



CHAPTER 4

GRAVE ROBBERS

Simon had always found it ironic that the tomb in Grethumn where his uncle was buried was so lavish. Those who still lived were seldom accommodated as luxuriously as the honoured dead. But most people in Grailin claimed to believe that life in the Realm of Aldinar was just a prelude to the wonders of the afterlife, where good souls were rewarded and evil souls were punished for the rest of eternity. “I guess my uncle believed that, too . . .” Simon voiced his thought in a whisper.

Simon led Mikallus up the short flight of stairs to the entrance of the temple. He contemplated the notion of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ while he opened the door to the temple that was built over the tomb. *Was raiding a tomb in the dark of night in hopes of preventing disaster considered good or evil?* His intentions were certainly good, but the image of him and the white-haired wizard violating his uncle’s resting place seemed rather ghoulish.

They walked in and heard a great boom. It was the sound of thunder. The rain had not stopped. The young man looked at the wizard and frowned. It was that strange something about the rain. He sensed it in the air. Like a sweet smell . . . or a cool touch. The rain was magical, and Simon felt even more sensitive to it now that he was near this sorcerer.

Mikallus did not look back. Now inside the temple, Mikallus seemed to take over the role of leader. His senses guided him past the pews into a room at the back of the temple. Though Simon had attended mass at the temple a few times, he found himself fumbling in the dark and bumping into things. Mikallus walked through the place as if he had lived there his entire life. Simon assumed some sorcery was involved in his unnatural ability to navigate his way through the dark building.

Finally, they came to a trap door. Mikallus flung the door open, revealing a winding stone staircase that went downward into darkness, down into the tomb, the resting place of Simon's uncle and other heroes. Simon hated the dark.

Mikallus put a reassuring hand on the young man's shoulder. The latter just nodded his head and urged the wizard to proceed. The two walked down into the gloom. It was not a very long descent, but to Simon it was an eternity before their feet touched the gravel ground of the tomb.

No light reached this place, and the noise of falling rain had faded into their subconscious. Only their sense of smell had been stimulated as a rank stench filled the chamber. They lingered in the dark for a moment.

Eventually, Mikallus sang a verse in the language that sorcerers use, the Arcane Speech. His hands moved through the darkness, as if he were the conductor of a symphony. The words and gestures came together, and the effect was light. There were torches in the room, and they now burned brightly with fire. Again, Simon contemplated the duality of good and evil. Their intentions were good, yet they were in violation of one of Aldinar's most enforced laws in a sacred temple.

There were six coffins arranged in two rows in the center of the small room. Mikallus crept toward them. He brushed the dust off one in order to read the inscription. He muttered the name he read then moved to the next. The third coffin he inspected was the one he was looking for. "Erasto Tabiri . . ." he whispered. He looked at Simon out of the corner of his eye, the young man keeping a few steps away from the scene.

"I have read the inscription many times, trying to figure out if there was some clue on how to open it." Mikallus's words were a frustrated growl.

"*Do not mourn my absence, but learn from my legacy.*" Simon recited the words he had read long ago when they had buried his beloved uncle and could not help but feel the pain of the loss that was not so long ago.

"That's not all," Mikallus said. "There is also something written in the Arcane Speech."

"What?"

"Look here!" Mikallus brought Simon's attention to the seam of the coffin. The mahogany did in fact have gold writing on the edges. It was so small Simon had not noticed it in the days leading to Erasto's burial. "You've never read this before?"

Simon shook his head. He looked at the words. All sorcerers knew the Arcane Speech. Erasto had given Simon some pages to study from, and when Simon had learned the words, Erasto had burned the pages. To be a sorcerer was to speak the words, but reading them was often difficult.

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Simon fumbled over the words that were written on his uncle's coffin.

“The final page of my life has been turned
And another tome shall be written.
The secrets contained inside to all but one
Are strictly forbidden”

Simon had only whispered the words when the letters on the coffin began to glow. The spell had been cast. The coffin that Erasto had used as a safe was now unlocked.

