



The Cities

THE CITY OF RAVENS

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CHAPTER ONE

Jack Ravenwild scrambled over the parapeted roof of House Kuldath and grinned in delight. The night air was heavy and wet with the first storm of spring. Water ran from his face over his stubbled skull, shaved just over the ears and closely cropped in a distinct widow's peak.

Jack was a small man, with a wiry build and a round, friendly face that was perpetually split by a jester's mocking smile. Dark eyes glittered gleefully over an impish nose, a wide mouth, and a thin trace of beard along his jawline.

"Hurry, hurry!" he called softly over his shoulder. "The rain stands to ruin my best suit."

All around him, the moss-grown shingles and leaning spires of the city's rooftops stretched out into darkness. Jack studied them with deliberate disinterest. Behind him, a single hairy arm groped for a handhold on the rain-slick rooftop. A moment later, Anders Aricssen hauled his head and shoulders to the parapet, grunting with effort.

"If you find yourself concerned about the condition of your clothes," he gasped, "you might consider helping me up, instead of capering up there like some kind of rubbish-heap weather vane."

"Rubbish-heap weather vane, indeed," Jack

said sniffing. He considered himself dashing dressed for the moment. The night's work demanded clothes that fit like a shadow over a grave, so the small man wore snug leather breeches, a loose shirt of dark gray cotton, and a leather doublet stiffened and padded, all in black. A rapier was slung high on his left hip in a thin wooden scabbard wrapped in black velvet, and a matching poignard rode on his right hip. Pausing a moment to brush the water from his dark cloak, he stepped over to the edge of the roof and offered his hand to Anders. "Come on, then."

Anders clasped his arm and dragged himself onto the flat roof, slipping and scrambling awkwardly. He straightened slowly, unfolding a frame more than a foot taller than his companion's. While Jack was dressed in dark leather and a voluminous cloak that billowed in the wind, Anders simply wore weathered buckskins that left his golden-haired chest bare to the elements.

"Are you certain you didn't use sorcery to magic yourself up that wall? That was not as easy a climb as you'd led me to believe, friend Jack."

"Why resort to magic when natural aptitude suffices?" Jack replied. He took two light bounds across the slick shingles and balanced a moment with his feet athwart a brick chimney, watching streamers of smoke wind about his legs. "Black as old pitch tonight, friend Anders," he laughed. "Why, I couldn't have picked a better evening for my enterprise!"

"**Our** enterprise," grunted Anders by way of correction. "That would be **our** enterprise, Jack. It concerns me when you make mistakes like that." While Jack occupied himself by hopping casually from one parapet to the other, ignoring the forty-foot fall below, the tall Northman unwrapped a heavy broadsword not too much shorter than Jack himself and slung the blade over his shoulder. He stood eye-to-eye with Jack, despite the fact that the

Ravenaar man now balanced on a crenellation a good cubit higher than the rooftop upon which Anders stood. "Speaking of which, you still have not told me what prize we seek tonight."

Jack led Anders across the rooftop to a small stone slab in one corner. "Below us, as you well know, is the warehouse of House Kuldath. The five brothers Kuldath hail from some distant land far to the east. Their principal trade lies in carpets of exquisite workmanship, rumored to be hand-woven by sixteen enslaved princesses forced to labor at the brothers' command in order to prevent House Kuldath from collecting on a debt owed by their destitute father."

Anders frowned. "Carpets. That's bad. They're quite heavy, and in this rain, they'll get heavier still. That will be a lot of work."

"No, no, forget the carpets. We're here—"

"Ah, so it's the princesses, then. They're even heavier than carpets, but unlikely to become heavier with a soaking. Manageable, I suppose."

Jack sighed. "Forget the whole carpet story. The important thing is, the five brothers Kuldath are quite wealthy, and in celebration of an extremely successful season, they recently purchased a set of five perfect rubies from the jeweler Shorlock Revahl, each one to give to his wife. We shall relieve them of the responsibility of caring for these small baubles."

"Rubies," Anders said, nodding. "That's much better. So how do we do this?"

