



The title screen features the game's title "RuneGuard" in a large, ornate, golden font with a crown over the 'R'. Below it, "SHIELD OF HEROES" is written in a similar but slightly smaller font. The background is a parchment-like texture with a map of a fantasy world, a compass rose in the top left, and a small illustration of a dragon or monster in the top right. The overall aesthetic is medieval fantasy.

Michael Reed McLaughlin

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RÜNEGUARD

SHIELD ⊕ F HEROES

Book Two

of

THE HERO SAGAS

written & illustrated

by

MICHAEL REED McLAUGHLIN

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Scriptorium Press™
Hollywood, CA 90046

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First Scriptorium paperback edition 2012

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Designed by Michael Reed M^sLaughlin

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
M^sLaughlin, Michael Reed
Rüneglaive: Sword of Heroes/ Book One of The Hero Sagas/
Michael Reed M^sLaughlin
p. cm.

ISBN-13: 1234567891011

ISBN-10: 234567891

ISBN-13: 1234567891011 (Pbk)

ISBN-10: 1234567891 (Pbk)

ISBN-13: 1234567891011 (eBk)

ISBN-10: 1234567891 (eBk)

BOOKS BY MICHAEL REED M^cLAUGHLIN

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Book II *Rüne guard: Shield of Heroes*

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Indröl—The Four Realms



Þáttur fjórði

CHAPTER 04

THE COMMON TOMBS

To the right, obscured from view, lay the Temple of the Priests and the northeastern slopes of Dale Öráð, to the left, the Temple of the Priestesses and the southwestern shoulder of the deep valley. Here stood the ancient entrance to the immortal resting place of the kings of Asäre—a subterranean labyrinth of crisscrossing tunnels and chambers that led to the many crypts and tombs of the sovereign lords of old. The day was new and bright, and in the distance, a solitary bird could be heard singing gaily. The sun shone warm and clear that morning, but from the dark drear entrance to the catacombs, issued forth a cool stale air that bore upon it the odor of death and decay. A sense of foreboding emanated from the blackness beyond the marble-columned entrance to the crypts, which crept forth to those who stood before the portal like the groping fingers of immemorial Time—even Death, Himself. Before the gaping black maw that stretched away into the mountainside, stood Miták, young Hero Unto the World. Beside the young Man from the Oakwood Forest, tall and proud in his light silvery robes, stood Zörwind, the wizard. Härbör, the Low Dwarf, was with them, and Delfen the Elf, also.

Was it truly to this oppressive sight that the four remaining companions had so valiantly struggled to arrive, battling Ögres and Ettins, Elementals and the natural elements of the arid desert, yea, even having braved the deadly pitfalls of riddling with an ancient Sphinx?

“And well it should,” replied the Wizard. “As Dëlfën correctly translated, it begins: ‘Beware the *march of time*—Death will find you all *in the end*.’ A great wisdom passed on from a race of Men who have all perished and turned to dust. No man lives forever. All too fleeting is our time here in Indrël, even though the days should span the long years in the Forest of a High Êlf, such as Dëlfën, here.”

The companions let their Royal Ärqüävëän Steeds run loose in the bright morning sunlight, so that the animals might graze freely while their masters were down in the catacombs. The adventurers could only hope that at least some of the mounts would still be around upon their return. They knew it might take days of searching the catacombs to locate the Imperial Tombs, for the regal crypts lay hidden in the heart of the mountain, in its deepest recesses, far beyond the multitude of *Common Tombs* located near the entrance. It could take significantly longer, still if excavation were required.

Dëlfën spoke to the Ärqüävëän steeds before loosing them, and asked the animals to wait for their return, though he knew perfectly well that the animals did not understand his Êlvän speech, not as true *Înhörnëä* would have comprehended it. Nevertheless, he believed that Pride, at least, would await his return, and hoped the other steeds would stay with the mare as well.

Tinbâstëän, the falcon from the Temple of the Priestesses, Mîtäk had wrapped in a cloth nest, her wing, bound with a splint by Härbör, tucked delicately inside. He had fashioned a hood for the falcon out of his leather coin-purse and made a place for her in his already heavy pack. He refused to leave her behind, for fear she might starve to death before their return, being unable to hunt for herself with the broken wing. But Zörwind convinced him that the perils of the catacombs would be even more dangerous for her, and so Mîtäk resolved to leave his aquiline friend behind. Each companion, however, committed to sacrifice for her a small portion of the dried meat they carried, and they left her near a spring of clear water. Then they were ready to venture forth into the catacombs.

A dank, musty smell rose up and drifted out of the unplumbed depths of the catacombs, heavy and cool with moisture. “Good Gentles All, our destinies await us,” Mîtäk said tepidly, with a gesture; then he stepped into the blackness.

Certainly the majority of the vast labyrinth of catacombs, crypts, and sepulcher cells—collectively called the “Great Tombs”—had, for the most part, been plundered long ago. Most of the original artifacts and valuables, which had once filled the vaults like royal coffers, had been

absconded and carried away many long centuries ago by grave robbers and treasure seekers. But even in the Common Tombs, some treasure still remained as the looted booty of the many monsters that yet inhabited the underground catacombs. Such spoils passed from one hand to another a hundred times over each century as the permanent inhabitants of the catacombs continually fought amongst themselves for gold and territory.

In the depths of the Great Tombs, each sovereign family, each monarchical line, and each successive dynasty of ancient Asäre had delved its own set of familial vaults, branching off of the Common Tombs that could be entered through Dale Ö räth. It was in these *Imperial Tombs*, hidden within the deepest recesses of the Great Tombs, that the companions hoped to find the hidden Imperial Chambers. Untold wealth was fabled to still lie there, undiscovered after all the countless centuries. Such lost tombs were called *Sealed Chambers*, and lore held that they still contained their original wealth intact.

The Imperial Tombs had been specially designed to prevent pilferage and looting by grave robbers, or successors, through concealment and by the use of secret entrances and booby-traps; thus, even after a millennium of plunder, a handful of such sealed chambers, tombs, and crypts had indeed remained untouched. They had lain hidden from all, since the last of the great imperial Asäreän architects had died shortly after the Apocalypse War, taking with them their well-kept secret knowledge of the catacombs and its many labyrinths.

Thus it was these separate and undisturbed vaults that Míták and the others sought. In fact, it was there in the Sealed Chambers that Zörwind secretly hoped to find *The Sörsër*.

"I like not at all that we begin this dubious venture on such an auspicious day," admitted Dëlfën to no one in particular.

"What? What?" asked Härbör.

"Today being the thirteenth."

"Verily, a great day," replied the Dwärf.

"An inauspicious one, by my reckoning."

"Why Dëlfën," said Míták stepping back out of the dark entrance to the Great Tombs. "I am indeed surprised at you. 'As superstitious as a Dwärf,' is what we say in the Southern Oakwood."

"I resent that saying, then," said Dëlfën.

"By my beard, I the more so than you, sir," said Härbör.

"It is just a saying," insisted Míták. "I did not make it up. I only meant to point out how surprised I was at Dëlfën's fear of a number."

“But numbers are *very* powerful,” retorted the Dwärf. “Especially the unlucky number, **DHÜRRHÊG**[†]—thirteen as you would say in the Common Tongue.

“Luckily, however,” added Härbör, “today is the sixth of **ERRÛN**, anyway, and we have nothing to worry about.” (For the Dwärves, the reckoning of moonths begins on first quarter—because the moon then resembles the spade of a shovel—and not on new moon, as it does for the Ælves, or full moon, as it does for the Southerlanders.)

“And it is the 27th of Midsummer, where I come from,” added Zôrwind.

“You see. How silly numerology is, when the days have at least three different numbers and names, anyway,” laughed Mîtak.

“And yet ill events oft transpire on the thirteenth, no matter which calendar one uses.” The old Dwärf would not give up his point so easily.

“I must say I have to side with Mîtak, however,” put in Dêlfên, who had begun all this. “For every day is most certainly the ‘thirteenth’ according to somebody’s calendar.”

“And yet I still say the **DHÜRRHÊGETH**[†] day of the moonth is always the most unlucky, and ill events oft do transpire on that day.”

“As they do on the other twenty-seven days of the moonth,” pointed out Zôrwind. “You only put meaning to them when the numbers confirm you suspicions. I would rather place more fear and effort on the tangible ills we shall face soon enough in there.” He pointed to the dark entrance, where even the light of day seemed not to want to trespass and did not penetrate beyond a few cubits.

“Humph,” said Härbör. “I see plain enough now, friend **ZÔTÔR**, who will stand by me and who will not, when it comes right down to it.” He turned his back on Dêlfên and marched into the dark maw in the hillside.

As they entered the catacombs, and the companions’ eyes grew accustomed to the dim light of their torches, it seemed the air was thick with an unseen smoke, which devoured the light as soon as it left the flambeaus. Only a few paces in, the air was heavy and still. Suddenly, Mîtak realized he had not the slightest idea where to begin to look for such elusive vaults, and Zôrwind had turned the role of leader back over to him. If scouring scavengers and treasure-hungry hunters had not been able to discover the Sealed Chambers after a thousand years of searching, how then was he supposed to find them in time to save Princess Kitfir,

[†] **DHÜRRHÊG** {L.D.} (ten + three)

[†] **DHÜRRHÊGETH** {L.D.} (ten + three –th)

and prevent the impending war between her father, King Jôrân of Ärqüâ-vêâ, and Prince Äzmadüs of Nödrêôf?

Indeed, Mîtâk asked Zôrwind just this, through their silent måging. Yet the only clue he could attain from the reserved wizard, was: *‘Keep a straight and direct course through the catacombs, and always seek firstly the Sealed Chambers.’*

The wizard, Zôrwind, upon reading and studying the Asäreân poet Flâitêš’ timeless works of tragedy, including the ancient tome in which Måxindîn the Great had first discovered mention made of *The Sörsër’s* whereabouts, had been able to discover only one more clue as to where the latter Potentates of Asäre, and more specifically, Potentate Långsförth the Long-Lived, had been interred: “The last emperor of Asävö [who died at the end of the Great War along with the potentate of Asäre] lies entombed in the deepest recesses of our catacombs;” this written by an Asäreân. Those tombs the book had said were: “where His Majesty Imperial was laid to rest with his brother by marriage, and his ally by treaty, the last great potentate of our fair land, His Majesty Imperial Långsförth the Long-Lived, Potentate of Asäre.”

All this, Måxindîn had known, but what Zôrwind had discovered, was that it was the custom to lay the Kings’ crypts in line with the main corridor, so the spirits of the lords would have a straight and unobstructed passage unto the Dêitål Ambit and the afterlife. And this was why the magic wielder instructed Mîtâk to keep to the central corridor in their attempt to discover Potentate Långsförth’s chambers (and thus his ally, Emperor Låndrös’s sepulcher as well).

In the dim shadows just inside the entrance, before the eternal sunless darkness of the catacombs’ tunnels were engulfed in black, Mîtâk paused to organize everyone for their descent into the dark tombs. The plan he devised called for briefly searching as many chambers as possible along the way for items they could use to confront Äzmadüs—magical, physical, and even spiritual weapons and artifacts. They would search for anything useful, while still expressly striving for their main objective, the Imperial Tombs, and more specifically, the sealed chamber of Potentate Långsförth the Long-Lived.

Each companion carried a heavy pack with him into the catacombs, laden with foodstuffs from Pântân Oasis, weapons, a bedroll, and torches. Since there was no natural light whatsoever in the vast subterranean tombs, everyone had to carry as many fagots as possible—about twenty flambeaus of cloth-wrapped wood, dipped in tar, to each adventurer’s pack; thus the precious links consumed the greater part of their space and weight capacity, more even than food and water was allotted,

for they knew that without the fagots for light, as heavy and bulky as they were, they would be lost in the catacombs. For that reason the wooden torches were the limiting factor in how long they would be able to remain in the underground sepulchers. However, they were not planning on, and indeed did not wish to stay in the subterranean tombs for much more than a few days, anyway.

Dëlfën, especially, was loath to leave the sunlit world behind for the confines of tunnels, and was glad they could not carry more links into the catacombs than they did.

Mîtāk shifted his heavy pack on his shoulders often, and noticed Zôrwind doing likewise. The wizard had decided to carry a pack along with the others, even though he would be slowed considerably in casting spells when forced to remove the encumbering burden before performing any incantations.

