

THIEF ON A STRING

BY DEAN EDMONDS

ILLUSTRATIONS BY DANIEL HORNE



HE ROPE SWAYED GENTLY, all but unseen in the shadows that filled the room. In spite of the liberal helping of grease that had been applied to the lip of the skylight, the rope gave off soft creaking noises as one of the shadows began sliding down its length.

“This should be close enough,”

Alcar thought to himself as he wrapped the end of the rope around his waist and tied it off with a secure knot. He then let go of the rope to hang spread-eagled above the display case, his soot-blackened face mere inches from the glass.

The Chalice of Corazor sat on a small velvet cushion within the planes of glass. To the naked eye, it appeared a simple golden goblet, giving no hint of the awesome powers that it supposedly contained. Alcar drew a small black pearl from a pouch on his belt.

As he brought it close to the case, the pearl began to glow. By the time it was within an inch of the glass, the pearl was brighter than the thief had ever seen it in the six years since he had “acquired” it, giving off enough light to read by.

Satisfied, Alcar put the pearl away and began clearing all nonessential thoughts from his mind, preparing it for the final assault. For a moment, all he could feel were the throbbing aftereffects of his rooftop battle a few minutes earlier, but he quickly pushed the pain to the back of his consciousness with an ease born of years of experience. Moments later, he was ready and reached out with every sense at his disposal.

Using this same technique, Alcar had discovered the demon guarding the roof before it had discovered him. Now his heightened perceptions were once again screaming their warnings at him. The slight asymmetry of the case stood out like a full moon in the dark of night. His fingers traced microscopic scratches in the glass as if they were bas-relief carvings. The faint scent of poison in his nostrils made him feel as if he were drowning in a vat of almond liqueur.

Alcar soaked up this barrage of sensory impressions, his trained mind distilling from it the fact that there were two traps on the case. One, a poisoned dart of devious simplicity, was swiftly disarmed. The other was magical in nature and was set to go off when the lid on the case was raised. That one would require a bit more care.

“Never rob a mage,” the thief mumbled to himself. Those had been the parting words of his mentor, Altimar, when a much younger Alcar had set out to find his fortune in an unsuspecting world.

“But Altimar, old friend, even you would be tempted by stakes such as these!”

Alcar pushed a hard lump of gum arabic into his mouth and began kneading it with his tongue and teeth. Once the wad had softened up enough, he took it from his mouth and gently stuck it to one side of the glass case. A moment later, he pressed one end of a short, weighted string into the gum. The other end, he tied to his rope.

From out of the depths of his pouch, Alcar pulled a wooden stylus with a sparkling gem set into one end. Pressing it against the glass case, he traced out a rough circle centered on the lump of gum. The diamond on the tip of the stylus cut deeply into the glass, leaving a minute groove behind it that scintillated eagerly in the moonlight filtering down from above.

The thief next took out a tiny wooden mallet with cloth wrapped around its head and began tapping on the circular cut he’d made in the glass. After a dozen carefully placed taps, the circle of glass popped free, the weighted string pulling it safely away from the case to where it wouldn’t accidentally set off the remaining trap.

Alcar smiled in greedy anticipation. For fifteen years, he had been stealing from others for a living, facing death or worse on an almost daily basis as he slowly built up his craft. The chalice represented the end of all of that. Even if he failed to learn the artifact’s secrets and was forced to sell it, the proceeds would allow him to retire and live out the remainder of his days in indecent luxury.

He reached out with one hand to grip his fortune . . .

“Shala-gora,” said an unfamiliar voice off to his left, and suddenly the thief found himself unable to move. A moment later, the room was bathed in light. Alcar tried to look toward the voice but couldn’t make his muscles obey him. Fortunately, his heart and lungs seemed to be free of the disability.

“Foolish little thief,” the voice said, moving closer. “Didn’t anyone ever tell you that you should never try to rob a wizard?” Alcar didn’t bother to answer, not that he had much choice in the matter.

A pair of slippered feet moved into his field of vision, weaving a complex dance around the lurkers and other traps that covered the floor. Now a pair of gnarled old hands appeared and slipped a slim golden ring onto one of the fingers of Alcar’s outstretched hand.

“You will make no attempt to escape,” the voice intoned in a formal manner. “You will neither harm me nor touch my person. You will not take off the ring. You will not allow others to break any of my commands on your behalf.” There was a pause, then: “Dinro-skeelat!”

