



MIDNIGHT'S MASK

BOOK III



THE
EREVIS CALE
TRILOGY

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CHAPTER 1

THE BEST LAID PLANS

Plummeting from the tower, Cale perceived the moment stretching. Air roared past his ears. Shadows poured from his flesh, no doubt trailing after his fall like the tail of a comet.

Above him sounded the despondent, furious wail of the Skulls and the crack of breaking stone. The cavern was falling to pieces, smashing the ruined Netherese city on the cavern floor. Lightning and a baleful green beam split the air beside him—ill-aimed spells from the Skulls.

Beside him, Magadon and Jak shouted as they fell. He clutched each of their cloaks in one of his hands. They clutched at him, whatever they could grab. The shadows leaking from his flesh coalesced, enshrouded them.

The floor of the collapsing cavern rushed up to

meet them. The moment was stretched to its limit; it was ending. Cale had to act or die alongside his friends.

Cale felt the darkness around him the same way he felt the air—a tangible sensation on his skin. Its touch was as light and seductive as that of a lover. He always felt the darkness now.

Opening his mind, he attuned himself to the correspondence between the Prime Plane and the Plane of Shadow, the link that lived in every shadow. He reached for it, took it in his mental grasp and willed them all to move from one plane to the other. At the same time, he consciously dispelled the inertia of their fall.

Sound fell away. Darkness swallowed them. In the span of a heartbeat they moved between worlds.

They found themselves lying face down on the cold, damp stone of the Plane of Shadow. The Skulls were gone; the ruins were gone. They were alone in the dark, but alive.

The breath of his friends came in ragged gasps. The slow drip of water sounded from somewhere. The air smelled dank, pungent with some vague foulness.

Cale remained still for a moment as stabs of pain shot through his body—the regenerative properties of his shade flesh closing the wounds Riven had inflicted on him.

Riven.

Cale sat up, and as he did he remembered it all, or thought he did. Riven's betrayal had been *planned*, or at least Cale thought it had. Unless he had dreamed it. . . .

Beside him, Magadon rolled over with a groan, still breathing hard.

"Demon's teeth," the guide swore, and his voice echoed loudly, jarring in the silence.

Beside Magadon, Jak sat up with a groan of his own. He looked around blindly, eyes wide. "I can't see a thing. Cale?"

Cale had become so accustomed to his ability to see

perfectly in darkness that he forgot that others could not. The chamber was as dark as a devil's heart, thick with the black air of the Plane of Shadow.

"Here, little man," he answered, and reached out a hand to touch Jak's shoulder. The halfling clutched his hand and gave it a brief squeeze.

"I will get a light," Magadon said. He unstrapped his pack and searched for a sunrod. Cale remembered that Magadon's fiendish heritage allowed him to see in the darkness, probably not as well as a shade, but well enough.

Cale stood, wincing as the last of his wounds closed.

"Can the Skulls track us?" Magadon asked as he searched his pack.

Cale had not considered that. "I don't see how," he said after a moment's thought. As far as he knew, his ability to walk the shadows between worlds left no footprints.

The guide nodded, found the sunrod he sought within his pack. He struck it on the chamber floor and the alchemical substance on its tip flared to life. He held it aloft and lit the cavern—dimly. The darkness gave ground only grudgingly.

Jak and Magadon blinked in the sudden illumination, but Cale felt a part of him boil away in the sunrod's light. He refused to cover his eyes despite the sting. His shadow hand, he was pleased to see, had not disappeared. Perhaps only real sunlight could cause that.

"The Plane of Shadow," Jak observed, eyeing their surroundings. "But where this time? This is not where we were before."

A large natural cavern opened around them. Loose stone and stalagmites covered the uneven floor. Irregularly shaped holes in the walls opened onto tunnels that led into darkness. An oily black substance clung in patches to the stone. It shimmered in the sunrod's light like polished basalt. Water dripped from the stalactite-dotted ceiling to fall into a dark pool in the center of the

chamber. The pool was as black as jet. The air felt heavy and still, threatening.

“Something akin to the Underdark but on the Plane of Shadow, I would guess,” Magadon offered as he stood. “Do not use the water to fill your skins and do not touch the walls. That’s some kind of lichen, but I’ve never seen its like before.”