The abundant optimism of the past few days was somewhat missing now as they actually entered the gaping black hole in the ground. Up until that time, the main goal in everyone's mind had simply been to reach the Temples of Asârê. They had not allowed themselves to think about what would happen once they got there, and now that they were there, the mood was quiet and forlorn. In the transitional twilight of the tunnel entrance, some thought of what lay ahead in the tombs below, while others considered what they were leaving behind on the outside. But everyone had in the back of his mind, more acutely than ever, the thought of Zôrwind's prophecy: that at least one of the original companions would not live to see the quest through to its end. And because of the untold dangers of the catacombs, it was most likely there, each believed, that such a fate would be met.

Mîtāk led the way and Dëlfën took up the rear as they left the last of the light of the forenoon sun behind. Härbôr tried whistling an old Dwärvän mining tune to lighten the mood; but it did not help. Their eyes slowly adjusted to the flickering light of their fagots, but it seemed the companions' spirits dimmed as well, with the change of atmosphere.

The main corridor leading down into the mountains in Dale Öràth was stately and grand. The floor was lined with large smooth marble and granite tiles. The tunnel itself had been carved out of the very living rock, eons ago, and had been polished so that to this day a burnished reflection of the companions' burning torches danced upon the walls and ceilings like a silver looking glass. Yet amidst the grandeur of the colossal columns and titanic tiles, the ambience was cool and reserved.

Härbôr stopped whistling his tune before the song's end, and the tunnels were once again ominously silent (as it seemed they should be). He, of all the companions, should have been at home in the confinement

of the long stretching corridors, for he had grown up in **FHĒLHDSFHÄR**, in the stone passageways carved by the Low Dwärves long ago, below the **RRÖT** Mountains. But the Great Tombs were somehow different, and the old Dwärf felt ill at ease as though they were watched at all times.

There was that smell in the air, too, particular to the catacombs, sickly sweet and tainted with the aroma of pitch torches aglow. It was the smell of death and decay, and it filled their nostrils with each necessary breath. The air was not completely still, however, and constantly flowed slowly towards the mouth of the vaults, cool and damp. Though, at first, it was a refreshing change after the arid desert, it soon became irritating and uncomfortable. The companions' clothes were soaked in no time and clung with chilly resolve to their prickled skin.

As they walked on in silence, and the last of Vītälüs's light was lost behind them to the arch of the tunnel, Mītāk thought about Kitfir again, wondering how she could have been in his dream before ever he had met her. Perhaps, he decided, the answer lay beyond his remembered past, a past that stretched only back to his fourth birth-day, the earliest event he could remember. Had he known Kitfir in the forgotten times before? It was possible.

The hard leather boots of the Men and the Dwärf—even the soft sued soles of the Ælf's shoes—seemed to make a thunderous amount of noise on the stone floor, echoing down the long cool corridor in rhythmic syncopation. They were still well above the level of the Glimmer River, but the damp air that blew past them from below left its glossy condensation on the walls and roof of the finely carved passageway.

Everyone was alert for the slightest sign of wandering monsters, and tensions were high. Härbör and Delfen began arguing over some measurements for the map the Ælf was keeping of their progress.

"Härbör, Gentle Dwärf, would you come here a moment?" asked Mītāk. "We could use a fine **KHWÄGÈN** such as yourself to lead us through these tunnels; after all, was it not the skilled hands of Dwärvän miners who delved these tombs below **RRÖTGHÖRRÄTH**¹ for the Asäreäns, in the first place?"

"As a matter of fact, it was," said Härbör proudly, instantly forgetting the quarrel. "You can tell by the magnificent **KHWÄGÈNZKH** craftsmanship and rugged structural design that has kept this place in such amazingly good condition for hundreds upon hundreds of years under the Mountain..."

¹ **RRÖTGHÖRRÄTH** {L.D.} (holy + fortress)

He rattled on for some while longer about “superior **KHWÄGËNZKH** this” and “quality **KHWÄGËNZKH** that,” but no one paid him any attention; they were just thankful *Mitāk* had distracted him from the pointless bickering.

While *Dëlfën* kept track of their progress on parchment, *Zôrwind* was assigned the task of making sure they always had light. The wizard was to ensure that at all times at least one torch other than his own flambeau was lit. He was also responsible for keeping the flint and tinder dry, and as a final precaution, was to keep handy the physical components necessary for a *Fire* spell, just in case. For everyone knew that to be caught without light in the sepulchers would be lethal if dealing with one of the many dark-seeing varieties of monsters that inhabited the Great Tombs.

They followed what seemed to be the main tunnel, larger and straighter than any veering off to either side, or downwards; though there were a few places where almost equally grand passageways diverged and ran off in nearly parallel fashion. *Härbôr*, following *Mitāk*’s instructions, guided them straight down towards the heart of the labyrinth, by sending *Dëlfën* back at these points a few hundred paces with a torch, so that the straightest shot could be easily eyeballed by looking back towards his light.

The outer passageways were, for the most part, deserted, with the exception of a small group of *Köböld*s, which straightway fled at the first sign of the well-armed party of companions. At one point, *Härbôr* pointed out some Green Slime, which he spotted on the ceiling, and said the gelatinous creature was to be avoided at all expense, since, “It can sense the vibrations of passers-by and drop on unsuspecting victims from above.” It was the worst of the Slime Molds, and he added that if the strange fungal creature were not immediately scraped off it would attach itself to any exposed skin. Then, if the limb were not amputated forthwith, or if the mold had attached itself to the trunk or head of a man, it would quickly consume its victim and would absorb him completely, turning him into a giant colony of Green Slime within a watch’s time.

The stone walls and floors grew damper and duskier as they descended into the depths of the catacombs, and the ceilings soon began to drip regularly with the icy black water filtering down from high above and long ago, born eons in the past, in the snowy mountains that fed the Glimmer River, now far above them. There was a narrow gutter running along the wall to one side. The water collected there and flowed dark and foreboding in its course as if it understood that never again was it to see sun or cloud, neither stream nor river. For the sad trickle flowed ever downwards from there, until it found, in the end, a vast cavernous tarn,

nameless and forgotten, somewhere deep within in the eternally dark recesses of İndrēl.

After some distance, the straight passageway began to branch off more regularly, in perpendicular passages that opened up on each side. As they continued on, heavy wooden doors lined the walls on the right and on the left, and strange sounds and odors emanated from many of them; but Hārbör led them straight on in a direct and unwavering path.

Mītāk's hands were sweaty and his heart raced with excitement as they walked farther and farther into the Great Tombs. In one hand he held Swift-Blade, the sword Skēba had given him, and in the other, one of Sindril's daggers, ready for anything that might come along.

Everyone was silent, Mītāk and Zörwind did not even mäge with one another as they marched along at a slow but steady pace. There was a strange apprehension in the air—something was going to happen soon. Indeed the sensation quickly grew so acute it could almost be tasted in the musty atmosphere. “Everyone on the alert,” ordered Hārbör.

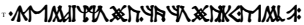
Then, for the first time, the companions came to a point where they would have to either turn aside or attempt to breach a set of closed doors. The main corridor ended there at a pair of large heavy doors made of solid brass with more Rüníc cirth characters embossed upon them. The small creek, which had been following the passageway, disappeared into a drain that flowed under the corroded green entrance and into the enclosed chamber beyond.

“These markings I cannot read,” announced Dēlfēn, “for they are in the lost tongue of the ancient Asäreāns.”[†]



“‘Many pass through these doors... but few return.’” Zörwind's words were stark and the reading of his translation ominous and foreboding in the dark tunnel. The massive metal portals signified the beginnings of the Common Tombs, and the idea that, in the rooms ahead Men had been laid to rest in their eternal mansions, was an eerie one.

Dēlfēn did not fear the souls of Men, but after what Mītāk had seen on the quest thus far he was ready to believe anything could exist—Ghóüls; the Walking Undead, Zombiēs, even Vāmpiērs—and was sore afraid of them all.

· Ürrhō zhín nóngá khwâ ghòngá ókh áthō ýth. {R.A.} (Many pass through these doors but few return.)

Among mortal Men, there had always been a deep-rooted fear of the dead. Perhaps it was an unconscious fear of their own inevitable mortality and the End that each knows he must face. But for the ancient Asäreäns, this was not what had driven them to long ago build such grand tombs and vaults to house their immortal spirits; for they had no uncertainty concerning what lay beyond this life. They knew they would live forever in their interment halls.

But what good had such faith done them? Mîtāk wondered. They have all come to naught but dust.

The light of the wizard's glowing torch played eerily upon his long face and shimmering robe.

Härbôr consulted Mîtāk in hushed tones for a few moments then announced with a harsh whisper: "We go through the doors; we are going to try and keep heading in a straight line as long as possible." He had felt unusually uncomfortable—for being below ground—since entering the Common Tombs. Perhaps it was because he and ZÔTÔR had encountered a Ghôst together before, in the KRÜKZIK Shaft; and that had not been so long ago nor so very far away, in the dungeons below ÄZGHÖRRÄTH.

Thirteen unlucky years ago, thought Härbôr. And I am as great a fool now as I was then, to follow the Wise Lord into this forsaken place.

But it was Mîtāk who felt the most uncomfortable with the thought of trespassing the tombs. What makes it any more right for us to come in here like common thieves and take what we need to fight Äzmadüs than it was for the other grave robbers who have trespassed and looted these sacred tombs? he questioned. But in the end, he found perhaps the fact that they had no choice but to do so, made the act somewhat more acceptable. Yet Mîtāk still did not enjoy the thought of plundering the riches of the dead.

Thus they stood before the great doors to the Common Tombs, each with his own doubts and fears about what lay beyond.



CHAPTER TWO

THE WELCOME MAT

Before opening the massive double doors of heavy brass and beginning their descent into the Common Tombs, Mítak asked Delfën to listen at the door for sounds of possible inhabitants beyond. So, the slender Elf pulled his long, golden hair back over one pointed ear and placed his head against the damp metal door, and listened for several moments.

“Nothing,” he announced. “Methinks ’tis safe to enter.”

Härbôr tried the door. It was locked. “If I had a set of me lock picks,” the Dwärf explained, “I could probably get us in there silently. Unfortunately, I do not go traips’n ’round in the mountains with the tools of a criminal in my pocket, and I could not find any in Pântän without risking arrest by the local authorities.” He shrugged his broad shoulders and produced his poisonous battle-axe and decided: “‘There is always more than one way to skin a turtle.’”

“Truly. But you mean *Griffin*,” corrected Delfën. “‘More than one way to skin a *Griffin*.’”

“Skinning a Griffin is easy,” retorted Härbôr. “It is skinning a *turtle* that is so hard. That is why the expression is: ‘More than one way to skin a *turtle*.’”

“Whichever,” interrupted Mítak. “The doors?”

Härbôr looked at Delfën and nodded smugly as though he had won the debate. “Now lets see if this blessed axe is worth its weight upon the

journey. Come on, Fell Venom-slasher. Have a bite of yellow brass.” The stout Dwärf swung his black-bladed battle-axe at the vertical crack between the two doors, and wedged the edge of one of the heavy blades into the seam. Then he pounded on the helve of his bipennis to wedge the blade further into the jam, and using the leverage given him by the long gray handle, he pried the doors apart.

They burst open and outward with a loud snap, and the sound of a bolt clanging to the ground beyond the doors was heard from without. Härbör patted **HESH ÜRRÄG-BHÜRR**, but the others winced at the loud noise. They nevertheless almost stumbled over one another trying to quickly, “peek in cautiously.”

The double doors opened into a large rectangular chamber many paces across, and from what they could see, the room appeared to be empty. Across the open floor, which was made of four huge square stone slabs, were two more large double doors identical to the ones they had just opened. Within the doors closest to them lay a large single-step dais, and the floor beyond was slightly lower.

Cautiously they stepped into the room, and indeed there seemed to be nothing within the chamber at all. In fact, there was an unusually thick layer of dust on the floor, particular to the room and not present in the other areas they had passed through. How many eons it had taken the fine dust to build up, none could guess, but it was free of footprints, and apparently no one had used the room in at least a hundred years.

Mitak was thinking of this, and how odd it was that none of the other passageways had any dust in them, when suddenly, the large stone slab the four of them were standing on became resilient and flexible, stretching up around Mitak, Härbör, Delfen, and Zörwind. At once, he knew it was a Stonetrapper—a Camouflage Beast!

The monster had been lying dormant, waiting for a victim for so long the dust had collected on top of its motionless body, but it was alive all along, and simply waiting hungrily. Then, when it sensed the creatures walking on top of it, the Camouflage Beast had sprung into action, surrounding its victims like a tablecloth picked up by the corners to remove the dishes.

