

# Chronicles of Athas

## Book Five

### The Rise and Fall of a Dragon King

#### Lynn Abbey

#### Chapter One

Nameless stars sparkled in the sky above the ancient city of Urik, casting a pale light on its black velvet fields, silver silk waterways, and the firelight jewels of its encircling market villages. On the towering walls of the mile-square city, a score of bas-relief sculptures stood guard in shadow grays and black, each an image of Sorcerer-King Hamanu, the Lion of Urik. With a sword in one hand and a scepter in the other, he kept watch over his domain.

A score of bright, sulphurous eyes looked out from the walls of Urik, bright motes of singular, unmistakable color in the chill, midnight air. Their light could be seen a day's journey beyond the irrigated fields. The eyes were beacons for honest travelers who journeyed during the cooler nighttime hours and warnings to covetous adventurers: The Lion of Urik never sleeps, never closes his eyes. King Hamanu's city could not be taken by surprise or pried from his pitiless grasp.

Within the city's walls, where the gemstone eyes did not shine, men and women wearing tunics of a similar sulphur color kept their king's laws, their king's peace, which should have been a simple enough task. Urik did not have many laws and they rarely, if ever, changed. King Hamanu's curfew had not changed since it was decreed a thousand years ago: Between the appearance of the tenth star after sundown and the start of the next day, no citizen—man or woman, child or slave—was allowed to set foot on the king's streets. By starlight, there should have been nothing for the king's templars to watch except each other.

But since the dawn of time—long before the Lion-King bestrode Urik's walls—the laws kings made applied only to the law-abiding folk of their domains. Wise kings made laws that wise folk willingly obeyed. Wiser kings learned that no net of laws could govern everyone beneath them, nor should they strive to do so. King Hamanu let the pots of Urik simmer nightly, and in a thousand years, they had boiled over no more than a handful of times.

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"Halt!" the yellow-robed templar commanded as he separated himself from a clot of similarly clad men and women. Here, within spitting distance of Urik's Elven Market, King Hamanu's minions coagulated for their own safety, traveling in threes and fours, rarely in pairs, never alone—especially at night.

The pair of mul slaves bearing a pole-slung sedan chair came to an easy-gaited halt that did not jostle their passenger. Four slave torchbearers arranged themselves in a diamond pattern around them. The muls set the chair gently on the cobblestones. They slipped the hardwood poles out of the carriage braces, then stood at attention, each resting a pole against his massively muscled left-side shoulder.

"Who breaks the king's curfew?" the templar demanded. The severity of his tone was belied by the continuing conversation of his peers beside him.

The lead torchbearer, a half-elf of singularly unpleasant appearance, looked down on the human templar with fourth-rank hemstitching in his left sleeve. "O Mighty One, we bear my lord Ursos," she answered confidently.

She had had no accent, save for the common accent of Urik, until she spoke her master's name

with the distinctive drawl of far-off Drajan. It beggared imagination that a Drajan lord would travel the curfewed streets of Urik—especially these anarchic times since the Dragon's demise and the simultaneous disappearance of King Hamanu's Drajan counterpart, Tectuktitlay.

The templar scowled. Whoever rode in the sedan chair, his name—or her name—wasn't likely Ursos.

"By whose leave does Lord Ursos break curfew?" he continued.

The half-elf shifted her torch to her left hand. She was unarmed, as were her five companions: slaves were, by Hamanu's law, unarmed. By law, all citizens, including lords who traveled in sedan chairs, were unarmed. Weapons were the templars' prerogative. The fourth-rank templar carried a staff not quite half as long as the muls' hardwood poles, and the half-elf's torch bore an uncanny resemblance to a gladiator's club, down to the leather wrapping on its haft and the egg-shaped killing stone lashed to its base.

He repeated himself, "By whose leave does your lord break curfew?" loudly and somewhat anxiously.

His wall-leaning peers at last abandoned their conversation. The slave's right arm disappeared in folds of her funnel-shaped sleeve. There was a moment of thick tension in the moonlight until it reappeared with a small leather pouch, which the templar passed to one of his companions for examination.

"By *your* leave, O Mighty One."

"It's all here," the inspecting templar announced, extracting two metallic pieces from the pouch before passing it to the templar beside him.

"The lion watch over you, then, and your lord," the first templar said as he retreated.

"And over you, O Mighty One," the slave replied, as much a curse as a blessing.

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The sedan chair and its escort stopped short of the Elven Market. Without hesitation, the party turned and disappeared into an alley whose existence couldn't have been discerned with the light of a score of pitch-soaked torches, much less the four they carried. Some distance into the cramped darkness, they stopped again. The half-elf rapped once on a hollow, drumlike door, and a rectangle of ruddy lantern light suddenly surrounded them. The muls carried the sedan chair across the threshold. The escort extinguished their torches and closed the door behind them.

Inside the vestibule, a person emerged from the chair. With his face obscured by an unadorned mask and his body swaddled in a drab cloak, it was easier to say what race Lord Ursos wasn't—not dwarf or mul, not halfling, nor full-grown elf—than what race he might be.

The ragged, menial slave who'd opened the door had run away when he saw the escorted sedan chair. He returned with another slave, of higher status, who was clad in pale, translucent linen that left no doubt about her sex. With a soft voice, she showed the escort where to leave the sedan chair, and then directed them down a corridor, to a door that provided discreet entrance to a boisterous tavern. When the escort was gone, the vestibule was once again silent—a silence so sudden and absolute one might suspect magic in the air. Without breaking that silence, the slave led the masked Lord Ursos down a narrow stairway to a curtained doorway. She bowed low before the curtain and swept her arm gracefully toward it, but made no move to pass between the rippling lengths of silk.

Lord Ursos strode past her, removing the drab cloak with one hand and the mask with the other as he swept through the silk into the upper gallery of an underground amphitheater. He was a lean, sinewy human, with the sunken features of a man who'd indulged his every passion, yet survived. With the casual contempt of an aristocrat, the lord held out his drab outer garments for a slave at the top of the amphitheater stairs. The slave hesitated, his arms half-extended.

"My lord," he whispered anxiously. "Who are—?" The slave caught himself; slaves did not ask such questions. "Do you—?" And caught himself again, in evident despair. No one, not even an elegant lord, entered this place without an invitation.

Lord Ursos understood. Smiling indulgently, he gestured with a dancer's swift grace. When he was finished, he held a delicate, star-shaped ceramic token between the tips of his thumb and forefinger.

"Ah—" The slave returned a smile as the token dropped into his hand. He relaxed audibly, visibly. "Your place is prepared, my lord. If my lord will simply follow me—?"

A place was indeed prepared, a place in the front row, along the rail, overlooking a circular pit floored with dark sand that sparkled in the light of wall-mounted torches. Another slave, who'd followed them down the amphitheater's steep, stair-cut ramp, offered the lord a shallow bowl filled with a thick, glistening fluid. The lord refused with another dancerlike gesture, and the bowl-bearer hurried away.

"My lord," the first slave began, his eyes lowered and his hands trembling. "Is there—? Would you prefer... a pipe, perhaps, or another beverage, a different beverage?"

"Nothing."

The lord's voice was deeper than the slave had expected; he retreated, stumbling, and barely regained his balance.

A certain type of man might come to this place for its entertainments, having paid handsomely in gold for the privilege. All the other men in the amphitheater—there were a score of guests, with several races represented, but no women among them—clutched bowls between their hands and metal sipping straws likewise gripped between their teeth. Their faces were slack, their eyes wide and fixed. A man who disdained the sipping bowl or the dream-pipe was a rare guest, a disturbing guest.

The second slave could not meet this guest's eyes again.

"Leave me," the lord commanded, and, gratefully, the slave escaped, his sandals slapping with unseemly vigor on the stairs.

The lord settled on the upholstered bench to which his token entitled him and waited patiently as another handful of guests arrived and were escorted to their appropriate places. Then, while the latecomers sucked and sipped, a door opened in the wall of the pit. Slaves entered first, wrestling a rack of bells and cymbals through the sand. Before the melodic discord faded, a quartet of musicians entered, swaddled completely in black and apparent only as velvet darkness on the sparkling sand.

Anticipation gripped the guests. Someone dropped his bowl. The clash of pottery shards echoed through the amphitheater, bringing hisses of disapproval from other guests, though not from the patient, empty-handed lord seated along the rail.

Another door opened, larger than the first, spreading a rectangle of ruddy light across the pit. The polished brass bells and cymbals cast fiery reflections among the guests, who ignored them. Nothing could draw their attention from the three low-wheeled carts being trundled onto the sand. An upright post of mekillot bone rose from each cart, a crossbar was lashed to each post, and a living mortal—two women and a man—was lashed to each crossbar, arms spread wide, as if in flight.

One of the women moaned as the wheels of her cart churned into the sand. Her strength failed. She sagged against the bonds holding her to the post and bar. The titillating scent of abject terror rose from the pit; patient Lord Ursos was patient no longer. He pushed back his sleeves and set his elbows upon the rail.

When the carts were set, the slaves departed, and the musicians struck a single tone: flute, lyre, bells, and cymbals together. It was a perfectly pitched counterpoint to the woman's moan. The fine hairs on the lord's bare arms rose in expectation as the night's master strode silently across the sand.

There were no words of introduction or explanation. None were needed. Everyone in the amphitheater—from the slaves in the top row of the gallery to those in the pit, especially those unfortunates bound against bone in the pit—knew what would happen next.

The night's master drew a little, curved knife from the depths of his robe. Its blade was steel, more precious than gold, and it gleamed in the torchlight when he brandished it for the guests. Then he angled it carefully, and its reflection illuminated a small portion of the bound man's flank. The prisoner gasped as the first cuts were made, one on either side of a floating rib, and howled as the master slowly peeled back his flesh. The lyrist took the first improvisation in the time-honored manner, weaving the middle tones together, leaving the highs for the chimes and the lows for the flute.

Brandishing his knife a second time, the master made a second, smaller, gash across the bloody

stream. He dipped his free hand in a pouch below his waist and smeared a white, crystalline powder into the new wound. The bound man gasped and strained against the crossbar. Tinkling cymbals framed his thin, close-mouthed wail, and the flutist blew a haunting note to unite them.

The bare-armed lord sat back from the rail. His sleeves fell, disregarded, back to his wrists as his eyes closed and his hands folded into fists. His breath came rapidly as the melody took shape in music and mortal suffering. The tones were too potent for some of the guests around him; they added their own whimpering harmonies to the night master's music. Symphony and empathy together sent a shiver along the lord's spine. But the shiver died before it reached his throat, and he alone, except for the master, remained silent.

The melody continued to evolve, not attaining its final form until the three captives were bleeding, weeping, and wailing: an eight-tone trope, four ascending, then the lowest, followed by a three-tone cascade through the middle range.

The dark passion of the night master's music quieted the lord's restless thoughts and gave him a moment of peace, but, born from mortal flesh as it was, the melody ended all too soon. One by one the captive voices failed. Where there had been music, only meat remained. The master departed, and then the musicians, the guests, and the slaves, also, until the lord was alone.

Utterly alone.

His lips parted, and music, at last, rose from his throat: an eight-tone trope, four ascending, then the lowest, followed by a three-tone cascade through the middle range.

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Much later, when all but Urik's rowdiest taverns had fallen into a stupor and templars drowsed against their spears, the midnight peace of one humble dwelling—a tiny room tucked beneath roof-ribs, broiling by day and frigid by night—was broken by an infant's angry squalling. The mother, sleeping on a rag-and-rope bed beside her man, awoke at once, but kept her eyes squeezed shut, as if sheer denial or force of will could quiet her unhappy daughter.

It was a futile hope. Tooth fever, that's what the infant's malady was called by the widowed crones, who sat all day beside the neighborhood wellhead. The baby would cry until her teeth came in and the swelling in her gums subsided. Both mother and daughter were lucky to have gotten any sleep at all.

"Do something," the man grumbled, rolling away from her, taking her blanket with him to pile over his ears.

He was a good man: never drank, never raised his voice or fist, but went out at dawn each morning and sweated all day in the kiln-blast of his uncle's pottery. He was afraid of his daughter, astonished that something so pale and delicate would, if Fortune's wheel were as round and true as his uncle's, someday call him Father. He wanted to do well by his offspring, but now, when all she needed was warm hands and a swaying shoulder, he was reduced to surly helplessness. So, the woman swung her legs over the side and swept her tangled hair out of her eyes.

There was light in the room. She silently cursed herself for leaving the lamp lit. An open flame was a danger to them—her man and her daughter and every other mortal in the neighborhood. It was also a waste of oil, a waste of money, which was scant these days, with her unable to work. In the instant before her vision cleared, the mother saw disaster in her mind's eye: her man, groggy because he hadn't slept and clumsy for the same reason, blundering against the kiln, screaming, and dooming them all to poverty, to death.

With that image fresh in her thoughts, she was too distracted to cry out when she saw another woman—a stranger—sitting on the stool beside her daughter's cradle. She reached blindly for the lamp, which was not lit. The light came from the stranger; it surrounded her and the infant.

"Lame..."

That word, her man's name, came weakly from the mother's tongue. It failed to rouse Lame, but drew the attention of the dark-haired stranger whose eyes, when she turned, were huge in her face and

gray as the infant's.

"Rest you, now," the stranger said in a sweet and gentle twilight voice. "Rest you... Cissa. Come the sun and your daughter's pain will be gone."

"Yes," Cissa agreed slowly. A part of her was caught in panic: a stranger in her home, a stranger holding her daughter. A stranger whom Cissa would have remembered if she'd ever seen her before, a stranger who sat bathed in light that had no source. "Lame—" she called more strongly than before. "Lame."

"Rest you, both," the stranger insisted. "The child is safe with me."

"Safe," Cissa repeated. The stranger's smile wrapped its arms around her and vanquished her panic. "Safe. Yes, safe."

"None in Urik is safer," the stranger agreed, and Cissa, at last, believed.

She returned to the rumpled bed where her man's warm shadow beckoned.

The radiant, gray-eyed stranger gave her attention back to the infant. She was not one for gurgly noises or nonsense syllables or mimicking a kank's jointed antennae with her fingers. She charmed the pained and weary child with a wordless lullaby.

The infant's fists unclenched. Her little furrowed face relaxed when the stranger stroked her down-covered scalp. The child reached for a thick lock of the stranger's midnight hair. They shared a trilling note of laughter, and then the stranger sang again—an eight-tone trope, four ascending, then the lowest, then a three-tone cascade through the middle range—theme and variations until the tooth had risen and the infant slept easy in a stranger's arms.

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He began his journey when the air was cool and the day no more than a bright promise above the eastern rooftops. With his bowl tucked inside his tattered, skimpy tunic and his crutch wedged beneath his shoulder, he made his way from the alley where he slept, safe and warm beneath a year's accumulation of rubbish, to the northwest corner of Joiner's Square. The baker's shop on that corner had a stoop that was shaded all day and wider than its door—wide enough for a crippled beggar to sit, plying the trade he'd never chosen to master. He inconvenienced no one, especially Nouri, the baker, who sometimes let him scrounge crumbs off the floor at the end of the day.

It was a long journey from his alley to the baker's shop, and a treacherous one. The least mistake planting his crutch among the cobblestones would throw him off his unsteady feet. He was careful, wriggling the crutch a bit each time he set it down before entrusting it with his weight and balance.

When he was sure of it, he'd grip the shaft in both hands and then—holding his breath, always holding his breath for that risky moment—hop his good leg forward. Then he'd drag his crippled leg, his aching, useless leg, afterward.

His shoulder hurt worse than the leg by the time he could see the baker's stoop ahead of him. The beggar-king to whom he paid his dues said he should forego the crutch, said he'd live longer and earn more if he dragged himself along with his arms. And it might come to that. Some days the sun was noon-high before the numbness in his arm subsided from his morning journey. He had pride, though. He'd stand and walk as best he could until he had no choice, and then, maybe, he'd simply choose to die.

But not today.

"Hey, cripple-boy! Slow down, cripple-boy."

A handful of gravel came with the greeting. He shook it off and planted his crutch in the next likely spot. He couldn't slow down, not without stopping entirely; didn't dare twist around to count his tormentors. Bullies, he knew from long experience, seldom went alone.

"Hey, cripple-boy! I'm talkin' to you, cripple-boy!"

"Cripple-boy—what's the difference between you an' a snake?"

There were three of them, he had that knowledge before a meaty hand clamped across the back of his neck and shook him hard.

"Snakes don't die till sundown, cripple-boy, but you're gonna die *now*."

He hit the cobblestones with his crutch in his hands, for all the good it would do him. He didn't recognize them, certainly hadn't ever done them any harm. That wouldn't matter. They were predators; he was prey. It was as simple as that, and as quick. There was an alley behind him, and though a whole man would undoubtedly say that its shadows and debris would work to a predator's advantage, not his, he dragged himself toward it, still clinging to his crutch.

The trio behind were whole men and able to see advantage in the alley. The nearest wrested the crutch away while the other two seized the beggar by the hair and belt and threw him bodily into the alley's deep shadows.

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Nouri couldn't have said what drew him out of his shop's oven-filled courtyard and put him at the counter at just that moment. Perhaps he'd had a reason and forgotten it. Dawn was the end of his day. His customers were workmen, laborers who bought their bread first thing in the morning, ate what they needed, and took the crusts home to feed their families when their work was done. Perhaps, though, it was the Lion's whim: an urge of fortune best blamed on Urik's mighty king. Either way, or something else entirely, Nouri was behind the counter, staring out the open door, when the adolescent thugs seized the beggar.

*His beggar.*

Father had always said a beggar was good for business—a polite and clean beggar with an obvious but not hideous deformity. The crippled boy was all that, and more: His wits weren't afflicted. He kept an eye on the street, an open ear for passing conversation, for thieves and thugs and, on occasion, profit.

If the boy had ever asked, Nouri would have given him a nighttime place beneath the counter. But the boy was proud, in his way; he wouldn't take charity, not above his place on the stoop or a few broken crusts of bread.

Nouri was always a bit relieved when he heard the boy thump and settle on the stoop. Urik was a dangerous place for anyone who didn't have a door to lock himself behind. In his heart, Nouri had known that the morning would come when the beggar wouldn't appear. But he hadn't imagined the boy would come to his end not fifty paces from his shop's stoop.

The tools of Nouri's trade hung on the wall behind him. Not least among them was the wedge-shaped mallet he used to beat down the risen dough between kneadings; it could be used for beating down other things... murderous young thugs who thought a crippled boy was fair game.

Nouri's wife, Maya, and his three journeymen were in courtyard unloading the oven. Maya would have stopped him if she'd seen him with the mallet in his hand, heading out the door. And the journeymen would have been some assurance of his own safety: he was bigger than any of the youths, but not all of them together. If he'd taken the time to think at all, he might well have thought better of justice. Urik had enough beggars, and his stoop was an attractive place for their trade; he'd have another soon enough. Nouri wasn't a templar or a thug; he'd never struck a man in anger, not even his apprentices, who deserved a beating now and again.

But Nouri didn't stop to think. He crossed the street and charged down the alley at a flat-out run. With a backhand swing of the mallet, he caught the laggard of the trio from behind. The youth went down with a shout that alerted his companions, the biggest of whom was also the closest. Paste-faced with fear, the thug tried to defend himself with the crippled boy's crutch, but the weight of Nouri's mallet swept the lighter shaft aside.

The baker delivered a blow that shattered teeth and released a spray of blood and saliva from the thug's mouth. Nouri was defenseless and vulnerable in the wake of the violence he'd done, but the third thug didn't linger to press his advantage. The last youth hied himself out of the alley without a backward glance for his bloodied and fallen companions.

"Get out," Nouri suggested in a voice he scarcely recognized as his own. "Get out now, and don't show your faces around here again."

It was good advice, and Bloodymouth retained the wit to take it. He hauled his stunned companion to his feet, and with arms linked around each other for support, they beat a clumsy retreat to the street.

With his free hand, Nouri retrieved the undamaged crutch. Aside from his own pounding pulse and ragged breathing, there were no other sounds in the alley, no other movements. Nothing at all to say he wasn't alone.

"Boy?" he called into the shadows. "Janni?" He thought that was the boy's name; *you* or *bay* were usually sufficient to get his attention when he sat on the stoop. "Don't be afraid, boy. Are you hurt, boy?"

Then, fearing the worst—that he'd been too late—Nouri set down both mallet and crutch. He waded into the shadows and began flinging rubbish aside before familiar sounds snared his attention: *tap*, *thump*, and *drag*; *tap*, *thump*, and *drag* again. The cold hand of fear clutched the baker's heart as he turned toward the light and the street.

Janni, the crippled boy, reached the stoop while Nouri watched. He lowered himself to the flat stone, same as he did each morning, and secured his crutch behind him before arranging his twisted leg on the cobblestones where passersby and Nouri's customers could see both it and the wrapped-straw begging bowl.

"Whim of the Lion," Nouri whispered. His hands had risen of their own will to cover his heart. He forced them down to his sides, though his fear had not abated, and the foreboding had only just begun.

"What have I done?" he asked himself.

The kneading mallet lay where he'd left it, bloodstained the same as Nouri's shirt. But the crutch... was gone. The only crutch Nouri could see was the one propped against his shop's wall.

"Whim of the Lion," he repeated and turned back to the shadows as his gut heaved.

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Hamanu, the Lion of Urik, King of the World, King of the Mountains and the Plains, and a score of other titles claimed during his thousand-year rule of the city, could soften be found on the highest roof of his sprawling palace. The royal apartments were on the roof. The doors and chambers could have accommodated a half-giant, though the furnishings were scaled for a human man, and austere as well, despite their gilding and bright enamel.

The king sat at a black marble table outside the lattice-walled apartments and stared absently toward the east, where the sun had risen an hour earlier. Hamanu hummed a tune as he sat, an eight-tone trope. A hint of midnight's coolness clung to the shadow behind him. A robe of lustrous silk hung loosely about his powerful torso. Its dull crimson color perfectly complemented his tawny gold skin and the black mane that swept back from a smooth, intelligent forehead to fall in thick, shiny elflocks against his shoulders.

There was no softness anywhere about him. His eyes held the deep yellow color of ripe agafari blossoms; his lips were firm and dark above a beardless chin. The faint crinkles around his eyes might have marked him as a man of good humor, who enjoyed a frequent, hearty laugh—but they could as easily be the brands of a cruel nature.

A sword of steel so fine it shone like silver in the sun rested blade-up in an ebony rack behind the king. Two darkly seething obsidian spheres sat on cushioned pedestals, one at the sword's tip, the other beside its hilt. Suits of polished armor in various sizes and styles stood ready on the backs of straw men. The armor showed signs of wear, but not a trace of the gritty, yellow dust that was the bane of Urik's housekeepers, as if the king's mere presence were enough to control the vagaries of wind and weather—which it was.

Hamanu blinked and stirred, shedding distraction as he rose from his chair. A balustrade of rampant lions defined the roof's edge. He leaned his hand on a carved stone mane and squinted hard at his domain until he'd seen what he needed to see, heard what he wanted to hear. His face relaxed. His thoughts drifted to more familiar places: the mind of his personal steward these last hundred years.

*Enver, it's time.*

The dwarf's answer came in obedience, not words, as he abandoned his breakfast and hurried toward the roof, shouting orders left and right as he ran.

Hamanu smiled and patted the stone lion lightly on its head. He'd had a satisfying night, last night. This morning he was disposed to indulgence and good humor.

He was seated behind the marble table again when Enver made his appearance, leading a small herd of slaves bearing breakfast trays and baskets filled with petitions and bribes.

"Omniscience, the bloody sun of Athas shines brightly on you and all your domain this morning!" Enver announced with reverence and a well-practiced bow from the waist.

"Does it, now?" Hamanu replied with arch inflection. "Whatever has happened, dear Enver?" Indulgence did not preclude—and good humor well-nigh demanded—a taste of mortal fear before breakfast.

"Nothing, Omniscience," the dwarf replied, flustered with piquant terror.

The slaves behind Enver clumped into a cowering mass that endangered the safe arrival of Hamanu's breakfast. He didn't need to eat. There was very little that Hamanu *needed* to do. But he wanted his breakfast, and he wanted it on the table, not the floor or splattered across the day's petitions.

"Good, Enver." Hamanu's smile had teeth: blunt, human teeth, though, like everything else about him, that could change in a eye blink. "Exactly as it should be. Exactly as I expect."

Enver bobbed a less-enthusiastic smile and the slaves shuttled trays and baskets to the table before scurrying to the far corner of the roof and the out-of-sight safety of the stairway. Hamanu caught their relieved sighs in his preternatural hearing. He could hear anything in Urik, if he chose to listen; his vision was almost as keen. More than that, he could kill with a thought and draw sustenance from a mortal's dying breath.

And sometimes he did—for no reason greater than whim or boredom or aching appetite. But today, a loaf of fresh-baked bread was the only sustenance that interested him. With manners to equal the most pampered noblewoman's, the king broke the loaf apart, then dipped a small, steaming chunk in amber honey before raising it to his lips.

Fear was intoxicating, but fear could not compare to the changeable taste and texture of a yeast-risen mixture of flour and water when it was still hot from the oven.

"Enver," Hamanu said between morsels, "there's a bakery at the northeast corner of Joiner's Square—"

"It shall be closed at once, Omniscience, and the baker sent to the mines," Enver eagerly assured him, adding another bow and an arm-wave flourish for good measure.

The dwarf was more than Hamanu's steward; he was a templar, an executor, the highest rank within the civil bureau. Enver's left sleeve was so laced with precious metal and silk that it fell a handspan beyond his fingertips as he remained folded in the depth of his bow. It was a ridiculous pose and a futile attempt on Enver's part to hide his disapproval behind an obsequious mask. The fear was back as well, a fetid vapor in the warming air.

Hamanu ignored the temptation, trying instead to remember if he'd been either more capricious or predictable of late. He strove to remember each day precisely as it happened, but after thirteen ages it was difficult to separate memory from dreams. A man like Enver, or the druid-templar Pavek, or any one of his score of current favorites, had simpler memories and a more reliable conscience.

Today, however, Enver had exercised his conscience needlessly.

"I have something else in mind, dear Enver. The baker there—" He paused, casting his thoughts adrift in Urik until they found the mind he wanted—"Nouri Nouri'son, he saved my life this morning."

Enver straightened his spine and his sleeve. "Omniscience, may I inquire how this occurred?"

"Oh, the usual way." Hamanu sopped up honey with another morsel of bread, chewed it slowly, savoring both it and the dwarf's bursting curiosity. "The streets were dirty. I'd retreated into an alley to cleanse them, but this baker, Nouri Nouri'son, took it upon himself to rescue me with a kneading mallet."

"Remarkable, Omniscience."

"True. All-too-sadly true. He was so intent on saving me that he let the criminals get away."



"Get away, Omniscience? Not for long, surely."

"No, no, dear Enver. They live, two of them, anyway. They seemed—how do you so charmingly put it?—they seemed to have learned a lesson, and I could hardly overrule the baker's justice, could I?"

Enver shook his head. "But you're watching them, Omniscience?"

"Dear Enver, of course I'm watching them. Even now I'm watching them. But, we were talking about the baker, weren't we? Yes. I have a task for you. I want two sacks of the finest flour—not warehouse flour, but *my* flour, white himali from the palace—taken to that baker's shop on Joiner's Square, and a purse of silver, too—else he'll fire the ovens with inix dung! Tell him he is to bake a score of loaves, the best loaves he's ever baked, and to deliver them to the palace before sundown."

The dwarf's grin was as broad and round as Guthay on New Year's Eve. The executor was quick with numbers and devious despite his rigorous conscience. Nouri Nouri'son could buy a year's worth of charcoal with a purseful of silver, and unless the man were a complete failure at his trade, he could make a hundred loaves with two sacks of palace flour.

"I shall be seen, Omniscience," Enver said, more eagerly than before. "The merchant lords, the high templars, the nobles, too, and all their cooks, I shall be seen by them all, Omniscience. By sundown the entire city will know you're eating bread baked by Nouri Nouri'son. They'll stand in line outside his doors."

"Mind you, dear Enver, it's a small shop on a small square. I think, perhaps, *half* the city would be sufficient. A quarter might be wiser."

"Word will spread, Omniscience."

Hamanu nodded. No one would have noticed three bodies in an alley. No one *had* noticed the solitary corpse he'd left in a doorway somewhat south of the square. But a generous gesture, that would change lives in ways not even he could predict.

"Is that all, Omniscience?"

The king nodded, then called his steward back. If he was going to make a generous gesture to the man who saved his life, he might as well make a similar gesture to the one whose life he'd borrowed. "There'll be a beggar on the stoop. A human youth with a crippled leg. Put something useful in his bowl."

"Oh, yes, Omniscience! Will that be all, Omniscience?"

"One last thing, before you return to the palace, hie yourself to the fountain in Lion's Square and throw a coin over the edge."

Enver's grin faded as his eyes widened. "Omniscience, what should I wish for?"

"Why—that Nouri Nouri'son's bread is as good as his kneading mallet, what else?"

## Chapter Two

Hamanu's morning audiences began when Enver left the roof. They ended when the king had broken the seal on the last scroll in the baskets on his marble table and had summoned, by a mind-bending prick of conscience, the last petitioner in the unwindowed and, therefore, stifling, waiting chamber below.

Sometimes petitioners abandoned their quest for a private audience before they felt the unforgettable terror of their king's presence in their thoughts. Sometimes Hamanu didn't second-guess a petitioner's misgiving. Other times he pursued the tender-hearted spirit throughout Urik and beyond; he had that power. After thirteen ages of practice, Hamanu could give his whims wills of their own and set them free to wander his city as he himself did almost every night, borrowing shape and memory—stealing them—and making another life his own for a moment, a year, or a lifetime.

Hamanu had a handful of willful whims and stolen shapes loose in the city just then, and touched them lightly as the day's last petitioner climbed the stairs. A thief who'd shown creative promise in his craft had seized a woman—a child, really, half his age—and forced her to the ground in the kitchen yard of her own modest home.

The king seared the thief's mind and flesh with a single thought. The last image that passed

through the thief's senses was the woman screaming as her rapist's hot blood burst over her. Then the thief was thoroughly dead, and the last petitioner was walking across the palace roof.

The civil bureau templars who prepared the petitions—for fees, bribes, and other favors—had written the plea of a merchant named Eden. Hamanu had mistaken Eden for a man's name, and mistaken the mind he'd touched moments ago for a man's mind, too. Everyone made mistakes. Enver notwithstanding, Hamanu was not omniscient. He didn't know everything and couldn't know everything about a living mind. The dead were another matter, of course. A dead mind yielded all its secrets, after which it was useless. Hamanu didn't kill for secrets.

Deceit was another matter.

He watched the merchant—Eden—lift the hem of her gown and step over the blasted remains of the day's most unfortunate petitioner. Most unfortunate, so far.

Her mind was filled with disgust, not fear. For the corpse, Hamanu hoped. As himself—as Hamanu, King of Urik—he dealt with few women, save templars and whores. His reputation was burdened with an ancient layer of tarnish. Respectable families hid their wives and daughters from him, as if that had ever protected anyone.

This Eden, with her white linen gown, pulled-back hair, and unpainted face, was the epitome of respectability. Far more respectable than the young nobleman—the late, young nobleman—whose bowels were beginning to stink in the brutal sunlight.

Hamanu didn't truly mind that Renady Soleuse had inherited his estate through the proven expedient of slaughtering his father and his brothers and the rest of his inconvenient kin; link's king didn't meddle in family affairs. And Hamanu wasn't outraged that the accusations of water-theft Renady leveled against his neighbors were whole-cloth lies; audacity was, in truth, a reliable pathway to royal favor. But the young man had lied when Hamanu had asked questions about the financial health of the Soleuse estate, and worse, the fool had counted on a defiler charlatan's lizard-skin charm to protect him while he lied.

Hamanu killed for deceit.

The hereditary honor of Soleuse had been extinguished with thought and fire, both somewhat sorcerous in origin and wielded with a soldier's precision. Now, Hamanu and Urik were short a noble family to manage the farms and folk the Soleuse had been lord to. Most likely he'd offer the honor to Enver. After more than an age overseeing a king's private life, Hamanu judged that the affairs of a noble estate should be child's play for the likes of Enver. But, perhaps he'd offer the spoils of Soleuse to this Eden, this plain half-elf woman with a man's name.

He'd hate to have to kill her. Two petitioners in one morning: that was both careless and wasteful.

"Why are you here?" Hamanu asked. His templars had written that she offered trade. No surprise there: she was a merchant; trade was her life's work. But, what sort of trade? "Recount."

She hesitated, moistening her lips with a pasty tongue and wrinkling her linen gown between anxious fingers. "O Mighty King of Urik, King of Athas, King of the Mountains—" Her face turned as pale as her gown: she'd lost the rhythm of his titles and her mind—Hamanu knew for certain—had gone blank.

"And so on," he said helpfully. "You have my attention."

"I am charged with a message from my husband, Chorlas, colleague of the House of Werlithaen."

"I know the name Werlithaen," Hamanu admitted. As the name implied, the Werlithaen were elves. Three generations back, they'd been elves who'd exchanged their kank herds for the tumult of Urik's almost-legal Elven Market. About an age ago, a few of the tribe had abandoned the Market for the civilized ways of the merchant houses. A step down, no doubt, in the eyes of the Werlithaen kindred, and sufficient to account for Eden's plain, diluted features.

The petition had mentioned trade, not a message, but knowledge was sometimes more valuable than water or gold and a sound basis for trade. Eden hadn't yet deceived him.

"What manner of message?" the king continued, curious as to the sort of bargain this woman would offer.

Eden made what appeared to be another nervous gesture, fondling the large, pale-green ceramic

beads of her bracelet. There was a *click* that earned Hamanu's undivided attention, and when her hands separated, a coil of parchment bounced in her trembling fingers.

It could just as easily have been a poison dart or a magician's charm, neither of which could have harmed him. Hamanu was, above all else, not the tawny-skinned human man he appeared to be. But his guards should have found it. There'd be an accounting before sunset.

"My husband bade me give you this."

The coil dropped from her fingers onto the black marble table. Hamanu retrieved it and read the words Chorlas had written, telling about three hundred wooden staves caravanned east, out of Nibenay, to a deserted oasis and left, unattended, by moonlight. The staves appeared to be plain brown wood, according to Chorlas, who was in a position to know, having been the owner of that east-bound caravan. But the staves left stains on the palms of the caravaneers who handled them and, afterward, the formerly brown wood had acquired a distinctly bronze-metallic sheen.

Agafari wood, no doubt, Nibenay's most precious resource and a reliable weapon against the serrated obsidian edges of Urik's standard-issue swords. Urik and Nibenay weren't at war, not openly, though there hadn't been true peace between the Lion and the Shadow-King since they'd laid claim to their respective domains long ago. And there'd been no trade between the cities these last three years, for which lapse there were as many reasons as there were grudges between Hamanu and his brother monarch, not least of which was the misfortunate ambition of a Urikite templar named Elabon Escrissar.

Indeed, at the moment, no legal trade passed between Urik and any other city in the old human-dominated heartland. No visitors, either. Folk stayed within Hamanu's purview, if that's where they were when he'd issued his decree, or they stayed outside it, under penalty of death.

There was trade, of course; no city was entirely self-sufficient, though, with well-stocked warehouses, Hamanu's Urik could withstand a siege of many years. The laws merely complicated and compounded the risks all merchants knowingly took when they carried goods among the rival city-states, and gave Hamanu the pretext—as if he needed one—to interfere.

"Was your husband in Nibenay when he wrote this?" Hamanu asked mildly, maliciously. If she lied, he'd know it instantly. If she told the truth, she'd be an accomplice in illegal trade, the punishment for which—at a minimum—was the loss of an eye.

"He was, O Mighty King. He sent this at great risk and bade me bring it here at once. And I did—" she raised her head and, despite crashing waves of cold-blooded terror, met Hamanu's smoldering stare with her own. "*Five* days ago, O Mighty King."

So, she dared to be indignant with him. On a bad day, that was a death sentence; today, it intrigued him. Hamanu ran a fingertip over Chorlas's words, reading the man who'd written them.

"There was another message," he concluded.

"Only that I was to come directly to you, O Mighty King, as I have already said."

"Your husband has placed you in great danger, dear lady, or do you claim not to know that it is against my laws to have discourse or trade with the Nibenese?"

"O Mighty King, my husband is Urikite born and raised."

Hamanu nodded. His edict isolating Urik from the anarchy spreading across Athas in the wake of the Dragon's demise had sundered families, especially the great, far-flung merchant dynasties, and his was not the only such edict: Tyr and Gulg and Nibenay itself had raised similar prohibitions;

Giustenal had never been without them. But trade and risk were inseparable, as the woman standing before him surely knew.

"That changes nothing, dear lady. I have forbidden all commerce. You have imperiled your life at your husband's bidding. *Your* life, dear lady, not his. And for what? What trade could justify the risk?" Hamanu could imagine several, but Eden might surprise him, and notwithstanding the content of the message she'd brought him, which was itself enough to merit reward, Hamanu cherished surprises.

Anxiety froze Eden's tongue in her mouth; Hamanu despaired of any surprise, then she spoke:

"O Mighty King, my husband and I, we judge it likely that the king of Nibenay is arming Urik's enemies."

"And?" Hamanu demanded. Her reasoning, though concurred with his own, wasn't the surprise

he'd hoped for.

"My husband is old, O Mighty King. He took me into his house when my mother died, as a favor to *her* father, who'd been a friend in their youths. Chorlas raised me as his granddaughter, and then, when I was old enough, he made me his wife." Her voice broke, not with bitterness, but with that rarest of all mortal passions: lifelong love. "My husband's heart is weak, O Mighty King, and his senses are not so sharp as they once were. Nibenay is not his home, O Mighty King. He doesn't wish to die there without having seen the sun set against the yellow walls or the Lion's fountain one last time."

"So he sends you to tell me that Nibenay arms my enemies? That the House of Werlithaen supplies the caravan? And for this mote of good news he expects me to leave Urik's gates ajar so he might return?"

"Yes, O Mighty King. My husband knows the precise location of the deserted oasis; it was not charted on any of his maps—until now."

"The master merchant of Werlithaen thinks that because he did not know the location of an oasis, then / would not know it either."

"Yes, O Mighty King," Eden repeated. Chorlas of Werlithaen had raised her well. She was afraid of him; that was only wise, but fear was not her master. She continued, "It lies outside Urik's purview; outside Nibenay's, as well. It is an oasis of death under Giustenal."

Wish for a surprise and get an unpleasant one. Once again Hamanu ran his fingertip over the writing. Five days, she'd said, since she had presented herself to his templars. Ten days, perhaps, since the words beneath his sensitive fingertip had been written. And how many days had passed between Chorlas's leaving the agafari staves for Giustenal's howling army and Chorlas's writing a message to his dear wife? Three, at best, if an old man had overcome elven prejudice, got himself a swift riding kank, then rode the bug into the ground.

Hamanu had his own spies, and those who rode kanks were ever in need of new bugs. He would hear about the staves, the oasis, and Giustenal's ambitions, but he hadn't heard it yet. He touched her mind, a gentle feather's touch that aroused neither her defenses nor her fears. She hadn't eaten in three days, not for poverty, but because her husband had returned to Urik. Chorlas was hiding in the slave quarters of their comfortable home. Between beats of Eden's heart, Hamanu found her Urik home and Chorlas within it. The elf was old and honest, for an elven merchant. His heart was weak, and he did truly wish to die within the massive yellow walls.

"What is your trade, Eden of House Werlithaen? Do you wish to die in Urik, like your husband?"

"O Mighty King, I do not care where I die," she said evenly. "But while I live, I wish to see my city's enemies ground beneath the heel of my king."

Hamanu laughed—what else could any man do, face-to-face with a bloodthirsty woman? He took amber resin from a small box and held it in his hand until it was pliable. "I shall count it treason, then, if my templars do not report seeing you and your emeritus husband beside the Lion Fountain before sunset." He marked the resin with his sea ring, then hardened it again with icy breath.

Her face was pleasing and far from plain when she smiled.

\* \* \* \* \*

The ever-efficient Enver had completed his tasks in Joiner's Square and returned to the palace before Eden departed, still smiling. Perhaps he passed her on his way to the roof with the usual herd of slaves in his wake, armed, this time, with buckets and bristle brushes. Hamanu didn't ask, didn't pry, anymore than Enver asked about the Soleuse corpse.

Enver was, however, adamantly uninterested in becoming the Soleuse lord.

"Omniscience," the dwarf said from a bow so deep his forehead touched his knees. "Have I or my heirs displeased you so much?"

"Of course not, dear Enver." It was not a question that merited an answer, except that there was no way Enver could have seen his king's grimace. "But after what?—almost three ages between you and your father, is it not? Perhaps you're ready for a change."

"Your welfare is my family's life, Omniscience. More than life, it is our eternal honor."

"I can remove any lingering focus—"

Enver straightened suddenly, with such a look of outrage on his face that Hamanu was obliged to sit back a hair's breadth in his chair.

"I'd sooner die."

"Later, then, dear Enver. In the meantime, *who* was in charge downstairs this morning? That fool—" Hamanu flicked a forefinger at the wet spot where Renady had died and the slaves were now scrubbing furiously—"stood before me wearing a *charm*, dear Enver, a charlatan's lizard-skin charm which no one had confiscated. And later, a woman stood where you're standing and removed a message from a bead as large as your thumb! A useful message, to be sure— Nibenay's sent agafari staves to Giustenal—but someone downstairs was more than careless, and I want that someone sent to the obsidian pits."

Enver knew which investigator had been in charge of the waiting room: the face floated instantly to the surface of the dwarf's mind, along with numerous details of the templar's currently troubled life—his mother had died, his father was ailing, his wife was pregnant, and his piles were painfully swollen—none of which mattered to Hamanu.

"To the pits, dear Enver," he said coldly.

And Enver, who surely knew he had no private thoughts when he stood before his king, nodded quickly. "To the pits, immediately, Omniscience." Not as a slave, as Hamanu had intended, but as an overseer, with his sleeve threads intact. The image was crystal clear in Enver's mind.

Hamanu didn't quibble. Left to his own devices, his rule over Urik would be rigid and far too harsh for mortal survival. Left to his own devices, he'd rule over a realm of the undead, as Dregoth did beneath Giustenal. Instead, Hamanu culled his templars, generation after generation, plucking out the debauched, the perverse, and the cruel— like the late Elabon Escrissar, who'd contributed to the latest Nibenese pickle—for his personal amusement. The others, the foursquare, almost-upright folk, he selected to translate his unforgiving harshness into bearable justice.

Enver, being one of the latter, was indeed too valuable to exile off to the Soleuse farmlands. Hamanu tolerated Enver's benign deceit as he'd tolerated Escrissar's malignancy. Both were essential parts of his thousand-year reign in the yellow-walled city. He'd have to find someone else for Soleuse.

In the meantime, the slaves had finished their labor. All that remained of Renady Soleuse was a fading wet spot beneath the brutal sun.

Morning was nearly afternoon when Hamanu prepared to go downstairs and deal with his city's larger and more public affairs. Burnished armor and robes of state had been laid out for his approval, which he gave, as he almost invariably did, with no more than a cursory glance at his wardrobe.

A patterned silk canopy had been erected over the pool where he would bathe alone, completely without attendants. It was time, once again, for loyal Enver to depart.

"I await your next summons, Omniscience," the dwarf assured him as he herded the slaves down the stairs.

Hamanu waited until all his senses, natural and preternatural, were quiet and he knew he was alone. A shimmering sphere shrouded his right hand as he stood up from his table: a shimmering sphere from which a black talon as long as an elf's forefinger emerged. With it, Hamanu scored the air in front of him, as if it were a carcass hung for gutting and butchering.

Mist seeped from the otherwise invisible wound, then, thrusting both hands into the mist, Hamanu widened the gap. Miniature gray clouds billowed momentarily around his forearms. When the sun had boiled them away, Hamanu held a carefully folded robe that was, by color and cloth, a perfect match for the robe he wore, likewise the linen and sandals piled atop the silk. He dropped the sandals at once and kicked one under the table. He dropped the silk after he'd shaken out the folds, and let the linen fall on top of it.

When Hamanu was satisfied that he'd created the impression of a heedless king shedding garments without regard for their worth, the dazzling sphere reappeared around his right hand. It grew quickly, encompassing first his arm and shoulder, finally all-of him, including his head. The man-shaped

shimmer swelled until it was half again as tall as Hamanu, the human man, had been. Then, as quickly as it had appeared and spread, the dazzle was gone, and a creature like no other in the city, nor anywhere beneath the bloody sun, stood in his place.

Stark naked, Hamanu looked down upon what he had become. He fought nausea, or the memory of nausea, since even so minor a mortality as nausea had been denied to him for ages. Rajaat, the War-Bringer, the first sorcerer, had seen to that. But Rajaat had not made Hamanu what he was. Rajaat had had a vision, Hamanu had had another, and for the last thirteen ages, Hamanu's vision had prevailed.

His skin was pure black, a dull, fathomless shade of ash and soot, stretched taut over a scaffold of bones too long, too thick, too misshapen to be counted among any of the Rebirth races. There were hollows between his ribs and between the paired bones of his arms and legs. The undead runners of the barrens carried more flesh than Urik's gaunt Lion-King. Seeing Hamanu, no mortal would believe that anything so spindly could be alive, much less move with effortless grace to the bathing pool, as he did.

He paused at the edge. The still water of the bathing pool was an imperfect mirror. It showed him yellow eyes and ivory fangs, but it couldn't resolve the darkness that had replaced his face. With taloned fingertips, Hamanu explored the sharp angles of his cheeks, the hairless ridge of his brows and the crest that erupted from his narrowing skull. His ears remained in their customary place and customary fluted form. His nose had collapsed, what—two ages ago? or was it three? or even four? And his lips... Hamanu imagined they'd become hard cartilage, like inix lips; he was grateful that he'd never seen them.

Hamanu's feet had lengthened over the ages. He walked more comfortably on his toes than on his heels. His knees had drawn up, and though he could still straighten his legs when it suited him, they were most often flexed. Stepping down into the water, his movements resembled a bird's, not a man's.

He dived to the bottom of the pool and rose again to the surface. Habits that thirteen ages of transformation could not erase brought his hands up to slick nonexistent hair away from his eyes. For a heartbeat—Hamanu's hollow chest contained a heart; he hoped it remained human, though he couldn't know for certain—he sank limply through the water. Then the skeletal arms pumped once, demonstrating no lack of strength, and lifted his entire body out of the water.

The gaunt, black king had the power to hover motionless in the air or to fly faster than any raptor. Hamanu chose, instead, to return to the pool's embrace with a spectacular, unappreciated splash. He rolled onto his back and tumbled through the clear, warm water like a cart's wheel until he'd raised waves high enough to leave puddles on the roof. He was oblivious to everything except his own amusement until a bolt of pain lanced from his forefinger to his spine.

Roaring a curse at the four corners of the world, Hamanu made a fist and studied the pale red and gray sliver protruding through the soot-black flesh. It was bone, of course, human bone, another tiny fragment of his ancient humanity lost, now, forever. He pinched it between two talons and jerked it free.

A mortal man would have died from the shock. A mortal man *did* die. Deep within Hamanu's psyche, a mortal man died a hundred times for every year of his immortal life. He would continue to die, bit by bit, until there was nothing left and Rajaat's metamorphic spell would have completed its dirty work. The metamorphosis should have been complete ages ago, but Hamanu, when he'd understood what Rajaat had intended, had set his will against the War-Bringer. The immortal king of Urik could neither stop nor reverse his inexorable transformation; he slowed its progress through deprivation and starvation.

When his loathsome shape was concealed in a tangible human glamour, Hamanu ate with gusto and drew no nourishment from his food. In his own form, Hamanu lived with agony and hunger, both of which he'd hardened himself against. He could not die and had long since reached the limits of unnatural withering. Hamanu endured and swore that by force of will alone he'd deny Rajaat's spell until the end of time.

A bead of viscous blood the color and temperature of molten lava distended Hamanu's knuckle. He stared at it with disgust, then thrust his fist beneath the water. Stinking steam broke the surface as a sinuous black coil streamed away from the open wound. Hamanu sighed, closed his eyes, and with a sun-warmed thought, congealed his blood into a rock-hard scab.

Another lost battle in a war that had known no victories: magic in any form fueled the metamorphosis. Hamanu rarely cast spells in their traditional form and was miserly with his templars, yet his very thoughts were magic and all his glammers. Each act of defiance brought him closer to ultimate defeat. Even so—and though no one glimpsing him in his bathing pool would suspect it—Hamanu was far closer to the human he'd been at birth than to what Rajaat intended him to become. Within his still-human heart, Hamanu believed that in the battle between time and transformation, he would be triumphant.

Dispersing the uncongealed blood with a swirl of his hands, Hamanu left the bath with his confidence restored. He stood with hands resting on the lion balustrade, letting the sun dry his back, while he surveyed the city.

At this hour, with the red sun just past its zenith, Urik rested quieter than it did at midnight. Nothing moved save for a clutch of immature kes'treks making lazy spirals above the walls of the Elven Market. Slaves, freemen, nobles, and templars; men and women; elves, humans, dwarves, and all the folk who fell between had gone in search of shadows and shelter from the fierce heat. There was no one bold or foolish enough to gaze at the sun-hammered palace roof where a lone silhouette loomed against the dusty sky.

Hamanu touched the minds of his minions throughout the city, as a man might run his tongue along the backs of his teeth, counting them after a brawl. Half of the citizens were asleep and dreaming. One was with a woman; another with a man. The rest were lying still, hoarding their thoughts and energy. He did not disturb them.

His own thoughts drifted back to the woman, Eden, and her message. He asked himself if it was likely that the Shadow-King Nibenay, once called Gallard, Bane of Gnomes, would send staves of his precious agafari wood to their undead peer in blasted Giustenal. The answer, without hesitation, was yes—for a price.

There was no love lost between any of Rajaat's champions, including Dregoth of Giustenal and Gallard. They didn't trust each other enough for unrequited generosity. They didn't trust each other at all. It had taken a dragon, Borys of Ebe in the full culmination of Rajaat's metamorphosis, to hold the champions to the one cause that demanded their cooperation: maintaining the wards on their creator's netherworld prison, a thing they called the Hollow beneath a place they called the Black.

Hamanu recalled the day, over five years earlier, when Borys had been vanquished, along with several other champions. For one afternoon, for the first time in a thousand years, Rajaat had been free. The fact that Rajaat was no longer free and had been returned to his Hollow owed nothing to the cooperation of the three champions who'd survived Borys's death and Rajaat's resurrection. They distrusted each other so much that they'd stood aside and let a mortal woman—a half-elf named Sadira of Tyr—set the prison wards.

It had been different long ago, in the Year of Enemy's Fury in the 177th King's Age. After Borys first set the wards on Rajaat's Hollow, there'd been nearly a score of immortal sorcerers ruling their proud heartland cities. With the passage of thirteen ages, they'd winnowed themselves down to seven. Then a decade ago, Kalak, the Tyrant of Tyr, had been brought down by his own ambition and a handful of mortal rebels, including one of his own high templars and Sadira, the same Sadira who'd vanquished Borys and reset the wards around Rajaat's Hollow.

In the Lion-King's judgment, Kalak was a fool, a careless fool who'd deserved the crime committed against him. Kalak was no champion. Hamanu had, perhaps, trusted the Tyrant of Tyr more than he trusted his peers, but he'd respected him less. He cursed Kalak's name each time it resurrected itself in his memory. Kalak's demise had left an unfillable hole in Tyr, the oldest—if not the largest, wealthiest, or most powerful—city in the heartland. And now, thanks in no small part to the subsequent behavior of the rebels who'd killed their immortal sorcerer-king, the thrones of Balic, Raam, and Draj were vacant, too.

It was easier to list who among Rajaat's champions was left: himself, Gallard in Nibenay, Inenek in Gulg, and undead Dregoth in Giustenal—none of them a dragon.

So long as Rajaat was securely imprisoned in the Hollow beneath the Black, Hamanu didn't object to the missing dragon.

Once Borys had completed Rajaat's metamorphosis and walked the heartland as a dragon, Borys had ruled everyone. Even the immortal sorcerers in their proud city-states had jumped to a dragon's whim. There had been wars, of course—cities devastated and abandoned—but the balance of power never truly changed. What Borys demanded, Borys got, because he kept Rajaat confined in the Hollow.

Now Borys was gone, a handful of thriving city-states had empty thrones, and the only thing keeping immortal greed in check was the knowledge that every surviving champion carried in his or her bones: use too much magic, draw too much spell-quicken power from the Dark Lens or any other source, and become the next dragon.

The prospect might have tempted some of them—though never Hamanu—if they hadn't all watched helplessly as a maddened, mindless Borys ravaged the heartland immediately after they'd cast the spells to complete *his* metamorphosis. For his first hundred years, wherever Borys went, he sucked the life out of everything. When he was done, the heartland was the parched, blasted barren place it remained to this day.

Dregoth *had* already succumbed to temptation and drawn the wrath of his immortal peers. Borys had rounded them up for a second time, and they'd found a fitting eternal punishment for immortal hubris: they'd ruined his city and stripped all living flesh from the proud Ravager of Giants. He remained the champion he'd been on the day of his death, but he'd never be anything more. Dregoth was what folk called undead, *kaiskarga* in the halfling tongue, the oldest of the many languages Hamanu knew.

In shame, and under the threat of worse punishment, Dregoth had dwelt for ages beneath his ruined city. Mortal chroniclers forgot Dregoth, but his peers remembered— especially Uyness of Waverly, whom living mortals had called Abalach-Re, Queen of Raam, and whom Dregoth remembered as his betrayer.

Now Uyness was dead with Borys, and Dregoth wanted Raam's empty throne. Hamanu reasoned that Nibenay might well support Giustenal's ambitions in that direction with agafari staves, because, whether or not he conquered every empty-throned city, Dregoth could never become another dragon as Borys had been. Like as not, Gallard would support Dregoth no matter which city the undead champion had designs upon. Like as not, Gallard—who fancied himself the most subtle of Rajaat's champions—hoped there'd come a day when he and Dregoth were the only champions left. If the price of attaining dragonkind was the annihilation of every mortal life in a city or three, how much easier to pay when none of the cities in peril were one's own?

Gallard had that much conscience, at least. Kalak hadn't hesitated at the thought of consuming Tyr. That's what got him killed by his own subject citizens and templars, but Kalak of Tyr had been a fool and freebooter from the start, long before the champions were created.

And Hamanu of Urik—what had he been before he was an immortal champion?

Hamanu's thoughts sluiced sideways. In his mind's eye, he was suddenly far away from his precious city. He stood in another place, another time: a field of golden-ripe himali grain surrounded by hardworking kith and kin. Warm summer breezes lifted his hair and dried the sweat on his back. There was a hay rake in his youthful hands. A youngster—a brother too small to cut grain or rake—sat nearby with reed pipes against his lips, diverting the harvesters as they labored. The brother's tune was lost to time along with his name. But the dark-haired, gray-eyed maiden who stood behind the boy in memory, swaying in the music's rhythm, her name would never be forgotten while the Lion-King lived: Dorean.

For Dorean, Hamanu had become a man in his family's eyes. For him, Dorean had become a woman. The life that had once lain before them, filled with fields of grain, growing children, and a love that never needed words, was the only life Hamanu had ever wanted. If he'd done right by Dorean, if he'd protected her, as a man was sworn to do, he never would have seen the walls of Urik.

His body would lie beside hers, turned to dust and dirt a hundred times over.

A shadow wind sundered Hamanu's memory. He released the balustrade and turned around. A dusty breeze took shape, as tall as he was, yet far broader.

"Windreaver," he said flatly as the shape became substantial and the last commander of the troll army stood between him and the pool.



As big as half-giants, as clever as elves or dwarves, trolls had been formidable enemies for a champion-led army, and Windreaver had been—and remained—the most formidable of the trolls. He'd lived and fought for two ages before he and a fifty-year-old Hamanu faced each other and Windreaver fought his last battle. A wispy curtain of silver hair hung around his swept-back ears, and the wrinkles above his bald brow were as pronounced as the brow ridge itself. Age had not dulled Windreaver's obsidian eyes. They were as bright, black, and sharp on the palace roof as they had been on the windswept cliff high above a wrackened sea.

"Lose your wits?" Windreaver asked. If hate ever needed a voice, the troll stood ready to provide it. "Baking your brain till it's charred like the rest of you?"

Hamanu hissed, an effective, contemptuous gesture in his unnatural shape. When hate was measured, he and Windreaver were peers. If Enver was one aspect of Hamanu's conscience, Windreaver was the other.

The troll would have preferred to die with the rest of his kind; Hamanu had not offered a choice. Windreaver's body had become dust and dirt, as Hamanu's had not, but Windreaver lived, succored by the same starving magic that sustained Hamanu. He was an immortal reminder of genocide to the conquered and to the conqueror who had committed it.

"Look, there, on the horizon," Windreaver pointed to the southwest, toward distant Nibenay, exporter and abandoner of poorly stained agafari staves. "What do you see?"

"What did *you* see?" Hamanu retorted. "A bundle of sticks laid beside an old well?"

Windreaver served Hamanu. The troll had had no choice in that, either. The King of Urik could abide guilt and hate, but never useless things, be they living, dead, or in between. Windreaver was Hamanu's most trusted spy; the spy he sent to shadow his peers, his fellow champions.

"Do I need a fire to comfort me in my old age?" the troll retorted.

"Not when you can bring me bad news."

The troll chuckled, showing blunt teeth in a jaw that could crush stone. "The worst, O Mighty Master. There's an army forming on the plains beyond Nibenay. Old Gallard does not lead it—not yet. But I've skirled through the commanders' tents, and I've seen the maps drawn in blood on the tanned hides of Urikite templars. Nibenay's coming, Manu; mark me well, I know what I have seen. What Gallard sends to Giustenal doesn't matter. Gallard, Bane of Gnomes, means to become Gallard, Bane of Urik."

Hamanu bared his dripping fangs in contempt and disbelief.

Gallard might be marching—toward Tyr perhaps, or more distant Draji. Draji had been Lord Ursos's home until two years ago, and amid the lord's debauched memories were images of its bloody anarchy. Gallard wouldn't waste his army against Urik's walls, not while Draji's throne sat empty. It was impolite to march across another champion's purview, but not unprecedented.

"You're wrong this time, Windreaver. You've overreached yourself."

Disappointed, Windreaver sucked air and tried again. "He brings his children, his thousand times a thousand children. He will set them in your place, and you will do his bidding, and I will hover about you, a swarm of stinging gnats to blind your eyes as you weep. Where are your children, Lion-King of Urik?"

A thousand years had sharpened the troll's tongue to an acid edge. His final question lanced an old, old wound. Hamanu hissed again, and the dust that was Windreaver swirled apart. "Urik is my child, with fifty thousand hearts, each braver than yours. Go back to Nibenay. Sting Gallard's eyes, if you dare. Listen to his words when there's no one else about to hear them, then tell me of his plans."

Dust rose on its own wind and was gone. Hamanu inspected the armor and garments the slaves had laid out for him. His taloned hand trembled as it made another misty gray slit in the afternoon's torrid air. Anger, he told himself as he shoved armor and garments together into the trackless netherworld. Rage at Windreaver, because the troll had done what he always did, and at himself, because this time the barbs had struck home.

Urik *was* his child, his only child. He'd face them all—Gallard, Dregoth, anyone who dared threaten Urik. He'd risk the fate Rajaat laid before him, but for Urik's sake, he'd win. The Lion-King had

never lost a battle, except for the very first.

A dazzlement surrounded his hand again and spread from there across his seared, withered form. When it was done, he was a tawny-skinned, black-haired man again, taller than he'd been at breakfast and brawnier, garbed in illusions of the panoply he'd hidden in the netherworld. His manicured hands no longer trembled; that was illusion, too.

There was a way, if they all came at him, all at once and in all their strength and he had to choose between himself and his city.... At least, Hamanu thought there was a way to preserve Urik. But the risks were incalculable, and he'd require the cooperation of a man who was, in his simple way, as extraordinary as any champion, a man who kept his own conscience and who served a primal force that couldn't be coerced.

The time, perhaps, had come to secure that man's sympathy. Without it, there could be a dragon more terrible than Borys roaming the heartland.

"I'll tell the whole story, in writing," Hamanu said to the rampant lions lining his balustrade. "When he has read it through, then he can judge for himself, and if he judges favorably, the Urik guardian will respect his plea when he calls."

