

The Dragon Heir by Cinda Williams Chima

CHAPTER ONE—RAVEN'S GHYLL

The wind shrieked down out of Scotland, over Solway Firth, and bullied its way between the peaks and fells of the Cumbrian lakes, driving snow before it. Jason Haley hunched his shoulders against the sleet that needled his face and hands.

Raven's Ghyll spread before him, alternately hidden, then revealed by swirls of cloud and ice. A treacherous sheep path, pricked by cairns of stone, descended toward the valley floor.

Within him, his wizard stone thrummed, responding to the proximity of the Weirstone. The massive crystalline stone gleamed like a sapphire against the flank of the mountain known as Ravenshead. Blinking snow from his eyelashes, Jason peered up at it, gaping like a tourist. Also known as The Dragon's Tooth, the Weirstone was the source of power for all of the magical Weirgilds.

It had been six hours by car from London to Keswick, over increasingly hazardous roads, fighting the weather and the weird British habit of driving on the left side of the road. By the time he reached Keswick, Jason's eyes were twitchy from peering through the swirling flakes and his arms and shoulders ached from gripping the steering wheel.

That was the easy part.

He'd made the long climb to the top of the Ghyll, his feet sliding on the weathered stones despite his spiked climbing boots. He'd had to slide between the sentries posted by the Roses on the surrounding hills. The wizard houses of the Red and the White Rose had laid siege to Raven's Ghyll after the lord of the Ghyll, Claude D'Orsay, betrayed them on the island of Second Sister.

At least Jason was in good shape, better than he'd ever been. Most wizards were soft, since they used magic to do the heavy lifting. Jason, on the other hand, had been training under the tender hand of Leander Hastings, who favored five-mile runs before breakfast. Jason was only 17 and Hastings had been around for more than a century, but still it wasn't easy to keep up with the lean wizard.

Turning his back to the wind, creating a small shelter with his body, Jason lit a cigarette. Hastings was always on his butt about the smoking. But the risk seemed small against the danger he was in, here on the edge of the abyss.

He'd be lucky to make it to 18. For one thing, there was a good chance Hastings would kill him when he found out what he'd been up to.

Somewhere down below was D'Orsay, renegade wizard and holder of the fraudulent Covenant signed at Second Sister--the document that threatened to enslave them all.

D'Orsay was everything Jason was not: he was a cake-eater, born to privilege, former Master of the Game, heir of an aristocratic wizard house. Jason was an underpowered street punk, a mixed blood orphan holding a grudge.

Hopefully D'Orsay had no idea that bad news was coming down the hill toward him. Hopefully no one would expect an intruder on a night like this. Hopefully he could locate the Covenant and be away with it before anyone knew he was there.

If he couldn't find the Covenant, he'd look for D'Orsay's legendary Hoard of weapons—the magical legacy of Old Sorcerie. That rumor was the only thing keeping the Roses at bay.

At the very least, he'd scope out D'Orsay's fortifications and find out how many wizards protected the Ghyll. If he could succeed at any one of those things, Hastings might give him a longer leash.

At least he was *doing* something. Maybe Hastings was content to hang out in London, watching and waiting for somebody to jump. But there was nothing more boring than watching the Roses watch D'Orsay.

When Jason had finished his cigarette, he shrugged into his backpack and began the painfully slow descent to the floor of the ghyll. To call it a trail was a stretch—he'd chosen it for its obscurity. D'Orsay couldn't possibly monitor every overgrown sheep track and hiking trail that led into the Ghyll.

Jason had hoped the weather would let up once he got below the shoulder of the peak, but the biting wind still slammed snow into his face and tugged at his extremities, threatening to rip him off the mountain.

Ahead, a yellowish mist shrouded the trail, close to the ground, strange for the weather and time of day. An odd color for any season. Jason eyed it warily, extended his gloved hand, and spoke a charm. Nothing. He didn't know if the problem was in the charm or in himself. Wasn't that Shakespeare?

He tried a couple more charms without success until the mist grudgingly yielded to his magic, dissolving to shreds that the wind carried away.

