

**GREYHAWK**

# The Tomb of Horrors

**Keith Francis Strohm**

**GREYHAWK**


**THE TOMB  
OF HORRORS**

**Greyhawk - 07**

**Keith Francis Strohm**

**(A Flandrel & Undead Scan v1.0)**





# Prologue

He measured time in bursts of pain.

This one pulled Kim from sleep with terrible insistence, like a lover who would not be sated. He tried to scream when the forge-heated blade licked across his stomach with its razor tongue, but he managed only a feeble gurgle. The joints in his shoulders had long-since popped from the weight of his body, and breathing was difficult. Thankfully, he could no longer feel the fiery kiss of the steel nails holding his wrists and ankles to the wall.

Agony flared again. He felt the bruised muscles of his inner thigh shred beneath the blade's touch, and this time he forced out a scream. He did not waste time begging for mercy. There would be none. He simply screamed until his throat bled.

It wasn't until the cloying scent of incense nearly choked him that he realized the pain had faded into a dull throbbing, an ever present caress. He must have lost consciousness. Soft voices raised themselves in a whispered chant. Though the harsh language was unknown to him, the urgent cadences were horrifyingly familiar. He felt lightheaded as the chant gradually grew louder. A filmy layer of gauze had wrapped itself around his thoughts; he shook his head in a vain attempt to clear it, though he knew there was no hope. He wanted to cry, but even this was denied him. The first thing that the black-cloaked bastards had done was pluck out his eyes—leaving him in darkness.

But not alone.

Something Else brooded silently in the darkness with him, a Presence that lurked in the vast wasteland of his nightmares. It watched him, waiting for the right moment. He could sense it growing stronger now, could feel it slide across some vast distance, drawn by the twisted words of the ancient chant and the intoxicating offering of his pain. He gasped once as It entered his mind.

His last thoughts were of his wife and children, then the will of the god took him.

\* \* \*

The screams of the crucified seer shattered night's dark silence. Caught and magnified by the broad hills of the Fellreev forest, the sound rang out across the monastery's ancient grounds, an unholy call to prayer.

Durgoth Shem answered.

With a soft exhalation, the balding cleric gathered up the fragments of parchment lying in front of him, careful lest the already ancient and decaying vellum crumble beneath his touch. Needles of pain stung his fingers as they came into contact with the remains of the book. He grimaced but accepted the pain, as he accepted all of the Dark One's gifts, with hope and something of a deep hunger.

The sensation intensified, and Durgoth nearly gasped at the force of it. He could feel the flesh of his fingertips blistering beneath the assault, and then, just as suddenly as it had occurred, the pain disappeared. He rose gingerly from his seat upon the floor. Knees stiff from long hours of meditation cracked and groaned. Durgoth regarded the tome with a thoughtful scowl as he placed it carefully behind two loose stones in the ruined wall. Purple runes splayed across a cracked leather cover he suspected had been fashioned from human skin. The ancient symbols writhed before his eyes, slithering and bending like serpents. Long accustomed to the dark book's power, he concentrated until the runes settled into a familiar pattern.

So much had happened since the day he had found the *Minthexian Codex* in the dank chambers hidden deep beneath the monastery. Before that, he had been nothing more than a fugitive, a once-proud Hierarch of the Horned Society whose power was shattered the night Iuz and his host of fiendish servitors breached the Society's citadel and scattered its leaders to the corners of Oerth. The memories of those years, spent living like an animal, an object of scorn and derision to all he met, still ate at the cleric.

But power does call to power, and it was such a call that led Durgoth to the ruins of this monastery where, in its crumbling stone and rotten timber, he had unearthed the book and discovered a god of truly awesome power. Other, weaker men called the codex by its common name, *The Book of Nine Shadows*, but he knew that the roots of its true strength went beyond darkness to the heart of Nothingness itself. Long were the months that he wrestled with the secrets contained within the *Minthexian Codex*, until he had finally pierced its veil of mystery. Harnessing the power of its ancient rituals, the cleric built a place of refuge, a sanctuary from the predations of the Old One and his pet demons. In time, others came to the monastery's desecrated grounds, drawn by the power he had unearthed and the dark dreams of a god. Now, after the long tread of years, he was about to set in motion a plan that would shake the foundations of the multiverse. Not for the first time, he wondered if the screams of the gods would be more satisfying than the tormented cries of the mortals who worshiped them.

Such idle speculation would have to wait, he realized, as the sweet song of the crucified seer's pain surrounded him with its intoxicating melody. It was almost time. Placing the stones carefully to seal the codex's hiding place, the cleric bowed once, palms pressed together, and uttered the words to a prayer he had learned from his studies of the dark book. A blue glow circled round the area of the wall before him and then faded away. Satisfied that his mystic protections would hold, the cleric snubbed out the last thick bar of burning incense on the makeshift altar he had created for his private meditations and gathered his heavy black robes about him. With a sigh of anticipation, he turned to leave the room, only to find his way blocked by a shadowy figure.

"It has begun, my lord," the figure intoned in a raspy voice.

Durgoth cursed silently as he recognized the familiar tones of Jhagren Syn. Hoping that the room's dim light covered his startled reaction, he spoke harshly into the darkness, "Jhagren, I left strict instructions that I not be disturbed until my meditations were complete."

"Yes, blessed one," the man replied. The words were simple, almost uninflected, like most of the speech that came from this man. They neither betrayed guilt nor asked forgiveness, and like the speaker itself, they offered the cleric no key to unlock its secrets.

Of all the people who had found their way to the dark monastery, Jhagren Syn stood apart. The others stayed for reasons Durgoth easily understood—they lusted for power, they craved the Dark One's touch, and some, the cleric admitted, were simply mad, consumed by their own dark demons. Jhagren, however, was different. Though his skills and sharp mind quickly distinguished him as a man of true usefulness, the monk's motives remained a mystery, and Durgoth hated mysteries. For what he could not understand, he could not control.

And what he could not control, he feared.

As if sensing the dark cleric's thoughts, Jhagren stepped out of the shadows. Flickering candlelight washed over his pockmarked face, revealing a thick nose and full mouth.

"The god has come, blessed one," the monk said. "Even now the seer speaks words of prophecy."

Ruddy, olive skin stood out even darker in the illumination, and to Durgoth's sight, the deep red robes of the Scarlet Brotherhood flowed around the man like a cloak of blood.

The cleric nodded curtly, his frustration almost forgotten in light of his advisors message, and motioned for his companion to follow. The two walked across the monastery grounds in silence, surrounded by tumbled stone buildings and burnt timbers, the echo of history. Durgoth sniffed the chill winter air and surveyed the ruin. Centuries of dedicated prayer, lives lived and lost in service to an ideal, a holy cause, still offered no protection against death and decay. Only entropy, he thought with some satisfaction, held any constancy.

When they finally arrived at the remains of the monastery's sanctum, which stood lost and alone at the center of the ancient compound, the dark ceremony was in full sway. Twelve black-robed figures knelt in a circle, silver-wrought censers cupped between both hands. Thick plumes of incense rose from them, swirling in dark clouds around the ragged gaps in the stone ceiling, and the air vibrated with the layered harmony of chant.

But the cleric's gaze was drawn to the crucified figure above the circle of cultists. Arms and feet spiked to the stone-worked wall, the seer raised his head and stared out of the wreckage of his eyes, no doubt fixed upon a glorious vision of the Dark One.

Though Durgoth's followers called him "Blessed One" out of fear and respect, the cleric knew that it was this man, gazing upon the true face of divinity, who was truly blessed. Rescued by Durgoth's followers from what would have been a life of endless toil trying to eke a meager existence from the stony soil of a farm north of Redspan in the Bandit Kingdoms, the seer would now spend the remaining days of

his existence as the holy prophet of an ancient god. Durgoth wondered if the man had finally accepted the grace that had been given to him.

A torrent of words spilled out from the seer's bloody mouth, capturing Durgoth's attention. He recognized the flowing lilt of Ancient Suloise. Though he could not understand the old tongue, he noted with satisfaction that Jhagren's young apprentice, himself already familiar with the vagaries of that almost dead language, sat beneath the seer, soft-boned face held tightly in concentration as he painstakingly copied each word. Durgoth watched as the boy pushed back a strand of blond hair, head cocked slightly to the side.

Adrys. He recalled the boy's name after a moment. A bright lad, if a bit too devoted to his master, yet still useful. Though the boy did not quite move with the practiced ease and calm deadliness of Jhagren, Durgoth had witnessed the novice training. Adrys would prove a versatile weapon with the right encouragement. He reminded himself to reward the boy well when all of this was over.

His thoughts were interrupted as Adrys let out a shout in another unfamiliar tongue. This time, it was Jhagren who responded, firing what were obviously questions to his excited student. After a moment, the monk bowed low and made his way to Durgoth.

"Blessed one," he said, with more intensity than the cleric had ever heard him use, "the final quatrain is in place. We now have the location of the key's resting place."

At first, Durgoth simply stared blankly at his advisor, unable to register what he had said. As the monk's words sunk in, however, his heart raced.

"Jhagren," he almost shouted in his excitement, "cut the seer down when he has finished, but make sure he does not die. I have another use for him. And then summon everyone into the main hall. We have much to do."

The cleric smiled as he watched his followers complete the rite and scramble to obey Jhagren, who walked among the cultists like a predator stalking prey. Soon, Durgoth thought, he would avenge years of humiliation. Once they had retrieved the key, his ultimate plan would come to fruition. At last, Tharizdun would be free.

# Part 1

“Terror is a holy gift...”  
—*The Book of Nine Shadows*





Kaerion thought it might be different this time.

But it never was.

The walls were white, the pure white of marble cut from mines in the Cairn Hills. Elaborate stonework decorated the walls and recesses of the temple, relieving the simple, austere lines of its basic design. Statues of strong-jawed men and women, shields held forward, swords raised, gazed proudly back at him. Everything here bespoke strength and courage, forthright commitment in the face of adversity.

From a distance, the soaring lilt of a warm soprano cut across the silent temple, caressing each note, spinning a gossamer web of sound. He recognized the hymn, one of his favorites. He had chosen it for his own Dedication.

In came the procession, a line of gray-robed figures, hoods drawn, heads bowed, their stately gait carrying them forward as if they were floating. The boy walked at their head. Clad in a simple white tunic, his serene face broken by the hint of a smile, he marched toward the simple stone altar in the center of the chamber with wide-eyed innocence.

Kaerion wanted to step forward, armed with the knowledge of what was to come, and carry the boy away, but some force held him back. He tried to shout a warning, but the sound of a rich-voiced alto singing a harmonic line swallowed his voice as soon as he had opened his mouth. He looked around desperately for someone to help him, but could not find a single ally.

That's when the screaming began.

In a single, dizzying moment, the beautifully rendered hymn shattered into painful dissonance. Kaerion clapped dirt-crusting hands over his ears, desperate to escape the cacophony. Slowly, the screams faded, yet he could hear another voice, distant and faint but growing louder. He closed his eyes, trying to ignore the scent of blood that had begun to pollute the air, and strained to make out what this new voice was saying. It came to him slowly—

“Kaerion, get your gods-blasted ass out of that bed!”

The nightmare shattered as a boot connected hard with his side. Kaerion groaned, his already full bladder protesting the abuse, and swatted feebly at his attacker. His

stomach twisted fiercely, nearly disgorging last night's gristly mutton. Only sheer force of will and a tongue swollen to twice its normal size spared him that indignity.

Another groan escaped his lips, this time in response to the throbbing in his head, which had quickly outstripped the pain in his side. Rubbing scarred hands across eyes nearly crusted shut, he forced himself to gaze upon the visage of the demon that had ripped him from sleep.

A harsh, angular elven face stared back at him, arched brows raised even higher—in anger or amusement, it was always difficult to tell. The elf raised a gloved fist, obviously prepared to strike again, but Kaerion held up one arm in entreaty, wondering when the gnomes would finish their incessant hammering inside his skull.

"Peace, Gerwyth," he mumbled, "or so help me I'll throw your bony elven carcass right out the window."

A ghost of a smile cracked the elf's imposing facade, drawing the alien features in starker relief. Delicate cheekbones rose even higher, accenting the angular lines of his face. Long blond hair, pulled back from a high forehead by a silver circlet, flowed around the curved expanse of ears, only to fall into a jumbled cataract around shoulders covered by a dark green cloak. Beneath the folds of the cloak, metal studs glinted softly in the candlelight.

"Damn it, Kaerion, this is serious." All trace of levity fled from the elf's face. "We're in trouble again, and I'll be hung and quartered if I'm going to die because you can't get your ale-sotted wits about you."

"What now?" Kaerion asked, rising unsteadily to his feet. The room spun viciously, but he managed to catch himself before he fell by grabbing on to the stone wall to his left. His hair stank of tabac, and the sour reek of his sweat filled the small room. It nearly made him vomit, but he mastered his rebellious stomach once again, instead releasing only a single noisy belch.

"Gods' blood, Kaer!" the elf shouted. "How long are you going to go on doing this to yourself?"

Kaerion ignored the question—as he always did. He was far too sober to think about the circumstances that had brought him to this place. All he really wanted to do was find a dark corner and drink his throbbing headache into quiescence.

"You said we're in trouble," he replied, with considerably more aplomb than he felt. "What kind of trouble?" He thought perhaps reasoning with his old friend might reduce the likelihood that he would continue to shout.

"Do you remember the merchant who needed caravan guards to help transfer his assets from Hammensend to Woodwych?"

Kaerion nodded. The greedy bastard had hired thugs to steal valuables from certain families and then tried to sell them back to these families for twice their value. It was a good thing they hadn't made it back to Hammensend, he thought wistfully, or that pile of filth would have had to deal with him.

"You mean Master Hemon, the thief who—"

"I mean the merchant who *hired* us to protect his interests," the elf interrupted. "The one connected to half of the crime lords in this city." He paused, obviously looking for some sign that his companion understood where he was heading.

Kaerion opened his mouth to protest, but was cut off with a sharp gesture.

“Gods! Did you have to take it upon yourself to ‘redistribute’ those gold nobles?” Gerwyth asked.

Kaerion felt his own temper rise, and the pounding in his skull intensified. “It wasn’t really his money, anyway,” he said through gritted teeth.

Five years they’d traveled together across the roads and byways of the southern Flanaess and Gerwyth still didn’t understand. Even after everything that had happened to him, after he’d proven his own guilt and cowardice a dozen times, there were still a few things that mattered.

Like getting stinking drunk, another part of his mind thought, instead of standing here arguing like an old married couple.

“Yes, well,” the elf responded, with all the grace of a spurned fishwife. “Now he’s taken the money that is his and placed a bounty on our heads. I was down by the docks when I found out. It seems that there are quite a few people who won’t mind sharing the reward, and they are apparently going to try and collect soon. We’ve got to leave Woodwych for a bit. If we hurry, we can start our journey as soon as the gates open. I have a purse set up for us in Rel Mord. It’s a big enough city that we can lay low until we meet our contact.”

“Contact?” Kaerion questioned sarcastically. “Who are we working for now, the Circle of Eight?” Truth be told, he didn’t feel much like working for anyone and had told his friend that on occasions too numerous to count. “I’m not taking on any more work, Gerwyth,” he stated flatly.

The elf’s eyes flashed emerald green. Nearly a decade of familiarity allowed Kaerion to read his friends moods. When his almond-shaped eyes took on that color, it meant the ranger was at his most dangerous.

Gerwyth, however, did not challenge his companion. “We can argue about this later,” he replied. “Right now, we need to get out of here before it’s too—”

The sharp crack of splintering wood echoed loudly from a distance.

“Late,” the elf finished.

Kaerion heard the deep-throated grumble of voices followed by several muffled screams and knew that trouble had indeed found them. He only hoped that the bastards left the innkeeper and his family unharmed. The Griffon’s Wing wasn’t the best inn within the walls of Woodwych by any means, but its owners were decent people, even if their patrons left something to be desired. If any of their family were hurt tonight, Kaerion thought angrily, he just might make a personal trip back to Hammensend and gut that fat merchant himself.

