

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

VIPER'S  
KISS

HOUSE OF SERPENTS

JS

BOOK II

LISA SMEDMAN





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## CHAPTER 1

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Arvin leaned on the ship's rail, staring across the waters of the broad bay the ship had just entered. Ahead lay the city of Mimph. Like Hlondeth, it was a port, its harbor crowded so thickly with ships that their masts resembled the bare trees of a winter forest. But there the resemblance ended. Hlondeth had been built by serpents—it was a city of round towers, gracefully arcing viaducts, and ramps that led to rounded doorways reminiscent of the entrance to a snake's burrow. The buildings of Mimph, in contrast, were squat, blocky, and square. The city was a series of sharp angles and edges, from its square windows and doors to the jagged-looking flights of stairs that led up from the piers that lined the waterfront. Where Hlondeth's buildings were of green stone

that glowed by night with the residual energies of the magic used to shape them, Mimph's structures were of plain gray granite that had been hewn by hand.

By human hands.

As the ship sailed slowly into the harbor, making its way between the dozens of ships already at anchor, the only other passenger aboard her joined Arvin at the rail. He tasted the air with a flickering, forked tongue then gave a slight sniff. "Humans," he hissed under his breath.

Arvin glanced sideways at the other passenger—a yuan-ti half-breed with a distinctive diamond pattern on the scales of his face. The yuan-ti's head was bald and more snakelike than human, and his lower torso ended in a serpent's tail. He wore an expensive looking winter cloak, trimmed with white ermine fur, that draped all but the tip of his tightly coiled tail. He hugged a stove-warmed stone to his belly; his breath, unlike Arvin's, didn't fog in the winter air. His unblinking, slit-pupil eyes stared with open distaste at the city as he sluggishly turned his head to stare at it.

"How they stink," he hissed, completing his thought.

Arvin's eyes narrowed. He smelled nothing but clean sea air, wet canvas and hemp, and the tang of freshly cut pine drifting over the water from the dockyards, where dozens of naval vessels were being constructed to counter the threat from neighboring Chondath. Arvin said nothing, even though the yuan-ti's remark was designed to goad him. He was the only human aboard this ship who was not a slave; the sailors who toiled above, calling to one another as they furled the sails, all had an S brand on their left cheek. The yuan-ti obviously couldn't resist an opportunity to remind the one free human about his place in the world.

Arvin smiled. Enjoy it while you can, he thought. Here in the Barony of Sespech, it's the humans who run things.

Foremost among those humans was Baron Thuragar Foesmasher, the man who had wrested control of Sespech away from its former baron—a Chondathan lackey—nine years ago. The barony was now fully independent, a rising star among the states that lined the Vilhon Reach. It was a place where a man with the right skills and talent could go far.

Arvin, with his psionic talents, was just such a man. And this trip was going to give him the opportunity to prove himself to no less a person than the baron himself.

Six days ago, the baron's daughter Glisena, a headstrong young woman of eighteen years, had gone missing from the palace at Ormpetarr. The baron's spellcasters had been unable to find her; their clerical magic had failed to reveal even a hint of where she might have gone. With each passing day the baron's fears had increased. There had been no ransom demand, no boastful threats from his political enemies. Glisena had just . . . vanished.

Desperate, Baron Foesmasher had turned to his yuan-ti allies. Lady Dediana's militia, he knew, included a tracker said to be the best in all of the Vilhon Reach, a man with an extremely rare form of magic. Perhaps this "mind magic" could succeed where the other spellcasters had failed.

That tracker was Tanju, the psion who was Arvin's mentor.

Lady Dediana, however, was loath to loan Tanju to Baron Foesmasher. There was pressing business within Hlondeth for him to attend to, and he couldn't be spared. Yet a failure to respond to Baron Foesmasher's plea might fray the alliance that had recently been woven between the two states.

Tanju had proposed the solution. In recent months, he told Lady Dediana, he'd taken on an "apprentice," one with a quick mind and immense natural talent. This

apprentice, he assured her, could do the job. Delighted at being presented with a solution that would swallow two birds in a single gulp, as the old expression went, Lady Dediana had readily agreed. And so, early yesterday morning, Arvin had set sail for Sespech.

