

The Labyrinth

Kenneth McDonald
km4101@netzero.net

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Works by Kenneth McDonald

The Labyrinth
Of Spells and Demons
Wizard's Shield

The Godswar Trilogy

Paths of the Chosen
Choice of the Fallen
Fall of Creation

Daran's Journey

Heart of a Hero
Soul of a Coward
Will of a Warrior
Courage of a Champion

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Chapter 1

It was a glorious spring day in Sacreth, the Valley Kingdom. The sky was a soft expanse of blue, unmarred by even a wisp of cloud, and the brilliant radiance of the sun

was eased by a gentle breeze from the west, bringing with it a clean smell of wildflowers and freshly-cut grass.

The sun's rays gleamed on the pristine but aging buildings of the University, along the cool banks of the Roe River. They shone on the vast open space of the Quadrangle, the heart of the campus, where hundreds of students—and in many cases, their professors—were passing the day in study, sport, or simple relaxation in the company of their friends. Birds fluttered by, or sang from perches on the hundreds of trees planted in strips along the edges of the neatly-manicured expanses of grass that dominated the square.

The southern edge of the Quadrangle was demarcated by Avellin Hall, named after one of the six mages who had founded the University just over four hundred years ago. The students referred to the structure as “Caterpillar Hall,” and the building, with the three wings that had been added since its original construction, did resemble a narrow, segmented creature, stretching out to fit every stride of available space. A portion even intruded onto a corner of the Quadrangle, as if menacing the adjacent Tallwarden Hall.

One of the more notable features of Avellin Hall was its basement library. Originally just one of several adjuncts to the campus's main library, with its vaulted halls and storied collections of tens of thousands of texts, over the years the room under Caterpillar Hall had been claimed by the senior students of the University as something of a private demesne. In the winter months, the chamber was full of them, sitting on the comfortable couches near the two huge stone hearths, or working at one of the thirty-four semiprivate carrels situated throughout the room.

On this spring day, however, the library was nearly deserted. The slanted horizontal windows set near the ceiling, at ground level outside, had been left open to allow fresh air and the sounds of happiness to drift in from the adjacent quad. That combination had proved too powerful to ignore, and the long tables in the center of the room were littered with open books and parchments that had been hastily abandoned by would-be scholars. Most of the spelled lamps that dangled from long chains from the ceiling were dark, leaving the corners of the room draped in mysterious shadow.

Other than a pair of young women talking quietly on one of the couches in front of the darkened hearths, the only other occupant in the library was a man working at one of the carrels on the far side of the room. He looked as though he'd been there a while, with a small pot of tea and an earthenware mug forgotten at his right elbow, and a scatter of books and scrolls forming a rampart in front of him. He was deep into another book propped up against that mound, referring to it frequently as he made notes in a tiny script on a long roll of parchment. He looked young, almost too young to have earned the certificate in advanced magical studies that was the informal badge of entry to the Caterpillar Library. His hair was a sandy blonde mop that was a bit disheveled, and there was a slight smear of what might have been ink along the line of his jaw on the right side of his face. He bit his lip in an absent gesture as he continued writing on the parchment, pausing only to refresh the ink in his steel-nibbed pen. His lips twisted into a frown as the parchment parted in a tiny tear; like most of the scrolls used by students, this one was worn thin, already scraped clean several times. The student carefully avoided the tear, and started a new line of text, his pen moving in a smooth and constant stream over the paper.

"Now, isn't this just a sad and pathetic sight. I told you we'd find him here, chained to a study carrel."

The student carefully put down his pen on a piece of blotter and turned to see three others standing behind him. They were a disparate group, but all young and all clad in the unadorned half-robos that was the unofficial uniform of the University. The speaker was a tall, handsome man in his early twenties, with dark hair and penetrating green eyes. He was flanked by a slender woman and a short, somewhat rounded man, who carried a fat satchel under one arm.

"Some of us have studying to do, Iskanderon," the seated student said.

"It's a beautiful day outside, Keric," the young woman said. Her name was Alis, and her eyes glittered as she looked at him. Keric had had a crush on her during their first year; they'd gone out together a few times, but it had not progressed further.

"You know, if you spend too much time staring at those books, you're going to ruin your eyesight," Iskanderon said.

"That's a myth," his shorter, pudgier companion said. "At least, ocular degeneration doesn't begin to set in until the fourth decade of life in most cases, and as long as there is proper lighting—"

Iskanderon interrupted him with a laugh. "Peace, Draef," he said. "We're not here for one of your recitations."

"Why are you here?" Keric asked. "You said you were looking for me."

"We need you, Keric," Alis said.

"That, is true," Iskanderon said. He leaned casually against the wall of the adjacent carrel, which creaked slightly under his weight. He folded his arms in front of his chest and nodded at Keric. "Talith Zran has suffered a ruptured appendix."

"Oh? Is he all right?" Keric asked.

"Fortunately he was near the infirmary when it happened," Alis said. "He's responded well to Healing, and Dean Zharas says that there is no sign of taint remaining within his body that could complicate his recovery."

"Yes, yes, he'll be fine, won't even miss Examinations," Iskanderon said. "The problem is what his mishap does to our chances this year."

Keric blinked. "Chances?"

"Neva's teeth, you really are out of the flow of events, aren't you? Yes, our chances. The Labyrinth competition? Perhaps you've heard of it."

Keric grunted. "Yes. Well, I have to admit, I haven't been following all of the talk around this year's contest. In case you haven't noticed, I'm trying to get into Professor Padronis's Advanced Magical Theory seminar, and he's only accepting four new students this year."

"Bah, you'll get in, I have no doubt that you'll make full professor in five years, and have a Belker Prize under your belt in ten. My immediate concern, however, is the Labyrinth. In case you hadn't heard, the competition is in three days, and the scrolls lack a candidate."

"Why don't you do it?" Keric asked him. "The crowd will love you, I'm sure."

Iskanderon smiled, revealing perfect white teeth. "Oh, I fully intend to have a seat on the Mage Council by the time I'm thirty," he said, buffing his fingernails on the breast of his robe. "But I know my weaknesses, and raw magical talent is one of them. We need someone who can win."

"The scrolls have lost the last five years," Draef said. "Even before Talith's misfortune, the odds-makers in the city put the odds against us at seven to one."

"I suspect they're in the double-digits now," Iskanderon said. "Look, Keric. We need a good entry, and you're one of the best in the current crop of scroll mages. Everyone knows that." He glanced at his companions. "Alis here is good, but she hasn't gotten her certificate yet." Keric looked at her; she flushed and lowered her eyes, but not before he saw something there that helped explain what she was doing here. He felt a stab of jealousy, an unpleasant feeling that he quickly quashed. It occurred to him that Iskanderon had probably brought her on purpose, to sway him. It would be just like him, he thought.

"As for Draef," Iskanderon was saying, "Well, he's got the magic, but we both know that the Labyrinth involves physical tests as well." Draef merely nodded, accepting the dig as simple truth. Iskanderon folded his hands together and pointed his index fingers at Keric. "And you play sek'kabar."

"I've hardly picked up my racquet this year," Keric said, but he could feel his resolve weakening. Iskanderon obviously sensed it as well, for he forged ahead, rising and stepping forward to face him directly.

"Consider this, then. Scoring well in the competition is a good way to attract the attention of the deans," he said. "Maybe even the Council. Certainly a good showing would look favorable before an evaluation panel."

While that was true, Keric knew that the argument worked both ways. If he embarrassed himself in the Labyrinth, it would stay in the memory of the University and its leadership. Even he, who hardly followed the details of the annual competition, knew of several young mages whose spectacular failures were still discussed in the halls and classrooms of the school.

"The shield mages are fielding a competitor this year," Draef noted. "It'll be the first true four-way competition in a few years. They're submitting Ashandra Hael."

"I've heard the name," Keric admitted. "Have heard she's good."

Iskanderon smiled. "She is. Some say you're better."

Keric saw through the obvious ploy, but as he looked past Iskanderon, Alis smiled at him. "Please, Keric. We really need you."

He let out a heavy sigh and fielded the last arrow in his quiver. "As you said, it's only three days to the competition. No time to prepare a proper cache of scrolls, even if I postponed work on my portfolio for Professor Padronis."

"We've got you covered, chief," Iskanderon said. He nodded at Draef, who took out a leather scroll case from his satchel.

"Most of the senior students amongst the scrolls contributed something," Draef said. "They wrote them for Talith, but I don't think there's anything in there that will give you any trouble. Three of them are my own work. The inventory's in the lid."

Keric took the case. There was a long pause. "Oh, very well," he said.

"Excellent!" Iskanderon said. "I'll see to the submission materials myself, no need to do anything further but be there in three days." He grinned at the others. "I think this may be our year."

"I think that I may regret this," Keric replied. He put the scroll case on the desk in front of him. "I'd better get to work reviewing these, if I'm going to be ready."

“Of course, of course, we’ll leave you to it,” Iskanderon said. The three started to leave, but Iskanderon paused, leaning on the wall of the carrel. “Oh, thought you should know; rumor is that the Paladin himself is designing the course this year.” He shot a final smile at Keric, and left before he could respond.

Keric only shook his head. “Wonderful.” He carefully rolled up the scroll he’d been working on, and put it along with the book he’d been using back amongst the pile. He opened the scroll case, and glanced at the inventory in the lid before he drew out a roll of parchments of varied color and size. Spreading them out to his left, he stared at them for a moment, then took the first one from the top and started to read.

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Chapter 2

“Absolutely not. I will not wear those... clothes.”

“Come on, man, it’s tradition!”

Keric’s expression soured at Iskanderon’s reply. The taller man grasped a sleeve of the robe that Alis was holding up, and lifted the fabric to reveal the full intensity of the colored patterns woven into it. “Well, it is a bit... bright, but this is what the public expects of magic-users, it fits the conventional image in the mind of the plebs. And it helps the audience tell the competitors apart. You know that you can hardly see anything through the Viewing Pool unless you have one of the closer seats.”

“It is ridiculous,” Keric said. “And impractical; why, I don’t imagine I could walk ten steps in that without tripping.”

“Talith was a good deal taller than you,” Alis said. “We adjusted it as much as we could, given the limited time-frame.”

“I’m just surprised that there isn’t a pointed hat to go with it,” Keric observed, dryly.

“What, you forgot the hat?” Iskanderon said to Alis. At Keric’s scowl, he laughed and added, “Kidding! I am only kidding! Come on, all of the other competitors will be wearing similar finery. You don’t want the scrolls to look drab by comparison. Alis, talk to him, will you? I need to make sure we don’t miss our mark for the introductions. I saw the Paladin himself earlier, with all of the deans; it’s a full house for this year.” His grin grew wider, if anything, as he headed to the door of the small changing room, leaving Keric and Alis alone.

