



THE ALABASTER STAFF



EDWARD
BOLME





PROLOGUE

THE TIME OF TROUBLES

Zimrilim felt his heart thudding in his chest, beating out what might prove to be the last moments of his life. All his experience, his tenure as a war priest, his pogroms against heretics, his repression of the other churches of the Untheri pantheon, his officiating at the execution of hundreds if not thousands of citizens, his aggressive climb to power in one of the most ruthless religious organizations known, his entire life in a society built upon suffering and hardship, all of that had still left him woefully unprepared for what was happening in this remote field.

They faced a goddess.

Tiamat herself, the Dragon Queen, stood across the field from them, her five scaled heads weaving in a hypnotic serpentine pattern. There was no superlative that surpassed Tiamat's lusty, greedy evil. There was no greater threat to the god-king whom Zimrilim served.

It was true that they had a god on their side, as

well: Gilgeam, Master of Wars; Father of Victory; God of the Sky and the Cities; Supreme Ruler of Unther, Chessenta, Threskel, Chondath, Turmish, the Shaar, and Yuirwood; who had ruled from his throne in Unther with an iron fist for over two thousand years.

The god-king stood tall and proud in the center of their battle line, with not a trace of fear in his handsome face. His golden hair and beard glowed in the sunlight, and for armor he wore only a skirt of bronze scales, each as large and as thick as Zimrilim's hand. Secured by a wide belt that reached up to his ribs, the skirt protected his most vital assets, and left his awe-inspiring physique exposed to enthrall his followers and intimidate his enemies.

It was hard for Zimrilim to imagine a finer physical specimen than Gilgeam. His shoulders were so broad that a grown woman could sit on each comfortably (and, in fact, they often did so at his official debaucheries). His arms had muscles the size of watermelons, with sinews as strong as steel. In his hands he held a great war mace, with a long handle as thick as Zimrilim's arm and topped with a spiked ball of solid bronze that weighed more than Zimrilim could lift.

Gilgeam always kept his body oiled, so that the sun's reflection might better contrast the shadowed crevasses of his chiseled musculature.

The god-king's forces stood arrayed at his direct orders. Nearest him were his high priests, of which Zimrilim was the senior member. Gilgeam's bodyguard, a dozen phalanxes of handpicked troops, surrounded them. A legion of loyal troops protected each flank, their morale bolstered by the petty clergy that moved among them, incanting blessings and prayers. The sycophants, servants, and other non-combatants huddled to the rear, bleating their supplications like sheep, helpless to avoid whatever doom befell Gilgeam's forces.

Under ordinary circumstances, the sight of Gilgeam's

force would send the enemy army into flight . . . but these soldiers had not only refused to flee, they had deliberately sought out the retinue, ambushed the procession as Gilgeam toured his realm.

And while Gilgeam was tall, he was nowhere near as towering as the draconic monster that had challenged him.

Legends said that Tiamat's five heads could spew forth death, each in a different form. Fire, lightning, acid . . . with such a mighty arsenal, Zimrilim knew that mere mortals such as him would not last long in battle with her. They would do their part, of course, fighting with each other in an attempt to sweep away the worship and adoration that supported the two deities, but in the end the outcome would be decided between the two immortals.

The sun reflected off the sweat that beaded Zimrilim's shaved scalp. He wiped his hand across his forehead, smearing the three rings of blue that adorned the front of his brow. The rings were a traditional symbol that identified him as a member of the priesthood and a user of great magic—and a user of magic he would remain, so long as Gilgeam lived. Just as Zimrilim's worship supported Gilgeam, so did Gilgeam's divinity empower Zimrilim's supernatural abilities.

The priest looked across at Tiamat's forces, just beginning their advance. Arrows flew from Gilgeam's troops, striking the first casualties of the day.

He was glad that he was not a soldier, fighting for three meals and a copper a day. They did not comprehend the grave import of the day. He knew that somewhere among the enemy forces was a high priest like himself, and that, like him, the other knew that doom would crush the one or the other. By the end of the day, one of them would be broken, his god dead, his power stripped. At worst he would be dead with no deity to lead him to the afterlife; at best he would survive to flee into hiding and assume a new identity to escape the wrath of the victor's people.

