

# V SEEDS OF VIRTUE



DARK DESCENT  
BOOK I

CHRISTOPHER LAPIDÉS



“Hey!” Druzeel shouted before he realized that course of action might not have been one of the smartest things he had ever done.

The assassin’s head snapped up. Druzeel let out a gasp when he saw the man’s eyes. They were completely black, without a speck of white showing. His skin was the opposite, almost white, looking as if it was dead flesh. The sight unnerved Druzeel, but he took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. There was no backing down now.

“You’re under arrest!” Druzeel proclaimed, unsure of what else to say. What *did* one say to a murderer and thief? “Put back what you—”

His voice caught in his throat as the man’s arm snapped forward. A dagger, materializing out of thin air it seemed, flashed from his hand and sped at Druzeel. He let out a squeak and made to dodge, but the speed at which the assassin had moved was too much, but just as the dagger was about to reach him, it bounced off one of the shields he had cast moments before.

Thank you, Druzeel said to himself, thinking of Graeak and all the lessons the man had drilled into his head. Going defensive first had just saved his life, like his mentor had said, but only for the next few moments. Seeing his dagger laying on the ground, the assassin’s eyes narrowed at Druzeel. The man even looked a little surprised. But that expression disappeared so fast that Druzeel wasn’t even sure he had seen it. What he *was* sure of seeing was a terrible sword, pointing in his direction.

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*February 2014*

Seeds of Malice

*December 2014*

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CAL • PRODUCTIONS™

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Printed in the USA

Cover art by Christopher Lapidés  
First Printing: April 2013

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For my girls. All three of them.





# PROLOGUE

It was a clear night, without a cloud in the sky and Lunaria was shining bright. The streets were bathed in her cool glow and though it was late, there were plenty of people navigating the cobblestone roads. Since it was the middle of spring, the citizens of Atlurul stayed out late into the night, enjoying the cool air and breeze that wove its way through the maze of buildings. It carried the scent of rain, promising that tomorrow would be a day filled with heavy showers. There would be some grumblings about the rain for there were many that stayed indoors, not wanting to get wet, but there were others that welcomed the early year showers for it gave life to the crops and washed away the grim that every city managed to accumulate over the year. Then there were the children who welcomed any chance to dance in the cool downpour, despite their parent's objections. Regardless of the way anyone felt, it would be a damp day when next the sun rose.

But tonight the roads were dry and the streets busy. Business's doors were propped open and merchants welcomed all who had a little extra coin to spend. In fact, they even encouraged those with heavy purses to come in a purchase a trinket or two, regardless of the need. Mothers walked with their children and couples lazily strolled down the avenue, free from worry or doubt. Even the city watch, referred to as the Lances, was at ease for tonight was a night that they knew would be free of skullduggery. Even thieves and scoundrels took off from their usual practices for such a beautiful night.

The dozen or so taverns that were spread throughout the city were full, with music filling the air and ale flowing from the tap. Bards played their fiddles, lutes, and harps, entertaining the crowds and hoping for a generous donation or three. Mugs were kept full, plates were piled high with meat and

roasted potatoes, and every hearth held a fire, warming any and all who sat near.

One such tavern, the Crying Lady, was especially full, with people resting against the wall, leaning on the bar, or standing in any place that happened to be empty, if only for a few seconds. But despite the cramped surroundings, which would make even the most drunken dwarf stand up and curse, only joyful voices and humorous music filled the air. Conversations were free of business and dark dealings. Family, pleasant memories, and the occasional jest was the only thing painting the lips of the tavern's patrons this night. The dark cherry wood, chandeliers decorated with tear-shaped crystals, and the comforting warmth of the fire made this one of the most desirable places to sit and have a drink and it put everyone in a jovial mood.

The Lady, as many called her, was one of the largest taverns in Atlurul and considered one of the best, with the finest wine, the most delicious cheeses, and ale that possessed the perfect balance of bitterness and sweetness. The meat was cooked well and brought out fresh, further contributing to the fine mood of the establishment. The bards that were employed by the tavern's proprietor—a large woman who was rumored to cry at the drop of a hat, hence the name—were always the most talented and sang songs of adventure, romance, and enchantment. Many of those nearby would join in, if they knew the lyrics. Some would just watch and listen while others completely ignored the songs because they deemed their own conversations more important than listening to songs they may or may not have heard. One such figure was not singing with the bards, listening to the music nor was he conversing with his friend. His eyes were only on the empty table to his right, the only table in the entire tavern that sat vacant.

The simple wooden table was located near the back of the Lady, roped off so not a single soul could sit in one of the two chairs that surrounded it. People stood near the barrier, not even noticing or seeming to care that a free place to sit was going unused. Only Buldrik noticed and he was not happy with what he saw.

“Hey!” the young adventurer said rather harshly to a young woman who was walking by, carrying a tray full of foaming mugs. At first, she did not react for the clicking of the glass mugs had drowned out Buldrik's voice. Truthfully, she had heard his rude inquisition but choose to ignore him, but when he grabbed her arm, rather forcefully, she was forced to give him her undivided attention.

“Why's this table empty?” Buldrik asked when she turned to look at him, her face quickly turning to an angry expression.

“Let go of my arm and perhaps I’ll tell you,” Meena replied, holding her anger in check. Usually she would have kicked him somewhere that would have left him howling on the floor, but tonight she was in a forgiving mood, at least for a few seconds.

Buldrik held on for a few more moments but eventually let go, though the angry look on his face never faded. Meena held his gaze but finally turned to look at the table.

“Because no one is sitting there,” she said with just the slightest curl to the edges of her mouth. Buldrik’s eyes started to smolder.

“Why you smart-mouthed wen—”

“C’mon Buldrik,” said his more levelheaded friend from behind him, cutting him off. “Not tonight. Can we just enjoy our drinks without you getting into another fight?”

“This place is packed!” Buldrik exclaimed, motioning to the crowd before him. “Yet here sits a perfectly empty space. Why would—”

“You must be new in town,” Meena said as if she had had this type of encounter before. The two men looked at her strangely.

“Arrived earlier today,” Buldrik’s friend said, his voice indicating he wanted to know just how she had made such an observation. They *had* just arrived with a caravan coming from the east. Meena only sighed.

“This table is reserved every night for one of our guests. We keep it roped off so no one will take his spot.”

“And if he doesn’t show?” Buldrik asked, his voice filled with annoyance.

“Then it stays empty,” Meena responded matter-of-factly. With that, she turned to go, wanting nothing more to do with idiotic young men.

“Not tonight it doesn’t!”

Buldrik turned around and leaned over to where the rope was hooked to the wall. He tore it from the clasp and threw it to the ground. Then he grabbed one of the chairs and pushed it out, intent to have a seat.

“Hey!” Meena said forcefully. “I said this was reserved.”

She took a quick step forward and took Buldrik by the shoulder. At this point, a few other patrons had turned in her direction, wondering what the commotion was. Many eyes full of mirth just seconds ago soon turned to anger as they saw what was happening, but no one made a move to help her. Meena’s reputation was well known in the Lady. They knew she could take care of herself and, as many who did try to help her found out, wanted to. There was many a man who had walked away from Meena with a limp when they tried to defy her wishes. It looked as though two more were about to be added to that list.

Meena went to pull Buldrik around, to smash the tray of mugs right into his face, but his friend had moved too fast and snatched the tray from her hand. At the same time, Buldrik was turning, hand raised to give her a slap that would surely send her across the room, but the sudden sound of a throat clearing stopped them all.

“My dear Meena,” said a voice filled with age, “is there a problem?”

The trio turned and saw a stooped old man in tattered robes standing before them. He looked ancient, with hundreds of wrinkles decorating his face. His hair was as white as the clouds and his clothing looked to have come from a garbage heap. A beard that came to his waist was unkempt and spotted with dirt. It appeared as if he would keel over if not for the gnarled staff he leaned on, which looked to have come from a rotted tree. Only his eyes, as brown as the wood that held up the Lady, showed any signs of vigor.

Buldrik and his friend lowered their arms, with the friend now holding a tray full of mugs. Both just stared at the man with a mixture of disgust and confusion.

“No problem,” Meena said, sending daggers into the two men. “They were just leaving.”

“Who in the hells are you?” Buldrik asked, his temper rising.

“Oh, just an old man who likes his ale cold and his maidens fair,” the old man replied, sending a wink at Meena. She just rolled her eyes. “I am also someone who doesn’t appreciate brash young men accosting young ladies who are just trying to do their job. That is the problem with adventurers these days. They think the world is theirs to do with as they please, never thinking of the consequences.”

Buldrik and his friend continued to stare at the man as if he had grown two heads. Then Buldrik shook his head and the rage returned.

“You should watch your tongue old man, before these brash young adventurers give you what for. Why don’t you just turn around and limp back to where you came from.”

“Oh, I plan to,” the man said as if he hadn’t a care in the world, “but only after I have the drink I came for. It would be a mighty bit easier if you weren’t standing in front of the table that Meena has so valiantly tried to defend.”

“They have this roped off for you?!” Buldrik said in amusement.

The patrons that had been watching the entire confrontation had gone back to enjoying their music and ale. They either lost interest or knew that the old man had the situation in control. Buldrik and his companion didn’t notice. They just continued to stare at the old codger as if he was crazy. Meena stayed where she was, enjoying every moment of the adventurers’ confusion.

“Aye,” the old man responded. “And if you would be so kind as to move aside, I can commence with the aforementioned drink.”

“I don’t think you’re in any position to make demands,” Buldrik said with a laugh, amazed at the bravado of the old man, but that amusement quickly turned to annoyance. “I think you should just turn around and go away before you get hurt.”

“You see,” the man said, “that’s what really irks me, when people make threats they have no chance of carrying through.”

“No chance?” Buldrik said with rising anger, his fists coming up. “I should beat—”

Suddenly, the eyes of the old man flashed and the area directly around the four figures went silent. Not the music, not the fire, and not a single voice penetrated the area. It was as if the rest of the world had just dropped away. Even though they were surrounded by people, only three seemed to notice the silence and the blue glow around the old man’s eyes.

“Do you know what I think you should do?” the man said, his gaze solely on Buldrik and his friend, whose faces suddenly went slack. Meena stood off to the side, trying her best to stifle the giggle that was working its way to her lips.

“I think you should go to every tavern in the city and let the crowd know how rude and disrespectful you are and beg their forgiveness. And when you are finished, I think you should return here and offer your deepest apologies to Meena. If she is not here when you return, you will wait until she is, be it an hour, a day, or a week. When she has forgiven you and accepted, you may leave and continue on whatever quest you have come to Atlurul to complete. How does that sound? Hmm?”

