



THE CITY OF SPLENDORS

A WATERDEEP NOVEL

ED GREENWOOD
AND
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PROLOGUE

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Sharp gusts of wind buffeted Laeral Silverhand as she strode along the ramparts of Waterdeep's Westgate, dodging among archers and the wizards and sorcerers hurling fire at the besieging host below. Her beautiful face was grim, and her lithe body glowed slightly through her well-worn battle leathers. That glow was the only outward sign of the great power being drawn steadily out of her by the man she loved.

All about her, wizards were dropping with exhaustion. Two mages, their minds scorched by overuse of Mystra's fire, cowered behind merlons, gibbering like the madmen they might forevermore be. Laeral passed by without breaking stride. Later she'd weep, but nothing could be done for them now. Waterdeep was very far from being saved.

The wind off the sea blew cold and strong, too capricious and cruel even for early spring. Fell magic was at work. Sudden gusts snuffed the archers' flaming arrows and made small fire-spells to guttering like empty lamps. The Weave around her was aboil, stinging her skin like thousands of ceaseless needle-piercings. Laeral had not expected such magic from the seas.

Alas for Waterdeep, none of its defenders had, not even the mighty wizard who commanded the guard over the Westgate.

Khelben "Blackstaff" Arunsun, Archmage of Waterdeep, stood atop the gigantic stone gate-lintel. In the throes of spellcasting, he let slip the face and form he'd worn for many a year. Briefly,

all eyes could see him as Laeral did: tall, ageless, elf-blooded, feral as a rampant dragon, barely recognizable as a mortal being. The building power of a mighty spell sent his somber robes and raven-black hair swirling, and motes of silvery light coursed around him like moths drawn to flame. In both hands he held his long black staff high overhead, and in an awful voice like a chorus of all his mortal lives combined, declaimed a ringing chant.

The tiny lights began to multiply and grow, each swiftly taking the shape of an enormous silvery fish. A vast school of these flying creations spun briefly above Khelben and then swept out to sea, drawing the winds in their wake. Laeral's windblown tresses settled around her shoulders as the invaders' wizard-wind faded.

As he lowered the Blackstaff, Khelben seemed to sink back into himself, becoming once more a pepper-and-salt-bearded man in his later middle years, cloaked in black robes and imperious dignity, strongly built but no taller than Laeral's own slender height.

She slid a steadying arm around his waist. "And now, love?"

For a moment Khelben was silent, glaring along the city walls. Laeral followed his gaze.

Magic burst into the twilight sky beyond Mount Waterdeep like fireworks celebrating a festival of death. To the south, the harbor flamed. A strong stench of burning pitch was drifting from the docks, where the oily smoke of burning spars and sails was billowing up into the sky. Low tide was approaching—but if the sea was retreating, its minions were not.

The sands below the Westgate were littered with blackened, smoking sahuagin bodies, yet fish-men beyond number were still storming the gate furiously, undeterred by the carnage. To Laeral it looked like all the devils of the Nine Hells had come to host a fish-fry.

Their strivings had taken a heavy toll of the city's defenders. Many mages slumped in utter exhaustion, and several hung out over the walls, retching helplessly in the foul smoke. A few stood muttering together, casting dark glances at the Archmage of Waterdeep.

It was widely—and correctly—rumored that enough magic blazed in Khelben's staff to melt all the rock and sand along Waterdeep's shores into glass and turn the entire harbor into a simmering saltwater cauldron in which the sahuagin would boil alive.

Therein lay the problem, Laeral knew well: The Art always had its price. The more powerful a magic, the greater its cost. She didn't need to glance at her beloved's face to feel his anguish and frustration. Waterdeep was his city, his home, and—perhaps even more than Laeral herself—his deepest love. The Lord Mage of Waterdeep had power enough to protect the City of Splendors ... but only at the risk of destroying it.

Khelben turned his head as sharply as a hunting hawk. "I dare not call down the ward-wall, not with the Weave so strained. 'Tis small magics and force-of-arms we need now."

With a snarl he gestured at the nearest merlon. It exploded outward like a great tumbling fist, to topple down onto the crowded sands below.

They watched its fragments roll, raking red crushed ruin through the sahuagin. Before the great stones stopped, fresh sahuagin were surging forward, rising out of the blood-dark waves where so many bodies of their brethren already bobbed, filling the beach once more with unbroken fish-men.

"Ahghairon's enchantments weigh on me like yon mountain," Khelben growled. "I'm holding them from crashing down on all our heads right now. If I wasn't calling so much power out of you, I'd be crawling-helpless."

Guardsmen were trudging along the walls toward the Lord and Lady Mage of Waterdeep, faces grim and eyes full of questions.

Khelben watched their approach and sighed. "I need you to return to Blackstaff Tower and summon all aid-of-Art you can, right down to the last tremble-fingered novice. Use the Tower magics to send your plea afar."

Laeral looked down at the roiling sea, where sahuagin were still rising out of the blood-red waves to splash ashore, crowding against their fellows. "You're saying we can't hold them?"

The Lord Mage shook his head. “A few might scale the walls and fight through, but the gate will hold.”

She shrugged, not seeing his reasoning.

“They’ve got that far.” Khelben waved grimly at the harbor and then back at countless staring eyes and wet scales below. “You know the merfolk would die before they let these sea-scum into the inner harbor.”

Sorrow thinned Laeral’s lips. In the fury of the fray she’d forgotten what the bold advance of the fish-men must mean. Some of the harbor merfolk were dear friends.

Had been dear friends.

“Without them,” she murmured, “the storm drains are undefended. Each is well warded, but whoever sends the sahuagin against us is no stranger to the Art.”

“Aye,” Khelben agreed, claspng her shoulders briefly as she turned to go. “For all we know, there could already be sahuagin in every sewer in Waterdeep—and once they’re down there, there’s no place in the city they can’t go.”