“You know, he’s using you as much as he is me,” Keric said to her.

“Kander is... well, he is what he is,” Alis said. She held the robe up against him, confirming the size. It would trail slightly on the floor, he saw. “It’s really not that bad,” she said.

He looked at her suspiciously. “You keep holding it up that way... what’s on the back, that you aren’t showing me?”

She maintained an innocent look for all of a second before she yielded and reversed the robe, revealing the design stitched into its back, a representation of a huge yellow

parchment scroll, partially unrolled to reveal mystical-looking—but nonsensical, Keric saw—characters.

Keric raised an eyebrow. The two shared another long look, and finally both laughed.

When Iskanderon returned half a cycle later, Keric was dressed, and was just buckling the wide leather belt that fit over the robe. The oversized buckle was a mockery of the ones of real silver that actual mages wore, but it bore the sigil he hoped he would have the right to wear one day, an unrolled scroll that was far more tasteful in design than the garish decoration on the back of his robe. But maybe Iskanderon was right; once he was in the Labyrinth, no one would be able to see small details through the Viewing Pool.

“Oh, good, you’re ready,” Iskanderon said. “Come on, the other competitors are already in the staging area,” he said. “It makes a good display to be the last to arrive, but if you’re late, the deans and their exalted guests won’t be happy.”

Keric picked up his scroll case, and lifted the thin leather supporting strap over his shoulder. He started toward the exit, but Alis stopped him. “Wait, is that yours?”

He looked back at the small leather wallet lying on the bench, and blushed. “Ah, right. My own scrolls.” There were only four in his own cache, a few useful minor spells that he’d had handy, and one more substantive healing spell that he’d found time to write in between his other preparations for the competition. He’d meant to add the contents of the wallet to the collection that Draef had provided, but in his hurry he’d forgotten. He started to open the case, but Iskanderon forestalled him. “No time for that, we’ve got to go now,” he said, taking Keric’s arm. The young mage tucked the wallet under his robe, into the deep pocket sewn into his vest.

He was a bit nervous, but mostly he wanted to get this over with, so he could get back to the real work that mattered. He wasn’t ambitious in the way that Iskanderon was, craving approbation and maybe even power and influence. But the magic, that had won him early on, ever since his uncle had first worked spells in his presence. He’d been just a boy then, and he now knew that Hule Olwyhn’s talents had been barely those of an apprentice, but at the time the magic had seemed wondrous and fantastic, something from another world that brightened the quite mundane one that he lived in. His passion for the magic was what had brought him here, and learning more, doing more, expanding his knowledge and his talent, that was what drove him.

Iskanderon was briefing him on details of past years’ competitions, but finally Keric interrupted him. “Don’t worry, I’ve read the manuals by Dratek and Joranthor on the Labyrinth, and I reviewed the commentaries on the last fifty runnings that are in the main archives,” he said.

“Come on, you haven’t had time to—”

“You chose him because he’s good,” Alis said. She grabbed Iskanderon’s arm as they came to an arched doorway. “We’ll need to hurry if we’re going to claim the seats that Draef was supposed to save for us.” Her eyes gleamed as she looked at Keric. “You’ll do great,” she said, with that soft smile that had so entranced him back during their first year.

Then they were gone, Iskanderon flashing him a “V” salute as they left through the side door. Keric turned back to the arch and took a steady breath before stepping through.

His three rivals looked up as he entered the small waiting room. He knew them by name and by reputation, and had been in a class or two with some of them, but this was their first true meeting.

“Well, look who finally decided to grace us with his presence,” Ashandra Hael said. She was the antithesis of Alis, tall and curvy, with lustrous black hair tied into a smart bun. She wasn’t beautiful in the traditional sense, but there was nevertheless something striking about her, maybe in the way she pursed her full lips, or the permanent twinkle of amusement visible in her eyes. She was dressed in an impressive ensemble that was more like a dress than a traditional robe, layers of dark cloth in shades of blue and violet that approached black. She wore a wrap over her shoulders, and Keric didn’t need to see her back to know that it would be fashioned into the shape of a shield. A similar design was visible on the silver buckle at her waist. She carried no obvious foci that he could see, but he knew that the amulets used in her chosen field of magic would be hidden somewhere on her person.

“Ease off, Hael,” Trave Sarhus said. He was the oldest among them, nearly thirty, and he carried himself with a calm confidence that seemed to be genuine, as far as Keric could discern. His robe was infused with some sort of stiff laminate that shone brightly even in the relatively dim interior light; it would probably blaze like fire in the sunlight outdoors. His buckle was crafted into the shape of a multifaceted gemstone, and he certainly would have an assortment of spelled stones in the pouches that dangled from his belt. Keric had learned in his research that Trave had participated in three Labyrinth competitions; he had won outright two years ago, and had done well in each of the others. He’d won his certificate seven years ago, but his reputation was of patience and methodical progress rather than procrastination, and it was widely accepted that he would pass his review board and become a full mage by the end of the current session.

The last member of the group came forward and offered his hand to Keric. “Marthek Jarol,” he said in introduction, with a wide and open smile.

Keric took the hand and shook it. Marthek’s grip was strong, but then it would be, given what he was. The steel mage was dressed in the style of an ancient knight, a look that seemed in no way an affectation on him. Marthek was tall and strong, broad-shouldered, with a mane of golden hair that gave him the look of a legendary hero who’d just stepped out of a book or down from a tapestry. He had a faint scar that ran from his left ear almost to his chin, but somehow that only managed to accentuate his rugged good looks. He wore a golden breastplate imprinted with an engraving of crossed swords, the same symbol that was visible on his belt buckle, and a long cloak of matching cloth that looked almost like a tent was draped over his shoulders. The weapon at his hip was a tallsword rather than the short, practical weapon used by the Border Wardens, and Keric didn’t need to touch it to know that it was spelled.

Keric’s eyes were drawn to the door in the far wall as the sound of a flourish of trumpets became audible from outside. He couldn’t see through the windows that flanked the door, as thick curtains covered them, but Marthek nearly jumped as he turned toward the door. “They’re starting! It’s starting!” Keric swallowed and rubbed smooth the front of his robe, and even Trave straightened, lifting his chin and adjusting his pouches.

"You're like a litter of puppies," Ashandra said, as she walked past them to the door. "Well, gentlemen?"

Keric was overwhelmed by the bright sunlight and the roar of noise from the crowd as he stepped through the door onto the open sward of the Quadrangle. The temporary wooden bleachers that had been erected for the event were crowded full of people, and every window in the facing buildings was occupied, sometimes by three, four, or more people, some sitting on the sills facing outward. Keric thought them foolish—they weren't even nearly close enough to be able to see through the Viewing Pool—but he figured that the festivities of the event alone were probably excuse enough for most students to avoid work for one day. He saw Iskanderon, Alis, and Draef on the edge of one of the bleachers, and returned their wave. He followed his fellow competitors through the crowd to the space enclosed by the bleachers, where a small wooden platform had been set up. He recognized the deans of the four schools of magic; Dean Zharis seemed to incline his head when his eyes met Keric's, but it might have been his imagination. All four loomed over the fifth person on the dais, who stood almost a head shorter than even the diminutive Dean Kalas of the gem mages, but the crowd quieted when he stepped forward. Keric had never met Seris, but as he stood before the gathered multitude and addressed them, he thought he could understand how the famous Council mage had gotten his nickname. Despite being short, squat, and utterly bald, there was a certain power to Sacreth's most notable steel mage, and the name Paladin seemed to suit him utterly.

"Mages, competitors, students, guests," the steel mage said, his voice booming through the Quadrangle, augmented by a minor spell. "On behalf of the Mage Council and the faculty of the University, I welcome you to this year's running of the Labyrinth."

There was an outpouring of applause and eager shouts, and Keric was surprised to recognize a number of faculty members among those on the bleachers adding their approbation. It seemed that no one was immune to the frenzy inspired by the Labyrinth competition.

He was so caught up in observing the crowd, he missed the next words from Paladin; he jumped slightly as his fellow competitors started forward, and hurried into place next to them facing the podium.

"The Labyrinth is a test not only of your magic, but of your wits, your skills, and your strength of will," Paladin said. For a moment his eyes met Keric's, and the young mage felt a slight surge of power, almost as though his aura was being delved. He blinked in surprise, and the moment passed.

"Competitors, take your places."

Again Keric was in the rear as he followed the others to the left, where the Labyrinth waited.

He'd walked by the fountain dozens of times. The water in the pool was still now, and the topper had been removed from the stone spigot in its center, leaving a cup-shaped cradle almost an arm's span across. Resting in that cradle was the Labyrinth, a crystalline sphere that radiated a dim glow that was visible even in the bright sunlight.

Keric walked around the base of the pool until he came to his assigned position. Wooden planks had been laid on the edge of the pool at the four cardinal positions, each facing one of the four main buildings that fronted the Quadrangle. The planks

formed simple bridges to the center of the fountain, to the jut of stone that supported the Labyrinth.

For what seemed like a long time, Keric could only stare at it. Here was magic, raw, potent, and old, very old. He understood the basic theory of how it worked, and had read carefully the long passages in Joranthor's definitive study of the Labyrinth, but it was something else entirely to stand there looking at it, and to know that in a few moments, he would touch that magic personally. No one had ever died from it as far as he knew, and injuries were rare within the Labyrinth, but he knew that all magic, even the most benign spells, always affected those who used it, and he wondered just what legacy this day would have for him.

He was so absorbed that he started in surprise as his rivals stepped up onto their bridges, and he hastily emulated them, nearly stumbling as the edge of his robe got caught under his foot. *That would really be a memorable start*, he thought, the mental image of his overdressed self launching face-first into the Viewing Pool causing his face to go crimson. But he recovered, and by the second step he'd caught up to the others, who approached the central sphere one step at a time. He thought that it began to glow brighter as they drew nearer, but again it might have been an illusion; he could certainly feel its power now, but it wasn't doing anything overt, just sitting there, waiting.

They paused directly in front of the sphere, close enough to touch it. Keric felt a tingle as the preparatory spells were completed. Paladin's magic was quick and effective; there was no flash of light or tinkle of disembodied chimes, just a sudden wrenching that was gone as quickly as it arrived. He looked down and saw that the surface of the pool no longer showed the reflected image of himself and the others on their makeshift bridges, but rather a vaulted chamber with floor and walls of gleaming white stone, lit by bright lamps that shone in diamond-shaped niches in the walls. In just a few moments, it would show himself and his fellow competitors as well.

"Good luck to you, mages," came Paladin's voice. Keric could no longer see him or the others; the sphere *had* brightened now, and it seemed to grow in front of him, filling his vision.

He closed his eyes, reached out, and entered the Labyrinth.