The door to his room shuddered beneath a fearsome blow.

Instinctively, Kaerion reached for his sword and cursed when he discovered his scabbard was not buckled on. He scanned the room, trying to remember where he had dropped it. Battle tension ran through his system, chasing away a good portion of the aftereffects of the previous evening, as it always did. His head, however, still remained a bit fuzzy, and it took a few moments to locate the well-worn scabbard beneath a filth-encrusted cloak.

Kaerion drew the sword just as the door rocked beneath another blow. He could clearly see the door’s thick wood beginning to split, and he looked to Gerwyth. The elf had just finished stringing his bow and held the weapon in one hand. Silver runes ran down the curved ash-wood body, bathing the room in cold fire.

Kaerion gripped the worn hilt of his own weapon tightly. Years of habit brought his thumb forward to rub the pure white diamond set deeply into the leather-wrapped pommel. The action always calmed him before a battle. He stifled a curse as his finger touched only simple steel, and he cast a bitter glance toward the corner of the small room, where a finely wrought jeweled scabbard lay against the wall.

*Galadorn*, he spoke the sword's name silently, longingly, as if calling out to a long-lost lover. Where once he would have heard its response, deep-voiced and regal, sonorous tones ringing with unearthly purity, he sensed only the slightest of responses, like the tremulous whispers of that lover's farewell, and he nearly staggered under the familiar weight of loss that descended upon him.

Forged with powerful magic and blessed, legends said, by the hand of Heironeous himself, the mystic sword would protect its wielder from all but the most powerful spells, and its holy might would cut through the thickest of armor. But the power of the sword lay beyond him now, lost the moment his faith in his god shattered under the vaulted domes of a hellish temple. Try as he might to separate himself from this poignant reminder of his past, the sword always remained. He'd tried everything from weighting it down and tossing it into a river to hiring hedge wizards to cast spells of holding. The result was always the same. He'd wake up from a drunken stupor with the sword only a finger's breadth from his hand—and permanently sheathed in its jeweled scabbard. Thus, he was forced to wield a simple piece of cold, dead steel.

"We should climb out the window and make for the roof." The elf's voice broke through Kaerion's mournful thoughts. "It's too far to jump down to the lane below."

"Gerwyth, you know I will not run from this."

The ranger smiled, tossing his cloak behind one slender shoulder. "Who said anything about running? The roof will make it far easier for *her*," he said, indicating the glowing bow, "to pick off whoever is after us."

Kaerion shrugged and followed his friend to the window. There was no time to put on any armor, and the close quarters of the room made it more likely that he could be cornered and overmastered by a rush of bodies. The roof was just as good a place as any to send these ruffians back to the dark mother who bore them.

The door finally gave way under the combined attack of several figures, and they let out a shout of victory as the last plank shattered. Before he climbed out the window, Kaerion made out the glint of chainmail beneath some of the attackers' cloaks. At least that will slow them down somewhat, he thought, as he pulled himself up over the jutting lip of the window.

Above him, he could make out the scuttling form of Gerwyth. The nimble elf was already rolling quietly on to the rooftop. He caught the howls of outrage from the thugs in his room as they realized that their quarry was escaping. A few quick pulls brought Kaerion to the roof, where he took a moment to catch his breath.

The gray light of false dawn hung over the rooftop, giving everything a dim, muted feel. Patches of fog rolled past, touching his face with its cool fingers. He spotted Gerwyth standing to one side, head cocked slightly, eyes scanning the urban horizon. Kaerion knew his friend had sensed something amiss and now relied on his hunting instincts—instincts which had made him one of the best trackers and guides in the southeastern Flanaess—to unearth the source of his unease.

“We’ve got company,” the elf said after another moment.

The twang of a bowstring and the sharp hiss of an arrow cut through the pre-dawn silence. Kaerion leapt to one side and noticed with satisfaction that the ranger had done the same. The arrow shattered as it struck stone.

He wasn’t prepared, however, for the sudden emergence of six figures from the gloom. He had a moment to watch Gerwyth deflect two sword strokes with the hardened curve of his magic bow before his attackers were upon him. He ducked quickly as the blade of a sword came whistling for his neck, and he brought his own weapon across in a quick cutting stroke, satisfied when he felt the blade slash deeply into the stomach of his opponent.

His other attacker wasted no time, however, taking advantage of the opening presented by his defensive move, and Kaerion grunted hard as a mailed boot connected with his side. He used the momentum brought on by the kick to place some distance between him and his opponents.

There were four of them, hard-eyed and steel-jawed all, each with the look of practiced killers. The heavy-booted one wore chainmail and carried a wicked-looking curved sword. Of the three, his eyes were the coldest, like blue ice, and Kaerion knew he’d have to take that one out fast. Two others wore no armor, but each wielded long daggers in either hand. The fourth lay on the ground, holding in the bulge of guts that threatened to spill out.

Kaerion opened his stance and shifted his weight toward his center, taking deep, easy breaths. The last remnants of the previous evening’s debauchery fled beneath the familiar thrill of battle. Let them come to me, he thought. They’ll have to fight me on my terms.

The sounds of battle rang out over the rooftop, and he risked a glance at his friend, noting with satisfaction that the elf had dropped his bow and now wielded two gleaming short swords with expert precision. One of the figures, a grizzled human, lay at Gerwyth’s feet, clutching the juncture of his neck and shoulder. Blood spurted out between the man’s fingers, raining down upon the cold stone of the rooftop.

A furious snarl brought his full attention back to his own problems. He raised his sword to parry as the mailed figure ran toward him, swinging his weapon in a wide arc. Kaerion gave a curse as the two blades clanged together with great force, nearly shattering his wrist. Gods this man was strong!

Both dagger-wielding men moved in swiftly as Kaerion grunted with the effort of freeing his sword from the curve of his opponent’s blade. He sidestepped the first viper-fast dagger by stepping inside his main opponent’s guard with his left foot and bringing his right foot behind him while twisting his hips. The momentum freed his sword, but made his right side vulnerable to the second man’s daggers. He cried out as the twin blades punctured shoulder and forearm.

Sensing victory, the mailed warrior redoubled his efforts, and Kaerion found himself hard pressed to block the vicious cuts of the man’s powerful attacks—especially while minimizing his exposure to the two other men who circled him like wolves waiting to pounce on a wounded elk. Sweat poured down his face now and his breathing grew labored. Grimly, Kaerion tried to summon his reserves. While years of heavy drinking had not quite erased the effects of a lifetime of training and battle, he was like a weapon dulled by abuse and neglect.

He saw his opening when one of the unarmored figures darted in for a quick attack. Kaerion brought his sword up, feinting a strike against the leader. Sidestepping the dagger, he reached out with his right hand and grabbed the collar of the man, throwing him into his mailed opponent. While the two stumbled against each other, Kaerion aimed a blow at the man's weapon, grimacing only slightly as his sword neatly sliced off his opponent's arm at the elbow. The mailed figure screamed and fell to the ground. His severed hand landed with a metallic clang several feet away, still holding the scimitar.

Kaerion took advantage of the distraction and quickly ran one of the dagger-wielding figures through with his blade. The remaining attacker turned to flee. Kaerion cursed and started to take off after him, but stopped short as the figure stumbled once and then pitched forward, an arrow protruding from his throat.

Kaerion turned to see Gerwyth lowering his bow, an exultant smile on his face. The elf's cloak and studded leather armor were spattered with gore, and his blond hair was streaked red with blood. In the lanes below, the two companions could make out the stirrings of the city watch come to investigate the early morning disturbance. The remaining assassins would no doubt have high-tailed it out of the inn, not wishing to be exposed to the authorities.

"So, Kaer, what do you think now?" the elf asked as the two caught their breath.

"I think," Kaerion replied, wiping blood from his blade, "that you are an insufferable fool who is right more times than is good for him."

"Does this mean you'll come with me to Rel Mord?"

Kaerion nodded in the first rosy light of day. The shouts of the watch grew louder and more frantic as they neared the Griffon's Wing.

"What choice do I have?" he replied.



Fire spat an unkindly illumination in the large stone room. Gray tile, already slick with blood, caught the hellish light, its hue transforming to a grisly crimson. Bits of bone and discarded flesh were strewn about the central blaze, sizzling beneath the intense heat. The awful stink of butchered meat lay heavy about the hall.

Durgoth ignored the gruesome sight in the same way he ignored the moans and pitiful cries of the faithful who lay wounded and bleeding at his feet. Instead, he concentrated on the hulking figure standing naked before him. Nearly eight feet tall and brutally constructed, the creature was all muscle, sinew, and vein—a mass of bulging flesh and bone held immobile in the rigor of death.

The cleric sighed once in satisfaction, inspecting the vessel in front of him. Days of painstaking preparation had brought them to this moment. Endless hours of study and toil transformed the monastery's ancient refectory into a focal point of the Dark One's power, until the sacrifice began. Everyone had contributed—a bit of flesh here, a limb there, and in the case of the most faithful, their entire bodies—all given freely to build the creature before him. Only the seer had resisted, struggling weakly until Durgoth removed his head and fused it, mouth still open in mid-scream, upon the cold shoulders of the vessel.

Now, all that remained was the final prayer, the ancient rite that would infuse the mass of flesh before him with the dark power of Tharizdun. Durgoth breathed deeply and recalled the hallowed text. At first, his mouth refused to form the words; the ancient phrases withheld their dark meanings from him. Sweat beaded down his face and his hands trembled, for he knew that his Master would brook no failure here. Without an outlet, the accumulated power would rise up and destroy him, like a swollen river bursting its dam.

Years of study and self-discipline took over just as Durgoth's will was about to break. An easy calm stole over him. He opened his mouth again, and this time the words spilled out, sibilant as asps. There was a moment of stillness as his voice echoed in the vast hall. The cleric feared that he had made a mistake in reciting the ritual—until he felt a presence in his mind as horrifying as it was intangible. He resisted a shudder as Tharizdun's power flowed through him, a vast wave of darkness

that threatened to sweep away everything in its path. The cleric cried out beneath the force of the god's will, struggling to keep the spark of his life flickering beneath the divine assault. Finally, the vessel of flesh before him twitched twice and Durgoth felt the pressure ease off of his mind. Secure in the knowledge that he would survive, he gathered what little resources he had remaining and plunged toward the final blessings, ending the dark prayer with a shriek.

Silence descended upon the ancient hall. Even the most grievously wounded held their sobbing tongues. The cleric rose wearily to his feet, not remembering the moment he had fallen to his knees, and stared at the misshapen creature. It twitched twice more in the silent room before giving a great shudder. When at last it turned its gruesome face to survey the hall, Durgoth could see that its eyeless sockets held a darkness more absolute than night.

"Golem," he nearly shouted, "whom do you serve?"

Far more quickly than he had thought possible, the creature turned to face him and opened its mouth. At first, he could see it struggle for speech, its swollen black tongue squirming in its mouth like a blood-gorged leech. It gained some control, however, and after a few moments managed a thickly voweled response. "Y-you, blessed one. By the will of my Master, I serve you."

The hall erupted into spontaneous murmurs, as the once-miserable cultists writhed in holy fervor. Durgoth accepted their adoration and gave back twice more to great Tharizdun. Gently, almost as if he were congratulating his own child, the cleric placed his hand upon the construct's shoulder.

"Good," he replied to his latest triumph. "That is very good indeed."

His power spent, Durgoth turned from the golem and regarded his flock. Men and women, grievously injured by their own hands, were sprawled in clumps before him, muscle and bone exposed to the air where they had sawed off limbs and flesh as a gruesome offering to their god. One of them reached out a bloodied stump and tried to touch the cleric's robe. Durgoth curled his lips reflexively and kicked out at the offending cultist—angered by the woman's audacity. His person was inviolate, a precept he drilled into his followers' heads from the moment they arrived at the monastery.

He watched the mewling cultists for a few moments more. Their ecstatic cries reminded him of the pitiful moans of jhapeth addicts, men and women who had long-since given away their humanity, losing themselves in the seductive comfort of that narcotic root. Like the jhapeth-lost, these cultists represented the castoffs and dregs of the Flanaess, fugitives that he had welcomed in Tharizdun's name.

And now they would be the instruments of the Dark One's freedom.

He called Jhagren over with an absent wave of his hand, quietly satisfied at the monk's quick response. Behind him, Durgoth could feel the presence of the golem looming in the shadows. If his pock-faced advisor felt any discomfort at the construct's presence, the red-robed man didn't show it. He simply bowed once as he approached and regarded Durgoth with his usual even expression. The cleric smiled, but waited a few moments before speaking. For all the mystery that surrounded this man, he knew that it was tied closely with the Scarlet Brotherhood. Perhaps Jhagren felt that he could steal the codex and deliver it to the Order in Hesuel Ilshar, or



perhaps he was simply a spy. Either way, Durgoth enjoyed testing the man's patience.

"What do you say, Jhagren? It appears that our lord has truly blessed us."

Jhagren nodded impassively. "Indeed, we have been blessed Durgoth."

"Now, my friend," Durgoth said, in that slightly superior tone that he knew must make the monk yearn to send his hand striking at the soft cartilage of his throat, "it is time to prepare for our journey. Tharizdun has granted us a great boon this day, but we will still need support for our expedition."

"Yes, blessed one," Jhagren replied. "The tomb we seek lies many weeks to the south, beyond the kingdom of Sunndi. I have already contacted some associates of mine. We shall meet them in the Nyrondese city of Rel Mord, and from there we will strike out for the Vast Swamp."

"Good," Durgoth said. "Will we have difficulty remaining inconspicuous in the city?" He motioned, indicating the golem behind him.

"No, blessed one. The companions who will accompany us on our journey know several, shall we say 'less-traveled', ways into Rel Mord. And, like any large city, there is no dearth of innkeepers who are willing to look the other way as long as they have enough gold coins to distract them."

The cleric nodded, confident that the always-efficient monk had everything in order. "Excellent," he replied. "Then I leave you to find what able-bodied help you can to load our boats for travel. We leave in two days' time."

He gestured once, knowing that the golem would follow him out as he left the room. Durgoth had done some research on his own. The tomb they sought was none other than Acererak's, an ancient wizard who, it was said, had sought to conquer even death. Legends surrounded Acererak's tomb, rumors and old tales of magic and treasure beyond the imagination. And danger. Those heroes who set out after Acererak's legacy never returned.

Durgoth smiled.

There would be plenty of opportunities to make sure Jhagren met with an accident. And then the world would be his.



Rel Mord sat like a giant fist in the vast grasslands of northern Nyronnd. Beyond its fortified wall, the marble spires of the Royal Palace soared into the afternoon sky, but even its exquisite craftsmanship could not disguise the crenellated barbicans and manned towers visible even from outside the city. Other stone structures, less lofty perhaps but no less imposing, proudly thrust their own elaborate heights skyward, like the teeth of some great dragon. The swift-moving Duntide River lay at the city's feet, a jeweled serpent whose sun-dappled scales burned bright beneath the noonday light. Everywhere the sound of life thrummed, strong and sure.

Despite the press of bodies milling about the stone-fortified gatehouse guarding one of the three entrances to the city, Gerwyth hummed a lively elven song. Kaerion looked over at his companion, wishing, not for the first time, that he could share in his friend's high spirits. But a sense of unease had stolen over him these past few days, and it had grown steadier as they approached the capital.

If Rel Mord was the martial and political heart of the country, Nyronnd itself was an aging soldier. Roads that had once crisscrossed rolling plains and gentle hills, connecting and supporting cities, towns, and hamlets, lay damaged and in disrepair, their earthen lengths scarred with deep ruts and pocked with wheel-snapping ditches and holes. Or they stood uncared for, allowed to run wild with bracken and the thorned scrub vines that grew as wild as the almost endless grass fields. What's more, the village folk were withdrawn, sullen. Farm doors remained closed to strangers, and merchants refused to trade, no matter how heavy the purse before them.

Kaerion had noted all of this and voiced his unease to Gerwyth. The ranger had just shrugged and proclaimed the ways of humans too inscrutable to his elven sensibilities. The rest of the journey had taken place in silence, as Kaerion's distress grew.

