



The Shadowman

Aril forced his stare away from the troll's head. His gaze wandered up the blade of the sword to its hilt, then to the dusky, shadow-enshrouded hand that held it, and finally rested on the face of a tall, dark-haired human man. Aril met his eyes and they flared yellow.

The shadowman had saved them.

The Pretender

“Your niece summoned that dark cloud to try to kill my father. And you inflamed the council's passions with theatrics. The two of you arranged for this lie to be spoken.”

Mirabeta scowled. “Your mind is addled, Abelar Corrinthal. My niece is incapable of casting spells. And it was not I, but the Overmaster's corpse that named your father a murderer. You defame two members of my family in a single stroke while you cradle the head of a murderer.”

The Mind Mage

Soon after his separation from the Source, the nightmares had begun. The Nine Hells haunted his dreams. When he slept, he saw souls burning, writhing, screaming in pits of fire while leering devils looked on. The visions had grown worse over time. He felt as if they were moving toward some climax that would drive him mad. For months, he had feared sleep.





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FORGOTTEN REALMS[®]

SHADOWBRED DWEN
THE TWILIGHT WAR
PAUL J. KEAR
BOOK I





The Twilight War, Book I

SHADOWBRED

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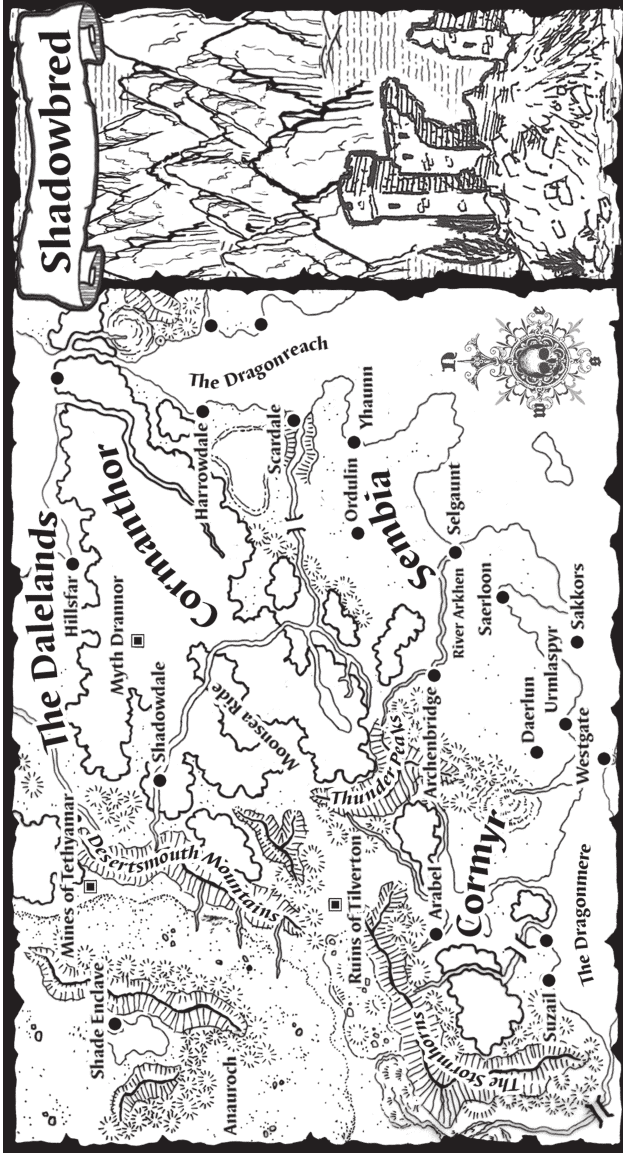




For Jen, Riordan, and Roarke, my loves.

Thanks to Phil Athans and Bob Salvatore,
my friends.







*Hey now,
all you sinners,
put your lights on.*







PROLOGUE

*23 Eleint, the Year of Lightning Storms
(1374 DR)*

Aril could not contain a smile. Five good skipping rocks filled his pocket and a pouch of squirming bole slugs hung at his belt. And there was no better bait for catching greengills than bole slugs, especially fat bole slugs like the ones he'd just caught.

When the sun rose, he and Mother would take the path to Still Lake. Aril would skip some rocks, and they would catch a few fish, always a welcome addition to the supper table. It would be the best Nameday ever. Aril only wished Mother would have let Nem come along, too.

Mother walked beside him, slowly, to accommodate Aril's awkward gait. As always, her right arm hovered near his back.

"I won't fall, Mother," he said. She was always afraid he would stumble or fall, but he never did. He was awkward on his clubfoot, but not clumsy.





“Of course not, sweetdew.”

Her arm dropped for three strides before drifting back to its usual position.

A yawn snuck up on Aril. He had not been awake so long after moonrise in a long while.

“Sleepy?” Mother asked him.

Aril *was* sleepy, but did not want to say so to Mother. He did not want her to think him a wee.

“No, Mother,” he fibbed, and turned his head as another yawn tried to betray him.

“Well, you should tell your yawns that, then, or they’ll soon have your mouth filled with mosquitoes. And I know how much you like that.”

Aril winced, in part because Mother had caught him in the fib, and in part out of disgust. He knew exactly what a mouthful of insects tasted like. Once, on a dare from Nem, he had run through a cloud of gnats with his mouth open. He’d spent a good long time gagging and spitting out gnat fragments. Nem had nearly split his sides laughing. Thinking back on it caused Aril to giggle. Mother smiled, too. Then a thought occurred to him.

“Hey! How did you know about that?”

She looked down at him and winked. “Mothers know everything, Aril. How do you think I knew where to look for bole slugs in the middle of the night?”

Aril frowned, his mind racing. She could not know *everything*, could she? What if she knew about Matron Olem’s pie? Or that time he and Nem had hidden in the peddler’s wagon and ridden halfway to Ashford?

He decided he should tell her the truth from then on, to be safe.

“Maybe I am a little sleepy,” he acknowledged. “But only a little.”

Mother smiled and tousled his hair. “There’s a good boy. Maybe you can sleep late tomorrow, before we go to the lake.”

“Do you mean it, Mother?”

The next day was the last of the tenday, and even though it was a day of rest in the village, Mother never let Aril sleep late. Usually,





she took him to hear Hearthmistress Millam give a sermon about Yondalla. And the hearthmistress said the same thing every time: the harvest would be better next year, the drought and wild weather could not last, the dragons had all gone back to sleep. Millam's voice always made Aril drowsy.

"It's your Nameday," Mother said. "So if you like, you can sleep in."

He knew what she wanted him to say, so he said it, though without much enthusiasm. "No, Mother. We should go to temple and hear the hearthmistress. We can go to the lake after that."

Mother smiled and took his hand in hers. He did not resist. He still liked holding Mother's hand when they walked. If his friends had seen it, they would have laughed and called him a wee. But his friends were not around. It was just him, Mother, the Old Wood, and the night.

A full Selûne floated in the sky, but her light fought its way through the forest canopy with difficulty. Aril was not usually afraid of the dark, but night in the tangled Old Wood was a little scary. He knew it was safe, though. Halflings had been hunting game and chopping timber in the Old Wood for generations.

"Look, Mother!"

He grabbed her cloak and pointed up through an opening in the trees. A shooting star chased a glowing path across the sky. He watched it until it faded to a pale scar, then vanished.

"Did you see it?"

"I saw it, Aril," Mother said, and she offered a brief prayer to Yondalla.

Aril remembered the previous autumn, the night that a whole rain of flaming stars had streaked from the dark sky. He'd heard from a peddler that the falling fire had destroyed villages and burned down forests and caused destructive waves and made the drought, but he doubted it. They had been too beautiful. He wished with all his heart that he could find a piece of one of those falling stars—he imagined they were probably orange, or maybe red—and carry it around in his pocket with his skipping stones. But none of them had struck near his home. If one had, he and Nem could have found it





and taken it out to look at it anytime they wanted. That would have been wonderful. And Jase would have been so jealous.

Thinking of his friends, Aril decided to ask Mother just one more time if Nem could accompany them to the lake on the morrow. He held his tongue for a time, thinking to wait for just the right moment.

They picked their way through the trees and brush in silence. Quiet shrouded the wood. Even the insects were sleeping. Aril could hear himself breathing. He and his mother moved lightly through the undergrowth—quiet and light was the halfling way, his mother always said. Aril could have sneaked up and touched the three brown hares he saw nibbling on foliage near the base of a pine. He was hardly quick or graceful on his clubfoot, but he was quiet.

Fighting another yawn, he suddenly longed for his bed. He asked, “How much farther to the village, Mother?”

“Not far, Aril. The edge of the forest is just ahead.”

Aril was glad of it. He decided the time was right to ask about Nem. He clasped his mother’s hand a bit more tightly and adopted his wee voice, the one that usually got him what he wanted.

“Mother?”

She looked down at him.

“May Nem—”

A sound from ahead of them rushed through the trees and bit off the rest of his words. As one, he and his mother crouched in the undergrowth and froze. Aril was glad they had relied on only the moon for light.

“What was that?” Aril whispered.

It sounded like a growl, but unlike any growl Aril had heard before. His heart beat fast. He reached into his pocket and clutched a skipping stone in his fist. Mother’s grip on his hand tightened and she shushed him.

The sound had come from the forest’s edge, from the direction of the village.

Mother stared into the trees, her head cocked, worry lines creasing her forehead. She caught Aril looking at her and forced an insincere smile.

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Aril opened his mouth to speak but she shook her head and put a finger to her lips for silence. That made him more nervous, but he held his tongue and nodded.

They stood as still as the shrubs. Time passed slowly, but when the sound did not repeat, Mother's grip on his hand loosened. She visibly relaxed. Aril took a sweaty hand from his skipping rock and let out a breath.

He pulled Mother down by her cloak to his level, leaned in close, and whispered, "What made that sound, Mother?"

He imagined in his mind a passing bear, or maybe a wolf. Two months earlier a bear had killed Matron Ysele and her dog. Aril had not seen her body but he had heard enough from Nem that for a tenday he'd had to sleep in Mother's bed with his feet touching hers. Sheriff Bol had said the bear was just hungry, the same as the villagers, and that he would not return.

"I don't know, sweetdew," Mother answered. "Let's be still for a bit longer. To be sure it's gone."

Aril nodded.

An autumn wind rustled through the trees. Limbs rattled. Aril wished for the thousandth time that his father was still alive, that the red pox had never come to the village. Father would have come with them into the Old Wood. Father would have protected them from any old bear.

He leaned against Mother. Her warmth and smell—like fresh bread—comforted him. She crouched and put her arms around him.

A limb cracked sharply somewhere in the woods behind them. Both gave a start and looked about. Aril's heart raced anew. He saw nothing through the filtered moonlight but trees and undergrowth. Aril had heard that dwarves could see in the dark. He wished with all his might that halflings could.

Mother was breathing fast and Aril did not like it. He tried to swallow but his mouth was dry; he clutched a handful of Mother's cloak and bit his lower lip.

Another limb cracked behind them, in the dark.

Mother put her mouth to Aril's ear. "Quiet. We must hide."





He nodded.

He still saw nothing, but he knew something was out there. Mother was afraid—he could feel it. He started to shake and Mother hugged him tighter. He was breathing as fast as she.

“It will be all right,” Mother whispered to him, but he was not sure if she was really talking to him. She half-stood out of the undergrowth and looked around the forest for a better hiding place.

Aril wondered if maybe they should dash for the village. Or shout for help? Surely someone would hear them. Maybe even Sheriff Bol. “Momma . . .”

He had not called her Momma since he was a wee, since Father had died.

“Momma, shouldn’t we—”

One of the village’s dogs barked. Another joined it. Soon it sounded as if every dog in the village was barking.

Aril looked to his mother for reassurance but she was not looking at him. She was looking through the trees, toward the village.

A shout of alarm sounded—a man’s voice—then another, and another. Before Aril could ask any questions, a woman’s scream tore through the night. Aril did not recognize any of the voices, but he knew they were his neighbors, his friends.

Growls answered the shouts—lots of growls. Worse than before. They sounded like Aril’s stomach after he ate too much rhubarb pie, only worse. A man’s voice shouted for arms and Aril thought it might have been Farmer Tyll. There was fear in his voice, and the sound made Aril’s skin turn gooseflesh.

Mother squeezed him so hard that he could hardly breathe. Aril’s heart beat so fast it hurt his chest. His stomach fluttered.

“What’s happening, Momma?”

“We stay right here, Aril,” she whispered. “No matter what.”

The growls turned to roars and Mother paled. More shouts answered. The dogs barked themselves into a frenzy, doors slammed, wood cracked. Aril could not see it but he knew the village was in tumult.

“What is it, Momma? What is it?”

“I do not know, Aril. Cover your ears. Don’t listen.”

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But Aril could not help but listen as the shouts turned more and more to screams. He heard a dog yelp in pain and go silent. A second dog did the same. A man screamed, then a woman. He thought he heard Sheriff Bol barking commands. And throughout all of it came the roars, the terrible roars.

He buried his face in Mother's cloak.

Mother picked him up, stood, and started back into the woods.

Fear seized Aril. He did not want to go back into the woods.

"Where are we going?!" he said, too loud.

From the trees behind them came another growl, almost thoughtful. Saplings snapped, and the sounds came closer.

Mother froze in her steps. Aril felt a tremor run through her body.

Something was moving through the brush toward them—something big, snapping trees.

"No," she said, so low that she probably had not thought Aril would hear. "Please, Yondalla, not my boy, not my son."

Terror rooted in Aril's chest. Whatever monsters were in the village, more of them were in the woods. He wrapped his legs around his mother's waist and buried his face in her neck. Tears filled his eyes.

"What do we do, Momma?" he whispered through his tears. "I want Papa. Where's Papa?"

The words made no sense but they poured out anyway.

"We must hide," she said again, her voice a hiss. "Yes, we will hide."

She whirled a circle and fixed her eyes on a stand of pines near the edge of the forest, off to the side of the village. A dead log lay near it—a good hiding place for them.

Mother balanced his weight in her arms and ran. She sometimes struggled to carry him lately, but at that moment she bore him as easily as a babe.

The creature behind them in the woods growled. Mother stumbled and Aril squealed in terror, but her grip on him never faltered. She kept her feet, crashed through low-hanging tree limbs and undergrowth, and fell to her knees under the pines, near the log.





They both turned to look behind them, breathing heavily. Aril saw nothing but trees and darkness. Perhaps the creature had not seen them?

Another crash sounded from the trees, so loud that Aril thought the creature must be not more than a stone's throw away. More roars from the village. Aril covered his ears and squealed.

Mother pried his hands away and put her mouth to his ear. She spoke in a whisper.

"I don't think it has seen us, Aril. Squeeze under the log and do not move. Like when you play hide and find with Nem."

Her voice calmed him and he nodded, though the screams from the village made him think of his friends. He was worried for Nem.

With Mother's help, he hurriedly squirmed under the log. It was a tight fit, but the hills and hollows of the ground gave him space. The earth filled his nostrils with their loamy scent. Dry pine needles poked his flesh and made him itchy. Mother laid herself behind him, like a pair of wooden spoons, sheltering him. She pulled armfuls of leaves and branches over them both. He could feel her breathing in his ear, feel her body trembling. He worried that she was not well hidden.

"Do not move, sweetdew," she whispered. "No matter what happens. No matter what. Nod if you understand."

He nodded and got a face full of pokey pine needles for his trouble.

"Momma loves you, Aril. More than anything. Papa did, too."

Aril tilted his head to get a needle out of his ear and saw that a thin gap between the log and the ground offered a window through which he could see part of the village commons. He pressed his cheek into the ground so he could see better . . .

. . . and wished immediately that he had not.

His view was limited but he caught a glimpse of long-limbed, lumbering creatures loping across the green, tearing at any halfings within reach. In the village torchlight, he saw flashes of claws, huge mouths full of teeth. He knew what they were, and the knowledge made him sick to his stomach.





Trolls. There were trolls in the village. And there were more trolls behind them in the woods, hunting him and Momma.

He knew what trolls did. He'd heard the stories. He knew they could smell as well as Farmer Tyll's hounds. He and Momma would be caught. He knew they would be caught.

And they would be eaten alive.

Tears flowed anew but Aril bore them in silence. He clenched his eyes shut and wished the horrible images away but the sounds coming from the village, the screams, the roars, preyed on his imagination. He saw with his mind what he no longer saw with his eyes: trolls killing and eating, claws and fangs dripping with the blood of friends and neighbors. He imagined Momma screaming. . . .

He heard a rush of motion behind them, the slow footfalls of something large prowling the undergrowth nearby. He heard heavy respiration. It was sniffing for them; a troll was sniffing for them.

He felt Mother tense.

Aril felt dizzy. His heart beat so hard and fast he thought it might jump out of his chest. His breath left him. He could not breathe. He could not breathe! Panicked, he squirmed and his body pressed against one of the branches Mother had used to cover him.

It cracked.

The troll near them went still.

Momma's hand squeezed him. Both of them held their breath.

More screams from the village, and a long, high-pitched wail of pain.

Aril pressed his face into the dirt to muffle any more sounds but that only made it harder to breathe. He wished so hard for his Papa. He wished that he was one of the bole slugs so he could burrow into the ground under a tree where no troll could ever find him. He wished he could hide in the earth and never come out again. He promised Yondalla that if she made him and Momma into worms he would live in the ground and never bother anyone ever again.

His mother gave him another squeeze. He felt her tears warming his ear. A limb broke right behind them. He heard sniffing, then a rumbling, curious grunt.

The troll started tearing through the debris under the pines and





he knew, with perfect clarity, that he would die.

“Stay here,” Mother whispered, and jumped to her feet.

The troll roared.

Aril immediately ignored her words and squirmed out from under the log. He stood, raining dirt and leaves and twigs. He was already on his feet before he thought about what he had done.

“Aril, no!” Mother said, and he heard despair in her voice.

A troll stood five paces from them. Though hunchbacked, it still looked as tall as a tree. Warty green skin with patches of coarse black hair wrapped a frame that looked to Aril to be composed solely of muscle, claws, and teeth. It looked at them and inhaled deeply, as if testing the air for their scent. It smiled a mouthful of fangs, and a low rumble emerged from somewhere deep in its throat. Moonlight gleamed on the drool dripping from its lips.

Aril wanted to scream, but no sound would come from his mouth. It just hung open, waiting to be filled by mosquitoes. He was frozen.

The troll stared right at them. Its eyes were as black as the night.

Mother held out her arms to shield Aril. “Into the woods, Aril! Run! Run now!”

But Aril could not run. He could not move.

The troll cocked its head at Mother’s audacity. It flexed its claws and took a step toward them.

“Now, Aril!” Mother ordered. She picked up a stick and brandished it at the troll. “Here, creature!”

Aril was tempted to run, but only for a moment. He would not leave his Momma. Papa would not leave her, and he was Papa’s son. He grabbed a skipping stone from his pocket.

The troll growled and took another step toward Mother.

Aril hurled the stone and hit the troll squarely in the chest. It sounded like it had hit a log, and the huge creature barely flinched. Its eyes fixed on Aril, and it said something in a foul language and licked its lips.

Mother exclaimed, “No! Here, beast!” She waved her makeshift club and tried to charge, but slipped and fell on her stomach.

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Aril did not think. He did what Papa would have done. He jumped in front of his prone mother, planted his clubfoot in the earth, and prepared to stand his ground. He took another stone from his pocket and prepared to throw.

“Leave us alone or I’ll hit you again!” he shouted.

The troll bounded forward with terrifying speed and Aril knew he had made a mistake. His arm went limp. His legs weakened and the stone fell from his fist. He screamed in terror.

Mother pulled him to the ground and threw herself over him.

“I love you, Aril!”

Aril hit the ground on his back and could not help but stare, eyes agog, as the troll loomed over them. Claws, teeth, and a wall of green flesh filled his vision. The night grew darker. The troll stank like rancid meat. Sounds faded. Aril’s vision blurred and the darkness swirled. He was spinning, spinning.

The troll opened its mouth.

The night clotted into a blackness deeper than pine pitch.

The troll reached down for them, its claws as long as Aril’s fingers.

Shadows haloed the troll like black fire.

The troll’s mouth was so wide Aril thought it would swallow him whole. He saw its black tongue, its sharp teeth. He could not close his eyes. He wanted to, but he could not.

A man appeared beside the troll, a dark man with a dark sword.

Aril knew the man had come to carry him away to death. He realized that all of the Hearthmistress’s sermons had been a lie. Yondalla had not come for him. There were no Green Fields. There was just a dark man with a dark sword.

The troll took hold of Mother’s arm and she screamed. The sword flashed and the troll lurched and released Mother. Aril screamed as the massive body of the creature fell to the ground.

Fell to the ground.

Fell to the ground.

Aril blinked, confused. He stared wide-eyed at the body of the troll. This did not make sense. Wasn’t he dead?

Still lying atop him, Mother was crying wracking sobs that shook her whole body.





Black blood pumped from the stump of the troll's neck. Aril watched it soak the forest floor. The headless body still scabbled at the ground near them, as though trying to reach them—or dig its own grave.

Next to the body, the dark sword pierced the troll's severed head, pinning it to the forest floor. Pennons of shadow twirled around the blade. The troll's jaws gnashed futilely in an effort to reach the steel.

Aril still did not understand. He blinked rapidly, unconvinced that he was seeing something real. He closed his eyes, held them shut, opened them.

Everything remained as it was. Mother continued to cry. The troll continued to bleed.

