

The Unwelcome Warlock

A LEGEND OF ETHSHAR

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Dedication

*Dedicated to
John Betancourt
for his help in keeping Ethshar alive*

Chapter One

Hanner the Warlock looked at the tapestry without really seeing it; that constant nagging whisper was distracting him. He closed his eyes for a moment to clear his thoughts, but that only seemed to make it worse. He clenched his jaw, shook his head, and balled his hands into fists.

“Is this not what you had in mind, Chairman?”

The wizard’s voice brought Hanner back to reality for a moment. He opened his eyes and forced himself to focus on the tapestry.

The silky fabric hardly seemed to be there at all; the image woven into the cloth was so detailed, so perfect, that he seemed to be looking through the tapestry into a world beyond, rather than at the material itself. In that world gentle golden sunlight washed across a green hillside strewn with wildflowers beneath a clear blue sky above. In the distance he could make out a cluster of handsome golden-tan buildings, though details were vague.

“Does it work?” he asked.

The wizard beside him glanced at the tapestry. “It does,” Arvagan said. “My apprentice tested it before I sent for you. The tapestry that can return you to Ethshar is hanging in that house there, on the right.” He pointed, but was careful to keep his finger well back from the cloth — the slightest contact would trigger the tapestry’s magic and pull him into that other world.

“The tapestry that comes out in the attic of Warlock House?”

“Precisely.”

“These tapestries will both work for warlocks?”

The wizard hesitated. “I *think* so,” he said at last. “You understand, without a warlock’s cooperation we have no way of testing it. Divinations are unreliable where warlocks are concerned. We know *some* tapestries work for warlocks — in fact, we’ve never found one that doesn’t — and I don’t see any reason these wouldn’t, but magic is tricky.”

That brief hesitation had been enough for the Calling to once again start to work on Hanner. He had turned his head away from the tapestry as if to listen to the wizard’s reply, but then the motion had continued, and now he was staring over the wizard’s left shoulder, to the north, toward Aldagmor.

He needed to go there, and soon. He needed to forget about all this Council business, forget about the wizards and their tapestries, forget about schemes to avoid the Calling. He needed to forget about Mavi and their children, and about his sisters and his friends, and about the other members of the Council of Warlocks, and just *go*. Whatever was up there in Aldagmor, it needed him, and he needed to go to it...

“Chairman?”

Hanner bit his lip. What he *needed*, he told himself as he forced himself back to reality, was a refuge where he couldn’t hear the Calling and couldn’t feel its constant pull.

That was what these tapestries were supposed to provide. That was what he had paid the Wizard Guild the insane sum of eight thousand rounds of gold to obtain, a fortune that had completely wiped out his own assets, and half the Council’s money as well.

Not that money would matter to him in Aldagmor...

“I’m sorry,” he said. “What were you saying?”

“I was saying that we do not actually know whether this tapestry will do what you wanted. We don’t understand your magic, any more than you understand ours, and we have no way of testing how the two magics will interact, other than sending a warlock through the tapestry. We know that warlock

have used *other* tapestries safely, but wizardry can be...erratic. We can't promise what *this* tapestry will do until a warlock tries it."

"You haven't tested that?"

"Chairman Hanner, you specifically forbade us from telling any other warlock anything about the project. That was part of our contract, and we have abided by it."

"Of course," Hanner said. "I didn't want to get anyone's hopes up. So you don't know whether I will be able to hear the Calling from that other world?"

Arvagan sighed. "Chairman, we have no idea what the Calling is. We don't know how it works, or whether it extends into the new universe we created for you — assuming we did create it, and not just find it; we don't really know *that*. We know that you can breathe the air there, and drink the water, and that my apprentice suffered no ill effects from doing so. We know he chewed on a blade of grass and wasn't poisoned. We know that the village in the tapestry was uninhabited when he got there, though we can't say with any certainty whether its builders, if it *was* built, might still be around somewhere. We know he says that he walked three or four miles around the area without finding any people, or any animals larger than a rabbit, or any edge to the world he was in. But that's about it as far as our knowledge goes. We don't know whether warlockry will operate there. We don't know whether there are natives dwelling somewhere in that world. We don't even know how long the day is there — he didn't stay long enough to determine that. Creating or finding new worlds is an unpredictable business, Chairman; we told you that when we first agreed to this."

"You did," Hanner admitted.

This had been a tremendous gamble, paying the wizards to open a way to another world, and there was only one way to find out whether it had worked, or whether he had thrown away an immense fortune for nothing. All he had to do was reach out and touch the tapestry, step into it, and he would be in that other world, that beautiful refuge.

He started to raise his hand, then stopped.

"Not here," he said. "I might not..."

He didn't finish the sentence; when he realized what he had been going to say, he forced himself to stop.

He had been about to say he couldn't use the tapestry because it might cut him off from the Calling, but that was what he had wanted; that was the whole *point*. This tapestry was intended to let warlocks escape from the doom that eventually befell them all.

Every warlock knew that the farther he was from Aldagmor, the weaker the Calling was — and the weaker his magic was, as well, but that was only a secondary consideration. That weakening had given Hanner the idea to find, or make, a place so distant from Aldagmor that the Call couldn't reach it at all.

The Calling touched every corner of the World; warlocks had established that. From sun-baked Semma in the southeast to frozen Kerroa in the northwest, there was no place in the World where a warlock was safe. So, obviously, the warlocks needed a refuge that wasn't in the World at all, and that meant they needed wizardry. The only three kinds of magic that could reach out of the World into other places were demonology, theurgy, and wizardry — herbalism, witchcraft, ritual dance, and the rest were limited to everyday reality.

The gods didn't recognize warlocks as human beings, and had trouble even acknowledging their existence, so theurgy wasn't going to help. The Nethervoid, where demons originated, wasn't anywhere anyone would ever want to go, and trusting demons was usually a stupid thing to do, so demonology was out, too. That left wizardry. Wizards had various spells that could reach other planes

of existence. It wasn't clear whether these spells opened a path to places that had existed all along, created new places out of nothing, but they could definitely provide access to other worlds. Hann had even visited one, long ago, and found that warlockry did not work there, and that presumably the Calling did not reach it.

So here it was, the wizardry he had asked for — a Transporting Tapestry to another world that just might be the refuge the warlocks needed.

It looked lovely, but that didn't mean much. Arvagan's apprentice had survived a visit there, so it couldn't be *too* hostile, but would it really be a decent place to live? Would it be a safe home for his wife and children?

He grimaced. He was assuming that Mavi would want to accompany him, but he had not actually asked her yet. He knew she was worried about the Call, but worried enough to give up her life in Ethshar of the Spices, the city that had always been her home? It wasn't as if *she* was in any danger, but he had invited her to become a warlock, to have that little adjustment made that would let her draw magical power from the Source, but she had never done it. She was content to leave the magic to him and the other warlocks while she attended to more mundane matters.

But she loved him and wanted to be with him, so of course she would want to come with him. She wouldn't need to stay; she could go back and forth at will, while he would need to remain in that other place once the Calling became too strong.

That assumed, of course, that it wasn't just as strong on the other side of the tapestry. He really would need to try it out someday, when the Call reached a dangerous level — maybe after he got back from Aldagmor...

He closed his eyes and clenched his teeth and held his breath.