Now, the two stood amid a crowd of wagons and people, waiting for their turn to enter Rel Mord. The rank stench of unwashed bodies and animal dung burned in Kaerion's nostrils, and he tried to ignore the rising shouts of squabbling traders and farmers as they all pressed forward, eager to enter the city. He wondered how his

friend's trained senses could handle such a miserable assault, and was just about to ask when a large weight slammed into his side, nearly toppling him over.

With a grunt, he disentangled himself from the net of arms and feet that surrounded him and came face to face with a red-faced bull of a man who stared back at him with an unpleasantly furrowed brow. The man's eyes were drawn together sharply and his mouth seemed frozen in a permanent frown.

"My apologies," Kaerion began in his friendliest tone, "I did not mean to stand in the place that you intended to fall into." He gave the unpleasant man a hard look, at odds with his congenial tone.

Though broad of shoulder and thick of limb, the offending man still did not have Kaerion's mass. At first it seemed as if he might actually growl something back, but he took another look at the fighter's well-tended mail and leather scabbard and hastily grumbled an unintelligible phrase before scampering off into the crowds.

Kaerion felt a slender hand rest upon his shoulder.

"Easy, Kaer," Gerwyth said in a soothing tone. "No sense traveling all the way to Rel Mord only to spend time in the city prison."

Kaerion exhaled through his nose before replying, "Gods, you know how much I hate large cities!"

In truth, it wasn't the unending crowds and lack of privacy that was really bothering him. The wineskins had run out quickly, and he was afflicted with a throbbing head that never seemed to leave him. His nights, never the refuge they were for other people, were now filled with nightmares. If anything positive could be said for this city, it was that he could soon find himself in the taproom of some inn, cradling a blessed mug of ale. Maybe even two.

"I know you do," replied the elf, "but if you can relax for just a bit, we'll soon be inside." He indicated the line, which had moved considerably closer to the gatehouse.

They reached the gatehouse a few candle-spans later, only to be challenged by a guardsman in plate armor. The soldier flicked a bored gaze over the two men. "State your name and business in the city of Rel Mord," the guardsman intoned in a flat voice.

"Gerwythaeniaen Larkspur and Kaerion Whitehart, lately from Woodwych," the elf responded. He would have continued, but the bored guard had already moved on to the next person in line, waving the two travelers in with an impatient shake of his halberd.

"They must take their duties very seriously," the elf said with a smile as they passed through the stone gateway.

Kaerion simply scowled at his friend. Disgust with the soldier's obvious laziness warred with his own painful memories. There was a time when he would have called the gods' own thunder down upon anyone serving under him who shirked his duties so blatantly, before—

He shook his head to deny that memory. It was another life. No one served under him now. He was master of nothing. Let the city commander worry about the discipline of his own troops. Kaerion certainly wasn't about to start caring. And when, he thought as he loosened his cloak, did it get so blasted warm? There were still several weeks left until Readyng and the early spring thaw.

“Where are we supposed to meet this contact of yours?” he asked Gerwyth, who had stopped to converse with a blue-cloaked elf maiden. “I’ve a powerful need to wash the dust of the road from my throat.”

The two elves continued to speak for a moment more, the mellifluous tones of the Elvish tongue flowing between them like quicksilver, before the ranger nodded and touched hand to heart in the elven gesture of farewell. He turned to Kaerion slowly, with a familiar grin on his face.

“Has anyone ever told you, Kaer, that you are a prime example of your race?”

Knowing that he wasn’t about to get a quick answer to his question, the fighter sighed. “I’ll take that as a compliment,” he replied sardonically.

“Hmm, yes. You would.” The elf’s grin widened after a moment. “Fear not, my friend. I have just been informed of the location of our meeting place.” He sketched a courtly bow and spoke in his best high-class accent, “If you’ll just follow me, my lord,” and turned into the crowd.

Kaerion threw up his hands and followed.

\* \* \*

Despite its fortress-like appearance, the City of Rel Mord was abuzz with domestic life. Traders and merchants of all races and nationalities drove wagons teeming with bolts of brightly-colored cloth, silks, and woven fabrics toward the market, while a seemingly endless train of livestock and other animals plodded their way through the wide streets. Soldiers patrolled the lanes and avenues, some as bored as the gate guard, others careful to watch the collection of street urchins, beggars, and musicians that wove in and out of the passing crowd.

Drawing close to the market, Kaerion could hear the strident call of booth merchants and the hum of commerce taking place in a variety of languages and dialects. Common, Baklunish, and Flan mixed with the tongues of elves, dwarves, and even a few gnomes to form a multi-layered wave of sound that washed over the two companions.

Despite the outward signs of life, Kaerion clearly felt the same sense of quiet desperation that had greeted both he and Gerwyth on their journey south toward the city. The music and laughter and tenor of the entire city seemed just a bit too loud and forced, the faces of its citizens a bit too wary, or worse, apathetic. Walking through its streets, Kaerion could see a film of dirt covering the magnificence of its stone temples and buildings. Even the royal palace, which had quickened the beat of his heart with its martial splendor, now seemed hollow and empty, like an ancient tomb, as the two adventurers drew closer. Nyron had been a kingdom divided, sapped of strength by war and betrayal, and it was clear to Kaerion that the wounds had still not healed.

As they moved deeper into the city, the press of the crowd eased somewhat. Streets narrowed, wood and stone buildings drew closer together, and the anxious stamp of merchant feet was replaced by the soft-soled tread of robed priests, royal messengers, and court functionaries, who carried on their business with an air of self-conscious dignity. Kaerion’s heart lurched for a moment as he caught sight of several mailed priests of Heironeous heading right toward them.

He must have stopped in his tracks, for Gerwyth spoke in a gentle voice at his side, “Peace, Kaer. Let us be about our business.”

The comforting tones settled him somewhat. He nodded and continued on his way past the group of approaching clerics. “Traitor,” he expected them to yell. “Betrayer! Coward!” He was all of those things—and more. How could the Beloved of the Arch-Paladin not see his shame? It was clearly written on his soul.

But the priests walked right by, intent on their own private conversation. No one had even spared a glance his way. Kaerion wiped the cold sweat from his brow and followed his friend down another street.

Most of the buildings in this area were made of stone, with an impressive amount of gilt marble facades. A few of the decorously crafted houses even had small yards surrounded by iron gates or stone walls. The few folk who were walking about the cobblestone streets were richly appointed, wearing fine tailored velvets, thick cloaks, and an array of gold jewelry around throat and hands.

“Where are you taking us?” Kaerion asked his friend in a tight voice.

“To our destiny,” Gerwyth replied in a voice so heavy with melodrama that the fighter wondered how his friend could still stand.

He shot the elf a barbed look and crossed his meaty arms in front of him. “No more joking,” Kaerion said tersely. “I’m tired and hungry, and I don’t have any patience for your damned elven wit!”

Gerwyth sighed, the ever-present smile falling from his angular face. “Fine. If you must know, we’re going right there.” The elf pointed a slim finger at a two-storey wooden building just past the bend in the street.

Kaerion eyed their destination carefully. Despite not being made of stone, the elegantly carved lines of the structure blended perfectly with the surrounding architecture. A high-peaked roof lent the building a sense of dignity, matched by the elaborately framed windows and exquisitely worked door. A masterfully painted sign hung above the lintel, proclaiming the name of the establishment.

“The Platinum Shield?” he asked. “Who in the hells are we meeting here, Ger? The Nyrondeese Royal Family?”

When the elf failed to reply, Kaerion stared at him in disbelief.

“No,” he said after a few moments, “you didn’t. Phaulkon’s feathered ass, what have you gotten us into this time?”

Gerwyth just shook his head and pulled his friend toward the inn. “Come on, Kaer, just relax. At the very worst you’ll have the chance to get drunk in the best taproom in the city of Rel Mord.”

Against his better judgment, Kaerion followed his friend into the Platinum Shield.

\* \* \*

“They’re late,” Bredeth snapped in an arrogant tone as he slammed the door to the sumptuously decorated suite.

Majandra Damar gave a breathy sigh at the intrusion and stopped running graceful fingers across the strings of her harp, upon which she had been composing the final themes for a new work. It didn’t matter anymore, however, as the man’s interruption had already driven the melodic line from her mind.

The yew harp cast out its final, plaintive note and the room descended into silence. Majandra regarded her guest thoughtfully. The noble's perfectly sculpted face held a slight red tinge that was deepening even as she watched, and his gold-flecked eyes flashed dangerously in the dim light of the room. Even his normally immaculate close-cropped blond hair lay askew, tousled by wildly gesticulating hands.

Good, she thought. He's angry. This should be fun.

"They are not late, Bredeth. Phathas made arrangements for them to meet us three Stardays hence, and the last I checked," she said, looking out of the stained glass window to her left, "it is still Starday."

"I have wandered the streets and the situation is even worse here than in the other cities," the noble replied. "My country is suffering. My people are exhausted. Nyronid is but an echo of the great nation it was. And we—" he leaned over and stabbed his finger violently down on the table before him—"who have a plan that can help restore the country to its former glory, have to wait on the whim of two foreigners who are probably sitting in a brothel right now laughing at their good fortune."

"First off," retorted the bard, "these are not *your* people. You are cousin to His Majesty, and a distant one at that. Your head, however inflated with its own sense of importance, will never, gods' willing, wear the crown. And second, Phathas himself chose these 'foreigners'. If he believes that they offer us our best chance of success, then I shall not gainsay him."

"Such insolence." Bredeth nearly spat as he drew closer to the bard. "If we were in my father's castle, I would have you beaten and cast out with the other criminals."

"I pray that I never fall so low as to have to ply my skills for a family of tone-deaf boors who couldn't appreciate a song if it came from Olidammara's own mouth. With any luck, I'll never find myself near the drafty wreck of a keep where you were born."

Bredeth recoiled as if he had been slapped, and Majandra wondered if perhaps she had gone too far this time. The young noble drew even closer to her, his perfect teeth clenched tightly. "You have noble blood in you, Majandra," he whispered, "and that has protected you so far. But don't ever forget what other blood flows through your veins."

At this, the bard's hand absently pushed aside flowing strands of red hair to finger the ever-so-slight point of her ear.

"Some may find you exotic," Bredeth continued. "Others..." He tilted his head to the side and shrugged. "Well, let's just say that not every noble family regards marital infidelity as a romantic gesture."

The bard sat stunned, unable to even phrase the crudest of retorts. She had always known that the events surrounding her birth were fodder for the sitting rooms of bored nobles who had nothing better to do than gossip away the hours of the day, and she had dealt with the whispered imprecations and sidelong glances that accompanied her adolescent years. Until this time, however, no one had ever confronted her directly with the shame of her mixed heritage.

Anger rose up inside of her. This may have started as a game, a way to pass the time as she waited for the two of whom Phathas spoke, but it had become quite real.

She refused to be judged by this petulant spoiled brat, and she was about to tell him so when another voice broke into the conversation.

“Peace,” it commanded. “Both of you. Phathas is at rest and will need all of his strength for the coming journey.”

As one, Bredeth and Majandra turned to face the source of the voice. Vaxor stood in one of the suite’s many doorways, his mouth, surrounded by a silvering black beard, drew down into a frown, his deep-ridged brow furrowed. Even beneath his flowing robes, Majandra could see the man’s solid build bulked even further by a layer of chainmail. His left hand was wrapped around a silver medallion in the shape of a lightning bolt, the symbol of Heironeous.

The bard pushed down her anger for the moment. There would be ample opportunity to spar with Bredeth on their journey. The young noble, however, obviously felt no such restraint. “An insult has been dealt my family,” he continued, this time turning toward the priest for support, “and I demand that it be redressed—”

“Enough, Bredeth,” Vaxor’s deep voice interrupted the man’s tirade. “We have more important matters to deal with besides a slight to your honor.” He fixed both of them with a stern gaze, and it became clear to Majandra why this man had risen so high within the church of the Arch-Paladin. She could feel the power of his presence like a palpable force.

“Our guests will arrive soon,” the priest continued, “and we should be prepared for them.”

Bredeth snorted, either unaware of the intensity in Vaxor’s gaze or just too stupid to heed it; Majandra couldn’t decide which.

“I don’t even know who our ‘guests’ are,” the noble said, “but since they have not arrived yet, I am beginning to doubt whether or not they could actually guide themselves into a harlot’s skirts.” Majandra began to protest again, but the young man held up his hand, cutting her off. “Then where are they?” he asked.

“I can’t be sure,” broke in a fourth voice, its bright timbre carrying clearly across the room, “but I think that we are right behind you.”

Majandra hid a smile at the look on Bredeth’s face.

\* \* \*

The interior of the Platinum Shield was every bit as elegant as its exterior suggested. Rounded teak and cherry oak tables stood upon a floor of polished wood, while masterful carvings decorated the inn’s paneled walls. The design of the common area, with its sweeping lines and softened corners gave the impression of depth yet still retained an intimate atmosphere. A set of stairs, complete with a runner made of thick red carpet, led up to the sleeping rooms above, and another door led downstairs to the Shield’s famous wine cellar.

The taproom itself was empty except for the small group assembled around a wide table close to the marble-mantled fireplace. Majandra ran a lazy finger across the exquisite horn cup that held her pint of ale, gazing at the giant of a man that sat across from her. After a few tense moments of silence in the suite above, Vaxor had taken charge, rousing Phathas from his rest and assembling the group in the common

room of the inn. Introductions were hastily made and the six of them now sat talking in subdued tones.

The burly human had a kind face, with deep-set eyes and a strong nose. Thick black hair ran in waves just short of the man's broad shoulders; the leonine mane accented a sharply defined jaw. But it wasn't Kaerion's stunning looks that drew the bard's attention. Rather, it was the haunted gaze that leapt from his eyes when he thought no one was looking, the way he obviously carried an aching wound so deep that it had settled into his bones. She found her hand almost tingling with the desire to caress his brow, offering what comfort she could. There was a bitter tale here, and nothing compelled Majandra so much as the promise of a tale—the more tragic the better.

His companion was another matter entirely. The gorgeous elven ranger had introduced himself with the grace and charm befitting a royal courtier, his silver tongue lapsing into the most beautifully accented Elvish that she had ever heard, in order to pay her a particularly "adventurous" complement. She had smiled and accepted his words gracefully enough, and she had found herself responding despite everything she knew about such rakish folk. And this line of thinking wasn't helping her concentrate on the matter at hand at all.

She watched as Vaxor stood, helping Phathas to his feet. The ancient mage wore his power like a cloak. Majandra could almost see the eddies of arcane energy swirling about him. Eyes that were gray as the clouds of a summer storm looked out from a face of harsh angles. Like many wizards, he wore a beard, silvered by time but thick and curling in the heated room. Unlike many of his noble colleagues at the University, who groomed their beards almost obsessively with silvered combs, often weaving the hair into thick braids, Phathas' beard resembled a wild bird's nest of tangles and knots.

Majandra's attention returned to what the wizard was saying.

"For many years," continued Phathas, "Nyronde was a kingdom divided against itself. Disgusted by his father's leadership during the Greyhawk Wars, which had left much of the kingdom in debt to foreign powers, Black Prince Sewarndt poisoned the king and, with a cadre of his most trusted advisors, attempted to seize the throne. He would have succeeded if it hadn't been for the valiant efforts of the Heironean clergy," he nodded once toward Vaxor, "and the decisive leadership of King Lynwerd, who was then Crown Prince of Nyronde."

"But the Regicide had broken the spirit of the already beleaguered country. Starvation, drought, and the aftermath of the war had scarred Nyronde deeply; civil war nearly killed it. And I fear that the country still suffers from this illness of spirit."

Phathas paused for a moment, head bowed. Majandra was struck by how fragile the mage seemed. His voice, always rich and resonant, sounded rough around the edges, and his hands, confident hands that were ever ready to wield ancient spells or teach a fledgling spellcaster her first cantrip, shook ever so slightly.

He's getting old, she thought in amazement, and wondered why she hadn't seen it before. With a shock, she recalled that her own studies with the mage were nearly two-score years ago. The bard looked at the smooth skin of her hands. Time marches on for us all, she knew, but elven blood slows the pace.