“That sounds fine,” Buldrik and his friend replied at the same time, in the same monotone voice. Without another look, Buldrik’s friend handed Meena back her tray and the two turned and walked out of the tavern, heading for the closest neighboring tavern to express their regrets. When they were out of sight, the glow around the old man’s eyes faded and the sound returned. He walked to the closest chair around the formerly roped off table, sat down, and looked up at Meena with a sly smile.

“The usual, please.”

“You know,” she said, walking next to him and placing a hand on her hip, “there are not too many people, let alone men, that I would allow to help me like that.”

“I know, my dear,” the man replied, a smile still on his lips. He raised his soft brown eyes to meet hers. “My apologies. Of course I know you can take

care of yourself and any ruffian that thinks otherwise, but I thought these two needed to be taught a lesson in humility and only one with my...talents could have taught them as such.”

“His friend *really* didn’t do anything.”

“And therein lies his crime in the confrontation,” the old man replied. “A man that sits back and does nothing is just as guilty. Perhaps he will respond a little more forcefully when his friend starts misbehaving.” Meena just smiled and shook her head. She then gave the old man a kiss on top of his head.

“Thank you,” she said. “You drinking alone tonight?” she then asked while wiping down the table with a rag she had removed from her belt.

“Not tonight,” he replied. “Hellric shall be joining me soon. Said he has something exciting to tell me.”

“Oh no,” Meena said, her eyes once again rolling. “Every time he gets excited the mayor and the nobles start to groan. Should they expect to have a few less gold in the coming weeks?” The old man only smiled.

“I’ll admit that Hellric is a little...”

“Crazy?” Meena said when he trailed off.

“Eccentric,” the old man corrected. “But he has done more to help this city and its citizens than I ever could. He means well. It’s just that things don’t always go as well as expected.”

“Graeak Loyalar,” Meena said, staring him straight in the eye, “that is the understatement of the century.”

“Hey!” Graeak exclaimed. “He paid for what he damaged and—”

“Relax,” Meena said, patting him on the head as if he were a child. Graeak went silent and a frown painted his face. “I’m only fooling. Is he going to come in here disguised as a sack of rotten potatoes as well?”

“Of course,” Graeak responded with a smile, his mustache curling ever so slightly.

“Why don’t you ever just drop the disguise,” Meena said in all seriousness, “all this magical illusion, as you call it, and come in here as you are?”

“Why Meena,” Graeak said, his eyes flashing, “you insult me. You don’t like the old worn out look?” When she lowered her gaze and her eyebrows rose, he cleared his throat. “I prefer anonymity and far too many people in this city know my real appearance. Only you, your generous employer, and a few others know this disguise. I’ve learned long ago that if I want peace and quiet, relatively speaking,” he said while motioning to the crowd before him, “then I need to lock myself in my tower, or change my appearance. So far, this option is working just fine.”

“But,” Meena said, leaning over so her ample cleavage was right in his

face, “your true appearance is much more handsome.” After a few moments of letting him enjoy the view, she leaned up. “I’ll see about that drink.” As she walked away, Graeak could not help but stare at her swaying, shapely backside.

“Calm yourself,” Graeak said to himself, pulling his eyes from Meena. She’s not even a quarter of your age yet. Besides, he thought, she is just doing that for a better tip, which works every time.

Meena brought his drink a few minutes after she had disappeared from view. Graeak sipped his wine, content to enjoy the sweet liquid and entertainment for however long it took Hellric to arrive. The night was late and any work he had could be done in the morning, or late afternoon, depending on when he actually got back to his tower. Until then, his apprentices could handle the load. The problem with Hellric was that the man was always late, which was why Graeak had arrived at the Crying Lady an hour and a half after their initial meeting time. He was not surprised to find the table still empty when he had first arrived. The question now was how much longer he would have to wait, or if his friend would show up at all. About an hour and a handful of drinks later, not to mention a few more flirtations with Meena, Graeak’s guest finally arrived.

Hellric Sazzor arrived in much the same fashion as his friend. He was dressed in the illusion of a fragile old man. The same tattered robes, gnarled staff, and dirty hair decorated the man’s true form. Graeak was a bit annoyed for his companion looked just as he had. It would be difficult to remain inconspicuous if people noticed two of the same old man sitting in the corner.

Hellric looked up as he entered and noticed the similar disguise. With a simple thought, he changed his robes to a dark blue, shortened his beard, and added little details in his face that would make them more noticeably different. When he sat down, Graeak was still wearing a frown.

“Punctual as usual,” Graeak said in a flat voice, with more than a little annoyance mixed in.

“At least I’m here this time,” Hellric replied in a raspy voice.

It was nice to see Hellric actually show up. Graeak had made many appointments with his friend in the past where the man didn’t even show or he had sent a message that said he wasn’t coming. Many a time had Graeak left the same way he had arrived: alone.

“I guess that counts for something, but must we keep meeting in public like this?” Graeak asked. “We both have towers in the city. I know there is ample room in mine so you must have more than enough space in yours. The least we can do is let each other know what the other is going to wear.”

“And risk having every upstart wizard listening in to our conversation?” Hellric responded, referring to the dozens of apprentices they each had in their homes. Each man had the same problem of eavesdropping students, each trying to one up their fellow classmates, hoping they could overhear a piece of juicy gossip to use to their advantage.

“I’ll have you know,” Graeak said as if he had been insulted, “that my students are well-behaved and know their place.”

“Uh-huh,” Hellric responded. “Just like *we* were at their age?” Graeak said nothing. He just gave his friend a smirk. “Stop complaining,” Hellric continued. “I see you have had plenty to keep yourself...entertained as you waited.”

Graeak turned to see what Hellric was looking at, and saw Meena making their way towards them.

“Be serious!” Graeak exclaimed, his cheeks going slightly red. Not even his magic could hide that much blushing. “She could be my granddaughter.”

“Your great-granddaughter,” Hellric added with a laugh.

“Lord Sazzor,” Meena said as she reached the table, interrupting the retort Graeak was planning. “How lovely it is to see you.”

“And you, my lady.” Hellric gave a slight bow.

“Can I fetch you something?”

“I’ll have what my esteemed colleague is having.”

Meena nodded and after making sure Graeak had plenty of wine, left the two alone. Hellric waited until she had disappeared in the crowd then wove his hand through the air. The noise around the two lowered so they could talk without having to yell. The spell he had just cast also made sure that stray ears would not overhear their conversation.

“Well?” Graeak said. “What did you wish to talk about?” He looked at his friend, whose eyes had just brightened. Hellric suddenly looked like a boy who had just gotten his first kiss.

“I found it.”

All mirth and merriment was wiped from Graeak’s face. He stared at his friend as if he had not heard him correctly. After a long pause, he finally found his voice again.

“What?”

“I found it,” Hellric said again, his eyes wide and a large smile on his face. “It was buried in the ruins just a few hundred miles from here, deep underground. It took almost an entire month to extract it. The traps placed over the tomb were not easy to overcome either. We lost a few dozen men and I lost a few artifacts that, I am sorry to say, were irreplaceable. But I actually



found it!”

Graeak just sat in stunned silence. He could not believe what he was hearing. He didn't want to believe it. He had thought the orb was just a legend, something that tyrants had made up to scare their armies and enemies into submission. He had tried to tell Hellric as much, that he was wasting his time searching for something that did not exist, but his friend would not be dissuaded. He was content to let Hellric waste his time. Every wizard had his or her obsession and this one kept his mind busy and kept him out of Graeak's hair. The man had spent over ten years searching for the artifact, combing through ruins, books, and tomes, always believing that it was real. Graeak always believed that something so powerful, something filled with so much evil could not possibly be real, but now his friend was telling him that it was, that he had actually found it and brought it up from the place it which it had been buried.

“Hellric,” he said, in almost a whisper. “How did you—”

Just then, Meena walked up, bringing Graeak's comment to a halt. She paid no mind to the sudden change in noise level. She just set a glass of wine on the table for Hellric. She looked at him, then at Graeak. Her expression softened when she saw the nervous look on his face.

“Are you all right?” she asked with true concern. He must have looked more frightened than he thought. Graeak pulled his eyes from Hellric and managed to put on a fake smile.

“Fine, sweet Meena.” He held that smile until she walked away. She looked back once, and then disappeared into the crowd. Graeak looked back at Hellric. “How did you find it? How did you manage—”

“None of that matters now,” his friend said excitedly, cutting him off. “What matters is that I found it. All my work, all that time searching through endless lore has finally paid off. The legends were true and now I have one of the most powerful artifacts ever created.”

“Wait,” Graeak said, his face paling even more. “You...you have it here? In the city?”

“Of course,” Hellric said as if his friend should have known. “It's in my tower. And don't worry,” he said, seeing the grave concern that suddenly painted Graeak's face. “It is tucked away where no one but I have access to it. No one knows it is here except me. And now you.”

Graeak blew a small sigh of relief. The last thing that needed to happen was having an unaccomplished apprentice stumble upon something that even wizards as powerful as Hellric and himself may not be able to handle.

“Hellric,” Graeak said, thinking of handling the orb. “You should not have

brought it here. Indeed, you should have never even brought up from where it was buried.”

“What?” Hellric said, his voice filled with a little surprise. His friend would surely understand what this discovery meant. “What are you talking about?”

“It was buried for a reason,” Graeak said, “tucked away from the world because it is too dangerous. You’ve read the lore. You know the legends. No one should be allowed to handle that much power. And I remind you that it is a weapon of evil, never meant to be used by the power of good, however noble the intentions. The orb is a bringer of death and destruction. Someone went to a lot of trouble to keep it hidden, with good reason.”

“I understand your fears, my friend,” Hellric said, “but—”

“No,” Graeak interrupted, knowing that Hellric was trying to calm his fears, fears that were well deserved. “I don’t think you do.” He took a deep breath and looked at his friend with compassion. He could understand why Hellric had taken the orb. He had spent so long searching and to have actually found it was quite a feat. The temptation to leave it alone would be too much, even for him if he had spent over a decade searching for something.

“Every mention of the orb has always included plague or famine or death,” Graeak said. “That doesn’t include what it does to those unfortunate to die while in its presence, or the powers it has to create armies of undead. Those that use it are—”

“But I do not intend to use it,” Hellric was quick to point out.

“Your intentions do not matter,” Graeak responded. “How often have you tried a spell, mixed a potion, or enchanted an item with the intention of making it more powerful only to find out that something entirely different happens? The people that have used the orb only have one intention: to wreak havoc. You cannot hope to do anything with the orb other than cause harm, whether or not you intend to. I implore you to return it to where it was found, or destroy it, if such a thing is possible.”

