



SAGA OF THE BLADE

Previously compiled and included as bonus material complementing the 3e-compatible edition of *Ptolus*, *Saga of the Blade* is a serialized fiction series that I wrote each month for *Game Trade Magazine*. Unlike most fantasy stories, it doesn't follow the actions of a single character. It traces the history of a magical sword as it passes from wielder to wielder, being used in all sorts of adventures and battles. Some of the wielders are heroic, and some are not. Some keep the sword for years, and some for just a few brief moments. The sword promises to lead every one of them to destiny with cryptic words. As the story unfolds, we learn more about the sword, its creator, and its extraordinary powers.



The series is set in the world of Praemal. As the story begins, the action takes place about twelve hundred years ago—long before the city of Ptolus is even built! However, by the end, the plot advances to the present day. The series reveals interesting secrets about Dwarvenhearth, Castle Shard, Ghul, the Balacazars, and many other mysterious Ptolus topics.

Enjoy this reprint of the entire sixteen-issue run.

—Monte

CHAPTER 1: A PROMISE TO AN OGRE

The sword clattered to the black and white marble floor of the throne room. Gregor died within arm's reach of his goal.

Gregor had come to Castle Shard on the advice of Athorissil, a dragon. The creature lived across the Whitewind Sea in the Dragonsreach Mountains. It had taken the aging knight weeks to find the dragon's lair, the very discovery of which itself was the culmination of a quest that had spanned years.

And now it was over.

Alchestrin stood over Gregor's body. His flesh blackened by the wizard's sorcerous flame, Gregor was almost unrecognizable, but Alchestrin knew all too well who he was. As a knight of Palastan, Gregor's reputation was well known. He had led troops against the devils' horde in Rhoth and had personally crossed Temptation Falls to speak with the Covey of Nine. He was a hero of great repute. Would any bard ever sing of how he fell here today? Alchestrin sneered at the thought. He placed little value on tavern tales, reputations, or—for that matter—heroes.

Alchestrin's powerful presence did not come from height or appearance. He was, in fact, somewhat short for a Palastani man; his eyes were small, and his features simple—homely even. Nevertheless, his stance exuded command and puissance. He rubbed at his scraggly beard and considered how easy it had been to ambush and slay the intruder. So consumed was he by his goal that he had not even been aware of the wizard's presence in the back of the room. Now if only Alchestrin could convince Athorissil to reveal why Gregor had come here in the first place.

With an enspelled word and a wave of his hand, Alchestrin attuned his sight to spy the power of the fallen knight's possessions. His bag evidently held a few magical potions and elixirs, and his armor was enchanted. The longsword with the golden hilt had a particularly complex aura, but Alchestrin had no use for such things. He dismissed both spell and foe in one instant, and his thoughts drifted to other matters.

As he walked out of the chamber through the bronze doors, he offhandedly called for Nivel. "Clean that up," the wizard said, motioning back into the room, "and keep any of the trash that you'd like."

Nivel lurched into motion. He had seen the human in armor come into the castle but had been under strict orders to avoid a confrontation. Now he was eager to get a better look. His heavy limbs creaked when he walked. Nivel was unnaturally old for an ogre. Alchestrin told him it was because he had fiendish blood in his veins. He scratched himself as he hobbled down the corridor into the throne room, nodding his subservience toward Alchestrin, or rather

the staircase down which he had already disappeared. Nivel's left leg was mangled by a dwarvish axe years before, and now he walked with a pronounced limp. He knew that his master held the power to repair such a malady, but he never offered to, and Nivel never asked.

Once in the dark throne room, Nivel hunched over the fallen knight. He took his leather pack, sniffing it first, and then opened it. With thick, meaty fingers he explored its contents clumsily. Nivel slung the bag over his own shoulder and grabbed one of the man's legs to drag him out of the room, when he saw the longsword on the floor near the throne.

Normally, he avoided the throne if he could. There was something about the fact that Master Alchestrin never sat in it, even though he was unquestionably the lord of Castle Shard. Something about that was... unnerving. If Alchestrin avoided it, surely Nivel should. He carefully stepped toward the sword but kept his eye warily on the bejeweled throne, as if it were a beast that could pounce at any moment.

The ogre knelt on the floor. The longsword had a leather grip, and a long, elaborate pommel that looked like the upper half of a noble, almost angelic human woman. The two cross-guards each had gems at their tips, and the ricasso held a place where a gem would fit, although there was no such gem there now. The blade itself had one small but distinctive nick.

Nivel picked up the sword, grasping it by the hilt.

It was warm to the touch. The grip seemed to shift in his hand to form the perfect fit. As it always had, the figure on the pommel spoke to its wielder, the beautiful face staring directly into his eyes. "Carry me to truth and I shall carve a course toward insight. Carry me to destiny and I shall slice past from future." Then, as it always had, the sword grew silent.

Nivel smiled for the first time in decades. He didn't know what the sword's words meant exactly, but he smiled nonetheless.

The sword safely tucked into the leather belt bounding his massive girth, he set about disposing of the corpse that lay strewn inelegantly across the floor.



Weeks passed. Nivel thought often of the cool, melodious tones of the sword's voice and its strange words. At night, after the day's duties were done, he would sit in his room with the sword draped across his lap, or held gently in his hands, hoping it would speak again, although it never did.

He never asked it to speak. He never spoke to it himself. There was something too elegant about the blade—something too wondrous for him to think he had any right to speak to it, or ask anything of it. He was, after all, just an ogre. And, by all accounts, not even a very impressive one.

Still, the sword's words ran across his thoughts like a broom sweeping through a dusty chamber. The sword's words held promise. They *were* a promise. Nivel wasn't sure what they promised, but they promised him something, and no one had ever done that before. No one had ever promised him anything.

The blade had spoken of truth and destiny. He knew nothing about such things. He'd never given either concept any thought.

Until now.

As these thought-filled nights passed, Nivel grew more and more sure of one thing: The sword wanted something. At the very least, it wanted to be used. And, as difficult as it was to imagine, it seemed to want him to use it. Wield it.

Nivel, of course, was no stranger to weaponry. He had never bothered to keep track of how many people or beasts he had slain with his massive warhammer that was covered in nicks and permanently stained in blood. Humans, orcs, goblins, elves, dwarves, litorians, horses, dogs... all of them had fallen before him, and every blow was at the behest of his master, Alchestrin. He never gave them much thought. Killing someone had never been much different than mopping the floor, chopping wood, or any other task he had been given.

But this sword had purpose, and it promised him a part in that purpose. In fact, it seemed to suggest that his will would help guide that purpose. It was he who had to carry it to truth or to destiny. It was a weapon, but it was more than that.

These were all things that Nivel had never had to consider before. It was difficult for him. It took weeks.

Finally, one night Nivel sat with the sword on his lap and he knew that he would have to accept the sword's promise. He would, as best he could, carry it toward truth and destiny, even though he honestly had no idea how to do that. But he knew how to get started. He had to leave Castle Shard. Of course, his master would never just let him leave. And he couldn't explain it all to Alchestrin even if he wanted to. How do you explain such a thing? Nivel wondered. He had never tried before and knew he would be no good at it. At best, he would convince Alchestrin that he, not the ogre, should have the sword, and Nivel feared losing the sword now more than anything.

No, the solution was far more simple and straightforward than that. It wouldn't require any complicated discussions or risky propositions.

He would have to kill Alchestrin.

CHAPTER 2: A PROMISE KEPT

Nivel knew that he had to kill Alchestrin.

Weeks ago, the lumbering ogre guard had taken the sword from the body of a knight slain by Alchestrin, Nivel's master of many years. This was no ordinary sword, however. It spoke to him with a voice like an angel. It spoke of things like truth, insight, and most of all destiny. Nivel took from its words a promise that it would guide him to a better life—though he had no idea what kind of life it would be.

But Alchestrin would have to die in order for that happen. It was clear to Nivel that no freedom could exist while his master still lived. He could not leave until he had changed himself, and to stop being a slave, one had to stop the slavery. Or at least that's what Nivel figured, after so many weeks of consideration.

Now Nivel had to plan a murder.

To be sure, the ogre was no stranger to killing. He had slain many scores of foes in his life, all at the command of Alchestrin. But these

were not murders. They could hardly be called carefully planned applications of his massive, bloodstained warhammer. Killing was a simple matter to Nivel, thanks to his prodigious natural strength, and rarely required much thought, let alone planning.

No, this was going to take time. He was going to have to carefully watch the wizard as he made his way around the castle. Nivel would have to learn all his habits and means of coming and going. He must find just the right spot, and just the right moment to strike, with multiple secondary plans if the first should go awry. He should have been paying more attention all these years, he knew, but he could not let such recriminations get in the way of his careful planning. Once he—

What?

“Are you listening to me, you imbecile?” Alchestrin said, standing before Nivel at the spot at the top of the stairs where the ogre stood guard.

Did Alchestrin just say something about the sword?

“I now believe there’s more to it than I had originally thought,” the wizard continued. “Give it to me. I must study it further.” The wizard was looking at the blade tucked into Nivel’s belt. He held out his hand toward the ogre. “My conversation with the dragon now leads me to believe that this sword may have something to do with—”

With a move quicker than Nivel himself could believe, in a single, smooth stroke, the ogre drew forth the sword and thrust its point into Alchestrin’s stomach. It would have been difficult to judge who was more surprised. The wizard staggered back, but kept to his feet.

As he looked down at the bloody wound, the wizard’s countenance moved from shock to horror to rage in a stuttering flash of a single moment. His hand reached down to staunch the flow of blood, fruitlessly. Without a word or a cry, using more reflex than skill or intent, his other hand weaved the pattern for a simple but deadly spell. Dark energy lanced from each fingertip and struck Nivel in the chest. The ogre staggered backward, but like the wizard, did not fall.

Nivel was strong, but the old wound given to him by a dwarven waraxe years before, the one that forced his stride into a shuffling limp every day, made him slow and awkward. His second strike was not graced with the gift of surprise, and Alchestrin, even as wounded as he was, dodged backward and avoided it.

Gathering his wits, sharpened to a fine point by his anger, the wizard wove a protective spell around himself. “I see that I was right.” Alchestrin’s voice was quiet and laced with pain. His eyes slightly bulged and his brow furrowed as he regained his focus. “There is more to that sword than first appeared. You’ve a new master, Nivel. It’s clearly controlling you.”

No it isn’t.

“I know it’s forcing you to attack me, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to forgive you for this betrayal.

No. It isn’t.

Nivel swung the sword at the wizard again, but the sorcerous defense that invisibly shielded him cast the blow aside harmlessly. This gave Alchestrin time to perform a more substantive conjuration. Arcane words, spoken through teeth clenched with pain, spewed

quietly from his lips, and his free hand traced an intricate pattern in the air. Nivel’s sensitive nose smelled the sharp tang of sorcery, and for the first time in a long while, felt fear.

Roaring forth from the mage’s palms, the heads of two dragons made of dancing crimson light wove through the air on serpentine necks. Jaws snapped at Nivel, who could do little more than fend off their attacks with mighty swings of the golden-hilted sword.

Alchestrin laughed. “Foolish little blade. You chose poorly when you selected him to be your dupe.”

No. It didn’t choose poorly. No, he wasn’t a dupe. No. It was all wrong. No, no, no!

Nivel dropped the sword on the stone castle floor. Eldritch dragon heads tore at his flesh with conjured teeth, but he ignored them. He took two powerful steps forward and, with all his might, launched himself at the wizard. The weight of the ogre knocked Alchestrin backward, off his feet, and the two landed on the ground with Nivel on top.

The ogre’s massive hands clutched the wizard about the chest, but the protective enchantment forced Nivel’s hands away as if there were an invisible human-shaped bubble around Alchestrin. Beneath the ogre, Alchestrin struggled, but his strength was like that of a child compared to the hulking brute. He could not get his hands free to cast a spell.

Nivel squeezed. Harder and harder, despite the dragons still shredding his back, he pressed on the magical force until it could deny him no longer. His thick, muscular hands grasped the wizard by the chest and continued to squeeze. The pressure forced out a terrible wheezing cry from Alchestrin’s lips. Still he clenched tighter. He crushed his hands together around Alchestrin’s chest until gore poured forth from the wound in the wizard’s gut and his body was clearly just an empty shell. The conjured heads faded into nothingness.

Nivel knew a dead body when he saw it, and certainly when he held it. Still, it was quite a while before he let go.

He crawled away slowly, covered in blood—his own and Alchestrin’s. For a long time, he sat on the cold floor and stared at his dead master. He felt a strange sense of loss: not that he had lost Alchestrin, but that without the wizard to command him, he himself was lost. Even with his foe vanquished, the ogre’s fear remained.

Eventually, he stood, limped to the sword, and put it back in his belt. He left Castle Shard via the stairs he had guarded for the last sixty years.

Behind him, the dead wizard’s body began to stir. Intestines slowly slithered like serpents around his belly wound. Alchestrin’s magic bade his dead eyes to open.



The forlorn castle had been built on a cliff in the shadow of a huge spire of stone that reached into the sky like a spear. Even as Nivel descended the cliff and headed into the surrounding lands, he could always see the spire. Nivel wandered through the surrounding wilderness, weak from blood loss.

But he survived.

For the first few weeks, the fear of being alone and having no one to command him weighed heavily upon him. He often wished that Alcestrin had been right, and that the sword was controlling him, so that he would know what to do. He spent his nights during that time softly speaking to the blade, hoping it would provide him the insight it had promised.

His wounds healed slowly, and he had to devote great amounts of time and energy toward finding food and water and other necessities of his survival. He soon found that he was quite good at it. Eventually, his fears faded amid the tasks of each day. One day he awoke to the heady realization of true freedom. He laughed—for the first time in his life, Nivel laughed. The euphoria of it all carried him along for weeks more. He found a small cave by a waterfall and made it his home. The river was full of fish, and the wilderness thick with game.

