



THE
WIZARDS
FROSTFELL
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CHAPTER ONE

The Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR)
The woods north of the Lake of Mists
in the lands of the Khassidi

Dim dusklight bled from the boughs, and Amira ran through a cloud. The mists grew thicker with each step, dampening her skin and hair. It could mean only one thing: They were nearing the lake.

“Run, Jalan! Don’t look back!”

Amira ran behind her son, and she had to strain to keep up with him. Over their pounding feet and her heavy breathing, she could hear the men behind them, and they sounded as if they were getting closer. She didn’t know if Walloch had brought the hounds. The slaver sliced the vocal cords of his hounds so that they could never bark above a hoarse whisper. Not that he’d really need the dogs. She had no idea where she was going. She and Jalan were running blind. They didn’t know this land, and their enemies did.

Jalan stumbled, almost falling. Amira pulled

him to his feet and urged him forward.

“Need . . . rest,” said Jalan.

“Not here. Move. Up!”

Jalan pounded on, heedless of the noise he made, and Amira followed. If Walloch had brought the hounds, hiding would do no good. Their one hope was to reach the lake. If they could only make it there, they could hide themselves in the mists and lose their scent in the water.

The trees and underbrush clustered thick before them. The ground became rocky and uneven, and they found themselves running downhill. Amira and Jalan stumbled over roots, branches, and thick ferns, but they kept going.

“*Ut ish vet! Ut!*”

The voice came from behind them—much too close. During the years Amira spent fighting the Tuigan Horde, she picked up a bit of the speech—enough to understand the meaning behind the words. *Ut ish vet. Ut.* There she is! There!

Amira didn’t slow. She swore she could smell the heady scent of the lake, but the mists were growing thicker with the onset of evening, and she could see nothing but more trees and brush in every direction. She dared a look back. Three figures, no more than blurry forms in the mist, ran on the trail behind them—and they were gaining. She could hear more not far away.

The ground fell away before Jalan’s feet, and he slid down the slope. Amira half-ran and half-fell behind him. She hit the brushy ground beside Jalan, the sudden stop rattling her teeth, but she pushed the pain away and got them both to their feet. She grabbed Jalan’s shoulders, leaned in close, and said, “Keep going! Make for the water.”

Jalan turned to look at her, his eyes wide with fear. He looked far younger than his fourteen years. “Mother, no! I—”

She shoved him and said, “Go!” as she choked back tears. “Lose them in the water. I’ll find you.”

“You promise?”

The earnestness and fear in her son’s gaze almost undid

her resolve, but she clenched her jaw, took a deep breath, and pushed him onward. “Go, Jalan!”

She turned to fight, the words of an incantation already forming on her lips. Behind her, she heard Jalan sobbing, then the sound of the boy blundering off through the forest. Amira raked her sleeve over her eyes to clear the tears, then her hands began the intricate patterns to complete her last spell, the one she’d been saving, hoping she wouldn’t have to use it. She was Jalan’s last hope. Amira had never been much of a praying person, but as the sounds of Jalan fleeing faded behind her, she sent out a silent plea—*Let Jalan get away. My life for his.*

One of Walloch’s Tuigan mercenaries came to the slope and began his sliding descent. He saw Amira about halfway down. He hit the ground running, a wild light of triumph in his eyes, and his body slammed into hers full-force.

Amira hit the ground. The full weight of the Tuigan came down on top of her, forcing the breath from her lungs. Bright orbs of light danced before her eyes, and she fought to stay conscious.

The Tuigan grabbed her right forearm in a grip that she thought might crack stone, then seized her collar and hauled her back to her feet. Two other men—another Tuigan with a naked blade in his hand and one whose short, muscular body and long horsetail of hair made him a Nar—descended the slope, laughing at the sight of Amira subdued. The Nar carried a coiled length of rope in one hand and a dagger in the other.

Her captor shook her hard and held her up, displaying his prize. Amira’s vision swam. She swallowed the pain, took a deep breath and uttered the last syllable of the spell, grabbing the man under the chin as she did so. She dug her nails into skin, and emerald flame burst from her hand. The man screamed and thrashed away, but too late—the green fire had taken root and blossomed in his greasy hair. He slapped at it, and the flames caught in his sleeves. In moments, brilliant green fire wreathed his upper body, lighting the surrounding mists in eerie ghostlight.