He was *not* going to Aldagmor. He was not going to give in. The Call was obviously already dangerous. It was always there, every second, day and night, nagging at him, working insidiously to draw him away. Every time he used even the slightest bit of warlockry, or took a single step to the north, it grew a little stronger. Simply facing south was becoming difficult; his head kept turning involuntarily, and his neck was getting sore from his struggle to resist. He was leaking magic, he knew that; small objects tended to levitate around him without any conscious effort on his part. He *needed* a refuge.

And now, just in time, he might have one. All he had to do was reach out...

But the wizards didn't know, didn't *really* know, whether it was safe, or whether it would work. He should go home and discuss it with his wife before he did anything more. He should go home, to Warlock House, on High Street, just a mile north of this secret room on Wizard Street.

A mile *north*. A mile closer to Aldagmor. He shuddered at the thought, and at the same time he felt a deep longing.

It was very bad. He wasn't going to be able to hold out much longer. He couldn't sleep anymore; when he did, he dreamed of fire and of being cast down from the heavens and buried deep in the earth. In Aldagmor, he dreamed of a need to go there and help, and he always awoke to find himself moving northward. He hadn't dared to sleep at all for the last two nights, and he had made do with brief naps for a sixnight before that.

He just had to reach out and touch the tapestry, but he couldn't lift his hand. He was so tired, so weary of fighting the Call — not physically, no powerful warlock's body ever tired, but mentally. If he gave in he could rest. He could fly, any warlock worthy of the name could fly, he could be in Aldagmor in no more than a day or two. He had been refusing to fly at all for about a month, so that he would not fly off to Aldagmor, but now that just seemed foolish. Why not get it over with?

“Tell my wife I love her,” he said. “Tell her to wait for me in the attic of Warlock House. If this works, I’ll meet her there and let her know. If it doesn’t, well...”

“Should we tell her any details? About the tapestries?”

Hanner shook his head. “No,” he said. “I’ll tell her. She knows I was planning something, and I want to be the one to tell her what it was.” He paused, then added, “If it works. For all we know, the Call will be even stronger in there.”

“I suppose it might be,” Arvagan admitted. “Though I don’t see why it would be. Wherever the place is, it’s not Aldagmor.”

“But it could be *near* Aldagmor, somehow.”

“I suppose.”

Hanner turned to Arvagan. “You’ll tell her?”

“The instant I see you enter the tapestry, I’ll send word for her to go to meet you.”

“Good. Good.” He turned back to face that shining image of green fields and tried to step toward it, but his foot would not lift.

Inspiration struck. “Arvagan, would you do me a favor?”

“What sort of a favor?”

“Would you move the tapestry to the north wall? Or just turn it so it faces south?”

“Is it that bad, Chairman?”

“Yes, it is,” Hanner said. “I didn’t know... It took so long...”

“We told you when we started that it took a year or more to make a Transporting Tapestry.”

“Yes, you did — but I hadn’t realized how close I was to being Called. A year ago it was nothing, just a little murmur in my head; now it’s...it’s everything, it’s constant, it’s so *strong*.”

Arvagan nodded. Then he reached up and pushed at the rod supporting the tapestry, being careful not to let his hand come too close to the fabric. Like the sail of a ship clearing the breakwater, the tapestry swung slowly around.

Hanner turned with it, and when it was due north, between him and Aldagmor, he found he could lift his arm and step forward, step northward. His finger touched the silky cloth.

And the secret room was gone, the wizard’s house was gone, Wizard Street and the Wizards’ Quarter had vanished, the entire city of Ethshar of the Spices was gone. He was standing on a gentle, grassy slope sprinkled with white and gold flowers.

He didn’t notice.

A sun was shining warmly on his face, a sun that wasn’t quite the same color as the one he had seen every day in Ethshar, and a soft wind was blowing against his right cheek. He didn’t notice that, either.

Sky and sun and wind and grass and flowers, a sound of splashing somewhere in the distance, a cluster of strange buildings — Hanner ignored them all.

He was too busy listening to the silence in his head.

The Call was *gone*. The constant nagging, the murmuring voice in his head, the wordless muttering that he had somehow been able to draw magic from, was gone. There was nothing in his head but *himself*.

He hadn’t experienced such total mental freedom since the Night of Madness, seventeen years before. Even before he had consciously noticed it, he had lived with the constant whisper of magic for so long that its absence was overwhelming. Now he simply stood, listening for it, for several minutes.

At first he didn’t show any reaction; the change was too sudden, too complete, to comprehend. Then the rush of relief swept over him, and his knees gave way, and he tumbled onto the grass, trembling with the impact of his release from bondage — and trembling with terror as well. His magic was gone, and it had been central to his existence for so long that he barely knew who he was without it.

He lay on the grass for several minutes and gradually began to notice his surroundings — the sun, the breeze, the grassy slope. He tried to stand up.

It didn't work.

He took a moment to absorb that, and to realize that he had become so accustomed to levitating and flying that trying to rise using only his own muscles was difficult, surprisingly difficult. He had forgotten how to do it.

He had tried to spring directly to his feet — or really, since of late he had usually hung in the air with his feet an inch or so off the ground, “to his feet” wasn't quite right. He had tried to fling himself upright, but without magic it hadn't worked. Now he rolled onto his back and pushed himself up into a sitting position, then set his feet on the ground, one by one. Then he stood up, leaning forward and straightening his legs.

That time it worked.

He stood for a moment, taking in his surroundings and his situation.

He had no magic. Wherever he was, he wasn't a warlock here; probably nobody would be. All the little things he had done magically he either had to do with his own muscles or not at all.

He was dismayed to realize how many of them there were. He had been using warlockry to stand up and to walk — or rather, to fly; he realized now he hadn't actually *walked* in months, even when he thought of himself he wasn't flying and tried to stay close to the ground. He had been summoning things to his hand, rather than reaching out to take them. Magic had infiltrated every part of his life. Now that his head was clear, he could remember any number of ways he had used magic — walking, lifting, cooking, cleaning, heating, cooling, playing with his children, even making love to his wife. He had done it all without thinking. Even when he had begun to feel the Call, when his dreams had become nightmares and the whisper in his head had become a constant nagging, and he had tried to stop using warlockry because it made him more susceptible, he had unconsciously continued doing all those little, everyday magics. The power *wanted* to be used, so he had used it. Only now that he *couldn't* use it did he realize he had been doing so. He was standing here on a grassy hillside, and his legs were supporting his entire weight, his skin was unprotected from sun and wind, and it felt *strange*.

He thought he could get used to it, though. After all, he hadn't been born a warlock; he had grown into adulthood without any magic. Most people managed just fine without warlockry.

He sniffed the air and caught the scent of the sea, or something very like it. He walked cautiously down toward the cluster of buildings that he could not help thinking of as a village, though he had no idea whether that was really an accurate description.

As he drew near, he decided that they were indeed houses and did indeed comprise a village. They were built of some hard, golden-brown material — stone or brick or dried mud, he couldn't tell which. There were many small windows and a few arched doorways. Arvagan had said that the builders might not be human, but the proportions looked right for humans; Hanner didn't see anything particularly odd about the houses.

