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SALVATORE

FORGOTTEN REALMS

*The Cleric  
Quintet*  
BOOK  
III

*Night Masks*

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# PROLOGUE

## Q

The larger man regarded him warily, beginning to understand, and asked, “You know all in attendance?”

“Of course.”

The burly fighter looked back just in time to see the last of the other patrons slip out the door then added, “And they have left at your bidding?”

“Of course.”

“Mako sent you . . .”

The weaker man curled his lips in a wicked grin, one that widened as the fighter regarded his skinny arms with obvious disdain.

“. . . to kill me,” the large man finished, trying to appear calm.

His wringing hands, fingers moving as if seeking something to keep them occupied, revealed his unease. He licked his dry lips and glanced around, not taking his dark eyes from the assassin for more than a heart-beat. He surely noticed that the smaller man wore

gloves, one white and one black, and must have silently berated himself for not being more observant.

The thin man replied, "You knew Mako would repay you for his cousin's death."

"His own fault!" the large man retorted. "It was he who struck the first blow. I had no ch—"

"I am neither judge nor jury," the puny man reminded him.

"Just a killer," the fighter replied, "serving whoever gives you the largest sack of gold."

The assassin nodded, not the least bit insulted by that characterization.

The little man noticed his target's hand slipping casually into a hidden pouch in the **V** cut of his tunic, above his right hip.

"Please, do not," the assassin said, and the fighter stopped and eyed him with surprise.

"Of course I know of the knife you keep there," the assassin said. "Do you not understand, dear dead Vaclav? You have no surprises left for me."

Vaclav paused then protested, "Why now?" His ire rose with his frustration.

"Now is the time," replied the assassin. "All things have their time. Should a killing be any different? Besides, I have pressing business in the west and can play the game no longer."

"You have had ample opportunity to finish this business many times before now," Vaclav argued.

In fact, the little man had been hovering around him for tendays, had even gained his trust, to some degree, though Vaclav didn't even know the man's name. The fighter's eyes narrowed with further frustration when he further contemplated that notion and obviously realized

that the assassin's frail frame—too frail to be viewed as any threat—had only helped win his trust. If the man, now revealed as an enemy, had appeared more threatening, Vaclav never would have let him get so close.

"I've had more chances than you would believe," the assassin replied with a snicker. The large man had seen him often, but not nearly as often as the killer, in perfect and varied disguises, had seen Vaclav.

"I take pride in my craft," the assassin continued, "unlike so many of the crass killers that walk the Realms. They prefer to keep their distance until the opportunity to strike presents itself, but I"—his beady eyes flickered with pride—"prefer to personalize things. I have been all around you. Several of your friends are dead, and I now know you so well that I can anticipate your every movement."

Vaclav's breathing came in short rasps. The assassin could imagine what was going through the fighter's mind: Several friends dead? And a weakling openly threatening him? He had defeated countless monsters ten times that one's weight, had served honorably in three wars, had even battled a dragon! But he was scared. Vaclav surely had to admit that.

"I am an artist," the slender, sleepy man rambled. "That is why I will never err, why I will survive while so many other hired murderers go to early graves."

"You are a simple killer and nothing more!" the large man cried, his frustration boiling over. He leaped from his seat and drew a huge sword.

## Q

A sharp pain slowed Vaclav, and he found himself somehow sitting again. He blinked, trying to make

sense of it all. He saw himself at the empty bar, was, in fact, staring at his own face! He stood gawking as he—as his own body—slid the heavy sword back into its scabbard.

“So crude,” Vaclav heard his own body say.

He looked down at the figure he had come to wear, the killer’s weak form.

“And so messy,” the assassin continued.

“How . . . ?”

“I have not the time to explain, I fear,” the assassin replied.

“What is your name?” Vaclav cried, desperate for any diversion.

“Ghost,” answered the assassin.

Ghost lurched over, plainly confident that the seemingly androgynous form, one he knew so well, could hardly muster the speed to escape him or the strength to fend him off. Vaclav felt himself being lifted from the floor, felt the huge hands slipping around his neck.

“The . . . ghost . . . of who?” managed the desperate man. He kicked as hard as his new body would allow, so pitiful an attempt against the burly, powerful form his enemy possessed. Then his breath would not come.