Jak nodded, his eyes thoughtful. He looked up at Cale.

“Are you are all right? The wounds, they’re healed?”

When Cale regarded him to answer, Jak recoiled slightly but masked it quickly.

“Dark, but I cannot get used to the way your eyes look here,” the little man said.

Cale felt himself flush.

“I’m all right,” he said. He extended a hand and pulled Jak to his feet. Cale put his fingers through the hole Riven had made in the front of his cloak and armor. He had similar holes in the back. The holes in his flesh were closed. “What about you two?”

Both Jak and Magadon were pale, exhausted, and obviously wounded. Claw rakes had opened cloaks, rent armor, and torn flesh.

“I’m well enough,” Magadon said, and moved to the edge of the pool. The guide knelt and stared at the water. He dipped his fingers, smelled them, and wiped them clean on his breeches.

Jak said, “I am all right, too. We killed one of the slaadi, Cale. The small one. The other one. . . .”

Magadon stood and finished for Jak. “In our hurry to get to you, we left the other alive but enspelled. He may have died in the cavern’s collapse.”

Cale doubted it, but kept his thought to himself.

“We should have killed him,” Jak said, and reached into his belt pouch for his pipe. “Just to be sure.” He came out with a wooden pipe, the one he had given to Riven, the one Riven had thrown back at him atop the tower. He must have picked it up before they fled. He eyed it for a

moment, then threw it past Magadon and into the pool, where it vanished. He withdrew his other pipe—the ivory bowled affair—and popped it into his mouth. He chewed its end in agitation, but did not light up. Around the pipe stem he said, “I’m personally going to drive an armspan of steel into Drasek Riven’s gut for what he did.” For Magadon’s benefit, Jak added, “I’ve done it before, you know. Treacherous Zhent bastard.”

Cale thought the little man’s anger might be misplaced. To Magadon, Cale asked tentatively, “Do you . . . remember what happened between you, me, and Riven, last time we were on the Plane of Shadow?”

Jak looked up, a furrow in his brow.

Magadon started to speak, stopped, finally nodded. “Erevis, I thought I had dreamed it all, or conceived it in a meditation. Sometimes my mind manifests wishes as reali—” He stopped and smiled. “Never mind all that. I do remember. It started to come back to me shortly after I saw him atop the tower with the slaad.”

“What came back to you?” Jak asked.

Cale nodded, pleased to have his own hazy memory confirmed. Magadon had set Riven’s betrayal—itsself the product of a latent psionic compulsion—as the trigger that would allow the guide and Cale to remember the strata-gem they had developed.

“So what next, then?” Magadon asked.

Jak took his pipe from his mouth and regarded them with narrowed eyes.

“What are you two talking about?”

Magadon’s question sent Cale’s mind racing. He thought first of Riven and of Varra. He made up his mind.

“A return to Skullport,” he announced. “Just me. For only a moment or two.”

He wanted to determine if the city still stood. He needed to see if Varra was all right.

“Skullport?” Jak asked. “Why would we return there? Again, what in the Seven Heavens are you two—”

Magadon stared into Cale's face and shook his head. "We cannot go back to Skullport, Erevis. Not right now. Riven is relying on us."

"Riven!" Jak exclaimed.

"Because of what we did, the cavern could be collapsing," Cale said. "We've only been gone moments. I am going back, Mags. I can get her out."

Magadon did not ask who Cale meant by *her*. Instead, he shook his head and said, "I understand what you want to do, Erevis. But if it was going to collapse, then it already has. She's either alive or . . . not, and you won't be able to affect which it is. But wherever Riven is right now, he will soon remember what happened, too. That makes him vulnerable. The slaadi have displayed telepathy, and we think they can read minds."

Cale hesitated. Magadon must have seen it. The guide added, "He trusted you when he agreed to do this. We've got to back him up. We can return to Skullport afterward. I'll go with you. Jak will go with you."

"I will?" Jak asked, confused. "Wait a—"

"But not right now," Magadon said. "Right now, we do what we intended to do."

"And what in the Hells is that?" Jak exclaimed.

Cale stared at Magadon, not in anger, but in frustration. He knew Magadon was speaking sense but he felt as though he were abandoning Varra. He made one last play. "You're sure you have Riven?"

