush some as they moved outside.

Anesi had wished for sunlight. Now he realized how merciful the darkness could be when it hid from sight things the eye should never see.

The crumbling remains of soaring, once-proud structures rose all around. Towers of matchless grace that dared to touch the sky and gentle minarets of another age stood cracked and draped in vines and mold. Weeds grew up through the fractured marble roads, and huge *morgia* trees pushed aside ancient paving stones to sink their roots into rich black dirt.

The sky was gray with an oppressive, sunless twilight and filled with great clouds of bats. Insects buzzed noisily everywhere. Humble Bellows quietly blew out the lamp's tiny flame and set it on the ground.

"Almost out o' oil, anyway, mates," he muttered.

The cave had been part of a city park. A pair of marble statues, figures of long-forgotten city fathers, no doubt, stood near the mouth of the cave. The head of one of them had broken off. It was nowhere to be seen. Both arms of the other lay half-buried on the ground at its feet. Not far from those they found still a third figure. It had toppled completely off its base to rest face-down on the earth. A slender tree grew up between its legs, taller already than any of their company.

Wordlessly they left the park and stepped onto the ancient streets, craning their necks to witness the horrible beauty that surrounded them. A wind blew up from a side street, bringing with it a raspy, rustling swirl of dead leaves.

They found gardens long untended and overgrown, and broken fountains at every square and on every street corner. They found estates whose ruptured walls had not

kept out the ravages of creeping time, and more parks that had surrendered themselves to jungle.

Anesi paused to wipe sweat from his brow and from the corners of his eyes. A wet, sweaty triangle already marked the front of his tunic above his chest, and his collar too was drenched under the cloak he wore. *How could it be so hot without a sun?* He loosened the laces of the tunic at his throat and wished the wind would blow again.

"Dolo Finis," Humble Bellows said suddenly. His words clanked harshly, unwelcome by the silence that had for so long owned the city. Nor did the sounds he made rise up in echoes among the old towers, but fell muted on the ground.

Perhaps Cubby was immune to the mood of the city. "What's that?" he asked curiously.

Anesi swallowed hard, and when he spoke it was in a respectful whisper. "Dolo Finis," he said before Bellows could. "Sorrow's End. The old capital of Miznia."

Fidget's gaze swept the tall, vine-shrouded pinnacles as he spoke. "I didn't know there were any cities in Miznia."

"Only this one, mate," Bellows said. "Ages ago the Quendorns thought their magic could hold back the swamps an' the jungles, they did, an' they built this city as a kind o' monument to their power over nature, an' called it *Dolo Finis*, or Sorrow's End, cause it was like an oasis in the middle o' such miserable country." A sneer flickered briefly upon his face as he scratched his sweat-drenched beard and wiped at his brow. "O' course, time proved 'em wrong. The jungle and swamp jus' crept right back in no matter what they did, an' the Quendorns eventually gave it up."

"A fitting home for the Great Terror," Anesi added, with an unrepressed shiver. He glanced up at the high, empty windows that dotted the looming structures, half expecting to see a face or faces peering down at them. "I can feel it. It's watching us now."

"Tyrilleee feeellsss it tooo!" The dryad wrapped her

poncho tighter around her slight body. "Winnnd turrrnsss sssso collld!"

Fidget put an arm protectively around her shoulder and drew her close. "There's no wind blowing right now. Tyrillee," he told her quietly. "No wind at all."

It was true. Dolo Finis was still as death. Nothing stirred, not even the leaves of the trees. The city seemed to be holding its breath, waiting for something.

A rat scuttled out of a crack in the street curb and ran across the toe of Anesi's boot. Startled, he jumped back with a gasp, nearly knocking Cubby over. The rat stopped in the middle of the street, turned, and scolded him with a harsh chittering. A moment later, it disappeared down a storm drain.

The faintest sound of laughter floated in the air.

"It's here," Fidget whispered, as he slid an arrow from his sheath and laid it against the grip of his bow. His gaze raked the buildings that rose around them. "The Terror. I feel it too now."

A gentle wind began to blow again, sweeping fine veils of dust down the vacant streets. The morgia trees shook their dry leaves like rattles.

Anesi lifted his head. He felt something, some pulse that throbbed weakly under the marble paving stones, something that grew stronger like a heartbeat, like the heart of Dolo Finis stirring to life after uncounted ages of suspended sleep. A shutter in some window somewhere began to bang, and the wind began to rasp and wheeze. He felt his own heartbeat, too, drumming an insistent counterrhythm, and heard his own pulse, the sound of his own blood pounding until he cringed and covered his ears with his hands.

Tyrillee screamed. With a trembling finger she pointed to the sky, to the beautiful purple and white flowers that drifted on the wind as it blew between a pair of broken towers. Even against the bleak twilight they were lovely and graceful as they lofted on the breeze, as random currents of air ruffled velvet blooms and set long silver tendrils to streaming and undulating.

They were beautiful, yes. They were also deadly.

"Spiderflowers!" Humble Bellows shouted, as the wind bore the blossoms toward them. "Inside, mates!" he cried, pointing to the decrepit estate on the far side of the street, whose wide, ancient door offered the nearest hope of refuge.

They ran for it as fast as they could, leaping the curb, pushing back a decorative iron gate that hung half open, dashing across a narrow lawn that had surrendered to weeds and sharp brambles. The wind blew at their necks as they reached the door and tried the huge old knob.

"It's locked!" Fidget shouted, his eyes widening as he turned to see the first spiderflower land in a tree that grew by the curb.

Its delicate silver tendrils elongated rapidly, weaving an elaborate web pattern among the branches to anchor itself from the wind. The dark violet petals at once began to exude a sweet, sticky dew that was both lure and venom. It glistened even in the half-light and gave off an overwhelming honey-like odor. The air around the single plant was at once abuzz with insects hurrying to their doom.

