

THE BROKEN SPHERE

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Prologue

The colors of the phlogiston were particularly chaotic in this part of the universe. They rippled and ran, curdled and swirled like oil paints boiling together in a stewpot, a million million vibrant hues most of which could only be named by the gods themselves.

In this part of the universe, the crystal spheres—each a "bubble cosmos"—clustered close together. They bobbed and shifted on the phlogiston tides, too slow to see their motion, yet frenetically rapidly as these things are usually measured, as if they were the iridescent glass net-floats used by fishermen on a thousand thousand worlds. They were like pearls of incalculable price catching and reflecting back the strange light of the Flow.

The pearls were tightly packed here, sometimes separated by less than the diameter of a single sphere, sometimes by much less.

What would happen if they collided? Many sages of many races had asked that question, yet nobody could give a good answer. *Could* they collide, or were they kept apart by some negative analogue of gravity? Would they bump, then bounce apart like balls in the game known as "pockets," played on several planets? And, if so, how would that affect the suns and planets—and the possible civilizations on those planets—within the spheres? Would the result be planetary catastrophe? Or would the inhabitants even notice?

Or, perhaps, would the spheres shatter on impact? Few sages supported this latter view... though many myths included *some* discussion of a broken sphere...

And through this crowded space, a ship moved, a dark mass against the surrealistic background of the Flow. The streamers, blebs, and rivers of phlogiston parted before it—unwillingly, it seemed—flowing back around it, yet giving it respectful berth, before closing once more behind it. The multicolored phlogiston—or, more correctly, where the phlogiston *wasn't*—formed a uniform, ovoid bubble of clear air around the ship. Although the ship moved smoothly, it moved almost unimaginably fast.

The ship was huge, a massive, curved thing, winged like a manta ray the size of a small world, with a long tail upswept to poise above the great ship's upper surface. Here in the chaotic light of the phlogiston, it was impossible to tell the ship's color, or even if it *had* a color. It was like a sharply bounded shadow, a shape of impenetrable blackness.

The *Spelljammer*.

That was the name originally given to the great ship by the elves—if the elves could be trusted to speak truly, on a matter as important as this—and the name subsequently given to all lesser ships that sailed the spaceways. The *Spelljammer*—subject of countless legends, myths, and barroom tales, most of them conflicting. It was the greatest spacefaring ship ever built—if, indeed, it *was* built—and the fastest, created by the gods as a test for the faithful, or a scourge for the unbeliever. Or perhaps it had been built by a mysterious race, long vanished from the universe, or created by a fiend from the Lower Planes, traded to an ambitious race in return for their collective soul. Or maybe it had been spawned in an entirely different universe, with its own array of crystal spheres. It was captained and crewed by...

Who knew? On this topic, too, the legends contradicted each other. Was it captained by a god, with lesser immortals as its crew? By a demon? By a mortal, who'd won the honor through epic feats of bravery? Or was the mighty ship *without* captain and crew, and with no need of them?

Serenely unconcerned by the confusion and discord centering around it, the *Spelljammer* cruised silently on.

The massive manta craft changed course, pointing its bow toward the nearest of the crystal spheres. As it drew closer, the scale of the scene became apparent. The *Spelljammer*, the largest vessel in creation and bigger than some worlds, seemed to shrink in comparison to the sphere. First it appeared like a bird next to a mighty castle, then like a fly to a mountain, finally like a gnat to a whole world. Ahead of the great ship, the surface of the crystal sphere seemed to be a flat wall of mother-of-pearl, extending to infinity in every direction, without even a hint of curvature. Here, among the tight-packed crystal spheres, the scale of mortals and the scales of the gods came into perspective.

A point of brilliance burst into life on the iridescent gray wall before the *Spelljammer*. Like a star, impossibly burning here in the phlogiston, it waxed in brilliance, quickly becoming intolerable. It seemed to expand, though whether that was the case or not, or whether the great ship was diving toward it, was incidental. From a dimensionless point it became a small disk of actinic light, growing instant by instant. Then, at its center, a point of blackness appeared, at first almost invisible in the heart of the radiance, but swelling rapidly. In an eye blink it became a broad annulus of scintillating light around a disk of blackness now bespecked with stars.

The *Spelljammer* plunged through the center of the black disk, out of the Flow and into wildspace.

Here, inside the sphere, were none of the curdled colors of the phlogiston. The darkness of the space that "planet-siders" call "real" enveloped the huge ship. At immense speed it hurtled away from the inner surface of the crystal sphere, which now appeared as endless black emptiness studded with alien stars.

In the center of the sphere—countless millions of leagues from the *Spelljammer*—there was a sun... or, more properly, something that had *been* a sun. Now it was the torn and shattered body of a star, ripped apart from within by catastrophic forces. Concentric rings of gas expanded out from where the sun had been. Even though the scale was so great that actual movement was imperceptible—*would* be on any time scale measured in less than centuries—the feeling of speed, of inconceivable violence, was inescapable. Lashed by radiation that sages could only guess at, the gas fluoresced in eye-piercing greens and violets.

About a quarter of the way out from the center of the nebula were two tiny white blobs, each only the smallest fraction of the size of the gas clouds. Before the star had torn itself apart and vented its fury on its children, these two blobs had been planets, the largest of thirteen. Now only the two remained—the others had vaporized almost instantly—and even they were burned to cinders, scoured of all life.

And, at the very heart of the nebula, there was something else. Detectable only by senses more precise than sight, it lurked like a ghost among the radiation-lashed gases: the tiny corpse of the destroyed star.

The *Spelljammer* cruised far from the fury of the crystal sphere's center, out where there was nothing but light and lingering gravity-wave echoes of the star's self-immolation. With mysterious senses, it scanned the area—searching, always searching.

Myriad thoughts flickered through what some might call the ship's mind, thoughts coupled with emotions that bore only the barest resemblance to those felt by humans. Sadness, that was the core emotion, sadness tinged by a sense of loss. There was an overtone of incompleteness, of yearning.

And a strong undercurrent of fear.

Chapter One

Teldin Moore's shoulders slumped. He opened his eyes. True vision replaced the magical, mental vision that had possessed him for the past—what?—hour?—two? The light faded in his small ship's cabin; the brilliant glare of molten bronze that had reflected off the few metal fittings dimmed, leaving nothing but the light of a small, guttering oil lamp. Teldin knew that bronze light well, knew it came from the traveling cloak around his shoulders. He'd seen it many times over the past weeks.

He stretched muscles sore from holding the same position for so long. Cupped in both hands on the table before him, he held a simple bronze amulet. He opened his hands and let it fall to the scarred tabletop. He'd received the amulet... when? In Herdspace, he thought, that strange crystal sphere where monstrous "megafauna" strolled around the inside of the sphere, and more familiar races made their homes around the great beasts' footprints, or even on their gargantuan bodies. Hadn't Gaye given it to him?

Gaye. He sighed. Gaeadrelle Goldring, the childlike kender. Whenever he thought about her flashing eyes, her lustrous hair, or her quick laugh, he felt a sick emptiness inside—a sense that he'd lost something important to him, but that he'd never known he'd had. Isn't that always the way? he asked himself cynically. You never recognize the value of something until it's gone.

But just what had he lost? he asked himself again. There'd never been anything between the two of them, anything significant... had there? He couldn't recall any words of endearment, any moments of *connection*.

He couldn't remember anything consciously, at least. But sometimes, when he slept, his dreams contained tantalizing images: a conversation in his cabin, where words were spoken that he couldn't remember while awake, and a realization that there *was* something between them after all.

Teldin shook his head in frustration. Why don't I remember all that now? he demanded of himself. It's not something I'm likely to forget, is it? It was much more likely that the images were created by some part of his mind, manifestations of some hidden desire—probably to have someone to trust, he admitted wryly. That was a luxury that had been all too rare recently.

Still, Gaye was gone. He'd left her behind in Herdspace— at her own request, he amended quickly. To the best of his knowledge, she was still alive—and he couldn't say that of many people he'd come to care about over the last months. Who knew? Maybe he'd eventually see her again. The universe was vast, but destiny seemed to enjoy loading the cosmic dice so that absurd coincidences came up from time to time, particularly around Teldin Moore.

He held up the amulet, twisted the chain between his thumb and forefinger so the bronze disk turned slowly.

Outwardly, it was so simple a thing, no more ornate than the cloak he wore. Yet both—amulet and cloak—were apparently objects of immense magical power. The cloak—the Cloak of the First Pilot, an ultimate helm—bestowed upon him magical abilities he'd only just started to explore. Most important among these—if the elves, and the fal named One Six Nine were to be believed—was that it would allow him to control the *Spelljammer*, the greatest of all spacefaring vessels and the object of a kind of cosmic scavenger hunt that included most of the spacefaring races Teldin had ever heard of (and probably some he hadn't). Apparently the cloak—given to him by a dying reigar, whose spelljamming vessel had crashed on his farm in Ansalon—marked him as a candidate to be the *Spelljammer's* next captain.

All he had to do was find the great ship.

That's where the amulet came in. Again, according to One Six Nine and the elves of Evermeet, it allowed Teldin to "see through the eyes of the *Spelljammer*"—to see what the vast ship was picking up with its strange senses. In the times he'd used the amulet, he'd experienced wondrous things: suns and worlds beyond imagining, all perceived with senses quite different from—and more sensitive than—gross human sight. This time he'd seen crystal spheres packed so closely that they looked in danger of touching, and a sun that had apparently blown up like a cask of smoke powder. Eventually, Teldin hoped, he'd see something he recognized through the *Spelljammer's* vision—some sphere or world he'd already visited—and then he'd know where the mysterious ship was.

He rubbed his tired eyes again. That wasn't all that came through the mental link. Sometimes—usually when he was tired, such as now—he felt emotions coming through the link. They were strong emotions, but alien ones, difficult to understand.

Emotions. The concept worried him on a profound level. Emotions are a characteristic of sentience, of self-awareness, aren't they? he asked himself. How can the *Spelljammer* be sentient? Certainly, One Six Nine and others had told him that the vast vessel was alive, but how could a *ship* be sentient, and intelligent, aware of its own existence, with feelings, hopes, and fears of its own? Impossible. He just couldn't make that intellectual leap.

Anyway, he reminded himself, one of the emotions I sometimes feel is fear. What could the *Spelljammer* have to fear?

No, he decided firmly, the emotions he felt weren't coming from the ship, but from a much more immediate source. Obviously the amulet was picking up his own emotions—and only when he was tired, at that, and his mental guard was down. That made a lot more sense. The senses of longing, of loss, of fear—all were his.

But, then, what about the dreams? part of his mind asked. On a couple of occasions he'd dreamed of the *Spelljammer*, and he'd felt emotions then, too. In one case, he'd even "heard" words associated with those emotions. Something about "others on a ribbon," and great need, wasn't it? Rightly or wrongly,

he found he associated those words directly with the *Spelljammer*.

He shook his head firmly, banishing those thoughts. They were just dreams, and what do dreams have to do with reality? Exactly nothing, that's what, he told himself.

He stood and stretched, felt the muscles in his shoulders and neck pop as he did so. Tired, he told himself again, too tired for such deep thoughts. Deep thoughts so easily become unsupported fantasies if you're not paying attention.

As he stretched, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror mounted on the bulkhead. His lips quirked up in a smile.

What would Grandfather say if he saw the way I dressed now? he wondered. Or, may the gods forbid, my father? He ran his hands down the sides of his night-black jerkin, felt the soft nap of the velvet caress his skin. Close-tailored trousers of black cotton disappeared into the tops of black, glove-soft boots. The cloak—which manifested the most unpredictable color changes—was now black, too, matching the rest of his ensemble. The unrelieved black of his garb was broken only by the flash of silver: the lion's-head clasp of the cloak, the jerkin's buttons, the buckle of his broad leather belt—black, too, of course—and two totally useless buckles on the boots. He had a pair of black gloves—more gauntlets, actually, reaching halfway up his forearms—to complete the outfit, but they were somewhere in his cabin with his short sword and scabbard, and the three knives he'd taken to sheathing behind his belt buckle and in his boot tops when he went groundside.

With a wry smile, he recalled the way he always used to dress: simple, homespun jerkin and breeches, usually in earth tones, and practical, hard leather boots with stout soles. The dress of a farmer.

But, then, Vallus Leafbower—mage and representative of the elven Imperial Fleet—had equipped him with well-tailored black garb for his meeting with the rulers of Evermeet on Toril. At the time he'd thought the getup was ludicrous for someone of his station and background. In retrospect, though, he'd wondered whether the elves would have shown him the same respect and honor if he'd been dressed as a dirt-kicking farmer, rather than the wildspace rake he'd considered himself at the time. Probably not, he'd decided wryly. Accordingly, at his last landfall, he'd picked up a new wardrobe.

He examined his image in the glass again, stroking his jaw thoughtfully. His new beard—closely trimmed, little more than a narrow band of sandy hair following the line of his jaw—still felt strange to his fingers.

But it certainly goes with the clothes, he had to admit. With his light brown curls cropped in what he thought of as a "helmet cut"—short, to fit under an armored helmet—and the beard, plus the black clothes, he looked quite piratical. Teldin Moore, wildspace pirate, cutlass-for-hire. He snorted.

Still and all, he told himself, I wear the Cloak of the First Pilot, as the elves call it. Why not dress the part? He flipped his mirror image a mocking salute.

For a moment, he considered going out on deck for a breath of fresh air. The one-compartment cabin of his ship was small, not much larger than the sail locker he'd shared with the gnomes aboard the *Probe*. Sometimes he regretted his decision to set sail alone in a ship tiny enough to be crewed by one man. While he relished the privacy, and the chance to think without interruption, he frequently suspected the tradeoffs had been too great. Space was a major issue, but even more important was the fact that he couldn't put an end to his privacy when he was done thinking his deep thoughts.

Still and all, he reminded himself, you've made your bed and now you've got to lie in it.

After parting with Vallus Leafbower, the bionoid Hectate, and the other members of his last crew, Teldin had looked into acquiring a private ship. At first he'd balked at the staggering prices of even the smallest spelljamming vessel. But then he'd discovered, through conversation with a minor ship broker, that money was the least of his problems. Apparently—thanks to one "Master Captain Leafbower"—Teldin had a line of credit, backed by the Imperial Fleet, sufficient to buy outright anything up to the size of a hammership, like the late Aelfred Silverhorn's *Probe*, or even larger.

A ship that size wasn't what Teldin wanted, however. It hadn't taken him long to spot the vessel that matched his needs perfectly. The ship broker had acted as though Teldin had taken leave of his senses when he pointed it out, but that didn't matter. There was something about the old river trader—converted for spelljamming travel through the addition of a battered minor helm—that called to him. The ship's

background, he'd thought, was probably very much like his: spending the majority of its existence in some peaceful, bucolic—and definitely terrestrial—setting, and only lately being thrust into the confusing reality of wildspace, the Flow, and the greater universe.

The trader was short and beamy—not more than thirty feet from prow to stern, and more than half that in width—with a single square-rigged mast. It had a single communal cabin, with a small, closed room for the helm at the stern, plus a surprisingly large cargo hold. In answer to Teldin's question, the broker had reluctantly admitted that the ship *could* be handled by a single person—though at much reduced speed and maneuverability—and that had sealed the matter in the Cloakmaster's mind.

The deal was settled, and the next day at dawn he'd set off. With his cloak—the ultimate helm—glowing sunrise pink at his back, Teldin had listened to the water hissing from the ship's hull as he climbed away from the harbor. A few quick experiments had confirmed that the decreases in speed and maneuverability arising from a crew of one were more than compensated for by the incredible control the cloak gave him. The ship was unarmed, but the Cloakmaster was confident he'd be able to evade all but the swiftest vessels that might come after him.

And so he'd taken to wildspace in his own vessel—which he named the *Ship of Fools*, even though he now was the only fool aboard, alone and—for the first time in a long time—free.

But I'm not really free, am I? he asked himself, stroking the smooth fabric of the cloak. Not while I'm wearing this.

No matter how much he wanted to deny it, he was still bound, his actions constrained. He'd never been one to bow to the dictates of destiny without some kind of a struggle, and that wasn't going to change now. But what could he do? He couldn't remove the cloak; that was part of its magic. And even if he could, would he? Should he? There were many others in the universe who wanted to command the *Spelljammer*—*who'd* kill for the immense power it represented. Yet he found that he didn't trust anyone who wanted to be the next captain of the *Spelljammer*....

Paladine! he cursed through clenched teeth. He *hated* this. Since he'd first set eyes on the triple-damned cloak, his actions had been severely limited. While he had, theoretically, freedom to choose at each decision point, he was still being forced along a particular course by his own ethical and moral outlook.

Will I always be trapped like this? he asked himself. When do I say "consequences be damned," and act in my own best interest? He crossed his arms before his chest, his jaw set angrily.

And then he caught another glimpse of himself in the glass. The image brought a half smile to his lips. Tough-talking Teldin Moore, he chided himself. At least I'm not losing my sense of humor.

He woke with a muzzy head and a foul taste in his mouth. A dull headache had taken up residence behind his right eye, and his stomach burned with acid.

Again, he thought disgustedly. This is getting much too familiar.

He looked at the earthenware jug on the nightstand beside his cot. He'd neglected to put the cork back in it, and the pungent aroma of sagecoarse filled the cabin. With hands that could be steadier, he restoppered the jug. The smell of the strong liquor was still in the air, of course, and continued to make his stomach churn.

This isn't the way it should be, he told himself.

Not too long ago, Teldin had rather prided himself on the fact that he didn't drink hard liquor. While sailing aboard the hammership *Probe* with Aelfred Silverhorn, he'd developed a taste for sagecoarse, but had felt no need to drink more than an occasional small cup. But now?

He picked up the jug and swirled it, estimating its contents by feel. About a third gone, he guessed, and it was full yesterday. Is it any wonder I feel like scavver dung?

Even worse, this wasn't the first time. He'd started having trouble sleeping while he was still on Radole, soon after his parting of the ways with Vallus Leafbower. Even though his body was dead tired, he'd found he couldn't turn his mind off." Lying in bed, he found himself replaying in his brain all the major

decision points in the course that had taken him from Ansalon to here, trying to find some alternative choices that would have made things turn out better. Eventually—sometimes hours later—he'd sunk into a fitful sleep racked by nightmares. He'd awakened unrefreshed, tangled in sheets that his thrashing had turned into sweat-soaked ropes.

He'd weathered almost a week like this, growing steadily more and more tired, his gritty-feeling eyes becoming ever more sunken. One night, in desperation, he'd bought a flask of sagecoarse from the inn where he was staying, and had used it to drink himself into oblivion. Surprisingly, he'd felt better rested the next day (even though the resulting hangover had been epic). Better yet, he'd seemed to have broken the cycle. The next several nights he'd managed to sleep without taking a drink and had thought he was over his problems.

No such luck. The nightmares had come back, as had the hours of staring at the ceiling, second-guessing everything he'd done since leaving his farm. Again he'd had to turn to the bottle when he couldn't handle the sleeplessness any further. By this time, he was aboard the *Ship of Fools* and in space. Fortunately, he'd had the forethought to include some jugs of sagecoarse among his traveling supplies.

That had been—what?—three weeks ago now, give or take. While he'd tried to use the liquor sparingly, only when he felt he couldn't handle the insomnia any longer, his self-control had been slowly slipping. For the last three—or was it four? or even more?—nights running, he'd hit the sagecoarse hard. He shook his head carefully, so as not to aggravate the dull ache. This isn't the way it should be, he repeated.

Slowly he swung himself out of bed. Not bothering to dress, he expanded the cloak to its full size and wrapped it around his body. He headed out onto the deck, stopping only at the water barrel to wash the sour, dead taste out of his mouth.

Wildspace in this crystal sphere was cool but not cold.

The air was brisk on his skin through his cloak and cotton undergarments. Although it made his headache spike momentarily, the relative chill seemed to clear the cobwebs from his brain, giving his thoughts more clarity. He removed the starchart from its tube and unrolled it, comparing what it showed him with what he could see over the *Fools* railing.

This was the major problem with traveling alone, he admitted to himself. Even using the cloak, he could control the ship only for limited periods before he grew too exhausted to continue. At first he'd managed only four or five hours before his thoughts started to fog up and his control of the vessel started to slip. With practice, though, he'd brought himself along so he could helm the *Fool* at full speed—more than four times normal spelljamming speed, he guessed, even without additional crew—for more than twelve hours. In that time, he figured—based on what Sylvie, the late navigator for the *Probe*, had once told him—the small vessel could travel more than a hundred million leagues. A literally unimaginable distance, he thought for the thousandth time, particularly for a know-nothing farmer. That was a distance equivalent to traveling around Krynn's equator more than seven thousand times in a single day. How could people ever take spelljamming travel for granted?

Anyway, helming the ship accounted for twelve hours of every twenty-four. The rest of the day was taken up with the maintenance chores that every ship requires, with charting and checking his course, but mainly with sleep. During that time the *Fool* simply drifted. In wildspace, it usually—and "usually" was the key word—kept to roughly the same course it had held when under power, and maintained a decent speed. Travel in the Flow was quite another matter, there were rivers, eddies, even whirlpools, in the phlogiston that could catch the drifting ship and fling it in totally unpredictable directions. Considering, Teldin was surprised he'd ended up at the crystal sphere he'd wanted to reach.

It had been worth the inefficiency, and the risks, however.

On first leaving Radole, he hadn't had any real plans. He'd just wanted to get away—away from the elves, away from the bionoid Hectate, away from everyone and everything that reminded him of the burden on his shoulders. His first couple of days in space he'd spent mired in self-pity, alternately cursing himself and the fate that had seen fit to afflict him with the ultimate helm. Eventually, he'd rid himself of these negative feelings as he'd known he would, and was able to concentrate on finding a solution, rather

than just dwelling on the problem.

If he'd hoped to come up with the answer, the one, simple key that would solve everything, he'd have been disappointed. What he did find, however, was a new way of looking at the matter. Plainly put, he didn't have to make a decision now—at least, not the central decision, whether or not to become the *Spelljammer's* next captain. Even if he were to decide—either in the affirmative or the negative—exactly how would that change things here and now? If he chose "no," he had to learn how to be rid of the cloak, and how to keep it out of the hands of those who'd use the *Spelljammer* for ill. If "yes," he had to track down the ship. Either course required that he learn a lot more than he currently knew.

Which, of course, nicely defined his next move. He had to find out as much as he could about both the *Spelljammer* and the ultimate helm. The question, then, was how?

For a while he'd considered returning to Herdspace to question One Six Nine again, but he'd eventually discarded that idea. How could he be sure the giant slug-sage was telling him the truth, and not shading his answers to manipulate Teldin into doing what the fal wanted him to do? Certainly, One Six Nine didn't seem to have any personal interest in the cloak—and Teldin couldn't envision the creature wearing it—but did that reflect reality, or just the Cloak-master's ignorance of the situation?

The same argument held for the elves, the gnomes... and everyone else, for that matter. For all he knew, any sage he approached might have some hidden agenda concerning the ultimate helm and the *Spelljammer* itself. No, he had to find some totally objective, uninvolved source of information: a library—a daunting conclusion for a barely literate farmer, but one he couldn't avoid.

While on the Rock of Bral, Teldin had heard stories about a massive library or archive, allegedly the greatest repository of knowledge in the universe, located on a world called Crescent in the crystal sphere known as Heartspace. He'd brought the *Fool* in for a landing at Remagin, a small port on the world of Whyst in the same sphere as Radole, to learn more.

Most people had heard at least something about the Great Archive on Crescent, but didn't know where in the universe it could be found. It took Teldin almost two days to track down a sage who not only described the way to reach Heartspace, but also sold him a starchart for that distant crystal sphere. Armed with the information he needed, Teldin took to the spaceways again, setting a course for Heartspace.

He rerolled the chart and inserted it back into its protective tube. Allowing himself a tight smile of satisfaction, he rested his hands on the rail, looking forward along the *Foots* course.

Directly ahead of the small vessel was the sun of Heart-space, the fire body at the center of the crystal sphere. It was much dimmer than the sun of Krynn-space—so much so that Teldin could stare directly at it without pain—and it had a cool, brick-red color to it. From what the chart told him, the sun—predictably called "the Heart"—was more than ten times bigger than Krynn's own sun, a bloated, tenuous thing reaching the end of its natural lifespan, destined to become a solar cinder in "only" a few more million years. At this distance, though, it looked only a little larger than the midsummer sun had from Teldin's north field.

He watched the sun for a few minutes, trying to detect the slight changes in size that gave the Heart—and, hence, the entire crystal sphere—its name. According to what the Whyst sage had told him, the Heart "beat" slowly, expanding and contracting by a slight but noticeable margin over a cycle of a few hours. What must it be like living here, the erstwhile farmer asked himself, under a sun that's not a constant thing?

If he gave himself enough time, he knew, he'd be able to see the Heart change size. But he didn't have the patience for that, not now. According to the chart and his own admittedly inaccurate observations, he was less than a day's travel from Crescent, with the ultimate helm powering the *Fool*.

Excitement tingled in his chest. If the Great Archive was as wonderful as everyone had claimed, he should be able to find out—for himself, without any intermediary to distort the information—more about the mighty *Spelljammer*. Maybe he'd find what he needed to know to make the grave decision that was always weighing on him... and further, what he needed to know to actually implement the decision once he'd made it.

With a final glance at the sun of Heartspace, he turned to go below deck again—to dress, and get his

small vessel underway toward distant Crescent.

Chapter Two

I must be getting jaded, Teldin told himself. A year ago— even a few months ago—I'd have been so overwhelmed I couldn't move. Now? I'm taking all this in stride.

"This" was the world of Crescent, of course. As the *Fool* approached the small planet, it appeared to live up to its name: a bright arc of silver against the black backdrop of wildspace. At first, Teldin assumed the world appeared this way because the sun was lighting it from an angle—for the same reason that the familiar moons of Krynn showed different phases. But now, as he drew closer, he realized how appropriate the small world's name really was.

Crescent actually *was* a crescent—a curved *piece* of a world, like a fireapple with a huge bite taken out of it. The two pointed ends of the strange planet—the "horns," he termed them—seemed fixed in space, as though attached to a single axis. The rest of the world rotated around that axis, as though, he realized after a moment, the arc of rock were still part of a spherical planet.

According to his chart, the planet's entire population was concentrated on the curved inner surface of the arc. Bringing the *Fool* in closer, Teldin could see why. The outer surface of Crescent was the most rugged, inhospitable-looking environment he'd ever seen—and that included hellholes such as the goblinoid planet of Armistice. The land surface was all mountains and craters, split with great cracks and fractures leagues wide, as though the world had been struck with a cosmic hammer until it had shattered. There weren't many clouds, but those he could see were moving incredibly fast across the landscape, hinting at ship-killing winds. The Cloakmaster found himself shuddering just thinking about trying to make a landing there.

In contrast, the inner surface was downright inviting. There were mountain ranges, certainly, large enough to be seen from space, but the individual peaks looked immeasurably older, weathered into smooth, rolling shapes quite different from the knife-edged, needle-summited monstrosities on the other side of the world. The inner surface was a land of blurred greens and browns, reminding Teldin strongly of his last view of Ansalon from space, and even of the terrain around Rauthaven and Evermeet on Toril.

What was that? It seemed that there was some feature on the planet's surface that looked much sharper, more vivid than the blurred surroundings. It looked like a sharp black dot....

It took his mind a moment to make sense of what he was seeing. The black dot wasn't on the planet's surface at all. It was a ship of some kind, climbing rapidly out of the atmosphere. He watched it for a few score heartbeats, expecting it to "drift" across the planet's surface in one direction or another. But no drift was visible, as the ship expanded in his vision—no longer a dimensionless dot, but a shape with length and breadth. No drift, he told himself. That meant it was heading directly for the *Fool*.

He felt warmth at his back, like the heat of the noonday sun beating down onto his shoulders. He knew that the ultimate helm was flaring with power, reacting to his thoughts and his subconscious fears. The ship—whatever it was—was coming straight toward him. While he knew the unarmed *Fool* could outrun and outmaneuver virtually any other ship, that advantage could help him only if he *used* it....

He frowned at the course his thoughts were taking. Paranoid, he chided himself. You're starting to see enemies everywhere.

The ship continued to draw nearer. Now he could make out its configuration, the angular, hunchbacked shape of a wasp. Again he felt the cloak flare to life. No wonder, he told himself. The last time I saw a wasp ship close up was when the pirates attacked the *Unquenchable* just off Krynn. He forced himself to release his control over the ultimate helm's power. No, he ordered himself sharply. If I run every time a ship closes with me, I'll never get anywhere.

If there was ever any doubt over the wasp's destination, it was gone now. The brutal-looking ship—painted an unrelieved, drab gray—had slowed and was edging directly toward the *Fool*. From this distance, about a spear cast away, Teldin could see motion on the angular vessel's deck. Standing exposed on deck, he felt vulnerable—a single, well-aimed shot from the wasp's heavy ballista would put an end to him, and there was little the cloak could do to save him— but he brutally suppressed those fears. He stood at the rail, feet braced, hands on his hips, and waited.

The two vessels were close enough now that their atmosphere envelopes had merged. Teldin heard a voice ring across the open space between them. The language was the Common tongue, but the accent was unfamiliar. "Permission to come alongside?" the voice called.

Teldin cupped his hands around his mouth. "What vessel are you?" he hollered back.

"We are the *Pathwalker*," the voice rang out from the wasp, "of the Crescent Peace Force. Permission to come alongside."

"What's your purpose?" Teldin called.

"Routine inspection of incoming ships," the answer came back immediately. "Please stand to. Permission to come alongside, third request." This time the "request" for permission wasn't even phrased as a question.

Teldin hesitated. From the way the man aboard the wasp had specified this was the third time he'd asked, the Cloakmaster had to assume some official policy would come into play if he didn't respond correctly. He glanced nervously at the weapon platform filling the bow of the angular ship. A ballista shot into the hull, perhaps? "Permission granted," he yelled back quickly.

He watched tensely as the wasp maneuvered closer, side on to the *Fool*. Now he could see a small white insignia painted on the hull near the vessel's widest point—a simple crescent with a seven-pointed star framed between its "horns." The ballista, set on a swivel mount on the ship's upper weapon deck, was trained out over the starboard rail, pointing directly at the Cloakmaster's smaller ship. The weapon was cocked and loaded, Teldin could see, and armed with a full crew of four. They wore gray uniforms of a severe, militaristic cut, and looked—to his partially experienced eye—chillingly disciplined and competent. How competent do they have to be, after all? he asked himself wryly. At this range, even *I* couldn't miss....

The *Pathwalker* edged nearer. The wasp's crewmen were definitely competent, he had to admit—neither that or suicidal and phenomenally lucky. Huge wings of fragile, translucent material extended from the top of the ship's hunched back, with a total span easily equal to the wasp's eighty-foot length. If that weren't enough, the six slender, jointed legs—the craft's landing gear—extended down and outward from the keel. If anyone had asked him, the Cloakmaster would have stated—categorically and without doubt—that it would be patently impossible for the wasp to come close alongside the *Fool* without either driving one of its legs through the smaller ship's hull or shearing off one of its fragile wings.

Yet that was exactly what the *Pathwalker's* captain had in mind, it seemed. The wasp's starboard wings loomed over the *Fool's* deck, while three sharply pointed legs extended only a couple of feet below the river trader's keel. For an instant, Teldin was uncomfortably reminded of when the *Probe* had been grappled by a neogi deathspider soon after his departure from Krynnspace.

The wasp finally finished its delicate maneuver, hanging in space—totally motionless relative to the *Fool*—with the rail of its foredeck no more than a man's height from the smaller ship's hull. Fancy ship-handling, Teldin admitted grudgingly. If I'd. tried that—even with the ultimate helm—I'd probably have holed both hulls.

As he watched, a figure emerged from a hatch onto the open foredeck. He was tall and slender, Teldin noted, much the same build as the Cloakmaster but perhaps half a hand-span taller. Even though the man wore a uniform similar to those worn by the weapon crew, Teldin recognized at once he was looking at an officer.

The man looked across the six-foot gap at the Cloakmaster, nodded briskly, and made a curt gesture that Teldin took to be a form of salute. "Permission to come aboard."

Teldin hesitated only long enough for a quick glance at the ballista—now at absolute point-blank range—before he answered, "Permission granted."

These people are *good* at this, the Cloakmaster told himself. Within heartbeats of his giving his permission, three more gray-clad crew members appeared on the wasp's foredeck. From below the rail—out of Teldin's view—they produced a broad wooden plank, which they quickly swung into place between the two ships. The officer stepped lightly onto the plank and, as casually as if he were walking on a town's street, crossed the gap. He stepped down onto the river trader's deck and repeated his earlier salute.

The Cloakmaster inclined his head in a sketchy half bow. "Welcome aboard,... ?"

"Lieutenant Commander Gorase," the man said briskly. From inside his gray jacket he withdrew a small, hand-sized slate and a sharpened piece of chalk. "Ship's name?" he asked.

"Uh, the *Ship of Fools*."

Gorase raised an eyebrow, but said nothing, scrawling a notation on the slate. "Master's name?"

Teldin hesitated for a moment. Then, "Aldyn Brewer," he said, offering the same pseudonym he'd used in Rauthaven.

"Brewer," the officer muttered as he made another notation on the slate. Then he glanced up at Teldin from under thick, dark brows. "Brewer?" he repeated, pitching the word as a question.

The Cloakmaster felt a sudden flash of fear. Were people on the lookout for "Aldyn Brewer"? He felt a cold prickling along his hairline, and his chest was suddenly tight.

But, no, he told himself firmly, that's ridiculous. I'm how many months away from Rauthaven? How could anyone be looking for me here, under that name? He felt the officer's gaze on him, his clear eyes clouding with growing suspicion. "That's right," Teldin said quickly, "Aldyn Brewer."

Gorase shook his head. "No, I meant 'are you a brewer?' It was a small joke." He looked levelly at Teldin for a long moment, then glanced down to write something else on his slate. When he looked up again, his face was even more carefully expressionless than normal. "Arid what is your trade, sir?" he asked.

Teldin shrugged. "Traveler."

"Not a merchant?"

"No," the Cloakmaster replied.

"No trade goods aboard?"

"None."

Gorase's chalk screeched against the slate, raising the hackles on the back of Teldin's neck. "No trade goods," the officer mumbled. He fixed the Cloakmaster once more with his cool stare. "Then what is your purpose for coming to Crescent, if I may ask?"

"The Great Archive," Teldin replied at once, and truthfully.

The officer nodded slowly. "So you come seeking knowledge," he said emotionlessly. "*What* knowledge, specifically?"

Again Teldin hesitated. This wasn't going well, he recognized. If Gorase hadn't been suspicious of him—for whatever reason—when he first came aboard, there was no doubt he was now. Teldin's fumbling of the name issue had seen to that. The best way to divert that suspicion was to tell the truth—free and full disclosure.

But he couldn't do that, could he? Admitting he was looking for information on the *Spelljammer* was just too risky.

"Just some old spacefaring legends," the Cloakmaster said vaguely, "travelers' myths, that kind of thing." He winced mentally; his explanation sounded dubious to his own ears.

It didn't sound much better to Gorase, either, judging by the man's sharp-eyed look. The officer didn't say anything for almost a minute, simply watching Teldin steadily. The Cloakmaster knew the officer was waiting for him to babble on, just to fill the silence, and maybe incriminate himself in so doing. It was all he could do to hold his tongue, and wait the man out. Difficult though it was, he instinctively knew that was his best course.

Finally, Gorase glanced away from Teldin's face, to scratch another note on the slate. "Travelers' myths," he mumbled to himself. "And no trade goods." He looked up again. "Then you wouldn't mind showing me belowdecks, I suppose," he said guilelessly.

Teldin led him into the small main cabin, watched the officer's cold eyes flick around him, apparently itemizing mentally all the compartment's contents. "What's back here?" Gorase asked, indicating the small door at the aft of the main cabin.

"The helm," Teldin answered. He swung the door open to let Gorase look into the cramped compartment, little larger than the minor helm it housed. Lucky I didn't remove the helm the way I was thinking of doing, the Cloakmaster told himself. That would have fired up the officer's curiosity if nothing

else had—a spacegoing vessel without a spell-jamming helm....

Gorase spared the helm compartment only the briefest of glances. "And the cargo hold, please," he said.

The Cloakmaster led the way back on deck and indicated the closed hatch near the bow. Without waiting to be asked, he opened the securing bolt and swung back one side of the hatch cover. Gorase crouched down beside the opening, craning over for a better view into the hold. He cleared his throat, and Teldin clearly heard the sound echo in the emptiness.

Gorase stood again, indicating that Teldin could close the hatch cover once more. The officer scratched away at his slate for a few more seconds, then nodded briskly. "You're free to proceed, Master Brewer of the *Ship of Fools*," he said officiously. "As a visitor to Crescent, your first landfall must be made at the city of Compact. Landing anywhere else is strictly forbidden and will be considered evidence of intent to smuggle. Do you understand?" He waited for Teldin's nod. "Do you have any questions?"

"Just one," the Cloakmaster said slowly. He walked to the rail and looked downward to the planet below. "Just where *is* Compact? If I land anywhere else, it'll be evidence of getting lost."

For the first time, Gorase's thin lips twisted in what could almost have been a smile. "I think I can see my way free to selling you a planetary chart, Master Brewer," he said wryly.

Gorase's chart had more than paid for itself, Teldin had to admit later. As he'd brought the *Fool* spiraling down into the atmosphere, he'd compared the geographical features he could see on the world below with the chart. With that chart showing him where to look, he'd managed to pick out the world's major city—Compact, home of the Great Archive. Without that guidance, he'd have spotted the metropolis only by purest luck, or after an extensive search. Even though Compact was said to be huge, and Crescent itself was only a small world, the scales—human and planetary—were so far apart that the city could just as well have been invisible from orbit.

Once he'd known what to look for, however—and once he'd brought the *Fool* down to a low enough altitude—it had been easy to spot Compact. It had looked to be a huge metropolis, spread three-quarters of the way around a large lake of azure-blue water. As large as Rauthaven, if not larger, Compact had none of that port city's beauty. Instead of the pure white walls and bright red tile roofs, this city had seemed to be all grays, the only bright color being the lake itself.

Teldin had shrugged. It's not as if I'm here for the scenery, he'd reminded himself, and brought the *Ship of Fools* in on its final approach to the lake.

He now walked the narrow streets of Compact—a strange name, he found himself thinking. I wonder where it came from? From the ground, the city was even more drab than it had looked from space. There were no colors anywhere that he could see. Everything, from the streets, to the walls of the buildings, to the clothing of the citizenry, was rendered in different shades of gray. No colors—not even any black. Even the inhabitants' skin had a gray tinge, Teldin thought wryly.

The people of Compact were an incredibly somber lot, he decided. The expressions of the men looked as drab as their clothes, framed by simple haircuts that looked as if they'd been done with gardening shears. As for the women, he couldn't tell *what* their expressions were; they wore ground-length cloaks—of gray, of course—with cowls pulled forward over their heads, concealing their faces. Passersby rarely looked up from the ground in front of their feet—except to cast suspicious glances his way, he noticed—and they never smiled.

They didn't seem to talk, either, other than in whispers. Even the children—of which there were many in the streets—were unnaturally silent. Instead of running and playing, laughing and yelling, the way kids were supposed to do, they walked soberly around like smaller versions of adults. What a depressing place to grow up, Teldin mused, remembering his own boisterous childhood. I'm sure my father *wished* I'd been like these little zombies, but—thank the gods—that's not the way it worked out.

After a few minutes of walking through the streets, Teldin thought he could pick out some people

who didn't look as if they really belonged. Certainly, they wore the same unrelieved gray clothing, and they kept their eyes down and mouths shut. But there was something about their expressions—a hint of interest, perhaps, or vitality—that set them apart. They're visitors, too, the Cloakmaster realized with surprise. They knew what to expect, and took on the dress and mannerisms of the locals so they wouldn't stand out the way I do. He frowned. I should have done more research before coming here, he admitted to himself. There's definitely something to be said for not drawing attention to yourself.

The situation wasn't permanent, however. Using the cloak's shapechanging powers, it would be only a moment's work to turn himself into a gray-clad drone. Of course, undergoing the change on a crowded street wouldn't be the smartest idea. He glanced around him. All he needed was a deserted alley and a couple of seconds to remedy his error. But then his eyes lit on a group of burly men across the street, and he realized he might not have a couple of seconds to do anything.

There were five of them, all large and broad-shouldered, the smallest about Teldin's height and the largest a head taller. They wore the gray clothes and had the severe haircuts that marked them as Compact locals, but their eyes were fixed on the Cloakmaster, not the ground, and their expressions were hard and angry.

Teldin stopped in his tracks. He couldn't even guess at what the gray-clad men might be angry about, but he was in no mood for any kind of confrontation. Quickly he glanced around him, looking for some way of avoiding them, somewhere to duck out of sight. He was in the middle of the street, though, and there was no alley, or even an open doorway, within a dozen yards.

It wouldn't have helped him if there had been. The largest of the five men was already striding toward Teldin, with the others following behind.

With no option but confrontation, Teldin drew himself up to his full height and fixed an expression on his face that he hoped conveyed determination and confidence. He brushed his cloak back and planted his fists on his hips. For a moment he silently berated himself for leaving his sword aboard the *Fool* and trusting only to his knives, but then he pushed the thought aside as useless.

The big man stopped a pace in front of him and glared down into Teldin's face. The other four spread out on either side of him a half pace or so farther back. For a moment there was silence as the five men looked him up and down. Then, "Well?" Teldin asked coldly.

"You be a big fancy-man, don't you be?" the leader demanded, his voice like gravel. "Walking here in your devil's colors, not following the Way of the Plain."

Teldin didn't answer at once. Then he shrugged, as though the big man's anger meant nothing to him. "I wear what I usually wear," he said at last, his voice reasonable. "I don't know your 'Way of the Plain,' but I intend no insult." And with that, he turned aside, ready to walk away.

But the leader grabbed his shoulder with a hand the size of a feast day ham and jerked him back. He glared down at Teldin from a handspan away, breathing his sour breath right into the Cloakmaster's face. "The Way of the Plain be the law," he growled. "You come here to break that law. What other laws you be here to break, then?"

The man's grip on Teldin's shoulder was tight enough to hurt—obviously too tight for the smaller man to pull free easily. Quickly, the Cloakmaster considered his options. For a moment he considered trying to break free, but immediately realized that would just further enrage the man.

With an effort, he schooled his expression to calm, and said quietly, "I'm not here to break any of your laws."

"But you *be* breaking one, don't you be?" the gray-clad man demanded harshly. "He *do* be, right, lads?" The others growled and grunted their agreement. "What do we with lawbreaker, then?" the leader asked.

Teldin looked quickly from face to face, saw the same thing written in all five expressions. They're working themselves up, he recognized, working themselves into a state to do something. The question was, how far would they go? He let his right hand creep closer to the hilt of the small knife sheathed behind the buckle of his broad belt. "I mean you no harm," he said as calmly as he could manage. He wasn't really afraid for his life—he didn't think the men looked like trained warriors, and he could probably hold his own against five street fighters—but there was always the chance one of his foes would

get lucky and injure him, perhaps badly. Even if he escaped unscathed, the fight would attract entirely too much attention to the "black-clad stranger," and could prevent him from reaching the archive.

"You harm by your presence, lawbreaker," the man grunted. He tightened his grip on Teldin's shoulder, then drew back his other rock-hard fist to drive it into the smaller man's face.

Teldin brought up his left forearm to deflect the coming blow. With his right hand he snatched the knife from its concealed sheath and poised the slender blade to strike.

"Hold!" The sharp command echoed through the street.

The six men froze, forming a strange tableau. Teldin looked around wildly for the one who'd spoken.

"Hold, I say," the voice repeated.

Now Teldin could see the speaker. He was a slender man an inch or two taller than Teldin and, judging by his face, a couple of years younger. He wore the same nondescript gray garb as the Cloakmaster's assailants, and his hair—gossamer-thin, and so blond as to be almost white—was cut in the same straightforward style. His pale, gray-blue eyes were steady, his face expressionless.

The man holding Teldin glared at the new arrival. "You defend the lawbreaker?" he snarled.

"He breaks the law only because he doesn't *know* the law," the newcomer pointed out reasonably. His voice had lost its snap of command, and was now soft, almost musical. "What does the True Path say about ignorance?"

The large man hesitated. His hand loosened its grip on Teldin's shoulder, then fell away entirely. He glanced at the comrades at his sides, doubt in his eyes. "Ignorance is the greatest crime..." he said slowly.

"... but a crime to be corrected, not punished," the newcomer concluded. "Am I right? Our friend"—he indicated Teldin—"comes to the Great Archive for knowledge, in respect and reverence as he should. He knows not our customs, it's true, but the fault lies equally with you for not enlightening him."

Teldin's erstwhile foe dropped his gaze. His comrades had already taken a couple of steps back, as though they were trying to fade into the crowd around them.

The big man managed to generate one last burst of bravado. "And who be *you*," he demanded of the newcomer, "to lecture me on the True Path?"

"I am a Child of the Path," the new arrival said quietly. He held something out toward the man. Teldin couldn't see details, but it looked like a silver disk a couple of inches across, carved with complex symbols.

It didn't mean anything to Teldin, but his foe recognized it instantly. The big man's grayish complexion paled even further, and he lowered his gaze once more. "I beg forgiveness, Worthy One," he mumbled, jerkily touching the fingertips of his right hand to his forehead. "I—"

The newcomer cut him off. "Enough," he said sharply. "Think on what I've said... but do it somewhere else."

Teldin watched as his erstwhile opponent vanished into the crowds, followed by his companions... then started slightly as the newcomer spoke to him.

"You won't be needing that, I think."

Teldin's cheeks burned with embarrassment as he realized he was still holding his knife, ready to strike at a foe who wasn't there. He hastily returned the blade to its sheath. "Thank you," he said quietly. "I didn't know how best to handle that."

"You handled it the only way you could have," the other said with a shrug. "They were out to 'discipline' an unbeliever—probably after a few hours in a wineshop, building up their courage." He smiled.

Teldin didn't return the smile. There hadn't been any smell of alcohol on the man's breath, had there? What did that mean? Did it mean anything at all, or was Teldin's paranoia acting up again?

"In any case," the young man went on, "it's not an uncommon problem in Compact. One of the disadvantages of living in a theocracy is that sometimes the faithful let their fervor get a little out of hand." He shrugged again. "The True Path is supposed to be one of peace, but people sometimes forget that it extends to unbelievers as well."

"You keep mentioning that," Teldin pointed out. "What is the True Path?" He hesitated, then added

tentatively, "If you've got the time to talk."

The man flashed Teldin a disarming grin. "I've got the time," he confirmed. He glanced up at the sun, which hung, bloated and red, in the sky, to judge the hour. "Have you eaten highsunfeast?" he asked.

"No," Teldin replied, "and I'd be glad to buy you a meal. Or"—he quirked an eyebrow wryly—"would that be against the Way of the Plain?"

The blond man seated himself across the small table from Teldin. The place he'd selected reminded the Cloakmaster of the wineshops he'd seen on the Rock of Bral, except that it had small tables right out on the street, where the patrons could watch the passersby. It was one of these outdoor tables that the stranger had chosen.

As his new acquaintance arranged his chair to his liking, Teldin examined him a little more closely. The first thing he realized was that he could well be as much as a decade off in his estimate of the man's age. His face was smooth and unlined, and could belong to a man of barely thirty summers. Yet his eyes belied that impression. They seemed calmer, more perceptive—wiser—than the eyes of a thirty-year-old had any right to be.

The only individuals Teldin had ever seen with that combination of apparent youth and rare wisdom had been elves. Trying not to display his interest, he scrutinized the man's ears. Yes, they did seem to have the points typical of the elven race—though, granted, they weren't as pronounced as, say, Vallus Leafbower's.

The newcomer smiled across the table at Teldin. "I have to say something before we take our meal," he said lightly. "Call it a tradition." Teldin's reaction must have shown in his face, because the blond man chuckled. "No," he reassured him, "it's nothing like the Way of the Plain. It's just that I never let someone buy me a meal unless I know his name."

Teldin felt his own face relax into a smile. "Aldyn Brewer," he said deciding to stick with the pseudonym—at least for the moment.

The blond nodded graciously. "Well met, Aldyn Brewer. My name is Djan"—he pronounced it *DYE-un*. "Djan Alantri, of Crescent."

Teldin shot him a surprised glance. "Of Crescent?" he echoed.

Djan chuckled again. "Yes," he confirmed, "I was born here. My father was a priest of the True Path—that makes me a Child of the Path, as I told that lout earlier, and worthy of respect."

He shrugged. "Unfortunately, my father had the, urn, marginal judgment to fall in love with someone who wasn't 'of the blood'—which makes me worthy of disrespect. It almost evens out."

"You're a half-elf, then," Teldin stated. Djan nodded. "And that's a problem here?"

Djan gestured around them. "Look at their faces," he suggested. "Notice anything unusual?"

Teldin did as he was told. It took him a moment to realize what the half-elf was getting at. "They're all human," he said slowly.

Djan nodded. "Blood is very important to the followers of the True Path," he explained. "If I weren't a Child of the Path, my life might have ended long ago." He smiled, as if what he'd just said didn't worry him at all. "In any case, I followed in my father's footsteps—I trained for the priesthood. But the ongoing prejudice got on my nerves. I quit, and I even left Crescent." He chuckled self-deprecatingly. "You know the kind of thing: leave home, see the universe. I only arrived home a couple of weeks ago."

Teldin nodded slowly. That made a lot of sense. Even though Djan dressed like a local, and obviously knew much about the culture, there was something about him very different from those who'd lived their lives on Crescent. "Do you still follow the True Path?"

"In my heart," Djan replied quietly.

"And?"

The half-elf's smile was back. "And what *is* the True Path?" he finished for Teldin. "It's the religion of Crescent, the worship of the god Marrak, Master of All Knowledge." He shrugged. "The faith itself is based around a reverence for knowledge and learning—an admirable tenet, if you ask me."

Unfortunately, the Church of the True Path—that's the organized, bureaucratic religion that's grown up around the Marrakite faith—has made some changes. According to the Church, knowledge is to be revered... and just about everything else is to be *repressed*.

"That's where the 'Way of the Plain' came from," Djan went on, "and all the other repressive trappings of the religion."

"I don't know how I feel about organized religions," Teldin said quietly, honestly, "but I think I'd like one that put a high priority on knowledge." He gestured around him. "Crescent must be a dynamic place," he remarked, "always learning something new, always—"

Djan cut him off with a snort. "Maybe that's the way it should be," he said dryly, "but that's not the way it is. That's something else the Church has changed. According to Church doctrine, the only knowledge that counts is *old* knowledge. Everything that's important—everything that's *real*—has already been discovered. There's no need to try to discover anything more. Anything you think you find out that's beyond the 'true knowledge' is just lies, created by the Great Deceiver to lead us astray." He snorted again. "Nonsense, of course, and that's another reason I left Crescent: I *realized* it was nonsense.

"But at least there's the Great Archive," he went on in a less cynical tone. "At least the Church has done something right, though maybe for the wrong reasons. They think they're protecting the purity of the Truth. What they're actually doing is providing an incredible service to scholars from all over the universe. Such as yourself, hm?" he added, smiling at Teldin.

The Cloakmaster felt an icy chill in his stomach. "That's the second time you've said—or implied—I'm going to the archive," he pointed out, trying to keep his voice light, but doubting that he was succeeding. "How do you know?"

The half-elf smiled broadly, disarmingly. "Why *else* would you have come to Crescent, by the mind of Marrak?" he asked. "To learn from our sense of fashion, perhaps?" He placed his gray-garbed arm next to Teldin's black-clad one, and flicked, the silver button on the cuff.

Teldin had to laugh, his suspicions dispelled by his companion's easy manner. "Well said, Djan Alantri," he said with a smile. "So just where is this Great Archive of yours?"

"We're not far from it," Djan answered. "Head up this street here. When you reach the main square, turn right. You can't miss it." He paused. "If you like," he suggested, "after our meal I can take you there. Perhaps even help you find whatever it is you need. The filing system is... *interesting*."

Teldin hesitated. It was a kind offer, and a valuable one, too. He'd already been worrying about how he'd find the information he needed—considering the fact that he wasn't the most accomplished reader—even without hearing about the "interesting" filing system. But he instinctively wanted to avoid telling anyone that he was looking for information about the *Spelljammer*.

"Thanks for your offer," he said, "but I can't tie up that much of your time." He hesitated again! "But," he added impulsively, "if you'd like to meet me for a glass of wine— here—after evenfeast..."

The half-elf's smile broadened. "I would be honored, Aldyn Brewer," he replied politely.

I should have known better, Teldin told himself wryly. Anytime someone says "You can't miss it," you're going to have the Dark Queen's own time finding what you're looking for. He chuckled dryly. The half-elf, Djan, had neglected to point out that Compact had *several* large courtyards that a visitor could mistake for the "main square." Teldin had based his search on one of those, and it had taken him almost an hour to literally stumble across the Great Archive.

At least his wanderings hadn't been interrupted by any more fervent Marrakites out looking for unbelievers to discipline. As soon as he'd left Djan at the wineshop, he'd ducked into a deserted side street and seen to his appearance. He looked down at his garb, simple breeches and jerkin of rough-looking gray homespun. If this doesn't follow the Way of the Plain, I don't know what does, he mused. Taking a fold of fabric between his thumb and forefinger, he rubbed the cloth. Although it looked like homespun, it still felt like the smooth, expensive fabric of his black outfit. He shook, his head in

puzzlement. Sometimes when he used the cloak—now shrunk to the size of a necklace—to change his appearance, all details were changed, including, texture. Other times, however, there were surprising inconsistencies—like now. The results seemed totally unpredictable.

Oh, well, he thought with a shrug, it won't matter for the moment. All I have to do is stay away from suspicious tailors.

The Great Archive was one block ahead of him. He could see it clearly now. The street he was on was narrow, which surprised him a little. Shouldn't a thoroughfare leading to one of the city's most significant features be wider, more prominent? It wasn't even as busy, as crowded, as the other streets he'd wandered down, lost. He was surrounded by gray-clad natives of Compact, but no more than a dozen. He shrugged. It didn't really matter, did it? He headed toward the archive.

And that's when he saw the figure ahead of him. It was a large man, dressed in sand-brown sheepskin and leathers. He was broad and muscular, with curly black hair that fell to his shoulders. The man looked as out of place among the smaller, drably clad Marrakites as a wolf among lambs. He had his back turned to Teldin as he looked out over the small square in front of the archive. As Teldin watched, he started to turn.

He's dangerous. Very dangerous. The thought flashed into Teldin's mind without warning, with the intensity and suddenness of a mental shout. He had no idea where the thought came from, but that very fact made it impossible to ignore. Without hesitation, Teldin stepped off the road, into a narrow alleyway—quickly, before the curly haired man could turn and spot him. He flattened against the rough brick wall of a building. His heart pounded a triphammer beat in his ears. He held his breath....

Just what the hell do I think I'm doing? he asked himself. Where did that reaction come from?

Who was that man to drive him to hide? Nobody that Teldin knew—just another stranger to the city of Compact. The Cloakmaster had reacted to the mental warning of danger... but where had that warning come from, and why should he trust it? With a muttered curse, he stepped out from the alley again, and looked around for the broad-shouldered figure. But the man was gone, without any clue of the direction he had taken.

Teldin cursed again. What in the Abyss had just happened? he asked himself again. Where had that sensation of danger come from? From the cloak? Certainly, the ultimate helm sometimes fed him information, or enhanced his senses—he recalled how it had let him see through the magical disguise of Celestial Nightpearl, the radiant dragon—but had this been an example of the same kind of thing?

Or had his mind started to play tricks on him? Was this the first sign of the onset of paranoia? He definitely had reason enough to distrust strangers, considering his recent experience....

No. He shook his head firmly. Smoothing his drab gray attire, he strode down the last block, crossed the small courtyard to the Great Archive, and climbed the marble steps toward the big double door.

The archive was a huge building, sprawling over two city blocks. Constructed of finely dressed blocks of gray-white marble, it seemed to combine half a dozen architectural styles. Tall and narrow archways opened into broad, squat-looking colonnades. Pillars of several different styles flanked the stairway, and mismatched carvings and bas-reliefs covered the front facade. In any other setting, the mismatch of techniques would have looked chaotic, even ugly. The sheer size of the Great Archive made it all right, however. While Teldin would have found fault with a smaller building, the archive was so daunting that he simply accepted it: the archive *was*, and that's all there was to it. He hesitated a moment, then pushed open one of the huge, blackened oak doors and stepped inside.

He wasn't exactly sure what he'd been expecting. If he'd been pressed for an answer, he'd probably have expected the Great Archive to consist of small, claustrophobic rooms lined, floor to ceiling, with shelves of leather-bound books and carefully rolled scrolls. But nothing's ever quite what I expect it to be, is it? he asked himself silently.

The double doors opened onto a great circular hall, at least a dagger cast across. It looked totally empty: no people, no shelves of books. Around the periphery he saw arched doorways, leading off into the depths of the building. Right across from him, diametrically opposite the door, was a large, ornate wooden structure, like a huge magistrate's bench. It, too, seemed empty. He took a couple of steps

across the polished marble floor toward the bench, his footsteps echoing hollowly, and stopped.

The hall was almost as high as it was wide, walls and columns stretching up, ten times or more the height of a man, to a hemispherical dome above. The dome had windows set into it, windows formed of many small, irregularly shaped pieces of crystal, each a different color. The ruddy light of Crescent's sun shone down through them, its beams scattering into fragments and spears of a hundred hues, each dazzling his eyes as the multicolored stars of wildspace did.

It took him a few moments of staring to realize that the colored glasses actually formed pictures. Men and women, three times life-size, strolled through forests of emerald green, under impossibly blue skies, or sat around tables in rooms hung with crimson and gold curtains. In a dozen frames, people dressed in flowing robes of luminous colors did incomprehensible things.

Something tapped Teldin's left hip. With a start, he looked down.

A small figure, dressed in gray shirt and baggy gray pantaloons, stood beside him, staring up at him. Brilliant green eyes flashed out of a weather-tanned face, framed with tightly curling brown hair. The figure was a gnome, quite obviously.

"Are you here for the tour?" the small figure asked, his voice so fast-paced the words almost ran together. "If you *are* here for the tour, I'm very sorry to tell you there *is* no tour. There *used* to be a tour," he went on, without even a breath, "but so few people took the tour that we decided there was little reason to have a tour anymore. So if you're looking for a tour—"

"No," Teldin said sharply, cutting off the torrent of words.

The gnome's eyes opened wide, apparently startled by Teldin's brusqueness.