If all went well, he'd never have to return to Hlondeth. Tanju had agreed that, when the job was done—assuming the baron approved—Arvin could remain in Sespech. From time to time, Tanju might contact him and ask for information on the barony, but otherwise, Arvin would be his own master.

Staying on in Sespech suited Arvin just fine. After months of constantly looking over his shoulder, wondering if Zelia was going to suddenly appear, he could at last relax. He felt more at ease already than he had since last summer, when the yuan-ti psion had tried to take over his body with a mind seed. Arvin had narrowly defeated her by planting a false memory of his own death in her mind. In order to maintain that deception, he'd had to remain in hiding since that time. It hadn't been easy.

A light snow began to fall. The yuan-ti beside him hissed once more, tasted a snowflake with a flicker of his tongue, and slithered back to the passengers' quarters. Arvin watched him go, wondering what urgent business had stirred the yuan-ti out of his winter torpor and sent him south across the Reach. This winter was colder than any Arvin could remember, and yet the yuan-ti were more energetic than ever. They seemed ... restless.

As the ship drew closer to the spot where it was to unload its cargo of wine, sailors scrambled down to the deck where Arvin waited and stood ready with heaving lines. The gap between the ship and the pier narrowed and the sailors whirled the lines—each weighted at the end by a large “monkey fist” knot—above their heads. At the captain's order they let fly, and the lines, looking

like white streamers, arced toward the pier. They were caught by dock workers, who hauled them in rapidly hand over hand, drawing toward them the thicker ropes to which the heaving lines were tied, then looping these over bollards on the pier. The sailors, meanwhile, scrambled to the ship's two capstans and grasped the wooden arms. The ship jerked abruptly to a halt as the mooring lines pulled tight then gradually, as the capstans were turned with rumbling squeals, was drawn closer to the pier.

The hull snugged up against the large, ball-shaped fenders of woven rope that hung against the pier to protect the ship from scraping. One of the fenders tore apart with a wet ripping sound, and Arvin snorted disdainfully. Whoever had made it must have used substandard materials. Not only that, but the weave was sloppy and uneven.

He waited patiently while the ship was secured. Unlike the yuan-ti—who was lethargically directing the sailors hauling his numerous heavy trunks up onto the deck—Arvin was traveling light. A single backpack held his clothing, travel gear, and the handful of magical items he'd been able to make for himself without the Guild finding out about them. Collecting these from their various caches throughout the city had been tricky. If anyone in the Guild had realized that Arvin was thinking about leaving Hlondeth for good, the Guild would have seen to it that he was stopped. He owed them an enormous debt; it had been the Guild that had helped him hide from Zelia these past six months. And Arvin was a valuable resource—a source of magical ropes and nets at mere coppers on the gold piece. Too valuable to ever be let go. If they found out he was planning on running, they'd make sure he'd never do it again. They'd probably lop off a foot, this time.

He sighed and adjusted his pack into a more comfortable position on his shoulders. Inside it, carefully

wrapped in cloth against breakage, was a magical item Tanju had given him—a crystalline wand called a dorje. Made from a length of clear quartz as narrow as Arvin's forefinger and twice as long, it pulsed with a soft purple light: the psionic energies Tanju had charged it with. Using it, Arvin would be able to view Glisena—and her current surroundings—as if he were standing next to her. All he need do was touch the dorje to something that had once been close to her. A dress she had worn or, better yet, a hairbrush with a strand of her hair in its bristles.

Once Glisena was located and returned home again, Arvin would, no doubt, be rewarded by a grateful baron. Coin would be involved. Much coin, since Baron Foesmasher was known to be a generous man. Arvin would use the coin to set up shop in Sespech—an independent shop, not one controlled by the Guild. He would at long last reap the full profits of his magical rope making and net weaving, without the Guild dipping a hand in the purse. He'd make a new home for himself far away from the demands of the Guild, the reminders of his years in the orphanage—and the constant slithering hiss of the City of Serpents.