But the danger to them was not from just a single carnivorous plant. Hundreds floated in the sky now, slowly dropping toward the earth and toward them. Even as they watched, another caught the iron gate and reached out with its tendrils to the first, linking and interweaving with it. A third joined those two, and a fourth, and the web began to grow.

A colony of venomous spiderflowers had been known to trap and kill entire herds of oxen. Men were easy prey.

Fidget screamed this time, his voice as high and shrill as the dryad's. A spiderflower, wafting downward, reached out for his face. In a single motion he dropped the bow and arrow he held, whipped his sword out and up in a high, two-handed arc, and sliced the plant in two.

The halves wiggled weakly and tried to drag themselves away with their tendrils. "Yuck," Cubby said pragmatically. Drawing back a foot, he booted first one, then

the other out toward the gate, where they were immediately taken up and integrated into the growing web.

"Weee beee trapped herrre!" Tyrillee warned. Bending down, she scooped up a handful of marble fragments, depositing all into her poncho's pockets, except for two that she gripped in her hands.

Her right arm made a blur as she flung the first one. The sharp-edged missile tore completely through one purple blossom, ripping a wide hole, and its tendrils went limp. But the other spiderflowers merely shifted to take up the slack and keep the web taut as more and more descended from the sky to join them.

The yard was beginning to fill with spiderflowers. Humble Bellows dealt the door a kick. "We've got to get inside, mates, or we're deaders!"

"Get back!" Anesi ordered, pushing the little man out of the way. He touched the stubborn door with the palm of his hand, releasing a *rezrov* spell. Radiant energy crackled all along the edges of the door, along the joints and the hinges. It sizzled over the rusted knocker and the knob until it found the lock. With a bright blue flash the lock exploded, leaving a smoking hole where the lock and knob had once been.

"A little too much *presence*, maybe," Anesi muttered to Bellows as he pushed open the door. Fidget swept up his bow and arrow and dashed past him to the inside, followed quickly by Cubby and Tyrillee.

"Yer down one spell, though, boyo," Bellows answered as he rushed after them. "Never ferget to count yer shots."

There wasn't time to tell him about the *rezrov*. Anesi knew it by heart. It didn't require memorizing anymore. He still had the three special enchantments he'd committed to memory on the highway.

Cubby's deep-throated voice came from inside. "Yo, Fidge! Do you tell him, or do I?"

Fidget came running back outside. "That wasn't such a good idea, 'Nes!" he cried, finding a position in the yard halfway between the house and the ever-growing web.

As swiftly as they had sought refuge in the house,

Cubby and Tryillee and Bellows all raced out again and looked at him, pale-faced. Frowning, Anesi stuck his head inside the door.

A few pieces of broken furniture, some debris in the middle of the floor, and a lot of dust was all he saw until he looked up. The debris in the floor was all that remained of the roof. But the spiderflowers were quickly making a new one, and chaining their way down inside while they were at it.

Anesi backed out again, his mind working.

"There's no place like home," Fidget muttered, his eyes darting in all directions like those of a trapped animal. "There's no place like home."

He had no choice now but to use one of his spells. The web was too large, too tight. They had no place left to run. He walked out into the yard and motioned the others behind him. "I'm getting tired of this!" he muttered under his breath in the hope that the Great Terror was listening. "Tired of you!"

A blast of white-hot flame leaped from his outstretched hand as he unleashed his *radnog* enchantment. Above the iron gate, spiderflowers shriveled instantly to ash, and fire engulfed a great section of the web, spreading swiftly along the chain of tendrils from bloom to bloom.

"That's me boyo!" Humble Bellows shouted gleefully as he led the way into the street again.

They ran as fast as they could, hearts pounding, around a corner and down a narrow lane where high, vine-covered walls rose on either side. Fearfully, Anesi shot glances over his shoulder at the sky, expecting the next wind to bring more spiderflowers. They rounded another corner, came to a crossroads, and raced straight across.

They ducked under a half-open portcullis, emerged into a wide courtyard, and drew up suddenly. Four soaring walls loomed around them. They sensed immediately that they had made a mistake, and turned around.

The portcullis dropped with a reverberating *clang*.

"*Rezrov* it?" Fidget suggested meekly.

"Right," Anesi answered sarcastically. "And after I shatter the locking mechanism—assuming it has one, which I doubt—you'll volunteer to lift it up all by yourself while we duck under."

Fidget looked dubious, but willing to try anything. "Think it weighs a lot, huh?" he said.

"Aneeessee?" Tyrillee said, tugging suddenly at the hem of his cloak.

He turned around and saw at once what had caught her attention.

A small well stood in the center of the courtyard. Up over the mortared stone enclosure surged a black, wriggling mass of gleaming scales and diamond eyes, fangs and flickering tongues.

"Snakes!" Anesi screamed, as the creatures poured over the sides of the well and glided sensuously across the courtyard ground. "I hate snakes!"

Cubby made a clucking sound and tilted his head thoughtfully. "Not much different from a nabiz," he commented.

"I hate nabizi, too!" Anesi shrieked, stamping his foot.

Humble Bellows craned his neck back as if searching for something along the upper ramparts. Patiently, he turned in a slow circle.

"These must be the only walls in the entire city that are still intact!" Anesi cursed, turning with him. "No cracks, no gaps!"

"Up there, mate," Bellows said with surprising calm. He pointed to a wheel house on the wall just above the portcullis. "Fly up there an' let us out. Quickly, 'fore we find out how snakes like *you*."

Anesi shot him a startled look, momentarily forgetting about the snakes, which were winding their way closer and closer. "How'd you know that was one of the spells I memorized?"

"Strategy is everythin', boyo," he said, turning aside long enough to measure the snakes' progress. "Yers, the Great Terror's..."—he gave Anesi a wink—"an' mine. Now up ye go, or else we're fang food!"

