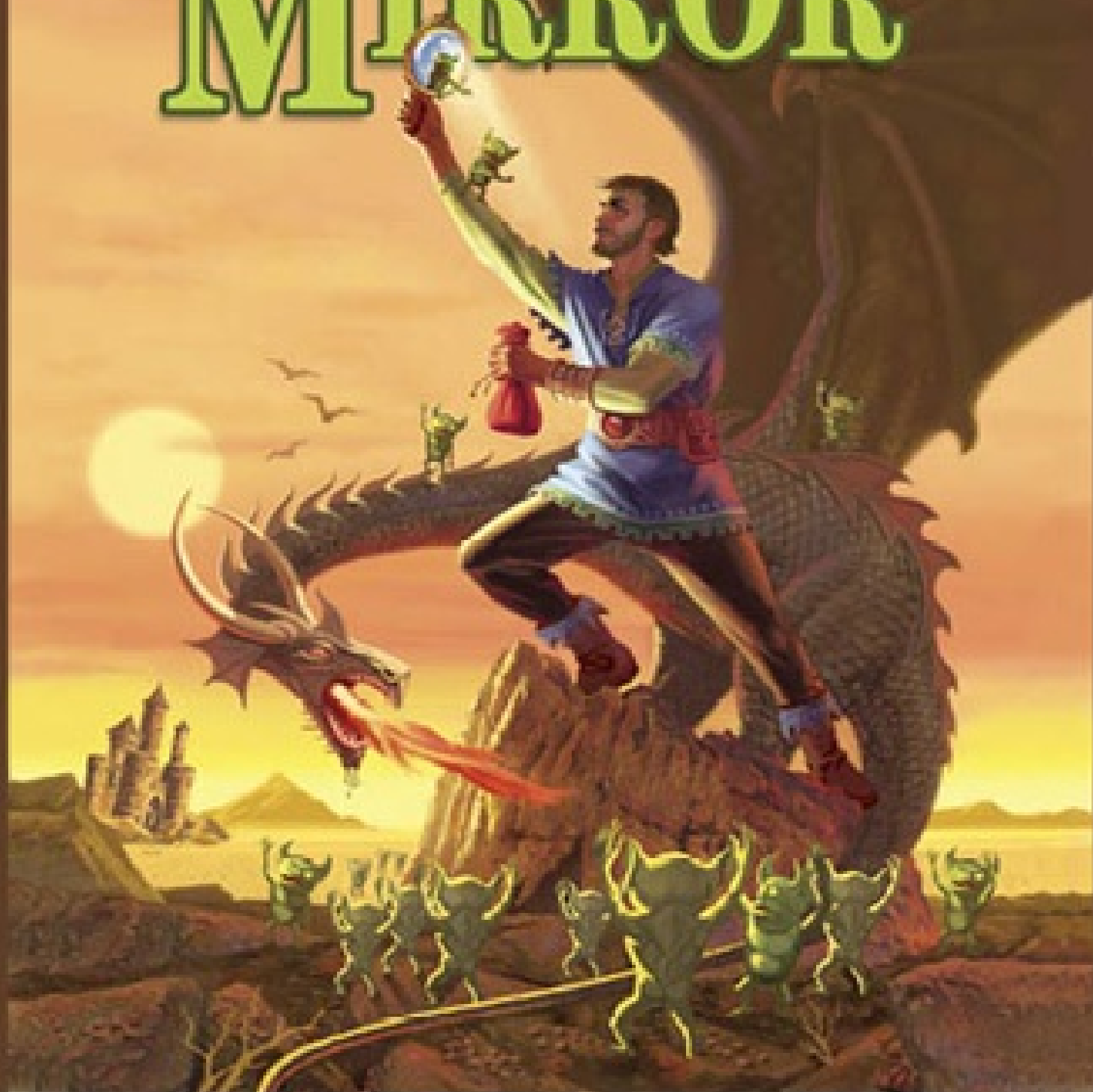


LAWRENCE WATT-EVANS

THE
**SPRIGGAN
MIRROR**



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CHAPTER ONE

Gresh was yawning, still not entirely awake, when the bell jingled and the just-unlocked door of his shop opened behind him, letting in a swirl of cold air. He blinked once more, flexed his shoulders, and started to turn.

“Don’t you *ever* sleep?” his eldest sister’s voice demanded.

Gresh finished his yawn, finished his stretching, finished his turn, and then replied, “Good morning Dina. I slept well, thank you—and you?”

“You certainly didn’t sleep very *much*,” Dina retorted. She was standing in the doorway, hands on her hips, glaring at him. She wore her wizard’s robe, which generally meant she was on business. “I was trying to reach you until at least an hour after midnight. Twilfa didn’t know where you were, but wherever you were, you were still awake...”

“And having a lovely time, I might add,” he interrupted. He smiled broadly at her, then glanced at the shop curtains he had been about to open and decided not to move them just yet. Dina’s presence in her robe often implied a commission, and that might well mean traveling. If it required an immediate departure he would just need to close up shop again. He leaned back against his counter.

“I’m sure you were,” Dina said. “Are you planning to see her again, whoever she was, or just add her to the long list of pleasant memories?”

“Well, I don’t think you’ll be acquiring a new sister-in-law in the immediate future—but you didn’t come here to inquire about my love life, Dina. I take it you were trying to use the Spell of Invaded Dreams to contact me last night?”

“Yes, of course.”

“And it always leaves you in a foul temper when a spell doesn’t work, even if it’s not your fault. I’ll apologize for the inconvenience. What was it you wanted to tell me?”

“I need the blood of an unborn child,” Dina replied. “I *thought* I needed it urgently, since the spell was already started when I discovered I’d run out, but it seems to have dissipated safely after all, since I couldn’t *find* you to get more.”

“You didn’t *check* beforehand?” Gresh asked, shocked. “You didn’t make sure you had all the ingredients ready? *Gods*, Dina...!”

“I checked,” she protested. “Of course I checked! I had one vial left.” She held up two fingers, perhaps an inch and a half apart, indicating the size of the vial in question. “Then a spriggan spilled it on the cat.”

“Oh.” Gresh grimaced as he pushed himself upright and began fishing in his belt-purse for something. “My sympathies. Spriggans *do* get into everything, don’t they?”

“Yes, they do. The little monsters are attracted by magic, you know—especially wizardry. Locks and spells can’t keep them out. I *hate* the stupid things!”

“I, for one, don’t blame you a bit,” Gresh said, pulling out the key he had sought. “They’re a nuisance, no doubt about it.” He turned to look at the magically-sealed iron door of the vault room that young Twilfa could not open unassisted. “How much did you need? And how were you planning to pay?” Then he paused and looked at Dina. “Blood of an unborn child? Was that for the Greater Spell of Transmutation?”

“Yes. Not that it’s any of your business.” She stepped into the shop, pushing the door partly closed behind her, then crossed her arms over her chest.

“You’re *sure* it dissipated safely? Isn’t that a high-order spell?”

“Of course it is,” she said, marching forward. “You let me worry about it, Gresh. I’m just here for

the blood.”

“Yes, well, I have a reputation to maintain...”

“As a supplier of goods and ingredients, not as a confounded babysitter,” she said. “I’m ten years older than you and a master wizard; I can take care of myself.”

“I don’t want anyone thinking I sold you anything that wasn’t exactly as described,” Gresh protested. “If you turn yourself into a toad, then I don’t want a bunch of wizards whispering to each other that it happened because I sold you a bad batch of baby’s blood.”

“The blood was bad?” a new voice asked, worried, and brother and sister turned to see Twilfa, the youngest sister and Gresh’s assistant, emerging from the rear passageway with the freshly filled coal bucket. She set it on the hearth, then looked at Dina. “I thought you said a spriggan spilled it on the cat.”

