

The Wizard & The Warlord

The Wardstone Trilogy • Book Three

Not for Sale

***** Chapters 1-5 *****
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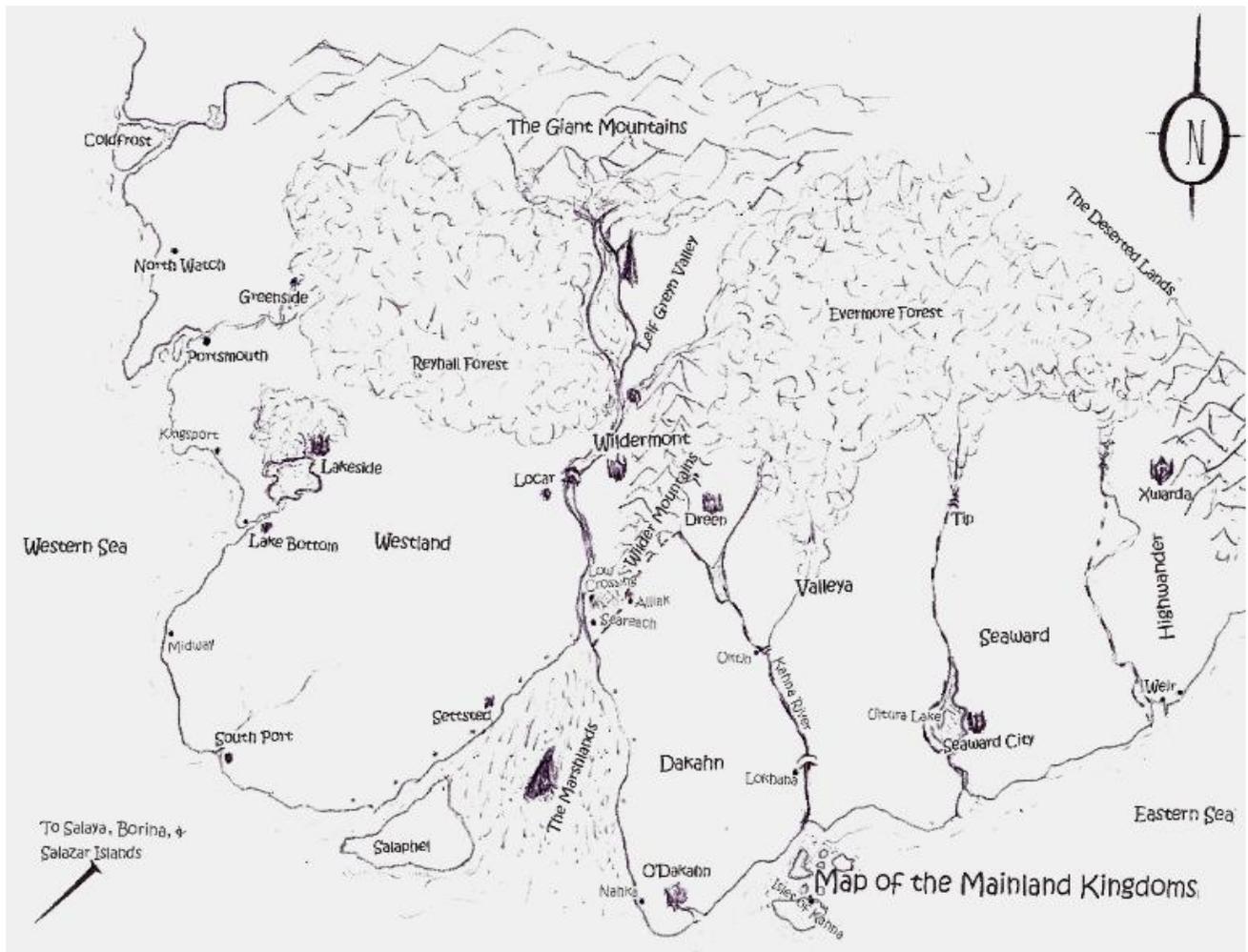
The Wizard & the Warlord - The Wardstone Trilogy Book Three

Chapter 1-5 Preview

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Chapter One

“Men are always fighting wars,” Telgra’s father Dargeon lectured. He was an elf over two hundred years old. “The humans are never content with what they have, or the world around them. They long for power over each other, so much so that they will lie, cheat, steal, and kill to get it. What is worse is that they will dabble with forces of any nature to give them an advantage.”

“Well, what dark nature did they dabble in that caused this wonder to grace our senses?” Telgra asked him.

He laughed at her. They, and a small delegation of their kind, had secretly traveled across the continent from the Evermore Forest and then taken a ship to the Isle of Salaya. Now they were standing atop the island, amid a miniature forest of blooming fiery trees in the late morning of a warm and beautiful day.

“The magic of King Mikahl’s sword, Pavreal’s sword, was born from the magic of Arbor, my dear.” Dargeon put his arm around her and kissed the top of her golden hair lovingly. “It was not a man who caused this blooming love. It was ancient elven magic.”

Never in her seventy-two years of life had Telgra questioned her father’s wisdom, until that moment. “But father, you prove my point about the humans. Pavreal’s sword was forged by dwarven hammers, under the fire of dragons, with the purest of metals that the giants brought down from the mountains. We may have ensorcelled the blade with its power, but on that day, when the sword was made, the races of the light all came together for the good of the world, and all of us in it.” She put her hands on her hips, like her mother sometimes did.

He smiled at her with fatherly love.

“Pavreal was a human, Father,” she continued. “If it were not for him, our magic would have never been instilled into the blade and would have never caused the fiery trees to bloom. So, therefore, it is humanity that caused this beauty before us. We only had but a small part in it.”

Dargeon stood there dumbfounded by her logic. He realized at that moment how much like her mother she was. He decided that the elf who eventually took her hand would most likely be as unlucky as he was blessed.

They made their way back to the monastery's entrance. Some of the monks who tended the mountain top garden were whispering over a pot of carrot stew.

The elven expedition's second in command stepped up. He was an ancient, blue-haired elf named Brevan. He had been speaking to a few of the monks. Telgra smiled at him respectfully. He returned the gesture and then touched her on the shoulder, more or less, ignoring Dargeon.

"I think the origin of the fairy trees is more than likely traceable back to the Evermore Forest. After all, that great forest is where the fairy folk have lived for as long as time has been kept."

"I think," Telgra interrupted cautiously. "I think the name fairy tree is misleading. The blooms are bright red and flecked with yellow. It looks like the trees are on fire. I think it's more likely that the ancients called them fiery trees not fairy trees, and all of us have just lost the inflection over time. The long dormancy of the flowering, and this remote location of the only remaining grove, possibly caused the name to get misspoken over the years."

Old Brevan narrowed his wispy eyebrows, causing the tips of his ears to push their way out of his long silver-blue hair. "On what do you base this theory?" Looking over her shoulder, he gave a look to the monks who had suddenly gone quiet so that they could listen.

"Master Brevan, it's known that the fae have never been to this island. It's also known that never has one of those trees been anywhere else but this island." Her tone was confident and she spoke with more and more surety as she went on. "It seems obvious to me that if anyone were to call them fairy trees, it would be because of their stunted size. But ask yourself this question. When the humans of this island first saw the trees bloom, did they even know what a fairy was? I've been taught that the fair folk kept to themselves, and still stay hidden from human eyes. Go look for yourself, sirs." She finished with a shy grin at the monks. "In this breeze the sea has gifted us with today, those trees positively look to be ablaze."

Before Brevan could respond, Telgra was lightly skipping out of the open-air hall and down one of the paths that wound through the grove.

“She has a valid point, Brevan,” another elf stepped out of the shadows and said matter-of-factly.

Brevan sighed. “Too bright for her own good, I fear,” he said while staring aimlessly at the vacant spot where she had just been. After a moment he turned to the human monks and smiled. “Well what do you think of that?”

Later that evening, well after the sun had set, Telgra was standing among the fiery trees, enjoying the thick cinnamon and lavender aroma of their blossoms. Her eyes were looking skyward into the vast openness of the world. She felt like a giant standing in a forest that came up to her shoulders. In the Evermore, the trees reached to staggering heights. Oaks, elms, royal pines and bellow firs all reached hundreds of feet over her head. She figured that an elf standing in this forest would relatively be about a finger’s length tall in comparison.