Anesi used the second spell he'd memorized on the highway—the *izyuk* enchantment. A moment later, he stood atop the wall. Far below, his friends were pressed up against the portcullis. Cubby had even climbed half-way up the steel-barred barrier in his desperation, and Fidget showed every sign of following. A black, glittering tide wound slowly toward them.

Strategy. He said the word over and over in his mind as he pushed open the unlocked door to the wheel house and began to crank up the gate. He strained at the wheel. Chains and gears began to respond. A harsh clanking filled his ears. The portcullis slowly rose. *Strategy*, he thought with every torturous turn of the wheel.

He saw the Terror's strategy easily enough. One by one, it had forced him to waste the spells he'd prepared for their confrontation. Well, perhaps *waste* wasn't the right word, exactly, since he'd saved his friends' lives. But perhaps that was also part of the Terror's strategy, to show them all how pathetically vulnerable they were.

Suddenly he heard voices and realized that his friends were free, so he released the wheel again, and the portcullis slammed down. Rubbing his shoulders, he left the wheel house and walked close to the edge of the wall. The ground was very far away. His friends looked very small.

"Come down!" Fidget called up to him, waving an arm. "Hurry!"

He bit his lip. The only way to get down was to fly, and that meant he had to re-memorize the *izyuk* incantation all over again. He wondered as he reached into the pocket where he kept his spell book if the Great Terror would let him.

The book came halfway out of the pocket.

A savage downdraft sent him sprawling atop the wall, and he cried out as rough stone scraped flesh from his elbows and knees. His spell book teetered on the brink. Ignoring his pain and the rush of true fear that seized him, he lunged for it with his hand, actually brushed it with the tip of his fingers, and watched in anguish as it fell.

Far below, his friends screamed and called his name.

The shadow of great wings fell over him. Slowly, his heart hammering, he rolled over on his back and stared at the four circling servants of terror in their horrible bird-forms. Four pairs of malevolent eyes turned toward him until he felt their hatred like a hot brand.

The sky began to crack and fracture like gray glass. Faster and faster gaping fissures formed, shattering the firmament, breaking it into smaller and smaller pieces until nothing remained but the cracks and fractures and fissures—and they were black emptiness.

No stars, no moon hung in the sky.

The four remaining servants flew above him, the sound of their terrible wings matching the fearful beating of Anesi's heart. Below him, he heard his friends. It was not for themselves they screamed. It was for him. It was his name they called so desperately.

But he was not alone, so close to the edge atop that high wall. All around him there was Terror.

Defiantly, he stood and shook his fists, while the blood of his scrapes poured down his body.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

T

HE WIND FROM THE servants' wings began to take form. Huge leathery pinions pounded the air, and with each beat the night surged and swirled with serpentine lines of glimmering black energy that twisted and writhed wildly, shooting off at angles and accelerating back to a central place above the wall, where they wound and wound like weird mummy wrappings, giving form to some shape where no shape could be.

It was magic as Anesi had never known it, obeying no laws, following no rational principles. He watched, enrapt.

Even before the form was complete it reached out a hand to him and lifted up its head. A cold chill shivered along Anesi's spine, and he took a step back. There was something familiar in the way it stood, in the shape and size of its blackness, something that pricked his mind and frightened him more than all else that had happened.

The Great Terror looked out at him from the face of his father, and it spoke with his father's voice. *Lo, I am with you always, it said, even to the end of your miserable world.*

Anesi felt his sanity slipping toward the edge. He threw back his head and screamed and screamed until his raw throat burned and tears scalded his cheeks.

The Great Terror laughed at him. *Man-child*, it whispered, *you who were my son will be my new servant.*

It strode toward him, then, reaching for him with Choboz's arms, leering at him with Choboz's mouth. *Son*, it had called him. It was a lie, a trick! It couldn't be his father. It just couldn't be.

But it could be! Choboz had wanted to be an enchanter, had always lusted after the secrets of thaumaturgy, and had envied others for their knowledge. Hadn't his mother told him so? Was it coincidence, then, that Choboz chose to run away on the same night that the Terror's first servant, in the form of the hellhound, awakened in the woods near their home? What if, to gain power for himself, he had given himself willingly to the Great Terror, just as seven other men had done in ages past?

What if, now, he was willing to give his son?

Rage overwhelmed Anesi's reason. Struggling to see through his tears, he backed away, screaming at the Terror. "I'll never serve you!" he railed. "Never!" He had one spell left, and he poured all his anger and fear recklessly into it until it exploded out of him.

The Great Terror screamed with an unholy voice and flung up its arms as the entire top of the wall suddenly incandescenced with a pure white radiance. Like a powerful beacon, light shot up into the night, brightening the heavens, flooding the city.

The eyes of the Great Terror burned with light, and its shrieking mouth filled with light. Light exploded from its fingertips, and light burst forth from its ripping chest. It flung out its arms, and beams of light scorched the darkness. In pain—perhaps even in terror—it flung itself from the top of the wall and fell like a shooting star.

Sobbing uncontrollably, half blinded by his own spell, Anesi collapsed backward into emptiness. His toes left the edge of the wall, and the soft whistling air embraced him. His fluttering cloak closed around his body like a shroud. "Wouldn't serve you! Wouldn't serve you toast on Sunday morning," he muttered from the brink of

consciousness. "Wouldn't serve you burgers in a cheap diner!"

Then, something soft brushed against his back and cradled his weight, and the wind rushed in a new direction over his stinging face. The sky and the world wheeled in a slow, lazy circle. Stars floated in the darkness now, and the moon's smile balanced on the horizon.

A blast of flame streamed across the night, then another and another. Distant panther-cries sounded weak and surreal in Anesi's ears as a winged shadow burst into a spectacular ball of fire and crashed earthward.

That seemed, somehow, to penetrate the veil that had closed around his mind. He wiped a hand over his eyes with a growing awareness of a battle going on in the air far away, where roaring tongues of red-orange fury licked at the darkness.

