

# A QUESTION OF MAGIC

by

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## I

The hedge magician had set up his tent in the field behind the potter's shed. Jora, Imrie's best friend, spent all day talking about it as they worked in the fields, until Imrie thought she would go mad from her chatter.

"I'll bet he's been everywhere," Jora said, pulling damp hair from her forehead. She refilled her seed basket from the sack. "Across the ocean and everything. And they say he can even tell what you're thinking," she continued. She shivered, scared and delighted. Imrie merely grunted.

"I heard my mother tell my aunt that he could talk with the Old Ones." Jora stopped all pretense of work. "And my father said he could make rain, too. Even lightning!"

"Nonsense," Imrie said. "The rain comes or goes, the lightning happens or not, and that's all there is to it. Talk to the Old Ones—humph." She pulled her damp shirt away from her body—it was hot today, and sticky.

"Come on, Imrie," Jora said. "Aren't you excited, just a lit-

tle bit? I'll bet he's even seen dragons, and flying ships, and all sorts of stuff."

"Have *you* ever seen a dragon? Or a flying ship?" Imrie said, planting her hands on her hips. "Or talked to anyone who's seen one? No, it's always someone knew someone knew someone who heard that someone else's aunt saw one. Or the Old Ones, have you ever seen one? Or heard one? Or felt one?" She glared at the other girl. "Well, have you?"

"Your problem," Jora said angrily, "is that you have no imagination." She took her seed basket and marched away between the furrows, leaving Imrie to finish filling her own basket alone. A vagrant breeze pulled dark hair from her headband, and she swiped it away from her neck. Magician—charlatan, rather, she thought impatiently.

At dinner, Imrie's cousin Tib bubbled with childish speculation about the magician's upcoming performance, while Uncle Rosin pulled his beard and made pronouncements. Aunt Melia nodded, silent as always. Imrie watched her as she helped her aunt clear away the meal and prepare to go out. Melia was her mother's sister, a survivor of the raids in Menasdale, to the north, that had killed Imrie's parents. Like Harkensdale, Menasdale lay in the clutter of small valleys that dotted this part of High Hallack, save that while Harkensdale abutted the great sea, Menasdale shared a border with the Waste, that desolate and unknown land inhabited by scavengers, outlaws, and the ghosts of the Old Ones. The raid, in a larger Dale, would have been minor; mounted outlaws sweeping into the valley with sword and fire, another skirmish in the constant border disputes. Save that tiny Menasdale had no adequate defenses against a force that large, and within the course of a day the Dale's small holdings lay in ruins. As far as Imrie knew, only she and Melia had escaped the slaughter.

Imrie sometimes wondered if her mother would have become like Melia: silent, tired, and gray. She remembered her parents only vaguely, as laughing, loving people who filled her world with light and happiness. Melia she remembered as a young woman, pretty and quick with laughter. Melia had saved a few relics of Menasdale, keeping them in a tiny wooden box on the mantelpiece. Her aunt never touched the box anymore, but to

Imrie it was a key into a lost and better world. Sometimes, late at night, she lifted her mother's amulet from the box and took it to bed with her, holding it close and pretending that she and Melia were still back in Menasdale, that Melia still laughed and flirted with the young men, that Imrie's parents held her and told her silly riddles. Then, silently, she would cry herself to sleep.

That night, after dinner, she reluctantly accompanied her family to the field behind the potter's shed, but only because Tib had teased her unmercifully throughout the meal. The magician's tent, gaudy with flags and banners, sat on a rough platform and the magician's boy sat on the platform's edge and kicked his legs, watching the crowd with a bored, superior expression. The sleeves of his overtunic dragged on the wooden platform beside him. It seemed that everyone in Colmera had come. Rosin and Melia stopped to talk with Set, the village headman. Imrie expected more nonsense about the magician, but instead Set scratched under his worn blue cap and gestured to the east.

"Trouble brewing," he said quietly. "Down to the coast. War talk."

Rosin tugged his beard. "Any weight to it?"

"Maybe. Maybe." Set frowned. "Halle from Norrisdale came by last night." Norrisdale was the next Dale over, as tiny as Harkensdale and, although landbound, near one of the main trading roads that braved the rough hills of High Hallack. Imrie felt surprised. Usually, no one left home in the spring, not until the fields were safely planted.

"Didn't hear of it," Rosin said.

"Came quiet. Lord Betry had people up to his castle, asking help. They want troops. He's come to see Lord Harken. Since we're on the coast."

"Any word who they're fighting?"

"Outlanders. Come across the sea."

Rosin looked surprised. "Across the sea?"

"Unlikely. Might just be wind-talk, always something after a winter. Harken'll tell, if there's anything to it."

Rosin grunted an agreement, and Set moved off in search of the other elders. Imrie shivered and crossed her arms, tucking her hands against her sides.

"Uncle Rosin?" she said.

"Just wind-talk," her uncle replied. "You get on, watch the show. Happens every spring, talk of one wild thing or another. Set loves it, it makes him feel important. Go on, find your friends, have a good time. And keep an eye on Tib."

"I don't need her," Tib said rebelliously, but at a look from his father he took Imrie's hand and dragged her through the crowd. Jora spotted her and made her way over.

"I knew you couldn't stay away," she said. "Come on, my sister's saving us a place up close."

Tib cheered and towed Imrie after him, following Jora to the front of the crowd. Imrie sighed.

Soon the magician appeared, a shabby man with a straggly gray beard and sleeves even longer than his apprentice's. After a long oration promising all sorts of wonders, he proceeded to toss various powders into the air, create a number of obnoxious stinks, and flail about in the center of a plume of smoke. When the smoke started, a number of people screamed and covered their heads, and the man standing behind Imrie swore the way men do when they're afraid but aren't willing to show it. The magician's boy shrieked prayers and disappeared into the crowd as though seeking safety; Tib buried his face in Imrie's skirt and howled. Imrie shook her head, squinting, but all she could see was dark smoke, and the hedge magician writhing about inside it like a man with pepper in his underclothes. She poked Jora sharply with her elbow.

"What is it?" she demanded. "What do you see?"

"Monsters," Jora gasped. "O great Mother, save us, they're eating the magician!" She howled in terror. Her sister buried her head in her arms and wept with fear.

The magician gave a fierce, triumphant cry and leaped out of the smoke, leaving it in tatters. Everyone cheered, and Tib bounced enthusiastically. The smoke blew away, the magician bowed, and the magician's boy went through the crowd with a bowl collecting pennies. Jora tossed coins into the bowl, but Imrie merely scowled at him. The boy thumbed his nose at her and passed by.

All that night, the villagers could talk of nothing but the magician's deadly battle with the smoke monsters, until Imrie pulled the blankets over her ears and pretended to sleep. Even

Set's talk of trouble was forgotten—and probably, Imrie thought, for good reason; the trouble was nothing more substantial than the magician's illusions. But it bothered her—even her hardheaded Uncle Rosin had seen the smoke monsters, and Uncle Rosin didn't believe in anything he couldn't plant, harvest, chew, or swallow. Imrie bit her lip, staring over the top of the blanket at the hut's wattle wall. Maybe Jora was right, she thought. Maybe she didn't have any imagination.

She turned over. Her aunt and uncle snored on their pallet, and Tib muttered in his sleep. Well, maybe she didn't have any imagination, she thought, but that didn't stop her from knowing what her life would be like, and it didn't stop her from disliking it. She was fifteen—ripe for marriage, Uncle Rosin said, and Imrie thought that she'd be married to Posten, who worked the neighboring fields—or, if she was very lucky, to Met, the smith's son. She snorted. Met was squat, loud, and drank too much ale at the village celebrations. But whoever she married, she knew that all too soon she, too, would be tired and quiet like Aunt Melia, spending her life cleaning, cooking, weaving, mending, working in the fields, drawing water, bearing children, while the moments of her life passed away into grayness, and the grayness darkened into death.

I have enough imagination to imagine that, Imrie thought unhappily. Maybe Jora can stand it because she has enough imagination to imagine dragons, too.

Then, impatient, she punched the pile of straw under her head and closed her eyes. Imagination or no, the magician was a fraud and that was all there was to it. Holding this thought close like a prayer, she eventually fell asleep.

The magician left the next morning—gone, it was rumored, to entertain at the castle near the Dale's head. Imrie just shrugged when Jora told her this breathtaking news. She had seen the Harkens riding out a few times, the lord heavy in his saddle, his wife almost invisible under her finery, and the young lord brave and bright and obviously proud of it. They would probably be just as taken in as the village folk, Imrie decided, and lugged her heavy seed basket back to her set of furrows.

The hot weather broke at sunset, just as they finished plant-

ing; the skies darkened and a fine, small rain began to fall. Imrie opened her arms to it, glorying in its reality, in the cool drops running down her neck, the soft, sweet breeze, the aroma of damp, fertile earth. Lightning flickered to the east and Jora, standing beside her, gasped and pointed.

"It's from the castle," she said positively. "It's the magician—he didn't make lightning for *us*."

"I wish," Imrie said, "that you'd forget about that forsaken magician and start talking about boys again—at least there are more of them."

Jora glared at her and stomped away. Imrie looked at the lightning appraisingly. It certainly looked like regular spring lightning, nothing special really—except that the weather usually came from the east, not the west, and this lightning seemed to be centered over the Dale's head, and not moving despite the breeze that tossed the clouds. She shook her head impatiently, hunched her shoulders, and marched toward the village. Nonsense, she thought. Just arrant nonsense.

As the night wore on, the lightning grew stronger, sending bright white flashes through the sky above the village—bright enough, Uncle Rosin said, to count the seeds in their furrows. He and Set talked at length and with worry about a possible spring flood, their seeds washed away, crop ruined, while Aunt Melia kept the ale cups filled. Whenever the thunder rumbled, she jumped a little. Even Tib was, for once, silent.

Imrie finished cleaning the supper dishes, then, infected by the tension in the room, took her small wooden box from the mantelpiece. Still watching Uncle Rosin and Set, she opened the box and groped among the trinkets. Her eyes widened and, sitting quickly, she emptied the box into her lap. Her mother's battered amulet was missing. The amulet was an old sphere of metal, smooth with years of wearing; certainly nothing valuable save for its memories. Unbelieving, she counted through the trinkets again.

"Aunt Melia!"

"What is it, child?" her aunt said, coming over to her.

Imrie showed her the box. "The amulet's gone, Mother's amulet—"

"Hush." Melia frowned at her. "I'm not surprised, it always

did get away from folk. Save your mother, and you. It's probably in your bed, you'll find it soon enough. Quiet, now, your uncle and Set are very worried. Put those away and take this." She held out a trencher of guest bread.

Imrie refilled the box and put it away, lay the bread on the table, and retreated to her corner, where she proceeded to take her bed apart. She found two buttons, a missing ribbon, and any number of fluff-balls, but no amulet. Melia, watching her, shook her head in warning. Imrie remade the bed and sat on it unhappily, her plain cloak pulled tight around her shoulders. She'd find the amulet in the morning, she told herself firmly; it had to be somewhere in the hut. She certainly wasn't going to cry about it. At least, not yet. She put her shoulders back and listened to the men talking. A spring flood would spell disaster and possibly famine, and the gloom thickened. Neither of them mentioned the magician, although from the way Set kept making the sign against evil, she knew that magic was on their minds.

But, she told herself firmly, the magician had no more magic than she had—just the ability to make people believe in him. Just powders and stinks and smoke, nothing more—he certainly was not responsible for either the rain or the lightning, or the booming thunder that accompanied it.

Although he probably had enough magic to distract people while his apprentice burglarized their houses, she thought suddenly. She jumped to her feet. Aunt Melia frowned and Uncle Rosin, rising to see Set to the door, shook his head. Imrie sat back down again. It was only, she thought, a suspicion, and a paltry one beside the possibility of flood and famine.

"Uncle Rosin," Imrie said as soon as Set left.