With that last arcane phrase, Alcar suddenly found himself in control of his body once more. He took the

opportunity to look up at his captor—a tall, slim man in silken robes, his hair mostly white with the occasional fleck of black, remnant of a distant youth. Alcar needed no introduction to know that this was the mage Porozan, owner of the mansion that he had broken into.

The man was close enough that Alcar considered slugging him, but some form of magical compulsion refused to let him complete the motion.

“Congratulations!” the wizard said with a chuckle. “You made it farther than any of the others. You might even have succeeded, had I not taken into account the possibility that someone might manage to defeat Catarilzakptinablion.” He nodded toward the open skylight above. “You see, I had another of his fellow demons, bound to me, waiting on the spirit plane with orders to report to me if Catarilzakptinablion were ever to return.”

Porozan’s expression turned grim. “But now that they have both fulfilled their duties to me, their geases are broken and I shall have to summon up two more—a prospect which I do not much relish. Since you were responsible for the loss of their services, it seems only appropriate that you make it up to me in whatever way possible. Untie yourself and follow me.”

To Alcar’s amazement, he found himself immediately obeying the commands. It was all he could do to keep from tripping over the traps in the room in his haste to follow the wizard out.

“What the hell is going on?” he demanded.

“Lower your voice,” Porozan admonished him. “I don’t want you waking the neighbors.”

“Cork you!” Alcar tried to shout, but the words came out in a subdued whisper.

Porozan looked back at the thief with an annoyed expression. “You will henceforth speak to me with respect,” he commanded, “and you will address me as ‘Master!’”

“Go kiss a basilisk,” Alcar thought, but the words that found their way to his lips were: “Yes, Master.”

“That’s better.” Porozan turned and resumed his journey, the confused thief trotting obediently along behind him.

By this time, Alcar had begun to suspect that the ring on his finger was the source of his sudden, uncharacteristic subservience. He held it up to his eyes as he walked, noting the arcane runes etched into its golden surface. The thief could rotate the ring or slide it up and down his finger at will. But no matter how hard he tried, he could not bring himself to slip it all the way off.

Porozan came to a sudden stop in one hall and pointed at an ironbound door.

“That is the vault,” he informed his captive. “You are never to enter it, nor is any part of your body ever to come within five feet of it. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Master,” Alcar responded meekly, shuffling the requisite distance away from the door and glaring at Porozan the whole time.

The wizard noticed the look Alcar was giving him and smiled. “You might as well get used to it,” he said. “So long as I wear this ring, and you yours, you will be

forced to obey my commands.” He held up his right hand where a thin band of gold gleamed evilly on one finger.

Porozan moved the hand to stifle a yawn. “After all of tonight’s commotion,” he added, “I probably won’t be getting up until around 10 o’clock, but I’ll expect you to have my breakfast waiting for me then. Come along now and I’ll show you the kitchen.”

Alcar followed his new master down the hallway with a sinking heart.

OVER THE COURSE OF THE NEXT WEEK, ALCAR came to understand the powers and limits of the cursed ring he wore on his right hand. The ring forced him to obey any command that Porozan chose to give him, no matter how demeaning or self-destructive it might be. But the ring held sway only over Alcar’s actions, not his thoughts. Porozan could command the hapless thief to not escape, but he could not command him to not think about escaping.

Alcar began biding his time. Sooner or later, he knew, Porozan was bound to give him contradictory orders. That, the thief hoped, would provide him with a loophole through which he might escape.

The opportunity finally came late one evening, when the wizard commanded Alcar to give him a back rub. Although this contradicted Porozan’s earlier dictum about never touching his person, the thief was dismayed to find that his body swiftly responded, giving the mage a gentle massage, then backing off when done. When Alcar tentatively tried to touch Porozan again, he found that the old rule was firmly back in force. Apparently, the ring resolved contradictory orders by temporarily suspending earlier commands, then restoring them once the latest order had been fulfilled.

Alcar had to admit that this approach made sense, but that did nothing to ease his growing despair.