"No, thank you, Master Gnome," the Cloakmaster went on, less forcefully. "I'm not here for a tour."

The gnome looked relieved. "That's good, because we don't have a tour anymore, but if you'd like to hear more about the stained crystal windows above you, I can certainly tell you. They represent the Golden Age of Learning, when Marrak—may His wisdom always be praised—walked the face of the world, before the Great Truths were all learned, and before..."

Teldin held up his hands, palms out.

The gnome's words trailed off, and he looked puzzled. "You don't want to know about the stained crystal windows?" he asked after a moment. "Then what *do* you want?"

"I want some books."

The gnome blinked. "Ah, books, is it?" His face suddenly brightened again. "Well, you've come to the right place. As you may or may not know, this is the Great Archive of Crescent, and..."

Again Teldin cut him off. "I know," he said evenly. "That's why I'm here."

"Ah," the gnome repeated. "Ah. Yes. Well." The gnome blew out his cheeks. "What kind of books?"

Teldin sighed. This conversation was going the way all his conversations did when gnomes were involved. "Maybe I should speak to someone in charge," he suggested carefully. "A librarian."

"That's me," the gnome announced with a huge grin, hooking a small thumb toward his chest. "Second Assistant Third Backup Vice-Librarian's Aide (Day) Fazinaleantin Mememelnisikian. You may call me Fazin if you like."

"Fazin," Teldin started, struggling mightily to keep his voice steady, "you're the Second Assistant Third Librarian's Aide—"

"Second Assistant Third *Backup* Vice-Librarian's—"

"Whatever," Teldin cut him off. Fazin's face fell. "Where's the *First* Assistant whatever the rest of it was? Or, better yet, the real librarian?"

"I can tell you where they all are," Fazin pointed out.

"Can you do it in five words or less?"

The gnome hesitated for a moment, then started counting on his fingers. "They're... not... on... duty... today-and-they-won't-be-on-duty-for-another-week-or-thereabouts-but-if-you-want-to-come-back-th-en-you-can-talk-to-them," he finished in a breathless rush.

Teldin didn't trust himself to speak for a few moments. Although he recognized he was getting much better at talking to gnomes—a very specialized skill, if one wanted to avoid homicide—he still found it rather more taxing than mortal combat. "Can you help me find some books?" he asked at last.

"That's my job."

The Cloakmaster sighed. "Take me to them," he suggested.

Instead of taking Teldin to the shelves of books as the Cloakmaster expected, Fazin led him to a small but comfortable waiting room off the circular hall. The gnome pointed to a small box containing square pieces of paper, a quill pen, and an inkwell. "You write down on the paper the subjects you want to read about," Fazin explained. "Then I go to the indexing system and locate the appropriate books. Then I bring them to you here. It's an efficient process, much better than you trying to use our indexing system yourself. After all," he added with a quick grin, "I've been studying it for six years now, and sometimes it still surprises me. When we get the *new* indexing system working, things'll be much better, but..." Apparently he saw the impatience in Teldin's face, because he slid the box of papers across the tabletop toward the human. "There," he suggested, "just write down what you want to know."

Teldin looked down at the pen and paper. "Can't I just tell you?" he asked.

Fazin looked scandalized. "You have to write it. That's the system, and the system won't work if you don't follow it."

"Why?"

The gnome was silent for a moment. Then, "I don't know," he admitted, "but that's the system, and I'm sure there's a very good reason for it. There's always a very good reason..." He trailed off, then took a deep breath. "Why don't you just tell me?" he capitulated. "What do you want to know?"

It was Teldin's turn to take a deep breath, to try to relieve the sudden tension he felt in his chest. "The *Spelljammer*," he breathed. "Get me what you have on the *Spelljammer*."

Fazin's green eyes opened as wide as they'd go. "You mean the one-and-only-*Spelljammer*-not-the-lesser-vessels-that-are-also-known-as-spelljammers? Yes, of course you do. Well." He grabbed a piece of paper from the box, scrawled a few indecipherable words on it. "Got to follow the system," he remarked conspiratorially to Teldin. "Would you like them all at once?"

"What?"

"All the books," Fazin explained patiently. "Would you like them all at once, or maybe an easy hundred at a time?"

"*What?*" Teldin demanded again.

Fazin shrugged. "I assume you want all the information we have on the one-and-only-*Spelljammer*," he pointed out. "All the books and scrolls in the archive that mention the one-and-only-*Spelljammer*, well, there must be thousands of them. Now, would you like them all at once?"

"No, no, no," Teldin almost shouted, raising his hands. He struggled to calm himself. "Look," he went on more quietly, "I know there are lots of rumors about the *Spelljammer*— rumors, myths, legends... What I'm looking for is the *truth*. Do you have anything like that? Like maybe..."—he gestured vaguely—"like maybe a single book that lists all the things about the *Spelljammer* that are *most likely* to be true?"

"An interesting request," Fazin mumbled. "A very interesting request. You know..." His face suddenly lit up. "Do you know, I recall someone making a similar request, oh, it must be almost two years ago now. A purple gentleman with *things* on his face." He put his hand against his chin with his fingers pointed down, and wiggled them.

Teldin stared, then he smiled. "Did the gentleman give you a name?"

Fazin shook his head quickly. "I think he was in too much of a hurry," he said, "and I didn't want to press him, if you know what I mean."

Teldin nodded slowly. So Estriss was here, almost two years ago, he mused, researching the *Spelljammer*.

Or, at least, *some* illithid was, he quickly corrected himself. The odds favored Estriss. From what others had told him about run-of-the-mill mind flayers, another illithid would probably have just taken what it wanted and killed Fazin in the process. But it wouldn't do to count on that fact.

"Did the gentleman find the books he wanted?" the Cloak-master asked.

Fazin nodded. "Two of them," he confirmed. "He was quite impressed with them." He shrugged. "He read many more as well—he was quite a demanding patron, I'll tell you that—but I recall he, um, 'said' that only two were worth the parchment they were scribed on."

That sounded promising, Teldin thought. "Could you please bring me those two books, then?" he asked.

"Certainly, certainly, right away." Fazin indicated a leather-upholstered wingback chair. "Make yourself comfortable. This won't take long." And with that he turned and scurried away.

Teldin watched his retreating back with a half smile. Gnomes, he thought. They'll do anything for you... if you can get them to do anything at all. He settled himself down in the chair Fazin had indicated—it was surprisingly comfortable, he found—and waited.

He didn't have to wait long. He guessed it was less than five minutes before the gnome reappeared in the doorway... empty-handed.

Teldin sighed. "What else do you need me to write down?" he asked tiredly.

Fazin looked confused for a moment, then shook his head. "No, it's not like that at all," he explained. "The books you wanted aren't in the stacks." Teldin blinked. "Not on the shelves where they're supposed to be," the gnome elaborated.

"Has someone borrowed them?"

"*Borrowed* them?" Fazin asked in outrage. "Let people *borrow* them? Never. All the books here are so important we'd never let them outside the building, no matter how much people requested us to change our policies—"

"Anyway," Teldin interjected forcefully.

Fazin stopped and visibly changed mental tracks. "Anyway," he said, "the books are missing. Stolen, probably, or maybe lost."

Probably the latter, Teldin corrected mentally. "Do you often lose books?"

"Not often," the gnome stated. "Misplace, yes. Lose, no. And the number of misplaced books will go down when we bring in the new indexing and retrieval system—"

"But at the moment," Teldin cut him off, "the books are..."

"Gone," Fazin finished for him. "Not here. Not available. So sorry."

"Both of them?"

"Both of them."

Teldin thought about that in silence. How likely was it— really—that both of the most valuable books about the *Spell-jammer* were accidentally missing, and simultaneously at that? It *was* remotely possible, but far from probable. How much more likely that somebody who was also searching for the mysterious ship had decided owning the books would be much more convenient than reading them in some library waiting room? He slumped in his seat. He'd put so much hope in his quest to Crescent, he realized, even more than he'd thought. After all, wasn't the Great Archive supposed to be the largest repository of knowledge anywhere? And now the two books he wanted were missing....

Wait a moment, he thought. Paladine's blood, *two books* Two books out of the greatest library of them all? That shouldn't be catastrophic, should it? Books were often written based on information taken from other books; Sylvie had told him that once. Mightn't he be able to find the earlier books on which *these* had been based? Why not? Anything was possible; and anything was better than just giving up.

He jumped to his feet. "Take me to the indexing system," he told Fazin.

The gnome twitched as though he'd been pinched. "The indexing system? That's off-limits, it's not allowed, it's against all the rules, and for good reason, too..."

"Where is it?" Teldin demanded. He strode toward the door. "I know it's through here somewhere."

Fazin darted around Teldin's legs and stopped in front of him, drawing himself up to his full height of three and a half feet. "No, you can't," he said firmly. "It's more than my job is worth."

Teldin hesitated. For a moment he considered just pushing the gnome out of the way, but then he crouched down so his cornflower eyes were on a level with Fazin's green ones. He rested a hand heavily on each of the gnome's shoulders. "I need to see the indexing system," he said quietly. "Now, will you

take me to it, or do I have to tear this place apart until I find it myself?" .

For a moment, Teldin thought the gnome was going to resist, but then he saw all the fight drain out of the Second Assistant Third Backup Vice-Librarian's Aide (Day). "I'll take you," he sighed. "Just don't cause any trouble. It's getting so a gnome can't get through a day without someone coming in here and throwing his weight around. I tell you, this job is harder than ever I thought..." Without any break in his monologue he turned around and led Teldin deeper into the labyrinthine Great Archive.

Chapter Three

"Well, here it is," Fazin announced. He pushed open a door and stood aside to let Teldin precede him.

For a moment the Cloakmaster hesitated, then he pushed the flash of paranoia aside and stepped into the room.

And stopped. "This is *it*?" he asked.

Fazin slipped by him. "This isn't *all* of it, of course," he explained. "This is just what we call the GUI—the Gnome User Interface. The actual workings are down in the basement, where it's cool and where the power supply can't get loose and damage things. Of course," he added, "it's going to be very different when we install the *new* indexing and retrieval system—"

"Yes, of course," Teldin interrupted distractedly, "Now, er..."

"How does it work?" The gnome pointed to the large chair dominating the small room, its back to the door. "The operator sits in the operator's chair, in front of the workstation." He indicated a desklike surface mounted on the wall directly ahead of the chair. "The operator then enters his search terms—what he wants to find out—through the digitizing tablet." He pointed to a complex contraption on the desktop.

"Digitizing... ?"

"So called because the operator uses his digit to enter information," Fazin elaborated, wiggling his right forefinger.

"Then he pulls the processing lever, there on the wall."

Teldin saw a large leather-handled metal lever mounted in a slot in the wall, within easy reach of the chair. "And that's it?" he asked.

Fazin nodded. "Then the operator just waits for the results to come out of the output slot, there next to the tablet."

"Sounds simple enough." Teldin strode over to the large chair and seated himself. He stared down at the "digitizing tablet," as Fazin had called it. It looked like an open-topped box of dark, small-grained wood, about a foot square and an inch high. In the center of the box was a small ring of silver metal, about the same size as a man's finger ring. Attached to it were a number of slender and delicate leverlike linkages—reminding Teldin uncomfortably of a spider's legs—that disappeared into small holes and slots in the desktop.

Seeing Teldin's confusion, Fazin pointed to the ring. "Put your finger in there," he instructed.

The Cloakmaster hesitated, then did as he was told. The spider legs held the ring about half an inch off the bottom surface of the "box." With the tip of his right index finger resting on the smooth surface, the ring was at a level with the first joint.

"Now move your finger around. You'll see the linkages communicate every movement to the mechanisms in the basement." Fazin smiled. "Cunning, yes?"

Teldin moved his finger in a circle, watching with fascination the way the linkages bent and flexed. They made a faint clicking, whirring sound that he found slightly disturbing, but the resistance to his movements was a lot less than he'd expected. "Cunning, yes," he agreed. "Now what do I do with it?"

"Write the word or the words you want to find information about," Fazin told him, "just as if your fingertip were the nib of a pen. The more words you write, the more precise the search.... but the longer the mechanism will take."

Teldin nodded. "Let's give this a try." Carefully, he used his finger to print the word *Spelljammer*. He hesitated, then also printed the word *Juna*. Why not? he told himself. Who knows? Maybe Estriss's

guesses about the ancient race were right. Then, for good measure, he added *ultimate helm*. He glanced over at Fazin. "And now?"

Wordlessly the gnome pointed at the leather-handled lever. Teldin grasped it and pulled it down. With a grinding, clattering sound, the lever slid to the bottom of the slot. When he released it, it rose slowly back to its original position.

"And... ?"

"And now we wait," the librarian answered.

Teldin removed his finger from the digitizing tablet's ring and leaned back in the chair. "How long?"

Fazin shrugged, puffing out his cheeks. "It varies," he said—a little abashedly, Teldin thought.

"By how much?"

"It varies by how much it varies. Sometimes it takes just a few seconds. Other times... longer."

"How *much* longer?" Teldin pressed. "Minutes?"

"Sometimes."

"Hours?"

"Sometimes."

"Days?"

"No!" Fazin said emphatically. "Never days." Then he added, almost under his breath, "The mechanism always breaks before then." He looked up at Teldin and added firmly, "But that'll all be different when we install—"

"The new indexing and retrieval system, I know." Teldin looked over at the black maw of the output slot. Nothing was being output. For all he could tell, the mechanism in the basement had already broken. But what could he do except wait? "Tell me about the new system," he suggested, more to pass the time than from any real interest.

The gnome's eyes flashed with enthusiasm. "It's wonderful, marvelous," he gushed, "a breakthrough, even if I do say so myself as one of the participants in its design. It'll be a hundred times more efficient, a thousand times, and it'll never, ever, *ever*—hardly—break." He paused, then asked diffidently, "Would you like to see it?"

Teldin blinked with surprise. "There's something to see?"

"The whole thing," Fazin shot back, "or at least the important part."

The Cloakmaster hesitated. He cast another glance at the output slot—still empty—and sighed. "Why not?" He rose to his feet. "Where is it?"

"Right there." The gnome pointed to Teldin's left.

He looked where Fazin was indicating and saw nothing but a wall. "On the other side of the wall?" he asked.

The gnome shook his head forcefully. "No, no, of course not. *On* the wall."

Teldin looked again, suddenly feeling a premonition of what the gnome was getting at. Yes, sure enough, there was a square of parchment tacked up on the wall, a parchment bearing about twenty lines of finely scribed words and symbols. "And that's it?" he asked tiredly.

"That's the heart of it," Fazin corrected him. "That's a description of the central search and retrieval algorithm. Of course, we still have to deal with implementation, testing, installation, more testing, and system cut-over. But that's it in a nutshell."

Teldin shook his head slowly. He remembered the "secret weapon" that the gnome Dyffedionizer had brought aboard the experimental warship *Perilous Halibut*—actually a sheet of parchment with a single line written on it. "Eee mik two," he murmured absently.

"What? What? What?" Fazin sputtered. "What did you say?"

The Cloakmaster looked over, puzzled. The gnome's complexion was gray, as if the blood had drained from his face. "Nothing," Teldin said.

"But where—?"

The gnome's panicked question was cut off by a loud, raucous *buzz* from the general direction of the output slot. Teldin glanced over. It couldn't actually have *worked*, could it?

Sure enough, a strip of paper about as wide as his hand and twice as long protruded from the slot.

Teldin took the end and pulled. For a moment he felt resistance, then it was gone—as if somebody on the other side of the wall had been holding the paper and had released it the moment he'd taken it. Just how mechanical *is* this mechanical wonder? he wondered.

Fazin snatched the paper out of his hand, stared in amazement at the half dozen lines of tightly formed text. "By the ineffable mind of Marrak, that was fast," the gnome muttered. Then he shot Teldin a sharp look. "You've used this before," he accused.

Teldin didn't dignify the charge with an answer. "And now... ?"

"And now I go get the books the indexing system specified," Fazin explained, indicating the slip of paper.

The Cloakmaster nodded. "While you do, I'll just run a few more searches."

Fazin sighed. "I have the feeling it's going to be a long afternoon."

Teldin sat back in the large chair, stretched his arms high over his head and heard the cracks and pops as his muscles and joints complained. His right forefinger was sore from using the digitizing tablet, his eyes ached from reading, and his brain felt as if it were full of carded wool. How long have I been here? he wondered. He took in the pile of books on the desktop next to the digitizing tablet, another two on the floor by the chair. His gaze drifted over to Fazin, who sat in an exhausted heap in the corner. I almost wore his legs off, the Cloakmaster thought with a wry smile: ten, or maybe more, trips to and from the stacks, each carrying a couple of heavy books.

It had been nowhere as daunting a process as he'd expected. When Fazin had appeared with the first couple of books—huge, bulky things of several hundred pages, each covered with closely scribed text—he'd felt himself totally out of his depth. While he wasn't illiterate, by no means could he classify himself a confident, practiced reader. As he'd stared at the first page of the first book, and struggled to make out the first sentence, he'd begun to despair.

But then he'd felt the calming influence of the cloak, felt its power insinuate itself into his mind like fine, ice-cool tendrils. The words on the page before him didn't change their appearance in any way; they remained the same dense, cramped hand. Yet now, suddenly, Teldin knew the meaning of every word simply by glancing at it, without having to pick out each letter individually, sound out each syllable. This must be what it's like to be able to read fluently, he told himself. But the power the cloak was bestowing on him was even greater than that. Just as he didn't have to analyze each word, so too he didn't have to attend individually to each sentence, or each paragraph. Simply by passing his eyes over a page, he knew what the text was saying. It wasn't as if he could hear the words in his mind; the effect was much subtler than that. From scanning a page from top to bottom—a process that took a couple of heartbeats, no more—he knew the contents of the text, and the intentions of the author, as well as if he'd been familiar with the material since childhood. With a speed that left Fazin gaping in abject awe, he was able to fly through the first two books... and the three after that, and each subsequent load, absorbing their contents almost faster than the gnome could fetch the books.

He rubbed his tired eyes. The process hadn't been without its cost. By the time he'd finished with all the books the indexing system could list, he felt as tired as if he'd plowed a field without the benefit of a horse. As he let the power of the cloak fade away, he cringed at the onset of a headache that felt like an ice pick driving into his skull over his right eye.

It was worth it, he reminded himself. He had more information on the *Spelljammer* than he'd been able to get from anywhere else. Even though a handful of the books he'd wanted were missing, he was confident he'd filled in the gaps they'd left from other sources.

Most of the material he'd absorbed had confirmed what he'd already known—that there were hundreds of rumors, many mutually contradictory, about the great vessel, and that nobody knew for sure where it came from or how. But there were some interesting threads that had kept recurring throughout his reading.

First of all, he could finally understand where Estriss had developed his conviction that the

Spelljammer and the ancient race known as the Juna were somehow connected. Nowhere in the books Teldin had scanned was there any categorical statement that the Juna had or hadn't created the mysterious ship, or even that there was any linkage. No categorical statement... but there was certainly circumstantial evidence. In more than a dozen retellings of ancient legends—drawn from the mythology of a dozen races, from elvenkind to the insectoid thri-kreen—both the *Spelljammer* and a mysterious, vanished race appeared in close proximity. Sometimes the race was called the Elders, other times the Ancients. In only one case did Teldin recognize the name—in an elven tale, the race was known as the Star Folk—but he could understand how Estriss had concluded that all the legends referred to the Juna. He could also comprehend how the illithid had decided that proximity implied connection: if the *Spelljammer* and the Juna were mentioned together often enough—even if no direct link was ever stated—there must be some connection. So the illithid's mind must have worked, at least. Although Teldin himself wasn't convinced, he had to admit the connection was a good hypothesis.

With that established, he'd followed a couple of other leads. First he'd read whatever he could about the Broken Sphere.

There wasn't much, unfortunately—or, at least, much that he didn't know already. There were several dozen legends involving the Broken Sphere, most of which had little or no similarity with each other. Teldin was sure that someone reading the legends normally wouldn't have made any connection between them. Yet the enhanced understanding the cloak gave him let him pick out some basic similarities. Just as it was possible to infer a connection between the Juna and the *Spelljammer*, he could infer a central thread of truth that formed the basis of all the legends. He *thought* he could, at least. He didn't understand enough about what the cloak was doing, about its abilities and limitations, to be sure that the central thread existed, and wasn't a product of his own imagination. In any case, he decided to operate on the assumption that his inference was correct.

Apparently the Broken Sphere, in some tellings, was said to be the origin of many races. There had once been a crystal sphere that had ruptured in a cataclysmic explosion... or so Teldin's inference told him. The matter and energy spewed out by this blast had spread throughout space, littering the cosmos with debris and life forms. The legends claimed that many nearby crystal spheres were moving outward from this explosion, away from the remnants of the Broken Sphere. Theoretically, then—or so certain philosophers hinted—it should be possible to locate the Broken Sphere simply by backtracking the movements of related spheres.

Theoretically, perhaps. But half a dozen books written by less philosophical sages and scientists claimed that, practically speaking, it was impossible. Rivers and eddies in the Flow had so disturbed the motions of the spheres that such a simple backtracking was doomed to failure.

Teldin had been surprised to find no linkage between the Broken Sphere and the *Spelljammer*. No myths or legends made any connection.

What did that mean? The fal, One Six Nine, had been adamant that there was a connection. Was the sluglike sage wrong? Or had he told Teldin something really significant, given him an important lead that he couldn't have found anywhere else? It bore thinking about.

He'd then tried to trace the Juna, to find some hint about whether they still existed. At first he'd found nothing: every mention of the Juna, or the Star Folk, or the Ancients, or whatever, claimed they'd long since vanished from the universe—perhaps died out, perhaps moved on (whatever that might mean). No matter what reference he dug up, the result was the same: the Juna were *gone*. Oh, their works were still around—on the planet of Radole, for example, they'd crafted huge tunnels and caverns leading deep into the titanic mountain range that girdled the world—and their symbols, the three-petaled flower or the three-pointed star, could be found on a hundred planets. But of the Juna themselves there wasn't a trace.

In a fit of frustration, Teldin had stuck his finger back into the digitizing tablet and quickly traced the trilaterally symmetrical symbol that was woven into the lining of his cloak, then pulled the processing lever. He'd had no idea whether the indexing system could handle symbols as well as words; Fazin hadn't mentioned it, and the gnome had been down in the stacks at the time. For all he knew, he could have broken the temperamental mechanism. When the output slot had disgorged a single reference then, he'd been surprised... and intrigued. And when Fazin had brought him the book...

Teldin patted his belt pouch, felt the stiffness of a piece of parchment. Nex, he thought, the planet Nex.

He felt the excitement in his chest. For the first time in a long time, he had something to go on. If the information he'd copied from the book was right, he might have a lead that would eventually answer all his questions.

He forced himself to relax. No point in getting all keyed up about it now, he told himself. I'll have plenty of time to think about it later.

Time...

"Fazin."

The gnome looked up, an expression of dread on his face. "*More* books?" he whined.

Teldin chuckled. "Not this time. I've got all I need." He patted the digitizing tablet. "This thing really works," he mused.

Fazin was on his feet in a moment, staring hard at the tablet, as though trying to wrest some secret out of it. "I know," he said darkly. "It's never this efficient. Something must be wrong with it...."

It was full night when Teldin left the Great Archive. He walked quickly through the streets of the city, under guttering oil lamps and the unfamiliar constellations of Heart-space. Retracing his steps was much easier than finding the archive in the first place, so it didn't take him long to find the wineshop where he'd agreed to meet the half-elf Djan.

The tables and chairs that had been on the street were gone, and the place looked closed for the night. Guiltily, Teldin glanced up at the stars, as though they'd be able to tell him the hour, as they would in Ansalon. His ignorance of the local constellations made the gesture useless, of course. Even so, he knew he was late. He pushed open the wineshop's front door—it was open, after all—and stepped inside.

He spotted Djan immediately, sitting at a corner table, immersed in a small book. The half-elf looked up immediately when Teldin cleared his throat, and a broad smile creased his face.

"Well met, Master Brewer," Djan said, rising. He set his book—open, to hold his place—on the table and extended a hand to Teldin. The Cloakmaster took it, returning the half-elf's firm grip. "You had a busy afternoon, I'd guess."

"Sorry I'm late," Teldin started.

Djan waved the apology aside. "No matter," he said lightly. He patted the small leather-bound book. "I put the time to good use. Come, sit." As they both took seats, the half-elf waved to a waiter and requested, "Two glasses of nightwine, late harvest." He leaned toward Teldin mock-conspiratorially, and whispered, "About the only thing worth drinking on Crescent, I'm afraid."

The two remained silent as the waiter brought their drinks. Teldin found himself a little uncomfortable, sitting here with the amiable half-elf. What does he want from me? he found himself wondering. He's so friendly, so open....

He then realized what it was he was thinking. Am I that cynical? he asked himself. Have I become that closed to people, that I don't feel comfortable around someone who acts friendly toward me? I used to relish that; it was one of the things I most liked about Ansalon. How much I've changed....

Djan raised his crystal glass. Hurriedly, Teldin did the same. "What should we drink to?" the blond man asked. "How about, 'To the successful conclusion of all ventures'?"

"Sounds good to me," Teldin allowed. He took a sip of the straw-colored wine, let it roll around on his tongue for a moment before swallowing. The liquid was sweet, slightly fruity, but with a tantalizing tang to it. From the warmth he felt as he swallowed, he guessed it was quite potent. "This is excellent," he pronounced, setting his glass down.

The half-elf nodded. "I think I'm going to miss it," he admitted.

"Oh?" Teldin glanced at his companion in surprise. "I thought you'd just come home."

"Returned to Crescent," Djan corrected him gently. "I don't think I'll ever be able to consider this

world home, not again." He sighed. "It was a good place to grow up, I suppose, all things considered, but once you've seen the greater universe, it's hard to return to a limited, parochial life, don't you think?"

Teldin was silent for a moment, considering the half-elf's words. How true is that? he asked himself. Does that mean I won't be able to go home again? With an effort, he forced his attention back to Djan's words.

"In any case," his companion was saying, "I don't see myself staying here for too much longer. I thought as much when I came back, but I had to be sure. I'll find a ship going somewhere interesting, then shake the dust of Crescent off my feet—probably forever, this time." He smiled at Teldin. "The same for you, I imagine?" he suggested. "If you found what you needed at the Great Archive, of course."

Teldin resisted the urge to pat his belt pouch. "I think so," he said. He was tempted to tell the friendly half-elf exactly what he had found—the problem with operating alone was that he had no one to share his successes with—but he kept silent.

If Djan noticed Teldin's reticence, he gave no sign. "Good, good," he said. "Then you survived the indexing system."

"Barely," Teldin agreed with a laugh. "Gnomes."

Djan chuckled, too, then they sat in companionable silence for a couple of minutes.

As he sipped his nightwine, Teldin surreptitiously examined the half-elf over the rim of his glass. He seems so open, the Cloakmaster found himself thinking, so free of worries and fear, so accepting of whatever Destiny hands him. He doesn't really care where he goes, as long as it's interesting. *Interesting*, Teldin told himself wryly. His approach to life seems so sane....

"What do you know about spelljamming?" The words were out of Teldin's mouth before he was aware of phrasing the question.

Djan shot him a quizzical smile. "A little, I suppose," he said slowly. "Maybe more than a little. I was second mate aboard a squid ship merchantman out of Mitreland for almost a year." He raised an eyebrow as if to ask why, but he didn't speak the question.

Teldin was silent for a moment. Then, impulsively, he asked, "Would you consider signing on as my first mate?"

Djan didn't answer immediately. Instead, he swirled the nightwine in his glass, watching the slightly viscous liquid form tears on the vessel's inner surface. "What ship?" he asked at last. "And how seasoned is your crew?"

"No ship, and no crew. I came here in a one-man vessel," Teldin elaborated, "but I'm tired of traveling alone. I want to buy a ship and hire a crew."

The half-elf nodded slowly. "And your destination?"

"If you don't mind, I'll tell you once we've set sail," said the Cloakmaster. He smiled tentatively. "I think I can promise you'll find it interesting."

"The finest selling point, Master Brewer," Djan laughed, clapping Teldin on the shoulder. "Or shall I call you 'Captain' now?"

"'Aldyn' will do," Teldin said carefully, "for now." He thought for a moment, then asked, "Do you have any plans for tomorrow?"

"Ship hunting?" the half-elf guessed.

"Ship hunting," the Cloakmaster confirmed.

Teldin Moore stood on the sterncastle, looking down at the chaos spilling onto the docks from the main deck of the ship.

My ship, he reminded himself, patting the mizzenmast possessively. It wasn't the first ship he'd owned and mastered—the *Ship of Fools* possessed that dubious honor, or perhaps the elven swan ship *Trumpeter*, if you followed the letter of maritime law. But he considered this one to be the first ship that was fully his.

It was a squid ship—a big vessel, like the hammership *Probe* had been—two hundred and fifty feet

long, from the tip of its piercing ram to the extremity of its fluked stern. It measured twenty-five feet or so in the beam, with two gaff-rigged masts. Armaments included a heavy catapult in a turret on the forecastle and two aft-pointing medium ballistae mounted just aft of where Teldin stood on the sterncastle. Painted red, like almost all the squid ships Teldin had ever seen, the vessel looked as if it had seen hard use. The decking was scratched and stained, and the planking of the hull showed the many repairs of a ship that had survived its share of battles. The whole vessel was... tired—that's the way it felt to Teldin—and it would take huge amounts of labor to get it shipshape, like the *Probe* had been under Aelfred Silverhorn.

On the other hand, there was no major damage. Teldin himself had spotted no potential ship-killers—things such as dry rot in the keel, for example, or krajens on the hull—and the more experienced Djan Alantri had confirmed his judgment. The squid ship was spaceworthy.

I wouldn't have managed this so quickly without Djan, Teldin told himself. It was the half-elf who'd picked out the faded red squid ship as a good prospect. It was he who'd handled the negotiations—after Teldin had confirmed to his own satisfaction that the line of credit that Vallus Leafbower had extended to him was accepted on Crescent—and had shaved a good ten to fifteen percent off the price through hard bargaining.

Finally, it was Djan who'd volunteered to handle hiring a crew. Tirelessly he'd done the rounds of the harborside taverns and wineshops, recruiting and interviewing, selecting two dozen or so competent sailors he thought would work together well. Teldin had made sure he'd included primary and backup helmsmen on his "shopping list"—the Cloak-master had no intention of revealing the spelljamming powers of his cloak if he had any alternative—but the half-elf had already covered the requirements.

Teldin—or "Captain Brewer," as everyone called him—stood freely on the sterncastle of his ship, watching his crew load his supplies and prepare the squid ship for space. He shook his head slowly. How I've changed, he told himself. Captain and ship owner? What next?

A quick chill shot through his heart as part of his mind provided an unwanted answer: *Nothing different—just a much larger ship.*... He took a deep breath, trying to force his sudden anxiety down to a manageable level. Not necessarily, he told himself firmly, the decision's not been made. There are always alternatives....

Before leaving the ship to buy the final, last-minute supplies he'd thought of, Teldin put a few minutes into considering his appearance. For obvious reasons, it wouldn't do to wander the streets of Compact in his black garb. Yet, as "Captain Brewer," master of an armed and provisioned squid ship, the nondescript gray homespun he'd worn to the Great Archive wouldn't do either. After some thought, he compromised, keeping the cut of his real clothes while using the cloak's powers to change them all to gray, and to disguise their costly fabric.

Apparently he'd made the right decision, he decided as he headed back toward the docks. None of the gray-clad Marrakites had cast him so much as a second glance. In the few ship chandleries he'd visited, he'd been treated with some measure of respect—that befitting a ship's captain—yet if the proprietors had labeled him a stranger, they hadn't made an issue of it.

He patted the long rosewood box he carried under his left arm and smiled. After visiting the first two outfitters he'd started to despair of ever finding what he was after. Yet he'd persevered, and at the third establishment the proprietor had responded to his questions, not with a blank look, but by presenting the rosewood box he now carried. The price for the device inside was steep, but Teldin had no doubt it would be worth it.

He'd finally acquired a spyglass, like the one that he'd used aboard the gnomish dreadnought *Unquenchable's* longboat. He'd thought about the cunning device often, but he'd never had the chance to purchase one until now. He remembered the sense of pleasure he'd felt as he turned it over in his hands in the chandlery, enjoying its substantial weight and its smooth brass finish. He looked forward to showing his new acquisition to Djan.

The blow came out of nowhere, slamming with stunning force into the side of his head. He staggered back as another fist drove into his abdomen. The world spun wildly around him, and his stomach knotted with nausea. Iron-hard hands grabbed his shoulders and upper arms, almost dragging him off his feet. His back, and the back of his head, crashed against something unyielding. The rosewood box containing the spyglass crashed to the road. For an instant he thought he'd fallen backward, but then he realized he'd been driven against a wall. The hands that had grabbed him now released him.

Teldin's vision was still blurred. He raised a hand cautiously to the temple where the first blow had struck, and felt warm wetness on his fingertips. His skull still rang like church bells, but at least his vision was starting to clear, the red-gray fog of pain that had descended fading away. He pushed a lock of hair back from his face and looked at his attackers.

It could almost have been a repeat of his earlier encounter with the angry Marrakites, he thought at first. Facing him were six large men, all dressed in the familiar gray homespun. None had weapons drawn, though most had knives sheathed on their belts. The two who'd dragged him and thrown him against the wall—he could see he'd been pulled off the street a dagger's cast down an alleyway—were backing off from him, watching him carefully.

No, he realized with a chill of fear. No, it wasn't just like the first time. These men didn't have the sullen, disgruntled expressions of the first group. These had expressions that were cold, emotionless. He'd seen that degree of implacable determination before, but only on the faces of professional sellswords—the hirelings of Barrab, who'd tried to capture Teldin and Rianna on the streets of Rauthaven, for example. He let his hand drop to where the hilt of his short sword should be.

Nothing was there, of course. The weapon was safely aboard the squid ship. Confident that his nondescript appearance would be all the protection he needed, the Cloakmaster was armed with nothing more than his boot and belt knives. As smoothly as he could, he changed the reach for the nonexistent weapon into a gesture of defiance. He squared his shoulders and hooked his thumbs into his belt.

"What is your purpose with me?" he asked, injecting a combination of amusement and menace into his quiet voice. Carefully he watched his assailants' faces for their reactions.

If he'd been expecting some decrease in their confidence, he was sorely disappointed. Only one man's expression changed at all, and that was to twist his lips into an unpleasant smile.

The largest of the six men took a step forward. He glared down into the Cloakmaster's face. "You be not welcome here, stranger." The man's voice sounded as cold as a midwinter wind that brings the snow. Yet there was something about the man's tone that set off warning bells in Teldin's mind. The words the man used fit, matching closely what the earlier group of Marrakites had said, but, to the Cloakmaster's ear, they sounded somehow rehearsed.

Teldin strove to keep his thoughts and doubts off his face as he returned the man's stare evenly. "I be of Crescent," he said as calmly as he could manage. "I follow the Way of the Plain, is that not so? Step aside and let me pass."

Now all of the men were grinning nastily. "You be plain," the leader said with a grim chuckle, "but you be a stranger. You be not welcome here, stranger. We be here to teach you how unwelcome you be." And with that, he balled his large fists.

It took all of the Cloakmaster's self-discipline to hold his arrogant pose and not reach for the knife sheathed behind his belt buckle. He kept an aloof half smile on his face, as he repeated, "I follow the Way of the Plain. Step aside."

"You be a *stranger*," the leader snarled, and the others rumbled their agreement.

In an instant, Teldin made his decision. He let his smile broaden. "You believe I'm a stranger, do you?" he said, his voice hardly more than a whisper. "Then maybe you should see just how right you are."

With the last word, he drew a deep breath and let his awareness expand to include the cloak at his shoulders. He let the disguise fall away from his clothes, allowing them to appear in their stark, striking blackness. Simultaneously, he altered his body—not grossly, but enough to add a dagger's length to the width of his shoulders and a hand to his height. As an afterthought, he changed the lines of his face, enhancing the jaw-tracing beard and darkening and thickening his brows. He glared out of his new face at the men threatening him.

Again, he was disappointed by their reaction... which was no reaction at all. Most people would have shown some response to having the bland-looking, gray-clad man facing them turn into a hard and piratical figure garbed in commanding night black. These six, however, just stared back at him as though they saw this kind of transformation all the time. (Or as though they had expected it, part of his brain added.)

The time for talk—for bluff and counter-bluff—was over. The leader stepped forward, his ham-sized fist drawn back to strike the first blow.

As he drove it forward, Teldin ducked under the man's arm, simultaneously snatching his dagger from its sheath behind his belt buckle. The point of his shoulder slammed into his assailant's chest.

Although staggered by the impact, the big Marrakite's reactions were blindingly fast. Instead of trying for another blow—which was what Teldin had expected—he threw both arms around the Cloakmaster in a great bear hug. Teldin tried to gasp as the air was driven from his lungs and his back bent like a bow. He tried to drive his knife into his assailant's body, but the arms that were killing him also trapped his own arms at his side. In desperation, he brought his knee up with all the force he could muster, driving it into the big man's vitals.

The blow struck home. His assailant made a retching, gasping noise, spewing saliva into Teldin's face. The crushing arms fell away. Even though badly hurt, however, the big man wasn't finished. He made a wild slash at the Cloakmaster's neck with a long-bladed knife that had almost magically appeared in his hand. With a spasmodic movement, Teldin was able to parry the thrust, then, instinctively, he riposted. His own attack opened the side of his assailant's throat, and the big man collapsed to the stones of the alley.

The Cloakmaster sucked air hungrily into his aching lungs and steadied himself with his left hand against the wall. His back was on fire, the muscles feeling as though they'd been torn apart, and his vision was faintly blurred. He knew he wasn't injured badly, however, and that he'd be back to normal in only a couple of dozen heartbeats.

But that was time he didn't have. Seeing their leader felled didn't seem to deter the five other large men, and they advanced on the Cloakmaster, keeping a rough semicircle to prevent him from escaping. Their weapons were all drawn now—nothing larger than a belt knife, but since there were five blades to his one, that wasn't overly reassuring. With a harsh cry, Teldin feinted at the face of the man to his far left, then spun and gashed the forearm of the attacker directly before him. The man howled in agony but riposted with his own weapon. Teldin danced aside, feeling the razor-edged blade scribe a line of fire across his ribs, and battle was joined.

A broad-bladed knife stabbed at him from the right. He didn't have time for a proper parry, but he managed to slam the pommel of his own weapon into the attacker's wrist, deflecting the blow. He thought he felt the small bones of the other man's wrist shatter under the impact, but he couldn't be sure. He didn't have time to think about it. He had to fling himself aside to avoid another weapon driving for his heart, and felt a third blade tear the flesh of his left shoulder.

As the pain exploded in his brain, he felt energy bloom behind him. It was the cloak. In an instant, the movements of the five attackers surrounding him slowed as though the men were immersed in thickening molasses. A knife blade glinted in the sunlight as it arced toward his throat in what should have been a blindingly fast killing stroke. Now, however, the Cloakmaster had all the time in the world to raise his own blade in a perfect parry, then riposte and watch the long knife plunge into his attacker's heart. Before the newly dead man had time to fall, Teldin had slammed a blow into another attacker's throat and sidestepped yet another attempt to kill him.

He could see the amazement and horror blossom in slow motion in the remaining attackers' eyes. What must this seem like to them? he wondered with fierce amusement. To them, I'm moving as fast as lightning, as fast as a death god's avatar. They can't touch me, and I can slice them apart at my leisure.

As if to reinforce that thought, he turned to avoid another wild cut at his stomach, stepped inside the aggressor's swing, and drew his blade smoothly across the man's forehead, laying it open to the bone. Before the wounded man's face began to register the pain, the Cloakmaster had backed off again, well out of range of the panicked answering slash.

Two of the attackers' number were dead, and none of the other four was unharmed. Teldin could clearly see the survivors' morale desert them. As one, they flung their weapons to the ground—the Cloakmaster saw them fall with unnatural slowness—and turned to flee. To his magically enhanced senses, it was as if the men were leaving at a saunter, even though he knew they were pelting headlong for safety. It would have been so easy to slay them from behind, but Teldin didn't have it in him to kill anyone so totally defenseless, even though they'd shown no qualms about killing him. He watched them sprint out of the alleyway into the street and disappear around a corner.

With a sigh, he let the power of the cloak slip away. Time resumed its normal speed around him, and as it did he felt—as if for the first time—the fiery throbbing of his multiple wounds. With a tired groan, he reasserted his nondescript appearance and followed the long-departed assailants out of the alley.

Good thing Djan's crew included at least one priest capable of using healing magic, Teldin told himself sourly a couple of hours later. Even though his wounds weren't serious, let alone life-threatening, their pain had been a nagging reminder that something was going on, something that he didn't fully understand. As the magic knitted the sliced and torn flesh and soothed away the pain, he was able to think clearly about what had happened. Teldin was again walking the streets of the city, searching again, but not for a spyglass this time.

The confrontation in the alleyway hadn't been a random event, not like his first run-in with the Marrakites. (And was even that random? he found himself wondering.) Even though at first glance that conclusion might seem paranoid, on closer inspection there was sufficient evidence to support it.

First, his assailants had claimed to know he was a stranger. How? In his visits to the ship chandleries, nobody else had shown any suspicion that he wasn't a native of Crescent. Why pick him out for special attention, when his magically altered appearance was specifically chosen to divert such unwanted attention? The only explanation was that the men knew—somehow, from some source—that Teldin was a stranger.

Second, at the time the Cloakmaster had felt there was something wrong with the encounter, felt that the leader of the attackers was reciting phrases that were rehearsed, that the man was acting out a role in some play.

Third, and perhaps most telling, was the fact that the attackers hadn't shown any reaction when he'd used the cloak's magic to change his appearance. How would most people have responded if the nondescript man they were talking to suddenly changed into a black-clad, piratical-looking figure? With fear and doubt, almost certainly, or at least with shock, but his assailants hadn't shown even the slightest hint of surprise.

What did all that tell him? His assailants had known who he was—if not what he represented—and at least some of what to expect from him. That, in turn, meant that someone had told them, and hired them to make trouble for the Cloakmaster. There was another possibility, though he decided it wasn't likely: that his assailants had set up the whole tiling on their own initiative.

The implication was that there was somebody—or several somebodies—in Compact who had serious interest in the movements of "Aldyn Brewer." The Cloakmaster, in turn, had serious interest in him, or them.

Again he'd disguised his appearance using the cloak, but this time he'd decided to use the full range of the artifact's abilities. He smirked to himself. Let the people who were after him scour Compact for a thirty-something, sandy-haired human of average height. They wouldn't give a second glance to a snowy-haired and bearded dwarf, stooped with age.

Teldin's plan of the moment was simple. By asking around at taverns, ship suppliers, and similar establishments, he would get a line on anyone who'd been showing inordinate interest in the whereabouts or actions of Captain Aldyn Brewer. He'd then track down those people and ask them some hard questions about their interests and intentions.

As he walked along one of the major streets leading to the docks, he wondered again if he should

have brought Djan— and maybe some other members of the crew—as reinforcements, or, at the very least, as moral support. No, he thought. This is a task for one.

His plan was working out better than he'd expected. He'd already learned that two individuals had been asking about the "stranger who arrived in the one-man ship." In fact, the second person he'd spoken to about this—the bartender at a dockside tavern—had given him a description of the people involved.

"A woman, one of them," the large man had told Teldin. The man casually breathed a warm reek of sour wine into his face. "Didn't see no face under that cloak of hers, but she sounded real fine. And her bully boy partner—a big sod, couple axe handles across the shoulders, jaw like he could chew granite, and black hair down to his shoulders. Didn't say nothing, he didn't, he just looked like he was thinking bad thoughts." Teldin smiled as he remembered the man's description. Colorful, he thought, and something I'm not likely to forget.

He'd asked similar questions at several more establishments, building up a mental picture of the pair's movements. As he'd expected, they'd been quartering the port area of the city, gathering as much information as they could about "Aldyn Brewer." Now, it seemed, they were heading back toward the docks themselves—specifically to the area of the docks where the Cloakmaster's squid ship was moored. He smiled to himself. If they were still following the pattern he thought he'd established for their movements, he was pretty sure he knew their next destination—a small wineshop called "Curbert's," only a few spear casts from the Cloakmaster's ship. He picked up his pace, cursing for the moment his choice of a dwarf for his disguise; he'd be making much better time if he had longer legs. If his timing was right, he might be able to set up some kind of ambush for the pair when they emerged from the wineshop.

Curbert's was less than a dagger cast ahead of him when he saw the front door open and two figures emerge. He slowed his pace immediately to an apparently aimless stroll. Damn it to the hells, he thought, almost.

It was them all right, the pair that the bartender had described. The woman was short, of relatively light build, but that was all he could make out. She wore an ankle-length cloak of light gray homespun, with the cowl pulled forward over her head. If it weren't for the large figure beside her, Teldin would have paid no more attention to her than to any other Marrakite woman. Her companion was definitely striking, however—striking and familiar. Even though he couldn't see the big man's face, Teldin knew it was the same man he'd seen on the street near the Great Archive—the man who'd prompted that strange, inexplicable reaction in the Cloakmaster.

Mentally, he assessed his emotional reactions, in much the same way he might probe a tooth to see if it ached. This time there was no strange aversion; the figure was just another big man... and a big man who didn't seem to be carrying any weapons, he noted with satisfaction. Teldin let his hand fall to the hilt of his short sword (he'd made sure to bring it this time), which felt more like a broadsword in comparison to his dwarven frame. He picked up his pace, enough to start to close the distance with his quarry but hopefully not enough to draw attention to himself.

The two figures reached the opening of an alleyway that opened to their left, and turned into it. Why? Teldin wondered. To discuss their next step? It really didn't matter. Getting the two of them off the main street so he could talk to them uninterrupted had stood out in his mind as a major problem, one that they'd unknowingly solved for him. He smiled. With them out of his sight—and hence him out of theirs—he could hurry.

He stopped at the opening of the alley and cautiously looked around the corner. The two figures stood close together, not much more than a spear length from the road, apparently engaged in quiet conversation. All the better. He drew his sword and, holding it steady before him, stepped around the corner. "Greetings," he said conversationally.

Two heads snapped around, one framed in curly black hair, the other shadowed. The big man turned an indifferent gaze on Teldin, then his eyes widened and he growled, "It is he!" His voice was rough but emotionless.

Suddenly, Teldin was struck with another mental flash. It wasn't words this time; instead, it was an image as vivid as it was disconcerting. In his mind, the Cloakmaster saw a broad, loose-lipped mouth filled with teeth like daggers. And somehow, he knew that image was associated with the big man before

him. Involuntarily, he let his magical disguise fade, revealing his true appearance. He took a step back and leveled his weapon at the man's belly. "Don't move," he barked.

"No."

It was the cloak-enshrouded woman who'd spoken.

Slowly Teldin lowered his blade and turned to the other figure. She'd thrown back her hood, exposing red hair, which shone in the sun like burnished copper. Her white teeth flashed in a smile he hadn't seen since he and Aelfred had set down on the Rock of Bral. Even after all this time, however, all his recollections of this woman—her laugh, her sudden enthusiasm, even the way her hair swung around her neck—were as fresh as if they'd been formed just the day before.

A torrent of conflicting emotions flooded through him: surprise, doubt, excitement, fear, paranoia... but, most of all, a piercing, bittersweet emotion that he tried to suppress before he had to admit its nature.

"I hear you're hiring a crew," the woman said. "Are there any berths still open?"

Schooling his expression to neutrality, he replied, "Let's talk. Come back to the ship with me, Julia."

The large compartment in the "head" of the squid ship was officially the captain's cabin; so Djan had told him. It was so large, however, with two big, circular ports that made up the vessel's "eyes", that Teldin had felt uncomfortable keeping it for his sole use. Against his first mate's suggestions, he'd had the crew move a table in there as well as his personal effects, so it could double as an officers' meeting room. When the arrangements were made, the resemblance to the saloon aboard the *Probe* was enough to make him smile.

Right now, however, Teldin Moore wasn't smiling. He and Djan sat at one end of the table. Julia—who'd doffed her gray cloak to reveal a green jerkin that perfectly set off the copper of her hair—sat at the other. Behind her and to one side sat the big man, who Julia referred to as Beth-Abz. He was handsome. Broad of shoulders and square of jaw, with thick black, curly hair down to his shoulders, he looked like the very quintessence of the heroic warrior. So far he hadn't said a word aboard the ship and seemed satisfied just to watch everything with calm interest. Every now and again, Teldin shot him a curious look. The strange image of a tooth-filled mouth hadn't recurred, and the Cloakmaster could determine no reason for it to have happened in the first place. He set that train of thought aside and returned his attention to Julia.

The attractive woman shifted in her seat uncomfortably. "I know," she said tiredly, "I know what it looks like, but I didn't follow you here." She opened her hands, palms up. "I didn't even know you were here, Teldin. I heard yesterday at the White Elf tavern that 'Aldyn Brewer' was hiring a crew. Honestly, I'm as surprised as you are."

"You talked to people at other places as well," he said sharply, "not just the White Elf."

"Of course." Her tone was almost impatient. "I wanted to find out as much about what you were up to as possible. I had to..." She paused, looking away uncomfortably. "I had decisions to make."

Teldin was silent for a moment. He wanted to believe her. They'd been friends and comrades aboard the *Probe*. After the death of the treacherous Rianna Wyvernthane, there'd been the strong hint they could become considerably more. But then Julia had left the *Probe's* crew and signed on with another vessel setting sail from the Rock of Bral.

He could understand why; even though she'd never said it straight out, she'd hinted at it often enough. Teldin Moore would never be free to follow his own path, she feared. Even if he didn't subsume his own desires and ambitions to the "enforced destiny" that the cloak seemed to carry with it, the fact that enemies would always be pursuing him implied that he'd always be *reacting*, not *acting*. It was a very limited existence; she'd said that often enough. It was also an existence—and this she'd never actually said—that held little space in it for Julia. Unwilling or unable to put herself through what a relationship with Teldin would involve, she'd gone off alone—leaving behind a note reading, "It's better this way," and a lock of copper hair nestled in the fold of the parchment. She'd also left behind a lot of memories, of course.

He *wanted* to believe her, yet there was still the fact of the six "alley bashers" who'd assaulted him. He was still convinced they'd got their information from someone who knew all too much about Teldin Moore, and here was someone from his past who definitely fit that description. "How did you come to Crescent, Julia?" he asked quietly.

Her hopeful half smile faded. She shrugged. "I signed on with a merchantman setting sail from the Rock to the world of Nivil," she explained, "a safe billet but a dull one. Remember, at the time I didn't really care where I was headed. I just needed to keep myself busy." She shot him a quick glance from under her copper bangs.

"When we set down on Nivil," she continued, "I was offered a commission as second mate, but I knew I'd die of boredom if I took it. So I signed on with a small 'package trader' who was bound for Radole."

Teldin jerked upright in his chair. "*Radole?*"

Julia sighed. "I know, I know, you visited Radole, too. I know what it sounds like, but I didn't know you were there, Teldin," she went on earnestly. "You'd already left when I arrived."

"But you knew I'd *been* there," Teldin pointed out sharply.

"Of course I did," Julia admitted sadly. "*Everyone* did. Just about every rumor I heard on the docks was about the human 'admiral' sailing on an Imperial Fleet vessel... and one that got itself badly chewed up, at that. Not many people knew your name, but they knew enough about the 'admiral' for me to make a good guess as to who it was.

"But I didn't know where you were headed next," she concluded firmly. "*Nobody* did. You covered your tracks well."

"You're here." Teldin's voice was almost a whisper.

For the first time, Julia's eyes flashed with anger. "I know, damn the gods' eyes," she snapped. "I was planning to stay on Radole for a while, but *you* screwed that up, even though you weren't there anymore. I had to get busy again. I couldn't give myself time to think that maybe I'd made a wrong decision." She glared at him. "Do you know what I'm saying?"

For a moment Teldin was silent, then, "Yes," he said, nodding, "I know. But, how..."

"How come I'm here?" Julia shrugged again. "There was another merchantman setting sail the next day for Crescent. No other vessel I'd ever consider crewing on was leaving for a week, so I didn't have much choice. I came to Crescent."

Teldin snorted. "So I'm supposed to accept it's just coincidence that you're here? And that you were asking around about me?"

"Coincidence?" Julia bared her teeth in an expression that was more snarl than smile. "I don't think the word has any meaning around you, Teldin Moore," she stated. "I think you *make* coincidences, because of what's happened to you, and what and who you are. I'm sorry if I'm saying things that you don't want spoken aloud"—she looked meaningfully at Djan—"but I've got to say them. I can't *not* say them any longer.

"I think you warp the laws of probability, Teldin," she went on, warming to her theme. "You and... what it is that makes you who you are. Think back on all the 'coincidences'—happy *and* sad—that have happened to you and around you. Do you honestly believe they were caused by pure luck? You'd have to be stupid... and you're *not* stupid.

"The universe is huge, Teldin Moore, more vast than any of us can imagine. Yet you've kept 'coincidentally' meeting people who've channeled your destiny in new ways, focused them toward a goal. How probable is that, going on chance alone? I know it sounds ridiculous—even I don't believe it all the time—but your destiny might be so strong that it overwhelms the normal laws of chance."

She paused, and Teldin watched as she controlled herself. "So, Teldin," she concluded, "in answer to your question: *Yes*, it's just purest coincidence that I'm here... for whatever little that word may be worth." With that she sat back in her chair and firmly crossed her arms before her chest.

Teldin was silent for three dozen heartbeats. He didn't know what to make of the woman's statements. Certainly, random events seemed to have conspired to force him along the course he now followed, events that almost seemed tailor-made to guarantee he'd act in a certain way.

But, in some sense, wasn't that a meaning of the word 'coincidence'? Several random events coming together to produce a certain result? Had one of those random events occurred differently, he'd probably have been channeled onto a totally different course. At the end of that course, however, he'd have looked back and remarked on how 'predetermined' his path had been....

For an instant, he wished Estriss were present. He'd know how to deal with this strange philosophy, Teldin told himself... or at least he'd enjoy discussing it, and probably at ridiculous length.

The Cloakmaster suppressed his smile and turned to his first mate. "Djan?"

The half-elf didn't answer right away. His gaze flickered back and forth between Teldin and Julia, and he seemed to be mumbling under his breath.

"An interesting philosophy... Teldin Moore," he said at last, stressing the name. "And one the Marrakites of Crescent would easily understand. The followers of the True Path believe there are some people they term '*verenthetae*,' who weave the strands of fortune and destiny in different patterns by their very presence." He smiled mildly. "An interesting question, Aldyn Brewer—or Teldin Moore. Are you *verenthetae*?" He shrugged. "In any case, my captain, your old friend is speaking the truth as she knows it."

It took Teldin a moment to comprehend what his first mate had just said. Then, "What?"

"She did come to Crescent by chance, my friend," Djan confirmed. "As a Child of the Path, I have some skills in this matter. She was utterly surprised—and both saddened and elated—to find you on Crescent. Her presence here is coincidence"—he chuckled quietly—"for whatever that word is worth in the presence of *verenthetae*."

Teldin closed his eyes and forced his breathing into a more normal pattern. He realized his hands were clenched into fists and forced them to relax, laying them flat on the table before him. After a few moments, he opened his eyes again and raised his gaze to Julia. With an ultimate effort, he kept his tone light as he said, "It seems we have space in the crew for two more. Would you care to sail with us? We cast off tomorrow."

Chapter Four

The individual who, here on Crescent, was known as Grampian watched the man before him shift uncomfortably from foot to foot. A scrawny, insignificant-looking example of his species, Grampian told himself. The man was less than average height, without much flesh on his bones, and had a face like a malnourished camp rat. Yet, here on Crescent, he was revered in certain circles as the most skilled at his specialized craft.

Grampian kept the face he'd assumed frozen into a hard expression, his cold gaze drilling into his ever-more-discomfited hireling. With every moment he could see the man's fear grow. He'd chosen his current appearance specifically based on what he'd guessed humans would find intimidating, and now Grampian was pleased that his insight had been correct.

He kept the man on tenterhooks for another few moments, then let his face relax into a half smile. "You have completed your task, I take it?" he asked.

The man nodded quickly and prodded with his toe a leather backpack that lay on the floor before him. "Right here, everything right here, like you asked."

Grampian nodded. "Good," he pronounced. "There were no... complications?"

The small man's confidence was obviously returning. He flashed a momentary smile, showing crooked and discolored teeth. "No worries," he said, "I'm good at what I do, I tell you that. Just in and out. Nobody saw me. Nobody knows I was even there, the city guard, the librarians that run the place, nobody. Just like I was a wraith." He paused for a moment, glancing down at the backpack at his feet. "These books," he went on slowly, "they're worth a lot?"

Grampian almost laughed out loud. This sneak thief may think he's sly and subtle, Grampian thought, but he's as transparent as a fine crystal goblet. He's considering holding out for more money. The thought of someone like *this* extorting money from one of Grampian's kind was almost hilarious.

Yet Grampian kept his face expressionless and amusement out of his voice. "Not as such," he said, and almost smiled as the thief's face fell. "They mean nothing to me."

"Then... ?"

"Why?" Grampian found himself enjoying this. Against all his expectations, he realized he enjoyed explaining his reasoning to this mere human. "Because they're valuable to someone else. Extremely valuable. Their only worth to me lies in the fact that, if I have them, this other can't have them. Do you understand?"

The thief's disappointment was evident, but he nodded and forced a smile onto his face. "So I did a good job anyway," he suggested.

"Perhaps." Again Grampian was silent and watched the anxiety build on the other's face. "Perhaps you did a good job," he said slowly, "perhaps your efforts are worth a bonus. *If you* completed *all* of my instructions." He pointed to the backpack. "Did you get them all?"

"Sure I did, every last one on your list."

"Then, why, I wonder, did the... the *subject* make arrangements to set sail so soon after he'd visited the library?" Grampian mused. "It seems as if he found what he was looking for, doesn't it? But how could he, if what he was looking for is in the bag at your feet?" He leaned forward, watched with satisfaction as the thief cowered. "You *did* consider the possibility of multiple copies, I take it? Stealing one copy of a book is little use if there's another on the shelves. You *did* think of that, didn't you?"

"*Sure* I did," the thief protested in an aggrieved voice, "I'm not an idiot."

But you are, aren't you? Grampian told himself. He could see the guilt, the realization of his own stupidity in the man's expression. He *didn't* think of multiple copies.

"Maybe he... the subject... found out stuff from *other* books," the thief babbled. "There's lots of books in there. I seen them."

Grampian sighed. Predictably, the thief was trying to excuse his failure. Of course, Grampian knew better. He understood a little about the indexing system in use at the Great Archive. There was no way that gnome-built monstrosity could have let the subject fill in the gaps left by the stolen books.