“It seems obvious that you are the ‘one’ to which my old friend referred to. I have read that passage out loud many times, and it never unlocked,” Mikallus said. “I told you Erasto had great faith in you. He enchanted this coffin before his death to make certain only you would have access to what's inside.”

Simon swallowed a huge lump in his throat and squirmed slightly. “Well . . . Help yourself,” he replied shakily. He immediately felt guilty for his irreverence. He felt even more guilt when the white-haired wizard raised his eyebrows in momentary shock. “I'm sorry,” Simon muttered under his breath. He just did not know how to react. His thoughts were a mess.

“I apologize for what I am about to do, old friend. No one has earned a rest more than you have, and it pains me to disturb it,” the white-haired wizard said. He cast another spell, words and movements creating an effect that should not have been possible. Without being touched, the nails of the coffin were pulled out, and the lid was lifted. It rested gently on the ground at Mikallus's feet.

Simon was reluctant to watch as the wizard reached inside the coffin. Not even curiosity could bring him to approach his beloved uncle, whom he thought had been laid to rest long ago. What Simon saw simply seemed wrong to him. Finally, Mikallus pulled a leather-bound book from the coffin.

“Erasto's journal . . .” he said with a sigh. Then, after a short pause, he reached in and pulled out another book. It was also bound in leather and had something inscribed on it in a strange gold ink. “. . . And Erasto's book of spells.”

Simon did not say a word. Mikallus put each book in a large pocket in his coat. “It is done, Simon.”

Mikallus replaced the cover of the coffin and doused the flames using words and slight movements. Quickly, they left the tomb, and it was Simon who closed the trapdoor. Suddenly, he felt a great tension was relieved.

“Thank you,” Mikallus said. “I know that was very difficult for you. Erasto would be . . .”

The wizard stopped short. He crept toward a door and peered around the corner. Puzzled, Simon looked at the man. Mikallus gasped and shrank away from the door. “May the Fates spare us . . .”

“What is it?” Simon whispered the question, and his posture was suddenly tense again. Over the sound of the rain outside, Simon could hear footsteps. The young man shivered. He could hear the faint noise of something scraping against the floor. He strained to hear over the clapping of rain on the rooftops. He heard heavy footsteps. The crash of thunder and a flash of lightning shattered his thoughts like glass. When the young man came to his senses, Mikallus was in another hall. Simon followed quickly. The scraping noise came nearer.

“What’s going on?” Simon demanded.

“They’ve found me!” Mikallus was climbing out of a nearby window. “Follow me if you want to live.” Mikallus began climbing up a storm drain outside the temple. His aged shoulders shook as he pulled himself upward. Simon looked out the window.

“Why climb up?” Simon asked, trying to be heard over the rattle of rain.

“Don’t ask questions!” the wizard yelled back.

Simon looked carefully. In the darkness were dozens of pairs of eyes glaring ferociously. They glowed with a red tint. All were approaching the temple. Now Simon climbed the gutter, appearing even more awkward than the elderly man who preceded him. The frazzled man shrieked at the faces carved into the wall. Stone gargoyles sneered all the way to the roof.

He pulled himself over the edge of the roof and saw Mikallus. The old sorcerer stared blankly. He did not twitch a muscle or blink an eye. Simon followed Mikallus’s line of sight and saw what had frozen Mikallus in his tracks. It looked like a pewter figure, something carved to look like a lizard but with long wolf-like ears and standing as tall as a man. Sodden hair fell about the sinuous muscles of its neck and shoulders. Large wings protruded from its back, wings like five fingers stretching a nearly opaque membrane of pink flesh. Its hands and feet were clawed, and it barely stood upright. The form still managed to look proud, however. At least it looked proud to Simon. Its eyes glimmered with determination. It seemed superior to Simon and the wizard in every way. Its weapon was a long halberd, sharp and pointed at one tip. “Shanawar . . .” Mikallus muttered.

