

The King in Copper

15 Ches, Year of the Bent Blade (1376 DR)

“I have heard,” said Lord Hekman Odelmor, “that the old harmachs of Hulburg were buried well indeed, with the trappings and appointments befitting lords of a wealthy city.” He leaned back in his great chair and favored Angar Hulmaster with a wide grin. Tall and round-faced, Odelmor—a lord in fact, if not exactly in title—habitually wore a mask of geniality, but his eyes were cold and hard. “Tell me, young Angar, is there anything to that tale?”

The hall of Daggergard echoed with raucous laughter, shouts for service, and the heavy clinking of goblets and cutlery. Angar Hulmaster’s few servants scurried to fill the plates and cups of the Hillsfarran company, despite the fact that the Hulmasters could ill-afford such hospitality. Carefully the dark-haired lord put on a small frown of indifference as he set down the cup and considered his answer. He was a young man with a taciturn, sullen, manner to him. Strangers sometimes mistook him for a scholar of some sort, but Angar was an indifferent student. He had no talent for applying himself to things that didn’t interest him, and a strong stubborn streak that surfaced when others tried to bend him to their will. Unfortunately that was exactly what Odelmor and the rest of his fellows had been doing for months now, and Angar had no choice but to bite his tongue and make a show of graciousness if he cared to live from day to day.

Kindon Marstel, sitting on Angar’s opposite side, mistook the young lord’s reticence for evasion. “Come, Angar, you must know something of your family’s old vaults,” he said sharply. “What are you trying to hide from us?” Marstel was a lean old martinet with close-cropped hair of iron gray and a cold, humorless nature. Like Odelmor, Marstel was a former Red Plume captain from the city of Hillsfar. A year ago, the mercenary lords had been obliged to flee Hillsfar when the forces of Zhentil Keep overthrew the Red Plumes and their master Maalthir. Unfortunately both settled on the ruined city of Hulburg—small, distant, and virtually unoccupied except for the Hulmasters and their handful of folk—as a safe place to begin their lives in exile. More Red Plumes had followed, bringing from their estates in Hillsfar whatever treasure, servants, and sellswords they could.

Angar grimaced and offered the least dangerous answer that came to mind. “I am hiding nothing, Lord Marstel,” he said. “The old harmachs are buried in the crypts of Hammerbold Abbey, but I don’t know of any great wealth buried there.” That much at least was true. His family’s poverty had long ago stripped Angar of any useless sentimentality. If he’d known of any valuable trinkets decorating the moldering bones of his distant ancestors, he might have plundered them himself. Now his unwelcome guests would undoubtedly make pillaging burial vaults their next project. Already Red Plume expatriates had dug up half of Hulburg, ferreting out any glint of old treasure remaining in the long-ruined city.

Of course, if I admit that I know of no more buried treasures, Odelmor and Marstel might decide that I have outlived my usefulness, he reflected glumly. As galling as it was

to have his tiny demesne overrun by Odelmor and his fellows and to endure the pretense of hosting the invaders in his own keep, at least Angar hadn't been killed yet. Hoping that he might deflect the Hillsfarrans for a few days more, he added, "The abbey ruins likely harbor dangerous undead. King Aesperus claims most such places in Hulburg, as you well know."

"You think to scare us away with that old grue's tale?" Marstel scoffed.

"It's no empty fright. Two years past the Company of the Black Griffon guested with me while they searched the crypts beneath the city. I spoke at length with their mage, Irina, about their explorations. I wouldn't dismiss Aesperus's influence, my lord."

"Be that as it may, I am inclined to investigate the matter," Odelmor said. "Our soldiers can deal with a few moldering old skeletons easily enough, and if your King in Copper objects, well, Marstel and I have competent wizards in our employ. Would you be so good as to show us the abbey ruins in the morning?"

"They aren't hard to find, my lord. The abbey is the great old stone building on the seaward slopes of the Easthead. You can't miss it."

"Oh, I am sure that my men and I won't have any trouble finding the place." Odelmor glanced over at Marstel, and then fixed his eyes on Angar. "It merely seemed to me that you might wish to accompany us and pay your respects to your forebears. Or would you prefer to keep your own company?"

A chill ran down Angar's spine, but he managed to keep his expression neutral. It was not a casual request; doubtless Odelmor wanted to make sure that Angar didn't send him into some cursed chamber or ancient trap. "Of course I will be happy to join you, Lord Odelmor, but I do not expect that much remains unspoiled. The city has been sacked several times since the old lords were laid to rest."

Odelmor waved his hand in dismissal. "As you say, but perhaps fortune will favor us anyway. We might as well have a look, hey? I'll send for you tomorrow when we're ready to begin."

Angar inclined his head in assent. He didn't dare to refuse. Somehow in the last few tendays dozens of Red Plume mercenaries had wound up billeting in the empty barracks of Daggard. They outnumbered his own ill-equipped retainers three or four to one by now. Even if he somehow found a way to evict the Red Plumes from the keep with his handful of poorly trained Hulmaster soldiers, two hundred more Hillsfarran mercenaries and their families were encamped by Hulburg's harbor. It wouldn't take them long at all to force the door of Daggard if he tried to shut it in their faces.

