

PROLOGUE

The wizard hunched over the balcony rail and retched. He coughed long and hard, his body shuddering, and spit the last of the blood into the raging river below.

His apprentice inched out onto the balcony. The wizard would be in a foul mood after yet another failure. His mood was often foul even when things went well.

The wizard wiped a small rag over his lips and tossed it over the railing. It fluttered on the night winds and disappeared into the foggy mist that covered the river like a thick blanket. Far below, the current rippled against the rocks and then cascaded in a dull roar over the falls.

“Wine!” the wizard demanded. He snatched the proffered flask from the apprentice’s trembling hands and took a draught, swishing it around his mouth and spitting it out over the railing. He clenched the railing with his thin, skeletal hands and stared out at the shadowy mountains jutting upwards towards the moon, like the teeth of some feral animal.

“I feel them out there,” the wizard muttered, his bloodshot eyes turning down into the impenetrable mist below. “They are close.”

The apprentice shuddered and glanced toward the top of the tower. An almost imperceptible bluish glow emanated from the tin-shingled roof. A matching hue tinged the rail of balcony. The warding spells still held. He allowed himself a silent sigh of relief.

“Master Romandiran asks for more tincture,” the apprentice reported. “He says there is not much time.”

The skin of his master’s face stretched tightly over his cheek bones like a pitched tent. Thin lips, still red with wine, sneered. “Do you not think I know that? What am I to do? The enchantment does not work! More mistakes like the last and we will all be dead! Our prisoner misleads us, hoping to help *them*.” The wizard waved his wrinkled hand at the darkness outside.

The apprentice, eyes downcast, stepped aside as the wizard pushed past into the tower. He knew better than to voice his opinion. The prisoner was now too weak to remember the spell properly.

He scurried after the wizard down the winding stairway. At the entrance hall a pair of massive wooden doors was faintly lit by the same blue wards. Their enemies might be just outside. Certainly the river would not stop them.

They continued down the stairwell and into the bedrock, passing the sleeping quarters of the other guild members. Behind closed doors he could hear heated arguments taking place. The wizard ignored them and continued down to the conjuring room at the base of the tower.

The circular, windowless chamber was brightly lit with torches burning in wall sconces. A stone pedestal in the center of the room was charred black and badly cracked, shards of chipped stone lying scattered around its base. Upon it lay a single steel blade. One side of the steel was tempered into a sharp edge and decorated with ornate designs. The opposite side was thick and straight, as if the whole of the blade had been split perfectly along its length. But this dagger had been intentionally forged in its current form, and it was nearly ready to be joined with its counterpart. Completion of the weapon would mean an end to the guild's exile. They could finally rebuild all they had lost.

The apprentice closed the heavy iron door at the foot of the stairs. On the far side of the chamber the wizard unlatched a smaller door and pulled it open. A blast of warm air gusted out of the cell beyond. Inside, a raging fire burned in a small iron stove. On a nearby pallet a figure wrapped in blankets lay huddled and shaking. The wizard stepped inside.

"Get up, Romandiran!"

The figure on the pallet rolled over and a wan face peered out from the blankets. Bright green eyes stared out beneath a tangled mass of unkempt moss-green hair interwoven with tiny silver trinkets. "More tincture!" the figure croaked.

The wizard lifted a small vial strapped around his neck and swung it gently, taunting his captive. "Not until this spell is finished, Jamari. This last conjure is critical. Without it to hold the other enchantments in check, the Blade cannot be safely wielded!"

"Like as not you pronounced it wrong, fool." the figure said. He rubbed his eyes with thin, mottled brown fingers, like the bark of a tree. "Give me tincture or I will tell you nothing more."

"Then you will die!"

"Gladly," the figure responded. He rolled back to face the stone wall, shivering.

The wizard's lips parted in a forced, knowing smile. "Romandiran, I know a focusing word is required to complete the spell. You will tell it to me."

The prisoner defiantly met the wizard's gaze, but there was a glimmer of surrender in his eyes. "Tincture first!" the huddled figure demanded stubbornly. His master had guessed correctly. Remarkably, the Jamari had held back the final incantation from them.

Cursing, the wizard snatched up a mug from the floor. He uncorked the vial around his neck and poured out a small amount of the milky fluid. Romandiran seized the mug with trembling hands and greedily sucked down every drop.