“Down!” said the Nar. “Get him down!” He made a feeble swipe at the burning man’s legs with his rope, but he seemed hesitant to get too close.

His efforts brought him a few paces closer to Amira. She lunged and planted her burning fist in his gut—not hard, just enough to get the flames into his shirt. He shoved Amira away. She hit the ground hard, biting her cheek. Emerald flames licked their way up his shirt, and the man screamed, but he had the good sense to drop and roll in the thick brush.

Amira spat blood and planted her hands to push herself up. Her left came down on the thick shaft of an autumn-dry branch. She squeezed, and the green flames bit into the wood, caught, and flared to life. She grabbed the other end with her free hand, pushed herself to her feet, and turned.

“Enough of this!”

Amira looked up. A man stood at the top of the slope. He was taller than the Tuigan and the Nar, but not nearly so thick. In the last of the day’s light, Amira recognized him. Though she couldn’t make out the details, his outline against the sky was all too familiar. He wore a knee-length Tuigan shirt called a *kalat*, but his ornate cloak and long hair held back by a scarf round his forehead betrayed an origin far to the west. He held a rapier in his hand. It was Walloch, the slave lord who’d held her captive for days.

He aimed the tip at the burning man and said, “*Silo’at!*”

A funnel of frost hissed out of the blade, enveloping the man caught in the green flames and extinguishing them. The man fell only a few paces from Amira. Down in the hollow it was too dark to make out details, but she could smell the sickly sweet scent of scalded flesh and the sulfuric stench of burned hair. He was breathing in quick, shallow gasps.

“Stay right where you are, *bukhla*,” said Walloch. Amira didn’t know what *bukhla* meant—it wasn’t a Tuigan word—but the slaver’s fondness for it said enough. He made his way down the slope, keeping the tip of his blade pointed at Amira.

The other two men kept their distance, their gaze alternating between Amira and their boss. The Nar's shirt was still smoking, but he didn't seem injured.

Walloch stomped to a halt at the bottom of the slope. "Where is the boy?"

Amira glared at him.

The Nar spoke up. "We saw only the woman. Chiet grabbed her, and she burned him. We never saw the boy."

The green flames in Amira's fist were growing smaller with each breath, though the fire on the end of the branch she held still crackled with life.

"Put the stick down," said Walloch.

Amira raised it over her head, ready to strike.

"You really think a torch is going to help you against me?"

Amira glanced at the two mercenaries. They took a cautious step back and looked to their boss.

"Enough of this," said Walloch.

Amira crouched and prepared to spring, her eye fixed on Walloch's blade.

The slaver took one step forward and brought his other hand around in an almost lazy pitch.

Something sharp struck Amira on the forehead, pain flared in her skull, and every shadow in the wood seemed to flood her vision. A roaring filled her ears, then she felt herself being hauled to her feet. The shadows fled, and she found herself looking into Walloch's furious gaze. Her limp hands were empty, and the last of the green flames were dying in the brush at her feet.

"Stupid *bukhla*. You go up against another wizard, all you think about is magic, and I take you down with a rock." He spat in her face and threw her down.

She fell on her side. Her head bounced against the carpet of sodden autumn leaves and mud, and pain lanced through her skull. Light flared in her eyes. She had to fight the pain to stay conscious. Wet warmth pulsed from the point of the pain on her forehead, and when she tried to rise, a mat of leaves and dirt clung to her face.

Blood, she thought. It's blood. That bastard hit me with a rock, and I'm bleeding like a hung pheasant. She cursed her own foolishness.

She made it halfway to her feet, and Walloch's boot struck her in the side. Her breath left her body, and she heard ribs crack.

"Stay down! You get up when I tell you. Not before."

Amira tried to draw a breath into her lungs, but she felt as if her entire upper body were stiff and brittle as cracked wood. Something struck her in the back, hard. Darkness filled her vision—

She was drowning. Water filled her nose, choking her, and she coughed and coughed until she found herself vomiting a pace away from two worn leather boots.