Eventually the banquet—really nothing more than an evening of organized plunder, in which Angar's so-called guests graciously allowed him to put everything in his larder and cellars before them—came to an end, and the mercenary captains and their soldiers took their leave. Angar stood by the door and saw them out, as if Odelmor and Marstel were dear friends. For a moment he hoped that the Hillsfarrans had forgotten about their earlier conversation, but Odelmor paused at the threshold. He leaned close to Angar and gripped the young harmach's arm in one sword-hardened fist. "It would be good if we found something of value soon, Angar," he said in a low voice. "If you have any thoughts of withholding any of the city's old treasures for yourself, you'd be wise to abandon them. Should we come to think that you have nothing more to share with me, well, it would mean that certain changes in our association must follow. I doubt you would wish that to happen."

Angar winced, but he nodded. "I understand."

"Good," said Odelmor. "Tomorrow morning, then." He grinned again and followed his soldiers down to the rain-splattered street.

Angar watched him leave then shut the door behind him. His servants moved slowly through the keep's cluttered hall, picking up after the Red Plumes as they did every night. The young lord waved them off as they came to report on the pillaging of the keep's cellars and wearily turned his steps toward his private chambers. He let himself in and went to stand before the small fire that burned in the room's great stone hearth.

He heard the door to the inner suite open carefully behind him, and the light rustle of robes. "They are gone?" Estine asked.

Angar glanced at his wife. She was a rather plain young woman, whose Thentian family was almost as poor as the Hulmasters; their match had been the best either family could arrange, but he was fond of her, and she was wiser than he. He'd been careful to keep her hidden in his rooms as much as possible for fear that some Red Plume guest might take a fancy to her. "For now," he answered her. "But Odelmor intends to send for me in the morning. He wants to dig up the Hulmaster vaults beneath the abbey."

She shuddered in distaste. "Is there anything of value there?"

"I have no idea. But if there is, I'm sure Odelmor and his mercenaries will sniff it out. They're worse than swine hunting for truffles."

"Let us hope they don't find anything," Estine said. "Once there's nothing more to unearth, it might be that they'll grow tired of Hulburg and leave us be."

"I doubt it." Angar ran his hands through his black hair. "Before he left, Odelmor said that it would go badly with me if he came to think that I had nothing left to give him. I think you know what that means."

Estine frowned. "We just have to keep them convinced of your usefulness as long as possible."

"It might be better if we fled—"

Estine shook her head. "We've discussed that. We have Red Plumes at our elbows from the moment we step out the door."

Angar clenched his fists and stared into the fire. "What else can I do?" he snarled. "What other choice do we have?"

"Wait, and watch. Perhaps you'll find some rich treasure tomorrow, and the Hillsfarrans will fall out with each other when they divide their spoils." Tentatively Estine took his arm and leaned her head against his shoulder. "It can't continue like this for much longer."

"No, it can't," Angar said. He sighed, and let her lead him to the bedchamber.

In the morning, Odelmor's soldiers did not appear at the Hulmaster keep until almost noon. Angar was not surprised. The expatriate lords were rapidly losing whatever personal industry and discipline that might have once carried them to their high positions. With little to do and no one to please other than themselves, they had fallen into the habit of keeping at their revels long past midnight and rising late. In a few more months, their hardened mercenaries would be little more than a slothful band of ill-kempt brigands. But for now, they were still more than sufficient to deal with Angar and all his folk. The soldiers paid little attention to him as they led him through the ruined districts of old Hulburg in a cold, steady drizzle, but that was to his liking. For today at least the

common soldiers still showed him a shred of deference, even if there were mocking smiles or muttered remarks behind his back.

Hammerbold Abbey overlooked the gray Moonsea to the south and west, offering a broad view of the city and its harbor. The old temple had been the grandest in Hulburg back in its day, but that had been two or three centuries ago. The roof had long ago fallen in, leaving a shell of a building with empty windows and an interior choked with rubble and weedy shrubs. Odelmor and another twenty warriors waited for Angar by the ruins of the Tyrite abbey.

“Ah, there you are, Angar,” Odelmor said with a small smile. He was dressed in a long coat of scale armor, and wore a large broadsword with a plain, well-worn grip at his side. “As you see, we found the abbey.”

Angar glanced up at the jagged walls and brushed the water from his cloak. He wore a shirt of light mail underneath, and a short sword belted at his hip. He had a little skill with a blade, but he had no illusions about besting any of the Hillsfarran expatriates, who were all seasoned mercenaries. He was armed only to protect himself against any tomb-guardians they might blunder into, and if it came to that, he was likely better off staying out of the way of more experienced fighters. “I’m afraid I don’t know where the crypts lie,” he said.

“No matter. Zerna here divined the entrance.” Odelmor nodded at a black-cloaked woman in the robes of a mage who stood nearby. Her ash-blond hair was held in a strange spiraling coiffure by silver combs. “My soldiers have already cleared the rubble from the doorway.”

Zerna inclined her head in acknowledgment, and said, “We are ready to proceed, Lord Odelmor. If you’ll follow me?”

The mage led the way as Odelmor, Angar, and a squad of mercenaries picked their way through the old temple doorway and the rubble within. Near the building’s rear wall the wizard stepped aside and inclined her head; Angar saw that more of Odelmor’s soldiers waited in the ruins by a narrow stairway descending into darkness. An antechamber from the main chapel? he wondered.