### Chapter Three

Long after nightfall, when the slaves were locked in their quarters and the nightwatch templars drowsed in the corridors, Hamanu of Urik retreated from the rooftops and public chambers of his palace to its deepest heart, far from mortal eyes. Hamanu's midnight sanctum was a hidden cloister that resembled a peasant village; including a well and mud-walled cottages. Mountain vistas from a greener time were painted on the walls. A variety of common tools were available for working the vegetable plots, but the vines had turned to sticks and straw. The fruit trees bore neither fruit nor leaves.

The cloister's solitary door was always bolted, from the inside. When Hamanu visited his sanctum, he entered magically, stepping out of the same Unseen netherworld where he hid his clothes. Once inside, he sometimes opened the door, admitting Enver or another trusted person for a meal or conversation. But most times, when Hamanu came to his sanctum, he came to sit alone on a crude stone bench, bathed in starlight and memory.

This night, ten nights after Hamanu had heard Eden's and Windreaver's messages, ten nights, too, after he'd sent Enver kank-back across the northeast salt flats, the Lion of Urik shifted his bulk on his familiar stone bench. He'd brought a battered table to the cloister. It stood before him, crowned with a sheaf of pearly, luminous—virgin—vellum, upon which no marks had been made. An ink stone, oil, and a curved brass stylus lay beside the vellum, waiting for the king to complete the task he'd set for himself.

Or rather, to begin.

Hamanu had thought it would be easy—telling his story in script, letting silent letters do the work of mind-bending or sorcery. He'd thought he'd have it written by the time Enver returned with Pavek, his self-exiled high templar, the earnest, novice druid upon whom Hamanu pinned such hope. He'd been wrong, as he hadn't been wrong in a king's age or more. The words were there in his mind, more numerous than the stars above him, but they writhed like snakes in a pit. He'd reach for one and find another, a different word that roused a dusty memory that he couldn't release until he'd examined it thoroughly.

He'd thought these chance recollections were amusing at first. Then, he deceived himself into believing such wayward thoughts would help him weave his story together. Those optimistic moments were over. He'd shed his delusions several nights ago: Writing was more difficult than sorcery. Hamanu had conquered every sorcery beneath the blood-red sun; the vellum remained blank. He was well along the path to desperation.

Six days ago, Enver had used his medallion to recount his safe arrival in the—from Enver's urban perspective—depressingly primitive druid village of Quraite. A few hours ago, at sundown, the dwarf had used his medallion again to recount—very wearily—that he and Pavek and half of Enver's original

war-bureau escort were nearing Urik's gates.

*What happened to the other half of the escort?* Hamanu had thought of revenge—his messengers traveled under his personal protection, his personal vengeance—but mostly he'd hoped for distraction, for anything that would rescue him from midnight and the ink stone.

*Left behind, Omniscience: This Pavek is a loon, Omniscience. "Come home," I said to him, Omniscience, as you told me to, and the next thing I knew, he was mounted and giving orders like a commandant. He does not stop to eat or rest, Omniscience; he doesn't sleep. Four of your prize kanks are dead, Omniscience; ridden to exhaustion. If the ones we're riding now don't collapse beneath us, we'll be at Khelo by dawn. Whim of the Lion, we'll be in Urik by midday, Omniscience, else this Pavek will have killed us all.*

*I'll alert your sons, dear Enver,* Hamanu had promised, looking east toward Khelo and the reflection of the setting sun. *Your weariness will be rewarded.*

Well rewarded. Since there was no excuse for vengeance, Hamanu had spent the early evening arranging proper welcomes for both the dwarf and the druid. Enver's sons had been warned of their father's impending return. A feast with cool wine and the sweet fruit the old templar loved was already in the throes of preparation. House Pavek, formerly House Escrissar, the residence that Hamanu had assigned for Pavek's city use, had been unlocked for the first time in two years. Freeman and women had been hired; Pavek would not be served by slaves. Larders had been restocked, windows had been unboarded, and the rooms were airing out by the time the moons had risen.

Everything would be ready—except Hamanu's history.

There were no distractions in the cloister, no excuses left unused. There was nothing but this last night before Pavek's arrival and the sheaf of virgin vellum. With an unappreciated sigh, Hamanu smeared oil on the ink stone and swirled the stylus in a black pool.

He'd thought it would be easy, but he'd never told the whole story, the true story, to anyone—including himself—and, with the stars sliding toward dawn, he still didn't know where to start.

"Recount," he urged himself. "Begin at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end, but, at the very least, *begin!*"

\* \* \* \* \*

You know me as Hamanu, the Lion of Urik, King of the World, King of the Mountains and the Plains, the Great King, the Mighty King, King of the World. I am the bulwark of war and of peace wherever I hang my shield.

My generosity is legend... and capricious. My justice is renowned... for its cruelty. My name is an instrument of vengeance whispered in shadows. My eyes are the conscience of my city.

In Urik, I am called god, and god I am, but I did not choose to be anyone's god, least of all my own.

I was not born immortal, invincible, or eternal.

I was born a human infant more than a thousand years ago, in the waning years of the 176th King's Age. As the sun ascended in the Year of Dragon's Contemplation, my mother took to the straw and bore me, the fifth of my father's sons. She named me Manu, and before my black hair dried, she had wrapped me in linen and carried me to the Gelds, where my kin harvested himali. My father tucked a golden ear between my swaddled hands. He lifted me and the ripened grain toward the sun.

He gave thanks for the gifts of life, for healthy children and bountiful harvests. Without the gifts of life, a man would be forever poor; with them, he needed nothing more.

The women who had attended my mother and followed her to the fields passed around hot himali cakes sweetened with honey and young wine. All my kin—from my father's father's mother to a cousin born ten days before me—and the other families of Deche, our village, joined the celebration of a life beginning. Before sundown, all the women had embraced me, that I might know I was cherished. Each man had lofted me gently above his head and caught me again, that I might know the safety of strong hands around me.

I remember this because my mother often told me the story while I was still young and because such were the customs of a Deche family whenever a child was born. Yet, I also remember the day of my birth because now I am Hamanu and my memory is not what it was when I was a mortal man. I remember everything that has happened to me. After a thousand years, most of what I remember is a repetition of something else; I cannot always say with certainty when a thing happened, only that it did, many, many times.

Perfect memory is another portion of the curse Rajaat placed on the champions he created: I am jaded by my memories. Every day, I seek a new experience, one that does not echo endlessly through my past. I delve deeper and deeper into the mire of mortal passion, hoping for a moment I have not lived before, but I was born once, and once only. The memory of that day still shines as bright as the sun, as bright as my mother and father's faces.

Deche was a pleasant, prosperous place to be a child. It was pleasant because every family was well housed and well fed; my grandfather's family was the best housed and best fed of all. It was prosperous because the Cleansing Wars had raged since the 174th King's Age, and armies always need what villages provide: fighters and food.

Deche owed its existence to the wars. My ancestors had followed Myron Troll-Scorcher's first sweep through the northeastern heartland when the Rebirth races— humankind's younger cousins: elves, dwarves, trolls, gnomes, pixies, and all the others except halflings—were cast out. My ancestors were farmers, though, not fighters. Once the army turned the trolls into refugees, my ancestors settled in a Kreegill Mountain valley, east of Yaramuke.

But Deche had never been a troll village. The trolls were mountain dwellers, stone-men—miners and quarriers. Throughout their history, they traded with the other races for their food and necessities. That was their mistake, their doom.

Dependence made them vulnerable. Myron of Yoram— *the first* Troll-Scorcher—could have sealed the trolls in the Kreegills and their other strongholds. He could have starved them out in a score of years. He would have needed sorcery, of course, if he'd besieged them, and sorcery would have laid waste to the Kreegills. The valleys would have become ash and dust. Deche wouldn't have been founded. I wouldn't have been born....

So much would have been different if Myron Troll-Scorcher had been different. Not better, certainly not for Urik, which would never have risen to glory without me. Simply different. But Myron of Yoram was what he was: a vast, sweeping fool who drove the trolls out of the Kreegills with a vast, sweeping advance. He turned the stone-men into the stone-hearted fighters that his army could never again defeat.

Later, when *I* was the Troll-Scorcher, it *was* different. Much different. But that was later.

When I was born, the pixies were gone, the ogres and the centaurs, too. The center of the heartland—what was left of the once-green heartland after the Pixie-Blight, the Ogre-Naught, and the Centaur-Crusher had purged those races from it—belonged to humankind. The remaining wars were fought along the perimeter. Myron of Yoram fought trolls in the far northeast, where the barrens reach beyond sunrise to the middle of last night.

Once the trolls abandoned the Kreegills, it was destiny that human farmers would clear the valleys. All the rest was destiny, too.

After my birth, my destiny was tied to the Troll-Scorcher in ways that no one in Deche had the wisdom or magic to foresee. We weren't ignorant of our place in the Cleansing Wars. Twice a year, our grain-loaded wagons rumbled down to the plains where the Troll-Scorcher's bailiffs bought and sold. Men went down with the wagons; women, too. They gave their names to the bailiffs and got a weapon in return.

Sometimes—not often—veterans returned to Deche. My middle brother didn't, but an uncle had, years before I was born. He'd lost one leg above the knee, the other below, to a single swipe from a troll-held axe. In time, all of his children made their way to the bailiffs. One of those cousins returned when I was ten. He had all his limbs, but his eyes were haunted, and his wits had been seared. He cried out in his dreams, and his wife would not sleep beside him.

I asked him what had happened, what had he seen?

"Fire," he said. "Fire as bright as the sun. Trolls screaming as their skin burned. Flames exploding from their eyes."

My cousin's words frightened me. I saw what he had seen, as if it were my own memory... as it is my own memory, now. When the Troll-Scorcher slew, he slew by fire that consumed from within. That was Rajaan's sorcery: all his champions can kill anything with a thought. Each champion had and retains a unique killing way that brings terror as well as death. But I was ten and ignorant of my destiny. With frightened tears on my cheeks, I ran from my cousin to my father.

"Don't make me go. Don't send me to the trolls! I don't want to see the fire-eyes!"

Father held me in his arms until I was myself again. He told me there was never any shortage of folk who wanted to join the Troll-Scorcher's army. If I didn't want to fight, I could stay in Deche all my life, if I wanted to, as he, my father, had done. As I clung to him, believing his words with all my heart and taking comfort from them, Dorean joined us. Silently, she took my hand between hers and brought it to her cheek.

She kissed my trembling fingertips.

It was likely that Dorean was a few years older than I; no one knew for certain. She'd been born far to the east of the Kreegills, where the war between the trolls and the Troll-Scorcher was an everyday reality. Maybe she'd been born in a village. More likely she'd been born in one of the wagons that followed the army wherever it went. Then her luck ran out. Myron of Yoram, whose idea of a picket line was a man holding the thong of a sack of rancid broy, left his flank unguarded. Troll marauders nipped his ribs, and Dorean was an orphan.

The bailiffs brought her out of danger; they did that out of their own conscience—loading their empty wagons with orphans and the wounded and bringing them back where trolls hadn't been seen in generations. Later, when the army was mine, I would remember what the bailiffs had done and reward them. But that day when I was ten and I looked beyond my father's arms, my eyes beheld Dorean's beauty for the first time, and the untimely vision of living torches was banished from my mind's eye.

"I will stay with you, Manu."

Surely Dorean had spoken to me before, but I had never truly heard her voice and, though I was young, I knew that I had found the missing piece of my heart.

"I will take Dorean as my wife," I told my father, my tears and fears already forgotten. "I will build her a house beneath the cool trees, and she will give me children. You must tell Grandfather. He cannot handfast her with anyone else."

My father laughed. He was a big man with a barrel chest. His laugh carried from one side of Deche to the other. Dorean blushed. She ran away with her hands held against her ears, but she wasn't displeased—

And Father spoke with Grandfather.

I had six years to fall in love with Dorean, and her with me. Six years to build a tree-shaded house. Six years, too, to perfect my wedding dance. I confess I spent more time up in the troll ruins perfecting my dance to the tunes my youngest brother piped than I did making mud bricks for the walls of Dorean's house.

In the way of children, I'd forgotten my cousin's memories of trolls with flaming eyes. I suppose I'd even forgotten the tears that first drew Dorean to my side. But something of my mad cousin's vision must have lingered in the neglected depths of my memory. I never followed the himali wagons down to the plains, yet the trolls fascinated me, and I spent many days exploring their ruined homes high in the Kreegills.

The script of my own race remained meaningless to me, but I deciphered the inscriptions I found on the troll monuments. I learned their names and the names of the gods they chiseled into the stone they'd quarried. I saw how they'd panicked when they saw the Troll-Scorcher's army in the valleys below them, abandoning their homes, leaving everything behind.

Stone bowls sat on stone tables, waiting for soup that would never be served.

Their benches were made from stone, their beds, too; I was awed by what I imagined as their

strength, their hardness. In time, I identified the tattered remnants of their blankets and mattresses in the dust-catcher corners, but my awe was, by then, entrenched.

Rock-headed mauls lay where they'd fallen beside half-cut stone. Their erdland-bone hafts had withstood the winds and weather of two king's ages. I could guess the damage such things could do to a human skull. But the mauls weren't weapons; I never found any weapons more deadly than a single-edged knife in the stone ruins.

In truth, the trolls were a placid race until Rajaat raised his champions and the champions raised their armies. Myron of Yoram taught the trolls to fear, to fight, and, finally, to hate the very thought of humankind. Yet, it is also true that Deche and the trolls could have prospered together in the Kreegill, if Rajaat had not interfered. Men did not quarry, and trolls did not farm. By the time I was born, though, there was no mercy left in either race. It was too late for peace, too late for anything but annihilation. Rajaat and the Troll-Scorcher had seen to that.

It was too late for Dorean. My beautiful bride remembered her life before Deche and could not bear the mention of trolls. To her, the gray-skinned trolls were evil incarnate. As the sun rose each day, she slipped outside the village and made a burnt-honey victory offering for the Troll-Scorcher. Her hatred was understandable: she'd seen trolls and their carnage. I'd seen only their ruins. My thoughts about trolls were whirling mysteries, even to me.

In Deche, boys became men on their sixteenth birthday. I could have taken Dorean into my almost-finished house, but the elders asked us to wait until the next himali crop was in the ground. Dorean and I were already lovers; the delay was no hardship to us. We would be wedded before our child was born.

The day of my birth looms bright in my memory, but the day that looms largest was the Height of Sun in my seventeenth year—the Year of Enemy's Vengeance, the day Dorean and I were to be wed. I remember the bloody sun as it rose over the Kreegill ridge, the spicy aromas of the food the women began to serve, the sounds of laughter, congratulations, and my cousin's pipes as I began the dance I had practiced for years. With music and motion, I told the world that I would cherish Dorean, protect her, and keep her safe from all harm.

I was still dancing when drumbeats began to echo off the mountains above us. For a handful of heartbeats, the throbbing was part of my dance. Then my crippled uncle screamed, "Wardrums!" and another veteran shouted, "Trolls!" as he bolted from the feast.

We had no time to flee or hide, scarcely enough time for panic. Trolls surged into Deche from every quarter, their battle-axes swinging freely. As I remember now, with greater knowledge and the hindsight of thirteen ages, I know there could not have been more than twenty trolls, not counting the drummers hiding outside the village. But that morning, my eyes beheld hundreds of gray-skinned beasts wearing polished armor and bearing bloody weapons.

Fear made me bold, reckless. I had no weapons and wouldn't have known what to do with a sword, axe, or spear, if one had suddenly blossomed in my hands. In the midst of screaming confusion, I charged the nearest troll with my naked fists and never saw the blow that laid me flat.

I've been spared the true history of that day, with all its horror and agony: not even Rajaat's champions can hope—or dread—the memory of what happened while they lay unconscious. I choose to believe that the village was dead before the butchery began, that all my kith and kin died swiftly, and that Dorean died first of all. My mind knows that I deceive my heart, because my mind learned what the trolls did when they defeated humanity: Their women drew our men's guts through slits in their bellies or broke apart their ribs and seized their still-beating hearts. What their men did to our women, no matter their age or beauty, would be best forgotten—

If I could forget.

Vengeance was mine, in the fullness of time; my conscience does not trouble me, but I am grateful that I cannot remember Deche's desecration. Destiny had dealt me a glancing blow to the side of my head, then destiny covered me in the refuse of what would have been my wedding feast and my home. The trolls didn't spare me, they simply didn't find me.

The sun had set when I next opened my eyes. My head was on fire, but that wasn't what made

me blink. A half-congealed drop of blood struck my cheek as I lay there wondering how I'd survived, wishing I hadn't. The eviscerated corpse of someone I had known, but no longer recognized, hung directly above me. I was showered with gore and offal.

When I'd conquered my despair, I could hear flames crackling nearby—the source of the light that had revealed the corpse. I heard the deep-throated laughter of drunkenness.

Trolls, I thought. They'd massacred Deche and stayed to celebrate their deeds in its ruins. I had no notion how many trolls remained, nor any hope that my second attack against them would be more successful than my first. I didn't much care either way. My fingers explored the ground beside me and clutched a rock somewhat larger than my fist. Armed with it and numb courage, I gained my feet and lunged for the nearest head.

She seemed twice my size in the firelight. Drunk or not, she heard me coming and swatted me down. I was laid out on the damp ground, staring at the sky with a sore head, a busted lip, and tears leaking out my eyes. A score of strangers laughed. When I tried to stand, someone planted a foot on my chest.

He'd've been wiser to kick me senseless: I still had my rock and put it to good use.

The man went down, and I got up, trying to connect what I saw with what I remembered. I remembered trolls, but the drunken sods were human. They'd been guzzling Deche wine, keeping warm around a fire built from chairs, tables, and doors. Carnage was everywhere: hacked apart bodies, bodies with their faces torn off. Bugs were already crawling, and the stench—

The sods didn't notice, or didn't care, but I'd never smelt violent death before. I gaped like an erdlu hatchling and coughed up acid from my gut.

"You from around here, boy?"

I turned toward the voice—

And saw what the trolls had done to her, to my Dorean. Dead or alive, they'd torn away her wedding gown and bound her to the post beside the village well. Her face was gone, her breasts, too; she was clothed in blood and viscera. I recognized her by her long, black hair, the yellow flowers in it, and the unborn child whose cord they'd tied around her neck.

A scream was born in my heart and died there. I couldn't move, not even to turn away or fall.

"What's your name, boy?" another sod demanded.

My mind was empty; I didn't know.

"Can't talk. Doesn't know his name. Must be the village loon."

"Hungry, loon?"

Another voice, maybe a new one, maybe not. I heard the words as if they came from a great distance. A warm, moist clod struck my arm and landed in the dirt at my feet. My mind said stew-pot meat, but my heart said something else. More clods came my way, more laughter, too. I began to shiver uncontrollably.

"Clamp your maws!" a woman interrupted sharply.

Hard hands grasped my shoulders and spun me around. I lost my balance and leaned against the woman—the best of a sorry lot of humanity—I'd attacked with the rock. She was shorter than I, but numb and hopeless, I needed her strength.

"Dolts! Can't you guess? This was *his* village, his folk—"

"Why ain't he strung-out dead, like the rest of them?"

"He's the loon—"

"He ran off. Turned his yellow tail and ran."

I stiffened with rage, but the woman held me tight. Her eyes told me to be quiet.

"He got conked, that's what," she said, defending me.

Her hand brushed my hair. It was a gentle touch, but it awakened the pain both in my skull and in my heart. I flinched away with a gasp.

"Clipped him hard. He's lucky he's not dead or blind."

Lucky—the very last word I would have chosen, but it broke the spell that had bound my voice.

"My name is Manu," I told them. "This place was called Deche. It was my home until the trolls

came this morning. Who are you? Why are you here? Why do you eat with the dead?"

"You hear that?" one of the sods said with a drunken hoot. " 'Why do you eat with the dead'—fancy talk for a moon-touched farm boy."

I knew who they were by then. There was, truly, only one possibility: These were the soldiers of the Troll-Scorcher's army. They'd pursued their enemy—*my* enemy—back to the Kreegills.

"Where are the trolls? Have you avenged our deaths?"

There were more hoots and wails of laughter until an otherwise silent yellow-haired man got to his feet. The mockery died, but looking into this veteran's cold, hard eyes, I was not reassured.

"You ain't dead yet, farm boy, 'less you're tryin' to get yourself killed w' fancy words."

He had the air of leadership about him, just as my grandfather had had. The woman beside me had gone soft with fear. His stare lashed me like a whip. I was expected to fear him, too. And I did. I'd measured myself against the Troll-Scorcher's soldiers and knew myself to be less than the least of them in every way save one: I was cleverer. I could see them for what they were. They scorned me, so I stood tall. They mocked my speech, so I chose my words with extra care.

"I'll speak plainly: We farmers are told the-Troll-Scorcher's army swears an oath to uphold our race and pursue each and every troll to an unhallowed grave. I see how you uphold the folk of Deche; now show me the trolls in their unhallowed graves."

The yellow-haired man cocked his fist, but my clothes were stained with the blood of my kith and kin. While I met his stare with one of my own, he didn't dare strike me.

"Where are the trolls?" I demanded. "Have they returned to the plains? Have they ravished Corlane as they ravished Deche?" Corlane was another Kreegill village, somewhat higher in the valley. "Have they vanished into the mountains above us? I know their old places. I can take you to them."

Behind my eyes I saw the folk of Corlane not as I had known them, but as my own people were: mutilated, faceless, and bleeding. I felt nothing for them; I felt nothing at all, except the need for vengeance.

"You can slaughter them as they slaughtered Deche."

"Slaughter!" the yellow-haired man snorted. "Us? Us slaughtering trolls? Risking *our* lives for the likes of them... or you?"

There was a secret in his eyes. I saw that, and a challenge. He'd answer my questions if I had the guts, the gall, to ask them, but he didn't think I'd survive the knowing. Perhaps, I wouldn't have if he hadn't tempered me, then and there, in his contempt.

"Why are you here?" I demanded, returning to my earlier questions. "Why do you feast with the dead as witnesses?"

Why don't you hunt and slaughter the trolls who hunted and slaughtered us?"

The yellow-haired man smiled. His teeth were stained, and one was sharpened to a fang point. "That's for the Troll-Scorcher, boy. He's the one, the only one, who slays trolls. We hunt 'em, boy, an' hunt 'em an' hunt 'em, but that's all we do. *He* comes an' scorches 'em. We touch one gray wart an' we'd be the ones getting cindered-up from the inside out. I seen it happen, boy. This"—he cocked his callused thumb at poor Dorean—"this ain't nothing, boy, compared to scorching. Trolls could take you an' yours a thousand times, an' it don't matter to me, so long as there's trolls for scorchin' when *he* comes."

I stood mute, strung between disgust and rage. The woman beside me squeezed my arm.

"It's the truth, boy," she said.

Swallowing my disgust, I let my rage speak, soft, slow, and cold. "Where is Myron of Yoram?" I asked. "When does the Troll-Scorcher come?" I thought I knew the answer, but I needed to hear it.

Another smile from the yellow-haired man. "Maybe tomorrow, maybe the next day. We been following these trolls since the start of High Sun." The grin soured. "He knows where we are, boy. He'll come when it suits him, not before. Till then, we follow the trolls an' we follow 'em close, so no *man* knows we're here."

"I'm a man," I said, "I know."

He drew a bone knife from his belt. "Trolls leave meat behind, not men."

I should have died. Everything I loved and cherished had already died. Their shades called me



through the darkness. I belonged with Deche, with my family, with my beloved. But my rage was stronger and my thirst for vengeance against trolls, men, and Myron of Yoram couldn't be slaked by death. A voice I scarcely recognized as my own stirred in my throat.

"Take me with you," I said. "Let me follow the trolls with you until the Troll-Scorcher comes."

"A good-for-nothing farmer's boy? What can you do, boy—besides dig furrows in the dirt?"

"I'll keep him," the woman, still beside me, said before I could speak.

"Jikkana! Jikkana! You break my heart," another man cried out in mock grief. "He's a *boy*. He won't last ten nights in your bed!"

She spun around. "My second-best knife says he lasts longer than you did!"

Her knife was never at risk.

\* \* \* \* \*

A lavender glow had appeared above the painted mountains on the eastern wall of Hamanu's cloister. The quiet of night gave way to the barked commands of the day-watch officers taking their posts along the city's walls. Another Urik morning had begun. Setting his stylus aside, Urik's king massaged his cramped fingers. Bold, black characters marched precisely across several sheets of pearly vellum. Several more lay scrunched and scattered through the neglected garden. Two sheets remained untouched.

"I'll need more vellum," Hamanu mused, "and more time."

## Chapter Four

The heat of day had come again to Urik. Here and there, insect swarms raised raucous chorus. All other creatures, if they had the wit and freedom, sought shelter from the sun's brutal strength. Throughout Hamanu's domain, the din of commerce faded, and labor's pace slowed to a snore. Mindless mirage sprites danced across the burning pavement of the city's deserted market squares, while merchants of every variety dozed in the oppressive shade of their stalls.

Beyond the city walls, in the green fields and villages, workers set aside tools and napped beside their beasts. Farther away, in the gaping complex of mountain pits that was the Urikite obsidian mines, overseers drank cool, fruited tea beneath leather awnings and the wretched mass of slaves received a few hours' rest and unrestricted access to the water barrels.

No great mercy there, the king reminded himself as he, like the distant slaves, sipped water from a wooden ladle in the shadows of the peasant cloister, deep within his palace. While he'd lived, Borys, the Dragon of Tyr, had levied a thousand lives each year from each champion to maintain the spells around Rajaan's prison. The obsidian mines required even more lives—too many more lives—to keep Urik secure.

Letting slaves rest each afternoon insured that they'd live to hack at the black veins for a few more days. The life span of a mine slave was rarely more than two seventy-five-day quints of the three-hundred-seventy-five-day Athasian year. An obsidian sword didn't last much longer, chipping and flaking into uselessness. Maintaining the balance between able-bodied slaves and the baskets of sharp-edged ore Urik's defense required was one task Hamanu refused to delegate to his templars. It was *his* age-old decree that gave the wretches their daily rest and the threat of *his* intervention that kept the templar overseers obediently under their awning.

It certainly wasn't mercy.

Mercy was standing here, concealing his presence from Pavek, who'd fallen asleep in the shade of one of the dead fruit-trees. Waking the scar-faced man would have been as easy as breathing out, but Hamanu resisted the temptation that was, truly, no temptation at all. He could experience a mortal's abject terror anytime; the sweet-dreaming sleep of an exhausted man was precious and rare.

As soon as he'd returned to the city yesterday afternoon, Enver had sent a messenger to the

palace, begging a full day's recovery before he resumed his duties. Faithful Pavek, however, had visited his Urik house only long enough to bathe and change his travel-stained clothes. He appeared at the palace gates as the sun was setting and passed a good part of the moonlit night reading the vellum sheets still spread across the worktable.

Pavek was a clever man; he'd had no difficulty reading Hamanu's narrative or understanding its implications, but, mostly, Pavek was an upright man who radiated his emotions as fire shed heat. This morning, he'd radiated an intense unwillingness to talk about what he'd read. Hamanu had honored that reluctance in his own way, by putting the novice druid to work in his lifeless garden.

Naked tree stumps and neatly tied bales of twigs and straw testified to Pavek's diligent labor—at least until exhaustion had claimed him. He sprawled across the fresh-cleared dirt, legs crooked and one arm tucked under his cheek, as careless as a child. Images, not unlike the heat mirages above the market squares, shimmered above Pavek's gently moving ribs, though unlike a true mirage, which any mortal could observe, only Hamanu could see the wispy substance of the templar's dreams.

They were a simple man's dreams: the shapes of Pavek's loved ones as they lived within him. There was a woman at his dream's shimmering center; Hamanu's human lips curved into an appreciative smile. She was blond and beautiful and, having met her one momentous night in Quraite, the Lion of Urik knew his ugly templar didn't embellish her features. Hamanu didn't know her name; there weren't enough mortal names to label all the faces in thirteen ages of memory. He recalled her by the texture of her spirit and through the uncompromising honesty of Pavek's dream.

The blond druid had fallen afoul of Hamanu's one-time favorite, Elabon Escrissar, during the zarneeka crisis that had first brought Pavek to Hamanu's attention. Scars of abuse, disgrace, and torment entwined beneath her loveliness. She'd healed somewhat in the years since Hamanu had last seen her, but she'd heal more if she'd accept the love, as well as the friendship, his high templar offered her. She might, in time; women often grew wise in the ways of mortal hearts, and she'd been raised by the archdruid, Telhami, who was among the wisest of women.

Or, she might not. Bitter scars might offer more consistency and security than any man's love.

Regarding mortal frailty and apologies, Hamanu had seen almost everything in his life; very little surprised anymore—or intrigued him. Enver's father, who'd lived two hundred fifty-six years, had begun to see the world with immortal detachment shortly before he died. Pavek, though, was a young man, and the woman he loved was younger still. Men and women lived longer and in greater variety than flowers, but Hamanu had seen how fast they withered—especially when he embraced them.

He gestured subtly with an index finger. Pavek sighed, and the woman's dream images collapsed into one another, then reformed. There was a boy above Pavek's shoulder, a sturdy black-haired boy who smiled too easily to have been raised in a templar orphanage, as Pavek had been. In the quirky way of memory, Hamanu remembered learning the boy's name, Zvain, in another part of this palace a little more than two years ago. He recalled the name because it was uncommon in Urik and because the taste of the boy's shame and misery had been as honey on his immortal tongue.

Zvain was another mortal who'd been scarred by Escrissar and by Telhami, too. He was an orphan through no fault of his own and a survivor because when he'd needed a hand, the hand he'd seized was Pavek's.

It was almost enough to make one of Rajaat's champions believe in justice and higher powers.

But for every Zvain who triumphed over his destiny, there were ten copper-hued Ruari's hovering behind him. The youthful half-elf of Pavek's dream was handsome, proud... brittle, and *oh-so-appetizing* to a jaded king who craved the passions of his subjects. Just as well that Pavek had left his unforgettably vulnerable friend behind in Quraite. Even in another man's dream, Ruari's dark needs cried out, and copper eyes flashed green as the distant spirit responded to a champion's hunger—Then vanished with a yawn as Pavek levered himself up on his elbows.

"Great One!" the bleary-eyed templar muttered. Confusion reigned in his thoughts. He didn't know if he should stand and bow or remain where he was with his face pressed against the dirt.

"I disturbed your dreams," Hamanu admitted.

Pavek's eyes widened; he made his decision. His head dropped like a stone, and he prostrated

himself in the dirt.

"Great One, I don't remember—"

Which was a lie; honest men told lies to protect the truth.

Pavek didn't want to remember his dream, but Ruari's face floated on the surface of his thoughts and would not sink— *could* not sink—until Hamanu released it, whereupon the burly human shivered despite the oppressive heat.

"When I asked you to set my garden in order," Hamanu began mildly, "I expected you to demonstrate your mastery of druid spellcraft. I didn't expect you to work yourself to exhaustion digging in the dirt with hand tools."

Hamanu told a lie of his own to balance Pavek's. He knew there was no magic save his own in Urik's palace and that *his* magic had doomed this cloister. He'd hoped, of course, that Pavek might waken his guardian to infuse this barren soil with new vigor, but, in truth, Hamanu would have been disappointed if Pavek had obeyed him with any force more potent than sweat or brawn.

"If you wanted an overnight forest, Great One, you should have summoned someone else." As always, Pavek's stubborn honesty won out over the combined might of his fear and good sense.

"Another druid?" Hamanu asked; teasing mortals—tormenting them—was low treatment of those with no means to oppose him, but it did stave off his more dire cravings. "Your friends, perhaps? Ruari? That blond woman who means so much to you—as you mean so little to her? Tell me her name, Pavek; I've forgotten."

"Akashia, Great One," Pavek admitted softly; a templar could not disobey his king's direct command. The man's shoulders shook as he pushed himself to his knees. "She'd sooner die than serve you, Great One, but even if you compelled her to come, she could do no more than what I've done. Nothing will grow here. The soil has been scorched."

And what, a champion might ask, had brought that particular word to Pavek's mind? "Do I compel you, Pavek?" Hamanu asked instead, less benignly than before.

"I don't know, Great One. To hear your voice, Great One——To feel you in my mind—" His chin sagged again.

"Do you *feel* compelled? Did you feel compelled when Enver brought you a plain ink message written on plainer vellum?"

"You know where Quraite is, Great One. They have no protection from your wrath, should you choose to punish them. How could I refuse?"

Pavek spoke to the dirt. His eyes were closed. He expected to die in a thousand horrible ways, but nothing would keep him from telling the truth as he understood it. And yet, irony of ironies, of all those living under Athas's bloody sun, Pavek was among the very few who had nothing to fear from the Lion-King. He didn't need to fear for his precious Quraite; *Telhami* had secured the enclave's perpetual security long before Pavek's grandparents were born.

"I grant you the right to refuse to serve me, Pavek. Even now, I grant you that. Walk through that door. Leave, and know in your heart that I will never follow you. The decision is yours," Hamanu said, and within his illusion of human flesh and saffron-dyed linen, what remained of his own mortal heart beat faster.

Hamanu inhaled his Unseen influence: his power to bend a man's thoughts according to his own desire. The world grew quiet and dulled as his senses shrank to mortal dimensions. He truly didn't know what Pavek would choose to do. When *Telhami* left, he'd had the fortitude to keep his word; others hadn't been so lucky. Hamanu didn't know what he would do after Pavek made his choice. The stakes were high, but even after thirteen ages of dominion over his city, the thought that one puny mortal might deny him was acid goad between his ribs.

Pavek grasped a shovel's handle and used it to rise. "I've been a templar too long," he said as he thrust the shovel into the ground. Leaving it upright in the dirt, Pavek touched a golden chain barely visible beneath his shirt's neck. "Tell me to come, and I'll come. Tell me to leave, and I'll go. Ask me to choose, and I'll stay where I am because I am what I am."

Hamanu exhaled and resumed command of the world around him. Through the golden medallion

hung on the golden chain Pavek wound between his fingers, Hamanu felt his templar's heart, the vibrations of his thoughts. Honesty had again prevailed.

Peering into himself, Hamanu found a morass of questions he couldn't hope to answer. Had he expected anything else? Would he have allowed Pavek his freedom if there'd been any risk that the habits of a lifetime were less strong than a champion's power to compel? He *was* the last of Rajaat's champions, and his powers had become habits, as deeply ingrained as any templar's. Ages ago, the landscape of his own tortured psyche had fascinated him, but after a thousand years, introspection had lost its allure. He, too, was what he was.

His eyes met Pavek's. Despite the fear, distrust, and habit that permeated the templar's being, he didn't flinch. Perhaps that was all a champion could hope for: a man who could return his stare.

A stare would have to be sufficient for the moment. Pavek wasn't the only templar with a hold over Hamanu's attention. Someone else had wrapped a hand around a medallion. With lightning quickness, Hamanu identified the medallion's steel and gemstones and the confident hand that held it.

*Commandant Javed.*

A spark of recognition flowed through the netherworld to the war-bureau templar. When it bridged the gap to Javed's medallion, the two were joined in Hamanu's thoughts. He'd sent Windreaver off in search of the Shadow-King—the disembodied troll would learn things no mortal could—but he'd sent his own champion to spy on the Shadow-King's army. He wasn't surprised that the commandant was returning to Urik first.

*Recount!* he demanded, because it was easier to listen than to rummage blindly through chaotic thoughts. *Where is this host that the Shadow-King marches across our purview?*

*Gone to shadows, like their king, Great One, as soon as they saw our dust on the horizon,* Javed recounted. *The women and their mercenaries fled rather than face us.*

Hamanu scowled. For ages, he and Gallard, Bane of Gnomes, had skirmished on the barren borders of their domains, tempering their troops and probing for a decisive advantage. Never before had the Nibenese fled the field. He raked the surface of the elf's mind, gathering up images of an abandoned camp: cooling hearths, empty trenches, empty kank pens.

*But not one thing of value,* Hamanu mused for his commandant's benefit. *Not one overturned cook pot or bale of forage. They'd planned that withdrawal from the beginning.*

*So it would seem, Great One—*Javed agreed, but not before Hamanu plunged deeper into his memories. *I'm coming, Great One!* The elf's thoughts exploded in the gray ether of the netherworld.

Urik's templars did not generally study the Unseen Path. Its secrets were rooted in powers that Hamanu couldn't control as he controlled the elemental magic he released through the medallions. He made exceptions for commandants and other high-ranking templars, whose thoughts might be subject to scrutiny from Urik's enemies. As a mind-bender, Javed could not prevail against his king, but he could sound an alarm, which Hamanu wisely heeded.

*I'm coming, Great One,* the commandant repeated, expanding his consciousness to include the thundering kank that he, an elf of the wilderness, rode out of deference to his king—because the bug could carry him faster than his own venerable legs.

The green haze of Urik's irrigated farmland hugged the forward horizon in Javed's sight.

*Great One, grant me swift passage through Modekan, to the gates of Urik, and beyond.*

Templars—even exalted commandants, like Javed, or gold-wearers, like Pavek—could use their medallions to communicate directly with their king, but never with each other. If the commandant wanted to avoid a confrontation with the civil-bureau templars who stood watch over the wheel-spoke roads into Urik, much less if he wanted to ride a racing kank clear to the gates of Hamanu's palace itself, the Lion of Urik would have to make the arrangements.

There were laws that not even Javed was above, and foremost among them was Hamanu's injunction against beasts of burden on his city's immaculate streets. It was a wise law that did more than improve the sight and scent of Urik; it kept down the vermin and disease as well. But a man did not reign for thirteen ages without learning when to set his most cherished laws aside.

*Granted,* Hamanu said. He broke their Unseen connection.

Hamanu summoned the distinctive rooftops of the Modekan barracks from his memory and made them real. Peering out of the netherworld, he watched a score of drowsy, yellow-robed templars clutch their medallions in shock. As one, they turned bloodless faces toward the sky where, by the Lion's whim, a pair of slitted, sulphurous eyes had opened above them.

"The Champion of Urik approaches."

Hamanu projected his voice from the palace to the village, where every templar heard it, and the rest of Modekan, too. Cheers went up, and the village gong began a frantic clanging. If he weren't absolutely confident of Javed's loyalty, Hamanu would have been greatly displeased by the elf's popularity. He had to shout his commands.

"The Champion is not to be challenged or impeded. Clear the road to Urik for his swift passage."

Discipline was lax in the village barracks: half the templars dropped to their knees; the rest thumped their breasts in salute. But Hamanu's will would be carried out—he caressed each and every templar's spirit with the razor edge of his wrath before he closed his eyes. The king made a similar appearance above Urik's southern gate before he blinked and brought his focus back to the cloister.

Pavek still stared at him. Though medallion conversation was inviolate, Pavek had heard the spoken commands and drawn his own conclusions.

"Commandant Javed, Great One?" he asked. "Is Urik in danger, Great One?" The other questions in Pavek's mind—Is that why you summoned me? Do you expect me to try to summon the guardian?—went unspoken, though not, of course, unheard.

"You may judge for yourself, Pavek," Hamanu suggested, both generous and demanding. He let the human glamour fade from his eyes and, at last, the templar looked away.

There was enough time for the palace slaves to bathe Pavek with scented soaps and clothe him in finery from the king's own wardrobe. The silks skimmed Pavek's shoulders and fell a fashionable length against his arms and legs. By measurement alone, Pavek cut a commanding figure, but he had no majesty. He followed Hamanu into an audience chamber looking exactly like what he was: a common man in borrowed clothes.

The sorcerer-kings, of which Hamanu was one, had built palaces with monumental throne halls meant to belittle the mortals who entered them. Hamanu's hall had a jewel-encrusted throne that made his back ache no matter how he disguised his body. Even so, circumstance occasionally demanded that he receive supplicants in his fullest panoply, and ache. He wondered, sometimes, how the others endured it—if they knew some sleight of sorcery he'd overlooked or if they simply suffered less because they did not starve themselves and carried more flesh on their immortal bones.

Most likely, the others enjoyed their spectacles, as Hamanu did not. He'd had little enough in common with his peers in the beginning, and nothing had since brought them closer together. He'd seen less of them than he saw of the slaves who clipped his illusory toenails. In truth, Hamanu was a peer unto himself alone. His closest companions were his own thoughts, and the places where he actually dwelt reflected that isolation.

Hamanu preferred to conduct Urik's state affairs in an austere chamber where a pair of freestanding, ever-luminous torches, a marble bench, and a black boulder set in fine, gray sand were the only furnishings. Water rippled magically over the boulder and, as Hamanu entered the chamber, it began to flow down three of the four rough-hewn walls. The liquid murmur soothed Hamanu's nerves and awed the novice druid, who stifled his curiosity about the spells that made it flow. But the waterfalls had a simple purpose: conversations in this chamber couldn't be overheard by any means, physical or arcane.

"Sit," Hamanu told Pavek as he, himself, began to pace around the glistening boulder with martial precision. "Javed has passed beneath the gates. He'll be here soon."

Pavek obeyed. He focused his mind on the water flowing over the boulder, and his thoughts grew quiet. Then Pavek's thoughts vanished into the sand. Hamanu ceased his pacing. He could see the man with his eyes, hear his breathing, and the steady beat of his heart, but the Unseen presence by which the Lion-King observed his templars and any living creature that captured his attention was suddenly and completely missing.

Not even Telhami had mastered that feat.

The guardian, Hamanu told himself, the druidic essence of Urik that shunned an unnatural creature forged of Rajaat's sorcery, but heeded the call of a very ordinary man. The Lion of Urik cast an imperceptible sphere around his druid-templar and let it expand, hoping to detect some perturbation in the netherworld that would illuminate the guardian's disposition.

He found nothing and was contemplating the implications of magic that could nullify a man's thoughts *and* elude a champion's scrutiny when trumpets announced Commandant Javed's approach. Hamanu touched the minds of the guards in the corridor, and the high bronze doors swung open to admit the elf who'd held the title, Champion of Urik, for forty years.

The elf was tall for his kind. He stood head and shoulders above Pavek, above Hamanu, himself, in his human glamour. His skin and hair were as black as the boulder in the middle of the chamber—or they would have been if he hadn't ridden hard and come directly to his king. Road dust streaked the commandant from head to foot; he almost looked his age. Pavek, who was, by rank, Javed's superior, offered his seat on the marble bench.

Javed bent his leg to Hamanu, then turned to Pavek. "I've sat too long already, my lord. It does an old elf good to stand on his own feet awhile."

Which was true, as far as it went. Hamanu could feel the aches of Javed's old bones and travel-battered wounds. He could have ignored them, as he ignored his own aches, but accorded the commandant an empathic honor Javed would never suspect.

"May I hold this for you?" Pavek—ever the third-rank regulator—asked, reaching for the leather-wrapped parcel Javed carried under one arm.

But the parcel was the reason Javed had raced across the barrens and risked his king's wrath with a mind-bender's shield. The commandant had a paternal affection for the scar-faced Pavek; but he wouldn't entrust this parcel to anyone but his king.

"What did you find, Javed? Scrolls? Maps?" Hamanu asked, fighting to contain his curiosity, which could kill any man who stood too long between him and satisfaction.

Javed had seen that happen. He hastily laid the parcel on the bench and sliced the thongs that bound it, lest the knots resist and get him killed. Beneath the leather were layers of silk—several of the drab-dyed, densely woven shirts Javed insisted were a mortal's best defense against a poisoned arrow or blade.

Hamanu clenched his fists as the commandant gingerly peeled back sleeve after sleeve. He knew already there was nothing so ordinary as a sorcerer's scroll or cartographer's map at the heart of Javed's parcel. Though neither mortal had noticed, the chamber had become quiet as the minor magic that circulated the water was subsumed by the malevolence emerging from the silk. The Lion of Urik steadied himself until his commandant had stepped back.

The last layer of silk, which Javed refused to touch, appeared as if it had been exposed to the harsh Athasian sun for a full seventy-seven year age. Its dyes had faded to the color of moldering bones. The cloth itself was rotting at the creases.

"Great One, two good men died wrapping it up so I could carry it," Javed explained. "If it's your will, I'll lay down my own life, but if you've still got a use for an old, tired elf, Great One, I think you'd best unwrap the rest yourself."

"Where?" Hamanu asked in a breathless whisper, no more eager to touch the silk or what it contained than either Javed or Pavek. "How? Was there anything with it?"

Javed shook his head. "A piece of parchment, Great One. A message, I imagine. But the *thing* had bleached and aged it like this silk. We didn't so much *find* it as one of our men stumbled across it and died...." The elf paused and met Hamanu's eyes, waiting for a reaction Hamanu wasn't ready to reveal. He coughed nervously and continued, "I can't say for certain that the Nibenese left anything behind deliberately—"

"You may be certain it was deliberate," Hamanu assured him with a weary sigh.

He waved the mortals aside and shed the glamour surrounding his right hand. Neither man reacted to the skeletal fingers, with their menacing black talons—or, rather, each man strove to swallow his shock as Hamanu carefully slit the remaining silk.

A black glass shard as long as an elf's arm came into view. Obsidian, but as different from the obsidian in Urik's mines as mortals were from Rajaat's champions.

"Dregoth?" Hamanu mused aloud. Was this what Gallard had received in payment for his agafari staves? Before he could wonder further, a red ember grew on the shard's tip. "Stand back," he advised his mortal companions. "Stand *very* still."

A smoky pall rose from the shard, obscuring the ember from any eyes less keen than Hamanu's, which saw in it a familiar, blue-green eye. A foul odor, partly brimstone, partly the mold and decay of death, permeated the window-less chamber. Shedding his human glamour completely, Hamanu bared dripping fangs. The pall congealed in a heartbeat and, like a serpent, coiled up Hamanu's arm. It grew with lightning speed until it wound from his ankles to his neck.

"Damn Nibenay!" Javed shouted as he drew his sword, risking his life twice-over as he disobeyed his king's command and prepared to do battle with sorcery.

"Fool!" Hamanu replied, which froze the commandant where he stood, though it was neither the Shadow-King nor Javed who occupied the forefront of his thoughts. "I am no longer the man fate made of me," he warned the sooty serpent constricting his ribs and neck.

Working his hand through the serpent's sorcerous coils, Hamanu found the head and wrenched it into the light where he could see it. And it could see him.

"I am not the man you thought I was."

With a flicking gesture, Hamanu impaled the serpent's head on his thumb's talon, then he let the heat of his rage escape from his heart. The serpent writhed. Ignoring the talon piercing its skull, it opened its mouth and hissed. Glowing, molten blood flowed from its fangs, covering Hamanu's wrist. Hamanu hissed back and, reaching into the Gray, summoned a knife from the void.

He cut off the serpent's head. Its coils fell heavily to the floor around his feet, where they released noxious vapors as they dissolved.

The poison posed no threat to Hamanu, but Javed and Pavek fell to their knees. The Lion of Urik was in no mood for sacrifice, especially of his own men. Reversing his grip on the hilt of his knife, which was forged from the same black glass as the now-shrunken shard, Hamanu drew a line along his forearm.

His hot blood sizzled when it struck the ooze on the floor. Dark, oily smoke rose as it consumed the dregs of vanquished sorcery. The stench grew worse, but it was no longer deadly. When the ooze was gone, Hamanu inhaled the odor into himself. He looked down on his mortal companions, who were still on their knees and far beyond fear.

"Did you bring the message?"

Javed nodded, then produced a stiff, stained sheet of human parchment. "I knew you'd want it, Great One."

Hamanu seized the parchment with a movement too quick for mortal eyes to follow. The ink was gone, as Javed warned, but there were other ways to read a champion's message. He closed his eyes, and the Shadow-King's blurred features appeared in his mind.

*You have seen our danger. This was sent to me. You can imagine who, imagine how. We've gone too long without a dragon. If we can't make one, he will. Mark me well, Hamanu: he'll find a way to shape that turd, Tithian, into a dragon, if we don't stop him. Long before he died, Borys confided in me that Rajaat had intended to shape you into the Dragon of Tyr until he—Borys, that is—decided otherwise. It's not too late. The three of us can shape you before Rajaat tries again with Tithian. I've evolved a spell that will preserve your sanity. It won't be the way it was with Borys; we can't permit that, none of us can. Think about it, Hamanu. Think seriously about it.*

The Shadow-King's image vanished in the heat of Hamanu's curse. The shard of Rajaat's sorcery was an unexpected, unpleasant proof of Gallard's claim. If Rajaat was making sorcery in the material world, then the Hollow was weakening; they'd gone too long without a dragon maintaining it. But if Gallard had found a spell that tempered the madness of dragon creation, Gallard wouldn't be offering it to him.

Reluctantly, Hamanu reconsidered Windreaver's recounting of the Gnome-Bane's strategy. There were three ways to transform a champion into a dragon: his peers pells to accelerate his metamorphosis,

he could quicken so many sorcerous spells that he'd transform himself, or—following Kalak of Tyr's despicable example—he could gorge himself on the death of his entire city. Most likely, Gallard hoped to implement all three.

"Summon the first levy of my armies," Hamanu told Javed softly, calmly. If he'd allowed any fraction of his own passion into his words, the sounds would have slain both mortals. "Let it be known that everyone who relies on Urik for protection *will* rally to Urik's defense—or suffer dire consequences."

"Who do we fight, Great One?" Javed asked, his voice cracked and weak from poison.

"Do as I command, Javed," Hamanu scolded his most-trusted officer. "Summon my levy."

Wisely, the elf nodded and bowed as he rose to his feet. "As you will, Great One. As you command."

He retreated to the bronze door, which Hamanu opened with a thought. Pavek followed.

"Not you. Not yet."

Pavek dropped again to his knees. "Your will, Great One."

"I need you here, in the palace, Pavek, but I need your druid friends as well. Send a message to Quraite. Send a message to Telhami, if you will. Tell her it's *time*, Pavek; the end of time."

"If Urik's danger is Quraite's danger, Great One, then I'm sure she already knows. She says there's only one guardian spirit for all of Athas, and she is part of it now," Pavek said, still on his knees with his head tightly bowed.

There were many tastes and textures swirling in the young man's thoughts, but loathing was not among them. Leaning forward, Hamanu hooked a talon under Pavek's chin, nudging gently until he could see the troubled face his templar strove to conceal. Then, with another talon, he traced the scar across Pavek's face.

"And if it's *my* danger, and only mine, what then, Pavek?"

Once again, Pavek's mind cleared, like still water on a windless day. Short of slaying the man, there was no way for Hamanu to extract an answer to his question from Pavek's thoughts. Murder was easy; lowering his hand, letting Pavek rise unsteadily to his feet and leave the chamber alive—that was the hardest thing Hamanu had done in a generation.

*Windreaver!* Hamanu cast the name into the netherworld along with Gallard's parchment. *Windreaver! Now!*

He sat down on the marble bench, which, like the stone bench in his cloister, was strong enough to support his true weight and proportions. Water flowed again over the boulder and down the walls. The Lion-King buried his grotesque face in his malformed hands and tried not to think, or plan, or dread until the air quickened, and the troll appeared.

"I hear, and I obey," Windreaver said. "I am the doomed servant of a doomed fool."

Hamanu didn't rise to the bait. "Did you search the Nibenese camp?"

"Of course. Four hundred ugly women surrounded by four thousand uglier men."

"Nothing more?" Hamanu betrayed nothing of his suspicions, his anger.

"Nothing, O Mighty One. Enlighten me, O Mighty One: What do you think I should have found?"

"This!" Hamanu brandished the remnant of the obsidian shard. It had shrunk to a fraction of its former size, and the glass was pitted with soot. The troll leapt back, as if he still had life and substance.

"It was not there," Windreaver insisted, no longer insolent. "I would have known—"

"Nonsense!" Hamanu hurled the shard at his minion; it vanished at the top of its arc, swallowed by the Gray. "You've grown deaf and blind, Windreaver—worse, you've grown careless."

"Never... not where *he's* concerned. I'd know the War-Bringer's scent anywhere."

Hamanu said nothing, merely waited for the troll to hear own his folly and self-deception. Windreaver's hatred for the War-Bringer was greater than his hatred for the Troll-Scorcher but he hadn't sensed the shard before Hamanu revealed it. He'd dreamed of watching the champions destroy each other, and his dreams had, indeed, left him careless.

"Is Rajaat free?" the troll asked. "The Dark Lens—it's where the Tyrian sorceress put it five years ago, isn't it? No one's stolen it, have they? The templars—? The medallions—?"



"Still work," Hamanu assured him. Without the Dark Lens, the champions could not channel magic to their templars. "That shard didn't come from the Dark Lens."

"Then where did it come from? How did Rajaat—?"

"I don't know, Windreaver—but you'll tell me, when you come back from Ur Draxa."

He expected an argument: Borys's demolished stronghold was a long way away and dangerous, even for a disembodied spirit. But Windreaver was gone before Hamanu finished speaking.

## Chapter Five

A pair of silvery rings surrounded the golden face of Guthay, Athas's larger moon, as it neared its zenith in Urik's midnight sky. It was the fourth night in a row that Guthay had worn her crowns, and though Hamanu was alone in his cloister, he knew he wasn't the only man staring at the sky. One more beringed night, and farmers throughout his domain would go down to the parched gullies that ran around and through their fields. They'd inspect each irrigation gate. They'd dig out the silt and make repairs as necessary. Later, they'd meet with their neighbors and draw a numbered pebble out of a sacred urn to determine the order in which the fields received their water.

The lottery was necessary because no one—not even the immortal Lion-King—could predict how long the gullies would seethe with dark, fertile water from the distant mountains. Hamanu couldn't even say for certain that the gullies *would* fill. A score of times during the last thirteen ages, the flood hadn't come.

All Hamanu knew was what he'd learned from his mother and father long, long ago. When Guthay wore her gossamer crowns for five nights running, it was time to prepare the fields for himali, and the hardy grains, mise and gorm that had sustained the heartland since the rains stopped falling with any regularity. And once the dry fields were planted with seeds more precious than gold or steel, it was time to pray. The gullies would fill within twenty days, or they did not fill at all.

The folk of Urik prayed to their immortal, living god and entreated him with offerings. Already a steady trickle of farmers—nobles, free-peasants, and slaves alike—made their way to the palace gate to offer him a handful of grain. Sometimes the grain was knotted in a tattered rag, other times boxed in a carved-bone casket or sealed in an enameled amphora. Regardless of the package, Hamanu's templars emptied the grain into a huge, inix-hide sack. When the water came, Hamanu would sling the sack over his shoulder and, in the guise of the glorious Lion-King, he'd sow four fields, one to the east of the city walls, the others in the north, the west, and the south.

Tradition, which Hamanu didn't encourage, held that the gift-grain toward the bottom of the sack—the grain that the Lion-King had received first and sowed last—was lucky grain, which presaged great bounty for the farmer who'd donated it. The mortal mind being what it was, Urikite farmers didn't wait for Guthay's fifth ringed night before they brought their gift-grain to the palace. They took the moon on faith and brought their grain early, despite knowing that if the rings did not last for the full five nights, the sack would be emptied, and any grain it had held would be burned.

None of this surprised Hamanu. He'd been one of them once. He knew that all farmers were men of faith and gamblers in their hearts. They gambled every time they poked a seed in the ground. They regarded the gift-grain as a faithful way of evening their odds.

It was an act of faith, as well, for Hamanu, the farmer's son, when he strode barefooted through the fields, scattering the gift-grain. But a man who let himself be worshiped as a god could have faith only in himself. He could never be seen with his head bowed in doubt or prayer. This year, with the Shadow-King's armies dancing along Urik's borders and a pitted remnant of the first sorcerer's magic still fresh in memory, Hamanu's doubts were especially strong. He'd pray if he knew the name of a god who'd listen.

The longer he delayed summoning the second and third army levies, the greater the chance that Urik's enemies would attack. If he summoned his citizen soldiers too soon, the fields wouldn't get sown, the grain couldn't grow, and, win or lose on the battlefield, there'd be no High Sun harvest. And if the

waters didn't come at all...

Altogether, there were too many unanswerable questions even for a mind of immortal subtlety. For the first time since Hamanu had begun writing his history, delving into his past was preferable to the present or future. He swirled an oil drop across the ink stone's surface. When the ink was ready, Hamanu picked up the stylus and wrote without hesitation.

\* \* \* \* \*

For five years, I fought beside Jikkana in the army of Myron Troll-Scorcher. There was nothing about her that reminded me of Dorean or Deche, which is probably why I stayed so long. She was a hard and homely creature who cursed and swore and drank too much whenever she had the opportunity. I never knew if in me she saw the son she'd never had or simply another farm boy with fire in his gut, who would finish the brawls she started.

Jikkana taught me human script and how to fight with a knife or a club, with my teeth, fists or my feet—or whatever else was available. She had a temperament like broken glass, and sooner or later, she fought with everyone, me included. In all the years she marched with the Troll-Scorcher's army, though, she came no closer to fighting trolls than that day I'd met her in Deche.

As the sun descended through the Year of Priest's Fury, two decades' dissipation in the Troll-Scorcher's army caught up with Jikkana. Her lanky muscles melted like fat in the fire. Leathery flesh hung in folds from her arms and chin. She coughed all night and spat out bloody bits of lung when morning came. I carried both kits as we marched and foraged for herbs that might restore her, but it made no difference. One afternoon, she collapsed by the side of the road.

I offered to carry her along with her kit.

"Don't be a fool, Manu," she answered me, adding a curse and a cough at the end. "I've gone as far as I can go, farther than I'd've gone without you. No farther, boy. Let's get it over with."

Jikkana handed me her knife. I made the cut she wanted. I'd wrung bird necks when I helped Mother prepare supper, and I'd held the ropes while Father slaughtered culls from our herd. I was no stranger to death, but as men measure such things, Jikkana's death marked the first time I'd *killed*. Life's light faded quickly from her eyes; she didn't suffer. I held her corpse until it had cooled and stiffened. Then I carried her to that night's camp. Jikkana had been the first teacher in my life after Deche, and I paid for what we drank as we sang her spirit off through the night. When the sky began to brighten, I dug her a grave and piled stones atop it to keep the vermin from digging her up for supper.

The long shadows of dawn bound me to her grave.

I expected to weep, but my tears never flowed. There were none inside me. I had wept in terror when Deche had been destroyed, but I hadn't wept for Dorean. I couldn't weep for anyone else.

I scratched Jikkana's name onto a shoulder bone, forming the letters the way she'd taught me, then I shoved the narrow end among the rocks. I'd scratched a few words as well on the underside, using the trollish script I'd learned in the ruins above Deche, which none of my companions could read. Stretching the truth a bit, I wrote that Jikkana was an honorable woman and that she'd never laid hands on a troll, which was true enough and might give the trolls a moment's pause before they desecrated her grave.

There were trolls nearby. There were always trolls nearby in those years. After a generation of retreat, Windreaver had brought his army back into human-held land. Deche was among the first of the human villages that fell to Windreaver's wrath those five years while I marched beside Jikkana. We never caught up the trolls that killed Dorean and my family, though we'd followed them for almost a year and saw more examples of their handiwork than I had the heart to count.

But there were trolls nearby, and we'd learn to track them. We made reports to the Troll-Scorcher or his officers when they rode their rounds.

We never fought trolls. Never. Neither Jikkana nor Bult, the yellow-haired man who led our band, nor any of the veterans had a notion *how* to fight our gray-skinned enemies. That's how far the Troll-Scorcher's army had sunk in the two ages since its founding.

Bult had told the truth that day in Deche. The Troll-Scorcher's army was divided into bands that tracked trolls as they despoiled the heartland. We tracked them, and we told the officers where they were. When it pleased him, if it pleased him, Myron of Yoram would come to kill them.

Five years of tracking trolls. Five years of burying eviscerated corpses and burning ruined houses to forestall disease, and I never once saw Myron of Yoram, except at the High Sun muster on the plains, when we drew our pay and provisions for the year.

Oh, he was an imposing figure—our champion, Myron of Yoram, dressed in riding silks, watching us parade across the choking dust from the back of his half-tamed erdland. He had *magic*, no doubt of that.

Every year he'd haul a few trolls to the muster. He'd truss them up and scorch them good, right in front of us. Flames would leap out of troll eyes and ears, out of their mouths when they screamed. Our champion would do the same with any poor human sod who'd earned his wrath—usually by killing a troll without permission.

We were impressed by what Myron of Yoram did to the trolls, but it was what he could do—would do—to us that had kept the army in line for generation after human generation.