Beyond the village, the land continued to fall away, and he could see the ocean, or something very like it, spreading out in the distance. A tree-lined stream gurgled its way past the village, which accounted for the splashing he had heard, and the leaves rustled in the gentle breeze.

It was very pleasant, really. Arvagan had said that he couldn't guarantee anything about this place, that there might be hidden dangers, anything from insidious poisons to rampaging monsters and distorted time, but to Hanner it looked calm and inviting. The stream would presumably provide fresh water, and the land looked fit for growing food; there might be fish in the sea, or even clams to be dug up along the shore.

Or if appearances were deceiving, and that somehow proved impossible, if the tapestries continued to work as promised, he could still have food and even water brought in from Ethshar. Unless there were some nasty surprises awaiting him, he had his refuge — a place where warlocks could come and escape the Calling.

He wandered around for what felt like an hour or so, exploring the houses. They were large and unfurnished, as if their intended inhabitants had never arrived, never brought their belongings.

That was fine. That was *perfect*.

The air was sweet, the sun was warm, and there was no Call. It was everything Hanner had wanted.

In the one house, just as Arvagan had said, was the other tapestry, the one depicting the attic of Warlock House, the mansion that had once belonged to Hanner's uncle, Lord Faran. That bare, dimly lit room looked dismal compared to the bright sunlit refuge, but Hanner did not hesitate; he knew his wife was waiting for him there. Mavi and the children had been worried about him; this refuge would be a relief for them all, even if none of the others ever set foot in it. Hanner walked up to the tapestry and put a hand and a foot out to touch it, eager to tell Mavi the good news.

He knew the Calling would return, but he assumed it would take a few seconds to reach its old form. He thought he was ready for it.

Then he was in the attic, back home in Ethshar of the Spices, and he was wrong. There was no delay at all. The Call was instantaneously a deafening, irresistible screaming in his head, and he had had no time to prepare, no chance to brace himself. After an hour of freedom, his resistance was gone, and he could not restore it quickly enough. There was one final instant of clarity, one glimpse of Mavi waiting, a glimpse of her staring at him as he appeared out of thin air, and then there was no room in his mind for any thought but the desperate need to get to Aldagmor as fast as he could, by any method he could. Nothing could be permitted to stand in his way, and with a wave of his hand he shattered the sloping ceiling, splitting the rafters and tearing wood and tile to shreds as he soared out into the sky. He could not spare so much as a second to tell his wife goodbye before flying northward.

He did not hear Mavi call his name, did not hear her burst into tears as he vanished. He did not see Arvagan's apprentice rush up the attic stairs to her side, to catch her before she collapsed.

By the time the apprentice brought Mavi to Arvagan's shop, Hanner was thirty leagues from the city. By the time word went out to the Council of Warlocks, Hanner was in Aldagmor. He could not tell them what had happened. He could not tell them that the refuge was a success, and only failed because he had been caught off-guard by the sudden instantaneous return of a Calling he had only barely been able to resist *before* he stepped through the tapestry. No one knew how very, very close he had been to giving in before he touched the fabric and was transported to that other reality.

All they knew was that Hanner, Chairman of the Council, had stepped through the Transporting Tapestry still able to fight the Call, and upon emerging had instantly flown off to Aldagmor.

There were some who theorized that the Call was somehow stronger on the other side of the tapestry, some who thought the magic of the tapestry itself somehow added to the Call's power, some who really didn't care about the details, but the Council as a whole agreed: The Chairman's attempt at creating a safe haven for high-level warlocks had failed.

The tapestry was rolled up and stored securely away — after all, it was bought and paid for, and belonged jointly to the Council and Hanner's widow Mavi, and perhaps someday some new spell or divination would allow them to use it safely. A new Chairman was elected.

And the Calling, that inexplicable melange of nightmares and compulsions, continued to snatch away any warlock who grew too powerful.

Chapter Two

The cold air rushed past Sensella's face, drying her eyes and chilling her skin, but was not enough to distract her from her ferocious *need* to reach Aldagmor — or rather, a specific place in Aldagmor; she knew she was probably somewhere in Aldagmor now, but she still had a league or two to go. Nothing else mattered — not the cold, not the dark, not the family she had left behind. She knew her children and grandchildren would be upset that she was gone, that she had flown off in the middle of the night, but that wasn't as important as getting to the thing in Aldagmor, to whatever it was that was calling her. Her magic didn't matter, other than in helping her get there; if it were to suddenly vanish and she survived the fall, she knew she would just get to her feet and walk, or better yet, run, to answer the Call.

She had left before dawn, flown the day through, and now the sun had been below the horizon for more than an hour, but she would not be traveling much longer. Dark forests rolled past beneath her feet as she flew through the night sky, stars twinkled overhead, and she knew she was getting closer. That was so important, so urgent, that she was barely aware of her surroundings —

Until the sky above her lit up in a blaze of light and color that flashed in an instant from red through orange to yellow, and then turned impossibly white, lighting the World so brightly that everything was washed out, every shadow banished.

And while the Call did not stop, it was suddenly overwhelmed by a wave of reassurance, of comfort. The Calling was wordless, but put into words it would say more or less, "Come to me." This new message, equally wordless and far more powerful, answered, "*We have come.*"

But it wasn't speaking to *her*.

Sensella slowed in her flight, and blinked, trying to understand what was happening.

The landscape ahead was lit with that strange, intensely white light that leached the color from everything. It was fading somewhat, not as bright as it had been, but it was still more than enough to see. There was a valley, there were forested mountains on the far side. It was uninhabited wilderness — no roads, no houses, no farms.

But in the middle of the valley was a mound, a strange dark mound directly ahead of her; Sensella could not make it out clearly. It was not overgrown with trees or grasses, like a natural hill, nor was it bare stone or earth. It was made up of hundreds or thousands of objects piled one upon another, but in the eerie whiteness Sensella could not judge their size, or discern their colors.

The source of that unnatural light hung directly above the mound, and was descending slowly toward it.

The Calling, she realized, came from the mound. *This* was what she had come to Aldagmor to find. This was the source of the warlocks' magic. She could feel the power surging through her. Until just a moment before she had been unaware of it, unable to use it for anything but flying closer, but now the spell was — not broken, but countered, by that gigantic *thing* that was slowly sinking down from the heavens.

She looked up, trying to see through the glare, and her brain refused to resolve what her eyes saw into a comprehensible shape. There was *something* coming down from the sky, something the size of a small city, something that glowed as brightly as the sun, but in a different spectrum, and Sensella could not make herself see it. She thought it was more or less round, and at least twice as wide as it was tall, but beyond that she could not make sense of it.

That overwhelming message of reassurance came from the thing in the sky, just as the Call

demand for aid came from the mound — or from something beneath the mound. The thing in the sky had come in response to the Call, just as she had herself; she knew it. She could not have explained how she knew it, any more than she could have said exactly what the Calling had been whispering to her all these years, but she did know it, completely and irrefutably.

Sensella had slowed in her flight, but not stopped; she was still approaching the mound, and now, as her eyes adjusted to the glare and her mind to the alienness of what she was seeing, she realized what the objects composing the mound were.

They were people. Hundreds of people, packed face-down into an immense pile. Most of them were dressed in black — warlock black.

Shocked, she stopped in mid-air. She hung about sixty feet off the ground, staring at that great heap of humanity.