“Good work!” Odelmor said. “Let us see what we shall find.” The exiled captain nodded to the waiting soldiers. A pair of warriors with shields and drawn swords descended carefully into the dark stairway, followed closely by two more who carried bright torches so that the soldiers in front could keep both their hands free for fighting. “After you, my lord harmach,” said Odelmor. Angar nodded and followed after the soldiers who led the way down the dust-choked steps, and then Odelmor brought up the rear with Zerna and several more of his mercenary fighters.

The stairs descended fifteen feet in a straight, steep flight before opening into a low barrel-vaulted hall with thick columns to hold up the ceiling above. The air was musty and thick. Torchlight glimmered on slick, wet masonry. Beneath their feet, worn stone slabs covered with runes—and sometimes the likeness of some long-dead person—marked dozens of crypts. Angar shivered; the place was cold and unpleasant.

Odelmor stooped down to peer at the crypts under the floor. “Common graves,” he said aloud. “Well-off merchants and burghers, I would guess, but not nobles.”

“Shall we open a few, my lord?” one of the warriors asked.

“It’s likely not worth the trouble. Let’s see if we can find the old harmachs first.” Odelmor straightened and looked over at his wizard. “What does your magic tell you, Zerna?”

The black-robed mage closed her eyes and extended a hand, as if feeling for some subtle air current with her fingertips. After a moment she opened her eyes, one eyebrow raised. “I sense little gold here, my lord, but the crypts are very well-warded against divination. Even after centuries the old protections still stand. Someone was very thorough about it.”

“My lord!” called another soldier from the other side of the hall. “I think I’ve found the royal crypts.”

Odelmor hurried over; Angar followed him. The mercenary stood by a large archway in the western side of the chamber. A large round chamber lay beyond, its walls lined with eleven large sarcophagi inclined with their feet toward the center of the room. Each stone lid was carved in the image of a man or woman lying as if asleep, with old Dethek runes decorating the sides. “Ah, now this is better,” the Red Plume captain said. “No pious townsfolk here, I’d wager..”

Angar moved close to the nearest sarcophagus and gazed on the old stone image. It was a proud lord with a large mustache. He was shown in armor, with the mail coif and conical helm favored a century or two past. His hands gripped the hilt of a sword over his heart, with the point extending a handspan below his knees—the image of a warrior-king if he had ever seen one. A flush of shame darkened Angar’s face; he could only imagine what his ancestor would make of House Hulmaster now. With one hand he brushed the dust away from the old runes, and read aloud: “Cosimar, First Harmach of Hulburg, who reigned from the Year of Cold Claws until the Year of the Squire.”

Odelmor turned and grinned at Angar. “The founder of your line, Angar! This must be a proud day for you.”

Angar’s mouth twisted in a bitter smile. He doubted that Cosimar would have regarded it as a proud day. “That is not quite correct, my lord. Cosimar’s line came of the Nanthon family, but they died out after a century or so. The Hulmaster line begins in 1050, the Year of the Keening Gale.” He drifted to his right, passing three more sarcophagi, and stopped before the fifth in the chamber. “Here is Ivar Hulmaster, my forebear.”

The Hillsfarran shrugged. He was not really interested in the details of the Hulmaster family’s reign. “Zerna, do you detect any peril here?”

The mage searched the room again. “No, my lord.”

“Then let’s open these up and see what the old lords of Hulburg left for us,” Odelmor said. He smiled at Angar, and turned his attention to supervising his soldiers as they set to work on the first of the crypts with crowbar and hammer. The shrill ring of steel on stone echoed loudly in the chamber.

Angar grimaced and returned his attention to Ivar’s crypt. This one was much like Cosimar’s, but Ivar was shown in a stately robe, with a tall staff at his side. Was he a wizard? Angar wondered. He’d never heard any such tale, but then again, his father Argyl hadn’t relayed much of the family history to Angar. He suspected that Argyl hadn’t known much, in truth. Hulburg had been in ruins for all his father’s days and for most of his grandfather’s as well. Much of what the Hulmasters had once known or claimed was

lost in the rubble of the city. He peered closer to study the Dethek runes under Ivar's name and the years of his reign. They read:

Ivar, Accomplished Mage and Nephew to Aesperus the Great, King of Thentur, who Granted unto Ivar and all his Descendants Dominion over Hulburg in the Year of the Keening Gale. In Keeping with the Proclamation of Aesperus the King, by the Name Hulmaster shall the Line of Ivar be Known.

Nephew to Aesperus? Angar read the inscription again, wondering if perhaps he had misread it. But the runes did not change. He snorted aloud at the irony; Odelmor had meant to mock him with the suggestion that he might learn something about the Hulmasters of old, but the expatriate lord's prediction had turned out to be true. Angar had never heard that the Hulmasters were any kin of old Aesperus. It made a grim sort of sense; Aesperus had come to power in Thentia around the year 1050, and quickly subjugated the nearby cities. Of course he would have disposed of Hulburg's old ruling line and rewarded someone close to him with lordship over the city. "Cosimar's line died out, indeed," he murmured aloud.