Hellric leaned back and looked at his friend with disappointment, shaking his head. He took a deep breath and looked deep into Graeak’s eyes.

“Why do you use magic?” Hellric asked, catching Graeak off guard.

“To spread knowledge, to help the weak, and to make the world a better place,” Graeak said after a short pause. He had been asked that question a million times and his answer was always the same. He taught the same answer to his students.

“Exactly,” Hellric said, knowing what his friend’s answer would be for he had also heard it many times. “As do I.”

“Nothing that orb offers can possibly aid this world.” Graeak said.

“Can’t it?” Hellric replied. He continued after seeing the reluctant look on his fellow wizard’s face.

“Imagine an object so powerful that it can cure any disease, heal any wound, no matter how serious the injury. Imagine an object that can bring people back from the brink of death, if not back from death itself. Imagine how much good an object like that could do. How many lives would be saved? How many people would no longer have to shed unneeded tears over the death of a loved one? How many children would be saved from plague and disease? Just think about what this world would be like.”

Graeak finally understood the reason for Hellric’s obsession with the orb. He had a wife once, but she had been taken many decades ago, when a plague had broken out over the entire city. Thousands died, including his beloved Dalria. Despite all his magic, all his power, he had been powerless to stop her sickness. He had to watch as the plague slowly took her life. Then he had to put her in the ground. Graeak had never been married, nor in love for that matter, and could not imagine the pain his friend had gone through. He had locked himself in his tower for almost a year, grieving for his wife. One day, when Graeak had finally managed to drag Hellric outside, Hellric had told him that no one should ever have to go through that type of pain. Now, with the orb in his grasp, no one would ever have to.

“You’re thinking to reverse the orb’s magic, to make it a giver of life, instead of a master over death.”

“Exactly!” Hellric said with excitement, happy that his friend finally saw his plan. “No death, no sickness, no pain. Never again will we have to watch as our loved ones are struck down.”

Graeak took a deep breath. “You can’t bring her back,” he said with sadness, not knowing if that was indeed his friend’s intention. By now, Dalria’s body would be all but dust. Even magic could not bring her back. Even if it was possible, Graeak believed he had known Dalria good enough to know she would not want to be brought from the afterlife. Luckily, Hellric next words indicated that he agreed.

“I know,” Hellric said, looking into the wine in his glass, a somber look crossing his face. “But think of all those I could help. Think of all the pain I can stop.”

Graeak looked at Hellric and what he saw, just the slightest hint of madness creeping into his eyes, made him shiver. He knew it was not actually insanity. It was obsession, which could be even worse.

“Hellric, though I can appreciate your desire and your intention to free people from grief, to free them from death, I fear that what you plan will

have unforeseen consequences. The world needs pain, it needs disease and sickness. I dare say it even needs death, no matter how painful it may be. These maladies cleanse the world, much as a random fire clears brush that has grown too large to survive on its own. Imagine if plants never died or if the deer we eat could never be killed. Imagine if nothing ever passed to the gods. The world would be overrun. I even believe that these painful experiences are necessary. They make us stronger as a civilization for is it not these trials and tribulations that make us who we are? That teaches us what *not* to do? That strengthens our souls and makes us human? Death is nature's way of saying it is time, regardless of the means. What you are talking about goes against every law of nature. It even goes against the will of the gods and that is not something to be taken lightly."

Hellric just stared at Graeak with the same disappointed look, but this time he was actually smiling. He knew he would never convince Graeak. He was well accustomed to his friend's beliefs for he had heard them many times before. All he had planned to do was share his discovery and try to see if his old friend would simply understand. Unfortunately, it seemed Graeak did not. He was not surprised with his friend's reaction, just a little saddened. He just did not see the larger picture.

"I knew you wouldn't understand," he said with a sigh. "You are too much of a purest, which is an odd thing to find in a wizard. Perhaps you should have been a priest."

"You know I never had the patience for prayer." Despite himself, Graeak actually chuckled, which eased the tension. Hellric let out a deep laugh for wizards indeed needed to have a very different kind of patience than priests.

The two enjoyed the moment of levity, if only briefly. The feeling quickly faded and a serious tone fell over the two men once again.

"Are you sure you won't reconsider?" Graeak asked, knowing that despite his pleas and concerns, Hellric would still go ahead with his experiments on the orb. He knew that his friend was just trying to make him understand. He appreciated the attempt, but he could never go along with such an obvious attempt to challenge the laws of life itself.

Hellric looked right into Graeak's eyes. "I can't. If there is a chance, however small, I have to try. I have to make the attempt, if for no other reason than to see if it is even possible. You know," Hellric said after a short pause, a grin coming to his face, "it may be a little easier with help."

"I cannot," Graeak answered calmly. "I just don't think it is right."

"So why not try to stop me?" Hellric said, surprising Graeak. His voice wasn't abrasive. He truly sounded as if he wanted to know how his friend

would react. “Why not take the orb or tie me down?”

“Tis not my place,” Graeak answered truthfully. “If you were to use this for evil, then I may have tried to stop you, but this was your discovery. It would be no more right for me to try to stop a king who finds a magical sword. As long as he doesn’t turn it on me or the innocent, he is free to do as he pleases. You spent your coin and your time to find the orb. It belongs to you now. It is your property and you may do with it as you please, as long as it brings no harm to this city or its citizens.”

“Should I take that as your endorsement?” Hellric asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Graeak responded with a smirk. “To be honest, a part of me hopes you don’t succeed for I fear that what you may discover would violate the laws of life itself. I only see bad things coming from this.”

“And the other part?”

Graeak just smiled but remained silent. A small part of him wanted to see Hellric succeed if for no other reason than to see the orb’s power of evil destroyed. That would surely happen if he managed to reverse its effects. Another small part—the wizard in him—also wanted to see his friend succeed because it would be one of the greatest accomplishments in history. If he could actually succeed on an artifact that is supposedly as powerful as the orb, it would be amazing.

He looked over at Hellric and saw him smiling. His friend knew his feelings and found the conflicting emotions humorous. Though Graeak preached purity of life, he had been known to dabble in a little magic that helped extend his youth. Even one such as he had hopes of living a much longer life than the gods had planned. But Hellric knew he would not delay his destiny forever.

“Well,” Hellric said, draining the rest of his wine. “I think it is well past my bedtime. After all, I have a very busy day tomorrow.” He looked at Graeak and smiled.

“Please,” Graeak said with concern. “Be careful. The last thing I want to see is Godspire blown to pieces.” Godspire was the name of Hellric’s tower, a name that Graeak had actually come up with when they were younger, before either of them had a place to call their own. Graeak would always joke with Hellric, saying he would never be able to afford to build a god’s spire of his own, a name many arrogant wizards had used to describe their homes. Little did he know that Hellric would use the joke many years later to name his residence.

“But then The Fount would be the tallest tower in the city,” Hellric responded with laughter. Graeak had named his tower Fount of Knowledge,

believing that magic was useless without the knowledge to use it. Over time, people had just referred to his home as The Fount, finding the shorter title much more desirable.

Graeak just shook his head and watched his friend leave the tavern. The spell Hellric had woven went with him and the sound returned to normal.

Graeak spent a few moments watching the crowd. He watched their smiling faces, listened to the joyous music, and enjoyed his last sip of sweet wine. He suddenly found himself wondering where Meena went and if, when the time came, she would miss him when the gods called him home. His eyes turned towards the door that Hellric had left through.

“Watch over him Dalria. I fear he knows not what he is getting into.”

When Meena came back to the table a few minutes later, she found that Graeak had already left.



The massive fireball blazed right over his head. It had come so close that the intense heat singed his hair and sent wisps of smoke rising from his robes. If not for the protective magic he had cloaked himself and the others behind him in, Graeak knew he and the contingent of Lances that were following him would have burst into flames. He was lucky to have magic to wrap himself in, but those caught in the massive blast when the fireball landed were not so fortunate.

The roar of the flames were deafening and only intensified tenfold as it hit the building down the street from him. The structure and all those within were instantly incinerated, dissolving into a pile of ash. The explosion that followed rocked the entire city, throwing Graeak and everyone within five blocks to the ground. The whoosh of hot air that followed blew him even further along the road, rolling along the hard cobblestones. His shields flashed as they absorbed the impact and the small bits of debris that managed to survive the explosion. He looked up and saw that the other homes and business next to the building that was suddenly gone, those parts that were not destroyed from the blast, immediately caught fire and started to burn.

Only minutes ago, he had been sound asleep in his bed, enjoying a wonderful dream of a sultry elf he had once known when he was suddenly, and quiet rudely, shaken awake by one of his apprentices.

“My lord,” the boy named Vambalar had said frantically. “The city is under attack! The Lances request your aid!”

Though he was old and his bones always ached after waking from a deep

sleep, Graeak rose quickly from bed, donned his golden robes, grabbed his staff, and rushed down the stairs. A large group of Lances, dressed in their gleaming, golden platemail armor and armed to the teeth, was waiting with eyes filled with concern. Supreme Lance Camruadd Delonshire, a man Graeak had known for many years, stood out in front, eagerly awaiting Graeak's arrival.

"My Lord Loyalar," the Supreme Lance said with a steady voice. "We need your magic."

Though Graeak was just a normal citizen of Atlurul, the Lances, nobles, and the mayor always came to him and the other dozen wizards that called the city home when there was trouble. True, they had their own host of wizards that were employed by the city, but he and a few others were much more powerful, able to study and experiment as they pleased without the weight of government on their shoulders. Graeak always lent his help when needed. Now appeared to be another one of those times.

"What befalls?" he said, mentally readying his spells. His dark gray hair was wild from sleep and his short beard was tangled in knots. He wiped the sleep from his brown eyes and sniffed the air with his bulbous nose, smelling something burning.

"We'll explain on the way."

When he had gone outside, he saw that the night sky across the city was bathed in red light. Flames reached towards the heavens and people were screaming in terror. Guards were racing past him, running towards whatever trouble he was now heading for. Supreme lances, capital lances, and lance captains were shouting orders and horses were galloping through the streets, with armored riders in their saddles.

Graeak could feel the magic in the air and felt the rumbling of explosions beneath his feet. As he cast a few spells on himself and the guards with him, he quickly scanned the rest of the city and saw that whatever was happening appeared to be concentrated in only one area of the city. Behind him and to the side, all was quiet. The city walls were calm and the land beyond the gates was empty save for the insects and rodents that woke during the night. Whatever was happening had started from *inside* the city.