“The situation is intolerable,” continued Vaxor, filling the ensuing silence with an orator’s practiced ease, “and there are a number of loyal Nyronde, both noble and common, who would see our country restored to its former greatness. Thanks to Phathas’ tireless research, we have an opportunity to do just that.”

The priest crossed his arms and indicated with a nod of his head that Phathas should continue, but to Majandra’s surprise, it was Bredeth who interjected. “We have discovered the location of an ancient tomb, the resting place of the fabled wizard, Acererak. Inside lies a veritable king’s ransom of gold and magic, treasure enough to pay off our debts to these foreign kingdoms with some left to fill the country’s coffers once again. Nyronde will rise again from its ashes—” the noble nearly shouted, slapping his hand hard against the table—“and she will once more stand among the greatest kingdoms of the world.”

Stunned as she was by the ferocity in the man’s tone, Majandra nearly fell from her chair at the sharp bark of laughter that erupted from the man called Kaerion.

“That’s your plan?” asked the broad-shouldered fighter. “You’re going to restore your nation’s glory by pillaging an old wizard’s final resting place? Why not take to the roads and steal what you need from itinerant travelers? It would be far easier.”

Despite the fighter’s harsh tone, Majandra’s trained ear picked up a trace of anger and bitterness. The hidden emotions beat a subtle counterpoint to the man’s words, and it took the bard a few moments to realize that they were not directed at their plan, but right back at the fighter himself.

“Peace my friends,” Phathas spoke, forestalling Bredeth’s heated retort. The noble sat back down in the chair from which he had sprung and closed his mouth sharply—though his golden eyes smoldered.

The old mage directed his gaze at Kaerion. “Rest assured that Acererak was no benevolent conjurer or kindly sage,” he said. “Rather, he was completely and totally devoted to the cause of evil. The treasure buried within his tomb was either stolen, extorted, or gathered from the ranks of slain heroes who died opposing his dark reign.

“All of us,” he gestured to the assembled group, “have thought long and hard about our course of action, and we have committed to seeing it through. Make no mistake; it will not be easy. Legends tell of Acererak’s quest to rob death of its power. It’s probable that he still dwells within his tomb in some form, surrounded by every horror his twisted mind can envision. With skill and a fair bit of luck, we may succeed where others before us have failed.”

“Then where do we fit in Phathas?” asked the golden-maned elf, who, up until this point, had remained completely silent. “Your message said nothing about crawling through some decrepit tomb, only that you needed my woodlore.”

Phathas’ answering smile split his face into a canyon of lines. “Exactly correct, my old friend,” the mage responded with obvious affection. “We’ve crawled through enough dungeons together, haven’t we?”

Majandra dropped her cup at the wizard’s words, spilling the last few drops of her ale. By the looks she saw on her friends’ faces, she wasn’t the only one surprised to hear that Phathas knew the elf, let alone that one of the greatest minds at the Royal University had once strapped on gear and braved the dangers of the adventuring life. Kaerion, too, seemed surprised at the revelation—surprised and, she’d have to say,

none too pleased. But before any of them could voice their thoughts, Phathas spoke again.

“Acereraks tomb lies deep in the Vast Swamp, south of Sunndi. We need you and Kaerion to guide us through that treacherous land. The journey will not be easy or, I’m afraid, terribly swift. We have made arrangements with several merchants and will have adequately provisioned wagons and a small team of drovers to help us carry out whatever we can discover in the tomb.”

“Gerwyth, this is crazy,” interjected Kaerion. “The Vast Swamp is crawling with humanoid tribes, not to mention the hazards of the swamplands themselves.”

It was Vaxor, however, who responded. “It is said, friend Kaerion, that Heironeous favors the bold and punishes the timid I believe that the Valorous One favors this mission, and the resources of my Church are at our disposal.”

The bard watched as Kaerion recoiled at the priest’s words. For a moment, she thought he would get up and strike Vaxor, so great was the anger that flared in his countenance. Instead, he scowled at his companion. “Ger,” the man said, “surely you’re not—”

The ranger held up his hand, cutting off his friend’s entreaty. “I owe you much, Phathas,” he said, “and loath are the elves to turn their back on those they call friend. Let me have a look at your plans, and I will speak with Kaerion privately. We will deliver our answer to you in the morning.”

“Very well,” the mage nodded and stood. “Come Vaxor. Let us retire to our suite and fill Gerwyth in. We will all assemble in the morning.”

Majandra watched as the three men left the taproom. The elf threw his friend a single glance, but Kaerion simply scowled and downed his ale in a single gulp. Without a word of farewell, he stood up and headed for the door of the inn.

She stared at the door for a few moments, and then back at Bredeth, who also wore an ill-suited look about his face. She sighed once and made a decision. Sketching a quick and none-too-respectful bow at the dour-looking noble, she followed Kaerion out the door.

Curiosity had won.



The air stank. Damp and fetid, the awful stench filled the sewer tunnels that snaked with labyrinthine complexity beneath Rel Mord. Built of thick, dark stone, the sewers channeled waste and garbage—the unmentionable castoffs of civilized society—from the city above into the deep-flowing waters of the Duntide River. Small ledges in each tunnel allowed passage over the oozing flow of sewage, though even the relatively high ceiling did not make the journey anywhere near comfortable.

Durgoth fought down another gag at the oppressive fumes, cursing silently at the necessity for such a demeaning entrance into the city. A thin layer of slime and moss clung to the slick walls of the passage, and the sound of dripping water echoed everywhere around him. Just for a moment, he heard in the dreadful repeating sound thousands of voices calling out his name in awe and terror. Moss-covered walls became towers and temples, draped with banners proclaiming his majesty and the power of the god he served, and the chill touch of the damp sewer air become the crisp bite of the winter wind whipping hard across the plains and grasslands of Nyronnd at his command. This is how one should enter a city such as Rel Mord, the cleric thought, and he vowed to make it so after he had completed his quest.

The moment passed and Durgoth glanced at his companions, noting with a touch of bitterness that among the group that had traveled from the monastery, Jhagren alone appeared serene and unaffected by their dank, oppressive surroundings. Even young Adrys could not match the easy gait and impassive mien of his master, though it was obvious that the apprentice tried valiantly. Only the dull, heavy tread of the golem, walking dutifully behind him, kept the cleric's temper from fraying completely. He allowed a rare smile at the thought of his creation. Let the others wonder about the extent of his powers, now. He could command death, and soon, he knew, his Master would give him the power to command life.

Their guide, a rough-voiced human with a small, angular face that resembled a ferret, interrupted the cleric's ruminations. "About twenty yards up this passage is a narrow side tunnel that leads into a larger chamber. We can take a few moments to rest there before continuing on."

“I don’t understand,” Durgoth replied. “We are obviously beyond the city gates, and we’ve passed at least four separate ladders that would take us up into Rel Mord proper. Why don’t we push on and use the next ladder?”

Truthfully, he was more than annoyed at the delay. The sooner they settled in the city, the sooner they could make final preparations and begin their journey.

“We may be beyond the gates,” the guide spoke in a calm voice, “but the streets of Rel Mord are patrolled by armed sentinels, and we can’t risk being spotted as we emerge from the sewers. It would endanger not only us, but also the Guild’s relationship with the city watch. As long as we do nothing overt, the watch commanders can take their bribes in good conscience. And even were we to leave the sewers unnoticed, it would be difficult to travel inconspicuously.” He indicated the hulking golem with a deft finger. “Even cloaked as it is, it would be a risky thing to try and pass off the creature as human. No. There are several passages that will take us into the Poor Quarter. From there, I can take you to a Guild house, where you’ll be hidden until you’re ready to leave as a respectable caravan master.”

Durgoth nodded reluctantly at the logic of the thief’s words. “Then lead on, but hurry. I have much more important things to do than skulk around in a gods-blasted sewer.”

When they entered the chamber, Durgoth was surprised at its elegance. A high-vaulted ceiling arched into darkness beyond the light of their group’s torches, and the walls, almost painfully drab in the sewer tunnels, were almost garishly ornate, decorated as they were with grinning bas-relief gargoyles and prettily accented stonework. Several passages ran off this chamber, each one beginning with a wide archway. Above the center of each arch, seemingly flying out of the very stone itself, hung the torso of a beautiful winged human. The right hand of each sculpture bore a stone sword, while the left hand lay open, palm up, as if holding something invisible to the eye.

The cleric looked around for a moment, almost enviously. Their guide had said this chamber was used long ago as a way station for the caretakers and guards that once patrolled the sewers, repairing any damage and clearing the tunnels of any creatures that might have taken up residence there. The quality of the stonework spoke volumes as to the skill and wealth of the founders of Rel Mord, and Durgoth could not help but be impressed.

How far they have fallen, he thought as he watched several of his cultists lay down their packs and wipe the muck from their boots. Out of the corner of his eye, the cleric saw Jhagren talking softly with their guide. When the two were finished, the monk made his way silently toward him.

“How long do we rest?” Durgoth asked.

“A few moments only,” Jhagren replied. “Our guide indicated that we had perhaps another half hour of travel before we were deep enough in the Poor Quarter to emerge from the sewers.”

“Good,” the cleric nodded. “How are the others holding up?”

The journey by river boat and then overland had taken over a month of hard travel, and even he, nourished by his god and the finest provisions he could purchase, felt the strain of such a trek. His concern, however, was not truly for the welfare of

his followers. Let Tharizdun give strength to those who deserved it. He only wished not to be slowed down by those who were undeserving.

“They are tired, blessed one,” replied the monk, “but they are eager to accompany you on your quest. They will do what it takes to continue.”

“Indeed they will,” the cleric confirmed with a hint of steel. He would have replied further, but another voice interrupted him.

“Danger,” it hissed with the cold sibilance of the grave. It took a few moments for Durgoth to realize that it was the golem itself that had spoken.

“Where?” the cleric asked, searching for the cause of the alarm.

But it was too late.

The room plunged into total darkness.

“What treachery is this?” Durgoth shouted above the wild cries of his followers.

A moment later another voice answered, “Please, my dear friend, let us not be too hasty in our pronouncements. This is not treachery. This is merely a renegotiation of terms.”

Durgoth’s blood burned with anger. Was that amusement he heard in the ringing tones of that voice? He was nobody’s plaything, to be used and made a fool of. Quietly, he reached for his obsidian mace.

“And what if I choose not to renegotiate?” he asked of the mysterious voice.

When the reply came, it was yet a different voice. “That would be most... unfortunate.”

“Then here is my reply,” said the cleric.

He touched the tip of his mace and shouted into the darkness. The room filled with a dim bluish light. Durgoth could see figures skulking out of the shadows toward their group.

Suddenly, the air was filled with the hiss of flying crossbow bolts. Two cultists fell to the stone floor immediately, bolts imbedded in the center of their chests, while a third clutched his leg in obvious agony. Durgoth shrank back for a moment, expecting the sting of metal, but Jhagren Syn sprang into action. Soundlessly, the monk stepped to Durgoth’s side, his hands moving blindingly fast. Three bolts to the left clattered harmlessly to the floor, while the fourth, which sped right for Durgoth’s throat, split in two beneath the knife edge blow of Jhagren’s calloused hand.

The cleric was stunned for only the briefest of moments before he turned to the golem. “Defend me!” he shouted at the mass of flesh and muscle. Without a word, the creature stepped in front of Durgoth, ready to meet the advancing figures.

He turned to give orders to Jhagren, but the monk was already gone, carrying the fight to their attackers. Durgoth spotted the man rolling to his feet amid three opponents. The monk was a red blur, spinning, kicking and punching. When he was through, two men lay dead on the floor, and the last one clutched at the red ruin of his throat, unaware that he was already dead. Durgoth watched as the monk opened his hand, dropped the shattered cartilage to the floor, and then rushed forward to meet more attackers.

Another deadly hiss brought his attention back to the fight at hand. Five crossbow bolts hit the golem in the chest with a meaty thunk. The creature ignored them and reached out with a thickly-muscled arm to slap away the short sword of a thief. Another swipe of its arm struck the attacker squarely, and Durgoth could hear a sharp

snap as the man's bones broke beneath the blow. The thief crumpled into a pulpy heap on the ground.

That nuisance taken care of, the cleric scanned the room for bowmen. Sure enough, he spotted five figures hastily reloading their crossbows on a ledge in the northern section of the room. With a vicious smile, he focused his will and began to chant in a deep-throated voice. He twisted his arm up in a swift motion and then finished the words to his prayer. A beam of pure darkness shot from his hands, consuming all light in its path. When the beam struck the bowmen on the ledge, they screamed and began to tremble. Durgoth watched in satisfaction as the darkness consumed their flesh from the inside out, until nothing living was left on that ledge.

The sounds of battle and the cries of the wounded filled the wide chamber. Jhagren and Adrys continued to strike blow after blow against the treacherous thieves, and Durgoth noted the pile of bodies they had left in their wake. The slightest whisper of sound alerted him to the presence of a cloaked figure approaching from behind. He cursed once and spun, trying to avoid the inevitable attack, but it was too late. He cried out as a dagger plunged deeply into his side. Blindly, he struck out with his fist and felt it strike the would-be-assassin with a satisfying crunch. Swiftly, the cleric grabbed his obsidian mace and swung it hard at his attacker, hoping to take advantage of the thief's surprise at being struck. His opponent, however, was far faster. The thief ducked beneath the whistling mace and drew his own sword. The two opponents circled each other warily, though Durgoth spared an occasional glance at the golem, hoping to maneuver his attacker within reach of the creature's grasp.

His opponent attacked left. Durgoth allowed himself to be drawn in by this obvious feint, blocking hastily with his mace. When the thief drew a second dagger and struck at his right side, the cleric stepped easily aside and kicked his attacker with a heavy boot. The man doubled over only for a moment, but it was enough time to bring his own mace crashing down on his opponent's head. The thief's skull cracked open like an egg. Gray matter and blood spilled out on the floor.

Durgoth turned from his defeated opponent and surveyed the scene. The battle was clearly over. Jhagren and his apprentice were moving quickly through the center of the chamber, scanning the shadows for any more opponents, and the golem had just cracked the back of his last attacker.

Silence descended upon the room. Dead bodies littered the floor, and the ground was slick with pooling blood. Several of his followers were among the corpses, but he noted with some satisfaction that most of those who journeyed with him from the Fellreev forest were still alive.

It wasn't until Jhagren shouted, however, that Durgoth noted the single figure slinking away toward the shadowy recesses of a side passage. He turned toward the retreating figure, one hand on the onyx-wrought symbol of his faith, and spoke the words of another prayer. He shuddered once as the divine energy of his god poured forth from him.

The figure froze in place.

As Durgoth approached, he noticed the fine weave of the thief's cloak and the jewelry on hand and ear. This was no simple gutter snake or cutpurse, but someone of substance in the Thieves' Guild. Someone they could use. He motioned the golem

forward and commanded it to hold the helpless human. The creature reached out and grabbed the thief by the neck.

Secure in the knowledge that their prisoner could not escape, the cleric released the thief from the bonds of his spell. The man struggled briefly, but stopped when the golem tightened its grip around his throat. The thief stared bug-eyed at his captor.

“So, my *dear* friend,” Durgoth said to the terrified man, “I think it’s time we continued our conversation.”

“W-what do you want from me?” the thief managed to gurgle.

The cleric smiled and sent out a quick prayer of thanksgiving to Tharizdun, for even compressed by the crushing grip of his golem, he could hear the familiar tones of the voice that first spoke to them in this chamber.

“Why,” replied Durgoth in an overly sweet tone, “I want to take you up on your offer. Let’s renegotiate our terms, shall we?”



“More ale!” Kaerion bellowed at the portly barkeep. “And bring along a few more fingers of that damned Dragons Breath. Packs a fine kick, it does.” He slammed down his mug on the chipped wooden bar and drew his other hand across his mouth.