"Careful, boss. You don't want to kill her."

"Those pale-skinned bastards'll kill us all if we don't get that boy back." It was Walloch, nearby and spitting mad.

"No need to hurt good merchandise. That's all."

"If I want your opinion, I'll give it to you. Now get her up."

Amira felt strong hands hauling her to her feet. She opened her eyes and had to squint against the burning light. More men had come, and several held torches. The thick, oily light struggled to burn a halo through the dense mists, but the blow to her forehead seemed to have cracked more than skin, and even the feeble light stabbed into her like hot needles. It was hard to tell for sure, struggling to see through the pain and uncertain light, but Amira thought she saw at least four more newcomers, and one of them held the leashes to two hounds.

"Hey!" More water splashed into her face.

She turned to face Walloch. He still held his sword in one hand, but the other held a dripping waterskin.

"Look at me, *bukhla*. Look at me and listen, or I'll be the last thing you see."

Amira looked. Blood dripped into her right eye, but the men to each side held her arms fast, and she couldn't wipe it away.

“Where’s your boy?” asked Walloch.

“He ran.”

“He ran?” Walloch looked to his men and laughed, but it held no mirth. “You hear that? He ran!” He turned back to Amira. “I know he ran, you stupid *bukhla*. Where’d he go?”

Amira kept looking at him, feeling the blood trickle off her forehead and down her cheek. She said nothing.

“That’s how it’s going to be, eh?” Walloch shrugged and turned to his men, pointing at the one holding the hounds and two others. “You three, after him. Don’t let the dogs get to him. I want the boy back unharmed.”

The men, taking two of the torches, bounded off with the dogs. Amira watched them go, following Jalan’s trail. Maybe if he’d listened, maybe if he’d run and kept running, he’d have made it to the lake and then . . . what? Amira’s heart sank.

“My hounds’ll find him,” said Walloch. He was looking at Amira, but his voice was loud enough for everyone to hear. “Damned whelp’s probably not far. All he’s done for days is whine for his mother.”

Amira tested the hold of the man on her right. Her feeble attempt only made him squeeze harder, and she let out a small hiss through clenched teeth.

“He hurting you?” asked Walloch.

“Yes.”

“Good. You hold still, or I’ll let him hurt you more.”

Amira stared daggers at the slaver, but he merely smiled and turned away. At the slaver’s orders, the two men sat Amira down and bound her wrists in front of her with a strap of raw leather. They pulled it tight until Amira couldn’t help but cry out at the pain. Seeing her discomfort, Walloch walked back over and drenched the leather with water from his waterskin.

“Feel better?”

“No.”

“It’ll feel a lot worse when that leather dries and tightens even more. If your boy comes back soon, I might cut the straps.”

Walloch turned away and began to pace the area, restless as a hound that scents the fox but is kept at his master's leash. When he walked past the steaming body of the Tuigan that Amira had burned, the man let out a faint whimper.

"You still alive, eh? Eh?" Walloch nudged the man with his boot, and the Tuigan cried out. The slaver shook his head, said, "Nothing for you, then," and shoved the tip of his rapier through the man's temple. The charred form jerked once and lay still.

Two of the other men standing nearby were also Tuigan, and they scowled. Walloch cleaned the tip of his blade in the dry leaves, saw them watching, and said, "Nothing for him. I'm a wizard, not a cleric. You? No? Then turn your eye somewhere else. His gold can go to the rest of you now."

The Nar and the other men smiled at this, but the Tuigan's scowls only deepened.

Amira wiped at the blood that still trickled down her scalp. Leaves and dirt were matted in her hair in a grisly mud. "You know what I am." She looked at Walloch but raised her voice for everyone to hear. "Others will come for me. Better if you let us go now. I might try to forget where I left you when the war wizards come for justice."

Walloch laughed. "Come for justice, eh? That's nice. Is that what those three fops I killed had come for? Didn't look like it to me, and you didn't seem happy to see them." He looked to his men and spread his arms, his silver rapier still in his hand. "Let them come!" He spat on the ground. "That for your war wizards! Me and my men'll make belts from their hides."