The little girl inside of her took over for a while and she began stalking through the trees pretending to be some huge monster, smashing villages and towns under her feet. She worked her way to the southernmost edge of the glade when a horrid smell came to her carried on the ocean breeze from somewhere to the south. Thankfully, it was a brief sensation. She scrunched up her nose, but paid it little mind. She then started toward a copse that stood separate from the main grove, at the edge of the viewing path that wound its way through the garden.

The sound of crying came to her ears. For a moment the grotesque smell wavered past her again. As she neared the copse she decided that the smell was coming from somewhere very far away. She’d smelled rotting flesh before, when the expedition had come across a long dead mooza in the forest, and again as they crossed the bridge at Tip in an invisible huddle. The humans had been warring there. This smell was very similar. Now, just as it had then, the stink made her want to retch.

She put herself downwind of the separated cluster of fairy trees, and let the savory smell of the flowers fill her nose again. She sat cross-legged and breathed deeply, filling her lungs with the potent scent. It took only seconds to make her feel better.

She was certain that the trees had some magical purpose. There were many medicinal and magical qualities to the petals and buds. She was determined to understand what the purpose of these trees was in the world. When she looked into the sky, a shooting star sped past. She giggled with delight as she lay back and traced its trajectory with an outstretched finger.

A few moments later she slipped into a deep dreamy sleep.

In her dream she was in a forest so great and huge that she felt like a mouse. The ground around her was strewn with leaves the size of blankets and twigs as big as felled trees. Ahead of her, a butterfly the size of a horse, with wings of gold and velvety black, beckoned her to come closer.

She did, though hesitantly.

“Get on my back, Telgra,” the butterfly said in a soft musical voice similar to her mother’s. “Let’s fly.”

“Love to,” she heard herself reply as she climbed onto the delicate creature. It fluttered into the air and darted to and fro through the monstrous branches of the trees. Higher and higher they went. They passed several little villages of elves who were as small as she was. They had houses made from hollowed-out mushrooms that grew on the giant limbs. The inhabitants waved and smiled as she and her fragile mount fluttered up and past them.

A blackbird darted by, eyeing them hungrily. It started to bank around toward them but ended up spotting something else below. A snake as big as the dragons in the tales her father used to read her, lazed along one of the upper branches. Its lime-colored scales were splotted with sunlight. Telgra looked up and saw that the great golden swaths of living light had found a way through the leaves above them. Motes of dust danced through them like cottony flakes of gold.

The butterfly carried them right into one of the rays and immediately Telgra felt the sun warm her skin. The brightness of the Giver’s light forced her to look anywhere but up. They fluttered ever upward through the air in tight circles that kept them in the warm, pleasant ray. Soon Telgra saw the tops of the trees below her. Great slab-like leaves flickered on the breeze,

each a different shade of green. It all shimmered as she was carried even higher. Below, the mosaic of the leaves seemed to blend into a rolling sea of emerald and teal. A gust of wind buffeted them sideways. Telgra looked up to see that the forest they had just left was surrounded by the white lace of a crashing shoreline. The butterfly, which no longer seemed as big as a horse, fought the wind and turned them into it.

The delicate insect carried them beyond the land. For a very long time only the glistening cobalt expanse of ocean spread out below them. Eventually a mass of land appeared to the south, an island. How big it was she couldn't guess, for she had no true sense of how big or small she herself really was.

As they flew above, she saw a dark thing take flight from a clearing in the forest that covered most of this other island. From somewhere farther away she heard a howling scream. It was followed by the sound of sobbing. Over the menacing island, in a clearing, she saw a circular hole in the earth. Around it, men in robes of bright crimson danced and chanted. As the gusts carried her butterfly haphazardly over the hole she felt a powerful sense of fear. A horrible rotten smell filled her nostrils and made her stomach roil. She chanced a look down into the depths and froze in terror. A great toothy maw came shooting upward. Behind yellowed teeth, demon red eyes glowed so brightly that they seemed to outshine the sun. The butterfly tried to turn away, to evade the closing teeth of the fiend coming for them, but it couldn't move fast enough.

Telgra cried out in fear as the fetid mouth of the monster closed down over her. Just as it would have swallowed her, a flash of magical blue light flared and the monster roared out in pain. Telgra looked around to see a man in silver chainmail riding a winged horse made of flame. The man's sword was glowing bright blue. His wavy golden hair fluttered behind him as he swooped back in to attack the beast a second time.

The butterfly was knocked through the air by a scaly limb. Telgra screamed as she began tumbling down towards the open hole from the sky. Faster and faster she fell until the world, and all its colors were soaring past in a great blur.

Suddenly, she felt a cold hand on her cheek patting her gently. Her eyes fluttered open and she expected to find herself lying at the edge of the copse of fiery trees, but that's not

where she was. A statue of a boy was... was... was doing what? A statue of a boy was patting her cheek and looking down at her with an expression of deep concern on its alabaster face.

“Are you all right, m’lady?” the statue asked.

The deep grumbly voice of someone low to the ground barked out irritably, “That girl is an elf! She’s a fargin elf maiden!”

“Lady,” the statue said, with a smile forming on its ever stony face. “Let’s get you up now.”

Telgra’s world spun again. She felt herself falling backwards through something. Maybe trees?

“Come, milady,” a soft, nervous voice spoke.

She fluttered her eyes open again and tensed as the sensation of weightlessness came over her. “Where?” She mumbled the question feebly.

Telgra relaxed when she saw that one of the monks of Salaya had her in his soft chubby arms. The morning sun was bright, but he was purposely keeping the shadow of his round head in a position to shade her eyes. His smile grew as he felt her fear slide away.

“You fell asleep in the grove, lady,” the man carried on. “Your father would turn us all into frogs if we hadn’t found you. Oh how the town would talk about that.”

“I was dreaming,” she said, returning his smile. “The dream was so, so real.”

“The trees do that to you, even when they aren’t in bloom.” The monk’s voice grew serious. “I hope they were good dreams.”

The look in his eyes piqued Telgra’s curiosity. The memory of the fear she’d felt when she looked down into that horrible smelling pit came to her for an instant.

“What if they were bad dreams?” she asked.

“The dream of the fairy trees helps us to have visions of the future, or glimpses of the present elsewhere.” The monk stopped and let Telgra down to her feet. After he looked at her a moment he paled.

“Are the dreams always prophetic?” she asked. “Do they always come to pass?”

“I’m afraid so,” the monk replied.

“Then something must be done about the island to the south of here. If it wasn’t a vision of the future I saw, then we might already be too late.”

Chapter Two

Word that the human's great war had finally come to an end made its way to Salaya by a trade ship. The news came the same morning that Telgra had her dream in the grove. This information, the monks explained to the elven delegation, came to the island in the form of sealed scrolls from the High King of men; it wasn't gossip.

The slave master king of Dakahn had been bested, and the tale of the deed was so fantastic that it overshadowed Telgra's dark vision. For days her insistent warnings were dismissed as foolish attempts to draw attention to herself. Other tales of wizards and kings battling the slaver, and of the dragon queen and her acid-spewing wyrm, were told and retold over her. She pleaded with her father to at least look into the matter, but the stories of how the great red dragon that used to guard the seal to the underworld had come to aid High King Mikahl and his wizard were more intriguing. The huge winged worm had torn down the walls to King Ra'Gren's castle and cleared a road for the High King's armies to march in. Tens of thousands of slaves had been freed. The dwarves had come back to the surface from their underground cities to aid in the battle, too. Telgra's premonitions weren't taken seriously at all.

Her only ally in the matter was the monk who had found her after she'd dreamt. His name was Dostin. Dostin was what the other monks referred to as simpleminded. He was slow, and not always clear with the meanings of his words. He was clumsy and easily pleased or distracted. His pleas to the superiors of his order were taken even less seriously than Telgra's.

Another ship arrived bearing news that the High King was marrying the princess of Seaward, and that the dwarves had pledged to build a new palace in the new seat of the unified realm, a city called Oktan.