Things were beginning to change around the time that Jikkana died. Windreaver had measured his enemy well and divided the trolls into bands that took ruthless advantage of the orders Myron of Yoram had given us. Some human bands were deserting and more were fighting back, which meant that the loyal bands—and Bult was nothing if not loyal to his pay—hunted humans more often than they hunted trolls.

Everyone had to be careful. Everyone had to post guards at night and sleep with a weapon or two beneath the blankets. Bult's band was no exception, and I pulled my share of nights on the picket before Jikkana died. Afterward, I took the picket by choice, one night in four—as often as a man could stay awake all night and still keep the pace. I wanted to be alone. Jikkana's death had raised the specter of Deche and Dorean in my dreams. I didn't want to close my eyes or sleep. Hunting trolls—following their bands and hoping the Troll-Scorcher would do us the honor of killing them—wasn't enough. I wanted my own vengeance.

I wanted to kill trolls with my own weapons, my own hands.

I didn't have long to wait.

It was Nadir-Night of Priest's Fury, another year half-gone to memory, and the troll-hunters of Bult's band celebrated the holiday as they celebrated everything: they drank until they couldn't stand, then lay on their bellies and drank some more, until they'd all passed out around the fire. I thought about leaving. Bult and the rest were the dregs of humanity, and they were the only folk who knew my name. In those days, with trolls and deserters both prowling, a solitary man's life wasn't worth much. I took a picket brand from the fire, wrapped the smoldering tip in oilcloth, and, with my blanket and club tucked under my arm, climbed a nearby hill to keep watch.

The trolls knew our human holidays and our human habits; we'd all lived together peacefully until the wars started. If I'd been a troll, I'd've taken advantage of Nadir-Night, so I was expecting trouble and was ready for it when I heard straw crunching beneath big, heavy feet. Our picket drill was simple, and I knew it well: at the first sound I was supposed to tear the cloth off my brand, then wave it in the air. The flames would alert our band and blind the trolls, whose night vision was better than ours, but vulnerable to sudden flashes of bright light. Once I'd waved my picket brand, though, my orders were to run like wind-whipped fire. The whole band would be running, too—More orders from Myron of Yoram.

I obeyed the first part of my orders, slashing the air to blind whatever was coming up my hill, but Bult and the others weren't going to run anywhere this Nadir-Night. And neither was I. Switching the torch to my off-weapon hand, I picked up a flint-headed club with a short, sharpened hook on one side of the flint and a chiseled knob on the other. I shouted, "Here I am!" and made the guttural sounds I'd been told were insults in the troll language.

The heavy-footed tread got louder, and a big chunk of sky grew darker as the troll hove into view. Like me, he was armed with a stone club, though its haft was thicker than my wrist, and the stone

lashed to its tip was as large as my head. He shouted something I didn't understand while he brandished that club over me. I shouted something I can't remember. Then his arm drew back for a killing strike.

Except for the Troll-Scorcher himself, there were no humans left who remembered the victories that drove the trolls out of the heartland and cleared the Kreegills. All the tales I'd heard at Jikkana's side were legends passed down through three or four generations. We didn't know anything about trolls, except that they were big, and they were fast, and their bare gray skin was tougher than our best armor. Without magic, I'd heard that the only way humans could take down a troll was to swarm over it like jozhals and beat it to death with a thousand puny blows.

I'd get one chance, one swing. To make the most of it, I tossed the torch aside and put both hands on the shaft of my club. Against another human, the flint knob would have been the best choice: a human could stun a man of his own race with the knob, men take him apart with the hook. But against a thick-skinned troll, it was all or nothing. I spun the shaft as I lunged at my enemy and swung with the hook leading.

My arm bones jammed my shoulders when the flint struck flesh. I nearly lost my grip. Nearly. Somehow I kept my hands where they belonged as hook went in up to the leather thong that lashed the stone to the shaft. The troll made a sound like a baby crying. His club grazed my arm as he toppled. He was dead before he struck the ground.

Staggering, because my heart suddenly refused to beat and my lungs forgot to breathe, I dropped to one knee and savored my victory by starlight. But the thoughts that rang in my mind were: *What was his name? Did he leave anyone behind who would remember his name?* The army Windreaver had loosed in the heartland wasn't made of outcasts, orphans and rootless veterans, like us. The trolls were totally committed to their cause. The bands we trailed were families with fathers and grandfathers, mothers and children.

I'd never know my troll's name or what had brought him, alone, to my hill, his death. Perhaps he'd gotten lost in the night. Perhaps he'd been chasing his own dreams of vengeful glory. But it was a safe bet that he wasn't the only troll in walking distance, and that some other troll was going to come looking for him.

Even if there weren't any other trolls nearby to put the tang of danger in my victory and cut short my celebration, the torch I'd tossed aside had set the straw-grass ablaze.

Fire was an enemy I'd known as long as I'd lived. Grabbing my blanket, I swung and stomped those flames until they were gone and every ember was dark. Then, on my hands and knees, I raked the hot ash with my fingers until it was as cool as the corpse behind me. Dawn was coming when I rested and drained the last drops from my water-skin.

As the first red streaks of daylight thrust over the eastern horizon, I gazed at my night's work: the fire I had extinguished, the troll I'd killed. He was young, probably no older than I—which made him very young for a troll. The warty calluses that armored adults of his race had scarcely spread up his arms. His face was smooth, with soft brown eyes, wide-open and staring at me. His open mouth asked *why?*

I had no answer. We were far from Deche; there was no cause for me to think I'd claimed vengeance against a troll who'd wronged me personally. Like as not, the troll I'd killed—the troll who would have killed me, I made no mistake there—had his own wounded memories and fought humans for the same reasons I fought trolls.

Neither of us was right, but I was alive. Nothing else mattered. I'd survived the massacre at Deche, and I'd survived a face-to-face combat with a troll. Destiny had plans for me. I believed that as strongly as the sun rose, but I had no hint of what lay before me.

Trolls were sun-worshippers. Every house I'd explored above Deche had an east-facing door with a rayed disk and an inscription chiseled into the stone lintel above it. I'd determined that before the Troll-Scorcher had come to the Kreegills, trolls had set the skulls of their ancestors atop their homes where the sun would strike them first and fill their hollow eyes with light.

My troll had fallen wrong-way round. Dawn struck his feet while his eyes were still in shadow. It was no desecration—not compared to what the trolls had done in Deche and elsewhere—merely an accident as he fell and died. But I had to prove myself better than the trolls, to justify what I'd done. I

wrapped my belt around his ankles and hauled him around so the rays fell on his still-open eyes. In ashes on his chest, I wrote the troll blessings I'd seen on their hearthstones.

Then, when the sun was well risen, I took my knife and hacked off his head.

Bult and the others had begun to rouse from their stupor by the time I returned to our camp with my trophy, banging bloodily into my knee. Looking back, I now recognize another gesture from destiny's hand, guiding me into a situation I ought not to have survived. I was young—that accounts for most foolishness among men of all races; I suppose it accounts for mine that morning.

Throwing the troll's head at Bult's feet, I shouted, "I saved your worthless lives last night," and, in the inexplicable reasoning of youth, I expected him to thank me. More than that, I expected him to recognize that I was the better man and admit as much before the whole band.

Foolishness. Unmitigated foolishness... and destiny.

Bult had a sword, the only sword in our band. It had a composite blade: bits of broken obsidian wedged into a stave of waterlogged wood that had then been baked hard in a kiln and strengthened with a copper spine. It was useless against a troll, but Bult figured to make short work of me when he drew it out of a bulky scabbard.

"Knew you was trouble from the start," he said, kicking my trophy aside as he advanced on me. "Should've killed you then and there—you with your fancy farm-boy words and your *ideas*."

I retreated a pace and tested my grip, finger by finger, against the rawhide braid wrapped around my club. With a dead troll fresh in my memory, I was cautious, but not overawed by my adversary or his weapon. My club needed a bit more room than Bult's sword; I shook out my shoulder and retreated, cocking my arm for my first swing. Bult smiled and nodded.

I thought our brawl was about to begin, but I hadn't been paying attention to my back. Hands I hadn't suspected seized my wrist and elbow. They wrenched my weapon from my hand, clouted me on the flank, and thrust me forward to my doom.

I landed hard on my hands and knees, well in range of Bult's leather-shod foot. He kicked me solidly under the chin, and I went head over heels in the dust, to the great amusement of my fellows, who had more enthusiasm for the murder of one of their own than they'd shown for a true enemy's death.

"You think you're smarter than me, Manu," Bult told me as he raised his foot to kick me again. I scabbled backward into an unfriendly wall of legs and feet that ended my retreat. "That's been your mistake all along. You think 'cause your mamma and papa taught you to talk pretty, you're cut from a better piece of cloth. Well, your mamma and papa aren't nothing but troll-meat, Manu, just like you're gonna be when they find you."

Bult meant to hamstring me and leave me for the trolls—that was clear from the gleam in his eyes and the angle his wrist made with the sword's blade when he raised his arm. He could have had his will with me; I was weak with fear and sick with defeat. Sour blood filled my mouth. There was no strength left in me to move my legs out of harm's way, *if he'd* taken his cut right then. But Bult lugged his stroke and gut-kicked me instead.

Today I am the Lion of Urik, invulnerable and invincible. In the form Rajaat has given me, the finest steel cannot harm me. With an exercise of whim, I can hide my shape beneath an illusion of any creature I imagine. But when I was a mortal man, there was nothing about me that warranted Bult's respect. I took after my mother's folk: light-boned and slender. From my earliest days I'd learned the tricks of balance and leverage because I never had my father's and brothers' strength. I could carry Jikkana because I knew where to lift; I could fell a troll because I knew where to balance, where to pivot, how to coil my entire body and release its power in a serpent's strike.

Knowledge was my weapon, I told myself as I lay there in the dust, blood and bile streaming from my face. I was smarter than Bult; I was better, but first I had to breathe and protect myself from the kicks that came from all directions. Ignoring pain and blurred vision, relying on instinct—knowledge—alone, I caught a foot as it struck my ribs. I twisted it one way as I rolled the other. Finally there was a groan that didn't come from my throat, and a few heartbeats for me to rise up on my hands and knees.

I choked when I tried to breathe and spat out a tooth or two. My hair dragged in the muck my

blood had made of the dust, but my lungs were working again, and my thoughts were clearer. I heard Bult sidestepping, taking aim at my flank. Raising my head, I caught his eye.

"Coward," I named him in a hoarse, broken whisper. "Can't fight trolls without the Troll-Scorcher's say-so. Can't fight a puny man unless he's already battered and bloody."

I nailed Bult, midstride. He backed off, and his mouth worked silently a moment before he said: "Get up, farm boy. Get up on your feet, if you dare, or crawl away as you are."

We'd heard that trolls could track by scent, that their noses were as good as their night eyes. The way I was bleeding on the ground and clutching my side, Bult guessed I'd be troll-meat whether he hamstrung me or not. And probably he was right: I was a deadman, but I was done running from trolls and wasn't going to start crawling from my own kind. I got to my feet and stayed there. A few of my fellows sucked their teeth with surprise or admiration. I didn't know which. I didn't care. My blood settled.

"Cowards," I repeated, including my fellows in the curse. Bult took a step toward me. I spat out another tooth that left a bloody mark on his cheek, and he stayed where he was. "Little children, a little bit afraid of trolls, a lot more afraid of the Troll-Scorcher. Eyes of fire!" I recalled my cousin, five years dead and forgotten in the ruins of Deche. "I've seen the Troll-Scorcher's magic, his eyes of fire, just like you. I've seen them at the muster—nowhere else. I've seen Myron of Yoram burn the heart out of a trussed-up man when we're all camped for muster, but I've never seen his awful magic out here."

I believed what I said, and I hated Myron of Yoram more than I hated Bult or any troll that ever lived. It gave me the strength to take a step in Bult's direction.

"Call him, Bult. Call the Troll-Scorcher. Tell him what I've done. Tell him to come and burn me with the eyes of fire. I'll die for him, Bult, that's what we're here for, isn't it? Call him!"

Once a month, as Guthay's golden face cleared the eastern horizon, we'd all gather around the fire, hand in hand, to shout the Troll-Scorcher's name to the night. When we'd shouted our throats raw, Bult would drop to his knees, his veins bulged and throbbing across his brow, and he'd tell the Troll-Scorcher how many trolls we'd seen since the last time, what they'd done, and what we'd done, which never changed: they ravaged, and we ran.

"Aye, Bult," someone behind me said. "Call the Troll-Scorcher. Let him decide."

"Manu's right. Maybe the Troll-Scorcher listens to us; maybe he don't. We see his mighty-bright officers, an' they tell us he's wagin' war somewhere else, but never near us." Another voice in the crowd.

"Never near no one," a woman added, sweet honey to my ringing ears. "Never met no one at the muster who didn't say the same thing: they seen trolls all year, an' never once seen the Scorcher."

I could feel the power of persuasion around me. "Call him, Bult," I taunted, then reached out for my fellows' hands and shouted our champion's name.

We all shouted as if Guthay were rising. Bult hit the dust with his eyes squeezed shut. Nothing happened—but, nothing ever happened when a poor, mortal human called Myron of Yoram.

When the time came and the dark magic was mine, I gave all my templars medallions—lumps of fired clay for most of them, but hardened with my breath, so they'd never doubt that I could hear them, see them. No less than Jikkana, Bult was my teacher; he taught me that in the field, fear, morale, and discipline are different words for the same thing.

And I learned from my younger self, too. If Myron of Yoram had been half a man to begin with, he'd have heard Bult that day. He'd have stirred himself across the netherworld—I know he had the power, what he lacked was will and wit—and he'd have struck me down with the eyes of fire.

It was not a mistake *I've* ever made. When my templars call me, my will is theirs; and when they rebel or rise against me, I reduce them to grease and ash, as if they'd never been born.

Not Myron of Yoram. I killed Jikkana, my solitary troll, and ten thousand others since, but Myron of Yoram killed Bult.

"It's outrage," I said softly while Bult still struggled to catch our champion's attention. "We stand by, human men and women, while trolls ravage our own folk. If we don't run, we howl at the moon, like beasts, hoping, year after futile year, that someone will hear us, that someone cares enough to come and kill our enemies for us. What sort of man do we serve? What sort of man is Myron of Yoram, Myron

Troll-Scorcher? It's been ages since he led his army to victory in the Kreegills. Now he hoards trolls like a miser hoarding metal. He doesn't want victory—he wants his eyes of fire to burn slow from now until eternity!"

They heard me; my fellows heard me. They let go of one another's hands, shook their heads, and whispered among themselves. I couldn't hear their words, but—O Whim of the Lion—if only I'd listened to myself! I held every piece of the puzzle in the palm of my hand, but it slipped away. Instead of rallying them all—humans, trolls, and every other race alike—against Rajaan's champions, I took the club they returned to me and smashed it into the side of Bult's yellow-haired head.

## Chapter Six

"It's been ages since Guthay wore two crowns for seven days, and then, a single crown for another three nights. Ten nights together, Omniscience! Not since the Year of Ral's Vengeance in the 177th King's Age," Enver said, reading from a freshly written scroll. "The high bureau scholars have taken half a quinth to research the archives, but they've at last confirmed what you, Omniscience, no doubt, remembered."

Hamanu nodded, not because he agreed, but because when Enver's recitation slowed, it was time for Enver's king to nod his head... and recall what the dwarf had said. Hamanu did pay attention to what his executor told him, and certain words or intonations would prick him to instant awareness. For the rest, though, Hamanu remembered faster than Enver recited. He listened with an empty ear, gathering words the way a drip bucket gathered water, until it was time to nod, and remember.

Having nodded and remembered, Hamanu's thoughts went wandering again as Enver read what the scholars had dug out of the Urik archives. He had not recalled the exact date when Guthay had put on her last ten-night performance—the systematic reckoning of years and ages meant little to him anymore—but he certainly remembered the event, two years after Borys, Butcher of Dwarves, had become Borys, Dragon of Tyr. That year, whole swaths of the heartland had turned gray with sorcerous ash, but, yes, Guthay had promised water in abundance and kept her promise.

As she'd kept it this year.

Fifty-eight days ago—twenty days after Guthay had shed her last crown—the gullies north of Urik had begun to fill. Ten days later, every cultivated field had received twice its allotment of silt-rich water. At the head of a planting army larger than the first military levy, which Commandant Javed drilled on the southern high ground, the Lion-King had marched into the pondlike fields and with back-breaking, dawn-to-dusk labor, planted a year's worth of hope.

The precious water flowed for another ten days. Gullies overflowed their banks. Walls of sun-baked brick dissolved into mounds of slick, yellow mud. Dumbstruck farmers stepped across their crumbling thresholds into ankle-deep streams of frigid, mountain water. With their newly planted fields endangered by an almost inconceivable threat—too much water—the farmers had turned to the priests of earth and water who, in turn, eighteen days ago, had led an anxious procession through the city walls, to the very gates of Hamanu's palace.

Hamanu had been waiting for them—he could see farther from his palace rooftop than any priest in his temple. He'd known the water was still rising, and after a dramatic hesitation, he'd called a second levy of Urik's able-bodied men, another one from every remaining five. Then, as he rarely did, the Lion-King explained his intentions: The second levy wouldn't march south to drill with the first. It would march north, beyond the established fields, and, digging with picks and shovels, pointed sticks and muddy hands, make new channels to spread Guthay's bounty across the barrens. The newly planted fields would be spared.

The crowd erupted with a spontaneous cheer for their Lion-King—an infrequent event, though not as infrequent as the floods that inspired it. By the next sunrise, a thousand men stood at the north gate. They'd come peacefully, the registrators said—another infrequent event—and fully half of them were volunteers, which was unprecedented. Fear and worship could sustain a living god, but nothing

compared to the pride Hamanu had felt with them and for them as they marched north to save the fields from drowning.

The second levy dug for twelve days. A moat of dark mud grew beyond Urik's fields, saving the crops, but water *still* churned out of the distant mountains. Beneath Urik, the vast cavern lake that slaked the city's thirst had become a roaring maelstrom. It had already flooded its stony shores and rose steadily against walls that had not been wet since the Lion of Urik was a mortal man.

Hamanu released the second levy to Javed's mercy and called up a third. One in five of men and women, both, and every age, would be levied. Five days ago, four thousand Urikites assembled in the palace forecourt. While the throng watched, the mighty Lion-King had taken a hammer to the doors of one of Urik's ten sealed granaries, then he'd sent the third levy into the second levy's mud, sacks of seed slung over their shoulders.

The third levy continued its labor in the flooded field; Hamanu could see hundreds of dark dots moving slowly across the mud. Pavek was out there, planting seeds with his toes while knee-deep in muck. His gold medallion was thrown carelessly over one shoulder. Twenty Quraiters worked alongside him. The hidden village had sent more than its share of farmers—of druids, too, though they strove to conceal their subtle renewals of the land.

It was a gamble as old as agriculture: if the granary seed they planted sprouted and throve until it ripened, they'd harvest four sacks for every one they'd risked, a respectable yield for land that hadn't been cultivated in ages. There'd be grain to sell to less-fortunate neighbors, conquering them with trade rather than warfare. There might even be enough to justify laying the foundation for an eleventh granary. If the grain throve—

And if the bonus crop failed, if war came to Urik, or some other disaster intervened, there were still nine sealed granaries, each with enough grain to feed Urik for a year. Hamanu didn't make blind gambles with his city's well-being.

"Omniscience, the orators have composed a new encomium." Enver was still reading from his notes. "They name you Hamanu Water-Wealth, Maker of Oceans. They wish to include the encomium in tomorrow's harangue. I have the whole text here, Omniscience; I'll read it, if you wish. It's quite good—a bit too florid for my taste—but I'm sure the people will find it stirring."

"Maker of Oceans," the Lion-King repeated, bringing his attention back to the palace roof.

Ocean was a word his scholars had found in the archives, nothing more. The Lion of Urik doubted there was anything alive that had seen an ocean—except Rajaat, of course, if Rajaat were alive in his Hollow prison. Hamanu had glimpsed the memory of an ocean once in Rajaat's crystal visions: blue water rippling from horizon to horizon, foaming waves that crashed one after the other on sand that never dried. The steamy moat girdling Urik wasn't an ocean, wasn't even the promise of an ocean. All it promised—all a living god dared hope that it promised— was a green field and an unexpected harvest.

What did an ocean want before it would be born? What did it need? More than ten nights of silver rings around a golden moon. More than one year of muddy water as wide as the eye could see. Borys had taken more than an age to finish the destruction the Cleansing Wars had begun. It had only been a handful of years since a dragon stalked the heartland. How many years before Urik's cavern could hold no more and water began to pool above ground?

Maybe then Hamanu would start to believe in oceans.

"The temples of Andarkin and Ulydeman—"

Temples was a word guaranteed to seize Hamanu's attention. He didn't completely forbid the worship of divinities other than himself—the Lion of Urik was neither a god nor a fool—but he didn't encourage them. As long as priests of the elemental temples stayed in their time-honored place, the Lion of Urik tolerated their presence in his city. Their place didn't include Enver's daily list.

Patience had never been Hamanu's virtue, but he felt exceptionally generous this morning—exceptionally curious, too—and let the dwarf continue without interruption.

"—would proclaim the existence of a demiurge they name Burbote—"

"Mud, dear Enver," Hamanu corrected with a sigh. "The word is *mud*. Rummaging through their grimoires looking for words that were old when I was a boy won't change matters. They want to sanctify



*mud.*"

Enver's hairless brows pulled together at a disapproving angle. He clutched his scroll between fists that grew white with tension.

After the Dragon's demise, when change had become inevitable, Hamanu had told his venerable executor the truth: Urik's Lion-King had been born an ordinary human man in a Kreegill valley thirteen ages earlier. He was immortal, but he wasn't a god. The dwarf hadn't taken the revelation well. Enver, the son, grandson, and great-grandson of yellow-robed templars, preferred to believe the lies about divinity—and omniscience—he'd learned in his own youth.

"If you say it is so, Omniscience, then it must be so," he said stiffly, his chosen response when his god disappointed him. "The priests of earth and water wish to erect a temple to mark the flood's greatest extent, but surely they will dedicate it to whomever you wish, even *mud.*"

"Do they claim to have marked the flood's greatest extent, dear Enver? Have the flood waters begun to recede?"

"Omniscience, I do not know."

Hamanu could not resist baiting his loyal servant. "Neither do I, dear Enver."

"I am at a loss, Omniscience." The dwarf was so stiff it seemed he'd crack and crumble in the slightest breeze.

"What shall I tell them, Omniscience? That they must rename their demiurge? Or should I tell them nothing at all until the floods recede?"

"Nothing, I think, would be the wiser course—for all I know, dear Enver, Burbote might consume all the land between here and the Smoking Crown. He might swell up and drown us all... Burbote is a *he*, yes? A muddy demiurge that is female, as well—the combination is more than I can bear to contemplate."

"Very well, Omniscience. As you will, Omniscience. I shall instruct the priests of Andarkin and Ulydeman to interrogate their oracles. They've not got the demiurge's name right, and they must be certain of its maleness... or femaleness... before their proclamation can be read or their temple built. Will that suffice, Omniscience?"

Enver was a paragon of mortal diligence and rectitude, and almost completely devoid of humor. But a god who acknowledged his own fallibility had to tolerate the failings of his associates—or dwell in utter isolation.

"It must, dear Enver. It must."

Hamanu's attention began to wander before Enver was three syllables into the next entry on his tightly clutched scroll. Between floods and preparations for war, he'd neglected his minions for the better part of a seventy-five-day quinth. The minions survived, of course—most of them. When he wasn't living their lives, they lived their own, much as they'd done before he'd woven his curiosity into their being. Casting an Unseen net, Hamanu touched them, one by one. A beggar had died. A nobleman had eaten unwisely and suffered the consequences in a dark, befouled corner of his luxurious home. Lord Ursos entertained an unwilling guest. Cissa's daughter had another tooth coming in. Nouri Nouri'son had adopted his beggar and put him to work behind the counter of his busy bakery.

Ewer's recitation progressed from religion to refugees, a subject that did not engage Hamanu's curiosity or require his attention. Though it pleased the Lion-King to think that the suffering citizens of Raam, Draj, and even far-off Balic would choose Urik as their sanctuary, his templars dealt with such strangers. Urik's borders were, of course, legally sealed, but Hamanu trusted his yellow-robos to determine when, where, and against whom his laws should apply.

He went back to his minions, until another trip-word scratched his hollow ear: arrows. The Khelo fletchers were squabbling with the Codesh butchers over the price of feathers for the thousands of arrows the army required.

"Tell the butchers they'll sell their damned feathers at the established rate, or their *heirs* will donate them in perpet—"

*O Mighty Hamanu! Lion-King, Lord, and Master, hear me!*

A distant voice echoed in Hamanu's mind. The totality of his awareness raced backward, along a

silver thread of consciousness through the Unseen netherworld, to the source.

*Armor! I crave invincible armor and earthquake!*

The Gray was charged with acid needles, and Hamanu's vision, when he opened his sulphur eyes above the desperate templar, was streaked with lurid colors. There was powerful magic—someone else's powerful magic—in the vicinity.

*O Mighty Hamanu! Hammer of the World! Grant me invincible armor and earthquake!*

Squinting through the magic, Hamanu made out chaos and bloodshed: a full cohort of his own templars outnumbered by ragtag brigands. Or, not brigands. Another moment's study discerned a well-armed, well-drilled force disguised for brigandage. In the midst of the Urikites' impending defeat, a militant, a human man with tears of panic streaming down his face, raised his bronze medallion and entreated the Lion-King for the third time:

*O Mighty Lion, grant me invincible armor and earthquake, lest I die!*

A wise invocation—in its way. An earthquake, if Hamanu empowered the spell to create one, would swallow everything on the battlefield, friend and foe alike, except for the invincibly armored militant. Though sacrifice was necessary in battle, the Lion-King of Urik was not in the habit of rewarding militants who'd save themselves and doom the lesser ranks and mercenaries they led. He'd have considered granting the earthquake while withholding the invincible armor—and savored the militant's death—if the netherworld turbulence wouldn't have negated any spell he granted.

There were only a handful of mind-benders capable of disturbing the netherworld enough to disrupt the bond between a champion and his templars. The champions themselves were foremost in that small group. Hamanu knew the hallmarks of their spellcasting intimately.

*Inenek*, Hamanu loosed an enemy's name to the Unseen wind. It was her spoor he scented in the netherworld and her disguised Gulgan templars winnowing his own. *Ogre-Naught*.

The turbulence ebbed, replaced by a sultry voice, full of seduction and, though *Inenek* tried to hide it, hate. *You tricked me once, Manu, but never again. Rajaat chose you for your strength, not your brilliance. You're not as clever as you think you are. Surrender to me, and Urik will survive.*

A wind-driven fist shrieked through the Gray with the power to smash a mountain into gravel.

*Your promises are as empty as your threats, Inenek*, Hamanu replied, dispelling her assault with a roar of laughter.

*Inenek* had always been vulnerable to mockery. The netherworld shone with futile lightning; she'd never learned to control her temper, either. Hamanu dispelled the bolts as he'd dispelled the shrieking fist. *Inenek*—the Oba of Gulg, she called herself now—was arguably the least among the champions. How she'd annihilated the ogres was a mystery Hamanu had never taken the time to solve. He suspected she'd disguised herself as an ogress and slain every male after taking him into her bed.

The *Ogre-Naught* couldn't harm him, but his besieged templars were doomed if he didn't intervene. With his eyes still glowing, Hamanu turned to Enver, who'd sensed nothing amiss until that moment.

"I go," he told the dwarf. He caught a fleeting glimpse of Enver's widening eyes before he slit the rooftop air with a talon and stepped into the Gray.

Hamanu departed Urik as a black-haired man. He emerged on the battlefield as the black-maned Lion of Urik, taller than a half-giant, stronger and far more deadly. A gold sword gleamed in his right hand. It sliced through the warrior weapons raised against him, and through the warriors as well. Hamanu wielded his sorcery-laced sword with the skill gained in a very long lifetime of practice, inflicting precise slaughter among his enemies.

He didn't bother to guard his back or slow his attacks with parries; the Lion of Urik was only another glamour, hiding his true form. A calm and sharp-eyed observer—had there been any on the field—would have noticed the discontinuity as metal weapons passed through the Lion's ephemeral form before shattering against otherwise invisible dragon flesh. Wooden and bone-crafted weapons met a different fate. They burst into short-lived flames when they breached his infernal aura.

With their king wreaking havoc among their enemies, the Urikite templars rallied. They surged forward in a score of close-fought skirmishes. Hamanu welcomed their renewed courage; he'd reward

them with their lives. And as for the militant who led them...

His leonine ears flicked as the golden sword brought death to another five fighters. He listened for two particular sounds: the militant's pulse, and the clang of his metal sword.

One lapse of leadership might be forgiven—if the militant's panic hadn't been stronger than Inenek's Unseen interference, Hamanu wouldn't have known that his templars needed him. A second lapse would be unforgivable, unsurvivable. Hamanu strained his hearing. He found half of what he listened for: a mortal heart pounding hard beneath a bronze medallion.

*Bakheer!* Hamanu seized the militant's disarrayed thoughts and rattled them. *Fight, Bakheer.*

Hamanu didn't enjoy killing his own templars. At the very least, it was a waste of mortal life. At the worst, because of the medallion-forged bond he shared with them, their deaths brought his darkest appetites to the fore. *Fight the enemy, Bakheer. Fight to the death... or face me.*

A sane man would have listened, would have understood and thrown himself at Inenek's minions, but Bakheer was no longer sane. What Inenek had begun, Hamanu inadvertently finished. Bakheer's mind shattered. His heart beat one final time, and his spirit flared in the instant before Rajaat's last champion savored it.

The tiny morsel of mortality tantalized Hamanu's much-denied appetites. For a moment, there were neither Urikites nor enemies on the field before him, only aching need, and the motes of life that would sate it.

The Lion of Urik roared words too loud and angry for mortal ears to interpret: "Damn you!"

Hamanu turned away from temptation, away from the battlefield. Abandoning his templars, he cast himself into the netherworld... where a whirlwind awaited him.

Inenek had guessed his choice—his predictable weakness—and caught him in a mind-bender's trap. Stripped of all his glamour, reduced to a spindly shadow of his unnatural form, Hamanu, was sucked away from his templars. He wasn't surprised when a black maw appeared suddenly, far below his feet, growing larger with each howling spiral.

Inenek was sending him toward the Black, toward the Hollow beneath it, and into Rajaat's grasp. Hamanu could imagine what rewards Rajaat had promised her.

But, truly, the Oba of Gulg couldn't harm the Lion of Urik. Her powers, though awesome, were no match for his, when he chose to use them. Radiance blossomed from Hamanu's long, skeletal fingers, wrapping him in a cocoon of light. Inenek's whirlwind lost its hold over him, and he began to rise, slowly at first, then faster, until the whirlwind dissipated in his wake.

Time flowed erratically in the Gray. Days, even years, of sunlit time could vanish during a netherworld sneeze, or time could twist the other way, and a champion could reappear on the battlefield—as Hamanu did—a heartbeat after he'd left.

Hamanu took advantage of his enemies' astonishment and confusion. Two of them died from a single, decapitating sword stroke. Another two tried to run; he took them from behind.

Drubbed in the netherworld, unable to deliver Hamanu to Rajaat, and besieged on the battlefield, Inenek withdrew her support from her templars who, feeling the tide of battle shift away from them, tried to escape a now-inevitable defeat. A few, on the battlefield's fringes, might have succeeded; they were hardly the lucky ones. Inenek wouldn't take them back for fear Hamanu had tampered with them, and ordinary folk made certain that the life of a renegade templar was neither pleasant nor long.

The Gulg templars who fell into Hamanu's hands knew what their fate would be: a quick death, if they were lucky, a drawn-out one if they weren't. They didn't know who the sorcerer-kings truly were or why they despised one another. They only knew that a templar's life was over once he stood before another sorcerer-king. Two or three of Inenek's templars fell on their knees, renouncing their city; they offered oaths to Urik's mightier king. But there was no hope in their hearts or useful knowledge in their heads—and he would never spare a templar who denied his city.

He offered them the same opportunity he offered his templar prisoners—death by their own hands instead of his. Without exception, they took the easier, safer course: running onto the swords and spears the Urikites held before them.

"O Mighty One, your will is done," a young adjutant informed Hamanu when the deeds were

finished. The elf's bright yellow robe and metallic right sleeve were torn and stained. The thoughts on his mind's surface were painfully clear. His name was Kalfaen, and this had been his first campaign. He hadn't risen through the war-bureau ranks, but had been given an adjutant's enameled medallion on the strength of his family's connections. "The Oba's templars are all dead, except—except for the wounded—"

Kalfaen's voice trailed. His thought-shapes shifted. He imagined himself on a less fortunate day, wounded, in dire pain, and waiting for some other living god to unravel his memories.

Hamanu ignored the young man's distress. He tolerated nepotism in the templar ranks because it gave the likes of Kalfaen no real advantage. "Wait here," he commanded, and insured obedience with a frigid thought that held the youthful elf where he stood. "When I am finished with the wounded, you shall recount what happened here, from the beginning."

Elves were chancy mortals. A good many of them crumpled and died the first time Hamanu touched their minds. The best of them matured into loyal, independent templars such as Javed. If he'd made the effort, Hamanu could have learned to separate the weak from the strong before he put them to the test, but it was easier—certainly quicker—to nail Kalfaen to the ground and see if he survived.

None of the Oba's wounded templars would survive. Those who remained welcomed the release provided by yellow-robed surgeon-sergeants, usually with a quick slash through the jugular. The two knife-wielding sergeants bowed low when Hamanu's shadow fell between them. Without a spoken word, they scuttled off to join their comrades beside the Urikite wounded. They left their king to tread silently among the bloody Gulgans, carefully severing the spiritual fibers that bound essence to substance. Hamanu had subsumed one man's spirit already, and he neither wanted nor needed to add another name to his army of grievance against Rajaat.

He was careful as well because these templars had belonged to Inenek and she could have easily tampered with them. He himself had done so, from time to time, with the men and women he'd sent into war.

With Nibenay between them, Urik and Gulg—the Don-King and the Oba—had rarely warred with each other. While Borys lived, Rajaat's champions made war with their closest neighbors and uneasy alliances with the rest of their peers. Gulg and Nibenay had never been anything but enemies, until now—

Hamanu plunged his awareness deep into the ground and located himself. A chill shook his heart. This battle had taken place far from any road, farther still from any village or oasis, deep within the barren borderlands that Urik and Nibenay had contested for thirteen ages.

Hamanu didn't doubt that Gallard knew where Inenek had sent her templars, but he doubted that his old nemesis knew she'd been trading secrets with Rajaat. In other times, communion with the War-Bringer was the only crime that the champions would unanimously condemn and punish.

Times had changed. Everything had changed—except Hamanu, the Lion of Urik. As Hamanu thought of dragons and champions, the last of the Gulg templars heaved a shuddering sigh and passed from life into eternal sleep.

The Lion-King strode toward the Urik infirmary tended by his surgeon-sergeants. He granted unlimited spells to the war-bureau healers in the aftermath of battle, for all the good it did the injured. Working with second-hand magic, the surgeon-sergeants were barely competent in their craft. Templars moaned and wailed when their wounds were tended. They healed with troublesome scars such as Pavek bore across his otherwise handsome face.

Hamanu used the endless potential of the Unseen world when he chose to heal. As a restorer of life and health, he was more than competent, but not even his flexible consciousness could attend the needs of so many. He chose not to choose a lucky few among them. He chose, in truth, to keep his compassion well-hidden from the templars who served him, and he defended his choice with the thought that it was better that mortals not rely on his mercy.

Pale and streaked with clammy sweat, Kalfaen waited precisely where Hamanu had left him.

"Recount," the Lion commanded, tugging the Unseen strings laced through the elven youth's mind.

Hamanu's sorcery kept Kalfaen upright. His own will shaped the words and thoughts that the

king skimmed off the surface of his mind.

The disaster had begun innocently the previous night, when a clutch of refugees approached the templar camp. They were better fed than the usual wanderers—richer, anyway, with enough metal in their purses to buy a night's protection beside a templar fire.

"There were children with them," Kalfaen explained.

Despite their strong tribal attachments to kith and kin, elves weren't sentimental about their offspring. They'd abandon anything, anyone if the need arose. On the other side of the coin, a tribe with children in tow appeared both prosperous and fearless. Kalfaen's thoughts were tinged with shame. He'd succumbed to metal-coin bribes, women's charm, and the prejudices of his own race.

Hamanu returned that shame as a thousand sharp needles lancing Kalfaen's inmost self. The youth gasped involuntarily.

"I die," he whispered.

Trust and prejudice together were just another two-sided coin. When the Lion of Urik trusted his mortal templars, he got their prejudices in the bargain. Kalfaen wasn't the only Urikite who'd bought the Gulgan deception. Hamanu's spell kept the youth alive as surely as it kept him standing.

"Recount," he demanded. "What next? What of the others? Recount!"

The rest was as simple as it was predictable: something had been slipped into the wine. Immune to their own poisons, the false refugees had slipped away during the night, leaving the templars to death at dawn. But the militant had drunk less than Kalfaen and the rest. He saw telltale dust on the eastern horizon and sounded an alarm, then kicked each of them soundly in the flanks until they roused. By the time Kalfaen was on his feet, the sound of hobnail sandals slapping the barren soil was all around them.

There was nothing more to say or learn. Hamanu released Kalfaen. The elf collapsed in stages—to his knees, his elbows, his face. Belatedly, he clapped his long-fingered hands over his ears and scalp, as if scraps of mortal flesh could have protected him from Hamanu's inquiry. He reeked of vomit and worse, but he'd live. He'd been tempered in the Lion's fire and, having failed to die, was doomed to survive.

Hamanu's thoughts were already moving away from the elf. Scanning the remains of the camp, he looked for the missing pieces in the puzzle Inenek had left for him. Her plans had gone awry: he'd arrived early, trying to save his templars, triggering her traps out of sequence. But she *had* meant for him to come—why else tamper with the mind of his militant or set a whirlwind to wait for him in the Gray?

The militant, then, was the key. Inenek had meant for the templar to use his medallion to summon him to this barren place, though not during the fighting. The poisoned wine and the netherworld disruption were both designed to keep him away while his templars were slain.... While all save one of his templars were slain....

Did the Oba think Urik's templars were fools? No war-bureau templar would admit to being the sole survivor of monumental stupidity. He certainly wouldn't summon his immortal king to witness the debacle. A militant would have needed a better reason.

"Stand down!" Hamanu's voice roared beyond the battlefield.

The surgeon-sergeants continued their work, but the templars who'd been gleaning armor, weapons, and other valuables from the corpses of friend and foe alike stood at attention with their arms at their sides. Hamanu's head throbbed—had been throbbing since he stepped from the netherworld. It was a minor ache compared to the agonies he customarily ignored, and no surprise, considering the unnatural power that had been expended in this unlikely place.

Massaging an illusory forehead with a human-seeming hand, Hamanu dissected his aches. Sorcery and mind-bending, his and Inenek's, had caused much of the harm, and beneath that, the War-Bringer's spoor. The smell of Rajaat was not just in the netherworld, where Hamanu had glimpsed the Black as he battled Inenek's whirlwind, but here, amid the battle refuse.

Hamanu bestrode his lifeless militant, who'd fallen exactly where he'd stood when he raised his medallion. The man's mind was cold; when a champion subsumed a mortal spirit, there was nothing left behind for necromantic interrogation.

With a roar, the Lion of Urik cursed himself, Inenek, Rajaat, and the useless militant. He kicked

the corpse aside and knew before it struck ground again that he'd found his missing piece.

Already wrapped in silk and leather, this second shard was smaller than the one Javed had found in the Nibenese camp. Its dark power pulsed in rhythm with Hamanu's throbbing veins—or the other way around. It wanted destruction, but he dared do nothing with it while the surgeon-sergeants drained him for their healing power.

Impatiently, Hamanu cast a net into the netherworld.

*Windreaver!*

Nearly a quinth had passed since Hamanu had sent the troll to Ur Draxa—not a lot of time, considering how treacherous the citadel might have become if Rajaat were working sorcery from his prison.

*Windreaver!*

Hamanu hadn't been concerned by the troll's absence. In the past, Windreaver had been gone a year, even a decade, ferreting out secrets. Disembodied, neither dead nor alive, the wayfaring troll had little effect on the world around him and was equally immune to any manner of assault. And if Windreaver had been destroyed—Hamanu rubbed his forearm; beneath the leonine illusion he felt a stony lump—the troll's passing would have been noticed.

*Windreaver!*

A third call echoed throughout the Gray and died unanswered. Hamanu pondered the imponderable: Windreaver falling into a trap. Windreaver imprisoned. Windreaver seizing an opportunity for vengeance. Hamanu would have staked his immortal life that Windreaver wouldn't betray him to Rajaat or another champion, but he'd been wrong more often than not lately.

*To me, Windreaver—now!*

Nothing. Not a whisper or a promise anywhere in the netherworld. By sundown, the surgeon-sergeants had finished their work among the wounded. Hamanu picked up the wrapped shard and broke it over his thigh. He inhaled the malignant vapors, and then seared Rajaat's spells with his own. With nothing left to hinder him, Hamanu shouted Windreaver's name to the beginning of time, the end of space. He harvested countless interrupted thoughts, none of which emanated from a troll.

\* \* \* \* \*

After thirteen ages, an enemy was as good as a friend. As the two moons rose together, Hamanu returned to Urik not merely alone but lonely. He called Enver, Javed, and Pavek away from their separate suppers. They sat, stiff and still, on the palace roof while he paced beside the balustrade, disguised as a man and fooling no one. He could perceive their thoughts, their conviction that something must be terribly wrong, but he couldn't make them speak, not to each other, not to him, not the way Windreaver would have spoken.

"Such a doleful gathering, O Mighty Master. Is someone you care about dead or dying?" Like a shadow sketched in darkness with silver ink, Windreaver spun himself out of the night. "I heard you, O Mighty Master, and thought it might be important."

Hamanu hid his relief. "What have you learned in Ur Draxa? Have you found the source of the shards?"

Thick silver lips parted, revealing thicker silver teeth. "Shards, O Mighty Master? Have you found others?"

Hamanu had beaten Windreaver's trolls decisively, but he'd never outsmarted the old general, who could still make him feel like the young man he'd once been. "Inenek. Today. Destroyed now, like the first."

"If there were two, O Mighty Master, there are certainly more," Windreaver said in a tone that might easily be mistaken for concern.

"What of Ur Draxa? What have you learned?"

"That men are fools where women are concerned, O Mighty Master."

"Spare me your homilies. Recount!"

Hamanu squeezed his own forearm, and Windreaver's silvery outline stilled.

"The Usurper's storm still rages, O Mighty Master. Cold rain falls on molten rock. Steam and ice exist side by side above the black lake where the War-Bringer's bones were imprisoned."

Hamanu's heart skipped. "*Were?*"

"Absolute brilliance that was, O Mighty Master, imprisoning your enemy's bones in a lava lake, then hurling the Dark Lens in afterward. Absolute pure brilliance. What, after all, is lava but unborn obsidian? Who's to say now where the Lens ends and the prison begins, eh, O Mighty Master? When does a prison become a palace? A palace become a prison?"

Beneath Hamanu's hand, one of the balustrade lions cracked and crumbled into dust.

"It's hard to say, for the smoke and steam and fog, but it seemed to me, O Mighty Master, that the lake's no longer flat. It rises up, I think, in the middle, rather like a baby's gums when the teeth are about to erupt—Oh, I'm sorry, Mighty Master: You have no children. You wouldn't know about erupting teeth—"

"Will it hold?" Hamanu demanded. "Will the wards and spells that woman cast hold Rajaat in the Hollow?"

"By the sun's light, O Mighty Master, they were strained, but strong."

## Chapter Seven

Hamanu sent them away—all of them: Windreaver, Pavek, Enver, the myriad slaves and templars whose labor fueled the palace routine. The Lion-King retired to distill the reagents and compose the invocation of the stealthy spell he'd need to get close enough to see his creator's prison with his own eyes and—more importantly—get away again.

"Oil, O Mighty Master?" Windreaver whispered from the darkest depths of the room where Hamanu worked into the night.

The storerooms beneath the palace were flooded. Their contents had been hurriedly hauled to the upper rooms for safekeeping, leaving Hamanu's normally austere and organized workroom in chaos. The treasures of a very long lifetime were heaped into precarious pyramids. Windreaver's shadowy form would be lost amid countless other shadows, and Hamanu didn't break his concentration to look for his old enemy.

"Do you *truly* believe oil from the egg-sack of a red-eyed roc will protect *you* from *your* master?"

"... nine hundred eighty... nine hundred eighty-one..." Hamanu replied through clenched teeth.

Shimmering droplets, black as the midnight sky and lustrous as pearls, dripped from the polished porphyry cruet he held over an obsidian cauldron. Four ages ago, he'd harvested this oil from a red-eyed roc. It had vast potential as a magical reagent—potential he had scarcely begun to explore—but he did not expect it to protect him from the first sorcerer.

Nothing but his own wits and all the luck in the world could protect the last champion from Rajaat.

"You're a fool, O Mighty Master. Surrender and be done with it. Become the dragon. Any dragon would be better than Rajaat unchained. You certainly can't fight Rajaat *and* your peers."

"... nine hundred eighty-eight... nine hundred eighty-nine..."

Unable to provoke an explosion from either Hamanu or the concoction in front of him, Windreaver turned his attention to the clutter. Save for his acid voice and the swirling wake of his anger, the troll had no effect on the living world. That was his protection—he could slip undetected through all but the most rigorous wardings, including the ones Hamanu had set on this room. It was also his frustration.

Whirling through the room, Windreaver shook the clutter and raised a score of clattering dust devils from its shadows. Hamanu stilled the air with an absentminded thought and counted the nine hundred ninety-second drop of oil. The devils collapsed.

There was another table in the workroom, uncluttered save for writing implements and two sheaves of vellum: one blank, the other already written upon, It drew Windreaver's curiosity as a lodestone attracted iron. The air above the table sighed. The corners of the written-upon vellum rustled.

Hamanu imagined a thumb in the center of the sheaf. "... nine hundred ninety-four... nine hundred ninety-five ..."

Driven by a very local wind, the brass stylus rolled to the table's edge and clattered loudly to the floor. The vellum remained where it belonged.

"Memoirs, O Mighty Master?" The rustling stopped. "An apology?"

Windreaver's accusations were icy knives against Hamanu's back. The Lion of Urik wore the guise of a human man in his workroom where no illusion was necessary. Human motion, human gestures, were still the movements his mind knew best. He shrugged remembered shoulders beneath an illusory silk shirt and continued his count.

"What fascination does this street-scum orphan hold for you, O Mighty Master? You've wound him tight in a golden chain, and yet you plead for his understanding."

"... one thousand... one thousand one."

Hamanu set the cruet down and, taking up an inix-rib ladle, gave the cauldron a stir. Bubbles burst on the brew's surface. The two-score flames of the overhead candelabra extinguished themselves with a single hiss and the scent of long-dead flowers. A coal brazier glowed beneath the cauldron, but when Hamanu stirred it a second time, the pale illumination came from the cauldron itself.

"I noticed him, this Just-Plain Pavek of yours, Pavek the high templar, Pavek the druid. His scars go deep, O Mighty Master. He's scared to the core, of you, of every little thing."

"Pavek is a wise man."

"He's young."

"He's mortal."

"He's young, O Mighty Master. He has no understanding."

"You're old. Did age make you wise?"

"Wiser than you, Manu. You never became a man."

Manu. The troll had read the uppermost sheet of parchment where the name was written, but he'd known about Manu for ages. Windreaver knew the Lion's history, but Hamanu knew very little about the troll. What was there to know about a ghost?

Shifting the ladle to his off-weapon hand, Hamanu reached into an ordinary-seeming leather pouch sitting lopsidedly on the table. He scooped out a handful of fine, dirt-colored powder and scattered it in an interlocking pattern across the cauldron's seething surface. Flames leapt up along the powder's trail.

Hamanu's glossy black hair danced in the heat. He spoke a word; the flames froze in time. His hair settled against his neck; illusion maintained without thought. Moments later, screams and lamentations erupted far beyond the workroom. The flames flickered, died, and Hamanu stirred the cauldron again.

"You're evil, Manu."

"So say you."

"Aye, I say it. Do you hear me?"

"I hear. You'd do nothing different."

"I'm no sorcerer," the troll swore indignantly.

"A coincidence of opportunity. Rajaan made you before he made me."

"Be damned! *We* did not start the Cleansing War!"

"Nor did I. I finished it. Would you have finished it differently? Could you have stopped your army before every human man, woman, and child was dead? Could you have stopped yourself?"

The air fell silent.

Iridescence bloomed on the swirling brew. It spread rapidly, then rose: a noxious, rainbow bubble as tall as a man. The bubble burst, spattering Hamanu with foul-smelling mist. The silk of his illusory shirt shriveled, revealing the black dragon-flesh of his true shape. A deep-pitched chuckle rumbled from the workroom's corners before the illusion was restored.



Hamanu released the ladle. The inix bone clattered full-circle around the obsidian rim, then it, the penultimate reagent, was consumed. Blue light, noxious and alive, formed a hemisphere above the cauldron, not touching it. With human fingers splayed along his human chin, concealing a very human scowl, Hamanu studied the flickering blue patterns.

Everything appeared in order. The turgid brew, the shimmering light, the lingering odor were all as his research and calculations had predicted. But predictions could be wrong, disastrously wrong, when spells went awry.

Rajaat, creator of sorcery as well as champions, had written the grammar of spellcraft in his own youth, long before the Cleansing Wars began. Since then, additions to the grimoires had been few, and mostly inscribed in blood: a warning to those who followed that the experiment had failed. Hamanu's stealthy spell was perilously unproven. Its name existed only in his imagination. He would, in all likelihood, survive any miscasting, but survival wouldn't be enough.

Still scowling, Hamanu walked away from the table. He stopped at a heap of clutter no different from the others and made high-pitched clicking noises with his tongue. Before Windreaver could say anything, a lizard's head poked up. Kneeling, Hamanu held out his hand.

The lizard, a critic, was ancient for its kind. Its brilliant, many-colored scales had faded to subtle, precious shades. Its movements were slow and deliberate, but without hesitation as it accepted Hamanu's finger and climbed across his wrist to his forearm. Its feet disappeared as it balanced on real flesh within the illusion.

"You astonish me," Windreaver muttered from a corner.

Hamanu let the comment slide, though he, too, was astonished, hearing something akin to admiration in his enemy's voice. He was evil; he accepted that. A thousand times a thousand judgments had been rendered against the Lion of Urik. He'd done many horrible things because they were necessary. He'd done many more because he was bored and craved amusement. But his evil was as illusory as his humanity.

The Lion-King couldn't say what the lizard saw through its eyes. Its mind was too small, too different for him to occupy. Scholars had said, and proven, that critics wouldn't dwell in an ill-omened house. They'd choose death over deception if the household doors were locked against their departure. From scholarly proofs, it was a small step to the assumption that critics wouldn't abide evil's presence, and a smaller step to the corollary that critics and the Lion of Urik should be incompatible.

Yet the palace never lacked the reclusive creatures. Shallow bowls of amber honey sat in every chamber for their use—even here, amid the noxious reagents, or on the roof beneath Hamanu's unused bed.

With the critic on his arm, Hamanu returned to the worktable, dipped his finger in just such a delicately painted bowl, and offered a sticky feast to his companion. Its dark tongue flicked once, probing the gift, and a second time, after which the honey was gone. A wide yawn revealed its toothless gums, and then it settled its wrinkled chin flat on the Lion-King's forearm, basking in the warmth of his unnatural flesh.

With a crooked and careful finger, Hamanu stroked the critic's triangular skull and its long flanks. Bending over, he whispered a single word: "Rajaat," and willingly opened his mind to the lizard as so many had unwillingly opened their minds to him.

The critic raised its head, flicked its tongue—as if thoughts were honey in the air. Slowly it straightened its legs, turned around, and made its way back to Hamanu's hand, which was poised above the blue light, above the simmering cauldron.

A shadow fell across Hamanu's arm. "This is not necessary, Manu."

"Evil cares nothing for necessity," Hamanu snapped. "Evil serves itself, because good will not." He surprised himself with his own bitterness. He'd thought he no longer cared what others thought, but that, too, was illusion. "Leave me, Windreaver."

"I'll return to Ur Draxa, O Mighty Master. There is nothing you can learn there that I cannot—and without the risk."

"Go where you will, Windreaver, but *go*."

The critic leapt into the cauldron. For an instant the workroom was plunged in total darkness. When there was light again, it came only from the brazier. The brew's surface was satin smooth; both the troll and the critic were gone.

With doubts and emptiness he did not usually feel, Hamanu lifted the cauldron. He set it down again in an iron-strapped chest inscribed all over with words from a language that had been forgotten before Rajaan was born. Then Hamanu locked the chest with green-glowing magic and, feeling every one of his thousand years, sat down before the ink stone and parchment.

The reagents must age for two nights and a day before they could be decanted, before the stealthy spell could be invoked.

There was much he could write in that time.

\* \* \* \* \*

I removed Bult's sword from his lifeless hand. It was the first time I'd held a forged weapon. A thrill like the caress of Dorean's hair against my skin raced along my nerves. The sword would forever be *my* weapon. Casting my gorestained club aside, I ran my hand along the steel spine. It aroused me, not as Dorean had aroused my mortal passions, but I knew the sword's secrets as I had known hers.

The dumbstruck veterans of our company retreated when I swept the blade in a slow, wide arc.

"Now we fight trolls," I told them as Bult's corpse cooled. "No more running. If running from your enemy suits your taste, start running, because anyone who won't fight trolls fights me instead."

I dropped down into the swordsman's crouch I'd seen but never tried. I tucked my vitals behind the hilt and found a perfect balance when my shoulders were directly above my feet. It was so comfortable, so natural. Without thinking, I smiled and bared my teeth.

Three of the men turned tail, running toward the nearest road and the village we'd passed a few days earlier, but the rest stood firm. They accepted me as their leader—me, a Kreegill farmer's son with a wordy tongue, a light-boned dancer, who'd killed a troll and a veteran on the same day.

"Ha-Manu," one man called me: Worthy Manu, Bright Manu, Manu with a sword in his hand and the will to use it.

The sun and the wind and the homage of hard, human eyes made me a warlord that day. My life had come to a tight corner. Looking back, I saw Manu's painful path from Deche: the burning houses, the desecrated corpses of kin... of Dorean. Ahead, the future beckoned him to shape it, to forge it, as his sword had been shaped by heat and hammer.

I couldn't go back to Deche; time's tyranny cannot be overthrown, but I was not compelled to become Hamanu. A man can deny his destiny and remain trapped in the tight corner between past and future until both are unattainable. The choice was mine.

"Break camp," I told them, my first conscious command. "I killed a troll last night. Where there's one troll, there're bound to be more. It's nigh time trolls learned that this is *human* land."

There were no cheers, just the dusty backs of men and women as they obeyed. Did they obey because I'd killed Bult and they feared me? Did they listen because I offered an opportunity they were ready to seize? Or was it habit, as habit had kept me behind Bult for five years? Probably a bit of each in every mind, and other reasons I didn't guess then, or ever.

In time, I'd learn a thousand ways to insure obedience, but in the end, it's a rare man who wants to go first into the unknown. I was a rare man.

We had three kanks. Two of the bugs carried our baggage: uncut cloth and hides, the big cook pots, food and water beyond the two day's supply every veteran carried in his personal kit—all the bulk a score of rootless humans needed in the barrens. The third kank had carried Bult and Bult's personal possessions and our hoard of coins. I appropriated the poison-spitting bug and rode in unfamiliar style while our trackers searched for troll trails.

I counted the coins in our coin coffer first—what man wouldn't? We could have eaten better, if there'd been better food available at any price in any of the villages where we traded. I found Bult's hidden coin cache and counted those coins, too. Bult had been a wealthy man, for all the good it had

done him. Wealth didn't interest me, not half as much as the torn scraps of vellum Bult had kept in a case made from tanned and supple troll hide.

While the others slept, I examined the scraps and gave thanks to Jikkana, who'd taught me human script. There were maps on some of the scraps: maps of the Kreegills, maps of the whole human heartland. Roads were lines; villages were names beside dots of greater or lesser size. Deche was marked on the Kreegill map, with a big red slash drawn through it. Deche and other villages, more than I cared to count.

Bult had made other marks on his precious maps: blue curls for sweet streams that flowed year around, three black lines with a triangle below them to mark where we'd buried our dead. Those black lines surprised me: I hadn't thought he'd noticed. The last five years of my life were written on those vellum scraps.

Another scrap held the names of the veterans in his band. I laughed when I read the words he'd written about me: "Bigmouthed farm boy. Talks too much. Thinks too much. Dangerous. Squash him when Jikkana lets him go." A man who has to write such things down in order to remember them is a fool, but I read his entries carefully, committing them, too, to my memory before I burnt the vellum. After all, he'd been right about me; he just hadn't moved fast enough.

There were intact sheets of vellum in the case. Each bore the seal of a higher officer. The words were unfamiliar to me, even when I sounded them out. A code, I decided, but aren't all languages codes, symbols for words, words for things, motions, and ideas? I'd cracked the troll code before I knew that humanity had a code of its own. I had no doubt that I could crack any code Bult had devised.

Of course, Bult hadn't devised the code. It was Myron of Yoram's code: the orders he—or someone he trusted—had sent to bands like ours. On each folded sheet, the officers whose paths crossed ours had written their thoughts about us. As we rarely saw the same officer twice running, the sheets were a sort of conversation among our superiors.

Pouring over them, I easily pictured Bult doing the same. The image inspired me. I cracked the Troll-Scorcher's code three nights later. It was a simple code: one symbol displacing another without variation from one officer to the next. The Troll-Scorcher's officers weren't much cleverer than Bult had been, but their secrets had been safe from our yellow-haired leader. He would never have carried those closely written sheets around for all those years if he'd known how Yoram's officers belittled him.

But there were more than insults coded on those sheets. Word by word, I pieced together the Troll-Scorcher's strategy. He herded the trolls as if they were no more, no less, than kanks. He culled his bugs and kept them moving, lest they overgraze the pasturage: human farms, human villages, human lives.

We— Bult's band and the other bands that mustered each year on the plains—weren't fighting a war; we were shepherds, destined to tend Myron of Yoram's flocks forever.

I read my translations to my veterans the next night. Honest rage choked my throat as I described the Troll-Scorcher's intentions; I couldn't finish. A one-eyed man—one of Bult's confidants and, I'd assumed, no friend of mine—took up after me. He was a halting reader; my ears ached listening to him, but he held the band's attention, which gave me the chance to study my men and women unobserved.

They were mostly the children of veterans. They'd been raised in the sprawling camp in the plains where the whole army mustered once a year until they were old enough to join a band. Their lives had been completely shaped by Myron of Yoram's war against the trolls. When One-Eye finished, they sat mute, staring at the flames with unreadable expressions. For a moment I was flummoxed. Then I realized that their sense of betrayal went deeper than mine. Their very reason for living—the reasons that had sustained their parents and grandparents—was a fraud perpetrated by the very man they called their lord and master: Myron Troll-Scorcher.

It was no longer enough that I lead them from one village to the next, looking for trolls who had—as they did from time to time—vanished overnight from the heartland. If I wanted my veterans to follow me further, I'd have to replace the Troll-Scorcher in their minds.

I'd come to another corner in my life, hard after the last one. I could have sat with them, staring at the flames until the wood was ash and the sun rose. With neither leader nor purpose, we would have drifted apart or fallen prey to trolls, other men, or barrens-beasts, which were, even then, both numerous

and deadly. But destiny had already named me Hamanu; I couldn't let the moment pass.

"Perdition," I said softly as I rose to my feet. There was no need to shout. The camp was grave quiet, and I had their attention. "Perdition for Myron of Yoram *and* the trolls. We'll tell the truth in every village and slay any rounds-officer who sniffs up our trail. We'll take this war back to the trolls. We'll finish it, and then we'll come back to finish the Troll-Scorcher!"

This time there were cheers. Men took my hand; women kissed my cheek. Guide us, Hamanu, they said. We put our lives in your hands. You see light where we see shadows. Guide us. Give us victory. Give us pride, Hamanu.

I heard their pleas, accepted their challenge. I led them toward the light.