If Magadon did not have a sensory link on Riven, they would have no way to locate him. Cale did not know how he wanted Magadon to answer.

Magadon nodded and replied, "Since the moment I stepped into the cupola atop the tower. Erevis, if he makes a play for the Sojourner because he expects our help. . . ."

Cale sighed and nodded. The guide spoke the truth. Riven *had* trusted him. Cale silently prayed to Mask to protect Varra until he could return to Skullport.

If there still was a Skullport.

Fed up, Jak stepped between Magadon and Cale. He pointed his pipe at Cale, glared, and said, "I'll ask again. What in the Hells are you two talking about?"

Cale smiled and said, "Sorry, little man." He quickly explained to Jak the plan they had developed on the Plane of Shadow: Magadon had implanted a latent mental urging in Riven's mind to betray them at an opportune moment and ally himself with the slaadi. They had hoped that Riven would thereby get close to the Sojourner, where he would serve as a beacon for the rest of them. To avoid discovery by the slaadi, who likely could read minds, Magadon had wiped the scheme from their memories until the triggering event occurred—Riven's putative betrayal. Riven's trigger was different. He would not remember the plan until he saw the Sojourner.

Jak absorbed the story in wide-eyed silence. Finally, he said, "He's a plant? Burn me! Every time I think I have that blackheart figured. . . ."

"You are not alone in that," Magadon said.

Jak popped his pipe in his mouth and looked up at Cale, his expression mildly hurt. "You could have trusted me with it."

"I know that, little man," Cale answered. "It wasn't trust. I figured the fewer who knew, the better. And I wanted at least one of us to be outside of it, in case something went wrong. If we all started to go mad, I wanted someone who could figure things out and fix it."

Jak seemed to accept that. He chewed his pipe, thoughtful, and said, "You three were talking a long while to come up with this little scheme. And you said something in a foreign language, Cale. What about that?"

"We did?" Cale asked.

"You did," Jak answered.

Cale had no idea what Jak was talking about. He looked to Magadon, whose face showed similar confusion.

"Something else?" Cale asked Magadon. "Another contingency?"

Magadon shook his head. "Perhaps. We won't know until we know."

"Trickster's hairy toes," Jak softly said.

Cale agreed. The idea that something else might have been placed in his mind but he was ignorant of it. . . .

From far down one of the tunnels, whispers sounded, hisses. They trailed back to silence. Still, whatever lived in the Underdark of the Plane of Shadow must have heard their voices or perhaps seen their light.

All three had blades in hand before they drew their next breath. Jak pocketed his pipe and licked his lips.

"We should not stay here overlong," the little man said.

Weaveshear leaked shadows; so too did Cale's flesh.

"We aren't," Cale said. "Mags, show me what Riven sees. We go on my word. We wait for the Sojourner to show, find out what we can, then hit him with everything we have."

Magadon nodded, closed his eyes, and concentrated. A violet halo surrounded his head and he held up his free hand. Cale took it.

And saw.



For the hundredth time, Riven rebuked himself for leaving Cale bleeding but alive. He still did not understand why he had done it. He *never* left opponents alive. A simple flick of his blade would have opened Cale's throat and put an end to the First of the Shadowlord. Cale's shade flesh could not have regenerated the damage that Riven could have done.

He could not explain his behavior. When he looked back, it was as though someone else had been controlling him. The events atop the tower were a blur in his memory.

He pushed the recriminations out of his mind as unproductive nonsense. He needed to focus on the present. He

stood on a sword's edge and he knew it. He had taken a gamble allying with the slaadi. The creatures were unreliable; they might turn on him at any time.

He did not know where the slaadi had brought him. From the crumbling cavern near Skullport, they had teleported to the surface, mentally communicated with their master, the Sojourner, and from there teleported to. . . .

Here, Riven thought.

The foppish slaad Azriim, in his preferred half-drow form, stood to one side of him, and the dull slaad, Dolgan, stood to the other. Both seemed to have already recovered from the wounds inflicted on them at the Skulls' tower.

"Where are we?" Riven asked.

"Home," Azriim answered.

They were in the center of a smooth-walled, hemispherical chamber. There were no windows and the stone, while smooth, was not masonry, so Riven assumed they were underground. The dry air smelled faintly of medicines or perhaps alchemical preparations. The smell made his nose tingle.