The yoke of destiny weighed on Zimrilim's shoulders. As with all his people, it was a burden he bore gladly, and he knew that whichever side better bore the burden would, in the end, prove victorious.

"There," rumbled Tukulti, the high priest of the City of Firetrees. He gestured with one arm. "I see Furifax. Gilgeam grant that I might crush his skull."

Zimrilim looked, and he saw the banner of the famous outlaw on the other side of the field, and next to it a tall elfin figure mounted astride a swift horse. As they had suspected, then, Tiamat had an alliance with Furifax, at least temporarily. Doubtless Furifax had used his woodsman's skills to lead the Tiamatan forces to the battlefield and arranged to surprise Gilgeam as he journeyed to visit the City of Shussel, where Ekur the Cruel ruled as high priest.

Tiamat's forces closed. Though waiting to receive the charge was agonizing, the melee started all too soon. Zimrilim called down the power of Gilgeam upon his foes, channeling the god-king's divine might through his own body. Tiamat unleashed her terrible weapons upon the assembled troops, felling friend and foe alike. With a mighty roar, Gilgeam leaped to the attack, his mace reaping death as easily as a farmer's sickle hews grain. Blood and limbs, the chaff of battle, flew around wherever the god-king strode.

The noise was unbelievable. Thousands of soldiers pounded upon each other. The clash of bronze, steel, wood, and flesh resounded again and again. The press of the melee threatened to crush Zimrilim. Warriors on both sides pushed forward with their shields, churning the ground, attempting to break the enemy line.

The grunts and screams of the soldiers, the smell of sweat, blood, fear, and death, the gravity of the battle, the chaos at all hands, and the threat of imminent harm all turned each soldier's grand battle into a personal struggle for survival where the horizon stood no more than fifty feet

in any direction. Arrows rained indiscriminately. Lightning struck from the cloudless sky, and great gouts of flame erupted from spellcasters' fingers. In the midst of it all, Tiamat towered over the grand melee, her massive heads protecting her great flanks while also trying to strike down her immortal foe.

Zimrilim and Tukulti worked together to keep Tiamat's flank exposed, using their great magic to smite those who sought to protect their vile draconic goddess. Brave Untherite soldiers charged into the gaps rent by the priests' spells and, as Zimrilim and Tukulti prayed for their strength and prowess, tried to pierce the Dragon Queen's hide with spear and sword.

Zimrilim saw one of the sergeants thrust his spear deep into Tiamat's side, then bury it almost entirely in her flesh with another strong heave. Zimrilim cast a glance toward the god-king and saw the golden man break the jaw of one of Tiamat's heads with a fell stroke of his great mace. Zimrilim's lip curled in anticipation of victory; the great beast was faltering!

Just then, Zimrilim heard a thundering noise break into his own private war. He looked up and saw a group of chariots bearing down on their position, intent on striking down the high priests.

"Tukulti!" he cried, and the storm broke upon them.

A long lance wielded by a soldier in the lead chariot impaled Tukulti through the chest, slaying him in an instant. The soldier let the spear drag along the ground behind him until Tukulti's limp body tumbled off.

Zimrilim dodged the spear presented by the second chariot, but the chest of the horse struck him and knocked him senseless. He was dragged by the horses' harness, until he, too, fell off, rolling along the ground to a painful stop.

The high priest's hip ached, and he could feel that several ribs had broken. He assumed he had internal injuries,

as well, a presumption proven when he coughed and a fine spray of blood patterned his fist.

Another chariot passed, rolling across his ankle and breaking it. Desperate, he grabbed a shield, and, ignoring the body to which it was still attached, pulled it over his head and chest for protection. He heard a hoof strike the bronze, then was crushed again as a wheel rolled across the shield's boss, but after that the thunder passed, and he dared peer out to see how events had transpired.