A loud crash of stone came from behind him, where the mercenaries had succeeded in prying off the last of the sarcophagi lids. Angar ignored it and moved to his right to examine the tomb of Ivar's successor. The carving on this one showed a warrior-mage holding a wand and a sword crossed over his chest.

Rivan Hulmaster, Son of Ivar, Harmach of Hulburg from the Year of Slaughter to the Year of Bloody Fields. By his Valiant Rebellion was Aesperus the Tyrant Undone and his Kingdom brought to Nothing in the Year of the Bursting Song, Freeing the Realms of the Moonsea.

Angar frowned again, puzzling over the words. So Aesperus had made Ivar lord of Hulburg, but then Ivar's son had rebelled against his great-uncle? Angar knew that Aesperus's old kingdom had fallen centuries ago, but he hadn't ever wondered what part his ancestors might have played in the events of the time. The glories and triumphs of his predecessors simply were not relevant to the sadly diminished domain he ostensibly governed. He'd spent all his life surrounded by the empty ruins they'd left behind; clearly whatever victories the old Hulmasters had won in their day had not lasted long.

"One side," a soldier said to him. Angar looked up and realized that Odelmor's mercenaries had reached Rivan's crypt. He scowled, but stepped aside. Nothing he could say or do would sway Odelmor from his course. The mercenary lord's men were busy gathering the funereal jewelry from the crypts they'd already opened, while Odelmor examined the plunder—rings of gold, circlets and pendants, jeweled daggers and belts. It did not seem like very much to Angar, and the mercenaries looked disappointed in their take.

Odelmor snorted and turned away from his trinkets. "Apparently your ancestors were not as wealthy as I'd been led to believe," he said in a sour tone. "Let us hope their prosperity was greater in another harmach's reign."

Angar did not reply. The soldiers with their pry bar went to work on Rivan's sarcophagus. Stone chipped and cracked under their careless haste, and Angar winced. It

was bad enough that he had no power to keep the invaders out of this place, but he was quickly discovering that he had more pride in his family than he remembered. To stand passively and watch his ancestors robbed of the few things they'd been buried with made him sick to his stomach. With a groan and a puff of old, foul air and dust, the stone lid slid to the floor and broke in two. The soldiers moved on to the crypt of Rivan's father, and Odelmor stepped up to peer at Rivan's ancient bones.

"Faugh! There's little in this one, as well." Odelmor motioned to another of his warriors, who eagerly came forward to strip the skeleton of its small treasures—a pair of rings, a modest gold chain around the neck, and a handsome sword with a brass hilt that lay at the dead lord's hip. He turned away from the opened sarcophagus, an ugly scowl on his face. "Were they poor, or simply stingy? Perhaps the Hulmasters of old begrudged the proper attiring of their dead."

Angar watched as the Hillsfarrans finished with Rivan's crypt. He felt little kinship to the ancient corpse; he wasn't completely certain that his own father was really the Hulmaster he claimed to be, after all. But despite himself, he drifted forward to look on the crumbling bones and tattered clothing. The empty sockets gazed up at him in silent outrage, and he shuddered. He was not especially sensitive to such things, but in the lands about Hulburg there were powers who lingered in places of death, and it was not wise to provoke them. He studied the remains and started to turn away—but then his eye fell on an old amulet of some kind that was lying beneath Rivan's bones. It was a plain thing of copper, green with great age, and seemingly of no great value. Odelmor's greedy soldiers hadn't even bothered with it. Yet it caught his eye and held him. He gazed on it as the Hillsfarrans broke open Ivar's crypt. Without really knowing why, Angar removed the amulet from the tomb.

He glanced quickly at Odelmor and his soldiers, but none had noticed him; they were busy with the last few crypts. Angar peered at the copper amulet, brushing his fingertip over the old green metal. There was magic here, a faint cold whisper of power that brought a shudder to his frame. Strange that Odelmor's wizard hadn't discerned the amulet's enchantment, but then again, Zerna had remarked on the wards against divination; perhaps the old counterspells in the tomb had prevented her from sensing its presence. Angar could make out a faint tracery on its surface, a simple whorl with a vertical stroke and a pair of dots . . . *the sigil of Aesperus*.

He drew in his breath with a hiss and almost dropped the thing. He'd seen the sign before in barrows or tombs claimed by the King in Copper. It was said that Aesperus was jealous of things that had once been his, and bitterly resented the living, especially those who lived in the small, weak cities that were the wreckage of his short-lived kingdom. That meant the amulet in his hand was a thing that might be deadly perilous to own. Yet the harmach Rivan had owned it once—for that matter, if the inscription on his crypt told the truth, had defied Aesperus, rebelling against him. What trinket of Aesperus's had Rivan carried to his tomb? Had it protected the first of the Hulmasters from the lich in some way? Given him power over Aesperus? Or was it merely a trophy, a memento of Aesperus's defeat?

"What do you have there, Angar?" Odelmor asked sharply.

Angar looked up, startled. Odelmor had finally noticed him. He hesitated before answering. If the amulet had some virtue of magical protection, it was very valuable, something he did not want to surrender. On the other hand, if the amulet was the property

of Aesperus, something the King in Copper desired, then it was dangerous. And something that was dangerous might be turned into a weapon, if used in the right way. It occurred to him that he might be holding the tool he needed to free himself of Odelmor, if only he could think of a way to use it. But that would never happen if he allowed the mercenary lord to take it from him.

