

## Chapter 1

The sky was red enough for killing. Even with the fall of dusk, hot, dry air rose from the canyon, the scent of desert-baked sand and scorched rock hard in the nostrils. The heat would keep men looking down at their feet, to the dust, anywhere but up at the ridge where Kite sheltered with the rest of the ambush party. I wiped sweat from my brow, pushed my hat lower and held the song-lamp steady.

Something wasn't right.

"They're coming," the new officer said, voice wavering. His armour strained around his bulk, and the sweat ran in rivers down his ruddy face. "Prepare your, ah, weapons and such. Make sure they're loaded."

"Aye, sir," the sergeant said. "We'll make sure they're loaded." He caught me watching and gave a little shake of his head, grim disbelief at being told what to do by a green-sleeve a third his age. Sarge had been soldiering for longer than the new officer had been walking. That didn't seem to matter to the generals, but at least they'd given Lord Ovitus command of what could have been quite a simple ambush. I grinned at the sergeant and made hand signs that said *Three to one*. The odds that the new commander officer crapped himself. The sergeant shook his head, but he was hiding a smile.

"Good, good, all good then," Lord Ovitus said, looking anything but. He was soft, made for cities and featherbeds, perfume and parties, sitting and sleeping, maybe. Not much else.

It wasn't the first time I'd found myself part of a unit governed by some spoiled grub from the aristocracy. It doubtless wouldn't be the last. They liked to come out here, earn themselves some balls playing soldier before heading back to the free cities. Still, they usually came with at least the necessary amount of arrogance to assume command effectively. I'd offered up half a week's pay on this one lasting less time than a cat's fart, but none of the squad had fancied those odds either.

It ought to be a simple enough action, a routine ambush. Why then did I feel that sensation of unease in my shoulder blades, turning me tense? The stream at the bottom of the ravine was calm enough. The enemy detachment hadn't made an appearance yet. It wasn't like me to get nervous. The officer rubbing off on me, maybe. Now there was an unpleasant thought.

"Hold that bloody song-light steady, Fal," Mysticar Ranakin snapped. She didn't have to tell me what to do. This wasn't my first ambush. I'd been apprenticed to her for six years, but for all the good that I was doing here, she could have replaced me with a decent lamp stand. Since she didn't think I was good for much except carrying her kit about, my job was largely relegated to making smart-mouthed comments. Still, a job's a job, and I had to do my best at it. The round, glyph-carved stone within the lantern murmured quietly, singing wan red light into the world. Ranakin went on, oblivious. "Keep it low. They might be dead men, but that doesn't mean that they're stupid."

I kept my mouth shut and held the lantern exactly where I had for the last hour. My arm ached with its weight, but there was no argument to be had, no matter how much Mysticar Ranakin grumbled. I yawned, well used to her irritation, then stuck my head over the ancient wall that ran along the cliff edge, my free hand keeping my hat lodged firmly in place. There, they came marching around a bend in the ravine, a footsore detachment of lightly armed raiders. Fifty in all.

“This should be fun,” I said, showing Ranakin my teeth, turned to red in the song-light. She didn’t break from her concentration, continued with her chant. Not for the first time, I wished that I had something more to do than just hold the lantern.

There was no chance of the enemy soldiers seeing the light from the dim, hooded lantern that I held poised over Ranakin’s writing board. Three sides of it were blacked out, and the singing stone within barely gave enough of a glow to see the scroll staked over the wooden board as the daylight sank into bloody streaks against the darkening hills in the horizon. Ranakin crouched low, round and squat, her silver-weave cloak wrapped tight around her shoulders, blinking in the weak light. She scowled at the words as she mouthed them, whisky on her breath, long lines on her face, but her mood had been foul when she’d taken me on and hadn’t improved since. She was tense, ever more so these days, especially when she was responsible for an ambush. I was more concerned with the words that she had written. I frowned at them in the near-darkness. A bad taste had risen in my mouth, sour and salt.

The rhythm of Ranakin’s spell-working pattered in the back of my mind, slow and soft, uneven, like two hollow reeds clicking together in the wind. *Tock*. Two. Three. Four. *Tock*. Two. Three. Four.