As the days turned into weeks, Alcar learned a grudging respect for the old wizard’s intellect. His commandments were all carefully worded and fitted together to prevent the thief from harming him or escaping from him. Alcar was confined to the mansion and banned from communicating with anyone else, be it a guest or a passerby on the street outside. But the one commandment that puzzled the thief the most was that which forced him to give a wide berth to the ironbound doorway in the mansion’s southern hall each time he passed that way.

Alcar had initially assumed that the vault contained Porozan’s valuables, and that the geas placed upon him to stay away from that room was simply the wizard’s way of protecting his possessions. But if that was the case, then why did Porozan later issue a commandment that Alcar could steal nothing from him? That would seem a bit redundant and wasteful—unusual traits for Porozan. Furthermore, if the vault contained the wizard’s valuables, then why in Dara’s name were the Chalice of Corazor and other priceless artifacts sitting in display cases in a room on the other side of the house?

The mystery of the vault deepened a few days later when a short, dark-skinned mage paid a visit to the mansion. Alcar had been a prisoner in Porozan’s home for better than a month now, and aside from deliveries,

this was the first visitor that the wizard had ever received in his home. Little wonder, too—the magicians greeted each other warily, sheathing themselves in so many layers of protective magic that the air between them shimmered and sparked.

“I’ve come here for the orb, Porozan,” the visitor announced without warmth.

“You know my price, Gillamon,” Alcar’s captor replied, equally coolly.

Gillamon hawked and spat on the carpet. “It’s extortion, you miserable ratbag! The Eggs of Morinar are worth a dozen such orbs.”

Two hoops of colored light—one blue, the other green—spun about the carton fast enough to make Alcar dizzy.

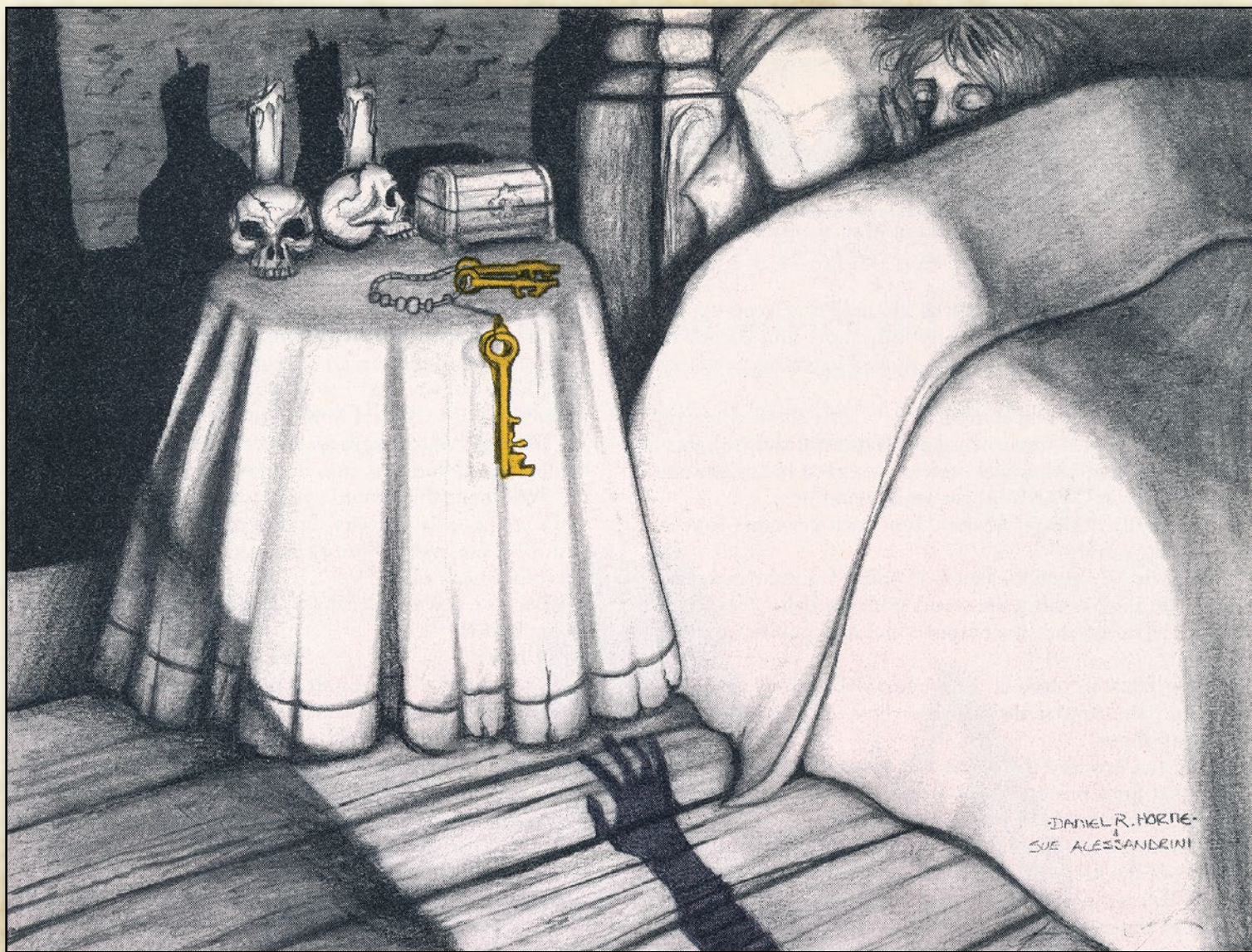
“Temporal stasis?” Porozan asked with a smirk.