Acting with the amazing agility and lithe form of a true Elf, Delfen alone sprang from the maw of the monster just before it closed upon the others completely, sealing them within its deadly grip.

Mitak was quick enough to sink his dagger into the soft flesh of the Beast before it had completely enveloped them. But then the monster returned to its rigid form, and he might as well have stabbed a granite boulder with the triple-bladed dirk, for the Stonetrapper’s thick hide became as stone, and hardened around the blades of his small scythe like

Dwärvän cement. Then, the strange creature was once more completely motionless and rigid as it had been when they first stepped on it only they were now sealed within its airtight pocket, a hollow sphere large enough for the three of them to stand in.

At first, panic set in, and Mîtāk and Härbôr hewed vigorously at the monster's hide with their steel weapons. But without adequate room to swing either a long sword or an axe, it became obvious to Mîtāk they were simply wasting their time and dulling their blades, and he quickly gave up trying to cut his way out of the impregnable Beast. Once he had calmed down enough to think clearly, he settled Härbôr down and got him to stop swinging his poisonous axe around like a crazed woodcutter.

Then Mîtāk realized how stupid he and Härbôr had been; they might easily have injured one another, or Zôrwind, by wildly swinging their weapons around inside the cramped little ten-foot diameter prison.

If memory served Mîtāk well, and if the rede he had heard from a passing traveler in the inn he often stayed at in Ärqüävêä had not been too exaggerated, he guessed they had at least a full watch in the vise-like grip of the monster before they would begin to suffocate and then it could slowly digest them. *If that is true, it might at least give me time to come up with a plan*, he thought.

"Can you hear me!" shouted Mîtāk to Dêlfên on the outside.

"Truly," came a muffled reply from without. "Though, just barely. I have tried killing this thing from out here, but 'tis of no use; 'tis as if he were made of rock or stone!"

"Same in here!" said Härbôr.

Already it was getting stuffy in the gullet of the monster, and it seemed difficult to breathe the heavy air inside the Beast. Mîtāk wondered how reliable the rede he had heard was. "Well, what are we going to do?" he asked only loud enough for the other two victims within the Stonetrapper to hear him.

"I can surely tell you this much," scoffed Härbôr: "I have not come this far to be stopped by a confusticating rock!" He hit his fist against the stony wall that engulfed them and then danced about, shaking the wounded hand he had nearly broken on the hard surface of the Beast.

"That is it!" said Mîtāk excitedly. "That is exactly how we shall get out of here!"

"Yes," answered Zôrwind, who had read his thoughts. "That might just work."

"What, ZÖTÖR? What might just work? What are you two talking about?" demanded Härbôr. The Dwarf's face was red from the excitement and the frustration of trying to divine the two companions'

thoughts, and his bulbous nose looked like an overripe tomato that might explode at any moment.

“Dëlfën!”

“Yes Mîtāk?” came the faint answer.

“I want you to get the largest, heaviest object you can find, and bring it over here. Then I want you to crack this thing open like a giant acorn!”

Then Härbör nodded in understanding. If the Beast was as hard as a rock, then perhaps it was as brittle as one as well.

“And Zörwind, put that torch out,” suggested Mîtāk. “We need all the air we have in here; who knows how long it shall take Dëlfën to find a nut cracker large enough to open this gigantic shell—especially down here in these catacombs.”

Zörwind nodded, but Härbör did not smile; he figured they would have plenty of time for humor later, *if* they got out of stone monster alive.

So, the three victims sat quietly in the dark and waited for the Ælf’s help to arrive. But it was only a brief while ere they heard Dëlfën return, dragging something heavy and solid-sounding, along on the stone floor with him, something that he then struck against the outside of the rigid Stonetrapper.

The first blow was so loud inside the monster it temporarily deafened all those within as if they stood within the dome of some gigantic bell, rung by a drunken giant.

A moment later a second sharp impact tolled the hollow monster, deafening even their thoughts. But the Beast remained intact.

Dëlfën gave one final blow to the outside of the creature, one he was certain would crack its shell wide open. And indeed, it was in conjunction with the sharp, unmistakable sound of splitting stone.

But with much disappointment, Dëlfën found that he had only succeeded in breaking his makeshift cleaver.

“What is going on?” asked Mîtāk when his hearing began to return. There was a ringing in his ears, a high-pitched note that seemed like it would never stop, but over it he heard Dëlfën’s distant response.

“Truly, Mîtāk of the Oakwood; I am thinking.”

“You had better be doing something more than just racking that empty skull of yours,” retorted Härbör gruffly. “’Tis getting hard to breathe in here.”

“We must find something as hard as the Beast itself, to break it open,” said Zörwind calm and composed, though loud enough for the Ælf on the outside to hear.

“Truly,” agreed Dëlfën, “and I think I have just the thing!”

"In the name of Ärxê! What is going on?" cried Härbôr as the round Stonetrappier began to rock slightly back and forth and then to roll across the stone floor with a sharp Grinding sound.

"Fay! Be not dismayed!" said Dêlfên, "But I think I have found something as hard as a Beast."

The hollow, man-filled ball stopped for a moment, then rocked back and forth as he started to roll it in a new direction, perpendicular to the first.

"Where are you taking us?" shouted Härbôr, tripping over himself and the others, who were tripping over him in the dark. "Stop this thing this very instant, you lame-brained WHIMLHÖ!"

"No!" said Mîtāk, guessing what the Êlf had in mind, "we must help him roll it along. Walk with it as it rolls!"

So, they began to stumble along inside the hollow sphere, running with it as it turned over and over, faster and faster, swirling both dust and Dwärf about as it went.

Then suddenly, the great ball impacted with something solid and immobile. There was a sharp splitting sound again; then a definite cracking noise began and continued for some time.

The initial sharp splitting sound had come from the solid stone wall of the carved chamber Dêlfên had run them into, but the cracking noise was the Beast shattering into half a dozen, separate, jagged pieces. They fell to the floor like the shards of shell from a newly hatching Drägôn, and three dusty, bruised, and coughing Dräglets came staggering out of the dusty tumult.

Once the Stonetrappier was shattered and dead, its rigid body pieces went limp again and bled at their broken edges like severed flesh.

Mîtāk grimaced and removed his dagger from a piece of the softened hide, then looked for somewhere to wipe the blood from the blade of the dirk. He stepped from the carnage toward the doors they had been heading for, opposite the entrance. They had rolled to the other end of the chamber; and he noticed, in the shadows of the corner, a pile of what was either the Beast's treasure hoard or merely the waste left behind after it had digested its victim's flesh. Whatever it was, there were several pieces of rusty armor and weaponry amongst the pile, which were obviously no longer of any use; some old rags, which he cleaned his dagger with; and several bones—some those of a Man, some not.

Zörwind moved closer to investigate the stash as well, and he found two scrolls. But the parchment the scripts were written upon had either rotted or had been digested beyond repair, and their mystical runes were no longer legible.

Härbör poked around in the pile with his axe and came up with something else. "Look. One of these poor gents died without finishing off his flask of whiskey." He popped the tiny bottle's cork off, took a sniff, and was about to take a swig when Zörwind snatched the small blue vial from his gnarled hands. "What is the matter, Old Friend?" complained Härbör. "You know I can hold my liquor better than any man alive."

Zörwind held the bottle up reverently and did not reply at first. It looked like an ordinary flask of whiskey to Mîtāk and the others, but Zörwind apparently thought otherwise. He removed his pack and straightened his long, shimmering robes, then moved one hand in a circular motion above the blue bottle, wiggling his long bony fingers and said: "*AZMÜİD MÜRETÜ ÖZËVSÖ!*"

The bottle began to glow slightly red.

"What does this mean, ZÖTÖR? Was it poisonous?" Härbör held his neck as though the idea alone burned his throat.

"No, luckily not. But it is a potion of some sort, and if you were not fully prepared when you took it, it might have killed you just the same." Zörwind retrieved the cork roughly from Härbör and tossed the bottle aside as, "useless without any instructions for its application."

Now it seemed odd to Mîtāk that he should bother to cork the bottle, when he was just going to discard it, and so he watched the wizard's hands carefully and saw just what he had suspected. His own father had been somewhat of an expert at prestidigitation, and Mîtāk knew a little slight of hand, when he saw it. Oh, he did not actually see Zörwind pocket the vile—the wizard was too good of an illusionist for that; (but then again, none of them saw the bottle actually "tossed away;" it only looked that way). No one else seemed to have noticed, and so Mîtāk neither said anything to the others nor maged anything about it to the wizard.

Once again, they headed for the second set of brass doors, since nothing more of value could be found among the rubbish.

"What was it you tried to crack the Camouflage Beast with the first time?" asked Härbör as Dëlfën listened at the next set of doors.

"Hush," said the Elf.

"I am just a little curious. It sounded like stone itself." He looked back across the room from where they had come, but in the shadows of the torchlight, he could not make out what the broken pieces had once been.

"Shhh," said Mîtāk and Zörwind at the same time.

"Truly, you do not want to know," said Dëlfën.

Härbör frowned. "Do so."

"Then I shall tell thee," said Dëlfën, giving up and looking away from the brass doors. "I used the lid of a sarcophagus. 'Twas the only thing I

deemed perchance heavy and strong enough to break the Stonetrapper's grip."

Härbôr's eyes grew large beneath his bushy red-gray eyebrows, and he swallowed dryly. "A c-c-c-casket lid? The top of a sarcophagus! A dead man's bed! That is sacrilege, you foolish **WHIMLHÖ!** By my hood, we shall all be haunted by the owner's Ghôst, now!" he exclaimed.

"Relax, Gentle Härbôr," said Dêlfën. "Truly, from what I could tell, that coffin had not housed a resident in hundreds of years. Someone else stripped it of its contents long before you were born."

But Härbôr did not look fully convinced there was no danger of spectral haunting, and he shook his scruffy head in disgust. "A sarcophagus. Humph."

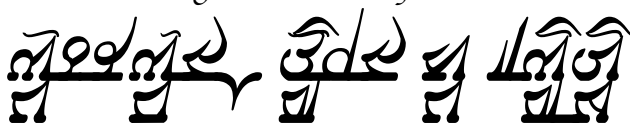
Dêlfën listened at the door again, and looked at Mîtak and shook his head negatively. "Not a sound."

"Good," said Mîtak. "Now let us all try to be a little more careful this time."

He undid the bolt, which was locked on the inside, and the door opened into a hallway similar in appearance to the one they had just entered the room from. As before, the corridor led straight ahead, with the familiar black rivulet flowing along the side gutter from beneath the chamber they were leaving behind.

"Let us continue, Härbôr," said Mîtak, and he stepped aside to let their appointed scout go first.

Härbôr marched on through the huge, brass, double doors and into the Common Tombs. But this time, of course, only after first testing the ground outside the doors with the top end of his heavy battle-axe for unexpected welcome mats.



CHAPTER THREE

NAP TIME IN THE TUNNELS

Härbör, Mitak, Zörwind, and Delfën, in that order, walked down the wide passageway. The corridor they followed was of the same size and general shape as the one that had led to the chamber of the Camouflage Beast, though it no longer had any branching hallways breaking off to either side. The fancy columns and colorful patterns of stone-tiled floors continued as before, and there was still the same steady trickle of water from above, with its flowing gutter of icy water on their right. Over the centuries, the climate had warmed slightly in the sunlit world, and the amount of melt-water that filtered down from the mountains above now filled, and eventually even overran, the bounds of the shallow gutter. As the companions descended farther into the Common Tombs, the trickle, which had grown into a steady rivulet by the time they reached the Beast's chamber, was now waxing into a full-fledged stream. It gurgled and rushed along the floor several inches deep at its shallowest point.

Härbör grumbled as he splashed along through the dark water, mumbling something about leeches, though Delfën continually assured him the seep-waters were too cold for such creatures. If anyone had cause to complain, it was the Elf, whose pointed gray Elvân shoes were soon too short to keep out the deepening water.

"As long as the water does not get so deep it prevents us from following the main corridor, let us not complain," Mîtāk advised.

"The floor should soon begin to slope back upwards," said Zôrwind, clutching his robes up about his silvery boots, "as we enter the heart of the mountain and approach the Imperial Tombs."

"I hope so," murmured Härbôr. "'Tis certain, my boots are getting soaked, and they shall never dry out down here; not in a million years under the Mountain."

"Let us hope we are not down here quite that long," ended Mîtāk.

