

THE CLOAKMASTER CYCLE

Book 1:

BEYOND
THE MOONS

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Prologue
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"Jettison away!"

"Aye, Captain, jettison away!" The mate's words were almost swallowed by a shrieking crash. The flying ship's deck shuddered as a section of the sterncastle shattered in a rain of wood and iron splinters. An agonized howl echoed from below, somewhere along the catapult ball's destructive path. The captain and mate, both staggered by the hit, grabbed the rail.

"Damn my eyes! Hard to port, helmsman," bawled the captain. "Get us out of their fire, now! Mister Yandars, see to the damage below!"

"Aye, sir," the helmsman and the mate responded simultaneously. The captain hardly took notice, certain that her orders were being carried out. Already she was striding to the sterncastle, her long, fine cloak billowing behind her. She found the ballista crew frantically struggling with its weapon. Two men were just giving the last turns to the winch that bent back the powerful bow, while a third laid a massive bolt into place.

"Take your aim carefully, lads," the captain intoned, trying to soothe her artillerists' shaken nerves. "We'll be coming about in a moment. They'll steer to port to avoid our jettison. When they do, take aim for an eye. If you can hit her square, you should cause those villains some grief." She laid a soothing hand on the loader and watched over the firer's shoulder as the man adjusted the aiming screws, laying in the shot.

Finally satisfied, the artillerist jerked the weapon's lanyard, pulling the trigger. The ballista's great bow released its burden with an off-key twang that hung in the air as the bolt shot away toward the enemy. At first, the shaft arced straight and true, only to skitter off the enemy ship's rounded hull just yards from the bulging, domed porthole.

"Faster, boys! Load and fire again!" The captain thumped the loader on the back to get him moving. "Keep our course steady," she shouted to the helmsman, "till we fire again, then bring-

The whistling whine of an incoming projectile interrupted the captain's words. Before anyone could react, another catapult stone struck, ripping through the ship just aft of where the captain stood. The deck buckled under her feet, shearing the ballista from its mountings. The gigantic crossbow heaved over, one end of the metal bow savagely impaling the loader, pinning the writhing man to the deck. Another of the artillerists was pitched against the rail. The decorative spindles shattered under the man's weight and he plunged over the side into the darkness with a pleading scream. The captain was flung backward against a bulkhead, wood splinters bloodying her arm and face. She slid to the deck, dazed by the blow.

Before the officer could recover, she was gently scooped up in the massive arms of her cabin boy. Head still groggy, the captain felt herself being carried toward the forecastle. "Private Gomja is here for you, Captain," the cabin boy offered in a deep, rolling voice.

"Captain, are you injured?" the first mate frantically inquired when he met the pair while coming up from below.

The captain waved off the mate's question while ignoring her cabin boy's ministrations. "Report on the damage below." Instinctively, she knew the information would be bad. The last two shots from the enemy had been too well aimed for the Penumbra to escape lightly.

"Captain, Mister Tyreen reports the helm was cracked by that last shot. The wizard's trying to hold it together, but he says we'll have to cut our speed if we want to keep it from breaking up." The first mate looked worriedly toward the stern, where their pursuers followed.

"Blast and damn!" sputtered the captain, pushing herself out of the cabin boy's arms. "Well, we can't run anymore. Get below and tell Tyreen I want every drop of speed he can get out of her, and I don't give a damn about his helm. We're going to run for the cloud bank and make for land."

"But the helm-"

"Mister Yandars, this is our only chance, so just do as you're ordered! Unless, of course, you're willing to trust your fate to them." The captain pointed emphatically toward the dark shapes astern, three hulking ships slowly closing on the small, crippled merchantman. "Tyreen's got to hold it together till then. If my rudders are right, that'll be Krynn below us. There's a fair-sized continent down there-Ansalon it's called on the charts. We'll make to land on it. Once we're down, Tyreen can make his repairs."

Mister Yandars fearfully glanced back at their pursuers, his face pale. "Aye, Captain," he said weakly, "I'll see your orders are carried out."

"Very good, mister. Helmsman, take us into the clouds," commanded the bloodied captain. The rigging creaked slightly as the Penumbra nosed downward.

Chapter One

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'Dragon!'

Teldin Moore stopped in midswing, and the hoe he held almost flew from his grasp. Liam's excited shout, practically in Teldin's ear, was as startling as the word itself. "Liam, by the returned gods," Teldin snapped as he dug the hoe into the ground, "I'm right here!" The tall farmer swung around to give an icy, blue-eyed glare at his shorter, older neighbor, but a dribble of sweat, brought out by the setting sun, dripped down his forehead. Teldin blinked as it dropped into his eyelashes, ruining the reproachful glare he hoped to achieve.

The pair were standing in the middle of the melon field, which filled one small corner of Teldin's land. The farmer's property extended from his cabin to a wooded ridge an acre away, beyond which lay Liam's farm. Teldin scanned the horizon as he tried to guess just what had gotten his neighbor so excited. To the west, the yellow-red glare of the setting sun burned through the thin clouds to dazzle his eyes. Blinking, Teldin let his gaze follow the cottonwoods that ran past the edge of the field. There was no sign of a dragon above the stream where the cottonwoods grew. Teldin turned almost completely about and faced northeast, where his simple cabin stood. The wavering branches of an apple orchard behind the house rose above the roofline, but even there Teldin saw no sign of anything that looked like a dragon. Neither did the chickens in the yard show any sign of alarm. Instead they lazily scratched the ground outside their coop. The young farmer threw one last glance around the small dale that enclosed his land. "Where?" Teldin skeptically demanded. Liam Shal, with his worn, ill-fitting clothes flapping like a scarecrow's, bobbed nervously and excused himself with a grimace of embarrassment. The

scrawny old farmer practically hopped from foot to foot, one hand jabbing at the sky, the other balancing against his own hoe, firmly set in the broken dirt. The scrawny melon plants' yellowing leaves scratched at Liam's bare legs. "Teldin, look up in the sky! It must be a dragon, right? You saw them in the wars right? That's a dragon, isn't it?"

Teldin leaned against his hoe, dubiously scanning the horizon where Liam pointed. The older man was a good farmer, but Teldin knew his neighbor had never seen much of the real world. Even at dusk, weeding out the melon field was hot work, and the farmer wondered if his neighbor had conjured up an imaginary dragon as an excuse for a break. Not that he really cared, for his own taut muscles suddenly motionless after a day's worth of hoeing, ached agonizingly. Stiffly flexing his shoulders, Teldin brushed back trickles of sweat into his stubby, light brown hair, and, shading his eyes, peered into the reddish western sky. This time he took care not to gaze into the setting sun, but looked more toward the faint image of Solinari, the Moon - of Silver, as it hid behind wispy clouds.

At first there was nothing to see. Teldin looked toward his neighbor. "Liam, you've been in the sun too long," he declared with a snort.

"No, look over the big oak on the ridge, just below the clouds!" Liam thrust his arm under Teldin's nose, his finger pointing toward a distant spot in the sky.

Teldin barely noticed the rich, salty tang of sweat and dirt emanating from Liam's grimy skin. Instead he squinted and tried to sight on Liam's outstretched fingertip without luck. Then a sparkle, hanging over the top of the big oak that Liam had named, caught his eye. A familiar childhood landmark at the end of the field, the tree stood above most of the others. Teldin squeezed his eyes down to wrinkled slits against the glare, then saw a series of brilliant, red-gold flashes that seemed to shoot from the oak's topmost branches. Before the two farmers could say another word, though, it was gone into the wispy tails of a glowing cloud bank.

"Dragon fire, I bet, just like you saw in the war," Liam blurted, obviously confident in his identification. The older man nevertheless looked eagerly to Teldin for evidence that he had guessed right. Although half again Teldin's age, Liam had the bubbling enthusiasm of a child.

"Could be," Teldin cautiously allowed, not letting the old man influence him. With such scant evidence, Teldin reserved his judgment, pointedly avoiding the faults of his late father. Amdar's fierce opinions had been one of the reasons Teldin had run away to become a soldier in the first place.

The few dragons Teldin had seen as a youth during the War of the Lance were always at rest and never fighting. The truth, which Teldin had never broached with Liam, was that in his years as a soldier, the young farmer had been little more than a mule skinner. The older farmer was pleased to know a "war hero" and Teldin just could not disillusion him.

The fact was that he had never been in anything but a few minor skirmishes, let alone seen a dragon fight in earnest, using its fearsome breath to scorch men to cinders. Coming after the warriors, though, he'd seen the results. At the Battle of the High Clerist's Tower, Teldin had buried men-and things that weren't men-all roasted by dragon fire, blasted by lightning, or eaten away by corrosive spittle. It was an awful memory that filled him with horror, and he quickly shut it out of his mind, but not before his neck instinctively tensed and strained already stiff muscles even more.

Liam, still prancing about from foot to foot, thought of dragons only as exciting. The grizzled neighbor finally despaired that the thing he had seen would return. The lustrous evening sky was already darkening. Both Solinari, with its smooth, silver disk, and Lunitari, Kryn's other, blood-red, moon, were well up into the heavens. Stars were faintly visible in the east, opposite the setting sun.

"Well, it's gone," Liam said dejectedly, after spitting at a gob of dirt between the melon vines. Teldin blinked, trying to get the sun's dazzle and sweat out of his eyes.

Teldin walked over beside his neighbor. "All for the best, Liam," he consoled. "Dragons are bad business." Taking up the hoe, the young farmer hefted it for another try at the weeds that lay thick among the melon hills at his feet. His shoulders, barely rested, ached so that Teldin let out a surprised grunt, and he let the hoe fall. "Oh, gods, that's enough for today."

Teldin stiffly clapped his friend on the shoulder. "No more today, Liam. You should be getting home. I can finish the field tomorrow." The pair had worked all day and, even if they were not done, Teldin was content with their progress.

Liam stood firm. "Teldin, these melons have got to get weeded, and you've been letting it slip for a week now. Those weeds are going to choke off your vines real soon. If this were my field, I'd be out here hoeing by torchlight."

Teldin shrugged somewhat painfully, ignored the older man, and began to march off toward his cabin. "It's not your field," he called back upon reaching the porch. "There are more than enough melons hoed for me. Who else is going to eat them?" Teldin set the hoe against the cabin's log wall and disappeared inside. The cabin was old and small but well cared for. Teldin's grandfather had cut the timber back when he first had claimed the land. He had dressed out the logs and cut the joints to fit them together. Teldin's father had replaced the thatch roof with hand-split shingles and built the stone chimney that thrust up through the center of the roof, replacing his father's original smokehole. After returning from the war, Teldin, grateful to be home, added the porch that wrapped around the front, and whitewashed the logs until the place looked like the village houses found in other parts of Estwilde. The whitewash gave the cabin a cozy, speckled gray look that Teldin liked. The house seemed to blend in with the trunks of the few trees around it. Although he had lived alone ever since his father had died, Teldin kept the house neat and in good condition. It was home, and now he was proud of it. He had run away once, but now he was staying.

When Liam didn't come out of the field, where he still stubbornly swung his hoe, Teldin stepped back onto the porch and held up a pair of wooden cups. "You can stay and hoe if you want, but I've got a fine cheese and a fat skin of wine cooling in the stream. Join me for a swim and a drink!" he yelled. "Or are you too old to remember how to do that?" Teldin grinned at his neighbor's determination, trying to get in a few more moments of work by the last rays of the setting sun. Old Liam lived for nothing but farming, but Teldin preferred a balance of work and relaxation.

Still, the offer was enough for the old farmer. With a higgledy step, scrawny Liam picked his way through the melon hills to the house. He followed Teldin across the yard, all the while chiding in mock irritation, to where the stream ran close by the house. The pair sat on a rock and let their feet soak in the cool water. Not bothering to pull off his shirt, Teldin slid down into the stream and let the water play over his tortured shoulders. Liam stayed on the rock and dabbled in the water with his feet.

"Liam, thanks for helping with the melons. I know you're busy with your own place and everything," Teldin said sitting up, "but I'm grateful for the help."

The older man kicked up some water in mock disgust. "Your father and I helped each other for years while you were soldiering. Just because he's passed on doesn't mean I'm going to stop."

Amdar was a painful subject, one that Teldin just as soon hoped didn't come up. Memories of his stern father churned upward from the pits of Teldin's past—the painful years of fights and criticism that finally drove a young farm boy to run away to the war. There were other memories, those of the strange silence between them when Teldin finally had come home. Neither man had spoken much of their years apart, leaving each to his peace. Even now a Teldin wanted to respect that silence.

Climbing out of the stream, Teldin clacked the wooden cups together. "Let's have a drink." Water dripped from the goatskin bag as he fished it from the stream. Strong, homemade purple wine sloshed into the wooden cups.

The two men sat in silence, enjoying their drinks until the sun was completely set, leaving only a faint glow on the horizon. This was complemented by the light from the twin moons, causing the trees, crops, cabin-everything- to leave twin shadows tinged in red and silver. Teldin was content, even a little bored.

Finally Liam set his cup down, "Time I headed home, Teldin. My old eyes are too weak to see that path in the dark." Liam grinned a crooked-toothed smile. Teldin snorted at the joke, knowing perfectly well that Liam's eyes were not nearly that bad or that old.

Standing, Liam wobbled a little, the wine apparently taking its toll. Teldin corked the wineskin and stood to see his friend off. "Now, you sure you can handle that melon field?" Liam pressed as he held out his hand.

Teldin took the smaller man's hand and clasped it firmly. "It'll be fine, Liam, just fine. Go home now, before Eloise starts worrying. You be sure to fetch me when its time to do your haying."

"I'll do that, I will," promised Liam. With one last " swipe at the sweat on his brow, the smaller man turned and headed across the fields toward his own farm. It would be a long walk back. Teldin's homestead was cut off from the other farms in the area by the wooded ridge to the west. Most of the other farmers lived clustered in small villages along the road from Kalamán, which ran through the main valley about two leagues away. Only a few smaller homesteads, like Teldin's, were situated in the side valleys. Teldin's father had liked it that way, and it suited Teldin just fine, too. Teldin, like all the Moores, had never been a particularly sociable man. The isolation did not bother him, because he never thought about it. When Teldin felt the urge for company, he visited Liam or some of the other farmers in Dargaard Valley, particularly those with pretty, young daughters.

As Liam disappeared into the woods, Teldin sighed, finally ready to give up. He was getting a crick in his neck. There were still chores to do, and milking the goat was first. Slow and stiff, he went back into the house for a bucket. As Teldin came out the door, a small spark of light caught his eye. It left a fiery streak like a shooting star, though the fact that it flashed through the sky beneath the clouds went unnoticed by Teldin. Then the spark turned, suddenly shifting more in his direction.

Stars don't dart about, Teldin realized, his curiosity suddenly piqued. The spark kept moving, jiggling slightly this way, then that, like a tadpole in a stream, while all the time holding to an almost straight line toward Teldin. The more he watched, the larger and faster the light grew. Teldin thought he could almost hear a hissing noise, like a drop of water skittering in a hot skillet.

The imaginary sound grew louder, now more like a redhot stone cast in a pot, then changing again as deeper rumbles sounded beneath the popping hiss. Weak echoes came back to Teldin from the hills of his small valley. The spark had become a glowing coal surrounded by a fiery nimbus, almost the size of brilliant Solinari at full.

Teldin stood watching, waiting for the thing to change course again. It did not heed his wishes and instead bore downward, resolving into a great, dark shape, like a tapered oval, silhouetted by sparkling points and tongues of flame

Teldin abruptly realized that it was plunging straight toward where he stood dumbfounded, bucket in hand. The yeoman squinted at the thing that charged out of the sky, bright enough now to hurt his eyes. A great jutting beak and bulging, glowing eyes clearly marked it as some kind of maleficent beast. Gigantic wings, billowing with fire, flared out from the sides and trailed showers of fiery sparks. A roaring filled the air over the silent farm, like the teeth-grating scream of an enraged fiend.

"Paladine's blood!" swore Teldin as his amazement wore off and he saw doom descending. Instinctively he threw up one arm to shield himself. The bucket dropped, and with his other hand he groped about for the hoe, a poor weapon at best. The flaming beast still bore down from the sky, relentless in its

approach.

Self-preservation finally overcame inertia, and Teldin flung himself to the side, springing and stumbling to evade the creature's charge. Leaping from the porch, his hoe in hand, Teldin hit the ground, tripped over a root, pitched forward, and rolled across the dirt yard. The goat, waiting to be milked, ran with terrified bleats as Teldin, dirt-smeared and panting, scrambled to his feet. The farmer twisted around to see if the fiery beast still pursued him. All thoughts were shattered by a crackling screech as the monstrous, dark underbelly scraped across the field. The beast smashed into the ground, not slowing in the least for its landing. The great bulk plowed through the melons, throwing up dirt like a plow cutting a furrow. Vines and fruit were gouged away. Under its driving landing, the earth shuddered, as if the soil were struck by Reorx's hammer itself.

The shock wave blasted Teldin with a hail of pebbles and dust. The earth heaved under his feet, throwing him head over heels. The farmer crashed backward down the stream bank until he was slammed onto his chest and sprawled headfirst down the opposite bank. The wind was driven from his gut. The hoe ricocheted out of his grasp, and his arm was numb where it had struck a stone. Gasping, Teldin sucked in half a lungful of mud and water and succeeded only in choking himself worse. Forcing himself onto his elbows, it was all he could do to weakly lift his face, gasping and spitting, out of the muck.

In the field above, the thing from the Abyss rebounded from its initial impact until it was almost airborne again. Melon vines hung from the splintered underbelly, the plants' roots desperately clutching to the earth as if they were trying to entwine the charging beast in their grasp. The creature's broad beak tore through the slender trees in front of the house, shattering the trunks in grinding howls that ended in cracking explosions. As one of the flaming wings passed overhead, an arc of sparks cascaded down, and hot embers singed Teldin's back through his wet shirt. Other coals extinguished themselves with a quick hiss in the muddied stream.

From where he lay sprawled, it looked to Teldin as if the thing, beast or whatever, might get itself airborne once more. The shape's ponderous bulk hovered over the farmhouse's shingled roof, struggling to break the bonds of gravity.

The illusion was shattered by a rippling series of explosions, like a giant striking stones together, from somewhere deep within the thing. The great curved shape trembled. There was another single roar, and the side burst open in a gout of flame, blasting shards across the farmyard. In the brief moment that the conflagration illuminated the sky, Teldin had the image of a great ship, some winged ocean vessel, its planking shattered and broken, hovering in the air over his house. In that same second, the burning tongue flared toward him, washing his face in roasting heat. Jagged wooden splinters lanced the bank around Teldin while flaming embers once again rained from above.

Mindful of injury, Teldin pressed back into the stream, the warm mud squeezing up around his chest, the water running over his back. Above he could hear a wood-shearing roar as the ship lurched downward, crushing the roof of his house. The fieldstone chimney, built by his father, collapsed as the old rafters gave way without a fight. Only Grandfather's strong log walls resisted, for a moment supporting the great weight pressing down on them. From where he lay, Teldin heard a groan of wood followed by a popping crack, the way trees sometimes froze in the worst winters. After a series of thunderous booms, a relative silence-broken only by the crash of an occasional piece of debris-was all that sounded.

Though trembling and shaken by this unexpected attack, Teldin peered over the bank, his blue eyes quickly going hard as he looked at the destruction of his home. The ship, if it was one, had finally settled to a stop, crushing the house's entire western wall. The stone-and-mortar chimney had fallen over on the chicken coop, caving in the flimsy roof. The whitewashed logs were thrust out at terrible angles and the porch he had built was buried under the

remains. Teldin could barely hear the squawks of hens, now somewhere far off in the darkness. Fires swirled and crackled through the gaping holes in the hull, like beacons set to highlight the ghastly scene.

Finally, Teldin warily raised himself out of the water, ready to bolt like one of the rabbits that sometimes crouched at the edge of his fields. Muck ran down his scratched and burned body, but the farmer was too intent on the blazing scene to notice. Cautiously, he stepped up the bank and slowly began to circle the burning wreck.

Abruptly there was a loud groan of timber, followed by a single thundering crack as the vessel's keel split. Teldin sprang back as the shattered form lurched, then split in two, the back half settling, slightly canted on its outspread wings. The front, with its long, jutting spar, tore free and dropped onto the remains of the chicken coop, smashing it flat. Stunned hens reeled out of the wreckage and staggered through the rubble-strewn yard. The knifelike bow wobbled and fell over, tipping away from the wreckage of the house, and the upper decks listed toward Teldin. A short mast thrust out at him like a misguided dragonlance, wavering up and down, a tattered pennon at its tip. The few hens that remained fled, squawking in alarm. When the ship finally settled, Teldin stalked forward, his hoe clutched in both hands. He could barely make himself move, he was so tense and ready to bolt, but the need to know more drove him forward.

As he advanced slowly, weaving from side to side, Teldin studied the wreck. The main hull and most of the ship seemed to be made of wood, but sprouting from the keel of the rear section were four flaring fins, definitely not of timber. Ribbed like a trout's fins, the strange sails were mangled badly by the crash, broken in several places when the vessel sheared through the trees. Bits of a fleshy membrane, of which only torn and burned strips remained, once joined the ribs of these wings. A similar fin rose out of the middle of the deck, its arching shape tangled in the shattered branches overhead. Trailing into the darkness at the back was something that looked like a flamboyant fish's tail.

Teldin had never seen these things on any ship in Kalamán. He blinked, wondering if the explosion had addled his senses. The strange wings, combined with the gleaming portholes near the bow, made the vessel seem like a living creature. This was furthered by the leaping shadows of the fire, which gave the shattered hulk the image of pulsing life, as if the last breaths of the ship were being gasped away.

"By the Dark Queen of the Abyss!" Teldin swore softly under his breath, letting loose the strongest oath he had ever used. The farmer ducked down to go under the mast of the fore section when a scratching noise came from the deck. Whirling about, Teldin watched a dark, limp shape slide across the tilted foredeck, break through the railing at the edge with a wet thud, and drop behind the broken wall of the house. "A person!" Teldin blurted. He froze in place, torn about what to do. If there were beings on board, Teldin finally realized, the gods only knew who or what they might be. Part of him suddenly wanted to flee, to get away from this monstrosity, but other parts, his curiosity and his decency, urged him forward. It was with slow steps that Teldin finally edged forward to the broken log wall. With his hoe held ready like an axe, the farmer thrust his head over.

The other side of the wall was dimly illuminated by the leaping flames that showed through the shattered porthole in the bow, but there definitely was a body crumpled atop the tumbled piles of shingles and rafters. Teldin could not tell if the body was male or female; that much it was too dark to discern. Taking up a burning brand, Teldin held the rude torch up for a closer look. The being's frame was light and thin, like an elf's. The body was strong and muscled, though, and certainly not like the few elves he'd ever met. The face was toward the ground, but the black, tangled hair glistened wetly. Probably blood, he thought. Whoever it was, it wasn't human, of that he was almost sure.

Teldin poked at the body with the handle of his hoe. Nothing moved. He prodded

again. There was still no movement. Satisfied, Teldin scrambled over the remains of the log wall, cleared away some of the shingles and rafters, and knelt beside the body. Ignoring the fact that he had scraped his shin on a jagged bit of chimney stone, Teldin breathlessly rolled the body over, succeeding only with difficulty, since a long, purple cloak was twisted around the arms and legs. One arm was bent at an odd angle, apparently broken. The shirt was dark with bloodstains.

As he had guessed, the intruder clearly was not human. The bones were too light and long, the fingers too narrow. To his embarrassed surprise, Teldin discovered as he loosened the shirt that the stranger was female. Her breasts left no doubt about that. The almost triangular face was drawn, yet kept a compelling aspect. Everything about the face was thin-narrow lips, sharply cut nose, pointed ovals for eyes. Bands of dark makeup ran above and below the eyes and were drawn out in whorls at the outer corners. She was exotically handsome, vaguely masculine, yet clearly not, and, even unmoving, seemed endowed with more grace than any man.

A sticky, warm wetness dripped through Teldin's fingers as he lifted her head. Dark blood matted her hair from a gash in the side of her skull and ran down Teldin's arm as he tried to lay out the body. The cloak, coiled and tangled, again interfered, but Teldin could only fumble unsuccessfully at the silver clasp around her neck. As he did so, the painted eyelids weakly opened and the dark eyes beneath still showed a spark of life.

"Neogi bly zam no insson..." the woman-thing whispered, her sibilant voice growing softer with each word until only the lips moved without speaking. The eyes dimmed; the lids almost closed. Whatever she had said clearly had taken great effort.

"What?" Teldin pressed, astonished to find the stranger still alive. So startled was he that he almost dropped her head, which he held cradled in his arms. Finally he drew closer, almost pressing his face to hers. "Who are you?" "El za.m neogi," the stranger falteringly tried again. Her delicate lips barely moved as each word was whispered.

"What? I don't understand," Teldin answered with excessive slowness, as if that would make him understood. He fumbled again with the clasp of the cloak, trying to remove it.

With her good arm the woman-thing weakly tried to push Teldin's hands away. "Ton! Ton!" she hissed at him. Teldin let go of the clasp and shook his head in frustration. The flames beyond the porthole lit his face, and she seemed to understand. Slowly reaching up, she touched her fingers to his lips. They tasted slightly of ash and salt, mingled with the sweeter flavor of blood. Her own lips moved, silently forming words. When she finished, she let her hand fall.

"Now we may speak," she whispered, somehow in words Teldin could understand. Her voice was more musical than any he had heard. "Yes?"

"Yes," Teldin quickly answered, taken aback by this sudden transformation.

"What-who are you?"

"I am dying, I think," the woman-thing continued, ignoring the human's question. "Are all my crew dead?"

Teldin, who had not seen a living soul since the crash, nodded.

The alien closed her eyes. "Then I am resigned to die."

"Who are you? What happened? Where did you come from?" Teldin demanded. The ability to communicate uncorked a stream of questions in the farmer's mind. He let them flood out, trying to get all his answers before it was too late. As her eyes dimmed, Teldin patted her cheeks, hoping to keep her conscious.

"The ...the neogi did this," was her weak reply. Her eyes barely opened. The color was fast draining from her already pale cheeks and her eyes were growing duller. "They want the-" She stopped abruptly, her eyes suddenly opening. "You must take this. Take this!" the woman-thing said with a forcefulness greater than before. With her good hand she tore at the clasp to her cloak. What he could not open, she sprang free easily. "Take the cloak. Keep it from the neogi." The alien pulled Teldin's hand onto the fabric. "Take it to the

creators."

"The who? The what?" Teldin queried. None of this made any sense and he wasn't getting any answers. He easily shook off her grip. "Why? What are the neogi?" he practically shouted.

"Wear it. Now," the stranger insisted. With her one hand, she tried to place the cloak around his neck, wincing in pain to roll free of the purple fabric. "What are you doing?" Teldin was more puzzled than frightened by her determination.

"Take it," she demanded even more urgently.

"Why-no, explain why," Teldin said, refusing her, as his prudent nature asserted itself.

"Take the cloak!" the woman-thing said more fiercely than before. She bared her teeth with a certain savage fury, but the fire in her eyes grew even weaker.

The effort was killing her, Teldin realized in dismay. "Stop. I'll take it," he assured her. Taking the silver chains, Teldin laid the cloak around his shoulders, though he did not fasten the clasp. The purple gleamed richly in the leaping firelight. "I have it. Now what's going on here?"

The female gave a rattling sigh. "No more questions. I am dead." Her hand dropped limply and the light went finally from her eyes.

"What? You can't just die now!" Teldin blurted, even though he knew it was futile. He had seen enough dead to know it was too late for her. He sat amid the wreckage of his house, the dead female in his arms, and felt indignant, used, and mystified. The creature had no right to die now, he fumed. He had only accepted the cloak to keep her alive. "What, by the gods, is going on?" he asked aloud to no one. He held up an edge of the cloak, looking for mystical symbols or anything. He saw nothing but dark purple cloth. "Why kill yourself to give it to me? It can't be worth much." Teldin looked down at the female as if expecting an answer. "And just who are the neogi? By the Abyss, who are you?" He paused, as if to hear her reply.

"Stand, assassin, so I may kill you!" boomed a voice behind him.

Chapter Two

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Like a flushed fox, Teldin sprang to his feet and spun about, hoe in hand, the cloak flapping over his arm. The farmer choked back an enraged outcry, for on the opposite side of the wall stood a massive form half-concealed by a tangle of spars and deck planking. The blazing debris grotesquely illuminated the bestial creature-so unlike any Teldin had seen-that lurched from the wreck. It stood stiff and upright like a seasoned knight, though it was a good seven feet tall and almost half that in width across its shoulders. Thick shadows marked its heavy jowls, its large sagittal crest, and the deep pits of its nostrils. The creature had a face like a hippopotamus, but the skull was flatter, with pert little ears at the top of its head. It was difficult to tell in the firelight, but Teldin thought the creature's skin looked bluish gray. Its two legs were like tree trunks and its chest was as big around as the old water barrel that used to stand beside the house.

The thing wore trousers and a tight-fitting blouse adorned with ribbons; the whole outfit was now badly ripped. A broad, orange sash was wrapped around its thick waist, and in it was tucked a collection of mismatched knives and a worn cutlass. As Teldin stared dumbly, the beast stumbled forward over rubble, not taking its small, dark eyes off the human. It kept one arm stiffly outstretched and pointed directly at the farmer at all times. In this hammy, blue fist was a strange, curved stick of metal and wood, aimed at Teldin's head.

"Assassin and thief, before you die, know that your slayer is Trooper Herphan Gomja, Red Grade, First Rank, First Platoon of the Noble Giff," the creature gloweringly intoned. "When your soul gets to wherever it goes, remember my

name!"

"No, wait!" shouted Teldin in a desperate attempt to explain. "I didn't kill-" "It is too late, groundling!" the big blue-gray beast bellowed back. His thick finger squeezed down on a small lever on the underside of the stick. Paralyzed more by astonishment than fear, Teldin was rooted in place. A scorching wind from the blazing wreck sucked up a rain of cinders and ash and swirled it around them. The cloak fluttered and flapped in the breeze. The stick gave a mighty flash and roar, dazzling Teldin but breaking the spell that bound him in place. Blinded and deafened, he flailed out with the hoe, missed, slipped on a loose stone, crashed over a tangle of wood, and sprawled on the ground. Panting and blinking while scrambling back to his feet, the farmer waited for the big creature to strike, but nothing happened.

By blinking furiously, Teldin cleared his eyes, though a bright spot from the flash still hung at the center of his vision. There was a strange, acrid smell that overpowered even the smokiness of the fire. Turning about, he saw the trailings of an iron-blue cloud dissipating into the night air. Underneath that strange smoke Teldin spotted the big blue giant sprawled on the ground only a few feet away. The creature's hand, the one that held the strange device, was black with soot. Cuts and burns marked up his arm and neck and a swelling bruise was already beginning to show on the hard-looking forehead. "Trooper Gomja, eh?" the farmer scornfully said, remembering the creature's name. When there was no response, Teldin threw the cloak over his shoulder and hobbled to where the trooper lay. Nearby was the strange, threatening stick, its metal tube now bent and twisted into apparent uselessness.

Gingerly kicking the exotic device away, Teldin checked with his hoe to see if the beast was conscious. Satisfied it was not, he carefully searched the remains of his once-beautiful, whitewashed cabin to find a good, long piece of very, very stout rope.

The search was brief and, a short time later, Teldin set the final knot in place with a hard yank. Exhausted, the farmer looked down at his handiwork. The big giff, if that was what he was called, was trussed tighter than a pig on market day, his wrists and ankles firmly bound. Teldin really wanted to hog-tie the creature solidly, but there had been only so much rope in the ruins of his house. The whole thing had taken longer than he expected, but at least the murderous creature was safely restrained.

While Teldin was working, the wreck's flames crept uncomfortably close. Since his opponent still lived, the farmer took it upon himself to drag the beast's inert bulk away from the burning wreck. Whatever it-he-was, he was not light, Teldin quickly discovered. The gray-blue beast had to weigh at least as much as a good-sized sow, maybe four hundred pounds or more. It was only by half-rolling, half-dragging the creature that Teldin reached the shelter of the broken trees near the stream.

With a spent sigh, Teldin plopped onto the chest of his huge captive and looked back to the wreck, trying to decide what to do. The fires on the ship still blazed brightly and were slowly spreading, since there was plenty aboard the shattered ruin to feed the fiery tongues. Curiosity urged him forward to investigate the bizarre skyship. "No," Teldin said to himself, shaking off the desire. "It's too dangerous." Still, Teldin's sense of decency demanded he try to get the body of the dead woman away from the fire. At least he could do that much.

After a quick check on his prisoner, Teldin approached the burning ship only to have a wave of heat drive him back. He unconsciously slipped the cloak off his arm and fastened the clasp about his neck. As the silver jaws clicked shut, the farmer suddenly realized just what he had donned. For a moment he expected strange and mysterious magic to burst forth. When nothing happened, Teldin plunged forward to where the dead alien lay. After dragging her body to safety, he returned to the ruin.

The wreck now burned brightly, lighting the torn-up field and even the trees beyond. The flames were enough to provide a clear view of the destruction. During the long siege of Kalamán, Teldin had seen quite a few ocean-going

vessels, the army's only lifeline to the outside. Although it was now broken into halves, the shattered hulk that lay across his house looked similar. The bow section was on its side amid the rubble of the cabin's chimney and roof. The stern, supported under its keel by a tangle of logs and trees, canted upward toward the front, giving the impression that the stern had carved the ragged gouge through Teldin's melons. It was in this half that the fiercest fires raged.

Teldin realized as he looked at the giff and the female that the crew had to be larger than these two. Ocean ships, he remembered, had crews of ten or more men. Teldin reluctantly pulled the damp cloak tight and headed back toward the crackling wreck. Although it was dangerous, perhaps even foolhardy, Teldin knew he had to search for more survivors, and that meant once more braving the flames.

He continued his circuit of the vessel. Although the hull planking was splintered or sprung all along the length to the stern, no safe opening presented itself. The few gaps that Teldin guessed he could wriggle through showed hellish flames leaping inside. That was more than enough to discourage any attempts to enter by those routes.

Near the stern, the way was blocked by the arch of the bizarre fin that stretched from the ship's keel. Teldin could see that it was of a strange substance, almost flesh. The enormous, bound prisoner and the slight corpse on the fin's thick ribs quivered when he touched them, and the stench of roasted meat that rose from the charred membranes was nauseatingly heavy. Skirting past the horrid appendage, Teldin climbed over the trunk of an uprooted tree and came around to the stern. He stood in the remains of the melon field, immature fruits, reduced to green pulp, squashed under his feet. As Teldin had suspected, the stern had a bay of windows marking a cabin. It was the same as the ships of Kalaman, and Teldin guessed that ships must be pretty much the same regardless of their ports of call.

The side of the stern angled downward, putting the cabin's shattered windows just within reach. While smoke poured out from the top of each window, there was no sign of the hellish flames that consumed other parts of the ship. Teldin got his fingers on the sill, then pulled himself up to peer over the edge. The heat and smoke were noticeably greater even this small distance from the ground.

The farmer scanned the cabin through smoke-burned, watering eyes. Firelight from outside provided the only illumination, for no flames had yet found their way this far aft. Right beneath his nose was a narrow table, tipped on its side. A sea chest, flung loose in the crash, had broken one of the legs. Several other chests had been thrown with enough force to crack the fine wood paneling of the cabin's walls. Strewn all around the floor were charts and logs, bent calipers, and instruments Teldin could not recognize. These might be valuable or useful, but, clinging to the sill, he could not reach them. Oddly, there was an enormous chair, bulky and plain looking, sitting undisturbed in the center of the room. Just how it had survived, the farmer could not fathom, until he noticed that the heavy legs were bolted to the deck, a point that aroused his curiosity. The seat faced the bow, ignoring the view out the stern windows, and was hardly a position Teldin would have chosen.

Aglow around the edges of the cabin door heralded the blaze's arrival. Almost immediately following the dim illumination, flames licked through the cracks of the jamb and tickled the cabin's ceiling. The new fire lit the darker corners of the room. Huddled in one of these was a form, half-hidden under a welter of papers and junk.

"Are you all right? Can you move?" Teldin shouted, enthusiastically but mistakenly seeing the body as something alive. The expanding light quickly changed his hopes. The War of the Lance had given the farmer more than enough examples of death's visage, and this was just another. The corpse was an old man's, clearly human. Its pockmarked face was slack, but the fingers stiffly pointed with rigor mortis. The mouth hung open, the dead-blue tongue lolling

out one side, and the clouded eyes stared to the ceiling. The corpse wore a long, dirty white robe of thin material, like a summer nightgown. On its feet were red velvet slippers, decorated with glass beads. A small pouch at the waist had spilled open, revealing little bundles of feathers, powders, small stones, prisms, dried leaves, and bits of bone. A wizard, Teldin guessed, probably one of the Order of White Robes, those whose moon was the silvery Solinari.

For a moment, while clinging to the window sill, Teldin debated climbing in and dragging the corpse out. The wizard deserved a proper burial. The crackling roar from the fire, however, quickly dissuaded him. The farmer saw a solid sheet of flame billow across the ceiling. Fingers of fire ran down the window frames. Fiery drops of pitch bubbled and oozed out of the wood and dropped to the floor. Dust from the melon field started to blow past as the growing fire sucked air into the room. A blast of heat assailed Teldin, and the wooden door panels split open. Smoke and fire roiled through the doorway. "Paladine's blood!" Teldin swore. He abandoned all thoughts of rescuing the corpse, then dropped back to the dirt. His move came not a moment too soon, for a gout of flame rushed through the shattered windows and played across the ship's stern.

Teldin picked himself up and finished the little that remained of the circuit before returning to his camp. Along the way he found more bodies: men, apparently sailors, all dead. These dead were in no danger from the fire, so Teldin hurried back to check on his prisoner.

The giff, or whatever it was, was still bound and apparently not conscious, but it stirred sluggishly. The burns and cuts on its face and hands did not seem too severe. There was a large lump on its temple, purplish green against the blue skin. Teldin guessed that a chunk of the exploding device had caused the bruise, laying the creature low.

"By all the gods, Teldin Moore! Are you alive, boy?" echoed Liam's voice faintly over the rumble of the flames.

Teldin struggled to his feet, astonished to hear a friendly voice, any voice.

"Liam! Over here!" he shouted through cupped hands. "Liam! By the creek!"

"Teldin," Liam shouted back, "are you all right? What, by the gods, happened?"

The skinny farmer scurried out of the darkness, pausing to climb over fallen timber. Panting he reached Teldin's little camp. "Lords, you're a mess!" Liam exclaimed between breaths. In the gloom of the trees the older man didn't even notice the hog-tied giff or the dead female on the ground.

"Thank the gods you're alive!" Liam rattled on, grabbing Teldin gratefully by the shoulders. "I thought for sure you'd been burned to cinders. The sky's lit up clear on the other side of the ridge. When I saw it-well, that's why I came. Are you all right, boy?"

"I'm fine, fine," Teldin answered, almost breaking into laughter. Liam's concern was touching, almost comical after the events of the night. "Oh, it's good to see you, Liam!" Teldin burst out, grabbing his neighbor's wiry arms. Liam held Teldin's shoulders as if he were afraid the young farmer would evaporate, then he sniffled back a tear of happiness. "What in all the Dark Queen's Abyss happened-" Liam abruptly stopped, his eyes goggling at ground "-here?" he squeaked out at last. "And what, by the Queen herself, is that?" Liam stammered, pointing at Teldin's hog-tied prisoner.

Teldin swallowed, his mouth parched. "That is a giff-I think. At least that's what he said he was," he answered hoarsely.

"A giff?" A dazed Liam mulled over the name, readily accepting Teldin's answer. "But-but, what happened to your farm, boy?"

Teldin didn't answer. He instead looked over Liam's shoulder toward the blazing ruin that had been his cabin. Slowly he realized it was all gone-the cabin his grandfather had built, his father's stone chimney, even the porch he'd built with his own hands.

"What's going on here, Teldin? Draconians do this?" Liam asked in a gentler voice as he saw his young friend's hollow stare.

Teldin snorted at the suggestion, Liam being so naively wrong. He shook his

head. "I don't really know, but..."

* * * * *

By the time Teldin finished his tale, the sun had cleared the eastern horizon. Liam sat cross-legged in the dirt, listening carefully the whole time. When Teldin got to the part describing the giffs attack, Liam shifted to where he could keep one eye on the prisoner. Teldin's body sagged as he finished, and he noisily drank the water Liam offered.

"It's quite a story, Tel. If I hadn't seen it, I would've called you the dammedest liar in all the valley-by the Abyss, all of Kalamán. Flying ships, monsters, and dead wizards! I don't think ships are meant to fly," Liam offered sincerely.

"There were the flying citadels of the dragonarmies," Teldin pointed out. "You never saw them, but those were big hunks of rock with castles on them. They weren't supposed to fly either, but I saw one doing it at the battle of Kalamán."

"But things like that don't land on your farm!" Liam protested. "It's not natural."

Teldin mournfully looked at the remains of his cabin. The fires were finally starting to go out for lack of tinder. His house was a broken, smoking shell. Most of the larger logs were not split by the crash, but were charred black. The roof and everything else were gone. Most of the ship's planking had burned or fallen away, leaving the framing ribs like black bones thrusting out of the earth. A few hunks of the deck clung precariously to the frame, giving some indication of the ship's original form.

"It doesn't matter whether they fly or not. This one did," Teldin sadly commented.

"What'll you do now, Teldin?" Liam asked, following Teldin's gaze. "If you want, the valley folk could gather up and help you out.

The melon crop was destroyed, the house crushed, the chickens and geese lost. Even the goat had disappeared. Teldin tried not to sound defeated. "I do not know, Liam. I just do not know. Maybe I am not meant to be a farmer. Maybe it's a sign from the gods." Teldin rubbed at his short-cropped hair, brushing away a new layer of dirt and ash. "Damn it, Liam, things seemed to be going so well!" he burst out. "Crops were good. It was peaceful here. I thought, for once, maybe my life could be happy-after the war and all Teldin's voice stopped in a knot of frustration and anger.

Liam awkwardly laid a hand on the younger man's shoulder. "Look, we'll just spread the word around. You've got friends here. The Stanish boys, the Harnweilers, even Lur Dal would come help. Things'll be back to normal in no time. I've rebuilt from fires, too." Teldin nodded numbly, letting Liam plan. Behind the old farmer, the giff's gray-blue bulk slowly stirred. He gave a deep rumbling groan, rolled to his side, and tried to get up. The creature flopped back to the ground, suddenly aware of his bindings. Teldin couldn't be sure, but he had guessed from the sounds the thing made that it was male. Liam scuttled away from the brute at its first movements. "What'll you do about that?" he whispered to Teldin, nodding toward the giff.

As an answer, Teldin stood with exaggerated care, moving his stiff muscles slowly. Taking the cutlass confiscated from the creature's sash, Teldin stood over the giff and pointed the tip of the blade at the beast's chest. The human was in no mood for subtlety. The giff stared up at him with small, deep-set eyes. "Who are you and why did you try to kill me?" Teldin demanded, trying to remember how the officers had interrogated prisoners during the war.

"Trooper Gomja, Red Grade, First Rank, Red Platoon," the giff recited. Teldin was slightly taken aback by the giff's outburst. The creature spoke perfect common, though it was thickly accented. Teldin expected the giff to use some kind of foreign gibberish, like the female had the previous night. After all, hadn't she used a spell to communicate with him?

"Fine, Gomja," the farmer answered after regaining his composure. "I want to

know why you attacked me and where, in all the god's names, you came from!" Teldin's voice became louder and higher until it was almost a hysterical shout. He pressed the blade against the giff's skin to emphasize his point. The giff hesitated with his answer until a little more pressure from Teldin encouraged a response. "You killed and robbed my captain. It is my duty and honor to protect her. Therefore-

"Walt-I killed your captain?" Teldin asked in disbelief. "And robbed her?" "You wear her cloak," the giff answered, as if that was all the proof needed. "She gave it to me!" Teldin's voice was rising to hysteria again. Without dropping his guard on the giff, Teldin pointed to the body of the female he had pulled from the wreckage. "That's your captain?" The giff nodded.

Teldin stepped around and looked the giff straight in the eye. "Well, Trooper Gomja, you thick-headed lug," he angrily informed his captive, "you had better know that your captain was dying when I found her. She gave me the cloak and told me to keep it from the neogi." Teldin didn't add that he had no idea who or what the neogi were.

As he listened, Gomja unflinchingly met the farmer's glare. When the speech was over, the giff looked at his captain's body, then back to Teldin. He did not speak, as if pondering the farmer's words and his own situation. "You are a military man?" he finally asked.

Teldin was once again taken aback by the giff's words. "No, I'm a farmer. Your ship ruined my farm.

"But you have served in the military," Gomja insisted.

Teldin was amazed at the giff's perception. Cautiously, Teldin answered, "I was, sort of." The farmer could not see what the creature's point was.

"What was your rank?" the giff pressed.

Somewhat embarrassed and somewhat irked by the giff's questioning him, Teldin curtly replied. "I was a mule skinner, if that is what you mean."

From behind the tree, Liam could not suppress a snort of surprise. "Mule skinner! I should've known, Teldin Moore!" Teldin glared at the older man, willing him to be quiet. The old farmer would probably hound him about his deception for years, Teldin figured, forgetting the giff for an instant. The giff's jowls twitched and his jaw flexed as he considered the title. "Mule skinner," he mouthed slowly, working over the words, which were obviously foreign to him. His little eyes met Teldin's again, trying to look hard but not quite achieving that effect. "I have made an error," Gomja conceded, his voice stiff with pride. "It was poor discipline for me to attack you. I give my oath that I will not attack you again. You can now release me safely." "Don't do it, Teldin," Liam shouted from behind the tree. "He's probably a draconian's misbegotten spawn!" The old farmer scurried over and grabbed one of the giff's knives from the pile, then quickly returned to the shelter of the tree trunk.

Teldin pondered. He studied the giff's face. The giff sat stiffly, his massive head held high, eyes pointedly staring at the wreckage. His uniform's tattered remains completed the ludicrous appearance. In a way, the giff reminded Teldin of certain hard-nosed sergeants he had met or seen in the war.

"Don't trust him, Teldin!" Liam shouted.

The younger farmer ignored his neighbor's urging. As comical as the giff looked, there was something in his eyes that suggested honor. The giff's jaw was resolutely set and his gaze showed no signs of suspicion or betrayal. "Well, I can't keep you tied up forever," Teldin finally allowed. "I'll release you, but that doesn't mean I trust you- understand? Hold your hands out." Teldin sawed away at the ropes with the cutlass. As the last strand popped, Teldin's grip on the weapon tightened and he unconsciously braced for treachery. When the giff did not move, Teldin began cutting at the ropes around Gomja's ankles.

Finally freed, Gomja awkwardly rose and loomed a good foot over Teldin. The giff's feet and hands were numb from the bindings, so he stood rubbing his wrists and stamping his feet. Each huge foot hit the ground with a solid thud.

All three-Liam behind the tree, Teldin with the cutlass, and the towering giff-stared at each other. "I would like permission to search for the dead," the giff finally asked.

Teldin almost expected the giff to add "sir" to the request, given the giffs tone. After looking at the captain's body, its skin now a pale blue, he nodded his approval. "Liam," he called, drawing his neighbor from behind the tree, "I found some bodies by the edge of the field last night. Take Trooper Gomja here out so he can bury them." With that, Teldin handed the cutlass over to the skinny old man.

"Aren't you coming with me?" Liam grouched. His eyes flicked fearfully toward the giff, who stoically waited for permission to start.

"I've got my own things to do," was Teldin's tired response. "I'll be searching the house. They're his dead, so let him bury them."

"OK, Teldin," Liam said with a nervous gulp, "if you say so. Now, get moving you-you giff." Liam clumsily brandished the cutlass, trying to frighten the impassive giff. The creature gave Liam a look of contempt but finally acquiesced to the order.

As the other two marched off to find the bodies, Teldin picked his way across the broken yard to the cabin. The interior was not quite gutted. The corner farthest from the wreck seemed to have escaped the worst of the fire. Probing through the debris, Teldin recovered a few of his things not destroyed by the blaze. Protected under a fallen stone was a small gold medallion that once had belonged to his grandfather. A few clothes, a pair of heavy boots, and a pouch with a few steel coins had managed to escape the fire. Between these and what he wore, Teldin at least had clothing. Elsewhere he found a little salt, some softened cheese, and a toasted loaf of bread. Little more was salvageable. Teldin looked at the medallion glinting in his hand. When he was little, he had wanted the medallion so badly, he remembered. Grandfather had used to tease him with it. Trembling with pain and bitterness, Teldin closed his eyes to stop the tears that now came. He had run away from his life once, thinking he was escaping to become a hero, only to spend three years in the war doing ugly jobs and learning the truth about a dirty world. It had taken three more years to make his peace and realize that the family farm was where he wanted to be. Now, all the things of his life were gone.

Finally swallowing his bitterness, Teldin set off to see how Liam was doing with the prisoner. He found the pair near the derelict's stern, the giff standing in a shallow trench, digging it out with a board. Liam sat on a chest, his cutlass always ready. Three bodies lay on the ground nearby. Teldin marveled at Gomja's strength, guessing that the giff had easily hefted all of the bodies at once. With each scrape of the board, the giff brought up huge amounts of dirt. Teldin squatted beside Liam, then took the opportunity to ask the giff questions.

"Where do you come from?"

"The void," Gomja tersely answered, driving the board into the dirt.

"More likely the Abyss," Liam hissed from his perch.

"Quiet, Liam," Teldin softly cautioned. "The void?" Teldin asked Gomja. The human pointed toward the sky.

"Sort of," Gomja grunted. "Out where the stars are." The giff didn't stop his work.

Teldin knew the giff was lying. Only the gods lived among the stars.

Paladine's, Takhisis's, and the others' constellations shone brightly every night. "If you are from the stars, what are you doing here?"

The giff stopped shoveling for a moment. "The ship was damaged in battle. Captain Hemar tried to bring us down for a safe landing, but the damage was too bad. We lost control and missed our target.

"Your target. You were going to land that thing?"

The giff nodded. "There is a large body of water north of here. The Penumbra could have landed there."

"Whole thing's crazy," Liam warned. "There ain't no lakes around here. I tell you, Teldin, this thing's lying."

"North of here, eh?" As a soldier, Teldin had seen quite a bit more of the world than his friend. "Liam, I think he means Vingaard Bay."

"But that's way up by Kalamán! It's a good dozen leagues from here," Liam argued.

"Where else, Liarn? Like you say, there aren't any lakes around here. Besides, it did fall from the sky," Teldin pointed out. "It's not like other things are impossible for it." The giff ignored the pair and went back to work. Liam gave up the argument.

"You said the ship was damaged in battle. I want to know who you were fighting and why," Teldin demanded in the most authoritative tone he could manage. Getting facts kept his mind from other things.

Gomja pondered a long time, scratching at the dirt with his board while he thought. "We battled a ship of the neogi. They sought to board us and take our crew prisoner."

"The neogi again!" Teldin said softly, remembering the warning given him by the dying captain- "You must keep it from the neogi"-as she pressed the cloak on him. "So what are neogi?"

Gomja looked surprised at the question, his ears wiggling. "The neogi are ravagers of worlds," he answered, as if explaining the facts every child should know. "They do not seek trade, only to enslave and devour everyone they come across. They are the enemy of all folk in the void. Even the illithids deal with them cautiously."

"Illithids?" Teldin started. "Oh, never mind." Every question seemed to lead to more. Neogi, illithids, it was all getting too confusing. Teldin wanted to keep the conversation on the neogi, since at least the captain had mentioned them. "These neogi, will they come here?"

The question was obviously beyond the giff's estimation. "If your world is rich in life, I suppose they might appear someday."

Teldin shook his head. "No, I mean now. Will the neogi come after your ship?"

Gomja still looked puzzled. "The Penumbra? I do not think so. The Penumbra was only a small merchantman. They are certain to think it was destroyed. Besides, I do not think their ship could land here."

Then why did the captain warn him, Teldin wondered. It didn't make any sense. But then, since last night, nothing in his life was making sense. More confused than when he started, Teldin gave up his questioning. He needed time to sort out what little he'd learned so far, then maybe he could try again.

Liam loudly kicked the chest he sat on. "Look what I found, Teldin. Must be a load of jewels and gold in it-and maybe steel! I found some other stuff, too." Liam eagerly laid out his discoveries. A few pots, knives, two swords, and a handful of spearheads was the limit of Liam's treasure. Teldin looked it all over and gave a shrug. Disappointed, the old farmer made of pile of the few useful goods he had found.

"Well, I'll bet this has got the captain's treasure in it," Liarn exclaimed, clapping the chest with a solid thud. "I can't get it open, though. Help me with this thing, Teldin."

"No, not yet." Teldin was dismayed by Liam's eagerness to plunder the ship. The older farmer clearly believed salvage was their right. "We will put the chest with the other things. We can do it later. I'm tired, Liam. It's been a long night."

"Oh, well, if you want to wait, I can, too. I just figured there'd be something to help you get back on your feet," Liam explained. "But, if you're tired, why don't you come over to my farm, Teldin. Eloise would be glad to know you're safe, and we can fix you up with a meal and a bed."

The offer was tempting, but Teldin just didn't want to leave. It felt wrong abandoning his farm. Reluctantly he shook his head. "You're kind and generous, Liam, but I can't leave Trooper Gomja behind." Teldin nodded toward the giff, still working in the grave. "What would Eloise say?"

Liam smiled at the thought. "There'd be hell to pay, that's for sure. Sure you won't come now?"

"Thank you, Liam, but no. I want to stay here. You go on home and come back

tomorrow," Teldin insisted. "We can open the chest tomorrow. Liam sucked at his gums and finally realized that Teldin was right. If the boy wanted to stay, Liam would not force him. Standing, he dusted off his dirty trousers and looked toward the sky. The sun was edging toward noon. "Have it your way. Take care, Teldin." Liam started to leave, then stopped and motioned Teldin to join him. "What about the big, blue thing?" Liam whispered, discreetly motioning toward the giff.

"Don't worry, Liam. I tied him up once. I can do it again," the young farmer assured.

Liam gave a worried sigh, but shrugged his shoulders in resignation. After good-byes, he hiked across the field and disappeared into the woods. Teldin went back to the grave and helped Trooper Gomja with the last few shovelfuls, though he kept a wary eye on the giff as they worked. He was experienced at digging graves-too many of them-during the war. The task done, the farmer retreated while the big creature made a few quiet observances over the burial ground. By the time the giff turned away, Teldin had gathered a few barely ripe melons from the remains of his field. "Trooper," he called out to the giff, "come and eat." Teldin pointed to the melons, cheese, and bread he had set out. After saving the giff, the farmer was not about to let the creature starve. The wooden cups from the previous night held cool water. The meal was simple but satisfying. With a knife Teldin sliced portions for himself and the giff. The melons were sweetly fragrant and a tender, pale green inside. "I'm going to need to sleep," Teldin said between mouthfuls, "so I'm going to have to tie you back up." He watched the trooper's face for a reaction.

The giff shifted uncomfortably at the suggestion. "It is not the most pleasant way to pass the time," he commented.

"I don't have a whole lot of other choices," Teldin tersely pointed out. He spit a melon seed into the dirt.

The giff sat up stiffly, as if at attention. "I give my word not to harm you if you will let me remain untied."

Leaning back and scrutinizing the giff's face, Teldin considered the offer.

"Are you willing to swear an oath on that-and not to run off?"

"I have nowhere to go," the giff pointed out. "But, for you, on my honor as a trooper of the giff, I will remain here as your-uh-bodyguard. That way, you will know I will not harm you.

Teldin wasn't sure if the giff was up to some trick or just naively honest. Instead of trying to figure it out, though, he decided to take the risk. "On your word, then." All the same, Teldin planned to sleep lightly. Making a simple bed, he lay with the cutlass and knives close at hand under the edge of his blankets. Glancing toward the giff, who sat straight-backed under a tree, Teldin spoke, "I suggest you make yourself comfortable and get some rest also."

The giff looked solemnly at the farmer. "I gave my oath to protect you. That is my duty."

Teldin gave up worrying whether he'd made a mistake and tried to remove the cloak, but the clasp was jammed and wouldn't open. With a sigh, he gave that up, too, for some well-deserved rest; he could fix the clasp later. Within seconds the farmer was sound asleep.

Chapter Three

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Teldin was shocked out of sleep by a hand clapped over his mouth. Struggling, he tried to sit up, only to be easily forced down. Standing out dimly against the night sky was the giff's form, which made him struggle all the more frantically. Damn his trust! Teldin thought, infuriated with his own sense of honor. He wanted to shout in anger, but the giff's hand blocked all but a soft gurgle. Teldin groped for the cutlass under the blankets.

The giff raised one fat finger to its jowled face, signaling for silence.

Then, slowly and carefully, Gomja pointed toward the wreck of the Penumbra. Teldin twisted his head around to see a small cluster of lights coming out of the woods on the far side of the dale. It took a while to find the cutlass, tangled in the blankets, but finally his fingers wrapped around the hilt. "Neogi!" Gomja whispered. Once he was certain the human understood, the giff released his grip.

Teldin gaped. "What, them? How do you know? It could be neighbors." Teldin suddenly realized it was dark, not daylight. "How long have I been asleep?" He demanded.

The giff ignored the last question. "Not humans," he insisted in his thick accent. "Listen to the voices.

Straining, Teldin could barely make out a droning, clicking noise floating faintly on the breeze. It was clearly nothing he had ever heard before. The giff's certainty was convincing. "What do they want?"

"I don't know," Gomja answered. "The Penumbra?"

"What do we do?"

"We could fight them."

Teldin studied the advancing lights. "Are you mad?" Judging from the giff's set look, he was mad. "There are too many." Teldin glanced over his shoulder to the woods behind them. "We'll hide. Come on." With his eyes adjusted, the farmer led the way along the stream, following it past the cottonwoods and into the trees. Gomja brought up the rear, and Teldin's only fear was that the giff might really try to attack. Things were already bad enough, and getting killed was not the way to improve his day.

The pair crept along, doing their best not to make any noise until they reached a tangle of fallen logs. Teldin knew this spot—from back when he had a farm, he sardonically thought; the hens kept getting out of the coop and hiding their nests in the downed branches. The farmer now worked his way into the middle, showing Gomja where not to step. At the center was a small clear space, large enough for the two of them and little else. From this hiding place the pair had a clear view of the Penumbra, the desolate wreckage barely lit by the mingled light of the moons and the coming dawn.