“Aren’t you being just a bit overcautious?”

Gillamon grunted noncommittally. “Maybe, but I’ll bet you don’t take the orb to bed with you at night, either.”

“No, but I have my own, less extreme, precautions. If you’ll wait here a moment, I’ll go get the orb.”

Porozan turned and, gesturing for Alcar to follow him, left the room and headed toward the vault. Once they were out of earshot, Porozan stopped and turned to face the thief.



“Ah, I see.” Porozan rose from his chair. “If you feel that way, then I suppose we’ve no further business . . .”

“Fossilized dung heap!” Gillamon grated in a low voice. “Spare me your amateurish playacting. I have your price and will pay it.”

The visiting wizard snapped the fingers of his left hand. There was a clap of thunder, and a silver egg carton appeared in the middle of the room with a dozen gray eggs in it, their surfaces giving off an oily sheen.

“Stand still a moment,” he commanded. Then he took up the slim black wand that hung from his belt and pointed its silver-tipped end at Alcar. “Shalagora,” he intoned, and for the second time in his life, Alcar found every voluntary muscle in his body frozen into immobility.

Porozan lowered the wand and wandered off down the hallway out of Alcar’s sight. The thief’s keen hearing was able to pick up the sounds of a key rattling in a

lock and a door being swung open on infrequently used hinges.

There followed a few moments of indeterminate muffled sounds before Alcar heard the door swing shut and its bolt click into place once more. A moment later, Porozan reappeared, now wearing gloves on his hands and carrying a glowing yellow iridescent sphere cupped between them.

“Dinro-skeelat!” he muttered, freeing Alcar from the wand’s effects once more, but the thief hardly noticed.

What was so special about the vault, he wondered. Why would Porozan use the wand to hold him when a simple command would do? In fact, why bother with any special commands at all? The existing ones seemed to cover all the necessary contingencies.

As he followed Porozan back to the parlor, Alcar decided that it was high time he paid a visit to the vault.

ABOVE AND BEYOND EVERYTHING ELSE, ALCAR was a thief. That being the case, the litany he kept repeating in his mind was the complete antithesis of everything that he believed in.

“I’m not going to steal anything,” he told himself for the umpteenth time, “I’m just going to borrow it. I promise to put it back immediately afterward. The ring will see to that.”

Alcar was appalled at the degree to which his thieving skills had deteriorated during his weeks of slavery. He winced at the minute noises his picks made and the length of time that it was taking him to master the simple lock on Porozan’s bedroom door. Prisoner or no, he promised himself that in future he would stay in practice.

If the ring had any consciousness of its own, Alcar’s mental pleadings must have convinced it of his sincerity, for it did not interfere with his attempts to pick the lock. Moments later, he was able to swing the door open and creep stealthily inside.

The thief was already familiar with the layout of his master’s bedroom, having been in it twice each day of his captivity: once to deliver breakfast in the morning and a second time later in the day to collect the dirty dishes and make up the bed. Alcar was pretty sure that Porozan would object to this midnight raid, but as the old mage had made no specific prohibitions in regard to the matter, the ring let the thief do as he pleased.