With sudden recklessness, he decided to gamble on it. He held up the amulet in plain sight and gave a small shrug. "A trinket from one of the old lords. As long as you were helping yourself to the rest, I thought I'd keep something for myself."

Odelmor glanced at the green copper amulet. The mage sigil on it was very faint indeed, so faint that it couldn't be seen from more than a foot or two away . . . or so Angar hoped. The mercenary looked back to Angar's eyes and gave a small chuckle. "Well, why not? It doesn't look like much to me. Keep it."

Angar could not bring himself to thank Odelmor for allowing him to keep something he'd just plucked from his ancestor's resting place. He nodded and slipped the amulet into a pouch by his belt. Then he withdrew to far side of the chamber, and made a show of examining the inscriptions on the tombs of the other harmachs, hoping that no one would think to look to closely at Harmach Rivan's sarcophagus.

In another quarter-hour, Odelmor and his warriors were finished with their grave-robbing in the crypt of the harmachs. The mercenaries searched throughout the rest of the abbey's catacombs for any more tombs of interest, but after a fruitless hour Odelmor grew tired of his day's work and abandoned the effort.

They returned to the ruined chapel above. Kindon Marstel was waiting for them with a small number of his own soldiers. Together he and Odelmor inspected the plunder of the harmachs' crypts. "Hardly worth the effort," Marstel said when they finished. "I told you there was little more to gain by picking over Hulburg's bones, Hekman."

"I am beginning to believe you," Odelmor said to the other captain. He turned his attention to Angar with the predatory smile of a shark. "Surely there must be something worthwhile here, young Angar. I grow tired of digging through rubble for shiny bits of rubbish and beggar's baubles."

Then go somewhere else! Angar fumed silently. But he kept his anger from his face and instead said, "You might recall that you aren't the first to plunder the city, Lord Odelmor. Both the Zhents and the Mulmasterites have sacked Hulburg within a man's lifetime. They left little behind, as I well know." He laughed bitterly. "I'm sure that you are familiar with the reduced circumstances of House Hulmaster."

Odelmor scowled at Angar. He had little liking for anyone laughing at his expense, regardless of the cause. "Have we reached the end of your hospitality, then?" he asked.

Angar spread his hands. "My lord, what more do you want from me and mine? You are free to make your home here—I have no strength to say otherwise. Call yourself lord or baron or harmach if you like. I cannot stop you. But if you want to live in greater comfort and gather more wealth, your men will have to earn it with the work of their hands. I have nothing left to give you."

"I can think of one or two things more," Odelmor growled. "Your title, as you suggest. That miserable old pile you call a keep, perhaps. Or that plump little wife you try to keep hidden in your quarters. That might be an entertaining diversion for a day or two." He drew his sword and advanced on Angar.

“About time,” Kindon Marstel remarked. He spat on the ground and smiled for the first time that Angar had seen.

Angar was far from ready to die on the point of Odelmor’s sword, but he simply didn’t see what else he could do. And the thought of the mercenary lord sitting at his place in Daggard, sleeping in his bed, using his wife with the callous disregard he brought to everything he did . . . he bared his teeth in a snarl of frustration and reached for the hilt of his sword. Odelmor would carve him to pieces, but at least he’d die with steel in his hand and defiant words in his mouth. But his fingers brushed the pouch by his belt, and an idea born of desperation leaped into his thoughts.

He backed away from Odelmor and held up his hand. “Enough!” he shouted. “There may be one thing more. But you must promise to let my wife and I leave unharmed if I show it to you.”

Marstel laughed drily. “He’s lying, Hekman.”

Odelmor hesitated and cocked his head to one side as he studied Angar’s eyes. “Most likely,” he admitted. “Still, it only takes a moment to hear him out. Well, boy? What do you think you have?”

“The treasure vaults of Aesperus, King of Thentur,” Angar said. “Most of his hoard was never found. I think I know where it lies.”

“Bah! If you knew where to find the treasure of a king, you wouldn’t be so poor,” said Odelmor. “You’d have taken it for yourself long ago.”

“I never dared to. The place is haunted. You’d need magic, or plenty of steel. I don’t have those things, but you do. The treasure’s yours for the taking—if you agree to let me go free.”

“Hmmp. You won’t go anywhere until we see whether there’s anything to this treasure of yours.” Odelmor looked over to the wizard Zerna. “What do you make of it?”

“I know of Aesperus and his old kingdom, but I’ve never heard of any missing treasure,” Zerna answered with a shrug. “His last stronghold was somewhere nearby Hulburg. But it may not be wise to seek out the King in Copper, my lord. He had a fearsome reputation.”

“You can always kill me later if I’m lying to you,” Angar pointed out.

“Of course, but trust me, you’d much prefer to die now than to play me for a fool.” Odelmor gazed at Angar for a long moment, then snorted. “All right. Show me where this old king’s ransom is hidden.”

“It would be better to go tomorrow, my lord. Your wizard is right; Aesperus is no trifling matter. You’ll need more men, and it’s a few miles from here. If we leave now, we wouldn’t arrive until after sundown. You should wait for daylight.”

