

## Chapter Four

### The Lockbreaker and the Distance Man

A sprinkling of ash covers the scrubland weeds. As the three ride on, the ash grows denser. Soon the vegetation recedes entirely, replaced by barren earth. Overturned boulders lie scattered across slopes and hollows. A starving hawk circles uselessly overhead.

Eventually the remnants of an old civilization appear. Crumbled bricks, some red, some yellow. A long-buried pillar covered in cracked blue tile. A door and a railing, both cast in bronze.

Amid them are strewn new relics of a recent battle: broken swords, sheared lances, melted helmets. Fresh graveyards, their shallow mounds arrayed in neat ranks and rows, attest to an effort to bury the dead. Still, fragments of skull and bone, raked by the teeth of scavengers, salt the land. They belong to man and horse, to elf and dwarf.

An open pit yawns in the distance. Gad speeds his horse; Tiberio and Calliard follow. The earth yields uncertainly beneath them. They hear the whicker of horses. Four scraggly beasts stand glumly, tied to the

last branches of a scorched and toppled tree. The three tie their mounts there and walk toward the pit.

Two weary figures clamber from the pit's edge. Seeing Gad, Calliard, and particularly Tiberio, they freeze and reach for their swords. Tiberio holds out his hands in a gesture of peace. The explorers sheathe their weapons and slowly approach. They are human women, lithe and long-tressed. One wears metal; the other, leather. Mystic symbols cover the latter woman's breastplate. The two appear to be twins.

"Too late," the metal-wearer says. "All cleaned out."

"Anyone still down there?" Gad asks.

"Other than our damnfool time-wasting laggard of a lockpick?"

"That's who we're looking for." Gad bows gallantly. Each woman raises an eyebrow, notes a flash of attraction and moves on. The warriors untie their horses, and another besides, and ride away.

Tiberio climbs down the rope ladder first, followed by Calliard and Gad. The ladder extends for more than forty feet, taking them through a sinkhole and then a stone-lined catacomb. They leap down to a mosaic floor. It depicts a muscled warrior crushing prostrate enemies beneath his boot. An ancient war leader, probably, or perhaps a god. The tiled faces of general and victims have been chipped out and hauled away. Stone benches circle the chamber's edges.

The hall serves as a junction; open archways lead from it to the north, east, south, and west. The three stop to listen. They hear a faint sound of metal on metal. They listen further, finally deciding that its faint echo comes from the eastern corridor. Calliard lights a lantern. They move through a vaulted passageway, its walls and floor also covered in pictorial mosaics. Faces

and decorative features, as on the floor in the round chamber, have been hacked out and spirited away for resale.

The tap-tap-scrape grows louder. They move toward it, ignoring other doors. The chamber terminates in another archway. Tiberio pauses at its threshold.

A corpse lies across it. It is the body of a man, cut nearly in two. The jagged slice through his body begins at his right shoulder and ends at his left hip. He has been stripped to his bloodied undergarments. Tiberio looms briefly over him. "About a week ago," he says.

His fingers delicately trace a groove recessed inside the archway. A spike juts from the groove, stopping a five-foot blade meant to scythe out from it.

Splayed in a corner around a bend are a pair of burned corpses. On the opposite side of the hallway, the inner cement wall has been exposed. Tiles spill across the floor in heaps, along with clods of crumbled plaster. Disassembled metal spouts, plaster chunks still attached to their coppered sides, lean against the wall. A fire-spitter, taken apart, though not before it claimed at least two lives.

They follow the tapping noises down a curving set of cement steps. The last step has been pulled away. Those above it are spattered brown-red and spackled in gobbets of dried brain matter. Beside the removed step, now set against a stone urn, sit a bronze trip plate and the spring mechanism it once activated. A bloodied boulder has been rolled to the side. Across from the steps stands a larger-than-life stone lion, another boulder readied in its mouth.

The tap-tapping takes them through an octagonal chamber surrounded by marble porticoes. They step over a severed tripwire on the way in. Stacked by type

across the chamber floor are hundreds of segmented metal components. These are magical constructs, deconstructed. From the collection of barbed stinger pieces, the automatons appear to have been artificial scorpions.