She could not hear anything. The Call and the Response made no actual sound, but they drowned out everything else all the same, filling the part of her brain that might otherwise have reacted to what her ears detected. She could smell nothing but the cool night air of the forested hills of Aldagmor. She could see the mound, but the strange light made it hard to know exactly what she was seeing, and she could not tell whether the people stacked up before her were breathing, whether they were alive or dead. Certainly, they weren't *moving*.

The idea that she was looking at a gigantic pile of corpses horrified her, and she reached out with her magic, with that awareness of location and movement that was a part of a warlock's supernatural abilities. She tried to sense the people she saw, to tell whether they were dead or alive.

She couldn't. Something stopped her perceptions.

It wasn't just that they were dead; warlockry could sense a dead body perfectly well. No, something was blocking her magic.

She looked up at the glowing thing. It was still descending. If it didn't stop, it would land upon the mound and crush all those people.

"No!" she shouted. She moved forward again, descending, and landed running. It was only when her feet hit the dew-covered knee-high grass that she realized she was barefoot; she had risen from her bed in the middle of the night, and had been drawn away by the Calling in her nightgown, without shoes or a coat.

That didn't matter, though. She had to get to that mound. She had to help. Somewhere deep in her mind, she knew that she was confusing different urges, that she was combining the Call's demand to come to this place with her desire to help those poor helpless people, but right now it didn't matter; they both drove her toward that mound.

To her surprise, she reached it before the descending monstrosity did — she had misjudged either the thing's speed, or its size. She stopped just short of the mound, despite the relentless Calling that still tugged at her; she forced herself to stop, to look at the situation. The Response had drowned out enough of the Call to let her think, to allow her to remember that no Called warlock had ever returned, and she looked at the great pile in front of her and guessed that if she touched it she would be pulled in, never to escape. She was inches away from the motionless back of a gray-haired man in a black tunic, she saw, and to one side of him stood a white-haired woman, and beyond that a black-haired man; to the other side were more, wearing the black garb of warlocks, or assorted nightclothes, or in some cases nothing at all.

Looking between the shoulders of this front layer, she could see more people, jammed together skin to skin, and stacked atop the people at ground level were others, standing or kneeling on shoulders and heads, leaning forward. The entire mound seemed to be a great mass of people, piled together to

tightly to move or breathe, all utterly still, completely unmoving. She heard no movement, no breathing, no heartbeats — yet they did not *look* dead. Her warlock perception could not detect anything at all; it was as if the World ended a step in front of her. The surrounding hills and forests, the grass beneath her feet, the air around her and the earth upon which she stood were all their normal natural selves, composed of a myriad of tiny particles and subtle forces moving and interacting in ways that she, as a warlock, could sense but not explain, but the pile of people in front of her was just...*blank*.

She let her gaze move up, past the head of the man in front of her, past the woman sprawled above him, to where the stars and moons should have been, to where the mysterious, incomprehensible *thing* was instead. If that monstrosity did come down to crush the mound, she realized, she wouldn't be able to get out from underneath it in time; it filled the entire sky above her, a gently-glowing immensity she still could not bring into focus.

But then the descent stopped, and something protruded from the hovering mass, reaching down toward the mound of people. Something shimmered, and something moved, and she sensed thumping and rustling — sensed it more than heard it, though she realized that her hearing was beginning to adjust to the overwhelming presence of the Response. She stepped back — and even as she did, she marveled that she *could* step back, away from the source of the Calling.

She knew she should be terrified, should be *mad* with terror, being here and seeing these things — that gigantic thing in the sky, the huge pile of what could only be Called warlocks that were neither alive nor dead, these displays of magic completely outside human understanding — but somehow she was not. The Response, even though it was very clearly not directed at anything human, was so reassuring that it calmed her and let her watch everything with a certain detachment.

Then the first body rolled down the mound and thumped onto the ground a few feet away.

She started, and turned to find a middle-aged man lying on his back in the grass, looking dazed. She turned to help him. “Are you all right?” she asked, as she reached for his hand.

His gaze was fixed on the thing in the sky, and he did not take her hand. She was unsure he had even heard her. “What *is* that?” he asked.

“I don't know,” she said. “Can you sit up?”

He finally turned his head enough to see her, and her outstretched hand. “Am I dead?” he asked.

“I don't think so,” Sensella replied. “But if you don't move, that may not last.”

“But I —”

He was interrupted by the thump of another body hitting the ground.

“Come *on*,” Sensella said. “I don't think we should stay here!”

He finally took her hand and allowed her to help him to his feet, just as an elderly woman fell to the ground a dozen feet away.

“What's going on?” the man demanded. “Where are we?”

“We're in Aldagmor,” Sensella told him. “But I don't know what's happening.”

“That thing,” the man said. “Who is it talking to?”

Sensella glanced up. “Then you hear it, too?”

“Of course I do! How could I not? It's deafening!” He turned and looked at the mound. “And...the Calling? I answered the Call?”

“So did I,” Sensella said. “I think they all did.”

“Was I in there?” The expression on his face worried Sensella; it seemed not so much the apprehension or revulsion she would have expected, but eager longing.

More people were tumbling down the sides of the mound, falling onto the grass; a few cried out

pain and surprise as they hit the ground. Then one of them, a woman Sensella thought looked about thirty, caught herself halfway down and flew to one side.

As if that reminded the others that they were warlocks, several people took to the air; suddenly curious, Sensella did the same, lifting herself up, leaving the confused man behind.

Her magic worked as well as ever — better, in fact. She shot upward with astonishing ease and had to catch herself before she slammed into the underside of the gigantic glowing object.

Once airborne, she had a clearer view of what was going on. A long, thin, grayish-white projection of some sort, vaguely tubular, was reaching down from the hovering thing and pushing down into the mound of people, pulling some of them out and heaving them aside, where they tumbled down to the ground — or if they reacted in time, caught themselves before they fell that far. Some of them Sensella saw, then flung themselves back against the mound, trying to get back into it. She couldn't tell whether any of them succeeded.

Most of them, though, were able to resist the Calling, as Sensella could, now that the Response had come. They were flying about the scene in a cloud of warlocks, like gnats around a lantern, looking at the mound and at the thing blotting out the sky.

“It was Called, too!” someone exclaimed, pointing up.

“Listen to it,” someone else replied. “That’s what was being Called all along! Whatever’s down there didn’t want *us*, it wanted *that*!”

“We just got caught up by accident?”

“But what *is* it?”

Dozens of people were talking at once now, in a dozen languages, and Sensella could no longer follow it all. She ignored the other warlocks and tried to understand what was happening.

The pile, she knew, was made up of warlocks who had answered the Call, and the only reason she had not plunged right into it and become part of it, trapped in whatever spell held it together, was that the Response, as she thought of it — the voiceless message of comfort that came from that gargantuan flying thing that had come down out of the sky — had drowned out the Calling and let her think again.

The Calling came from *beneath* the pile of warlocks, she was sure, and whatever was down there was protected by a spell of some kind, a spell that had frozen the warlocks when they got too close, a spell that had made them imperceptible to her own magic. It was probably a defensive spell, a magical barrier, guarding the Call’s source until the thing it was Calling came for it.

But now the Response *had* come, more than thirty years after the Calling began, and it was digging through the trapped warlocks to get at whatever was down there.

