



THE NEW
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RETURN OF THE SORCERESS

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COVER & INTERIOR ART
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CHAPTER 1

UNWELCOME VISITORS

What business do you have in Ravenscar?" Two broad-shouldered men armed with swords stood in the middle of the muddy road, blocking the way. The first man's tone was neutral, but the hard look in his eyes sent a shiver down Nearra's spine. This was someone who would kill without thought or remorse.

"Why should we tell you?" Davyn said.

The second man scowled and dropped his hand to his sword, though he made no move to draw the weapon.

Nearra tensed. She wished she was holding her dagger. But she knew if her hand so much as twitched in the direction of her blade, the two thugs—who, it seemed, were Ravenscar's unofficial welcoming committee—would be on them in an instant.

It was early spring in Solamnia. The trees were beginning to bud, and while the air was still cool enough for the five companions to wear their fur cloaks, there was a fresh, green smell in the breeze that promised warmer weather to come. The road that led into Ravenscar was muddy from recent rains, and dotted with mounds of horse manure, fruit rinds, and gnawed meat bones. The town, if it could be called that, was little more than

a collection of ramshackle buildings made from weathered and rotting wood. It seemed to Nearra as if one good strong wind could turn the entire town into kindling.

Catriona, Elidor, and Sindri remained silent and Davyn spoke again.

“Our business is our own. Since when did the folk of Ravenscar start asking questions of visitors?”

“Since we felt like it,” the first man growled. He was tall and clad in leather armor and wore a snake-skin sword-belt.

“But if you don’t want to answer in words, you can always answer in coin,” the second thug added. He was dressed like the first, except his belt was plain leather, and he wore a cloak made from the hide of a mountain cat. The second bully began to draw his sword, and his companion did likewise.

Catriona reached for the steel dragon claws tucked beneath her belt, while Sindri raised his hand, the one with the silver ring, in preparation of casting a spell. But before a fight could break out, Elidor drew a fat coin purse from his tunic.

“In that case, here’s our answer.” The elf shook the purse, jingling the coins inside. “I suspect it’s your favorite language.”

The first thug—Nearra thought of him as Snake Skin—stopped drawing his sword, but he didn’t slide the blade back into its sheath. “That it is,” he allowed. “But how many words of it do you intend to speak?”

“As many as necessary,” Elidor replied.

The two men stared at the purse for a moment, sizing it up, and then looked at each other. The barbarians sheathed their swords, and Nearra let out a breath she hadn’t known she was holding.

Elidor tossed the money pouch and Snake Skin snatched it out of the air. He opened it and both men examined the contents. Satisfied, Snake Skin closed the purse and stepped aside.





“Enjoy your stay in Ravenscar,” Snake Skin said.

“For as long as it lasts.” Cat Hide smirked. “Or maybe I should say for as long as *you* last!”

Both men laughed, but Nearra and her companions did their best to ignore them as they walked past. When they were out of earshot, Elidor said, “It truly pains me to have to part with so much steel.”

“It’s a good thing you did,” Davyn said. “If we hadn’t paid them, a fight might have broken out, and the last thing we want to do is draw attention to ourselves. Remember, we’ve come here to contact an old friend of mine who can help us sneak into Cairngorn Keep.”

“I still don’t see how a centaur is going to get us into Maddoc’s home,” Elidor said.

“Ayanti is Bolthor’s gamekeeper,” Davyn explained. “She often goes to the wizard’s keep to deliver supplies and pick up Maddoc’s latest, uh, creation for Bolthor’s amusement. But she won’t be able to help us if we’re imprisoned—or dead. So let’s be careful, all right?”

Despite everything Nearra had been through since awakening with no memories on a forest trail so many months ago, she didn’t think she’d ever become completely used to being in dangerous situations. And from what Davyn had told them, Ravenscar was a dangerous place indeed.

The friends continued walking through the town, doing their best to ignore the stares of the residents they passed.

“Look at *him*!” Sindri said, pointing at a man standing in front of one of the buildings. He held a long metal staff with axe heads at both ends, and his face was covered with a skull tattoo.