As he was not in the heat of the battle, he could take time to scan the whole field from beneath the protection of the dented shield. Great carnage had been wrought, and past the scattered remaining pockets of melee he could see, in the distance, the banners of the Shussel legions approaching quickly. Ekur had indeed received the summons from his god and had sent help.

Heartened, Zimrilim turned the other way to see how his divine leader fared.

Neither of the gods looked healthy. Tiamat bled from over a dozen wounds on her flank, two of her heads were held away from the melee, and a third seemed to be unconscious on the ground. Her tail lashed angrily, keeping away any others who might try to spear her but also striking down anyone who strayed too close while protecting her. Gilgeam staggered with exhaustion. His beautiful golden hair had been scorched in places, and his skin showed raw where acid, flame, and searing cold had eaten it away. The haft of his mace had been splintered, and he wielded the item one-handed, the other arm held close to his chest. Zimrilim could not tell if Gilgeam nursed a broken arm or several fractured ribs . . . perhaps both.

Tiamat reared up her right foreleg, preparing to smash her enemy flat, while baiting Gilgeam with her two remaining heads. Gilgeam charged forward, swinging his mace in a circle around his head to strike a devastating blow at the breastbone of the Dragon Queen, left exposed by her

maneuver . . . and he fell right into her trap. With an agility that seemed impossible for a beast of her size, she hopped up with her left foreleg, and, with a swipe backed by her massive weight, smote Gilgeam on his fully exposed side. The crack of breaking bones resounded across the battlefield, and Gilgeam pinwheeled through the air. He landed on his shoulders with a crunch a few yards away from Zimrilim, tumbled end over end, and stopped as his head struck Zimrilim's shield with a clang. Tiamat thundered to earth as well, her heads studying her foe.

In the stunned silence that followed that crucial moment, Zimrilim heard the last breath rattle its way out of Gilgeam's divine breast.

Tiamat turned and roared her defiance at Ekur's approaching forces, then lurched her way back onto her feet. Using two of her heads to carry the unconscious head by the scruff, she retreated from the field, limping. She managed to get airborne before she reached the edge of the forest, her flight as ungainly as that of an aged albatross.

As the sounds of battle ceased, Zimrilim let his head fall back into the mud, coughed once, and waited as waves of despair washed over him until blessed darkness closed his eyes.

Fifteen years later . . .

CHAPTER ONE

In times of war, the gates of Messemprar closed each evening at sundown and did not open again until a sliver of the sun could be seen rising above the waves of the Alamber Sea. The guards strictly observed the rule in accordance with the city's extensive laws—a compilation of regulations, fiat, common sense, and bureaucratic whimsy all carefully inscribed in a huge aggregation of conflicting scrolls dutifully assembled and catalogued throughout the city's three-thousand, four-hundred-year history. Clever administrators occasionally “lost” a scroll filled with particularly troublesome requirements, but the bulk of the ancient papyrus still weighed upon the city's populace like a well-worn yoke, providing direction and security, if not freedom.

Outside the city, however, those time-honored directives offered little consolation, especially in mid-winter. A large crowd of pitiful refugees huddled in the lee of the city walls, poorly sheltered

from the cold, moist easterly wind that blew in from the sea. It was bad enough that the sun was nearing the winter solstice and thus rose nearly as late as it ever did during the year, but, even worse, slate-colored clouds covered the midwinter sky. When the city guard could not see the sun rise to the east, they delayed opening the gate, just to ensure that the sun god Horus-Re had indeed ascended.

The refugees huddled like helpless sheep, an analogy that occurred to the guards who paced atop the walls, furred in heavy cloaks. Confident in the refugees' chill misery, they drew their chins deep within the folds of their cloaks, and, their minds turned to their own discomfort, they did not notice that one of the refugees, impatient for the gates to announce the dawn, stealthily climbed the city walls.