“Maybe we should, and maybe we shouldn’t,” Marstel said. “I think he intends some sort of mischief, Odelmor.”

Odelmor nodded. “So do I.” He looked at his warriors and said, “Gather the troops by the keep. I want sixty men ready to march within the hour. We’ll go today.”

As it turned out, it took the mercenary captains twice that long to organize their expedition. Angar wanted to go back to his keep to speak with Estine, but Marstel and Odelmor didn’t allow him to. He waited by Odelmor’s side as the Hillsfarrans made ready to march, wondering whether he had any hope at all of saving his own life or was simply ensuring a very unpleasant death in a few hours’ time. To his surprise, he found that he was not as frightened by the prospect as he might have been. Over the last few

tendays he'd expected the invading mercenaries to kill him at almost any time, and he'd simply become tired of it all. A strange, reckless mood was on him; whatever happened in the Highfells, he wasn't going to be bullied and threatened by the Hillsfarrans any longer.

They set out in midafternoon, following the old road that led up the Winterspear valley. Marstel and a score of his own soldiers accompanied Odelmor and his troops. The two mercenary captains rode at the head of the column, with Angar mounted on a skittish roan gelding at their side, while most of the soldiers followed on foot. The steady rain slackened as the day waned, driven off by a cold wind from the north. Angar led the column several miles alongside the river, and then turned on a trail that climbed up the eastern side of the vale and broke out onto the open moorlands known as the Highfells. Ahead of them the snowy Galena Mountains loomed, their peaks lost in streaming clouds.

Odelmor wrapped his fluttering cloak closer to his torso and frowned. "There's nothing but old barrows up here," he said. "Where are you taking us?"

"The Wailing Tower," Angar replied. He pointed at the foothills of the mountains. "It lies another four or five miles ahead."

"We hardly needed your help to find Aesperus's old keep! Any of my men could have found their way here."

"Perhaps, but do they know the way to the Vaults of the Dead that lie beneath it?"

Marstel gave Angar a sharp look. "You mean to say that you've visited the Tower and found a way to the vaults below? I can't believe that you would have the nerve for it."

"I didn't. But I've spoken with adventurers who have—the Company of the Black Griffon, for example. They found their way into the Vaults and escaped with their lives."

"How do you know they didn't lie about what they found?" Odelmor demanded.

Angar shrugged. "I suppose we'll all find out soon enough."

They reached the ruins of Aesperus's final fortress an hour after sunset. The night was moonless and cold, with a bitter wind that constantly threatened to blow out the guttering torches the mercenaries lit. Long ago the old tower had been broken in a siege; the walls showed the damage of bombardment by heavy stones, and the gatehouse was little more than a pile of rubble; Angar guessed that the building had been destroyed in the final assault. Odelmor ordered his soldiers forward, and entered the tower's courtyard only after they reported that the place was deserted.

Angar swung himself down from his mount, and paced forward, studying the old fortress as he compared what he saw with what he'd heard over the years. If he failed to find the doorway he sought, he'd most likely die in the courtyard in a matter of minutes. Of course, there was an excellent chance that he would die if he did find the doorway. Few of those who passed within ever came out again, and while the large company of mercenaries around Angar was reassuring in its way, he had a dark suspicion that numbers might not count for much in this place. There was a deeper chill in the air than the cold north wind and the damp would seem to account for, and he shuddered. "The main tower," he told Odelmor and Marstel. "There's a hidden door in the cellars."

"You know this because you heard it from some adventurer?" Marstel asked.

"Yes, Lord Marstel. The mage Irina told me about it two years ago."

"But this adventurer and her companions didn't loot the place themselves?"

Angar allowed himself a small smile. "No. They fled for their lives."

Marstel hissed in displeasure. “So you think to lead us into a trap, then?” he demanded.

Angar shrugged. “There were seven in the Company of the Black Griffon. You have ten times that many here. What do you fear?”

Marstel scowled, but Odelmor allowed himself a small smile. “Nothing I’ve seen so far,” he said in answer. “Lead the way, my boy.”

Before he could change his mind, the young harmach took a torch from one of the mercenaries nearby and strode into the shadows of the empty tower. He could almost hear the dead of the place whispering in the darkness, a sound like the rustling of dry old leaves. The sense of unseen eyes upon him grew steadily stronger, until it was all that he could do to walk forward. Under any other circumstances Angar would have turned back then, but he was here to court death. He paused a moment within the threshold, looking in at the great ruined hall of the tower. The stones were blackened with centuries-old soot, and nothing remained of the furnishings or decorations that might once have been displayed here. An archway led down into darkness on the far side of the hall. If the stories he’d been told were true, that way led to the tower dungeons. A shuffle of feet and the jingle of mail at his back steeled his courage, and he crossed the hall. Wide stairs led down into the shadows.

“Caution, my lord,” the wizard Zerna murmured to Odelmor behind him. “There is potent magic sleeping here, and the shadows are more than they seem.”

“Do you fear to follow me?” Angar asked over his shoulder. He strode boldly down the steps, his torch flickering weakly before him. The steps wound downward through two full turns, then opened into a wide chamber in the tower’s foundations. Here he found old bones scattered on the floor amid rusting scraps of steel—the remains of warriors who fell defending Aesperus to the last, or so he guessed. He ignored them and raised his torch higher to inspect the chamber walls. This was the weak point in his plan, for he was not exactly certain how to find the secret door Irina had spoken of before she killed herself in the guest-chamber of Daggeward, her mind unhinged by whatever had happened to her in this place. There was something about a black dragon . . .