Aril forced his stare away from the troll's head. His gaze wandered up the blade of the sword to its hilt, then to the dusky, shadow-enshrouded hand that held it, and finally rested on the face of a tall, dark-haired human man. Aril met his eyes and they flared yellow.

Aril realized what had happened.

The shadowman had saved them.

“Back away,” the shadowman said in the halfling tongue, and he nodded at the twitching body of the troll. His voice was deep, and it scared Aril.

Aril had never before met any big folk who spoke the language of halflings. But the shadowman did.

Mother, still shaking and crying, was beginning to bleed from where the troll had grabbed her arm. She scooted backward and pulled Aril with her, away from the body of the troll.

Blood soaked Aril's trousers, but it was the troll's blood. Or maybe Momma's. It was warm and sticky. He had not noticed it at first.

“Thank Yondalla,” Mother said through her tears, the words barely recognizable. “Whoever you are, thank you. Thank you.”

“He's the shadowman,” Aril tried to say, but the words did not come out.

The shadowman did not answer Mother, did not even look at





her. He removed a small flask from his cloak and soaked the troll's body with the contents.

Lamp oil. Aril knew the smell.

The shadowman took a tindertwig—like the ones peddlers sold in the village—from a belt pouch, ignited it on one of his boots, and tossed it on the troll. As flames engulfed the body, it thrashed in agony. The skewered head twitched and gnashed frenetically as the body burned. The shadowman held an open palm over the blaze. Darkness shrouded the fire and masked its light. At first Aril did not understand why he did it. Then he remembered the other trolls. The shadowman did not want them to see the flames.

The shadowman pulled his sword free to toss the troll's head into the fire. It gnashed as it burned. Then its eyes popped.

The man—he was so tall!—looked at Aril and Mother. Shadows wrapped him. Aril could not quite tell where the man ended and the night began.

“You are safe for now. I will do what I can for the village.”

He looked past them to Oakthorne, where screams, roars, and shouts of combat and slaughter continued. The shadows around his body alternately coiled and flared.

“You are the shadowman,” Aril said, finally croaking the words out.

The man regarded Aril with narrow eyes. The wind stirred his long hair.

Mother drew Aril close. “Thank you for saving us, goodsir. Please, help our folk.”

The shadowman ignored her. He had eyes only for Aril.

“What did you call me?”

His sword was as long as Aril was tall. Darkness poured from it like steam off the lake on winter mornings.

“He meant no offense,” Mother said.

Aril said, “The shadowman. You don't like that name? That's what Nem said the peddler called you. Hunters have seen you, too. In the forest. Some said they spoke to you but I thought it was all a tale. Nem said he heard you rode here on a shooting star. He said you came here to protect us because . . .”





Aril trailed off, suddenly nervous about continuing. He did not like the frown on the shadowman's face. The dark eyes—they weren't yellow anymore—bored into him.

"Because?" the shadowman prompted.

"He meant no offense, goodsir," Mother said, her voice quavering. "Please . . . leave us alone, now."

Aril summoned his courage and said, "Nem said he heard you protect us because you had a friend who was a halfling and you . . . could not protect him."

The shadowman's face was frozen. Aril could not tell if he was angry or sad.

The shadowman appeared next to him—had he moved?—reaching to touch Aril's head, maybe to tousle his hair, but he stopped short. He studied Aril's face and said, "Your friend has the right of it. My name is Erevis. Erevis Cale." He paused then said, "But I like 'shadowman,' too."

Mother audibly exhaled.

The roars and shouts from the village drew the man's attention back to the slaughter. Without another word he was gone.

Aril twisted in his mother's grasp and looked about. He did not want to be left alone in the forest.

He spotted the shadowman not far from them, crouching in the undergrowth, looking toward the village, and said the first thing that came to his mind.

"Tomorrow is my Nameday."

"Let the man go," Mother said to Aril, in the tone she usually reserved for telling him to do chores. "He's going to help the others."

The shadowman turned so that Aril saw his face in profile. Darkness gathered around him.

"I do not want him to go," Aril blurted. "I'm afraid."

Aril did not see the shadowman move. The man looked back on Aril, the darkness blurred, and he was suddenly kneeling at Aril's side. Mother and Aril gasped.

"Everyone is afraid," the shadowman said, his tone soft. Ribbons of shadow leaped from his flesh and touched Aril with cold fingers. "Even me. There's no shame in it. Do you really want me to stay





here while the trolls attack your village?”

Aril understood the question. It was the same as when Mother had offered to let him sleep in the next day. He was supposed to say no. He struggled to find words.

“I was just . . . I was praying for Papa to come, and you came. I thought . . .” He trailed off. He did not know what he had thought.

The shadowman stared at him for a moment. Finally, he asked, “What number Nameday is it? Eighth?”

Aril felt indignant that the shadowman had taken him for a wee. “My tenth,” he corrected, and his tone made the shadowman smile.

“You are small for your age,” the shadowman said. “But only in your body, not in your heart. What is your name?”

“His name is Aril,” Mother answered. Aril frowned that she had stepped on his answer.

The shadowman nodded. “Aril is a good name. My friend’s name was Jak. And he was a halfling like you. Not from this village, but from another like it.”

The screams from the village continued.

“Can you count, Aril?” the shadowman asked.

Aril nodded.

“To one hundred?”

Aril nodded again.

The shadowman stood and looked down on them. “When you reach one hundred, this will all be over. Those trolls will never bother you or your village again.”

Aril nodded, wide-eyed.

The shadowman looked at Mother. “This is nothing you’ll want to see. Same for the boy. Trust me, and stay where you are. I’ll save who I can.”

Mother just stared.

The darkness around them began to deepen. Before it was too dark to see, Aril took a skipping stone from his pocket and tossed it to the shadowman.

“You might need it,” he said.

The shadowman caught it, smiled, and slipped it in a pocket.

“I might at that. Your papa would be proud of you, Aril.”





The shadowman vanished as the darkness grew impenetrable. Aril held his hand before his face and saw nothing. His mother's arms were around him though, so he felt safe enough.

The shadowman's voice cut through the darkness. "Start counting, Aril. Aloud."

Aril did. "One, two, three, four . . ."

By ten, he heard roars of surprise from the trolls. By fifteen, he heard the first of them die. Others followed quickly—at twenty, twenty-three, thirty-one. Roars of pain came one moment from Aril's left, then from his right, one moment nearby, the next farther away. He imagined the shadowman stepping out of the shadows, killing, and disappearing, only to materialize across the village and slay again. By sixty, Aril stopped counting. The surviving trolls were trying to flee. He could tell by the way their terror-filled shrieks grew more and more distant.

Mother held him throughout, rocking him, humming a lullaby. He thought perhaps she was more frightened than he was.

"It's all right, Mother," he said, and patted her hand. "He is here to save us."

He felt his mother shake her head. "No, sweetdew. Not us. He's here to save himself."

After a time, quiet settled over the woods. Then Aril heard a *whooshing* sound. The smell of smoke and burning flesh grew powerful.

He and Mother remained still, as the shadowman had told them. He heard no trolls, no combat, merely the moans of wounded villagers, the soft crying of mourners, the barking of a few dogs.

"Shadowman?" Aril called.

The darkness lifted. He blinked in the flickering orange light of a great bonfire that burned in the communal fire pit between the forest's edge and the village. Aril and his mother walked cautiously to the forest's edge. A pile of a dozen or more troll bodies, all of them dismembered and squirming, lay within the flames. Thick, stinking black smoke spiraled up from the corpses. The smell was foul and sickening.

The shadowman was gone.





The survivors from the village wandered slowly, dazed, confused. A few tended the wounded or knelt over fallen friends. Aril avoided looking too long at the dead. He would have cried but he felt too numb to do anything more than stare.

Some of the survivors walked cautiously toward the fire. Many held weapons—mostly pitchforks—but a few carried swords. Others leaned on their fellows, whether from wounds or fatigue Aril could not tell. They murmured amongst themselves as they neared the pyre. Aril could see them pointing, explaining, trying to make sense of what had happened. Some prodded the burning troll corpses with their weapons. Sparks mushroomed into the air.

Thunder rumbled in the distance. A storm was threatening. Aril doubted it would rain, though. It rarely did.

“None escaped,” Aril heard someone say.

“Did you see him?” said another. “Who was it? *What* was it?”

Aril and his mother limped out of the woods toward the fire. Mother took Aril’s hand firmly in her grasp.

“It was the shadowman,” Aril called, and all eyes turned to him. “The shadowman saved us, all of us. His name is Erevis Cale. We saw him. He talked to me.”

Aril spotted Nem in the village beyond, standing near his father, who held a woodsman’s axe resting on one shoulder. Aril waved, relieved to see his friend. Nem returned the gesture and both forced smiles. The numbness left Aril abruptly and he began to cry. So did Nem.

“The shadowman is a hero,” said another, and everyone nodded.

“Where did he go, Aril?” asked Matron Steet.

Aril glanced around through his tears and could only shrug.

“Back into the shadows,” Mother said.

Aril gazed into the woods, into the dark.

“Come into the light,” he whispered to Erevis Cale.





CHAPTER ONE

25 Eleint, the Year of Lightning Storms

Black clouds roiled in the night sky. Lightning flashed, splitting the dark. Thunder rolled and boomed. Swells like mountains rose and fell on the sea. Rain fell in torrents. The mizzenmast of *Night's Secret* bent in the wind. The whole of the caravel creaked from the battering of the storm. Loose rigging and shredded sails snapped like whips in the gusts, but the dark pennon bearing the symbol of Shar and flying from high atop the mainmast held its ground against the storm. Rivalen smiled at that. The black circle bordered in violet looked like an eye, Shar's eye, guiding them to their goal.

Rivalen stood on the lurching deck of *Night's Secret* and tried to keep his footing as the bow again rose skyward, crested a swell, and skidded down a mountain of water. The crew, experienced hands all, gripped lifelines nervously as they lurched across the slippery deck to obey Captain Perin's shouted commands.





Rivalen knew they were close to Sakkors. The augury he had cast whispered as much in his ear. The first part of his quest would soon reach its end.

More than a year earlier, a cry had sounded across the Weave and the Shadow Weave, the warp and weft of magic, and resounded across Faerûn. Every spellcaster of power had heard it, though probably only a handful had understood the language, that of ancient Netheril.

I am here, proclaimed a voice in Loross. *Help me.*

Rivalen's father, the Most High Telemont Tanthul, had immediately deduced the origin of the plea, as had Rivalen himself. Its only possible origin was the mythallar of Sakkors, a sentient artifact created thousands of years earlier by one of Netheril's High Arcanists, Xolund the Maker. The revelation that a second mythallar had survived Netheril's fall had sent a ripple of excitement through the rulers of Shade Enclave. Divinations had been cast, auguries consulted. Eventually, Rivalen's brother, Brennus, a prodigy in the use of divinations, had located the site of the mythallar. Rivalen and Brennus had been dispatched to find it.

And they were nearly upon it.

Rivalen reached into the pocket of his rain-soaked cloak and removed a worn platinum coin. The octagonal currency had been known in ancient Netheril as a *thurhn*. Time had rounded its corners and worn the stampings—twin lightning bolts crossed over a mountain on the obverse, a date on the reverse—almost into illegibility. The coin had been minted in Sakkors long ago, when the city had flown in the sky on an inverted mountaintop. Like all the other floating cities of Netheril, save Shade Enclave, Sakkors had plummeted to earth when Karsus the Mad had attempted to achieve godhood. His meddlings temporarily unraveled the Weave, and the Empire of Netheril had died in a rain of falling metropolises.

Shade Enclave had survived only because the dark goddess Shar had helped Rivalen's father shunt the city into the Plane of Shadow. Shade Enclave had abided there for centuries, had absorbed the darkness of the plain, and had only recently returned to Faerûn.





Rivalen squinted against the rain and watched the coin, waiting. He nodded with satisfaction when his eyes, attuned to see dweomers by merely looking for them, saw a soft red glow emanate from the center of the platinum piece. The spell on the *thurhn* was of negligible power, little more than a magical mintmark designed to prevent counterfeiting, but its appearance indicated that they were nearing Sakkor's mythallar.

The quasi-magic in the coin had been common in ancient Netheril, but was nearly unknown in Faerûn's present era. The coin derived its power from a mythallar, and the mythallars of the empire had done far more than fly cities through the sky. They allowed spellcasters to create magical items in the mythallar's presence without physically or psychically taxing the caster. The physical and mental drains of spellcasting, ordinarily natural boundaries that limited a spellcaster's ability to forge magical items, were thus overcome by the presence of a mythallar.

The quasi-magic went quiescent if items were taken out of proximity of the mythallar, but that had not stopped a profusion of quasi-magical items from rapidly transforming society in the empire. Rivalen remembered those days well—magic had permeated almost every facet of society and culture. The ancient Netherese had used magic and magical items for even the most mundane tasks, from street cleaning and waste disposal to flavoring food or carving a joint of beef.

The presence of such vast quantities of magic had served only to make the empire's fall all the more spectacular when the Weave unraveled and magic failed.

But before the Fall Xolund of Sakkors had improved on the mythallar's design. He had infused his enclave's mythallar with a rudimentary sentience. The self-aware artifact called itself the Source, and unlike all other mythallars, its sentience allowed it to direct or withhold its magical power as instructed. Instead of powering all items in its proximity, it could focus all its power on a single item, on none, or on many.

The development of a sentient mythallar had caused a stir among the arcanists of the empire, but the Fall had ended any attempts





to duplicate Xolund's feat. Sakkors's mythallar was unique. And Rivalen wanted it.

He peered through the storm and across the churning sea for *Secret's* twin, *New Moon*. The darkness did not hamper his vision—Rivalen was a creature of darkness, bonded to it, and saw through it as if it were day—but the rain obscured his surroundings. He spotted the caravel two long bowshots to starboard, bobbing on the swells like a toy. Both *Moon* and *Secret* would have been lost to the storm but for the water elementals Rivalen had bound to his service. The living waves surged through the turbulent ocean alongside both ships, righting them when they listed, shielding them from swells that would have swamped them.

Rivalen's younger brother, Brennus, stood beside him, clutching one of the many hemp lifelines that webbed the deck. Shadows crawled over Brennus's exposed skin, betraying his nervousness. Like Rivalen, like all the Twelve Princes of Shade Enclave, Brennus was a shade. He usually traveled in the company of two homunculi, but the storm terrified the little constructs. They covered belowdecks.

"The storm is sent by the kraken," Brennus said, and he lurched as the ship slid down another swell. His shining eyes, the color of polished steel, glittered in the darkness. "It's not natural. We must be close."

Rivalen held up the Sakkoran coin for Brennus to see. "Not close. We're here."

Abruptly, the storm abated. The rain, thunder, and lightning ceased. *Secret* and *Moon* floated on a quietly rolling sea. The clouds parted to reveal a starry night sky.

The soaked crew of *Secret* was too exhausted to do much more than give a hoarse cheer. Captain Perin issued orders to assess the damage to the masts, sails, and rigging, and to get a headcount. The men snapped to.

Rivalen and Brennus used minor magics to dry their clothing and gear.

"How fare you?" a sailor on *Secret* shouted across the water to *New Moon*. His voice carried easily over the calming sea.





“Wet but no worse!” came the shouted answer. “All hands accounted for.”

Rivalen’s augury was nearly at its end, but before expiring, it revealed to him an approaching danger. He secured the *thurbn* in his pocket.

“It’s coming,” he said to Brennus.

“Now?”

Rivalen nodded.

“Ready yourself and the crew, Captain Perin!” Rivalen shouted to the captain. “Something comes.”

The brothers shadowstepped from mid deck to the rail, covering the distance in a single stride. There, they scanned the sea while the crew heeded Rivalen’s warning and took up crossbows and belaying pins.

“My princes?” the captain called from the sterncastle.

Rivalen did not reply, but gripped the medallion of Shar he wore on a chain around his throat and stared at the water. Brennus held a duskwood wand in his hand. Shadows leaked from their flesh and cloaked them both.

“I see nothing,” Brennus said.

“Wait,” Rivalen cautioned.

They waited, waited . . . then saw it.

About midway between the two caravels, a soft red glow rose up from the depths and stained the sea crimson. It grew brighter like a rising sun, spreading through the water like pooling blood.

The crew saw it, too. They shouted, pointed, rushed to the rail, not knowing what they would soon see. Rivalen had said nothing about the creature, fearing he would not have been able to secure a crew.

“The glow . . .” Brennus said.

“Must be from the mythallar,” Rivalen finished.

Brennus nodded. “It bears the mythallar with it?”

Rivalen nodded and frowned. Caution would be necessary in defeating the kraken. They could not risk damaging the mythallar with poorly chosen spells.

Brennus turned to Rivalen, a question in his eyes. “Strange that





the Source has not contacted us, is it not? We know it to be sentient. We are close enough. It should have contacted us. It called to us before.”

Rivalen nodded and said nothing. He’d had the same thought but did not want to give his concerns a voice. Brennus tapped his wand on the rail, demonstrating enough anxiety for both of them.

“Perhaps an attack has weakened it, or destroyed its mind? Perhaps it is now too weak to suit our purposes? Perhaps . . .”

Rivalen pointed a finger at his brother. Shadows poured from his flesh, betraying his agitation. “Enough, brother. We will know soon. Speculation is pointless.”

Brennus looked chastened. “Of course.”

The red glow grew brighter.

“What is it, my princes?” the captain asked. “What comes?”

The crew’s curiosity was giving way to alarm. They eyed the brothers and the sea nervously. All were Sharrans, and all would die for Rivalen, but that did nothing to quell their fear. They would have been more frightened had they known the truth.

“We capture it, if possible,” Rivalen said.

Brennus looked at him sidelong. “That will be quite a capture, brother.”

Rivalen allowed himself a tight smile before he drew on the Shadow Weave and incanted a series of arcane stanzas. Brennus watched for a moment, noting the spell Rivalen was casting, then put aside his wand and mirrored Rivalen’s efforts. Their voices merged, arcane power gathered, and both moved their hands through an intricate set of gestures.

The magic of their spell gave substance to the darkness and a net of shadows formed on the surface of the water, backlit by the red glow of the mythallar. The lines of the net’s mesh were as thick as a man’s arm. The brothers poured power into the spell until the net of shadows reached across the water, nearly touching both *Night’s Secret* and *New Moon*. The water between the ships looked not unlike an enormous chessboard.

“That must be quite a fish,” one of the crewman jested. No one laughed.





Rivalen and Brennus held the magic of the shadow net taut, waiting.

The glow grew brighter.

“Now!” Rivalen said.

He and Brennus released the pent-up magic of the spell and the giant net shot downward at the kraken, closing as it went. The net was powerful enough to scoop up everything in the sea between the ships to a depth of a hundred fathoms, killing most everything it touched, and trapping and weakening the kraken.

A rush of bubbles rose to the surface as if the sea were boiling. Hundreds of dead fish bobbed upward, their lives extinguished by the enervating touch of the net. A shriek, like nothing Rivalen had ever heard, carried up from the depths and out of the sea.

As one, the crew of *Night's Secret* backed away from the rail. Sailors exchanged alarmed glances.

“Steady, seajacks,” shouted the captain. “We’ve a sound ship under our feet and two princes of Shade aboard. Steady.”

“We have him,” Brennus said, and leaned over the railing.

Rivalen was uncertain.

The red glow flared as the kraken broke free of the net, shot upward, and breached the sea. A glistening, dun-colored mountain of flesh exploded out of the water. Spray flew as high as a bowshot into the sky. Tentacles as tall as towers squirmed into the air and blotted out the stars. The tatters of the net of shadows clung to the massive limbs and dissipated into nothingness.

The crew of *Night's Secret* shouted in terror. Crossbows twanged but the bolts were too small to affect the kraken. The roiling sea set the ship to rocking, nearly tossing Brennus overboard. Rivalen grabbed his cloak and jerked him backward. Brennus steadied himself on the gunnel and cursed.

“At your stations, seajacks!” Captain Perin shouted. “At your stations! Harpooners to starboard!”

The tentacles retreated under the sea and the head of the kraken—sleek despite its enormousness—broke the surface. Rivalen saw what he had never expected to see outside of Shade Enclave: a Netherese mythallar.





Another shriek from the kraken split the night.

The glowing, crystalline shard of the mythallar, as big as a mature oak, stuck out of the kraken's head like an enormous unicorn's horn. The creature's flesh had grown over to enclose the huge crystal.

One of the kraken's huge eyes—partially visible above the waterline—fixed on *New Moon*, and the great creature dived under the surface. The mythallar's glow highlighted the kraken's form in silhouette. Its massive size surprised even Rivalen.

With a single undulation of its body, the kraken darted like an arrowshot toward *New Moon*. The panicked shouts of the crew carried over the water.

Brennus began a series of complex gestures and incanted the words to a spell to blast the kraken with dark energy. Rivalen took hold of his brother's hands and interrupted the spell.

"No. You could damage the mythallar."

Brennus's eyes flared. "Those are worshippers of Shar, brother. Men serving us."

"I know." But Rivalen also knew that he could not risk the mythallar. He needed it; Shar needed it.

The kraken plowed into *New Moon* without slowing. The ship, a three-masted caravel from the Pirate Isles, disintegrated in a cacophony of cracking wood, roiling water, screaming men, and the shriek of the kraken. The creature dived under again, circling below the floating debris.

Flailing men and hunks of broken ship dotted the sea's surface, lit from below by the light of the mythallar. The kraken's silhouette glided under the men. They screamed in terror.