A surge of fear shot through Graeak as he turned back to where the commotion was coming from. The explosions, flashes of light, and streams of magic that were filling the night sky seemed to be coming from only one structure. It was the tallest structure in the city, and the home of his friend. His fears were quickly confirmed when Supreme Lance Delonshire next spoke.

"We don't know why, but about an hour ago he just started firing spells into



the city without warning,” the Supreme Lance said, keeping his eyes forward. “We tried to breach the wall but thick magic protects the entrance. Our wizards are powerless against it. Some attempted to teleport to the top, but they were met with resistance. Some disappeared only to reappear seconds later, turned into something I...I cannot really describe. I only know that it was dead when it came back. Our arrows are useless and any spell cast against him rebounds, twice as strong as before. We came for you as soon as we realized we needed spells that are more powerful.

“My Lord Loyalar,” the Supreme Lance said with remorse, “it appears that your friend Hellric has gone insane.”

Graeak tore his eyes from Delonshire and found Godspire in the sky. As they came closer, he could see beams of light, bolts of lightning and other spells coming from the top of the tower, all directed into the city. Buildings burned, people screamed, and the streets ran red with blood. All around it was fire and destruction, as if a ring of chaos had fallen from the sky to settle around the tower.

“By the gods, Hellric,” Graeak said under his breath. “I told you to be careful.”

It had only been a few months since he had last spoken to Hellric, in the Crying Lady, but since then, he had seen neither hide nor hair of his friend. The man had locked himself in the tower, no doubt performing his experiments on the orb. Graeak cursed himself for a fool for not checking on Hellric, knowing what the orb was and what he had been doing to it. He should have been more involved. He should have made sure his friend was all right. Now it seemed his negligence would cost them all. The old wizard must have unlocked something terrible, and everyone was paying the price.

“Let’s get to the tower,” Graeak said. “I need to—”

That was when the gigantic fireball had come screaming towards him. Now, Graeak was picking himself off the ground, old bones protesting. He looked back towards Godspire. They still had a ways to go but at this rate, they would be blown to pieces before they came within a hundred yards.

“Are you all right?” came Delonshire’s voice. Graeak nodded and brought to mind a spell that would get them past this madness.

“Hold tight,” he said and cast the spell. The Supreme Lance must have realized what he was doing for fear suddenly painted his face.

“No!” he screamed. “I told you teleporting into t—”

His words were ripped away as Graeak and the entire contingent of Lances were instantly teleported only a few hundred feet from Hellric’s tower. When they appeared, half the guard emptied their stomachs, this being the first time



many of them had experienced teleportation. Delonshire and a handful of others managed to hold in their dinner but they still looked a little queasy.

“There is no harm if we don’t actually teleport *into* the tower,” Graeak said as Delonshire and his men regained their wits. When they were stable, the group took off down the street, coming to the tower gates within moments.

A dozen city wizards were there, along with dozens of Lances. Graeak was quick to note a few dead bodies that had been pulled to the side. One was a burnt out husk, obviously a wizard. The other two were guards, who looked to have been burned to death. Graeak quickly surmised that the men had tried their hand at the entrance and met a grim demise.

The thick wooden doors of Godspire were dotted with burn marks, scorched from spells of acid, and marred by other forms of magic. Only two small sword marks indicated that someone, or a pair of someone’s, had tried brute force. The result now lay in a heap off to the side.

“Graeak,” came a voice. “Thank the gods!”

Graeak looked to a small man dressed in bright blue robes, carrying a glowing red scepter. The archmage had known Waalharim for over fifteen years and knew he was one of the most capable of the city’s wizards. When the man saw him, relief painted his face.

“Waalharim,” Graeak said as the two clasped hands. “Any luck?”

“No,” the aging man said. “We have thrown everything we have at it, to no avail. Two guards tried their swords but you can see the unfortunate result. Grimermal tried a touch spell and met his end. We dared not try anything like that twice. Graeak, I have never seen anything like this. It is as if the gods themselves bar our way. I don’t understand why Hellric would do such a thing.”

Graeak looked at the doors, then up towards the sky, to the top of the tower where spells of destruction continued to fall into the city. Luckily, Hellric’s attention was turned out toward the city instead of near the base of his tower. If he sent a few spells straight down, he could have killed them all.

“Stand back,” Graeak said, knowing that time was of the essence.

The wizards and the Lances stepped back. The wizards cast spells of shielding against death, fire, and any other form of offensive magic they could think of. The Lances ducked behind walls or hid behind their shields.

“Get ready to lend your magic,” Graeak said to Waalharim and the other wizards. “It may take all of us to break these wards.”

Graeak cast a series of spells on himself in case he set off the magical traps that were no doubt placed upon the door. Then he cast a spell that let him see magical emanations of nearby objects.

Godspire glowed like a small sun, which was no surprise to Graeak. Most wizards had dozens of magical wards and protections upon their towers, which protected the structure from thieves and the ravages of nature, but what really caught his eye was the black glow surrounding the doors. It was like nothing he had ever seen. It appeared as a black sun, surrounded by a ring of purple fire. Though he had never seen such a thing, he knew exactly what it was from. The orb's influence had wormed its way into the tower itself and veins of its magic had crept into every surface. Graeak could sense that the dark ward was somehow connected to the orb and he could feel, just barely, that it was connected to something on the upper levels of the tower. If he could sever the connection, the ward should fade. No wonder the others haven't had any luck, he thought to himself. He had just barely sensed the connection, and that was only because he knew what to look for.

Graeak took a deep breath. He cast his spell and thrust his will against the ward. The force of the backlash that came at him almost knocked him from his feet. Luckily, he had been expecting some type of defense and was able to fight off the power, but it still rattled his teeth and made his head pound.

"By the gods!" he growled. "The power!"

After he steadied himself, he threw everything he had at the ward. It continued to resist, sending that power back at him, but he was able to keep the backlash at bay while simultaneously chopping away at what made the ward so strong. He felt other magics start to boil to the surface. His eyes widened as he realized that he was powerless to stop those from reaching him. Concentrating his magic on two tasks at once was hard enough. Blocking a third was almost impossible.

Thankfully, the surrounding wizards had been watching and waiting for just such an occurrence. They sent spells of dispelling and rebounding at the wards that Graeak could not counter. The dangerous protections shattered and blasted to oblivion, allowing Graeak to throw a powerful surge of anti-magic at the ward.

The tendril that connected it to the orb cracked and crumbled. To his eyes only, there was a burst of purple brilliance, temporary blinding him. When his vision returned, he saw that all the magic guarding the doors were gone.

"Are you well?" Graeak heard Waalharim ask.

In response, Graeak cautiously approached the doors. He slowly placed his hand upon the wood. When no spell of death attacked him, he pushed.

The door swung open, revealing the inside of Godspire. The only thing that greeted him was an empty foyer.

"He will know we have gained access," Graeak said. "Stay close and let

me engage him first. Your swords and armor will do little against his magics. Keep your eyes open for his apprentices. We know not if they are suffering from the same affliction.” No one said a word. They just followed Graeak inside, weapons and spells at the ready.

Hellric’s tower was five hundred feet tall and consisted of twenty-five levels. The stairway was a single path, set against the outer wall, winding its way around the circumference of the tower, all the way up to the top. Most rooms were open, which would make searching for the apprentices and servants easy, but a handful of levels consisted of a half dozen smaller quarters, so they would have to be searched separately. But first, they had to reach Hellric and put an end to his madness. Graeak was not looking forward to the coming confrontation. If he could bring Hellric back from wherever his mind had gone, he would. But if he could not...

He took a deep breath and quickly scanned the ground level. It was empty, save for some scattered furniture. Not a single soul was present.

“Higher we must go,” Graeak said and started up the stairs.

They cleared the first ten levels in just a few minutes. They found no one. Every room had been empty. The lack of bodies—be they living or dead—did not put any of the men at ease. Usually the tower was alive with activity, at all hours of the day. Now it felt like a tomb. As they climbed higher, they started to see signs of life, or more appropriately, the signs of struggle.

Clothing, glass, wood, and other debris they could not identify lay scattered across the ground. Scorch marks and chunks of rock also lay in random places throughout the rooms they passed through. The chaos just got worse the higher they climbed. As they went higher and higher, they could hear explosions from the other side of the wall. When they passed by windows, they could see that Hellric was still at it, throwing spells of death down into the city. Was there no end to his magic? Graeak thought. It wasn’t until they reached level eighteen that they found the first body.

The mass of burnt flesh and bone looked to have been a female, though they could not be certain. Whatever it had been, it was melted into a fleshy mass by some insidious spell. They found three more masses nearby, as if the four people had been caught in some type of fireball. The ground was scorched black, as were the walls.

“We can do nothing for them,” Delonshire said, seeing the remorse and regret on Graeak’s face, though he had no idea why the old wizard would feel such guilt. Graeak knew why he felt so, but nodded to the Supreme Lance and continued up the path in front of him.

The next level looked as though gravity had suddenly reversed. All the

furniture and experimental equipment were on the ceiling. No one could tell if anyone was buried under the mass of destroyed debris, so they moved on.

The next three levels looked like something out of a nightmare. Everything that decorated these floors had been blasted to pieces, including the dozen or so people that called these chambers home. Blood lay splattered against every surface and bodies were scattered everywhere. Blood dripped from the ceiling, falling into pools on the floor below. A few of the younger guards could be heard emptying their stomachs as they passed through.

“What the hells happened?” one of the wizards asked in a whispered voice.

“Evil,” replied another. “This is not insanity. This is pure evil.”

“Something devilish has a hold of your friend,” Delonshire said, looking at Graeak. “This is no botched magic. If he cannot be saved, he must be put down, for the safety of the city.”

Graeak could not bring himself to voice his agreement for he knew that he might have to kill Hellric in order to protect the city. The question now was, was killing his friend even possible? The power displayed here was beyond his understanding. Could he even stand against such strength?

Graeak nodded and continued climbing towards his friend, a little more swiftly this time. If Hellric was capable of what he had just seen, it was imperative that he stop him as soon as possible.

They ran through the next level without stopping. Graeak did glance into the room and caught the sight of a few more bodies that appeared to be burnt out husks, lying in a large pile of ash. He ignored them, intent on reaching Hellric before he did anymore damage. The men behind him simply followed, feeling Graeak’s intensity, his need to end this now.