The procession of lights, steady and unflickering, swarmed over the Penumbra, carried by creatures Teldin could only barely make out. It was difficult to estimate their numbers. Only a few creatures were silhouetted; most were nothing but vague shapes moving just beyond the range of light. The creatures were gigantic, possibly as large as the giff who crouched beside Teldin. They seemed to have no heads, only thick, bulbous lumps in place of the necks and skulls. Huge fangs, grotesquely long, thrust out from the sides of these lumps. The rest of each body was hard and stocky, with arms overly long. The torchlight glis

tened off the monsters' backs as if off armor. Each was carrying something in its arms, something that writhed and twisted. The forms merged into the darkness like a single, surging creature that flowed over the wreck.

"What are they searching for—the cloak?" Teldin whispered.

The giff eyed the human with a start, then answered as quietly as he could, his bass voice still a rumble. "Why would they search for the captain's cloak?" he asked suspiciously.

Teldin nervously gripped the fabric and pulled the cloak tighter about him. What made this cloak so special? "Just a hunch," Teldin awkwardly answered.

Aboard the broken Penumbra, the shapes continued to prowl. Teldin could make out voices, but the words were strange and lost on the wind. The sounds were unnatural, bleats and snarls mingled with sharp clicking noises. It was a language of menace and hate, and it made Teldin shudder as he listened.

It sounded like a pack of starving foxes, snarling and snapping at each other and punctuated by sudden shrieks. A squabble had broken out among the creatures. The human slid forward to gain a better view among the branches. Abruptly, part of the mass surged away from the graves and began moving in his direction. Animal instincts taking over, the farmer froze like a deer in the brush.

As the figures drew closer, Teldin could see that the single shapes were indeed two completely different creatures. The main forms were giant brutes, and now he could tell they were even taller than the giff. The beasts' legs were comically short, forcing them to move with shuffling strides, but their arms were enormous. He was certain that they had no neck or proper head, only a broad dome on the shoulders. The fangs weren't fangs, but pincers, like those of a beetle, growing out of the side of this dome.

The second shapes were cradled in the brutes' arms. Each was about the size of goat or large dog; their bodies were round and saclike. Dangling from each body was a mass of small, narrow legs. Long, snaky heads probed and darted over their porters' arms. From the little creatures' sharp tones Teldin judged the smaller ones as the masters, the larger brutes the slaves.

The small band was moving along the edge of the woods, drawing closer to Teldin and Gomja. Teldin lay where he was, afraid to move back and join the giff, but also afraid of what the giff might do if he were not restrained. The muscles in his arms began to tremble. Teldin fought the spasms, trying to hold as still as possible. By now, the creatures were almost alongside.

The group stopped no more than a hoe's length from Teldin. There was a quick exchange of words. ". . . away trail . . . woods. . . come others maybe." The words were foreign, but Teldin somehow understood. As he pressed back into the branches, he hardly had time to ponder on this new wonder.

One of the brutes lowered its master to the trail, breaking off any further discussion. The little ball-shaped body poised on spidery legs while the small eel-like head wove over the path, the narrow eyes glinting over some tiny details. "This way one go," it hissed to the others standing around. "Two send and find. Before morning two must go. Raise me up," the little creature ordered to its slave.

"Yes, little master," intoned the hulking drudge. As the beast stooped to retrieve its overlord, Teldin caught a glimpse of its face. There were two sets of eyes. At the center, mashed in over a toothy maw, was a pair of pinched, evil lights filled with cunning. These alone were enough to raise a shudder, but the other set made Teldin veritably weak. Spaced on the outermost part of the beast's dome, they were bulging, multifaceted orbs. These eyes were strange and swirling, and for an instant, Teldin didn't know what to do. He wanted to leap and charge, run in fear, cower, and cry out all at once. The effect was nauseating and confusing. Teldin's mind reeled until he forced himself to think of other things-Grandfather on the porch, companions from the war, even the quiet days fishing in the nearby ponds. He focused his thoughts on these, forcing the vertigo from his mind.

By the time his head had cleared, the creatures were moving away. "Hope, let us, your quastoth find food, Nyaesta," Teldin overheard one of them say. The farmer was not quite sure if quastorh meant kinsmen or slaves. He knew he should not even have any idea what the word meant, but somehow he understood everything that was said. The creatures continued their conversation out of his hearing. Most returned to the wreck, but two pairs, master and slave, continued on up the trail. Teldin watched as they disappeared into the woods. Risking discovery, Teldin slid back to where the giff was sheltered. The big, blue creature was half-standing, his club in hand. Teldin grabbed a sleeve and pulled the giff down. "You," he hissed. "Those things have taken the trail to Liam's farm. What are they likely to do?"

The giff looked earnestly at the human. "I told you. They are killers, ravagers of worlds." He did not need to say more.

"We've got to do something," Teldin moaned.

"Give me a weapon and I am ready to fight," Gomja rumblingly announced.

The giffs bravado brought home to Teldin the precariousness of their position. With so many of the creatures and only two of them, there was no chance of winning a battle. Even following the neogi into the woods was dangerous, provided they could escape the notice of the creatures at the wreck. Teldin wanted to go forward and help, but he was certain the neogi would discover them if the pair moved at all. Torn between fear and loyalty to his friend,

Teldin balked, unable to reach a decision. Common sense urged him to stay where he was. Liam was his friend, though. He had to remember that, Teldin thought. It was cowardice to abandon the old farmer without trying, even if the attempt was hopeless. Swallowing back his fear, Teldin decided to brave a journey to Liam's farm.

The giff knelt silently beside him, barely restraining himself from charging amid the neogi. For a second the human considered abandoning the big alien and setting out on his own. Teldin did not owe the giff anything and did not even particularly trust the creature. He had tried to kill Teldin once already. Gomja had warned him of the neogi's arrival, though. Furthermore, the giff just might hold the answers to what was now happening to Teldin's life. Loyalty finally won out. Teldin nodded to the watchful giff. "We're going to Liam's. Come on.

The giff did not move. "I cannot leave my captain," the tall, blue one insisted.

"Your captain's dead. Liam's not," Teldin snapped, almost forgetting and raising his voice. "We go where I say!"

The giff did not take a second urging. Rising slowly, he began to push through toward the path. Before Gomja had managed two lumbering steps, Teldin pulled him back. "Not that way," the human ordered. "We'll follow the stream." Moving with as much silence and grace as they could manage, the pair splashed along the water's edge. Several times Teldin came to an abrupt halt, fearful that the neogi had heard their passage. Finally, the two reached the mossy bank. The water gurgled past the small stones and sticks, hiding their movements. In a short time, Teldin was certain they were beyond the range of any possible discovery.

"Hurry up!" Teldin ordered, forcing the pace as hard as possible. The heavy-set and stocky-legged giff was no sprinter, but he lumbered along the bank as best he could. Following the stream was longer than the trail the two neogi scouts had taken, and Teldin had already wasted too much time with his own indecision. With his choice made, the young farmer was suddenly afraid for his neighbor. If the neogi meant ill, old Liam would have poorer luck than a chicken against a fox.

The first lights of dawn were tinting the leaves of the wood, providing just enough light for Teldin to pick the path. Night birds whispered through the branches, telling the secrets of the trees. Teldin wondered briefly if they sang of the neogi passing. A few crickets sawed out their songs, and the frogs from the stream answered, only to fall silent as the pair neared. Behind them, the frogs reluctantly resumed their chorus. The air over the stream was chill and damp, but Teldin barely noticed.

"How far is it?" the giff asked, shattering Teldin's growing anxiety. The giff seemed to march along with no appreciation of the world around him, the powers that surrounded them. He stomped along mechanically, easily avoiding the roots and tangles. The farmer guessed the giff was one of those blessed with the "elven-sight," as his grandfather had called it, the superb night vision of that kind.

"Across the ridge and then just a little farther," Teldin answered, somewhat annoyed with his big companion. He kept his voice to a whisper.

"What are you going to do?" Gomja asked.

Teldin wondered if the giff was just dense. "Warn Liam, of course."

"And if he's dead?"

Teldin spun about in rage. "He won't be." He snapped out the words through clenched teeth. "Now quiet. You don't know what's nearby."

"Listen, human," the giff pressed. "Give me a weapon—a dagger or one of the big knives. If we have to fight, I want to be ready."

Teldin turned away as he spoke. "Why should I trust you?" he challenged.

"Because you're a groundling farmer and I am a warrior of the giff," Gomja answered plainly. Another might have made the words boastful, but from him it was a statement of fact. "If I meant to kill you, I could do it now. I could've killed you while you slept."

Teldin bit his lip. The giff was right, but knowing that did not make his decision any easier. Finally he stopped, undid one of the giff's knives, and passed it over to the alien.

Drawing the blade and inspecting it, Gomja pronounced, "Now I can fight. I only wish another of my people were here."

Teldin, already moving again grunted with irritation. The creature talked too much, as far as he was concerned.

"If I fight valorously, who will know?" the giff explained, mistaking the exclamation for interest. "If we win, another giff could testify about my bravery. Then I could wear a tattoo of my victory with pride. If I loose, he could tell the others how I died gloriously in battle." Gomja followed the smaller human, bulling his way through the underbrush. When Teldin did not answer, the giff at last gave up talking.

Dawn's light was brushing over the rooftops of the buildings just as they reached the farm. Liam's place had been here for years and was by now a mismatched collection of a house and several outbuildings, all built of wood and stone and fine shingles. The fences were in good repair, and the stone walls were sturdy. A pigsty divided the barn from the main house, while to the other side of the house was a stone wall that marked the edge of the fields. Although not wise in the world, old Liam possessed a special knack for farming.

The dark shape of Liam's house was silent. Cautiously, the giff led the way into the farmyard. Teldin had fearfully expected the farmhouse and barn to be ablaze, the sty shattered, and the crops trampled. Instead, there was no sign of the neogi, or that they had yet arrived.

Relieved, Teldin moved to step past the giff. Just as he was about to take the lead, Gomja grabbed Teldin's shoulder and pulled him back. "Should the doors be open?" he asked softly.

Teldin stopped short and scrutinized the outlines of the buildings. "Which doors?"

"Over there, and there," Gomja replied, first pointing to the barn and then the farmhouse.

Teldin suddenly felt cold. Liam was a good farmer, too smart to let his livestock roam loose at night. "No. His cows would get out," he said hoarsely, his throat choking up. Teldin stepped briskly through the tufted meadow. Dew splattered off the long foxtail stems.

Just beyond the corral fence was a damp shape. At first Teldin thought it was a pig nestled into the wallow, then the smell of raw meat started to come clear to his senses. "No!" he shouted and sprinted to the corral fence.

In a far corner he found a carcass, with bared bones dangling strings of hide and meat. Fence posts and walls glistened wetly in the growing dawn. Teldin's foot kicked a fleshy lump. It squelched under his boot, and the farmer leaped back, crashing into the giffs rock-hard chest.

"The hogs," Teldin offered in a hoarse voice. The dark corpses, huddled in the corners of the sty, were clearly not alive. The farmer gulped back his sudden disgust. "Neogi!"

"It would seem so, sir." Gomja's small eyes were wide, filled with the horrible wonder at what had happened here. "The veterans of my platoon said the neogi liked their kills fresh."

"Kills," Teldin echoed. "Quickly, the house!" Without waiting for the giff, Teldin whirled and sprinted through the muck of the sty. Caution abandoned, he charged toward the house, the cutlass in his hand flashing wildly in the dawn light. Behind him, thudding footsteps echoed between house and barn as Gomja trailed after, unable to keep pace with the human's wild rush.

Teldin ran through the open doorway of Liam's house. A horrid shadow leaped out of a corner. With a howl and wild scream, Teldin spun about and swung the cutlass with two hands, chopping through the intangible shape to bury the blade into the wood of the jamb like an axe. The blow sent painful vibrations through his arms. Tearing away a chunk of the wood, Teldin turned back to face the enemy, only to find that it was his own harmless shadow, the play of light

and dark from a small fire in a hearth on the other side of the room. Outside, Gomja stopped short of the doorway, its frame tiny compared to his great bulk. Stooping and twisting sideways, the giff carefully squeezed into the room. Inside, his seven-foot bulk just scraped the ceiling. Teldin's heart failed as he looked about the parlor. The furniture was in shambles, overturned and broken. Blood was smeared across the floor, splattered over the hearth, and ran in streaks down the overturned table. It gleamed red and brown in the warm yellow light of the fire. Frantically, Teldin tore through the room, but there were no bodies among the mess. Another doorway stood in the far wall. Teldin knew from his many visits to Liam's that it led to where the family slept, the only other room of the house. The doorjamb to that room was soaked, like the floor, with wet reds and browns.

Choking on fear and rage, Teldin slowly walked forward. He clutched the cutlass with both hands and held it just before his stomach, the blade jutting outward like the prow of a ship. Even held so firmly, the tip wobbled and wavered. Try as he might, Teldin was unable to stop his hands from shaking. Gomja loomed behind him, the giff forcing his way past the overturned furniture.

From the doorway, Teldin and Gomja cast hulking shadows across the floor and far wall, partially blotting out the shapes in the room. Rays of the morning sun barely gleamed through a dirty window covered in oilskin. The bedroom floor was a jagged landscape: broken bedposts, slats, shattered chests. Among the jutting profiles were rounded contours draped limply over the sharper forms.

Teldin shook as he stood in the doorway, unable to make himself go any farther. The air was warm and thick with the smell of blood. Flies buzzed in the shadows. "Too late," Teldin choked out. "There's no point. I waited too long." The young farmer sagged by the doorway, the cutlass drooping in his limp hands.

Unable to think of a comforting word to say, the giff squeezed past the human. His ears brushed the rough beams of the ceiling, so he walked half-hunched into the room. With exaggerated caution, Gomja knelt to examine the closest shape, gingerly pulling aside the thick quilt that concealed it. A swarm of flies flew noisily away. The quilt was warm and wet, heavy with blood. Underneath, Gomja could see a body, tinged red in the window's weak light. It had been a woman.

"Oh, gods, Eloise." Teldin let the stifled words escape. Teldin knew he had seen worse in the war among the fields of dead, but these people were his friends, his father's and grandfather's friends. Teldin slowly got to his feet, then moved to check the other bodies.

It took the giff longer to regain his composure. His face was ill and hollow, a look Teldin remembered on raw recruits after their first battle. Unsteady on his feet, the giff joined Teldin in the search. A brief look was all either needed. The pair hastily bundled the bodies in the bloodstained blankets. That work done, Teldin retreated from the room. The giff leaned heavily against the doorjamb, his chest heaving, his skin ashen gray. "How many lived here?" the giff managed to ask.

"Four. Liam, Eloise, and their two children, Telvar and Cyndia." Teldin looked at the dark shapes in the room beyond. His shoulders were shaking. The sword was still clutched tightly in his hands. In his mind they all were still alive and welcoming him inside. "Liam and Eloise tried for children for such a long time. Telvar and Cyndia were twins. They were so..." Teldin let it go; there was no point in saying any more.

The giff nodded weakly. "Four," he whispered.

"I was too late," Teldin said. "I didn't save them." He slammed his fist against the jamb, driving the shaking fit away. He ignored his bloodied hand and turned to go back into the room. "Come on, giff," the farmer said grimly. "We can't leave them here. We'll have to bury them. There should be a shovel in the barn."

"Yes, sir," Trooper Gomja numbly replied.

Chapter Four

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Work made things easier for both Teldin and the giff, blocking out the thoughts of what had happened in Liam's house. While Gomja shoveled graves in the rocky soil behind the cabin, Teldin scrounged through the barn, looking for something to use as a marker. At last he split a clean wedge from a log and crudely carved "Shal" on it. Elegance didn't matter since the board was only temporary. Teldin planned to come back later with proper headstones. The giff came clumping around the house and stiffly announced, "The graves are finished." The morning sun was already climbing into the sky and the dew was starting to steam away. The giff mopped his expansive brow with a rag. Sitting on his log, Teldin kept whittling at the marker, not looking up. He was reluctant to get on with this burial, more than any other he had done. The knife pared away another strip of wood.

"Sir?" the giff spoke again.

Teldin bit his lip, then thrust the knife with a fierce jab into a fence post. "Let's get it over with." His voice was tight and grim, edged with exhaustion that was fast overtaking him. He stood slowly and followed the giff back around the house.

The bundled bodies lay in a neat row near the stone wall behind Liam's house. Not too far away, under a scraggly tree, were four holes in the ground. The fresh earth was heaped in a great mound alongside. Teldin and Gomja lowered the bodies one at a time into the graves and shoveled the dirt back over them. Teldin worked slowly, letting the monotonous task numb his mind.

When they eventually finished, both stood unmoving in front of the graves. The giff simply watched the human, waiting for some sign of what to do next. Teldin stared at the fresh earth and tried to remember a prayer. During the war, when he had to work the burial details, the Seekers had chanted while they worked. He had never paid much attention to the prayers then and now none came to mind. "Good-bye, Liam, Eloise. Paladine protect you all," the young farmer said softly. It was all he could think of saying. As far as he was concerned, nothing more needed to be said.

"What about the neogi?" Trooper Gomja quietly asked. The giff's words broke Teldin's trance. Without acknowledging Gomja's presence, the farmer turned back to the house. "There, beneath Abyssal gates, I choose my way," Teldin whispered, remembering a snatch of verse his grandfather had taught him. He didn't know why the thought came to him now, but he could clearly remember Grandfather teaching him the words as they walked through the fields. Teldin couldn't have been more than ten at the time.

"What will you do now?" Gomja asked again. The giff plodded to where Teldin stood, a spade still in his hand.

Teldin was tired, too tired to plan. "I don't know. I don't care," he bitterly answered. "Go back to the..."

Teldin stopped. He had been about to say his farm, but he didn't have one anymore, or at least not much of one. He needed money to buy supplies for rebuilding. Trooper Gomja's expectant expression, turned attentively toward Teldin, forced the farmer to think, and he suddenly knew where to go. He had cousins in Kalamán, and they could help him. At any rate, it was better than staying around

here-but the giff was not part of this plan.

"Sir?"

"Back to the farm," Teldin hastily said. That was all the giff needed to know.

"And then what, sir?" Gomja pressed.

Then I leave you behind, Teldin thought with a shake of his head. He began to feel the strains of the last two nights. Labor, pain, terror, and rage had worn the threads of his mind thin. "I want to go home." The giff nodded in understanding, his broad muzzle bobbing up and down. "Now, let's get out of

here before the valley folk show up."

"Or the neogi return," Trooper Gomja grimly added.

Teldin let the giff lead the way back through the forest, occasionally pointing out the right path. The morning birds were already falling silent in the midday heat. Squirrels chattered at their passage. In the clearings Teldin could look back and see the lonely buildings of Liam's farm in the bright light. He was glad to be away from the site.

Once across the ridge, Teldin felt a weight lift off him. The terrors of the night were still firmly fixed in his mind, but he had left Liam's farm behind. Both the fear of discovery and the shame that he felt eased. His brain became numbed, focusing only on the simple task of walking.

When they reached the edge of Teldin's melon field, Trooper Gomja reverted to his old caution, halting their march in the bushes. The giff carefully picked his way to the edge of the field and knelt in the cover of some brambles. The big creature patiently scanned the shattered farmyard.

As he stood near the kneeling giff, Teldin wondered, too, if the neogi were really gone. Trying to watch with the same vigilance, Teldin looked over his farm's broken remains. The destruction seemed less from this angle than he actually feared. The cabin was a complete loss, as were most of the melons, but the other fields seemed unharmed. I can recover, he thought optimistically, with a little money and time. All I need is money, from somewhere.

"It looks very quiet," the giff announced. Teldin could already see that, and he moved to head down the trail. The farmer was brought up short when Gomja laid a restraining hand on his shoulder. "But there might be hidden scouts. Shall I go out and see?" The giff stood, ready to go.

Teldin checked his first impulse to give approval. It was his farm, he decided, and he wasn't going to hide behind a seven-foot-tall walking hippopotamus. It grated against his pride. Besides, as he looked up into the big creature's dark eyes, Teldin again didn't trust his companion. The problem was that he still didn't trust the giff at his back either. Maybe the giff had saved his life, but the yeoman still remembered how they had met. "You stay," Teldin ultimately chose, letting pride win out. "I'll go. If I signal, then everything should be safe."

"Yes, sir," Gomja said, unable to hide the disappointment in his voice. Staying along the tree line, Teldin loped down to the Penumbra's debris. The morning sun gave the wreckage the feeling of a majestic ruin left over from the days before the Cataclysm had shattered Ansalon. Fire-scarred and broken pieces suggested great age in the same way as the moldering halls of the High Clerist's Tower near Palanthas. The crushed cabin beneath the Penumbra's bow broke the illusion, reminding Teldin of the things he had lost. Near enough now to see the details of the ship, Teldin scouted quickly for any sign of the creatures from the night before. All seemed peaceful. Even the songbirds had begun to sing again. Teldin waved an "all clear" to Gomja, though he was uncertain whether the giff would appear. The big alien quickly strode into the clearing, shoving the knife into his sash. Perhaps, Teldin speculated, the giff could be trusted.

"They're gone!" Teldin shouted. He settled down at the base of a tree and stabbed the cutlass into the earth beside him. He felt giddy, the burden of fear suddenly lifted. It was an irrational impulse given the horrors of the night, but still he could not help the feeling. Teldin adjusted the cloak and leaned against the tree, relishing for a few seconds the feeling of peace. Trooper Gomja slowly walked down to join the human, warily circling the ship's remains before he settled down. "They are gone."

"Thank the gods," Teldin added, slightly vexed that the giff did not seem to believe him.

"Perhaps." Gomja looked toward the wreck. "The neogi dug up the graves. The bodies are gone." The giff's voice was cold and unfeeling.

Teldin's good feeling collapsed inside him as a surge of dread replaced it.

"The graves? They dug them up? Why?"

"I don't know! I don't know anything!" Gomja bellowed. He turned his broad face, twisted with a snarl, on the startled human. Exhaustion finally broke the giffs strict discipline, releasing a wave of rage and frustration. "They kill things. They kill everything. I'm just a trooper, not an expert on neogi! They've killed my captain, they've killed my friends, and I didn't even die fighting them like a true giff!"

Teldin sat stunned by the huge creature's outburst. Only a few moments before, Teldin was ready to trust the creature, but in this instant he felt no such security. Teldin glanced at the cutlass jammed into the earth and slowly slid his hand toward the weapon. The giffs savage tone dispelled any of Teldin's illusions concerning the creature's peaceful nature.

Before the human could reply, Trooper Gomja wheeled away. The giffs shoulders shook as he strode through the wreckage, giving a few well-placed kicks to the loose wood in his path. Teldin sagged back, exhaling the breath he had held since the beginning of the creature's tirade. He felt anger and relief all at once. At least, Teldin mused, giff are like humans in some ways. They both need to blow off steam.

There were noises from Gomja rummaging through the wreckage, and although Teldin knew he should see what the giff was up to, he felt it was much wiser to give the big creature some privacy. He needed some for himself, too. Teldin basked in the sun and deliberately tried not to think. It didn't work; grief and sorrow came over him and sitting alone only highlighted the pain. He cursed himself for his weakness, for killing Liam and his family.

A regular beating noise, like stone whacking stone, roused the farmer. At first he thought it might be the drumming of a woodland grouse, but he quickly discarded that notion. Nearby was Gomja, beating at something with a heavy stone. A concerned Teldin strolled over, trying his best to look casual about the giffs activities. He did not care to trigger another of the alien's tantrums.

The giff was crouched over a chest, the one Liam had found the day before, and was hammering at the lid with a big stone held in his two hands. The trooper was intent on his work and did not notice Teldin coming up behind him.

"Trooper Gomja," Teldin said softly but firmly, "what are you doing?"

The startled giff dropped the rock at Teldin's words. He scuttled around, his face dark purple with embarrassment. "I was just trying to open it, sir. There may be useful things inside." From the way the giff sounded, Teldin was reminded of the time his father had caught him playing with his grandfather's sword. Teldin could understand the giffs curiosity, but, all the same, he had to scowl disapprovingly. The giff looked contrite, his ears and jowls drooping.

Asharp reply hung on Teldin's tongue, but he held it back. The chest was a distraction and one they both obviously needed. "Go ahead then," the human ordered, watching from over the giffs broad shoulder.

After the battering Trooper Gomja had already given it, the chest was not difficult to open. One of the hinges was sprung and it only took a little prying with his dagger to work the other loose. Gomja pulled the entire lid off, then easily tossed it aside and carefully began removing the contents. Teldin watched interestedly over the giff's shoulder. The chest held mostly books and papers. As the trooper pulled them out, Teldin made a stack of the thick, bound volumes. They looked like old ship's logs, packed away for safekeeping. Pressed between them were folded sheets of heavy linen paper. Teldin opened one to find that it was a large sheet covered with symbols, diagrams, and notes in a strange language. The farmer held it up for Gomja to see.

"Rudders-star charts, I think," the giff answered after a brief look, "for navigating. The captain had many of these."

"These aren't charts for any stars over Krynn. Where's the Balance or Paladine?" Teldin commented as he studied the symbols, trying to match them to the positions of the constellations he knew.

"It is probably for a different sphere, not yours." Gomja looked at the chart

that Teldin held in front of him.

"Sphere?" Teldin asked, cocking his head slightly toward the giff.

Gomja struggled to explain. Navigation and charts were clearly not his strong suits. "There are other worlds like this one, but different. These are spheres."

"You mean like Solinari or the other moons." Teldin thought he understood.

"No, sir," Gomja corrected, unconsciously addressing Teldin as his superior.

"The spheres hold moons, worlds, even stars.

"So you come from another sphere?" Teldin asked the giff.

"Yes, sir."

Comes from the Abyss, more likely, Teldin thought. Yet the gift's explanation seemed to make sense. Certainly Teldin, in all his travels, had never seen or heard of anything that resembled a giff. "Grandfather always wondered if there was something out in the night sky, beyond the moons. Maybe he was right." His grandfather, Halev, had shown Teldin there was more to the world than just the farm, and maybe there was more than even his grandfather knew. Teldin's father never did understand that or any of Teldin's other dreams. Amdar had no time for dreams. That was one of the reasons Teldin had run away to fight in the war.

"Let's finish this," Teldin decided, breaking out of the coil of his memories. The giff returned his attention to emptying the chest. Out came more books and papers, then a layer of clothing. Teldin held up a shirt, clearly too small for his lanky frame. It was richly made with silken fabric and gold embroidery. Teldin carefully folded the shirt and set it aside.

The last things in the chest were three bags and a long, leather-wrapped bundle. Two of the bags were rather large. Teldin opened the first sack, only to find it contained a dirty white powder. The second was equally disappointing, containing a coarse gray powder. The third pouch was no better, for it held nothing but lead marbles. Carefully undoing the thongs on the leather bundle, Teldin unwrapped two short, curved sticks, bound in metal and each fitted with a tube. Strange mechanisms protruded from the sides. They had the same general look of the stick Gomja had threatened him with the night the Penumbra had crashed.

"By the blessing of the Great Captain," Gomja huskily breathed, "he has remembered me!" He slid closer. Even on his knees the giff was not a small person.

Teldin picked one of the tubes up and examined it. He shook it and heard something rattle. He looked into the tube, but it was dark. A short metal rod fell out. The mechanisms on the side seemed to move stiffly, and one of them held a small piece of flint. Teldin tried to hold the stick the way he remembered Gomja holding it. Pointing the tube toward the giff, he demanded, "What is it?"

Gomja stepped out of the direct line of the barrel. "It is a pistol. May I have it?"

"Pis-tol? Last night, you pointed this at me and it exploded. Why?" Teldin made no effort to hide his suspicion.

The giff bit at his lip, a comical sight for one so heavily jowled. "I thought you meant harm to my captain."

"So this is a weapon, isn't it?"

The giff nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Gnomish work," Teldin speculated as he turned the pistol over and over in his hands. The gnomes were notorious inventors and tinkerers, equally notorious for their inventions' spectacular failures. "Must be, from the way it blew up. For now, I'll keep them," Teldin told the giff as he wrapped the bizarre weapons back up.

"What about the bags?" the giff asked, trying to conceal his disappointment. For a moment, Teldin considered claiming those, too. He couldn't fathom what their purpose was. "Wizard things," Teldin guessed. "I say leave them, but you can take them if you want." Magic was not something Teldin cared to dabble with. It was too dangerous, unpredictable, and even corrupting.

The giff carefully took them up and checked to make sure the strings on each bag were tight. Satisfied, he tucked the bundles into the dirty orange folds of his sash. "Thank you, sir."

The giffs mammoth jaw opened in a huge yawn, exposing two rows of huge, blockish teeth.

Teldin suppressed a bemused smile. "When did you last sleep?" the farmer asked. He felt somewhat rested while his companion looked far from soothed.

"Two days, sir," Gomja replied, closing his huge maw.

Apparently, Teldin figured, being blasted unconscious by your own weapon didn't count as sleep. "Then go get some rest," Teldin gently said. Gomja opened his mouth to protest, but Teldin cut him off. "That was an order, Trooper Gomja," he said firmly.

The giff let out a big sigh. "Yes, sir. I will, sir."

Teldin pointed to the shade of a big elm. "Right now- over there." Gomja nodded and with no more protesting hauled himself into the cool gloom, where he fixed up a simple bed, using a root for a pillow. Within a few minutes, the leaves overhead were shaking from the giffs deep snores.

His own worries momentarily put aside, Teldin leaned back against the tree.

"Someone should stay on guard," he said to himself. He had barely finished the words before his own eyes shut and sleep again overtook him.

Chapter Five

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Teldin awoke the next morning after a restless night of dark images that haunted his sleep. The dreams had roused him from slumber and left him sleepless in the dark. Teldin had stared into the night sky, tracing the paths of Krynn's two visible moons, silvery smooth and featureless Solinart and the freckled red orb that was Lunitari. The world's third moon, Nunitari, was invisible to all but the sinister wizards of the Black Robes. Each time Teldin drifted off to sleep he was wakened again when the frightful dreams returned. When the sun had risen, the dreams were mercifully banished. Only small memories remained, more sensations than images-those of a terrible pressure, then something tearing at his chest. Whatever he had dreamed, Teldin was thankful he did not fully remember it with the dawn.

Sitting up on his bed of leaves and moss, the farmer brushed the dirt from his clothes and threw the cloak back over his shoulders. He looked ruefully at his shirt. The brown linen was scorched and stained, marked by large smears of dirt and blood. His cotton trousers were little better, marked by tatters and unraveling threads. Unfortunately, nearly all his other clothes had been lost in the blaze. The cloak, curiously enough, wasn't stained at all.

"Best to wash what I've got. Wouldn't want my cousins to think me a beggar," Teldin muttered.

At the stream edge, Teldin kicked off his shoes and pulled down his trousers. His ankles and shins were scratched and scraped, and there were several new large bruises on his calves and thighs. No wonder he ached with every step. "Explains the bad sleep," Teldin muttered crossly as he got ready to bathe. The cloak would have to come off before Teldin could remove his shirt, he reasoned. Up to now, he'd had no luck with the clasp, because it had jammed somehow. It was either that or it obviously didn't work the way he thought. Sitting on a stone at the edge of the bank, Teldin pressed his chin down to his chest, trying to see the small silver chain that held the cloak around his neck. It was ornate workmanship. The fine links of chain ended in two small lion-headed clasps. At least, Teldin assumed they were lions. The silvery jaws gripped each other in an intricate death struggle, holding the chains shut. Teldin looked for a catch that would open the jaws. He tried pressing the eyes and nose, squeezing at the jaws, and pushing on the top of the head. Nothing happened. Stumped, he tried turning the heads. Perhaps they needed to be twisted in just some certain way, he thought.

As Teldin fiddled with the clasp, a shadow fell over his shoulder. "Trouble,

sir?" rumbled the giff, standing behind him.

Teldin gave a sour look over his shoulder at the giff towering over him. Apparently the creature could move quietly. Teldin cautiously shifted around to put himself at less of a disadvantage. "It's this clasp. I can't seem to get it open, he grumbled. "Your captain ever take this off?"

"She never wore it until the neogi appeared," Gomja answered.

"Hmm?" It wasn't the answer Teldin had expected. He gave a yank on the chains, trying to pull the clasp apart. "How so?"

Trooper Gomja unwound his filthy sash. "I remember the captain went below when the neogi first appeared. She said she needed to get her advantage. She came back wearing the cloak." The giff began unbuttoning his blouse.

"Advantage?" The more Teldin learned, the more puzzled he became.

"That is what she said." The giff peeled off his uniform. "Besides, she must have been able to remove it. She gave it to you, didn't she? You jammed it, sir."

Teldin doubted that greatly. The clasp did not look broken. He stared at the little eyes of the animal heads. "Is this thing magical, maybe?"

Trooper Gomja looked up from pulling off his trousers. His ears twitched warily. "I don't know. Never had much use for magical stuff," he muttered. In a louder voice the giff continued, "Could be, I suppose. The captain seemed to think wearing it would help." Trooper Gomja's words were carefully chosen and guarded.

Teldin chewed at his lip, vexed with the problem. He tried wiggling a fang. Nothing happened. "Did she? What's it supposed to do?"

"I don't know, sir. The captain never told me," came the matter-of-fact answer. Naked, but unseen by Teldin's occupied eyes, Trooper Gomja waded into the center of the stream and gingerly sat down in the cold water.

"Well, did you see anything? Did your captain, or this cloak, do anything special?" Teldin stood, his shirttail flapping against his bare legs.

Gomja thought carefully. "Not that I saw, sir. It was just a cloak." Scooping up a handful of sand from the bottom, the giff let the mud in it filter away. Trooper Gomja turned away and began scouring his blue-gray hide with clean grit.

Teldin was not sure whether the giff really did not know or was carefully picking his answers so as not to reveal too much. All the same, he was not getting any answers. "Well, this is wonderful!" the farmer burst out in frustration. "I've got you, a cloak that might be magical-but I don't know with what powers-and a bunch of creatures ready to kill for it! And I can't even take this damn cloak off!" Infuriated, he yanked at the chain, trying to snap the silver clasp, but the fastening held. "And I can't even take a bath!" Gomja watched silently from the center of the stream. He had stopped scrubbing, letting the sand flow out from between his thick fingers. "Why don't you pull your shirt off over it?" he calmly suggested.

Ready to start snarling, Teldin glared at the giff, then stopped. "Of course," he said calmly, more to himself than to the giff, "pull my shirt off over a five-foot-long cloak. That shouldn't be difficult. And every time I want to change my clothes, I can just do the same thing." After a short struggle, Teldin emerged from the tussle of clothes, shirt in hand, cloak still around his neck. "It's a good thing I don't have to bathe too often," he grumbled. The farmer finished pulling off his clothes and stood nearly naked on the bank. The cloak hung long down his back, lending an air of imperial, if ridiculous, dignity, to the bath. Teldin waded into the water, trying to keep the cloak dry. "Damn! I don't want to go hiking with it soaking wet," he muttered. The captain's gift was becoming more and more of a curse every instant as he fumbled with the cascades of cloth, trying to wrap it around his shoulders or bundle it on top of his head.

Finally, with a frustrated growl, Teldin plopped into the stream and resigned himself to wearing the wet mass. The cool water tingled over his thighs and buttocks, raising the hairs on his legs.

"That's curious," the giff commented, watching Teldin's back.

"Eh?" Teldin remarked with mild alarm while craning his neck around to look over his shoulder. The cloak was shorter, now barely more than a half-cape, dangling just above the water. The bottom had shrunk upward, as if suddenly afraid to get wet. "It changes sizes?" Teldin asked, dumbfounded. Still watching, the farmer leaned back slowly, trying to see the strange cloak in action. Sure enough, as he leaned, the hem receded, maintaining its distance just above the water.

Satisfied with these observations, Teldin decided to try something more extreme and suddenly pitched backward into the water, dunking himself completely. He emerged, blowing and rasping from his sudden immersion in the coolness. Water streamed from his short, sandy hair and down his hairy chest. The cloak was little more than a collar, shrunk to a minuscule size. Teldin beamed triumphantly.

After finishing their baths, the pair returned to the bank. Teldin sat on a stump, observing the waving green of his sunlit wheat field. Trampled paths made by the neogi and their slaves threaded through the waving stalks. The farmer scowled as he looked at the field. The wheat would recover from the beating, but Teldin worried about being away from his crops for too long. It would take at least a week, maybe more, to go to Kalamán and make arrangements with his cousins, and even then there was the matter of rebuilding the cabin. That needed to be done before the winter rains. Teldin started making a mental inventory of all the work that needed doing. He had to clear the wreckage, build a new cabin, replace the chicken coop, get new livestock, and still lay up enough food to see him through the winter. It was going to be a lot of heavy labor. "I wonder if I can talk Cousin Trandallic into buying a team and hitch." In his heart, Teldin doubted it. During the siege of Kalamán, Teldin had lived with his cousins and knew they were not the wealthiest people in the city. Still, Malbart Trandallic had always been a good-hearted man.

At last dry, Teldin pulled on his clothes. "It's time for me to go," he announced casually. It was all the leavetaking he felt the giff needed. They were hardly old friends or companions. The farmer assumed the creature could manage on his own—he was certainly big enough to do so.

Teldin gathered his few surviving possessions, rolled them in a blanket, and tied off the ends. Shouldering his load, he struck out on the forest trail. The giff gathered up his own paltry goods and fell into step behind. Aware that he was being accompanied, Teldin stopped and confronted the blue-skinned alien. "Where are you going?" he challenged.

"With you-sir," the giff answered, somewhat surprised that the question had even come up.

"I'm going to see my cousins. I don't remember asking you along," was Teldin's cold reply. The farmer turned his back on the big alien.

As he walked, Teldin listened for sounds of the giff behind him. There was nothing, no plodding footsteps, and with the silence Teldin did not feel very proud. The big creature had even fewer choices than himself, he knew. The farmer wondered briefly where the giff would go or if the alien would still be here when he returned. "It's not my problem," he snarled softly to himself.

"He can take care of himself."

Abranch cracked behind the farmer, followed by crunching noises. The giff, Teldin thought, was following him again. The noises continued and doubt entered his mind. What if it wasn't the giff? It might be a neogi, after all, left behind to spy. Slowly and carefully drawing the giffs cutlass, Teldin turned around, crouched like a brawler in a bar-fight.

There were no neogi, but across the field the giff was marching steadily along. Teldin jabbed the sword into the dirt and stood up straight. "Trooper Gomja," he bellowed across the distance, "will you stop following me? Leave me alone! Go away!"

The giff barely paused in his stride. He met Teldin's hot glare with an ingenuous smile. "But, sir, I'm not following you," Trooper Gomja sweetly answered back. "I'm just going the same way. Kalamán sounds like an interesting place." In a few lumbering strides, Trooper Gomja was almost

alongside the farmer.

Teldin was getting a headache. Having refused to accept the giff, the farmer couldn't very well order the creature away, nor were threats likely to work. It was clear that whether Teldin wanted him or not the giff was coming along, at least as far as Kalamán. "You sly knave," Teldin grumbled, "get yourself up here. If we're both going to Kalamán, we might as well walk together."

Resigned to the companion at his side, Teldin struck out on the path for the last time, crossing the melon patch and wheat field. At the edge of the woods, he looked back. Blackbirds were settling on his broken melons. Teldin automatically took a step back toward the farm to shoo them away, but then stopped. There wasn't any point. When he came back with money and maybe a team, then he could take care of things.

"Good-bye," Teldin whispered, his voice unable to speak any louder. The cabin's roofless walls echoed his words. Teldin could see the house, complete and whole, as his grandfather had built it. There were the places he had played: the brook, the gnarly oak at the edge of the forest, the fields in the time they grew corn. He saw his father, bent and tired, in the doorway when his son had come home from the war. Although Amdar had never said anything, Teldin knew the years alone had burdened his father, had worn him down before his years. Now, as he was leaving again, Teldin regretted going away the first time- any time.

Teldin swallowed painfully. He realized he hadn't even visited the family graves. There was no time. "Good-bye, father. Good-bye, grandfather," he whispered. "I'll be back soon," he added, not wanting their ghosts to think he was running away this time. Biting his lip, the farmer turned away from his land before the echoes of his own voice might return in the rustle of the trembling wheat.

As Teldin led the way, Gomja cast a look over his shoulder, searching for the ghosts that Teldin had seen.

By midmorning the pair had crossed Dargaard Valley and reached the Kalamán road. Teldin had swung wide of Liam's farm. There was a good chance people might be there, and Teldin didn't want to try explaining Gomja just yet. He also wasn't ready to face the memories of that place. The detour had lengthened their march to the road, but neither Teldin nor the giff was in a particular hurry.

Before long, the late summer sun made their trek a sweltering march. The grasses that grew thick on all sides were already turning a sun-scorched tan. Grasshoppers flew up at every step, and thickets of brambles rustled with mice and birds.

As they strode down the rutted lane, Teldin noticed that his big companion didn't seem very happy. With jowls sagging, Trooper Gomja stared at the ground.

"Why the long face?" Teldin asked. If they were going to walk together, they might as well talk, he reasoned. Conversation had certainly shortened long marches during the war.

"Long face?" the giff queried, raising his small, black eyes to meet Teldin's gaze.

"Sad, unhappy. Not cheerful."

Trooper Gomja gave an expansive shrug. "The neogi are gone," he answered as if that explained everything.

"Yes, I know. I thought that was good," Teldin answered with a tinge of sarcasm. A red-winged blackbird dove past them, cawing with irritation as they passed its nest.

"But I did not face them in combat!" the giff exclaimed. "I'll always be Trooper Gomja, Red Grade, First Rank. At this rate, I'll never get the chance to fight." Gomja kicked at a rock with a big, round foot, sending the stone skittering into the grass. "It doesn't matter anyway," he continued, "because there aren't any other giff here to see what I do. I'm never going to go up in ranks, I'm never going to get off this world, and I don't even know where here is!" The giff's big shoulders heaved with frustration. He stomped the earth

with a solid thud.

Teldin held back his own feelings, giving the giff a chance to vent. He remembered how similar his own bitter accusations to his father were to Gomja's complaints. Amdar had never seemed to understand, always insisting his son perform his duties on the farm and avoid pointless death in battle. They were not the words an idealistic youth had wanted to hear and, in the end, Teldin ran from the farm to seek honor and glory. He never found it in the war. Now, listening to the giff, Teldin tried to remember how it had felt back then. So much had changed since that time. Indeed Teldin found he had greater sympathy for his father than for his own voice in Gomja.

"Well, you're in Vingaard Valley, outside Kalamán," the farmer offered lamely, trying to be sympathetic. It was hard, though, since he no longer saw any glory in war. "Does that help?"

Trooper Gomja snorted, shaking his head. "What planet is this?"

"Planet?" Teldin was somewhat surprised by the question. While he had learned during the war that the continent on which he lived was Ansalon, the concept of an even larger body had never occurred to him. "I don't know," he admitted. "Oh." That knowledge didn't really seem to help the giff at all. The creature's gaze sank again.

"What are you going to do in Kalamán?" Teldin asked. It would be nice, bethought, if the giff had some kind of a plan, though Teldin doubted that was the case.

"I don't know." Gomja abruptly looked up. "What should I do, sir?"

"Me? That's not my problem." Teldin quickly backed off. Being sympathetic only went so far. The giff had already made his life complicated enough. "I've got my own worries, like how to get this cloak off. Can't you decide for yourself?"

The giffs bluish skin darkened. "I don't know," the giff said, embarrassed to make the admission. "I've never had to."

"Never had..." Teldin shook his head in disbelief. It didn't seem sensible that anyone as large as the giff should be so inexperienced. Then, remembering his experiences with his own father, Teldin stopped in the middle of the road and considered the trooper. "Just how old are you?" he asked the giff suspiciously.

"I am of age to serve in the ranks of the giff," Trooper Gomja answered, again standing at attention as he spoke. A dragonfly whirred by and settled on the spreading head of a sunflower beside the road.

Teldin couldn't help but notice the defensive tone in the giffs voice. "How old is 'of age'?"

"Sixteen cycles of the spheres," Gomja answered with exaggerated pride.

"Sixteen cycles-oh, sixteen years," Teldin said, nodding. He found himself reevaluating his relationship, such as it was, with the giff. Teldin was twice the trooper's age, even as old as a parent. "And what about your family? They weren't on the ship, were they?"

"Family?" Gomja cocked his head, bemused by the question. "I was of the Red Platoon."

Teldin did not understand the gift's answer. "But you do have a mother and father? Parents-family?"

"Of course I had sires," Gomja replied, explaining the obvious, "but I am of the Red Platoon. Giff do not live with their sires.

Although it seemed unnatural, Teldin accepted this, given the giff's curious militaristic bearing. He started walking again, slowly, so that the giff could keep pace. "Well, then, where's the rest of the Red Platoon?"

"I am Red Platoon-or all that's left," Gomja answered sadly. The giff wiped away a rivulet of sweat that ran down the center of his muzzle. "The others were on board. They did not have the chance to die fighting." Teldin wasn't sure, but it looked like a small tear was forming in the corner of the gift's tiny eye. If it did, the tear quickly disappeared into the fleshy folds of the gift's jowls. The farmer decided not to bring the subject up again.

Flies buzzed between the two, attracted by the scent of sweat that reeked from

the pair. It was not until the road reached the edge of the hills overlooking the Vingaard River that Teldin felt the urge to talk again. He looked out to see the river flowing across the valley floor.

"Those creatures, the neogi," the farmer carefully asked of Gomja, "will they be back?"

Gomja screwed up his brow in thought. "They might," he allowed.

"Might..." Teldin mulled over the words. "And if they caught up with the cloak-bearer?"

"It would mean a fight," Gomja countered, not sounding entirely displeased. The two companions stopped for a rest at the edge of the road. Teldin leaned against a worn distance marker while Gomja sprawled back in the tall, sun-browned grass. The giff rubbed the big, round pads of his feet and let out a mock groan.

"In Kalamán," Teldin said, speaking to himself, "I'd better find someone who can get this cloak off. I might even be able to sell it for the team I need. After all, it's magical-I think." Teldin fingered the fabric, little more than a circlet around his neck since its immersion in the stream.

The giff was not listening; he was too busy checking his feet for blisters. Teldin spat out a mouthful of road dust. "Better get used to it-the marching, I mean," he advised. "It's a long walk to Kalamán."

The giff raised his head and gazed mournfully at the human. "How far, sir?"

"A dozen leagues, at least." Teldin looked under his arm at the stone marker. "Fourteen, by this."

Gomja let his head fall back with an audible sigh.

"I thought you were a soldier. Didn't your platoon ever march anywhere?" Teldin chided.

The giff rolled his bulk upright. "We were marines," he answered proudly, "not groundlings. We served aboard ship. Marching is for groundlings."

Teldin felt his temper rise at the giff's words. "I marched everywhere," he said coldly. "You'd better remember, you're a groundling now."

The giff reddened, or, more properly, purpled, as his face flushed. "Yes, sir. I will remember that."

"Enough," Teldin said with no rancor in his voice. There was no point in arguing. "It's time to get marching. Kalamán won't get any closer if we just sit here." He stood and rolled his shoulders, flexing out the kinks. The giff heaved to his feet.

"I will carry the load, sir." Gomja held out a huge hand for Teldin's bedroll. "You should not have to carry it. I want to do my part."

Teldin started to protest, then thought better of it. Shrugging the makeshift pack off his shoulder, he passed it over. The giff draped the undersized pack around his neck.

"You told me you were a mule skinner," Gomja said as he lumbered along, adding a curious inflection to the words. "Mule Skinner is the name of your platoon? It would be a great unit to have such a fearsome name."

Swallowing hard, Teldin stifled a hoot of laughter. His blue eyes twinkled mischievously as he thought of how to answer. Finally, with a straight face and mock seriousness, Teldin explained, "Oh, yes, Trooper Gomja, mule skimmers were a brave lot, all right. The mule is one of the most dangerous, clever, and ornery beasts found in the land. It was the mule skimmers' job to keep these creatures under control."

Gomja's little eyes grew wide as he absorbed every word Teldin spoke. "There must be many heroes in your unit, sir."

A smirk escaped from Teldin's lips. He fought to keep from collapsing with laughter. "There were many heroes much greater than any mule skinner." The joke was going too far, and he doubted he could keep a straight face for much longer. "The mule skimmers were only soldiers. Others did much more in the war."

Gomja nodded, though Teldin wasn't sure the giff accepted his answer. "Did your army win, sir?"

"Win the War of the Lance? I suppose so-yes, we did." Teldin was relieved to

be off the topic of mule skinners, but the question was certainly odd. He assumed everyone knew about the War of the Lance. "We chased the dragons and most of the draconians out, thanks to the Knights of Solammia and the dragonlances."

The giff's ears suddenly perked up. "Dragonlances? What are those?"

Teldin paused to spit out another mouthful of dust. "It's a weapon, a lance. Dragonriders carried them. They were supposed to be special against dragons." Teldin had never seen an actual dragonlance, and everything he knew about them came from camp tales. "One touch and, poof, the dragon was slain," he explained with a wave of his hands.

"These must be mighty weapons," Gomja said, awe-struck.

"We couldn't have won the war without them," Teldin agreed, nodding.

"Where can I get one of these dragonlances? I would like one." There was no mistaking the eagerness in Gomja's voice.

Teldin was taken aback by the directness of the question and the fact that the giff thought he could just go out and pick one up. "I don't know. Maybe Kalamana. Palanthas, for sure," he equivocated.

"Good. I'm going to Kalamana. I'll look for one there." Gomja gazed down the Kalamana road. "It will not be such a long march." With that, he picked up the pace.

Teldin fell into an easy stride beside the hastily lumbering giff, but by noon, human and giff were both thoroughly hungry. When they had started, Teldin expected to meet farmers on the road, carrying vegetables to the Kalamana market. It was his plan to buy food for their journey with the little money he'd rescued from the wreckage of his house. Unfortunately, the plan was not working.

Teldin's thoughts of food were interrupted by a sound different from the whine of the locusts and songs of the field birds. From behind came the groaning creak of wagon wheels and the snap and jingle of a harness. Looking back, he saw a wagon rounding the bend, but the wagon master hadn't yet seen the pair. The road at this point passed through a narrow cut. Thick brush and trees grew close to the banks, forming a shaded alley. These would give more than enough cover for Gomja. "Quickly," Teldin ordered the giff, "get into the bushes and stay out of sight."

"Yes, sir," Gomja replied. His huge bulk swaying from side to side, the giff trotted off the road and behind a thicket. From the bushes he called out.

"Shall I attack on your command?"

"Don't do or say anything!" Teldin hissed back in exasperation.

"Yes, sir," came Gomja's muffled answer. The bushes rustled and grasshoppers leaped away as the giff settled in.

Teldin brushed the dust from his clothes and stood by the side of the road. He studied the wagon as it drew closer. It was really nothing but a simple farmer's cart, with two big wheels and high sides. A pair of horses were in the hitch, plodding forward, urged on by a gaunt farmer's whip. Next to the farmer sat a grubby youth, sucking on an orange. The boy casually spit orange seeds as the cart jolted along.

"Greetings, farmer!" Teldin shouted as the wagon drew near.

The farmer frantically pulled back on the reins as he spotted Teldin, letting the cart rattle to a stop while still a good distance away. The hollow-faced fellow shaded his eyes to scrutinize Teldin. The youth watched curiously, his cheeks covered with orange pulp.

"Greetings to you, stranger," the farmer finally said in a voice dry and dust-cracked. The words were slowly spoken, as if each were precious.

"My companion and I are bound for Kalamana," Teldin explained as he began walking toward the cart.

"Stand where you are, stranger," demanded the farmer. The older man spoke a quick, whispered word to the youth. The lad reached down and produced a small crossbow from under the seat. Fumblingly, he started to load the weapon.

Before the boy got the bow set, however, he dropped the bolt. "We'll have no funny business from you!" the farmer called to Teldin.

"We mean no harm. We only want a ride to Kalaman, if that's where you're bound," Teldin shouted back. He spread his arms as if to prove his innocence. "We? I only see one of you. You look like a brigand. You talk like a brigand." The farmer, trying-and failing-to be discreet, squinted toward the bushes on either side of the path. The boy, still struggling with the crossbow, scooped up the dropped bolt only to have the empty bow twang as he accidentally released the trigger. The farmer angrily whispered to the lad, and the boy apologetically cowered as he started to work again.

"I'm no brigand," Teldin protested, taking a few steps forward. The farmer raised his whip menacingly.

"Well, you're dressed like one," the old man shouted back.

Teldin was forced to consider his appearance and realized that the accusation fit the image. Here he was, a stranger standing in the middle of the road, wearing old farm clothes, with a battered cutlass slipped through his belt and a fine cloak-which seemed to have lengthened again-dangling from around his neck. It was hardly the dress of the ordinary traveler.

"I'm Teldin Moore of Dargaard Valley, a farmer like you. I'm just going to Kalaman to see family." The driver squinted fiercely back, but did not relent. Teldin tried a different tact. "I'll pay for the ride."

"Just now you said 'we'," the gaunt farmer countered suspiciously. The lad at his side finally succeed in drawing back the crossbow's string and fitting a bolt. He pointed the weapon unsteadily in Teldin's direction, which only made Teldin fearful he'd be shot accidentally. "Which is it, I or we?" Teldin thought fast, trying to think of a good explanation for Gomja. "Well.. . uh... I have a companion, but... uh... but he suffered cruel misfortune during the war."

"I don't care if he's crippled or scarred. Have him out, or my boy shoots!" The lad looked up to his father, waiting for a signal.

"It's not quite like that. He's-" Teldin tried to explain. The old man cut him off with a quiver of the whip. "Very well. Trooper Gomja," Teldin called back over his shoulder, "come on out-slowly."

The branches of the thicket cracked as Gomja stepped into view. On the wagon, father and son gave a simultaneous gasp. The old man's eyes widened while his boy almost dropped the crossbow again as he stood there stupidly, mouth agape. "This is Trooper Gomja," Teldin hastily said, before the wagon driver did something foolish. "He won't hurt you. Please, let us ride with you." The wagoneer nodded his head in stunned silence while the boy slowly lowered the crossbow. Human and giff quickly climbed aboard before the man had a chance to come to his senses.

For several hours they rode along in silence. The father and son were too terrified to speak to their passengers. The giff dozed off, basking in the sunshine. Teldin grew bored and clambered up to the front. "I apologize for our meeting," he offered. "But why were you so frightened? You don't seem to be carrying anything that valuable."

"It's true, all I have are oranges and almonds and such, but this road's been dangerous ever since the war," the farmer allowed. "Name's Jacos, by the way." Teldin was puzzled. He had never heard of any trouble, but then, he had not been to Kalaman since he had left the army. "The war's been over for years. I know, I was in it."

"Maybe over for you, but there's a lot of men who never learned how to put down the sword." Jacos flicked the rump of his horses to keep them from straying after a nibble of grass. "A lot of soldiers didn't want to go back home-or there wasn't a home to go back to. Now they've found an easy life, robbing folks on the road."

"What about the officials? What about the Knights of Solamnia? Couldn't they to deal with that?"

"They did, for a while. I suppose it just wasn't glamorous enough for them knights. Since they left, the local militia can't keep up. Somebody gets robbed and the militia chases the bandits around for a while till things quiet down. Then everybody goes home." There was an ominous tone in the old man's

voice.

"I don't mean to be rude," said Jacos, changing the subject, "but what happened to your friend back there? You said it was something in the war." "What?" Teldin stalled. He'd been working up a story for just this question and now he had to remember all the details. He lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

"Oh, him. He doesn't like to talk much about it. They-you know, the Highlords-did something to him. Tried to make him over, like they did with draconians." Teldin's blue eyes took on a mischievous gleam. "Only they got that"-He nodded back toward Gomja-" instead. They called him a giff. It was a terrible thing. He won't talk about it at all. In fact, I don't think he even remembers it.

Jacos and his son nodded, their eyes wide with wonder.

"The best thing to do," Teldin continued, relishing their gullible reaction, "is just never mention it. I wouldn't want him remembering anything about it. Sometimes he gets nightmares and he'll just tear a place up in his sleep." The farmer gulped nervously as he glanced back at the dozing giff.

"So why you stick with him, mister?" asked the boy. Jacos shot his son a dark glance.

"He's a friend," Teldin replied hesitantly. "You can't just leave a friend."

"That's enough of that now, boy. Let's not be rude." The boy looked disappointed that the topic was closed.

After that the conversation shifted to safer subjects. Teldin told of his cousins in Kalamán and the time he'd been there during the war. The boy was eager for war stories, and Teldin spun him a few yarns filled with dragons, flying citadels, and battles, to pass the time. Teldin was only telling stories he'd heard from others, but it made no difference to the boy. For him, the tales were all exciting. The lad's enthusiasm made everything seem clear and simple again-who was good, who was evil, the heroics that were performed. It hadn't quite turned out that way, Teldin thought.

By the time Teldin had exhausted the last of his war stories, the day was slipping into dusk. The rugged valleys were long behind them and ahead the road drew a straight line across the plain that surrounded Kalamán. The way was dotted with small villages and fields. Even after five years, most places showed some sign of the ravages of the siege and liberation of Kalamán. Houses were still abandoned, their owners long since fled or slain. Trench lines, crumbling and overgrown, still cut across fields. The woodland patches that grew in the wastelands were struggling to recover. Teldin remembered that nearly all the trees had been cut by the two armies. Ruins of earthworks and palisades thrown up by besieger and besieged stood in broken lines across the landscape.

It was not all ruined land, though. Teldin was surprised how much had been accomplished in five years. The survivors had resourcefully applied themselves to the task of rebuilding. Many of the houses were repaired with timber taken from the deserted palisades, the sharpened log

points now forming the corners of cabins. Trenches were converted to irrigation channels. Passing a cluster of shanties, Teldin saw the remains of an old wooden tower converted into a dozen small shacks.

A few leagues ahead, the familiar gray walls of Kalamán sat in a shadowy mass, small spires of the central fortress rising over the walls. Alongside was the glittering silver of the Vingaard River where it broadened into the great Vingaard Bay.

Teldin climbed into the back, where Trooper Gomja lay sprawled over a heap of orange peels. The giff had eaten a prodigious amount of fruit. Teldin had promised Jacos payment, but now he worried what the current price of oranges in Kalamán was. His purse was far from substantial. Still, given the recent events in his life, this was only a minor concern.

As the wagon neared the city gates, Teldin gently tried to rouse the sleeping giff. Grumblingly, Gomja batted away Teldin's hand and tried to roll over, setting the whole cart creaking with his shifting weight. Not to be put off so

easily, Teldin grabbed the giff's shoulder and shook hard. The alien groggily opened his eyes.

After haggling with Jacos, Teldin dug a few of his precious coins out of his small purse and paid the farmer. Fortunately, there must have been a surplus of oranges this year, because a few steel still clinked in the bottom of his purse. Climbing out the back of the cart, the pair approached the gate. Teldin caught himself worrying whether the giff would play his part correctly, then wondered briefly why he was even bothering to help the giff get through the gate. But he was.