After enough badgering, Telgra's father finally did confer with the monks about his daughter's dream. They explained to the elves that dreams in the fairy grove are truly prophetic. Telgra hadn't fallen asleep in the grove. She had been found by the simpleton lying at the edge of the tiny copse. They didn't doubt that she dreamed what she said she did. The

dreams of prophecy only visited those who slept in the heart of the grove, and even then the revealing visions only found their way into the sleep of but a small handful.

A full turn of the moon after the ordeal, Telgra was standing near the copse where she'd fallen asleep. She was enjoying the cool salty air as it swept across her skin. The sun had just recently set and the sky was a brilliant sheet of pastel blue that exploded into a reddish copper band before it disappeared beyond the sea. Stories of the High King's fantastic wedding had made it to the island, too. Telgra found herself envious of young Princess Rosa. The High King had been the one who'd ridden the flaming Pegasus in her dream. Unfounded tales of a hole in the earth similar to the one she saw were being told. Only this hole had been in some Westland castle's bailey yard. Great winged demons had supposedly escaped the hells there. She tried not to think about the dark things. She envisioned herself in a fancy flowing dress of silk and lace standing before an elven hero. Only her hero had no face because a true elven hero hadn't lived for ages. There was Vaegon Willowbrow, the elf who'd helped the High King and the fabled wizard Hyden Hawk. But Vaegon had been killed. His younger brother Dieter was cute, though, she mused. And the Willowbrow family were well respected hunters.

Her pleasant thoughts were suddenly rocked away when the foul smell hit her full in the face again. She fought back a reflex to gag, and with a determination that only an elven woman can muster, she went to find her father. The smell, this time, wasn't faint. It was thick and horrible. She was worried, but wanted to show the others that she hadn't been just a silly girl wanting attention, too.

She found her father studying specimens at a well-lit table full of fiery tree dead fall. His yellow eyes, when they met hers, seemed distant, sad. He smiled and the look passed from his amber gaze until he saw her expression.

"Come, Father. This is important," she said simply. She led him out the door of one of the monastery's dimly lit halls. There they rounded up a pair of monks and a younger elf named Corva, his presence among the expedition was solely due to his swordsmanship and archery skills, not his curiosity over rare blooming trees. It didn't matter to Telgra. She wanted him for a witness, nothing more. She led the group hastily up the stair and walkways.

When they were at the flattened top of the island, standing at the rail near where she had fallen asleep, she faced them all in the southbound wind and stepped back with hands on hips. The young elven guard was already gagging. Her father's face paled and he rankled his nose. The monks though, said they weren't able to pick up the scent.

"That smell is not a product of my girlish dreaming, Father," she declared, then she strode over to the fairy trees at the edge of the path.

Dostin appeared, as did another pair of elves. They were helping the four hundred year old Master Brevan up to the grove.

Seeing her, Dostin eased over to Telgra's side with a warm smile on his round face.

"Hello, Dostin," Telgra smiled up at him with a look of smug satisfaction.

"My lady," he gave a nodding bow of respect. She had told him to dismiss with the formalities when they arrived, but since his brothers and her father were present she didn't chide him for it.

The Giver pulled his magnificent sunset down into the ocean, leaving the sky dark and starlit. The moon was but a faint slip. Her father and the others were engaged in a heated argument and she wasn't interested anymore. She reached across the walking rail and fondled one of the fiery tree flowers. She saw Dostin looking at her strangely.

"What?" She asked.

"I'm sorry for looking, milady," he said. He seemed very nervous. She half expected him to say that he had fallen in love with her, but he surprised her.

"It's your eyes." He looked at his feet for a moment then back to her. "After all this time, I'm still not used to them. They look like a wildcat's eyes, or an owl's eyes."

She smirked to hide her relief, then made a strange face, feigning offense.

"Your eyes are strange to me as well, Dostin." She looked back at the fiery trees absently. "When I first saw humans in the town called Dalton, just after we left the Evermore, I thought how similar we were built. Then I saw the eyes of your people and realized I was wrong. Your eyes are like robin eggs, Dostin." She focused more intently on the flower she was stroking and her voice trailed away. "Eggs with sapphires stuck in--" She stopped speaking as she ducked the rail to investigate what had struck her speechless.

The young elven guard, Corva, suddenly pointed skyward and hissed a warning. No one could see anything above at first, then Dargeon gasped. Brevan mumbled a spell and made a flourishing wave of his hand.

“Whatever it is, it can’t see us now,” the old elf said when he was done.

“What is it?” Dostin asked Telgra. He was craning his neck so far back that he was about to fall over backwards.

Telgra was no longer paying attention to the others. Something about the leaves held her captivated.

“I saw something eclipse the stars,” Corva said, pointing in the sky while looking to Dargeon for a command.

“A Choska, or maybe a large wyvern,” Dargeon said. He glanced at his daughter and his concern over the flying creature evaporated.

She was studying the flowers intensely. She didn’t even know creatures had flown over head. Dargeon saw the horrified look on her face. His keen eyes caught the starlit reflection in the tear that ran down her cheek. He hurried to her side, his heart full of fatherly concern.

“What is it, love?” he asked as he hopped lightly over the guardrail.

“Look,” she said, putting her chin in her chest and sobbing.

He was appalled. The fairy tree flowers were turning sickly and black before his eyes. He could almost hear the ancient trees crying out in pain. The atrocious smell in the air, or maybe whatever was causing it, was hurting them. He felt an awful pang of guilt as he stroked Telgra’s golden hair. She had warned them, but they had been fools.

“As long as you shit your britches again, Oarly, we’ll be all right,” Phen said to his dwarven companion. They were in a rowboat fighting the waves just off of the rocky shore of the Isle of Kahna. Phen's familiar, a lyna-cat named Spike, lazed in the floorboards. Of the three of them, the porcupine-quill-covered, cat-like creature was the most comfortable at sea. Even so, Phen gently handed the animal up to Captain Biggs, who was standing in the cargo net hanging into the water from the side of the Royal Seawander.

Phen had bonded with the little feline when he'd stowed away on one of the Dragon Queen's ships to try and retrieve a powerful artifact for Hyden hawk. Her wizard and his lizard-man crew had taken it from them. Phen was a wizard himself, and had been through a lot for such a young man.

How he became to appear to be made of marble was another intriguing tale that he wasn't fond of remembering. He didn't just appear to be made of stone, and he would still be petrified solid if it wasn't for the mighty dragon Claret. In truth, his skin was pretty hard. He weighed as much as three full water kegs. The quality of his personal predicament was exactly why he was doing what he was doing.

Oarly had fought Phen's decision to go after the Serpent's Eye emerald from the beginning. Of course, he lost the battle. They, along with Hyden Hawk Skyler and Brady Culvert, had sworn a pact when they found the jewel last spring. Now it was fall, and Brady was dead, killed by a black wyrm, just before the Dragon Queen's wizard took the silver skull. Sir Hyden Hawk had disappeared into the Nethers of Hell, but they knew he was alive. They had no idea how to go about finding him, though, or if he even wanted to be found. That left just him and Oarly who knew about the jewel. Phen chose to go after the emerald while his hardened skin would be an advantage. Soon he was going to embark on a journey deep into the Giant Mountains to find a magical pool that Claret had told him about. The pool's warm spring water supposedly had the power to revive his pigment and return his body to its normal flesh and bone state. Oarly protested and pleaded, but due to his pact with the others, he couldn't tell anyone what Phen was planning. He was left with no choice but to come along. Phen knew this was the case. He was smart, a fair mage in his own right, and as confident as they come.

As Phen pulled on the oars, Oarly gave a backward glance at the Royal Seawander. The emerald they were after was in a cave called the Serpent's Eye. It was only possibly to get inside when the tide was low. They'd chosen the moment just right, as it was almost all the way out as they rowed towards the opening.

A huge serpent lived inside. When they'd been in the cavern before, the thing had slithered out of its hole and scared Oarly so bad that he'd soiled himself. Strangely, the creature hadn't killed them, or even attacked them at all. The joke was that the horrible smell of Oarly's shit had scared the thing away. Phen knew that it had left for other reasons, but teasing Oarly was one of his favorite pastimes.