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Chapter 3

As the competitors entered the Labyrinth, the crowd watching from the bleachers leaned forward to stare down into the Viewing Pool. First-year students in plain tunics rushed forward to remove the crossing boards from the pool. The Labyrinth crystal continued to glow, but dimly now, with faint patterns of light that seemed to trickle within its depths like currents of water.

A figure clad in a gray robe, its cowl up despite the heat of the day, emerged around the edge of one of the bleachers. He walked bent over like an old man, and as he made his way toward the pool, one of the guardsmen on duty noticed him and stepped

forward to block him. The man made a gesture, and the guard froze. Stepping past the paralyzed man, the robed figure threw off his garment and straightened, revealing a startling appearance to the gathered crowd.

He was lean and dark, his torso bare save for a harness of black leather that covered his chest and arms with interlocking strips. His skin shone with a sheen of sweat, and was decorated with odd designs, tattoos that could not fully obscure the marks of dozens of scars that covered his frame. His beard was narrow and trimmed to a point in the style of the Sokhali far to the south, and he wore a skullcap of battered metal that shone brightly in the intense sunlight.

A stir ran through the crowd as the newcomer turned in place, lifting his arms as he scanned the gathered folk before settling his gaze on the mages atop the platform. The deans had risen to their feet as soon as he had appeared, and now watched him with expressions that ranged from surprise to anger.

"So-called wizards of Sacreth!" the intruder announced, his voice booming naturally without the aid of magic. "I challenge the legitimacy of this competition! Your leaders insult you with their weak and limited definition of magic! They hide the truth from you!"

"And what truth is that, Kaavan Zorr?" Dean Corinther returned. The elderly shield mage leaned against Dean Zharis for support, and his voice was feeble in contrast to the intruder, but the old man still carried an aura of power and authority about him. "Yes, we remember who you are, exile! You dare to return here, with your forbidden arts and vile arguments?"

Zorr laughed. "You fear what you do not understand, you old fool! But I will show you, you and your charges, the next generation of mages. I demand the right to represent my school of magic in your Labyrinth!"

Seris stepped forward, and where Corinther's aura was one of stately dignity, the Paladin spoke with barely-constrained fire. "Blood magic is forbidden in Sacreth, and with good reason! When you were banished from the Valley Kingdom ten years ago, you were told that you returned only at your peril! Guards, arrest him!"

A dozen guards had slowly closed a ring around the exiled mage while he had issued his challenge, and now they rushed forward to apprehend him. But Zorr reached down and drew out a short curved knife from a hidden pocket. The blade was only a few inches long, but the blood mage did not intend to use it as a weapon against the approaching men. Instead he lifted an arm and drew the knife across his own flesh, opening a deep gash that sprayed droplets of blood as he swept the injured limb in a wide arc in front of him. The guardsmen hesitated, just for a moment, but that was long enough for Zorr to work his magic.

Sinuuous black tendrils snapped up like whips from the ground, emerging from the spots where the mage's blood had fallen. The guards cried out as the tendrils lashed around their bodies, twisting and tightening until they held them immobile. Their clubs and staves had no effect on the tendrils, passing through them as though they were vapor, but when they touched flesh they were as tough as leather, constricting around the guards like serpents.

As cries of panic and alarm spread through the crowd, Zorr reached into a pouch at his hip and drew out a small object, which he hurled in the direction of the platform of notables. The object, barely larger than a clenched fist, landed with a sick squelching

sound on the compacted grass. It glistened wetly there, a bloody heart, still quivering with some terrible animative force.

The ground shook, and something else erupted from the sward where the heart had fallen. The huge tentacle dwarfed the black tendrils of Zorr's earlier spell; this one rose a full ten strides into the air, and it was so thick around at the base that two men might have had difficulty touching hands around it. It was covered in a mottled green hide that glistened with a rank slickness, and as the tentacle extended fully into the air, a bulb at its tip split open to reveal snapping jaws full of rending teeth. A terrible noise issued from it, a challenge of destruction.

Men and women were fleeing in every direction, but on the platform, the senior mages held their ground. The tentacle slammed down to crush them, but Dean Corinther lifted a golden amulet in the form of a shield, shouting defiance in the ancient language of magic. As the amulet flared with light a golden aura sprang into being around the platform. The tentacle hit that glow and rebounded, a hissing noise escaping from its jaws as it assaulted the barrier again without effect.

Paladin sprang forward. He was unarmed, but as he leapt from the edge of the platform, he extended his hand toward one of the imprisoned guards. The man's sword shot out from its scabbard and flew unerringly into the steel mage's hand. The stout mage passed through the golden glow and dropped into a forward tumble as he landed, coming up next to the base of the huge tentacle. The sword lashed out, and there was a ringing noise like the sound of a clapper striking a bell as the weapon tore deeply into the substance of the tentacle. Black ichor hissed from the wound, but Paladin dodged the ugly spray, which burned the green grass that it touched to char.

The alien conjuration responded, the snapping jaws darting down toward the mage, but Paladin moved in a blur, and the bulbous head slammed onto vacant ground, the long teeth tearing vicious gouges in the sod. The steel mage struck again, stabbing the sword deep into the rubbery texture of the tentacle, his face twisted with focus as he dragged the sword *through* it, tearing a ring around its girth. More of the black ooze spurted out, searing his arm and shoulder, but he didn't stop until he'd completely bisected the thing. As he drew back the tentacle toppled over, almost crushing one of the bleachers, thankfully missing the few students that hadn't yet fled the area. It was already starting to dissolve as it hit the ground, and within a few heartbeats, it was gone, leaving only a smoking hole in the ground and the black marks on the grass to indicate it had ever existed at all.

The other mages had not been idle during the brief battle. Even as the tentacle-thing died, Dean Kalas triggered a spell-gem, the faceted stone flaring with light as the magic stored inside it was released. The head of the school of gem magic directed that light in a beam that slashed across the field, doing no harm to the men it touched, but cutting through the black tendrils like an impossibly-sharp knife. The guardsmen staggered back, free now but still wary of the blood mage.

Zorr lifted his bloody knife to unleash another spell, but even as he began his conjuration, Ayas, Dean of Steel Magic, launched her own attack. She drew a small metal object from her belt, which snapped open into a tri-blade with wickedly sharp edges. She threw the weapon with a smooth motion, and it spun in a curving arc that took it around several of the guardsmen, streaking unerringly through their circle until it caught the blood mage in the shoulder, one of the sharp prongs biting deep into his

flesh. The impact knocked Zorr off his feet, and he grunted as he landed hard on his back.

Dean Zharis had unrolled a scroll from the compact case attached to his belt, and he uttered the words of magic inscribed there, each rune flashing and disappearing as its power was triggered. A cube fashioned out of glowing bars of light materialized around the fallen blood mage, imprisoning him within.

The guards approached the magical cage warily, but kept their distance. They made room for Paladin as the short mage stepped forward. Ugly black marks covered his arms and torso where the splatter from the conjured tentacle had burned away his tunic and scored his flesh, but he betrayed no hint of pain as he fixed a cold gaze at the fallen blood mage.

Zorr had reached up to grab the tri-blade, and with a groan tore it free from his shoulder. His fingers were deeply gashed by the other blades in the process, but like the steel mage, he did not seem to feel pain in the same manner of other men. Or perhaps, he had become inured to it.

Sensing the presence of the other, he stirred himself and rose, the bloody weapon still held in his hand.

"You would be wise to stay down," Paladin said. "A healer will attend to your wounds."

"So you can hang me intact? I think not." He laughed, a grim, nasty sound. "I think that you Sacrethans still have a lot to learn about the true meaning of power. You will pay for your hubris with the blood of your young ones!"

Paladin tensed, but when the blood mage lunged, he went not toward the steel mage, but against the far side of the cage. He lifted the bloody hand still clutching the tri-blade, and as droplets of his blood hit the glowing bars they tore slashes in the barrier. He struck the cage himself a moment later, and with a sizzling flash he tore through, staggering as he reached the far side. The closest guards rushed toward him, but with another sweep of his bloody hands the men were flung from their feet, as if struck by a ram. Paladin was already charging around the cage to block Zorr's escape, but too late he realized that escape was not the mage's intent.

Zorr leapt up onto the edge of the Viewing Pool. Paladin lunged for him, but the blood mage was faster, and before anyone could intervene he plunged one of the tri-blade's bloody prongs into his chest, piercing his skin, the slender blade driving between two of his ribs and into his heart. He toppled forward, landing with a splash into the water of the pool.

Paladin grabbed Zorr's boots before he could drift out of reach, and with considerable strength dragged him clear of the pool. A bright plume of red had already spread from his body, however, and as the steel mage watched, it continued to expand, roiling through the water like thunderclouds. The other deans arrived at his side, but there was nothing they could do to stop the workings of the blood mage's death-spell. The plume spread to fill the entire pool, dissolving until the waters cleared enough for them to see once more into the Labyrinth, their view still tainted by a faint tinge of red. The light from the crystal had dimmed, and the striations within pulsed erratically, almost as though something inside was trying to get out.

"What has he done?" Kalas asked.

"We have to get them out of there," Zharis said. Ayas and Kalas were already grabbing one of the discarded boards, and together they laid it down to form a bridge to the crystal. Paladin jumped onto it as soon it was settled, and crossed to the sphere. He lifted a hand toward it, and incanted the spell that would release those inside.

There was a flare of light, and the mage staggered back, clutching his hand. Paladin cursed and turned again to the crystal, but before he could try again, Corinther forestalled him. "Do not bother, Seris. The curse is too strong; even if you could overpower the ward, you would only disrupt the stability of the Labyrinth itself, and almost certainly risk the lives of our young mages along with it."

"There has to be something we can do!" Kalas said, as Paladin retreated back across the bridge to join them.

"Corinther's right," Paladin said. "We cannot cleanse the Labyrinth while people are inside it."

"What about a counterspell?" Ayas asked.

Paladin nodded. "Get as many of your senior mages here as you can, and we'll need to send word to the Council as well." But as the five mages looked at each other, they each saw the same truth in the others' eyes; even if they could undo the blood mage's final spell, it would take time. And time had suddenly become their enemy.

Zharis stared down at the scene visible through the Viewing Pool. The portal was one-way only, and did not transmit sound. He could see their charges, but couldn't speak to them, couldn't warn them of what was coming. "Get out of there," he whispered, willing them to hear him. "Get yourselves out of there."

* * * * *

Chapter 4

Keric groaned and sat up, holding his head, where it felt as though a gang of miners had gone to work on the inside of his skull with pickaxes. "What happened?"

Whatever had affected him, the others were clearly feeling it as well. He was the only one to have fallen down, but Ashandra was leaning against the wall, clearly relying on the stone for support, and Trave was on his knees. Only Marthek was still standing unassisted, but even he looked decidedly unsteady.