“No, the blood was *not* bad,” Gresh said, with a hint of a growl.

“Is the cat all right?” Twilfa asked, as she transferred coal from the bucket to the grate.

“Is anyone...Are you open?” an unfamiliar voice called from the still partially open front door.

Gresh sighed. “Why don’t you two discuss it all while I see to my customer?” he asked, dropping the key back into his purse and heading for the door. “Come in, come in!” he called.

“I can’t open the vault!” Twilfa called after him. “I can’t open the explosive seal.”

“I’ll be right back,” Gresh told her, as he let in the tall, black-haired woman in a red dress. He did not recognize her, and he was quite sure he would not have forgotten a face like hers.

“The door was open, and I heard voices,” the new arrival said uncertainly. She spoke with an odd accent, one that struck Gresh as somehow old-fashioned.

“I was just preparing to open the shop, my dear,” Gresh said with a bow. “Do come in.” He stepped aside and ushered her into the center of the room.

She obeyed and stood on the lush Sardironese carpet, looking around curiously.

Gresh was aware that Dina and Twilfa were both standing by the iron vault, staring silently at the stranger, but he ignored them. “Now, what can I do for you?” he asked.

The stranger tore her gaze away from the endless shelves of boxes and jars and said, “We want to hire you.”

“*Hire* me?” Gresh smiled indulgently. “I’m afraid I’m not for hire, my lady. I sell wizards’ supplies. I don’t run errands.”

“I’m not a lady,” the stranger said. “I’m a witch. We were told that if we wanted something hard to find, something magical, something wizardly, then you were the man to see.”

Gresh considered her for a moment.

He had assumed she wasn’t a wizard, from her attitude toward him, toward his shop, and toward her own belt-knife; she did not wear her knife quite the way wizards wore their magic daggers, though Gresh could not have explained the difference coherently. Besides, he knew most of the wizards in Ethshar of the Rocks by sight, if not always by name, and he was sure he had never seen her before.

It hadn’t occurred to him that she might be some other sort of magician. From her appearance and slightly stilted pronunciation, he had assumed she was just another wealthy ninny, perhaps a prince from the Small Kingdoms, looking for something exotic to impress someone, or trying to hire adventurers for some foolish scheme.

But witches were rarely ninnies—and for that matter, rarely wealthy. They were also not ordinarily his customers, but perhaps this person had her reasons for coming here. He decided she could indeed be a witch, and telling the exact truth.

“Who is ‘we’?” he asked.

“My husband and I. Really, he’s the one who wants to hire you, but he’s busy with the baby, so I came instead.”

The *husband* was busy with the baby, so the *wife* was running his errands? The beautiful young witch who claimed to be a witch and whose slim figure showed no evidence of having recently borne a child? Gresh glanced at his sisters. He wanted to hear this explained, but he had his business to attend to. “I do not run errands,” he said.

“Fine,” the woman said calmly. “Then let me put it this way. My husband is a wizard, and he wants to buy a specific magical item from you.”

Gresh could hardly deny that that was exactly his line of business. “Could you wait here for a moment, please?” he said.

“Certainly.”

He turned and hurried to the vault door, where he fished out the key again, unlocked the lock, then pried a large black wax seal off with a thumbnail, being careful not to mar the rune etched into the wax. He set the seal aside, to be softened over a candle-flame and re-used later, and placed a glass bowl over it to keep it safe from stray fingers. If anyone else touched that seal, anyone but himself, would explode violently, and Gresh did not particularly want to risk burning down the shop because Twilfa got careless or a customer got curious.

“There,” he said, opening the vault. “Twilfa, find her blood for her, would you? I’ll help you in a moment. And afterward, I want you to find Tira.”

“Tira?” Twilfa looked at the woman in red, then back at her brother. “What do you want *her* for?”

Gresh glared at her silently for a moment, then turned back to his waiting customer without explaining. Twilfa ought to be able to figure it out for herself, and he did not care to say anything that the customer might overhear. An ordinary person wouldn’t have heard a whispered explanation at that distance, but a witch would—as Twilfa ought to know. Tira, another of their sisters, was a witch, and Twilfa had certainly had plenty of opportunity to observe just how keen Tira’s senses were. One witch could always tell another and could also evaluate the other witch’s honesty. Tira might be useful in assessing the customer in the red dress.

Twilfa threw one final curious glance at the stranger, then stepped into the vault, Dina close behind.

“Now,” Gresh said, returning to the front of the shop, “what was it your husband wanted to buy?”

“A mirror,” the witch said. “A very specific mirror, about this big.” She held out her hands in a rough circle perhaps five inches in diameter. “He last saw it in the Small Kingdoms, in the mountains near the border between Dwomor and Aigoa.”

“The Small Kingdoms.” That was more or less the far side of the World, and explained her accent.

“Yes. In or near Dwomor.”

“And is this mirror still there?”

“We don’t know.”

Gresh suppressed a sigh. “My dear, the Small Kingdoms are almost a hundred leagues from here and my time...”

“We have a flying carpet to take you there,” she interrupted. “And we can pay you well.”

Gresh blinked. “A flying carpet?” He glanced at the vault; Dina and Twilfa were out of sight behind the iron door.

“Yes.”

Flying carpets required high-order magic; not one wizard in twenty could produce one reliably. And a wizard who *had* one, assuming he had made it himself, could generally find most of the ingredients for his spells without assistance, rather than paying Gresh. Certainly finding a mirror should not be :

very difficult for such a wizard.

~~“What’s unique about this mirror?” he asked. “Why do you want me to find it for you?”~~

The self-proclaimed witch replied, “It’s where spriggans come from.”

Gresh considered that for a moment. On the face of it, it seemed preposterous—but then, a great deal of what wizards did was preposterous. She looked calm and sincere, and why in the World would anyone come to him with so absurd a story if it wasn’t true?

“Have a seat, my dear,” he said, gesturing to the maroon velvet chairs in one corner. “I’ll need to hear the whole story, but let me finish with this other customer first.”

CHAPTER TWO

Once Dina was safely on her way with a fresh bottle of blood, Gresh locked and re-sealed the vault, closed the front door, and settled on the other velvet chair. He watched as Twilfa slipped out the back, then turned to focus on his customer.

“Now, my dear, if you could explain to me what you know of this mirror, I will consider whether or not I can obtain it for you.”

“Thank you.” The woman nodded an acknowledgment. “My name is Karanissa of the Mountain. About four hundred and seventy years ago, in the course of my military service, I met a powerful wizard named Derithon the Mage, or Derithon of Helde. He was much older than I, but we thought each other to be good company, and before long I found myself living in his castle—a magical castle floating in a void outside the World entirely. Are you familiar with such things?”

“I’ve heard of them,” Gresh said cautiously. He was wondering now whether he was dealing with a witch or with a madwoman. Although nothing she had said was *impossible*, Gresh had never before met anyone other than wizards who claimed to have lived more than a century, and as he understood it, manufactured places outside the World were extremely scarce—not to mention notoriously dangerous to create.

“Well, Derry had made one, which could be reached through a Transporting Tapestry. We lived there happily for a time, but one day Derry was called away, leaving me in the castle, and he never returned. The tapestry leading out of the castle stopped working, stranding me there. I found out later that Derry had died just on the other side of the tapestry, altering the appearance of the room—you know how Transporting Tapestries work?”

“In theory,” Gresh said. He had heard them described, and of course he knew what ingredients went into the spell to make one, but had never personally used one. Anyone could simply step into the image on the tapestry and instantly find oneself in the actual place depicted, no matter how far away it was—but the image had to be *exact*, or the tapestry would not work properly, if at all. “I don’t quite see how his death would change anything, though.” Gresh knew there were spells that would still be working if the wizard who had worked them died, but they were much less common than most people supposed, and he was certain that the Transporting Tapestry wasn’t one of them.