Chapter Six

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It took an hour and another of Teldin's precious coins to convince the guards that Gomja was not a dangerous spy from the draconian lands. The farmer described the horrors Trooper Gomja had suffered and, fortunately, the giff played his part, muttering a few ominous phrases of nonsense to back up Teldin's tale. Though not completely convinced, the guards decided the pair was harmless enough--the steel pieces saw to that. "Sign your names. You-" The sergeant of the guard pointed to Teldin-- "you are responsible for this creature. If he does anything, we'll put you both under arrest. Understand?" Teldin suppressed a groan of dismay and nodded. Given the trooper's penchant for creating trouble, Teldin didn't dare abandon the giff in the city as he had planned. It appeared the giff would be coming with him for a little longer.

"They are very cautious here," Gomja scornfully remarked as they passed through the gate. "Do they have enemies, sir?'"

Teldin didn't answer at first, concentrating on leading the giff through the crowd of hawkers that clustered around the gate, trying to ignore the stares his companion was getting. It would be nice if he could just disappear, Teldin thought, but there was no such luck. The path easily parted before them, no one very willing to come too close to the pair. "The people of Kalamán still remember the war," Teldin explained. "The city is pretty close to the frontier. Kalamán citizens are not naturally trusting--or courageous. The guards, I suppose, make them feel safe."

Gomja snorted contemptuously. "They'd be a lot better off to hire some muscle to go out and solve their problems, if you know what I mean, sir." Before Teldin could answer, a vendor carrying a basket of pastries distracted the giff. The trooper's nostrils flared as he inhaled deeply and started to follow the scent. The vendor quickened her pace, fearful of the hungry look in the strange creature's eyes. As she disappeared into the crowd, a fruit stand caught Gomja's attention and he veered toward that.

Teldin grabbed the giff's sleeve. He could guess the trooper's intentions and was determined to stop him before Gomja ate his way through every last steel in their purse. "Not now," he snapped, steering his companion away. "We'll go to my cousin's. There I'm sure you'll be fed. Probably have a nice roast or something," Teldin pointed out as he turned them down a side street.

"Ugh--meat." Gomja gave a slight shudder. Seeing Teldin's puzzled look, the giff explained. "Our kind aren't carrion eaters . . . I mean, not that you are, sir," Gomja added hastily. "It's just that fruits and vegetables are much better. These keep us strong, which is why we giff are such good soldiers." For emphasis, Gomja slapped his chest, which boomed with a hollow thud. Teldin only nodded, filled with silent wonderment at this latest revelation of his companion.

Finding his cousin's home took some time. It had been five years since Teldin was last in Kalamán. He had been in the tail end of the great victory parade, well after the siege of Kalamán, and there hadn't been much time for visiting distant cousins. He had a vague idea of where the house lay, but since the war it seemed as if every street had been rebuilt or renamed. Teldin eventually

gave up and accosted strangers, asking for directions. These were mostly fruitless, clipped denials punctuated by fearful glances toward the creature that stood behind Teldin. Finally, after making Gomja wait in the dark shadows of an alley, Teldin found someone who knew the way and was not ready to bolt like a rabbit at the approach of a stranger.

The directions led to a small street not far from the main square. There was a feeling of familiarity to the doors and windows on either side, but it was hard to be certain, in the darkness, that all was the same as Teldin remembered. He studied each entrance carefully, looking for a cobbler's sign that swung over the doorway, announcing Master Trandallic's trade.

At the fourth door, in a dark and dilapidated structure, Teldin stopped, Gomja almost walking into him. A canted iron bracket hung over the door, its chains missing the sign it once held. The door was off its hinges and propped clumsily in the entrance. The farmer gawked at the decay.

"Your cousins live here, sir?" Gomja rumbled in amazement.

"I thought so," the farmer slowly answered as he scanned the decrepit structure. A scrap of signage on the door proclaimed the place the dwelling of a "Master Trand-" The rest of the name had long since rotted away.

"Go away, you beggars! There's nobody there!" shrilled a voice from across the street. A shuttered window clacked open and a double-chinned woman leaned menacingly over the sill. "Trandallics left town years ago without even a word of where they were going, so just get on out of here!" Teldin stood stunned at the news. His cousins, his only hope, had vanished. Gomja took a menacing step forward only to be restrained by his companion.

"Let's get out of here," Teldin mumbled in dismay. He needed to find someplace quiet to rethink his plans. Grabbing the giff by the arm, the farmer dragged the alien out of the street. A flutter of cloth in a dark passage caught his eye. Stopping for an instant, Teldin darted into the alley and snatched the fabric off a line. It was a big, gray blanket, coarse in weave, but just the thing Teldin was looking for. Hurrying back onto the street, he tossed the cloth to the giff and hurried along. "Wrap yourself in that," Teldin ordered. "I'm tired of trying to explain you." His angry tone effectively discouraged the giff from arguing.

The pair walked for several blocks before either spoke. It was the giff who finally broke the silence. "Where to now, sir?"

Teldin paused, considering his scant options. He had been too upset to think. Everything had been staked on finding his cousins and securing their aid, but now that hope was dashed. They had left for parts unknown and he was alone—the giff barely counted—in Kalamán. The bazaar had been his next planned stop, there to get the cloak off and sell it. If nothing else, he could get a blacksmith to cut the chain. The bazaar, however, would not open until daybreak.

From the position of the moons Teldin guessed it was about two o'clock in the morning. There would be precious little open at this time. Kalamán was not a city noted for its endless entertainments. All the inns had closed their doors far earlier in the night. During the war, the waterfront always had something going, but Teldin could not imagine taking Gomja into one of those dives. He knew from wartime experience the type of folk who could be found drinking at this hour. "We wait for morning."

"Where, sir?" the giff asked. A cool breeze blew toward the waterfront, kicking up scraps of garbage that littered the street.

"Anywhere we can find. All the inns are closed by now. Come on, let's not stay here." Teldin said dejectedly.

The two set out to nowhere in particular, crossing through the twisting streets, working their way to the north of the marketplace. Even though it was late, there were a few people on the street. Some might have been thieves or worse, but they drew away upon seeing the seven-foot, hulking shadow that followed Teldin around. Still, the farmer noticed that many more were simply poor, sleeping under makeshift tents or huddled around fires. Some of the men he saw were crippled, missing one or both eyes, a leg, or an arm. Survivors of

the war, he assumed. Like himself, few of these men saw any benefit from the return of the gods and their healers.

More disturbing were the others Teldin saw: whole families squeezed into little shanties, built in the shadows of grand houses of the city. Fitful coughs and whining cries came from these hovels. Refugees, Teldin guessed. The war had displaced so many people. Some of them had yet to return home. Others would never return, for their farms might still be in draconian hands. "This is war's promise," he sighed to himself. "We fought for these people, Gomja, and look what they got out of the great victory." Right now, Teldin could not help feeling bitter. The giff looked at the farmer curiously, trying to understand the human's attitude, but the sentiments were too foreign to the big alien. War was always a glorious endeavor in his eyes.

Feeling thoroughly desolate, Teldin chose what looked like a quiet, dry corner. "We'll have to sleep here for the night," he grimly announced as he scuffed the garbage away with his foot. The giff looked at their quarters and gave an unconcerned shrug.

"What then, sir?" the alien asked.

Teldin kept at the business of clearing away some of the rubbish. "Tomorrow, the market. I want to be there when it opens in the morning."

"I hope we can get something to eat there," opined the giff.

Chapter Seven

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The morning was overcast and warm. A wet wind blew in over the sea wall, foreboding rain for the day. Indeed, the clouds made feeble efforts to that end, sprinkling fat drops haphazardly over the city. It was just enough to dampen the ground and transform the dusty cobblestones into slick grime. Teldin pulled his cloak tighter and wondered how it was that rain could be mud before it even reached the ground. It seemed as if every drop left a brownish smear on everything it hit.

Bad weather or no made little difference to the merchants in the great market plaza. They were already in their stalls and hard at work, hawking their wares. The narrow aisles were clogged with cooks carrying baskets, young parents pulling squalling children, and impoverished students hoping for a scrap of stale bread. Ramshackle structures of wood and cloth marked the offices of established businessmen while simple straw mats rolled out on the ground were all the farmers needed to display their wares. "Make way! Make way!" the poulterer's servant shouted to the crowd as he pushed a handcart filled with plucked and gutted chickens to his master's stall.

There was a government-imposed order to the whole place, run gleefully riot by the merchants' entrepreneurial spirit. The supposedly straight rows of stalls thrust scattershot into the aisles as each vendor pushed his or her tables or mats farther and farther into the flow of traffic. The outer ring of the plaza was mostly food. Clustered around the street entrances were the fryers of hot breads, the boilers of dumplings, the sweet-sellers, and the soup-makers. The latter clinked spoons against bowls, trying to lure customers close enough to smell their wares, while the nearby sweet batters sizzled in hot oils. Old friends-the fishmonger from down the way, the leather cutter on the way to his stall, even rival cooks standing across from each other- traded jokes and gossip.

Finally, past the grocers, butchers, coopers, clothiers, tinkers, rug dealers, and potters, the two reached a small aisle angled at odds to those around it. 'just ahead, that's Steel-Seller's Lane," was the answer the old tea merchant gave Teldin, pointing toward the gloomy row. The way was quiet when compared to the bustling activity of the outer regions, where the food stalls lay. The booths here were sturdy little shacks with louvered doors and curtains. The long eaves of the roofs grew into awnings that covered most of the narrow street. The sun, filtered through cloths of orange and blue, pulled up small coils of steam from the barely damp cobblestones. A few pieces of worn pottery

and dull bronzeware were neatly arranged on the shelves of some stalls, promising greater treasures within. The curio market was still here, Teldin was satisfied to see, but it seemed much smaller now.

Halfway down the lane, a pair of merchants sat on stools across from each other, their voices floating languidly through the silence. One was a human, broad and grossly fat, with the puffiness of his face visible even under his neatly trimmed beard. The man's salt-and-pepper hair was thin and limp and hung from underneath his brimless leather cap. In one hand the merchant idly waved a fan, stirring away the flies that swarmed around him.

His companion was a dwarf dressed in sturdy workman's clothes of leather huffed as brightly as the gilt wooden sign shaped like an anvil that swung overhead. On his stool, the little goldsmith seemed no less tall than his human companion, but Teldin guessed the dwarf could not have been more than four feet high. A thick, curly, black beard tapered down to a point, dangling just above his waist, incongruously balanced by his sheared, stubbly scalp. The smith's lightly tanned face was dominated by a flat nose, singed and smoked with the fires of the forge. Hands folded upon his spacious chest, the small craftsman let a long churchwarden pipe rest in his palms. At that moment, the dwarf was pointing the stem significantly toward the human trader. Teldin stayed at the mouth of the aisle, at first preferring not to venture into its gloomy recesses. "Let me do the talking, and I'll get a good price," the farmer cautioned the cloth-draped giff. Teldin's words echoed louder than he wished down the avenue, causing the two merchants to notice their potential customers.

Gomja's brows beetled as he mulled over Teldin's words. "Good price ... You really mean to sell the cloak, don't you, sir?" he asked in accusing tones. "Of course I do," Teldin snapped, irked that only now the giff was going to protest. "How do you think I'm going to rebuild my farm?" The farmer could not help suspecting that the giff knew all along and only raised his objections now, when it was far too late to get rid of him.

The merchants rose in greeting, both barely concealing their interest in the two strangers who approached. If alone, Teldin, tall and lanky in his frayed farmer's clothes, would hardly have seemed a prospective customer to dealers in exotic wares, though the fine, black cloak that swung from his shoulders was unusual. It was the broad giant lumbering behind the farmer that piqued the tradesmen's interest. With his face muffled in a thick, coarse blanket and pudgy, ashen-blue hands, the strange creature assured the merchants that the two customers were more than common rabble. "Greetings to you, sir, breathed the human as he rolled his obese bulk forward in a cramped bow. "Welcome to the shop of Master Mendel, myself who is before you.

The fat merchant steered the unresisting Teldin toward his shop. "What is it you seek, sir? Perhaps a fine piece of crystal from the isle of Ergoth, or perhaps this brooch, said to have been made for the clan-master of Thorbardin himself?" As he named each thing, Master Mendel held up an intricate bauble or pointed to an exotic piece lurking in the shadows at the back of his stall. The merchant continued on, proudly enumerating his wares. At last Teldin was able to get in a word.

"I've come to sell, not buy."

The tradesman's manner instantly underwent a subtle change in tone as he shifted from selling to buying. The man's eyes seemed to gleam brightly from within their deep folds of flesh as he evaluated Teldin's character. "Indeed, and what would you have to sell that I might want?" He feigned polite disinterest, the first phase of any negotiation.

"This cloak." Teldin turned to the dwarven smith, who was still watching the pair with great interest. "I think it might be dwarven work. Perhaps you know?" Teldin held the fabric out for the dwarf to see.

The goldsmith gave a snort of contempt. "We're rock-eaters, boy, not tailors. We don't make cloaks." The dwarf tapped Teldin's chest with the end of his pipe. In the background, Gomja tensed then relaxed when he realized the dwarf meant no harm.

"No, that's not what I meant," Teldin corrected as he leaned down to show the dwarf the silverwork that hung around his neck. "It's the clasp. It won't open and I think it has some secret catch. That's why I thought the dwarves had made it."

"HMMMMMM."

Mendel's curiosity was suddenly piqued. The merchant knew his neighbor well enough to interpret the dwarf's measured "HMMMMMS" as a sign of great interest. He tried to peer over Teldin's shoulder.

The dwarf now took the chain in two hands and pulled it close to his eye, dragging Teldin's chin forward with it. "HMMMM," the smith commented again. "Uh-hMMMM."

Abruptly the dwarf finished his examination and hopped off the stool. "Not dwarven work, I warrant, but fine work all the same. Too small a thing for the gnomes. Can't tell who made it." Mendel, dealer in rare antiquities, raised a very interested eyebrow.

"So you don't know how to get it off?" Teldin asked with some alarm. He had been certain that the dwarf would know the trick, and all at once that hope was dashed.

"No," was the blunt answer.

Teldin sagged. He was getting tired of defeats at every turn. Why couldn't something just go right for once?

It was Mendel the merchant who spoke from behind the farmer. "The fabric does not seem to be of much account," he drawled even while fingering the dark, silky cloth. "If I get the cloak off, I'll give you ten steel for the clasp." The merchant pressed quickly to close the deal.

"A hundred steel," Teldin countered.

Counteroffer followed counteroffer as the two men haggled over the price. Just as they were about to close the deal, the cloaked Gomja stepped forward and laid a hand on Teldin's shoulder, as if to try to shake off the whole bargain. With a dark glare, Teldin warned the giff back, and, in the next instant, sold the cloak, or at least its parts.

"Master Stonebiter," the vendor asked of his dwarven friend, "if you'd bring some tools, we could free this young man from his problem."

Interested in the outcome in his own right, the dwarf quickly produced a sharp knife, the blade decorated with hammered silver coils. "This should do the job just fine." With a quick step, he hopped back onto the stool and prepared to cut the clasp free. Gomja drew himself up to his most menacing height and stepped forward, one hand on his own knife. It was clear to Teldin that the giff was struggling to restrain himself, but whether the creature meant to protect Teldin or prevent the damage, the farmer had no idea.

Just as the blade was about to touch fabric, Teldin closed his eyes, fearfully certain that the giff was going to do something rash—such as hurl the dwarf down the lane. He braced for the trooper's onslaught. Instead, Teldin's body was seized by a tingling blast that jangled every one of his nerves. The farmer's eyes flew open in shock and his body involuntarily jerked and was flung backward until he crashed in a heap near the door to Mendel's stall. There he sat dazed and gasping like a trout from a stream while the hairs on the back of his neck seemed to crawl up and down his scalp of their own will. Master Stonebiter had fared no better. While Teldin sat stupefied, the dwarven smith twitched and jerked about, hooting and hopping as if in the grip of some convulsive dance. The blade had dropped from his nerve-numbed grasp.

An astonished Gomja and Mendel each hurried to their respective concerns. It took some time for Mendel to get his neighbor quieted down, and by the time the merchant succeeded, Gomja had Teldin back on his feet. "G-g-great Paladine," stammered Teldin, "what was that?"

"It was the Dark Queen's curse!" shouted Stonebiter as he struggled to calm down the little tics and seizures that afflicted him. "The damn thing's cursed."

Teldin shook his head to clear it. "I didn't mean—"

All at once, the two merchant's eyes were wide and staring at a point over

Teldin's shoulder. Stricken by their horrified looks, the farmer's heart leaped with fear. He spun about, expecting the worse, only to find Gomja standing there, uncloaked. In the excitement, the giff's head-cloth had slipped to his shoulders, revealing his broad, blue-gray jowled snout and pert ears. "By the horrors of the Abyss," Stonebitcr mumbled, "the thing's a spy! Be away with you! Get on and go!" The dwarf scrambled for his axe. Mendel himself could only stand in the middle of the street, helpless and terrified. A thin, piercing wail of despair started to leak through his slack lips, slowly but steadily increasing in volume.

Before they attracted any more attention, Teldin seized the blanket and covered the giff again. Mendel's panicked whine grew louder, so the farmer skillfully guided his crudely cloaked companion out of the market.

Following old landmarks, Teldin led the giff down the narrow streets to the waterfront. Having to duck out of sight of every passer-by made their progress painfully slow. It wasn't until late afternoon that they finally reached a small, run-down tavern. A battered sign, announcing it as the Sea Steed, swung over the doorway. The noise of voices came from inside.

"Just follow me closely and don't say anything," Teldin advised the giff. Gomja stood stiffly and gave a curt nod from under his blanket.

Teldin was pleased to note that the Sea Steed had changed little in five years. The tavern was still small, but warm against the cool bay breezes. The embers of a fire flickered in the hearth. About half the candles on the chandelier were lit, dripping hot wax into the center of a scarred table. The rest of the furniture was equally simple, a few nicked tables, each with an oddly matched assortment of chairs and benches around it. The smell of smoke, salt, fish, and flat ale flowed out the door.

Even though it was early, the place was not empty. Three of the tables were occupied, two by lone drinkers, the third by a cluster of five men in quiet conversation. The taverner half-dozed on a stool near the fire, one eye open to watch the customers. The serving maid was out of sight, probably helping the cook in the kitchen.

As Teldin entered, those capable of it looked up and made note of the stranger without stopping their own conversations. Just as they were about to dismiss the new arrival, a shadowed form squeezed through the door behind him. All at once every voice went silent, all eyes trained on the giff. The innkeeper suddenly sat up, his eyes wide open.

Teldin did his best to ignore the stares; he was getting used to them. Picking a table, he pulled up a bench and signaled the innkeeper. Gomja took another bench and sat. It promptly broke under the giff's weight, dropping Gomja to the floor, but no one laughed. No one made a murmur. No one dared to.

Embarrassed, Gomja gave it up and sat cross-legged on the floor; the table still only reached his chest.

"Do you have rooms?" Teldin asked the innkeeper.

The man nodded. "Upstairs, third on the right." After a quick hagggle, Teldin paid for beds and a pot of ale. As he and the giff drank, Gomja looked around the commons with wide eyes. The others in the room gave the pair surreptitious glances, trying to deduce just who or what the giff was.

As Teldin was mournfully finishing his ale, one of the men at the other table walked over and stood opposite the farmer. While he was not tall, perhaps a half-foot shorter than Teldin, the stranger was heavily muscled. He was dressed in battered leather armor, crudely patched. The stranger's face was broad, his nose squashed and broken in several places. Thick, black tangles of hair hung from under his leather skullcap, the type a warrior wore under his helmet. A businesslike knife hung at his side. There was something familiar about the man, but, try as he might, Teldin couldn't place him.

The stranger stood, not saying anything, only studying the farmer's face.

"Teldin Moore, is that you?" he finally asked, leaning closer to get a better look in the gloomy light.

"Yes," Teldin answered warily.

"By the damned gods! I knew it!" the stranger burst out. "Don't you remember

me? Vandoorm, Vandoorm of the Solanthus Light Infantry?" He spread his hands open wide in a gesture of friendliness.

Suddenly the face and name connected in Teldin's mind. "Vandoorm! Why-what-what are you doing here? I haven't seen you in five years!" Teldin got to his feet and thrust out a hand to his old companion. The two warmly embraced, greeting each other as old friends should.

Their salutations finished, Vandoorm looked at the giff, still sitting on the floor. "What the hell is this?" he asked softly of Teldin.

"This," Gomja said firmly and with some irritation, "is Trooper Gomja." "He's a ... friend." Teldin hastily explained the giff's appearance. Gomja watched, waiting for any sign of suspicion from their visitor, but the story seemed to be accepted. Vandoorm, in turn, introduced his companions, four tough old campaigners like himself. In no time at all, Teldin and Vandoorm fell to reminiscing about old times. Hours passed as they ate, drank, and talked, until it was quite dark outside.

Although fascinated by their tales, Gomja could barely keep himself awake. The conversation seemed to go on forever with stories, lies, and questions.

Finally, Teldin stood and embraced his friend once more. "In the morning, then," the farmer said as the two parted.

"Indeed. I'll be at the west gate in the morning," Vandoorm gruffly said. "If you need work, show up. I can always use a good hand like yours." With that, he and his companions left for the night.

Rousing Gomja to his feet, Teldin led the sleepy-headed giff upstairs, talking excitedly as he went. "It's a stroke of luck to meet Vandoorm like that. He's a mercenary now, moving around from job to job. Tomorrow he's off to Palanthas to look for work. People say there's a sage, Astinus, by name, who lives in Palanthas. Maybe he can tell me what's so special about this cloak. I'm damn well never going to find out here. Curse my cousins and all."

"And maybe get me home, sir?" Gomja asked sleepily.

"I don't know, Trooper Gomja. Look, I just want to get this cloak off and go back to my farm. Maybe it's time you were on your own," Teldin suggested as he reached the second floor landing.

Gomja looked confused. "But I don't know were to go."

Teldin didn't have an answer for that. Even though he knew otherwise, the farmer felt obligated to help the giff. The hours of drink swirled in his head and made it hard to think, until he regretted bringing the subject up. "Never mind. Forget about it. Right now you can get some sleep." Without waiting for the giff, Teldin trudged into the room and collapsed for the night. Gomja was not far behind.

Chapter Eight

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Teldin sat on the edge of the rumpled bed, his eyes closed in intense concentration. A ray of morning sunlight crept slowly across the dull wooden floor to play on the farmer's leg. Across the small room, Gomja stood at the washstand, scrubbing his face in the cold water of the basin. The sound of water trickling and dripping mingled with the occasional cries of the vendors from the street below. Gomja began to hum an off-key march, the song droning mournfully. Before the giff had gotten more than a few notes into the song, Teldin flung himself back on the bed in exasperation.

"Damn! What am I supposed to do with this thing?" Teldin shouted toward the ceiling. He beat his palms in frustration on the moth-chewed blankets, raising a cloud of dust. "I can't take this damned thing off. I can't even get it to change size, and I know it can do that!" In a decidedly poor mood, Teldin rolled off the bed and paced over to the window, like a fox prowling along the edge of a chicken coop.

The giff watched the outburst wide-eyed but said nothing, since this had been going on all morning. As a trooper, it wasn't his place to comment anyway. Keeping one wary eye on the farmer, the giff returned to his ablution.

"Again," Teldin said with a forced sigh as he struggled to calm his temper. The human's eyes closed, brows knitted, and teeth clenched as he translated mental concentration into physical effort. There was a tickle at the back of his neck like the pull of static from a woolen sweater. The tickle grew stronger and ran down his spine, raising the hairs ever so slightly. Teldin stopped and looked at the shimmery fabric that hung from his shoulders. There was no doubt that it was now shorter than before.

Teldin took a breath and tried again. "Shrink," he ordered. In his mind, he imagined the cloak as a stubborn mule. The tickling sensation returned and then seemed to reverse, drawing in toward his neck. The cloak was once again a small collar around his neck. "Something's finally worked right," he sighed in triumph.

While the giff finished scrubbing and dressing, Teldin practiced his newfound control, at first hesitantly and then with greater and greater confidence. The cloak grew, shrank, grew, and shrank again. "It works! I think of it like a mule, and it seems to react!" The farmer chortled triumphantly. After so many disasters and disappointments, this small success was elevated to the status of a major victory. Reducing the cloak to little more than a curious necklace, Teldin grabbed his boots and prepared to go.

From somewhere Trooper Gomja had found an apple and was chewing on it noisily. "Where to now, sir?" the giff asked as he gulped down the last remains, core and all.

"Weren't you listening? I'm leaving town, going to Palanthas," Teldin answered, almost cheerily. "I made arrangements with Vandoorm to meet him at the west gate. There I'll buy a horse and ride to Palanthas." Teldin didn't even bother to look at the giff while he spoke, but he stressed the singular nature of his plans. As soon as the second boot was pulled on, the human sprang to his feet and hurriedly began stuffing his few possessions into a small bundle.

Gomja began to mimic the human's packing. He ducked his head under the ceiling beam and set his gear on the bed. With the precision that came from years of military training, the trooper began efficiently stowing his gear. "We, sir?" the giff asked hopefully as he folded the few charts salvaged from the Penumbra's wreckage.

Teldin stopped in the midst of cramming his one spare shirt into the bottom of his bag. "Vandoorm and I," the farmer said quite clearly.

"I see." The giff continued packing. His face showed no sign of emotion or distress. "Vandoorm - he's a mercenary, isn't he?"

Teldin slowly resumed packing. "That he is," was his wary answer. The farmer stowed his gear by touch, his eyes watching the tall giff.

"Then I will offer my services," Gomja calmly announced without once looking away from his packing.

"You will what?"

"Hire on, sir. He is a mercenary and I am a soldier without a command." Gomja finally stopped and looked toward Teldin as he calmly explained his own plan. The giff was casually confident in the success of the idea.

"You will do no such thing! You can just stop following me around and get out of my life," Teldin sputtered. He grabbed his bundle and violently swung it over his shoulder.

"Of course, sir," Gomja answered, still unperturbed by Teldin's outbursts. The giff continued his methodical packing, tying off the bundle and swinging it over his shoulder. "I'm seeking gainful employment. It's purely a coincidence that the only person who will hire me is your friend, Vandoorm. Giff are the finest bodyguards and enforcers in all the Known Spheres. Besides, I, too, have questions to ask this Astinus of Palanthas fellow. The sooner I find a way off this world, the farther 'out of your life' I'll be." The giff gave a placid, almost serene smile. "I'll see you at the west gate, sir."

Teldin gave a scream, or more properly a bleat, of frustration and buried his face in his hands. "All right, you win! Let's just go to the gate together." Very deep down, the human felt a little quiver of relief. Was it because he

was coming to like the big brute's company? Or was it simply a release from the guilt of stranding the giff in Kalaman? Teldin could not tell for sure. The pair left quietly, taking care not to disturb the sleeping innkeeper. The man had already been paid, so Teldin saw no need to rouse him. A cat followed them out the door, disappearing down an alley as they walked down the street. The clear sky and morning sun already made for a warm day, but the cool night breeze was still blowing in from the bay.

Teldin wasted no time making for the main thoroughfare. This broad avenue cut through the heart of Kalaman, straight from the castle to the west gate. Saplings lined the avenue and flowers bloomed down the parklike center. Just before the castle stood a great bronze statue of Lauralanthalasa, the Golden General and liberator of Kalaman, astride her horse. At the far end of the thoroughfare was the great tower of the west gate, looming over the small houses clustered around it. Statue and gate were easily visible anywhere along the length of the boulevard.

Teldin remembered that when Kalaman was freed from the siege of the draconians, the avenue had been a bleak and cheerless swath, littered with the camps of troops and the homeless. In many ways, it had looked like the park he and Gomja had stumbled into two nights ago. There were the same collections of hovels, the same stripped trees, even the sad and desperate people. Teldin wondered how many in that park had once lived along this green avenue.

"Sir, who is this Vandoorm anyway?" Gomja asked as they hurried down the street. The giff's voice was muffled by the folds of cloth that covered his head. "Is he a brave commander? I should know before I sign on with him." The lanky farmer briefly considered not answering-or even lying to get the giff in trouble-but chose against it. The giff might be a nuisance, but he did not deserve that kind of treatment, 'Vandoorm's an old soldier, and brave enough, I imagine. I never served under him, so I wouldn't really know."

"Then how do you know him? I assumed you fought under him in the war." Gomja struggled with the blanket trying to keep it from slipping off his ears.

Teldin reached up and helped readjust the cloth as they walked. "I met him during the war-at Palanthas when I first came to join up. I was a raw youth-" Teldin stopped to pick his words somewhat carefully, remembering that Trooper Gomja was only sixteen, "Anyway I met Vandoorm in Palanthas. He showed me the way things worked in the army-kept me out of trouble."

"He sounds experienced," the giff offered.

"That he certainly is-also profane, bawdy, and a few other things besides."

Teldin picked up the pace, worried that he might miss the morning rendezvous. The giff hustled to keep alongside the human, effectively ending their conversation

"Good morn, Moore!" called out a voice as they neared the gate. The brawny Vandoorm stepped free of the taller men and horses clustered around the fortress wall. "You finally made it. I always thought farmers got up early in the morning, but maybe farming makes you soft, eh?" The squat mercenary's jibe was good-natured. Clapping Teldin on the shoulder, the shorter man turned back toward the riders and, with a wave of his hand, boastfully introduced them. "This is my squadron, the toughest fighters in all of Solamnia."

Teldin looked over the twenty or so men who formed Vandoorm's war band. They were unmistakably mercenaries; some sat tall and proud, others slunk in their saddles, but all were marked by a hard edge in their stares, suspicious eyes chiseled out of stone. Each man was outfitted for battle. There were lances adorned with tattered pennons, shields painted with fanciful designs, and unmatched pieces of armor dyed in brilliant colors and gilt with silver and brass. Swords poked out from under cloaks, bows and quivers hung on the horses' flanks, spears fit in sockets at the sides of saddles, while other implements of war gave each man an individual and unique armory.

A few of the riders stood out from the already distinctive group and Teldin took note of them. One, sporting an eyepatch and a mane of black hair, carried two great knives cross-belted over his chain mail shirt. Another, dressed only in simple browns, studied the newcomers as he waxed the string of his long

bow. These two, in particular, seemed to stand out from the rest of the group. Just as Teldin studied them, the score of riders carefully looked the farmer over. There was no hatred or rancor in their looks, only cool contempt bred by their survival instincts. Finally Vandoorm broke the spell. "We are ready to ride, Moore. Meschior will get a horse for you while you say good-bye to your . . . companion." Vandoorm nodded toward the giff.

"He wants to come along," Teldin answered tersely, stepping closer to the giff.

The mercenary captain stopped and looked at Teldin. "That's not what you said last night," Vandoorm replied in surprise.

"Things change," Teldin answered with a shrug. "Now he wants to come with me." The shorter man puckered his mouth in thought, clearly a little skeptical of the new arrangement. "Come here," he finally ordered the enormous, cloaked stranger facing him.

"Yes, sir!" Gomja boomed from within the folds that still covered his face. In true military manner, the giff briskly stepped forward and snapped rigidly to attention. "Trooper Gomja requesting permission to sign on, sir!"

Looking around the giff, Teldin smiled as Vandoorm arched an eyebrow in surprise. At five feet tall, the captain's nose barely reached the middle of Gomja's chest. "Can you use a sword?" Vandoorm finally asked.

'Yes, sir!'

"Have you fought in battle?"

Gomja hesitated for a moment, then decided the Penumbra's crash counted-sort of. "Yes, sir."

"Have you kill a man?"

Looking dead ahead, avoiding Vandoorm's gaze, Gomja answered, "No, sir." The giff stood waiting for more questions, but Vandoorm just let him wait. Instead the captain slowly circled the giff, noting the pudgy, blue-gray hands, the thick legs, and the wide shoulders.

"I do not know, Teldin. For you I say yes, but first I will ask my lieutenants," Vandoorm commented as he stopped beside his old friend. "Brun, Meschior, we talk." Walking away from Teldin, Vandoorm motioned for his two aides to join him. Teldin, not too surprised, noticed that it was the one-eyed man and the archer who joined their captain. The three held a quiet conversation, punctuated by stares at the giff and Teldin and a few sharply pointed fingers. Teldin could not hear what they said, but he guessed from their expressions that it was not going well. When the discussion ended, all three came over, Vandoorm in the lead.

"Like me, my lieutenants do not like this," the bearded captain announced, talking mainly to Teldin. "He looks strong, but why does he hide his face?"

"I told you last night what the Dark Queen did to him," Teldin quickly offered before the giff might say something else. "It draws too much attention in town, so it's better if he stays covered up." Gomja, learning his part, nodded in agreement.

The answer wasn't good enough for Vandoorm. "Show me your face," he demanded, turning to the giff. Gomja turned to ask Teldin, but all the farmer could answer with was a shrug. Reluctantly, the giff slowly opened the folds of the blanket. As he pulled back the cloth just enough for them to see, Vandoorm, Brun, and Meschior pressed close like boys eager to peek into a tavern wench's bedroom. Getting a view of Gomja's face, Vandoorm's eyes widened slightly. The gaze of the other two remained as hard and unreadable as before. Finally, the captain spoke in slow measure. "I see why you cover him up. He would draw attention in town." He glanced back at Gomja, sizing up the giff up in a new light. With hardly a look at his aides, Vandoorm casually added, "Good fighter, I think. He comes. Get the men ready to ride." This last was addressed to his lieutenants.

The mercenary leader turned to Teldin and clapped him on the back. "I do this because you are like a son, Tel. On the trip, you'll pay me back, I am sure." He broke into a laugh on seeing the puzzled, panicked look that crossed the farmer's face. "You take care of my horses, I take care of you. Come now,

let's get you a horse." Grabbing Teldin by the elbow, Vandoorm led the farmer to the waiting company for instructions. Gomja, pleased with the results, trailed after the two.

They were quickly underway, but soon the ride became monotonous, just the steady plodding of horse hooves over the dusty road. Even walking alongside, Gomja was able to keep pace fairly well. Outside the city, the giff did away with the hot and stifling blanket over his face. The first appearance of the blue-gray monstrosity in their midst caused considerable consternation among the men at first, but they quickly concealed their surprise and curiosity, except for the occasional watchful glances from the corners of their eyes. That night, the group camped in the foothills of the Dargaard Mountains. Somewhere to the south, not too distant, was the ill-omened fortress of Dargaard Keep. Although well inside the borders of Solammia, the man kept careful watch, mindful of the tales told of Lord Soth and his dark stronghold. Finished with his soup of dried peas and herbs, Teldin sat close to the fire. The night sky was clear and the sun's warmth had quickly drained away, replaced by a cool breeze from the mountains. The campfire provided good protection from the unseasonable chill. Teldin considered producing the cloak but decided against it. He distrusted its powers, for while it was an inanimate thing, it seemed to have the knack of causing more trouble than it solved. Besides, he was just as happy not to be reminded of the cure he wore around his neck. Gomja, ever conscious of danger, sat farther from the fire, carefully positioned to watch the others as much as he could.

Vandoorm finished his rounds of the men and squatted beside Teldin. "I thought last night you had a cloak - a warm-looking one." The warrior yawned and picked at his beard.

"Yes," Teldin answered slowly. Although the question was innocent enough, any curiosity about the cloak made Teldin wary. His first instinct was to deny the cloak's existence, but logically he knew that was impossible.

"It is foolish to sit in the cold, that is all." Vandoorm smiled and spread his hands.

Teldin's blue eyes narrowed, nervously scanning the captain from head to toe.

"It was a cousin's. I borrowed it and gave it back."

"Ah. Do you need a blanket? I have extras for an old friend," Vandoorm generously offered. When Teldin shook his head, the captain smiled and shrugged. "Always the same. My generosity you do not need." Vandoorm nodded toward Gomja. "The strange one - you met him in the war?"

"Sort of" Teldin lied. The tale of Gomja and the Dark Queen was not going to hold up if Vandoorm started asking too many questions. The veteran knew more about the War of the Lance than Teldin and certainly more than Gomja. The farmer did not want to risk their fraud being discovered. "He showed up on my farm, not long after the war. The poor thing doesn't really remember what happened."

"Much better that way," Vandoorm grunted. "You told him all about us, right? How I am like your father?"

Teldin chuckled at the captain's good-humored vanity. "Only a little, Vandoorm. Stories could never do you justice."

"Ah, maybe I'll tell him how I taught you to drink like a real soldier." the mercenary ribbed as he kicked a log farther into the small fire. "You remember, eh?"

"Oh, I still remember, Vandoorm. How could I ever forget your lessons?" That drink, a young farmer's first, was quite unforgettable in Teldin's mind. Then there were Vandoorm's lessons in avoiding guard duty, camp life, requisitioning supplies, and whoring. Vandoorm had been an excellent teacher in the practical business of soldiering.

"They were good times, the war," Vandoorm said as he stared at the fire. "Not like now - little work for this old soldier." The mercenary pulled a hair from his beard. "Maybe I'll become a farmer like you."

Teldin burst into laughter at the thought of his old friend trying to tend a field. "Hah!" he declared through snorts. "I can see you ordering chickens

into the henhouse! Move, you lazy birds," the farmer bellowed, imitating his old friend. Teldin's impersonation brought a self-mocking smile to the captain's face. Soon the quiet night echoed with their laughter.

At last Vandoorm rose, shaking out his stiff legs. "You do not change, Tel. I am glad I found you in Kalaman. Enjoy your sleep. Tomorrow we'll talk more about old times." Vandoorm shook hands with his old friend, then went back on his rounds.

After all the precautions taken in the camp, the night was peaceful. Awakening at dawn, Teldin saw Gomja's dark shape huddled near the fire. The giff was asleep, still sitting upright, as if on guard. The farmer stirred up the coals of the fire and made breakfast. Only then did he wake his companion. Not too much later, the war band broke camp, the men glad to leave the region of Dargaard Keep.

Once on the road, the ride quickly fell into the same simple routine of the day before. True to his word, Vandoorm rode with Teldin. Having given his orders yesterday, there was little more the captain needed to do. On occasion, he had Teldin check a load or clean a horse's hoof, but the ride was generally quiet.

Their conversation drifted to many things. Vandoorm told of how he had drifted around since the war. It seemed that with groups of draconians still on the loose, there was sometimes work for mercenaries. Over the years Vandoorm had gone from just another hired sword to the leader of a small band. He'd made a fair share of money and, like a good soldier, had managed to squander most of it away.

For his part, Teldin described what had happened to his farm both over the years and recently, though he made no mention of flying ships, neogi, or his strange cloak. It was raiders, the farmer claimed, that had destroyed the farm, and now he was going to Palanthas to seek funds from distant cousins. Talk wandered back to the old days. Vandoorm took delight in relating to Gomja embarrassing tales of Teldin's youth. "I had to talk him out of joining the lead troops," Vandoorm incredulously explained. "When he came to Palanthas, Teldin was ready to fight draconians all alone." The captain smirked at the thought. "To keep him alive, I saw that he became a mule skinner. Is it not true, Tel?"

The giff looked up at Teldin to check the veracity of the mercenary's words. The yeoman nodded, his head bobbing in rhythm with the plodding of the horse. "It's true enough, but I hated him for it. He told the commander I was a farmer and skilled with mules."

"That man was a fool, easy to trick - but I did it for you. He was too young to be killed in the war - and had no stomach for soldiering," Vandoorm proudly cut in. "It was for the best. You see, you're alive today, eh?"

Teldin hated to admit that the captain was right, but he was. The mercenary was a good judge of character, even then. Teldin had come to Palanthas full of ideals but not much on realities. Vandoorm knew it and had arranged for the farm boy to learn. "Why did you do it, anyway? It's something I've always wanted to know."

Vandoorm swayed in the saddle for a time before answering. "I think maybe you reminded me of my sister's son," he eventually answered, flashing a wicked grin. "I liked you, didn't want to see you die, eh?"

Teldin did not argue. Their friendship was one of the things he had never really understood. True, they got along well enough, but, then or now, the farmer could not guess why Vandoorm had taken him under his wing.

Still, the friendship between Vandoorm and Teldin seemed to have little effect on the other men. It did not bother Teldin. As a rule, he found mercenaries to be an unpleasant and unlikable crew. Teldin remembered their sort of war, men who, upon seeing blood, first learned not to fear it, then grew to like it. They fought not because the cause was just, but because they enjoyed it. For the mercenaries, money settled all moral issues. More than once in the war, Teldin had met men who had fought on both sides, picking whichever side paid the best or was most expedient. They never understood or cared for which side

was right. Revenge was their idea of justice.

The wild-maned, eye-patched rider, Brun One-Eye seemed particularly suspicious of Teldin and his companion. Three - maybe four - times an hour, Teldin would catch the man staring in their direction. Brun was never hostile and, indeed, was even friendly. Sometimes he rode alongside, asking questions about the giff, their destination, where they'd been, and what they had seen. But Teldin's answers were guarded; the one-eyed mercenary did not inspire a feeling of trust.

At night, when Vandoorm was busy, Teldin spent his time pointing out the constellations to Gomja. The trooper worked at memorizing their positions, names, and histories; the Balance, Paladine, and the Queen of Darkness were among the few that Teldin could identify.

For his part, the giff tried to explain to the farmer the wonders of space: how the stars burned, how strange creatures walked other worlds, and how ships flew between the spheres. Words failed Gomja too often, leaving Teldin more confused than he had been to start with. Still, the giff's tales were full of wonders and adventures that Teldin had never heard before.

The company traveled without change for several days, pressing hard by day, camping at the edge of fields by night. They seldom stopped at the inns along the route. Vandoorm kept a strict discipline, and the tavern rooms were too great a temptation for drunkenness. In that much, the captain had changed quite a bit, Teldin reflected. Some of the men grumbled, but most were professionals, used to Vandoorm's ways.

Seven days from Kalaman, and six from their camp near Dargaard Keep, the mercenaries reached the walls of the High Cleric's Tower. The massive fortification, site of the first great victory in the War of the Lance, sat astride Westgate Pass, blocking the narrow canyon that eventually led to distant Palanthis. The road pierced the walls of the keep and passed through a smaller section known as the Knight's Spur. To one side of the spur rose the keep's distinctive structures: a cluster of towers grouped around a single main spire, the sanctuary of the High Cleric, that soared to dizzying heights over the rest. Teldin had been told once by a knight that from the top you could see as far as Throtyl Gap, sixty leagues away. Discounting the obvious exaggeration, the tower was tall enough to reach above the canyon walls that marked the edge of the plain. These cliffs cast flanking shadows on the road as it neared the gate.

Throughout the keep, years of neglect and war were slowly being undone. Fresh masonry stood out plainly against the old, dark stone. Nearly deserted at one time, its walls now held many men, who stood bored but watchful. The memories of two wars were still fresh in the minds of most of the garrison, wars during which the keep had been undermanned and ill-led. The soldiers of the fortress now seemed determined to prevent that from happening again.

Where the guards of Kalaman were cautious, their fellows at the High Cleric's Tower were outright suspicious. The attitudes of those in Palanthis were slowly changing and these guards reflected those new feelings, carefully checking all who sought to pass through the portcullises. The line of traffic slowly wound through the gates as each vehicle, each traveler, was stopped, then cleared for entry into Westgate Pass. Finally, Vandoorm went forward, representing his men. Returning, he waved the troop forward as the guards idly watched. When Teldin and the giff approached, Vandoorm pulled them aside.

"It takes much persuasion to get your friend through the gates. The knights are no longer the most trusting and foolish of warriors. Even some of my own men tell me to leave your friend behind. If the guards challenge him, make sure he does nothing rash." Vandoorm nodded significantly toward the giff and then reined his horse away. Teldin also looked at his companion, trying to read the alien's expression, but Gomja's broad face was an impassive mask. Quelling any feelings of doom and misgiving, Teldin followed Vandoorm through the tower gate.

Once they were finally past the portcullises, over the bridge, through the walls, and had entered the narrow canyon beyond, Teldin looked to Gomja with

relief. The giff had not done anything rash, which was a small blessing. His troops reunited and his authority restored, Vandoorm easily swung onto his horse, a sturdy chestnut mare. At his bawled command, the troops mounted and began the long descent toward Palanthatas.

After leaving the keep, the road plunged into a narrow gorge that cut between two knife-edged mountain ridges. The track shared the canyon floor with a swift-flowing stream fed by the rains and snows that tumbled down the gully-creased inclines. Few trees could find a foothold on the steep and rock-bound slopes, so the waters flowed red-brown from the minerals carried off by erosion. The road followed the stream where it could, winding in and out of the shadows. The canyon floor was seldom in full daylight.

Where before they had ridden at a hard pace, Vandoorm now ordered a complete change, slowing the column to a gentle walk. Teldin, tired and saddle-sore from days of jolting trots, had no complaints, while Gomja found it easier to keep pace with the riders. The big giff marched alongside the mounted human. As he gently swayed in the saddle, Teldin spoke with the giff, raising his voice to be heard above the clacking hooves of the column. "Well, Gomja, this cut leads straight to Palanthatas. In a few days, we'll be there."

"You know this road, sir?" Somehow the giff had managed to find some food and was eating again.

"During the war-the first one-I served at Palanthatas. I was in the first relief column to reach the High Clerist's Tower after Lord MarKenin's victory over the dragonarmies.

Gomja looked up, his small eyes wide with interest. War stories were never boring and it sounded as if Teldin was about to begin one. "That must have been a magnificent thing, sir!" he said eagerly.

Teldin closed his eyes and repressed a shudder as he remembered the trek. "No, it wasn't," he finally responded. In his mind, Teldin could see the canyon as it had been back then. "It was wintertime and the pass was closed by snow. Our column marched just as the thaw began, and we had to break through the melting crust to reach the tower. The water was running high and the road was washed out more than once. Three men were swept away by that-" Teldin opened his eyes and pointed to the stream alongside them- and their bodies weren't found until the spring. Half the men in my company were frostbitten by the time we reached the tower. And that's where things got even worse.

"The Knights of Solamnia had just 'won' the battle of Westgate Pass a few days before. But they were knights, not soldiers." There was no mistaking the scorn in Teldin's voice as he remembered the past. Gomja listened intently, forgetting even to chew. "The knights were too few-and too important-to take the field and claim it. All that time, while we were bashing through the drifts to reach the tower, the Knights of Solamnia stayed inside the keep and honored their fallen commanders. They left the rest of the dead for us to bury. Three days-they let them lie out there for three days."

Teldin closed his eyes, trying to control his rising temper. The memories were painful, even now. When he opened them again, he noticed that Vandoorm had fallen in beside them. How long the captain had been listening, Teldin did not know. "It took us two days of solid work to bury them all. Some men stood guard while the rest of us dug in the freezing wind. We couldn't burn the bodies-there wasn't enough wood and pitch to do the job-so we had to use picks to dig out the frozen ground for graves. We stacked twenty or thirty bodies in a single pit. When we finished that, there were still the dragons in the keep."

"Dragons, sir?" Gomja asked, suddenly perking up. "And dragonlances?" In his mind, the giff was trophy collecting.

"Three dragons," Teldin answered, continuing his story while ignoring Gomja's curiosity. "The knights had lured them in somehow, killed the lot, and then left them there. When we got to the tower, the bodies were still in the courtyards. We couldn't bury the dragons-they were way too big, even too big to drag out through the gates-so we had to butcher them on the spot. Then we carried the slabs of frozen meat out onto the plain and burned them with the

little firewood we had." Teldin stopped his tale, waiting for the images to fade from his mind.

"That's what war was like," Teldin finished, looking down at the giff. On the other side of Teldin, Vandoorm nodded in agreement. "That and waiting," he added. "Go places and wait. Tel, you learn well."

Gomja said nothing, at first, just looked back at Teldin. Then, with a grotesquely cheerful smile and a touch of braggadocio, he said, "It is a good thing giff are known as good soldiers. My people are always put in the forefront of the battle."

"That's a great place to die," Vandoorm observed. He spat on the ground, then wiped his beard on his sleeve.

Gomja stood stiffly upright. "It is the only place to gain honor," he insisted.

"There's not much honor in being dead, Gomja," Teldin said. With a flick of the reins, he brushed a fly away from his mount's golden mane.

"A bold death does great honor to the platoon." Gomja double-timed his step to keep pace with Teldin's horse. "When Commander Finlei lost half his command at Burgg's Rock, his platoon became one of the most feared- and highest paid-in five spheres. Everyone wanted to join his command. They always had work."

Vandoorm laughed a snorting chuckle. "Creature, you speak like a true mercenary!" He picked at something in his beard, then spurred his horse forward, trotting to the head of the column, where Brun One-Eye rode.

His old friend gone, Teldin dropped off his saddle to walk beside Gomja. "So those in this platoon died because someone paid them to?" Teldin couldn't imagine anyone volunteering for such a deed.

"To defend the Rock was an honor, sir. Isn't that why everyone fights?" Gomja looked down at Teldin, now alongside him. "After all, why did you join the army, sir?"

Teldin tried to remember his motives while he steered around a puddle. "When the war broke out, I was young," he answered slowly. "I heard stories about the cruelties of the dragonarmies. I was going to go out and right those wrongs, protect the world from their injustice." The farmer looked to see if Gomja was paying attention to his meanings, not just listening to the words. The giff's ears were turned slightly his way, so Teldin continued. "The war showed me that things weren't quite that way, weren't that simple. Like Vandoorm said, I was ready to save Estwilde and wipe the draconians from the face of Ansalon all by myself. By the end of it, I was happy that we made a truce-even if there were still lands in draconian hands. I just wanted to go home." Teldin abruptly stopped and looked to the top of the canyon walls.

"Defeating injustice just wasn't all that simple, Gornja."

The giff, a little ahead, turned and looked back. "If you say so, sir," he murmured. His ears lay flat as he spoke. Gomja waited for Teldin to join him, and the two walked on in silence.

Late that afternoon, Vandoorm called a halt for the day. A side canyon, somewhat broader at the bottom than their own valley, looked like a good site for their camp. The company turned off the main road and picked its way around the rubble field of an old landslide. Leading men and horses, the captain let his scouts find a good section of level, sheltered ground. There the troop pitched their bed-rolls under the boughs of the mountain pines.

In the deep cuts of the canyons, the darkness of shadowed night flowed swiftly over the bottom. The peaks and ridges shone in golden pinks and browns while the valleys were filled with deepening gloom. A peacefulness settled over the group, quieting their normally boisterous evening meal.

The days of hard riding were finally catching up with Teldin, especially since the pace had at last slowed down. He was too tired to supervise Gomja's cooking, something he had carefully done up to now. The giff's tastes were different, to say it nicely. While the giff fussed over the stew pot on the fire, Teldin watched the stars slowly emerge through the fading twilight. When dinner came, Teldin regretted his inattention; looking at a bowl of green shreds swimming in a yellow broth, Teldin couldn't help but be suspicious.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Yaneesh," Gomja answered, proudly setting the pot back on the fire. "You will like it, sir." He waited for Teldin's approval.

Again, without knowing how, Teldin mentally translated yaneesh to mean something roughly equal to boiled, spiced grass. With a sigh of resignation, the human sipped a little of the stew. The broth was tolerable, though heavily flavored with pepper. The grass, however, was grass- stringy and unchewable. He tried gnawing at a piece while the giff looked expectantly on. "It is-unique. I've never had, uh, yaneesh so good," Teldin said, chewing slowly. Smiling, the giff turned back to the fire. Teldin quickly spat wads of pulp into the weeds. Diligently, Teldin worked through the bowl, disposing of the grass whenever Gomja wasn't looking.

The meal finished, Teldin hit the sack. Gomja, as was his habit, huddled near the fire and kept watch. Eventually the giff would trade shifts with Teldin, but the farmer suspected Gomja always let the human sleep a few hours longer than was arranged. Still, the mountain nights were cold and Teldin was more than happy to wrap himself in blankets. When Gomja wasn't watching, Teldin dug into his pack for a strip of jerky. In the darkness, he gratefully gnawed on the tough, salty chunks of dried meat. A vegetarian he was not.

Chapter Nine

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Teldin woke to the sound of hoofbeats drumming away into the distance. Spitting out an oath under his breath, the farmer struggled up out of his blankets, certain that he had overslept. It would be just like Vandoorm to take off and force Teldin to hurry and catch up, the captain's idea of a great joke. "Gomja!" he cried, not shouting but loud enough for the giff to hear. "Quiet, sir!" a bass voice answered, vibrating with urgency. Suddenly Teldin realized it was still dark. It was not morning and Vandoorm had not broken camp yet. It's me-Gomja, sir," the giff explained in a whisper. His huge form loomed up out of the blackness.

Teldin lay still, completely confused. "What? What's happening?" he whispered back.

The giff stood to, reacting to his commander. "It's Vandoorm and Brun, sir. While I was on guard, they took their horses and rode out of camp. They were talking about something, and I heard our names.

"What-huh?" Teldin sputtered. He turned to look toward the main camp. There was flickering movement before the dull light of the fires and in seeing it Teldin had a flash of panic. He relaxed almost as quickly when he realized it was only the movement of a sleeping man rolling over. 'So?"

"I don't like it, sir," the giff stated flatly. "It would be better if we knew what they were doing."

For a moment, Teldin considered telling Gomja to go back to sleep. There was a tone, though, in the giffs voice that suggested the creature might, just possibly, be right. Rubbing at the sleep in his eyes, Teldin finally agreed.

"OK, how do we follow them?"

The giff looked up toward the starlit sky. "It's dark, so they can't ride fast, sir. And I can see well in this light, so, if we hurry, we should be able to catch up with them."

Realizing the urgency, Teidin pulled on his shirt and jacket, then snatched up his hanger and fastened the cutlass around his waist. The metal buckles clinked and Teldin cursed the noise under his breath, hoping the other men didn't hear anything unusual. "What about my horse?"

"I have already scouted the area, sir," Gomja continued. "I do not think we can take it without waking the others."

"Well, we don't want that," Teldin agreed as he hopped about, trying to pull a boot on. "Gather up our gear, just in case." The pair hastily stowed what little was easily available. "Leave the rest," Teldin ordered. Looking toward the other side of the camp, he could see the shadowed silhouettes of the

sleeping men. "Ready to go?"

Gomja nodded. "I will take the lead, sir, if it is all right with you." The giff shrugged the larger pack onto his shoulder. In one hand he carried a knife, the blade rubbed with dirt to keep it from glinting in the dim light. "Your sword, sir," Gomja reminded the human.

"What? Oh, yes." Teldin pulled his cutlass from its scabbard, a little embarrassed that he had forgotten all about it. "Now, let's go."

In the narrow canyon, the night was intense. The brilliant silver of Solinari was nearly gone, leaving only the red gleam of Lunitari, partially blocked by the high ridges, and weak starlight to see by. Gomja led slowly, circling the darkness at the edge of the camp, working toward the trail that led to the main canyon.

Once on that trail, the giff set the pace at a slow lope, taking care not to move too far ahead of the night-blind human. Where necessary Gomja hissed out warnings of roots, rocks, or holes in the trail. Trying to slip away as quietly as he could, Teldin winced every time a stone clattered underfoot. Just as they neared the intersection with the main road, Gomja came to a stop and held one hand behind to warn the human of his move, not that Teldin could really see it. "What-" Teldin began.

"Quiet, sir," Gomja cautioned in the softest whisper possible. "There are voices ahead." Teldin strained to listen but could not hear anything.

Undoubtedly the gills adjustable ears were more sensitive than his.

"I can't hear a thing," Teldin protested. "Who is it? What are they saying?" Gomja did not answer but, after a pause, carefully led the way forward.

Gradually Teldin could hear murmurs, then distinct voices. His eyes adjusting to the dark, the human could see shapes that might be people-or rocks

"Brun, take the creature. I want Tel alive, but you kill the other one." The voice was unmistakably Vandoorm's accented tone.

"It's about time. We waited too long already," snarled another voice. Probably Brun, Teldin guessed. "Should have done it when we had the thing chained."

"And if the big one broke loose, what then?" was Vandoorm's reply. "I want no mistakes. Do this and we are well paid in Palanthas."

"Sir," Gomja's bass whispered in Teldin's ear, "give me my pistols. The enemy commander has foolishly revealed his position. If I have my pistols, I can put a ball in him from here. This would give us the element of surprise."

"No," Teldin hissed back. He still didn't understand what Vandoorm was doing. The man was his friend, after all. Whatever was going on, Teldin refused to believe that Vandoorm was a willing part of it.

"But, sir, we are defenseless," the giff pleaded. "At least give me my weapons!"

Teldin felt for the strange sticks he carried in his bundle, remembering how Gomja had once threatened him with one like them. Considering the effect then, Teldin could not understand why the giff wanted them now. "Are they that useful?"

"Yes, sir, and I swear I will not use them against you," Gomja earnestly offered.

"Or Vandoorm," Teldin insisted after brief consideration.

Gomja glumly acquiesced. "Or Vandoorm, sir." The word given, Teldin handed the two weapons over, but not without a twinge of dread.

As the giff took the last of the items, there was a clatter of rocks somewhere to the left. Vandoorm and the others, whom Teldin had been straining to overhear even as he gave up the pistols, suddenly stopped their conversation. The human froze in dread at the thought that they had been discovered.

"Someone's out there!" the mercenary captain hissed. "Brun, go right. I'll draw his attention." There was a soft footfall on the stone as the lieutenant moved out.

The bearded captain raised his voice in mock conversation, quickly shifting the topic away from his plans. Teldin ignored the distraction, trying to follow Brun's motion. A black silhouette marked the stalker's moves. The farmer tensed, one hand on his sword, ready to strike. Unwilling to turn away,

he could only hope that the giff was staying out of sight.

Another louder clatter of rocks pulled Brun's attention away. A dark shape burst from a hiding place to the left. Vandoorm and Brun both sprang after the fleeing shape, scrambling over the broken stones in pursuit. Teldin had the impression of a fleeting, reptilian shape before the creature fled out of sight.

"By damn, it's a draconian!" the captain swore in surprise. He stopped chasing the beast. "Let it go. It won't hurt us." Brun hurled a few choice curses after the creature and gladly halted.

Teldin welcomed the distraction the creature had provided, since the mercenaries were now a good distance away, but it concerned him that a draconian had surfaced at all. Teldin quickly relocated his giff companion and began hustling from the area.

"Now, Gomja, we're going to get out of here-without fighting. We're not far from Palanthis, so we can get to the city on foot. Understand?" The last was not so much a question as an order.

"Yes, sir," said the giff, but his voice showed that he remained unconvinced. "Then let's go, trooper," Teldin ordered, giving the giff a gentle push to move out.

"I will never gain honor," Gomja muttered bitterly as he set off to circle Vandoorm's position. Fortunately their route was sheltered from Vandoorm's view and the ground they crossed was free of obstruction.