"Not tonight, child," Rosin said wearily. "Whatever it is, it can wait till morning."

The family went to bed, but Imrie lay rigid, thinking about the amulet and about the storm until both merged in her mind, one as dire as the other. A louder blast of thunder shook the hut, and Imrie leaped off her pallet, fumbling for her cloak, pulling on her boots, shoving an unlit torch under her belt. Moving rapidly, she threw half a loaf of bread into her belt pouch, along with her spark-striker and a dried apple. Then,

still moving with silent, desperate speed, she rushed out into the night.

Magicians were stuff and nonsense, and no doubt about it—but if the magician was making all this racket, she could make him stop, make him return her amulet. She didn't know how she'd do that, against someone who might, after all, control the heavens, but she knew she had to try. Imrie pulled her hood tight around her cheeks and set out, almost running, along the path leading east to the Dale's castle.

After a while, she noticed that the small rain continued to fall, as gently as a benison, then drifted into a fine mist, and that into dryness. No danger of a spring flood, then—but the lightning still clove the sky, the thunder shook the ground beneath her feet, and she never thought of going back.

## II

Ryle Harken drummed his fingers impatiently on the tabletop, while the acrobats spun and stretched and tossed one another about. A stupid waste of time, Ryle thought; the banquet, the speeches, the entertainment, everything. Across the table, his uncle Betry, lord of Norrisdale, frowned and picked at his beard. Betry had come over from Norrisdale two days ago, bearing news of a possible invasion that caused Lord Josich, Ryle's father, much amusement.

"Come now, Betry," Lord Josich Harken had said, his wine cup supported comfortably on his great belly, "you know better than to come traipsing over the hills with wild rumors. An invasion from the sea is ridiculous just on the face of it—there's nothing out there, cousin, and everyone knows it."

Lord Betry, a thin, anxious man, fluttered his hands. "But, Josich," he said, almost squeaking, "listen—"

"Besides, Harkensdale's tiny, very tiny," Lord Josich said genially. Late afternoon sunlight spilled through the room, illuminating the cushioned chairs and unassuming tapestries. "The size of a sneeze, Betry, just a sneeze-worth of farms and a sin-

gle fishing village. And so, for that matter, is Norrisdale. If anyone did come from the sea, they'd probably miss us entirely. Now, now, stop your fussing and enjoy yourself—we know you just wanted an excuse to visit with your sister.”

Betry had reluctantly allowed himself to be dragged off to admire Lady Kora's flower beds, while Lord Josich smiled and called for more wine.

The trouble, Ryle now thought, was that his father might be right. An acrobat somersaulted before him, the firelight golden on her damp skin. She stood on her hands, almost losing her balance, almost losing her performer's grin. Harkensdale had been at peace for decades, too tiny to attract much notice, neither very rich nor very poor, snuggled into a tiny valley between the sea and the tall western hills that marked the beginning of Norrisdale. To the north, rugged hills and forests protected the valley from Menasdale, from which nothing had been heard for a good ten years. Harsh granite mountains, rumored to contain places of great, dark magic, maintained a wall between Harkensdale and the south. Isolated, quiet, and, Ryle thought angrily, boring, where the best entertainment they could provide a visiting lord were this troupe of awkward acrobats and the tattered hedge magician waiting in the kitchen. The songsmiths, Ryle thought, would find nothing but comedy in Harkensdale.

The acrobats finished in a trembling, sweaty heap before the great fireplace. Lady Kora clapped enthusiastically, her round face flushed, while Josich banged his wine cup in approval and Lord Betry continued picking at his beard. Ryle shifted impatiently in his seat.

“Wonderful,” his mother said in her little-girl voice. “Don't you think so, Betry? Weren't they wonderful?”

“Wonderful,” Lord Betry echoed dutifully.

Ryle covered his face with one hand. He'd spend his entire life like this, he thought with despair. Tied to this boring Dale, surrounded by farmers and fishers, never too rich or too poor, tiny beyond history's notice. If he were lord of Harkensdale, he thought, he'd fortify Pessik, the fishing village at the castle's foot; stockpile food and water, empty the castle's modest armory, conscript men from the fields. He had said as much to his father, after Uncle Betry disappeared toward the gardens.

"You would, would you?" his father had said, signaling for more wine. "Fortify ten stone huts—with what, pray? Seaweed and dreams? And you might remember that it's barely spring—there's very little to stockpile unless we levy the villages, and then what are the people to eat? And I wouldn't think of a conscription, not during planting. Unless you expect us to eat twigs and bushes next winter. You haven't developed a fondness for bushes, have you? I hope not—it would upset your mother."

"I don't think it's something to joke about," Ryle said angrily. "If Betry's right, if there is an invasion, you won't have to worry about what to eat next winter, because we won't be around to eat anything."

"But Betry isn't right," Lord Josich said patiently. "He's all a-flutter because of a rumor he heard from some trader on the road, who heard it from another trader, who heard it from heaven only knows where. Last summer, it was outlaws marching out of the Waste, and the spring before it was something equally silly. Betry gets bored, that's all. After a long winter, everyone gets bored."

"And you don't?" Ryle said rudely.

"Me?" His father laughed. "With everything I have to do? Don't be silly, boy." He had waved Ryle away, and ten minutes later was in the fields behind the castle, deep in conversation with the beekeeper.

Servants rolled up the acrobats' rush mats and dragged them out, while others brought in the magician's paraphernalia. Lady Kora pried family gossip from her brother, and the magician came in. He bowed to the head table, shook back his long sleeves, and produced a dozen gray doves from the air. They flew toward the rafters, Lady Kora clapped, and the magician presented her with a bouquet of roses that he also plucked from the air. His assistant set up a brazier.

The show, Ryle had to admit, was really quite good, especially the smoke monsters. They filled the hall, coiling around themselves, eyes gleaming, claws extended, huge wings cupping as they danced through the air, menacing the magician. The magician battled them fiercely, while his boy did a very professional job of looking terrified. This was more like it, Ryle thought, leaning forward. Monsters, dragons, great battles,

danger and daring—that was what life should be about. The magician struck the monsters, shouting magic words. After a stirring fight, the monsters screamed in defeat and dissolved, and tatters of smoke fled through the windows. Lady Kora gasped and applauded, Lord Betry uncovered his eyes, and Lord Josich bellowed his approval and invited the magician to their table. Ryle scooted over to make room as a servant set a chair beside him. The magician sank into it, wiping his forehead, and smiled modestly at Lord Josich's praise.

Of course he had seen such monsters, he said in answer to Ryle's barrage of questions. He had battled monsters in the wilds of the outlands, forcing their magic secrets from them before he destroyed them utterly. Certainly the Old Ones respected his powers, for the evil ones left him in peace, while the others eased his travels with good hunting and shelter. He had been all over the Dale lands, north to south, east to west, and had seen all there was to see; he had performed before the great lords in their sumptuous palaces and, he implied, been fittingly rewarded by lord and lady both. He had been offered positions of power and wealth, but, he said, he preferred his life as a traveling magician and would not trade the danger and adventure for any number of rewards or sinecures.

"When I was a little girl in Norrisdale," Lady Kora said dreamily, "a magician came through who made lightning for us. It was so pretty—can you do that? Make lightning, I mean?"

The hedge magician smiled. "Of course," he said lightly. "Even an apprentice can make lightning—there is very little mystery to it."

"Really?" Lady Kora said breathlessly. "Could you make some for us? Now?"

The magician frowned. "Naturally, your ladyship—but we would have to go outside. And it is raining."

"A little rain never hurt anyone," Lord Josich boomed, pushing back his chair.

"I only meant," the magician said hastily, "that it really would be much too easy, with the rain falling—no art to it at all. Besides, you might think the lightning natural, with the rain and all. Much better to make it on a clear day, your lordship—a clear, bright day with not a cloud in sight."

"Perhaps," Lord Josich said, scooping up his wine cup. "But if I know anything about the weather, it's going to rain for another two or three days, and you'll be gone by then. So come along, Master Magician. Let's see your lightning, rain or no rain. And I promise to believe in it—those aren't storm clouds overhead, you know, just simple, quiet rain. My dear," he said, offering his arm. Lady Kora tittered and put her hands around his huge forearm. Betry dithered for a moment, then accepted his cloak from a servant and followed the lord and lady from the room. Ryle, trying to look sophisticated and bored, walked with the magician, while the magician's apprentice brought up the rear. The magician, Ryle noticed, did not look very happy.

"It's all right," Ryle whispered. "It really isn't a storm rain, so we'll believe your lightning, I promise."

The magician's lips pinched down.

Lord Josich led them to the castle's roof. A light breeze brought the rain to their faces. Ryle peered west, where sunset gilded Pessik's thatched roofs. Long spits of granite reached into the sea, almost joined at the mouth of Harkensdale's tiny harbor, and the waters were empty and calm. Disappointed, Ryle turned back to the magician.

The magician, arms crossed and gray beard fluttering in the breeze, stared with concentration toward the north, while his apprentice watched him with a peculiar expression on his face. The castle folk maintained a respectful distance, letting him take his time. After a while, the magician suddenly flung his arms wide, tilted his face into the rain, and began shouting magic words. Ryle's skin prickled and he clenched his hands. Nothing happened.

"The skies are confused," the magician explained, rubbing his sleeve across his face. "I shall have to bend them to my will."

"My goodness," Lady Kora said. "Is that safe?"

"Your ladyship, all magic is fraught with danger," the magician said sternly, and called to his boy. They conferred briefly, then the boy retreated and the magician resumed his cross-arm contemplation of the sky. Josich drew his family farther away from the magician—Lord Betry was already at a distance, ready to bolt down the stairs. The sky darkened further. The

magician began flinging his arms about, describing vague but undoubtedly magical shapes in the air, then again shouted at the clouds. Again, nothing happened.

The magician turned to Lord Josich, shaking his head. "My lord," he said, "there seems to be some disturbance in—"

The sky flashed white, throwing stark shadows along the rooftop, and the castle rocked with thunder, flinging them all down. The magician looked astounded. Lady Kora screamed, and after a shocked moment, Lord Josich said firmly, "Very impressive, Magician—now turn it off."

Lightning flashed again, and thunder bellowed, and Lord Betry fled down the stairs. Ryle had landed almost head to head with the magician, across the roof from his parents. He peered with great excitement at the skies.

"That's *wonderful*," he said. "That's really wonderful."

The magician muttered.

"Beg pardon?" Ryle said, turning his head to look at the magician. The skies lit, and the magician's face looked stricken. Before the thunder could finish, lightning struck the castle roof, rocking the stone, and the sound deafened him. Ryle yelled, frightened and blinded. Someone grabbed his shoulder and tried to drag him away.

"Get going," the magician shouted. "Come on, you fool, do you want to die? *Move!*"

Ryle pushed the hand away and sat up, blinking. For a moment the darkness remained, then cleared. Ryle shook his head, and screamed—the other part of the castle roof was gone, tumbled into fragments of stone and wood, and his parents had disappeared. The magician pushed him toward the stairs.

"My mother," Ryle yelled, trying to pull away. "Father!" The magician pushed him again, and Ryle spun to face him. "You've killed them! You've—"

"You idiot, I can't make lightning," the magician shouted. "I didn't do it—come on!" He ran down the stairs. Ryle stood rooted, staring at the broken roof, while another bolt of lightning struck at Pessik by the sea. Startled, he looked east.

An immense, dark shape filled the mouth of the harbor. Light streaked from it, and a moment later the entire fishing village disappeared in a burst of heat and noise.

Horrified, Ryle fled down the stairs. The castle rocked and groaned around him; screams echoed from the servants' quarters, and the main hall, directly under the roof, was a shambles of broken stone and splintered furniture. Valon, the captain of the castle's small guard, caught him up as he streaked from the stairwell; in his other arm, he held the magician. The magician's boy cowered behind them. Valon had come to Harkensdale years ago, a blank shield retired, he said, from fighting outlaws in the western Dales, but for all his age his arms held both magician and boy immovable.