Laeral nodded grimly. “I’ll send for everyone who can hurl a spell or swing a sword.”

“We’ve not much time,” the Blackstaff warned, “and many of our friends may be busy elsewhere. This strike from the sea isn’t limited to Waterdeep.”

“I’ll contact Candlekeep first.” Laeral, never much of a scholar, gave her lord a swift, ironic smile. “Surely the monks have nothing more pressing to attend to.”



A small snake, a bright garden slitherer banded in tropical turquoise and green, wound a soundless way through room after dim room full of books. With sure instinct it made its way to a certain dusty alcove deep in Candlekeep and spiraled gracefully up one leg of a study table.

The young man seated there greeted his familiar with an absent-minded nod and returned his full attention to the book open before him: a thick history of fabled Waterdeep. Mrelder had

always been fascinated by the City of Splendors, his hunger for its lore almost stronger than his ache to master sorcery. Almost.

The sorcerer seemed an ill match for the bright little snake. Lean, fit, and intense, he was pale from many hours spent with books. His once-dark hair had already gone gray, and his narrow face was seamed with thin, pale scars and dominated by fierce dark brows over mismatched eyes. One was a muddy gray, and the other (an old glass eye he'd bought in a manygoods shop) an odd pale green hue. Mrelder wasn't vain, but hoped to have coin enough someday to have a glass orb made to exactly match his surviving eye. It would be one less constant reminder of the horror known as Golskyn.

Light footfalls whispered on stone, approaching his corner. Mrelder paid little heed. Candlekeep was a quietly busy place, where many came to learn or, like him, to hide. The little snake, however, took alarm, darting into its master's sleeve and coiling about his forearm.

Thus alerted, Mrelder swept up his books and rose—just as a red-bearded giant of a man rounded the nearest shelf. Though one of Candlekeep's Great Readers, Belloch looked more like a warcaptain than a scholar. Just now, his face wore a dark expression better suited to a battlefield than a library.

"Come," Belloch rumbled, dropping a massive hand onto Mrelder's shoulder. Without pause he wheeled, jerking the young sorcerer along so sharply that books tumbled. Mrelder stooped to retrieve them, but Belloch's grip tightened. "Leave them."

Mrelder stiffened. To treat precious tomes so was unprecedented in Candlekeep! In a sudden flood of wild speculations, he fetched up chillingly against a dire prospect: perhaps a certain priest by the name of Golskyn had recovered from his latest "improvement," somehow found Mrelder's trail, and come here.

No escape, even here . . .

Striding hard, Belloch marched the young sorcerer out of the chamber and down hall after hall Mrelder had never walked before. Some short time after he'd become thoroughly lost, they descended a winding stair and crossed several darkened rooms

to emerge in a large circular chamber.

Mrelder's heart sank. Several senior Readers were gathered, and with them his favorite lore-guide, the visiting monk Arkhaedun. Six of his fellow scholars were also in attendance, looking frightened and confused. Armored guards—and where had *they* come from?—ringed the walls, faces impassive and long spears held ready.

It looked as if a court had convened to condemn Mrelder for his part in Golskyn's crimes—*or perhaps*, a small voice whispered deep in his mind, *for his own inability to duplicate them*.

“Arkhaedun informed us of your training,” Belloch said curtly, stepping away from Mrelder only to turn back and glare. “He says you possess considerable fighting skills—not just small, untutored magics.”

The Reader's dismissive tone wasn't lost on Mrelder. Belloch had been a battle mage; many wizards scorned the inborn—and to their minds, *unearned*—powers of sorcery. Long used to far worse treatment, Mrelder was years beyond taking offense.

“I've learned much in my time here, lords,” he replied, trying to sound calm. “May I ask what this meeting concerns?”

“We've received an urgent summons for every willing warrior and magic-wielder we can spare. A great battle rages, spawning small fires that can best be stamped out by such as you.” Belloch grew a mirthless grin. “Your fascination with the city of Waterdeep has been noted; it should serve you well.”

“Waterdeep? You want me to go to *Waterdeep*?”

Something in Belloch's face changed at Mrelder's awed tone. “I'll not lie to you, lad: this task may be your last. Monks' sparring is poor preparation for bloody war—and Binder forgive me, even all our books and scrolls leave many of that city's secrets untold.”

“I'll go,” Mrelder said eagerly. “Of course I'll go.”

The Master Reader nodded and turned to the other scholars. “Choice made? Well, then: When 'tis time to return, say *'arranath'* aloud, and so hear the way.”

As he silently mouthed that word to fix it in memory, Mrelder's

thoughts were of Waterdeep. To see the City of Splendors with his own eyes!

How often he'd dreamed this dream without really expecting it to become truth! Yet what crisis could threaten mighty Waterdeep that his small skills were needed? Had the great wizards of the city somehow . . . fallen?

Wilder thoughts whirled through Mrelder as he watched Arkhaedun step onto a circular mosaic in the middle of the chamber floor, an intricate rune outlined in flecks of colored crystal. A fractured rainbow of light shot up from the crystal shards—and the monk disappeared.

When the soft shafts of light faded, a sturdy, fair-haired lass Mrelder had seen frowning over high-piled tomes of battle magic stepped onto the rune. She was followed by a tall, silent scholar from the Inner Sea lands. When the soft glow of his journeying faded, a scholar of Tethyr was waved forward.

Then Belloch nodded, and it was Mrelder's turn. The young sorcerer hastened into the circle.

A searing flash of white light was his prompt greeting, as painful as falling into a hearthfire. Groaning, Mrelder fell to his knees, hands clapped to his burning eye.

When his mistily swimming vision returned, he saw spear-points. The circle of guards had closed around him with deadly intent.

