

Lightning flashed again, and the entire crew saw the sheer, nearly vertical cliffs of Sylmarin, the Isle of Serpents only a few hundred feet away. They were firmly grounded on a sand bar. Another bolt of lightning lit up the sky and was followed by an enormous thunderclap.

“Grab yer personal effects,” Lorn ordered. “We’re goin’ ashore.”

The crew gladly ran to retrieve their belongings. Smilin’ Jake accompanied Lorn to the hold. Lorn crawled down the ladder and handed up six extra revolvers, a small cask of powder and a bag of bullets. They tossed everything into one of the lifeboats as a few raindrops pelted the deck. Within minutes they had launched the boat and steered a course for land. Lorn hunkered in the bow, staring intently into the darkness.

“See anything?” Ox asked worriedly.

Lorn shot him a perplexed look, then resumed staring into the blackness. If there wasn’t at least a strip of land between the cliffs and the sea, they’d have small chance of getting through. Another bolt of lightning ripped through the sky.

“There!” Lorn nearly shouted. “To the right. Looks like just enough beach to make landfall.”

The *magii’ri* pulled hard on the oars and slowly swung the boat around. As they did, they struck something with a small thump.

“What the Hell?” Lorn exclaimed.

He bent down just as another flash of lightning crashed into the cliffs above them. A ghostly white hand clawed out of the water, then disappeared. Lorn gritted his teeth against the fear he felt at that sight and plunged his hand into the cold sea. He felt cloth and grabbed it, then lifted the body with all his strength and flung it into the boat.

“Goddamnit!” Bill cursed as he lunged away from the body. “What the Hell are you doin’?” His sudden move nearly capsized the boat and Ox lunged to the opposite side to counterbalance it.

Smilin’ Jake bent close to the dead man’s face, then felt for a pulse. As he did the man suddenly grabbed his hand in his own cold and clammy ones. He jerked Smilin’ Jake close to his mouth while Bill frantically clawed for his revolver. Ox placed a restraining hand on Bill’s wrist

and stopped him at half draw.

“They’re comin’ for me,” the dark man whispered. “Leave me.” Then his head lolled to one side and his hands thumped lifelessly on the deck of the boat.

Lorn suddenly felt very exposed.

“Row, dammit,” he ordered though gritted teeth.

The *magii’ri* rowed with renewed energy and struck the sandy beach with enough speed to plow a furrow and firmly ground the lifeboat. They quickly jumped ashore, and Ox lifted the injured man effortlessly and flung him over his shoulder.

“Which way?” he asked.

“Only one choice,” Lorn replied.

He led the way up the beach in the same direction they had been rowing at a fast trot. He didn’t look back to make sure the others kept up. He knew they were there, and that Ox could carry the injured man all day if need be.

Lorn felt his land legs returning, and his breath came deep and evenly. Sweat dripped down his face, but he kept up the brutal pace. The common bloods lagged behind, but only by a few yards.

“Somethin’ up ahead,” Smilin’ Jake grunted.

Lorn strained his eyes into the gloom, but could see nothing.

“What is it?”

“Prob’ly a whorehouse,” Jake muttered. “What do ya think? It’s gotta be the Citadel.”

Bill skidded to a halt.

“I ain’t goin’ in there,” he stated.

A loud croaking sound floated down from the darkened sky. It sounded like a raven, only bigger. A lot bigger. A vagary of wind swept over the group. The Citadel was visible now, the window ports were dark shadows against the ghostly white stone. The injured man began to struggle violently, and Ox had to wrap both arms around him to restrain him.

“For bein’ dead he’s a strong little bastard,” Ox grunted.

“They’re comin’ for me,” the injured man moaned. “They’ll kill us all!”

“Get inside,” Lorn ordered. He drew his revolvers as he brought up the rear. Even Bill went willingly. Jake waited only long enough to keep pace with his Captain.

“See anything?” Lorn asked.

“Not yet...” Jake’s voice trailed off as a blurry black shape engulfed him. He was knocked flat on his back, and could feel the fetid breath of some unearthly monster against his cheek. Then Lorn opened up with his revolvers in one continuous roll of thunder. The monster squealed in pain as the heavy lead slugs tore through it. It tried to leap back into flight then fell as its life blood gushed from the bullet wounds. Lorn bent and hauled Jake to his feet by the collar. The common bloods had surpassed them as fear sent shots of pure adrenaline flowing through their bodies. Their churning feet sent geysers of sand spraying behind them.

“Run, dammit!”