"What is it?" Valon demanded. "What has this one done?" He shook the magician like a rag.

"Nothing," the magician howled. "I tell you, I didn't do it—"

"There's something in the harbor," Ryle gasped. "Pessik's gone—we have to get out of here, they're destroying the castle!"

Valon shook him, too. "Who is?" he demanded. "Where's Lord Josich?"

"The roof," Ryle said, faltering. "Lightning hit the roof, and—my father—" He couldn't make his mouth say the words, and Valon, peering into his face, widened his eyes.

"By the Flame," he whispered. The castle shook again, and the stairwell crumbled. Valon released them. "Come, then. And quickly." He strode from the room. Ryle, the magician, and the apprentice crowded at his heels.

The guardroom had suffered a hit, for the outer wall was gone, and dead men lay across the floor like broken puppets. Valon grabbed weapons from the rack, thrust them at Ryle and the magician, and led them, running, back through the great hall and into Lord Josich's council room. He pushed aside a curtain, revealing the dark mouth of a tunnel. The magician stopped.

"What's that?" he demanded suspiciously.

"Just go," Valon said, shoving him. He snatched an unlit torch from a bracket. "It'll take us out of the castle."

Ryle hesitated, looking behind him.

"You too," Valon said, pushing the apprentice through. "Come on, your lordship—you can do nothing for them now."

Choking back a sob, Ryle followed the magician into the darkness.

### III

The low arm of a hill separated Colmera from Harken Castle and the bay. Imrie had been over it a thousand times, but tonight lightning flared and thunder shook the ground under her feet as she crested the hill and froze, staring at the ruins of Harken Castle. Harsh white flashes struck again and again, pounding the land between the castle and the sea. Not lightning, she thought numbly. Magic, perhaps, but a magic fearsome and more evil than any hedge magician could command. Tatters of cloud blew away, leaving a fat white moon riding the sky. A flash struck the base of the hill and the trees in the copse below caught fire. She flung herself on her belly and scuttled backward through mud until the coast dropped from sight, then she stood and ran toward a granite outcrop. She didn't think the granite would protect her, not after what she had seen of Harken Castle, but perhaps the magic could not reach this side of the hill. Diving headlong into a gap in the rock, she wrapped her arms around her middle and prayed as she had never prayed before.

When someone touched her arm, she screamed and leaped to her feet, ready to flee. A hand closed over her shoulder and another hand, large but gentle, covered her mouth.

"Hush, lass, I won't hurt you. I'm Valon, of Harken Castle." The voice paused. "When there was a Harken Castle." Imrie stopped struggling and the hand moved away from her face. "Who are you?"

"Imrie, Imrie Rosinsniece, of Colmera, I came up, the noise, Aunt Melia was frightened, I saw the castle—what *happened*?" she finished, panting, as three other figures emerged from the darkness of the granite cleft. She recognized one of them.

"You!" Imrie yelled, furious, and charged the hedge magi-

cian. A tall, young man stood between them; she bowled him over. "Where's my amulet, you thief!"

The magician, waving his sleeves about, skipped back and collided with his apprentice. Both went down in a tangle of sleeves. Grunting with triumph, Imrie sat on the magician's stomach and grabbed his beard. Behind her, the tall, young man howled curses, the apprentice sniggered, and Valon grabbed both Imrie and the magician and held them in the air, shaking them.

"Quiet, then!" he demanded in a voice that brooked no disobedience. Everyone stopped shouting, and in the silence Imrie heard another silence; the thunder had stopped. Valon's expression told her that this was not of itself good.

"They'll come ashore now," the captain whispered, almost to himself. "They'll come to take Harkensdale."

"Who?" Imrie whispered back. Valon released her, but kept his grip on the magician.

"I demand—" the magician squeaked, and Valon shook him again. Something clattered to the ground. The young man, bending down, retrieved a necklace and a small box.

"It's Mother's," he said, holding the box to the moonlight. It glittered. "It's Mother's powder box—" He sobbed suddenly and turned on the magician as Imrie snatched the chain from his hands.

"That's mine," she yelled. "Where's my amulet?"

"Enough, Ryle!" Valon said firmly, and added as an afterthought, "Your lordship." The young man stopped crying. Valon set the magician down. "I need to see what's at the coast—we'll deal with this one later. Perhaps your lordship would guard him? And his boy?"

Ryle shifted his grip on the sword and spread his feet. He looked like he knew how to handle the sword; the magician, muttering quietly, sat down.

"Your lordship?" Imrie said weakly.

"And you, lass, you come with me," Valon said. "I'm not leaving both of you alone with the magician, he'd be dog meat in a minute. Now!"

She scampered after him, biting her lip against the questions

she wanted to ask. When he dropped to the ground, she did likewise, and together they slithered over the crest.

Beyond the pall of smoke from the burning trees, Pessik glowed like coals in a grate; the castle was a dark ruin. Flames ate at the small fishing fleet, and farther out a dark bulk filled the harbor. Lights glowed along it, and a line of large shapes moved toward the land. When they reached the beach, they kept going; square, determined sea monsters invading the coast. Imrie gasped. Very distantly, she heard a sound like rocks rubbing together.

The monsters reached Pessik and pushed through the stone ruins as though through grass. One of them shot flame toward a hut; the hut disintegrated. A few minutes later some had reached the base of Harken Castle, while others started on the road to Colmera. Valon cursed and crawled backward; Imrie followed.

"What is it?" she whispered as they stood and rushed toward the outcrop.

"I don't know," he said, and cursed again.

Ryle had done an efficient job of tying both magician and apprentice up in their own sleeves; beside them, he had accumulated a pile of combs, earrings, embroidered pouches, and other petty thievings. He looked remarkably pleased with himself, Imrie thought warily, remembering how she had knocked him down. Valon frowned.

"Pick them up," he ordered. "Damn it, boy, the enemy will find those and be on us immediately. Your lordship."

Ryle drew his shoulders back. "I think you ought to be more respectful," he said. "I'm Lord Ryle now."

"Lad, if you don't hurry you'll be Lord Crowmeat," Valon replied. "Whatever destroyed the castle and Pessik is coming this way, and fast. Pick up that litter, we have to hide."

"Hide?" Ryle echoed.

"It's terrible," Imrie said. "Big sea monsters that swim and crawl too, all by themselves, and shoot fire and knock down buildings and they're heading toward—" she stopped, her stomach cold. "Toward Colmera," she said, and turned to run. Valon caught her up, wrapping his arms around her.

"Hush," he said. "Listen."

The sound of monsters grew suddenly louder. Imrie had time to see one crest the hill, blocking out the sky, before Valon carried her, running, deeper into the granite. She clawed at him and yelled, and he clapped his hand over her mouth. The tunnel turned sharply and even the faint light disappeared. The monster sound died away.

"You can't help Colmera," Valon said as he ran, his breath hot against her neck. "Lass, we can't help any of them."

After what seemed a long time, Valon halted and let her down. Imrie thought of Aunt Melia's tired smile, of Tib's bright laughter. She leaned against cold, damp rock, holding her arms around her middle, while the others came up to them. Ryle and Valon conferred in whispers. Occasionally the earth shook.

"Imrie," someone said. She tried to move away, lost in a grief so deep she could not even cry. An arm circled her shoulders.

"Imrie," the voice said again. "Lady Kora—my mother died in—my father . . ."

Then Imrie turned toward him, and they held each other and wept in the dark belly of the earth.

Even though Valon carried an unlit torch, and Imrie had both a torch and her spark-striker, the captain decreed that there would be no light. "We don't need it now," he had said, "and we're sure to need it later." So they huddled in the darkness, speaking in whispers. The rock shook slightly, as though giants marched over their heads.

"There are men in the moving boxes," Valon said. "Or something that looks much like men—I saw their heads, when the monster came over the hill. And that means they'll be afoot, when they think it safe. And *that* means that they'll find the tunnel, so we'd best be gone as soon as we can."

"And how, pray tell, are we to do that?" the magician said. He and his apprentice were still bound together, despite his bitter complaints.

"Tunnels," Ryle said. "I used to play in some of them. My father—" His voice trembled and he paused, then continued resolutely. "My father said that the Old Ones mined these hills,

and the tunnels remain. Some go to the coast, to the cliffs beyond Pessik—”

“No good,” Valon said. “The enemy has the seacoast, and the fishing fleet’s burned. We have to strike inland, get to Norrisdale and warn them.”

“I think not,” the magician said quickly. “Menasdale’s much closer, isn’t it? We should certainly head north, it would be much safer there, I’m sure.”

Imrie heard Valon’s snort. “What, strike over the mountains? During the melt? No, Norrisdale is where they’ll head next, and Norrisdale’s where we’ll go. What worries you, Magician? Did they catch you thieving in Norrisdale?”

The magician was silent, but his apprentice sniggered again. Imrie’s hands curled into fists.

“Charlatan,” she said. “Making stinks and smokes so that folk won’t know you’re robbing them—”

“He did make good smoke monsters,” Ryle said. “Everyone saw them.”

“Well, I didn’t,” Imrie replied. “All I saw was black smoke, and this one jumping around in it and shouting like a madman and scaring people, scaring Tib . . .” Her throat ached. Valon took her hand.

“Courage, lass,” he said. “I had a woman in Pessik—we’ve all lost someone.”

“Except the fraud,” Imrie said bitterly. “He took my amulet, my mother’s amulet, and I want it back. Now!”

“Lass, put it behind you,” he said. “And perhaps your family escaped—Colmera had warning, as Pessik didn’t. But we have to get out of here—Ryle, what else about the tunnels?”

“What about my amulet?”

Valon gave her a stern look as he rose, and she bit her lip.

“Well,” Ryle said slowly, “there is one that goes toward the hills behind Colmera, it branches off from this one. But my—my father said it wasn’t safe. He told me not to use it, but he never said why, exactly.”

“Still, it’s our only chance,” Valon said. “Whatever’s wrong with it, it can’t be worse than what’s outside in Harkensdale. Lass, I need your torch now, and the spark-striker.” Imrie handed them over.

"I won't go," the magician said. "If Old Ones mined these hills, there's no telling what they've left behind."

"Fine," Valon said. Sparks flew in the darkness. "Ryle, untie them. They can try to make it out on their own."

"Now wait a minute," the magician said hastily. "You can't leave us here, unprotected."

"Oh, yes?" Valon said. The tinder ignited, and he nursed the flame onto the torch. It sputtered and caught.

Imrie blinked against the dim light. They were a sorry-looking bunch, tattered and mud-stained. She glared at the magician and his apprentice. The apprentice glared back; there was a bulge under his tunic.

"Captain," Imrie said. "The boy's hiding something."

"I am not," the magician's boy said, but Ryle held him down and extracted a sack from his clothes. It held a loaf, a slab of dried meat, and a flagon of wine. The Harken crest gleamed from the flagon's side.

"More thievings," Ryle said.

"These, at least, we can eat." Valon stamped out the tinder and put the remains in his belt pouch, along with the spark-striker.

"I have some bread," Imrie said. "And an apple."

"Not much, but altogether it will do for three," Valon replied.

"Three!" The magician struggled to his feet, arms still bound. "Three! You can't go without us—I can help you, protect you against the Old Ones. I know how to deal with them, they're sure to have left something in these forsaken tunnels, you'll be sorry if I'm not along."

"That's doubtful," Valon said, looking at him coldly. "Still, it's better than the risk that you'd find your way out, and bring the enemy down on us—"

"I wouldn't! How dare you—"

"Shut up, thief," Ryle said, poking the magician with his sword. "Valon, I could just kill them now—"

"No. There's been too much death this day already," the captain said. "And he may be useful to us. Come." He handed the torch to Ryle and lifted his sword. The magician cowered,

but Valon merely slit his sleeves, freeing him and the boy. More thievings fell to the floor, and Imrie grabbed one up.

