



The Floodgate

Counselors and Kings • Book II

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PRELUDE

The battle had turned against the laraken. The monster knew this, its enemies did not. They continued to fight with the frenzy peculiar to brave men who wish to die well.

Men had come into the Swamp of Akhlaur before, but these warriors were armed not with enchantments but with wicked swords and pikes and arrows. With them was a strangely familiar elf woman who was neither food nor foe.

The laraken advanced, shrieking like the demon it resembled and paying little heed to the arrows and spears that bristled its hide. Its taloned feet crushed the fallen humans. A casual kick tossed aside the body of the wemic—the mighty lion-centaur who had died protecting the elf woman. The battered corpse thumped and skidded along the sodden ground, splattering the surviving warriors with fetid water before coming to rest amid the lurching roots of a bilboa tree.

Still the laraken came, charging into the humans' ranks—and away from its source of life-giving magic. The monster's shrieks had less to do with battle lust than with mind-numbing hunger. Greenish ichor leaked from countless wounds, but starvation, not the humans' weapons, would be the laraken's death.

Its only nourishment was the elf woman's

spells and the tiny draught of life-magic offered by the tall, red-haired warrior. The laraken greedily drained this scant sustenance, leaving the human as translucent as a dew-drop. Yet the man lived, and fought on!

So did his comrades, and none fought more fiercely than the dark-hawk human who clung to the laraken's back like a tick, slashing until the monster screamed with rage and pain.

The laraken's most formidable foe was the small female, a human whose eyes were dark pools of magic and whose voice could not be ignored. Her song lured the laraken onward, when every instinct urged it to flee back to the trickle of liquid magic that was its main sustenance.

She Who Called perched in a tall tree, far above the battle. The magical song pouring from her filled the laraken with exquisite longing, both courting and mocking its hunger. Frustration slowly gave way to fear: the laraken remembered the long-ago wizard whose magic could not be eaten.

A flash of silver darted toward the laraken's eye and exploded into a burst of liquid agony. The laraken screamed and clamped its upper pair of hands against its ruined eye. Its lower arms flailed wildly as it raked at the warrior who had blinded it. Talons found human flesh. At last the man released his hold and rolled down the laraken's back.

Gripped by a desperate, mindless rush for survival, the laraken broke free of the singer's grip and hurtled toward the pool. The elf woman shouted a strange word and tossed something into the bubbling spill of magic. In an instant, the bubbles grew into iridescent, man-sized domes, which burst into sprays of life-giving droplets. As instinctively as a creature aflame, the laraken threw itself at the water.

Immediately the monster was seized by a liquid storm that dwarfed the fury of battle. The laraken fell—or perhaps flew—through the whirling white terror. Its battered senses registered the bruising tumble, the roar of the water, and the thunderous, hollow thud of the magical gate slamming shut.

And then, silence.

Dazed and disoriented, the laraken gave itself over to the water. It drifted, vaguely aware of the tingle of energy that whispered against its scaled hide and sank deep into bone and sinew.

After a time the laraken began to take note of its new surroundings. Water was everywhere, but not like the water in its home swamp. This was liquid magic—less dense than mundane water, more alive than air. The laraken could breathe this water, and each breath brought renewed strength.

The monster moved forward cautiously, speeding its way with swimming motions of its four webbed hands. It did not marvel at the beauty of the coral palaces or undulating sea forests as lush and colorful as a jungle. It paid no heed to the intricately carved arch framing the place where the magical gate lurked, just beyond sight and sense. The eel-like appendages that surrounded the laraken's demon face stirred. Reptilian eyes snapped open and took focus, jaws yawned wide, and fangs extended like unsheathed claws. The eels began to writhe about, snapping at a passing school of tiny, jewel-colored fish.

An overwhelming stench of magic engulfed the laraken, an acrid, gut-clenching odor that the monster instinctively recognized as danger. The laraken spun, snarling, to face the unknown threat.

A white blur swept in with preternatural speed. The laraken's first perception was vast size, and the yawn of a huge, hideous gate. In a heartbeat the laraken recognized that the "gate" was actually the jaws of a gigantic shark, easily wide enough to engulf its twelve-foot prey. Wedge-shaped teeth lined the jaws in multiple rows. Beyond was bone, and nothing more.

Instinct prompted the laraken to flee, but it sensed the futility of this course. Instead, the laraken leaped directly *into* the tooth-and-bone gate, diving powerfully for the open water beyond those empty white ribs.

The skeletal shark's bones folded around its prey. Cartilage creaked as the ribs clattered together and laced like tightly entwined fingers. The laraken's head slammed into the narrow end of the basket weave of bones, abruptly cutting off its dive to safety. Two interlocking ribs sheered off one of the laraken's eel appendages. The disembodied head tumbled free through the roiling waters. A passing fish snapped it up and darted triumphantly away.

The laraken hooked its foot talons on the shark's spine and swung upside down to grasp a pair of locked ribs with all four hands. Bracing its feet, the laraken threw its strength into wrenching the bars of its cage apart. The shark's flexible cartilage buckled, but would neither break nor give way. Frantic now, the laraken flung itself from one side of its prison to another until it was battered and bleeding. The skeletal shark merely kept swimming, long past the lure of blood.

The laraken threw back its hideous head and shrieked like a demon new to damnation. Its cries sent bubbles jetting out to mingle with the thrashing currents.

Through the sound of churning water and its own roaring protests, a new note began to play at the edges of the monster's consciousness, a magic more focused and pungent than that of the water. Instinctively the laraken reached for it but found no sustenance. The elusive magic smelled a bit like the elf woman's life-force, only stronger.

Stronger, and suddenly familiar.