After studying Bull's maps, I found a pattern to our wanderings. More, I studied the vast, empty areas where we never wandered and where, I hoped, trolls might go when they vanished from their usual haunts.

There were twenty-three of us left in what had been Bull's band, what had become Hamanu's. We were nowhere near enough warriors to confront trolls in lands that they knew better than we did. So we wandered before heading into the unknown, visiting map-marked villages. By firelight and the blazing midday sun, I told our tale to anyone who'd stand still long enough. Our message was simple: humanity suffers because the army sworn to protect it pursues the unfathomable goals of the Troll-Scorcher instead.

"Turn away from the Troll-Scorcher and the trolls. Take your destinies into your own hands," I said at the end of every telling. "Choose to pay the price of victory now, or resign yourself to defeat forever."

Instinct told me how to hold another human's attention with pitch, rhythm, and gesture, but only practice could teach me the words that would bind a man's heart to my ideas. I learned quickly, but not always quickly enough. At times, my words went wrong, and we left a village with dirt and dung clattering against our heels. But even then, there'd be a few more of us leaving than there'd been when we arrived.

From twenty, we grew to forty; from forty to sixty.

Our reputation—my reputation—spread. Renegade bands whose disillusionment with the Troll-Scorcher's army was older than ours met us on the open plains. Alliances were proposed. My band should fall in step, they advised, and I, being younger in both years and experience, should accept another leader's authority. Duels were fought: I *was* young, and I was still learning, but I was already Hamanu, and it was my destiny—not theirs—to forge victory.

Bull's metal sword carved the guts of four renegade leaders who couldn't perceive, that truth. After each duel, I invited their veterans to join me. A few did, but loyalty runs deep in the human spirit, and mostly, duels left me with a cloud of enemies who wouldn't join my growing band and couldn't return to the Troll-Scorcher's army. Cut off at the neck, without leaders, and at the knees, with nowhere to go, they were of little consequence.

I had no greater concern for the Troll-Scorcher's loyal bands, which dogged us from village to village. They threatened the villagers who aided us, then melted away, and got in the way of trolls when I tried to pursue them. My trackers guessed that there were, perhaps, three loyalist bands shadowing our movements and intimidating the villages we depended upon for food and water, now that our number I had grown too large for easy forage. Thirty men and women, they said, forty at most, and not an officer among them.

I believed my trackers.

I was stunned speechless one cool morning when the dawn patrol reported dust on the eastern horizon: something coming our way. Something large, with many, many feet.

We'd made a hilltop camp the previous evening. The camp Bull would have made on the ground he would have chosen: the Troll-Scorcher's loyal veterans didn't care if the trolls saw fire against the nighttime sky. They'd choose defense over concealment every time. But the morning's dust cloud didn't rise from the feet of trolls.

"How many?" I demanded of the trackers who'd failed me.

Shielding their eyes from the risen sun, they grimaced and squinted with eyes no sharper than my own.

"A lot," one leather-clad woman declared, adding, after a moment's pause. "A lot, if they're trolls. More, if they're human."

Her companions agreed.

"Are they human?" I asked, already knowing the answer. There were humans in the vicinity, but we hadn't seen troll sign since the day Bult died.

By then the whole camp was awake. The ones who weren't staring at the sun were staring at me. No tracker would meet my eyes.

"How many?" I cocked my wrist at my shoulder, ready to backhand the woman if she failed to answer.

"A hundred," she whispered; the count spread through the camp like fire. "Maybe more, maybe less. More'n us, for certain."

Veterans had at least a hundred curses for an incompetent leader, and I heard them all as the cloud broadened before us. They were getting closer—spreading out to encircle us. There were a whole lot more than a hundred. Sure as sunrise, there was an officer among them, and where there was a loyal officer, there was the Troll-Scorcher's magic, or so the older veterans promised. I'd never seen magic used before—except at the muster, when Myron of Yoram fried a few trolls, or the piddling displays Bult made when we'd held hands and shouted the Troll-Scorcher's name at the moon. We couldn't stand against the one and needn't fear the other.

"What now, Hamanu?" someone finally asked. "What do we do now?"

"It's all up," another man answered for me. "There's too many to outrun. We're meat for sure."

I backhanded him and drew the sword that was at my side, night and day. "We never run; we attack! If Myron of Yoram has sent his army against us instead of trolls, then let his army pay the price."

"Attack how, Hamanu? Attack where?" One-Eye chided me softly.

I'd kept Bult's one-time friend close since he'd taken up my cause. He was twice my age and knew things I couldn't imagine. When he'd been a boy, he'd listened to veterans who'd made the victorious sweep through the Kreegills. I gave One-Eye leave to speak his mind and listened carefully to what he said.

"If we run now," One-Eye continued. "If we scatter in all directions before the noose is closed, leaving everything behind, a few will get away clean. If we stand, we're trapped, Hamanu. Say, they don't have enough punch to charge the hill, they can set the grass afire. There's a time for running, Hamanu."

"We attack," I insisted, fighting my own temper.

My sword hand twitched, eager to slay any man or woman who cast a shadow across my ambitions. The veterans around me saw my inner conflict. Four times—five counting Bult—I'd proven that I could kill anyone who stood in my way. One-Eye presented a greater challenge. His wisdom alone could defeat me, and gutting him would be a hollow victory.

The dust cloud was growing, spreading north and south. We heard drums, keeping the veterans in step and relaying orders from one end of the curving line to the other. My heart beat to their tempo. Fear grew beneath my ribs and in the breasts of all my veterans. There was panic brewing on my hilltop. When I looked at the dusty horizon, my mind was blank, my thoughts were bound in defeat. I wanted to attack, but I had no answer to One-Eye's questions: *how?* and *where?*

"You can't hold them," One-Eye warned. "They're going to run. Give the order, Hamanu. Run with them, ahead of them. It's our only chance."

Hearing him, not me, a few men lit out for the west, and a great many more were poised to follow. My sword sang in the warming air and came up short, a hair's breadth from One-Eye's neck. I had my veterans' attention, and a heartbeat to make use of it.

"We'll run, One-Eye," I conceded. Then my destiny burst free. Visions and possibilities flooded my mind. "Aye, we'll run—we'll run and we'll attack! All of us, together. We'll wait until their line is thin around us, then, just when they think they've got us, we'll shape ourselves, shoulder-to-shoulder, into a mighty spear and thrust through them. Let them be the ones who run... from us!"

In my mind I saw myself at the spear's tip, my sword Bashing a bloody red as my veterans held fast around me and my enemies fell at my feet. But, what I saw in my mind wasn't enough: I watched One-Eye closely for his reaction.

His lips tightened, and his lumpy nose wrinkled. "Might do." His chin rose and fell. "Worth a try. Better to die fighting in front than get cut down from behind."

My fist struck the air above my head—the one and only time that I, Hamanu, saluted another man's wisdom. The orders to stand fast, then charge as a tight-formed group, radiated around the hilltop. Not everyone greeted them with enthusiasm or obedience, but I ran down the first veteran who bolted, hamstringing him before I slashed his throat. After that, they realized it was better to be behind me than to have me behind them.

I held my veterans on the hilltop until the encroaching circle was complete. Grim bravado replaced any lingering thoughts of panic or fear once the circle began to shrink: either we would win through and roll up our enemies' line, or we'd all be dead. At least we hoped we'd be dead. That's what gave my veterans their courage as we started down the hill. Any battlefield death was preferable to the eyes of fire.

How can I describe the exhilaration of that moment? Sixty shrieking humans raced behind me, and the faces of men and women before us turned as pale as the silver Ral when he was alone in the nighttime sky. I'd never led a charge before, never imagined the awesome energy of humanity intent on death.

Every aspect of battle was new to me, and dazzling. We ran so fast; I remember the wind against my face. Yet I also remember realizing that if I continued to hold my sword level in front of me, I'd skewer my first enemy and be helpless before the second, with a man's full weight wedged against the hilt.

There was time to change my grip, to raise my weapon arm high across my off-weapon shoulder, and deliver a sweeping sword stroke as we met their line. A man went down, his head severed. Beside me, One-Eye swung a stone-headed mallet at a woman. I'll never forget the sound of her ribs shattering, or the sight of blood spurting an arm's full length from her open mouth.

A glorious rout had begun. Destiny had pointed our spear at the handful of humanity who could have opposed us: the life-sucking mages who marched with Yoram's army. Their spells were their own, independent of the Troll-Scorcher. But spellcasting requires calm and concentration, neither of which existed for long on that battlefield.

The enemy had expected an easy victory over ragtag renegades. They expected magic to do the hard work of slaying me and my veterans. They weren't prepared for hand-to-hand bloody combat. We took the fighting to them, and they crumpled before us—fleeing, surrendering, dying. At last, we stood before fine-dressed officers with metal weapons, mekillot shields, and boiled-leather armor.

The battle paused while they took my measure and I took theirs. My veterans were ready, and they were prepared to die defending themselves.

But they preferred not to—

"Peace, Manu!" Their spokesman hailed me by my name. "For love of human men and women, stand down!"

"Never!" I snarled back, thinking they'd asked me to surrender, knowing I had the strength around me to slay them all.

To a man, they retreated.

"You've made your point, Manu," the spokesman shouted from behind his shield. "There's no honor in killing a man when there're trolls for the taking not two day's march from here."

I raised my sword. "You lie," I said, not bothering to be more specific.

The officers halted and stood firm. There were five of them. An honor guard stood with them, armed with metal swords and armored in leather, though they lacked the mekillot shields. I judged the guard the tougher fight. We'd already lost at least ten veterans from our sixty, and the pause was giving the enemy the opportunity to regroup.

I took my swing—and reeled into my left-side man as a better swordsman beat my untutored

attack aside.

"Don't be a fool, Manu," another officer said. I recognized her from earlier times and wondered which of the coded parchments had been written by her hand. "We *know* where the trolls are. We'll lead you to their lairs. Remember Deche, Manu. Which do you want more, us or trolls?"

One-Eye and six other voices counseled me against the officer's offer, but she knew me, knew my dilemma. Trolls were the enemy because, after ages of warfare, there could be no peace between us. Myron of Yoram was the enemy because he wouldn't let his army win the war. But humanity was not the enemy. I'd kill humans without remorse if they stood between me and my enemies, but, otherwise, I had no cause against my own folk.

"Lay down your swords," I said to those before me, and they did. "Call off your veterans!"

Another of the officers—a short, round-faced fellow that no other man would consider a threat in a fight but was the highest ranked of all—shouted, "Recall!" From the midst of the honor guard, a drum began to beat. I waved the armed guard aside and beheld a boy, fair-haired, freckled, and shaking with terror as he struck the recall rhythm with his leather-headed sticks.

His signal was taken up by two other drummers, each with a slight variation. The round-faced officer said there should have been five drummers answering the recall, one for each officer. The drummers were boys, not veterans, not armed. They'd been no threat to us when we attacked and rolled up their line, but the round-faced officer swore they wouldn't have run, that they were as brave as any veteran, ten times braver than I. By the look in his eye, I understood that at least one of the boys was kin to him, one of the boys who hadn't sounded his drum. He judged me the boy's murderer, just as I'd once held Bult responsible for Dorean.

By my command, we searched the field, looking for the missing drummers. We found the three missing boys before sundown, their cold fingers still wrapped around their drumsticks.

Battle is glorious because you're fighting the enemy, you're fighting for your own life and the lives of the veterans beside you. There's no glory, though, once the battle has ended. Agony sounds the same, whatever language the wounded spoke when they were whole, and a corpse is a tragic-looking thing whether it's a half-grown boy or a fullgrown, warty troll.

There were more than a hundred corpses around that hilltop. I'd walked away from Deche, and the death it harbored, hardly by my own choice. When the time came, I'd buried Jikkana, and Bult, and I'd seen to it that all the others went honorably into their graves. But a hundred human corpses...

"What do we *do* with them?" I asked One-Eye over a cold supper of stale bread and stiff, smoked meat. "We'll need ten days to dig their graves. We'll be parched and starving—"

One-Eye found something fascinating in his bread and pretended not to hear me. The woman officer answered instead:

"We leave them for the kes'trekels and all the other scavengers. They're *meat*, Manu. Might as well let some creature have the good of 'em. We head west at dawn tomorrow—if you want to catch those trolls."

And we did, but not at dawn. The round-faced officer kept us waiting while he buried his boy deep in the ground, where no scavenger would disturb him.

They held me in thrall, those five officers did, with their hard eyes and easy assurance. I knew I was cleverer than Bult and all his ilk, but, though I'd taken their swords away, I felt foolish around them. My veterans saw the difference, sensed my discomfort. By the time we'd marched two days into the west, those who'd joined me before the hilltop battle and those we'd acquired in that battle's aftermath heeded my commands, but only after they'd stolen a glance at my round-faced captive.

"Show me the trolls!" I demanded, seizing his arm and giving him a rude shake.

He staggered, almost losing his balance, almost rubbing the bruise I'd surely given him. But he kept his balance and kept the pain from showing on his face. "They're here," he insisted, waving his other arm across the dry prairie.

The land was as flat as the back of my hand and featureless, except farther to the southwest, where a scattering of cone-shaped mountains erupted from the grass. They were nothing like the rocky Kreegills, but trolls were a mountain folk, and I believed the officer when he said we'd find trolls to the

southwest.

"The mountains move!" I complained later that day. I'd reckoned the odd-shaped peaks were closer, that we'd be among them by sundown.

There was throttled laughter behind me. As veterans were measured, I scarcely passed muster. I'd seen the Kreegills, and the heartland, but the sinking land—that's what the officers called the prairie—was new to me. It appeared flat, but appearances deceived, and sinking was as good a description as any for the land we crossed.

The dry grass was pocked with sinkholes large enough to swallow an inix. The holes weren't treacherous—not at a slow pace, with men walking ahead, prodding the ground with spear butts to find the hidden ones, the ones crusted over with a thin layer of dirt that wouldn't hold a warrior's weight. But sinkholes weren't the only difficulty the grass concealed. The prairie was riddled with dry stream beds, some a half-stride deep, a half-stride wide. Others cut deeper than a man was tall—deeper than a troll—twice as wide. They were banked with wind-carved dirt that dissolved to clumps and dust under a man's weight.

When we came to such a chasm, there was naught to do but walk the bank until it narrowed—or until we came to an already trampled place where crossing was possible. Muddy water lingered in a few of the chasms. There were footprints in the mud: six-legged bugs, four-footed beasts with cloven hooves, two-footed birds with talons on every toe, and once in a while, the distinctive curve of a leather-shod foot, easily twice the size of mine.

A band of trolls could hide in those muddy chasms. If a troll knew the stream's course—which crossed which, which went where—his band could travel faster than ours, and unobserved.

As the sun grew redder and shadows lengthened, our round-faced officer advised making camp in one of the chasms. There weren't many who wanted to sleep in an open-ended grave. Myself, a boyhood in the Kreegills and five years with Bult had conditioned my notions of safety: I *wanted* those odd-shaped mountains beneath my feet. I wanted to see my enemy while he was still a long way off.

And I was Hamanu. I got what I wanted.

Marching by torchlight and moonlight, pushing the veterans until they were ready to drop, I made camp at the base of one of the strange mountains. In form, the mountains were like worm mounds or anthills—if either worms or ants had once grown large enough to build mountains with their castings. Their grass-covered slopes were slippery steep, without rocks anywhere to give a handhold or foothold.

By daylight, we'd find a way to the top; that night, though, we made a cold camp at the bottom. The sinking lands were familiar in one way, at least: scorching hot beneath the sun, bone-chilling cold beneath the moon. Veterans and officers wrapped themselves into their cloaks and huddled close together.

I took the first watch with five sturdy men who swore they'd stay awake.

I faced south; the trolls came from the north. The first thing I heard was a human scream cut short. I know we'd fallen into a trap, but to this day I wonder if that trap had been set by the trolls or the Troll-Scorcher's officers. Whichever, it wasn't a battle—only the trolls had weapons; humans died tangled in their cloaks, still drowsy or sound asleep.

I had my sword, but before I could take a swing, a human hand closed around the nape of my neck. My strength drained down my legs, though I remained standing. Fear such as I'd never known before shocked all thoughts of fight or flight from my head. A mind-bender's assault—I know it now—but it was pure magic then, for all I, Manu of Deche, the farmer's son, understood of the Unseen Way.

I thought I'd gone blind and deaf as well, but it was only the Gray, the cold netherworld sucking sound from my ears as I passed through in the grip of another hand, another mind. For one moment I stood on moonlit ground, far from the odd-shaped mountain. Then a raspy, ominous voice said:

"Put him below."

Something hard and heavy hit me from behind. When I awoke, I was in a brick-lined pit with worms and vermin for my company. Light and food and water—just enough of each to keep me alive—fell from a tiny, unreachable hole in the ceiling.



I never knew how the last battle of my human life ended, but I can guess.

## Chapter Eight

Hamanu's chin, human-shaped in the morning light that filtered through the latticed walls of his workroom, sagged toward his breastbone. The instant flesh brushed silk, though both were illusory, the king's neck straightened, and he sat bolt upright in his chair.

Grit-filled eyes blinked away astonishment. He who slept once in a decade had caught himself napping. There was tumult in the part of Hamanu's mind where he heard his templars' medalLion-pleas—not the routine pleas of surgeon-sergeants, orators or others whose duties gave them unlimited access to the Dark Lens power he passed along to his minions. To Hamanu's moderate surprise, he'd responded to such routine pleas while he slept. After thirteen ages, he was still learning about the powers Rajaat had bestowed on him. Another time, the discovery would have held Hamanu's attention all day, more, but riot this day. His mind echoed with urgency, death and fear, and other dire savors.

The Lion-King loosed filaments of consciousness through the Gray, one for every inquiry. Like a god he would not claim to be, his mind could be in many places at once—wandering Urik with his varied minions while being scattered across the barrens in search of endangered templars.

The essence of Hamanu, the core of his self—which was much more than a skein of conscious filaments, more even than his physical body—remained in the workroom where he looked down upon a haphazard array of vellum sheets, all covered with his own bold script. Blots as large as his thumbnail stained both the vellum and the exposed table-top, a testament to the haste with which he'd written. There were also inky gouges where he'd wielded the brass stylus like a sword. The ink was dry, though, as was the ink stone.

*"O Mighty King, my lord above all—"*

A new request. Hamanu replied with another filament, this time wound around a question: What is happening?

This wasn't the first time the Lion-King had been inundated with requests for Dark Lens magic. The desiccated heartland that Rajaat's champions ruled was a brutal, dangerous place where disaster and emergencies were commonplace. But always before, he'd been awake, alert, when the pleas arrived. His ignorance of the crisis—his templars' desperation—had never lasted more than a few heartbeats. He'd been awake, now, for many heartbeats, but so far, none of his filaments had looped back to him. He had only his own senses on which to rely.

And dulled senses they were. Hamanu's illusion wavered as he stood. Between eye blinks, the arms he braced against the table were a tattered patchwork of dragon flesh and human semblance. He yawned, not for drama, but from long-dormant instinct,

"Too much thinking about the past," he muttered, as if literary exertions could account for the unprecedented disorder in his immortal world. Then, rubbing real grit from the corners of his illusory eyes, Hamanu made his way around the table.

The iron-bound chest where his stealth spell ripened appeared unchanged. Passing his hand above the green-glowing lock, he kened the spell's vibrations—complex, but according to expectation—within.

"O Mighty King, my lord above all. Come out of your workroom. Unlock the door. Lion's Whim, my king—*I beg you, O Mighty King: Answer me!*"

Still cross-grained and pillow-walking from his interrupted nap, Hamanu turned toward the sound, toward an ordinary door. Neither the voice nor the door struck a chord of recognition.

"Are you within, O Mighty King? It is I, Enver, O Mighty King."

Enver. Of course it was Enver; the fog in Hamanu's mind lifted. He could see his steward with his mind's eye. The loyal dwarf stood just outside the door he'd sealed from the inside with lethal wards. Anxious wrinkles creased Enver's brow. His fingers were white-knuckled and trembling as he squeezed

his medallion.

Hamanu judged it ill omened that this morning, of all mornings, Enver was addressing him as a mighty king rather than an omniscient god. He broke the warding with a wave of his hand, slid back the bolt, and opened the door.

"Here I am, dear Enver. Here I've been all along. I was merely sleeping," Hamanu lapsed into his habitual bone-dry, ironic inflection, as if he were—and had always been—the heavy-sleeping human he appeared to be.

The dwarf was not taken in. His eyes widened, and anxiety rippled above his brows, across his bald head. A frantic dialogue of inquiry and doubt roiled Enver's thoughts, but his spoken words were calm.

"You're needed in the throne chamber, O Mighty— *Omniscience*." With evident effort, Enver resurrected the habits of a lifetime. "Will you want breakfast, Omniscience? A bath and a swim?"

A few of the filaments Hamanu had released when he awakened were, at last, winding back to him, winding back in a single ominous thread. Templars had died at Todek village, died so fast and thoroughly that their last thoughts revealed nothing, and the living minds that had summoned him were uselessly overwrought.

Elven templars were already running the road from Todek to Urik. Their thoughts were all pulse and breath. Coherent explanations would have to wait until they arrived at the palace.

Other filaments had traveled to a score of templars at a refugee outpost on Urik's southeastern border. There, the filaments had been frayed and tangled by the same sort of interference the Oba of Gulg had wielded in the southwest yesterday. In the hope that something would get through, Hamanu widened the Dark Lens link between himself and his templars. He granted them whatever spells they'd requested. But it wasn't spells those desperate minds wanted. They wanted him: Hamanu, the Lion-King, their god and mighty leader, and they wanted him beside them.

There were limits to a champion's powers: Hamanu couldn't *do* everything. Though his thoughts could travel through the netherworld to many places, many minds, and all at once, his body was bound to a single place. To satisfy his beleaguered templars, he would have had to transport his entire self from the palace, as he'd done when the Oba challenged him. But Enver wasn't the only numb-fingered templar in the palace. A veritable knot of pleas and conscious filaments surrounded his throne chamber where, at first guess, every living gold medallion high templar, along with the upper ranks of the civil and war bureaus, was clamoring for his attention.

The Lion-King wasn't immune to difficult choices.

"Fresh clothes?"

Extraordinary days—of which this was surely one— required extraordinary displays and extraordinary departures from routine. Hamanu raised one dark eyebrow. "Dear Enver," he reprimanded softly and, while he had the dwarf's attention, remade his illusions, adding substantially to his height and transforming his drab, wrinkled garments into state robes of unadorned ebony silk, as befitted a somber occasion. "Clothes, I think, will be the least of our problems today."

Hamanu strode past his steward's slack-jawed bewilderment, slashed an opening into the Gray netherworld, and, one stride later, emerged onto the marble-tiled dais of his unbeloved, jewel-encrusted throne. He needed no magic, no mind-bending sleight to get his templars' attention. The sight of him was enough to halt every conversation. Hamanu swept his consciousness across their marveling minds, collecting eighty different savors of apprehension and doubt.

The six civil-bureau janitors, whose duty was to stand beside the empty throne and keep the great lantern shining above it, were the first templars to recover their poise. In practiced unison, they pounded spear butts loudly on the floor and slapped their leather-armored breasts. Then the orator who shared throne-chamber duty with them cleared her throat.

"Hail, O Mighty King, O Mighty Hamanu! Water-Wealth, Maker of Oceans. King of the—"

Mighty Hamanu shot her a look that took her voice away.

The chamber fell silent, except for the creaking of the slave-worked treadmills and the network of ropes and pulleys that ran from the treadmills to huge red-and-gold fans. At this late hour of the morning,

the heat of day beat down on the roof, and nothing except sorcery could cool the chamber and the crowd together.

Exotic and expensive perfumes competed pungently with each other and with the ever-present aroma of mortal sweat. The more delicate and sensitive individuals wore pomander masks or held scented cloth against their noses.

For his part, Hamanu drank down every scent, every taste born in air or thought. His champion's eyes took in each familiar face without blinking. There was Javed, clad in his usual black and leaning nonchalantly against a pillar. Javed leaned because the wounds in his leg ached today— Hamanu felt the pain. But Javed was a champion, too, Hero of Urik, and, like the Lion-King, had appearances to maintain. Pavek stood near the door, not because he'd arrived late, but because no matter how carefully and properly his house-servants dressed him, he'd always be a misfit in this congregation. He'd migrated, by choice, to the rear, where he hoped his high templar peers wouldn't notice him.

Hamanu had other favorites: Xerake with her ebony cane; the Plucrataes heir, eleventh of his lineage to bear a scholar's medallion and more nearsighted than any of his ancestors; and a score of others. His favorites were accustomed to his presence. Their minds opened at the slightest pressure. They were ready, if not quite willing, to speak their concerns aloud. The rest, knowing that the Lion's favorites were also lightning rods for his wrath, were more than willing to wait.

He let them all wait longer. On the distant southeastern border, a sergeant's despair had burst through the netherworld interference.

*Hear me, O Mighty Hamanu!*

The Lion-King cast a minor pall over his throne chamber. An eerie quiet spread through the crowd. Conversation, movement, and—most important for a champion who was needed elsewhere, but couldn't be seen with his vacant-eyed attention focused in that elsewhere—memory ceased around him.

*I hear you*—Hamanu examined the trembling mote of consciousness and found a name—*Andelimi. I see you, Andelimi. Take heart.*

His words reassured the templar, but they weren't the truth. Hamanu glimpsed the southeast border through a woman's eyes. Her vision was not as sharp as his own would be, but it was sharp enough: black scum dulled an expanse of sand and salt that should be painfully bright.

*An army of the undead*, he said in Andelimi's mind, because it reassured her to hear the truth of her own fears.

*We cannot control them, O Mighty King.*

Controlling the undead—of all the mysteries Rajaat's Dark Lens perpetrated, that one remained opaque. Like the other champions, through sorcery Hamanu held vast power over death in all its forms. He could inflict death in countless ways and negate it as well, but always at great cost to his ever-metamorphosing self. Not so his templars, whose borrowed magic had its origin in the Dark Lens and was fundamentally different from the sorcery Rajaat had bestowed on his champions.

The magic his templar syphoned from the Dark Lens neither hastened the dragon metamorphosis nor degraded ordinary life into ash. And, since the undead didn't hunger, didn't thirst, didn't suffer, the champions often relied on their living templars' ability to raise the casualties of earlier battles whenever it seemed that marching a mass of bodies at an enemy would insure victory.

Which wasn't often.

Once a templar had the undead raised and moving, he or she faced the chance that someone else would usurp control of them. Not an equal chance, of course. Some living minds were simply better at controlling undead, and all other aspects being equal, a more experienced templar—not to mention a more experienced priest, druid, sorcerer, or champion could usurp the undead from a novice.

Hamanu personally tested his templars for undead aptitude and made certain the ones who had it got the training they needed. The war bureau wouldn't have allowed Andelimi and the twenty other templars in her maniple out the gates without an apt and trained necromant templar among them—especially in the southeast, where Urik's land abutted Giustenal.

Hamanu stirred Andelimi's thoughts. *Where is your necromant?*

*Rihaen tried, O Mighty King*, she assured him. *Hodit, too.*

Her eyes pulled down to the hard-packed dirt to the left of her feet; Hamanu seized control of her body and turned her toward the right. Andelimi was a war-bureau sergeant, a veteran of two decade's worth of campaign. She knew better than to fight her king, but instinct ran deeper than intellect. She'd rather die than look to her right. Hamanu kept her eyes open long enough to see what he needed.

*Rihaen tried...*

Andelimi's thoughts were bleak. She'd barely begun to mourn. The dead elf had been her lover, the father of her children, the taste of sweet water on her tongue.

Rihaen had tried to turn the undead army, but the same champion who'd sundered the link between Urik's templars and Urik's king had roused these particular corpses. Instead of usurping Giustenal's minions, Rihaen had been usurped by them. His heart had stopped, and he'd become undead himself, under another mind's control. Hodit, who was also apt and trained, had—foolishly—tried to turn Rihaen and suffered the same fate.

The remaining templars of the maniple, including Andelimi, had overcome their own undead. It could be done without recourse to magic, and every templar carried the herbs, the oils, or the weapons to do it. But what the raiser of Giustenal's undead army had done to Rihaen and Hodit could not be undone. For them, the curse of undeath was irrevocable. Their bodies had fallen apart. Nothing recognizable was left of Andelimi's beloved except a necromant's silver medallion and several strands of his long, brown hair, all floating on a pool of putrid gore.

For the honor of his own ancient memories of Deche and Dorean, Hamanu would have left Andelimi alone with her grief. But it had been her anguish that cut through Dregoth's interference, and for the sake of Urik, he could show her no mercy.

*Andelimi!*

She crumpled to the ground; he thrust her to her feet.

*Where are the others of your maniple? Who survives?*

Hamanu would not make her look at Rihaen again, but he needed to see. He forced her eyes open, then blinked away her tears. He found the fifteen surviving templars in a line behind Andelimi. Their varied medallions hung exposed against their breasts. Defeat was written on their faces because he had not heard their pleas in time. They knew what was happening—that he'd taken possession of Andelimi—and that it had happened too late.

*"We stand, O Mighty Lion! We fight, O Great Hamanu!"* the maniple's adjutant shouted to the king he knew was watching him through a woman's eyes. He saluted with a bruising thump on his breast. *"Your templars will not fail you!"*

The adjutant's thoughts were white and spongy. His hand trembled when he lowered it. Urik's templars didn't have a prayer of winning against the undead legion sprawled before them, and the adjutant knew it. He and Andelimi wished with all their hearts that death—clean, eternal death— would be theirs this afternoon.

They'd get their wish only if Hamanu slew them where they stood and drained their essence, furthering his own metamorphosis.

Hamanu pondered the bitter irony: only *living* champions were afflicted by the dragon metamorphosis. Dregoth was as undead as the army he'd raised, utterly unable to become a dragon, will he or nill he. There was no limit on Dregoth's sorcery except the scarcity of life in his underground city.

The very-much-alive Lion of Urik tested the netherworld with a thought, confirming his suspicions. Giustenal's champion had raised the undead army creeping toward Urik. Hamanu could turn them, mind by empty mind, but he'd have to fight for each one, and victory's price was unthinkable high.

*"You will retreat,"* he told the maniple with Andelimi's voice.

They weren't reassured. Undead marched slowly but relentlessly; they never tired, never rested. Only elves could outrun them—unless there were elves among the undead.

*"Better to stand and fight."* A slow-moving dwarf muttered loudly.

He stood with his fists defiant on his hips. Whatever death Hamanu chose for him—his undercurrent thoughts were clear—it would be preferable to dwarven undeath with its additional banshee curse of an unfulfilled life-focus. In that, the dwarf was mistaken. The Lion-King could craft fates far

worse than undeath—as Windreaver would attest—but Hamanu let the challenge pass. Urik's fate hung in the balance, and Urik was more important than teaching a fool-hearted dwarf an eternal lesson.

*"Set all your water before me."*

While the adjutant oversaw the assembling of a small pile of waterskins, Hamanu thrust deeper into Andelimi's consciousness, impressing into her memory the shapes and syllables of the Dark Lens spell he wanted her to cast. If grief had not already numbed her mind, the mind-bending shock would have driven her mad. As it was, Hamanu's presence was only another interlude in an already endless nightmare.

When the waterskin pile was complete and the arcane knowledge imparted, Hamanu made Andelimi speak again: *"After the spell is cast, you will each take up your waterskins again and begin walking toward the north and west. With every step, a drop of water will fall from your fingertip to the ground. When the undead walk where you have walked, the lifeless blood in their lifeless veins will burst into flames."*

*"There is not enough water here to see us back to our outpost!"* the dwarf interrupted, still hoping for a clean death. *"The undead will engulf us—"*

*"There is a small oasis north of here—"*

The maniple knew it well, though it was not marked on any official map. They collected regular bribes from the runaway slaves it sheltered. It was a minor corruption of the sort Hamanu had tolerated for thirteen ages.

*"Its spring has water enough to hold the undead at bay—simply fill your waterskins from the spring, and then walk around the oasis. And after the undead army has marched past..."* Hamanu narrowed Andelimi's eyes and made her smile. A lion's fangs appeared where her teeth should have been. *"After the undead army has passed, burn the oasis and bring the vagrants back to Urik for the punishment they deserve."*

They'd obey, these templars he was trying to save. No power under the bloody sun would protect them otherwise. Hamanu, their king, deserved his cruel, capricious reputation. They'd march to Urik because it had been known for thirteen ages that there was no way for a yellow-robe templar to hide from the Lion of Urik. They could bury their medallions, break them, or burn diem, and it wouldn't save them. Once his mind had touched theirs, he could find them, and so, they would obey—Never imagining that if Dregoth's army reached Urik, there might not be a Lion left to find them.

*Killer-ward.*

Hamanu put the word in Andelimi's mind. She repeated it, triggering the mnemonics he'd forced into her memory. The links between templar and champion, champion and the Dark Lens, were pulled, and magic was evoked. Sparks danced over the waterskins, growing, spreading, until the drab leather was hidden by a luminous white blanket.

After that, it was time for Hamanu to return to Urik, time to tell his exalted templars of the dangers he—and they—faced from yet another direction. He'd done all he could here.

Hamanu blinked and looked out again through his own eyes. His pall persisted in the throne chamber. Two of the templars nearest the dais had not been standing straight on their feet when the pall caught them, and as effects of time could not be easily thwarted, they'd both tumbled forward. One of them would have a bloody nose when awareness returned, the other, a bloody chin. Deeper in the silent crowd others had fallen. One—a woman, Gart Fulda—would never stand up again. She hadn't been particularly old or infirm, but death was always a risk when Hamanu's immortal mind touched a mortal one.

The elven pair from Todek had arrived while Hamanu's attention was on the Giustenal border. They'd been running when they entered the throne chamber, and momentum had carried them several long strides toward the dais before the pall enveloped them. They, too, would tumble when Hamanu lifted his spell. The leading elf would have to take his chances. His companion carried an ominously familiar leather-wrapped bundle under his left arm.

A day that had not begun well and had gone poorly thereafter showed signs of becoming much, much worse.

Before he dispelled the pall, Hamanu carefully took the 'bundle from the immobile runner. It thrummed faintly as he carried it back to the throne. Cursing Rajaat yet another time, Hamanu considered destroying it while the pall was still in place. There'd be questions—in the minds of the elven runners, if nowhere else—and questions sired rumors. More questions, if he slew the elves, too. He reconsidered. If the templars in this chamber saw the shard's power before he destroyed it, he wouldn't have to worry about their loyalty when times got difficult, as times were almost certain to do.

After a sigh, Hamanu inhaled the pall into his lungs. The elven runners tumbled. Others gasped or yelped as words trapped in their throats broke free. None of the commotion held Hamanu's attention when a trace of blue lightning, such as heralded a Tyr-storm, leapt from the shard's leather-wrapped tip. The flash grounded itself in the crowd. Hamanu followed it to a strange templar's mind.

"Raam," Hamanu muttered, savoring the stranger as his most agile-minded templars became alert again. "Who in Raam would stand against me? With Dregoth marching, it would be better to make common cause."

Javed, whose mortal mind was among the most agile and alert Hamanu had ever encountered, had heard the thrumming shard. He watched the blue lightning leap from the Lion-King's arm. As Champion of Urik, Javed was privileged to bear his sword in the throne room. He drew the blade as another templar cried out.

Hands pressed against her steaming cheek, she reeled in agony, knocking over several less-alert templars. In her wake, Hamanu got his first eyes-only view of the Raamin stranger.

The Raamin was a striking example of humanity in its prime, taller than average, well fed, well muscled, with sun-streaked hair. That hair had begun to move as if a strong wind blew upward from the object he clutched against his ribs.

"Drop it!" Hamanu shouted, a sound that loosened dust and plaster flakes from the ceiling, but had no effect on the Raamin's bright blue, pall-glazed eyes.

Hamanu put the shard he held behind his back. Lightning danced on his chest, his shoulders, his neck. It penetrated the Lion-King's human illusion without destroying it or harming him—yet.

"Drop it, *now!*" he shouted, louder than the first time. He didn't dare any kind of magic or mind-bending, not with Rajaat's malice whirling around the chamber.

The stupefied Raamin didn't so much as blink. From his appearance, he'd been one of Abalach-Re's templars; the Raamin queen had never been particularly concerned with cleverness when she picked her templars. Fortunately, Urik's king had other prejudices. Urik's elite templars were bold enough to take matters into their own hands. A handful of men and women wrestled the crackling bundle from the stiff-armed stranger and deposited it before their king's throne, where, within a heartbeat, its wrapping had disintegrated.

Rather than the black-glass shard Hamanu had expected, a sky-blue serpent slithered lightning-bright and -fast across the marble dais. It struck his ankle, easily piercing the human illusion. Unbounded rage and hatred boiled against Hamanu's immortal skin. Sorcerous fangs struck deep, but there was only bone, obsidian black and obsidian hard, beneath his gaunt flesh.

With the Todek shard in his left hand, secure at his back, Hamanu reached his right hand down. He seized the serpent behind its scintillating eyes. The sorcerous creature was more sophisticated than the one he'd squelched in Nibenay's abandoned camp, but its venom had no effect on him.

"You surprise me, War-Bringer," he said as he held the construct up for his templars to see. He began to squeeze, and the sky-blue head darkened. "Thirteen ages beneath the Black has dimmed your wits, while mine have grown sharper in the sun."

The serpent's head was midnight dark when its skull burst. Venom hissed and sputtered on the dais, leaving pits the size of a dwarf's thumbnail in the marble. It fizzled on the illusory golden skin of Hamanu's right arm, where it harmed no living thing.

Hamanu held the serpent's fading, dwindling body aloft so his templars could cheer his triumph. Their celebration would necessarily be brief. The other shard had ceased its thrumming, which Hamanu didn't consider reassuring. The templars hadn't completed their second salute when the chamber darkened. Sunset couldn't be the cause; he hadn't palled the throne chamber long enough for the day to

be coming to its natural end. Ash plumes from the Smoking Crown volcano could have caused the darkness; but the eruptions that produced the plumes were invariably preceded by ground tremors.

A Tyr-storm was the most likely cause, those fast-moving tempests born from the would-be dragon Tithian's failed ambitions and fueled by Rajaat's rage. Tyr-storms were destructive, deadly, maddening, and, in the end, altogether preferable to the darkness that descended on the throne chamber once the eternal flame in the Lion's head lantern suspended above the throne flickered, then vanished.

Hamanu would not tolerate such an affront. He whispered the sorcerer's word for sparks. A sharp pain lanced his flank.

All sorcery required life essences before it kindled. While defilers and preservers quibbled and pointed fingers at one another, Hamanu quickened *his* spells with life essence from an inexhaustible, uncomplaining source: himself. He willingly sacrificed his own immortal flesh. Pain meant nothing if it thwarted Rajaat's grand design. Whatever essence he surrendered would be replaced, of course. But a man *could* draw water in a leaky bucket if he moved fast enough, and although the dragon metamorphosis was, ultimately, unstoppable, Hamanu prolonged his own agony at every opportunity.

His thoughts carried the quickened sparks to the lantern wick, and the Lion's eye gleamed gold again. An instant later, brighter light flashed through breezeway lattices-lightning as blue as the shard-born serpent had been, as blue as Rajaat's left eye. A distant crash of thunder accompanied the lightning. Then the throne chamber was dark again—except for the golden-eyed Lion. With his templars silent around him and the wails of Urik's frightened folk penetrating the palace walls, Hamanu waited for the next event, whatever it might be.

He didn't have to wait long.

"Hamanu of Urik."

Through the darkness of his throne chamber, Hamanu recognized the predatory voice of Abalach-Re, once known as Uyness of Waverly, the late ruler of Raam. Over the ages, the Lion-King's eyes had changed, along with the rest of him. Urik's Lion-King could see as dwarves, elves, and the other Rebirth races saw—not merely the reflection of external light, but the warm light that radiated from the bodies of the living. More than that, he could see magic in its ethereal form: the golden glow of the medallions his templars wore, the deep cobalt aura—scarcely visible, even to him—that surrounded the blond Raamin templar.

Uyness's voice came from the aura, but *not* from any spell the queen of Raam had cast in life or death. Hamanu thought immediately of Rajaat, but the first sorcerer hadn't cast the spell that put words in the air around the dumbfounded Raamin; nor had any other champion. Yet it was a subtle, powerful spell, as subtle and powerful as the stealth spell Hamanu aged in his workroom. The realization that he could not put a name to the sorcerer who cast it sent a shiver down his black-boned spine.

"Mark me well, Hamanu of Urik: the War-Bringer grows restless. He's waited thirteen ages to have his revenge. He remembers *you* best—you, the youngest, his favorite. The wounds you gave him will not heal, except beneath a balm of your heart's blackest blood. He seeks you first. He'll come for you, little Manu of Deche. He already knows the way."

On any other day, Hamanu might have been amused by the haphazard blend of truth, myth, and outright error the spell-spun voice spoke. He would have roared with laughter, gone looking for the unknown sorcerer, and—just possibly—spared the poor, ignorant wretch's life for amusement's sake.

Any other day, but not today. Not with Rajaat's blue lightning pummeling his city. Though the spell-caster didn't know what Uyness of Waverly would have known from her own memory of the day, thirteen ages ago, when the champions betrayed their creator and created a prison for him beneath the Black, there were undeniable truths in the thick air of the throne chamber. Rajaat was restless, Rajaat wanted revenge, and Rajaat would start with Urik.

Taking the chance that there was a conscious mind still attached to the spell, Hamanu said mildly, "Tell me something I don't already know. Tell me where you are and why you come to Urik now, when the War-Bringer's attention is sure to catch you... again. Wasn't one death enough?"

The cobalt aura flickered, as it might if motes of the Raamin champion's true essence had been used in its creation. "The Shadow-King found me," she said when her aura was restored.

The statement wasn't quite an answer to Hamanu's questions. It might have been an evasion. It certainly couldn't have been the truth. Gallard of Nibenay was many things, none of them foolish enough to search the Black near Rajaat's Hollow prison for the lingering remains of any champion, least of all, Uyness of Waverly. More than the rest of them, the Raamin queen relied on myth and theological bombast to sustain her rule. There were two reasons Nibenay hadn't swallowed Raam long ago: One was Urik, sitting between the cities; the other was Dregoth, who hated Uyness with undead passion.

"And the Shadow-King sent you to me?" Hamanu asked, hiding his disbelief behind a still-soft voice and keeping his true questions to himself.

The Tyr-storm, which had lapsed into faint rumblings after its initial surge, showed its power before the spellcast voice answered. Thunderbolts rained down on Hamanu's yellow-walled city—his keen ears recorded a score of strikes before echoes made an accurate count impossible. An acrid stench filled the chamber and brought tears to the eyes of his assembled templars. The storm's blue light shimmered in the pungent air, then coalesced into a swirling, luminous pillar that swiftly became Uyness of Waverly in her most beautiful disguise, her most seductive posture.

"Rajaat grows strong on our weakness, Hamanu. Without a dragon among us, no spell will hold him. We *need* a dragon, Hamanu. We need a dragon to keep Rajaat in the Hollow. We need a dragon to create more of our own kind, to restore order to our world. We choose *you* to be the dragon. Rajaat will come to Urik for revenge. He will destroy you. Then he will destroy everything. The champions come to honor you, Hamanu of Urik. We offer you lives by the thousand. You will become the dragon, and Athas will be saved."

## Chapter Nine

Another barrage of blue lightning and deafening thunder pummeled Urik from above. The lightning-limned figure of the Raamin queen vanished with the afterglow and didn't reform. In the tumult, the sound of one man collapsing slowly on the marble tiles was heard only by Hamanu, who bent a thought around the blond templar's heart to keep it beating.

This Tyr-storm seemed fiercer than the last such storm to pound Urik's walls. Indeed, it seemed fiercer than any since the first—perhaps because like that storm, this one had arrived unexpectedly. Five years ago, Urik's most exalted templars had succumbed, at least temporarily, to the madness Tyr-storms inspired. Now the survivors stood impassively in the flickering blue light. If they were not confident that the storm would spend itself quickly—and Hamanu discerned their doubts through the lightning and the thunder—they were at least determined not to let their neighbors see their weakness.

Hamanu tolerated any mortal trait in his templars, except weakness. The men and women in his throne chamber were hard, often to the point of cruelty; competent, to the point of arrogance; and strong willed, even in his presence. They'd hesitate to ask the questions the Raamin queen's voice had raised in their minds, but inevitably, one of them would overcome that hesitation.

To forestall the death that would follow such insubordination, Hamanu reached into the blond templar's mind.

*Who sent you? What do you know about the message and the object you bore?*

Spasms rocked the Raamin templar as he lay unnoticed on the marble floor. He'd need a miracle to survive interrogation by a champion other than his mistress, and despite whatever promises the Raamin queen might have made while she lived, champions couldn't conjure miracles.

*Don't fight me, Hamanu advised. Answer my questions. Recount.*

The templar complied, giving Hamanu vision after vision of a Raam fallen in anarchy deeper than any he'd imagined. Five years after the woman Raamins called Abalach-Re, the grand vizier of a nameless, nonexistent god, had disappeared, Raamin merchants, nobles, templars, and the worst sort of elven tribes had carved her city into warring fiefdoms.

Her templars, as ignorant as ever of the true source of their power, had tried to reestablish their magical link with the god that Uyness had claimed to serve. Small wonder, then, that these days the



despised, dispirited Raamin templars struggled to hold their own quarter and the gutted palace. Small wonder, too, that when some of them began seeing a familiar face in their dreams, hearing a voice they'd despaired of hearing again, they'd done whatever it had told them to do. They went down to the dust-scoured wharves where the silt schooners tied up. There they found the shard among the rocks that were sometimes visible along the shore—

Learning that, Hamanu immediately thought of Giustenal on the Silt Sea shore and its ruler, Dregoth, whose designs on Raam were almost as old as Rajaan's, and whose undead army marched on Urik's southeastern frontier, ravaging his templars. Hamanu thought, as well, that there was nothing more to dredge out of the templar's weakening mind. Miracles were beyond Hamanu's purview, but eternal rest was not; he severed life's silver thread. No one, not Dregoth, not Rajaan, not Uyness, if she were more than a memory or a pawn, not Hamanu himself, should he change his mind, possessed the power to raise the blond templar from death to undeath or unravel his memory.

Without moving from the dais, Hamanu turned his attention to the elven runner who'd brought the second shard.

*Recount,* he commanded.

The elf's heart skipped a beat or two, but he was young and healthy, and he came to no permanent harm.

*A pair of messengers, O Mighty King, came to the Todek registrar claiming to be templars from Balk—*

*Another city, far to the south of Urik, but also on the Sea of Silt.*

*Our registrar, she disbelieved. They were afoot, rat-faced and worse for traveling, with nothing in their scrips but a handful of ceramic chips so worn there was no telling what oven baked them or where. But they knew the things templars know, O Mighty King, and there was one among us who'd been to Balic and knew they had the city pegged aright: merchants and nobles in charge, just as in Tyr. Templars all dead or in hiding. So, the registrar listened—*

*We all listened close, O Mighty King, when the pair said King Andropinis wasn't dead, but that he needed help before he could give them power again. He'd said they'd find help in Urik if they delivered a message.*

*Hamanu interrupted, And the message was the leather-wrapped parcel?*

*No, O Mighty King. The parcel was to be a gift, a truth token from King Andropinis himself—or so they said. The registrar, she ordered them to unwrap it. They wouldn't, until we threatened them. I laughed, O Mighty King, when they cast lots and the loser made his death-promises. But he died a bad death, and the thing was still all wrapped in silk—*

Sighing, Hamanu withdrew from the elf's mind while his templar was still recounting the fate of the Balkans. Would a lightning-limned image of Albeorn Elf-Slayer rise in the storm-lit chamber if he unwrapped this second shard? Would it spew a mix of truth and error, promises and threats? Were there, at this very moment, messengers from the championless city of Draj headed for Urik's walls with a deadly shard bundled under their arms?

Hamanu let the bundle under his left arm slide back onto the hard seat of the throne behind him. He was ready to deal with his elite templars, ready for the storm to be over, but not quite ready to raise a figurative fist against the powers that spawned it.

Tyr-storms weren't long-lived. Their violence worked against them. Hamanu listened outside his palace and heard the wind swirl itself into knots and die. Lightning paled quickly; thunder faded. Cold black rain pelted the city as the air cooled to a midnight chill. The pounding of countless drops was as loud as thunder. Every wall, every roof, every market square and street would have to be scrubbed clean. The Lion-King's monumental bas-reliefs that paraded around the outer walls would have to be repainted—an enormous expenditure of labor and wealth that couldn't be avoided, not even when every army in the heartland seemed to be marching toward Urik.

Hamanu cast his netherworld net beyond the city. The corners of his mouth pulled upward with relief: the Tyr-storm's fury was so tightly centered above the palace that the fields outside the walls had suffered no worse than a steady rain. The workers were safe in whatever shelters they'd found for

themselves, and the seeds they'd planted were safe, as well.

If war came to Urik, nothing would spare the crops, but in the ruins of his mortal human heart, Hamanu remained a farmer. Tomorrow was tomorrow's problem; today, the crops had survived; tonight he could sleep content... if he slept at all.

His elite templars wouldn't sleep before midnight. As the storm grumbled to a close, Hamanu crafted orders for his men and women. He'd meet immediately with his war-bureau commandants and a few others in the map room, but most of his elite templars would find themselves with civic duties in the storm's aftermath. Keeping order was the templars' responsibility. There'd been casualties—he could feel the Urikite dead and dying—and property damage: collapsed buildings; fires, despite the black rain; and a smattering of mad folk, some pathetically helpless, and others more dangerous than any arena beast.

Hamanu's yellow-robed templars would see to it all. They'd dispatch the dead to the knackers; the injured to whatever healers they could afford; and they'd keep the city safe from looting, riot, and madmen. They'd organize the work gangs to put out the fires and dig out survivors. They'd get their own hands dirty, if he told them to.

And he would.

"I retire to consider what I've learned," Hamanu announced before any templar had overcome his or her reluctance to ask questions. "You will each do what your office commands in the aftermath of a Tyr-storm." The individual orders he'd crafted flowed simultaneously from his mind to theirs. "Are there any questions?"

He looked around the chamber, meeting and breaking the stare of anyone who considered a time-wasting inquiry. The templars began departing. As soon as there was a clear path to the corpse, the slaves left the treadmills. They took up the blond Raamin's body and bore it respectfully from the chamber.

Hamanu picked out one particular dark-haired head among those moving toward the door. Flicking a finger through the netherness, he tapped the man sharply on the shoulder. Pavek's face slumped forward even as his spine straightened—an impressive physical performance in its helpless, hapless mortal way—but otherwise no one suspected that he'd been singled out for private conversation with his king.

Pavek was learning the tricks of his new trade.

"I gave you no orders," Hamanu said once they were alone. He narrowed his eyes and got a good taste of common-born fear before Pavek managed to swallow it.

Slowly, Pavek raised his head. Dark mortal eyes, wide with dread, found the strength to defy the Lion-King. "O Mighty King, I was following the commands of my office. There are Quraite farmers planting seed north of the walls—"

"Eight of whom are more competent druids than you'll ever be! If all of Urik were so well protected, the fiercest Tyr-storm would be tamed to a breeze long before it got here."

Pavek gulped. Guilty thoughts swirled in his mind. He'd known about six of the druids, but not eight. He was afraid for himself, more afraid for them. It was the latter fear that stiffened his spine. "O Mighty King, you said it was time for Quraite to pay the price of your protection. It was their choice. More would have come—"

"But you thought six was enough. I tell you, Pavek, they sneaked an extra two in without your knowledge."

The man broke at last. His posture went limp; he stared at his feet and muttered, "It was their choice, O Mighty King. They know their magic is forbidden, but they came anyway. You made them understand that Quraite is as much a part of Urik as the Lion's fountain."

Even in defeat—*especially* in defeat—Pavek spoke the words that formed in his heart. Once, never more than twice, in a human generation, Hamanu found a man who'd tell the truth, no matter the risk.

"I need you here, Just-Plain Pavek."

"O Mighty King, I'm yours to command."

"Good." Hamanu smiled, baring pointed golden teeth, but the illusion went for naught because

Pavek continued to stare at his toes. He reached around for the wrapped bundle he'd left on the throne seat. It was heavier now and definitely inert. "You will take this to my workroom—*Look at me, Pavek! Look at me when I'm giving you an order!*"

This time the fangs weren't an illusion. No one could predict the precipitous shifts in the Lion-King's mood, not even Hamanu himself. His heart beat wrong, and with no greater warning, indulgence became a dangerous level of indignation. Sometimes Hamanu killed with no more than a heartbeat, but not today. Pavek was stalwart; he bore his fears with dignity and lifted his head. Hamanu's indignation faded as suddenly and inexplicably as it had arrived.

"I meant no disrespect, O Mighty King."

Hamanu seldom explained himself or apologized for anything. He hid his cursed fangs within blunt-edged human illusions and considered that sufficient. He shoved the bundle into Pavek's reluctant arms. "You will take this to my workroom; I judge it harmless enough now, but it warrants further examination. You'll find a table covered with vellum. Put it on the table and wait for me to return. While you're waiting, you'll see an iron-bound chest against the far wall. Keep a careful eye on it, Pavek, but otherwise, leave it alone."

"I will not touch anything, O Mighty King. I wouldn't consider it."

"Keep an eye on the chest. Don't fret over the rest. It's loot, mostly, from Yaramuke and other forgotten places. With all the flooding, the palace is as damp as the rest of Urik. There's water below and history piled everywhere that's still dry."

Another man hearing of Yaramuke's fabled treasure might be tempted with greedy thoughts. Not Pavek. His thoughts were utterly guileless when he said, "I will wait, O Mighty King, and watch the iron-bound chest, as you ordered."

"You might *read* the vellum," Hamanu suggested, tamping the seeds of curiosity firmly into Pavek's consciousness.

"If you so command, O Mighty King."

Hamanu silently bemoaned the frustrations of tempting an honest man. "You might be waiting a while, Pavek. You might grow bored. You might read the vellum, if you do grow bored."

"I will remember that, O Mighty King."

Like as not, Pavek would never succumb, and Hamanu would have to order the man to read what he'd written, as he had before. "Go," he said wearily. "Wait, grow bored, and remember whatever you wish."

"Your will, O Mighty King." Pavek bowed awkwardly—he'd never have the grace of a properly obsequious courtier—and retreated toward the door.

Hamanu had slit the air before him in preparation to entering the Gray when the mortal man stopped suddenly and turned around. Misty tendrils of the netherworld wafted between them. Pavek affected not to notice, but the man was a druid—however rudimentary his training, he had the raw talent to see the mist and know what it was.

"Yes, Pavek?"

The scarred templar blinked and shuddered. He'd almost forgotten why he'd stopped. Then the thought reformed in his mind. "O Mighty King, the iron-bound chest that I'm supposed to watch. What am I watching for? What should I do if... if something happens to it?"

"Nothing, Pavek, nothing at all. If anything happens, you'll simply die."

Hamanu didn't wait for Pavek's reaction. He thrust one arm, then one leg, into the netherworld and strode from the throne chamber to the map room where his war staff had assembled. The Lion-King didn't stand on ceremony with these men and women.

"We fight for Urik's very life," he told them as he sealed the netherworld rift. "Armies from Nibenay and Gulg pin our flanks while Dregoth sends undead hordes our way from Giustenal. Raam sends messengers, Balic, too, and it's safe to wager they'll be marching before long. It's only a matter of time before we hear from what's left of Draaj."

There was a collective intake of breath, a muttered curse or two, and a question: "What of Tyr?"

That Hamanu couldn't answer. The free folk of Tyr, having slain their king, a dragon, and

returned the War-Bringer to his prison, had become a realm unto themselves, obsessed with laws and councils and taking little interest in the heartland beyond their borders.

Most of those assembled in the map room had known about the Nibenese and Gulgan forces lying low, just out of Urik's reach, and marked with colored silk ribbons on the miniature heartland Hamanu had carved into the walls of this room. The Giustenalt army—a series of bold, charcoal lines Hamanu quickly added in the southeast—was an unpleasant surprise.

They didn't ask their king what he'd done to incur the wrath of his peers. For the most part, that question didn't occur to them: But other questions did: practical questions about another levy and overextended lines of supply, a shortage of weapons in the city's armory, and the havoc that floods were wreaking on Urik's normally reliable roads. Hamanu listened more than he answered. He'd been Urik's supreme commander for thirteen ages, but, together, the mortal minds he'd assembled had more experience. Individually they offered insights and perspectives he might have overlooked.

The Lion-King's armies were unbeaten because the Lion-King was not too proud to take his advisers' advice.

Evaporating puddles from the Tyr-storm made for a sultry, sticky afternoon. Men, women, and Hamanu himself shed their ceremonial garments—or the illusion of them— and, clad in plain linen, thrashed out a battle plan. Night had fallen when Hamanu gave his approval to the best notions that mortal and immortal minds could devise, never hinting that it wouldn't be enough if he were right about the enemy they faced.

Enemy or enemies.

Try as he might in odd moments in the map room, or afterward, alone on his storm-tossed rooftop, Hamanu could not wrestle the day's events into a single pattern. Rajaat's champions had weaknesses deriving from their own human natures and the spells that created them. They'd contrived to keep their weaknesses secret, but after ages of spies and spells, Hamanu could scarcely believe that he'd been any more successful keeping his secrets from his peers than they had been keeping theirs from him. He'd had Windreaver, of course, but he didn't *know* that he was the only champion whose victory was one ghost shy of complete. And Gallard had talked to Borys, who'd known why the Lion of Urik would never become the Dragon of Urik.

Unless Rajaat were still behind it all. If Rajaat had cast the spells that brought Uyness's voice to the Lion-King's throne...? But, no, Hamanu hadn't recognized the personality behind the spell, and whatever enmity the surviving champion peers had toward one another, it wouldn't dull their wits where the War-Bringer might be involved.

Or had Rajaat found a way to conceal his sorcerous essence?

Hamanu found no answers on the rooftop above his moonlit city. The sounds of rescue and repair, of mortal life determined to continue, no matter the price, rasped his nerves. He slashed the air and returned to his workroom, where the city's noise was masked by walls and Pavek was enthralled by the unfinished story written on the vellum sheets.

The Lion-King's sandals and jewelry were illusion. They made no sound as he approached the lamplit worktable.

"Were you bored—?"

Pavek shot out of his seat before Hamanu finished his question. The chair toppled behind him and the table in front of him. Loose vellum, the ink stone, the stylus and— not to forget—the leather-wrapped shard went flying. The air snapped as Hamanu, moving faster than sight or sound, caught the leather a handspan above the floor. For a moment, they both stared at the innocent-seeming parcel, then at each other; then Pavek, who'd barely caught his balance after his leap, dropped hard on his knees.

"I am an oaf, O Mighty King," Pavek insisted breathlessly, though his agitated thoughts implied that the Lion of Urik might have given a poor man a bit of warning.

"And I might have warned you, mightn't I?"

Wisely, Pavek said nothing. Hamanu righted the table, returned the shard to its top, and collected a handful of vellum sheets.

"You were reading. What do you think?"

A veritable storm of thoughts stewed in Pavek's mind, but they were all half-formed and elusive. As impatient as any fountain-side poet reciting for his supper, Hamanu had to wait for the man's spoken words.

"I think—I think, O Mighty King, that it is not finished."

"That's *all*? No greater understanding of me, of the choices I made and make? It is *not* the version you were taught in the orphanage," Hamanu said with certainty. That version—the Lion-King's official history—was a god's tale, full of miracles, revelations, and infallibility, nothing like the human frailties the vellum revealed.

It was embarrassing to beg a mortal's opinion. It was degrading. Worse, it stirred the dark fire of Hamanu's anger. "Speak, Pavek! *Look at me!* Ask a question, any question at all. Don't just kneel there like a poleaxed inix. I've told you secrets I've kept for ages. Don't you want to know why?"

"O Mighty King, forgive me, but I couldn't hope to understand. I have so many questions, I wouldn't know where to begin—"

"Ask, Pavek. Look at me and *ask* a question, ask as if your life depended on it, for it does!"

The head came up, wide-eyed and very mortal, very fragile. The question flowed exactly as it formed in Pavek's mind—

"Were you Rajaan's favorite? Is that what you became after—?"

Two questions: twice as many as he'd commanded and an excuse—if Hamanu needed one—to slay the trembling man where he knelt. But, strangely, the rage was gone. Hamanu walked around the table, righted the chair, and eased his illusory self onto its seat.