"You caught them by surprise," said Amira. "That won't happen again."

Walloch shrugged. "And they won't catch me by surprise. Let them come. When our new friends come for your boy, our reward'll be far more than your pretty-robed war wizards can handle."



The evening wore on, and full dark fell. It was still early autumn, but winter often came early to the Wastes, and when a slight breeze set to rattling the boughs, Amira began shivering. Her hands pulsed from the tightness of her bonds, and she feared that before long she would no longer be able to feel her fingers. Not that it mattered. Her spells were spent.

Walloch kept up his pacing, restless as a caged lion. The Tuigan kept their blades handy and their backs to the torches so as not to ruin their night vision. The Lake of Mists had a reputation among the locals, and even the hardiest Tuigan was never quite comfortable around such a large body of water. They were people of the open steppe, and any water that could not be crossed on horseback was water to be wary of. The Nar and the other few thugs huddled near the torches and whispered among themselves while one kept a tight grip on Amira.

“Where are those damned skulkers?” said Walloch.

“If the boy made it to the water, the hounds might’ve lost his scent,” said the Nar.

The flickering hope in Amira brightened at this. The men and hounds had been gone a long time. Amira whispered another prayer, “Azuth, keep him safe. Please. Mystra, watch over him. And Kelemvor, if you’re listening, give me a chance. At the least, let me die well. And if you want me to take any of these bastards with me, I am your humble servant.”

“What are you muttering about?” Walloch had come back over, and the tip of his sword hovered not far from her face. “I see even a flicker of green fire and I’ll do more than hit you with a rock this time.”

The man guarding her took a step back.

“How much longer do we wait?” asked the Nar. “Those three know the way back to camp. Why must we sit out here freezing when we could be back at the fires?”

“We aren’t leaving until I have that boy,” said Walloch. He looked down at Amira, and the torchlight put an evil gleam in his eye. “But my friend here has a point. I’m tired of waiting. You”—he motioned to another of his men—“help him hold her

up again. You others stand close with those torches.”

The man seemed hesitant to get too close. “What about the green fire?” he asked.

“You think she’d be sitting quiet if she had any spells left?”

“Maybe she’s trying to trick us,” said the other.

Walloch turned the point of his sword in the man’s direction. “You worry about me. Pick her up, damn you.”

The men did so, but the man on Amira’s right was trembling.

A sudden rustling shook the branches overhead, and a cry broke through the fog.

“What’s that?” said the man on Amira’s left, and his grip loosened.

“Just a raven,” said Walloch. “The lake is thick with ’em this time of year. Now be quiet and hold her good.”

The man’s grip tightened. The raven cawed again.

Walloch stepped to within a pace of her and put the tip of his rapier beneath her left breast. “You’re lucky he wants the boy unharmed, or I’d lop off a few of his fingers to show you what happens to those who cross me. But you? My buyer says whoever else I snag is mine to keep. I might sell you. Pretty western wench like you ought to sell well. Or I might keep you and teach you some manners. Eh, *bukhla*?”

Walloch chuckled and shook his head. “I’m through being nice,” he said, then raised his voice to a booming shout. “Boy! Hey, boy! I got your mother! Come back now, boy! Come back and I promise you no harm will come to your mother! You have the word of Walloch! You keep hiding and . . . well, I may have to start cutting!” The slaver brought his waterskin to his lips, took a long drink, then leered at Amira. “Or maybe something else, eh?”

Amira wanted to spit in his face, but her mouth was dry as dust, and cold and weak as she was, she was half afraid it might come out a whimper. She clenched her jaw and looked away.

“Come back, boy!” Walloch shouted. “Come back and we go to the fires for some food, eh? I give you to twenty, then I

start on your mother!" He took a deep breath. "One!"

The raven cawed again, and Amira heard branches rustling overhead.

"Two!"

The raven cried out twice. Walloch looked up. "Damned bird," he muttered, then—"Three!"

The count continued, Walloch pausing for a few breaths between each shout and drinking from the skin a few times. The raven continued its cawing, but Walloch ignored it.

"Eleven! Come on, boy! Hurry! Your time's half gone!"