A thick carpet covered the floor, and a single, dim green glowglobe on the far side of the chamber provided the only light. The globe cast only enough illumination to raise shadows in the room. Riven could see little. Irregularly-shaped mounds dotted the floor and it took Riven a moment's study to recognize them as cushions and furniture. In better light, the place must have looked like a Calishite Caliph's harem room.

Riven saw no means of egress, no doors or archways of any kind. That made him uncomfortable, and he let his hands fall to the hilts of his sabers. It would have been ridiculous for the slaadi to have brought him all the way here only to ambush him, but. . . .

They are unpredictable, he thought. And it's better to be cautious than dead.

He decided to take steps to ensure a means of escape, should he need it.

“Home is dark,” he said. “How about a light? I can’t see past my hands.”

He deliberately stepped on a cushion at his feet and feigned a stumble into Dolgan. Cursing, he intentionally entangled himself in the slaad’s cloak and limbs—the slaad’s form looked fat but his body was as solid as a tree—and used the short-lived tussle to lift the teleportation rod from the slaad’s cloak pocket.

“Watch where you step, human,” the big slaad said, dislodging Riven and shoving him away.

“I can’t watch anything, oaf,” Riven answered. “I said I cannot see.” He feigned a second stumble on another cushion and used the movement to secrete the rod in his cloak. “There are cushions all over the floor and walking on this ridiculous carpet is like moving through mud.”

“I selected these carpets myself,” Azriim said, his tone mildly hurt.

“I’m not surprised,” Riven answered, putting a sneer in his voice.

Dolgan said to Azriim, “Why can’t I just kill him?”

“I am tempted,” Azriim said lightly, “given his view of my carpets.”

Riven stared into Dolgan’s face, the features indistinguishable in the darkness. “His permission to try won’t make it so, slaad. I’d put you down in less than a tencount, darkness or no.”

Riven kicked away the cushions near him, to clear any trip hazards. Both hands went to saber hilts and he balanced on the balls of his feet. Dolgan took a step forward but Azriim stopped him with an arm across his chest.

“Enough,” Azriim commanded, smiling indulgently. “You’re adding to his tension.”

Riven kept his gaze on Dolgan but said to Azriim, “You haven’t yet seen me tense, slaad.”

“I can smell your sweat at ten paces,” Azriim said.

Dolgan glared at Riven and said, “I do not understand

why we have not killed him. His brood killed Serrin, wounded you, wounded me.”

“Brood?” Riven asked derisively. “I’m a man, oaf. I don’t have a brood. And you’re fortunate that it wasn’t me who gave you the wound. If it had, you wouldn’t be standing here to annoy me.”

Azriim ignored Riven and said to Dolgan, “You enjoy being wounded, Dolgan, so no harm done. And besides, I like him.” He looked at Riven and smiled broadly. “Even though he has poor taste in clothes, friends . . . and carpets.”

Dolgan started to speak but Azriim cut him off, saying, “Silence, now. The Sojourner comes.”

Riven felt something . . . a presence . . . join them, fill the space. He could find no other way to characterize it.

The slaadi looked past him, their eyes wide.

Riven could not help himself, though it meant turning his back to the slaadi. He turned around to see a circular hole in the wall where none had been before. Floating a hand’s-breadth off the floor before it was a humanoid creature that could only be the Sojourner. The instant Riven laid eyes on the creature, memories from the Plane of Shadow flooded him.

“Father,” said Dolgan, awe in his tone, and Riven heard the big slaad abase himself.

Azriim stepped forward and put a hand on Riven’s shoulder. The sudden contact gave Riven a start but he managed not to gut the slaad.

Azriim said, “Sojourner, I’ve brought you a present.”



“What in all the Hells is that?” Cale breathed. Wisps of shadow snaked from his flesh.

“The Sojourner,” Magadon answered softly. “It must be.”

“Dark,” Cale swore. He knew that at that moment Riven’s memory was filling in.

Beside them, Jak asked, "What does he look like? What is he?"

Cale only shook his head. "I don't know, Jak." He had never seen a creature like the Sojourner.