“What an interesting tattoo. Do you think it means anything? And I wonder if he’d consider trading his staff for mine. I think I’ll go over and ask.”

But before Sindri could take a step toward the man with the death's head tattoo, Davyn put a hand on the kender's shoulder and stopped him.

"What did we all agree on before entering town?" Davyn asked.

"Not to talk with anyone and to avoid eye contact whenever possible," Sindri said in a sullen tone.

"And therefore you . . .," Davyn prompted.

"Will stay with the rest of you and keep my mouth closed." Sindri sounded miserable. Kender lived to satisfy their boundless curiosity, and not being able to do so was killing him.

"And make sure you don't use any magic," Davyn continued. "We're only a couple miles from Cairngorn Keep, and the wizard will detect any magic in the area."

Sindri nodded.

Davyn kept his hand on Sindri's shoulder a few moments longer, as if to make certain the kender was going to do as he said. When he was satisfied, Davyn removed his hand and Sindri remained where he stood, his lips pursed in an unhappy pout.

"Come on," Davyn urged. "It's best to keep moving in Ravenscar. Stand still long and you're liable to become a target."

"All right, boss," Catriona said with a grin.

Davyn scowled. "I thought we settled that. Don't call me boss."

Catriona's grin widened. "Of course, b—" But Davyn shot her a venomous look, and still grinning, she fell silent.

Nearra didn't have to ask what Davyn meant by becoming targets. There were other people walking down the street, standing in doorways of shacks and lean-to's, lurking in the spaces between buildings that weren't quite large enough to be called alleys. Most were human, though over by a cutler's cart a trio of dwarves garbed in red cloaks stood drinking from wineskins





while they listened to a bearded half-elf strum a lute. But while there was wide variety in the way the denizens of Ravenscar looked and dressed, they all shared a single trait: their eyes were cold, calculating, and full of potential menace.

But regardless of the danger, Nearra was determined to do whatever she must to finally regain her memories and win her freedom from the spirit that Maddoc had instilled in her. That was the reason the companions had come to Ravenscar in the first place. They had grown tired of always being on the defensive against the evil wizard. This time they were bringing the fight to Maddoc.

"It's not really a town though, is it?" Elidor said. "I see no people working, no families, no children, and these shacks are so poorly built they don't deserve to be called buildings."

"You're right," Davyn said. "In many ways, Ravenscar is more like a camp for bandits and mercenaries. It came into existence centuries ago, when Asvoria lived in the keep that the wizard now occupies."

There was bitterness in Davyn's voice and Nearra noted that he didn't say *Maddoc* or *my father*. He'd barely spoken of the evil wizard at all since learning what Maddoc had done to his true father. And now Davyn had to live with what he'd been forced to do to free his real father from the wizard's curse.

Davyn went on. "It was a place for those who served the sorceress to drink, gamble, and fight while they awaited their mistress' orders. After Asvoria fell from power, outlaws continued using Ravenscar as their headquarters. Once the wizard took up residence in Cairngorn Keep, he established a similar business relationship with the criminals from the town. While he maintains a small staff of servants in the keep, when he needs certain supplies to be acquired or a *special* task to be done, he turns to the folk of Ravenscar."

From the rough and dangerous appearance of the people they'd seen so far, Nearra had no trouble picturing Maddoc recruiting them for whatever dirty work he needed done.

They passed a pair of old weathered buildings that leaned upon one another as if for mutual support. Catriona asked, "What are all these buildings for? There are no signs to help visitors tell one from the other."

"There are no signs because the buildings are apt to change owners suddenly, not to mention violently," Davyn said. "So what might once have been a tavern will be a fur trader's on your next visit. People probably got tired of constantly making signs, so they just gave up."

"How does anyone know where anything is then?" Nearra asked.

"You ask around," Davyn said.

"But how can we do that?" Sindri said. "You told us not to speak with anyone!"

Davyn smiled. "We don't need to ask. We're going to visit the one establishment in Ravenscar that never changes. The Pit."

Sindri's eyes widened and he turned to Nearra. "I just thought of something. If Asvoria used to live around here, does that mean you remember this place?"

"It doesn't work that way," Nearra said. "Asvoria's spirit may dwell within my body, but we are two separate beings. I no more know her thoughts than she does mine."

