

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

SHADOWS OF STORM
THE TWILIGHT WAR
PAUL SEMPER
BOOK II



CHAPTER ONE

*11 Uktar, the Year of Lightning Storms
(1374 DR)*

The freezing wind howls despair into my ears, rips through my meager clothing, cuts like knives against my flesh. In the bleak distance I hear the rumble of falling ice, the groan of gigantic glaciers grinding one against the other like the bones of titans. The pained screams of the damned rise above the noise and soak the air.

“Welcome to Cania,” my father says. His voice comes from everywhere, from nowhere, and worms into my soul.

The power in his tone causes Erevis and Riven to clutch their heads and groan. The blood that leaks from their ears freezes a crimson streak down jaw and neck. Erevis leans forward and vomits onto the ice. It steams for only a moment before Cania turns it hard and cold. Riven does the same and the wind devours the curses he

offers between heavens. My ears, too, might be bleeding. I cannot tell. I still feel the sting in my forearms from the Source's tendrils, but little else. Mind and body have not fully integrated.

I think: I brought us here. And the thought is accompanied by the despairing realization that I am, truly, my father's son. Darkness is loose in me, given freedom by my own hand. I have gone in a moment from possession by the Source to possession by an archdevil.

I laugh but it turns to sobs. The tears freeze on my face, unable to fall.

We stand on a soot-dusted mound of packed snow and rock overlooking a desolate plain of filthy ice. Rivers of hellfire cut a jagged, arterial path through the plains as far as I can see. Steam billows in the air where hellfire meets ice. The snow-swept wind carries the stink of charred flesh, rot, and brimstone.

Suffering and despair are thick in the air. Thrashing souls burn within the rivers of flame. Their screams, plaintive and agonized, make an eerie symphony with the wind. Ice devils—towering, pallid insectoids armed with iron hooks and coated in exoskeletons like plate armor—prowl the river banks. They are far enough away that they seem not to notice our arrival. Or perhaps they do not care.

The burning souls try from time to time to clamber up the river bank for a respite from the flames. They are free of the fire for only a moment before the gelugons pounce, impale them on their hooks, and toss them, flopping and screaming, back into the fire.

The scene makes me lightheaded.

Erevis spits out the last of his vomit, glances at the suffering, and turns away. He shouts a spell into the icy air. Shadows swirl protectively about him and war with the wind. He finishes the casting and puts an ice-rimed hand to himself, to me, to Riven. The magic insulates me from the cold. Erevis removes his cloak and places it around me. He takes me by the shoulders, looks me in the eyes, and shouts something, but I cannot make it out. I

hear only the damned and wind and glaciers and the echo of my father's voice. I am distant from events, outside myself.

He sees my despair and his face shows concern. I don a mask of strength and nod to assuage him. Seemingly satisfied, he pats my shoulder and turns, weapon ready, to search the desolation for my father.

I do the same, squinting into the wind but dreading what I will see.

I spot my father first and my breath catches; my heart sinks. I point.

"There," I say, and hear the hopelessness in my voice.

Erevis's and Riven's gazes follow my upraised arm. When they see him, both go still.

"Gods," Erevis says, but I barely hear it. The shadows about him withdraw into his flesh, as if in fear.

Riven says nothing, but his single eye is transfixed, his habitual sneer erased by open-mouthed awe.

Mephistopheles, Archduke of Cania, Lord of Hell— my father—crouches a long bowshot from us atop a hill of ice. The freezing wind blows over his muscular form and pulls ribbons of smoke from his flesh. The smoke swirls into the shapes of tortured forms and screaming mouths before dissipating in the air. His exposed skin glows a soft crimson, as if lit from within. Black fire flares intermittently from his form, cloaks him in evil the way shadows cloak Erevis. He turns to regard us and his eyes—white eyes like mine—fix on us, on me. The full weight of his gaze drives the three of us to our knees.