Dragonfire.

He felt again the rush of wind on his face and the soft surface on which he reclined. He had fallen from the top of the wall, he vaguely remembered, and someone had caught him. He turned his head to his right and saw a familiar red-and-gold pinion. It didn't beat, but held itself steady in a smooth glide for which he was grateful, because he lay so near the tip of it.

"Chuck?"

"Who loves ya, baby?" The dragon answered gently. They floated in a wide circle around Dolo Finis, dropping ever nearer to the ground. It was difficult, though, for Anesi to see where among so many towering structures Chuck could possibly land.

"You do," Anesi answered quietly as he summoned strength and crawled closer to the dragon's body. Sooner or later, Chuck would need to use his wings, and Anesi had no *izyuk* spell to save himself if he fell.

Another bird-servant exploded in flame and plummeted earthward.

"I see you brought friends," Anesi said, hugging his knees to his chest and wrapping his arms around them as he watched the battle.

"The Every-Third-Saturday-of-the-Month Leather

Club!" Chuck answered breathily. "Half the clientele of a particular bar I used to haunt. Nearly twenty of us altogether. After I showed them the sapphires they insisted on meeting you right away, the pushy bitches!"

Anesi grinned and leaned against the dragon's side. Nearly twenty, he'd said. Four or five to one against the servants of Terror. Almost on cue, another ball of flame erupted in the distance and crashed into the swamps beyond the city.

"Are they all like you?" he teased, beginning to feel like his old self again.

Chuck swished his tail, neatly knocking a minaret off its crumbling tower. "Don't you just wish, you naughty boy! Looking for more trouble to get into? The minute I saw those four big blackbirds cruising the coastline of the Shallow Sea I said to myself, 'That boy's in trouble again,' and wasn't I just right about that."

A panther-cry reached them from far away. Anesi looked toward the horizon, where the wings of the final remaining servant of terror burst into flame. Screaming in pain, it spread burning pinions and climbed toward the stars. Then it faltered and fell back to earth, streaming fire like a bright meteor, and disappeared in the jungle.

Chuck finally touched down in a huge marble-paved plaza. In the distance, a beacon of white light speared the heavens, unwavering in its purity.

Anesi marveled at his own work. "That was some froggin' frotz," he said with a low whistle. "Which reminds me, I should try to find my friends. Will you wait here?"

Chuck lowered his wing, and Anesi slid down to the ground. "Anything for you, honey," the dragon answered.

Anesi walked across the plaza, using the beacon of light as his guide. He ached in a hundred different places, and each step was a jarring effort that set his teeth on edge. He was soon among the street and alleyways again, however, and Chuck was out of sight.

If Dolo Finis had seemed strange in the gray twilight, it was ominous now. The light that radiated from the top

of the high wall cast shadows everywhere. His own shadow made him jump as he rounded a corner. He gave a nervous little laugh.

"Fidget!" he called, cupping his hands to his mouth. His shout echoed through the night, but no one answered. He tried each of their names, listening intently each time for a reply, then moving on.

Something shuffled in the yard behind the low wall on his left. He paused suspiciously, then relaxed. A tree limb, swaying in the easy breeze, scratched against the side of the house.

The barest itch rose on the back of his neck. He turned quickly, hoping to catch whatever watched behind him. There was nothing. Just patches of shadow and light. The itch was still there, however, bordering on a familiar tingle.

He picked up his pace, finally breaking into a run. His boot heels rang on the marble pavement as he glanced right and left over his shoulder. The itch only worsened. He began to run from one patch of light to another, jumping the shadows and dodging them.

Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of your miserable little world!

Did he hear it, or did he just imagine it? He'd defeated the Great Terror, hadn't he? Wasn't that why the Thriff wizards had chosen him, because he had the power to defeat it? His *frotz* spell had done the trick: *light* had beaten *darkness* as it was supposed to, hadn't it?"

The wind carried the low-throated echo of laughter.

He decided it was a bad idea to look for his friends on foot when Chuck could find them easily from the air, so he started back for the plaza. It took only a few turns down strange roads, however, for him to realize that he was lost.

He clutched at the medallion under his tunic and thought of Khare. *Look for a tree growing on the south side of a patch of moss*, he could imagine his old instructor saying, *then you'll have your bearings!*

It wasn't his bearings Anesi wanted, though. It was his spell book, or the sound of a friendly voice.

How about dear old dad?

The tingle at his neck shot up through the top of his head as Anesi jerked around. A hand clamped on his throat before he could scream. A powerful arm lifted him off his feet and into the air. Kicking, struggling for breath, he stared into the angry eyes of the Great Terror.

The face that once was his father's leered at him through burned and blackened lips. Half-melted flesh hung like wadded tissue on one cheekbone, where scorched teeth showed through. Only a stubble of hair remained, and the scalp had slipped to the back of the skull. A great gaping split opened from the throat to the belly, but where organs might have been there was only emptiness and a muffled rustling like the sound of the sea in a shell.

Fear me! the Great Terror demanded. *Make me strong again!*

Anesi tried to kick with his feet, and he clawed at the wrist that held him. "No!" he croaked, barely able to make a sound through the vise-grip on his neck.

Fear me! the Terror demanded again, giving him a rough shake.

"I do fear you!" Anesi conceded in a harsh whisper. A deep sigh issued from the monster at the sound of those words, as if it anticipated a great feast. Anesi groped at his belt. "But it's not fear that makes you strong, you stupid beast. It's submission to fear!"

He jerked free the small dagger that Fidget had given him and plunged it into the wrist at his throat. The Terror gave a roar. Its hand opened reflexively and dropped him, and he crawled slowly away from it until a morgia tree at his back stopped him.

"I've broken your power," Anesi hissed triumphantly through the pain in his throat. "Look what you've become. No more than an ugly beast. Even if you kill me, I've won!"