By now it was dark in the Ghyll below, the peaks around him gilded with the last of the light. Lamps kindled in Raven's Ghyll Castle, at the far end of the valley. The dark shape of D'Orsay's castle bulked through the swirls of flakes and blowing snow.

As he neared the bottom, he was able to move with greater speed as the sharp verticals gave way to more gradual switchbacks. Until he rounded a corner and blundered into a mess—like a giant cobweb made of thick, translucent cords—nearly invisible in the failing light.

It was a Weirnet, a magical web made to capture the gifted. He tried to back out of it, but it was incredibly sticky, and every move embedded him further.

So much for a surprise attack. Jason forced himself into stillness, moving only his right arm, fishing for his knife. Gripping the hilt, he pulled it free and sliced carefully at the tendrils he could reach. The net parted reluctantly. It was designed to resist magic, and he wasn't doing much better with an actual blade.

Something bright streaked across the sky like a comet, then detonated at the height of its arc, flooding the ghyll with phosphorescent light.

Now the fun begins, Jason thought.

It took ten precious minutes to cut himself free. Even then, the opening was just broad enough to slide through.

He knew he should ditch the mission and get out while he could. But his entire life had been a string of bad decisions. He had no desire to slink back to Hastings with the same bad taste in his mouth he'd had since Leicester and D'Orsay killed his father.

He thrust his body through the breach. As he emerged, volleys of wizard flame erupted from the hillside above, and he flung himself sideways. He scrambled on hands and knees into a grove of trees, then turned to look.

All around him, black-clad wizards ghosted through the forest like demons on a quest, directing withering fire on the tear in the web.

Jason considered his options. If D'Orsay was smart (and he was), he would stay barricaded inside the hold until the all-clear. D'Orsay's Hoard of magical pieces would be in the keep, too. Along with the Covenant that made D'Orsay ruler of all the magical guilds.

To Raven's Ghyll Castle, then. But best not to be noticed.

Jason stuffed his fingers under his coat and pulled out a circlet of dull stone engraved with runes. It was a *dyrne sefa*, meaning *secret heart*, an amulet of power. Despite the cold, it was hot to the touch, steaming in the brittle air, drawing power from the nearby Weirstone. Stroking the surface with his fingertips, he spoke a charm.

Now rendered unnoticeable, Jason threaded his way through the woods and across the open meadow of the valley floor toward the castle. Away from the shelter of the Ghyll walls, the wind assaulted him again. But now he was impervious to the cold, ignited with power and determination.

The meadow was studded with wind-seared brush, powdered with fine, dry snow, and fissured with ravines. The need to mind his footing warred with the desire to peer about like a tourist.

These must be the tournament fields.

Here the blood of generations of warriors had been shed in ritual battles that allocated power to the Wizard Houses. Here the warriors Jack Swift and Ellen Stephenson had fought the tournament that broke the original Covenant and challenged the power of the Roses.

Here the sanctuary of Trinity was born.

More than anything, Jason wanted to make the same kind of mark on the world.

More wizard flares rocketed into the air, lighting the Ghyll to midday. Trees went up like torches, sending smoke roiling into the sky. Jason guessed he should be flattered at the intensity of the response to his mini invasion. It was like using a shotgun against a gnat. And still the snow fell, glittering in impossible colors as the light struck it.

Ahead loomed the castle, a forbidding stone structure that might have been hewn from the side of the mountain. Terraced gardens surrounded the keep, littered with the skeletons of winter-dead plants, like the leavings of a failed fair-weather civilization.

Squadrons of wizards charged up and down the valley, magical shields fixed in place, splattering power in all directions. Some passed within a few feet of him, glowing white ghosts in their hooded, snow-powdered parkas. Jason continued his stubborn march on the hold.

He'd hoped they'd give up, assuming their intruder had fled. But no. D'Orsay's wizards gathered near the castle, forming a broad phalanx of bristling power. Charms were spoken, and a great wall of poisonous green vapor rolled toward him across the meadow.