Being careful not to wake the sleeping wizard, Alcar picked up the old mage’s key ring from where it lay beside the wand on the nightstand, then stole quietly from the room.

Back downstairs, he took a pair of straw brooms and tied them end-to-end, then strapped one of the keys from the key ring firmly to one end. Holding the whole rig out before him, he was able to slip the key into the lock on the vault door without coming within five feet of the door.

Alcar’s knowledge of locks was such that he’d been able to pick out the correct key right away. Nonetheless, it still took over an hour of jiggling and adjusting his cumbersome rig before the bolt finally snapped back. He had to give his aching arms a few moments of rest

before he could find enough strength to prod open the vault door and peer in from a distance.

The vault was not very impressive. It was a small, austere, ten-foot-square room with shelf-lined walls holding all manner of bizarre and arcane-looking objects. The Eggs of Morinar sat in one corner, looking rather mundane without their twirling hoops of magic.

Alcar spared little attention for the contents of the vault; he was more concerned with the properties of the room itself. Drawing the black pearl from his pouch, he fastened it to the end of his makeshift pole and extended it toward the doorway.

The pearl glowed a bit as it approached the entrance to the vault, but not nearly as much as one might expect given that something as powerful as the Eggs of Morinar were inside. At least Alcar assumed that the eggs were powerful, given the way Porozan and Gillamon had treated them.

The pearl did not brighten appreciably as it got closer to the room, but the moment it crossed over the threshold, its light suddenly went out. Alcar hastily pulled back on the broomstick, fearing damage to his precious trinket, but the pearl’s gentle glow returned the instant it was out of the room.

Alcar raised his eyebrows in surprise. Apparently, the vault was some sort of antimagic zone. That would explain why Porozan had banned the thief from entering the vault, and why he resorted to the wand whenever he wanted to visit it himself. If either Porozan’s ring or Alcar’s ring ever entered the vault, the geas would doubtless be broken, at least temporarily, allowing Alcar to slip off his ring and escape.

“All well and fine,” the thief thought to himself. “But how does this buy me my freedom?”

Alcar’s eyes flicked toward the Eggs of Morinar once more, and a crafty smile tugged at the corners of his lips. Perhaps there was a way after all . . .

WHEN ALCAR PREPARED POROZAN’S BREAKFAST the next morning, he carefully excluded the boiled eggs that were a regular feature of the wizard’s morning meal. The mage noted their absence almost immediately.

“Where are my eggs?!” he squawked.

“They are downstairs, Master,” Alcar replied. “Shall I bring them up here for you?”

“Yes, you fool!” he snapped. “Go fetch them! And be quick about it before the rest of my meal goes cold!”

The thief spun about and dashed speedily from the room, more to hide his smile of triumph than to obey his master’s request for alacrity. Alcar’s intent was to bring Porozan his eggs—his Eggs of Morinar, that is. That, of course, would necessitate entering the vault.

But the thief’s smile quickly evaporated when he reached the bottom of the stairs and found his feet carrying him not toward the vault but back to the kitchen. Apparently, if there were multiple ways of fulfilling one of Porozan’s orders, the ring would allow him to choose only the one that involved the least conflict with the wizard’s previous commands.

Alcar boiled up two eggs exactly the way Porozan liked them, then carted them back up to the wizard’s

bedroom, cursing the ring the entire time. If the elderly mage noticed his captive's sudden ill humor, he gave no indication of it, consuming his meal in silence.

Later that night, after he'd finished up all his household chores and dutifully practiced his lock picking skills, Alcar retired to his room and dropped onto the edge of his bed with a great sigh of relief. His plan with the Eggs of Morinar had required that he leave the vault unlocked from the previous night. With the plan's failure, he suddenly found himself in danger of discovery. Throughout the day, whenever Porozan headed down the southern hallway, the thief's heart would begin pounding so loud that he thought it would deafen him.

Fortunately, the mage found no reason to enter the vault, and Alcar's trickery went undetected. Now all that remained was to sneak back into Porozan's room, borrow the keys once more, and relock the vault. It was going to be another hour or two before the mage settled into deep slumber, and Alcar dutifully spent the time analyzing what had gone wrong with his plan.

Clearly, the ring had not been fooled by his deliberate misinterpretation of the wizard's command. Alcar was beginning to suspect that the ring had no intelligence of its own, but simply relied upon the wearer's understanding of the orders given him. So it wasn't good enough for Alcar to fool Porozan: he had to fool himself as well!