I'll get it back, the Terror said in Choboz's voice as he plucked the dagger and cast it aside. *If not from you, then from your friends, then from others.* In a voice like thunder it repeated itself. *Lo, I am with you always.*

An arrow jutted suddenly through the Terror's neck, and a hail of stone fragments bounced with bruising force off its chest. The Terror staggered back in confusion while a three-fingered hand locked on Anesi's arm and pulled him behind the morgia tree.

Humble Bellows strode up the alley, his black bag on his shoulder and the head of Dimwit Flathead in his hand. The air seemed to shimmer around him as he came closer, like heat waves in the wasteland, making him indistinct.

Then things began to change. The bag on his shoulder was suddenly no longer a bag, but a black coat with many pockets. Dimwit Flathead was next. The puppet and its crown shimmered and blurred and became, instead, a book on the little man's palm. Humble Bellows himself changed too. He grew taller, his black hair and beard turned iron gray, and his features wrinkled with age.

"Grandpa!" Anesi shrieked. It was truly Stribel Wartsworth there in the street. He remembered his grandfather exactly, though he'd been very small the last time he'd seen him. Anesi tried to run from behind the tree, but Cubby held on to his arm, and suddenly Fidget was there to restrain him, too.

Bellows's voice was gone, too. "It's not over yet!" Stribel Wartsworth called. "As long as it walks our earth it won't be over!"

The Great Terror pulled the arrow through its throat, snapped it in half, and tossed the pieces aside. *Do you think you can stop me, old man?* it said for everyone to hear. *Will you harm your daughter's husband?*

"You're not my son-in-law!" Stribel shot back with a sneer. "Your nose is much too big, and your scalp is on crooked." The book opened on his palm as he spoke, and he barely glanced at it. "Now, hold still. I've waited years for this."

Stribel Wartsworth held out a hand and unleashed a potent spell. Ruby energy crackled wildly in the air and formed a scintillant ring around the Great Terror. Slowly, within that ring, a hole ripped open in the fabric of space,

and a great suction pulled leaves and dust from the street into another dimension beyond ours.

But then the rip sealed itself, and the Great Terror smiled a very ugly smile. *Years for that?* it mocked.

Stribel Wartsworth looked from the page of his book to the Terror and back. Then he shut the book with a *thump*. "Uh-oh," he muttered. "Well, no hard feelings?"

While the Great Terror doubled over with laughter, the old man hurried around to join Anesi, Fidget, and Cubby.

Anesi flung his arms around his grandfather's neck and hugged him with all his might. But the old man put him off with a frown and a pat. "Time for that later, I hope," Stribel Wartsworth said worriedly. "That *guncho* spell hurled the evil Krill himself into another world, but the Terror shrugged it off like an oversized suit."

"Then we're finished," Fidget said questioningly.

In the street, the Great Terror gave a shout. In the gaping cavity of his chest a tiny flame began to burn. *Yes!* It cried in triumph. *I can taste your fear! More! Make me stronger!*

"Lift weights, you creepy tushpah!" Fidget shouted, realizing somehow it was he who had provided nourishment to their tormenter by giving up. Defiantly he fired another arrow, which missed by a narrow margin.

Tyrillee dropped down out of the morgia tree where she had been watching them. "It iss commming!" she announced, filling her hands with stones from her inner pockets. "Ooooooh. Aneeessee miiight need thiss!" She pulled out his spell book and handed it to him.

Anesi stared suddenly at the dryad, and the book slipped right between his fingers. "I have an idea," he said, stroking Tyrillee's hair and thinking rapidly. He grabbed her, then, and kissed her on the forehead. "Do you still have that last firestick of Dispoz's?" he said to his grandfather. "I need light to read, and there's too much shadow here."

Stribel Wartsworth quickly rummaged in the pockets of his cloak and came up with the match.

"Good," Anesi said, taking the *yonk* scroll from his

own cloak pocket. His grandfather struck the match, and in the light of the tiny flame he read and memorized the complex incantation.

"*Yonk*," his grandfather said aloud, as the scroll crumbled to powdery ash. "That augments magic. Want to try it with my *guncho* again?"

He gave Stribel Wartsworth a quick hug, unbelievably happy to see the old man after so many years and know he was still alive. But as he himself had said moments before, there was time for that later. "Uh-uh," he muttered excitedly. "This involves the three of us."

He pointed to himself, Cubby, and Tyrillee.

Moments later, he stepped around the tree ready to face the Great Terror again. "Come out, come out, wherever..." The taunt froze in his throat. The Terror had grown visibly. The flesh had almost healed on its face, and the wound in its chest burned with a growing inner fire.

The Terror saw his hesitation and reached for him. Quickly Anesi ducked under the outstretched arms and turned around again. Its hands glimmered with a dark radiance.

Fear permeates your world, the Terror said. *I drink it up like a sponge, and when I am full I will give it back again.* It laughed. *Am I not generous, young enchanter??*

"No," Anesi answered in a small voice. "You're only boastful and stupid, like all evil creatures. Despite your outside cleverness, you're the cowards, the parasites that feed on honest folks."

The Terror's low chuckle rode on a rising wind, a further sign of its increasing power. *A pretty speech, enchanter*, it mocked him. "Do you intend to destroy me now?"

"Not me," Anesi said simply. "Her."

Tyrillee dropped from an upper limb to stand before the morgia tree. At the same time, Anesi bathed her in the amber energy of the *yonk* enchantment. Cubby, the strongest of them, also dropped from an upper limb, seized the Great Terror by its arm and flung him toward the dryad with a fierce growl. Tyrillee wrapped her arms tightly about it and gave a tinkling little giggle, pleased to

play so important a part, and the two of them vanished inside the tree.