Karanissa sighed. “The tapestry came out in a secret room, and Derry died there, and no one found his body. The tapestry didn’t work as long as his bones were lying on what was depicted as empty floor.”

“Oh, I see.” He had not realized the tapestries were that specific, but it made sense.

“The point is,” Karanissa continued, “I was stranded in his castle for more than four and a half centuries. I didn’t *know* it was that long—he’d put a spell of eternal youth on me, and the castle was magically supplied with food and water. I used my own witchcraft to let me pass the time swiftly, so I lost track of time, and had no idea it had been that long. At last, though, a young wizard named Toban of Telven happened to find the secret room and the Transporting Tapestry. He found his way into the castle, and eventually he figured out how to get us both out again. While he was looking for a way out, though, he went through Derry’s book of spells, studying the situation and learning more magic. One spell he tried, Lugwiler’s Haunting Phantasm, went wrong, and instead of producing the phantasm, it produced a spriggan.”

Gresh held up a hand. “What do you mean, ‘produced’?”

“Do you know how the spell works?”

“I think I’ve heard of it.” He had heard Dina and others describe it, but he wanted to hear his would

be customer's version.

"Well, it requires a mirror, and in this case, instead of creating the phantasm it was supposed to create, the spell enchanted the mirror, and the spriggan climbed out of the mirror as if the glass were a door. A minute or two later another spriggan did the same thing, and a moment after that a third, and they kept coming. That's where *all* the spriggans come from. By the time we got the tapestry working again there were dozens of them running around loose in the castle, and some of them came through the World with us. They stole the mirror so we couldn't break it and hid it somewhere, and it's been popping out spriggans ever since."

Gresh stared at her, considering this, keeping his face expressionless.

Spriggans had started appearing a few years ago, without explanation; they had just suddenly been there, getting underfoot, poking into everything, babbling nonsense. It was just one or two at first, but they had gradually been growing more common. Divinations had not, so far as he knew, been able to determine their origin, although everyone was fairly certain they were a product of wizardry. He had never before heard anything about spriggans coming from an enchanted mirror. They were, as Dina had said, drawn to magic in general, and wizardry in particular—but, annoyingly, most magic did not work on them.

That was typical of wizardry; other spells almost never worked properly on something that was already enchanted.

And here was this person, claiming that someone named Derry—no, someone named Tobas—had created them accidentally, by miscasting Lugwiler's Haunting Phantasm.

Gresh knew a good deal about how the Phantasm worked. It was his business, as a wizards' supplier, to know as much as possible about *all* wizardry, so he made a point of coaxing as much information as he could from not just Dina, but every other wizard he sold to. He did not think he had actually picked up any Guild secrets yet, but he certainly knew more about wizardry than the vast majority of people.

The Phantasm was an easy spell, one many wizards had learned before they had finished the third year of apprenticeship. Who was this Tobas who had botched it so spectacularly?

But that wasn't entirely fair, he told himself. Dina had told him that if a spell went wrong, there was no way to predict what it would do. It might just do nothing, like her ruined spell of the night before, or it might do a variant of the intended spell, or it might do something completely different, and the effect might be utterly out of proportion. The famous Tower of Flame in the Small Kingdoms had supposedly been created when someone sneezed while performing a simple fire-lighting spell, after all. Perhaps this spriggan-generating mirror was the result of just as innocent a mistake.

"When did this happen?" he asked.

"5221," Karanissa replied. "Some time in Leafcolor, or possibly at the very end of Harvest."

"Six and a half years ago, going on seven." That was well before Gresh had ever heard of spriggans, so that fit the facts. "Why are you only looking for the mirror *now*?"

"We were busy." She turned up an empty palm. "And we thought the spriggans were harmless. And we didn't know the mirror would produce so *many*. At first we didn't think it would produce *any*, once it was out of the castle."

"Just who is 'we'? You and your husband, or are others involved?"

"My husband and his other wife and I."

Other wife? The husband staying with the baby while Karanissa saw to business suddenly made sense. "And your husband is this wizard named Tobas of Telven, then?"

"That's right."

"You hadn't mentioned that he had another wife."

“It wasn’t relevant.”

“She wasn’t involved in creating the mirror?”

“No. She’s not a magician.”

Gresh nodded and inquired no further about that, although he was curious. Other people’s family arrangements were not his business.

Magical objects sometimes were, though. “And you want me to find this spriggan-generating mirror for you.”

“Yes. You come highly recommended; Telurion and Kaligir both spoke well of you.”

Once again Gresh found himself staring silently at the woman for a moment before he spoke. Telurion was one of the most powerful wizards in Ethshar of the Sands and was rumored to be a high official in the Wizards’ Guild. He had reportedly supervised the Guild’s efforts to remove a usurper from the overlord’s throne last year, though of course no one would admit to telling Gresh anything of the sort. And Kaligir, here in Ethshar of the Rocks, was *definitely* a high official in the Guild—whose name and the question of his status came up a year or so back Dina had admitted he was Guildmaster and had hinted that he was perhaps the city’s senior Guildmaster.

“You know them?” he asked.

“We know Telurion. We helped him dispose of poor Tabaea. We’ve met Kaligir once or twice; he was the one who directed us here, at Telurion’s suggestion.”

The mere fact that this woman knew those two names made it much less likely that she was mad, but her story was more outlandish than ever. She and her husband had helped defeat the self-proclaimed Empress of Ethshar who had briefly taken power in Ethshar of the Sands last year? And it seemed she and her husband got their shopping suggestions from the upper echelons of the Wizards’ Guild.

Add that to a magic castle, eternal youth, the accidental creation of the spriggans that plagued the World, and it was a little much to accept.

“How did you come to be asking their advice?”

Karanissa frowned—the first time Gresh had seen her do so. “They weren’t advising us as much as *ordering* us,” she said.

“Oh?”

“The Wizards’ Guild holds my husband responsible for the spriggans,” Karanissa explained. “They summoned us to a meeting, back in Snowfall, and told us as much. A good many wizards have been complaining about the silly things and demanding the Guild *do* something. They’ve caused a lot of trouble. There’s a man named Ithanalin who got turned to stone or something when he tripped over a spriggan, and was petrified until his apprentice taught herself enough magic to cure him...”

“Kilisha,” Gresh said. “I know Ithanalin and Kilisha.” That was a mild exaggeration; he had met them, even sold them a few things, but no more than that. He remembered the fuss about Ithanalin’s accident; he hadn’t been *petrified*, exactly, but Gresh supposed the exact details didn’t matter.

“Yes, well, that was one instance,” Karanissa said. “Ithanalin has been very persistent in demanding Kaligir do something about the spriggans. There have been any number of other ruined spells and spilled potions and wasted ingredients...”

Gresh remembered Dina’s precious blood, spilled on her cat. “Yes,” he said.

“No one’s been killed yet, so far as we know, but it seems almost as if it’s just a matter of time, and the Guild wants Tobas to do something about the spriggans before it comes to that. He created them, Telurion says, so it’s his responsibility to stop them. And that starts with destroying the mirror—we don’t do that, it’ll just make more.”

“But first you need to find it.”

“Yes. The spriggans hid it, and we need to find it.”

“So you came to me.”

“When nothing else worked, yes.”

Gresh did not like the sound of that—but then, if the Guild had ordered them to do something about the spriggans back in Snowfall of last year, and they had already been working on the problem for five months, then coming to him had clearly not been their first idea. “What else did you try?” he asked.