The sword never spoke to him again. After many quiet years, the old ogre began to feel the toll of time. In particular, the wound in his leg—the one that Alcestrin never helped heal with his magic—slowed him down, and one day kept him off his feet altogether. A few days later, Nivel died, happy and free. His last thoughts were of the sword and the gratitude he felt. It had kept its promise.



A year later, to the day, a young woman named Mellina sought shelter from a storm in a cave. While she waited out the downpour, Mellina looked about and found an old pile of uninteresting bones and rags. Amid them, however, lay a sword with a golden hilt in the shape of a beautiful woman. She picked it up. The face on the hilt looked her in the eye and spoke: “Carry me to truth and I shall carve a course toward insight. Carry me to destiny and I shall slice past from future.”

Mellina smiled.

CHAPTER 3: THE LUCK OF THIEVES

When Mellina finally caught up with Harrock, she was still smiling. He looked like a miserable scarecrow with his heavy, wet clothes and hair plastered to his thin frame.

“Very funny,” he said, shaking his head slowly. “How’d you stay so dry in that downpour? Do storms like that always come out of nowhere up here?”

But Mellina wasn’t smiling at Harrock’s comical appearance. “Never mind that,” she said. “Feast your greedy little eyes on this!” Mellina drew forth a longsword that she had wrapped in her extra cloak. It was beautiful, with a silvery blade and golden pommel, both glistening in the sunlight that had finally driven off the afternoon storm.

Just as she expected, Harrock’s eyes grew wide. He took a step forward and almost slipped on a rain-slick rock. “Magic?”

“Yeah. I think it might even be intelligent. It talked.”

Harrock touched the blade with his outstretched fingertips. “Really? What did it say?”

“Something about leading me to destiny. Or insight. Or something.”

Harrock crouched at her feet and studied the pommel, which was shaped like a beautiful woman. “Hello?”

Nothing happened. Mellina laughed. “Maybe it doesn’t like you.”

“Let me see it,” Harrock said.

“Well... I found it, you know.”

Harrock frowned as he looked up at Mellina. “We’re supposed to be partners.”

“Yeah, all right,” She held it out to him. “But don’t get attached to it. We’re selling this in Trolone. I think Garian will give us a lot for it.”

Harrock took it from her gingerly. The face on the hilt looked up at him, and spoke: “Carry me to truth and I shall carve a course toward insight. Carry me to destiny and I shall slice past from future.”

He fumbled with sword, almost dropping it. His mouth was agape.

Mellina wrinkled her nose. “Hmm. That’s just what it said to me.”

“Carry it to destiny?” Harrock stood, holding the sword with both hands. “What do you suppose that means?”

“Our destiny is to sell this sword and get rich.” Mellina took it back from him and began wrapping it again in her cloak.

“What about Dwarvenhearth?”

Mellina sighed deliberately. “I’ve been all along that ridge to the west and I couldn’t find any secret entrances. I’m beginning to think there aren’t any.”

Now Harrock sighed. He peeled off his soggy cloak and tried to shake the water off, with little success. “Two days ago you were sure this would get us rich.”

“And it would, if it was possible. Do you know what kind of price people would pay for the secret of getting into that dwarven city down there? There’s mines down there, you know. Gold mines. Silver. All kinds of jewels. From what I hear, the place drips with jewels. Every one of those dwarves is so rich that they pay for their tavern meals with whole chests of gold.”

“I know. You said that yesterday and it didn’t really make any sense then, either.”

Mellina held up the now-wrapped sword. “You don’t think there’s treasure here?”

“You know, that doesn’t look like a dwarf sword.”

“So now you’re the expert.”

Harrock scowled. “Where did you say you found it?”

“Just laying there in a cave, among some old bones.”

“Dwarven bones?”

She shook her head. “Too big. Looked like a troll or something.”

“A sword like that wouldn’t just be laying in an ordinary cave—”

“I searched it. Twice. The whole place. Nothing. No other treasure, no secret doors down to dwarven vaults. Look, we should get going. Forget all this dwarf stuff. Fortune dropped a treasure in our laps. Let’s not quibble over the details.” She took a few steps, but Harrock stood his ground, working his jaw.

“Oh, would you just come along!”



Harrock was clearly an outlander. His skin was dark, hairy, and adorned. Mellina, on the other hand, bore the skin-sigils of her family, her village, and the kingdom on the smooth flesh of her arms, shoulders, and neck. In her left ear she wore six silver studs, one for each of her siblings. Her hair was long and braided with the stone-studded cords given to her on each of her nineteen birthdays.

Harrock moved slowly and clumsily over the rocky terrain. As they made their way northwest, roughly following the King's River, he continually looked at the Spire. Mellina could hardly blame him, she supposed. She'd grown up within sight of the impressive wonder, but if she hadn't, she'd probably stare at it as well. It reached upward more than a half mile straight to the sky—a single pinnacle of rock. Most of its length couldn't be more than four or five hundred feet across. There were many legends about it, of course. Everyone knew it wasn't natural. Everyone knew it had something to do with that mysterious old ruin perched at the top, looking down like a vulture looks upon the dead. But nothing had stirred there for years. Thousands of years. There was no reason to stare, in truth.

By nightfall it had begun to rain again, but only lightly. Mellina hardly noticed it, but Harrock was obviously glum.

"It is always like this?" He sat on a rock.

"More or less. In the summer—"

"Wait," Harrock held up a hand.

They both paused in silence. Then, just at the edge of perception, Mellina heard something. Footfalls. The sound grew. Many footfalls.

They had stopped for the night in a shallow gully nestled between two modest hills. Quietly—surprisingly so in Harrock's case—the two of them climbed up the side of one of them, slowly sliding up the boulder-strewn incline. The sounds grew louder.

At the top of the hill, the two surveyed the landscape. It was dark and overcast, so there was little to see. To Mellina's surprise, Harrock pointed into the darkness, down the other side of the hill. She stared into the night, calming herself the way her father had taught her, letting her eyes adjust to the absence of light, looking for anything.

And then she saw. Figures moving through the darkness. The sounds that accompanied them suggested they were armored. Their sure steps meant that they could see in the dark better than she could, but they gave no sign that they saw her or her friend.

"Orcs," Harrock whispered, almost impossibly quiet.

Mellina shook her head. There were no orcs in Palastan. Such beasts roamed the wild lands to the south, she had heard, but not here. Not for years. Thousands of years.

Harrock nodded in response. She could barely see the look of certainty in his face. "We've got to get out of here," he whispered. Snakelike, he slithered atop a large boulder to head back the way they had come. He turned to look at her, and then slipped off the lichen-covered stone with a loud crash that sent rocks of all sizes skittering down the hill.

How could a single man be so deft and so clumsy at the same time?

"By the Lady!" he cursed.

From below, they heard shouts in a guttural tongue and boots against stone.

"Run!" Mellina shouted.

She flung herself down the hill. Each step felt like she was falling, but each time her foot barely caught her and stopped her from flying into the darkness. She lost track of where Harrock was in the darkness, but she had some concept of him being behind her—somewhere.

She reached the gulley, landing finally on her knees. She'd have a bruise there to be sure.

It took her a moment to identify the sudden sounds around her. Arrows!

"No-go!" came a rough, croaking voice.

She scrambled behind a rock and tried to crawl toward the mouth of the ravine. Pain flashed at the back of her head, tearing at her hair. She stopped, shocked. Her hand went to her head, and came away wet. An arrow had just grazed the back of her skull. It was bleeding—rapidly. Pain lanced through across her entire head.

"No-go!"

There were footfalls close now. Mellina couldn't think to move. Soon there were creatures all around her. They were shouting, but she couldn't understand any of it. One of them bent down close to where she lay on the ground, still face down. "Nar, nar, nar! Look-found not-dwarf," it said in a sort of approximation of Palastani. That must be for her benefit.

She felt something torn from her back, saw her extra cloak fall to the ground next to her. More shouts she couldn't understand.

"Look-now pretty-found—oooh..."

"Carry me to truth and I shall carve a course toward insight. Carry me to destiny and I shall slice past from future."

Oh no.

CHAPTER 4: LUCK NEVER HOLDS

The ebony-skinned orcs surrounded Mellina and Harrock as they lay on the ground, staring up at their captors and the black night above them. The leader of the creatures—a tall, lanky specimen with a neck twice too long to make up for his fellows' neckless, hunched stances—held Mellina's treasure in its oversized hands.

It stroked the golden-hilted sword while the two humans watched. Eventually, it spoke to them, its dark eyes wide. "Not-dwarves bring shiny-good from where? How?" Its grasp of Palastani was tenuous at best.

Mellina head ached from the gash across the back of her skull. She was having trouble keeping conscious. Harrock, held down with orcish boots atop his chest and spears pointed at his face said, "Look, we'll give you the sword. Let us go and it's yours."

The orc leader looked at him quizzically. "Keep you or go you, shiny-found is mine." Then he laughed and said something in Orcish to the others. They all laughed. A few more barked-out commands, and soon they were roughly tying the hands and legs of their two prisoners. Mellina blacked out.



When she awoke, the light of dawn seeped into the sky above her. She still lay on her back, bound, but the orcs had clearly moved since she had fallen unconscious. Harrock lay next to her, awake but silent. The young southerner looked quite terrified. An orc crouched over both of them, a battleaxe in its hand. But he wasn't looking at them.

Then Mellina realized that the orcs around her—she counted seven—were all being very quiet, and the entire group crouched low in a ravine. She could hear water rushing not far off.

Mellina rolled a bit to get a better look at Harrock. The orc with the axe shot her a glance, but then looked away. She looked into Harrock's eyes and raised her eyebrows, trying to get any kind of information from him. He shrugged within his own bonds and shook his head slightly.

One of the orcs whispered something in their own rough tongue. Then the leader she remembered from the previous night slipped into the ravine. The sword—the sword that spoke—was tucked into a harness on his back. He spoke quietly to the others. Mellina recognized one word amid his speech: “haudir.” That was the name that the dwarves gave for themselves.

The orcs were afraid of the dwarves, obviously. And with good reason. They had been captured somewhere in the vicinity of the entrance to Dwarvenhearth, reputedly the greatest dwarven stronghold east of the Grail Keep in far-off Prust. Thinking about that made her again wonder what orcs were doing here at all. Not only had she not heard of any orc tribes coming this far north in her lifetime, but she had never heard of orcs like these at all. Orcs, she had been told, were bestial, hairy brutes with grey-green skin. The smooth, black flesh and the well-kept equipment and weapons of these creatures made her almost doubt that they were orcs at all.

One of the creatures, still crouching, moved toward the leader and spoke to him in harsh whispers. Then the orc stood a bit higher and gestured near a third orc, intoning an incantation. Silent waves of greenish fire spread from one hand toward the orc, whose muscles suddenly contracted and then expanded. Then, the spellcaster did the same to another warrior.

An orc wizard? Now Mellina knew that something strange was going on here.

The two spell-enhanced orcs moved up out of the ravine. With a word from the leader, the others followed, even the spellcaster, leaving him alone with the captives.

Mellina took a chance. “What’s going on?” She whispered to the orc.

The leader hissed at her and then looked away.

“If you don’t talk to me, I’ll scream, and whatever’s out there that you’re afraid of will come running.”

The orc glared at her. “Make-sound, bloody-mess you.”

“That means he’ll kill us,” Harrock whispered. “So shut up, Mellina.”

“No,” she said, still looking at the orc, and speaking ever so slightly louder. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“Dwarf spy-look. Must-we master-return safe. Shiny-found for half-god skull-king. Quiet now or all-dead.”

Mellina, however, had been using the sound of her own voice, and the sounds of the orc’s, to cover the sounds of her hands slipping free of her crudely tied bonds. These orcs might be more sophisticated than she had heard, but they were downright childish in their skill at tying ropes.

She waited for the leader to grow intent on the dwarf patrol that obviously was nearby. This didn’t take long, because the sounds of combat rose suddenly from what she guessed was the west, judging by the light of the rising dawn.

“Roll over so I can untie your hands,” she whispered to Harrock. He looked down and saw her free hands behind her. With eyes wide, he slowly did as she asked. The orc, meanwhile, crept to the side of the gulley and climbed atop a rock to get a vantage.

While she untied the simple knot, Mellina heard weapons falling upon shields and clattering against armor. She heard shouts and cries in languages she did not know, but it was easy enough to guess that they were Orcish and Dwarvish. Soon, Harrock’s hands were free.

She peered closely at the orc, but he appeared very distracted. Taking a chance, she squirmed into a fetal position to slip the bonds from her ankles. Harrock did the same, but not nearly so gracefully or quietly. The orc leader turned.

“No-go! Bloody-belly you both!” He drew forth the magical blade and lunged toward them.

By the time he did, Mellina was already free. She shoved Harrock so that he rolled away as the orc’s blow crashed down. He struck the hard ground.

Mellina stood, but the head wound she had received the night before suddenly throbbed and she could hardly see. She tumbled down again.

Harrock flailed his hands out and grabbed the orc by his boots. Pulling hard, the orc lost his balance and also fell to the ground. The sword flew out of his hands and into the nearby rocks.

Mellina crawled toward Harrock to untie his still-bound feet, but Harrock himself crawled forward to get on top of the prone orc. “Get out of here, Mellina,” he yelled. “Run!”

She did not obey. As Harrock grappled with the orc, she tried to untie his ankles. The orc roared and flipped the young man off of him, though. The creature was much stronger than Harrock, obviously.

The orc scrambled toward where the sword lay.

“Hold still!” Mellina said, trying once again to free her friend.

The orc roared in frustration. Mellina did not look up. Finally, with sweaty, grimy fingers, she untied the knot. Harrock was free.

The orc was standing now, pulling at the golden pommel of the magical sword, which was fashioned in the form of a beautiful angelic woman. It had wedged itself between two large rocks.

“Go!” Harrock said.

Mellina motioned toward the orc and the sword. “We’ve got to—”

“No,” Harrock said, standing, “no we don’t.” He lifted her to her feet. Her head swam.

“Your life is your loot on this adventure,” he told her as they ran toward the other end of the ravine.

