

Prologue

The Shard lay almost within reach, so near to completion. Durion struggled closer, pushing past the bodies of his recent companions. Trae'embra's knife, the sharp blade jutting from Durion's back, slowed him, but he had to reach the Shard. The stolen souls of Trae'embra and Dontair hadn't been enough to seal the Shard; one life-force remained. But Durion did not intend to give up his own life to this weapon; he intended to use the Shard himself.

Each of his fellow wizards had the same goal in mind; forge the antithesis to that cursed Stone Corntainooth, Debrah, and their fellow wizards in the east sought to create. Yet each, it seemed, also had betrayal in mind. Durion suppressed a wry grimace. His proteges had learned much from him, but not enough in the end. They lay dead, and he lived.

Though not for long, he acknowledged, as the blood flowed from the tip of Trae'embra's treachery. She had punctured a lung, and Durion spat up blood, feeling the knife even now trying to pierce deeper, seeking his heart. Trae'embra's ensorcelled blade seldom missed its mark.

Durion edged ever closer to the Shard, his breath coming in laboured gasps, the sweat pouring from his tanned face. The blood of his companions smeared the floor, making sure purchase all the more difficult. His arms weakening, Durion slipped, his cheek landing in a warm red puddle. His eyes met the unseeing glare of Dontair. Durion raised himself to his elbows and there, before him, lay the Shard. He reached for it, refusing to give in to his waning strength. Surly one of their acolytes would come soon, seeking their masters. Not soon enough to Heal Durion's failing body, but with one more soul, Durion could complete the Shard, and then, no power in Aeroth could stop him.

With the last of his strength, Durion cast his essence from his shell into the Shard of Destruction. *One more soul*, he thought as his empty body slumped to the floor. *I shall steal their soul and take their body*. He wondered how long before an acolyte would disdain caution and enter the chamber.

And so the Shard of Destruction waited deep in the mountains. Hours turned to days, to weeks, to years. And in Aeroth, the Wizard Wars eventually ended, and stability slowly returned to the land. Years spanned to centuries, then millennia, and still the Shard containing the essence of the great Wizard Durion slept on, waiting. Until finally, a power so near its own entered the periphery of perception. Ancient powers stirred as the Stone of Peace unleashed its magic.

And the Shard of Destruction woke, knowing that none would come unless called. The Spirit of Durion stretched out his awareness, seeking one of suitable strength and malleability. One whose soul could complete it and fully awaken the power to enslave the world. He found a fitting match to the north, and so he called. And heard an answer.

Chapter 1

Shara stared out at the storm-swept evening. Lightning flickered above the waves washing over the piers of Zamar's Great City, great whitecaps blown in from the Ocean of Gales, but she paid these almost as little heed as the wizard speaking at her back.

"You understand our concern, of course," Wahlpour said, finally drawing Shara's attention. She turned to regard the large wizard. He sat by the fire, his brown robes amply filling the cushioned chair where he appeared to lounge, though Shara suspected his relaxed demeanour merely masked a wary and pragmatic man. One with every right to suspicion and caution, given recent events and the roles played by the late rulers of Zamar.

I still can hardly believe that Ord fails, she thought, her Zamaran accent and mannerisms as strong in her mind as in her spoken words. *More, that his failure leads to his death and to this instability of my land*. Granted, Darman had ruled in name (in truth for many who did not recognise Ord's power), but with both men dead, it mattered not who had held the strings. Their failure left Shara de facto leader of a military state that didn't appreciate being led by a sorceress rumoured to traffic with daemons. The army, forcibly quelled, might follow her, but only if she could return them to a field of battle. And Wizard Wahlpour clearly intended to ensure she not follow that course.

"Of course, Wizard Wahlpour," she replied. "May I enquire how many wizards the Council intends to keep in the Great City?"

This Council Wizard had returned with Zamar's defeated army after Broman's war, bringing with him twelve lesser wizards and apprentices, and one hundred soldiers, twenty of whom wore the livery of Marcadi's famed House Guard. He now proposed to leave a number of those wizards here to help Shara establish a stable rule in Zamar. To Shara, their presence could only serve to weaken whatever status she might have achieved, but Wahlpour clearly knew the benefits of having Marcadi's fingers trying to influence the future of Aeroth. No one

wanted another Broman to deal with, and if that meant spying on near-wizards like Shara who might aspire to rule, than Marcadi's wizards had no qualms abusing their present influence. To call these wizards 'advisors' did not change the fact that they would serve as spies for the powers in Holy Divan.

"Five will remain, along with ten of the House Guard."