"My amulet!"

"Leave that be, you stupid child." The magician tried to snatch it back, and Imrie skipped away from him and behind the captain. "Give it back, you don't even know what it is."

"Oh, yes?" Imrie said tauntingly, safe behind Valon's bulk. "You think it's valuable, don't you? It's worth more to me than it is to you."

The magician glowered. "I'll buy it from you," he said. "For more money than you can imagine—just give it back, before you hurt yourself."

"Hurt myself? Why?"

"Give it to me," the magician said cunningly. "I'll show you—" Imrie shook her head, clutching the amulet. "You stupid fool!" He lunged for it.

"Silence!" Valon said, lifting his sword again. "We haven't time to bicker—the lass keeps it, it was hers to begin with. Another word out of you, Magician, and I will split you, and slowly."

The magician stepped back, mouthing silently at Imrie. She stuck her tongue out at him, and Valon frowned at her, too, before turning back to Ryle.

"Your lordship, you know the way?"

"Yes." Ryle lifted the torch and set off down the tunnel. At Valon's gesture, the magician and his apprentice followed, while Valon and Imrie fell into place behind them. She slipped the amulet into her pouch; it felt smooth and comforting beneath her fingers. The torch flickered against the dark rock walls.

## IV

Ryle held the torch higher, and repressed a shudder. The rock corridor before him was even and wide, sloping down gently. Perfectly ordinary, he told himself, save that the skin on his nape prickled uncomfortably, and he could not tell why.

Behind came the footsteps of the others: the magician's nervous patter, his apprentice's shuffle, the solid, comforting ring of Valon's boots. The girl's footsteps were so quiet he could not hear them over the others, and he thought about her while he walked, in an effort to ignore his discomfort. He didn't remember seeing her before, although he must have if she came from Colmera; there were no other villages in Harkensdale. She claimed the magician to be a fraud, said she hadn't seen anything in his magical display—which was patently nonsense, Ryle decided. He had certainly seen the smoke monsters, and for that matter, so had his father. He put that thought away quickly, afraid that it would lead to tears. And tears, he decided resolutely, were not the proper thing for a young man confronting enemies and great danger in the world.

The tunnel narrowed slightly and angled to the left. Ryle examined it minutely, trying to remember the map his father had once shown him, then shrugged and proceeded. Until the tunnel branched, there was nothing to do but follow it.

The girl—Imrie, her name was. Pretty eyes, for a peasant. And a young man in the world needed someone to rescue, all the best songs included a helpless maiden in dire need, and she would have to do, for the nonce. Of course, she wasn't properly helpless—her journey toward Harken Castle certainly seemed to indicate some courage, but peasants were hopelessly coarse when it came to the finer points of chivalry. Still, she'd have to do.

"Ryle, halt," Valon whispered. Ryle jumped, unsheathed his sword, and spun around.

"What is it? Enemies?" he demanded. The magician and the apprentice plastered themselves against the walls of the tunnel; Valon shook his head, and the girl, beside him, looked at Ryle curiously. Mud stained the front of her plain gown.

"No. You missed a tunnel," the captain said, indicating the wall. A second tunnel branched at right angles from the first.

"Oh," Ryle said, embarrassed. "Well, I did notice it, but—well." He hustled to the side tunnel and thrust his torch forward so that it shone into this new darkness. Damp walls glimmered back at him.

"What are we waiting for?" the magician said testily. "Let's get going."

"Patience, charlatan," Imrie muttered. "Does this go seaward or landward, do you think?"

While Ryle frowned, trying to remember the map, Valon knelt and, with the tip of his finger, drew lines in the fine dust.

"The mouth faced west," he said. "The first tunnel angled east and north, toward Harken Castle, and we're going back along it, so this new tunnel—this tunnel must head west, west and slightly north again, I think. Landward, toward Norrisdale."

His words seemed to free a corner of Ryle's mind, for he could suddenly see his father's map before him, as clear as if it lay real beneath his fingers.

"Yes," he said, excited. "And from it branches another tunnel, heading toward the sea—just about here." He squatted and jabbed his finger at Valon's quick sketch. He drew in other lines, rapidly and confidently, then rocked back. "That's the map," he said. "I know it."

Valon looked at him, and nodded. "Magician, do you have paper?"

The magician spread his hands, then looked from Valon to Ryle and, obviously thinking better of any protest, delved into his voluminous robes and produced Uncle Betry's tooled Book of Days and Ryle's own stylus. The apprentice sniggered again.

"I'm growing tired of that noise, boy," Valon remarked. "Do it again and I won't leave you a nose to make it with. Lass, your hands are free—can you draw?"

"I know my letters," Imrie replied, as though insulted, and took book and stylus from the magician. Kneeling, she quickly copied the map into the book, then held it out to Ryle. She smelled of spring, damp earth, and flowers.

"I remember it," he said, standing and moving a step away from her. She turned, hands still outstretched, toward the captain.

"No, lass, you keep it. Our hands are full enough already," the captain said. The girl tucked book and stylus into her pouch, and Ryle began walking down the new tunnel.

Within a very little time it began twisting on itself, the floor

grew uneven and pick-marks scored the walls. The prickling at Ryle's neck intensified, until even thoughts of derring-do did not serve to hide it. His pace faltered and he stopped, his heart beating hard.

"You feel it too, do you, boy?" the magician said. "Evil here, something very old, and very wrong." He made a quick gesture of protection.

"Don't call me boy," Ryle said angrily. The magician seemed to leer at him in the uneven torchlight. "I am Lord Ryle to you, and you'll remember it."

"Oh, of course, my lord," the magician replied, bowing. Ryle peered at him, suspecting sarcasm. "I only meant, my lord, that I sense a presence here, an old and evil presence, beyond the ken of man—dangerous, my lord, greatly dangerous. And hungry."

Ryle shuddered, and Valon looked nervous.

"Bunk," Imrie said clearly. "Great and immediate nonsense, thief. Captain, do you feel such a thing?"

Valon frowned at her. "I feel something, lass, something uneasy, like the night before battle, against a superior force. I do not like it."

"It's like facing the sea rocks on a dark night," Ryle added, referring to the fanged stones that guarded the entrance to Harkensdale's harbor. "In a high tide, or in a storm."

"Well, I feel nothing," Imrie said. "But I know that whatever is behind us is a greater danger than nervous willies in the dark. I say we go on. Now." She paused. "My lord," she added.

"A stupid child," the magician said angrily. "She alone does not feel the Power—but we do, Captain, and we are men of the world. If we press ahead, you will need me, for I alone know the ways of these beings, and can bring us to safety."

Imrie snorted, but Ryle and the captain were nodding, albeit reluctantly.

"Very well," Valon said. "Ryle, give him the torch."

"No! I mean, that's not necessary, I can sense the presence without having to see it," the magician said. "You go ahead, my lord—your young eyes are sharper than my old ones. I will feel for this Power, this Old One, in other ways." The magician screwed his eyes closed and adopted an expression of great con-

centration, raising his spread hands as though fingering the air before him. Valon rested his hand on the pommel of his sword, Ryle braced his shoulders, and the group proceeded, the apprentice guiding his master.

The tunnel narrowed farther, its roof bending toward them. Ryle unsheathed his sword. The corridor angled sharply to the right, then to the left again and opened suddenly into a large chamber filled with a pulsing green glow. Ryle stopped suddenly as the others crowded behind him. For a moment he saw the cavern empty, and the tunnel continuing at its far side; then the glow twisted upon itself to become waves as tall as cliffs. Demons rode the crests, their voices shrill with menace, brandishing barbed lances and evilly notched swords. As Ryle cried out the first wave crashed to the sand, the demons springing free to rush upon him.

"Ware demons!" young Lord Ryle screamed, casting the torch aside and grasping his sword with both hands. He slashed out, but for every demon left dead and smoking on the ground, two others took its place. Valon appeared beside him, the captain's great sword cutting wide swathes in the demonic ranks, then Ryle was too busy to notice anything save the endless waves of enemies ready to engulf them.

## V

"Ware demons!"

Imrie, still in the tunnel, caught the torch as it arced through the air. She held it high as Valon leaped past her, sword out.

"Wastelanders!" the captain yelled. "Guard yourselves!"

The magician and his apprentice, skipping to either side of the swordsmen, scooped and hurled rocks from the floor. Heart beating hard, Imrie approached.

"Stay back, lass," Valon commanded grimly. She hesitated, biting her lip. The dim green light of the cavern barely outlined the battling men. They formed a flying wedge before her, Valon's and Ryle's swords flashing and spinning like scythes at

reaping. The magician, looking terrified, flung stone after stone and his apprentice ducked and wove as though avoiding something very deadly. Imrie shook her head sharply and held the torch aloft, squinting.

"They don't stop coming!" Ryle called, his voice catching.

Imrie saw nothing save mail-clad backs and a shine of moving blades.

"Magician, do something!" the captain commanded. "Lass, replace him."

Imrie grasped the torch with both hands and jumped forward, almost singeing the magician as he leaped back. He grabbed at her pouch.

"Give it to me," he shouted.

Imrie shoved him away; giving her a wild look, he raised his hands. "If we die, it's your fault," he said, and began incanting furiously, waving his sleeves like tattered flags. Torch braced like a club, Imrie turned toward the cave and searched for the enemy.

And found none. Before her, the bare cavern widened and narrowed again to the tunnel; in its center stood a small rock, no bigger than a loaf of bread, from which emanated the unpleasant green light. Imrie blinked, lowering her torch.

"Defend yourself!" Ryle shouted with a curse, and swung his blade so close before her that she jumped back.

"But there's nothing there," she said. The men, shouting and battling, ignored her, and the magician set up a cloud of spells and sleeves.

"I don't think this is very funny," she added. "And you're not going to frighten me, so stop it."

The one-sided battle continued, as though she had not spoken. Imrie took a deep breath and walked forward.

"They've captured Imrie!" Ryle yelled. She ignored him.

An unseen force pressed against her skin, as though the air thickened as she neared the green rock; the torch fluttered and dimmed, until it barely gave light at all, and Imrie could no longer force her way forward. Reluctantly, she moved back until the torch flared again.

"She's escaped them!" Valon cried. "Good lass, get behind me."

Imrie glanced at him and shook her head. She started around the side of the cavern. Here the air maintained a constant, but pierceable, thickness; when Imrie was half way around the cave, she paused, chewing her lip, and turned to look at her companions. They looked comical, until she noticed that Valon and Ryle had turned more toward each other, that at any moment their swords would engage; that the danger came not from invisible enemies, but from their own weapons. She rushed back to them.

"My lord! Captain! They—they fear the torch!" she yelled with sudden inspiration. "They fear fire! Follow me!"

Valon glanced at her, surprised, and in that instant one of the apprentice's stones struck his right shoulder. The captain grunted and Ryle raised his sword against him.

"Lord Ryle!" Imrie screamed. "Ware behind you! Apprentice, guard the magician!"

Ryle spun away from the captain, his face white and slick with sweat.

"This way!" she yelled. "See them drop back before me? Follow, Captain. My lord, the path is clear behind you! Retreat!"

Valon threw the sword to his left hand and turned toward Ryle.

"Captain! To your right!" Imrie shouted, and as he turned she grabbed his cloak, tugging him backward. "Magician! Follow!"

At that moment a pall of thick black smoke emanated from the magician's swirling form, greeted by the others with glad cries.

"Come!" Imrie shouted. "This way!"

Urging, shouting, discovering enemies just in time to keep her companions from killing one another, Imrie led them along the sides of the cavern, skirting the green rock. The smoke hurt her throat but she did not stop yelling until the cavern narrowed and the tunnel twisted. Both the green light and the heaviness disappeared, and Imrie sighed with relief, then noticed that the others were still behind her, battling and yelling. She ran back, grabbed Ryle's shirt, and jerked him backward. He stumbled, yelled, then looked about him, blinking. She did

the same for the captain, made sure he and Ryle were not attacking each other, and reached for the magician. He tumbled into Ryle, sending both to the floor. Valon bent to lift them up, and as Imrie turned to fetch the apprentice, light exploded before her, followed immediately by the dark.