They continue on through a narrow corridor. It opens into a smallish antechamber, where a hunched halfling figure pokes thin metal wire into an enlarged, multifaceted keyhole. The door is already open. The halfling's lantern, hanging from an ingenious portable pole device, illuminates the bare shelves of an emptied vault.

Strands of white, gray, and ash-blond interweave into a complex construction atop her head. Supported by an intricate copper lattice strategically bedecked with seed pearls and agate shavings, the great mass of hair remains firmly in place and out of her way. Its owner is stout, round of hip and generous of thigh. Skin crinkles around her eyes and at the corners of her mouth. Blocky, jeweled rings adorn her stubby, fast-moving fingers. Ruby powder sparkles on her lips. Beneath her greasy hardened-leather breastplate, frills and ruffs of unaccountably spotless white lace coyly peek, partially obscuring the thin silver chain of a sapphire pendant.

A magnifying eyepiece dangles on a chain from one of the spokes of her hair lattice. She seizes it, planting it firmly in place between brow and cheekbone, and squints deeper into the lock.

"Vitta," says Gad.

"Who's the orc?" says Vitta.

"Half-orc," says Gad.

"That's what they all say." She turns briefly from the lock. "If you're with Gad, and I suppose you are, I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

“I’m Tiberio.”

“Thought you’d sworn off dungeon-hopping,” she says, presumably to Gad.

“Never sworn it in. Nice work taking the traps apart.”

Vitta snorts. “Had a bit of bother with the fire trap. Not Isano Golemsmith’s handiwork, though. Not by a long stretch. The rumors were wrong. As rumors tend to be.”

She bangs the lock with the end of a chisel, frowns, and contorts her padded frame to peer into it from below.

“Vitta?” Gad says.

“What?”

“I can’t help but notice . . .”

“The door I’m trying to unlock is already open?”

At her knee sits a leather case shaped vaguely like a coffin. Its velvet drawers cosset hundreds of small tools of copper, glass, and wood. She selects a brush and jams it fiercely into the lock. Inside, something clicks into place.

“Yes,” says Gad. “That is what I couldn’t help but notice.”

“It was open when the first looters got here. Probably left that way when the inhabitants fled. During the last days of the Volobri Exodus, would be my guess. The entire complex is a disappointment. Except for this lock.”

“Some might point out that the door is already open and the vault empty.”

“Immaterial. As you well understand. It’s a lock I couldn’t get—some sort of a counter-tumbling action.” She turns a wheel beside the lock. With a snap, the protruding bolt snaps back into the side of the door. Vitta exhales in satisfaction. She detaches the eyepiece

from her hair lattice, placing it back in its designated spot inside her case.

“Got something juicy for me then?” she asks.

Vitta hangs upside down, suspended by cords from a scaffold of her own design and construction. Hollow tubes, through tension produced by interior springs, press tight against the wall above.

“Remind me why this is necessary,” says Gad.

“Why what is necessary?”

“Hanging from your heels.”

“Angle-sensitive tumbler cuffs,” answers Vitta. Only a single twist of blond hair has escaped from its assigned position. “Hand me the expander.”

He reaches into her case and withdraws a triangular device with a gear in the middle.

Vitta snorts. “The small expander.”

Gad gives her a smaller version of the same tool. He peers down the round, metal-shod passageway, through the six doors Vitta has already opened, past the propped-up portcullis, to the guard room a hundred feet away. In less than an hour, guards he hasn’t and can’t pay off will appear to relieve the ones he could and has.

They are deep beneath Bogilar Fortress, in a vault designed to house its baronial family after demons burrowed into their souls. Due to the terms of their demonic pact, the first generation of the Bogilar clan could not die, except of old age. The horrified second generation built this vault, to keep them in until they did just that. Two generations later, all that is left of the Bogilar is the name of the fortress. Only one occupant now dwells in its vault.

Vitta drops the small expander. The impact sounds like a dropped pin but the sound reverberates and

amplifies as it travels down the corridor. Gad stoops and hands it back to her. She places the tool inside the vault lock.

“Now a wad of gauze.”