Chemical warfare, wizard style.

Swearing softly, Jason disabled the unnoticeable charm, so he could use magic. Extending his hand, he tried to reproduce the charm he'd used on the yellow mist. Either he got it wrong, or he simply wasn't strong enough. The cloud kept coming, relentlessly swallowing trees and stones and fleeing animals. There'd be nothing left alive in the Ghyll by morning.

His only hope was to get above the cloud. Jason turned and sprinted for the Ravenshead and began to climb. As the way grew steeper, he went into a vertical climb, reaching high to find handholds above his head, desperately hauling himself up, insinuating himself into crevices, wedging his feet into the imperfections that marred the stone face of the mountain.

Greedily, he sucked in air, grateful for his hard training at Hastings's hands, afraid the next breath he took would carry the sickly taste of poison, knowing that if he fell, he would be dead before he hit bottom.

About the time he thought his lungs would burst, he reached a ledge just below the Weirstone and shoved his body up and over. He lay facedown in the snow until he caught his breath, then pulled himself to his feet.

The Ghyll below was a sea of mist, a vast polluted cesspool that lapped higher and higher on the surrounding slopes.

Then the earthquakes began. Thunder rumbled through the Ghyll, and the stones rippled under Jason's feet like an out-of-control skateboard. The mountain shifted and shuddered, trying to fling him off. Boulders crashed down from above, shaken loose from ancient perches high on the slopes, bouncing past him and disappearing into the sea of mist at the bottom. This was more than wizard mischief. It seemed...apocalyptic.

Jason crouched back against Ravenshead, his arms wrapped around his head to fend off falling debris, his gaze drawn back to the blue flame of the Weirstone.

It loomed above his head, a faceted crystal the blue-green color of the deepest and clearest ocean. With the stone so near, blood surged through his body, intoxicating him, heating him down to his fingers and toes. Magic flamed under his skin, demanding release. Power battered him from all sides, vibrating in his bones like a crashing bass from a magical band.

As he watched, a jagged crack opened in the solid rock face above him. It yawned wider and wider, a raw gash in the shadow of the stone. Small stones and grit stung his skin and he squeezed his eyes shut to avoid being blinded.

Gradually, the earth quieted and the stone dimmed. Cautiously, Jason opened his eyes. Creeping forward, he peered over the edge of the rock. The mist was still rising, inching up the slope.

He sat back on his heels, eying the new-made cave. Cool air kissed his face, flowing from under the Weirstone. Maybe he could worm deeper into the mountain until the mist subsided. Seeing no other choice, he plunged into the opening.

The air was surprisingly fresh to have been bottled up in the mountain for so long. Jason collected light on the tips of his fingers, a makeshift lamp to show the way. As he snaked back into the rock, it became clear that the quake had reopened a cave hewn out of the mountain in centuries past. Scattered across the stone floor was evidence of prior occupation: the bones of large animals, shards of pottery and metal fittings.

Jason pushed on, the cave wind blowing against his face. Good. That might keep the mist at bay, he thought.

The passage ended in a chamber the size of a large ballroom. Far above, the wind whistled through an opening to the outside. That, then, was the source of the fresh air. Jason tried to push light to the ceiling, but the dark vault soared high overhead, beyond the reach of his puny lamp. The Weirstone glittered, a long shaft driving far into the mountain.

Soot smudged the walls all around, as if from the smoke of thousands of ancient fires. In one corner bulked a great raised platform, eight feet off the floor. Jason found fingerholds and scrambled to the top.

Here were fragments of fabric: velvets and satins and lace that disintegrated when he touched them. More large bones lay piled neatly in a corner, including what might have been human skeletons. Human and animal skulls grinned out from niches in the wall. He was in the lair of some great predator or the site of a long-ago battle.

At the far end of the platform was a massive oak door.

Jason eyed the door. In a movie, that would be the door you shouldn't open.

But of course you would.

By now, the Ghyll, the mist, and the wizards searching for him outside seemed a distant threat. He had to get past that door. Something drew him forward.