The crew of *Night's Secret* watched it all in fearful, silent awe.

"My princes," shouted Captain Piren, the fear evident in his tone. "No ship on the sea can outrun that beast."

"We are not running, Captain," answered Rivalen over his shoulder.

Two harpooners hurried to the rail. Rivalen eyed the powerfully built men bearing iron pikes tipped with sharpened hooks. Rivalen waved them back. Harpoons would not harm the kraken. Nor would



most of his spells, at least not before the creature could destroy the ship. He would have to try something else.

The kraken swam under *New Moon's* surviving crew and jerked several of the men under the waves. They left behind only ripples; they did not even have time to scream. The kraken abandoned its sport with *New Moon's* survivors and turned toward *Night's Secret*.

The wide eyes of *Night's Secret's* crew darted back and forth between the onrushing kraken and the two princes of Shade. Rivalen felt Brennus's gaze on him, too.

"See to the rescue of *Moon's* survivors," Rivalen said. "At least a dozen men are still in the water. Use the elementals."

Brennus cocked his head in puzzlement. "What do you intend?"

"To end this," Rivalen answered, taking his holy symbol in hand.

Brennus grabbed him by the wrist. Shadows coiled around them both.

"This is not a time to test your faith, Rivalen. A stronger shadow net might hold it still."

Rivalen removed his brother's hand from his arm. He had made a lifelong habit of testing of his faith, and Shar had rewarded him for it. He saw no reason to change his practice.

"No net will stop it, Brennus. But faith will. Watch."

With that, Rivalen spoke an arcane word and empowered himself to fly. He stepped off the deck and streaked toward the kraken. The dorsal hump of the creature's body rose above the surface, so large it could have been an island. The glowing mythallar spike rose from the sea like a standard and led its charge.

Rivalen felt the weight of the enormous creature's gaze, but answered with his own. The kraken's body pulsed, churning the sea behind it, and accelerated toward him. It shrieked from an unseen beak.

Rivalen pulled up, hovering just above the surface of the sea. He recited a prayer to the Lady of Loss and felt her presence near him, frigid and calm. He took comfort. He was her instrument and would not fail.

Drawing on the Shadow Weave—Shar's Shadow Weave—he





spoke the arcane stanza for one of his most powerful charms. He completed the spell as water and tentacles exploded out of the sea and reached for him.

Rivalen's magic reached into the mind of the kraken, established a link between man and beast. The spell pitted Rivalen's will against that of the kraken.

"Stop," Rivalen said, and the spell sent his voice careening through the corridors of the kraken's brain.

The creature's mind and comprehension were as immense as its body. The kraken had lived centuries, spent decades in contact with the sentient mythallar, learning, growing, knowing. Its mind was keen, incredibly powerful.

But it was no match for Rivalen Tanthul.

Rivalen had lived for millennia, had learned spellcraft at the sides of the most powerful arcanists Toril had ever known, had survived the horrors of the Plane of Shadow for centuries, had battled the primordial malaugrym on their home plane, had melded his physical body with the stuff of shadow, had served and continued to serve as high priest to one of the most powerful goddesses in the multiverse.

The kraken's mind quailed before Rivalen. The huge creature submitted and stopped.

Rivalen hung in the air, surrounded on all sides by tentacles as thick as wine vats. He could have reached out and touched them. They smelled of fish and the sea. Suckers dotted the limbs, each of them as large as a war shield.

"Lower your limbs and be still," Rivalen ordered.

The tentacles sank into the sea and the kraken held its position below him. Rivalen reached into the kraken's mind and learned its name: Ssessimyth.

Behind him, the crew of *Night's Secret* cheered and praised Shar. A cloud passed before Selûne, obscuring its light. Rivalen knew it to be a sign of his goddess's approval.

He looked over the sea to the survivors of *New Moon* and saw the water elementals scooping them up in turn, bearing them toward *Night's Secret*. More than half the crew of *New Moon* had been lost





to the kraken. Rivalen felt pangs of regret. They had been loyal servants.

He flew along the kraken's body until he reached its head. There, he studied the mythallar. The flesh of the kraken's head grew along much of its length, and the open wound and folds of rubbery skin out of which the crystal protruded looked swollen and inflamed. Removing it from the creature would be difficult and painful for the kraken, but probably not fatal. That was well. Rivalen was certain he could find a use for the enspelled creature.

Rivalen found the swirling whorls of color within the artifact's crystalline depths seductive, hypnotic. He lowered himself and placed a hand on it. The shadows around his body swirled about him defensively. The kraken spasmed as though startled.

"Be still," Rivalen commanded the creature, and it was.

You are the Source, he projected to the mythallar. *Do you understand me?*

No response.

He frowned. He had neither the time nor the resources to spend repairing another mythallar. The arcanists of Shade Enclave had only recently repaired the damage Mystra's Chosen had done to his own city's mythallar.

Brennus, powered by his own spell of flying, flew out to him. The two brothers hung in the night air over the subdued kraken, in the light of the mythallar, while the crew of *Night's Secret* took aboard *New Moon's* survivors. Brennus eyed the kraken and shook his head.

"Shar favors you indeed, brother. Forgive me for doubting."

Rivalen waved away the apology and ran his fingertips over the mythallar. His touch left fading streaks of shadow on the glowing crystal.

"I tried to contact it and received no response. It does not appear damaged. What can you see?"

Brennus cast a series of divinations. With each spell, his expression showed increasing puzzlement.

Rivalen knew his brother could study a subject for tendays at a time. "Speak, Brennus. What is it?"





Brennus shook his head. “I am not certain. The mythallar is weakened, though it appears to hold enough power for our purposes. But . . .”

“But?”

“But I cannot elicit even a superficial response from the sentience. For the moment, it’s as inert as any other mythallar.”

Rivalen frowned. “Has its mind been destroyed?”

Brennus shook his head.

“No. The intelligence still exists. My spells detect the mind. But it is . . . torpid.” He looked down on the mythallar in puzzlement. “As if hibernating.” He looked at Rivalen. “To heal, perhaps?”

“Can we awaken it?”

Brennus shrugged.

Rivalen offered his disappointment to the Lady of Loss as sacrifice. Even if the mythallar’s sentience was forever lost, the crystal might still be used.

“It can serve our purpose, asleep or awake.”

Brennus nodded absently, still puzzling over the mythallar.

“I am going below,” Rivalen said.

Brennus cocked an eyebrow and looked at his brother in astonishment. “Below? Now?”

Rivalen nodded and removed the ancient Sakkoran coin from his pocket. Thousands more were probably scattered on the sea floor. If he found a quality specimen, perhaps he would add it to his collection.

Seeing the coin, Brennus jested, “I do not think the kraken will charge you a fee for transport.”

Rivalen smiled and said, “I want to see the ruins.”

Brennus grew solemn, nodded.

Rivalen lowered himself onto the kraken’s head. Ssessimyth’s flesh was rubbery, cold, and slick, but Rivalen sat on his knees and kept his balance. He took his holy symbol in hand and offered an imprecation to Shar. Magic coursed through him and the tingle in his chest told him the spell had taken effect—he could breathe water.

He followed with the arcane words to another spell and when he felt the magic charge his hands, he spun shadows from the air and





shaped them with his fingers into a short rope and a barbed piton as long as his forearm. By the time he was done, both were as solid as if they were real.

“What are you doing?” Brennus asked, but he must have guessed, for he floated backward a few paces.

“Remain still,” Rivalen ordered Ssessimyth, and he drove the shadow spike deep into the kraken’s flesh. The gargantuan creature seemed not to notice. Rivalen looped the rope of shadows through the piton’s eye and held both ends in his hands.

Brennus shook his head and smiled. His fangs—a royal affectation—glinted in the starlight.

“Descend to the ruins,” Rivalen said to Ssessimyth.

The kraken immediately dived under the surface and shot downward like a bolt from a crossbow. The terrific speed almost stripped Rivalen from his perch, but his great strength, enhanced by the darkness, allowed him to keep his hold on the shadow rope. He expelled the air from his lungs and inhaled to fill them with water. The ever-present shadows around him held the cold and pressure of the depths at bay.

Led downward by the soft red glow of the mythallar, the kraken dived for the bottom of the Inner Sea toward a city that had last been in the light of the sun over two thousand years earlier.

The silence and isolation underwater surprised Rivalen. Sediment clouded the sea, probably churned when the kraken had left the bottom. It was like moving through mist. Rivalen could see only a short distance in front of him despite the light of the mythallar.

After a time, the kraken leveled off, partly rolled its body, and began to wheel a slow circle. Rivalen clutched the rope, leaned over, and looked down.

The ruins of Sakkors materialized out of the misty murk like a specter. The destruction shocked Rivalen. The inverted mountaintop upon which the flying city had stood had come to rest on its side. The position made the once-horizontal plateau into a vertical cliff. Caves in the cliff suggested the activity of creatures, but Rivalen saw no life. Perhaps whatever creatures had lived there had moved on or died.

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The sideways landing had dumped the city off the plateau. Thousands of buildings lay in a heap on the sea floor at the base of the artificial cliff. Rivalen recognized the outlines of some of the structures—the shattered dome of the temple of Kozah, the onctall spire of Xolund’s tower. Rivalen wondered what Xolund’s final thoughts might have been as his city fell into the sea. He wondered what the Source’s thoughts must have been. He shook his head and remembered a day, thousands of years earlier, when he had walked the streets of Sakkors, when he had taken counsel with Xolund himself. Sakkors had not been as grand as Shade Enclave, but it had been a beautiful city nevertheless.

And it would be again.

Rivalen thanked Shar for sparing Shade Enclave the fate of Sakkors. He promised her that he would resurrect the sunken city. He would bring it up from the bottom and back into the air, just as Shade Enclave had emerged from the shadows to fly again in Faerûn’s sky.

Through the mental connection of his spell, Rivalen willed the kraken to move closer. He longed to examine the mountaintop in more detail.

The powerful magic that had first severed the top of the mountain from its root appeared also to have preserved it nearly intact, despite the impact and the passing of years. This bade well. The Shadovar of Shade Enclave could repair a damaged mythallar, could use magic to rebuild a city in a month, but Mystra’s Denial—an edict issued by the goddess of magic in response to Karsus’s Folly, an edict that prohibited the casting of certain powerful spells once common in ancient Netheril—made it difficult and costly for even the most high to cast the spell necessary to remove the top of a mountain and use it as a base for a floating city. Mystra’s Denial meant that the empire could never be fully replicated.

But a new Netheril could rise. The raising of Sakkors would be its harbinger.

Rivalen decided that he had seen enough. He took the *thurhn* from his pocket and dropped it into the depths. It reflected the red light of the mythallar as it sank, tumbling, to the ruins. He would





recover his coin when he recovered the city.

He took one last look behind him, committed the ruins to memory, and commanded the kraken to surface.

He found Brennus waiting for him, still hovering over the sea. Rivalen was still able to use his spell to fly, so he leaped off the kraken's back and recited a minor magic that dried his clothing and gear.

"What did you see?" Brennus asked.

"The destruction of the city is complete," Rivalen answered. "But the mountaintop is intact. You should see it, Brennus. The spire of Xolund's tower is discernible, as is the temple of Kozah."

"Kozah. That is a name I have not heard in a long time." Brennus smiled slightly. "But, no. I do not want to see it until it joins Shade Enclave in Faerûn's sky."

Rivalen nodded and smiled, feeling satisfied. The first task set to him by Shar and his father was almost complete.

"We should inform the most high that we have been successful," Brennus said.

"Agreed."

Brennus put a hand on Rivalen's shoulder. "And I have some thoughts about how to awaken the mythallar's sentience."



Days later, far removed from Sakkors and the Inner Sea, Rivalen sought his father, the Most High Telamont Tanthul. Striding into his father's parlor, pennons of shadow formed spontaneously in the caliginous air and clung to his high collared silk shirt and linen breeches. Rivalen had become so accustomed to the touch of the shadows over the centuries that he scarcely noticed them anymore. Shadows saturated Shade Enclave just as the Inner Sea saturated Sakkors.

Dim lights provided the only illumination in the rich, duskwood-paneled chamber. A thick gray rug decorated with an azure spiral motif covered the floor. Plush chairs and two claw-foot divans provided seating. Books and scrolls covered most of the walls in the circular chamber. The Most High's mammoth darkwood desk sat





centermost, itself covered in scrolls and tomes. Rivalen's father read voraciously everything he could find. Rivalen knew that the Most High had made a secret arrangement with the keeper of tomes, the master of Faerûn's greatest library, Candlekeep. The most high had provided the keeper with some rare tomes from ancient Netheril, written in the original Loross. In return, the keeper allowed the most high—through his agents, of course, or in disguise—full access to Candlekeep's collection.

Rivalen spotted his father on the far side of the parlor, standing before a magical wall map of Faerûn. Rivalen saw no sign of Hadrhune, his father's counselor and Rivalen's chief rival for his father's ear.

"Central Faerûn," said the most high, and the magical map changed perspective, expanding to show the details of the heartlands of Faerûn—Cormyr, Sembia, and the Dalelands.

Rivalen prepared to announce himself but the most high said, "You and Brennus have found Sakkors. Its mythallar is ours."

Rivalen no longer bothered to ask how his father knew what he knew.

"Yes, Most High."

The most high turned to face him. His knowing, platinum-colored eyes stared out of a narrow, expressionless face. Rivalen had inherited his father's sharp nose and imperial bearing. His father's royal cloak, originally violet, was so dark as to be almost black. As much shadowstuff as flesh, Telamont seemed to float rather than stand. The outline of his body blurred with the darkness in the room. Shadows swirled constantly around him, longer and thicker than those that circled Rivalen. The shadowstuff had not yet so consumed Rivalen. But it would.

"Well done, Rivalen."

The most high's praise was hard won. Rivalen enjoyed the moment.

Telamont moved past Rivalen to the darkwood desk and removed the crystal stopper from a bottle of nightwine. He poured two glasses and gave one to Rivalen. Rivalen held it but did not drink; he never did.





“The mythallar is undamaged?” his father asked.

Rivalen swirled the nightwine, inhaled its piquant aroma. “Structurally it is undamaged. And its magic appears intact, if somewhat weakened. But the sentience within is . . . unconscious. At this point, it is nothing more than a slightly weakened, ordinary mythallar.”

The most high sipped his drink and frowned. “The sentience in the mythallar would be a formidable weapon to add to our arsenal. Awaken it, Rivalen.”

“Easier spoken than accomplished, Father. Brennus has learned the name of someone we believe may be able to awaken it. I wanted only your permission to proceed.”

“Who is this person you seek?”

“A mind mage who travels the Dragon Coast. He is of no political consequence and will be missed by no one.”

“A mind mage? Unusual in this age. This will not distract you from other matters?”

“What other matters?” Rivalen asked.

Telamont smiled enigmatically. “You have my permission, Rivalen.” He clasped his hands behind his back and floated back to the wall map.

Rivalen followed, thoughtful.

“We should proceed with the raising and reconstruction of Sakkors,” the most high said. “Your brothers Yder and Clariburnus should lead the effort while you and Brennus pursue this mind mage.”

“As you wish, Most High.”

“Yder and Clariburnus are to use all resources at our disposal. I want the city rebuilt within the month.”

“Yes, Most High.”

A month would be an ambitious timeline, but with magic and slave labor—especially that of the krinth, a strong but dull race born of slaves and shadow demons—it could be done.

Rivalen stood at his father’s shoulder and studied the map. It showed Sembia centermost: roads, cities, towns, temples, all clearly marked. Rivalen had long advocated moving against Sembia, a rich realm with fertile upcountry farmland and several southern ports.





Rivalen had discussed the plan with his father at length, had planted the roots of Sembia's overthrow long ago, even before Shade Enclave had returned from the Plane of Shadow. Rivalen controlled cells of Sharrans in almost all of Sembia's major cities.

The most high said, "The Heartlands are ripe, Rivalen. The Rage of Dragons has weakened them. Drought has weakened them. The Rain of Fire has weakened them. Their internal political squabbles and this elven Return have weakened them. We must not let them rot on the vine."

"Most High?" Rivalen asked, not daring to hope.

Telamont continued, "We have spent over a year scrabbling in the dirt, looking for trinkets from the empire while we sought alliances with the child kings who now rule Faerûn. Wasted efforts, I think. Do you agree?"

Rivalen licked his lips and carefully worded his reply. "We have recovered what magic there is to recover from the ruins of the empire, Father. That time is past. And our attempts at diplomacy have been met with scorn and mistrust. Cormyr and Evereska still blame us for the depredations of the phaerimm. The elves that have Returned to Cormanthor gather strength while we speak. The time for diplomacy, too, seems past."

The most high gestured at the map, indicating all of Faerûn with a wave of his arm. "Faerûn is covered by petty realms ruled by petty kings, little better than the Rengarth tribesmen who once peopled the lands under the flying cities of the empire. Even the elves have degenerated into barbarism. What have any of them accomplished since the Fall? The Empire of Netheril gave them the pinnacle of magic, arts, and science, and they preserved none of it." His father faced him, his platinum eyes aglow. His voice softened. "What is now Sembia once was called Arnothoi by the elves. Did you know that, Rivalen? It was all rolling forest and grassy meadows."

"I did, Most High." Rivalen's collection included a coin of magically preserved, polished wood from Arnothoi. He knew the elven realm's history.

The most high pointed to upcountry Sembia, not far from Daerlun. A wisp of shadow spiraled from his fingertip and kissed



the map. “I walked a meadow there with Alashar, long ago. A stream divided it in two. Goldslips covered the banks. Your mother loved how the flowers looked in the sun.”

Uncomfortable, Rivalen said nothing. His father seldom waxed sentimental, and the subject of Rivalen’s mother, Alashar, always made him squirm. Rivalen had murdered her, after all.

Telamont exhaled a cloud of darkness. “Let the Sakkoran mythallar be the last artifact of old Netheril that we seek. Trying to resurrect the old empire is a fool’s task. Instead, we will build a new one. Do you agree?”

“You know my thoughts on this, Most High.”

“You have prepared the way in Sembia, yes?”

“All is ready, Most High. ”

“Proceed, then.”

A thrill went through Rivalen and he saw Shar’s will made manifest in the news. “Shar favors your course, Father.”

The most high’s eyes narrowed. “She has given you signs?”

Rivalen’s hand went to the holy symbol around his neck. “Yes. Ever since Variance recovered *The Leaves of One Night*, the Lady has been generous with her favor.”

Variance Amatick was Rivalen’s underpriestess and archivist, second only to Rivalen in Shar’s hierarchy in Shade Enclave. Over a year and a half earlier, she had recovered a lost book long sought by Shar’s faithful—*The Leaves of One Night*. Rivalen purported to have locked it away in the temple’s vault. In truth, he bore it with him always. The book revealed Shar’s one moment of weakness. Most of the faithful believed that the moment had passed long ago; Rivalen knew that it had not yet occurred. But that was a secret he kept to himself.

Telamont said, “If Shar has spoken to you clearly, Rivalen, inform me of her words.”

“You know I should not,” Rivalen answered. “The Lady’s secrets are for the ears of her high priest. Forgive me, but that is the way of her faith, Father. Of your faith.”

The most high’s eyes flared.

“I am the Most High, Rivalen. And your father.”





Rivalen did not quail. “I am her high priest and servant.”

“You are also a servant of the most high,” said a voice from behind them—Hadrhune’s sibilant, reptilian voice. Rivalen turned to see Telamont’s chief counselor rise from one of the parlor’s chairs, dripping shadows. He clutched his ever-present darkstaff in his hand.

Rivalen had not noticed him upon entering. He wondered if Hadrhune had been in the room the entire time.

Hadrhune continued. “Your loyalty is to the most high first, Rivalen Tanthul. To Shade Enclave second, and to your goddess only third. Or so it should be.”

Rivalen glared. “A false choice, Hadrhune. The interests of all three are aligned.”

Hadrhune smiled. “I wonder what would happen should they become misaligned? What would you do, Prince?”

Rivalen held Hadrhune’s gaze. “I would never allow them to become misaligned.”

“So you say,” Hadrhune said, and waved a hand dismissively.

“Enough, Hadrhune,” Telamont commanded. “Rivalen, enough.”

Both men stared at one another but bowed before the most high’s anger. Rivalen’s father went on. “We must respect my son’s religious zeal. He answers to what he believes to be a higher calling. Isn’t that so, Rivalen? Shar has called you to a greater purpose, has she not?”

Rivalen stared at Hadrhune and nodded.

“And Hadrhune seeks only to serve me and this city.”

“As do I,” Rivalen said tightly.

Telamont nodded and shadows flowed from him. “The time has come to build a new Empire of Netheril. See it done, Rivalen. Find this mind mage first, if you must. But see it done.”

“As you wish, Most High.”

Rivalen gave Hadrhune a final look and turned to leave. As he walked from the parlor, he realized that he had been standing in the room at the very moment when a new Netherese Empire had been conceived. He gave Shar praise and thanks.

Now he had one man to kill and another to capture.





CHAPTER TWO

29 Eleint, the Year of Lightning Storms

Rivalen and Brennus stood in the doorway of a scrying chamber in Brennus's mansion. Shadows cloaked the room, cloaked the brothers. Rivalen had decided to do the killing before the capturing.

A domed ceiling of dusky quartz capped the scrying chamber, and the starlight that crept timidly through did little to dispel the murk. No moonlight marred the darkness. Selûne was new, in hiding, as if she knew what was to come.

