

Prologue

Three massive shapes sped northward in a tight formation through the darkness of the ancient Bottomless Chasm. Only the slight rustling of leathern wings upon the crisp pre-dawn air gave any indication of their passing. The shadowy trio, as long as war galleys, neared the northern end of the canyon and angled upward toward the few twinkling lights marking the sleeping city of Ketran.

A pair of watchmen was nearly blown off the south walls when the massive shapes exploded out of the chasm. Dazed, the men squinted back toward the city, their mouths hanging open.

With the first alarm bells echoing, the dragons dove upon a tall slender citadel of white standing out among the darkened flat buildings surrounding it. The lead beast's jaws parted with a loud smack. It sucked in a long guttural breath that caused its belly to rumble like a gathering storm. With a tremendous roar, the dragon belched forth a blazing stream of blue and yellow hellfire that rocked the tower. Two more blasts of fire exploded against the southern face as the dragons raced by, leaving the structure glowing red like a blade upon a forge.

A door flew open on the roof of the tower known as the Spire. Several robed figures hustled out into the night air. They were led by Navah, a spare woman garbed in the white robes of a high wizard. With sooty smoke curling up past the rooftop, the wizards began frantically searching the skies.

“Look!” Navah pointed to the northeast, a stiff wind whipping her short black hair. “They return!”

“By the great texts!” someone cried. “They’re gigantic!”

“Look to your work!” Navah barked.

The wizards began chanting ancient incantations, their voices blending into a low chorus that could just be heard above the distant continuous clanging of heavy brass bells in the distance.

The lead dragon’s head cocked slightly. After emitting several short screeches, it broke formation and angled off toward the northern half of the city.

Twin jags of crackling blue lightning erupted from atop the Spire and traced their way skyward, filling the air with the strong smell of ozone. The first bolt sizzled wide of its mark; the second exploded against the first dragon’s shoulder, slicing a glowing red line along its armored flank while trailing sparks and flaming gobbets of seared black scales.

The wyrm let loose a piercing shriek before swinging sharply away with dark blue smoke trailing from behind.

The remaining beast turned back toward the tower only to find itself suddenly engulfed in a raging blizzard. Incredible winds and hail stones the size of sun melons buffeted the creature mercilessly.

With great wings pumping, the dragon narrowed its eyes and dove through the icy onslaught. It soon found the edge of the Spire’s rooftop and sank its iron-like claws into the mortar there. Drawing in a

long hissing gulp of air, the dragon's head slowly rose like that of a giant cobra preparing to strike.

Knowing what was about to come, Navah released the spell she had been holding. A rose colored dome of translucent energy appeared over the gathered wizards just as the dragonfire struck. Orange and yellow split the night sky in a dazzling explosion, bathing the Spire in a premature dawn.

Her outstretched arms trembling and her bosom heaving, Navah fought to hold her own against the fantastic creature's unbridled fury; it was a battle she was slowly losing. Flames began licking through several fractures that had appeared across the magical shield's glistening surface. Navah gritted her teeth and tried to hold on.

At the moment her spell shattered, the storm ended. Navah dropped to her hands and knees, gasping for air while fighting to maintain consciousness.

With thin twisting fingers of black smoke trailing from its snout, the dragon gave a short huff and released its hold on the tower. While turning away, its spiked tail snaked around in a sweeping arc. It slammed into an unsuspecting mage and launched him screaming over the edge.

Navah rose on unsteady legs, every fiber of her weakened body burning from having channeled so much mystical energy for so long. Through stinging smoke that brought tears to her dark gray eyes, the high wizard scanned the sky. With luck, the abominations had had enough. A short breath

escaped Navah's lips when she spotted a pair of huge winged shapes approaching low and fast over the city rooftops.

"What now?" cried Theroou, a fetching young enchanter glancing fearfully in the direction of her mentor.

"Now," Navah replied resolutely, "we see how badly we wish to live."