"You needn't have thrown a rock at her," someone was saying as she woke up. The world jounced rhythmically, and with each bounce, her head threatened to split. She groaned.

"I thought she was a . . ." The apprentice's voice trailed away.

A what? Imrie thought fuzzily. She opened her eyes, saw mud-stained blue just before her nose, and closed her eyes again.

"Stop," she said.

"Ah!" Valon halted and swung her gently to the ground. Imrie groaned again and buried her head in her arms. Her stomach felt queasy.

"Give it a moment, lass," the captain said. "It won't kill you, much as it feels like it."

"Here," Ryle's voice said. "Sip this."

She smelled spirits, turned over carefully, and sat up. To her astonishment, her head remained in place. The liquor tasted sharp and burned her throat, but she immediately felt better. Ryle, kneeling beside her, beamed. The magician turned ostentatiously away, and Imrie groped in her pouch, closing her fingers around the amulet.

"Some rescue, huh?" Ryle said. "It was close there, but I got you out in one piece."

"You rescued *me*?" Imrie said, incredulous. Ryle looked offended.

"Of course I did," he said. "Oh, you must not remember, after that blow on your head. Sure, back in the cavern, when you were surrounded by demons. I brought you out," he added proudly.

Behind him, Valon's lips quirked. "Well, lass, we all rescued you," he said gently. "Of course, my lord Ryle did the most of it, naturally—"

"They had you," the apprentice said suddenly. "We had to fight our way to you—"

"Then we had you surrounded," Ryle interrupted, glaring at the apprentice. "And we were almost out, but they snatched you again, and I pulled you loose, and that one stumbled in right after you."

"I was doing my share," the apprentice said stoutly. The magician cuffed him.

"None of you would have won free, if not for my spells," the magician announced. "It was the smoke monster who routed them; without that, we'd be in there still, fighting or dead. If I had that idiot girl's charm, I could have destroyed them all."

"You colossal fools," Imrie shouted. "I rescued you, every last one of you—I led you out of there!"

"Well, well, in a way, lass," Valon said.

"In a way! There you all were, hacking away at the air and almost hacking away at each other! You, Captain, what happened to your shoulder?"

Valon grimaced, touching his right shoulder. "One of them got through my guard," he said grimly.

"One of what, Captain?"

"Why, a Wastelander, of course," the captain replied.

Imrie grunted. "And you," she said. "My lord. You saw demons, did you not?"

"How can you doubt it?" Ryle said, frowning at the captain. "They were demons, Valon, great fanged ones with claws like green daggers—surely you saw them."

"I saw Wastelanders, boy," the captain said testily. "Men, not demons, though for the way they fight they could be demons, I'll grant you that."

"And you," Imrie said, turning on the magician and his boy. "What did you see? Townsfolk come with pitch and pig-slops to run you out of town?"

"Nothing of the sort," the magician said, looking indignant. "It's not safe to stay here, my lord, we should move on."

"And you, lass?" Valon said.

"I saw a cavern with a big green rock within it, and the closer I got to the rock, the denser the air became. I saw the four of you hacking and shouting and prancing about and almost killing

one another, and I told you that they were afraid of fire, and I led you out."

"That's absolute nonsense," Ryle said angrily, leaping to his feet. "Magician, you're right. Let's be moving." He stalked off, holding the torch before him, with the magician and the boy on his heels. Valon reached down to help Imrie to her feet.

"Well, Captain?" Imrie said.

"I don't know, lass," the captain said, his face disappearing as the torchlight moved farther ahead. "I'll have to think on it." They started to walk after the others.

"Perhaps," the captain said after a while, "we none of us saw the truth, in there. There are places where men—where people see what they wish to see. Yet you saw nothing, lass. I do not understand it."

"I didn't see that charlatan's smoke monsters, either," Imrie said, and hurried to march ahead of him. No imagination, she thought. Well, if it leads to Wastelanders and demons, I'm just as glad I lack it. She put her hand in her pouch and curled her fingers around the amulet, finding some comfort in its worn shape.

By the time they grew hungry for supper, the companions had agreed to disagree on the inhabitants of the cavern, and spoke no more of it, although Imrie nursed a core of indignant anger at what she saw as the belittling of her victory.

Valon called a halt and they squatted on the rocky floor, sharing a niggardly meal of bread and apple slivers, washed down with a sip of wine.

"We'll rest, try to get some sleep," the captain ordered. "I'll take the first watch, then Ryle, then . . ." He looked at the magician doubtfully, and said, "Then we'll move on again. We should be near the end of this tunnel, unless we're lost."

"I don't think so," Ryle said. "We followed the map—unless my father's map was incomplete, but I doubt it. It was a very, very old map."

Valon grunted and extinguished the torch. "We'll see on the morrow," he remarked. "By the Flame, I think I'd prefer those sea-going monsters to more of this rock. Sleep, your lordship, I'll wake you for your watch."

Imrie brushed small stones away, smoothing the tunnel floor.

The tunnel was so dark that it didn't seem to matter whether her eyes were closed or opened. She quietly took the amulet from her pouch, slid the chain through it, and hung it around her neck, then lay back, feeling a little better. The magician wouldn't dare steal it now—would he? She pulled her cloak over her shoulders and lay down, turned over, pulled the cloak over her head, pushed it back down again, turned onto her back, stretched, curled up again, and finally sat.

"Trouble sleeping, lass?" Valon's voice whispered. "Then come share a watch with me."

She groped her way toward his voice, almost stepping on the apprentice, and settled beside him. He smelled of leather, and sweat, and metal, a comforting scent. The air was very still.

After a while, metal grated softly as Valon moved. "You're not from Harkensdale, are you, lass?" he whispered.

Imrie shook her head, then said, "No, Captain. From Mensdale—we came here after the raids."

"We?"

"My aunt—" She paused, her throat suddenly tight. "Aunt Melia. My mother's sister. She brought me here."

"To Colmera. Take heart, lassie. They had warning, they may have escaped."

Imrie didn't reply, her mind busy with unwelcome images of the great sea monsters and their unnatural lightning. She shifted quickly. "What are we watching for?"

"Anything. Another—thing, like that in the cavern. We won't see it, but we'll feel it. Save that you won't, will you?"

"I guess not," Imrie said. "Jora—my friend Jora, in Colmera . . ." She had to stop again, and Valon found her hand and patted it. Imrie took a deep breath. "Jora says I have no imagination, that's why I couldn't see the smoke monsters."

"Or the demons, or Wastelanders, or whatever," Valon said. "But you saw a rock, true? A green rock."

"And I felt something—like heavy air, that wouldn't let me get close to it," Imrie said. "When I tried, it was like—like walking through syrup, until I couldn't move forward at all."

"So you did feel something," the captain said slowly. "And what you saw was probably true, Imrie—we saw illusions, made by that rock, that Old One, to confuse us—to draw on what-

ever we most fear." He chuckled suddenly. "So either you have no imagination, lass, or you have no fear."

"No," Imrie said. "There's lots of things I fear, like the sea monsters, or cutting myself with a scythe at harvest, or growing up to marry Posten or Met Smithsson and getting old and tired and gray like my aunt. If that thing just wanted to scare me, it should have shown me ten thousand farmers, come with marriage on their minds."

Valon chuckled again. "It may be a blessing, lass, that you have no imagination. Perhaps you did rescue all of us, while we were battling imaginary enemies."

"Me, and not the magician?" Imrie said sarcastically.

"Don't be too harsh on him," Valon replied. "I spent years on the borders, riding against outlaws from the Waste—after a while, we learned that a bit of Power is not to be scorned, especially if it's on our side. That's why I retired here, to Harkensdale—far enough away from everything so that Power is not treated with fear, as it is in the rest of High Hallack. Not that I have any," he added. "I just respect it. And I suspect, lass, that if you ever meet true Power, you'll see it as plain as we do. Plainer, perhaps. Until then, remember that the magician may yet have his uses, for all that he's a thief."

Imrie fingered her talisman. "Why does he want my mother's amulet so much? I mean, it's important to me, but why to him?"

"I don't know, lass. Magicians are strange folk." The captain was silent for a moment. "Is it—odd? Does it do anything?"

Imrie thought. "No," she said finally. "I feel good when I have it, and bad when I don't—but I think it's because it was my mother's, it's all I have of hers. And Tib—Tib didn't like it, he said it tried to run away from him. But Tib was—*is*—he's just a baby, he makes things up."

Valon snorted. "Well, leave it be, then. We've enough problems to solve now, that one can wait." He busied himself with something, then touched Imrie's hand again.

"Here, lass, use this as a pillow and get yourself some sleep. It's been a long day, and perhaps a longer one tomorrow."

Imrie obediently lay down, pillowing herself on Valon's

rolled cloak. She heard his soft breathing nearby and, comforted, fell into a dreamless sleep.

## VI

It began to seem to Ryle as though they had been underground forever when, ahead, he spotted a radiance so dim that, at first, he thought his eyes must be tired. Then, catching his breath, he wondered if another cavern lay ahead, with monsters for him to battle and for Imrie to complain about. He stopped, and Valon came up beside him.

"I see," the captain said quietly. "Stay here, lad, let me take a look."

Valon moved along the tunnel's side toward the light, and Imrie came to stand beside Ryle. He resisted the urge to move away. She still smelled of flowers and sunlight, and she was still pretty, but it didn't help—she was, he thought, a complete failure when it came to being a damsel in distress. Imrie squinted at the light.

"At least," she whispered, "it isn't green. I don't think I could take another such battle . . ."

That was more like it, Ryle thought.

"With a straight face," Imrie added.

Furious, Ryle moved two paces ahead, his nape prickling. Valon returned, striding down the tunnel's center.

"We're out," he announced quietly. "Somewhere in the hills—the tunnel opens above the valley, and we'll have to scout before we leave it. Put out the torch, and come. And not a sound, remember—we don't know where the enemy is."

Ryle's stomach tightened as he remembered the huge monsters stalking the valley, the deadly lightning and the thunder that tumbled castles. Then, resolutely, he put his shoulders back and followed the captain.

The tunnel opened into a dense growth of bushes and trees, part of the thick forest covering the hills. Valon led them to a rocky outcrop a few paces away, and they blinked against the

bright sunlight. Ryle looked at his companions. They were even more tattered than he had suspected, their clothes and faces so streaked with dirt that even the symbols on the magician's sleeves had disappeared into a uniform muddy brown. Valon left them again. The Dale was silent and Ryle realized uneasily that even the birds were quiet.

Valon returned, his expression hard to read, and gestured that they should move west, higher into the hills. Ryle shook his head.

"It's my valley," he whispered. "I want to see."

"Lad, don't do it," Valon replied as quietly.

"I do, too," Imrie said. "My family—"

Valon sighed. "Go, then, the both of you," he whispered. "You have a right. But stay beneath the stones, they may have scouts close by. I'll stay with these two."

The magician grimaced and looked away, offended; his boy curled up in the forest duff and napped. Ryle and Imrie followed the faint track Valon had left, through the dense copse and up a chimney in the rocks. The chimney opened to a ledge, which they crept along until Ryle, in the lead, put his hand up. After a moment, they both raised their heads.

