



The Wizardwar

Counselors and Kings • Book III

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CHAPTER ONE

A small, swarthy young man glided like a brown shadow through a labyrinth of corridors far below King Zalathorm's palace. Dawn was hours away, and this deep place was lit only by the small blue globe in the young wizard's hand.

Moving with the assurance born of experience, he barely glanced at the ancient skeletons moldering in side corridors, silent testament both to the spirit of Halruaan adventurers and the wards guarding the land's deeply buried treasures.

He made his way to the center of the maze and stepped into a circle ringed with deeply etched runes. As he chanted in the ancient, secret language of Halruaan magic, the stone beneath his feet melted away, swirling downward like dense gray mist and reforming as a narrow, circling stairway.

Down he went, moving deeper and deeper into the heart of the land. With each step he intoned the specific arcane word required. He respectfully avoided treading upon the blackened spots marking the final resting places of wizards whose memories had faltered.

At the foot of the stairs was a great hall, lined on each side by a score of living guards. Here gathered many of Halruaa's great necromancers, keeping watch over secrets last whispered by lips

long ago faded to ash and memory. They nodded to the young man as he passed, giving the deference due to the king's messenger. None of them suspected the true identity of the black-eyed, brown-skinned youth.

The disguised wizard stopped before an enormous door and bowed to the ancient, cadaverous archmage who guarded it. He handed the old man a scroll.

"A writ from the king," he said in the lilting accents common to the coastal islands.

The archmage glanced at the missive, then lifted his rheumy gaze to the messenger. "By the king's command, we must answer your questions with the same candor we would offer him. I swear by my wizard-word oath it will be so."

The youth inclined his head in respectful thanks. "I would know who raised and commanded the undead army during the battle against the Mulhorandi invaders."

The guardians exchanged uncertain glances. "The king himself is acclaimed for this victory," the archmage ventured.

The messenger snorted. "When did the king become a master of necromancy? Tell me who among your ranks could have done such a thing."

The old man's lips thinned as if to hold back the answer he was sworn to give. "It is beyond my art," he admitted at last. "No one in this room could cast such a spell. We can all raise and command undead, certainly, but not in such numbers! If the king did not cast this spell, then his equal did."

"Who is equal to the king?" asked the disguised wizard, imbuing his voice with a mixture of indignation and concern, such as a faithful young messenger might express.

"I assume you speak rhetorically, as did I," the archmage hastened to add. "For who could be the king's equal?"

Who indeed? The wizard swallowed the wry smile that tugged at his lips. The old archmage's parry was as deft as any swordmaster's, but in truth many wizards were begin-

ning to wonder if perhaps they might prove to be the king's equal. The guardian's question might have been rhetorical, but it would not long remain in the bloodless realm of rhetoric.

The wizard bowed his thanks and gestured toward the door. The archmage moved aside, clearly eager to end this disturbing interview.

Massive, ironbound doors swung inward on silent hinges, untouched by mortal hand. Torches mounted on the walls flared into life, revealing a circular room with several doors but no floor other than a gaping pit. Faint but fearsome howls wafted up from untold depths, carrying a faint charnel scent and the promise of oblivion.

The wizard stepped into the empty air, counted off several paces to the left, and strode confidently across the void. He passed through three other magically trapped rooms before he came to the place he sought.

This final chamber was empty but for the ruby-hued crystal floating in the room's center. Shaped like a many-pointed star, it burned with its own inner light and filled the room with a crimson glow.

The wizard let his disguise melt away, revealing the mild, middle-aged face of the man who had claimed the crimson star more than two hundred years ago. He dropped to one knee and began the difficult process each visit demanded: emptying his mind of thought, his heart of sorrow and guilt. When at last the silence within matched the profound stillness of the chamber, he rose, lifted his eyes to the gem, and spoke.

"The heart of Halruaa seeks counsel," King Zalathorm said softly.

In lean words Zalathorm described the battle spells that just two days before had siphoned the fluids from hundreds of living men to create an enormous water elemental, then raised the desiccated men into an undead army.

"What wizard, living or dead, might have cast such a spell?" he concluded.

He tuned his mind's ear for the silent response, the familiar, elfsong voices of sages long dead. They spoke in a single-note chorus of wordless, overwhelming terror. Waves of emotion swept over him like an icy storm, stealing his breath. Stopping his heart.

Crushing pain enveloped Zalathorm's chest, sending him staggering back. He fell heavily against the chamber's only door, unable to move or breathe. For long moments he believed he would die in this room.

Finally healing magic, more ancient even than the sages' remembered fear, pulsed from the crimson star.

The king's heart leaped painfully, then took up its normal rhythm. Slowly his agony receded. Once again, the crimson star had preserved its creator.

Once again, it had given Zalathorm an answer he could find nowhere else. The gem was undying history, centuries of experience preserved in eternal immediacy. In all of Halruaa's long history, Zalathorm knew of only one wizard who could inspire such terror in the time-frozen sages' hearts. Though no word had been given, Zalathorm had his answer all the same.

Somehow, Akhlaur had returned.