Still the raven cawed.

"Twelve!" Walloch swallowed the last of his water, then looked to Amira. "Little bastard does know how to count, doesn't he?"

The men holding her laughed, and the raven called again. The bird seemed to be making the Nar and Tuigan nervous.

"Thirteen! Thirteen, damn it all!"

Amira heard a faint rustling. At first she thought it was only the raven moving around again, but the sound grew stronger—and it was coming from the direction in which Jalan and his pursuers had disappeared. The flickering hope in Amira sputtered and died.

"Fourtee-ee-eeen!" Walloch roared.

The sound of someone running through the thick brush grew louder.

Walloch nudged Amira with the tip of his blade. "Seems he can count after all. Maybe we forget the cutting and get to the other, eh? Teach you a lesson. Maybe I let the others have turns and make your son watch."

The sounds of running feet came very loud now, perhaps amplified by the thick mist. Sick to her stomach, Amira forced her blood-caked eye open and watched. The raven cawed and cawed and cawed.

A figure emerged from the mist.

It wasn't Jalan. It was one of the men Walloch sent out—the one who'd held the hounds. His companion was nowhere to be seen, nor were the hounds.

“Iquai?” said Walloch, seemingly more confused than angry. “Where’s my dogs, you worthless—?”

The man fell to his knees, one hand gripping his side and one hand holding on to the Nar for support. Even from several paces away, Amira caught the stench. The man had soiled himself. He twisted to one side, turning toward the torchlight, and Amira saw blood leaking between his fingers at his side. The Nar pushed the man away and he fell. An arrow—wood so pale as to be almost white but with fletching black as a raven’s wing—stood out from the man’s back. The man tried to speak but could not gather his breath.

“What—?” Walloch’s jaw opened, shut, then opened again. He seemed more stunned than angry.

The breeze that had been whispering out of the north suddenly picked up to a full wind, setting the branches to rustling and stretching the mists into thin tendrils that fled like ghosts between the trunks. A pale, horned moon peeked through autumn-bare branches and bathed the little hollow in silver light.

A dozen paces or so behind the dying Iquai, standing just outside the shadow of a large tree, Amira saw two shapes. One was a man, tall and thick with muscle, his black hair corded in a long braid. He held a bow in one hand—not the short bows of the Tuigan, suited for loosing from a saddle, but a long horn bow at least a pace and a half in length. Standing to his left was another figure, his hair white as snow, bits of pale skin peeking out amid sinuous tattoos, but he was dressed like his companion in leathers and animal skins. The pale-haired one held a sword in one hand, single-edged and slightly curved near the end. Overhead, the cawing of the raven ceased.

“Release the woman,” said the man. His voice held no anger, no threat. It was simply cold and unyielding.

“And who are you?” asked Walloch.

The newcomers said nothing.

“You feathered my man here, eh?” said Walloch, motioning with his sword at Iquai.

Still the newcomers stood silent.

“You an elf?” asked one of the Tuigan, motioning to the figure behind the large newcomer.

The pale-haired newcomer didn’t look at the man who’d spoken. He kept his gaze on Walloch. Amira studied him more closely. His hair flowing in the wind seemed gossamer fine. In the merging light from the moon and torches, Amira could see ears that curved upward into sharp points. An elf. He glanced at her, for an instant only, but in that moment the torchlight caught in his eyes and they shone like embers. After first entering the Wastes so many tendays ago, she and her companions had camped on the open steppe. Wolves had come in close to the camp one night. The Cormyreans and their guides had kept the fires going, and the light from the flames reflected back from the wolves’ eyes—exactly as they did from the elf’s now.

“That’s a *vildonrat*,” said the other Tuigan. His eyes were wide, and even in the dim light, Amira could see his knees were trembling.

“Vildonrat?” Walloch smirked. “What’s that? That mean ‘pale elf’ or something?”

“Your Tuigan sellswords have thick tongues,” said the tall man. “He is Vil Adanrath.”

The Tuigan tensed and exchanged nervous glances. One lowered his blade and took a step back.

“Vil Adanrath?” said Walloch. “What’s that mean, eh?”