This wasn't entirely true. There'd been numerous times when she'd sensed Asvoria's thoughts, often hearing them as a voice speaking in her mind. And from time to time, she'd been able to tap Asvoria's power. Or perhaps the sorceress' spirit had simply worked her magic through her body. Whichever the case, Nearra didn't want to let the others know how blurred the boundary between her spirit and Asvoria's had become—especially after she'd been drenched by the mystic blood of the dragon well. One





reason she wished to keep the full extent of the truth from her friends was because she didn't want them to worry about her. But she was also afraid that if they knew how strong Asvorla had become they would not trust her. Look how long it had taken them to trust Davyn after he'd revealed the truth about his relationship to Maddoc and his role in the wizard's grand scheme to resurrect and control Asvorla. Catriona still didn't trust him completely. How would they treat her if they knew the truth?

They continued walking toward the center of Ravenscar, doing their best to ignore the town's inhabitants and be ignored by them. Before long they heard cheers and laughter, but these sounds had a decidedly dark and nasty edge. They turned a corner and saw a crowd gathered in a circle.

"There it is," Davyn said. "Looks like there's a match going on." He looked at the others. "What goes on in the Pit isn't very pleasant, but do your best not to let your true feelings show. If there's even a hint that we don't approve of what's going on, it could give us away."

The five companions approached the crowd and got as close to the edge of the Pit as they could. They received a few looks from spectators—mostly due to Sindri's presence. There had been no sign of other kender in Ravenscar, and Nearra thought Sindri might be the only one. And given the kender habit of "accidentally" procuring objects that weren't theirs—a habit which Sindri believed in his case was due to an ability to magically conjure items—it was no surprise that people would eye him warily. But no one said anything, and as long as Sindri kept his hands to himself there shouldn't be any trouble.

At least, that's what Nearra hoped.

The Pit was exactly as its name implied: a round pit thirty feet across and twenty feet deep. The walls and floor of the Pit were lined with stone blocks, and a rusted metal grate in the

center served as a drain for rainwater and, Nearra guessed with a clench of her stomach, other liquids. Sharp iron spikes a foot long ringed the edge of the Pit. Many of the spikes were covered with reddish-brown stains that Nearra hoped were rust but knew were not.

Despite herself, Nearra found her gaze drawn to the battle taking place within the Pit. Two dire wolves attacked a lone ice bear, their fangs sinking into the helpless creature's neck. Nearra turned her head away, disgusted.

While most of the audience stood around the Pit, one man sat in a fine oak chair mounted on a raised platform to give him a better view. From what Davyn had said Nearra knew this was Bolthor, the unofficial ruler of Ravenscar, while the bandits, barbarians, and other unsavory types who made up the crowd cheered, the outlaw chieftain remained silent, his face impassive. His eyes glittered with intensity as he watched the action below.

Looking at his thick brow, cruel eyes, and tangled black hair and beard, Nearra could believe he was half-human, half-ogre. Standing on either side of him were two elves—one male, one female. Their bodies were covered with tribal tattoos and they wore tunics made of deerskin over leather armor.

"Who are the elves?" she asked Davyn in a whisper.

"Kuruk and Shiriki," he said. "Fierce Kagonesti warriors who serve as Bolthor's bodyguards. They're also cousins."

Nearra glanced at Elidor. He was half Kagonesti, on his father's side, though he dressed more like his mother's people, the Silvanesti. Elidor was looking at the elf guards and scowling.

Nearra leaned close to him and whispered. "Davyn told us to mask our feelings, remember?"

Elidor hrumped, but he stopped scowling and turned his attention to the Pit.





Small tin whistles hung on chains around the necks of the elf guards. They lifted the whistles to their mouths and blew. Shrill high-pitched tones cut through the air and Nearra gritted her teeth and clapped her hands to her ears, as did most of the crowd. Bolthor, however, seemed unaffected by the sound. The bear and the wolves responded at once to the signal, moving to opposite sides of the Pit and lying down, though in the bear's case, it was closer to collapsing.