The common area of the Men O’Steel tavern was packed with bodies, hard drinkers all of them. Humans, elves, and even a few dwarves jostled and joked, drank and swore in its dim-lit confines—though Kaerion noticed that no one let their hands stray too far from their weapons. Dirty rushes covered the floor and serving maids swooped from table to table, collecting coins and absently swatting away roaming hands and pinching fingers. Somewhere off in a corner, a minstrel swept swift fingers across the strings of an instrument.

Kaerion turned back to his drink, disgusted. Only a few moments later, the barkeep deposited two more mugs of dark ale and three small cups filled with a brownish liquid. He sniffed the cups, satisfied by the smoky scent that wafted up. Holding up his first cup, he saluted an elf, who had just tied the beard of a dwarf to the cheap wooden table upon which he rested his head, completely passed out. The elf gave a quick smile in return, and Kaerion could not help but think of his own companion. The thought forced him to drain the cup of its contents in one gulp.

The drink filled his belly with the heat of a small fireball. The fiery sensation spread throughout his body, until he felt his very blood boil. He let out a deep bellyful of air, amazed at how the drinks flavor lingered on mouth and tongue. The din of the tavern and the warmth provided by ale and liquor had combined to lift the tension of today’s events. His head swam peacefully in a warm sea of alcohol.

Until now.

Damn him to the Abyss, Kaerion thought acidly, recalling his meeting with Gerwyth just a few hours ago. He had stormed out of the Platinum Shield and headed for the nearest tavern, intent on getting himself utterly and completely drunk. He had been well on his way when the elf walked in, fresh from his meeting with the wrinkled old mage.

Ten years! Ten long years they had traveled together and fought side by side. Kaerion felt betrayed. Gerwyth should have told him what he was planning long



before today. He had even said that very thing to the blasted elf. His companion had mumbled back something about friendship, honor, and duty.

Words.

They were simply words to him now. Once he had understood their meaning, had embodied them with his life. But looking back across the hard trail of choices he'd made, he could not quite recall *that* man. It was as a fading memory, nothing more than a dream.

It wasn't the journey itself that was making Kaerion angry, though the gods know he wouldn't look forward to crawling through a steaming swamp in search of an ancient tomb, and it wasn't even the presence of the Heironean priest—even if the pain and shock of that meeting still lingered. It was the fact that Gerwyth hadn't filled him in on the whole truth regarding their next job.

Kaerion had known few people he could depend on after... his thoughts hesitated a moment, still afraid to go *there*... after the god had pronounced judgment. Embittered and angry, Kaerion had spent a few years wandering from city to city, selling his sword where he could, keeping himself in food and drink. Mostly drink. It wasn't until he had met Gerwyth—at swordpoint, no less—that he had felt comfortable enough to open himself up to the possibility of friendship. Over the course of several years, he had grown to trust the elf implicitly. They were shield mates and brothers. Inseparable.

Or so he had thought.

Kaerion broke from his painful reverie, only to discover that he had finished his drinks. He was about to order a few more, when he felt a light tap on his shoulder. "What?" he slurred as he spun around.

The figure standing before him appeared hazy and indistinct. It took a few moments for Kaerion to realize that the figure was fine. He rubbed his eyes a few times and willed them to focus. After a few more moments, the blurred shape resolved itself into the form of a familiar half-elf face. Majandra, he remembered the bard's name.

"Mind if I join you?" she asked.

He shrugged, though the movement cost him some effort. He'd lost track of how much he'd had to drink tonight. "It's your country," he replied. Something about his reply must have struck him as funny, because he found himself laughing right after he had spoken.

He caught the quick frown on Majandra's face, but the bard did not reply. Instead, she sat down next to him and ordered ale from the barkeep.

"What are you having?" she asked in a neutral tone.

"A really bad day," Kaerion found himself replying. When the bard said nothing, he pursed his lips and then decided to be polite. "I'll take an ale."

She relayed his order and then turned back to face him. He wondered why he hadn't noticed her eyes before. Wide and slightly slanted, they reflected the dim light of the tavern like twin pools of gold.

"You think us foolish, don't you?" the bard's voice cut through his ale-induced wanderings. He blinked and turned as much of his full attention as he was able back to her.

He found himself shaking his head. “Don’t think yer foolish,” he said, forcing his now-sluggish tongue to function. But truly, he didn’t know what he really thought—about Majandra and the mission she and her friends wanted to undertake, or about Gerwyth.

“Then why do you carry around such anger?” she asked in a casual tone, but Kaerion could feel a quiet intensity from her.

All at once, he felt tired. Tired of carrying around anger and pain. Just once, it would be nice to share his burden with someone else. To tell someone else the things that he hadn’t even told Gerwyth.

She stared at him, eyes alight with intelligence, red hair flaming around her softly angled face. She was beautiful. Beautiful and interested. Kaerion felt his own heart soften beneath the soulful glance she was giving him.

He started to talk, to unburden himself when Majandra pitched forward for a moment.

“Hey!” she shouted at the lout who had tried to stagger past her, but obviously misjudged his way. “Watch where you’re going.”

The drunk muttered something incomprehensible under his breath and started to weave his way past the bard. Instinct, not quite dulled by the wash of alcohol in Kaerion’s system, sent an alarm ringing through the haze that had enveloped his mind. His hand shot out and caught the offending drunk by his stained shirt.

“Hey,” the man complained in a loud voice, “let go of me you crazy bastard!”

Several of the tavern patrons turned their attention to the happenings, and Kaerion could hear the mumbled stirrings of the crowd.

“Kaerion,” the bard exclaimed, “what are you doing?”

The fighter kept his grip on the drunk’s shirt. “Yer gold pouch,” he managed to say without too much slurring.

Majandra stared for a moment without comprehending, but checked her belt when she realized his meaning. Her eyes flew wide when she discovered that the drunk had stolen her coin pouch.

“You little—” she started to shout, but the thief grabbed a half-empty mug of beer and threw it at Kaerion.

Caught off guard, Kaerion let go of his prisoner as the thick liquid stung his eyes. Blinded by ale and not a fair bit of rage, he threw a wild punch, hoping to stun the sneaky bastard before he had a chance to run away. His fist connected solidly and he heard a heavy thud along with the shattering of crockery.

It wasn’t until he had cleared away the last vestiges of ale from his eyes that Kaerion realized what had happened. Three angry men stood around the remains of a wooden table. A fourth man, clearly not the cutpurse he was after, lay dazed atop the splintered wood.

There was a moment of silence before all hell broke loose. Someone threw a bottle that shattered against the wooden bar, and the tavern erupted into violence. The three men advanced on Kaerion, brows furrowed in anger. All around him he could hear the telltale shouts and thuds of brawling fighters.

Kaerion tried to sidestep the first man, who threw a punch at his midsection, but ale-dulled reflexes would not respond. Breath whuffed out of him as the man’s blow struck him solidly. It wasn’t until the third kick to his head that Kaerion realized he’d

been knocked down. Dimly, he heard Majandra's voice protesting and then a bright flash of light. The repeated blows to his head stopped for a moment, and Kaerion struggled to his feet.

All around him, tight circles of men and women fought with each other. In the wild chaos, he could make out his three assailants, each crumpled to the floor clutching their eyes. He searched for Majandra and was relieved to find her calmly sitting on the bar and watching the exchange.

He was about to speak with her when a thick-nosed man with a large circle of metal pushed through his left ear grabbed him by the shoulder. Kaerion spun around and blocked an incoming punch with a muscular forearm. He ducked another wild swing, but felt the floor spin beneath him. Overbalanced, Kaerion hit the ground. Desperately, he kicked out at his attacker, struck solid bone, and raised himself, once again, to his feet. No attack came.

When he looked around, he saw his opponent curled up on the ground, holding the jagged edge of his shattered bone as it protruded brutally from his leg.

"Kaerion, look out!" Majandra shouted from her vantage point by the bar.

Warned of an impending attack, Kaerion brought up both arms. The movement saved him from the full crushing force of the chair, which broke as it struck him from the side. Dazed, Kaerion could do nothing as two men leapt upon him and brought him crashing to the ground. Instinctively, he curled into a ball, warding off as many blows as possible, but even he could not delay the inevitable. He caught sight of the bottle descending upon his head before darkness claimed him.

\* \* \*

Terys Van stood with arms folded, surveying the damage in the tavern's common room. Wooden tables and chairs lay overturned or smashed. Splinters of wood and broken shards of glass and crockery crunched under the booted tread of his guardsmen. Here and there, he spotted small clumps of bloodied rushes, and the occasional tooth. The stench of stale beer and cheap smoke mingled with the sour musk of sweat, producing the familiar smell of desperation.

Fourteen years as a sentinel in the city watch, however, had pretty much inured him to the darker and more violent aspects of life in Rel Mord. So it was with a somewhat bored nod of his head that Terys acknowledged the young guardswoman who stood at attention to his left, waiting to offer her report.

"Typical bar fight, sir," the smartly uniformed guard spoke at his signal. "No deaths. Three wounded seriously. The clerics are seeing to those. They'll be ready to meet the king's judgment. The rest are being escorted to the prison now."

"Good work," he responded. The entire investigation had been quick and efficient. The sentinel was calculating the time it would take him to stamp the paperwork through and head home for the night when he noticed the guardswoman still standing stiffly to his side.

"What is it, Kendra?" he snapped. He was in no mood for complications.

"Sir," the young guard straightened at her commander's tone, "several witnesses identified the one who started the fight."

She pointed to a spot near the bar, where a bear of a man leaned heavily against the wall, arms bound behind his back. Blood covered his tunic, and even from his position, Terys could make out an angry bruise beginning to blossom on one side of his face.

“I see,” he said, dismissing the guardswoman with a sharp wave of his hand. “I’ll handle it from here.”

“But, sir,” Kendra called out, “I think—”

Another wave of his hand silenced the protesting guard. “I said that I would take it from here, Corporal.” He sent her to deal with the proprietor of the tavern, who was complaining loudly about the loss to his business.

The prisoner looked up as he approached, and Terys’ steps faltered for just a moment. The man’s face was handsome enough, even with the rapidly deepening bruise, but his eyes—they were hard eyes, steel blue and penetrating. The eyes of a killer.

The guard stopped a few feet from the sulking prisoner, leaving enough room to draw his sword should the need arise. The man was still drunk, evidenced by his slightly swaying posture and his rapid, irregular breath, but there was no reason to leave himself completely vulnerable should the man’s anger overcome his common sense.

Terys ran calloused fingers across his goatee, in a move calculated to disguise his own tension. He regarded the prisoner briefly, hoping that the interrogation would move along quickly so that he could finish up for the night, but the man’s flat gaze revealed nothing.

Puzzled, he drew breath to speak but was cut off by the sound of a feminine voice. “There you are, Captain. I’m glad to see you’ve finally arrived.”

Terys flinched. The voice was rich and textured, almost sultry, but even he could hear the biting tone of self-conscious authority mixed with reflexive disdain. Noble, he thought. No doubt slumming the Poor Quarter, looking for some lowborn excitement before she returned to the trying world of servants and sumptuous meals. It wasn’t that uncommon. He just wished it had happened on someone else’s watch.

He turned to face the source of the voice, hoping that his face disguised the frustration he was feeling, and caught his breath. Before him stood one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. She smiled gracefully, throwing exquisite features into stunning relief, and all at once he felt an ungainly fool. It wasn’t until he gazed at the gold ring and matching medallion, etched with the long-antlered stag, symbol of House Damar, that he realized just how complicated his evening had become.

“Milady, I was simply going to interrogate the prisoner,” he responded, looking back at the hulking drunk.

“Well,” the noble said, ice creeping into her voice, “I would hardly call a friend of the daughter of the Duke of Flinthill a prisoner now—” she paused “—would I?”

Terys swallowed hard. This wasn’t going well at all. “Milady,” he managed to force out the words, “other witnesses name this man the cause of the evening’s... brutalities. I do have my orders. He must be detained and questioned.”

“Nonsense,” she exclaimed. “You will release him at once, and I will take full responsibility for his actions. I’ve already paid the *innkeeper*—” she spoke the word with such disgust that it was clear to him what she truly thought of this

establishment—“for any damages that may have resulted from tonight’s mishap. I’m sure you’ll agree that everything is taken care of.”

“B-but my orders...” Terys stammered. “Surely you understand that I have to follow procedure on this.”

“Now, Captain,” she said, drawing closer, and he could feel his face flushing red at their proximity, “I would hate to have to tell the city commander that I had difficulty with one of his captains the next time I see him at dinner.”

The threat was as real as it was politely delivered, and Terys found himself backed into a corner. Enforcing the law was his duty, but the labyrinthine complexity of Nyronese politics was not unknown to him. The city commander would not appreciate the daughter of one of the major noble houses of the realm criticizing his troops. On the other hand, a favor delivered now might cause this Damarian daughter to smile upon the commander’s efforts, something he would surely reward the one who dispensed the original favor.

“Well, Milady. If you are taking responsibility for this . . . gentleman, then who am I to gainsay you? I will release him,” he replied, and ordered one of his subordinates to loosen the man’s bonds.

And may you both be damned, he thought.

“Thank you, Captain. I’m glad that we could come to such an understanding.” She smiled again, the graceful upturn of her lips belying the condescension that Terys could hear dripping from each word.

Bitch, he thought as he turned to go.

“Oh, and captain, one more thing,” the lady said, “next time we meet, please feel free to address me as Lady Majandra.” With a toss of her fire-red hair, she put a slim-fingered hand on her companion’s shoulders and guided him out of the tavern.

\* \* \*

“Why did you help me?” Kaerion asked. His deep voice still slurred, though Majandra couldn’t tell if that was from the ale he’d consumed or the cracked and swelling lip that still bled.

She thought of her answer as they weaved their way through the narrow, angled streets of the Rich Quarter. After their exit from the Men O’Steel tavern, the bard had quickly started to guide them back to the suite at the Platinum Shield. They had made most of the trip in silence, their quiet journey broken by the whistling of Kaerion’s nose as he drew breath through his nostrils. It was only after they had entered this section of the city that the man had spoken.

“What good is being noble-born if you can’t use it to your advantage once in a while?” she said finally as they made their way through the servant’s entrance to the Platinum Shield.

A few of the serving lads and kitchen maids looked askance at their condition, but Majandra paid them no heed. A few silver coins would keep their tongues relatively quiet.

She started to bring Kaerion up the side stairs to her room, but stopped when she heard Bredeth’s arrogant whine close by. She cursed and guided the listing fighter back down the stairs and through a side passage. It wouldn’t do for any of her

companions to see Kaerion like this—especially Bredeth. That highborn dolt would make an issue of it, and she didn't want to risk the possibility of Kaerion walking away from their offer. They needed him.

Or perhaps you need him, a small voice whispered in her mind. She ignored the implications of that and tried once again to sneak him upstairs. This time, Norebo, god of luck, smiled upon her. Majandra breathed a sigh of relief as she led Kaerion to her bed and closed the door to her suite.

Gently, she helped Kaerion out of his tunic, wincing at the sight of fresh bruises and old scars that marred the sweeping cut of his massive chest and broad back. By the time she tucked silk sheets around his girth, he was half asleep, staring vacantly at the ceiling.

“Didn't answer... question,” he mumbled as she made to leave. “Why... help... me?”

When the answer came, it surprised even her. “Because you have a tale to tell, and I'm a sucker for a tale. Especially,” she said, half to herself, “when it comes wrapped in a gorgeous frame like yours.”

But Kaerion hadn't heard. Sleep had finally claimed him.



The days passed with a quiet hum of intensity as Phathas and his companions met with a seemingly endless array of merchants, provisioners, caravan masters, and even a few of the old wizards colleagues from the Royal University. The group checked and rechecked their calculations, measuring the distance against their available stores and trying to plan for most emergencies. Nights were spent poring over old maps and the notes from Phathas' research, verifying the probable location of the ancient tomb and the safest possible route toward it.

Kaerion watched the preparations from a distance, trying hard not to remember spending his time similarly in the years when he commanded battalions of armed men. For that's what the activities of the last few days felt like—preparations for a war. He just couldn't shake the unsettling feeling that they had already lost.

Why then, he asked himself several times, am I staying?