“Well, since the Guild wanted us to do it, we thought it was only fair to ask them to help us, so we did. We had Mereth of the Golden Door use every divination in her book, and half a dozen other wizards, as well, but none of them could locate the mirror. We consulted three or four theurgists and even a demonologist, to no avail—the gods apparently can’t even perceive spriggans, let alone identify their source, no matter how roundabout you make the questions, and there don’t seem to be any demons who deal with this sort of thing. Witches don’t have the range—I could have told them that, but Tobas talked to a couple of others just to be sure no one had found a way during the four hundred years I was gone. Warlocks had no idea of how to even begin looking, and the scientists and ritual dancers didn’t do much better.” She sighed wearily at the memory. “So when magic failed us, we decided to try other methods. Lady Sarai can’t leave her duties as the overlord’s investigator and didn’t have any clever ideas, but Telurion said you were the best in the World at finding hard-to-find things without magic—so here I am.”

“Indeed,” Gresh said. He leaned back, keeping his eyes on his guest.

This was, at least potentially, a problem—and an opportunity.

He made an excellent living supplying wizards with the ingredients for their spells; he had been doing it since boyhood. He had started out running errands for his older sisters—mostly Dina, since wizards used so many odd ingredients in their spells, but also occasionally Tira and Chira and Shest. Witches used herbs and other tools; sorcerers sometimes wanted particular metals or gems for their talismans and were always looking for leftover bits of old sorcery; and demonologists sometimes needed specific things to pay demons for their services. His business was never *entirely* for wizards, but wizards certainly made up the bulk of his business.

He had started with his sisters, but then he had begun to fetch things for their friends, and the friends of friends, and then people with no connection he knew of who had heard his name somewhere. Word had spread; by the time he finished his apprenticeship and opened his own shop, he had developed a reputation for being fast, efficient, honest, and discreet.

He had also developed a reputation for being able to get *anything*, given time.

This reputation let him charge high prices—higher, in fact, than any other supplier in the city. Even so, he had never lacked for business. There were always people willing to pay more for the best.

The problem was that he had to *stay* the best. He had to maintain his reputation as the man who could get anything a wizard needed. He could never admit that there was something he couldn’t find or couldn’t obtain once it was found.

So far, no such admission had been necessary; sooner or later he had gotten everything he went after or else had been able to give good, sound reasons why he would not seek certain things. As he explained to anyone who asked: he would not kill or maim anyone to obtain an item; he would not violate Wizards’ Guild rules, and he tried to obey the overlords’ laws; and some of the things people had attempted to buy simply didn’t exist.

Or at least, he said they didn’t exist, and no one had ever proved him wrong.

This spriggan mirror, though, apparently *did* exist. If Karanissa was telling the truth, she *knew* it existed. Fetching it would not break any Guild rules; in fact, the Guild *wanted* it found. He would

be stealing it, or breaking any other laws so far as he could see, and he could see no reason anyone would be killed or maimed if he acquired it. ~~By his own rules, therefore, he should have no objection to going after it.~~ Unless he could find a new and convincing excuse, refusing the task would severely damage his reputation.

Finding it, of course, would enhance his reputation. If he could become known as the man who eliminated the nuisance of the spriggans once and for all, he could crank his prices up even higher. He would be a minor hero throughout the Hegemony.

The problem was that if he agreed to get it and failed to do so, his reputation would be not merely damaged, but ruined—and he had no idea how to find the thing! By Karanissa's account, most of his usual methods would not work.

Of course, no one outside the family knew what his usual methods *were*—and he liked it that way. Keeping his trade secrets secret added to his aura of mystery and kept the competition down.

“Will you get it for us?” Karanissa asked, interrupting his train of thought.

He really had no choice. “Of course,” he said. “But it may take some time, and it will be very expensive.”

“The Guild has agreed to cover the cost,” she replied. “We will pay any price.”

Gresh blinked at that. *Any price?*

He had thought he might scare her away; given his reputation for charging high prices, he had thought that when *he* said “very expensive” she might reconsider and save him the trouble of actually finding the mirror. But the *Guild* would pay?

When the Wizards' Guild said “any price,” that meant rather more than when anyone else said it. The Wizards' Guild had entire *worlds* at their disposal.

But of course, the witch might not have meant it literally. She could not be a member of the Guild herself and might have misinterpreted what the Guildmasters had actually said. There might be limitations of which she was unaware.

Still, to have access to the Guild's own coffers—he would be rich! *Really* rich, not just as well off as he was now. Or perhaps he might be paid with *more* than money...

That assumed, of course, that Karanissa was telling the truth. Twilfa had not yet returned with Tira, so he had no way of verifying the story.

It also assumed he could indeed retrieve the missing mirror, but he had confidence in his own abilities—far more confidence than he had in Karanissa's account of herself.

He considered trying to stall Karanissa, by asking her questions until Tira arrived—after all, he would need more information from her before setting out to find this mirror—but he decided against it. This was probably not going to be a quick and easy errand. He would undoubtedly talk to her a good many times, with and without Tira.

He would probably need to talk to her husband, as well, but first he wanted to do a little preliminary planning.

“It will take me some time to make preparations,” he said. “I will need to speak with your husband and to do some research.”

“Of course,” Karanissa said. “Whatever is necessary.” She rose.

“Bring your husband and his other wife here this afternoon, and we will settle the details,” Gresh said, rising as well.

She bowed an acknowledgment.

He showed her to the door, then stood in the doorway watching her walk away down the street toward Eastgate Market.

She was a handsome woman, no question about it, and if her story was true, she was a woman with an incredible history. The task she had set him was going to be a challenge—stupendously profitable, he hoped—but a challenge.

In fact, he had no idea at all, as yet, of how he would do it.

That did not worry him. He would find a way. Various possibilities were already stirring in the back of his mind.

CHAPTER THREE

Gresh sat at his kitchen table across from Twilfa and Tira, stroking his short-trimmed beard. “She said they’d tried wizardry, theurgy, demonology, warlockry, science, and ritual dance. She didn’t mention witchcraft, but since she’s a witch herself I think we can take that for granted.”

“Then why did you want me here?” Tira asked.

“To see whether she was telling the truth,” Gresh replied. “Whether she’s really a witch and really as old as she claims.”

“But you let her go!”

“She’ll be back this afternoon.”

“You want me to stay here all day? Gresh, Dar and I have our own customers to attend to.”

Gresh sighed. “Are any of them coming today?”

“I’m not going to tell you my entire schedule.”

“I won’t keep you, then, but can you please come by this afternoon? Naturally, I will pay you for your time.”

Tira frowned.

“Tira, I’m sorry I dragged you over here for nothing, but I didn’t know how the conversation was going to go, and this way you’ll know what I want when you come back, and I won’t need to try to signal you surreptitiously. And you can tell me if you’ve ever heard of this Karanissa of the Mountains, or her husband Tobas of Telven, or a mirror that makes spriggans.”

Tira considered that for a moment, then relented. “Fine, I’ll be here this afternoon and will tell you whether they’re lying,” she said. “And I never heard of Karanissa or Tobas, but didn’t you say they were from the Small Kingdoms? I don’t know anyone there. The Sisterhood doesn’t operate openly there.”

“Thank you.”

“And you will indeed pay me my full consultation rate this afternoon.”

“Of course.”

“I don’t want you thinking you can get a discount just because you’re my brother, or because you’re the famous Gresh the Supplier.”

“Of course not.”

“Good.” She pushed back her chair and stood up. “I’ll be back this afternoon. If I have a chance, I might talk to a few people about this Karanissa.”

“Thank you,” Gresh replied. He and Twilfa watched silently as Tira straightened her shawl and marched out the back door. Except for Dina, his sisters almost always used the back door, at his request. He didn’t want anyone wondering why all these non-wizards were coming to his shop.