My father rises and he is as tall as a giant. His cloak flutters in the wind, and the great, tattered black membranes of his wings unfold. His long, coal-colored hair—like mine—whips in the wind. Twin horns, also like mine, protrude from his brow.

I am my father's son. Tears freeze in my eyes and I scrape them away.

Below, the damned see him, too. They point, cower, and wail. He gazes in their direction and they submerge themselves fully

in the torturous hellfire rather than fall for long under his baleful gaze. The ice devils raise their hooks and grunt a salute. My father smiles at the suffering, showing his fangs, and returns his gaze to us.

He takes wing in a cloud of snow and smoke and I can only watch.

He is beautiful as he soars into the gray sky and blistering air, terrible and terrifying, a perfect predator.

But his prey is not flesh.

Erevis recovers himself first. He curses, leans on his blade, and climbs to his feet. He clutches the powerful weapon in a shaking hand, eyes on my approaching father, and pulls Riven to his feet.

“On your feet,” he says above the wind. “On your damned feet.”

Riven wobbles but draws his sabers and nods. His one good eye moves to me, back to my father, back to me. I see the fear in his face. I have never seen it there before.

They each extend a hand to help me stand but I do not respond. I am limp, horrified, awed. They shout for me to rise, try to pull me up by the armpits, but I cannot stand.

They release me, share a look, some words I do not hear. As one they close ranks before me, forming a bulwark between my father and me.

But the only wall that mattered between Mephistopheles and me—the wall in my mind—has already crumbled. I tore it down to save myself from the Source, and the flesh and bravery of my friends is not enough to remake it. The devil within me feels glee at the approach of my sire. The man feels disgust. I stare at the sky, torn, divided.

We are lost.

Erevis shouts at me over his shoulder, and his words penetrate my haze. “Get up, Mags! Do not give him this!”

I look at him, barely comprehending.

Bow says the devil in me.

Rise says the man.

Mephistopheles swoops in the air, prolonging his approach, letting the fear build.

“Cale . . .” Riven says to Erevis, his eye on my father.

“I know,” Erevis snaps. Shadows ooze from his flesh and swirl closely about him. “But we hold this ground. Understood?” He thumps Riven on the shoulder. “This ground is ours.”

“It’s only ground, Cale,” Riven says. “We can leave it.”

Erevis shakes his head. “We cannot. The shadows do not answer me here. I cannot take us out.”

Erevis’s god is not lord in Cania. My father is.

Riven goes still and stares at Cale for a moment. He knows there is no escape. He looks back at me, at Cale, up at my father.

I see the resolve harden in him. He is as much ice as Cania.

I am awed by more than merely my father.

I have seen my friends stand together before, the First and Second of Mask. I watched Erevis drive his thumbs into the braincase of a death slaad. I have seen Riven’s blades move so fast they whistled. I know they are not normal men; normal men would still be on all fours on the ice, awaiting death.

But I know, too, that they are no match for the Lord of Cania.

Each beat of my father’s wings looses smoke into the air. As he nears us, the tattoo on my bicep—a red hand sheathed in flames, the symbol of my father—stings my flesh. Smoke rises from my arm. I do not need to look at it to know that the flames are swirling on my skin. Mephistopheles has marked me and I am his.

But the pain stirs me to motion; the bravery of my friends draws me back to myself. I quell the fiend within me, lick my lips, and try to climb to my feet. I will not die on my knees. I will stand with my friends.

They see me stir, turn, and pull me the rest of the way to my feet.

“Godsdamned right,” Riven says, and gives me a thump on the shoulder. “Godsdamned right.”



Cale knew they had a twenty count, no more, and there was nowhere to run. He held Weaveshear in a numb hand and blew out clouds of frozen breath. He whispered a series of rapid prayers, invoking magic that made him stronger and faster.

Looking upon the archfiend, he did not think it would be enough.

Magadon spoke in a low tone, his voice hollow. “This is my doing. I planted this location in Erevis’s mind as he moved us between planes. Or part of me did. I am sorry.”