When Graeak reached the next level, the one before Hellric’s own, he rushed forward without stopping for the stairs had come to an end before him. The only way up was across the room to a single spiral staircase, rising up through the floor, but when Graeak finally looked up, he suddenly stopped, frozen in his tracks by the sight before him. The men following almost barreled into him, throwing him forward. They were about to run by him, thinking he had lost his mind, when they heard the moans, sounds that drove the icy finger of fear through their hearts.

The rest of the tower’s inhabitants stood before them, standing like statues made of gray stone. But they were not statues, but they weren’t alive either.

Their clothes, those that still wore them, sat in tatters on their bodies, bodies that were covered in rotting skin, flesh as dead and pale as the god of death’s own. Their eyes were glowing pools of purple light though they were lifeless and without feeling. Many were missing limbs but most were

whole yet they sported vicious wounds that would end the life of even the most battle-tested warrior. Their hands ended in sharp claws and when the party entered the room, they raised their arms and started to shuffle forward. Their moans of despair echoed throughout the room, further sending icy shivers up everyone's spine.

"By Kilgar," Delonshire whispered behind Graeak. "Undead!"

Any hope, however miniscule, that this entire ordeal had not been brought on by the orb, was dashed to pieces. Seeing those shambling zombies, those perverted creatures of undeath slowly moving towards him, Graeak no longer had any doubt that Hellric had been turned—or taken—by the artifact he had hoped to change. Now, that force of evil had made his friend into something that Hellric had always hated: a bringer of pain and destruction.

Anger crept into Graeak then. Not only just at the orb and Hellric, but at himself, for not being more vigilant and making sure Hellric had not strayed. He had failed his friend and the city. He had always said that a man that stands by and does nothing is just as guilty of the crime. He may not have turned these unfortunate souls into undead or caused the death of the gods knew how many people outside of these walls, but he shared in the blame. But before he accepted punishment, he would stop this madness.

He started chanting, calling to mind a powerful spell to blast the zombies into nothingness, but a hand fell on his shoulder, pulling his thoughts of destruction away.

"No," the Supreme Lance said. "I have a feeling you will need everything at your disposal, all your power, to overcome Hellric. Save it for him. We will take care of the undead. Go. Quickly."

Graeak hesitated but the confidence on Delonshire's face made it last only a few seconds. After nodding his acceptance of the situation, he backed away and let the guards and wizards rush into the room, engaging the zombies so he could make it to the stairs. He stepped back and ran along the perimeter of the room, moving away from the battle. To his complete shock, as soon as the undead were engaged, they sprang to life, with all the movement and ferocity of a caged demon of the Infinite Hells. The men were soon sorely pressed, finding the fight much more difficult than they first thought.

"Go!" Delonshire yelled, seeing Graeak pause, contemplating on lending his spells to the suddenly fierce battle. He saw the look on the man's face, one of courage and strength, then ran to the stairs. A few zombies went to stop him but the wizards lit them up with spells of lightning, fire, and force. He reached the stairs and ran up into Hellric's private chambers. What he saw when he reached the top made his heart almost burst from his chest.

Hellric's personal chambers used to be the envy of every wizard that called Atlurul home, consisting of dozens of tables filled with beakers full of bubbling liquids, gems that glowed almost as bright as the stars, items of wondrous power whose strength the wizard hoped to unlock, and other artifacts that an archmage could only dream of possessing. Potions that could enchant the mind, capture the soul, or heal even the most grievous wound used to sit on shelves that wrapped around the circular chamber. Items that even Graeak could not identify used to bob in the air, hang from the ceiling, or blink in and out of existence used to fill the air, pulsating with powerful magic.

But now, the circular chamber was a broken shadow of its former self. The tables—some made of stone, some of wood—lay in shambles, most appearing as if they had spontaneously exploded. Bits and pieces lay scattered around the room, some even floating through the air as if gravity had failed to take hold after the destruction. Globes of liquid, shards of glass, and other strange objects floated through the air as well and decorated the floor. Black marks, splotches of strange colors, and deep grooves also painted every surface, adding to the chaos. Stains that could only be blood, perhaps the remnants of some of the small animals Hellric used to experiment upon or keep as pets, turned the usually gray stone red.

A flash of light tore Graeak's eyes from the bedlam. He turned to see that an entire section of the wall, along with half the ceiling, was gone. Only the sky filled his vision, as well as some of the city, but that was not all.

Hellric stood at the edge of the void, bathed in an eerie purple light. His robes, which were usually as silver as a newly forged blade, were black as night, almost blending in with the openness before him. If not for the flames that filled the air with an orangish light or the glow that surrounded him, he would have been invisible against the sky. Every time he sent a spell into the city, the glow would brighten then flash, filling what was left of the chamber with a surge of magic and light. Strangely, his staff was nowhere to be seen. He used only his hands to send death raining into the city.

Though he could only see the back of him, the sight of Hellric's bald head shocked Graeak, even more so than he did already. His usual shinning white hair was gone, replaced with what Graeak could only guess was burnt flesh. His skin looked almost gray and twisted into something that resembled the surface of a rotted piece of fruit. The screams of elation that came from Hellric every time he cast a spell also sent Graeak back on his heels. What in the name of all the gods had happened to him?

Graeak took no time to assess the situation. He had to put an end to this madness and he had to do it now, so he brought to mind one of his most

powerful spells. Hopefully, it would dispel all magic within a certain area. He planned to center it directly on his friend.

Suddenly, as if his intentions had been spoken aloud, Graeak felt a presence within his mind, urging him to abandon the foolish notion of stopping his friend, and join him. It was so sudden and shocking that he almost lost the spell. Luckily, he held on but the magic he had started to gather slowly started to fade as something powerful began sucking the energies from it. Graeak took a step back and forced the presence from his mind. It faded but did not disappear completely. He looked all around the room, searching for whatever had assaulted him.

Floating in the air, not three feet from Hellric, was a sphere so black that Graeak swore he was looking into the end of time. Strange that he had not noticed it before for it looked to have been sitting there the entire time. He had the odd feeling that some type of magic emanating from the orb was trying to make him ignore its presence.

It was about three feet in diameter and bobbed up and down as if floating on a column of air. Small arcs of purple lighting played across its surface and a low hum issued forth, a sound that Graeak was just now noticing. Just below the orb, looking as though it was cut directly into the ground, was a hole, about four feet wide, filled with red light. The light pulsated and hummed, making Graeak's head pound. He looked back to the orb, to the utter blackness, and gazed inside.

Images too repulsive and terrifying to comprehend played across the surface of the orb, making Graeak want to scream. He pulled his eyes away and tried to calm himself. It wasn't easy but he managed to get a hold of his thoughts once more. He knew a lesser man may have run screaming from the room and he could not imagine what those visions had done to his friend.

Graeak quickly came to realize that what he was looking at was the dreaded Orb of Decay, an item so evil that it was rumored even gods were afraid of it. It was the orb that had driven Hellric mad, that had corrupted him and turned him evil. The artifact that Hellric had unearthed and brought back to his tower in hopes of using it for good had turned one of the world's most benevolent and powerful wizards into an agent of death and chaos. It was the orb and not Hellric that had to be destroyed, Graeak realized. Not only for Hellric's sake, but for the world's.

Graeak poured his will against the orb's influence and pushed it out completely. He felt anger and hatred but ignored them both. He started to gather the magic for his spell, to blast the orb into oblivion. Banishing it to another dimension or teleporting it away from this place wasn't enough. He



had to destroy it, to make sure that it never fell into the wrong hands again.

As if sensing his intentions, the orb flashed and sent a surge of energy into Hellric, as if yelling for aid. The mad wizard must have heard for he turned and screamed.

“Blasphemer!”

Graeak almost dropped his spell when his eyes fell upon his friend for his face looked just like the back of his head, the skin twisted and colorless. His features were barely discernible. The only things Graeak recognized were his eyes, but they were not the bright vibrant blue he had known. They were a dark red, blazing with power and malice.

The orb and Hellric both flashed with power. The spell that hit Graeak had come from his friend so fast that he hadn’t even had any time to scream. The blast of force lifted him from his feet and slammed him into the back wall. His staff went flying and his head crashed into the hard stone. Stars danced before his eyes. If not for the spells protecting him, he had little doubt he would be nothing but a bloodstain.

“Hellric!” Graeak struggled to say as the magic held him aloft, pinning him against the wall. “Fight against it!”

His friend said nothing. He did not even acknowledge that he had heard the words. His eyes just flashed, along with the orb, as he sent another blast of killing magic against Graeak.

The magic broke apart against another of Graeak’s shields, but it also took the ward with it, destroying yet another protection. Another spell followed after Hellric saw the first two had done nothing. That spell destroyed another of his friend’s wards.

Graeak knew he would not last forever. Hellric seemingly had an endless supply of power, granted to him by the orb. He had to separate the two, but he did not know how.

“Hellric,” Graeak said again, this time with more force. “Stop this!”

The only response he received was another spell of death, which tore away yet another protection and sent a surge of pain through Graeak’s body. A few more like that and he was done.

Graeak closed his eyes and sent his senses forward, hoping to feel Hellric or something that had been his friend. Unfortunately, all he sensed was darkness and death. He had hoped there was something of his friend left inside that twisted body, but there was nothing. The man he had known was gone. There was only one way to save him, but even he doubted he had the power.

Even though he was pinned, he managed to wriggle his arms free and blurt out a handful of powerful spells, meant to throw Hellric away or distract him



enough that the pinning magic would fail. Each spell was met with failure, being blocked by Hellric and the orb or fading away before they even came close. Hellric just laughed hysterically. Luckily, the maniacal laughter and countering kept him occupied, which gave Graeak more time to figure a way out of this mess. Unfortunately, he saw no way of getting free except by luck so he continued to throw spells.

They were blocked as before, but Graeak did notice something that could prove useful. Though Hellric was unaffected by the magic cast against him, the ground at his feet showed that it was not. If that was the case, the orb's protection only stretched to Hellric.

Just as Hellric was about to send another spell at Graeak, a guard appeared at the top of the spiral stairs.

“By Kilgar!” he said, seeing the chaos.

“Back!” Graeak shouted, but by then, Hellric had already sent a ball of fire at the guard's head.

The man disappeared beneath an explosion of fire and heat. The blast of air slammed against Graeak and his wards flashed as they fought against the flames that filled the room. The floating debris was incinerated, as were many of the broken objects that lay scattered throughout the chamber. The tumult continued for many moments and it felt as though it shook the entire tower. And that shaking is what gave Graeak his chance.

He dropped to the ground as the stones behind him shook. The fall was unexpected so he fell onto his backside when the magic disappeared, but even in his old age, Graeak was quick. He brought to mind a spell and as the smoke and flames cleared, sent it streaming at Hellric.