Vaclav heard the snap of bone, and it was the last sound he would ever hear.

## Q

“Not *‘the ghost,’*” the victorious assassin replied to the dead form, “just *‘Ghost.’*”

He sat then to finish his drink, thinking how perfect the job had been, how easily Vaclav had been coaxed into so vulnerable a position.

“An artist,” Ghost said, lifting his cup in a toast to

## NIGHT MASKS

himself. His more familiar body would be magically repaired before the dawn, and he could take it back then, leaving the empty shell of Vaclav's corpse behind.

Ghost had not lied when he mentioned pressing business in the west. A wizard had contacted the assassin's guild, promising exorbitant payments for a minor execution.

The price must have been high indeed, Ghost knew, for his superiors had requested that he take on the task. The wizard apparently wanted the best.

The wizard wanted an artist.



# ONE

## P L A C I D F I E L D S

# Q

Cadderly walked slowly from the single stone tower, across the fields, toward the lakeside town of Carradoon. Autumn had come to the Southern Heartlands and the few trees along Cadderly's path, red maples mostly, shone brilliantly in their fall wardrobe. The sun was bright and warm, in contrast with the chilly breezes blowing down from the nearby Snowflake Mountains, gusting strong enough to float Cadderly's silken blue cape out behind him as he walked, and bend the wide brim of his similarly blue hat.

The troubled young scholar noticed nothing.

Cadderly pushed his sand-brown locks from his gray eyes then grew frustrated as the unkempt hair, much longer than he had ever worn it, defiantly dropped back down. He pushed it away again, and again, and finally tucked it tightly under the brim of his hat.

Carradoon came within sight a short while later, on the banks of Impresk Lake, surrounded by hedge-lined fields dotted with sheep, cattle, and crops. The city

proper was walled, as were most cities of Faerûn, with many buildings huddled inside against ever-present peril. A long bridge connected Carradoon to a nearby island, the section of the town reserved for the more well-to-do merchants and governing officials.

As always when he came by that route, Cadderly looked at the town with mixed and uncertain feelings. He had been born in Carradoon, but didn't remember that early part of his life. His gaze drifted west past the walled city to the towering Snowflakes then to the passes that led high into the mountains, where lay the Edificant Library.

That had been Cadderly's home, though he realized that that was no longer true, and thus he felt he could not return there. He was not a poor man. The wizard in the tower he had recently left had paid him a huge sum for transcribing a lost spellbook—and he had the means to support himself in relative comfort for a time.

But all the gold in the world could not have provided a home for Cadderly, nor could it have released his troubled spirit from its turmoil.

Cadderly had grown up, had learned the truth of his violent, imperfect world—all too suddenly. The young scholar had been thrust into situations beyond his experience, forced into the role of hero-warrior when all he really wanted was to read of adventures in books of legend. Cadderly had killed a man, and had fought in a war that had blasted, torn, and ultimately tainted a once-pristine sylvan forest.

He had found no answers, only questions.

Cadderly thought of his room at the Dragon's Codpiece, where *The Tome of Universal Harmony*, the most prized scriptures of the god Deneir, sat open on his

small table. It had been given to Cadderly by Pertelope, a high-ranking priestess of his order, with the promise that within its thick bindings Cadderly would find his answers.

But Cadderly wasn't sure he believed that.

The young scholar sat on a grassy rise overlooking the town, scratched at his stubbly beard, and wondered again about his true calling. He removed his wide-brimmed hat and stared at the porcelain insignia attached to its red band: an eye and a single candle, the holy symbol of Deneir, a deity dedicated to literature and the arts.

Cadderly had served Deneir since his earliest recollections, though he had never really been certain of what that service entailed, or of the real purpose in dedicating his life to any god. He was a scholar and an inventor and believed wholeheartedly in the powers of knowledge and creation, two very important tenets for his Deneirath sect.

Only recently had Cadderly begun to feel that the god was something more than a symbol, more than a fabricated ideal for scholars to emulate. In the elven forest Cadderly had felt the birth of powers he could not begin to understand. He had magically healed a friend's wound that otherwise would have proved fatal. He had gained supernatural insight into the history of the elves, not just their recorded events, but the feelings, the eldritch aura, that had given the ancient People their identity. He had watched in amazement as the spirit of a noble horse rose from its broken body and walked solemnly away. He had seen a dryad disappear into a tree and had commanded the tree to push the elusive creature back out—and the tree had heeded his command.