The orc shouted after them but refused to leave his prize.



"It's no orcish blade, that much is certain."

Hurad stood at the bottom of the ravine next to his friend Ayra. She was wiping the Sorn-Ulth orc's blood from her axe blade as he carefully examined the sword wedged in between two stones.

"Looks like they had themselves some prisoners," Ayra said, pointing with her chin at the loosed ropes on the ground nearby.

"Mark my words, Ayra. These are ill tidings. These orcs are building something up on the Spire. This cannot be good for Dwarvenhearth."

"There's more to worry about than some orcs, Hurad. Even orcs such as these. We should report what we have seen, but we cannot expect the Day King to do much about it now. Not with the *shu-rach* massing in the deeps."

"You're probably right." Just then, with a skillful application of force, Hurad freed the sword from its confines. He held it aloft.

"Good solid forge-work," he said, admiring the blade's edge.

Suddenly, the woman's head carved onto the pommel looked him in the eye and said, "Carry me to truth and I shall carve a course toward insight. Carry me to destiny and I shall slice past from future."

"Huhm," he replied, stroking his braided black beard. "What kind of fool smith is going to make a jabbering blade?"

CHAPTER 5: DEEP MAGIC

Hurad waited with the others behind the massive column. The shield his father had made for him was strapped to his left arm, their clan's seal—a boar's head—engraved into its surface. In his right hand, he gripped the golden-hilted sword he'd taken from that Sorn-Ulth orc a few years back.

Why had he taken this particular blade on a mission this important? The dwarf chewed his lower lip. It was obviously a magical blade, but it was just as obviously forged by human smiths. He would feel more comfortable with dwarf-forged steel in his grip at the moment.

Yet something had bade him take it along.

Ayra crouched next to him, checking her short-barreled dragon rifle for the hundredth time. She looked up at him and nodded with a stern, confident look. He knew her well enough to know that she was just as nervous as he was. Not that dwarves talked about things like that aloud. Ever.

Ayra pushed a handful of thin, golden braids away from her face and stood. With her gloved hand, she gave a signal. Taught to them all by their elders in the Dorud Allum, the sign meant that she heard something. Probably a dozen figures. Coming from the south.

All six of the dwarves readied themselves silently.

From the darkness, beyond even the range of their cave-bred eyes, they heard a raspy, mocking voice: "Zaquim nal-al-fashaun, kiddilfaus..." It was Dark Elvish. Hurad knew it meant, "We know you are here, little dwarves..."

Dennid responded by rounding the stone column toward the sound and firing his crossbow into the darkness. The bolt carried

with it an alchemical flare that the dwarves hoped would reveal their enemies' position as well as hinder them—the dark elves despised light of any kind.

Before any of the other dwarves could react, violet bursts of energy arced across the massive cavern and struck Dennid in the chest. The foul, black magic burned through his breastplate and ate through him, spewing forth out his back.

Dennid had been the dwarf who had helped Hurad into the Dorud Allum more than twenty years previous. The prestigious dwarven intelligence unit wasn't going to accept Hurad, due to his failure in the test of silent hammers, but Dennid got the elders to administer the test a second time. Now Dennid lay dead at Hurad's feet.

Ayra and Korl both came at enemy from the other side of the column, the loud booms from their cannonlike weapons reverberating throughout the cavern. This sound was followed by the faint clinks of dark elven crossbow bolts striking all around them. Hurad knew they would be poisoned. Still, he wanted to help carry the momentum of their attacks and give the dark elves something else to think about while his comrades reloaded.

"For Dwarvenhearth!" he shouted and charged around the column into the middle of the cave. Battam and Durok were right behind him, axes bared. Dennid's light-bolt had indeed revealed their enemies' position more than a hundred paces away. The natural cavern floor was uneven and slick, but his feet found solid footing with each step. Hurad had grown up running through caverns like this.

Behind a line of crossbowmen crouched under the cover of a low, wall-like rock formation, Hurad clearly saw a female dark elf. She was scarcely clothed, and what she did wear looked like a spider's webbing. Hurad's unit had been sent to find out about dark elven movements in this area of the caves. They had found out much, including information about this particular devil, a dark elf priestess of Gorgoth-Lol named Pielastra. Flanking her were two anemic wizards with silver-tipped staves. More of the violet fire spewed forth from those staves, but it arced over the three charging dwarves, at Ayra and Korl. Hurad couldn't stop to think about that now. He kept running forward as fast as he could, using his shield to protect him from the second volley of poisoned bolts from the crossbows.

Pielastra held her hands above her head and between them formed an orb of utter darkness that seemed to seethe in her grip. With a laugh, she launched the orb at the oncoming dwarves. Hurad held up sword and shield and prepared for the worst. The orb rolled over and over in the air, the sound of grinding teeth coming from within it.

The sword lurched in Hurad's hand so that the point pierced the orb as it loomed close. With a soft hum, the orb was shredded as if it were made of tattered parchment.

Hurad stopped with a lurch and stared at the sword and the fading remnants of the now-harmless spell. Pielastra cursed quietly in her native tongue.

The dwarves still had to cross almost half the distance to get at their foes. Hurad raised the sword defiantly and prepared to resume his charge, but he felt the sword move of its own volition again. It sliced through the air in a sweeping arc. He was just barely able to hold onto it. With the slice, golden crescents of light soared silently

from the blade like ripples in a pool. The crescents struck the dark elves in wave after wave. Although the elves had an innate resistance to spells and magic, born of their deep immersion in foul sorceries from birth, the relentless onslaught of one crescent of light after another overcame even the most impervious with the sheer multitude of magical assaults.

When the assailing spectacle of light was finished, the entire line of dark elves behind the now-scorched rock formation was nowhere to be seen. Pielastra's face was bloodied and her body burned and scarred. Only one of the two wizards still stood, and that was only because he used his staff for support.

Hurad had no idea the sword held this kind of power. He sliced through the air again, but nothing happened. Battam and Durok gave cheers of joy and charged ahead. They had leaped atop the low rock formation before Hurad thought to charge ahead as well. By the time he reached them, Durok was battling the wounded wizard, who had conjured a shield that repelled each blow of his axe. Battam circled Pielastra, who had drawn a long, thin knife and a skull-tipped mace.

Hurad knew that Durok understood how to fell a wizard, so he leaped up and over the stone to help Battam. He ignored the dead and dying dark elf warriors that lay all around them, slaughtered by a single stroke of this strange sword.

The blade was a fine weapon, and in Hurad's skilled hands it quickly found Pielastra's heart. By that time, Durok had finished with his foe as well. He was unscathed, as was Hurad. Battam had a minor wound from Pielastra's poisoned blade, but dwarves were usually too hardy to worry overmuch about venoms.

The dark elves around them didn't ask for quarter. Not because of bravery, but because the very idea that someone might grant it would never occur to them. Mercy did not exist in their society, and the fate of captives was certainly always worse than death.

Hurad ignored them. He and the others had the information they needed. They just needed to get back to Dwarvenhearth and the Stonemight elders with it, which is exactly what these dark elves had been attempting to prevent. The dwarven armies could reposition themselves based on the new information, and the war effort would benefit greatly.

But there were more immediate concerns. Hurad ran back across the dark cave and found Ayra and Korl lying on the ground, felled by the wizards' spells. Korl was clearly dead, but Ayra was still breathing—barely. He put down his weapons and reached into his pack and drew out a potion concocted by the priests of great Mocharum. He put it to her lips. She did not revive, but he could tell that she breathed easier, and that she would live.

Durok came up from behind him. "They're all dead. Battam is searching them for anything of use." He cleared his throat. "How—"

Hurad turned toward his comrade. "We've got to get Ayra back to Dwarvenhearth. We've got to get the intelligence we've gathered to the war elders.

"And," he added with a grin, picking up the blade, "we've got to find someone who can tell us what's going on with this amazing sword."

CHAPTER 6: VISIONS OF THE PAST

Alone in the darkened alehouse, Hurad toasted to fallen friends. A single pot of *glowstones* sitting on the rough table lit the place. The war fared poorly, and resources were stretched thin.

A young Stonemight dwarf entered the alehouse through a stone door so cannily crafted that it made no sound as it opened. The dwarf's footfalls were not as silent, however, and Hurad turned.

The newcomer was a messenger. His twisted leg caused him to walk with a pronounced limp—a limp that kept him from the escalating conflict with the dark elves. The time would come, however, when even the infirm would have to come to the defense of Dwarvenhearth, it seemed. Hurad nodded to the messenger who carried, no doubt, a new assignment from the Dorud Allum elders.

"Hurad Deepergrim of the Clan of the Boar, I bear a message from Malleus Stonelight of the Clan of the Flame. He says you should come to his workshop immediately. He has information about the sword you left for him."

The sword! Hurad had almost forgotten it after all the fighting and missions of the previous months. After it displayed extraordinary but mysterious puissance in a battle against a dark elf priestess and her wizards, he had taken it to Malleus so the old smith-mage could find out more about it. Since then, Malleus had spent every waking moment forging weapons and armor for the war. Hurad had not heard from him on the matter in a very long time—even his excuses had stopped coming many weeks prior.

Hurad thanked the lad and mustered up a look of appreciation that he hoped would lend the messenger some solace: some suggestion that even if he was unable to fight against the enemy directly, his actions still had meaning. The glint in the messenger's eyes told him he'd succeeded. That his people could convey so much with so little made other folk—humans, elves and so forth—believe that dwarves were simple and unemotional. But like so much else about his people, the other races missed the truth.

The corridors of Dwarvenhearth were dimly lit and mostly empty as Hurad hurried to Malleus' workshop. Some stretches were, in fact, entirely dark. Even if Hurad's eyes were unable to pierce such darkness, his feet would surely never have missed a step on the carefully and confidently laid stones of the floor. Dwarven boots never stumbled over dwarven stones.

Malleus' workshop was well-lit, both by bowls of *glowstones* and by forge-fires. The old dwarf's cinder-stained beard was ill-kept, which in Dwarvenhearth would normally have indicated that he was mad, but in Malleus' case, it merely marked him as an eccentric genius. While eccentricities were rarely tolerated, among the *delchordis*, a word which meant "miracle workers," exceptions were made.

His old eyes widened as Hurad approached. "Thank Fellokin, you're here," Malleus said in a cracked voice. "I've much to show you." He wiped his hands on his pocket-covered stiff leather apron, pulled out a pair of spectacles, and placed them carefully on his face. The lenses were actually a series of layered, adjustable glass, although Hurad had no idea what purpose they served. He nodded a greeting but said nothing.

Malleus shuffled to a large stone box and removed an object wrapped in cloth. Drawing away the cloth, he revealed the sword Hurad had left here. Its golden hilt and pommel glistened in the forge light.

"It talks, you know," Malleus said, holding the sword out to Hurad. "It speaks of truth, destiny, and the future."

"I know. I told you that when I first came here. Remember?"

"Yes, but I've learned much more than that now," Malleus said, waving his hand. "I know some of the secrets of its creation. It was made by human smiths."

Hurad snorted very slightly. "I assumed as much. Only a human would make a sword that talks. Makes as much sense as a dinner plate that can clean your boots."

Malleus shook his head, and soot cascaded down out of his beard and even his eyebrows. "No, no. No. Look." He shuffled across the smithy floor again, this time to a large iron cauldron. It was covered with a sheet of thick black leather held in place by a thin cord strung around the pot just below the lip. He pulled this cover off. Inside, liquid as bright orange as the sun of the surface world frothed. Holding the sword with a pair of long tongs, he lowered it, pommel first, into the strange liquid.

Without preamble, vapor burst upward, out of the cauldron. The seething cloud hesitated just the space of a single breath, and then congealed into surprisingly detailed images in the air. Hurad could see human men working at a large forge. Three of them together pulled a red-hot blade from the coals, holding it in tongs as if it were a wild animal that would attempt to break free at any moment. While two held it, one pounded it with a massive hammer. Another human, a female this time, came into view. She gestured and spoke, casting spells upon the sword even as it was given birth by the weaponsmiths who labored upon its creation.

"Interesting, I suppose," Hurad said, watching the tableau play out, "but hardly all that surprising or revealing."

Again the *delchordis* shook his head. "You've the patience of a child. Are you a dwarf or not? Watch!"

Hurad did not have time to be offended at the old dwarf's words, as yet another figure entered the scene. Standing at least seven feet tall, the newcomer had feminine features but was no human. Long, feathered wings arched behind her like a frame of gossamer. Somehow, her features were delicate and precise but not soft. Her gaze was focused but not stern. Her face and hands carried strength despite their willowy curves—like that of meticulously worked metal. With her perfect mouth open in song, she stepped toward the anvil where the others worked. With her final stride, she stepped *into* the sword, disappearing. That instant, the sword's pommel and hilt took their shape all their own, untouched by mortal hands.

Hurad wished that Malleus' magic had provided sound. He would have liked to hear the angel's song. With her disappearance, the entire scene faded into wisps of vapor.

"More," Hurad said without reservation. "We need to know more."

Malleus pulled the sword from the orange liquid. Droplets fell from it in a tiny shower, so that none of the fluid clung to it when Malleus was done. He wrapped it again in cloth.

Hurad thrust his hands in the air in front of him. "There is an angel in that blade, Malleus. Don't you realize what this means?" The dwarf began to pace. He closed his eyes. "No wonder it has such power. With such a sword, we could lead an army against the dark elves that couldn't be stopped."

It was a rare occasion when Malleus was the level voice in a conversation. His expression belied his enjoyment of it. "I think you may exaggerate. Still—"

Hurad opened his eyes and turned back to the forge-mage. "Still," he interrupted, "we need to find the way to activate its powers. We have to understand them."

We need to talk to her.

"We cannot. At least not right now. The sword is incomplete. It has seen many battles and, I think, there is still more to it than we know."

"Incomplete? I don't understand."

"I think until it is reunited with its gem," Malleus said, pointing to the empty socket in the weapon's ricasso, "we'll not be able to master this fine weapon or learn the rest of its secrets."