Belloch pushed through them and dragged Mrelder roughly to his feet. "Are you a traitor or a fool?" he thundered. "Only one living thing at a time may pass the gate! What secret are you hiding?"

Belatedly, Mrelder remembered what he bore coiled about his arm. "My familiar," he gasped, plucking back his sleeve. What had been his snake fell limply to the floor like a bit of severed rope.

Chagrin twisted the Great Reader's face. "I—it did not occur to me you might have a familiar. It appears your sorcery hasn't been . . . sufficiently regarded."

"I seldom speak of my Art," Mrelder murmured. "If there's fault, it's my own."

He should have anticipated something like this. Of course any magical portal in this most precious of strongholds would be carefully warded. Allowing but one living thing to pass at a time was a wise safeguard, given the worth-beyond-price of Candlekeep's irreplaceable treasures.

He gazed down at the little snake, the latest of many creatures to die in his service, and allowed himself a sigh. Then he looked at Belloch. "I'm ready to go."

The Great Reader shook his head. "No. You'll be a staggering weak-wits until morn, no use in battle."

Mrelder held out rock-steady hands. "I've . . . learned to withstand worse pain. I'm ready, and I am needed. Send me."

After a moment's hesitation, the burly monk nodded and thrust Mrelder into the circle.

The crystal mosaic blazed up and seemed to give way at the same time, and Mrelder found himself falling through a void of soft colors and eerie silence. In the utter absence of sound, the faint but constant ringing in his ears—another reminder of Golskyn—seemed deafening. It was almost a relief when he jolted to a stop on solid cobblestones amid the clanging cacophony of battle.

Mrelder glanced quickly around. He stood in a reeking, rat-scurrying alley between two old, large, rather crumbling stone buildings—warehouses by their look. Over the stench of rotting refuse and a heavy smell of smoke, the stink of fish was strong in the air. Mount Waterdeep loomed up behind him, its first rising rocks only paces beyond an alley-blocking mound of rotting crates, barrels, and garbage. The other end of the alley opened into a larger cross-street filled with a hurrying crowd.

They were all fleeing to Mrelder's left, shrieking and jostling as they ran. The crackle of fire and the clang of hard-wielded weapons sounded very near, off to the right.

Beyond the warehouse to his left stood a taller, finer building. Wisps of steam coiled from a door left ajar, bearing the soft tang of seawater. This must be one of the heated saltwater baths said to be popular in Waterdeep. Mrelder stepped closer.

A soft plash of disturbed water came through the steam.

Mrelder frowned. It was unlikely even the notoriously jaded citizens of Waterdeep would be idly soaking in the public baths as their city burned around them.

Then he heard something more from inside the bathhouse. Faint converse. The tongue was strange, liquid-sounding and guttural: Clicks, grunts, and deep thrumming croaks that plumbed depths no human voice could reach.

Mrelder looked around for a likely weapon. One nearby crate looked sturdier and less rotten than most strewn about the alley. He pried loose one of its boards, noting with approval two long iron nails protruding from one end. Sidling up to the bathhouse door, he peered in cautiously.

Three large, wet, green-scaled creatures were padding softly through the steam of the lofty, many-pillared bathing hall, finned tails lashing. Barbed-headed spears were clutched in their webbed claws, and their staring black eyes were intent on the panicked crowd visible through the multi-paned windows along the street-front.

Vaguely human, they resembled enormous upright frogs with tails that brought to mind merfolk or gigantic tadpoles. Their fish-like heads bristled with spikes, and were split by gaping jaws filled with lethal-looking fangs.

Sahuagin.

Mrelder swallowed hard, slipped inside, and followed them, flitting from pillar to pillar as silent as a shadow.

Dripping, the fish-men stalked to the ornate front doors of the bathhouse. They glanced at each other—and then kicked the doors open, leveled their spears, and charged into the street. A chorus of screams and desperate shouts rose above the battle-din.

Mrelder hurled himself into a run. Bursting from the building, he slammed his board into the head of the central, largest sahuagin, driving the nails deep into the glistening scales at the base of the creature's skull—

—and breaking the board into splinters.

The sahuagin was thrusting its spear viciously over the shoulder of its comrade to the left at a tall armored warrior beyond. As

Mrelder's strike slammed home, the creature shuddered. Before it could turn, he leaped onto its back and rode it down to the cobbles.

The sahuagin writhed and bucked, trying to free itself of both imbedded weapon and stubborn attacker. The broken board swung wildly, slamming into Mrelder's clenched jaw.

He struggled atop the fish-monster, avoiding its spines as best he could. Around him was confusion, swords swinging on all sides, scaly limbs waving, bubbling screams rising wetly from beneath him. Angry shouts were laced with squalls of rage and pain that didn't sound human.

Finally Mrelder managed to tear the broken board-end free. Tossing it aside, he seized the finned head by two of its spines, and threw all his strength into a quick, brutal twist.

Something broke sickeningly under those wet scales. The sahuagin shuddered again and went limp.

Seeking the ruins of his board again, Mrelder sprang off it, afraid the other fish-things would—

And found himself staring up into the open visor of a fine, burnished war-helm, into a face lined by well-spent years—and a calm swordpoint of a gaze, leveled at him by eyes that were kind and wise.

This, marveled the awed sorcerer, is what a king looks like.

The regal man looked right through Mrelder, as if able to see everything the young sorcerer was and his every last guilty secret. Sudden dread rose in Mrelder and was as swiftly gone; the man was giving him an approving smile.

"Aby done," he said, in the rich voice of one cultured yet commanding. "Without your aid, that spear would have found me."

Mrelder tried to return the smile, but his mind was awlirl. He'd never seen such splendid, silver-blue battle armor. Knights in warsteel just as fine were gathering beyond the tall warrior's broad shoulders, but Mrelder's attention was on the bright silver crescent of metal covering the tall warrior's throat, a device that bore an elaborately wrought stylized torch—the arms of the Lords of Waterdeep.