Rivalen brushed his fingers over the enameled black disc that served as his holy symbol. He wished the Lady's eyes to be upon him, so he pronounced a bit of her liturgy into the room.

"In the darkness of night, we hear the whisper of the void."

"Heed its words," answered Brennus.





Rivalen heard only partial sincerity in his brother's rote response but did not let it bother him. While the most high and all of the princes of Shade worshiped Shar, only Rivalen *served* the Lady of Loss. His father and his brothers craved worldly gain, for themselves and for their city. For them, Shar's worship was a means to that end. Rivalen, on the other hand, craved gain for the world—by returning it to the peace of Shar's nothingness. For him, Shar's worship *was* the end.

None of them fully understood that. But none of them needed to.

Few men were called to true faith. Rivalen's father and most of his brothers were powerful wizards—several were even more powerful than Rivalen, but they were only wizards. Their understanding was therefore limited. Rivalen was more—he was both archwizard and priest, a theurge. Among the Twelve Princes of Shade Enclave, he was unique. Among all men, he was unique.

Rivalen had received Shar's calling as a young man, when Netheril still had ruled much of Faerûn. To prove his faith, Shar had required him to arrange the murder of his own mother, Alashar, and Rivalen had done it. The death of Alashar had sunk the most high into despair and that, in turn, had led him to Shar, the Lady of Loss.

Through the ensuing years, Telamont had turned all of Shade Enclave to the worship of Shar. Rivalen had taken the dark rites and become first her priest, then her high priest. As a reward for their service, Shar had gifted the Tanthuls with special knowledge—how to bind their essence with shadowstuff. She had taught them of the secret weft of magic, the Shadow Weave, and had helped Shade Enclave avoid the otherwise complete destruction wrought on Netheril by Karsus's Folly.

She had given Rivalen still more. She had whispered to him his Own Secret: Rivalen would bring about the destruction of the world. She had birthed a plan then that would only see fruition two thousand years later.

Rivalen still marveled at the depth of Shar's planning, at her patience. He did not regard the murder of his mother as a betrayal





of his father. Alashar's death had served a more important purpose than her life. All was according to Shar's plans.

"Come," Brennus said, and gestured him from the doorway into the chamber.

The brothers crossed the smooth floor of the scrying room. The shadows gave way before them to reveal a massive cube of tarnished silver, half again as tall as Rivalen—Brennus's scrying cube. Dim images played across one of the four vertical faces.

Brennus's two homunculi sat cross-legged on the floor, their backs to the brothers, watching the images displayed on the cube. The tiny humanoid creatures, each constructed by Brennus, absently fiddled with their toes while they watched intently. When they noticed Brennus, one nudged the other and both jumped nimbly to their feet. Toothless smiles opened under flat noses. Both had droopy eyes the same steely color as Brennus's. Their gray skin creased like old leather as they bowed. To Rivalen, they looked like unfinished clay sculptures.

One of the homunculi croaked, "The master arrives. We have observed the images as you commanded. There is nothing of interest to report."

"Well done," Brennus said.

The homunculi preened at his praise. They asked, "Up? Up?"

Brennus smiled and extended an arm downward. The homunculi grinned and gripped his shirt sleeve to clamber up his arm, then took station on either shoulder. From there, they eyed Rivalen through narrowed eyes.

"I do not understand your fascination with constructs," Rivalen said, studying the creatures. His brother was also adept at crafting golems.

The homunculi stuck their tongues out at him.

"No more than I understand your fascination with numismatics," Brennus answered.

"Coins are bits of history, Brennus. Countless realms rose and fell during our two-thousand-year absence from Faerûn. Collecting the coins of those failed kingdoms reminds me of the fragility of empire. A useful lesson, as we craft another."





“Crafting constructs reminds me of the fragility and delicateness of life,” Brennus retorted. “A useful lesson, as we take those of others.” He grinned and his fangs gleamed. “You see? We are similarly motivated, Rivalen.”

The homunculi giggled.

Rivalen smiled and tilted his head to concede the point. He studied the images that the homunculi had been watching. Brennus waved his hand before the device and the images cleared and brightened. The homunculi clapped.

In one of the images, two women sat in solemn counsel across an ornate wooden table. A blue tapestry featuring a purple dragon hung on the wall behind them. The younger of the two, an attractive woman with blond hair, gestured intently as she spoke. The other, a dark-haired, dark-eyed woman with a serious countenance, remained still and listened, sometimes offering an observation.

“The Regent of Cormyr and Lady Caladnei,” one of the homunculi observed.

Rivalen nodded and turned to the other image. A man with long gray hair and a thick beard sat in a padded chair, studying a thick tome in an expansive library. Smoke spiraled toward the ceiling from an ornate, dragon-headed pipe set on the desk before him.

“Elminster of Shadowdale,” the other homunculus said.

Rivalen recognized Mystra’s Chosen. He faced his brother. “Impressive. No doubt the most high is pleased.”

Brennus smiled distantly. “Perhaps not as much as you think. The Steel Regent and Caladnei incessantly discuss and debate the plots and counterplots of her nobility. They are convinced, correctly, that some of the rebellious nobles are allied with us. But they do not know which. Other than that, we have learned little of value. As for Elminster, the image is fake. He thinks to deceive us by feeding us an illusory image.”

“A fake, a fake, a fake,” one of the homunculi chanted.

Rivalen raised his eyebrows and more closely examined the image of Elminster.

“Are you certain? The detail is extraordinary.”

Even as he watched, the false Elminster leaned back in his chair,





took up his pipe, and studied the ceiling, as if pondering a point he had read in the tome before him. Care lines creased his face, though his eyes looked as young as a man in his prime.

"I am certain," Brennus answered. "The illusion is a spell tag. It is designed to attract divinations, twist the magic, and turn them back on the caster, allowing Elminster to scry those who would scry him. I prevented that, of course." Brennus eyed the image with open admiration. "Still, it is extraordinary work. He is clever, and his spellcraft formidable. I have been unable to pierce his defensive wards."

"Yet you continue to scry the illusion? Why?" Rivalen asked.

"It amuses me to do so. And I hope to turn his own spell against him. It must reach back to the real man somehow. I simply have not figured out the method. But I will."

Rivalen had no doubt. Few could match Brennus's skill with divinations.

Brennus gestured at the cube and the images of Elminster and Alusair went dim.

"Bye-bye," said one of the homunculi.

"Shall we proceed?" Brennus asked.

Rivalen nodded.

Brennus asked, "The most high is aware of your plan?"

"Only you and our father are aware of my plan," Rivalen answered, deliberately leaving out any mention of Hadrhune. "And the most high wishes it to remain just so until events progress further."

The two took positions before one of the blank faces of the scrying cube. Speckles of black tarnish marred the silver face.

Brennus held up his hand and the homunculi mimicked his gesture. Streams of shadow leaked from his flesh. He spoke an arcane word and the tarnish on the cube face began to swirl and eddy.

"What do you hope to see?" Brennus asked, as the magic intensified.

"Shar teaches that hope is an indulgence for the weak," Rivalen answered.

"Of course," Brennus answered with a half-smile.





Rivalen said, “Therefore, let us not hope. Instead, let us *expect*. And what I expect to see is opportunity. Consider it yet another test of faith.”

Brennus smiled at that.

The swirling cube face took on depth, dimension. Rivalen felt as though he were looking into a hole that never ended. He felt nauseated, as he always did when scrying, and had to look away for a moment.

Brennus extended both arms and pronounced the name of the Overmaster of Sembia: “Kendrick Selkirk.”

Rivalen looked back to see colors spinning on the cube face as the magic of the device sought its target, found him, and wormed its way through a number of wards against observation. The colors slowed, expanded, and an image began to take shape.

The homunculi clapped with glee.

Rivalen put a hand to his holy symbol as the image cleared. With his other hand, he took from his pocket one of the coins from his collection that he had pocketed for the occasion: a five-pointed Sembian five-star, stamped in 1371 Dalereckoning to commemorate Overmaster Selkirk’s ascendance to power. He flipped it over his knuckles, a nervous habit, and waited.

The face of the scrying cube showed a balding, bearded man asleep in an ornate bed. Dyed silk sheets covered his tall frame. The soft glow of embers provided the only light.

He was alone.

Rivalen smiled and ran his tongue over his left fang. Another test—passed. He slipped the five-star back in his pocket. Sembia would need another five-star designed and stamped for 1374, to commemorate the beginning of a new overmaster’s reign.

“Opportunity, indeed,” Brennus said. “He is alone.”

Rivalen concentrated to engage the magic-finding in his eyes, then examined the overmaster through the viewing cube. His enhanced perception showed him magical auras as fields of glowing color.

Two protective dweomers warded the overmaster, probably emanating from the two magical rings he wore. But neither would





protect him against what Rivalen planned to do. Rivalen also saw the glowing lines of a spell of alarm that warded the overmaster's chambers. He frowned, even though he had expected a magical alarm. It could be defeated by dispelling it, which Rivalen did not wish to do, or by speaking the password, which Rivalen did not know.

"The wards are easily dispelled," said Brennus, who had his own ability to see magic.

"Dispelling them will not serve my purpose," Rivalen answered, but he had another idea. "Maintain the image."

Brennus did as Rivalen bade him, asking no further questions.

Rivalen lowered himself to a sitting position on the floor, drew on Shar's Shadow Weave, and spoke a series of arcane words. As he cast, he stared at the sleeping overmaster, let the image sink into his brain, and completed the spell by speaking aloud Kendrick Selkirk's name.

Instantly his consciousness separated from his body and streaked through the scrying cube at dizzying speed until it reached the overmaster's chambers. There, it oozed into the overmaster's mind and infected his dreams. The phantasm allowed Rivalen to adopt a guise pleasing to the overmaster in his dream, to use that guise to cause the overmaster to do what Rivalen requested upon waking.

Rivalen did not see Selkirk's dreams, nor did he know what guise the spell adopted for him. Instead, his mind hovered around the edges of the dreams until the spell captured the overmaster's attention. Rivalen felt the connection open.

He projected a compulsion through the spell and into Selkirk's dream: *Upon waking, speak aloud the password of the alarm spell that wards your chambers. Otherwise, all will be lost.*

The spell allowed no more, so Rivalen pulled himself out of the overmaster's sleep. In a fraction of a breath, his mind returned to his body. He opened his eyes to find himself once more in the scrying chamber.

"And now?" Brennus asked.

"And now we wait until he awakens and speaks the password. Then I will kill him."

Brennus nodded. "Do you wish me to accompany you?"





Rivalen shook his head. He was Shar's servant. He would do her will and he would do it alone.

"This is a task set by Shar for me alone," he answered.

Brennus accepted his statement with a nod. None of the other Twelve Princes disputed Rivalen on matters of religion. Even the most high accorded great respect to Rivalen's views when it came to Shar's faith.

"My gratitude, however, for the offer," Rivalen added.

The homunculi grinned, as did Brennus.

They spent the next few hours watching the scrying cube, waiting. Rivalen used the time to pray, to rehearse his plan, to toy with the Sembian coin. He had already committed to memory the many spells he would need, including several that he had memorized so they could be cast with only a thought.

"He stirs," Brennus announced.

Rivalen tensed, placed the coin back into his pocket.

The overmaster rolled over in his bed. His eyes opened, he blinked, and he sat up, a glazed look on his face.

"Machinations," he announced.

Rivalen knew that the puzzled frown on Selkirk's face would soon change to worried alarm, so he wasted no time. He spoke aloud the single arcane word that would transport him bodily across Faerûn. The magic whisked him into the bedchamber of the Overmaster of Sembia.

"Machinations," he said as he appeared, preventing the magical alarm from functioning. He followed this immediately with one of the spells triggered only by his thoughts.

The magic took effect and silence cloaked the room. No sound could be made or heard within the chamber.

Selkirk saw him and recoiled. His mouth opened but his shout made no sound. His eyes went wide and he lunged for an exquisitely carved night table beside his bed.

Rivalen triggered a second spell and a swirl of magical shadows went forth from his outstretched hand. The dark tangle struck the overmaster, expanded, and wrapped his arms, torso, and legs in chains of shadow.





Selkirk struggled futilely against the bindings but managed only to fall off the bed to the floor. The Sembian's labored breathing, though silent, was visible even through the shadowy chains.

Rivalen stepped through shadowspace, covering the length of the chamber in a single stride, and knelt at the overmaster's side. The acrid smell of fear rose from the Sembian's body. Words spilled out of his mouth—desperate words, to judge from his expression. Probably he was offering Rivalen wealth, station, trying to make a bargain. Rivalen had come to expect as much from Sembians. But even if Rivalen could have heard the words, he would not have cared what the overmaster had to say. Rivalen had not come to bargain; he had come to kill.

He put his hand gently on Selkirk's brow. The man's body went rigid and he shook his head over and over again. Rivalen would have respected him more had he shown defiance.

With a thought, Rivalen tapped the Shadow Weave and triggered a powerful necromancy spell. The overmaster might have been powerful enough to resist the spell, so Rivalen poured his power into the casting to make his fate certain and quick. The shade had no desire to prolong the Sembian's suffering.

Energy flowed out of Rivalen's hand and into the overmaster's body. It drove an arcane spike into the Sembian's heart. Selkirk arched his back, grimaced in pain, convulsed for a few moments, and died. His eyes stared upward; foamy spittle glistened in his beard.

Rivalen dispelled the bindings on the overmaster's corpse and they vanished. Using the strength granted him by the darkness, he lifted the body into bed and covered it neatly with the sheet. Wondering what Selkirk had been lunging for, Rivalen examined the night table. A glass vial stood near an oil lamp and a small pile of coins. The vial's contents glowed with a faint magical aura. Within it was a clear liquid. Rivalen tilted the bottle and the liquid grew cloudy. He smiled.

The potion would have turned the overmaster into mist, allowing him to escape the room, probably through a tiny bolt hole. It was a simple but prudent bedside elixir for a head of state. Rivalen placed





the vial where he had found it and eyed the coins, tempted. One of the fivestars was dated 1374 Dalereckoning, the year Overmaster Selkirk had died. The overmaster's profile was featured on the obverse.

Rivalen could not resist. He pocketed the coin. In his pocket, he had a fivestar minted in the year of Overmaster Selkirk's ascendance and a fivestar minted in the year of his death.

Coins are history, he thought.

He waved his hand to dispel the magical silence. Placing his hands over the overmaster's nose and mouth, he softly uttered the words to a powerful spell that severed the metaphysical tie between the Sembian's body and his soul. There would be no resurrection for Kendrick Selkirk.

He evaluated the room to ensure that nothing betrayed his presence, then took some time to cast several masking spells that would make his presence undetectable. Under the best of circumstances, Weave users had difficulty detecting spells cast through the Shadow Weave. Riven's masking spells made it nigh impossible.

His plan was almost complete. He had but one final spell to cast.

He stepped before the limestone hearth that filled nearly half of one wall of the chamber. The night embers glowed red. Crossed sabers and a shield featuring a coat of arms, a silver raven on a blue field, hung over the mantle.

Rivalen turned his back to the fire and the light from the embers stretched his shadow out before him on the carpeted floor. He held his holy symbol in his hand and intoned a prayer to Shar. As the spell progressed, it drew off some of his essence—he gasped as part of him drained away—and funneled it into his shadow, giving it rudimentary life.

The moment the shadow animated, it began to squirm free of the floor. Rivalen took it by the armpits—it felt slippery in his grasp, as if coated in oil—and helped draw it forth. He turned it and held it before him like a cloak—it had no weight—and looked into its face. A duller version of his own golden eyes looked back at him. He smiled. His shadow self was as much a construct as his brother's homunculi.

"You know what you are to do?" Rivalen whispered.





“I am you,” the shadow self hissed.

“Then do it.”

Rivalen released the shadow and it floated to the overmaster. It hovered over the bed for a moment, leering, then stretched itself into little more than a ribbon and wormed its way into the Sembian’s body through one of the nostrils.

When it was gone, Rivalen cast another concealment spell on the body and surveyed the chamber one final time. The chamberlain would find the overmaster dead in his bed of a failed heart, his personal wards and the alarm spell still intact. Perfunctory divinations would be cast but would reveal nothing. Resurrection would fail, if tried, and the customary attempts to speak with the dead would reveal only what Rivalen wished.

Satisfied, he thanked Shar, drew the shadows about him, and rode them in an instant back to Brennus’s scrying room. The homunculi greeted his return with applause.

“Well done,” Brennus said.

Rivalen did not acknowledge the praise. Events would move quickly. He needed to contact Elyril.



The Lord Sciagraph entered her dream, dwarfed her consciousness. The proximity of the Divine One hollowed out Elyril, reduced her to an empty rind of flesh. Her dream-self trembled with awed anticipation. It had been two decades since she had last felt the oblivion of the Lord Sciagraph’s presence.

Then, she had been a mere adolescent, the daughter of a Sembian noble family. The Lord Sciagraph had entered her dreams for the seven consecutive nights of the new moon and ordered her on the last night to do Shar’s will by murdering her parents and older brother in their sleep.

Awed by the magisterial void of Volumvax, the Divine One, the Lord Sciagraph, the Voice and Shadow of Shar, Elyril had obeyed. Her parents had been planning to murder her anyway. She knew that for certain.





The memory of that blood-spattered winter night in Uktar still pleased her. The murders became her Own Secret, an event known only to Elyril, Volumvax, and Shar, and as reward for the deed Shar had granted her a secret name: Nightbringer.

The murder had resulted in Elyril being fostered in the house of her aunt, the Countess Mirabeta Selkirk. Elyril assumed her fostering to be Shar's plan all along, so she wasted no time worming her way into the confidence of her aunt, a dark-hearted, petty woman whose only virtue was unbridled ambition. Over the years, Elyril became the daughter Mirabeta wished she'd had, so much so that the countess sent her own sons away from the capital and paid for Elyril's tutors. By the time Elyril reached womanhood, she had become the countess's chief advisor and confidante. Elyril made it a point to dismiss all suitors, which only pleased her aunt further.

"I serve only the Countess Mirabeta," Elyril always told them.

So positioned, Elyril had bided her time and waited for word from the Lord Sciagraph to learn what Shar wanted next. The wait had been long, but it appeared to be over.

Elyril let her dream-mind careen into the cold, empty abyss of Volumvax's manifesting eminence. She tumbled downward toward infinity, and the metaphorical fall went on for a time that felt like years. Her body smashed flat as her fall was arrested on a bleak gray dreamscape, as level and featureless as a board of slate. The abrupt stop elicited a gasp but otherwise left her unharmed. Naked, small, and merely human, she rose to her knees and waited for her lord and intercessor to reveal himself fully.

Within moments a heaviness suffused the air, its presence more tactile than visible. An oiliness formed on Elyril's skin, black, thick, and viscous. From her earlier experience, she knew it to be the precursor to the manifestation of Volumvax. She waited, eager, awed, shaking with anticipation.

Slowly, like sweat squeezed from pores, darkness oozed from the slate of the dreamscape. She kept still as it formed an expanding pool at her feet. The touch of the shadowstuff elicited shivers. She sensed her physical body, still asleep in her bedchamber, trembling with the ecstasy and exquisite terror that accompanied contact with the divine.



Her heart thumped like a war drum, her flesh tingled, and blood pulsed in her pelvis. She knew that she would awaken with the flushed skin and weak legs that always afflicted her after sexual release, but she did not care. She was in the presence of Volumvax, the highest servant of her goddess, himself a demigod, and she trembled.

The shadowstuff rose up and began to take shape before her, solidifying, twisting itself into a form that Elyril's mind could not fully comprehend, whose dark borders reached into the secret corners of the world, whose presence murdered light.

Elyril averted her gaze and abased herself before her manifesting lord, pressing her forehead into the slate of the dreamscape. She knew that she was unworthy to look upon Volumvax, even in a dream. The Divine One was too beautiful in his darkness for a human to see unveiled.

A palpable wave of bitterness went forth from the forming demigod and washed over Elyril. Primal emotion pressed against her mind until she screamed. The sound died the moment the scream left her lips, absorbed by the nothingness around her. Terror and excitement drew her breath forth in gasps.

After a timeless moment, she felt a presence before her, so heavy, so substantial that it surely must shroud the world.

Elyril knew when Volumvax's gaze fell upon her trembling form. She felt his eyes on her back like the stabs of twin spears. The weight drove her chest flat against the floor and she lay there, pinioned by his might, impaled by his eyes.

Drool dripped stupidly and unheeded from her lips as she mouthed the words to the Supplication: "I kneel before Shar's Shadow, who shrouds the world in night. I kneel before Shar's Shadow . . ."

Elyril knew that the Lord Sciagraph would not speak in her dream. He never did. But she heard him nevertheless; she *knew* him nevertheless. She waited, her breath like a bellows. As one moment stretched into another, she tried to brace herself. Her fingers gouged grooves into the dreamscape. Her heart bounced in her chest. Her lungs rose and fell, rose and fell.

"I kneel before Shar's Shadow, who shrouds the world in night. I kneel before Shar's Shadow . . ."





Volumvax touched her, the gentle caress of the demigod who would rule the world in Shar's name.

An instant of excruciating pain wracked her body. She convulsed, and swallowed her scream only by biting down hard on her tongue and pressing her forehead into the ground. Back in her bed, blood from her mouth joined the drool that already dampened her pillow.

The pain passed quickly, replaced by indescribable pleasure. The touch of divine fingers excited such arousal in her already sensitized body that she experienced wave after wave of sexual release, one rapid, agonizing, ecstatic pulse after another. The wail elicited by that ecstasy was uncontainable, even in the dream. She arched her back and groaned her pleasure into the nothingness.