Hellric still stood, laughing as if he had just heard a humorous joke. It could have been raining daggers and he would not have cared, so when Graeak's spell came at him, he did nothing to stop it. The orb flashed, lending its strength to Hellric to assist in overcoming the magic. But the magic had not been aimed at the maddened archmage, but at the very ground he stood on so the orb was powerless to stop it.

A section of stone heaved, as if a tremendous amount of pressure had been building beneath it. Hellric, now giggling, was thrown back, right out of the tower and into the night. Graeak just caught the tail end of his friend's robes as he disappeared from sight.

Graeak turned to the orb and watched as it flashed and hummed with vigor. The purple lightning also flashed and grew more intense. It looked as though the orb was trying to lend its magic to Hellric, to protect him from the fall. For a moment, Graeak wondered if it had that kind of power, but when the glow

around the orb suddenly winked out, the purple lightning fading away, and the sphere settled on the ground, he knew that his friend had met his end. Though the wind that was flowing through Godspire assaulted his ears, Graeak swore he had heard his friend laughing all the way to the street.

“I’m sorry, my friend,” Graeak said in remorse. He desperately wished that there had been another way but he knew that Hellric had offered him no choice.

“You should not have died like this,” he said, painfully rising to his feet. “Rest easy now and give Datria my best.”

Graeak closed his eyes and struggled to hold back the tears. He let a few go and wiped the rest away. He would mourn his friend and drink to those that had fallen, but that would have to wait. Now he had sort through the chaos that ensued and rid the world of something that never should have been created.

“My Lord Loyalar?”

Graeak turned from the orb and looked to the stairway. He could see the tip of a blade just emerging from the opening.

Thinking quickly, he turned and cast a spell, creating an illusion over the orb that hid it from sight. He would take no chances with something so dangerous. No one needs to know it existed and until he found a way to destroy it, he would keep it hidden, from everyone.

“The danger has ended,” he said as Supreme Lance Delonshire came up from below. “The zombies?”

“Their life has once again left them,” Delonshire said. “Where is Hellric?”

Graeak just pointed toward the sky. The Supreme Lance walked over and looked down to the street. He could just barely make out the mess that had been Hellric Sazzor. He looked over the city, at the dozens of fires and broken buildings that surrounded the tower.

“I’m sorry,” he said, tearing his gaze away from the destruction and walking back over to Graeak. “I know he was your friend.”

“I had to be done,” Graeak responded softly. “For the safety of everyone.”

“What happened? What could have caused this?”

“I know not,” Graeak lied. “But what I saw shall haunt me forever. Hellric was taken by something. Perhaps a ritual gone wrong? A potion? Whatever the reason, I shall try to find out so it is never repeated. How fare your men?”

“We lost a few,” the Supreme Lance said, looking toward the stairway. “The rest are combing through the tower, searching for survivors.”

Graeak nodded and walked to the edge of the opening. He looked out over the city, staring at the pain and suffering his friend had unwittingly caused. Seeing his expression, Delonshire left him in peace, to join his men, looking

for any that may have survived what had happened.

“Lord Loyalar?” came a soft voice a half-hour later. Graeak had not moved in all that time. He had just stood gazing into the city, thinking of all the memories he and Hellric had shared. When Delonshire called, he turned slowly.

“We found only one survivor. A small boy, about five winters.”

“A boy?” Graeak asked in confusion. Most of the apprentices that Hellric had taken on were in their later years, the youngest he knew of being about fifteen. He did not remember his friend mentioning a boy.

“Yes, my lord,” Delonshire said. “His mother and father were students here, accomplished wizards by the looks of them. It looks as though they hid him away when the madness started. We found him in a closet, buried underneath a mountain of clothing.”

“His parents?” Graeak asked. When the Supreme Lance shook his head, Graeak went silent. Delonshire did not elaborate on how the boy’s parents had been killed, and Graeak really did not want to know.

Graeak turned and looked into the city once more. Just another young innocent soul caught up in this tragedy, he thought to himself. How many more families had been destroyed because of Hellric’s actions? Because of his own lack of action? He knew of at least a dozen, a dozen or so apprentices who would never again see their mother or father again, whose families would spend the next weeks, months even, mourning the loss of their children.

“Does he have any other family?” Graeak asked, fearing the answer.

“None that he will speak of,” the Supreme Lance said. Graeak knew that meant the boy had other family that he was estranged from or that he truly was alone.

“So you know,” Delonshire added, seeing the distressed look on the wizard’s face, “the boy looks like a practicing wizard as well. He was dressed in robes and wielded a wand. Almost blasted us. Took a moment for him to recognize us as his saviors.”

Graeak looked at Delonshire, a hint of interest creeping onto his face. A five-year-old wielding magic? It was not unheard of but very rare. He could let the guards take the boy but Graeak knew what growing up in an orphanage could do to a child, especially one coming from tragedy. If he truly had the aptitude for magic, it would be lost unless he was placed in the proper care and tutelage. He only had one real choice.

“Please take him to my tower and tell Vambalar to give him food, new clothing, and a room to stay in. He is to be my...guest until he chooses otherwise.”

“I have already seen to it, Lord Loyalar,” Delonshire said with a smile, knowing Graeak would take the boy in. The wizard nodded and smiled back. Delonshire turned to go.

“What is his name?” Graeak asked before the Supreme Lance disappeared. He wanted to know what to call his new guest.

“The lad gave his name as Druzeel.”

Supreme Lance Delonshire gave his old friend one last look and left him in peace. Graeak turned back and looked into the city for a few more moments. With a heavy sigh, and an even heavier burden, he turned toward where the Orb of Decay lay and dismissed the illusion.

“I will find some way to destroy you,” he said to the orb. He felt an intense hatred but was able to focus his will and push it away. “But first the city needs my aid and a young boy needs a new teacher.”

Graeak left the chamber then, knowing he would have his hands full in the years to come, not just with trying to find a way to destroy the orb, but also with repairing all the damage his friend had done. He intended to start with repairing the city then turning his full attention to the young student that he had just inherited.

# CHAPTER 1

He held his eyes shut and concentrated, feeling the mystical energies all around him, brushing against his skin, snaking through his hair, and even passing through his body, sending shivers down his spine. Though his eyes were closed and his mind was set upon the spell he was trying to master, he saw the waves of energy before him, looking like sparks of light, saturated in hues of blue, white, and silver. To someone accustomed to the sight, they may have shielded their face from the brilliant light or even turned away thinking they were hallucinating, but to a practicing wizard, there was nothing more beautiful than the magical emanations floating before him. They were like a second skin, settling over him, offering their protection and comfort, much like a mother does to her newborn child. Along with that protection and safety, the magic also offered power and provided the weapons a young man needed to become a mighty wizard.

No matter how many times he felt it, the sensation of those tendrils of magic flowing through him always filled his soul with joy for there was no better experience than feeling that energy, the energy that flowed through all living things. That power, that energy he so enjoyed, flowed around everything, even the world itself, penetrating deep into the ground, the rock, and the very air he breathed. It lived within every being, be they dwarf, elf, orc, or dragon and whether they knew it or not, it was a part of their soul. It connected them to each other and made them a part of something only a select few, perhaps only the gods, could even begin to understand. Magic was in everything and for those who knew how to call to it, to shape it to their needs, and draw it to them, it was a powerful tool, and wonderful experience.

By now, he would have thought his body would have become used to such

feelings, would have become bored and uninterested in the way magic made him feel. After twelve years, he would have thought that the routine would have lost some of its appeal, but each time was the same, sending waves of pleasant emotions flowing through him. If he could spend all day basking in magic's brilliance, he would, but eventually that power had to be used, had to be expelled and directed from his body or he risked being burnt out. Magic was wonderful, yes, and in the right hands could bring about wonders that could change the world, but it was also dangerous and if not used properly, could kill a man or turn them into something...undesirable. Holding that power inside one's body for too long could be perilous, but one of the first things his mentor had taught him was how to control the flow, how to shape it, and how to expel it so that it did its wielder no harm.

"Very good, Druzeel," came a voice, muffled and seemingly so distant. Druzeel knew his mentor was close but being so deep in a trance, it sounded as though he was far away, standing behind a wall of glass.

"Feel the magic," his mentor said, his words becoming clearer the more he spoke. "Let it build and tell it what you want it to do. Do not force it. *Ask* it to do your bidding. Remember, magic is not your slave, but your partner and will do as you desire if you treat it with respect."

If his eyes had been open, Druzeel would have rolled them. He had been hearing those same words from his mentor since he was five, since Graeak had begun teaching him the ways of wizardry. He knew what to do, and more importantly, what not to do. He would think I know this by now, the young wizard-in-training thought to himself. But he also knew that Graeak was just being Graeak; always over-cautious. The knowledge that his mentor cared so much brought a smile to his face.

"Now speak the words," Graeak said, a bit of hesitation in his voice. Druzeel had never attempted a spell of such power and though if he failed the spell would most likely fizzle away, there was always a chance, albeit small, of something bad happening.

Druzeel heeded his mentor's words and began the words to the spell that, if successful, would turn his skin as hard as stone. No apprentice had even tried this spell before their twenty-first birthday, but Druzeel was extremely skilled and adept with all things magical, or so his mentor had told him, and was confident he could do it. Graeak had resisted the seventeen-year-old's pleas to try the spell for almost an entire month, but he eventually relented, as he always did when being prodded by his star pupil. He only agreed to let Druzeel try under the strictest supervision: his own. Now Graeak walked around his apprentice, watching intently, with more than a little bit of angst, as Druzeel

began casting the spell.

He pulled in just as much energy as he needed and started to shape the spell. To pull in anymore would be dangerous and he knew if he showed the slightest bit of trouble Graeak would intervene and that was not what he wanted. He wanted to prove he could do this, that he had the skills and training to pull this off.

As the words continued to pour forth, he pictured what he wanted and felt the magic react, settling over his body and clinging to his skin. For just a second, the magic slipped away and he felt the spell start to fade. He clenched his teeth and threw his will at the spell, concentrating as hard as he could. His face must have showed signs of distress for he heard his mentor wince. Fortunately, Graeak stayed his hand and let his apprentice work through it. A quality that Druzeel loved about his mentor was that he was not afraid to let his students overcome such obstacles on their own. He believed that if he always lent aid whenever one of his apprentices was in trouble, they would never learn. For some reason, his stance on that had lessened considerably with Druzeel, but over the years, he slowly let the budding wizard fight through his own battles. Thankfully, this was one of those times.