Ever since he had woken up the morning after his ill-fated altercation at the Men O'Steel, he knew that he would accompany Gerwyth and the rest of the group on their journey. Perhaps it was the perverse desire to confound and antagonize the hot-headed Bredeth, who had spent a good portion of that morning arguing with Majandra, Gerwyth, and Vaxor once he had learned about Kaerion's activities of the previous evening. Or perhaps it was the fact that, despite his protestations to the contrary, a part of him still believed in the power of friendship and honor. Perhaps it was even the desire to remain close to the fiery-haired bard, the only person besides Gerwyth who, in the last decade, had ever shown him a measure of true kindness. In the din and tumult surrounding the last few days, it was difficult for him to identify his motivations. He only knew that he had woken up that morning with a blazing hangover and a commitment to the upcoming journey. Only one of those two things had eventually faded away.

Now, he watched and waited, not quite sulking, but definitely anxious to keep his distance from the Nyronese party—especially Vaxor. A few times, he had caught the priest of Heironeous casting a stern gaze his way, and though he was able to meet the cleric's eyes, he found himself shrinking inside, trying to hide his shame from that

penetrating countenance. If the cleric had discovered anything, he did not, thankfully, confront him.

As time passed, Kaerion's head began to ache and he found his muscles trembling, as much from the onslaught of nightmares and sleepless nights as from an absence of ale. Kaerion gritted his teeth and bore the pain. There would be time for indulgences soon enough. He just hoped he had the strength to survive until then.

\* \* \*

A few nights before the group was supposed to leave the city, Gerwyth tapped Kaerion lightly upon the shoulder and pointed to a secluded corner of the suite. Phathas and Vaxor were engaged in a long discussion regarding the implications of a verse on some ancient scroll, and both Majandra and Bredeth were doing some final negotiations with one of the merchants who was providing the draft animals for their expedition. Alone and, truth be told, anxious for some company, Kaerion shrugged and followed Gerwyth. For once, the elf's face did not bear a mocking smile. His demeanor was uncharacteristically serious.

Kaerion stared at his friend. The silence and hurt of the last few days stretched out between them like a yawning chasm. There had been several attempts at normal conversation between the two of them the day after their arrival in Rel Mord, but each one had ended with shouting and the same bitter feelings of hurt, anger, and betrayal. It took more than a few moments for the silence to break.

When it did, it was the elf who spoke first. "I hate seeing you like this, Kaer."

His friend's words were spoken softly, carefully, and try as he might to deny it, Kaerion could hear the concern in the ranger's voice.

"You should have told me who we were supposed to meet, Gerwyth," he replied. "You should have told me everything."

The elf nodded and waited a bit before speaking. "You're right, of course. I should have. It was wrong of me to hold back on you like that."

Kaerion sat stunned for just a moment. In all the years that he had traveled with Gerwyth, this was the first time the free-spirited elf had ever apologized for anything.

"It's just that I knew you wouldn't come if I told you all about this job, and I knew I would really need you on this one."

"There's a reason why I wouldn't have come, Ger," Kaerion replied, heat building in his voice. "All of this," he indicated the lavish room and the two nobles who dickered on oblivious of the two guides, "reminds me of the life I left behind, the life that my own mistakes destroyed. It's like Galadorn...."

He paused for a moment after he spoke the holy sword's name—even now, after everything he'd forsworn, he couldn't speak about the blade without experiencing a frisson of awe and reverence.

"That sword reminds me of everything that I've lost. It's a damned curse. The last and final punishment meted out by the god I betrayed. Only now, I have to spend months pretending to be nothing more than a hired sword while traveling with a pack of nobles and their Heironean cleric." Kaerion pitched his voice even softer before continuing. "Do you know what Vaxor will do if he uncovers my sin?"



Gerwyth nodded and placed a hand upon Kaerion's shoulder, giving it a companionable squeeze. "I do understand, Kaer. Truly I do. We have traveled many leagues together, my friend, and I have watched you suffer from the mistakes you've made. You have rebuilt a part of yourself from the ashes of your defeat, and that takes great strength and courage, whatever you may think. But a half-life is no life at all. I've seen the way you drink, hoping that it will fill the part of you that is still missing, the part that died over ten years ago. The time has come for you to stop running and face that darkness inside."

Kaerion shrugged the elf's hands off of his shoulder. "That is my decision to make, Ger, not yours. When I'm ready for such a journey, I'll take it."

"Perhaps," Gerwyth replied, "if you were an elf, such a sentiment would hold true. But the life-flame of your kind burns fast, and I would not see you carry such pain to the grave. You are a true friend, Kaerion, and I will bend every ounce of my power to help you."

"Like you're doing with Phathas?" Kaerion said. Bitterness burned like a hot coal on his tongue.

Gerwyth raised an eyebrow at his response. "Phathas is an old friend. And yes, I would do anything I could to help him—even brave your wrath." A trace of that familiar mocking smile crept upon the elf's face.

Despite himself, Kaerion found his anger abating somewhat. "You could have told me about Phathas," he said with just a trace of pettiness.

"That was another lifetime, Kaer," Gerwyth responded. "And truth be told, I didn't think you'd be that interested. Besides, if I regaled you with all of the details of my life, you'd be half-dead before I finished." His smile grew even wider.

"Yeah," Kaerion replied, a grin forming on his own face, "no doubt from boredom."

The elf's almond-shaped eyes widened in a poor imitation of innocent shock, and he let out a sharp laugh before offering Kaerion his sword arm. "So," he asked, "shall we still travel together as shield-mates?"

Kaerion regarded his companion's outstretched arm. He was still a bit angry with Gerwyth, but only because the elf's actions forced him to deal with things he had wished remained hidden. It was the way of friends to speak and act truthfully toward one another. He thought that in a strange way, by hiding the truth from him, Gerwyth might have been revealing an even deeper truth—a revelation that would not have been possible when the world existed in black and white.

Finally, Kaerion grasped the elf's forearm. "Always, my friend," he said. "Always."

"Then come," the elf said. "Let us lend our own considerable scholarship to the debate raging in this very room." He slapped Kaerion once on the shoulder and then rose, heading toward Vaxor and Phathas, who were now engaged in a heated exchange over the scroll's meaning.

May the gods have mercy upon all of us, Kaerion thought as he joined the trio.

Outside, the winter wind whipped hard against the painted glass of the suite.

\* \* \*

Death lurked in the shadows of the room.

Durgoth couldn't quite see the cloaked figures skulking in the dark beyond the pulsing light of the silver-wrought lamp, but he could sense their presence—crossbows poised, watching, waiting for a sudden movement or a silent signal. He knew that Jhagren detected their presence as well, for the monk sat completely and utterly still in his wide-backed chair, gazing calmly at the flickering shadows. The cleric had spent enough time with Jhagren to understand that this calm demeanor belied an almost unearthly focused mind and a body trained to uncoil like a serpent in an explosive attack at the first sign of violence.

Let them try. Durgoth was tired of dealing with this rabble. He had already warded himself with a quietly whispered spell. All it would take would be a swift command to his golem, hulking silently behind him, and blood would flow. Unfortunately, that would not get them any closer to their goal. The cleric expressed his disappointment with a sigh and leaned back in his chair.

They had arrived here nearly an hour ago. A quick conversation with their hostage had revealed that the simpering fool was far more interested in living than he was in protecting his guilds secrets, and so they navigated their way through the maze of sewers toward one of the guild's main hideouts, using their captive as a key to bypass all manner of traps and checkpoints. News of their impending arrival must have preceded them, for when they reached their destination, they were ushered into a side passage by a hard-eyed woman with close-cropped hair. After making sure their prisoner was unharmed, their guide brought them to this room and instructed them to wait.

The room itself was sumptuously appointed, all out of place with the dank tunnels of the surrounding sewers. Thick red carpet covered the floor, and a mahogany desk sat in the center of the chamber. Another high-backed chair, a match to the ones that both Jhagren and Durgoth sat upon, stood behind the desk. The pungent scent of cloves filled the room, driving out the acrid stench of sewage.

Besides the graceful curves of the polished lantern that lay upon the desk, Durgoth could make out several jade figurines—nymphs, dancing and cavorting in typical abandon. A jeweled dagger lay next to the figurines, a palpable reminder of the violence that brooded behind the room's elegant exterior.

Just as Durgoth's temper began to fray once more, a figure strode quietly out of the shadows and took a seat behind the desk. Gray eyes regarded the cleric coolly from a lupine face, its animal resemblance reinforced by close-cropped silver hair and a salt-and-pepper goatee. Deep lines radiated out from the sides of the man's eyelids almost to the temples, as if he observed everything with intense scrutiny. His lips drew back in a half-smile, revealing a set of perfectly white teeth—though Durgoth noted that the man's apparent good humor never reached his eyes.

"Welcome," his host said after a few more moments of silence. The man's voice was low and resonant, with a smooth, cultured accent. "I am the Guildmaster, though you may call me Reynard. I trust that I have not kept you waiting too long. I had... pressing matters elsewhere."

Without lifting his gaze from the cleric, the man drew heavily bejeweled hands from the folds of his purple cloak and absently traced deft fingers across the folds and curves of the jade nymphs. The half-smile never left his lips.

For one intolerable moment, Durgoth felt as if he were being sized up by a predator. Gray eyes bore into his with an almost hypnotic power. So, Durgoth thought, this is how the rabbit feels before it gives itself to death. He returned the gaze evenly, a slow smile creeping across his own face. Let others be cowed by such a display. He had met and destroyed far more powerful challengers than this ragged gutter-scum who paraded around in the finery of his betters like a child playing with her mother's silks.

As if sensing his resolve, the thief turned his gaze away. Durgoth could see that the man truly smiled now, and he felt his own anger rise. "Your guild betrayed me. I don't deal with betrayal very well, Reynard."

"Come now, Durgoth. Oh yes, don't act so shocked, friend," the Guildmaster replied at the look of surprise that flicked across the cleric's face, "I take it upon myself to know the name of everyone who travels through my domain." He stopped, indicating the room and the sewers beyond with a wave of his hand. "Now, where were we? Ah, yes, I believe we were talking about betrayal. It is I who feel betrayed. Does that surprise you?"

"Surprise me?" Durgoth asked. What in the Nine Hells was this man raving about? And then it hit him—the attack, the ease in which he and his group bypassed the Guild's traps and watch wards, the attitude of the seemingly crazy Guildmaster—everything led to one inescapable conclusion.

"You planned this whole damned thing," Durgoth said.

Reynard slapped his hands together sharply. "By Zilchus' Sacred Vault, he's figured it out," the thief said with a smile.

"Why?" the cleric asked. He was tired of being played for a fool. If Reynard didn't cease his prattle, Durgoth would show the damned thief what it was like to antagonize a priest of the Imprisoned One.

"Simple," the Guildmaster replied. "You have something I want—or rather, you will soon have something I want." Durgoth shot him a venomous glance until he continued. "I have discovered, through no fault of your own, I assure you, the ultimate destination of your journey."

"Go on," the cleric urged a hint of steel creeping into his voice.

"Like any good businessman, I want a piece of the action. I offer the services of my guild in exchange for a share of the gold, jewels, and other treasure you liberate from the... ahh... site."

Durgoth stared at the thief in disgust. The man's gray eyes were alight with greed. He could almost hear Reynard counting the gold coins in his head. What were petty coins and useless treasure next to the dark glory of Tharizdun?

"If that's what you were interested in, why didn't you simply offer to meet instead of attacking my followers?" Durgoth asked.

Reynard gave the cleric a crooked smirk. "I needed to make sure that you were capable enough before I reassigned my best guild members. The loss of a few men is a small price to pay for a share in the riches that await beneath that tomb."

"If we are capable enough—and I *know* that we are," Durgoth replied with a wicked gleam in his eye, "what's to stop us from killing you and every one of your skulking guildsmen that are in this room right now?" The idea appealed to him greatly.

Reynard leaned forward in his chair, fingers steepled together beneath his chin. “Because,” he said softly as he met the cleric’s gaze once again, “I have some information that you would find exceptionally valuable. Information that you would have a difficult time retrieving from a corpse.”

Don’t be too sure, Durgoth thought viciously. But he remained silent, regarding the grizzled thief with a measuring look. He was intrigued by the man’s offer and, to be honest, his cunning. He might be little more than scum, but he was smart and dangerous—a true predator whose weakness for gold would make him a valuable tool.

“What information is this?” Durgoth asked, finally breaking the silence.

“According to a few of my agents in Rel Mord, a group of nobles is planning an expedition through the Vast Swamp—” Reynard paused before continuing—“their ultimate destination: the ancient tomb of Acererak the mage. I can provide you details and locations once we have agreed upon the deal.”

But Durgoth had ceased listening. Another expedition, he thought, and sat back in his chair. Another group making their way toward the ancient tomb. He knew this was not a coincidence. There were no coincidences where Tharizdun was concerned. Surely this was a sign. Even bound by the accursed will of the other gods, his master was reaching out to him, letting him know that he was on the right path.

“Blessed be your Dark Will,” he whispered, already plotting his next move.

Reynard cleared his throat gently. “So Durgoth,” he asked, “do we have a deal?”

Let the thief have his useless treasure, if that would secure his aid. Once Durgoth had the key, he would free his master, and his magnificence would swallow the whole world. No amount of gold would be able to stop it from happening.

The cleric offered his hand to Reynard and smiled. “I accept your terms,” he said.

“Excellent,” Reynard replied, and rapped sharply upon the table.

Two other figures emerged from the darkness, a man and a woman. Durgoth’s breath nearly caught in his throat as they approached the desk. The woman wore the flickering light like a garment of gold. It rippled across tanned skin stretched smooth across a full-figured body and reflected off of eyes the color of pure honey. Tight-fitting leather hose clung to long, muscular legs and ended in high-topped boots. Her corset laid her midriff bare and dung to the rounded swell of breasts. Two silver bracers lay strapped to her forearms, and she carried a black yew staff, inlaid with silver. Durgoth could see the polished glint of a small crossbow at her belt.

Her companion seemed made of shadow. Skin almost as black as obsidian absorbed the light, and a close-cropped black beard accented the man’s pronounced jaw line. Long hair lay bound at the nape of the neck with a dark cord, and Durgoth was sure he saw the telltale glint of a fanged garrote along its edges. A form-fitting leather garment, sporting an amazing number of small pockets, covered his muscular frame. He carried a short sword on his left side and a number of body scabbards held daggers.

The woman tossed Reynard something as she entered and stood with her companion several paces away from the desk. With a shock, Durgoth saw the master thief holding a severed hand and was only slightly surprised to see a familiar ring. The hand belonged to the thief who had guided them here.

“This is Sydra and Eltanel,” Reynard said, indicating the two figures. “Sydra is a practitioner of magic whose sorcerous powers will complement your own. Eltanel is the best lockpick and trap-springer in the Guild. They will both be valuable additions to your expedition.” Reynard rose to his feet. “They will be able to give you the details on that other expedition. I will leave you to make your plans, but remember—” he threw the grisly hand onto the desk, knocking over the jade figures—“I don’t take betrayal very well either.”



Two nights before the expedition was set to leave, Majandra found herself navigating the torchlit streets of Rel Mord with Bredeth. The blue-gray shadows of dusk had finally deepened into true darkness, and a heavy winter mist swirled across the ground like some undulating serpent. The city's winding streets were mostly empty of traffic, as many citizens had retired to taprooms or the familiar comfort of home and hearth. A few, however, braved the chill air and the shadows, walking openly beneath the safety of torches and oil lamps, intent on their own business. Others slid in between the shifting shadows of old buildings and alleyways.

Majandra kept a constant watch for the footpads and cutpurses that made the night their home. Not for the first time she cursed the heavy sacks and packages both she and her companion practically had to drag through the street.

“What in the name of the Nine Hells are we going to do with all this clothing?” she complained. “We’re going to be spending months in a swamp for the gods’ sakes, not wintering with the Ice Barbarians.”

Bredeth, already several paces ahead of the half-elf, stopped and turned. “You know that Phathas tries to plan for any eventuality,” he said. “It does appear, however, that our dear mage may be planning a bit too hard, eh?” With that, the young noble shouldered his burden and staggered back on his course.