Riven spared Magadon a hard look but said nothing.

“It wasn’t you, Mags,” Cale said, and meant it.

Riven shifted on his feet.

“I am sorry, Riven,” Magadon said to him.

Riven drew a dagger from his belt, flipped it, and offered the hilt to Magadon.

“It’s enchanted. Take it. It is better than nothing.”

Magadon did not take the dagger. He looked at Riven, at Cale.

“We cannot fight him and live.”

“Which doesn’t mean we don’t fight,” Riven snapped. “I don’t go down without giving what I’ve got. And neither should you.” He held the dagger’s hilt before Magadon’s face. “Take it.”

“I have a weapon if I have need,” Magadon said, but took the dagger anyway.

Cale said, “If we cannot fight, then we have to negotiate. What can we offer him, Mags?”

Mephistopheles vanished from the sky and reappeared directly behind them. His form dwarfed them. His wings enveloped them. The unholy energy that sheathed the trio stole their breath. One of Mephistopheles’s enormous hands closed over Cale’s shoulder,

and the claws sank into his skin. He bent and put his mouth to Cale's ear.

"There is nothing you can offer me that I cannot otherwise take," the archdevil said, and the sound of his basso voice buried them all under its power. His fetid breath stank like a charnel house.

Supernatural terror accompanied the archdevil's presence but Cale fought through it. He remembered that he had faced his own god, stabbed Mask in the chest.

"But this is no alley," Mephistopheles whispered into Cale's ear. "And I am not your god."

Shadows leaked from Cale's skin, twined around Mephistopheles's hand.

"No," Cale answered. "You are not."

Moving deliberately and forcefully, Cale took the archdevil's hand, removed it from his shoulder, and turned to stand in the towering shadow of a ruler of Hell. Riven and Magadon, perhaps freed of their terror by Cale's nerve, did the same. Riven and Cale edged before Magadon and closed ranks.

The fiend radiated spite. It took all Cale had to stand his ground.

Mephistopheles's white eyes bored holes into him. The archdevil inhaled deeply.

"You stink of goddess and godling, shade. Where is the Shadowlord now, I wonder? Do you imagine that he will save you?"

Cale decided then and there that he was of one mind with Riven—he would not die without giving what he had. He tightened his grip on Weaveshear and shadowy tendrils leaked from the blade.

"Save me from what?"

"Nothing here we need saving from," Riven added. The assassin, who looked small standing beside Cale, looked insignificant standing before the archdevil.

Mephistopheles's eyes narrowed, moved from Cale to Riven.

The devil poked the tip of a black-nailed, ringed finger into Riven's chest.

"You are transparent to me," he said.

"I am easy that way," Riven said with a sneer.

Mephistopheles's lip curled and he scraped his claw down Riven's chest, hard enough to rock the assassin on his feet, penetrate armor, and draw blood.

"I think that you could have been one of mine," the archdevil said.

Blood from the gash in Riven's chest darkened his shirt and cloak, but the assassin did not wince, though a tic caused his one good eye to spasm.

Cale placed the edge of Weaveshear's blade under the archdevil's finger and lifted it away from Riven.

"That is enough."

Mephistopheles put a fingertip on the blade and black fire twined around the steel. Cale held onto the hilt and darkness snaked from his hands.

Shadows met fire, churned and sizzled.

The fire flared, consumed the shadows, and Weaveshear flashed red hot. Cale's skin blistered. He cursed and released the weapon.

Mephistopheles snatched it from mid air and held the superheated blade without harm. He studied it, smelled it. Cale and Riven shared a glance. Both knew they were out of their depth.

Mephistopheles smirked, dropped the weapon. It hit the ice of Cania tip first, sank half its length into the ground, and sent up a cloud of hissing steam as it cooled.

"A mildly interesting toy," the archdevil said.

Cale kept his face expressionless as he retrieved the weapon, still warm, from the ice.

Magadon cleared his throat and said in a small voice, "We are leaving Cania, father."