It had been Calling warlocks for all those years; that was a *lot* of warlocks. Thousands of them, surely! Already, dozens of people were flying around, and most of the mound was still untouched.

But it couldn’t be *all* the Called warlocks, could it? Could there be people who had been trapped there since the Night of Madness, back in 5202? That was thirty-four years ago! Sensella herself had been a baker’s apprentice, fifteen years old, the night she woke up screaming, hanging in mid-air above her bed, suddenly aware of every motion in the room around her, her mind filled with images of fire and falling. Hundreds of people, maybe thousands, had vanished that night — they had flown off to Aldagmor, never to return. Ever since then any warlock who grew careless, who used too much magic and made himself too receptive to the Calling, had eventually been drawn away — just as she had herself, less than a day ago.

“Aunt Kallia?”

Sensella turned to see a man she judged to be in his late thirties staring at a young woman. Both were flying above the mound, and their almost random flight had brought them near one another, and

near Sensella as well.

The woman turned to look at the man. “Do I know you?” she asked.

“I’m Chanden! Your nephew Chanden! Luralla’s son!”

The woman blinked at him. “But Chanden’s just a boy!”

“I was on the Night of Madness, when you vanished, but that was more than twenty years ago.”

“Thirty-four,” Sensella interjected.

The young woman looked confused. “I don’t understand,” she said.

“Thirty-four?” Chanden turned to Sensella. “How do you know?”

“I wasn’t in there,” Sensella said, pointing down at the pile of humanity. “I was just arriving when

when *that* appeared.” She pointed up.

“So — so it’s 5236? I’m eight years in the future?”

“It’s 5236, yes. Were you in there for eight years?”

“I...I suppose I was.” He looked down. “It doesn’t *feel* like it. I was...I answered the Call, and I flew

here, and I saw that, and I didn’t understand what it was, but I knew I had to get in there, so I flew

down to it, and then — then I was thrown back out, and that thing was up there saying everything was

all right now, and...” His voice trailed off.

“If it was 5228 when you came, then it’s been eight years.”

“It didn’t even feel like eight *minutes*.”

“Magic,” Sensella told him. “*Strong* magic.”

He looked up. “Yes,” he said. “It must be.”

“Your aunt,” Sensella asked. “She disappeared on the Night of Madness?”

“Yes.”

“And that’s her? She’s out now?”

“Yes! It flung her out just now. I saw it, and I recognized her, but she doesn’t know me...”

“It’s dug down to the first warlocks, then?”

Chanden turned. “Oh. I guess it has, yes.”

Sensella was not sure why, but that troubled her. The Response, whatever it was, must be almost

down to the source of the Call. She looked down and was suddenly aware that she was standing on

nothing, perhaps a hundred feet up.

She had done that dozens, maybe hundreds of times since the Night of Madness. She had flown for

miles without feeling any worry, but now it troubled her. She swooped down, eager to get back on

solid ground. She landed perhaps fifty feet from the mound and turned — just as the next big change

came.

The first had been when the flying thing had appeared out of nowhere and she had felt the Response

the second had been when it started burrowing down into the mound, flinging warlocks aside.

And the third was when the spell holding the immense mound of people together suddenly stopped.

The change was abrupt, completely unheralded — one instant the pile of people was motionless

undetected to warlock senses, magically frozen in time, and the next instant they were awake and

aware of their surroundings, aware of being trapped in a gigantic three-dimensional mob. They were

writhing and screaming, spilling outward in all directions, trying to get out before they were

smothered or crushed.

“It’s all right!” Sensella shouted, using her magic to snatch the nearest person out of the seething

mass. “You’re safe! Just use your magic!” She pulled a second person free, and a third, dropping them

unceremoniously on the grass a few yards away from the suddenly-expanding ball of screaming

crying warlocks.

The mound collapsed and vanished, and still people came spilling out, flying, running, walking, jumping, or crawling. The mound was gone, and in its place was a pit, and the pit was jammed full of people.

Sensella was not the only one helping; dozens of other warlocks were calling reassurances and pulling panicky people to safety. The crowd surrounding the pit extended for a hundred yards in every direction and was still expanding, and hundreds or even thousands of warlocks were flying above, as well.

Sensella looked up at the swarm of warlocks with an inexplicable sense of foreboding. She didn't know why, but she was absolutely certain this was a bad time to be flying. "Get down!" she called. "It's not safe up there!"

Still more people were clambering or flying out of the pit. Sensella could not see it through the crowd anymore, but she could sense it magically now, and she knew it was deep, very deep — the people at the bottom *needed* their magic to get out.

Thank the gods that only warlocks heard the Call; every one here *had* the magic they needed to escape.

Some of them, though, might not know it — if they had been among the very first, drawn away on the Night of Madness, they might have no idea how to control their power, how to use their warlock magic to do anything other than answer the Call. Sensella was no longer close enough to be heard, or to reach anyone in the pit with her own magic when there was so much other power seething in the air, but she could sense that others were helping. The pit was mostly empty now.

Then the fourth change came.

The Calling stopped. With staggering abruptness, the constant demand, the need to come to the place that had filled every head, was simply gone.

And with that, the warlocks' magic vanished.

Chapter Three

Hanner awoke suddenly to find himself trapped in a mass of humanity, pressed in on all sides by other people. Instinctively, he pushed out with his magic, trying to clear himself a little breathing room, only to find himself pushed *in* on every side by magic as strong as his own.

He could still hear the Calling, summoning him forward, but the people ahead of him were packed too tightly to move. Maybe if he went around, he thought — around, or over. He tried to move himself upward, and was able burst free. He was still in the midst of a crowd, but no longer in danger of being crushed.

The Call wanted him to come to it, but there was something else, something new, coming from somewhere overhead, something that let him know the Call was already answered. He tried to make sense of that. When he looked up, he could see only a swarm of flying warlocks against a glowing background, a background that he could not see properly even when there was no one in the way.

What was going on?

He was vaguely aware of screaming, of human voices calling on all sides.

What was going on? He tried to remember how he had gotten here, wherever “here” was. He had been in Arvagan’s shop; he had looked over the tapestry he had ordered, and then he had stepped through it into the refuge, and the Calling had stopped. He had looked around, taken a leisurely stroll on legs he hadn’t used properly for years, and then he had stepped back out, into the attic of Warlock House —

And the Calling had caught him off-guard, and he had flown away to Aldagmor. He had a vague memory of soaring over the city wall and out past the trade villages and farm markets, past farms and across the Great River, over more farms, and grassland, and forest, and hills, and then he had come swooping down, and there had been something ahead of him, but he didn’t bother to look, and...and here he was.

What *happened*?

In all the hours he had spent trying to imagine what the source of the Calling might be, he had never pictured being packed in a great mass of people, like seeds in a pod. Had the *people* somehow generated the magical summons? But that didn’t match the images everyone had seen on the Night of Madness, or in their dreams once they began to feel the Call.

He needed to get clear, to see what was happening. Ordinarily he would have gone up, but that glowing thing that filled the sky worried him. Instead, he veered sideways.

That glowing thing — was *that* the source of the Calling, the source of warlockry?

No, he could sense that it wasn’t. The Calling came from below; the answer to it came from the glowing thing. He flew sideways, slipping through narrow gaps in the tangle of limbs around him, looking for clear air.