"The answer that comes to me, Pavek, is no. I was never Rajaan's favorite. I hated him before I knew what he was, before he made me what I became, and he knew I hated him. I wouldn't have tolerated his favor, and for all these years I have believed that I didn't have it. Tonight, though, it's not me who asks the question, but you, a mortal, whom some might call *my* favorite. Hatred doesn't protect you from my favor, dear Pavek, and so I realize I have become what I hated when I was a man.

"Today is a sad day, Pavek. Today I've realized that my hatred amused Rajaan, amuses him still, as yours amuses me. I was the last of his creations—but not because we imprisoned him. No, he'd had two hundred years to ponder his mistakes before he created me. I was the last because I was everything he meant a champion to be. I loathed him, but, yes, Pavek, I was Rajaan's favorite. I carried in my bones his hopes for a cleansed and purified Athas; I still Hamanu recalled the mortal man he'd been and felt the weight of his immortal age as he'd never felt it before. Looking across his worktable, he saw the gray dust and empty memories of an unnatural life. He didn't see Pavek at all, until the man said—

"I don't loathe you or hate you, O Mighty King."

"Then you are either an innocent or a fool," Hamanu said wearily, indulging himself in a moment of self-pity—and eager to stifle a favorite, whose voice, at this moment, sounded too much like his own.

"Telhami says not, O Mighty King."

Perhaps Rajaan was right. Rajaan had already lived two thousand years or more when he began creating his champions. Perhaps a man needed several ages to learn the ropes of immortality—to learn to pick his favorites from the ranks of those who hated him.

When Telhami lived in Urik, Hamanu had forgotten Dorean and every other woman. Her eyes, her hands, her laughter had made him human again. For how long? A year?

Twenty years? Thirty? He'd lived an enchantment. Every day had been bright and sparkling, yet different; every night was the stuff from which men's dreams were spun. Then, one morning she was dressed in traveler's clothes.

She'd had a vision during the night of a place beyond the Ringing Mountains, a place where the air was cool and moist, where the ground was a thick, soft green carpet, and trees grew halfway to the sun. Cold springs bubbled year around in the place she'd envisioned, and at the center of everything was a waterfall shrouded in mist and rainbows. Her life in Urik was over; she had to find her waterfall.

*Druids cannot stay*, she'd said—as if that explained everything.

And he, of course, could not go. Urik had already suffered from his neglect. A generation of templars had succeeded to power thinking that their king was a besotted fool. The ordinary folk on

whose shoulders he and the templars stood did truly curse the Lion-King's name.

Hamanu could have forced Telhami to stay, but he couldn't command her affection. He could have slain her as she stood before him with her staff and veiled hat. The deaths of mortals—even mortals he loved—was a familiar pain. Being left behind was not.

*Will you return?* he'd asked, as countless other men and women had asked their departing lovers, but never Hamanu, never the Lion-King, not before or since.

Telhami had returned, in her way. She'd settled her druids close enough to Urik that he knew roughly where she was, but on the far side of lifeless salt, where his magic couldn't reach her. Until one night, when this Pavek, this stolid, stubborn lump of humanity who stirred forgotten memories, gave his king passage across the waste. Hamanu had saved Telhami's village from one of his own. He would have saved her, too, but she chose to die, instead.

He never knew if she'd found her damned waterfall. Because he'd loved her, he hoped she had. Because she'd left him, he hoped otherwise. Pavek might know, but thirteen ages had taught a farmer's son not to ask questions unless he truly wanted the answers.

"Go home," he told Pavek. "I'll watch the chest overnight. Come back tomorrow or the day after."

The templar rose to one knee, then froze as a breeze spiraled down from the ceiling, a silver-edged breeze that roiled the vellum and became Windreaver.

A fittingly unpleasant end to an unpleasant day.

"I thought you'd gone to Ur Draxa."

"I have a question, O Mighty Master."

"I might have known."

A breeze and a shadow, that was all the influence the troll had in the material world, but he could observe anything—Rajaat in his Ur Draxan prison or a scarred templar reading sheet after sheet of script-covered vellum.

"Your little friend might find the answer interesting, O Mighty Master *if* you're inclined to answer."

Hamanu could pluck thoughts from a living mind or unravel the memories of the naturally dead; he could do nothing with his old enemy, Windreaver, except say—"Ask for yourself. Don't involve Pavek in your schemes."

"O Mighty Master, it's his question as well as mine. I heard it off his own tongue as he turned the last sheet over."

Poor Pavek—he'd said something that Windreaver had overheard, and now he was using every trick he'd learned as a templar, every bit of druidry Telhami had taught him, to keep his wayward thoughts from betraying him. It was a futile fight, or it would have been, if Hamanu weren't wise to Windreaver's bitter ways.

*"Ask for yourself!"*

His voice blew Windreaver's silver shadow into the room's four corners. It was no more than a moment's inconvenience for the troll, whose image reappeared as quickly as it had vanished.

"As you command, O Mighty Master. Why did Rajaat choose a thick-skulled, short-witted, blundering dolt, such as you were, to replace Myron of Yoram?"

He almost smiled, almost laughed aloud. "Windreaver, I never asked, and he never told. He must have had good reasons—not from your view, of course. You would have beaten Myron, eventually, but once I was Troll-Scorcher, my victory was inevitable."

A blunt-fingered shadow hand scratched a silvery forward-jutting jaw. "Perhaps. Perhaps not. Someone taught you strategies and tactics Yoram never imagined, and you never guessed while you were..." Windreaver's voice, his deep, sonorous troll's voice, trailed off to a whisper.

"Alive?" Hamanu finished for him. "You cannot accept that the son of a Kreegill farmer conquered the trolls. You'd prefer to believe that Rajaat conjured some long-dead genius to inhabit my body."

"The thought had crossed my mind. I was there in the sinking lands, Manu of Deche. I saw you: a

stringy human. You looked young, acted younger, standing behind your bright steel sword with your jaw slung so low that a mekillot could crawl down your gullet. You were unworthy of the weapon you held. I watched as your own men came to kill you for the shame and defeat you'd brought them. Then I blinked, and you were gone. The next time I saw you—"

Insubstantial silver tears seeped from the shadow's eyes, and it came to Hamanu that Windreaver had recognized him that day on the cliff. It came to him as well that Windreaver could answer one of his undying questions.

"Were we betrayed?"

Windreaver inhaled his tears. "Betrayed?"

"Did Myron of Yoram sell my veterans to your trolls? Did you know where to find us?"

"We retreated to the sinking lands whenever the yora plants there had grown high enough to harvest. The Troll-Scorcher never followed us; you learned why—"

"I followed you."

"Yes, O Mighty Master, you followed us everywhere, but Myron of Yoram did not. I think he did not expect you to return, but he didn't betray you, not to us. I didn't guess the great game Yoram played until I looked over Pavek's shoulder and read your recounting."

They stared at each other, through each other—immortal ghost and immortal champion. The air was thick with unspoken ironies and might-have-beens.

Pavek, the mortal who didn't understand, couldn't possibly understand, cleared his throat. "O Mighty King—what happened after the battle? How did you escape from the prison-hole?"

Hamanu shook his head. He hadn't escaped, not truly, not ever.

"Yes," Windreaver added, breaking the spell. "Rajaat must have prepared quite a welcome for you."

"Not Rajaat," Hamanu whispered.

No sorcery or mind-bender's sleights could alter those memories. He could feel the walls as if they were an arm's length away, just as they'd been when he realized he'd been stowed in a grain pit. The remembered bricks were cool and smooth against his fingertips. Give a man a thousand years, and he wouldn't scratch his way through that kiln-baked glaze or pry a brick out of its unmortared wall. Give him another thousand, and he wouldn't budge the sandstone cap at the top of his prison, no matter how many times he pressed his limbs against the bricks and shinnied up the walls, no matter how many times he came crashing down to the layer of filth at the bottom.

"Not Rajaat?" Windreaver and Pavek asked together.

Hamanu spied the brass stylus on the workroom floor. He picked it up and spun it between his fingers before closing his hand around the metal shaft. "The Troll-Scorcher, Myron of Yoram, plucked me out of the sinking lands. He had me thrown in a grain pit on the plains where his army mustered—"

"A grain pit," Windreaver mused. "How appropriate for the pesky son of a farmer."

The Lion-King said nothing, merely bared his gleaming fangs in the lamplight and bent the stylus over a talon as black as obsidian, as hard as steel.

"At night—" Hamanu's lips didn't move; his voice echoed from the corners and the ceiling. "At night I could hear screams and moans through the walls around me. I wasn't alone, Windreaver. The Troll-Scorcher had pitted me in the midst of my enemies: the trolls. Big-boned trolls who could stand, maybe sit cross-legged—if they were young enough, agile enough—but never stretch their legs in front of them, never lie down to sleep. Not once, in all the days and nights of their captivity, which was, of course, as long as mine... or longer. And mine was..."

"When did you harvest the yora plants, Windreaver? While the sun ascends, while it's high, or while it descends? The Troll-Scorcher's army mustered at High Sun, so I suppose I was in that pit for less than a year, though it seemed like a lifetime. A human lifetime—but trolls live longer than humans, don't they, Windreaver? A troll's lifetime would seem longer, standing the whole time."

Hamanu clutched the bent stylus in his fist, squeezing tighter, waiting for the old troll, his enemy, to flinch. But it was Pavek who averted his eyes.

"Shall I tell you how I got out of the pit?" Hamanu asked, fastening his cruelty on one who would

react, lest his own memories overwhelm him. "First they threw down burning sticks and embers that set the filth afire. Then they lowered a rope. Burn to death or climb. I chose to climb; I chose wrong. Spear-carrying veterans circled the pit, according me a respect I did not deserve. I could stand, but I'd forgotten how to walk. The sun blinded me; tears streamed from my eyes. I fell on my knees, seeking my own shadow, the darkness I'd left behind.

"Their spears jabbed my flanks. I lashed out, seizing one behind its flint and wrestling it away from the veteran who held it. They fell on me then—my own kind, human men and women like myself—beating me senseless. When I had my wits again, I was bound hand and foot, with my back against a standing mekillot rib and the sun in my face.

"A man called my name, Manu of Deche; I opened my eyes and beheld the Troll-Scorcher, Myron of Yoram. He was a big man, a huge, shapeless sack of a man wrapped in a tent of flame-colored silk. Two men stood beside him, to aid him when he walked. Another two carried a stout and slope-seated bench that they shoved behind him after every step because he had no strength in his legs and could not sit to rest.

"I mocked him," Hamanu said, remembering the exact words that had earned him another ruthless beating. His mortal eloquence hadn't been limited to long words and flowery phrases. Between his farmyard childhood and his years among the veterans, he'd become a champion of coarse language long before he'd been a champion of anything else. But time was unkind to vulgarity. His profanity had lost its sting; his choicest oaths were quaint now, or forgotten entirely. He was left with paraphrase: "I dubbed him a sexless man, a stinking mound of dung."

"You'd figured out where you were and what was about to happen. You'd decided to get yourself killed, no doubt," Windreaver suggested.

"I recognized the place, yes: the plains, the mustered army, the trolls staked out on either side of me. Seeing him, though... seeing what he was, the Troll-Scorcher who'd let Deche and a hundred other human villages die, I wasn't thinking of death, only of my hatred. You cannot imagine my hatred when I looked at him."

"Oh, I can, O Mighty Master, each time I look at you."

Once again Hamanu locked eyes with the ghost. Windreaver's hate was his most tangible aspect, yet it paled beside the memory of Myron of Yoram.

"He was a failure, a coward who could not face his enemies. He was a glutton for pain and suffering—when he had nothing at risk—"

Windreaver's silver-edged shadow bent low across the table. "When were *you* ever at risk, Hamanu?" the troll demanded, his voice a cold, bitter whisper. "When did you ever fight a fair battle to an honorable end?"

"I fought to end the war," Hamanu snarled back, though there was no need to defend himself to a defeated adversary and a thoroughly cowed mortal man. "Peace was my honor—"

And the risk? What had he risked after he faced Myron of Yoram?

"I told the truth. I exposed the Troll-Scorcher to the veterans of his army. I accused him of human deaths, countless deaths, pointless deaths. For Dorean and Deche and all the others whose voices were stilled, I raised mine for judgment. I named him *Betrayer* and *Deceiver*. I cried out for vengeance—and he struck me with the eyes of fire.

"My blood grew hot in my veins. It simmered. It boiled in my heart. I opened my mouth to scream; my tongue—"

There were no more words in the workroom, just as there had been no more words that hot High Sun afternoon on the plains. Writhing under the assault of the Troll-Scorcher's fiery sorcery, Hamanu's mouth had filled with a tongue of flame, not flesh. The last sounds he heard were his own ears crackling, like fat in the fire. Myron of Yoram's corpulence grew vast before his heat-swollen eyes burst. Mortal Hamanu died in a black inferno of heat, silence, and torment that neither words nor memory encompassed.

The ropes that bound him to the mekillot stake had burnt through. He'd fallen slowly toward the ground, toward death, but Hamanu hadn't died. Myron of Yoram had seized the filaments of his



existence and hauled him away from eternity's threshold to agonies redoubled.

Hamanu had had no tongue, no lips, cheeks, or jaw. He couldn't scream and, anyway, no human sound could measure his pain as the Troll-Scorcher denied him death's release time after unspeakable time. He became mad, insane, but not quite mindless. A single thought had remained: a curse that had grown louder, stronger and more complex the longer Hamanu's essence dwelt within the eyes of fire.

"I would not die," the Lion-King whispered. "Death ceased to have meaning. Life ceased. Pain ceased."

Hamanu blinked and shuddered free of the memory, as free as he ever was. Windreaver and Pavek were staring at him, at his hand. He looked down. Thick, greasy smoke seeped from the depth of his clenched fist. The stench of charred flesh belonged to the present as well as the past, to reality and illusion. With unfamiliar effort, Hamanu found the muscles of his fingers and straightened them.

A pool of molten bronze shone brightly in the palm of Hamanu's hand. He felt nothing—nothing new, nothing different, but the long-suffering human core of him shuddered, and the liquid metal dribbled onto the table. While the more benign aromas of burning wood and tempered metal cleansed the workroom air, Hamanu stared at the new crater in his already black and ruined flesh.

There were other sounds around him, other movements. He ignored them until Pavek—mortal Pavek, who did not understand—stood before him with a length of cloth torn from the treasures of ancient Yaramuke in one hand and the critic-lizard's honey pot in the other.

Windreaver stirred, casting his shadow between them. "You waste your time, manikin. The Troll-Scorcher neither feels nor heals."

Pavek said nothing, and his thoughts were tightly shuttered in his druid-templar way. He poured the honey over Hamanu's wound—an old soldier's remedy, Javed would approve, Telhami, too—then wrapped the cloth around it, hiding it from sight. Hamanu closed his eyes and reveled in a newfound pain.

## Chapter Ten

Hamanu banished his companions from the workroom. He'd lived too long outside the bounds of compassion to be comfortable within its embrace. Not that Windreaver had suddenly mellowed; the shadowy troll departed in a gust of bitter laughter. Hamanu didn't know where his ancient enemy had gone—to Ur Draxa, perhaps, where he should have been all along, spying on Rajaat.

In truth, Hamanu didn't care where Windreaver was. It was Pavek who weighed heavily in his thoughts, and Pavek who ignored his command. The stubborn, insignificant mortal stopped one stride short of the doorway.

"Your hand—" he said, defiance and fear entwined in his voice. Then he held out the honey jar.

"I am the almighty, immortal Lion-King of Urik, or weren't you paying attention?" Hamanu snarled. "My flesh doesn't heal, but it won't putrefy. I require neither your service nor your concern."

Pavek stayed where he was, not talking, not thinking—at least not thinking thoughts that could be skimmed from his mind. Twisting human lips into a scowl, Hamanu shaped and shifted his illusionary body. He intended to snatch the jar from the templar's hand faster than Pavek's mortal eyes could perceive. But Hamanu had a real injury: his reflexes, both illusory and real, were impaired. His fingers slid past the jar. The improvised bandage snagged the rough-glazed pottery and tugged the raw edges of his wound as well.

The Lion-King flinched, the jar shattered on the floor, and Pavek blinked—simply blinked.

Hamanu cradled his hand—the real hand within the illusion—trying to remember the last time he'd misjudged the balance between reality and his own illusions. Before the templar was born, before his grandparents had been born.

"You cannot take my measure, Pavek. A mortal cannot imagine me or judge me." There was more edge to his words than he'd intended, but that was just as well, if it would get the templar moving.

Pavek folded his arms across his chest. "You were mortal when you measured Myron of Yoram and Rajaat. You didn't hesitate to judge them," he said, omitting the Lion-King's titles and honors, as if he

and Hamanu were equals.

"Go now," Hamanu commanded.

But he wasn't surprised when the templar disobeyed; he would have been disappointed otherwise. Pavek didn't share Hamanu's hot temper, but the mortal man had a quiet stubbornness that served the same purpose. An ill-omened purpose for any mortal when a champion's mood was more bleak than it had been in an age.

"Go, Pavek, before my patience is exhausted. I do not choose to be lessoned tonight, not by you, Windreaver, or anyone."

"You didn't finish your tale."

"Men have died—and died unpleasantly—" The rest of Hamanu's threat went unspoken. He wouldn't kill tonight, and he'd never kill a man who dared to tell him the truth. "Not tonight, Pavek. Some other time. Go home, Pavek. Eat a late supper with your friends. Sleep well. I'll summon you when I need you."

A thought formed on the surface of Pavek's mind, so clear and simple that Hamanu questioned every assumption he'd ever made about the man's innocence or simplicity. *Surely my king needs sleep and food*, Pavek thought. *Surely he needs friends about him tonight.*

*I do not sleep, Pavek*, Hamanu replied, shoving the words directly into the templar's mind, which was enough, at last, to send him staggering across the threshold.

"Friends," the king muttered to himself when he was finally alone. "A troll who loathes me, justly, and a templar who defies me. Friends. Nonsense. A pox on friends."

But the thought of friendship was no easier to banish than Pavek had been. No one had known Hamanu longer, or knew him better, than the last troll general. Urik's history was their history, laced with venom and bile, but shared all the same. What was Windreaver, if not a friend, as well as an enemy?

And what was a friend, if not a mortal man who overcame his own-good sense to bandage a dragon's hand?

Hamanu's hand, down to its patterned whorls and calluses, was illusion, but the wound was real—he had the power to pierce his own defenses, even absentmindedly. There had been other wounds over the ages, which he'd hidden within illusion. Tonight, sorcery and illusion had failed, or, more truly, Hamanu himself had failed. The sight of molten metal in his palm had filled him with horror and self-loathing, and given Pavek an opportunity no mortal should have had.

Ordinary cloth would have burned or rotted when it touched a champion's changeable flesh. There was only one piece of suitably enchanted cloth in the workroom: the celadon gown of Sieiba Sprite-Claw, champion and queen of Yaramuke. She had worn it when she died in the Lion-King's arms, with his obsidian knife piercing her heart.

Had Windreaver guessed Pavek's intentions while Hamanu was preoccupied? Had the troll whispered a suggestion in Pavek's mortal ears—

Or, had some instinct guided the templar's search? Some *druid* instinct? Some druid guardian whose presence a champion's magic couldn't detect?

Hamanu had thought himself clever when he conceived his campaign to win Pavek's support as a means to win the druid guardian's protection for his city. His bandaged hand could be taken as a sign that he was succeeding—but, at what cost?

A wound?

That was nothing. Windreaver spoke the truth: Rajaat's champions didn't heal, but the raw crater would be consumed by Hamanu's inexorable metamorphosis. In the meantime, he'd had a thousand year's practice ignoring worse agony.

A wound, then, was no cost, but what about the nagging emptiness around his slow-beating heart, hinting that he'd lived too long?

He had Urik, and for a thousand years, Urik had been enough. Mortals came and went; Urik endured. The city was immortal; the city had become Hamanu's life. The passions of his minions had supplanted any natural yearning for love or friendship. Then he conceived the notion of writing his history, and after that—after ages of attention and nurturing—his precious minions wandered the city like lost

children while he confessed his private history on sheets of vellum.

Hamanu berated himself for their neglect and sought his favorites through the netherworld.

*Lord Ursos reclined in his scented bath while adolescents satisfied his whims, his needs. Elegant fingers cupped a beardless chin and drew it close.*

The Lion-King turned away. Lord Ursos's bents were familiar, stale, and without fascination. The bath faded from his imagination. He looked around the workroom for another stylus.

\* \* \* \* \*

I don't know how long I remained strung between life and death, locked in a mind-bender's battle with Myron of Yoram. That's what it was, a netherworld war: the Troll-Scorcher's imagery against mine, his years of experience against the purity of my rage, my hatred. I was, if not dead, at least not truly unconscious when the battle ended. Our battle had lasted long enough and was loud enough to disturb the War-Bringer's peace, and that was what truly mattered.

Rajaat burned through the Gray to find me, though I could not appreciate my rescue or his undoubtedly spectacular appearance on the plains. I was aware of nothing except the pain, the darkness, the silence and—very dimly—that my enemy no longer rose to the challenges I continued, in my mad, mindless way, to hurl at him.

Then there was a ray of light in my black abyss, a wedge of sound, a voice I recognized as power incarnate, telling me to desist.

*Your pleas are heard, your wishes granted.*

Rajaat. No need for him to state his name, then or ever. When the first sorcerer was present in my mind, the world was Rajaat and Rajaat was the world, endless and eternal.

*Look for yourself—*

He gave me a kes'trekel's vision and hearing. Peering down from a soaring height, I saw mekillots pulling a four-wheeled cart along a barrens road. There was a cage on the cart, and Myron of Yoram was in the cage. The Troll-Scorcher had himself been scorched. He lay on his back, a bloated, blackened carcass. His charred skin hung in tattered strips that swayed in rhythm with the creaking cart. A cloud of buzzing insects feasted on his suppurating wounds.

I'd judged Yoram a corpse; I was wrong. With Rajaat's aid, I heard pathetic whimpers in the depths of his flame-ravaged throat. I saw delicate silver chains nearly lost in the rotting folds at his wrists and ankles: links of sorcery potent enough to render a champion helpless.

I was pleased, but not satisfied. It was not enough that the Troll-Scorcher suffered for his betrayal of the human cause. The war against the trolls had to be fought and won—

*In time, Manu. In due time. Wait. Rest—*

A soft shadow surrounded me, not the bleak darkness of my recent torment, but oblivion all the same. I wasn't interested in oblivion or resting or waiting. Childish and petulant, I tried to escape the shadow.

My uncanny vision shifted: There was a second cart. Like the first, it ferried a human husk across the barrens. The second body was little more than a black-boned skeleton held together with rags. Its knees were drawn up. Its arms were crossed and fused together. They hid what remained of its face.

Of my face...

The husk was alive; the husk was me.

All the pain I'd felt was nothing compared to my imagination when I saw what had become of Manu, the lithe dancer of Deche. I no longer fought Rajaat's shadow. I surrendered myself to its numbing softness.

*Don't despair, Rajaat told me with a grandfather's kindly voice. Pain belongs to your past. Soon you will be reborn and you will never know pain or suffering again.*

From the first, I doubted that promise: a life without pain or suffering wouldn't be a human life. But my living corpse was strong in my mind, so I banished my doubts and drifted until I heard his voice again.

*It is time.*

The soft shadow faded. My mind returned slowly to my body. At first, there was only pressure. Then I distinguished movement within the pressure. At last, there was a sense of unfolding, of stretching, of sound. I had ears again.

"It is time for you to be reborn."

The pressure was Rajaat's sorcery-laden hands restoring my body around me. His thumbs traced the curves of my eye sockets. Bone grew like bread rising in a baker's oven, but Rajaat's miracle was not without discomfort. Bone was not meant to grow and harden so quickly. For one unbearable moment, the pain was so intense that I would have begged him to stop, if I'd had a mouth or tongue.

Rajaat knew my thoughts. "Patience, child. The worst is behind you. The best is barely begun."

I hadn't been anyone's child for years. I did not care to be reminded of what I'd lost, and I wasn't willing to cede my hard-won manhood, even to a god. A low, rumbling chuckle echoed through my mind. My thoughts scattered as chaff on the wind.

Today, perhaps, I could keep a secret from my creator— certainly that is why I have a spell simmering beside me— but not that day under the relentless sun. I took refuge in the manners my parents had taught me and thanked him properly. Chuckles became a kirre's contented purr.

Pressure shifted. Rajaat began restoring my cheekbones and jaw.

My reborn ears made me aware that Rajaat and I were not alone.

"Look at him," a deep-voiced man said. "A farmer. A dung-skull, no better than a slave. I tell you, there's no need. The Scorcher's finished, but so are the gnomes. There's no need for the War-Bringer to *replace* him. My army stands ready. They could finish the trolls in a single campaign."

In the Troll-Scorcher's army, we'd heard of the other armies cleansing the human heartland, and of the leader of them all. Even before I knew his true name—before I knew what Rajaat was or what I was to become—I knew that Gal-lard, Bane of Gnomes, was not half the military genius he believed himself to be. Gnomes had been sly and wily, as he was, himself. Gallard's stealthy strategies were effective in the dwindling forests where they dwelt, but Windreaver would have carved the Gnome-Bane and his army into kes'trekel bait.

The Gnome-Bane wasn't my only audience.

"A peasant," a woman agreed. "He might be *useful*, when the War-Bringer's done with him." Her name, I later learned, was Sielba. I would learn more about her notion of usefulness as the years went on, but at that moment, I had no interest in them or her.

"He can hear you," a third voice, another man, cautioned. He was no less contemptuous of me than the other two had been, but Borys of Ebe always saw much farther into a maze of consequences. "He will be one of us when the War-Bringer's done with him."

After that, they spoke silently, if they spoke at all. My mind filled with eager curiosity; I didn't yet know what being *one of us* meant. I thought only of leading an army— my army—against the trolls. I envisioned slaughter and victory. Once again, Rajaat's amusement swept over me, dulling my consciousness as he shaped smooth muscles across the newly hardened bones of my face.

When my eyelids were finished, I opened them, curious to see my savior.

I was stunned senseless. In my life, I'd seen only humans and trolls. Myron of Yoram was a fat, bloated sack of a man, but he was—I believed he was—a human man. Beyond humans, there were only trolls. Rajaat War-Bringer wasn't a troll. Trolls were handsome, well-formed mortals, compared to my savior.

In all ways Rajaat lacked the simple left and right symmetry a man expects to see in another man, be he human, troll or some other sentient race. The first sorcerer's head was huge and grotesque. Wisps of colorless hair sprouted between the bulbous swellings that covered his skull like lava seeps. His eyes were mismatched in color, size, and position. His nose was a shapeless growth above a coarse-lipped mouth that was lined with snaggleteeth. Rajaat wheezed when he inhaled, and when he exhaled, his breath stank of death and disease.

If he were resurrecting me in his own image...

Rajaat laughed and promised me he wasn't. His gnarled, magical fingers tilted my head so I could

see the men and women he'd called to witness his making—and unmaking— of a champion.

Ah—they were a magnificent gathering, epitomes of human perfection, and every one of them cloaked in illusion, though I did not guess that then. An aura of unspeakable power hung about them. That was real enough, and almost as tangible as their collective disdain.

*They are flawed, my savior assured me, turning my head again so my eyes beheld nothing but him. Each of them bears a mistake to which you are the correction. You are my last champion, Manu of Deche, Hamanu Troll-Scorcher. You will cleanse the land of impurities. Athas will become blue again.*

In my ignorance, I imagined my familiar world transformed to a world of blue mountains and sand, blue barrens, and blue himali fields. Rajaat changed my mind, showing me blue water beneath a blue sky. I overlooked the oceans; so much water meant nothing to me.

Where was the land? I wondered. Rajaat showed me islands and drifting cities shaped like schooners running before the wind. Where were the people of this blue world? I wondered. The cities teemed with life. Human life, I assumed, and Rajaat did not correct me. Then.

His hands moved from my head to my neck, from my neck to my shoulders and onward, down my body. Bone, sinew, nerve, and every other part of me quickened beneath his fingers. Bit by bit, I became a man again. The pain was exquisite—I ground my regrown tongue until it was a bloody rag between my teeth, lest my soon-to-be peers heard me scream or moan.

Daylight faded. Cool, gray shadows reached across the cart before Rajaat was satisfied with my regeneration. He bid me move each limb, then rise slowly. I sat, stood, and took a tentative step, watching my feet, ankles, knees, and hips as if I had never seen them before. I was myself again, a sound-bodied man, as I had not been when Myron of Yoram's bullies dragged me from the pit. The scars of war and farming were gone, hut my mother would have known me by the crooked big toe on my left foot.

My audience was clad in silk and jewels or sparkling armor such as Athas has never seen, before or since. I, of course, was birth-naked and subject to intense scrutiny. Visions of grunting beasts and sweating slaves were thrust into my consciousness. Flame-haired Sielba ran her possessive passions over my body. She took me by surprise; I flushed with shame, not because I was a hot-blooded man, easily aroused, but because she meant me to be ashamed.

Only Borys of Ebe would have nothing to do with me. His contempt was complete. Dwarves interested him; my shame and suffering didn't.

"Can you walk?" Rajaat asked.

The War-Bringer stood on a beaten dirt path. Behind him stood a slender spire so amber bright that it seemed aflame, though the color was only the setting sun's reflection on pristine white stone. Myron of Yoram's cart rested beside the path. His flayed, tattered skin moved as he breathed, and his mewling echoed in my ears.

My legs would bear me, but I couldn't walk toward my savior without walking past that cart. I hesitated, summoning my courage. Gallard, Sielba, and the others mocked me; my shame was immense, but it wouldn't move my feet. Rajaat made a slight, two-fingered gesture, after which my strength or courage were of no importance: *his* will brought me to his side.

"Prepare a feast," the first sorcerer said, speaking to those magnificent men and women as if they were slaves.

He pointed at the cart where he'd restored me and where a mass of tall, crystal goblets instantly stood. I saw outrage flicker, then die, on their faces as, one after another, they started toward the cart. And all the while, Rajaat's steady control over me never wavered. It would be a king's age before I could seize the minds of so many mortals and direct them to separate actions. I cannot, even today, seize a champion's thoughts, nor can any of my peers, but Rajaat could hold us all... easily.

Rajaat was cautious with me. He turned me sunwise; toward the brilliant tower, away from the cart where Myron of Yoram lay. But there wasn't enough caution to spare me the understanding of what food, what drink, would be served at the impending feast. I braced myself against my savior's influence. My new body trembled like a smoke-eater's.

*Walk!* Rajaat roared in my mind. *Your destiny awaits.*

Destiny. Deche and Dorean. Jikkana and Bult. Myron Troll-Scorcher and Hamanu... My destiny was my justice and my will. I faced the second cart, raised my arm, and lightly touched the mound of ruined flesh. It howled, a shrill, acid warble like no sound I'd heard before. A pair of smoldering red eyes appeared on its otherwise featureless face and, with them, a mind-bender's wall of malevolence.

*What are you?* I asked, shattering the wall, though my true question was: what will I become?

Rajaat intervened before I had an answer to either question. A cold, gray mist enveloped me. *Walk!* he commanded a second time, and with his will wrapped around mine, I entered the Gray.

I emerged in a small chamber where light flashed brightly and without warning. The floor beneath my bare feet was quicksilver glass, as cold as a tomb at midnight. A stride ahead, the quicksilver angled into a pool of still, dark water. The ceiling above me was a rainbow of colored crystals, six stones mounted in a ring around a seventh crystal that was darkness incarnate.

While I watched in mute wonder and awe, jagged streams of colored light pulsed from the crystals in the rainbow ring. Each pulse was stronger than the preceding one and brought the separate streams closer to a conjunction at the center of the dark crystal.

*Watch,* Rajaat told me, though I needed no encouragement.

A pinpoint of pure, colorless light sprang into being the instant the jagged streams touched. It swallowed the rainbow colors and began to swell, growing brighter as it did, until the dark crystal was filled with more light than my still-mortal eyes could bear. I closed my eyes, turned my head, and felt a faint concussion through my private darkness. When I opened my eyes again, the room was dark, as it had been when I entered it, and the jagged rainbow streams were no longer than my finger.

"The Dark Lens in the Steeple of Crystals," Rajaat whispered in my ear. "Do not ask what it is, how it was made, or where it comes from. In all the planes of existence, there is nothing that compares to it. Stand in the pool beneath it and become my greatest creation, my final champion."

My family did not raise a fool for a son. I didn't need questions to know that the gift Rajaat offered was nothing any sane man should accept. Yet I knew as well that I would not survive refusing it. I'd chosen death once before when I'd faced Myron Troll-Scorcher—and Rajaat had restored me. My life had become too precious to squander a second time. Stubbornness failed, and my legs took me forward, across the quicksilver and into the opaque water as the rainbow streams pulsed toward each other again.

"You will not regret this," Rajaat assured me.

"I already—"

The colored lights merged into a lance of pristine light that pierced my skull with fire. I screamed mortal agony and slowly began to rise. The Dark Lens burst open. Inside, it was exactly as high as a man, exactly as broad as his outstretched arms. When my heart was at its center, it sealed into a perfect sphere again. Rajaat's sorcery took many-colored shape around me. It became a pillar of light, lifting me and the Lens into the sunset sky.

What can I recount of my final mortal moments? My flesh became fire, my bones red-hot steel on the smith's anvil. Even my memories were reduced to flame and ash. Then, when there was nothing left but light itself, the Lens focused inward. Drawing substance from the dying sun, the risen moons, and the countless stars above our cloudless sky, Rajaat created his final champion.

My heart beat in rhythm with the world below me, and I rejoiced as immortality quickened in my veins. I saw Athas as I wished it could be: a bountiful paradise of flowering fields, green forests, white-capped mountains, and blue lakes and rivers, all bound together beneath a shifting lace of clouds.

*Never!* Rajaat shattered my vision. *Athas does not belong to us! We are the unclean, the defilers. Our children are raised from dung. Our blood is filth. It is not for us to envision the future. You must cleanse the world so it may be returned to the pure ones.* The blue world he had shown me earlier—the Athas of endless ocean and floating cities—supplanted my own vision. I looked closer and saw that the cities were populated with halflings, which astonished me because then, as now, halflings were not a city-dwelling race. *Humanity's debt folk on your shoulders. It must be paid, Manu of Deche. It must be paid in full.*

Bands of sorcery tightened around me, commanding me to accept my destiny, to obey the War-Bringer, to revere Rajaat, my creator. I surrendered.

*Great One, your will is my will.*

The bands loosened, and Rajaat had made his final champion. I cannot speak for the mistakes and flaws Rajaat claimed existed in my peers, but I knew my own even before the Dark Lens settled back into the rainbow ring atop the Crystal Steeple. I took the first sorcerer's gifts because I had no other choice, but I clung to the shards of *my* vision, a farmer's vision of a many-colored Athas.

And it was well that the seeds of my rebellion were already planted when the Dark Lens spat me out. There could be no secrets as I lay on the quicksilver glass, my translucent skin stretched taut over a star-flecked midnight skeleton.

"Arise."

Lightning fingers caressed me as I gathered myself into a crouch, then slowly stood. I stared at my black-boned hands. I wondered how I could see anything, but I dared not touch my face.

"Are you in pain anywhere? Do you feel the lack of any vital part of yourself?" Rajaat asked from the periphery.

"No, nothing hurts. Nothing's lacking," I answered slowly, realizing that he'd known my answers before he'd asked the questions. "I'm—" I sought words to describe the indescribable. "I'm hollow... empty. I'm *hungry*."

I met Rajaat's mismatched eyes and saw that he was gleeful. Then I remembered the feast. When my mind's eye touched the memory of Yoram's scorched carcass, my hunger swelled. Looking down, I saw a pulsing hollow beneath my ribs.

"What have you done to me?" I cried out recklessly, though Rajaat would have heard my thoughts had I tried to stifle my words and, in truth, I doubt that I would have tried.

"I have made you a champion. I have instilled in you the power to cleanse Athas of *all* its impurities. You no longer depend on the fruits of the land or the flesh of life for your nourishment. I have given you a gift beyond measure. Sunlight will sustain you, but you will grow sleek only in pursuit of your destiny. As you cleanse Athas, death will be your ambrosia. Begin with the trolls. Begin with your predecessor. Go down, Hamanu, Scorcher of Trolls, and claim your feast."

Nausea of the mind overwhelmed me. I dropped to my knees and hid my face behind my hands, as a man might do. But I was no longer a man, no longer a mortal man with a mortal man's love of life and fear of death. Grieving for my lost self, I made tears flow from the holes where my eyes should have been. The tears were sorcery. I realized that immortality wasn't the only gift Rajaat had given me. My whims were spells. I marveled at my powers, then I felt my hunger.

I knew in an instant that it was death I craved, not bread.

"Hate me, if it pleases you," Rajaat said without losing his smile. My thoughts were transparent to him. "I don't expect thanks... or willing obedience."

I swallowed hard, never mind that I had no gullet except in my imagination; a champion's imagination is more potent than material truth. The imaginary act, however, stirred my appetite to new heights.

"Will you or not, you'll fulfill your destiny." Rajaat's fowl teeth showed within his grin. "Be my loyal champion, and you'll rule the world, once it's clean. But, deny your hunger, Hamanu, and you'll go mad. Go mad and know that you will not be sated until you have consumed every living thing beneath the bloody sun. Your choice matters little to me. You *will* serve, and Athas will be cleansed of its impurities. You will consume the foul and the deformed."

Again I surrendered. Mind against mind, will against will, I was no match for my creator. A battle with him would have left me a maddened beast, ravaging life wherever I found it. He'd told me the truth about myself. My hunger grew less resistible with each beat of my heart.

Rajaat stepped sideways, revealing an open door, and the downward spiral beyond it. Measuring what remained of my sanity, I judged I could get to the ground, where Myron of Yoram awaited me, before I succumbed to madness.

"Your choice," Rajaat reminded me as I strode past him.

My choice, indeed, and I descended slowly, testing the limits of madness at each step. While I stood in the Steeple of Crystals, what I knew of sorcery could have been written in bold script on a single vellum sheet. By the time my right heel struck the ground, I was a master. I'd learned the deadly dance of life and magic: My hunger sucked life from plant and animal alike. My hunger killed. I could—and would—learn to use my hunger to fuel mighty sorcery, but it would kill whether I learned or not.

Since the massacre at Deche, I'd become indifferent to killing. My conscience didn't trouble me when I fixed my eyes on the cart where Myron of Yoram lay. I could kill trolls, all the trolls, because there was no other way. I could kill the Troll-Scorcher because I was there to replace him. I could kill anything—I might kill everything, if I wasn't careful.

*Become careful, Hamanu. Become very careful. Become whatever you want. It won't matter. Your destiny is to use the gifts that I have given you.*

Warning and promise together. I knew it at the time, though I thought the War-Bringer meant only that I was to cleanse the world of trolls. I thought—all the champions thought—that Rajaat meant to return Athas to us and to humanity when our wars were finished. We were wrong; I was wrong. It took me many years to understand that Rajaat hated humanity above all, because humanity embodied chaos and transformation. Humanity had engendered the Rebirth races. Rajaat's champions would cleanse Athas of what he considered unnatural creatures—including humanity itself—before returning it to the one race he considered natural and pure: the halflings.

I have never fully understood why the War-Bringer needed champions. His power was so much greater than ours. He could have cleansed Athas of every race in a single afternoon. For thirteen ages, I've examined this question. I have no good answer. The answer must lie with the halflings themselves. Halflings destroyed their blue world, which Rajaat wished to recreate, and when it was gone—before they retreated into their tribal, forest lives—halflings created humanity. But which halflings?

Surely there was some dissent, some rebellion driven underground. Perhaps rebel halflings created Rajaat; perhaps he found them on his own. Whichever, Rajaat had halfling allies before he created the first champion, and he and his allies nurtured one another's hatred of the green world Athas had become. Hatred made them all mad; madness made them devious, and because Rajaat was both mad and devious, he created champions to do the bloody work of cleansing Athas of the races he hated, while his own hands remained unsullied.

It isn't a good explanation, but there can be no *good* explanation for why Rajaat did what he did.

For myself, when I stood outside the white tower, I, too, was mad—with hunger. When I laid my black-boned hands on Myron of Yoram's quivering chest, I knew I would regret it, but when the Troll-Scorcher's substance began to flow into me, I forgot everything else. It's not a good explanation; it's simply the truth.

Yoram's smoldering eyes reappeared when I touched him, sun bright and malevolent in the lavender twilight. Mauled though he was, he was still a mighty sorcerer, and he recognized me as the renegade farmer's son.

*Mann. My name came to me on a netherworld wind of hot, sharp cinders. Kill me if you dare. I'll curse you with my dying breath.*

He strained against the thin silver chain that bound him, wrist, ankle, and neck, to the cart. Remembering my helpless day on the plains, bound to a mekillot stake while the eyes of fire blazed within me, I snapped the chains. A great death sigh went up from the plants and wildlife surrounding Rajaat's pristine tower as the erstwhile Troll-Scorcher reaped power for his spell. But he tried too hard and took too long. I pressed my lips against his and sucked him hollow in a single inhaled breath.

*Manu*, he said again, my human name, and the entirety of his curse.

Mounds of reeking meat collapsed inward, becoming ash and dust that vanished quickly in the evening breeze. I stood straight, sated and clearheaded. Layers of Yoram's substance padded my bones. My ribs had expanded as the old Troll-Scorcher died; they contracted as I exhaled. I felt a warm stream of breath against the back of my tawny-skinned hand. A part of me felt human again.

*Look at him!*



A champion's vagrant thought pierced me to the heart. They'd arrayed themselves in a ring around me and the now-empty cart. Their auras shone brighter than Ral or Guthay above the eastern horizon. None among them seemed well-disposed toward me; none among them *was* well-disposed toward me.

One of them, an overdressed fellow with the quick, furtive eyes of a jozhal thief—drew a knife that was both dead black and glittering, as my skeleton had been. I spread my feet and prepared for battle as Myron of Yoram had prepared. Beyond the champions' circle, life sighed and surrendered its essence as sorcery quickened.

"Don't be a fool!"

Borys of Ebe identified himself with his warning; I recognized his name from my mortal days in the Troll-Scorcher's army and recalled his voice from earlier in the afternoon. I turned toward his voice as an invisible wall came down between me and the rest. The Dwarf-Butcher held out his hand, not in friendship, but to demonstrate that he controlled the wall. He was a powerfully built man, like the race he slaughtered, and tall. His hair was pale and confined in long braids; his eyes glowed with a blue fire.

"We cannot harm one another—not here," Borys explained, leaving no room for doubt in my mind that he would harm me where he could, when he could. "Clothe yourself, man, and we'll be done with this. I won't drink blood with a naked peon."

"Naked peon—?" I began, letting my rage flare.

The wall glowed crimson, stifling my inept spell. Snickering echoed at my back: with Yoram's substance clinging to my bones I was not a handsome man. Shamed and bested, I imagined a drab, homespun cloak—and yelped with surprise when the heavy cloth manifested around me.

But I learn quickly. Unfurling the coarse cloak from my shoulders, I heaved it into the night air and transformed it into shimmering cloth-of-gold. I transformed myself, as well, becoming Hamanu Troll-Scorcher before the radiant cloak touched me again. I was as tall as Borys of Ebe, but lithe and graceful as Manu had been, crowned with Dorean's long black hair, and meeting Borys's stare through her calm, gray eyes.

"Will you drink blood with me now?" I challenged without knowing precisely what I implied.

But before Borys could answer, the invisible wall around me flared crimson again as it absorbed another champion's wrath. Not mine, or Borys's, though he was quickly engulfed in the tumult as spells rebounded around the circle. Untouched in the center, I saw that my peers despised me no more than they despised one another, and that I had "nothing to fear from them.

Fear was something we all reserved for Rajaat, our creator, whose hand fell harshly upon us, scattering the rampant spells, smashing Borys's wall, and quenching each aura, each illusion. We were all naked before him, and though none of us was as grotesque as the War-Bringer himself, our ensorcelled flesh was no improvement on the natural human form.

*Fill them! Share them! Drink them!*

Rajaat's commands were more than words; they were demanding images that seared my consciousness. Two of the women and one of the men fell to their knees. A fourth champion vomited bile that etched a crater in the ground. I, at least, held my feet and saw the crystal goblets rise from the cart where they'd first appeared. I caught mine before it struck me; several others weren't so quick or lucky.

The overdressed jozhal's knife would have been useful. I hadn't begun to master the art of putting an edge on an illusion and I was, of course, too proudly stubborn to ask questions. The flame-haired woman bit her tongue until her blood flowed freely, but that reminded me too much of the moments when Rajaat was healing me. I watched Borys slit a vein in his forearm with an extension of his thumbnail and managed a similar gesture.

When our goblets were filled and steaming, Rajaat bid us exchange them. I sought the Dwarf-Butcher, but he eluded me, and I sipped the jozhal's thick blood instead. Sacha Arala, Curse of Kobolds: his name and more filled my conscious mind, as my name must have entered his. Arala's cleansing war against the mischievous kobolds had ended shortly after the Troll-Scorcher's war against the trolls had begun. He passed his empty days in Rajaat's shadow.

In my mind he said he'd befriend me and teach me the champion's way.

I didn't need sorcery to know a lie when I heard it.

My second goblet came from the hand of the flame-haired woman, but the name I drank was Pennarin and the battles he fought in the south against a long-limbed, big-eyed race. He'd been a human king, or so he claimed, before Rajaat invited him to stand beneath the Dark Lens. His opinion of farmers and farmer's sons doesn't bear repeating.

The blood of another forgotten king, Gallard Gnome-Bane, was in the third goblet. After that, I grew confused as one after another of Rajaat's champions battered me with lies and illusions.

I remember Borys, though, whose blood filled my eighth goblet. The dwarves had slain the first champion Rajaat dedicated against them. He, like I, was a recreation. His goblet held a nameless past along with his own. The first Butcher had claimed kingship and royal ancestry, but Borys had been a commoner before Rajaat plucked him off the blasted battlefield.

Once he'd stood where I stood, in the center of the champions' scorn. Until I proved myself, he'd give me nothing and set obstacles in my path if he could, but if I triumphed over the trolls he offered something better in the future.

My own goblet came back to me at the last. It remained half-full; my new peers had been less than gluttonous. I gulped the thick, cooling ichor down. The visions I got from my own blood were the eviscerated memories of Deche. I threw the crystal down hard enough to shatter it.

"The last champion speaks," green-eyed Gallard said and raised his goblet high before throwing it down.

The others, even Dregoth who'd assailed me when I'd challenged Borys, copied my gesture. For an instant, there was harmony among us, a shared distrust and disregard for our creator, who watched us with his mismatched eyes from the white tower's gate.

Then Albeorn said, "Are we done here? I have a war to win."

The War-Bringer nodded, and our moment of unity evaporated. The Elf-Slayer was gone, vanished into the night, followed by the other champions, until only Borys, Sacha Arala, and I remained.

"I'll go with you," Arala suggested. "You'll need someone to show you the way."

"Don't listen to him," Borys advised. "Don't trust anyone who's stood beneath the Dark Lens. He doesn't—" Borys shook a finger in Arala's direction, and the Pixie-Blight retreated. "I don't. That's all the advice I got; all that I needed. What you can't learn from Yoram's memories, you can learn as you go."

He drew a down-thrust line through the air in front of him, as he'd drawn a line on his forearm earlier. Instead of blood dripping into a goblet, silvery mist leaked into the moonlight. Borys's hands disappeared as he thrust them slowly into the mist, which grew thicker, until it surrounded him and he was gone.

Rajaat' and Arala both watched me as I imitated the Butcher's movements. I shudder to think what would have become of me—of Athas—had cold tendrils of the netherworld not wound themselves immediately around my wrists.

"You'll serve." Those were the War-Bringer's parting words as I stepped into the Gray.

Only a fool goes through his life without ever catching the scent of fear around his shoulders. As I am not a fool, I have many times been afraid and never more intensely than that moment when the netherworld closed behind me.

The Unseen realm measures no east or west, up or down, past or future. If a mortal lost his course, he might drift his life away before he found it again; an immortal man, of course, would drift longer.

I drifted only long enough to ransack Yoram's memories for his knowledge of the Gray and the striped silk tent at the center of his army. When those brown and ocher stripes were bright as life itself, I fixed them in my mind's eye and strode out of the Gray.

At the very last I remembered my nakedness and made myself into the warrior Myron of Yoram had never been.

Slaves slept in the corners of my tent while my officers gamed for gold and jewels at my map table.

"Enough!" I shouted, loud enough to wake my slaves and the recently dead, alike.

I pounded my fist on the table, thinking to scatter the dice, but splintering the rare, carved wood instead. The scent of fear was thick around me; I discovered fear was not as nourishing as death, but it would stave off starvation and madness.

"Go to your veterans," I told the human lumps cowering at my feet. "Prepare to break camp. When the bloody sun rises again, this army—*my* army—is going to fight trolls and fight trolls until there are no more."

There was mutiny, not that night, but not long after. Yoram's officers were lazy folk, used to living in luxury. Most adapted readily to my methods. Those who didn't perished, one way or another. My first few years as champion were spent putting down mutinies rather than fighting trolls. I had a lot to learn about both fighting and leading, and Yoram's memories were of no use to me on either score.

More than once, I thought of Borys of Ebe, but the simple truth was that Rajaat kept us champions isolated from each other. I could have sent scouts in search of the Dwarf-Butcher... and lost good scouts for my efforts. I could have searched for him myself, but I hadn't traveled widely, and while the Gray can take you anywhere you desire, it's unwise to let the Gray take you anywhere you haven't been before.

And Borys had already given me all the advice I needed: what I couldn't extract from Yoram's memories, I learned for myself.

Five years after I left Rajaat's tower, my army was a small fraction of the size it had been when I claimed it. We traveled kank-back wherever our enemy led us. In those days, my metamorphosis was less advanced, and I rode bugs from dawn till dusk. Every man and woman under my yellow banner was a tried veteran skilled in fighting, scavenging, and survival. And every one of them wore a yellow medallion bearing my likeness around his neck. While I led the Troll-Scorcher's army, no veteran's pleas or prayers went unheard.

Rajaat had made me an immortal champion, with a hunger that only the deaths of trolls could truly sate. Rajaat's Dark Lens had given me an inexplicable ability to channel magic to any man or woman who wore my medallion. Not the life-sucking sorcery such as I had already mastered, but a clean magic, such as elemental priests and druids practiced. Yoram had known of the Dark Lens's power, but he'd never used it, lest a troll escape his appetite.

To my disgust, I came to understand my predecessor's reasoning. Rajaat told his greatest lie when he said pain belonged to my past. Without a steady diet of death—troll death, in particular—my skin collapsed against my bones. I suffered terrible agonies of emptiness, and my black immortal bones ground, one against the other. Let it be said, though, that I had suffered far worse when Myron of Yoram held me in the eyes of fire.

Until I slew a troll with the eyes of fire, I didn't understand the true nature of Rajaat's sorcery. The second time filled me with a self-loathing so profound that I tried, and failed utterly, to kill myself. There was no third time. I schooled myself to live without the obscene bliss the eyes of fire provided. Fear and ordinary death were enough to keep the madness at bay, and once I learned that immortality was not an illusion I could cast aside according to my will, pain itself became meaningless.

I gave my veterans all the spells and magic they desired, thinking I was thwarting Rajaat's plans for both me and Athas. In the seventh year of my campaign against Windreaver's trolls, I learned that I was wrong. Rajaat had anticipated my duplicity. Mote by mote, my body was transformed each time the Dark Lens's power passed through me on its way to my veterans.

One evening, after a routine invocation to purify our drinking water, spasms stiffened my right hand and arm. I retreated from my army, claiming that I needed solitude to plan our next attacks. The truth was simpler: for seven years I hadn't shed my glamour or looked upon my black-boned self, and I wished to be alone when I did. What I saw by Guthay's golden light horrified me. I was taller and heavier than I'd been. My rib cage had narrowed, and my breast-bone thickened into a ridge such as flightless erdlus have beneath their wings. Bony spurs had sprouted above my ankles, and a shiny black claw was rising out of a new knuckle on the least finger of my right hand.

As I stared at what had become of my hand—what would become of it—I heard the

War-Bringer's deranged laughter through the Gray. After that, my army fought as human men and women, using our wits and weapons whenever we could, resorting to sorcery and Dark Lens magic only when nothing else would bring us a victory.

For another ten years, I harried Windreaver's trolls with lightning raids. No bolt hole was safe from our skirmishers. If I led one nighttime foray through their lines, I led a thousand. Sometimes we killed a troll or two, mostly the old-fashioned way with a crushed skull or a pierced heart. More often we burned their baggage carts and watched them starve. Always, we kept them moving.

For ten long years, my army never camped two nights running in the same place. Windreaver kept his trolls divided. We couldn't pursue them all, all the time, but we tried, and time, inexorable time, was on our side. Human villages still sent their food tithes to the annual muster. There was never a shortage of volunteers to counter attrition in the ranks.

Trolls had neither resource. They couldn't raise their food or purchase it honestly. Every mouthful they ate was stolen from a human field or loft. Every mouth they lost was nigh irreplaceable. They were never a fecund race, and once their women became fighters and raiders, there was very little time for bearing children or raising them.

Chronicles and royal myths are rife with kings who won their petty wars on the battlefields—and perhaps they did. But Rajaan's Cleansing Wars were never the stuff from which great legends are woven. We weren't fighting for land or treasure or vague notions of honor and glory. We fought to exterminate thirteen other races whose only crime was existence. So long as one man and one woman of a Rebirth race remained—so long as the promise of children could be fulfilled—a champion could not claim victory. So long as genocide was the destiny I pursued, pitched battles between armed veterans would resolve nothing.

I waged war on the trolls who didn't fight, on the elders who maintained their race's traditions, and on the young who were their hope and future. My campaign was relentless; my victory inevitable. Sheer and single-minded annihilation has an insurmountable advantage over survival, much less creation.

You will forgive me, though, if I do not dwell on those years. It is enough to record here that the trolls are gone from Athas, forgotten, and Hamanu bears the blame.

The end of my war—the end of the trolls—came in the thirty-first year of the 177th Ring's Age, the appropriately named Year of Silt's Vengeance. We'd driven the last of the trolls—some five hundred men, women, and what few of their children as remained—far to the northeast, beyond the vague boundaries of the heartland, and into a land that was as strange to us as it was to them.

The trolls hoped, perhaps, that I would abandon pursuit if they retreated far enough, long enough. But even if they'd trudged to the end of the world, I would have plagued their heels as they plunged over the edge. And, indeed, that was very nearly what happened.

Whether through miscalculation or some half-conscious desire to meet doom at his chosen time, not mine, Windreaver backed his people onto a rocky peninsula jutting into the brack-water and wrack-water we now call the Sea of Silt. There, under an ominous and gritty sky, the trolls stretched their tanned human hides over drum heads for the last time.

"Will we fight?" my adjutant asked when he found me on the mainland heights overlooking Windreaver's camp.

By my count, I had three veterans to pit against each and every troll, which any fool will tell you isn't enough when the cover is sparse and there's a narrows to be won and held at the battle's start. Simpler, wiser by far to sit in my mainland camp until disease and starvation winnowed their ranks. Simplest and wisest of all to wait until those invisible allies won the battle outright. But those drums took a steady toll on my army's morale, and neither disease nor starvation would respect the line between our opposing camps for long. I couldn't guess how long my slight advantage in numbers would hold, or when I might find myself in a disadvantageous retreat.

"We'll fight," I decided. "Spread the word: All or nothing, at dawn."

The land offered little choice in tactics. Wave after wave of my veterans sallied up the peninsula's neck while I stood on the heights, protecting them from the troll shamans and their rock-hurling magic. When the neck was secure, I left the heights and entered the battle myself.

Not long before, I'd seen the animal that was to become my emblem forever after: the tawny lion with his thick black mane, ivory fangs, and lethal claws. I cloaked myself in a glamour that was half human, half lion. My sword was precious steel, as long as my leg and honed to a deadly edge. I gave it a golden sheen to match my lion's hide. My own men fell to their knees when they saw me; the troll drums lost their rhythm.

Wherever I walked, the ground turned red with death. Even so, it was a long battle, a hard battle, and our victory was not assured until late afternoon when I led a score of veterans over the rampart that sheltered the shamans and the drummers. Without them, the trolls panicked and lost heart. It was a simple matter to corner them, cut them down, or drive them to the precipice at the peninsula's tip.

I sought Windreaver myself—his axe against my sword. It was no contest. By the time I found him, he was bleeding from a score of wounds. His white hair was red and matted with blood from a skull wound that would have killed a human twice over. One eye had swollen shut. One arm hung useless at his side; the other trembled when he raised his axe to salute me. I thrust my glowing sword into the dirt.

"Finish it," he demanded. "There'll be no surrender. Not to you. Not to any puny human."

I balked on brink of total victory. I'd come to the end of my destiny: Windreaver and his few battered companions were the last. When they were gone, there'd be no more. My champion's hunger gnawed in my empty gut; all day, I'd turned away from every troll death. The thought of Windreaver's spirit writhing through my grasp as it sought eternity left me burning with anticipated bliss.

And for that reason, I couldn't do it.

"Live out your lives," I offered. "Men and women apart from each other, until your race comes to a natural end."

Had I stood where the old troll stood, I'd have spit in my own eye, and that was exactly what he did. Still, I wouldn't kill him; I wouldn't kill the last troll, nor would any of my veterans. I made them kill themselves, marching off the seaward cliff. Windreaver stood silently beside me. He was no sorcerer, but he was the first person I'd met who could hide his thoughts beneath an empty, surface calm.

Singly and in pairs, clinging to one another for support-but never moaning, never wailing—the trolls hurled themselves over the edge. Trolls couldn't, by nature, swim, even if they'd tried. Those who didn't die on the rocks drowned quickly in the wracken surf. With my eyes closed, I counted their deaths, forty-seven in all. Forty-eight, when Windreaver left me.

He meant to be the last and knew—I suppose—that I would not let him go as easily as the others. I would not let him go at all. I was ready when, on the verge of leaping, he thrust his knife into the big veins of his neck. I caught his escaping spirit, imprisoned it in a smooth gray pebble, and I say this now, thirteen ages after: I was not wrong to bring death to an entire race. The wrong was Rajaat's and Rajaat's madness. But I was not right, and the onus of genocide, rightfully, falls on me, on Hamanu.

## Chapter Eleven

... *Omniscience*...

There was the smell of himali flour, of fresh-bated bread, moist and hot from the oven, filled with sunshine and contentment. Childhood. Family—Mother and Father, brothers and sisters, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews. Community—Deche and Dorean. Love and the future bound as one, together, forever.

... *Omniscience*...

Coarse-grain bread, cut with sand, kneaded by war-hardened hands and baked flat on hearthstones. Hollow stomachs and hollower victories under a heavy sky. A sky that had neither stars nor moons to break the darkness. Firelit faces in the darkness, waiting for the future.

... *Omniscience*...

Bread with a golden-tan crust floating in twilight. A mind floating in a windowless room, a room cluttered with chests and bundles. A room crowded with faces. Faces with open eyes, open mouths, and closed minds. Strangers' faces: some men, some not; some human, some not. All of them waiting; none of

them familiar.

Worry hovered in the air. Questions. Words that had no meaning. Voices that were unconnected to the open mouths.

"Hamanu."

A jolt of darkness as eyes blinked. His eyes. Him. Hamanu.

One voice that cut through the swirling memories. One face above the crowd. A face unlike the others, drawn in silver on the room's shadows. A face that was, at last, familiar.

"Windreaver."

The sound of his own voice was the final key that released Hamanu's self from a stagnant mire of memory. A surge of self-knowledge began to restore order to his consciousness. He blinked his eyes away from the waiting faces, to gather his wits in a semblance of privacy, glanced down and saw an arm—his arm—little more than bone cased in dull, dark flesh.

The thought came to him: When did *that* happen? Before the answer had unrolled itself in his consciousness, another question had taken its place: After ages upon ages, have I finally succumbed to Rajaat's madness?

The mere fact that he had to ask the question made any answer suspect.

Hamanu shuddered and closed his eyes.

"Step back from the brink, Hamanu," Windreaver's echoing whisper advised.

What brink? Wasn't he sitting in a crowded room?

Then the windswept peninsula where the last trolls had died sprang up behind Hamanu's eyes, more real than this room and anyone in it, anyone except Windreaver.