Once beyond the enemy, Teldin moved more quickly, casting occasional glances over his shoulder toward the camp. So far, there was no indication that their absence had been discovered. Turning north, they set out at a steady pace on the road to Palanthis.

The air was even colder now and, to Teldin, there did not seem to be much point left in concealing the cloak. There was no one around to see it, after all. "Grow," he willed. The black fabric, more gray in the darkness, billowed out with a faint rustle. Teldin caught the edges and wrapped it around himself. The thick cloth instantly warmed his skin, driving out the chill. With Gomja in the lead, the pair kept moving on the road at a steady pace for about an hour. Both man and giff were alert and tense. Sooner or later the mercenaries were going to discover their absence. Teldin had no clue what would happen then. Perhaps nothing or perhaps something much worse. The uncertainty was an even greater strain than knowing for sure that pursuit followed.

Reaching a broad area where the road cut through a small stand of scrubby pine that spread from the brush-covered banks of the stream, Gomja suddenly came to an abrupt halt. "There's something ahead. What do we do, sir?"

Teldin bit his lip. "What is it?"

Gomja tilted his head and swiveled his ears, trying to make out the sound.

"Voices, I think, sir, but I cannot be sure. It does not sound like Vandoorm's men.

"Damn!" Teldin debated his options, but none of them were good. "We need to know more. Let's get closer." He gripped the cutlass even tighter than before. Maybe they would be lucky and the whole thing would be just more travelers camped for the night.

Gomja drew himself straighter. "Sir, this is not your duty. Let me go ahead and scout. I can see better in the dark than you," the giff added to forestall Teldin's objections. "I will come back and report what I find, sir."

Teldin thought about it for only a moment. "No-we do this together." He had to see for himself.

The giff shrugged and carefully began to advance. Teldin followed behind. As they got closer, they could hear strange, sibilant voices. Whatever they were, they didn't sound human, but they did sound familiar to the farmer. Teldin's first thought, tinged with panic, was neogi, but these voices were different, not the same as those he had heard that night on his farm. He stopped to listen carefully. Gomja, not noticing Teldin's halt, still kept advancing. Then the source of the voices came to Teldin, filling him with a new fear.

He'd heard these voices before-during the war. "Draconians!" he blurted out. Gomja was barely visible in the darkness ahead. "Gomja," Teldin hissed. "Take cover!" Teldin had heard stories of draconian bands, left behind during the retreat, hiding out in the mountains ever since the war. He could only guess this was one group of such raiders, though he was surprised to find them still active after five years.

The giff reacted with instinctive speed, springing into action at his commander's orders. Spotting a tangle of brush just large enough to conceal him, the giff waded into the middle of the thicket and squatted down. Teldin, so concerned for Gomja's safety, suddenly realized that he, too, needed to find cover. The bushes were out; they were barely large enough to conceal Gomja. On the verge of panic, Teldin frantically looked around for someplace to hide.

"Stop standing. Come!" hissed a voice from the darkness ahead.

Teldin froze in surprise and terror. Whatever it was-and it was probably draconian-Teldin was certain that the creature was talking to him. Yet, the thing was not raising an alarm; in fact, it did not even sound as if it were taking him prisoner.

"Faster, stupid baaz! You help search." A darker shadow moved in the gloom toward the human. As it neared, Teldin saw that it was a draconian. The creature's golden scales and bearded dragonlike muzzle identified it clearly as an aurak. It wore several layers of badly tattered robes over bent and rusting armor. Even in the darkness, Teldin could see they were caked with filth. In one hand the aurak held an ornately etched sword, the blade a fearful-looking series of teeth and curves. With its other hand it gestured toward Teldin, one long, nailed finger a pointing dagger aimed at Teldin. "You not search?" it hissed, slowly shifting the sword's blade forward. "You not obey Trammaz?"

Teldin looked around him, still astonished that the thing hadn't attacked him. There were no draconians in sight. Even Gomja was all but invisible. "Me?" he finally sputtered.

"Yes, yes-you, stupid baaz, you!" snarled the aurak. The draconian strode forward and seized Teldin by the arm, removing all doubt of whom it was addressing. The clawed fingers dug into his skin. The aurak, far stronger than a human, yanked Teldin and flung him forward. Almost falling, Teldin stumbled along, the aurak giving him an occasional shove to keep him moving. "You search for human now!"

Off to the side Teldin saw the bushes move, then part. Gomja, kneeling among the brambles, was carefully steadying his pistol, ready to take a shot at the aurak. One eye was on Teldin, waiting for the signal. The human hastily shook his head, warning the giff off. Teldin was curious. While the farmer had no idea how, the draconian apparently mistook Teldin for one of his own kind, and the human wanted to know more. The giff acknowledged the order but did not lower his pistol.

"Why are we searching?" Teldin asked. The draconian cocked his head, large catlike eyes narrowed to suspicious slits. Teldin suppressed feelings of panic. He'd clearly done something wrong, but he had no idea what it was.

"You speak well, stupid baaz," sneered the draconian, "but you forget I am Trammaz-aurak. You only baaz." With a backswing of his clawed hand, Trammaz knocked Teldin sprawling. "Now you remember."

Rubbing his throbbing temple, Teldin got unsteadily back to his feet. "Stupid baaz remember," he said slowly.

The aurak's long snout twisted in a grotesque parody of a smile. "Good. Now others come. You learn how to search from them."

Teldin looked around. More shadows were converging on them. He couldn't see the figures clearly, but the scratching of clawed feet in the dirt confirmed Trammaz's words. Counting shadows, Teldin estimated there were ten or more draconians gathering around him. Realizing he was trapped in their midst, Teldin suddenly wondered what kind of reception he would receive. What if this aurak was mad and the others saw him for what he really was? Without showing

any panic, Teldin tried to spot Gomja-just in case.

As the first of the newcomers, a bony-looking creature with dull bronze scales, approached, it cocked its head curiously to stare at Teldin. Only one eye was good, while the other was filmed over in milky gray. "Baaz-new," the bozak grunted. "Why here?" The newcomer drew a sword from under armor as equally bent and battered as that worn by Trammaz.

Trammaz drew himself up until he towered over the other draconian. "I find on road. He know Trammaz great leader. Ask to be bandit, serve Trammaz. This true, baaz?" The aurak looked at Teldin for confirmation.

"True, true," Teldin answered. Several things were coming clear now. He did not know why, but the draconians were seeing him as one of their own. Perhaps they were all mad. Apparently these creatures, far from their homeland, were once part of the draconian armies. Most likely they were left behind when the armies retreated, Teldin thought, and have been living as bandits in the mountains ever since. "I be bandit," he added.

The bozak grunted in disgust. "You not like?" Trammaz demanded. "You challenge Trammaz?" By now several more draconians had gathered around Teldin, but their interest was in the other two, not him.

The bozak's chest swelled as it vainly tried to intimidate the bigger aurak. Trammaz would have none of it. Finally stepping back, the bozak said, "Trammaz leader. No challenge." The other draconians grumbled in disappointment that there was no fight.

Trammaz turned to the group, arms spread in victory. He turned the point of his blade on the group. "No human?" he roared. "Scout say men at camp search for human. They want human very much. Human must be important. We find human, we become important."

It was slowly starting to make sense to Teldin. The draconians, undoubtedly out raiding by night, must have overheard Vandoorm talking about him and Gomja. Whatever Vandoorm had said, the draconian scouts reported it back to their leader, Trammaz. The aurak clearly had come up with the plan.

One of the draconians, a broken-toothed haaz, spoke from the ranks. "We find, we kill human?"

"No kill, stupid baaz!" Trammaz bellowed. He lunged into the group, which parted like tall grass. Seizing the offending draconian by its scaly throat, Trammaz lifted the creature until only the tips of its claws reached the ground. "No kill. Trammaz want human alive!" The aurak said his words slowly, letting the baaz choke in his grip. Finally when the gurgling draconian's claws could only weakly scratch the dirt, Trammaz cast him aside. "Alive! Remember, I want human alive!" The other draconians only watched fearfully. Suddenly there was a whoop, a wild whinny, and clatter of hooves. The spell Trammaz held over his companions was broken. "Riders!" spat one of the draconians near the edge of the circle.

"There he is, men, in the center!" bawled Vandoorm's voice. There was a sudden blaze of light as the mercenaries unshuttered lanterns. The draconians howled as the unexpected glare temporarily blinded them. Teldin stood in their midst, blinking at the unexpected gleams.

"Take them!" Vandoorm shouted. There was a twang, a soft hiss, and a thud. A baaz, its fanged mouth gaping in surprise, reeled backward, clutching at the arrow that transfixed his collarbone. Even as the draconians stumbled back, the flashing lights of the riders drove wedges through defenders.

"Fight them!" Trammaz howled, but with the riders tearing through his ranks, Trammaz's orders were pointless. Already a rider, his broadsword held back for a slash was bearing down on the aurak. Standing his ground, Trammaz hissed with rage and swung his toothed sword in a powerful arc, tearing through the charging mare's chest. The horse's front legs collapsed, knees grinding into the dirt. The rider, unprepared for the fall, was hurled forward. Teldin dove to the side as the man crashed into a knot of draconians. The dazed mercenary was hurriedly slain under a cascade of swords and axes, his gurgling scream mingled with the wet thuds of their savage blows.

"There he is!" Teldin heard Vandoorm shout again. With his eyes now adjusted

to the lights, the farmer saw Vandoorm pointing at him. Even as he did, the bearded captain shifted slightly and slashed at a baaz impeding his way. "Fight, stupid baaz!" Trammaz snarled at Teldin. The aurak stood next to the horse he had brought down. The mare was still jerking, futilely trying to stand as the blood ran out of its chest. "Your fault-riders want you. Now fight or I kill you!"

Teldin was caught between the savage aurak and murderous captain. Teldin whirled about with the cutlass in his hand and looked for any immediate threats. Most of the draconians had already fallen or fled. The few that remained were already hard pressed by the riders. Only the aurak, holding off two of the riders, seemed to be getting the upper hand. "Fight here, baaz!" Trammaz ordered, indicating that Teldin was to come to his side.

"The beast is mad," Vandoorm shouted in amazement. "He wants the farmer to help him!"

Teldin, even while he knew that all around him were enemies, could not bring himself to fight on the draconian side. Instead, he carefully began backing up, working toward the bushes, where he hoped Gomja still lurked. Teldin held the sword awkwardly, the hilt high near his head.

Trammaz, seeing that Teldin was not coming to its aid, howled in frustration. "Coward baaz!" it shrieked. Catlike eyes gleamed with berserk rage as the aurak hurled itself forward with no care for its own safety, slashing its way toward Vandoorm. Several riders fell before the mercenaries finally brought the raging draconian down.

Teldin was thankful for the aurak's death fury, for it looked as if he might escape Vandoorm's men unnoticed. But, just as he was nearing the edge of the bushes, a lance dug into his back. He could feel the hot breath of a horse over his shoulder. "Forward, mule skinner, not back," the rider instructed, prodding the lance gently to spur Teldin along. With great reluctance, Teldin started back toward Vandoorm.

In the center of the road, the battle was over. The draconians had been defeated, though at a cost to Vandoorm's men. The captain and two others were off their horses, seeing to their companions. Two men were clearly dead: the rider hacked to death when he fell and the other slain by Trammaz in the aurak's final attack. Another man sat on the ground, clutching his side. His face was pale blue and his eyes were glazed. Blood seeped through his fingers and he mumbled in a low moan. Vandoorm looked at him, then turned to one of the other survivors. "We have no healers. Othork is a dead man. Offer him the blade or let him sit there until he dies." The man nodded, then knelt to whisper in the dying man's ear.

Several other men sported wounds-bloody gashes and punctures-but seemed fit enough to ride. All told, there were perhaps five fit men left. One man bled heavily from a large gash in his leg. Vandoorm came over and looked at the injury. "Can you ride?" he demanded.

The soldier looked toward Othork, dying in the road. "Yes, sir," insisted the soldier through gritted teeth.

"Good. Fix him up," Vandoorm ordered. "We leave soon. Vandoorm turned to Teldin. "So, you have cloak, Tel, and a most interesting one, I am sure. You know, someone wants this cloak very much. They offer a fine price for a farmer with a strange cloak-just the cloak, that is. I even heard news of it in Kalamán." Vandoorm took the edge of the cloak and rubbed it between his fingers. "I wonder why this is so valuable?" The mercenary grabbed the chains that fastened the garment in place.

Teldin felt a tingle up his back, then there was a sharp crack and a burned smell. "Ahhh!" screamed Vandoorm as he snatched his hand back from the chains. The mercenary shook his arm, trying to drive the pain from his nerves. "It sparks at me!"

Suspecting treachery from the farmer, there was a waver of swords as the men closed their ranks behind their captain. The faces were grim and hostile. The spear point dug once more into Teldin's back, this time drawing blood.

"What happened to friendship, Vandoorrn?" Teldin hotly demanded. "I was like

your son, you said. What about the war?" Vandoorm was his friend-not this, the man who stood before him. Teldin clenched his fists in rage. There was little else he could do, ringed by men with swords.

"Steel. Lots of steel pieces, Tel," the captain answered curtly, still massaging his numb arm. "But, because you are a friend-take off the cloak and I will let you live."

Teldin stiffened. "I can't," he futilely tried to explain. "'It's-'"

"Too bad. That's just too bad," Vandoorm interrupted the farmer. "I am sad you say this. I think I cannot take the cloak off you-alive." He turned and walked back toward his injured men, only to stop halfway and look back. "Kill him, then I'll take cloak," he ordered the rider at Teldin's back.

Teldin sucked in his breath, braced for the thrust.

There was a loud crack, followed instantly by a scream. The lance jabbed forward in the final thrust, only to drop suddenly from Teldin's back and clatter to the ground. The cloak must have done something, like the shock before, was Teldin's amazed thought. At the same time, the farmer could see Vandoorm and the others turning in surprise when, all at once, the man's heavy body crashed across Teldin's shoulder, smearing blood and knocking the farmer to the ground. The horse, panicking, reared with a snort and galloped away.

"Stand back or I'll fire again," boomed Gomja's bass voice. Vandoorm and the others froze, uncertain of just what had happened. The giff stood at the edge of the road. In each hand he held a pistol, carefully leveled at the mercenaries. Smoke trickled from the barrel of one. "Come over here, sir," Gomja said.

On the ground, Teldin reached to roll the body off his legs. The rider flopped over, a gaping wound in the back of his head. Scrambling up, Teldin carefully edged his way toward Gomja.

Vandoorm made a slight move forward. "No, sir. I would not do that," Gomja ordered. The captain stopped, looking at the awful wound in the man on the ground. When Teldin got alongside, the giff, without taking his eyes off the mercenaries, softly asked, "What do I do now, sir? Should I shoot their leader?"

Teldin was tempted for a moment, feeling pure hatred for his treacherous ex-friend, then had what seemed a better idea. "Vandoorm," he called out, "my friend here is a wizard of the Red Robes. You've seen what he's done already with his magic-and he's only using his wands. Move away from your horses. Vandoorm remained unmoving in the lantern light, uncertain of what to do.

"Gomja, can you give them another demonstration?" Teldin whispered.

"I have one shot left, sir. Do you want me to kill another?" Gomja offered.

Vandoorm and the others glanced at each other, trying to deduce what was happening.

"No, don't kill anyone," Teldin answered slowly. "Just a demonstration."

"Yes, sir. A demonstration." Taking careful aim, the giff gently squeezed the trigger of his second pistol. There was another loud bang and a burned metallic smell as a spout of flame and smoke leaped from Gomja's pistol.

Teldin jumped, surprised, even though he almost expected the result. For a moment a thick cloud of smoke obscured things. There was a scream of pain from one of Vandoorm's men, followed by a string of moans.

"Damn you to Takhisis's Abyss, farmer!" shouted Vandoorm. "No more-we're moving!" As the smoke from the powder cleared, Teldin could see Vandoorm and his men moving to the side of the road. One of the previously unwounded men was now being dragged by the captain and another. The fallen trooper's face was in agony as he clutched at a bloody knee.

"What did you do?" Teldin demanded of Gomja.

"A demonstration, sir, as you requested. I shot him in the knee," the giff answered innocently.

"Fine," Teldin spat, still burning with rage. "Keep them covered. I'm going to get us some horses."

"Sir," Gomja said out the corner of his big mouth, "I am out of shots."

Teldin kept his face impassive at this distressing news. Shots, he assumed,

were the powers of the wand. "Look, just don't tell them-bluff!"

"Yes, sir." Gomja took a step closer to the mercenaries, glowering as fiercely as possible. An animalistic rumble came from deep in his chest. While he was occupied, Teldin caught the two strongest-looking horses and scattered the others with shouts and yells. For himself he chose Vandoorm's stallion, exercising his desire for vengeance. Up in the saddle, he led the other back to Gomja.

"Pass me your pistols and mount up," Teldin ordered. Gomja handed over the pistols, one at a time. Teldin took care to keep them pointed directly at Vandoorm. "The wizard has shown me how to use his magic," Teldin loudly announced to the glaring men.

"I've never ridden a beast like this before, sir," Gomja pointed out as he looked at the horse.

Teldin steeled himself with a deep breath. "That's all right, Gomja. It's never had you ride it before either. Now, let's go!" The farmer hissed the order through clenched teeth.

"Yes, sir." After several awkward attempts, Gomja finally got himself situated in the saddle. Teldin gave the giff's horse a slap on the rump, sending it forward into the darkness.

"Don't try to follow us, Vandoorm, or I'll forget you once you were my friend," Teldin vehemently swore. Digging his heels into the stallion's sides, Teldin galloped into the darkness after Gomja.

"I'll find you, damn you, farmer!" cursed Vandoorm as Teldin disappeared into the darkness. "And I'll make you pay in pain!"

Chapter Ten

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Gomja clung to the saddle, his legs clamped firmly to the mounts sides, as his horse galloped through the darkness. Aside from being a novice rider, the giff simply wasn't suited to the task. His feet, with their great, round pads, could never fit into the stirrups, nor was his bulk comfortable in the narrow saddle, designed for a human posterior. To make matters worse, the steed labored under Gomja's weight, barely able to keep up a bone-jarring trot. Gomja endured this for what seemed like hours. Finally, he shouted to Teldin, who rode ahead, "Sir, requesting orders to dismount and walk!" The giff's words were punctuated by his mare's jarring steps, each jolt pushing Gomja's normally deep voice higher.

"Well, I think we're far enough from Vandoorm to slow down the pace," Teldin claimed for the sake of his companion. In truth, Teldin was not going to feel comfortable until he was safely within the walls of Palanthas. Vandoorm would catch his horses sooner or later and was bound to come after the cloak.

"If you think so, sir," Gomja moaned while getting off his horse. Mindful of possible pursuit, though, Teldin rode on at a good pace, forcing Gomja to jog alongside. Still, the giff seemed happier than he ever had while riding.

As the pair continued toward Palanthas, the sky gradually lightened, causing the snowy mountain peaks to glow a rich cerulean. The hues faded and lightened into reds and yellows as the sun rose over the lip of the ridge.

The sun was an hour over the mountains when Palanthas finally came into view. At last feeling safe, Teldin reined in his horse to savor the view of the city from the top of the pass. Teldin had forgotten how - even during the war - Palanthas had been a majestic and inspiring sight.

Nestled in a bowl-shaped valley with its back pressed against the gleaming, blue-green Bay of Branchala, the city had the vague shape of a huge wheel. Concentric streets radiated from the heart, culminating in a massive walled ring pierced by great gates. The wall had long ago proven ineffective at containing Palanthas's vibrant growth, and the city had tumbled from its confines to climb the surrounding hills and form the maze called the New City. Teldin pointed to a cathedral-like building standing at the edge of the central square in the middle of the city. "That's the palace of the lord of

Palanthas," Teldin told the giff, indicating one of the sights. "See those low buildings, closer to us, along the road in? That's the library where the sage Astinus is supposed to stay." Gomja showed only a minor interest in the architecture "The walls are dwarf-built," Teldin explained tersely. He was slightly vexed that the giff wasn't paying attention to his descriptions. "They say the walls are among the oldest in the world, built even before the Age of Might."

"What is that dark tower that stands by itself?" Gomja asked, pointing toward a jet-black structure not far from the palace. The tower was actually one main edifice with two slender supporters, each topped by a blood-red minaret. Teldin shuddered as he looked toward where Gomja pointed. He had been unconsciously avoiding the structure. "It's called the Tower of High Sorcery. Can't you feel the evil?" The farmer marveled at the way the giff calmly looked at the dark structure.

Gomja shrugged, relatively untroubled by the palpable vileness the tower radiated. "Magic is not the giff way," was all he could offer by way of explanation.

Teldin accepted the answer and turned his gaze back to Palanthas. He noted, with surprise, a new feature to the landscape. On the far side, outside the city walls, was a huge rock topped by a partial castle. The whole structure sat canted in a field at the edge of the New City. During the war that space had been a drill ground, he recalled. He pointed out the curious structure to the giff, but Gomja only nodded with disinterest.

"It is much like the Rock of Bral," the giff observed, casually comparing the strange feature to a relic of his home, the void. He looked over the city's radiating streets. What about inns? Do they have any that serve meals? I don't think I've eaten for days, sir." Even as he spoke, the blue-skinned alien looked sincerely up at the farmer.

Exasperated but amused, Teldin shook his head. "Yes, of course there's food." He rubbed his weary eyes. "To the city then, men!" Teldin finally said brightly, sitting up straight and playfully speaking as if to a thousand men. "First, a horse market to sell this fine steed. Second, breakfast!" Orders given, Teldin led his imaginary army toward the city of Palanthas.

* * * * *

By late morning, Teldin's purse jingled and Gomja's belly rumbled pleasantly once again. Vandoorm's stallion had brought a fine price at the horse fair, though the sale was helped in great part by Teldin's knowledge of horseflesh and the horse dealers of Palanthas. Years as a mule skinner among the Whitestone forces had not been a total waste, the farmer reflected. The sale provided enough steel for the pair to get by for several weeks, though Teldin was forced to lower the estimate by the time Gomja had finished breakfast. After overcoming their fear of the strange robed figure, the serving wenches had kept the trooper supplied with a seemingly endless flow of fruits and vegetables. Teldin could only take consolation in the fact that at least the giff spurned the more expensive roasts and sausages that were offered. Teldin fretted as he and Gomja made their way through the streets of the Old City, bound for the Great Library of Palanthas. "How am I going to get in to see Astinus?" he asked himself. "We're not exactly nobility—we're not even bathed!"

"Sir?" inquired Gomja.

"Nothing." Teldin looked up, startled. "I was just thinking. You see, this Astinus, the sage, well, he doesn't have a reputation for hospitality, and I was just wondering how we were going to get in."

"Perhaps he will be curious about me, sir."

"I don't think the word 'curious' applies to Astinus. He probably already knows about you. They say Astinus knows everything and spends all his time writing it down. Supposedly, he wrote all the books in the Great Library." Teldin shook his head in wonder at the thought. "Not the kind of life I'd

want."

"Nor I, sir," Gomja added. "No fighting. Maybe he will take pity on you, sir." "Not likely. The cold fish didn't lift a hand to help the armies during the war," Teldin answered with scorn. "He stayed in his library the whole time, writing. You'd think he could have put what he knows to good use."

Gomja pursed his lips, which were barely noticeable on his heavy jowls.

"Bribe?" he finally suggested.

Teldin shook his head. "The Order of Aesthetics, which surrounds him, provides all he needs. We don't even have enough to bribe the gatekeeper."

Gomja kept silent, leaving Teldin to his musing, and the two said nothing more until they reached the Great Library. Entering the grounds, they passed through a small park, rich with the growth of late summer. Couples, strolling through the gardens, stopped and gawked at the strange and filthy pair. Teldin paid them no mind; he bore little love for the citizens of Palanthas. He recalled how they had cowered behind their walls while far better men, many his friends, had died defending the city from the dragonarmies. He returned to the problem at hand and headed directly for the main building.

Like nearly all the buildings of the city, the Great Library was a monument of gleaming white marble. It consisted of three wings, long halls whose colonnaded walls were pierced by small windows. Although it stood three stories tall, the library gave the impression of being a low, squat structure. Perhaps this was caused by the broad roof, or possibly the building's plain front. Save for the columns that graced the entrance there was none of the fanciful ornamentation of which the Palanthians were so fond.

Teldin led the way past a small, unimpressive entrance to the public section of the library and took Gomja to the next door down. This was a grand facade with a curving marble stair and pillared portico. Reaching the top, Teldin took a deep breath, then pounded on the glass-paned door.

For several moments nothing happened, but just as Teldin was about to knock again, the door swung open.

"What do you seek of the Order of Aesthetics?" asked a young man standing in the doorway. Of average height and somewhat plump from a sedentary life, the man wore simple, plain robes. His dark hair was neatly trimmed and his clean-scrubbed face made no attempt to hide the disdain he obviously felt for the grubby vagabond who stood before him.

"My friend and I-" Teldin motioned for Gomja to come forward- "seek an audience with the great sage Astinus." Teldin kept his voice low and respectful, being genuinely awed by the presence of so much obvious power. Gomja, on his best behavior, stood behind Teldin, his own head rising over the human's. As the two had agreed beforehand, Gomja pulled back the blanket covering his head. Teldin hoped this would intrigue the monk, and not terrify the man out of his wits. The giff wiggled his ears and even smiled, revealing the gaping extent of his mouth.

The doorman's eyes widened. The look of scorn vanished and was replaced by dumbfounded amazement. "Wait here," he squeaked, then scuttled away into the building's dark depths. In his haste, he left the door open.

Just as Teldin was considering slipping through the doorway, the pudgy doorkeeper returned. The man, perhaps guessing Teldin's intent, officiously blocked the entrance. The doorkeeper gulped but met the giff's glower. "Well- he will not see you," the Aesthetic pompously answered. His head twitched slightly with a nervous tic.

Teldin looked incredulously at the man. "He's got to see me. I've come a long way and he can't just turn me away now!" Gomja stepped closer to the door, reasserting Teldin's words.

The chubby Aesthetic stood firm, momentarily regaining his composure. "Astinus does not have to see anyone, the doorkeeper answered, raising his voice with every word. "In fact, he has only had visitors once, as far as I know."

"He can't just turn me away!" Teldin insisted. "What about my friend here? He needs to see Astinus so he can get home." Teldin laid a hand on Gomja's arm. The giff stepped just a little closer, stooping to bring himself down to the

Aesthetic's level.

Looking up at the giff, the monk's nervous tic returned. Still, even with his head jerking slightly, the doorkeeper adamantly refused. "Astinus has given orders not to be disturbed," he said in a forced voice.

"We could force our way in, sir," Gomja whispered into Teldin's ear. The human quickly vetoed the suggestion with a curt shake of his head. While the farmer had little doubt that they could easily overpower the soft, pampered monk, he knew that would not win them an audience with Astinus and would more likely gain them one with the constables of Palanthas. They needed a more persuasive argument that would appeal to the library's learned monks.

"Books!" Teldin suddenly said, though not too loudly. "Gomja, do you still have those books, those charts we found in the chest?"

"Yes, sir," the giff answered slowly, not grasping Teldin's intention. "I think I still have them . . . right here." The last was said with understanding. Gomja hurriedly pawed through his gear and finally produced one slim volume. "This is all I have left, sir. I left the others in the mountains last night." The giff held out the lone folio, a somewhat apologetic look on his face.

Teldin was relieved to see they still had even one of the books. "Don't worry, Gomja," he assured. Teldin held the book out to the doorkeeper. "Perhaps the donation of this rare tome would help?"

The doorkeeper, a curious expression on his face, took the slender volume, turned it over in his hands, and carefully opened the covers. A brief glance at the text obviously intrigued him; it was like none he had ever seen. His pudgy hands turned the pages with growing interest. "Wait here. I will check," the monk finally offered. With that, he hurried away again.

It seemed that the monk was gone for hours, but Teldin did not worry. The monk's reaction to the book had given him confidence. When the Aesthetic finally returned, Teldin's patience was rewarded. The man's manner had changed, for he now was solicitous and slightly amazed by the strange pair at the library's door. "Astinus says he will give you a brief audience." Teldin noted the monk's words, but figured that getting in at all was an accomplishment.

The nervous monk ushered the pair through the door, and they found themselves in a marble corridor that ran along the front of the building. The white stone, age-worn and smooth, gleamed in the morning light, which poured through a bank of windows. Teldin had expected the library to be a dim and gloomy place, and the brightly lit reality was surprising.

The three walked the length of the corridor without encountering a soul. The route was away from the public halls and into the unvisited depths of the building. It made sense to Teldin that Astinus, famed for his privacy, would be found far from the open sections of the Great Library. The way took them past many doors, some closed, others open. At each, Teldin glanced in, not really knowing what he was looking for. Most rooms contained books, shelved neatly and covered in layers of dust. Teldin marveled at the number of volumes in the library. A single room held more books than he had ever seen, and here there was room after room of musty albums.

Not all the rooms were empty of occupants. At one, Teldin carefully peered through the partially open door to find it filled with members of the Order of Aesthetics. They sat at rows of benches and intently copied texts that were laid out before them. The air was filled with the noise of quill pens on parchment. Teldin softly closed the door and moved on.

Finally, after taking a number of twists and turns, the monk stopped at a plain, unassuming door. Teldin was a little surprised that this was Astinus's study. For a man of such importance, the farmer assumed his surroundings would be much greater. Tapping lightly, the doorkeeper called softly to the one within, "Master, I have brought them, as you requested."

"Show them in, Maltor. I will see them for a moment." The voice was cold and emotionless, showing no trace of either warmth or hostility. Maltor swung the door open with a slight creak, ushered Teldin and Gomja into a small study,

and indicated stools where the two were to sit.

A man-young or old, Teldin could not be sure-sat at the desk on the far side of the room, writing carefully on a sheet of parchment spread before him. Every few moments he lifted his hand from the page to dip the quill into an inkwell. With no unnecessary delay he resumed writing, never once stopping to think of a word or puzzle out a phrase. Stacked beside him were two piles of parchment, one clean and untouched, the other carefully filled with lines of immaculate writing. As he finished with the sheet before him, Astinus sprinkled it with white sand to blot the drying ink, carefully set the sheet aside, and laid another clean page before him. Then the quill began its steady course over the page once again.

All during this time, Astinus never looked up to acknowledge his guests' presence. "Wait outside, Maltor," Astinus said without stopping the flow of words from pen to page.

"Yes, Master," the Aesthetic said with a bow. He backed out of the room and quietly shut the door.

Teldin waited for the great sage to speak, to ask a question, but Astinus paid the pair no mind. The ink steadily flowed from his pen. Finally, with a nervous swallow, Teldin spoke, "Lord Astinus, I-,"

"You are Teldin Moore of Kalamán, born the son of Amdar Moore and the woman Shari," Astinus interrupted, still looking at his page. "Two weeks ago, your farm was destroyed by a ship that fell from the sky. I have made a note of this already. The one with you is called Gomja. He came on the ship. Before this, I knew nothing of him."

Teldin and Gomja both let their jaws drop; mouths hung slack at the chillingly efficient recital of their histories.

"I know all these things, Teldin Moore of Kalamán, from what I have written," Astinus continued in his pedantic, matter-of-fact tone. "Right now I am writing that you are here before me because I have become curious"-The sage rolled the word off his tongue with particular distaste-"about your misfortunes." Astinus paused and finally looked up. A minor flicker of irritation shone in the sage's eyes. "Ask your questions, and I will write those down, too, just as I will write the answers if I know them." Without waiting for Teldin to speak, he resumed writing.

Teldin swallowed nervously again. Something about Astinus, his cold self-assurance, perhaps, filled Teldin with terrified respect. "I was given this cloak and I can't take it off," he whispered.

"So I have noted," Astinus said. "Explanations are unnecessary.

Teldin could not help but stare. It seemed there was nothing the great sage did not already know. It filled him with the hope that Astinus would provide him a solution. "I mean, how do I get it off?"

"I do not know." Astinus stopped, realizing that he lacked a certain piece of knowledge. The sage closed his eyes and considered the implications. Finally, he spoke again, the faintest tinge of puzzlement in his voice. "The cloak comes from beyond this world, beyond the range of my . . . authority." Teldin's shoulders sagged with the sudden failure of his hopes. "Your authority? Then who does know?" he asked weakly, his confidence quickly draining away.

"For that answer you must go outside this sphere," Astinus answered. He went back to looking at his writing, seemingly forgetting the pair's presence.

"Sphere? What sphere?" Teldin asked. So far, the great sage Astinus had provided more riddles than answers.

"Your friend did not explain spelljamming?" Astinus asked with only mild interest.

Gomja nervously wetted his lips. "I've never understood it very well myself, sir," the giff admitted.

"Ignorance of the world is no asset," Astinus humorlessly remarked as he wrote in flowing strokes, "although too much knowledge may also be bad." Carefully setting his quill into its holder, the impassive sage sprinkled the drying

sheet with sand, then gently set it on the top of the stack. After the briefest pause, Astinus took up another sheet and began writing again. Teldin remembered stories about the sage and his library. It truly was his library, for Astinus's books were supposed to be the only works found here. According to tales, each day the sage wrote a precise number of pages and each night these were spirited away by his aides, bound into volumes, and shelved in the halls of the Great Library. In his works, the history of all the world was set down.

"You have delayed my work long enough. This audience is over." The sage's cold words shocked Teldin from his reverie.

"But our questions! We haven't learned anything," the farmer started to argue, half-rising from his chair.

"And how do I get home?" interjected the giff, his deep voice rumbling ominously.

Astinus appeared unmoved by their pleas, and continued his writing unabated.

"Maltor," he smoothly called, summoning the doorkeeper. The pudgy man hurriedly appeared, his nervous tic stronger than before. "Take these two-" Astinus noted that Teldin was ready to argue and rephrased his thought. "Help these two find their answers. Gnome history, one hundred and twenty-three years ago. Mount Nevermind. There are some passages there that may be of use." "Yes, Master," the Aesthetic answered reverently. He stood waiting for the guests to leave. Sensing that perhaps their visit had not been a complete failure, Teldin rose and motioned Gomja to follow.

Astinus kept scribbling, never once looking to see them depart. The words on the page, meticulously recording every event, told all he ever needed to know.

...the farmer and the creature leave Astinus's study. Neither says good-bye. Maltor takes them into the stacks of books...

* * * * *

From atop the ladder, Maltor finally sounded a note of triumph. "Ah, here it is!" the Aesthetic told the pair, who waited below. Prying a volume from the tightly packed shelf at the uppermost level of the stacks, where it almost brushed the ceiling, Maltor fastidiously wiped a layer of dust from its edges. The gray powder filtered down through the gloomy aisle like mist. "You have been most favored," the monk continued as he struggled to lower his fat body down the ladder, book under one arm. "For Astinus to allow you to read one of his books, let alone meet with him, is a great honor." Blowing out his breath, the Aesthetic reached the floor and led the pair to a bare table lit by a single lamp.

The room was almost solid bookshelves, more books than Teldin had ever imagined existed in all of Ansalon. The neat rows of black and brown bound volumes were crammed tightly onto the shelves, arranged and numbered according to dates and places. Dust seemed to coat everything, including the floor, where the three left their tracks. Teldin wondered how long it would be before those footprints faded. "This must be the Great Library," he breathed in awe. "A little of it," Maltor casually answered. "Covering from five hundred to one hundred thirty-seven years ago. Teldin looked astonished that there could be more books than the hundreds found in just this single, unlit room. "Now, let's see if I can find what the master intended. What should I look for?" The monk peered up from the densely lettered volume.

Teldin was stumped. Astinus had already declared his ignorance of the cloak, so the farmer really didn't have any idea what he was looking for. Confused, he looked to the giff for suggestions.

"Spelljamming," Gomja offered. "How can I go home?"

"Spell-jamming?" the Aesthetic mouthed as he traced his fingers down the page.

"What's that?"

Gomja briefly tried explaining the concept of flying ships and what he knew of space, which was very little indeed. Nonetheless, Maltor seemed to get a

rudimentary idea of the process, enough to continue his search. Teldin and Gomja sat patiently while the monk skimmed the work. The rich smell of burning lamp oil began to fill the stale air, warming the already stuffy chamber. The tired and dispirited farmer began to nod off. "Ah, here it is," Maltor said at last, echoing his earlier triumphant tone. "This looks promising. Listen." The monk bent his nose close to the page, striving to make out the faded, cramped lettering by the lamp's dim light.

"...this day, as above Afterwatch Hour climbing 10, a vessel arrived to the gnomes of Mount Nevermind. It came from the stars and was greeted by Tuwalricandilifchustra-"

Maltor stopped reading. "There is a very long name here and other details that may not be important. Perhaps it would be better if I summarized the master's words"

"If you think that's best," Teldin allowed with a wave of his hand. Almost instantly he struggled to repress a sneeze brought on by a cloud of dust raised from the table. Maltot nodded quickly, his tic resurfacing. Burying his face in the book, he read on, skimming quickly over the pages. More time passed as the monk studied the pages. He flipped forward and backward several times, as if puzzling out a strange reference. Teldin and Gomja watched the monk's every move with eager expectation, as if these actions might in themselves reveal a secret of the universe. After turning through the pages for the fifth or sixth time, the Aesthetic finally pushed the tome aside. He rubbed dust from the corners of his eyes.

"I am not sure I understand what is written here" he offered as a preface.

"Astinus knows many things the rest of us will never understand."

"What does it say?" Teldin asked with an edge of impatience in his voice.

The monk turned the book toward Teldin and pointed to a passage. "As you can see, it seems to explain things right here-"

The farmer pushed the page back. "You explain it. I'm far too tired to read," he lied. His small skill at letters was no match for the words of Astinus, though Teldin had no desire to let the monk know this.

The doorkeeper blew out a sigh that stirred up another cloud of dust. "Well, according to this, our world-Krynn, that is-is not the only place in the universe. It is one of many places separated from each other by-by nothingness." The monk's expression made it clear that he understood none of this.

"I know that," Gomja muttered in vexation. Teldin hushed the giff and motioned for Maltor to continue.

"From what Astinus writes, Krynn, the moons, even the stars are enclosed in a sphere, one of many such spheres, like a glass ball." Seeing Teldin's puzzled look, the monk traced a circle in the dust. "Our world and all these other things are inside, while outside is some kind of a nothing called phlogiston."

"A nothing with a name?" Teldin asked.

Maltor faltered, groping for just the right way to describe it.

"It is a great ocean of swirling colors, sir," Gomja offered, based on his own experience. Teldin cocked an eye at the giff, skeptical of the creature's sudden expertise. "I never knew how to describe it," the giff explained.

"As he said," continued Maltor, "there are other spheres floating in this phlogiston, but each sphere is supposed to be separate from the others. It says here that each is like a crystal orb, enclosed and independent, with whole worlds to themselves." At this point, even Maltor could not suppress a tone of skepticism about his master's words.

"So how does Astinus know all this?" Teldin demanded. The whole explanation sounded cockamamie to his ears.

Maltor threw up his hands. "How does Master Astinus know anything? He just does-but, from my reading, it seems the spheres beyond our own are unknown to my master. Of these other worlds he apparently knows only what has been reported by travelers."

Teldin's mind was starting to reel with confusion. He pushed away from the table and ambled a little way down the dust-clogged aisle. "Travelers? More than just Gomja?"

"Quite a few, from these records," Maltor noted by tapping at a page. Apparently this was not the first ship to visit the gnomes of Mount Nevermind. The place is something like a port on an ocean. These travelers reach Krynn by the method your companion called spelljamming- sailing among the stars and through the phlogiston. The ship that crashed on your farm was such a ship-magically powered to fly through the sky."

"Like the flying citadels during the war?" Teldin offered.

"I guess, but probably more so," Maltor speculated. The monk's scholarly interest was being excited by the very bizarreness of the research. "These ships travel beyond our sky even into the airless reaches of space. However it may be, your companion was part of a spelljamming ship." The Aesthetic looked at Gomja with renewed wonder, just realizing the implications of his own conclusions. "Where do you come from?"

The giff started, taken aback by the monk's sudden inquisitiveness. He answered slowly, as if fearful of betraying a secret. "I-uh-signed on at Dalweor's Rock, sir." The giff shifted uneasily from side to side.

Maltor seemed to make a mental note of this. "Dalweor's Rock is your home, then? I am only asking for Astinus's sake. I mean, just in case he wants to know." The monk clumsily covered his own curiosity with this excuse.

Gomja hesitated again. "Well, no, sir. It belongs to the dwarves. We-I mean, the giff don't really have a home. I've always lived wherever my sire's-my father's-platoon found work. Mostly that was on Dalweor's Rock, I guess."

"Does that book say anything about the neogi?" Teldin interrupted. He had not come this far to chat with a curious Aesthetic. He wanted information.

"Nee-ogi?" the monk intoned. He plunged back into the folio's pages. When he resurfaced a few moments later, his face showed no sign of success. "Astinus says nothing of them here."

Teldin dropped the question. He did not want to explain who or what the neogi were to this monk. It just did not seem prudent. "So the gnomes of Mount Nevermind might know more about spelljamming?" And my cloak? Teldin thought.

"It would seem so," Maltor confirmed as he stood to put the book away. "As I said, more than one of these ships has visited there."

"Where is it?" Teldin demanded, following the librarian.

"Mount Nevermind? Why, on Sancrist Isle. It is the homeland of the gnomes." Maltor puffed himself up, showing off a little of his own scholarliness. "The gnomes are a remarkable and underrated people-a little impractical, perhaps. They design the most cunning and amazing machines. With that alone, they may be able to help you."

"There's nothing else here?" Teldin asked with a slight touch of desperation. He pointed to the rows upon rows of books. Sancrist was a long sea journey away, beyond the shores of Ansalon. Going there would only take him farther from his home.

"Not according to Master Astinus," the monk replied as he unsteadily climbed the ladder and replaced the book. "You must go. There is nothing more we can do." Maltor descended again and led the two visitors out of the library's depths. He went bustling down the hall, frequently checking to see that Teldin and Gomja still followed him. However, the library, with all its side rooms and stacks, no longer interested the farmer. The audience with Astinus and Maltor's research, however unsatisfying, were all that had interested him. Neither he nor the giff made any attempt to wander.

As they drew closer to the exit, a tall, brown-robed Aesthetic, the first Teldin had seen in the halls on the way out, hurried their way. Instead of passing by on some mysterious errand, however, the man called out as they neared. "Master Maltor!" the tall Aesthetic nearly shouted. "Master Maltor-at the door, more of them!"

"Eh?" remarked Maltor, coming to an abrupt halt. Wiry and nimble, Teldin stepped to the side, barely avoiding a collision. Gomja was not so quick and

plowed into Maltor's back, almost sending the Aesthetic sprawling. The doorkeeper shot Gomja a vituperative look, though his tongue-lashing was stayed by the arrival of his fellow Aesthetic.

"Master doorkeeper," the newcomer said urgently as he approached, "there are more strangers at the door, demanding admittance. They want to see these two." The tall man nodded toward Teldin and Gomja. "The strangers even described our visitors!"

"Vandoorm!" Teldin breathed. He looked up at Gomja. The giff nodded in agreement. "Damn, he moves fast!" Teldin could only guess that the captain, once he and his men had recaptured their horses, had ridden the mounts to death to reach Palanthas so quickly. Maltor could not help noticing the urgent looks that passed between his two guests.

"Do they still wait outside?" the doorkeeper inquired of his fellow.

"Yes, sir."

"Tell them to wait, then, Tamros," Maltor explained. "Their friends will be coming soon enough. Send a boy for the city guard. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Tamros said weakly.

Maltor gave the novice a gentle clap on the back. "Good. Don't worry. Everything will be all right. Do as I told you." The lesser Aesthetic nodded and hurried back in the direction from which he had come.

Satisfied that the man was carrying out his orders, Maltor turned back to his guests. "I assume these men are not friends of yours."

"No, sir," Teldin practically spat. "Vandoorm's a mercenary. He and his men tried to kill us last night." While the farmer spoke, Gomja peered out a window, trying to get a view of the front entrance.

"I see," mused Maltor, the nervous tic returning to his face. "You understand that I am under no obligation to help you."

"I am ready to fight them, sir," Gomja offered, drawing himself up to his full seven-foot height.

Maltor sighed. "This would not be good. If I show you another way out, will you leave and never visit us again?"

"You have my word," Teldin eagerly accepted.

"Then follow me this way-to the servants' entrance." Maltor turned and began walking back down the hall.

"Come on, Gomja," Teldin hissed, "and keep the knives put away. There'll be no fighting today."

"But, sir!" Gomja protested. "We can still heat them!"

Chapter Eleven

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Maltor closed the small gate to the kitchen gardens behind him, leaving Teldin and Gomja standing on a quiet side street well away from the front entrance to the Great Library. The lane was narrow and crooked, lined by courtyard walls occasionally pierced by windows and doors. Somewhere children kicked a ball around the dusty alley, their voices reaching the strange pair by the gate. Carefully looking up and down the small lane, Teldin reassured himself that none of Vandoorm's men was watching.

"Just where are we going, sir?" Gomja asked. The giff purposely included himself in the question.

Teldin prepared to deny the giff's implied request, then paused, remembering Gomja's performance of the previous night. When the giff could have deserted and left Teldin to Vandoorm, he had not. Instead the creature had taken a chance. "We... are going to Mount Nevermind."

"Where is that, sir? Someplace called Sancrist, didn't the fat one say?" A pleased grin already began to play across Gomja's face.

"Sancrist lies west of here, over the ocean - or so I'm told," Teldin explained. "It's where a good deal of the Whitestone army came from."

As they walked, they reached a small well at an alcove, and Teldin stared down

at the still water. It had been weeks since he had seen his reflection. Looking at it now, the farmer saw that his sun-bleached brown hair had grown longer and was wild and unruly. Dirt smudged his face and two weeks' worth of stubble covered his chin. His good looks were almost obscured by grime. "I've heard it by report. Never been there myself," Teldin added absentmindedly as he rubbed at the dirt on his chin.

"And Mount Nevermind?" Gomja scooped up a dipperful of water and slurped at it noisily. Liquid dribbled out of the corners of his mouth.

Teldin stopped his preening. "A gnome hole, apparently, judging from what the Aesthetic said. I've never heard of it. Of course, I never met any gnomes during the war - they mostly kept to themselves, manning the catapults out along the bay."

Gomja gulped down his water. "I've heard they travel among the stars. My sire - I mean, father - once told me 'Never sign on a gnome ship.' Their captains are supposed to be mad and their ships -" Gomja paused for a moment, at a loss of words - "are unique." He grimaced at the thought then, drying his mouth, seemed to wipe the expression from his face.

"It doesn't sound as if you'll have much of a choice, and neither will I," Teldin pointed out. "It's the gnomes or nothing."

"Yes, sir," Gomja answered glumly.

Taking the lead again, Teldin continued toward toward the main street. The children at their game still shouted loudly behind him. "Here's our plan. First, we get away from here. After all, Vandoorm's smart enough to look around back. Next, we get a room, because I want to get cleaned up." Teldin ticked each point off on his fingers. "Third, we go to Sancrist." The farmer paused at that point. "If I remember rightly, folks got there during the war either by flying or by sailing. Wouldn't know any dragons would you?" the human sarcastically asked.

"Oh, no, sir," Gomja answered earnestly. The giff's face was solemn.

Teldin winced at the alien's earnest naivete. "Then I guess we sail," he allowed through chuckles. "To the waterfront, then." Teldin pointed forward, then suddenly stopped just as they reached the street. "Gomja, make sure that blanket is wrapped tightly around you. We've already made things too easy for Vandoorm."

"I wish I didn't have to, sir. It's hot and itchy." Gomja moaned. There was a touch of a whine in his voice.

"Too bad. It's an order," Teldin answered sternly. "Like I said, we've already made things too easy for Vandoorm."

"How so, sir?" Gomja asked, his voice muffled as he pulled the cloth well over his face.

"Well, first we didn't exactly make it a secret that we were coming to Palanthas to see Astinus. And then I let you parade around the streets instead of keeping you out of sight. A blind child could have found us! From now on we can't afford the risk of trusting anyone-no matter how well we know them."

"I don't know anyone here, sir," Gomja pointed out.

Teldin ignored the comment and stepped back to look at his partner. "Pull your sleeves down-try to cover your hands as much as possible," he ordered, tugging things into place. The dark, rough cloth completely concealed Gomja's features. Once again the giff had been transformed into a gigantic, hulking specter of doom. "It was made for you," Teldin snidely commented, unable to resist.

"Let's hurry, sir." A gigantic sneeze shook the fabric. "It's hot, and it itches my nose," complained the voice inside.

"To the waterfront, then," Teldin said cheerily. "An inn and a ship, in that order. And if all else fails, we can become street comedians!"

"Oh, thank you, sir," muttered Gomja from deep inside his cowl.

* * * * *

Teldin plopped onto the bed in their room. The hostler of the Golden Dory had been wary of letting his place to such a strange pair. Teldin's eastern accent easily marked him as a stranger to Palanthis, and the cloaked giff hadn't made matters any easier. Still, Teldin doubted the innkeeper would have given them a room at all if he had seen Gomja uncovered. As it was, it took some hard bargaining, along with a few well-timed growls from the giff, to secure lodgings. Only the farmer's assurances and a little extra steel soothed the man's fears.

Up in the room, the human thought and planned while the giff shrugged his way out of his cloak. With a whooping gasp, like a swimmer breaking the surface, Gomja cast the tentlike mantle into a corner. "Thank the Great Captain!" he cried, glad to be out of his confinement. Gomja carefully unbuckled his sword, then sat on the floor with a resounding thud. "What next sir?"

Teldin looked up, roused from his thoughts. Fingers poised before his lips, he considered their choices. "A bath and a shave, then I'm off to find a ship." Gomja's mouth opened, ready with an offer to come along, but Teldin cut him off. "You're staying here. It'll be easier that way. I'll arrange for the innkeeper to bring up a meal. Stay in the room. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir" Gomja answered sullenly, his eyes downcast. "But I should go with you-I'm your bodyguard."

"Since when?" Teldin countered firmly as he pulled off his boots. He did not want an answer, so he continued before the giff could give one. "And if you answer the door, make sure you're covered up. We don't want to give some poor servant a fright." Teldin opened the door and stepped into the hall barefooted. He stuck his head back in the room and added, "Now, I'm going to see about hot baths."

Later, a clean-shaven and scrubbed Teldin sat on the edge of the bed and pulled on his boots. A laundress had even managed to get some of the grime out of his clothes, though his pants were still damp as a result. Going to the table, the farmer studied his reflection in the water basin. Teldin looked unchanged, except for haggard circles under his eyes and a few singes and bruises, as if none of his adventures had ever occurred. He was back, once again, to his handsome self. The farmer finished dressing, then paused and mentally adjusted the cloak, reducing it again to a small collar. Teldin had heard of cursed treasures that plagued their owners and could not be lost or removed. If the cloak was cursed, at least it was accommodating.

"I really should go with you, sir," protested Gomja for the umpteenth time. Teldin only shook his head. "You're too obvious. I'll have to be on the watch for Vandoorm." The giff only frowned. "Look, Gomja, if I'm alone, I can avoid him, but you'll stand out like a torch in the night. Even with the cloak there aren't many people as tall or as broad as you.

"Then at least take a sword, sir," Gomja urged.

Again Teldin shook his head no. "I'm no good with them. I'd more likely hurt myself in a fight. Besides, carrying swords in Palanthis makes people nervous. "Well, at least that's something I can do," the giff said with a petulant sigh. "I would be glad to teach you how to fight, sir."

Teldin rubbed his smooth chin, considering Gomja's offer. Until last night, the farmer had always assumed he would be able to handle himself in a fight. He could brawl with the best of them, but a real battle, like the previous night's massacre, showed how much he really needed to learn. The violence of actual bloodletting was frightening. Swordsmanship was not one of the arts he had learned with the Whitestone army. After all, no one expected mule skinnners to fight.

"Agreed," he said, "but not right now." The giff gave a wan smile, proving he was mollified in some small way.

Teldin finished with his preparations and left the room, pausing outside long enough to be certain that Gomja did not try to follow. Satisfied that the giff was following his instructions, Teldin left the inn and headed for the waterfront. He warily watched along the way for any sign of Vandoorm or his

men.

Walking along the quays, Teldiri was amazed by the number and variety of ships. He could hardly tell that Palanthis had suffered through two wars in recent memory. Perversely, those wars, the War of the Lance and the Siege of Palanthis, which had threatened to destroy the city, only managed to bring greater prosperity. During the War of the Lance, the threat of blockade had forced the ruling lord to spend vast sums improving the harbor and its facilities. The second war, marked by Kitiara's invasion, reinforced the need to maintain the port, and the Lord of Palanthis had paid greater attention to his harbor ever since.

Palanthis had been a large port before, but now it was even larger and busier. Coasters, fat, round-bottomed ships from Kalamon, Caergoth, and Eastport, were tied next to the tall and graceful elven caravels. The shimmering silken banners of the Silvamori ships were, in turn, a contrast to the gaudily decked little cogs from Hylo. That the kender ships, with their crazy patchwork of "borrowed" parts and endless streams of multicolored sails, could float at all seemed like something of a miracle to Teldin.

"How do I know where they sail?" the farmer asked himself. "Or when they sail?" There were so many ships bobbing against the wooden piers that Teldin did not have a notion of how or where to start. He leaned on a piling, elbows resting on top, chin cradled in his hands. During the war it seemed there had never been enough ships coming to Palanthis. The threat of siege had hung over the city. Now there were too many. The port was alive with strange vessels and stranger crews.

"Well, my boy, find a gnomish ship," Teldin finally resolved. He began walking up and down the quay. He had no idea what kind of ship gnomes would use, but he guessed it would be little. They were not a tall people, so it stood to reason that they would not have a big ship.

Teldin walked the length of the marina without any luck. There were small ships, particularly kender vessels, but they looked distinctly unseaworthy. Teldin didn't care if those ships were going to Sancrist. He wasn't about to sail on one of them. Finally he gave up and called to one of the porters hauling a bundle aboard a salt-stained galley. "Where can I find a ship to Sancrist?" Teldin shouted over the noise of the laborers.

The sweating worker stopped and let his load crash onto the dock. "The Hall of Merchants, where else, ye big lubber!" the man said, pointing toward a large, white marble hall at the far end of the waterfront. "All ships in port register there." Before Teldin could thank him, the man heaved the bale onto his shoulder and turned away. The farmer ignored the man's attitude, picked his way through the wagons waiting to be laden, and headed to where the man had indicated.

The Hall of Merchants was a guildhall, the headquarters of the masters who controlled trade in and out of the city. Teldin's greeting at the hail was barely more courteous than the porter's. The yeoman felt distinctly out of place and spent the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon being passed from one apprentice clerk to another. Finally, just before Teldin's patience gave out, a thin-nosed scribe looked over the top of his dog-eared register and said in answer to Teldin's inquiry, "I think there is one going for Sancrist tomorrow. Let me see- the Silver Spray, it is."

"That's just fine," Teldin exclaimed with a sigh of relief. "Where can I find it?"

The clerk peered from under his visor to look skeptically at Teldin. "The Silver Spray is an elven ship. I don't think they will take passengers-at least not you. You are- human."

"Tell me where to find it," Teldin demanded. He was in no mood for lectures by an apprentice money-counter.

"Her, not it," the clerk corrected, tsking under his breath. "The big pier at the end of the main avenue." He consulted the register before him. "She flies a banner of a silver wave on a field of green." The apprentice held his hand out, expecting payment for his minor service.

Teldin ignored the man's greed. Even if he could afford to leave the clerk a gift, he was in no mood to be generous. Without a thanks, he turned and left. Behind him the clerk slammed the register shut, punctuating it with a loud huff that echoed through the marbled hall.

Out on the wharf, the day's activity was slowly winding down. The tide was out, revealing slimy, green muck on the pilings. Porters, sweating miserably in the hot weather, stowed the last of their cargoes while a few seamen finished odd jobs on board, such as patching sails, splicing hawsers, or tightening rigging. Here and there small dories bobbed alongside larger vessels as men inspected and scraped hulls. Most of the ships were lightly manned, the crews ashore for one last night of revelry.

The clerk's directions were good and Teldin had little trouble finding the Silver Spray's pier. He walked down the dock slowly, studying the flags that hung limply from the masts. About halfway down he found the vessel he sought. The green banner fluttered weakly in a passing breeze, showing the arching silver wave that was its owner's coat of arms.

The Silver Spray seemed aptly named. The ship was a caravel of carefully balanced proportions. Although broad of beam, the ship's width was offset by the length of her keel. The arching prow and the intricately carved sterncastle lent an image of grace. More surprising was the hull's color. The vessels around the Silver Spray with their brown and black hulls, looked dour and sluggish compared with the gleaming bright, silvery ash wood used for the Silver Spray's planking. The ship's fittings were polished to red-gold, brass, and silver highlights. The figurehead, a cresting wave, was freshly painted blue and white. The three masts' sheets were ready for tomorrow's sailing. Even Teldin, a landlubber, felt a sense of awe rising in him as he looked upon the ship. He wondered if he really could get passage aboard such a fine vessel. Biting back his feeling of intimidation, the human strode up the gangplank. A lone sailor's figure sat on the deck, its back to Teldin. "Excuse me. I have heard your ship is sailing to Sancrist," Teldin hailed in his best manner. He stood on the gangplank, uncertain whether to go any farther.

The sailor casually turned about, until she could see Teldin over her shoulder. He tried not to gape but hardly had expected a woman to respond to his call, much less an elven maiden. Long, fine, ashen hair fell over one eye. The other, finely shaped and pale gold, scrutinized Teldin. "You're a human," she finally commented in the Common tongue. Then, in a burst of nimble grace, the elf leaped about and to her feet, as if to show that she could do it. She moved lightly, barely making a noise while strolling across the deck to where Teldin stood.

The elf was small and thin, her legs long, her waist narrow in a delicate balance of height and slimness, much like the few other elves Teldin had seen. The elf's straight silvery hair hung loosely over her shoulders, covering the distinctive sharp-tipped ears of her kind. If she was a sailor, her skin was bizarrely pale, almost translucent. The lips, nose, chin—all her features except her eyes—were thin. The simple leather and linen clothes she wore barely disguised her femininity. That in itself was a major contrast to the other sailors Teldin had seen.

The elf woman stood at the edge of the deck and made no attempt to invite Teldin aboard. "If we sail to Sancrist, what business is that of yours?" she asked coldly.

Teldin tensed. "A friend and I need to get to Mount Nevermind. We're looking for someone who will take us as passengers." The farmer could not suppress the proud defiance in his voice, especially since the elf's words came as such a challenge.

"You're a human. This is an elf ship." The sailor turned to leave as if that explained it all.

