

R.A. 
SALVATORE

*The Cleric
Quintet*
BOOK
V

The Chaos Curse

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PROLOGUE

Q

Dean Thobicus drummed his skinny fingers on his desk. His chair was turned so that he faced the window, not the door, pointedly looking away as a nervous, wiry man entered his office on the library's second floor.

"You . . . you asked . . ." the man, Vicero Belago, stuttered.

Thobicus lifted a trembling, leathery hand to stop him. Belago broke into a cold sweat as he stared at the back of the old dean's balding head then looked to the side, where stood Bron Turman, one of the library's headmasters and the highest ranking of the Oghmanyte priests, known as Lorekeepers. The large, muscular Turman merely shrugged, offering no answers for Belago.

"I didn't ask," Dean Thobicus corrected Belago. "I *commanded* you to come." Thobicus swung around in his chair, and the nervous Belago, seeming small

and insignificant indeed, shrank back near the door. “You do still heed my commands, do you not, dear Vicero?”

“Of course, Dean Thobicus,” Belago replied. He dared come a step closer, out of the shadows. Belago was the Edificant Library’s resident alchemist, a professed follower of both Oghma and Deneir, though he formally belonged to neither sect. He was loyal to Dean Thobicus as both an employee to an employer, and as a sheep to a shepherd. “You are the dean,” he said. “I am but a servant.”

“Exactly!” Thobicus snarled, his voice hissing like the warning of an angry serpent.

Bron Turman eyed the withered old dean with suspicion. Never before had the old man been so animated, so agitated.

“I am the *dean*,” Thobicus said. “I assign duties to the library’s staff, not Ca—” Thobicus bit back the rest of his words, but both Belago and Turman caught the slip and understood the implications.

The dean spoke of Cadderly.

“Of course, Dean Thobicus,” Belago said again, more subdued.

The alchemist realized he was in the middle of a power struggle, one in which he might either play a part, or pay a price. Belago’s friendship with Cadderly was no secret. Neither was the fact that the alchemist often worked on unsanctioned, privately funded projects for the young priest, often for the cost of materials alone.

“You have an inventory document for your shop?” Thobicus asked.

Belago nodded. Of course he did, and Thobicus knew it. Belago’s shop had been destroyed less than a year before, when the library was in the throes of the chaos curse. The library’s deep coffers had funded the repairs and the replacement ingredients, and Belago had given a complete accounting.

“As do I,” Thobicus remarked. “I know everything that belongs there. Everything, you understand?”

Belago, finding strength in honor, straightened for the first time since entering the room. “Are you accusing me of thievery?” he demanded.

The dean’s chuckle mocked the wiry man’s firm stance. “Not yet,” Thobicus answered. “You’re still here, and thus, anything you might wish to take would also still be here.”

That set Belago back, and his ample eyebrows furrowed.

“Your services are no longer required,” Thobicus explained, still speaking in an awful, cold, casual tone.

“But . . . but Dean,” Belago stuttered. “I have been—”

“Leave!”

Q

Bron Turman straightened, recognizing the weight of magic in Thobicus’s voice. The burly Oghmanyte headmaster was not surprised when Belago stiffened

suddenly and fell back out of the room. With a look to Thobicus, Turman quickly moved to close the door.

“He was a fine alchemist,” Turman said, turning back to the large desk. Thobicus had turned to once again stare out the window.

“I had reason to doubt his loyalty,” the dean explained.

Bron Turman, pragmatic and no real ally of Cadderly, didn't press the point. Thobicus was the dean, and as such, he had the authority to hire or dismiss any of the lay assistants as he saw fit.

“Baccio has been here for more than a day,” Bron Turman said to change the subject. Baccio was the commander of the Carradden garrison, come to discuss the defense of the city and the library should Castle Trinity strike at them. “Have you spoken with him?”

“We won't need Baccio and his little army,” Thobicus said with confidence. “I shall soon dismiss him, too.”

“You have word from Cadderly?”

“No,” Thobicus answered. They had heard nothing since Cadderly and his companions had gone into the mountains earlier that winter. But as the young priest's power continued to grow, many of the Deneirath at the library had voiced concern over a feeling of being pushed away from the light of Deneir. Once, Thobicus had commanded the most powerful divine magic, but even the simplest spell, like the one he had used to dispatch poor Belago, seemed to come hard to his thin lips.