Mephistopheles's brow furrowed and he looked down on Magadon, as if for the first time.

“Did something speak? I hear a voice but see nothing here worthy of addressing me.”

“We are leaving,” Magadon reiterated.

“Ah,” Mephistopheles said, glaring at Magadon, who wilted under the scrutiny. “It is my ungrateful son who dares utter words in my presence. And leaving, you say? But you have only just arrived. And it was you who brought them here.”

“No,” Magadon said. “It was you.”

“You perceive a difference where there is none.”

Magadon looked up with defiance in his eyes. Cale was pleased to see it.

“You lie,” Magadon said, his voice strong at last. “There is a difference.”

Mephistopheles’s eyes flashed anger. “Think you so?”

Sensing the danger, Cale edged closer to Magadon.

The archdevil turned on him, growing to twice his height in a breath.

“He is spoken for, shade, body and soul!”

The power in Mephistopheles’s voice caused ice to crack, the damned to whimper in fear, and drove Cale back, knocking him breathless to the frozen ground.

Riven lunged forward, one blade low, one high. The archdevil held up a hand and a rush of black power from his palm drove Riven flat on his back and skittering across the ice.

Magadon stood alone before his father.

Mephistopheles recovered his composure and shrank back into himself. His expression went from enraged to calm in a heartbeat.

“I am not yours,” Magadon said.

“You are mistaken,” Mephistopheles responded. “We have dreamed wonderful dreams together, you and me.”

Magadon shook his head and looked down at his feet. “No. They weren’t mine. They never were. You put them there.”

Mephistopheles reached down and placed a giant hand on Magadon’s emaciated shoulder. The mindmage blanched at

the touch—smoke rose from his flesh.

“How could I do so if you did not invite them?”

Shadows swirled around Cale, comforting him, healing him. He climbed to his feet and pointed Weaveshear at the archdevil.

“He *is* spoken for, devil. But not by you.”

“Truth,” Riven added, as he, too, rose.

Mephistopheles looked from Magadon to Cale and his lips formed a hard line. The dark fire around him flared. He beat his decayed wings and the wind of Cania answered with gusts. The cold cut through Cale’s protective spell. The archdevil’s voice was as gelid as the plain.

“All here is mine, shade, even the shadows. You will never leave here. Your lot is to be punished. I will flay your souls and the screaming tatters that remain will be playthings for my gelugons.”

Cale did not bother to deny the archdevil’s claim. He instead said, “We will hurt you first. I promise you that.”

“Hurt you so you remember it,” Riven added.

Unholy power, dark and cold, flared around Mephistopheles’s form.

“Do not,” Magadon said, and Cale was not certain if he was speaking to his father or his comrades.

Mephistopheles kept one hand possessively on Magadon and held his other out at his side. A wickedly pointed iron polearm as tall as Cale appeared in his fist. Magic crackled on its point.

“Hurt me? Think you so?”

Cale stared into the face of his own death and affirmed his claim.

“Think we so.”

Shadows haloed him, thick and dark, and he drew strength from them. Riven twirled his blades and invoked Mask’s power until his sabers bled darkness.

“Seems Mask is here after all,” the assassin said, and spat in the archdevil’s direction.

“But not for long,” the archdevil said.

A soft popping sound heralded the arrival of a gelugon beside Mephistopheles. It stood nearly as tall as its master. The white orbs of its insectoid eyes stared down at Riven and Cale. It held a huge hooked spear in its clawed hand. Frost and soot covered its naked exoskeleton. Wet, steaming respiration leaked through its clicking mandibles. Another gelugon appeared on the other side of its master, another, another. A dozen popped into existence around Mephistopheles, then a score materialized around Cale and Riven and Magadon.

Cale stood in the midst of threescore devils certain in the knowledge that he would die. But he resolved to give Hell to the Lord of Hell before he did.

He called to mind the words to a spell that would charge him with divine power, Mask's power. He looked at Riven and said farewell with his eyes. Riven looked back and nodded.