"Below there," Jack said, pointing to the stone slab, "lies the hitherto inviolate inner sanctum of the brothers Kuldath. With some careful scrying, I have determined that the first floor of this building is the Kuldath Emporium; the second, their main warehouse; the third, their living quarters; and the fourth, the private offices and secret

vaults of the house.” Jack donned a pair of soft leather gloves and pulled his hood over his face. “The room below is reserved for the storage of their very finest carpets. Two rooms away is a locked strongbox wherein the rubies lie. You shall remain in the carpet room and stand guard, while I steal the strongbox.”

“I don’t see why you need me along, if that’s the case,” Anders replied. “One of your ability should be able to handle that quite easily.”

“There may be a complication,” Jack admitted, “involving a guardian demon who watches over the wealth of the house.”

Anders turned to stare down at him. “Am I going to have to fight this demon?”

“It’s extremely unlikely. I anticipate that we will reach our goal and retreat before any encounter with the guardian becomes remotely possible. I merely asked you to come along to handle that one chance in a hundred—nay, a thousand—whereby the demon may become aware of our presence.” Jack knelt by the trapdoor and spoke the words of an opening spell, gently passing his hand over the latch. With a small rasping sound, a bolt on the other side slid out of the way. Before the blond-bearded Northman could reconsider, Jack opened the door and dropped inside.

He landed on a soft stack of carpets, surrounded by deep gloom. He’d always had a knack for feeling his way around in the dark. Without stumbling, he glided forward to the storeroom’s door and cracked it, peeking out into the hallway. A checkered wooden floor and ornate chestnut paneling gleamed in lamplight outside the storeroom. Watching for any sign of movement, he heard Anders drop into the room somewhat more awkwardly than he had.

“Stay here, good Anders,” he said quietly, “and be ready to come swiftly to my aid if I call for you.”

"May I ask a simple question first?"

"Of course."

"How do you intend to divide five gems, Jack? Four or six present no problem, of course, but five are difficult to split between two partners."

Jack closed the door to the narrowest of cracks and turned back to Anders. "Well, each of us shall have two rubies to start. That is only fair."

"That makes four," Anders observed. "Do you mean to tell me that you will leave the brothers Kuldath the fifth gem, in order to ensure a fair and evenhanded split of the take?"

"Of course not. I shall have it," Jack replied.

Anders scowled. "Your certainty unsettles me, friend Jack. How did you arrive at this decision?"

"It is a simple matter. I conceived tonight's adventure, and I reconnoitered our means of ingress. Therefore, I shall take the greater part of the treasure." Jack set his hands on his hips, putting on an expression of lordly indulgence. "Your assistance is important, of course, so I cheerfully assign to you two-fifths of tonight's take. You will note that I deal with you honestly and without deceit before the work commences. Others in our profession might conveniently allow the question of the fifth gem to go unanswered until the prize was in hand. That, in my experience, leads to rash actions and hurtful words."

"I am not reassured," the Northman replied.

"Why, you should be, friend Anders. I am in all things and in all ways the very soul of honesty. Not only do I pride myself on my true and forthright nature, but I believe that I can claim to have never knowingly allowed a falsehood to pass my lips. The slightest deceit is quite beyond my capabilities, and every day I fervently pray to be struck down in the most horrible and grisly fashion

imaginable should I fail to live up to my own exacting standards of decent and moral conduct.”

“And what is that?”

“Decent and moral conduct? Why, I define—”

“No, no, not that. The most horrible and grisly demise imaginable. What would that be?”

Jack raised his hand as if to answer, thought for a moment, and then lowered it. “I’m not entirely sure.” Momentarily nonplussed, he tapped his finger on his chin and then gave up with a shrug. “I’ll think on it. Are you satisfied with the arrangements?”

Anders grimaced. “I accept, under one condition: If I end up fighting the demon, I get the fifth gem.”

“I assure you, that condition is completely unnecessary,” Jack said.

“If that is really the case, then you should be able to agree to it without hesitation. Now, do you agree to my condition?”