When the ship was secure, one of the ship's officers—a muscular fellow whose braided beard hid most of the slave brand on his cheek—shouted directions. The other sailors unfastened the hatches and swung a crane into place, preparing to unload the barrels that filled the hold. Another officer—this one a yuan-ti with patches of yellow scales on his cheeks and forehead, slithered over to the rail and coiled himself there. He watched the crew with unblinking eyes, one hand gripping a wand whose tip was set with a hollow snake fang. The slaves glanced nervously at him over their shoulders as they worked. The yuan-ti officer did not speak, but his message was clear. Any human seeking his freedom ashore would meet a swift end.

Arvin ignored the yuan-ti officer, taking in the people on the pier instead. The dock workers all appeared to be free men—many were bearded, an affectation that was forbidden to all but the most trusted slaves. Four teenage boys stood on the pier next to them, jostling each other and waving up at the ship, trying to catch the eyes of its passengers. Their voices overlapped as they shouted up to those on deck.

“Come to the Bluefish Inn! Good food, good ale.”

“Clean rooms, just five silver pieces a night at the Travelers’ Rest!”

“Hey, Mister! Let me show you the way to the Tangled Net Tavern. It’s close by.”

“Cheap rooms! Cheap rooms at the Silver Sail.”

A handful of women were also present. One walked behind a boy who trundled a wheelbarrow laden with a steaming pot of dark red liquid, a ladle in her hand. “Hot mulled wine!” she called. “Sweet and hot, six coppers a cup.” The half dozen other women were all doxies in low-cut dresses that were too thin for the winter air, strolling back and forth across the pier in an effort to keep warm.

Arvin’s eyes were immediately drawn to one of the doxies, a woman with high cheekbones and dark hair that fell in a long braid down her back. She was pretty, but what had caught his eye was the gesture she just used. She’d raised a hand to her face, pretending to rub her eyes with fingers that were spread in a V. As Arvin watched, she lowered her hand, rubbing her fingers against her thumb, then pointed at the ship on which Arvin stood, directing someone’s attention toward its passengers.

Arvin nodded. So Mimph had a rogues’ guild as well, did it? He supposed that was only to be expected. He glanced around the pier and easily spotted the weedy-looking boy lounging a short distance down the pier. The boy—who looked about fourteen, the age Arvin



had been when he found himself on the streets and was forced to steal to survive—acknowledged the doxy with a quick nod of his right fist, then began making his way toward the ship.

Arvin was glad it wasn't the doxy who would be attempting the grab. That was how things had started, the last time around. He looked around, trying to spot the other rogues he suspected would be somewhere nearby. There would probably be three or four in total, all working together in a carefully choreographed routine that would see whatever was stolen passed from one hand to the next. But the others—assuming there were more than just the woman and boy—didn't tip their hands.

Arvin slipped his pack off his shoulders, checked to make sure its flaps were securely fastened, then put it back on. He made a show of nervously patting a trouser pocket, drawing the boy's eyes to it. The only thing in that pocket was the remainder of Arvin's breakfast—some nuts and a dried cheese, wrapped in waxed cloth. His coin pouch with its supply of the local currency—small silver and gold coins called "fists" and "plumes," respectively, after the symbols stamped onto them—was tucked safely inside his boot.

As the ship was made fast, Arvin's eye ranged over the waterfront. The businesses lining it were typical of any port city: warehouses, boat builders, sail and rope makers, taverns, and fish-salting houses. There were also a number of stables, judging by the whinnying coming from some larger buildings farther down the waterfront, buildings that were fronted by fences that led to ramps on the pier. From these, the swift-footed horses of Sespech's famed Golden Plains were loaded aboard ships.

Instead of fountains, which could be found everywhere in Hlondeth, the people of Mimph seemed to prefer religious sculpture. At the top of a short flight of

steps leading up from the pier where Arvin's ship had tied up was a low stone dais that supported an enormous gauntlet as tall as a man—the symbol of the god Helm. The statue was brightly polished and appeared to be made of silver. The fingers were stiff and erect, as if the gauntlet were saying, "Halt!" It faced the harbor; on its palm was the symbol of an eye, outlined in blue. The pupil of the eye was an enormous gemstone. Judging by its rich blue color, it might have been a sapphire.