Majandra stared after him, puzzled. For the past week, the two of them had spent a great deal of time purchasing provisions, haggling with caravan masters, and running errands for both Phathas and Vaxor. But in the last two days, she’d seen a decisive shift in the normally sour nobles attitude. Gone were the tantrums and highborn disdain for physical labor, the refusal to carry anything without the aid of a servant, and all of the protestations of a pampered heir. Tonight, he’d labored hard, making several trips to the merchants without complaint, and he had even offered to go to the Royal University to pick up several scrolls that Phathas feared he might need on the road. Quite unlike the acid-tongued snob she usually dealt with. And the bard was almost certain that the noble’s last statement had been an attempt at levity. Unbelievable, Majandra thought, as she hurried to catch up to his rapidly retreating form.

The two traveled for quite some time in silence, and the bard listened with fascination at the nocturnal voice of the city. The deep-throated bark of a dog, the yowl of an upset alley cat, the cries of merriment and anger rising from inns and public houses, even the faintly threatening tread of feet in the shadows—all of it combined to form a rich symphony of sound that surrounded her, its powerful chords touching her with a profound sense of mystery and promise, hope and despair. She sighed and wondered idly if she'd ever be able to capture the essence of this city in her own music. That would be a work worthy of a master bard.

A few more turns and the two arrived in the wealthier section of the city. Majandra noted, without surprise, that everything seemed muted here, dulled. There were fewer people on the streets, fewer taprooms. Looking into the windows and elaborate stained glass portals of the surrounding houses one saw mostly darkness. The half-elf knew that beneath this placid exterior there existed a vibrant and dangerous world—a world of lavishly appointed drawing rooms, sumptuous parlors, and decadent boudoirs where noble and merchant alike gossiped, schemed, and seduced each other in a complex game of politics and survival. Outside, however, everything was quiet and still.

Majandra cast a glance at her companion and was surprised to see his normally pursed lips drawn back in a slight smile. He walked smoothly in the shadowed lane, despite the heavy burden slung over one shoulder, and the half-elf had the impression that if it weren't for the cumbersome gear he carried, Bredeth would have been skipping toward the Platinum Shield.

The noble must have caught her quizzical gaze, for he slowed his pace a bit and stared back. Trapped, Majandra could do no more than smile sheepishly and quickly turn away. Despite their polite interactions this evening, the tension of their earlier fight still lay between them, and like a phase spider, it sprang up at various times. The bard expected a spiteful reprimand or other such recrimination, but was surprised when Bredeth resumed his former pace, smile still intact.

She was even more surprised when, a few moments later, he broke the silence. "It's really going to happen, isn't it?" he asked. "After so many months of planning and research, we're really going to do it."

So that's it, Majandra thought, hearing the noble's tenor voice ring with excitement. Bredeth was giddy over the thought of playing hero. Well, let's see how well he does when we're mired knee-deep in swamp sludge with a host of biting insects crawling through every chink in armor and clothing.

"Yes," she agreed, keeping her tone positive. "And we couldn't have done it without Phathas and the support of Vaxor's church."

Bredeth nodded, ignoring or completely missing the bard's gentle reminder.

"This is our chance Majandra, a chance to do something for my ... the people of Nyronnd," he said with only the briefest of hesitations.

Perhaps she was being too hard on the young noble, she thought as they finally approached the Platinum Shield. It was clear that he cared deeply for the folk who lived their lives within the borders of the kingdom—even if he was trained to lord himself over those who were of "lesser" station.

“Perhaps, once we have restored Nyrond,” Majandra said as they veered toward the small servants entrance to the inn, “we can help the nobility learn to trust and believe more in the dignity and talents of those whom they lead.”

Bredeth snorted as the bard finished. “Now why in all the world would we want to do that?” he asked, almost knocking down the servant who had opened the door as he muscled past. “There’s a reason why we lead them, and a reason why they need to be led.”

Majandra swore softly and staggered into the servant’s hallway of the Platinum Shield, arms almost numb from carrying her burden across the city. She knew that her companion’s change of heart was too good to be true. “Constant as a noble’s arrogance,” she repeated the old adage.

Preoccupied by these thoughts, Majandra failed to see the sharp-eyed lad slip into the doorway behind her. Nor did she see the splash of scarlet beneath his worn servant’s livery.

\* \* \*

Durgoth Shem stood in the darkened alleyway and studied the elegant building before him. A cruel smile played across his face. Days of bribing merchants, threatening servants, and following what leads they could uncover had finally brought them to their quarry.

Although Luna, the great moon, cast a half-lidded eye down upon the city this evening, thick clouds obscured its silvered gaze, hiding Celene, the lesser moon altogether, and deepening the shadows. It was, he thought, the perfect night for a hunt. Their prey would have no idea what hit them. He’d sent Adrys ahead earlier, disguised as a servant. The foolish nobles had been so wrapped up in their puerile chatter that they hadn’t noticed the lad slinking in behind them. The apprentice had returned an hour later with all of the information they needed.

There were six of them, holed up in a large suite on the top floor. Four doors led off the main chamber into separate bedrooms, but it was the mage’s room that concerned Durgoth the most—for that was the most likely location of the group’s scrolls and maps. With that information in hand, he would have an easier time locating the tomb.

A pity, he thought for a moment as he rubbed hands together against the chill night air, that they didn’t have time to wipe them all out. But the wealthy quarter of a city was no place for a pitched battle. They would have precious little time before the sentinels arrived. No, the plan was simple: Durgoth would cause a large enough diversion to draw the nobles from their rooms, while Sydra and Eltanel would, with a small complement of thieves from the guild, secure the upper suite and retrieve the scrolls. After some discussion, it was decided that the swift-footed monk would remain outside the inn to “discourage” any pursuit.

As if reading his mind, Jhagren stepped from the shadows of the inn and signaled. Although he knew the monk couldn’t see him, Durgoth nodded his understanding. Everyone was in place. It was time for the diversion.

The cleric cleared his mind, taking three deep breaths. While less difficult than the magic that created his golem, this summoning spell took a great deal of



concentration. Softly, the cleric intoned the words until he felt the mystic portal open. Reality shifted around him as planar forces collided and intermixed. Durgoth focused his will and called upon the creature he needed, and his summons rang through the planes. At last he felt an answer. It came, guided by his master's power, and he sent it to the place fixed firmly in his mind. He shuddered once as he felt the planar portal shut. An icy wind blew hard between the buildings of Rel Mord as Durgoth completed the words to the spell. Despite this, sweat beaded thickly upon the cleric's brow. He wiped at it absently and watched through the Platinum Shield's windows as a reddish glow pulsated within the common room.

Durgoth smiled.

It was only a matter of time.

\* \* \*

Kaerion woke suddenly to the sound of screaming. Years of campaigning across the continent and the natural instincts of a warrior brought him rolling to his feet, sword in hand. He scanned the room for signs of immediate danger.

Though the fire in the hearth had burned to embers, he could see Gerwyth shouldering his leather quiver and strapping on short swords. In the muted red glow of the coals, the elf looked bathed in blood.

The screams continued, followed by the sound of breaking glass from the common area below. Free from immediate danger, Kaerion allowed himself to relax just a fraction.

"What do you think it is—thieves, assassins?" he asked Gerwyth in a cautious whisper.

The elf shook his head. "No. I'm not sure what it is," he replied, "but I have a very bad feeling about it." Finished with the last adjustments to his bow, he slapped Kaerion on the back. "Are you coming, Kaer, or should I ask our guests to wait until you've had a bath?"

Kaerion grunted as Gerwyth turned and ran out of the room. Quickly, Kaerion grabbed his shield and strapped it to his forearm. There wasn't enough time to don his entire suit of armor, but the curved steel of an embossed shield—all that was left of his once-famous field dress—had served him well these past years.

Blearily, he stumbled through the door and into the main suite, shaking his head to clear the last cobwebs of sleep from his mind. Not for the first time, he envied Gerwyth's ability to snap out of his nightly reverie at a moment's notice. It was a trait that had saved their lives many times, and he found himself wishing for that ability right now. Not willing to waste another moment, he drew a few quick breaths and launched himself down the stairs to the common area.

The grisly sight that greeted him nearly froze his blood. The elegance of the inn's taproom lay in bloody shambles. Tables and chairs lay splintered and broken on the ground, amid a pile of bodies who looked as if they had been punctured with a thousand sharp needles. Blood pooled on the floor and lay spattered across the walls.

In the center of the destruction, standing among the shattered detritus of wood and glass, stood one of the most terrifying creatures Kaerion had ever seen. Nearly eight-feet tall, the hulking figure lashed out with a set of razor sharp claws and tore

the throat out of a man who charged it with a sword. The victim's sword clattered to the ground and the creature stalked forward, intent on the remaining patrons of the inn, who were knocking each other over in an attempt to flee.

In the remaining light of the taproom, Kaerion could see that what he'd first thought armor was actually a thick collection of wicked barbs covering the monster's whole body—including the length of a meaty tail that whipped back and forth behind the creature's substantial bulk. The barbs glistened with blood.

At that moment, Kaerion heard a familiar voice shout something at the creature. He looked again at the panicking crowd and saw both Vaxor and Majandra. The two had placed themselves in front of the crowd.

"Gerwyth, we have to do something to distract that... *thing*," Kaerion shouted. It was clear that the two nobles couldn't hold out much longer. The bard's hair was caked with blood that streamed down from a vicious wound on the temple, and the priest's once-shining chainmail looked severely battered and rent in several sections.

The elf nodded assent and knelt. "I have just the thing, my friend," he said, and then in one fluid motion drew two arrows from his quiver, knocked his bow, and released them in swift succession. The wooden missiles flew unerringly across the space and caught the creature between barbs in the juncture of neck and shoulder.

They had no effect.

The creature opened its mouth, revealing row upon row of needle sharp teeth, and let out a high-pitched ululation. Kaerion dapped hands to ears and watched in horrified fascination as the monster advanced. The twin arrows fell from the monster, as if worked out by unseen hands.

Gerwyth let out a curse and grabbed two more arrows. This time he rubbed the curved length of his ash bow and spoke several words in Elvish. The weapon's silvery runes pulsed with a blue-tinted glow as the ranger took aim and fired. This time, the arrows streaked across the room, leaving a trail of blue fire in their wake.

The creature let out another wail, this one even worse than before, as the missiles pierced the hollow beneath its right arm. It stopped its advance and whipped itself around to face Kaerion and Gerwyth. The creature's tail struck out behind it, and only Vaxor's hastily raised shield protected him from a deathblow to the head.

Kaerion rushed forward to meet the creature, swinging his own sword in an arc. The steel rang loudly as it struck the monster square in the chest. Sparks flew out from the violent contact, but the creature did not slow. He ducked once as the figure lashed out with its own razor sharp claw, just barely missing him. He took a step back, hoping to find some weak spot on the beast—

And cried out as the monster's tail struck him hard on his shieldless side. The pain was incredible. It was as if thousands of needles penetrated his skin and were simultaneously making their way through his veins toward his heart. He felt as if his blood had turned to ice and his stomach churned with a familiar sensation—fear.

Kaerion cried out again as the walls of the inn melted away and he found himself surrounded by walls of solid stone—white stone, carved and worked like the walls of a temple. He knew this place, and the knowledge caused him to choke with panic. This was the scene of his disgrace.

"No!" he shouted in defiance, and the stone walls disappeared.

Kaerion lay on the ground, curled up in a ball. Around him, he could see Majandra and Vaxor attacking the barbed beast, keeping it distracted, unable to concentrate on killing its fallen victim. Three more arrows thudded into the monster, one catching it in its baleful red eye, and at last it gave ground.

Kaerion rolled to his feet. Anger had replaced the fear that had chilled him, and he let out a bellow as he rushed in. The beast struck out with its barbed tad, but he managed to deflect the blow with his shield. The shock of that contact nearly broke his forearm, but he kept pressing forward. Twice he landed blows that would have felled a bugbear, but the monster just shrugged them off. The third time, Kaerion blocked the creature's razor claw with his own blade and then spun, slicing out with his sword as he turned with his hips.

The steel bit deeply into the creature's throat and it let out a shocked gurgle. A small trickle of steaming black blood fell on to the blade, and then the wound closed, pushing the blade out.

Kaerion shouted in frustration. He backed away, letting Vaxor and Majandra keep the creature busy. Another two arrows buzzed angrily as they struck the creature, this time in the chest. Their enemy let out a roar and swept his tail before him, knocking Majandra and Vaxor out of the way. Quickly, the beast turned and faced Gerwyth. It pointed the wicked curve of a single claw at the elf archer and spoke a single, horrific word. A green bolt of energy shot out from the beast's claw. Kaerion saw the elf try to roll out of the way, but it was too late. A green bubble of energy coalesced around the ranger, freezing him in place.

"Here, take this!" Majandra shouted at him and threw her own blade at Kaerion. "I have to help Vaxor." She indicated the fallen cleric, who was struggling to rise.

Kaerion reached down and took the blade, catching a glimpse of a silvery glow before he was forced to dodge another barbed claw.

Time seemed to slow as Kaerion met the creature's blows with sword and shield, his world reduced to the ring and clash of steel on barbed flesh. It wasn't until the creature launched forward with both claws that he saw his opening. Ducking under the beast's attack, Kaerion let his momentum carry him forward and slightly left of the creature. With a curse, he spun and brought his sword down hard on the meaty expanse of tail.

The beast recoiled as the mystic blade severed the section of tail. Kaerion tried to take advantage of the beast's vulnerability, but his sword had bitten too deeply into the wood of the inn's floor. He could not raise it up.

It only took a moment for the barbed monster to recover, and Kaerion found himself hastily raising his shield. One of the creature's clawed hands struck him hard on the shoulder, laying open muscle and sinew. The other batted away his shield and then lashed out, catching him directly in the chest.

Numbed by loss of blood and fatigue, he could not muster the strength to free himself. The creature chuckled low in its throat as it brought Kaerion inexorably closer to its spiked chest. Once impaled, the fighter knew that he wouldn't survive long.

Just then, he heard Vaxor's voice, deep and intense, chanting over the sounds of combat and the cries of the frightened crowd. A circle of white light formed behind

the creature, a circle whose intensity grew by the moment. The beast must have noticed it, for it stopped trying to pull Kaerion closer and turned to look.

The circle burned brilliantly now, like a miniature sun. With a high-pitched squeal, the monster threw Kaerion to the ground and fled.

Kaerion cast about the room and saw Vaxor, bloodied and bruised, holding a section of the beast's severed tail above his head with one hand. The other traced holy sigils in the air, glyphs that remained visible, burning with unearthly potency in the panicked atmosphere of the inn.

Suddenly, the circle of light spun open, like the iris of a human eye. Power flooded into the room, white-hot and palpable. Kaerion nearly wept at the familiar presence. Vaxor had called upon the power of Heironeous, and the god answered, filling the room with a fragment of his puissance.

Without thinking, Kaerion fell to his knees. Never in the time since his betrayal had he placed himself so close to the power of the god he had once served. The presence was like a knife that cut open a half-healed wound, and Kaerion ached with the sense of loss that swept through him.

The creature, on the other hand, screamed in agony as tendrils of energy reached from the circle, pulling the creature toward its opening. It struggled vainly against the god-wrought force, and Kaerion watched in fascination as the monster fell into the opening and disappeared with a final, high-pitched wail.

The pulsating circle remained open a few more moments. A sound like thunder filled the room, causing those members of the crowd who were still alive to dive on the floor with their heads covered. Kaerion cast a glance at Vaxor and knew, by the look of complete devotion that crossed the priest's face, that the phenomenon had nothing to do with the activities of a normal thundercloud. It was clear that Heironeous had spoken—words that only the faithful could hear.

The circle irised closed and then disappeared, plunging the room into stunned silence. Kaerion watched as Vaxor fell to his knees, whether from his wounds or from some movement of faith Kaerion could not be sure. Panting, he picked up Majandra's sword and moved toward Gerwyth, who still stood frozen at the stairs landing.