Moments later, Tyrillee reappeared alone. "It hasss a whollle worllld alll tooo ittssself," she said, stepping away from the morgia tree.

"I wish I had an axe," Fidget muttered with a sullen glare.

Cubby walked up to the tree and dealt it a kick. "Hmmmph!" he said.

Stribel Wartsworth took his grandson in his arms and held on to him for a long, long time. "How did you know it would work on a dryad?"

Anesi laid his head on his grandfather's shoulder. "I didn't," he admitted.

EPILOGUE

T

HERE WAS A BREATH of winter in the air. The leaves of autumn made a golden brown carpet on the forest floor and along the edge of the beach near Anesi's home. Thick gray clouds hung in the northern sky. It would snow soon.

Anesi sat alone on the sandy shore with a pile of small stones by his left hand. Idly, he used his water spell to create an image on the sea surface, and idly he lofted a rock at it. If the stone shattered his work, fine. If he missed, it didn't matter. Making the water sculptures just didn't hold the same excitement for him anymore. He listened to the whisper of the surf instead, and tried not to think too much.

Tyrillee had remained in Miznia. Something about the morgia trees, which didn't grow in the north, fascinated her, and she wanted time to play among them before she began a search for the rest of the Dyriadnaiad.

Chuck the dragon had flown the rest of them home, taking the scenic route up the eastern coast along the Flathead Ocean. When they flew over Borphée, Cubby and Fidget suddenly asked to be let off. Cubby wanted to visit old haunts and old friends along the harbor, and Fidget wanted to sample the experiences a truly big city had to offer while he had the advantage of a guide. He had no family to go home to, anyway. Why didn't Anesi join them?

But he'd declined. Home was what he'd wanted more than anything, he'd thought, a chance to sit on his beach and pass the day and watch the ever-changing creatures in the clouds. And he'd wanted to see his parents. So he'd hugged both his friends fiercely, receiving their promises to return northward in a month or so, and given them all the treasure, the jewels and coins, that had remained in the pockets of his enchanter's cloak.

Chuck had flown Anesi and his grandfather practically to their doorstep, landing in the sea and spreading his wingtip to the shore, letting them off right beside the creek that led to the house.

Anesi had exchanged a few jokes with the dragon, then they'd once more said their goodbyes. "Play safe," Chuck had told him with a lazy wink and a grin. "You, too," Anesi had answered, waving as his wondrous friend took to the air again and winged out of sight.

Then he and Stribel Wartsworth had walked up to the house.

Everything had changed. The magic of the Thriff wizards had cleared more land, painted and trimmed the house, and built new rooms. A bright new barn stood where the old one had been. And an elaborate series of pipes and pumps carried fresh water from the creek right into the house, something the wizards called "indoor plumbing."

"It's all the rage in Thriff," Raskil Worrysnot had assured him.

They had worked other changes inside the house. Nothing was as Anesi remembered it, and though many of the changes were indeed improvements, they saddened and disconcerted him somehow, and as quickly as possible he'd slipped away to his place on the beach.

There he sat now, hurling stones at water sculptures.

He didn't hear the footsteps on the sand behind him, and too late he felt the warning tingle of magic in the air. Suddenly, he levitated five feet straight off the ground and began to tumble head over heels like a pinwheel.

"Heyyy!" he cried in surprise, barely able to see

Khare and Stribel Wartsworth's grins through the blur of his motion. "Ssstop!"

Khare ceased the rapid hand gestures he'd been making, and Anesi's tumbling slowed and eventually stopped, leaving him hanging upside down.

"That's a fair imitation of a dryad," his grandfather commented drily.

Khare scratched his chin studiously as he walked a circle around Anesi. He nudged the pile of stones with his slippered toe. "Looks like a serious case of let-down to me," he said aloud.

Stribel stood back with his arms folded on his chest. "Yes, let-down," he concurred.

"Let me down!" Anesi shrieked.

Khare nodded sagely. "See what I mean?" he said to Stribel Wartsworth. He snapped his fingers, then, and the magic that held Anesi aloft let him go. With a squawk, he fell on the soft sand, rolled over, and glared at them. Then, pointedly, he turned around to stare back at the sea again, and picked up a rock.

"Whoa," his grandfather said, "that is a serious sulk."

The two old men sat down beside him, Stribel on his right and Khare on his left, and for a long time none of them said anything. He bounced the rock on his palm and frowned and shifted uncomfortably.

"I'm not sulking," he said at last. "It's just..." He shrugged, unable to sort out his feelings.

"A let-down?" Khare supplied. "You've saved the world, so what? Now it's back to the farm and the chores, and it all seems so hum-drum?"

His grandfather interrupted, leaning closer to him. "We've all been talking it over," he said quietly. "You don't have to stay here. We can arrange for you to enroll at Galepath University right away."

"But go or stay, young enchanter," Khare cut back in, "you're going to be having a lot of company. Enchanters and wizards from all over Frobozz are going to be coming to you to hear your story and ask you questions about the Great Terror and about yourself. Finister says he must get back to Oresia, but the rest of us have all agreed to stay

as long as you need us." The old man hesitated, then placed a hand lightly on Anesi's back.

Anesi smiled half-heartedly and felt for the zorkmid medallion under his new white tunic. "Thanks," he muttered. He looked up into his instructor's worried gaze. "Master," he said, deliberately choosing the honorific, "would you mind leaving me alone with my grandfather for a while?"

Khare grinned and ruffled his hair. "I have to start dinner, anyway," he sighed. "We haven't let your mother lift a hand for anything since you left. Between us, she's become quite spoiled." He got up slowly, joints creaking, and strode across the sand and into the woods.

Again, an uncomfortable silence settled over the beach. Anesi regarded his water sculpture, then gently set the stone he held back on the pile of stones. "Why didn't you tell me who you were?" he asked.

Stribel Wartsworth let go a long sigh and looked away. He pursed his lips, lifted his chin, and scratched the gray stubble on his throat. At last he spoke.