"Eat, Omniscience. You haven't eaten—haven't moved—for three days and nights together."

Hamanu recognized a round, hairless, and very worried face. With chilly dread, he marveled that he hadn't recognized the dwarf's voice when he first heard it, or picked Enver's face immediately from the crowd. The dread turned icy when he considered that, indeed, he hadn't moved for three days and nights. His joints were rigid, as hard as the black bones that formed them.

He willed his fingers, knuckle by knuckle, to ungrasp the metal stylus. It clattered loudly on the table and rolled beneath an untidy array of parchment sheets, which were slashed and splattered with his frenetic script. He read the last words he'd written: the onus of genocide, rightfully, falls on me, on Hamanu.

So much remembering—reliving—of the past was not a healthy thing.

"This is Nouri Nouri's son's bread: your favorite, since he began baking it for you. If not his bread, then what, Omniscience? You must be starving."

Yes, he was starving, but not for fresh-baked bread, not for anything Enver could imagine. Windreaver knew, and Windreaver had gone. Pavek might have guessed, but Pavek's scarred face wasn't in the crowd. Hamanu reached for the loaf Enver offered. He tore off a large chunk with his teeth, as if it were a panacea for his doubts. He reached for his druid-templar's mind and found him in a city square.

Pavek had summoned the quarter's residents. He was drilling them by morning light: sweep and parry; thrust and block; push away forward, push away and retreat. He'd armed them with bone and wood tools, barrel staves, and mud-caked laths ripped from household roofs, but he drilled them as if they, and their paltry weapons, would make a difference.

"If fortune's wheel turns square and the walls are breached," Pavek shouted, in rhythm with the drill. "Then everyone becomes a warrior for Urik. Make the enemy bleed for every step. Make them climb mountains of their dead. We'll fight for Urik, for our city, our homes, our families, and ourselves."

The same words, no doubt, that Pavek had used to inspire Telhami's Quraite farmers. Like those farmers, the Urikites listened. They worked up a sweat, and not because a score of civil-bureau templars stood on the verge, blocking the streets. The templars weren't watching the citizens; they were drilling, too. Citizen and templar together did what Pavek told them because Pavek was an honest man, a man who told the truth, a man who'd give his life for his city. A man who knew—Hamanu sensed the awareness in Pavek's mind—that his king hadn't moved for three days.

Pavek wasn't the only high templar out among the ordinary citizens. Similar scenes played out in other city squares and in the ringing market villages, where the line between templar and citizen was less distinct and the wicker walls were meant to keep kanks, erdlus, and inixes in their pens, not keep a determined enemy out.

Aware of the bread melting sweetly in his mouth, Hamanu took another moment to find the thoughts of Javed and the other commandants. The men and women of the war-bureau elite were far beyond the walls and the green fields. They, too, were drilling, drilling the veterans and the levies who'd defend Urik with obsidian and steel. The commandants were no less dedicated to Urik's cause than Pavek, and no more optimistic, though Javed was more sensitive to his king's mind-bending touch.

*O Mighty King*, Javed greeted Hamanu with silent, enthusiastic relief. *How may I serve you?*

*You serve me well enough*, Hamanu replied. *I have been... distracted.* As humbling an admission as any he'd made in a thousand years. *Has there been change?*

Javed spun out his observations, with the assurance that Urik's situation had neither improved nor worsened since they'd last seen each other. The same rival armies still lurked beneath Urik's horizons. There might have been a few skirmishes; it was difficult to be certain: with Hamanu distracted, messages traveled no faster than an elf could run. Relay teams of messenger elves—a tactic the war-bureau employed when its officers didn't wish to be in constant contact with their monarch—had already been established.

*Wise*, Hamanu conceded. *You have matters well under control.*

Javed made his own concession: *So far, our enemies have not resorted to templar magic. They sit in their camps, awaiting some signal. The palls that Nibenay and Gulg have cast over the land hinder them as much as they hinder us. Away from the city, the war bureau doesn't know how far-reaching our danger has become. They ask no questions, and we give them no answers.*

In his workroom, Hamanu swallowed hard and broke the Unseen connection with Javed. He looked at Enver and the others—the men and women of his templarate and the handful of sorcerers who lived on sufferance, casting the war-spells the Dark Lens could not empower and battering down the wards on his workroom door. The wards on his immortal mind were secure from mortal mind-bending and sorcery. But mortals based their opinions on cruder measurements: three days staring into the past. Three days without moving a muscle. The fear in the workroom wasn't fear of a champion's might but fear for his sanity.

Hamanu couldn't begin to explain and didn't bother to try.

"I didn't not summon you, dear Enver, nor anyone else. I'd cast my mind adrift. I hadn't found what I was seeking; certainly, I had not asked for assistance."

The dwarf executor bowed low. "I thought—"

Hamanu cut him off. "I know what you thought, dear Enver." And he did; it shamed him to quarrel with mortal compassion, however misdirected. "I will summon you when I need you, I do not expect or need to see you a moment earlier."

"Yes, Omniscience."

The others, templars and pasty-faced sorcerers alike, were skulking across the threshold, leaving Enver to face the Lion-King's wrath. Hamanu permitted their escape, waiting until he and the dwarf were alone before saying:

"Thank you, dear Enver."

Enver raised his head. "Thank you, Omniscience? I've served you since I was a boy. I thought I was accustomed to your ways; I was wrong. Forgive me, Omniscience. I shan't make the mistake again."

"No," Hamanu agreed as the dwarf straightened and retreated toward the door. The time for mistakes and triumphs was growing short. "Enver—"

The dwarf halted in his tracks.

"—Thank you for the bread. It was delicious."

A faint smile creased Enver's face, then he was gone. The workroom door was gone, as well. Not even dust remained. Hamanu could have cast a spell to set an illusion in its place, and yet another to ward the illusion thoroughly. He tidied the parchment sheets instead—as much to exercise stiff muscles as

anything else.

The past was a trap, Hamanu had proven that to himself twice since he'd started writing his history for Pavek. He couldn't change the past; he'd never before permitted it to affect his future—Urik's future—and he wouldn't start now. If now weren't already too late. The stealth spell with which he hoped to harvest the answers to so many of his questions should have been ready two nights ago.

Invoking fortune's round and fickle wheel, Hamanu rose unsteadily to his feet. He needed three stiff-legged steps to reach the iron-bound chest. The chest was intact; that was a good sign. Still, Hamanu held his breath while he unspelled the locks and lifted the lid. The many-colored sand around the crucible had bleached bone-white; that, too, was a good sign. He didn't let go of his breath until he'd lifted the crucible out of the sand. Its surface was marred with tiny pits, and the seam between its base and lid had fused. Hamanu rapped it soundly with a forefinger. Metal flakes fell onto the sand. The lid lifted cleanly.

More than a score of lustrous beads, some tiny, some as large as Hamanu's thumbnail, filled the crucible's bottom. He poured them carefully into his palm. He dribbled half of the beads, by volume, into an amulet case, then swallowed the rest, gagging out the words of invocation and reaching out to brace himself against the wall as the beads melted in his throat.

The discomfort was minimal compared to the disorientation the spell caused as it ate through his illusions from the inside. For a few moments, Hamanu's skin was uniformly luminous. Then the workroom was awash in sharp, shifting light beams. The light danced across his skin, leaving patches of sooty darkness in its wake. Hamanu snatched the amulet case from the bleached sand, where he'd dropped it when the spell began its work. He slashed the air in front of him. Mist danced with the spell-light as he strode quickly into the Gray, lest he be trapped in a room too small to contain his metamorphic self.

Another illusion seized Hamanu once he was fully, exclusively, in the Gray. It was an illusion that was all the more remarkable because it made the Lion-King of Urik appear in this most magical of places—completely ordinary. He marveled at the symmetry of his human hands, the tangles in his coarse, black hair, the puckered scar that ran from the underside of his right eye, across the bridge of his nose, and ended with a painful lump on the dark seam of his upper lip.

What would Pavek think, if Pavek's netherworld self were to wander past and see its double hovering nearby?

Not that such an encounter was likely. Magicians and mind-benders of many stripes could, and did, meet in the Gray, but rarely by accident. A strong presence—such as Hamanu was, no matter how thorough his disguise—could attract lesser presences: lost spirits, misplaced artifacts, and novice druids—or repel them, which was the Lion-King's intent as he navigated through the ether. Not a profound repulsion that would, itself, rouse the interest of any other strong presence, but a subtle, ignore-me-I'm-not-here rebuff that would permit him to approach his chosen destinations without anyone, specifically Rajaat, noticing him.

If Rajaat did, by mischance, sense scarred Pavek drifting close—well, the first sorcerer would attempt something unpleasant, but not as vengefully unpleasant as he'd attempt if he thought that one of his rebellious champions were nearby. The champion in question, therefore, might have a heartbeat or two in which to make his escape.

There were two places Hamanu intended to visit before his stealth spell lost its potency. Both of them were supremely dangerous for a champion. Both of them were, in a way, Rajaat's prisons.

When the champions rebelled a thousand years ago, they'd achieved their lasting victory by separating Rajaat's tangible substance from his living essence. They'd imprisoned their creator's essence in the Hollow beneath the Black, a pulsing heart of shadow and darkness at the netherworld's core. They'd imprisoned Rajaat's immortal body in a stone cyst that Borys had enshrined in the center of his circular city, Ur Draxa. For a thousand years—more accurately, nine hundred years, because Borys had been mad for the first hundred years and didn't build Ur Draxa and its shrine until after he'd recovered—Borys maintained the spells that kept Rajaat's essence in the Hollow and kept the Hollow away from Ur Draxa.

So it would have remained after Borys's death—at least long enough for the champions to have considered the matter—except for the Dark Lens. The Lens had disappeared shortly after Borys became



a dragon. It had been lost by Borys himself, or stolen by his dwarven enemies—Hamanu had heard both versions of the story. Borys insisted the loss wasn't a problem, so long as the Lens wasn't near Ur Draxa.

Then, one momentous day five years ago, Sadira, Tithian, and the rest of their ragtag band of Tyrian rebels brought the Lens to Ur Draxa. Four champions were vanquished that day, including Borys. The stone cyst was destroyed. Rajaat got free.

What happened next was a matter of opinion. In Tyr, opinion held that Sadira and a young mul named Rkard had saved the world. In Urik, opinion was, understandably, different.

What mattered, though, was that Rajaat had been stopped. His essence had again been separated from his substance. Hamanu, Gallard, and Inenek had reimprisoned their creator's essence in the Hollow beneath the Black. The sorceress, Sadira, had interred Rajaat's substance beneath a lava lake. That left the Dark Lens. In the end, it had gone into the lava lake with Rajaat's bones. retrospect, Hamanu marveled that any of them, mortal or immortal, could have been so foolish as to leave the Lens anywhere near Rajaat's bones. There was a resonance between the Black and the Dark Lens, at least insofar as Rajaat was responsible for both of them and only he understood their secrets. And, of course, there was resonance between the first sorcerer's essence and his substance. For five years—five uninterrupted, unobserved years—Rajaat had been exploring those resonances.

Hamanu had to find out what the War-Bringer had accomplished in that time.

The first part of Hamanu's plan was simple, in concept, if not execution: a careful approach to the throbbing Black, along a line oblique enough to give him a glimpse of the Hollow while, at the same time, leaving him with enough speed and energy to escape its lethal attraction. The spell he'd cast moments ago in his workroom gave him a good chance for success. If he'd truly been Pavek, in the flesh or spirit, he might have evoked the Lion-King's name. But Hamanu didn't believe in his own power over fate and fortune:

A shadow sprouted around Hamanu, a Pavek-shaped shadow reaching through the Gray toward the Black where all shadows were born or died. Flecks of brilliant white, paradoxical and inexplicable, appeared in the Black, migrating, as Hamanu's shadow lengthened, to the point where the shadow and the Black would meet. Hamanu struggled not to follow his shadow.

The normal silence of the Gray became deafening. Flares of dark ether appeared without warning and wound a tightening spiral around Hamanu's attenuated shadow. Another moment—as Hamanu's mind measured time in the netherworld—and he'd have pressed his luck too hard. He'd have to break away, if he could, without his precious glimpse of the Hollow.

There was no air in the Gray. A netherworld traveler didn't breathe, yet Hamanu held his breath, and his shadow shrank. He risked everything to get a little lower, a little closer, and got his heart's desire: a glimpse of a Hollow without substance or shadow, light or dark. The Hollow was nothing at all—except the War-Bringer's essence.

Because Hamanu's own spells, his own substance and essence, had helped to forge the Hollow thirteen ages ago, he knew it was not empty. He knew as well—and with no small horror—that it was riddled with cracks through which shadow, if not substance, could seep.

Without thought for the consequences, Hamanu cursed his complacency. Five years ago, he'd trusted Sadira because it was convenient, because they'd declared a truce on the shores of Ur Draxa's lava lake, because he'd trusted that her hatred of him and the champions would be enough to insure her vigilance.

He'd been a fool then, and was twice a fool now: his thoughtless curse had broken his concentration.

His shadow expanded violently, touching both the Black and the dark, spiraling flares. Arms and legs extended like a cartwheel's spokes, he tumbled wildly, gathering shadow with every turn. In panic, he clawed for the amulet case and the beads it contained. Shadow engulfed his hand.

He had a moment to contemplate his folly. Then a vaguely human-shaped figure manifested itself between him and the Black.

Rajaat, Hamanu thought and, anticipating a fate truly worse than death, got a firm hold on his courage and dignity. Though the figure grew larger, its silhouette did not devolve into Rajaat's asymmetric

deformities, and its aura was neither menacing nor vengeful. It simply broke the flow between the Black and Hamanu's shadow.

When his limbs were free, Hamanu righted himself with no more effort than he expended in his rooftop bathing pool. He wasn't out of danger. The Black continued to exert its attraction on him, and he continued to fall toward the ultimate shadow—and the waiting figure—despite his every effort to escape.

Once again, Hamanu prepared himself for death.

*Not yet*, the still-distant figure roared above the deafening silence.

Its outstretched right arm crossed its body and extended a finger toward a point beyond its left foot. Hamanu looked in the indicated direction and began tumbling again. This time, however, an attractive presence other than the Black, held him in its grip. Like any dying man, mortal or immortal, Hamanu grasped any opportunity, however unproven, to escape certain oblivion.

With bold and practiced strokes, Hamanu swam with this new current. Glancing over his shoulder as he passed beneath his savior's foot, he glimpsed the Lion-King of Urik bestriding the Black. Hamanu had no time to ponder the extraordinary sight. He was moving fast through the Gray, and a sense of boundary had already sprung up in his mind.

Hamanu ripped out of the netherworld while he was some distance above the ground. The choice was deliberate: he didn't know where he was, and while a fall wouldn't hurt him, an emergence that left him half in and half out of any solid object would be fatal, even for an immortal champion. Tucking his head and shoulder as he hit the ground, Hamanu rolled several times before he got his feet under him.

A true adept of mind-bending or magic could always establish his place in the world. Though the hot daytime air around him was saturated with water and, therefore, more opaque than the netherworld, Hamanu felt the push and pull of Athas beneath his feet, and knew for certain that he was within the ruins of Borys's city, Ur Draxa.

A thick mat of squishy plants had cushioned his fall, a mat that covered every surface, including the walls, where the walls were still standing. Stagnant water seeped through the illusory soles of Hamanu's illusory sandals. He gave himself sturdier footwear and wrestled with garments that were already damp and clinging to his skin.

Ahead, Hamanu heard the rumble of thunder, the ear-popping crack of lightning. He was puzzled for a moment; then he understood: five years after Tithian had been trapped inside the Dark Lens, his rage continued unabated. The would-be Tyrant of Tyr was responsible for the violent Tyr-storms throughout the heartland. Here in Ur Draxa, he was responsible for the unrelenting, stifling fog. He'd forged an environment like nothing Hamanu had encountered elsewhere on Athas.

Taking a step in the direction where his inner senses told him he'd find the lava lake, Hamanu's foot sank to midcalf depth before striking a buried cobblestone path. The squishy mat belched, and twin scents of rot and decay filled his nose. Initially, Hamanu the Lion-King was repelled by the stench. After a moment's reflection, Manu the Fanner recognized that the streets of Ur Draxa were more fertile than Urik's best fields.

He slogged the next little distance plotting the ways and means to bring the riches home.

Hamanu wasn't the only one stumbling through to Ur Draxa's treasure. His inhumanly sharp ears picked up other feet sinking in the bog. He didn't fear discovery; the fog hid him better than any spell. A talkative pair slogged past, so close and diffident, he could have stolen their belt-pouches. By their accents, they were Ur Draxans struggling to adapt to a diet of slugs, snails, and dankweed.

How the mighty had fallen! While Borys ruled the city that he'd founded nine hundred years ago, the Ur Draxans were the fiercest warriors beneath the bloody sun. Now they were bog farmers, and Hamanu dismissed them as no threat to the veterans he'd send to harvest Tithian's sludge.

On the other hand, Manu had been raised by farmers who went to war against nature each time they planted their seeds in the unforgiving ground. He knew that farmers weren't meek in defense of their land. The battles would be different here, but folk who fought them would be as tenacious as any farmer, anywhere.

As tenacious as he himself had been, returning to the Kreegills after the trolls were gone.

He'd discharged his veterans, giving each of them a year's wages and a lecture on the virtues of

going home. He told them to rebuild what the war had destroyed and to forget what they'd seen, what they'd done in his service. His mistake—if it was a mistake and not another sleight of destiny's hand—was telling them about the home he wanted to rebuild for himself in the Kreegills.

For Hamanu, the war had had a clear beginning and a clean end. He was scarcely fifty years old when the war ended. He'd fought for over thirty years but, considering his immortality, he'd remained a young man, clinging to a young man's dreams. He'd forgotten that for his veterans, war was the life they'd known for generations. They didn't have homes to rebuild. Some of them followed him into the Kreegills where the fields were overgrown and time had scrubbed the empty, desecrated villages.

A man could spend a lifetime bringing the valley back to what he remembered—an immortal lifetime. Hamanu tried, though he was hindered from the start by the best efforts of his companions, who didn't know the first thing about growing grain, or living in the same place, day-in, day-out, season after changeless season.

The ones who couldn't take the boredom packed up and left. Hamanu had thought he was well rid of them. He went back to teaching the land-wisdom he'd learned from his father and grandfather to the veterans who remained. But the veterans who returned to the lowlands—and those who'd never left—couldn't live without war. Rumors reached the Kreegills of brigands who terrorized the plains, flaunting the medallions he'd given them. The rumors claimed that lowland farmers and townsfolk believed Hamanu Troll-Scorcher had become Hamanu Human-Scorcher, ready to enforce the demands of any petty warlord.

Even now, a thousand years later, Hamanu's sweaty shoulders stiffened at the memory. The first time he'd heard what his discharged veterans were doing in his name, he'd been stunned speechless. The second time, he'd vowed, would be the last. He'd always been ready to take full responsibility for his war against the trolls, for the orders he'd given that his veterans had carried out. But he wouldn't—then or ever—bear the blame for another man's crime.

In a cold fury, Hamanu had left the Kreegills for the second time. With his loyal veterans behind him, he tracked down those who betrayed both him and humanity. He killed the boldest—and found he had as much a taste for human suffering as he'd once had a taste for trolls. He could have killed every medallion-bearing brigand and every low-life scum who'd fallen in with them. But killing his own kind—those who'd been his kind when he was a mortal man—sickened Hamanu even as it sated him.

His metamorphosis advanced. He grew too massive for any kank to carry and, therefore, walked everywhere in the half-man, half-lion guise he'd adopted before his final battle with Windreaver. His followers didn't mind; for years, they hadn't believed he was a man like them. They thought they served a living god.

A living god, Hamanu thought as he went down to his knees in the reeking sludge, would pay better attention to where he put his feet!

The Lion's reputation spread far beyond the Kreegill Mountains. Human refugees from deep in the heartland, where other champions had fought other cleansing wars, came to him with complaints of brigands and warlords who'd never fought a troll or worn his ceramic medallion. At first, he refused to help, but there were more refugees than the Kreegill plains could support. So, he walked westward, chasing rumors and warlords across the Yaramuke barrens until he came to a pair of sleepy towns named Urik and Codesh, where rival warlords fought for control of the trade-road between Tyr and Giustenal.

A delegation from Urik met Hamanu while he and his followers were still a good day's journey from the paired towns. There were nobles and farmers among the Urikites, freemen and -women from every walk of life—even a few individuals whose odd-featured appearance bespoke a mixture of human and elven blood, the first half-breeds Hamanu had ever seen.

Prejudice older than his champion's curse reared up within Hamanu. He thought he knew what he'd do before a single word was spoken; raze Urik for its impurity and let that town's fate bring Codesh into line. But he went through the motions of listening—a god, he thought, should appear, at least, to listen. His arm—the arm where he'd secreted the pebble that held Windreaver's silent spirit—ached the entire time he listened to the Urikite's carefully reasoned plea not only for his help in ridding their town of

the warlord, but a proposal that he make Urik his home forever.

"An immortal sorcerer rules in Tyr," the Urikite leader had explained. "Another rules in Giustenal. Urik lies between them. First the warlords bled us dry, O Mighty Lion; now they bleed the trade caravans that travel between Tyr and Giustenal. Already, the gods of those cities threaten *us* for crimes we cannot prevent. We beg you to deal harshly with the warlords and to stay with us, to protect us against the greed and anger of our neighbors. If we must live under a god's yoke, then we wish a god of our own choosing, not the god of Giustenal or Tyr."

"Tyr and Giustenal are cities," Hamanu had countered, ignoring the rest. They tempted him, these proud, pragmatic people who thought nothing of the differences between the work men did—indeed between the very *races* of men—and everything of their common safety. "What can Urik offer me, that I should become its *god*?"

They told him how Urik occupied the high ground. It dominated the surrounding land and was easily defended because it had access to an inexhaustible water supply that could sustain a population many times the town's then-current size.

Resting a moment beside a moss-covered statue of a dragon, Hamanu recalled the earnest Urikite faces. What they hadn't told him that day was that their rival, Codesh, tapped the same vast underground lake and that Codesh kept a stranglehold on the only route wide enough for a two-wheeled cart between their natural citadel and the Giustenal-Tyr trade road. Hamanu had gleaned *those* tidbits from their stray thoughts.

In the few short years since he'd stopped waging war on the trolls, Rajaat's last champion had become expert at gleaned thoughts from other humans' consciences. He'd been quite surprised, and very pleased, to discover that elven blood didn't hinder his gleaned ability at all.

Still, he'd accepted the Urikite proposal, at least as far as cleaning out their warlord's nest before he dealt with Codesh. That was easier promised than accomplished. The warlords knew the Lion's reputation, and made common cause against him from Codesh, sending a united plea to the court of the Tyrian Tyrant, Kalak.

Kalak was no champion, not then, not ever. He'd never stood in the Crystal Steeple atop Rajaat's white tower. He was a powerful, unscrupulous sorcerer who ravaged the land, sucking life for his spells, leaving it sterile for a generation afterward. For the first time since he'd become a champion, Hamanu found himself in an even fight.

After that, there was no going back to the Kreegills. By the time Kalak's dust headed back to Tyr, it no longer mattered whether the Urikites had invited him to rule their town. What the Lion fought for, the Lion kept. Knowing that he could glean their least thoughts, Hamanu had offered medallions to those who'd serve him—veterans, brigands, and Urikites, alike. There'd be no betrayals in his Urik; there'd be peace—*his* peace—and prosperity.

Hamanu had found his home. He crowned himself king. The sterile, ashen fields that Kalak had defiled were scraped and cleared. Fresh, fertile soil was carted in from the distant Kreegills. The farmer's son never farmed the land again." Ruling Urik satisfied his farmer's urges.

There was no room for sentiment in a farmer's heart, or in a king's. Urik was like a field; it needed clearing, fertilizing, plowing—and a time to lie fallow, a balance of laws and taxes and judicious neglect—to be truly productive. The Urikites were like flocks. They needed to be fed, sheltered, and above all else, culled, lest undesirable traits become entrenched. He circulated his minions among them, watching his fields with his own eyes, culling his flock with his own hands. Like both fields and flocks, Urik and its citizens had to be protected against predators who appeared in the heartland as more of Rajaat's champions emerged victorious from the Cleansing Wars.

It wasn't threats from Tyr or Giustenal, Nibenay, Gulg, or Raam, however, that drove Hamanu to build Urik's walls or ensconce himself in a mud-brick palace. People simply kept coming to his city on the hill. Humans, of course, though Hamanu didn't ask questions of the immigrants, so long as they didn't look too much like elves or dwarves—the only uncleansed races left. His dusty, sleepy town grew into a sprawling, complicated city that, of itself, attracted more folk, mostly honest folk, but a few would-be warlords, brigands, and tyrants among them.

Hamanu let them all in, and weeded the worst out after they'd begun to sprout. When his city became too big for him to do everything, he turned to the men and women who already wore his medallions around their necks. After that, it was only a few short steps to the templarate, with its three bureaus and distinctive yellow robes. After the templarate, the walls and the palace grew almost by themselves.

Those were Urik's golden years, when rain still fell reliably, gently, each year as the sun descended to its nadir, and again neared its zenith. Those were the years before Rajaat called in his debt, before the champions rebelled against their creator, and before Borys became a dragon whose madness devastated the once-green heartland.

When Borys recovered his sanity, he founded Ur Draxa to house Rajaat's prison and to keep the rest of Athas—especially his fellow champions—at bay. Borys's plans had worked for thirteen ages—an eternity, perhaps, in the minds of mortal men—but not nearly long enough from Hamanu's perspective.

He put his head down and slogged the rest of the way through the deserted outer city in thoughtless silence. The sludge thinned. When Hamanu reached the spell-blasted walls that had separated Borys's palace from the city, he was on the verge of Tithian's ceaseless storm. As Windreaver had promised, icy winds alternated with goutts of sulphurous steam. The ground was slick and treacherous, and nothing grew.

Hunkering down in such shelter as he could find, Hamanu removed the pearls from the amulet case. He held them above his head, letting the heat of his hand melt them into a translucent jelly that flowed down his arm and over his body. Not quite invisible, but no longer a perfect imitation of his loyal high templar, Hamanu had, he hoped, made himself as inconspicuous and unremarkable as the critic lizard that had sacrificed its life for this moment.

He found and followed the path that would take him to the heart of Ur Draxa and the lava lake. The warm mist grew redder with each step Hamanu took. It was tempting to blame the changes on the War-Bringer, but the cause was far simpler: daytime was drawing to an end.

Hamanu cursed. He muttered over his poor luck. He'd lost more time in the Gray than he'd imagined. Night would be as dark and thick as pitch. If he wanted to see the lava lake with his own eyes, he'd have to crawl to its shore on his hands and knees. He'd be so close to Rajaat's bones that he doubted anything would hide him. Going on under such circumstances was the sort of folly that got mortals killed. Immortal Hamanu kept going, step by step.

He'd taken about a hundred cautious strides, deafened by Tithian's thunder but cheated of the illumination of the blue lightning that almost certainly accompanied it, when he hunkered down again to measure his progress. This close to the Dark Lens, it was difficult to sense anything other than its throbbing power. Hamanu was so intent on finding the world's push and pull beneath the Dark Lens that he didn't immediately notice that its presence was growing stronger even while he remained still.

As Hamanu understood Rajaat's magic, the Dark Lens was an artifact of shadow rather than of pure or primal darkness. It was—or should have been—less potent after sunset when shadows grew scarce. Unless—

A revelation came to Hamanu, a revelation so simple and yet so fraught with implications that he rocked back on his heel: Sadira's power came from shadow. By day, she was the champions' equal, but by night, Sadira was a mortal sorceress, a novice in her chosen art, as Pavek was in druidry. Her own spells were dross, cobwebs that couldn't hold a fly, much less the immortal inventor of sorcery.

Pavek could raise Urik's guardian spirit, but only when that spirit wished to rise. Could Sadira's spells bind Rajaat when Rajaat didn't wish to be bound?

Hamanu didn't doubt that the Tyrian sorceress had meant to seal Rajaat in an eternal tomb. The living god of Urik wasn't *that* foolish. Five years ago, when they must have stood near this very spot, he'd probed Sadira's mind thoroughly—by *night*.

The living god of Urik changed his opinion of himself.

By night, Sadira wasn't infused with the sorcery that she'd received from the shadowfolk in the Pristine Tower—Rajaat's white tower, where he'd made his champions. By night, she sincerely believed that she'd put both his bones and the Dark Lens in a place from which they could never be retrieved,

never misused. By day, she probably *believed* the same thing, but by day Sadira wielded Rajaat's shadow-sorcery, and what she *believed* was influenced by what Rajaat *wanted*.

To be sure, they'd all taken the first sorcerer by surprise that day when Borys died. They'd had him down and running. But when Hamanu and the other champions let Sadira throw the Dark Lens into the lava lake with Rajaat's bones, and then let her set the wards to seal them in, they'd all been dancing to the War-Bringer's tune. They'd put him in the perfect place to lick his wounds: the shadow of the Dark Lens.

Whim of the Lion—his own complacency could be taken as proof of Rajaat's lingering influence over *him!*

With that thought burning in his mind, there was little need, now, to risk a closer approach. Hamanu wanted to know more about Sadira: what she'd seen and felt five years ago and what she'd been doing ever since, but he wouldn't get the answers to those questions in Ur Draxa. As he began his retreat, Hamanu realized that Sadira's shadow-cast warding spells had ebbed enough to allow the War-Bringer's essence out of the leaking Hollow and into his bones beside the Dark Lens.

The Lion-King made himself small within his illusions as Rajaat drew the blue lightning down through the fog. Hamanu was closer to the lava lake than he'd imagined, close enough to observe, in that blue lightning flash, patches of molten rock on the lake's dark surface, close enough to watch in horror as shards of translucent obsidian erupted from the lava, and disappeared into the fog.

Slowly and carefully, Hamanu took another retreating step. A moist, brimstone wind whispered his name.

"Hamanu. Lion of Urik."

Not Rajaat's voice, but Tithian's. Tithian the usurper, Tithian the insignificant, Tithian the high-templar worm who'd betrayed everyone around him and wound up, like a sole-squashed turd, on the bottom of everything.

"Rajaat says Hamanu of Urik's the key to a new Athas. He says when you become a dragon, the world will be transformed. Borys of Ebe, he says, was but a candle. You will be the sun. I say, if that were true, you wouldn't be skulking about disguised as a lizard."

Thirteen ages, and a man learned when to rise to a challenge and when to let it pass unacknowledged. It was discomfiting to know that Rajaat and the worm were sharing confidences, but discomfort was nothing new for the last champion.

"I say," Tithian's windy voice continued, "I say Rajaat's the one who wants to transform Athas, and it will take a true dragon to stop him. I know the way, Hamanu; get me out of here. I'll play Borys's part. I'll become the Dragon of Tyr. That's enough for me."

Hamanu swallowed a snort of disgusted laughter. There was some truth to the notion that the quality of the mortal man determined the power of the immortal dragon, and by that measure, the worm would be a lesser dragon. But that was not what Tithian believed. The craven fool believed he'd have unlimited power; worse, he believed he could trick the Lion of Urik into helping him acquire it.

The only thing Tithian could truly do was draw Rajaat's attention, now, just when Hamanu was nearly out of danger. Mindful of the obscuring fog and the slick, treacherous footing, Hamanu picked up his pace. He needed to be outside the palace's blasted walls before he dared a netherworld passage. The walls were still ahead when Tithian let out a howl that ended abruptly. Hamanu cast aside both illusion and caution. He ran for the perimeter as another voice, larger and more menacing, filled the wind.

"Hamanu," Rajaat purred. "Come to me, little Manu."

The dank wind reversed itself. It blew in Hamanu's face, pushing him toward the lava lake. He lowered his head, digging into the soggy moss with black-taloned dragon feet.

"You're starving, Manu. You've starved yourself; you're a shadow of what you should be. So much the better, Manu."

Once you begin to fill your empty spirit with life, you won't be able to stop until every mote of foul humanity is part of you. I've waited long enough, Manu. My other champions rise against you, Manu—they've never liked you, they were easy to persuade. They want a dragon—" Rajaat's voice turned indulgent: a predator toying with its prey. "You never told them, Manu; they think you're just like

them.

Three days, Manu, three days and they'll draw their noose around Urik so tight that a dragon will be born. You will serve, Manu. You *will* fulfill your destiny."

"Never!" Hamanu shouted back as the air turned hot enough to dispel the fog and jagged, lava-filled crevasses yawned open all around him.

Desperately, he slashed an opening into the Gray. He was ankle-deep in molten rock before he dived into a different sort of mist and darkness, clinging to the hope that Rajaat needed to trap him in the material world to force dragon metamorphosis upon him.

He'd had the same hope in Urik thirteen ages ago.

The Gray closed about him, safe and familiar, Hamanu remembered that fateful day. He'd received and ignored two invitations to return to the white tower. Rajaat came in person with the third.

"The world is almost cleansed," Rajaat had said in a now-abandoned chamber of Hamanu's palace. "Only the elves, the giants, and the dwarves remain, and their fates will be written soon enough. Borys has the last dwarves trapped at Kemelok. Albeorn and Dregoth are winning, too. It's time for my final champion to begin the final cleansing. The Rebirth races defiled the land with their impurities because humanity itself is a desecration of this world. Forget trolls and the eyes of fire, Hamanu—serve me now as the Dragon of Athas!"

Before Hamanu had recovered from the twin shocks of Rajaat's appearance and his demands, the first sorcerer had seized his wrists. His illusions had evaporated between heartbeats. He was himself, gaunt, with leathery flesh stretched taut over black bones. Then his body began to swell, and his mind screamed the deaths of five-score mortals, whose only crime was their proximity to him.

Hamanu—and Urik—had survived that day because Rajaat hadn't conceived that one of his creations could resist not only him but the dragon frenzy as well. In truth, it hadn't been particularly difficult. When he'd felt the obscene ecstasy surging through his flesh, Hamanu had used it all to quicken a single, explosive spell. He'd hurled himself into the Gray and run to Kemelok, where Rajaat had just told him the one champion he dared trust could be found.

This time there was no Borys, no Kemelok, no place at all to run. There was only Hamanu himself and, still standing guard above the Black, that tawny-skinned giant with a golden sword and a lion's black mane.

## Chapter Twelve

By the time Hamanu knew that Rajaat hadn't pursue him, he was far from Ur Draxa, far from the Hollow and the Black, far from the mysterious leonine giant, and far from Urik as well. The narrowness of his escape and a sense of impending doom made his precious city the last place in the heartland he wanted to be. As Hamanu drifted aimlessly through the Gray, however, no other material-world destination sprang into his mind.

He couldn't imagine approaching Gallard or Dregoth as he'd approached Borys of Ebe outside Kemelok all those ages ago, and Inenek was a fool. The heartland was home to guilds of powerful sorcerers, druids, mind-benders, and other magic-wielders. Hamanu knew more about their practices and strongholds than they imagined, and knew, as well, that none of them could light a candle in Rajaat's wind. As the Lion-King of Urik, he'd disdained allies for thirteen ages; as Rajaat's last champion rebelling against his creator, staring at three short days before doom, there was no one who could, or would, help him.

Hamanu needed to think, to examine his choices, if he had any, and to plot a strategy that, if it would not bring him victory, would at least spare his city. He imagined himself on a serene hilltop, reading the answers to his many questions from patterns in the passing clouds. The place was real in Hamanu's mind, but it wasn't real enough to end his netherworld drift. Green hilltops and cloudscapes belonged to Athas's past. Aside from Urik, *all* the places Hamanu imagined belonged either to the past or to his enemies.

His mind's eye finally fixed on a landscape filled with stones the same color as the netherworld: the troll ruins in the Kreegill peaks above Deche. The ruins hadn't changed in the ages since he'd last seen them; he had no difficulty finding them in the netherworld. A few walls had tumbled, and there was no trace at all of the bits of mattress Manu found beneath the massive troll beds, but the rest was exactly as he'd remembered it.

Hamanu's first thoughts outside the Gray had nothing to do with the War-Bringer. His hands, still black-taloned and bony, lingered over the perfect, unmortared seams of a gray-stone doorway. The trolls were gone, but their homes stood ready to welcome them, as if they might return tomorrow.

Not so the human villages. Turning away from the troll houses, Hamanu beheld a barren valley. Wars hadn't devastated the Kreegills. The valley had been intact when Hamanu left it last. No other champion had set foot on its fertile soil until Borys came, in his dragon madness, and sucked all the life away.

A hundred years after he'd sated himself completely, metamorphosis, Borys recovered his sanity, but the land—the land wasn't so fortunate. The sky had been permanently reddened by a haze of dust and ash. Until the worm, Tithian, began his sulky storms, a mortal human might experience rain once in a lifetime—as muddy pellets, nothing like the life-giving showers of Manu's boyhood.

Rain or no, wind still blew in the Kreegills. Thirteen ages of constant, parched wind had buried the valleys beneath rippling blankets of loose gray-brown dirt. The soil itself was good, better, perhaps, than the heavy soil Hamanu remembered. If the rains came back—and farmers built terraces to keep the soil in place until long-lived plants put down their roots—the valleys would bloom again. Until then, there'd be only the skeletal branches of the tallest trees reaching out of their graves.

The loss Hamanu felt as he turned away from the valleys was for Athas, not himself. There was nothing down there to remind him of what he'd lost: Deche, Dorean, his own humanity. His memory held a face he named *Dorean*, but were his Dorean to reappear, he wasn't certain he'd recognize her. She'd never recognize him. The young man who'd danced for her was gone. His metamorphic body could no longer perform the intricate steps.

Ages had passed since Hamanu wished that he could weep for his lost past or wished that he was dead within it. There were no gods to grant a champion's wishes. He'd never weep again, and he'd lived too long to throw his life away.

In his natural shape, Hamanu was taller than any troll. He looked directly at the carved inscriptions he'd once studied from the ground, and lost himself recovering their meaning from his memory.

"Can you read it?"

A voice—Windreaver's voice—asked from behind his back. Hamanu let out a breath he'd held since Ur Draxa. He hadn't wanted to be alone. The troll's voice was the right voice for this place, this moment.

"'Come, blessed sun,' " he answered, tracing the word-symbols as he translated them. " 'Warm my walls and my roof. Send your light of life through my windows and my doors.' " He paused with his finger above the last group of carvings. "This one, 'awaken,' and the next pair, 'stone' plus 'life'—they're on every stone in every wall. Wake up my stones? Wake up my people? I was never certain."

" 'Arise, reborn.' We believed the spirits of our ancestors dwelt in stone. We never mined, not like the dwarves. Mining was desecration. We waited for the stone to rise. The closer it came to the sun—we believed—the closer our ancestors were to the moment of rebirth."

"And do you still believe?" Hamanu asked. He didn't expect an answer, and didn't get one.

"Who taught you to read our script?" Windreaver demanded, as if the knowledge were a sacred trust, not to be shared with outsiders, with *humans* especially.

"I taught myself. I was here at sunrise, whenever I could get away from my chores, imagining what it had been like. I looked at the inscriptions and asked myself: what would I have written here, if I were a troll, living in this place, watching the sun rise over my house. After a while, I believed I knew."

Silence lengthened. Hamanu thought Windreaver had departed.

He considered issuing a command that the troll couldn't disobey, demanding recognition for his



accomplishment. He'd learned the script without assistance and, save for the two symbols that dealt with a faith he couldn't imagine, he'd learned it correctly. But that would be a tawdry triumph in a place that deserved better. With a final caress for the carved stone, Hamanu turned and saw that he wasn't alone.

Windreaver said something in a language Hamanu had heard only a handful of times and never understood. The troll had no substance, either in the material world or the Gray; there was no aspect of him from which a mind-bender could glean his meaning.

"I taught myself to read your script. I couldn't teach myself to speak it. If you wish to insult me, do it in a living language."

"I said you read well."

The Lion-King knew his captive companion better than that. "When mekillots fly," he challenged.

"No, you're right. I said something else, but you read well. That's the truth. Nothing else matters, does it—in a *living* language?"

"Thank you," Hamanu replied. He didn't want an argument, not today. But it seemed he was going to have one: Windreaver's face had soured into an expression he hadn't seen before. "Is it so terrible? A boy comes up here—a human boy. He imagines he's a troll and deciphers your language."

"What I said was: I could wish I had met that remarkable human boy."

Hamanu studied the ground to the right of his feet. He remembered the boy's shape, his voice, and his questions as he stood among these stones. Memory was illusion; there was no going back. "I could wish that, too. But we had no choice, no chance. Rajaat took that away before I was born. Maybe before you were born. Our paths were destined to cross on the battlefield, at the top of a dark-sky cliff, far from anywhere either of us knew. One misstep, by either of us, and we'd never have met at all."

"'One misstep'?"

"And the Cleansing Wars would have ended worse than they did. You could have held Myron of Yoram to a stalemate, but Rajaat would have found another lump of human clay to mold into his final champion. The dwarves, elves, and giants wouldn't've survived... and neither would the trolls..." he paused a second time and raised his head before adding the long-unspoken words—"My friend."

Windreaver's silver-etched silhouette didn't shift in the sunlight. "I believe you," he said softly, without saying what he believed. "Our race was doomed."

Looking at the troll's slumped, translucent shoulders, the Lion-King remembered compassion. "You believe your dead dwell in stone, awaiting rebirth. When the wind's done scouring these stones, there'll be trolls again, someday. You'll teach them their language." He thought of the pebble imbedded in his forearm. "You might be reborn, yourself."

Terrible silver eyes met Hamanu's. "If the spirits of our dead survived in stone, the War-Bringer would have declared war on stone. He would have made a champion to suck life from stone."

The War-Bringer had. If there'd been life sleeping in these ruins, Rajaat's final champion could have destroyed it. "I wouldn't... won't. It will not happen. Not in three days. Not ever."

"You learn," Windreaver concluded. "Of all your kind, you alone learned from your mistakes."

"I learned from you. But. by then, there were no choices so there couldn't be mistakes. When Rajaat came to me in Urik and I ran from him. it was your taunts—"

"I didn't taunt you, not that day."

"You were waiting for me when I came out of the Gray near Kemelok. You'd gotten there first; you knew exactly where I'd go. You said that if I ran—if I kept running— Rajaat would make another champion to replace me. How many years had it been since that day on the cliff? You hadn't said a word in all that time—I didn't think you could. As a man, I was still young—what did I know? Fighting and forming. You were ages older. Of course I listened to you. 'Think of what the War-Bringer's learned from *you!*' I've never forgotten it; I remember it as if it were yesterday. I realized that it wasn't enough to disobey Rajaat; I had to stop him. I must remain his final champion. There can none after me."

"I'd sworn I wouldn't speak to you. Then you broke away from the War-Bringer. I saw it, heard it, but I didn't believe it. You refused what he offered. Then you ran to Borys, and I was afraid for you, my enemy, my warden, so I broke my oath," said the troll's spirit, as though in recitation.

"You made me think before I talked to him."

"For all the good it did, Manu. For all the good it did, long ago..."

\* \* \* \* \*

Borys hadn't welcomed another champion's sudden appearance behind his Kemelok siege line. The Butcher of Dwarves hurled a series of Unseen assaults at his illusion-shrouded visitor. Hamanu deflected everything that came his way, all without raising a counterattack. After a short lull, a solitary human strode out of the besieger's camp. It wasn't a good time for meeting another champion. Borys made that clear from the start.

As Borys explained, ten days earlier, he'd fought a pitched, but not quite decisive, battle against the dwarven army here at Kemelok. He'd given their king, Rkard, a fatal wound—at least it should have been fatal. Borys wasn't certain. That was half his anger. The sword Borys had carried into the battle was enchanted. Rajaat had given it to him the day he'd become the thirteenth champion. The sword imparted a lethal essence to any dwarf it cut open, as it had opened Rkard, but the cursed dwarf had gotten lucky.

Rkard's axe had taken a chunk out of Borys's shoulder, a blow that would have quartered a mortal man. Battle-stunned and unable to hold his weapon, Borys had fallen. His officers had carried him back to their lines—leaving the sword behind in the hairy dwarf's chest. Borys admitted that he had slain three of his best men before he got his rage controlled. His own life was never in danger, but the damned sword was irreplaceable.

Hamanu listened to the Butcher of Dwarves's tirade and wisely didn't mention that his victory over the trolls hadn't depended on any enchanted weaponry. He waited until the other champion had calmed down enough to ask the obvious questions.

"What do you want? Who sent you? Why are you here?" asked Borys.

"Rajaat came to me in Urik."

"This is my war, Troll-Scorcher, and I'm ending it now. No one's coming in to share my kill. If Rajaat's whispering in your ear, that's your problem, not mine."

"Wrong," Hamanu countered. He opened his mind to share his recent encounter with their mutual creator, but Borys was warded against such invasion. "He means for me to finish your war—"

"Never," Borys snarled and quickened another spell. "I warned you."

"—And start another cleansing war, this time against humanity itself."

A needle-thin ray of orange light shot from the palm of the Butcher of Dwarves to Hamanu's gut, where it raised a finger-wisp of oily smoke before Hamanu deflected it with a gesture of his own. Once pointed at the ground, the orange ray seared a line a hundred paces long across the already ash-streaked dirt.

"He showed me how it would be done," the Lion-King said, "and gave me a foretaste of human death."

"We can all kill, Hamanu," Borys said wearily, as if explaining life's realities to a dull-witted child. "Kill all Urik, if that pleases you, but stay away from my damned dwarves, and know this: make war with humanity, and you're making war with me."

"I'll win."

"When mekillots fly, Hamanu. You're the last, and the least. You may have vanquished the trolls, but they were almost finished when Yoram lost his fire. You don't have the wit or power to battle any one of us. Go back to Urik. Be careful, though—I hear you're taking in half-bloods. Give a dwarf shelter, and I'll make war with you."

"Forget dwarves," Hamanu advised. "Think about what happens next. What did he promise you?"

"A new human kingdom in a new human world, a pure world, without dwarves and the rest of the Rebirth scum. I'll rule from Ebe—or here at Kemelok—until I can wrest Tyr from old Kalak. After that, who knows? We needn't be enemies, Hamanu. There's enough to go around, for now."

"You seemed wiser. I thought you knew better than to believe him."

"If Rajaat could cleanse the world, none of us would exist. He's the War-Bringer, not the war

commander; the first sorcerer, but not a sorcerer-king. He needs us more than we need him."

"Have you looked at yourself, Borys?" Hamanu shed his illusion. He stood twice as high as a human man. His jaws had grown to support an array of fanglike teeth, and his nose was flattened by a bony ridge that obscured a portion of his vision. The same ridge, continued above his dwindling brows and across his scalp. Similar metamorphosis had deformed every other part of him.

Locked in what he hoped would be humanity's final battle with the Rebirth dwarves, Borys wasn't eager to be seen conferring with a man who was clearly not-quite-human. After throwing a scrap of cloth on the ground, to shape his spell, Borys tried to reconfine Hamanu in his customary black-haired and tawny illusion.

"Begone!" the Butcher of Ebe growled softly with his own true voice.

Hamanu shook off the spell. With a hundred human deaths fresh on the back of his dragon's tongue and Windreaver's taunts still ringing in his ears, he pleaded for an open mind. "Let me show you—"

"I've seen enough."

Abandoning the calm tactics that went against his nature and hadn't accomplished anything, Hamanu gestured widely with both arms. Borys responded with another spell, but before he could cast it, Hamanu cast a spell of his own. The air between Urik's gaunt king and the blond human flashed with lightning brilliance as Hamanu found the veterans from whose life essence Borys was quickening his spell. He annihilated them, in the way he'd learned from Rajaat; Borys felt the echo of their deaths. When the light faded, the Butcher of Dwarves held one hand against his breast, and in his army's camp, clanging gongs signaled an emergency.

With his hand still pressed above his heart, Borys looked from Hamanu to his frantic camp. "I felt them die. I couldn't stop it. If I'd tried, you'd have drained me, too." He lowered his arm and turned back to Hamanu. "Just what are you?"

"Rajaat's last champion: Troll-Scorcher. Annihilator of all humanity. I'll win," Hamanu repeated his earlier assertion. "*If I start the war. And if I won't, he'll make another who will.*"

"The Dark Lens? Is that how you do it? Are you bound to it in a different way than the rest of us?"

"I didn't ask; he didn't enlighten me. Maybe it's the Lens. Sometimes I think it's the sun. It was there from the beginning, I suppose, but I didn't know how to use it until today."

Hamanu opened his mind a third time, and Borys accepted the images of Rajaat's visit to Urik: a hundred humans annihilated in a single breath. Nothing remained of them, not a single greasy, ash-cruled splotch on the palace floors.

Borys lowered his hand. He cursed as any veteran might curse: heartfelt and impotent.

Hamanu interrupted. "He says humanity must be cleansed because we're deformed. He wants to return a cleansed Athas to the halflings. He says it belongs to them, not us."

"He's mad."

"Aye, he'll probably cleanse the halflings, too. The only question worth asking is, can *we* stop him? I can resist him, disobey him, but I can't stop him, not alone. If we all attack at once..."

"You'd survive," Borys responded quickly, the old distrust burning bright in his eyes. "You could lay back until you were the last—"

"And he'd slay me, then he'd find someone else to annihilate the humans. Maybe a score of someones. He promised you a kingdom, Borys. What price will you pay for it?"

Borys neither spoke nor moved.

"Make up your mind, champion. He's probably out looking for another farmer's son right now. Maybe he'll pluck someone out of *your* army this time. Maybe he's already dragged the poor sod up the stairs in his damned white tower."

"No. You saw how it was. He needs us—"

"Needed."

Another curse as Borys looked at Kemelok's battered towers. "Five days. If I'm gone longer than that, the siege will fail, and the runts will scatter."

Borys allowed a breathtakingly short time in which to bring down the War-Bringer.

"You must be very persuasive," Hamanu said. "With whom do you plan to start?"

"Sielba," Borys replied without hesitation.

Hamanu was inwardly astonished. He'd have left the red-haired Sprite-Scourge and seducer of champions for last. But he'd come this far to get Borys's help and kept his opinions to himself while the Butcher of Dwarves made arrangement with his high-ranking officers to continue the siege while he was gone.

Since the day the champions had drunk each other's blood in the negligible shade of Rajaat's white tower, Sielba had repeatedly invited Hamanu to visit her retreat. The invitations had grown more frequent and enticing in the years since he'd vanquished the trolls and taken his place among the champions who'd achieved their final victories. The notices had become especially regular since he'd settled in Urik and begun to transform the dusty, roadside town into a rival city.

They were neighbors, Sielba would write on ordinary vellum scrolls that her minions delivered to the Urik gates, or she would whisper in a mysterious, musk-scented hush that haunted the midnight corners of Urik's humble palace. They should know each other better. They should explore an alliance; as partners, Sielba promised, they and their cities would be invincible.

Hamanu had ignored every overture. He hadn't forgotten the loathsome combination of lust and contempt with which she'd scrutinized him that one time, the only time they'd stood face to face. He wanted nothing to do with her or her invitations.

However his farmer's son's jaw dropped when Borys led him from the Gray into an alabaster courtyard, and he began to reconsider his reticence. Musical fountains, flowers, lyric birds, an abundance of brightly colored silk... he'd never dreamt of such things. Sielba had cleansed Athas of sprites, then retired to the ancient city of Yaramuke, where she idled away the days and years, ruling a docile citizenry from an imperial palace. Hamanu shook his head and reshaped his appearance to equal the luxury surrounding him—at least he hoped he equaled it.

Sielba greeted Borys warmly and familiarly; Hamanu readily perceived that their acquaintance was both old and intimate. She greeted *him* like a kes'trekel alighting on a corpse.

"Will you feast with me?" she asked, with her lips against his ear and her hands weaving through his hair.

Lips, ears, hands, hair—even the tense muscles at the back of Hamanu's neck—were all illusions, but beneath their illusions Rajaat's champions remained men and women. Hamanu, at least, knew that he remained a man. He remembered every loving moment in Dorean's arms; Jikkana's, too; and the infrequent others of his mortal years. After Rajaat made him a champion, he'd discovered the hard way that there were lethal limits to illusion. Sielba's sturdy immortality tempted him with dangerous possibilities.

He pushed her away, with more force than he'd intended. "We've come to talk about Rajaat—"

"You still have the manners of a dirt-eater, Hamanu," Borys interrupted. "Try to behave."

With words and a few subtle gestures, the two more experienced champions pierced Hamanu's defenses. They shrouded him with an awkwardness that wasn't illusion. He was young compared to them, and ignorant. He knew how to fight, but not how to sit amid the wealth of cushions surrounding Sielba's banquet table, or which of the unfamiliar delicacies were eaten with fingers, and which required a knife.

As for the urgent matter that had brought Hamanu first to Kemelok and then to Yaramuke, Borys disposed of it between the berries and the cream.

"The War-Bringer's not going to stop with the Rebirth races," he said bluntly, but casually. "He's going to create another champion to cleanse Athas of humanity."

Sielba set down her goblet of iridescent wine. Her illusion retained its beauty when she frowned, but her inner nature—the heart and conscience of a victorious champion—revealed itself as well. "And us? What about his promises? Are we to rule a world filled with beasts and halflings?"

"Apparently," Borys replied, with studied nonchalance balancing a mottled berry on the tip of his knife. He exploded it with a thought. "Or he'll create a champion to cleanse us, too."

"He has to be stopped."

"Agreed. Are you with us?" the Butcher of Ebe asked as he turned from Sielba to Hamanu, who was, at that inopportune moment, blotting berry stains from his sleeve.

Lips as red as the stain parted in a condescending smile. "Do you have a plan?" she asked Borys, not Hamanu.

"Of course, but it will require all of us, together."

Sielba's dark eyes narrowed. "And you need to know where everyone is?"

"I can hardly ask the War-Bringer, can I?"

"Or little Sacha."

"I'll get him last, and bring him here by force, if I have to."

"After I've told you what you need to know?"

"I have hopes, my dear enchantress." Borys laid his hand atop Sielba's.

She withdrew hers from below. "And you have promises, promises as hollow as Rajaat's." Her smile belied her words.

So much, then, Hamanu observed, for Borys's persuasion—or any acknowledgment that without him they'd be ignorant of the War-Bringer's plans. The elder champions disappeared, leaving Hamanu with the silks, the slaves, and the remains of their feast. When they returned, Sielba settled herself on the cushions close beside him, while Borys stood beside the door.

"Stay here, Hamanu," the elder champion said.

An order, not a suggestion, and Hamanu didn't take orders; he wouldn't be treated like a child or slave. If Borys hadn't learned that at Kemelok, he'd learn it now.

The air in Sielba's banquet hall stilled. Water drops hung suspended in the fountains, and the human slaves fell to the floor. Borys's doing; Hamanu had done nothing to harm them.

As he started to stand, Sielba threw herself at Hamanu's feet. She tangled him in the cushions. The huge and well-built palace shuddered when they collapsed together.

"Stay with me, Lion of Urik," she urged as they wrestled with small but potent sorcery.

Long ago, Myron of Yoram's officers had humiliated him with their superior sword-skills. Hamanu then spent years practicing with every weapon known to man to insure that such a thing would never happen again. He thought that because he was strong and skilled, he could win any fight. He should have taken a few days, at least, to learn the cunning strategies with which women traditionally fought and won. Sielba used his lion's strength against him. She drained his spells as fast as he conceived them and then twisted his arm behind his back so thoroughly that the black bones beneath his illusion threatened to snap. When he was aware of his predicament, she whispered in his ear again, in her huskily seductive voice:

"It's better this way. Trust me."

Hamanu was no more inclined to do that than he was to trust Rajaat.

"I'll return with the others, then we'll deal with the War-Bringer," Borys said from the doorway. "In the meantime, maybe you'll learn something useful."

Sielba let her guard down once Borys was gone. The Lion of Urik, taking quick advantage of the tricks she'd just taught him, freed himself, and achieved a similar twisting grip on her arm.

"And now, what are you going to do, Lion of Urik?" she asked. Her voice came from behind his shoulder though her face was smothered in the pillows. "You're a quick and rever farmer's lad, but that's hardly enough."

Later Hamanu would blame the wine, Sielba's shifty and shimmering red-blue iridescent wine. The wine wasn't to blame; no amount of wine could affect him, no more than the spiced delicacies could fatten his gaunt body. He was young as immortals reckoned age, but a score of years had passed since he'd touched a woman's cheek without leaving a bruise or kissed her lips without bloodying them.

In time, Hamanu mastered illusion's most subtle aspects and could seduce whomever he wished or secret himself in a mortal mind to explore the world with another's senses. In time, he and Yaramuke's queen would descend into the quarrel that ended with her death and the destruction of her city. Until then, Sielba offered, if not love, fascination, and he offered the same to her.

The Lion of Urik was a different man when Borys returned two days later. The ten other champions emerged, one after another, from the Butcher's netherworld wake. Hamanu kept his temper and said nothing when he saw how thoroughly the Butcher of Ebe had established himself as the champions' champion, the one who would free them from their creator.

Partly, Hamanu stayed calm because he saw how they'd restrained Sacha Arala, the War-Bringer's sycophant. There were no perceptible chains binding the Curse of Kobolds, but his eyes were glazed, and he said nothing at all, unless Borys or Dregoth suggested it first. Although Hamanu didn't think they could control Urik's king as they controlled Arala, he saw no need to risk a confrontation. That was the greatest change Sielba had wrought in him: the Lion of Urik didn't need to prove something to others once he'd proved it to himself.

Hamanu had already measured himself against Borys, and the Dwarf Butcher was no War-Bringer. If Borys wished to be the touchstone of their rebellion, he'd let Borys have his wish. There'd be opportunity for another rebellion, if necessity demanded one. Rajaan's champions had treachery bred in their bones. Hamanu was no exception.

As afternoon in Yaramuke became evening and their strategy took its final shape, Hamanu quietly accepted a subordinate's role. The champions' strategy was as simple as it was risky. Emerging from the Gray, all at the same time and close to Rajaan's tower, they'd each cast a different, destructive spell. No one of the spells would be sufficient to overpower the first sorcerer, but together, they might distract and confound him long enough for Borys, or Dregoth, or Pennarin, or even Hamanu—the four champions who prided themselves on their sheer, brute strength—to dispatch their creator with a physical weapon. Failing that—but only if the quartet seemed truly doomed—the others would attempt to destroy Rajaan's Dark Lens.

Better, they'd decided, to live without the magic they passed to their minions than to face Rajaan's wrath with the Lens still in existence.

Their simple strategy collapsed as soon as they were in the Gray. Savage winds erupted from every corner of the netherworld. The winds buffeted the mighty sorcerers, sending them caroming into each other and away from each other, as well.

*Too many champions, too many unnatural creatures for even this unnatural place,* Hamanu thought as he struggled to retain his orientation in the chaos.

Borys had a less charitable notion: *Arala! Get a ward on Sacha Arala—he's behind it.*

Prudence launched a bolt of blue-green sorcery off Hamanu's right hand, and off other hands, as well. They blinded each other in their eagerness to stop Sacha Arala's treachery. The Curse of Kobolds screamed for mercy that was not forthcoming until Dregoth announced that he had the traitor in his grasp. The winds ebbed. The champions regrouped and continued toward Rajaan's tower, which shone in the Gray as a sliver of pure white light.

In silence, the champions surrounded the netherworld beacon, then returned to the material world where, hiding in the moonlight shadows, Rajaan War-Bringer waited for them.

A fiery maw engulfed Pennarin before he'd invoked his spell. The maw closed, and Rajaan's first champion was gone.

Hamanu took a breath and cast his spell: a simple transmutation of dry, rock-hard dirt into mire as hot and viscous as molten lava. The ground beneath Rajaan's feet began to glow. Through the tumult of spells and counterspells, the Lion of Urik heard the War-Bringer cry his name.

"Hamanu... Hamanu, you're next!"

A writhing, dark counterspell came Hamanu's way. Gelid and corrosive, it would have consumed his immortal flesh eventually, but it was as slow as it was icy. Hamanu dodged and sent Rajaan's wrath oozing harmlessly into the Gray. Then he drew his golden sword. With his hands on its hilt, Hamanu advanced toward his creator across ground his own spell had made treacherous.