At first Ryle thought they had come clear through the mountains and found a different valley; then, throat tight, he recognized the curve of the hills. The village of Colmera had disappeared, replaced by a burned and ruined waste; the newly planted fields were churned to mud, the woods reduced to smoking twigs. A dark pall of smoke hung over the valley, and the sea monsters crawled everywhere, leaving destruction behind them. Men moved amid the wreckage, wearing strange uniforms; men and monsters clustered at the top of the hill between Colmera and the sea, where they seemed to have established a camp. Of the people he saw no trace until he noticed a field just behind the blackened stables, where arms, and legs, poked through the earth. Ryle felt sick, and glanced at Imrie to see his own shock mirrored in her face. He touched her shoulder, and she turned quickly and buried her face in his tunic, her body shaking silently. Ryle hesitated, then held her close.

No songsmith had ever described a battlefield more terrible, a slaughter more complete, and it came to Ryle that there were

things worse in the world than monsters, and dragons, and magic. There was no glory, he thought, in taking sword against monsters that breathed lightning and ate entire valleys—only foolishness, and the promise of a swift, ignoble death. Then he saw movement beyond a tumbled wall, and a moment later a column of soldiers emerged. They surrounded one of the monsters while two of their number scaled its sides; they wriggled into the monster, feet first. Ryle touched Imrie's shoulder, and she raised her head to look. The monster started jerkily; a huge hollow pipe atop it swung left and stopped. The other monsters came to life, rumbling down the Dale toward the Norrisdale road. Imrie and Ryle glanced at each other, amazed, then scooted backward down the rock, until they could not see the valley; together they scrambled back to Valon.

"The monsters aren't monsters," Ryle said, his voice low and angry.

"Aye," Valon said. "I saw men within them, before we entered the tunnel, and again by Colmera. But if not monsters—"

"I don't think they're alive. They're like—like—I don't know *what* they're like, but if men control them, they can be stopped. And we have to do it." Valon shook his head, but Ryle put his hand up. "No, listen to me. They're gathering at the foot of the hills—they've found the road to Norrisdale. We can't let them—there must be *something* we can do—"

"Not me," the magician said loudly.

"Quiet, you idiot." Valon clapped a hand over his mouth. "Do you want us all killed?"

The magician pushed Valon's hand away. "You stop them," he whispered. "The boy and I will rush to Norrisdale, and warn them."

"They'd catch you," Imrie said. "And you'd tell them all about us before they gut you."

"Stop!" Valon whispered furiously. "We'll all be caught with this noise. We move higher up, first, away from them, then talk about it."

Within a few moments they were moving, Ryle in the lead. He had hunted these hills often, and found the thin tracks of deer, the sudden watercourses, which took them higher and to the south, until the valley dropped well behind them. It was

late evening by the time they entered a small copse, and Valon decided they had come far enough. The night was sharp and cold and they huddled without a fire, for fear of drawing the enemy to them.

"Valon, we must do something," Ryle said as the captain parceled out the food. "If they make it to Norrisdale, they'll reach the main trade road—"

"Lad, I've thought on it," Valon said around a mouthful of bread. He swallowed. "I agree, but what are the five of us to do, against a force that large? With that sort of weaponry? You saw the Dale, what's left of it—there's no way we can fight them. Our best hope is to reach Norrisdale before they do, and hope that Betry kept his armsmen prepared."

"I doubt it," Ryle said. "Besides, it takes three days to reach Norris Castle, even if we run. How fast do you think those monsters are? They'd be there right behind us, if they didn't get there first."

"Why not head beyond Norrisdale?" the magician said. "We could outrun them—"

"And leave every Dale in the area in ruins?" Ryle said. "No, we have to stop them here, in Harkensdale. Even if it takes a miracle to do it."

"Perhaps not a miracle," Imrie said slowly. "Perhaps all we need is magic."

"Magic!" the magician said sarcastically. "More of my stinks and powders, little girl? I thought you didn't believe in that."

"I just don't believe in you," Imrie retorted. "Captain, your lordship, listen a minute. Last night, Captain, you said that you believed me, about the cavern, and the green rock. No, wait, let me go on. Suppose the stone I saw really was making illusions, convincing each of you that you saw what you most fear—you all did see different things, didn't you?"

Ryle nodded reluctantly, as did the others. Imrie took a deep breath.

"I think, maybe, that if the stone did that to you, it could do that to the enemy, too—and maybe they'd start fighting one another, as you almost did. Then we wouldn't need an army, all we'd need is the rock."

"Supposing all of this to be true," the magician said, "I sup-

pose you have a plan to lure the enemy into the mine tunnels? Sea monsters and all? I wish you luck, child, but I'll have no part of it."

"We could bring the rock out," Imrie said. "It's not very big, and—"

"Bring it out!" The magician snorted and crossed his arms. "That's not a pebble in there, girl. That's an Old One. I suppose you're powerful enough to deal with an Old One?"

"Even if such a plan would work," Valon said, "you told me you couldn't get near the stone. And we certainly couldn't do it, we'd just meet our demons, or Wastelanders, again. A good thought, lass, but not, I think, one that we can use."

Imrie bit her lip. Ryle stared thoughtfully at the magician.

"Perhaps we can still use magic," he said. "Magician, if you made a smoke monster in their midst—"

The magician frowned, then his expression shifted. "Perhaps I could, my lord," he said slowly. "But I wouldn't help—unless I can borrow a bit more Power. Then, I think, I could do it."

"Borrow Power?" Ryle repeated. "From where?"

"From her," the magician said, pointing at Imrie. She stared at him. "From that amulet of hers. The stupid child doesn't know what she has, and wouldn't be able to use it anyway—but I can, and with it, I can save us, and Norrisdale, and everything."

Everyone started talking at once, until Valon silenced them with a slash of his hand.

"One thing at a time," he said firmly. "Magician, you'd best tell what you know about that amulet, and now. And I'll have the truth this time."

"But he can't have it back," Imrie said quickly.

"It's just a trinket," the magician said, spreading his hands. Valon lifted his sword a little from its scabbard, and the magician made a face. "Very well, it's more than a trinket. It comes from the Waste, a leftover from the Old Ones. Oh, a good thing, no evil in it, Captain, but it does focus Power—if one has Power to begin with, as I do and she does not. It's wasted on her—"

"How does it focus Power?" Imrie said, but the captain interrupted her.

"Tell me about your Power, Magician," he demanded.

The magician eyed Valon's sword unhappily.

"Very well, but you're not to hold it against me," he said. "I grew up in the Waste, my parents were scavengers. My mother dabbled a bit in magic—nothing serious, you understand, just enough to learn a little, and teach it to me. It's not an easy life, out there, and when I was old enough to come into the Dales with my father, to sell the metal he found, well, life just looked easier here, that's all. So I stayed. And I had to do something to make a living, so I became a magician. See, it's all very simple, really. Very innocent."

"And how many Dales were you run out of?" Valon said. "They don't take kindly to magic in the rest of High Hallack, especially magic with a man behind it."

"I know," the magician agreed. "That's when I developed my—my other skills. But I do have Power, you know, and if I had something to help me focus it, something like the amulet—"

"You'd be even more greedy and unscrupulous than you are now," Ryle said.

"Wait," Imrie said, leaping to her feet. "How do you know that I don't have Power? The green rock didn't affect me, did it? It couldn't make me see illusions, maybe that's Power, too. How do you know that it isn't?"

The magician made a gesture of disgust. Ryle put his hand up.

"Maybe she's right," he said slowly. "There seems to be a lot of stuff that the songs don't talk about—maybe this is one of them."

"And if my Power is that I don't get taken in by magic, then if the amulet helps me, not the magician, I should be able to get the rock out of the tunnel," Imrie said. "Captain, your lordship, it's certainly worth a try. It's better than any other plan, and if it doesn't work, then we're no worse off."

"And no better," Valon replied. "Lass, let me see the charm."

The sun had almost set, and the companions squinted in the dusk as Imrie reluctantly pulled the amulet over her head, and

dropped it in the captain's hand. It immediately slid through his fingers and onto the dirt. Imrie snatched it up.

"I didn't drop it, lass," the captain said, his voice soft. "It moved."

"Let me try," Ryle said eagerly. Imrie carefully put the amulet in his cupped palm, and he watched with amazement as it slid up the curve of his hand and over the side.

"Aunt Melia said it was slippery," Imrie said, a hint of apology in her voice. She took it back, and it rested solidly in her hand.

The magician stretched out his hand. "I can hold it," he said confidently. Imrie's fingers clenched around the charm. "And if I can, Captain, then I'm the one to use it, you'll agree to that. It's like putting a sword in the hands of a child, or in the hands of an armsman. Who would *you* rather have defending you?"

"Lass," Valon said, "he's right. I know it pains you, but you must give it to him."

Imrie blinked, and Ryle saw her suddenly as a young girl, dirty and tired, as bereft as he himself and ordered to lose the one memento she had of a happier time. He leaned forward impulsively and touched her cheek.

"You'll get it back, Imrie," he said. "After all of this is over, if we live—I promise you, I'll see that it returns to you."

The girl looked at him, tears pooling in her pretty eyes, then tightened her lips and opened her hand.

The amulet hesitated for a moment before sliding free, and the magician twisted his hand quickly, catching the charm by its worn chain. He closed his other hand around the amulet.

"Aha!" he said. "You see!"

"He's *not* holding it," Imrie said hotly. "He's got it by the chain, that's probably how they managed to steal it. Make him do it right."

"I'm getting tired of threatening you," Valon said. "Release the chain, Magician, and consider the threats already made."

Muttering curses, the magician slid the chain from his fingers. A peculiar expression crossed his face, then he yelled suddenly and his hand flew open. The amulet fell and the magician tried to stuff his hand into his mouth. Imrie grabbed the talisman and clutched it against her breast.

"Mine," she said. "Unless you want the apprentice to try it, too."

The magician took his hand out of his mouth and examined it: "It never did that before," he whispered.

Imrie grunted and waved the amulet at the apprentice, who shook his head, stuffing his hands into the remains of his sleeves. Ryle looked at the others. He could barely see their faces, then the last of the sunlight disappeared. The waning moon cast a dim glow over the group.

"Captain?" Imrie said. "Your lordship? Do we try my idea?"

"We try it," Ryle said firmly. "We've run enough, and I won't have the songsmiths say that Harkensdale fell without a sound. Captain, are you with me?"

"I'm with you," Valon said, standing. "By the Flame, it will be good to do something to strike back."

"Good." Ryle turned and led the way back down the hillside.

## VII

"Wait," the magician said. Their second torch was almost burned down, and Imrie glanced back at him, impatient. Ahead, a pale green glow suffused the corridor. The magician moved up beside her, and she took a step away.

"I know you don't trust me," he said. "But we seem to be stuck with this, and I, at least, want to survive it. Can we call a truce?"

Imrie studied the magician. He looked tired, and old, and friendly, and her lips pinched down. "Why?" she said rudely.

"I do have some Power, child, more than you—and I know some of its ways. It's not easy to use the Power, even for those with practice. If we are going to do this, you'll have to let me help you."

"How?" Imrie clutched her amulet tightly.

The magician sighed. "Using Power is exhausting, especially for a novice. And if you try to harness a Power greater than your Talent can hold, it can overwhelm you, overwhelm all of

us. If we blend our Talents, perhaps we can be strong enough to do this thing. Will you let me try?"

"It's a good idea, lass," Valon said, even as Imrie was thinking the same thing. "We can't afford to turn down help."

Imrie nodded. They had already agreed that if she could move the stone, they would place it high in the pass above Colmera, where the road ran through a natural cut in the stone hills. But it would take most of the night to reach the cut, even if they took the stone on their first try, and they were already tired. What the magician said made sense, and Imrie tried to quench her dislike. He examined her face for a moment, then pushed his sleeves back.

"First," he said, "you must cleanse your mind, put everything aside so that the Power has room to move within you. Second, you must concentrate on the task, to direct the Power, and for this you must know precisely what the task is. Do you know what that is?"

Imrie thought a moment. "I must be able to get close to the stone, to pick it up, and to carry it to the cut."

"Yes, that's what you mean to do, but that is not the task," the magician said. "Think again."

Imrie frowned. "The task is—is to hold back the stone's influence, to contain it, so that I can hold the stone."