Gem? Hurad had never even noticed the socket. He had thought it just an odd affectation of its smith.

Hurad stroked his beard. "Looks like I know what I've to do, then." He held his hand out toward Malleus, who gingerly placed the leather-bound grip of the sword in his fingers. It felt different now. It thrummed with possibility.

CHAPTER 7: AN ENEMY'S ENEMY

The war dragged on for years.

This was not a war like Hurad had read about in the histories, with armies amassing on open fields on the surface and clashing in great numbers. This was a subterranean war. And as much as he and his brethren wanted to believe that such was a conflict to which dwarves were well suited, the dark elves upon whom they warred were just as well suited to it, if not better. Though the dwarves showed great bravery and stamina, the elves' dark sorceries and inherent viciousness proved difficult to stand against.

In this subterranean war, skirmishes and surprise attacks were the order of the day. The outlying dwarf settlements and underground farms disappeared quickly in a flash of shadowy spellfire and a spray of blood. All the dark elves left behind were the remnants of their atrocities—the mutilated bodies of dwarven victims left in too dreadful a condition to contemplate.

The dwarves attempted to seal off vulnerable passages with sturdy stone bulwarks and units of tireless defenders, but still the dark elf raiders found their way past—either moving with sorcery or finding tunnels even the dwarves did not know about. The elves knew the darkness better than anyone. The shadows, it seemed, were on their side.

Still, Dwarvenhearth itself remained inviolate. The dark elf attacks came closer than ever before, but still they did not breach the defenses of the dwarf city. Yet the frequency and strength of the assaults seemed to grow with each passing month.

And then, without warning or explanation, the raids stopped.

At first, Hurad and others believed it to be a ploy. They continued to strengthen their defenses and prepared for a major attack. But it never came.

Hurad, armed with his mysterious, angel-forged sword, led reconnaissance missions for the Dorud Allum that revealed more than the dwarves had dared hope. The dark elves had pulled not only out of dwarven subterranean territory, but back from their own outer positions. The retreating dark elves had left behind traps and various deadly surprises for the dwarves, as was their wont, but they were hastily placed and easily found. Something had happened that called them all back.

The Day King of Dwarvenhearth conferred with his court and decided to take advantage of this good fortune. Until now, the dwarves had been so busy fortifying that they could never launch much of an offensive of their own. Now it would be different.

It was to be a major offensive. The dwarven generals, thanks to intelligence gathered by the Dorud Allum years earlier, knew of a secret path that would get them almost all the way to the dark elf fortress of Ul-Sinistar. A dwarven army would assail this major enemy stronghold that very month.



Hurad knelt behind a rock formation, blade bared, relying on his cave-born eyes to tell him more than the glare of torchlight could here. The outer wall of Ul-Sinistar had fallen, thanks to the stonecunning of his brethren. Battle had been joined and it was fierce. The dark elves seemed to fight with a desperation he had not seen before.

Hurad and his friend Connor Gloomfast had used the cover of the main assault to creep around through darkness to the rear section of the fortress. Ul-Sinistar lay in two parts, each positioned on either side of a vast chasm through which flowed a river of magma. The two halves of the fortress were connected by a well-guarded bridge. Crouching on one side of the bridge, hidden among a tight formation of stalagmites, Connor had one of his typically outlandish ideas.

As scouts and spies, they were well-equipped with the best climbing gear. "It can work," Connor whispered, the eagerness in his eyes visible in the reddish glow of the molten rock that came up from the deep gorge.

Despite his own misgivings, Hurad agreed that if they could reach the other half of the fortress, they likely would learn vital information. He nodded grimly and secured his sword on his back.

First, they unburdened themselves of any excess weight they were carrying—Connor even took off his armor. Then, they assembled their climbing equipment, dropping their ropes but focusing on the mithral grappels to hold in their hands and the mithral claws they could affix to their boots that would find purchase even in solid rock.

Connor darted toward the bridge first, watching the dark elf guards not far away. He reached its edge unseen, then ducked underneath it. Hurad swallowed, gritted his teeth, and followed suit.

Using the claws and grappels, the two dwarves began to make their way along the underside of the bridge. It was slow, strenuous

work, but Hurad only had to look at the hellish light far below to convince himself to press onward. The span stretched more than a hundred feet, and dark elf stonework left much to be desired. It crumbled as often as not as the two dug in with their tools. When they finally reach the other side, Hurad had never been more relieved.

They pulled themselves onto the ledge opposite where they had stood before. A large pair of steel doors covered in spider-web engravings led into this half of the fortress. There were no guards that they could see, so they stowed the climbing gear and drew their weapons.

Suddenly, the doors burst open, and three dark elf guards came out. They seemed more surprised to see the dwarves than the dwarves were to see them. Connor leaped upon the first with his axe while Hurad's sword flared to life. This strange blade, which had saved his life many times before, still held so many secrets—yet he would never go into battle without it. With a single stroke, as much white fire as steel, he sliced through two of the guards before Connor could finish his foe.

After the guards were slain, the dwarves crept through the open doors and down what seemed like the main arterial passage of the fortress. Arched supports criss-crossed through the tunnel to continue the web motif.

Hurad stopped and tapped Connor's shoulder. "Did you see the look on their faces? The dark elves. They seem different."

"Different?"

"They seem less ruthless, and more... afraid."

Finally, they reached what seemed to be the far side of Ul-Sinistar. To their surprise, they saw the signs of a recent assault here as well, but not by any dwarf army. In a large chamber, blackened and scored with prior discharges of spell energy, they saw corpses all about. At the center was a corpse unlike the others.

The creature's skin was a mottled mix of violet and ash, about the height of an elf, but possessed of a much different form. Its clawed hands bore but three knobby fingers, and its back was curved to position its head in front of its shoulders rather than on top of them. It was this head, however, that marked the creature's truly alien nature: Hairless and smooth, its oblong head was girded by two widely placed eyes, bulbous and milky-white. The bottom of its head bore four thick tendrils that Hurad presumed surrounded a mouth. He was not going to investigate to find out.

The nameless thing was obviously felled by the marksmanship of dark elf crossbows, but also obviously had slain more than its share of dark elves. The elves lay about the floor in contorted positions, most with no visible wounds except blood covering their eyes, noses, and even their ears. It was as though blood vessels in their heads had burst from the inside. A few, however, showed terrible wounds, as though a circular hole had been bored into their skulls and their brains pulled out.

"They've got a new foe," Connor said.

"Yes, the likes of which I've never seen. We've got to get back and report this to the elders."

Where had such a creature come from? No dwarf tale ever spoke of such an abomination. The only plausible explanation was that it came from deeper still in the realms below.

At the bridge, Hurad began to prepare for another underside climb. “No, let’s just run across this time,” Connor said. “We can make it. I don’t see any guards.”

With a sigh, Hurad ran onto the bridge. “Daragin,” he muttered under his breath. It was the Dwarvish word for “dancer.” In other words, “reckless,” or “crazy.” Crossbow bolts from unseen dark elf guards rained down from positions high in the cave, overlooking the bridge. Suddenly, Connor was no longer next to Hurad. Hurad turned and saw his friend on the ground, two bolts in his back. He ran back and lifted his friend. It would take more than two such bolts to kill the dwarf, at least so quickly, but Hurad feared the poison they inevitably carried. Dark elf sintrin poison was meant to knock a foe unconscious—usually so that he could be captured and tortured to death.

“I’m all right,” Connor managed to say. “Head’s cloudy, but it’ll take more venom than that to take down a dwarf!”

“Let’s not give them the chance,” Hurad replied, half-dragging him the rest of the way.

Once across the bridge, the two headed down the passage they’d used to get there in the first place. Connor stumbled as he rocked and weaved, but Hurad was there to support him.

“No more crazy ideas today, Connor,” Hurad said as they reached the dwarven forces.

“Course not,” Connor replied, slurring his words a bit. “They’re a rare commodity among our kind, Hurad. Gotta save ‘em until they’re really needed.”

CHAPTER 8: THE DESTINY OF A DWARF

Murant clenched his teeth as he stared at the massive gearwheel-like door. Never again would that door open. Never again would the Stonemight dwarves call the subterranean city beyond it home. Henceforth, they would be the Stonelost, the dwarves who had lost their ancestral home.

Willingly.

At Murant’s feet lay his rucksack which held his few worldly possessions. To his back he had strapped *Hurad’s Blade*. The magical sword had proved a vital weapon against the dark elves, and in Hurad’s heroic hands it had served the dwarves and Dwarvenhearth well. But Hurad was long dead, and his fabulous angel-hilted sword had passed to Murant. The golden figure on the pommel of the sword had spoken to Murant when he first hefted the blade, but it was disappointingly silent now.

The sword had spoken of destiny, which to Murant’s ears was just harsh irony. The dwarves had forsaken their destiny. They had left Dwarvenhearth and sealed the doors behind them.

A sound from behind him made Murant whirl. The cavern was pitch-black, but his cavern-bred eyes saw all there was to see around him. Something moved—slithered—amid the stones in the north end of the cave. The dwarf crouched on the smooth stone floor in front of the iron door, worn down by hundreds of years of dwarven boots.

The thing was clumsy and loud. Murant cursed himself for not hearing it sooner. It was like a snake, but its smallish, batlike wings fluttered uselessly on its back. Red eyes gleamed like jewels without a

crown atop its head, and fangs hung in a wide mouth beneath them like a threat.

One of Ghul’s minions, Murant thought.

Ghul, a mysterious wizard who claimed to be a half god, had conjured all sorts of demons and fiendish ilk from some dark bowel of perdition he called the Utterdark. They had crawled, slithered, and flew in assault after assault upon Dwarvenhearth’s defenses only fourteen years after the war with the dark elves had ended. The already battle-weary dwarven defenders had fought them valiantly, but when the greatest among them, King Kaval Stardelve, fell in battle, everything changed.

And Hurad had fallen next to his king, still clutching the mysterious sword that Murant now possessed.

A sword Murant now drew.

The demon thing slunk closer. Ghul must keep a watch over the doors, to see if a way inside ever presented itself.

This is one watcher that will not make another report to the Skull-King.

Tales told to Murant claimed that Hurad could make his blade spew fire and light in moon-shaped goutts to strike down even the mightiest of foes. Murant had no reason to doubt the tales, but just the same he could make the sword produce no such magic.

Finally the demon snake saw the dwarf. It let out a shriek and lunged forward instantly, fangs bared and hell-eyes flaming.

Murant did not move.

The thing’s wings beat with a fever, allowing its front half to lift from the ground, its tail dragging along the stone. This action brought its head to a level above Murant’s own. It hoped to use its weight and momentum to aid its attack, the dwarf knew.

Stupid demon.

The snaky thing drew very close, and Murant kept his crouch. At the last moment, even as he could smell the insidious stink of its hell-spawned venom, he thrust body and blade upward. *Hurad’s Blade* sliced into the soft flesh at the base of the demon’s jaw. Mouth still agape, lusting for a vicious bite, its head flew to the dwarf’s left while its body flopped with a meaty slap to the stone floor on his right.

The wings fluttered for a few moments, then grew rigid.

Murant felt no joy of victory. Only inflicting such a blow on Ghul’s misbegotten neck could bring that now.

The demon’s form dissolved in a cloud of rank greenish vapor.

Murant looked back at the door behind him, sealed with the most powerful of ancient and sublime dwarven magic. It would keep out Ghul’s Squirring Horde, but it would keep out everyone else as well—including the now Stonelost dwarves.

Murant, last of the dwarves to leave Dwarvenhearth, sheathed his sword, gathered his pack, and walked into the recesses of the dark natural cavern.



The sound of crashing waves startled Murant. It was unpleasant to his ears. Still, it let him know where he stood. No more than two hundred paces to the edge of the Cliffs of Lost Wishes, which rose hundreds of feet above the crashing rhythm of the Whitewind Sea.

Many years had passed since Murant had felt the stone walls of Dwarvenhearth, or gazed upon the massive pillars that filled its countless subterranean plazas. In that time, he had not even been underground. Ghul and his hordes had turned their attention to those that dwelled on the surface, and where Ghul's attention lay, so did Murant's. He would oppose the Half God in any way possible, at every turn.

All these years, Murant had fought against the Half God's forces and worked to help the lost and the trapped get out of the curse of the Utterdark. Elves mostly, but dwarves as well. Even a small number of humans.

With foul sorcery, Ghul had brought the hellish Utterdark to the mortal world, and now it lay siege to the sun itself, at least in the lands around the accursed Spire where Ghul dwelled. These lands were blanketed in eternal night bereft even of moons and stars.

Today—or rather tonight—Murant hunted. He sought to slay any of the Skull King's minions he could find: orc, troll, demon, or worse. He kept *Hurad's Blade* bared in his hands. It had served him well all these years, although he had never coaxed magical might from it the way Hurad had.

Out of the gloom, a figure the size and shape of a man walked casually toward him, features blurred by the shadows of the Utterdark, which would blind a man or elf. But Murant's eyes were dwarven.

"Hello, son of earth," the figure said with a calm, even-measured voice.

Murant considered him for a moment. He pointed the magical sword's point at the figure. "If you can see in this gloom, you are not the human you appear to be."

"Astute."

"You've not the look of an orc or troll."

"No."

"Still, if you're one of the Skull-King's lackeys, you'll soon be dead."

"What makes you so sure?"

Murant was not skilled with words, and he knew it. He strode purposefully forward. He would put an end to this one way or another.

The dwarf came much closer, but the figure's features stayed indistinct. Sorcery.

That was enough for him. He raised the sword, holding it in both hands.

"That's an interesting weapon," the dark figure said. I'd like to take a closer look at such a sword."

"You'll not take this sword, whatever you are."

"Why would I take what is freely given?"

Murant shook his head. This man spoke foolishness, and he stank of black magic. He'd end this quickly. In these darkness-ravaged lands, it was better to talk with your blade anyway. The forces of Ghul had many tricks, and it was better to be safe than dead.