The thief shook his head in despair. He'd heard about some fakirs who were able to put a person into a deep trance and thereby convince them of things that were blatantly untrue, but it was not a technique that Alcar had any mastery of. And even if he did, the ring probably wouldn't let him use it on himself, as that would eventually lead to escape—which was clearly against Porozan's orders.

So if he couldn't get into the vault himself, maybe he could get the wizard to go into the vault without using the wand. Alcar's heart skipped a beat. That was it! He could replace the wizard's wand with a powerless stick, then . . . but no. Once again, the ring would interfere, as that would ultimately lead to a violation of Porozan's prohibitions against theft and escape.

And that, Alcar realized, was the crux of the matter. He could lay any escape plans he chose, but he would be prevented from carrying them out so long as he wore the ring and Porozan its twin: the wizard's orders would see to that. Therefore, he had to find some hole in the orders themselves. Something that would let him escape without interference from the ring.

Alcar took out a sheet of paper and a stylus, then began listing all the commandments that Porozan had ever given him. This was not a simple task, as he had never bothered to commit them to memory; he hadn't needed to with the ring watching over him all the time.

After an hour of racking his brain this way, Alcar decided that he could ignore all of the short-term commands, such as "sit down," "bring me my slippers," and so forth, and just concentrate on those that were worded in a permanent fashion. The list he ended up with was surprisingly short:

1. Do not try to escape.
2. Do not harm Porozan.
3. Do not touch Porozan.
4. Do not take off the ring.
5. Do not allow others to break any of Porozan's commandments.
6. Always speak to Porozan respectfully and address him as "Master."
7. Do not enter the vault or come within five feet of it.
8. Do not leave the mansion.
9. Do not communicate with anyone except Porozan.

Alcar whiled away the night, gazing at his list, looking for some inconsistency, some hole that would allow him to escape. But that was the problem: any hole he did find would lead to escape, which would be prevented by rule number one, and probably by rule number four as well.

Growling with frustration, Alcar hurled his stylus down onto the bed with a thud. He had to get moving anyway if he wanted to get the vault locked up before sunrise. He rose from the bed and had begun gathering together his equipment when a fragment of memory trickled through his brain.

There was something else that Porozan had said that first, fateful night. Something not on the list. When Alcar finally remembered it, he frowned. It wasn't much to work with, but it was all he had.

This time, there was no smile on the thief's face as he laid his plans—just desperate hope. That his new scheme would start, as his previous, unsuccessful one had—with a nocturnal visit to Porozan's room left Alcar with a disturbing sense of *déjà vu*.

BY THE TIME ALCAR GOT BACK UP TO Porozan's room the next morning to retrieve the breakfast dishes, the wizard was up and dressed, his wand and key ring hanging from their accustomed places on his belt. The old mage yawned, then strode past Alcar and out of the room. The thief hurriedly scooped up the dirty dishes and scurried after his master.

The two of them walked along in silence for a few moments before Porozan paused and turned toward the thief, giving him an irritated look.

"Why do you dog my footsteps like that, man? The kitchen is down the other corridor."

"My apologies, Master. I was concerned that you might have some other tasks for me to perform."

The wizard's face took on a wary look. "You're unusually obsequious this morning," he noted, "What are you up to?"

Alcar gulped. If Porozan had framed the question as a command . . .

"Master, do you realize how degrading it is to be pulled willy-nilly by this damnable ring? If I can obey your commands quickly enough on my own, I can avoid its coercion and retain at least some semblance of dignity."

"You call this fawning dignified?" The mage laughed cruelly. "Very well, then. If nothing else, it should be entertaining to see how long you can keep it up."

They proceeded down the corridor once more, Porozan chuckling to himself and Alcar grinding his

teeth in a mixture of anger and anxiety. When they came even with the vault, Alcar stopped dead in his tracks.

"What's that?" he said.

Porozan, several paces ahead of him, stopped and looked back, a frown on his face.

"What's what?" he asked.

"That sound," Alcar replied. He held one hand up before the wizard could say anything more, then cocked his head toward the door of the vault as if listening to some faint sound.

"There seems to be something . . ." the thief whispered. He tried to take a step toward the vault but the ring immediately jerked him back. Alcar shrugged in resignation.