Smilin’ Jake drew as he ran, occasionally firing into the sky. They were almost there, but Lorn sensed another attack. Then Bill and Ox opened fire through the window ports, and several more of the monsters squealed in pain. They burst into the Citadel as the skies opened up and rain pounded the beach. Lorn began reloading. Rayburn dashed through the door accompanied by a ghastly scream.

“They got Hawkins!” he shouted. “Just scooped him up and...” His voice trailed off as at least a dozen arrows flew through the darkness and thudded solidly into his body. His face twisted in pain and he slithered limply to the floor. Bill finished loading his revolver and emptied it into the darkness. Ricochets whined wickedly off the solid rock as Jake tackled him.

“Goddamnit,” Lorn shouted into the silence that followed the gunshots. “Cease fire! Are you crazy?” He wiped blood from a gash in his forearm where a mangled lead slug had torn his skin. Nothing happened for several long seconds.

Bill struggled for a moment under Jake’s solid weight, then he relaxed.

“Sorry, Cap’n,” he muttered. “I thought we was under attack.”

“Rayburn’s dead,” Ox announced. “Poor bastard. He thought he had it made.”

Lorn glanced about. "Shit," he summed up the situation with one word. "Did you see it?" he asked Jake.

"Yeah," Smilin' Jake replied as he reloaded too. "It had really big teeth."

"I already know that," Lorn said. "Did you notice anything else?"

"Well, it was dark and I was kinda preoccupied at the moment!" Smilin' Jake said. "They're big and mean and nasty! That's all we need to know."

"They can't get in, can they?" Bill asked.

"I don't think so," Lorn answered. "I think they're too big to get through the doorways."

"So who shot Rayburn?" Ox asked.

"Damned if I know," Lorn answered.

As he spoke, stone slabs to each side of the doorways began to slide shut. Ox leaped into the doorway and pushed back with all his strength until Bill jerked him back into the Citadel. The doors slammed shut with a resounding boom.

"I ain't sure I like that," Bill said.

"Strike a light," Lorn ordered. "Let's see if we can get a fire going and see about this injured man." He finished reloading and holstered the weapons.

Bill struck a light into a piece of tinder from his belt pouch and held it aloft. Driftwood from some violent past storm littered the ground floor of the Citadel, and they hurriedly gathered some and built a small fire in the center of the room. Other than that and some wreckage, the Citadel seemed empty. Ox dragged the wounded man closer to the fire, and Bill McCurry bent to examine him. Lorn and Smilin' Jake took stock of the security of their position. The window ports were much too small for the monsters, but almost as soon as Lorn noted that one began to claw at the opening. The monster's claws shattered against the stone of the Citadel, and as it began to mindlessly bite at the opening its teeth sheared off. Lorn raised his revolver for one careful shot, but before he could squeeze the trigger they all heard a hissing sound and an arrow plowed into the monster's gaping mouth. It fell out of sight, squealing in pain until the rest of the beasts finished it off. Lorn dropped into a half crouch and hastily covered the room with his

revolver, but there was no one else in sight.

“Now what the Hell...?”

Silence answered him. The remaining beasts, educated by the failure of their comrade, made no attempt to attack the enchanted stone of the Citadel.

“You said the Citadel was guarded,” Smilin’ Jake finally said. “I reckon those critters ain’t welcome.” He indicated Rayburn’s body. “And neither are common bloods.”

Lorn grunted an obscenity. “Then why ain’t we stuck full of arrows, too?”

Smilin’ Jake gave him his trademark grin. “Maybe we’re just lucky,” he replied sarcastically. “It don’t make a damn bit of difference *why*, it is what it is.”

Bill McCurry stood with his mouth working like a fish, but no sound came out. His revolver was in his hand again, cocked and ready.

“Bill.” Lorn said quietly.

McCurry stared at him.

“Holster that piece, Bill,” Lorn ordered, “and tend to the wounded.”

“Its magic, ain’t it?” Bill asked as he found his voice. “Honest to Aard magic.”

“It ain’t directed at us,” Smilin’ Jake said.

“He’s right,” Lorn agreed. “It’s workin’ for us for a change. Now holster that hogleg and tend to that wounded man.”

Bill slid his revolver home in its holster. He tried to speak again then clamped his mouth shut and bent over the man they had pulled from the sea.

“I hate magic,” Lorn muttered under his breath. Smilin’ Jake grinned in agreement.

“He’s still alive,” Bill announced. “But this man’s been through Hell. He’s skin and bones and has two nasty gashes on his head. I don’t know what’s keepin’ him alive.”