The companions followed the main passageway without event for some time, until presently they came to a point where the tunnel split. The main corridor continued on into the darkness in a straight line; but at that point, two smaller divergent passages broke off at right angles, level with the main hallway and with equal amounts of water filling them, as well. Härbôr kept to the central tunnel, and Dêlfën noted the two radiating corridors on his map.

Härbôr was just strolling along casually when a Fleshglutton (or what some call a *Carrion Crawler*) came into the torchlight just ahead of them. The twenty-foot-long, cutworm-like Earth Drăgôn was headed down the tunnel straight towards them, its fat round body nearly obscuring the entire corridor.

"Hew and cry! A Fleshglutton!" yelled Härbôr as he turned to run from the approaching Wÿrm.

Mîtāk looked at Härbôr, knowing how powerful the large, green larva-like serpent was, which fed on flesh, fresh or rotting. They had nowhere to go but back the way they had come.

But already the deadly, blind Wÿrm had become aware of their presence, the eight, long, purple tentacles surrounding its mouth flailing about wildly, tasting the air as it homed in on its intended victims.

Mîtāk slipped on the wet floor, twisting his ankle as he avoided Härbôr's errant fagot, while the Dwärf quickly fled the terrible monster. The huge Fleshglutton was in its best environment, making it a danger they each deemed better entirely avoided, if at all possible.

Zôrwind turned back and helped Mîtāk to his feet. The youth leaned heavily upon the wizard as they began to follow Dêlfën and Härbôr back down the corridor as fast as they could go.

But lo! The pursuing monster quickened its pace, sensing the flesh within its reach. It moved quite rapidly as its dozens of short, round legs carried it along the stone floor, but it was slowed in its scuttling along by the water that flowed along the passageway. So, the Crawler effortlessly moved up the wall as it scurried along, its suction-cup feet holding it securely to the perfectly smooth stone. Then it moved to the ceiling and

followed after the companions in a suspended fashion, crawling quickly along the smooth roof of the tunnel.

The fleeing prey knew then that they would not be able to outdistance the poisonous monster for long, especially with Mítak's sore ankle. Delfën was the quickest among them and in the lead. Thinking a smaller passageway better for defense, he turned into the corridor on his right upon reaching the intersection of tunnels. Härbör came puffing up after him and followed him down the right-hand tunnel as the two slowly outdistanced Mítak and Zörwind.

When the last two companions reached the split in the diverging passageways a few moments later, Zörwind turned to follow the others.

"Wait," said Mítak. "I am going this way." He pointed down the tunnel branching off to the left. "When the Crawler follows you three that way, I will attack it from behind." He was hoping that once the monster got into the smaller tunnel, it would not be able to turn around to fight; thus he could kill it from behind. "Stick close to the mouth of the tunnel, and get Härbör and Delfën to make a lot of noise. Hopefully it follow you down that way, since your scent-trail will be stronger."

Zörwind briefly glanced back down the darkened tunnel in the direction of the pursuing Fleshglutton and stroked his beard, then he nodded and headed after Delfën and Härbör. "Hold! Lads! Wait up!"

Delfën had run about a furlong down the right-hand passage, when his agile form rounded a sharp corner and nearly ran smack into the tall formidable figure of Zörwind. Somehow, the old magic wielder had gotten ahead of him!

A moment later Härbör rounded the same corner and crashed into Delfën, and his amber battle helm and axe went flying.

"Ma'fay! How...?" began the confused Elf as Härbör splashed about in the dark water searching for his fallen bipennis.

"Magic," answered Zörwind simply and he brushed the matter aside. "We must needs stand and fight the Fleshglutton here," he admonished. "We cannot let it get past this corner. I shall lead the first wave of attacks, but when I have exhausted my spells for the day, you two must hold the Crawler here."

"Where is...?" began Delfën when the Carrion Crawler arrived and cut him short.

Zörwind shoved the others behind himself just as the Fleshglutton turned the corner, still on the ceiling. Only half the monster's long, slimy, green body was able to round the sharp bend, before it was forced to stop and confront the wizard. Quickly Zörwind reached for the spell components he would need for his magic as he simultaneously retreated a bit

farther down the corridor. He found one component, but the Fleshglutton was already almost on top of him and he did not have the time to locate the second chemical ingredient to the spell.

'I shall have to try it without the raven ash,' he realized. Soon he would be powerful enough to cast spells without physical spell components, for with each encounter that he overcame with magic, he grew stronger; but until then, he was limited by the need for physical ingredients.

Zörwind's intent was to produce a large fireball with the spell, but without the second physical ingredient, he only succeeded in generating a very dangerous looking puff of smoke. The Fleshglutton was slowed and confused by the threatening smoke, but still one of its long, blue tentacles found its target. Fortunately the tentacle's poison was not lethal, only meant to paralyze its victims, keeping its prey fresh to devour at leisure as with a spider.

So it was that Zörwind, the greatest wizard alive, was paralyzed before the pursuant battle ever really commenced. He fell to the floor lifeless as Delfën and Härbör jumped over him and into the mêlée to prevent the Crawler from getting around the corner. By doing so, they kept the bulky monster restricted within the confines of the bend, and at a disadvantage.

"Fell Venom-slasher, taste thine enemy!" Härbör cried as he swung wildly with his heavy axe. Helped by Zörwind's smoke, he was able to keep the monster at bay for some time. Indeed, he struck one of the rubbery tentacles full-force with his weapon, and though it did not sever the appendage all the way off, the tentacle became useless and limp as the magic poison from his blessed bipennis began to spread.

Delfën fought more carefully, and swung more accurately with his slender rapier. Still, he was able to cut off two of the paralyzing appendages with the razor-sharp edges of his light blade, and duck and dodge several attacks from his opponent; but one of the tentacles finally struck him. Then he, too, was paralyzed and helpless.

"A pox on all **WHIMLHÖÜN!**" exclaimed Härbör when he accidentally stepped on the fallen companion's limp body. "By my hood, I am having a hard enough time fighting this abominable monster all by myself, without your scrawny body lying about in the way, Delfën." Härbör put his boot under the Elf's side and rolled him out of the way, turning him so that his face was no longer in the shallow water.

Then it happened. A long, purple tentacle struck Härbör right in the face.

Nap time! he thought. *And I do not have my pillow.* He waited for the paralyzing affects to take over, and positioned himself so that at least he

would not fall facedown in the water and drowned; but the paralysis never came.

My magic armor! he realized. Xärgön was right! Thank the High Lôrëän!

“Hey! You oversized, green maggot!” he yelled. “That hurt!” Then the battle-scarred Dwärf dove headlong back into the fray with the Fleshglutton and began wielding his axe with bolder stronger strokes.

But even as he drove the gigantic cutworm-like creature several links aback, Härbör began to realize that even with the blessed godsend, he could not overpower the massive Wÿrm alone. Eventually he would tire, and the Fleshglutton could simply smash him with its enormous bulk. His enchanted clothing could not protect him from that.

. . . .

The giant Carrion Crawler was not far behind as Mîtäk ducked out of sight in the shadows just inside the left-hand passageway. From the opposite corridor he could see the dwindling glow of a torch's light as Zôrwind lagged behind. The giant Wÿrm soon came to the intersection, and hung from the ceiling as it flicked its tentacles about like a snake's tongue, first towards the others and then towards Mîtäk. He heard Zôrwind's commanding voice call out from the opposite tunnel to attract the Wÿrm's attention, to draw it away from him. After a moment's hesitation, the ploy worked and the Crawler turned its bulky weight towards Zôrwind's voice and shuffled off after the wizard.

Once the Fleshglutton had made up its mind, it pursued its prey with amazing speed. But when it had nearly caught up to Zôrwind, the magic wielder suddenly disappeared!

Mîtäk's ankle was already feeling much better; luckily it was not sprained badly, just twisted painfully. Still, Mîtäk was unable to keep pace with the Crawler as he abandoned the left tunnel and crossed over into the right-hand tunnel in pursuit of the gigantic Wÿrm. As he hobbled past the burning torch Zôrwind had left behind leaning against the wall, he picked it up and continued the chase. When he could barely see the Crawler ahead of him anymore, the great green Wÿrm suddenly slowed and stopped. Mîtäk limped along as fast as he could through the flowing water to catch it up, but still it took some time to make up the distance.

“Behind you, Foul Wÿrm!” he yelled as he hobbled into battle and tried his enchanted sword for the first time on a real enemy. Still unaccustomed to its weightlessness, his first blow was easily deflected by the Fleshglutton, who had two large pincers on its rear end that Mîtäk had

not anticipated. The pincers seemed small in comparison to the Low Drägon's gigantic body, but each one was almost as long as Mîtāk's arm, and they were more powerful than he might ever have imagined. Forced to fight with the burning torch in one hand, and the unusual weightless sword in the other, it took him a while to get used to the glaive.

He swung at the Fleshglutton, but missed, for the creature was now aware of Mîtāk, and snipped its pincers about furiously in a mad attempt to protect its rear flank.

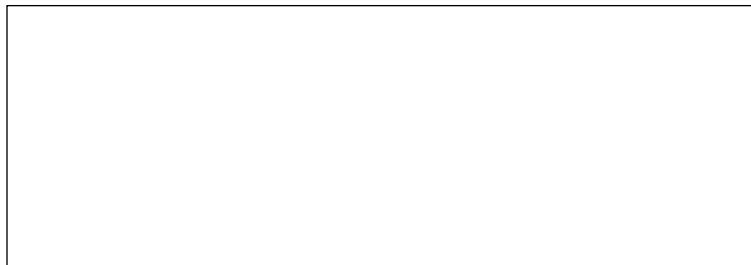
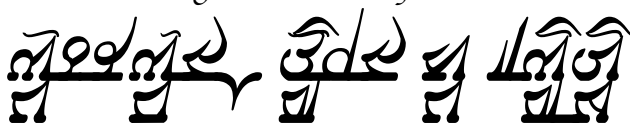
On the other side of the heaving body, around the corner, Mîtāk could hear Härbôr complaining as he chopped away at the giant Wÿrm. "Death to all foul creatures with more than two arms and legs," he shouted, "Fleshgluttons, and Bloodgluttons, and giant grubs, Dâmānits, and Drägons, and fey horses!"

Mîtāk smiled and ducked just in time to avoid a blow from above, by one of the armored claws, then swung upwards himself and struck the main body of the Crawler for the first time. But his sword did not cut into the worm-like monster! Instead, the glaive did the most extraordinary thing. Indeed, Mîtāk did not believe his eyes at first, but when he had inflicted a second direct hit, the change was so obvious he could no longer blame it on his imagination—the giant Fleshglutton was getting smaller! Each time Mîtāk landed a direct hit, his sword shrunk his opponent a little!

After about ten well placed blows the once-gigantic Carrion Crawler was about the size of a large dog. It left the ceiling and crawled down onto the wall to turn and face Mîtāk, its tentacles swarming frantically at its two adversaries, still potent enough to paralyze him for some time but no longer long enough to foil his swordsmanship.

Mîtāk continued to wield the magic glaive, eventually pinning the Crawler to the wall with the tip of his sword and shrinking the Wÿrm until it was small enough for Härbôr to squash it into the stone like a spider with the butt of his fist.

"Merry, sir! Well done, indeed!" said the fatigued Dwärf, leaning heavily against the wall. "But 'tis certain, I had the situation completely under control all along." Then the tough old Dwärf toppled over with sheer exhaustion and landed on his back with a splash in the chilly black waters.



CHAPTER FOUR

AS WARM AS STONE

Kitfir hated having her evening meals with Äzmadüs. She hated him expecting her to wear his fancy dresses. She hated his gifts of jewelry and bobbles. And most of all, she hated being his prisoner.

It was afternoon, the twelfth day since being kidnapped by the sorcerer, and as she stared out the open lancet window just before going down to sup, she thought about the awful dinners. She never knew what to say, how to say it, or even sometimes how she felt. But that evening, Kitfir would have more than enough to say to Äzmadüs. She knew exactly how she felt, now, and the only thing worrying her was if she would be able to control herself enough to keep from saying too much. She knew the truth, now, about the ambush, and about the dark sorcerer's involvement in it, and she would tell him so. No longer was she going to play his hypocritical games or avoid reality by allowing herself to believe the easy lies he told her.

When she arrived downstairs that night, the Prince had not yet come to table, so she sat herself to await his arrival.

Jôrêl came into the royal dining hall with a platter of roast mutton and boiled potatoes and carrots, and noticing the look on Kitfir face, said, "Art thou well, this eve? You look not at your best."