"And so that the rest of us are not beset with demons," Ryle added. Imrie agreed.

"Third," the magician said, raising his finger, "we must try to insure that the Power you evoke will be something that you can handle, and we have no way of knowing that, because you have never done this before, never even come close to Power."

"Then that makes all the other stuff pretty useless, doesn't it?" Imrie demanded, but the magician was shaking his head.

"No. If we can link together, we can merge our Powers, you borrowing mine. It may not be enough, but it's the best we can do. And the amulet will help us."

Under his direction, Imrie wrapped the amulet's chain around her wrist and around his, so that she held the talisman in her hand, and he cupped her hand with his own. The amulet seemed content to stay in place. She glanced at Ryle, Valon, and the apprentice, then closed her eyes.

"Picture a cup of water," the magician said softly. Imrie visualized one of Aunt Melia's worn pottery cups, with water sparkling within it. She felt thirsty and pushed the thirst aside.

"There is nothing, save for the cup, and the water," the magician continued. "And now the cup fades, slowly, very slowly, until you can see through it, see the water, water in the shape of a cup, for now the cup is gone and there is only water, water by itself, alone. Now the water, too, fades, so slowly, growing lighter, growing fainter, and now the water, too, is gone.

"Now," the magician's quiet voice said, "behind the nothingness there is the green stone, but it is held, enclosed, captured in a wall of nothingness, and it is still, the nothingness holds in its light. And now the nothingness folds, like an invisible cloth, until the rock is covered, sealed tight, until its light cannot escape, and all you see is an envelope of nothingness holding a green rock, just a small green rock, and it is harmless. Can you see it, that nothingness?"

"Yes," Imrie whispered.

"Then open your eyes and walk to it, and we will pick it up," the magician said.

Imrie opened her eyes and walked forward, and it seemed that nothing existed save for the small green glow before her; she barely felt the magician's hand, clasped over hers. The cavern opened up before her, and she walked straight to the stone, and bent. The magician gasped, a distant, meaningless sound. One-handed, she spread her cloak over the ground. Something seemed to push at her, trying to force her back. Quickly, ignoring the magician's groans, she wrapped her fingers around the stone and levered it onto the cloak. The pushing grew stronger, like hard hands thrusting at her. She leaned into them, panting, and twitched one end of the cloak over the stone. A wave of pressure moved against her, and she closed her eyes suddenly.

*Old One, she thought, Old One, I will not harm you. I need your help, Old One, against great evil—I beg you, Old One, let me through.*

The pressure faltered for a bare moment, and in that instant she flipped the cloak entirely over the stone and tumbled forward through the suddenly passive air, taking the magician with

her. She cried out; the green light had disappeared, and they were alone in the dark.

"We did it!" the magician shouted, and to her immense astonishment, he flung his free arm about her and kissed her cheek. A moment later the others ran up to them, almost dancing with excitement and bringing the dim light of Valon's torch.

"It's going to work," Ryle said. "By the Flame, Imrie, I think it's going to work!"

"I hope so," she said, gasping. She felt as though she'd just run, nonstop, from Colmera to the sea. Her ribs hurt. "I don't think I could do that again."

"Let's hope you don't have to," Valon said. "We don't have much time—they'll start moving at sunrise."

The magician slid his hand free of the chain and rose, brushing his robes, while Ryle handed Imrie his belt and she bound stone and cloak together.

"Keep the amulet around your neck," the magician said. "You'll have to carry the stone yourself—we'll need my strength later, and I don't want to be too weary."

Imrie opened her mouth, thought better of it, and pressed her lips tight. She picked up the stone.

"If you feel anything strange," the magician added, "call me at once." He strode to the tunnel and waited, his back turned.

To her relief, the stone was fairly light, but as she held it a strange emotion came over her, as though the rock demanded her protection, her care, as much as an infant.

*Sleep, Old One*, she thought. *I'll guard you—sleep*. The sense of demand faded slightly. "All right," she said to Valon. "Let's go."

He looked at her dubiously, then nodded and moved away. Imrie held the stone close, took a deep breath, and followed him from the cavern. Her foot struck something, and she glanced down to see a skull roll out of the sputtering torchlight. Ryle, falling into step beside her, shuddered quickly.

"That was very brave of you," he said. She didn't reply. "I'm sorry I was rude to you before—about seeing things back there. Is it—is it very heavy? You can lean on me, if you want."

"All right," Imrie said again, still trying to catch her breath. He's not so bad, she thought. The torch flickered ahead, and they hurried to catch up.

\* \* \*

The moon had set, leaving only dim starlight. Ryle had long since extinguished what remained of the torch. Imrie leaned against his shoulder.

"Just a little longer," he whispered. "Here, sit down."

The captain had left them a few moments ago, to scout the way into the cut on the Norrisdale road. Imrie gratefully sank to the ground. They were well above the tree line and she felt that she had walked for days amid granite fields, around great boulders the size of houses, while the green stone grew heavier and heavier in her arms. She settled the stone in her lap and leaned against a boulder, eyes closed.

They had formulated a plan of attack—not, as Valon said ruefully, the best in the world, and fraught with danger, but it would have to do. Once half the enemy force had passed through the cut, they would set the green stone on the road itself, and hope that its effect was both quick and strong enough to panic the soldiers. Placing the stone was the one great question remaining, and Valon had gone to seek a place where they might hide beside the road, safe from the enemy, until the time came. Imrie refused to think about the long hours they would have to spend waiting, while sea monsters and soldiers marched by; her concentration had narrowed to carrying the rock safely. She heard voices nearby, speaking in whispers.

"She shouldn't be this tired," Ryle said uneasily. "We haven't come that far."

"It's the stone," the magician said. "She has more Power than I thought, or she wouldn't have been able to touch the rock at all. But for all that, her Power is scarcely enough. The stone is draining her."

"Well, make it stop." Ryle sounded angry and frightened. "Can't she just put it down for a while? Wouldn't that help?"

"Oh, surely it would help her," the magician said. "But what of us? Only the girl prevents the stone from filling us with images of demons, or whatever. Do you, my lord, think you have the fortitude to ignore a legion of monsters?"

Ryle was silent. Imrie's limbs felt heavy, made of stone themselves, and the rock in her lap seemed to pin her to the ground below. Eyes, lips, tongue, everything was dense, immovable,

and even sound became a distant, ponderous thing. She disappeared into a great and weary silence.

A noise like leaves rustling in a small breeze, but there were no trees here, she remembered. She listened to it, vaguely wondering what it was. The sound sharpened a little; she recognized the magician's voice, and his boy's, conferring together. Only a few words came clearly to her: escape, and amulet, and weapons, and the captain's name. Ryle must be asleep, she realized distantly, almost falling into silence again. They're frightened—they're planning to run away. The thought came to her unbidden, and she examined it as though it were a novel idea, something to be played with but not, really, important, not a thing of moment. They're going to leave, and take the weapons, and take the food, and take—the amulet. An uneasy feeling grew within her; she felt the weight of the talisman against her chest, and the whispering came clear again.

"Yes you can," the magician said, cajoling. "It's weak, too—she doesn't have the Power to keep it strong. Just take it, boy, just lift it off and take it. You'll be safe, I promise you."

The words were sharp and clear and dangerous, and she fought against her lethargy, still unable to move. Without the amulet, her Power would disappear and the Old One's influence blossom not against the destroyers below, but against themselves.

*Old One, she thought, help me—help me now, or we are both lost. By all that lives in light, let me move.* Slowly and with struggle, her hand rose toward the amulet around her neck.

Footsteps approached quietly over the rock, creeping closer. She fought the lethargy, her muscles almost cramping with tension; a rock rattled in the cut below them and the footsteps stopped.

After a moment, the magician whispered, "Go on, you fool, hurry!" but in that moment's grace Imrie's hand had found and touched the amulet. The heaviness abated just a little bit, enough for her eyes to slit open, and her free hand to twitch upon the covered rock. If only Ryle would wake up! Her fingers picked at the bound cloak. The quiet footsteps resumed; she could see the apprentice's shape as a darkness against the starlit rocks, and beyond him a taller darkness that was the ma-

gician himself. Ryle snored steadily. The apprentice knelt slowly and reached a hand toward Imrie's throat, and in that instant her fingers touched the stone itself, and she pushed a corner of the cloak aside.

Her hand flew away from the rock as though pushed by the beam of sharp green light that shot from the stone, momentarily illuminating the apprentice's startled face and the magician behind him. Then the apprentice screamed, flinging his arms over his face; the magician yelled, Ryle cursed and leaped to his feet, sword drawn, and the green light spread, a pulsing glow rapidly filling the small stone hollow in which they lay.

Like a beacon, Imrie thought, and did the only thing she could think of. Hand clenched tight around the amulet, she pitched forward, throwing her body over the bright green stone.

## VIII

The light disappeared as quickly as it had come, but not before Ryle had grabbed the magician and thrown him to the ground. The magician lay rigid as Ryle rested his sword against the mage's throat.

"She did it," the magician said, gasping. "The girl, she released the rock, she wanted to kill us all—"

"Shut up," Ryle said fiercely. He turned the magician over and, planting a foot on his back, bound his sleeves together before turning toward Imrie and the apprentice. The girl lay collapsed over the bundled rock, and the apprentice, his face etched with horror, lay on the ground beside her. Ryle touched the boy's throat, but no pulse beat. Then, fearfully, he reached out a hand toward Imrie.

He couldn't touch her. An Imrie-shaped force pushed his hand away, no matter what angle he tried, so that it seemed the girl was captured within an invisible shell a bare hairbreadth larger than herself. He remembered Imrie's version of their first meeting with the stone in the cavern, of the pressure that had

kept her away. Now, it seemed, whatever force protected the rock protected, or ensorceled, Imrie, too—he could not even tell if she still lived.

Pebbles rattled as Valon ran up, bare sword in hand, and stood for a moment staring. Ryle gestured wearily and rose.

“I don’t know what happened,” he told the captain. “The magician says Imrie tried to release the rock, but I don’t believe him. The boy is dead. And Imrie—” He stopped, his throat tight, and turned away while Valon bent over the girl. After a while the captain touched his shoulder.

“She’s alive, lad. You can see her back move as she breathes.”

“No thanks to this one,” Ryle said bitterly, and raised his sword to kill the magician. Valon barely stopped him.

“If she’s captured in magic, we’ll need magic to free her, no matter what its source,” he said. “Listen, I’ve found a cleft leading down into the cut, almost midway through it. There’s another cleft across from it, narrow enough to hide us.”

“It won’t do you much good,” the magician said. He had rolled himself over and now lay on his back. “You can’t touch the girl, which means you can’t touch the rock. Or perhaps you’re planning to roll girl and rock together into the road? The soldiers will be amused by that.”

“Not half as amused at finding a trussed magician in the road,” Valon said. “Would they gut you, or let their sea monsters squash you? Because, unless you shut up and cooperate, that’s all you have to worry about, in the few hours left you.” He spat and turned back to Ryle.

“My lord, we can die here, or we can die on the road to Norrisdale. On the road, at least we have a chance to strike back, puny as it may be. If I can, I’ll carry the girl down. You follow with the magician, at sword’s point. And you, charlatan, you had best think to your Power, and how to use it to release the girl. It is your only guarantee of life, I promise you.”

Ryle pressed his lips together, nodding, and levered the magician to his feet while Valon sheathed his sword and bent to the girl. She seemed to make a rigid bundle, but he was able to slip a hand beneath her knees and another around her shoulders, and raised her up.

"What about my apprentice?" the magician said suddenly. "We can't leave him here, unburied, for the crows to eat."

"The crows may yet eat all of us," Ryle said. "If we live, I'll return and bury him. Which is more than I'll do for you." Poking the magician with the tip of his sword, he urged him after the captain.