"If it's so important," the thief was still jabbering, "why don't you just send someone to follow this subject of yours?"

This time Grampian couldn't control his smile. "I believe I have that covered," he murmured, "in several ways." He reached into his robe and pulled out a small but heavy pouch, lofted it across the room and into the hands of the thief. "Your payment," he stated. "Discuss this with no one if you want to live to spend it."

Swallowing visibly, the thief shoved the purse into his own belt pouch. He bent to pick up the backpack.

Grampian's sharp order stopped him. "And leave the books."

With a quick bobbing of his head—a gesture that reminded Grampian even more of a man-sized rodent—the thief turned and fled the room.

As the door shut behind the thief, Grampian sighed. It was a good plan, he mused to himself. My mistake was to entrust it to an incompetent. But no matter.

He let his magical disguise drop away, stretched the stiffness out of the limbs of his true form. No matter, he thought again. Every good plan covers contingencies, and this is no exception.

If any humans had been standing in the hall outside the room, they wouldn't have known how to interpret the strange, coughing sound coming from the other side of the door. A member of Grampian's race would have recognized it at once, however. Grampian was laughing.

"Captain Brewer?"

Standing atop the sterncastle, Teldin brought his mind back to the present with a start. He looked over to where one of his new crewmen, a rough-looking half-orc, was standing at the top of one of the ladders leading down to the main deck. Although the fellow looked easily powerful enough to tear the Cloakmaster's arm off and beat him to death with it, the man was shifting uneasily from foot to foot as though uncomfortable in the presence of such an august personage as the squid ship's captain.

"Yes?" Teldin asked, suppressing a smile.

The half-ore tugged at his forelock. "First mate's compliments, Captain," he said carefully, as though reciting something he'd memorized, "and he wants to see you down on the wharf, at your earliest convenience."

Teldin nodded. "Thanks,... Dargeth, isn't it?"

Dargeth bobbed his head enthusiastically, as though awed that his captain remembered his name. Then he just stood there.

It took Teldin a moment to realize he was waiting for further orders. "Uh,... that'll be all, Dargeth," he muttered. With another tug of his forelock, the half-ore turned and scurried back down the ladder to the main deck.

Shaking his head, Teldin followed at a more sedate pace.

There's more to being a captain than I thought, he mused. He didn't want a ship aboard which his crew treated him with awe—though he did want them to follow orders, of course. What he really wanted was a ship like the *Probe* had been with Aelfred Silverhorn as captain, where the feeling had been relaxed, yet everything got done efficiently. Maybe when the ship was underway he'd be able to discuss the matter with Djan and his other officers. At the moment, though, he had other things to think about. There was more to getting a ship underway than he'd ever thought, more details that could be handled only by the captain. Djan's probably thought of another one, the Cloakmaster thought wryly.

He was right. "I'm sorry I didn't know earlier, Captain," the half-elf explained when Teldin met him on the dock, "but"—his voice took on a sarcastically officious tone—"the masters of ships departing from Compact harbor must get official permission from the harbormaster's office." He shrugged. "I think that's the last outstanding issue."

Teldin sighed. "Can't somebody else handle it?"

"Officially, it's got to be the ship's master," the first mate stressed again. "Sorry, Captain."

The Cloakmaster nodded resignedly. "I'll handle it." He looked around. "Which way's the harbormaster's office?"

Once he'd set off along the wharfside walk in the direction Djan had indicated, Teldin found that he was, in fact, glad for an excuse to get off the ship for one last time before they set sail. The decks and compartments of the squid ship were still scenes of chaos, as the crew gamely struggled to get everything shipshape for departure. The consequence of the last-minute work, however, was that there was nowhere quiet where the Cloakmaster could go and wrestle with his thoughts.

Things were different ashore. There were plenty of people around at this time of day—an hour or two before highsun-feast—but none of them required anything of Teldin Moore, captain of the as-yet-unnamed squid ship. The Cloakmaster found himself thoroughly enjoying the stroll. The sun was warm on his skin, and the breeze blowing onto the shore was crisp and refreshing, carrying with it a fascinating melange of odors—tar, woodsmoke, and other scents that Teldin couldn't identify.

The harbormaster's office was half a dozen spear casts around the curving harbor from where the squid ship was moored. It was a low, stone building, little different from the warehouses, suppliers, and taverns that lined the docks. Totally unprepossessing, the building's only feature that set it apart was the small gray flag bearing the white crescent-and-star emblem that Teldin had first seen on the wasp that had intercepted his approach to the world. As he drew nearer, Teldin took a deep breath, bracing himself for another run-in with frustrating bureaucracy.

"What's that?" The cry came from somewhere nearby, and was followed immediately by a female scream of panic.

Teldin looked wildly around him. Gray-clad passersby were staring up into the blue sky, some of them pointing. The Cloakmaster looked up, too.

Something was burning its way across the sky, a teardrop shape of fire leaving a turbulent trail of white smoke behind it. For an instant, Teldin thought it was a shooting star, a space rock that had

plunged into Crescent's atmosphere and was now burning up. But then cold realization struck him. He'd seen this before—months ago, on Ansalon, on the last night of his old life. It was a crippled spelljamming vessel, on fire and plummeting to earth.

As he watched, the ship hurtled overhead, now so close to the ground that he imagined he could hear the rushing of its passage and the roaring of the flames. It was definitely near enough that he could make out the kind of ship—a wasp, painted a familiar light gray. The angular ship was crippled—only one wing remained, and Teldin was sure the keel was shattered—spinning and tumbling wildly. If the crewmen were still aboard, if they hadn't abandoned the stricken vessel before it entered its final dive, they were doomed. To punctuate that realization, the burning vessel drove into the surface of the lake about half a league offshore, bursting into splinters on impact.

The people around Teldin were stunned into momentary silence by the terrifying violence of the impact. But then the yells began again, and people again pointed upward.

More ships were rising into the blue sky—three more gray-painted wasp ships, clawing for altitude. Something serious had to be happening above the planet's surface, the Cloakmaster knew. The wasp that had crashed was definitely part of the Crescent Peace Force—maybe the same ship that had intercepted him—and now three more official vessels were heading for space. Just what in the hells was happening here?

Well, whatever it was, the Cloakmaster decided that Compact's harbormaster could go whistle if he wanted any more paperwork filled out for the squid ship. Regardless of the details, Teldin didn't like the new turn of events, and he figured he'd feel happier aboard his ship and well out into the void. He turned and ran back toward his vessel's berth.

Panic was spreading along the docks as he ran, dodging knots of people. He was almost back at the squid ship when screams of dread rang out again, redoubling in volume. Teldin looked up.

A bloated black shape—no bigger than his smallest fingernail held at arm's length but nonetheless threatening for that—hung in the sky over the city. The Cloakmaster had seen that shape before, too, more times than he cared to recall. Even at this distance, it was impossible to mistake a neogi deathspider....

As he watched, two much smaller dark specks—presumably Crescent-based wasps—swooped down onto the spider ship's stern. One blew apart into fragments, probably shredded by the neogi vessel's aft-firing jettisons. The other continued its attack run, and a small fireball bloomed, bright red against the black of the deathspider.

The Cloakmaster turned away from the spectacle in the sky and sprinted for his ship. He could see Djan on the sterncastle. "Cast off!" Teldin screamed at the top of his lungs. "Get us out of here *now!*"

Teldin raced up the gangplank and onto the squid ship's deck. Behind him, two crewmen dragged the gangplank aboard the instant he was off it. "Get us spaceborne!" he cried.

"The helm's manned, and we're cast off." Djan's pale and pinched expression belied his calm and controlled tone. "We can lift any minute."

"Port regulations say we've got to clear the harbor area before lifting off," Dargeth pointed out.

"To the Abyss with the port regulations!" Teldin snarled, and he saw the half-ore quail before him. "Djan, get us into space as soon as possible." He looked up at the fight in the skies above them, and shivered. "*Sooner.*"

Neogi! May what gods there be damn them to hells everlasting!

From his window, Grampian glared into the sky. If those foul creatures had interfered with his plans, if they'd driven the subject off Crescent before Grampian's own stratagems were fully in place, they'd pay. Grampian would make sure of that, one way or another.

Teldin sighed. Apparently his ship had managed to avoid the neogi entirely. With no sign of the bloated ship, the Cloakmaster grew ever more confident that he and his crew were safe. Either the Crescent vessels had crippled or destroyed the deathspider, or they'd simply kept it too busy to pursue as the squid ship made its escape. Teldin didn't really care what the truth was. All that mattered was that there were no neogi on his tail. The Cloakmaster was free to take the next step in his great quest.

Even after more than a day underway, the main deck still seemed to be in chaos, as the new crew members struggled to get used to each other and their duties. He knew this was necessary, a normal part of getting a new vessel and crew shipshape, but that didn't make it any less distracting and frustrating.

How much worse must it be for Djan? the Cloakmaster found himself wondering. Djan Alantri had voluntarily taken on most of the responsibilities of organizing the crew. He was handling almost all facets of shipboard routine, from assigning duties to organizing watches, right up to training those crew members who might need a little help. For example, not long ago, Djan had been directly below him in the helm compartment, discussing with the primary helmsman—a corpulent human priestess of Ptah with the unlikely name of Blossom—exactly how to handle the orders she'd hear when the ship next went to battle stations. Teldin sighed. He was lucky to have Djan as his first mate; he was constantly being reminded of that fact. As if to reinforce it again, he noted that the indefatigable half-elf was running the crew through yet another battle station drill.

Well, up here on the sterncastle, at least, it was peaceful. By unspoken agreement, the crew had deemed the sterncastle as "officer country." Until battle stations were officially sounded and the ballista crews had to man their weapons, the afterdeck was reserved for the ship's pensive captain and any members of his officer corps with the temerity to interrupt his thoughts.

Even though he found this strange sign of respect rather amusing, Teldin had to appreciate the privacy. He needed time to think and figure out his feelings.

Just what *do* I feel? he asked himself. Excitement, definitely. He might well have found the most important clue yet in his quest for an answer to the question of the cloak. Fear? That, too—stemming largely from the two sides of a single question: What if I don't find the answer, and what if I do? Then there was a flurry of conflicting emotions, a bubbling stewpot of wants and desires, fears and anxieties, that he didn't really want to analyze yet.

"Serious thoughts?"

He turned at the sound of a soft voice beside him.

Julia was leaning against the aft rail an arm's length from him. How long has *she* been there? he asked himself. The light of the distant Heart reflected off her hair, making it look like burning copper. With an effort, he turned his gaze away. He tried to appear natural as he strolled forward to the rail overlooking the open portion of the main deck. "Just thoughts," he said as casually as he could manage. "How are you settling in?"

She didn't answer his question, just came forward as well to stand beside him. He could feel her proximity, even though she didn't touch him, like the heat of a nearby fire. While the urge welled up inside him, he knew he couldn't walk away again.

For a long moment she remained silent, looking down at the activity on the deck below. Then, "You can't avoid me forever, you know," she said softly, her voice hardly above a whisper. She gave him a half smile, whether ironic or sad, he couldn't tell. "It's not that big a ship."

"I've been busy—" he started.

"No," she cut him off gently, "you haven't." She looked down at the main deck again. The silence stretched until Teldin felt he couldn't stand it, felt he'd have to say something to break the tension.

Then Julia spoke again. "I think I understand you, at last," she said, almost as though she were talking to herself. "I didn't before, not really, but I think I do now. You understand why I left you on Bral?"

"You told me why, before we left Crescent."

"Not straight out," she corrected him, "but I hinted at it. Do you really know why?" Without giving him time to answer, she went on, "Because I had to make a decision, Teldin Moore. I had to decide whose life I was going to live: mine or yours. Was I going to... "—she chuckled wryly—"take the helm of my own life, or let you chart my course for me?" She raised a soft hand to his lips, to silence his

objections. "Oh, I know you wouldn't have meant to control my actions," she continued. "You might not even have known you were doing it. But you'd have done it just the same, just by being there." She chuckled quietly. "Even if you're not... whatever your first mate said, *verentheslae*... how could anyone be near the Cloakmaster without being swept up in his destiny?"

She sighed. "And that's the decision I had to make," she said slowly. "Follow my destiny, or follow yours. I chose..." —she smiled again—"and look where I am now. Even my decision didn't change anything, did it?"

"That's why I understand you, Teldin Moore," she continued, her voice quiet but intense. "You're struggling with the same thing, aren't you? Do you choose to live your own life, or choose to follow the course that someone else has charted for you? And if you choose your own course, what should that course be? That's it, isn't it?"

Teldin couldn't answer out loud. His throat felt so tight that he could hardly draw breath, let alone speak. He nodded—the slightest inclination of his head, but Julia saw it.

"And that's why you need me, Teldin," she went on. Her voice was pitched barely above a whisper, but still the Cloakmaster had no trouble hearing it over the hubbub from the deck below. "You need someone who understands you. And someone who cares."

Teldin found himself unable to look her in the eyes. He could feel her gaze burning into him. "When you left..." he murmured.

"I know I hurt you," she conceded, "probably more than you let yourself admit. I'm not asking for forgiveness, or for anything like that. All I ask is that you let me care."

Again, the Cloakmaster couldn't answer. There wasn't anything to say, anyway. He reached out, took Julia's soft hand, and squeezed hard, almost fiercely, and felt her return the pressure. Then both let their hands drop back to the rail. He felt a sense of release, deep in his chest—the sense that tension, so long-lived that he'd grown totally unaware of it, had now been relieved.

"I'm glad you're back," Julia said quietly.

Teldin raised an eyebrow. "It wasn't me who went anywhere," he reminded her.

"Maybe not physically," Julia replied, and left it at that.

For a few more minutes they stayed across the rail. The crew seemed to be coming together, coalescing from a mob of disparate individuals into a team that could work smoothly as a unit.

Except for one. Beth-Abz, the big man who'd come aboard with Julia, was among the other crewmen on the main deck, but he didn't seem to be one of them. Even working shoulder to shoulder with the others, he seemed somehow apart. It wasn't solely that the crew seemed to give him a wide berth—though that was part of it—but his manner, and the way he moved.

Was that the truth, or were Teldin's two strange experiences with the big man—the conviction of danger, and the image of a tooth-filled maw—warping his perceptions? No, he decided after a moment, Beth-Abz was different.

But how? And what did those two experiences mean? Were they flashes of insight from the cloak? Or were they twinges of paranoia, with no basis in fact? Either way, he decided it was about time to find out...

Julia seemed to pick up on his thoughts. "Beth-Abz," she said slowly. "Maybe I shouldn't have brought him aboard."

Now that she'd opened the subject, Teldin could ask Julia the questions he'd wanted to since he'd first seen her in the Compact alley. "Who is he?" he queried. "Where did you meet him?"

The copper-haired woman shrugged. "I met him on the docks," she answered. "We'd both just come into port—our ships landed at almost the same time—and we'd both decided to look for berths on other vessels. We got to talking." She paused. "He's an interesting man, Teldin... if you can get him to talk. He's traveled a lot—visited places I've never even heard of. And he's got a unique way of looking at the world."

"So you thought you'd sign on with the same ship?"

"Why not?" she asked simply. "He was the only interesting person I'd met since Bral, and we both wanted passage off Crescent. Remember, this was before I heard that 'Aldyn Brewer' was hiring a crew."

When I heard that, I... well, I decided to look into it, and suggested Beth-Abz tag along."

Teldin was silent for a moment. "This Beth-Abz," he started, "he didn't have any particular interest in sailing with 'Aldyn Brewer,' did he?"

She shot him a sharp look. "That's paranoid," she told him flatly.

It was his turn to shrug. "Paranoia's the price I have to pay for staying alive." Then his lips quirked up into a wry smile. "And that sounds even more paranoid, doesn't it?"

She returned his smile. "We'll have plenty of time to talk through your neuroses later," she chuckled. "But, no, he didn't know whose ship we were going to approach, and he didn't care. He just wanted to get back into space."

She hesitated, then went on more firmly, "Listen, Teldin, I just want to make one thing clear. I've never sailed with Beth-Abz. I don't want you to think I'm vouching for him"—she paused again—"in any way. All right?"

He nodded. "All right."

"So, fearless leader," she said with a wicked grin, 'don't you think it's time you told us exactly where we're going? And maybe a little hint about why?"

"Why don't you go get Djan," he suggested, "and meet me in my quarters? There are a few things you should know."

Teldin pulled a tightly folded piece of parchment from his belt pouch and spread it out on the table. Both Julia and Djan leaned forward for a closer look, then glanced up expectantly at Teldin.

"A chart?" Djan asked.

The Cloakmaster nodded. "I copied it from a book in the archive. It contained material from even earlier books, material dating back several hundred years at least." He reached out and tapped a circle near one side of the parchment. "This is Heartspace. And this"—he indicated another—"is Realspace over here. These lines are rivers in the phlogiston. I think, but I'm not sure, that the book drew the faster rivers wider and the slower ones narrower. Anyway, I tried to copy the width as accurately as I could."

Djan leaned over the table again and examined the roughly scribed chart in silence for a few moments. Then he tapped a couple of symbols on the parchment. "I think you're right," he agreed. "If this is Krynnspace over here"—Teldin nodded confirmation—"then this is the major river leading to Heartspace. It's one of the fastest ever discovered, and it appears as the widest on your map."

Julia had been studying another portion of the map. With a fingertip, she traced another set of lines leading from the vicinity of Heartspace right across to the other side of the parchment. "Then what's this?" she asked. "If you've got the width right, it's almost as fast as the Krynnspace-Heartspace channel, which makes it a major potential trade route. But I've never heard of it before." She looked an unspoken question at Djan, who shook his head as well.

"I got the width right," Teldin said quietly. "If the book's right, it *is* one of the largest phlogiston rivers in the universe."

"And it leads right here." Djan tapped a circle on the far side of the chart. "To this crystal sphere." He looked closer. "What's this symbol? A flower of some kind?"

Teldin smiled. "You could say that." He caressed the three-petaled flower—which he'd drawn a lot more carefully than anything else on the map—with a calloused forefinger. "That's our destination. Nex."

"Nex?" Djan echoed. "It's a crystal sphere? I've never heard of it."

"I'm not surprised," Teldin agreed. "According to all of the other charts I looked at, it doesn't exist. Neither does the phlogiston river leading to it. But this chart claims it does."

Julia was silent for a moment, then said slowly, "You have to have some good reason to chase wild spacefarers' tales."

"I do," Teldin agreed. "Several of them. First, this symbol. I didn't choose it. It appeared on the chart I copied, and elsewhere in the book as well. Where have you seen it before, Julia?"

She didn't say anything, but Teldin saw her eyes widen, and her gaze drifted to the cloak around his

shoulders. She nodded slowly.

"There's more," the Cloakmaster continued. "According to the book, Nex—that's the name of the crystal sphere and the major world inside it—is associated with an ancient race of immense power, capable of reforming entire planets, even entire systems, to suit their needs."

"That sounds like Stardust to me," Djan broke in. "I'm sorry, Captain," he went on apologetically, "but I've heard many myths like that, about some godlike race or other, and I can't bring myself to believe any of them."

"I can," Julia rebutted. "When I was on Radole, I saw the Barrier Mountains and walked through one of the great caverns. They were built by an ancient race, Djan. And 'godlike' is an appropriate description."

The first mate gave her a half bow. "Then I withdraw my objection," he said equably, "having not seen those wonders myself."

"According to the book," Teldin continued, "the race—it called them the 'First Voyagers'—long ago left the universe as we know it. Maybe they died out, maybe they went"—he shrugged—"somewhere else, it didn't say." He glanced at Julia again. "Does that remind you of anything?" he asked.

"Those myths Estriss was always talking about," she said quietly. "The Juna."

Djan cleared his throat quietly. "Perhaps there are some things I need to know if I'm to participate in this discussion," he suggested, his voice dry.

Teldin couldn't help but smile. He clapped his half-elven mate on the shoulder. "You're right, of course. It's rather a long story."

Djan spread his hands. "We have about twenty days until we reach the crystal sphere," he said. "I think I have the time."

Without preamble, Teldin launched into a rendition of what he'd come to think of as the "Saga of the Cloak"—from the night the reigar's spelljamming vessel had crashed on his farm, to his arrival on Crescent in the *Ship of Fools*. His audience of two remained silent throughout, though he could tell from their expressions when he needed to elaborate on a particular point.

He watched Julia particularly; he knew she already grasped some of the story but not all, though he figured she'd made some informed guesses. He interpreted her occasional slow nod as indication that her guesses had been close to the mark.

At the end, his throat was dry. "Any comments?" he asked.

A slow smile spread over Djan's face. "*Verenthetae*," he pronounced, "as I'd guessed." He chuckled. "Oh, you don't have to believe me now, but you'll see I'm right." He shook his head in amazement. "Teldin Moore, Cloakmaster. I remember telling you I was looking for a berth on an interesting voyage. I'll have to remember the old saying, 'Be careful what you wish for, lest you receive it.'"

Julia was looking fixedly at the three-petaled flower drawn on the chart. "So the symbol of the Juna is associated with this sphere—what did you call it? Nex?" she mused. "Do you think the Juna are still there?"

"I don't know," he said honestly. "I'd like to think so, and there's some evidence that they might be. But even if they aren't, I might find the answers to a lot of questions."

"Evidence?" Djan picked up on the word, just as Teldin had expected he would. "What evidence would that be?" He mused. "Something to do with why Nex and this phlogiston river don't appear on other charts?" he surmised. "Am I right?"

"I think so," Teldin allowed. "It has something to do with the sphere's name, too. 'Nex' comes from an ancient language. It means 'violent death.'"

"According to the book," he went on quietly, "Nex is a forbidden sphere—or maybe 'proscribed' is a better word. Ships tried to visit it long ago, using the phlogiston river. Few explorers returned, and those that did spoke of being attacked by magic of such titanic power that it could... well..."

"'Reform entire planets, even entire systems,'" Djan suggested dryly. "Is that the phrase you're looking for?" Teldin simply nodded.

"And Nex was eliminated from all more recent charts because it's proscribed, because to visit it

courts violent death, is that what you're saying?" Djan continued.

"It's one possibility," Teldin said.

"Another is that these are all rumors," the half-elf countered calmly, "that neither Nex nor the river in the phlogiston exists."

"Maybe," the Cloakmaster had to admit.

"If you are right, Teldin," Julia started, "what's to say we won't get ourselves blasted out of space?"

He was silent for a few seconds, looking sightlessly at the chart. Then he raised his eyes, met her gaze steadily. "Nothing. If the Juna still exist, and if they created the cloak, I'm betting they'll be able to sense its approach."

"A lot of 'ifs,'" Djan pointed out.

"Granted. But think it through." Teldin ticked off points on his fingers. "First, if Nex doesn't exist, we've lost nothing but time trying to find it. Second, if Nex does exist, but the Juna aren't there, we've lost nothing. Third, if the Juna are still there and they sense the approach of the cloak, we might not have lost anything. Only if the Juna still exist and they attack on sight are we in any danger."

The Cloakmaster drew himself up to his full height. "I want to search for Nex," he said, his voice firm. "I'd like you to sail with me, but it's your choice. If you want, I'll take you back to Crescent."

"Are you with me?" He turned to Djan.

The half-elf was silent for a moment, his face expressionless, then he smiled broadly. "I said I was looking for an interesting voyage. I think I've found it. I'm with you."

"Julia?"

"You know my answer."

Teldin smiled. "All right," he said. "We need to tell the crew. Not everything, obviously, but that this may be a dangerous voyage. Anyone who wants off, they get paid what I promised them. Anyone who stays, they get a bonus equal to their current pay." He looked questioningly at Djan. "Does that make sense?"

"Yes, Captain," the half-elf confirmed. "I'll spread the word. But first... Do you realize some of the crew already think this ship is a jinx, because we're sailing without a name? Very bad luck, according to spacefarer superstition. I think we should remedy that right away."

Teldin thought silently for a few moments, then he glanced over at Julia with a half smile. "I propose *Unexpected Rendezvous*" he said.

Julia returned his smile. "Better, *Boundless Possibilities*," she suggested.

"I concur," Djan said at once. "*Boundless Possibilities* it is." He inclined his head to Julia. "Madam second mate, shall we tell the crew?"

The Cloakmaster smiled broadly as he watched them leave. Once the door was shut behind them, though, his smile faded. With a worried frown, he turned to his study of the hand-copied chart once more.

The good ship *Boundless* was making fine time, Teldin thought. The two helmsmen—the human, Blossom, and a dwarven mage named Dranigor—were keeping the squid ship under almost continuous power, putting more than a million leagues of wildspace under the keel each hour. Already they were far past the most distant planet of the Heartspace system, a mammoth ovoid world known as Loom. Like a yellow-white egg, it hung against the black backdrop almost directly astern.

Their course—which Djan had plotted with the navigator, Lucinus—was taking them toward one of the sixteen permanent portals that allowed access to and from the Heartspace crystal sphere. According to the starchart, using this existing portal took them a little off the direct line from Crescent to the start of the phlogiston river on Teldin's map, adding two days or more to the overall journey. When the Cloakmaster had asked about this, Djan had agreed with him... in principle.

In practice, however, the half-elf had argued, it made more sense to use an existing exit from the sphere than to create one—even temporarily—using magic. Although portal generators and spells with

the same effect were largely safe, the mythology of the spaceways described many catastrophes: portals closing prematurely and slicing ships in two, or not opening at all and causing ships to slam into the crystal sphere at great speed. Even though neither Teldin nor Djan fully believed these tales, the Cloakmaster had to agree that it was better to be safe than sorry. In the grand scheme of things—given the concept of *verenthetae*—what difference did two days' additional travel make?

From his vantage point on the sterncastle, Teldin watched as two halflings—as nimble as children, yet little weaker than human adults—swarmed up the ratlines to adjust the mainmast's single gaff boom. The crew was meshing well, he thought with satisfaction. That reflected well on Djan, the man who'd chosen them. To Teldin's surprise, only two crew members—twin hadozee, known to most of the crew as "deck apes"—had asked to be set ashore when Djan and Julia had explained that the voyage might be dangerous. The *Boundless* had set down on Starfall, the next world out from Crescent. As he'd promised, Teldin had paid the two hadozee the full sum Djan had negotiated, and the parting had been amicable on both sides. Teldin had assumed his first mate would replace the missing bodies, but Djan had declared it unnecessary. They already had enough hands to sail the squid ship efficiently... and, further, two fewer mouths and sets of lungs might make a difference over a long voyage.

Apart from the hadozee, the rest of the crew seemed more stimulated than disheartened by the news that the voyage might be risky. Or, more likely, Teldin thought cynically, it's the fact that they're getting paid twice what they expected that's making the difference.

Several of the crew had approached Teldin personally to thank him for leveling with them, for giving them the chance to decide whether or not to put their lives at risk. Further, they'd insisted on taking him out for a glass of sage-coarse—which had quickly become several glasses—at a strange little tavern on Starfall called The Philosophers' Rest. Surrounded by sages, metaphysicians, and philosophers—and a healthy number of would-be intellectuals—all discussing and arguing over contentions that had sounded meaningless to Teldin, they'd repeatedly toasted their captain's health.

It was surprising, the Cloakmaster had thought at the time; most captains must just keep their crews in the dark. But he couldn't have done that. He had an ethical and moral responsibility to them. He had to give them the chance to chart the courses of their own lives.

There was only one crewman who hadn't responded in any way that Teldin had expected. Instead of being pleased that he was getting paid double, he'd been surprised, even outraged, that Teldin had even considered it necessary. That man was Beth-Abz.

Beth-Abz. He was a strange one. Teldin hadn't experienced any repetition of the strange "revelations," if that's what they were, but then he hadn't been close to the man often. No, the Cloakmaster could only judge Beth-Abz's characteristics based on the reactions of others. Those reactions painted a strange portrait.

Even several weeks into the voyage, he still didn't seem to fit in—in any way—with the rest of the crew. The others on the same watch avoided him as much as they could and never spoke to him unless they absolutely had to. That would have bothered another man, but Beth-Abz seemed oblivious. Or maybe he was grateful; he showed no desire to talk to his crewmates either.

The broad-shouldered man was on the forecastle at the moment. He was supposed to be greasing the central bearing of the catapult turret, Teldin remembered, but the bucket of fish oil and the long-handled brush lay on the deck, while Beth-Abz stood against the port rail, staring off into the depths of space. The gunner's mate—Allyn, a weather-tanned, aging man who reminded Teldin of a piece of chewed leather—was rubbing linseed oil into the catapult's shaft, occasionally stopping to shoot venomous glances at the big warrior's back.

I've got to do something about this, Teldin told himself. He knew that Djan had already spoken to Beth-Abz, but the first mate's lecture obviously hadn't taken. Maybe what was needed was a dressing down from the captain himself.

"Hey." Teldin called to one of the crewmen passing below him on the main deck. When the fellow looked up, the captain pointed forward. "Get Beth-Abz," he ordered. "Send him to my cabin immediately." From the crewman's smile, quickly hidden, he knew he was doing the right thing. Beth-Abz was bad for morale, and one of the major lessons Teldin had learned from Aelfred Silverhorn was the

importance of morale aboard ship.

Teldin climbed down the ladder to the main deck and headed forward into the forecabin. Julia sat in the saloon, eating a late dawnfry. "Got a minute?" he asked her as he passed. "I've got to speak with a friend of yours." Without waiting for an answer, he walked through into his own quarters.

She followed him, shutting the door behind him. "Beth-Abz?" Her tone made it more statement than question. Teldin nodded.

A knock sounded at the door. Hastily, Teldin sat down at one end of the table, indicated for Julia to sit to his right. "Come in," he called.

The door opened to reveal Beth-Abz. The big warrior seemed to fill the low doorway. "Captain?" he said in his rough, emotionless voice.

"Sit down." Teldin pointed to the seat at the opposite end of the table from him.

As the black-haired man seated himself, Teldin watched him with undisguised curiosity. There's something about him I don't understand, the Cloakmaster told himself, something that makes him seem alien. Was it his eyes, maybe?

Teldin focused his attention on the man's face.

His skin was smooth, without a trace of wrinkles; there weren't even squint lines around the eyes. And the man's eyes themselves were so pale as to be virtually colorless, "spit-colored" as some friends had once used the term. But it wasn't just the color, was it? It was their unusual steadiness, the way they fixed on a single point without shifting around as most people's did. Teldin realized he was leaning forward involuntarily, trying to get a better look at those eyes.

The image struck him without warning—struck him so hard it forced a gasp from his throat. For an instant, perception that wasn't quite sight overlaid his vision of Beth-Abz. His mind was again filled with an impression of daggerlike teeth, but now to that image was added a churning mass of something that could be tentacles, and a single, staring eye.

He reared back in his seat. As suddenly as it had come, the vision was gone.

He felt pressure on his left arm. Julia had grabbed his biceps, and was staring into his face. "Teldin...?" she asked.

The Cloakmaster drew a hand over his eyes. There was no doubt about that, was there? That was definitely an image provided by the cloak.

He forced himself to take a deep breath, let his muscles relax, and listened to his heartbeat slow back to some semblance of normalcy. He looked at Beth-Abz again, bracing himself for a resurgence of the magical image. But this time all he saw was a large, handsome man.

He struggled to keep his voice calm as he said, "You're not really as you seem, are you?"

If the big man gave any response, it was too subtle for Teldin to spot it. "It's over," the Cloakmaster said, more harshly. Julia looked at him as though he were crazy, but he pressed on. "We're not buying it anymore. Drop your disguise *now*."

For almost half a minute, the only sound Teldin could hear was the pounding of his own heart. Beth-Abz's colorless eyes—unmoving, unblinking—were fixed on his. Teldin could almost sense the intensity of the man's thoughts. Beth-Abz's expression gave no indication when he reached his decision, but the moment was impossible to miss.

The lines and contours of the burly warrior's body shifted, like flowing water. His limbs withdrew into his body, and his body itself shortened and broadened. The chair he'd been sitting in scraped across the floor, pushed back from the table by his new bulk. His head, too, was reabsorbed into the bloated body, to be replaced by multiple, writhing processes that extended upward. As the outline changed, so too did the figure's texture and color. The man's clothes vanished as though they'd been, absorbed into his flesh through his pores. Then the skin thickened, shifted, and cracked into what looked like discrete scales. A mouth opened in the center of the swollen body, and above it lay a great, staring eye.

The transition took only an instant. Even before it was complete, however, Julia was on her feet, a short sword seeming to sprout magically from her hand. She tried to interpose herself between Teldin and what Beth-Abz was becoming.

The Cloakmaster grabbed her left arm, gestured her to be calm. Unwillingly she obeyed, lowering

her shining blade.

Although his heart was beating so hard he imagined the crew could hear it like a slave galley's drum, Teldin remained seated. He struggled to keep the rush of terror he felt from showing on his face.

Beth-Abz was a beholder, an "eye tyrant." Teldin had seen only two, one on the Rock of Bral and one on the cluster world of Garden. The former had been dead and stuffed, mounted over the door of a tavern. The latter, though, had been alive... and lethal. The Cloakmaster remembered with a chill the destruction the beholder had caused with the magical blasts it could create. Teldin felt his muscles tensing, as though that could possibly save him when the creature lashed out with its power.

But...

It could have killed me at any time, Teldin realized, but it didn't. Why would it do so now? He let himself relax a degree and observed the creature silently.

The bulk of its body was roughly spherical, maybe five feet in diameter. Teldin guessed that that body might weigh about six hundred pounds. But, then, weight doesn't mean much, does it? he reminded himself. The beholder was floating in the air so that its center was about four feet off the ground. The body was covered with discrete plates of what looked like hardened skin and were colored a dark brown-green. In the center of the body, facing Teldin, was a single enormous, lidless eye the size of a dinner plate. Bloodshot white surrounded an almost colorless—"spit-colored"—iris, in the center of which was a horizontal, slit-shaped pupil. And beneath the eye was a great, loose-lipped mouth. Although the mouth was closed, the way the lips bulged clearly showed that it was full of teeth the size of small daggers. Sprouting from the top of the body were ten armored and segmented protrusions, like the legs of lobsters or spiders, almost as long as Teldin's arm, each tipped with a single small eye no larger than a man's fist. While the central eye was fixed, steady and unblinking, on the Cloakmaster, the ten smaller eyes moved constantly, tracking around the room, making a sickening, faint clicking as their joints flexed.

"Who..." Teldin's voice cracked. Four of the small eyes pivoted to focus on him. He took a deep breath, and forced control. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"I am Beth-Abz," the beholder stated. Its voice was low-pitched, slow, blurred, hard to understand. That's how a swamp would sound if it could talk, Teldin told himself. "Beth-Abz." the creature repeated, "of the clan Beth, of the nation Gurrzhz-Ahr." It paused. When it spoke again, its voice was less certain—tentative, almost, Teldin thought. "You saw through my disguise. How is this?"

Teldin blinked in surprise. From what other people had told him about beholders, they weren't given to asking questions. If something puzzled them, or confounded them, they tended to blow it apart so they wouldn't have to worry about it anymore. He shrugged. "I have my ways," he said vaguely. "But I'm asking the questions. What are you doing on my ship?"

"You already know my reasons," the beholder said slowly. "I have already told this one"—with a pair of eyestalks, Beth-Abz indicated Julia—"the details of my travels."

"That was the truth, then?" Teldin demanded. "You expect us to believe that?"

The beholder's ten eyestalks moved in unison, a strange, circular gesture. The creature's equivalent of a shrug? Teldin wondered. "I would have no reason to tell you an untruth," Beth-Abz pronounced simply.

"All that you told me about crewing on various ships," Julia cut in, "you're trying to tell me you *did* all that *You?*" She gestured vaguely at the spherical shape across the table.

"It is as I said."

"Why in human form?" she demanded.

Beth-Abz chuckled—a horrible, burbling sound like swamp gas rising from the bottom of a fetid marsh. "Would humans and their kin sail with me otherwise?"

Teldin nodded slowly. He understood the rationale; it was much the same that Estriss the mind flayer had discussed with him long ago.

But there were still things that the Cloakmaster didn't understand. He didn't know much about beholders, but he had heard travelers' tales. "What about your clan?" he asked. "What about clan Beth? Why did you leave it? Or does it still exist?"

"Clan Beth is still in existence," Beth-Abz admitted, "as is nation Gurrzhz-Ahr." The creature

paused—uncomfortably,

Teldin thought. "I broke with my clan," the beholder continued slowly, "something that young such as myself do only with serious provocation."

Teldin leaned forward, fascinated. "What provocation?"

"It is hard to explain, and I would not expect any to understand it."

"Try me," Teldin suggested.

Again the beholder's eyestalks made their circular gesture. "The way of nation Gurrabh-Ahr is obedience and loyalty," Beth-Abz explained, "to the clan, and to the hive mother—the ultimate. The existence of an individual is subordinated to the existence of the clan, and the existence of the clan to the existence of the nation. I found that... intolerable.

"There is more to the universe than blind obedience," the beholder continued. Its voice had taken on a new tone, one that Teldin interpreted as doubt, as struggling with a concept that came hard for the creature. "I wished to experience that 'more.'" Again it paused. "I understood what my destiny should be within my clan and wished for another existence. I left my hive some time ago. My clan and my nation consider me a rogue, a renegade—by definition insane for placing my own needs above those of my kin. Yet...

"It is an insanity I find I relish." Once more it gestured with its eyestalks. "I would not expect you to understand."

Teldin shook his head slowly, a sad half smile on his face. On the contrary, he thought, I understand all too well... if what you're saying is the truth. He took a different tack. "What do you know about the *Spelljammer*?" he asked sharply.

"What any sentient in the universe knows," Beth-Abz answered. "That it is the subject of myth and legend, perhaps the largest and most powerful vessel to ply the space-ways. More powerful than the largest tyrant ship, more powerful even than nation Gurrabh-Ahr's entire fleet. Some of the false nations among those not of the true ideal covet it, I know that also."

Teldin wasn't sure he grasped the nuances of what the beholder was saying, but he thought he understood enough. "And what about nation Gurrabh-Ahr?" he asked. "And clan Beth? Do they covet it?"

"I can no longer speak for my clan or my nation," Beth-Abz said slowly, and this time the sadness in the creature's voice was unmistakable. "I no longer *have* clan or nation. I can speak only for myself, and I would as soon covet an entire crystal sphere as the *Spelljammer*, for the chances of obtaining either are nonexistent."

The Cloakmaster was silent, lost in thought. He watched his fingers stroking the heavy grain of the tabletop. Then he raised his gaze back to the beholder. "What would you say if I told you that I sought to captain the *Spelljammer*?" he asked quietly. He heard Julia's gasp of shock, but forced himself to ignore her.

With a chorus of clicks, all ten of Beth-Abz's eyestalks pivoted around to focus on Teldin. "I would say your insanity is even greater than mine," the creature said at once. "Yet I would also say that your destiny is your own, Captain, and the direction of your life is yours to choose." It paused. "I would also say that I would relish a chance to glimpse the *Spelljammer*," it finished wistfully.

Good answer, Teldin told himself. It has the ring of truth. But can I trust this thing?

Yet what good would distrusting Beth-Abz do? He remembered what he'd heard about beholders, that each of its smaller eyes could direct blasts of destruction, and that its central eye could emit a ray capable of suppressing all magical activity. If it wanted me dead, I'd be dead already, he thought again. If it wanted the cloak, it could kill me and take it off my body, and the entire crew of the *Boundless* couldn't stop it. Or it could simply suppress the magic of the cloak and take it from my shoulders. (Now *there* was a thought...)

But Beth-Abz hadn't done any of those things. What possible benefit could it gain from deceiving him? Teldin wondered.

He watched the beholder silently. All of its eyes were still fixed on him, as it watched him in return.

The creature was terrifying, its potential for destruction impossible to estimate. In form it was a

monster... but, Teldin found, he wasn't *thinking* of it as a monster. Maybe his time with Estriss, and his exposure to other sentient races that humans might consider monsters, had burned that atavistic, instinctive reaction out of him. Beth-Abz was a thinking, feeling creature. A potential threat, yes—but also a potential ally of great power. And—who knew?—maybe a potential friend.

The Cloakmaster nodded as he made his decision. "Will you sail with me, Beth-Abz?" he asked. "Will you accept my authority as captain?"

"I have already done so." The hideous creature's response seemed guileless.

Teldin laid both hands flat on the table before him. "You are part of my crew, Beth-Abz," he said quietly. From the corner of his eye he could see Julia's look of disbelief. Yet almost at once he saw her suppress her reaction, saw her shoulders relax as she accepted his decision.

Before him, the lines of the beholder shimmered again as it began its shift back to human form.

"No," Teldin said sharply. The transformation ceased; the beholder returned to its spherical form. "No," the captain repeated, "you'll keep your true shape. I don't want any more deception on this ship. I've had enough of deception."

He turned to Julia. "Please spread the word about our... um... new crew member."

Again Julia stared at him as though he'd lost his mind. "It's going to be a hard sell, Teldin," was all she said.

He shot her a reassuring smile. "Then think of the satisfaction when you succeed."

Chapter Five

The privateer *Shark* hung against the psychedelic backdrop of the Flow, its helm warmed up for station-keeping and prepared for pursuit or flight. In front of the battle dolphin, the outer surface of Heartspace's crystal sphere looked like an infinite wall of mother-of-pearl. From the command deck, the permanent portal into the sphere's interior looked like a black disk limned around the edges with Saint Elmo's fire. At this distance, the portal—actually large enough to accommodate even the biggest ship—appeared about the size of a doubloon held at arm's length.

Captain Berglund leaned back against the aft railing, looking forward down the length of the command deck toward the shimmering portal. He pulled from his belt pouch the folded sheets of parchment he'd been given when he was ashore on Starfall. For the dozenth time since entering the Flow, he reread his orders—he still thought of them as "orders," even though it had been seven years since he'd deserted from military service.

The orders were very specific. Hold station at a specific point outside the Heartspace sphere and wait for a particular vessel to exit through the portal. Intercept said vessel and cripple it. Board and put the crew to the sword... with one exception: the captain was to be spared, no matter what it took to guarantee that. Scuttle the target and head off with all haste into the Flow for a distant crystal sphere, bringing the captain as prisoner.

Berglund stroked his beard as he thought. With the exception of sparing the captain, the orders matched his standard operating procedure. He didn't have a problem with that part of the mission at all... particularly since the nondescript human who'd hired him agreed that Berglund could keep whatever booty he could take from the vessel.

What did bother him was the amount of detail he'd been given about the target. He turned to the second page of the orders. Here was a complete rundown on his victim—a squid ship, he noted again. There was also a manifest detailing all the weapons the vessel carried, its projected time of arrival at the portal, plus an entire crew roster. Berglund simply wasn't used to having this level of intelligence on a target.

Still and all, he thought, it does make my job easier, and guarantees no surprises. You don't refuse a gift ship just because you smell dry rot, do you?

But where did that mystery man get all this information? Berglund wondered again. There was something about this that hinted to the pirate captain that he was getting into something much too big for him.

Yet the payment was big, too, wasn't it? Even if the squid ship turned out to be empty of valuables,

Berglund and his crew would make more from this single operation than they'd normally make in a four-month of piracy.

He shook his head. His battle dolphin against a squid ship was normally a much closer fight than he liked. Smaller, less maneuverable, and worse-armed vessels were much more tempting targets. Even though Berglund was a good tactician, there was always the chance of losing such a well-matched battle. Yet the mystery man had said that had been taken care of, too....

A final time he read the section describing how the enemy captain was to be treated. Bound hand and foot, blind-folded, and gagged—that he could understand. But kept unconscious throughout the entire return voyage, even if that meant risking his captive's life through repeated blows to the head? There definitely *was* more to this mission than he knew.

Still, he supposed, he who pays the piper calls the tune. And this piper was very well paid indeed.

The crew's even better than I expected, Teldin Moore thought. Although the revelation that Beth-Abz was a beholder shocked the crew members down to their very cores, their outward reactions had been calmer than the Cloakmaster would have thought possible. There'd been no hysteria, no outrage, and—Teldin's greatest unspoken fear—no hint that anyone was considering mutiny.

Certainly, the crew had treated the beholder with fear at first, shying away from it whenever it appeared, as though it would vaporize them at any moment. But within only a few days, their reactions had started to change. Fear had faded and quickly become respect. Crewmen still stepped well back when Beth-Abz floated across the main deck or entered the galley, but the wide eyes and grimaces of terror were gone. It hasn't killed me so far, each crew member seemed to think, so why should it now... as long as I don't give it a reason?

For the first week after the revelation, nobody had talked with the beholder, probably because they just didn't know what to say. Teldin, Julia, and Djan—who took the whole matter in stride, as if sailing with an eye tyrant were an everyday thing—had gone out of their way to be seen treating Beth-Abz no differently than the rest of the crew. They'd greeted the creature in the same way they would anyone else, and chatted idly with him whenever they happened to have similar duties.

The example hadn't been missed by the crew. At first cautiously, and then more freely, other members of the *Boundless* complement had taken to striking up conversations—albeit very brief ones—with the spherical creature. Teldin had known the campaign to integrate Beth-Abz with the rest of the crew was won when he'd wandered into the saloon one graveyard watch and found the beholder trading travelers' tales with a handful of off-duty sailors. When he'd heard them break into laughter together—the harsh, coughing sounds of the beholder's mirth mixing with human chuckles—he'd been amazed.

"I can't believe it," he'd told Djan the next morning, after describing what he'd experienced. "The credit's all yours for picking good spacers."

The half-elf had shaken his head. "No," he'd corrected Teldin, placing a hand on the captain's shoulder, "I think the credit's yours. They trust you, Teldin. They trust your judgment, and they want to sail with you. If a beholder in the crew's mess is acceptable to you, then it's acceptable to them."

In his familiar position on the afterdeck, Teldin shook his head. Everybody's always so keen to trust me, he thought. Sometimes I think I'm the last person they should trust... if they want to stay alive, at least. He took a deep breath and forced the thoughts from his mind. He knew all too well that they'd be back, however.

"Portal ahead, Captain." Djan's voice rang out, echoing hollowly through the speaking tube the half-elf had installed running up the mizzenmast from the helm compartment to the afterdeck. "Slowing to tactical speed."

Teldin stamped on the deck once—the agreed-upon signal for "message received and acknowledged." Then he waved to Julia, who stood on the forecastle by the mainmast.

"Crew aloft," the copper-haired second mate called. "Rig for portal passage. Flow stations."

Extinguish all flames." On her order, four crewmen scurried up the ratlines, while twice as many more on the main deck hauled on lines to trim the rigging. Still others scoured the ship, putting out torches and braziers, so as not to ignite the volatile phlogiston once the ship passed through the portal.

The Cloakmaster felt the motion of the ship change as it decelerated—from about three hundred leagues each heartbeat, to less than a spear cast—and the strange winds of wildspace filled the sails. A lot of trouble just to pass through a portal, Teldin grouched to himself. The other times he'd passed through a sphere portal—except for obvious special cases such as HerdSPACE—the ship had done so at full spelljamming speed, without any ill effects.

But Djan had been adamant. "The permanent portals of HeartSPACE aren't like any others anywhere in the universe," the half-elf had told him firmly. "The very fact that they're permanent tells you that. You might be able to blow on through at full speed, and live to tell about it, but then you might find yourself thrown totally out of control, with no steering and no helm command, and no way to bring the ship back to an even keel. Hundreds of ships have died in or near HeartSPACE because their masters were overconfident."

Teldin had considered telling Djan about his own entry into the crystal sphere—in the *Fool* he'd come in at full speed, not knowing any of the risks—and he'd been fine. But then he'd remembered that the tiny *Fool* was under the control of the ultimate helm at the time, and that could well have made a difference. Rather than making an issue of it, he'd gone along with his first mate's recommendations.

He could see the portal ahead now. As always, he found his sense of perspective thrown off by the view. Even though he knew the inner surface of the HeartSPACE sphere was only a score of leagues away, the black backdrop of space looked very little different. Granted, there were no stars—his field of view encompassed only a gap *between* stars—but he still experienced the sense of gazing into infinity that he always felt when he looked into space. The crystal sphere showed no detail and no texture—nothing to give him any due as to its proximity or distance.

The portal itself, now that was a different matter. It seemed to hang in space in front of the *Boundless*—a totally fallacious image, he knew, but one he couldn't shake. It appeared to be a huge disk, with a diameter several times the length of the squid ship, showing the myriad curdled colors of the Flow. Outlining the disk was a shimmering margin that reminded Teldin of the heat lightning he'd sometimes seen during the summer storms in Ansalon. The portal appeared to expand slowly as the *Boundless* crept forward.

"Crew down," Julia called. "Lookout aloft."

Teldin watched as all but one of the ratline crew slid down ropes to the deck. The one remaining sailor—Merrienne, a young woman not yet out of her teens, with long blond hair gathered up in a bun—crawled into the crow's nest atop the mainmast. "Portal ahead," she sang out in a clear, ringing voice—more to confirm that she was in position, Teldin thought, than to tell anyone something they didn't already know.

Djan joined the Cloakmaster atop the sterncastle, swinging up the steep ladder as if he'd been born on ship. Flashing a quick smile at his captain, he positioned himself near the speaking tube. "Ready to pass the portal," he told Teldin. "Be ready. Sometimes it can be a little rough." As though to confirm his words, he spread his feet into a broad, stable stance and steadied himself with a hand on the mizzenmast.

Teldin still remembered his uneventful entry into HeartSPACE. But, better safe than sorry, he told himself. He took a firm grip on the port rail.

"Crew ready," Julia ordered.

The *Boundless* nosed into the portal.

As the pointed ram of the squid ship penetrated the plane of the portal, the large vessel's motion changed noticeably, and Teldin realized his first mate might not have been exaggerating the dangers after all. If he'd been aboard one of the small river craft he'd know as a youth, he'd have guessed the ship had been caught by an eddy of some kind. Here, without anything for there to be an eddy *in*, it had to be some kind of attribute of the portal itself. The hull proper entered the portal, and the sideways, twisting motion became more pronounced. Spars creaked and lines groaned as the rigging took the strain. Then the mainmast itself was through, and the canvas of the mainsail cracked like a bombard as a blast of wind

struck it from an unexpected direction.

"Look out above! It's..." The rest of Julia's screamed warning was drowned out by the scream of tortured wood. Instantly, Teldin snapped his head up.

The gaff boom, mounted on the aft side of the mainmast, was angled far out—way too far out—over the starboard rail of the squid ship. The sail, still bellied out, was applying force to pivot it even farther out of line. The only things keeping the boom from being torn away altogether were its mount—a metal bolt-and-eye bracket on the mainmast—and two half-inch ropes that ran down from its tip to belaying-pin racks on the port and starboard rails.

"Strike the mainsail, *now*," the Cloakmaster bellowed, "or we'll lose the boom, maybe the mast!" Crewmen sprinted to where the main sheets were cleated off and struggled to release them against the abnormal pressures of the sail.

A shrill scream echoed the length of the *Boundless*. Teldin raised his gaze higher, above the twisted bracket that supported the boom. "Paladine's blood!" he screamed. "The lookout! Get her down!" The force generated by the flapping mainsail was being transmitted through the boom into the mainmast itself, twisting and torquing it in ways it had never been designed to resist. The mast top lashed back and forth like the end of a riding crop. To Teldin, on the deck below, it looked as though the mast were a live thing, purposefully trying to shake the shrieking Merrienne out of the crow's nest.

Julia saw the girl's peril, too. "Crew aloft!" she yelled. A handful of crewmen ran to the ratlines, then stopped in bafflement. On the starboard side, the boom was already tangled in the ratlines, twisting what were usually broad rope ladders into warped renderings of spiderwebs. On the port side, the mast's contortions were transferred directly to the ratlines, making them jerk and vibrate like the strings of a plucked lute. There was no way anyone could climb them.

"Strike that sail!" Djan cried, echoing Teldin's order.

But it was too late. Even as the crew members freed the main sheet to let the mainsail flap free, the line connecting the boom to the port rail parted with a crack like a giant's whip. With nothing to stop it, the gaff boom swung farther around, out over the starboard rail, and pivoted completely until it pointed almost dead forward.

The mounting bracket, already hideously strained, failed. With a screech of tearing metal, the boom came loose from the mainmast and crashed to the foredeck, striking the glacis of the catapult turret.

As the boom came free and the torque it had produced vanished, the mainmast *twanged* audibly, its tip flailing wildly. With a piercing scream, Merrienne was snapped out of the crow's nest to land with a sickening thud on the main deck.

"Strike the sails!" the Cloakmaster roared. "All of them! And bring the helm down!" As the crew leaped to obey his orders, Teldin couldn't drag his gaze from the small, huddled figure lying on the planking, her head surrounded by a halo of fine blond hair that had been shaken free from its bun. The ship's two healers knelt beside the woman, blocking the Cloakmaster's view. He turned away.

Then, suddenly, a sickening thought struck him. Julia was on the foredeck, where the boom had landed!

Teldin almost jumped down the ladder and sprinted across the foredeck. He staved off a massive jolt of guilt as he passed Merrienne's huddled body. The healers can do more for her than I can, he told himself. He sprinted up the portside ladder to the forecastle.

Julia was unscathed, he saw immediately, but another crewman hadn't been so lucky. The falling boom had bounced off the metal facing of the turret, shattering the port foredeck rail as if it were kindling. Somewhere along its path it had struck someone with the ill fortune to be standing just aft of the catapult shot hopper. Julia was kneeling beside the fallen man, her ear pressed to his chest, listening for a heartbeat.

Teldin didn't have to come any closer to know it was futile. The man's left shoulder and neck had taken the brunt of the impact, pulping the bones. The side of the man's skull, too, looked soft, like an overripe fruit. Even though the victim's face was distorted, Teldin recognized him easily as Allyn, the gunner's mate. The wind-tanned old man who'd survived a career in space that was longer than Teldin's entire life.

For what? the captain found himself wondering. To come here, to die in the service of Teldin Moore, Cloakmaster?

He looked up into the chaotic "sky" of the phlogiston that now surrounded the ship, tears blurring his view. *Why?* he silently demanded. Just what in the Abyss is it all for? One more dead—maybe two, if the healers' expressions were any indication. And the voyage had barely begun. How many more would fall before it was all over?

"Ship ahoy!"

The hoarse shout cut through Teldin's dark thoughts. He snapped his head around toward the source of the voice.

It was Dargeth, the half-orc, a member of the catapult crew. He was leaning against the forward rail of the turret, pointing out into the Flow. "Ship ahoy!" he repeated. "High on the port bow."

Teldin's gaze quartered the area of space Dargeth had specified. Nothing...

Yes, there it was, a black shape against the riotous colors of the phlogiston. It was close, too—closer than a ship had any right to be without being spotted... "What's the ship?" Teldin yelled. "And what course?"

The answer came from the afterdeck. Djan stood braced against the mizzenmast, Teldin's brass spyglass to his eye. "Battle dolphin," he called back. "And it's on an intercept course."

"A battle dolphin, confirmed," Djan sang out again a moment later. "It's maneuvering, probably trying to come in below us."

Even without a spyglass, Teldin could see that the half-elf was right. The black shape of the enemy ship was sinking toward the starboard rail. Soon it would be masked from view—and from weapon shot—by the squid ship's own hull.

"Load all weapons!" the Cloakmaster ordered. "Helm up now!"

"It'll take a couple of minutes to warm it up," Julia reminded him.

Teldin cursed under his breath, remembering his own order to bring the helm down. They didn't have a couple of minutes. But, at least, they did have other options.

"Get Beth-Abz up on deck," he told Julia. Then he planted his back against the mainmast and braced his feet. With an effort, he forced his breathing to slow and his muscles to relax.

Berglund lowered his spyglass and snorted in amazement. The mystery man had proven himself right on two counts. Here was the target squid ship, right on time—and, lo and behold, dead in space. Would wonders never cease?

He flashed the other members of his bridge crew a predatory smile. "Bring us in," he ordered quietly. "Below their hull, if you please."

"Yesss, ssir," his first mate, an olive-scaled lizardman, hissed. Surprisingly fast for his heavy build, he hurried down the ladder to the helm compartment directly below, to convey his captain's orders.

"They're not maneuvering," Rejhan, Berglund's second mate, told him. "Their helm must be down."

The pirate captain nodded his agreement. "Continue to bring us in," he ordered. Then his smile broadened. "And... catapults away," he added almost negligently.

The hull of the *Shark* jarred beneath his feet as the vessel's twin catapults fired.

"They're firing! Take cover!" Djan screamed from the sterncastle.

Around him, Teldin heard the scurrying of feet as the crew took Djan's suggestion and found shelter. He wanted to do the same thing himself, wanted to crouch behind the metal glacis of the turret.

But saving his own life wasn't the only thing he had to worry about at the moment. The ship and its entire crew were his responsibility. The helm was down, and the *Boundless* truly helpless...

Unless he did something about it.

The squid ship jolted hard as a catapult shot struck the low port quarter of the bow. In his peripheral vision the Cloakmaster saw the second shot hurtle by, a couple of yards away.

"They're reloading!" Djan called.

Teldin took a deep breath—so deep that his chest felt as though it would burst—then let all the air spill out of his lungs. A sense of calm came down upon him, stilling the knotting fear in his belly. The sounds around him—the creak of the windlass as the weapon crew wound back the main catapult, the thunder of feet on the deck—seemed suddenly muffled, not as sharp, somehow. And yet he could hear everything, even those noises normally much too quiet for his ears to detect. He felt the presence of the cloak on his back.

The cloak felt warm around his shoulders—not the simple, passive warmth of a garment, more like the vibrant warmth of a living thing. Even though he couldn't see it, he knew it was starting to glow with a pink light. He felt his awareness start to blossom, to expand. *I am the ship...*

Julia grabbed his arm, and the glow—and the expanded perception associated with it—faded slightly. "Get below," she told him. "You're exposed out here."

He shook his head. "No time. I have to take over the ship now."

She gripped tighter. "You can do that from anywhere!" she shouted at him. "If you get yourself killed up here, what good will that do the rest of us?"

He wanted to argue but had to accept the sense of her words. He let the awareness, the sense of the cloak's power, slip away. Then he turned and followed her down into the forecabin.

The squid ship still hadn't moved, Berglund saw. It still just hung there against the backdrop of the Flow, like a strangely shaped fruit ripe for the picking. He turned to his second mate.

"Rejhan, bring us in along their axis, full on the bow," he ordered.

The dark-haired man looked aghast. "On the bow... ?" he echoed. "But... but captain, all they have to do is roll and we're in their main catapult's field of fire, at point-blank range."

"Follow my orders," Berglund said, his voice deceptively calm.

Rejhan blanched even more and jumped to obey.

Berglund smiled. But behind that smile, he was doubting. Am I depending too much on the mystery man's promises? he asked himself. The next two minutes would tell.