And then the Call stopped, and his magic disappeared, and he found himself falling. He stretched out his arms to catch himself, and collided with a woman, but she was falling, too; he bounced from her to someone else, and then to other people, but they were *all* falling, they had *all* lost their magic.

He landed heavily on a pile of bodies, and someone else immediately landed on top of him, knocking the breath from his lungs. Hanner flung up his hands to shield his head.

The Calling was gone, just as it had been in the refuge the wizards had made for him. Could something have transported them all into another world?

People were still screaming, and he could feel the people around him writhing and struggling to get

free of the immense heap of fallen bodies, but the volume of sound was less now — Hanner no longer heard or felt the thump of more people landing atop him.

But then there was a *new* sound, and a vibration, a shaking, like nothing he had ever felt before. He tried to turn, to see what was happening, and someone slid aside just in time to give him a view of the sky, and of that huge glowing thing that hung above them all. Thus he saw the *other* thing as it rose up from below, pulled up out of the ground by its airborne companion.

He recognized it. He had seen it in his dreams, and especially in his nightmares, for years, though he could never have described it or put a name to it. This was the thing that had fallen out of the sky on the Night of Madness, the thing that had plunged, fiery and screaming, down into the earth, blasting a great pit into the heart of Aldagmor. The pit had fallen in on it, the fire had damaged it, and it had been trapped there.

It had called for help. It had sent out a magical shout that kept repeating endlessly. Hanner knew that — he had been Called, and now that the Calling had stopped and he could think clearly again, he understood what he had heard. It had never been clear so long as he was able to resist its pull, but once he had come here and heard it clearly, close up, he understood, even though the message had not been in words, nor even really in human concepts. He was able to interpret it, translate it into images and ideas he understood; they might not be *exactly* right, but they were close.

The thing had called for help, and because it was not from the World, not from this entire universe, it had needed to call so very loudly that its call resonated in certain human minds. Some of those humans had immediately obeyed, their will overwhelmed by the demand that whoever heard the Call must come and help; others had been able to take the sheer *power* of the Call and shape it with their own will, using it to perform magic.

But the more they had used that power, the more they had become attuned to it, until at last they received the message and had to obey.

The message wasn't *meant* for humans, though, and humans could do nothing to help the trapped thing. Instead, they ran into the defenses it had set up to protect itself while it waited. The thing had not wanted to stay awake down there, trapped, frightened, and alone, until rescue came; it had cast a protective spell, put itself into a timeless, dreamless sleep, and anything that came too close to it was trapped in the same spell, frozen into unconsciousness and immobility.

Now help had finally come, the help it had been calling for all along. The protective spell was broken, and the signal the trapped creature had been sending had stopped.

What's more, it was no longer trapped; its rescuer had pulled it free, scattering the warlocks that had covered it in all directions. As Hanner watched, the thing that had been the source of all warlockry was pulled up to join its rescuer, and then both of them rose, ascending and accelerating, until they dwindled amid the stars.

Behind them, strewn across this valley in southeastern Aldagmor, they left thousands of people who had once been warlocks.

Hanner watched the two monstrous things vanish, then realized he was kneeling on somebody. His first instinctive response was to try to fly, to get off whoever it was, but of course he couldn't — the Call had ended, and the source of warlockry was gone.

The warlocks remained, though, and Hanner could hear them calling, groaning, and crying on all sides. He turned, and tried to see where he was, where the shortest route to the ground might be.

"This way!" someone called — a woman, not a voice he recognized. "There's room over here!" Hanner scrambled in the direction of the voice, mumbling, "Excuse me, I'm sorry, please, I'm sorry," as he clambered over the bodies of his fallen comrades, many of whom were now trying to free

themselves, as well.

So far every body he had put a hand or foot or knee on had felt warm and alive, but Hanner was beginning to realize that some people must have died, must have dashed their brains out or broken their necks when they hit the ground, or been smothered or crushed by the people on top of them. There were hundreds of people here; he couldn't tell how many, really, but from what he saw and heard it had to be at *least* hundreds.

There might be more deaths to come, as well. As he moved out of the press of bodies he could feel the night air, and it was cold, cold enough, Hanner thought, for unprotected people to die of exposure.

They were somewhere in Aldagmor, in a valley in the mountains of Sardiron; how cold did it get here? What time of year was it? He had been Called in early summer, and this was definitely not early summer. He looked up, but all he could tell from that was that it was night. The greater moon was a half-circle in the western sky, but other than providing a little light that didn't help.

He couldn't really see much of anything in the dimness; his eyes had not yet adjusted after the glowing thing's departure. He was crawling on all fours, finding his way by feel more than by sight, and his left hand finally came down not on cloth or flesh, but on cold, damp grass — not the soft grass of a lawn, but the rough, scratchy grass of the wilderness. He pulled himself onto it, then got to his feet and looked around.

He was surrounded by shadowy forms — people were standing, or kneeling, or crawling on all sides. He wished he could hold up his hand and make light, as he had so often in the past, but his magic was gone. It had vanished with the Calling, and the source had flown away, gone forever. The World had once again changed suddenly, without warning, just as it had on the Night of Madness, when warlockry had first come into being, and just as it had then, the change had brought chaos.

Someone needed to take charge here. If no one brought some order out of this chaos, more people would die needlessly.

“*Hai!*” he shouted. “I am Hanner, Chairman of the Council of Warlocks! If you're unhurt, please get to clear ground and stand up, and then help those who aren't so fortunate!” He glanced around. “Does anyone have a tinderbox, by any chance, or some other way to make a light?”

This was greeted by a chorus of questions. “Hanner?”

“Who?”

“*Lord Hanner?*”

Hanner grimaced; at least some of them recognized his name.

Someone behind him, a woman, shouted, “Listen to him! If you can give us light, do it! If you can help spread everyone out — there are still people in danger of being crushed!” Hanner thought it was the same woman who had called out a few moments earlier directing people. He looked about, trying to spot her, and at the same time he tried to direct people away from the central pit, out to safer, more open areas.

“This way!” he called.

Then, at last, a light flared up. For an instant Hanner wondered why it had taken so long, but then he realized — these were *warlocks*. *Powerful* warlocks, strong enough to be Called. Up until a few minutes ago, they hadn't needed flint and steel to make fire; they had magic that could set an entire house ablaze in an instant.

That realization left him wondering why anyone *did* have a tinderbox; he peered toward the light.

The man holding a torch was no one Hanner recognized; he was not dressed in traditional warlock black, but in the yellow tunic and red kilt of a guardsman. Hanner briefly wondered whether the Hegemony had sent guardsmen to Aldagmor, but then dismissed the idea — Aldagmor was one of the

Baronies of Sardiron, outside the Hegemony entirely, and any guards sent here who got this close would have been Called.

But there was one obvious explanation — this man must have been Called on the Night of Madness seventeen years ago!

But...was it seventeen years? Or was it more? Hanner knew that he had been Called in Longdays 5219, but he didn't know how long he had been trapped by that protective spell. Certainly, not all of these people had arrived in a few sixnights, and Hanner had not been on the outside of the great mass of trapped warlocks. He might have been there for a year or more!

That soldier had probably been here since 5202. No other explanation made sense.