“Here they come,” Ovitus chittered. He licked his lips, maybe nervous, maybe seeking some forgotten smear of sugar. His sword rattled as he dragged it clear of its scabbard. His soldiers kept low behind the wall, clicking as they eased themselves around in their armour, winding back the cords on their crossbows. Tough men, determined, good at their work. They smiled as they cranked. Most of the action was going to be over before they even broke cover.

The sweat on Mysticar Ranakin’s brow caught the yellow lamp light. Spell-chanting was hard work but it was a coin flip whether her sweat was driven by the exertion of maintaining the spell’s rhythm or the afternoon’s whisky. I’d suggested that she might want to go easy on it and my cheek still stung where she’d slapped me, but this was important to me. Things ought to be done right or not at all.

*Tock*, two, three, four, five. *Tock*, two, three, four. *Tock*. The rhythm was unsteady, clicking along in my head.

The ship was headed for a cove, a sandy stretch once popular with smugglers, now with slavers, and they saw it directly below us. An easy landing from which to embark in the night, to come silently to the nearby town where there were men, women and children to shackle. Only, there was no gentle cove at the foot of the cliff below us. There were jagged spurs of rock, as hard and sharp as the teeth of a dragon, and they’d chew the ship to splinters as surely. The wrecks of fool-captained vessels were strewn against the foot of the cliff where the tide had lodged them, broken timbers and twisted old rigging, shattered hulls and riven masts.

Mysticar Ranakin whispered the words of power, over and over. Long words, impossible words that flowed from her tongue like ribbons of iridescent silk, twisting and turning over themselves as they wove an illusionary coastline below. There was power in Ranakin. The soldiers all kept their distance. I fought back a yawn. Ranakin traced the words as she spoke them. I’d had seen her work her illusions before, but as the words fell like sparkling millstones from her lips the cold was creeping beneath the hem of my coat and up my spine. Something wasn’t right. Mysticar Ranakin had been doing this for decades, long before she took me on as her fetch-and-carry boy. But I’d been with her for six years, and despite the power in her words, something was scratching at the back of my mind.

I looked back to the ship. Concentrated on that instead. Watching the Tolanders sail towards certain death would take my mind from the prickling sense of unease that had climbed my spine. *Don't question, Fal. You can't question.* I had no understanding of Ranakin's spell-working, and I'd learned many years back not to ask. She hadn't used the switch on me since I was fourteen, and though I overtopped her by a head now, she still held all the power.

The approaching ship failed to scratch the itch in my mind. The bad taste hadn't abated.

Something wasn't right in her murmured chanting. Something that didn't sit well in the back of my mind. The rhythm, the cadence: something. But I wasn't the mysticar here. My only role here tonight – much as it annoyed me – was to hold the fucking lantern.

The words on the yellowed vellum page gleamed in the weak light. There was copper mixed into the ink, cat's blood and foxglove too. It was the best ink I'd ever mixed. Better than Mysticar Ranakin's own, though she didn't know it. She'd got complacent in preparing her own tools, and since she was usually reeling around by mid-afternoon, I'd decided to replace them by following her recipes properly. I knew the recipes as well as she did, maybe better. I'd worked in secret, late at night, but a better ink was going to add power to her chanting. I didn't understand what she was doing; I was no Ajani. But I'd read some of the few books she hadn't pawned, and basic chemistry worked the same for anyone. Common ink for the base, ground copper for stability, a drop of cat for guile, a pinch of foxglove for spite. Mysticar Ranakin had been lax on getting hold of the cat's blood lately. It was dear, and most of her finances seemed to have been flowing into The Pig and Whistle, as her dignity flowed out.

I felt sorry for her, but not much. Had she made something more of herself, maybe she wouldn't be stuck out here on the far-flung north-eastern coastland. And then maybe I wouldn't be either.

Mysticar Ranakin coughed twice, disrupting her flow. An unpleasant, wet sound. She wiped her mouth, and then her finger switched back to the start of the sheet, and she began his chanting again, barely audible over the ocean wind.

"Beautiful night for it," one of the soldiers said, trying to inject some cheer into his fellows as they watched the ship's approach.

"I hope you all had a good dinner and a tot to put fire in your bellies," Connald said. His enthusiasm was a bright contrast to the stoic, workmanlike soldiers around him. "When the ship hits the rocks, they'll try to put out boats. The sea's rough as old bricks tonight, so with luck they won't make it. But you all know what to do if they make it a-land."