Teldin hurried into his cabin, flung himself into a chair, and tried to recapture the sense of calm. To his surprise, it returned almost at once. Again he felt his perception, his awareness, expand beyond the physical limits of his body, until it encompassed the whole ship. Again, he *was* the ship: he could feel its every plank, its every dowel. Its keel was his spine, its thwarts his ribs, its hull his skin, and its sheets and lines his muscles. He could sense the minor damage inflicted on the hull by the enemy's catapult shot, and the torn and twisted rigging, as a strange tingling, a kind of pain-yet-not-pain. The cabin brightened as the cloak began to glow with a rosy pink light.

With his expanded perception, he could see the approaching enemy clearly, even though he was inside the ship, and the other vessel was screened by the squid ship's own bow. The adversary was close enough now for him to make out details without the benefit of a spyglass.

A dolphin, Djan had called it, and the name was appropriate. It was a smooth-lined ship reminiscent of a huge fish—maybe a jumping trout, Teldin thought—with its horizontal fluked tail raised higher than the main body. A turret atop the tail contained one catapult—heavy or medium, he couldn't be sure—while another catapult was mounted on the main deck just forward of the mast. The whole vessel, painted a misty blue-gray, was as long as the squid ship and slightly broader, hinting at a greater tonnage. The battle dolphin was coming in slowly, though Teldin had the unmistakable feeling it could move fast enough when necessary.

There was something about the ship's approach that bothered Teldin. It took him a moment to realize what it was.

"They're coming in wrong," the Cloakmaster said to Julia, who was standing in the cabin doorway. In his own ears, his voice sounded emotionless, detached. "It's as if they're daring us to roll and use our catapult. What do they know that we don't?"

Julia opened her mouth to reply, but before she could speak Teldin's answer came from the deck above him. A crash and screams of fright came from the forward turret. The Cloakmaster's perception instantly focused on the foredeck.

The catapult had torn itself apart, he saw at once. As the crew had been winding back the shaft, one of the thick skeins of hemp fiber that provided the weapon's power had torn. The unbalanced force had wrenched the shaft to one side, tearing it loose from one of the bearings. A man in the weapon crew had been struck by the shaft and seemed to have a broken arm. The others were unharmed, he was glad to see.

But the catapult—the squid ship's only forward-firing weapon—had been rendered useless. How did the enemy captain know... ?

The *Sharks* second mate lowered his spyglass and shot a sidelong glance at Berglund. "Their catapult's down, Captain," he said.

Berglund just nodded. "Clear their decks, Rejhan," he ordered simply.

The second mate jumped to relay the order, but the unasked question still echoed in his head: How had the captain known... ?

"Firing again!"

Teldin could hear Djan's voice twice—once, muffled, through his own ears; and once, clear as crystal, via his expanded perception. Even against the distracting background of the flow, he could track the enemy's catapult shots coming in. This time they weren't single stones, but clusters of pebbles. This "grape shot" couldn't harm a ship's hull or rigging, but was absolute murder on an exposed crew. He tried to call out a warning, but was a moment too late.

The tiny stones rattled off the foredeck over Teldin's head, sounding like a sudden lashing of hail. His ears were filled with screams. All over the ship he saw crewmen stagger and fall as the tiny stones tore into their flesh. Djan's forearm was laid open to the bone, but he kept his position by the speaking tube.

I've got to get us out of this, Teldin told himself, or they'll slaughter us. He extended the power of the cloak, the ultimate helm, and tested the squid ship's response.

With the first touch of power it surged forward responsively, but it resisted turning and rolling as if it were a live thing. It must be the rigging damage, Teldin realized, with a chill feeling in his stomach. Even with the ultimate helm, a ship needs rigging if it's to maneuver. He cut back on the power and examined the situation.

It wasn't good. As he'd discovered from experimenting with the *Fool*, he could drive a ship with any degree of speed or control only forward. That meant the *Boundless's* possible range of motion could be pictured as a flaring cone centered around the line of its keel. In this case, it was a *narrow* funnel, because he couldn't turn the ship's bow rapidly. No matter how fast he drove the ship, he'd still be within the battle dolphin's fire pattern for several minutes, the last portion of which he'd be at point-blank range.

Paladine's blood! he raged to himself. If the battle dolphin had made a normal approach—from the side, or the stem—he'd be able to use the speed of the ultimate helm to escape. But because the enemy was directly on his bow, his choices were cut to few or none. Again, it's as if the enemy captain knows my situation....

At least there's one thing he *doesn't* know about. With his extended vision, Teldin could see

Beth-Abz—in human form, he was glad to note—clamber up onto the foredeck. We have *one* forward-firing weapon left, the Cloakmaster told himself with a grim smile. He watched the black-haired man stride to the front of the foredeck and grab the rail with both hands to steady himself.

Suddenly Teldin knew the tactics he had to use if he wanted to get out of this alive. He felt his lips draw back from his teeth, his smile becoming an almost feral grimace.

"Tell Beth-Abz to hold on," he told Julia. "Don't do anything until I say so."

She nodded, backed out of the cabin—leaving the door open behind her—and took up a position by the saloon's door that led out onto the deck. Teldin heard her voice as she relayed his instructions to the beholder above him.

Behind him, around him, he felt the ultimate helm's energy as he drove the squid ship forward.

"They're moving!" the *Sharks* second mate called out.

His cry was unnecessary. Berglund had already seen the target ship lurch forward, directly toward the battle dolphin. Damn, he thought, they've got the helm up again sooner than expected. But he was close enough now to see the damaged rigging, the missing gaff boom, the mainsail still flapping uselessly over the squid ship's starboard rail. He remembered the time, several years ago, when he'd captained a military squid ship, and reviewed in his mind what he knew of that vessel's maneuverability. With that much damage, the enemy would be about as maneuverable as a heavily laden tradesman—in other words, not much at all. In contrast to his topped-out battle dolphin, it may as well have remained dead in space for all the good an operating helm would do for it. He smiled again.

"Hold course," he ordered.

Then, to his shock, he saw the squid ship leap forward, faster than any ship had any right to move...

Teldin gasped with the exertion—neither physical nor mental, but something totally different—as he poured on the power. In only a few seconds, the *Boundless* was up to its normal top speed, and still it accelerated.

Suddenly the heavy vessel lurched, tried to maneuver in a way that Teldin hadn't intended. He knew that the ship's major helm was on line again, and knew that the helmsman was trying to take command of the vessel.

"Get Blossom off the damn helm!" he yelled to Julia, and again heard her echo the order aft. After a moment, he felt the extraneous movement cease as he regained control of the ship. "And tell Beth-Abz to get ready."

The enemy battle dolphin loomed ever larger before the *Boundless*. He altered the ship's heading by a few degrees—even that minor change taking great effort—and brought the squid ship's slender piercing ram to bear on the larger vessel. Still the *Boundless* accelerated.

He saw the attacking vessel's two catapults fire again, and watched both shots go wide as the enemy gunners tried to track their high-speed target. That would be their last chance, he knew. There was no way they'd have the time to load and fire again before this was over... one way or another.

The battle dolphin swelled in his forward view. "Brace for ramming!" he bellowed. "And tell Beth-Abz to hit them with everything he's got!"

They're ramming! Berglund felt a sudden chill. The enemy was taking the fight to him. This engagement wasn't going the way he'd intended it at all.

But then he relaxed a little. What other choice did the enemy captain have, after all? With no way to maneuver, the squid ship's tactical choices were cut almost to nil. A successful ram would damage the

Shark, perhaps seriously, but it wouldn't destroy the larger vessel. Then Berglund's crew would swarm aboard the enemy—his highly trained boarding crew easily outnumbering the smaller, and generally untrained, crew of the target—and that would be the end of the fight. Mentally he reviewed the crew roster the mystery man had given him. There were three people aboard the squid ship worthy of respect in combat: the captain himself and the first and second mates. Everyone else, however, may as well already be dead before the swords of his boarding party.

No, he remembered suddenly, there *was* one unknown quantity: the large, curly-haired warrior who'd signed on soon before the squid ship had left port. He might prove to be a problem, so Berglund would order four of his better swordsmen to handle the burly man. No matter how good he may be, he wouldn't last long against four swords.

There he was! Berglund could see him on the foredeck of the rapidly approaching squid ship. If Berglund could see him, that meant he in turn could see the armed warriors lining the rails of the *Shark*. Yet, even seeing the force arrayed against him, the big man seemed undismayed.

That was something to consider, wasn't it? That much confidence might be based on some foundation....

All this flashed through Berglund's mind in a heartbeat. Maybe accepting the ram wasn't a wise decision after all....

"Hard to port!" the pirate captain yelled.

But it was too late. With a sudden pang of real fear, Berglund saw the squid ship—impossibly—accelerate even more.

Then he saw the large warrior on the enemy's foredeck start to change....

Teldin growled with fierce exhilaration as he saw Beth-Abz assume its true form. A beam of brilliant green—brighter than the sun—lashed out from one of the beholder's lesser eyes and struck the battle dolphin amidships. The Cloakmaster saw the heavy wood of the hull flash into dust under the magical onslaught.

Then the squid ship's piercing ram struck. The impact hurled Teldin from his chair, into the forward bulkhead. For a moment he was stunned, the ringing in his ears drowning out the sound of shattering timber. Shaking his head to clear it, he forced himself to a sitting position. The glow of the cloak—flickering as he struggled to regain control—flared brightly once more. His expanded perception returned.

The *Boundless's* slender ram had driven deep into the "head" of the battle dolphin, piercing the reinforced wood as if it had been light balsa. Chunks of torn timber, knocked free by the impact, slammed against the hull of the squid ship. Many of the battle dolphin's crewmen had been knocked to the deck, he saw, but they were quickly readying themselves to board.

They were too late. Teldin's own "boarding party" was already moving.

Beth-Abz floated over the foredeck rail and headed forward along the length of the ram to where it pierced the battle dolphin's hull. Teldin saw Beth-Abz reorient itself slightly as it adjusted for the slightly different gravity plane of the other vessel. A green beam flicked out again, blowing a gaping hole in the planking. Then Beth-Abz disappeared through the gap.

"Stand by to repel boarders!" the Cloakmaster yelled.

A beholder? A gods-cursed beholder! And it's aboard *my ship*.

From below him, deep in the "head" of the *Shark*, Berglund could hear his crew members screaming, dying. There was no way they could fight an eye tyrant.

The *Shark* was lost; he knew it, and the knowledge was a cold, sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach. And if he didn't act soon, his life would be lost, too.

A captain owed loyalty to his crew, as they owed loyalty to him—that philosophy had been drummed into him when he'd served with the military. But that loyalty didn't extend to sacrificing his own life for them.

"Separate the shuttle!" Berglund screamed.

Some few of the pirates had swarmed over their own rail and were trying to board the *Boundless*, Teldin could see. But their attempt was halfhearted at best, and Teldin's own crew was holding them off with boarding pikes. On the afterdeck, Djan—seemingly little hampered by his arm wound—was pumping crossbow quarrels into the attackers. Dranigor, the secondary helmsman, was doing his part, raking the would-be boarders with magical projectiles that burst from his extended fingertips. The wave of attackers faltered, then broke, fleeing back toward the dubious safety of their own ship.

Even with his enhanced senses, Teldin couldn't see Beth-Abz anymore. He could hear, however, the screams from within the battle dolphin as the beholder rampaged around within it. As he watched, a section of the larger craft's lower hull blew out into space—presumably struck by the eye tyrant's disintegration beam.

Something was happening to the battle dolphin's open main deck, he saw suddenly. The lines of the ship seemed to change, as though it were breaking up...

But then he realized just what he was seeing. A section of the battle dolphin—most of the upper portion of its "tail," in fact—was lifting free under its own power. As the gap between it and the rest of the ship opened, he could see it resembled a two-masted, open-decked sailing ship. Much smaller than the battle dolphin as a whole, this new vessel was no more than forty feet long, and couldn't hold a crew of more than fifteen to twenty, if that. It had to be a kind of lifeboat, a captain's gig, or perhaps some combination of the two. Obviously the enemy captain was making his escape, leaving the remainder of his crew to their fate. If Teldin had anything to do with it, the pirate captain wouldn't make it.

But the Cloakmaster couldn't have anything to do with it. The *Boundless* ram was driven deep into the battle dolphin, effectively immobilizing the squid ship and preventing it from giving chase. The catapult was broken, and the lifeboat-gig-whatever was taking care to stay out of the firing arcs of the ballistae. Already the escape craft was out of effective bow range. The captain was going to get away with his unprovoked attack, and Teldin would never know who he was or what his motivations were....

Then, without warning, the familiar line of burning green lanced up from the battle dolphin. Angling up out of the space recently occupied by the gig, it struck the stern of the smaller ship, blowing much of it into fragments. The gig instantly began to corkscrew slowly, obviously unpowered and out of control.

Berglund rose slowly back to consciousness like a man swimming to the surface of a night-black lake. The side of his head hurt abominably where something—a fragment of his ship, he thought—had struck him. He felt warm wetness spreading down from above his hairline on the right, blinding his right eye. He wiped the blood from his eye, but didn't bother to tend to the wound, or to any of his other minor injuries.

The dolphin shuttle was virtually wrecked, he saw at once. The aft quarter of the sterncastle deck was just gone, blown into dust by the beholder's magical ray. Amidst the wreckage trailing behind the ship, he could see the tumbling body of his second mate. From this distance he couldn't see whether Rejhan was alive or not. He rather thought not, but there was no way to be sure. Certainly, the helm was down and the ship crippled, leaving him no way of retrieving his lost crewman.

Or relieving the ones I left behind to die, he reminded himself dully.

Berglund had never—quite—considered himself a pirate, preferring the term "privateer." Because of that sophistry, he'd never sailed under the neogi skull ensign favored by many other wildspace pirates. Now he found himself regretful. It would be so much more symbolic to officially strike his colors, so

much more dignified. And dignity might be all he'd be able to salvage from this. Everything else was lost, maybe even his life.

Oh, well.... He sighed.

"Run up a white flag, if you please," he ordered quietly.

One of his few surviving crewmen hurried to obey.

The din from inside the battle dolphin's main hull had fallen silent. Either the crew members left aboard were all dead, or they'd given up their resistance as useless. The Cloakmaster hoped the latter.

He focused his enhanced senses on the stricken gig, trailing its cloud of space flotsam. As he watched, a crewman ran an improvised white flag—it looked like half a bedsheet—up to the masthead.

"They're surrendering," he called back to Julia. "Get Beth-Abz back aboard. And see what we can do to get the *Boundless* moving again."

The beholder was back aboard the squid ship in a matter of a minute or two. Using its disintegrator ray to carve pieces of the battle dolphin's hull away, it freed the squid ship to back away from the drifting hulk.

Teldin kept the *Boundless* moving dead slow, maneuvering gently toward the wrecked gig, where the white flag still flew. As he came in alongside, he turned to Julia. "What in the Abyss do we do now?" he asked. "I don't know the protocol for this kind of thing."

"I do," she said grimly. "Send a prize crew aboard and bring the captain back here so you can accept his surrender personally."

The Cloakmaster nodded slowly. That'd give him the chance he wanted to question his attacker. "Do it," he instructed.

Teldin was waiting on the foredeck when Julia, Djan—his forearm heavily bandaged—and two others escorted the enemy captain aboard the *Boundless* a couple of minutes later. He wasn't a particularly prepossessing man, the Cloakmaster thought, a finger's span or two shorter than Teldin, but with a similar build. His hair and beard were a couple of shades darker than the Cloakmaster's own. Blood from a scalp wound was drying on his right cheek. Teldin found himself staring into the man's eyes, looking for some flash of hostility, some taint of evil, but there wasn't anything like that to be seen. His opponent looked like any other tired, wounded, defeated man, desperately trying to cling to those, shreds of his dignity that remained.

"I'm Teldin Moore," the Cloakmaster said. "And you are...?"

For a moment, Teldin could see the steel of command in the man's manner. "Captain Henric Berglund," the other answered formally. "I offer you my surrender."

"Accepted."

"What will happen to my crew?"

You weren't thinking about that when you escaped in your gig and left so many of them to their fate, were you? Teldin thought. He suppressed his distaste for the man and said simply, "Their lives are spared."

"Are any still alive in the hull?" Berglund asked.

"Some," Teldin responded. "Those who surrendered."

Berglund accepted that without comment. "Prisoners?" he asked.

The Cloakmaster shook his head. "I've got no space for prisoners, and nowhere to take them. You should be able to repair your gig"—he gestured to the small vessel alongside the squid ship—"and you're free to take it anywhere you want." He paused. "If you answer some questions."

"Like what?"

"Why?" Teldin asked earnestly. "Why attack my ship? You were after me, weren't you?"

The shorter man shrugged. "It was a contract," he answered. "Business."

Teldin pointed to the four cloth-wrapped bodies lined up along the port rail—Allyn, Merrienne, and two others slain by the battle dolphin's catapult shots. "Business!" he spat. "You killed my crew!"

"You killed mine," Berglund shot back.

"It's different."

Berglund remained silent.

It took immense effort, but the Cloakmaster forced himself to calm down at least a little. "All right," he allowed, "business. So who contracted you for this business?"

The pirate's lips twisted in a sarcastic smile as he shook his head.

Teldin ground his teeth. "Then what—exactly—were you contracted to do?" he asked. "Blow us out of space? Take us prisoner? What?"

Berglund still didn't answer.

"Interesting," Julia said. Teldin turned in surprise to look at his second mate. She was examining Berglund curiously. "Interesting that you have such loyalty to the people who hired you. After all, they sent you into battle against overwhelming odds, didn't they?" She nonchalantly indicated Beth-Abz, who was easily visible on the afterdeck.

"Your masters, the ones who hired you... they're the ones who killed your crew, aren't they?" she pressed. "I think you owe them nothing, least of all your loyalty."

The pirate was silent for a moment; Teldin could almost feel the intensity of his thoughts. Then he nodded. "I don't know who hired me," he said quietly. "I didn't recognize him, and I didn't ask. All that mattered was that his money was good."

Teldin took a step forward, intent. "What did he want you to do?"

"Take you prisoner," Berglund said flatly.

"And the others?"

"Put them to the sword, then scuttle your ship."

Business, Teldin thought. He struggled to keep disgust out of his voice. "And what was to happen to me?"

"I was to take you to a planet where I'd hand you over to some people who apparently want you quite badly."

"What planet?"

"Falx," Berglund answered.

Chapter Six

"Falx," Djan said.

He, Teldin, and Julia sat in the Cloakmaster's cabin. The half-elf's wounded arm was swathed in bandages, supported by a sling. The ship's healers had done a little for it, but the first mate had insisted that they concentrate their attentions on the several crew members who were more sorely wounded.

"So where—or what—is Falx?"

Teldin glanced over at Julia. From the drawn, pinched look to her face, she knew all too well. "It's a planet of illithids," he told Djan simply. "They've tried once before— maybe more than once—to get the cloak."

Djan's eyes widened slightly. "Mind flayers, too?" he asked. Then he smiled faintly. "You certainly cast your net wide when it comes to finding enemies."

"Apparently," Teldin said dryly.

"So, what now?" the first mate queried.

"On to Nex," the Cloakmaster replied. "There's not much else to do, is there?"

Djan accepted that without comment.

Julia still looked troubled. "How did they know?" she asked. "How did they know we'd be coming? And how did Berglund know as much as he did about us?"

Good question, Teldin thought. It was one he'd been chewing on a lot during the day since they'd left the surviving pirates packed aboard their damaged gig. He shrugged. "Spies on the docks, I'd guess." His

lips tightened. "Maybe even spies on board." He paused. "You know, now that I think of it, weren't the 'accidents' with the boom and the catapult a little coincidental? Djan," he said, turning to his first mate, "maybe you should look into that."

The half-elf looked back with a mirthless smile. "The crew's repaired the gaff boom," Djan said, "and they're working on the catapult. I had a chance to examine the damage before they began."

Teldin felt his skin grow cold, as if a chill wind had blown through the cabin. Even though he'd expected it, he didn't have to like having his suspicions confirmed. "Sabotage?" he asked quietly.

Djan didn't even bother replying, and he didn't have to. His expression was answer enough.

Wonderful, the Cloakmaster thought. "You know what that means, then?"

"Of course I do, Teldin," Djan said, his voice as quiet as the Cloakmaster's. "We have a saboteur on board, maybe more than one. I personally checked the rigging and the weapons before we set sail. Everything was fine then."

"One of the hadozee?" Julia asked plaintively.

Djan shook his head. "I meant, 'before we set sail *from Starfall*,' *after* the hadozee had gone ashore. The saboteur's still aboard."

Teldin was silent for a moment, digesting this news. Then, "Have you told anyone else about this?" he asked.

The half-elf shook his head again.

"Don't," Teldin said firmly. "We don't want to tip off the saboteurs that we're on to them." He gave a grim smile. "And I don't even want to *think* about the effect this would have on morale."

"So what do we do?" Julia asked, her voice quiet.

"What can we do?" the Cloakmaster asked bleakly. "We'll watch the crew as closely as we can..." He paused, the enormity of the situation only now dawning on him. "We'll watch them. But there are only three of us—four if we include Beth-Abz—and there are twenty of them. The saboteur could wreck just about anything on board, and we'd only spot him if we were extremely lucky. Still," he sighed, "it's the only thing we can do at the moment." He ground his teeth with frustration. There *had* to be something else they could do—something active instead of reactive—but he could think of nothing.

Julia turned to Djan. "Any ideas who it might be?" she asked.

The first mate shook his head firmly. "None," he said flatly. "I don't know any of them well enough to even guess." He shrugged. "They all have good experience, they all came well recommended, they all seem trustworthy. But, offered enough money—and I assume a planet full of illithids can offer a *lot* of money—even the most trustworthy person might succumb to temptation."

The Cloakmaster looked at his two officers, his two closest friends. He could see anxiety written plainly in the lines of their faces, but there was something else there as well as they looked back at him. He thought it was trust, mixed with hope. They trust me to do something about this, he realized grimly. I'm the captain; I'm the gods-damned *Cloak-master*. It's my responsibility. I've got to do *something*... but what'

He stretched a painful kink out of his neck. I'll think of something, he told himself. "Well," he said aloud, "we'll do what we can on this issue." He turned to Djan with a wry smile. "Have you got any *good* news for me?"

"As a matter of fact, yes." Djan's face brightened a little. "Blossom tells me we've entered a phlogiston river. A *fast* river, one that doesn't appear on our charts... but does appear on yours." He smiled. "Maybe Nex isn't a myth after all."

The voyage continued with no further incidents—a pleasant surprise, Teldin told himself; we've had all too many *incidents* recently. As captain, it had been his unpleasant duty to officiate at the funeral services for the four slain members of the *Boundless's* crew. He'd known he'd have to say a few words before their canvas-wrapped bodies were put overboard—'consigned to space'—but at the time the words just hadn't come. Staring at the bodies—Allyn, Vernel, Manicombe and little Merrienne—his eyes had filled with tears, and his throat had tightened so much that he'd felt as if he was choking. All he'd been able to manage was a croaked, "Good-bye. And thank you." To the crew, that had seemed to be enough—a fitting tribute from a captain who so obviously cared for those who served with him. The

burial crew had taken over, and the bodies had slid over the rail. For a few minutes he'd watched the pathetic bundles drift out along the squid ship's gravity plane. More deaths added to the tally, he'd told himself. But then Julia had appeared at his side to lead him away, down below to his cabin.

Julia had been there for him during the hours and days after the funeral. Never had she pressed her presence on him, but when he'd wanted someone to talk to—or someone just to silently be with him—she'd been there. The intense, confusing emotions he'd felt for her when they'd both been aboard the *Probe* hadn't returned. In their place he felt a growing kinship, a calm acceptance of each other's strengths and weaknesses, of needs and desires. It was friendship, but a different kind of friendship than he'd experienced before, more intense, yet also somehow more subtle. The two had been lovers aboard the *Probe*, and both seemed to accept that they'd be lovers again. But neither felt there was any need for haste in consummating matters.

While the captain had been coming to terms with the changes in his emotional landscape, the crew had been busy. Under the close scrutiny of Djan Alantri, they'd gone over the whole ship—supposedly checking for hidden damage the *Boundless* might have taken from the recent engagement, but actually looking for more signs of sabotage.

They'd found nothing, the half-elf had reported. While they'd been at it, they'd reinforced the mountings for both booms—mainmast and mizzen—since Djan had recognized that that was a weak point in the squid ship's design. They'd also patched and reinforced the bow where the pirate's catapult shot had struck. In what Teldin had considered a meaningless exercise, they'd even repainted the scores and scratches left on the ram from when it had pierced the battle dolphin's hull. Now those areas gleamed a bright blood red, a strong counterpoint to the dull, space-faded hue of the rest of the ship.

The *Boundless* was seventeen days out from the Heart-space sphere. A new crystal sphere loomed ahead of the squid ship, right where Teldin's copied chart had said it would be. Nex is within it, the Cloakmaster told himself. It *bas* to be. The ancient book had been right about everything else. And if Nex *were* there, were the Juna present also? He'd know soon enough.

Standing on the afterdeck, Teldin looked forward along the hull, along the slender ram, toward the crystal sphere that hung in the phlogiston like a huge pearl. In the Flow it was nearly impossible to judge the scale of anything, or its distance, with the naked eye alone. Even so, he could *feel* that he was close.

He looked away from the sphere as Djan joined him on the sterncastle. "Six hours from the sphere," the half-elf said with a smile, "maybe a little less. That's what the navigator says." He hesitated, and Teldin could see doubt in his friend's expression. "She also says it's very small," he went on slowly. "Unusually small. Maybe *too* small, I don't know. Based on our distance and its apparent size, the sphere can't be more than a single day's sail from one side to the other."

Teldin nodded slowly. "Unusual," he admitted.

Djan smiled wryly. "*Very* unusual," he emphasized. "If Nex is the outer planet of the system, that makes it only *six hours' sail* away from the sun. If it's *not* the outer planet..." He shrugged.

The Cloakmaster understood his point. If it's not the outer planet, Nex is even less than six hours from its primary. In contrast, Krynn was *twenty-four* hours' sail from the sun. Did that mean Nex would be a fire-scorched cinder? Or was its sun abnormally small, or very cold? "Well," he told Djan, "we'll know soon enough."

The half-elf nodded. "That we will."

Unusually small or not, the crystal sphere still loomed huge before the *Boundless* as the ship approached. From this distance, the curvature of the mother-of-pearl outer surface was invisible, and Teldin could almost believe the squid ship was suspended, bow down, over an infinite flat plain.

Below him, *within* the sterncastle, Blossom was on the helm, while Dranigor readied himself to open the portal. Djan stood in his customary position by the speaking tube that communicated with the helm compartment. "Ready to open the portal," the first mate announced. Teldin simply nodded, hardly listening as the half-elf relayed the command to Dranigor. This could be it, he told himself, the end of my

quest. Maybe 'the creators'—the mysterious figures the dying reigar had spoken of at the outset of all this—were on the other side of this crystal barrier.

Or maybe there was nothing there at all, and this was just another dead end. Part of him eagerly awaited the opening of the portal; another part wished for more time—more time before his hopes were dashed again.

With a firm shake of his head, he forced the negative thoughts deep into the darkness of his mind.

A point of brilliance sprung to life on the surface of the sphere, swelling quickly to become the lightning-limned disk of blackness that had become familiar to Teldin. The *Boundless* plunged through the portal...

Into total blackness. There were no stars, no sun; there was nothing to give any illumination. For an instant, Teldin thought he'd been struck blind.

"Make lights!" Djan called from beside him. Within a few moments, he saw small flames burst to life around the decks as crew members struck lights with their tinderboxes and ignited strategically placed oil lamps. Djan himself lit the large ship's lantern hanging from the jackstay at the aft rail.

Teldin looked around in puzzlement. Beyond the extent of the ship, there was literally nothing to see, nothing at all. Even the portal had closed behind the ship.

"No stars," he murmured. Then he turned to Djan, and asked, "Is this common?"

The first mate shook his head. "I can't remember ever hearing of a crystal sphere without stars," he admitted. He gestured forward. "Or a fire body of any type."

Teldin looked forward, too, in the direction that should lead to Nex. The half-elf was right: there was no light ahead either.

No sun? he wondered. How could life exist without light? Maybe the sun's burned out... which could explain why the crystal sphere's so small.

"Well, Captain," Djan said slowly, "what course?"

Teldin didn't answer at once. It was a good question. What course do you set in a crystal sphere that seems to be completely empty? And how do you set it anyway, with no stars or sun to navigate by? "Hold position," he ordered. "Let's think about this."

Djan relayed the order down the speaking tube, then announced, "Station-keeping, Captain."

Teldin suppressed a smile. He'd noticed that when the time came for a serious decision, the half-elf would usually become much more formal, addressing the Cloakmaster as "Captain" rather than "Teldin." Did he do it to divorce himself from the responsibility, or to remind Teldin of the weight of his burden? Or was the first mate even aware that he did it? Probably not, Teldin decided.

Regardless, the responsibility was Teldin's. He and only he could decide what to do next.

Well, what he needed at the moment was information—any information—on which to base that decision. But where would he get it?

Possibly from the cloak. He knew that he hadn't explored all of the ultimate helm's powers. Maybe one of those abilities would help him.

"Continue station-keeping," he told Djan. "I'll be below if you need me."

He descended the ladder to the main deck and walked forward into the forecabin. As he did, he noticed that the on-duty crewmen were lining the rails, staring silently into nothingness. Nobody was speaking, but they didn't have to for Teldin to understand their anxiety. Paladine's blood, he felt it himself. Originally, when he'd first taken to space, the star-flecked void had terrified him. Now, however, it was familiar, reassuring, and the *absence* of stars was cause for concern. He continued forward into his cabin and seated himself on the edge of his bunk.

Now, how do I go about this? he wondered. He'd never consciously used the cloak for information-gathering before. He took several deep breaths, letting the tension flow from his muscles. As he felt his mind grow calm, he let his awareness of the cloak grow. Warmth on his shoulders told him that the artifact was responding. Mentally, he posed a question: What is the nature of this crystal sphere? As he let the warmth wax against his back, he concentrated on that question.

Without warning he felt a new sensation: warmth on his chest as well, where the bronze amulet hung on its chain. Apparently something had triggered the power of that artifact as well. For a moment he felt

as though he stood between twin suns, their light shining bone-deep into his body.

Then he gasped as information flooded into his mind....

Djan, Julia, Lucinus, the navigator, and the Cloakmaster stood in the helm compartment around the *Boundless's* chart table. To the aft of the large compartment, Blossom sat on the helm, a look of calm patience on her face.

Teldin had spread a blank sheet of mapping parchment on the table. He picked up a broad-nibbed pen and dipped it in the table's inkwell. He leaned across the sheet and drew a large circle. "That's the crystal sphere," he said. "As you said, Djan, about a full day's sail in diameter." He drew a black blob halfway between the center of the circle and its periphery "This is a outer planet of the system," he said. "An air world, a small one, about six hours inside the crystal sphere. Frigid-cold, apparently—cold enough that some of the gases in its atmosphere are probably frozen solid."

"Can that be Nex?" Julia asked.

It was Djan who answered with a shake of his head. "I don't think so. And if it is, we may as well leave now and save time and effort. There's no way anything could live there—not anything like life as we know it, that is."

The Cloakmaster nodded agreement. From what he'd read about the Juna, the worlds they chose to colonize and alter were similar in climate to Krynn and Toril, hinting that the mysterious creatures shared at least some characteristics of humans and demihumans.

"Are there any other planets?" Lucinus, the ginger-haired halfling navigator, wanted to know.

"One," Teldin announced. "Here, right at the center." He drew another blob in the middle of the circle. "It's an earth world..." His voice trailed off.

"But... ?" Djan prompted.

"But I didn't find any fire bodies," the Cloakmaster continued. "No sun, or suns. Now," he went on quickly, "I didn't actually *see* the system. I..."—he paused, trying to find the right word—"I *felt* it. And I don't know whether I learned everything about it."

Djan nodded slowly, looking at Teldin's rough drawing. "An earth-centric system without a sun," he mused. "Unusual. Very unusual." He looked up. "You're sure about this?"

"As sure as I *can* be, considering."

Lucinus piped up again. "Maybe your... your *perception* has a size limitation," he suggested. "Maybe you can't... experience anything smaller than a certain size. Class B, for example, thirty leagues or so in diameter. Much too small for a sun."

"Couldn't you have a tiny, very bright sun?" Teldin asked.

The halfling didn't answer, just gave the Cloakmaster a patronizing smile.

"Is there anything else?" Djan asked after a few moments.

"Yes," Teldin said slowly. "There's something, but I'm not sure I know exactly what it is." With the pen, he scribbled in an amorphous band encircling the central blob, a fraction of the way out.

"What's that?" Lucinus wanted to know, standing on tiptoe for a better view.

"A dust cloud of some kind, I think," Teldin said. "It forms a complete shell around the world at the center, about an hour out."

"Maybe it glows on the inner surface," Julia suggested. "Maybe it gives heat and light to the planet..."

Teldin cut her off gently. "According to what I felt, it's almost as cold as the outer planet." He frowned grimly. "But there's *got* to be something I'm missing. The book said ships that came here never returned. There's nothing I've seen that could do that."

"Maybe," Djan said with a shrug. "But maybe not. There's no light, no stars to navigate by. Ships would be flying totally blind. Maybe they rammed the frozen air world. They couldn't even detect the boundary of the crystal sphere," he went on. "They could have rammed right into it." He shrugged again. "It's possible."

Teldin wouldn't be swayed. "Then what about the ships that *did* make it back?" he demanded. "The

ones that told of being attacked by immense forces of magic?"

"Spacefarers' tales, perhaps?" the half-elf suggested. Then he smiled. "But you're right, of course, it is a mystery, isn't it? I hate leaving a mystery unsolved. And anyway, it's not as if it'll take long to find out. If this *is* Nex"—he tapped the central dot—"we can be there in twelve hours at full speed."

They didn't travel all the way at full speed, of course. The *Boundless* plunged through the blackness of wildspace, only to slow just outside where the dust cloud began. At tactical speed, the squid ship edged inward.

Teldin and his two mates were on the foredeck as the vessel began to penetrate the cloud. To the Cloakmaster's naked eyes, there was nothing different about this part of space. Outside the radius of illumination cast by the *Boundless's* running lights, there was just impenetrable darkness, with no details or texture visible. At first, Teldin had wondered whether the information the cloak and amulet had given him had been wrong, whether there wasn't anything in this region of space at all. But then word had been relayed up from the helm that the ship was encountering some kind of resistance and traveling slower than projected.

Both Julia and Djan had expressed worry about the dust or gas or whatever diffusing into the squid ship's atmosphere envelope, possibly fouling or even poisoning it. Yet that didn't seem to be happening. Teldin took a deep breath, scenting the air. If there *was* anything filtering into the ship's air, he couldn't detect it with any of his senses.

"What's that?" Julia was leaning on the forward rail, pointing.

Teldin looked in the direction she was indicating, straight out along the squid ship's ram.

He saw light! It was a faint, unfocused glow, so weak that he could almost believe it was his imagination.

But Djan was staring in the same direction, his mouth hanging open in surprise.

At first too faint to be said to have color, the light was taking on a red-orange hue, rather like the glow of a sunrise seen through a pre-dawn fog. With each passing second, the illumination grew in intensity. The *Boundless* was emerging from the inner edge of the dust cloud, Teldin realized.

The three comrades watched in silence as the light continued to intensify. Then, with shocking suddenness, the squid ship emerged into clear space once more.

After a long moment, Djan turned from his gaping stare at the vista to ask Teldin, "Just what in all the hells *is* that?"

Teldin felt a broad smile spreading across his face. "Nex," said the Cloakmaster.

The *Boundless* hung in a high orbit, three thousand leagues above the surface of the planet. On the afterdeck, Teldin stared down with a sense of awestruck amazement at the world below him.

It was a vibrant, living world—the brilliant blues of oceans contrasting with the verdant greens of forest-covered continents—streaked and swathed with the gleaming white of clouds. From this altitude it looked so much like his last glimpses of Krynn as to bring a lump into the Cloakmaster's throat and sting his eyes with tears.

With a sudden laugh, he threw the cloak back from his shoulders. Even this high above the planet, space was comfortably warm. From the vegetation he could pick out below him, he guessed the climate of the world would probably be much like that of Ansalon.

We should have thought of this, he told himself. One of us should have guessed. But no—we're all so used to the standard pattern, where a planet orbits around a much larger sun, or perhaps where the sun orbits the planet. Our preconceptions prevent us from anticipating the wonders the universe puts before us.

The planet—it had to be Nex, didn't it?—had not one sun, but many. Orbiting at an altitude of about

two thousand leagues were two dozen tiny spheres, burning so brightly with red-orange light that to look directly at them set tears streaming. The "mini-suns," as he'd taken to calling them, moved rapidly, each following its own orbit, yet somehow never coming near any of the others. Teldin guessed that, at any given time, any point on the planet would have at least two mini-suns in the sky. Hence, there'd be no night, and a new "mini-dawn" every couple of minutes.

He chuckled again. No wonder the cloak had shown him no sun. When he'd brought Lucinus up on deck to show him the spectacle, the halfling navigator had abashedly admitted that each mini-sun was no more than a league in diameter. "Class A suns," he'd muttered. "Who'd have thought it?"

Not you, Teldin thought.

I should be excited, he told himself, on edge to get down there and see what there was to be seen. But he found himself calmer than he'd been in a while—a long while. The phlogiston river, the crystal sphere, and the world of Nex—all had been just where the old book had said they were. As to the Juna themselves... Well, there was no reason to go charging down to the planet's surface right away. Everything would come in its own good time.

Anyway, it simply wouldn't be safe to move yet. Djan, Lucinus, and Julia were up on the foredeck now, using astrolabes, sextants, and other instruments to track the movements of the mini-suns, analyze their orbits, and figure out how to project their future positions. The burning spheres moved *fast*, faster than a spelljammer at tactical speed. Until the experts worked out their paths and found a "window," any attempt to land would be a crazy risk. An impact from a mini-sun would smash the squid ship into burning splinters, while even a near hit might set the vessel on fire.

The view from up here was so beautiful; Teldin was in no hurry to give up this perfect vantage point. As he watched, a spot on the upper left limb of the planet seemed to glow yellow, then red. Then another mini-sun soared clear, looking for all the world like a flaming spelljammer climbing from the land into space.

He forced his eyes away from the vista as Djan clambered up the ladder to the afterdeck. Teldin could see the anticipation in the half-elf's face. "Have you found your window?" he asked.

"We've found it," the first mate confirmed, it's narrow, but safe enough. It'll take us down about *there*"—he pointed to the lower right quadrant of the planet—"on that large continent. If that's what you want, of course, Captain," he corrected. "Once we're past the mini-suns, we can cruise anywhere you want to go."

"One place is as good as another." Teldin shrugged.

"Do you want to take the window?"

"Let's do it," the Cloakmaster confirmed.

The afterdeck was crowded as the *Boundless* began its descent. Lucinus and Julia continued to take bearings on the speeding mini-suns, every few seconds wiping streaming eyes. Djan had a sextant, too, and used it occasionally; however, most of his attention was taken up with relaying course corrections to Blossom on the helm. Teldin considered clearing the deck to give them more room. But they seemed to be managing fine, and the afterdeck was his favorite vantage point.

"Steady as she goes," Djan instructed down the speaking tube.

Nex was swelling steadily below them now, as they descended to the altitude at which the mini-suns orbited. He could see now how frighteningly fast the fiery bodies actually moved, and how large they were. When Lucinus had told him they were "only" a league in diameter, he'd been thinking in planetary terms. Now he realized that the smallest had a diameter more than *two hundred times* the length of the squid ship. If Julia and the navigator made a mistake with their bearings, the chances of anyone surviving were zero.

But Teldin had little fear that they would make a mistake. They'd taken enough time analyzing the mini-suns' orbits, and even now they were cross-checking each other's results to eliminate any chance of error. The "window" was still open, and would remain so for almost a dozen more minutes—plenty long

enough to get the *Boundless* to a safe altitude.

He craned his neck to look all around. The mini-suns orbited at different altitudes—which was why they never collided, he guessed—spread out over a range of more than a hundred leagues. The squid ship was already in the midst of that "danger band," closer to the planet than some of the fire bodies, but higher than others. For the next couple of minutes, they'd theoretically still be at risk.

"Steady as she goes," Djan said again. Then he asked the observers, "Everything still on track?"

"Still on track," Julia confirmed.

Then, suddenly, "No!" She pointed up and back, over the ship's stern. "Port astern, high. One's off track!"

Teldin felt tension grip his chest. His fingernails bit into his palms as he clenched his fists. He looked back, following the direction of Julia's arm.

He could immediately see the mini-sun she meant, about fifteen degrees above the stern rail and an equal angle to port of the squid ship's track. It was still a good distance away, not a direct threat to the ship... yet.

"Observation error?" Djan queried. "Check it again."

The two observers raised their instruments, confirming the bearing of the speeding object. "It's off projected course," Julia answered after a few moments. "Ten degrees off." Then, a couple of heartbeats later, "No, more. Fifteen degrees and increasing."

"What in Paladine's name is happening?" the Cloakmaster demanded. He felt suddenly, sickeningly powerless. For an instant he felt an almost uncontrollable urge to use the ultimate helm, to speed the *Boundless* on its way. But he couldn't, he recognized at once. His crew had computed this "window" based on a certain ship speed. If he changed that speed, or the ship's course, he ran a very real risk of driving the vessel into the path of another mini-sun.

"Mini-sun increasing speed!" For the first time ever, he heard real panic in Julia's voice. "Twenty-five degrees off projected course, deviation increasing!"

In a hushed voice, Lucinus echoed the realization that had, an instant before, struck Teldin. "It's coming after us!"

"Helm," Djan yelled down the speaking tube, "full speed! *Now!*"

"What about the atmosphere?" Lucinus cried. "If we hit the atmosphere at full speed..."

"By the mind of Marrak!" Djan snarled. "If we don't get out of the way now, we'll never get that far."

Teldin felt the motion of the *Boundless* change as Blossom poured on the power. He could see the mini-sun changing course, curving from its previous trajectory to follow the speeding ship down.

How's this possible? The question hammered in Teldin's brain.

Nex, part of his mind answered. *Nex*—violent death. Now you know why it has that name....

"It's gaining!" Lucinus called.

"More speed!" Djan barked down the speaking tube. "Give it everything you've got!"

The deck vibrated under Teldin's feet as Blossom pushed the helm—and herself—to the limit. His ears were filled with the thrum of the rigging's vibrations.

"Still gaining!" Lucinus's voice was a wail that easily carried over the background din.

Teldin could see that he was right. The mini-sun was dead astern now, swelling ominously with every passing moment. He could feel heat like midsummer sun on his face. From the ship's movement he knew Blossom had reached the maximum speed she could manage, and still the mini-sun closed the gap. The heat falling on Teldin's skin continued to increase.

Before he even knew he'd made the decision, he felt the cloak flare with power and felt his awareness expand to include the entire squid ship. He could feel the mini-sun's burning heat on the ship's stern, the strain the speed was putting on the rigging.

"Get Blossom off the helm." His voice sounded calm, emotionless, in his own ears. Djan relayed the order.

As the woman released her control over the major helm, the Cloakmaster felt his command of the vessel become total. He almost lost his footing as the squid ship leaped forward, doubling, then tripling its speed in only a few seconds.

But, in his wraparound view, he could see the mini-sun still closing. He saw, as well as felt, the paint on the stern flukes and spanker sails start to bubble with the heat. He gritted his teeth and drove the full force of his will into the cloak. Still the *Boundless* accelerated.

"Still pursuing!" Julia called out; Teldin could clearly see the burning sphere on their tail.

But it's not closing! he told himself exultantly. The gap between mini-sun and squid ship was remaining constant. No, it was starting to open up again. The heat on the stern was diminishing. I'm pulling away!

"Still pursuing!" Julia repeated. Then, "No!" she shouted. "It's changing course again."

Teldin was tempted to slow the ship down—the planet below was looming up awfully quickly—but he kept the power on. It could be a trick, he told himself. If a gods-damned burning rock can give chase, it might have more tricks in its repertoire.

But then even he, without the benefit of a sextant or astrolabe, could see that the mini-sun had broken off the pursuit and was climbing again, back toward its normal orbit.

He gasped as Djan grabbed his arm in a grip like a vise. "Pull up, Teldin!" the half-elf almost screamed into his ear. "Pull up!"

Nex was much closer now—no longer so much a planet as a landscape, with the world's curvature more inferred than directly visible. He could feel the rigging straining as the ship entered the outer wisps of the planet's atmosphere. Normally a ship's own air envelope would protect it from turbulence and from the effects of entering a planetary atmosphere, he knew, but not at speeds like this. He closed his eyes, focusing every fiber of his being on bringing the *Boundless* out of its lethal dive.

Pain racked him; he clenched his teeth, trying to hold back a scream. The strain on the squid ship's keel burned up and down his own spine. He felt as though he were being torn in two. His skin crawled as he heard the keening of wind through the vessel's lines, the musket-shot cracking of the sails' canvas. We're not going to make it, he told himself.

But that thought was the spur he needed. He forced himself to dissociate from the ship's pain, concentrated the last iota of his will on bringing the bow up, up, away from the planet.

The strain lessened—imperceptibly at first, then with growing rapidity. As the ship's speed decreased, and its nose-down attitude changed, the stress on the hull and rigging diminished. I'm doing it! he thought, with a flash of triumph. He brought the bow up even farther...

And it was over. Back out of the atmosphere, back in the vacuum for which it had been built, the *Boundless* was back under control.

Teldin released the force of his will; the sense of internal relaxation was directly analogous to easing tension in a strained muscle. He felt the breath hiss from between his teeth, felt his shoulders sag. He opened his eyes again.

The *Boundless* was hurtling in a low orbit, maybe twenty leagues above ground level. It was still traveling abnormally fast, but the danger seemed over. He let the speed bleed away.

We're safe, he thought as he climbed up to the deck.

Djan, Julia, and Lucinus were clinging to the rails, their faces paste-white, their wide eyes staring at him. He forced a smile, saw their answering relief. "We've made it," he whispered. Their exhausted smiles mirrored his.

He wouldn't have seen it if his sphere of attention didn't still surround the entire ship. A sudden fire-red glow bloomed on the planet's surface. Another mini-dawn, he thought.

But no, the light wasn't on the horizon, it was directly beneath the squid ship.

Before he could react in any way, a titanic burst of searing energy arced from the ground twenty leagues below, flashing past the *Boundless* like an oversize lightning bolt. Concussion like a dozen thunderclaps pummeled him as the bolt superheated the outer edge of the ship's air envelope. Screams echoed around him, audible even over the ringing in his ears.

Another glow sprung to life, now to the left of the ship's path. Another bolt arced skyward, burning past the hull.

Another glow, another bolt, then another. Instantly he knew this one wasn't going to miss like the preceding three.

He felt the impact like a punch over the heart delivered by an ogre. He felt the ship's hull rupture, felt his body torn asunder. Redness, then blackness, enveloped him.

"We're going down!" Julia screamed.

And her voice followed Teldin down into unconsciousness.

Chapter Seven

Teldin could only have been unconscious for a couple of heartbeats if that, not even long enough to fall. As awareness returned, he could feel the deck jolting beneath his feet as the *Boundless* plummeted toward the world below. He grabbed at the mizzenmast to retain his balance.

His connection with the ship—his cloak-mediated control—had vanished as consciousness had fled. Now he struggled to regain it. Rosy pink light flared around him.

He gasped, almost doubling over with the pain, as his awareness once more encompassed the whole of the stricken squid ship. A huge hole had been smashed in the hull just starboard of the keel—directly amidships, in the middle of the cargo hold. Flames licked around the jagged edges of the hull breach and across the overhead. The large hatch cover had been blown loose and lay smoldering on the main deck.

"Fire in the hold!" he gasped, and heard Djan echo the cry. He felt and saw crewmen with buckets of sand jump to deal with the threat.

Again, the squid ship was plunging toward the ground. But this time the Cloakmaster knew he had more time to react. They were falling free, not being driven downward in a screaming dive by the power of the ultimate helm. That alone made the threat less immediate, but that benefit was negated by the serious damage to the ship.

Cautiously, he extended his awareness throughout the squid ship's structure. The impact of the bolt—whatever in the hells it was—had been tremendous. Joists and thwarts throughout the hull had been cracked or ripped apart. As his consciousness touched each area of damage, he flinched anew. The "wounds" he felt were grievous, maybe even mortal. His chances of bringing the ship out of its plunge rested totally on the condition of the keel. He hesitated, afraid to discover the worst. But then he forged on.

The keel was cracked amidships. He could feel the fibers of the timber grinding back and forth against each other, like the two bones in a badly broken arm. But the crack didn't extend right through. There should be enough support for him to bring the ship down in one piece... if he was careful. If he applied too much force, or turned the ship too sharply, the damaged keel would part, and then there'd be nothing even the ultimate helm could do to save it. Carefully, he started to pull the *Boundless* out of its stern-first plunge.

The ship jolted sideways—none of his doing!—threatening to rip the keel in two. *Blossom!*

"Get her off the helm!" the Cloakmaster screamed, loud enough to tear his throat and bring the bright copper taste of blood into his mouth. In an instant the spurious motions were gone, and he recognized that the ship was again entirely his.

Carefully—oh, so carefully—he started to apply forward power. With the stem of the vessel pointing downward, that began to slow its fall. He felt timber strain, felt the keel shift a fraction of an inch, another dozen wood fibers shearing under the stress. Then he started to bring the bow down—a couple of degrees a second, no faster. He tried to gauge how far they still were above the mountains below, but realized instantly that even that slight shift of his attention decreased his control over the ship's motions.

"Get Blossom to call out the altitude," he croaked to Djan, and heard the half-elf relay the instructions down the speaking tube.

He could feel Blossom sitting on the helm. She was no longer trying to exert any influence on the ship, but he could sense her extended perception overlapping his. He didn't need Djan as a relay when she announced, "Ten leagues."

Slowly he continued to push the squid ship's bow over. He tried adding a touch more forward force, instantly felt the damaged keel complain, and backed off again.

The ship's attitude was still forty-five degrees stern-down. But now the hull was exposing more surface area to the strong wind that whipped through the atmosphere envelope. He felt their downward

speed start to diminish further... as the strain on the keel increased again.

"Four leagues." Even through the-artificial calm that connection with a helm brought, he could hear the fear in the woman's voice.

He didn't have much time left. The ship had a huge amount of speed; there was nothing he could do to bleed it all off, he knew. It's make or break, he told himself. He forced the bow over even harder.

He felt his stomach lurch and his feet almost leave the deck as the ship pivoted around an axis running horizontally through its beam. He felt and heard the screaming of tortured timber. But now the ship was horizontal, falling keel-first through the sky.

"Two leagues."

Still he pushed the bow over, until the *Boundless* had fifteen degrees of downward pitch. He felt the air catch the spanker sails bracketing the stern, felt the wooden supports take the strain. He fought the ship's desire to flip into a vertical bow-down attitude. Wood and canvas screamed a banshee wail.

It was working. With the spanker sails catching the wind, some of the ship's downward speed was being converted into forward velocity. If the spanker sails didn't tear loose, and if the keel didn't part... Again he added a touch more forward power.

The wind was a howl around him. He knew that, with the main helm effectively inactive, the ship's atmosphere envelope would collapse if he released control. Then the speed of their flight would tear the masts away, fling everyone on deck over the stern, even peel the decks themselves away from the hull.

"One league."

We really might make it! He knew it with sudden clarity. The ship was still in a screaming dive, but it was traveling bow first now. He had control of both its attitude and its heading. He started to bleed off speed with feather-touches of reverse power. Wood ground against wood as the keel flexed. If the keel were ever going to let go, now was the time, as his attempts to decelerate effectively tried to compress the *Boundless* along its longitudinal axis.

But the magnificently strained keel held. The death scream of the wind faded to a faint whistle. Then it fell silent as the ship's air envelope reasserted itself over the slipstream. The ship still was at a fifteen-degree angle and he didn't think he could pull it up again without tearing the vessel in two, but at least the speed was down to manageable levels.

"Altitude," he croaked.

"Two thousand feet," he heard Blossom gasp. Then she shouted, "Mountains!"

But he'd already seen them, some of the peaks reaching several thousand feet above the deck of the squid ship. By sheer luck, he'd brought the *Boundless* in along the line of a steep-sided pass between the highest of the peaks. Less than a league to one side or the other of their present course, and the ship would have been smashed to splinters against the rocky slopes.

What in Paladine's name am I going to do? Teldin asked himself. The squid ship was designed solely for a water landing, but there wasn't any water for dozens of leagues, and he knew he wouldn't be able to keep the stricken ship in the air for much longer before something critical failed.

So be it, then, a ground landing it had to be. He knew all too well what it would do to the ship, but his sole concern now was the lives of his friends and his crew.

He looked below the ship for a flat place to land, but couldn't spot anywhere suitable. The pass was actually a V-shaped valley, with boulders—some as large as farmhouses—around the bottom. To bring the ship down there would be to court disaster.

The pass was narrowing ahead of the ship, he saw, the valley floor rising in altitude until it merged with a high rampart of mountains two leagues or so directly ahead. He was running out of time.

Teldin tried to slow the ship further, managed to bring it down to little more than a walking speed. But each second of flight, he could feel the stress increase on the keel. The cracks in the heavy wood had spread and were on the verge of fracturing the ship's "backbone" at any instant. The *Boundless* is doomed, he recognized, no matter what I do. The only question is, can I keep *us* alive? He let the big ship descend several hundred feet for a better view of the terrain.

The walls of the valley were precipitous—forty-five degrees or even steeper, he judged—covered with a thick blanket of trees. The only places where he could see gaps in the forest were where large

outcroppings of red-brown rock jutted out of the mountainsides.

The trees will tear the bottom out of the hull, he thought, probably killing us. But if I hit one of those rock outcroppings, we're definitely dead. He smiled mirthlessly. Yet again, circumstances seemed to be conspiring to force him onto a path he hated.

"Open space ahead!" Julia screamed.

Teldin focused his enhanced perception ahead of the squid ship.

Yes, she was right. A quarter of a league ahead, the right side of the pass leveled out, forming a kind of shoulder. For some reason, no trees were growing there, revealing a verdant meadow almost a hundred yards across. The grass—or whatever it was—seemed totally flat, without even any rolls or hummocks.

Perfect. He started to turn the ship around so that its bow pointed directly toward the meadow. Simultaneously, he let the vessel's altitude creep down, while trying to decrease the speed even further.

Almost there. Just a few more ship-lengths, and he could set the *Boundless* down. The upper branches of the tallest trees whipped the underside of the hull. Even those minor impacts sent shudders through the tortured keel that Teldin could sense plainly. Just a hundred feet more...

And there was the meadow, right below the bow. Teldin tried to bring the ship to a hover, but as he applied the reverse force, he felt the sickening crack as the keel gave way. His control started to evaporate as the ship ceased to *be* a ship, becoming instead a broken-backed wreck. With the last vestige of control, he forced the ship's bow down so it couldn't overshoot and plow into the trees beyond.

The ram struck first, gouging a furrow in the soft soil of the meadow. Then the tip caught against something—a buried rock, perhaps—and the ram was torn clear away.

And the hull itself was down. The impact bowled Teldin off his feet, slammed him into the forward rail of the stern-castle, his head striking something with stunning force. Blackness welled up, threatened to take him again, but he fought it back with pure force of will. Through the ringing in his ears the Cloakmaster could hear cries of fear and pain from belowdecks and around him, and the scream of tortured wood. The ship jolted and jarred, each impact sending bolts of pain through Teldin's body.

Then it was over. The power of the cloak faded, and Teldin was completely himself again—not the ship, just a very battered and bruised human being. With, a groan, he forced himself to his feet and looked around him.

The squid ship had torn a furrow right across the soft meadow, and had come to a stop only a short dagger cast from the trees on the far side. A couple of seconds later in pushing the bow down, Teldin realized, and they'd have slammed into those heavy trunks.

Apart from the missing ram, the squid ship looked relatively undamaged from Teldin's vantage point on the after-deck. But that was an illusion, he knew. As his enhanced perception had faded, he'd felt the keel snap, and felt the heavy planking of the lower hull stave in as though it had no more strength than an eggshell. The *Boundless* was dead, without some kind of miracle, and Teldin wasn't expecting any miracle any time soon.

He was alive, though, as were Julia, Lucinus, and Djan. The half-elf was bleeding from a nasty gash in his left eyebrow, but didn't seem to notice. As Lucinus and Julia—both looking battered and bruised, but not seriously injured—disentangled themselves from each other and the forward railing, Djan took up his familiar position by the speaking tube. "Report," he called down to Blossom.

After listening for a moment, he looked up at Teldin and gave a tired smile. "Heavy damage," he reported, "lots of minor injuries, but nothing major. Amazing." He shook his head. "I thought we were all dead. That was the most amazing piece of ship-handling I've ever seen."

Teldin looked away, embarrassed. "We should check out the damage," he said briskly, to change the subject. "Djan, Julia?"

Both officers followed the Cloakmaster down the ladder to the main deck, then down one more flight to the cargo deck. The hold was filled with acrid smoke, which was only now starting to dissipate. At least the fires were all out,

Teldin saw.

He crouched by the hole the magical bolt had smashed in the deck. Roughly circular, it was almost a man's height in diameter. As he looked down into it he could see an even larger hole in the hull planking below. He shook his head, looking up at Djan. "What *was* this?" he asked quietly.

The half-elf was silent for a moment. "I've never seen anything like it," he admitted at last. "The magical power involved was... well, it was staggering. Most attack spells I'm familiar with have ranges measured in hundreds of yards. What was our altitude when we were struck? Fifteen leagues? Twenty?"

"Something like that," Teldin agreed.

"Then I take back any sarcastic comments I made about the impossibility of world-altering magic," Djan announced dryly. "If your Juna were trying to convince me of their existence, I think they should consider the point made."

"Was it the Juna?" Julia asked, her voice little more than a whisper.

Teldin didn't answer immediately. What was it that the elves at the embassy on the Rock of Bral had told him? That the ruins of the "Star Folk's" works are sometimes guarded with magic so powerful and old that it's lost its meaning, and now strikes out in its madness at all who trespass? It was something like that, even though he couldn't recall the exact words. And that could well describe what had happened to the *Boundless*. "I don't know," he admitted. "Perhaps. Or perhaps we triggered something mindless that they left behind."

"How can we find out?" Julia pressed.

"I'd guess these Juna will make it clear to us if they actually exist," Djan answered. "Not that I'm overly enthusiastic about meeting creatures who can fire fifteen-league-long bolts and cause mini-suns to chase ships out of the sky."