Arvin whistled softly under his breath. Even if the gauntlet were only coated with a thin layer of hammered silver, it would have been worth a fortune. It should have been locked away behind temple doors. Yet there it sat in plain view, unguarded. It might be too heavy to carry away, but surely thieves like the pair below would have found a way around whatever magical wards the statue bore to pluck out the gemstone at the center of that eye.

A horn sounded from somewhere near the center of the city. Once, twice, three times it blared. At the final note, all activity on the pier below stopped. Dock workers, vendors, doxies, the boys from the inns and taverns—even the two thieves—turned toward the sound and raised their left hands in a gesture that mimicked the gauntlet's, their lips moving in silent prayer.

Straining to see past the warehouses that lined the docks, Arvin caught a glimpse of a larger building topped with a square watch tower. Its crenellated battlements had led him to assume it was a keep or well-fortified noble home. He realized it must be a church—one devoted to Helm, the Vigilant One. Unlike the Chapel of Emerald Scales in Hlondeth, which was topped by a spouting serpent, this church was devoid of any representation of its deity. Instead, its tower was capped by a curved object, also of brightly polished silver, that Arvin guessed must be the horn that had just sounded.

The midday genuflection was brief; moments later the dock workers were back at their tasks. Aboard the ship, two sailors brought out a gangplank, ran it over the side, and lashed it to the rail. Arvin moved toward it, then remembered the other passenger. He stepped back, eyes lowered, as the yuan-ti slowly made his way to the gangplank. The yuan-ti gave a smug hiss as he passed Arvin and slithered down the gangplank to the pier.

Arvin watched, amused, as the weedy-looking boy—pretending to be one of the cluster of touts for the inns and taverns—crowded around the bottom of the gangplank with the other boys. The gangplank suddenly tipped—one of the dock workers must have bumped it—and the yuan-ti stumbled. The boy jumped forward to steady him. As he caught the yuan-ti, his left hand darted into a pocket inside the yuan-ti's cloak. The yuan-ti bared his fangs in an irritated hiss, and the boy backed away, bowing and making a sweeping gesture with his right hand in order to draw onlookers' eyes away from the object he'd palmed with his left.

The yuan-ti wasn't fooled. His slit eyes narrowed, and he touched his pocket with slender fingers. "Thief!" he hissed.

Arvin, descending the gangplank, was surprised by the speed of the yuan-ti's reaction, given the fellow's earlier sluggishness. The yuan-ti lunged forward, grabbing for the boy's wrist.

The boy was faster. The yuan-ti's hand caught his shirt cuff, but he wrenched his arm free and danced back out of the way. His hands—now empty—were spread wide. "He's crazy!" he protested. "All I did was help when he stumbled."

The doxy moved into position at the base of the flight of steps. Arvin knew what would happen next. The rogue would turn and flee—only to run headlong into her. During this "accidental collision" whatever he'd just stolen would be exchanged. Eventually he would be

caught, and searched, but by this time the doxy would be well on her way down the pier and out of sight, passing the object off to the next rogue.

The yuan-ti, however, wasn't playing along. Instead of calling out for the militia—or whoever patrolled this city—he used magic. No words were spoken, no gestures used, but suddenly the young rogue's face blanched and his hands started to tremble. Arvin knew just how he felt, having been the target of a yuan-ti's magical fear himself.

"You've . . . made a mistake, sir," he gasped.

The yuan-ti raised a hand and flicked his fingers. Acidic sweat sprayed from his fingertips, striking the boy in the face. The young rogue howled and clawed at his eyes.

"Give it back," the yuan-ti demanded.

The boy turned and ran—blindly, crashing into the dock workers and shoving them out of the way. As he neared the base of the steps, the doxy opened her mouth as if to call out to him then thought better of it and turned away. The rogue waved his arms around, feeling blindly for her then staggered up the steps.

The yuan-ti turned to the officer on board the ship. "Use your wand," he hissed. "Stop him."

The officer shook his head . . . slowly.