"We're in the Labyrinth," he said, trying to ignore the pounding in his head. Marthek offered him a hand, which he accepted gratefully. The room swirled around him slightly as he stood, but he was able to stay on his feet without help.

"Where else?" Ashandra said. With deliberation she stepped away from the wall, although she still looked pale.

Keric looked around. The small foyer where they were standing looked like the room he'd seen through the Viewing Pool, but slightly... different. The whitestone blocks that made up the walls were gray and dingy, covered with a thin film that might have been dirt or soot. The lamps in the wall niches still shed light, but their flames were weak, fitful, struggling as though a faint gust might extinguish them completely. The four

archways that provided egress from the room also looked somehow off, although he couldn't quite put his finger on the problem. His eyes rose to the capstones above each arch, each marked with a different design that matched the symbols they wore on their belt buckles.

"Something's wrong," he said.

"There is always some disorientation when entering the Labyrinth," Trave said. "It is a byproduct of our bodies adjusting to the altered reality present within an extradimensional space. But I have to admit, it was never this bad before."

"Maybe the Paladin's skills are overrated," Ashandra said. She turned toward the arch that bore the shield icon. "We might as well get this business over with."

"Maybe we'd better stay together," Keric suggested. "I know we're supposed to face the challenges individually, but if there *is* something wrong..."

"If there was, wouldn't they have pulled us out?" Ashandra countered.

Trave nodded. "This could be part of the test," he said.

"What do you think, Marthek?" Keric asked.

The golden-haired knight frowned. "I don't know. I don't like it, though."

Ashandra let out a derisive snort. "Well, you boys can huddle around here until mommy and daddy come to rescue you, but I still intend to win this thing." She seemed to have recovered her equilibrium fully, and even Keric could feel his headache fading. Before any of them could comment, she stepped forward and vanished through the arch.

Trave shrugged. "The Labyrinth can be a rough experience, but it's not lethal," the gem mage said. "Good luck, gentlemen." With a nod at Marthek and Keric, he walked through the arch that matched his sigil.

Keric looked at Marthek, who shrugged and did the same. The scroll mage stood there alone for another few heartbeats, then took a steadying breath and turned to the arch meant for him.

The darkness of the archway gave way to a staircase of deep stone steps that descended in a slight curve. He almost stopped to conjure a light, but then saw that there was a bright glow coming from the foot of the stairs. He was almost fully recovered from his earlier disorientation, but he still made his way down slowly and carefully, with one hand on the inner wall.

As he approached the bottom of the staircase he could see that it culminated in a broad landing. The walls were decorated with arcane symbols that looked almost as though they had been hacked into the stone. He couldn't decipher any of the symbols, but somehow they filled him with a vague sense of disquiet. The glow originated through another open archway on the far side of the landing, where another, larger chamber could be seen beyond.

Keric stopped there at the base of the stairs, and opened his case of scrolls. He'd already rearranged them in the most probable order he'd need them, so it only took a moment to withdraw the one he wanted. Turning so that the glow from the chamber fell upon the writing, he incanted the spell stored upon the parchment. Using a scroll scribed by someone else always felt *different* than his own work, with each mage's magic feeling as distinct and unique as a fingerprint. But the spell was one with which he was quite familiar, and it gave him no difficulty. Within ten seconds he'd completed it, and he felt a tingling that spread across his body, sharpening until it was just shy of

painful before it faded. The warding was invisible, but he could feel it there, its power lying quiescent upon him until it was needed. It would fade in a few hours in any case, but he hoped to be well clear of the Labyrinth by then.

He took out a second scroll and cast it as well, adding a warding for mental protection on top of the physical defense he'd just enacted. That spell went easily as well, but as he triggered it he felt a sudden wave of disorientation sweep over him. Keric stood there and weathered it, breathing in deep and steady breaths until the dizziness faded.

With his wards in place, he started toward the arch. The room beyond was not as big as he'd first thought, a square maybe six and a half strides on a side. The glow came from bright globes set into the corners of the room just above eye-level. Below them, Keric could see four stone pedestals that jutted from the walls like teeth. Atop each pedestal was an irregularly-shaped piece of metal. On the far side of the room was the apparent exit, a slab of stone of a slightly different color than the blocks that made up the walls. There was a small round opening in the door, ringed with some sort of silvery metal, and something else beneath it, a marking or design that he couldn't quite make out from across the room.

So his first trial would be a puzzle, then. He started forward into the room, but hesitated in the archway. Aware that he was being watched and judged, still he lingered there a moment, thinking. Ashandra might be the sort to charge forward, trusting to her talent and her magic to keep her safe from whatever traps she triggered, but Keric had always been more deliberate. It didn't seem like the Labyrinth was the best place to change his habits.

Finally he drew back, and opened his scroll case again. He paused again over the next scroll, considering his options.

Layering was one of the more intricate hazards of working magic. Spells were extremely complex things, and even when they were designed to work in conjunction, it was very easy for even an experienced wizard to miscast a spell that was layered on another already in effect. Keric had once successfully layered four spells, but they had all been his own work, and it had been in the controlled environment of a classroom at the University. The magic of the Labyrinth itself wasn't supposed to interfere with the workings of the wizards participating in the competition, but it was becoming increasingly clear to him that something was wrong, either by design or accident. Making assumptions in such circumstances was... dangerous.

But when it came down to it, he decided that he would rather take risks now, before he'd placed himself in the midst of a trial. He took out a third scroll from the case, took a deep breath, and incanted the spell inscribed upon the parchment.

His head began to spin almost at once, even before he had finished the first line. He completed the spell through sheer determination, but as the magic flashed around him, he staggered and nearly fell. Only the cold hard stone of the archway supported him, and he clung to it for stability as the walls spun and distorted around him. The bright glow coming from the room sent daggers of pain into his skull, and he closed his eyes, groaning as he fought through the pulsating waves of nausea.

After an interminable span of time had passed, he stirred and opened his eyes. For the briefest moment he could not remember where he was, then memory and awareness returned in a sudden jarring surge.

Slowly he stood, keeping the fingers of one hand connected to the wall in case he needed the support again. But he could stand, if a bit unsteadily.

The room on the far side of the arch was as it had been before, but its contents had slid into sharp detail. He could now clearly see the markings in the door, and the narrow slit underneath them. The round opening in the top of the door ringed by the silver metal was not a keyhole, as he'd first thought, but a spigot of some type, probably for the inevitable trap. He still couldn't make out the full details of the metal objects on the platforms in the corners, except that each appeared to be made out of a different metal, and they were cut into different patterns, flat disks with jagged edges like oddly-spaced and sized teeth.

Keys, then. No doubt if he slid the incorrect one into the door, something bad came out of the spigot.

There was something else, something that seemed wrong, but which he couldn't quite identify at first even with the boost to his senses from the perception-enhancing Heightening spell he'd just cast. The spell could cause some minor distortions, and with the combined effects of the layering and the odd problems with the Labyrinth, those could be expected. But as Keric studied the room, he realized that when he quickly shifted his attention from one side of the room to the other, faint red trails were visible in his peripheral vision, glowing tracks that faded to nothing when he turned his full attention upon them. Frowning, he studied the phenomenon for a minute longer, but did not learn anything further.

You're procrastinating, he told himself. He couldn't gain anything more from standing in the doorway, so he turned to the nearest pedestal on his left and started into the room.

He'd been ready for just about anything, but he hadn't expected the trap to trigger instantly; midway through his second step through the arch the spigot on the door flared, and a stream of fire shot unerringly across the room to engulf him in a violent, raging maelstrom of flame.

Keric fell back against the wall of the room as the flames roared over him. He cried out as he huddled there, just for a moment, while panic nearly claimed him. He couldn't see, couldn't feel anything except for a rising heat. The thought of his skin charring to black finally shook him to action, and clutching the wall of the room he staggered back to the archway. The flames followed him, and he could feel the heat beginning to sear his skin as his magical shield was overwhelmed. With another cry he dove forward through the arch and rolled clear, crawling until he ran into the first step of the staircase.

He just lay there for a while, breathing in deep gulps of air. The flames had stopped, but he could smell the acrid tang of char, probably from his clothes. The skin on his back was raw and tender, but it could have been a lot worse; he had no doubt whatsoever that without his warding, the flame trap would have killed him.

Moving slowly, he rose to a seated position and checked himself over. The ornate robe was a wreck, but at least it had offered some modicum of protection against the trap. He stripped it off and tossed it aside. It was a bit cool in just his vest and trousers—an odd feeling after being nearly roasted alive—but he welcomed the freedom of mobility gained by discarding the robe. Then he felt a momentary panic as he realized that his scroll case was gone.

He found it a moment later, just barely inside the archway. His fears were confirmed as he picked it up. The exterior of the case had been blackened with char, and even before he opened it and saw the damage to the seal he knew what he would find.

The scrolls themselves were mostly intact. But even the slight crinkling on the edges of the parchments had been enough. He checked each one just to be sure, but even before he unrolled them he could tell, could sense that the magic stored on them was gone, disrupted by the fire, or maybe by the magic of the Labyrinth, which he could no longer deny had somehow turned against them.

His Heightening spell was still in effect, sharpening his hearing, so he quite clearly heard the distant cry that echoed down from the staircase above. The voice was familiar, as was the sound of pain and terror that filled it. This time he didn't take time to think, and was charging up the stairs even as the shout abruptly and permanently ended.

* * * * *

Chapter 5

Keric hesitated only briefly in the foyer where they had first arrived. All of the arched exits were dark, but he knew where the shout had come from. Wary now, he passed through the dark opening, into a tunnel that curved slightly ahead to the left. Again he paused, and with a start remembered the scrolls he held in his wallet. He reached under his vest; yes, it was still there, in his pocket. He considered going back to the foyer to see if they were intact, but he remembered the pain in that shout he'd heard, and he hurried forward, one hand against the wall to guide him.

As the darkness deepened he again considered going back, if only to summon light before proceeding, but again a glow became visible ahead before it became too black to see. The arch and the glow were almost identical to those he had encountered earlier, and he crept forward slowly, alert for another trap.

The room was similar, but the nature of the trial had clearly been different in this case. The blackened wreckage of some sort of apparatus of metal and stone dominated the center of the room, with pieces of it strewn about the floor. There were six doors in the wall, heavy constructions of wooden planks reinforced with banded iron. It was obvious which one the other mage had taken; Keric crossed the room—giving the destroyed construct a wide berth—and looked through the opening where the blasted door had stood. A few fragments of wood still clung to the twisted pieces of metal that hung from the warped hinges, but the rest of the door was just scattered splinters and fragments of iron. He was unsure whether the door had been destroyed by a trap or sundered by the wizard's magic; the lingering aura there was so strong that he could almost taste it in the air, but there was no time to stop for a Delving, and little to be gained by it in any case.