Mrelder had seen its unmistakable likeness that very morning,

on a page of an obscure book of Waterdhavian lore. He was looking at the Guardian's Gorget, a magical device of great power, fashioned for and worn by only one man.

"My Lord Piergeiron," Mrelder breathed, awed to find himself in the presence of the Open Lord of Waterdeep.

Piergeiron clapped him on the shoulder in a soldier's thanks to a battle-comrade. Drawing a long dagger, he pressed it into Mrelder's hand.

"Well met, lad. That board of yours is not good for much more fighting; take this." The lord grinned. "If you're so minded, there's work yet for us all."

If? At that moment, Mrelder would cheerfully have followed Waterdeep's Lord into a volcano!

A deep rumbling shook the cobbles under their boots then, and everyone turned to peer at Mount Waterdeep. Another thunderous impact followed, and then another.

The young sorcerer followed their gazes and found himself whispering "Mystra's sacred shadow!" in fresh wonderment.

A man-shaped colossus of weathered stone, ninety feet tall or more, was striding down the mountain, finding—and sometimes making—a sure path to the harbor. Mrelder had never expected to set eyes on one of the fabled Walking Statues, much less watch it walking!

"*That* should hold our foes," Piergeiron said in satisfaction, watching the great construct lumber along.

He turned his head. "Are you with me, lad?"

"I'd not want to be anywhere else, just now," Mrelder said firmly, and they traded heartfelt smiles.



Time passed in a bright haze of blood and fire. Never far from Lord Piergeiron's side, Mrelder fought errant flames, vicious fish-men, and men who swarmed the shadows of Dock Ward like rats to loot and steal and stab.

It seemed as if the lord's band was a running, tireless whirlwind. When at last Piergeiron barked a halt in the courtyard of

some grand mansion, Mrelder's shoulders sang with pain, and his eyes swam with smoke and stinging sweat.

Around him, the grandly armored knights of Piergeiron's guard sprawled wearily on smooth stone benches or leaned against statues, tending small wounds and seeing to their weapons.

One handed Mrelder a water flask. "Whence do you hail, monk?"

The sorcerer drank deep before murmuring, "I'm no monk. Trained to fight as one, yes, but I've not taken orders in the service of any god or temple."

The knight smiled. "Smart lad. Gods are like women: When there are so many fine choices, why should a man limit himself to but one?"

This philosophy was greeted with a few tired chuckles from around the courtyard.

Piergeiron turned to give Mrelder that commanding gaze. "Listen but lightly to Karmear. 'Tis a fine path you've chosen. My father was a paladin, and I've always held the deepest respect for all who choose the way of the altar."

"My father's a priest," Mrelder blurted. Surprised by his own outburst, he stammered hastily, "Or was. I'm not sure . . ."

The Open Lord's brow furrowed. "You know not if your father lives?"

"No, Lord. We parted badly, some time ago." Mrelder hesitated, not sure what to say. "I was . . . I could not be the son he wished me to be."

"When you leave Waterdeep, you must find him," Piergeiron said firmly. "From what I've seen this day, I'm certain any father would rejoice in such a son."

The words, spoken with such assurance, kindled hope in Mrelder. Could it be that he, who'd proved capable in a fray and was at least comfortable as both sorcerer and monk, might be weighed in Golskyn's grim measure and finally found worthy?

Suddenly, Mrelder could imagine nothing more important than learning the answer to that. He looked at the Lord of Waterdeep. "As you say, I will do. This I *swear*."

Piergeiron nodded. Eyes never leaving Mrelder's, he reached into a belt-pouch and drew out something small, black, and gleaming. "This is a Black Helm. I'd like to hear how matters fall between you and your father. If you return to the city, present this at the palace, and the guards there will know you as a friend to Waterdeep and to me."

Mrelder stared down at the charm. It was a tiny replica of Piergeiron's own war-helm, rendered in fine obsidian and pierced to be hung on a neck-thong.

"My lord!" was all he could find to say.

The tall paladin waved away his stammerings and turned to address his knights. "The city's quiet. There'll be much to do come morning, but our night's work is done."

At this dismissal, the men rose slowly and stiffly, taking up swords and helms. Mrelder politely refused an offer of lodging for the night in their barracks and waved farewell. Candlekeep was expecting his return and report. The last he saw of that shining-armored band was Piergeiron's answering wave and smile.



Twilight slid into night as Mrelder made his way deeper into Dock Ward. Dazed citizens stumbled past, wandering like sooty ghosts amid the ruins of homes and businesses.

As the weary sorcerer trudged along, he murmured, "Arranath." Belloch's gruff voice promptly announced in his mind: *To find Candlekeep, seek the same circular symbol that adorns our floor, and say aloud 'Arranath' when touching it. The symbol is in the wellhouse behind the shop called Candiera's Fine Shoes and Sandals, on the west side of Redcloak Lane three shopfronts south of Belnimbra's Street, in Dock Ward.*

Mrelder's destination looked humble indeed. Timber-framed buildings leaned dark and close over narrow streets. Ramshackle balconies and catwalks meandered from one to the next, many crossing overhead and casting the streets below into deep shadow. Belnimbra's Street, however, was long, broad, and well-known, and Mrelder soon found Redcloak Lane.

He turned into it, shouldering past merchants morosely trying to salvage wares from a tangle of wrecked and charred carts—and stopped in dismay.

The corner shop stood intact, but most of the west side of Redcloak Lane beyond it was gone. Candiera's Fine Shoes and Sandals was just a few plumes of smoke drifting from blackened ruins.

Mrelder stared at the mess, sighed, and strode forward. The soot might make things look worse than they really were, and along Redcloak two or three buildings rose undamaged out of the swirling smoke like surviving teeth in a crone's grin. Perhaps . . .