Abject terror seized the laraken. Abandoning any hope of escape, it cowered into the farthest depths of its skeletal cage and began to shriek mindlessly, like a baby monkey that clings to a tree limb and awaits the jaws of a jungle cat.

The laraken saw the wizard, and its scream choked off into a strangled whimper. In profound silence the monster waited—and hoped—for death.



Akhlaur stalked toward the skeletal shark, moving as easily through the magical water as he had once walked beneath Halruaa's sky. The necromancer's magic had sustained his life through his long exile, yet two hundred years in the Elemental Plane of Water had profoundly changed him. He was still a powerful man, tall and lank, with fine black eyes and strong, well-formed features. Now tiny scales covered his skin, and gills shaped like twin lightning bolts slashed the sides of his neck. The fingers holding the wizard's staff were long and webbed, the skin faintly green in hue.

The wizard had not just survived but prospered. His servants supplied him with robes of fine green sea linen, embroidered with runes made with black seed pearls. His necromantic artistry was much in evidence. The staff he carried was not wood, but a living eel locked into a fierce, rigid pose. Small spats of lightning sizzled from the creature's fixed snarl and sent light shimmering across the wizard's bald green head.

Akhlaur reached out with his eel staff and stroked the shark's skull between its empty, glowing eyes.

"What have you brought me, my pet?" he inquired in a whispery tone.

Blue lightning sizzled from the eel into the undead shark. The bony cage flared with sudden light, prompting a thunderous, agonized shriek from the shark's latest captive. An explosion of bubbles and a long, wavering cry spiraled out into the water.

Akhlaur, intrigued but not impressed, leaned in for a better look. His eyes widened in sudden recognition. "By curse and current! I know this beast!"

The wizard's gills flared with excitement as he considered the implications of this latest capture. This was the laraken, the spawn of water demons and elven magic! It was his own creation, and a link to his homeland. If the laraken had found a way into the Elemental Plane of Water, then perhaps at long last he, Akhlaur, could find a way *out!*

"How did you come to be here?" the wizard demanded, "and what have you brought me this time?" He leaned his staff against a coral obelisk and began to gesture with both hands, easily tracing a spell he had not cast in two centuries.

In response, magic seeped from the monster like blood from a killing wound. The laraken clutched its bony cage for support as the wizard drained it to some minutely defined point just short of death.

Akhaur savored the stolen spells as a gourmand might consider a sip of wine. "Interesting. Most interesting," he mused. "A blend of all the magical schools, with some Azuthan overtones. Definitely these are Halruaan spells, but the chant inflections are slightly off, as if the wizard were not a native speaker. The accent is that of . . . an elf?"

The wizard considered. Yes, the laraken's prey had definitely been an elf, probably female. The influence of Azuthan training flavored the spells—to Akhaur's particular palate, the taint of clerical magic was as cloyingly unpleasant as sugar in a stew.

He snorted, sending a rift of bubbles rising. "Halruaa is in a sorry state indeed. Elf wenches and Azuthan priests!"

Yet the prospect did not displease him. He had slain hundreds of elves, outwitted and overpowered scores of priests. He could easily overcome such foes.

Or so he could, if only he could win free of this place!

By some odd quirk of fate, Akhaur, the greatest necromancer of his time, had been exiled from the land he was destined to rule. For over two hundred years his every attempt to wrest free of this prison had fallen short. How, then, had some lesser wizard opened the gate wide enough to admit the laraken?

This should have been impossible. Any wizard who came near the laraken should have been destroyed, his magic and then his life drained away by the monster's voracious need. Akhaur was invulnerable, of course, but he had created the monster, painstakingly fashioning the channels that made the laraken a conduit through which

stolen magic flowed. This was one of Akhlaur's finest achievements, the very height of the necromantic arts. Creating the laraken had taken many years. Several attempts had ended in failure when the growing spawn destroyed its female host. Not until Akhlaur had thought to forge a death-bond with the green elf wench he'd nicknamed Kiva—

His thought pattern broke off abruptly, stumbling over a startling notion.

"No," he muttered. "It is not possible!"

But it *was* possible. Kiva had witnessed many of his most carefully guarded experiments. She had clung to life when thousands of others had yielded to pain and despair. She had even survived the laraken's birth—barely, but she had survived. Akhlaur hadn't wasted much thought on her. Who would have foreseen that a scrawny elf wench could not only survive but learn?

"It would seem," Akhlaur mused, "that I have acquired an unexpected apprentice."

He nodded, accepting this explanation. Apparently Kiva's resistance to the laraken had outlived the punishing birth. She was able to venture near enough to open the gate and let the monster through, even though that meant losing her wizardly spells to the monster's hunger.

Why would she do this?

Akhlaur studied the creature huddled within the undead shark. What had prompted Kiva to risk herself to send the laraken here? Not maternal warmth, surely! Elves could barely abide the notion of mixing their blood with humans, much less water demons. The only possible motive Akhlaur could fathom was vengeance.

Yet surely Kiva understood the laraken could not kill its creator. Perhaps she sent the monster not as an assassin but as her herald.

Yes, Akhlaur decided. This was the answer. His little Kiva had sent him a message.

The wizard glanced at the coral obelisk, where neat

runes marked the passing of each moon tide. The lunar rhythm echoed through the miniscule opening that mocked his captivity, and the obelisk pointed the way home like the very finger of the goddess. Soon, when the moon was full and the path between the worlds shortest and surest, a vengeful and astonishingly powerful Kiva would come to repay him with his own coin.

"Come, then, little elf," he crooned, gazing past to the obelisk toward the invisible gate. "Come, and learn the full truth of the death-bond we forged."