



CHAPTER
1

THE REPORT

Cairngorn Keep stood alone on a wooded hillside. Its dull gray towers thrust up from the furry cover of the evergreens like the bones of some impossibly large giant. Yellow lights burned through some of its upper windows, casting round haloes in the foul weather. An early winter storm pelted the unyielding towers and ramparts of the keep with fat raindrops and slushy hail. The wind howled with a vengeance and the pines on the hill creaked and cracked in its fury.

Anyone fool enough to be out on such a night might have seen the wizard. He stood on the main balcony above the gates, as uncaring about the storm as the castle around him. Despite the bone-chilling wind and the heavy downpour, the man was dressed lightly in a robe of fine black silk. Around his waist he had bound his robe with a belt of silver links that gleamed brightly against the blackness of the garment. His hood was thrown back, revealing flowing gray hair and a peppery beard. The rain that soaked the balcony around him seemed to be ignoring the man himself. He stood calmly surveying the valley below, a dry island in a sea of wet.

Maddoc ground his teeth in frustration as he stared off into the gathering darkness. Despite the wizard's powerful magic, his eyes

could only see so far and that fact galled him. He knew that somewhere beyond the distant hills the vessel that bore Asvoria's soul struggled to keep that soul at bay. Sooner or later Nearra's strength would fail her, and Asvoria would emerge. When that happened, Maddoc would have his prize. In the meantime, all Maddoc could do was wait, and Maddoc was not a patient man.

A cold, stinging sheet of rain swept over the balcony where Maddoc stood. Normally he wouldn't have been out in such weather, but it had been over a week since he'd last heard from his minion, Oddvar. Nothing irritated Maddoc more than no news so Maddoc had taken to pacing Cairngorn's halls and passages, finally ending up on his favorite balcony. It was as if he felt his watching from the balcony would make news come faster. The more rational part of Maddoc's brain knew that nothing he could do would make Shaera, his familiar, find Oddvar faster. Standing on the balcony in the rain, staring out at the dark countryside, gave Maddoc the satisfaction that he was doing something, so he persisted.

"Your eminence," a raspy voice called from the shelter of the keep.

A brief look of annoyance crossed Maddoc's face and he turned slightly toward the voice.

"What is it, Kaz'un?" he sighed.

"A thousand pardonss, Lord Maddoc," Kaz'un continued, "but you assked to be informed if there wass any change in the mirror."

"Shaera's found the dwarf, then?" Maddoc asked, turning to face the draconian.

"Sso it would sseem," Kaz'un confirmed, nodding his large reptilian head.

Maddoc swept from the balcony, leaving the dry spot where he'd been standing to be quickly gobbled up by the storm. He pushed past Kaz'un and hurried down the carpeted hallway toward his study.

Maddoc's study occupied the top room in the south tower. It was small and cozy, with curved bookshelves covering most of its walls and provided with comfortable chairs for reading. A fire had been laid in the hearth, and when Maddoc entered he found the room comfortable and snug.

A small, freestanding mirror stood on a low table by one of the chairs. Rather than reflecting the room, the mirror's polished silver surface swirled with colors and strange lights. Maddoc moved quickly to the chair and seated himself in front of the mirror. Eagerly he reached forward but stopped himself before his fingers made contact with the mirror's pulsating surface.

"Leave me," he instructed Kaz'un, who had followed him into the room. "This will take some time," he added as the big draconian turned back to the door. "Tell the cook to prepare my dinner and wait for me in the dining room. I will have instructions for you later."

"Yess, your eminence," Kaz'un hissed, and then he let himself out, shutting the door behind him.

Maddoc took a deep breath and let it out slowly, clearing his mind. He touched the mirror. Instantly, the swirling colors on the silver surface reached out and surrounded Maddoc. The old wizard could feel the miles rushing by him as his consciousness stretched across the land.

"Shaera," he whispered, calling the name of his beloved falcon familiar. "I am here."

Gradually the swirling images in the mirror cleared, revealing snow-covered mountainside bathed in bright afternoon light. Maddoc's eyes were closed but he saw the scene just the same. He felt the familiar union as his mind and thoughts joined with the powerful black falcon so many miles away.

Maddoc looked around through Shaera's eyes and found a short, heavily cloaked figure standing in the snow below.

"Where have you been, dwarf?" Maddoc snapped, perhaps a bit more forcefully than he needed.

“Your forgiveness, master,” Oddvar growled from the shadows of his hood. “I’d have reported before this if your bird had found me sooner.”

Maddoc’s eyes narrowed at the dwarf’s impertinence but he chose to let it pass for now. “Where are you?”

The dwarf shrugged. “I’m not sure.”

“Oddvar,” Maddoc said, menace creeping into his voice, “I’m paying you to know these things.”

The dwarf gave a humorless laugh. “Not nearly enough,” he said under his breath.