And they did come fairly often. His sisters were his most important trade secret. Oh, he had plenty of other sources and contacts, a network of agents scattered across the western half of the World, but his family was at the heart of his unique ability to acquire the things his customers sought. He had based his entire business on sisterly affection and sibling rivalry—what one sister could not find another could, and would, because to refuse would be to disappoint their only brother *and* miss a chance to crow.

Gresh was only eight when he first realized he could play off Dina, who was then a freshly accredited journeyman wizard, against Difa, then an apprentice warlock, to his own benefit. He had known all along that Difa had originally intended to be a wizard and had only become a warlock because the possibility was new and exciting and as a warlock she would not be once again following

in her older sister's footsteps. Still, it was not until Dina made journeyman that Gresh had discovered he could exploit this rivalry, challenging each sister to show that she could do more with her magic than the other. Warlockry was still relatively new and unfamiliar at the time, which had helped—questions of which sort of magic was better at what had not yet all been settled.

Tira was already in her third year of apprenticeship then, and she, too, had joined the competition quickly enough. Chira and Pyata and Shesta joined in their turn. No two of Keshan the Merchant's daughters chose the same school of magic—that would have been copying—but all were determined to demonstrate that *their* magic was best.

Then Gresh had reached apprenticeship age himself and faced the prospect of learning his own magic. Dina had not yet been ready for master's rank, but she could have found him a place with a wizard somewhere.

Or Difa could have found a master warlock. Tira could probably have found a witch. The others were still apprentices themselves, but...

But it didn't matter, because Gresh had decided he didn't want to be a magician. It would have meant choosing one sort of magic—and one of his sisters—over all the others. Whichever school of magic he chose, the sister in that school would have deemed it a victory and the others a defeat. Factional lines within the family that had always been fluid would become fixed.

He might have chosen a variety of magic that *none* of them had studied, which would have avoided choosing sides by rejecting all of them, but even at twelve he had been able to foresee a lifetime of being told, "You chose *your* magic instead of *mine*, so I can see you won't want my help!" Although finding a magic none of his older sisters had chosen would have worked as far as not choosing sides for the first, it ignored the question of what might happen when his younger sisters began choosing *theirs* for apprenticeships.

No, there were too many potential complications with *any* school of magic. Appealing as learning a new magic might have seemed, he did not want to alienate any of his sisters, or choose one over the others. He liked being able to call on *all* of them.

So he had apprenticed to their father, which had made both their parents happy, and he had learned the merchant's trade, learned bookkeeping and bargaining, buying and bartering—and he had made use of all his twelve sisters in his business, older and younger, from Dina the wizard to Ekava the seamstress, and had eventually taken on Twilfa, the youngest, as his assistant. Because of the family's competitiveness no two had pursued exactly the same occupation, even after their contacts could no longer find new varieties of magic, and he now had available for consultation representatives of eight different schools of magic, as well as a seamstress, a sailor, and a guardswoman.

That didn't include the husbands or children his sisters had acquired over the years—nine of the twelve were married, and three of them had offspring old enough to have begun their apprenticeships. His nephews, nieces, and brothers-in-law were not as usefully diverse as his sisters, but they did add to the mix.

"So do you want to talk to Chira?" Twilfa asked, when Tira was out of sight. Chira was the family sorcerer, and Karanissa had not mentioned trying sorcery.

Gresh considered that, then nodded. "I think that's a good place to start, and she definitely owes me one." He had located several sorcerous items for Chira over the past few years and had been generous in pricing them. Karanissa's omission of sorcery from her list was probably just an oversight, and Gresh did not see how any sorcery he was familiar with might help, but it wouldn't hurt to ask.

"I'll fetch her," Twilfa said, rising.

"And if you see any spriggans on the way, try to catch one," Gresh said.

Twilfa paused. “You want to have one here for Chira to try her talismans on?”

“I want to ask one a few questions,” Gresh answered. “For all I know, we may not need *any* magic find this mirror.”

Twilfa blinked. “You think it might just *tell* you where the mirror is?”

Gresh turned up a palm. “Why not?” he asked. “Spriggans are stupid little creatures, and they seem to want to be cooperative—why *wouldn't* it tell me?”

“If it’s that easy, wouldn’t this Karanissa have already tried that? Or her husband?”

“They’re magicians, at least in theory. She’s a witch; he’s a wizard—they’re accustomed to doing things magically. It may have never occurred to them just to ask.”

Twilfa started to say something, then stopped and thought for a moment. “You could be right,” she admitted.

Gresh smiled at her. “You’re learning,” he said. “Magicians are just as fallibly human as anyone else.”

Twilfa stuck her tongue out at him and turned away.

Gresh watched her go, then leaned back and began planning.

The mirror was probably still somewhere in the Small Kingdoms—why would the spriggans have taken it anywhere else? He could accept Karanissa’s offer of transport by flying carpet, but how big a carpet was it? How much could it carry? It might be better to travel on the ground.

Although his customers were nominally buying the mirror, what they really wanted was its destruction; should he bring tools for breaking it? An ordinary mirror could be smashed readily enough, but enchanted items had a tendency to be uncooperative in unexpected ways.

Of course, depending on just what he did to locate it, he didn’t necessarily want Tobas and Karanissa to know how he found it; if customers found out how simple some of his methods actually were, it could hurt his business.

He needed to talk to a spriggan, no question about it, to find out as much about the mirror as he could. He glanced down the passage toward the shop; naturally, no spriggans were in sight. When he was busy and had no use for the little pests they were everywhere, getting underfoot and making a mess, but now that he *wanted* one, there were none to be found.

Well, Twilfa might have better luck in apprehending one. Or he could stroll down Wizard Street later and listen for outbursts of profanity or the sound of falling crockery.

Then the doorbell jingled, and he rose hurriedly to attend to his customer.

Ordinary trade filled the remainder of the morning. Twilfa returned shortly before lunch with word that Chira was busy at the moment but would be along later and that all the spriggans seemed to be hiding.

“Of course,” Gresh said.

They had finished a meal of salt ham and cornbread, and Twilfa was clearing the table when Gresh heard a thump. “What was that?” he said.

“What was what?” Twilfa asked, stacking the pewter plates.

A loud crash sounded from the front of the shop.

“That,” Gresh said, as he leapt up and dashed down the passage.

As he had expected, he found a spriggan sitting on the floor below a high shelf, surrounded by broken glass and drying blood. The creature looked up at him as he entered, then sprang to its feet and ran for the door.

Gresh darted in front of it, cutting off its escape. It stopped dead and looked up at him, crestfallen. Its big pointed ears drooped.

“Sorry sorry sorry,” it said, in a high-pitched squeak of a voice.

Gresh smiled. “Of course you are,” he said. “I’m sure you didn’t mean *any* harm at all, did you?”

The spriggan stared up at him uncertainly, its bulging round eyes fixed on his face.

“You were just *curious* about what was in the bottle, right?”

Hesitantly, the spriggan nodded, never taking its eyes from Gresh’s face.

“And you certainly didn’t *mean* to spill dragon’s blood worth *five rounds of gold* all over my carpet, did you?”

The ears drooped even further. “Sorry,” the spriggan said.

“Do you know how much five rounds of gold is?”

The spriggan blinked once, its thin, pale eyelids seeming to appear out of nowhere. “No?”

“It’s a very great deal of money. You now owe me a very great deal of money.”

The creature looked panic-stricken. “Spriggan doesn’t *have* money,” it squealed.

“I can see that,” Gresh said. The spriggan was naked and only about eight inches high; there was nowhere it could hide a purse, or even a single coin.