Perhaps not. The second building, a shop offering stools, benches, and chairs, seemed largely untouched under a thick veil of soot, but the third was a tumbled pile of blackened timbers, fronted by a crazily leaning doorframe that now led nowhere but still sported a blackened signboard proclaiming to all Waterdeep that this was Candiera's Fine Shoes and Sandals.

Mrelder sighed again and started to pick his way through the still-warm embers, dodging drifting cinders as he went.

His boots grew warm as he trudged through tumbled, blackened spars and over a heap of stones that had recently been a chimney into an open area beyond: a stretch of back alley that hadn't disappeared under the rubble of fallen buildings.

Right in front of him, like a gift from the gods, stood what he'd been told to seek: a communal wellhouse, a small stone hut that had escaped the flames.

Opening its peg-latch door, Mrelder felt his way down the stone steps inside. The wellhouse was damp and dark, but dim light beckoned ahead. A single stroke of crumbling glowpaint had long ago been splashed across the ceiling. In its glow he made out an uneven stone floor, a few scattered pebbles, and the well, a simple circle-wall of stone covered with a cross-braced wooden disk like a barrel-end. Mrelder lifted this lid by its rope handle and held it up to the glowpaint.

There on its underside was a crudely carved rune, the echo of the mosaic in Candlekeep that had brought him here. He smiled—which was when the faintest of grating sounds came from

beyond the well, hinting of unseen places and stealthy lurkings. Mrelder ducked down, easing the well-cover to the floor. Leaving it there, he crept around one side of the well, drawing the dagger Piergeiron had given him . . . had it really been just half a day ago?

He could make out things in the gloom now. He'd thought the cellar drew down to an end just beyond the well, but now he saw its deepest shadows hid the mouth of a stone-lined passage.

Wet feet slapped stone in its darkness, pounding quickly toward him!

A huge sahuagin lurched into the well-cellar, its dark-eyed, spiny head nosing this way and that as it sought to see all perils. It was larger than any sea devil Mrelder had seen before, and its hulking torso sprouted two—*two!*—pairs of long, heavily muscled arms. One limb hung limp and useless, shattered ends of bone protruding from a deep sword-gash, but the other three all held bloodstained blades of various sizes. Seized in battle, no doubt, from men this fish-beast had slain.

It hissed at Mrelder and leaned forward, seeking to reach over the well with its swords.

At full stretch, its trio of blades could just span the stone circle, but it could not seriously menace Mrelder so long as he could move freely.

He moved now, backing to the steps with his lone dagger raised. He mounted the first step by feel alone, keeping his eyes on the sahuagin.

The fish-beast hissed again, the gills on its neck flaring convulsively, like a hooked fish gasping on a riverbank. It occurred to Mrelder that the sahuagin was dying, *drowning* in the thin air.

The creature tried again to lunge across the well, but the act of reaching made it shudder in pain and draw back, swaying. In a moment, it would choose one side of the well or the other and come around the stones in another charge.

Mrelder readied his dagger for a throw. It was well-balanced, the finest war-steel he'd ever wielded, and would fly straight and true. At this range he couldn't miss, and if he feinted first to make

the sahuagin commit its arms and blades in an attempt to block his strike and *then* flung his steel, it would have no time to dodge or deflect. A quick toss would win Mrelder time enough to race back up the steps and flee into the ashes and drifting smoke.

From what I've seen these past hours, I'm certain any father would rejoice in such a son.

Piergeiron's remembered words stilled Mrelder's arm.

He stretched forth his other hand, palm down and fingers splayed, and worked almost the simplest of spells.

The wooden lid rose into the air and spun toward the sahuagin. Three blades batted at the spinning disk, but the force of Mrelder's magic kept it on course. The lid caught the fish-beast just below its ribs and sent it staggering back.

The sahuagin slammed solidly into the stone wall and slid down it, too winded to draw breath.

Mrelder advanced, chanting another spell, this one of his own devising and used on his last familiar: the bright Chultan snake that had once been large enough to swallow two of Golskyn's servants.

The sahuagin began to shrink. It dwindled, spasming and clawing the air in a violent,—and vain—struggle against the magic.

When the fish-man was no taller than the length of Mrelder's hand, the sorcerer ended the spell. The moment the sahuagin was released, it hissed and darted toward the tunnel.

Mrelder snatched up the tiny creature in one hand and tugged a vial from his belt-pouch with the other. Ignoring the sahuagin's fierce struggles—an easy matter, as its fangs and webbed talons were now no more vexing than a kitten's claws—the sorcerer pulled the vial's cork with his teeth and tapped a single drop of fluid onto the sahuagin's head.

Gills flared, instinctively grasping the proffered moisture—and the tiny creature went stiff and still.

Mrelder tucked vial and immobilized sahuagin into his pouch. Then he moved the inverted wooden lid to an open stretch of floor and stepped onto the rune-design. With but a word, he and his prize would be in Candlekeep. “Arr—”

Just in time, he remembered his familiar's fate. The sahuagin was no good to him dead.

Hissing one of his father's viler oaths, Mrelder drew it from his pouch and scowled at it. A dead sahuagin wasn't hard for a man like Golskyn to acquire. Capturing one alive, now, was another matter, but how could he keep it living until he was ready to face his father . . . and endure the grim transformation that must follow?

Mrelder stepped off the gate to think.

He could see only one path: hide the creature here and return for it at some later time. If he couldn't take this prize to Golskyn, he'd bring his father to Waterdeep. Surely even the great Golskyn wouldn't scorn such an offering as a four-armed sahuagin, nor the son who'd brought it to him!

He caught up a handful of pebbles in case he needed to toss or drop them to judge unseen distances, then strode into the dark tunnel. Unpleasant wet and rotting smells assailed him as he felt his way into deepening chill and damp, groping at the rough walls in search of hiding-places.