“Well? Where is your hidden door, Angar?” Odelmor asked.

Angar frowned and studied the room more closely. The floor was cluttered with the debris of fallen masonry and the old bones, so the door that Irina spoke of wasn’t under the floor. The corners of the room were carved in the shape of columns with serpentine shapes winding about them; he moved to the one on his right and examined it carefully, but he could detect no hint of color. He moved on to the next one, and found the same thing. The serpentine shape certainly looked draconic, but it had the same hue as the rest of the masonry in the room. Its face was rather skull-like, with two large horns curling forward from its head. Of course, he realized. The color’s long gone, but the face is right. He set his hand on the skull-like carving, and pushed. Nothing happened, so he tried twisting and poking at the eyes, the fangs, and then the horns.

The left horn turned in his grasp. There was a sudden grating of stone behind him, and Angar whirled to find a large section of the wall nearby sinking into the floor, revealing another great staircase leading down. Eerie green light spilled out of the opening; the passage beyond was illuminated by dimly glowing vapors swirling in thick glass globes. Statues of twisted skeletons stood arrayed in ranks to either side of the steps. The aura of menace that spilled from the passage was palpable; Angar heard the

nervous muttering of the men behind Odelmor. But he forced himself to walk into the passage and descended again, this time a long, straight, shallow stair that must have burrowed far under the hillside the tower stood upon. At the end stood a great hall, with a double row of tall pillars in the shape of gaunt, groaning giants who bore the weight of the ceiling on their shoulders. More archways led deeper into the vaults; a cold wind sighed in the shadows.

“There is dread magic in this place,” the wizard Zerna murmured. “We should leave.”

Odelmor took two steps up to Angar and seized him by the arm, spinning him around. “Do you think to make a fool of me?” the Hillsfarran demanded. “I see no great treasure here! I’ll leave you bound and gagged on the floor for whatever evil spirits haunt this place if you’ve lied to us!”

“Then search the vaults for yourself,” Angar answered. “This chamber is the only one I’ve been told of. If any have ventured past this hall, they’ve never returned to tell the tale. But I haven’t lied to you, Odelmor.” He gave a low, soft laugh. “This is the abode of Aesperus, the King in Copper, and no one has ever despoiled the vaults beyond.”

“You dare to laugh at me!” Odelmor snarled. With a single powerful blow of his mailed fist, he backhanded Angar across the mouth, sending the young lord reeling to the ground. White agony seared Angar’s face, and his vision swam darkly for a moment. When he could see and think again, the taste of iron was in his mouth, and his hand came away from his face splattered with blood. He raised himself off the floor on his elbows and looked up, expecting to see Odelmor’s blade over him. But the mercenary lord was no longer looking at him—he was staring at the dark archway opposite the entrance passage. Angar felt a cold, sick dread gathering at the nape of his neck and *knew* that something terrible was approaching behind him. Somehow, he found the will to turn his head and look.

At the far end of the hall stood a tall, robed figure dressed in a tattered mantle. A spiked crown rode upon its naked skull, and a deathly green flame burned in its vacant eye sockets. Bands of rune-carved copper were riveted to the yellowing bones, as if they might fall apart without the metal to join it together. Streamers of dead white mist poured out across the stone floor around it, and the very air dripped with numbing dread. It leaned on a great black staff, and it laughed in a dry and horrible voice. The sound of its scorn was like an icy hand on Angar’s quivering heart.

“Such a great company!” the robed figure said. “Have you all come to help yourselves to the treasure of Aesperus, then?” It made a small motion with its hand, and at the far end of the passage the secret door guarded by the black dragon slid shut with the grating of stone.

None of the mercenaries spoke for a long moment. Then Odelmor raised his sword and pointed it at the King in Copper. “Destroy that thing,” he said in a thin voice. The sound of his own words seemed to hearten him some, and he looked back at his soldiers. “Did you hear me? *Destroy it!*”

Zerna gestured with a wand and shouted out a word of arcane power. From the tip of the wand a ray of shimmering ruby energy sprang, aimed directly at the lich’s heart. But dark mist seemed to gather instantly to intercept the ray a few feet from Aesperus. Crossbows thrummed as mercenaries took aim and loosed their bolts, but Aesperus ignored the missiles as if they were children’s toys. They clattered from his bones or stuck in his robes without seeming to do him harm. The lich fixed his eyes on Zerna, and

stretched out one bony claw toward the wizard. With a horrible shriek, Zerna *crumpled*, her torso crushed as if by some gigantic unseen hand. Blood burst from the mage's mouth, and then her body was dashed headlong across the room. One of the silver combs of her coiffure clattered to the stone not far from where Angar lay.

"Fools," said Aesperus. Then he intoned the words of a spell so terrible that Angar covered his ears and screamed into the dusty floor. A wave of dark power rippled through the hall, followed by a sudden chorus of screams such as he had never imagined men might make and an awful, wet, crunching sound. Swords rang on the stone floor as they fell, and the mercenaries gave in to a mad rush. Some fled down the passage despite the sealed door at the end, some ran aimlessly in the great hall or fled into the archways leading deeper into the lich's lair, and a few of the boldest and most determined rushed the lich with blades drawn.