A short, straight passage was on the far side of the broken door, progressing for maybe twenty strides before opening onto another room. The walls and floor were

plain, unadorned stone. A limp form lay on the floor. Keric hurried over to it, and pulled the body over to see Trave's dead eyes staring up at him.

It was easy to see what had killed him. The gash across his throat was deep, so deep that it had scored the bones of his spine. It took an effort for Keric to examine the terrible wound, but once he did, he quickly realized what was wrong. There was almost no blood. The gem mage's skin was pale, almost white, and while the interior of the wound was red, the separated skin bright like a twisted parody of open lips, the cuts should have unleashed a terrible spray as the primary vessels delivering and retrieving blood to and from the brain were opened. It was almost like looking at a cadaver that had been meticulously prepared for study, and the young mage shuddered at it.

"What... what happened?"

The voice caused him to almost jump out of his skin, and he looked up to see Ashandra standing there, staring at him in horror. He saw that she mastered herself quickly, gathering in the fear and thrusting it behind an iron mask of control. She needn't have bothered; he knew exactly what she was feeling, and didn't even bother to try to hide the cold terror that clenched in his guts.

"He was murdered," he heard himself saying. Almost reflexively he scanned the rest of the body. He wasn't entirely surprised to find the gem mage's pouches gone, along with the enchanted stones they had carried.

"Marthek?"

He stared at her for a moment before he realized what she was suggesting. "That's crazy."

"His throat, it was slashed open."

"Yes, but it was no ordinary weapon that did that. The Labyrinth, there's... there's *something* here, something wrong here." That much was obvious; people didn't die in the Labyrinth. When a trial was failed, competitors were ejected, sometimes somewhat the worse for wear, but alive. Its creators had built it as a testing tool, not some mad engine of torture. There were some scholars who argued that you *couldn't* die in the Labyrinth, and the archives were full of accounts of past competitions where mages had been ejected after daring and incredibly dangerous actions, daredevil stunts, uncontrolled eruptions of wild magic, and the like. As far as he knew from all of the records he had studied, Trave's death was the first such loss of life in the entire history of the Labyrinth.

He looked up at her, expecting a protest, but after a moment she nodded. He noticed something else as well, and stood. "You're hurt? What happened?"

Ashandra shook her head. "Imps. Conjured in my first trial. They were... they were more *violent* than I had expected, caught me off guard. I'm fine." She walked around him, to the other side of Trave, but couldn't hide her limp, or the flecks of blood visible along the gashes in the skirt of her dress. "I have a lesser Healing spell," he said, and started to reach for his wallet.

"Save it," she said. "We may need it later."

He nodded. "We have to find Marthek." Ashandra didn't look up, staring down at the body. "Ashandra?"

She started and met his eyes. "Right. Yes, of course. I... I'm sorry, Keric. For doubting you, before. You were right."

"It doesn't matter now," he said. "We have to find Marthek, and get out of here. Before whatever did that to him finds us."

The two of them were quiet as they returned to the entry foyer and headed through the arch marked with the crossed-swords sigil of the steel mages. There was another staircase on the far side, this one heading up. Keric offered a hand to Ashandra, but she shook him off. Her face was twisted into a grimace and her limp was getting worse, but it was clear that she was not going to accept his help.

"What happened to your robe?" she asked him, as they made their way up the stairs. Like the one Keric had taken down earlier, this one curved slightly as they ascended.

"Burned. Fire trap. It got most of my scrolls as well, I'm afraid."

"What? You didn't have a shield up?"

"If I hadn't had a warding, I wouldn't be here now," he shot back, defensive of his magic despite all that had happened. They could see the glow up ahead now, and hastened their pace.

"Sorry," she said. "This is... this isn't..."

"Don't worry about it," he said. "We have bigger problems."

The landing at the top of the stairs had the now-familiar arch, and the same small room beyond. The signs of Marthek's passage were immediately obvious. The shattered remnants of several suits of armor were scattered around the floor. From what Keric could tell from the wreckage, the suits had been occupied by mannequins of wood and straw. And magic, most likely, automatons that had sought to block the steel mage's progress. With his enhanced vision he scanned the floor, looking for drops of blood or any other sign that Marthek had been injured. He didn't see anything, but he remembered Trave's body, and remembered that he couldn't make any assumptions here.

Ashandra crossed the room to the single exit, a recessed doorway warded only by a curtain of plain woolen cloth. "What are you doing?" Keric asked.

"It seems likely that he went this way," she responded.

"Be careful," he said, hurrying over to her. But by then she had already reached out and pulled the drape aside, revealing only another passage on the far side.

"I am not exactly defenseless," she said. But she was nervous, Keric could see that, despite her disciplined outward mask.

They made their way down the corridor. After about twenty strides, they came to a short flight of steps that descended into a long hall. The hall was narrow, only slightly wider than the passage, but it extended for a good thirty strides ahead, with a vaulted ceiling buttressed by massive arches of rough-hewn stone. Lamps hung from niches along the walls, their flickering light more than strong enough to reveal the trail set here for them.

"Uh oh," Ashandra said.

The floor was covered with a matrix of marble tiles, each about a pace across. The tiles were covered with sigils, etched in streaks of color embedded in the stone. Each sigil was unique, or at least it looked that way from their vantage; even with his enhanced sight Keric couldn't quite distinguish those on the far side of the hall. On the far side of the tiled floor, a matching stair led up to another passage that exited the place.

"Those sigils aren't based on any magical nomenclature with which I am familiar," Ashandra said.

"No," Keric said. Careful not to touch the nearest tiles, or even extend any part of his body over them, he knelt on the lowest step and studied them. There was *something* familiar about them, something he couldn't quite place. He tried to make sense of the pattern of tiles, at least the nearer ones, looking for relationships between the sigils,

"Well, we're going to have to try something," Ashandra said, after Keric's silence had extended for almost a minute. "We can't just stand here."

Keric lifted a hand to forestall her, but didn't look up. "Marthek made it through here; he must have solved the pattern."

"He's a soldier," Ashandra said. "Maybe he just bulled through..."

"Wait," Keric said. "You're right, he's a soldier." He nodded as something clicked in his memory. "These sigils... they have nothing to do with magic at all, they are military symbols, the sigils used by units in the army. Historical, I think, back from the days of the great empires."

"Military history is not exactly my strong point," she said. "I don't suppose you know what they mean?"

"No, but Marthek did." Keric was already taking out his wallet, and he extracted one of his few remaining scrolls. He spread it out on the flat top of the stone balustrade that edged the stairs, holding it down while he studied it. He'd written the scroll himself, and knew the runes almost as well as he knew his own name, but what he would do here would require a bit of subtlety.

She glanced over his shoulder. "What are you casting?"

"A lesser Delving," he said.

She frowned, not understanding at first what he was doing, but knowing enough not to interrupt him further as he read the scroll and worked its magic. Once again he felt the stabbing disorientation of the layering effect, but it was not as severe as before; the Delving did affect his perceptions, but the bulk of the magic was extended outward into his surroundings.

As he finished the spell, he closed his eyes and reached out with his mind. After a few moments of concentration, he opened his eyes and stared out across the room.

At first, all he could see was red. The subtle currents he'd detected on the edges of his perceptions before were bright and obvious now, tendrils of corruption that were visible everywhere: on the floor and walls, floating in the air, even seeping down from the ceiling like hanging vines. He had to control a brief sensation of revulsion as some of them touched him; he couldn't feel anything, of course, and they had to have been there since they'd entered the Labyrinth, but the sight still filled him with dread.

Ashandra noted his reaction. "What is it? What do you see?"

It wouldn't do any good to share what the Delving had revealed to him, so he didn't answer at once, focusing instead on the floor of the hall ahead. It took intense concentration to filter through the red haze, but when he finally found the trail left by Marthek's aura, the faint golden flickers made a clear path across the room. If anything, the omnipresent red corruption made the path easier to follow, as the steel mage's traces were bright and pure by comparison.

"I found it," he said. "The aural traces are still strong. He must not be far ahead of us."

He took a deep breath, and stepped onto the first tile indicated by the golden trail. Nothing happened, and he let out the breath with relief. "Follow me, step exactly where I step," he told Ashandra.

"Right behind you."

They made it across without incident. The pattern made by the military runes remained a mystery to Keric, but he realized that to Marthek they must have created some sort of map, a trail of history that led across the hall to safety. He wondered what danger lurked under the other tiles, but decided that he could live with that mystery remaining unsolved.

Keric sagged against the balustrade on the far stairs. His head swam from the effort of maintaining his concentration on the Delving for that long. Ashandra touched his arm. "Are you all right?"

He nodded. "This isn't... exactly... a casual walk... through the Quadrangle," he said.

She managed a smile. "No, not exactly."

It took a supreme effort, but he straightened, pushing off from the balustrade. Faint smears of red had been left on the stone where his hands had touched, but as the Delving faded, they slowly dissolved from his view. He knew that the corruption that suffused the Labyrinth was still there, however.

"Come on," he said. "Let's find Marthek."

* * * * *

Chapter 6

They found the steel mage quickly enough. The stairs that ascended from the marble hall gave way onto another passage, one that bent to the left around several turns, until the corridor should have twisted back onto itself. The two mages shared a look, but they already knew that the Labyrinth didn't obey normal rules, and there was no sense in wasting time pondering the impossible.

The passage jerked to the left once more, and ended in an arch that should have been a dead-end, or opened onto the corridor they'd just traversed. Instead, looking through the arch revealed another spacious, brightly-lit chamber, divided into a foyer and a slightly higher annex on the far side, with six thick pillars separating the two. A broad staircase led up to the annex.

Standing in front of the stairs was Marthek.

Ashandra and Keric could instantly see that something was wrong; the steel mage was standing awkwardly, as if he'd been frozen in mid-step. A faint halo of light surrounded him, and as they looked up, they could see that the pillars were topped by glowing golden spheres, shining so brightly that they almost could not look at them directly.

"Paralysis field," Ashandra said. She took out an amulet from one of the hidden pockets in her dress. "I should be able to get through, but I don't know that I'll be able to drag Marthek clear."

"Hold on a moment," Keric said. He scanned the room, but it was difficult to see with the brilliant light of the spheres filling the room. He took out one of his last scrolls, but instead of opening it to read, he kept it rolled, and looked through it. With the glare of the globes thus reduced, he could see that there was another arched exit on the far side of the chamber, in the rear of the raised annex, and something else as well; a lever jutted from the wall near the arch.

"There," he said, handing the scroll to Ashandra so that she could see it. "A triggering mechanism, I believe."

"Well then," she said. "I'll just go over there and deactivate it."

"And if your ward cannot withstand the field? Then there are two of you trapped."