"I will be fine," answered Kitfir with a thin smile. There were butterflies in her stomach, and she did not have an appetite, but she forced herself to begin the meal without the Prince in defiance of his traditions.

Jôrêel walked behind Kitfir's chair, so that she could speak with her without the other slaves hearing, and more importantly, so Âzmadüs could not catch her talking with Kitfir.

"I am scared, ma'Lady," she whispered. "I canst not find the King. He came not down for breakfast this morn'; so I didst go to his bedchamber to bring him some bread and whey, but found his bed hadst never been turned down! I fear lest Âzmadüs didst discover..."

Âzmadüs walked into the dinning hall then, almost as if on queue. "Good the evening, ma'Lady," he said to Kitfir, as he always did. He motioned for Jôrêel to leave the room. (Kitfir did not notice the evil look the dark magic wielder gave Jôrêel, but the young slave did, and it made her blood run cold.)

Kitfir stood without replying to the lord's greeting. "You lied to me about my friends," she said angrily. "You had all but one of them killed, did you not?"

"Of course not, ma'Lady," said Âzmadüs. "We didst no such thing. Who hath told thee such an abominable lie? Hath Our infirm father poisoned thy gentle ears with his wicked untruths?" (The fact that Kitfir knew of the fate of her company was a surprise to Âzmadüs. The Ögre guards who had participated in the abduction had all been conveniently slain in a skirmish along the northern borders. A patrol of Homeguardsmen had been tipped off about a band of pillaging Ögres, conveniently just after the goons had destroyed their black and maroon Nöd-rêôfëân uniforms. Not even Stëngër could have told her.)

Kitfir shook her head. "It is of no moment *how* I know. They are dead, are they not?"

Âzmadüs nodded. "Beshrew Us, but We didst not kill them. Truth be told, We didst arrive just in time to save thee from the very ambush so cruelly contrived by the assassin we hitherto spoke of. Sadly, we didst arrive not soon enough nor with sufficient men to save the other members of thine expedition. For this, We art truly sorry, ma'Lady."

"You make a mock of me, sir. You are *not* sorry. *You* killed almost all of them yourself! Why?"

Âzmadüs frowned. The conversation was getting nowhere, and he was beginning to find it difficult to control his anger towards the accusations Kitfir was making. (Even if they were true.)

"Please sit," he said with unmasked strain in his voice. "Be most assured thou shall feel much the better after thou hast eaten."

Kitfir did not sit. "I am not hungry," she said coldly. "What I want is the truth from you. Why am I being held prisoner here? What are you going to do with me? Am I to be ransomed or just ravished?"

"Verily, thou art no prisoner here. We have but taken thee under Our protective watch to keep thee from harm."

"You keep me here without my consent, but I am not going to stay any longer. I am leaving tonight." Kitfir threw the lavish rings and the golden bracelet Äzmadüs had given her on the table and stomped towards the hall doors. Furiously she threw the double doors wide, but without, stood two huge Ögre guards. Like pillars of immovable stone, they blocked the egress with their crossed halberds. Kitfir slammed the doors closed, and burst into tears. She tried to hide her face from Äzmadüs, but her shoulders shook as she cried silently.

"We do care for thee, Your Royal Highness," said Äzmadüs as he moved closer. "And We are sure indeed that it be terrible hard for thee the-now; for thou art so young and frail. But thou must put thy trust in Our Humble Royal Personage." He gently put his arm around her shoulder, but Kitfir jerked away from his icy touch.

"Just leave me alone," she begged. She rubbed her skin where his cold hands seemed to have frozen the very flesh.

"We begin to grow impatient with thee, ma'Lady," said Äzmadüs harshly, his façade suddenly abandoned, and his genuine emotions showing through. His frigid words made the Princess shiver even more than his icy touch did, and he added more gently: "We have done all that We might to please thee. Have not We given thee jewels of great worth, silk cloths of the finest weave, and all the love a prince's heart may bear? And still thou dost spurn Us. Now We, too, have lost Our appetite." He wiped the corners of his mouth with a red napkin and smoothed out his black Beard.

"We have important business the-night. Get thee to thy room, if thou be not hungry, and rest thee there well. But know that We shall expect much gentler a demeanor towards thy 'Belovèd Benefactor' in future."

Äzmadüs spun Kitfir around harshly and took her face in his bony hand. He held her there, still and immobile as he pressed his thin cool lips against hers. Then he swung the tall double doors open again, and shoved the lumbering Ögres out of his way. As he strode down the hall he gave a stern command to the guards to see Kitfir to her bower, immediately, and to be certain no one disturbed her.

Kitfir woke with a start from a nightmare about Ögres being eaten by Tröls that were being eaten by Ghöls that were being eaten by worms. She had not intended to sleep so long, and she quickly got up and slipped on a sheer white robe, then stepped to the window. Silva had already set in the western sky. *I have slept too long*, she thought. *The night is more than half gone, and I had wanted more time.*

Quietly she dressed and put on some silken slippers. Then Kitfir went to her door and listened. On the other side she could hear the harsh snoring of the Ögre guard Äzmadüs had stationed there. Cautiously, she pulled out the book that would allow her to trigger the secret bookcase doorway, and tilted the carved Gärgöyle release mechanism forward. Click.

For the first time, the bookcase creaked on its hinges just a little as it swung open, and Kitfir cringed at the sound. But when she listened at her chamber door a second time, she could still hear the guard's loud snoring without.

Stepping out of the room and through the entrance to the secret passageway, she carefully swung the bookcase closed behind her. Once she was within, Kitfir removed the iron sconce from the wall and lit its tallow candle with a match. Then she began to descend the many stone steps leading to the castle-proper below.

At the bottom of the staircase she followed the tunnel she had taken to the trapdoor below Äzmadüs's study, but this time she continued on past the secret entrance and followed the passage until it split off in several different directions. She took the first one that led back upwards, and made for the castle above.

After two dead ends at locked doors, Kitfir finally found a tunnel that led to a chamber with an unlocked door. She blew her candle out and peered through the nondescript portal she stood behind, into what she found to be the castle's wine cellar. There were no servants around at that late watch, and from there she moved quickly through the rooms, heading towards the citadel's main entrance. As she wound her way up and towards the open-air ward and the massive mahogany front doors, Kitfir encountered only two guards walking their rounds. One was a short round Ögre, who walked with a distinctive limp, and the other was a tall gangly looking Single-headed Giant who had to walk with a stoop to avoid bumping his head on the ceiling.

It was Kitfir's intention to explore the possibility of escape through the front door at night, but when she got to the main entrance she found four guards stationed there: two Men with long swords at their sides, clad

in their usual black and maroon-trimmed uniforms, with the Insignia of the Nòdrêôfëän Army^{*} emblazoned upon their chests; and two Ögre guards, halberds at their sides, who wore similar (though planer and more worn) uniforms, with slightly different coat-armor over their mail hauberks. Obviously, such a plan would be less than ideal, and she resigned to the idea of searching the tunnels for a passage that might lead outside the castle-proper or even beyond the island-castle's outer walls.

With her hopes at a low, Kitfir turned and headed back before the guards spotted her, intending to first search for the slaves' quarters and visit Jôrêél. But as she crept through the castle courtyard, she had the strangest feeling she was being watched. At first she thought the feeling a premonition of impending discovery. Then, in the pale starlight, she was momentarily startled by the lifelike, marble statues, which stood shrouded in shadow in the large bailey. An eerie sensation drew Kitfir towards the sculptures, and she found she could not deny the sense of presence they exuded.

"Kitfir..." Less than a whisper.

She spun about in terror. She had been discovered. Or at least it had sounded like someone had called out her name softly.

"Who is there?" she whispered when no one approached. "Is that you, Jôrêél?" But there was nothing. No one was there. *I must be imagining things*, she concluded. Then once again she found herself strongly attracted to the strange statues. Deciding to take a closer look at them, Kitfir moved through the ward garden, wondering again why Äzmadüs kept, yet neglected, such beautiful statues.

As she drew closer to the magnificent sculptures, Kitfir found herself amazed anew at their craftsmanship. In the pale white starlight she bent close to the marble and examined it deftly, but still could find no flaw in the marble or sculpture, however insignificant.

"Diävid: Revered son of King Pïer and his queen, Nêdra," she read one inscription. *Äzmadüs's elder brother*, she thought. The base and the engraved plaque looked to be ordinary marble and brass, with dark mineral veins and the beginnings of corrosion, unlike the pure white statues, without even a hint of imperfection to the stone.

"Baron-General Bôroxén: Who died for his king and for his country."

The next statue Kitfir remembered well, for it had reminded her so strongly of her own mother, when she had first seen it more than a quarter-moonth before: "Queen Nêdra: beloved of her king, Lord Pïer."

^{*} see: Appendix F⇒Roll of Arms of İndrêl⇒Insignia of the Nòdrêôfëän Army

Kitfir could not remember there being more than three statues the first time she had seen them, but now there were two more. Curiously she moved closer to read the inscriptions. At once, she recognized the first new statue to be a semblance of the King, himself, whom she had met at dinner her first night in Nödrêôf.

"King Piër: sovereign lord and gentle father," the inscription read. Kitfir wondered if he, too, had now died mysteriously as Jôrêél had said of the other members of the royal family. She did mention the King had not slept in his bed the previous night.

Kitfir's eyes went from the inscription of the King's statue, to the one next to it. *How odd*, she thought. It was the only statue without an inscription.

"Jôrêél!" she cried aloud softly in amazement when she saw the white figure of her slave friend.

Why had Âzmadüs commissioned a statue of one of his slaves? she wondered. The sculptor's craft was so sublime she could not help but think, *How lifelike she looks in the starlight*.

Again she thought she heard her name whispered softly.

"Kitfir..."

"Hark! How now! Who goes there that hides among the shadows so?" the Princess demanded, trying to sound bold. Something frightened her, something more than the fear of discovery, or who it might be that called her name. Kitfir's stomach tightened and the hair prickled as it did when Âzmadüs touched her. "Dark Prince, is that you?"

But there was no reply. Something unnatural was in the air, an apprehension of the sixth sense that told Kitfir things were awry.

"Kitfir..."

The Princess gently touched the cheek of the marble statue before her; Jôrêél's cheek. It was warm against her hand. *What bedevilment is this? What wicked sorcery?* She fell away with fright at the unnatural touch. *By the Ancient Ones!* she realized. *Cruel Âzmadüs has turned you all to stone!*

O dear Jôrêél, dear Jôrêél; I am truly sorry I got you involved.

ମିତାକ ଓ ଦାର୍ବର ସହ ଲୁଣ୍ଠନ



CHAPTER FIVE

WHAT KIND OF BAG?

Mītāk and Dārbōr needed to find someplace for them all to spend the night, far below the starry skies of Āsārē. The seasoned Dvärf had encountered Carrion Crawlers before, and from costly experience knew the paralysis-inducing poison would wear off on their immobilized companions in less than a day's time. The important thing was to keep the victims warm and to prevent moisture from building up in their lungs.

They found a small cell just off the main corridor inhabited by a battle-hammer-wielding Minotaur. The half-bovine beast was forced to give up his residence to the terrestrial travelers when young Mītāk shrank him down to the size of a common house cat with his enchanted sword. He gave the Minotaur two choices of action, then: either to, "Surrender and abandon your lair and treasure or I shall put a ring through your nose and parade you through these catacombs like a shaved dog!"

The once-ferocious Minotaur scurried away down the darkened corridor, its bull-tail between its hairy Man-legs as might a sniveling hound who knows it has wronged its master.

Judging the uneventful passage of time by the lives of their slowly burning fagots, Mītāk bided his watch tinkering with what appeared to be some sort of strange device the minotaur had left behind, along with a small assortment of precious gold and silver trinkets. The curious object

was an intricately carved, golden ball, about the size of his fist, with mysterious runes and strange designs engraved upon its polished surface. Inlaid in the precious metal were dozens and dozens of tiny, multifaceted jewels, which shimmered and sparkled in his burning torchlight like the morning sun gleaming off crystals of ice formed during a cold Fore-midwinter night's frost.

After a time, Mîtak became bored with the golden puzzle, and tossed it into the pile of gold coins, goblets, and utensils he and Härbôr had made when sorting through the minotaur's treasure hoard. He remembered a medium sized barrel of ale the minotaur had kept, and having nothing better to do while he waited, he picked up one of the golden goblets and wiped it clean the best he could with his soiled shirttail, polishing the chalice until it reflected a comical distorted image of his upside-down face in its concave bowl. He poured himself a draught of the dark brown liquid, smelled the ale, and it seemed good; so he took a sampler-sip. To his surprise, he found the brew in the oaken barrel was not good but was, in fact, marvelous—some of the best beer he had ever tasted.