The Sojourner was neither slaad nor human, though he was humanoid in shape. With his pale flesh and skeletal frame, Cale might have thought him undead had it not been for the thready black veins pulsing beneath his skin. He bore a staff, and several magical gemstones orbited his head.

Magadon said, "Gods. I can detect his mental energies even through the link with Riven. He has a *presence*, Erevis. Do you feel it? I think he's not only a wizard but also a mindmage."

"A mindmage? Like you?" Cale asked.

"Not like me," Magadon corrected. "More powerful, Erevis. Much more. Riven is in very real danger."

Cale nodded. To Jak, he said, "Little man, cast every defensive spell on us that you can. Hurry. Do whatever you can to shield us from spells and mental attacks."

"Done," Jak said. He pulled out his holy symbol, a jeweled pendant, and recited the words to a spell, then another.

Still watching through Riven's eyes, Cale said, "Speed and surprise are all we have. When we get there, we concentrate everything on the Sojourner. He's the target. The slaadi are incidental. Mags, can you tell Riven that we're coming?"

"Not without risk of detection by the Sojourner," Magadon answered. "He will be sensitive to mental emanations. I'm surprised he hasn't yet detected the visual leech."

"Then we'll surprise Riven, too," Cale said. "Get ready. We go when I say."

Cale held off because he wanted to give Riven a moment to gather himself. The rush of memories was intense. Besides, he also wanted to learn as much as he could before attacking. He could not hear through the

mind leech but he could see enough to read the Sojourner's thin lips.

Meanwhile, Jak continued to cast.



In a rush, Riven remembered why he had betrayed Cale, why he had left the First of the Shadowlord bleeding but not dead. The torrent of memories made his temples burn.

He was a plant.

Only long practice allowed him to keep his face expressionless. He suddenly became painfully conscious that a mind-reading slaad stood beside him and another behind him, and that the Sojourner—a creature of obvious but unknown power—hovered across the chamber.

Riven, Magadon, and Cale had devised a plot back on the Plane of Shadow to get Riven close to the Sojourner. Riven's betrayal of Cale was designed to gain the slaadi's trust, which it had. Magadon and Cale would then use Riven as a beacon to bring them to the Sojourner.

Snippets of the exchange played in his mind.

Why me? Riven had asked, when Cale had related his idea.

You already know why, Cale had answered, and Riven *had* known why: because a betrayal by a former Zhent and assassin was believable; because the Second of the Shadowlord would surely covet the position of the First; because Riven was a better killer than Cale.

It was believable enough that it was almost true. Hells, perhaps it *was* true.

Riven's mind raced; he pored through his memories. What had he really intended? He could not remember many of the details. But he did remember that he'd wanted to keep other options available. And at that moment other options were looking more and more appealing.

When Riven had told Azriim in Skullport that he

always sided with the winner, he had meant it. And while he deplored being second to Cale in Mask's eyes, he also had thought back then that they would succeed. Mask was blessing him with more powers every tenday. He'd had no intention of remaining the Shadowlord's Second forever.

But he could see now that his calculus had been off. He had stood face to face with high-ranking members of the Zhentarim, powerful priests, skilled warriors, all of them powerful men and women, but he had never before stood in the presence of anything like the Sojourner. The creature's thin body fairly sparked with pent-up power; his presence implied might. There would be no defeating him.

If Riven wanted to side with the winner, he had to side with the Sojourner and the slaadi.

He reconsidered the plan, reconsidered everything. He may or may not have planned a betrayal of the betrayal back on the Plane of Shadow, but now. . . .

Don't come, he thought to Cale and Magadon, in case Magadon was somehow connected to him. *Don't bother*.

The Sojourner looked past Riven and Azriim to Dolgan and said, "Stand, Dolgan." His soft voice leaked so much power that it seemed to squeeze everything else out of the room.

Over his shoulder, Riven watched the big slaad lurch to his feet, as obedient as a well-trained dog. Dolgan was gnawing excitedly at his lower lip, so hard it was bleeding. Riven wanted to sneer at the oaf's obsequiousness but could not quite manage it. Obsequiousness seemed appropriate, somehow.

Dolgan caught his gaze, made a bloody grin, and said, "Maybe you're tense now, eh?"

Riven resisted the urge to slit the bastard's throat and turned back to face the Sojourner.