They turned to Mephistopheles.

"Enough," Magadon said.

The mindmage's words hung in the air, as frozen as the ice. Magadon looked up at his archdevil father and, for the first time, Cale noticed the uncanny resemblance between father and son—the eyes, hair, horns, and jaw.

The archdevil cocked his head with curiosity and the unholy storm of dark energy gathering about him subsided to a simmer.

"Enough, father," Magadon said.

As sudden as a lightning strike, Mephistopheles backhanded Magadon across his head. The force of the blow knocked the mindmage sprawling to the ice. The gelugons clicked eagerly, shifted on their clawed feet. Cale and Riven started forward.

"No!" Magadon said, halting Cale in his steps. He rose to all fours.

Mephistopheles loomed large over Magadon's prone form.

"You dare speak thus to me, half-breed? You are the happenstance of my spraying seed, nothing more. Your life has provided me with a measure of amusement, but that life is over now. I

will kill your soul, the same as theirs, but your suffering I will prolong.

Blood trickled from Magadon's nose. He spit out a tooth and lifted his gaze to his father, but only for a moment before he bowed his head in despair.

Cale realized that he and Riven could fight before they died. Magadon could not. It was not in him, not then. Cale had to find another way. He said the first thing that popped into his mind.

"A bargain, devil."

Mephistopheles kept his eyes on his son as he answered.

"You possess nothing of interest to me except your pain. And that, I claim as my own."

He raised his polearm high. The wind howled.

Cale's mind raced. He tried to imagine what he could offer that might appease the archfiend.

"Kesson Rel," he blurted, and the shadows around him swirled. He swore he heard chuckling on the wind. He had gambled. He knew only a little of Kesson Rel.

The archdevil cocked his head, his weapon leaking evil into the cold air. The gelugons clicked and grunted.

"That is an old name," Mephistopheles said softly.

Cale heard the curiosity in the archdevil's tone.

"Will you hear more? I have more to tell."

Mephistopheles regarded Cale with a thoughtful look. He lowered his weapon and signaled his gelugons. They gave disappointed grunts and blinked away, one after another, back to their sport with the damned.

"What more is there?" Mephistopheles asked. "Choose your words well, shade. There are not many left to you."

Cale debated on how much to say, what to offer. He looked at Magadon, prone and bleeding, afraid. He glanced at Riven, who stared at him intently.

Cale took a deep breath and did what he must for his friend—he defied his god. He had no choice.

"Kesson Rel possesses something that belongs to another. You

know what it is. I will get it back . . . and give it to you.”

The archdevil’s eyes flared, but with anger or excitement Cale could not tell. Cale didn’t know what Kesson Rel had taken, only that Mask wanted it back and that Mephistopheles seemed intrigued.

Mephistopheles said, “The divine essence of your god, stolen by the first thief of the Lord of Thieves? You make a promise you cannot keep. Have you not already promised it to another?”

Cale quailed when he learned what he had offered, but his words bound him. He nodded. “I have made a promise to another,” Cale said softly, feeling Riven’s eye on him. “But I will keep my promise to you nevertheless.”

Mephistopheles stared at him, into him, through him.

“Words have meaning in Cania, shade. Promises are not idle here—not to me.”

“I know what I have done,” Cale answered.

What he had done was make conflicting promises to Mask and Mephistopheles. He owed a god and an archfiend the same thing—the divine power stolen by Kesson Rel.

Mephistopheles looked out across the plain.

“Speak,” Cale dared say. “I have made you an offer.”

Mephistopheles grinned, showing fangs. “I am considering it.”

Cale moved forward and helped Magadon to his feet. He whispered a healing spell to Mask—expecting full well that the god would not answer him—and sighed with relief when healing energy flowed out of his hands and into his friend.

Magadon squeezed his shoulder gratefully and did not let him go.

“Erevis . . .” Magadon began.