Jason pulled the dyrne sefa free once again. Using it like an eyepiece, he scanned the entry. It was covered with a delicate labyrinth of glittering threads, invisible to the naked eye. Another kind of web.

Extending his hand, he muttered, "Geryman." Open. The door remained shut.

Jason looked about for tools. Lifting one of the long legbones, he came at the door from the side, extending the bone and poking cautiously through the web of light.

With a sound like a gunshot the door exploded outward in a blast of flame. Had he been standing at the threshold, he would have been incinerated. As it was, he about wet his pants.

When his rocketing pulse had steadied, he approached the doorway, again at a slant, and peered through. Beyond the entrance was yet another door, set with six panels of beaten gold, each engraved with an image. It took a moment for Jason to realize what he was seeing.

Each engraving depicted one of the Weirguilds. A beautiful woman with rippling hair and flowing robes extended her hands towards Jason, smiling. She obviously represented the enchanters, who had the gift of charm and seduction. A tall, muscled man in a breastplate and kilt charged forward, swinging a sword. That was the warrior, who excelled in battle.

In another scene, an old man gazed into a mirror, tears rolling down his wrinkled cheeks. He must be a soothsayer or seer, who could predict the future, though imperfectly. In the fourth, a woman ground roots with a mortar and pestle. She was a sorcerer, expert in the creation and use of magical tools and materials. Finally, a lean-faced man in a nimbus of light manipulated the strings of a marionette, who seemed unaware of the puppeteer.

Well, there's the wizard, Jason thought. The only one of the lot who could shape magic with words, and for that reason most powerful.

The center panel, the largest, was engraved with a magnificent dragon, clawed forelegs extended and wings spread.

The legend was that the founders of the Magical Guilds had originated in the Ghyll as cousins, slaves to a dragon who ruled the Dragonhold. Eventually, by working together, they'd managed to outsmart the dragon. In some versions they killed it, in others they put it into a magical sleep. They'd renamed the valley Raven's Ghyll, preferring to forget that the dragon had ever existed.

Then four of the cousins were tricked into signing a covenant that made them subservient to the fifth cousin.

The wizard.

By the 16th century, the Hierarchy of the magical guilds was well established. The ruling wizards had organized themselves into the warring houses of the Red and the White Rose, whose incessant battles decimated the houses over time. The system of tournaments known as the Game had been launched to limit bloodshed among wizards. The Dragon House, to which Jason belonged, harked back to a time before wizards assumed their dominant role.

Jason studied the engraving of the dragon, knowing such pieces often held important clues. The work had been done by Old Sorcerie, using an artistry lost to time. Power seemed to ripple under the dragon's metal scales and humor and intelligence glittered in its golden eyes. An elaborate cloak poured in glittering folds down the dragon's back, to be caught in the arms of a lady who stood just behind the beast.

The lady was well-dressed for a servant, if that's what she was. Her hair was carefully arranged and she wore a necklace with a single glittering gemstone set into the metal. Although she was tiny next to the dragon, she seemed unafraid. She rested one hand on the dragon's leg in

an affectionate way and the dragon's head arced down toward her as if to continue an intimate conversation.

In a faint continuous script around the center panel ran the words, "Enter with a virtuous heart, or not at all."

Well, that shuts me out, Jason thought. Though by wizard standards he might qualify.

Who would have made something so cool and then hidden it in the mountain to be found only by chance? And what lay behind it?

It's no use. You're going in. You can't resist.

Taking a deep breath, extending his hand, he whispered "Geryman" again, expecting another magical attack.

This time, the double doors swung silently in.

Once again, he used the *dyrne sefa* to examine the entrance for magical traps. And found none. Leading with the legbone, waving it like a sword, he advanced through the doorway.

It was a storeroom, lined ceiling-high with barrels, chests and casks, strongboxes and coffers, baskets and bins.

He stood blinking stupidly for a moment, then dropped the bone and pried the lid off the nearest barrel. Recklessly thrusting his hand deep, he let the contents trickle through his fingers.