Teldin shook his head impatiently. Discussions such as this weren't going to do them any good. Whether or not Nex was home to living Juna, the knowledge wouldn't be of any value unless the Cloakmaster could get off-planet again and act on the knowledge, would it? And that would require a functional ship.

"I'm going down into the bilges," he announced. "Can someone give me a light?"

"Can it be fixed?" Teldin asked.

Teldin, Djan, and Julia were sitting in the Cloakmaster's cabin. Although the squid ship had come down on a fairly even keel, the cant to the deck was enough to be irritating. The small oil lamp suspended by chains from the overhead didn't hang straight, and when he leaned back in his chair, Teldin kept thinking he was on the verge of going over backward. Overhead the Cloakmaster could hear the crew moving about, working on repairing the peripheral damage that the rigging had taken. Wasted effort, he thought glumly, unless we can do something about the hull and the keel.

"The hull, yes," Djan replied at once. "The bow took a fiend's beating, and then there's the hole farther aft. But still, that's just a matter of patching and reinforcing. I think the ship's next landing would be its last, particularly if we put down on water, but I could guarantee you the hull would handle normal flight... if that were the only problem.

"Unfortunately, it isn't," the half-elf continued. "You saw the keel, Teldin. It's split right through amidships, almost split just forward of the mainmast, with cracks just about everywhere else." He shrugged. "If the damage was localized to one spot, I'd say let's try strapping it and take our chances. But the way it is now, the moment it's put under any stress—like trying to take off—it's going to shatter into half a dozen pieces."

"Can we replace it?" Teldin asked—then instantly knew from his comrades' expressions that it was a stupid question.

"Replacing a keel's not much different than building an entire ship," Julia explained gently. "It takes facilities and resources we just don't have here."

"The *Boundless* will never fly again," Djan concluded. "I'd stake my name on it."

Teldin nodded slowly. He'd suspected as much from the moment he'd lowered himself into the squid

ship's bilges. Even to his relatively inexperienced eye, the damage had seemed just too extensive. "You may as well tell the crew to lay off," he said, trying to keep the disappointment out of his voice. "Tell them to save their energy for..." For what? he asked himself. For building another ship? Julia had as much as said that was impossible. For making a life here, then?

As though she could sense his worry and mentally overhear his questions, Julia laid a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "We can think about all this later," she pointed out reasonably. "You're on Nex, where you wanted to be. Don't you want to find out more about it before you start obsessing about getting off-planet again?"

He met her ironic smile with one of his own. "You're right, of course," he admitted. "Julia, Djan, would you care to join me for a little exploration?"

The meadow felt springy and resilient—and undeniably, vibrantly alive—under his feet as Teldin dropped the last couple of feet from the rope ladder. How long has it been since I walked on good, honest grass? he asked himself. How long since I've had fertile earth under my feet, and not ship decks or paved city streets? Far, far too long. He crouched down, ran his fingers over the grass...

To discover that it wasn't grass, not as he thought of it at least: not single, narrow blades rising out of the earth. Instead, the "grass" here was composed of stalks from which sprouted a dozen tiny branches, each bearing tiny, almost circular leaves. Each plant looked, then, like a miniature tree standing about an inch tall. Still, he told himself, grass is as grass does. This is still a meadow.

He climbed back to his feet as the rest of the scouting party joined him. Julia and Djan were with him, of course, as was Beth-Abz—in human form, at the Cloakmaster's order. They were accompanied by the half-orc Dargeth, plus another burly crewman, both armed with short swords and slings. The latter three had come along solely on Djan's insistence. It hadn't occurred to Teldin that they'd need any kind of defense. But of course it should have, he chided himself. Someone or something on the planet had tried—multiple times—to blast the *Boundless* out of space and kill them all, and that someone/something might try again at any moment, regardless of how peaceful this planet looked. Well, with the disguised beholder and two strong sword arms at his back, he felt as well protected as it was possible to be.

At the moment, though, it was all too easy to forget about the danger. The environment around him was so beautiful, so peaceful. At first glance, the steep-sided gorge could easily be part of a mountain range on Krynn or Toril, and the forest that enshrouded it wouldn't look out of place on any of the other worlds Teldin had visited.

That was at first glance. On closer inspection, however, there were enough jarring elements to keep the Cloakmaster constantly aware that this world was quite different from any other he'd visited. There was the sky, first of all. The azure blue and pure-white clouds were familiar, but instead of the disk of a normal sun, the light came from half a dozen speeding mini-suns crisscrossing the sky.

Then, too, there was the forest itself. While speeding above the trees in the stricken squid ship, Teldin had thought they were standard deciduous trees—oaks, perhaps, or maybe larches. Now he could see that they didn't match any tree species he was familiar with... if they could even be called trees at all, he added mentally. In fact, they looked like vastly larger versions of the "grass" plants he'd examined a few moments before. Their overall shape was reminiscent of normal trees, but that was about it. Instead of bark-covered trunks, he could see that the central member of each plant was as green as the leaves were, and much more fibrous-looking. To the touch, however, they felt rock-hard, without even the minuscule give of an old oak. If the *Boundless* had slammed into those trunks, he knew, the impact would have been the same as if the ship had struck a rock outcropping.

As he let the sensations wash over him, Teldin had to admit that everything was alien: the strange, sweet-sharp scents of unfamiliar flowers carried by the breeze; the chattering of unseen creatures in the foliage; even the way the grass-tree leaves rustled and clattered as gusts of wind struck them.

Now, why is this all hitting me so hard? Teldin asked himself. He'd been on new worlds before, worlds more different from Krynn than this place. Why was he so hypersensitive to the deviations?

Almost the instant he posed the question, the answer came to him. The Juna, he told himself. This isn't just another new world; this is—maybe—the home of the Juna, who might well be "the creators" he'd been seeking.

His five companions were as edgy as he felt, Teldin could see. They had different reasons, no doubt; but still they seemed more alert, more sensitive to the slightest sensory cues, than he'd ever seen them before. When a bird—or *was* it a bird?—squealed in the distance, he saw them all jump, saw Dargeth bring up his sword, ready to thrust or parry. He almost told them all to relax, but then decided against it. Maybe I should be *more* ready for trouble, he mused, not they less.

They reached the edge of the meadow. There was a path of some kind leading into the forest, Teldin thought. The undergrowth—plants following the same paradigm as the grass" and the "trees" but about two feet tall—was sparser here, hinting at a trail. What creatures used it? he wondered. Animals? Or the Star Folk themselves?

Djan signaled for a stop. He turned to Teldin. "Well, where from here?" he asked quietly. "Into the forest?"

The Cloakmaster nodded wordlessly.

From his expression, Teldin knew that the first mate didn't really like, or agree with, the decision. Even before they'd left Teldin's cabin, he'd made it clear that he considered it too much of a risk to go far from the ship until they knew more about the environment and the dangers it might contain. "On board ship we've got the catapult and the ballistae to protect us," he'd pointed out. "They won't do any good against magic—not on the scale we've already seen—but they're enough to give the biggest predator something to think about."

But—now, as then—Teldin was convinced that they should explore. The half-elf had backed down before his captain's orders; and, even though he still disagreed, he didn't seem to take being overruled as a personal affront.

Djan sighed. "Beth-Abz and Dargeth, take the lead," he ordered. "Anson, watch our backs."

Teldin watched as the crewmen followed their orders, the half-orc and the disguised beholder moving forward ahead of them, the human, Anson, taking up a position behind them all. Quietly, they moved into the forest.

Among the trees, the air was cooler—like a mid-fall day in Ansalon, Teldin thought—and slightly more humid than out in the meadow. Light lanced down through the foliage in spears of yellow-gold light, shifting at angles visible as the mini-suns sped by in the unseen sky. The sounds the group made seemed somehow hushed under the green canopy. Paradoxically, Teldin could hear his own breathing and heartbeat with preternatural clarity. A sense of peace, of belonging, enfolded him. He felt a smile spread across his face. He slowed to a stop, breathing the fresh air of the forest deep into his lungs. As he looked around him, he saw similar expressions of peace on the faces of his companions.

All except Beth-Abz. If the eye tyrant was feeling the same sensations, it was resisting them, maintaining its alertness. Suddenly, the big figure stopped dead in its tracks, staring off into the dappled forest ahead. It signaled silently to the others, who stopped as well. "Something is up ahead," it reported in a harsh whisper. "It comes this way."

As quickly as it had come, Teldin felt the sense of serenity, of belonging, evaporate. Tension once more squeezed his chest.

"More than one of them," Beth-Abz hissed. Beside him, the half-orc sank into a sword-fighter's crouch, while Anson readied his sling, seating a lead ball in the leather pocket.

Teldin took a step forward to join Beth-Abz, but Djan's hand on his shoulder restrained him. Gently, he disengaged himself from the half-elf's grip and moved to stand between Dargeth and the beholder. He strained his senses to the utmost.

Yes, he could hear movement ahead, the rustle of underbrush as something—or multiple somethings, he couldn't be sure—approached along the path. The shifting spears of light interfered with his vision, not letting him see as far as he wanted to. But then...

There they were, strange shapes moving toward them at a slow walking pace. Teldin could feel his comrades' tension around him and felt his own heartbeat start to race. The figures ahead weren't

humanoid—not even close—but he still couldn't make out their true shapes. The Juna... ?

Then the creatures emerged into a broad beam of sunlight, and he could see them clearly. His breath caught in his throat, and his pulse pounded in his ears like a mighty drum.

There were three of them, slender shapes slightly taller than Teldin's almost-six-foot height. Each creature had a smooth cylindrical body supported by three legs arranged evenly around the bottom of the torso. The legs looked flexible, with more joints and better articulation than a human limb, and ended in broad, soft-looking feet with three long toes. From two-thirds of the way up the body sprouted three more limbs—arms, Teldin labeled them, though they seemed boneless, more like muscular tentacles. Overall, each tentacle was about six feet long. Halfway along its length, each tentacle split into three, and each of those split again into three. The nine tips, each more slender and delicate than a child's finger, were in constant motion, writhing and twisting in complex patterns. Above each tentacle was mounted a single large eye, as big across as the span of Teldin's palm. The eyes were all bright gold, catching and reflecting the light of the hurtling mini-suns, with black, three-lobed pupils in their centers. The creatures wore no clothes of any kind and had no hair. They were covered in smooth skin, a pale yellow-cream color, that showed a satinlike sheen in the bright light. Teldin guessed each creature weighed about as much as an adult human, if not slightly more, but they moved with a grace and delicacy that made him think they were weightless.

The Cloakmaster gaped at them in wonder. He "heard" Estriss's mental voice speaking in his memory, describing the mysterious creatures he'd dedicated his life to following. *They had a trilateral symmetry, the mind flayer had told him. Three legs, three arms... Like a xorn or a tirapheg, but unlike both.* For an instant, he remembered holding the grip of the Juna knife that Estriss had given him, recalled the feel of the strange channels and ridges against his palm. At the time he'd known the grip had been designed for manipulative organs very different from human hands. Now he looked at the weaving, nine-tipped tentacles of the creatures, felt a strange stirring of... not quite familiarity, but certainly a hint of recognition.

Are these the Juna?

The instant the three creatures emerged into the light, they stopped dead in their tracks. As surprised to see us as we are to see them, Teldin thought.

Maybe they're surprised that we survived their magical onslaught.... The Cloakmaster braced himself for some kind of hostile response.

But no attack came. For a few of his racing heartbeats, he watched as the three-legged creatures remained totally still, even their tentacle tips motionless. Then the tentacles resumed their weaving. They were moving faster, he thought, jerkier, more anxiously—or was that his own mind reading an inappropriate meaning into something totally different? Slowly, almost cautiously, the creatures turned around their central axes—one third of a circle at a time, pointing one eye after another at Teldin and the others. Only when each creature had scrutinized the humans and demihumans with all three of its eyes did one of them start forward in a strange, crablike gait.

Teldin felt Dargeth and Anson tense beside him, readying their weapons, and saw the lines of the beholder's disguise start to shift like water. "No," he said, his voice pitched barely above a whisper. "Let's not do anything hasty." Obediently, Beth-Abz resumed its disguised form, and the crewmen lowered their weapons. Still, however, the Cloakmaster could feel their tension radiating from them in waves. If I can sense it, he wondered, looking at the trilaterals, can they? And, if so, how will they interpret it?

He watched as the single trilateral—already he found himself considering it the leader, or at least the spokesperson—approached. It moved slower than a walking man, though Teldin couldn't shake the feeling that it could sprint much faster if it had to. Its motions were less graceful, less sure, than it had appeared before it had sensed the presence of the strangers. Although it showed none of the emotional cues that were normal to demihumanity, Teldin strongly suspected it was anxious, if not downright fearful. He frowned slightly. That didn't make any sense. Anxiety in the face of four humans fit his image of the Juna about as badly as... as fear did his perception of the *Spelljammer*, he concluded. Yet hadn't he sometimes felt fear, when he'd eavesdropped on the great ship's perceptions through the amulet?

He shook his head, forcing those thoughts away from his mind. Worry about the *Spelljammer* later, he told himself. I've got enough to think about here and now.

The trilateral stopped thirty feet away from the crewmen. While the eye itself remained motionless, Teldin could see the three-lobed pupil opening and closing in precise, almost mechanical gradations—presumably scrutinizing the two figures standing in front of the creature. After a few seconds, it edged a couple of feet closer, then stopped again. The Cloakmaster waited for almost half a minute, but the creature didn't move again. Neither did it make a sound, or try to communicate. It just stood there, its tentacle tips writhing like baskets of snakes.

I suppose it's my turn, he told himself. Taking a deep breath in an effort to calm himself, he stepped forward, between Beth-Abz and Dargeth, toward the creature. Stopping twenty feet in front of the creature, he opened his hands to show them empty.

It watched him in utter silence, its only movement the rapid opening and closing of its pupil.

Without warning, Teldin felt a warm pulse of power from the cloak at his back. The back of his neck tingled, and the sensation—almost like a slight jolt of static electricity—spread up his spine and into his brain...

And he could suddenly sense and interpret the trilateral's thoughts, a confusing mix of concepts and emotions blended with symbols for which Teldin's mind had no referents.

This one [interest] partial crippled [surprise-pity] incomplete!

Teldin staggered backward a step under the impact—almost painful—of the creature's thoughts. If Estriss's mental voice had been the "volume" of normal speech, this unexpected rush of thoughts was more like a full-throated yell. As he regained his balance, in his peripheral vision he saw Julia and Djan running to help him. He waved them back. "I'm all right," he told them. "Everything's okay."

Then he turned back to the trilateral and took another slow step toward it. "I mean you no harm," he said calmly, trusting to the cloak to convert his words into something the creature could understand. Around his shoulders, the cloak pulsed and throbbed with power. It suddenly struck him that this was the most complex translation task to which he'd ever put the ultimate helm, and it was pushing the powerful item to its limits. "I wish to talk to you."

The trilateral jerked as though it had been whipped or stung. Lightning fast, it pivoted around to focus a different eye on Teldin. Its thoughts flooded out and into the Cloak-master's mind, filtered through the cloak to a more bearable psychic "volume."

This [shock] animal talks [amazement]. Yet not [disbelief] cannot be. Cannot be intelligent. Mistake [certainty].

Teldin almost smiled. He could understand the creature's denial all too well. Before the reigar's ship had crashed on his farm, if some strange apparition that didn't match his image of how an intelligent creature "should" look had spoken to him, he'd probably have denied it and dismissed it as some kind of mistake or hoax. He took another slow step forward.

"It's not a mistake," he said quietly, and felt the cloak processing his meaning. "I can understand you, and I can speak. I *am* intelligent. Different, but still intelligent."

The trilateral pivoted again to give its third eye a view. It was "silent" for a long time—processing his words, Teldin thought. Then it edged a couple of steps closer.

Not mistake [doubt-fear]? Incomplete animal [wonder] talks. Where from, incomplete animal?

"We came here from Heartspace," Teldin explained. "You might call it something else, of course. We followed the river in the phlogiston..."

A rush of thoughts cut him off. *Incomplete animal [bafflement] nonsense no meaning. Talk mistake [doubt] after all?*

The cloak wasn't capable of handling complex subjects, Teldin decided. Quickly—before the trilateral decided his incompletely translated words were just mindless babble after all—he rephrased his answer. "This world is in a crystal sphere," he explained. "Outside the crystal sphere is what we call the phlogiston, or the Flow. We came here from another crystal sphere, one with more worlds inside it."

No meaning [confusion] yet form of meaning. The creature's thoughts came slower, as though it

were puzzling over Teldin's communication. *Crystal sphere [frustration] no referent, phlogiston no referent. Incomplete animal [curiosity] incomplete thoughts? World beyond world [perplexity] meaningless.* And then, with a sudden blast of mental speech that almost staggered him again, the Cloakmaster felt its comprehension.

Incomplete animals [shock] from above suns? [stupefaction] Words mean this, meaning complete after all. Yet what beyond suns [awe]? Nothing beyond suns [anxiety] nothing beyond world. Nothing [fear] but time ancient time before People [terror-shock] before people were Others [panic] can incomplete animals be Others be incomplete [disgust-denial] no no [shock] impossible mistake...

Discrete thoughts faded into a kind of "mental white noise," blurring into a mishmash of symbols for which Teldin had no referents, no basis for understanding. There was no mistaking the emotional content, however—profound shock, mixed with fear and a kind of panicked doubt.

Without changing its orientation, the creature strode quickly away from Teldin—one of the advantages of trilateral symmetry, he thought—and joined its comrades. Over the intervening distance, he could sense their rapid mental conversation—or argument, maybe—even though the cloak was incapable of distinguishing individual thoughts or concepts.

He felt a presence at his side and turned to see Julia standing next to him. Her eyes were fixed on the three trilaterals. "What in the hells was *that* all about?" she asked in a whisper. "What *are* those things?"

Teldin didn't answer at once. That was the question, wasn't it: what *were* the trilaterals?

Were these the Juna?

No. They couldn't be. Could they?

Even though they definitely matched Estriss's description, he couldn't bring himself to believe that these creatures were the all-powerful Juna—the race that had left artifacts behind them on a hundred worlds, possibly including both the ultimate helm and the *Spelljammer* itself. Hadn't the Juna been traveling the seas of the phlogiston millions of years ago? Hadn't they roamed the universe before humans and illithids—even before the thri-kreen that Estriss had talked about—had ventured into the void?

Yet the trilateral hadn't understood anything that Teldin had "said" about crystal spheres, or the phlogiston, or other worlds, had it? And that couldn't have been just a translation problem. Eventually the creature had grasped that Teldin meant he'd come from "beyond the suns," and that had disturbed it profoundly, almost as if...

Almost as if the sphere surrounding the planet was forbidden territory from *both* directions—from the Flow coming in, and from the planet going out. Almost as if Teldin and the others had become objects of fear because they'd come from the taboo region. No, these couldn't be the planet-shaping, sphere-altering Juna.

But then, what *were* they?

"I don't know," he replied to Julia's question.

Could the Juna have devolved? The thought struck him suddenly. Could they have somehow slipped backward, forgotten what they used to know, lost their powers? Could they have become marooned here on this single planet, cut off from the universe that had once been their playground— marooned for so long that their racial memory didn't contain any trace of what they'd once been? That would certainly explain why the Star Folk had vanished from the ken of all other races: they'd just turned in on themselves, somehow, leaving only artifacts behind.

He shook his head. It couldn't have been like that, he told himself. That was too sad an ending to the glorious story of the Juna. Leaving this universe for another plane of existence, as many rumors told—now that was a fitting conclusion. But to sink back into obscurity, to become savages again—at least, in comparison with their greatest achievements—was just too ignoble. Even worse, what did that say about humankind and the other demihumans—even long-lived elvenkind? That they, too, could lose everything they'd gained, including even the memory of those gains? It was a chilling, depressing thought....

With an effort, he forced the thoughts away. The trilaterals' argument of thoughts had ended, and one of the creatures—not the first one he'd "spoken" to, though Teldin didn't know what made him quite so

sure of that—was approaching him again.

Teldin stepped forward to meet it. "I am Teldin Moore," he said.

Greetings [curiosity], Cloakmaster, the trilateral "said." Apparently the cloak had been unable to translate his name, Teldin realized. Interesting how it chose to identify him instead.... This one [pride] Speaks First, of the People. Incomplete person [acceptance] not of the People, not of the World of the People, but [curiosity] of elsewhere. True [anticipation]?

Teldin paused. This trilateral's mental "voice" was slower, more deliberate, and considerably clearer and easier to understand than the first one. Yet he still had to struggle to make sense of what it was trying to communicate. "Speaks First" seemed to be the creature's name—an indication that it was some kind of a leader among "the People," maybe?— and it seemed to view Teldin somewhat differently from the first individual: as an "incomplete person" rather than as an "incomplete animal." Considering that the Cloakmaster only had four limbs instead of six, he could understand the "incomplete" part. Did the transition from "animal" to "person" mean that Speaks First was willing to consider him an equal?

"Greetings, Speaks First," Teldin said. "You're right, we're not of the People"—he pointed, one at a time, to the three trilaterals—"or of the World of the People"—he indicated the ground under his feet. "We came here from beyond the suns. And that seemed to scare the first of your group to talk with us. Why was that?"

Looks Around lives the Legends too much [amusement]. No immediate understanding, then fear [condescension].

Teldin nodded slowly. He'd met two-legged people like that: anything they didn't understand at once was an object of fear. Yet there was more to it than that, wasn't it? All that babbling about the "ancient time" and "the Others"...

The creature edged forward. Although it moved slowly, Teldin didn't get the sense that it did so out of fear—more that it didn't want to frighten *him* with a precipitous approach. When it was less than a man's height away, it stopped. *May this one [fascination] touch?* it asked.

For a moment, Teldin considered refusing. This *thing* was just so alien—more so, he found, than even the beholder Beth-Abz. But he steeled himself and nodded.

It took him a few seconds to realize the creature wouldn't know how to interpret his gestures. But before he could express his agreement in words, the trilateral had started to reach toward him with one of its twice-trifurcated tentacles. Apparently the cloak will translate gestures as well, part of his mind noted. I'll have to remember that....

With the delicacy of a lover's caress, the nine tentacle tips touched his face, traced the lines of his cheekbones and jaw, brushed his nose and lips. The trilateral's skin was as smooth as a baby's, slightly cooler than human flesh. It exuded a complex, faint odor, with a slight undertone of musk—sharp, yet by no means distasteful. Teldin closed his eyes and felt feather touches across his eyelids.

Then the examination was over. The creature backed a step away. *Cloakmaster is not incomplete [curiosity-certainty],* it stated mentally. *Cloakmaster is not [resolution] of the People. Cloakmaster is not [doubt-decision] of the Others.*

"What are the Others?" Teldin demanded.

Legends tell, Speaks First answered slowly. *Legends [reverence] tell of Others, tell of place of People [certainty] in life. Legends [perplexity] for People only [doubt]... yet though Cloakmaster not of People [indecision] Cloakmaster speaks with People....* The creature's mental voice fell silent for a moment. Then, *Cloakmaster [decision] not-People [resolution],* it stated firmly, *yet Legends for Cloakmaster also. Cloakmaster to Place of People [certainty] will come.* As though that had totally settled matters, Speaks First strode off to join its fellows.

"Wait," Teldin called after it. "What about my friends?"

The trilateral paused. With five tentacle tips it indicated Djan, Julia, and the others. *Other not-People [hesitation] speak with People?* it queried.

Teldin shook his head. "No," he said unwillingly. Speaks First rubbed its tentacle tips together with a hissing sound. *Legends [decision-determination] not for not-People not-Cloakmaster,* it stated firmly. *Cloakmaster alone [certainty] come.*

And that seemed to be that.

Chapter Eight

As he'd expected, Teldin was hard pressed to match the pace the three People were setting through the forest. All three of the creatures were walking in front of him, "chattering" back and forth among themselves—probably thinking the "not-People" couldn't overhear their conversation. The Cloakmaster smiled wryly. With the cloak's help, he *could* decipher their crosstalk... if he wanted to. But he'd quickly decided the creatures didn't have much to "say" that wasn't banal—comments about the position of the mini-suns, the way the foliage was growing, and such things—and had soon "tuned out" their conversation until it became nothing more than a background mental hum.

Even though they didn't discuss him—presumably out of some sense of politeness—Teldin knew he still fascinated the creatures. When they didn't think he was paying attention, all three of them oriented themselves so that one of their three eyes was fixed directly on him. As soon as they saw his own eyes on them, however, without breaking stride they pivoted slightly—a matter of sixty degrees or so—so they weren't staring right at him. Each time he noticed this shift, he chuckled slightly to himself.

It's fascinating, he told himself. I have no fear of these creatures. Why is that?

When Speaks First had made it clear that the invitation to the "Place of People" was for Teldin alone, the Cloakmaster had passed the message on to Julia and Djan. Predictably, both first and second mate had tried to talk him out of going alone with the trilateral—Julia even going so far as to call him an overtrusting, rock-headed idiot. But he'd been adamant, eventually "pulling rank" on the two of them, ordering them—as captain—to wait for his return. He shook his head. Maybe that hadn't been such a swift move, particularly in Julia's case. Odds were, she'd make him pay later, one way or another.

The path the creatures were following was smooth and free of obstacles, an easy walk. That allowed Teldin to let his concentration wander from the ground at his feet to the grass-trees that towered around him. At first he'd thought the foliage and underbrush were empty of life. Once he'd figured out what to look for, and where, however, he was amazed by the profusion of creatures surrounding him.

To his fascination, there wasn't a single specimen that even vaguely resembled a creature with which he was familiar. Certainly, it was easy to pick out the niche each creature filled, or the function it fulfilled in the forest, but the details were decidedly alien.

Take the "birds," for example. They perched on the branches of the grass-trees, feeding on the leaves or on bright purple berries, delicately picking the fruit with one delicate, three-clawed foot while clinging to their perch with the other two, and consuming it with a mouth mounted on their undersides. When they flew from perch to perch, they did so, not by flapping their three wings—covered with short, wiry hair, he noticed, not feathers—but by whirling them around their bodies in complex, interwoven patterns. Although they looked like small, swirling bundles of chaos, he couldn't help but notice the precision with which they avoided obstacles and landed on the slender branches.

Is everything trilaterally symmetrical here? he asked him-self. If so—and that was certainly how it appeared—the fact that the People matched Estriss's vague description of the Juna didn't necessarily mean much after all. There could well have been *two* intelligent races on Nex—the Juna and the People. In that case, the "Others" that Speaks First mentioned might be the Juna themselves.

But how likely was it that a race sharing a planet with the advanced Juna would remain at this relatively primitive level? He mused on that for a while. On Ansalon, there were more "primitive" races. But either the humans had "civilized" them to some degree, or—in the case of some of the humanoids—the other races had borrowed or stolen components of human civilization. No, he thought, it didn't seem likely that advanced and primitive races could coexist without some kind of "cultural diffusion" between the two.

So maybe the People arose after the Juna had left. That made a little more sense, didn't it? When the Juna were present, the race that would become the People wasn't intelligent. Perhaps they bore the same relationship to the Juna that apes bore to humankind. When the Star Folk moved on—or died out, or whatever—the People continued to evolve, increasing in intelligence and sophistication over the passing millennia. Maybe magic and other artifacts left behind by the Juna had helped this new race up the

evolutionary ladder. In a way, then, if that were true, didn't it make the People the heirs of the Juna? It was an interesting thought. He found himself staring at his three guides with ever deeper fascination.

The trek through the forest lasted no more than a quarter hour. The path they followed led across the slope of the terrain, angling only slightly downward while the hills above and below the path itself were inclined at almost forty-five degrees. Eventually the path opened into a clearing only slightly smaller than the meadow where the *Boundless* had landed. As the three People continued into the open space, Teldin paused on the margin.

There were more of the People in the clearing—almost twenty of them. Most were roughly the same size as Speaks First and its two companions, but he spotted four that were considerably smaller. Children, he guessed. This had to be a family group, then, or perhaps a tribe or clan. For a few moments the other People seemed unaware of Teldin's presence. Then one of them stopped stock still, a bright gold eye staring directly at the Cloakmaster. In his mind he "heard" a mental cry of warning or alarm—the cloak didn't bother to translate the exact meaning, but its significance was clear enough—and then all of the other People were frozen motionless, too, staring at him. They're examining the "incomplete animal," he thought with a wry smile; having seen the birds and other examples of three-legged Nex native life, the phrase made a lot more sense now.

The stunned immobility lasted only a few moments. Teldin could "hear" Speaks First's explanation that the "not-People not-Other" was a guest. As he'd figured from the outset, Speaks First had to be the equivalent of a clan leader.

Cloakmaster come [pride] be seen by People. Speaks First's mental voice rang clearly in Teldin's head. The trilateral creature made a beckoning gesture with a twice-trifurcated tentacle.

Slowly, Teldin advanced into the clearing, hands open to show he was unarmed. "I mean you no harm," he said as calmly as he could manage, hoping the cloak would inject a reassuring note into the mental message it was broadcasting. The smaller, immature People dashed into the shelter of full-sized adults as he emerged from the forest. The adults themselves, however, exhibited no obvious signs of fear. More fascination than anything, he told himself. Several of the trilaterals were showing the same behavior as Looks Around, rotating about their axes to examine him with one eye after another.

As Teldin approached, Speaks First indicated one of the trilaterals standing nearby. *This one [reverence] Message Bearer,* the creature's mental voice stated. *Message Bearer [respect-honor] memory of People, tell Cloakmaster of past [awe] of Others.*

Teldin looked at the one named Message Bearer. Its skin was slightly grayer than that of the others—drier-looking, almost dusty. Its eye, too, appeared slightly different, the Cloakmaster thought, with a duller yellow tinge to it instead of the bright gold luster of the others'. It's old, he told himself. The aged storyteller? It had to be. "Greetings, Message Bearer," he said with a slight bow.

Message Bearer moved closer, stopping a man's height away. Even at that distance, Teldin could smell the creature's odor—sharper and somehow more sour than that of Speaks First. The creature's oddly shaped pupil expanded and contracted, its size changes slower and less precise than those of the younger creatures. *This [distaste] not-People,* it "said" sharply.

Teldin took a breath to speak, but Speaks First was already communicating with the older creature. *Not-People not-Other [respect] Message Bearer correct. Yet not-animal [awe], yet from beyond suns Cloakmaster comes [certainty]. Cloakmaster has questions. Message Bearer [respect] answer [petition-order], Message Bearer speak [order-petition!] of Others.*

The aging trilateral pivoted to examine Teldin with another eye that looked even more faded than the first. For a few seconds it remained mentally silent, and the Cloakmaster thought it was going to refuse. But then, *Cloakmaster [resignation] ask,* it answered. It widened its stance slightly, apparently taking up a more comfortable position. To Teldin's surprise, a little squeaking creature—a trilateral analogue of a rat, he guessed—scurried from the edge of the forest carrying a fist-sized yellow-green fruit on its back, steadied by three tiny upper limbs. The creature stopped next to Message Bearer's foot, waited calmly while the trilateral reached down with a tentacle to take the fruit, then bounded off again to disappear into the undergrowth. Message Bearer reached up underneath its cylindrical body, and the fruit disappeared.

What did I just see? Teldin asked himself. He had the unshakable feeling that something important

had just happened, but that he simply wasn't grasping the significance. *Cloakmaster [impatience] ask*, Message Bearer repeated. Teldin took a deep breath and schooled himself to calm. "Tell me about the Others," he requested. Then, "Please," he added.

Message Bearer paused—reflectively, Teldin thought. *Others [reverence] gone*, it "said" at last. *Long ago gone, gone [sadness] forever. Left behind World of the People, left behind Mind of the World.*

"Where did they go when they left?"

Gone [certainty]. Gone only, nowhere.

Teldin frowned. "What were the Others like, then?" he asked. "Were they like the People?"

Like the People, the Others [reverence], yet not like. As People are like not-People animals of World of the People, yet not like. People learn of Others through Mind of the World [reverence-awe]. Long ago gone, the Others [sadness], before People see world and think-together.

Teldin nodded slowly. If he was interpreting Message Bearer correctly, he could well have been right in his guess that the People had risen to intelligence and what level of civilization they had after—perhaps long after—the Juna's disappearance.

"Were the Others always here?" he asked. "Did they evolve here?" He wondered how the cloak would handle the word "evolve."

Not [certainty] always here, Others, Message Bearer answered firmly. *Others from distant world come, [reverence] from Egg come with all life to World of the People, long before People see world and think-together.*

"The Egg. What is the Egg?"

Is [surprise] the Egg. Cloakmaster [suspicion-doubt] not know of Egg? All nonanimals must know of Egg....

Doubt and emerging distrust were emanating from the trilateral in waves. "Maybe we call it something different,"

Teldin said hurriedly. "Tell me about the Egg, and I'll tell you what we call it."

Message Bearer seemed to think about that for a few moments. Then its mental voice continued, *Egg is [reverence-awe] the Egg. All life came from Egg, [wonder] everything came from Egg. Egg hatched, and [certainty] everything then was.*

"The Broken Sphere..." Teldin murmured under his breath.

This Broken Sphere [anticipation] Cloakmaster's name for Egg?

"Yes," Teldin answered. "So the Juna—the Others—came from the Broken Sphere?"

So this one [certainty] has said, Message Bearer confirmed.

Teldin felt excitement flare in his chest. "And where is the Broken Sphere?" he asked breathlessly.

At the center [certainty-awe] of all things.

"And where's that?"

At the center, is all.

"Where is the center?"

[puzzlement] At the center, between the pearl clusters. Beyond the suns.

Teldin sighed in disappointment. He shouldn't have expected anything else, he told himself. After all, what did he think Message Bearer was going to do, pull out a star-chart and give him precise coordinates? These were racial myths that the creature was reciting to him, using terms and concepts that the People could understand. He shouldn't have expected a meaningful answer, and he shouldn't be disappointed. But he had, and he was.

"Do you know anything about the *Spelljammer!*" he asked. "A great ship the size of a world?"

To his amazement, he felt a wave of comprehension from the trilateral. *The Spelljammer [surprise] is what Cloakmaster calls the Wanderer?* Message Bearer asked. *Memory of the People [reverence] knows the Wanderer [awe].*

"Did the Others build the *Spell...* the Wanderer?"

What build [shock]? Message Bearer spun again to scrutinize Teldin with its third eye. *No build,*

[outrage] Wanderer is. Wanderer and Others [reverence] together traveled from hatched Egg. Others to World of the People came, Wanderer [awe] throughout creation traveled then, [certainty] travels now.

Teldin sighed again. Once more he realized he was listening to myths, which might or might not have any connection to the truth. Even though he knew it was hopeless, he asked, "Do you know where the Wanderer is now?"

Wanderer is [certainty] where Wanderer is.

Well, that was predictable, wasn't it? Teldin thought with a wry grin. "Does the Wanderer ever come here?"

Beyond the suns [surprise]? Any thing beyond the suns [certainly] driven away, or destroyed. Mind of the World [reverence] makes it so.

That was the third time Message Bearer had mentioned the "Mind of the World," Teldin realized. Just what was it? A magical "watchdog" left behind by the Juna, perhaps? The artifact or group of artifacts that controlled the magical forces that had attacked the *Boundless*? Teldin had concluded that the People definitely weren't behind the attacks on the ship.

"Where is the Mind of the World?" he asked.

Where [confusion]? Message Bearer echoed. Everywhere is where [puzzlement]. All of world that is not People is Mind of the World. World of Cloakmaster has [skepticism] no mind?

Teldin paused. Communication gap, he told himself. I'm surprised we've avoided it this long. "Where is the Mind of the World?" he asked again. "I wish to see it."

Look around [certainty], was the only answer.

He stroked his beard, thinking. "What is the Mind of the World made of?" he asked, deciding to try a different tack.

Everything [certainty-reverence], Message Bearer responded at once. *Everything but People.* The creature raised a tentacle, used several delicate tendrils to simultaneously indicate different objects around the clearing, *[pleasure-acceptance] Ground is of Mind, tree of Mind, fly-flutter of Mind, fruit of Mind. Mind of the World is everything [certainty-wonder], everything is of Mind.*

The Cloakmaster stared at the dull-eyed trilateral with dawning comprehension. Is it saying...? But, no, that's impossible, isn't it? "Are you saying," he said slowly, "that everything alive on this planet is part of the Mind?"

Everything [certainty] alive, Message Bearer confirmed flatly. *Ground alive, trees alive, animals alive. All [reverence] part of Mind.*

It couldn't be much clearer than that, could it? Teldin asked himself. Everything around me, all part of some great, single consciousness? It sounded impossible...

But, then, hadn't traveling beyond the moons, away from Krynn—so unimaginably far away—sounded impossible not so very long ago? And it wasn't as if he'd never heard the concept discussed before. In The Philosophers' Rest on Star-fall, he recalled, that had been one of the theories that a handful of elven metaphysicians were arguing over in an alcoholic fog: the possibility that an entire world could somehow become alive, merge into one single, planetary intelligence. At the time he'd dismissed the idea as foolish, as meaningless as the old argument over how many spirits could dance on the point of a sword. Now, however,...

He looked around him again, this time trying to reach out with the extended awareness that the cloak somehow gave him. For an instant, he thought he detected a pervasive sense of awareness, coupled with an echo of the strange feeling of belonging he'd experienced while walking through the forest. Then it was gone without a trace, so suddenly that he couldn't be sure whether he'd really felt it, or whether his mind was playing tricks on him. Search for something hard enough, and you'll find it, he reminded himself, whether it's there or not.

He looked back at the trilateral. "Are the People of the Mind?" he asked quietly.

The People [sadness-acceptance] not of the Mind of the World, Message Bearer replied. *Others [reverence] started Mind to protect the People. People not of Mind [loneliness], People free to follow destiny alone. Mind of the World protect People, Mind [serenity] cherish People.*

Things are starting to make a little more sense now, Teldin told himself. He remembered how the little ratlike creature had brought the fruit to Message Bearer. The trilateral hadn't had to issue any kind of mental order—the Cloakmaster would have "heard" it if it had. Instead, the trilateral had presumably felt hunger, or maybe just a desire for a fruit. The planetary Mind had somehow sensed that need or desire and had sent part of it forth—in the form of the rat-thing—to satisfy it.

Did it go even further than that? Had the rat-thing picked the fruit, or had the plant—being part of the world-Mind itself—just let the fruit fall? The possibilities were almost endless...

And quite frightening. A human was more intelligent than a rat, largely because a human had a larger brain. A dragon was—arguably—more intelligent than a human, again because it had a larger brain.

What about a brain the size of an entire planet... ? Teldin felt his fear like ice water in the marrow of his bones. "Do you... communicate with the Mind?" he asked. "Do you 'think-together' with it?"

The incessant motions of Message Bearer's tentacle tips slowed. Teldin could feel the creature's sadness like a palpable pressure against the fringes of his mind. *Mind of the World [loneliness-melancholy] not think-together, it "said" softly. People try often [sadness], never succeed. Mind of the World not made [isolation] for think-together with People, Mind cherishes People, Mind protects People. But not [despair] think-together.*

"Protects? "Protects how?" the Cloakmaster asked, suddenly sure he knew the answer. "Through magic"

People [puzzlement] not know magic.

"By lights in the sky, by lightning strikes from the ground... ?"

By [undemanding] making the suns move, yes, Message Bearer's mental voice cut him off. This [curious] magic?

"It must be," Teldin confirmed.

Message Bearer's pupil tightened down to three fine, intersecting black lines. The sense of scrutiny, of speculation was undeniable. *This magic [doubt], the reason [suspicion] why Cloakmaster to World of People come?*

"If you're asking what I think you're asking, yes," the Cloakmaster told the creature. "Your Mind of the World almost destroyed my ship, almost killed my friends."

The trilateral didn't respond immediately. When it did, its mental voice was slow. *Mind of World [doubt] protects People from harm. Not [sadness] cause harm to not-People not-Others not-animals [regret]. Wrong [decision] is.*

I get the feeling that was an apology, Teldin mused wryly. Then another thought struck him.

"Do the People regret the harm that was done to me and my ship?" he asked.

The answer was as immediate as it was unequivocal. *Regret, yes.*

"Then," the Cloakmaster pressed, "if the Mind of the World really responds to your desires, I think you can help us out...."

Teldin stood beside the smashed hull of the *Boundless*, flanked by Message Bearer and Speaks First. After leading them back to the clearing, he'd steered them on a stem-to-stern tour of the crippled vessel, pointing out the critical damage inflicted by the magical blasts from the surface. As other members of the crew looked on, gaping openly, he'd shown the trilateral the fractures in the keel, stressing repeatedly that the damage prevented the ship from ever lifting back into space.

Throughout, he'd sensed their emotional reactions, "eavesdropped" on their conversation between themselves. While they'd been puzzled at first by the ship's design, they soon came to understand its purpose and basic structure. He could easily detect their surprise and dismay over the fact that the Mind of the World, in protecting and "cherishing" them, could mete out destruction to "not-People not-Others not-animals" such as Teldin Moore.

At last he finished his explanations. He gestured around to the crew lining the deck rails—including Djan and Julia, both of whom quite obviously wanted to know just what was going on. They can wait

until this is over with, he decided. "That's the situation we find ourselves in," he concluded. "The Mind of the World did this. Can the Mind of the World *undo* it? It's up to you, I think." And then he stepped back, reaching out with whatever extended perception the cloak saw fit to grant him at the moment.

If he'd been hoping to be able to detect a moment of decision, to sense the interaction between the two trilateral and the planetary mind, he was disappointed. He sensed nothing.

For a long moment, he thought nothing was happening. But then, in his peripheral vision, he saw movement.

From this spot, on the soft "grass" of the meadow, he could see through the great rent in the squid ship's hull, into the bilges. The light from the speeding mini-suns shone down through the open cargo hatch, then through the hole blown in the cargo deck itself, illuminating the smashed keel. In the yellow-orange light Teldin saw the wood of the keel shift—saw it flex slightly, watched as the individual wood fibers interwove with one another, knitting themselves back together.

He felt the almost uncontrollable urge to recoil from the sight, to deny it, to refuse to accept that such things were possible. But with a titanic effort of will, he forced himself to watch the process through to its conclusion.

It didn't take long. Within three or four minutes, Teldin found he couldn't tell anymore where the breaks had been. Under even the closest scrutiny, the thick keel looked like one solid piece of wood again. He reached in through the hull breach, ran his hand over the smooth wood. Under his fingers, the only evidence of the damage was that certain regions were slightly warmer than others.

Major damage [satisfaction] undone. Ship [expectation] function with other damage?

Teldin turned to face the two trilateral. It was Speaks First who'd "spoken." He glanced up at Djan, at the rail above. "It wants to know if we can fly with the other damage," he relayed.

The half-elf shrugged dispiritedly. He hadn't seen the miracle in the bilges, Teldin reminded himself. "The only thing that matters is the keel," Djan replied. "We can fix everything else while we're underway, but without that keel..."

"Be careful what you ask for. You might just get it," Teldin said with a quick grin. Djan stared at him for a few moments as though the half-elf thought the captain had lost his mind. Then the first mate's eyes widened with surprise, and he disappeared. Teldin heard his friend's running footsteps thundering down the ladder into the cargo deck. With a smile, he turned back to the trilaterals.

"The other damage doesn't matter," he told Speaks First. "Thank you for our keel."

The creature waved its tentacles—dismissively, the Cloak-master thought. *Then Cloakmaster [certainty]should from [impatience] World of the People*, it "said" firmly. *World of the People [decision] not for the Cloakmaster, Mind of the World [detachment] not for the Cloakmaster.* And with that, the two creatures strode away for the edge of the forest.

"What was all that about?" Julia called down to him.

The Cloakmaster shrugged. "I think we've just been dismissed."

From within the hull, he heard Djan's yell of astonishment and joy as the half-elf saw the mended keel.

Teldin stood on the afterdeck of the *Boundless*. Julia and Djan were still leaning on the rails of the grounded ship, staring at the periphery of the meadow. Since the departure of Speaks First and Message Bearer, nobody had seen any sign of the trilaterals. It's almost as if they've decided the "Incomplete animals" are off-limits, the Cloakmaster mused. Certainly, the creatures seemed to have no curiosity about Teldin and the others, or what they'd do now that the ship's keel was fixed. That, perhaps, was the most alien thing about them, he mused. Virtually every other race he'd ever encountered had some touch of what his grandfather had called "monkey curiosity."

"A mending spell," Djan breathed for the dozenth time, amazement still sounding in his voice. "A mending spell, that's all it was that fixed the keel. Rudimentary magic, the kind of thing any wizard's apprentice learns in his first year of training. But the *scale*, a whole ship's keel..." He shook his head. "If we could find some way to harness this Mind—"

"No," he cut himself off sharply. "Forget I said that. I don't want anything to do with those... those *things*, and the sooner we're back in space, the better."

Teldin turned, surprised at his friend's vehemence. Although he, too, wanted to get clear of Nex—and intended to, as soon as the crew had the ship spaceworthy again—he didn't have any particular negative feelings toward the trilaterals. "Why's that?" he asked.

"It's this whole 'Mind of the World' thing," Djan replied. He shrugged apologetically, visibly forcing himself to calm down. "This whole business of the world-mind cherishing and protecting the People. It scares me."

Julia had turned to regard the half-elf as well. "What's wrong with it?" she asked. She grinned. "I wouldn't mind a little cherishing from time to time."

"But what does that cherishing *mean*?" Djan asked. "Doesn't it mean that the People get their every need met? Maybe even before they realize they've got a need. Remember what Teldin said about that rat creature bringing Message Bearer a fruit?"

Teldin nodded slowly. He thought he knew where the half-elf was going with this.

Julia obviously hadn't guessed yet, however. "So what's wrong with that?" she repeated blankly.

"It's stagnation," Djan answered, his voice cold. "That's what's wrong with it. The People are living in this..."—he struggled for words—"this terrestrial paradise. The Mind protects them from anything that might threaten them. The Mind gives them food whenever they need it, probably gives them warmth. Maybe reassurance, too, I don't know."

"So what's left for them to strive for?" he demanded. "What goals are they pursuing? Name me one thing they need and want that's just a little bit out of their reach, that they have to struggle to achieve. There's nothing, is there?"

Neither Teldin nor Julia had an answer for him.

"And that's stagnation," Djan concluded more quietly. "They're not progressing, they're not advancing. They're just there." He turned to the Cloakmaster. "Teldin, you think they evolved from some species—the equivalent of a monkey, perhaps—the Juna left behind, don't you?"

Teldin nodded wordlessly.

"So they evolved, the People," the half-elf went on. "They evolved to the point where the Mind of the World decided that they were no longer animals, that they were different from the rat-things, and the birds, and who knows what else. That's when the Mind started to 'cherish' them."

"And at that moment, evolution stopped." Djan sighed. "If we could travel a thousand years into the past, I'm convinced we'd find the People living exactly the same way. And a thousand years into the future, the same thing: nothing would be changed."

"If the People ever had a destiny as a race," he said, his voice little more than a whisper, "I think the Mind has made sure they'll never reach it. All from the highest of motives, of course." He looked steadily at Teldin, then Julia. "And *that's* what bothers me."

Teldin watched the mini-suns crisscrossing the sky overhead and felt the fear in his chest. One of those things almost got us once, he thought, and that was on the way down, when we could use the planet's gravity to give us more speed. Can we evade them on the way up?

He knew his tension was shared by the rest of the crew; he could feel it in the air around him like the sense of waiting before a thunderstorm breaks. But they weren't talking about it—not in his hearing, anyway—and it didn't seem to be interfering with their work as they readied the ship for space. Maybe the fear's a good thing, the Cloakmaster mused. If it makes somebody jump just that bit faster, it might help keep us alive.

He abandoned his scrutiny of the sky as he heard Djan join him on the sterncastle. "Are we ready?" he asked.

The first mate nodded. "She's as ready as she'll ever be," he announced, patting the *Boundless's* rail.

"The keel?"

Djan spread his hands. "As good as new, as far as I can tell. Better, even. I don't think we've got anything to worry about on that score."

Teldin saw his friend shoot a quick glance at the speeding mini-suns. "I've been thinking about that," he admitted. "And I think we're reasonably safe. The world-mind tried to destroy us in case our arrival turned out to be a threat to the People, right? Well, what threat could our departure be? You'd think the Mind would be glad to see the last of us."

That's what *you* think and what *I* think," the half-elf said darkly. "But what does *it* think? That's what matters." He paused. "How fast can you take us out of here?"

"Fast," Teldin replied simply.

"Then I think you should do it."

The Cloakmaster nodded. It made sense. "Let's get underway," he suggested.

As Djan hurried about the ship, making sure all crew members were at their stations and ready for what might be a rough ride, Teldin breathed deeply and let himself relax. His breathing slowed, and he could feel the cloak's presence. Gently he let his awareness expand to encompass the whole ship.

He could feel the *Boundless* wounds, the breaches in the hull that they'd repair only once they were underway. The damage was serious, but he was confident that it wasn't ship-killing. What really mattered was the keel.

As his awareness touched it and spread throughout it, he felt the heavy keel tingling with the remnants of the powerful magic that had repaired it. Djan was right, he sensed, the keel was as good as new, as strong as it had been when the squid ship had first been built. He felt his anxiety lessen another notch.

Blossom was on the ship's main helm; he could feel her presence, her expanded perception overlapping his. Her duty throughout the departure was to keep a lookout around the vessel, to watch for any mini-suns that seemed to be taking an interest in them, and to spot any magical manifestations on the planet's surface. She was *not* to exert any control over the ship itself, though—Teldin had been adamant about that—unless she knew for a fact that the Cloakmaster had somehow been incapacitated. The risk of conflicting "orders" slowing the ship down at a crucial point was too great otherwise.

Julia swung up the ladder to the afterdeck, carrying her sextant. She flashed him a quick smile as she set up the instrument, steadying it on the stern rail. "Just taking some final readings," she explained.

He nodded wordlessly. The positions and movements of the mini-suns weren't going to be so crucial during the ascent—that's what he'd told himself, at least. On the approach to the planet, the plan had been to keep the ship's speed relatively low as it passed through the region of the fire bodies, to minimize the danger of plunging into the atmosphere at a velocity high enough to destroy the ship—not that that plan had worked all too well anyway, he thought wryly.

That constraint wasn't important now. Teldin figured he could lift the ship as fast as the cloak would let him, confident that the air resistance would only decrease with altitude, until the *Boundless* emerged into the vacuum of wildspace. By the time the vessel was at an altitude at which the mini-suns could conceivably threaten it, it would be traveling so fast that nothing could keep pace with it.

"Ready," Julia announced, setting her sextant aside. "We've got a window directly overhead."

Teldin nodded wordlessly. Tension still gripped his chest and throat, but as always he found his communion with the cloak kept the stress tolerable, almost as if it were affecting someone else. He looked forward to where Djan stood on the foredeck. The first mate waved and gave him a thumbs-up gesture.

It was time to go. Teldin felt the power of the cloak grow around him, flow *through* him. Light flared, a nimbus of bright pink that seemed to shine right through his bones. He felt the ship around him like an extension of his body, an extension of his will. As responsive as thought itself, the large squid ship lifted clear of the ground.

Teldin held the vessel at an altitude of fifty feet or so over the meadow, as he repeated his mental "inspection." Now that it was airborne, the stresses on the ship's hull and keel were slightly different. The staved-in planking of the hull had shifted slightly—nothing critical, he decided—but the keel felt as solid as a rock. Gently at first, he put the ship into a climb, feeling out its maneuverability, ready to respond instantly to any instability or other hint of problems. With his wraparound awareness, he saw the verdant forest drop away below him.

The ship was steady, responding instantly to his mental commands. He let the speed build up slowly,

as he simultaneously brought up the bow. Again the torn planking of the hull complained, but again he judged it to be nothing dire. Ever more confident with the ship's solidity, he pushed the *Boundless* to the maximum speed he felt was safe within the atmosphere. Rigging creaked and sang in the wind that penetrated the vessel's air envelope, an audible counterpoint to the tension that still gripped his heart. He brought the bow up even farther. The contrast between what his sense of balance and what his eyes told him became profound. While he felt as though he were standing upright on a horizontal surface, the horizon of the planet was canted at an angle of sixty degrees or more as the squid ship hurtled toward the freedom of space.

Julia was back at the sextant, tracking the mini-suns once more. "No change," she announced quietly. "The window's still open."

Teldin nodded. He could feel the resistance of Nex's atmosphere lessening, and he added a touch more speed. The ship was now flying faster than a dragon, faster than a swooping eagle. Soon, he knew, it would be traveling unimaginably faster still.

Below the ship, the surface of the world was changing from the landscape of a map to a sphere. From this altitude, he could easily see the curvature of the horizon.

Without warning, the keening of the wind through the rigging died. They were clear of the planet's atmosphere, Teldin knew. The only air around them was that which the ship carried along with it, and that was traveling at the same speed as the vessel itself. In other words, there was no more air resistance. He extended his will, through the cloak, and the *Boundless* leaped forward.

"Coming up on the mini-suns," Julia said.

"Any change?" he asked.

She shook her head, her copper hair gleaming in the ruddy light of the fire bodies. "They're all still on course."

"Let them stay that way," he muttered.

The passage through the region of the mini-suns turned out to be purest anticlimax. At the ultimate helm's full spelljamming speed, the squid ship flashed through the danger zone and out into the emptiness of wildspace. If the Mind of the World had even noticed their departure, it hadn't shown the slightest sign. According to Julia's readings, no mini-sun had diverged even a fraction of a degree from its normal course.

For the first time since the *Boundless* had lifted from the planet, Teldin let himself relax. "Please tell Blossom that she has the helm," he said quietly to Julia, and he heard her relay the message down the speaking tube. Only when he felt the priest extend her will did he let the power of the cloak fade from around him. The ship immediately slowed to normal spelljamming speed from the velocity imparted by the ultimate helm.

"Blossom wants to know what course to set," Julia announced.

The Cloakmaster was silent for a few moments. Then, "Tell her to take us out the way we came in," he decided, "That'll do for the moment. I need to talk some things over with you and Djan."

Teldin stared fixedly out of the *Boundless's* starboard "eye" port, as if looking for an answer to his questions in the unrelieved blackness of wildspace. Behind him he heard Djan shift uncomfortably in his chair.

"You don't know where to go next," the half-elf said quietly, "is that it?"

The Cloakmaster nodded wordlessly.

"The People didn't know where the Juna disappeared to?" Julia asked.

"No," Teldin replied. "Message Bearer said they're just gone."

"But they did mention the Broken Sphere," Djan reminded him.

"Yes," Teldin agreed, "but they didn't say anything meaningful about where it is. Just that it's 'at the center of all things,' and 'between the pearl clusters' or something. Does that mean anything to either of you?" He turned his back on the porthole to look at his friends.

Djan shook his head. "That sounds like myths I've heard in the past," he said, "about the First Sphere, the Cosmic Egg."

The Cloakmaster nodded. "Me, too," he agreed, remembering what he'd read in the Great Archive on Crescent.

"There was nothing new?" the first mate asked.

"Only that the People link the *Spelljammer* with the Broken Sphere," Teldin said, "and with the Juna. But I've heard both those connections before."

"And it doesn't help anyway," Djan concluded. "People have been looking for the First Sphere for a long time and they've never found it. What are the odds that we'd be the first?"

Teldin glanced over at Julia, saw the pensive expression on her face. "What is it?" he asked. "Did you think of something?"

She looked up, a little surprised to be jolted out of her reverie. "Probably not," she said slowly, "it's probably nothing..." She smiled self-deprecatingly. "But... you said something about 'pearl clusters,' didn't you?" The Cloak-master nodded. "Well, from the Flow, crystal spheres often look like pearls, don't they?"

"So?" Teldin wanted to know.

"So, what if there's somewhere in the universe where the crystal spheres are very close together?" she suggested. "Where they look like clusters of pearls? Maybe that's where you'll find the Broken Sphere."

A half-forgotten memory tugged at Teldin's consciousness. What was it... ?

Then it came back to him. It was an image he'd seen through the perceptions of the *Spelljammer* via the amulet, while he was cruising in the *Ship of Fools* to the world of Crescent. An image of half a dozen crystal spheres so tightly packed that some were separated by less than the diameter of a single sphere—gathered together against the backdrop of the Flow like a cluster of gargantuan, magical pearls....

Excitement washed over him like a wave. Breathlessly, he described the image to his friends. "Is there any place like that on the charts?" he asked.

His excitement turned into depression again as he saw them both shake their heads. "Not on any charts I've seen," Djan answered for both of them. "Maybe it's on some specialized chart somewhere, but most of the charts you can buy show only the important 'known' spheres, the ones that are on standard trade routes." He laid a hand on the Cloak-master's shoulder in commiseration. "I'm sorry. I wish I could tell you different."

Teldin looked at his friends with empty eyes. "Then I've got nowhere to go," he said quietly.

Chapter Nine

Teldin felt drained, physically exhausted. He slumped into a chair and lowered his head into his hands.

What now? he asked himself. Where do I turn? What do I do?

This was the first time he really had no clues, no leads to follow. Since that first night, the night the spelljammer had smashed his farmhouse and set his life on a new course, he'd always had some goal to pursue. At first it had simply been escape. Then it was the gnomish port within Mount Nevermind. Then the arcane on Toril, followed by the elves of Evermeet, the fall of HerdSPACE, and on and on, until finally it was the forbidden world of Nex. There'd always been something to go after next, something to keep him going...

Until now. The Juna were gone from the universe, or might as well be, for all the chance Teldin had of ever finding them. The Broken Sphere was... somewhere in the infinite universe, but he had no usable clues to lead him toward it.

So what was he to do now? *What?* What course was he to instruct the helmsman to set?

Where was the Cloakmaster to go now?

It was a terrifying, overwhelming sensation, this aimlessness. For so long, he'd been following a path. It had been a twisting, cryptic one, granted, and often one that he had lit-

He desire to follow, but now there was nothing. He felt as if he'd been set adrift on the trackless ocean, given no map and no instruments, no way of charting a course.

Since the beginning of his quest, he'd been wishing for freedom. Wasn't that what he had now? And, if so, why was it so traumatic?

But this isn't freedom, is it? he asked himself. The cloak still exists; I still wear it. And the enemies who've been after me from the outset are still out there, searching for me. No matter what I do to hide myself, they'll eventually find me.

That was the difference, he decided; that was where much of the anxiety came from. Before, the fact that he was being hunted had been almost secondary. He was being active. Now he had no choice but be reactive, responding to the actions of others.

No. He felt some deep, basic part of himself rebel, strive against the depression that weighed him down. No, he thought again, I still have options. I'm still the master of my own destiny. So I've met an obstacle; I've met obstacles before, and I've never let them stop me. What's so over-whelming about this one?