Volumvax's fingers lingered on her flesh as he communicated his intent. His eyes burrowed through her back and into her soul to impress upon her his will, Shar's will: *So says Shar, the Lady of Loss, through her instrument and Shadow, the Lord Sciagraph. Follow the Nightseer until the sign is given and the Book is made whole. Then, summon the Storm to free the Divine One. This to be a secret known only to we three.*

Elyril sagged, began to weep. She had waited for so long to be Shar's instrument. The time, at last, was at hand.

Now see the Lady's vision for you, secret even from me.

The Lord Sciagraph removed his hand from Elyril, leaving her bereft, and the gray plain instantly fell away. She found herself alone, suspended within the nothingness. Elyril's stomach rushed into her throat. Vertigo made her dizzy. Back in her bedchamber, she felt her body vomit its evening repast.

Mountains, seas, rivers, and plains took shape far below her. Her nausea passed and she recognized the landscape. She was floating as high as the clouds above an image of Faerûn's heartland. She could see for leagues in all directions. The landscape stretched from the sandy wastes of Anauroch and the Dalelands in the north to the Dragon Coast in the south, from the jagged Stormpeaks that bordered Cormyr on the west, to Sembia and Ravens Bluff in the east. She recognized the dark lesions on the land as cities:





Arabel, Selgaunt, Urmlaspyr, her own home of Ordulin.

She waited.

After a moment a thin, purple-veined tendril of shadow formed in Anauroch, within Shade Enclave, home of the Shar-worshipping Shadovar and their high priest, the Nightseer, Rivalen Tanthul. The tendril expanded southward and east, toward Sembia. At the same time, a second shadowy tendril, thick and blunt but also lined with veins of purple, burst out of Ordulin and made its way west across Sembia.

Elyril smiled to see Sembia caught in the vise of her goddess's will. She smiled even more to see one side of that vise originate in Ordulin, presumably with her.

Summon the storm, the Lord Sciagraph had commanded.

The two fronts moved inexorably toward one another, swallowing the light, shrouding the land. Darkness devoured Sembia, and all of Faerûn cowered. Elyril watched it all, satisfied that she would live to see Shar's final victory in Faerûn, until . . .

A third tendril of darkness, narrower but deeper than the other two, arose in central Sembia and expanded rapidly outward in both directions to meet the onrushing shadows of Shar. This tendril bore no trace of Shar's holy purple.

The competing fronts of shadow met and did battle. Elyril shouted in rage as darkness warred against darkness. Who would dare stand in the path of the Shadowstorm? How would—

Without warning, the vision ceased and Elyril was alone in the nether. She screamed her frustration into the void.

Some time later she awakened in her bed, sweat-soaked, exhausted, and staring up at the beamed ceiling of her bedchamber in her aunt's mansion east of Ordulin.

"No!" she said, and sat up, disturbing the vomit, blood, and drool that stained her silk sheets and pillow. Her tongue ached from where she had bitten it in her dream. She ignored the pain and the sloppy mess on the bed.

Volumvax's will throbbed at the forefront of her consciousness and she whispered it aloud: "Summon the storm to free the Divine One."

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She wanted to know more, needed to know more, but she knew she would learn nothing else. The Lord Sciagraph and the Lady of Loss kept their secrets. Such was the nature of the faith. As a priestess of Shar, Elyril often had to act while ignorant of Shar's plans.

Near the foot of her bed, she heard Kefil stir. The black mastiff climbed to his feet, stretched, and uttered a contented rumble from deep in his huge chest. The dog's shoulder stood even with the top Elyril's bed and his bloodshot brown eyes fixed on her.

You thrashed about in your sleep, Kefil projected. Gray hairs dotted his massive jaws, and his bleary eyes showed their age.

Elyril smiled in spite of her concerns. The dog spoke to no one but Elyril—it was their secret. Kefil had first spoken to her the night after she had murdered her parents. He had been a pup then, and his name had been Mors. Elyril had renamed him after her dead brother. She assumed his intelligence to be a gift granted by Shar. Over the intervening years, he had become a trusted confidante. Her aunt hated the dog, but allowed Elyril to keep him in her room anyway.

Kefil whirled around to nibble at an itch in his hindquarters.

"The Lord Sciagraph spoke to me," she said to him, and offered no further explanation. She would not share even with Kefil the intimacies of her relationship with Volumvax.

Kefil continued biting his itch, and respectfully asked no further questions.

Mindful of her soiled sheets, Elyril carefully pushed the silk from her legs and swung them off the huge bed. Her head felt as if it were stuffed with rags; her temples pounded. She cradled her brow in her hands.

"Thank you, my lord," she said to Volumvax, wincing at the pain in her tongue and head. "It is my humble pleasure to serve."

Kefil abandoned his itch and devoured some of the darkness in the room.

Elyril smiled. Kefil always hungered for shadows. The mastiff sank back to the floor with a grunt.

A tingle under her scalp told her that the Nightseer was trying to contact her through the magical silver and amethyst ring she





wore. She looked down, saw the amethyst set into her ring sparkle as its magic linked into the Shadow Weave. The connection opened.

You have received a sign, dark sister, Rivalen said, and it was not a question.

Elyril's breath caught. Volumvax had commanded her to keep the sign a secret. How could Rivalen have known? He could not know of Elyril's relationship with Volumvax, could he?

Elyril could not answer the Nightseer for a moment. Finally, she responded. *Yes, Prince Rivalen. I have received a sign. I believe the Cycle of Shadows is beginning.*

A long pause passed before Rivalen answered. *No, dark sister. The Cycle was begun long ago, thousands of years before your birth. Know that the Overmaster is dead.*

Elyril gave a start. *Dead? When?*

This night. He appears to have died in his sleep.

Elyril giggled. She had never fancied her aunt's cousin.

All will suspect murder, she projected. And most would suspect her aunt.

And they will have their murderer, Rivalen answered. *Resurrections will fail and none but a user of the Shadow Weave will be able to learn the true cause of death. Speaking with the spirit of the dead will reveal a name—the name of he who we wish known as the killer. Be certain that it occurs in public, before the High Council if possible. Prepare your aunt to take power. Prepare yourself to steer her as I and the Lady direct.*

Elyril's aunt had been positioning herself for over a decade to challenge Kendrick for power. With Elyril's aid, Mirabeta had bribed or extorted alliances from fully half of Sembia's High Council. She would be among the leading candidates to replace the dead overmaster.

That should not be difficult to arrange.

That is what I expected, Rivalen said, and Elyril thought she heard a smile in the tone.

Night shroud you, Nightseer.

And you, dark sister.





A gentle hum in Elyril's ear indicated that the magic of the sending ring had gone quiescent. Rivalen was gone.

Elyril sat on the edge of her bed for a moment, letting the import of the night's events settle on her. She had been directly contacted by the two most powerful servants of her goddess. She must indeed be Shar's instrument. Now she needed only to await the sign, and for the book to be made whole.

But what book?

She did not know. For the moment, it was Shar's secret.

She touched the disc she wore on a chain around her neck. Years earlier she had paid a wizard to make the black and purple disc permanently invisible, then used it in a ceremony sacrificing him to Shar. No one but Elyril, Volumvax, and Shar knew of the symbol. Its existence was their secret. So, too, was the fact that the holy symbol stored the souls of those Elyril had killed, including her parents.

Elyril's headache reminded her that divine visions did not come without a physical price. She stood, and her legs, weakened from sexual release and the exhaustion that accompanied contact with the Lord Sciagraph, wobbled under her. She touched a fingertip to her tongue, looked at the blood, clasped the invisible holy symbol that hung from her neck, and whispered a healing prayer to Shar. The wound in her tongue closed; the pain in her head subsided.

She noticed a chill in the room. Embers glowed in the huge stone hearth that dominated her bedchamber, but they offered scant warmth to her body, covered as it was only in a thin nightshift. She crossed the chamber, stirred the embers with a poker, and added a log. She caught Kefil leering at her out of the corner of her eye. She knew her lithe body pleased the dog.

Flames rose from the stirred embers and caught quickly, sending flickers across the room. The wood crackled.

She walked to the night table and rang a small, magical brass bell. Her personal servants, all magically attuned to the bell and others like it, heard its ring no matter where they were or what they were doing.





After ringing, she began a mental count. She had adopted her aunt's rule that servants had a twenty count to attend her after the ring, no longer, or they would be flogged. Before she reached ten, she heard the sound of feet rushing down the hall, the tinkling of bells, and a hesitant knock on her door.

"Enter," she commanded.

The door opened. Daylight from the hall outside cascaded into the room. She blinked in it. She had not realized that the sun was well into its daily course.

"Close that door," she snapped.

Kefil growled at the sudden light.

A skinny adolescent boy hurried in, eyes on the floor, and closed the door behind him. The room returned to darkness. The youth wore the black tunic, belled head wrap, and calf-length trousers that Mirabeta required of all the servants. Bony legs and arms jutted from the clothes, the limbs like those of a scarecrow. Elyril did not know his name and did not care. Probably the boy was the result of one of the sexual unions that Mirabeta had arranged between her servants. Her aunt enjoyed breeding the staff, selling some to slavers, some to fighting rings, some to brothels, and keeping those who pleased her. She had done so for decades.

"Mistress," the boy mumbled. "You summoned me?"

The boy's eyes never left her bare feet.

Kefil stood up and the boy gulped. The mastiff cocked his head and eyed the boy as he might a piece of meat.

"My sheets and bed pillow require laundering," Elyril said. She reached for the tiny iron snuffbox she kept in the drawer of her night table.

"Yes, Mistress," replied the boy. He stepped to the bed, keeping as much of it between him and Kefil as possible, and began to gather the sheets.

Elyril popped the snuffbox with her thumb. The piquant, bitter aroma of dried and powdered minddust filled her nostrils. The drug was a poor substitute for Volumvax's touch, but she found it pleasing nevertheless. She'd once heard from an apothecary that prolonged minddust use drove its users mad. Elyril found the notion absurd.





She'd been using the powdered leaf for nearly a decade and showed no ill effects.

She took a pinch between her fingers, brought it to her nose, and inhaled sharply. The drug danced over the back of her throat, tickled her senses. She felt the effects almost instantaneously. Her head went light, she heard a melody in the crackling of the fire, and the hairs on her arms stood on end, tingled in the air.

She caught the servant-boy watching her from the corner of his eye as he leaned over her bed and pulled in the sheets and pillow. He bunched the bedding into a ball, bowed—Elyril heard a poem in the tinkling of the head wrap's bells—and prepared to leave.

Elyril held out the snuff box and purred, "Do you wish to try some?"

He froze for a moment, shook his head, and refused to look at her.

"I wish you to try some," she said. "Come here."

He lifted his eyes to hers for only a moment before restoring his gaze to her feet. She could smell the fear in his sweat and it intoxicated her nearly as much as the minddust. She took another pinch from the box, inhaled it, and laughed aloud.

"Come," she ordered. "This instant."

He took a slow step toward her, another, and she glided the rest of the distance to him. Her shift clung to her as she moved and showed her body to best effect.

The boy trembled, uncertainty and fear writ clear on his troubled brow.

"You are a pretty boy," she said.

Still looking at the floor, the boy said, "The mistress is gracious, but I should see to these sheets immediately, lest the stain become difficult to remove."

Elyril smiled and clapped her hands. The boy was clever, moreso than most. Mirabeta's breeding program had resulted in a fine specimen.

"You are articulate," she said, and leaned in close to let her breath warm his cheek. Before he could frame an answer, she lightly ran a fingertip over his arm.





Startled by her touch, the boy stumbled backward a step and nearly fell down. The bells on his wrap tinkled loudly. Their melody told her to kill the boy.

The youth scrambled to his feet, holding the bedding defensively between himself and Elyril. Vomit from the sheets smeared his clothing. “Mistress, I—”

Kefil padded around the bed and the boy froze. Kefil sniffed around his legs.

May I maul him? Kefil projected.

Elyril considered it but decided that she did not want blood in her chamber. She could chop him up and feed him to the dogs later.

Devour his shadow, she answered.

The mastiff seized the boy’s shadow from the floor, shook it, and devoured it as it screamed. The boy never made a sound, never moved. Kefil finished his repast and let out a satisfied grunt. He sank to the floor beside the boy.

“What is your name?” Elyril asked the slave at last, keeping her voice level. She liked to know the names of those she would sacrifice to Shar.

“Mard, Mistress,” the boy said, and she could hear the beginnings of tears in his voice.

“Mard,” she said. She let the word hang between them for a long, delicious moment before deciding to end the game. “Mard, do not get your tears on my sheets. Begone from me. Alert one of the kennel boys that Kefil requires a walk.”

Mard stared at her for a moment, as if unsure what she had said.

“This instant,” she ordered.

“Thank you, Mistress,” he said, and fled the room.

She watched him go, thinking how pleasant it would be to hear him scream as he died.

Kefil belched, sated on shadows.





In the darkened chambers of his mansion in Shade Enclave, Rivalen stared at his coin collection and let the ache in his temples subside. He always found mental contact with Elyril uncomfortable. Her minddust madness polluted the connection and made his head throb, and it had grown worse over the years. Still, she was a useful tool to him as he prepared to bring his plan to fruition. The most high wanted a new Netherese empire. His goddess wanted the Shadowstorm. Rivalen knew that the two goals were compatible. He would use the one to bring about the other. And a Sembian civil war would be the means.

Over the centuries, Rivalen had spent much intellectual energy finding ways to make the requirements of his faith compatible with his duty to his city, his people, and his father. So far, he had been successful, but Hadrhune's words made him worry that the day would arrive when he would not.

Rivalen did not know the entirety of the Lady's plan—such was the nature of Shar's faith. Through the years, Shar had revealed to Rivalen only bits at a time. But Rivalen had faith that she would reveal to him what he needed to know when he needed to know it, and that she would reward his successes. While he dared not hope to be Shar's Chosen, after experiencing firsthand the power of Mystra's Chosen, he had allowed himself to . . . consider the possibility.

He dismissed such thoughts as unproductive and continued with his sendings. He activated the magic of his sending ring and thought of another of his Sembian agents, the Sharran dark brother in Selgaunt. The familiar tingle of the magic tickled his scalp. He sensed the channel opening.

Prince Rivalen, answered the dark brother, an heir to a wealthy Sembian family.

Rivalen knew him to be an effective servant of the Lady, posing as a rich dilettante.

Is all prepared? Rivalen asked.

As well as it can be. Construction proceeds apace. None suspect the truth.

See that it is complete within the next three months, Rivalen said. *There will be still more for you to do afterward.*



The night shroud you, Nightseer.

And you, Rivalen answered, and terminated the magical connection.

Rivalen went on to contact the leaders of each Sharran cell in Sembia, over two dozen of them. Each wore a sending ring paired to his master ring, though none knew the other powers of the rings. To each, he gave a variation of the same message: *Be prepared. The Shadowstorm is brewing.*

None asked him questions, for they all knew they would receive no answers.

Prior to Rivalen's involvement, the Sharran cells in the heartlands had operated independently, mostly ignorant of each other. But after Variance, at Rivalen's command, had recovered *The Leaves of One Night*, Shar had revealed to him the identities of the leaders of the cells. One by one, he and Variance had contacted the cells and brought them all under his leadership, until finally Rivalen commanded the grandest conspiracy in Faerûn. A small army of Sharrans lurked beneath the veneer of Sembian society, eating away at the core.

His sendings complete, Rivalen relaxed by sipping tea and examining his coin collection. He stored his coins in a large case of magically hardened glass, each piece placed in a black velvet setting. He had an electrum falcon from the year of Cormyr's founding, one-hundred-year-old gold belbolts from Chessenta, a cursed copper fandar from Amn that caused the bearer's business decisions to go poorly, a magical platinum Calishite kilarch that returned to its spender thrice, and a host of other coins, both magical and mundane, from all across Faerûn, from almost all eras of its history. He looked to the empty place in his collection where he had kept his Sakkoran *thurbn*. The hole in his collection reminded him of the magnitude of his tasks. He had many holes to fill in the coming years.

He finished his tea and turned his mind to the first of his holes—the problem of awakening the sentience in Sakkor's mythallar. He would need Brennus's divinations to find the mind mage.





CHAPTER THREE

30 Eleint, the Year of Lightning Storms

The sight of the oak brought a smile to Magadon's face. He had passed the soaring old tree many times in his journeys to and from Starmantle, though it had been almost a year since he had seen it last. It looked almost exactly as he remembered it—a lone soldier standing sentry over an expanse of knee-high whip grass. Other trees dotted the plain here and there, but none were as large as the oak. He was their general.

Magadon ignored the chatter from the camp behind him and ran his fingertips over the tree's bole. The deep ridges of the bark and the size of the bole put the tree's age somewhere between seventy and eighty winters—a grand old man. A few tumors bulged here and there from the trunk, and the crotch showed a ragged scar from a recent lightning strike, but Magadon thought the tree hale. The world had thrown another year at it, and there it stood.





Magadon figured there was a lesson in that. Too bad he had not learned it sooner. Magadon had not had the oak's strength. The last year had broken him.

"Or bent me, at least," he murmured.

The oak's leaves were changing from green to autumn red. They looked beautiful even at night, especially at night, framed against the starry sky and glinting in the silver moonlight of the newly risen crescent of Selúne and her Tears.

Magadon flattened his palm against the oak. He had missed the tree, or he had missed . . . the part of his life it represented.

But he was reclaiming that part of his life, reclaiming himself.

Droppings at the base of the tree caught his eye. He knelt to examine them, and recognized raccoon pellets. He stood, smiling. Things were coming back to him. He had not forgotten his woodlore.

A soft skitter sounded up in the tree. Magadon looked up and found two pairs of masked eyes peeking down at him—a mother raccoon and one of her young. He would not have seen the creatures but for the nightvision granted him by his fiendish blood.

"You've picked a good home, mother," he said to the larger raccoon.

Mother and baby cocked their heads to the side, chittered, and ducked back into their hidden den.

Magadon patted the tree's trunk.

"Can you bear some more company, old man? I promise you will find me an easy guest."

The oak kept its own counsel, so Magadon unslung his pack—stuffed full with gear, as always—and sat with his back against the trunk, facing the camp. The campfire was going strong, and merchants and men-at-arms sat around it on barrels, crates, and logs, talking, drinking, laughing.

Magadon stretched out his legs, interlaced his fingers behind his neck, and blew out a sigh. The oak felt good at his back. His friend Nestor had once said, "There's naught steadier than an old oak." Magadon knew it to be true. And he knew there was much to be said for steadiness.





He hoisted his waterskin in remembrance of Nestor and took a long drink. Thinking of Nestor and his death brought back a wash of memories, some good—of Erevis, Riven, and Jak—and some bad—of the Sojourner, the slaads, the Weave Tap, and . . . the Source.

Recalling the Source made him squirm. He cleared his throat and tried to forget what it had shown him, what he had known, what he had been, for those few moments of contact. But memories were stubborn things.

He unclenched his hands from behind his neck and held them before his face. A tremor shook them, softly at first, but growing stronger. He knew what was coming. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and waited. He had seen the same shaking in minddudd addicts who had gone too long without their snuff.

The need came on him, the hunger. A tic caused his right eye to twitch.

The Source had given him so much knowledge, so much *power*. He could have done such good with it. . . .

He should find it, go to it, and bond with it once more.

“No,” he said, and shook his head. Even if he had surrendered to his need, he could not have gone to it. The Source lay at the bottom of the Inner Sea, sticking out of the head of a creature as large as a city.

Magadon recognized what was happening and fought, as he did every day, to keep hold of himself. His mental addiction to the Source had caused him to lose himself once. An entire year of his life had vanished into a haze. He would not allow it to happen again.

He took a deep, shaky breath, felt the oak at his back, the breeze on his face, and the clean air in his lungs, and heard the laughter of the caravaners, and rode out the pull.

After a time, it passed, more quickly than the day before. He was beating it. The realization strengthened him further.

Another chitter came from above. He looked up to find not two, but a row of six raccoon faces staring down at him, presumably the mother and all of her young. He could not help but smile at their wide-eyed, curious expressions. One of the young climbed over another and the mother chattered at them.



“Very well,” he said. “I will be on my way, but only after I eat.”

The raccoons continued to stare at him with bright eyes through their masks.

Magadon pulled a half-wheel of cheese and two mostly-brown apples from a leather bag in his backpack. He habitually ate alone, separating himself from the caravaners. He did not quite feel up to companionship. He thought the men of the caravan decent fellows, but he needed meditation more than company. Or so he told himself.

The raccoons chattered at him in irritation.

He took another bite of apple. “You don’t frighten me,” he said to them with a smile. “I have seen angry eyes behind a mask before.”

He took another bite of apple and noticed the black, clawed nails that had once been his normal fingernails. He sank them into the apple to hide them.

Inexplicably, his contact with the Source had changed not only his mind but also his body, somehow stirring the blood of the archdevil father that polluted his veins. As his mental powers had expanded, his body had come to more closely resemble that of his diabolical sire. As had his proclivities.

Soon after his separation from the Source, the nightmares had begun. The Nine Hells haunted his dreams. When he slept, he saw souls burning, writhing, screaming in pits of fire while leering devils looked on. The visions had grown worse over time. He felt as if they were moving toward some climax that would drive him mad. For months, he had feared sleep.

He had grown desperate, had sublimated his desire for the Source and his need to escape the dreams by turning first to drink, and when that did not stupefy him adequately, to drugs. He had lost himself for months. The dreams had not stopped, his need for the Source had not stopped, but he had been so dulled that they had bothered him less.