Pearls. In all colors, from precious black to creamy white to pale pink and yellow. Large and round and perfect. These must be worth a fortune, he thought.

He lifted the lid on a small brass-bound chest. Emeralds, in a deep green color with fiery hearts. A small gold coffer was filled with diamonds so large that, anywhere else he'd assume they were fake.

There were stones in all colors, spools of gold chain, both loose gems and jewels in medieval settings. Coins engraved with the portraits of long-dead kings and queens. Bolts of velvet and satin shrouded in sleeves of sturdy linen. Cabinets filled with parchment scrolls, fragile with age, and books in leather bindings. Paintings in gilded frames were lined four-deep against the walls.

In some of the large baskets he found the best treasure yet: talismans for protection, amulets for power, inscribed with spellrunes in the mysterious languages of magic. Many were crafted from the flat black stone familiar from his own collection, the magical pieces he'd inherited from his mother. Others were made of precious metals—devised by methods now lost to the Guilds.

They were carelessly jumbled together, and he sorted them into piles, his fingers itching to put them to use. Jason was not particularly powerful, but with these at his disposal, even Raven's Ghyll Castle might fall.

Was this the legendary Hoard of weapons? It seemed unlikely. The Hoard was said to be a living arsenal, regularly used and added to by the D'Orsays. These things looked like they'd lain untouched for centuries. While some of the *sefas* could be used as weapons, this was mostly fancy work—jewelry, books, art, gemstones.

Was it possible that D'Orsay didn't know this was here? Totally possible.

Jason leaned against the wall, rubbing his chin. Well, now. It wouldn't do for the Roses or D'Orsay to get hold of it now.

He couldn't haul everything out in one trip, but he couldn't count on coming back, either. He might not make it out alive this time. And if he were caught, they'd force the cave's location out of him in no time.

He'd have to choose carefully, and focus on smaller items. He zipped open his empty backpack and set it on the cave floor.

The magical artifacts were the first priority. He and Hastings and the rest of the Dragon House were in this war for survival. Anything that kept the other Wizard houses away from the Sanctuary at Trinity was golden. The rebels could use the amulets created by Old Sorcerie to make the price of conquest too high for Claude D'Orsay or the Roses.

Jason methodically worked his way through the vault, torn between a growing claustrophobia and the fear he'd overlook something critical. He wrapped some of the more fragile and dangerous-looking pieces in strips of cloth he ripped from the bolts of fabric. Then he quickly shoveled magical jewelry, crystals, mirrors, and scrying stones into the backpack, trying to be careful, hoping he wouldn't break anything or inadvertently set something off. It was like loading pipe bombs into a shopping cart.

At the back of the cave, a sword in a jeweled scabbard stood alone, as if its owner had leaned it against the wall, meaning to come back and retrieve it. Gingerly, he gripped the hilt. The metal tingled in his hand, a kind of magical greeting.

"What have we here?" Jason muttered, feeling a rising excitement.

The hilt and crosspiece were of rather plain make, embellished with a Celtic cross on the pommel, centered with a flat-petaled rose. It was somehow more beautiful for its simplicity. Jason was no warrior, but he recognized quality when he saw it. As he drew the blade from its covering, it seemed to ignite, driving the shadows from the corners.

Could this be one of the Seven Great blades?

Of the Seven, only one other was known to exist: Shadowslayer, the blade carried by Jason's friend, the warrior Jack Swift, of Trinity. Stroking the glittering metal, Jason wished he could marry himself to a weapon the way Jack did.

But, no. Always better to be a wizard than a warrior in the hierarchy of the magical guilds.

Sliding the blade back into its scabbard, he carried it forward and set it next to the bulging backpack. Now what else? he queried the room.

Niches lined the back wall, in the blue shadow of the Dragon's Tooth. Some were empty, some displayed treasures, some were mortared shut. Reasoning that the closed niches might contain the most valuable contents, he took the time to break them open with cautious bits of magic. The mountain shuddered uneasily under the assault. Dirt trickled onto his head and shoulders from above.