"And your alternative idea? Unless you have a scroll of telekinetic manipulation in that wallet there."

"You know that I do not; no student could manage such a working."

"Then it is up to me." Her expression softened slightly, and she reached out a hand to touch Keric's arm. "Trust me; when it comes to this sort of thing, I do know what I'm doing."

He nodded. The shield mage affixed the amulet to the front of her dress, directly beneath her throat. She touched it with the index fingers and thumbs of both of her hands, closed her eyes for a moment, and incanted a brief triggering phrase. Keric's Delving had faded, but he could still perceive the subtle shift to her aura, and could feel how strong the warding was.

But as she stepped boldly forward into the room, he wondered if it would be enough.

The golden glow that held Marthek captive erupted around her before she'd covered three steps into the room. Faint at first, it steadily brightened with each step she took, until a golden nimbus shone around her, an echo of the light radiating from the spheres above. Ashandra kept walking forward, passed Marthek without slowing, reached the steps leading up to the annex. There she faltered, stumbling slightly on the steps. The glow was pulsing at her now, battering at her defenses, and Keric could see the physical reaction; the shield mage was bending low, as though a heavy weight was being dropped onto her shoulders, and she raised her arms above her head as if to protect it from the deluge. Keric wanted to shout encouragement, but knew better than to distract her; all he could do was watch and hope.

Ashandra reached the top of the stairs and staggered forward into the annex. A deep, guttural sound came from her throat, and she drifted right, then left, nearly losing her balance. Golden flashes exploded around her, obscuring her from view, then Keric heard a furious yell of defiance, and the light abruptly died. He felt a momentary surge of panic as darkness surrounded him; the image of Trave's dead body filled his thoughts, and he could imagine who or whatever had killed him coming for him, striking him down before he even knew it was there.

"Ashandra?" he asked, tentatively.

"Light," came a tired voice in response. The voice belonged to Marthek, not Ashandra, and in response a dim glow appeared around the steel mage, the illumination

coming from his drawn sword. The steel mage's face was lined with exhaustion, but he held the blade up proudly, and its tip did not waver in the slightest.

"Ashandra," Keric said, rushing toward the far exit. Marthek followed, and as the light from his sword spread, they could see the shield mage slumped against the wall under the lever. Keric felt a momentary stab of fear before she stirred her head and looked up at him.

"Remind me not to volunteer to do that again," she said.

"Are you all right? Can you stand?" Keric asked.

"I don't quite know," she said. This time she accepted his hand, and did not shrug off his steadying grip once she was back on her feet. She nodded at Marthek. "How are you, soldier?"

"I will survive." He looked them over, taking in their condition with a single weighing glance. "I take it that the Labyrinth has been cheating with you as well," he said.

"Where is Trave?"

"Dead," Keric said. "We found his body near the entry."

"Dead? Then this contest has become one of survival." The young steel mage seemed to take strength from the realization, standing straighter, the brightness of the glow coming from his sword intensifying slightly.

"I think that whatever is corrupting the Labyrinth, it is getting stronger," Keric said. "We need to find the way out, and quickly." He looked at Ashandra. "Can you continue?"

"I guess I'd better, no?" She turned to the exit. "Let's get going."

The next passage started like all the others, but after a short distance it became a spiral ramp that descended at a manageable but definitely noticeable angle. They stayed close together, for the reassurance of proximity as much as for physical support. Marthek's light gave them enough illumination to see by, though there was not much to see, except for the unadorned and smooth stone of the walls and floor. They were alert for another trap, though, knowing that even an instant's warning might be the difference between life and death.

But no traps or other hazards materialized, and the slant of the passage leveled out before it straightened and deposited them into a vast chamber. They walked through the arch into a cavernous hall, dominated by a dome of white marble that stretched a good fifty strides from one side to the other, its peak easily that high above them. Alcoves along the walls were occupied by statues of robed men, decorated with fringes of colored cloth that rose almost to the rim of the dome above. The floor space was dominated by a large tiered gallery, full of ranks of cushioned benches, and a rostrum in the center where a speaker would dominate the attentions of those gathered. There were numerous exits, huge vaulted arches that one might have driven a wagon through, and small side doors that blended almost invisibly into shadowed crevices along the walls.

The place was empty, sepulchral, a vast and quiet tomb.

"The Hall of Order," Keric said. "This is the Mage Council's chamber."

"Seems bigger than I remember," Ashandra said. "Of course, it was full of arguing mages at the time."

"This... this cannot be!" Marthek said.

"Of course it can be, and it is," Ashandra said to him. "We're in the Labyrinth, remember?"

The steel mage flushed and lowered his eyes, abashed at his own outburst.

"So I wonder what we have to face here," Ashandra said. "Maybe the Mage Council will appear and we have to kill them to get past? That would have a certain appeal, I would admit."

"You speak of treason," Marthek chided her. She rounded on him, but before an argument could begin, Keric stepped between them. "I think the exits are the test," he told them. "Look."

The mages stared at the varied routes out of the chamber. At first they saw nothing; the corridors beyond the great arches were deep in shadow, but that was not unusual in and of itself. But after a moment, they recognized what Keric had seen; each exit, from the arched corridors to the small doorways, was covered with a faint, hazy film, an aura of distortion that was just barely visible. Once they'd seen it, though, they could feel the slight tingle of contained magic.

"So which way do we go?" Marthek asked.

"If we wanted to get out of the building, the fastest way would be the main doors," Ashandra said, pointing to the double doors on the far side of the room. If this had been the real Hall, those doors would lead to the Great Foyer, and then out into the central square of Sacreth beyond. She had actually taken a step in that direction before Keric stopped her.

"Wait," he said, turning to a small, almost invisible opening in the side of the room opposite the rostrum, nearly hidden behind the outermost tier of seats, under a subtle arch that was barely defined from the surrounding stone. "That's it. The Petitioner's Arch."

Ashandra nodded. "The gateway that every one of us must go through, to present themselves before the Council and be admitted to the ranks of Sacreth's wizards." She looked at Keric. "It's the other entrances that are used by mages, ambassadors, people with wealth or power. Even the most humble citizen can use the front doors. The petitioner comes in through the little side door, to remind her of the importance of humility. I think you're right, it would be just like Seris to make that the test."

"Come on, we can get to it by cutting through the chamber," Marthek said. He started forward, but the others had barely taken their first step when a noise drew them up short.

The sound startled them, disturbing the silence of the vast empty chamber as it did. It was a sick, wet sucking noise. Its source was close, and getting closer. The three mages drew back reflexively from the sound, which seemed to come from one of the arched corridors on the far side of the room, along the route that would take them to the Petitioner's Arch, and the way forward.

When the source of the sound finally appeared, emerging through the archway into view, each of them felt a cold terror in their guts. Trave's killer had finally found them.

It was roughly the size and shape of a man, but at that all similarity between themselves and the entity ended. Its skin was a glistening red mess the color of freshly spilled blood, its features amorphous, lacking anything even as remotely familiar as a mouth or eyes. Its arms ended in slightly curved blades, and as it stepped closer, they could see that with each tread a splatter of viscous gore was splashed upon the floor.

The sucking noise came when it lifted a foot; the substance, even the bits that had separated from the creature, followed it, parting from the white stone to be reabsorbed, leaving only a vaguely discolored mark in its wake.

“By Neva’s grace,” Ashandra gasped, her skin almost as pale as the white marble walls of the great chamber.

Squelching with each step, the blood golem approached the three mages.

* * * * *

Chapter 7

“Go around, I will hold it off,” Marthek said, lifting his sword.

“We won’t abandon you!” Ashanadra said.

“Go!” the steel mage yelled, as he stepped forward to engage the thing. He raised his sword in salute, then sidestepped smoothly as it lunged at him, one of the arm-blades coming around in a vicious slice. The blood golem was fast, pivoting into a sweep attack with its other arm, but Marthek met it with an expert block. His sword cut through the substance of its body, severing the end of the blade from its arm. The glistening hook landed on the floor with a sick plop.

Ashandra and Keric had hurried around the rostrum, but before they could make a run for the exit, the blood monster shifted back to block their path. The two mages retreated, but the creation did not come after them, apparently content to keep them from safety.

Ashandra held another amulet, but she did not trigger it, clutching the small bronze disk with white fingers. “What can we do?” she asked.

Keric was too terrified to respond. He had pulled out his wallet of scrolls almost by reflex, but neither of the minor spells he had left seemed like they would stop such a thing. Still, he pulled out the one spell that might even have a chance. The spell went by different names; most mages simply called it the Stunner. It operated by overloading the target’s nervous system for up to a minute, rendering an enemy incapacitated without inflicting permanent damage. But while Keric was no expert on magical constructions such as the blood golem, he had a pretty good idea that the thing lacked the biology that would leave it vulnerable to such magic.

Marthek came forward again to meet the golem. The construct spun to meet him, swinging with its remaining blade at his head. The steel mage again met the attack with a solid parry, and again the substance of the golem parted, and its remaining blade fell to the floor. The golem withdrew a step, but Marthek stayed with it. He brought his sword up and with a fierce yell drove it down into the golem’s body. The blade flashed as it bit into the thing, cutting from the side of its “neck” down to where its heart would have been, had it been a living creature. There the steel stopped, caught in the dense substance of the golem.

Marthek’s lips twisted into a growl as he tried to draw his weapon free. The sword quivered, but then runnels of blood flooded out in a torrent down the length of the steel.

Marthek's eyes widened and he released the hilt, but tendrils of the stuff shot out and wrapped around his fingers and wrist, holding him to the creature.

"Marthek!" Ashandra yelled.

The steel mage pulled hard, and the bloody strands lengthened, stretching like gobs of rubber. But he could not get free of them, nor could he do anything to evade as the golem's arm lashed out again, its end lengthening again into a blade edge that struck him hard in the elbow. The blow severed the young mage's arm, which snapped back into the blood golem's body, sticking there with a soft sick noise. Marthek cried out and fell onto his back, clutching at the severed limb with his good hand. There was no blood. He stared up at the golem with eyes wide with horror, and watched as his arm was absorbed into its body. His sword still jutted from its torso, but it was now covered from pommel to tip with a sheen of glistening red, completely engulfed by the golem's substance.

The golem took a step forward, and the gob of its matter that Marthek had severed earlier stretched out and was reabsorbed into its body.

Ashandra rushed forward to block it, a bright silvery glow flaring into being around her hand as she triggered the power of her amulet. "Back, fiend!" she yelled at the golem, trying to protect the fallen mage.