Druzeel felt the magic snap back and the spell took shape. It fell over him and a slight constricting sensation took hold of his body, but the feeling only lasted a few seconds. When it faded, the magic he had held also fled from his body and the energy dispersed. He opened his eyes and looked to his hands. The flesh looked as it had before. There was no noticeable difference. Since he had never cast the spell before, he had no idea what to expect. He had read about what may happen, but wanted to be sure. He looked up to find his mentor standing before him, a blank look on his bearded face.

“Did it work?” he asked.

Graeak Loyalar, his mentor and teacher, stood before him donned in golden robes that shined bright in the candlelight. The fabric had the same sheen and reflection as with a bar of gold. Some whispered that Lord Loyalar, as most people called him, had found some way to spin gold into fabric and had knitted himself fine clothing indeed. Odd swirling patterns decorated the robes and a deeper gold color, almost brown, lined the edges. If not for Graeak’s long white beard, hair of equal color and length, and the odd red hat he wore, he would indeed look like a golem made of the auriferous substance.

“Well?” Druzeel said, staring into his mentor’s brown eyes, eyes lined with almost a century of wrinkles.

Graeak’s mouth, lined with just as many wrinkles as his eyes, slowly curled up into a smile. Druzeel saw the expression and was about to put on a smile

of his own when his mentor waved his hand through the air a dagger suddenly appeared within. It looked like a simple dagger and Druzeel was about to ask what his mentor was doing when Graeak suddenly sent the weapon sailing straight at his apprentice's heart.

"Wh...?!" was all Druzeel managed to blurt out before his hands flew up to deflect the missile. The weapon slid through his arms and hit him right where his heart was, but instead of slicing through his flesh, penetrating his heart and ending his life, the dagger just bounced off him, as if a piece of stone had been set beneath his cloths.

He stared at the dagger in shock then frantically put his hands to his chest, to make sure there was no blood. Assured that he was indeed unharmed, he turned narrowed eyes to his mentor.

"It appears to have worked," Graeak said with a smile.

"Not funny," Druzeel replied in a level tone, but his dismay soon turned to delight as he realized that he had done it. He had successfully cast the spell!

"I did it!"

"Yes," Graeak said with both pride and relief. "Very good, but don't let this small success go to your head."

"Small?" Druzeel replied with surprise. "Small? I just did something that no other apprentice has ever done at my age and you call that small?"

Graeak kept his face neutral but inside he was feeling the same elation as his student. He was proud of the young wizard for he had come further in his young age than any wizard Graeak had taught in the same time frame. Indeed, what young Druzeel had just done was quite a feat, but he could not let the young man let that accomplishment, or the sense of power, go to his head. It was time for a little lesson in humility.

With a simple flick of his wrist, Graeak dispelled the spell that Druzeel had just cast. It had been fast, so simple that Druzeel did not even have time to blink, but he felt the magic fade. He knew what his teacher had just done.

"You *have* done well," Graeak said, seeing the dismay that suddenly filled his student's face, "but do not think you have come farther than anyone that has come before you. Remember, there will always, *always* be someone just a little bit faster, just a little bit smarter, and a with a little more power. It is not enough to know *how* to cast a spell, but how to use it in the best way possible. That is what can make the difference between life and death. I am proud to see you achieve these feats, but there is much left to learn."

"I know," Druzeel said, a bit more modesty to his voice. "I'm just trying to be the best."

"You don't have to be the best," Graeak said, looking his young apprentice



in the eyes. “Being great is much more important. A great man. A great friend. A great citizen who helps where he can and lends his spells when aid is called for. Trying to be the best can lead to very bad things.”

Druzeel stood still for a moment, absorbing his teacher’s words. He had wanted to be the best, to be the very best at every spell he attempted, but perhaps that *wasn’t* as important as he had once thought. Perhaps his mentor was right. How you used the knowledge you gained was much more important than how fast you learned it. His mentor was telling him that coming in first should not carry as much influence as Druzeel was allowing it to carry.

He walked over to a large mirror on the wall and looked at his reflection. Smooth skin, deep brown eyes, dark brown hair, and a nose with a slight point stared back at him. The beginnings of a beard and mustache were just starting to show on his young skin. He reminded himself he would have to shave in a few days for it took almost a week for any real growth to take hold, but until then, he was content with the image he saw. Most women would call him handsome, if he ever got out of the tower enough to meet one, but his studies and lessons kept him in the tall structure. Graeak had given him numerous opportunities to go out and have fun in the city, but Druzeel was relentless in his studies, pouring over books and tomes, wanting to be the best. Perhaps now, after hearing his mentor’s words, he *would* go out for a little leisure time.

“Are you happy with what you see?” Graeak asked, walking up behind Druzeel, looking at the young man’s reflection.

“Are you?” Druzeel said, not knowing why he had just offered the offhand comment.

“Don’t talk back to your elders,” Graeak said, lowering his gaze, though a smirk split his lips a few moments later. Druzeel managed to stifle a chuckle and looked back at his reflection.

“Yes,” he said. “I like what I see.”

“Good,” Graeak replied. “If you have no respect for yourself, if you do not like what you see when you look into a mirror, your actions will reflect your emotions. A lack of self-esteem is detrimental to a wizard, especially one so young, who wields the power that you do.”

“It’s strange, is it not?” Druzeel asked. Graeak looked at him oddly. “For one so young to be able to control such magic?”

“Strange?” Graeak said. “No. Rare is the word that more aptly describes you, my young apprentice. Someone of your age, to learn and be able to wield magic as you do is a rare thing, but not completely unheard of. You indeed have a gift, a gift that you must use wisely. Thankfully, I am here to guide you.” Druzeel smiled at that comment, but his mirth soon turned to distress as

another thought entered his mind.

“The others don’t treat me like someone with so much skill,” Druzeel said, his voice carrying a hint of anger.

Graeak took a deep breath. He knew well of the taunts and teasing the other apprentices threw Druzeel’s way. Most of the students in Fount of Knowledge, or The Fount as most called it, treated everyone as an equal, regardless of their wizardry level, but a handful, as with any school, were bullies and always picked on those younger than they, even if they did hold more power or possesses a larger aptitude of magic. Much of their vitriol came from jealousy for Graeak *did* give Druzeel a greater amount of leniency and attention, but that was not the entire reason for their behavior. Some people were just insolent and no amount of discipline could cull that behavior from their souls. There were a handful of apprentices that Graeak wished he could expel from his tower, but he had made promises, and taken gold, and he never went back on his word.

“Though I know you suffer through a large amount of harassment,” Graeak said, “you are not the only one, though that does not excuse some of my apprentice’s behaviors. You need to stand up to them, whatever the consequence. Eventually, their bullying will relent and they will come to respect you for your courage and talents. It may take time, but trust me; they will learn to respect you. Know that it will not last forever and though they see your age as a disadvantage and something to exploit, it is one of the best advantages you have.”

“Being young?” Druzeel asked, baffled.

“Yes. When the time comes for you face combat—though I hope it never does, but it will for combat never leaves one alone forever—your opponents will think you weak, think you at their mercy because of your youthful appearance. What wizard would think a man of your age able to possess such magic? They will think you inexperienced and you will use their naiveté to your advantage. That will keep you alive and help you win the day.”

“So,” Druzeel said, finally understanding, “*your* enemies must turn tale and run as soon as they see you.” Now it was Graeak’s turn to look confused. “Someone as old as you surely has the power to destroy worlds.” Graeak raised a single eyebrow.

“Not funny,” he said, though a smile quickly formed on his lips. Druzeel started smiling as well and soon both were laughing.

After the mirth died down, the two went about cleaning up the sparing chamber. They placed the books back on the shelves that lined the room, bottled up the spell components that lay scattered on the floor, and placed

sparing dummies back in their original positions. Graeak watched Druzeel during this time and a surge of pride shot through him. He truly was proud of the young wizard, the boy who had quickly grown up into a responsible young man and would no doubt become a powerful wizard, perhaps even more powerful than himself. That thought brought him both happiness and fear for he could only watch over the young man for so long. Eventually, Druzeel would leave his tower and venture forth on his own, to make his own way. Graeak was confident he would make the right choices when he did, but that small amount of worry in the back of his mind reminded him that he had been wrong before. All he could do was continue to guide the man down the right path and hope he followed it after his time at the tower ended.

“All right,” Graeak said after the room was set back to its original state before they had started their lessons this morning. “Off you go.”

“What next?” Druzeel asked, wondering what chore, task, or mindless work his teacher was about to give him.

“Whatever you wish,” Graeak responded, bringing a look of surprise from Druzeel. “After what you have done here today, you’ve earned a little free time. I strongly suggest you spent it outside the tower. You could use some fresh air, as could I come to think about it.”

“Are you sure?” Druzeel said. “I could—”

“Go!” Graeak said rather loudly, with force to his voice. “Before I change my mind and have you cleaning the refuse pits, without magic!” With that promise, Druzeel was down the nearby stairs in less than a heartbeat. After he was gone, Graeak slowly, and with more than a little pain, made his way up the tower to his personal chambers.

He walked to the small wardrobe and took off his golden robes, robes that had grown quite heavy over the years. He then walked over to his elaborate desk, took a seat, and poured himself a glass of wine.

Although he had successfully put up a facade of vigor and vitality in front of his students, in private, Graeak’s bones and joints ached. It seemed that the years, almost a century, were finally catching up to him. Lately, it was taking him longer to dress, indeed, to even get out of bed in the morning. True, he could use spells and potions to make himself younger, but those would only do the trick for so long. The body could only take so much magic and it looked as though their use had finally come to an end. Unless he chooses to become a lich, something that he would never do, he knew he had only a few more years of life. The thought of death did not scare him for he knew that all things must die eventually and he had lived a good life. Death would be his ultimate reward and truth be told, he was looking forward to seeing his family and

friends once again, those that had passed before him. His only regret, his only remorse, was that he would not be able to see Druzeel progress into the great man he knew his apprentice would become.

Druzeel knew that Graeak was finally feeling his age. Though the young wizard hid the knowledge from his mentor, Graeak knew that his student had seen the signs. A stifled grown, a slight limp, or a long breath, held longer than usual, was all Druzeel needed to see to know that his mentor was growing older and would not be with him forever. The boy didn't miss much, Graeak mused. Thankfully, Druzeel only needed a few more years of tutelage before he was ready. Who knew, perhaps one day, the aspiring archmage would eventually become Graeak's replacement and take The Fount as his own.