Jack winced and offered a weak smile. Anders was much smarter than he looked. “I do, although perhaps we should define ‘fighting.’ ”

“Easily done. If I find myself in a situation where it’s trying to kill me, or I’m trying to kill it. Now, if you please, resume your burglary.”

The small thief opened the door and slipped out into the hall. He furiously considered some kind of strategy by which he might have avoided conceding the last gem to the Northman but fell short. He glided past several doors emblazoned with the symbol of the House Kuldath, an anvil crowned by five gemstones, and wondered idly if in the near future the brothers would amend their house symbol to a plain anvil. Jack had carefully studied the interior of the building through various divinations and seeing spells over the last week, committing the entire plan of the building to his memory. He knew, for example,

that the door immediately to his left led to the personal quarters of Aldeemo, eldest of the brothers, and that the door across the hall led to a linen closet backed by a secret stairway that led down to the emporium on the first floor. Talent in both sorcery and thievery made possible thefts that mundane rogues or honest sorcerers would never have attempted.

He reached the end of the hall, where a door sheathed in green copper sheets warded the upper vault. Here Jack knelt and fished out a couple of small picks from a pouch at his side, expertly picking the lock with a moment's work. He glanced over his shoulder; at the other end of the hallway, Anders peered out of the carpet storeroom, watching intently. Jack winked at him and opened the copper door, quietly sliding inside.

The room was a small, crowded place fitted with five counting desks all in a row, awash in bagged coinage and precarious stacks of iron strongboxes. Had Jack a mind to take it, the coinage itself would have been an epic success . . . but he was after something more impressive than hundreds of pounds of coins. He worked his way to the back of the room, where a small iron box rested in an alcove in the wall. Cautiously, he inspected the niche and the box, using his poignard gently to raise the front edge of the box.

The weight of the box held down a small spring-loaded trigger, just visible under the center of the container. "Perfectly predictable," Jack muttered. Taking the box out of the niche would trigger some kind of alarm or trap. He could probably disarm it, but did he need too? Suddenly the answer struck him. He laughed softly. "Of course!" Carefully, he fished another set of picks from his pouch and set to work, quickly opening the small box right where it sat. If he didn't move the lockbox, he wouldn't trigger the trap, and that meant that all he had to do was remove

the rubies from the box without removing the box from the niche. With one final click, the box opened.

Five perfect rubies glimmered darkly inside.

Jack grinned. He pushed the lid back out of the way, exposing the five rubies to view. Then, as a precaution in case removing the weight of the rubies might be sufficient to trigger the spring-loaded catch beneath the box, he fished out a small wooden dowel from his burglary kit and wedged it in place to hold the box firmly down on the bottom of the niche. That done, he produced a small silk cloth from another pocket and folded the five rubies inside. "And that is that." He grinned.

Something snuffled and grunted outside.

Jack froze. He held his breath, listening intently. Then he mumbled an invisibility spell, fading from sight as the familiar words and energies worked the magic in the accustomed way. Even as he vanished, the counting-room door slowly swung open, creaking on its hinges.

A hulking, bearlike shape stood in the door. Leathery bat-wings flapped and shuffled as it advanced into the room. Demonic red eyes glowed in the center of an ursine face crowned by curling ram's horns.

"Come out, come out, little thief," the demon hissed. Its voice was thick oil poured over a hot stove. "I can smell your magic, I can hear your heartbeat, I can taste your spoor in the air. You cannot hide from me."

Jack decided to try anyway. He held himself perfectly still, breathing slowly and silently.

The demon advanced into the room, snuffling and spreading out its limbs to grope for him. "I see you have borrowed my masters' rubies, little thief," the creature hissed. "Put them back now, and I will allow you to live."

Moving very slowly, Jack crouched low and began to feel his way forward. The only way to escape was to dive under the creature's grasp and bolt before it could turn

to follow. He tightened his grasp on the gems, held in his left hand. Then, before he could lose his nerve, he jumped to one side and scrambled under the monster's outstretched paws.

"**Anders!**" he called.