Anger rose within Teldin, and he walked farther up the gangplank. "Where's your captain?" he demanded. "You've no authority to turn me away."

The elf wheeled around, her eyes hard. Only the faintest shimmer of golden

light showed through her narrowed lids. "I am Cwelanas, the mate. For you, that is as good. But if you want to talk to the captain, I will summon him." The elf's words were cold. "Wait here. Do not step on board." The elven mate disappeared down the companionway at the head of the sterncastle.

Teldin waited nervously at the edge of the deck, uncertain whether he had just ruined any hopes of getting to Sancrist. There was still a chance, if the captain was any more reasonable than the mate. It was not a possibility that filled the farmer with confidence. He wondered what he could say or what he could offer that could possibly make a difference. Teldin's fears were interrupted by voices from the companionway, which he could barely make out. "I do not like him, father," spoke the woman's voice. Teldin's heart sank as he recognized her.

"You do not like any human, Cwelanas. I will meet with him and decide. Perhaps he will be different." The second speaker sounded like an older man. His tone was calm and reasoned, a contrast to the mate's fiery temper. As quickly as he had lost heart, Teldin regained his hope. Footsteps sounded on the stairs.

"My mate tells me you seek passage," spoke a soft yet firmly commanding voice. Teldin feigned a small start of surprise and turned to the speaker. Slightly stooped with age, the patriarchal elf captain still stood taller than his daughter. Long arms, seeming little more than skin over bone, dangled from the bottom of a near-sleeveless robe. The elf's face was tight and drawn, the skin so translucent that Teldin could almost see the old elf's cheekbones, even the sharp crease of his nose, through it. The elf captain's hair was white and silky thin, hanging in a long fringe around the top of his balding head. He was, for Teldin, a stork-man, glistening pearly white with a sharp-beaked face. His daughter, the mate, stood on the stair slightly behind him.

"Yes-umm-Captain," Teldin answered, genuinely startled. The farmer had not known elves could look so old. He moved to take a step forward.

"Stay." The captain held up his hand, an order for Teldin to move no farther. Confused, the human froze. The old elf seemed to glide across the deck to the gangplank, his feet moving like water over the boards. "Forgive me for not inviting you aboard. By the custom of my people, if you step on my ship, I am bound to accept you. Now, where is it you seek to go?" The elf's tone was cold and imperious.

"Mount Nevermind," Teldin answered nervously.

"The Isle of Sancrist, then." The old elf captain appraised Teldin through half-closed eyes. "And why would you seek a nestful of mad tinkers?"

Teldin stopped, uncertain whether he should answer the captain's question. He opened his mouth but was cut off.

"Never mind." The captain dismissed the question before it was answered. He slowly drifted away from the gangplank, as if his interests were already being pulled elsewhere. Unconcernedly staring away from the human, the captain continued, "I apologize for my dau-my mate's behavior. Please understand that a seaman's life is difficult, especially in your human ports. She finds it much more comfortable to remain on board with me. I am Luciar." With an unpretentious flourish, the captain turned and bowed politely to Teldin. "And you . . .

"Teldin Moore of Kalamán, sir," the farmer hurriedly offered as he awkwardly bowed in return.

The captain mulled the name briefly. "Why come to my ship?" he finally asked.

"The harbormaster said you were sailing to Sancrist," Teldin patiently explained.

"Even as the last of leaves falls, so shall I count them," murmured the old elf, quoting from some source Teldin did not know. "He spoke truth, but not wisely. Did he not say this was an elf ship?"

Teldin nodded. "Yes, sir, he did."

"And he warned you that elves would never take you?"

"Perhaps he said something like that," Teldin allowed, "but I didn't choose to believe him."

Cwelanas, standing behind her father, made a face as if to bite Teldin. Her

teeth clicked sharply together and her eyes were half-closed with dark contempt. Although Luciar certainly heard her, he paid his daughter no attention. "And what do you believe?" the old captain asked.

Teldin hesitated, then, in a rush, he remembered the awful charnel house the neogi had left behind at Liam's farm. Drawing himself up straight, he boldly spoke, "It is important for me and my companion to reach Mount Nevermind. It is a duty I owe a friend."

The elf captain stepped closer. "Brave talk for one so young. Why should I take you aboard?"

"I can pay," Teldin offered. "A little, at least."

Luciar politely turned away so as not to laugh in Teldin's face. His daughter reddened, reckoning the human's words as an insult. Bristling, she made ready to spring to Luciar's defense, but before she could act, the old elf held up a single bony finger to restrain her. In gently biting tones, he admonished the brash human before his deck. "If your precious pieces of steel had been all I ever wanted, then this would have been concluded long ago. We elves ask for more. Could you lead my shipmates in a merry jig? Dance them until they are spent? Hold them enthralled, like the rooted willows, with the playing of your pipes? Do you know the lays of the lost dreamings? Would you even climb the mainmast to bathe in the golden waters of the sun?" A sorrowful tone crept into the old elf's voice. He turned and hobbled across the deck to the stairway, now moving like one afflicted by great age. "I cannot take you. You have nothing to offer me," Luciar called as he disappeared down the companionway.

Stung at the old elf's rebuke, Teldin made to follow. "But I must- " As quick as a blur, the human found his way blocked by Cwelanas, standing catlike before him, a long dirk in her hand. She smiled fiercely, waiting for him to move. "I told you, human," she purred triumphantly, "this is an elf ship." Teldin thought better of a fight and reluctantly turned and plodded back down the gangplank. He fumed to himself, the lunatic elf captain, and his arrogant daughter.

Chapter Twelve

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Teldin found a niche in the shade, away from the afternoon sun and away from the elf ship. The distraught farmer folded his lanky body and settled into a quiet doorway to brood. Sitting on the stoop, his chin resting in his hands, he watched the legs of pedestrians go by, not even making the effort to look up to see the faces that connected to the boots, shoes, and sandals that clicked across the cobblestones before him.

Teldin must have made an appropriately pathetic sight, for several of the passersby stopped long enough to toss a coin from the purses at his feet. In his dejection, Teldin barely noticed the small coins that grew before him. Behind the huddled farmer the door creaked open. "Go away! Get out of my door, you worthless beggar!" A hail of swats came down on Teldin's head. Scrambling up from where he sat, the yeoman escaped the wrath of a plump woman standing in the doorway. "And take your filthy money, too!" she screamed, kicking the coins at his feet.

"And to think I protected your kind in the war!" Teldin viciously shouted at the shrewish woman. Her face, previously flushed with indignation, drained pale as she felt the rage that boiled out of the lanky beggar on her stoop. "Damn you all to the Abyss!" the farmer snarled, baring his teeth in an animalistic grimace. He took a shaking step toward and towered over the short woman. The terrified woman trembled before his assault, then slammed the door in Teldin's face before he might spring to the attack.

As he stood in the street, Teldin realized he was far from alone, for a circle of gawkers had gathered behind him. Embarrassed by the outburst, he scooped up the scattered coins of money, then became embarrassed by that, too. He had not

come to Palanthas to beg. Pride in honor said to throw the money away; common sense urged them to keep it. Common sense won, and Teldin hurriedly but the money into his purse, all the time muttering, "I'll never get to Mount Nevermind," as he counted the coins. The onlookers unconsciously drew back lest the beggar be a madman.

Such was Teldin's mood that he forsook what little caution he had exercised all day, little caring to note any suspicious characters. Thus, as he left the side street, he failed to notice Brun One-Eye and another of Vandoorm's mercenaries watching from among the small crowd gathered at the homemaker's door. With a nod, Brun and his companion began to follow Teldin at a safe distance, stepping into a merchant's stall or a shadowed doorway each time Teldin even casually looked about.

It wasn't until Teldin had reached the smaller back streets where the foot traffic thinned out, that he sensed something odd. There, between the half-timbered houses that jutted over the street. Teldin became aware of strangers behind him. He turned in an attempt to catch whoever followed him, but the yeoman's only reward was a shadow disappearing down a side street and a thunk of a door quickly closing. A cat came out of the alley and quickly padded across the road. Still suspicious, Teldin continued on, turning the corner and out of sight.

* * * * *

Stepping out of the shadows of a doorway, Brun hissed softly for his companion. The man poked his head out of the alley and, seeing that it was all clear, hurriedly joined the eye-patched warrior. The two fell into a huddled discussion, Reaching the corner, Brun carefully peered around it, then urgently waved the other forward. Down the lane, Teldin was nowhere in sight.

* * * * *

With his back pressed against the rough stone of a courtyard wall, Teldin watched Brun and his companion still at the corner. The farmer, suspecting he was being followed, had slipped through an open gate into a small courtyard beyond. The early evening sun gave long shadows to the high walls, and it was from this deep gloom that Teldin watched, peering carefully through the barely ajar gate. Teldin instantly recognized Brun; the man's wild hair and eye-patch were absolutely distinctive. The other man he vaguely knew as one of Vandoorm's men. Their faces showed puzzlement as the pair cursorily scanned the street, not noticing the slightly open gate. Brun gave a sharp command, then led the other man down the way. The farmer shifted and watched them go. After waiting for a minute or more, Teldin finally ventured back into the street. He looked both directions as he decided which way to go. "Always better to swing the first punch," Teldin mused aloud, remembering the advice grandfather had given him when he was young. Grandfather had also said, 'Don't be fool, boy,' advice that made sense right now. "I can go back to the inn, or I can follow them," Teldin whispered to himself, weighing his choices. Common sense said to go back to Gomja - he had already made another close escape - but that choice did not satisfy him. Another part of him urged him to follow Brun. After all, Teldin thought, how much longer could he keep getting away? It would be a great advantage knowing where Vandoorm was; it would make the deceitful captain that much easier to avoid.

Teldin let his curiosity overrule his good judgement. He would follow Brun back to the spider's web, just to know what and where to avoid. That decided, the long-legged farmer sprinted down the lane before his newfound quarry escaped.

At first, Teldin thought the chase was getting him nowhere. Brun and his stooge seemed to wander almost aimlessly, casting about like hunters searching for a lost deer trail. It was all Teldin could do to keep from losing them and still stay hidden. The pair constantly doubled back or separated, forcing

Teldin to move quickly to keep his plans from failing. After more than an hour of searching, as the narrow streets descended into darkness, the pair seemed to give it up. They moved purposefully, no longer taking the time to peer up every alley or circle around blocks. Emboldened by his success and the increased darkness, Teldin followed closer. Finally, well into dusk, he was close enough to hear small bits of the pair's wind-borne conversation.

"Vandoorm won't like..." spoke the smaller of the two.

"I don't care... Vandoorm can go..." came bits of Brun's snarling reply.

"...whole thing isn't..." The two rounded a house and Teldin lost the conversation.

When he finally peeked around the corner, Teldin found that the pair had reached an old, run-down section of the harbor. They were headed along a deserted quay with a tumble-down collection of abandoned storehouses and drafty shanties to one side and crumbling piers to the other. Small fishing dories, some barely seaworthy, bobbed on the black, sewage-rich water and thumped against rotting pilings. Teldin ignored the thick smell of dead fish and waste, slipped behind a row of old lobster pots, and crept close enough to hear more.

"Why does Vandoorm... meet here anyway?" griped the nameless mercenary. The two were standing just on the other side of the wooden traps, their backs to Teldin's hiding place.

"Shut up, and don't... questions," snapped Brun. "It's where... our employers. My guess... they want to know..." The rest of Brun's words were drowned out by other voices. In the dim light from the nearby shanties, Teldin could barely see the short, swaggering figure of Vandoorm leading a small band of men, no more than ten of his original score. The farmer noted with no small satisfaction that more than a few hobbled painfully. Confident that he couldn't be seen, Teldin pressed himself forward against the damp traps, trying to hear as much as possible.

"Hail, Brun," called Vandoorm. "What luck?"

"We saw him, but he lost us," Brun answered glumly. "He was down here, by the waterfront." Vandoorm swore, naming Brun's ancestors in a blistering tirade. The one-eyed mercenary bristled. His hand went to his sword and he took a step forward, only to be restrained by his companion. "I don't remember you holding him well, either." Brun sneered. The words brought Vandoorm's rant to a halt. The lame men behind the captain tensed, their eyes hard and narrow.

"Do not speak about things you don't know," Vandoorm icily reminded Brun. "Good men die - you do not." The captain slowly circled Brun, never taking his eyes off his lieutenant. Brun, under Vandoorm's and the others' withering gazes, seemed to shrink.

"We've learned something at least," the one-eyed warrior boasted in defense.

"Our goat said he was going to Mount Nevermind - on Sancrist!" Brun, puffed up with his tidbit of information, strutted toward Vandoorm.

"Sancrisssst?" a new voice spoke with prolonged syllables. The speaker's whispery call echoed through the dark waterfront. "Gone to Sancrisst he hasss?"

All the mercenaries save one wheeled to face the mysterious speaker. Swords flashed as battle-instincts seized the men. Only Vandoorm turned calmly, surprised but unruffled by the new appearance. "So I report, noble - uh - one." The captain hesitated slightly, searching for the right word with which to address the mysterious speaker.

A small, horrific shape moved to the edge of the shadows. Though it was still half-veiled in darkness, Teldin, peering through the slats of the lobster pots, instantly recognized the creature. He had seen it before, though only vaguely then. It was a neogi, like the ones he had glimpsed that dreadful night on his farm.

In the shadows, the creature seemed no larger than a child and there was no sign of the hulking brutes Teldin had seen in his last encounter with these hateful beings. The monster took a few clicking steps forward, its spider-like legs moving it in strange rhythms, ever more into the light. The furry,

boulder-shaped body was cloaked in a silken wrap. The gloom was too heavy for Teldin to tell what color the creature might be. Its head, supported by a long, snaking neck, weaved in and out of the light. The little face was a cross between an evil serpent's and a raving dog's, with a rigorous smile, all fangs and thin lips.

"Ssancrisst iss where, sservant-sslave?" demanded the neogi. Its eight legs clicked with impatience on the cobblestone pavement

"Information costs money, creature-sir," Vandoorm shot back. His men, quickly recovering from their shock, warily formed into a line behind their captain. With small gestures, Brun marshalled them into position, past differences already forgotten. From his hiding place Teldin found it harder to see what was going on. Vandoorm and the neogi-the alliance filled Teldin with even greater contempt for his ex-friend and mentor.

"Sservant-sslavess do not Nyeasta defy!" threatened the neogi. "Your ansswer worth more than money iss." The neogi whipped its head about and barked a quick command. By their faces Teldin could tell the tongue was foreign to Vandoorm and his men. Teldin, probably through some power of the cloak, vaguely understood it, though parts did not translate perfectly. "Quasroth, kinsmen-slaves-your lordservants bring. Nyeasta, your captain-owner, demands it."

The response was an immediate movement from the shadows on three sides of Vandoorm's men. With a loud clattering, giant creatures closed on the mercenaries. "These my umber hulks are. As I bid, they do," Nyeasta intoned. As with the neogi, Teldin had seen these larger creatures before. The plated bodies rose out of the shadows, glistening like June beetles' backs. Their giant mandibles clacked and grated as the beasts lumbered forward, claws almost dragging on the ground. Teldin took care not to look at the creatures' outermost eyes, remembering the violently disorienting effect their gaze had had on him before.

At that point, one-eyed Brun, overstrung with bravado, rushed forward with his sword raised and charged the nearest creature. "Restrain!" Nyeasta barked. The umber hulk closest to the lunging mercenary swept an arm out and effortlessly seized the lieutenant in its great claws. Even so, Brun tried to complete his slash, but the warrior's sword skittered off the bony plates that covered the beast's body and barely left a mark. With a violent twist, the umber hulk pinned its quarry to the ground. There was a soft pop and grunt of agony from Brun. The lieutenant's sword arm flopped loosely at his side, the shoulder wrenched free from its socket. His teeth clenched to grind hack the pain, Brun squirmed helplessly under the brute's unyielding grip.

Nyeasta returned its attention to Vandoorm. "Ssancrisst iss where?" the neogi demanded once more.

"Release Brun or I say nothing!" Vandoorm countered, defying the neogi. The little creature turned to its monstrous servant and Vandoorm took a deep breath of relief, confident that the neogi had relented.

Smiling a gruesome smile, the neogi calmly told the lordservant, "Meat kill." Vandoorm's triumphant look turned to horror when the umber hulk slashed downward with its arm at the wriggling Brun. The outthrust talons struck in concert with a single wild shriek from the doomed man's mouth. Before the cry had begun to echo, there was the hard grinding of rock as the beasts's claws speared Brun's body and drove into the flagstones of the quay, gouging a huge fistful of bloody rock. Its talons dripping, the umber hulk threw the one-eyed lieutenant's torso into the center of Vandoorm's company. Blood splattered the legs of the stunned men.

"Now, servant-slave, Ssancrisst Isle iss where? Answer and you and your slaves spared will be." Here Nyeasta motioned with a tiny claw to Vandoorm's mercenaries.

Teldin, horrified but locked in place by grotesque fascination, struggled to see clearly without revealing himself. Small tremors palsied the leg and arms of the wrought-up mercenaries, their swords clenched rigid, the tips vibrating with tension. Teldin was hardly surprised to see that even the cool Vandoorm

shook, spasms rippling across his back. The captain's gaze turned from Nyeasta to Brun's bloody remains and back again. The umber hulks, of which Teldin had counted five, took a step closer to the mass of men.

"West!" blurted Vandoorm, desperate to forestall an unprofitable fight. "West, beyond the isles of Ergoth, at the mouth of the strait that divides north and south." It all tumbled out at once. "I trained an army of Whitestone there in the war. Nevermind is a peak somewhere in the mountains. Only gnomes live in that part of Sancrist." The bearded warrior shook, as if speaking had released the tension coiled within him.

"Gnomesss?" hissed Nyeasta. "Gnomess shipss build- there, of course, the cloakmaster will go. Him the spheres call." The neogi stared toward the sky, rapt in its thoughts.

"Then my information is good, is worth something, creature-sir?" Vandoorm probed, his nerve and his mercenary instincts returning. "We'll take our pay and go."

"No promisesss to ssslaves there are," Nyeasta said in cool, slippery tones. "Kill them," the neogi ordered in the harsh tongue of its hulking servants. "To swords and break out right!" Vandoorm shouted as the umber hulks lumbered forward. The order was hardly necessary, for the mercenaries had already sprung futilely into action, but the umber hulks' strange, multifaceted eyes swirled in hypnotic colors and the seasoned warriors staggered back, dazed and confused. Some struck out blindly while others, hopelessly outmatched for the first time in their careers, cried for mercy, but there was no mercy coming. The broad-bodied, gigantic umber hulks waded among the random, raging mass of mercenaries, tearing the warriors apart with impunity. Only a few, Vandoorm among them, seemed to retain their sanity.

Teldin suddenly realized that he was too close to the massacre when a hapless mercenary crashed through the lobster pots just to the right. The body landed by Teldin's feet, its head dangling toward the harbor below. Half the man's shoulder had been torn away and the blood flowed quickly into the greasy water. The man's legs kicked feebly in dying throes at the splintered wood of the traps. Another shriek, along with a splash of blood and gore across his cheek, tore Teldin's attention away.

Beyond the shelter of the pots, the umber hulks gruesomely thinned the ranks of Vandoorm's few remaining men. The short, bearded captain hewed at the beasts with his broad sword, his most furious blows hacking gashes through the horrors' bony armor. Blood and flesh soaked the pavement under Vandoorm's feet. Reeling back for a swing, the captain's foot suddenly slipped beneath him. He dropped to one knee and weakly tried to beat the monsters off, then suddenly the mercenary was swarmed by the creatures. Vandoorm's screams were drowned by the umber hulks' rending claws, their blood-stained talons flailing down upon the prostrate captain.

Teldin fled, blindly scrambling along the quay. Fear forced him into a hunched run; instinct somehow kept him behind the shelter of the fishermen's nets and traps. Screams ended abruptly. Clacking mandibles and soft, fleshy ribs faded and welcome darkness cloaked the terrified farmer. Teldin ran on, turning and twisting blindly. He gasped for breath, his throat raw and thick. Pain seared his heaving chest. He sprinted until, exhausted, he could run no more. Still he lurched on.

Dirty, sweaty, and blood-stained, talking fiercely to himself and staggering as he walked, Teldin gained a wide and fearsome berth amid the Palanthians he passed on his way back to the inn.

Chapter Thirteen

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Given his blood-smeared and panicked state, Teldin had little difficulty persuading Gomja that it was well past time to leave Palanthas. Indeed, the giff gathered their belongs and strapped on his sword in a grimly satisfied

mood. In his unspoken opinion, Vandoorm and his men had gotten only what they deserved. Still, Gomja wanted to stay and fight, but Teldin knew it was time to escape. The elves were sailing tomorrow and Teldin was determined to be on that ship when it left. Teldin and Gomja hurried out onto the night streets, leaving an awestruck and terrified innkeeper behind.

Somehow, the pair managed to reach the quay without incident. The Silver Spray was still moored there, riding higher in the water as the tide slowly came in. A lantern swung from the main boom, another over the aft companionway. The deck was deserted and the pair had little difficulty slipping aboard, though the gangplank groaned under the giffs weight. Relying on Gomja's knowledge of ships, they found a hatch to the hold and dropped into the darkness below. There, by slowly groping their way, the two found what seemed a secure, if uncomfortable, nest.

Once they had settled in, all they could do was wait. Teldin periodically dozed until he had no idea what time it might be. At some point he was aware of a vaguely sickening motion as the whole world seemed to rise and fall at rhythmic intervals. This was accompanied by thin streams of sunlight around the edges of the hatch and planking above. Teldin ignored both these and Gomja's voluminous snores, and drifted back to sleep.

"There! I told you I heard something," cried a silvery voice muffled by the crates in the hold. "That way."

The words roused the farmer from his sleep. The giff was already awake, trying to draw his sword while lurching to his feet. Teldin wriggled to avoid being crushed underfoot.

"Sir, I think we've been discovered," the alien rumbled as he struggled to reach a good fighting position.

"Over there!" called an elven voice.

"Ahoy on deck, get the mate over here. Something's going on!" another voice sang out.

Suddenly brilliant sunlight filled the hold as the main hatch cover was pulled away. Teldin and the giff shielded their eyes, unable to see clearly in the glare as three elves sprang forward. Lithe and lean, they held a menacing array of knives, gaffs, and spears pointed toward the two intruders.

"Stowaways, I told you!" announced one of the elves.

"A human!" breathed another.

"And a . . . what?" asked the third, jabbing at Gomja. The giff batted the gaff away with his sword. "Trooper Herphan Gomja, Red Grade, First Rank, Red Platoon." he indignantly announced. "Stand back. groundlings. before a superior warrior of the giff descends upon you!

"Gomja," Teldin snarled in an aside to his partner, "just shut up and surrender! I don't think they mean to kill us."

"Out of there, human, and your ogre friend, too," ordered the tallest of the elves, who stood only up to Teldin's nose. Still, the spear the elf waved added considerable impetus to his command.

"I am a giff," Gomja proudly maintained as he and Teldin slowly clambered over the crates. The elves quickly took the pair's swords and knives. They even took Gomja's precious pistols, though not without eliciting a snarl from the defiant trooper. That done, the elves escorted their prisoners to the hatch, where more of their kin peered down from above. Even in the hold, Teldin could hear the elves on deck spreading the news.

"On deck, you two," the spear-armed sailor ordered, pointing to the ladder.

"Stand back," he shouted to those waiting above, "stowaways coming up!" One section of the circle of elven heads parted and disappeared. "Now up!" the elf commanded, urging Teldin forward with the tip of his spear. For an instant, the farmer wanted to sink just one good punch into the elf's pale and delicate face. Perhaps seeing it in Teldin's eyes, the elf quickly stepped back and repeated his command in less fearsome tones. "Up."

Teldin climbed, but slowly, defiant at being herded. He knew that as a stowaway he had no right to expect better, but there was no way he was going to submit meekly to such treatment. When he reached the deck, the bright

sunlight dazed Teldin, but, by shielding his eyes, he could make out the slim figures that made a broad ring about him. Somewhere overhead a gull squawked, and the rich salt bite of the air made his nose tingle.

"You? You are our hidden mouse?" a woman sneered. "I should have expected no less from your race." There was no mistaking the sharply cutting words carried by the gentle chiming tones of her voice. His eyes adjusted, Teldin looked around until he saw Cwelanas standing across the hatch from him. With one bare foot on the lip of the opening, the elf maiden leaned forward. She wore different clothes from yesterday, simple trousers and a shirt bound with silk laces. Away from the port, she looked even less masculine than she had the day before. For some reason, she smiled, not an overly friendly smile, but a smile nonetheless. "You are determined to get to Sancrist, aren't you?" She turned to one of the crew. "Fetch Captain Luciar." The elf crewman hurried to obey. A strangled shout followed by a crash and a thump ended Teldin's need to reply. "Help!" screamed a voice, not Gomja's, from the hold. That cry, too, ended in a series of wooden thuds as crates tumbled and barrels rolled loose in the hold. Teldin tore free of the hands that grabbed at him and lunged forward till his chest was pressing against the hatch rim, trying to see what was happening below. The farmer looked down to see the giff hunched warily in a fighter's pose. In one hand he held a spear, the one Teldin recognized as belonging to the tall elf who'd found them. Of Gomja's three captors, one half-sat, half-sprawled against a bulkhead with his head lolling from side to side, one lay half-buried under crates, and one was obviously laid out on the floor, his feet sticking out of the darkness. Teldin guessed they all were still alive.

The farmer was unable to suppress a cheer for his companion. Seeing their captors coldcocked gave Teldin particular satisfaction, a sense of victory he really enjoyed.

With a gasp of astonishment, Cwelanas drew the saber that hung at her side. Teldin looked up in time to see her legs tense. "Gomja, stop!" he bellowed before the elf could make her move. The giff whirled and looked up at Teldin, instantly relaxing upon seeing his commander unharmed. His eyes tracked to the other side of the hatch, where Cwelanas lurked. "Onto the deck," Teldin ordered, content with the display the giff had made. He did not want to see his friend killed. With a rumble of disgust, Gomja threw down the spear and climbed out of the hold, each rung of the ladder creaking forbiddingly under his weight. Once he was on deck, all but Cwelanas warily backed away.

"No more fighting, Trooper Gomja," Teldin ordered as the giff clambered on deck.

"It's not the giff way to surrender without a fight, sir, the big, blue creature protested. "That would be without honor-but now I have beaten them, so there is no shame."

Cwelanas cocked her head in disbelief at the giff's words, trying to understand his strange ways. "You will not fight anymore?" she asked. When the giff nodded, she curtly ordered. "Take him!" A gaggle of elves swarmed over the unresisting giff. Satisfied, Cwelanas turned back to Teldin. "Now, what are we going to do with you, human?"

"I have a name, elf-Teldin Moore," Teldin firmly replied, refusing to be cowed.

"Nonetheless, Teldin Moore, you are on my ship," sounded Luciar's much older voice. He stood on the afterdeck, his drawn face dour and imperious. The freshening breeze whipped blue and white robes around his thin frame. "Mate, do not let the crew lose this breeze."

"There is still time to put these two ashore," Cwelanas mentioned, pointing to Teldin.

"I want us underway as soon as possible. We will not delay for them." Luciar's voice was firm and certain. "See to things, then bring our human guest up here."

"Yes, Captain," Cwelanas answered darkly but without argument. She turned to the elf sailors who gawked around her. "You heard the captain, crew. He wants

us out of the bay now. Unfurl more sail. You four-" She pointed to a group of lean and hard-looking elves-"see to that-"

"Giff," Teldin interjected.

"-thing does no more damage. When llfaras and his clumsy peers are able to walk, send them to the galley for tending. Now, you, to the captain." Cwelanas grabbed Teldin roughly by the shirt and pulled him toward the stairs to the afterdeck. She was surprisingly strong for her size and easily jerked the surprised human off balance.

"I can walk, thank you," Teldin insisted, upon recovering his footing. With an unconcerned shrug, she dropped her grip and let him go ahead of her, out of caution, not courtesy. Teldin lurched and almost fell as the ship caught the breeze and heeled slightly. Cwelanas made no attempt to help the human, but instead pushed him forward. He caught the banister, then climbed to meet Captain Luciar.

The old elf kept his face impassive as he stared gravely at Teldin. Cwelanas stood near the stair, her saber still unsheathed. "You came to me yesterday asking for passage to Sancrist," Luciar intoned as if reminding himself of events. "I told you no. Today I find you-and a monster- smuggled aboard my ship. This violates law and custom."

"Sir," Teldin said, "my-"

"On human ships, I am told, stowaways are simply thrown overboard," Luciar coldly continued, ignoring Teldin's words for the moment. "If they are lucky, they swim to shore." He turned to survey his crew's progress.

"Maybe the big one could, but this one would never make it," snorted Cwelanas.

"Quiet, my daughter," Luciar chided. "The jib is going slack. It should be full in this wind. See to it, Cwelanas."

"Yes, Father," the elf maiden said quietly, sensing her father's faint displeasure.

As his first mate descended, Luciar strolled to the aft railing. Teldin remained. "Young man, do you understand what you have done?" the ancient elf asked grimly.

"Stowed away, sir," was the human's answer, meekly said in spite of his determination. The captain's imperious manner chilled the farmer's spirit. Teldin was not proud of his act, since he knew it was little more than thievery.

"I am bound by the customs of the Silvamori to welcome any soul who sets foot on my ship, provided he draws no blade against me," Luciar tersely explained. "That is why I would not let you aboard yesterday. Now I am stuck with you it would seem. Cwelanas would let tradition hang and throw you overboard." The captain shook his head sadly at the thought. Teldin's hopes brightened. Perhaps his luck was beginning to change. After all, he deserved a break in his fortunes, the farmer reasoned.

"This I will not allow," the old elf captain continued, "but I will not allow you to steal free passage aboard my ship, either! You and your-thing-will work among the crew. Cwelanas is my first mate, and she will give you orders. You must do as she says." The elf let a faint smile cross his lips. "I imagine you will regret stowing aboard long before we reach land."

"Thank you, Captain," Teldin said, somewhat crestfallen. Easy passage had been a vain hope, more than he had a right to expect. "Gomja and I will manage." Even as he claimed so, Teldin was far from sure. He certainly knew the voyage would be anything but dull.

"Teldjn Moore, report to Cwelanas for your duties."

Chapter Fourteen

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Teldin leaned against the bowsprit and gazed longingly at the distant land. The queasiness of his first night at sea had passed, but Teldin found sea-going life more difficult than he had expected. He was used to the open spaces of a farm; the ship was small and confining, even when he was on the

main deck. Teldin was constantly and nervously aware of the limits of his fragile new home. It did not help to be constantly reminded of his ignorance about things nautical. Gomja at least, from his flying ships, had something of an advantage over Teldin in this.

Still, he was trying to learn quickly and had so far mastered some of the basics of sailing. Fortunately, Teldin was a quick study. He had always had the knack for picking up skills in a short time-farming, hunting, mule-skinning, army life, and now, apparently, sailing. Teldin fully expected to have a good understanding of the principles by the time the ship reached Sancrist. He certainly was getting enough work at it. By this, his second, morning aboard, Teldin was no longer looking about stupidly when Cwelanas ordered the crew onto the ratlines, the ladderlike ropes that ran from the top of the mast to the gun-wales- another new term he had learned. Indeed, Teldin was getting adept at watching the rest of the crew for clues as to just what Cwelanas's orders meant, since her words were so full of nautical lingo. With a tired sigh, Teldin leaned against the railing and gazed out over the water. To either side-port and starboard, he had learned from Gomja-were still-dark shapes of craggy peaks. Galwylin, one of the more out-going members of the elven crew, said they were the Gates of Paladine that marked the mouth of the Bay of Branchala. Beyond the cliffs was open sea. Sometime today the Silver Spray would pass beyond those mountainous walls and leave the shelter of land behind.

At Teldin's back, the morning sun was slowly changing from the first orange-red of dawn to the rich yellow fire of the day. Although he had been awake for several hours, this was the first moment he had gained from Cwelanas for anything more than just working, only because there was finally nothing that needed doing.

"She's determined to get every ounce of sweat out me, Teldin reflected, talking to the fish that shot by the bow in silver streaks. "Teach me to stow away. Wouldn't recommend it." The fish ignored his advice and plunged beneath an oncoming wave crest, their shining fins disappearing into the murky blue ocean.

Leaning out over the carved wave figurehead, Teldin let his thoughts wander to Cwelanas, comparing her to the young women he'd known back home. She was alluring despite-or perhaps because of-her fierce and proud demeanor. The elf maiden's graceful form, exotic ferocity, even her fiery personality, Teldin allowed, this time not talking aloud to himself, attracted him-more than any of the local girls he had met. Watching the waves, he remembered Grandfather describing elves that the old man had seen. "How they look, it's a way they cast a charm on your eye," the patriarch had said. 'Fair is not enough to describe them. They'll make your heart pain.'" Teldin had wondered at the time just what his grandfather meant; now he felt he knew.

Teldin's thoughts were interrupted by Gomja's heavyfalling tread behind him. The foredeck's creaking boards could herald only the giff's approach, for there was no one else on board larger than Teldin. At a little over six feet tall, Teldin towered over the smaller, lighter elves. "Bare Tree" was the nickname they gave him, descriptive of his long, lean frame. Gomja they nicknamed "Boardbreaker."

"You look troubled, sir," Gomja commented as he joined the human. There was barely space for the two of them on the bow, so Teldin slid to the side, giving the giff some space along the jutting bowsprit. Teldin was amused by the giffs interpretation of his mood. "Cwelanas's doing, Gomja, that's all. Wonder what else she'll have us do today." Teldin turned away from the breaking waves; his stomach was starting to roil and he was only now getting accustomed to the rolling of the ship.

"Sir I took the liberty of approaching the mate," Gomja admitted somewhat guiltily, "and requested some time for you and I to drill-an hour or two a day." Teldin shot the giff a curious look. Gomja continued hurriedly, "In Palanthas you said you wanted instruction in fighting. Now is a good time." Teldin looked at the giff with a tinge of mild suspicion. "Did I really say

that?"

"Most assuredly, sir. I explained to the mate that it was to keep my skills up. We should practice. There may be neogi at Mount Nevermind." Teldin blanched slightly at the mention of the creatures, but Gomja did not seem to notice the look. Instead the giff drew a sword, one of several that now hung at the muscular creature's side or were thrust into his sash, and offered it to Teldin. Somehow, Gomja had been collecting weapons, until now he looked like a veritable sword dealer.

Teldin took the blade offered. It was surprisingly light and carefully balanced, far better than the heavy sword he had been using. Teldin made a few grandiose swipes through the air, trying to test the feel of the sword even though he had no idea what made one sword superior to another. Even though it was light to his grip, the blade swung heavier than he had expected. The farmer hauled back for another wild backswing, then stumbled off balance and teetered toward the rail. Spray from the bow splashed against his cheek as he caught a glimpse of the water slipping by below.

His perilous career was abruptly halted as the giff lunged out and seized Teldin's shirt. Gomja hauled the human to safety with ease.

"Excuse me, sir," Gomja said politely once Teldin had regained his composure, "but I think it might be better if we started with a different weapon. Swords take more training than we have time for, I think." The giff studied Teldin's frame, briefly assessing the man's potential. "You are familiar with staves, sir?" he finally asked.

"From the farm, yes."

"Well, I think a spear would be best then," Gomja suggested. "That way we can work from what you already know. And a spear is a good weapon. Wait here, sir." The giff headed aft and returned a short time later with a stout, metal-headed shaft. Teldin took it with both hands, this time more carefully checking the weapon's balance.

So began the first lesson. Teldin felt like a child as Gomja taught the most basic maneuvers. For an hour Teldin lunged at shadows, thrust at air, and blocked to the calls of seagulls. Gomja took his role as instructor seriously, demonstrating, correcting, scolding, and praising. By the end of the lesson, Teldin was in a fine lather of sweat. "Cwelanas put you up to this, didn't she?" Teldin panted as he collapsed on the deck.

"She did say she wanted the lessons to be useful, sir." It was as close to an admission as Teldin was going to get. Looking out over the waves, the human did not notice the giffs conspiratorial grin.

The day wore on in uneventful doldrums, as did the following day and the day after that. Each day Cwelanas gave the landlubber a list of tasks, most fairly simple but backbreaking, to be completed before the evening meal, then she joined Luciar on the afterdeck. As Teldin worked, coiling rope, sewing sails, or whatever, he found he kept watching the elf maiden, watching her watch the crew at its tasks. The way she commanded the others and saw to the ship's business, Teldin could almost forget her long, pale hair and slender figure-almost, but not quite. Then, embarrassed by what he was doing, he quickly looked away. Late one day, he caught her watching him. Their eyes met for an instant, then Cwelanas broke the spell, her eyes flashing with rage, though her face flushed a delicate shade of red.

The voyage fell into a pattern that wore on Teldin. In the morning was Gomja's fencing lesson, then work for the rest of the day. His progress in nautical matters and close combat was rapid, though the human was still far from being either a captain or a duelist. On some days Cwelanas worked him hard; on others she barely assigned him any tasks. Teldin quickly discovered there was no predicting the elf mate's moods, which, in a peculiar way, reminded Teldin of his father, before the youth had run off to fight in the war. Cwelanas was as difficult and hard to deal with as Amdar had seemed back then. The only difference was that, instead of lashing back in fiery but futile battles, Teldin quietly kept his peace.

With each evening came the bland and monotonous meal the galley cook prepared,

usually boiled beans and herbs. Once or twice there was fish, but on the sea's deep water the catch was small, and most of it went to the captain's table. Teldin decided the Silvamori might be brilliant artisans, but their cooking left much to be desired. The farmer longed for the spicy pork sausages of home or even the fiery fish stews of Kalamán. Dinner was followed by sleep. Teldin's ignorance of ships at least spared him the night watch, since Cwelanas did not trust the human when she was not on deck.

Conversely, Gomja's spirits rose as the voyage continued, for the giff was far more comfortable on board. It was at least a ship, similar in that respect to the wrecked Penumbra. The elves, struck by his alienness and the sorrowful tale of Gomja's creation at the hands of the Dark Queen, gave the "big heathen" greater latitude. His plight appealed to their romantic sense of melancholy, though Gomja's great size also accounted for part of their awe. The slender ratlines of the shrouds, the rope ladders to the mastheads, were far too fragile for his weight, which kept him from working the yardarms. At most, Gomja could haul on lines to trim the sails, but the elves quickly discovered the giff could handily do the work of several of them, freeing their hands for other tasks. When needed, Gomja laid into the ropes, lustily bellowing what Teldin could only assume were chanteys of the spelljammers, the sailors who, according to Gomja, plied the seas of space. At the end of the day, the giff cheerfully devoured the same meals that made Teldin dream of crisply seared roasts and thick stews.

After three days, the ship left sight of land and beat a westerly path, struggling against the ocean currents. The breeze was often against the small caravel, forcing the captam to tack back and forth rather than sail a direct route. Teldin and Gomja kept at their dueling, the human driven to improve by his memories of the neogi and his feelings of helplessness during the battle with Vandoorm. Gomja was pleased with the speed of Teldin's training. On the fourth day, Teldin could not help noticing a current of tension among the rest of the crew, particularly in the eyes of Luciar and Cwelanas. The human could see no obvious reason why anyone should be worried; things on board were otherwise no different than the day before, and he doubted there was any danger of depleting their provisions. Finally, while he was high above the deck, hanging in the yards and struggling with the brails, the small lines that lashed up the forecourse sail, Teldin looked back over his shoulder to see Cwelanas and Luciar in conference on the afterdeck.

Teldin clutched at the yard to keep from falling, then turned to Galwylin, who was beside him, providing the day's lesson in the proper way to furl a sail. Galwylin was one of the few elves who seemed to have any patience with the yeoman's clumsy landlubber ways. "Wise Galwylin," Teldin asked while struggling to keep his balance over the yard, "what do you suppose they're discussing?"

The weatherworn elf cast a casual glance aft. "Something has the captain worried, Bare Tree," he laconically replied.

"But what?"

"He does not tell the rest of us. If it is important, he will tell us. If he does not, then it is not important. Trust him." The elf gave a fatalistic shrug and returned to work.

Teldin shook his head. "I can't. I nearly got killed once already, trusting someone I thought was a friend. I can't afford the risk anymore." He looked back to where Cwelanas and Luciar stood.

A tug at his arm reminded the human why he was hanging in space over the deck. "Then more is the pity for you, Bare Tree," Galwylin said sadly. While Teldin struggled to keep his feet on the ropes, the elf continued the lesson.

When the work was finished, Teldin gratefully clambered down the shrouds.

"Now's the time," he decided, intent not to let his trust be betrayed once more. With a resolute stride, he made his way aft to learn from Luciar just what was going on, only to have Cwelanas block his path at the afterdeck stair.

"Where are you going, human?" Her face was grim.

"I want to see Luciar," Teldin replied with polite firmness. He carefully kept his distrust suppressed. "I want to know what's going on."

Cwelanas didn't move. "Captain Luciar has retired to his cabin. He does not want to see you and he has nothing to tell you. Go help Galwylin splice line-Bare Tree." From her tips, his nickname sounded like an insult. The farmer did not let her gibe get to him. "Captain Luciar can't speak for himself? Let's ask him and see what he says," Teldin insisted. His gaze locked with Cwelanas's. He suddenly felt the heart pain again, which Grandfather had described, from something deep in her eyes. Given her attitude toward him, the pain he felt only made Teldin more sarcastic.

"He will not see you," she said more fiercely, though she was unable to take her gaze from him.

"Or is it that you don't want me to see him? You're afraid he might like me-a human," Teldin blurted. "That would just ruin your day, wouldn't it?" Even as he spoke, the farmer knew the words were a big mistake.

For a moment, Teldin thought Cwelanas was going to relent. Her hard gaze softened and her pale cheeks flushed with pink. Then, just as suddenly, her old temper returned. "Get back to work, human!" she spat, her finger pointing toward the rest of the crew. "Do as Galwylin tells you."

Teldin could feel his temper rising. Rather than push it over the limit, the yeoman bit his lip and strode back toward the bow. After a few long strides, he vented his rage in a low, fierce mumble. "Damned proud-

"Human!" Cwelanas angrily called out. "Did you think I would not hear you?" She came down the stairs and walked up behind Teldin. The whole plan was turning into a disaster, but if Cwelanas was going to be so stiff-necked about it, Teldin was damned well not going to apologize to her. He clamped his mouth shut to keep himself from doing anything else stupid, then slowly ruined to face her.

Cwelanas continued her tirade. "Ever since you appeared at our ship, you have been nothing but trouble. When you could not buy your way on, you stole on board. Now, because of some moldering old laws, we're forced to take you to Sancrist!" Cwelanas was shouting, her voice choked with rage. "You eat our food, you demand to see the captain, and now-now you suggest that I-I-Ohh! I will not be so insulted!" Her hand went to the sword at her side, and before Teldin could say a word in defense, the blade of her silvery cutlass flashed in the sunlight. She lunged blindly forward, but Teldin instinctively threw himself to the side.

"Now wait a-" Teldin tried to say, suddenly very aware that their argument had gotten out of control, but already Cwelanas had recovered and held her sword raised, intent on hewing him. Instead of backpedaling, Teldin remembered one of Gomja's lessons-"Do the unexpected."- and so dove forward beneath her arcing blade, trying to knock the elf off her feet. With her quick speed, it was futile; Cwelanas lightly sprang to the side at the last instant, Teldin's fingers barely brushing her thigh. The cutlass swished through the air behind him, carving out a slice of air.

Teldin sprawled on the deck, then rolled as quickly as he could. Cwelanas wheeled to face him. Her face was flushed red, eyes wide and wild. "To the Abyss with the laws of hospitality," she muttered.

Teldin's hand found his spear resting near the rail. Frantically the farmer got one hand on the shaft and swung the weapon up just in time to block her lunge. The elf's cutlass skittered off the haft, shaving the wood as it did so and almost knocking the spear from Teldin's grip. With a solid thunk, Cwelanas's blade wedged into the ship's railing. She tugged at the sword, but it was stuck fast. Teldin, still on his back, kicked hard with his legs and caught the elf full in the side. She crashed to the deck with a startled grunt, hardly expecting the human to transform their fight into a brawl. The fall wrenched the cutlass free.

Once on his feet, Teldin cautiously backed away from the bloodthirsty elf, keeping his spear up and ready, as Gomja had taught. A cloth flapped at Teldin's back, and he realized his bizarre cloak had grown of its own accord,

transforming itself from the small collar he normally wore.

At the start of the fight, the crew members had politely ignored the pair, until steel had flashed. Now they were gathering at a safe distance, uncertain of just what to do. Someone had already gone for the captain, while Galwylin hurried to fetch Gornja.

Amidships, the two fighters warily circled each other; the human backed away as the elf kept trying to close. Fire still smoldered in Cwelanas's eyes. Her sword flicked out in feints and jabs, and metal tang on wood as Teldin blocked her attacks with his spear. He did not want this light, and he tried to avoid using any threatening moves. The elf may have started the battle, but he didn't want to end it in blood-his or hers.

"Stop this foolishness!" Teldin demanded. Cwelanas answered with a low feint to the legs, followed by a lunge for his chest. Teldin saw the feint just in time and barely managing to beat away her attack. While she was badly out of position, Teldin made no attempt at a riposte. His arms ached from warding off the ringing fury of her blows. "Stop it, Cwelanas! Let it go." He turned and shouted to the crew gathered around them, "Stop her!" None of the seamen made any attempt to interfere. A strange sense of honor kept them from the battle, apparently.

Likewise, Cwelanas did not seem to hear him. She made a few quick attacks, testing his parries, probing for weak spots. In desperation, Teldin faked some lunges, trying to keep her off balance and away from him. The cloak, which flapped in the breeze, hindered his moves somewhat. Teldin realized he was working against himself, feeding her rage. Her countenance was cold and businesslike, seemingly immune to the human's reasoning.

"Do the unexpected." Teldin remembered the axiom again. At the same time, he could remember his Grandfather saying, "Pick your fights wisely, son." The memory was startlingly clear-Grandfather wiping the tears from Teldin's dirty face after a childhood brawl. He even remembered the cold draft that blew through the rip in the oilcloth of the kitchen window. This was not a fight he wanted, nor a battle he wanted to win, but Cwelanas was offering no choices. One of them had to lose. In his mind, Teldin knew what to do. He just hoped it wouldn't get him killed.

"Why fight?" Teldin asked aloud. Suddenly standing straight, he cast his spear down with an angry thrust, dropping his guard. There was a thunk of wood as the spear hit the deck. Teldin stood before Cwelanas, his arms spread, ready to receive her blow. "I won't fight you, Cwelanas. If you still want to kill me, I suppose you can," he said, trying to sound as brave he could. Cwelanas, with her hair falling over one eye, took a step forward, her cutlass pointed at his chest. She took another step. Teldin forced himself to stand his ground. Part of him prayed that his gamble would work; the other part waited for the blow to land. The only sounds were the waves booming against the hull and the sails snapping in the wind. Teldin's cloak swirled behind him in the gusts.

Before Teldin knew what her choice would be, Gomja roared through the small crowd of sailors. The big giff easily bowled aside the delicate elves. Distracted, Cwelanas started to turn toward the onrushing giff, but before she could complete her move, Gomja lashed out with his broadsword. Suddenly the elf maiden was on the defensive, driven back by the raging mass of muscle that bore down on her. Gomja moved with a speed surprising for his bulk, hewing at the elf's parries. There was a ringing clang of metal and Cwelanas's sword was knocked from her grasp. The blade slid toward the rail, where it was grabbed by an onlooker. Gomja restrained himself and stepped between the mate and Teldin, his sword pointed at Cwelanas. His huge chest heaved rapidly.

"No more fighting!" he bellowed in his bass tones. "On my life, you will not kill my commander!"

"Indeed," echoed Luciar's voice from the aft companionway. The old elf stood at the head of the stair that led to his cabin. He spoke softly, but his voice trembled with rage. "Cwelanas, attend me. You, with the sword, Boardbreaker, take your friend and keep him out of trouble. Put your sword away now. As for

you crewmen, go to your posts and reflect on what should have been done. There will be no brawling aboard my ship!" The captain's normally frail body seemed as hard as steel as he glowered at the assembled crowd. Gomja quickly snapped a salute and grabbed Teldin by the arm. Cwelanas, the fury exorcised from her by Luciar's words, stood in shock at what she had done. Her shoulders sagged and her chest heaved from the exertion. At a sharp motion from the captain, she numbly began to move, but before Cwelanas reached the companionway, her pride had returned. Her chin was high once again as she looked back at Teldin, but her large eyes were narrowed and hard.

Gomja led Teldin by the elbow to the bow, moving easily through the gathered crewmen, who apprehensively parted before the pair. Elven eyes harbored looks Teldin couldn't fathom-anger, distrust, fear, sympathy, perhaps even respect in a few faces. Slowly the seamen returned to their tasks.

Teldin, shaking from what he had done, collapsed by the base of the bowsprit. Gomja stood stiffly over him, waiting for a chance to speak. Finally Teldin looked up. "Yes?" he asked defensively.

"It is only some observations on your fight, sir," Gomja explained uncomfortably, "to help you improve." The farmer snorted at the suggestion, surprised that anyone would even think of such a thing at this time. Gomja, however, interpreted the sound as permission to continue. "You blocked quite well, sir, but you were not aggressive enough. There were several times when you could have lunged or made an effective riposte, and you let these opportunities go. And, sir, if I may say, you should never drop your weapon. Teldin's jaw dropped, and he looked at Gomja in disbelief. Was the giff just dense? he wondered. "Gomja, that was the idea! I didn't want to kill her." "That may be true, sir, but she wanted to kill you," the giff callously pointed out. He sat on the angled spar, unconsciously dropping into his instructor's tone. "Sir, I'm sure you meant well, but in a fight, if you take up your spear, you must be ready to use it. Suppose I attacked you. What would you do? You couldn't run away on this ship and you couldn't parry me forever. If someone tries to kill you, you must fight. It's the only choice-kill or be killed."

"No, it's not, Gomja! What if I had wounded or killed her? What would happen then? I don't think Luciar would be too understanding about his daughter's death. The crew would probably hang me-and you-or throw us both overboard." The farmer left unsaid his feelings for the elf maid. Part of him had wanted to strike back, if only because of her pigheadedness, but ultimately he could not and did not. "Gomja, things just aren't that simple!" Teldin shook his head in disgust. "You can't go in and solve everything by fighting. Sometimes you have to try to get along and work things out." Teldin slid about to stare down at the bow cutting through the waves.

Gomja's huge mouth puckered as he thought about Teldin's words. "If you say so, sir." He sounded unconvinced. "Perhaps it is that way for humans." Teldin sighed from the frustration of trying to get the giff to understand anything other than fighting.

Gomja noticed that the crew kept casting glances in their direction, so he pulled a whetstone from his pocket and drew it in long, careful strokes across his broadsword. The steely scrape formed a rhythmic counterpart to the Silver Spray's surging through the waves. The hot sun and rhythmic noise slowly eased Teldin's tense muscles, lulling him into a drowsy but irritable lassitude. Teldin began to doze, the adrenaline of the fight almost gone, when Gomja stopped his sword-sharpening in mid-stroke. "Sir. Wake up, sir." The giff gripped Teldin by the shoulder and gave him a solid shake. "Company, sir." The haze of sleep lifted, and Teldin scrambled to his feet. Near the ladder to the forecabin stood Luciar, looking more solemn and grave than he normally did. The old captain was dressed in elegant finery, a pearl-white robe trimmed in gold and red. His thin hair was tied back, leaving his head a bald dome. Behind him stood Cwelanas, her eyes downcast, her hair falling gently to frame her face. Most amazing to Teldin was that she wore none of her mannish, martial garb. Instead, she stood on the swaying deck in a deep-blue gown of

shimmering silk. It fit tightly, revealing a figure as feminine as Teldin had ever imagined. The long, flowing sleeves almost hid her hands, which were demurely folded at her waist. Behind the elf pair were the barely visible heads of the crew, gawking almost as much as the yeoman imagined he was. Sweaty, salt-stained, sunbaked, and unshaven, Teldin suddenly realized he must look atrocious in comparison.

"Teldin Moore of Kalaman, please accept my greetings," Luciar solemnly began. "I have brought my daughter. She asks permission to come forward and speak with you." The old elf waited for Teldin to reply.

Teldin caught Gomja's wary expression from the corner of his eye, but in that instant Teldin could not suspect the old captain or even Cwelanas. It just was not in his heart. Refusing the giff's mistrust, the farmer nodded slightly. "Very well, I will hear her words," he accepted, trying to make himself sound polite.

Luciar stepped aside to let his daughter pass. As she glided across the deck, the blue silk rustled slightly, then dropped to whisper as she stopped before Teldin and held out her hands. The farmer, uncertain of why, realized he was meant to hold them and held out his own dirty and calloused hands. At first the elf maiden's fingers darted back at his touch, then Cwelanas seized his fingers and squeezed tightly. Teldin made every effort not to wince.

"Teldin Moore of Kalaman," Cwelanas said in unemotional, even tones, "I have done you a grave injury. The shame for what has happened falls upon me, and I apologize for all that has occurred. By the honor of House Olonaes, house of my father and his father before him, accept this gift from my hand." Cwelanas released her grip from Teldin's aching fingers. From her bodice she unfastened a small, silver pin in the shape of a flower and fastened it onto his shirt. The gift given, the elf maid stepped to stand beside Teldin. A forced smile graced her lips. Teldin stood shocked by the elf's whirlwind change of heart—even if her father had put her up to it. He managed a weak, baffled smile.

Satisfied that ritual had been followed, Luciar turned to address the crew, which by now had assembled of its own accord. "Know that these two who fought are now reconciled," the captain formally announced. "No more will the shadow of hate hang between them." The ritual words spoken, the captain addressed the crew more personally. "This rite I have ordered because we may need all our strength in the days ahead. Word has reached me that minotaurs sail these waters." The captain paused to let the import of his words sink in, and a gradual murmur of concern passed through the sailors.

While her father's back was turned, Cwelanas fiercely whispered to Teldin, "I will not strike you again, but do not think this is over, human." She gave a perfunctory curtsy and hurried for her cabin. Luciar bowed to Teldin, dismissed the crew, and followed in his daughter's wake, stopping to answer questions from his crew along the way.

"What was that all about?" a mystified Teldin wondered aloud as he walked to the edge of the half-deck, his mouth still hanging open. He looked to Gomja, but the giff only shrugged helplessly. Galwylin, standing on the main deck below, overheard the farmer and looked up.

"The rual 'Jithas, the rite of harmony. Our mate has made her peace for striking at you. The token you wear is the sign of apology. You should be honored, Bare Tree."

"Fine," Teldin answered, fingering the pin. He was far from convinced there was harmony between them, though. "What's this about minotaurs?"

"Pirates, Bare Tree, pirates," Galwylin answered darkly. "Worst of the kind, too. Tougher than humans, almost as good as elves on the sea. It is odd, though, for them to sail so far from their usual haunts. Raiding must be poor along the Blood Sea coasts. I tell you, it will be a bad day if we meet them. Pray to your gods that we do not."

"If they find us, I will make it a bad day for them," stated Gomja, patting his weapons. "We have pirates among the stars, and the giff have no love of them. But I do not understand one thing. What are minotaurs?"

Galwylin, unaware of the giffs origin, looked uncomprehendingly at Gomja, then shook his head and went back to work.

Chapter Fifteen

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Although the tension between Teldin and Cwelanas was officially eased by the rite of harmony, Gomja found it hard to tell by judging from the mood on the ship. It seemed everyone save the giff was in a dark humor. The lookouts constantly were on guard, waiting for a menacing sail to appear on the horizon, while the rest of the crew stopped work at times to look beyond the gunwales. The giff, with the captain's reluctant approval, began organizing the crew for a possible sea battle. While not inexperienced fighters, the crew was made up of elves who were sailors first and warriors second. Still Gomja diligently tested and instructed, refreshing the elves' seldom-used skills until he was able to divide the crew into two simple platoons, one of archers and another of swordsmen. The work took the better part of each day, drawing on whatever elves were not involved in tasks at the time. Teldin stayed out of the way, watching the giff hesitantly attempt to command.

Afew mornings later the apprehension of the crew were rewarded by a cry from the mainmast. "Sail to the port, captain!" At those words, the elves assigned to the rigging scrambled among the yards, straining for a view of the ship the lookout had sighted.

On deck, Luciar and Cwelanas likewise peered to the port, their gazes sweeping over the expanse of gently swelling waves. Teldin looked over the ocean and failed to see a thing. Apparently the captain and the mate had, though, for the two were in quiet conference. Luciar shook his head and pointed in the direction of the wind. Cwelanas looked back to port, cupped her thin hands, and hailed the lookout. "What's her rig?"

After a pause, the lookout shouted back. "Three masts, two square and a lateen aft. Showing a lot of sail-red sails, Captain Luciar!" Again Luciar and Cwelanas conferred, their faces so grim that Teldin wondered what it all meant. It was Galwylin who, seeing the human's puzzled expression, gave him the answer.

"We are in for it, Bare Tree. Red sails mean our visitor is out of the Blood Sea. It must not pay to raid draconian ships these days."

"Blood Sea? That's beyond Estwilde, clear on the other side of Ansalon!" the stowaway exclaimed.

"I know," Galwynlin commented, "but when the draconians get irritated, the minotaurs sail west to raid."

From the afterdeck rail, Cwelanas ordered, "Full sail and quickly!" There was no mistaking the urgency in her voice. She spotted the giff and singled him out for special duty. "Boardbreaker, to the arms locker and bring up the weapons." Gomja crisply nodded and set about his task. Teldin, meanwhile, scrambled up the ratlines.

For the next hour, the Silver Spray tacked and veered, struggling to catch every ounce of breeze available. The crew, Teldin included, worked constantly to adjust the running rig and trim sails to match new headings and variations in the wind. Each change of the wind, each slip of a rope, triggered another string of orders and corrections from Cwelanas. Their pursuer was close enough now to be seen by all; a three-master, it was flying before the wind with red sails billowing full.

The pirate vessel dogged the Silver Spray, shifting over and across the sea for every knot of speed. The elves watched to the stern with worried looks, fingering the swords they now carried at their belts. It was clear, even to a lubber such as Teldin, that the Silver Spray was outmatched. The pirates steadily gained.

"Bring her about!" Luciar shouted from the afterdeck. Teldin didn't understand-such a move would send them directly back toward their pursuers. He collared Galwylin and asked the experienced sailor why.