The creature stood as immobile as a stone statue. But a red glint in its eyes gave the secret away. The thing was alive. Simon sensed a bloodthirsty rage welling up inside it. Another one of the creatures landed behind him

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with a thud. When lightning flashed, Simon briefly saw shadows of more flying over his head. They could be seen as great dark shapes with blazing red eyes. They shrieked. It was a cry that pierced heart and soul. It inspired fear and confusion.

Mikallus turned around and grabbed Simon by the collar with both hands. The Shanawar walked slowly toward them. "Someone must finish Erasto's work! Your uncle's books are your inheritance! The responsibility is yours now! Take these things to Grailin and show them to the king! To Grailin, Simon!" With that, Mikallus gained a strength known by few men. He lifted Simon off his feet, and hurled him off the roof. The young man began to fall, but his descent slowed. He glided down softly into a mud puddle at the foot of the temple. The fall should have killed him, but it didn't. Simon knew that Mikallus must have cast a spell to protect him. It would probably be one of the last spells the old man ever cast.

Simon groaned as he rolled onto his side then rose to his knees. He felt something in his coat. Reaching his hand into the inside pocket, he found Erasto Tabiri's journal. Mikallus had snuck it there somehow. In the other pocket was the book of spells. *Damn wizards!* Simon was livid.

He looked up at the roof. Flashes of lightning illuminated the sky, giving Simon brief pictures of the eerie scene taking place on the temple. One flash revealed Mikallus holding a very long staff seemingly conjured from thin air. Another flash and Simon saw a ring of Shanawar flying over the building, flapping their bat-like wings. One of the creatures emitted a shriek that split the air. The two already on the roof lunged at the sorcerer, who ducked out of the way. The halberds flew at Mikallus from both sides. He managed to deflect several attacks with his staff, but even from such a distance, Simon could see the man's weary shoulders sagging. Every move was a reminder of the wound in his right shoulder. When the large weapons hit the wooden staff, they clashed like steel against steel.

The creatures attacked again, but this time Mikallus yelled strange words and pointed his staff at the sky. Like the hands of an assassin, tendrils of lightning leapt from the sky and throttled the creatures. The limp, smoking bodies fell from the roof, and were replaced by two more Shanawar, which landed with a heavy bang on the stone. This time when they attacked Mikallus's staff was knocked from his hands. The long wooden staff flew many yards and landed at the foot of the building, erect in the mud.

Simon looked at the staff and pondered it for a moment. He looked at the roof and saw nothing until a flash of lightning cast the images of dark silhouettes. One of the Shanawar had lanced a spear through Mikallus so fast that the man could not even scream before dying. The lightning froze

his body in a position that had his hands reaching to the sky and his face looking at the flying demons above his head. Finally, he fell.

“No!” Simon cried. He had barely known the wizard a day and losing him so suddenly was like having a knife stabbed through his heart. But he stood there helplessly, paralyzed by fear of the creatures that flew above and devastated by the loss of the man whom he had grown so close to in only a few hours. It was almost like losing Erasto again. “NO!” Simon was confused and almost found himself running back to the temple.

The rain stopped abruptly, and the thunder was silenced. The spell that had conjured the storm died with the sorcerer who had cast it.

Strange whispering words seethed in Simon’s head. The words beckoned him. They spoke his name. Simon did not resist the call. The long staff fell like a diviner’s rod, and it pointed directly at Simon. He dashed for it. He pulled the cold object out of the mud. The moment his fingers touched the staff, an eerie sensation surged through his body. It felt as if spiders were crawling up his back. It felt as if a snake was coiling itself around his limbs. His first instinct was to throw the staff back into the mud. But one of the voices in his head told him not to. The voice insisted!

Simon! His fingers clutched the rod even tighter. Then he ran.