He had the *Boundless*, which represented freedom to move. He had the amulet, which gave him access to the *Spelljammer's* perceptions. He had friends and allies around him. He had options. His major obstacle, he decided, was an unwillingness to explore those options.

Take the amulet, for example. As a matter of course, throughout the voyage, he'd been using the artifact, hoping to sense something that he recognized through the *Spelljammer's* strange perceptions, something that would give him a clue about the *Spelljammer's* location. So far he hadn't seen anything useful, but there was always the next time, wasn't there, and then the time after that? Eventually he'd have to see something that would give him some guidance.

Why not now, for instance?

He raised his head and looked at his two friends. Neither had moved. Both were watching him, their expressions showing how they empathized with his pain, but they respected his privacy too much to interfere.

I have friends, he reminded himself again. And that was the most empowering thought of all. He felt new energy flow through him, felt a broad smile spread across his face. As he watched, his friends echoed that smile—a little more tentatively—though they couldn't have known what was going through his mind.

"I'm trying the amulet again," he told them. He reached down to his belt pouch and extracted the bronze disk. The smooth metal felt heavy in his hands. Pregnant with possibilities? he wondered. He ran his thumb over the smooth surface, felt it slightly warm—from its proximity to his body heat, or for some other reason?

Djan stirred in his chair. "Do you want privacy for that?" he asked quietly.

Teldin considered for a moment, then shook his head. "It's not what you'd call an exciting show," he said with a grin, "but, if you don't mind, I think I'd like the company."

He pulled his chair closer to the table and rested his forearms on the flat surface, with the amulet cupped in both hands. He stared at it intently, as though trying to memorize its texture, its color, its every feature. Simultaneously, he slowed and deepened his breathing, feeling the tension drain out of his shoulders and neck. In their own good time, he let his eyes shut. A tingling up and down his spine told him that the cloak was glowing with a bright bronze light. He felt a shift—there was no other way to describe it—inside his brain. And then his awareness seemed to blossom painlessly out through the top of his head and into the blackness of space.

Fire!

Fire everywhere, filling his entire perception. Surrounding the entire Spelljammer with liquid flames. Surreal flashes and bursts of yellow, green, even lightning-blue, against the red background.

Yet the fire wasn't licking at the Spelljammer, it wasn't consuming it, or even heating the structure of the great ship. An ovoid bubble of clear, fire-free air surrounded the vessel, in much the same way as a normal ship's atmosphere envelope excluded most of the phlogiston when in the Flow. Is it flying through a sun? the Cloakmaster asked himself.

For the briefest of instants—so fleeting that it could easily have been an illusion—Teldin felt a flash of pleasure, aesthetic pleasure from the massive vessel, as though it sensed and appreciated the beauty of this sea of fire, Teldin thought. But that didn't make sense, did it?

And then, with shocking suddenness, the fire was gone from around the Spelljammer. Space was black and star-specked once more...

Except dead astern. The fire was still there, a seemingly endless plane of silent yellow-red flames churning and writhing. And then, rising above the flame plane like the sun over Krynn's Great Ocean, he saw a massive disk, glowing the dull red of a dying ember....

For a few moments, Teldin was totally disoriented. Then he realized just what it was he was seeing.

The brick-red disk was a massive fire body, like a great, bloated sun. Even though there was nothing to give it scale, he knew—thanks to the strange perception bestowed by the amulet—that the fire world was titanic, as many times larger than the world of Krynn as the Spelljammer was larger than the Boundless. The "endless plane of flames," he saw now, was a broad ring of yellow fire that girdled the huge world around its equator. So broad was the ring that a spelljamming vessel would have taken perhaps a quarter of an hour to traverse it, and the ring itself was probably a full hour of fullspeed flight from the "surface" of the fire body. The Spelljammer, it seemed, had plunged right through that ring of fire.

The scene was spectacular—one that couldn't exist twice in the universe, Teldin told himself. Maybe this was the opportunity he'd been waiting for, when the Spelljammer was near a recognizable world. He "looked" around, seeking more distinguishing features to eliminate the chance of error.

There was something: a dark, circular area on the face of the great fire world, covering an appreciable fraction of the visible disk. A weather pattern in the fire? he wondered.

And something else, shapes moving among the yellow flames of the fire ring. Great, angular shapes—winged forms like strange spelljamming ships built along unfamiliar configurations. Yet how could ships exist in the fire ring? he wondered. The Spelljammer had done it, but now he knew that it was only some magical attribute of the mysterious ship that had let it survive unscathed....

The view changed again. A small, bright disk—little more than a point—of burning, blue-white light rose above one limb of the dark red world. Sunrise on a sun...

Without warning, the strange vista collapsed in upon itself. There was a wrenching sense of discontinuity, then information from Teldin's normal senses flooded back into his mind.

He opened his eyes and looked into the concerned faces of his two friends. Setting the amulet down on the table, he wiped pinpoints of cold sweat from his brow. His fingers were trembling, he realized, and his heart pounded as if he'd run a footrace.

Why? he asked himself. Why did using the amulet sometimes take so much more out of him than others? Was it something to do with distance—and did that then mean the *Spelljammer* was a great distance away?—or was it something else? There was so much about the amulet, and its relationship with the *Spelljammer* and the ultimate helm, at he didn't understand.

"Well?" Julia asked. "Anything?"

"I think so." Teldin's voice sounded tired in his own ears. from the solicitude that showed in his friends' expressions, he guessed he looked as bad as he sounded... if not worse. "Maybe something important." He went on to de-scribe what he'd seen in as much detail as he could. "I can't imagine that there could be more than one place like that in the universe," he concluded dryly.

"I think you're right," Djan said. His voice was quiet, but held a timbre of tightly controlled excitement. "A fire world a half day's flight in diameter, with a fire ring," he went on, ticking points off on his fingers. "A dark spot—maybe some kind of weather pattern, you think. And all orbiting a smaller, blue-white sun. I think it has to be Garrash."

"Garrash," Teldin echoed. "You've been there?"

"I didn't say that," the half-elf corrected. "I read about it once in the *Geonomicon*—that's a book describing almost a hundred of the more fascinating worlds ever discovered— but your description definitely matches what I remember."

"Where is Garrash?" Teldin demanded. "Near here? Far?"

"I don't remember," Djan admitted, shaking his head.

Julia stood. "I'll bring a chart," she said, heading aft.

She was back quickly. With Djan helping, she spread it but on the table and pored over it for a minute. Teldin felt impatience growing within him, but he knew better than to hurry the copper-haired woman.

Finally she straightened up. "Garrash is in a crystal sphere called Vistaspace," she said, "over here." She tapped a dark circle near one side of the chart.

"And where's Nex?" Teldin asked.

"It's not shown on the chart, of course," she answered slowly, "but it's over here." She laid a finger on a region of the chart near the opposite edge.

Teldin felt his face fall. "How far's that?" he asked, dreading the answer.

"Far." It was Djan who'd replied. He craned over the table for a better look. "We can pick up a couple of phlogiston , rivers—to Pathspace, for example, and from there to Prime-space. That'll save a lot of time over the direct route..." His voice trailed off.

"But... ?" the Cloakmaster prompted.

Djan looked up, meeting Teldin's gaze steadily. "But," he continued, "we're still talking about a total voyage of... "— he glanced questioningly at Julia, as if to confirm what he was about to say—"of thirty days, maybe thirty-five?" Julia nodded slowly in agreement.

"And that doesn't include moving around within Vista-space once we're there," the half-elf added. "The chart says it's a big sphere. We don't know how Garrash's orbital plane is aligned, or where the planet's going to be in relation to where we enter the crystal sphere. But actually getting to the planet's going to add another... well, call it thirty days to be safe. Total voyage time..."

"Sixty days or more," Teldin finished for him. His excitement over Djan's recognition of what he'd seen was gone, and depression threatened to wash over him again. "Two months. It's unlikely that the *Spelljammer's* going to be there in two months."

"I know." Djan laid a hand on the Cloakmaster's shoulder, gripped hard, "I understand. It's a slim chance, I suppose... "But a slim chance is better than none," Teldin elaborated, "that's what you're saying."

"Isn't it?" Julia asked quietly.

The Cloakmaster was silent for a few moments, lost in his own thoughts. Then he nodded. "Yes," he said. Then, again, more firmly, "Yes, it is." He turned to Djan and drew himself up to his full height. "First mate, pass word to the helmsman and navigator. Set course for Vistaspace and Garrash."

The half-elf snapped into a salute. "Aye, Captain."

One advantage of the long voyage was that the crew of the *Boundless Possibilities* had plenty of time to conduct the repairs the ship desperately needed. In an example of the foresight that Teldin had come to expect of his first mate, before the ship had lifted from Crescent, Djan had loaded much of the cargo hold with planking of the same kiln-dried hardwood that made up the squid ship's hull. Now, with two months of sailing ahead of them, the crew was kept busy—and out of trouble, Djan had pointed out—nailing the planking into place to repair the hull breaches caused by the magical attack and the crash-landing on Nex.

During the first couple of days in the Flow, the half-elf had gone over the ship from stem to stern, listing all the areas that needed attention. Although the crew members had groaned almost as one when

they'd initially seen the first mate's task list posted in the mess, they now seemed designed to the work. In fact, Teldin mused, they seemed to relish it in a way. He thought he could understand why, he decided after some reflection. Probably the greatest danger to a crewman on a protracted voyage was boredom. With nothing to do but think, there was a real danger he'd drive himself to distraction.

And that, Teldin told himself firmly, is just what I'm doing. As captain, there was basically nothing for him to do, nothing but think.

Oh, he could talk to members of the crew. Beth-Abz's stores of life in a beholder tyrant ship were particularly fascinating—terrifying, in fact—giving him an insight into the strange race of eye tyrants he'd never expected to gain. But everyone except he had duties to attend to, and Teldin knew enough to realize that he couldn't expect his crew to neglect those duties just so that they could keep their captain company.

Even Djan and Julia had their tasks—mainly supervisory, monitoring the crew's repair work, but nonetheless vital for that. They both seemed to sense their friend's growing ennui, his discomfort, and they did what they could to help lessen it. When they'd finished their duties for the day, they'd often join Teldin in his cabin for a glass of sage-coarse—the Cloakmaster was drinking a fair bit of that again—and conversation. But they'd always tire before he did, worn out by their work about the ship. He'd see them start yawning, struggling to keep their eyes open. And then he'd "release" them, let them hit their bunks for some much-needed sleep.

And then he'd be alone again in his cabin, just him and the sagecoarse.

Like I am now, he told himself, twenty days into the voyage, with another forty-some to go. At the moment, it seemed like an eternity.

He'd pulled one of his cabin's chairs over to the starboard porthole, giving himself a panoramic view of the Flow surrounding the ship. A half-empty glass of sagecoarse sat on the corner of the table, within easy reach. Julia and Djan had just left, heading for their bunks. It was just after one bell in the night watch—past midnight, according to the groundling clock Teldin still preferred—but he wasn't ready for sleep yet. His thoughts were churning as though they had lives of their own. No matter how hard he tried to relax, he couldn't still them, or even ignore them. Even worse, he'd reached the point where his attempts to relax—and his anxiety over his failure—were actually fueling the tension he was trying to combat. A vicious circle, he told himself.

It would be different if Julia were still sharing his bunk, he thought, a little sadly. They'd slept together the first couple of nights after leaving Nex, and that had dissipated most of the Cloakmaster's stress.

Well, that wasn't exactly true. He forced himself to be honest. What had actually happened had been that Julia had taken on his stress as her own. His edginess had spread to her. While he'd been able to sleep, he'd known from her drawn, haggard appearance in the mornings that she hadn't. When he'd asked what was wrong, she'd been unwilling to tell him, apparently out of some mistaken belief that she could shelter him from some unpleasant reality. It had taken some direct questions to extract the truth.

He was talking in his sleep, she'd told him—incessantly carrying on conversations with friends and colleagues long dead, sometimes yelling out orders to avoid events that had already happened. Even though he couldn't remember them in the morning, she'd convinced him that his sleep was tormented by almost continuous nightmares.

She'd toughed it out for almost a week—never complaining, always trying to be there for Teldin when he needed someone to talk to, or just to sit silently with him. He'd watched the toll it was taking on her, however, and that added to his stress. It hadn't taken him long to realize—and admit to himself—that it wasn't working out, that instead of diminishing his stress, the situation was guaranteeing that they were both suffering from crippling tension. When he'd quietly suggested that they sleep apart again, the copper-haired woman had tried to conceal her relief, but Teldin had seen it clearly. Over the next few days, he'd watched her return to normal as her anxiety had receded.

During the time that Julia had been sharing his cabin, however, she'd helped him reach some important insights into the sources of his own tension. Destiny, he told himself, that's what it all comes down to. Whose destiny do I follow? My own, or the one forced upon me by the cloak?

Or are the two really different? Maybe my destiny is—and always has been—to be the

Cloakmaster, to captain the *Spelljammer*.

It was those questions that were constantly churning through his mind, keeping him on edge, not letting him sleep. He'd thought he'd come to terms with them some time back, in essence deciding not to decide—withholding decision on whether to assume captaincy of the great ship until he'd actually found it. It had made sense, that course of action; what good making a decision now, when he couldn't act on it—might never be able to act on it if he didn't manage to track down the vessel? He'd thought at the time that this tactic relieved him of much of his stress in the short term.

What it had actually done, he recognized now, was simply suppress it—drive it so deep into the recesses of his mind that he wasn't aware of it anymore. But it was still there. Julia had helped him recognize that. It bubbled to the surface in his dreams, keeping his body keyed up to a high pitch of fight-or-flight stress—incredibly self-destructive, since there was nothing that he could actually fight or flee from.

It's almost exactly like the situation Julia was in when we were both aboard the *Probe*, Teldin mused. He took another swallow of sagecoarse and felt its warmth—and its temporary, sham relaxation—spread throughout his body. Which destiny should she choose? Hers, or that of another? She chose hers, and that's why she left.

Can I make the same decision? he asked himself. Theoretically, yes. For the first time, perhaps, since he'd closed the cloak's clasp around his throat, he had the opportunity to be rid of it. The cloak was a magical item, after all, and didn't the beholder Beth-Abz's central eye emit a beam that suppressed magic? With the eye tyrant's help, he could finally remove the cloak. And what then? Just tossing it overboard would be easiest, letting it drift forever in the Flow. Or, if he decided to follow the long-dead reigar's injunction to keep it out of the claws of the neogi, he could destroy it—burn it on the afterdeck, perhaps, with Beth-Abz's antimagic ray to counteract any magical defenses the cloak might have.

And then I'd be free...

But could he actually do that? For practical reasons, probably not. Just because he'd gotten rid of the cloak wouldn't mean that his many enemies would believe he'd done so. If the foes who were tracking him found they could no longer scry on the location of the cloak, would they believe he'd destroyed it? Of course not. Consciously giving up such power would be against their nature, and of course they'd assume that Teldin viewed the universe the way they did. No, instead of concluding that Teldin had destroyed the cloak, they'd decide that he'd just found some way of suppressing its magical "signature." Further, they'd probably even intensify their attempts to find him, since wouldn't suppressing that signature hint that he'd increased his control over the cloak's many powers?

So, to be free, he'd have to not only destroy the cloak, but inform everyone else that he'd actually done so. And convince them, too, because if they figured there was even a chance he was dissembling, they'd continue to pursue him. How could he do that?

He couldn't, he concluded sadly. It was a paradoxical position in which he found himself. He needed the powers of the cloak to protect him against his many enemies. Destroying it wouldn't get those enemies off his trail, but it would leave him helpless against them.

I've got no choice, after all, have I?

He gulped back the last of the sagecoarse, relishing its fire in the back of his throat. For a moment he considered pouring himself another, but then set the glass aside. What he really needed was fresh air.

The *Boundless* was on a three-watch rotation, with every crew member on duty for eight hours out of twenty-four. That meant that one third of the crew was on duty at any given time. Even though there was no day or night in wild-space or in the Flow, most human and demihuman crews kept to a twelve-hour day-night orientation, however. During the forenoon and the afternoon watches, two thirds of the crew were usually up and about—one third on duty, the other off but awake. During the night watch, however, most of the off-duty crew was asleep. It didn't make much sense if you looked at it logically, Teldin thought, but he'd noticed it held true on every ship he'd been aboard. That made the night watch—particularly the "bottom" of the watch, after four bells—the quietest time aboard the squid ship.

The saloon was empty as Teldin headed aft, out onto the main deck. Then he climbed the ladder against the port rail, up to the foredeck. Dargeth, the half-orc, was working on the catapult, lubricating

the bearings with oil and checking the ropes and fiber skeins for rot or damage. He looked up as Teldin stepped onto the forecastle.

"Captain," the burly fellow said, pulling himself up to his full height. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Teldin couldn't help but smile. Even after weeks of serving aboard the *Boundless*, Dargeth still seemed as keen and eager to please as he'd been the day he first stepped aboard. "No, nothing," he answered, "just out for a stroll. Don't let me interrupt you." The half-orc relaxed visibly, but still obviously didn't feel comfortable turning his back on his captain to return to work. The Cloakmaster strolled over to the rail and stared out into the swirled colors of the Flow.

After a moment, he felt Dargeth's presence as the larger man joined him. "Did... did the captain come out for some fresh air?" he asked diffidently.

Teldin nodded. "Sometimes the captain would like to forget for a couple of minutes that he is the captain," he said wryly. He turned to regard the big half-orc. "Are you from Crescent, Dargeth?" he asked.

The man shook his head hurriedly. "No, not from Crescent," he stammered. "No, Captain, I was born in Baldur's Gate, on the Sword Coast of Toril."

"I've been to Toril," Teldin answered idly. "Twice. Once to Nimbral in the south, once to Evermeet."

"Nimbral?" Dargeth turned to stare at him. "The land of magic? Truly?"

Teldin chuckled. "Truly, it wasn't that wondrous." He sighed, it seemed like a fine world, Toril," he went on quietly, "what little I saw of it. Someday, maybe, I'd like to return."

"It is a fine world, Captain," Dargeth confirmed, "and the Sword Coast maybe finer than most parts."

"I'd like the opportunity to see it. Maybe settle down for a while."

"If the captain pleases," the half-orc said shyly, "maybe I could show you the sights. I'm not an expert, of course, not really, but I did live there for twenty years."

Teldin smiled. Dargeth's enthusiasm, his desire to be of help, was touching.

But then he felt his smile fade. Will I ever have the chance to take him up on his offer? he wondered sadly. I think I'd like that, to be just a tourist with a native guide. But what were the odds that either of them would ever make it back to Toril?

He sighed, pushed himself away from the rail. "If we both find ourselves on Toril, I'll take you up on that," he told the half-orc. "And, Dargeth,... thanks." He turned away. "I think it's time I hit my bunk."

He started down the ladder, but turned back when Dargeth called after him. "Captain, would it be possible for the second mate to help me with the catapult tomorrow?" he asked. "She was such a help to Allyn, the old gunner's mate, before we left Heartspace."

"I'll talk to her," the Cloakmaster promised. As he descended the ladder, he saw Dargeth return happily to his work. He smiled sadly, remembering the good, honest satisfaction of working with his hands, of a job well done. Will I ever have the chance to relive that? he wondered.

As he reached the main deck, a bloated, roughly spherical shape emerged from the companionway that led below. Beth-Abz's great central eye reflected the shifting light of the phlogiston, making the creature's form look even more surreal. With the faintest of clicking sounds, a handful of eyestalks pivoted around to inspect the Cloakmaster.

"Greetings, Teldin Moore," the creature said in its deep, swamp-bottom voice. "Do you seek solace in the void, as I do?"

The Cloakmaster looked at the eye tyrant curiously. He knew from the comments of other crew members that the beholder frequently could be found on deck during the night watch, its eyestalks pointing in half a dozen directions as though it wished to see absolutely everything that surrounded it. Teldin had often wondered why, but had never had the opportunity to ask. Now he moved over and leaned against the rail again—This is my night for unexpected conversations, he thought wryly—and said, "I don't really know, Beth-Abz. Sometimes I come out here for fresh air. But solace?" He shrugged.

The beholder floated over to join Teldin at the rail. Side by side they stared out into the chaos of the Flow. "It is solace I seek," Beth-Abz said quietly. "Solace for the loss of my clan and of my nation. Solace for my solitude." It paused for a few moments. "Sometimes I seek peace and the certainty that the

decisions I have made were the right ones."

Teldin found himself nodding. "I guess I am looking for the same thing," he said slowly. "Different decisions, but I suppose the doubts are the same." He looked over at his comrade. "Do you ever find what you're looking for?"

Beth-Abz's eyestalks pivoted in the pattern that Teldin interpreted as equivalent to a shrug. After a few long moments, the creature spoke again, changing the subject drastically. "If you ever find the *Spelljammer*," the beholder said, "you should be aware of an important fact. According to the tales of my clan, there are false nations, not of the true ideal, aboard the great vessel. You should beware their perversion."

The Cloakmaster didn't answer immediately. From Djan and Julia he'd learned a little about the fierce, genocidal hatred that existed between different beholder nations, each of which considered itself "of the true ideal," while all others were "perversions." Keeping that in mind, he stripped Beth-Abz's comments of their more dire-sounding overtones. An interesting fact still remained—if it was fact, and not a baseless rumor, he reminded himself. Apparently there were beholders aboard the *Spelljammer*. Beth-Abz was right, that was something Teldin was glad to know. He drew breath to thank the eye tyrant for the knowledge.

But Beth-Abz was speaking again. "What will you do when you captain the *Spelljammer*, Teldin Moore?" it asked quietly. "Is that still your intention?"

Good question, Teldin thought. He shrugged, trying to find a way to put into words his doubts, his confusions.

Again, the beholder didn't wait for him to speak, but continued, "Will you then become the over-*Krezt*?"

"The what?"

"The over-*Krezt*," Beth-Abz said calmly. "Is that your desire?"

"Tell me what a *Krezt* is, and maybe I can answer you," the Cloakmaster suggested.

"The *Krezt* is a figure from ancient religious myth among those of my nation," the beholder explained. "Few clans of the nation Gurrash-Ahr still hold to the ancient words that tell of the *Krezt*, but clan Beth is one of those. The ultimate aboard my hive mothers ship ensured that all of the clan learned of the prophecies."

Teldin leaned forward, fascinated despite himself. Even though Beth-Abz had been very open in the past about the day-to-day realities of life in a beholder hive, it had said nothing whatsoever about more spiritual issues. "What prophecies?" he asked.

"It is said that the *Krezt* will come forth and put an end to the wars of the form, melding the disparate nations into one." The creature "shrugged" with its eyestalks. "Since this would require the nations of the true ideal to allow those of perverted form to survive—which is obviously anathema to many—most of my nation ignore the prophecies, or dismiss them as distortions. Those who disbelieve the prophecies jest that the *Krezt* must have the mightiest ship in space," Beth-Abz continued dryly, "since only by defeating all of the nations, true and false, could the *Krezt* bring peace to the universe."

"So is that what you intend to do as captain of the *Spelljammer*, Teldin Moore?" the eye tyrant asked. "To use it to defeat all of the warring races of the universe, and thus bring them to peace? To be the over-*Krezt* who pacifies not one race but all? Is that your intention?"

Teldin turned away, suddenly unable to meet the globular creature's multiple gaze. It wonders about the grand scheme that I'm following, he thought, the ultimate agenda that guides my actions. It wonders what universe-rocking plans I've got in my mind.

How can I tell it that I don't have *any* plans past finding the *Spelljammer*?

"Would you be the over-*Krezt*?" Beth-Abz pressed.

"I haven't decided yet," the Cloakmaster said uncomfortably. "I'm still thinking about it."

Chapter Ten

Even the longest voyage eventually comes to an end, Teldin reminded himself, and this one was no exception. The crystal sphere boundary of Vistaspace was fifteen days behind them, and Garrash was no

more than five days ahead. From this distance, the mighty world appeared as nothing more than a point of ruddy light, occasionally tinged with a brighter yellow that had to come from its fire ring. Even the Cloakmaster's spyglass wasn't sufficiently powerful to resolve the fire world into a visible disk.

They'd been fortunate, the Cloakmaster knew. By sheer luck, the point at which they'd penetrated the Vistaspace crystal sphere was relatively near—on a cosmic scale—to Garrash. If the planet's orbital plane had been oriented differently, or if the world were at a different point along its orbit, their voyage would have been fifteen days or more longer.

Throughout the voyage, Teldin had used the amulet regularly to keep tabs on the *Spelljammer*—not every day, but at least every few days. The results had been inconclusive. Since that first time, the great ship's perception hadn't included anything as distinctive as Garrash and its fire ring. Each time he'd used the amulet, Teldin had seen nondescript views of star-studded blackness—obviously wild-space, but within which crystal sphere? Conceivably, the patterns of the stars might have given some idea—at least confirmed that the vessel was still within Garrash's crystal sphere—but the *Boundless* didn't have a detailed stargram of Vistaspace on board.

Still, Djan had pointed out, the fact that Teldin had never once seen the Flow seemed to hint strongly that the *Spell-jammer* hadn't yet left the sphere. The Cloakmaster wasn't as firmly convinced as his half-elven friend. After all, he knew from his reading at the Great Archive that the manta-shaped ship seemed able to complete in a day or two voyages through the phlogiston that would take any other vessel weeks. Yet, he had to admit, the odds of finding his quarry still in Vistaspace rose with each observation.

Of course, as Djan had stressed to him several times before, crystal spheres are almost inconceivably huge. Large though the *Spelljammer* may be on the scale of ships, and even of worlds, considered on this scale it was a very small needle in a very large haystack. Thus, actually locating the *Spelljammer* could turn out to be a task in and of itself.

Julia and Djan had both agreed with him that the best place to start was in the vicinity of Garrash itself, however. At least that was a recognizable "landmark" in the vastness of the void.

From his cabin, Teldin heard Julia "make" eight bells-sounding the ship's brass bell in the stern—indicating the time. The beginning of the forenoon watch, he thought. That put the time at about eight in the morning, according to the groundling clock. He hadn't been awake long, and he had yet to make an appearance on deck. He'd long since lost his farmer's habit of rising early, and he'd been getting up progressively later recently as he'd gone to sleep well past four bells in the bottom of the night watch—past two in the morning. That'll change, he told himself firmly. I'll make it change. Yet still there was some part of his mind that cast doubt on his resolve.

He reached above his head, pressing both his forearms flat against the overhead, feeling the muscles of his back and legs stretch. His stomach felt like a fist clenched around emptiness, and the stretch only intensified the sensation. Breakfast, he thought.

The four sailors sitting in the saloon just aft of his cabin greeted him politely. Nothing was cooking in the galley—he was between meals, after all, too late for what the crew still called dawnfry and too early for highsunfeast—but the cook had left out a plate of cold meats, pickled vegetables, and a sliced loaf. Teldin built himself a hand meal, which he munched as he headed out onto the main deck.

Djan called a cheery, "Well met," down to him from the afterdeck as Teldin emerged from the forecabin. He waved back and started to head aft to join him.

It was then that the commotion broke out belowdecks, just a muffled yell at first, but quickly followed by the pounding of running feet. Teldin stopped in his tracks, looked questioningly up at Djan.

A figure—it was Dargeth—dashed up the ladder from the cargo deck and the crew's quarters. His face was pale. "It's Blossom," he gasped.

Blossom? She's on the helm... But, no, this was the forenoon watch, wasn't it? That meant it was the dwarf, Dranigor, currently helming the ship. "What about Blossom?" he demanded.

"She's hurt bad," the half-ore told him. "Maybe dead, I don't know."

"Where?"

Dargeth pointed down the ladder he'd just climbed. "The cargo deck."

Teldin went down the ladder so fast that he might as well have jumped. He heard footsteps behind

him—Djan probably, he thought. At the bottom, he turned left, then left again, sprinting aft past the foot of the mainmast.

There was a small crowd already there, five or six crewmen crouching or kneeling in a group at the aft end of the dimly lit cargo hold near the mizzenmast. As they saw him, they all backed away, giving him his first view of Blossom.

The rotund woman lay flat on her back, arms outstretched. Her eyes were closed, her round, cherubic face at peace, as though she were asleep, Teldin thought. Even from a distance he could see great bruising on the right side of her neck, under her ear—a great, spreading hemorrhage under the skin, reddish pink, not yet turned to purple. "Where's a healer?" he demanded.

Then he saw the angle at which her head lay, and he knew there was nothing a healer could do. He dropped to one knee beside the corpulent shape and touched two fingers to the unbruised side of her throat just to be sure. For an instant, he thought he could feel some feeble trill of life left in the woman, but then it was gone. Was that just my imagination, my own anxiety? he asked himself. Or did I feel the woman die? Regardless, he knew that Blossom was dead.

He looked away and saw Djan kneeling beside him. "I'll deal with this," the half-elf told him quietly. "You talk to the crew."

Teldin nodded, climbed slowly to his feet. The crowd of crewmen—larger now—had backed away, leaving a respectful space around the captain, Djan, and the dead priest. The Cloakmaster could see Julia at the back of the group, by the mainmast. "Who found her?" he asked.

"I did, Cap'n." One of the sail trimmers—a stout halfling woman named Harriana—stepped forward. She looked uncomfortable, slightly pale. At first Teldin wondered why, but then she added, "I sing out as soon as I found her, Cap'n, I promise you. I wasn't no sluggard about it...."

He smiled as reassuringly as he could under the circumstances and clapped her on the shoulder. "I know you did, Harriana," he told her firmly. "I know you weren't a sluggard. Nobody thinks you were. I don't think it would have mattered even if you'd found her sooner." He looked down into the diminutive woman's eyes and saw the specter of guilt fade from them. "Now, tell me what happened."

Harriana shrugged. "I come down to the hold just a couple of minutes back, looking for a sail patch. I keeps my repair things back aft there, by the mast foot." She pointed aft, toward where assorted gear had been stacked against the hold's rear bulkhead. "On the way I passes the bilge watch."

The Cloakmaster nodded. The woman was referring to a wooden hatch, about two feet square, giving access to the bilges and the keel under the hold deck for repair or inspection. "So you passed the bilge hatch," he prompted.

"And I sees it's open," the halfling said. "Not all the way, like, but just a thumbspan. I think there's somebody down there, inspecting the bilges. So, just to be friendly like, I opens the hatch and I calls down, 'halloo.'"

"And that's when I sees her." Harriana pointed at Blossom's still body. "The helm-priest, just lying all huddled up at the bilges. She doesn't look comfortable," she went on with a shrug, "so I thinks she might be hurt. I calls for help, and these two"—she pointed out Dargeth and Anson—"they answer. They drags the helm-priest out, and then we just fells like the blazes."

Teldin looked questioningly at the two. It was Anson, predictably, who answered. "That's how it was, Captain," he confirmed. "We thought she'd maybe been checking the bilges, fell in, and hit her head. We didn't think it might be her neck until we saw it." He hesitated, obviously uncomfortable. "Did we do wrong, pulling her out?" he asked quietly. They say you don't move them with less..."

It was Djan who answered, his voice quiet but carrying, "You didn't do her any harm, Anson, or you either, Dargeth. nobody could have done her any more harm by the time you got here."

The two men looked noticeably relieved. "Captain," Anson started tentatively, "one thing I wondered... What was Blossom doing in the bilges anyway? Checking the keel?"

"That's right." Again it was Djan who responded—louder, more firmly this time. He stood and strode over to join Teldin and the others. "She was checking the keel, like I ordered her to."

The Cloakmaster shot the half-elf a quizzical glance. There was something strange about his friend's manner. He trusted Djan, and it wouldn't do to question him about it here.

"I think you were right, Anson," Djan continued, "I think she must have slipped, fallen, and landed badly. A tragic, fluke accident." He turned to the half-orc. "Dargeth, would you see to the body, please? Pick the people you need." Then he looked over at Teldin—meaningfully, the Cloak-master thought—and said, "Captain? I think we've got to discuss the watch list. Can we speak in your cabin?"

As soon as Djan and Julia had followed him into the cabin and shut the door behind them, Teldin turned to his first mate. "Could someone tell me what in Paladine's name is going on?" he asked quietly.

Djan pulled a chair out from the table and sat down. There was something in his expression that Teldin hadn't seen before—a tension that chilled the Cloakmaster to the bone. "I didn't send Blossom to check the keel," he said bluntly.

"Then, why... ?" Teldin's voice trailed off. A sharp pang of suspicion stabbed his chest. He suggested softly, "So the crew wouldn't think... what?"

"Blossom's neck was broken," Djan answered, "but not in a fall." He looked up, meeting the Cloakmaster's gaze squarely for the first time. "Somebody killed her, Teldin. Somebody—a skilled warrior, I'd say—broke her neck with his hands. Then he stuffed her in the bilges." He blinked thoughtfully. "I say 'he,' but it could just as easily have been a woman, I suppose. Breaking a neck isn't hard if you know how to go about it." He shook his head briefly, as if forcing his mind back to the subject at hand. "Somebody killed her," he repeated. "It wasn't an accident. We've got a murderer on board."

Teldin pulled a chair over and sat down. He nodded slowly.

"Do you have any idea who?" Julia asked. Her face was pale and drawn.

The first mate shook his head. "It could have been just about anyone, really," he answered. "It definitely happened less than half an hour before Harriana found the body. But half an hour's a long time on a ship this size, and it doesn't take long to kill someone if you've got a mind to." He sighed. "Somebody leaves his watch station—he claims it's a lead call—or slips out of his hammock. Or, if he's off duty and awake, he just goes belowdecks. Nobody's going to question him. He finds Blossom, leads her down to the cargo hold on some pretext. He kills her—*snap!*—and disposes of the body. Then he just strolls back to wherever he's supposed to be and waits for the commotion to start so he can look suitably shocked and horrified."

"Why do you think she was killed there?" Julia asked.

Djan chuckled mirthlessly. "You try carrying Blossom more than a couple of paces," he suggested. "Anyway, the hold's the only place deserted enough to get away with it."

"He must have known the body would be found soon enough," Teldin pointed out.

The half-elf nodded agreement. "But he didn't need it to stay hidden for long," he explained. "Just long enough to fade back into the woodwork, so to speak."

Teldin was silent for a few moments. A murder, he thought. That's a long step up from sabotage, isn't it? A murderer among the crew. Someone who wants to... what?

What does he want? he asked himself. Why kill Blossom? Why kill a helmsman? And there he had his answer. If you look at it from the right standpoint, it's not that much different from sabotage. If you want to slow down a ship or cripple it, you can sabotage its rigging or you can eliminate its source of power. With Blossom dead, the *Boundless* had only one official helmsman left—the dwarf, Dranigor. Eliminate Dranigor, or just incapacitate him somehow, and that just leaves me. Then do something about me, and the ship's dead in space....

"Put some kind of a guard on Dranigor," the Cloakmaster told Djan. "Come up with some kind of excuse." The half-elf, nodded. "I like the way you handled things back there," he added.

Djan's lips quirked in a half smile. "I was making it up as I went along," he said, "but I had to do something. If the crew figures out we've got a murderer aboard, then everything we've done—you've done—to build morale goes out the porthole... and I think I want to get off this ship." His smile faded. The murderer knows I made it *up*," he went on grimly, "and he knows that you two know now as well. But I couldn't see any way of avoiding that."

Teldin waved that aside. "I don't think that matters much," he decided. He paused. "Can we ask around—see if anyone did make a head call during the half hour in question?"

Djan looked doubtful. "I can try," he reflected. "I will try, but I can't be too obvious about it, or people will guess what happened."

The Cloakmaster nodded sadly. "You're right, of course." He patted his friend on the shoulder. "Well, do what you can," he suggested, "is there anyone other than the three of us that you think we can trust?"

"Beth-Abz?" Julia proposed.

Djan nodded agreement. "If the beholder wanted Blossom out of the way—for whatever reason—it could have just disintegrated her, and we'd have thought she fell overboard or something." He stood. "I'll get on to things, Captain," he promised, "in the meantime,... I suggest we all watch our backs."

Djan had been as good as his word, Teldin thought five days later. He'd asked around, just as he'd said he would, trying to get a line on anyone who might have been inexplicably missing around the time of Blossom's death. But, for obvious reasons, he'd had to be very circumspect, and that had seriously limited his effectiveness.

At first, the Cloakmaster had considered helping his friend by asking his own oblique questions, but then had discarded the idea as counterproductive. The whole purpose was to prevent anyone in the crew from attaching any significance to the questions, and—almost by definition—any queries by the captain, the master of the ship, would attract such significance. Although it galled him to sit back and let Djan do all the work, he had to admit that this was the most logical course.

After two days, Djan had sadly admitted to Teldin that he hadn't found out anything useful. Nobody could remember seeing someone acting in a suspicious manner—but that didn't really mean much, he'd stressed, since he couldn't let anyone think that his questions were important.

A highly skilled priest or mage would have come in really handy, Teldin told himself. He'd heard enough folk tales about powerful spellcasters being able to speak with the souls of the dead. Surely Blossom herself—her soul, wherever it happened to be at the moment—would be able to shed light on the details of her death, and even the identity of her killer. But the only person aboard of sufficient aptitude for such a task had been Blossom herself.

Which the killer had known, he thought with grim certainty.

In the five days since the murder, he'd found himself eyeing every crew member he encountered. Is he the one? he kept wondering. Or is it him? The knowledge that a murderer was constantly nearby had been unsettling enough, but what had made it even worse was that he had to hide his suspicions, his knowledge.

Even without the rest of the crew knowing that Blossom had been murdered, her death had seriously weakened morale aboard the *Boundless*. He'd overheard muttered conversations among the crew that the squid ship was a jinxed vessel. Some crew members seemed to be linking Blossom's "accidental" death with that of Merrienne, the lookout who'd fallen to her death from the mainmast crow's nest. The crew still considered the incident with the boom, just outside the Heartspace crystal sphere, to have been an accident, not the sabotage that it actually was. That made two tragic, pointless, fluke deaths. And sailors seemed almost universally superstitious, Teldin had noticed, whether they sailed the rivers of Ansalon or the void of wildspace. A third "accidental" death, and the crew would be convinced that the *Boundless* was a ship of ill omen.

Still, he couldn't let himself dwell on such things, Teldin knew. His crew depended on him—on him and his officers—more now than ever before... even though they might not be fully aware of it themselves. They were trusting him to guide them through the troubles that had beset them and might continue to do so, to protect them, even to convince them that the *Boundless* wasn't a jinxed ship after all. He owed them that much, he recognized—or, at least, his best efforts—and didn't feel that their expectations were in any way unreasonable. Bonds of duty go both ways, he'd frequently reminded

himself. He owed his crew his best efforts.

Yet, right or wrong, those expectations put even more pressure on him.

At least they were now close to Garrash, looping around the vast planet in an orbit that would take them just under a week to complete. The ship's current attitude presented its starboard beam to the world, which guaranteed Teldin a spectacular view from his cabin's large "eye" porthole.

From the ship's present position, Garrash was a swollen ember-red disk, not quite circular, but slightly bloated in places, as though the world's gravity was barely capable of restraining its burning atmosphere. Looping around it was the fire ring, glaring with bright yellow-red light. From this point of the ship's orbit, Teldin was looking at the fire ring from directly above, showing it as perfectly circular, concentric with the planet itself, a thin band of flames. Djan had told him it was only—only!—a quarter-hour of spelljamming flight wide, but since that was only one-fiftieth the diameter of the planet itself, in comparison it looked like little more than a line. When the *Boundless* had first approached Garrash, they'd been seeing the fire ring from edge on. Since the band was only twenty or so leagues thick, it had been invisible from any significant distance, and Teldin had feared they'd somehow come to the wrong system. Today, however, there was no doubt.

So we've reached Garrash, he told himself. Where's the *Spelljammer*?

The previous night watch, he'd used the amulet again, striving to maintain his contact with the *Spelljammer* for longer than he'd ever done before. For almost an hour, his senses had been united with those of the great ship. During that time, he'd seen a small, bluish fire body—presumably the primary of the system the ship was in—and countless views of the distant stars. But there'd been no glimpse of Garrash, the fire ring, or—and here he'd admitted to wild hopes—the *Boundless* itself in orbit around the great world.

The star patterns hadn't been any help. Even now that they were within the Vistaspace crystal sphere, Djan and the navigator had charted only a fraction of the system's stars. The patterns he'd seen hadn't matched anything on those incomplete starcharts. But that didn't really mean much, one way or another, did it? Also, the bright blue-white sun might have been the primary of the Vistaspace system, but it might just as well have been in an entirely different sphere. At least he still hadn't seen any hint that the *Spelljammer* had passed through a portal into the Flow, or that it was about to do so in the near future.

Throughout his contact, he'd also tried to connect with the mind of the mysterious ship—if it had anything resembling a mind—not just its wide-ranging suite of senses. Some tinge of emotion—or thought, even—might have given him some clue as to his quarry's location. But, though he'd sometimes felt such emotions in the past—or thought he had, he forced himself to add—nothing came through the link this time.

After an hour he'd let the contact slip away, returning to a physical body that was panting with exertion and drenched in cold sweat. Nothing.

Still, the *Spelljammer* had been here. It had passed close to Garrash itself, apparently sailing right through the fire ring. And, during its passage, the ship had sensed other vessels—if that's what they were—moving within the ring itself.

That's the last real clue I've seen, he told himself, the best lead I've got. He sighed.

He wrapped the cloak around his shoulders and headed aft, to where Dranigor sat on the helm. "Take us down," he ordered quietly, "closer to the ring."

Standing on the afterdeck, Teldin imagined he could feel the heat of the fire ring on his face, just a baseless fancy, he knew. While the ring burned hot enough to ignite the squid ship like dry kindling, both Dranigor and Djan had reassured him that this heat didn't radiate far through the vacuum of wildspace. If necessary, they'd told him, he could bring the *Boundless* within a league of the ring without undue risk, maybe even closer.

Let's hope it won't be necessary, he thought. Even from this distance—a league or so from the ring, a distance inconsequential in comparison to the width of the band of fire—the violence of the Garrash

system was impressive, terrifying. The huge planet itself, more than an hour's full-speed flight away, filled the sky. He could see the writhing, tortured surface of the atmosphere, churning and bubbling with heat, sometimes sending out great flames and prominences that soared many thousands of leagues above the surface before falling back. The comparison with the magical bolts rising from the surface of Nex were unavoidable, and every time another prominence started to climb into the heavens, fear squeezed his heart. Would this one fall back like the others? Or would it continue out into space, questing blindly for the ship, to send it down in fiery destruction?

He could see the great, dark circle—the weather pattern or whatever it was—near the distant limb of the planet. From this range, he could see that it wasn't black, as he'd thought initially. It was just a darker red than the rest of the world, appearing black only in comparison to the brighter fires around it. The circle—which Djan had taken to calling the Great Storm—was actually a great cone, the half-elf had explained to him, easily large enough to swallow tens of thousands of worlds the size of Krynn, extending far down into the heart of the world. The Great Storm was much colder than the rest of the flaming atmosphere, so much colder that Djan had guessed a spelljammer might be able to descend some distance into it before bursting into flames.

The ring itself was a spectacle in its own right. From a distance it had seemed perfectly flat, but now Teldin could see that its surface churned, too, as though currents of unimaginable speed and ferocity were flowing through its liquid fire. Its light was largely yellow, but sometimes rivers or bubbles of flame burned at the surface in different colors— red, emerald green, even sometimes lightning blue. The result was an impression of barely contained violence.

The *Spelljammer* sailed through that? Teldin found himself wondering. And what about the other shapes—ships or whatever they were—he'd seen cruising within the ring? It boggled the imagination.

He turned away from the view, stared out into the star-specked blackness. Where are you? he asked mentally. Where?

"Ship ahoy!" Harriana's voice echoed down from the repaired crow's nest.

Her words jolted Teldin like an electric shock. The *Spelljammer*! "Where?" he yelled,

"Low off the stern, starboard," the halfling called. "In the fire ring."

Teldin sprinted to the aft rail on the starboard side and pivoted the ballista aside to give himself more room. He leaned over the rail, looking aft and down, past the broad spanker sail.

Yes, there it was, a darker shape moving within the liquid fire of the ring. Was it the *Spelljammer*?

No, the configuration was all wrong. No manta shape, this, but a broad-based triangle with an extended, sharp apex. As he stared in shock and amazement, the apex emerged from the ring, liquid fire dripping off it. Metal, it looked like, finest steel polished to a mirror finish.

The rest of the—the thing—emerged into the vacuum, and he could see it clearly for the first time, a cylindrical body or hull, maybe a hundred feet long, maybe a little more, sprouting broad, knife-edged wings that spanned at least one hundred and fifty feet. The tips of the triangular wings bore sharp, forward-pointing spines or spears dozens of feet long. The whole thing seemed to be made of the same mirror-polished steel as the apex.

A ship made completely out of steel? Capable of surviving—and keeping its crew alive—in the depths of the fire ring?

Teldin sensed a presence next to him—Djan. "What in all the hells is it?" he whispered.

The half-elf shook his head. His face was pale, his eyes wide with wonder, or perhaps fear. "I don't know," he answered slowly, "I've never seen, never heard of, anything like that before. I can't even guess what race could build a ship like that."

The broad-winged metal ship moved slowly, cruising parallel to the rippled surface of the ring. Although he couldn't see any portholes—and there definitely couldn't be any open decks!—Teldin imagined he could feel the vessel's crew scrutinizing the squid ship. Then, smoothly, the metal ship's bow lifted, pointing directly toward the *Boundless*, and it began to accelerate.

"Battle stations!" Djan screamed. "Man all weapons!"

Feet pounded the decks as the crew hurried to obey. Teldin moved farther forward, getting out of the way of the gunners who began to prepare the twin ballistae.

The first mate turned to Teldin. "Captain... ?"

"Bring us around," the Cloakmaster answered after a moment's thought. "Bring the bow toward it."

Djan paused, then nodded and relayed the order through the speaking tube to the helmsman. Teldin could understand the first mate's hesitation. Normally, aligning the bow with an approaching vessel would allow the squid ship's main weapon—its forward catapult—to come to bear, but it would limit the ship's maneuverability if it needed to escape. The half-elf had realized, however, that the Cloakmaster's unusual control over the *Boundless*—through the ultimate helm—would compensate for that disadvantage.

"And get Beth-Abz up on deck," Teldin added, "just in case."

The bearing to the knife-edged metal ship began to change as the squid ship's bow came around. As Teldin watched, the strange vessel maneuvered, too—much smoother than he'd seen any other ship change course—to keep its own bow pointing directly at the *Boundless*. It continued its acceleration for a few seconds, then settled down on a fast—though not incontrovertibly aggressive—approach course.

Djan had brought the Cloakmaster's spyglass to bear on the vessel. Now he lowered it, his expression one of profound puzzlement. "No obvious weapons," he said quietly. "And no portholes, no hatches, no way of getting in or seeing out." He shook his head. "I've never seen anything even vaguely like this."

Teldin stared at the strange ship. Now no more than half a league off, it had started to decelerate again, slowing its silent approach. Its mirror finish reflected the yellow light of the fire ring and the ruddy red of the planet below. It gleamed in the firelight, occasionally flashing with almost intolerable brightness as the light reflected off facets on its surface.

What are you? Teldin thought fiercely. What?

Then, suddenly, thoughts and images blasted into his mind. He clutched at his head with both hands, as though to keep his skull from splitting under their ferocious impact. His stomach knotted, and he almost doubled over with the pain of it.

What am I? The voice, echoing in his brain, carried a sense of almost ludicrous surprise. *What am I? I am.*

Through the bolts of agony that still lanced through his body, Teldin felt Djan's supporting hand on his shoulder. He looked into his friend's concerned face. "What is it?" the half-elf asked. "What's wrong?"

Teldin took a deep breath, tried to force his pounding heart to slow. "It's talking to me," he whispered.

"What is?"

Only as the words emerged from his lips did Teldin recognize the truth. "The ship." He pointed with a trembling finger. "That ship."

The titanic voice boomed again into his brain. *What are you?* it asked. *Come closer, so I can see-hear-sense you better.*

"The ship," Teldin breathed again. "It's alive, but that means it's not a ship."

"What?" Djan shook his head in disbelief. "What?"

"I'm bringing us in closer," the Cloakmaster told him, struggling to keep his voice firm and under control.

"You're doing what?"

"Bringing us closer," Teldin repeated. "Get Dranigor to release the helm."

He could see conflicting emotions warring across his friend's face. Concern, fear, denial... But, then, finally, he saw Djan's expression settle into one of acceptance. Without another word to the Cloakmaster, he crossed to the speaking tube and issued the order to the helmsman.

Teldin extended his will, focused it through the ultimate helm, and exerted it upon the ship. The *Boundless* started to move, slowly, toward the metal object.

Filtered through the expanded perception of the helm, the metal ship-being's mental voice didn't seem as "loud" or overwhelming. *I can sense you better now*, it said, and again the words were tinged with surprise, this time alloyed with intense curiosity. *You are of a primitive form, your species, and you seem to be injured. Yet your voice is strong, your presence distinct. How can that be? I sense you suffer from the same infestation as those who have come before you. Explain this to me.*

Teldin shook his head, confounded. The words were clear, but the meaning was the exact opposite. The statement about his species, his "primitive form"... Perhaps a creature of living metal might consider a human primitive. He could almost understand that. But what was that about injury? Teldin wasn't injured. And he certainly wasn't suffering from any kind of "infestation."

Djan was by his side, his eyes full of questions.

"It's speaking to me through the cloak," Teldin explained quietly, "like the People did on Nex. It's alive, Djan! It has a mind." Like the *Spelljammer*? he asked himself.

He turned his attention back to the metal being. It had stopped and was now hanging in space less than a league ahead of the *Boundless*. Even though the "voice" currently wasn't speaking, he could still sense puzzlement and curiosity through the mental link.

"I am Teldin Moore," he said softly, focusing the meaning of his words through the cloak, "captain of the *Boundless Possibilities*."

And I am Zat, of the fire ribbon of Garrash, the "ship" replied, as are my fellows. The voice paused. 'Captain'? A strange designation. What does it mean? And what are these 'boundless possibilities' you refer to?

Teldin shook his head again. They were talking, he and this metallic creature, but he wasn't convinced they were really communicating. "Captain," he tried again, it means the person in command of the ship, the ship we name the *Boundless Possibilities*."

'Ship.' Puzzlement had turned to outright confusion in the mental voice. *Is that a place you refer to? The crystal sphere of your origin, perhaps?* it guessed tentatively.

"No." Teldin forced himself to think things through. Obviously the cloak wasn't translating as well as it usually did. Probably the mind of this great shiplike creature was too alien for easy communication. "The ship that we call the *Boundless Possibilities* is what you see directly in front of you," he tried again. "I'm the captain of the ship. I am in command of the crew that runs it. I'm the one who makes the decisions, who tells the crew to set the sails, or steer the ship." He paused, frustrated. "Don't you see the ship?" he demanded.

Of course I see you, the being—Zat—replied. I see you, and I sense your mind, Teldin Moore. But I ask you again: what is this 'ship'?

Teldin rubbed a trembling hand across his eyes. "I don't know what in the hells it's talking about," he told Djan tiredly. "And it doesn't know what I'm talking about. It can see the ship, and it 'hears' my thoughts, but..."

And then realization flooded through the Cloakmaster's mind, it thinks it's talking to the ship," he said to Djan. "It thinks *I'm the ship*." Of course, he told himself. The "injury"—that had to be the squid ship's ram, torn away during its crash-landing on Nex, and never replaced because the materials weren't available. And the "infestation"—didn't that have to be the crew, and by extension, Teldin himself?

He grabbed the rail with both hands, poured all his concentration into the link with the huge creature. "Zat," he said, "I am not what you see, or what you think you're seeing. *I am not what's hanging in space before you. That's what I call a 'ship'. I am—Teldin Moore is—a human. There are twenty of us, each of us about*"—he quickly calculated— "*one thirtieth the size of the ship we're aboard.*

"We are all alive," he pressed on forcefully, "we all have minds, like you do. The ship isn't alive. It has no mind. It's nothing more than"—he groped for words—"than a box of wood in which we live."

A wordless blast of shock, tinged with horror, flooded through the telepathic link, powerful enough to make Teldin sway dizzily. *The infestation? Yet... this is not possible. No. How can the tiny, scurrying things have minds, the parasites? No.* The last mental words carried a strong sense of denial, of refusal to accept something that went against cherished beliefs. But there was more to it than that, Teldin recognized: a hint of... could it be guilt? Why?

He put those questions aside for the moment. "Why would I lie to you?" he asked firmly. "What possible benefit could I gain?" He took a deep breath. "Look through my eyes, if you can," he demanded. "Use my senses. See if I'm not telling you the truth."

Slowly he turned around, scanning the length and breadth of the ship with his gaze. All the while, he concentrated on every detail he saw or otherwise perceived, trying mightily to channel it down the

telepathic link into the mind of the metal creature. "Those 'tiny, scurrying things' you see," he whispered harshly, "they're like me. And they're like you, too. They have minds, emotions. They have wishes, and hopes, and dreams. They love. They feel fear. *They're alive.*"

He pounded the ship's rail with a fist. "This—the ship— *isn't* alive. It has no mind, no will. When it breaks, we fix it. We steer it, control it. Without us—without our minds—it's inert, goes nowhere."

No, the mental voice maintained forcefully. *The parasites are not like Zat. They have no minds.* It paused—hesitantly, Teldin thought. *Why have the parasites never spoken?*

"One is speaking to you now," the Cloakmaster asserted. "Except I'm not a parasite. I am an independent being like you, with my own mind. We all are."

"I know it's difficult," he went on more quietly. "We seem so different, don't we, you and us? In size, in shape, in where and how we live. But we share one thing: we're aware of ourselves, and of the universe around us. Despite all the other differences—minor differences—that makes us the same."

The mental link remained "silent" for so long that Teldin was starting to think that Zat had broken the connection. But then the telepathic communication resumed—slowly, almost tentatively. *I hear your thoughts*, the creature said. *Fora moment I shared your senses. What you say must be true. But is it true for all the infestations on all the "ships"?*

"I think so," Teldin confirmed.

There was another long pause. *Then we have done something terribly unwise, Zat* murmured. *All infestations?* The sense of guilt was stronger, overlaid now with sadness.

Teldin shut his eyes, his throat constricting so tightly that he could hardly breathe. He thought he knew what the "terribly unwise" thing that Zat and its race had done was. What do you do when you find something you consider to be alive parasitized, suffering from some kind of infestation? You remove the infestation, don't you... ?

Teldin Moore, Zat continued, *you and your tiny, scurrying minds are welcome in the space of Garrash. I and those of my kind welcome you.*

In response to Zat's mental words, half a dozen more of the mirrored triangles emerged from the fire ring, soaring up into the cold darkness of wildspace to take up station behind and to either side of the first creature.

Is there any service we may perform for you? Zat asked. *My kind would learn more about you....*

"No service," Teldin said quickly. It wasn't that he particularly distrusted Zat, but there was something about the creature's suddenly effusive friendship so soon after its doubt and denial that bothered him. How many ships have you "sanitized?" he found himself wondering. "We just want some information. We know that you were recently visited by a large ship, a very large ship." He visualized the *Spelljammer*, tried to communicate the image through the telepathic link.

Apparently he'd succeeded. His mind was filled with a torrent of emotions, powerful enough to sear his thoughts with pain, as if his brain were being scoured with wire brushes. Recognition mixed with surprise, with excitement, and with tinges of ecstasy, but the dominant feeling was one of awe, almost religious in its intensity. *Yes, Zat* answered eagerly, *the Wandering One. It was in the space of Garrash. It deigned to join us, the Wandering One, to sail on the currents of fire with us. It even shared its thoughts with us, to our great honor.* The creature hesitated, then continued doubtfully, *You know of the Wandering One?*

At first Teldin was surprised by the tone of Zat's telepathic contact, but then he understood. You think the *Spelljammer's* one of you, don't you? he mused. Or something very like you, but much greater. The idea that "tiny, scurrying things" like us know your "Wandering One"—it must be as shocking to you as it would be to me if a rat swaggered up and told me it was personally acquainted with Paladine.

Could they think the *Spelljammer's* a kind of deity? he wondered. It would make sense, wouldn't it?

"Yes, we know of the Wandering One," he answered. "In fact, we've been following it across the universe."

Why? Zat wanted to know. There was a tinge of something that could have been suspicion in its voice.

"Wonder," Teldin answered quickly. It wouldn't do to tell Zat that I might be a deity's next captain, would it? "Wonder and awe. We've never seen anything like it before, and we want to learn what we can about it. To revere it—from a respectful distance, of course." He held his breath, waiting for the metal creature's answer.

Yes, Zat replied after a few moments. Yes, that is filling, but the Wandering One left the space of Garrash, Teldin Moore, it went on. It left over a planetary turn ago. Teldin instantly knew—thanks to the cloak, of course—that a 'planetary turn,' or a Garrash day, was about two hundred hours long.

More than two hundred hours, more than a week. Teldin felt his shoulders sag. The *Spelljammer* had left Vistaspace, then, traversing the Flow to another crystal sphere between the times that the Cloakmaster had used the amulet. The great ship was just so fast...

"Do you know where it was going?" Teldin asked pessimistically. "Did it tell you?"

The Wandering One returns home, Zat replied, to Teldin's shock, as it frequently does. A tinge of regret seeped into the telepathic voice. *I tried to follow, in my presumption, but I was unable to keep pace with it.*

You tried to follow your god home, Teldin translated with a wry grin, and it left you in the dust. "Where is this home?" he asked. "Do you know?"

Of course. The voice seemed surprised. *Do not all who know the Wandering One know of its origins?*

"No. We don't. Where is it?"

The One Egg, Zat replied flatly. Among the shards of the One Egg.

Teldin felt that his heart would burst. The Broken Sphere. What else could the creature be referring to? "And where's that? Do you know?"

At the center of all.

Teldin ground his teeth in frustration. So close... "And how do I find that? Can you give me directions?"

Of course.

The breath hissed from Teldin's lungs. "Tell me," he whispered.

Leave the space of Garrash, and this crystal sphere, Zat instructed, then follow the secondary eddies in the paramagnetic gradient, as they increase in amplitude. There are tertiary eddies that might lead you astray, but if you concentrate entirely on the secondaries, you cannot help but find the shards of the One Egg. It is a long journey, one that would take us many planetary turns, but at least the direction is simple to determine.

Teldin stared at Zat, hanging in space like some demented artificer's trick mirror. I think I understood one word in five, he told himself. What in Paladine's name is a 'paramagnetic gradient,' and what do 'secondary eddies' look like?

He turned to Djan. "What's a paramagnetic gradient?" he asked.

The half-elf looked startled—Teldin remembered he'd only been hearing half of the strange conversation—but then he shrugged. "I couldn't tell you to save my life," he admitted.