“Quiet, Mags. It is not over.” Cale looked up at Mephistopheles. “I have given you my terms. Do you accept?”

The archdevil said, “Your god would not be pleased if he knew what you offered.”

“My god often finds me displeasing.”

“So do all fathers their sons,” Mephistopheles said, looking at

Magadon. “If I accept your offer, how will you guarantee payment of your debt?”

“My word is all you get. It was enough for him. It is enough for you.”

The archdevil shook his head. “No. I am not as trusting as the so-called *god* of thieves.” His eyes hardened and fixed on Magadon. “I shall keep my son to ensure you do not default.”

Cale put himself before Magadon. “No.”

“Erevis,” Magadon said, and tried to step out from around Cale. “I will—”

“No,” Cale said to Magadon, to Mephistopheles. “Non negotiable.”

“Everything is negotiable,” the archdevil said.

“Not this.”

Mephistopheles stared into Cale’s face, measuring his resolve.

“Very well,” Mephistopheles said at last. “I will accept a compromise.”

The archdevil waved his hand in the air and motes of sickly green energy sparkled over Cale and Riven’s skin.

“What is—”

The magic cut Cale’s words short and held him immobile. He could not speak, could not move. His heart hammered against his ribs as Mephistopheles grew to twice his already enormous size and reached around him . . . for Magadon.

Magadon tried to hold onto Cale, but Mephistopheles peeled him loose.

“I will keep half of him instead of the whole,” the archdevil said.

The mindmage, unaffected by the spell that held Cale immobile, squirmed like a fish in the archdevil’s hand.

“Father, no!”

Mephistopheles wore a smile that Cale had seen before only on madmen. The archdevil stepped back so that Cale and Riven could see everything.

Black energy pooled around father and son. Magadon

screamed. The archdevil, as tall as a titan, laid Magadon across his palm and stabbed him in the abdomen with the tip of one of his dagger-sized claws.

Blood poured from Magadon's torso; he wailed with pain as the devil opened his body.

"No! No! Erevis, help!"

Cale struggled against the enchantment that held him immobile, felt around the edges of the magic and tried to slip the chains of the spell. To no avail. Shadows swirled around him. Frustration and anger rose in him so strongly that he thought he must burst. He broke through enough only to voice a scream.

"Stop!"

Mephistopheles paid him no heed. He tore his claw through Magadon's torso, opening his abdomen fully, and spilled his innards. They fell in a steaming heap to Cania's ice.

Magadon's screams died. The hole in him gaped.

The archdevil shook out the corpse to empty it of blood and organs. A shower of crimson spattered the ice.

Mephistopheles took Magadon's limp body by the ankles and torso and tore it in two at the waist. The sound of tearing flesh and cracking bone sent bile up Cale's throat. He could not swallow and it burned the back of his tongue, acrid and foul. Tears formed in the corners of his eyes and froze in the cold air.

The archdevil held aloft the two pieces of Magadon and chuckled. "A half-breed, truly."

Cale vowed with every breath that he would kill the archdevil, punish him, cause him pain.

Mephistopheles dropped both halves of the body to the ice. Magadon's face stared at Cale, the dead eyes and mouth wide with pain. The mindmage's arms spasmed grotesquely in his own gore. Cale prayed it was only a reflex.

Mephistopheles reached down into the pile and with two fingers drew forth a glowing, silver form, a ghostly image of Magadon.

A soul. Magadon's soul.

Cale wanted to close his eyes but could not.

The form squirmed in Mephistopheles's grasp as the archdevil held it up before his face. He leered and his eyes glowed with hunger. The face of Magadon's soul contorted in terror, pounded its fists against the archdevil's hand, but could not escape.

The archdevil lifted the soul high, tipped back his head, opened his mouth, and bit the soul in half. He swallowed it down as the other half writhed in his grasp. The silence with which Magadon's soul endured the agony made it all the worse to witness. Cale heard the screams only in his own imagination.