A battered wooden chest covered with a tracery of runes stood just under the Weirstone in an open niche. Jason lifted it down to the floor of the cave and pried at the lid. Inside was a collection of scrolls, bound together with linen twine, covered with writing he couldn't decipher. And a large book secured with a jeweled lock.

Jason wasn't much for books and this one looked awkward and heavy and who knew if it was worth carrying back with him? Then again, someone had taken the trouble to lock it.

The lock fell apart in his hands, and the ancient binding protested with a crackling sound as he opened it. This was almost too easy. The text was handwritten in a flowing hand by a scribe or scholar. On the title page was scribbled in a hurried hand, *Of the Last Days of the Glorious Kingdom and How it Passed Into Memory: A Tragedie*.

Spinning light off his fingers, Jason scanned the first few pages.

It was a journal, kept by the attendant to some ancient ruler, written in the Language of Magic. He almost closed the book and set it aside, but something kept him reading.

My Lady Queen Ladhra greeted the Kings of Gaul in the Great Keep! How she glittered in the firelight, her jeweled armor burnished bright by my hand. Her terrible beauty transfixed our

guests and struck them dumb with awe. They fell on their faces, and only rose when she begged them to do so in the most gentle voice.

They dined with us, and I must say, my Lady was most disappointed in their conversation. She was gracious as always, but her guests were impossible! She brought in musicians, and they ignored them, eating and belching and singing bawdy songs and slipping silver into their pockets. She spoke of art and sorcerie, and they were only confused. They know nothing of magic....

Jason jumped ahead in the text.

My Lady Aidan sent a kind invitation to the Kings of Britain, inviting them to attend her at her winter court. But they came with armies, and with battle machines of all kinds, and sent an envoy demanding her surrender. It was a patronizing message; clearly they thought her to be stupid and incapable of negotiation. I am afraid my lady was so nettled that she killed the messenger on the spot and ate him for supper. Then destroyed the armies that came after.

Whoa.

Jason skipped forward again.

Failing in her attempt to find friends among the existing kingdoms, and discouraged by their responses to her friendly overtures, My Lady Aidan Ladhra has decided to create her own community of peers, artists and scholars gifted with the use of magic, a talent that will pass to their children. I have seen the future in my glass, and I've told her this is risky, but my lady is lonely with only my poor self for companionship. As for me, I require no gift other than her presence.

The mountain groaned and shifted overhead. Although it was cool in the cave, Jason blotted sweat from his face with his sleeve. Conscious of passing time, he hurriedly turned over the fragile pages, his damp fingers leaving spots.

My Lady Aidan tires of the constant disputes among those she has Gifted with power. Where she sought companionship, she has gained only troubles. Priceless talents she has given to all, yet they each are jealous of the others. I fear they are conspiring against her, particularly the wizard Demus, who shapes magic with words. I see them cast envious eyes on the treasure she has accumulated. But she will have none of my warnings. She considers these squabblers her children, rightly or wrongly, and will hear no evil about them.

Somewhere along the underground passage, Jason heard rock crash against rock. It was time to go, and he still didn't know if the book was worth taking. He flipped to the back, looking for the last entry. It appeared to have been scrawled in haste, the pages stained and blurred, as if spotted with tears.

It has happened, as I predicted. Demus and the other ungrateful vipers have poisoned us. My Lady retreated to the Great Hall in Dragon's Ghyll to die. I tended her as best I could, but there was nothing I could do. She expired a few hours ago.

She dies childless. Before she passed into sleep, she gave into my hands the Dragonheart, which is now the source of power for all the magical guilds. Despite all, she still has hopes for them. Over my objections, she named me Dragon Heir, and charged me and my descendants to hold the guilds in check and prevent them from visiting destruction on each other and the world. I promised I would to ease her passing, though I am dying myself. I have no love for this task. I would wish that my children have nothing to do with the Gifted.