"Here, have a drink," he offered some of the dark liquid to Härbôr. "It is pretty good."

But the old Dwärf shook his head negatively and mumbled something about having to sharpen his, "combat awareness." He insisted it was his personal fault they had run into the Fleshglutton as unprepared as they had. Härbôr was convinced that if he had been a little more alert, Zôrwind and Dêlfën would not have been injured.

Mîtak tried to relieve Härbôr of his guilt, insisting that there was nothing he could have done, but the dispirited Dwärf chose to squat alone in a corner and chant to himself in concentration.

. . . .

Mîtak woke with a start when Dêlfën moaned. His head hurt. He looked around the small torch-lit chamber and found that the Carrion Crawler's poison was wearing off as *Lê Êlf* began to stir. He heard Härbôr still chanting to himself in his gruff Low Dwärvän Tongue.

When the Êlf was coherent enough to sit up, Härbôr came over and joined them. He gave Dêlfën some stew he had made from the dried jerky they had brought along, and some of the ale (for medicinal purposes). Before long, Dêlfën was up and about, and not long thereafter, Zôrwind came around as well. As soon as the old wizard had recovered a little, he discovered the golden sphere Mîtak had been playing with, and

found, to his utter horror, that Mîtāk had considered using the golden object as a ball, “to play catch with Härbôr with,” in order to pass the time. The tall magic wielder’s eyes narrowed at discovering that, and once again Mîtāk was reminded of how intimidating the silver-robed wizard could be.

“I charge thee a fool and a child! Mark you how you must now put your youthful games aside and learn the ways of manhood! Such thoughtlessness could get us all killed!” The seven-foot-tall Man towered over Mîtāk like a scolding father, and his sharp blue eyes burned into the youth like biting steel dirks. The sudden change in Zôrwind’s character reminded Mîtāk of the magic wielder’s darker side, the one that the wizard had kept so well hidden from him until reaching Asärê.

Mîtāk stood up to confront the Zôrwind, and held his powerful stare for several moments. “I did not know.”

Then, just as quickly as the anger had emerged, it disappeared, and a smile crossed the old Man’s bearded face. “Of course you did not. And I am sorry, Young Mîtāk,” he apologized. “But please be more careful in future.” He stroked the long growth of silver whiskers that stretched to his knees and said thoughtfully: “Quite an astonishing discovery, this is, I deem; you may be proud of that much.” Zôrwind took the hollow, gold sphere in his hands and turned it over and over, reading the runes on its round surface silently to himself.

“Well, ZÔTÔR?” said Härbôr.

“Yes, this object is enchanted and is very valuable, indeed,” the wizard said at length. “Because it needs no other spell components to work, an item like this is virtually priceless among wielders of magic and sorcery. It was fashioned a long time ago, I would say, perhaps during the Age of Art—at the beginning of the Epoch of Man—more than a millennium and a half ago,” explained Zôrwind. “’Tis called a *lûmin*.”

Härbôr stood on his toes and leaned forward to get a better look at the fascinating object held between Mîtāk and Zôrwind.

“Truly. But what does it do?” asked Dêlfên. He reached to take the golden sphere and examine it more closely himself.

But Zôrwind withdrew the lûmin from the Êlf’s reach almost savagely. His eyes narrowed once again, and the Êlf and Dwärf stepped aback. “I claim this object for myself as the sole magic wielder among us,” he said. “Remember our bargain at the onset of the quest.” Zôrwind tried to control himself, but he could not restrain his sudden greed. His attraction to the lûmin was so powerful it would have been very difficult to give the enchanted object to Dêlfên, even if he had wanted to. For to magic wielders, such as Zôrwind, the allure of powerfully enchanted objects could be so enticing they might unintentionally injure, even

friends, to retain their possessions. (Mèràk had felt the same magnetism when he had given Mítàk his share of the wishstones; but the sensation was much weaker for the boy, because he was not a magic wielder, and he had not had the stones in his possession for very long.)

Härbôr had been around ZÔTÔR far longer than the others, and he knew that the wizard—as with all magic wielders—had little ability to control himself when it came to his strange and compelling attraction to enchanted objects.

Zôrwind turned the sphere over and over in his dexterous hands again. “What does it do?” he echoed Dêlfên’s question. “Something wonderful.” He rubbed the golden ball tenderly with his long fingers. As he did so, he softly spoke the necessary incantations, which he read from its shiny surface. “*ÄNTËMUS LÜMINÖRËUM*,” he articulated slowly, and the globe began to glow.

The sphere’s bright yellow-white light grew increasingly intense, until Mítàk wondered that it did not burn the wizard’s hands.

Zôrwind’s companions stared at the glowing ball with awe. At first, to them the light was a mere fascination of curiosity, but to Zôrwind, the discovery of a lümin meant something much more profound. Now he could search the catacombs for *The Sôrsër* for much longer periods of time without the necessity of having to frequently resurface. With no need to carry many heavy torches, they could carry far greater amounts of food and water at a time into the Great Tombs.

Nonchalantly he tossed the lümin in the air and turned to walk over to the pile of “trash” Mítàk and Härbôr had discarded from the minotaur’s treasure hoard. The wondrous ball did not simply fall back to the ground, however. As Zôrwind walked, the lümin followed him, hovering in the air a few hands above his left shoulder; thus the glowing sphere of gold lit his way in the darkness, replacing the cumbersome fagots with its inexhaustible source of bright clear light.

“Now, let us see what other great treasures you two would throw away,” said Zôrwind, his lighter mood a relief to everyone after his sudden changes of personality. The wizard was more like his usual self again, but Mítàk and Dêlfên did not so easily forget the harsher side of the Man that they had now been privy to. The sometimes brutally cold wizard scared them both, more than a little bit, and they exchanged a brief look of uncertainty before following him over to the corner of the cell, where Zôrwind scoured the minotaur’s discarded possessions carefully.

Though he certainly did not expect to find *The Sôrsër* among the “great treasures” they had discarded, he hoped to perhaps find other enchanted items like the lümin. Carefully, he picked through the

trinkets: a gold-dudgeoned stiletto whose poorly forged blade was rusted, dull and nicked; ten copper regals overlooked in a small leather pouch, which he tossed aside (and which Härbôr quickly recovered); and the always abundant bones of Men.

Then Zôrwind picked up a small black vial and examined it closely. He tried to conceal his excitement at finding the tiny bottle.

But Mîtāk noticed the slightest widening of the mâge's crystal-blue eyes and how they dilated, and he sensed that it was more significant than the wizard was letting on.

"What is that?" asked Dêlfën.

Zôrwind looked at the Òlf with what could only be described as disgust. "Nothing," said the wizard and he tossed the vial aside.

Once again, Mîtāk caught the magician as he palmed the vial. The young leader looked at Dêlfën and Härbôr—neither one of them had seen the wizard's prestidigitation, secretly slipping the vial into a pocket of his robes with one hand as he seemed to toss it away with the other.

"You see," said Mîtāk, changing the subject. "There really was not a lot here; so we did not think much about the gold ball—the lümin, I mean. How were we to possibly know its worth?"

Zôrwind looked at Mîtāk, but he did not say anything. Then he nodded his head slowly and said, "Yes, but it is a good thing I am well versed in magical devices and charms. Do any of you know what this is?" he asked the other companions. Zôrwind held up an empty, black bag. The large pouch looked quite ordinary. It was made of velvety sable cloth, about an arm's-length long, and it had a simple golden drawstring. It looked just like a dozen other bags Mîtāk had seen before in the markets and stores of Ärqüâvêä.

Zôrwind held the black velvet satchel out so the others might examine it more closely; but none of them could find anything that looked out of the ordinary. He tossed it to Dêlfën. "Examine it well."

Dêlfën pulled the drawstrings open and looked inside. Nothing. He passed it to Härbôr, who turned it over and shook it. Nothing fell out.

The Dwärf passed it on to Mîtāk, who felt its weight and reached inside tentatively (after checking with the wizard). Nothing inside that he could feel. He was just about to turn it inside out, when Zôrwind took it back.

"I would not do that, if I were you," said the magic wielder. "My friends, I urge you all: You must be most careful; something that seems ordinary and harmless, could be very dangerous if enchanted, or at the very least, priceless beyond belief. If you find anything, and I stress the word *anything*, that seems the slightest bit peculiar or strange, bring it to me to examine, at once. Something like this ordinary-looking bag could

very well be of great importance or worth to us, as indeed this one is. 'Tis probably the most valuable item we have found thus far, or of at least equal import as the lümin. For it is nothing less than a *bag of holding!*"

"What kind of bag? You mean one that actually holds things?" said Härbôr sarcastically.

Zôrwind smiled. Gone was any hint of nefarious maliciousness. "A *boundless satchel*," He repeated. The Wizard was proud of his new paraphernalia and wanted to show it off. "Tell me, Gentle Härbôr, what were you planning on doing with all that heavy gold you hope to find in these catacombs? Carry it home with you on your back?"

Härbôr nodded stupidly as if put in a trance by the mere mention of the word, "gold."

"Well then, Goodly Dwärf, your aspirations are quite mediocre. You could hardly pack out that pile of 'treasure' you took from the minotaur.

"All of your hopes are far too petty, if you had planned on carrying out even but a tenth part of the wealth we shall find in these catacombs." Zôrwind looked at Mîtäk and Dêlfên as he spoke. "I am Zôrwind the Young, to the Men of Fêrmên, Zôrwind the Silver, among my equals,"

"**ZÔTÔR**, the Wise Lord, we Low **KHWÄGËNZKH** call you."

The wizard nodded to Härbôr and continued: "And Zôrwindüs Mîstförium, to the High Êlves... I do not quest for trivial prize! I warrant Your Graces, we shall recoup enough booty from the wretched monsters who thrive here upon the defiled sepulchers of noble Men, and reclaim enough gold and wealth, for each of us to establish his own kingdom, if he so desired!"

At the thought of so much gold, Härbôr got so excited he could not contain himself. "**RRÖ! RRÖ! RRÖ!**" he sang as he danced about the chamber—"Gold! Gold! Gold!"

*Visions of gold,
In dreams unfold!
Bracelets of gold,
We will behold!
Rings of gold,
Will never grow old!
Trinkets of gold,
Have worth untold!
Cloth of gold,
Will never mold!
Sheets of gold,
Hammered and rolled!
Plates of gold,*

Buried of old!
Goblets of gold,
One-hundred-fold!
Armor of gold,
Won't feel so cold!
Coins of gold,
Some Goblin stolèd!
Bags of gold,
Hold wealth untold!
Nuggets of gold,
To craft and mold!
Ingots of gold,
Should never be sold!
Bars of gold,
Too heavy to hold!
Mountains of gold,
Reward the bold!

Mîták and Dêlfên, however, had gone on the quest for other reasons. But now that the idea of vast amounts of wealth was presented to them so succinctly, they, too, found the thought enticing in their own ways; particularly Mîták.

The things I would do if I were rich! he thought. I would buy Father a house so big he would get lost on the way to bed every night. And I would get Mêrâk more books than he could read in a lifetime—a whole library filled with knowledge for him to study. They would really like that, I should think.

And for me? Well I would offer it all as a marriage portion to King Jôrân, if it would win the hand of that fair maiden they call Princess Kitfir.

Now Härbôr's list of dreams—the things he would do and buy and collect with so much gold, is far too lengthy to be enumerated in this short account of their adventures. Suffice it to say: in such a long list, he forgot to think of anyone else but himself, even once as he went to market with the imagined gold.

It was Dêlfên who interrupted their splendid thoughts. "Let me remind you all that the reason we are here is for the sake of a poor scared child—a young princess, who, at this very moment, is probably wondering if anyone at all cares about her and if anyone in the World is coming to rescue her.

"Truly. And mark you this, here we stand gloating over ourselves and what we would like, when young Kitfir would certainly trade all the

riches in Índrêl for an evening at home again with her family and loved ones." Dêlfên turned his back on the other companions and got his pack. He strapped his Êlván shield to it, with its Ärqüâvêân/Ëstêrêân insignias^a split palewise on its leaf-shaped surface^a and then shouldered the heavy burden without help. He headed for the door that led in the direction in which they intended to proceed.

Härbôr and Mîták could not help but feel guilty about thinking of themselves so greedily, when they had insisted all along that they were doing this for Kitfir's sake.