The trip down the cleft was a nightmare in stony darkness, for the pallid starlight did not reach here, and of the three, only the magician was free to use both hands. The cleft opened into a tumbled slope of scree, which they slid down to reach the road. The sky paled slightly. Valon led them quickly to a cleft on the other side. A boulder at the cleft's mouth offered minimal concealment, but, Ryle thought, it was the best they could do. Valon set Imrie down on her side, gently stroking the invisible field above her arm. Distantly, a bird sang. A more ominous noise followed it; the far clangor of an army preparing to march.

Ryle raised his sword until its tip touched the magician's throat. "Magic," he whispered. "Now."

The magician, looking unhappy, set to work. The problem, Ryle thought, was that he had no idea what the magician was doing, could not tell if he worked for good or for ill, and there was not a thing he could do about it, either. He stood uncomfortably as the magician took various implements from his robe. One was a wand, with which he drew a large geometric shape encompassing himself, Imrie, and Ryle. Next he produced a number of herbs and performed various actions upon them, all the time muttering incantations almost silently. Ryle glanced at the captain, and they both shrugged. The sound of the army drew closer, and under it came the stone-on-stone noise of the moving monsters.

Eventually, content with his preparations, the magician stood up and traced various patterns in the air; his finger left a glowing line behind it, until the line solidified into a complex pattern Ryle did not recognize. He raised his hand to make the sign against evil, but froze at the magician's quick shake of the head, and lowered his hand again. Valon, outside the magic shape, crept to the head of the cleft, ventured a look out, and returned, his face grim. Now Ryle could hear the distinct sound

of marching feet. The first wave of soldiers passed the cleft, singing a hoarse, unpleasant song in an unfamiliar language. Ryle held his breath, but no alarm was raised. He glared at the magician, who frowned back and sent more glowing patterns into the air. The rock beneath them shook gently as one of the sea monsters rumbled by.

Imrie stirred, the barest motion of her shoulders. Ryle dropped to his knees beside her, his hand extended, but could not touch her skin. The magician knelt on her other side, staring at her hand.

"If she releases the stone, grab it and throw it immediately," the magician said, his voice hushed and hoarse with effort. Then he closed his eyes and swayed with the force of his incantations, and Imrie slowly rolled onto her back, her body still clenched around the stone. Ryle could see a side of it under her arm; the belt seemed to have worked loose from the cloak that covered it, but the rock was quiet. Her lips opened, as though she sighed or groaned, but he could not hear the sound. Beyond the cleft, more sea monsters rolled by, drowning the soldier's song.

Suddenly the magician flung his arms above his head while bands of light flared from his fingertips, and in that moment Imrie's body relaxed. Ryle grabbed the stone, not giving himself time to think; it resisted, then came easily to his hands and he almost drowned in a world of hatred, swords and lances flashing toward his body, a sea monster directly before him lowering its deadly snout toward his belly. Gasping, he staggered to his feet.

"Now!" the magician shrieked. "By the Flame, now!"

Ryle rushed blindly toward the sea monster, through it, through a phalanx of leering demons until he caromed from the boulder guarding the cleft. With all his might, he pitched the stone into the center of the Norrisdale road. The cloak blew free of it, and the soldiers yelled in confusion as it landed in their midst. Then Valon's hand grabbed his collar and jerked him back into the cleft, and the demons disappeared.

The sounds of surprise turned quickly into shouts of fear and outrage; weapons clashed and men screamed. Within the cleft, the magician sprawled limply over Imrie's legs, and she lay pal-

lid and as still as death. Ryle moved toward her, but Valon's hand clamped hard upon his arm.

"We have to get out," the captain shouted. He tossed the magician over his shoulder, caught his balance, and moved quickly down the cleft. Ryle swore and put his hands to Imrie's body; it was soft and warm, and he thought a brief prayer of thanks as he slung her over his shoulder and followed the captain. She didn't smell of summer now, just of sharp sweat and dirt.

Although it twisted and turned, this cleft was slightly broader than the other, and the slope more gentle. Ryle staggered onward, one arm claspng Imrie and the other grasping the hilt of his sword. The noise of battle was deafening, and clouds of dust billowed into the air. Ryle blinked against the grit in his eyes, and almost ran into Valon.

It seemed the very mountain had turned against them, for the cleft took a final twist and opened higher up on the Norrisdale road, where soldiers screamed and fought downhill against their own. One soldier saw Valon and shouted; he and his fellows, turning, multiplied, until a horde of screaming fighters rushed forward. Ryle let Imrie slide to the ground behind him and braced his feet, swinging his sword and thinking only briefly of death.

His sword bit into the first soldier and slid through the second as though through air. Beside him, Valon cursed.

"The stone!" the captain shouted. "Some are illusion, lord, but which?"

There was no way to tell, and a wrong guess would be instantly fatal. A sword swung through his guard, slicing through his arm without leaving a trace; his own sword jolted against an enemy's armor.

"My lord!"

He swung, missed, swung, connected.

"Ryle! There are three of them!" Imrie's voice, harsh and shrill, screamed over the sound of battle. "To your left, Ryle! Captain, before you!"

The soldier in front of Ryle leered and raised his axe, and Ryle spun away from him and struck at the man to his left. The

sword bit into flesh, just as the first soldier's axe hacked at Ryle's head, and disappeared.

"Captain, another behind you! They also fight illusions!"

At that moment, the second soldier swung furiously at the air, and Ryle's sword slid through his guard and through his armor. The man collapsed, and did not disappear.

"Ryle! Your right, the man with the axe fighting Valon!"

Ryle strode through legions of illusory enemies, impaling nothingness on his sword, until the sword touched solidity and he drove it through the soldier's back. Together he and Valon dispatched the remaining warrior, and looked at each other wildly.

"Back!" Imrie shouted. "Before others come, quickly!"

She staggered upright. Grabbing the magician by his arms, Valon and Ryle retreated after her into the cleft again, away from the road and the stone. As soon as the illusions stopped, Imrie pulled the magician from them, drew her arm back, and slapped his face as hard as she could.

"You're not asleep," she cried. "Get up and do something useful!"

The magician opened his eyes. "What?" he demanded. "If we're to be killed, I'd rather go quietly, thank you."

Imrie hit him again. "Make a smoke monster, you fool," she said. "The enemy won't come through it, only illusions will. We can follow it out of here."

The magician blinked at her and sat up quickly. "By the Flame," he muttered, delving into his robes. "By the Flame, girl!"

Ryle, leaning against the rock face and panting, stared at them. "A smoke monster?" he echoed.

"Do you have any better ideas?" Imrie retorted. "I may have been under the rock's spell, but I wasn't asleep, and I'm not stupid. Come on, thief, hurry up, hurry up!" She rocked back. "Ryle, Valon, all you have to do is remember that the illusions can't hurt you—only your fear can harm you, and that's what the stone feeds on. If you have no fear, it has nothing to throw back at you."

"Aye, easy to contemplate, and harder to do," the captain said. "You propose that we walk through an army of warriors and sea monsters, and not feel fear?"

"Yes," Imrie said. She rose. "Blindfolded, if necessary. I can lead you. We have to head for Norrisdale—there's nothing left behind us, and we must give warning. The sea monsters haven't started making lightning yet—I don't think they're ready, or alive, or whatever it is that gets them going. Captain, I don't think we have a choice, and I don't think we have much time. Once we get beyond this, is there a break in the cut?"

"Yes," Valon said. "About fifty paces up—but the stone's between us and it."

"Good," Imrie said. "Hurry," she said to the magician, and offered to hit him again.

Ryle closed his eyes. "I thought you were dead," he said.

"No, my lord," she said gently. "Just removed—and fed my Power back and my strength, as though it had been borrowed and returned twofold. I don't know why. And we don't, I think, have time to talk about it. Charlatan?"

"Hah!" the magician said. He shook back his sleeves, arranged a pile of supplies on the ground, and produced a smoke monster. It lunged into the air, eyes glowing and claws extended. Ryle looked at it dubiously.

"Do you see it?" he demanded of Imrie.

"I see a bunch of black smoke," she said impatiently. "Do you want a blindfold?"

Ryle shook his head, then reached out and grabbed her hand. She turned to him, surprised, and he looked for a moment into her pretty, grubby face, before bending and kissing her swiftly.

"That's just in case," he whispered, and turned to go.

If anything, the walk on the Norrisdale road was even more horrifying than the earlier battle. The smoke monster surrounded them, belching fire, and around them screams and the clash of metal filled the air; dead and dying men lay underfoot, the ground slippery with their blood. Ryle kept his eyes fastened on Imrie, ignoring the legions of enemies that attacked his sides, only to vanish the moment they touched his skin. Beside him, Valon kept up a steady stream of curses, and the magician walked just ahead, guiding the smoke monster with his hands and glancing nervously over his shoulder.

In the midst of it all, to his astonishment, Imrie paused and knelt. She reached to touch the smooth green stone lying in the

roadbed, passing her palm over its surface gently and murmuring. Then she rose and led them on, at a faster pace. Light flared and thunder shook the mountain; the sea monsters were finally awake.

"Here, lass!" Valon shouted, and they ducked into yet another cleft. Imrie immediately started to run and they followed her up piles of talus and a narrow chimney in the rock, leaving the sounds of battle farther behind. Small rockfalls struck at them as the sea monsters loosed lightning on the road below; Ryle's hands, slick with sweat, slipped again and again on the rock, and the muscles in his arms cramped. He fought the cramps grimly, his world narrowing to touch upon dark rock, sounds of screams, bright unnatural flashes that hurt his eyes, the rocking of stone against deep thunder. The chimney went up forever, then it stopped and hands gripped his wrists, levering him into starlight.

"No resting," the captain ordered, panting. "Remember Harken Castle."

Ryle shuddered, gasping clean, cold air, and stood. The companions staggered on, grabbing one another, legs weak and barely able to see; and of a sudden the entire mountain writhed beneath them, tumbling them to the ground. Ryle clutched at the moving stone, eyes closed; it seemed that the world was ending, and a new, more terrible one begun. Thunder and the shuddering of the earth, again and again, until with a final, cataclysmic movement the mountain stilled. He held his breath, fingers aching against the rock, and gradually realized that a silence had fallen, in which even the sound of wind over rock had died. Cautiously, he raised his head and looked.

The sun shone through a haze of dust. He turned his head slowly to see Imrie, beside him, staring into the distance, and he followed her gaze. A pale, rectangular cloud of dust rose above the Norrisdale road, and after a moment the earth shuddered one final time as a peak slid into itself and down, leaving a jagged fang against the horizon. Ryle pushed himself up and looked back. A few paces beyond his feet, a new chasm had opened in the land, and below it lay Harkensdale, desolate and still. The Norrisdale road had disappeared.

"I think the earth herself cried out," Imrie murmured. Ryle

turned back to look at her. She sat, shaking her head; dark hair tumbled around her shoulders, shining in the sun. She glanced at him, and behind her he saw Valon and the magician come, blinking, to their knees to see what the earth had wrought. Ryle stood, using his sword as a crutch, and Imrie came to stand beside him.

"It's not over," he said as Imrie rested her head against his shoulder.

"No. High Hallack will see change greater than we can imagine," she said. "By the Flante, Ryle, I am tired."

He put his arm around her, and all his visions of chivalry, of high-born maidens in romantic distress, faded forever as he held Imrie close, savoring the sharp tang of her, the unkempt hair, the feel of Power and of promise in her weary body. Valon and the magician came up beside them, and without speaking they turned together to face away from Harkensdale, toward the rest of High Hallack's many Dales.

"We'll rest, my lady," Ryle said. "We deserve a rest. As someday, my lady, I hope to deserve you."

Imrie snorted, a tired, loving sound, and after a moment he realized that she was asleep, upright against his body. Valon laughed.

"And who, my lord, has a better right?" he said.

Ryle laughed with him and, wrapping his cloak around the sleeping girl, lowered himself and her together to the quiet earth.