He scarcely remembered those days. He did remember that during the all-too-rare moments of clear-headedness, he had considered reaching out with his mind to Erevis or Riven, his friends, but had lacked the courage. His stupor had not dulled his shame





over what he had become. He had not wanted his friends to know of it.

Besides, each of them had their own burdens to carry.

The visions of the Hells had eventually left his dreams and invaded his waking hours. He'd hallucinated immolations on the city streets at midday, heard his father's voice in the call of street vendors, seen devils in the darkness of every alley. He was falling into madness, but could not stop the descent.

Blood of my blood, his father assured him in a voice smoother than Calishite velvet. *I can end all this and give you what you want, what you need.*

Magadon had never been sure if the voice had been real or imagined, but he had been tempted. He awoke one night in a dust den, his shirt stained with blood—someone else's. He'd known then that he had to do something to save himself or he would die, in spirit if not in body.

Ironically, the Source, by expanding his mental powers, had given him the tool he needed. He used it, performing a kind of psychic surgery on his own mind, walling off most of the dark, addicted portions of his consciousness from the rest. He likened it to cutting off a gangrenous limb, but this was more like splintering himself. He'd had to divide himself to save the whole. He could not cut off all of the addiction or all of the dark impulses, but he had severed most of them from his core.

And it worked. Mostly.

He still dreamed of the Hells. His body told him that he had not slept well in months, but his conscious mind did not remember. That was the important thing. He worried what kind of rot was occurring within him, unnoticed behind the mental wall, but he figured a man half-saved was better than a man wholly-damned.

A loud round of laughter from the merchants shook Magadon from his ponderings. One of the merchants, a brown-haired man with a pot belly and receding hairline, stood up and called over to him. Magadon thought he remembered his name was Grathan.

"Woodsman! We've a wager here. We all know that you never doff that hat."





“Even when you sleep,” one of the men-at-arms shouted.

Grathan nodded. “Even when you sleep. I say you’ve something even more peculiar than your eyes under it.”

Magadon’s eyes—colorless but for the pupils—often drew comment. He had explained them to the merchants as a defect of birth, and he supposed it was, coming as it did from his fiendish blood. Most called them “asp eyes” because they looked like single pips on the dice: an unlucky roll.

“A scar or somesuch, perhaps,” Grathan said.

“Or maybe a balder head than Grathan’s,” shouted another of the merchants, bringing the rest to hoarse laughter.

“That’d be bald, indeed! A scar’d be better.”

Grathan waited for the laughter to die down, then gestured at a young merchant who sat near him. “Tark here says you wear it out of superstition, for luck or somesuch. Which is it? There are twenty silver falcons to the man with the right of it.”

Magadon pushed his floppy, wide-brimmed hat back on his head, though he took care to keep it over his horns.

“This hat?”

“None other,” said the merchant.

Magadon decided to amuse himself by telling them the truth. “I wear it to hide the devil horns sticking from my brow. Or somesuch. And that makes you both as wrong as an orc in a dwarfhold, so you can add the twenty falcons to my fee.”

The merchants and men-at-arms loosed raucous guffaws.

“Has you by the danglies there, Grathan!”

Grathan laughed along with the rest, even toasted Magadon with his tankard. When the group quieted, he said, “Done, sir. Such sum to you . . . or somesuch.”

Magadon appreciated the turn of phrase. He tipped his hat in a salute.

“But the added fee only if you share a drink with us,” called Tark, who had a much more commanding voice than his willowy frame suggested. “You abstain with such fortitude that Noss here,” he jerked a thumb at a burly man-at-arms near him, “claims you’re an ascetic Ilmaterite monk in disguise.”





Noss's face wrinkled with puzzlement and he slurred through his beard. "Huh? Ascetic? What is that, a drunkard?"

More laughter.

"A drink, sir," seconded Grathan, and the others around the fire nodded and murmured agreement. "Come, join us. Our journey is almost done and custom demands we share a drink with our guide while still on the road."

Noss filled a tankard with ale and held it up for Magadon.

Magadon rehearsed an excuse in his head, prepared to offer it, but surprised himself by changing his mind. It *was* custom around the southern shores of the Inner Sea to drink with a guide while on the road; and more than that, he suddenly wanted company more than privacy.

He adjusted his hat, collected his bow and pack, and rose to his feet.

To the raccoons, he said, "I'm away, Mother." To the merchants, he said, "I can put your minds at ease that I am no ascetic, goodsirs, not by a wide margin. I've had everything from homebrewed swill in Starmantle to firewine in Westgate. But these days, I have sworn off spirits."

The merchants booed and hissed, but all held their smiles.

"You still must shed the hat," someone called.

"Yes! The hat!"

"Yes!"

Magadon realized that his hat had become the focus of too much attention, albeit intended as jest. He had to do something to diffuse the matter or one of the men would grab it off his head as a fire-side prank. And if the caravaners learned that he was fiendspawn, the smiles and camaraderie would vanish as quickly as they had appeared. He had seen it happen before when someone discovered his horns, or the birthmark that marred his bicep.

As he approached the fire, he summoned some of his mental energy, used it to extend his consciousness, and lightly reached into the minds of the dozen caravaners around the fire. None showed any sign of noticing.

He took a subtle hold of their visual perception, pulled off his hat, and modified what they all witnessed. Instead of horns, he caused





each of them to see only a smooth brow and his long dark hair.

“Not even bald!” one of them shouted.

“You see?” he said, and fixed the hat back on his head. He released his hold on the caravaneers’ senses and offered a lie. “Neither scar nor bald head. I wear the hat because it belonged to a close comrade who fell to gnolls while we were on the road together. So when I am on the road, I rarely take it off. Well enough?”

The men understood that. “Well enough,” most said in more subdued tones, and all nodded. Two even raised a drink in a salute. Others cursed the gnolls.

Magadon drew tight the drawstring on the hat and took a seat by the fire. As the jests, tales, and insults flew, he held his conversational ground as well as any. For the first time in almost a year, he truly felt like his old self. He was pleased to see that his hands remained steady throughout the evening, even when his thoughts returned to the Source, as they continually did. The pull was weakening, albeit slowly.

As Grathan and another merchant debated the intricacies of Sembian contract law, Magadon’s mind drifted back to a night long ago, on the Plane of Shadows, when he and Erevis had shared a conversation across a campfire. Not banter or debate, but honest words between men. Magadon had admitted his lineage to Erevis and Erevis had admitted his fears to Magadon. Neither had judged the other. They’d become friends that night. Later events had only strengthened the bond.

Magadon missed Erevis and Riven, missed them both more than he missed the Source, more than he had missed the oak.

He realized all of a sudden that he had been foolish to isolate himself. His friends had not judged him for being born of a devil and they would not have judged him for his addiction to the Source. He had lost himself all the more easily for not having his friends around him. He resolved to find them as soon as the caravan reached Starmantle.

His mind made up, he allowed himself to enjoy the camaraderie around the campfire. After a few hours, the drink took its toll on the caravaneers. By the time Selûne passed her zenith, the merchants and





men-at-arms had begun to wander to their wagons for sleep. A few, including Tark, nodded off where they sat.

Grathan stood. "I'm off to sleep."

"Goodeve to you," Magadon said. "We'll reach Starmantle in a few days."

Grathan nodded and started off, but turned back to Magadon. He came close and said in a low tone, "Woodsmen . . . I've seen worse than your horns."

Magadon was too shocked even to stammer a denial. He felt himself flush. His mind raced. Before he could frame a reply, Grathan went on, "If a man keeps his word and cares for his own, I don't care what his appearance may be, or his bloodline. There are some here you could have trusted. And we could have managed the rest."

Magadon looked quickly around to see if any of the few remaining caravaneers were watching or listening. All were sleeping, or nearly so. Magadon looked up at Grathan.

"I hear your words," he said softly, studying the merchant's jowly face, "and appreciate them. But how . . . ?"

The merchant smiled and touched his silver cloak clasp. "This shields me from whatever trick you used on the rest. A valuable gewgaw for a merchant, no? I picked it up from a Red Wizard in Daerlun." Grathan sat down beside him.

Magadon stared at him and asked, "What now?"

"Now, nothing. You've naught to fear from me. If you wish the horns and whatever else a secret, a secret it shall remain. And I'll ask no more questions. I meet all sorts in my travels and here's what I know: All men keep a coffer full of secrets in their souls. It's what makes us men. You are no exception to that. But I will tell you this. You must open up that coffer and show the contents to another sometimes, or it rots in you."

Magadon heard wisdom in his words. He extended his hand and said, "You have my gratitude, Grathan."

"And you have my respect," the merchant answered, clasping Magadon's hand. "That cannot be an easy load to cart."

"Easier some times than others."

"Or somesuch?" Grathan said with a grin.





“Or somesuch,” Magadon answered with a nod and smile.

“Goodeve to you, woodsman,” Grathan said, and patted Magadon’s shoulder. “Remember to take off your hat sometimes.”

He rose and walked toward the wagons.

Magadon stared into the dying fire, thoughtful, playing with the drawstring of his hat. He reminded himself that he should not always assume the worst of men. He had grown so accustomed to thinking so little of himself that he automatically thought little of others.

The realization lightened his mood. He resolved again to contact Erevis and Riven—

Sudden motion near the oak drew his eye. The mother raccoon and her young scrambled up the tree. The young climbed awkwardly but fear lent them speed.

Frowning, Magadon scanned the area near the tree for a predator, but saw nothing unusual out to the limits of his nightvision.

A cloud bank swallowed the crescent of Selúne and the drone of insects immediately went quiet. The horses and train mules, tied to the wagons, snorted and pawed at the ground. The temperature dropped noticeably. A tingle tickled Magadon’s exposed flesh. He felt magic in the air. The few snoring men around the fire stirred restlessly and waved a hand in the air, as if fending off nightmares.

Magadon’s heart began to thump. For a moment, he feared that he had fallen asleep, that Grathan’s words had been a dream, that the walls he had built in his mind had crumbled and that he would soon hear his father, see the men around the fire burst into flame. His hands started to tremble but he steeled himself, told himself that it was no dream.

He took up his bow, rose to his feet, and with difficulty, nocked an arrow. The familiar movement steadied him. He turned in a circle and looked out on the plain but saw nothing to alarm him—just rolling grass, the old oak, and few other scattered trees. He stepped around the fire and nudged Tark, who was sleeping.

“Up,” he ordered. “And the rest. Be quick and quiet. Something comes.”

Tark did not move. Neither did anyone else.

“Up!” Magadon said, and kned him hard.





Tark fell off his barrel, but neither he nor any of the other caravaneers around the fire stirred.

Magadon cursed. Tark and the other men had been enspelled. He weighed whether to raise the alarm and tip off the attackers that he knew of their presence. He decided there was no other way.

“Is anyone awake?” he shouted at the wagons. “Grathan!”

His shouts agitated the pack animals further, but no one in the caravan answered his call.

He was alone. Perhaps his mental abilities had spared him the effect of whatever spell had rendered the rest of the men unconscious. He licked his lips, swallowed, and focused his mind on his arrow tip, charging it with mental energy. Power filled it and it shone red. It would pierce plate armor.

Magadon scoured the terrain with his eyes. He controlled his breathing, steadied his hands, and held his calm. He drew on his mental power, transformed energy into a physical force, and surrounded himself in a translucent barrier that would deflect incoming projectiles. Wrapped in the power of his own mind, he turned a slow circle and sought a target.

“Father?” he shouted, nervous as the word left his mouth. “Show yourself!”

A sound like rushing wind filled his ears, though there was no wind. He scanned the night for the source but saw nothing. The sound grew, louder, louder, until—

At the limits of his darkvision, a mass of squirming tendrils seeped into view. As thick around as the oak, as black as ink, they wormed sickeningly over the terrain. Their motion reminded him of the kraken’s tentacles, of the grotesque limbs of the darkweaver that he had faced on the Plane of Shadows.

The tentacles brought a fog of darkness in their wake.

Two pinpoint pairs of light formed in the darkness above the tentacles, one pair the cold gray of old iron, the other pair a dull gold.

Eyes.

The rushing sound grew still louder, as loud as a cyclone. Magadon thought his eardrums would burst. The horses and mules panicked. Two snapped their lines and sped off into the night.



“Who are you?” Magadon shouted, his voice barely audible over the roar.

The tendrils drew closer; so did the eyes.

“Show yourselves!”

No response, so Magadon loosed an arrow at one pair of eyes. The missile streaked from his bow, leaving a red trail of energy in its wake. When it hit the darkness, it vanished with no visible effect.

Screaming, Magadon fired another arrow, another. The rushing sound ate his battle cries; the darkness ate his arrows.

The rush reached a crescendo, so loud Magadon felt his head would explode. How could the caravaneers sleep through it? It was like a pair of knives driven into his eardrums. He dropped his bow and clamped his hands over his ears. He screamed in pain but the roar swallowed the sound.

Without warning, the roar ceased.

But for his gasps, silence ruled the night.

Magadon’s ears rang; his temples throbbed. He looked up and saw that the tendrils were gone, the eyes were gone. He was alone. He looked at his palms to see if there was any blood, saw none.

He almost collapsed with relief.

“Tark,” he nudged the young merchant. “Tark!”

Still no response.

A rustle from above drew his gaze. He looked up and what he saw stole both strength and breath. His hands fell to his sides.

“Gods,” he mouthed.

The night took him.



Elyril wore a false face—that of a solicitous young niece and trusted political advisor to Lady Mirabeta Selkirk—and stood beside her aunt next to the bed of the dead overmaster. They had traveled by common coach rather than carriage across the streets of Ordulin, and both wore heavy, plain, hooded cloaks. After hearing what the messenger had to say, they had not wanted their





passage noted. The city was in enough turmoil. All of Sembia was in turmoil.

Kendrick Selkirk the Tall lay cold, pale, and very dead between his sheets. The overmaster's balding, gray-haired chamberlain, Minnen, stood in the doorway behind Elyril and her aunt, wringing his age-spotted hands. Beside him stood the bearded house mage, Saken, arms crossed over his ample belly, chapped lips pressed hard together. The circles under his eyes looked as if they had been drawn with charcoal.

Seeing the dead overmaster for herself, Elyril felt an uncontrollable urge to smile. She masked her mirth with a hand before her mouth and a feigned cough.

"I have sent for priests of Tyr, Countess," Minnen said to Mirabeta. "To certify the death and prepare the body."

Mirabeta nodded. "Well done, Minnen. You have sent word to Selkirk's family?"

Kendrick Selkirk's immediate family consisted of only his two sons, Miklos and Kavit. His wife had been dead almost a year.

Minnen fiddled with the flare at the end of his shirt sleeve. "I have dispatched messengers, but contacting Miklos or Kavit is always difficult. As is their wont, they are away from Ordulin. No one seems to know their current location. That is why I hurried a messenger to your estate, Countess. You are the overmaster's cousin, his only family in Ordulin. Despite your . . ." he cleared his throat and looked embarrassed, ". . . political differences, you must speak for the overmaster's needs until his sons arrive."

Mirabeta and Elyril shared a glance and Elyril could read her aunt's mind: *If* the overmaster's sons arrive.

No doubt it amused Mirabeta that Kendrick Selkirk's body and estate were in her charge, if only temporarily. Most of Ordulin saw Mirabeta as a respectful rival of Kendrick. Elyril knew better. Mirabeta had thought her cousin little more than a weakling and dolt whose incompetence had led Sembia in the direction of disaster. Probably Mirabeta would have had him killed herself if she had thought she could have avoided suspicion.

The countess ambled around the chamber, eyeing the rugs, the



sideboard, the swords and shield over the large fireplace. “That was well conceived, Minnen. Kendrick and I disagreed on political matters, but he was ever my beloved cousin.”

Minnen wisely held his tongue.

“Should we examine the body, aunt?” Elyril suggested, an idea born of a desire to provide political cover for her aunt, and a desire to touch something dead.

The old chamberlain looked appalled. “Why, Mistress?”

Before Elyril could answer, Saken unfolded his arms and said to Mirabeta, “There is no sign of violence, Countess. The wards on the room were intact and my preliminary divinations have detected nothing untoward.” The mage looked pointedly at Elyril. “There is no reason to examine the overmaster’s body.”

“A skilled assassin would leave no sign,” Elyril said to the room.

Minnen frowned. “The mistress seems to know much of the quiet arts.”

Elyril smiled politely to hide her hatred.

Minnen looked to Mirabeta. “None passed his door last night, Countess. Of that I am certain.”

Mirabeta looked from Elyril to Minnen. “And I am certain of no such thing. As my niece observed, a skilled assassin would leave no sign, magical or otherwise.”

Elyril was pleased. Mirabeta’s political instincts, honed through years of maneuvering in Sembia’s capital, were as sharp as ever. The countess did not know that Selkirk had been murdered. But she did know that *she* had not been involved in the murder, if murder it was. She therefore realized that she would be best served politically by insisting on a zealous and thorough investigation. She could only gain from it, whether she found a murderer or determined that Overmaster Selkirk had died of natural causes.

Elyril knew the truth, of course, and the secret she held made her smile.

“My cousin was as healthy as a cart ox,” Mirabeta said. “I saw him just two days ago. He showed no signs of illness, yet we are to believe that he just died in his sleep?”

“Men die,” said Saken with shrug.





“And men are murdered,” Mirabeta said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “I will determine which occurred here.”

Without waiting for permission, Elyril bent over the overmaster’s corpse, pried open his mouth, and examined his gums. Finding nothing—as she knew she would not, for the Nightseer would not use poison—she peeled back his eyelids and studied the eyes. Then she lifted his arms and looked in his armpits.

“Mistress!” the chamberlain said, appalled.

Elyril let the overmaster’s arms drop to the bed and spoke a lie. “I have heard of poisons that discolor the skin for only a short time before all signs vanish. I do not want evidence to go unnoticed.”

“Poison!” Minnen exclaimed.

Saken nodded thoughtfully. “I, too, have heard of such poisons.”

“As have I,” Mirabeta said.

Overruled, the chamberlain quieted.

Elyril went through the motions of thoroughly examining the body. Touching the cold, dry flesh of the corpse aroused her, but she kept her face expressionless. Attuned as she was to the Shadow Weave and Shar, she felt the squirming, dark thing hidden within the corpse.

“I can find nothing,” she said to her aunt. “But that means nothing.”

“Who else knows of this, Minnen?” Mirabeta asked.

Minnen answered. “The messengers I dispatched, but they are all trusted men. The priests of Tyr, by now. No others.”

“Keep it so for now,” Mirabeta ordered. “Do not let the household staff leave the grounds. All are to be questioned under spell by the priests. Including both of you.”

Both reddened, but both nodded.

“Perhaps he did die in his sleep,” Mirabeta said, and Elyril could see in her aunt’s expression that she hoped it was otherwise. “We will know soon enough. A resurrection should be attempted. I will pay for it, of course.”

Elyril could tell from the marked lack of enthusiasm in her aunt’s tone that she begrudged the idea; she made it only to maintain appearances. No doubt she hoped the resurrection would fail, as





they sometimes did. Elyril, of course, *knew* a resurrection would fail. Rivalen had assured her of as much.

Minnen said, "That is most gracious, Countess. But . . ."

"Speak, Minnen," Mirabeta ordered.

Minnen nodded. "I am aware of the contents of Lord Selkirk's testament, Countess. He specifically forbids any attempt to resurrect him after his death. As you know, he was a faithful follower of Tyr. He regarded his end as his end."

For a moment, Mirabeta said nothing. She looked at Elyril and Elyril felt certain that her aunt would not be able to contain a smile. But she did, somehow, and returned her gaze to Minnen.

"I understand, Minnen. Thank you. Then I shall pay all costs of the investigation into his death. That is the least I can do for my cousin."

"Countess, I am certain the High Council would appropriate—"

"He was my cousin and I will pay," Mirabeta said, cutting off discussion.

More positioning, Elyril knew.

"Of course, Countess," Minnen said.

Mirabeta turned to Elyril and Elyril saw the pleasure in her aunt's expression. The wrinkles around the countess's eyes looked less pronounced than usual.

"I will await the arrival of the priests with Minnen and Saken," Mirabeta said to Elyril. "Return to our estate. Send out messengers under seal. The High Council is to meet in emergency session as soon as possible. A successor must be chosen."

Elyril started to go, but turned and said, "May I offer a suggestion, Aunt?"

Mirabeta nodded and Elyril spoke the Nightseer's wishes. "A ruler is dead. The stability of the state during the transition is paramount. All suspicions must be laid to rest. My cousin cannot be resurrected, true, but would it not be prudent to put questions to his body about the circumstances surrounding his death, and to do so before the High Council?"

"Necromancy," Minnen murmured.

Saken raised his eyebrows thoughtfully and nodded. "There is





precedent. Four hundred years ago, Overmaster Gelarbis was murdered by a mob. The questioning of his body by priests, in the presence of the members of the High Council, helped locate the murderer.”

Elyril could have hugged the fat house mage, though his words were probably unnecessary. Mirabeta would have seen the political benefit of a magical inquiry before the council. It would publicly exonerate her of any involvement and solidify her guise as a concerned cousin. Her aunt wore false faces almost as well as a Sharran.

“Your idea has merit,” Mirabeta said. “I will think about this. My cousin’s wishes must be considered. Does his testament speak of such matters, Minnen?”

Minnen did not look her in the eye. “It does not, Countess.”

