

An alliance that will set them upon a perilous search for an ancient relic . . .

"You are surely aware", she went on, "of the value one wizard may make of the bones of another. For centuries the relics of great sorcerers have been made into powerful talismans by others; for a wizard's flesh and bone, even when long dead and dried, retains a whisper of the power commanded by that wizard in life.

"If prepared with the proper rituals, such relics can be used as a means to harness and direct one's own power."

"So I've heard tell," Elhanan nodded.

"This tablet . . ." here the witch removed from a nearby shelf a square item looking to be at least a foot and a half long by two thirds as much wide, wrapped in a covering of yellow velvet. Withdrawing the cloth, she unveiled a weathered fragment of slate, upon which were chiseled rows and columns of angular symbols and asymmetric shapes. ". . . is one of a set of fourteen, scribed by a loremaster now long forgotten, which tell of the life of the last sorcerer to have possessed the mummified bones of Nastherias's left hand. The rest of the tablets are lost, but this one, the fourteenth, is said to reveal the resting place of the hand.

"It is written in the language of ancient Ulseka, which I cannot read . . . but which you, who bears the Brand of Asticahtë, can."

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Without another word he turned his back and began to quit the chamber.

"Wait," Zenobia called after him. To come so close and yet be thwarted was a thought she could not bear. She must try to reach him somehow. "Why will you not read the tablet?" she asked.

"Why should I wish to? You are nothing to me," he shot back over his shoulder.

"I'll share the talisman with you—it can give power for us both . . ."