Before the proud Êlf reached the door, however, Zôrwind stopped him. "Dêlfên, Gentle Êlf," he said. "You are quite right, we are all guilty of thinking of ourselves first, once in a while; including myself. But let us also rejoice in the good fortunes the Lôrêân do bestowed upon us. For look you, this bag of holding shall in first wise help us in our quest to save the Princess; but it will also well further our own means.

"Here, let me have your pack a trice, Dêlfên," he said kindly. Zôrwind helped the Êlf remove the awkward pack. "Not only is this a heavy burden and limited in its capacity but it is also quite dangerous. If each of us had not such a heavy pack on our backs yesterday, we just might have been able to outrun the Fleshglutton. Mîták, perhaps, might not have twisted his ankle. And I might have been just a little quicker with my spell-casting."

"Ach! 'Tis certain. But what choice do we have?" asked Härbôr. "Even without the need for torches, we must still at the very least carry our bedrolls, our rations, and our armor and weapons."

Everyone nodded. What Zôrwind had said made sense, but they failed to understand how one small bag would help.

"Even if that thing could make Dêlfên's pack weightless as is my enchanted sword, it is still only one pack."

Silently, Zôrwind loosed the drawstrings to the bag and stretched the velvet satchel, which did not seem as though it could, but did, so that it engulfed Dêlfên's pack entirely, shield and all; like a serpent swallowing a much larger prey. Then, when Zôrwind pulled the drawstring tight again, the bag of holding shriveled to its original loose form.

Zôrwind tossed the bag to Dêlfên.

"Truly, 'tis as light as air!" the amazed Êlf cried with surprise. "But where is my pack?" Dêlfên felt for the large pack and shield through the strange, black material.

^a see: Appendix F⇒Roll of Arms of Índrêl⇒Dêlfên's Shield

^a see: Appendix F⇒Roll of Arms of Índrêl⇒Dêlfên's Shield

"I cannot tell you its secret ways," answered Zörwind. "But I *can* tell you that whenever you wish to retrieve your pack, merely open the drawstring and turn the bag over. Then all you need do is ask for your pack to come forth."

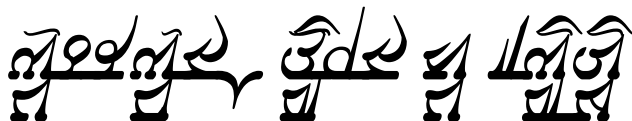
This Delfën did as Zörwind spoke, and sure enough, out fell the Elf's pack, larger than the bag itself had just been.

Everyone was quite pleased with the trick, especially Härbör, when he learned he could put the heavy barrel of ale they had found in the bag as well. He was pleased they would not have to leave the fine keg of brew behind, since he had tasted some of it, when administering a cupful to Delfën, earlier, and had found it to be quite remarkable. But more than anything else, he was thrilled with the idea of being able to put an unlimited amount of heavy gold into the bag, although a little hesitant to trust the black satchel with his share of the treasure, until he had tested it several times with the bag of silver coins.

Lastly, the companions put their packs and extra pouches in the bag of holding. With Zörwind carrying the bag strapped to his thin silver belt, they prepared to continue their search for the Sealed Chambers, where they hoped to find more items that could help them defeat Azmadüs.

They backtracked to the spot where they had run into the Fleshglutton and then continued down the central corridor, encountering no persons or monsters along the way. For since passing through the room with the Stonetrapper, the tunnels had grown less and less populated.

Härbör was in the lead once again, with Delfën at the rear, Zörwind and Mîtäk, ready and cautious.



CHAPTER SIX

SUCH A SIMPLE TASK

THE companions had been walking and talking for some time when the passageway opened up abruptly into a spacious, natural cavern. The smooth, level path still cut its way through the stalagmites and boulders, but the lavishly carved and tiled walls of the main corridor were gone. Here and there the path spanned narrow fissures with small stone bridges, keeping the course straight and unwavering. The small rivulet that had followed them since before the Camouflage Beast's chamber, disappeared into the first deep crack they encountered, tumbling and churning out of sight, to some unseen subterranean tarn, never again to see the light of day, return once again to the clouds far above, or see the deep, wide sea.

Seep-water was still abundant in the cavern, however, and it dripped down from the high ceiling into crystal-clear pools or onto magnificent stone formations. Härbör pointed out the various strange growths and described and named them for the others: "Those cones on the floor are called *stalagmites*," he explained. "Water that seeps through the rock above us becomes saturated with minerals and when it strikes the floor it forms calcite deposits that slowly grow upwards over many thousands of years under the Mountain. If they grow long enough and tall enough, they will meet up with their counterparts overhead—the icicle-like *stalactites*—and when they do, they form *columns* as are those, or *curtains* such as the ones over there." He pointed out several of the beautiful

natural pillars—red, orange, brown, and white ones. Then he had ZÖTÖR shine the magical lümin-light through several translucent banded *curtains* or *draperies*. He pointed out strangely twisted cylinders snaking out of the walls and ceilings called *helicites* and delicately spiraled *gypsum flowers* that sprouted from the living rock. Slick wet *flowstone* colorfully covered much of the floor and walls. The cavern was magnificent in the bright light that revealed the various and varied speleothem structures in all their glory.

Some of the glistening white calcite formations reminded Mîtāk of the tall towers of Ärqüävëä's Keep and others reminded Dëlfën of the leafy boughs of a forest canopy.

Almost as soon as it had begun, however, the strange grotto ended, and once again the path cut its way straight through the solid rock. A tunnel similar in shape and design to the central corridor they had passed through earlier took them several furlongs into the stone, and then, for the first time, it began to slope upwards, with wide shallow stone steps.

Dëlfën recorded one-and-one-hundred steps on his map; then the corridor opened up into yet another cavern, larger and more expansive than the first. The second natural cave was drier than the previous one and perhaps older, for the majority of the stalactites and stalagmites had grown into ancient-looking pillars. The air was dry, but once it had been full of moisture, for the walls, ceilings, curtains, and columns sparkled with a coating of tiny crystals. Indeed, the air was warm and acrid with the smell of brimstone—not the cool, damp atmosphere they had encountered at the entrance to the Great Tombs and throughout all the passages they had thus far explored.

The companions had gone only a few dozen paces into the second vast cavern, when they were forced to come to a sudden halt where the path ended in a sheer chasm.

As Mîtāk looked over the steep edge of the giant fissure, he could feel the heat rising from a pool of molten rock, which filled the bottom of the fracture some dozen fathoms below. The little water that did drip from the ceiling and the small pools that flowed into the fissure sent jets of hissing steam rising upwards. As the air cooled and the dissolved lime in the steam was forced out of solution, gigantic crystals had formed upon the rim of the chasm, red in the glowing light, so that they looked like sharp, bloody teeth along the edge of a gargantuan hungry maw.

Beyond the chasm of steaming red magma, on the farther side of the fissure, Mîtāk could see a large drawbridge in the upright position. *Probably left that way when Potentate Längsförth the Long-Lived was entombed in the vaults beyond, a thousand years ago*, he thought.

There were also the skeletal remains of several soldiers, still in uniform and armor, on the distant side of the chasm, encrusted with sparkling crystals of red and blue. They had apparently died defending the crossing, and still lay or sat slumped where they had fallen long, long ages ago. A tattered royal standard stood pitched defiantly beside the drawbridge, and the purple and white labarum testified that none of the soldiers had lived to bury their dead. It also attested to the fact that their vanquished foes had never crossed the open fissure and claimed a victory, for they would certainly have cast down the standard, if they had.

“Were they Asäreäns or Asävëäns?” asked Dëlfën, whose keen green eyes could see the royal seal* on the ancient standard. “Purple, three lions rampant guardant in fess argent, on a chief nebuly argent a ruined castle and a castle purple, in base a three-headed Hýdrá, and a gore sinister argent.”

“Asävëäns,” concluded Zôrwind. “And indeed, this confirms my suspicions. They must have died here in Asäre after interring their king, Emperor Lándrôs, in his ally’s tomb; the very tomb we seek. Both kings were slain on the field in the Battle of Kéntrê Plateau. And it would appear that Emperor Lándrôs’s guard remained behind to defend the vault from attack and raised the drawbridge as a last defense,” he added. “But it does not look like Sêhtôn’s Men ever made it across.”

Härbôr nodded his agreement. “They must have been valiant soldiers, those sturdy Men of **ÄZGHÖRRÄTH**. ’Tis certain.”

“Truly. But why bury an Asävëän king in Asäre?” asked Dëlfën.

Mîták did not know a whole lot about the fall of those ancient and mighty kingdoms during the terrible Great War, but he could follow most of what the others were saying. He remembered what Xärgôn had told him about the battle between those faithful to the Ancient *Lôrëän* and those who had rebelled against Them.

“As you know,” the wizard explained to the others, “the Faithful were led by Hêrômêr the True and by Potentate Längsförth and Emperor Lándrôs. They fought against the powerful sorcerer Sêhtôn the Malcontent and his henchman, Dôgämdüs.” (Again, Mîták was familiar enough with the dark priest he had since met in the Temple of the Priestesses).



* Emblazon:

Blazon of the Imperial Asävëän Seal: Purple, three lions rampant guardant in fess argent, on a chief nebuly argent a ruined castle and a castle purple, in base a three-headed Hýdrá, and a gore sinister argent

see also: Appendix F⇒Roll of Arms of İndrêl⇒Imperial Asävëän Seal

"Towards the end of the great struggle, it seemed almost pointless for Men to fight any longer on either side; so many Dâmăniŧs and beneficent Demigods had been released by İximălêfăŧôr and by the Benevolent *Lôrêân* upon the World. Once the colossal combatants had been brought into play by *The Sôrser* and *The Skîwărd*, it appeared as though the only thing left for the mortals of the İndrêl to do was to watch and wait for the outcome of the struggling titans. And troth, the Apocalypse War *had* escalated into a battle in which, among mortal men, only Hêrômêr and Sêhtôn held sway over the outcome.

"Yet by the time Hêrômêr had thrown down his sorcerous brother, the wicked forces Sêhtôn had allied unto himself—Köböldes and Örcs and Trölls and Goblins—had been almost utterly wiped out by the Hero's Men and Êlves and Dwärves and Hălfêns. Unfortunately, it was the same for the Hero's forces as well: the Êstêrêâns and **FHÊLHDS-FHĂRÊÂNS** had loŧt many, and of the High Dwărvăn forces, not a single brave wee-warrior remained alive, so that their race was utterly destroyed then. Indeed, the once unrivaled kingdoms of Asărê and Asăvô both lay in ruins, both of their great kings dead. And verily, those few Men of Asărê who *had* survived the holocaust fled into the wilderness with their Women and children, to hide themselves away, wanting only to be left alone, that they might have a chance to feed and provide for their families during the rapidly approaching winter."

All this, Zôrwind recounted; though he knew more as well... Indeed, he had wanted to tell his companions at the onset of their quest, about the talisman he sought, the book of Malevolent Sorcery that Sêhtôn had wielded in the Battle of Ancient Magic and Sorcery—*The Sôrser*; but he had dared not for fear that Âzmadüs would somehow thwart his efforts yet again as he had once before been able to do so.

"And, 'Why bury an Asăvêân king in Asărê?'" the wizard answered the question finally: "Because, as a kingdom, Asăvô was no more. By war's end, only some few survivors remained in the ruins of a city that had been all but leveled by combat and sabotage, and this they abandoned at that time. But in doing so, a great secret was concealed—an enigma that has been kept well hidden for a thousand years. When Emperor Lăndrôs, the last emperor imperator of Asăvô, was laid to rest here beside his sister's spouse—His Majesty Imperial Lăngsfôrth the Long-Lived, the last emperor potentate of Asărê—it is believed that a most momentous and infamous talisman was interred with him. Indeed it is for this reason that I came upon this quest—for it is here that I hope to find *The Sôrser*."

"*The Sôrser*?" repeated Mîŧăk.

"Yes," said Zôrwind.

"What? What? And just what would you do with that foul tome?" demanded Härbör.

"I would try to keep the lost book from Äzmadüs. Then we might at least hope for a possible victory over the Dark Lord, and retain a glimmer of hope that we might rescue Princess Kitfir from him."

"You speak as if our chances are almost nil," said Mitäk.

Zörwind looked around as though the very walls might have ears. "Right now they are, and if Äzmadüs acquires *The Sörsër* before us, we are doomed completely and forever. For without *The Skiwärd* to protect us, he would rule with malevolence FOREVER!"