The emerald was guarded by far more than just the serpent. It sat atop a pile of gold coins, held aloft on a platter by three life-size skeletons molded from rusty iron. Around the whole monumental display was a shallow moat full of slithery eels with needle teeth that might be poisonous. Phen planned to stroll right through the moat, knowing that their fangs wouldn't be able to penetrate his skin. He also had an elven ring he found on his first visit to the cave. It would let him turn invisible after he snatched the jewel. That part of the plan might not even be necessary, Phen knew. Hyden believed that the iron skeletons might come to life and attack after the jewel was taken, but no one was sure if they would. Up until Phen had been turned into a statue by one of the Dragon Queen's priests, he hadn't been able to imagine an iron statue of a skeleton coming to life. But now he didn't doubt the possibility at all. If they did animate, though, they would have a hard time attacking him. He planned on putting on his ring and being invisible even before he snatched the emerald.

Oarly had to agree that it was a good plan. He had his axe if the serpent came back from feeding too soon. There was also a small, dead end tunnel they could hide in. It was too small for the creature. Oarly pointed out that not once had one of Phen's, or Hyden Hawk's plans ever gone right. He also voiced his dislike of the idea that no one but them knew what they were doing. No one even knew where they were. Oarly couldn't forget the fact that the boy was, for all intents and purposes, made of stone, and would sink to the bottom of the sea if their boat failed. Oarly could barely swim. Beside all of that, the last time he was here the serpent had literally scared the shit out of him. He kept a brave front, but what was underneath was one terrified and slightly drunken dwarf.

Phen knew his squat little friend was concerned. He was concerned, too. Noticing the look on Oarly's face, he stopped rowing.

"Stop worrying Oarly," Phen said, trying to hide the nervousness he felt.

"I don't see it, lad." Oarly shook his head. "I don't see how you can sit in a little boat knowing that if you fell into the water you'd sink like a stone."

Phen cringed. He did want to think about it. "Look Oarly, the tide's going to come in, so the time for back-stepping has gone. Take a few pulls from that flask and concentrate on being ready to shit your britches."

The dwarf's laugh turned into a low grumble that ended with him cursing under his breath. He did more than take a sip. He emptied the flask and tossed it into the sea. After a moment he pulled another flask from his boot, took a sip, and mumbled a prayer to Doon. "Let us get on with it then," he barked when he was done.

By the time the two were under the rocky ceiling of the entrance and easing into the Serpent's Eye, the dwarf was belligerent. Phen hoped it was true, that dwarves function better drunk, because in moments they would be past the point of no return. The tide was already rolling back in and closing the entrance behind them.

Phen opened his mouth and went through the motions of breathing, even though he wasn't sure if his body actually drew breath or not. He was thankful that he could see the bottom of the cavern pool through the clear water. He was concerned about Oarly now, though. The dwarf was emptying a third flask while patting around on his person in search of another. When he couldn't find one, he looked over at Phen and shrugged.

Chapter Three

The next night the moon was nowhere to be seen. All nine of the elves were gathered in the heart of the fairy tree grove. Brevan was casting spell after spell, some in hopes of protecting the main grove from the blight the smaller copse was affected with, and some to conceal the presence of their activities from the spying eyes that were circling high above. Dargeon had to plead with the leaders of the order of monks to not run to the king of Salaya, or his son, just yet. If the human royalty was notified then the elves would be forced to either reveal their presence, or abandon the fiery trees to their fate. Neither choice was acceptable. Reluctantly, the monks agreed to give the elves some time to work with the trees. They didn't like the idea of keeping the possible sky-born threat from their king, though. They made that clear.

Once Brevan felt satisfied that his protective spells were in order, he started gathering the elves into a circle. It was awkward as they were standing among the trees attempting to hold hands with outstretched arms. The old elven mage, with the help of the others, was about to attempt a powerful casting.

"Where do you want me?" Telgra asked.

"And me?" Corva stepped up.

"The power of the Arbor will scorch you both," Brevan warned. "You're far too young for such a casting."

"What little strength they can add might make the difference, Old One," Telgra's father argued for her.

The old elf stopped and stared at her for a moment. His luminous amber orbs were as fierce as anything she'd ever seen. She met his gaze, as did Corva beside her.

"Very well," he snapped.

Telgra was excited, and more than a little afraid. She had only read about the high magic of Arbor or heard tales of it from her instructors back in the Evermore. Her father was a respected mage, but he rarely used his craft. He was an explorer at heart, and he loved nature. He'd been to the Bitter Isles northwest of Coldfrost to observe the great wolves and the ice

bears that lived there. He had trudged through the southern marshes cataloging the vast array of amphibians and reptilian life there. He'd even been across the great desert and ridden the humped cullomal beasts through the gorge of fire, where the rare and beautiful tookaskas live.

It amazed Telgra that he'd done all those things, especially since he'd done them without the humans seeing him.

Her father gave her right hand a gentle squeeze. Brevan was on her left. She felt safe enough between the two of them. Poor Corva was between stubborn old Oglav, and Teverall, the expedition's weapon master. Neither of them were particularly powerful magi, but what little craft they did know would add to the rest. If Brevan's worries about the magic affecting them were founded, Telgra thought, Corva would probably find out. She doubted that the foggy old elf would even remember the words to his great spell, though. He hadn't even bothered to acknowledge the fact that she wasn't just a foolish girl trying to get attention. She gave him a glance and a smug look as he started into his casting.

All at once a warm electric buzz shot through her. It was uncomfortable, yet familiar. Another squeeze of her hand by her father helped slow her breathing and gave comfort. After that she was on her own as the smell of ozone and the tingling kinetic feeling of raw power came sweeping through her. She looked across the circle at Corva, at his wide-eyed, open-mouthed face. She decided that her expression was probably much the same. Then blinding lavender light erupted from her feet and her mind was washed away into a psychedelic swirl of pastel radiance. What happened next, she would never know, but the sound of it was haunting.

At first, she heard the murmur and chant of the four elves that knew what was going on, but then the hissing crackle and the deep resonance of the magical power around her forced all else out of her head. At least until the screaming started.

For a long time she tuned the sound out of her mind, afraid to know what it was that was in so much pain. She felt as if she were stuck deep down in a barrel of honey. There was no up or down, no left or right. She couldn't breathe.

After short time she realized it was the voices of the trees amplified in her head. They were in agony, some more than others. She heard Brevan distantly as he spoke to them, but

she couldn't make out the words. She heard her father as well. She even heard Dostin's shrill voice. His was clear and unmistakable. "Look, Father Malik," he exclaimed. "The elves are glowing. And the trees are on fire."

The screaming of the trees stopped, and a relative hush descended over the thick buzz of the magic. A sound comparable to a large group all gasping in unison filled her ears. She opened her eyes to look, but was greeted by the same disorienting kaleidoscope of pastel color she had seen with her eyes closed. She was forced to shut them tightly again, lest she began to heave from vertigo.

Dostin's voice rang out in fear. "Oh no," he yelled. "Noooo!" Then he grunted and let out a scream that caused even the trees to cringe.

"Oh no, my love," Telgra heard her father say sadly, then he let go of her hand.

A soft yell of surprise sounded like it came from old Brevan, but it died away in a gurgling hiss. Scuffling, and then the sound of steel being drawn, came to her ears. Telgra then felt herself being yanked up into the air by something that was causing terrible pain in her shoulders. Blackness crept into the colorful array of her vision and pain replaced the tingle of the magic. She heard her father's desperate cry over the chaos.

"Oh, Telgra, no," he yelled. "Please, nooooo!" His voice was fading, as if he were getting further away. She could tell by the clipped way he spoke that he was sobbing.

"Put her down!" Her father roared this time. "Put her dow--" The abruptness with which his words ended, and the wet tearing sound that accompanied the instant, echoed through her brain like a thunderclap. Then there was nothing, save for pain. Eventually even that faded into nothingness.

He'd been married for only a few weeks, and already High King Mikahl Collum was fighting desperately to keep his myriad of duties from coming between him and his beautiful bride. His good friend and adviser, Lord Alvin Gregory, was working himself ragged trying to lighten the load. Lord Spyra and General Escott were helping as well. This day however, Mikahl had no choice but to leave Queen Rosa's side and see their unexpected guest himself.