His name was Jaldi. He was small, but his clean and experienced movements showed that he'd put several rigorous adolescent years behind him. He scaled the wall easily, as the ancient stone offered many good holds for his strong, thin fingers. He made no more noise than a spider and climbed as rapidly as one, as well. Dressed in drab, ragged clothing and hidden in a shadowed angle of the weather-stained wall, he was nearly invisible.

The chill wind cut through his scant clothing, but Jaldi preferred to endure an extra bit of cold over sitting any longer in that rank and foul-mouthed crowd, waiting for the chance to enter Messemprar legally. There was also the simple fact that he had no coin to pay the entry fee and thus would have to try to dodge behind the gate guards yet again. Better to dodge them on his terms, atop a darkened wall, than on theirs, at a narrow and crowded gate.

As he neared the top of the wall, the salt-smelling wind blew unfettered by trees or refugees, and it pierced the small holes in his jersey like a spear, turning the sheen of his sweat into painful patches of cold. As he had no fat on his lithe body, he was forced to use his tongue to keep his

teeth from chattering, though, thankfully, his hands remained sure as he scaled the precipice.

Jaldi's fingers probed the gap at the base of the topmost stones of the wall, looking for secure purchases. A bronze climbing spike, pounded into the crack between two stones centuries ago by Chessentan mercenaries, offered its pitted surface as a handhold, but, like most citizens of Unther, Jaldi felt safer relying on venerable Untheri stone. He found a cleft, brushed away the moss that had accumulated there, and pulled his head close to the top of the wall. He held the position for no little time, rolling his eyes in juvenile impatience as time seemed to slow to a stop. Soon he saw the tip of a spear, barely visible over the rampart, slowly working its way toward his position like an inverted pendulum. He ducked his head.

The wind interfered with his hearing, so he pressed one ear to the cold stonework. Through the stone he heard the slow step of a miserable guard walking the monotonous pace of the exhausted soldier. As the noise passed his position, he hazarded a quick glance over the parapet. The guard indeed had passed, head down, shuffling along the wall.

Jaldi pulled himself up and rolled over the battlement, dropping quietly on the inside of the waist-high stonework that gave cover to the guards on the wall. Jaldi glanced left. The guard that had just passed continued pacing his post. Glancing right, he saw the next guard, a long arrow's shot away, just turning and starting to hobble his frigid way back toward Jaldi's position, dark against the lightning sky.

Jaldi scuttled crabwise to the inner side of the wall and glanced down. The interior edge of the wall's walkway dropped into the cramped, labyrinthine streets of Messemparrar. The lack of any kind of barrier or crenellations on the interior side made wall duty rather more dangerous for the guards when a storm rose, but it certainly

made life easier for a roguish young interloper seeking free entry.

He swung his legs over the wall, then flipped over to his stomach and slid down to his ribs, holding himself steady by propping himself up on his elbows. His feet searched the interior stonework for a foothold, rooting around the way a dog's nose roots through a pile of rubbish. He glanced right and saw that the receding guard was still oblivious.

Jaldi's feet continued to scabble, finding no crevices worthy of the name. He looked over his shoulder at the more distant guard to his left. As he watched, he saw the guard pause, peer forward, and straighten in surprise. If the guard yelled something, the wind caught it before it reached Jaldi's ears, but the guard's gesture was unmistakable. Jaldi had been seen.

Glancing down, he saw a straw-thatched roof below him, some meager house built right up against the city's walls. With a quick prayer to any available god that might look after petty rascals like himself, Jaldi let go his perch. As he fell, he pushed off from the wall, both to distance himself from the cold stone and to try to align his body to land as flat as possible against the sloping roof and absorb the impact of his fall.

Jaldi landed awkwardly on the roof, jarring his head and feeling a pain shoot through his lung. He heard a crack and hoped that it was a thatching strut and not one of his ribs. He slid off the roof and dropped onto the street.

He landed on his feet on the rough and stony ground. With a quick glance up, he saw that neither of the two closest guards could see him at the moment. As quick as a monkey, he scuttled back up the side of the house, in the corner where it met the great stone wall, and sequestered himself among the eaves, wriggling slowly and patiently into the insulating straw thatch until he was well concealed.