"The captain figures that since we cannot outrun the foe, we are best to fight with the advantage of the wind. They will have to sail close-hauled, which makes them slow to turn. If the Silver Spray can break past, we might just lose them." Galwylin's voice was barely hopeful as he explained Luciar's intentions. Before Teldin could ask further, Cwelanas called out more orders in her clear voice. Some of the elves scrambled into the shrouds, slender bows in hand. Each carried quivers filled with white-plumed arrows.

Gomja went to the aft stairs and, with a deferential salute, spoke a few words to the elf maiden above him. She gave him a quick nod of approval and turned to give the crew new orders. Soon, all the hands, including Teldin and Gomja, were hauling tables and benches from the mess hall belowdecks. The giff single-handedly carried the heaviest of the ship's few tables and, under his close supervision, these were now turned on the side and lined along the starboard rail. Cwelanas looked over the crew's handiwork approvingly as the last barriers were lashed in place. "What now?" Teldin anxiously asked Gomja as they levered an oaken bench onto the wall.

"I don't know, sir. Boarding nets would be good," Gomja explained, giving the mismatched furniture a condescending nod. "A proper spelljammer would have nets roofing the deck to discourage boarding. At least with these we've got a wall to fight behind."

Running fast with the wind, the Silver Spray was almost upon its foe. The Blood Sea galleon had closed the gap, trying to work close enough to touch the elven ship's hull. The feared red sails were almost parallel to the pirate ship's keel, trying to catch the wind that blew against them. Captain Luciar had obviously chosen his tactics well, for the bulk of the minotaur crew was occupied with trimming the sails. Still, there were many others lining the sides, great bows and spears in hand.

Feeling the need for what little security the cloak might provide-it was, after all, magical-Teldin took a few moments and willed his cloak to its full length. Galwylin's eyes widened in surprise, but the elven sailor made no comment. Instead the sea dog followed his fellows' lead and hunched behind the improvised shield wall. Those aloft took shelter behind the masts. Only the captain, Cwelanas, Teldin, and Gomja-the giff positioned foremost in the bow-stood ready to receive the foe.

The first shots of the sea battle were fired well before the ships were within the range of even the strongest elven bowmen. There was a faint twang from the pirate ship, then a smoldering bolt arced across the sky. Before it had a chance to hit anything, another fiery missile took to the air. These two shots ended in hisses of steam as the flaming bolts fell into the ocean, one splashing short and the other soaring well over the Silver Spray's sails into the water beyond. "Ballistas, sir!" Gomja bellowed from the bow. "They're ranging us, Captain!"

Two more bolts quickly followed, this time both striking home. One passed so close to Teldin's head that he could smell the oily, black smoke of burning rags. The bolt hit the deck but did not bite. It instead skittered across the planking until it lodged at the base of the aft cabins, where it splintered the thin wall. Along its path was a trail of fitfully burning oil. The broken wood where it had held blazed furiously, the pine-tar caulking catching fire. The second shot went high, tearing somewhere into the rigging overhead, but Teldin had no time to follow its course. He grabbed the bucket that was thrust into his hands and hurried to douse the blaze on deck. As the crew smothered the last of it, Teldin could hear shouting from above. "I don't understand, Galwylin," Teldin yelled to the elf. "If they're pirates, why are they trying to burn the ship?" he asked while hastening back to the wall's shelter.

"Not the ship, Bare Tree, the sails. Look aloft." The elf nodded upward to the masts. There Teldin discovered the cause of the shouting. The second bolt had struck the mainsail squarely, leaving a gaping tent in the canvas. The missile had torn through to land in the ocean, but not before gobbets of pitch had rained over the elven sail. Already the blaze had spread from the edges of the teat, the flames racing along the sun-bleached fabric.

"Cut the sail!" commanded Cwelanas. "Do it now!"
"Ahoj below!" sang a voice from the shrouds, followed by a rapid series of whiplike cracks. The mainsail sagged in the middle, then drooped at one end, and finally crashed through the rigging to tumble, aflame and aflutter, to the deck below. Teldin leaped out of the way, the flaming cloth driving him toward the stern. A bellowing cheer echoed from pirate ship's deck.

"Night watch, hoist it overboard and hurry! Day watch, to your positions!" dictated Luciar amid a swirl of sparks and ash. His thin, old voice strained to shout above the growing noise. The designated crewmen struggled with the tangled mass of burning sail, beating back the flames and swearing vehemently as the cloth snagged on every projection. Spear in hand, Teldin worked his way back up to the barricade neat the base of the afterdeck ladder. Looking forward, he saw Gomja still in the bow. The giff was coolly loading his pistols, ignoring the havoc astern.

With the mainsail gone, the advantage the Silver Spray had was suddenly trimmed. Teldin could hear the snap of bowstrings from the elves aloft, bowshots the minotaurs paid back in kind. The table barricade in front of Teldin reverberated as the barbed head of a harpoon savagely rammed through. The stowaway jumped back, realizing the crude barricade did not provide immunity. He was just as astonished when the table started to back over the gunwale.

"Cut the rope, human!" Cwelanas shouted from the top of the ladder. The elf maiden was dressed in chain mail, finely woven but oily gray, and she held a brightly painted shield to block any arrows from her unprotected face. With her cutlass she pointed to something on the outside of the hull. "The harpoon!"

Teldin scrambled halfway up the afterdeck ladder and thrust himself over the wall until he could reach over the barricade. A light line ran back from the harpoon that transfixed his table, all the way to the minotaur vessel. Their ship was so close now that Teldin could see the horned monsters hauling on the thin cable that stretched across the open space. The barest glance down the length of the Silver Spray showed other lines, some in the hull, others in the barricade. Suddenly a set of bookcases from Luciar's cabin toppled over the side, banged against the hull, and splashed, broken, into the ocean. As he hung over the edge, the stowaway glimpsed minotaur archers aiming in his direction. Teldin fumbled a dagger from his belt and quickly sliced through the line. He wasted no time and tumbled back behind the wooden wall. The table shook with a series of thuds as enemy arrows struck moments too late.

"Well done," said Cwelanas with a faint smile. They were the first kind words she had said to Teldin. "More voyage than you expected?" She stepped away as an arrow struck the deck at her feet.

Teldin nodded. "Do we have any chance? It looks as if we're badly outnumbered," he shouted up at her.

The smile vanished and was replaced by a grim look for the minotaurs. "That is true, Teldin Moore, but we still have a few tricks for them-or we all may die. They are almost upon us now. Fight well, human. I will be watching you." At that Cwelanas hurried toward the stern.

A flurry of spears announced the next phase of the minotaur attack, but the elves were unscathed behind their wall. The spears were immediately followed by the loud clangs of metal hitting wood. Grapples bounced over the barricades or hooked into the railings. A few elves leaped forward to cut the thick cables. One fell, gurgling, to the deck as a spear jutted out the back of his throat.

The minotaurs were then upon them. With a rending crash, large sections of the barricade gave way, clattering into the ocean. Teldin's table teetered and fell, leaving him uncovered. The breach was immediately followed by a small series of charges along the line of the deck as the fiercest of the bullheaded men leaped across the narrow gap between the two ships. Their faces were bestial-fanged mouths flecked with foam, thick manes fluttering in greasy strands, and dirty yellow eyes filled with hate. Jabbing with his spear at the

man-beast's rage-twisted face, Teldin struck the creature closest to him as it sprang across open space. The minotaur roared with insensate pain and plunged into the ocean as it clutched at a mined eye. The creature's fall bought the stowaway a little breathing time.

Elsewhere along the rail, the first wave was going against the elves. The minotaurs were breaking through the gaps, fighting their way onto the Silver Spray's deck. Clangs of metal, howls, and screams filled the air. Overhead, the elyen archers were having greater success. Practically clinging to the rigging by their toes, they poured arrows down upon the pirate ship's deck. A desultory sprinkle of arrows came in reply, since most of the minotaur bowmen were already slain or injured.

At the bow, Teldin saw a sudden cloud of white smoke, followed almost instantly by a sharp crack. A minotaur at the rail flopped backward, clutching at its face. The smoke and sound repeated and another beast sank to its knees and disappeared in the surging mass of battle. As the wind blew the smoke away, Gomja strode into view, hewing and lunging his way toward the stern with his broadsword. Teldin could hear the giff bellowing, already trying to whip the elves into a counter-boarding party to carry the battle to the pirate decks. Those minotaurs who saw the giff recoiled at the appearance of a creature as formidable and bizarre as themselves.

Just as abruptly, Teldin's attention was forced back to his own surroundings. A pair of minotaurs hurtled over the rail, a single axe stroke from one brutally sweeping the elf closest to Teldin aside. More elves sprang to replace their fallen comrade, who writhed on the ground at their feet, but one of the horned creatures, foam on its lips and nostrils, bore down on Teldin. The horned creature towered over him, hefted an axe, and brought it down in a wicked slash. Teldin was trapped against the aft cabins but managed to scramble up the afterdeck stair just as the axe blade hacked through the bottom rung. The farmer thrust his spear's tip deep into the minotaur's shoulder. The creature snorted in fury and swung the axe again, gradually driving Teldin up onto the afterdeck. Teldin was vaguely aware of Cwelanas engaged in her own battle behind him.

Somehow, over the noise of the battle, Teldin heard a voice reciting a tortuous incantation not far behind him. As he dodged his opponent's blow, the human saw Luciar, dressed in red ceremonial robes, engaged in a brief ritual. He was preparing to cast a spell, the farmer guessed. "Keep them away from Father," Cwelanas shouted, her voice strained as she parried a savage blow from the beast in front of her. Teldin grunted in understanding, the best he could manage at that moment.

Teldin dodged a hack from his bullheaded opponent, then lunged forward to drive the beast away from Luciar. With an easy swing of its axe, the minotaur swatted Teldin's thrust aside and struck back with lightning quickness. The beast-man's blade sliced through shirt and cut a bloody gash across Teldin's chest. He hardly noticed the pain and lunged again, just as Gomja had taught him, aiming for the minotaur's exposed shoulder. The thrust was rewarded with another howl of pain.

"How much longer?" Teldin shouted to Cwelanas as he pulled the blood-stained spear back. He was strong and fit, but already his lungs were sore from the exertion.

As if to answer, Luciar's voice rose in pitch and volume. Complex syllables floated over the din, then, all at once, they were replaced by a sizzling roar. The noises of battle- the grunts, bellows, clangs, even the wails of the wounded and dying-were muted. A blast of heat seared the farmer's beard-stubbed face and burned his hair. At the same time, the farmer was dazzled by the flames. Fortunately, the minotaur facing him was in a similar muddle.

Teldin shielded his eyes and was amazed to see a curtain of fire ripple down the gunwale of the minotaur ship. The flames leaped and dodged in strange colors of blue, green, and gold, yet held their rippling shape as a wall separating the two vessels. Already the grappling ropes and gangways smoldered

with fire. At the near end, the curtain abruptly bulged then parted as a minotaur, cloaked in flame, crashed through the blazing wall and howled in piteous agony as it plummeted into the sea below. The salty waves quenched its pain with a steaming hiss. Overhead, covetous fingers of fire reached upward for the pirate's red sails.

The spell's effect was profound. The shouts and screams began anew, though with a much different tenor than before. A ragged cheer went up from the elves as they quickly recovered from their astonishment. The tide had turned against the minotaurs. With reinforcements cut off, those bull-men that remained on deck were quickly being surrounded and overwhelmed. The elves showed no quarter, and the minotaurs, realizing this, made desperate attempts to escape by plunging over the side or furiously wading into the midst of their attackers. Gomja, bellowing an alien war song, cheerfully walked into the battle, his attempts at organizing a boarding party pointless now. His own opponent still distracted by the spell, Teldin seized the opportunity and drove his spear past the beast's lowered guard, slipping the point in deeply just under the jaw. The minotaur gave one last strangled cry and crashed off the afterdeck. It hit the deck below with a bone-breaking crack and hung limply, half over the side. Not wasting time gloating over one victory, Teldin turned to help Cwelanas, only to see her strike a deathblow to her opponent. The giant creature toppled sideways and broke through the flimsy railing along the edge. At the last instant, the near nerveless fingers reached out and seized the elf maiden by the hair, and as Cwelanas screamed in shock and terror, the dying minotaur pulled her over the side. Their splash barely echoed over the noise.

Teldin instinctively ran to the edge. Ripples were already spreading on the ocean's surface where the pair had plunged. There was no sign of Cwelanas or her captor. Teldin dropped his spear, gulped a huge breath, and dove. The arc carried the farmer just clear of the hull and he sliced into the warm water. The salt stung his eyes, but Teldin kept them open, searching for the submerged elf until he saw shapes sinking into the gloom below. Driving with his legs and arms, the human swam after them.

As Teldin went deeper and deeper, the pressure built, squeezing his head and ears. His lungs began to hurt. Vision dimmed, whether from the depth or lack of oxygen, he had no idea. Then his hand brushed a supple skin of metal. Teldin groped frantically and caught a hem of Cwelanas's chain mail, then pulled, trying to reverse his descent. He was horrified to realize that he, too, was being dragged down. He kicked harder, his oxygen-deprived lungs tearing in his chest. The chain mail wriggled and jerked in his grasp. They sank farther. Beneath him Cwelanas kicked one more time, then went limp. Darkness closed around his eyes and his ears throbbed with pressure, but Teldin gave one last try, knowing that if he couldn't free Cwelanas this time, he would have to let go. With his last effort, he found them rising-ever so slowly.

Teldin fought to gain the surface. His eyes burned, and the cut across his chest felt on fire as the saltwater mingled with blood. The searing pain kept him conscious, until finally the water broke over Teldin's face. With a frantic gasp, the human gulped air and half-choked as saltwater splashed into his mouth. He paddled furiously, forcing Cwelanas's head above the waves, and swam for the Silver Spray, barely visible through a pain-induced haze. The ship was the only thing he could focus on.

When he finally did reach the Silver Spray, the elves were already at the side, fishing out their fallen comrades. Teldin thumped against the hull and eager hands seized him and his load. The farmer's body went limp as his spent mind could comprehend nothing further.

Chapter Sixteen

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Teldin realized he was lying chest down and soaking wet on the deck as Gomja

knelt over him, gently massaging the saltwater out of the farmer's lungs. The giff gave a gentle push and Teldin coughed and choked. Somewhere he heard one of the elves say, "That is a good sign." It certainly did not feel like one. Gradually Teldin saw Cwelanas lying on the deck beside him, one of the elves firmly massaging her back. At first, nothing happened. The elf looked at his fellows with concern, then applied himself more furiously to the task. Finally there was a strangled cough, then another. A small, murmured prayer of thankfulness rose from the onlookers.

It was some time later that Teldin was finally able to sit up. He leaned against a mast, watching the elves work on Cwelanas. The risk of death had passed and she was slowly regaining a little strength and color. Finally able to comprehend what was going on around her, she choked out a question to her attendant. The elf listened, then pointed toward Teldin, causing a baffled look to pass over the elf maiden's face. At last she croaked, barely loud enough for Teldin to hear, "I have you to thank for my life. I may have misjudged you." She weakly stretched a hand to him.

Teldin gave a feeble shrug, triggering a coughing fit. "Maybe," was all he could think to say. He leaned forward and took her hand in his. Neither had the strength to squeeze. "Humans sometimes do that, too," he allowed with a sardonic smile. She gave a half-smile back, then they both collapsed into sleep.

Later, Teldin, wrapped in his mysterious cloak against the ocean's salt spray, watched from the deck as the elves checked the last of the brails on the new mainsail. At a shouted command, the folds of canvas dropped, billowing out to catch the wind. The Silver Spray, battered and limping but once again under full sail, neared the headlands of Sancrist Isle two days after the nearly disastrous encounter with the minotaur pirates.

Thanks mainly to Luciar's spell, the elves had won the battle. The sheet of flame raised by the old captain's conjuring had ended the bloody assault. Those minotaurs who had been trapped on board were not offered any quarter, and instead were cut down by archers in the rigging. By the time Teldin and Cwelanas were rescued, the fight had been all but over. The surviving pirates had stayed to their own vessel, too busy battling the blaze aboard their raider to keep the Silver Spray from limping away. Since there had been no pursuit, it became apparent that the beasts had no desire to taste elven magic again.

Still, the victory had not been without cost; seven crew members were dead, eleven wounded. The elves had none of the healers, with their prayers and mystical cures, whom Teldin had seen during the war, but they did all they could with herbs and common sense. Awnings erected on the deck sheltered the dying from the sun, and there they lay, groaning in the midday heat. Already, though, the attack seemed distant to Teldin. The memorial, repairs, and constant fear of more minotaurs were enough to keep his mind occupied. Still, even though the crew was short-handed, Cwelanas no longer sent him into the masts. She claimed that his cut would reopen with such hard work. The tasks she did assign him were light. Teldin figured her sudden solicitousness had nothing to do with his wounds, but he certainly was not about to complain about her treatment now.

Ever since the battle, the elf maid's mood had changed with the suddenness of a wind shifting off the bow—an expression Teldin had learned since coming aboard. Cwelanas even addressed the human by name now, no longer using the pejorative "human" or even the slighting "Bare Tree" every time she spoke. When their glances met, the elf maiden neither glared nor tore her gaze away. Without her smoldering hate, the hard edges of Cwelanas's face softened and Teldin found her even more seductive than before. The farmer doubted that the elf mate had abandoned her general dislike of humans, but at least in his case she seemed to make an exception.

Teldin could only assume her feelings paralleled his own, which were confused and a little disturbing. He did not know exactly how to feel. Before the battle, Teldin was still stung by Vandoorm's treachery and dared to trust the

elves no more than they had trusted him. The possibility that they might betray him had always lurked at hand. Now he was not so sure. They had fought together, and that had provided a bond greater than any he had ever felt with Vandoorm or other humans. Elves, at least those of the Silver Spray, seemed to deserve his trust.

Teldin's feelings toward Cwelanas were particularly unsettled. Her conversion from animosity to warmth was too abrupt for him, too flighty by his standards. He could not decide whether it was because she was female or because she was elven. Whichever it was, her moods left him pleased but confused.

Teldin sat in reflection, watching the rocky, brown mountains of Sancrist Isle slide slowly past, until Cwelanas, awkward and self-conscious, strode up and stood beside him. Her cutlass tapped against the top of the elf maiden's boot, scraping in rhythm with the ocean swells. "The captain says tomorrow you will be set ashore in Thalan Bay. That is as close as we can come to Mount Nevermind. Tonight, dinner will be served in the captain's cabin at evening tide," she said in blunt, graceless tones, though there was no trace of anger in her voice.

Teldin, drowsy in the afternoon sun, languidly turned his head. "I'm invited?" he asked in bemusement at her manners, though in truth he felt a thrill at the summons. Cwelanas's pale cheeks flushed pink so slightly that it seemed no more than the coloring of a wild rose. She was painfully conscious of her brash tone.

"I am sorry, Teldin Moore," the flustered elf apologized. "Life at sea has left me unpracticed in these things." The rough-edged elf maiden composed herself, then began again by taking a pose of excessive modesty, her almond eyes downcast, her hands folded demurely in front of her. In a blouse and sturdy trousers, even with a sword at her hip, she was a child awaiting a reprimand, not a confident ship's officer. Cwelanas took a deep breath and spoke again in almost a whisper. "You and your large friend are requested by the captain-my father-and me to dine with us this evening, in honor of our voyage and the sorrow we will feel at your leave-taking." She looked up with a pleasantly self-mocking gleam in her eye. "Was that better?"

"Quite well spoken," Teldin complimented, somewhat embarrassed himself. "Gomja and I will be pleased to come." The farmer made an equally unpolished bow, the type he once used to woo the girls at the social dances back home. "It is an honor for Gomja and I-I, uh..." His own lack of polish suddenly showed through.

Cwelanas gave him a smile, barely more than a curve to her lips. "I will tell Father that you accept," she interjected, saving him from further mortification. A little of her old fire reasserted itself, the firm and knowing glint in her eyes silencing any more Teldin had to say. With that, the elf maiden turned and left, almost but not quite rushing away.

Teldin slowly straightened back up as he watched her go. "Well, not quite at ease, I'd say," the farmer remarked to no one as he scratched at his beard.

With a shake of his head, he ambled toward the bow and found the giff collapsed blissfully on the deck. "Rise, Gomja," Teldin hailed, prodding the drowsy lump with his toe, "we've got to wash and get into our best!"

After moving the giff and overriding his protests, Teldin spent the afternoon diligently grooming himself while the helmsman and officer on deck, a tall elf with muscles to match, watched in amusement from the afterdeck. With a knife, soap, and bucket of water for a mirror, the human painfully scraped his ragged beard away, determined to make a good impression at the meal. Meanwhile, the giff, who grew neither beard nor hair-at least not more than a few bristly strands-raided the sail locker for needle, thread and sailcloth. Gomja sat on the anchor winch, cut patches from the coarse fabric, and sewed up the holes in his uniform. They both scrubbed and groomed until they were as respectable as two ex-stowaways could ever hope to be.

The sun, gold-orange and sweltering, touched just at the top of the western waves, marking the hour of evening tide. Running before an easy northeasterly wind, the Silver Spray charged through the waves in rhythmic beats. With the

weather calm, most of the crew had been given orders to stand down, leaving only a few hands to stand watch during the night. On such a small ship, it was already known to all that the outsiders had been asked to dine with the captain, and the crewmen watched with interest as the pair made their way aft. Teldin was an almost beggarly sight. His trousers, ragged and worn, were trimmed back to just below the knee and he likewise had been forced to cut off the sleeves of his shirt, leaving his muscular, tanned arms exposed to the evening's heat. Nonetheless, the farmer wore the alien cloak long so that it flowed majestically behind him, sparing him the image of utter poverty. Gomja, having assiduously worked all day to restore his tattered uniform, lumbered aft in a pair of deep blue trousers fixed with patches scrounged from the crew. Closer inspection showed the thick stitches of sail-cord that held each square in place. The giff's orange sash was carefully pleated to hide the smudges he could not wash out. Peeking through the folds of his brilliant cummerbund were the butts of his two pistols and five knives that somehow just seemed to end up in Gomja's possession. A cutlass was tucked completely through the sash, and a rapier swung in the hanger at his side. To add the final touch, the giff's smooth, blue-gray skin was lightly oiled, so that it glistened in the evening light.

The captain's cabin was at the bottom of the narrow stair to the aft companionway and, for a moment, Teldin was not sure the broad-shouldered giff would fit into the tight passage. Finally, stooped and hunched, Gomja squeezed down the little staircase, though the risers creaked ominously with every shift of his substantial weight.

Thus, with their arrival well-announced ahead of them, Cwelanas was on hand to open the door to her father's cabin before Teldin had any chance to knock. The farmer barely remembered his manners upon seeing her, stopping a surprised gasp half-completed and hoping his eyes were not too wide. The elf maiden once again had forgone her manly attire and wore a gown made of material like none Teldin had ever seen, an ice-blue gauze that floated on the slightest breeze. It swirled over her arms in the delicate breeze of the opening door. The cloth was sheer, no heavier than the dust-coated cobwebs Teldin used to find in his chicken coop. Cwelanas's gown was fashioned from layers of the material, cunningly laid on to look like haphazard piecework or the trembling leaves of a frost-kissed tree. The pale skin of her legs, arms, and bosom were barely covered by the thinnest layers. Ends and edges trailed and flowed off her shoulders and hips. Her silvery hair was tied up in careful braids and from somewhere the elf maid had gotten a circlet of small daisies for her brow. Cwelanas's eyes sparkled and glowed, filled with a mischievous light. Standing by the door, the maiden said nothing, but waited for Teldin to speak. Finally a wry smile crept onto her narrow lips. "Will you come in?" she asked pointedly. Cwelanas could not disguise the relish she felt at Teldin's stupefaction, and Teldin, for his part, could not tell if it was due to femininity or her elven nature.

"We would be delighted, wouldn't we, sir?" Gomja swiftly intervened. The giff was apparently immune to Cwelanas's significant charms. Teldin clapped his mouth shut, realizing he was gawking like a fool. "Yes, of course," the human mumbled. This time, Teldin could feel his face flush, which only made him more self-conscious.

At the back of the cabin, Luciar rose from his stool like a fragile bird rising from its perch. "Do come in, my friends." The invitation bore no trace of Luciar's customary formality. Teldin stepped inside, trying desperately not to trip over his own feet. "I fear my ceilings are too low for one as tall as you," the captain remarked as Gomja ducked through the doorway. The captain wore robes of slippery, red silk, girdled with a belt of intricately tooled leather dyed subtle shades of green.

The cabin was a spartan affair, which surprised Teldin somewhat. During the afternoon Teldin had tried to guess its appearance, imagining an exotic lair of carved beams cleverly done to look like a forest grove or a dark den filled with the arcane hardware that must be a wizard's stock in trade. In truth, the

room held little more than a few stools, three tables, and a pair of chests. The silver-wood ceiling gleamed brightly in the fading sunlight reflected from the waves, dispelling all gloomy shadows from the chamber. A pile of neatly folded blankets, the captain's bedding, was stacked in one corner, ready for the night. All in all, Teldin found himself just a little bit disappointed at the severity of the surroundings.

"A seat at my table is what I extend," Luciar said graciously. The words were apparently a ritualistic greeting, for neither the old captain nor his daughter made a move to sit, but waited for their guests to act. Gomja dubiously eyed the slender stools placed around the table. "I don't mind sitting on the floor, sir" the giff offered. "I fear my weight may be too much for your furniture, and I wouldn't want to break anything." The alien eased himself gently to the deck.

"Indeed, we are a small people compared to one as large as you," Cwelanas apologetically offered as she floated to her father's side. Her bare feet padded lightly over the wood. Seeing that the human was still standing, she assumed the tone of a woman tending to her family. "Everyone to your seats, before our dinner grows cold."

"Cwelanas has prepared this meal for us, so we would all be wise to heed her." Captain Luciar smiled mockingly at his daughter, the first smile Teldin had seen the captain make during the entire voyage. Luciar offered a stool to Teldin, waiting for the human to sit before taking his own place, which was framed by the sterncastle windows. Teldin sat opposite the captain and could look past the old elf to the sea beyond. Gomja sat crosslegged on the floor, and the table still came only partway up his chest.

Once everyone was settled, Cwelanas set small platters in front of her guests, then took her own seat at the end of the table. From there she passed covered bowls around the table. Lifting the first lid, Teldin found the dish was nothing like what he ate with the rest of the crew. Here the interminable diet of boiled beans, dried vegetables, hardtack, and pickles was replaced by fresh vegetables floating in boiled, spiced wine, steamed breads, fresh fruits, and sweets of sticky grains and candied dates. Though it still lacked meat, the farmer was not about to complain and savored the rich smells that rose from the small pots.

As the food was served, neither Luciar nor his daughter spoke and Teldin quickly guessed the meal was to be eaten in silence, apparently another type of elven custom. Observing the delicate care his hosts used in selecting their small portions, Teldin contained his hunger and slowly relished each small piece. Gomja tried to practice restraint, though his "small" servings were still large enough for everyone else at the table.

After the candied fruits were passed for the last time and everyone had swallowed their last bites, Luciar rose from his stool, signaling the meal's end. It was just as well, for not a scrap remained on Teldin's or Gomja's plates. Placing his hands on the table, the captain looked toward both Teldin and Gomja. "Teldin Moore, there are many things about you I do not know-why you want to go to Mount Nevermind, who you run from, what your companion truly is, or how you came by the wondrous cloak you wear." Teldin's eyebrows shot up at that statement. Luciar smiled, bemused at Teldin's reaction. "I knew. I am a wizard of the Red Robes. Magic like yours is not so easily hidden. Do not fear. The secret will remain unspoken.

"Most of all, I do not know why my ship was chosen to bear you, but for that I am grateful." The old elf paused to take a long breath. As he stood before the cabin windows, Luciar clasped his hands. "When you first asked for passage, I said there was nothing you could offer me. I was wrong, Teldin Moore. You rescued that which is most dear to me, and there is no treasure that will show my gratitude." Luciar stopped, his voice trembling with emotion. "And you, our gigantic friend," the captain finally continued, "fought for my ship, which I hold almost as dear." His shoulders square and firm once again, the captain walked across the cabin to where an assortment of weapons hung on pegs. Luciar took down a slim-shafted spear and a razor-edged sword, then studied each

weapon with loving respect for the craftsmanship.

"These things have belonged to the House of Olonaes for many centuries," the captain softly said, looking toward his guests as he spoke. "It is said they were forged by the dwarves during the Age of Might and enchanted by my ancestors. They are named 'Eversharp'--" Here he held out the spear--"and 'Brilliance.'" The old elf stopped and let the evening light play over the half-drawn sword blade. The metal did more than reflect the sunlight; it radiated a dazzling spectrum of colors. The brilliance shone no less from the spearhead. Teldin squinted in amazement at the weapons' magnificence.

"Take them. Each is given according to your skills," Lunat abruptly urged, pressing the spear into Teldin's hands and the sword into Gomja's. "Accept these gifts as a sign of the friendship between my family and yours." Holding the spear, Teldin was flabbergasted. This was a gift beyond value, certainly more than he deserved. The farmer rose from his stool and bowed clumsily to the elf. "I stowed away on board your ship, sir," Teldin protested. "That doesn't make me worthy of such a gift." He held the spear out, offering it back to Luciar.

"You will take it," the old elf said firmly as he looked into the human's eyes. "I think shadows of death hover close to you, Teldin of Kalamán, and I fear you will need these weapons more than I." The absolute look in Luciar's eye persuaded Teldin that the captain would not relent.

Gomja rose also, as best he could in the tight quarters, and made a rigid giff bow, which meant he bent more at the neck than his big chest. "Thank you, sir," he rumbled. "You have made the heart of this giff glad." With a broad smile, he slid the elven sword into his sash.

"It is less than either of you deserve," Luciar assured them, as he returned to his seat. "By the weapons you carry, each of you are welcome within the halls of the Olonaes of Silvamóri. Now, I have a fine old wine I also intend to share. Cwelanas, I will fetch the glasses." The captain departed the cabin, purposely leaving his daughter behind to entertain their two guests. Although Luciar was gone only for a moment, it was long enough for an awkward silence to fill the room. Teldin looked at Cwelanas, but she seemed to avoid his gaze. The farmer again felt the heart pain his grandfather had described, but he said nothing.

Gomja broke the spell, asking Cwelanas the history of his sword. The elf maiden welcomed the question, and when Luciar returned, daughter and giff were in earnest conversation. The bottle was uncorked, glasses filled, and toasts made and remade until gradually the atmosphere relaxed. Warmed by the wine and comforted by the night air, Luciar told stories of his youth and what little he knew of the gnomes. Teldin talked a bit of the war, but mostly listened and watched, as did Gomja, though every few moments the giff half-drew his new sword and admired the blade. Even though she had heard the stories before, Cwelanas listened intently as the tales were told once again.

Finally the old elf set his empty glass down. It was dark outside and starlight showed through the windows. "By the trees of the wood, you may be young, but for an old one such as me, it is late. Go to the deck and leave my stuffy cabin so I may sleep. Daughter, I will see you in the morning." Luciar waved the three--Teldin Gomja, and Cwelanas--toward the door. Cwelanas feebly protested, though Teldin suspected her attempts to dissuade her father were more out of politeness. Once she relented, the farmer, feeling the wine, rose and escorted Luciar's daughter onto the deck.

A deep lungful of fresh salt air revived him and Teldin was about to return to the bow when a soft hand touched his sleeve. "Come, join me on the afterdeck. I, too, have much to thank you for." Cwelanas smiled shyly, embarrassed by her own boldness, and yet, without waiting for an answer, she took Teldin's hand and led him to the stern. There she rested against the railing, watching the waning Solinari cast a thousand glittering crescents over the dark waves. Teldin stood beside her, watching the same scene and uncertain just what he should do or say. His wine-dimmed mind could not guess the elf's full intention. Her purpose could be innocent or it could be filled with meaning,

the farmer thought.

Finally the elf maiden turned to him and said, almost humbly, "Teldin, when you were first aboard, I saw you only as a... human." Her tone made humans sound like things. "You know, I never liked humans. I mean, that is until now." She stumbled, trying to think of just the right words. "I mean, I-I misjudged you and I am... more than just sorry." Cwelanas hesitantly turned and leaned forward until her silvery hair brushed against Teldin's cheek, then her mouth lightly touched his. Her warm breath moistened his lips. The elf maid's hand lightly held Teldin's arm, almost fearful that he might pull away. Their kiss lingered, then finally broke. Flustered, Cwelanas suddenly looked away, her face red; her hands were tightly knotted together. Teldin himself could barely look at her, his own feelings a mixture of amazement, wonder, befuddlement, and ardor. Solinari's glow barely outlined her trembling features.

"I misjudged you, also," Teldin whispered, touching his hand to Cwelanas's shoulder. Her gown's thin fabric seemed to hover just above her trembling skin.

"When you are done at Mount Nevermind, Teldin Moore, if you need passage back, the Silver Spray might stop there again," Cwelanas softly speculated without facing the human. She pulled away from him just a little, suddenly afraid to let herself get too close. When at last she turned back, there was a small tear welling in her eye. "If you come back, there is another who will welcome you to the House of Olonaes." Cwelanas bit her lower lip at the boldness of her own words, then turned and hurried off the deck, disappearing into the cabins below.

Teldin did not follow her. He was stunned by the elf maid's rapidly changing moods and his own feelings for her. He remained at the stern and watched Solinari slip closer to the water while ruddy Lunitari crept higher in the west. The farmer was in no hurry to go to the bow and the solid company of the giff, but preferred to linger with his memories of these last few ethereal moments. To the port side hung the dark peaks of Sancrist and, though somewhere among them was his goal, Mount Nevermind, Teldin wondered, just a little, if all this effort to get rid of a cloak was really worthwhile. He could stay here, aboard the Silver Spray, and never go home again. Until the neogi arrived, he grimly remembered. That dark thought anchored the farmer once again to the pain of the real world. Teldin knew that someday the neogi would find him. Curiously, it was not for himself that he feared, but the others who might be with him - like Liam. With a sad, painful shrug, he forced back his sorrow and fear and made for the bow, where the giff already snored.

Chapter Seventeen

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The next morning, davits creaked as the ship's dinghy was hoisted over the side. Gomja worked the bow line, easily handling the job that four elves were struggling with aft. After a few thumps and bumps against the hull, the boat hit the water with a soft splash. A rope ladder uncoiled, and Teldin and Gomja followed several sailors down to the small rowboat. The water rose ominously as the heavy giff settled into a rowing seat.

From the deck above, Luciar and Cwelanas watched as the little boat shoved off. "They will take you to a landing the gnomes use," the balding captain shouted in his thin voice to Teldin. "From there you should find a road to Mount Nevermind-I think. May good fortune and the gods smile upon you." Cwelanas was silent, her good-byes had already been said, so she simply lifted a hand in farewell. Teldin watched her wave as the boat slowly cut through the water toward shore.

The Silver Spray was but a small shape in the bay when the ship's boat finally bumped alongside the forlorn little pier that was Gnome's Landing; The structure was little more than a few moldering pilings and a strange

assemblage of booms loaded with pulleys and gears. The masts hung out over the reflecting water.

"Gnome work," explained Galwylin, who had volunteered to row his human friend ashore. "It is supposed to unload cargo. I saw the little fellows try to use it once. An amplified mechanowindlass, they called it. They sank a boat like ours when their machine dropped an ox amidships." Galwylin hoisted Teldin's kit onto the pier. "Take care while you are with them. The gnomes have cunning hands, but little sense."

The farmer nodded, slightly dumbstruck. The collection of wheels and spans brought home every description and caution Teldin had ever heard about gnomes. "Gnome work?" He clambered onto the dock. "As always, your advice is good, wise elf. I'll be careful." With an oomph, Teldin helped hoist Gomja up beside him. The giff had difficulty scrambling from the small boat onto the pier, and it was only with a fair amount of pulling and pushing that the bulky creature finally got ashore.

"May Habbakuk grant you a safe voyage to Ergoth and beyond," Teldin said as the dinghy started to pull away.

"And a safe journey to you, Teldin Moore," Galwylin called back. The crewmen threw their backs to the oars and quickly turned the dinghy toward the Silver Spray.

Teldin stood, watching them go, until there was nothing left to see. Gomja, already shouldering both his own gear and the human's, was waiting on the shore when the farmer finally, reluctantly, tramped off the pier. From the end of the landing there was only one choice of direction, a weedy track that cut straight through the sparse woods toward the mountainous inland of Sancrist. "Time to leave, Gomja," Teldin mournfully said.

It was only an overnight hike to reach Mount Nevermind. The trail led first through meadow-patched forest and then gradually into the mountains' lush foothills. All along the route lay reminders of the gnomes: rusted cogs buried under tree roots, vine-cloaked skeletons of ancient machinery, and, ever in the distance, the cone-shaped peak of Mount Nevermind itself. After a quiet night, marred only by Teldin's silent fears that the gnomes might refuse him, the pair set off on the final leg of their trek. Gomja, who fully expected to return to space, was positively jaunty as they marched.

It was midafternoon when the road finally crested a rocky ridge and dropped down into the valley that nestled against Nevermind's slopes. There was no mistaking the gnomes mountain, for the entire region was landscaped on an immense scale that only maniacally industrious hands could have accomplished. The forest ended in a straight, clean line at the rim of the valley. Beyond that unnatural boundary were carefully laid fields that filled the perfectly level valley floor. The road cut straight through these to the massive mountain peak at the far end.

The mountain was the most extraordinary feature, more so than anything Teldin had been led to expect. Captain Luciar had said only, "You will know when you find it." The peak would have been a perfect cone, shaped by volcanic action eons ago, except that the sides had been sliced into series of terraces, reducing the overall shape of the mountain to a giant staircase reaching up to the clouds. Teldin was dumbfounded by the sheer size of it—an entire mountain, the tallest on all of Sancrist, had been carved into a single massive ziggurat.

"This must be Mount Nevermind, sir," Gomja offered helpfully, his small eyes open wide with amazement.

"You're right, Gomja." The farmer spoke mechanically, for he was too awed to show any other emotion.

Advancing with greater caution, Teldin and Gomja picked their way down the slope. On the valley floor, the road bridged innumerable canals and ditches, part of an intricate irrigation system that radiated from the peak. On the distant terraces, Teldin could see planned waterfalls where aqueducts descended to lower levels and tracks where things were hauled up. A scraggly forest of cranes creaked in the distant wind, filling the valley with the

echoing cries of mechanical birds.

The road ended at a pair of bronze doors, larger than any gates Teldin had ever seen. It took the pair almost an hour to reach the massive valves. The bronze was smooth and polished but unadorned, and the evening sun's glare off the gleaming surface was almost blinding.

"Well, this is it," Teldin said with grim finality as he pounded against the great gate.

Nothing happened.

Teldin banged again, beating at the door with all his might, but he barely made the metal valves echo. Gomja stepped up and helped him, and the pair thumped the doors for all they were worth. Still nothing happened. Finally, in desperation, Teldin beat the bronze with the butt of his spear. A faint ringing sound echoed from inside.

Before the echoes faded, there was a metallic scrape and the perfectly smooth door was marred by a small peephole that opened high over their heads. A pair of tiny eyes glared down through the opening.

"You can't get in by banging. You have to use the door alarm. It's--"

"What?" Teldin asked, unprepared for the barrage of gibberish from the muffled voice. It seemed like Common speech, but the words went by so fast.

The little face stopped and scowled. "What is the matter?"

Do you not understand Common, which I am speaking? It is Common,

and it is not my fault if you are outsiders who do not

know that you have to press the door-alarm"

"What?" Teldin pleaded, "Slow down!"

There was a loud sigh from overhead, then the little, bearded face began again, saying every word with exaggerated precision. "I said, you can't get in by banging, because you have to use the door alarm, which is that little button alongside the door, and if you push it, the door might be opened if the Doormaker's Guild says it's all right, which it might--"

Teldin suspected that the gnome might go on talking forever, so he reached out and pressed the small, black button alongside the door. The gnome's declaration, which definitely was still going on, was interrupted by a blaring claxon. Teldin, his finger still on the button, leaped back in terror at the thundering noise, and Gomja tensed, his huge body striking a fighting pose.

Only the gnome seemed unfazed by the racket. "There, that is much better, because now I, as a member of the Doormaker's Guild, may open the gate and . . . The little, talking face disappeared from the window. From inside came a series of rattles, groans, clanks, whistles, and wheezes. With a rattling hiss and a fitful cloud of steam that leaked from the hinges, the doors slowly swung inward. A little brown-skinned man, slightly smaller than a dwarf, stood in the center of the doorway. He wore simple tradesman's clothes, a once-white, loose shirt and coarse pants covered with a stout leather apron. Quills, small tools, and rolled up sheets of paper poked out of every pocket and even stuck out from the wild tangles of his hair and beard.

"Why have you come to the wonderful Great Huge Tall

Mound-Made of Several Different Strata of Rock--"

What?" Teldin demanded for the third time. His spear, still in hand, swung ominously up as his exasperation increased. Gomja laid a steadying hand on his shoulder.

"Calm, sir. It's the way gnomes speak. I've heard them like this before."

Teldin took a deep breath and nodded understandingly.

"--Which Occasionally Comes to the Surface and Flows Down the Side of the Great Huge Tall Mound that Our Ancestors Learned from the Humans Was Really Called Mount Nevermind," finished the doorkeeper, apparently all in one huge breath. The gnome stood there panting and waiting for a response.

"Think carefully before you answer," Teldin whispered to himself, sensing that the wrong word probably would set the doorkeeper off on an unending string of gibberish. The farmer quickly cast a cautionary look to Gomja, as if to warn the giff to keep silent while Teldin thought. Finally, he composed an answer.

"I come because I was given a magical cloak and now I can't take it off. If

the gnomes can remove it, I would be glad to leave it with them and go back home to Kalamán. Please speak slowly when you answer." Teldin braced himself for the reply.

"I always speak slowly. That is why I am the doorkeeper," the gnome answered indignantly, his words picking up pace as he went along. Teldin held up a hand, and the gnome restrained himself. Perhaps to keep his furious mind occupied, the gnome pulled out parchment, quill, and ink from his voluminous pockets, sat in the middle of the roadway, and prepared to take notes.

"Strange cloak, eh? If you want the cloak examined for weave, you'll have to go to the Weaver's Guild, but if the color is important, that is a problem for the Dyer's Guild. On the other hand, if the thread is important, that would be the Weaver's Guild again, but since you said you cannot take it off, the Jeweler's Guild might have to be called in to look at the clasp, unless it is magical, in which case-

"Magical, as I said before," Teldin interrupted, seizing on something he understood in the gnome's stream of speech.

The gnome stopped, scowled, made a note on his sheet, and looked up at Teldin again. "Magical examinations are on the fifteenth floor, but before you can go I need to know if the cloak is only apparently magical, magically powered by an outside source, or-

"Look, all I know is that it's magical," Teldin snapped as he rapped his spear on the pavement. The farmer held back his rapidly growing temper. He was beginning to understand why so few people had ever visited the gnomes. From behind him came Gomja's warlike hum as he patiently waited for Teldin to finish before asking his own questions of the gnome.

"Magical, unknown," the gnome muttered under his breath as he carefully made notes. "And your large friend, who does not look like anything that lives on Krynn or that is cataloged in the records of the Zoologist's Guild, is he part of the magic or- Gomja bristled. "I came to seek passage on a spelljammer," the giff grumbled.

"Oh!" the gnome blurted, suddenly too stupefied to speak. "Spelljammers? Thirty-fifth floor."

"Let's go. I want to get this thing off:" Teldin urged before the gnome could begin again. "By the way, what's your name?" The farmer marched through the gate, Gomja in tow, before the doorkeeper could stop them. The little fellow scrambled to gather up his papers, then decided their entrance was as good as an invited one and motioned for them to follow him down the shadowy corridor. He scuttled forward, weaved through a tangle of rope and pulleys, ducked under a large sign labeled Very important experiment, so do not touch and plug your ears, and casually wedged his thumbs into his ears, which were buried under a thick layer of hair. Shouting, not because it was loud- since the hall was fairly quiet-but because he could not hear himself, the gnome explained, "I am not going to tell you my full name, because my friend who was the gatekeeper before me but got too old to work the levers-

"Slow down," Teldin admonished, trying both to listen and figure out why the warning sign was posted. He hesitantly made to follow the instructions, then stopped, unwilling to appear undignified. The gnome looked and shook his head, wiggling his fingers to show the thumbs in his ears. "Do not talk so fast!" Teldin shouted.

"Right!" The gnome nodded. Without missing a beat, the little man picked up where he had left off. "-to work the levers that open the doors told me that the last outsiders yelled at him when he tried to tell them his name, and they yelled at him again when he tried to tell them his nickname-

Teldin shouted back, loud enough for the gnome to hear, "Get to the point!"

"I am, but you keep yelling at me!" was the gnome's complaint. His mouth opened to continue, but a sudden screech wailed down the corridor, rapidly growing to earsplitting intensity. Teldin winced in pain and clapped his hands over his ears. Behind him, Gomja staggered backward, giant paws pressed over his head. As he reeled, the giff crashed into the tangle of pulleys, triggering the rickety movement of hawsers through the blocks. Sandbags lashed

to the cables dropped and rose all around, forcing the bulky Gomja to dodge and whirl, which only plunged the giff farther into the tangle of ropes and scaffolding. The burlap weights hit the stone floor with skull-splintering thuds and spewed sand, lead shot - even feathers - throughout the passage. Just as Teldin tried to guess how a bag of feathers could split on impact, the high-pitched squeal abruptly became a reverberating bass that rolled back toward the center of the mountain.

As the last echoes of thunder rebounded in the distance, the weights stopped falling and Teldin's eardrums ceased throbbing. He could hear faint cheers in the distance. As he stood listening, trying to guess what madness was going on, the human realized the gnome was still talking. The doorkeeper still had his thumbs jammed firmly in his ears.

-so because of that business with the avalanche, outsiders call me Fildusmangelhors-" The gnome misinterpreted Teldin's amazed look. "It means Gnome at the Center of Extremely Cold Solidified Water Shaped into a Large, Hard, Compact Sphere Rolling-"

"Snowball?" Teldin interrupted, rubbing his temples to make the ringing noise go away. Behind him, Gomja irritably batted his way through the still-swinging pulleys to rejoin them. The gnome made no indication that Gomja's calamity had caused anything amiss.

"Right, that is what outsiders call me," beamed the doorkeeper. "Anyway, I would plug my ears if I were you, because the Communicator's Guild is going to test its new long-range voice improver message system-" An alarm whistle blew, but by now Teldin hardly twitched. "See, that's the alarm whistle-"

"If the test was a loud noise, I think they already did it, Snowball," Teldin wryly commented at a shout, incredulous that the gnome had missed the racket.

"Now, please, can we get going?"

"Oh, drats! I missed it!" Snowball said, popping his thumbs out of his ears.

Chapter Eighteen

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The gnome rattled on as he ducked under ropes creaking across pulleys and led Teldin and Gomja down the central corridor. Water dripped from patched and repatched pipes that ran at all angles across the ceiling. From down the hallway, toward the center of the mountain, came a faint but steady clamor of bells, whistles, and banging drums. Gnomes, bundles of parchment under their arms, hurried past, sometimes hailing Snowball with a greeting that was never completed until long past. Teldin, just for caution's sake, remained alert, ready to plug his ears. The giff warily brought up the rear, leery of every rope, pipe, and unknown thing that hung from the ceiling.

At last their passage broke into an immense central shaft, both terrifying and grand. Although Teldin had seen a few impressive fortifications during the war, particularly the dark Tower of High Sorcery at Palanthas, nothing in all his brief travels could compare to the gnome works here. The inside of the mountain was an immense, hollowed out, and inverted cone, terraced just as the outside of the mountain had been, forming rings around a widening central shaft. Lights gleamed and moved along the sides. A constant rumble of noise filled the cavern; the deep drone of a thousand distant sounds were punctuated by occasional shrill bursts close at hand. The chamber soared upward into the darkness as far as Teldin could see and beyond, as he picked out quivering points of light somewhere high above him. They were like night stars, except he knew that neither was it night nor was he outside.

Almost as impressive as the shaft itself was the seemingly endless tangle; ropes and cables stretched across the center of the cavern to tie together far-flung gantries that projected over the rims of different terraces. It looked to Teldin like an incomplete spiderweb. The main floor was littered with catapults of all types and sizes. Gnomes swarmed over these, hammers and saws in hand. "Gnomeflingers," Snowball explained. "They're not working right

now, because they've got just a few little problems that need to be worked out-

"Such as?" Teldin asked, his curiosity piqued. He was starting to get the hang of gnome speech, the breakneck way they approached the Common tongue and their constant desire to keep talking.

"Oh, well, first, the sponges all died, so we have to get new ones," Snowball explained as he led them around the perimeter of the main floor, "but we do have a few working gnomeflingers for cargo, and the sponges are only the emergency emergency backup safety system," the gnome offered hopefully, "so it is perfectly safe, unless the new gears in the timing system are not right, which we have not tested yet, but you could be the first and-" "No, thank you, Snowball," Teldin politely refused.

"Besides, I think Gomja might be too heavy for your machines." He laid a hand on the giff's bulky arm, eager to make his point.

Snowball rolled his eyes up as he made some quick mental calculations. "It might take a few shots, level one to level four, then level four to the big catapult on level seven, then-

"Nobody is shooting me anywhere, little gnome," Gomja boomed emphatically as he stepped forward, his ears perked with alarm. Legs set and arms crossed, the giff towered over Snowball.

"Well, then, I guess we will have to use the slow method," Snowball answered in another peevish huff. "Not that we would ever hurt anyone-gnomes have such a bad reputation with you outsiders, but, really, everything is perfectly safe and I have only been hurt once-seriously." Watching closely for the expected look of alarm, which did cross his guests' face, the doorkeeper snickered at his own joke. He led them to a metal disk suspended by chains, like the pan of a giant scale. "If you will step on there, we can get you ready..." The gnome tugged on Teldin's sleeve, impatiently hustling the human onto the disk, talking all the while. The farmer did not hear any more, for his attention was caught suddenly by a creaking overhead. Above he saw a small gondola swinging precariously over open space and being furiously pulled along by a small gnome in a basket. As Teldin gawked upward, Snowball leaned over and scrutinized a needle and a team of gnomes loaded bags onto a similar disk. The gondola passed out of sight, and the farmer looked down and realized he was standing on a giant scale.

After both Teldin and Gomja were weighed and given disks denoting their tonnage, Snowball struck out for another section of the shaft. Here baskets and barrels shot into and out of the darkness above at alarming speeds. Those descending came rushing down with a blare of horns and bells. Teldin jumped involuntarily when one crashed onto a giant pile of pads beside him. The barrel tumbled over, rope raining down on it, and a pair of gnomes spilled onto the cushions and across the floor. They quickly got to their feet and wobbled away with all the dignity they could muster.

"Quickly, now. That is your car, and I will be in the next one," urged Snowball, pointing to the empty barrel. Teldin went pale at the thought and Gomja planted his feet, one hand reaching for a pistol. "It is the only way up," the gnome assured as the pair resisted, "because the vertical engineers are redesigning the stairs to make them faster, so come on and get in the car or you will not get to the examiners, besides other people are waiting and you do not want to be rude." All the while, Snowball, far stronger than he looked, was tugging Teldin toward the hastily righted barrel. Perhaps desperate to be relieved of the cloak, the human finally gave in, steeled his courage, and climbed aboard. Gomja, not one to seem cowardly, followed suit.

Snowball stepped back with a smile and waved to the operators. "Level fifteen-eighty-nine dramrnars! That is how much you weigh, see," the gnome explained, "and up above-oh, up there somewhere-the vertical engineers will load twice your weight to lift you and the barrel, then pull the lever to ring the bell down here, and when that happens, you just hang on and-

Before Snowball could finish, Teldin's knees gave out as the barrel was forcefully jerked into the air. The farmer had a sickening feeling of hurtling

through dizzying space as the gnome's upturned face dwindled. One, two, three levels soared past, the number of each terrace disappearing in a brilliant flash. Teldin's fingers dug into the barrel's wooden sides. From somewhere below the human heard a clanging bell.

"-still a problem with stopping!" were Snowball's last shouted words. The levels whizzed past faster and faster, but Teldin took no notice-of that or of anything, including the pale blue giff frozen beside him. The terrified human was still trying to puzzle out the method of stopping when he looked up. Hurtling toward them was a giant wheel over which ran the rope affixed to their barrel. The yeoman suddenly had an awful guess just what the "problem with stopping" was. "Hang on, Gomja!" he howled over the din. Teldin closed his eyes and braced for the crash.

"I am, sir," the giff answered in a barely audible voice. All at once the rope stopped its upward flight, but the barrel, moving of its own momentum, continued upward until the giffs ears barely brushed the flywheel. Barrel, giff, and human hung weightless for an instant, then the wooden gondola plummeted. The shift from meteoric rise to uncontrolled fall was worst of all. The barrel dropped only a short distance before it snapped to a halt, almost throwing Teldin and Gomja over the low sides. As the barrel swung back and forth on the end of its rope, gnomes scrambled to pull the passengers onto a projecting landing. A big, black "15," painted on the wall, announced the level. Teldin looked up and guessed that the flywheel was mounted on level sixteen.

Once their feet were back on solid ground, Gomja sagged against the wall in a weak-boned heap; Teldin managed to stagger a few steps before he collapsed. "Sir," the giff announced, his voice trembling with finality, "I'd sooner go down on the blazing Penumbra again than ride one of those gnome things another time!" The farmer, his heart thumping wildly, could do little more than nod. By the time the pair had regained their wits and their breath, Snowball had rejoined them, unruffled by his own harrowing ride. "It is good to see that everything went well and nothing went wrong this time, though it would be interesting to test the safety systems on people as large as you, because we have only had gnomes..." the wild-haired gnome said by way of greeting. Again, the doorkeeper could not suppress a smile at their panicked faces.

"Now what?" Teldin demanded, eager to get moving, get the cloak off, and get out of this madhouse. He weakly struggled to his feet, bracing himself against a wall. Gomja very slowly followed suit.

Snowball plunged down a gloomy corridor. "Well, we go to the Magical Artificer's Guild examination rooms, and they will do tests on you, which will be fascinating, because I have never seen the kinds of tests-are you coming?-they do..." Sharing a look of dread, Teldin and Gomja followed the prattling Snowball.

The magical artificers received Teldin with great interest and listened to his explanation of the cloak's discovery. As usual, Teldin adjusted his story a bit, though this time he included the spelljammer and the captain in his tale. It seemed best to mention the cloak's otherworldly source. What the farmer did not say related to the neogi, especially their deadly interest in the artifact. As he both hoped and now somewhat feared, the gnomes were fascinated by the tale. The human wound up repeating it at least six times as gnomes of greater and greater importance were brought in for consultation. Finally he showed them how the cloak grew and shrank on command.

"Self-fitting fabric!" exclaimed Niggil, a particularly excited onlooker.

"Think of the possibilities for the Tailor's Guild!"

"Can you take it off?" Teldin demanded of the oldest and most pompous observer of the lot, a dark-haired gnome named-for Teldin's convenience-Ilwar. The fellow's beard was curly, full, and squarely cut, each stray hair long since having been excised. The beard made the gnome's chin look like of block of ebon stone.

The little expert circled slowly around Teldin, who was perched on a small stool, pausing only to finger the cloth. "It is possible to remove any item,

given the correct application of-

"Can you remove it now?" Teldin pressed quickly. He did not want them to spend all their time working out 'correct applications."

"All things must be done in their right time, since it would be a mistake to rush into something without all the facts," Ilwar said pompously, his straight-cut beard bobbing with each word. "In this case, an examination period of at least one full lunar period will be necessary before..."

Teldin groaned as the gnomes launched into a debate about how best to proceed. In fact, they ignored him as he sat on a stool between them. Finally they agreed to keep the cloak under observation for twenty-four hours before trying anything else. The decision having been reached- without once consulting the human- the gnomes all shook hands and filed out of the room, ignoring Teldin's protests and ushering Gomja from the room as well. When the farmer tried to follow, a small squadron of armed fellows kept him at the door. He made several vain attempts to escape, then gave up and returned to his stool. "Have a good time, Gomja!" the farmer yelled to his partner, though he suspected that was unlikely. The door clicked shut, leaving Teldin alone in the chamber, barren except for the single stool on which he sat.

The twenty-four hours were perfectly uneventful at least, though extremely frustrating and boring to spend alone. Teldin wondered what the giff might be up to, where Cwelas was right now, and whether what was left of his farm was still there. He thought of his parents, Amdar and Sharl. When three gnomes-bearded Ilwar and two assistants, Niggil, and Broz-ftnally returned, they ushered him to a table in a nearby testing chamber and once again circled, touched, smelled, and examined. The fact that the cloak had done nothing was treated with the greatest of importance, nonaction being an event in itself.

The gnomes proceeded to poke and prod, citing these steps as necessary to remove the cloak. Ilwar sat on the floor and assiduously took notes of every test and reaction.

"And you are sure you can't take it off?" asked Ilwar, in a remarkably short-winded question. As the group's leader, his full, black, and square-cut beard lent a great deal of solemnity to the proceedings.

"Not since I put it on. I can't open the clasp," Teldin explained once again, chin propped on the table, wearily watching their shadows.

"More testing is what we need!" Niggil eagerly suggested. Niggil was a goggle-eyed fellow and had been suggesting this course of action from the start. "Puncture stress test, material resistance to temperature variability of extreme degrees, impact absorption analysis. I have all the tools right here!" the gnome rattled on excitedly. Teldin was getting used to the speed with which the gnomes spoke. He understood most of the words, though not always their meaning.

Suddenly one of the shadows on the wall waved a long, sharp-looking dagger.

"See, we can puncture stress test it right here!" The shadow dagger suddenly pointed toward Teldin's shadow back.

In an instant, Teldin was on his feet, sending Broz, the fat one, sprawling from his stool. There was a clink as the metal point of Niggil's dagger bit stone. "Wait! Just wait right there!" Teldin bellowed, his face quivering with rage. He had been poked and jabbed enough already. The farmer wrapped the cloak tightly around himself and prowled the edges of the room, keeping Ilwar, Niggil, and Broz in sight at all times. "No more! That's enough examining, and there will be no more testing!" As he spoke, Teldin whirled on Niggil, who was trying to creep forward with his dagger. "Just tell me this: Can you get this thing off?"

"Indubitably," Ilwar answered gravely, scowling at the suggestion that there was something they couldn't do.

"Theoretically possible," said Niggil.

"We could cut it off," suggested Broz in his relatively slow, earthy drawl.

The other two both turned to Broz and evaluated his proposal.

"Don't even try!" Teldin remarked through gritted teeth.