The creature held a smooth duskwood staff in his pale, long-fingered hands. A tracery of gold or electrum spiraled around the shaft from base to top. He inclined the staff

slightly and the hole in the wall behind him vanished, replaced again by smooth stone.

No wonder Riven had seen no exits. The Sojourner created them as needed. Riven was doubly pleased that he had lifted Dolgan's teleportation rod. He would need to figure out its operation quickly, should an emergency arise.

Riven considered the Sojourner. He looked vaguely human, but unlike any race of humans with which the assassin was familiar. Standing a head taller than even Cale, the Sojourner's thin body looked as though it had been stretched overlong by pulling him at the ankles and head. Sunken black eyes in cavernous sockets stared out of a similarly elongated face. His nose was little more than a bump with two vertical slits, his lips as thin as blades. The points of his backswept ears reached nearly to the top of his bald, spotted pate. A handful of magical gemstones whirred around his head in different orbits. Seeing them, Riven was reminded somehow of Cale's celestial sphere, the magical artifact that had started everything.

"A present, Azriim?" the Sojourner asked, letting his gaze fall on Riven as he floated forward across the room. Outside the light of the glow globe, the Sojourner was reduced to a shadow in Riven's sight.

With great effort, Riven kept his face a mask—no fear, no wonder, no dread—even while his mind moved through possibilities.

Azriim said, "Yes, Sojourner. This human was . . . helpful in our successful use of the Weave Tap. His clothes are unfortunate, I acknowledge. And his taste is poor in general. But neither of those are fatal flaws."

Riven did not bother to correct Azriim, though he had been more than merely helpful with planting the Weave Tap seed—he had been instrumental. Without Riven's intervention, Cale would have killed Azriim.

But instead of speaking, Riven made a stiff bow. The gesture did not come easily to him.

“Sojourner,” Riven said.

The creature did not acknowledge him, and Riven dared take no offense. The Sojourner stopped in the air two paces from Riven. Up close, his power was even more palpable. Fear threatened, but Riven managed to hold his ground and his expressionless mask. Riven’s eyesight adjusted somewhat to the darkness and he could again mark the Sojourner’s features.

Though he was not a slaad, the nose slits, spotted skin, and the shape of his eyes reminded Riven of something slaadlike, or at least reptilian. He wore a short-sleeved robe of red silk, trimmed in gold, over which hung an ermine-trimmed black cape clasped at his throat with a silver pin. His thin body swam in the clothing, and both robe and cape hung off his frame as though he were made of sticks.

The Sojourner fixed Riven with a stare, started to say something, but stopped, blinked, and inhaled sharply.

At first Riven did not know what had happened, then it hit him. The Sojourner had felt a stab of pain.

“Father?” Dolgan asked.

Beside him, Azriim wore a sneer nearly the match of Riven’s.

The Sojourner had to be sick or injured, Riven reasoned, which explained why the creature had moved his body hardly at all since entering the room. Perhaps even small movements pained him.

Riven tried to figure how that fit into his calculations, if at all.

The Sojourner’s spasm passed as quickly as it had appeared.

“I am well, Dolgan,” he said, and eyed Riven. “You were a companion of the priest of Mask?”

Riven nodded tightly. The mention of Cale as a *priest* irritated him.

“You betrayed your friend to join my sons?”

“I don’t have friends,” Riven answered, and kept his

voice steady. "I have allies and enemies. Allies I use. Enemies I kill."

The Sojourner smiled, a barely perceptible rise in the corners of his mouth. "Which are we, then?"

Behind Riven, Dolgan chortled. The big slaad shifted on his feet.

"Allies," Riven said, but could not prevent himself from adding over his shoulder, "For now."

Dolgan growled, moved a step closer.

Riven tensed, readied himself. Azriim dispelled the tension. "You see?" the foppish slaad said, grinning and thumping Riven on the shoulder. "I like him. So does Dolgan."

Dolgan scoffed and spat on the carpet.

Azriim frowned at that and said, "Mind the carpet, fool."

The Sojourner remained expressionless, motionless, and considered. Riven knew his life sat on a blade's edge. The moments seemed hours. Finally, the Sojourner said to Azriim, "The timing is poor, Azriim. Things are nearing completion and you have introduced a . . . random element into my plans."