He made himself as comfortable as his unusual situation

would allow and hoped the grumbling of his stomach would not give him away before the guards tired of searching for one lone urchin.



By midmorning, the city streets and markets were filled with activity. Jaldi padded through the edges of the crowd, his fast, youthful reflexes directing him through the jostling throngs like a fish through a hard current. He could feel the movements of the crowd. His years spent as an urchin had taught him to sense the mood of the people and therewith the source and probable cause of any rippling disturbance. Sometimes it was danger, as when the Mulhorandi army first marched across the River of Swords and attacked his village, but occasionally it was entertainment, as when some criminal was dragged forth and pilloried to the amusement of the public.

Usually, though, the mood of the crowd warned him when a whip of constables was approaching, looking for little thieves like him . . . and receiving that warning had often kept him in possession of his hands. Untheric justice was as creative as it was cruel and thus served Jaldi both as a diversion and as a goad to excellence, for he determined that he would never be caught at his work. In his few years, he had seen tortures the like of which were unknown outside the Old Empires, punishments that the public and accused alike not only bore without comment, but prided themselves upon withstanding with great solemnity. It was the firm belief of all Untherites that the mark of a high culture was to promote at once high arts and ruthless punishment, and to appreciate both with equal aplomb.

In that hour, however, the mood of the crowd spoke of hope. And since the Mulhorandi invasion a year and a half ago, the hope of the crowd meant one thing: food.

Jaldi vividly remembered seeing the Green Lands get

churned into mud by the armies of Mulhorand and Unther during the opening months of the campaign, when he had been pressed into service as a camp slave for his people's army. His left triceps still bore the scar of the slave branding. When the Mulhorandi army emerged victorious, Unther lost not only its field army, but also the crops that were meant to feed the majority of its populace.

The enemy forces had besieged and taken Unthalass, capitol of Unther, during which time Jaldi had made his escape from military duties. Since then, the Mulhorandi had driven a swarm of refugees before them. He, like many others, had fled north, pursued by the invaders until the River of Metals and Messemparr itself were all that stood between Mulhorand and the complete conquest of Unther.

Thus Messemparr was the last refuge of the Untheri, a city bloated to thrice its natural size by the influx of fearful peasants, wounded soldiers, and desperate officials. The city's stocks of food had run out quickly, causing everyone to feel the pangs of hunger. The raw, gnawing feeling of empty stomachs turned society's solid foundations into greasy, treacherous slopes, and he had seen just how fast the most noble of people could fall to barbarism over a scrap of food. The hands of justice were swift these days, swift and brutal, lest defiance breed upon defiance, and all order be lost.

These were interesting days for the young thief. Everyone was suspect, for a change, for hunger made a thief out of even the wealthiest noble, yet whereas before he might have faced a flogging for his petty theft, in these hard days he would surely be killed for stealing food.

He glided through the crowd toward the docks, where his instinct told him the source of the crowd's hope could be found. Most likely a merchant ship had slipped past the Mulhorandi navy and arrived with a cargo of precious foodstuffs. Though such journeys risked annihilation by the Mulhorandi, the cargo sold for exorbitant prices,

purchased with Untheric iron, cloth goods, slaves, and priceless antique art. It was a seller's market for food.

Good living for a thief . . . if he could survive it.

A throng milled at the quay that jugged out into the Alamber Sea, where a deep-drafted merchant vessel had moored just inside the breakwater at the Long Wharf, flying a proud black pennant emblazoned with a gold Z. Stevedores, stripped to the waist but still wearing their heavy winter breeches and boots, lumbered up and down the ship's gangway, unloading the vast cargo. The city guard had turned out in force and kept the pressing throng back, while merchants and nobles pushed forward in bids to do business with the captain. Shouts, oaths, laughter, the jingle of coin, and the thump of heavy crates and barrels being dumped on the dock filled the area with a great din.