“Very well,” Thobicus conceded after he'd turned

to face Turman's stare. "Tell Baccio I will meet him this evening. But I maintain that his army should hold a defensive posture and not go traipsing through the mountains."

Bron Turman was satisfied with that. "But you believe that Cadderly and his friends have succeeded," he said.

Thobicus did not respond.

"You believe that the threat to the library is no more," Bron Turman stated. The burly Oghmanyte headmaster smiled, a wistful look in his large gray eyes. "At least, you believe that *one* threat to the library is no more," he added.

Thobicus steeled his gaze, his crow's-feet coming together to form one large crease at the side of each orb. "This does not concern you?" he warned.

Bron Turman bowed, respecting the words. "That doesn't mean I don't understand," he said. "Vicero Belago was a fine alchemist."

"Bron Turman . . ."

The headmaster held up a submissive hand. "I am no friend of Cadderly's," he said. "Neither am I a young man. I have seen the intrigue of power struggles within both our sects."

Thobicus pursed his thin lips and seemed on the verge of explosion, and Bron Turman took that as a sign that he should be leaving. He gave another quick bow and was gone from the room.

Q

Dean Thobicus rocked back in his chair and pivoted once more to face the window. He couldn't call Turman out on his outwardly treasonous words. The man's reasoning was undeniably true. Thobicus had been alive for more than seven decades, Cadderly for just over two, yet for some reason the old bureaucrat could not understand, Cadderly had found particular favor with Deneir. But the dean had come to his power painstakingly, at great personal sacrifice and at the cost of many years of almost reclusive study. He was not about to give up so hard-fought a position. Thobicus would purge the library of Cadderly's allies and strengthen his hold on both orders, Oghmanyte and Deneirath. Headmaster Avery Schell, Cadderly's mentor and surrogate father, and Pertelope, who had been like Cadderly's mother, were both dead, and Belago would soon be gone.

No, Thobicus would not give up his position.

Not without a fight.

ONE

THE PROMISE OF SALVATION

Q

Kierkan Rufo wiped the stubborn mud from his boots and breeches, and muttered quiet curses to himself, as he always did. He was an outcast, marked by an ugly blue-and-red brand of an unlit candle above a closed eye, which lay on the middle of his forehead.

“Bene tellemara,” whispered Druzil. A bat-winged, dog-faced, scaly creature barely two feet tall, the imp packed more malicious evil into that tiny frame than the worst of humankind’s tyrants.

“What did you say?” Rufo snapped. He glared down at his otherworldly companion. The two had been together for the last half of the winter, and neither much liked the other. Their enmity had begun in Shilmista Forest, west of the Snowflake Mountains, when Druzil had threatened and coerced Rufo into serving his wicked masters, the leaders of Castle Trinity—when Druzil had precipitated Kierkan Rufo’s fall from the order of Deneir.

Druzil looked at the man and squinted from the flickering light of the torch Rufo held. The human was over six feet tall, but bone-skinny. He always stood at an angle, tilted to the side, and that made him, or the world behind him, seem strangely incongruent. Druzil, who had spent the past few months wandering through the Snowflake Mountains, thought Rufo resembled a tree on a steep mountainside. The imp snickered, drawing another glare from the perpetually scowling Rufo.

The imp continued to stare, trying hard to view the man in a new light. With his stringy black hair matted to his head, those penetrating eyes—black dots on a pale face—and that unusual stance, Rufo could be imposing. He kept his hair parted in the middle, not on the side as it had always been, for Rufo could not, on pain of death, cover that horrid brand, the mark that had forced him to be a recluse, the mark that made every human shun him when they saw him coming down the road.

“What are you looking at?” Rufo demanded.