“You!” Hanner called. “Bring that light over here!”

The guardsman looked uncertain, but he came, holding the torch high. “What’s going on?” Hanner demanded. “Who are you?”

Calling himself Chairman of the Council probably wouldn't mean anything to this man; if Hanner was right, he had been in Aldagmor since before the Council was created. Still, Hanner thought he knew a name the man *would* recognize and respect. “I’m Lord Faran’s nephew,” he said. “I’ll explain the rest later — I’m sure there are a lot of people here who don’t understand. For now, we just need to make sure everyone’s safe.”

“Lord Faran? From Ethshar of the Spices?”

That caught Hanner off-guard. “Yes, from Ethshar of the Spices,” he said. “Where are *you* from?”

“Ethshar of the Rocks.”

“Ah. Well, we’re in Aldagmor, in the Baronies of Sardiron, right now, so I don’t think it matters which of the three Ethshars we’re from. Here, see if you can get more torches lit without setting the grass on fire — it’s cold and dark, and some of these people may be in trouble. We need light, and we can probably use the heat, too.”

“Yes, my lord,” the soldier said, raising a hand in acknowledgment. He turned toward the heart of the crowd.

Hanner, on the other hand, was still heading away from the center, to make room, to get some breathing space, and to see if he could find a better vantage point. He was also looking for the woman who had been shouting. The more level-headed helpers he could find, the better. As he moved he pushed people in various directions, trying to get them spread out, and kept calling instructions.

“Chairman Hanner!” someone called, and there she was, the woman who had been shouting. She was a little on the short side and appeared to be at least fifty; her hair was graying and her face lined. Hanner felt a twinge of jealousy; *he* hadn’t made it to fifty before being Called, but only into his late thirties despite trying to avoid doing any strong magic.

He hadn’t been very successful at avoiding it. His position as chairman had required him to use magic sometimes, and his own natural tendency toward sloth had contributed as well — it was so much *easier* to fly than to walk, or to use magic rather than arms and legs to lift and carry. A warlock’s spark was so much more convenient than flint and steel, and making the air glow worked better than a lantern. Especially when his children were young and constantly demanding attention, warlockry had just been so handy that he had used it constantly, even though he *knew* he was inviting the Calling.

He had thought the Calling meant death. He smiled wryly. It seemed they had all been wrong about that part.

In fact, remembering the soldier and looking around, he wondered just how many warlocks had actually died in all those years. Not many, he guessed. Warlocks didn’t die of old age; they were always Called first. They generally didn’t die of disease or injury, either; their magic could be used

heal. A few had managed to get themselves killed, by other magicians or by assassins, but most had been Called and vanished into the mysterious depths of Aldagmor.

“*Hai*,” he said. “Who are you?”

“My name is Sensella of Morningside,” the woman replied. “I was Called about a day and a half ago.”

“I’m sure we all think it’s just been a day or two —” Hanner began.

“No, Chairman,” Sensella said, interrupting him. “I never reached the...the...that pile. I got here the same time that big glowing thing did. I wasn’t caught in the guarding spell the way everyone else was.”

“Oh? Then I’ll want to talk to you, but for now I think we need to concentrate on everyone’s safety. We need to get them out of that...where the thing...”

“Out of the pit,” Sensella said. “I agree. What can I do to help?”

Hanner turned to look and assess the situation. Things seemed to be more under control now; he no longer heard actual screams, though there were still shouting voices, and someone was crying somewhere.

“We’ll need fires to keep everyone warm,” Hanner said. “Shelter, and water, and food. Are there any farms nearby?”

Sensella looked at him with an expression he hoped to never see again, as if he had not merely failed her, but had failed her so stupidly it amounted to betrayal. “Chairman, we’re in *Aldagmor*,” she said. “No one has lived within miles of this place for thirty years!”

“*Thirty?*”

“More, really. Thirty-four. You were Called a long time ago.”

A sudden realization burst upon him. “But my *wife*...”

Hanner was interrupted by a sudden blaze of light. As he turned he thought at first that that foolish soldier had started a grass fire, but then he saw just how bright the light was, and that it was coming from somewhere high up, and he thought that perhaps that glowing thing had returned.

Then he saw the black-robed man hanging in mid-air, glowing like a bit of the sun, and his mouth fell open.

“I don’t understand,” Sensella said from beside him. “I thought the magic was all gone!”

“*Our magic is gone*,” Hanner said. “This is something else.”

“A wizard, maybe?”

Before Hanner could reply the glowing man spoke, and his voice was magically amplified until it was as loud as thunder.

“I am the Emperor Vond,” the apparition said, his words rolling across the crowd and echoing from the surrounding hills. “I am the absolute master of the southernmost part of the Small Kingdoms, and as you can see, I alone, out of us all, am still a warlock. It is by my magic that I built my empire, and by my magic that I rule. I am going to return to my realm now, and I wish to return in a manner befitting my station — with an honor guard. Any of you who swear fealty to me will accompany me to my empire, where you will be given positions of authority under my rule. If you wish to join me, simply raise your hands above your head!”

“By all the gods,” Hanner said. “Who *is* that? What’s he talking about?”

“Don’t raise your hands,” Sensella said. “I’ll explain later.”

Hanner had no good reason to trust Sensella, but he had no reason to trust this Vond, either; he kept his hands by his sides.

Hundreds of others, though, were less restrained, and as each pair of hands rose, the owner of the

hands rose as well, soaring up into the sky to hover a dozen feet below the self-proclaimed emperor.

~~Others shouted questions or protests in a variety of languages, but Vond ignored them; he simply~~ lifted his new followers skyward, one by one.

After about eighty or ninety, by Hanner's estimate, they began to rise less steadily, and not as quickly; he guessed that this Vond was reaching the limits of his power. Not long after, people stopped rising at all; the remaining raised hands were ignored.

"Farewell," Vond said, his voice booming out in a thoroughly unnatural fashion.

And then he, and his hundred or so volunteers, flew away southward, leaving Hanner, Sensella, and thousands of others in the cold darkness of Aldagmor.

Chapter Four

Kelder of Radish Street had gone to bed early after a long day moving furniture, but he had been asleep for less than an hour when he was awakened by a loud thump. His head jerked up and his eyes sprang open.

The room was dark; he rolled out of bed, found the shutters by feel, and opened them, letting in what little light the surrounding city and the greater moon provided. So far as he could see in that dim glow, nothing looked out of place; he was alone in his attic room, just as he should be, and the furnishings seemed undisturbed.

Then he heard a scraping, and what he thought might have been a moan, and realized that the sound came from above. Someone, or something, was on the roof.

He turned to the window, pushed the shutters back, and opened the casement. He leaned out and looked up, but the eaves extended out too far for him to see anything above. Cautiously, he climbed up on the windowsill, hooked his left arm around the window frame, and leaned out further, craning his neck to see over the eaves.

“Help,” someone said weakly, and the sound guided his eyes.

A woman was lying on the roof; she was wearing black, and her long, black hair hung over much of her face, rendering her almost invisible in the darkness.

“What’s going on?” Kelder called.

“I don’t know,” the woman answered, her voice thin and unsteady. “I fell.”

Kelder glanced around, confirming what he already knew — old Tarissa’s boarding house was the tallest structure on the block. There wasn’t anywhere this person could have fallen from other than the sky.