The demon roared and slammed its monstrous talons against the wall, trying to catch hold of Jack or pin him in place, but Jack dropped to all fours and scrambled past the guardian. Coins glittered and crashed in the darkness. The monstrous creature whirled with impossible speed and sprang after him, talons grasping blindly for him, its stinking breath hot on his neck. Jack gained his feet in the hallway outside and fled for his life.

At the far end of the hall, Anders broke his cover and charged forward, unsheathing his broadsword with a shrill ring of steel. The demon roared and spat a gout of flame at the swordsman, driving him to the ground. For one long, flawless moment, Jack saw nothing between him and his route of escape but the dark crevice of the storeroom door. He put his head down and ran for all he was worth.

Then a door opened right in front of him, and Aldeemo Kuldath stepped right into his path. Pale and wizened, the easterner blinked his eyes sleepily while drawing back the string of a small hand crossbow. Jack, still invisible, crashed into him at a dead run. Both thief and merchant sprawled to the floor. Aldeemo's crossbow fired with a sharp snap, embedding its tiny quarrel in the middle of his own left foot. Jack's rubies flew from his hand and scattered across the polished wood floor of the hallway, skittering and dancing like droplets of wine.

"My foot!" howled the merchant.

"My rubies!" wailed Jack. His invisibility faded, spoiled by the collision.

Roaring in rage, the demon leaped over both to meet Anders's charge, as the Northman shrieked a battle cry

and sprang forward with his blade flashing. The guardian's claws and teeth snapped and gouged huge furrows in the paneling. Anders dodged and slashed, parrying the attack and hacking away at the monster with furious strokes.

"That's three!" the swordsman cried. "Do you hear me, Jack? That makes three!"

While the swordsman and the demon traded desperate blows, Jack shook his head, clearing the cobwebs, and scrambled after the rubies. The first one he reached for was kicked aside by a careless step of the guardian demon; the second, Aldeemo reached first. He groped for another ruby and seized one . . . just as another door opened and Ospim Kuldath stepped into the fray, armed with a long cudgel.

"Thievery! Burglary! Chaos!" the second Kuldath shrieked. "Summon the Watch!" Then he stooped and picked up the fourth ruby.

"Discretion is advised," Jack muttered, then decided to leave while he could. "Anders! Get out!" He jumped to his feet and darted past Ospim, ducking under a swing of the club, and threw himself into the secret storeroom in the middle of the hall—there was no way to get past the demon and Anders, engaged in their furious duel.

"Stop! Come back here!" Aldeemo cried. He tried to scramble after Jack, sprawling to the ground again when he tripped over the quarrel stuck in his foot. The lean, bearded merchant screamed a string of curses in some uncouth eastern tongue and clutched his injured extremity.

Anders snarled a curse of his own and started giving ground, retreating back to the carpet room. At the right moment, he jumped back and slammed the door in the demon's face, barring it with one swift movement. The creature lowered its massive head and butted the door hard enough to split one of the planks. Hoping that Anders

had sense enough to make his escape while the demon battered down the door, Jack retreated into the linen closet and groped for the catch to the secret door. An anxious moment later, he found it and bolted down the secret stairway.

One ruby still clutched in his hand, he burst out of the secret door into the Kuldath business floor and threw himself out of the first window he encountered in a spray of broken glass. Without breaking stride, he rolled to his feet and pelted for home. Instinctively he avoided the bobbing torches and angry voices of the local watchmen converging on the scene, slipping into a dark alleyway and resuming his mask of invisibility.

It could have gone worse, Jack told himself.



An hour later, Jack sat in the crowded warmth of the Cracked Tankard and quaffed a clay mug of ale. The Kuldath ruby rested in the innermost pocket of his doublet, a mere handspan from his heart, and he reveled in the cool impression it made against the ribs of his left side. As always, he'd claimed his seat on the back wall, midway between the stairs leading up to the Tankard's private rooms, a doorway leading to the kitchens and then the alleyway beyond, and a small window fronting on De Villars Ride. He'd learned through necessity that he could fit through that window in a pinch, and he now counted it among the seven possible exits from the room.