“*Bene tellemara*,” Druzil rasped again in Abyssal, the language of the lower planes. It was a profound insult to Rufo’s intelligence. To Druzil, schooled in chaos and evil, all humans seemed fumbling things, too clouded by emotions to be effective at anything. And Rufo was more bumbling than most. However, Aballister, Druzil’s wizard master, was dead, killed by Cadderly, his own son, the same priest who’d branded Rufo. And Dorigen, Aballister’s second-in-command, had been captured, or had gone over to Cadderly’s side. That left

Druzil wandering alone on the Prime Material Plane. With his innate powers, and no wizards binding him to service, the imp might have found his way back to the lower planes, but Druzil didn't want that—not yet. In the dungeons of the very building through which they stalked, rested *Tuanta Quiro Miancay*, the chaos curse, among the most potent and wicked concoctions ever brewed. Druzil wanted it back, and meant to get it with the help of Rufo, his stooge.

“I know what you are saying,” Rufo lied. Then he mimicked, “*Bene tellemara*,” back at Druzil.

Druzil smirked at him, showing clearly that the imp really didn't care if Rufo knew the meaning or not.

Rufo looked back at the muddy tunnel that had gotten them under the cellar of the Edificant Library and said, “Well, we've come this far. Lead on and let us be out of this wretched place.”

Druzil looked at him skeptically. For all the talking the imp had done over the last few tendays, Rufo still didn't understand. Be out of this place? Druzil thought. Rufo had missed the whole point. They would soon have the chaos curse in their hands, why would they want to leave?

Druzil nodded and led on, figuring he could do little to enlighten the stupid human. Rufo simply didn't understand the power of *Tuanta Quiro Miancay*. He had once been caught in its throes—all the library had, and nearly been brought down—yet, the ignorant human still didn't understand.

That was the way with humans, Druzil decided.

He would have to take Rufo by the hand and lead him to power, as he had led him across the fields west of Carradoon and back into the mountains. Druzil had lured Rufo back to the library, where the branded man didn't want to go, with false promises that the potion locked in the dungeon would remove his brand.

They went through several long, damp chambers, past rotting casks and crates from days long ago when the library was a much smaller place, and mostly underground, when those areas had been used for storage. Druzil hadn't been there in a while, not since before the battle for Castle Trinity, before the war in Shilmista Forest. Not since Barjin, the Talonite priest, had been killed . . . by Cadderly.

"Bene tellemara!" the imp rasped, frustrated by the thought of the powerful young cleric.

"I grow tired of your insults," Rufo began to protest.

"Shut up," Druzil snapped back at him, too consumed by thoughts of the young priest to bother with Rufo. Cadderly, young and lucky Cadderly: the bane of Druzil's ambitions, the one who always seemed to be in the way.

Druzil kept complaining, scraping and slapping his wide, clawed feet on the stone floor. He pushed through a door, went down a long corridor, and pushed open another.

Then Druzil stopped, and ended, too, his muttering. They had come to a small room, the room where Barjin had fallen.

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Rufo pinched his nose and turned away, for the room smelled of death and rot. Druzil took a deep breath and felt positively at home.

There could be no doubt that a fierce struggle had occurred there. Along the wall to Rufo and Druzil's right was an overturned brazier, the remains of charcoal blocks and incense scattered among its ashes. There, too, were the burned wrappings of an undead monster, a mummy. Most of the thing had been consumed by the flames, but its wrapped skull remained, showing blackened bone with tattered pieces of rags around it.

Beyond the brazier, near the base of the wall and along the floor, was a crimson stain, all that remained as testimony to Barjin's death. Barjin had been propped against that very spot when Cadderly had accidentally hit him with an explosive dart, blasting a hole through his chest and back.

The rest of the room showed much the same carnage. Next to Barjin's bloodstain, the brick wall had been knocked open by a furious dwarf, and the crossbeam supporting the ceiling hung by a single peg perpendicular to the floor. In the middle of the room, beneath dozens of scorch marks, lay a black weapon handle, all that remained of the Screaming Maiden, Barjin's enchanted mace, and behind that were the remains of the priest's unholy altar.

Beyond that . . .

Druzil's bulbous black eyes widened when he looked past the altar to the small cabinet wrapped in white cloth emblazoned with the runes and sigils of both

Deneir and Oghma, the brother gods of the library. The mere presence of the cloth told Druzil that his search was at an end.

A flap of his bat wings brought the imp to the top of the altar, and he heard Rufo shuffling to catch up. Druzil dared not approach any closer, though, knowing that the priests had warded the cabinet with powerful enchantments.

"Glyphs," Rufo agreed, recognizing Druzil's hesitation. "If we go near it, we shall be burned away!"