Borg, the Southern Guardian of the Giant Mountains, was a personal friend, and Mikahl had no intention of brushing off a chance to see Urp, Oof, and Huffa. The three great wolves had carried Mikahl, Hyden Hawk, and Vaegon the elf, out of the Giant Mountains and across the Evermore Forest once. Grrr, the proud and fierce leader of the pack, had sacrificed himself to save Mikahl. The people of the realm unknowingly owed a great debt to that wolf. Had he not saved Mikahl, the demon wizard Pael would have taken the city of Xwarda and used the Wardstone to destroy all that was good.

Why the wolves were here with Borg, instead of at home with King Aldar, Mikahl didn't know. He was glad they came, though. The messenger had arrived breathless and wide-eyed just moments ago with news of the giant's sudden appearance at Dreen's northernmost gate. Very few kingdom folk had ever seen a real giant. The half-breed giants that fought alongside the High King in the recent war against Dakahn were as close to a giant as they had seen. Borg was a pure-blooded giant. He stood over fourteen feet tall and was proportionately as human-formed as the next man, save for his huge slab of a forehead.

Lord Gregory had to act quickly to keep General Escott from manning an unnecessary defense against the visitor. Borg was no enemy, but even still, a fifty man mounted troop was dispatched to escort him through the streets of Dreen to the modest castle the monarchy was residing in while the dwarves built the new palace. Mikahl imagined the wolves were worrying the newly promoted general and the people of the city to death. A demon tore through Dreen only three turns of the moon earlier and destroyed a score of homes and thrice as many people. Borg wasn't nearly as big or as ugly as the demon had been, but he towered over the Red City's low buildings. There was no doubt he was frightening the citizens. It couldn't be helped. Mikahl knew the people would relax after they saw him welcome Borg, though. He smiled as the excitement of the reunion coursed through him.

Mikahl hurried outside to the castle's entry yard, which was really just a glorified horse pen. The knot of armed men forming up outside staggered him.

"Commander Lyle, please get these men out of here," Mikahl ordered.

"But, Your Highness," the man argued carefully. "General Escott said--"

"I don't care what he said," Mikahl snapped. "Borg is my friend, and no more threat to us than a ladybug."

"But the wolves?"

"The wolves are even closer to my heart than the giant is!" Mikahl's voice betrayed displeasure at being argued with over the matter. Already he could see the giant a few streets over, striding quickly closer. A sack holding something the size of a barrel keg was thrown over his shoulder.

"Out of my sight now," Mikahl yelled. "All of you, and if any of you so much as thinks of harming one of those wolves, you'll be pulling the Lord of Lokar's cart around with Ra'Gren!"

Just then, a massive white-furred wolf leapt the wall that surrounded the castle yard and charged full speed at the High King. To their credit, at least a dozen of the archers scattered among the soldiers drew arrows and aimed at the wolves. Luckily for them, no one loosed. Even when the great wolf's huge paws landed on the High King's shoulders and sent him onto his back, they held their arrows. Commander Lyle was suddenly terrified. The shoulder of the wolf that was strolling leisurely past him came up to his chin. His hand went to his sword hilt but stopped when he saw Mikahl fighting away nothing more than slavering tongues and wagging tails. The warning growl of another wolf directed at the archers snapped the commander into action. "Double time it out of here, now," he screamed, and the men started complying.

Within seconds three wolves were crowded over Mikahl, all wagging away excitedly. He spoke loving greetings to them while three other great wolves came over the fence and paced around the yard, watching their pack mates.

The two gatehouse guards looked stupefied. They wouldn't have been able to stop the wolves from getting into the castle yard had they tried their best, and they knew it. Then a gigantic boot, with a wolf skull for a buckle, stepped down before them. One guard fell to the ground unconscious and the other ran into their weather shelter and shut the door with a bang. It sounded as if he pulled the bolt shut after himself. General Escott and his fifty-man escort were left outside the locked gate, unable to even see inside, much less defend the king if it became necessary.

“King Mikahl,” Borg boomed and bowed at his waist politely. “King Aldar sends his regards. The wolves somehow managed to get him to let them come with me.”

“Hey, Borg,” Mikahl called, trying to sit up. “The bark lizard cloak looks great.” Far better than the patchwork goatskin cloak he’d last seen the giant wearing. Borg still wore the menacing looking wolf skulls on his belt buckle and boot shins, though, and his tree trunk staff looked to have a few new dark, sticky stains on its end.

“Haw,” the giant barked out a glum laugh. “It does look good, but it makes me sad when I think about what Loudin lost for bringing the skin to me.”

“Aye.” Mikahl took a moment to remember his friend and the horrible death he found in the Giant Mountains.

“I brought you a present,” Borg said, dropping the oversize patchwork sack to the ground with a dull thud. A putrid smell roiled through the air. “I’d rather present it to both you and the Lion Lord, if he is around.”

Mikahl finally got to his feet, but stayed where he was scratching the three great wolves behind the ears in turn. “It stinks,” he observed of the sack, while wondering what was inside it.

“You should be glad you weren’t the one carrying it for days and days,” the giant chuckled. “And this is from Hyden Skyler.” He held forth a scroll that looked tiny in his huge hand.

“Hyden?” Mikahl froze, feeling a sudden wave of hope wash over him. “He’s really alive? You’ve seen him?”

“He is,” Borg answered simply. “He told me about the giant you two found in the Dragon Queen’s dungeon. I wish you had killed her and her wizards more slowly.”

“Aye.” Mikahl nodded his agreement as he put the scroll in his pocket for later.

He couldn’t remember the name the emaciated giant they found had spoken. He had it written down, though, and had been planning on making a journey into the Giant Mountains to tell Borg. A sudden pang of guilt came over him. It should have already been done. He dropped his head in shame. “Who was she?” he asked.

“My sister,” Borg replied. “You did her honor by avenging her death, Mikahl. I have brought you a small token of my appreciation. Is Lord Gregory here?”

“Aye,” Mikahl said. “I’ll send for him. My new palace is being built with rooms and entries to accommodate your people. I’m sorry I can’t invite you into this one. Would you like some refreshments?”

“A keg of ale will suffice for now,” Borg said. “Maybe a boar, or a doe, for later.”

Mikahl laughed. “I’ll have someone cart something around from the kitchen for you.”

He told a steward to fetch Borg a keg and to summon Lord Gregory to the yard, then he jogged the short distance to the kitchen himself. He commanded the cooks to prepare a feast. The head cook looked at him crazily when he told them to roast three full boars instead of just one, but he didn’t dare argue with his king. As Mikahl was returning, he heard Borg’s booming voice outside. He stepped back around to find lady Trella and Queen Rosa speaking to Borg from the second story balcony of Lady Trella’s apartment. Rosa giggled girlishly and gave Mikahl a wave, and then the two women disappeared back inside the castle.

“Who is Pin, and why does he seek the fountain of Leif Repline?” Borg asked Mikahl when he strode back into the yard. “I think your queen spelled me,” the giant continued. “...for I just promised I would look out for this person while he makes his way through our land.”

“His name is Phen,” Mikahl laughed. “She calls him Pin. He and his dwarven pal, Master Oarly, are fools of the first order. Phen’s is a long story that I’ll share with you over supper. I’ve ordered a feast prepared in your honor.”

“The whole city of Dreen will want to celebrate once they see the gift I’ve brought you,” Borg boasted.

Just then, Lord Gregory came out of the castle and smiled broadly up at Borg. “Well met, Southern Guardian,” the Lion Lord said, using Borg’s official title. “I hope my warning about the loosed demon reached your people in time.”

Borg nodded and smiled, then picked up the sack he’d brought. He dumped the hideous demon’s head out of the bag onto the castle yard, the demon that had recently torn through Dreen. His big face split into a huge grin and the whole pack of great wolves howled out in pride.