"And how long does Marcadi anticipate their . . . observation and advice is required?"

Wahlpour's dark eyes narrowed speculatively.

"You intend something we won't approve, Shara?"

Shara shook her head, gazing directly at the large wizard.

"I intend what I has always intended, Wahlpour," she said. "That Zamar remains an independent state, free from the influence of outsiders. This goal I cannot achieve while you undermine what little authority I might command."

"You see us as an intrusion."

"Of course I does." Her reply drew a small smile, as though Wahlpour had expected less directness, and now found her honesty refreshing. "What authority I has comes from Darman's insistence that I stands as protector of the Great City in his absence. Now he's dead, and rivals seek to claim a vacant throne. It matters not that by Darman's word, I has the right to continue to lead. Would-be rulers see only a sorceress with little backing.

"And now, they see a weak woman who must turn to outsiders to hold that rule. Your presence can only weaken Zamar, and possibly thrust her into a greater civil unrest than already looms on the horizon. Whether I appreciate your advice or not, getting the nobles to accept me as Zamar's rightful ruler only becomes more difficult because of Marcadi's intrusion. They wonder if I serve Zamar or Marcadi. But then, perhaps that is your intention."

"We intend that Aeroth *not* fall into war again, civil or otherwise. If you fear Marcadi's advice--"

"It is not your advice I fear, Wizard, and I think you know this. I stand at the brink of a great chasm. If I blindly take your help, Zamar's upper classes revolt, seeing only wizards hoping to use them, and I fall into oblivion; if I refuse your aid, I fall into the darkness by your hand. I has seen the alternatives, Wizard, and I know they harm Zamar if they come into power, and therefore I cannot step back. It is arrogance and presumption of the highest order to state that I am Zamar's only hope, yet I fear it is true nonetheless. The strongest families will destroy the Great City in their bid for power, and in keeping it should they win. The weakest families does not understand what it truly means to rule and will allow us to fall into ruin out of ignorance. That leaves me."

"And you cannot hold Zamar on your own," Wahlpour nodded, as though finally understanding Shara's position, though, again, she suspected he had grasped the problems from the start, and had waited until she voiced them, proving her own comprehension of Zamar's dilemma.

"No, I can't. But I also cannot has your wizards rule in my stead, nor remain any longer than absolutely necessary to prove that I *can*, and will, rule as I see best for my country. I is a sorceress, not a wizard, and that distinction, however slight, might prove enough that Zamar will accept my direction. But not if you stand in the way."

The large wizard suddenly grinned, surprising Shara as he stood and offered her a hand.

"If you can show as much passion to your nobles, Lady Shara," he said, at last affording her a title, "then I have little doubt Marcadi will see no need for her presence to last longer than a half-year."

Shara kept her face neutral, though inside, she railed at the time. *A half-year?* Far too long, in her estimation. But she had to admit, she understood the wizards' concern. After all, Zamar *had* betrayed her supposed allies. The Wizards had no guarantee that Shara did not share the same traits as Zamar's late rulers. *And if they know Ord himself trains me in the finer points of magic, they will undoubtedly push for another to rule, even someone far less adequate than myself.*

"Indeed, Wizard Wahlpour." Outside, thunder rumbled, a sudden gust of wind lashing the thick window with pelts of rain, the weather reflecting Shara's mood. "The hour grows late," she continued. "Perhaps we leave the final details until the morrow."

"Of course, Lady Shara." He gave the briefest of nods, then left the room. Shara glanced out at the storm once more before leaving to find her own chamber.

Despite the swirl of thoughts and worries sweeping through her mind, she found it remarkably easy to drift into slumber. Where she found a startling answer to her unspoken question: *How does I keep my land intact, her power unquestioned, her people free from outside influence? How does I get Marcadi to leave us be?*

'By finding something they cannot stand against,' a deep voice rumbled. 'A talisman that they cannot ignore, a power that can shut them out forever.'

They is among the greatest wizards of Aeroth. I is but one sorceress who may, even now, stand alone.

'They are mere insects to me,' the voice spat contempt. 'And with me, you will not stand alone.'

Shara thought about the implications. Truly holding the power, making of Zamar what the land and her people always should have been; a power to be reckoned with and not shoved aside. A country even Ord may have applauded.

And how is this possible? Who is you?

'With the Shard, anything is possible.'

And Shara saw that it *was* possible, where she must go, what she must do, to gain this promise of help. A deep feeling of well-being suffused her, enfolding her sleep in swaths of comfort as the soul within the distant Shard murmured assurances.