Broz looked up in mild surprise. "Oh, I didn't mean the cloak or the chain or the clasp," the quiet one finally explained in a torrent of words, "since we certainly don't want to damage these, but I have a friend in the Healer's Guild, and he's been working for years now on a device that should keep a person's head perfectly functional while separated from the rest of the body, and now you've come along, and it's a perfect opportunity to test his theories and see if they really work-" Broz took a deep breath while Teldin stared at him in disbelief-"then," Broz continued, "he could begin work on learning how to reattach the head!"

"Capital idea," applauded Niggil, "then we can do tests!"

Without waiting for another suggestion, Teldin seized his spear, long since returned from examination by the Weapons Guild, and sprang to the door.

"Snowball!" he bellowed at the portal. "Take me to Gomja now!"

Chapter Nineteen

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"There, sir. It's not much too look at, but the gnomes say it'll get into the void." High on the thirty-fifth level, Gomja pointed out a rough-hewn window to the lake below, where a ramshackle and half-built ship, another great pride of gnomish engineering, floated. Teldin and Gomja were watching the work from well above the floor of the volcano, looking down on the crater lake filled with the pale-blue waters collected from yearly snowmelt and rains.

"It's not even finished!" Teldin protested. Teldin leaned on the windowsill and studied the craft. It didn't look like any ship he'd ever seen, neither the Silver Spray nor even the Penumbra's wreckage. It looked more like an immense, flat-bottomed river barge topped with a collection of buildings, catwalks, gantries, windmills, gigantic chimneys, and, amidships, a pair of waterwheels mounted on the sides. There was a semblance of order, with decks, a sterncastle, and a single small mast, but the whole thing was cloaked in jury-rigged scaffolding that obscured details. Teldin was amazed the whole thing even floated. "They've got a lot of work to do," he scoffed.

"I think it is finished, sir," Gomja cheerfully offered, gamely struggling to suppress a grin. "That's the way the gnomes want her to look."

"Want?" Teldin walked away from the window, shaking his head in disbelief. Barely escaping three days of "examination" and hardly recovered from a harrowing barrel ride up to the thirty-fifth level, Teldin couldn't fathom any more wonders of gnomish tinkering. He grabbed one of the too-small chairs from a corner and sat, his long legs sprawling across the floor.

"Do you understand these gnomes?" He sighed with frustration, throwing his arms out wide. Gomja answered with a lopsided grin and a shrug, but Teldin did not see it, because his head had flopped back so he could stare at the ceiling.

Before any more could be said, the door banged open and a small herd of gnomes barged into the room, solemn Ilwar in the lead, Niggil, Broz, and Snowball following. While Ilwar managed to maintain a stately appearance, the other three reminded Teldin of chickens leaving the coop in the morning, swirling and half-flying in every direction. Naturally the gnomes were all talking at once.

Snowball was the first to make himself heard. "Since I found you, it is my pleasure to say that your cloak is-"

"Amazing," Niggil interrupted. "Your cloak, as we have determined, is-"

"Quite amazing," Snowball countered, glaring at the uppity Niggil, "because we are certain it is not- "From this-" Niggil cut in again.

"World!" Snowball finished with a defiant scowl at his fellow gnome. Satisfied that he had the last word, the doorkeeper smiled triumphantly at Teldin.

"I know that," Teldin peevishly replied. "You asked me and I told you."

Snowball's smug posture deflated slightly at the scorn in Teldin's voice.

Calm and dignified in contrast to his fellows, Ilwar held up his hand to prevent any more outbursts. Surprisingly enough, the other three kept quiet,

though Broz had yet to speak anyway. "Ah, Teldin Moore of Kalamon, now we have proven it through our studies, where before we had only your word, and therefore the origin is certain, so there--"

"Well, excuse me, but if you know so much, how do I get it off?" Teldin interrupted, hoping that, just maybe, the gnomes might finally have the answer.

"That must be determined by further examination--"

"And testing," chimed in Niggil. Ilwar glared at the big-eyed gnome, cowing him into silence.

"Fortunately, we three--"

"Four," Snowball corrected. The square-bearded gnome glared again. Snowball looked to the floor, abashed.

Satisfied, Ilwar continued. "We four are familiar with the new and wonderful science of spelljamming and are perfectly suited to--"

"Is that your ship?" a voice suddenly boomed. Ilwar, automatically assuming one of the gnomes had spoken again, glowered at the trio. They, in turn, did their best to look innocent, nodding back toward the large giff. Gomja was pointing to the vessel that floated on the lake. "Excuse me, sir, for interrupting," the alien offered. The human dismissed the whole thing, secretly relieved to be free of the building barrage of gnomish gibberish. The gnome's call for more testing had the ominous ring of failure to it.

Before Ilwar could regain control, the other three gnomes scurried to the window and, practically piling onto one another, peered over the edge of the sill to the lake below.

"Oh! The pride of our fleet, the finest ship we ever built," chattered Snowball, "the Unquenchable Fire-Powered Sidewheel-Shaped..." He continued on with an endless name.

"Certainly finer than our last ship," the goggle-eyed Niggil assured the giff, "the Improved Star-Sailing Ship Based On Modified Plans From the Previously Improved Star-Sailing Ship That Broke in Half and Sank..."

"Indeed," Ilwar gravely added as he came to the window, clearing a way through his juniors. "This one has remained afloat for an entire thirty days, whereas the Improved..."

"And it doesn't require all those squirrels," the heretofore silent Broz announced in his deep voice. Gomja's eyes darted from gnome to gnome as the giff vainly tried to follow a single conversation.

Squirrels? Teldin thought, hopelessly trying to puzzle out that one.

"But what do you call this one?" the big alien asked, totally lost by the four different speakers.

Snowball harrumphed in self-importance. "As I was saying, the Unquenchable Fire-Powered Sidewheel-Shaped Motive--"

"Does it have a shorter name?" Teldin asked from across the room, breaking the litany of words flowing from Snowball's lips. Everyone fell silent at the grave import of this question.

Ilwar stroked at his black beard several times before finally speaking. "No," he allowed slowly, "but to help you, it could be given one, such as the Unquenchable Side-Mounted Steam Generated--"

Teldin tried to suppress a wince as the litany began anew. "Maybe something smaller-like one word?" the farmer suggested.

"Hmm, that will be difficult, for it is not in the gnomish nature to be anything less than absolutely precise," Ilwar answered, almost rationally explaining his people's trait, "unless, of course, you or your companion, who is not like any other creature we have seen on Krynn, can make a suggestion that we could use--"

"The Unquenchable," Gomja eagerly interrupted, sensing an opportunity to end the discussion. "Will that do?"

The gnomes turned to each other in serious consideration of the title, with Ilwar acting as dignified moderator of the discussion. Finally they quit chattering and looked at one another with wonder in their eyes.

"Unquenchable!" Niggil chortled, hopping from foot to foot. "Superb, because

now we can fit the name on the side, which is something we were going to have to build another ship to do, but now-

"This is a wonderful advance for the Namer's Guild, since now they won't have to use the diving suits," Snowball concurred, "and as a representative of the Doorkeeper's Guild it is my duty to carry news of this great discovery-

"Do not be so eager," Ilwar scolded with a frown. "I am not so certain about this proposal. There must be a committee established to study the ramifications these alterations will have upon the overall design-

From the other side of the room, Teldin coughed. "Excuse me, but what about the cloak?"

Ilwar stopped the lecture of his fellows, stroked his beard once more, and looked at Teldin with annoyance. "I was saying something important. But since you have asked, I should think the answer is obvious. Since the cloak is not from Krynn, we assumed you would accompany us into space, where the cloak can be properly studied and tested, since all calculations and observations made on Krynn cannot be considered definitive, given the non-Krynn origins of-

"Accompany you where?" Teldin exclaimed. The mouths of Niggil, Broz, and Snowball all opened to have their say, but their de facto leader, the square-bearded one, silenced them again. The human walked to the window and looked at the wildly jury-rigged Unquenchable below. "You want me to fly into space on that?" he asked. "I don't think so. I just want this cloak off so I can go back home and rebuild my life again." Teldin knelt to look the gnomes in the eye. "Can you do that?"

Ilwar raised an eyebrow. "Your life is not our affair, Teldin Moore of Kalamán, so you will have to rebuild your farm on your own."

"Do you insist?" Snowball asked, crestfallen. The gnome's dreams of fame and importance were fast fading.

"It seems such a shame-

"There's so much we could learn," scientific-minded Niggil added, pushing to the front. "It really does not seem as if you have the proper appreciation of your importance to..."

Broz, as was his wont, said nothing.

Teldin ignored them and focused on Ilwar, the most realistic-seeming of the group. "Please, just answer the question. Can you get the cloak off and keep me intact?"

Ilwar looked thoughtful, Niggil avoided Teldin's gaze, Broz stared back with sorrowful eyes, and Snowball fidgeted nervously. Finally the senior gnome said, "Of course, it is theoretically possible-

"Theoretically, but you don't know?" Teldin pressed for clarification. The gnome nodded slightly, stroking his thick beard. "So you can't take it off right now?" The gnome nodded again.

"But if you were to accompany us aboard the Unquenchable," Snowball interrupted, hoping to revive his dreams of glory, "we are certain to find the solution, and then all we need to do is build the machinery needed-

"A big machine!" Niggil added.

"-to remove the cloak, and then you can go back home just like you wanted as soon as we land back on Krynn from our voyage," concluded Snowball, triumphant at the obvious simplicity of his plan.

Teldin retreated from the window and collapsed into a tiny chair, where he clutched his head in his hands. "Excuse me, good gnomes," he mumbled toward the floor, "but I feel a terrible headache coming on. Can we continue this later?"

Ilwar once again took command, pushing the other gnomes toward the door. "Of course, Teldin Moore of Kalamán. We will go set to work at once. Do not fear. We are certain to find an answer." As the last of the other three left, Ilwar turned back toward the human. "I know it is hard to be so far from home," the tinker sympathetically offered. "I traveled far in the wars, and there were many times when I only wanted to return to our mountain, so we will try very hard to help you go home if that is what you truly want." The gnome ended his speech with a low bow and quickly left the chamber.

Feeling a little less exasperated, Teldin watched as Gomja closed the door and leaned against it. The farmer was exhausted by the day's grueling examinations and disappointments.

"Peace, at last," the lanky human sighed.

"Yes, sir," Gomja rejoined slowly. He crossed to the window and stated down at the Unquenchable with a pained look on his face. He finally turned away and stood stiffly, almost at attention. Teldin ignored the giffs curious mood as he sprawled across the small chair.

Looking at the ceiling, his hands nervously twisting, Gomja finally ventured to speak. "Sir," he began hesitantly, "what you told the gnomes, sir, about not going-did you really mean it?"

Teldin cocked his head toward Gomja and answered with a yawn, "If they can get this cloak off, then I'm free of all this. I'll go home and try to start over. There'll be a lot to do before winter."

"But what will you do with the cloak, sir?" Gomja countered.

Teldin sat up a little straighter, noticing the giffs extreme nervousness.

"Leave it for the gnomes to study, I suppose. I haven't had time to think about that." Unconsciously, Teldin's fingers began to drum on the arm of the chair. "Just what are you getting at?"

Gomja swallowed. "Well, sir, it's just like Astinus said. There are spelljammers here. And now, well, sir, I asked the gnomes for passage on the Unquenchable, for both of us, I mean." Gomja's voice stiffened, and he stood straighter. "I thought you would be coming along."

"And now I'm not," Teldin finished.

Gomja nodded affirmatively. "I have broken the chain of command, sir.

Accordingly, you have the right to discipline me for this," the giff said bravely.

"Discipline?" Teldin echoed, surprised that Gomja even thought he was upset.

"According to regulations, sir." Gomja closed his eyes and recited from memory. "'Unauthorized transfers shall be considered desertion of the third grade and are punishable by imprisonment not greater than 30 days, lashes not to exceed twenty-" Gomja's voice shuddered-"and reduction in rank or grade, or such penalty as the commanding officer deems appropriate, not to exceed the severity of those listed.'"

"You're saying I'm supposed to punish you for asking to go home?" Teldin rose to his feet.

"Yes, sir," Gomja answered, his body still at attention. Teldin strolled to the window and rested his weathered hands on the sill. "And if I don't?"

Startled by the suggestion, Gomja broke his rigid demeanor to steal a glance at the human, who stood with his back to the giff. "That's the way it's done, sir," he explained, his voice filled with confusion.

"Hmmm," Teldin mused, thinking over the curious request. Below him, a rope ferry towed a load of gnomes to the Unquenchable. Finally, Teldin turned back to the giff, who had resumed his rigid-backed and unmoving stance. "Private Herphan Gomja," he began formally, "since you have admitted a minor infraction of regulations, I sentence you as follows: For the duration of our visit to Mount Nevermind, you are to prevent all gnomes in my presence from saying more than ten words at a single time unless I say otherwise."

Gomja's mouth dropped open, and his ears twitched. "'What, sir?"

"Keep them from rattling on and on," Teldin interpreted with a grin. "I think you'll find it harder than it sounds. Now relax."

"Yes, sir," acknowledged the bewildered giff. His shoulders abruptly drooped, his big chest sagged, and, with the lapse of tension, he finally breathed again.

Teldin, prowling the room, stopped at a table and toyed with a gadget made of gears and pendulums suspended from a numbered dial. Accidentally touching a small switch, the cogs started to whirl and the pendulums swung. The thing made an irregular ticking noise and, justifiably suspicious of any gnome invention, the farmer quickly set the device down. "You still want to leave, don't you, Gomja?"

Once again the giff hesitated. "Sir," the giff eventually began, searching for the words, "I request a transfer from our platoon to the crew of the Unquenchable. Will you approve it?"

Teldin looked to the table, where the gnomish device still rattled and clicked. "We're saying good-bye," he said slowly. The farmer found himself reluctant to let the giff leave, even felt a twinge of sorrow at the prospect. "If you approve the transfer," Gomja answered. "The gnomes will be leaving within the week. You've been a good commander, sir." The giff offered gamely as he patted at his elven sword, "I've even earned a trophy or two. I've grown to like the big fellow, Teldin thought. Still, he knew he couldn't keep the giff from his own people. "Once you leave, you won't have a commander, you know," Teldin pointed out.

"There are the gnomes, sir."

"For your own sake, I wouldn't want to see you under the command of any gnome. Are you ready to assume command?"

Gomja's face was solemn and concerned, and he answered, "If I must, sir, but I'll only have myself to command."

"It's not much of a platoon," Teldin commented. "No, sir, but I won't have to worry about mutiny." Teldin chuckled at the joke. "You've changed since we first met." The farmer held out his hand as an equal. The giff took it in his own, which dwarfed the human's. "Very well, I approve the transfer. And as my last official act as your commander, I promote you."

The giff froze in mid-handshake and opened his mouth to protest, but Teldin cut him short by clenching down on the big fellow's hand. "You can't command a platoon without a rank. Congratulations, Sergeant Gomja."

The flustered giff stammered a reply. "Th-thank you, Commander. I think it's rather irregular, though." The giff unconsciously squeezed Teldin's hand back until the farmer winced and wrenched his hand from the giff's grasp. The giff was so overcome with the honor of his new rank that he didn't notice.

Teldin discretely shook out the pain, took Gomja by the elbow, and steered the giff toward the door. "Since you're now an officer, I want to buy you a drink. Then we'd better find you a gnome tailor and see about getting a proper uniform." Gomja, still dumbfounded, followed without protest.

* * * * *

Night or day made little difference to the gnomes of Mount Nevermind. With few windows around the outside conical peak, most never saw the sun for hours, days, even weeks, at a stretch. Each gnome adopted his own pattern and schedule, comfortable for him- or herself, yet utterly impractical for everyone else. One slept while another worked and a third ate, all in the same quarters. Some of the agricultural engineers tended their terraced outdoor fields by the light of the moon while others enjoyed their breakfasts when the sun hung directly overhead. All this confusion and disorganization did not seem to matter one whit to the gnomes. They blissfully accepted the strange routines of their neighbors and adjusted their own schedules accordingly. For Teldin, though, it meant that within the dark heart of the mountain, the cacophony of deep-throated whistles, rippling bells, and gnashing gears continued unabated and the shafts through the rock throbbed with the jarring, unmusical rhythm of grotesque machines. In time, his senses dulled and he became immune to even the infrequent but distant explosions that belched from dark workrooms. Mount Nevermind never stopped doing something, but the human eventually found it necessary to collapse with exhaustion. Floating on these waves of noise, Teldin tried to sleep after his very long day. While Gomja seemed to have no problem falling into a deep, rumbling slumber, the constant thrumming kept Teldin awake, each change in pitch and rhythm rousing him just as he started to doze off. The giffs burbling snores only added to the racket. It had been difficult for Teldin to convince the

gnomes that he and Gomja needed rest, but finally the little tinkers had arranged a room, deep in the heart of Mount Nevermind, for their use. Suspicious, lest the curious, scientific types- Niggil in particular- decide to attempt some nocturnal testing on his cloak, Teldin had locked the door carefully before retiring.

Eventually, exhaustion overtook the farmer, though even in slumber there was no rest. Neogi, perhaps stirred by the turmoil of the mountain, lurked in Teldin's dreams. The eel-like monsters paraded through Nevermind's dark and unending halls, bloody trophies in the arms of their brutish umber hulk slaves; behind these came more of their malicious kind clutching vile treasures in their ridiculously tiny claws. Each neogi appeared before Teldin's dream self, laying gruesome spoils at his feet. Struggling, the farmer tried to rise with the exaggerated care of a nightmare, but all his efforts came to naught.

The charnel mound grew before him: Vandoorm's bloodless, blue head, Liam's body gutted and bound, a necklace made from Gomja's hands and ears, and a bundle of gnome-skin cloaks. Old memories of flesh were added to the new: blubbery sheets of butchered dragon flesh, Knights of Solamnia frozen on the battle plain, their icy limbs thrust out at odd angles. Finally, the pyre of dead was taller than Teldin's cabin, even in a dream. At its apex was the hacked and burned head of a dragon, again from the High Clerist's Tower. Teldin's dream irresistibly panned upward, lingering over each monstrosity of the bloody heap. Perched precariously atop the macabre pyre was a golden-skinned neogi, it's loathsome, bulbous body covered with tattoos. The spiderlike legs gripped the fleshy mound. The creature glared malevolently down at Teldin. "Give me the cloak," it hissed. A slender, snapping claw reached out and slowly grew longer, stretching toward the paralyzed human. Teldin awoke with a choked scream and his body tangled in the blankets. He shook his head, trying to drive the monstrous apparitions from the shadows of his mind. Breath came in quick pants as the farmer nervously unwound himself from the sweat-dampened covers.

After straightening the blankets and fluffing his pillow, Teldin experimentally closed his eyes. Almost immediately the bloody procession filled his thoughts again, forcing the human to snap his eyes open once more. "No sleep for me," he mumbled, trying to rub away the pressure building on his temples. The single wavering candle transformed the room into a dreary cavern. Gomja's shadow became a hibernating bear. Teldin sat up, and he debated getting dressed. Unable to face sleep again, there was really nothing else to do.

From beyond their room came a distant boom, like a peal of thunder, even deeper and more resonant than Gomja's snores. Whatever it was, Teldin realized, it had triggered a whole clamor of alarms and whistles. Another invention gone wrong, the farmer concluded as he pulled his worn trousers over his long, lean legs.

Teldin was fumbling with his shoes when frantic knocking began rattling their door. "Open up! Open up! Hurry! Wake up! We're under attack!" shouted a high-pitched voice from the other side. Teldin could hear the scratching and jangling sound of someone fumbling with the lock. All at once, the tumblers caught and the door burst open.

Chapter Twenty

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"Attackers have invaded the upper levels!" a frantic gnome shouted in a single breath as he charged into the room. Almost as fast as he had entered, the gnome hurried out, joining the stream of his fellows rushing through the hail, carrying an ad hoc collection of weapons. Teldin, half-dressed, sat stunned on the edge of his bed.

The previously gloomy passage was awash with torchlight. A din of bells and whistles reverberated through the air while thundering booms rocked the floor.

A delegation of gnomes, led by Snowball and Niggil, rushed through the open doorway. "We are under attack! Invaders in the upper levels! It is terrible! Come on, we have to go fight them!" shouted Snowball. Gomja practically sprang bolt upright on his bed at all the noise.

"Slow down! What's happening? Who's invading and where?" Teldin demanded. He tried to pull on his shirt and buckle his belt at the same time. Gomja had already grabbed his weapons, ignoring his clothes for the moment. The doorkeeper began, his hands flying as he tried to pantomime the scene. "I do not know how many, but there seem to be quite a few, and they are killing people-"

"Quiet," rumbled the giffs deep voice, authoritative in all the confusion. "Answer the commander's question. "Where? Keep it short, gnome." The dark, warlike look on Gomja's face chilled any argument from the assembled tinkers. Teldin nodded his approval to Gomja.

"Level thirty. They're hovering over the lake in a big ship-"

"Who's attacking?" Gomja pressed, trying to extract precious information from the skittish lot. Teldin grabbed his spear and was ready.

Snowball, Niggil, and the others looked at each other, confusion clear on their faces. "We do not know, but Thromvangilherskisl-" Snowball began a fellow gnome's endless name, only to be cut short by Gomja's growl. The gnome gulped and tried again. "He says there are big creatures with funny eyes and little, talking spiders with the heads of snakes, and they-"

"It's neogi and umber hulks," Teldin confirmed. Gomja nodded. "The big ones, umber hulks, are the fighters. The little spiders are neogi, the brains," the human quickly explained, seeing the gnomes' vacant looks. For safety's sake, he made sure the cloak was at its smallest dimensions, a collar about his neck.

"Are you fighting or running?" the giff continued in his questioning.

"Well, the Weapons Guild wants to test its new inventions, but those in the Shipbuilder's Guild do not, because they are worried about the Unquenchable, and the Glass-blower's Guild is too busy trying to move its works out of the way in time," Snowball explained, pointing in a different direction to show where each group was working. Niggil grabbed his sleeve in violent disagreement. "No, the glassmakers are over there, not-"

"It's as I feared, sir," Gomja said, stepping over to Teldin and not even bothering to listen to two gnomes. "No proper organization, no one seems to be in charge. Even if they are outnumbered, the neogi are certain to capture the upper levels-maybe the entire mountain-if this is all the resistance they meet."

Teldin, his nerves shaken by the neogi's appearance, steered the giff away from their hosts. "What do you think we should do?"

The two fell into private conference, leaving the gnomes to argue. Neither group paid notice of the other. Gomja wanted to mount an immediate counterattack, arguing that attacking was the only way to win. Teldin glanced at the gnomes with their hodgepodge of weapons and overruled the giff. They needed to stall the attackers until the gnomes could recover from the surprise. A violent rumble from the central shaft brought Teldin and Gomja's hurried discussion to an end. Before the gnomes would pay attention however, Teldin had to separate Snowball and Niggil, by now almost to blows.

"Listen to me!" the human shouted, infuriated with the dissension among the tinkers. "Listen! You're going to lose Mount Nevermind if you keep arguing like you've been. You," Teldin commanded, pointing at Broz, who stood in the back, "you find your leaders and tell them Mount Nevermind has been attacked by the neogi, who will kill every gnome in the place unless action is taken right away. Stress that all the guilds must work together to win. Now get going!" Cowed by the anger in Teldin's voice, Broz nodded in understanding, his jaw slack. Still, the appointed messenger did not move until Teldin took a threatening step toward him. All at once, the fat, short gnome found his legs and darted away.

Teldin turned back to the rest of the gnomes, who were already beginning

another argument, and laid his strong hands on the shoulders of Snowball and Niggil. The latter, terrified of the human, tried to squirm away. "Now the rest you, listen!" Teldin shouted over the noise. "Sergeant Gomja and I will try to set up some defense. Everyone in my half of the room stand with Snowball." Teldin gave the gnome an encouraging shake. "The rest of you are to go with Niggil and Sergeant Gomja and do exactly as the sergeant tells you. Any questions?"

The mouth of every gnome opened to speak, and Teldin realized he had just made a serious tactical error.

"Good!" the giff bellowed in a parade-ground shout before a single word could be spoken.

"Then everyone's in agreement!" the human continued with a nod toward his companion. "So let's go!" That said, Teldin and Gomja hustled the gnomes into the hail, moving them along before any could think of even a single question or new idea.

Teldin nodded the giff aside. "Gomja, you know more about fighting than I do, so you'll have to take whatever's hardest." The farmer felt some shame at the statement, feeling as though he were putting his friend at unnecessary risk. "Thank you, sir," the sergeant said brightly. "That would be the main shaft. Lots of ways for the enemy to get down. Don't worry, I'll take care of it, sir."

"I know you will," Teldin agreed, though he lacked the giff's confidence in their situation. The neogi were coming for him, and a lot of people were going to get hurt because of it. The farmer felt like a plague carrier, involuntarily spreading death wherever he went. "Where should I go?" The giff wrinkled his brow in thought, more used to following orders than making plans. "The staircases, I guess, sir. See if you can block those so the enemy can't get down that way.

"All right," the farmer agreed. He was not at all certain how he would accomplish it. "Good luck, Sergeant Gomja." The giff was already beyond earshot, herding his unruly band down the hail.

Grabbing Snowball and his troops, Teldin set off to the left, toward the supposedly "improved" staircases. Teldin tried to formulate a plan. All that seemed to come to mind was to gather the gnomes in the area and organize a barricade. The human explained his simple idea to Snowball, playing on the gnome's vanity for cooperation. With a promised rank of second-in-command, the gnome eagerly helped work out the plan.

At the staircase, Teldin saw the improvements added by the engineers to "make the stairs faster." The width of each step had been cut in half and replaced by a smooth, semicircular groove. The curling, circular staircase was now half stairs, half slide. Pistons could be triggered at each level to divert the slide into the hallway, where the descender shot across the floor and into a thick wall of mattresses, hopefully to come to a safe stop. Even as he worked to organize the barricade, gnomes from the upper levels shot by and disappeared, shrieking into the distance. Teldin didn't know if their screams were caused by the neogi or their hair-raising method of transport. Stopping as many as he could, the human, with Snowball's assistance, pressed the newcomers into service. Two of his crew, sent hustling off to look for an armory, came back with a mismatched assortment of weapons: swords, axes, hammers, and things Teldin could not identify. The farmer had to break up several arguments over who got to wield which weapon.

As he questioned Snowball, Teldin learned there were four staircases on this level. With only one barricaded and guarded, there was little time to waste. The farmer took a random guess and appointed the most sensible-looking gnome of the lot to command this station. After carefully explaining what he wanted done, the human assigned a few of his crew to remain on guard, then gathered the rest, some of whom already had managed to wander away, and hurried to the next stair. From somewhere above, the booms and crashes of battle seemed to grow louder.

At the second staircase, the task was complicated by the discovery of a

bizarrely built catapult, a ballista designed to fire ten bolts at once, so that they went "around corners, too," according to one of the crewmen who dragged the device through the halls. The engineers had been wheeling it toward the center when Snowball had found them. "It's just what we need!" the doorkeeper shouted, and, before Teldin could stop him, the artillerymen were drafted to their cause. At the staircase, the yeoman tried to arrange it so the ballista was as far from everyone as possible, but the gnomes insisted on placing the device in the front lines. With grave misgivings, Teldin continued to the third staircase.

While they were in the midst of setting up defenses at the next station, a gnome, riding the slide from above, suddenly diverted to their level and shot through their numbers. Skidding across the floor, he slammed into the wall of mattresses with a loud phlooph! and a swirl of feathers. Once pulled from the padding, the refugee staggered back to the landing to inspect the slide.

Teldin and the other gnomes, curious to see what the new arrival was looking at, packed themselves in the doorway. A trickle of water appeared from around the curve of the staircase and ran down the center of the slide.

"Oops," the new arrival said, spotting the water. Ears perked up among the group.

"Oops?" Teldin asked. With his back to Snowball and the other gnomes, the human did not notice that those at the rear of the group had already turned to run. "Oops" was a universal danger signal for gnomes. Behind Teldin, Snowball and the few gnomes still remaining edged carefully away from the landing. The gnome looked up. "Yep, oops," the little fellow answered, nodding his head. "Looks like the Water Guild tried to flush out the enemy." In the distance there was a faint rumbling noise. The trickle of water had widened a little in that time.

"Flush out? How?" Teldin asked, not understanding what the gnome meant.

Snowball, the only gnome of Teldin's crew that remained, quietly turned and ran.

"Well, I'm not a Water Guildsman, mind you," the gnome began, his speech gradually increasing in speed, "but I would guess that they opened the main valves on the water mains from the big lake and now there are, let's see-" The gnome stopped to make some calculations, wiggling his fingers as he thought- "a lot of water coming down! Bye!" Before the human could argue, the gnome leaped on the slide and disappeared.

"Wait!" Teldin shouted. "Do you mean that-"

"Yes!" echoed back the reply, almost drowned out by the growing rumble from above. That was enough for the farmer. Turning to warn his crew, he discovered they were all gone. "Snowball," he screamed, "damn it, get back here!"

Then the flush-out hit. At first it was only a wave washing about Teldin's legs. The staircase behind him had turned into a waterfall, water splashing down the steps and swirling down the coiled shaft. Most of the flood roared past to disappear farther down the stairwell. Then, all at once, the pressure became too great and the cascade became a solid blast. The algae-rich lake water burst through the doorway and slammed the farmer full in the face.

Without a chance to even struggle for his footing, Teldin was swept backward down the hail. He floundered and struggled, trying not to drown, but the surging water bashed him from wall to wall, rounding corners in an endless rush. Teldin choked and sputtered and struggled to break the surface, but the hallway was filled. The current dragged him along the tunnel's rough rock face, which ripped his shirt and skin on its sandpaperlike surface. His body hurtled into doorjambs and debris, battering the farmer nearly senseless. Finally, half-drowned and scraped raw, Teldin broke the surface, gagging and sputtering. The crest of the flood had passed, but the current carried the limp human swiftly through the corridors. He was barely aware of what was happening and feebly clawed at passing projections, trying to stop his progress.

Then he heard an echoing roar, deeper than the high-pitched crash of the waves, a roar that came from somewhere ahead. Teldin turned to see the end of

the corridor, where it opened into the central shaft of Mount Nevermind. The carrying flood swept out onto the ledge and plunged over the edge into darkness. Desperately Teldin tried to brace his feet on the bottom, only to have them swept out from under him. He splashing and clutched at a shape, but it was only a crate that bobbed underneath his grasp. Rolling around, the farmer saw he was only seconds from the edge of the chasm.

At the very edge Teldin saw a barrel-lift just to the left. He lunging outward, and his fingers grazed the wooden rim, then slipped away. With a frantic flail, his arm wrapped around a rope. The farmer clung to the slender line, his body swinging out over open space. Water from above battered the human, as if trying to knock him loose. A small body smashed against his shoulder and disappeared into the darkness.

Looking through the spray, Teldin saw the barrel he had lunged for just above him. The rope he clung to was the other half of the lift and somewhere above it looped over a big pulley and ended at the barrel. Somewhere below was the counterweight.

Teldin wrapped his legs around the hemp, then began to carefully slide down. The rope creaked and groaned, but the farmer paid it no mind until he realized, to his amazement, that he was moving up, not down. Even as his dazed brain tried to figure this out, the barrel on the other end dropped past him. The wooden gondola was filled to the brim with water, and as more crashed into it from above, the force drove it down farther and faster. Teldin, in turn, rose higher and faster. Before he could stop it, the lean human was rocketing to the upper levels.

Teldin wanted to scream, but the cry was driven back into his throat. Looking up, he saw a massive disk forming out of the darkness. As he sped toward it, the drenched climber suddenly realized it was the pulley. He thought briefly about his hands being dragged over the metal wheel. With a wild, frantic kick he swung the rope toward the outer edge of the shaft, and at the height of the swing, Teldin let go, praying the momentum was enough to carry him to safety. The wild lunge carried Teldin to one of the landings. He tried to land on his feet, but, soaking wet and slippery, he crashed to the floor. With an almost audible crack, his temple hit the stone. Teldin's eyes suddenly flashed bright sparks, then darkness settled upon him.

Chapter Twenty-one

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"To the Chamber of Pain take meat you shall," the leading neogi whispered to the red-brown brute carrying Teldin. The human, stripped of his weapon and slung over the beast's shoulder, craned around to see the neogi scuttling about. Teldin's head throbbed and he had trouble focusing. The horrid little creature swam before his eyes.

Hanging limply across the umber hulk's shoulder, such as it was, Teldin's chest banged against the creature's bony hide. Gradually his head stopped swimming and he could see around him again, albeit upside-down and across the back of a smelly, plate-covered creature. From his position, though, the human had a fairly good view of the back of the beast's feet, and somehow he was not surprised to see the creature's talons gouging the solid rock floor like soft sand. Each glimpse of the cracked, yellow claws accentuated the agony of the equally powerful hand that dug into Teldin's back, holding him in place.

Teldin caught fleeting upside-down glimpses of the corridors and rooms they passed, but he had no idea where he was. He counted five of his captors. At least one neogi and four freakish umber hulks were in his group, of that much he was certain. The escort plodded through the halls, the noise of cracking stone and clicking mandibles echoing with every step. Just as Teldin thought he knew where he was, the caravan reached a stair, still dripping from the gnomish flood, and disoriented him again.

After climbing several levels, the group struck off through the corridors again. The pace was brisk; apparently, the neogi was trying to spirit its

captive out of the gnome warrens as quickly as possible. Along the route were clear signs of battle: shattered walls, broken machines, bloodstains, and bodies. Most of the dead were gnomes; only a few were umber hulks, and none were neogi. In several instances, the neogi leader ordered its slaves to collect the corpses until the beasts were loaded down with bodies. Bloody streaks darkened their rust-brown hides.

When the sanguinary caravan finally reached the outdoors, Teldin found himself once again looking at the crater lake. The neogi's choice of direction was now clear, for hovering over the water below was a massive ship-or creature. From his vantage point, Teldin couldn't be sure.

Whatever the thing was, it looked like a gigantic spider, divided into three parts. The rear section, blood red and larger than the rest, was egg-shaped with an underbelly, if one could call it that, lined with veinlike courses. This abdomen loomed fat and plump in the starlit sky over the tiny Unquenchable. From its broad end protruded a smaller section, looking much like the head. A thick, curved, gray mantle covered the forward part while glowing hemispherical ports gave the impression of malevolent eyes glaring down at its prey, the hapless little sidewheeler.

A tight cluster of slender spars, jointed like gigantic legs, were affixed at the front of the head. Four swept to the rear, arching above and below the main hull, and each tapered to a point. Four others reached out to the front, probing into the darkness. Teldin could only see the spars as the spider's legs, completing the image of an immense, bloated arachnid hovering in the sky. Gossamer sails, woven like vast cobwebs, stretched between the tips, trembling on the slightest breeze. More webs, strung like ladders, reached from the abdomen of the hovering thing to the shore. The ship was a maleficent spider weaving its web over the helpless Unquenchable.

Teldin's ride, forced as it was, became rougher as the umber hulk scrambled down the talus slope. For once the yeoman was thankful for the creature's gripping claws, though its bony hide scraped his chest nearly raw. Finally it reached the bottom of the slope and grabbed a webbed ladder. The farmer expected the massive beast to tear through the thin hawsers but the cables were far stronger than they seemed. The ladder swayed and tossed as the immense bulk ascended toward the ship's belly. Teldin could clearly see the gnome sidewheeler floating in the water below. While he knew it was undamaged, the ship looked like little more than floating wreckage.

The swaying stopped and darkness closed about Teldin as the umber hulk struggled off the ladder and into the neogi ship's hold. Apparently the neogi did not feel the need for lights, since none of several commands the leader hissed involved illumination. The words were foreign, but Teldin felt he understood them. "Dead meat take to food lockers," the foul thing told its slaves. "Live meat take to Chamber of Pain. Live meat guard well, and see it escape does not."

"I obey, small lord," rumbled Teldin's keeper, its chest trembling beneath his legs.

"Do it, lordservant." A scrabbling series of clicks told Teldin the neogi had departed. He was unable to follow their progress in the darkness, and Teldin could do nothing but let himself be carried to some new destination. Somewhere along the way, the umber hulk climbed a ladder, pressing its claws into Teldin's back and causing warm blood to seep into the weave of his shirt. Held helpless, he gave up his ideas of escape.

The umber hulk reached another deck, no brighter than the previous, walked a short distance, then stopped. Teldin heard the rattling of a lock, then the faint creak of a well-oiled door. With a savage clench to the ankles, the beast swung the human off its back and hurled him through the doorway to crash to the floor, skinning his body even more. Teldin heard the door slam and the lock drop into place.

Teldin huddled on the floor in the darkness for he didn't know how long, his mind shut down in shock. Eventually self-preservation took hold and the farmer pulled himself up. "Don't sit there! Do something!" he cursed under his

breath. Teldin carefully began to crawl on his raw knees across the prison's floor, feeling his way. Groping along this way, the captive bumped into several tables, each of them bare, though he could feel the tops were scarred and scored. There was a smell in the air, the faded suggestion of a sweetly thick odor. What was it that seemed so familiar? As he surveyed the cell's dimensions, the mule skinner in Teldin remembered the odor, a long-forgotten scent from the war. It was blood, dried and stale to be sure, but blood just the same. Suddenly fearful in the darkness, Teldin pressed himself against the wall, trying to melt into it, fighting the panic that rose from his core. "Keep going!" the farmer snarled at himself, whispering the words through clenched teeth. He thought of Amdar, scowling at his weak son, remembering the disappointment so clearly etched in his father's face. The grim memory stiffened Teldin's resolve; he would not fail this time. He would meet every one of his dead father's expectations. Painfully, slowly, the trembling yeoman moved forward, fingers following the wall. He desperately tried not to think about the smell, the blood, the scarred tables, the "human meat," as the neogi had called him. Scratching the metallic surface, the farmer finally touched something different. Fingers eagerly caressed the surface until it was clear that it was the hinge of the door. There was almost a sense of hopes that the joints might offer some chance of escape.

It was while he was probing the door that Teldin heard faint voices from the other side. He pressed his ear to the metal and strained to make out what was being said.

"...human I found and brought. My property he is. Tattoo him I will!" snarled the first voice. Teldin could only guess that the speaker was his neogi captor. While he magically understood their speech, the nuances were still beyond him. The words were distinctive enough, though.

"Overmaster you defy, M'phei. Human meat overmaster claims until found is the cloak." Although not raised, the second voice spoke with clear menace. "Here cloak is, overmaster believes. A giff with gnomes, reports say. A giff went with human, groundlings said."

"If my meat overmaster wants, in pit overmaster I will meet," M'phei promised. "Human meat and cloak who will get we will see. If cloak I have, benefit greatly my friends do. This world with cloak the overmaster could enslave." There was a long pause. The second voice started speaking, softer than before, as if the speaker were walking around. "...loudly you speak not. Nearby overmaster is."

The first voice spoke again, louder and stronger than before. "Growing old overmaster is. Another yrthni ma'adi in fleet may be soon." Teldin barely understood the meaning of the word yrthni ma'adi. The literal translation-which the cloak imparted?-was "great old master."

"...cloak find?" The words were drawn out, tempting.

"Ah, cloak. Key human meat is and give it up meat will." Even without understanding nuances, there was no mistaking the triumphant gloat in the neogi's voice.

Teldin unconsciously touched his hand to his throat. The silver chain and clasp were still there. Feeling the back of his neck, the cloak still was little more than a strip of cloth, and the whole thing felt like no more than a necklace or amulet. The farmer wondered what would happen if he just gave up the cloak-if he could get it off. Could he convince the neogi to let him go? Teldin refocused his thoughts on listening for more.

"Discuss I will not until..." Teldin had no idea what the two voices were now debating, but it did not matter, since the voices trailed off. The captive kept his ear pressed to the door, but there was no more.

Slowly the farmer let his body slide to the floor, his long limbs slowly folding underneath him. Part of his spirit sank into despair. The neogi's meanings seemed clear; Teldin could not imagine any other "human meat" on board the black ship. Apparently the creatures knew about the cloak. Indeed, it seemed they knew more about its purpose than he ever imagined. The neogi wanted it desperately, enough to trail him halfway across a continent and

slaughter untold numbers of innocents. Now that the creatures had him, Teldin had few doubts about the extremes to which they would go to attain their goal. The farmer thought of the Penumbra, Liam, Vandoom, and the-gods-knew-how-many gnomes. How many more had the neogi killed searching for the cloak? Teldin tried not to consider the bloody responsibility that rested on his shoulders, but he failed to drive the thought from his conscience. For a moment, the human's thoughts sank to resignation, surrender, and sacrifice to prevent more death.

Still, there was a small spark of promise that kept Teldin from utter despair. Apparently, while they had him, the neogi did not know their human prisoner wore the cloak. That, the farmer guessed was all that kept him alive. Teldin squatted against the door and tried once more at the clasp, hoping to get it unfastened. With it off, his numbed mind rationalized, he would be free from its burden and the neogi might even let him go.

As he fumbled with the chain, the face of the dying alien came into his mind. The spelljammer captain had perished rather than surrender to the neogi. She had taken an entire ship and her crew to their deaths, taken them by choice. How many more had died to keep it from the neogi's grasping little hands? Teldin wondered. Could he give up, or would surrendering now be a betrayal of the captain and perhaps others, even his father? Worse still, the neogi had hinted that the cloak could enslave whole planets. How many untold innocents would be killed then? Almost sadly, he realized the cloak could not be given away, at least not to them. It felt as if Amdar and hundreds of others all had spectral eyes trained on him, a lone human captive in a shipful of the enemy. A thumping vibration came through the floor. Alerted, Teldin pressed close to the door and listened. Without light, there was no distraction from his sense of hearing, and the human discovered this sense was more acute than he suspected. Through the wall, the thumps ended in clicks, and Teldin guessed they were the footfalls of the huge lordservants, the beetle-headed umber hulks. "Door open," a voice hissed. Futilely trying to hide, Teldin scrambled backward in the dark, until he cracked his head against the edge of a table. The prison door swung open and light from a lantern streamed through the doorway, blinding the dazed farmer, who could only sit blinking at the glare. Silhouetted in the door was a pair of umber hulks, while behind and between them was a small neogi, holding a lantern high. Farther back were more of its kind, twisting to catch sight of their prey. Lantern light glinted off the lordservants' mandibles and the neogi's yellow eyes.

"Lordservants meat grab, kill not," ordered the neogi. The two umber hulks leisurely rumbled forward, confident in their own might. Teldin avoided the gaze of their multifaceted outer eyes, focusing instead on the small, beady pair at the center of each of their broad faces. Nonetheless, the farmer could not help but glance at the strange orbs, and the minute he did his mind felt fogged and confused, like the time he'd gotten sunstroke working in the fields. It was a struggle to think, to act, but his mind would not obey, and the lordservants were on him before he could even formulate a thought. Seizing the human roughly, clawed hands gouged skin and the beasts slammed their victim onto a table, then ruthlessly pinioned his arms and legs. Shoulder joints strained as one of the lordservants pressed Teldin's arms backwards over the edge of the table.

"Me lift up," rasped a sinister voice. From out of Teldin's sight, a third lordservant mutely hoisted a neogi to where the human could see the creature, a ball of flesh and legs gently cradled in the monster's arms. The little body was tattooed with brilliant designs of red and gold, marking it clearly as different from the creature who had captured Teldin. The neogi twisted its neck about and looked over its prisoner's scraped, cut, and bleeding body. The creature's eyes gleamed with feral hunger.

"Cloak you know where is," the neogi intoned with leisurely sibilance, its fanged maw barely inches from the farmer's face. The words were a statement, not a question. The neogi tipped its serpentine head toward one of the lordservants. Already crushing Teldin's wrists, the umber hulk pressed down on

the human's spread-eagled arms. The yeoman heard his shoulder joints creak while his vision dimmed, tunneling down until he could see only his tormenter's black-gummed, gleaming teeth. The pain roared in his head-for seconds or minutes, Teldin did not know. Then, gradually, the pressure subsided. "Cloak you tell where is," the leering eel face promised. "But not yet. First play I must." It smiled, or at least showed its teeth, in a gruesome mockery of friendship, and then signaled the lordservant once again. The pain rushed back in on Teldin, distorting his senses. He was keenly aware of sweat running down his temples, soaking his hair, and the roaring noise that returned to fill his mind with grinding and hammering. Shoulders popped and cracked, biceps burned. All he could see was a single point on the ceiling. Time became meaningless. At last, the tearing pressure eased again and faded to a steady burn of his tortured muscles.

"Again," instructed the neogi in a whisper just loud enough for Teldin to hear.

The torment flooded back, swallowing the farmer in it. Once more it faded, then returned again at a word. The cycle continued endlessly-peace, pressure, suffering, then peace again. The torture pulled a scream from the victim's lips, one he could not stop even when his throat was raw.

"Enough," commanded the neogi again. Teldin, his arms wrenched and twisted, hardly noticed the difference when the umber hulk let go. He didn't feel himself lying on the table, panting in choked spasms. Slowly the neogi's face, floating overhead, swam before his eyes. The beast reached down with spidery legs and dragged the tips across his chest. They were surprisingly sharp, slicing the remains of Teldin's shirt and pulling the sweat-and blood-soaked rags from the human's bare skin. In his current state, the farmer could only eye the neogi with mute terror and rage.

"You perhaps now talk," the neogi murmured, its face pressed close to Teldin's ear, "but I want to listen not yet." The razorlike limb tips etched Teldin's shuddering chest, slowly creating a web of thin cuts across the skin.

"Overmaster," hissed a familiar voice, "mine to tattoo meat is!" The enraged neogi stopped its bloody tracings and drove the claw tips into Teldin's chest. Though not deep, the punctures ignited pain. The farmer writhed under the touch, only to have the immense lordservants wrench him back down onto the table.

"Bold my quastoth, kin slave M'phei, grows. Will overmaster challenge?" said the torturer to the hidden speaker. "This meat I take, then remove unnecessary parts I will- first a tongue." The neogi glared at its opponent.

There was a scrabbling noise near Teldin's head, the clicking walk of a neogi.

"Confused overmaster is. Without tongue, meat will talk never about cloak," the voice, M'phei's, shot back. "Perhaps ready to join yrthni ma'adi overmaster is."

The golden-skinned neogi, the captain, the overmaster, from what Teldin understood, jerked its head up with a rasping hiss. Struggling in the arms of its lordservant, the neogi lunged outward, making a biting snap at the air in M'phei's direction. "Overmaster I am. Quastoth, slave kin you are. You threaten me not!"

Moving slowly, Teldin painfully managed to turn his head enough to see the other neogi. He judged by its tattooed colors and the hissing voice that it was the creature that had captured him. "Tattoo meat I will, not overmaster," M'phei coolly answered. The overmaster bristled in rage. "Unless," the challenger continued, "overmaster's errors all quastorh to know overmaster wants."

Teldin was not quite sure why, but the other neogi abruptly paused, then slowly returned to his upright position. "Human meat you will have, quastoth M'phei, but cloak I claim." The words came out in icy, venomous tones, clear even to the cloakmaster's untutored ears.

"Quickly do it then, overmaster," M'phei said with equal vehemence, "or remember your errors again I will."

The gold-hued overmaster clicked his teeth in a fierce snap, then turned once

more to Teldin. The eelly creature lowered its head until its razorlike teeth brushed the farmer's ear. It whispered, "The Reigar's cloak is where?" Teeth clenched tightly to suppress the rivers of torment inside him, Teldin fought to keep from shivering. The farmer could feel the neogi's fetid breath on his neck, making the muscles tighten and cramp, as if parts of his own body were trying to crawl away from the creature. "I don't know," the human slowly said, articulating each word with excessive care to prevent all his other feelings from rushing out. Greatest of these was the urge to manifest the cloak in hopes that it could protect him. Frantically Teldin drove back that thought before the magic took effect.

There was a snap and a sudden burning pain in his ear. Teldin's back arched with a jerk, only to have the umber hulks slam him down again. The neogi rose back up, its mouth bloodied and a piece of Teldin's ear dangling between its jaws. "Cloak is where?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Teldin screamed, his face contorted in pain. The lordservants yanked at his arms, reviving the shearing agony. The dimly lit room started to go gray, swirling into oblivion.

"Overmaster, my meat maim not!" shrilled M'phei's voice. "Meat must be whole or your errors I report. Work meat must do. No broken bones, no torn limbs."

"No broken bones," the overmaster sullenly agreed, "yet."

For Teldin, the speakers were growing distant and faint and the pain grew less and less. He only vaguely heard the overmaster's voice, filled with disgust.

"It talks not yet. Lordservants, fill meat with pain, but mutilate body not."

There was a strange clicking and buzzing voice as one of the umber hulks replied. "Yes, little master. Your slaves do as little master commands." With the words came a searing pain, then darkness and nothing.

Chapter Twenty-two

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It was later. How much later, Teldin did not know, for time had been replaced by a wheel of pain and numbness. There were centuries where the lordservants towered over him, clicking their mandibles as they pulled and twisted Teldin's inert body. The centuries were broken by hours when the overmaster appeared to ask Teldin a single question in its stilted tongue: "Cloak is where?"

Sometimes Teldin thought of answering, just to end the pain, but each time something else in him stopped the answer from coming.

The farmer struggled to hold the cloak at bay, keep it from doing anything.

Teldin knew that if he slipped and let the cape make the slightest sign, everything was lost, his life and possibly even his world. So far the human had managed to deny the overmaster his prize, but each refusal brought another century of pain, followed by the oblivion of unconsciousness.

At one point, the farmer dimly feared all his resistance was for nothing. The umber hulks, searching for some new torment, noticed the thin cord and silver clasps, all that showed of the cloak the neogi sought, around Teldin's neck. Fearful that the lordservants would try to remove it and discover his secret, he feebly tried to raise an arm to push them off, but the best he could manage was a weak wave of one hand. Arrogantly, one of the creatures batted his hand with a wave of its own claw, ending the attempt. The farmer's hand burned from the savage blow.

For all his pain, luck had not abandoned Teldin. The clasp was small compared to the umber hulks' grotesque claws, and they were unable to work the silver buckle. Neither could they slip their talons between the chain and his neck, except perhaps by gouging Teldin's throat. Under orders not to mutilate or kill, the umber hulks gave it up and returned to the better understood agonies of their trade. It was then that finally, blissfully, Teldin passed out and remained unconscious.

From this moment of non time Teldin slowly awoke and recovered. He still lay on the table, stained with his own blood. A lantern in one corner cast a dim light over the slaughterhouse. To the captive's numb surprise, his torturers

were gone; indeed the room, or as much as the farmer could see of it, was deserted. They had left him alone and unbound, but it mattered little, since Teldin barely had the strength to roll his head from side to side. Finally tiring of staring at the tongue-and-grooved ceiling planks' knots and whorls, Teldin began to take inventory of himself. His chest was crossed with thin lines of dried blood and raw patches caused during the flood. More blood caked his hair and clotted around his bitten ear, muffling his hearing on the left side. The lordservants had done their work well, mangling, twisting, and pulling every joint in his body. Still, he had all his limbs and, in accordance with the neogi's orders, none seemed broken or even dislocated. Every inch felt bruised, and his face, especially, was puffy from beatings. "I must be a handsome fellow," Teldin croaked, his throat parched. "It's time to go," he told Gomja's image, standing over him. Astonished, he blinked, and the giff was gone, replaced by Amdar, as unsmiling as ever. "If it's worth doing, it's worth doing tight," the old man's ghost preached. As quickly as it had appeared, Amdar's face disappeared into the planking above. With excruciating effort, enough to force tears to his eyes, the farmer swung off the edge of the table and stood unsteadily on his feet. He clutching the table for support, then ventured with jerky steps across the room. Slowly and painstakingly, the human tottered toward the door. Incomprehensibly, the portal swung open as he neared it, and there, blocking his path, was a party of umber hulks and neogi. Teldin's mind was too numb to be surprised, and he could not read the malevolent expressions on the neogi's faces. In the forefront, though safely behind the lordservants, were the golden-tattooed overmaster and M'phei. The overmaster's small claws snapped in triumph. "There," the neogi gloatingly hissed. "You see, unharmed human meat is. Warned you were, quastoth M'phei, my patience test not too far." "True, meat lives," the other neogi sourly conceded, "but tell you nothing it has. Useless meat will be with more persuasion." "No longer important that is." The overmaster signaled an umber hulk to seize Teldin. The beast ducked through the small door and easily caught the exhausted farmer in its grasp. "To yrthni-ma'adi meat will be given." M'phei's eight clawed feet rattled on the metallic floor in anger. "No! This you do not. My capture human meat was. My slave it is!" The neogi made a snapping lunge for the overmaster. One of the lordservants seized the enraged M'Phei and restrained it. The golden neogi ignored the outburst. "Overmaster I am and feeding yrthni-ma'adi my responsibility is. This meat I claim for feeding. That my right is." "Expose you I will, overmaster!" the other hissed. Hoisted up by its lordservant, the overmaster smiled evilly. "You will not. Against your overmaster witnesses have heard you speak. Revolt of my quastoth I tolerate not. This you risk or human meat for feeding I take." M'phei paled, its tattoos gaining an ashy gray color. Futilely, the neogi tried another tack. "Cloak-" "Revealed will be, if cloak human meat has," the overmaster hissed softly so that Teldin, as groggy as he was, had to strain to hear the words. "Cloak protect meat it will, certain I am. Cloakmaster it will let die not and then know I will." M'phei looked hungrily toward Teldin. "Eating this one I hoped," it said plaintively. "Other meat will be. Rich in meat this world is," the overmaster curtly announced. "With me to feeding you come-as my guest." There was no warmth in the overmaster's voice, only the cold calculation of keeping an enemy close in its sight. Teldin, still listening, doubted these creatures knew any love or charity. "Time it is. Lordservant-to the pit." The overmaster's umber hulk carried the neogi through the ship's corridors. Teldin's guard pushed the staggering human along behind, while M'phei brought up the rear. This time the route was well lighted, which the yeoman could only

assume was to honor the overmaster. The group went down a deck, other neogi gradually falling in behind. Teldin noticed a few non-neogi cowering in the corners as the overmaster went past. These were a smattering of humans, gnomes, and elves, watching from the shadows with a haunted look in their eyes. Teldin could clearly see the elaborate tattoo each bore on his shoulder, marking the poor soul as neogi property.

Finally the group reached an improvised pen in the middle of the cargo hold. It was enclosed by solid walls more than fifteen feet high, which were braced with a motley assembly of beams, as if to hold back some great pressure. A narrow gallery circled the top of the walls and was reached by reinforced stairs.

"Wait," the overmaster ordered the prisoner's guard. The umber hulk clicked its huge pincers in understanding. While Teldin stood on the deck, slowly trying to regain his strength, the lordservants hoisted their neogi masters up to the balcony, since it was clear that the small catwalk would never support the huge slaves.

The balcony quickly became clustered with neogi, their bodies tattooed in a variety of ways and colors. Here the overmaster was clearly supreme, the other neogi keeping a respectful distance from where it stood. Only M'phei was close by, glaring hatefully whenever the overmaster's attention was elsewhere. At last the neogi overmaster gave the signal for Teldin to be brought up. The brown-plated umber hulk prodded Teldin up the strengthened stairs, staying close behind him. Once on the catwalk, the umber hulk pushed Teldin toward the edge of the pit. At the far corners, several neogi hung lanterns on poles and swung these out over the void.

The bobbing lights filled the pen with shadowy shapes, some real, others only brief interplays of light and dark. Teldin sensed danger and resisted the umber hulk's prodding as he desperately scanned the shadows for the source of his fears. His vigilance was rewarded when a bloated, dark bulk slowly twisted and heaved across the floor. Moving into the fitful light, the dark blob metamorphosed into a grotesque parody of the vile neogi. Where the overmaster and the others were small, no larger than a strong dog, the thing in the pit was immense. The bulk of it was a shuddering mass about the size of a wagon or more, the flesh falling in thick, sagging folds. Its dull white skin was covered by overstretched tattoos and a network of purple veins. It had the appearance of a gigantic maggot. The body shuddered and heaved as the creature turned its head toward Teldin. There was the face of a neogi, all evil eyes and ravenous teeth, but the neck was buried in the folds of fat. Tiny, shriveled hands protruded from the ball of flesh, and the eight legs that gave the neogi its distinctive spidery appearance were nothing but atrophied stumps. The yrrhni-ma'adi, the great old master, struggled to climb up the sides of the pit with labored breath, only to slide slowly back to the deck. Teldin pushed against the umber hulk's claws that forced him forward, but, weakened as he was, the human slowly lost ground. Two toes slipped over the edge. A hissing chant rose from the neogi, eager for the spectacle to begin. "Stop!" the overmaster snapped, striking the umber hulk to convey the command. "On platform him you put."

"Yes, little master," the lordservant intoned. With pressure behind him gone, Teldin quickly stepped back from the edge.

"Cloak you produce," the overmaster demanded of Teldin, "before to yrthni-ma'adi I feed you." The overmaster pointed to the thing in the pit. "My quastoth once it was, before too old and feeble it became. Now, more quastoth for me it will breed." The overmaster was interrupted by a grating scream from the creature below. "Your flesh my children hunger for. Tell me!"

Teldin's body trembled, not with fear or exhaustion, but with hysterical rage at his captors. His death was certain, the farmer felt, so it did not matter what he did now. "You'll never find the cloak," he prophesized, abandoning all denials. Teldin spat at the overmaster's face, causing the creature to lunge forward, snapping with rage. The sharp teeth brushed at the cloth of Teldin's pants. Barely recovering its composure, the overmaster wheeled to its

lordservant.

"Out set it!" raged the overmaster. "Out set the meat! Watch it die I will and cloak I then will find."

The umber hulk seized Teldin, pinioned his arms to his side, and swung the human out over the edge. The great old master flowed underneath Teldin, the little head lunging and snapping up at his dangling feet. Set for the end, Teldin awaited the inevitable drop.

To the farmer's surprise, the umber hulk, with its arms fully extended, carefully lowered Teldin onto a small wooden platform about the size of a flagstone. Teldin wobbled before finally gaining his balance. The platform was set atop a pole in the center of the pit, just tall enough to be out of the yrthni-ma 'adi's jaws. This cleverly made sitting impossible, since the creature would then be within reach. Teldin could only remain safe as long as he stood and kept his balance. The creature, knowing this, waited patiently below.

"Until it falls," called out the overmaster from his seat of honor, "meat remains and to their duties my quastoth will return. With me M'phei will stay." The other neogi grumbled, envious of the honor shown M'phei, but they slowly left the balcony.

From his perch, Teldin watched them leave. The human felt as if he were floating in space, so precariously balanced was he. The overmaster watched and waited eagerly. Weak from his tortures, Teldin fought to control the muscle spasms that seized his legs and back. Memories of the pain ached through his joints; exhaustion floated into his muscles. "Fall meat will," the overmaster intoned just as Teldin wavered, struggled to regain his footing, wobbled some more, and finally brought himself back to stability.