Chapter Four

The light that carried through the sea into the Serpent's Eye from outside was fading as the tide rose. Phen cast a spell. A small sphere of light the size of an apple appeared in his open palm then slowly rose and hovered at a point about a foot over his head. He looked around the cavern. Oarly was standing with his feet planted. He was weaving slightly to and fro with the slack bow line of the dinghy held loosely in his hand. Most of his bulbous face was buried in his tangled beard.

"Oarly," Phen said a little loudly. "Tie the line around that stalagmite and let's make ready."

The dwarf jumped at the mention of his name, as if he'd been in a daze, but after a snarl he settled back into his standing stupor. Phen huffed with frustration and then bent down and picked up a loose pebble. He threw it rather hard and it bounced off the side of Oarly's head. The impact sounded like the thump of a ripe melon. Oarly rubbed the spot absently and sneered at Phen. Three heartbeats later the hairy stump took a step back and yelped loudly. "By Doon, lad!" Oarly rubbed his head briskly now. "What was that for?"

"You're drunk," Phen returned. "Now tie off the skiff."

"I'm not even close to drunk, lad," Oarly boasted as he finally tied the line. When he stood back up he pulled his axe from his back and puffed his wide chest out. "Now where is that serpent?"

Phen made an expression of pure terror and pointed beyond Oarly into the darkness. "It's... It's right behind you." His voice was trembling with fear.

Oarly looked at him for a long moment and then let out a huff. "Bah! You'll not get this dwarf that easily."

Phen smirked and grabbed a burlap sack out of the boat. Oarly glanced back over his shoulder, just in case.

The natural-formed cave looked much the same as it had the last time they'd been in it. The large rough chamber had two passages leading up and away from the sea pool that took up nearly half of its rocky bottom.

Phen started down the smaller right hand tunnel. As soon as he was a dozen paces ahead, Oarly pulled a new flask from his boot and took a deep swig. Phen just laughed at him and carried on. A wave made a loud smacking-sucking sound against the rocks as the tide seal broke in a wave's valley. Phen laughed because the sound sent Oarly stumbling quickly to catch up with him.

The narrow tunnel was about a hundred paces deep. Phen knelt at the end of it looking curiously at the ancient skeleton on the floor. It was that of the elf he called Loak, whose ring and journal had helped Phen track down and destroy the Silver Skull of Zorellin.

He thought about all that had led to his being turned into a statue. Only Claret's powerful magic had prevented him from remaining an immobile monument for eternity. He and the dragon had more-or-less saved the day at the battle of O'Dakahn. Phen achieved his goal of becoming a hero like Hyden Hawk and King Mikahl, though he hated passionately the name he'd earned for himself. He hadn't ever intended to be known to the people of the realm as the Marble Boy. Oarly wouldn't let him forget the title.

Phen couldn't wait to get his pigment back. He hoped that Claret's suspicions about the pool in the Giant Mountains were founded. It was a long and treacherous journey to undertake, and there was no certainty it would help, but it was a chance he was willing to take. He would do anything to rid himself of the marbled skin, and the title, Marble Boy, and besides that, he just wanted to be plain old Phen again.

"All right, ease back to where we can see the entry chamber," he said. "Once the serpent slithers out to feed, I'll put on the ring and go get the emerald. Then I'll come back here." He squeezed past Oarly and started back out of the tunnel. "All you have to do is warn me if the serpent returns."

"I'll do more than warn ye, lad," Oarly bragged drunkenly. "I'll have that sea snake on the fire when you get back."

"Aye," Phen laughed. "Fight the beast, if you want to, just be sure and warn me if it returns."

Back near where the tunnel opened onto the main chamber, Phen dropped the contents of his sack out onto the floor. A small bundle of dried meat, a wheel of cheese, and a cord of

dried wood spilled out of it. Oarly snatched up the rations while Phen used a flaming finger spell to start the dwarf a fire. Once he was done, he extinguished his magical light. Unlike the dwarves that had returned from the underground cities to aid in the battle against Pael, who could see as well in the dark as they could in the sun, Oarly had been among the dwarves who'd stayed on the surface and lived in Xwarda. Without the fire's light, or Phen's orb, he wouldn't be able to see it all.

With the fire lit, Phen stood at the mouth of the tunnel, waiting for the serpent to leave.

"Here," Oarly handed Phen a long dagger. "Take this, just in case."

Phen looked at it. It reminded him of the dagger Hyden Hawk had given him before they went into the blue dragon's lair. He took the weapon with a nod of thanks. If he hadn't lost Hyden's dagger on a zard ship, several thousand lives could have been saved. He could have run it through the Dragon Queen's heart before she let loose all those demons into the world.

He made to slip this new knife into his belt, but realized that his clothes, and his belt, were as stony as he was. There were only two things on his person that he could remove: Loak's ring, and the medallion that held Claret's dragon tear, and even they looked made from marble.

A scraping sound drew his attention to the other tunnel.

"What is it that I'm supposed to do?" Oarly asked with a blank expression on his face.

Phen turned and looked at him severely. The dwarf grinned devilishly back at him.

Phen shook his head, and though he didn't need air anymore, he went through the motions of sucking in a breath. A green phosphorescent glow was wavering at the mouth of the larger tunnel. Soon, the viper-like head of the serpent was hovering above the floor as the thing's bulk slid out of the opening. The room was filled with the strange green-tinted glow. The head darted instantly toward the mouth of the smaller tunnel, where Phen stood. Only the fact that opening was smaller than its skull kept it from snatching Phen up and swallowing him. Its milky pupil-less eyes narrowed peevishly. A forked tongue shot out and flickered across Phen's face. Oarly was holding his battle axe's blade up over his face to keep his eyes from settling on the creature.

Phen felt the tingling of the dragon tear medallion around his neck. He could see it in the reflection of the serpent's eyes, showering out a fountain of prismatic sparkles. The flickering tongue shot out at the dragon's tear and tasted the air around it. For a long moment the serpent held its head there, as if it were deciding what to do about the intruders. Then it finally eased back. Phen glimpsed the rows of palm-sized suction cups that ran the length of its undulating body. Only when the thing was over the pool did the serpent take its strange gaze off of Phen. When it did, it slithered right into the water and its glow eased quickly out of the cavern and through the now submerged opening. It had to be a hundred paces long from tip to tail. Phen forced away his fear and slipped Loak's ring onto his finger. Immediately, he faded from sight. He glanced at the dagger in his hand to make sure it had vanished too. It had.

He turned to see Oarly still hunched behind his axe blade. As quietly as he could, Phen crept over to the dwarf's side and let out a loud yell. He was rewarded with a new fetid stench. He almost gagged and vomited as he laughed his way across the entry chamber and down the other passage to the serpent's lair. Behind him, Oarly was cursing and swearing, and trying to regain the wits that had been scared out of him.

As Phen walked cautiously down the long winding tunnel, Oarly braved the water of the main chamber and washed the mess out of his britches and small clothes. He'd done the exact same thing last time they were here, only then there had been no fire to dry his things with. He wasted no time wringing the filth out of his garments and hurrying back to the safety of the smaller tunnel. He was glad he'd brought that last flask for he was shivery and cold. After laying his clothes by the fire, he took a deep swig and sat back with his axe. The stone floor was so cold on his arse, though, that he jumped up. The fire was too small and he was getting chills. After another long pull from the flask, he began hopping and pacing around.

Phen was finding the major flaw in his plan as he neared the darkened serpent pit. He couldn't see. If he cast his magical orb of light, it would hover over his invisible head and throw his shadow. He decided that, up until he snatched the jewel off of its pedestal, it didn't really matter if he was seen. He was immediately thankful for the light. A few more steps would

have carried him tumbling down into the shallow pool that ringed the unnaturally formed chamber. He took in the room and felt a deep sense of awe at the beauty of it. Wicked stalactites hung down from the ceiling, dripping water into the pool full of wiggling two and three foot miniature serpents. They were identical, save for size, to the one that had just left.