There could be no doubt for young Cadderly: mighty magic was within him, granting him terrifying powers. His peers called that magic the Grace of Deneir, saw it as a blessing, but in light of what he had done, of what he had become, and the horrors he had witnessed, Cadderly was not certain he wanted that power within him.

He got up from the grassy rise and continued his journey to the walled town, to the Dragon's Codpiece, and to *The Tome of Universal Harmony*, where he could only pray that he would find some answers and some peace.

## Q

He flipped the page, his eyes desperately trying to scan the newest material in the scant heartbeat it took him to turn the page again. It was impossible. Cadderly simply could not keep up with his desire, his insatiable hunger, to turn the pages.

He was finished with *The Tome of Universal Harmony*, a work of nearly two thousand pages, in mere moments. Cadderly slammed the book shut, frustrated and fearful, and tried to rise from his small desk, thinking that perhaps he should go for a walk, or go to find Brennan, the innkeeper's teenaged son who had become a close friend.

The tome grabbed at him before he could get out of his seat. With a defiant but impotent snarl, the young scholar flipped the book back over and began his frantic scan once more. The pages flipped at a wild pace. Cadderly couldn't begin to read more than a single word or two on any one page, and yet, the *song* of the book, the special meanings behind the simple words, rang clearly in his mind. It seemed as though all the mysteries

of the multiverse were embedded in the sweet and melancholy melody, a song of living and dying, of salvation and damnation, of eternal energy and finite matter.

He heard voices as well—ancient accents and reverent tones sang in the deepest corners of his mind—but he couldn't make out any of the written words on the pages of the book. Cadderly could see them, could feel their meanings, but the actual lettering slipped away.

Cadderly felt his strength quickly draining as he continued to press on. His eyes ached, but he couldn't close them. His mind raced in too many directions, unlocking secrets, then storing them back into his subconscious in a more organized fashion. In those brief transitions from one page to another, Cadderly managed to wonder if he would go insane, or if the work would actually consume him.

He understood something else then, and the thought finally gave to him the strength to slam the book shut. Several of the higher ranking Deneirrath priests at the Edificant Library had been found dead, lying across that very book. Always the deaths had been ruled having been the result of natural causes—all of those priests had been much older than Cadderly—but Cadderly's insight told him differently.

They had tried to hear the song of Deneir, the song of universal mysteries, but they had not been strong enough to control the effects of that strange and beautiful music. They had been consumed.

Cadderly frowned at the black cover of the closed tome as though it were a demonic thing. But it was not, he reminded himself, and before his fears could argue back, he opened the book once more, from the beginning, and again began his frantic scan.

Melancholy assaulted him, and the doors blocking revelations swung wide, their truths finding a place in the receptacle of young Cadderly's mind.

Gradually the young scholar's eyes drooped from sheer exhaustion, but still the song played on, the music of the heavenly spheres, of sunrise and sunset and all the details that played eternally in between.

It played on and on, a song without end, and Cadderly felt himself falling toward it, becoming no more than a passing note among an infinite number of passing notes.

On and on . . .

"Cadderly?"

The call came from far away, as if from another world. Cadderly felt a hand grasp his shoulder, tangible and chill, and felt himself turned gently around. He opened a sleepy eye and saw young Brennan's curly black mop and beaming face.

"Are you all right?"

Cadderly managed a weak nod and rubbed his bleary eyes. He sat up in his chair and felt a dozen aches in various parts of his stiff body. How long had he been asleep?

It was not sleep, the young scholar realized then, to his mounting horror. The weariness that had taken him from consciousness was too profound to be cured by simple sleep. What, then?

It was a journey, he sensed. He felt as though he had been on a journey. But to where?

"What were you reading?" Brennan asked, leaning past him to regard the open book.

The question shook Cadderly from his reflections. Terrified, he shoved Brennan aside and slammed the book.

“Do not look at it!” he replied harshly.