"No quarter for the godless," the soldier replied with the ringing surety of one who values her piety more than she does her common sense. She was a tough old girl, grey haired and hard eyed. We're bred hard in the highlands.

"Sailors and soldiers can go to the sword," Connald said. "But if you get hold of the captain or his magician, stay your hand."

"What's our share?" the woman asked. "Ten percent, split all ways? Twenty for you, thirty for the lord. Forty to the crown, for them what never had to lie around on this freezing bloody cliff all night waiting to watch men drown."

Discontented muttering followed. I felt it along with them. This wasn't their regular line of work. It was cold, it was dangerous, and the danger didn't just come from the doomed sailors as

they tried to struggle ashore. When the ship hit the rocks, they'd have to climb down the cliff path, in the dark. I'd surveyed the cliffside by day, and I hadn't fancied it then. By night, I thought that I'd probably break my neck. They were probably thinking that too.

"You'll get yours. Snag their wind-worker and there'll be silver in your hands," Connald said. He knew the value of keeping his people sweet, and they knew the value of reminding him too. There weren't always prisoners after a wreck. On a night like this with the sea pounding and the wind high, it would take a small miracle for a longboat to make it through the rocks. Without prisoners, it was basic night-pay for all involved.

Except me. Mysticar Ranakin didn't seem to think it worth paying me any more for freezing my arse off and nearly losing my hat. She probably wouldn't even have replaced the hat.

The ship drew closer, her sails fat and filled with driving wind.

Mysticar Ranakin muttered on and on, repeating the same lines over and over. I stared at the words on her page, and then, right then, and not from the cold or the wind, the lantern wavered in my hands.

I saw it.

I saw it, and the itch in my brain suddenly became a stone crashing through a window, shards of glass reflecting it back on me a thousand times as they fell around me.

"Mysticar Ranakin," I hissed.

The old magician fluttered her right hand at me, left index finger tracing the words. She growled the words, faster, harder, spitting them out like swallowed sand.

"Mysticar Ranakin!" I demanded. I thrust my finger at the page, not close enough to touch the ink or bring my gloved finger close enough to interfere with the power that played there, but jabbing and insistent. I'd seen this spell written out a dozen or more times, had watched her trace it as she brought the sigils to life with her chanting. It was wrong. She'd written the damn spell wrong.

"Mysticar Ranakin, there's a tail missing!"

"Stifle your tongue, ignorant boy!" Ranakin snapped at me, barely able to believe that I'd dared to interrupt her. "You think you know how to work an illusion like this? You think that you . . ."

Her voice died as her small-eyed glare switched from me to the vellum; to the second-to-last word in the third line; to the sigil which, now that he looked at it closely, was missing its tail. She stared in disbelief, the same feeling that now assailed me taking hold of her. Like falling. Like her stomach dropping away, disappearing into the depths of a lake.

"Ink!" she screamed. "Get me the fucking ink!"

I ditched the lantern and ran as fast as my crooked foot would let me, an undignified, lumbering hobble. The pair of baggage mules raised their heads as I startled them and skirted away from me unhelpfully. I slowed and tried to make soothing noises as I caught hold of the bigger one. The soldiers started muttering uneasily and my breaths came sharp and fast. The packs were buckled tight; I'd done the bloody fastening, of course they were tight. Our important supplies were safe from the mules' jostling but for once, my diligence was no bloody help at all. I couldn't work the buckles through my gloves so I stripped them off, felt the wind's bite against exposed skin. A hard

pull and the buckle gave. I drew out the box of writing materials and limped back to Mysticar Ranakin.

“What’s wrong?” Officer Connald snapped. “Ajani, what’s the matter?”

“It’s fine,” Mysticar Ranakin said quickly, but the sweat ran in rivulets down her cracked cheeks. She’d been safe in her superiority ever since he’d earned her blade, thirty years ago. She didn’t answer to a minor captain like Connald. The knight looked at me, teeth bared, but I looked away. His comfort wasn’t my concern.

Mysticar Ranakin grabbed the satchel and drew out a jar of ink. It was tightly stoppered and wax-sealed, the contents too precious to risk spilling, but I grabbed her wrist as she went to tear at the wax. It was instinctive and her eyes flared. I had never laid a hand on her before.