Eventually he found one: a small niche in the uneven stones to his left, well above his head and near what felt like an empty but sturdy iron torch bracket. Mrelder hid the tiny monster there behind most of his handful of stones and then cut free one of the leather thongs that criss-crossed his soft boots to ensure a snug fit. He tied the thong to the bracket, letting it dangle there to mark the hiding-place for his return.

Mrelder stood listening for a breath or two, afraid the small noises he'd made thus far might have lured other sahuagin—or worse—hither.

He heard nothing, not even the plink of dripping water, and with a relieved sigh returned to the wellhouse, took his place on the gate, and murmured, "Arranath."

Once again, the floor seemed to give way under his boots, plunging him into a silent, dreamlike freefall.

He emerged into warm lamplight in the circular chamber in Candlekeep where an anxious Belloch was pacing.

The monk's scowl fell away as he rushed forward to clasp Mrelder by the shoulders. "You're the first to return! What news?"

"Waterdeep's secure," Mrelder mumbled, suddenly weak with weariness. "Our work's done, the Open Lord told me."

The Great Reader smote the young sorcerer's shoulder, in a painful reminder of Piergeiron's salute. "Victory, lad—glorious victory!"

"Yes," Mrelder agreed, managing a smile.

He was not seeing battles in the streets of Waterdeep, however, but a confrontation to come, one where he'd not stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the Open Lord of Waterdeep and a score of veteran bodyguard knights.

When he faced Golskyn again, he and the sahuagin *would* prevail.

Even as he made that silent vow, Mrelder seemed to hear the mocking echo of his father's taunting voice, saying this bid would fail him as so many had before.



Monsters, observed Beldar Roaringhorn glumly, were damnable unreliable fellows. According to everything Beldar knew of swordplay and monsters—and he prided himself on his knowledge of both—the ugly green bastard should have won that fight. Handily.

He counted out the ten dragons he'd lost betting on the scarred half-ogre, and with a casual flourish that told the world he tossed away gold at least a dozen times a day, slid the coins across the table. The peg-legged sailor who stood waiting for it grew a nastily delighted leer.

Beldar studied him. The strange, dirty, spidery-looking fellow appeared to be held together largely by years' worth of accumulated grime. His arms were long, thin, and ropy with sagging remnants of muscles. He wore no shirt, but his faded red breeches were belted high over a tightly rounded belly that seemed at odds with his emaciated limbs. His remaining foot was bare, and gold toe-rings gleamed down there through layers of dirt.

The old man grinned at Beldar, displaying three blackened teeth, and flipped one of the coins to the half-ogre. The brute caught the gold deftly and gave Beldar a mocking, almost courtly bow.

“Son of a sahuagin,” muttered the young noble.

“My friend Gorkin’s not what you’d call sea-devil spawn,” the old sailor said smugly, “but you’ll be seeing plenty of *those* soon enough. Word is Waterdeep’s under attack right now! Wouldn’t put it past yer perfumed pretty-women to drag the scalies into those public baths fer a quick . . . swim.”

The look on Beldar’s face sent the wretch into gales of laughter that promptly turned into a coughing fit. It lasted, relatively speaking, a tenday or so, ere the salt spat a thick gobbet of pipe-weed onto the floor, wheezed, and gave Beldar that grin again.

“You’d like that, would you?” he taunted. “Comin’ home to Waterdeep to find yer women’s got a taste for seafood, so to speak? Might be they’d find the sea-devils a closer thing to a real man than yer fancy-pants, soft-handed, white-livered, sorry sons of—”

The old sailor’s words ended abruptly with a sharp *urp!* as Beldar sprang lightning-swift from his chair to drive a fist deep into that capacious gut.

The salt went to his knees, wheezing, coins bouncing and rolling in all directions. In an instant, the makeshift sparring floor emptied as the trio of mixed-blood outlaws currently fighting for the entertainment of Luskan’s lowlives hurled themselves at a richer prize, not to mention the young nobleman who’d provided it.

Beldar’s eyes lit up at the prospect of battle. With a widening smile he clapped his hand to the hilt of his sword.

Suddenly a larger hand took hold of his collar, and he was jerked up and back so sharply his feet left the floor.

Green muscles rippled as that arm twisted, turning the momentarily strangling Beldar to almost touch noses with . . . Gorkin. The half-ogre’s other hand clamped over Beldar’s sword-hand, holding the noble’s magnificent weapon firmly sheathed.

“Easy, lad. I’m just takin’ you out of harm’s way.”

Beldar blinked. There was no menace in the brute's face. Avarice, yes, but what face in Waterdeep didn't bear the same stamp?

"Very kind of you, I'm sure," he replied, "but hardly necessary."

The half-ogre held Beldar off the floor a moment longer, because he could, then lowered him, stepped back, and jerked his bald, green-skinned head at the widening brawl where knives were out, and men were dying over a few spilled coins.

"More needed'n'you might think. Yonder's Boz." A stubby green finger indicated a furry mongrelman not much larger than a halfling. "Might as well thrust your arm into a dragon's maw as draw steel on him. Mean little bastard."

"Really." Beldar watched the small fighter kick, bite, and stab for a moment, and saw Boz's teeth take out a second throat as thoroughly as his wickedly hooked knife had served the first one. "Gods! He looks as if his mother had carnal knowledge of a badger."

Gorkin grinned. "Fights like it, too."

"So I see," the nobleman murmured.

The little mongrelman pinned an orcblood foe tusks-down to the ground and wrenched one thickly muscled arm back so sharply that Beldar imagined the thick, wet sound of rending bone and sinew. Not that he could have heard it over the shrieking. Boz was calmly biting off fingers, one at a time, to get at the coins clenched in the orc-blood's fist.