The Cracked Tankard was not the roughest taproom in Raven's Bluff, nor the oldest, nor the one most frequented by thieves and swindlers, nor the one with the cheapest ale or the sauciest barmaids. It was instead a pleasant combination of all these things. Situated on the western end of the Anvil, the heart of the city, the Tankard not

only made an excellent meeting place, but it also collected rumors and news in much the same way that the lowest portion of an awning collected rainwater. All manner of things in Raven's Bluff ran downhill to this one spot.

By Jack's guess, midnight was two hours gone, and still Anders had not showed up at their arranged rendezvous. He chose not to worry too much. The blond-bearded swordsman was one of the best brawlers he knew, and he was as comfortable racing across the city rooftops as the rocky cliffs of his distant homeland. It would take more than an angry demon and the brothers Kuldath to prevent his escape. Jack had partnered with Anders before in similarly daring escapades; if he knew the Northman, Anders would be along sooner or later.

Observing that his ale was almost gone, Jack held his mug in the air and called, "Briesa! There must be a hole in this cup, for it is empty again!"

Across the taproom, a pretty dark-haired barmaid waved him off. "I'll get to you as soon as I can, love," she replied over the din.

"I have been waiting to hear you speak those words for weeks now, Briesa," Jack replied.

She rolled her eyes and turned away, six tankards brimming in her hands as she danced off to a table of rowdy Sembians. The girl was very pretty, a few inches shorter than he was, and quite fetching in the busy barmaid's blouse and dress. Jack grinned to himself and drained off the last of his mug, designs upon Briesa's virtue forming in his mind.

When he looked up from the empty tankard, he found himself gazing into the eyes of an exquisitely beautiful woman dressed all in dark leather. Hair as dark as midnight spilled down her shoulders. Eyes that smoldered with sultry promise and ebon fire studied him with calm,

collected confidence. A long, slender sword was sheathed at her hip.

“Good evening,” she said in a clear voice marked by a faint burring accent. “Are you called Jack Ravenwild?”

“I might be,” Jack admitted, setting down his cup with some care. “If you owe Jack Ravenwild a substantial sum of money, then I am certainly he. If, on the other hand, you intend to run him through for some imagined slight long forgotten on his part, then no, I don’t believe I’m the one you’re looking for.” He paused, studying the woman, and then added, “If, perchance, you have heard of his prowess in the arts of love, and yearn to find out if half of what you might have heard is true, then I am most certainly Jack Ravenwild.”

She smiled coldly, a smile that didn’t touch her eyes, and settled into the chair opposite him. “I’ll take that as a long-winded yes, although I don’t owe you money, I don’t mean to kill you, and I don’t have any particular interest in your romantic prowess. I’m here to talk business.”

“Business?” Jack sighed dramatically. “Well, business it is, then. To whom am I speaking?”

“You can call me Elana,” the dark-haired woman said. She shifted slightly in her seat, clearing her sword arm and moving to make sure that the table would not interfere with a sudden draw. Long, lithe muscles flexed along her forearm. Jack realized that her face and figure showed not a trace of softness—she didn’t wear the sword for show. She was a panther, a tigress, absolutely confident in her own abilities.

“What can I do for you, Elana?” Jack asked. He offered a subtle smirk, unable to resist the temptation to jest a little with her. He hated serious people.

“I hear,” said Elana, “that you excel in finding things. I would like you to find something for me.”

“You have heard correctly. There will be, of course, a

pittance of a finder's fee. I would charge you nothing for my services, but if word got out that I'd worked for free, why, then I should never be solvent again. What are you looking for, dear Elana?"

Elana started to speak, and then held her tongue as Briesa approached and replaced Jack's mug of ale. The barmaid glanced at Jack and hid a smile, as if to say that Jack had no need of troubling her anymore with his suggestions, now that he had female companionship. Jack winced. It might take weeks to convince Briesa that he was discussing business and business alone with the lovely Elana.

"Anything for your companion, Jack?" the barmaid asked.

Elana glanced up at her. "I'll take whatever he's drinking."

"Right away, miss," Briesa said. She whirled off into the crowd, a serving tray balanced on her shoulder. She didn't notice the long, thoughtful look Elana gave her as she moved away.