Brennan seemed at a loss. “I . . . I’m sorry,” he apologized, obviously confused, his green eyes downcast. “I didn’t mean—”

“No,” Cadderly interrupted, forcing a disarming smile to his face. He hadn’t intended to wound the young lad who had been so kind to him over the last few tendays. “You did nothing wrong. But promise me that you’ll never look inside this book—not unless I’m here to guide you.”

Brennan took a step away from the desk, eyeing the closed tome with fear.

“It’s magical,” Cadderly acknowledged, “and it could cause harm to one who does not know how to read it properly. I’m not angry with you—truly. You just startled me.”

Brennan nodded weakly, seeming unconvinced.

“I brought your food,” he explained, pointing to a tray he had placed on the night table beside Cadderly’s small bed.

Cadderly smiled at the sight. Dependable Brennan. When he had come to the Dragon’s Codpiece, Cadderly had desired solitude and had arranged with Fredegar Harriman, the innkeeper, to have his meals delivered outside his door. That arrangement had quickly changed, though, as Cadderly had come to know and like Brennan. The young man felt free to enter Cadderly’s room and deliver the plates of food—always more than the price had called for—personally. Cadderly, for all his stubbornness and the icy demeanor he had developed after the horrors of Shilmista’s war, had soon found that he couldn’t resist the youth’s unthreatening companionship.

Cadderly eyed the plate of supper for a long while. He noticed a few specks of crumbs on the floor, some from a biscuit and some darker—the crust of the midday bread, he realized. The curtains over his small window had been drawn and his lamp had been turned down, and turned back up.

“You couldn’t wake me the last three times you came in here?” he asked.

Brennan sputtered, surprised. “Th-three times?”

“To deliver breakfast and my midday meal,” Cadderly reasoned, and he paused, realizing that he shouldn’t know what he knew. “Then once more to check on me, when you turned the lamp back up and drew the curtains.”

Cadderly looked back to Brennan and was surprised again. He almost called out in alarm, but quickly realized that the images he saw dancing on the young man’s shoulders—shadowy forms of scantily clad dancing girls and disembodied breasts—were of his own making, an interpretation from his own mind.

Cadderly turned away and snapped his eyes shut. An interpretation of what?

He heard the song again, distantly. The chant was clearer, the same phrases repeated over and over, though Cadderly still couldn’t make out the exact words, except for one: *aura*.

“Are you all right?” Brennan asked again.

Cadderly nodded and looked back, not so startled by the dancing shadows. “I am,” he replied sincerely. “And I have kept you here longer than you wished.”

Brennan’s face screwed up with curiosity.

“You be careful at the Moth Closet,” Cadderly warned, referring to the seedy private festhall at the end

of Lakeview Street, on the eastern side of Carradoon, near where Impresk Lake spilled into the Shalane River. "How does a boy your age even get into that place?"

"H-how . . . ?" Brennan stuttered, his pimpled face blushing to deep crimson.

Cadderly waved him away, a wide smile on his face. The dancing shadow breasts atop Brennan's shoulder disappeared in a burst of splotchy black dots. Apparently Cadderly's guesses had knocked out the teenager's hormonal urgings.

Temporarily, Cadderly realized as Brennan headed for the door, for the shadows already began to form anew. Cadderly's laugh turned Brennan back around.

"You will not tell my father?" he pleaded.

Cadderly waved him away, stifling the urge to burst out in laughter. Brennan hesitated, perplexed, but he relaxed almost immediately, surely reminding himself that Cadderly was his friend. A smile found his face, and a dancing girl found a perch on his shoulder. He snapped his fingers and swiftly disappeared from the room.

Cadderly stared long and hard at the closed door, and at the telltale crumbs on the floor beside his night table.

Things had seemed so very obvious to him, both of what had transpired in his room while he was asleep, and of Brennan's intentions for a night of mischief. So obvious, and yet, Cadderly knew they should not have been.

"'Aura?'" he whispered, searching for significance.

The young priest looked back to the tome. Would he find his answer there?

He had to force himself to eat, to remind himself that he would need all his strength for the time ahead. Soon after, one hunger sated and another tearing at him, Cadderly dived back into *The Tome of Universal Harmony*.

The pages began to flip, and the song played on and on.