The champions' strategy had been sound. Though they'd never had the surprise advantage Borys planned for, and they'd lost Pennarin at the start, the War-Bringer was thoroughly beset. Borys was wading through Hamanu's steaming mire toward Rajaan ahead of Hamanu. The Butcher of Dwarves had drawn his sword, a dark-metal weapon that seethed with crimson fire against the midnight stars. It wasn't

the sword Rajaat had given him; he swore the crimson blade would be a telling weapon against the War-Bringer. Hamanu hadn't argued. He wasn't going to tell another champion what weapon to bring to their rebellion.

Dregoth appeared on Hamanu's left. He was die Ravager of Giants, and his weapon was a plain stone maul. If there was one champion, one weapon, with the best chance to smash the War-Bringer's skull, it was Dregoth and that maul. Borys and Hamanu had agreed to aim low and leave Rajaat's misshaped head for Dregoth.

The Butcher of Dwarves swung first: a solid cut across Rajaat's ribs, ending deep in his gut. Blood and viscera sluiced over the dark crimson blade. The War-Bringer bellowed; fire roared out of his gaping mouth. Hamanu ducked his head beneath the flames and stalked forward, thrusting his sword into Rajaat's flank. The golden sword slid between the first sorcerer's ribs, then stopped, as if it had struck unyielding stone. Hamanu sank his black-taloned feet into the mire and pushed; the sword began to move again.

Fire seared Hamanu's scalp and the length of his back.

Somehow he kept his hands on the hilt and kept the sword creeping deeper.

*Hamanu. Look at me, Hamanu.*

There was compulsion in the words the War-Bringer placed in Hamanu's mind, compulsion that made the Lion of Urik raise his head to meet his creator's mismatched eyes.

*Take them, Hamanu. Take them all! You have the power.*

It was the same power Rajaat had offered in Urik. Hamanu refused it a second time.

"Never!" he swore.

He found a last reserve of strength within himself and, with a roar of his own, surged behind his sword. Rajaat fell back, toward Dregoth, who swung his maul just once. A sound like the moons colliding pummeled the white tower. Rajaat heaved away from Dregoth's completed stroke. The mire quaked, the champions fought for balance, but the War-Bringer was down. Potent sorcery, no longer under the control of Rajaat's unfathomable intellect, sizzled wildly and died.

"Is he dead?" one of the women asked.

"No," Borys, Hamanu, and Dregoth said together before Dregoth hoisted his maul for another blow.

The Ravager of Giants smashed Rajaat's protuberant brow, but the answer didn't change.

"He can't die," someone said. "Not while we're alive."

No one argued.

"So, what now?" That from Albeorn, whose metamorphosis had given him an erdlulike aspect. "If we can't kill him, what do we do?"

"Lock him up someplace. Some place dark and deep," Inenek suggested.

Gallard Gnome-Bane snorted. "Fool. Shadow's the source of the War-Bringer's power,"

"When it gets dark enough, there aren't any shadows. I can think of a few places that never feel the light of day or any other light," Dregoth said with a malicious laugh.

"Put him there," Gallard countered, "and he'll use the Dark Lens to fry us all."

Borys cleaned his simmering sword and sheathed it in a scabbard that vanished against his leg. "All right, Gallard, where do you suggest?" He swept his arm wide in an exaggerated bow, but kept his head up and his eyes fixed on the Gnome-Bane's face.

"At the center of the Gray netherworld lies the Black, and beneath the Black—"

"The Gray isn't *flat*," Albeorn interrupted. "If there's black at its center, then there's more Gray beneath it!"

"Shut up, twerp!"

Gallard shot sorcery at his critic. The air around the Elf-Slayer shimmered with ward spells, then it shimmered around everyone else, as well. For several long moments, no one said anything. At last, Sielba lowered her guard.

"And beneath the black?" she urged Gallard to finish.

"Beneath the Black, we can make a hollow where neither light nor shadow exist, nor can exist."

Borys had a question: "What about the Dark Lens?"

Gallard shrugged. "When the Dark Lens intensifies nothing, it remains nothing."

"Better we cut him apart and each take a piece with us," Wyan of Bodach interjected.

Hamanu stared at the Pixie-Blight. Stripped of illusion— as they all were—Bodach was a small-statured creature. He'd destroyed the smaller, defenseless race of shy, tree-worshippers not by slaying them but by turning their god-trees to sorcerous ash. While Hamanu wondered why such a coward would suggest carving their still-living creator into bloody chunks of meat, the other champions bantered about how Rajaat should be divvied up and which part should go to whom.

The lewd conversation ended abruptly when a blue spark flickered amid the gore that had been Rajaat's face.

"He's healing himself." Borys confirmed what they'd all felt.

There was a round of curses as they each cast a warding spell over their creator.

"It won't be enough," Gallard warned. "Wards won't keep out the sun once it rises. His own bones will make the shadows. We put him beneath the Black tonight, or we'll join Pennarin tomorrow."

Pennarin. Where was Pennarin? The Black, Gallard said. And how did Gallard come to know so much about the center of the Gray or what lay beneath it? Who'd taught the Bane of Gnomes? Why had he needed to learn? Who had he planned to imprison in a nowhere place where neither light nor shadow, time nor substance existed? Rajaat? Or had Gallard planned to imprison them all there eventually?

So many questions, but no reason to ask any of them. The champions couldn't kill their creator and couldn't let him heal himself whole. That left Gallard's Hollow beneath the Black. As little as he relished the notion of trusting Gallard's notion, Hamanu had nothing to offer in its place— nor did anyone else.

"Is there time?" he asked, breaking the silence that threatened to last until dawn.

Gallard grinned, revealing steel-sharp fangs behind his slack and blubbery lips. "Only one way to find out, isn't there?"

Indeed, there was only one way: follow the Gnome-Bane's instructions, stretch their powers to exhaustion scouring the heartland for reagents before dawn's light, and deliver the noxious reagents to the top of Rajaat's white tower where Gallard—and only Gallard—sat in the Crystal Steeple, waiting, enshrined beneath the Dark Lens.

After depositing a vial of fuming realgar at the Gnome-Bane's feet, Hamanu plodded down the spiral stairs. Resuming his human illusion—because it was more comfortable than his gaunt natural form—he leaned back against a crumbled wall. Champions needed sleep no more than they needed food, but even an immortal mind needed a quiet moment to reflect, this day and night.

Big Guthay had set. Little Ral was alone in a sky of a thousand stars. None shone brighter than the warding spells layered over Rajaat's body, like so many green silk veils. Hamanu lost himself in the spells' constantly changing patterns. His thoughts wandered so far that his mind seemed empty, almost peaceful. Looking straight ahead, he saw nothing until—with a jolt of returning consciousness—he saw that a black shadow had cut the warding spells in two.

He's healed. He's breaking the wards, Hamanu thought, a lump of cold terror clogging his throat.

But the shadow wasn't Rajaat's. A man crouched over Rajaat's body, casting the shadow Hamanu saw. A man who was so intent on peeling back the warding spells that he didn't hear the light tread of another champion's feet behind him, or sense another shadow mingling with his until it was too late.

"Arala!" Hamanu shouted as he seized a scrawny neck and jerked the traitor from his mischief.

Objects that might have been the War-Bringer's teeth or finger bones showered from Sacha's hands—except, the culprit wasn't Sacha Arala. In the brief moment Hamanu had before the illusion became a writhing metamorph, he recognized Wyan Bodach's face: Wyan Bodach, who'd suggested chopping Rajaat into pieces earlier.

All arms and legs in his natural form, the Pixie-Blight sprouted claws that raked through illusion to Hamanu's true flesh. The Lion roared, but held on until another champion came to investigate the furor. Unable to sort innocent from guilty, the newcomer slapped spells around them both. Hamanu's limbs



grew heavy as a Kreegill peak, and Wyan was even heavier, but he kept hold. Another spell—two, three, more than he could count—wrapped around them. The arm that had been as heavy as a mountain was stone-stiff when the spellcasting was finished and Dregoth reached in to pry Bodach free.

"He dispelled the wards!" the Pixie-Blight declared the instant Hamanu's fingers were no longer squeezed tight around his neck. "He defiled the War-Bringer, defiled his body."

"And do you deny it?" Dregoth asked Hamanu.

The heavy paralysis was withdrawn. Hamanu flexed his muscles and said: "I do. Wyan said he wanted a piece of Rajaat's body earlier. It's his own deceit he describes, not mine. I thought it was Sacha Arala at first. I cried out his name by mistake."

Vapors seeped from Dregoth's nose as he looked from Hamanu to Wyan and back again.

"And where is Sacha?" Albeorn asked from far on Hamanu's right side.

He and the others had gathered quickly. Some had emerged from the netherworld, the rest strode out of the nighttime shadows. Sacha Arala wasn't among them, nor was Borys, nor, of course, was Gallard. Hamanu realized they were all looking at him, distrusting him more than Wyan because he was still the outsider. He had several long moments to wonder exactly what Borys had told them while Sielba had entertained him in Yaramuke, before Sielba's husky voice broke the silence.

"Sacha's with Borys, where else? He's got no part in this—whatever *this* is. And neither has Hamanu. If the Lion of Urik says Wyan was cutting off bits of Rajaat, then I believe him, and I suggest we find out *why* before Borys gets back here."

Sielba was right about Hamanu, though he knew he'd pay dearly for her defense. She might have been right about Sacha, too. Rajaat's sycophant might have had nothing to do with Wyan's macabre gleaning. But Wyan swore otherwise.

"It was all Sacha's plan," the Pixie-Blight insisted. "He said Rajaat has no one vital part; he can regenerate himself entirely if any living part of him is placed in the pool beneath the Dark Lens. He knew you'd keep close wards on him, so he came to me—"

"—And you went to Rajaat. You made the Gray-storm when we left Yaramuke. You used it to hide yourself while you raced here and back again. That's why he was waiting for us, why Pennarin was consumed," Uyness, who'd cleansed Athas of orcs, concluded.

It could be a true explanation. One of them had warned Rajaat—unless Rajaat's sorcery were so much more subtle than theirs that he'd spied on them in Yaramuke without their knowledge. Unless Uyness herself was their traitor: whenever one champion explained the behavior of another, she, or he, became suspect in other eyes. Hamanu had gotten a dose of that himself a few moments back. But if there'd ever been an enduring partnership among the champions, it was between Uyness and Pennarin, and they all preferred to think that there was some limit to their creator's power.

Suspicion fixed on Wyan, who threw the real onus on Sacha Arala, who wasn't there to defend himself. By Hamanu's reckoning, events didn't require Arala's treachery: Wyan could have learned all he needed from the War-Bringer after he'd raced through the Gray to warn him. But Hamanu kept his thoughts about traitors to himself, saying nothing when Borys returned with two flawless obsidian spheres and the enthralled Curse of Kobolds.

Borys had another suspect: "Gallard!" he shouted loud enough to shake the white tower where the Gnome-Bane prepared the imprisonment spell. "Gallard! Here! Now!"

Gallard grumbled and Gallard resisted. The air between the steeple chamber at the top of the tower and Borys on the ground beside Rajaat rained sparks as they argued silently, mind against mind. Then the air stilled and Gallard came outside. He swore he didn't know what Wyan was talking about.

"But, if the coward's telling the truth, then that's all the more reason to get Rajaat locked beneath the Black."

Borys disagreed. "Not in the tower or the pool. Not near the Dark Lens. Not if it's going to regenerate him."

The Gnome-Bane said there was no such danger with the spell he intended to cast. Though he'd use the Dark Lens to intensify his sorcery, Rajaat's body would stay where it was, well away from the white tower's mysterious black-water pool.

"Stay here and watch," Gallard offered with rare generosity, "or come up to the steeple while I cast the spell."

Borys and Dregoth agreed that half of them should be with Gallard in the tower, the other half posted on the ground. Inenek produced six black beads, for those who'd stay with Rajaat, and five white ones, for those who'd climb to the steeple. They drew beads in the order of their creation, Arala and Wyan included, and hid them in their hands until Hamanu drew his. The Lion's bead was black; all the others had bleached theirs.

"Someone cheated," Inenek protested.

"And someone didn't," Dregoth observed mildly. "I'll stay below with Hamanu. We'll deal with our traitors once we've dealt with Rajaat."

Borys gave orders as if he'd been ordained their leader, but the Butcher of Dwarves tread carefully around Dregoth. The Ravager of Giants was unique, even among the champions: when Rajaat found him, Dregoth was already immortal and already at war with the giant race. In his natural form, he was, by far, the largest, most powerful champion, the closest to the death-dealing creature the world called Dragon.

With Dregoth volunteering to change his bead's color, none of the others felt the need to change theirs.

"We'll know if they try to deceive us," Dregoth said, pointing at the wards over Rajaat's body.

Hamanu, seeing no reason to admit he had no idea what Dregoth was talking about, grunted noncommittally.

"And it would be a poor time for you to think about deception," Dregoth added.

"I have no reason to."

Dregoth seemed not to have heard. "There's no place where you could hide, Hamanu, should you try to escape."

"I have no reason to," Hamanu repeated. "I'm the one who didn't cheat."

The third champion found Hamanu's remark amusing and chuckled softly until, in the tower, Gallard cast his spell beneath the Dark Lens.

In the years since he'd watched the last trolls march off a cliff, Hamanu had spent more time governing unruly humans than he'd spent learning about the netherworld. He knew the Gray was more shadow than substance and the Black was pure shadow and the absence of substance. He wasn't confident about any of it. Still, he thought he understood Gallard's proposal, and he expected that Rajaat's warded body would vanish from the moonlit world and wind up in a hollow place, beneath another place that had no substance. He was more than mildly startled, then, when Gallard's mighty spell seemed to do nothing more than seal Athas's first sorcerer in an egg-shaped rock.

"I'd sooner have carved out a hole in a Kreegill peak and shoved him down to the bottom," he muttered.

"Interesting," was all Dregoth had to say.

It seemed to Hamanu that a huge, mottled rock was not quite what Gallard expected to find when he led his audience into the dawn light. For a fleeting moment, the Gnome-Bane's eyes showed white all around their dark irises, and his mouth was slack-jawed, but only for a moment. By the time the questions and accusations started, Gallard was either honestly confident of his spell or a better illusionist than Hamanu ever hoped to be.

"Something had to be done with his substance!" he declared, letting his irritation show. "I couldn't put substance beneath the Black. That would be a complete contradiction, an intolerable paradox. There's no guessing what would have happened. So, I left his substance here, a cyst in a world of substance. His essence, I assure you all, is in the Hollow."

Borys put his fist on the rock. "If I broke this open—"

"—You can't," the Gnome-Bane insisted.

"But if I did, I'd find the War-Bringer's *substance*, and if I poked my head inside this *Hollow* of yours—"

"—You wouldn't."

"But if I did, you say I'd find his essence?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

"In what manner?" Borys hammered the rock with his fist.

Hamanu didn't see what happened, like a mortal fool, he'd winced. He wasn't the only one: Dregoth's eyes were still closed when Hamanu opened his again. Bathed in the ruddy light of the rising sun, Gallard's egg-shaped rock was... a rock. It wasn't hollow; Rajaat's bones didn't rattle inside. There were no cracks where the Butcher's fist struck, no luminous leaks of sorcery.

"It's finished. Done," the Gnome-Bane said. "He's bound beneath the Black for all eternity."

"And we can get back to what we were doing," Albeorn urged.

That was Uyness's cue to lunge for Wyan's throat, shrieking, "Vengeance! Vengeance for Pennarin! Death!"

Vengeance was easier threatened than accomplished. Without Rajaat's sorcery, no one of them knew how to kill another champion—yet. Will-sapping spells such as the one Borys cast on Sacha were harder on the spell-caster than they were on their targets. And, anyway, Uyness wasn't interested in a painless punishment. She wanted the Pixie-Blight's death in the worst possible way; Hamanu saw that clearly on her face when she looked at Wyan of Bodach. He saw deadly determination on a number of other faces, including Sielba's.

Distrust would become murder before long. They'd all have to keep warding spells at their backs. But Albeorn Elf-Slayer wasn't the only champion eager to leave the white tower. Borys and Dregoth had wars to fight and finish.

Rajaat's demise wouldn't end the Cleansing Wars against the elves, the dwarves, or the giants any more than Myron of Yoram's death had spared the trolls. They'd saved humanity, that was all. The children of their own ancestors need never fear a champion-led army. And aside from Borys, who gave a barely perceptible nod when the Lion of Urik stared straight at him, none of the champions suspected how grave humanity's danger had been.

Wyan and Sacha got reprieves. If they were wise, they'd hie themselves as far from the human heartland as the sun and moons allowed. As the champions parted company without fare-thee-wells or other false promises, Hamanu wondered if he, too, wouldn't be wiser himself to leave Urik. There was a lot of world beyond the heartland. He'd seen a bit of it chasing trolls. Surely a man—an immortal champion starving for the savor of human death in his heart—could find better neighbors.

Hamanu never had the chance to look. The champions turned on each other before the white tower's netherworld glow had vanished behind them. Wild sorcery raised whirl-winds in the Gray. Hamanu didn't know if the assault spells were aimed at him or were echoes of other quarrels. The way the netherworld was spinning, it didn't matter. He took his chances with unfamiliar, but real, terrain, tumbling from the morning sky onto an empty plain. He took his bearing from the sun and started walking.

Four long but uneventful days later, the Lion of Urik walked through the gates of his palace. He was astonished to find Gallard waiting for him by the well in one of the inner courtyards.

"Peace. Truce. Whatever," Gallard said quickly, shedding his servant's illusion and holding his hands palms-up, to indicate that he had no spells quickening on his fingertips. "We thought we'd lost you."

While Hamanu cooled himself and slaked his thirst, the Gnome-Bane told him what had happened in the Gray: who'd attacked whom and with what success. Gallard would have told him more, but Hamanu cut his litany short.

"Your feuds mean nothing to me. Why should I care?"

The Gnome-Bane had a quick, disturbing answer: "Because between them, Sacha Arala and Wyan have cracked the cyst."

Hamanu finished pouring a bucket of water over his head then heaved the clay-coated straw bucket across the courtyard. It hit the wall with a satisfying thud and collapsed in a shapeless, useless mass on the ground.

"Is he free?"

Gallard writhed. "Not yet. We need you, Hamanu. We need everyone."

"Shall I get the realgar?" Hamanu headed toward the locked storeroom where he kept his reagents.

"It's too late for that. We've got to hurry."

Hamanu's peers still hadn't found a way to kill each other, but they were getting closer. Sacha Arala and Wyan were unrecognizable, indistinguishable, as they sagged against what appeared to be ordinary ropes binding them to columns on either side of the white tower's gate. Uyness kept watch over them with Dregoth's stone-headed maul braced across her arms. They'd have been wiser to run—if they'd gotten the chance.

Of far greater concern to Hamanu than the fates of two lesser champions was Gallard's egg-shaped cyst around which the remaining seven champions had gathered. Thick layers of shimmering green warding couldn't hide the damage. While Hamanu watched, finger-length worms of intensely bright sorcery oozed from dark cracks. They wriggled like slugs until the warding destroyed them. With the Dark Lens nearby, the champions could renew the warding continuously. With no more than a thought and a twitch of his thumb, Hamanu added his own spell to the mix. But warding wouldn't hold forever, not against humanity's first sorcerer.

"What about the Hollow beneath the Black?" Hamanu asked.

Borys glowered at Gallard, who shook his head. "Too dangerous to get close enough to look. But it holds... it must! If the Hollow were cracked, nothing could hold here."

"So, do we wait until he breaks free, or what?"

"Another rock," Albeorn advised. "A bigger rock, around this one."

Hamanu arched a highly skeptical eyebrow.

"You've got a better idea?" Borys demanded, cocking his fist for emphasis.

The Lion of Urik was no master of sorcery, at least not then, and having nothing better to offer, he could only go along, providing the strength, both physical and sorcerous, that his elders requested. Working together, the cooperating champions did construct a second cyst around the original one. It seemed that the new prison would hold, but there were dark lines on the mottled surface by sundown and flashes of dark blue light by moonrise.

"He exploits the weaknesses between us," Sielba said wearily.

Hamanu had come to the same conclusion, but the red-haired champion spoke first.

"We need to make our own Rajaat before we can make Rajaat's prison," Borys suggested softly.

Hamanu thought the Borys who stood before them, tall, thick-necked, and armored like a troll, was the Butcher of Dwarves in his true, metamorph's shape, but that was illusion, too. As golden light cascaded around him, Borys reformed himself. His head became a fang-filled wedge. His eyes glowed with the sun's bloody color. His limbs lengthened and changed proportion. Though he remained upright on two legs, it was clear as his torso grew more massive that he'd be more comfortable and more powerful if he balanced his burgeoning weight on his arms as well.

"I offer myself." Borys shaped his words with sorcery and left them hanging above the insufficient prison. "Help me finish the metamorphosis, and I will keep Rajaat in the Hollow."

Dregoth roared, but he wasn't nearly the dragon Borys already was. His outrage was moot and impotent.

"Think of the risks," Hamanu said, thinking of himself and the metamorphosis that lay before him. He was unaware that he'd spoken aloud.

*I have, Borys said in Hamanu's mind alone. My risks are not so great as yours would be. I will finish the dwarves—the elves and the giants, too—but humanity has nothing to fear. Athas will be our world, a world of humans and champions where Rajaat has no power, no influence.*

\* \* \* \* \*

"I believed him," Hamanu said to Windreaver when they had talked and recounted their way through events they both recalled.

Windreaver had been at the white tower the night when Hamanu and the others champions had fledged a dragon, with the Dark Lens's help.

"Champions always lied," Windreaver countered flatly. "Then and now."

In the ancient landscape of his memory, Hamanu recalled Dark Lens sorcery shrouding Borys in a cloud of scintillating mist. The cloud grew and grew until it engulfed the white tower and threatened to engulf the champions as well. Wyan and Sacha had screamed together, then fallen silent. Two small, dark globes had flown out of the mist and vanished in the night. The globes were the traitors' severed heads, still imbued with immortal life, because Borys hadn't had been able to kill them outright when he consumed their bodies. Uyness had cheered, then she, too, had screamed.

Borys couldn't stop with the traitors: he needed every one of them. They'd all underestimated how far Rajaat's metamorphosis would go, how much life the spell would consume before the dragon quickened. In agony and immortal fear, the champions had torn away from the Dark Lens, saving themselves, but leaving a half-born dragon behind.

For a hundred years Borys had ravaged the heartland, finishing the sorcerous transformation he'd begun beside Rajaat's tower.

"He was not Rajaat." Hamanu stated, which was half of the truth. "He wasn't what I would have been."

"You can't be sure," Windreaver chided.

"I've looked inside myself. I've seen the Dragon of Urik, old friend. I'm sure. There were no choices, no mistakes."

## Chapter Thirteen

Sunset in the Kreegills: a fireball impaled on a jagged black peak, the western horizon ablaze with sorcery's lurid colors, and, finally, stars, one by one, crisper and brighter than they were above the dusty plains.

Hamanu held out his hand and gathered a pool of starlight in his palm. He played with the light as a child—or a dancer—might play, weaving luminous silver strands through moving fingers. In his mind, he heard a reed-pipe melody that lulled all his other thoughts, other concerns and memories. Alone and at peace, he forgot who he was, until he heard Windreaver's voice.

"The world stretches far beyond the heartland. There are lush forests beyond the Ringing Mountains and who-knows-what on the far shores of the Silt Sea. Wonders lie just over that horizon," the ghostly troll said, as if they were two old merchants in search of new markets.

"Leave Urik to its fate? Without me?"

"You chose Urik as your destiny. But you're Hamanu; you are your own destiny. You've always been. You can choose somewhere, something else."

Hamanu thought of the leonine giant he'd seen guarding the Black and the Hollow beneath it. "Hamanu is Urik." He let the starlight dribble off the back of his hand. "If I went somewhere else, I'd leave too much behind. I'd leave myself behind."

"What of yourself, Hamanu? Borys is dead. The War-Bringer's prison cannot hold him. If you can believe what he said—if—there's nothing you can do to save Urik. If he's lying—as he usually does—then what do the champions of humanity do next? Whose fear is stronger than his greed? Which one of you will become the next great dragon and burn the heartland for an age? There is no other way."

"There must be. There will be!" Hamanu's shout echoed off the mountain walls. A cloud of pale steam hovered in the air where his voice had been. "I *will* find a way for Urik to survive in a world without dragons *and* without Rajaat."

Windreaver merged with the fading mist. "You won't find it here. The Kreegills have been dead for a thousand years. They have no answers for you, Hamanu. Forget the past. Forget this place. Forget Deche and the Kreegills, your woman and me. Think of the future. Think of another woman, Sadira of Tyr. Rajaat had a hand in making her, true, and he's used her, made a fool of her and you. But she's no

champion. Her metamorphosis begins each day at dawn and unravels at sundown. She's not immortal. She's not bound to the Dark Lens. She's not like you, Hamanu, not at all, but her spells hold; by day, they hold. Find a way to make them hold at night, and maybe you'll have an Athas without either dragons or the War-Bringer."

"Sadira's a fool." He saw her clearly in his mind's eye: tall, as half-elves were tall, doubly exotic with sun sorcery shadowing her skin.

Sadira of Tyr was a beautiful woman, though the Lion-King was ages past the time when aesthetics influenced his judgment, and he'd shed Rajaat's prejudices against humanity's cousins long before that. Elves, dwarves, even trolls and races Rajaat had never imagined, they were all human under their skin. There were no misfits, no outcasts, no malformed spirits made manifest in flesh; there was only humanity, individual humans in their infinite variety. *He* was human, and he would not despise himself. That was Rajaat's flaw—one of many. Rajaat despised himself, and from that self-hatred he conceived the Cleansing Wars and champions.

Rajaat's madness had nothing to do with Hamanu's opinion of Sadira. "She's a dangerous fool." Or her council-ruled city. "They're all fools."

"So were you, once. She'll never learn otherwise with fools for teachers, will she? You've got three days, Hamanu. That's a lot, if you use it properly."

Windreaver was gone before Hamanu concocted a suitable reply. He could have called the troll back. Windreaver came and went on the Lion-King's sufferance; his freedom was as illusory as Hamanu's tawny, black-haired humanity. When his master wanted him, his slave came from whatever place he was, however far away.

Hamanu thought Windreaver traveled through the netherworld, but the troll was never apparent there. Like the mist from Hamanu's voice, Windreaver might still hover, invisible and undetectable, in the ancient troll ruins. He might have remained there after Hamanu slit the Gray and strode from the mountain valley down to the plains northwest of Urik.

The Lion of Urik knew the way to Tyr, the oldest city in the heartland. Kalak, Tyr's now-dead king, had been an immortal before the Cleansing Wars began. Unlike Dregoth, Kalak had spurned Rajaat's offers and never become a champion, though in the chaos after Borys's transformation, he'd found what remained of Sacha Arala and Wyan.

The Tyrant of Tyr had suborned the mindless heads, replacing their champions' memories with demeaning fictions. He convinced them that he, not they, was the source of the Dark Lens magic Tyr's templars wielded at home and in Kalak's endless wars with his champion neighbors.

If he'd tried, Hamanu might have pitied the Pixie-Blight and Curse of Kobolds, but he'd never tried. The traitors had served Urik's interest because Tyr's purview controlled the heartland's sole reliable ironworks, as Urik controlled the vast obsidian deposits near the Smoking Crown volcano. With the traitors' Dark Lens magic, Tyr controlled its treasures just well enough to keep the mines and smelters from falling into a true champion's hands.

Hamanu wouldn't have tolerated that, and the other champions wouldn't have tolerated a Urik that controlled both obsidian and iron. They'd have united against him, as they did now, but in greater number, and with Borys leading them. For thirteen ages, the Lion-King had supported the Tyrian Tyrant more often than he'd warred with him, until the doddering fool thought he could become a dragon to rival Borys.

Fifteen years ago, *that* had been the single act of monumental foolishness that brought Hamanu to this morning on the Iron Road. In the guise of a shabby, down-on-his-luck merchant, the king of Urik walked slowly through the morning chill asking other merchants—

"Which way to the old Asticles estate?" which was where, according to his spies, the sorceress maintained a household of former rebels and former slaves.

They pointed him toward a hardpan track that wound through estates, farms, and irrigated fields. Guthay had worn her rings above the entire heartland, not just Urik. Tyr's fields were lush and green, though not as tall as Urik's. The unwieldy Council of Advisors hadn't summoned levies to protect their established fields or take advantage of Guthay's bounty. The Tyrian farmers had simply waited until their

fields were nearly dry before they planted. Tyr would reap a good harvest, but nothing like the one Urik's farmers hoped to bring in... if there was a Urik, four days from now.

Tyr's smaller harvests weren't entirely the fault of Tyr's council. The Tyrians were shackled to a dubious history.

Despite two thousand years of rule, Kalak had never understood that a city's might wasn't measured by the size of its armies or the magnificence of its palaces, but in the labor of its farmers. In a good year, Tyr could feed herself; in a bad one, she bought grain from Urik or Nibenay.

Kalak had been a man of limited vision and imagination. In Urik, there were free folk and freed folk as well as slaves; guild artisans and free artisans; nobles who lived on estates outside the city walls and nobles who lived like merchants near the market squares. In Urik, a man or woman of any station could find outlets for enterprise and ambition. In Tyr, folk were either free, rich, and noble, or enslaved, poor, and very common. For two thousand years, ambition had been a criminal offense.

The rebels of Tyr, whose recklessness had turned the heartland on its ear could, perhaps, be forgiven for thinking that slavery was the cause of all their problems. It was easier to identify abused slaves and set them free than it was to resurrect a dynamic society from stagnation. At least, the council-ruled city hadn't succumbed to rampant anarchy as Raam or Draj had done since the demise of their champion kings and queens.

Sadira and her companions had shown themselves capable of learning. Perhaps Windreaver was right and Tyr was the heartland's future.

Hamanu left the hardpan track. He approached a gate guarded by two women and a passel of children, who could not have kept him out even if he'd been no more than the peddler he appeared to be. Indeed, the Lion-King's problem wasn't getting onto the estate, but escaping the curious women who wanted to examine his nonexistent wares. Realizing that curiosity might be worse at the estate-house, Hamanu scooped up a handful of dried grass and pebbles as he walked away from the gate.

"For your mistress's delight," he explained as he displayed the dross to the door-steward.

With only a tiny suggestion bending through in his mind—not enough to rouse anyone's suspicions—the steward saw a handful of whatever the steward imagined would please Sadira this deceptively unremarkable morning.

The steward chuckled and rubbed his hands together. "Follow me, good man. I'm sure she'll want some for both Rikus and Rkard."

Hamanu wondered what the man had seen, but kept his wondering to himself as the steward led him through a series of corridors and courtyards to a small, elegant chamber where—by the bittersweet flavor of the air—Sadira of Tyr was in the midst of a melancholy daydream.

*No need for you to remain.* Hamanu put the thought in the steward's mind. *I'll introduce myself to your mistress.*

When the steward was out of sight in the next corridor, Hamanu erased his entire presence from the mortal's memory. Then he crossed the threshold into Sadira's chamber.

"Dear lady—?" He interrupted her as gently, as unmagically as he could, though aside from his simple peddler's illusion, he'd done nothing to disguise himself, and Sadira should recognize him instantly.

She did. "Hamanu!"

"No cause for alarm, dear lady," he said quickly, holding his hands palms-up, though, like her, he didn't need conventional gestures, conventional sources to quicken his sorcery. "I've come to talk—"

Before Hamanu could say anything more to reassure her, the sorceress quickened a spell. It erupted faster than thought, and whatever its intended purpose, its sole effect was to destroy completely the little pebble Hamanu cached between the black bones of his left forearm.

A smoking gap formed in Hamanu's peddler illusion. Hot, viscous blood dripped onto the floor, corroding the delicate mosaic. The physical pain was intense, but it paled beside the heart-stopping shock as greasy smoke began to flow from the wound. Hamanu clapped his right hand over the gap. The smoke seeped around his fingers. Windreaver took shape in the smoke.

"We come to the end of the trolls at last."

"No." A soft, impotent denial.

"Let go of the past, Hamanu. It's time."

Another denial, equally impotent. The hole in his arm was empty. Windreaver was real, and Windreaver was gone. Hamanu's anguished rage began to suck the life out of everything around him.

"Leave it be, Hamanu," Windreaver cautioned, and laid a faintly warm, faintly tangible hand over the Lion-King's wounded arm. "I know your ways. You think this is no accident. You think this is my vengeance. It's not. Thirteen ages is too long to think of vengeance, Hamanu. We've fought the past long enough. Think of the future." The troll's smoky fingers began to collapse. "I'll wait for you, Manu of Deche. I'll prepare a place beside me, where the stone is young..."

Four greasy streaks of soot on Hamanu's arm and a larger splotch on the floor were all that remained of the last and greatest commander of the once-great race known as trolls.

Sadira rose from her stool. Her foot came down beside the stain.

"Stay back!" Hamanu warned.

The power of death was inside him, and the will to use it. She lived because Windreaver wished her to live. Hamanu would honor the last troll's wish—if he could. And if he couldn't let her live, then he'd live with the consequences, as he'd lived with all his other consequences.

Sadira sensed her danger and retreated. "What—" she began, then corrected herself. "*Who* was that? Another dragon?"

It was an almost-honest question. The half-elf had no notion of trolls or the Troll-Scorcher. Her experience bound Hamanu with dragons instead. He collected his wits and tried to speak, but it was too soon.

Sadira mistook his silence. "Did you think that you could come in here and work your foul sorcery on *me*?" she asked with all the arrogance that Rajaat's sorcery could breed in a sorcerer's mind. "I *know* how to destroy dragons. Kalak, Rajaat, Borys, *you*—you're all alike. You destroy my world. Athas won't be safe until every dragon's dead."

Hamanu's tangled emotions snapped free. The rage that killed with a thought vanished like a cool breeze at midday. Grief and mourning were set aside for the moment when he'd be alone—very alone. He forgot, in large part, why he'd come, and that Rajaat's promised doom hung over his city. What remained was the capriciousness, the cruelty that fully deserved the hatred the half-elf directed at him.

She was a fool, and he intended to enjoy proving it to her.

"You know very little, Sadira of Tyr, if you don't know the difference between Kalak and Borys, Borys and Rajaat, Rajaat and me."

"There is no difference. You're all the same. All evil. All life-sucking defilers," she insisted. "I know you get your magic from the Dark Lens. I know you'd enslave all Athas if no one stood against you. I know all the lies, you told me that day in Ur Draxa when Rkard bested Rajaat. You were children rebelling against your father, but the only reason you rebelled was envy. You wanted his power for yourselves. What more do I need to know?"

"You need to know that every dragon is different and that Rajaat created dragons when he created sorcery and that was long before he created champions to wage his Cleansing Wars. You need to know that if a sorcerer lives long enough to master the secrets of the Unseen netherworld, then that immortal sorcerer will change into a dragon—but not a dragon like Borys. Borys wasn't a sorcerer when he became a dragon; he was a champion. Rajaat shaped his champions out of human clay in his white tower. He bathed them in a black-water pool and stood them in a Crystal Steeple beneath the Dark Lens. The dragon is a part of a champion's nature—a large part, an inevitable part—but not the only part, or the most powerful part."

"Anything else?" Sadira asked, feigning disinterest.

She feigned disinterest because she owed her sooty armor and shadow magic to an immersion in that black-water pool and to spells cast in the Crystal Steeple. Her inner thoughts betrayed a deep concern about the powers she used so freely. The Dark Lens hadn't been in its proper place when the shadowfolk transformed her. Rajaat hadn't been there, either, but the shadowfolk were Rajaat's minions, and they'd acted on his orders. Sadira had reason to be worried,

Hamanu savored her worry.



"Borys was a champion. I was Rajaat's last champion of the Cleansing Wars. Kalak wasn't a champion—" Hamanu began.

"Tell that to his templars—"

"Sacha Arala and Wyan *were* Kalak's champions—fools and traitors, too. *They* gave Tyr's templars their spells. They could have done the same for anyone—especially after Tithian found the Dark Lens."

"Tithian," Sadira sighed. In Tyr, the conversation always came back to Tithian.

"Tithian wanted it all: Rajaat's spells, the pool, the tower, the Dark Lens. He didn't think about dragons. He thought he wanted to be a sorcerer-king, but what he truly wanted to be was a champion."

"Would he—" the sorceress succumbed to her own curiosity. "Would Rajaat have made Tithian into something like you or Borys? The way Rajaat was hunting and killing sorcerer-kings, I wouldn't think he'd ever make another champion."

The trap was set, the prey was sniffing at the bait, all that remained was a little tug on the trip-cord. "Rajaat already had his next creation: something better than an immortal champion who'd slip from his control. His minions had already shaped her in his tower—with his permission, of course. They couldn't have worked magic there otherwise. She can't draw on the Dark Lens, can't channel its power to her friends, because it wasn't there when she was made. And, being mortal when she was made, she won't survive long enough to become a dragon. But she'll serve his purposes; she already has—"

Sadira boiled off her stool. The shadow-stuff that cloaked her skin when the bloody sun was above the horizon came alive with the sorcery she intended to hurl at him. But Rajaat's last champion—his last *true* champion—sprang his trap. Pursing his lips, Hamanu inhaled through his mouth. A thin stream of shadow-stuff whirled from her to him, and, to Sadira's wide-eyed horror, she couldn't stop it.

"There are," Hamanu explained when she was mortally pale and shaken, "a few things you don't know about yourself."

He shed what remained of his peddler's illusion and became his favorite self: the tawny-skinned man with flowing black hair. There was just a hint of sulphur in his eyes. The shadow-stuff he'd stolen flowed in serpentine streams along his limbs.

Sadira tried to cast an ordinary spell the ordinary way Hamanu wagged a finger, and she was cut off from everything except herself. A dragon could quicken spells from the life essence he, or she, hoarded inside; a mortal sorcerer didn't have the essence to spare. Sadira wrapped her arms beneath her breasts.

"Why have you come? Why have you come now, today? You could have killed me anytime."

"Not to kill you, dear lady. I came to talk to you, but you weren't listening and, because of that, no one will ever see a troll—the silver shadow of a troll—again."

The words of an apology swirled the surface of Sadira's thoughts. She swallowed them without speaking them, which was wise, because the apology wouldn't have been sincere. She didn't care about trolls; she especially didn't care about Hamanu's loss. "Talk to me," she said instead, her thoughts a mixture of fear and defiance.

"We'll talk about sorcery. It must be quickened. You know that—" Hamanu stirred Sadira's memories. "You learned when you were twelve, when Ktandeo of the Veil came to—" he stirred deeper and found the name—"the Mericles estate, *Tithian's* estate—"

Hamanu's eyebrow rose. He hadn't suspected an older connection between the sorceress and the usurper, between a slave and her master.

Sadira squirmed on her stool. She froze when he smiled. Her mind conjured images of her fears; the fears women naturally and needlessly had in his presence. Foolish fears: the Lion-King hadn't raped a woman since Borys became the Dragon of Tyr.

"I'm not here for that," he said wearily. "From Ktandeo, you learned to steal the life essence from plants for your sorcery. Then you learned that with obsidian between you and your spell, you could steal the essence from any living thing. The Dark Lens is a sort of obsidian, dear lady, a very special sort: it steals from the sun, the source of all life. I don't know where Rajaat found it, but he didn't make it. He

used it to make his champions, but mostly he was looking for a way to steal directly from the sun, as you first learned to steal directly from plants."

"The shadowfolk? Rajaat was looking for a way to steal from the sun when he made Umbra, Khidar, and the other shadow-giants?"

"The War-Bringer had found a way well before that." Hamanu held out his arm. The shadows had ceased writhing and were spreading a sooty pall across his tawny skin. "But his way was independent, contrary. He rebelled, refused his destiny. Because of him, all the champions rebelled and sealed Rajaat beneath the Black. For ages Rajaat had explored the sun and light; in the Hollow, he studied dark and shadow. That's when he made the shadowfolk and the shadowfolk made you. But one thing is always true, whatever Rajaat does, his sorcery exacts a price. Each time you resort to the gifts Rajaat's shadowfolk gave you, whether to quicken your spells or save a life, you slip deeper into Rajaat's destiny."

Sadira rose. She stood in the hot sunlight streaming through the open window. Her thoughts moved far below the surface of her mind. Hamanu left them alone. If the sorceress was cold, the light would warm her. If she thought her shadow-gifts would be restored, she'd be sorely disappointed. They'd be back tomorrow, and not one sunbeam sooner.

"I would know," she said, too softly for mortal ears to overhear, but loud enough for the Lion-King. "I would know if I was one of *them*. It can't be true. Hamanu is the liar, the deceiver."

Silently, Hamanu came up behind her and laid his hands gently on her shoulders. She shuddered as thoughts of resistance rose, then fell, in her consciousness.

"Dear lady, I have neither need nor reason to deceive you. The War-Bringer's sorcery lives within you as it lives within me. It makes patterns of light and shadow across our thoughts. We deceive ourselves." For a fleeting moment, the lava lake was foremost in his thoughts. "We've deceived each other—"

Sadira cut him short. "I'm *not* like you. I went to the Pristine Tower because the Dragon had to be destroyed and the shadowfolk could give me the power to destroy him."

The lake was gone; the cruel need to make her suffer for Windreaver's loss had returned. "*Rajaat's* shadowfolk. *Rajaat's* shadowfolk helped you because Borys was the key to Rajaat's prison. Once you destroyed Borys, Rajaat was free—"

"Tithian freed Rajaat! Tithian had the Dark Lens."

"Tithian was aided by the same shadowfolk who took you to the Crystal Steeple."

"I *fought* Rajaat. He would have killed me if Rkard hadn't used the sun and the Dark Lens together against him. I cast the spells that put him back beneath the Black. I put his bones and the Dark Lens at the bottom of a lake of molten rock, where no one can retrieve them. How can you *dare* say that I'm Rajaat's creation, that I serve him!"

Hamanu amused himself with her hair. Like Manu so many ages ago, Sadira had all the pieces in her hand, but she couldn't see the pattern. Unlike Manu, she had someone older and wiser who would make the pattern for her. And he would show it to her, without mercy.

"Dear lady—what is obsidian?"

"Black glass. Shards of sharp black glass mined by *slaves* in Urik."

"And before it was black glass?" Hamanu ignored her predictable provocations.

She didn't know, so he told her—

"Obsidian is lava, dear lady. Molten rock. When lava cools very fast it becomes obsidian. You, dear lady—as you said—put Rajaat's bones and the Dark Lens in a lava lake. Have you felt the Black, dear lady? It's so very cold, and Rajaat, dear lady, is both beneath the Black and at the bottom of a lava lake. Think of the Dark Lens sealed in an obsidian mountain. Think of Rajaat—or Tithian, if you'd rather—quicken a spell."

"No," Sadira whispered. She would have collapsed if his hands hadn't been there to support her. "No, my spells bind them."

"Have you returned to Ur Draxa recently?" Hamanu thrust an image of the fog-bound lake into Sadira's consciousness. "Your spells weaken each night." Her pulse slowed until it and the sullen red

crevasses of the image throbbed in unison. "Rajaat is a shadow of what he was, but with the War-Bringer, shadow is essence. Tithian serves him as Sacha Arala once served him, so blinded by his own arrogance that he doesn't know he's a fool. A foolish enemy is sometimes the most dangerous enemy of all—"

Without warning, Hamanu sundered Sadira's mind. Rajaat's last champion ransacked every memory she clung to, every wish she'd made since childhood, all in search of their creator's shadow in her thoughts. He was as fast as he was brutal; the assault was finished before she screamed. Hamanu took her voice away.

Sadira writhed against the hands supporting her shoulders. Hamanu let her go. She reeled and stumbled her way to the window ledge where she crumpled into a small parcel of misery and fear. Her eyes and mouth were open wide. Her fingers fluttered against her voiceless throat.

"I had to know," he explained. "I had to know what you're capable of."

Hamanu already knew what he was capable of—not merely the sundering of a woman's mind, but the planting of a thousand years of memories of Windreaver. Hamanu had seen to it that Windreaver wouldn't be forgotten by the woman whose spell had both freed him and—in the Lion-King's eyes—destroyed him. Whenever Sadira remembered, she'd remember the troll commander. It was rough justice: the Lion-King's sort of justice, and no real justice at all, only guilt and grief.

Sadira's hair fell over her face as she struggled against Hamanu's spell. Locks of red tangled in her fingers. She gasped, a rattling spasm that left her limp against the wall. Still, it had been a sound. The Lion-King's sorcery was fading.

"There's nothing to fear. No need to scream. You are Rajaat's creation, but you don't serve him willingly."

Sadira swept her hair back from her face. Her eyes were baleful, belying Hamanu's words. "I would die first," she whispered. "I'm not Rajaat's creation. I put his bones and the Dark Lens where I thought they'd be sealed away forever. If you knew otherwise, then you're to blame. I did what I thought was right. If I was wrong..." She shook her head and stared at the floor. "Kill me and be done with it."

"I'm not here for that. I have been to the lava lake and now I've come here for your help. In three—"

She laughed, a rasping sound that clearly hurt and left her gagging as she pushed herself to her feet. "Help? Me help you? You must—"

Sadira winced. Her eyes were drawn to the sooty stain that marked Windreaver's passage. She'd encountered a memory that wasn't hers. With a cold sweat blooming on her already pallid face, Sadira once again needed the wall to support her. Hamanu skimmed her thoughts. What he found was Deche, not Windreaver; Dorean as she was after the trolls finished with her.

Hamanu was an expert at the deceptive mind-bending art of suggestion and false memory. He didn't make many mistakes; he removed them if he had. But his memory of Dorean resonated through Sadira's mind faster than he could remove it. The image, fixed and frozen, had become an inextricable part of the half-elf's experience. As a memory, it was no longer false.

"Who was she?"

There'd be no apologies or explanations, no pleas for understanding or compassion; such notions had no place in Hamanu's life. "Call her Dorean. She was... would have been my wife." He wrenched himself away from the memory they shared. It was difficult, but he was the Lion-King. "And I have been a fool. Rajaat must not escape," he said as if Dorean weren't still bleeding in his mind. "Last time we needed a dragon. This time—"

"A dragon? Is that why you're here? You want me to help you replace Borys. You're no different than Tithian—"

"I'm very different than Tithian or Borys, dear lady. I want to preserve and protect my city and yours. I want—I *need*—to find a way to keep Rajaat in his prison that doesn't require me—or anyone else—replacing the Dragon of Tyr. I needed to be certain that we agreed—"

"We agree about nothing!" Sadira shouted, then she winced again. Another false memory.

Hamanu didn't skim the image from her mind. Whether she beheld Windreaver or another horror

from his own past, he saw that he'd blundered badly when he'd hammered his memories into hers. He shouldn't have done it, and wouldn't have, if he hadn't strangled his rage after she cast her spell. His rage would have killed her, if Windreaver hadn't wished otherwise.

And there wouldn't have been either rage or wish, if he and Windreaver hadn't outlasted their enmity. He'd be in Urik now, conferring with his templars, trying to save his city.

"I have made a mistake. I took a friend's—" He stopped short: *friends*, that was the greatest mistake of all. Rajaat's champions weren't friends, not toward themselves or anyone, and they didn't attract the friendship of others. "Your spells are failing, dear lady. Rajaat's essence is loose in the world. He says that Nibenay and Gulg and Giustenal dance to his tune. He says they'll destroy the world we know in three days' time. He lies, dear lady. The War-Bringer lies. I'll repair your spells, or replace them. I'll set them right, as they must be set right. You needn't fear—"

"Need not fear *what*?" she demanded. "You'll set *my* spells right? You can't make anything *right*—"

"Woman!" Hamanu shouted. "Curb your tongue, if you value your life!"

Sadira wasn't interested in his warnings. "I've seen how you set everything right for Dorean!"

Hamanu didn't need mind-bending to sense the invective brewing on the back of her tongue. Sadira had a champion's knack for cruelty. He'd given her the measure of his weakness, and she would grind salt in the wound until it killed her—and who knew how many others? Hamanu heard gongs clanging everywhere and pounding footfalls racing closer. Between screams and shouts, half the estate knew the sorceress was locked in a dangerous argument.

The human glamour faded from Hamanu's hand. Black talons absorbed the sunlight as he raised them between himself and Sadira's face. A threatening gesture, for certain—but threat and gesture only: he intended to slash an opening into the netherworld and leave this place before he had even more to regret.

Sadira responded with a head-down lunge at his midsection. Regardless of illusion, the Lion-King carried the weight and strength of his true, metamorphic self. Sadira's attack accomplished nothing—except to increase his anger and confusion. He backhanded her, mildly by a champion's standards, but hard enough to fling her across the room. She hit the doorjamb headfirst, loosening plaster from the walls and ceiling. Her head lolled forward.

Stunned, Hamanu told himself, as he strained his ears, listening for the sound of her heart. Her heart skipped, and her breathing was shallow. A single stride, and he was on one knee beside her. Illusion was restored as he pressed human fingertips against her neck. He found her pulse and steadied it.

"Get away from her!"

With his concentration narrowed, Hamanu hadn't sensed anyone in the doorway until he heard a young man's voice, which he ignored. He hadn't come to the Asticles estate to kill anyone; he wasn't leaving until Sadira was on her feet and cursing him again.

"I said: Get away from her!"

Hamanu felt the air move as a fist was cocked. The blow struck his temple, doing no more damage than Sadira's whole body lunge had done. He raised his head and saw a human-dwarf mul in the doorway.

"I know you," he muttered.

The Lion-King wasn't good when it came to putting children together with their proper identities, and the mul, cocking his fist for another try, was still several years short of maturity. Children were changeable, both in their bodies and their thoughts, but there were only two muls Hamanu associated with Sadira. One was Rikus, who was old enough to know better when he'd led a cohort of Tyrian gladiators in a foolish assault against Urik over ten years ago. The other had been a half-grown boy when he wielded the sun spell that had separated Rajaat's essence from the substance of his shadow.

"Rkard," Hamanu said, flushing the name of Borys's ancient enemy out of his memory. "Rkard, go away. There's nothing for you to do here."

The youth blinked and lowered his fist. Confusion wrinkled his handsome face. It seemed, for a moment, that he'd simply do as he'd been told. But that moment passed, and he laid his hand rudely on

Hamanu's shoulder.

"Stand aside. I don't know who you are, or why you've come, but *I'll* take care of Sadira, and if I find that you've harmed her...." The youth's eyes reddened as he evoked the bloody sun's power.

Hamanu lowered the sorceress gently to the floor. She, Rikus, and the rest of the Tyrian hotheads had raised the young man staring intently at him. He had a fair idea what was going to happen once Rkard recognized him.

"Rkard, *don't* do it."

The warning came too late. Three separate streams of fire, one orange, one gold, and the third the same color as the sun, grew out of the young mul's sun-scarred hands. As Rkard cried out—sun magic exacted a fearsome price on its initiates—the fire-streams braided together and bridged the gap between them.

Hamanu cried out as well. The sun's power was real. His flesh burned within his illusion, but it could burn for a long time before he'd be seriously injured. Hamanu could have brushed the sun-spell aside but, almost certainly, it would have gone to ground in Sadira's defenseless flesh.

He tried to reason with the mul and got no further than his name, "Rkard—"

Rkard howled again as he evoked greater power from his element. The braided flames became brighter, hotter. Hamanu's illusion wavered in the heat; he ceased to resemble a human man. He retreated toward the open window. The mul followed, a smile—a foolish, ignorant smile—twisting his lips.

"Let it go, Rkard, before someone gets hurt."

The mul couldn't talk while he cast his sun-spell. He let his hands speak for him, clenching his fists until the tricolored flame was a white-hot spear impaling a tawny-skinned human man against a wall.

Hamanu closed his eyes. A thousand years evaporated in the heat. In his mind, he was a man again, with his back to a mekillot rib as Myron Troll-Scorcher assailed him with the eyes of fire, only now he could fight back. The sun behind him and the shadow at his feet were both his to command. All he had to do was open his eyes and his tormentor would be ash.

Hamanu did open his eyes but, rather than quicken any of the myriad destructive sorceries lurking in his memory, he thrust his hand into Rkard's incendiary sun-spell, then closed his fingers around it. The white fire consumed his illusion. To keep his fist where it needed to remain, Hamanu folded his spindly, metamorph's legs beneath him. He hunched his shoulders and crooked his neck. All the while, the bloody sun's might was held captive in the Lion-King's fist.

Hamanu squeezed tighter. He transcended pain and found triumph where he least expected it.

The spells of sorcery, the formulas of the magic that Rajaat had discovered, mastered, and bequeathed to Athas before he decided to cleanse it, had to be quickened before they could be cast. Something had to be sacrificed before sorcery kept its promise. The dilemma facing any sorcerer, from the most self-righteous member of the Veiled Alliance to Rajaat's last champion, was—at its simplest—what to destroy?

Preservers strove to limit the sacrifice by extracting a few motes of life's essence from many sources, destroying none of them; defilers didn't care. Those who could used obsidian to quicken their spells with the essences of animals as well as plants. Champions could hoard the life essence of the dead. A few—Hamanu, Sadira, and Rajaat's shadow-minions—quickened spells by transforming sunlight, the ultimate essence of all life, into shadow.

The Dark Lens intensified a spell after it was cast, but no sorcerer—including Hamanu and Sadira—could use the Dark Lens as Rkard had used it against Rajaat: focusing the bloody sun's light first inside the Lens, then letting it out again, letting it consume the War-Bringer's shadow. And not even Rkard could duplicate that uncanny feat: Sadira had buried the Lens and Rajaat had almost certainly found a better hiding place for his own life essence than his shadow.

But when he seized the white-hot stream and contained Rkard's sun-spell within his fist, Hamanu found that the young mul was a living lens who concentrated the sun's quickening energy *before* a spell was cast. With Rkard beside him, Hamanu could seal Rajaat's bones and the Dark Lens in a cyst the size of a mountain. He could counter anything his fellow champions threw at Urik, be it spells or armies of the living or the undead. And, for the first time in a thousand years, Hamanu thought it might be possible to

thwart a champion's metamorphosis.

Before any of that, Hamanu had to break free of Rkard's sun-spell, no simple task as the youth had opened himself fully to the sun's might and was unwilling—or, perhaps, unable—to halt the power flowing through him. Red-eyed and blazing, Rkard was slowly immolating himself.

Hamanu appealed to the mul with thought and words,

*"The sun is stronger than both of us, Rkard. Together, we can forge spells that will imprison Rajaat forever, but only if you relent now. Persist, and the sun will destroy you long before it destroys me. Save yourself, Rkard—"*

*"Never! Betrayer! Deceiver! You die first, or we die together and forever."*

Hamanu remembered himself on the dusty plain, a young man consumed by hate and purpose. He opened his fist. The sun-spell engulfed his arm; the obscene bliss of the eyes of fire threatened to overwhelm him. He remade his fist; the threat receded but didn't disappear.

Sunlight, Hamanu thought. Blocking the sun and casting his own shadow over Rkard might break the spell. He straightened his legs, bursting the room's walls and ceiling.

Somewhere outside the white fire, a woman screamed.

Still catching the sun-spell in his fist, Hamanu edged sideways. Rkard collapsed when the fringe of the champion's shadow touched him. The white fire darkened to pale yellow; tiny flames danced on the youth's arms. While Hamanu hesitated, Rkard wrenched free of shadow. The sun-spell whitened. The youth would not relent—no more than Manu would have relented a thousand years ago.

Hamanu's short-lived dreams crumbled: the chance of finding another young mul already hardened to the bloody sun's merciless might—of finding one in time—was incalculably remote. He prepared to take the larger step that would center his black shadow over Rkard and his spell.

The woman screamed again, this time the mul's name, "Rkard!"

A red-haired streak shot through Hamanu's shadow. It wrapped itself around the enthralled youth and heaved him sideways. The spell broke free, a diminutive sun hovering an arm's length above the mosaic. In a heartbeat, it had begun to strengthen. In another, Hamanu had thrown himself on top of it. The ground shuddered. For an instant, Hamanu was freed from his black-boned body. Then the instant was gone, and he was himself again, reforming the flawless illusion of a tawny-skinned man.

Sadira cradled the mul's head and shoulders in her lap. He was exhausted, unable to speak or move, but otherwise unmarked, unhurt. Hamanu's spirits soared.

"It could be done! We could do it. We could go to Ur Draxa and repair your ward-spells. We could save Urik. Together nothing could stand against—"

The sorceress's eyes narrowed. She wrapped her arms protectively over Rkard. "Stand with you?" Her expression said the rest: I'll kill him myself before I let that happen.

Hamanu tried to explain what had happened when Rkard's sun-spell struck him. Sadira listened; he perceived the spirals of her thoughts as she considered everything he said, but none of her conclusions included helping a champion save his city.

"I took the sun-spell inside, into my heart and spirit. Your shadow-sorcery doesn't go that deep," he warned. "You'd be consumed."

"So you say, but I don't believe you. Dragons lie, and you're a dragon. You'd deceive us and betray us. While even one of your kind exists, Athas can never be free."

"Free," Hamanu muttered. He had a thousand arguments against such foolishness, and none of them would sway her. Better to let her learn the hard way, though she wouldn't survive the lesson, and there was no guarantee Rkard would cooperate afterward. "For Athas, then, and your precious freedom—go carefully to Ur Draxa, look at what's happened to the lake where you sealed Rajaat's bones beside the Dark Lens. Look, then come to Urik at dawn, three days from now. I'll be waiting for you."

## Chapter Fourteen

Enver stood in the map room doorway. "Omniscience, a messenger approaches."

"I know," Hamanu assured his steward.

The sharpest mortal ear could not pick out the sounds of sandals rapidly slapping the tiles of the palace corridors as the messenger neared the end of her journey. Her journey continued because Hamanu didn't rely on his immortal ears. He'd known about the message since it passed through Javed's hands in Javed's encampment south of the market village ring.

"Good news or bad, Omniscience?"

Hamanu smiled fleetingly. "Good. Nibenay sent it with our messenger, alive and intact. I believe he has accepted my terms. We'll know for certain in a moment, won't we?"

Enver nodded. "For certain, Omniscience. Our messenger alive, that's certainly good news."

The dwarf's tightly ordered mind accepted that the Shadow-King was also a living god, and that gods, all other aspects being equal, weren't omniscient with regard to one another. His eyes were wide with awe and dread when the dusty half-elf slapped to a halt beside him. She clutched Gallard's black scroll-case tightly in both hands, as if it were a living thing that might try to escape or attack her. Nibenay's nine-rayed star glowed faintly on the case's wax seal, which protruded between her thumbs.

Knowing what she carried, although not the message it contained, she'd pushed herself to her limit and beyond, as had every other relay-runner who'd touched it

"O Mighty One—" she gasped, beginning to cramp from her exertions.

Enver steadied her. He put his own powerful short-fingered hand around hers, lest the scroll case slip through her trembling fingers and shatter on the floor.

"Give it to me," Hamanu suggested, reaching across the sand-table where he'd recreated Urik and its battle lines.

The half-elf doubled over the instant Enver took the case. The trembling was contagious; the dwarf's fingers shook as he handed it to Hamanu.

"See to her needs, dear Enver," the Lion-King said, dismissing them and their mortal curiosity with a nod of his head.

Ah, the predictable frailties of his mortal servants... the pair stopped as soon as they were out of sight and wrung their hands together in desperate, silent prayers: *Good news. Good news. Whim of the Lion, let the news be good.*

Hamanu slid his thumb under the scroll-case seal. The hardened wax popped free, and a tiny red gem rolled onto the sand pile that stood for the village of Farl. Never one to believe in omens, Hamanu fished it out of the sand and squeezed it.

*Alone. When the sun is an hour above the eastern horizon, he heard the Shadow-King's hollow, whispery voice between his own thoughts. The armies will begin their engagement. I will cast the first spell, then Dregoth, then Inenek. Do what must be done, and the walk of Urik will be standing at sundown. This I solemnly swear.*

The Lion-King let the bright gem fall back on the sand. By itself, the gem was worth many times its weight in gold. What was the worth of a champion's solemn oath? At least Gallard was no longer spouting nonsense about spells to forestall the creation madness that had overtaken Borys. Beyond that, Gallard's oath was worth what Hamanu's oath would have been in similar circumstances: very, very little, no more than a single grain of sand.

Hamanu studied the sand-table in front of him. Gentle mounds and grooves imitated the more detailed map of Urik's environs carved onto the map room's northern wall. Strips of silk littered the sand: yellow, of course, for the city's forces, green for Gulg, red for Nibenay, black for the largely undead army of Giustenal. The red, green, and black strips were where Rajaat promised they'd be. If there was a battle tomorrow, it would be on a scale not seen since the Cleansing Wars. If there wasn't a battle, there'd be mortal sacrifice to equal the day Borys laid waste to Bodach.

