

PROLOGUE

A Silence of Three Parts

I T WAS NIGHT AGAIN. The **Waystone Inn** lay in **silence**, and it was **a silence of three parts**.

The **most obvious part** was a **hollow**, **echoing quiet**, **made by things that were lacking**. If **there had been a wind** it **would have sighed through the trees**, **set the inn 's sign creaking on its hooks**, and **brushed the silence down the road like trailing autumn leaves**. If **there had been a crowd**, **even a handful of men inside the inn**, **they would have filled the silence with conversation and laughter**, the **clatter and clamor one expects from a drinking house during the dark hours of night**. If **there had been music ... but no**, **of course there was no music**. In **fact there were none of these things**, and so the **silence remained**.

Inside the **Waystone** a **pair of men huddled at one corner of the bar**.

They **drank with quiet determination**, **avoiding serious discussions of troubling news**. In **doing this** they **added a small, sullen silence to the larger, hollow one**. It **made an alloy of sorts, a counterpoint**.

The **third silence** was not an **easy thing to notice**. If **you listened for an hour**, **you might begin to feel** it in the **wooden floor underfoot** and in the **rough, splintering barrels behind the bar**. It was in the **weight of the black stone hearth that held the heat of a long dead fire**. It was in the **slow back and forth of a white linen cloth rubbing along the grain of the bar**. And it was in the **hands of the man who stood there, polishing a stretch of mahogany that already gleamed in the lamplight**.

The **man had true- red hair**, **red as flame**. His **eyes were dark and distant**, and he **moved with the subtle certainty that comes from knowing many things**.

The **Waystone** was **his**, just as the **third silence** was **his**. This was **appropriate**, as it was the **greatest silence of the three**, **wrapping the others inside itself**. It was **deep and wide as autumn 's ending**. It was **heavy as a great river- smooth stone**. It was the **patient, cut- flower sound of a man who is waiting to die**.

CHAPTER ONE

A Place for Demons

I T WAS FELLING NIGHT, and the **usual crowd** had **gathered at the Waystone Inn**. **Five wasn ' t much of a crowd**, but **five was as many as the Waystone ever saw these days**, **times being what they were**.

Old **Cob** was **filling his role as storyteller and advice dispensary**. The **men at the bar sipped their drinks and listened**. In the **back room a young innkeeper stood out of sight behind the door**, **smiling as he listened to the details of a familiar story**.

" When he awoke, Taborlin the Great found himself locked in a high tower. They had taken his sword and stripped him of his tools: key, coin, and candle were all gone. But that weren ' t even the worst of it, you see ..."

Cob paused for effect, "... cause the lamps on the wall were burning blue !"

Graham, Jake, and Shep nodded to themselves. The three friends had grown up together, listening

to Cob ' s stories and ignoring his advice.

Cob peered closely at the newer, more attentive member of his small audience, the smith ' s prentice. " Do you know what that meant, boy ?"

Everyone called the smith ' s prentice " boy " despite the fact that he was a hand taller than anyone there. Small towns being what they are, he would most likely remain " boy " until his beard filled out or he bloodied someone ' s nose over the matter.

The boy gave a slow nod. " The Chandrian ."

" That ' s right ," Cob said approvingly. " The Chandrian. Everyone knows that blue fire is one of their signs. Now he was —"

" But how ' d they find him ?" the boy interrupted. " And why din ' t they kill him when they had the chance ?"

" Hush now, you ' ll get all the answers before the end ," Jake said. " Just let him tell it ."

" No need for all that, Jake ," Graham said. " Boy ' s just curious. Drink your drink ."

" I drank me drink already ," Jake grumbled. " I need t ' nother but the innkeep ' s still skinning rats in the back room ." He raised his voice and knocked his empty mug hollowly on the top of the mahogany bar. " Hoy!

We ' re thirsty men in here !"

The innkeeper appeared with five bowls of stew and two warm, round loaves of bread. He pulled more beer for Jake, Shep, and Old Cob, moving with an air of bustling efficiency.

The story was set aside while the men tended to their dinners. Old Cob tucked away his bowl of stew with the predatory efficiency of a lifetime bachelor. The others were still blowing steam off their bowls when he finished the last of his loaf and returned to his story.

" Now Taborlin needed to escape, but when he looked around, he saw his cell had no door. No windows. All around him was nothing but smooth, hard stone. It was a cell no man had ever escaped.

" But Taborlin knew the names of all things, and so all things were his to command. He said to the stone: ' Break !' and the stone broke. The wall tore like a piece of paper, and through that hole Taborlin could see the sky and breathe the sweet spring air. He stepped to the edge, looked down, and without a second thought he stepped out into the open air"

The boy ' s eyes went wide. " He didn ' t !"

Cob nodded seriously. " So Taborlin fell, but he did not despair. For he knew the name of the wind, and so the wind obeyed him. He spoke to the wind and it cradled and caressed him. It bore him to the ground as gently as a puff of thistledown and set him on his feet softly as a mother ' s kiss.

" And when he got to the ground and felt his side where they ' d stabbed him, he saw that it weren ' t hardly a scratch. Now maybe it was just a piece of luck ," Cob tapped the side of his nose knowingly. " Or maybe it had something to do with the amulet he was wearing under his shirt ."

“ What amulet ?” the boy asked eagerly through a mouthful of stew.

Old Cob leaned back on his stool, glad for the chance to elaborate. “ A few days earlier, Taborlin had met a tinker on the road. And even though Taborlin didn ’ t have much to eat, he shared his dinner with the old man .”