Maddoc’s jaw clenched reflexively as he wished Oddvar were there in person so he could use some rather unpleasant spells on the dwarf. He was about to tell Oddvar exactly what would happen to him if he kept up this insolence, but something made him stop. As Shaera looked around, it became plain to the wizard that the dwarf was high up in the mountains, a place where he had no business to be.

“Where are you?” Maddoc asked again, staring hard through the falcon’s eyes in an attempt to get his bearings. “Where is the girl?!”

“We’re somewhere up in the Vingaard Mountains. It’s been snowing for over a week so I’m not sure exactly where.”

“What are you still doing there, you fool? You had specific instructions to trail Nearra to Arngrim and use the Scarlet Brethren to force the Emergence.”

“I’m afraid your plan was a failure, master. A part of Asvoria emerged in the girl, but when Arngrim was destroyed, she seemed to regain control.”

“Then what of Tezrat Junction? Did you not send your little rodent companions to set the next stage of our plan in motion?”

“Yes, but it’s pointless now, master. You see . . .” Oddvar gulped. “The girl is headed over the mountains along with those useless friends of hers.”



“Over the mountains!” Maddoc’s mind raced. Only a fool would travel into the mountains with winter coming on. Davyn knew better, Maddoc was sure. His son would never risk anything so foolish.

“I don’t think you’re giving those youngsters enough credit,” Oddvar continued when Maddoc didn’t reply. “They made it out of Arngrim and far into the mountains on their own.”

“Stop blaming a group of children for your failures,” Maddoc said, cutting off Oddvar’s excuse. “You’re sure the children went into the mountains?” he asked the dwarf again.

Oddvar nodded, his steamy breath emerging from the folds of his hood.

“Where are they now?” Maddoc asked.

“Well, that’s the trouble. Once it started snowing we lost the trail.”

“What!” Anger surged through Maddoc. “You’re beginning to annoy me, dwarf,” he hissed. “You can be replaced.”

“You’re going to put Drefan in charge? I’d almost pay to see that.” Oddvar chuckled.

“And where is that ridiculous goblin?” Maddoc growled, scanning the trees through Shaera’s eyes.

“Drefan saw some signs that other goblins were in the area.” Oddvar pulled the front of his hood down to keep the glare out of his sensitive eyes. “He’s going to convince them to help us through the mountains and find the little brats.”

“Good. Find the girl and force the Emergence. If she’s come through the mountains, then she and her friends are miles from any settlement. Now is your chance to press them.”

“Not to worry, master.” Oddvar flashed a devilish smile. “The youngsters aren’t properly equipped or provisioned for a trip through the mountains. If they aren’t at their wits’ end already, they will be soon. Asvoria will emerge when they start freezing to death.”



“See that it happens,” came Maddoc’s reply. “If the cold doesn’t do the trick, there’s a bandit named Gadion somewhere near there. He owes me a few favors.”

“I know the place,” Oddvar grumbled.

“I want that sorceress’s power and I want it now, Oddvar.”

“As you wish, master.” Oddvar bowed.

Maddoc took his hand from the mirror and broke the connection. He poured himself a brandy from a decanter on the table and sat back in his chair. Normally he would have enjoyed the fire’s warmth, but his mind was troubled.

Oddvar was becoming a problem. Maddoc knew the dwarf was usually sullen and surly, but he must be especially inept to allow a group of wet-behind-the-ears children to keep getting the better of him. Still, Maddoc was forced to wonder if there was something to the dwarf’s objections. He knew that Davyn had great potential, but at fifteen the boy was too inexperienced to be much of a threat.

“Sixteen,” Maddoc chuckled, breaking the silence of the room. Davyn’s birthday had passed just a week ago. “At this rate I’ll be a grandfather before Oddvar succeeds.”

Still, Maddoc could not help dwelling on Davyn’s decision to go over the mountains. There was just no reason to take such a chance. A sudden thought occurred to Maddoc, and he froze in the act of raising his glass to his lips.

What if Davyn went into the mountains to keep the girl away from me? Nearra was pretty for a peasant girl, but could Davyn be so smitten he would openly defy me, his father?

“Impossible,” Maddoc scoffed aloud. He took a swig from his cup, but there remained a nagging doubt in the back of his mind. Davyn had shown impertinence in the past, but he had never taken it quite this far. A betrayal of this magnitude would have serious consequences.

Maddoc took another drink. Despite his frustration there was

still plenty of time to coax Asvoria's spirit from Nearra's body. Patience, he reminded himself, would yield great rewards once the long-dead sorceress's knowledge was his. The Emergence first. There will be time enough to punish Davyn when his plans are completed. The thought made Maddoc smile.

Quenching the fire with a wave of his hand, Maddoc set down the empty glass and the decanter and went down to dinner.