"What is it?" Porozan was whispering now.

"Probably nothing, Master. Just a rat perhaps—put it from your mind."

The wizard shook his head. "I think I'd better have a look," he said, pulling the wand from his belt. "Stand still." He raised the silver-tipped end and pointed it at the thief.

Alcar froze in place at the wizard's command and felt sudden panic course through his veins. "For how long?" he blurted out.

Porozan lowered the wand and scowled in annoyance. "It's just for a minute. Now stop sniveling, you worthless cretin!" He raised the wand once more.

"Shala-gora!" The hallway was briefly filled with tinny echoes of the keyword, then fell silent but for the breathing of the two men.

Alcar shuddered inwardly. If Porozan had left his command at a simple, "Stand still," the thief might have remained frozen in place until they both died of hunger.

One minute later, the command timed out, and Alcar found himself free to move once more. He stepped over to the motionless form of Porozan, the wizard's lips still parted in the act of uttering the last syllable of the wand's keyword.

Alcar tugged the wand from the mage's extended hand and observed its freshly painted tip. A few flakes of silver had come free, exposing the dark wood below, but the paint job had lasted long enough to accomplish its purpose.

Being careful not to touch Porozan's flesh, Alcar slowly worked the band of gold from the wizard's middle finger.

"You commanded me never to remove my ring," the thief told the statue before him. "But you said nothing about my removing yours." With that, he pocketed the ring and departed, leaving his erstwhile captor to gaze on in helpless rage.

MEDREA LAUGHED UNCONTROLLABLY. "YOU mean," she gasped between bursts of merriment, "that he froze himself with his own wand?"

"Yep," Alcar replied, taking a sip of his ale. "It was a close thing, though. I didn't think the paint on that wand was ever going to dry!"

The other thief controlled her laughter long enough to down the remainder of her drink. "But how come you were able to take his ring from him?" she asked.

"Easy," Alcar said as he refilled both their mugs from the pitcher that the server had left behind. "Porozan's commandments forbade me from touching his person. But I could still touch his ring, just so long as I didn't touch him."

"No, no. I understand all that," Medrea reassured him. "But how come you were able to take your own ring off afterward?"

"Once I had the ring off Porozan's finger, the geas was broken and I was free to do as I pleased."

"Exactly my point!" the woman exclaimed, her mental faculties surprisingly intact considering the amount of alcohol both had consumed over the last hour. "Surely you must have known that you'd be taking off your ring the moment you'd relieved him of his."

"Uh-huh," Alcar agreed. He could see what she was leading up to, and was enjoying her obvious confusion.

"Well then, that would constitute a violation of Porozan's commands. So why did the ring let you go through with it?" she asked. "Sneaking into his room, repainting his wand—any of it?"

"Because it wasn't really a violation of his commands," he explained.

"What?"

Alcar smiled. "On my first night, Porozan told me that I would have to obey his commands so long as he wore the master ring. That in itself acted as a sort of modifier to all his other commands. It meant that I could do whatever I wanted to, carry out whatever plans I desired, and the ring would not interfere. Just so long as any intended violations would not occur while Porozan was still wearing the master ring."

"Holy Dara!" Medrea muttered, shaking her head in mock disgust. "You're no thief—you're a lawyer!"

Now it was Alcar's turn to laugh. Medrea took another gulp of ale and used the back of her sleeve to wipe the foam from her lips. "So what did you do with him?" she inquired.

"Who, Porozan?"

The woman nodded.

"What could I do?" he asked her, spreading his hands out helplessly before him, palms up. "I don't know how to break a wizard's spells."

"You could have dragged him into that special vault of his," she pointed out. "That would probably have dispelled the wand's effects."

"I suppose so," Alcar admitted, "but who knows for sure? It can get dangerous, messing around with magic you know nothing about."

"So you just left him frozen there?" Medrea asked in surprise.

"Oh heavens, no! That would be cruel. What sort of person do you take me for?" His features took on a look of injured innocence.

Medrea rolled her eyes in exasperation. "All right then, so what did you do with him?"

"Well, I figured that it was a matter best handled by another wizard." Alcar smiled as he lifted his mug to his lips. "So I asked Gillamon to look in on him and see what he could do."

Medrea's howls of laughter filled the tavern once more. ■