"I was always a wild one an' a wanderer, I was," he said, slipping back into the speech of Humble Bellows. After long years, it had become a habit. "An' some years ago when I was livin' in Mareilon with L. Rhonda—The L. stands for Letitia, by the way. She always hated the name, an' I can't blame her—that's when I first sensed that the Great Terror had gotten loose from Largoneth."

His grandfather bit his lower lip as he paused, and gave a slight shrug. "Well, I sneaked off from Rhonda like I'd done before—I'm not proud o' it, mind—and decided I had to try to do somethin'.

"So after years as a wilder—that's what the guild enchanters call an independent operator, an' where I got the name Wildroz—I finally joined a guild. The Mithicus chapter. Took me only a short time to rise to a good office, too, it did.

"But it didn't matter. By that time the Great Terror's influence was already spreading through the southern provinces, an' one by one, even the greatest enchanters and wizards succumbed to a creepin' fear. They jus'

crawled into their guild halls an' shuttered their windows an' did nothin'." He paused again and rubbed the tip of his nose with a sleeve.

"Why didn't you succumb?" Anesi asked.

"I think cause I knew what was really happenin'," he answered. "It provided a kind o' insulation. But I knew I had to get out o' the south an' hide an' bide me time. There was a spell, I knew, that had been used to destroy the evil wizard Krill, an' if I could find it, maybe it could be used against the Terror." An ironic grin flickered over his old face. "I guess ye saw how well it worked.

"Anyway," he said, continuing the story, "I had to swear off all magic, cause the Terror was sensitive to magicians, an' magicians were sensitive to the Terror's influence. An' I had to disguise meself from all who knew me as a wizard, too. So, with the very best chameleon spells in the kingdom—I don't say that to boast, mind—I changed me looks an' hid me cloak an' spell book too so's I could always have 'em near without folks knowin'."

Anesi picked up a rock again and tossed it lightly from one hand to the other as he listened. "What about all that business with Dispoz, an' the years you said you spent at Arbroneth?"

"That wasn't such a stretch o' the truth, it wasn't," Stribel Wartsworth protested. "He really did capture me 'bout ten years ago. But he captured me tryin' to break into his keep. I'd heard from sources how he had the *guncho* spell—the one I was after—in his library, an' after he refused several attempts at correspondence in which I offered to buy or trade fer it, I tried to steal it." He winced at an apparently unpleasant admission. "But I wasn't much o' a burglar, I wasn't, especially without me magic. Fortunately fer me, he never suspected I was a wizard, or that it was his spells I was after."

"Why did you make a grab for my spell book, then?"

"Oh, that." Stribel Wartsworth looked away and rubbed one hand over his face. "Well, I'll admit I jus' didn't have faith in ye, boyo. I knew Dispoz, an' I knew what was in that cell, an' I didn't figure ye were prepared

for either o' 'em. If I grabbed yer book an' took off runnin', I figured ye'd come after me instead, tryin' to git it back, an' I could lead ye away from big trouble."

"Without my friends?" Anesi persisted.

His grandfather shook his head. "It wasn't bright, an' it wasn't right. But at the time, ye were the only thing on me mind. When ye conked me on the noggin' I guess it knocked some sense into me."

Anesi gazed slowly back out to sea, where his water sculpture still bounced on the waves.

After an uncomfortable silence, Stribel Wartsworth leaned forward and began to draw patterns in the sand with the tip of one finger as he resumed his story. "Anyway, I stayed at Arbroneth, lettin' Dispoz think he was keepin' me against me will, runnin' away now an' then, an' lettin' him catch me. He had that *guncho* under the magical equivalent o' lock an' key, but I knew if I jus' bided time, I'd get a crack at findin' it." He looked up from his doodles and caught Anesi's gaze. "'Sides," he added, "it was relatively close to ye and Mildi. I could almost feel ye, sometimes. An' it was close to Thriff, where I had friends like Shuboz Shuboz who were also keepin' an eye on ye at me specific request.

"It was quite surprisin' when ye showed up on the doorstep. I didn't really know ye, at first, I admit, 'til ye said yer name. But ye gave me that shot at stealin' the *guncho*, ye did. While Dispoz was fightin' ye an' Chuck in his dungeon, the rest o' his spells weakened or completely dissipated, includin' the ward on his library door. I got the *guncho* an' the *radnog* an' the *yonk*." He tilted back his head and barked a short dry laugh. "I kept the *guncho* fer meself, an' gave ye the other two cause I didn't think 'em important enough."

Anesi flipped his stone out toward his water sculpture and missed. It skipped twice across the sea surface and sank. "But why didn't you tell me later when we were on the road? You know, I thought you were dead all those years. Everybody did!"

Stribel Wartsworth gave him a long hard look. Then he wet his lips. "Ye know, Anesi, I'll tell ye honest. I

never been much o' a family man. Had more wives than ye got fingers on yer hands, an' in more places. Now, I was proud o' ye, boyo. Proud of what I saw an' o' what you did at every turn." He paused again, but he held Anesi's gaze and refused to let it go. "But it was the Great Terror ye were dealin' with, an' at any o' those turns, ye could o' slid over to his side or jus' curled up an' refused to go any further."

"You didn't trust me," Anesi said with sudden realization. Somehow, because they were being so honest with each other, it didn't offend him.

"I couldn't trust ye," his grandfather stressed. "Jus' like ye didn't really trust me fer the longest time. An' if ye'd known it was me, ye might o' jus' set back an' let me take charge, an' I didn't want that. It was plain too much fun watchin' ye pull it out o' the fryin' pan ever time the fire got turned up."

"And if I'd known who you were," Anesi said, half to himself, "the Great Terror might have found out much sooner. It was in my mind several times along the underground highway."