"I enjoy random elements," Azriim answered, a challenge in his tone.

Anger flashed in the Sojourner's eyes. He raised his staff slightly and Dolgan fell to the floor. Azriim bowed his head and took his hand from Riven.

Riven considered using the teleportation rod to get the Nine Hells clear of there, but his pride refused to let him run. He would make his play and see it through.

"Time is short," the Sojourner said to the room, and Riven wondered at his meaning. "I am disinclined to indulge you. You will take another seed by sea to the Eldritch Temple of Mystryl. Your human is an unnecessary risk. Accordingly—"

"I can be an asset," Riven interrupted, even as he put one hand to the teleportation rod. "I know Cale well."

Azriim nodded and said, "He was his companion."

"He was, Azriim, and that is why I wonder why he aided you." The Sojourner turned his gaze to Riven. "That is the question."

"Why do we aid *you*?" Azriim asked. "That, too, is a question."

Behind Riven, Dolgan whined in dismay.

Riven turned one of the dials on the rod with his thumb. He was not certain he could operate it. He certainly could not dictate a location. But if things went poorly, anywhere would be better than where he stood.

The Sojourner's eyes bored into Azriim. "You aid me because I give you no choice. But also because I offer something you crave. And because you fear me." He said the last in a soft, tight tone that caused Azriim to take a half-step backward, leaving Riven alone and exposed.

"And appropriately so," the Sojourner added. He nodded at Riven. "This one does not fear you. That is evident. So what do you offer him?"

Azriim made no answer.

Riven gave his own: "Cale—the priest of Mask—I want him dead."

The Sojourner stared at him, baring his soul. "Why?"

Riven gritted his teeth and looked away. He would not admit, even to the Sojourner, that being the *Second* of Mask galled him. Instead, he said simply, "I have my reasons. It's enough that I'm here of my own choice, and for my own benefit."

"I will decide if it is enough," the Sojourner said softly.

To that, Riven said nothing. His thumb hovered over the rod's dials, gave another half turn.

The only sound in the room was the Sojourner's wheeze.

Riven decided to make one last play.

"Make the decision," he said softly. "I'm either with you or I'm not. And if not, then we are no longer allies."

Dolgan lurched to his feet with a growl. Riven put a hand to a saber hilt.

A look from the Sojourner froze the big slaad. The mysterious creature eyed Riven with something akin to appreciation.

“You remind me of Azriim,” he said.

Riven did not consider that a compliment but kept his feelings to himself.

Perhaps sensing a change in the Sojourner’s sentiments, Azriim again took station beside Riven. “He can accompany Dolgan and me, Sojourner, to the Eldritch Temple. He has already proven his usefulness. I believe his words—he wants the priest dead.”

“No,” Dolgan said. “Kill him.”

Riven wanted nothing so much as to turn around and slit Dolgan’s throat.

The Sojourner smiled distantly. To Riven, he said, “You are here of your own choice? For your own benefit?”

“Those are my words,” Riven answered.

“They are,” the Sojourner acknowledged. “Now let us see if they are true.”

The Sojourner never moved, gave no warning, but agony wracked Riven’s head.

He screamed, clutched his skull in his palms, and fell to his knees. He felt as if five long fingers had burrowed knuckle-deep into his brain. There, they began to sift through what they found. Riven had never before felt more violated. He resisted the intrusion and fought—futile. The Sojourner’s will was inexorable, the pain unbearable. Riven’s eye felt as though it would pop out of his skull. He forced his blurry gaze upward and stared into the Sojourner’s eyes, fell into them. His body shook, convulsed, but he held the Sojourner’s gaze. He bit open his tongue. Screams, spit, and blood poured from his mouth. He felt his consciousness being cracked open like a nut. He could not move; his body would not answer his commands. He could do nothing but suffer and scream.

He forced himself to stay conscious.

Mental fingers peeled away the layers of his brain, baring memories, hopes, fears, ambitions. He screamed again, again.

The Sojourner's expression did not change.

Distantly, he heard Dolgan laughing and Azriim shouting.

He, too, is a servant of Mask the Shadowlord, the Sojourner mentally projected, sorting Riven's life and laying it out for the slaadi. A mistreated boy who became an assassin. He hates his life up to now. Religion has given him purpose. . . .