Nearly spitting with anger, the first yuan-ti slithered after the blinded rogue. The stairs slowed him down somewhat—he slithered back and forth along them, humping his serpent's body up them one by one—but the boy's progress was even slower. He ran headlong into a pair of dock workers who were carrying a heavy sack between them and careened backward down the stairs. As he scrambled to his feet again, the yuan-ti lashed out, trying to bite him, and just missed. The yuan-ti's fangs caught the boy's collar, tearing it, and the boy shrieked. "He's trying to kill me! Stop him, somebody!"

Arvin strode down the gangplank and onto the pier.

He caught the doxy's eye, made his left hand into a fist, placed it on his open right palm, and jerked his hands upward. *Help him.*

The doxy's eyes widened as she saw Arvin using silent speech. For a heartbeat, she hesitated. Then, as the young rogue on the steps screamed a second time, she shook her head and hurried away.

Arvin was furious. The doxy could easily have saved the boy by "accidentally" colliding with the yuan-ti. She still had eyes to see with, and could have run away, but she'd abandoned him instead. Muttering to himself—and wondering what in the Abyss he was thinking, getting involved in the local guild's business—Arvin ascended the steps. He slipped his gloved hand inside the back of his shirt and grasped the dagger that was sheathed there. With a whisper, he vanished the weapon into his glove; it would make a persuasive backup if his psionics failed. He readied himself to manifest a charm and felt the familiar prickle of energy coiling at the base of his scalp, waiting to be unleashed. But as he reached the top of the steps, he paused. Maybe—just maybe—this dispute would resolve itself.

The young rogue had backed up against the dais that held the statue of the gauntlet. He threw down whatever it was he'd stolen; Arvin heard a metallic clatter as the object hit the cobblestones. "Take it!" the boy screamed. "Take it, and let me be! You've blinded me—what more do you want?"

The yuan-ti slithered over to the object—a small silver jewelry case—and picked it up. He slipped the case back inside his pocket and smiled at the boy, baring his fangs. His long forked tongue flicked in and out of his mouth, tasting the young rogue's fear. "Your death," the yuan-ti answered belatedly. Then he slithered forward.

None of the people in the small plaza that surrounded the statue came to the aid of the blinded

boy—thieves must have been as despised in this city as they were in Hlondeth. And yuan-ti must have been just as greatly feared. The humans had parted to let the angry yuan-ti pass, though Arvin noted they weren't lowering their gazes. Instead they stared at the yuan-ti, faint smiles quirking their lips, as if expecting something to happen.

They didn't have long to wait. The young rogue, hearing the rustle of the yuan-ti's tunic and cloak against the ground, spun in place then leaped. His jump carried him up onto the ankle-high dais, where he crashed into the gauntlet. He clung to it like a drowning man clutching a log as the yuan-ti reared above him, savoring his terror. A drop of venom fell from his fangs onto the boy's hair. Amazingly, though the young rogue flinched, he did not move.

Arvin manifested his charm.

The yuan-ti cocked his head, as if listening to a distant sound, then shook it.

"Master yuan-ti!" Arvin called in as obsequious a tone as he could manage, sorry that he hadn't bothered to ask the yuan-ti his name during their day-and-a-half-long voyage across the Reach. "You're needed back at the ship. The crew aren't certain which trunks are yours. Don't waste your time on this boy. You got your jewelry case back. All's well now, friend."

The yuan-ti stared at Arvin for several heartbeats while flakes of snow drifted down between them. His lips twitched in a sneer. "Friend?" he asked.

"Damn," Arvin muttered. Quickly, he spoke the command word that made the dagger reappear in his gloved fist. He started to raise it—but a man beside him caught his arm. The fellow—a large man in a food-stained apron, his lack of a cloak indicating he'd stepped out of a building to watch the fight—shook his head. "No need, stranger," he whispered. "The gauntlet will provide sanctuary."

While Arvin was still trying to get his arm free—the man beside him might have been stout, but he had a grip tight as a coiled serpent—the yuan-ti lashed out at the rogue, fangs bared.

Halfway through his lunge the yuan-ti jerked to a halt. He strained for several moments against an unseen force, his body quivering, then slowly drew back. He studied the rogue for a moment, swaying back and forth, and glanced at the gauntlet. Then he reached down to grab the young rogue's ankles.