Time passed and Teldin somehow managed to remain on the platform. The overmaster watched Teldin constantly, waiting patiently for what the neogi knew must come. Below, the yrthni-ma'adi sat motionless, though now and then its skin rippled and surged, as if something moved just beneath its surface. Finally, it happened. Teldin's eyes closed a little too long and suddenly he was falling.

Chapter Twenty-three

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Teldin hit the fleshy form beneath him with a glancing blow, bounced off onto the open floor, and sprawled into the dirt. The yrthni-ma'adi gave a scream of raw desire and surged toward Teldin in a flowing mass. As the human struggled to his knees, his mind filled with panic and he felt something soft brush the back of his legs.

From above the farmer could hear the overmaster let loose an exultant cry.

"Shown itself cloak has!"

"Damn cloak!" Teldin gasped as he dove to the side, dodging the giant, maggotish old master's lunge. The cloth billowed behind him, just missing being caught in the bloated neogi's jaws. The creature hit the wall with a resounding thud, shaking the overmaster on the platform above. With a screech of pain, the yrthni-ma'adi hauled its bulk around for another attack. Teldin scrambled backward and warily circled away from the creature, trying to keep the small pole of his former perch between them.

The human had no idea how long he had been playing this game of lunge and dodge, nor any idea how much longer he could keep it up. Each breath was a searing gasp of pain. His side was on fire, and the wounds on his chest were bleeding again. With each lunge, the weakened farmer moved a little slower and the jaws of the yrthni-ma'adi snapped a little closer.

"Human meat," taunted the overmaster from above, "soon kinsman avoid not. Your flesh he will eat. Then cloak I will take and most powerful overmaster I will be."

Teldin risked a glance up at the eel-like little face that peered from the darkness. "Why don't you come down and get it, you monster?" he defiantly

breathed. The bloated creature moved in the corner of his eye, and the exhausted yeoman shuffled left, keeping the pole between the two.

"Wait I will, meat. Much longer it will be not," the neogi's voice echoed back. "Wise that is."

Before Teldin could answer, the heaving bulk lunged again, this time straight across the center, ignoring the pole. The light timber snapped like a dry twig under the beast's hurtling mass. The human dove out of the way, wincing as his already pummeled shoulder smashed into the wall. With a screech of frustration, the swollen neogi lunged again with lightning speed. The cloakmaster rolled across the ground and barely managed to get his body clear before the sluglike form crashed into the wall where he had been. A crack of wood echoed through the hold and the walls of the pen trembled. Above, the two neogi, the overmaster and M'phei, clung fearfully to their perches.

Teldin scrambled to his feet before the yrthni-ma'adi recovered, rapping his knuckles against the broken pole. Not daring to take his eyes off the creature, he groped frantically until his fingers closed on the shaft. The farmer awkwardly hefted it, turning the jagged broken end toward the beast. The pole made a long and clumsy spear, but it was better than no weapon at all, and with it Teldin could jab at the bloated form as Gomja had taught him, trying to keep the creature at bay.

Surprised by this sudden counterattack, the beast slowly gave way. Teldin drove it back, until the yrthni-ma'adi crouched along the wall opposite him, fainting first to the left, then right, while the human inexpertly parried each move. Just finishing a thrust to the right, the farmer noticed a crack in the wall alongside him. It was where the beast had crashed before, apparently with enough force to splinter the pen's wooden planking.

The jagged line became a chance in Teldin's mind as he formulated a plan for escape. Feigning exhaustion, he let the pole drop slightly. The great old master lunged forward, only to be brought to a halt as the lanky yeoman snapped the tip up in its path. Quivering with rage, the creature heaved back toward its wall and renewed its lunges and feints with increased intensity, gurgling in frustration. Teldin kept toying with it, driving the beast to even more frantic attempts.

Suddenly the distended creature lunged forward in earnest. Teldin was not ready to put his plan into action, but when he thrust the pole, the great old master was not deterred. The beast hit the shaft squarely; the wood pierced the fleshy body with a squishy pop. The pole was torn from Teldin's grasp and skidded across the deck until it jammed against the wall. The great old master bore down upon the spar, forcing the wood to twist and bend. The beast's pallid, baggy skin tore open in a great rent, oozing yellowish ichor.

Squealing and grunting in half-formed speech, the swollen freak flailed madly, crashing against the pen. The farmer dodged aside, narrowly avoiding pole and flesh as the enraged monster slammed from wall to wall. Abruptly the great old master sagged in a quivering heap, mouthing whimpering moans as its body gurgled and heaved.

"My unborn kin-slaves! My children you hurt, human meat!" the overmaster screamed from overhead. The golden-skinned neogi scrambled forward and peered over the edge, looking down at its freakish progenitor, then glared at the stumbling human. "You great old master slowly eats! Look what you have done." The malevolent spider-eel waved a claw toward the injured grotesquery.

Teldin turned to look, attracted by a sucking, tearing noise that came from the beast. This was not the monster's mewling, but the sound of flesh slowly pulling apart. In the dim light, the human saw the oozing wound from his spear heave, wiggle, then part. A squirming, wormlike shape, about as thick as the farmer's muscular thigh, protruded from the gash. It thrust about, then fell to the deck with a soft, wet plop. Another followed, then a third; on the floor they looked like segmented and slime-covered maggots of obscene size. Even in this larval stage, Teldin could see the needlelike teeth and snakelike heads of tiny neogi. The worms writhed and weakly bit anything their blind faces touched, in venomous imitation of their elders. Repulsed, Teldin watched

in unmoving horror. The deformed parent, perhaps sensing the man's shock, sprang forward at the farmer, launching its bloated body with astounding might. At first unaware of the attack, Teldin barely tore his attention from the vile offspring in time. The farmer pitched to the deck, and the flaccid mass brushed over his back. Ichor from the wound dribbled across him and Teldin barely rolled clear of the crushing weight.

There was a shearing crack mixed with a shrill scream as the bloated neogi rammed into the splintered wall, sending a shock wave through the corpulent mass. The creature's head and tiny chest were mashed to a pulp, mingled with the shattered boards. The cage wall buckled outward, and the braces snapped with thunder-clap cracks. The balcony swayed and crashed to the deck in a rain of wood, followed by the boards of the walls.

The yrthni-ma'adi gave a single bellow, gurgling through its broken face while bubbling up yellowish ichor. The huge body flailed and thrashed, widening the breach. Teldin staggered warily toward the opening, keeping clear of the heaving flesh. New wounds oozed on the creature's sides, spewing more of the mucous-covered hatchlings through its gaping cuts. The slime-coated maggots instinctively wriggled for safety. Teldin winced in pain as one of the little monsters seized his ankle in its razor-sharp teeth. With savage desperation, the farmer kicked the creature free, smashing its soft body against the wall. The limp carcass was immediately set upon by others of its kind, tearing and fighting over the newborn flesh.

Fortunately for Teldin, there was no time to stop and think. The parent monster had stopped its writhing, though the body was still shaken by convulsions. "Meat! My kin-slaves meat kill!" shrilled the overmaster as it clung to its swaying perch on the opposite wall. Teldin didn't wait to hear more. Invigorated by the chance for freedom, he leaped over the old master's shuddering corpse.

He landed on the deck outside the pen, but slipped in a jumble of broken wood and sticky ichor and skidded across the floor, adding just one more agony to his throbbing body. The bloodied human regained his balance, snatched up a fallen lantern, and ran toward what he hoped was the companionway to the ship's upper deck.

There was a crashing noise behind Teldin, a grinding of wood and metal. He risked a glance over his shoulder to see the lantern lights over the pen bob, wave, then sink toward the floor. With one wall collapsed, the whole structure leisurely fell in upon itself. Teldin couldn't tell if the neogi overmaster rode his perch to destruction or if the hateful little creature had managed to escape. He was not about to go back and check.

The doors to the ship's hold loomed ahead. Teldin stopped, afraid to go forward but knowing there was nothing but pain behind him. The air in the gloomy chamber felt stifling and close while the noise of the collapse echoed furiously in the cavernous hold. The farmer was certain the racket could be heard throughout the ship, certain it would put the neogi on alert.

The hollow grating of claws against metal roused the numbed fugitive to action. The overmaster's sibilant voice whispered in the distance. The words were unclear, but the relentless tread of the neogi's lordservant was perfectly heard. Teldin shuttered his lantern so that only a little glow appeared, then he plunged through the doorway and into the hall. He headed left and broke into a loping run, ignoring the pain in his legs and the blood running down his sides. Incongruously, the cloak fluttered out behind him. Teldin cursed it as he ran; it had done nothing to save him and, instead, had brought him closer to death.

The cloakmaster rounded a bend in the corridor and was rewarded with the sight of a ladder leading to an upper deck. He blindly grasped it and clambered up. Below, the umber hulk's clicking toenails faded in the distance.

At the top of the ladder, Teldin poked his head through the hatch. The next deck was dark, so the human hung on the rungs, listening as long as he dared, but there was no sound from the blackness. He hoisted the lantern up and carefully opened a shutter to let a beam of light play over the floor. The

landing was empty, so Teldin sprawled on the cold metal deck, waiting to catch his breath.

It was only after he had stopped panting that the cloakmaster was ready to move again. The overmaster's umber hulk would soon regain the trail, and the longer Teldin stayed here, the sooner it, or another, would find him. Still, he was puzzled by the fact that he had not met another neogi during his flight. It seemed all the more surprising after the pandemonium his escape had created. The ship was too quiet, as if it had been deserted. Partly curious-but mostly running on survival instincts-Teldin took up his lantern and cautiously began exploring again.

The farmer left the landing and was struck by a feeling of familiarity. He checked one of the rooms by pulling open the heavy metal portal and letting the lantern shine in. The beam played over a blood-crustled table.

Panic rose from Teldin's core and grabbed hold of his gut. He slammed the door shut and fell against it, his body seized by uncontrollable shivers so strong that the lantern jiggled and wavered, throwing wild, leaping shadows all around. The farmer-turned-cloakmaster fought to drive away the fear that transformed the leaping shapes into hideous tormenters.

A deep boom, followed by a shudder through the deck, passed unnoticed by Teldin. A second explosion and a third caused no more reaction from the human, but the noises had not gone unnoticed elsewhere. Voices and the hammering of running feet came from the aft, and Teldin realized with apprehension that the ship was not deserted.

The need to act once again drove away his demons, and Teldin headed away from all the noise. Whatever was happening aft meant neogi were there, the fugitive reasoned, and he did not want to run into them. With wavering footsteps, the farmer ducked down a long, gray hallway lined with doors and stopped at each long enough to peer in. The first few he checked contained nothing but junk-old sails, spools of cable, buckets, and spare blocks. Just as he was closing the door on the third, a glint of metal caught his attention. Teldin looked closer and found that it was Eversharp, his spear, shoved into a pile of ethereal sailcloth. Eagerly, the farmer pulled the slender spear from the mass, working it free from a tangle of netting. Tapping the butt against the deck with a solid wooden thump made Teldin feel much better.

The ship shuddered with another explosion. Aware and alert once again, the farmer speculated about the cause. It was either outside or inside, and he guessed inside, probably caused by his escape. Perhaps the yrthni-ma'adi was still alive and rampaging in the hold; perhaps its maggot spawn were responsible. Teldin didn't care, since whatever it was had apparently drawn the neogi and their lordservants aft.

The yeoman pressed on, steadying himself with one hand on the bulkheads at all times. The blasts became more violent, causing the ship to lurch with each thundering roar. "I must have done better than I thought," mumbled Teldin in a daze. He continued the fruitless room-to-room search. While he found no one, nor, more importantly, an exit, each room was more imposing than the last. Teldin drew up at another door, spear poised, hand on handle. "There meat is!" a voice behind him hissed. Teldin almost dropped the lance in surprise, but managed to maintain his composure enough to turn about. With a flick, the human unshuttered the lantern, flooding the hall with light. There at the back of the corridor, hiding its eyes from the unaccustomed brilliance, was the golden-skinned and tattooed overmaster. Its draped robe was tattered and stained, and yellow fluid seeped from cuts and scrapes up and down its neck. Behind it loomed the overmaster's ferocious umber hulk lordservant. Teldin caught a glance of its swirling, multifaceted eyes, his knees suddenly buckled, and he remained standing only by sagging against the bulkhead. "Meat lordservant kill!" screeched the neogi, leaping aside for its slave's rush. The cloakmaster supported himself with one hand on the wall and braced the spear to receive the creature's charge, certain that he was about to fall to the umber hulk's crushing swipes. Nonetheless, Teldin was determined to fight to his last. The umber hulk steadily advanced, building speed with each step,

claws sweeping the ground before it.

Aloud, explosive crack, followed immediately by another, brought the umber hulk's menacing advance to an abrupt halt. The bone-plated beast jerked upright and let loose a chattering squeal as its mandibles ground and clattered in rage and surprise. The beast lurched forward for half a step, propelled by invisible blows from behind, then whirled about with its arms out-flung. The umber hulk's huge talons gouged furrows through the metal bulkheads. Teldin saw a pair of splintered, bloody holes in the creature's bony hide, just over the left shoulder.

"Second section-spears at ready!" boomed a familiar, deep voice from the far end of the hall. Teldin stood flabbergasted; it was Gomja. Over the umber hulk's chattering roar the yeoman heard high-pitched voices launch into long tirades. "Belay the prattle!" the voice boomed again. Before any more could be said, the wounded umber hulk crashed into its attackers.

Screams of metal, beast, and gnomes sang through the corridor. In the dim light at the end, the umber hulk was a flailing shadow of rage as its claws rose and fell. A small body hurtled over its shoulder, splattering blood across the ceiling. The disemboweled projectile landed near the overmaster as the neogi crouched against the wall. "Lordservant kill!" the vile little fiend shrieked. "Hateful meat I will kill." Malicious fire gleamed in its eyes as the neogi looked toward Teldin, who wobbled on his feet in the corridor. The umber hulk howled with renewed fury.

Warily scuttling closer on its spider legs, the overmaster bobbed and weaved its small head, looking for an opening to deliver a vicious bite. It moved its body like a fencer, head and neck like the sword. It feinted, then riposted when Teldin's thrusts carried him past the mark, and the supple neck dodged Teldin's strikes with artful ease.

Teldin's every block and thrust grew weaker. The adrenaline and fear that had sustained his body for so long were fading, leaving only a hollow shell. The concentration it took to battle the overmaster simply was not there. With each strike, the neogi edged closer to Teldin, confident that soon it would make the kill.

"Meat, surrender," the overmaster crooned confidently. "Only cloak I want. Failed your friends have. Most powerful my lordservant is. Help you they cannot. Their dying you hear." The raging screams of battle still issued from the hallway. Teldin paused for a moment, listening to the neogi's words, and the overmaster lunged at the opportunity. The tottering human barely beat back the attack. "Cloak you give me, human. Then kill you I will not-eat you I will not. With cloak offer generosity I can. Only slave you will be."

Teeth clenched, Teldin lunged forward. Eversharp nipped the neogi's shoulder and tore away the little spider-thing's robe, revealing the brown-furred body underneath.

"No! I can still kill you!" The cloakmaster seethed, but his timing and speed were off. Before he could recover, the neogi darted in and struck. Rows of razored teeth clamped down on Teldin's forearm, biting almost to the bone. "Aaahh!" Teldin screamed as first pain, then numbness seized his arm. His fingers spasmed, releasing Eversharp, which clattered to the floor. The neogi clung on and, with a vicious tug, threw the farmer to his knees. The overmaster twisted the human's arm, triumphantly forcing his prey to the floor until the little neogi towered over Teldin. The farmer stared up into the neogi's face, its blood-soaked jaws still clamped on his arm and its little eyes gloating with victory.

"First section! Prepare to fire!" echoed Gomja's voice over the din. Teldin had forgotten the giff, and a wild notion of rescuing Gomja leaped into his pain-racked mind. The human clung to it, refusing to surrender. His fingers touched his spear haft and weakly wrapped around it.

As Teldin struggled to strike a blow, the corridor erupted in a blast. A wind of steam and debris whipped past the battling pair, and the floor buckled, flinging the two apart. Teldin's ears were numb, nearly deaf. As the vapor roiled away, the farmer looked down the corridor, searching for the overmaster

or umber hulk. The neogi was huddled in a ball across the hallway; all that remained of the umber hulk was a black smear that covered the floor, walls, and ceiling. Something wet loosened from the ceiling and hit the floor with a plop.

The overmaster gaped at the carnage. "Dead-my lord-servant, the neogi said slowly. It almost sounded sorrowful. "Killed it meat did."

Teldin didn't wait for the distracted creature to recover, knowing he could not allow the risk. With a desperate lunge, the yeoman thrust Eversharp, catching the overmaster just below the head. The startled neogi gave a squawk of surprise as the human bore down with all his might, driving the spear cleanly through the gray flesh. The legs flailed madly while the overmaster futilely bit and snapped at the shaft. Teldin gripped the lance with both hands to keep the squirming neogi from tearing free. Slowly the death-struggles ceased, until only random spasms shook the dying form. His energy spent, the cloakmaster sagged beside the slain foe.

"Sir!" came Gomja's voice, muted in Teldin's ringing ears. The giff lumbered down the hall to where the human lay sprawled. "Sir, you're alive!"

Teldin weakly pulled himself up as confirmation. "Gomja," he mumbled with heart-felt relief, "what are you doing here?" The farmer slid back to the floor, and the giff gently eased Teldin to his feet.

"Counterattack, sir. We've cleared nearly all of Mount Nevermind." Cradling Teldin in one big arm, Gomja paused to issue orders to the impatiently waiting gnomes. A squad quickly hurried down the hall to the door at the other end and, with an amazing assemblage of tools and devices, set to work on cutting open the portal. Teldin vaguely wondered if any of them had tried the handle first.

"...attacked by surprise here. Nearly all the neogi were ashore, so there wasn't much resistance," Gomja was saying. The human had missed most of the explanation, but he really didn't care. The giff guided his weakened companion forward. A cry of triumph rose from the gnomes as the door-the entire bulkhead, frame and all-fell in with a crash. Weapons brandished with reckless abandon, the pot-helmed little warriors rushed into the chamber, ignoring Gomja's shouted commands for order and discipline.

Luck was with the gnomes, for the room was deserted. It appeared to be the bridge, for in the center of the room was a large chair that Teldin guessed was the captain's. A long table, spread with charts, stood to one side, and three huge, round portholes dominated the walls, offering a broad view of the lake beneath the ship. Through a single porthole Teldin could see the deck of the Unquenchable not far below. A stream of gnomes scurried down the pier, carrying huge bundles on their backs, while another line hurried from the dreadnought to fetch another load.

Elsewhere on the crater floor Teldin saw the gleam of metal sparsely punctuated by sudden clouds of steam. A scattered line of neogi and their iordservants were being driven away from the gates of Nevermind. Teldin could barely distinguish the shiny forms of the gnome warriors in their pot-topped armor, though their absurd war engines- bizarre catapults and throwing devices-stood out clearly. The gnomes seemed to be winning, perhaps because of their sheer numbers, but the neogi were making an orderly retreat. The farmer weakly wondered why the invaders were retreating toward the far end of the crater.

Suddenly the deck lurched under Teldin's feet, though not from an explosion, as he had first thought. "Aha!" cried the gnomes with glee. One of their number, nicknamed "Salaman" for Teldin's benefit, who was an old, puffy-faced fellow with eyes more sagacious than most, who sat in the chair with a look of intense concentration on his face. The deck quivered again, causing the gnomes to cheer once more. Teldin stared back out the porthole for a clue.

At first Teldin could see nothing extraordinary, certainly nothing that would cause the tinkers to break into cheers. Then he noticed the ship's shadow below them. It moved, rippling over the broken crater floor. The Unquenchable was no longer where it had been; the neogi ship had shifted to port, and the

lake's blue water was coming closer.

"Attention," began one of the senior gnomes, or so Teldin judged from the little tinker's wrinkled face, bushy, gray eyebrows, and incongruous gray braids, "upon making contact with the water, artificer engineers will begin dismantling the spelljamming helm and transfer it to the Unquenchable before this ship, which our naval engineers have determined is unseaworthy, sinks-" "Sir," Gomja called from across the room, "are you able to walk, sir, or would you like me to arrange a litter? We can't stay on this ship too much longer." "I can walk," Teldin insisted. Even though his legs felt like lead, his streak of familial stubbornness refused any aid. He took two steps and pitched forward as the ship jerkily lowered. Gomja quickly came to his side. "Let me help you, sir. We have to hurry." Teldin shot him a quizzical look, too fogged to understand Gomja's meaning. "The gnomes plan to land this ship beside the Unquenchable, sir. I don't think deathspiders float very well." Lending support to Teldin, Gomja stopped near the crew of tinkers busily disassembling the captain's chair. "How long will it take you to get the helm out?"

The gray-braided supervisor looked up and popped an oversized jeweler's loupe out of his eye. "Well, the whole frame attachment is counter-buckled to the-" "I asked how long, Section Three," Gomja grouched. The gnome paled and earnestly held up five fingers.

"Five minutes, Sergeant Gomja," the gnome briskly said.

"Make it four." Without waiting for a reply, Gomja guided his friend to the door.

"What was that all about?" Teldin asked in a shaky voice as the giff led him down the hall.

"Just a little discipline, sir," Gomja cheerfully replied. "Oh," Teldin commented, unconvinced. There was a loud splash and the deck bounced as the deathspider hit the water. Recovering from the jolt, Gomja hurriedly lifted the weakened human from the floor and urged him toward the gangway. The hull creaked and groaned as the water quickly seeped into the lower hold.

"I'm sorry, sir, but we'd better hurry," Gomja explained, scooping Teldin up before the human could protest. The giff cradled his frail friend in his massive arms and set out at a jarring sprint for the upper decks.

"What about the gnomes? What was that thing they were working on? The helm, you called it?" Teldin painfully asked as they bounced along.

"The helm? It's the engine, the thing that makes a spelljammer go," Gomja explained between pants.

"That thing? It was like a chair," Teldin said.

"Well, sir, that's what it is. Without it, this deathspider will never fly-and the gnomes can use it on the Unquenchable. I don't really understand, but the tinkers do." Gomja strode up a ramp to the upper deck. Bright sunlight assailed Teldin's eyes as the giff stepped onto the weapons deck. A team of gnomes was swarming over a half-disassembled catapult, passing the pieces to a boat waiting over the side. Reaching the edge of the deck, Teldin could see bubbles rise as water rushed into the deathspider's bowels. The human reveled in the thought of the great old master trapped in fast-flooding chambers.

"It's time to leave, sir," Gomja said, lowering Teldin, bleeding and bruised, to the outstretched hands below. A gnomish flotilla, rowboats that looked as if they couldn't possibly float, waited alongside.

Chapter Twenty-four

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Gomja was dozing at a small conference table, his head flat on the metal surface, when Teldin finally tottered onto the Unquenchable's bridge. His cloak, prize of the neogi, flapped against his arms as the wind blew through the open doorway. Teldin tugged the door shut, listening to the creaks and groans as the counterweights and pulleys slid the valves into place. The door was definitely a piece of gnomish work.

The racket was even enough to rouse the the normally hard to wake giff. With a tired lurch, the big alien pushed back the little chair he precariously perched on and brought himself to attention. "Good afternoon, sir!" Trooper Gomja hailed.

Teldin stared in wonderment, perhaps at the clutter of dials and levers on the tiny bridge, perhaps only in confusion over the missing hours. "What happened?" the cloakmaster finally asked, trying to get some bearing on where he was.

"We rescued you, sir, from the neogi," Gomja carefully explained, suddenly concerned for his friend. "Do you remember the deathspider, getting on the rowboats?" Teldin nodded, and the giff continued, "You collapsed, sir, so I had them bring you over to the Unquenchable where I could keep an eye on you. I wouldn't trust a gnome doctor unless I was around."

"Thank you for that," Teldin said paling slightly at the thought of what a tinker might do to his body. "But how did you rescue me, and with gnomes to boot?" Still somewhat wobbly, the farmer gently lowered himself onto one of the ridiculously small gnomish chairs.

Gomja smiled. "It wasn't that hard, sir. After you left, I organized my gnomes into a proper platoon, as a sergeant should. The little fellows were quite taken by the idea and spread it around. At one point, the whole mountain was a single platoon, but I managed to get that straightened out!" Gomja cheerfully allowed, banging his fist on the table at the humor of the thought. Once they got the idea, the gnomes were just demons for fighting. They don't like being kicked out of their mountain, I guess."

"They drove the neogi out?" Teldin asked in disbelief. It was hard to imagine the gnomes resolute about anything.

"Just about, sir." Gomja pointed with his big finger to the top of the cone of Mount Nevermind, clearly visible through the bridge windows. "The gnomes have pushed the neogi into those small spires. There're only a few of the beasts in the uppermost towers, levels thirty-seven through thirty-nine. The neogi are trapped and can't retreat. I've got six platoons up there trying to root them out. We'd have them out by now except for that other deathspider."

Teldin sat up straight at the words, inducing a wave of pain through his stiff shoulders. "What other deathspider? I thought there was only one!"

"Not anymore, sir," the giff grimly explained, pointing in the opposite direction. There, framed by the window, was the malevolent, black shape of a second spider-ship, hovering over the far end of the crater lake. "It showed up a few hours ago. It's my fault, sir. I forgot these things travel in packs. So far, it hasn't done anything. My guess is that they're waiting for reinforcements."

Teldin's bandaged arm throbbed. "Then?" The answer was obvious, but fatigue was making it hard to think.

Gomja scanned the ground between the enemy ship and the crater wall. "Then I think the neogi will attack again, better organized and with more forces. The gnomes might not fare so well against a serious attack."

"I thought we just had one," Teldin remarked, not encouraged by the giff's gloomy claim.

Gomja shook his big head. "No, sir. With only one ship, that was more like a raid. I imagine the neogi didn't expect resistance, but now they'll be prepared for a fight."

"Until they get the cloak," Teldin added as an unpleasant afterthought. The fabric hung on his shoulders like lead, the burden of death it carried suddenly crushing.

"I suppose so, sir."

Teldin painfully ambled to a porthole window and looked out over the deck. From on board, the Unquenchable seemed more like a proper ship, though still strange in its design. Unlike the ocean-going Silver Spray, the gnomish vessel appeared to have the flat hull of a riverboat, with the decks stacked on the hull. Each deck was surrounded by a balcony that opened onto all the cabins for that level. A crazy assemblage of ladders and stairs manage to ruin the

neat-seeming arrangement, but Teldin was certain the gnomes considered these an improvement.

The farmer leaned on the porthole sill and contemplated. He had come a long way since his adventure had begun. The farm seemed like something far distant, even though it was only a few weeks' journey away. Going back now would feel very different, even more than when he had rejoined his father after the war. At least then there had been something to go back to, Teldin ruefully realized.

"Did you wish to speak with me, sir?" asked Gomja.

"Right, right," Teldin finally said distractedly. He turned away from the porthole, his jaw set with determination. "What's it like out there?" the human finally asked after several false starts.

"Sir?" Gomja dropped his stiff stance.

"Out there, beyond this world, what's it like?"

Gomja cocked his head and didn't answer for a long time. "I don't know, sir. I mean, I can't explain. It's

quiet and dark, sir." The giff fingered his knives nervously.

"No, that's not what I mean," Teldin broke in. "I mean, are there people out there, humans, or is everyone-well, something else? I guess I want to know, would I be alone?"

Ears wiggling in surprise, the giff answered, "You will never be alone, sir. I'll be with you." Teldin shook his head, realizing Gomja didn't understand.

The big alien tried again. "There are humans, yes," he cautiously offered.

"Oh" Teldin said in disappointment, hoping for something more poetic. He didn't really know what he expected the giff to say. "I wish I knew what's so special about this cloak, Gomja. Why do the neogi want it?"

The giff pursed his big lips. "As I have told you, sir, I don't know. Perhaps you should rest some more.

The injured farmer ignored the giffs suggestion. "But the neogi do want it, and if they don't get it this time, they'll try again, won't they?" Teldin looked at the opalescent fabric for the thousandth time, trying to fathom its mystery.

"Yes, sir, that seems certain." All this was obvious, and Gomja could not see what the human was getting at. "The neogi are a determined race," he offered.

Teldin paced the little bridge, looking from the giff to the neogi ship.

Unconsciously, the farmer's fist drummed against his leg. "Would I like it?" Teldin blurted.

"Like what, sir?" Gomja asked, by now very confused.

"You know, out there. Would I like it out there?" Teldin demanded, a little irritated that the giff had not followed his thoughts.

Gomja sputtered with his mouth agape. "Well, sir, I suppose you might. I mean, I don't know, sir." Gomja realized he was gawking and closed his big mouth.

Teldin shook his head, cutting the hapless giff off. "Damn the gods, Gomja, I can't let them have it!" the farmer proclaimed. "Look, I don't know what this thing does, but, by the Abyss, I'm not going to hand it over to the neogi, not after-" His voice dropped to a whisper- "not after what they did to me."

Teldin's eyes were hard and grim and blood flushed into his cheeks. He stopped pacing and planted himself in the center of the bridge. "I'm going with you."

The giff's ears twitched. "But, you said you didn't want to leave the land, sir. We said good-bye and you made me a sergeant and everything." The giff peered closely at Teldin's face. "Are you sure, sir, that you're all right?"

"I'm fine," Teldin avowed, though he felt far from it. The poultice caused his cuts to itch and burn while his shoulder sockets still throbbed from the lordservants' wrenching. "I am going with you," he stated again, almost as if to convince himself.

"Why, sir? Space isn't your home. What about your farm, sir?"

Teldin looked back out the porthole toward the hovering deathspider. "As I said, Gomja, because I'll be damned if the neogi are going to get this cloak." Teldin's face was cold and stony as he nodded toward the neogi ship. "When I was a prisoner, there was something one of them said, about using the cloak to

enslave worlds. Maybe I didn't get it then, but now I do." Teldin turned back to face the giff. "Look, Gomja, if I stay here, the neogi will just keep coming, hunting for the cloak. How many have they killed already? You're saying Mount Nevermind might fall. If that happens, what then? Can you imagine it-fleets of neogi floating over Krynn? I've seen enough fighting. This whole land has seen enough war." Teldin turned away and quickly brushed a tear from his eye. "The farm's gone anyway- Grandfather, Amdar, Liam-all the people who meant anything. If I stay, the neogi will just hurt someone else close to me. This way there's no more killing."

"But fighting the neogi is a great honor, sir. They are friends to no one." Gomja's earnest face confirmed the truth of what he spoke.

"No, Gomja, I'm not you and I'm not a Solamnic knight. The war taught me a long time ago that there's no honor in fighting. Look what happened to Vandoorm, or the gnomes here. Do you think they felt honored?" Teldin's fingers clenched the porthole. "I can't-I won't be responsible for bringing the neogi to Krynn-so I'm leaving."

Gomja scowled, his voice dark and ominous. "Running away? A giff shouldn't serve under a cowardly captain."

Teldin turned slowly, pulling the cloak tightly around himself, biting back a surge of anger. "You don't understand! Whatever this cloak is, the neogi want it badly. I'm not running away. I'm drawing them away. I want them to follow me, to leave Krynn alone. Besides, out there maybe I can learn what this cloak does." Teldin's voice grew soft. "If it's as powerful as the neogi think, then maybe I can pay them back in kind." The farmer's eyes looked past the giff and toward something only the human could see. Never before had Gomja seen the human show such coldblooded fire.

Teldin jerked his finger toward the deck, snapping out of the spell. "When this ship leaves, I'm going to be out there waving this damn cloak right under neogi noses if I have to." The mule skinner glared defiantly at the giff, challenging the alien to protest.

Gomja's ears slowly rose and his little eyes widened. The giff now saw the dangerous sense of Teldin's plan. "I understand now, Commander. I was... wrong." Fumbling at his sash, the giff drew one of his pistols and held it, stock first, for the human to take. Teldin hesitated, the farmer in him unwilling to accept the commitment the pistol implied. "Please take this," Gomja urged. "You would have been a noble giff, sir. You have a hero's soul." Teldin reddened at the big alien's compliment. Gingerly, he took the pistol by the stock. Made for a giff's big, clumsy fingers, the weapon was huge in his own hand. As Teldin looked it over, Gomja drew the pouches from his sash and set them on the table. Dividing the bags of powder, wadding, and shot, the giff motioned for Teldin to join him.

"It works like so..."

Chapter Twenty-five

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The pistol lesson went quickly, though, despite Gomja's assurances, it seemed like so much magic to Teldin. The rattle of eager footsteps toward the bridge signaled the lesson's end. The giff, knowing the gnomes would dearly love to dismantle and analyze his precious weapons, hastily scraped everything back into the pouches.

The clanking door's valves parted and Captain Wysdor, the braid-bedecked gnome from their earlier meeting, rushed onto the bridge. Gone was the jeweler's loupe, but the gray braids remained. He wore practical, ordinary shirt and trousers. His leather apron, standard dress for a working gnome, was scratched and cracking with age. The captain's arms were covered with grease up to the elbows. "It's done, sir!" he shouted, breathless from his hurried trip from the depths of the engine hold to the bridge.

"Wefinishedthe-modificationstothespelljammerhelm-"

"What's done?" Teldin demanded. The rapid gnomish speech was adding to his

already throbbing headache. Gomja, his brows knitted as he tried to figure out what had been said, towered over the gnome.

Even the normally professional captain found it difficult to suppress his natural pride in the Unquenchable. "The spelljammer helm has been mounted, as instructed by the large, blue-skinned stranger who calls himself Gomja-" "You told us that already," Teldin snapped. "Well, yes," Captain Wysdor said, catching his breath and slowing down, "but now we have finished all the modifications to the helm-"

"Does this mean the ship can leave?" Teldin asked, ignoring the gnome's wordy barrage.

"-yes-and furthermore we have made several improvements on the design, which, though untested, should enhance the overall performance of the spelljammer engine, assuming, of course, various assumptions about the physical properties of space made by Master Alphonlongrutadinatachruvinuscadilmastarki-"

"We can leave, right?" Teldin demanded again, laying one hand on the captain's shoulder. He wanted to be absolutely certain that the gnome had answered his question. Teldin suppressed the urge to shout in the little fellow's face.

The captain stopped, pointedly removed Teldin's hand, and carefully straightened his braid. "Yes," he answered icily, glaring up at the human with impressive dignity, the mantle of professionalism restored.

Teldin stared just as fiercely back, unintimidated by the gnome's posturing.

"Is everything else ready?" He kept his finger poised to cut off any long-winded speeches.

"The Unquenchable will be ready to depart as soon as the admiralty reaches the bridge and gives the necessary-"

"Excellent," Teldin interrupted. Human patience with gnomes and their ways was wearing thin.

Gomja, poking his head out the door, called back to those inside. "The admirals are coming, sir. I don't think you're going to like it, though."

"Admirals?" Teldin echoed.

"Admirals, sir. Three of them," Gomja explained as he stepped back into the room. Captain Wysdor hastily stepped out of the way.

Marching in lockstep, the three admirals-neatly groomed Ilwar, wild-haired Niggil, and paunchy Broz- strode onto the bridge. The three were dressed in comical blue-and-green uniforms, overloaded with gold braid and heraldic symbols. Behind them came a jostling gaggle of technicians, toting unruly boxes of charts and papers. Gomja unconsciously stiffened to attention and snapped off a salute. "Admirals on the bridge, sir!" he bawled in proper military fashion.

With a groan Teldin collapsed into one of the gnome-sized chairs. Spotting him, the three admirals burst into congratulations at his escape, and shook his hands until Teldin thought his miserable joints would be wrenched free once again. Finally Ilwar srpoothed his square, black beard and asserted control.

"Officer of the Day, prepare a boat to carry Teldin Moore of Kalanian back to shore," Ilwar ordered. Captain Wysdor moved toward the door.

"That's not necessary," Teldin quickly put in, before the orders could be set in motion. "I'm staying."

"You are staying?" the gnome squeaked with surprise. His wrinkled eyes narrowed slightly as he studied Teldin. The concerned old gnome laid a paternalistic hand on the yeoman's arm. "Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked softly, keeping his question simple. "What about the farm you talked about? You may never get back, you know." Teldin nodded in understanding, but the square-bearded admiral would not be put off. "Teldin Moore of Kalamán, you do not have to do this because of us, and you are not to blame for what has happened, nor do I want you to go with us for these reasons, so be sure of what you are saying-"

"I would be honored to sail with you," the cloakmaster answered firmly.

Ilwar nodded a little reluctantly. "Belay that order, Officer of the Day!" he shouted back over his shoulder. "Excellent to have you aboard, Teldin Moore of Kalamán," the admiral said cheerfully, his demeanor completely changing upon

seeing Teldin's resolve. "I am very glad we will have the opportunity for further scientific study of your cloak, which, of course, you realize, can only be conducted beyond the earthly influences of Krynn, and that is why we recommended you come with us in the first place-" Behind Ilwar, admirals Niggil and Broz eagerly chattered in excitement to each other, clearly pleased with the human's decision.

Teldin could already see the greedy scientific gleam in Niggil's eyes. Holding his hand up, he firmly announced, "There'll be no testing of the cloak until I say so-if I say so. Is that understood?" Somewhat crestfallen by the announcement, the three gnomes, Niggil in particular, reluctantly agreed in their long-winded way.

"But my life-quest-" Niggil began to whimper before a shudder ran through the deck and cut him off. Through the forward portal they all could see the deathspider fire a missile from its aft. They heard the grinding noise of another ballista bolt hit.

"Captain Wysdor, get this thing out of here before the neogi sink us," Teldin urgently suggested. Captain Wysdor looked lamely at the three admirals. It didn't surprise Teldin that the gnomes would be redundant in choosing officers.

"Yes, yes, do as the human orders," Ilwar said. "Crew, assume positions and prepare presailing check. Bridge doors closed?"

The valves rattled shut. "Bridge doors closed-check!" shouted a squeaky voice. Even before that was finished, Niggil called out another step, followed by a shouted reply. Soon all three admirals were calling for confirmations, overlapping and, to Teldin's ear, contradicting each other. The crew seemed to find nothing unusual at all in the whole procedure, though at one point it seemed as if bearded Ilwar and goggle-eyed Niggil were about to come to blows over whether the bridge doors should be open or closed. They finally compromised by leaving them halfway.

Teldin kneeled next to the captain, who, throughout all the checks, double checks, and counterchecks, had said or done nothing but wait patiently to assume his place at the center of the bridge. "How does this ship fly anyway, Captain Wysdor?" Teldin asked, curious to know just how he was going to be traveling. "Where's that chair, the helm?"

Wysdor drew himself up, proud to be of service. "The chair, as you call it, is the spelljammer engine, and it has been installed in the engine room, where it can provide motive power to the paddlewheels-"

"Engine room? What's that?"

"Why, that is the room where the spelljamming engine is housed, since the engine must be close to the paddlewheel shafts to turn the-"

"Well, how does the bridge tell it what to do?" Teldin asked, sensing that he was getting an elaborately circular explanation.

"Ah," Wysdor said brightly, "that's the ingenious part of it, because from here we can visually examine our route, then, by means of automated carillon signal system..."

Seeing the human's confused look, Wysdor stopped and struggled to find a simpler explanation. "By means of signal bells, the bridge tells the engine to go slow or fast," he finally explained, as if talking to a child.

At least that made sense to Teldin. The clamor on the bridge continued unabated, and Teldin had to shout over the noise for Wysdor to hear him. "So what powers the engine? It was only a chair."

Wysdor stared at the ceiling as he tried to think of the simple way to describe the process. "This is very hard to explain. According to studies of the Spelljammer's Guild, the spelljammer engine derives its energy through the absorption of thaumaturgical power, which it then redirects into motive force, which-"

"Eh?" the puzzled human interjected.

Wysdor sighed and tried again. "It, uh, drains spells from our ship's wizard and uses that power to lift the ship." The captain looked to see if Teldin understood.

"But I thought you said the paddlewheels moved the ship." The farmer's head was hurting again. A bustling gnome carrying a bundle of charts and scrolls squeezed between Teldin's legs, bound for the admirals.

"The paddlewheels are a vital part of the secondary systems, as are the masts and sails, just in case the engine should fail at some critical time during flight and the need for secondary backup systems becomes apparent, in which case--"

"Ready and away!" Ilwar finally shouted, interrupting Captain Wysdor's explanation. Wysdor bobbed a quick bow, ushered everyone to a seat, and hurried to assume his post beside Ilwar, Niggil, and Broz. A hush fell over the assembled gnomes, giving the maiden flight-and first field test-of the new and improved Unquenchable a near-religious significance. Teldin tensed with eager expectation, not really knowing what was supposed to happen.

All at once the silence was shattered by the blaring of clanging bells and ear-shattering whistles. Teldin sprang from his seat. "What's wrong?" he shouted to anyone who would listen. Gomja stood wincing, his ears pressed tightly against his head.

Instead of answering, the gnomes let loose with a cheer. Their celebration was broken by a violent jerk as the deck suddenly lurched upward, a movement that threw Teldin and the rest of the crew sprawling to the floor. The cloakmaster hit the wooden deck on one shoulder and lay gasping for breath as the reignited pain of his injuries coursed along his nerves like molten fire. Only Gomja, feet widespread and knees braced, remained standing. With one big hand, the giff easily hoisted the numb human back to his feet.

The deck wobbled underfoot. Eager and fearful, Teldin joined the gnomes crowding around the portholes. Tall enough to stand in the back, the human was able to look over the assembled heads as the gnomes jumped up and down, fighting for a glimpse of the outdoors. Beyond the edges of the deck, the crater lake's dark water slowly receded. The Unquenchable was airborne. And headed straight for the neogi deathspider, Teldin noted when he raised his eyes to the horizon. "Gomja!" he shouted. "What's the plan for getting past the enemy?"

Gomja pushed his way over to Teldin and shouted over the pinging racket the Unquenchable made. "Plan? I assume the improvements to speed the gnomes made on the helm will let us easily outrun the neogi ship, sir."

"Improvements to speed?" Admiral Niggil spoke up, overhearing their exchange. "Oh, no, no, no. We improved the sound and color of the helm, not the speed, since- Teldin and Gomja looked at him with expressions of fear on their faces. "Admiral," Teldin practically screamed, "that's a neogi ship out there! How do you expect to get past it?"

The impractical Niggil looked at the human with a pained and confused look on his face. "But why should they chase us? This is only a scientific--"

"Gods, Gomja, we've got to do something!" Teldin yelled as he comprehended the gnomes' utter naivete. The giff nodded in agreement, still stunned to find the gnomes so unprepared. Out the fore porthole, Teldin could see that the deathspider had already started into motion. The slender legs were beginning to open, ready to receive the onrushing Unquenchable. Teldin grabbed Niggil, practically lifting the little gnome off the floor. "Niggil-that deathspider. What are you going to do?"

The gnome sputtered and kicked, as unprepared for Teldin's assault as he was for the attacking ship. Furious, Teldin pushed Niggil aside and grabbed Ilwar. "The deathspider!" Teldin yelled at him, pointing at the approaching ship. The stately Ilwar looked out the window. His brownish skin went pale at the sight of the voracious neogi ship bearing down on the lumbering Unquenchable. "Oh, dear," Ilwat mumbled, awestruck by the vision. "They mean to attack us, don't they?"

The answer to Ilwar's question came as a shattering boom mingled with the grating screech of tearing metal. The Unquenchable heaved forward and everyone, Gomja included, slid to the back of the bridge as the bow suddenly

angled upward. As the portholes flashed by, Teldin caught glimpses of the deathspider's metal legs wrap around the Unquenchable's hull in a murderous embrace. The view ended when the farmer thudded into an unyielding mass of arms, legs, chests, and boxes.

Floundering out of the pile of tangled gnomes, Teldin shouted at Gomja over the noise of the groaning hull. "What's happening?"

"She's grappled us, sir," the giff boomed. "Prepare to be boarded!" Gomja grabbed the doorjamb and heaved a group of the gnomes outside.

Teldin staggered across the canted deck to Gomja's side, dragging Ilwar along by the collar of his uniform. Planting the admiral between himself and the giff, he shouted questions at the dazed gnome. "Do you have weapons aboard-big ones?"

"No, Teldinmooreofkalaman," Ilwar answered, too dazed to obfuscate. "This is a scientific vessel."

"Wonderful," Teldin commented sarcastically. "Then at least keep your spelljammer engine going full-speed reverse to try breaking free." He let go of the gnome, who scrambled back to the slowly untangling mass of his fellows to pass on commands. "Gomja, we'd better organize something to repel boarders." The giff nodded in agreement, a smile crossing his face at the thought of battle.

With an easy pull, the big fellow dragged Teldin off the bridge and onto the deck. Up near the bow, they could already see the grappling legs drawing the gnomish ship closer to its hull. Only one leg was firmly embedded in the bow; the others clung precariously to projections along the Unquenchable's sides. UMBER hulks were already clambering through the rigging of the anchored leg, gradually nearing the bow.

"That's where they intend to attack, sir!" Gomja bellowed over the continuous squeal of grinding metal. None of the other grapples is secure enough to carry a boarding party.

Teldin nodded. "Then that's where we'll fight them. Come on." He charged along the pitching ship's deck, past masts and cabins, toward the gangways that led to the main deck. As the pair worked their way forward, they corraled every gnome that scrambled into their path. Those Gomja deemed fit to fight joined their growing squad; the rest Teldin curtly ordered to fetch axes and begin work chopping the other grappling arms away.

Teldin and Gomja pressed on, down the gangway and onto the main deck, past the ship's boat, swinging wildly on its davits, and through the jumble of booms and chains the gnomes used to load cargo. By the time they reached the bow, the two commanders had an ad hoc collection of engineers, deckhands, and scientific types carrying everything from swords to spanners. The little warriors noted the lordservants' advance with apprehension, but none shirked from his or her duty.

Deferring to Gomja's battle sense, Teldin watched as the giff deployed the defenders. The deathspider's leg had driven through the bow and now formed an arch from ship to ship, the way lined by web-like sails. The leg made a firm boarding ramp for the neogi attackers, who were about halfway across when the gnome defenders arrived.

Still trapped in a single-file line on the narrow leg, the umber hulks in the lead were at a clear disadvantage, which Gomja intended to capitalize on. Giving brisk orders, the giff divided the gnomes into two groups and stationed them on both sides of the attackers. Teldin remained to one side as the giff planted himself at the head of the army, squarely in the path of the attacking lordservants. His flanks were supported by the doughtiest of the gnomes, armed with spears, poles, or any kind of long weapon. Those few gnomes with crossbows were sent to the upper deck, where they would have clear shots at the enemy's back ranks.

"We'll hold them on the grapple," Gomja ordered his companions as he primed his pistol. The giff was not one for making speeches, but his fierce look of determination inspired the little warriors with him. The gnome fighters assumed their fiercest scowls, ready for the task.

"Sir, have your lot try to push them off the walk with spears," the giff shouted to Teldin. "With a good shove, you should be able to topple them over the side." The cloakmaster looked over the edge. The two ships, straining and grinding against each other, had drifted away from the lake and were now flying high above the crater's rocky walls. A fall from this height, Teldin guessed, would mean certain death for the lordservants.

The deck lurched and swayed as the first umber hulk came unsteadily down the deathspider's leg. The creature's bulk allowed it to bat easily through the thicket of poles and spears put up by Teldin's squad of gnomes. Before the lordservant could reach the bow, however, Gomja rose up with his pistol leveled at the beast. "To the void with you!" he bellowed, his defiant cry punctuated by his pistol's crack. The space between the two giants filled with smoke. The umber hulk reeled back with a squeal as a lead ball smashed through its forehead, then it stumbled over an out-thrust spear, plunged off the wood-and-metal leg, tore through the thin sails, and plummeted to the rocks below. "Again! Again!" cheered the gnomes as they marveled at Gomja's wonderful weapon. The giff only shook his head, thrust the still-smoking pistol back into his sash, and drew his elven blade.

Another lordservant charged forward to take the first's place, once again tearing through the bristle of spear points. Its wild rush was finally stopped by Gomja's almost equally matched bulk as the giff stood astride the spiderleg boom. Gomja, now in his element, wielded his sword with crazed intensity, aided by the gnomes at his side. Teldin had little time to watch, since another of the hideous umber hulks already charged down the boom. Unable to proceed past its predecessor, who was locked in battle with the giff, the newcomer slashed and battled against the forest of spears.

"On my signal, lunge!" Teldin shouted to the gnomes around him. "Now!" A wall of spear points thrust at the umber hulk. A rope shot out from the other side of the bow and snaked over one of the creature's mandibles, jerking the beast's head to the far side. The spears pressed at it and, though these were unable to penetrate the creature's bony hide, the beast staggered back.

Suddenly one taloned foot was clawing air and the umber hulk plunged over the side with a chattering squeal. A faint, pulpy thump echoed from the rocks below. Almost mindlessly, another pushed forward to take its place.

Although the umber hulks possessed advantages of size and ferocity, the battle was unwinnable almost from the start, once their chance of reaching the bow was lost. Restricted to their narrow beam, the lordservants were unable to bring their might to bear. While the front rank of gnome defenders, Gomja at their head, stalled the lead attacker, Teldin and his squad brought the second rank down. From the deck above could be heard the twang of crossbows as gnomish marksmen concentrated on ranks even farther back. Time after time the gigantic umber hulks plunged to their deaths, and as more of the lordservants fell, Gomja boldly pushed himself farther and farther onto the deathspider's leg.

Just when the giff was almost beyond the reach of the spears, the two ships rolled precipitously to the right as the Unquenchable tore free of all but this, the last of the deathspider's grasping arms. Teldin suddenly found himself sliding across the deck in a snarl of gnomes. There was a series of unnatural screams followed by the distant thuds of flesh on rock. "Gomja!" the human shouted in panic, dreading that his friend may have been among those lost.

"Still here, sir!" boomed the giff. The big brute had caught the bow railing just in time, but the lordservants facing him had not been so lucky. The other spider legs were clear of the gnomes' vessel, and now the wooden beam was all that joined the two ships.

"Axes, quickly!" Teldin shouted, pushing the gnomes around him to action. There was no telling how long this opportunity might remain. "Chop that leg free!" The gnomes scrambled quickly to gather the necessary tools. Turning to Gomja, still on the beam, the farmer waved the big giff back. "Clear off, Gomja, we're ready to go!"

"No, sir, I won't!" Gomja shouted back. He stood unsteadily in the center of the boom, his sword and tunic splashed with blood. "First platoon, gather to me!" he bellowed, raising his elven blade as a rallying point. Already the fiercest of the gnomes scrambled to join him.

"Gomja, what're you doing? Get back here. I order it!" Teldin cupped his hands and shouted to the giff over the freshening breeze.

"I'm sorry to disobey, but I've got to, sir. This tub-" Gomja waved his sword toward the Unquenchable- "can't outrun a deathspider. The neogi ship's got to be stopped from the inside. First platoon!" he bawled again.

"There's got to be another way," the human insisted as he forced his way onto the boom.

"No, sir," Gomja answered firmly. He strode down the leg to meet his friend, balancing himself with his sword. "It's time I took on a command, sir, a real command." The giff held out his big hand to Teldin. "It really is good-bye this time, sir. Don't worry, I'll get back all right-maybe even aboard this deathspider."

Teldin looked at the giffs offered hand and then, finally, took it in his own. They had been together long enough for Teldin to learn Gomja's sense of honor. The farmer did not like it-did not even understand it-but he could not deny the giff his chance for glory. "Damn it, good luck, Sergeant Gomja. You're going to be a famous giff someday. You'll have a lot of stories to tell when you become a sire." The wind whipped the cloak around Teldin's arms.

"Thank you, sir. I'm sure you'll be in them, too." The giff shook the human's hand firmly, but Teldin didn't even notice the crushing pain. "Now, clear off, sir, so your gnomes can cut that plank."

The cloakmaster nodded numbly and backed off the deathspider boom, signaling his axemen to their task as he did so. "First platoon, charge!" Gomja bawled. With a rush, the big giff led his handful of gnomes up the arching span of the leg, then straight down into the deathspider's maw. The giff scrambled onto the hull and disappeared from sight. Over the wind, Teldin could barely hear the sounds of battle. That distant noise was drowned out by the sound of axes biting into wood.

Teldin stood back and watched, ready to order the gnomes to stop if there was any sign of the giff or his men, but none came. Finally, the last axe blows severed the deathspider's leg and the Unquenchable lurched backward with a savage jolt. The splintered end of the wooden boom dragged across the bow with a grinding squeal, then swung out over emptiness. Without waiting to supervise the cleanup, Teldin turned and sprinted back to the bridge, barreling past any gnome who got in his way.

Bursting onto the bridge, the farmer found the three admirals and Captain Wysdor already hard at work, quarreling with each other. "Gomja's bought us time, so use it!" he demanded without even bothering to learn what their argument was about. He was furious that the gnomes were wasting this precious opportunity. Amazingly Teldin's fierce imprecations galvanized the commanders to function with a modicum of efficiency and brevity. "Hard up! Full speed!" the captain, who had the clearest head of the lot, ordered in a bewildering flurry of commands while the admirals pored over charts and log books. Bells rang and whistles blew from somewhere belowdecks. The Unquenchable lurched again and hauled upward, pulling fully out of the deathspider's grasp. Teldin pushed his way to a porthole and waited fearfully for pursuit.

The deathspider angled upward, poised to follow. Its porthole eyes glared balefully at the gnomish tub, and the arching grappling arms swung slowly, as if blindly trying to grasp the fleeing prey. Teldin saw, in the ship itself, a look of pure, hateful evil.

The look was disrupted by a brilliant flare in the enemy ship's bow. As Teldin watched, one of the great glass portholes exploded in a shower of smoke and flame, quickly followed by another. The vile ship shuddered and heaved, then rapidly fell away as the Unquenchable built up speed. Black clouds and bright flames poured from the enemy vessel. As the crater of Mount Nevermind receded with dizzying speed, the flaming neogi vessel nosed downward and plunged into

the bowl. Too far away to hear any noise, Teldin's view of the crash was quickly obscured by a billowing wave of white steam and gray smoke. The gnomes watched the sight from their stations and let loose with a wild, enthusiastic cheer. Papers and charts flew as the bridge crew clapped and capered in celebration. Teldin, though, could only grip the porthole till his knuckles were white. "Good-bye, Gomja," he said through clenched teeth. "I'll see you in the void." Teldin bitterly regretted every suspicion he had ever held against the big creature. The giffs sacrifice was another crime to lay at the neogis' feet, though Teldin prayed that somehow, against all odds, the giff had survived the crash.

Epilogue

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Teldin lay resting in a large, overstuffed, and very comfortable bed the gnomes had managed to cobble together for him. It was the first real rest he had enjoyed in days, though it felt more like weeks to him. The cloakmaster's physical sores and wounds were slowly knitting or fading. The days spent in Krynnspace since the Battle of Spiders, as the gnomes called his victory over the neogi mindspiders, had been quiet and restful.

For several days the Unquenchable had limped along, sailing on a single paddlewheel, which provided little motive power anyway. The gnomes had been working in the ship's shops to build a new wheel-they were wizards at repairs-but it had been complicated by the usual desire to improve and enhance the basic design. The former farmer did not mind the delay. He was surprised at how much he enjoyed the empty beauty of space. Compared to his recent life on the planet below, the majestic darkness was blessed tranquility.

Now, though, the repairs, or at least a decent jury-rig, were finished, and Ilwar, Niggil, and Broz had come by Teldin's cabin for a visit. Captain Wysdor was too busy with the repairs, they said.

The three admirals perched on a sea chest, looking at Teldin over the bed's footboard and holding big mugs of ale with both hands. Finally Ilwar harrumphed importantly and wiped a bit of brew from his black beard.

"Honorary Captain Teldin Moore of Kalamán," the square-bearded gnome began, using an honorific they had bestowed on the unwilling human, "we were wondering, since you might now want to go home-"

"If you were interested in hearing-" chimed in Niggil. Ilwar cleared his throat again, momentarily silencing his enthusiastic companion. "We though you might want to know our landing procedures. Of course, all our landing procedures are theoretical at this point, but I predict that by slowing the vertical rate of descent while maintaining forward motion, the Unquenchable should be able to land in a body of water, in theory, no less-"

"Posh and nonsense," countered Niggil, clearly cherishing some pet theory of his own. "The proper method for landing the Unquenchable is to detach the forward hull section and power it separately with a minor helm, then use that part to bring the main hull of the ship down, which we think will float safely in-"

Broz snorted in a slow, lazy sort of way, finally deigning to speak. "In theory, the best method is to stop all forward motion and increase the vertical descent so that-"

Teldin cut them off them with a bemused, if somewhat nervous, laugh. "There's no need to tell me all this. Tell me, what are your plans for the Unquenchable?"

Ilwar, as solemn as ever, wiggled his bushy eyebrows in surprise at such a question. "Why, the Unquenchable is a scientific vessel designed for exploration and collection of data-"

"And specimens," Broz interrupted, being positively loquacious.

"And the performance of scientific tests," Niggil insisted, not one to let scientific matters be disregarded.

"Ahem," asserted Ilwar, regaining control, "and as such, we will journey the trade routes of the Flow until we return home, so the whole thing is quite simple." Ilwar was the most concise of the lot.

"I see," mused Teldin as he sipped on his ale. "Will you be stopping anywhere where there are humans?"

All three nodded in the affirmative, having perfected the new-fangled communication method under Gomja's command, though Niggil had taken to testing the proper blink rate.

Teldin looked at the cape he still wore wrapped around him. Coming into space still hadn't let him take it off. The opalescent fabric was the same as ever. Still, he knew now that it was important and that the neogi, or at least some neogi, wanted it very badly.

"Do you want to land someplace, Honorary Captain Teldin Moore of Kalaman?"

Ilwar inquired gently, trying not to pressure his human guest. "I would understand if you wanted to go home. Spelljamming may not be your choice for a Life Quest. It is easier for us, for we live to learn and explore." The old gnome's insightful observations surprised the cloakmaster.

Teldin thought about what awaited him on the ground. With Gomja's sacrifice, going back to Mount Nevermind seemed cold and hollow. Cwelanas was sailing somewhere on the Sirrion Sea. Her eyes and charms tempted him until he remembered the neogi's leering faces. Teldin sadly realized that he could never go home again-not as long as he wore the cloak. Too many people had died on Krynn to get him this far. Returning now would betray them all.

"I think not," he explained, smoothing out the blankets with his hands. "There are things out here I need to know, and more that I can learn. No, good admirals, I think it's time to take the fight to them." He beamed a huge smile at the three gnomes opposite him.

"Excellent," Niggil hailed as he hopped to the deck, "now there's more time to test the cloak!" Teldin Moore felt a sudden twinge of dread as the goggle-eyed gnome sped through the door. "I'll just go get my equipment!"