"So that is why the soldiers stayed behind," concluded Härbör, "to protect *The Sörsër*, in the event that somehow it was discovered that the accursed volume had been hidden in the tomb with their dead king after he fell in the last stand at the Battle of Këntre Plateau."

Zörwind nodded.

The molten rock at the bottom of the chasm bubbled and hissed as more gas was released from far below the surface. The pressure caused globs of the lava to shoot up into the air, interrupting their thoughts, and forcing Mitäk to ignore his growing doubts about their wizard for a time.

"Yes, but what about the problem at hand?" he pointed out. "Somehow we need to get across this fissure." He gestured towards the wide chasm and its molten bottom. "We still face the same dilemma that has been faced a thousand years."

"It looks to be something more than a rod across," Härbör estimated.

Mitäk nodded.

"When I was young, I competed in the Hëndërm Games," said Dëlfën. "I represented the Êstëréän Êlves in the javelin throw, the overland run between Hëndërm and Hôpshîr (for which I won the Griffin Ribbon), and..."

"Enough of the vainglorious autobiography," interrupted Härbör. "What has it got to do with us finding a way across the chasm?"

Dëlfën cleared his throat and held his lithe Êlván frame erect and proud. "As I was saying, gentle brother," he continued: "and thirdly, I competed in the running far jump. I cleared one-rod-ell-a-hand-and-two-fingers, with two one-stone weights. Truly methinks I could jump across the chasm and lower the drawbridge from the other side, if I but had some good hand weights." Dëlfën looked down his slender nose at Härbör. "Dwärvës do not compete in that event, you know. I guess their legs are too short."

Härbör's round bulbous nose and cheeks turned a bright red, which Dëlfën declared went well with his amber clothes.

"You... It is not fair... 'Tis certain..." That was about as far as the Dwärf's retorts went. His tongue seemed to be tied up with the more colorful parts of his chides.

"I think that is about enough," barked Mîtāk. He stepped between the Ēlf and the Dwärf and placed a hand on the shoulder of each.

"Truly," Dēlfēn nodded his support.

"From both of you!" Mîtāk gave Dēlfēn a stern look.

"That idea is too risky, anyway," decided Zôrwind. "You were younger then and practiced. And what if the chasm is one-rod-ell-and-two-hands wide, and you land a few fingers short of the other side? 'Tis not worth that risk. We shall find another way."

Mîtāk looked at the bridge on the far side of the fissure. "Zôrwind is right. There must be another solution, some way to lower the bridge from our side." He studied the bridge's workings in the dull light. "Zôrwind, is there a way you can light up that area by the drawbridge, where the gears and counter-weights are?" he asked, pointing to the raising mechanism at its base.

With a nod, Zôrwind spoke a few *š*pidery words of magic to his lümin. The small, glowing ball left the *š*pot above his left shoulder, where it had been hovering quietly, and shot across the chasm to the drawbridge.

In the new light Mîtāk could see the bridge's gear-works, weights, and chains clearly. "Tell me how it works, Härbôr," he said.

"Now that is *my* *š*pecialty." Härbôr gave Dēlfēn a look out of the corner of his eye. "Ach! 'Tis certain, I can fix anything that used to work, sabotage anything that still does, and manufacture anything that has not yet been proven. If it has gears or *š*prings, pins or blocks, or if you can smith it with anvil and forge, carve it with a knife or chisel, build it with mortar and stone, or shape it with a hammer and saw, then you might as well start with me, because I am the best there is."

Dēlfēn drew a deep breath and let it out, emphasizing his boredom at having to listen to Härbôr's self-proclaimed "grandiosity."

"It looks to be a fairly simple mechanism," Härbôr continued. "That chain there is attached to the counterweights, there, which help to raise the heavy drawbridge and keep it from slamming down when lowered. You could either release the weights by removing the cog from the cranking mechanism or by cutting the chain, and it would fall across the chasm under its own weight." Härbôr stroked his long, red and gray-streaked beard as he thought.

"Then we must cut the chain," decided Mîtāk.

"Truly. But how?" asked Dēlfēn.

“Magic?” suggested Mítak. “A lightning bolt or something?” He looked at Zôrwind, who shook his head negatively.

“Too costly.”

Then Mítak had another idea. “Could you not just teleport yourself over there, Zôrwind; like you did yesterday with the Carrion Crawler?”

Zôrwind nodded affirmatively. “Not as tolling, and yes, I could have yesterday, but not today—I used the last of the major physical spell component for that incantation yesterday. Unless any of you by chance have some down from a fledgling Griffin on you. I am all out. Any other ideas?”

Everyone shook his head.

Unwilling to give up just yet, Mítak walked along the sheer edge of the chasm, hoping to find some clue as to how they could get across it. He scratched the short stubble of his brown beard as he studied the cliff walls with their deceptively beautiful crystalline formations and then stared up intently at the cavern’s high ceiling. “Mayhap we could attach a length of rope to one of those stalactites and swing across,” he suggested.

The others looked up and thought about his idea.

Härbör shook his head negatively. “We have rope that is long enough; ’tis certain. But I do not know that it would hold a person’s weight; stalactites are often hollow and can be quite brittle, you know... At least the ones that formed in the mountains near **FHËLHDSFHÄR**.” He grabbed hold of the tip of a nearby small stalagmite and broke it off with his bare hands. He nodded. “Even a scrawny little **KHWÂGËN** like Dêlfên, could not hope to swing across on one of them,” he decided sarcastically.

“Agreed. They are most certainly too weak,” said Zôrwind quickly, hoping to prevent another confrontation between the two troublemakers before it started. “But the idea of using rope to get across has given me the inspiration for another idea. It involves a cheap carnival trick I learned as a youth, but it might just be what we need. I do not know why I did not think of it earlier.”

After Zôrwind had prepared his spell, Mítak and the others watched as he sent a length of their sturdiest rope stretching out across the chasm, snakelike. The cord drifted across the fissure and then wound itself mystically about one of the bridge’s supports. Then twisting and turning upon itself like a constricting serpent, it tied itself in a knot on the far side of the crevasse.

The end of rope on the companion’s side was then wrapped around a large column formation and drawn tight only a few inches above the ground.

"And who do you propose is going to go dancing along that line?" questioned Härbôr. "I suppose you assumed that I would be the one to risk his neck in a balancing act over molten magma!"

"You did say that you are 'the best there is,'" pointed out Dêlfên.

"Well, I..."

"No need for modesty, gentle Härbôr," remarked Mîrâk. "I suppose I am much lighter than you, anyway..."

"And by that logic, I am the lightest of all," pointed out Dêlfên.

"And more to the point: you are probably the only one here who could do such a thing," pointed out Zôrwind. "But it was my idea..."

"And for that we all thank you," Mîrâk cut him off this time. "But you are right. Who would be better suited to the daring task than an Êlf? I would go myself, if I thought I was half as nimble as you, Dêlfên. But you are the Star-Child, after all. Do you think you could make it?"

Dêlfên nodded his head and leaped onto the taut rope without another moment's discussion. He used his longbow for balance and started to walk across the fire-bottomed fissure.

Even though he was indeed an extremely dexterous and agile Êlf, for Dêlfên Half-Êlvân, the balancing act was quite a test—not physically, but mentally. He had danced along plenty of narrow fences with his childhood playmates, as sprightly in his day as any Êlvân youth. Such a simple task at ground level, but crossing the wide chasm with Death waiting anxiously at its bottom, it was quite a different matter altogether. And the anticipation of certain fatality, should he slip or fall, knotted his muscles and distracted his concentration. Dêlfên's breath came in shallow gasps as he worked his way slowly across the frighteningly wide fissure. He kept his eyes on the pointed tips of his soft-soled hunting shoes, slowly putting one foot in front of the other, and tried to think of nothing else but balance. First left, then the right foot. Left. Right. One small step after another. Such a simple task a fathom above the ground—nearly impossible when suspended high above molten rock. (At least in the mind.)

Nervously, Dêlfên twisted his longbow in his sweaty hands. The heat rising up from the lava was intense. It burned his legs beneath his thin gray leggings, and he decided the molten rock must have been a recent intruder to the chasm, for he was certain the wooden drawbridge would not have lasted long in the ardent air before eventually catching fire; thus the lava must have come after the destruction of the Asârêân Empire a thousand years earlier, or at least have risen higher in the fissure since last the bridge had been used.

Every so often, bits of the molten rock were thrown up into the air as high as Dêlfên shoulders, sometimes even higher, as sputters of gas

escaped the magma below, and the companions gasped when some erupted dangerously close to their Ëlván friend. The red-hot glow of the fervid liquid below shone on Dëlfën's pure white skin, reflecting off the drops of sweat streaming down his placid face. " 'Tis hot out here," he said.

"Just keep your mind on crossing the rope," coached Mîták. "The far side will be cool enough."

Sweat ran down Dëlfën's neck and his long blond hair hung in tight curls about his shoulders as it became drenched with perspiration. The pointed tips of his ears, and the ends of his thin fingers were scorched by the heat, and his clothes clung uncomfortably to his damp skin. Then he noticed the rope was beginning to smoke, and realized he was only about halfway across the wide fissure. Suddenly, his foot slipped within his sweaty leather shoes, and he lost his balance!

The others watched in horror as Dëlfën's longbow fell to the molten rock below, and burst instantly into flames.

But somehow Dëlfën had caught hold of the rope, and now hung by his hands as he dangled precariously above the fervid magma.

"Cross it hand over hand!" someone was yelling, but Dëlfën could not hear the words. Deep down inside he heard Zôrwind's prophecy. Was it then he who was destined to die before the quest's end? *Truly, Fate shall play no part in my destiny. I am a High Elf of Èstèrëa, and I alone rule my future!* he heard himself insisting. Even in the face of such frightful odds, he refused to believe in closed destinies.

With strong, lean arms he began to carry his weight across the fiery chasm, hand over hand on the smoking rope.

Then, when he had nearly reached the safety of the solid rock on the farther side, the rope gave way behind him! The heat being too much for the hemp fibers to withstand, the rope had burned and snapped over the center of the chasm.

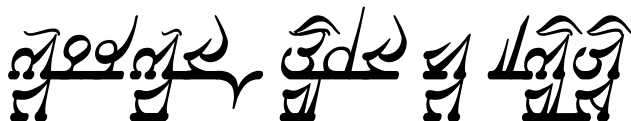
But again, Dëlfën was miraculously able to keep a hold of the rope as he was slammed into the cliff wall a fathom or so below the jagged crystal edge on the other side. Below him the rope caught fire and burned its way upwards like a fuse. He had only moments, but he could not rush, for fear that rubbing the hemp on the sharp edges of the crystals above would sever it. Delicately, but swiftly, he worked his way up past the sharp mineral deposits and then, with a tremendous effort, pulled himself up onto the ledge below the drawbridge just as the remainder of the rope was consumed with fire.

He had made it across!

"You did it! You did it!" cried Härbôr. Then he thought better of applauding the Elf too freely, and added, "Not bad for an Elf. 'Tis certain.

But the way you talk, I had expected you to dance across the rope like a spider along her web.”

Mitak laughed, but Delfen just shook his head and smiled ruefully. Yes he had made it, but he looked at his blistered hands and wondered if ever again his thin fingers would be as nimble as once they were.



CHAPTER SEVEN

THE PIOUS WATER TOUCHSTONE

IT was just past dusk. Kitfir brought with her only what she had come to Nòdrêôf with; she left behind all the lavish gifts and jewelry. She wanted nothing Āzmadüs had given her. She wanted never to see him again, unless perhaps on the battlefield, when she would return with her father and the knights of his Ārqüävêän Army to sue for retribution. The only items she would carry with her, were the waterskin and pack of dried fruits she had stolen from the castle kitchen.

After Mîtāk's appearance in the form of a falcon, she had determined to flee Nòdrêôf at all costs and as soon as possible. The next night she had unsuccessfully attempted to sneak out the front gates, discovering Jôrêêl's statue on the way, in the open ward, along with King Pïër's. Tonight she would find another way out, if she had to jump from the fortress walls to the river/moat below.

She stood dressing at her barred window, trying to muster all of her courage and determination as she looked out at the night sky. It was the fourteenth night of Erëin, and the twelfth she had spent in Castle Nòdrêôf. A moment ago, Silvā had been bright and just above the horizon, but a couch of dark thunderclouds had come up from the south, blotting her luminous gibbous face from the sky, and it looked like it might rain before dawn. Kitfir would not have chosen the night before full moon for her escape (had she any choice in the matter), for Silvā's bright green light might easily give her away; but she was determined to flee and would