It was clear to Arvin what the yuan-ti intended—to drag the boy away from the gauntlet, which obviously was providing some sort of magical protection. But once again, the yuan-ti jerked to a halt, his grasping fingers just shy of the rogue's ankle. The yuan-ti shook for a moment in silent rage, and his face flushed red where it was not covered by scales.

A woman in the crowd chuckled.

The yuan-ti spun and lashed out at her instead.

Screaming, she jerked away, clutching her shoulder. She tried to get to the gauntlet, but the yuan-ti slithered into her path, cutting her off. The crowd, suddenly fearful, broke apart. Several people shouted, and some ran.

The young rogue, still gripping the gauntlet, turned his head from side to side, trying to hear what was happening through all the commotion.

Arvin felt the hand fall away from his arm. He still held his dagger but was jostled by the panicked crowd and could not get a clear throw. Too many people were between him and the yuan-ti—but the crowd was quickly thinning.

The woman who had been bitten, her face pale, backed up until she was against a building then stared with wide eyes at the yuan-ti. "No!" she moaned, her hands clasped in front of her. "Please, no." The yuan-ti's first bite must have failed to penetrate her thick cloak, but

his second one wouldn't. The yuan-ti's head wove back and forth, his eyes fixed on her bare hands. If Arvin didn't act swiftly, an innocent woman would die.

Just as the crowd thinned and Arvin raised his dagger, a deep male voice shouted from somewhere to the right. "Hold!" it cried.

Arvin caused the dagger to vanish back into his enchanted glove and turned, but the command wasn't for him. The two armored men who had appeared in the plaza from out of nowhere had their eyes firmly locked on the yuan-ti. Both wore breastplates of brightly polished steel, each emblazoned with the blue eye that marked them as clerics of Helm. Their helmets were without visors, leaving their faces bare. Crimson cloaks hung from their shoulders. Their gauntleted fists were empty; amazingly, neither seemed to be armed.

"You," one of the clerics ordered, pointing at the yuan-ti. "Step away from that woman."

The yuan-ti turned slowly. His lips twitched into a false smile, the effect of which was spoiled by the forked tongue that flickered in and out of his mouth. "I was robbed," he said. He pointed at the young rogue. "By that human."

The second cleric strode over to where the young rogue knelt and took hold of the boy's cloak, dragging him to his feet. "Did you steal from this..." The cleric hesitated, then glanced at the yuan-ti as if uncertain what to call him. "From this gentleman?" he concluded.

The rogue shook his head, but the cleric raised his left hand, turning the eye on the palm of his gauntlet toward the boy. The boy nodded. "Yes," he said in a broken voice. "I stole from him. But I gave back what I took. And he *blinded* me."

The crowd, recovered from its earlier panic, drifted back into the plaza. The yuan-ti drew himself up, imperiously wrapping his cloak around himself. "Take the



human away," he ordered, pointing at the rogue. "Throw him in the pit." He began to slither back to the ship.

"Not so fast," the first cleric said, stepping between the yuan-ti and the stairs. He turned to the woman the yuan-ti had been menacing. "Did he harm you, miss?"

Before the young woman could speak, the yuan-ti gave an irritated hiss. "Step aside," he told the cleric. "Step aside, human, or it will go badly for you. I am an important person. I will not be trifled with. Step . . . aside."

Arvin felt the hairs on his arms raise, as if he'd just shivered. Once again, the yuan-ti was using his innate magic—this time, in an attempt to bend the cleric to his will. In another moment the cleric would either step obediently aside—or would feel the sharp sting of the yuan-ti's bite.

Ignoring the yuan-ti's order, the cleric raised his gauntlet and turned its eye toward the woman. He stood, waiting for her answer.

"He bit me," she replied. "By Helm's grace, my cloak stopped his fangs. If it hadn't, I'd be. . . ." She shuddered, unable to say the word.

The spectators crowded forward, calling out to the two clerics.

"I saw the whole thing. . . ."

"The boy did give the jewelry case back. . . ."