Angar looked up just in time to see the King in Copper wrench the bones out of his attackers with that same awful sound he'd heard before. Gory flesh spilled to the ground as wet, gleaming skeletons jerked themselves upright and staggered back at the rest of the company. Shriill, wild keening arose around him, and through the walls dozens of tattered specters raced to claw at the warriors who still stood. He saw Odelmor die with a specter's intangible talons gripped around his heart; the mercenary captain let out a low, whimpering moan, his flesh whitening as if with a sudden frost, then crumpling to the ground. Unable to bear another moment of it, Angar hid his face and screamed again, trying to shut out sight and sound of the horror unfolding around him.

After a long time, he realized that the only voice he heard screaming was his own. He fell silent, shuddering on the floor. There was no other sound in the great vault . . . but he was not alone. He felt again the lich's cold regard on him. "Enough," Aesperus said. "Cease your groveling and meet death with some dignity."

Angar's limbs felt weak as water, but he obeyed. Slowly he climbed to his feet, averting his eyes from the carnage around him. His hand shook as he reached into the pouch at his belt and closed his hand on the copper amulet within. "Wait, Lord Aesperus!" he said thickly through his bruised mouth. "I hold your phylactery!" Then he drew it out and held it before him.

There was a long pause before Aesperus spoke. "Where did you get that?" the lich demanded.

"From the crypt of Rivan Hulmaster, my lord."

The King in Copper said nothing in reply. Angar kept his gaze fixed on the old copper pendant whose chain he gripped in his hand. He dared not meet the lich's eyes, but he felt the awful weight of the King in Copper's regard on him. Then, finally, the lich spoke. "You are a Hulmaster," he said. His voice was like the rustling of dead leaves on a cold winter wind. "I know the smell of your blood. Did you think that little pendant would save you if you came to rob me in my house, fool?"

"No, Lord Aesperus," Angar managed to reply. "These others who intended to rob you, they were my enemies. I came to return your property."

"And you expect my gratitude?" the lich said softly.

Angar licked his lips. His hands were almost shaking with terror, but he pressed on. "No. I mean to bargain with you, my lord."

The lich laughed coldly. "Why should I bargain with you? You cannot destroy me with that, young fool, while I can slay you where you stand."

“I know it, great king. But I hope that you will see that it may be more useful to let me leave this place alive.”

“That seems unlikely. The amulet I will have in a moment regardless of what you do. What else can you offer me?”

“A fearsome reputation, my lord. I will see to it that many people learn what happened here tonight, and I will do my best to dissuade any other would-be robbers from troubling you. From this day forward, none shall rob the places of the dead in my domain if it lies in my power to stop them.” Angar motioned with the amulet. “And, of course, I shall return this to you.”

The lich considered him for a long moment. “You must swear not only for yourself, but for all who follow in your line,” he said. “You may have little care for what follows after you die, but I may abide for centuries to come.”

Angar nodded and held out the amulet to the lich. He did not raise his eyes above the hem of the lich’s robe. “I swear it. For myself and my line after me.”

“Very well. Then you have my leave to go back to your little realm in the Winterspear Vale. But the Highfells and the places where the dead are laid, those are mine and mine alone. Do not let my realm be troubled by any from Hulburg.” Bony fingers reached forward to take the pendant from Angar’s hand. He had to force his hand open by sheer will, and then made himself stand without shrinking away.

“I thank you, Lord Aesperus,” he said.

The lich laughed softly. “Soon enough you will lie in a tomb, too. And then you will belong to me, as you have sworn. You may rue your hasty oath on that day, young fool. Now go.”

Angar nodded and backed away, picking his way through the remnants of the Red Plume mercenaries. He stumbled on something that had once been a man’s face and his nerve broke completely. Of their own accord, his feet carried him into a mad, panicked run, and strange sobbing sounds came from his throat even as his mind reeled. He didn’t remember climbing the stairs back up to the ruined tower or floundering out of the rubble-strewn courtyard. He didn’t remember anything, in fact, until he found himself lying facedown in the thin grass of the moorland miles from the Wailing Tower, with the pale glow of sunrise lightening the clouds to the east.

Trembling, he climbed to his feet again and glanced behind him. He saw nothing but the deep shadows of the mountains. He turned the other way and saw the trail leading back to Hulburg ahead. Odelmor was dead, and Marstel too, and with them the better part of their mercenaries. Whatever awaited Angar in the morning, it was certainly better than what he had just escaped.

“There are still a hundred or more of Odelmor and Marstel’s men camped in Hulburg,” he reminded himself. And then he laughed, long and shrilly, a laugh that was not quite as steady as it should have been, a laugh that had little humor in it. “But they certainly won’t be robbing any more tombs in Hulburg, will they?”

The mercenaries who remained were in need of a new lord, even if they didn’t know it yet. And if they wanted to eat, well, he had little more food to surrender, but he had land to grant them for homesteads and pastures. He snorted, wondering if he could make himself harmach of Hulburg in fact and not only in name. Then Angar Hulmaster squared his shoulders and walked down to meet the coming day.

THE END