Phen had a theory on why these little serpents stayed so small and guarded the glittery egg-sized emerald, if in fact that was their purpose at all. The water in the moat probably wasn't sea water, and there wasn't any food. They only ate what the larger serpent brought back, so they couldn't grow. He slipped down from the edge of the opening and felt his heavy feet go into the water. He couldn't tell the temperature of the liquid due to of the condition of his nerve endings. He cupped a handful of it, though, and brought it to his mouth. Tentatively he touched his tongue to the water. It wasn't salty, and he decided that he needed to investigate why he could still taste. As he waded across the waist deep pool to the island of coins and jewels, he studied the metal statues. He didn't notice, when he was there before, the wide curving swords at their belts, nor the ruby eyes that seemed to follow him. He looked down and saw that the little serpents were furiously snapping and biting at his stony flesh with needle-like teeth. If a normal man attempted this, Phen mused, he wouldn't make it across before he was stripped to the bone. Some of them were attaching themselves with their suction cups. He would have to have Oarly burn them off. He was certain that if they escaped into the salty sea water they would grow to be as big as the other one, and he didn't want to be responsible for loosing a bunch of serpents along the coast. There were enough stories of such beasts attacking ships and wrestling them to the bottom of the sea already.

Phen's feet found the base of the mountain of wealth and he started to climb up it. By the time he was standing amid the skeleton guardians, at least a dozen of the little serpents were clinging to him. He took a few calming breaths and decided that the light didn't matter anymore. If he could see the serpents clinging to his invisible skin, then so could anything else. He could burn them off with a flaming finger but he'd just pick up more of them on his way back across the moat.

So much for planning, he thought as he shook his head. He tried to force the jittery excitement and fear from his mind. He needed another way to keep the skeletons off of him

after he grabbed the jewel. Phen's confidence always seemed to override his better judgment, but even as he realized this he spoke his next spell, stopping at the last word so that he could loose its effect at the desired moment. Then, without another thought, he grabbed the emerald from the pedestal and gave the nearest skeleton a good shove toward the other two. He stepped back across the moat as quickly as he could. There was no doubt the skeletons were now going to come for him. The one he'd toppled had wriggled and tried to gain its balance on its way over.

The great weight of Phen's body, and the growing number of serpents sucking onto him, was making his crossing slower than he'd hoped. He could hear the coins and jewels sliding into the water as the iron skeletons took up pursuit. Phen felt like he weighed a ton. He was nearly covered with the eel-like things. The added bulk threatened to drag him down, but he pushed himself onward. Finally, just as he felt the thumping tink of one of those curved sword blades across his stony shoulders, he made it to the other side. He heaved himself up and back-kicked at the cherry-eyed thing. It went sliding back into the moat as he pushed his way into the tunnel floor. Only two of the skeletons were crossing. The other was trying to get its footing on the loose mound of coins. Phen had hoped to have all three of them in the water, but this would have to do.

As the closest skeleton reached up to pull itself into the tunnel, Phen booted it back. He felt the dragon's tear medallion at his neck tingle as its power flowed into his spell. He'd expected it, but the amount in which it magnified his casting was surprising. Slowly at first, the moat's water stilled and clouded as the surface iced over. Within moments it was frozen solid. The eels were trapped in place and the two ice-locked skeletons were thrashing their arms and making silent faces as their eyes burned angry. The other skeleton started across the ice. It kicked and took two steps, then fell hard as its metal feet lost all traction. Phen dropped to his belly and rolled back and forth across the cavern floor, crushing the dozens of flailing little eels that were stuck to him. Most of them let go, but not all. Without bothering with the last few, he tore off down the tunnel. Oarly and his axe were better suited to deal with the remaining skeleton. The sudden thought that it was still several hours until the tide receded, and that the pool wouldn't stay frozen that whole time, came to him. Phen was trying to think, but when he

darted into the narrow passage all thoughts left his brain completely. He couldn't fathom the sight he saw.

Orly was standing by the fire, naked from the waist down, tipping a flask back while swinging his free arm round and round for balance. After he gulped his sip, he started singing and dancing a jig.

Chapter 5

Borg was correct. The whole city of Dreen did decide to celebrate the death of the demon that had stormed through. Since the head was far too large to post on a pike outside the castle, Borg jammed it down onto the castle's highest flag pole. People all over the city came to see it, and the pure-blooded giant that killed it. During the private feast, which was held in one of the castle's many stable yards, the number of spectators outside the castle walls began to grow. Borg, holding a full-size loaf of fresh baked bread that looked like a dinner roll in his hand, and a wide-necked floor vase full of ale in the other, announced that later he would recount the doing of the deed for them all.

Servants and castle staff spread the word, and by the time the feast was finished there were thousands of people gathered outside the castle. Luckily, General Escott and his troops were at hand to keep the gathering from getting disorderly. Many people were drunk, or trying to get that way, but most were just curious and happy to be hearing something besides the dire news of post-war horrors.

Mikahl made sure the great wolves were fed. Three does, freshly killed by the Royal Huntsmen, were laid out for them. Mikahl didn't want to hear Borg's story, he wanted to read the scroll from Hyden. He took a lantern and the rolled parchment out where the wolves were. It had been several months since he'd been forced to leave his friend, who'd been deathly ill from hellborn scorpion venom. He'd left Hyden in the depths of the Dragon Queen's dungeon and had thought him dead for a long time.

The oohs, awes, and gasps from the crowd as Borg strode up to the castle's palisade and leaned his elbows on it, drew his attention. The giant's warm laugh rumbled through the cool evening air. Mikahl smiled, knowing that the citizens of Dreen were about to be entranced by a wonderful tale. Giants were the very best of storytellers. Mikahl wished the people from Westland could be present too, but most of all he wished King Jarrek's people could hear.

Already the giant's voice was building the tale. Never had so many people, gathered in the streets, been so eerily quiet. Only the panting of Oof, and Urp at Mikahl's side could be heard. He gave them each a pat on the neck then reached down and scratched Huffa behind

the ears. Huffa shivered and made a circle. Her toothy maw opened wide into a tongue-curling yawn. The grazing pen they were in was well kept. Mikahl found a workbench under an old gnarled oak and sat down. The great wolves gathered around him, as if he were one of them. Even the wolves he didn't know seemed to accept him as one of pack.

Once he was comfortable, he broke the seal on the scroll and looked it over. The writing was neat, but far from carefully scribed. It made Mikahl laugh. Hyden had grown up in the mountains, illiterate. He was the best archer in the realm, though, and a self-proclaimed master wizard.

Mikahl took a deep breath and began to read:

High King Mikahl Collum,

Mik, I am alive and well, and recovering from the poisonous bite of that thing. I am with my people in the mountains, learning from the goddess and preparing for my destiny. I ask that you keep this quiet. A few others will have to be told, as this missive will explain. I know that I can trust you to carry out my requests directly, and efficiently. I will, as soon as I can, return to the kingdoms and grace you with my presence as repayment.

Mikahl laughed at that. He knew Hyden wasn't egotistical in the least. The man thought he was a jester, though. Mikahl couldn't help but smile as he read on.

Firstly, the long bow Vaegon gave me is still in the dungeon at Lakeside Castle. Please have it retrieved and given into Phen's care. As you know, it is priceless to me.

Secondly, Talon has found me and I understand the condition he and Phen share. Please inform Phen that I will accompany him into the Giant Mountains to seek the pool Claret told him of. Have Lord Gregory give him directions to my clan's village, and ask Master Oarly to come as a personal favor to me. At your choosing, a small escort should be sent with them, as there are still several stray demons about, not to

mention the other hazards of the mountains. A few capable swords, and an archer or two should do. If Phen can bring the bow at that time, I would be grateful.

Thirdly, and most importantly, you must be made aware of some things. The thing that used to be my brother is still loose in the planes of hell. It has grown into an enormous power and has assumed the role of Abbadon, the Master Warlord of the hells. He will relentlessly try to find a way into our world. He saw you dispatch Shaella. I believe he will seek vengeance for the death of his love. You aren't in any immediate danger, as there are no open gateways in existence that I know of. The goddess of my people has told me of a device that will allow you and me to banish the Abbadon to a deeper, darker place, where he won't be able to travel the world of man any longer. This artifact lies beyond the Giant Mountains, and after Phen and Talon have been revived in the Leif Repline fountain, we will seek it out. Please choose the party well - no family men - as some of them will not return.