The crowd pressed, and Jaldi saw one of the guards waving his khopesh, a vicious sword curved inward the better to cleave naked limbs. The young thief smiled. The greater the tension between the guards and the mob, the lesser the attention for a larcenous rat like him.

He slid past the rear of the crowd, edging his way farther out on the dock. When it became impossible to continue, he lowered himself beneath the dock, using the gaps between the ill-fitted planks for finger holds, and continued toward the ship. His feet dragged in the icy seawater, and those above occasionally trod upon his fingertips, but he was Untherite; such trials were the bread and water of his people.

He worked his way around the edge of the dock until he was behind—and beneath—the unloaded cargo. Peering between the gaps in the planks, he located a site already piled high with crates, sacks, and barrels, and therefore concealed from the view of the guards and stevedores. He crawled back on top of the dock and pulled a small knife from his belt. With a few moments' work he pried open the lid of a barrel filled with cured meats. Stuffing his soiled

jersey as much as he could without disrupting his scrawny appearance, he replaced the pried lid and disappeared once more beneath the wooden dock.

Two more bruised fingertips and a pair of frigid feet later, he was back on land, hiding in an alleyway and breaking his fast in as royal a fashion as he could imagine . . . but his thoughts kept wandering to the Jackal's Courtyard and what awaited him at noontime.



By midday, a chill drizzle washed over the streets of Messempnar, brushed around by the remnants of the morning's east wind and filling the streets with the smell of winter. At the moment, Kehrsyn was warm enough. She wore a faded green long slit skirt hemmed with gold over white leggings that tucked into her nearly knee-high brown leather boots. Her heavy violet blouse was laced with a leather cord from her sternum to her throat and a bright gold sash bound it around her waist. Her hands were bare. Over everything, she wore a brown cloak with a wide hood. The quilted pattern of the inside made it look almost like a cobra's hood when pulled up, an image she felt gave her some protection. The merchant had promised the cloak was waterproof. Unlike the merchant's word, the cloak was better than nothing.

She paused under an overhang before entering the square, surveying the crowd with auburn eyes. Brisk trading took place all around, precious food changed hands, along with coins and goods. The crowd was busy, but it was in a good mood. All Kehrsyn had to do was get people's attention. Given that she'd been performing in the same spot in the Jackal's Courtyard for a tenday, she hoped it wouldn't be too tough.

She didn't know how the Jackal's Courtyard got its name. She'd heard a jackal once stood guard over the area,

though she wasn't sure if that was a literal truth or if the large, shivered pole in the center of the square had once been surmounted by the graven image of a beast-headed god of the ancient Mulan, progenitors of Unther and Mulhorand alike.

She pushed back her hood, pulled the collar of her cloak more closely around her neck, and stepped out into the drizzle. It would have been more comfortable to wear the hood up, but it was harder to dazzle a crowd when the people couldn't see your face. A smile, a wink, and an air of nonchalance were all essential to her performance.

She strode over to the great, decapitated pillar and set her small shoulder bag of props down at its base. She pulled out a small box and opened its lid, providing those of generous heart a place to gift her with a few coppers or, should she manage to charm one of the haughty nobility, a whole silver. Her rapier she kept at her side; the city was at war, overcrowded, and hungry, so it seemed only prudent.

She looked again at the crowd. A number of people were looking at her, perhaps knowing what was to come, perhaps curious as to what the slim young woman was setting up in the center of the plaza. Here stood a small child whose tongue dabbled at the bottom of her nose, there watched a young boy trying to evade her eyes, and over there stood a cluster of guards and soldiers, no doubt speaking of her in salacious phrases.

Feigning obliviousness to the eyes upon her, she reached up and untied her brown ponytail, hair so dark it was almost black. She fluffed her locks around her shoulders, knowing that the motion of her long hair—her mane, some called it—would draw attention. And lo! when she drew her hands out, she held a bouquet of flowers, which she brought to her nose and smelled daintily.

She paused, savoring the scent, then glanced up beneath her eyebrows and saw that she indeed had the

full attention of the soldiers, two of whom had their mouths wide open in surprise.