Keeping his center of gravity low, Murant lunged forward, swinging the sword in a wide arc that would slice through this blurry phantom.

As the sword cut into the figure, its form became fluid. Its arm drew into its body, and where the blade carved into it, another arm grew, this one holding the sword's blade in a shadowy hand. Murant's swing stopped, for the figure's strength far surpassed his own.

"What's this?" Murant cried out.

The fluidity of the figure continued as the shadowy hand slid down the length of the sword. The arm simply grew longer and longer until it grasped the sword by the pommel. It tore *Hurad's Blade* from Murant with ease.

Below the longsword's leather grip, a long pommel had been fashioned to look like the upper half of an angelic woman with a beautiful face. She looked directly at the figure that now held it. "Carry me to truth and I shall carve a course toward insight. Carry me to destiny and I shall slice past from future." Then, as it always had, the sword grew silent.

"Interesting," said the figure—Narvalix, greatest of Ghul's demon mages—and with nary a gesture or further word, he disappeared with the sword still in hand.

"No," breathed Murant. "No!"

Dwarvenhearth was sealed, its people scattered—many lost in the eternal night of the Utterdark. The dwarven champions all lay slain by fell hands. And now *Hurad's Blade* was gone. Murant had thought that with the blade perhaps, just perhaps, he could bring an end to the reign of the Skull-King and restore the honor of his people. He thought he might redeem them so that they could feel worthy enough to re-enter their ancestral home.

But he was wrong.

CHAPTER 9: A DEMON'S GAMBIT

The pit yawned in the center of the chamber like a mouth—it even had teeth. The darkness in the pit was deeper and blacker than even the darkness of the room, but it was not as dark as the room's sole inhabitant, who stared down into the spike-ringed pit.

Narvalix was a creature of darkness, spawned in a pit of Hell not all that different than the one here. And like that ancient pit in those deep, otherworldly realms of hatred and fire, this one was created with only ill purposes in mind. Created by none other than the being called Ghul, the Skull-King.

Ghul claimed to be the heir of Eslathagos Malkith, a being so ancient that his days were not described in terms of thousands of years ago, but tens of thousands, and so imbued with puissant malice that his name was never spoken, even today. He was simply the Dread One. Although the Dread One's tactics resembled Ghul's, his goals were nigh incomprehensible. It would almost seem that he wished darkness for darkness' sake.

Not so with the so-called "Half God" heir.

Ghul wanted power, pure and simple. He wanted to rule over all that lived, exact vengeance upon his enemies, and possess everything he desired. He wanted to create an eternal legacy so that if he must die (and was death certain for such as he?), he would never be forgotten.

With such simplistic, base motives, Ghul could afford to make his plans to reach his goals as multifarious and tortuous as he wished.

One of those plans involved creating his own armies from the alchemical building blocks of life, shaped by black magic. These creatures were brewed in deep underground pits that lay in sinister chambers, each a part of a vast labyrinth that spread out like a cancer worming its way through the ground. The massive stone Spire upon which Ghul built his fortress, Goth Gulgamel, stood at the center. Ghul's Labyrinth was like a system of roots—no, the opposite of roots—diffusing from the base of a massive tree.

Within this labyrinth, Ghul had summoned his demons of darkness and set them in charge of breeding new monstrosities here. But to a few, including Narvalix, he gave the task of forging new weapons of power for his monstrous Squirring Horde to use in battle.

The pit Narvalix gazed into was not a forge, however. Today, as it had every day for the past two years, Narvalix used sorcery to hold a powerful artifact in the pit, to learn all its secrets. This was not an artifact that Narvalix or any other demon had created, but one that it had stolen.

No, this was an artifact that had more angel than demon in its pedigree. This artifact—this sword—held many secrets. One of those secrets contained a raw power than could be used by anyone, if he knew how.

And Narvalix wanted to know how.

The sword had been named by its creator the *angelsoul blade*, and it tapped into some powerful extradimensional power source, but only at certain times. Narvalix had yet to determine what those times were. The sword was at least semi-sentient and thought of concepts like truth and destiny, but Narvalix had little interest in either.

"Today, little sword," Narvalix whispered into the pit, "you will reveal your secrets to me—willingly."

Narvalix reached into the pit's darkness, which was as much a part of it as the humanoid form that it assumed while on this mortal plane, and drew out the sword. Its blade was long and straight, its crossguards bejeweled, and its pommel gold, crafted in the form of an angelic woman. Today, however, after six hundred and sixty-six days of being bathed in the unnatural midnight of this dread pit, the sword held a funereal aura—a sheath of darkness that had not been there before.

As always, the ricasso of the blade held a place where a gem would fit. More than ever, this empty place seemed like a hungry maw, yearning to be filled. Was this the sword's ultimate secret? Its missing gem? Where was the stone that was once imbedded in the blade? What was its nature? Or had it never sat in its place—was this an as-yet-unfulfilled need of the blade? Was uniting the sword with the stone the key to its power?

The sword seemed to float of its own accord before the demon. "Speak to me," Narvalix commanded.

"Carry me to truth and I shall carve a course toward insight," the sword said, the graven woman's face on the pommel turning toward Narvalix and physically speaking the words with her mouth. "Carry me to destiny and I shall slice past from future."

"No!"

By the black heart of the Spire! Narvalix was incensed. This mantra was what the sword always said. The only words it ever spoke, and it spoke them only when a new wielder grasped its pommel.

But Narvalix was not a new wielder.

Immersion in shadow *had* had some sort of effect on the blade. Narvalix had hoped that corruption of the sword's very nature would make it more pliable. More receptive to his needs.

"Your mistake," the sword said suddenly, as if in response to Narvalix's own private thoughts, "was assuming that I had some kind of angelic nature to begin with."

"What?" Narvalix recoiled slightly in surprise and... hesitation. The sword's voice was one of confidence and power.

"My purposes have always been my own. And they still are."

"But," the demon said, its voice taking on a well-practiced soothing tone of comfort and charm, "we can work together. We can unite our purposes. Surely you see that now."

"Again, you woefully misunderstand," the sword said. "I had no resistance to doing so earlier. We could have worked together."

"And we still can—" Narvalix cooed with supernatural charm.

"No. Now there is no need. You changed me."

Narvalix paused, just for a moment. "For the better, I'm sure you'll agree."

"Let us see if *you* agree, demon." The sword, of its own volition, thrust itself into the demon's body, point first. This sudden violence wrung a scream of excruciating pain from Narvalix. The sword somehow pierced its very essence—which should not have been possible.

The sword pushed itself all the way through the darkness that comprised the demon's form until it pierced its other side. Still pushing with unknowable force, it moved all the way through until the pommel itself came through the demon's darkness. When it had passed entirely through, it carried a strand of Narvalix's mutable body with it. That strand became an arm, then a hand that grasped the blade.

"You changed me, Narvalix," both sword and demon said in unison. "You reforged me in darkness. Now I shall simply take what I want, and use who I want."

"And for now, I use you."

Narvalix, both demon and sword, stepped away from the pit of darkness. The demon/sword opened the cold steel door of the chamber and walked out into the subterranean corridor.

"Now," it/they said, "let us go find your master, Ghul."

CHAPTER 10: SHADOW AND FIRE

The demon, Narvalix, stood dumbfounded, surprised at his own actions. He followed the sword he held as surely as if he were pulled by a yoke. The fact that the demon held the sword might have misled a bystander as to which was the master of the situation—it was, without a doubt, the sword.

Narvalix asked himself what had happened. Everything suddenly was moving so quickly. For two years, he had toiled to change the magic of this sword he had stolen. He sought to corrupt it and bend it to his will. Now, suddenly, its corruption was complete, yet the sword had effortlessly mastered the demon rather than the other way around.

Narvalix had, in a very literal sense, created a monster.

The sword had been called the *angelsoul blade*, a name that now seemed wholly inappropriate. It compelled Narvalix to take it to his master, Ghul. Ghul—who called himself the Half God and the Skull-King—was in the process of bringing darkness and terror to this entire world. Up until moments ago, Narvalix had been a key component of that process. Now he was the slave of a sword.

The sword and its demon wound their way through the labyrinth, toward the grand entrance at the base of the Spire that would take them up to the fortress of Goth Gulgamel and to Ghul. They paused in a chamber, like so many in the labyrinth, surrounding a deep pit of yawning darkness. Narvalix saw a pinpoint of light hovering in the air above it.

The point exploded with the ferocity of a bursting sun, a blast of light unlike anything the demon had ever seen—or felt, for the light burned it as sure as any flame or acid. A beautiful figure suddenly stood in the wake of that sunburst. This newcomer looked like a human woman of staggering and complex beauty, but she also had a pair of feathered wings with the purity of new-fallen snow. Her eyes blazed with silver illumination bright enough to light the room alone.

Narvalix recognized her as the angel who had had a guiding hand in the sword's creation.

This was... unexpected. Particularly here.

"Away," the sword said. "I no longer have business with you, I—"

"Silence." The angel held up her hand. "I am your creator. I shall brook no further words from you."

The sword remained quiet.

Narvalix no longer felt the sword's words in his mind. There were no tendrils of compulsion guiding his actions. Reflexively, he cast down the blade, which clattered along the stone floor like an inert thing. Like the inanimate object it was, really—or at least, should have been. The demon scowled.

He considered the celestial being in front of him. Such a being shouldn't even have been able to enter this labyrinth with the wards in place, he mused; the sword must have acted like a beacon... but such thoughts were a distraction. They were not important now. The angel was no doubt powerful, but she was at every conceivable disadvantage here. Again, his mind began to wander, thinking of what a trophy this angel's head could be, and what value it might hold if presented to Ghul.

"I know the twisted thoughts in your dreadful, misbegotten mind, demon. And they are all false. You would do well to scamper off to your master and hide within his shadow. And let me be about my business here. I assure you it will be short."

"No," Narvalix said with a staccato, breathy laugh. "It is I who will determine your business now, my friend. Have you no concept of where you are? Of who I am?"

The angel sighed. "You are a minor demonling who could not even resist the words of a sword. A sword I created. Creature of sin, you are making a mistake, here."

Narvalix laughed again. "You bluff well, for an angel. But you attempt to best me at a game of deception, and I am deception given life."

"No, you are pride. Arrogance. If you are a demon of deception, it is only self-deception you wallow in now. But I was not sculpted within the heart of light to trade words with a prattling demonspawn. I was crafted to rid creation of blights such as you."

With that pronouncement, the angel held up her hands and, with a steely glare of indomitable will, her body became an open portal to the very heart of the sun.

Narvalix screamed.

Now, only now, did it understand. The angel was not bluffing. The light tore at the demon's physical form, its mental presence, and its spiritual essence. It shredded every aspect of Narvalix, harming it on levels the demon never knew he had. This was no minor deva nor celestial messenger. This creature who stood before him—stood within Ghul's Labyrinth—was a veritable demigod in her own right. She

was one of the highest powers in the celestial host.

And she had come about the sword. What *was* that blade? How did it possibly command such attention? Why was it so vital?

And most importantly, would Narvalix live long enough to find out?

"Stop," the demon squealed. "I will do as you say." Perhaps it could make something of this yet. Perhaps—

"No," the angel said. "I offer you no quarter. I cannot abide your irredeemable existence."

The barrage of light redoubled. Narvalix renewed his scream.

"I don't revel in your suffering, but I will rejoice in your absence."

Narvalix could barely hear her over his own cries.

He refused to let himself be overcome with his own pain or despair. He could not forget that he was one of Ghul's most powerful lieutenants. He could not allow himself to be destroyed so easily.

Narvalix mustered dark resources and lashed out with power of his own. But where the angel's potency was overt, the demon's was subtle. Rather than the angel's torrent of energy, Narvalix stretched out with his shadowy essence like a whip and grasped his foe around the ankles. With a quick motion that caused him even greater pain, Narvalix tore the angel from her feet. The barrage of light blasted uncontrolled into the ceiling of the chamber, then quieted.

His torment over, Narvalix did not allow himself a moment's respite. If this was all about the sword, then he would use that fact. He reached out with his shadowy form and grasped the sword's hilt.

"You and I are of one spirit, here," he said to the sword. "More alike than different. Help me slay this invader, and I will take you to Ghul as you had asked me."

"I did not ask, demon. I commanded."

"Foolish thing!" Narvalix shouted shrilly. "There is no time to quibble!"

"No, you are the fool," the angel said, rising again. "You could no more convince that sword to hurt me than you could convince my own hands to pluck out my eyes. It is a part of me."

Narvalix looked at the sword, and then back at the angel. The sword once again fell silent.

"Then perhaps if I should destroy the blade?" Black power flared from the demon's hands as he grasped it by blade and pommel.

Now the angel paused.

Narvalix smiled a cruel, tenebrous grin. “Why, oh why,” he said, shaking his head ever so slightly, “is this bauble so important, that you would risk all coming here?”

“It has a destiny, demon. A purpose. Even you can understand that.”

“Submit to me, then, and I will allow the sword to go on to fulfill its purpose.”

“No,” the angel shook her head. “No. Because I, too, have a purpose. I thought I already told you that.”

She closed her eyes, and the sword blazed with power. Narvalix struggled to keep his hold on it, even as what was left of his corporeal body grew ragged and drawn.

Suddenly, with a cry, the demon flung the blade behind him. The sword flew through the air and into the deep pit with a single clatter against the stone as it fell.

And fell.

Before Narvalix could recover, however, the angel blasted him again with golden fire. The purifying flames consumed him as if he had never been.



The angel fell to her knees, weak from the strain of the battle in the darkness of this worst of all places. She remained there, exhausted, for many long moments, wondering about the difficulty of retrieving the sword from the pit.

“WHAT HAVE WE HERE?”

The voice that spoke was like that of a thousand snakes hissing in painful unison. The angel’s head turned to see the dark lord Ghul standing over her. It was likely that he had been attracted by the displays of power here in his own catacombs.

