

freely. I regarded them both dubiously. I felt certain that there were yet more things they were holding back from me, no doubt out of fear that I would decline if everything was made plain. I knew I would have to be on guard at all times.

"If we retrieve this fabled talisman of yours, this sword is mine—that shall be *my* reward for this mad scheme," I pronounced, running my eyes over the length of sharpened stone with no undue wonder.

*A BARGAIN THAT CAN ONLY LEAD TO MADNESS AND TERROR*

"Shalok's fist, woman!" I swore aloud. "What are they?!" My mind seemed not to accept what my eyes saw: the forms towered in height, almost scraping the ceiling as they moved, and semi-human, in that there was a torso bearing two arms and two legs—but the arms were long and dangling like thick ropes, bending with no sign of bones within, and the torso was squat and shapeless. All four limbs were almost a foot wide at their thickest, and rather than feet, the legs ended in trailing lumps that were dragged along the ground behind, while in place of hands the serpentine arms each terminated in three spine-like claws. There was no head, face, or eyes of any kind that I could see, the torso even dipping down in-between the bulges of the shoulders, but clearly they were able to sense our presence and position somehow. Their skin—if skin it was—was of a dirty greenish color, and looked oddly unreal, almost like dry and featureless clay. They were as silent as a peaceful grave, save for the sound of the dragging legs over the floor.

"Whatever they are, they are no product of nature, nor gods!" she shouted.

"Get behind me!" I bellowed, bounding ahead as I drew the stone-bladed sword. These beings, whatever they were, moved too slowly to catch a man who was nimble on his feet. I slashed in and darted back, having lopped off an arm that had been sluggishly groping down for me. Then, to my horror and amazement, the creature's other arm shortened while its severed one grew back, though now only as long as its shrunken counterpart. At that moment Sageebna hurled his spear into the body of the second guardian. His aim was sure and the head hit true, plunging into the strange substance of the body, but it was to no