Marthek tried to stop her, but he could barely roll over onto his belly, let alone get up. "Asha, no!" he shouted, reaching uselessly with his remaining hand, but she ignored him, thrusting the bright glow of her shield spell at the construct. It slashed at her with its blade, which carved into the aura like a steel knife scraping on flint; showers of sparks flashed from the contact, and Ashandra staggered, her protective aura flickering as her magic was disrupted. The golem gave her no chance to recover; it stepped forward, lifting both arms above its head, their ends coming together to form a dense bludgeon shaped like the head of a hammer. It swung hard, and with the impact the shield mage's spell collapsed with a thunderous reverberation. Ashandra was flung backward, flying several paces through the air before she slammed into the rostrum. She hung there against the stone for a moment, dazed, then collapsed onto the floor.

Marthek tried to crawl away, but the golem moved forward after him, absorbing its other severed "hand" as it went. Its arms separated and again formed into blades, longer and curved into nasty hooks, this time. It followed Marthek, in no apparent hurry now.

Keric had been dimly aware of the battle taking place in front of him, but he could do nothing to help Marthek, or to prevent the golem from striking down Ashandra. He was caught in a battle of his own, as he struggled against the waves of surging magic that permeated and corrupted the Labyrinth.

He'd realized that the stun spell written on his scroll would do nothing against the golem. But as he'd begun reading the runes inscribed upon the parchment, runes he had written, he'd changed the spell.

What he was doing was incredibly dangerous, forbidden even of sanctioned mages, and with good reason. All mages drew magic from the world around them when they prepared their spells, and a small trickle from themselves, an anchor that allowed them to bind the magic to their focus of choice, to store it until it was needed. The very best mages could bind a spell that would remain potent in perpetuity, although there were

few alive in Sacreth today with such skill. Magic was in and of the world, a bottomless wellspring limited only by the skill and personal fortitude of the wizard tapping it.

But there was a reason that spells were confined in objects, and constrained to very specific parameters. A mage who drew too deeply from that wellspring, or who tried to draw without the benefit of a focus, was just as likely to burn himself out as to shape the magic to his desire. Keric had had this message battered into him by his instructors: raw magic was like a sword that had points at both ends.

He knew that, and had no guidance other than instinct as he rearranged the order of the sigils as he read them, shifting the inflection, unraveling the complex and delicate web he'd created when he'd written the spell. He changed it only slightly, a subtle difference, drawing upon the magic that infused the Labyrinth to augment his spell.

Almost at once he felt it surrounding him, a corrupted torrent. He felt sick, and nearly lost the spell. He imagined that he could feel the thick tendrils of red taint twisting around him, passing through him, leaving marks upon his soul like the greasy slicks left by a gusher of black oil spurting from the ground. He knew that he could not long retain his grasp upon the spell, so he completed it as quickly as he could, summoning every bit of stamina that he had left and adding to it the energies he'd stolen, combining the whole into a single massive blast that he hurled at the golem. As the magic fled he felt as though he'd come up from the bottom of a lake, life flowing back into him like that first sweet breath of air. He slumped to his knees, and quite nearly fell further.

It took a great effort to look up.

The golem was splattered against one of the tiers of the hall, the gooey mass of its substance trickling over a row of benches, soiling the expensive cushions. The sight of it filled him with exultation; the spell had worked! A sound that was half laugh, half groan escaped his lips. He tried to get up; his head spun, but he was able to stagger to his feet. Marthek had crawled nearly over to Ashandra, who was stirring, coughing as she tried to suck air into her bruised lungs.

He started toward them, but managed only one step before he froze. He'd heard something, a subtle noise, a small squelching pop that chilled his blood. He turned his head slowly, knowing already what he would see.

The shattered mess of bloody gore that had made up the golem was scattered over the stone and wood of the tier, but at its core were several dense gobs of material. Those gobs were quivering, and as Keric watched, he saw the scattered splatters begin to shift and move, slowly extending to absorb or be absorbed into larger masses nearby. Slowly it was coming together again, gradually taking on form as it reconstituted itself.

Action replaced conscious thought, and he ran over to Marthek. The steel mage had reached the edge of the rostrum, and was using it to try and pull himself up, without much success. Keric grabbed him and lifted him, holding him against the weathered stone base of the platform. "We have to get out of here!" he said, making sure that he would stay up before turning to help Ashandra.

But the shield mage was already getting to her feet. Keric saw her tuck a small crystal vial, now empty, into her sleeve. She was battered and unsteady, but was standing on her own power, and she seemed to grow stronger with each passing second. "Help me," she said, pushing past him to take one of Marthek's arms. Keric

took the other, all too aware that it ended at the elbow. Blood was finally starting to ooze from the terrible wound, but it seeped sluggishly, smearing on Keric's hands as he helped Ashandra carry the crippled mage toward the Petitioner's Arch.

Behind them they could hear the noises of the golem growing steadily louder behind them, but neither looked back. Marthek was trying to help them, but his limbs fumbled, and he could not manage to get his feet under him. The other two mages all but dragged him through the arch, then Ashandra pushed the steel mage into Keric's arms.

"Get him as far away as you can," she said, turning back toward the hall.

"You can't fight that thing!" Keric said, his voice on the thin edge of panic.

"I'm not going to fight it," she said, taking another amulet from a pocket in her dress. No, it was *two* amulets, he saw, as she pulled the thing apart with some effort. They were lodestones, and she attached one piece to either side of the arch. The arch was made of stone, not metal, but the black stones stayed where she put them, and she began focusing on them, lingering in what Keric recognized as preparation for a spell.

"It won't stop—" Keric said again, but Ashandra cut him off. "Damn it, setting up a resonance on the fly is hard enough without you chattering at me. Get him as far away as you can, now!"

Keric took up Marthek and dragged him down the passage. In the real Hall of Order, the passage on the far side of the Arch led to a small cloakroom within ten paces, but this one stretched on for what seemed like an eternity. With the limp burden of the steel mage and his armor dragging him, Keric felt as though he was trying to push a boulder up a hill. He glanced back to see Ashandra still in the archway, still working her magic. He could see the effects of it now, a visible distortion that stretched between the two lodestones, filling the opening, a haze in the air that vibrated and wavered like the surface of a wind-swept pond. There was something else, too, a red outline that grew until it nearly filled the arch.

"Ashandra!" he yelled.

The shield mage reached out and touched the distortion, provoking a violent reverberation. The stones of the arch started to shake, and a high-pitched whine that was just short of painful filled the corridor. Keric turned, shielding Marthek with his body, as Ashandra ran toward them. The explosion, when it came, was almost an anticlimax. The shock wave knocked him down, but not roughly, and it was almost easy to slide over the rest of the way, and drift off into oblivion.

* * * * *

Chapter 8

"Keric. Keric, wake up."

The voice drew him the rest of the way back to consciousness, but it brought pain with it. His whole body hurt, but those aches could almost be forgotten against the throbbing that filled his skull. Falling back into the black seemed like a wholly preferable option, but he forced himself to open his eyes and sit up. He was surprised that he was

able to manage that, but once he was fully awake the pain receded to a more or less manageable level.

Ashandra was crouched over him. She looked to be mostly intact, if somewhat the worse for wear. Her dress was torn and singed in a few places, and her hair was scattered in a wild halo around her face, but her eyes were bright and alert. Marthek sat against the wall opposite, conscious but obviously in distress. He cradled the stump of his ruined arm, wrapped in a hasty bandage, in his remaining hand.

"Where are we?" Keric asked, looking around. They were in a passage of unmarked stone. Ashandra had summoned a light from a silver pendant dangling from a chain around her wrist, but its glow didn't extend more than a few paces down the tunnel to either side. The darkness seemed malevolent, expectant, and Keric quickly looked away.

"We're in the tunnel on the far side of the Petitioner's Arch," she said. "Don't you remember?"

"How long... how long was I unconscious?"

"Just a few minutes. The blast from the disrupted resonance nearly knocked me out as well."

He nodded. "The blood golem?"

She glanced over her shoulder, and when she looked back there was a haunted look in her eyes. "I collapsed the passage," she said. "If it could get through, I suppose it would have already."

"We can't assume that there isn't another way around," Keric said. "We need to find the exit. Help me up."

Ashandra nodded. Once he was back on his feet, both of them looked down at Marthek. "You said you had a healing spell, earlier," Ashandra said.

Marthek didn't look up. "Better to just leave me," he said.

Keric knelt beside the stricken man and took out his wallet, and the last precious scroll inside. "I can't replace your arm, but I can restore some strength, and maybe counter some of the effects of what that thing did to you."

Marthek looked as though he would protest, but finally he closed his eyes and nodded. Keric unrolled the scroll, and gestured for Ashandra to hold her light close by. The spell gave him no difficulties, and as the soft blue glow faded from the scroll and spread into the body of the steel mage, he sighed and relaxed incrementally. When Ashandra and Keric helped him to his feet, he was able to remain standing on his own power.

"Thank you," he said. "Give me... a moment," he said, taking a few tentative steps back down the passage.

"He needs immediate attention from a senior healer, and quickly," Ashandra said quietly. "That thing hurt him, but more than that, it's this place, it's affecting us somehow. I can feel it."

Keric nodded. "That was an illegal stimulant in that vial, wasn't it? Tarrenbar, or white lotus extract..."

"Naetha," she said. "It was naetha, if you must know. Unfortunately I had only the one dose, or I would share it with both of you."

He must have betrayed his revulsion in his expression, for she laughed grimly and shot him a hard look. "Had I not used it, none of us would be here right now."

"But the degenerative side effects—"

"Only develop upon repeated and excessive use," she responded. "You are in no position to judge me," she added, nodding at his arms.

Keric looked down, and saw that his bare skin was streaked with faint smears of red. At first he thought it was Martheke's blood, from when he'd carried him earlier, but with a dawning realization he reached up and touched his face. He could feel the slight stickiness on his fingers even before he looked down at them. He already knew that he would find no cuts or gashes on his skin. Neither of the others bore such marks. They were the physical remnants of the magic he'd unleashed in the desperate battle against the blood golem. The marks of a blood mage.

"I suppose if someone is still watching, we're both finished as wizards," she said, handing him a small kerchief from a pocket. "I wanted to win this before."

"And now?"

"Now, I just want to live."

Martheke rejoined them, a bit steadier on his feet. He let Ashandra take the lead as they resumed their trek down the tunnel. It went on for what seemed like forever, and they were all breathing heavily by the time that they finally saw a light ahead.

The passage opened onto a large oval chamber. A small stair of three broad steps led down to the level of the floor in front of them. The room was lit by lamps recessed into the ceiling, providing a vague but sufficient illumination. Kerik could see at least four other exits, all on the near side of the room, and all at different levels, from one passage mouth at least ten feet above the floor, accessed by a ladder of iron rungs, to a deeply recessed opening in the floor that had the look of a cave mouth. The plethora of routes into the chamber made him nervous, and he quickly joined Ashandra in crossing the room.