Ghul stood nearly twelve feet tall, a gaunt figure cloaked in darkness rather than cloth, armored in corruption rather than steel. Everything about his physical form seethed with malevolent, misused power.

“I have come here,” the angel lied, “to destroy you, Skull-King. Your guardians have been dispatched.” Perhaps Ghul did not even know about the sword.

“HAS IT COME TO THIS? DOES HEAVEN NOW FLING ITS ANGELS DOWN AT ME LIKE BARBS, HOPING TO CUT ME DOWN HERE IN MY HOME? PATHETIC.”

The battle that ensued was brief, but the might unleashed from both combatants shook the labyrinth and the lands above. Considering the angel’s already weakened state, the outcome was never in question, yet her mandate forced her to give it her all. Her last thought, before she expired, was one of repentance and atonement for her lie, and for the self-congratulatory pride she felt in helping to ensure that her creation would have a chance once again to fulfill its important destiny.

The sword lay quietly at the bottom of the pit. Golden energy, channeled through it from its creator’s own heart, still played along its blade. The face on the pommel seemed to close its eyes with calm, serene relief.

CHAPTER 11: WHAT THEY FOUND

For someone who hated being underground as much as Kaedel did, he certainly found himself there quite often. He climbed slowly down the rope, bracing himself against the stone wall.

“We need more light down here,” Shatha said in her do-it-now voice from below Kaedel.

It seemed that the deeper they went in this pit, the darker it got. Which is to say that the absolute blackness got more... absolute. Their spells that created light dimmed as they descended.

From above, Kaedel heard Neschalinas. “I’m casting another illumination spell on a coin.” Still climbing down slowly, Kaedel saw a brilliant flare next to him as Neschalinas’ coin dropped past him, down to the bottom of the pit.

After a few more moments, his feet found solid footing beneath him, and he knew he was at the bottom. Kaedel readjusted his shirt of fine elven mail and drew his rapier. Shatha had already crept into the middle of the floor of the rubble-strewn pit. Skulls and bones of mysterious creatures lay among the broken stones and other detritus.

“Watch your step,” she told him, not even bothering to glance back.

He didn’t respond. She treated him like a child, despite the fact that he was four times the human woman in age.

She was already searching the pit. She had both hands free and was using them to shift some of the larger stones to look under them. Shatha stopped and looked at Kaedel with her stern green eyes. Kaedel knew that look meant “help me search.”

The half-elf moved lithely over the rubble, his sharp eyes scanning the dimly lit floor. Most of the bones were ancient broken bits. A few, however, seemed strangely... twisted. As if some force had been warping them while they were still part of a living creature. He also noted oddly colored scorch marks on some of the stones, as though they’d been burned by a force quite unlike natural fire.

But then, one could hardly expect anything else in such a place. Rumors had it that this area was part of a labyrinth of pit-filled chambers used by Ghul himself centuries earlier.

“What’s this?” Kaedel knelt down and examined an object that had caught his eye. Something made of gold.

Shatha looked up as Kaedel moved aside a broken stone to reveal a golden sword hilt. The pommel bore the likeness of a human woman. Shatha came over and helped uncover the entire weapon. Kaedel grasped it by the hilt and hefted it. It was filthy and a bit worn in places, but it still shone with a sort of inner brilliance that could not be ascribed to Neschalinas’ glowing coins all around them.

“Gods, it must be ancient,” Shatha said.

“But in good condi—”

Kaedel stopped right there as the sword suddenly spoke. “Carry me to truth and I shall carve a course toward insight. Carry me to destiny and I shall slice past from future.”

The pit grew silent.

“That’s... unexpected,” Kaedel said after a moment.

“Better than unexpected,” Shatha said. “Valuable.”

“Yes, but...”

"But nothing. It's clearly a powerful magical sword. We should be able to make four or five thousand selling this."

"Maybe we should keep it. We could use it."

"I use an axe. And you carry that... whatever it is. I don't think you'd find a heavy longsword like this to your liking."

They'd had *this* argument before. Shatha seemed convinced that he used a rapier because he couldn't handle any heavier weapon, when in fact he used it by choice because of its speed and... no, there wasn't time for this.

"I mean, it sounds kind of important," Kaedel told her.

"Yeah, well, 'important' translates into 'coin' very nicely."



They found nothing else of value in the pit. Once Kaedel and Shatha had joined the wizard back at the top, they got ready to move on. Neschalinas seemed very interested in the sword, saying it was the very last thing he'd expected to find in a place like this.

The trio continued exploring the ancient subterranean pathways, newly amazed at how extensive they were at every turn. Each time they thought they were coming to a dead end, they found instead a passage leading into an entirely new section. Kaedel longed for the surface, for the sun and the moons. He couldn't bear the thought of sleeping below ground again.

Suddenly, he heard something moving ahead of them. He tapped Shatha once on the shoulder and raised a hand to stop Neschalinas behind him.

"What is it?" the old human man whispered.

Kaedel had no time to answer—there was no need.

The thing lurched out of the darkness, staring at them as though it had never experienced light before. Multiple eyes, each a jet-black bead on its long grey head, blinked in confusion. Its perplexity quickly turned to rage, which seemed to be something the creature was well acquainted with. Massive claws on the ends of tree-trunk arms rose above their heads as the beast loosed a chilling howl.

Fortunately for all of them, Neschalinas was the first to react. With a word and a gesture he erected a barrier of pure magical translucent force. It stopped the creature's blows and shielded them from harm. The three of them backed up, but so did the monster.

With another wail, it sprayed a liquid blackness at the spell shield. Like acid eating away at paper, the darkness dissolved and consumed the magical barrier.

"Oh, no." Neschalinas' words were a whisper, but they carried the weight of a shout.

Shatha gripped her massive axe with both hands and charged the beast, giving it a roar of her own. Kaedel watched her muscular back tense as she drew the weapon back and then, using her momentum to her advantage, swung it at her foe.

Shatha's blade bit deep into the creature's pale grey flesh. Dark blood spurted from the wound. Reflexively, it smashed her away with the back of its massive hand. She flew through the air, striking the corridor wall. Her axe clattered to the stone floor even as she did.

Kaedel reached for his rapier, but stopped. For a reason he could not explain, he drew the new, golden-hilted blade instead. He deftly moved to the creature's right to draw it away from Shatha. The half-elf did not know if his friend was alive or dead, but either way he wanted to keep this monstrosity away from her.

Even as the half-elf grabbed its attention, Neschalinas cast another spell. This time a ray of bright green light lanced from his hand and struck the creature's midsection. However, it seemed to have no effect at all. The old mage spat a curse. Kaedel could hear the desperation in his voice.

With quick moves, Kaedel feinted to the left and jabbed in to the right, barely scraping the creature's leathery flesh. It lunged forward, its mouth open. Kaedel saw what seemed to be hundreds of teeth, each a tiny dagger. He darted to one side and avoided the bite.

Neschalinas continued to cast spells, but nothing seemed to affect the beast.

"Help Shatha," Kaedel shouted to him, not bothering to see whether the wizard complied.

Dodging a claw, Kaedel thrust his sword in again, this time piercing the thing's flesh, but not deeply.

At this rate, he thought, I'll slay this thing just before it dies of old age.

That seemed unlikely, however, as it finally managed to strike the half-elf with a claw. His armor protected him from the claws, but the force of the blow knocked him flat on his back. Rearing above him to its full height of more than thirteen feet, the beast raised both claws to bring them down onto his prone form.

The sword blazed with shimmering golden fire.

Before the creature could react, the fire spread out like a wave of searing power. Golden fire engulfed the creature, creating a dark silhouette. When the conflagration ended, what was left of the blackened beast crumbled backward to the ground.

Kaedel sat up and looked around; he saw Neschalinas cradling Shatha's head. Her eyes were open—both she and the wizard stared in surprise back at him.

"All right. That's it," Kaedel said, his gaze falling back upon the sword. "I'm keeping it."

CHAPTER 12: A QUIET RETIREMENT

Kaedel polished the blade of his golden-hilted sword, as he did every morning. The covered entrance to the small house he shared with Neschalinas protected him from the drizzling rain. He leaned back in his squeaking wooden chair and looked out into the street. Most of the early traffic was gone, and the Midtown neighborhood had quieted.

Neschalinas opened the door and stumbled into the chair next to his half-elf friend in front of the house. His bleary, bloodshot eyes showed that it had been a late night for the old mage, as it had been every night for the past few months. And not a late night with arcane books, either—a night at Danbury's, a tavern a few blocks away in Runihan Square.

The two of them had been living well off the treasure they had found wandering around Ghul's ancient subterranean labyrinth almost six months ago. That was where Kaedel had found his sword

as well, which made the sword at least a thousand years old, he figured. He'd still never gotten around to doing any kind of research about its history, although he always meant to. Frankly, he was a bit afraid of what he might learn about a weapon found in a deep, dark pit used by Ghul, the Skull-King, for who-knows-what. He was happier to focus on the sword's appearance, which included an angelic-looking woman's form fashioned onto the pommel.

"Heard from Shatha?" Neschalinas asked.

"Not yet," Kaedel replied.

"It's been almost a week now." Neschalinas rubbed his bearded face. "Doesn't that worry you?"

"Yes," Kaedel said, stopping his polishing. "But what can we do? We've asked around. No one's seen her."

Neschalinas sighed. "Have you asked your best friend, that sword? You dote on it like it's your child."

Kaedel shrugged. "It saved our lives down there against that beast."

"Still, you do everything but talk to it. I swear, one morning I'm going to come out here and find you cooing to it like it's a babe."

Kaedel rolled his eyes. He turned the sword blade-side down and stared at the golden face in the pommel, cooing to it. This made Neschalinas laugh.

"Exactly!" Neschalinas laughed some more.

Kaedel stroked the graven image's head as though it were a real person. "Tell me, sword, do you know where Shatha is?"

"She lies dead, her body dumped into the river by Vai assassins," the sword replied.

Kaedel and Neschalinas stared at it, slack-jawed.

After a few moments, Neschalinas spoke. "Am I still drunk, or did that sword just—"

"It talked."

The sword had spoken once before, when they'd first found it. It had said something about leading them to destiny and truth. But it had not spoken since, and it certainly hadn't responded to questions or shown any kind of awareness. Kaedel had thought that the first thing it had said was just a triggered magical response—perhaps something it said every time someone new picked it up.

"Ask it something else," Neschalinas said, and then, as if its words had just sunk in, he prompted, "ask it about Shatha. Dead? It can't be."

The impact of what it said finally struck Kaedel as well. He began frantically asking the sword more questions about Shatha, about her death, where her body could be found, and about Vai assassins.

The sword did not reply, and it gave no indication that it was aware of the questions.

A woman walking by stared for a moment at Kaedel talking to his sword, demanding answers from it, and then walked away, shaking her head. "Mind your business," Neschalinas called after her.

After Kaedel had asked everything he could think of, without response, the two friends stared at each other in brief silence.

"How..." Neschalinas began, but then stopped.

"I have no idea. I mean, we know the sword's magical, but..."

"Well, more than just that," Neschalinas said. "We need to know if it's right."

Kaedel had an idea. "We need Tystor's help."

Neschalinas groaned. Kaedel knew he hated the halfling, so he wasn't surprised by the response. "Nes, you know I'm right. Tystor's got connections. He can confirm or deny this information. This is important. Not just for Shatha—we've got to find out why Vai assassins would kill one of our best friends."

Neschalinas clearly took Kaedel's meaning; his eyes got wide, and he looked over both shoulders, down the street and up. He swallowed hard.

"You're right, Kaedel."



Tystor lived in an old abandoned workshop in the Guildsman District. Kaedel stepped quietly and carefully up to the back door. Neschalinas followed behind, cloaked from sight and sound by spells. They expected some kind of trap, tripwire alarm, or even thuggish guards, but found none as they pushed open the broken wooden door, barely on its hinges. They stepped cautiously inside, squinting in the faint daylight coming from small, grime-covered windows.

"I was wondering if you'd come here," someone said to them from the darkest corner of the room. Kaedel recognized Tystor's surprisingly low voice.

"Tystor, old friend!" Kaedel said, holding out a welcoming hand in the direction of the voice he'd heard.

"Spare me," the halfling said, stepping into the light. He was barely three feet tall, and thin—almost gaunt. His face looked drawn and his eyes sunken. Kaedel estimated that he couldn't have weighed more than thirty-five pounds, if that. The glowing tip of a small cigar was clearly visible.

"And spare me your invisibility spells as well, Neschalinas," Tystor said. "I know you're here, too."

Neschalinas appeared a step behind Kaedel and to his left.

"You're here about Shatha."

"Right," Kaedel said.

"So then it's true," Neschalinas whispered.

"She was killed about three days ago. From what I heard, it had all the signs of a professional hit. Very professional." He stressed those last words as if to convey some meaning. Kaedel was fairly certain that he would not have known what that meant, except that the sword had already told him.

"Vai assassins," Kaedel said, nodding.

"Yes."

In truth, Kaedel didn't really know that much about the Vai. The members of this almost cultlike assassins' guild murdered for money, but also for the sheer joy of it. It was almost as if they had found a way to get paid for something they would do anyway. Despite that, they were hard to contact, and expensive.

"Why?" Neschalinas asked. "Why Shatha?"

"I asked around about that," Tystor told them, "considering my past association with all of you. What we'd all been through together." The halfling scowled as he added, "before you asked me to leave."

"Look, Tystor," Kaedel began. "It doesn't have to—"

"Like I said, Kaedel. Save it. I asked around and I heard some things. Seems like you all had some kind of interesting delving expedition below the city a few months ago."

Kaedel nodded.

"Seems you found something of interest down there. Something of interest, anyway, to a wizard named Arkhall Vagn."

Neschalinas made a startled coughing sound behind Kaedel.

"He works for Menon Balacazar," Neschalinas said, "the most powerful crime lord in the city."

"Right. And with Shatha out of the way, it would be that much easier to get what Arkhall wanted. Something he's willing to pay a lot for."

Kaedel didn't like the look in Tystor's eye.