Xwarda must be guarded at all times. The foundation of the city is pure Wardstone, as you know. If the Abbadon, or any of his minions, managed to manipulate that substance, he could breach the barrier between the worlds permanently. This must never be allowed to happen. Queen Willa and General Spyra must be told of the threat as well. Proper defenses must be manned. It may be tomorrow or it may be a dozen years from now, but my brother, the Abbadon, will come. We must be prepared. Below is a list of scrolls and texts I need Phen and Master Oarly to bring to me.

Finally, I do not know what became of the staff Queen Shaella used to communicate with my brother. She held it in her right hand as you took off her head. You must find it and lock it away in a vault, or have Master Amill, or another qualified wizard, spell it powerless. If there is a force that will help the Abbadon find another gateway, or a flaw in the barrier that exists, the Spectral Orb atop that staff is it.

Now that all of that is out of the way, I'm happy for you, and pleased that you somehow managed to save Princess Rosa. Tell the Lion Lord that Tylen sends his regards, as do my mother and father. Sadly, my grandfather passed away. Tell Lord

Gregory that my Uncle Condlin has assumed the position of Eldest, and that you and your wife are forever welcome here. He asked me to tell you to make sure that the Summer's Day Festival is crowded next year. My people depend on the trade there. Even you could've gotten your name on the Spire this year.

I must close this missive. Borg is growing impatient, and his stinking sack is offending the womenfolk. Once Phen arrives here, I'll have him contact Dreen's mage with a sending. Give my respects to Willa, Jarrek, and the dwarves.

Your friend,

Hyden

Mikahl just stared at the parchment for a long while.

General Spyra was now Lord Spyra. The man was trying to reorganize Westland with the help of Lady Able. Master Wizard Amill had been killed by the dwarves at the Battle of O'Dakahn. Hyden Hawk must not have heard.

Borg was well into his second tale. He was now telling the story of how his people once killed or rogue dragon without the aid of magic. Mikahl could hear the giant's booming voice carrying through the otherwise silent night. At his feet the great wolves had fallen asleep, save for Huffa, who kept a watchful eye over the rest. Through all the dire warnings and talk of magical artifacts, Mikahl's mind kept coming back to the same strange fact. Neither Phen nor Master Oarly were at the feast earlier. As he thought about it more, he decided that he hadn't seen either of them for a few days. He began to worry about them. He could only imagine what they were up to.

Oarly saw a glowing ball and three little serpents dangling as if they were trying to swim through the air to get at it. He stopped his advance and looked at the flask in his hand, then back at the scene. Phen's voice startled him so badly that he dropped the container into the fire. When the flames flared from the alcohol he stepped back.

"Oarly," Phen yelled in a panic. "Get your clothes on. No, forget it, get your axe. There's a skeleton coming, and two more back at--"

Oarly's eyes went wide and locked onto something behind what he now realized was the invisible Phen. The boy whirled around and Oarly saw a shiny sword come sinking down at Phen's chest. It hit Phen with a clank and it appeared that the hardness of the boy's condition startled the thing wielding it. Suddenly the skeleton went stumbling backwards, the result of an invisible fist, Oarly assumed.

Oarly came charging out of the tunnel with a yelp and bounced off of Phen. The half-naked dwarf went careening off at an odd angle with his axe held high. His battle cry faded into a cry of dismay. It looked as if the axe were too heavy for him and he was having to run to stay under it. He righted himself just as Phen pulled Loak's ring off of his finger and became visible again.

Phen didn't know whether to laugh or cringe at the sight of the hairy naked dwarf. The skeleton stepped heavily into a swing of its silvery blade. Oarly met the blow with his axe and cleaved the thing's sword arm completely from its body. Phen felt the wave of relief wash over him. When the skeleton bent down to try and get the sword with its other hand, he strode up to it and kicked it with a heavy marble boot. The skeleton's legs crumbled, and it half fell into the pool. For a long time it thrashed about menacingly, but it was obviously no longer a threat.

"Where are your clothes?" Phen asked.

Oarly looked down and realized that he was naked from the waist down. "Bah!" he growled and stalked off towards the narrow passage.

"There are two more of those skeletons back there," Phen's said. "We'd better hurry, before the ice I put them in melts."

"Aye, lad," Oarly said. "If ya hadn't scared me shitless, I wouldn't be needing to get my clothes back on now, would I?"

Phen took a step back. He didn't think he'd ever seen Oarly so mad before. He had to fight to hold in his mirth.

"Look," he said, holding up the egg-sized emerald for the dwarf to see.

Oarly looked at it, gave a nod, then continued his tirade. “We got buckets full of jewels left over from that blasted dragon’s lair. I got scars from getting that treasure. Brady died for it. What good is one more jewel, lad? I just don’t understand.”

“This one is magic. You played like you were dying in that lair, Oarly. You made me cry when I thought you’d died.” Phen turned toward the larger tunnel. He could hear the skeletons’ loud scraping approach. “If I made you shit yer britches a dozen times, we still wouldn’t be even.”

Oarly’s anger vanished. He even barked out a laugh. He knew he’d made the boy cry like a babe. He pulled his boots on and grabbed the flask he’d dropped. Most of it had indeed spilled onto the fire. He still drained the last few drops.

“All right, lad, let’s see what you’ve stirred up, then.”

Together they charged off into the larger cavern. One of the skeletons had pulled itself in two, and the torso was trying to drag itself along the floor by its arms. Seeing that it was no real threat, Oarly gave it a wide berth. Phen took a long stride and planted his heavy foot on its rib cage. The thing rattled and then grew still. Phen leaned down for a closer look at its jeweled eyes. The rubies looked like onyx pebbles now that the power in them had been extinguished.

“You don’t even need me, Marble Boy,” Oarly chuckled. “That blade that slashed across your body didn’t even scratch your robe.”

“Stop calling me Marble Boy,” Phen yelled. He hated that. He hated that he sounded like a little child in a play yard over it, too. “I won’t be Marble Boy for long, Oarly. You can wager on that.”

“Awe, lad, you just don’t know,” the dwarf replied, pointing down at the serpent-covered third skeleton lying still at the bottom of the moat. Somehow the little eel-like creatures had survived the freeze. They wiggled and squirmed through the slushy melting ice as if nothing had happened. “You will be Marble Boy forever.” Oarly laughed heartily and clasped Phen around the waist in a brotherly hug. “As long as you live, you’re doomed to be remembered as the boy made of marble who rode the red dragon and saved us at the Battle of

O'Dakahn. Only if you somehow manage to magic yourself into a king, or a god, can you shake such a nickname.”

Just then a loud splash erupted from behind them in the entry cavern. Both of them turned and started quickly back towards it. If it was the serpent then they were possibly trapped between it and all the little ones in the pool. As they ran, Phen gave the emerald to Oarly and fumbled for Loak's ring. It was hard to get it back off of the medallion chain and onto his finger while holding the dagger. He almost dropped it. Finally he put the dagger between his teeth and slipped the ring on.

The opening of the big tunnel wasn't blocked off yet, but they could see that the entry cavern was filled with the slithering green glow of the serpent.

“I'll look,” Phen said.

“Extinguish your light, fool,” Oarly hissed. “It'll see you, if it hasn't already.”

“Oh.” Phen had forgotten about the light spell entirely.

Suddenly the place went dark save for the continuously moving glow that radiated off of the serpent. Phen eased down to the big cavern and looked. The serpent was in front of the smaller tunnel, intently flicking its tongue as far in as it could reach. Phen felt the jewel on the medallion around his neck begin to tingle and knew instantly that the serpent would sense it.

“Out of the tunnel now, Oarly,” he yelled. “Stay against the wall. We can't let it trap us inside.”

The great head of the serpent lunged at Phen's fountaining jewel. Its huge toothy maw opening wide as it came. Phen realized then that being invisible before this sinuous monster did absolutely no good, but by the time the thought finished in his head, he was covered in a cloud of fresh fishy smell, and the serpent's mouth was closing down over him.

“For Dooooon!” he heard Oarly scream, but Phen was yanked off of his feet and the world turned into a dark spinning frenzy.

The End of the sample

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is scheduled for eBook release in late June, with an official release date of July 4th 2012

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