When I hold the Dragonheart stone in my hands, it is as if my mistress still lives. The flame of her spirit burns at its center, safer in this vessel than in any fleshly home, powerful enough to destroy all of her enemies. I only wish I were strong enough to use it.

The dragonkeep is surrounded. My children have scattered to the four winds. I dare not send a message to them lest it be intercepted, tho' I have sent along some small items of value by trusted courier. Truly, I harbor the bitter and rebellious hope that they thrive and prosper in ignorance of their charge.

Before I die beside my mistress, I will bury the Dragonheart stone in the mountain with such protections as I can lend it. Perhaps chance will put it into the possession of one with the heart and desire to release its full power. That person will seize control of the gifts that have been given. That person will once again reign over the Guilds. Or destroy them, as they deserve.

Jason rested the book on his knees. Was this just another of the fantastical legends created to explain a rather twisted magical heritage?

He set the book aside and peered again into the hollow in the rock, illuminating the niche with the light at his fingertips.

At the back of the niche stood an elaborate pedestal of intricately-worked metal, topped by an opal the size of a softball. Gingerly, Jason reached into the niche and lifted the stone off its base.

Jason sat back on his heels, cradling the stone between his hands. It was ovoid in shape, glittering with broad flashes of green and blue and purple fire. It was perfect, crystalline, no flaws in it that he could see. It warmed his fingers, as if flames actually burned at its center, and seemed to hum with power. Long minutes passed while he gazed into its heart, mesmerized. A pulsing magical current seemed to flow between the stone in his hands and the Weirstone in his chest, reinforcing it. Like the Dragon's Tooth set into the mountain, only...portable.

A performance enhancer? Exactly what he needed.

Leaning forward again, he pulled the metal base from the niche. It was a tangle of mythical beasts, or maybe one mythical beast with multiple heads. Dragons.

Feeling a little giddy, Jason dumped agates from a velvet bag and dropped the stone inside. Ripping a piece of crimson velvet from a bolt, he wrapped the stand carefully. He stuffed them into his backpack. *This is mine*, he thought.

Sorting quickly through the jewelry, he chose several interesting pieces, including a large gold earring for himself, a Celtic star. He poked loose jewels and jewelry into the empty corners of the bag, then zipped the pack shut. He slung the backpack over one shoulder, listing a little under the weight. He hung the sword in its scabbard over the other shoulder and slid the massive book under one arm. He wished he could carry more.

Around him, the mountain grew increasingly restless, groaning as rock slid against rock, sifting sand and pebbles onto the stone floor. It was as if the Ravenshead recognized the thief at its heart and meant to stop him. Jason was overcome by the notion that he had stayed too long.

He stepped out between the double doors, and they slammed shut behind him.

Great cracks fissured the stone vault overhead, spidering out ahead of him.

Uh-oh.

He charged back toward the entrance to the cave, leaping over debris, dodging falling rock and gravel, twisting and turning down the narrow passageway, feeling the pitch and shudder of the rock beneath his feet. Ahead he saw light, meaning he was almost through.

The mountain shimmied, shivered and quaked. Slivers of stone stung his face. Up ahead, he was horrified to see that the two great slabs of rock that had split to open the cave were sliding, slumping toward one another. The wedge of light was disappearing. He'd be trapped inside the Ravenshead.

He squeezed himself through the collapsing entrance, sliding like an eel, clutching the book close to his body, scraping his elbows and knees, smashing his hands, twisting to free the loaded backpack, dragging the sword after him, metal fittings sparking against stone.

And then he was out, clinging to the icy ledge at the entrance to the cave as the mountain snapped shut behind him.

Jason lay on his face on the rock, the sword, the book, and the backpack beside him, his battered hands leaving bloody smears in the snow.

He allowed himself a few more minutes rest before he levered himself into a sitting position and snuck a look over the edge.

The one-sided battle seemed to be over. The greenish mist was dissipating, shredding into long streamers that swirled away on the wind. The forest still smoldered on the slopes of the ghyll. Wizard fire was notoriously hard to put out.