“That’s the elf-leaf and rust,” I said. She glared as I took out another jar, the old whisky on her breath hitting me full in the face. I bit down the nausea that followed and broke the seal, uncorked it, and handed her a steel pen. Steel for certainty, that was the rule. Mysticar Ranakin shook excess ink free from the nib and focused hard on her page. She started over, tracing the words, one after another, hissing them between her teeth until she reached the offending sigil, second-to-last on the third line. As she spoke its power, she applied the pen and drew a very tight, slightly shaky flick. Without breaking the chant she handed the pen back to me and went on down the page, but there was new urgency in her voice. Urgency, and something worse; uncertainty. I focused the lantern for her again, and risked peering over the cliff edge.

The raiding ship continued on her course towards the rocks. The illusion held. I let out a breath that I’d held without thinking and spat the sourness over the cliff edge. The working was secure, the spell went on safely. The fat bellied ship ploughed into the waves, her helmsman still seeing a clear stretch of water, a coastline much further away.

We’d got away with it. I pulled my gloves back on and wiped the perspiration from my forehead. We’d been lucky. Illusion worked best by night when the senses were already dimmed. Under the midday sun, Mysticar Ranakin could barely have convinced me that a red apple was green, but under the flimsy light of distant stars, it was easier to deceive a mind.

Deceived, unto death. The unease leaked from me like a long-held fart, my stomach settled. I watched the ship now, rising and falling against the swelling waves. Who were her crew? Where they had come from? A vessel that large had to have a crew of at least thirty sailors, plus a whole bunch of fighting men. I had no love for the Vhaal or their land-hungry, god-denying emperor, but this was not the first time that Mysticar Ranakin had drowned men, far from it. I knew what came next. The screams of terror would rise above even the incessant bluster of the sea wind when they saw their deaths coming. I would see the broken bodies the next day, borne in on the uncaring tide, tangled with seaweed, wax-skinned, pale with death. I didn’t know how I felt about that. It was Mysticar Ranakin’s workings that brought them to the rocks, and it would be the soldiers who took apart those that made it ashore, but I had mixed the ink. I had held the lantern so that Ranakin could chant her words of power. My fingers were flecked black with the ink, but they’d be red before dawn.

“Here she comes,” Connald said, his excitement rising over the wind. “Get ready to meet her. Fight for your homeland!”

His attempts to rouse a cheer were carried away on the wind. Not to be brought down, he tugged the straps of his armour and rolled his broadsword around in little windmill arcs. He had

good steel, fine armour, a helmet with a face plate. He wasn't afraid of storm-tossed survivors. If they made it through the shallows, and that was a big if, they'd find him waiting.

Mysticar Ranakin broke from her chanting and abandoned the vellum, a grin of relief beneath her broad red nose. The words were already smoking, their endurance spent, and soon the page would destroy itself. She looked out over the lip of the cliff, down to see what his power had wrought.

The illusion ended as the vellum smoked and began to char as the slow beat of Ranakin's trance died away in my mind. The ship's helmsman must have seen it then. The gentle, welcoming bay that had filled his mind must have vanished, and instead he was three hundred feet from savage cliffs rearing fifty feet out of the night. The waves broke into flares of dark spray as they crashed into the wrecking rocks before him. He would spin the wheel, knowing even as he did so that it was too late. The crew, working through the night to bring the ship ashore in darkness, would see it all too. The terror, I thought. The mind-blanking, panic-bringing terror. They would know.

To the waves with them all. They'd no pity for the people of our shore. I'd waste none on them in return.

The ship stayed its course. It ignored the rocks, ploughing straight on towards us. Mysticar Ranakin sucked in a breath. Her eyes were savage and she grinned as we waited expectantly for the thundering crash of splintering timbers.

No crash. Nothing but wind and wave. The ship sailed right over the rocks, her prow aimed right for the cliff, punching through ocean swells as though they were nothing. Ignoring the rocks, as though they were nothing. Fearless of the cliffs, as though they were nothing. But they were all something, and I realised with horrible certainty, that it was the ship. The ship was nothing.

An illusion.

It vanished. There one moment, gone the next.