"Exactly," Stribel Wartsworth agreed. "But me, I was jus' a insignificant sidekick, a funny little dwarf who tagged along an' talked to a puppet-head sometimes, not even worth its attention."

"It almost worked," Anesi said with a sudden grin. He poked his grandfather on the arm.

"It failed miserably," Stribel corrected him. "All those years o' hidin' an' schemin', thinkin' I could take on the Great Terror alone." He rolled his eyes and looked irritated. "It failed, but it didn't matter, cause ye were there."

Anesi accepted the compliment in silence. He didn't really know what to say, so he said nothing. He picked up a stone, hurled it at the water sculpture, and missed again. Then he did think of one more question.

"I just want to know who you really are," he said finally. "Stribel Wartsworth, Steppen Wildroz, or Humble Bellows?"

His grandfather gave him a quizzical look and

shrugged helplessly. "Well, I guess I'm a little bit o' all three."

"In that case," Anesi said, leaning toward the old man with an air of mock-menace, "stop talking like that. It's driving me crazy."

His grandfather laughed and got to his feet. "I think ye're all right now, boyo," he said, as he brushed sand from his backside. Then he dropped the accent and laid a hand on Anesi's shoulder. "I'm proud of you, grandson. Remember, though, what Khare said. There's a lot ahead of you yet. It's not just *home to the farm and chores*. It'll never be just *home to the farm and the chores* for you again. But despite what Khare told you, you listen to your grandfather, too. Don't let go of your youth too easily. You'll miss it before you know it." He pointed to the sky and to the clouds in the north. "And once you stop looking for the unicorns in those, it's hard ever to find them anywhere again." He patted the top of Anesi's head. "Now, I'm going back to the house. You come along soon and speak to your father. He cares about you, you know."

He thought about that as Stribel Wartsworth left. He didn't know if he was ready to deal with his father yet. He felt hurt by some of the things Choboz had done, but he felt ashamed, too, for ever believing—if only for an instant—that his father had gone over to the Terror. And yet, even saying that, there remained an awful nagging doubt in his mind, a fear that it *could* have happened.

He hadn't sorted it out yet. He knew he would soon have to.

An arrow splattered into the sand beside him, making him jump to his feet. His heart hammered in his chest as he scanned the edge of the woods, seeking his attacker. Then, his jaw dropped. With a cry, he flung out his arms and raced across the sand as his best friend stepped out of the trees.

"Fidget! I thought you were in Borphée!"

Fidget dropped his bow on the ground and hugged Anesi in a big bear hug, lifting him off his feet. Overbalanced, they both pitched onto the sand, laughing.

"How did you get here?" Anesi demanded, as they

stood up and brushed themselves off. "Is Cubby here too?"

"Naw," Fidget said, picking up his bow again. "He's staying in Borphee a while, but I saw all I wanted of that place in about an hour. Yuck! What a slimehole! So I took part of the treasure you gave us and went to the nearest guild enchanter. He charged a bundle, but arranged something called an *aimfiz* spell. All I had to do was think of you, and here I am."

They stared at each other for a long moment. Anesi was delighted to have his friend back. In fact, he hadn't realized how lonely he felt without Tyrillee and Cubby and Fidge and Humble Bellows. Maybe his grandfather had realized it, though, and that was why he used the Bellows accent for their talk.

"Well," he said, raising one eyebrow, "what do we do now?"

Fidget grinned, and a twinkle came into his friend's eye. He looked over both shoulders and lowered his voice conspiratorially. "I've been thinking," he whispered. "You're rich now with the hoard of the hellhound servant. Now we both know how bored rich people can get."

"All right," Anesi said slowly, his smile broadening as he played along with the game. He knew it would be good. "How do I get un-bored?"

"I've got it all figured out," Fidget told him, leaning close. He held up a finger. "One hellhound—one hoard, right?" He held up a lot of other fingers. "But there were seven servants." He arched his eyebrows meaningfully, and grinned.

"Hmmm," Anesi said. "The Hoards of the Seven Servants. Sounds like a mystery to me."

Fidget looked him straight in the eye as he folded his arms over his chest. "I love a mystery."

Anesi laughed and clapped his friend around the shoulder. "It sounds great to me," he agreed, "and we'll do it someday. But how about a cup of hot chocolate right now?"

Fidget hesitated, then wiped his brow with an exag-

gerated expression of relief. "Whew!" he sighed. "For a moment I thought I'd actually talked you into it! Chocolate will suit me just fine."

Side by side they started toward the woods, but at the edge of the beach, Fidget stopped and turned around and stared out at the sea. "Oh, I didn't get a good look at your sculpture," he said. "What was it this time?"

"Oh, nothing," Anesi answered. "Just something to throw rocks at. Wait here a moment, will you?"

He left Fidget standing there and hurried back to his pile of stones. He picked up a small, smooth rock, judged its weight on his palm, and drew a deep breath, which he let out slowly. He took careful aim.

The stone flew straight and true from his fingertips, up through the blue sky, out over the blue water, and struck his enchanted water sculpture perfectly. The liquid face of the Great Terror exploded into a shower of sea spray.

The white, foamy surf rolled on, and the clean smell of the ocean filled the air as Anesi walked away. In the clouds, dragons and unicorns and rokks watched him go.

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Anesi was the grandson of the wizard Stribel Wartworth, but he'd never really studied magic. His father had pulled him out of the university after less than one semester. Anesi wasn't even allowed to use the little magic he knew.

Then the entire Thriff Guild of Enchanters came to his family's little house in the woods. The whole world was threatened by the evil of the Great Terror, and they were helpless before it. To fight the Great Terror would require a magical prodigy, one who was untouched by the petty temptations of a wizard's life.

It would require Anesi.

With his friends at his side—Fidget, Cubby the brogmoid, and Tyrillee the dryad—he began his march to the south to face the greatest danger his world had ever known.

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ISBN 0-380-75386-3

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