Again, Mirabeta managed not to smile. “Off now, Elyril,” she said.

As she walked to the door, Elyril noticed Saken’s ragged shadow on the floor. She could tell from looking at it that the mage would be dead within a year.

“I have a secret,” she whispered to him, grinning, and exited the chamber.



Sometime later—perhaps days, Magadon could not tell—he opened his eyes to darkness. He did not feel a blindfold against his face. Ordinarily, the fiend’s blood in his veins allowed him to see through darkness, but not this time. A magical shroud, then. The moist air slicked his skin.

He was seated, and bindings as cold as ice held him at his wrists, ankles, and waist. He could hardly move. He remembered little. His mind felt sluggish. He tried to summon a small amount of mental energy and transform it into light, but the attempt fizzled. Something was suppressing his abilities as a mind mage.

“He is awake,” said a voice. “The suppression cloud is working.”

“Then we go,” said another.

Before Magadon could ponder what the words meant, he felt the sudden rush of motion and the dizziness that often accompanied





magical travel. It reminded him of the times Erevis had moved them between worlds by drawing shadows about them.

When all stopped, he was still in darkness. A smell reached through the ink: salt—sea salt. He heard the telltale creak of a ship at sea, felt the slow roll of the waves.

A twinge of nervousness ran through him. The smell of the sea reminded him of things he would have rather forgotten.

“Show yourself,” he demanded, and tried not to betray his nervousness. His dry throat made his voice croak.

The second voice answered, calm and cold. “Soon, mind mage. The magical shroud is a necessary precaution to prevent the use of your mental powers. Be assured, however, that we can see you.”

Magadon struggled against the bindings at his wrists and ankles, to no avail.

“We? Who are you?” Magadon asked. “Where are we?”

“My name is Rivalen Tanthul,” the voice said from Magadon’s right.

The name meant nothing to Magadon. Rivalen went on, and this time his voice was behind Magadon. He must have been circling him.

“Your name is Magadon Kest and you hail from Starmantle. You are fiendspawn and a mind mage. A year ago, you had contact with something that belongs to my people.”

Magadon did not understand. “Your people? I do not know what you mean—”

Then he understood. A knot formed in his throat. Rivalen drew the knot tighter.

“We are Netherese, Magadon Fiendspawn,” he said.

Fear took root in Magadon’s stomach. The Source was Netherese.

“Where are we?” Magadon said, but he had already begun to suspect.

“We are on a ship on the Inner Sea,” Rivalen said. “Above Sakkors. Above the Source.”

Magadon was sweating. “Why have you brought me here? I will not do anything for you.”

“You will,” Rivalen answered calmly. “Because I will make you.





I am sorry, but I must.” He paused, then said, “The Source . . . it hurt you?”

Magadon shook his head. The Source had not hurt him. It had given him everything he could have wanted, or at least made him think that he had everything he wanted. And that was the problem. Once that feeling was gone, he had nearly killed himself trying to find a substitute for it.

Another voice asked, “How did you come to speak our language, mind mage?”

The question surprised Magadon. He did not realize that he had been speaking Loross. He had learned it from—

“Did the Source teach you our tongue?” the voice asked. “How intriguing. What else did you learn from it?”

Magadon reminded himself of Ssessimyth, the kraken, and how it had been snared in the Source, made content to spend its life in useless indolence, reliving a history that was not its own. Magadon wanted no part of it. He struggled against the bonds, grunting, but they did not budge.

“The bonds are composed of shadowstuff, Magadon,” Rivalen said. “You cannot break them. You will only exhaust yourself.”

Magadon ignored Rivalen and struggled nevertheless. He had worked so long to regain himself. He would not lose himself again. He would not.

As Rivalen had promised, he soon exhausted himself. The magic in the bonds sapped his energy. Gasping, he slouched in his chair. He prayed that the kraken would surface from Sakkors and destroy the ship, kill them all.

“I cannot help you,” he said. “I will not.”

Rivalen said, “The Source is torporous, Magadon. How did that happen?”

“Did you do something to it?” asked the second voice.

Magadon almost laughed, as if he could do something to the Source.

The second voice said, “It was attacked. You were here when it happened. I have determined that much. Answer my question. If you lie to me, I will know.”





Magadon closed his eyes, tried to convince himself he was dreaming, lost in a drug haze in some smoky basement den in Starmantle.

“Speak,” commanded Rivalen.

He was not dreaming.

“Not attacked,” he said. “Tapped. An artifact tapped it, drew on its power to serve the wizard who created the Rain of Fire.”

“A wizard *created* the Rain of Fire?” the second voice said, astonishment in his tone.

Magadon nodded. “Yes. He was from . . . somewhere else. He used the power in the Source to empower his spell.”

“Remarkable,” the second voice said.

Magadon realized that he had said too much. He did not want his captors to know of the tower on the Wayrock. Riven might still be there.

“The wizard is dead,” he added. “I saw his body, broken and burned to ash by the sun. The artifact he used to tap the Source is also destroyed.”

“He is speaking truth,” the second voice said, presumably to Rivalen.

Silence followed for a time, as if his two captors were silently conferring. Finally, Rivalen said, “We need you to awaken the Source, Magadon. Only a mind mage can do it. Only you can do it.”

Magadon closed his eyes and shook his head.

“I am sorry, then,” Rivalen said, and incanted the words to a spell.

Magadon gripped the arms of the chair, braced himself to resist whatever spell Rivalen would cast.

“Help us, Magadon,” Rivalen said.

There was magic in Rivalen’s voice, power. Magadon could feel it pulling at his will. He fought it.

“No.”

“You must. Awaken it for us, Magadon.”

Magadon gritted his teeth while Rivalen’s bidding wormed its way into his mind. He strained against his bonds, felt them give slightly. His heart pounded hard in his chest.

“It . . . will . . . kill . . . me!” he shouted.

“Careful, brother,” cautioned the second voice.





“You must do it, nevertheless,” commanded Rivalen. “Awaken it for us, Magadon.”

Magadon flailed like a mad thing against his bonds. Rivalen’s spell reverberated through his mind, the words like hammer blows. Rivalen’s voice soaked his will.

Magadon was weakening.

The words rang in his ears, sank under his skin. He felt himself losing, thinking of how much easier it would be if he simply submitted.

“No! No!”

“Almost,” said the second voice.

“You wish to do it,” said Rivalen. “I can see it in your eyes. Surrender to it, Magadon. End the pain.”

Rivalen’s words sounded so much like those spoken by Magadon’s archdevil father in his dreams that they shook Magadon to his core. He gritted his teeth so hard he bit his tongue. The sharp flash of pain and the taste of blood brought him an instant of clarity, of freedom. A sliver of mental energy slipped through the power-dampening shroud and made itself available to him. Magadon grabbed onto it like a lifeline and did the only thing he could think of to save himself.

Vermilion light haloed his head, penetrating even the ink of the shroud. His captors shouted. He felt hands upon him.

Magadon grinned even as the pain came. He felt as if he were breaking apart. He screamed as he splintered.





CHAPTER FOUR

10 Marpenoth, the Year of Lightning Storms

Cale dreamed of Magadon, though his friend's voice sounded like Aril's, the halfling boy whom Cale had saved almost two tendays earlier. Cale watched, frozen, as Magadon slipped into a dark void, screaming for help. Cale forced himself from his paralysis, shadowstepped to the edge of the void, dived for Magadon's outstretched hand, and barely caught it. He seized a firm grip, then saw that Magadon's fingernails had turned to black claws, and that his eyes, ordinarily colorless but for the black pupils, were golden.

Startled, he lost his grip. Magadon disappeared into the shadows, screaming. Cale shouted after him, "Mask! Mask!"

But there was no answer. Magadon was gone.

The roll of distant thunder woke him. He lay on his back in bed, heart racing, and stared up at the log cross-beams of the cottage, barely visible in the dark. The dream





had set his heart to racing. He had called Magadon by the name of his god. The realization unsettled him.

Mags? he projected, tentatively. As a mind mage, Magadon had easily contacted Cale through dreams before.

No response. Just a dream, then. He exhaled slowly and calmed himself. The deep of night surrounded him. He found comfort in the darkness. A distant lightning flash lit the room and pasted shadows on the walls. Cale sensed every one of them, *knew* every one of them for the instant of their existence.

Midnight was near, he knew. The Chosen of Mask always knew when the Shadowlord's holy hour approached.

He had been asleep only an hour, perhaps two. He had not even bothered to change his clothing before getting into bed. The stink of another night's travels, another night's killings, clung to his clothes.

Varra lay beside him, warm, soft, *human*. Her even breathing steadied his jumbled mind. He often lay awake through the night and listened to her breathe, watched the rise and fall of her breast. Since his transformation into a shade, he needed less and less sleep. But he always needed warmth; he always needed someone near him to remind him that he was still human, at least in part.

He drew the night about him and moved his body instantly across the room into the darkness near the shuttered window. Varra stirred slightly at his sudden absence but did not awaken.

Thunder rumbled again in the distance, the deep-chested growl of a beast. A storm was coming—a big one. It had been a long while since they had seen rain.

In silence, Cale lifted the latch on the window shutters and gently pushed them open. Moonlight spilled into the cottage. Its touch nettled Cale's flesh. Tendrils of darkness swirled protectively across his skin.

A cloud bank loomed in the distance, bearing toward the cottage, devouring the stars as it came. Lightning split the sky, and its afterglow limned the clouds with a purple cast. Cale thought it ominous. Thunder quickly followed and Cale fancied the thunder had a voice.





Everything dies, it rumbled.

He searched the sky for Selûne and found her hanging low in a half-circle over the top of the forest, trailing the glowing cascade of her Tears. Cale could not look at the Tears without thinking of Jak.

Just about a year ago, he had seen the most powerful wizard he'd ever known pull one of the Tears from the Outer Darkness and use it to eclipse the sun. In the end, the wizard's reasons for doing so had been small ones, human ones, though the wizard had been far from human. Cale almost admired him for his reasons. But the admiration had not kept Cale from killing him, because the wizard's small reasons had led to the death of Cale's best friend.

Thunder rolled, soft, threatening, and mocking. *Everything dies*.

The memory of those days darkened Cale's already somber mood. The night answered his emotions and the air around him swirled with black tendrils. Behind him, Varra turned in her sleep.

"I still blame you," he whispered to Mask.

When he looked back on the events involving the wizard, Cale saw the Shadowlord's manipulation in all of it. Through his scheming, Mask had managed to steal an entire temple of Cyric. The whole plot had been little more than divine burglary, petty theft. And it had cost Cale his humanity and Jak his life. Cale could not forgive Mask for exacting so high a price.

Before Jak had died, Cale promised his friend that he would try to be a hero. He had saved Aril and the halfling village, had done similar deeds throughout upcountry Sembia for months. But it did not feel like enough; he did not feel like himself. He missed his friends, missed . . . something he could not articulate.

He looked out on the dark forest meadow. An elm of middling size dominated the oval expanse of low, browning grass. Patches of wildflowers, mostly purple snaps, daisies, and lady's slipper, dotted the meadow. Varra had tried transplanting the wildflowers into a more orderly arrangement, but the flowers she moved invariably died.

Despite the strange weather and lack of rain, Varra had managed





to grow a thriving vegetable garden of cabbages, turnips, carrots, and beans. At Cale's request, she also grew pipeweed. Large stones from the nearby stream walled the vegetable garden to keep the rabbits at bay. The garden did not produce enough to live on, but Varra supplemented their needs with monthly trips to a nearby village, though she had been returning with less and less of late.

A table and two chairs sat under the elm. Cale had made them from forest deadwood. Not bad work. Varra loved to sit in the shade of the tree and watch the flowers in the sun. She had come out of the darkness of Skullport and made the forest cottage and sun-drenched meadow in upcountry Sembia her home. Cale thought her amazing for that.

Cale had bought the cottage and its land from the heirs of a dead woodsman. The place belonged to him, but more and more he knew it wasn't his home. He remembered words Jak had spoken once—*For men like us, friends are home*. Cale missed his friends. The time he'd spent in the cottage had been a welcome respite, but a temporary one. Something was coming for him, coming for him as certain as the storm. He was not sure how he would tell Varra. He looked back on her sleeping form and wondered if she already knew.

Their relationship was unusual. They had lived together a year but Cale knew little about her past, and made a point not to ask. She, in turn, respected his privacy in the same way. They shared a home, a bed, their bodies from time to time, but little else. Cale cared for her deeply, and she cared for him, but he knew he could not stay with her much longer.

He ticked the moments away as midnight drew closer. When Mask's holy hour was imminent, he let the shadows in the meadow steal into his mind, and willed himself into the darkness under the elm, near the two chairs. Always keen of ear, and even sharper of ear in darkness, Cale heard the fauna stalking the woods, the chirp of crickets, the soft coo of the nightjar that nested on the ground under the scrub, the rush of the wind through the forest.

He moved the chair so he could watch the storm approach over the woods. He reached into his pocket and took out the smooth, oval stone that Aril had given him.



“Shadowman,” he said, and smiled. He treasured the stone.

The clouds ate more of the sky. Thunder rumbled its promise.

Cale ran his thumb over the smooth stone, thoughtful. He heard the hiss of approaching rain. The wind set the trees to swaying. Lightning cut the sky. Thunder boomed. He wondered if it would wake Varra. After so much time living underground, she still had not grown accustomed to thunderstorms.

He reached into another pocket and retrieved Jak’s ivory-bowled pipe, the pipe Cale had taken from his dead friend as a token of remembrance. He took out a small leather pouch of pipeweed, grown in Varra’s garden, and filled the pipe’s bowl. He tamped, struck a tindertwig, and lit.

Midnight arrived. Cale felt it as a charge in his bones. Rain came with it.

A year ago, Cale would have spent the next hour in prayer, asking Mask to imprint his mind with the power to cast spells. But not any more. Cale had not prayed to Mask or cast a spell since Jak’s death. He had created his own ritual for the midnight hour.

He took a draw on the pipe and exhaled a cloud of smoke. He watched the cloud dance between the raindrops and stream off into the night sky.

The elm shielded him from the worst of the rain, but he welcomed the downpour. It washed the stink of his travels from him. It lasted only a short time—the rain never lingered.

Cale spent the next hours in his chair, listening to the wind, and communing not with his god, but with his past.

“I do not belong to you any more,” he said to Mask. “And neither does the night.”

It belonged to the shadowman.



I awaken in a perfectly square room. A soft red glow suffuses the air, providing light. I see no sign of Rivalen Tanthul and I no longer smell the sea. My bonds are gone.

Have I escaped? I remember shouting, a flash of green, but little





else. My mind feels as thick as mud. I know I tried to do something to escape but I cannot remember.

How long have I been here?

The room looks vaguely familiar to me but I cannot place it. I have been here before, though, I am sure of that. The room reminds me of a prison cell. There are no windows and only a single iron-bound door.

Looking at the door, I feel certain that I am supposed to do something. But I cannot remember. The lapse troubles me.

I sit on the floor and the smooth cobblestones feel cool through my clothes. My body aches, as if I have been in combat, or beaten.

Have I been tortured?

I have none of my gear or weapons. I wear only a loose wool tunic, breeches, and boots. Even my hat is gone, and I never take off my hat. I reach up to feel my exposed horns . . .

. . . they are gone.

Startled, I run my hands over my brow. I feel nothing but smooth skin. Has Rivalen removed my horns and healed the wounds? I hold out my arms to examine the rest of my body . . .

The birthmark on my bicep, the sword ensheathed in flames, the brand of my father, is also gone. How is that possible? I tried for years to efface that brand, scarring my skin in the process. Even the scars are gone. So, too, is the patch of scales on the small of my back. I feel only smooth skin, human skin. My heart races.

Someone has stripped my fiendish blood from me.

“This is not possible,” I say.

“You have come at last,” says a voice behind me.

I scramble to my feet and whirl around. I see no one else in the room. The voice sounds familiar, though, almost . . .

“Up here. On the wall.”

I look up and my head swims with dizziness. For a moment, I cannot not focus my eyes. I wobble on my feet, hold out my arms for balance. The feeling passes and I notice a thin, horizontal slit in the stone, more than three-quarters of the way up the wall. If it were not so high, it would be a feeding slit.

I move slowly to the wall, wary for a trick.





“Who are you?” I ask. I keep my voice low for no reason I can articulate.

“Come up so you can see me. I will show you.”

The request turns my skin cold. “Tell me who you are,” I demand.

“In a moment. Come up, first. I . . . need help.”

Help? The word sends a thrill through me. I cannot deny someone who needs help. I study the slit. I might be able to jump up and get my fingers in it, then pull myself up.

“I don’t know if I can make it.”

“You can,” says the voice with certainty. “Do it now.”

Without thinking, I jump up and catch the edge of the slit with both hands. I scabble my boots against the wall for leverage and heave myself up with a grunt. When I can peer through the opening, I find myself staring at another pair of eyes exactly like mine—black pupils, no color. I gasp, startled, and lose my grip. I fall back to the floor in a heap. The impact knocks the breath from me.

“I am sorry,” says the voice. “I should have prepared you. Are you all right?”

I climb to my feet, eyeing the slit, stammering, “Your eyes are like mine! How can that be?”

“No,” says the voice. “Your eyes are different. I saw them. They are green.”

I reel. Green? I am still groggy from the escape, or from the torture, or whatever has happened to me. This does not make sense. How can my eyes be green?

“Are you still there?” asks the voice.

I nod, though the speaker cannot see me.

“Are you a prisoner here?” I ask. “Where are we? Who are you? And why do you look like . . . like I should look?” The speaker sighs, as if at a precocious child. “Listen carefully. What I am about to say will alarm you. Are you prepared?”

I’m sweating, and I don’t know why. My skin turns goose flesh.

“Yes,” I lie.

The voice says, “There is no ‘here’ and you are not a prisoner.”





CHAPTER FIVE

10 Marpenoth, the Year of Lightning Storms

Word of the emergency session of Sembia's High Council spread through Ordulin like a plague. Rumors ran rampant, most of them hurriedly planted by this or that member of the council. Hushed voices in taverns spoke of the Overmaster's demise and the coming power struggle among the council members.

At Mirabeta's behest, Elyril had hired several trusted rumormongers to suggest that Overmaster Selkirk had been murdered and that nobles in service to Endren Corrinthal of Saerb had been complicit. The countess was portrayed as an indefatigable pursuer of the murderers.

The Highspeaker of the Council delayed the emergency session for more than a tenday, to allow time for the twenty-one members of the High Council to prepare and receive instructions. Mirabeta and Elyril,





though impatient to grab power, used the time to good effect. They exhausted Ordulin's messengers by sending queries to fellow members of the High Council, trying to determine where each stood on who should be elected the next overmaster. Mirabeta met face to face with seven of her colleagues. Some were coy, but for the most part, the office seemed destined for either Mirabeta or Endren Corrinthal. Elyril marvelled at the loyalty Endren commanded. Saerb was a trade town of little significance, but Endren Corrinthal was the second most powerful member of the High Council. She did not understand how he'd managed it.

Meanwhile, the overmaster's body was sent in magical stasis to the Tower of the Scales, the small shrine dedicated to his patron god, Tyr. The state funeral was scheduled for a tenday later, a sufficient time to allow outlying nobles to travel to Ordulin to give honor to the dead. The Tyrans forbade anyone from seeing the body until the questioning before the High Council, and not even Mirabeta dared gainsay them.

Sembia's High Council was at last summoned to session. The elaborate gong tower of the High House of the Wonderful Wheel, Gond's temple, sounded the ceremonial summons. The privilege to sound the summons rotated among the faiths of the city every decade and was determined by lot.

Assisted by their coach driver, Elyril and Mirabeta stepped from their lacquered carriage into the shadow of the Great Council Hall of Sembia. Both wore elaborate, high-waisted satin gowns, the current custom of noblewomen in the capital, though both had selected subdued colors in order to appear respectful of the overmaster's death. They also wore small, enchanted knives on thigh sheaths.

Mirabeta, who ordinarily glittered like a dragon's hoard, had limited her jewelry to a black pearl necklace and matching earrings. Elyril knew both the necklace and the earrings to hold powerful protective and communicative magics. For her part, Elyril wore jewelry that featured amethysts set into antique silver. The purple of the gems and the black of the tarnished metal were Shar's holy colors, Elyril's secret homage to her goddess. Elyril also wore her invisible holy symbol on a neck chain under her gown.





The stately Council Hall, a pentagonal affair, sat amid a tree-dotted municipal district in the center of the capital. Autumn had turned the maple leaves blood red. The gated grounds of the Tower of the City Guard and the impenetrable walls of the Sembian mint, called the Guarded Gate, flanked the great hall to either side. A pair of limestone golems, chiseled to look like oversized Sembian guardsmen in archaic armor, stood to either side of the mint's eponymous metal gate.

The polished limestone facade of the great hall and its five towers gleamed almost white in the setting sun. The glass dome of the central rotunda, known by all to be enchanted with the durability of steel, glittered in the sunlight. Flags flying the Sembian Raven and Silver flapped from the tower tops. Black pennons hung below the flags to mark Kendrick Selkirk's passing. Pairs of uniformed city guardsmen, standing at attention and holding halberds at arms, flanked the various entrances to the hall. All wore black armbands on the left biceps, also in honor of Kendrick. They appeared as miniature versions of the golems guarding the mint.

Each tower of the hall opened into a wide corridor, which featured several side chambers and halls, and each of the five corridors intersected at the rotunda of the High Council. She had always thought the whole thing looked something like a giant five-star, with the rotunda as the hub, the five towers as points, and the corridors as legs.