The little girl with the darting tongue toddled over to her, unsteady on the rain-slicked cobbles.

“How do do it?” she asked, her tongue still bobbing.

Kehrsyn smiled and kneeled down, her cloak crumpling against the ground, and she asked, “Would you like to smell them?”

The girl put her face into the parchment flowers and sniffed at the perfume fragrance.

“ ‘Mell good,” the girl proclaimed.

“Hey,” said Kehrsyn, “you have a jewel in your ear. Did you know that?”

The girl furrowed her brows and tugged uncertainly at one ear as her tongue once more wiped her upper lip clean.

“Not that one,” teased Kehrsyn. “This one.”

So saying, she reached out with her hand, gently caressed the curve of the girl’s ear, and produced a small, polished stone with the hue and grain of well-varnished wood.

The girl squealed, “Momma! Momma, lookit my ear! Lookit she saw my ear!”

She ran back over to her mother, holding her “jewel” aloft, stumbling on the cobbles in her glee but never quite falling. The mother turned on the child with a look of weary frustration but softened as the child’s exuberance overflowed. The child pointed back at Kehrsyn, and the woman favored Kehrsyn with a knowing look. Taking the girl by the hand, the mother put her worn purse back into her sash and strode away.

Kehrsyn sighed and stood up again, her slender hand reaching for the hidden fold in her sash and palming another stone from the score she carried there for just that purpose. It felt good to bring some small joy to a little soul in the midst of the cold, hungry winter. She didn’t want anyone to experience the same grim childhood she’d had.

Let the adults worry about the enemy that stalked the lands across the river; children needed to have their fun. So long as Kehrsyn could keep the war from stealing their innocence, she would.

She just wished it was a little easier to get their parents to show a little charity.

Despite her mother's miserly demeanor, the little girl had attracted Kehrsyn some attention, just as she'd hoped. The beginnings of an audience were forming, most notable of whom were the soldiers, who walked up to her directly.

"Olaré!" said one in greeting. "So you're a sorceress, huh?"

One of his mates, jealous that the other had spoken first, punched him roughly on the arm and said, "Of course not, half-wit. Where's the aura? You ever seen a magician without a glow about her spells?"

"Actually, yes," said a third, a seasoned veteran and clearly the senior of the rowdy group. "It's rare, but it's not unknown. Why, back in Chessenta, in, uh, fifty-four I think it was, I—"

"Come on, Sergeant," said the first, "we hear your stories all night in the bunkhouse. I'd rather hear this maiden's voice right now." A murmur of general agreement settled the issue. "So, young one," he continued, addressing Kehrsyn directly, "are you a sorceress?"

Kehrsyn chuckled and answered, "Of course not."

"I think she is," commented another soldier with a smile. "She's already charmed me."

Kehrsyn flushed with embarrassment.

"So if you're not a sorceress," asked the first, "how can you do all that stuff without magic?"

"It's easier without magic," she said, then she leaned forward toward the soldier. "It's easy to make jewels appear," she said in a stage whisper, "when guys like you don't groom yourselves properly."

With that, she tapped at his nose, striking it so that a

polished stone appeared to fly from his nostril, knocked loose by the flick of her finger.

The soldier stepped back, too startled to know whether or not to be affronted. His comrades laughed uproariously and showered him with a variety of new nicknames, from Gemfinger to Noseminer to Rocksnot.

The officer stepped forward, heedless that an audience had gathered.

“You’re a gambler, aren’t you?” he asked in a gravelly voice.

“No, I—I don’t have any coin,” said Kehrsyn. “Not even a wedge.”

“A likely story.”

“It’s true,” protested Kehrsyn. She turned to the sparse crowd around her. “But if one of you wants to loan me a coin,” she said loudly, “I’ll pay you back double.”

A half dozen coppers presented themselves, but she picked the lone silver egora offered by a merchant’s hand and favored the worthy with a wink and a bright, wide smile.