"No," Druzil reasoned, speaking quickly, frantically. *Tuanta Quiro Miancay* was close enough for the desperate imp to smell it, and he would not be denied. "Not you," he went on. "You are not of my weal. You were a priest of this order. Surely you can approach—"

"Fool!" Rufo snapped at him. It was as volatile a response as the imp had ever heard from the broken man. "I wear the brand of Deneir! The wards on that cloth and cabinet would seek my flesh hungrily."

Druzil hopped on the altar and tried to speak, but his rasping voice came out as only indecipherable sputtering. Then the imp calmed and called on his innate magic. He could see and measure all magic, be it the dweomer of a wizard or a priest. If the glyphs were not so powerful, Druzil would go to the cabinet himself. Any wounds he received would heal—faster still when he clutched the precious *Tuanta Quiro Miancay* in his greedy hands. The name translated into "the Most Fatal Horror," a title that sounded delicious indeed to the beleaguered imp.

The aura emanating from the cabinet nearly overwhelmed him, and at first, Druzil's heart fell in despair. But as he continued his scan, the imp came to know the truth, and a great gout of wicked laughter burst from between his pointed teeth.

Rufo, curious, looked at him.

"Go to the cabinet," Druzil instructed.

Rufo continued to stare, and made no move.

"Go," Druzil said again. "The meager wards of the foolish priests have been overwhelmed by the chaos curse! Their magic has unraveled."

It was only partly true. *Tuanta Quiro Miancay* was more than a simple potion, it was magic driven to destroy. *Tuanta Quiro Miancay* wanted to be found, wanted to be out of the prison the priests had wrapped around it. And to that end, the concoction's magic had attacked the glyphs, had worked against them for many months, weakening their integrity.

Rufo didn't trust Druzil, and rightly so, but it soon became plain that he couldn't ignore the pull on his heart. He must have felt his forehead's brand keenly in that place and suffered a severe headache merely from being near a structure dedicated to Deneir. At least wanting to believe Druzil's words, he moved inevitably toward the cabinet and reached for the cloth.

There came a blinding electric flash, then a second, then a tremendous burst of fire. Fortunately for Rufo, the first explosion had launched him across the room, clear over the altar and into an overturned bookcase near the door.

Druzil shrieked as the flames engulfed the cabinet, its wood flaring brightly—obviously it had been soaked with oil or enchanted by some incendiary magic. Druzil didn't fear for *Tuanta Quiro Miancay*, for that concoction was everlasting, but if the flask holding it melted, the liquid would be lost!

Flames never bothered Druzil, a creature of the fiery lower planes. His bat wings sent him rushing into the conflagration, eager hands pulling the cabinet's contents free. Druzil shrieked from a sudden burst of pain, and nearly hurled the bowl across the room. He caught himself, though, and gingerly placed the item on the altar. Then he backed away and rubbed his blistered hands together.

The bottle holding the chaos curse had been placed in a bowl and immersed in the clearest of waters, made holy by the plea of a dead druid and the symbol of Silvanus, the god of nature, of natural order. Perhaps no god worshiped on Toril evoked more anger from the perverse imp than Silvanus.

Druzil studied the bowl and considered his dilemma. He breathed easier a moment later when he realized that the holy water was not as pure as it should be, that the influences of *Tuanta Quiro Miancay* acted even upon that.

Druzil moved near the bowl and chanted softly, using one of his claws to puncture the middle finger of his left hand. Finishing his curse, he let a single drop of his blood fall into the water. There came a hissing, and the top of the bowl clouded over with vapor. Then it

was gone, and gone, too, was the pure water, replaced by a blackened morass of fetid and rotting liquid.

Druzil leaped back atop the altar and plunged his hands in. A moment later, he was whimpering with joy, cradling the precious, rune-decorated bottle, itself an enchanted thing, as though it were his baby. He looked to Rufo, not really concerned if the man was alive or dead, then laughed again.

Rufo had propped himself up on his elbows. His black hair stood on end, dancing wildly, and his eyes twitched and rolled of their own accord. After some time, he rolled back unsteadily to his feet and advanced in staggered steps toward the imp, apparently thinking to throttle the creature once and for all.