He hands it to her.

“No, don’t hand it to me, keep it for the moment. Now find the green vial with the yellow liquid in it.”

“Not the green liquid inside the yellow vial?”

“How cleverly amusing.”

“Got it.”

“Now pour just a dab on the gauze.”

“How big is a dab?”

“Don’t tell me you don’t know how much a dab is. After all this time.”

He pours a dab onto the gauze. It smokes, dispersing a rotting onion scent. She takes the gauze and carefully packs it into the lock. It hisses.

Inside the vault, something else hisses back.

Vitta pauses. “Should we be concerned about that?”

“Let me guess and say no,” ventures Gad.

“Am I to treat that as certainty?”

“If you choose to believe in the concept.”

“In which case, grab me,” the halfling instructs.

Gad wraps his arms around her waist and extends his leg muscles, bearing her weight. She yanks on a knot. The contraption releases her. Gad totters, regains his balance, edges over to the wall. His back pressed against it, he pinions his legs, gently placing Vitta on the vault floor. Unruffled by the graceless move, she squirrels hastily to her feet.

The liquid on the gauze has stopped hissing. The voice inside the vault has not. There is anger and joy in it.

“This is truly the only way?” Vitta says.

“You’re asking now?”

With a nod, Vitta concedes the point.

Gad explains anyway. “Too many demons come at you from the air. We need a distance man.”

“I don’t mean that.” She runs respectful fingers lovingly over the lock mechanism. “They’ve no one to repair this properly now.”

“That’s what you’re worried about? The lock?”

“What should I be worried about?”

“Just open it.”

She points to a spot above the mechanism. “Strike this part right here with the heel of your hand.”

“Why me?”

Vitta shrugs. “Thought you’d like to be a part of history.”

“In what sense?”

“This lock has never been cracked. Sola of Escadar tried. Barles Sablecoat didn’t even get as far as the third door. In a moment, no one will ever get the chance to break this lock again.”

Gad strikes it with the heel of his hand.

Nothing happens.

Vitta sighs. She hits it.

Smoke billows from the circular seam surrounding the mechanism. It seems to contract. Vitta reaches in and pulls out the entire lock.

Red eyes stare back at her from the window she’s just created.

“Fire,” says the prisoner.

Vitta curls her fingers around the edge of the opening and pulls. The heavy door swings open. Diffuse lantern light floods the darkened cell.

A naked man jogs back from the door to assume a bestial crouch in the corner. Shaggy black hair cascades from his head. It covers his back like a cape. Dark tattoos

stain the natural olive of his skin. Pink, shiny patches of burn scar dot his flesh, interrupting whatever patterns might be discerned in the tattoos. The whites of his eyes glisten through spears of drooping hair.

“Burning,” says the prisoner.

“Come on, Hendregan,” says Gad.

The prisoner blinks and rubs his eyes. He leaps up and down, making no effort to cover his nakedness. Then he takes note of Vitta. He grabs the frizzy hair running down his back and bundles it over his crotch.

“Oh, please,” says Vitta.

Gad opens his pack. He tosses Hendregan a loincloth. The prisoner seems puzzled by it at first. He pulls it on, folds it inexpertly, unfurls it, and starts again.

“Hendregan,” says Gad, “the guards.”

“Burn them?”

“No, don’t burn them. Just get yourself together quickly.”

The grimacing inmate fumbles with the loincloth, finally arriving at a half-satisfactory arrangement. Gad throws him deerskin leggings and a silk tunic and cloak. The last two items are crimson, with orange cuffs and trim.

Hendregan wraps it tightly around himself. Clothing emphasizes his improbable proportions. He is barrel-chested and muscular above the waist, spindly and pigeon-toed below. “You are Gad, yes?”

“Yes, Hendregan. Gad. You remember.”

His scowl is one of confusion. “Do I?”

“Yes, you do.”

“Gad . . .” He brightens. “Then there is someone to burn?”

“Yes, there is someone to burn.”

“Who?”

“Demons.”

Hendregan smiles. “Demons. Some burn already. Yet they can also be burnt. Others—the insect ones. Wings wisp away into nothing and smoke. Maggot flesh blackens. Beetle shell crisps. Yes, demons, demons. Burning demons.”