“It means you’d be wise not to anger him.”

“Piss on you and the vildonrat,” said Walloch. “Off with you both, or you’ll join the wench. I could get a good price for you, big one. You’d make a fine pit fighter, I think.”

A crackle of leaves and branches, and Walloch turned to see all but one of his Tuigan men running away. He now stood with only one Tuigan, the Nar, and the two men holding Amira.

“Jodai, what’s the meaning of this? Your men just lost their promised gold!”

The remaining Tuigan swallowed hard, his gaze still fixed on the elf. “Keep your gold, Walloch. We’ll keep our blood. Only fools anger the vildonrat.” The Tuigan sheathed

his blade, bowed to the pale elf, then turned and fled after his fellows.

“Damned cowards!” Walloch called after them. “Keep your blood! Ha! Forget your gold, you bastards! You’ll lose your blood, too, next time I see you!”

The two men holding Amira looked after the Tuigan, but the Nar kept his eyes on the newcomers.

“Go after them,” said the tall man. “Leave the woman and go. We’ll take care of your friend holding my arrow.”

“Piss on him!” said Walloch. “And you! You know who I am?”

“You’re a slaver. The caravan trails are thick with them this time of year.”

“I am Walloch! Battlemage and master of the arcane arts of Raumathar!”

The tall man raised his head and sniffed. “You smell like a slaver.”

Walloch stiffened, puffed out his chest, and took a step closer to Amira. He raised the point of his rapier toward her. “Maybe I kill her first, then you, eh? This is no ordinary blade, my friend. I pulled this from the corpse of a great wizard that died hundreds of years before your whore of a mother first sold herself to your father.”

The tall man glanced at Amira, then said, “Durja! *Aniq*, Durja!”

“Mingan! *Aniq*, Mingan!”

Amira jumped, for it was the pale elf who spoke, his voice both light and cold.

“What’s that, eh?” said Walloch, and Amira could hear fear and anger in the slaver’s voice. “What’s that you’re saying?”

Amira saw the tall man’s grip tighten on his bow. Walloch must have seen it, too, for his sword arm stiffened, aiming the point of his blade at them.

“Enough of this!” said Walloch. “*Sil—!*”

A black shadow struck the slaver’s arm. Amira heard the harsh shriek of a raven mingle with Walloch’s own shout of surprise. An instant later the man at her right gasped,

squeezed her arm so hard that he tore skin, then released her and fell. An arrow protruded from the juncture of his throat and shoulder. His heels hammered the earth as he jerked at the arrow, and he began to shriek.

“*Silo’at!*” said Walloch.

Amira heard a crackling hiss. She looked up in time to see a funnel of frost spew from Walloch’s blade and envelop the trees and brush—but the tall man and the elf were nowhere to be seen.

“Get him!” Walloch roared. “Kill that son of a whore! Now! Now!”

“In the dark?” said the Nar. “You’re mad!”

Snarling, Walloch pointed his sword at a large tree. “*Kelenta!*” he shouted, and a sparkling orb, no larger than a pebble, shot out from the tip of his sword. It tumbled and grew in size as it flew, seeming to feed on the air itself until it grew to a huge ball of fire that struck the tree full force. The autumn-bare branches exploded, and the entire tree became a great torch, lighting up the night. Amira flinched and looked away. The blinding light lanced right through her skull.

“There!” said Walloch. “Now get them!”

Something whipped past Amira’s face, so close that she felt the wind of its passage, then the man holding her left arm screamed and released her. Amira sat down hard and found herself looking at the man, who shrieked as he yanked at the pale shaft of an arrow protruding from between his ribs. Amira was looking right at him when the second arrow struck him just below the chin.

Amira’s numbness snapped, and she lunged for the dagger at the dead man’s belt even as he hit the ground.

“Kill her!” Walloch shouted.

The bonds were so tight that she could barely feel her fingers, but she forced them to grasp the hilt of the dagger and pull it free. She turned to see the dark silhouette of the Nar bearing down upon her. Pale moonlight flickered down the length of his blade. He pulled back to strike—

A gray shadow, swift and silent, hit the man, and both

went down. Amira stared dumbfounded. A wolf had taken the Nar's sword arm in its jaws. The wolf shook its head, rending and tearing flesh, its growling so low that Amira felt it in her gut more than she heard it.