Druzil's waving tail, its barbed end dripping deadly poison, brought Rufo to his senses, but did little to calm him.

"You said . . ." he began to roar.

"*Bene tellemara!*" Druzil snapped back at him, the imp's intensity more than matching Rufo's anger and startling the man to silence. "Do you not know what we have?"

Smiling wickedly, Druzil handed the flask to Rufo, and the man's beady eyes widened when he took it, when he felt its inner power throb within him.

Q

Rufo hardly heard Druzil as the imp raved about what they might accomplish with the chaos curse. The man stared at the swirling red liquid within the

bottle and fantasized, not of power, as Druzil was spouting, but of freedom from his brand. Rufo had earned that mark, but in his twisted perception, that hardly mattered. All Rufo understood or could accept was that Cadderly had marked him, had forced him to become an outcast.

All the world had become his enemy.

Druzil continued to ramble. The imp talked of controlling the priests once more, of striking against all of Erlkazar, all of Faerûn, all of Toril, of uncorking the flask and . . .

Rufo heard that last suggestion alone among the dozens of ideas the imp spewed. He heard it and believed it with all his heart. It was as if *Tuanta Quiro Miancay* called to him, and the chaos curse, the creation of wicked, diabolical intelligence, was indeed. It was Rufo's salvation, more than Deneir had ever been. It was his deliverance from wretched Cadderly.

This potion was for him, and for him alone.

Q

Druzil stopped talking the moment he noticed that Rufo had uncorked the bottle, the moment he smelled the red fumes wafting up from the potion.

The imp started to ask the man what he was doing, but the words stuck in Druzil's throat as Rufo suddenly lifted the bottle to his thin lips and drank of it deeply.

Druzil stammered, trying to find words to protest.

Rufo turned to him, the man's face screwed up curiously.

"What have you done?" Druzil asked.

Rufo started to answer, but gagged instead and clutched his throat.

"What have you done?" Druzil repeated loudly. "*Bene tellemara!* Fool!"

Rufo gagged again, clutched his throat and stomach, and vomited violently. He staggered away, coughing, wheezing, trying to get some air past the bile rising in his throat.

"What have you done?" Druzil cried after him, scuttling along the floor to keep up. The imp's tail waved ominously. If Rufo's misery ended, Druzil meant to sting and tear him, to punish him for stealing the precious and irreplaceable potion.

Rufo, his balance wavering, slammed into the doorjamb as he tried to exit the room. He stumbled along the corridor, rebounding off one wall then the other. He vomited again, and again after that, his stomach burning with agony and swirling with nausea. Somehow he got through the rooms and corridors and half-crawled out the muddy tunnel, back into the sunlight, which knifed at his eyes and skin.

He was burning up, and yet he felt cold, deathly cold.

Druzil, wisely becoming invisible as they came into the revealing daylight, followed. Rufo stopped and vomited yet again, across the hardened remains of a late-season snow bank, and the mess showed more

blood than bile. Then the man staggered around the building's corner, slipping and falling many times in the mud and slush. He thought to get to the door, to the priests with their curing hands.

Two young acolytes, wearing the black-and-gold vests that distinguished them as priests of Oghma, were near the door, enjoying the warmth of the late winter day, their brown cloaks opened wide to the sun. They didn't notice Rufo at first, not until the man fell heavily into the mud just a few feet away.

The two acolytes rushed to him and turned him over then gasped and fell back when they saw the brand. Neither had been in the library long enough to know Kierkan Rufo personally, but they had surely heard tales of the branded priest. They looked at each other and shrugged then one rushed back into the library while the other began to administer to the stricken man.

Druzil watched from the corner of the building, muttering, "*Bene tellemara,*" over and over, lamenting that the chaos curse and Kierkan Rufo had played him a wicked joke.

Q

Perched high in the branches of a tree near that door, a white squirrel named Percival looked on with more than a passing interest. Percival had come out of his winter hibernation that very tenday. He'd been surprised to find that Cadderly, his main source of the favored cacasa nuts, was nowhere to be found, and was

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even more surprised to see Kierkan Rufo, a human Percival didn't care for at all.

The squirrel could see that Rufo was in great distress, could smell the foulness of Rufo's illness, even from a distance.

Percival moved near his twig nest, nestled high in the branches, and continued to watch.