"Tell me how to complete the conjure," the wizard demanded. His master surely wished he could simply torture the information from their prisoner, but no further amount of pain would make Romandiran speak. Only the promise of more tincture loosened his tongue.

Romandiran rolled back towards the wall. "How much century root remains?"

"Precious little," the wizard replied. "It could take months to acquire more. And we do not have the luxury of time."

"The Conclave has discovered my involvement. They have come for me. And for you."

"Why does your Conclave care about this Blade?" the wizard asked. "It has nothing to do with your people. Lord Oraz would use the dagger to bring peace."

The Jamari croaked out a laugh. "As if you humans ever desire peace. The Conclave does not trust you. They believe you will use this weapon to unite against us and kill what few of us remain."

"And yet you came to help us," the wizard said. "Without your aid, neither guild could have created such an item."

“You’ve poisoned me,” the prisoner exclaimed. “I had no choice.”

“Now,” the wizard agreed. “But at first no one forced your hand. You willingly taught us your craft.”

The Jamari closed his eyes and said, “My reasons were my own.”

“I regret that those reasons changed, but we must complete this enchantment,” the wizard said. “Lord Oraz expected the Blade a fortnight ago.”

“Pity.” Romandiran said. He opened his eyes again and held his hands out towards the stove. “Bring more wood for my fire. And mind your protection spells. If the Conclave has summoned Vigilants, your wards will not protect you.”

“You had better hope they do,” the wizard threatened coldly. “When this dagger is completed you will receive the antidote I promised. You have experienced the agony of the poison. You will suffer a very long time before it kills you. Let us finish this!”

The Jamari grabbed his stomach, his features suffused with the excruciating pain that racked his body. “Another spasm is coming. Give me more tincture!” The apprentice looked away from the suffering, his eyes returning only when the Jamari finally spoke again.

“I will tell you,” the prisoner said. He bit his lip as another spasm took hold, and blood trickled down his cheek. The wizard poured a small amount of tincture into the mug and dribbled it into Romandiran’s mouth. The prisoner relaxed slightly and said, “After the tenth recitation, one final conjure is necessary. *Orlifitheram*.”

“What does it mean?” the wizard asked. “I am not familiar with that word.”

“It is crucial,” Romandiran murmured. “It completes the spell.”

The wizard studied the prisoner for long moments, searching for signs of duplicity. He leaned forward to stare into his prisoner’s face. “You realize that this will be the last time I can attempt the spell? If it fails you will die very slowly and painfully. Do you speak true?”

The Jamari nodded, sweat running down his face, his green eyes filled with hate.

The apprentice looked away again. Even if the prisoner was telling the truth, the wizard was not. There was no antidote to counter-act the poison. The tincture which had lessened the prisoner’s pain was almost gone. The Jamari was destined to die a torturous death unless the wizard killed him quickly out of mercy.

The wizard took a deep breath, as if the warm air alone might strengthen his weakened frame. “I will try again immediately.” To the apprentice, he commanded, “Summon the others while I prepare the room again.”

The apprentice darted out of the cell, glad to be away from the suffering prisoner. He rushed over to the stairs and pulled a long velvet cord that hung from the ceiling. Bells rang loudly in the chambers above, and a short time later a line of frail, elderly men began to enter the room, their gait forced and shaky. Their gaunt faces were pale, with ashen pockets under their eyes. They had been supporting the warding spells for too long. It was not wise to attempt the spell again with their strength fading, but they could not afford to postpone the enchantment.

The wizard stood at the pedestal and carefully sprinkled the last of the century root dust over the steel. Ground from the root of a mature rashbury tree, Romandiran had taught them how its powerful nature aided their conjures.

The wizard leaned on the pedestal for support, his white-haired head hung low as he waited for his followers to take their positions. He was nothing if not determined. Their guild of wizards had been banished and forced to hide in the old ruins of this ancient tower, outlawed by the priests and nobles who had declared magic-practice unnatural and wrong, fearful of any powers they did not understand and could not control. Out in the wilderness few apprentices could be found to add to the guild, and just when the guild had almost disbanded in despair, Romandiran had come and offered to teach them how to forge a dagger with tremendous powers. With it they could buy their

way back into favor with one of the warring human warlords. It had taken years of work and unprecedented coordination with a rival guild, but now they were so close . . .