Beldar rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Yonder mongrelman might prove to be a creature he'd long sought. It was certainly worth the price of an introduction to find out.

He met the half-ogre's speculative gaze. "You know who I am?"

The brute nodded. "I know who, but I don't know *why*."

Beldar smiled thinly. In certain circles he was known for his fascination with monsters. Of course, he wasn't the first wealthy well-born with a taste for exotic creatures, but Beldar's interest was less easily explained than most. He slew not for bounty, nor

entertainment. He did not line the walls of Roaringhorn mansions with mounted trophies, nor did he collect living specimens. Occasionally he purchased some of the more interesting bits of slain monsters for magical uses, but what man with his resources did not?

The truth was something Beldar pondered daily but had never spoken aloud. It sounded too vainglorious, even for a noble of Waterdeep, to announce an important destiny awaiting him. Stranger still to claim his path to greatness would begin when he mingled with monsters. So he'd been told years ago by a seer of Rashemen, and so he believed, with every breath he drew.

It wasn't Beldar Roaringhorn's way to wait for destiny to find him. He seized every chance to seek out the company of monstrous creatures. Fortunately, the travels expected of an idle younger son of a noble house of Waterdeep afforded opportunities aplenty to do so, far from the ever-watchful eyes of kin and the expectations of Waterdhavian society.

Boldy, he clapped the half-ogre on the shoulder. "Gorkin, is it? Let me buy you a drink! Perhaps we'll find business interests in common."

"*Perhaps?*" the brute scoffed. "You think I kept you from yon tangle out of the softly dawning love in my heart?"

"That possibility never occurred to me," Beldar replied with a wry smile. "How's the ale in this establishment?"

"Wouldn't know. I'm not allowed to drink here. They say it makes me mean and ugly." Gorkin bared his fangs in an ironic smile.

"Hmmm. Had I known," Beldar responded dryly, "I'd have offered to buy you a drink before I wagered on the outcome of your fight."

The half-ogre's bark of laughter sounded like a file rasping on a rusted blade, and he gave the noble a friendly swat on the shoulder. "A place down on the docks'll let me in—or used to, before I bought me one of their girls."

His small, piggyish red eyes studied the young nobleman, turning thoughtful.

They beheld dark chestnut hair falling in waves to shoulders, a fine-featured face with skin that evidently—remarkably—held its sun-browned hue year-round, dark eyes rimmed with sooty lashes that must be the envy of many a woman. Wiser than most idle young wastrels out of Waterdeep, by the looks of him, with a swordsman’s lean and fit build. Small, dapper mustache, and that air of style all wealthy young Waterdhavians wore like a golden cloak.

“Could be I’d get me another girl, if *you* was doing the asking,” the half-ogre wheedled.

Beldar fought to keep revulsion off his face. “Let’s start with a drink. If the wenches offer you their favors, what befalls is your choice.”

“But you’ll pay?”

The nobleman gritted his teeth. This sort of “mingling with monsters” hadn’t featured in his dreams and speculations.

“I’ll pay,” he said shortly.

Gorkin grinned wickedly. Turning, he pushed through the crowd, out into the deepening night, and led Beldar down a steeply sloping street to the docks.

The Icecutter stood hard by Luskan’s longest wharf, a first port of call for sailors just off the cold waters. It was a tavern only slightly less rundown than the fighting-den they’d left and full of patrons only slightly less disreputable. Oddly enough, its taproom was scrupulously clean. They took the nearest empty table.

A small, slim serving lass came over to them at once, a tray of battered tankards in her work-reddened hands. She placed two foaming drinks before them and swayed deftly back beyond the half-ogre’s hopeful reach.

“The ale comes with Vornyk’s compliments,” she said flatly. “He doesn’t want any trouble. Drink it and leave, Gorkin.”

The half-ogre emptied one tankard without coming up for air, thunked it down on the table, and belched mightily.

“Another,” he demanded, tossing his head toward Beldar. “He’s paying.”

The wench glanced at the Waterdhavian, fire rising in her brown eyes. "You'll pay for all damage, too? And a healer, if need be?"

"I hardly think such will be necessary," Beldar replied coolly.

"Tell that to Quinta," she snapped. "Enjoy your ale. 'Tis all you'll get this night."

Beldar watched the wench's quick retreat to the kitchens. She wasn't conventionally pretty; too thin for beauty, and not gifted with the lush charms Beldar usually sought in women of negotiable virtue. Yet unlike many dockside wenches, she was clean and neat, her long, thick brown hair carefully pulled back into a single braid. Those brown eyes were large and very bright, and something about her light step and swift, efficient movements appealed. A little brown bird, come to roost in an unlikely nest . . .

"That's the one I want," Gorkin announced.

The nobleman chuckled mirthlessly. "I'd not wager a copper on your chances. Who's this Quinta?"

Gorkin plucked up and drained Beldar's tankard. "My last girl. Haven't seen her since."

Before Beldar could inquire more closely as to just what *that* meant, a huge man was bustling up to them, a large, well-laden food tray nestled against his food-splattered apron.

He gave Beldar an oily smile and with swift skill served more ale and set surprisingly appetizing fare before them: a thick seafood stew in hollowed-out roundloaves, a small wheel of cheese, and a bowl of pickled vegetables. "Two gold, the lot."

An outrageous price, but as the half-ogre was already devouring cheese and stew as if starvation loomed large, Beldar dropped two gold dragons into the man's outstretched hand and threw in a sigh for good measure. One coin was promptly bitten, whereupon the man grunted approvingly, gave the half-ogre a curt nod, and left.

Watching him go, Beldar murmured, "Your peg-legged partner is surprisingly good at games of chance, considering how poorly he bluffs."

“Poorly? Got the better of you, didn’t he?”

“I refer to his comments about Waterdeep.”