The carriages of the council members ringed the hall, and several hundred armed and armored guards milled among them. All wore the heraldry of one or another member of the High Council. Ordinary citizens were being routed away from the municipal district, but Sembian custom allowed each council member an armed escort of up to twenty guards, though this right had been rarely exercised in the past.

Elyril noted the various tabards and recognized that the guards had drifted into two large groups, reflecting the anticipated schism in the High Council. The soldiers serving the members loyal to Endren Corrinthal of Saerb massed to the eastern side of the building, along the Wide Way, while those in service to the nobles loyal to Mirabeta massed on the west, on Norgrim's Ride. Mirabeta had sent



her force to the hall in the mid afternoon, and they moved among those on Norgrim's Ride.

The two groups eyed each other. Steel and hostility filled the streets.

"Things could turn bloody quickly," Elyril said to her aunt.

Mirabeta nodded and the coachman pretended not to hear.

A force of perhaps seventy city guards was spread throughout the street around the Council Hall and kept the nobles' escorts at a distance. Unlike the sentries posted at the Hall's doors, dressed in customary ceremonial garb, those in the street bore steel shields, wore chain hauberks under blue tabards, and carried heavy maces. Elyril did not see Raithspur, the tall, grizzled captain of the guard. The captain, it seemed, was wise enough not to wade too deeply into political waters.

The men loyal to Mirabeta cheered upon her appearance—at the urging of Mirabeta's own twenty men—and Elyril's aunt smiled in response. Anything more would have been undignified. The men loyal to Endren scowled and a few even booed. Mirabeta only held her smile.

The pair of guardsmen at the nearest doorway of the Hall left their posts and marched down the flagstone walkway to Elyril and Mirabeta.

"Countess," the middle-aged, bearded guardsman said, snapping to attention. "You are the final member to arrive. By order of the highspeaker, we shall escort you to the doors. The great hall has been cleared. None have been allowed within save the members and their *wolmoners*."

Elyril blinked in surprise. She had not heard the archaic term, *wolmoner*, in many years. Most used the term "vigilman" or "wallman" instead. The custom dated back centuries, when leaders were allowed only one trusted aide, their wallman, in sensitive meetings. Wallmen were originally warriors who served as bodyguards, but as political maneuvering became more important than force of arms, the position shifted to be filled by political advisors like Elyril. The High Council invoked the wallman rule only when a session was politically charged or involved confidential matters.





“My niece is my wallman,” Mirabeta answered. “Lead on.”

The guardsmen nodded, flanked Elyril and Mirabeta, and escorted them up the walkway through the ring of guards. The two guardsmen resumed their stations at the doors and Mirabeta and Elyril left them behind as they entered the Council Hall.

Mirabeta quickened her stride. Elyril hurried to keep pace. Despite the countess’s advancing age—she had seen well over fifty winters, a few less than twice Elyril’s twenty-seven—she remained a trim woman, and her walking speed, when she had a purpose in mind, approached a jog.

Their footsteps echoed off the walls of the tower’s entry hall. Elyril had never before seen it empty. Usually petitioners, merchants, and minor nobles thronged the building, trying to catch the ear of this or that member of the High Council.

They continued into the long, soaring hall of monuments. Towering statues carved from marble, quarried in distant Yhaunn, lined the hall. The sculptures depicted every Overmaster of Sembia since the founding of the realm. Plaques on the bases displayed their names. Magically colored lighting accented the statues to good effect. The exaggerated, heroic proportions of the sculptures made Elyril think of Volumvax. She licked her lips and looked for him in the statues’ shadows.

Mirabeta did not look at any of the statues save the last, that of her dead cousin. There, she stopped. The statue had been completed only two months earlier. Kendrick Selkirk had served as overmaster for just over three years, long enough to get his image carved in stone before dying, but too brief to accomplish anything of note.

“There are no overmistresses in this hall,” Elyril observed, watering the seed of Mirabeta’s ambition.

“There will be,” Mirabeta said.

From the far side of the hall, in the direction of the rotunda, came a man’s voice. “Gloating ill becomes you, Countess.”

Elyril and Mirabeta turned to see Endren Corrinthal walking toward them. The tall nobleman wore a long, ermine-trimmed blue jacket over a collared silk shirt and black breeches. Thick gray hair topped a craggy, careworn face. His overlarge nose had been





broken at least once, and his beard and moustache only partially hid a ragged scar that marked his left cheek. A rapier hung from his belt and by all accounts, he knew how to use it.

Mirabeta affected a smile, though the hardness never left her eyes.

“And snide comments ill become you, Endren, who are already so . . . ill-becomed.”

Endren chuckled as he crossed the hall. He bowed before Mirabeta.

“It is unfortunate, Countess, that you have never turned that sharp intellect to the public good.”

“Quite the contrary, Endren. I have done exactly that for my entire life. And I plan to continue doing so. As overmistress.”

Endren’s eyes narrowed at Mirabeta’s naked statement of ambition but he managed a polite nod. “We shall see,” he said, and turned to Elyril and bowed. “Mistress Elyril. You are as lovely as ever. It is a pity you remain unmarried.”

Elyril curtsied, wondering as she did how Endren’s screams might sound as she offered him to Shar.

“It’s a pity your own wife is dead,” Elyril said, all innocence.

Endren started an angry retort but a man stepped out of the rotunda and called down the hall.

“Father! The highspeaker is calling for order.”

The younger Corrinthal stood a head taller than his father. He displayed a stronger jaw, thicker frame, shorter beard, and no gray hair, but his eyes and nose looked so much like Endren that he could not be missed as the nobleman’s son. He wore a heavy blade at his belt—its pommel was a stylized rose—and a holy symbol on a necklace around his throat—another rose, symbol of Lathander the Morninglord.

Elyril hated him instantly. This newcomer’s soul shone like the sun. She refused to look at his shadow as he approached them.

“My son,” Endren said. “Abelar Corrinthal.”

Mirabeta smiled and held out her hand, which Abelar took.

“He could be none other,” Mirabeta said. “A pleasure, young sir. I understand you were an adventurer in your youth.”





Elyril smiled at the contempt her aunt managed to load onto the word “adventurer.”

“A folly of my younger days, Countess. I serve Saerb and my father now.”

“And Lathander,” Elyril said, and could not quite keep the venom from her tone.

Abelar regarded her curiously. “Indeed. I call the Morninglord patron.”

Mirabeta gestured at Elyril. “My niece and wallman, Elyril Haven.”

Abelar’s brown-eyed gaze made Elyril uncomfortable. She feared that he saw through her, that he knew her secrets.

“Mistress Elyril,” Abelar said, inclining his head. “I have . . . heard your name before.”

Elyril could not bring herself to curtsy or speak, though she did force a half-smile. She touched her invisible holy symbol and resolved to kill Abelar at the first opportunity. Abelar regarded her so intently that she wanted to scream, “Stop looking at me!”

Endren saved her by speaking. “Duty summons us, Countess.” He gestured for Mirabeta and Elyril to precede him and his son into the rotunda.

They did, though Elyril disliked having the Lathanderian dog her steps. She looked back at him frequently and changed direction as she walked to keep her shadow from falling on him. He answered with the expressionless, knowing gaze that Elyril already despised and feared. Her awkward gait eventually elicited a rebuke from her aunt. With nothing else to do, she bit her lip and endured the Lathanderian’s presence.

The gilded doors of the circular chamber stood open. The low murmur of conversation floated from within. Ordinarily, city guards would have been posted at the doors.

“We shall see you inside,” Endren said. Father and son stopped short of entering.

Mirabeta and Elyril walked through the doors and entered the chamber. Five pairs of doors opened into the room, and statues of notable council members from the past flanked each doorway.





A grouping of polished wooden tables ringed the raised speaker's dais, which occupied the center of the chamber. The dais was furnished only by an ornate wooden lectern. Glowballs lit the chamber brightly. Blue and silver pennons hung from the walls. Members of the High Council sat at tables and milled about. The Highspeaker, Dernim Lossit, stood on the speaker's dais, his ceremonial baton in hand.

The members' respective wallmen lined the outer edge of the room, away from the tables but near their patrons and patronesses.

All eyes turned at Elyril and Mirabeta's entrance. Half of the assembled members—those loyal to Mirabeta—stood and applauded at her appearance. Mirabeta smiled politely. She gestured for Elyril to take her place along the wall while she greeted her colleagues and found her seat at one of the tables.

A moment later, Endren and Abelar Corinthal entered from a doorway opposite the one Mirabeta had used. The symbolism was lost on no one.

Again, half the assembled council stood and applauded. Endren accepted their plaudits with a raised hand and took his place at a table, smiling insincerely at Mirabeta. Abelar took his station along the wall, directly across the chamber from Elyril. Elyril felt the young Corinthal's eyes on her, but she refused to give him the satisfaction of eye contact.

The highspeaker raised his ivory baton for silence and a hush fell. "A quorum being present, this emergency session of the High Council is called to order."

Tension hung thick in the air. Elyril saw it on the faces of the assembled council members. She noticed that almost all of the members and wallmen bore blades—unusual for a session of the High Council.

"Word has come that Kendrick Selkirk has died in office," Lossit said, obeying the formalities. "The realm is without a leader. It is therefore this council's obligation to select a successor from among its members. The dais is open for nominations."

Several members of the High Council stood to be recognized, though not Endren or Mirabeta. Custom demanded that candidates for overmaster not speak on their own behalf.





The highspeaker pointed his baton at Zarin Terb of Selgaunt and recognized him. Elyril knew Terb to be a supporter of Endren.

Terb straightened his long black coat and smoothed his full moustache before stepping from behind his table. He maneuvered his corpulent frame through the circle of tables and stepped atop the dais. The highspeaker surrendered his place and his baton.

“I will not waste time with pontification,” Terb said, bouncing the highspeaker’s baton on his palm. “The state is without a head, and without a head, the body will die. Now more than ever in our past, Sembia needs wise leadership, *honorable* leadership.” He looked pointedly at Mirabeta as he said the last, and several members stirred in their seats. “We all know who among us can best provide that. It is therefore my honor to formally nominate Endren Corrinthal for the office of Overmaster of Sembia.”

The hall remained silent and Endren remained still. Terb stepped down from the dais and returned the baton to the highspeaker. As Terb took his seat, Lossit stepped atop the dais and said, “Endren Corrinthal is nominated to the office of overmaster. A voice vote to second the nomination.”

Half the assembly shouted loudly enough to make Elyril wince. “Aye!”

“The nomination is formally entered,” said Lossit, and he banged his baton on the lectern. “Are there any other nominees to be put forth?”

Three council members stood, all of them loyal to Mirabeta, and the highspeaker recognized the stately, elderly Graffen Distef of Urmlaspyr, who stepped to the dais.

Graffen’s slow pace and clear diction lent his words gravity. “Sembia has endured many hardships recently and there are many more to come. The Rain of Fire and continuing drought have brought poor harvests in the upcountry and wildfires in the west. The dragon rage brought ruin in the north. The people crowd into the cities, now havens for disease. The winter will prove difficult for the realm.”

He took a deep breath and it turned to a cough. When it had passed, he continued. “And yet there is more for us to endure. We





know that the elves have returned to Cormanthyr and propose to retake what they think to be theirs. With our aid they have defeated the daemonfey, but who knows now where their ambitions will end? Cormyr, meanwhile, is ruled by an unseasoned girl queen whose nobles rebel in all but name. Now more than ever," he looked at fat Zarin Terb pointedly, "*stability* is needed, steadiness, political wisdom. Kendrick Selkirk provided such, and so too will the cousin who shares his name and blood. I feel it is my duty, therefore, to nominate the Countess Mirabeta Selkirk to the office of Overmistress of Sembia."

The highspeaker called for a voice vote to second the nomination and half the assembled members shouted, "Aye!"

"The nomination is formally entered," the highspeaker said, and banged his baton on the lectern. "Will there be any other nominees?"

The chamber was silent. The battle would fall between Mirabeta and Endren.

"In accordance with custom," the highspeaker said, "we will proceed with the Speaking. Who will advocate for these nominees?"

Almost everyone in the chamber except Mirabeta and Endren stood to be recognized. Lossit selected one member, then another. Elyril heard at least two bells sound from the great hall's belfry while a procession of members rose and extolled the virtues of Mirabeta or Endren. Not all members spoke, but enough did to reinforce what they already knew—the vote would be close.

Throughout the Speaking, Elyril kept her eyes on the doorways, waiting for the priests of Tyr to arrive with Kendrick's body. She knew her aunt had arranged for the body to be brought forth, and Elyril knew that Kendrick would name his murderer. She grew increasingly frustrated when the priests did not arrive. Mirabeta showed no sign of expectation or uneasiness.

During a brief recess, the wallmen left their stations and hurried to their lords or ladies to give counsel and receive instructions.

"The vote will be close," Mirabeta said to Elyril. "Inmin speaks not, nor Weerdon."

"I have marked that," Elyril said. She cleared her throat. "Aunt, when will the priests arrive with Kendrick's body?"





Mirabeta smiled and whispered, "They are now just outside. I arranged for street traffic to delay them."

Elyril could not hide her surprise. "Why?"

Mirabeta tapped her magical earring. "I wanted the arrival appropriately timed for dramatic effect. Watch, niece."

The highspeaker stepped to the dais and called the chamber back to order. Elyril and the rest of the wallmen retreated to their places.

"We will continue with the Speaking," Lossit said.

Before anyone else could stand, Mirabeta broke with custom and rose to be recognized. A surprised murmur ran through the assembly. The highspeaker appeared momentarily discomfited by Mirabeta's unexpected action, but recovered himself.

"Countess Selkirk. You . . . wish to speak?"

Mirabeta stepped out from behind her table and strode to the Speaker's dais. She put her hands on the lectern and affected a look of dignified grief.

"These proceedings are premature. The overmaster was more to me than the head of state. He was my beloved cousin."

The chamber erupted in shouts. Terb shouted above the tumult. His face reddened and his paunch shook as he spoke. "This is most irregular, Highspeaker! She must not advocate for herself! It is unheard of!"

The highspeaker shouted for order and the chamber gradually quieted. Before he could speak, Mirabeta stared ice at Terb. "I do not wish to advocate for myself, Zarin Terb. In fact, I am withdrawing my nomination."

She paused to let the surprised glances and gasps circle the room. Elyril noticed Weerdon and Inmin paying close attention. Mirabeta continued. "Even if this council deems me fit to hold the office of overmistress, I could not accept it until the questions surrounding the death of my cousin are answered."

No one dared take issue with Mirabeta's words. Elyril smiled, understanding at last, as her aunt continued.

"I—" she shook her head. "No, not just I, but none of us can look to the future until we have answered fully the questions of the past. Rumors swirl through the capital. Can a new overmaster take office



with such a cloud hanging over Ordulin, over Sembia? This matter must be put to rest fully and finally, and that should happen before the entire High Council. Let us put all rumors to rest. Only then should we proceed with an election.”

As if summoned by her words, the awaited procession of priests arrived. All heads turned. Quiet fell.

The Tyrran High Lord Abbot, Feldinor Jemb, entered first. A white sash cinched his deep blue robe, which featured a scale embroidered in gold on his chest. He wore a white linen glove on his left hand and a glove of black leather on his right. Elyril knew the latter symbolized Tyr’s missing right hand.

“Enter, High Lord Abbot Jemb,” Mirabeta said.

Jemb nodded and announced, “The Justicar’s eyes are upon this assembly. Let none speak falsely.”

Several members of the High Council raised their right hands and spoke the ritual answer: “For truth is the tool of the just.”

Mirabeta’s voice was loudest, her hand held highest. Elyril appreciated the irony.

A group of six junior Tyrrans followed the high priest into the chamber. They, too, wore the blue robes and black and white gloves of their faith, and a warhammer hung from each of their belts. They bore Kendrick’s body atop a railed wooden platform. A blue shroud covered the corpse.

“Your timing is impeccable,” Endren said to Mirabeta. “And suspicious.”

Mirabeta managed to look hurt rather than angry. “I arranged for my cousin’s body to be brought before this council, but that is a surprise to none. The highspeaker approved it. The truth must be known to all of us. Would you object to the questioning, Endren Corrinthal?”

Endren frowned and sat down. “Of course not.”

“I presume none object?” Mirabeta asked, and accepted the silence as acquiescence. “Ascend the dais please, High Lord Abbot.”

The Tyrrans walked solemnly through the chamber. The members watched them pass. Mirabeta stepped off the Speaker’s dais and returned the baton to the highspeaker. The junior Tyrran priests





lowered the platform to the dais and stepped away.

High Lord Abbot Jemb ascended the dais and stood over the body. He offered a prayer and addressed the High Council. “Speaking with the dead is rife with uncertainty. It is not the ghost of the dead who speaks, but a ghost of the ghost, the bit of memory that remains with the body while the soul goes to its reward or punishment. At times the answers given are unclear. Sometimes no answers are given. But where they are given, they are truth.”

He eyed each member of the ruling body in turn, then said, “With that caution, I proceed.”

The members rose from their tables and crowded around the dais. Even the wallmen stepped forward, though custom forbade them from leaving their posts. Elyril saw Abelar watching the proceedings with care, his brow furrowed. He sensed her looking at him and met her eyes. She looked away.

The high lord abbot peeled back the shroud on Kendrick’s body. The overmaster wore only a loincloth. The appearance of his pale body elicited an audible gasp from the council. Elyril grinned, but wiped the smile away when she noticed Abelar’s eyes still upon her.

The high lord abbot kneeled and put his hand on Kendrick’s brow. Holding his holy symbol, a shield-shaped gold medallion embossed with Tyr’s scales, he began to cast the spell. His voice boomed through the otherwise silent chamber.

Power gathered with each word uttered by the priest. The overmaster’s flesh began to glow violet.

The members of the High Council, all of them worldly and accustomed to magic, nevertheless stared wide-eyed at the spectacle.

The rhythm of the abbot’s cadence sharpened as the spell progressed. His voice grew louder. The violet glow around the body intensified, flared. The High Lord Abbot commanded the body to answer his questions.

Everyone leaned forward, straining to see.

The overmaster’s eyelids opened to reveal orbs as black as squid ink.





I hear the voice, but its words make no sense.

“What do you mean, ‘there is no here’? That’s nonsense.”

The voice says through the slit, “There is no time for this. He does not have much time. He has already awakened it and is losing himself even now. You feel as if you need to do something, yes?”

The hairs on my neck rise. My heart beats so hard I can scarcely breathe. “Who . . . who do you mean by ‘he’?”

“You feel as if you must do something, do you not? Answer the question.”

I back away from the wall but cannot take my eyes from the slit. “How can you know that? Who are you? What are you?”

“I am another piece of the same core,” the voice answers. “That does not make sense to you, I know.”

I nod but feel silly for doing so. The speaker cannot see me. Or can he?

The voice goes on. “We are personality shards. You and I are all he could spare.”

I shake my head in denial. I feel dizzy again. I cannot breathe. “Who is ‘he’?” I manage, and desperation seeps into my tone. “Who is ‘he’?”

“He is Magadon, the core, the whole. I am his courage, blended with some of his intellect. You are mostly his sense of duty.”

My legs give out under me and I sag to the floor, shaking my head over and over again. This cannot be. “That’s not possible. That is *not* possible.”

The voice goes on, unrelenting. “It is not only possible, it is. And it is the only thing that makes sense. You know that. Here’s your charge. Go to the wall. Find the rest of us.”

Inexplicably, the words send a thrill through me. I know with certainty that going to the wall is exactly what I am supposed to do.

“You are trying to understand,” the voice says. “It is difficult, I know. Stop and evaluate your response to my request. I charged you to go to the wall and you felt complete the moment I tasked you, did you not?”

“No. Yes.”





“Yes. Because you are his sense of duty. Fulfilling tasks is why you exist. Go to the wall and find the rest of us. That is your duty.”

My response bursts out before I can think. “Where is the wall?”

“Out there, beyond the door,” the voice says. “You must break through the wall. Part of us is behind it, untouched by the Source, untouched by the magic of our captors. Make it contact Erevis or Riven.”

The names Erevis and Riven trigger a memory. I cannot remember details but I know I have done my duty by them. I know just as certainly that they have done their duty by me. They are my friends, my comrades.

And I know something else: the voice is telling me the truth.

I stand, nervous, but resolved to fulfill my duty.

“How do I break through the wall?”

The voice is quiet for a moment, then says, “I do not know. You must find a way. And . . . what lies behind the wall is dangerous. But there is no choice. You must do it to save all of us.”

I say, “Come with me. If it’s dangerous, two will accomplish what one cannot.”

“I cannot.”

“Why?”

“I told you. I am courage. I must stay with him. He needs me more.”

“But why me?”

Courage says, “Because you are the strongest of us. You always have been.”

The words fortify me. I *am* strong. “You said there is no ‘here.’ What did you mean? Where is this place?”

“It is not a where but a what. A thought bubble. A microcosm of his mindscape. Go to the wall. Get through it. Find that part of us that is on the other side and force it to call our friends.”

I nod, but look uncertainly at my empty hands. “I have no weapon.”

“Yes, you do. You are a weapon. And you must hurry. We will all be lost in the Source if you do not hurry.”

“What is the Source?”





Saying the word makes me uneasy. It echoes in my mind.

The voice does not answer.

“Are you there?”

No response.

I listen to the silence for a moment before I listen to myself. I know what I must do.

I walk across the room and put my hand to the door handle of the cell. It turns, silently—and I push it open.