The floor in the center of the chamber descended via more steep tiers to culminate in a deep bowl. The stone on the far side of the depression was carved into a slender flight of stone steps that connected its bottom to their level, then continued up to a raised platform that filled the narrowest part of the chamber opposite. The ascent was steep enough so that a man atop the platform might feel a sense of vertigo looking over the brink; certainly the drop was enough to break bones if one misplaced a step.

Their eyes were drawn to something in the center of the bowl, situated just a few steps from the bottom of the stairs. A crystal orb lay in a broad stone basin, flashing slightly in the diffuse glow from above. The orb looked like a smaller version of the Labyrinth crystal.

"Come on," Ashandra said. She moved carefully around the perimeter of the bowl to the stairs, but hardly slowed there, taking the steps quickly down to the bottom in front of the basin.

Kerik and Martheke followed more slowly. The scroll mage paused at the juncture of the steps, and peered up toward the top of the platform. He could now see what had been hidden in shadows before; one last arch, this one black and empty.

"It's the way out," he said to the others. "It must be."

"This must be a trigger of some sort," Ashandra said, moving around the basin to a spot where she could easily reach the crystal.

"Be careful, it may be corrupted in some fashion," Martheke said. The steel mage's color was much improved since Kerik had healed him, but as he reached the bottom of

the steps he slumped against the edge of the bowl, exhaustion drawing hard lines across his features.

"I am just going to test it," Ashandra said. She looked at Keric, who had descended halfway down the steps. As he nodded, she reached out and gently placed both hands upon the crystal.

He could not tell exactly what she was doing, but he could see the look of concentration deepen on her face, and suspected she was doing exactly what he would have done; Delving into the magic. He hoped that whatever test Seris had placed here for them could be overcome with their innate talents; his own spells were all gone, and he doubted that Ashandra had much magic of her own in reserve.

But even as the thought crossed his mind, the sphere began to glow from within, casting the shield mage's features into stark relief. He could see the beads of sweat glistening on her brow as she continued to focus upon the crystal, activating its magic. The glow spread across the bowl, and he only belatedly realized that it was being matched by another radiance behind him. He turned and looked up the stairs, and saw that a brightness matching the light coming from the crystal had appeared within the arch. It grew steadier until it formed a sheer plane, a shimmering opening, a portal back to their own reality.

"You did it!" Keric said. "Come on, we've got to get out of here before—"

But his words died even as Ashandra released the sphere; the light instantly faded, along with the portal within the arch.

"I can't... I can't keep it open," she said. "It should... there's something there, something *pushing* against me. It slammed the door as soon as I released it."

Keric stepped forward. "Let me try," he said.

"No. You have to get him out of here," she said, nodding toward Marthek. The steel mage tried to protest, but she ruthlessly cut him off. "You can't even stand, let alone manage something like this," she said. She shifted her eyes toward Keric. "The same goes for you. I could barely manage it, even with the naetha in my bloodstream, and you look like you're going to fall down at any moment."

He stepped forward. "There has to be something, a way that we haven't thought of, to keep it open..."

"Save it," she said. "We don't have time—"

As if on cue, a sound interrupted her. A terrible, familiar sound.

"It's coming!" Marthek said. He surged to his feet, but almost as quickly fell, groaning as he collapsed onto the steps.

Keric met Ashandra's gaze. "Go," she said. "Go."

He tore his eyes away from her as she turned back to the crystal orb. He grabbed onto Marthek, pulled him to his feet. He didn't look back as he dragged the semi-conscious mage up the stairs, nearly falling with each step. Ahead of them the glow from the arch began to shine again. And behind... behind he knew what was coming, could see it in his mind almost as clearly as if he'd stopped to look. He could sense the eagerness of the entity to stop them, to absorb their blood as it had taken Trave's, and had started with Marthek's.

As it would take Ashandra's.

He almost stopped there, at the top of the steps. The glow had spread and steadied, the portal open once more, though its light was tentative, its edges flickering

within the boundary of stone. MartheK groaned and tried to pull free, and that alone was enough to drive Keric to action. Drawing upon the last lingering vestige of his strength, he hurled the both of them forward, into the light.

* * * * *

Chapter 9

Keric tapped on the solitary door at the far end of the long corridor that ran down the length of the third floor of Tallwarden Hall.

"Come in."

Professor Padronis was standing behind his desk, in the midst of what looked like a sea of chaos. Books, bags, parchments, and dozens if not hundreds of pieces of assorted miscellanea covered every flat surface in the room. Padronis was selecting items and putting them into a box that was balanced precariously on the edge of his chair; a half-dozen similar boxes were already stacked near the door. They blocked the door from opening more than a bit, but Keric was able to slide through.

The senior mage looked up as Keric entered the room. "Ah, good, Keric, I was hoping to talk to you before the movers arrived." He gestured with a hand toward the mess. "As you can see, I'm a bit behind. Hand me that mortar and pestle, will you? On the shelf behind the door."

As Keric handed it over, he said, "Congratulations on your promotion, sir."

Padronis hesitated with the ceramic bowl in his hands. "Yes, well, I think we can all understand why Dean Corinther chose to retire now. I cannot blame him."

Keric fidgeted a bit as Padronis carefully lowered the mortar and pestle into the box, then picked up the lid, fastened it, and shifted the box to the floor. There were more empty boxes behind the desk, but Keric couldn't see how all of the contents of the office would possibly fit into even twice their number. "Sir, I wanted to speak to you about my request. I thought maybe you could intercede with—"

Padronis interrupted him with a raised hand. He gestured for Keric to close the door. When he had, the older mage sighed and said, "Keric, the team sent into the Labyrinth included senior mages from both the University faculty and the Mage Council. Do you think you'll find something they could not?"

"No, it's not that. It's just that... I needed to..."

"I know that it is difficult to gain closure in circumstances like this," Padronis said. "In any case, even if I wanted to intervene, the matter has been closed. The Council has decreed that the annual Labyrinth competition is to be ended; they have taken custody of the crystal and are planning on securing it in their vaults. I wouldn't be surprised if they ended up finding a use for it again at some point, but it is no longer a University concern."

"No longer a University concern," Keric repeated, the words tinged with more than a hint of bitterness.

"We attend to our own," Padronis said softly. "I didn't see you at the services yesterday."

"I'm sorry. I... I guess I just wasn't quite ready to move on."

The other mage nodded. "Mages Hael and Sarhus will be missed; it is our task now to ensure that they will not be forgotten. Have you spoken to Marthek Jarol?"

"Not since he returned to Sirrath, to his family's estate there. I got the impression, however, that he was not planning on returning to the University."

"Yes. A shame, that. We can do so much with our magic, but we cannot give the boy back his arm." He settled his gaze on Keric. "The attack cost us three promising young mages. It is my sincere hope that it does not claim a fourth."

Keric nodded. "Is there any more information about the blood mage? I heard a rumor that he was connected somehow to the Sokhali, and that the Empire—"

"A mage should not barter in rumors," Padronis said, again cutting him off. "You should know, better than most, of the danger that can exist in careless words." He deliberately softened his expression. "The matter is being dealt with. I urge you to leave it at that." He bent down and picked up a fresh box from the pile, placed it on his chair. "Let us speak of more positive topics. I understand that you wish to study under me next term."

"If you are still taking students," Keric said.

"Oh, I do not intend to let my new assignment isolate me from teaching entirely," Padronis said. "Although I would have thought that you would have preferred to remain with a master within your own discipline for your advanced work. Trying to become the first archmage in two hundred years?"

"Scroll magic is definitely enough of a challenge for me," Keric replied. "But magical theory is universal. And... well, I think that the schools can be a bit too insular, sometimes. Maybe if we learned to work together better..."

"A wise sentiment," Padronis said. He looked around at the remaining clutter and threw up his hands. "Ah, this isn't going to get done any time soon. Come on, buy me a cup of tea, and tell me what brilliant discoveries you intend to make next term."

* * *

It was well past last bell when Keric returned to the Quadrangle, alone. The University was never truly asleep, but at that late hour, closer to dawn than to the preceding sunset, the large open square was deserted, and only a few of the windows in the surrounding buildings were aglow with the light of spelled lamps.

Keric walked slowly to the Viewing Pool. The bleachers and platform that had been used during the final running of the Labyrinth competition were gone, dismantled and returned to storage, but there were still subtle signs of what had happened. It was hard to see in the darkness, but patches of sod had been removed and replaced. Keric had heard that the spots where the blood mage's dark magic had touched had been utterly tainted; they'd even had to dig up and replace the dirt underneath the grass.

They'd left the fountain. There had been talk of tearing it down as well, but ultimately the governing council had elected to leave it. It now sat quiet and empty of water. Keric stopped before it, and stared down at the blank stone. There was no remnant of the blood mage, of course, but Keric shuddered as he thought of the man,

and what he had done here. He had not been there during the battle, of course, but he'd spoken to a number of people who had witnessed the exchange, and its grim finale. When he and Marthek had reappeared next to the fountain, in all of the confusion, he'd never gotten a chance to look into the pool, to look at the body of the man who had tried to kill him. Who had succeeded in killing two of them, and crippling a third.

He stood there staring for a long time. Then, stirring as though waking from a dream, he reached into his tunic and drew out a scroll.

He unrolled the crisp new parchment, carefully spreading it on the flat stone lip of the fountain. It was too dark to read, but he had prepared for that in his working, and as he anchored the corners of the scroll with small pebbles he traced his fingers over the writing, whispering a minor incantation. The runes flared slightly and came alive with a gentle light.

He started to read. The words flowed from his lips in the same way that they had flowed from his pen onto the parchment. Magic was never easy, even for a skilled mage, but somehow this time the words had rushed out, as if they had been penned up inside him, eager and waiting to get out. He swayed slightly and felt a slight dizziness as he read, but he completed the spell. All focus magic, whether scroll or gem or amulet or blade, drew somewhat on the personal power of the mage, but Keric had delved deeper with this working. His tutors likely would have frowned upon this expenditure and the risks involved, but it was something he had felt he had to do. To purge the demons he had brought with him out of the Labyrinth, perhaps.

The disorientation passed as he finished his casting. The runes inscribed on the scroll flared in sequence and disappeared, and the other words below them, several lines of text that extended to the bottom of the scroll, likewise faded. That writing was mundane, not magic, but those words too had power. For him, if not for anyone else.

He carefully removed the pebbles and lifted the scroll. It was too dark to clearly read the writing that was now deeply incised into the stone, but Keric knew them by heart. The inscriptions perfectly matched the words he had written on the bottom of the scroll.

ASHANDRA HAEL AND TRAVE SARHUS
THEY GAVE THEIR LIVES SO THAT OTHERS WOULD LIVE
WE WILL NEVER FORGET

Rolling up the empty scroll and tucking it back into his pocket, the young mage turned and departed, leaving the Quadrangle quiet and empty again in his wake.

THE END