Gresh had never bothered to take a good hard look at a spriggan. The first few he had encountered had been glimpsed from afar, or in the process of fleeing, and by the time he saw one close up and relatively still he had lost any interest in the little pests. Now, though, he stared down at the creature that crouched before his feet, studying it.

It was roughly human in shape—but it also looked a good bit like a frog, an impression aided by its lipless, oversized mouth and bulging pop-eyes. Its shiny, hairless skin was a dull green—Gresh thought he had seen a few that were more of a brown color, but this one was definitely an ugly shade of drab green. It came no more than halfway up his shin; if it stood straight and stretched its body, those long-fingered little hands could probably reach his knee.

This one apparently had no fingernails; some of them did, though. He remembered hearing that some could use their fingernails to pick locks.

Why did some have nails, and some not? Was there any significance to the different colors? There were plenty of unanswered questions about spriggans. No one knew whether they had one sex or two—or, Gresh supposed, more. No one knew why they all seemed to speak the same sort of broken Ethsharitic, or whether they had names. Not one had ever, so far as Gresh knew, admitted to having any name but “spriggan.” They generally spoke of themselves in the third person, but Gresh wasn’t sure if that was universal.

One thing he discovered, having one this close, was that they did not seem to have any odor at all. He was fairly sure he would have been able to smell a person at this distance, but all he could smell right now was the spilled dragon’s blood.

He was going to need to clean that up, but right now dealing with the spriggan seemed more urgent than the blood and broken glass could wait. He supposed he probably should have kept that in the vault with the other expensive materials, but wizards used so *much* dragon’s blood that he had never bothered—he and Twilfa would have spent half the day locking and unlocking the iron door. It seemed as if half the spells used in Ethshar of the Rocks required dragon’s blood.

The stuff had a sharp, metallic odor, and Gresh’s nose could detect nothing else. On a whim, he leaned forward and sniffed at the spriggan.

It backed away a step, startled. “No money,” it said. “You let spriggan go now?”

The creature had no scent at all, so far as Gresh could discern. He could smell the blood and the carpet and a dozen other normal shop odors, but nothing at all that might be the spriggan. That was odd, like so many things about the little pests. “You’ll just have to pay me with something *other* than

money,” he said.

“But spriggan not have *anything*,” the spriggan wailed woefully.

“You can pay me with *answers*,” Gresh said.

The spriggan calmed down slightly. It blinked up at him, then looked from side to side, as if hoping to see an explanation standing nearby.

Twilfa was standing in the passageway, watching the conversation, but there were no explanations in sight.

“What answers?” it asked warily.

“You owe me five rounds of gold,” Gresh said. “That’s forty bits. Let’s say each answer is worth, oh, two bits—which I’m sure you’ll agree is *very* generous of me. Then you owe me twenty answers.”

“What *kind* of answers?”

“Answers to my questions.”

The spriggan considered that carefully, then brightened visibly, its immense ears straightening. “Yes, yes!” it said. “Answer questions! Then you let spriggan go, yes?”

“Yes,” Gresh said.

“Good, good! Have answers, have fun!” It ventured a tentative smile.

“Don’t get *too* happy,” Gresh warned. “You still have to give me those twenty answers.”

“Will! Will! Ask questions!”

“Indeed I will. First off, did you come out of a mirror, as I’ve heard?”

“Not know what you heard. That one answer.” It blinked up at him.

Gresh grimaced. Obviously, he would need to be more careful about his phrasing. “Fair enough,” he said. “Did you come out of an enchanted mirror?”

“Yes. That two answers.”

“You’re counting...Can you even *count* to twenty?”

The spriggan hesitated. “Not sure,” it admitted. “Can try. Can count to twelve for sure. Twenty more than twelve, might not get all the way. Try, though.” It smiled happily. “That *three* answers!”

Gresh sighed. “I suppose it is. Now, do you know where the mirror you came from is?”

“No. Not know. That four.”

“No, it isn’t!” Gresh protested. “That’s not an answer!”

“Is, too. ‘Not know’ is answer. Just isn’t *good* answer. You not say *good* answers!”

Gresh put a hand to his forehead. “I’m being outwitted by a spriggan,” he said. “I don’t believe this. Then he lowered his hand and said, “Where was the mirror when you last saw it?”

The spriggan turned up empty hands. “Not know,” it said. “Five.”

“You have to give me *honest* answers, you know.”

“Did. Have. Will.”

“How can you not know where it was?”

“Not good with places. Not good with names. Not remember well. Six.”

“Well, how did you get here from wherever the mirror was?”

“Walked, mostly. Ran some. Got thrown once by pretty woman who found spriggan in her skirt—maybe eight, nine feet? Rolled down slope once. Is seven? Yes, seven.”

“Seven down.” Gresh sighed again, and rubbed his forehead. “Which direction did you walk?”

“Not know names of directions. Walked away from sun. Not like light in eyes. Eight.”

“But the sun moves!”

“Sun moves, yes. Spriggan know that. Spriggan is not *that* stupid.”

“But then you’d walk west in the morning, and east in the afternoon, and you’d wind up in the same

place—was the mirror here in the city?”

“No, mirror not here! Silly. Walked in mornings, had fun in afternoons—talked to people, played games. Nine.”

“So you went west.”

“Away from sun in morning.”

“That’s west.”

The spriggan turned up an empty palm. “You say is west; spriggan not argue.”

“So you came from the east—which makes sense, since we’re on the west coast. You didn’t turn aside, go north or south?”

“Went other direction when water got in the way. Ten.”

“Water? You mean the ocean?”

“Mean big, *big* water, great big huge water. Is ocean? Ocean’s eleven.”

“So when you got to the coast you turned aside and walked up the coast to the city.”

“Turned aside *twice*. First time long ago, then not so long at all. Twelve.”

Gresh struggled to remember his geography. The second time would be when the spriggan reached the west coast, of course, but the first time...

That would have been the Gulf of the East, the water between the Hegemony of the Three Ethshas and the Small Kingdoms.

“The first time you turned aside—you walked around the very big water and crossed a long bridge across more water, and then headed west again?”

“Yes, yes! Long bridge with guards.”

“Across the Great River.”

“What comes after twelve? Thirty?”

“Thirteen,” Gresh said automatically, as he tried to choose his next question.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Thirteen,” the spriggan said.

Gresh frowned. He was using up his twenty questions faster than he liked.

He had made progress, though; knowing that the spriggan had turned aside at the Gulf of the East and crossed the toll bridge on the Great River meant that it had, indeed, come from the Small Kingdoms.

But how far had it come? Where in the Small Kingdoms had it started? Gresh couldn't very well search all of the two hundred or more little principalities for one little hand-mirror.

“How long did it take you to walk from the mirror to the first big water? How many mornings?”

The spriggan turned up empty palms. “Don't know,” it said. “Didn't count. Is fourteen?”

“Yes,” Gresh admitted, annoyed with himself for wasting a question. He *knew* the spriggan couldn't count, and the stupid little thing probably hadn't maintained anything like a steady pace in its journeying.

A thought struck him. *Had* it started in the Small Kingdoms? What if it had started *east* of the Small Kingdoms, in the Great Eastern Desert?

“Have you ever seen a desert?” he asked. “A big sandy place, where no one lives and there are no trees or farms?”

“No,” the spriggan said. “Would be no fun, huh?” It hesitated. “Fiveteen?”

“Fifteen.”

So the mirror was definitely *in* the Small Kingdoms. He had five questions left to narrow it down.

“Do you know which kingdom the mirror is in?”

“No. Not good with names. Or kingdoms. Sixteen, yes?”

That was no surprise. “Is the mirror in the mountains, or on the plain, or in the forests?”

“Um...” The spriggan was clearly struggling to think. “Yes,” it said. “Seventeen. That almost twenty?”