"The yuan-ti spat in his eyes. . . ."

"It was a silver case. It's in the serpent man's pocket. . . ."

The yuan-ti's eyes darted right then left. Slowly he raised his hand. Acid trickled down his palm; he was about to use the same trick he'd used to blind the rogue. Arvin opened his mouth to call out a warning—

No need. The cleric neatly sidestepped the flick of acid. A weapon appeared in his fist—a translucent mace that glowed with an intense white light. He used it to knock the yuan-ti's hand aside. The blow was no more

than a light tap, but as soon as the mace touched the yuan-ti, his body became rigid. He stood, paralyzed, his eyes wide, the tips of his forked tongue protruding from his mouth, so still and silent that Arvin wondered if he was still breathing.

The cleric's glowing mace disappeared.

"That'll teach him," the man beside Arvin said—the fellow who had grabbed his arm earlier.

"What will they do with him?" Arvin asked him.

"Throw him in prison."

Arvin's eyebrows rose. "But he's a yuan-ti."

The other man shrugged. "So?"

"But. . ." At last it sank in. In Sespech, the yuan-ti were afforded no special status. Arvin had heard this—but witnessing it firsthand made his mind reel. It was as if sky and earth had switched places, leaving him dizzy. With the realization came a rush of satisfaction that bent his lips into a smile.

"Intention to kill," the stout man continued. "That's what they'll charge the yuan-ti with. If he pleads guilty and shows repentance, the Eyes of Helm may allow him to make atonement. If not, he'll be branded with a mark of justice. If he tries to bite or blind anyone again, he'll suffer a curse—as foul a curse as Helm can bestow."

Arvin whistled softly, glad the clerics hadn't seen his raised dagger. He watched as the second cleric placed a gauntleted hand on the rogue's head and chanted a prayer.

"And the boy?" Arvin asked.

The cleric's prayer ended. The rogue blinked, looked around with eyes that had been fully restored, and fell to his knees, weeping. His right hand raised above his head, he broke into fervent prayer.

Once again, the man beside him shrugged. "He'll probably be released, since he seems to have genuinely repented."

Arvin shook his head, incredulous. "But he's—" Then

he thought better of what he'd been about to say. The young rogue could no more cast off his guild—and its obligations—than he could shed his own skin. But if Arvin said this aloud, the fellow next to him might think back to Arvin's earlier actions and draw some conclusions that could bode ill for Arvin. It was bad enough that Arvin had drawn his dagger. He should have been more careful and stuck to his psionics. “—a thief,” he concluded.

“Yes,” the man said. As he spoke, he scratched his left elbow with the first two fingers of his right hand—probably the local sign for guild.

Arvin pretended not to see the gesture. The last thing he needed was to get enmeshed in the web of the local rogues' guild. He clenched his left hand, and the ache of his abbreviated little finger—the one the Hlondeth Guild had cut the tip from—enforced his resolve. This time, he'd stay clean. The whole point in coming to Sespech was to make a fresh start.

“And the gauntlet?” Arvin asked. “Can anyone use it?”

“Anyone. Even thieves. It shields the petitioner from blows, weapons—even spells that cause harm. But not,” the man added with a twinkle in his eye, “against justice. Use it carefully, if you've committed a crime.”

“Sound advice,” Arvin replied. “But I don't intend to commit any.”

He watched as one of the clerics laid a hand on the paralyzed yuan-ti and spoke a prayer. An instant later they both vanished; snowflakes swirled in agitation in the spot their bodies had just occupied. The second cleric touched the young rogue gently on the shoulder then waved him away, dismissing him. Then he, too, teleported away.

The snow continued to fall, dusting the ground with a thin layer of white. The crowd began to disperse.

The man beside Arvin shivered. “Need a place to stay,

friend?" he asked. "That's my inn over there: Lurgin's Lodgings."

Arvin shook his head. "Thanks, but no. I'm just passing through Mimph. I hope to catch a boat for Ormpetarr this afternoon."

The man placed a cupped hand over his heart. "As you wish."

Arvin turned and walked away, still awed by the treatment the yuan-ti had received.

He was going to like it in Sespech.