"Get out," Riven tried to mutter, but the syllables emerged only as an indecipherable mumble.

Ah, the Sojourner projected, and nodded. He is much like you two in that he also desires a transformation, not to gray, but from Second to First. He hates the priest for being First.

Riven tried again to speak, failed. His heart hammered in his chest. He tried to dismiss from his mind the events that had occurred in the Plane of Shadow, tried to tuck them into some distant corner of his consciousness, but the Sojourner burrowed like a gnome through the dirt of his life.

The Sojourner reached the memory. Riven screamed again. Blood leaked from his nose. Surely his skull must explode. Surely.

And here is this, the Sojourner said, his mental voice hard. He came to kill me, to draw others here to kill me. The betrayal of the priest of Mask was a fraud, a ploy. You have brought a would-be murderer into my presence, Azriim.

The full force of the Sojourner's mind and will assaulted Riven's mind, pinioning him, burying him under its weight. He fell flat on the floor. His vision went dark; something warm dripped from his ears. He was falling, falling.

Riven tried to mouth the words, “No. It is real. I want him dead.” His lips would not form the words so he thought them instead: *I want him dead! I want him dead!*

A booted foot slammed into Riven’s ribs—Dolgan. Riven’s leather armor kept the bones intact but his breath went out in a whoosh.

“Kill him,” Dolgan said.

He was going to die prone on the floor, helpless as a babe. Distantly, he wondered if Cale and Magadon were watching, laughing.

They must have a practitioner of the Invisible Art among their number, the Sojourner observed, surprise in his mental voice. *He has moderate skill.*

The pain in Riven’s mind intensified. He was too far gone to scream anymore. He dug his fingers into the carpet so hard that he tore three fingernails from their beds. He felt a peculiar sensation through the pain. A tickle in his consciousness. Something scurried around the edges of his sentience, trying to avoid the Sojourner’s mental perception. To no avail. Nothing could avoid the Sojourner.

The Sojourner said, *We have a mindmage in our midst.* To someone Riven could not see, the Sojourner projected, *I see you.*

It must have been Magadon. They had been watching the whole time.

With the Sojourner’s attention temporarily diverted, Riven managed to claw his way back to coherence.

“Get . . . out . . . of my head!” he shouted, and pulled himself up to all fours.



Magadon lurched back, clutching his temples and groaning with pain. Jak stopped whatever spell he had been casting and leaped to the guide’s aid.

“He sensed me,” Magadon managed, leaning on Jak. “Such a mind. . . .”

Cale knew. He had felt the Sojourner make contact through Magadon, had felt the residuum of power that had accompanied the contact. Cale had let the mental scrying go on far too long. Riven had suffered unnecessarily. He had hoped to learn the Sojourner's full plans for the Weave Tap, but he had learned only snippets.

He started to draw the darkness around them. The light from Magadon's sunrod dimmed. Shadows intensified.

"Mags?" Cale asked while he summoned shadows.

"I'm all right," the guide said. He took his hand off Jak's shoulder and massaged his brow. He unslung his bow and nocked an arrow, though he did not draw. "I'm ready."

The air around Cale's body crackled with magical energy; the hairs on his arms stood up—the result of Jak's various protective spells. Cale hoped the magic would be enough.

"I did what I could," Jak said by way of explanation, and gripped his holy symbol, shortsword, and dagger.

Magadon concentrated, and a handful of coin-sized spheres of light formed around his head and quickly faded.

"I cannot mindlink us," he said. "Jak's spell is blocking *my* abilities, at least. Let us hope it does the same to the Sojourner."

Cale nodded and quickly donned his mask. To Jak, he said, "It's a dark cavern, little man. Cluttered with cushions and furniture. The two slaadi—one in human form, one as a half-drow—and the Sojourner. Riven is on the floor."

He hefted Weaveshear, looked each of his comrades in the eye.

Both nodded.

"We go," he said.

Cale let himself sink into the darkness around them, let it seep into him. He understood that the shadows anywhere were the shadows everywhere. He pictured the

Sojourner's cavern in his mind, the shadows that filled its corners.

Pulling his comrades into his personal night, he moved them through the black, from a cavern on the Plane of Shadow to a distant cavern elsewhere.