The half-ogre raked his stew with a finger and caught a plump mussel. Tossing it between his fangs, he swallowed without chewing.

“’Twas no bluff. Kypur heard it from an old mate what has an ear out for wizard-talk. There’ll be lively times a-plenty hereabouts, once most folk hear. ’Course, some Luskan ships’ll run afoul of the sea-devils, but most jacks’ll quaff to their own misfortune so long as Waterdeep’s harder hit.”

Beldar nodded absently, but his thoughts were not of the long-standing rivalry between the two northern ports.

So ’twas true. Waterdeep was under attack by sahuagin, in numbers sufficient to be a serious threat. His family and friends were in danger, his home threatened. The rising bloodlust of a warrior bred and trained sang through his blood, but not loud enough to silence a single, devastating truth:

Waterdeep was under attack, by *monsters*, and Beldar Roaring-horn wasn’t there to seize his destiny!

He wanted to dash out and find a fast coach or ship about to sail and ask Gorkin a thousand questions, too . . . but the half-ogre waved away his first few to empty the pickles into his mouth. Making a face, he followed them with the soggy remnants of his loaf—and then reached for Beldar’s. The noble waved at him to eat it all and waited impatiently until the last crumb disappeared.

Gorkin leaned back, patted his belly in satisfaction, and growled, “I’ve one more need to settle, then we’ll talk.”

He rose and stalked to the back of the tavern, most likely to seek relief in an alley out back. In Beldar’s opinion, the quality of the ale was such that Gorkin might as well return his portion directly to the cask and call it a loan. No one would notice the difference.

A woman’s scream tore through the tavern clamor. Chairs scraped on the bare board floor as drinkers turned to see why, but not a single patron rose to help.

Gorkin was backing out of the kitchen, dragging the serving

wench under one arm. He strode toward a stair leading up to what Beldar assumed were coins-for-the-night rooms. The lass shrieked and struggled, but the half-ogre merely grinned.

The girl gave the apron-clad tavernmaster a terrified look of appeal. “Vornyk, *please!* He beat Quinta almost to death!”

The man shrugged, unmoved. “If he’s buying, I’m selling.”

Rage tempered fear on the wench’s face. “So I’ve heard, from this one and a hundred like him!” she spat. “The sooner he turns me loose, the sooner the two of you can go about your business!”

Gorkin released the girl long enough to backhand her savagely across the face. “Watch your tongue, wench, or I’ll cut it out and eat it,” he growled, watching her drag herself dazedly up from the floor. “Tis women for me, and none’ll say otherwise.”

“*This* woman isn’t for you,” she hissed. “I’ll die first!”

The half-ogre sneered. “Makes little difference to me one way or ’tother.”

The wench seized a heavy tankard from the nearest table and threw it at him, contents and all. Gorkin batted it aside, snatched her up and over his shoulder, and headed for the stairs.

Amid some cheers from around the taproom, the lass kicked, swore, and screamed, but never cried to patrons for help. Beldar decided she knew better.

Gorkin grinned and struck a pose, his prize struggling vainly in the curl of his arm. He made a show of starting to unlace the cods of his breeches, as men laughed and shouted lewd suggestions.

For a moment—just one—the young Roaringhorn noble weighed his life-long quest for an unknown monstrous ally against the sully of a tavern wench’s virtue. And then, with a disgusted growl, Beldar rose to his feet, reaching for his sword.

Another sword sang out faster. The taproom turned in almost perfect unison at the sound to behold an aging warrior in full armor, with the hammer and scales of Tyr bright upon the chest of his surcoat and his eyes shining with terrible wrath.

Holy wrath. A paladin of Tyr drawn by the screams, the doors of the tavern still swinging behind him. Beldar peered at the

man. He seemed familiar, as if Beldar had seen him before. In Waterdeep, most likely, but . . .

The paladin strode forward, and the patrons of the Icecutter sprang to sudden life. Leaping from their chairs, they pulled tables aside in a trice to clear a battlefield of sorts. Bets were shouted, and coins slapped down on a dozen tables.

The paladin paid no heed. Crossing the room in a few long strides, he plucked the girl from the half-ogre's grasp as if she weighed nothing.

Gorkin whirled with a roar and found himself facing a raised and ready sword, the wench safely behind the man wielding it.

Without hesitation the half-ogre sprang back, drew steel, and then plunged at his foe. Steel clanged on steel, sparks flew, the old paladin's blade circled arrow-swift up and under Gorkin's guard, and the half-ogre spat blood in astonishment, stared at the ceiling . . . and fell, eyes wide in disbelief.

Beldar was tempted to applaud. Four quick, precise movements, done in less time than it took to count them aloud, and Gorkin lay dying. It was a marvel of efficient swordsmanship, if lacking the showy flourishes Beldar favored.

The holy knight wiped his weapon on the sprawled half-ogre, sheathed it, and swept the taproom with a slow, measuring glance. Beldar got the uneasy notion the paladin was judging each man there. His grim expression suggested he saw little difference between those who committed evil deeds and those who merely sat and watched.

Then the paladin looked at the tavernmaster. "The girl leaves with me."

Avarice battled fear in Vornyk's eyes and won. "Aye, as long as you pay her price."

The paladin's cold expression deepened into a killing frost. "Is slavery legal now in Luskan?"

"She has debts," Vornyk growled. "An indenture. Not the same thing."

"I'd sooner challenge a skunk to a pissing contest than argue ethics with the likes of you. Name your price."

That amount was ridiculously high, but the paladin paid it without comment and left the tavern, gently leading the girl by one hand. As she passed Beldar her expression was wary, even cynical, but she probably preferred her chances with a grim stranger than a drunken, violent half-ogre.

Her chances were almost certainly better, the noble thought bitterly, with a champion of Tyr than with Beldar Roaringhorn of Waterdeep, the hero who might have been.