“Let’s discuss this outside.”

“But wait, but wait.” The man jigs and trembles. “Why me?”

“You have other pressing engagements?”

“Why do I get to do the burning? What about Esikull?”

“Left Mendev two years back. Let’s go.”

“Ashetak?”

“Missing.”

“Pera?”

“Dead. You are ready for this, yes?”

“Ready?” A new demeanor comes over him. His mad quivering ceases. He claps his hands together, moves toward the exit. A mirror, hanging on the back of the vault door, stops him short. He peers into it, confused. Moves his head from side to side. Realizing that the face he sees is his, he grimaces.

His right hand bursts into flame. He seizes his hair by the fistful. The strands turn orange and disintegrate. He pulls his burning hand over his scalp, until he is completely bald. A few blisters rise along the top of his head.

“I knew it would be you,” Hendregan says.

The five ride north for a day. The sky blackens. Spring snow straggles through the air.

The dark bulk of Suma Castle looms into view, barely visible against sooty clouds. Ahead, the trail forks.

Travelers may continue on to the monastery of Tala, to other points north, and eventually to Kenabres, the city of witch-hunters. Or they may turn to the west, toward the border, and the domain of Suma.

Gad takes the turn.

Calliard, lagging at the back of the small procession, urges his horse forward. He circles around Gad and his steed.

“You’re not . . .” he begins.

“We are.”

“Of all people, I’m in no position to—”

“That’s right, you aren’t.”

Gad spurs his horse. The others do likewise, and follow.

Suma Castle sits on the lip of a high crag. Its central tower punches into the heavens. Atop it, a vast box of ebon stone implausibly perches, held in place by four sturdy buttresses. Around its base, eroded barracks cluster. These in turn are ringed by neglected workshops and storehouses, and are themselves protected by a serpentine outer parapet. This wall bows and bends, accommodating itself to the shape of the mountainous hill beneath.

The riders’ horses strain to find safe footing as the slope to Suma’s gate grows steeper. There is only one gatekeeper, an ill-fed man who leans on a crutch.

“You have come to fight?” he asks.

Before Gad can reply, thunderous drums pound from the tower. Winged creatures sweep through the air from across the Worldwound border.

Hendregan, until now slumped slack-jawed in his saddle, comes to life. “We have come to fight!” He savagely spurs his horse. The keeper rushes to cover as the horse bolts through the gate.

A flood of airborne demons, their body shapes recalling both reptiles and monstrously bloated mosquitoes, whine toward the top of the tower. Hendregan slaps his horse on its haunches, accelerating it toward the crest of a sloping road. Turning backward in his saddle, he faces the formation of oncoming demons. With open throat, he holds clawed hands aloft and screams an incantation. Fire erupts from his arms and shoots toward the oncoming fliers. The formation falls apart. Creatures inside the mass see the fire wizard and attempt to peel away. Filmy wings break and carapaces slam together as demons collide. Then the ball of fire is all around them. They pop and crack and come apart. Flaming chunks of burning demon precipitate down, extinguishing themselves on the surrounding rocks and on the stone roofs of emptied barracks. A sizzling stinger lands near the hooves of Hendregan's steed, spooking it. Laughing and screaming, the wizard leaps from its bucking haunches. He lands on bended knee and chants again.

The others pepper the dispersing demon mob with arrows and crossbow bolts. Soldiers spill from the main tower to join the fray.

A winged clump of curdled flesh dives for Hendregan, acid sputum dribbling from spiraled mandibles. Hendregan finishes his spell-speech, firing a ray of scorching heat at it. In midair, the ray splits in two. One of the rays sizzles through the curdled flesh demon, blowing a discharge of boiling innards from its hind end. Another perforates the ropy wings of a worm-headed creature, sending it into a tailspin. It strikes the stone shingles of an armory roof, exploding in a shower of putrid slop.