“All right,” she said to the sergeant. “You see this egora, right? This side is crowns, and this side is verses. Crowns, verses. I’ll bet you this egora against one of your own. Done?”

The sergeant nodded assent.

Kehrsyn suppressed a smile and said, “Are you ready? Watch closely.” She held out her right hand and placed the coin on it. “There, it’s showing crowns, right? Crown side up, got it? Now watch closely.”

She held her left hand out next to her right, palm down. With a flick as fast as an arrow, she flipped her right hand down on top of her left, concealing the coin against the back of her left hand.

“Now, Sergeant,” she said, “tell me which side is up: crowns or verses.”

The sergeant snorted, “Verses, of course.”

Kehrsyn faked a heavy sigh and lifted her hand.

“Sergeant,” she said, “you weren’t paying attention.”

The crowd gasped; the coin showed crowns. The sergeant blinked a few times and did nothing until the elbowing of his troops prompted him to give Kehrsyn a silver egora.

“All right, let’s try it again, shall we?” said Kehrsyn.

The sergeant nodded.

“Look,” she said, “we’ll try it a different way. I’ll put verses side up this time. Got it? Verses up. Remember that. Ready? Verses up.” Again she flipped her hand over with the speed of a falcon. “For a silver, Sergeant, which side is up?”

“It was verses up,” mumbled the sergeant to himself, ensuring he had been paying full attention and remembering the chain of events properly, “and you flipped your hand over, so now it has to be crowns. Crowns up,” he said.

“Sergeant, I’m trying to help. I gave you the answer, you know. I said, ‘Verses up.’ Three times I did.”

When she lifted her hand, the coin indeed showed verses. The crowd cheered, most especially the soldiers. The sergeant handed over another egora.

Urged by those around, the sergeant agreed to a third guess. Kehrsyn placed crowns up once more and flipped her hand, but before the sergeant could say anything, the soldier known as Noseminer stepped up.

“I’ll make the guess this time, wench,” he said, “and I’ll wager three egorae against all three of yours!”

Kehrsyn paused and glanced around, her face paling.

“Uh . . . but the sergeant . . .” she stammered.

“I’m onto your trick,” Noseminer proclaimed. He clamped his hands on hers, ensuring that she couldn’t manipulate the coin. “The guess is mine. Don’t back out!”

Kehrsyn recovered some of her composure and said, “You—you don’t have three silvers on you to wager, so I decline.”

Ordering one of his fellows to keep a tight hold on Kehrsyn’s hands, Noseminer emptied his purse and indeed

found he had only one egora's worth of copper on him. So, while carefully watching to ensure she held her hands perfectly still, he quickly borrowed two others from his peers.

"There you are," he proclaimed. "Three silvers, even if two are in copper. Now show the coin!"

"Your guess?" asked Kehrsyn.

"Crowns!" barked the soldier.

"You're sure you won't change your mind?"

"Quit trying to flummox me and show the coin!"

Kehrsyn lifted her hand. The egora very plainly showed verses. The audience erupted in laughter and applause. In the midst of the noise, the soldier stared at her in shock and anger.

"The trick," she told him, "is knowing when to stop."

But before she could scoop the coins from his hand, Noseminer clenched his fist and stormed off, followed by the jeers of the gathered crowd. The rest of the soldiers ambled off as well, chuckling to themselves.

Despite having been shortchanged, Kehrsyn still had a profit to show for her efforts. She paid the merchant back two silvers as she had promised, and received an ovation for her honesty. But, in the end, applause was all that the crowd was willing to part with.

She performed prestidigitation and sleight of hand through the early afternoon, to an ever-changing crowd that watched with enough interest to withstand the drizzle, if only for a short while. Finally, however, the ongoing drizzle chilled her thoroughly, and her hands began to shiver. She had to stop. She looked into her little box, open at her feet. Save a thin film of water, it was empty. She had nothing to show for her efforts but a single silver egora and the fading memories of a score or more of bright, young faces. One silver for a young woman with nothing to eat and no place to stay. . . .

She hoped the children's happy memories of her would last longer than her pittance.