“Well, we seem to be safe enough for the time being,” Lorn said. He drew a few strips of dried horse meat from his belt pouch and tossed that along with his waterskin to Bill. “Boil that up and see if he can drink the juice. Jake, you and Ox keep a watch. I’m goin’ to look around a bit.” He glanced at Rayburn’s body. “Cover him up with sumthin’, too.”

The Citadel had been carved from solid rock, reaching hundreds of feet towards the cliff top, and according to legend it was protected by countless spells. The *magii'ri* had witnessed firsthand the protection spell of the Guardians, but there were many more. Now lightning played tag among its highest spires and raced in streaks of light among the intricate stonework. Lorn fashioned a torch from a piece of driftwood and climbed the solid stone stairs to the next level, his right hand never more than an inch above the grips of his revolver. That level was deserted as well, and so were the next three that Lorn climbed to. He explored several rooms on each level, and even though some were closed off by wooden doors several inches thick, he found nothing. Finally he returned to the ground floor. His crew had made the wounded man comfortable by the fire, and now they sat around it, talking in hushed tones.

“He took a little broth,” Bill offered. “But he’s in a bad way.”

Lorn glanced at the haggard faces of his men. It was obvious they needed rest almost as badly as the wounded man.

“Get some sleep,” he told them. “I’ll take the first watch.”

The *magii'ri* bedded down, and in minutes they were asleep. The storm broke loose, and rain pelted the Citadel. *They look like Hell*, Lorn mused. But it had been a tough assignment from the very first day. Too tough, as a matter of fact. It seemed that everything that could possibly go against them had done so. And now they had those monsters from above to contend with. He sighed and poured the tin cup full of water and sat it in the coals to heat. When he had made tea he settled back in his bedroll to watch the embers of the fire. They were safe enough in the Citadel, he reckoned. The Guardians would have already killed them if they were inclined to do so. He didn’t know why they hadn’t, but the reason did not matter in the least. He ate a strip of dried meat and contemplated their situation as he chewed. There was no doubt in his mind that they had been set up, but even the magic of the *magii'ri* Wizards couldn’t conjure up an enemy like the flying monsters that still squawked occasionally in the black sky. He was startled from his reverie by the wounded man’s voice.

“Who am I?”

The enormity of such a question silenced Lorn for several long moments.

“I don’t know who you are,” he finally sputtered. “But you’re safe enough, for now. Rest easy, you’re among friends.”

The wounded man huddled under his borrowed blankets.

“You really don’t know who you are?” Lorn asked.

The wounded man paused then shook his head irritably. He stared into the fire, deep in thought.

“Do you remember anything?”

“I remember being cold, cold as death. And falling. Then there was a comforting blackness that enveloped me. I was warm again and I saw my father’s face. I felt safe in that blackness until I was pulled from it like a babe from its mother’s womb, jerked from my only safe haven into the cold danger of the World.”

“That was me, I reckon,” Lorn said. He shrugged apologetically. “It was me that pulled you from the sea.”

The wounded man stared at him.

“You should have let me drown,” he said thoughtfully. “Who are you? Do I know you?”

“I reckon not,” Lorn replied.

“You seem familiar to me,” the wounded man said. “Are you sure we haven’t met?”

“Not that I recall,” Lorn replied. “And I have a good memory for faces.”

“Well, you saved my life, I think. The accepted response for a man in my position would be to thank you.” He fell silent again, but only for a moment. “At any rate, I owe you a life debt.”

“We just bumped into you,” Lorn said with a smile. “Think nothing of it.”

The wounded man seemed to relax, and grinned. “Is that where I got this knot on my head?”

“One of ‘em,” Lorn said with an answering grin.

The wounded man turned sober again. “Where are we? I had a meeting...somewhere.”

“This is the Isle of Serpents. Our ship was blowed off course and we hit a sand bar. So we put in the lifeboat and hit you,” he grinned apologetically. “Then we ran for the nearest shelter.”

“Ran from the storm?” the wounded man questioned.

“More or less.”

A strangled squawk reached them seconds before a peal of thunder drowned it out.

The wounded man shrank back into his blankets and edged closer to the fire. “They’re coming for me,” he whispered.

“You said that in the boat,” Lorn said. “Do you know what’s out there?”

“Death,” he answered. Then he lay back down and turned away from the *magii’ri*.

“That ain’t really what I wanted to hear,” Lorn muttered. He built up the fire. It was going to be a long night.