The Lord of Hell cast the remaining half of the soul back into Magadon's remains. He shrank back down to his normal, merely giant size, bent low, and exhaled a cloud of vile power over the gore.

To Cale's horror, the bloody pile began to stir. Magadon's eyes focused directly on Cale and his mouth opened in an animal scream that rose above the wind, that dwarfed the wails of the damned.

Slowly, the mindmage began to pull himself together. Screaming and gibbering all the while, he scooped his innards back into his torso, pulled his upper and lower halves back together. As the parts reunited, Mephistopheles's magic stitched the bloody pieces back into a man.

The archfiend waited until Magadon was almost whole, then grabbed his son by his hair, pulled him up, and put his mouth to Magadon's ear. He whispered something that Cale could not make out. The terror in Magadon's eyes made Cale thankful that he could not see Mephistopheles's lips to read them.

The archdevil released his son and Magadon collapsed to the ice. Mephistopheles eyed the immobile Cale, circled behind him.

Cale never felt more vulnerable. He waited for pain.

It did not come. Instead, he felt the archdevil rifling in his pack.

"Here," the archdevil said. "I knew I smelled the tang of a goddess. This, too, I claim as mine."

He circled back into Cale's field of vision and Cale saw that Mephistopheles held in his hands the black book that Cale had taken from the Fane of Shadows. The archdevil flipped open the back cover of the book and flipped through the pages, thumbing from back to front.

Cale could see that the pages contained more writing than the last time he had opened the book in Stormweather Tower. Precise purple script covered the sheets. It appeared that the book was . . . rewriting itself from the back to the front.

"Another interesting toy," the archdevil murmured. He snapped the book shut and smiled. "Interesting times lay ahead."

Mephistopheles flicked his wrist and the book disappeared in a puff of foul-smelling smoke. He looked over to Magadon, who was once more whole, but prone on all fours, slick with gore, and coughing. The archdevil moved to Magadon's side, grabbed him by the arm, and jerked him to his feet.

"No more," Magadon said in a broken voice.

"Your obeisance comes too late, half-breed."

To Cale, Mephistopheles said, "What's left of him is yours. But if you renege, I will destroy utterly what I have taken and come for the rest. You cannot protect him. Bring me what you've promised, and I shall vomit him up and do him no further harm."

With that, he threw Magadon toward Cale.

At the same moment, the spell holding Cale and Riven immobile ended.

Cale could do nothing but catch his blood-slicked friend, who groaned and collapsed in his arms, but Riven twirled his blades and stalked toward the archdevil.

"No, Riven!" Cale shouted immediately. "No!"

The assassin did not look at Cale but stopped his advance. His breath came like a bellows.

"Not now," Cale said.

The assassin stared hate at the archdevil.

Magadon started to shake in Cale's arms. It took a moment for Cale to realize that he was sobbing.

“Riven,” Cale said, more softly. “We are leaving.”

Riven looked back at Cale, saw Magadon, and his expression softened. He turned back to the archdevil, spat at his feet, and sheathed his blades.

Mephistopheles only cocked an eyebrow in amusement.

Cale held his friend and stared into Mephistopheles’s face, into his eyes, and did not blanch.

“I will get you what I’ve promised and you will return the rest of him to me. And when that bargain is concluded, I will exact payment for this.”

“And the price will be high,” Riven added, as he stepped beside Cale. He put a hand on Magadon’s shoulder, gently, the way Cale had seen him touch his dogs.

Mephistopheles lost the amused expression. “You make another promise you will find difficult to keep, First of Five.”

Cale shook his head and stared. “I have never made a promise more easily kept.”

“That’s truth,” Riven added coldly.

Mephistopheles did not even glance at Riven. He studied Cale’s face for a moment.

“You, too, could have been one of mine, I think.”

Cale stared. “You know nothing about me.”

“I know you entirely. I know what you want. I know what you are willing to do to have it.”

Shadows oozed from Cale’s flesh. He felt Riven’s eye on him, Magadon’s eyes.