The Cloakmaster focused his attention back on Zat. "Can you describe it in another way?" he asked.

Why? The creature was astounded. The paramagnetic gradient is the best signpost leading to the One Egg. It hesitated. *Can you not sense it?*

"Can you?" Teldin shot back.

Of course. Sensitivity to paramagnetism is one of the basic senses among intelligent life, is it not? It paused again. *Or perhaps your understanding of it is different from ours. Perhaps this would explain the sense we refer to.*

Suddenly, without warning, Teldin felt as if he'd sprouted a new eye, one that could see things invisible to normal senses. He could see—that wasn't quite the right word, but it was the closest he could find—a field of some kind surrounding the planet of Garrash, whirling up from the planet's poles and looping around its equator, like some strange and exotic skein of wool. Burning in colors for which he had no name, spiderweb-thin lines of force wove in intricate patterns around the fire ring, spiraling through it. The strange colors were more intense near the center of the planet—which he realized his new

sense could see right through—and in the heart of the fire ring. And everywhere he could see slight variations in the lines of force, bulges and twists—eddies.

I've seen this before, he told himself, or something very much like it. It had been during one of the times the amulet had linked him with the *Spelljammer*, when he was experiencing the universe through its mysterious senses.

Then the new sense—the vision-yet-not-vision—was gone, leaving him feeling momentarily bereft, blinded.

That is the sense of which I speak, Zat explained.

"We don't share that sense," Teldin said. "Is there any other way to tell me the way?"

Zat was silent for a long time, then, *No*, it said firmly. *There is no other certain way of describing the direction to the One Egg. Vision is such an imprecise sense, and most others are worse. Only the ability to sense the gradient will serve.*

Teldin felt as if he were clutching at straws. "Will you come with us, then?" he asked desperately. "Will you be our guide?"

And leave the space of Garrash? The question was tinged with incredulity.

"You said you were going to follow the *Spelljammer*—the Wandering One—anyway," the Cloakmaster pointed out hurriedly.

But not far from the space of Garrash, Zat pronounced definitely. *Certainly not beyond this crystal sphere. I and those of my kind cannot travel in the spaces beyond a sphere boundary.*

Teldin slumped over the rail as despair washed over him. So near, and yet so far. He'd finally found someone—or something—that could direct him to the Cosmic Egg and, ultimately, the *Spelljammer* itself, but the directions were useless.

He felt Djan's hand on his shoulder and his friend's concern. He turned to the half-elf. "It's like it's given me a map to the Broken Sphere," he told his friend dully, "but I can't read it."

Chapter Eleven

Teldin stared disconsolately out the "eye" porthole of his cabin. Below the ship he could see several of the massive metallic creatures cruising slowly into and out of the liquid fire of Garrash's ring. Behind him, at the table, Djan toyed idly with the bronze amulet.

Immediately after the conversation with Zat, Teldin and the half-elf had gone belowdecks, and his friend had watched while the Cloakmaster had made contact again with the *Spelljammer*. This time the great craft was definitely somewhere in the Flow. Before it, deep in the churning colors of the phlogiston, were half a dozen crystal spheres packed closely together, looking for all the world like a cluster of great pearls.

It's the same place I saw through the amulet when I was approaching Crescent, Teldin recalled, or somewhere very much like it. The *Spelljammer* was heading back to the shards of the Broken Sphere, as Zat had told him. And where was that? "Between the pearl clusters," as Message Bearer of the People had told him. Somewhere where the secondary eddies in the paramagnetic gradient increased in amplitude, according to Zat. Two descriptions, detailed enough in their way...

But both useless. Nobody aboard the *Boundless* knew of a place in the Flow where the crystal spheres were this tightly packed, and the charts gave no hint of it. And Teldin couldn't sense the paramagnetic gradient as Zat and its kind could do, and certainly knew of no other way of measuring it... largely because he didn't know what in all the hells it was. How can information be so uninformative? he asked himself bitterly.

"Where do we go now?" he asked softly. The creatures playing in the fire ring, predictably, gave no answer.

"Where?" He turned to Djan, repeating his rhetorical question.

The half-elf shrugged, setting the amulet down on the table before him. "I don't know, Teldin," he said candidly. "Somebody must know about the 'pearl clusters.' I'd wager that *some* spelljammer captain has seen them sometime, knows where they are. Maybe the best bet is to head for one of the major centers of spelljamming trade—Radole, maybe, or Garden—and ask around." He shrugged again. "I know it's not

much, but it's all I can think of at the moment."

Teldin nodded and gave his friend a tired smile. "Thanks," he said simply.

"Just think on it," Djan suggested. "And maybe try *this* again when you're feeling up to it." He tossed the amulet to the Cloakmaster, then he stood and walked toward the door. "Plus," he added over his shoulder, "I think you should get some rest."

As the first mate reached for the door latch, a diffident knock sounded. He quirked an eyebrow at Teldin—"Expecting company?"—and opened the door. The half-orc, Dargeth, was framed in the doorway. He tugged his forelock. "Sir, Captain." He shifted from foot to foot in discomfort. "Captain, do you have a moment, sir?" Teldin sighed. He didn't want to *take* a moment for dealing with ship's business, not right now, but duty does bind both ways, he reminded himself again. "Of course. Come on in, Dargeth. Have a seat. Is it all right if the first mate hears this, or is it personal?"

Dargeth ducked to avoid cracking his head on the overhead and crossed to the table. "No, sirs, it's not personal. It's..." He glanced at the open door behind him.

Taking the cue, Djan shut the door.

"Have a seat," Teldin repeated. To make the sailor more comfortable—obviously he didn't like the idea of sitting while his captain stood—he pulled a chair out for himself. "Now, Dargeth," he prompted, "what is it?"

Dargeth seated himself, hands in his lap, wringing them together uncomfortably. He glanced back and forth between his captain and the first mate.

"It's all right, Dargeth," Teldin told him, trying to inject as much reassurance as he could into his voice. "Whatever it is, it's all right."

The half-orc bobbed his head. "As you say, sir," he said tentatively, though he obviously didn't believe it.

"I've been thinking, Captain," Dargeth started slowly, his voice pitched little above a whisper. "About Blossom... about the helm-priest's death."

Teldin shot a quick glance at Djan, but tried to keep his face expressionless. "What about her death?" he asked, as lightly as he could.

"I've been thinking it's not an accident, Captain. Sorry to say it, but it's true. I think... I think she was killed."

The Cloakmaster sighed. Well, it had only been a matter of time, hadn't it? He had to admit he didn't have much respect for the half-orc's intellect, so if Dargeth was entertaining suspicions, what about the rest of the crew? "Why do you think that?" he asked coolly.

Dargeth shifted in his chair uncomfortably. "Lots of things, really, Captain," he mumbled. "I'm sorry, but..."

"No," Djan broke in, "no apologies. You've figured something out, or think you have. If you're correct, you did the right thing in coming to talk to us about it. If you're wrong, you still did the right thing. I've always told the entire crew I want them to use their heads, to think for themselves, haven't I?" The half-orc nodded. "You can be sure you're not going to get in trouble for doing what I told you to do," the first mate concluded. "Tell on."

The sailor looked immeasurably less uncomfortable, and Teldin again found himself respecting his friend's ability to deal with people.

"Like I said," Dargeth said, more confidently, "it's lots of things. I just sort of put them all together. First off, I got to wondering why the helm-priest would be checking the bilges or the keel." He looked directly at Djan, patently struggling not to drop his gaze. "I know you said you ordered her to, sir, but..."

"Yes," Djan said simply. "Go on."

"So there was that. Then there was the business about her falling and breaking her neck." Dargeth hesitated again. "It's just that Blossom... wasn't a *small* woman, if you take my meaning," he went on, "but nobody heard her fall. And, anyway, the distance in the bilges isn't much of a fall to get you a broken neck."

"She wasn't a small woman, remember," Djan pointed out.

Dargeth bobbed his head again. "I know that, sir, but it's like I said: it's not just one thing, it's a lot of

things all coming together."

Teldin signaled for the man to go on.

"And then there's the hatch," the sailor continued. "Harriana said it was shut—not all the way, but shut. I don't think any of the other jacks remembered that, but I did. If Blossom fell and broke her neck by accident, who shut the hatch?"

The Cloakmaster was silent. Maybe he'd been hasty in underrating Dargeth's intelligence after all. "That's one thing," he pointed out. "What are the others?"

"The accidents, when we were fighting the pirates and before," the man answered. "When Merrienne fell, and when the catapult broke. All on their own, they didn't mean much." He shrugged. "Things break on board ship, that's why you need jacks like me to fix them, but to have two things break, just when we're about to be attacked by a pirate who knew we were coming... Well, it made me think.

"And now it's the catapult again."

Both Teldin and Djan jerked upright in their chairs as though they'd been stung. "What's wrong with the catapult?" the Cloakmaster demanded.

"You know we wound it back when that metal thing was coming after us," Dargeth explained. "You ordered us to do it yourself, Captain. Well, when we were told to stand down again, it was my job to let the tension out of the catapult so it wouldn't be damaged staying ready to fire for too long.

"Well, when I was letting it back, I looked at the skeins and the bearing." His gaze settled steadily on Teldin's face. "They've been jiggered, Captain. Somebody split the bearing with a spike and cut one of the skeins. Not all the way through, otherwise she'd have torn apart right when we wound her back. But real clever, a couple of strands here, a couple of strands there, all the way around. If we'd left her wound back for any longer, she'd have gone soon enough. But she'd *certain* have gone the first time we fired her. She'd have torn herself right apart, and that first shot wouldn't have hit the side of a barn even if we'd been *in* the barn."

"Hold it." Djan raised a hand to interrupt the half-orc's rapid words. "When could this have happened? When did you last check the catapult?"

Dargeth shrugged. "During the repairs after we landed on the planet with those three-legged things," he explained. "I was tuning the catapult—Miss Julia was working with me—and everything was fine then."

So this happened recently, then, Teldin realized, during the voyage through the Flow after leaving the Nex crystal sphere. "Who else worked on the weapon, Dargeth?"

"Just me and Miss Julia at the time, Captain, but others might have come to work on it later. I don't know."

Teldin nodded. "Go on."

"So I put it all together, Captain," Dargeth mumbled, "and I'm sorry if I was wrong, but I think they're all connected. Somebody jiggered things so the boom and the catapult would break, outside Heartspace, just like somebody jiggered the catapult now.

"And"—his voice firmed up—"I think maybe that same somebody killed Blossom." He lowered his eyes. "If I'm wrong, Captain, tell me, and I'll take whatever discipline you see fit."

Impulsively, Teldin leaned forward, clapped the big man on the shoulder. "No discipline, Dargeth," he told the sailor. "I just have one question: who have you talked to about this?"

The half-orc looked up, surprised. "Why, nobody, Captain," he asserted. "It's not my place."

"And nobody *else* has talked about any of this in your hearing?" Djan asked.

"Nobody, sir," Dargeth said firmly. He paused and looked at his two superior officers.

Then I *am* right, sirs?" he asked quietly. He didn't wait or them to speak; apparently their expressions were all the answer he needed. "I won't mention this to anyone, ever, without you give me leave first," he stated flatly. "Is that what you want me to do, sir? Captain?"

"That's exactly what I want you to do," Teldin confirmed. He patted the big man's shoulder again. "Thank you, Dargeth. You've done exactly what you should have done, exactly what both of us would have wanted you to do." He smiled—difficult, since he didn't feel at all like smiling. "You can return to your duties now."

Djan watched the half-orc scramble to his feet and vanish out the door. Then he turned to Teldin and raised an eyebrow. "Interesting," he said neutrally.

"As my grandfather always told me," Teldin said, "Troubles are like raindrops; they never come singly."

The half-elf nodded agreement.

Julia, Teldin thought. It couldn't be Julia, could it?

He lay in his bunk, staring off into infinity. Through the closed door he heard someone make six bells. Six bells in the bottom of the night watch—that made it three in the morning by the groundling clock.

It *couldn't* be Julia...

But... how else to interpret their conversation of earlier that evening? He'd sought her out soon after Dargeth had left, to confirm the half-ore's memories about the catapult repairs. She'd been sitting in the saloon, eating a hand meal and chatting with Lucinus, the navigator. He'd joined her at the table.

After the quick kiss with which they usually greeted each other—just a peck, not the more intense kiss they used to share—he'd said, "Tell me about the catapult."

She'd looked at him blankly. "What about the catapult?"

"What condition was it in?" he'd asked. "When you tuned it with Dargeth after we left Nex."

"I never went near it," she'd responded lightly, and then she'd shrugged. "I know Dargeth was asking for my help, but I was busy with other things and never got around to it. I guess he found somebody else to help him."

"You're sure?" he'd pressed.

"Of course I'm sure," she'd replied. "I'd remember if I did it, wouldn't I?" Four bells had sounded, and she'd got to her feet. "No rest for the wicked," she'd joked. "I've got bridge duty. See you later, maybe?" And with a warm smile, she'd left the saloon.

That's when Lucinus had cleared his throat. "Captain..." he'd started uncomfortably.

"Yes, Lucinus?"

"Captain, I..." The ginger-haired halfling had paused to order his thoughts. "Captain," he'd begun again, "I don't mean to contradict the second mate, but..." His voice had trailed off.

That's when the cold chill had started to invade Teldin's bones, his blood. "But what?" he'd pressed, maybe a little harshly.

The halfling had blinked in surprise at the Cloakmaster's tone—had visibly considered dropping the entire matter—but he'd swallowed hard and pressed on. "I saw her, Captain," he'd said quietly. "I saw her working with Dargeth. I don't know quite what they were doing. I don't know anything about catapults. But they *were working* on it," he'd stressed. "The two of them. Then Dargeth left, and the second mate continued to work." He'd shrugged. "I didn't pay it any mind at the time, of course, but I do remember it, clear as day. Just thought I should tell you," he'd finished, then hurriedly vacated the saloon, leaving Teldin to his thoughts.

Julia. Could it have been her?

She certainly knew her way around the ship. She'd exhibited an incredible knack for fixing just about anything, from a sprung hull plank to a sticking hatch hinge. And didn't the ability to fix things imply the ability to *unfix* them, to sabotage them? He knew she was a doughty warrior, despite her petite size—he remembered the three sellswords she'd dispatched aboard the *Nebulon* in orbit around Toril. Was she was skilled with her bare hands as she was with a blade? Maybe Blossom's spirit could tell him....

He shook his head forcefully. No. But...

But. His mind kept drifting back to Julia's surprise appearance on Crescent, when the *Boundless* was readying for departure. The strange, circumstantial tale she'd told about now she'd come to be there. He'd never really felt comfortable with that, had he? Even with Djan's declaration that Teldin was *verenthetae*, a weaver of the strands of destiny, the coincidence had seemed just too strong, too unlikely. At the time, he'd suppressed his doubts from pleasure at having Julia back in his life, accepting

Djan's half-baked metaphysics as a way of denying his thoughts. Now, however, he had to reexamine things. How likely was it—really—that Julia had "just happened" to appear on Crescent right at that crucial moment? Not very likely at all. In fact, astronomically unlikely.

He ground his teeth in frustration. I should have thought all this through long ago, he berated himself. Instead I let myself be blinded, didn't I? I let myself be taken in. *Again*, by Paladine's blood. By *another* woman. He remembered Rianna Wyvernsbane, the lustrous fall of her honey-blond hair, the flash of her green eyes.

Her snarl as she lunged at him with his own sword.

Her betrayal.

Teldin writhed in degradation. Another betrayal, by another woman he loved—this time without the intervention of a magical charm, which made it even worse... By all the gods, how could I be so stupid twice in a lifetime? Tears stung his eyes, tears of bitter humiliation.

Yet, was he being stupid now? Was he overreacting, letting his suspicions—perhaps unfounded—get the better of his reason? He forced himself to think dispassionately—or, at least, as dispassionately as was possible given the circumstances.

Maybe he was being too quick to suspect—no, to be honest, to suspect, try, and convict—Julia. Considering his history, his experience with Rianna Wyvernsbane, it was perfectly understandable, he told himself. But did that make it right?

No, it didn't. What was he basing this on, really? On the coincidence of her appearance on Crescent—which, Djan attributed to the Cloakmaster being *verenthetae*. Although Teldin didn't believe it fully, Djan most certainly seemed to. And on the fact that she denied working on the forward catapult with Dargeth. The first point seemed telling, but—who knew?—maybe the half-elf's metaphysical mumbo-jumbo was right after all. And the second point: it came down to a lapse in Julia's memory, perhaps. The first weeks after leaving Nex had been busy ones, the crew scrambling all over the ship and each other to repair the damage. Wasn't it possible that Julia herself had been so busy that she'd simply forgotten tuning the catapult?

Possible, yes. Likely? Maybe.

He was sorely tempted to seek her out—she had bridge duty tonight, didn't she?—and question her again about the catapult. Maybe if he pressed, she'd remember.

But he couldn't do that. Maybe she'd remember, but if she *was* involved in the sabotage, she'd *pretend* to remember. And he'd have tipped her off that he suspected her. It was just like the investigation after Blossom's murder. He couldn't ask the questions he most wanted answered because those very questions would communicate too much to the people hearing them.

He sighed—a sigh that threatened to turn into a sob. What do I do? he asked the overhead. I can't trust her, not fully, but I can't let her *know* I don't trust her.

He rolled over, let his hand fall to the cocked and loaded hand-crossbow that he'd taken to keeping under his bunk since Blossom's death. When will this all be over?

When would this voyage be over? Grampian asked himself sourly. The ship he'd commandeered was reasonably large as spelljamming vessels went, but that still didn't represent much elbowroom. The sense of claustrophobia that always accompanied travel in space was strong in him.

The crew didn't help. It was all human—a necessity, he had to admit, but still a disappointing one. Like most of his race, he enjoyed the company of his own kind. But there had been none of his race available, and, anyway, "Grampian"—the identity he'd maintained for much too long now—was human, and would presumably hire a human crew.

He sighed, a high-pitched whistling sound. Still, the quarry was near, now: still in the crystal sphere it had entered two days ago, the same sphere Grampian's ship had entered, too, just hours before. Why remain here? he wondered. What was so fascinating that the quarry would remain in this vicinity? The question troubled him slightly. Anything that fascinated the quarry might turn out to be of help to him. And

anything that helped the quarry would hinder Grampian.

Or perhaps the quarry just doesn't know where to go next, he mused. That was possible, wasn't it? Perhaps even probable. Grampian had been surprised by the quarry's moves of late. Apparently the quarry *had* found something important in the Great Archive—why else the voyage to that tiny crystal sphere, deep in the Flow? And why else the trip to this undistinguished sphere, this valueless world in the vicinity of which the quarry now remained?

Still, any line of inquiry could play out at any time— Grampian knew that all too well from personal experience. Perhaps that had happened to the quarry.

Well, it wouldn't matter soon enough. Grampian's ship was closing the gap rapidly. It would arrive in another few days, unless the quarry decided to move on.

And, if Grampian's plan worked as he expected it to, the quarry wouldn't be *able* to move on. Grampian felt the muscles of his assumed face—quite different from his own muscles—twist thick lips into a smile. If all was happening according to schedule, his agent aboard the quarry's ship should already be seeing to that. He nodded slowly. He'd chosen well with that agent, an intelligent operative, and highly innovative.

Grampian sat back in his chair, staring out of the red-tinged, ovoid porthole set in the bulkhead of the captain's day room. Yes, he thought, a few more days, and then we'll see what we shall see.

Teldin emerged from his cabin into the saloon. His head felt stuffed full of cotton batten, and his eyes felt as though somebody had thoughtfully taken them out and sanded them for him while he'd slept.

Slept, he thought bitterly. If you could call what I did "sleep." He'd tossed and turned for hours, replaying scenes over and over again on the stage of his mind. His betrayal by Rianna Wyvernsbane, the line of reasoning that supported his suspicion of Julia... Even an unhealthy volume of sagecoarse hadn't stilled the churning thoughts and allowed him to relax.

And now he was paying the price for his "medication." Lights seemed too bright, even the small lanterns in the saloon, and sounds too intense. Even the sound of someone making two bells had sounded like the tolling of doom. And smells—*anything* seemed capable of making his stomach writhe. He needed food, he decided, something bland but solid, to settle his stomach.

Unfortunately, he saw, a settled stomach wasn't what he'd find in the saloon. There was only one of the crew members there—the beholder, Beth-Abz. It was hovering beside one of the mess tables, telekinetically manipulating some food into its gaping maw. While Teldin had long ago come to consider the eye tyrant a friend, he still had difficulty watching Beth-Abz eat, particularly now, he thought. The creature's meal, a joint of meat big enough to feed a family of four, totally raw and still dripping blood, hung in the air before it.

The Cloakmaster's stomach knotted, threatening to empty itself at any moment. With a grunted greeting, he hurried aft, through the door, and out onto the cargo deck.

He breathed deeply, drawing the cool, clear air into his lungs. Thankfully, he felt his nausea subside and the cobwebs in his head start to dissolve. Damn fortunate thing Beth-Abz didn't have to eat often, he told himself with a wry smile. Even with maybe one meal like that a week, the beholder was a serious drain on the ship's provisions. Fortunate, too, that the *Boundless* had come equipped with a "freezebox," a magical device of arcane manufacture that kept food fresh for protracted lengths of time. Beholders were carnivorous, after all, and Beth-Abz had proven unable to stomach cooked food. If they hadn't been able to keep raw meat fresh in the freezebox, they'd have had to let the young eye tyrant off the ship long ago. Even with a good supply of food, Teldin mused, Beth-Abz probably found the proximity of the rest of the crew a real stimulus to his hunger—much the same as if the Cloakmaster were living and working in a well-stocked larder...

He shook his head. What am I doing? he asked himself. Inventing more troubles for myself? As if I don't have enough....

He looked out over the port rail. Garrash was a distant, ruddy disk about as large as an apple held at

arm's length, its fire ring still clearly visible. After his frustrating conversation with Zat, Teldin had ordered the ship to stand off from the planet. Not from any fear of the great metal creatures; they seemed—well, not harmless, but not inclined to do any harm. More than a dozen of the metallic beings had congregated in the vicinity of the squid ship, seemingly fascinated by the fact that there existed one of the "tiny, scurrying things" that could actually communicate with them. The great, mirrored triangles had taken to cruising close to the *Boundless* for a better view... and scaring the wits out of Teldin's crew in the process. Even though he knew the beasts meant no harm, the Cloakmaster could understand his crew's reactions. Seeing another one of the things—one hundred feet long, one hundred and fifty wide—drifting in space a spear cast off the beam was enough to frighten *him*.

For that reason, he'd pulled the ship back to this distance. Zat and its fellows had seemed not inclined to travel so far just to satisfy their curiosity, and had returned to their normal life, which had let the crewmen return to theirs.

"Captain Teldin Moore." A voice that could have come from a clogged sewer sounded behind the Cloakmaster. He turned.

Beth-Abz had followed him out onto the deck. The beholder had swallowed its meal, but drips of blood around its thin lips still were enough to start Teldin's stomach churning again.

"Well met, Beth-Abz," the Cloakmaster said, backing off a step to stay out of range of the creature's slaughterhouse breath.

"Captain,..." the creature started, then its deep-pitched voice trailed off. There was something about the way its ten eyestalks moved that made Teldin think it was uncomfortable. What's this about? he wondered, with a chill of foreboding.

"Captain," it started again, moving closer and lowering the volume of its voice. A miasma of blood and other nauseating odors washed over Teldin, but he forced himself to stand his ground. "Captain, I have heard two of the crew talking about damage to the ship."

"The ship's damaged?" Teldin demanded.

The beholder's eyestalks weaved a complex pattern. "I am not communicating well," it said quietly. "I find my thoughts are somehow sluggish. What I mean is that they were speaking of *causing* damage to the ship."

Sabotage! "Who?" Teldin saw a couple of the crewman on deck glance over as they heard his barked question. He forced himself to pitch his voice lower, and repeated, "Who? Who was it?"

Beth-Abz was silent for a moment. Teldin cursed silently in frustration. He knew that the eye tyrant had a frustrating inability to easily remember human and demihuman names —probably because they didn't communicate the same information about clan and nation as did beholder names. "It was the small one," Beth-Abz said slowly, "the small one on the bridge."

Did that mean Julia?

"And another, a larger one."

"Describe them to me," Teldin ordered.

"The smaller one..." Suddenly the beholder fell silent. One of its eyestalks had suddenly convulsed, driving directly upward from the top of the creature's body. The other nine pivoted around to stare at the wayward eye. "The smaller one... ° it started over.

The eyestalk convulsed again, another joining it in its spastic motion. The creature's loose-lipped mouth opened slightly, and a goblet of yellow-white saliva dribbled down its lower surface to drip on the deck.

"What's the matter?" Teldin asked, suddenly alarmed.

"I feel pain," Beth-Abz said, its voice taking on a strange, bubbling tone. "Sharp pain. I feel..."

Another convulsion racked its eyestalks—all of them, this time. The creature made a sound like a cough, and saliva sprayed Teldin's jerkin, looking puslike against the black fabric.

"What is it?" Teldin asked again.

"Pain..." the beholder gurgled. Its huge central eye rolled wildly, the horizontal pupil contracting down to a black line, then suddenly expanding so large that the pale-colored iris almost vanished. It coughed again, but now green-black bile—or was it blood?—sprayed out with the spittle.

Teldin stepped back, horror and fear churning in his chest. What in the hells was happening?

Beth-Abz rocked, like a ship in heavy seas, listing one way then the other, as though it could no longer control its levitation power. The eyestalks convulsed again. The beholder crashed to the deck.

"What is it?" Teldin screamed at the stricken creatures. "What?"

The great mouth worked, made gargling sounds as Beth-Abz tried to answer. It coughed again, spewing bile and bright blood.

A brilliant green beam lashed out from one of the minor eyes, lanced out into space.

Teldin heard yells of alarm from the crewmen on deck, the thundering of running feet as they sprinted for safety. He backed off another couple of steps, wanting desperately to join them in their flight, but unable to take his eyes from the agonized creature.

Another beam—pinkish red this time—burst from another eye and persisted for a second or two as the eyestalk lashed about wildly. The beam swept through the air like a scythe, cutting into a pack of sailors struggling to get through the door into the forecabin. One of them screamed, a huge gout of blood bursting open in his back. The sailor fell, to lie still in a spreading pool of scarlet.

Now all of the thrashing, weaving secondary eyes were cutting loose with their magical powers. Beams of green, yellow, and actinic blue-white hissed through the air, striking wildly all over the ship. Teldin heard rather than saw the top of the mainmast detonate into splinters. The body of the dead sailor was struck by another beam, bright violet this time, and it was hurled into the air as though shot from a catapult. The green beam lashed out again, blasting a hole clean through the deck.

"By Paladine's blood...!" Teldin gasped.

He had to get out of here, had to get clear of the creature's magical convulsions. Its death throes? What else could they be? He turned and sprinted for the door into the stern-cabin. More screams sounded in his ears, mixed with the rending of tortured wood as something forward blew apart. He grabbed the door handle and flung it open as another beam—this one as black as night—played momentarily over the planking by his head. He ducked low and flung himself through the door into the helm compartment.

There was nobody on the helm—no need for a helmsman when the ship was drifting in space—and the compartment was empty. Teldin leaped behind the heavy wooden chair that was the helm itself and crouched low.

Not a moment too soon. A green beam lanced through the forward bulkhead, exploding a man-sized area into dust before continuing straight through the rear of the hull and out into space. Even over the sound of the destruction, Teldin could hear the gargling, choking sounds of Beth-Abz's death.

Another concussive blast sounded from the deck outside, then silence.

Teldin crouched behind the helm for almost another minute before emerging into the scene of devastation that was the *Boundless*.

The Cloakmaster knelt alongside Djan, examining Beth-Abz's corpse. The dead beholder lay on its side on the deck, looking like some kind of partially deflated kickball. Its eyestalks, which, only minutes ago, had lashed the ship with magical destruction, hung limply. The big central eye was open, the black pupil contracted so far as to be an almost invisible hairline. The area of the mouth and the deck around it were spattered with blood and bile and partially digested meat. Teldin wrinkled his nose, suppressing his nausea only through a titanic act of will. The stench was terrible.

Although Djan's face showed his own distaste, he dipped a finger in the horrid liquid and raised it to his nose. He coughed—a tight, gagging sound—and wiped the finger clean on a cloth he pulled from his belt pouch. "Bitter almonds," the first mate said quietly. "Poison."

Teldin rose unsteadily to his feet. He looked around.

The *Boundless* looked as though it had been through a major action, suffering mightily under the heavy weapons of an opposing ship. The upper half of the mainmast was gone, as was much of the portside rail. The dying beholder's disintegration beam had blown half a dozen holes in the main deck and

in the fore- and sterncastles. One of the stern spanker fins had been half torn away, and the mainsail was shredded, its fragments tied into complex knots, courtesy of the eye tyrant's telekinetic beam. The keel, the Cloakmaster could feel, as he extended his perception through the ultimate helm, had been cracked again—not critically, but enough to put the ship at serious risk if it had to weather any heavy maneuvering.

He sighed, shaking his head slowly. "Casualties?" he asked Djan.

The half-elf's shoulders slumped. "Four dead, not including Beth-Abz," he announced, his voice exhausted. "Six wounded, two seriously. One—Harriana—not expected to live."

Teldin felt his head bow forward as if under a crushing weight. More dead. And how many more to follow before this was all over?

He forced his depression into the deepest recesses of his mind. Deal with that later, he told himself. Right now you've got to be the captain... and be *seen* to be the captain. He pulled himself up to his full height.

"Start the repairs," he ordered loudly. "Prepare the bodies for burial. And whatever the wounded need, give it to them."

As crewmen scurried off to attend to their duties, the Cloakmaster turned to Djan and asked him quietly, "You're sure about the poison?"

"As sure as I can be," the first mate confirmed, his own voice barely above a whisper. "Somebody killed Beth-Abz, almost killed the *Boundless* as well."

"How *is* the ship?"

Djan shrugged. "We can sail—slowly—but we can't fight," he replied, confirming Teldin's own analysis. "Dranigor's one of the wounded, but"—he glanced at Teldin's cloak—

"but I suppose that doesn't hamper us as much as it might."

"Be thankful for small favors, you mean?" The Cloakmaster clapped his friend on the shoulder and squeezed—gaining as much reassurance from the gesture as he gave. "You're right, of course."

The half-elf lowered his voice even more, so much that Teldin had to lean forward to catch his words. "The crew knows about Beth-Abz," he said grimly. "There's no way to cover this one up. They all know he was poisoned, and they know that means one of them did it."

Teldin nodded. As with Blossom's death, the guilty party could have been anybody on board—literally anybody. Every crew member had free run of the saloon and the galley, of course, they had to be able to eat when they needed to. There wasn't a lock on the freezebox, as there might have been on some ships. Teldin had insisted on an honor system for such things, and it had worked fine. Until now, he reminded himself. Anybody could have slipped in, at any time during the voyage, and insinuated the poison into Beth-Abz's food. By unspoken consent, the meat that would be kept raw for the beholder was stored separately from the crew's provisions, so there'd been no risk that the poisoner would end up eating his own poison for dawnfry. The killer would have had to bring his or her own poison aboard, of course, possibly when the *Boundless* was last in port. But that wouldn't have been much of a problem. The Cloakmaster knew all too well how easy it was to buy just about anything around the docks of a major port like Starfall, and there was no way of knowing what a crew member brought aboard in his duffel, or even in his belt pouch. The only issue was the forethought and planning involved—it had been a long time since the squid ship had made landfall, but this whole thing reeked of a complex, organized plan, didn't it?

He sighed again, feeling the weight of his responsibility threatening to swamp him once more. For Djan's benefit, he tried to force a smile—but he feared as he did it that it would look more like a rictus. "Try to get us as spaceworthy as possible," he suggested.

"And then?" the half-elf asked softly.

Teldin had no answer for him but a shrug.

The Cloakmaster thrashed, straining against sweat-soaked linen ropes. He moaned deep in his

throat.

He knew he was asleep, knew he was dreaming, but that didn't make the dream any less horrific.

The dead Beth-Abz was hovering before him, the beholder's eyestalks limp and inert, its central eye sightless. Still it moved, tracking him with its blind eyes as he ran wildly around the deck of the *Boundless*. The creature's slack-lipped mouth was open, drooling blood and bile onto the deck beneath it.

And there was *something* stirring within that gaping mouth, something trying to free itself from the prison of the eye tyrant's body. It writhed and mewled, Coated with dark blood. As he tried to escape Beth-Abz's empty stare, Teldin couldn't see well enough to recognize just what it was that was trying to free itself and emerge into the light. But he had the unescapable feeling that he would recognize it if he only looked long enough. And that when he did recognize it, the horror would drive him insane. He moaned, running for the door leading into the forecastle, to his own cabin.

But before he could reach it, the door swung open. Someone stood there, the corpulent figure of Blossom, her head hanging unnaturally to one side. She smiled. Teldin recoiled in horror and sprinted past the beholder, heading for the door to the sterncastle.

Again the door opened before he could reach it, revealing Merrienne. Little Merrienne, the young woman who'd plunged to her death from the crow's nest as the squid ship had left Heartspace. The side of her head was slightly flattened, the skull staved in from its impact with the deck. Still she managed to bare her bloody teeth at Teldin in a warm smile...

Other figures were appearing from everywhere, climbing the ladder from belowdecks, descending from the fore- and afterdecks, even clambering over the rails from somewhere overboard. Allyn, the gunner's mate, and Vernel. Manicombe and Harriana. More—figures from deeper in the past. Dana, the gnome. Shandess, the forward gunner on the old *Probe*. Sylvie, the navigator, slain by an elven ballista shot in Herd-space. And still they came, all those who'd died while helping him in his quest—all those that he, in a way, had killed. They surrounded him, a ring of smiling faces atop torn or shattered bodies, pressing ever closer, forcing him nearer and nearer to the floating corpse of Beth-Abz.

He heard a sound. From deep within the body of the beholder it came, a sibilance of movement.

The *thing* within the eye tyrant, trying to escape?

But, no, it came from elsewhere, he recognized now. From all around him, maybe? Yet not that either. No, it came —somehow—from outside this horrible reality altogether....

And with that, Teldin was awake. He lay motionless in his bunk, staring up into blackness, every nerve fiber tingling. By the gods, what a nightmare. He was growing all too used to night terrors, but this had been particularly...

What was that! He stiffened.

It was the noise from the dream: a faint sibilance from somewhere in the darkness around him, as of something brushing softly against the deck. A foot? That was it-stealthy movement.

Was it the saboteur, the murderer, sneaking up on him, ready to finish him off as well? He'd latched the door of his cabin, but he knew all too well how little hindrance that would prove to someone with any skill at lockpicking.

His eyes were wide open, but he could hardly see anything at all. The cabin's lantern was out, and the only illumination was faint starlight coming in through the two "eye" portholes.

He remained totally motionless, focusing all of his concentration into his eyes and ears. For a moment he considered using the cloak, borrowing the enhanced senses of the ultimate helm, but he immediately dismissed that as foolish. The moment he tried to access that power, the cloak would glow with its magical light, giving the assassin—if that's what had made the sound—a perfectly lit target at which to strike.

The sound came again. Yes, it *was* stealthy movement. There was no doubt any longer. Somebody was crossing the cabin—slowly, oh, so cautiously—from the door to Teldin's bunk, mounted against the forward bulkhead.

He needed a weapon. The idea flashed through his mind. The hand-crossbow...

He grunted softly, drawing the sound out into a low mumble—hoping he sounded like a sleeper

disturbed by a dream. He rolled over, pulling the blanket up around his chin, simultaneously letting a hand flop down over the edge of the bunk. His fingers brushed the deck, then touched something else: the crossbow, cocked and loaded with a single bolt. One shot. It had to be sufficient—enough to either incapacitate the assassin or slow him down sufficiently for Teldin to escape or summon help. Slowly, carefully, he wrapped his hand around the small wooden stock and let his finger rest on the trigger.

In his mind he rehearsed his moves. Bring the small weapon up quickly—but not so quickly that he dislodged the bolt from its seat—simultaneously flipping off the safety catch with his thumb. Aim and shoot.

But aim where? He opened his eyes as wide as they'd go, trying to pick up every iota of light in the room.

Yes, there was something—a faint, cold shimmer. Starlight washing over steel. The blade of a short sword. His pulse was pounding in his ears, so loud that the assassin had to hear it. The faintly gleaming sword blade was only five feet away from him.

He tried to imagine the position of the body behind that blade. Assume it's a right-hander, he told himself. The odds are ten to one in your favor. That would put the swordsman's body... there!

In a single movement he brought the hand-crossbow up, flicked the safety, and pulled the trigger. The small weapon jerked in his hand as the bowstring sang. He imagined he could hear the bolt cross the open space, and undeniably *could* hear it drive into his would-be killer's flesh.

Light, that's what he needed now. He expanded his awareness through the cloak and squinted as the pink light flared from behind him, flooding the compartment.

From his virtually omnipresent viewpoint, he could clearly see the crossbow bolt's feathered haft protruding from the lower chest of the assassin.

It was Julia. By Paladine's blood, it *was* Julia....

The short sword dropped from the copper-haired woman's nerveless fingers. She clutched at the bolt, driven into her chest just below her right breast, and she crumpled.

Teldin flung the tiny crossbow aside and dived off the bed toward her.

Oh, no. By the gods, *no*... His eyes filled with tears, and his heart felt as though it were about to twist inside out.

There's a difference between suspicion and knowledge, he realized with a sickening impact. He'd suspected Julia. He thought he'd reconciled himself to the fact that she could have been the one. But that reconciliation had only been in his own imagination, he understood now. Now he knew that, again, a woman he'd loved—Why not use the word? he asked himself bitterly—had betrayed him, had tried to kill him. And he, in turn, had killed her.

What is it? he wanted to scream to the heavens so that the gods could hear him. What fa it you want me to learn so badly that you keep repeating the same damn lesson?

The light of the cloak faded. The enhanced perception slipped as his emotions overwhelmed his control over the cloak.

The knot in his throat felt so hard that it threatened to choke him as he knelt by the fallen woman and cradled her head in his hands. In the faint wash of starlight, her face was peaceful, youthful—the way it had looked on the pillow beside him when he'd woken in the night and turned to watch her sleep. Her eyes were closed. For a moment, he thought she was already gone, then he saw her chest rise and fall and saw a tiny bubble of air emerge from the bloody wound.

"*Why!*" he cried hoarsely. "*Why*, may the gods damn you?" Her eyes flickered and opened. Normally bright, her eyes were dulled now. They rolled wildly for a moment, and Teldin knew that whatever it was she was seeing, it wasn't this small compartment. Then they cleared slightly and focused on his face. "Teldin," she murmured.

"*Why?*" His voice was a whisper this time, but sounded even more tortured in his own ears.

"Is it dead?"

"What?"

"Is it..." Her voice faded; he brought his ear closer to her mouth. "Is it dead?" she repeated.

Was what dead? What was... ?

He heard it again. The faint brushing sound that had roused him from sleep and warned him of Julia's approach.

Behind him...

He snapped his head around, saw something hurtling at him from the shadows under the starboard port, a shape of black on black. He hurled himself aside, not an instant too soon. The object flew past his ear, struck the bulkhead with a sound of stone on wood, and fell onto his bunk.

For the first time he saw it clearly, as it recovered from its missed pounce. It was a spider, or something very much like it, its body at least the size of Teldin's clenched fist. Its legs scrabbled on the blanket, trying to gain better purchase for another leap. Starlight gleamed off its body as it might off a huge, dark gem.

Teldin rolled back, trying to widen the gap between himself and the *thing*. Too late. Its legs were under it again, and it hurled itself right for his face.

Without thought, Teldin flung his hands up in a warding gesture. He felt energy sear through his bones, through every fiber of his being—felt as though his eyes must be burning with the light of a blue-white sun. A sizzling, scintillating curtain of sparks burst into existence before him.

An instant too late; the spider-thing was already past. It struck him heavily in the chest, hard enough to knock him backward. He felt claws like skewers tear at his jerkin, at the flesh of his chest, as it tried for a purchase on his body. Something that felt ice cold, then fire hot, scored the skin of his throat—not quite drawing blood, but terrifyingly close. With a gasp of panic he punched at the thing, a short-arm right jab with more power behind it than he'd ever imagined possible. The blow knocked it clear off his chest—he felt its claws tearing free from his flesh—and across the cabin, to thud into the bulkhead. He heard the clattering as it struggled to right itself and prepare for another attack.

Teldin skittered backward, crablike, across the floor. His right hand struck something—something cylindrical: the sharkskin-wrapped grip of Julia's short sword. He snatched it up and raised it before him, point up and blade angled across to the left to protect his face and throat. With his empty left hand he forced himself to his knees.

The spider-thing was in the shadows again; he couldn't see it. The first glimpse he got of it was as it hurled itself at his face once more.

Without warning, time slowed, divided itself into distinct increments, giving him enough time to examine and evaluate each one.

The cloak, he knew.

His skin felt cold and the hairs on his arras and the backs of his hand could detect the minuscule air currents in the room. He could sense the weave of the jerkin he wore, and imagined he could count the tiny, needle-pointed scales of the sharkskin sword grip just by the way it felt in his hand.

He saw the spider coming toward him, seemingly no faster than a crawl. All eight legs pointed forward, each tipped with a single straight claw. For the first time he saw its two fangs, easily an inch and a half long. It had to have been one of those that scored his throat. Was it poisonous? he wondered. Almost certainly. If that fang had penetrated a fraction of an inch deeper, I'd probably be dying right now. The whole thing, he saw now, didn't really look like a living creature—more like a master sculptor's representation of a spider, cunningly worked in green-black volcanic glass. It isn't alive, he told himself. It's some kind of artifact, magically animated. But what does that matter if it rips my throat open?

He had plenty of time to estimate the spider's path, and almost an eternity to bring the blade up to block it. He saw the spider slam—still in slow-motion—into the edge of the short sword, and saw one of its fangs snapped off by the impact. But he also saw the incredible ferocity with which the clawed legs scrabbled at the sword blade in the instant they were in contact.

Then the momentum of his parry carried the sword around and knocked the spider off into another shadowed corner. This time, though, he found he could see into those shadows as if the starlight had somehow been intensified tenfold.

One of these times it'll get me. The thought struck with chilling clarity.

Without even being aware that he'd made a decision, he felt his right arm flip the sword up into the air. He watched it trace a lazy arc as it rotated end over end. Almost casually, he grabbed it by the blade

a third of the way down from the point, with plenty of time to make sure he didn't slash his palm on the edge. He drew the weapon back to his ear as if for a knife throw, and snapped his forearm forward hard.

The blade flashed in the starlight as it whirled through the air. It struck true, driving point first into the scrabbling black-glass spider.

With a sound that was a hideous cross between the shattering of crystal and an inhuman shriek, the thing exploded into fragments.

As though that sound had been a signal, time returned to normal. Now, the fear that the cloak had partially held at bay came crashing back in, knotting his stomach with nausea.

And with the fear came other emotions: horror, sadness, revulsion... and, most of all, guilt.

He flung himself back to the deck beside Julia and cradled her head again. Sobs tore at his throat. Tears blinded him. Oh, by the gods, *no*... "What were you doing here?" he railed—at her, at the gods, at his destiny. "*What were you doing here?*"

He felt her stir weakly in his arms. Her eyelids flickered open. But now, he knew—somehow he knew—her eyes were sightless. "Teldin?" she whispered.

"I'm here."

"Did I kill it?" When he didn't answer, "Did I *kill* it?" she repeated. "I don't remember."

He closed his eyes and lowered his head until his forehead rested against her cheek. "Yes." He struggled to force the words out. "Yes, Julia, you killed it."

"Then you're all right?"

"Yes." He thought his heart were bursting—wished it *would* burst. "I'm all right."

"I think it stung me, Teldin." Her voice was growing weaker. "I don't remember."

The Cloakmaster wanted to scream for help, call for a healer, run for help, but he couldn't. He was rooted to this spot. Julia was dying, he knew that, fading rapidly. There wasn't anything a healer could do for her now. He knew that, too. And he couldn't—*couldn't—leave* her, turn aside from her, in the moments she had left.

"I heard them talking, Teldin." He leaned forward, put his ear right to her lips. "I heard them talking about killing the captain."

"Who?" he whispered.

"I heard them," she repeated. "They said they were using an obsidian spider. I came to warn you." Her voice was little more than the faintest of breaths now. He had to fill in the syllables he couldn't hear.

"I came here," she went on. "But the spider was already here, I saw it. And you sleeping... I couldn't wake you. You might make noise, trigger the spider's attack. I had to kill it."

"And I did." Her hand, which was gripping the haft of the crossbow bolt, trembled, the fingers seeming to search for something. Teldin took the hand—it was chill to the touch, already—and squeezed. He tried to pour his emotions through the physical contact, to tell her that way what he couldn't with words.

Her pale lips twitched into a faint smile. *She knows*, he told himself. Oh, thank the gods, she knows. Desperately he tried to force himself to believe it.

Julia's eyes flickered again and sought his face. He felt the faintest pressure of her fingers. "Teldin, I..." The last syllable became an extended exhalation of air as her lungs emptied. He waited for the inhalation, though he knew it would never come.

He let the sobs come, now, the great, racking sobs that he'd been suppressing. They shook his frame, seemed about to break his ribs to fragments. He rocked forward, cradling the slight woman in his arms, his tears washing over her peaceful face.

Chapter Twelve

"This is how it got in," Djan said quietly.

Dully, Teldin looked up.

The half-elf was standing by the starboard "eye" porthole. With a fingertip, he traced a smooth-edged hole, not much bigger than a man's clenched fist, that had been cut in the glass crystal.

Then he crossed to the corner where the short sword was driven into the decking, surrounded by the spider's fragments. He stirred the shards with a booted toe. "A highly sophisticated magical construct," he mused. "We're dealing with a high level of magical power here."

The Cloakmaster turned away again. What did it matter? What did anything matter? He looked down again at the still body of Julia at his feet and knelt beside her again. Djan had arranged the corpse, crossing her hands on her chest, then covering her with a blanket from Teldin's bunk. For that he was glad. He knew all too well that if he looked at Julia's peaceful, pale face again, he'd lose control.

I killed her.

His thoughts kept turning back to that hideous, unescapable fact.

I killed her, when she was here to save my life. I distrusted her; I mentally accused and convicted her of treachery. And then I killed her. He swallowed a sob, fearing that if he let his control slip again, he'd never get it back.

Djan came toward him and squatted down beside him.

You didn't do this, Teldin," he said, his voice quiet and intense, as though he were responding to the Cloakmaster's churning thoughts. "*They* did it."

Teldin looked up at his friend. He felt the unshed tears burning what he knew were haunted-looking eyes. "I was the one who pulled the trigger," he croaked.

"What else were you supposed to do—supposed to think—when you saw what you did?" The half-elf shook his head impatiently. "You didn't kill her. Do you blame a sword when it kills? No, you blame the person wielding the sword.

"You're the sword, Teldin," he pressed on. "That's the way it worked out. You may have struck the blow, but the responsibility lies with those who set things up so that you had to."

Teldin shook his head. The half-elf's words were persuasive, but he knew he wouldn't be able to absolve himself of responsibility that easily. At best, he *shared* responsibility with the saboteurs, the poisoners, the people who'd tried to kill him with the magical spider. But, still, it had been he who'd pulled the trigger. He remembered the small crossbow bucking in his hand, the bowstring singing its lethal song. He shuddered and closed his eyes.

He felt a grip on his arm—tight enough to be painful. He opened his eyes again and looked into Djan's face. He saw a new emotion there—anger.

"No," Djan snapped. "What's done is done—a tragedy, a terrible tragedy—but it's *done*, by the mind of Marrak! You can choose to accept that and work to find out who's behind all of this, or you can choose to turn in on yourself, spend all your energy on punishing yourself."

"Maybe I deserve punishment," Teldin mumbled.

"Maybe you do," the half-elf echoed, "but leave that to the gods. That's what they're for. Will torturing yourself solve anything? Will it tell you the names of the killers? Will it bring Julia back from the dead?"

Teldin jerked as if stung.

Djan's grip on his arm slacked off. "I know it's hard, Teldin, maybe the hardest thing you'll ever do, but you've got to put it behind you, at least for now." He smiled wryly. "If you want to torture yourself, you'll have the rest of your life to do it... which might not be long unless we figure out what to do now."

"What?"

"They tried to kill you once, my friend," Djan stated, "whoever *they* are. You can bet they'll try again, unless we think of some way of stopping them."

Teldin nodded slowly. Djan was right, he knew. Self-pity and self-blame weren't any kind of answer. He'd known that all his life, and had been confused—and vaguely disgusted—when he'd seen others crippling themselves with self-blame.

And yet it was so seductive. While he was busy blaming himself, he wouldn't have to take action, wouldn't have to do anything. It was a nice, safe excuse, with the added advantage of a smug sense of moral superiority. Sure I'm not doing anything, but look how *guilty* I feel.... Seductive, but totally pointless.

He forced himself to his feet, driving his guilt and his sadness into the recesses of his mind. He knew

all too well that he'd have to deal with them sometime, but his friend was right: now wasn't the time for self-castigation.

Think, he told himself.

"Who else knows about what happened here?" he asked after a few moments. The vague outlines of an idea were taking shape.

Djan raised his eyebrows. "Nobody," he answered, "I heard noise and came to investigate. I don't know if anyone else heard anything or not, but nobody else came with me." He gestured to the closed cabin door. "When I saw what had happened, I shut the door." He shrugged. "I don't think anybody else knows anything happened here... apart from the murderers themselves, of course."

"Is Dranigor on the helm?" Teldin asked, thinking about the helmsman's expanded perception.

The half-elf shook his head. "Why should he be? No, he's still resting up from his injuries."

The Cloakmaster nodded. He thought he had his plan. It would be difficult—not practically, but emotionally—but it might just lead the murders to show their hand and reveal their identities...

"What if the murderers succeeded?" he asked Djan quietly.

While Djan went aft to spread the word of the captain's "foul murder," Teldin spent a few minutes in his cabin.

The face and body he'd assumed—using the cloak's shape-shifting powers—felt alien, his balance very different from normal. He touched the smooth skin of his cheeks and felt the tears that leaked from eyes that weren't his.

I'm sorry, Julia, he thought. Wherever you are, forgive me. Forgive me for taking your life, and forgive me for this deception.

He straightened his spine, brushed his short, copper hair back from his face, and opened the door. "Julia" walked out into the saloon, carefully shutting and locking the door of the captain's cabin.

There was a handful of crewmen in the saloon, standing around uncomfortably in silence, as though they didn't know how to react or where to go. When they saw Julia emerge, they dropped their gazes and looked away—looked anywhere but at the petite woman. Nobody stopped Teldin as he crossed the saloon. Nobody spoke to him—which was just as well, since if he'd been forced to speak, the deception would have come to an end instantly. He hoped that, if anyone *did* try to talk to him, he could just pretend to be too overcome with emotion to speak. Everyone on board knew about the on-again-off-again relationship between the captain and the second mate, and would presumably expect Julia to take her erstwhile lover's death hard.

The entire ship felt heavy and somber, Teldin thought as he emerged onto the main deck. Or was that just his own emotions coloring his perception? No, he decided after a moment, the sense of depression was real enough. The ship had lost its captain—or so the crew thought—and that was a major tragedy. Julia's lips quirked in an ironic smile. I'm one of the few people who know how people react after he's died, he told himself.

There were a dozen crewmen on the main deck and the fore- and sterncastles, working to repair the damage inflicted by the beholder's death spasms. Actually, at the moment they weren't working, just standing around as though they didn't know what to do, as though waiting for orders from their dead captain to get back to their lives. As he crossed to the ladder leading belowdecks, Teldin observed them from his peripheral vision, watching for some inappropriate reaction—a sense of satisfaction, perhaps. He knew Djan was already belowdecks, moving among the crew, looking for the same kind of thing, waiting for the murderers to take the next step in their plan.

Suddenly he heard a yell from belowdecks. "Fire in the hold!" From another part of the ship, a hoarse scream sounded, followed by the crash of footsteps. He sprinted down the ladder, almost falling as he forgot to compensate for Julia's shorter legs. The air was acrid with smoke, which drifted forward from the cargo hold. He ran aft.

The fire was small, a pile of oil-soaked rags burning next to one of the holes the dying beholder had

blown in the portside hull. Most of the smoke from the blaze was pouring out through the hull breach, instead of fouling the air of the hold. Crewmen had responded instantly to the warning shout, and three sailors were already throwing buckets of sand on the fire. As Teldin watched, the small fire was extinguished. He heard more commotion in the area of the crew compartments and ran forward.

There was a small knot of crewmen in front of the door to the forward sleeping compartment. One of them—Anson, Teldin saw—clutched a nasty gash in his left forearm, blood seeping between the fingers of his right hand.

"What in the hells is happening?" It was Djan, pushing his way through the crowd.

It was the wounded Anson who answered, his voice rough with pain. "They're in there," he gasped. "They killed Dranigor."

The last helmsman, Teldin thought. With Dranigor, Blossom, and (presumably) the Cloakmaster eliminated, the *Boundless* should be dead in space.

"Who?" Djan demanded.

"Dargeth and Lucinus."

Teldin closed his eyes and swayed as the world seemed to spin around him. Dargeth, who'd claimed that Julia had worked with him on the forward catapult—probably just to sow dissension and suspicion, he recognized now, a psychological analogue of physical sabotage to the ship. And Lucinus, who'd reinforced it by contradicting Julia's claim that she'd never touched the catapult. He ground his teeth together, struggling to bottle up the scream that threatened to tear from his throat. Paladine's blood, I'll kill them...

"Tell me what happened," Djan ordered.

"They came in, swords drawn," Anson replied, "ordered us all out of there. We were unarmed. What could we do?"

The half-elf pointed at the man's wound. "You tried to do something."

Anson grimaced. "For all the good it did. Before Dargeth shut the door, I saw Lucinus kill Dranigor in his hammock, just slash his throat open. Then they shut the door and secured it."

"Why?" Djan asked. "They're planning to just hole up in there? What are they..." The look of shock on the half-elf's face told Teldin he'd come to the same conclusion that the Cloakmaster had reached.

"They're expecting help," Teldin stated flatly. "Rhom, get up on deck. Keep a close lookout for other ships. *Now!*"

The crewman he'd named paled as he heard his captain's voice coming from Julia's mouth. But at least he didn't stop to question. As he sprinted away, Teldin turned back to the other crewmen and the door.

"I want them out of there," he almost snarled.

The crew turned shocked eyes on him. "They're armed," Anson said.

"So get weapons yourself," Teldin snapped. "I want them." To emphasize his point, he drew Julia's short sword from the scabbard on his belt.

While Teldin and Djan watched the door, the crewmen vanished, reappearing a few moments later with knives, swords, belaying pins, and other weapons. They looked tense, ready... dangerous. The Cloakmaster smiled grimly. He let his disguise slip away, let his body return to its normal form. The time for secrecy was past.

He saw the expressions on the faces of his crew—bewilderment, shock, but, most of all, relief coupled with renewed confidence. They've got their captain back, he told himself. He felt a flush of pride. Sword at the ready, he stepped forward and tried the door.

Predictably it was secured—latched from the inside, maybe secured in other ways, too. He hesitated, feeling a faint, almost subliminal tingle from the door handle. Magic? Was the cloak allowing him to sense magical energy now? Why not?

He stepped back. "I think the door's been magically sealed," he announced.

Djan raised an eyebrow. "By who?" he asked. "Neither Lucinus nor Dargeth is a mage..." He smiled mirthlessly. "They didn't *tell* us that they were mages, but then they didn't tell us they were saboteurs and murderers either. So, how can we counter if"

Teldin felt rage flaring within his chest. May the gods damn them to the Abyss! he thought. Saboteurs. Murderers. He felt his lips draw back from his teeth in a snarl.

He felt the cloak around his shoulders resonate with his anger—felt the cloak's power feed the rage, and vice versa. His fury swelled in his heart, moving like a live thing, with its own will and desires—like the *thing* he saw in Beth-Abz's mouth in the dream, he recalled, a bloody, writhing thing fighting for relief. Never had he felt anything like this before, this sensation that his rage was somehow *independent* of him, with its own distinct existence. That it could burst from him if only he let his guard down...

And why in the hells not? he demanded. He felt a growl nimble in his throat. The power of the cloak flared through his bones and sinews, pulsing in time with his racing heart.

Gods *damn* you...! With a wordless yell, he thrust with his sword toward the door, as though he were about to run it through. The power of the cloak virtually exploded within him, channeling down his arm and through the sword blade. With a thunderclap, an invisible bolt of force struck the door, shattering it from its hinges and driving it into the compartment beyond, to slam against the forward bulkhead. Ears ringing from the noise, Teldin leaped into the doorway.

Part of the door had slammed into Lucinus, knocking the halfling off his feet and stunning him. Dargeth was unharmed, however, his face twisted with mixed fear and anger. The half-orc pointed a finger at Teldin's chest and muttered a harsh phrase under his breath. Four tiny projectiles, burning like coals, burst from his fingertip and flashed across the intervening space, unerringly heading for their target....

They struck the Cloakmaster in the torso... almost. A finger's breadth before they touched his flesh, a scintillating curtain flashed into existence to block the missiles. With a hiss, they vanished.

Dargeth's eyes widened with shock. He scrabbled for his belt pouch—going for the material components of a more punishing spell, Teldin knew.

"No!" The Cloakmaster snarled. He raised his sword, sighting along it almost as though it were a crossbow. The power of the cloak pulsed and throbbed through him, seemingly eager to lash out again if he released it. "No," he repeated.

He could see—almost feel—the thoughts racing through Dargeth's mind. He saw him reach his decision. The half-orc flung the contents of the pouch on the floor and raised his empty hands. "Don't kill me," he gasped. On the deck next to him, the dazed-looking Lucinus pushed his own sword away and raised his hands as well.

"You miserable devil-kin bastards," Teldin growled. His pulse pounded in his ears as the power thundered in his heart and mind. He could kill them both, he knew. The power was there, at his fingertips—more amenable to his control than it had ever been, as though the strength of his emotions somehow refined the link between him and the cloak. It would be so easy, not so much an act of will as the *relaxation* of will. He felt himself grinning and knew the grin was terrible....

"No, Teldin." Djan's gentle voice sounded from behind him. He felt a gentle touch on the shoulder; he felt the half-elf's presence, his concern. He felt, also, his determination. "No, Teldin," he said again, his voice quiet, but still filled with force.

The point of the sword started to tremble. He's right, Teldin knew, but... I owe them death. For Julia, for Dranigor, for the rest.

"Let it go, Teldin."