The Nar screamed and dropped his sword. His free hand fumbled for the long knife belted at his waist.

Walloch charged, heading straight for the wolf with his sword held high.

"Mingan!" called a voice. "Mingan, *ikwe! Ikwe!*"

The wolf released the Nar, turned, and fled into the safety of the woods.

The tall man stood at the top of the gully, drawn bow in hand, the burning tree a great bonfire at his back. Amira had to squint against the bright light, but she could just make out the pale elf coming from behind the cover of the brush a few paces behind the bowman.

"Kill that *bukhla!*" Walloch pointed at Amira while facing the two assailants. "I'll finish these two!"

The Nar's sword arm was a mangled wreck, and a steady stream of blood dripped from the tips of his fingers, but his other hand held his knife steady. Three steps forward and he swiped at Amira, aiming high for her throat. Still on her knees and bound as she was, Amira's balance was limited. She fell back, and the tip of the Nar's knife just kissed the tip of her nose. She followed through with her fall, rolling, and brought both feet around. Hard as she could, she brought both heels up into the fork of the Nar's legs. He cried out, his eyes squeezed shut—

An arrow struck him in the side of the neck. It went all the way through, one side all pale wood and black feathers, the other a solid wetness that gleamed black. The man fell on his back, and he began to buck and kick and pound the earth with his fists. Amira could hear him trying to scream, but it came out a bubbling gurgle, then a cough that sprayed a fine mist of blood over his torso.

Amira forced herself to look away. Her head swam, and for a moment all went dark, but she took a deep breath, and the bright glow of the dying tree returned. No more

than five paces away, Walloch stood, his sword pointing at the newcomers—the bowman still standing against the light as he reached for another arrow; the elf passing him and descending the slope—while Walloch’s other hand clutched at something hanging round his neck. Over the roar of the flames and the thrashings of the dying men, Amira could hear the slaver muttering an incantation.

The bowman drew feather to cheek and loosed—Walloch screamed, “*Thranek thritis!*”—the arrow fell, straight and true, but the slaver didn’t move, didn’t even flinch. The point struck Walloch in the forehead, she heard a sharp *clack!* like the snapping of bone, and the arrow bounced away.

Walloch laughed. “My turn—*Silo’at!*”

Frost swirled out from the slaver’s sword. The pale elf had to dive and roll to avoid being struck. Another arrow bounced harmlessly off Walloch.

Amira gripped the dagger and pushed herself to her feet. Agony exploded in her head; she could feel tendrils of pain running down her spine and into her limbs. Darkness threatened to crush her again, but she breathed deep and pushed it back. She knew the spell the slaver was using. The bowman could loose his entire quiver to no effect, but the magic would do little against her steel if she could get close enough.

“*Silo’at!*”

Amira looked up to see the elf diving out of harm’s way again. Walloch’s spells were pushing him away. The tall man had dropped the bow and was holding something long in one hand—with the fire so bright behind him, Amira couldn’t tell if it was sword or club.

“Let’s try something else, eh?” said Walloch. He wove his free hand in an intricate pattern, then swept his sword at his feet, almost as if he were slicing underbrush. “*Sobirith remma!*”

Flame roared to life before the slaver and spread to each side of him as if fed by oil, forming a wall of fire between him and his foes.

Amira took a step forward, then another. Careful as she was, it felt as if each step hammered a spike into her skull.

She clenched her jaw, struggling to breathe through her nose, but still a hoarse cry escaped her throat.

Walloch turned to her. Backlit as he was by the fire, she could not read his features. Desperate, she lunged, but he caught her bound wrists almost lazily and turned the blade aside. He brought his sword around and planted the point in her stomach.

“Seems I won’t have time for you after all, *beluglit*, but know this”—he leaned in close over his sword—“I’m still going to find your son.”

He thrust. Amira cried out. Through her pain, through the roar of the flames, she heard the blade puncture the muscles over her stomach.

Then Walloch whispered, “*Silo’at.*”