Calliard places an arrow in his bow and pulls back the drawstring. His aim shifts from a fleeing mosquito-demon, its wings smoking and twisted, to a figure

emerging from the inky clouds. As he first observes it, it seems to Calliard as if the being forms itself from the encompassing clouds. Then he recognizes it: a shadow demon, or as the scholars sometimes call them, an *invidiak*. It flits over to the parapet wall as soldiers from the tower haul themselves up a ladder to defend it. As it moves, its shape flickers, contracts and expands, as a shadow does when it moves between two torches. Though its form alters from one moment to the next, the batlike outline of its wings remains nearly consistent. Each wing converges to a downturned, hooklike projection from its peak. Taloned legs form, vanish, reform and vanish again. Spindly limbs terminate in long, razored fingers. A crown and collar of ever-transforming horns surround an open, toothy maw. Tiny red eyes glow from the top of its flattened head.

They look into Calliard. He feels the demon's awareness moving around inside him. Exploring him. Testing his soul for flaws. Finding them.

He looses his arrow at it, but the demon is out of range, and the attack falls pathetically short.

At the edge of his hearing, a sandpaper laugh intrudes. The demon leaps nimbly from the parapet back into the concealing clouds. The move seems to be a command, or to correspond with one. The remaining demons scatter for the border.

Hendregan takes a succession of marionette leaps as the demons depart. While the castle's defenders lower their bows, he claws his hands together for a final spell. Amid the densest concentration of demons, a second globe of fire materializes. Half a dozen slain demons splatter in smoldering pieces against the tower's southern face. As many more spin in uncontrolled jags through the air as they strive to remain aloft.

In tense silence, the assembled soldiers watch until the rest of the demons are gone. They straighten their backs as the doors at the base of the tower swing open.

A middle-aged man strides out. A coat of gilt brocade, surmounted by a collar of lynx fur, underlines the grandeur of his strut. Gold medallions swing from his neck on matching chains. Atop his head jaunts a felt hat, its upturned peak bordered in silver ribbon. His ginger beard sharpens an otherwise rounded jaw.

Having made his entrance, he halts a few steps outside the doorway, waiting for Gad to come to him.

With unthinking instinct the soldiers form a ragged honor guard for their commander. They array themselves in two wayward lines, one on each side of the pathway. Gad walks their gauntlet, wordlessly greeting each as he passes. Despite broken arms, poisoned skin, sunken cheeks, and layers of scars, the soldiers of Suma proudly return his gaze.

Gad bows to the castle lord. "General Braval," he says.

Braval claps him showily on the shoulders. "Gad. Once more I have cause to thank you. Your men saved mine some trouble." The bravado is manufactured. Small, testing eyes rest uneasily in his face.

"The least we could do," says Gad.

"Passing through, then?"

"You could say that."

Braval's actorly smile fades. "Wherever you're headed, she'll not go with you."

"I can confirm that by asking her."

Braval puts his hand atop Gad's shoulder and squeezes. From a few feet away, the move looks friendly. "Where are you headed?"

Gad tilts his body westward, toward the Worldwound.

Braval's face hardens. "She'll especially not go with you there."

"As I said . . ."

"She won't so much as see you."

Gad clucks his tongue.

The Lord General of Suma Castle flushes. "She's standing right behind me, isn't she?"

Gad nods.

Fists at his side, Braval stands aside.

A young woman hovers in the doorway. Auburn hair and a certain straightness of the brow-line mark her as Braval's daughter. There the resemblance ends. She is paler and more hawkish than he. Lank curls tangle loosely from her head. Her chin is pointed, her crimson lips straight and drawn. A light dusting of freckles reaches from cheek to cheek, extending across the ridge of her nose. The tunic and leggings she wears are cut for a boy. Though it is not the intended effect, they heighten the otherwise modest curves of her rangy body. Calliard counts a dozen blades on her belt and knows that there are at least two more in each boot.

She cocks a hip to lean against the doorway, deceptively slim arms firmly crossed.

"Jerisa," Gad says.

"Gad," she replies.

The others gather at the far end of the undeclared honor guard. Vitta pulls on Calliard's cloak to bring him down to her height.

"That's not . . . ?" she asks.

"It is," says Calliard.

"This is not a good idea, then," Vitta says.

Calliard sighs. "Which of us is?"