The Cloakmaster took a deep, quivering breath and lowered the sword. He saw Dargeth and Lucinus relax minutely as they realized they might live a little longer. He turned away in revulsion. "Guard them," he said tiredly. He stepped out of the compartment into the companionway and leaned against the wall for a moment while his racing pulse slowed somewhat.

I almost killed them, he told himself. I almost set myself up as judge, jury, and executioner in one, pronouncing sentence and carrying it out without any hesitation. He'd never realized he had that capability for swift retribution; and now that he knew, he recognized he'd have to struggle to keep it forever in check.

"Ship ahoy!" The yell echoed down the ladder from one of the lookouts on deck.

In the turmoil of his showdown with Dargeth, Teldin had forgotten what the two saboteurs' actions

had to mean. Now realization flooded back. "Battle stations!" he yelled, and he sprinted up the ladder.

"Ship ahoy!" the forward lookout repeated when he saw Teldin on deck. He pointed. "High on the port bow, collision course and closing fast!"

Teldin looked in the direction the crewman indicated.

There, silhouetted against the dull red glow of Garrash, was a shape like a spiral shell, tapering at the bow to a lethal point: an illithid nautiloid. Its piercing ram was aimed directly at the squid ship.

Chapter Thirteen

"Battle stations!" Teldin yelled again, and heard the pounding of feet as the crew leaped to their stations.

Djan was beside him in a moment, taking in the tactical situation in a glance. "Load ballistae," he barked, "but hands off the catapult."

Teldin nodded. He'd forgotten about the new sabotage.

"They think you're dead." The first mate spoke quietly, for Teldin's ears alone. He gestured at the approaching nautiloid. "They think *all* the helmsmen are dead."

Of course they did, the Cloakmaster thought. That was the purpose of the fire set in the hold—not to threaten the *Boundless*, but to provide a smoke signal to the illithid vessel that the squid ship was dead in space. Smart, very smart. May the gods damn them to the Abyss forever.

Brutally, he suppressed his anger. He had to think clearly if he and his crew were to survive.

AH right. The nautiloid crew might think the *Boundless* was dead, but it wasn't, not while the Cloakmaster lived. He drew a deep, calming breath and let himself feel the cloak around his shoulders. He let his thoughts merge with the ultimate helm.

Then he was the squid ship. He could feel its grievous damage, the rents in the hull blasted by the dying beholder, the cracks in the keel, and the ripped and shredded rigging, only partially repaired. He frowned. It was as Djan had told him soon after Beth-Abz's death: the ship could sail—slowly—but it was in no shape for a fight.

That left Teldin with a difficult choice: push the ship to a speed high enough to guarantee escape from the approaching nautiloid, and risk tearing the *Boundless* apart, or keep to a speed that wouldn't kill the ship, and risk getting blown out of space by the illithid vessel. He sighed. Well, there was no way of telling which was the best course until he'd tested the ship's responses. He extended his will and felt rather than saw the cloak glow with power.

The *Boundless* surged forward. Teldin gasped with pain as he felt the cracked keel shift, threatening to tear apart. He backed off on the acceleration slightly, as he started to maneuver the ship to bear away from the attacker. Although his wraparound perception still let him see the nautiloid, most of Teldin's attention was focused on the squid ship's internal condition. Thus it was Djan who spotted the next development. "They're firing!" he screamed.

Projectiles—three massive ballista bolts, plus a catapult missile—hurtled through space at the squid ship. Quite a salvo, Teldin thought grimly. With his extended senses, he could easily pick out the incoming shots against the blackness of wildspace and mentally project their courses. In the few seconds before impact, he forced the *Boundless* into a wide barrel roll—a maneuver he'd heard called "battle evasion." The strain on the keel, and on the entire hull, screamed through his nerves. He gritted his teeth against the pain, desperately willing the ship to hang together.

The maneuver was partially successful. Two of the shots—the catapult missile and one of the ballista bolts—flew wide. The Cloakmaster gasped as the other two bolts ripped through the hull, one tearing another breach into the cargo hold, the other striking farther forward, near the crew compartments. He slowed the *Boundless* for a moment as he evaluated the damage. Bad enough, he decided, but still not critical.

Now I've got time to react, he told himself. It takes time to reload catapults and ballistae—one or two minutes at least. We've got that much time to get out of here.

He stopped the squid ship's roll and poured on as much speed as he dared. Gingerly, he brought the ship's bow around, curving away from the attacker. The nautiloid appeared to drift aft, hanging like an

ersatz moon over the deck rail, until it settled almost directly astern. "Ballistae away!" the Cloakmaster yelled.

He heard the two great bows sing; with his cloak-mediated senses he felt the vibration of their firing communicated through their mounts to the structure of the vessel. He watched the missiles hurtle silently through space. One missed, passing scant feet to the port of the nautiloid's spiral hull. The other struck the ship cleanly in its open battle deck, shattering the catapult and felling the barely glimpsed figures of the weapon crew. Teldin smiled grimly. One heavy weapon down, he told himself. "Reload," he cried. The weapon crews jumped to obey.

The Cloakmaster poured on a little more speed. He felt the damaged keel start to twist sickeningly under the strain, and he backed off again. Paladine's blood, he cursed to himself. Not enough speed. The nautiloid was still closing. The tactical situation had turned into a stern chase, which was always a protracted proposition, and the speed differential wasn't great, but the illithid vessel was slowly overhauling the abused squid ship. This wasn't supposed to be the way it worked; after all, didn't he possess an ultimate helm? It didn't matter much now, he had to admit, with a ship held together by little more than paint and determination. How in the Abyss was he supposed to get out of this one?

The nautiloid was ready to fire again. He could see the three medium ballistae—two on the upper battle station, one on the lower—cranked back and loaded. He started to maneuver the ship again, but felt the strained keel ready to give way.

Damn it to the Nine Hells! What did he do now? Throw the ship into another battle evasion maneuver and tear the keel apart? Or keep a steady course and let the nautiloid blow the squid ship to fragments?

The enemy ship's weapons fired simultaneously, a salvo of three missiles hurtling silently through the void, all heading straight for the mark. Damaged keel or no damaged keel, he knew that to let all three shots hit was to doom the *Boundless*. Desperately, he threw the bow down. His stomach lurched with the changing acceleration.

It almost worked. One of the iron-headed spears hissed past the ship, vanishing again into the darkness. The second grazed the starboard spanker fin, carrying away only a couple of square feet of wood and canvas. The third slammed squarely into the underside of the stern, tearing through the bilges and driving into the foot of the mizzenmast.

The impact jarred the ship from bow to stern. Teldin's ears were filled with cries of alarm, his body racked with pain as the keel flexed and cracked. He felt control slip away. The *Boundless*—again!—was no longer a ship under power, but a shattered and drifting hulk.

As the squid ship's speed bled away, the Cloakmaster saw the nautiloid looming up astern, rotating around its long axis so that it appeared to be capsizing. The spiral ship's long, piercing ram was a spear aimed at the *Boundless's* heart. "*They're ramming!*" he yelled. "Brace for impact!" Only at the last instant before contact did he take his own advice and grab the deck railing with all his might.

The hull timbers of the *Boundless* screamed in torment as the nautiloid struck the hull below and between the spanker fins. The long ram drove through the planking at an upward angle, smashing through the helm compartment to emerge out through the afterdeck.

The impact was enormous. With a dry crack, the mizzenmast broke in two, the upper portion falling aft and outward, ripping away the already damaged starboard spanker fin.

Despite his death grip on the rail, Teldin was almost torn free and flung overboard. His head struck a newel post with a sickening crack, and his vision filled momentarily with drifting stars.

No time, he told himself fiercely, no time for weakness. He shook his head to clear it and forced himself to his feet.

The *Boundless* was dead, he knew that. The impact of the ram must have shattered the keel. Theoretically, with an immense amount of work and colossal good fortune, it might be possible to repair it sufficiently to sail again, but that didn't matter much now, did it? The illithids from the nautiloid would swarm aboard the crippled squid ship at any moment. How many of them would there be? he asked himself. A dozen? Two dozen? Three? How could his crew stand up to that many mind flayers?

Still, he had to try. "Boarding pikes!" he screamed. "Stand by to repel boarders!"

Teldin clutched Julia's short sword as he tried to make sense of the situation. The *Boundless* was a bigger vessel than the nautiloid, which meant that the squid ship's gravity plane would be dominant. That meant that the boarders from the nautiloid would have to climb steeply down their own ship to the hull of the *Boundless*. Then, once they'd reached the gravity plane, they'd have to swarm up the sides and over the rails. Possible, definitely, but quite difficult. "Line the rails," he ordered as his armed crew poured up onto the deck. "They'll be coming from below."

They were coming already. He could hear footfalls on the underside of the squid ship's hull.

Could he use the cloak to see them, to learn how they were planning the assault? He closed his eyes, let his mind expand to include the cloak at his back, and felt his thoughts expand throughout the ship.

The mental link was fitful, intermittent. The squid ship was dying, as far as the cloak was concerned, but it wasn't dead quite yet. Through a gray, flickering haze Teldin saw the nautiloid's hull and the vessel's crew streaming over the bow and onto the underside of the *Boundless*, fifteen of them, twenty, twenty-five...

But they were humans, not the illithids he'd expected! Teldin's surprise broke the mental link, and he was unable to reclaim it.

Humans! That made things more hopeful—at least his crew wouldn't be facing creatures that could fry their brains with mental blasts.

But what were humans doing aboard an illithid nautiloid? he asked himself. So many of them, and seemingly eager to go into battle—infinately more eager than slaves would be. He forced the question aside. If he and his crew didn't win the upcoming battle, it wouldn't matter at all.

So, no illithids—or, at least, none who'd yet put in an appearance. But there were still twenty-five—no, thirty, now—hard-bitten mercenary types, armed with swords, axes, and maces, clambering across the hull. Maybe the enemy didn't need mind-blasting monsters.

Teldin heard a cry of alarm from the starboard rail. One of his crewmen thrust with his boarding pike and was rewarded by a scream from over the side. Battle is joined, he told himself.

For the first two minutes, the squid ship's crew was able to block all efforts by the nautiloid's mercenaries to climb onto the deck. It couldn't last, however.

"They're on the afterdeck!" one of Teldin's crew shouted. The Cloakmaster looked aft. There were four attackers clambering over the aft rail. Apparently they'd given up a direct assault as too risky and, instead of staying on the hull, had climbed onto the port spanker fin, and from there to the upper portion of the stern.

"With me!" Teldin cried. Flanked by Djan and two other crewmen, he charged up the ladder to the sterncastle.

The first of the boarding party over the stern rail was a huge, black-haired man wielding a crescent-bladed hand axe. With a snarl, he swung a whistling cut at Teldin's head. The Cloakmaster ducked under the swing and drove the point of his sword into the attacker's chest. He spun to the right to parry a sword thrust from another attacker and riposted quickly, laying open the man's left shoulder. Then, as the man howled, Teldin ran him through and pushed him backward, to fall clear of the ship. Teldin turned and looking for another foe.

Djan and the other crewmen had put paid to the remainder of the attackers, not without cost, however. One of the sailors was down, blood pooling around him from a gaping head wound, and Djan was bleeding from a nasty gash in his right forearm.

Teldin heard cries and the skirl of steel on steel from behind him. He spun.

Attackers had made it over the squid ship's rail and were among the defenders. Their boarding pikes useless in toe-to-toe battle, Teldin's crewmen were laying about them wildly with short swords, axes, hammers, even belaying pins, any kind of weapon they could find.

"We'll lose this," Djan said quietly.

Teldin felt the chill of space invading his bones. "I know it." Suddenly he clapped the half-elf on the shoulder. "Do what you can here," he ordered. "I've got an idea."

Djan didn't ask any questions. Beckoning to the surviving crewman, he charged down the ladder to the main deck and into the fray.

The first mate was right, Teldin knew. There was no way they'd be able to hold off the attackers. The squid ship's crew would be butchered, and the cloak would fall into the hands of whoever captured the nautiloid, unless the Cloak-master did something soon.

All right. Static defense wasn't the answer. He had to take the fight to the nautiloid's captain, and he thought he knew how. It was a risk—he had no idea how many of the attackers knew the details of their captain's plans—but any risk was better than the certain defeat of staying aboard the *Boundless*.

He forced himself to ignore the singing of steel, the crying of wounded men. He let an image build in his mind: a broad, flat-nosed face, a heavy-set body, short black hair... Dargeth, the half-orc. In his mind's eye, he superimposed the image over his own face and body. His skin tingled as he felt the cloak make the change.

He drew a deep breath and returned the short sword to its scabbard. Here goes, he told himself.

He swung a leg over the aft rail and lowered himself onto the slightly upswept surface of the squid ship's stern. Arms spread for balance, he dropped onto the curved wood surface of the port spanker fin. The surface of the fin was almost perfectly aligned with the squid ship's gravity plane, he knew. He lowered himself to his knees, then to his belly. Cautiously, he crawled to the forward edge of the fin.

From this vantage point, he could see a dozen mercenaries standing—upside down, according to his present orientation—on the underside of the *Boundless's* hull, preparing to climb down to the gravity plane, then up the other side to the rails. Preparing to board and kill my crew, Teldin told himself bitterly. His hand strayed to his sword hilt, as he fought the temptation to leap into their midst and hew about him wildly.

But, no, he told himself firmly, that wouldn't help in the long run. No matter how good he was with a sword, no matter how lucky, there was no possible way he could take down a dozen armed mercenaries. He'd just get himself killed or captured, and then he'd have no way of saving his men from their fate. No, the only way he could help them was to follow through with his plan.

He slid himself forward along the fin until his shoulders and chest extended out into space, then he bent forward, down, over the edge of the fin.

As soon as his head and shoulders passed through the plane of the fin, he wasn't looking down anymore, but up. His balance spun dizzily as his brain tried to make sense of conflicting data. The gravity plane passed through the middle of his body now, with "local down" being toward the plane of the spanker fin. He closed his eyes and struggled to fight the nausea that twisted within him.

He had to move fast, he knew. He bent farther, until his chest touched the other flat surface of the fin. Now he was folded around the forward edge of the fin. He pulled himself forward with his hands and kicked his legs out into space. Again his balance reoriented itself sickeningly. He tasted bile in his throat. He slid forward again until he lay flat on the fin—on what had been the underside of the fin but was now, to his senses, the top. He jumped to his feet.

From his new vantage point, the *Boundless* looked as though it had capsized. The nautiloid, its ram still buried in the squid ship's hull, appeared the right way up—thanks to its final maneuver before impact—but angled upward at fifteen or twenty degrees. He ran to the illithid ship's open lower battle station and vaulted over the rail, onto its canted deck.

Three mercenaries faced him, weapons drawn and faces grim.

For a second, Teldin's sense of vulnerability was almost more than he could stand. He wanted to snatch his sword from its sheath and at least go down fighting. Instead he kept his hand clear of the weapon's hilt and forced a look of urgency onto his face. "Where's the captain?" he grunted.

One of the mercenaries tightened his grip on his sword and stepped forward. I'm dead, the Cloakmaster told himself. They don't know who Dargeth is and don't know his significance. All I've done is kill myself.

Then another of the mercenaries grabbed the man by the shoulder, pulled him back. "No," he grunted, "he's with us."

Relief flooded through Teldin's body, threatening to weaken his knees so that he couldn't even stand. With a titanic effort, he kept his face and traitor body under control. "Where's the captain?" he repeated.

"Grampian's on the bridge deck," the first mercenary said, pointing vaguely upward. "Why d'ya need

to talk to him?"

"News," Teldin replied, keeping his voice hoarse, exhausted-sounding, in case these men had heard Dargeth speak before. "For Grampian's ears only." He held his breath, waiting for another question—a question he couldn't answer, that would reveal his deception and end his life.

But the mercenaries had other things on their minds. They paid him no more attention as they brushed past him to vault over the rail, onto the underside of the *Boundless*.

Teldin's knees felt weak, his heart pounding so hard that it threatened to burst. Still he managed to force himself on, up the sloping deck of the battle station. There were three ladders—one, in the center of the deck, leading down-, two leading up. The mercenary had pointed upward when he'd mentioned the captain's—Grampian's—location. The Cloakmaster sprinted up the starboard side ladder.

He found himself in a large, open area that filled the complete width of the nautiloid. To his right, as he reached the top of the ladder, was the ship's main catapult, smashed by the *Boundless's* ballista shot. Two human bodies, twisted and broken, lay sprawled over the wreckage. The Cloakmaster looked away.

The area was empty. Directly ahead of him were another two ladders, these wider than the one he'd climbed, one leading up, the other down. To the port side of the ladders was a door; to the starboard was a corridor leading aft. There had to be cabins back there, maybe storage compartments.

Where in the Abyss would he find the captain? He didn't have time to search the whole ship. His crewmates were dying....

Where would *he* be if he were the captain? Somewhere he could see what was going on, of course. That eliminated the cabins, didn't it? He ran to the ladders and climbed up to the next deck.

More than halfway up the shell-like hull of the nautiloid, this deck was considerably shorter and slightly narrower than the one below. But it was much higher, extending right up to the curved upper surface of the hull. Above him, like the galleries in some strange theater, were observation decks of some kind. And, even higher, a kind of narrow causeway extended from the aft to the center of the open space, supporting a large chair. Teldin stopped in his tracks, fascinated by the spectacle.

"What in the hells are *you* doing here?"

He spun. Facing him across the open deck, a dark, bearded man stood, fists balled and set aggressively on his hips.

By all the gods, it was Berglund, the privateer captain who'd attacked the *Boundless* outside Heartspace!

Teldin struggled to keep his recognition from showing on his face. "Gotta talk to Grampian," he gasped harshly.

Berglund scowled. "Why?"

"It's important," Teldin grunted. "Where?"

Berglund hesitated, and the Cloakmaster thought all was lost, then the pirate's face cleared and he pointed toward a circular, red-glass portal on the starboard side of the hull. "Out on the observer station."

Teldin grunted his thanks and hurried over to the portal. Just aft of the large, multipaned porthole was a small door. He grabbed the knob and pulled it open.

And there was Grampian (or so he assumed), a tall, nondescript, brown-haired man with a build slightly more slender than Teldin's. He stood on a small, semicircular gallery—open to the stars—leaning on the rail for a good view of the underside of the squid ship's hull. Apparently he was too absorbed in what was going on below him to have noticed Teldin's arrival.

Silently, the Cloakmaster stepped out onto the observation gallery and shut the door behind him. He drew his short sword, felt the sharkskin grip slick with the sweat of his palm. He took a step forward....

Suddenly he was struck by a vision. Superimposed on the tall human ahead of him he saw an even taller figure—gangling, slender to the point of malnutrition, standing twice Teldin's own height. Instead of brown hair, he saw a bald skull, strangely domed, covered with tightly stretched powder-blue skin...

An arcane.

Chapter Fourteen

The Cloakmaster must have gasped or made some other sound as the realization struck him; or maybe the arcane that called itself Grampian had otherwise sensed a presence behind it. In any case, it turned, its magically disguised face twisting into an expression of shock.

Teldin hurled himself across the intervening space, simultaneously releasing the magic of the cloak and returning to his true form. He drove a shoulder into Grampian's chest, slamming the figure back against the rail. Viciously, he grabbed the "man's" shoulder with his left hand and spun him around. Then he locked his left forearm around the figure's throat, drove a knee into the small of his back, and wrenched backward. Grampian gasped, a high-pitched whistling hiss, as Teldin arched its spine backward like a bow. The Cloakmaster settled the point of his short sword over where he guessed the creature's kidney might be, and pressed just hard enough to break the skin. "Call them off!" he hissed into Grampian's ear.

"It's *you!*" the magically disguised arcane cried, its voice pitched high with terror. "The cloak bearer!"

Teldin applied more pressure to the sword, feeling its point penetrate another fraction of an inch into Grampian's back. Pain jolted the body he held. "Call your men off!" he repeated. He felt his lips draw back from his teeth in a terrible, feral snarl. "Now!"

"How did... ?" the creature started.

But the Cloakmaster cut the arcane off by driving his knee into its back a second time. "I'll kill you," he snarled, his voice cold and low, terrifying to his own ears. "Call them back or you're dead."

Teldin was expecting some kind of resistance and was surprised when the arcane immediately bellowed, "Return to the ship! Cease the attack!" Looking down, the Cloakmaster saw the mercenaries still on the squid ship's hull hesitate for a moment, then obediently start climbing back aboard the nautiloid. At first he was heartily surprised at how easily they accepted the order. But, then, Why not? he asked himself. They're mercenaries; it's only their fight as long as their employer *says* it's their fight.

Behind him Teldin heard the door burst open. He spun, holding Grampian in front of him like a living shield.

"You!" Berglund stood in the doorway, sword drawn. He stared at Teldin, his face pale. "By all the fiends, what are *you* doing here?"

"Drop the sword, Berglund," Teldin shouted. "It's over." He twisted the sword and felt Grampian's muscles spasm with pain. "Tell him!"

"It *is* over," the disguised arcane echoed hurriedly. "Drop your weapon."

He watched Berglund's eyes and saw the thoughts flash through the pirate captain's mind—saw him make his decision. The short sword clattered to the deck. Berglund kicked it toward Teldin's feet. "Get down there, Berglund," the Cloakmaster told him harshly. "Get your men back here. And bring my first mate over." He tightened his grip on Grampian's throat, hearing the arcane gasp and choke under the pressure. "And don't think of trying any tricks. *Tell* him, Grampian."

"No tricks," Grampian gasped. "Do what he says. We must reach... an arrangement."

They sat in the nautiloid's main saloon, a large compartment at the aft end of the bridge deck. Teldin was there, with Djan, the wounded Anson, and Grampian—now in his true form, having let his magical disguise dissipate. The surviving members of the squid ship's crew—only six of them, not counting the two men present—were aboard the *Boundless*. Grampian had ordered his mercenaries to confine themselves to the cabins on the lower "slave" deck of the nautiloid, and they seemed willing enough to follow their employer's orders.

Teldin frowned. He didn't feel fully comfortable. The mercenaries outnumbered his surviving crew by more than four to one. And Berglund, he knew, was a wily man. The only thing that the Cloakmaster had going for him at the moment was "Grampian"—or whatever the creature's real name was—and the fact

that Djan had a crossbow leveled at the blue-skinned giant's skull from point-blank range. The saloon had only one door, which meant the mercenaries couldn't get to them without giving plenty of time to... encourage... the arcane to call off his sellswords. Berglund could, conceivably, set up some kind of standoff, trading Teldin's crew's lives for the arcane—and if he did, Teldin knew he'd have to surrender. But he didn't think the arcane would countenance that kind of risk to its own precious blue skin, and he tried to tell himself that Berglund didn't have enough personal stake in the matter to initiate something like that.

The Cloakmaster forced his doubts aside. He'd worry about those things if they came to pass. Right now he had to concentrate on the present: there were some things he had to know.

Teldin stared into the arcane's small, watery eyes. Even with the creature seated, he still had to look up into its face. "Who are you?" Teldin asked quietly.

With its magical disguise dropped, its voice had a high, fluting tone to it. "My name is T'k'Ress," the creature said emotionlessly. "I understand you met my... "—it hesitated—"my *brother*, you might say, T'k'Pek."

Teldin raised an eyebrow and nodded slowly. T'k'Pek was the name of the arcane he'd met aboard the *Nebulon*, a cylindrical ship in orbit around Toril, before the creature had been killed by the neogi. Interesting, he thought. "Why?" he asked.

The arcane's voice remained emotionless, though its expression seemed to indicate tolerant amusement. "The cloak, why else?" T'k'Ress answered. "I wish you to understand, Teldin Moore," it continued, "that there is nothing personal in this. My interest in the cloak is purely business, my acts motivated purely by business necessities."

Teldin wanted to spit. "That's what your hired dog Berglund said," he snarled, "after he killed my crew."

T'k'Ress extended a six-fingered hand, palm up. "The deaths are regrettable," it said quietly. "Would that they were not necessary."

"But you'd do anything to get the gods-damned cloak, wouldn't you?" With an effort, Teldin fought his rage back to more manageable proportions.

The arcane pivoted its shoulder girdle, a strange gesture that Teldin tentatively interpreted as its version of a shrug. "If the truth be told, I have little interest in the cloak as such," it said levelly. "I cannot speak for others of my race, but I would expect them to share my outlook."

Teldin stared at the creature. "What?"

"I have little interest in the cloak as such," T'k'Ress repeated.

"Then... ?"

"Why?" the blue-skinned giant finished. "Business, as I have said.

"You know that my race survives through trade," it went on quietly. "We are the only source for new spelljamming helms, for passage devices, for countless other technomagical products. Our monopoly was hard-earned, and we will do what is necessary to maintain it."

"The cloak..." Teldin started.

"The ultimate helm is of little importance in isolation," T'k'Ress cut him off. "We sell other items that provide all of the powers of your cloak, except one."

"The *Spelljammer*," Teldin breathed.

"Of course, the *Spelljammer*." T'k'Ress nodded. "From what I have learned of the ultimate helm, it gives you an ability that should allow you to locate the *Spelljammer*. Further, I believe it will allow you to take control of the great craft should you so locate it.

"And that is what I cannot allow," the arcane continued, not the slightest trace of emotion disturbing its voice. "There are great secrets aboard the *Spelljammer*. Perhaps knowledge of how to create spelljamming helms, and passage devices, and planetary locators. Perhaps knowledge even more advanced—more *valuable*—than that."

Realization dawned. "You're afraid I'm going to go into *competition* with you," he said, aghast.

"Were you to enjoy a monopoly such as ours, would you not fear the same?" T'k'Ress wanted to know.

Teldin shook his head slowly. He couldn't believe it! All this—all this effort, all these deaths—merely to protect the arcane's market dominance...

But there was nothing "mere" about the arcane's universe-spanning network. They were the only source of spell-jamming helms. How many did they sell a year, on all the worlds, in all the crystal spheres? Thousands, millions? Say, just for argument, ten thousand major helms a year, at a going rate of... what, two hundred and fifty thousand gold pieces? That represented two billion, five hundred thousand gold pieces per year flowing into the arcane's coffers. And that didn't include such relatively minor peripherals as passage devices and the rest, which, no doubt, netted the race another paltry few millions...

And all that wealth stemmed from the fact that the arcane held the monopoly on the ability to create such—what did T'k'Ress say? *Technomagic*?—devices. He could suddenly understand how the blue giants might consider a threat to that monopoly worthy of much effort to avert.

Still, it sickened him. There seemed something... base, something ignoble about it. Wasn't it more—"acceptable" wasn't quite the right word—to fight, to kill, to die, for a cause more honorable, more based in principle, than profit? Take the War of the Lance, for instance. Large portions of Krynn had been laid waste, but didn't it matter that the cause was worthy?

Not to the dead. The thought bubbled up from some dark corner of his mind. He remembered those he'd known who'd died in the war. Did it matter to them *why* they'd died?

With a disgusted shake of his head, he focused back on the arcane before him. Now wasn't the time to worry about philosophical digressions. "What if I told you I had no interest in breaking your monopoly?" he asked T'k'Ress.

The creature's thin lips drew back from the solid, bony ridges that served it as teeth, a disgusting expression that Teldin guessed it had learned from humans. "I might believe that you tell the truth for the moment," T'k'Ress said, no hint of humor in its voice, "but trust that you tell the truth for all time? Thai you would *never* consider it? No." It shook its head. "I could never trust so much."

Djan spoke up for the first time. "If you'd won," he asked quietly, "if you'd defeated Captain Moore and taken the cloak, would you have donned it yourself?"

T'k'Ress's tiny eyes opened as wide as they'd go in an expression of almost ludicrous surprise. "I?" Still, none of the creature's emotion sounded in its voice. "Never. The benefits might be high, but the risks and costs would almost certainly prove higher. Where would be the benefit to me?" It gave its strange, twisting shrug again. "Perhaps eventually I could find a way of realizing a profit without risking the monopoly, but it would take much thought."

"Tell me how you planned to acquire the cloak," Teldin told the arcane.

"You already know."

"*Tell* me," the Cloakmaster snapped.

"As you wish," T'k'Ress said mildly. "I tried to block your research into the *Spelljammer* on Crescent. When that failed, I hired Berglund to intercept you."

"What was that nonsense about Falx?" Teldin demanded.

The arcane spread its long hands. "It seemed unwise to tell a hireling the truth," it explained, "lest he should fail... as he did. Had he succeeded, I would have met his ship en route to Falx and taken my prize at that point. As it was, you perhaps spent energy in preparing to counter a threat from a direction where no threat existed.

"In all honesty, I did not expect Berglund to succeed," T'k'Ress confided. "You were, by all accounts, an innovative man and a skilled ship's captain. It would be foolish to trust to a single stratagem."

"So you put spies—saboteurs, murderers—aboard my ship," Teldin growled.

Unaffected by the Cloakmaster's anger, T'k'Ress nodded. "Dargeth and Lucinus, yes. Dargeth was a mage with a mind of great subtlety, one of the finest dissemblers I have ever met. Lucinus, too, was a fine operative." The creature raised its hairless eyebrows in interest. "What fate did they meet?" it asked incuriously.

"During the battle they tried to escape," Djan answered. "Their guards were forced to kill them both."

Teldin knew that the half-elf was telling the complete and utter truth, but the arcane obviously didn't believe him. Not that it mattered one whit to the creature, the Cloakmaster could see by its expression. He felt anger, hatred, burning in his chest.

"What happens now?" T'k'Ress asked quietly.

That *was* the question, wasn't it? But as soon as the question was posed, the answer appeared fully formed in his mind. "We maroon you here aboard the *Boundless*," Teldin told him coldly. "We take your ship."

"Aboard the squid ship?" For the first time, the Cloakmaster could hear alarm in T'k'Ress's voice. "Is it not crippled?"

"Not totally." It was Djan who answered. "It's dead in space for the moment, but you should be able to repair it... eventually."

"But the helm—"

"Should be functional," the half-elf cut T'k'Ress off. He grinned fiercely, his expression echoing Teldin's emotions. "If not, you should be able to repair it, shouldn't you? It's part of the arcane monopoly, after all."

"But..." T'k'Ress looked worried now. "But I sell helms—"

It was Teldin's turn to cut him off. "You don't repair them, is that what you're trying to say?" He smiled coldly. "I'm afraid you're not going to find me too sympathetic."

"Berglund and the mercenaries will not wish to go along," the arcane pointed out desperately.

"Then it's up to you to *make* them, isn't it?" Teldin snapped. "You'll recall my colleague has a crossbow pointed at your large blue head. And you can be dead sure he's not going to set it down until you're all safely aboard the squid ship and we've pulled away."

T'k'Ress studied Teldin's face. "Would you really kill me?" it asked, its voice a high-pitched whisper.

"After all of his friends you've killed? What do *you* think?" Djan shot back.

Teldin kept his face expressionless, pleased that the half-elf's answer had really been no answer at all. That's my weakness, he thought grimly. *Could* I order Djan to put a crossbow bolt into the arcane's head, just like that? And would he obey? The trick, then, was to maintain the bluff so strongly that T'k'Ress wouldn't dare call it.

The arcane was silent for a moment, its small eyes—shiny, like small, polished stones—studying Teldin's. Then it dropped its gaze and looked away.

It has its answer, Teldin thought. Let's hope it's the right one.

T'k'Ress looked up again. "And as for you?" it asked Teldin. "You will continue to pursue the *Spelljammer*, will you not? Where will you go?"

Teldin hesitated. Why not tell it? he asked himself, with a rush of frustration. It's not as if I really know anyway. "To the center of all," he said, "between the pearl clusters. Down the secondary eddies of the paramagnetic gradient."

Something changed in the arcane's eyes—a flicker of recognition, of understanding. It knows, the Cloakmaster realized. "You know about the paramagnetic gradient, don't you?" he demanded harshly. "You know what it is. And you know how to measure it, don't you?" Yes, he thought, his certainty increasing as he asked the questions. Yes, I'm right.

"And you..." T'k'Ress started. Then it shut its mouth with an audible click.

"And I don't," Teldin confirmed. He strode up, glared up into the blue giant's cadaverous face. "But, by Paladine's blood, you're going to tell me."

"No." The arcane shook its head firmly. "No, I will not."

Slowly, with what he felt as a terrible certainty, Teldin drew his short sword. He rested the blade across the flat of his left palm, stared intently into the mirror-bright blade as if an answer could be found there. Both his hands were trembling, he noted almost detachedly. "Then I'll hurt you, T'k'Ress," he said quietly. In his own ears, his voice sounded devoid of emotion. It could as well have been the voice of Death itself. "I'll hurt you as you've never been hurt before, more than you've ever thought you *could* be hurt. I'll *keep* hurting you until you tell me what I want to know. And you *will* tell me," he added, a touch more conversationally, "eventually. And you know what?" He raised the short sword so that its tip

pointed right between the arcane's black-marble eyes. "I hope you *don't* tell me for a good, long while."

T'k'Ress stared down, aghast, its blue skin paling with horror. Its mouth worked silently for a moment before it could force any words out. "You would not do this..." it gurgled.

Teldin drew his lips back from his teeth in a killing smile and echoed Djan's words. "After all of my friends you've killed? What do *you* think?" He turned to Anson, standing—open-mouthed with shock—by the door. "Bring some ropes to secure our friend," he told the sailor. Then, as an afterthought, added, "And some absorbent cloths, too."

Anson stared at him for a moment, then hurried to obey.

T'k'Ress surged halfway out of its seat, before Djan steadied his crossbow at its head and snapped, "No!" The arcane's eyes flicked back and forth between Teldin's sword and the half-elf's crossbow.

"*Think* about it, T'k'Ress," the Cloakmaster hissed. "If you don't want to tell us, you've got two ways to go. The quick way"—he inclined his head toward the crossbow—"or the lingering way." He stroked the blade of his sword almost lovingly. "It's your choice.

"Or..." He paused, drawing out the tension. "Or you can tell us what you know. As I said, it's your choice."

For a terrible moment, he thought the arcane was going to resist, was going to call his bluff.

But then T'k'Ress seemed to deflate, as all the resistance went out of it. "I will tell you what you need to know," it said, "if you swear to let me live."

It was difficult to keep the triumph out of his face, but Teldin figured he'd managed it. He shrugged, as though the issue was hardly worth discussing. "We'll see when you're finished if it's worth your life," he said as coldly as he could.

"It will be, I assure you," the arcane said hurriedly. "If you will take me to the captain's day room on the command deck, I will even show you."

Teldin glared fixedly at the arcane, letting the tension build as high as he dared. Then he nodded briskly. T'k'Ress sagged with relief, wiping at its eyes with a six-fingered hand. While its eyes were covered, the Cloakmaster flashed Djan a smile of victory.

The arcane had to hunch forward to fit under the low, curved roof of what it called the captain's day room. On the uppermost deck of the nautiloid, this was little more than a broad extension of the causeway that supported the captain's chair. The only furniture was a human-sized chair, a small map table...

And something that looked like a narrow, waist-high pedestal, on which to display a small sculpture or other work of art. Its fluted column was intricately carved wood, so dark as to be almost black. Its circular top, about two feet in diameter, was a flat sheet of smoky white crystal, smooth and cool to the touch. On closer inspection, Teldin could see fine black lines graven into the crystal's surface—a dozen lines crossing the circle, intersecting at a single point, and six concentric circles centered around that point.

Now, in the dimly lit compartment, the crystal glowed with a faint greenish light. On its surface—or, more properly, a fraction of an inch *below* it—were small blobs and traces of color, pink, dark blue, and green.

T'k'Ress ran its long, slender fingers almost lovingly over the smoked-crystal surface. "A planetary locator," it said. "You have heard of these?"

Teldin nodded. Even though he'd never seen one, he knew *of* them. They were devices built by the arcane, operating on principles that no other race had yet come to understand, though many had tried.

"What's so important about this?" he asked. He still had his sword drawn, and he toyed with it meaningfully.

"You do not know the principle behind the planetary locator," T'k'Ress explained quickly. "Few beyond my race do, I believe. The locator detects planetary bodies by the perturbations they cause in what we call the loomweave."

"So?" the Cloakmaster demanded.

"I have heard that the falmadaraathae have tried to understand the operating principle of the locator," T'k'Ress went on, somewhat elliptically. "They have had some minimal success. They have some conception of the loomweave... yet they use their own term for the phenomenon."

"The paramagnetic gradient," Teldin guessed.

"Correct," the arcane confirmed.

Teldin nodded slowly. He remembered the images that Zat had fed into his mind. At the time, he'd compared the twisting, whirling fields of colors-yet-not-colors to skeins of spiderweb-thin fibers. The loomweave? Yes, the word was definitely appropriate.

Djan still had his crossbow leveled at the arcane's head. Now the half-elf inclined his head to indicate the crystal-topped pedestal. "So this detects the loomweave?" he demanded.

"So I have said," affirmed the arcane. "It is a subtle example of technomagic." Its tone was proud, almost smug.

"What about secondary eddies?" Teldin wanted to know.

"In its present form, it detects tertiary disturbances in the loomweave," T'k'Ress told him. "But..." For a moment it hesitated, again apparently considering resistance, then it pressed on. "To detect the tertiary eddies, it must also detect the secondaries, if only to ignore them. The locator is simply set not to display them. Do you understand?"

Teldin forced himself to nod firmly, even though the truth of the matter was that he hardly understood anything the creature was saying.

Fortunately, Djan seemed to be following T'k'Ress a little better. "And you can adjust the display," he said, as more of a statement than a question.

T'k'Ress inclined its head. "I can."

"Then *do* it," the Cloakmaster ordered.

"It is ready," T'k'Ress announced almost an hour later.

Teldin had tried to watch the adjustments the creature was making to the mysterious pedestal, trying to make some sense of them, but to his eyes it had seemed that the arcane was doing nothing more than running its slender, many-jointed fingers around the circumference of the crystal display and over different portions of the supporting pedestal. "Show me," he ordered.

T'k'Ress simply pointed at the circular display on the locator's upper surface.

Teldin moved forward, careful not to block the line of fire of Djan's crossbow. This could be some kind of trick, he reminded himself wryly. He leaned over the locator and examined the display.

From what little he'd heard about planetary locators, the devices normally showed simple, discrete dots to represent planets and other astronomical bodies, their colors indicating their true nature. This display was very different, the Cloakmaster noted at once. Instead of clean, discrete circles and dots, the crystal surface was covered with a shifting network of hair-thin red lines, making an almost impossibly fine mesh. In places, the mesh seemed to fold in on itself, twisting into some complex pattern.

Here, for example. With his forefinger he traced a place on the display where the mesh—shading from red to yellow—was twisted into great loops, whirling up and around like some impossible skein of wool. Encompassing the loops was a circle of intricate patterns rendered in burning yellow-white, where the spiderweb-thin lines wove in and out, spiraling and knotting around each other.

It was the loomweave, he knew with sudden certainty. It was the same twisting, swirling field of energy that Zat had shown him, in orbit near the fire ring of Garrash. The perspective was different now, and the detail and resolution so much less. The colors, too, weren't right—on the display there *were* colors, not the strange analogues that the Cloakmaster had sensed. This was Garrash and its ring he was looking at—or their presence as defined by eddies in the loomweave.

Teldin shook his head, almost incapable of believing it. Now, for the first time, he had the tool he needed to find the "center of all," the Broken Sphere.

He looked up at Djan and felt a broad, triumphant smile spread across his face. "Transfer the crews," he told his first mate. "We sail immediately."

Chapter Fifteen

Teldin Moore drove the nautiloid outward from the vicinity of Garrash, toward the boundary of the crystal sphere, at the maximum speed the ultimate helm could manage. He sat in the single human-sized chair in the captain's day room. Through the wraparound perception of the cloak he saw the crippled squid ship falling rapidly away behind them.

There'd been a couple of tense moments as the arcane's mercenary crew had filed aboard the wrecked *Boundless*. Even though they were unarmed and facing the weapons of Teldin's crew—and even though their employer, T'k'Ress, had specifically ordered them to go peacefully—Teldin could hardly believe it when all were aboard and he backed the nautiloid's ram out of the squid ship's hull.

For a moment, Teldin felt a twinge of guilt at marooning the arcane and its men aboard a ship that might never sail again. But the emotion was fleeting; all he had to do was remember the faces of his dead comrades—and, particularly, Julia's peaceful, bloodless countenance—and his regrets evaporated like a snowball thrown into a sun.

Through his omnipresent senses the Cloakmaster saw Djan climbing the ladder to join him in the small day room. He smiled at his friend. "How's the crew?" he asked.

"Adapting as well as can be expected," the half-elf responded. "We can maneuver, but we don't have the men to fight with this ship."

Teldin nodded. Crewing even one weapon would take too many men away from more vital duties. "We'll just have to stay out of trouble, then."

Djan nodded. He didn't say anything else immediately, but neither did he make any move to leave. On his face Teldin saw the expression that he'd come to associate with unpleasant thoughts. "Out with it," he told his friend at last.

The half-elf sighed and seated himself on the edge of the map table. "That was too easy," he said softly. "You know that, don't you?"

Teldin nodded unwillingly. He'd been thinking the same thing. The monopoly that the arcane, as a race, possessed over spelljamming technology was of almost inconceivable value. Yet T'k'Ress had given Teldin a means of finding the *Spelljammer*—and thus potentially destroying that centuries-old monopoly—while putting up virtually no fight. Certainly, Teldin had threatened the creature with torture and death, but even a modicum of resistance would have shown his threats to have been empty bluff.

Even if T'k'Ress had utterly believed that Teldin would kill it, surely the magnitude of the loss to its race if the monopoly were destroyed would be reason enough to sacrifice itself. And even if the creature had no loyalty to any beyond itself, it must have realized that destroying the monopoly would earn itself the eternal enmity—and probably the vengeance—of every member of its race. It just didn't make sense...

Unless the means that it gave Teldin to find the *Spelljammer* was flawed in some way.

He looked over at the milky glow of the modified planetary locator. The technomagical device still worked; it still showed the glowing matrix of the loomweave. There had to be something he was missing, but what?

"I know it was too easy," he said, echoing Djan's words, "but what else could I do?"

Via his cloak-mediated senses Teldin could see the inner surface of the Vistaspace crystal sphere like an infinite black plane a few leagues ahead of the nautiloid. Below, in the helm compartment on the scout deck, he knew that Djan was preparing to use the passage device that T'k'Ress had left behind on the vessel. The Cloakmaster thanked the gods that they had this arcane device. Without it—and without a mage capable of opening a portal with his own magic—they'd have been trapped within Vistaspace.

"Ready to make passage." Even though the half-elf was a deck below, and pitching his voice at a

conversational level, Teldin could hear him clearly, thanks to the cloak. "Flow stations. Captain?"

Teldin called down confirmation. "Open the portal."

He felt a strange shiver in the power of the ultimate helm as his friend triggered the passage device. Ahead of the nautiloid, the portal flared into being, quickly expanding to more than a bowshot in diameter. Through the lightning-limned circle Teldin could see the curdled colors of the Flow. He tapped only a fraction of the ultimate helm's power, and the spiral-hulled vessel shot through the opening into the phlogiston. As soon as they were through, the portal closed behind them.

"Passage successful," Djan called up, needlessly.

The Cloakmaster felt tingles of anticipation shoot through his nerves. They were out of Vistaspace, into the infinity of the Flow. Next stop... the Broken Sphere. He shifted his gaze to the modified planetary locator, to read from its surface the condition of the loomweave, to see on what course he should set sail.

The crystal surface was blank.

He virtually leaped out of his chair and dashed across the compartment to the pedestal. Yes, the surface was totally blank. The twisting matrix of colors had vanished. Even the milky glow that he associated with the device's operation was gone. "Djan!" he yelled.

The half-elf was up the ladder and beside him in a moment. He stared down at the blank, featureless display. "Now we know why it was so easy," he said quietly.

Without turning, Teldin reached behind him and dragged over the chair. He slumped down into it. "Now we know," he echoed dully.

He felt as though he'd been plunged into a black, cloying fog of depression. Oh, logically he knew he was no worse off than before T'k'Ress and the nautiloid had put in their appearance. In fact, he was *better* off, because he'd rid the crew of traitors.

But it felt so much worse. He'd been almost euphoric. Finally he knew how to find the *Spelljammer!* That knowledge, and the hope it brought with it, had been wrested away from him by the arcane's machinations. Now we know why it was so easy, he thought again. T'k'Ress *knew* the planetary locator wouldn't work in the Flow...

And why should it? he realized. It was a *planetary* locator, after all, and you only found planets within crystal spheres.

So, what was he to do now?

Part of him wanted to turn the nautiloid around, to make best possible time to the crippled *Boundless*, and follow through with the threats he'd made to T'k'Ress. Part of him wanted to give up, here and now.

He shook his head. Neither option was attractive.

He glared at the inert crystal-topped pedestal. Maybe there was some way to fix it, he thought suddenly, or modify it so that it would work in the phlogiston. After all, it worked by detecting folds and wrinkles in the loomweave, and both T'k'Ress and Zat had implied that the loomweave existed in the Flow as well as within crystal spheres. Maybe if he could figure out how the device worked...

But how?

The cloak, why not? The ultimate helm gave him omnipresent vision when he used it to drive a ship. Wasn't it possible—remotely possible—that it would let him look inside this magical pedestal and see how it worked? It was worth a try.

The Cloakmaster took a slow, calming breath and let the tension flow out of his muscles like water out of a vessel. He mentally reached out to the ultimate helm and felt the artifact's power stir in response. He focused his attention on the dark pedestal of the planetary locator, trying to reach out with the cloak's arcane senses. Power glowed and throbbed around his shoulders.

Suddenly, it glowed and pulsed against his chest as well. The bronze amulet, on its chain, bloomed with energy. Although his physical senses knew the object wasn't changing size, his new nonphysical senses told him that it was swelling as it filled with power drawn from the cloak. The power of the amulet flashed brighter—invisible to his eyes, but easily discernible to his mind—and arced over to the planetary detector. To Teldin's amazement, the crystal display surface burst to life again, writhing and twisting with a colored representation of the loomweave.

The Cloakmaster turned a triumphant smile on his friend. "Djan," he said, his voice choked with conflicting emotions, "get the crew to their stations. We sail."

With an answering smile, the half-elf jumped to with a will.

The Cloakmaster ran his fingers delicately over the smooth surface of the planetary locator—the sphere detector, as he'd come to think of it. The display was more complex than he'd ever seen it, more cluttered. According to the device, the Flow before the ship was filled with warps and folds in the loomweave—secondary eddies in the paramagnetic gradient, as Zat would style it. On the crystal display, the eddies appeared as knots and vortices in the dull red mesh that was the loomweave, glowing yellow with an intensity that represented their amplitude. Today, the whole display seemed to burn with yellow brilliance.

We're almost there, he told himself.

It had been a long journey from Vistaspace. At first, the Cloakmaster had wanted to drive the nautiloid—renamed the *Julia*—straight on, following the rippled loomweave to the Broken Sphere without any delay. Djan, however, had eventually convinced him of the need to resupply and rearm. Teldin had resented the holdup, but had to admit to the necessity. At the maximum limit of the ultimate helm's power, he'd driven the *Julia* through the phlogiston to the crystal sphere of Primespace, where the half-elf knew of a mercantile post near the edge of the system.

Both Teldin and Djan had been a little nervous about cruising up to the outpost in a nautiloid; neither knew what kind of reception illithid vessels could expect in Primespace. As it turned out, their worries were baseless. We probably could just as well have sailed up in a neogi deathspider, the Cloakmaster had thought at the time, for all the attention the merchants paid to the nautiloid, and to the contrast between ship type and crew. They'd simply filled the *Julia's* orders of food and other supplies, accepting without question Teldin's elven letter of credit—the same letter he'd used to buy the *Boundless*. While the Cloakmaster had supervised stowing the merchandise, Djan had frequented the outpost's bars and hiring halls, selecting new crew members. As the new hires had trooped on board, Teldin had found himself scrutinizing each one closely, as if he could detect in their faces some sign of treachery. Foolishness, of course, he'd told himself; I didn't see anything untoward in the faces of Dargeth or Lucinus.

At the time, he hadn't fully agreed with Djan that they needed to replace the losses in the *Boundless's* crew. After all, he'd told himself, they'd made it to Primespace without any difficulties, hadn't they?

But when the *Julia* had set sail again with a crew of fifteen—enough sailors to fully man all the ship's stations—he'd had to admit that it definitely did make life easier. For one thing, among the new hires were two helmsmen to spell Teldin.

Where had T'k'Ress acquired the nautiloid? he'd wondered many times. The ship was equipped with a normal major helm, rather than with the series helm or pool helm typical of illithid vessels. Well, he'd told himself at last, I'll probably never know, and it doesn't matter anyway.

Of course, Teldin still had to use the ultimate helm, in combination with the amulet, to get the planetary locator to function, but at least now the *Julia* could make headway while he slept.

He was almost at the end of his journey, he told himself. It had taken them more than ninety days to get this far, but they were almost there. He glanced again at the crystal display. Yes, he thought, it can't be much longer now.

With a sigh, he released the power of the cloak and saw the crystal display fade once more to dormancy. He climbed down the ladder from the command deck to the scout deck, and from there to the bridge deck. He headed forward, out onto the broad, wraparound gallery that was the upper battle station. Here were mounted three of the *Julia's* ballistae—currently unmanned and unloaded, yet still looking severe and lethal silhouetted against the light of the Flow. The Cloakmaster found himself drawn to the forward rail. There he rested his forearms on its top and stared out into the phlogiston.

I've never seen anything this beautiful, he told himself.

The spiral-hulled ship was in the midst of a "pearl cluster." All around it, hanging against the phlogiston backdrop, were crystal spheres—half a dozen of them separated by distances less than the diameter of a single sphere. The iridescent surface of each sphere reflected curved, distorted images of other spheres—reflections of reflections of reflections, until it was almost possible to believe the "pearl cluster" was infinite in extent.

Teldin smiled, remembering his reaction—and that of everyone else aboard—when they'd first entered the cluster.

Claustrophobia, bordering on unreasoning terror, had been the order of the day. Passing between colossal crystal spheres that hung in the Void, it seemed that the titanic "pearls" had to fall sooner or later—probably sooner—crushing the infinitesimal speck that was the *Julia*. Crew members found it almost impossible to step out onto one of the nautiloid's open decks, and even a glance out one of the red-glass portholes would often prompt a fit of shivering. Teldin had found himself glad that the illithid-designed vessel was almost fully enclosed, sheltering its inhabitants from the terrifying spectacle.

The real problem had been the helmsmen—Corontea and Lilith, both human women. When on the helm, the wraparound perception made it impossible for them to ignore the spectacle of the pearl cluster, and the sense of calm that the magical device usually instilled was barely enough to counteract the atavistic terror.

Fortunately that had faded with time—and not that much time either. It was amazing, Teldin mused, just how adaptable humans and demihumans were. In a matter of only a couple of days, the crew had moved from uncontrollable fear of the vista to an equally uncontrollable fascination with it. Most of the off-duty crewmen spent much of their time on the various battle stations or at observation posts, staring out in wonder, and even those who were on duty kept finding excuses to frequent the same places. The Cloakmaster shook his head in wry amusement. And here I am, he reminded himself, doing exactly the same thing.

He drew a deep breath and held it. He ran a quick inventory of his feelings. There were wonder, certainly, and anticipation. But mixed with those emotions was a strong sense of satisfaction.

Im *near*, he told himself firmly, near the end of the voyage. Near the end of the quest' Who knew? Even though he wasn't there yet, he had to give himself credit for getting this far. And, even if he were to die tomorrow, he had to admit that it might be worth it just to have seen the pearl cluster from the inside.

He looked around him, for a moment extending the cloak's enhanced perception. This was, truly, a place scaled for the gods. It was easy to forget just how large the "pearls" were, to forget that they were whole *crystal spheres* that would take a spelljammer months to cross, separated by distances that could be crossed only in days of full-speed travel. In a place such as this, faced with this kind of spectacle, how could anyone consider himself—or his actions—to be significant in the grand scheme? *Everyone* should see this once in his life, he told himself, just to put it all in perspective.

He felt a presence beside him and glanced to his right. Djan was leaning on the rail with him, an innocent smile of wonder on his face as the half-elf stared out at the vista, it's worth it," his friend said softly, "if only for this."

Teldin Moore nodded his agreement.

Journey's end, the Cloakmaster told himself.

The pearl cluster was twenty-three days behind the *Julia*—still clearly visible, of course, though now the crystal sphere really did look no larger than pearls. As Teldin's will brought the magical trine—cloak, amulet, and locator—to life, the crystal display was a riot of yellow, so brilliant in places that it burned almost white. This region of the Flow literally churned with folds and ripples in the loomweave—like the echoes of a mighty explosion, Teldin thought, still ringing through the fabric of the universe.

He was here at last, at the center of all, between the pearl clusters. According to the myths of a dozen peoples, this was where the universe as he knew it had begun, millennia upon millennia ago. The One Egg. The Cosmic Egg. The Broken Sphere.

It actually existed, he told himself for the thousandth time. And if the myths were right about that, were they right about other things as well? That this *was* the origin of everything? And that this was the origin of the *Spelljammer*?

The shards of the Broken Sphere hung in the phlogiston around the nautiloid. Huge—unimaginably huge—jagged-edged fragments of crystal, they reflected the turbulent light of the Flow.

It was almost impossible to estimate their size. The smallest was probably thousands of leagues across, Teldin guessed, while the largest was maybe millions. To the naked eye, they seemed motionless against the phlogiston backdrop, but Djan had told him that measurements showed they were actually tumbling slowly, taking decades or centuries to complete a single rotation.

When the Cloakmaster had imagined the shards of the Broken Sphere, he'd pictured them as night black on one side, pearl-like on the other. In fact, however, he was wrong on both counts. Both surfaces of the shards resembled frosted glass, or—a better description—a mirror covered with steam or mist. They reflected light, but images in them were blurred, indistinct, not sharp-edged at all.

Were they always like this? he wondered. When the crystal sphere was intact, was its interior frosted, reflecting the light of its sun? Or was this some consequence of the shattering—of the hatching of the Cosmic Egg?

And that thought raised the central question: just what had caused the One Egg to "hatch," the crystal sphere to break? What unimaginable force could have burst it asunder?

He leaned against the rail of the upper battle station, staring at the shards. Conflicting emotions warred in his chest. Sadness—that was definitely part of his emotional landscape. A sense of total and utter devastation. This had once been an intact sphere, like the one enclosing Krynn, his home. When it shattered, everything within it must have been destroyed. Here, floating in the midst of the largest graveyard that the mind could conceive, how could anyone not feel sadness?

Yet, too, there was a sense of hope, of newness—of creation, or perhaps rebirth. The Cloakmaster didn't know quite where these emotions came from, but they were impossible to ignore. Perhaps they were right, he mused, all of them: Zat, the People, those who wrote the books in the Great Archive. Perhaps the Broken Sphere *is* the Cosmic Egg, the origin of all.

Whether or not that was true, whether the Broken Sphere was a beginning or an ending, one thing was undeniable: it was beautiful, wondrous, awe-inspiring. His eyes suddenly burned with unshed tears, and grief tore at his throat. Julia should be here to see this, not just the ship that bore her name.

"Ship ahoy!" The call from the starboard lookout, stationed in the observation gallery where Teldin had captured T'k'Ress, echoed through the ship.

The Cloakmaster swallowed hard and rubbed roughly at his eyes with the back of a hand. He hurried around the battle station until he could see the observation gallery, level with his own position. "Where?" he called.

"Low on the starboard bow," the lookout replied, pointing.

Teldin looked to where the man indicated, below the plane of the *Julia*, to the right of its twisted ram. Yes, there it was, a black shape against the swirls of the phlogiston. A smooth, curvilinear shape—gracefully downswept wings, a tail that arched up and over the flat dorsal surface...

The *Spelljammer*!

As realization struck him, Teldin Moore felt the cloak around his shoulders flare to life. Brilliance washed around him, a hard, brittle nimbus of blue-white light he'd never seen before. The amulet, suspended around his neck on its chain, throbbed and pulsed against his chest. For an instant, unbidden, an image of the *Julia* itself—distant and tiny against the crystal shards—filled his mind. He knew that he was seeing himself, through the perceptions of the *Spelljammer*. Then the image was gone.

Supernally heightened perception lingered, however. He drew a breath and felt the air chill his throat and his chest. He felt the oxygen absorb across the membranes of his lungs and spread into his bloodstream. The palms of his hands could feel the grain of the wooden rail that he grasped, could sense every detail of its fibrous structure.

He could sense every element of his *own* structure as well—every muscle fiber, every nerve. His skin was unnaturally sensitive, feeling the complexity of the fabric's weave as his clothes brushed against

it.

"Teldin, what...?"

He turned slowly to see Djan skid to a halt on the battle station.

It was as if he'd opened his eyes for the first time, the Cloakmaster thought, was truly *seeing* for the first time. He could see every detail of his friend—every hair on the half-elf's head, every pore in his skin, as a distinct element. And more: it was as if he could see deep within him as well, down into his soul. Djan's emotions washed over him, became one with his own...

Then it was over. The transcendence, the epiphany, could only have lasted a few moments, but, subjectively, it could have lasted for years, a lifetime, an eternity. The blue-white nimbus faded, as did the Cloakmaster's hyperacute senses, but the calmness—the sense of centeredness, of peace, remained.

He smiled at Djan, a smile of wonder. He pointed forward and down. "It's there," he said quietly, calmly. "The *Spelljammer*. I've found it at last."

The half-elf dashed to the rail and stared in the direction that Teldin had indicated. A smile spread across his face—a tentative smile, though. With the last remnant of his enhanced perception, the Cloakmaster sensed his friend's mixed wonder and trepidation.

"I see it," Djan confirmed. "What do you want to do?"

"Bring us closer," Teldin said simply. "Close with the *Spelljammer*."

As Djan sprinted into the ship to relay the order, the Cloakmaster turned back to stare at the object of his quest.

The great manta ship had already maneuvered, he saw at once. Rather than viewing it from the side and slightly above, he now looked full onto the *Spelljammer's* bow. The mysterious vessel was closing with *him*.

Sudden fear jabbed at his heart and throat. It was closing *fast*—already traveling faster than any vessel had a right to, and still accelerating. Against the chaotic backdrop of the Flow, the dark shape swelled alarmingly.

An attack run! With horrible clarity, he knew: the *Spelljammer* was attacking the nautiloid.

Why? He wore the ultimate helm, didn't he?

But, then, weren't there *other* ultimate helms in the universe, other contenders for the great ship?

What if someone else had reached the *Spelljammer* first, had taken control of it? And what if the new captain's first priority was to eliminate all potential rivals—among them Teldin Moore?

"Battle stations!" His scream was so loud that it tore his throat. He was unable to wrench his gaze from the onrushing world-sized vessel.

"Evasive action!" he ordered, but he knew it was already too late.