Was there a third alternative?

Yellow silk fingers surrounded the sandpile that stood for the market village of Todek, southwest of the city. They faced nothing, except a tied-up bundle of blue ribbons. Blue, for the armies of Tyr. Blue, for the army—enemy or ally—that hadn't arrived.

Hamanu's eyelids fell shut. He clutched his left forearm where, beneath illusion, an empty place remained unfilled.

"Windreaver," the Lion whispered. "Windreaver. Are they coming, Windreaver?"

Not an army. An army wouldn't make a difference. But two people—even one person, one young mul with the sun's bloody mark on his forehead—that could make all the difference in the world.

Windreaver couldn't answer. There'd be no answer.

As soon as he'd returned to Urik after his disastrous meeting with Sadira at the Asticles estate outside of Tyr, Hamanu had sent a peace offering to the sorceress: a champion's *apology*, rarer than iron, rarer than a gentle rain in this dragon-blasted world. He'd sent golden-crust himali bread from his own ovens, because bread had been peace and life and all good things in the Kreegills, and a hastily scribed copy of the history he'd written for Pavek, in the hope that she would understand why he was what he was, and why losing Windreaver was a loss beyond measure.

He should have sent Pavek. Pavek had a true genius for charming his enemies. As a runaway templar, he'd charmed the druids of Quraite. As both a runaway and a would-be druid, he'd charmed the Lion-King himself. If anyone could have undone the hash that Hamanu had made of his Tyrian visit, Pavek would have been the one.

But for Hamanu, sending Pavek out of Urik would have been sending away his last—his only—hope. So he'd appealed to the Veiled Alliance of sorcerers in Urik, stunning them, of course, with his knowledge of their leadership, their bolt holes, and all that his knowledge implied. For Urik, he'd told the old rag-seller who was Urik's mistress of unlawful sorcery. And, reluctantly, she'd sent an adept through the Gray with his gifts.

The adept had arrived. The gifts had been conveyed to the Asticles estate. Beyond that, without Windreaver to be his eyes and ears in tight-warded places, Hamanu knew nothing, which was, itself, an answer. The sorceress wasn't coming. Whether Rajaat plucked Sadira's strings in subtle melodies, or she was simply a mortal woman as stubborn and single-minded as he'd been at her age, was a dilemma the Lion-King would never resolve.

These last two days, he'd picked apart the memory of their abortive conversations as often as he'd examined the deployments on the sand-table. He'd blamed Sadira—mostly he'd blamed Sadira—for her failure to listen, but he'd blamed Rkard, too, and Rajaat, and Windreaver, for planting the weed's seed in his mind in the first place. At one time or another, Hamanu had blamed everyone for his blundering failure to win Sadira's help.

Recalling his own words, he'd blamed himself: his blindness, his prejudice, his overwhelming need to answer hurt with hurt. In the end, with the blue silk ribbons still tied in a compact bundle and Gallard's red gem in the sand beside Khelo, blame was unimportant.

"Mistakes," he told the absent Windreaver, "were made. I had choices, and I made the wrong ones. Now, I pay the price of my own foolishness. What do you think, wherever you are, old friend, old enemy? Will Pavek come to Urik's rescue with his druid guardian? Will the guardian vanquish the dragon I become? Will that be enough? Is there a guardian who can stand against the first sorcerer?"

He swept his arm across the table, leveling the mounds, burying the multicolored ribbons beneath the sand.

"From the day he made me his champion, I have prepared for the day when I would face my destiny. I had a thousand times a thousand plans, but I never planned for today."

Hamanu extinguished the map room lanterns with a thought. He left the room and found Enver sitting on the floor outside the door.

"You heard?" Hamanu asked.

The dwarf's upturned face, pale and vacant, answered before his thoughts became coherent.

"Go home, dear Enver." Hamanu helped his steward to his feet. "Stay there tomorrow. You'll know what to do."

Enver shook his head slowly from side to side. "No," he whispered. "No..."

Hamanu laid his hand atop the dwarf's bald head, as he might have done with a child. "It will be better, dear Enver. I will not be able to protect or spare you, and whoever comes after me—"



"Omniscience, there can be no *after*—"

"Precisely. The potion I gave you will set you free."

The dwarf shook his head, ducking out from beneath Hamanu's hand. His focus, that uniquely dwarven trait that guided a dwarf's life and determined his fate after death, was foremost in the thoughts Hamanu gleaned. It was a face the Lion-King scarcely recognized, though it was him, Hamanu, as Enver knew him.

"Your focus will be fulfilled, dear Enver. It is I who abandon you, not you who abandon me." He put a guiding hand on his steward's shoulder and pointed him away from the map room. "Go home now. It's time."

Enver took a few flat-footed steps, then turned, painted a new portrait in his mind's eye, and turned away again. The swift painless poison Hamanu had provided for all his household was, in truth, a regular precaution whenever he led his army to war. Rajaat's champions *had* learned how to kill each other. The dwarf's determination not to use it was an almost-tangible cloak around his shoulders as he walked down the corridor. Hamanu hoped he'd change his mind. The fate of anyone who'd been close to the Lion-King wouldn't be pleasant once the Lion-King was gone.

Hamanu waited until the corridor ahead of him was silent. Then he followed Enver's footsteps. From the map room, he went to the armory, from the armory slowly through every public room. Except for the slave and servant quarters, which he avoided, the Lion-King's palace was deserted. He'd sent away as many as he could, to Javed's camp or to their own families.

The sun had set some time ago. Slaves had set torches in the hundreds of wall sconces, as they'd done every night for ages. Hamanu snuffed the torches out, one by one, with a thought or a memory as he walked by. He came to the throne room with its monstrosity of a throne; he wasn't sorry to leave that behind.

Above the throne hung the lion's head lantern, the eternal flame of Urik. Hamanu recalled the day he'd hung it there and lit it. Immortal wasn't eternal. He'd known there'd come a day, a night, when it was extinguished—but not this night. He left it burning and felt its yellow eyes on his back as he left the throne room and began his circuit of his private places, closing doors, saying good-bye, until he came to his cloister sanctum.

His vellum history was there, a leather scroll-case beside it. He'd written no further than Windreaver's last battle. A thousand years went unrecounted; wars with all his neighbors, with rebels, criminals, and blighted fools. Except for the dead, all his wars had been alike. If he had written them, they'd all read: *We fought; I won. Urik prospered. Urik endured.*

There was nothing more to write. Hamanu rolled the vellum sheets together, tied them with a silk cord, and slid them into the case that he slung over his shoulder. Bathed in moonlight, the Kreegill murals painted on the walls were studies in charcoal and silver; they seemed too real to consider touching. Pavek's tools stood where he'd left them, in an orderly row against the little cottage. The novice druid had restored the scorched dirt. He'd planted grain in the ground he'd tilled and tended. High as a man's forearm, it, too, was silver in the moonlight.

Hamanu plucked a sprig and held it to his nose. He remembered the smell.

When the cloister doors were bolted shut for the last time, from the inside, Hamanu made a familiar slashing motion through the air. Netherworld mist enveloped him. He emerged beneath the palace gate-tower, a slightly built, dark-haired human youth with a leather case slung over a narrow shoulder.

The templar guards didn't notice him, nor did anyone else. Urik's streets were quiet, though not as doom-laden as the palace. War had been a regular occurrence throughout the Lion-King's reign. Even siege camps beyond the ring of market villages weren't unknown—and weren't a source of great concern for the ordinary Urikite. After all, as the magic-voiced orators reminded them at the start of each watch: Urik has never lost a battle when the Lion-King leads her armies.

Outside the Lion-King's inner circle of confidants and advisors, the city's plight was not widely known. Mortal minds, Hamanu had learned long ago, were ill-suited for lengthy confrontations with despair. Let them carry their faith to the end, or to the Lion-King's fountain in the city's center where, by moonlight and torchlight, a small crowd had gathered.

Long, slender eel-fish swam in the fountain's lower pools. They were bright streaks by day, dark shadows by moonlight, and sharp-toothed at any time. When a Urikite made a wish, second thoughts were ill-advised, and woe betide any light-fingered criminal who tried to skim the ceramic bits from the bottom. Those coins belonged to the Lion-King, the living god who cherished them, though he had no use for them. His eel-fish would eat just about anything, but their favorite snack was a finger or a toe.

Hamanu stood quietly to one side, watching ordinary men, women, and children whisper a prayer as they tossed their bits into the water. With his preternatural hearing, Hamanu heard what only a god should hear. Mostly they prayed for their loved ones' safety: husbands, wives, parents, and children. Half the city was camped outside the walls tonight, catching a few winks of sleep, if they could, beside their weapons. The other half of the city fretted about their welfare. Some prayed for themselves as well, which was neither cowardice or sin in the Lion-King's judgment. Some prayed for Urik, which was, after all, their home. And one or two—to Hamanu's astonishment — prayed for their king—

*Let him lead us to victory. Make him invincible before our enemies. Return our king, safe, to us—*

As if they knew Hamanu, the Lion of Urik, was not a god at all.

He was lost in listening when he felt a tug on the hem of the plain illusory shirt he wore.

"Want to make a wish?" a little boy asked.

The boy's thoughts were of a brother, a giant of a brother who'd been called up in the second levy a quinth ago, and of his mother, a shrunken woman on the other side of the fountain. The woman gave a shy, toothless smile when Hamanu looked at her.

"My brother's outside," the boy said. Neither he nor his mother had the least notion that explanations were unnecessary. "You got a brother outside? A sister? Somebody?"

He had no brothers, not for a thousand years, but Hamanu had somebody—ten thousand somebodies in yellow and mufti—outside the wall. "Yes."

"Bigger'n stronger than you, huh?"

He was Manu tonight, this last night in Urik; it had seemed appropriate. And Manu had been an unimpressive youth, though not as spindly as the boy imagined, comparing Manu to his mountain of a brother. If he'd been real, and not illusion, Manu could have slept outside the walls tonight; the third levy would have taken him.

The boy tugged Hamanu's shirt again. "You scared?" And where the brother had been in the boy's thoughts, there was fear, hurt and emptiness: all that a child could understand of war.

"Yes, a little." Manu knew better than to lie to children.

"Me, too," the boy admitted and held out a dirty, half-size ceramic bit. "We can wish together?"

"What shall we wish for?"

The boy pressed a pudgy finger against his lips. Hamanu nodded quickly. He should have known: wishes were secrets between the wish-maker and the Lion. They tossed their bits in together: two tiny ripples in the moonlight. Not even a god could have said which was which.

"It's gonna be all right, isn't it?" the boy asked, looking up at him. "The Lion'll take care of 'em, won't he?"

"He'll try," Hamanu said.

He was spared from saying more when the boy's mother called, "Ranci!" and held out her hand.

"Whim of the Lion," Hamanu said to the boy's shadow as he darted around the fountain. "He'll try to save them all."

The Lion-King put his fountain behind him and wandered the streets of his city. Pools of light spilled out of every tavern doorway where folk came together to either find courage or lose fear at the bottom of a mug. Taverns didn't have anything to soothe a champion's nerves. Nothing he could eat or drink would make this night shorter. Nothing he could imagine would make it easier.

Pavek's thoughts from a few long nights ago came back to him: *Surely my king needs friends about him tonight.* Hamanu hadn't wanted friends that night, and wasn't entirely certain he wanted them now. But he'd intended from the beginning to give his history to the druid-templar who was—he cocked his head and listened through the crowded melange of thoughts and voices—among friends.

Hamanu wandered back toward the palace, toward the templars' quarter with its crisscross maze of identical red-and-yellow striped facades on identical streets. Throughout the ages, the rivalries within Urik's templar bureaus had been as intense and deadly as the rivalries among Rajaat's champions. Nothing Hamanu could have done would have put an end to rivalry, but by keeping the bulk of his templars in yellow robes and *all* of them in identical dwellings in just one quarter of the city, he'd done as much as one man could to lessen the damage rivalries caused.

The templars' quarter was busier than the rest of the city. Although the war bureau commanded all of Urik's forces—including the lower and middle ranks of the civil bureau once the city went on a war footing—their families and households were exempt from the militia levies. A good many of them, as well, had duties that kept them legitimately inside the walls this night. And, since these were Hamanu's templars, there were some who should have been elsewhere but had bribed, intimidated, and extorted themselves out of harm's way.

They hoped.

Within his slight-framed illusion, Hamanu remained Hamanu. His champion's ears listened through the walls as he walked and yanked the most flagrant of his weedy templars as he passed their dwellings. He filled their minds with morbid guilt and lethal nightmares; he savored their anguish as they died. Then he calmed his vengeful heart and put his fist on the door of Pavek's house.

He had to knock twice before he heard someone moving toward the door. Even then, he wasn't certain the woman was coming to open it or was chasing a child who'd strayed into the vestibule. With or without his preternatural senses, Pavek's house was one of the noisiest dwellings in the templar quarter. Hamanu was about to attract Pavek's attention through his gold medallion when, at last, he heard footsteps on the interior stairs, and the door swung open.

It was the woman he'd heard before, and she did have a damp and writhing child straddling her hip. She wasn't a slave—Pavek didn't keep slaves—and she wasn't one of the servants Hamanu had hired to open the house before Pavek returned to Urik from Quraite. She wasn't a Quraite druid, either; druidry left its mark on those who practiced it, as did any magical or Unseen art, and she didn't bear it. Stirring her thoughts gently, Hamanu was surprised to discover she was simply a woman who'd lost her man to the second levy and, reduced to scrounging for herself and her child, had made the fateful mistake of offering herself to a certain scar-faced man.

By the look and sound of the dwelling, she was far from the only stray Pavek had brought home.

"I wish to speak to the high templar, Pavek," Hamanu said.

He was prepared to stir her thoughts to obedience, but that was unnecessary. Strangers, it seemed, came to this door all the time and, disguised as he was in Manu's homespun garments, the woman assumed he was another stray like her.

"The lord-templar's in the atrium. I'll take you to him—"

Hamanu raised his hand to stop her. There was more life in this place than he wished to have around him tonight. "I have something for him. If you'll fetch him for me, I'll give it to him and be gone."

She shrugged and hitched the toddler higher on her hip. "What's your name?"

He hesitated, then said, "Manu. Tell Lord Pavek that Manu is here to see him."

The name was common enough in this, Hamanu's city. She repeated it once and disappeared up the steps into the living quarters. Hamanu shut the door—a slave's job, but there were no slaves here—and settled down to wait on a tradesman's bench.

In a few moments Pavek appeared at the top of the stairs. He was alone. His right hand was tucked under his shirt hem and resting lightly on the hilt of a steel-bladed knife.

"It's a little late for caution, Pavek," Hamanu observed without raising his head. "Half the city could walk through your unguarded door. Half the city already *has*."

"Manu?" Pavek descended a few steps. "Manu? Do I know you? Step into the light a moment."

Hamanu obeyed. His illusion was, as always, perfect, and though Pavek could not hide his novice druidry from one of Rajaat's champions, there was nothing at all magical about the aura the illusory Manu projected. Indeed, there was nothing about Manu that Pavek should have recognized, including the scroll case, which was plain leather, sturdy, but scuffed.

A child's spindle top shot out of the doorway behind Pavek, followed immediately by the child who'd lost it. The top bounced down the stairs, coming to rest at Hamanu's feet. Pavek put a hand out to stop the child, a scruffy little creature of indeterminate race and gender. He bent down and whispered something in the child's ear. There was a hug and a high-pitched giggle, then the child was gone, and Pavek was coming slowly down the stairs.

Some men were born to be fathers, and Pavek was one of them. It was a pity he'd sired no children. A pity, that is, until Hamanu thought about tomorrow and the great number of fathers who would be unable to protect their children.

Hamanu picked up the toy and handed it to Pavek as he reached the last step. Their eyes met in the lantern light. Manu's eyes were brown, plain brown—even Dorean, who'd loved every part of Manu, said his eyes were ordinary, unremarkable. Hamanu's eyes, the eyes Rajaat had given him, were obsidian pupils swimming in molten sulphur. When Hamanu crafted his illusions, he always got the eyes correct, yet Pavek stared at his eyes and would not look away.

"Great One," he said at last, trying—and failing—to kneel on the entrance steps of his own home. "Great One."

Pavek lost his balance. Hamanu caught him as he fell forward, and held him until he was steady on his feet again.

Somewhere a child screamed, as children would, and incited a commiserating chorus.

Hamanu plucked the top out of the air where it had hovered while the Lion-King assisted his templar. He'd changed his mind about staying here. "Is there room in this house for one more?" he asked, dropping the toy in Pavek's nerveless hands.

"It is yours, Great One. Everything I have—"

"Manu," he said, grabbing Pavek's arm to keep him from kneeling.

Pavek nodded. "Your will, Great One—Manu."

They went up the stairs together. The child who'd lost the toy was waiting inside the hall along with two others, one definitely a dwarf, the other definitely a girl. They were soft-voiced and polite until Pavek relinquished the top. Then they were off, shrieking like harpies.

"Are you collecting every castoff and stray in Urik?"

"They have nowhere else to go, Gr—" Pavek caught himself. "I find one... but there's never just one. There's a sister, or a friend, or someone." He gestured at the ceiling. "This place, it's so big. How can I say no?"

"I can't have this, Pavek. You're giving the bureaus a bad name."

Pavek gave Hamanu the same worried look Enver had given him at least once a day. But Pavek—Whim of the Lion—knew when his humor was being tested.

"Not to worry, Manu. My neighbors think I'm fattening them up for market."

They laughed. It was invigorating to laugh in the face of doom. Manu, head-and-shoulders shorter than Pavek, reached out and gave the bigger-seeming man a hearty, laughing thump between the shoulder blades, which rocked him forward onto his toes. For a heartbeat, there was silence, and a world of doubt in Pavek's thoughts. Then Pavek dropped an arm on Manu's shoulder and laughed—tentatively—again.

A cold supper had been laid out in the moonlit atrium and a score of men and women gathered together to enjoy it. Hamanu was mildly surprised to see Javed sitting beside his chalk-skinned bride. The king of Urik might reasonably expect the Hero of Urik to lay his old bones on the hard ground of the army encampment the night before a great battle. But Javed knew exactly what they faced and how little difference his own presence on the battlefield would make tomorrow, and Mahtra, his bride, was as comfortable in this dwelling as she was anywhere. She'd practically lived here when it had belonged to Elabon Escrissar.

For that matter, Hamanu had visited House Escrissar many times and in many guises, but never as himself, certainly never as Manu.

There was a glimmer of inquiry from Javed's mind when Pavek introduced Manu, a Gold Street scribe left behind when his employer pulled up stakes and ran for a noble estate outside the walls.

Hamanu had no difficulty raising a mind-bender's facade to defeat the commandant's curiosity. He had to scramble a bit, though, to keep up with the story that Pavek was cutting quickly out of whole cloth.

Somewhere in Pavek's fundamentally honest breast beat the heart of a boy who'd grown up in a templar orphanage, where deception was the mother of survival. If anyone in the atrium had questioned their host's tale, Hamanu felt certain Pavek's answers would have been both entertaining and achingly sincere. But no one was at all surprised that their high-templar host had scrounged up another guest.

As for the other guests, beside Javed and Mahtra, there were the Quraite druids, all eight of them, including the young half-elf Hamanu had met before. Beyond-the-walls druids weren't the only guests in Pavek's house; there were Urikites, too, eating at his table, and not merely the strays he'd swept off the streets: A cheery earth-cleric helped himself to a handful of dried berries while a smattering of merchants and artisans—most of whom would not have nodded to each other on a sunlit street—talked softly among themselves. That they spoke naively of an unattainable future didn't diminish the remarkable nature of the gathering, especially in the red-striped home of a high bureau templar.

Pavek was a remarkable man, sitting at the foot of his own table—when he sat. Somewhere in the house there had to be servants, but Pavek was the one who poured wine for Manu and anyone else who needed it. He was the one who brought fresh food from the sideboard and carried away the empty bowls. A truly remarkable man, Hamanu decided as he sipped his wine and settled among the cushions. Quite possibly remarkable enough to evoke a miracle.

Hamanu's spirit was as calm and optimistic as it had been since he'd left Tyr, which, perversely, left him thinking not about where he was or with whom he was, but about Windreaver. Having put himself in the midst of friends, the immortal champion found himself with nothing to say, except to an ancient troll he'd never speak to again, no matter what happened tomorrow. He hadn't helped himself, either, with his choice of illusion.

He'd made himself Manu as Manu had been in Deche. Smooth-chinned and slight, that Manu appeared years younger than the rest of Pavek's atrium guests. He was a child among adults, and they patronized him. Hamanu could have aged himself: Manu had been a hardened veteran by the time Myron of Yoram snatched him away from the trolls in the sinking lands. Lean and scarred, he could easily have been mistaken for a half-elf, if there'd been half-elves in those days and if he hadn't been short-statured, even among humans.

But, then, being mistaken for a half-elf wouldn't necessarily make Manu more welcome or more comfortable in this gathering. The only half-elfin the atrium was Ruari, the youngest of the Quraite druids, who'd collapsed under the weight of his terror a few years ago when the Lion-King had asked him his name. Surrounded by congenial folk on the opposite side of the table, Ruari wasn't talking to any of them, nor they to him. All Ruari's attention went into his wine cup, which had been filled too many times.

Among the numerous legends that attempted to explain how Athas came to be, there were many tales of elves and humans. Half the tales maintained that elves were humanity's first cousins, the oldest of the Rebirth races. The other half, predictably, maintained that elves were the last, the youngest, the race that yearned in its heart to be human again. All the tales agreed, though, that elves and humans found each other considerably more attractive than either race found their inevitable half-breed offspring.

Frequently abandoned by their parents, half-elves were a dark and lonely lot. A casual stroll through any slave market would uncover a disproportionately large number of half-elves, as would a roll call of the templar ranks in any city. Hamanu had always found them fascinating, and in this gathering of Pavek's friends, none was more fascinating than Ruari.

Ruari's aura was all defense, closed in on itself; it posed no challenge for a champion's idle curiosity. There was nothing about Ruari's life that didn't yield itself to Hamanu's very gentle Unseen urging. The young man had all the earmarks of a typical templar: a vulnerable heart, an innate conviction that he'd never be treated fairly, a greater appreciation for vengeance than justice, and a quick and cruel temper. There were scores just like him wearing yellow in this quarter and scattered through the encampments outside the city walls. But Ruari had followed a different path. His mother had been a free elf of the tribes and the open barrens, and when she abandoned her rape-begotten son, she'd dropped him in Telhami's arms instead of an Elven Market flesh-peddler's.

Telhami had reshaped Ruari's destiny, channeling all his empathy into Athas until she'd made a druid out of him.

She'd been ancient when she began her shaping work. Hamanu scarcely recognized his beloved archdruid on the surface of Ruari's memory, but underneath, closer to the half-elf's heart, Telhami hadn't changed at all. She might not have succeeded with one of her last novices if Pavek hadn't come along to shake Ruari's world down to its foundations before building it back up again.

Pavek's efforts could go for naught, too, before this night was over. Ruari was so handsome, so *attractive*, with his shades of copper hair, skin, and eyes; and Windreaver was an aching hole in Hamanu's spirit that hadn't begun to heal: Hamanu hid his hand beneath a cushion. He made a human fist and let an unborn dragon's talons dig into the heel of his palm.

He should have taken Manu outside the walls to Lord Ursos's estate, where catharsis—especially the catharsis of pain and fear—was an every-night ritual.

A sudden movement on Ruari's shoulder startled both the half-elf and the Lion-King. Half-elves had a special rapport with animals, which Ruari's druidry enhanced. The house critic—exhausted, no doubt, by children who thought it was a brightly colored toy—had taken refuge behind the copper curtain of Ruari's hair. But Manu's presence had roused it from its slumber. Both youths, Manu and Ruari, looked up from the slowly stretching lizard and met each other's eyes.

*Look away quick*, Hamanu advised, but druid-trained Ruari resisted Unseen suggestion.

Ruari's eyes narrowed, and he tried to stop the critic from climbing down his arm. Outrage, jealousy, and envy erupted from the half-elf's spirit, piquing the attention of the other sensitives in the atrium. Pavek, who alone knew how hot the fire Ruari played with truly burned, was frantic in his determination to break the attractive spell between them.

Pavek might have succeeded. Critic minds didn't comprehend sorcerous illusion. The critic saw what it saw and placed its feet accordingly. Once the lizard had ambled across the table and begun its journey up Manu's arm, Hamanu had to pay more attention to the substance of his illusion than to the half-elf glowering at him.

Then someone—possibly Javed, Hamanu quite didn't catch the voice—said something about the ways in which a veteran might fortify himself before a battle that might well be his last.

"I know what *I'd* do," Ruari interjected boldly. His narrow-eyed stare was still fastened on Manu, whom he clearly considered younger and less experienced than himself. "I'd find myself a woman and take her back to my room."

But Ruari didn't stop there. He went on, describing his wine-fueled fantasies—and they were fantasies. Hamanu perceived *that* on the top of Ruari's thoughts: the boy had dallied, nothing more. Pavek told his young friend to be quiet. By then it was too late.

Too late to visit Lord Ursos.

Too late for Ruari.

Though Pavek tried, putting himself squarely between them when the supper was, at last, concluded and the guests were departing. Ruari was the last to find his feet. Lopsided and stumbling from the wine, he aimed himself at an open door and headed off, alone, for his bed.

"He's hotheaded and harmless," Pavek insisted, and beneath his words the thought: *If you must consume someone, Great One, consume me.*

That would have defeated Hamanu's hopes and intentions entirely. They were alone now, except for the critic still balanced on Hamanu's shoulder. The lizard never flinched when Hamanu remade his illusion, becoming the tawny-skinned, black-haired man Pavek knew—or thought he knew—best.

"You will come to the southern gate at dawn."

They stood face-to-face, Pavek a bit shorter now, but not falling to his knees.

"I know."

Hamanu unslung the scroll case. "For Urik." He placed his unnaturally warm hands over Pavek's and molded them over the scuffed leather. "When I am gone, you will raise that guardian spirit of yours."

"I will try, Great One."

"You will not *try*, Pavek. You will succeed. You will raise Urik's guardian. You will evoke every

power it possesses, and you will destroy me, Pavek. That is my command."

"I don't know."

Rajaat, the Dark Lens, the Gray, the Black, and a dragon, they were all just words to Pavek. He tried to rank them in his mortal mind, but for him, there was no catastrophe greater than Urik without its Lion-King.

"You'll know, Pavek. You'll know when you see what I become. Your conscience won't trouble you."

"But Rajaat—" the templar protested. "A dragon will protect Athas from Rajaat, isn't that true? Isn't that what the dragon—what Borys the Butcher of Gnomes did for two thousand years?"

Rajaat wasn't Pavek's worry. Rajaat would be Sadira's worry, and Rkard's. Rajaat would be their punishment for doing nothing when they could have put an end to both Rajaat *and* dragons. Hamanu wouldn't talk to Pavek about Rajaat.

"Borys was the Butcher of *Dwarves*," Hamanu corrected gently, after forcing the War-Bringer out of his mind. "Gal-lard was the Gnome-Bane; he took the name of Nibenay after Borys became the dragon, which was a thousand years ago, not two thousand."

"But—" Pavek had been educated in the templar orphanage; he knew the official history of his city.

"We lie, Pavek. We've all lied; all the champions. When the wars ended, Tyr measured its years from one High Sun solstice to the next, a full three hundred and seventy-five days, but Draaj and Balic measured theirs by equinoxes. Their years were half as long. Albeorn—Andropinis of Balic—didn't want to be associated with the champion Elf-

Slayer. So we lied, we took history apart and put it back together again so mortals who might remember the Cleansing Wars might never think that we had led them." Hamanu squeezed Pavek's hands tighter around the scroll case, then let go. "This, and this alone, is the truth. Keep it safe."

Pavek frowned. The gesture tugged his scar and caused a twinge of pain, which Hamanu shared.

"You should let me fix this."

"More illusions? More taking history apart and putting it back different?" Pavek asked.

"You'd be a handsome man. Women would notice."

"It's not my face that keeps Kashi away," Pavek said honestly.

And Hamanu had to agree. He traced the ugly scar with a fingertip, but left it alone. "Good-bye, Pavek, Just-Plain Pavek. It's time for me to go."

Pavek started to nod, but his chin stayed down against his chest. "I will miss you, Great One." His voice was thick. "If ever I have a son, I will name him Hamanu."

"Kashi won't stand for that," Hamanu said as he turned away.

He was halfway to the door when Pavek called him back.

"Telhami—" the templar began. His face was raised; his eyes were glistening. He had to begin again. "Telhami will be waiting for you."

Hamanu cocked an eyebrow, not trusting his own voice.

"When... if... you'll become part of the guardian *after*, Great One. That's what she says. And she'll be waiting for you."

He hadn't thought about *after*; it gave him the strength to turn away and walk out the door.

## Chapter Fifteen

Ruari had wedged himself into the corner where his narrow cot met the walls of his room, the better to keep both cot and walls from swaying wildly. His eyelids were the heaviest part of his body, but he didn't dare let them close. Without the moonlight patterns on the wall to tell him up from down, he'd be overwhelmed with the sensation of falling backward, endlessly falling backward until his gut began to heave in the other direction.

The half-elf knew this because it had already happened, not once, but twice. He'd shed his

reeking clothes outside the room and crawled the last distance to his cot on his hands and knees. His mind wasn't working particularly well, but it seemed fairly certain that he'd never felt quite this sick, this stupid, this *drunk* before. Given a choice between death right then or holding the walls up and his gut down until dawn, Ruari would have chosen death without hesitation.

He could be forgiven, then, for thinking that the woman who appeared so suddenly in the doorway was a ghost come to claim him for eternity.

"Preserve and protect," he muttered, the conclusion of a druid blessing the first few words of which he'd forgotten.

Grinding his heels into the mattress, Ruari pushed himself backward, but his legs were weak and the walls of Pavek's red-and-yellow house were made of brick, not woven reeds, like the walls of his hut back in Quraite. Terror seized him when she reached the cot and laid a surprisingly warm—for death, anyway—hand on his foot.

Terror was nothing Ruari's wine-drenched gut could handle at that moment. He made a desperate sideways lunge. Death caught him before he hit the floor.

"You shouldn't drink so much," she chided him.

Death smoothed his dank hair behind his ears—which Ruari didn't appreciate. Ears were supposed to *match* and his didn't. One of them was more tapering, more elven, than the other. He tried to hide the defect; she caught his hand before he caught his hair.

"Relax," she suggested, raising his hand. "You'll feel better." She pressed her lips against his knuckles.

Very warm lips.

Very warm and relaxing lips.

Ruari did feel better than he had a moment ago. His gut was calmer, and when she put her-arms around him, the room no longer threatened to spin wildly, either sideways or backward. He protested when she released him, but it was only to stand a moment while she undid the laces of her shift. It fell in a dun-colored circle about her ankles, revealing soft curves that glowed in the moonlight.

Ruari rose to his knees, balancing easily on the knotted rope mattress. No trace of his drunken unsteadiness remained in his movements when he welcomed her.

"If you're not death," he whispered in her ear, "who are—?"

"Shhh-sh," she replied, surrendering to his embrace.

Entwined around each other, they sank as one onto the bed linens.

Later, Ruari thought they were flying high above the city.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pavek didn't try to sleep, didn't bother going to bed. After the midnight watch bells rang, when his household was at last asleep, he took a lamp and Hamanu's scroll case back to the atrium. Sitting where Urik's king had sat in a youth's disguise, Pavek cleared a place on the littered table and unrolled the vellum sheets.

He set aside the ones that he'd already read and started with the score or so of boldly scripted sheets that his king said contained the truth. Pausing only to refill the lamp when its light began to flicker, he read how Manu became a champion, how a champion cleansed Athas of trolls. The air was cold and the eastern horizon was faintly brighter than the west when Pavek came to the last words: the onus of genocide, rightfully, falls on me, on Hamanu. His heart was far colder.

Not long ago, on a night when he'd bandaged the Lion-King's hand, Hamanu had told him that no mortal could imagine or judge him. As he rolled the vellum and stuffed it into the case, Pavek tried to do both, and failed. He couldn't imagine the forces that had transformed the young man who'd come to his house into the champion who stood and watched the last trolls march silently to their deaths. More than that, he couldn't imagine how the man—and despite the vellum, Pavek thought of the Lion of Urik as a man, now, more than ever—he knew had remained sane.

And without knowing that, without being absolutely certain that Hamanu *was* sane, as mortals



measured sanity, Pavek couldn't begin to judge his king, his master, and— Whim of the Lion—his friend. He could confidently judge Rajaat more evil than Hamanu, but that was no sound footing for judging Hamanu.

Urik, Hamanu's pride, was a brutal city in a brutal world. No one knew its underside better than the low-rank templar Pavek had been. Life in Quraite, the only other place Pavek had lived, was certainly more pleasant, but did that make the tiny hamlet on the far side of the salt wastes an inherently better place? Pavek had no difficulty judging Telhami a good woman, but Telhami could be as cruel as the Lion-King when she chose to be, and she'd been Hamanu's beloved partner somewhere in the past. Without hesitation, Telhami would welcome Hamanu to that shadow world where the guardian's avatars dwelt.

The eastern sky was definitely brighter than the west when Pavek sealed the scroll case and got to his feet. His gold medallion thumped against his breastbone. He drew it out and studied the rampant lion engraved on its shiny face. While he wore a medallion, be it gold or cheap ceramic, Pavek was a templar. A templar obeyed his king and left the judging to the guardian.

Lamp in hand, Pavek went from room to room, awakening the Quraite druids whom he'd asked to join him on the south gate tower. Twice before, he'd awakened Urik's guardian spirit and brought it from the depths of Athas to the surface where it had guided him and preserved him. Hamanu believed the city's guardian could surmount one of Rajaat's dragons. After reading the vellum sheets, Pavek was less certain than ever. He was a novice in druidry, with only his devotion to his city and—yes—his devotion to the Lion-King to sustain him. He'd try to justify Hamanu's faith in him, but didn't want to be standing alone on the south gate tower when the Dragon of Urik came calling.

Five of the six druids were awake when Pavek came looking for them. Ruari's cast-off, reeking clothes were heaped outside his door. Considering how much the slight half-elf had drunk the previous evening and how unaccustomed he was to wine's perils, Pavek expected to find his troublesome young friend curled up on the floor, still too far gone to rouse. Instead, when he opened the door, his lamp revealed an empty room.

The bed-linen was disheveled. The patterned lattice night-shutters weren't merely open, they were gone. And there was a woman's shift on the floor beside Ruari's cot.

Clutching the neck of his shirt and the gold chain beneath it, Pavek shouted Ruari's name and got no response. He levered himself over the high windowsill and peered down into a night-dark alley, two stories below.

Nothing. By then, the other druids had joined him. They searched the house frantically, as aware of the brightening horizon as they were of the missing half-elf. A search of the alley produced a pair of shattered night-shutters, nothing more. A search of all the inside rooms brought word that there was a young woman missing, too.

"She got up in the middle of the night, my lord, put on her shift, and went to the door," a somewhat younger girl explained to Pavek. "I asked her what was the matter, and she didn't answer. She didn't seem to hear me at all. It were passing odd, my lord, but I didn't think no harm would come of it. Whim of the Lion, my lord."

To no one's surprise, the girl identified the linen garment Pavek held in his hand as belonging to the missing woman.

Whim of the Damned Lion, indeed. Pavek swore a string of templar oaths that widened the eyes of Quraiteers. But the whim of the Lion-King was the best, the only, explanation he could offer his stunned guests, and even then, Pavek didn't tell them how or why the half-elf might have caught the mighty king's eye.

"He's young. Impulsive and reckless," one of the other druids said. "He'll be here waiting for us when we get back."

"And we'll never hear the end of it," another added.

Pavek raked his hair and stared at the sky. In his heart, he reminded himself that he was not the one to judge Hamanu of Urik and that one life measured against Hamanu's crimes and accomplishments was not terribly significant. It was merely that the life had belonged to a friend, and he'd thought another

friend might respect it.

A druid needed nothing to work his magic, no sorcerous reagents, no divine paraphernalia, just his devotion to the unifying life-force of Athas and a belief in the righteousness of his evocation. Pavek had the former as he hurried his companions through the gray-lit streets, but he'd left the latter behind: a linen shift draped across a scuffed leather scroll-case.

Urik's situation had changed overnight, and not for the better. From the south gate tower, Pavek saw the roofs and kitchen-smoke of four market villages, the velvet expanse of Urik's farmland, and well beyond all that, three dusty, torch-lit smears where the armies of Nibenay, Gulg, and Giustenal had reestablished themselves during the night. Urik's army had fallen back into a thick black line between the farmland and the enemy.

"Orders," Javed said when Pavek stepped back from the tower balustrade. "Everybody's been moving all night. Everybody's tired, and we're jammed up like fish in a barrel. Not enough room to fight. Not for us or them. There's not going to be a battle."

The ebony-skinned elf stared straight at Pavek, expecting confirmation or denial.

"He told me to be here at dawn," was Pavek's answer, until he added—foolishly—"Ruari's missing. Gone from his bed. A girl, too."

It was a foolish remark because there wasn't a full-elf anywhere who'd ever truly sympathized with a half-elf. If the missing girl had been an elf, that might have gotten a rise out of the Hero of Urik, but for Ruari the best Javed could manage was a sigh and an offhand gesture.

"He destroyed the trolls, every last one of them," the commandant said, as if that accounted for Ruari's fate. "He knows that whether there's battle today or not, he's not walking away from this battlefield. Not the way he walked onto it."

The Hero of Urik had performed some unpleasant duties during his forty-year tenure. Every few years, he'd marched the slave levies into the barrens and kept watch over them until the Dragon of Tyr showed up.

"We're meat, Pavek," said the Hero of Urik. "Less than meat. Just grease and ash. That's all that was left when Borys was done with them. But I saw those shards, too." He shook his head. "We die so the Lion can fight Rajaat. It's fair, I suppose, but I'd rather fight Rajaat myself."

Beyond the steel medallion he wore, Javed didn't have much faith in magic, whether it was sorcery or druidry. But it was magic that drew them all to the balustrade when a sergeant shouted:

"There he is!"

The gates hadn't opened, and there were no outbuildings beyond the tower where Hamanu could have hidden while he strapped on the glowing armor that had been his hallmark at the front of Urik armies for thirteen ages. Yet, he was there, a solitary figure, shining in the light as the bloody sun poked above the horizon, walking south to face his enemies' might.

Pavek wanted to believe. He wanted to feel his heart soar with admiration and awe for a true champion. He even wanted the despair of knowing not even a champion could surmount the odds the Lion-King faced. Instead, he felt nothing, a dull, sour nothing because, in taking Ruari, Hamanu had proved he was no different than his enemies, and there was no hope for Athas.

Still, he couldn't turn away. He watched, transfixed, as the striding figure grew smaller and smaller, until he couldn't see it at all.

"What next?" one of the Quraite druids asked. "Is it time to evoke the guardian?"

Pavek shook his head. He sat down with his back against the southern balustrade and buried his face in his hands. The sun began its daily climb from the eastern horizon. The sky changed color, and the first hints of the day's heat could be felt in the air. Pavek raised his head and studied the light. At the rate Hamanu had been walking, he should have been nearing one of the villages. He lowered his head again.

"Pavek!"

He looked up. The voice was so familiar. He thought it had come from his heart, not his ears—but the others with him had heard it, too, and were looking at the stairs.

"Pavek!"

Pavek was on his feet when Ruari cleared the last stain.

"Pavek—you'll never believe what happened—"

The young man stumbled. Javed caught him—which was a miracle of another sort—and kept him on his feet while a war-bureau sergeant shoved a bowl of water into his hands. Ruari gulped and gagged and threw himself another step closer to Pavek. He'd run himself to the limit of his endurance. His hair was dark with sweat and plastered against his neck and shoulders. His clothes were dark, too; his sweat-stained shirt hung loosely from his heaving shoulders.

Pavek needed another moment to realize the shirt was silk, trimmed with gold, nothing Ruari could have found in the red-and-yellow house in the templar quarter.

Then he seized Ruari's wrists and gave them a violent shake. "Where were you, Ru? I looked all over. You weren't in your room."

"You'll never believe—" Ruari repeated before his lungs demanded air.

"Try me."

They gave him more water and a stool to sit on.

"I was drunk, Pavek—"

"I know."

"I was so drunk I thought she was Death when she came into my room. But she wasn't, Pavek," Ruari gulped more water.

Pavek waited. He didn't really need to hear anything more. It was enough that Ruari had survived whatever encounter he'd had with the Lion-King, because, surely, that was Hamanu's shirt he was wearing. He wanted nothing more than to grab his friend and hold him tight, but Ruari had gotten his breath and was talking again.

"She was so beautiful, standing there in the moonlight. I thought—I thought it couldn't get better, then we were *flying*, Pavek—"

Pavek started to shake his head in disbelief, then curbed himself. Ruari hadn't been in his room; Ruari had been with Hamanu—whatever else the half-elf had seen or thought or chose to believe—and he could very well have been flying. There had to be some explanation for the shirt.

"Then, I woke up in this huge bed—on the palace roof. The palace roof! Do you believe it?"

Pavek nodded.

"Wind and fire—I knew you'd be looking for me. I found some clothes and got out of there as quick as I could—I knew you'd be angry, Pavek. I knew you would. But what does it *mean*?"

"Whim of the Lion," a druid and sergeant said together.

"What about the girl?" Pavek asked.

Ruari blushed; his already heat-flushed skin turned a shade darker than the bloody sun. "I sent her back to your house—in a shirt, Pavek. I found another shirt for her and sent her back to the templar quarter."

There was laughter, from the women as well as the men. Ruari's face became dangerously bright.

"What else was I supposed to do?" he demanded.

"Nothing, Ru," Pavek assured him. "You did the right thing." Then he welcomed his friend back from the presumed-dead with a bone-snapping embrace. "What's her name?"

"I don't know, Pavek. But she's beautiful, and I think she loves me," Ruari whispered his answers before they separated. "I think it's forever."

"I'm sure it is." Pavek held Ruari at arm's length; the young man was clearly besotted. But that was hardly surprising. "I'm sure you'll be very happy together."

He saw them together in his mind's eye—Ruari and a beautiful woman and children, also beautiful; one of whom had yellow eyes. Pavek hadn't ever had a vision before; prophecy wasn't at all common among druids... or templars. But he believed what he saw, and it lifted his heart. He hugged Ruari again, then let him go, and walked by himself to the tower's southern balustrade where, with his vision still strong in his mind, he stared at the empty road until he could see both of them together.

A hand fell heavily on his shoulder: Javed, his face deep in a hard, unreadable expression.

"Manu?" the elven commandant asked.

"Yes."

Javed's hand left Pavek's shoulder. It made a fist that struck the black breastplate armor over the commandant's heart: a lifetime of unquestioning obedience followed by an eyes-closed sigh.

"He was stronger than his nature. There's hope."

Pavek nodded. "Hope," he agreed.

But not for long. While both men watched, a second sun began to rise where the southern road met the horizon. It was as bright as the eastern sun and the same bloody color.

"Whim of the lion," one of the sergeants swore; the rest of them had lost their voices.

The templars lost more a few moments later when every medal-wearing man and woman collapsed. Pavek wrapped his arms around his head, lest his skull burst from the fire within. He beat his forehead on the rough planks of the watchtower floor. That helped, countering pain with pain. Someone stood behind him and broke his medallion's golden chain; that helped more.

But by then, it wasn't the physical pain that kept him on his knees with his face to the floor. It was the certain knowledge that the Lion-King, the Unseen presence in his life since he'd turned fifteen and received his first crude, ceramic medallion, had released him, had abandoned him, rather than destroy him.

Slowly, Pavek straightened and sat back on his heels. Javed was in front of him; his lips were bleeding where he'd bitten them. There were no words for what they felt as they steadied themselves against the balustrade and stood up. They turned away from each other and looked south, where the second sun had vanished behind—or within—a towering pillar of dust and light.

One of the lesser-ranked templars in the gate tower began a cheer. It died unfinished in her throat. No mortal could celebrate what was happening in the south once the sounds of death and sorcery reached the Urik walls.

The cloud-pillar grew until it could grow no higher—as high and mighty as the towering plumes that heralded an eruption of the Smoking Crown volcano to the northwest. Then, like those sooty plumes, the pillar began to flatten and spread out at its top. Lightning arcs connected the outer edge of the spreading cloud with the ground. The lightning danced wildly; it persisted longer than the blue bolts of a Tyr-storm.

Pavek knew—they all knew, though none of them was a weather witch—that the bolts sprang up from the ground, not down from the cloud.

The templars of Nibenay, Gulg, and Giustenal were not as fortunate as their Urikite peers. Their kings had sacrificed them and the rest of the three enemy armies to the dragon taking shape within the seething pillar.

Without warning, the cloud disintegrated before their awestruck eyes. A deep, rumbling roar struck the tower a few heartbeats later. Like a mighty fist—a dragon's fist—it drove each and every one of them backward. The tower shuddered and swayed; strong men and women fell to their knees and screamed in abject terror. Behind them, within Urik itself, roofs and walls collapsed, their lesser tumult subsumed in the ongoing echo of the southern blast. An echo that seemed, to Pavek, to last forever.

"We're next!" he shouted. He felt his words in his lungs and on his tongue, but his voice never penetrated his deafened ears.

But one voice did: *Behold! The Dragon of Urik!*

And another voice, immediately after the first: *Now, Pavek.*

He crawled to the balustrade. The blast-weakened rail crumbled in his hand when he clutched it. Pavek stood carefully, looked south. Everything was quiet beneath the light and heat of a single sun. The cloud was gone—as if it had never been. The three dark sprawls where the three enemy armies had camped were gone, too. The places where they'd been were as pale and dazzling as bleached bones in the morning light.

But the dark line of Urik's army still circled the still-green fields. They'd survived. They'd all survived. Their king was, indeed, stronger than the nature Rajaat and the other champions had given him.

*Now, Pavek. Now, or never!*

There was a black dot on the southern road, moving toward them. Far smaller than the monstrous creature Pavek had seen within the cloud, he didn't, at first, comprehend the words echoing in

his thoughts. He didn't comprehend that they had not come from a frantic Quraite druid, but from the moving dot, the dragon, racing toward Urik's walls.

All the druid magic Pavek had learned from Telhami followed the same pattern. He'd kneel, place his palms in front of his knees, and cast the image of his spell deep into the ground, evoking the guardian essence of Athas. If the casting and the image were right, and the guardian was well disposed toward him, the magic would occur. Very simple, very tidy, and not at all the way Pavek had roused Urik's specific guardian twice before.

There were no mnemonics or patterns in Pavek's mind when he evoked the city's essence, just need—burning, desperate need.

Surely need had never been greater than the moment when Pavek reached out of himself to evoke—to implore and beg for—the Urik guardian's aid. The other times, the guardian had been pleased to save a handful of individuals. Surely, the guardian would be pleased now to save the entire city.

Hamanu had thought so, and as he poured himself into the evocation, Pavek believed in Hamanu and the guardian equally, together. The guardian was the life essence of the city and Hamanu—the Hamanu that Pavek had known—had just died for it. No one could do more than the Lion-

King had done, yet Pavek tried, pouring himself into the evocation until he was empty, until they could see the dragon clearly: a scintillating black presence, as tall as the south gate tower and coming closer, with nothing—nothing at all—rousing from the depths to stop him.

Wisps of netherworld mist rose from the dragon's lustrous hide. His shape shifted subtly as he approached the tower. The changes were difficult for a mortal eye to perceive, but the eldest of the Quraite druids had a notion:

"He's not finished, not fully realized."

Pavek remembered the vellum, remembered the passages about Borys and the hundred years during which the unfinished dragon had ravaged the heartland before he regained his sanity.

"He's bigger than the Dragon of Tyr," Javed said to no one in particular; he was the only one among them who could make the comparison. "Different, yet the same."

"The guardian, Pavek." That was Ruari. "Where's the guardian?"

"I couldn't evoke it," he answered, giving voice to defeat and despair. "They can't be in the same place, Hamanu and the guardian."

A chorus of curses erupted, followed by moans of fear and despair, and a shout as one of the druids chose to leap from the tower to her death rather than face the Dragon of Urik. The dragon was a hundred paces away—a hundred of Pavek's paces, about eighty of Javed's, about ten of the dragon's. They could see it quite clearly now, more clearly than anyone truly wished to see a dragon.

Pavek, who'd seen Hamanu's true shape, saw the resemblance, though, in truth, the resemblance wasn't great. The talons were the same, though much larger, and the dragon's eyes were sulphur yellow. They were lidless eyes, now, covered with iridescent scales that shimmered in the light. Their pupils were sword-shaped, sword-sized. They did not seem so much to be eyes looking out as they seemed to be openings into a fathomless, dark space.

The longer Pavek looked at them, the less resemblance there seemed to be, until the dragon tilted its massive head.

"He sees us," Javed said. "Hamanu knows we're here. Go away, O Mighty One! Urik isn't your home any longer. Go fight Rajaat!"

The dragon cocked its head to the other side. Pavek was tempted—they were all tempted—to hope that something of Urik's Lion-King remained, resisting the madness that had claimed Borys's sanity for a hundred years. Hope vanished when the dragon roared and a gout of steaming grit battered the massive gate directly beneath them.

The dragon strode forward, its arms spread wide enough to seize a mekillot, ghastly liquid dripping from its bared fangs. Pavek's heart froze beneath his ribs; he couldn't keep his eyes open. The blasted, battered walls shuddered, and then there was light—brilliant, golden light that blinded him though his eyes were closed. There was a second dragon roar, and a third, with mortal screams between them. The air reeked and steamed.

Pavek thought he was going to die with the others, but death didn't take him, and when he opened his eyes he saw that everyone around him remained alive, as well. Those who'd screamed had screamed from terror, not injury.

The dragon had fallen. It lay on its back, stunned, but bearing no apparent wounds. Briefly—so briefly, Pavek thought it was his imagination—there seemed to be a man sprawled in the sun, a familiar man with tawny skin and long, black hair, rather than a dragon. But it was definitely a dragon that sprang to its feet and roared defiantly.

Urik's walls replied with another golden flash, and the dragon retreated.

"The Lion-Kings!" a templar shouted. "The eyes of the Lion-Kings."

The huge crystal eyes of the carved and painted portraits that marched along the city's walls were the source of the golden light that flashed a third time to drive the dragon farther back.

"The guardian," Pavek corrected as he began to laugh and shout for joy.

His celebration was contagious, but short-lived. The dragon didn't give up, and though the guardian lights drove it back every time it surged forward, the stalemate could not endure indefinitely.

And wouldn't have to. Well before midday, there was another cloud pillar spilling over the southern horizon. They speculated, exchanging the names of their enemies, until the cloud was large enough, close enough, that they could see the blue lightning seething inside.

"Tyr-storm," was the general consensus, but Javed and Pavek knew better:

"Rajaat," they told each other.

"They'll fight; the Lion-King will win, the Dragon of Urik will win," Javed continued.

"Not here," Pavek countered. "They'll destroy the city."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe he'll see it coming and go south to meet it. Far enough south to save the city."

They made fools of themselves, then, while Rajaat's storm cloud drew closer, jumping up and down, waving their arms, shouting, trying to get the dragon's attention. It was mad, or mindless; it didn't understand, never looked over its shoulder to see another enemy coming up behind it.

If it—if the Dragon of Urik perceived Rajaat as the enemy. If enough of Hamanu remained within it, hating his creator. If it hadn't become Rajaat's final champion, destined to cleanse humanity from everywhere in the heartland.

The guardian was enough against a mad, mindless dragon, but not against Rajaat's conscious insanity. Pavek slipped down the tower stairs. He opened the postern door—its warding had been dispelled when Hamanu released the medallions—and began walking toward the dragon.

"Rajaat," he shouted, though the words he held in his mind were the words Hamanu had written and the images they conjured. "Rajaat is coming to destroy Urik."

The dragon surged forward, arms out, reaching for Pavek. The yellow Lion-King lights drove it back.

Pavek tried again: "Urik, Hamanu—Rajaat will destroy *Urik!*"

Another surge, another flash.

"The fields, Hamanu! He'll destroy the fields where the green grain grows!"

This time the dragon stopped. It cocked its head, as it had before, and swiveled its long neck down to get a better look.

"Rajaat will destroy the fields, Hamanu. Winning's no good, if the grain won't grow."

A brimstone sigh washed over him. The dragon straightened and turned. It pointed its snout at the approaching storm and along the horizon, swaying from east to west, where—Pavek hoped—it saw the fields. At last the dragon roared and began walking—then running—to the south.

\* \* \* \* \*

The blue storm raged above the black dragon and the dragon raged back. Neither fought with conscious intent, but instinct was strong, as was hatred—especially in the dragon, which moved constantly to the south, then to the southeast, as it fought. When they entered the Sea of Silt, they raised

enough dust to blot out the sun for the three days they needed to reach the island where another dragon had built a city around a prison.

Rajaat, the War-Bringer, the first sorcerer—the creator of the city-building dragon and the relentless beast who'd brought the blue-lightning storm back to its source—cast the most powerful spells Athas had yet witnessed, in a futile attempt to resurrect the conscious mind of the black dragon, the Dragon of Urik. If he could *find* Hamanu's thoughts, Rajaat could manipulate them, even from his twin prisons—in the Hollow beneath the Black and at the bottom of the lava-filled lake. If Rajaat could find Hamanu within the dragon, he knew he could influence the farmer's son, deceive him, and regain control over his creation; his powers were, in every way, indisputably greater.

If the War-Bringer had had more than a toehold in the substantial world, he could have crushed the black dragon as he'd crushed Borys. But he had only Tithian and Tithian's storms, which had already proved ineffective. And he lost Tithian, too, shortly after the black dragon entered Ur Draxa, when Tithian's mortal enemies from Tyr planted themselves on the rim of the lava lake and drove their erstwhile king back into the Dark Lens.

That cleared a path, which the dragon followed into the molten rock. It roared; it howled as even its tough hide was seared away by the heat. For an instant, there was thought within the agony. Rajaat's hope soared; he spun dense sorcery from the Hollow, promising to heal his wayward champion's wounds and grant his wishes.

*I wish for your bones, your heart, your shadow.*

The dragon leapt out of the lava, trailing fire behind him. He arched his back and dived beneath the molten surface. Beyond the reach of curse or care, he plunged to the bottom, where lava became stone, where the remnants of Rajaat's substance had formed a crystal matrix around the Dark Lens. Smashing the crystal, he gathered the shattered pieces in his arms. He left the Lens for the mortals to destroy or control, as they wished; it was merely an artifact, neither inherently good or evil. Then, with the last of his strength, he took himself into the stone heart of Athas.

\* \* \* \* \*

Athas claimed the black dragon. It stripped him of his hard-won treasures; swallowing the War-Bringer's substance while it sealed the dragon himself in a tomb that shrank and squeezed. Then, when there was nothing left of the dragon, Athas restored Hamanu's sanity, while leaving him encased in stone. He was still immortal: he couldn't die, even without air, water, or food, with the weight of the world pressed around him.

There was no end of Hamanu, no end to his memories as Athas pummeled him and polished him, a living pebble moving slowly through the world's gut. He relived every moment of his life. He suffered. He regretted. He endured the pain and torment of the choices he'd made; then the Lion-King of Urik relived his life again.

And again until Athas was done with Hamanu and spat him out.

Hamanu was senseless when he fell from an unknown height. He landed hard on his shoulder and rolled to his side, unable for a moment to perceive his surroundings or to comprehend that he was living, not remembering.

Slowly, and with a fragility that had never been a part of his remembered life, Hamanu rediscovered the muscles, sinew, and bones of his body. He found his feet, and then his hands, which he used to steady himself as he stood. The world was smooth beneath his fingers, hard and warm and—following a jolt of consciousness that nearly cost Hamanu his balance—utterly without illusion. The flesh he felt was his own simple, vulnerable, *forgotten* flesh. Wherever he'd come, Hamanu had left the Dragon of Urik behind. His whims had no power and the ache in his shoulder where he'd landed couldn't be numbed with an idle thought.

Belatedly, Hamanu found his eyes and opened them; after so many stone-bound memories, he'd forgotten sight, the world that was smooth, hard, and warm was also gently luminous, casting a soft golden light onto a young man's hands, a young man's arms, legs, and torso. The surface lay a hand's

depth within the light. He moved his hands through the light, seeking but not finding the gap through which he must have fallen.

"It took you long enough."

Sound startled Hamanu and he dropped into a brawler's crouch. The ease of his movements startled him as well, but not as much as what his eyes revealed when he turned around: The glowing chamber defied easy measurement. It could have been a hundred paces square or a thousand, yet at its center, hovering higher than his head, Hamanu saw his own ostentatious, uncomfortable throne. And sitting on the throne was a figure he remembered well, a half-man, half-lion figure that his laborers had painted on his city walls, a black-maned figure with a naked golden sword at his side.

The Lion-King of Urik, who'd saved Hamanu when he was deeply disguised and blundered too close to the Black.

The *guardian* of Urik.

For the first time in his life—if he was alive—Hamanu was speechless. He looked from the Lion-King to his own hand, his own mortal hand returned to him through sorcery he couldn't fathom and for reasons he dared not guess. Myriad questions filled his mind; answers followed, all but one.

"Why could I never find you?"

The Lion-King descended from his throne. He seemed no taller than Hamanu, no stronger, but Hamanu remembered illusion's power and was not deceived.

"I sought my city's guardian. You could have revealed yourself," the now-mortal man complained. "For Urik, you could have revealed yourself."

"My spirit—the spirit of Urik that you engendered—was there from the beginning. I revealed myself a thousand times, ten thousand times. You were always looking in the wrong place, Manu. You became a great king—a great man—but you cherished your past and it remained with you, until you were ready to part with it."

Hamanu opened his mouth and closed it again. He was a proud man, but throughout his long life he'd cherished nothing... nothing after Dorean. He hadn't died, so he'd lived from one day to the next until Rajaat had made him a champion. As a champion, he'd won a terrible war and governed a mighty city and become the Dragon of Urik. As a dragon, he'd entombed himself in stone beneath a lava lake, and there recollected his entire life more times than he cared to count. He knew in the depths of his being that he cherished nothing.

Yet the Lion-King, the guardian of Urik, had spoken the truth, and Hamanu couldn't argue with the truth. Once again he studied his own mortal hand.

"How long?" he asked.

"A thousand years in the stone," the guardian replied. "A thousand years to understand yourself."

"A thousand years to scrape off Rajaat's curse," Hamanu countered. "A thousand years to return to the beginning, to Urik. Does my city endure?"

"*Your* city! Have you learned nothing, Manu? Will you go back into the stone for another thousand years?"

"A thousand years or ten thousand. What difference would it make? Regret won't change my memories; punishment won't, either. What I did cannot be undone. Leave me in the stone beside Windreaver until the sun and the wind scour our cursed bones—but answer my question: Does my city, endure?"

The guardian threw back his lion's head and laughed. "*My* city, Manu, *my* city! It was never yours. No man—not even a cursed and immortal champion—can possess a city."

Hamanu was mortal again, with no more power than he'd had long ago when he'd faced Myron Troll-Scorcher on the dusty plain. He faced the guardian as he'd faced the Troll-Scorcher, armed with only his quick intelligence and stubbornness.

"*My* city, because I gave it its shape. I gave it its strength to stand against what Athas had become, against what Rajaat had done through me and the others. *My* city, because without me you'd be the guardian spirit of an underground lake. I gave you my shape, my strength. You are me and Urik is my city."



The guardian ceased laughing. He bared the Lion-King's fangs. His sulphur eyes seethed, then quieted. "You talk too much, Manu. That mouth of yours will get you killed... eventually. *Our* city, Manu. *Our* city endures. Look into the light, and see what Urik has become."

A curtain of light appeared between them. For a moment, it was a tapestry of Urik, of what Urik had become in the thousand years since Hamanu's dragon had departed. Then the curtain grew brighter and the images faded.

"Pass through, Manu," the guardian commanded. "There is nothing more for you to do in this world. Your destiny was fulfilled: Urik survives. Urik will survive."

He was free. After a thousand years of life and a thousand years in the stone, Hamanu had come to the end of his path. He was free to walk into the light.

There was music: a reed pipe melody. There was a woman to welcome him.

And, further on, they found a waterfall.