That meant magic was involved. The black clothes probably meant she was either a warlock or a demonologist, but witches or wizards sometimes wore dark colors, too.

“Are you hurt?” Kelder asked.

“I think so,” the woman answered.

“Can you move?”

There was another scraping, and she inhaled sharply. “It hurts when I try,” she said. “I think something’s broken.”

Then she wasn’t a warlock; even if for some reason her magic had not protected her from the fall, a warlock could mend broken bones. For that matter, Kelder had heard that witches could block pain and do some healing, so she probably wasn’t a witch, either. He didn’t see a flying carpet or any other devices, but if she was a wizard, a failing levitation spell might explain her presence. Still, it didn’t seem the most likely possibility. “Are you a demonologist?” he called, looking around for anything that might be flying near. “Did a demon drop you here?” He did not want to climb out there and find some horror from the Nethervoid waiting.

“No. I’m a warlock,” she said.

“But...” Kelder was confused. “But then how... Why can’t you move? Why can’t you help yourself?”

“I don’t know!” she said miserably. “I was flying, and then I wasn’t — it was as if my magic just disappeared.”

Kelder had never heard of anything like that. Magic didn’t just disappear unless a magician wanted it to. Oh, there were stories about places where wizardry didn’t work — there were rumors that the

overlord's palace in Ethshar of the Sands was such a place, ever since that madwoman Tabaea, the self-proclaimed empress, had died there — but warlockry wasn't like that. The only places it might not work were out at the edges of the World, too far from the source in Aldagmor. Here in Ethshar of the Spices, it worked just fine.

He looked at the injured woman, lying helpless on the roof tiles, and then looked down at the street four stories below. There was no way to get her in through his window safely, not if she was really hurt, and there was no door or trap opening onto the roof.

"I'll go get help," he said. "Is there some other warlock I should ask to come get you?"

"Maybe. Where am I?"

"You're on the roof of a boarding house on Old Market Street, in Hempfield."

"Hempfield? I don't know anyone in Hempfield."

"That's unfortunate. Let me see if I can find someone. I'll be back as quickly as I can."

She made a noise that he didn't think was intended to be words, and he carefully lowered himself back into his room. Then he paused to think.

The obvious solution would be to find a ladder and get a couple of people up there to carry her down, but Kelder didn't know anyone with a ladder long enough. No, they needed a magician.

Hempfield was not exactly the Wizards' Quarter. There were three herbalists in the neighborhood, one defined "neighborhood" broadly, and a few blocks to the north lived a witch of dubious reputation by the name of Kyrina of Newmarket, but the nearest warlock Kelder knew of was a journeyman calling himself Berakon the Black, who had a place on Locksmith Alley in Allston. Kelder was not all sure Berakon could even fly — he had located his shop in Locksmith Alley because he earned most of his living working with locks and other small hardware — but he was a warlock and only about a dozen blocks away.

Kelder pulled on his tunic and boots, grabbed a jacket, and headed out the door.

He called a brief explanation to the landlady on his way, but did not take the time for more. The sooner he found help for that poor woman, the better.

Ten minutes later he was at Berakon's tiny shop — or really, his stall; it was a single room, barely wider than its double doors and perhaps ten feet deep. Kelder had wandered past it several times and looked it over, so he was familiar with its appearance. He knew he had the right place.

But it was closed. The doors were shut and secured by a large brass padlock.

Kelder frowned. Locksmiths usually worked late, since people found themselves locked out at all hours, but Berakon's stall was definitely closed. He hurried to the much larger but non-magical locksmith's shop next door.

A bell jingled as he opened the door, and the proprietor looked up from a disassembled mechanism.

"Where's the warlock?" Kelder asked. "There's an emergency."

"He closed up a few minutes ago," the locksmith said. "Said he wasn't feeling well. He asked if I knew a good healer witch."

Kelder blinked. That didn't make sense. "A *warlock* not feeling well?"

The locksmith grimaced. "I know, but that's what he *said*."

Kelder shook his head. "What did you tell him?"

"I sent him to Alasha of the Long Nose, up on Superstition Street."

Superstition Street was another four long blocks to the south, toward the Arena. Kelder was not eager to range that far from home.

"Thank you," he said. "Do you know of any other warlocks around here?"

"Around here?" The locksmith shook his head. "No." He hesitated, then asked, "What's going on?"

Why do you need a warlock?"

"One fell out of the sky and is stuck on my roof," Kelder said. "She says her magic stopped working. I thought another warlock could get her down and maybe figure out what was wrong."

The shopkeeper studied him for a moment, then said, "Berakon borrowed a padlock."

Kelder had been trying to decide whether to head for Superstition Street, or back to the boarding house, or maybe to Warlock Street in the Wizards' Quarter, so he had not really been listening.

"What?" he said.

"Berakon borrowed a padlock," the locksmith repeated.

"I'm sorry, I don't see..." Kelder let the question trail off.

"He never *needed* a padlock before," the locksmith explained. "If he went out, he used his magic to weld the doors shut, and then undid it when he got back. I didn't think he really needed to lock it at all because who would be stupid enough to steal from a warlock? But he did it anyway, every time. Until tonight, when he asked me if I knew where he could find a witch, and then borrowed that lock from me."

Kelder stared at him.

"You think they *both* lost their magic," he said. He tried to think how that could happen. Might there be some contagious disease that stole a warlock's magic? He had never heard of such a thing, but that didn't mean it couldn't happen.

"Maybe," the locksmith said. "Maybe they did. And maybe it's not just the two of them. I mean, warlockry just appeared out of nowhere on the Night of Madness, didn't it? That's what my mother told me. I was just a baby, so I don't remember it myself."

"I wasn't even born," Kelder said, "but yes, that's what I always heard."

"Well, maybe tonight it just *stopped*, as suddenly as it started."

Kelder started to protest, then hesitated.

Why not? Maybe it *had* just stopped.

If so, then there wasn't any point in looking for other warlocks. He needed some other way to get that poor woman off the roof. What other magic might work?

Well, wizards had various ways to fly or otherwise reach inaccessible places, but wizardry was *expensive*. A demonologist could probably get her down, but they were dangerous. Kelder wasn't about to hire a demonologist without a much better reason than this. He had no idea whether a theurgist, or a witch, or a sorcerer, or some other sort of magician could do anything to help.

Maybe he had been hasty in deciding magic was called for in the first place. He had never seen a ladder tall enough to reach that high from the ground, but couldn't it be set on the roof next door?

"Thank you," he said. He dropped a copper bit on the counter, then turned to go.

Rather the house-carpenter had some good ladders. Maybe he could help.

Lador the Black was leaning over the girl's sickbed, systematically sweeping the poisons from her blood, when suddenly he could no longer sense anything beneath her skin at all. He could still see her face, her brow slick with perspiration, and the soft green blanket tucked up to her chin. He could hear her labored breathing, smell the foul odor of illness, but everything below the surface had vanished.

His head felt strange, almost empty. All the things he normally perceived that ordinary people could not were gone — including that nasty, insistent murmuring that he knew would someday have drawn him away to Aldagmor. His hand, which he had been holding over her chest for dramatic effect, was no longer glowing; the only light came from the oil lamp on the shelf over the bed.

He blinked and straightened up, confused.

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