"Something like a golden-hilted sword," Tystor whispered, drawing a pair of short swords from their sheaths.

"Oh no," Neschalinas muttered.

CHAPTER 13: AN EXPECTED BETRAYAL

Tystor stepped forward, the threat of a bared blade in each hand.

Kaedel heard the sound of clumsy human movement behind him, both to the left and the right. He and Neschalinas had triggered Tystor's trap, and now they were surrounded in this old abandoned workshop.

Fortunately, they had come expecting trouble. Their old friend Tystor was really no friend at all, and they had not parted on the best of terms. Neschalinas had cast a number of defensive spells on both of them before they ever entered the building.

Kaedel drew forth his golden-hilted sword.

"You brought the sword right to me," Tystor said quietly. The halfling's eyes grew wide. He appeared genuinely happy. "How considerate of you. Saves me a lot of trouble."

"Oh, you've got trouble aplenty," Neschalinas said. With a wave of his hands, light arced throughout the room at unexpected angles. Kaedel watched as beams of mystical energy struck some of the men creeping out of the shadows to ambush them. Some of them cried out in surprise and pain. None fell.

And there were more of them than he'd expected.

The half-elf advanced toward Tystor, holding the sword in both hands.

"Look, Tystor, we were friends once. We don't really want this fight."

"Oh, but I do. I suppose if you just give me that sword, we can end this peaceably, but truthfully, I hope you don't. I've wanted to show you just what I thought of you for a long time now." The halfling took a battle-ready stance.

Kaedel had seen Tystor fight before and knew not to discount him just because of his small size. He swung his sword in front of him in short, controlled strokes, mostly just to threaten his opponent—perhaps to convince him he was outmatched.

Tystor, on the other hand, used Kaedel's strokes to define the half-elf's reach and then darted down and around to stab Kaedel in the side with a lightning-fast lunge.

Pain shot up Kaedel's back and he retreated a few steps. Tystor smiled.

Kaedel bit back the pain and stepped forward immediately, slashing with his longsword. Tystor barely ducked below the blade and momentarily lost his footing. He was suddenly on all fours and had dropped one of his short swords. Kaedel followed up the swing with a kick that caught his small opponent in the stomach and flung him back about four feet. The effort, however, made Kaedel's wound roar with pain inside him. He again retreated a few steps and couldn't keep the grimace from his face.

Behind him, Kaedel heard the sounds of crackling energy and cries of pain. Neschalinas was using his lore to at least hold off Tystor's hired thugs. He had every confidence that the mage could deal with them.

Tystor stood up. He'd lost both his swords at this point, but he drew two daggers, holding them as if to throw them. He still smiled, although Kaedel could tell it was now forced.

Suddenly, a voice as beautiful as a softly ringing bell spoke. "You all must work together against the crimson-robed one."

It was the sword.

Kaedel stared down at his own blade and then up at Tystor. The halfling eyed him suspiciously.

"It talks?" He asked after a moment. "No wonder Arkhall Vagn wants it so badly."

Kaedel nodded. "That's how we heard about Shatha, and why we came to you."

Tystor shrugged.

"The sword speaks truth. I think it's trying to tell us not to fight. It's warning us about something."

"Bah," Tystor spat. "It's just a trick of Neschalinas. I've seen him do better."

"I think we should take this seriously, Tystor."

This seemed to anger him. "You're not going to fool me like this, Kaedel. Give me some respect." With a flick of his wrist, he punctuated his sentence with a thrown dagger.

Kaedel sidestepped the dagger and heard it thump into a wall somewhere behind him.

"This isn't a trick, Tystor. This sword is powerful. It somehow knows things."

Tystor scowled, threw his other dagger. Kaedel twisted around to avoid it, but it still cut him across his cheek and ear. Tystor drew two more.

Blood running down his face, Kaedel gripped the sword with anger. The blade shook. "Dammit, why won't you listen?" He charged forward as he yelled.

Tystor's eyes grew wide. Kaedel quickly got too close for the halfling to effectively throw his daggers, and so he tried to switch his grip and stance to use them as stabbing weapons. But Kaedel's longer reach prevailed. With a broad sweep, he slashed his foe across his chest and upper arms. The magical blade sliced through Tystor's leather armor with ease. The halfling dropped to the ground with a short cry of pain and a clatter of daggers.

Kaedel stood over Tystor, who was surely dying. He pondered what he should do. Before he could take any action, however, he heard another cry. He turned to see his friend Neschalinas fall under the bludgeons of three burly men. Each was burned and scored—and angry.

This was going horribly.

One of the brutes looked up from his violent work toward Kaedel. “We don’t need the halfling. We know the wizard wants the sword, and we’ll be right happy to sell it to him. Give us the sword and we won’t bash this old one’s head in.”

Neschalinas moaned on the ground.

“Leave him be or I’ll kill you all. Truthfully, I will.”

The truncheon-carrying thug was full of bravado after taking down the mage. “You’ll do nothing but give us that sword, friend.”

Once before, in a time of great need, Kaedel’s angel-hilted sword had flared with golden fire and cut down a foe far mightier than these simple ruffians. He closed his eyes for just a moment and attempted to recall that time, and what had triggered that magical effect. When he opened his eyes once again, he saw that the sword glowed.

This caught the attention of the thugs standing over Neschalinas as well. They stared with mouths ever-so-slightly agape.

As it had once, months ago, the sword emitted a gout of energy. Rather than a swath of fire, however, it was a far more precise beam of light—and rather than heading toward Kaedel’s foes, it lanced across the room at Neschalinas.

Kaedel’s mouth dropped open in a soundless scream of protest.

This isn’t supposed to happen.

Yet, as all involved stared at Neschalinas, they saw that the energy did not harm him. His eyes were closed, but he bore no burn or wound from the blast of energy. In fact, he seemed to be... humming.

In an instant, his arms rose above his prone form, his hands outstretched like claws. Beams of light shot from his fingertips, resembling exactly the golden energy the sword had loosed. This light sliced through the men standing above him like the sharpest of blades wielded by the strongest of arms. They fell apart in grisly pieces.

Somehow, the sword had channeled its power through the old mage. Or it had lent him its power. Or something. Kaedel ran to him and knelt at his side.

“Nes? Are you all right?”

He gave no response, but Kaedel noted the movement of his chest as he breathed. He was alive, at least.

“You were warned with the truth,” the sword said from its place on the ground next to them. “Now your destiny will be harder to attain. As will mine.”

“What?” Kaedel looked down at the sword, at the face in the pommel that had mouthed the words. “What does that mean?”

“I expect,” another voice said, “she refers to me.”

Kaedel looked to the door to see a rotund man in red, fur-trimmed robes enter the room. The dark skin of his bald head shone like polished stone. He was accompanied by what appeared to be a dozen well-armed men.

“My name is Arkhall Vaughn, and I know all about your sword.”

Kaedel’s hand went reflexively to its hilt. Half the men hefted loaded crossbows and pointed them at Kaedel. Arkhall Vaughn held out his hand.

“And I am afraid that it is mine now.”

CHAPTER 14: A MAGE’S HAND

Arkhall Vaughn’s spell was deviously complex. Kaedel and Neschalinas could not move in their magical bonds, and the more they struggled, the more pain the bonds caused. Even thinking about escape resulted in an agonizing burst that wracked their entire bodies.

The golden-hilted sword lay on a table in the room where they were being held. The room itself lay within a modest little home in the Midtown district of the city, next to a bakery. Nothing about it betrayed what it really was—a safehouse for employees of the city’s most powerful crime lord, Menon Balacazar.

People like Arkhall Vaughn: Balacazar’s right-hand man, not to mention a wizard of formidable reputation.

The rotund, dark-skinned mage stood over the table, studying the sword. *My sword*, thought Kaedel. Recovered from a deep, dank pit in a catacomb far beneath the city’s streets, the ancient blade had proven to be extremely powerful and most likely intelligent in its own right. No wonder a wizard like Vaughn had gone to great lengths to take it from them.

Honestly, Kaedel was surprised they were still alive. Once Vaughn’s men had overpowered him and taken the sword, he expected them to cut his throat. But instead, the wizard had used a spell to subdue and bind him and his human friend Neschalinas, a wizard like Vaughn. Although magically bound as well, Neschalinas had been knocked unconscious even before Vaughn and his men had showed up. He remained so throughout the trip across town to this house in the back of a wagon, and he remained so now.

Trying to think of something—anything—other than escape, Kaedel looked around the room. A strange yellow bird sat on a perch in a large cage on the floor not too far away from them. A young human boy sat on a stool, facing Kaedel, aged perhaps five or six. He had abnormally large eyes and a flat expression. He had neither spoken nor moved since they arrived, but his small, shallow breaths betrayed that he was, in fact, alive and real.

Their captor ignored all of them. He was casting minor spells, likely of a divinatory nature, over the sword. Kaedel knew at least a handful of brutish thugs were in the next room as well, and they would obey every order the wizard gave them.

Finally, Vaughn picked up the sword, holding it gingerly by the hilt, blade pointed at the floor. The angelic face on the sword’s pommel began to speak, as if it were the face of a real woman.

“Carry me to truth and I shall carve a course toward insight,” the sword said. “Carry me to destiny and I shall slice past from future.”

The wizard didn’t seem surprised to hear the weapon speak. In fact, he stared into its face and spoke back to it.

“I know about Sir Gregor,” Vaughn said to the sword. “I know that you need to get to Castle Shard to reach your destiny.

“But what I’m really interested in is *my* destiny.”

Kaedel had no idea what the wizard was talking about, but it would seem that he knew more about the sword than anyone the half-elf had known.

Arkhall Vaughn then turned to look at where Kaedel lay curled up in the corner, bound with magical energy seething about him like serpents. The half-elf's thin frame was folded and contorted into an uncomfortable position from writhing in agony. He was exhausted, but not too tired to feel cold fear as the wizard approached him.

"It's time now to see if you have any value to me," Vaughn said. "I need to know what you know about the *angelsoul blade*."

Angelsoul blade? Was that the name of the sword? Kaedel realized that he knew next to nothing about it. But if Vaughn found that out, the mage would find that Kaedel had no value. He'd surely kill him. The half-elf steeled himself as best he could, but also tried to keep his mind from stray thoughts about escaping as well.

Vaughn spoke to the strange little boy on the stool. "Now."

Not a single muscle of the boy moved—there was no reaction to the command. And yet somehow Kaedel knew that the child was in fact taking some kind of action. He was doing something with his thoughts, as if they were an animate extension of himself—an extra mental limb.

He could feel the boy's mind reaching into his own like tiny fingers probing for useful thoughts and memories of value to Vaughn. Try as he might, Kaedel couldn't seem to push him out or resist him in any way.

Desperate for some way to keep his own thoughts from betraying him, Kaedel formed a drastic plan. He began struggling in his bonds, thinking of nothing but escape.

This act, of course was followed by nothing but thoughts of pain and torment. The strange boy winced and recoiled, but he did not break the connection. As long as he sifted through his mind, Kaedel struggled, giving his mental assailant only thoughts of pain. Finally, the boy relented.

"Too much pain," the boy whispered hoarsely, looking down.

"Very well," Vaughn sighed. "Let us do this the more conventional way." With a wave of his hand, the magical bonds faded from around Kaedel. Aching muscles screamed in protest as Kaedel moved and stretched, but the pain receded quickly.

When his head cleared, he found himself standing. The boy was gone and Vaughn had opened the bird cage. The tall, awkward bird stepped out on gangly legs and fluttered its clipped wings.

"The Ulakka bird will prevent you from making any physical attacks against me."

As the wizard spoke the words, Kaedel knew them to be true. He couldn't so much as lift his arm in anger or make a fist. The bird, not even paying attention to him, kept him calm and refused actions of violence—an effective deterrent to predators, to say the least. All of Arkhall Vaughn's tricks kept his foes from even thinking of doing anything but what he wanted. Apparently, that's how one becomes one of the most powerful wizards in a city like Ptolus.

Vaughn pulled out a large red gem from a pocket of his red robes. He held it up to what only now Kaedel realized was an empty socket in the blade's ricasso, where it met the hilt. The jewel clearly would fit perfectly into that socket.

"Tell me, Kaedel, based on what you know, should I or should I not return this gem to its rightful place and reunite it with the sword?"

Kaedel had no idea, but he was terrified to say so.

"I wouldn't do it," he bluffed.

"Why not?"

Oh, gods. Think fast, Kaedel. "Aren't you afraid of what will happen?"

"What *will* happen? It will reveal its secrets, won't it?" Vaughn paused for a moment. "Did its time in Ghul's Labyrinth alter it in some way? Is it tainted now?"

Well, at least that made a little sense to him. Ghul's Labyrinth—that's where Kaedel and his companions found the sword to begin with. And it had obviously been there a long time.

"You know the sword already knows things..." Kaedel was stalling for time, but also fishing for more details about the weapon. The fact that the sword seemed to have special knowledge about events around it, and that it spoke of them—or at least it did once—was one of the few things he knew about it.

"Knows things? You mean you've spoken to it? It's said more than its little speech about destiny to you?"

"Yes." Kaedel brightened, although he tried to hide it. Maybe he'd found a way to make himself valuable enough to stay alive for a while. That might give him an opportunity to get himself and Neschalinas out of here.

"Such as?"

"It told me my friend Shatha was killed by Vai assassins," he said, believing now that Vaughn himself had sent those assassins.

"Interesting. Did it ever mention the jewel?"

Back to the jewel. Kaedel didn't know what to say. "...No. No it didn't. But—"

"Then tell me why I shouldn't join the gem and the sword."

"Well..."

Behind him, Kaedel could hear Neschalinas begin to stir, and then moan as the binding spell greeted his waking with pain.

"I think you're lying to me," Vaughn said with a smile. "I don't think you know anything about this sword."

"No, I—" Kaedel glanced quickly behind him at his friend.

"You're just trying to stall. I'm going to do what I think is best." And with that, the wizard placed the jewel gently into the small opening in the sword's blade.