“Getting close,” Gresh said. “But you didn't answer the question—which is it, in the mountains or on the plain or in the forest?”

“Mirror is in mountain,” the spriggan said. “Eighteen.”

“No, that's just seventeen! You didn't answer the question the first time.”

“Wasn't same question! *Did* answer!”

“It *was* the same question! You just didn't hear it right the first time.”

“Was two questions!”

Gresh glared at the spriggan, and the spriggan glared back. Then something registered.

“Wait a minute,” Gresh said. “Did you say the mirror is in a mountain? You mean *inside* mountain?”

“Yes,” the spriggan said, folding its spindly arms across its narrow chest. “Said that, meant that. Nineteen.”

“It's in a *cave*?” Gresh said, before realizing that he might have just thrown away his last question.

“Yes. Tenteen.”

Gresh caught himself, closed his lips tight, closed his eyes, and did *not* correct the spriggan. Instead he tried to think what else he could ask.

He opened his eyes and glanced at Twilfa, who had obviously been listening and had, just like him, barely caught herself before calling out a correction. He could see her biting her lip as she turned away and hurried down the passageway to the kitchen, out of sight.

Gresh had no idea how many more questions he could get away with; it could be just one, or it could be a dozen before the spriggan caught on. He couldn't afford to waste any.

"What time of day does the sun first shine in the mouth of the cave?" he asked.

The spriggan considered that for a moment, then said, "Middle of morning, maybe? Not sure. Um. Eleventeen?"

Then the cave mouth faced more east than west and was probably on the eastern slope of a mountain.

"From the mouth of the cave, what buildings could you see? Castles, towers, farmhouses, villages, anything?"

"Only building was broken one. Castle or tower or something. Don't know names of buildings." The spriggan looked puzzled. "Is eleventeen? Said that before?"

"No, you didn't say it before," Gresh lied as he considered that. "Eleventeen is right."

A ruin. Nothing else. That made sense; if there were inhabitants in the area they might have noticed the steady stream of spriggans coming down from the cave. Word would have gotten around.

Or *up* from the cave, he reminded himself. Caves could occur at the bottoms of mountains as well as the tops.

This one, wherever it was, was in sight of a ruined fortification in otherwise uninhabited terrain, far enough from civilization that no one had recognized it as the source of spriggans.

Unfortunately, to the best of Gresh's knowledge, that described a good-sized portion of the mountainous central Small Kingdoms, from Zedmor in the northwest to Lumeth of the Towers in the southeast.

Lumeth of the Towers...could the cave be in sight of *those* towers, the gigantic ancient ruins rumored to be older than humanity itself?

But there were three of those, not just one, according to the travelers Gresh had spoken with.

"When you came out of the cave and went west over the mountains, what did you find?"

The spriggan blinked at him. It hesitated.

"Rocks," it said at last. "Trees. Lots of trees. Twelve...twelveteen? Not sound right."

"Twelveteen," Gresh said. "You saw forests." That narrowed down the search; Gresh knew that the southern end of the mountain range extended into open grasslands, and the forests that had once covered the northern end had been cleared for farming. He had had reason to learn such details, since some of the ingredients he sold included forest products—leaves from the topmost branch of a sixty-foot oak, for example, or dew from the underside of a fiddler fern.

Forests—so it wasn't in Lumeth or Calimor, or anywhere north of Vlagmor. What could he ask that would narrow it down further?

"Did you see a lake as you traveled westward through the forest, or cross a river?"

"No. No lake. No rivers in forest, just little streams. Didn't cross big river until the long bridge with the guards. And that...thirteenteen? No, that twenty! Twenty, twenty, twenty! Right, twenty?"

"Twenty," Gresh admitted.

So the mirror was in a cave on the eastern side of a mountain somewhere between Vlagmor and Calimor, and *not* in the central area where the spriggan's westward march would have encountered Ekeroa's lake, or the river that drained the lake and much of the western mountains into the Gulf of the East.

Karanissa had mentioned Dwomor and Aigoa. Gresh was not sure exactly where those were, but he thought they lay somewhere not *too* far from Ekeroa. If the mirror were still in Dwomor, and Dwomor was where Gresh had thought it was, and the spriggan headed west, it should have seen the lake—but it hadn't.

That was interesting, but not necessarily significant. Even if the cave was directly east of the lake, the creature hadn't headed due west over the mountains it might have missed the water. Depending on what time of year it had emerged from the cave, the sun might have risen well to the south of due east so that it might have headed northwest...

"Go now?" the spriggan asked, interrupting his chain of thought. "Please?"

"Fine," Gresh said. He did not think he was going to get any more useful information out of the creature. He had used up his questions. He glared at the spilled blood and broken glass, thinking he hadn't gotten much for the price. "You can go—but *don't come back*, ever!" He shook a warning finger at the little creature. "I don't want ever to see you again!"

"Yes, yes. Not come back. Promise."

"Good enough." He stepped aside and even opened the door. The spriggan dashed past him into the street, squeaking wordlessly.

Gresh stood in the door for a moment, watching it flee. He saw his sister Chira approaching, her sorcerer's pack slung on her shoulder. She waved cheerily, and he waved in return. Cleaning up the blood would have to wait—it had probably already spread as far as it was going to and would have soaked into the planking anyway. It might well need magic to remove it. Talking to his sorcerer sister was more important; he tried not to waste anyone's time but his own.

A moment later, after apologizing for the mess, he was ushering her to the chairs in the corner and calling to Twilfa to fetch tea.

"So, little brother, what can I do for you?" Chira asked happily, as she tucked her skirt under her and settled onto the velvet. She gave the broken jar a quick glance, then looked at him expectantly as she slid her bag from her shoulder and lowered it to the floor.

Gresh smiled at being called "little brother." He was over six feet tall, at least six inches taller than Chira, and given his solidly-muscled build and her slim figure, he probably weighed twice what she did. All the same, the four-and-a-half-year difference in their ages ensured that he would always be "little brother" to her.

"I need to find a particular enchanted mirror," he said. "It's in a cave somewhere in the Small Kingdoms, in the central mountains—not the area right around Ekeroa, but somewhere between Vlagmor and Calimor, probably on the eastern slopes. A couple of magicians have tried to find it with various methods and failed, but so far as I know they didn't try sorcery."

"What kind of mirror?"

Gresh held out his hands as Karanissa had. "A hand mirror, roughly this size," he said.

Chira looked down at her pack for a moment, considering. "Nothing comes immediately to mind," she said. "It's in a cave, you said?"

Gresh nodded.

"So I can't follow the sunlight to it. And mirrors don't have any special smell to track. What sort of enchantment is on it?"

Gresh hesitated. "A faulty version of Lugwiler's Haunting Phantasm," he said.

"Wizardry, then?"

"Yes, of course."

"No 'of course' about it," Chira said, reaching for the shoulder strap of her bag. "There are plenty of other kinds of enchantment."

"Well, yes, but...you know I work mostly with wizards. And what other kind of magic would make it so hard to find?"

"Demonology. And some kinds of sorcery—we do work with mirrors sometimes."

“True, true. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, don’t be sorry.” She waved a hand in dismissal. “You’re right, you mostly work with wizards, know that. And I owe you. We both know that. So tell me about Lugwiler’s Haunting Phantasm—that one that produces smoke?”

“No, that’s one...well, it doesn’t matter what it ordinarily does...”

“It might,” she interrupted.

“...but this mirror produces spriggans.”

Chira stopped moving, one hand holding the strap at her knee, the other tucked at her side. She stared at him.

“Spriggans?” she said. She glanced at the pool of dragon’s blood. “Like the one I saw running out here?”