Jason leaned back against Ravenshead and pulled out another cigarette. He had trouble lighting it. His hands were shaking, and not from the cold. The stone in his backpack provided all the warmth he needed. Somehow, he had to get it out of the Ghyll.

Using bungee cords, he bound the book to the outside of the backpack, distributing the weight as best he could. Then he lay down and slept restlessly, the magical stone illuminating his dreams.

Jason waited until the darkest hour before morning, giving the deadly mist more time to clear. Then he crept down the rockface, fighting the weight of his awkward burden, the sword catching in underbrush and crevices. He breathed out a long sigh of relief when he reached the valley floor.

Raven's Ghyll Castle was still brilliantly lit, and Jason could see dark figures moving along the walls, no doubt alert for a possible attack. Jason weighed the risk of going back the way he came against finding a new way out. He decided to take his chances on the path he knew.

Jason made himself unnoticeable and picked his way up the valley, the weight of the backpack becoming more and more apparent as he struggled along. Every so often the sound of quiet conversation or a faint light through the trees told him there were wizards keeping watch in the woods around him. When he reached the base of the trail, he turned upslope, walking even more carefully. He squinted against the wind, searching the inky shadows under the canopy of pines.

He was so numb with cold, he scarcely felt the tripwire when he brushed it. He was immediately engulfed in a bright, glittering cloud, his formerly unnoticeable self totally revealed, in brilliant outline.

"Ha!"

Acting totally on instinct, Jason dropped the unnoticeable charm and threw up a shield in time to turn a gout of blistering wizard flame. He swung round to confront his attacker.

It was a boy, younger than him, thirteen, maybe, almost pretty, pale blue eyes behind wire rim glasses, snow powdering his blond curls.

Well, crap, Jason thought. The *plan* was to get out without being spotted.

"I knew you must've gone unnoticeable," the boy crowed. "There's no way you'd have got through Father's guards otherwise."

Jason had stepped off-trail to circle around this new obstacle, but the boy's words stopped him. "*Father's* guards," Jason repeated. "Who the hell are you?"

"I'm Devereaux D'Orsay," the boy said. "I live here. Who are you?"

“Geoffrey Wylie,” Jason said, producing the first wizard name that came to mind. The Red Rose wizard could use a little street cred, anyway.

“You are trespassing, Mr. Wylie,” Devereaux D’Orsay said. He extended his hand imperiously. “Hand over the sword and the backpack.”

“Ri-ight,” Jason said. He went to turn away and Devereaux flung out an immobilization charm that Jason managed to deflect, though it left him stunned and reeling. The kid had talent. Unfortunately.

The boy frowned, drawing himself up to his puny height. “You. Come with me. I’m taking you down to the hold. Father and I will interrogate you and find out what you are doing here and for whom you’re working.”

Jason sighed, releasing a plume of vapor. He and Seph McCauley had killed Gregory Leicester in self defense. He figured he could kill Claude D’Orsay without losing any sleep over it. But not a 13-year-old kid. And that meant he’d be leaving a witness behind.

“Just go away, okay?” Jason said, wearily, “and let’s forget this ever happened.”

This seemed to enrage Devereaux D’Orsay. He flung himself at Jason, managing to penetrate his shield, and knock him off his feet. They rolled together into a small ravine, a cartoon tangle of arms and legs. Devereaux ripped at him, tearing at the cords around the backpack until the book came free and tumbled loose into the snow.

Jason punched the kid in the nose and blood poured out, distracting little D’Orsay enough so Jason could lay an immobilization charm on him. He managed to extricate himself and stood, looking down at Claude D’Orsay’s immobilized son, wishing he could make him disappear.

“Say hi to Claude for me,” he muttered. “Tell him I’ll stop by again.” There was no time to look for the lost book. Their magical fracas wouldn’t have gone unnoticed. Energized by the desire to stay alive, Jason loped up the trail, heading for the road back to Keswick, conscious of the mysterious stone in his backpack.

Behind him, the great shoulder of the mountain lay shrouded in unbroken darkness. The flame at the heart of the Dragon’s tooth had gone out.