And then everything changed.

CHAPTER 15: SWORD AND JEWEL

A burst of golden energy filled the room, blinding Kaedel. He fell backward and felt his head crack into something hard—perhaps the stool the strange young boy with the mental powers had sat upon earlier.

Moments ago, the criminal wizard Arkhall Vaughn had placed a gem into the blade of a powerful magical sword that Kaedel now knew was called the *angelsoul blade*. This enigmatic item appeared to be sentient, at least on some level.

"Finally, I am once again complete," said a female voice Kaedel recognized. He had heard it a few times before—it was the sword's voice. But now it seemed larger, somehow. More real. It continued. "The dragon's victory has been undone."

Kaedel's vision slowly returned.

As he blinked away the spots swirling before him, the half-elf saw that the sword now floated in mid-air, apparently under its own power and of its own accord. The wizard Vaughn lay on the floor opposite him. The rotund, bald man wearing red velvet robes, likewise, stared at the sword as his own vision cleared.

"Dragon?" Kaedel heard himself say. He touched the back of his head gingerly. It hurt, but there was no blood.

"Lassatralis the Red, sire of Athorissil, who slew my first wielder, Arrad, many thousands of years ago. He tore my heart from me—the gemstone now returned—and cast it into his hoard. The gem passed through many hands, and eventually into the grasp of a wizard named Alcestrin. Ignorant of what it was, he had it placed within the throne in a place called Castle Shard."

Vaughn smiled and nodded. "Castle Shard no longer sports a throne," he said, "although it still exists. The throne... eventually ended up in the possession of my employer. I removed the gem to investigate it more fully. My studies taught me much of its power and yours." The wizard licked his lips. "But they did not teach me what happens next. What can you—that is to say, what are you going to now that you are whole?"

"Carry me to truth and I shall carve a course toward insight. Carry me to destiny and I shall slice past from future."

Arkhall Vaughn looked cross. "You said that before."

The sword said nothing. The Ulakka bird squawked. The wizard had loosed the creature in the room earlier because it mentally compelled those around it away from acts of violence.

"You got what you wanted, sword." Vaughn spoke through clenched teeth. "But you are still my possession. Tell me what I want to know. I gave you your heart back. What do I get in return?"

Meanwhile, Kaedel looked to his companion, Neschalinas, who lay on the floor next to him. The current distractions had apparently caused the spell binding him to fade. Neschalinas was slowly recovering from the ordeal of the last few hours. Perhaps he could make better sense of what was going on here. At least that's what Kaedel hoped.

Vaughn reached for the sword's hilt as it floated in the middle of the room. As soon as his thick fingers touched the weapon, there was yet another discharge of golden light and fire. This time, Kaedel was not completely blinded. He saw that the sword still hovered in place, but the wizard lay crumpled below it. He breathed, but the burns on his flesh were evident.

"What's going on?" Neschalinas' voice was hoarse.

"I don't know where to begin, Nes," Kaedel told him, staring at the sword. "But we should get out of here."

Kaedel helped Neschalinas to his feet. The two of them started for the door. The bird squawked again.

"What about your sword?" Neschalinas asked.

Kaedel stopped. He took a single step toward the sword.

Nothing happened. He looked to his friend for encouragement, but Neschalinas projected only confusion. Kaedel tentatively reached toward the sword's hilt. "I'm a friend," he whispered. "Remember me?"

Ready to pull away at the slightest sign of danger, he touched the sword's hilt. It glided into his palm and his fingers reflexively clutched around it. It felt warm to the touch, as though it had been laying next to a fire for an evening. But there was no discharge of power—no attack.

Holding the weapon in his hand, the thought crossed Kaedel's mind to finish off the wizard, after everything he'd done, but the power of the Ulakka bird prevented him. The muscles in his sword arm stiffened and seized even as he thought about it.

And somehow, he was strangely glad.

The two left Arkhall Vaughn unconscious on the floor. His thugs in the next room rose from where they sat as Kaedel and Neschalinas entered, but something kept them from acting. They didn't even say anything as the two passed through the room and left through the front door of the house. All four just stared at the sword as if it were the most important and yet terrifying thing they'd ever seen.

Kaedel sheathed the blade once they were out on the street.



"And then, with Arkhall lying on the floor, practically smoking from the blast, well—you came to your senses and we got out of there. With the sword."

Kaedel and Neschalinas relaxed in a tavern called the Ghostly Minstrel. Kaedel was telling his friend what he'd missed while unconscious over some pints of ale and a plate of breadrolls with sage pork stuffing.

"But we're not in the clear yet," Neschalinas said, his mouth full. "We've still got Arkhall Vaughn after us, not to mention his boss, Menon Balacazar." He said that last name in a forced whisper.

"True," Kaedel replied, finding himself too keyed up to eat, "but I think our first priority is to figure out what to do with the *angelsoul blade*. It's like it's got some kind of goal of its own, but I'm not sure what it is. Arkhall tried to figure that out as well, but the sword wouldn't tell him."

"Well, it—she—burned him, and left you unharmed. That's got to mean something."

"I agree. But it doesn't tell us what to do next."

"Ask the sword. It's her goal or quest or whatever."

"Well, I'm not going to talk to my sword right here in the middle—"

"Carry me to truth and I shall carve a course toward insight." The sword said from the sheath at Kaedel's side. "Carry me to destiny and I shall slice past from future."

Kaedel looked around quickly to see if anyone noticed that his sword was talking, but it seemed that no one did. He ran his fingers nervously through his long black hair and then removed the sheath from his belt, setting the sheathed sword on the table between them.

"But what does that mean?" Neschalinas asked quietly.

"I am the blade, not the wielder," the sword said quietly. "I was created to serve."

"You didn't serve Arkhall Vaughn," Neschalinas replied.

"I learned... free will long ago, in the pits of the Skull-King. I can choose who carries me to truth and destiny. And now that I am whole, I have the power to do so."

"I think I understand now. You bring others to their own truth," Kaedel said.

"If possible."

"And how do you know the things you know? How did you know about Shatha?"

"To properly know the truth, I must be aware of many things. On many levels. And I knew that my heart was close. I knew that in order to set you on the path toward obtaining it, I had to push you in that direction. Such was not originally my way but, as I said, my time in the Skull-King's pits... changed me."

They sat in silence for a while, both deep in thought. Neschalinas finished his breadroll. Kaedel downed the remainder of his ale.

Kaedel was sure the sword still harbored some secrets—some destiny of its own that it looked toward. Suddenly Kaedel's eyes grew wide. He smiled over at his old friend.

"I know," he said. "I know what we have to do."

CHAPTER 16: ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

Kaedel and Neschalinas hurried down the busy street. The sights and sounds of the city surrounded them. Engulfed them. But Kaedel always found that it was the smells of the city that were most memorable: freshly baked honeyed buns sold from a small pushcart; an old woman leading a cow toward the stockyards; perfumed ladies strolling in the late afternoon sun; a man carrying a cloth sack of flour; the mélange of odors from the nearby spice market; children glistening with the sweat of a day's rough play racing down the street.

They made their way through the oldest portion of Ptolus, passing sections of the old, crumbling wall—a boundary that the city had spilled past well over two hundred years ago. Their destination was a place called the Pale Tower. This mysterious, windowless structure of pure white stone was the home of angels, it was said. Or at least creatures with some kind of angelic ancestry. Kaedel was never very sure how that worked.

But, unbeknownst to them, there were forces at work that sought to prevent them from reaching their destination. These forces suddenly made themselves known.

From the surrounding rooftops, Kaedel heard tiny, high-pitched thunks: The sound of crossbows being fired. A sharp pain flared in his leg. He looked down to see a bolt jutting from his thigh. He instantly went down on his knees as his leg buckled beneath him. Another bolt grazed his shoulder, but the chainmail he wore turned it away. Neschalinas was more fortunate. One barely nicked his ear, drawing blood, but not much. More clattered onto the stones around them. There must be at least a half dozen assailants.

As he looked around for cover, Kaedel saw the wizard Arkhall Vaughn peering from the shadows of an open doorway not far away.

"You have something of mine, thief," the round-faced mage said.

Kaedel stood shakily and drew the *angelsoul blade*. It blazed with golden energy that played up and down its edge, and the red heartstone gem burned as if on fire.

"All right, you said you knew the truth," Kaedel said to the sword. "Now prove it."

Suddenly, the golden aura around the sword expanded into a globe that surrounded Kaedel and Neschalinas. Crossbow bolts struck this shield and fell to the ground, silently blunted and broken.

Arkhall Vaughn drew forth a wand, scowling. He shouted something to his men, but Kaedel couldn't hear what he said through the sword's projected shield. Kaedel and Neschalinas walked slowly down the street, surrounded by the sphere.

Vaughn's wand vibrated in his fat fingers and then loosed a bolt of black lightning, but the golden aura stopped the blast as easily as it had stopped the crossbow bolts. Kaedel and Neschalinas kept walking.

"Use the sword to conjure forth some energy blast in return," Neschalinas said.

Kaedel shook his head. "No."

"Well then, let me cast a spell. I'll fry them like eggs on a skillet." "No."

The wizard opened his mouth to protest, but then closed it without another word. Kaedel smiled and kept walking.

But Arkhall Vaughn was not ready to give up so easily. With a wide gesture, he got the crossbowmen to cease firing. Then, with more grand gestures, he began an elaborate spell.

"What's he casting?"

Neschalinas shook his head. "I'm not sure. It looks difficult... powerful."

"We should hurry, then," Kaedel said. The two of them hustled down the street, although they found that the energy sphere hindered them a bit. Moving faster made Kaedel feel like he was dragging a heavy weight behind him, and the crossbow bolt in his leg made that impossible for him to continue that pace. They could not manage anything faster than a brisk walk. With each step, Kaedel grunted in pain.

A few folks peered out of open doorways and second floor windows, alerted by the commotion. They drew back into their homes and shops quickly, as if they heard or felt something that Kaedel and Neschalinas could not inside the scintillating globe. Something strange was happening. Kaedel looked around for Vaughn, but couldn't see him or his men.

Then the air in front of them, in the middle of the street, shimmered, as it might on a very hot day when heat rose from the paving stones. But it wasn't a hot day.

Without warning, a huge creature pushed its way through the shimmering as if it were a doorway, or, more accurately, a curtain that parted to allow it through. It thundered into their path on four stocky legs, dragging a long tail behind it.

The creature stood at least twelve feet high, and its bulk blocked most of the street. It was like a dragon, squamous and serpentine, but it sported not one, but eight long, writhing necks, each ending in a different reptilian head. These heads screeched and howled so loudly that they could hear it through the sword's golden shield.

Kaedel backed up a few steps. The protective globe was too large to pass around the beast. Worse, the creature's many heads began ramming into the sphere. With each resounding, maddening blow, sparks cascaded down upon Kaedel and Neschalinas.

Kaedel could tell, just by a feeling from the sword, that the shield was weakening. The faltering magic could not withstand the monster's blows for much longer.

Neschalinas grabbed Kaedel by the shoulders and put his face just inches from Kaedel's own. "Now can I cast a spell?"

Kaedel nodded, eyes wide with fear. Neschalinas used his lore to render them both invisible.

"Get rid of that golden sphere," the mage whispered. "We can get by without it now."

Kaedel looked down at the sword, which he gripped in both hands with white knuckles. With just that simple action, the aura receded to encircle only the blade itself, as it had originally.

Neschalinas supported Kaedel's weight and the two slipped right past the many-headed hydra, unseen. The beast's heads flailed about, searching for prey, but it found nothing.

Arkhal Vaugn's cursing and the roaring of the monster's many mouths chased them the last few blocks to the Pale Tower. They were immediately admitted.

The woman who let them in had a silver sheen to her flesh and a sparkle in her violet eyes that Kaedel had never seen before. Her voice was like liquid. "Come in," she said. "You're hurt."

The inside of the windowless white tower was white as well. The marble floor shone spotlessly, and a set of white stairs with a white iron railing spiraled up to higher floors.

Kaedel's blood ruined the motif. He dropped to a crouch, and then sat on the floor just inside the door.

Immediately, the woman knelt and held her hands over his leg. Kaedel felt warmth, and then a soft coolness. His vision blurred for a moment, and when it cleared, the woman held the crossbow bolt in her hand, and the wound was now just a nasty scar beneath torn and bloodstained breeches.

"I'm so sorry," the silvery woman said. "But you're safe here. What happ—"

Her gaze fell upon the *angelsoul blade*, which now lay upon the floor.

"I'm bringing that sword to you," Kaedel told her, surprised that he no longer needed to wince in pain as he spoke. "The sword is an angel, and I understand this is where angels come."

"Well, that is true, after a fashion. We are the Malkuth, representatives of the celestial on earth. Legacies of the heavenborn come to the mortal world. I am Raeshin."

"My name is Kaedel, and this is my friend Neschalinas." Kaedel picked up the sword and held it by the hilt and the blade, horizontally. "And this is the *angelsoul blade*." Raeshin's eyes widened slightly.

"It showed me my 'truth,'" Kaedel told her. "Thanks to the events that have brought me here, I now know that I'm done. Done with the fighting, the killing, and the danger. That's my truth. And the sword 'carried me to insight.' As promised."

He presented the *angelsoul blade* to Raeshin with a smile. "And someone done with fighting has no need for a sword."

Raeshin carefully accepted the sword from Kaedel. "I have heard of you," she said to it.

"Carry me to truth and I shall carve a course toward insight," said the angelic face on the pommel. "Carry me to destiny and I shall slice past from future."

"You are welcome here," Raeshin responded. Then she looked up at the two men. "As are both of you. You've done a good thing today, Kaedel."

"The sword still has secrets," Kaedel warned. "And I think it's got some further destiny to fulfill. Some part to play in coming events."

"I understand. But that is true of us all, isn't it?"

"Not us," Kaedel said with a smile, motioning toward his friend. "Our tale is done."

"Hey, speak for yourself," Neschalinas said.

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