"What happened?" Connald demanded as his men clutched at their winged charms. The wind roared in off the sea at him, making another grab for my hat, but it was the only answer he was going to get.

"Wait," I said, staring down into the churning waters. "There's something there."

Where before I'd seen a ship, a small boat without sail or oars, moved through the water on an unnatural current. Gliding smoothly, the waves divided and swayed from its path as it drew towards the cliff. A pale, solitary figure stood calm as dawn, heedless of the tossing waves, untouched by the glowering wind. Hairless, swathed in dark robes of a foreign style, his eyes glittered like cut diamonds.

My belly did a somersault, my heart doubled its beat. Every part of me said to run.

"Akil," Mysticar Ranakin breathed. Her eyes had grown wide with horror. The figure on the boat below looked straight up at her, though she could only have been a spec in the darkness on the cliff's edge. It did not need daylight to find her, somehow it knew who she was, where she was. It had come for her.

*Impossible.*

But the creature in the boat, hairless and maggot-white, eyes splitting the starlight, opened its mouth wide, and a terrible, silent keening ripped into my mind.

The world swam. I staggered and fell. Where Ranakin's trance had held a slow and unsteady beat, this creature's mind-howl was a piercing sky-song, as discordant as two files grinding together, metallic and corroded. The soldiers grabbed me and heaved me upright again as the sound died away. My head pounded, and there was blood on my face, leaking from my nose, and my brain felt like it had been rinsed with lime.

Below, from the foot of the cliff, I heard timbers groan and ropes snapping taut. Rock cracked and crunched. Something was happening down there. I wiped the blood from my face and shook the soldiers away.

I grabbed Mysticar Ranakin by the collar of her worn old coat and heaved her to her feet. She was closer to sixty than fifty and pork and ale had given her enough girth that pulling her upright wasn't easy. Pain shot through my misaligned ankle, but terror outweighed that discomfort. We dashed for the mules, abandoning the smouldering scroll as flames began to lick from the words; nothing written in the language of the old gods could survive for long in our world on something so transient as calfskin and the spell burned behind us as we fled.

An arm, impossibly large and formed from broken timbers and driftwood, wrapped in sodden ropes and black-podded sea weed, swung over the lip of the cliff. Fingers made of spars and fragments of masts clawed furrows in the chalk, gouges as wide as my leg was thick. Up, the thing rose, a creature of driftwood, salt and spray, a lumbering, dripping giant, ragged with tatters of old sails and dead-men's bunks. An old cabin door flapped open like a jaw and empty porthole-eyes swept the cliff in search of prey.

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

It had to be twenty feet tall. I may have ground ink for a magician, but I had never dreamed that such wonders – such nightmares – could walk the earth. Only a sustained clench was preventing me from shitting myself. The din in my head was the only thing that kept me moving.

Blind terror sent the soldiers tripping over their heels or throwing their hands over their heads. Their bills and crossbows were no use against this thing of wood, but Connald was bellowing at them as if he could get them into line. Courage before brains. The wreck-beast's eyeless face swung around towards him, and then a moment later, its fist swung down onto him too. There was a metallic crunching sound, and then the construct lifted what was left of him and casually hurled him out to sea.

"Wait," Ranakin said, drawing up as we reached the mule. "I've got something for the owl-munching bastard!"

She reached inside her coat and pulled out a scroll case, popped the cap and drew out a sheet of pure white paper. The best quality, the purest money could buy. There were few sigils written on it, but I recognised some of them. Some were new to me, but their shapes writhed and crawled in front of my eyes, sigils that said danger, that said that this was the language of the old gods and not for me to look upon. Ranakin snatched her focal sword down from the mule, a weapon that I'd never seen unsheathed, and held it against her chest as I held the paper open for her. Her slow, steady trance began to beat its rhythm in my mind again, *tock*, two, three, *tock*, two three as she chanted words that I had never heard before, vicious and hot, elegant, violent and incomprehensible. Expectant.

I expected something too. Nothing happened. The sheet of paper turned to ash in Ranakin's hands, her careful preparations drifting through her fingers. The behemoth dragged itself over the cliff edge on creaking, rigging-lashed legs and rose uncertainly.

And then, as the soldiers scattered in terror, its eyes turned to us.