“Shall I say it?” the archdevil asked. “If I do, it will never happen.”

“You know nothing,” Cale said, but his voice lacked conviction.

Mephistopheles looked upon Cale and smiled. “You wish to transcend, wish it desperately. So do all men who hate themselves. But you never shall. Not now.”

The truth of the words was too evident to deny.

Mephistopheles filled the silence with a chuckle. “Now,

begone from my realm. Skulk back into the shadows in which you cower and get me what you've promised."

He blew out a black cloud that engulfed the three comrades.

"And remember always that I am a liar," the archdevil said.

Cale's stomach lurched as they moved between worlds.



Elyril sat cross-legged and nude on the carpeted floor, her back to the hearth. The darkness in the chamber caressed her skin, teased pleasantly at the soft hairs of her arms and legs. She took a pinch of minddust from the small metal box on the floor at her side. The pungent drug took effect immediately and her consciousness expanded.

The flames from the fire behind her cast malformed shadows on the pale plaster wall opposite. The minddust darkened them, sharpened their lines. Elyril watched them dance and spin and tried to understand their truth.

What do they say? projected Kefil.

The enormous mastiff lay curled beside her, a mountain of black fur, muscle, and teeth.

They keep their secrets, she answered. *Silence, now, Kefil.*

Kefil sighed, licked her hand, and shifted position.

Elyril watched faces and shapes form and dissipate in the chaos on the wall. She willed them to speak, to give her wisdom. She wished to know the secret of the sign and the book to be made whole. She held her arms aloft, stirring the shadows, and whispered, "In the darkness of the night, we hear the whisper of the void."

Her words set the images to roiling. Dozens of faces formed momentarily in the darkness and leered at her from the wall. They said nothing, offered her no secrets, and her frustration grew. She shifted her position to change her perspective. Kefil groaned and rolled over on his back. Elyril inhaled another pinch of minddust and lit her senses on fire.

The wall darkened and the faces withdrew. Stillness ruled the

room. She was alone in the darkness. The air thickened. She saw her heart beating in her shadow.

A diabolical face appeared on the wall and lunged out of the plaster to hang in the air before her—a devil sent her by Shar, or Volumvax. Horns jutted from the brow to shadow the malevolent eyes.

Elyril recoiled in surprise but recovered herself quickly.

“Speak,” she ordered the image. “Where is the book to be made whole?”

The fiend licked its lips, mockingly smiled a mouthful of fangs, and spoke to her in a tongue that she could not understand, but with such power that the words nauseated her.

She knew there was truth in the speech, if she could only understand. She needed more minddust.

She reached for her tin of drugs, took a pinch between her fingers, and inhaled, but the face withdrew into the wall, smirking. She clenched her fists in anger.

“I do not understand!”

Her voice took physical form and bounced off the walls and around the room.

“. . . not understand . . . not understand . . .”

Kefil raised his head and looked around the room. *To whom do you speak? The fire is long dead. There are no shadows on the wall.*

“What? You lie.”

But he did not. The fire behind her was dead. She was alone in the darkness. How long had she been sitting so? How could there have been shadows without the fire?

Kefil stood, sighed, and stretched. *What is it you wish to understand, Mistress?*

Elyril pulled a nearby wool blanket about her. The minddust made her skin sensitive and the blanket chafed. She threw it aside.

“The location of the book to be made whole. The nature of the sign.”

So that you may free the Divine One?

Elyril smiled and nodded. “So that I may sit at his side as the Shadowstorm darkens the world.”

Kefil scratched his ear with a hind leg. *Perhaps you will never know the location of the book or the nature of the sign. Perhaps Shar will keep this secret from you always. Perhaps not knowing will drive you mad.*

Elyril glared at the mastiff.

“And perhaps I shall make a rug from your pelt.”

Kefil said nothing more.

Elyril spent the rest of the night praying and trying to wrest information from the darkness. But Shar held her secrets, and the truth of events lay just beyond Elyril’s reach.