On the other side of the Pit from where Nearra and her companions stood, the crowd parted for a quartet of men who carried a long wooden ramp. With ease they lowered the ramp into the Pit and stepped back.

Davyn leaned close to Nearra. "Here comes Ayanti," he whispered.

Nearra heard the sound of clapping hooves and then Ayanti came into view. Nearra gasped when she saw the centaur. There was something almost regal in the graceful way she moved. Nearra had imagined that she would be awkward, her body an unnatural blend of human and equine, but nothing could've been further from the truth.

Ayanti stepped to the edge of the Pit and clapped her hands. "Gerda, Mottul, come!" she commanded.

With happy yips and wagging tails, the two wolves bounded up the ramp, which was designed to fit over the metal spikes jutting from the Pit's edge. Once the wolves were out, Ayanti leaned over, her human half bending where it joined her horse half. Her chestnut-brown hair matched the color of her equine coat and it spilled into her face as she scratched the wolves behind the ears. Then she straightened and said, "You're done for now. Go rest, you two." She nodded to one of the men who'd brought the ramp, and he whistled for the wolves. They ran to him, eager as puppies, and he led them away.

The centaur then turned her attention to the wounded bear. The animal lay on its side, breathing hard, its fur matted with blood. Ayanti scowled and gave Bolthor an angry glance, as if she blamed him personally for inflicting the bear's injuries.

"Finish him off!" someone in the crowd shouted. The rest of the crowd cheered.

Nearra turned to Davyn. "Will she?"

But before he could answer, Ayanti drew a dagger from her belt sheath and pointed it at the crowd. "If you don't shut up, I'll come up there and slit a few throats until you do!"

The crowd suddenly grew quiet, and Bolthor laughed. Ayanti sheathed her dagger and clopped over to the ice bear. She bent of her forelegs and knelt next to the animal. She spoke soothingly to him as she examined his wounds. Then, with much coaxing, she led the bear up the ramp. One of her assistants was waiting with a muzzle, but Ayanti waved him away. She walked off, the wounded ice bear limping behind her.

"Are you certain she'll help us?" Catriona whispered to Davyn.

"Ayanti and I grew up together," Davyn said. "My—the *wizard* didn't approve of a human and a centaur having a personal relationship. But we became friends anyway. She'll help us."

After a time, Ayanti returned, pulling a wagon with an iron cage in the back. Inside the cage was a strange beast that resembled a boar, though it was closer to the size of a bull. Instead of fur, it was covered in greenish-black scales, and it had long lizard-like tail. The beast snorted and rammed its curved tusks against the iron bars of its cage, impatient to be free.

Nearra was horrified. "Is that abomination Maddoc's doing?"

Davyn nodded. "That's how he pays Bolthor. Bolthor gets the wizard whatever supplies and servants he wants, and in return, the wizard uses his magic to create monsters to fight in the Pit.

This one looks to be a cross between a boar and a lizard."





The beast slavered and whipped its tail about, eager to get to killing.

"It's disgusting!" Catriona said.

"I wonder what sort of spell Maddoc used to create the animal," Sindri said. "Do you think he might tell me?"

Ayanti pulled the wagon up to the ramp at the edge of the Pit and started to unlock the cage door. Though the centaur had showed affection for the wolves and the bear, it was clear from her expression that she held little love for the lizard-boar. Nearra couldn't blame her.

As soon as the door was open, the lizard-boar jumped onto the ramp and ran down into the Pit without any urging from Ayanti.

"What now?" Nearra asked.

Before anyone could say anything else, a shout came from edge of the crowd.

"Cheaters! Thieves!"

The crowd grew quiet, and turned to look at the cause of the commotion. The two bullies who had "greeted" the companions at the edge of town were pushing their way through, weapons drawn and faces twisted into masks of fury.

The crowd lost no time parting to make way for the angry thugs.

"I think perhaps it's time we were going," Elidor said nervously. But before any of them could move, Snake Skin saw them and jabbed his sword in their direction.

"You gave us iron coins coated with steel!"

His partner grinned and brandished his weapon. "So now it's time to give you a taste of *our* steel!"

The two thugs rushed toward Nearra and her friends, swords raised high and murder in their eyes.