"You were about to say?" Jack prompted.

The swordswoman returned her attention to him. "I'm looking for a book. A very old, rare book that I have good reason to believe is somewhere in this city. I'm willing to pay you five hundred pieces of gold for your help, plus a bonus if you actually recover it for me."

"What kind of bonus did you have in mind?"

Elana smiled in a predatory fashion. "I don't have too much more money at my disposal, but I'm sure you can think of other ways for me to reward you for a job well done."

Jack set down his tankard and sat straight up. She was toying with him, he was certain of it. On the other hand . . . "What can you tell me about the book? Anything you can volunteer at this point will help me to find it for you."

The swordswoman leaned forward, lowering her voice. "It is called the Sarkonagael," she said quietly. "Eight

years ago, it was brought to Raven's Bluff by an adventuring mage named Gerard. I do not know exactly where Gerard got it or how long he had it before he came here. But I've asked after Gerard already, and it seems that he disappeared on some failed enterprise about six years ago. All I really know at this point is that the Sarkonagael was in this city then, and it was brought here by Gerard."

"What happened to Gerard's belongings when he didn't come back for them?"

"Apparently, the landlord who owned the house Gerard and his company were renting chose to sell off all the band's trophies when they didn't come back for them."

"So the Sarkonagael was sold about six years ago from the estate of an adventuring band. That may be useful," Jack said. There were a limited number of book dealers in Raven's Bluff, and any such sale would have been attended by some of them. The odds were very good that the Sarkonagael might be sitting in someone's bookshop. He smiled at the prospect of an easy five hundred gold crowns . . . and the attendant bonus. In fact, he might do well to make the job seem much harder than it really was. He could fabricate any kind of tale about daring burglaries or skullduggery. "One last question: Why do you want it?"

Elana waited a moment while the barmaid returned with her ale. She took a small sip, watching Jack over the top of the mug. She deliberately set down the mug and licked her lips. "I collect old books," she said. "That is reason enough."

Jack laughed. Somehow he doubted that Elana collected many books, but she was entitled to maintain her fictions. "It will do for me, my lady," he replied. "Now, for matters of pay—"

Elana forestalled him by reaching into her leather coat and producing a small pouch. She dropped it on the table in front of him with a reassuring jingle of coinage.

"You'll find twenty five-crown pieces in the purse," she said. "Call it an advance. I now consider you to be in my employ. You'll receive the balance when you produce the book or convince me that it cannot be found in Raven's Bluff. If that is the case, I expect you to spend at least a month searching diligently for it—and I'll know whether you really look for it or not."

"My lady, I normally require half the promised fee in advance—"

"Of course, dear Jack. And since you are so generously foregoing that requirement, I am prepared to offer the bonus of which we spoke. Generosity engenders generosity, true?"

Jack smiled. He found himself wondering whether Elana had another gold crown to her name or not, but for the moment he didn't care. If the job was as easy as he suspected, a hundred crowns was sufficient reward . . . especially with the bonus included. "All who know me speak well of my generous nature, my lady. Of course I shall accept the arrangement you propose. Now, how shall I get in touch with you to report any progress I make?"

"I shall contact you when it becomes necessary," Elana said.

"But it may be a day, or two days, or a week, or a month," Jack said. "I hardly know how long it will take me to find your book until I complete the task! And, to be perfectly honest, I can be very difficult to find sometimes."

"I found you once. I can find you again when I need to." Elana took another deep draught from her ale and stood up. She drew the back of her hand across her mouth and donned a pair of gloves, tugging them over her fair hands. "I am afraid I have other business to attend to. I will find you when I need to speak to you, dear Jack. In the meantime . . . please exercise some discretion. I do not want it widely known that I seek the Sarkonagael."

"I understand perfectly," Jack said. Belatedly, he rose also. "I am the very soul of discretion. You need not have any fears on that account."

"Good," said Elana. She drew up her hood and stalked away, graceful and purposeful all at the same time. Jack watched her go, bemused. He sensed that he was out of his depth in dealing with her, but at the same time, the Kuldath expedition had not gone as well as he would have liked, and he could always use the money. Still, something about her unsettled him. Working for competent and dangerous people was one thing, but Elana clearly regarded him as nothing but a temporary associate of no real account. She'd simply played with him the whole time, a cat toying with a mouse.