The other mages slowly spread out in a circle around the pedestal while the apprentice locked the door and took his place in the back of the room. The wizard stood at the pedestal, eyes closed, his breathing slow and thoughtful. He held his thin hands over the steel and the guild began a slow chant, their discordant voices growing as they focused their sight and thoughts on their master's outstretched hands.

As the power grew in the room, the drone of the voices grew in volume. The air sizzled in the chamber and each breath of air tasted heavy and burnt. The wizard whispered the words taught to him by the prisoner. Slowly, the half dagger began to levitate off the pedestal, the dust of the century root swirling around it wildly. The steel began to emanate a golden glow that illuminated the wizard's exhausted face. His lips moved quickly, reciting the incantation over and over again. Showers of blue sparks leapt off the blade and crackled as they struck the stone pedestal.

The apprentice held his breath – this was as far as they had ever come before the spell failed. Finally, the wizard spoke the phrase for the tenth time. His eyes fixated on the hypnotic scene below his hands, he hesitated for a moment before calling out in a powerful voice, "*Orlifitheram!*"

A thundering detonation rocked the tower. The tornado of century root dust exploded outward. The wizard shrieked in agony as the swirling dust sliced through his hands and arms, flaying the skin and splattering blood and flesh over his shocked followers. For a brief instant, his eyes reflected the horrified realization of Romandiran's treachery, and then the mangled remains of his body tumbled to the floor.

The guild members stared in shocked silence at the pile of bloody rags that had been their master. The dust continued its wild path around the pedestal as the steel blade hovered in the air at its center. One elderly mage nudged his iron staff into the swirling globe. Sparks flew and the end of the staff snapped off. The wizards glanced uncertainly at one another.

Suddenly, a shaking voice called out. "The warding spells! Can anyone feel them?"

The others glanced around wildly. "No!" another cried. "They are gone!"

Above them in the tower they heard a crash. And then another. The outer doors had been breached. The old men stood frozen, gawking at each other with pale, sweaty faces.

The apprentice sprinted towards the prisoner's cell. He opened the locks with numbed fingers and ran inside. The prisoner lay on his bed in a fetal ball. His eyes were closed, but his thin mouth was frozen in a foul grin.

"What have you done?" the apprentice cried.

"I have won," Romandiran said calmly, never opening his eyes.

Another crash rumbled in the tower above them. The voices of the mages rose in a clamor as they realized that there was no escape.

"Tell us how to fight them!" the apprentice begged. "I will give you the antidote!"

The Jamari opened his eyes, but his expression remained disturbingly calm. "There *is* no antidote," he said. "And you cannot defeat the Vigilants. There is nothing left for us to do but die." A thunderous pounding on the iron door rocked the chamber.

The apprentice cursed and rushed back to join his comrades. The feeble mages had formed up in a semi-circle around the great iron door and were attempting to set a new ward. The door began to glow with a light bluish tint but then exploded in thousands of metal shards that impaled the screaming sorcerers. The apprentice was knocked flat, the shredded corpse of an elder mage lying dead atop him.

Unmoving, the apprentice gaped as two tall, dark soldiers stepped into the room. Their long limbs were covered in glimmering gray chain-mail that shimmered in the glow of the torches. Finely

crafted helms concealed their faces, but red eyes glared balefully out from slits in the metal. They gripped gleaming long swords inscribed with runes up and down the blades.

Moans escaped the injured men lying around him as the two creatures wordlessly thrust their blades into each of the wounded victims, cutting off their agony. The apprentice closed his eyes, paralyzed with fear, and prayed that the attackers would mistake him as dead beneath the corpse. He heard another mage begin to mumble the words to a flame spell, but the man's voice was quickly cut off with a gurgle.

The heavy, mailed step of one the creatures approached the prisoner's cell. A harsh voice grated out a wicked form of the Jamari language, "The Conclave awaits!"

"But I have made amends," the Jamari prisoner begged. "The Dagger is protected from them now!"

Suddenly, the shredded body was lifted off him. The apprentice instinctively opened his eyes and stared blankly at the shiny, armored foot beside his head. In its smooth, curved surface he could see the reflection of the creature raising its gleaming sword above him.

He closed his eyes tightly as the blade descended.