“Yes. Like that one—and yes, that one broke a jar of very expensive blood. Spriggans are a huge nuisance, and this mirror generates them. In fact, it may be the only source.”

“Someone knows where the spriggans came from?”

“So they tell me.”

“And they’ve hired you to find it?”

“We’re negotiating.”

“Why?”

“Why are we negotiating? Because we haven’t agreed...”

“Why do they want you to find it?”

“To destroy it, I think.”

“They don’t know where it is?”

“No. Spriggans carried it off and hid it in a cave, apparently.”

“Your customer told you that?”

“That spriggans carried it off, yes. I found out about the cave myself.”

“How did...No, never mind. I’m sure it’s a trade secret. Except...if one of our sisters could tell you it was in a cave, why couldn’t she tell you where?”

Gresh smiled. Chira did indeed know his methods. “It wasn’t anyone in the family,” he said. “It was an independent informant. He’d seen the cave, but didn’t know the route, or exactly where it was.”

Chira shook her head in amazement. “How do you *find* these people?”

Gresh turned up empty palms.

“Well, so someone’s hiring you to find this mirror and destroy it. You’re sure about that?”

“I’m sure about hiring me.”

“But destroying it? Not changing it to make something else, something worse?”

That possibility had not even occurred to Gresh. He wondered if Karanissa’s good looks had biased him, and had perhaps kept him from considering potential dangers. “I don’t know for certain,” he admitted. “But rest assured, now that you’ve pointed out the risk, I’ll make absolutely sure of the intentions before I let anyone else touch the thing. Assuming, of course, that I find it.”

Chira snorted. “You’ll find it,” she said. “You always find what you go after, one way or another. You always have. Remember when Mother hid the candy when we were little? It didn’t matter when she put it; you’d always have a piece by bedtime.”

Just then Twilfa emerged, carrying a tray bearing a pot and two cups of tea.

“Just two?” Chira asked, as she accepted hers.

“Mine’s in the kitchen,” Twilfa said.

“You’re welcome to listen,” Gresh said. “It’s all in the family.”

“No, that’s all right,” Twilfa replied. She set the teapot on a nearby shelf, then turned, tray in hand and retreated toward the kitchen.

Gresh frowned at her departing figure.

“I make her nervous,” Chira said quietly, cradling her teacup.

“You’re her sister,” Gresh protested.

“I’m twice her age,” Chira pointed out. “I was halfway through my apprenticeship by the time she could crawl.”

“Well, I was about thirteen, and an apprentice myself,” Gresh said. “It’s not as if we were playmates either.”

“But she works for you. She sees you every day. And you don’t carry around a bag of mysterious ancient talismans.”

“No, I sit in a shop full of magic! Blood and body parts on every shelf and a vault with explosive seals only I can open!” Then he waved it away. “Whatever. It doesn’t matter.”

“We’ve always been a competitive family,” Chira said. “You were special, being the only boy, so maybe you didn’t…”

“I noticed,” Gresh interrupted. “I definitely noticed. But that doesn’t mean I like it when Twilfa treats you like a stranger.”

“Not a stranger,” Chira said.

“Not a sister, either!”

Chira raised her empty hands. “Never mind that. I’m not here to see Twilfa, or to talk about her.”

“Fine. At any rate, I want to find the mirror. Can you help? And rest assured, I won’t just hand it over to my employer with no questions asked.”

“I can’t see how I can find the mirror directly,” she replied. “It doesn’t give off light or sound or odor, so far as you know?”

“No.”

“And it was an ordinary mirror before it was enchanted, not made of anything unusual?”

“Just a mirror—polished metal, or glass and silver, I suppose.”

“Then I can’t think of anything that would find the mirror itself.” She hauled her pack up onto her lap as she spoke and began unbuckling the straps. “But I do have something that might be useful.”

“Oh?”

She rummaged in the bag as she said, “I have something you can use to find and follow spriggans. Maybe when you get close you can use it to backtrack to the mirror.”

Gresh nodded thoughtfully. “That might help,” he agreed.

She pulled a talisman from the pack, a dully gleaming metal disk that looked rather like a hand mirror itself, and held it out. “It isn’t specific to spriggans,” she said. “But it can tell you when anything is moving within a hundred feet of you and follow the motion, even if you can’t see anything yourself. You can tell it to watch one movement and ignore another, or tell it to watch for a particular size or speed.”

Gresh accepted the disk warily and looked at its round surface; his reflected gaze looked back at him, far more faintly than from an actual mirror, but still clear enough.

“How does it work?” he said.

CHAPTER FIVE

Operating the sorcerous talisman was not as simple as Gresh would have liked. He was sitting in his front room, once again going over the various gestures and commands it obeyed, making sure he wouldn't forget them, when the front bell jingled. He looked up from the device as Twilfa hurried from the kitchen to answer the door.

He had been practicing with it since Chira left, which had been long enough for Twilfa to clean up the broken jar, wipe up the spilled blood as best she could, and arrange a carpet and a few boxes to hide the bloodstains, which Gresh had promised to have magically removed at the first opportunity. She had scarcely finished that when Tira had arrived at the back door, and Twilfa had barely settled her in the kitchen with a sausage roll and a mug of small beer when the bell rang. Twilfa still reached the front door before Gresh could even slip the talisman into the pouch on his belt. Twilfa was in full bustle this afternoon, rushing around and getting things done with remarkable efficiency. By the time he was upright and had straightened his tunic, she was showing the customers in.

The young man Twilfa ushered into the shop appeared to be in his mid-twenties, but since this was presumably Tobas of Telven, a wizard powerful enough to own a flying carpet, appearances might not mean much in this case. He had dull brown hair and rather pale skin and stood just slightly taller than average. He wore a black tunic trimmed with red and gold, and good leather breeches.

Behind him were two women—the tall, black-haired witch, and a shorter, plumper woman with hair equally black, but curly rather than straight. She had milky-pale skin, whereas Karanissa's was brown, and the other woman held a bundle in her arms—a bundle with tiny fingers and a face.

The baby was wrapped in fine white linen embroidered in blue and green; its mother wore green velvet and yellow silk. The family could obviously afford to dress well, though Gresh did not think much of their taste—no two of them went together well, not even the mother and child.

“Come in, come in,” he called, tucking the talisman out of sight as Twilfa ushered the foursome through the door. He rose to greet them—and not incidentally, to impress them with his own height and physique. That little bit of psychological advantage might be useful.

Karanissa stepped forward to make introductions. The man was indeed her husband Tobas, the other woman her co-wife Alorria of Dwomor, and the infant was their daughter Alris, who was still at an age where she did little more than stare, wave her hands aimlessly, and occasionally drool.

“She's named for her grandmother,” Alorria said, as Gresh smiled down at the baby and held out his finger for her to grab. “The queen of Dwomor.”

Gresh managed to hide his surprise at that. When he had first heard the baby's name, he had immediately wondered whether it deliberately combined elements of both wives' names, which would have been a remarkable bit of diplomacy. In his admittedly limited experience with polygamists, co-wives tended to treat each other like sisters, which is to say, with a great deal of barely concealed rivalry and an intense interest in maintaining their own place within the family. For a mother to give her baby a name that reflected both women hardly fit that model, so it wasn't surprising that Alris was not, in fact, named in part for Karanissa, nor that Alorria made sure he knew that—but it was surprising that Alorria's mother was a queen.

Alorria herself had not been introduced as a princess—but then, she was married to a wizard, and the Wizards' Guild would not allow someone to be both wizard and royal. Alorria had presumably had to give up her title and her place in the succession when she married Tobas.

Gresh wondered what that place had been. If she had been next in line for the throne then her attachment to Tobas must have been quite intense, but if she had half a dozen older brothers then she

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