"I am *not* a mouse," Jack laughed. He sat back down again and sipped at his ale, watching the crowd swirl and shout. He waited another hour and then went back to his room in Burnt Gables. A ruby, a purse of gold, a beautiful lady, and a mysterious mission, he mused. Perhaps this was not a bad night after all.



The next morning, Jack visited the disreputable sage Ontrodes, who kept his house in a particularly poor part of Shadystreets. Whistling a merry tune and dressed splendidly in soft dove gray and midnight blue, Jack pranced through the streets of the city, greeting all who passed by with mirthful grins and generous bows. The steady drizzle affected his spirits not in the least, and the mire of Shadystreet's muddy lanes and deceptively deep puddles did not slow his steps at all. He had a mystery to solve and a lady whose favors he sought. What more could he ask of a morning?

The home of Ontrodes had once been a small sage's

tower, a cottage with a round stone turret nobly looking out over the Fire River across a green marsh filled with waterfowl. That had been close to a hundred years past. In the thirty-odd (or was it forty-odd?) years that the place had been in the care of Ontrodes, ramshackle wharves and rotten old warehouses had fenced in the riverbank, squalid hovels had encroached upon the sage's fields, and the tower proper had almost fallen over, leaving nothing but a tottering edifice perched precariously on the edge of utter ruin.

Jack rather liked the place; he thought it unassuming. He stepped up to the cottage door and thumped it soundly, careful not to knock *too* vigorously lest he precipitate the final demise of Ontrodes's home. "Ontrodes! My friend! Awaken, and provide me the benefit of your advice!"

A long silence followed, then a clatter and a horrible sort of honking sound that might have been the old man clearing his throat. "Advice?" coughed the old man from inside. "I advise you to go soak your head in a piss-pot! I know your insolent voice, Jack Ravenwild, and you'll gain more wisdom in that fashion than you'll ever gain from me! Now, go away, and don't even think of returning until at least an hour past noon!"

"Have you been in your cups again, then, Ontrodes?"

"It is no concern of yours, Jack! Leave me be!" A rattle and a thump sounded from inside. The sage coughed loudly and mumbled more curses under his breath.

"Why, I am deeply concerned by the slightest illness in any of my friends," Jack replied. "My solicitous and compassionate nature demands no less. If you suffer from too much indulgence, perhaps I can find some way to improve your spirits."

"That is the very problem!" Ontrodes suddenly appeared at the door, yanking it open with a grunt of

effort. He stood there blinking, a short, paunchy man dressed in a wine-stained robe. White tousled hair crowned his red face, and a haze of untrimmed whiskers clung to his round jowls. "I sell my learning for the benefit of all, yet vagrants like you come and pick through my knowledge like curs sniffing through a heap of offal, refusing even the courtesy of a proper payment. Thus am I compelled to buy cheap, miserable Ravenaar wine instead of some more noble brew from Procampur or perhaps even fair Chessenta. And I awaken with ten angry goblins holding a war dance inside my head! Now, unless you have good gold in your pockets and some cure for my screaming skull-ache, leave at once!"

Jack bowed deeply and offered his most earnest smile. He dropped a small purse with a handful of Elana's gold pieces in Ontrodes's hand, and then he drew from his blue doublet a small silver flask. "Gold for your wisdom, and a fine elven brandy for your skull. The sublime bouquet is guaranteed to waft your perception to noble heights and charge your peerless mind with grand designs and astonishing visions." He laughed aloud. "If nothing else, I have improved your *spirits*, haven't I?"

The old sage slapped one meaty hand to his face and stood there for a moment as if to keep his brains from fleeing his head outright. Then he looked Jack in the eye. "I can see that you have no mercy in your heart. You might as well come in, then."

"Excellent!" Jack replied. He could feel a successful conclusion to his mission no farther away than a cheap brandy-flask and a terse, to-the-point discussion.