"You would have been proud of him," Graeak said, talking into his wine, seeing much more than the burgundy liquid. In the surface, in his mind, he was picturing his old friend, the man from whom he had inherited Druzeel.

Not a day went by when he did not think of Hellric and the tragedy that had struck his friend. In his dreams, he still saw his friend's mangled face and the insanity that had taken him, just moments before Graeak had been forced to kill him. He still had nightmares about that night, horrible dreams about what may have happened had he not acted as he had. He knew those visions were still haunting him to this day because of the guilt he carried, guilt of not being more involved with his friend, not making sure he watched Hellric's back as he experimented on that horrible artifact, an artifact that at this very moment sat tucked away in the room right above his head.

Graeak had wanted to destroy the orb right after Hellric's death, but with the damage to the city, the wounded throughout the streets, and his new apprentice, now an orphan, he hadn't found the time. When the city had finally been put back together, he had done some research but failed to find a way to destroy the orb. And he was not about to do experiments on it to find out if it had any weaknesses. After what had happened to Hellric, he did not want to come within a hundred yards of the dreaded Orb of Decay. So he tucked it away in his tower, hiding in a pocket dimension and surrounding it by some of the most powerful wards he knew. He also destroyed any mention of the orb in old tomes or scrolls he or Hellric had possessed. No one would ever find or read about the orb again and he was confident that its secret, its existence in this world, would die with him. The only thing left from the terror it had caused all those years ago was the small boy Graeak had taken in, the sole survivor of Hellric's dark descent.

Amazingly, Druzeel had escaped unscathed on that tragic night and Graeak thanked the gods every day that he had little memory of that awful night. He

hardly remembered his parents let alone the terrified screams that had no doubt filled the tower when the slaughter began. When he was old enough and started asking questions about his parents, Graeak had told him that they died in a tragic accident, that they died saving his life. The explanation must have been good enough for he never asked about his parents again and threw himself into his studies. That dedication, that yearning for knowledge, is what Hellric had no doubt seen in Druzeel, and his parents for that matter, for they were aspiring wizards as well. That was why he had taken the boy into his tower and that was why Druzeel was now as powerful as he was. That and Graeak's tutelage.

Those feelings of guilt, of obligation were why Graeak had been so involved with Druzeel and gave him so much more attention than the others. It was why he was so intent on making the boy something far greater than he or his friend had ever been. Graeak felt an obligation to him as soon as he heard he had survived the calamity that he could have helped avoid. He had done nothing to help his friend but he would do everything he could to make sure that one of Hellric's students, his last student, grew up and had everything at his disposal to succeed.

At first, the obligation to Hellric and the guilt he felt is what drove Graeak, but over time, the old wizard came to realize that he cared deeply for Druzeel. The boy had become like a son to him, a son he never had.

Graeak never married nor had any family. Druzeel, and some of the other apprentices and tower servants, were the closest people he had to a family, but Druzeel more so than the others. The fact that Druzeel progressed so much more rapidly than the other apprentices also helped grow their relationship. He did feel a little guilty about not spending as much time with his other students, but Druzeel was unique and with the right amount of attention and teaching, had the ability to become greater than any wizard Graeak had heard of. That would be what he left when he passed from this world. Druzeel Sesstar would be his legacy.

He drained what was left of his wine and slowly moved to his bed. The sun had barely started to dip below the horizon and there was plenty of daylight left, but Graeak found that he was tired. Teaching Druzeel could be exhausting sometimes. He lay back and close his eyes, hoping that for at least tonight, his dreams would be pleasant.



Druzeel practically skipped his way down the stairs and out of the tower. Not even the taunts from some of the older apprentices could damper his

spirits. He just ignored their jeers and made his way out into the streets of Atlurul. He had invited a few of his friends to go along, those handful of students who he actually got along with, but they were busy with their studies. After seeing what they were going to be doing tonight, a small part of him thought he should stay in the tower and get a little extra work done. But he knew if his mentor caught him inside after giving him explicit instructions to leave he would be made to do some insidious chore that he was sure he would not enjoy. So out of the tower he went, in search of a few drinks and perhaps a pretty lass he could fool into kissing him.

The night was crisp with not a cloud in the sky. Solaris was just about to disappear below the horizon and Lunaria was already shining brightly in the sky. Druzeel took a deep breath enjoying the cool air and the scent of flowers that decorated the tower grounds. He wiped away any dust that might be clinging to his dark blue shirt, patted down his brown pants, and left the tower behind him. His robes he had left behind for he did not want the added attention wizard's robes always brought. There were times when he liked animosity, when he could walk into a tavern without every eye turning in his direction. The only eyes he wanted to draw were that of a serving wench, and perhaps a few ladies as well.

He felt good, having just cast his most powerful spell yet and had hoped that in the coming months ahead, a dozen more would be following. The energy and feelings that magic brought always excited him and he could not wait until he was at it again, attempting a difficult spell. When he was in that trance, that moment when the magic passed through him, when the energy built to a climax and grabbed hold, he truly felt alive, alight with the fires of life itself. He could not imagine anything else feeling so wonderful. Nothing else in all the world mattered to him at that moment when magic was within his grasp, except for maybe the approval of his mentor. And even now, he heard his mentor's concerns echoing in his head about power and responsibility. That energy was wonderful, yes, but he had to be careful not to let that feeling take him over completely. That could lead to corruption, to evil, and that was something Druzeel would never let happen. Doing good and becoming a great man was his path and woe be the one who tried to steer him off course.

Even though his mentor had warned him, constantly it seemed, of the dangers of trying spells that were above his current experience, Druzeel knew his teacher was just as happy as he was and was looking forward to his student's next lesson. After all, Graeak's teachings and guidance had brought him to this moment.

As Druzeel walked, nodding and smiling to the many people that passed

him, he thought of the man that had become like a father to him.

Graeak cared for him deeply, Druzeel had no doubts, and the attention and encouragement the old wizard gave to his most adept apprentice only made Druzeel love and respect the man that much more. But it was more than just love. His teacher respected him and treated him like an equal. That was what Druzeel truly craved: the respect and trust of his mentor. Graeak was many years his senior and much more powerful as well, but he had treated Druzeel, indeed, all his students, as adults, at least when they behaved accordingly. That mutual respect, and the way he taught, was why Graeak was such a highly sought after teacher.

Many of Atlurul's citizens came to him, practically begging him to teach their children should they show an aptitude with magic. Some paid gold, others offered services, and many offered only good will for they were too poor to pay. Regardless of their position in the community, be they noble or poor, Graeak considered all. He only had a limited amount of space and took only those he thought could become not just powerful wizards, but good men and women. Sometimes he would take in a poor man's daughter while rejecting a rich man's son. Other times, the reverse occurred. He had made some enemies along the way but had secured more friends than adversaries. It all depended on what Graeak saw in the potential student. There were a few times when he took in some students that Druzeel felt were not quite up to his mentor's standards, but Graeak said he had made promises, and he was a man of his word. Those students, more often than not, usually ended up being the bullies. It seemed politics were in everything, Druzeel surmised.

But as time stretched on and as Graeak aged, the number of students he took in lessened. Even though Druzeel knew his mentor could not live forever, though when he had first come to Fount of Knowledge it appeared to him that his mentor would, he had never thought of a time when Graeak would not be around. The man had always been there, to teach him, to guide him, and yes, to even berate him when he had done something stupid, which all children do on occasion. Druzeel really did not want to lose Graeak but knew that eventually, all things pass. He had already lost his real parents and was not looking forward to the day when he would have to tell his adoptive father goodbye.

He had little memory of his real parents. Graeak had told him they died protecting him and he took the wizard's word as fact. He just wished that he could remember how they died or how his life had been before their premature deaths. He knew they had been wizards and took great pride that those qualities had passed to him, but a part of him wished he could remember what they were like.



The last memory he had before the guards had found him was being hurried into a small closet and buried underneath a mountain of clothing. His mother's voice was still embedded into his mind. It was just her face, and his father's, that were a bit hazy. He had heard the muffled screams and the tiny space around him shook dozens of times, like a small earthquake had attacked the tower they lived in. But eventually, the sound and shaking stopped. The Lances eventually found him and escorted him from the room. He never saw his parent's bodies, just the shape of two people lying underneath a bloodied blanket. That vision stayed with him even to this day. He was taken to Graeak's tower then, offered room and board, and soon after, a chance to learn magic. That was when his tenure with Graeak had started. He never spoke of what he had seen to his new mentor and kept it to himself. His soul was still pained a little by the tragedy but again, he hardly had any memory of what his life was like before coming to The Fount. Could he really mourn two people he never really knew?

Druzeel shook all the sad thoughts from his head. Now was not the time to think of such things. He had accomplished something great and was going to reward himself justly. The coins in his pocket seemed to be beckoning him to spend them, so he made his way to the Crying Lady, a nearby tavern that Graeak often visited and he himself had been in a time or two before. A small part of him wished he had a few friends with him to celebrate, but he had always been a bit of a loner and was content to offer a toast to himself.

The tavern was busy but he had no problem finding a table. The proprietor of the Lady, whose name Druzeel could never remember for some reason, always kept a table empty for Graeak, his friends, and a select few whose names the wizard had given to the owner and help. Druzeel happened to be one of those select few so he walked right in and took a seat. One of those employees, an attractive young woman with auburn hair, bright blue eyes, and full lips, saw him sit down at Graeak's table and walked over, a frown on her smooth face.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice betraying her annoyance, "but that table is reserved."

"I know," Druzeel said, trying his best to keep his eyes on her face and not her chest. She wore a loose shirt with a V-shaped collar, cut so low that it would make even the noblest of men blush. "I'm a student of Lord Loyalar. My name is Druzeel. Druzeel—"

"Oh," she said, her lips quickly forming a smile. The annoyance faded from her voice. "We know all about you. Graeak never stops talking about his prized apprentice."



“Really?” Druzeel said, his mood brightening. He knew that his mentor spoke of his students outside of the tower, but to hear that he was often the topic of those conversations made Druzeel beam even more.

“Oh, yes,” the woman said, her smile widening as she saw the affect of her words. “He’s very proud of you, have no doubts. You are welcome to his table anytime. What can I get for you this night?”

It took Druzeel a few moments to come down from his elation. The serving wench couldn’t suppress a giggle as he just stared off at nothing, eyes wide with joy. In truth, he was looking in the direction of Graeak’s tower, to the only home he had ever known, and ever wanted.

“A glass of the best wine you have,” Druzeel said gleefully, finally finding his voice.

“Had a good day, have you?” the woman asked with a chuckle. Druzeel turned a wide smile in her direction.

“My best.”