Before he could offer any assistance, an explosion from somewhere upstairs caused the already damaged building to buckle. Kaerion spun around and saw Majandra helping the priest to his feet. She looked back at him, eyes wide. "Phathas!" she shouted. "He's still upstairs!"

"Vaxor, see to Gerwyth. Majandra and I will head up to the suite. Follow as soon as you can."

In the heat of battle, Kaerion's voice had assumed a ring of command, carrying easily over the worried shouts and murmurings of the crowd. In his haste to aid the old mage, he did not see Vaxor's raised eyebrow before the cleric moved toward the frozen elf.

Turning, Kaerion launched himself up the carpeted stairs, conscious of Majandra's worried breathing behind him. A few moments later, they plunged through the doorway of their suite and into the heart of chaos. Tables and chairs lay smashed or overturned in various parts of the rooms, and several tapestries were pulled from their hangings. One entire wall of the suite had disappeared, replaced by

a flaming wreck of blackened wood and cinders. A chill wind blew threw the room, stirring ash and fanning small flames that flickered across the carpet and licked at the wood ceiling.

Phathas leaned feebly against the frame of a door, surrounded by a nimbus of red light. Three figures closed him in, each hacking at him with short swords that gleamed in the mystic light. The swords rebounded harmlessly every time they struck the red glow, but Kaerion could clearly see that the mage was weakening. One gnarled hand gripped a silver-shod brown staff, while the other supported the mage's weight against the frame.

Another figure stood slightly back from the main battle, directly across from where the mage was making his stand. From his vantage point, Kaerion could make out the face of a woman that was as beautiful as it was cruel. Icy features were stretched taut in concentration as her lithe form undulated to an unheard tempo. Silver lines streaked out from a pair of gleaming bracers as she reached into the air with slender arms. Between the smooth curves of her palms, the fighter could see a crackling ball of light growing brighter, as if she pulled the energy from the very air itself. Kaerion had no doubt that she intended to launch this magic at the struggling mage.

Just then, he heard Majandra cry out a single, unintelligible word. Three bluish bolts of energy flew over his shoulder to strike the gesticulating sorceress. The woman screamed and recoiled as the bolts spattered against her flesh. The ball of energy between her hands dissipated, and she turned a hateful eye upon Majandra.

"Kaerion, look out!" he heard a male voice cry out.

Spinning, he caught a glimpse of Bredeth, holding his own against two cloaked figures, before a shadow launched itself at him from the side. Kaerion met the attack with the full face of his shield and slid his own blade between the ribs of his opponent with an absent thrust.

Pulling his blade from the dying figure, Kaerion ran toward Phathas, whose spell was collapsing. With a shout, Kaerion lashed out with his boot and caught one of the assassins hard in the knee. The man cried out and hit the floor. Without breaking his rhythm, Kaerion stepped forward and ran his sword through a second cloaked figure, careful not to get too entangled in the treacherous maze of debris and bodies on the floor.

The third assassin turned away from the mage and launched three silver edged disks at Kaerion. He brought his shield up, blocking one of the missiles with a metallic clang. The other two sank painfully into his arm and shoulder.

Kaerion grunted once as the figure drew another short sword and pressed the attack. Unable to pull out the blades that penetrated his skin, Kaerion's attempts at parrying these attacks pushed the pointed barbs of the metal deeper into his flesh.

Fatigue made Kaerion's sword seem as heavy as a suit of mail, but he raised it again and again to beat back the assassin's attack. It was only after he failed to parry an easy thrust with his shield that he suspected he had been poisoned. His limbs simply wouldn't respond with their normal speed. It was as if he were submerged in water. Desperate now, for he knew he wouldn't last too much longer, Kaerion raised his own sword and aimed a vicious sideways swipe at his opponent. When the man brought one of his swords down to parry it, Kaerion spun and bashed his shield into

the assassins head. Stunned, his hapless opponent could not block the steel that imbedded itself into his chest. With a wet gurgle, he fell to the floor.

Kaerion quickly surveyed the battle as he removed the sharp metal discs from his arm and shoulder. Freed from his attackers, Phathas had regained his footing and now launched spell after spell at the leather-clad sorceress. He watched for a moment in awe at the speed and grace of the elderly mage. Bleeding and bruised from several wounds, the sorceress had erected her own shield against the attacks. It splattered and sparked as Phathas' spells slammed against it. Already it showed signs of collapsing.

With a cry, Bredeth finished off his last opponent, and Kaerion could see him slowly advancing with Majandra. Both were intent on killing the beleaguered sorceress. It looked to Kaerion's trained eye that this battle was nearly ended.

A slight scuffling sound caught his attention. Turning, he peered into the shadowy expanse of Phathas' room. The sound came again, and this time Kaerion saw a deeper shadow, a figure skulking within the darkness.

"Intruder!" he shouted and ran as fast as his sluggish limbs would carry him into the mage's chambers.

The well-muscled, black-skinned figure rifling through the mage's scrolls regarded him with obvious surprise. Kaerion raised his shield, expecting an attack. The thief, however, grabbed a handful of the scrolls lying on the desk before him and launched himself out the open window to his left.

Kaerion ran to the window and watched in amazement as the thief floated gracefully down to the street, already running before his feet touched the ground. He regarded the fleeing thief for just a moment before running out of the room and through the suite, ready to give chase.

"Where's the sorceress?" he asked Majandra, who was guiding the wounded Phathas to the only remaining chair in the suite.

"She fled," the bard replied. "Stepped through a portal and disappeared."

"I'm going after them," he said, halfway out of the door to the suite. "When you're done there, take Bredeth and make sure the area is secure."

He didn't wait for the half-elf to respond, but took the stairs two at a time in his haste to reach the street. As he ran through the common area, he saw Vaxor and Gerwyth. The elf was no longer immobilized, but it looked as if he needed a few minutes to compose himself.

"It seems we had visitors," Kaerion said. "They fled and now I'd like to pay them a visit. Come when you can."

With that, he ran out the main door to the inn and checked the street. The night air was crisp, washing away the copper tang of blood and rent flesh, but Kaerion could spare no time to enjoy it. He cast several long looks down either direction of the street that ran parallel to the inn, hoping to find some clue as to the direction the thief had taken.

So intent was he on tracking down their enemies that he almost didn't see the scarlet-cloaked figure detach itself from the shadows of an alleyway. He paused for a moment and watched as the figure approached, padding silently across the cobblestone street. A trickle of unease made its way down Kaerion's back as the cloaked figure, clearly a man by the rough cut of his face and the broad bulk of shoulders, stopped and slowly drew off his cloak. Every move seemed deliberate,

graceful. Kaerion was reminded at last of a panther he had once seen stalking wild deer while out hunting with his father.

He took another moment to survey his opponent, for clearly the man did not intend to let him pass. The newcomer wore no shirt beneath the scarlet cloak, and in the dim moonlight, Kaerion could see the smooth ripple of sinewy muscles across the well-defined expanse of chest, shoulder, and stomach.

The man carried no weapons, nor looked as if he had any hidden on his person, and yet, he stared quite calmly at the length of steel held expertly in Kaerion's hand. Loose-fitting scarlet pants flowed like water with every deliberate movement, held up by a belt of yellow cloth wrapped around twice and knotted elaborately on the side. The man wore no boot or sandals, but rather slid across the winter-cold ground on heavily calloused feet.

Kaerion was taken aback as the man drew forth his left hand to the center of his chest, perpendicular to the ground, while his thumb and index finger were bent parallel to the body, and sketched a deep bow. Carefully, he raised his own sword in salute, one honorable opponent to another.

Kaerion fell backward as the man crossed the distance between them in a blur and caught him with a knife-edged strike to the shoulder. Kaerion grunted and tried to bring his shield forward, protecting the numbed expanse of his sword arm. His opponent moved faster, spinning on one foot and planting a kick that connected hard with the side of his face.

Pain exploded in his head, and he staggered to the side. The man followed through with another strike, this time square in the throat, and Kaerion felt his entire body go numb as he gasped for breath.

The man simply smiled, casting his pockmarked face into a ghoulish grin, and waited for him to recover. Kaerion took that time to reassess his opponent. Although the assassins' poison still flowed in his veins, slowing down reflexes, and fatigue from several different wounds drained what remaining strength he had, he didn't think he'd be able to match the speed of his opponent even if he'd been fully rested. The man moved like lightning.

But there were more ways to beat an opponent, Kaerion thought as he launched himself at the smiling figure. He was bleeding from his wounds, but it was draining away the poison, and Kaerion was slowly gaining back some control of his body. His sword whistled as its keen edge cut sidewise in an attempt to lay open the man's stomach. The smile fell from his opponent's face as he was forced to roll out of the way of the attack.

Kaerion followed through as quickly as he could, not wanting to give the unarmed man a chance to regain his footing. A second cut with his sword should have laid open the man's bowels, but his opponent's agility saved him again. Instead of a deathblow, the sword had made a shallow cut on his hip.

Pressing the attack, Kaerion noted with satisfaction that his opponent was giving ground. Soon, he'd have the man backed into an alleyway. With little room to maneuver, the pockmarked man would not be able to dodge the deadly strokes of his blade.

A few more moments, Kaerion thought as his sword wove a net of steel, driving back his opponent.

There!

Kaerion raised his sword, intent on cutting a deadly swathe of steel across the man's body—

And struck nothing but air.

The monk had run up the side of the nearby wall and used his momentum to launch a flurry of kicks at Kaerion. Each one shot pain through Kaerion's already battered body. Another kick caught him straight in the chest, and he found himself knocked backward out of the alleyway.

Kaerion rolled gracelessly to his feet, but already he could feel the presence of his opponent, waiting to rain death down upon him. Kaerion knew he was at the last of his strength.

The twang of a bowstring cut through the night, followed by the hiss of arrows. His opponent cast a baleful eye toward the source of that sound, and Kaerion watched in disbelief as his opponent's hands moved quicker than his eye could follow, knocking aside the incoming missile. Two more followed soon after, and Kaerion knew that Gerwyth had arrived on the scene. Unbelievably, the pockmarked man deflected two more missiles. The fourth, however, caught him in the shoulder, and he let out a grunt of pain.

In the distance, Kaerion could hear the sounds of the city watch heading toward the embattled inn. His opponent must have heard it too, for he ducked back into the alleyway, safe from the deadly arrows.

"This is far from over," the man growled at him in a rough voice. He brought both hands together and began a low-throated chant. The air rippled beside him, shadows within shadows. He cast another hard look at the fallen fighter and then stepped into the moving shadows, disappearing as if he'd stepped through an unseen door.

Kaerion groaned and struggled to his feet. By the time he made it into the alleyway, it was clear that his opponent was gone.

\* \* \*

When the upper storey of the Platinum Shield exploded in a burst of flames, Durgoth knew that his henchmen had encountered some difficulties. Just how great these difficulties were didn't become clear until he saw both Sydra and Eltanel fleeing the inn. Rage and frustration at their incompetence ruled him for just a moment. He wanted to strike down their fleeing forms then and there.

Mercifully, the moment passed. Durgoth knew he could deal with their failure later. What concerned him now was the sheer strength of those who unknowingly sought the same thing as he: the Tomb of Acererak. His distraction had been dealt with very effectively. The presence of that other god still shook him deeply, and he marveled at the faith and power of anyone who could wield such holy might. This was no motley collection of treasure-hungry adventurers arrayed against him. Surprised and unprepared, they had still beaten back a carefully planned attack.

Perhaps, Durgoth thought, there may be a way to use such strength. Possibilities began to spin in his mind—plans and plots as cunning and twisted as the man who created them.



The sound of combat caught his attention, and he looked out from his vantage point in the darkened alley, smiling as he caught sight of Jhagren locked in battle with some sword-wielding brute. At least, Durgoth thought with some satisfaction, he could still count on the monk to succeed at his tasks. Though Jhagren's opponent looked imposing, blood ran from several deep wounds, and it was clear that he was no match for the monk.

Durgoth watched a few moments more. He found himself slightly disappointed when the whistles and alarms of approaching sentinels drew closer. The presence of the elven archer had just made the battle interesting.

"Ah, well," he whispered to the chill night air. "We shall all meet again. Very soon."

He faded into the darkness of the alleyway.



“The Scarlet Brotherhood... *here?*” Bredeth’s voice, grating at its normal volume, was pitched just short of a shout.

Majandra winced at the harsh tone, but managed to keep her face impassive. It was clear that the night’s events had rattled the young noble, and she had no wish to antagonize him further. Dark bruises stood out vividly on the man’s cream-tinted complexion, and several cuts crisscrossed both arms.

Despite herself, the half-elf was impressed that the young warrior had acquitted himself well during the battle. Perhaps, she thought, he won’t be a complete liability on the journey.

“How could those damnable assassins have found out about our plans?” the young noble asked in a slightly softer voice. “And why would they take such an interest in us?”

“The Brotherhood has its eyes and ears in every major city,” Phathas replied from his chair in the corner of the room, “and we have made little secret about our intentions. In that, we may have been a bit foolish. As for their interest, well, I believe that a united and healthy Nyronde would be a severe impediment to whatever dark schemes they are hatching.”

Majandra listened to the old mage’s words, trying to look attentive, but concern for her mentor kept clouding her thoughts. Despite the healing prayers of Vaxor, dark circles ringed the deep hollows of the wizard’s eyes, and his face seemed shrunken, almost ghoul-like in the firelight—weathered flesh stretched taut across the skull, like the cracked skin of an ancient drum.

Tonight’s attack had drained them all, but it seemed as if the battle had taken something permanent from the old mage. Vaxor had dealt with the sentinels and the hysterical rambling of the Platinum Shields proprietor. Even after leading the weary group to the spell-sealed chambers of the Royal University, Phathas seemed strangely silent, bent beneath burdens only he could identify. Now, as they sat within the relative comfort and safety of the university walls, the bard watched in dismay as those burdens continued to consume the flesh of her beloved teacher.

“Something just isn’t right,” interjected Gerwyth, as he drew himself out of the shadow-spun corner of the chamber. His lilting accent caught Majandra’s attention, turning her mind away from dark thoughts. She was surprised to find that despite the evening’s exertions, the elf appeared unruffled. Though he had discarded his usual cloak and wore his studded leather armor openly, the elf would not have drawn comment had he been attending a banquet, such was the effect of his still-immaculate waves of golden hair and unearthly beauty. His eyes reflected back the golden light of the fire, shining like emeralds in the small room, and if not for the grim set of jaw, one would have never known the ranger had fought a pitched battle just hours ago.

“Despite the fact that the attack was well planned,” he continued after a nod from Phathas, “it did not feel like the Brotherhood’s handiwork. It was too... straightforward, if you ask me.”

“I agree,” Vaxor’s deep voice resonated in the chamber. He turned to the silent figure of Kaerion, staring idly into the fire. “Are you sure that you encountered a member of the Scarlet Brotherhood? Perhaps it was someone else—a different group trying to shift blame onto the Brotherhood?”

The fire crackled and hissed within the stone hearth for several long moments before the burly fighter answered. Majandra listened with great interest. Unlike the rest of their group, Kaerion had refused Vaxor’s offer of healing, instead popping the wax seal on a clear flask and drawing a few swallows. After that, he’d bound his remaining wounds and stalked off. Beyond recounting the events that had transpired, he’d hardly said two words since entering the University grounds.

“No,” Kaerion said in an even tone, “I’m sure it was the Brotherhood. I’ve got the bruises to prove it.”

This last was said with a rueful smile, one of the few Majandra had seen the fighter allow himself. The effect was devastating—even with the deep scratches that cut across his chin—and the half-elf found herself dreaming up a hundred different ways she could bring such a smile to his lips.

“Well then, if the Scarlet Brotherhood is behind the attack, what should we do?” asked Bredeth.

The young noble paced restlessly about the confines of the chamber, anxiety present in every move. The group looked at Phathas, but it was Vaxor who responded.

“What we do next is get some rest. We’ve been up almost all day and night, and we have plenty to do in the coming hours. Because of tonight’s events, it’s clear that the city is no longer safe. We must push up our scheduled departure. Bredeth, you and Majandra should contact the caravan masters after you’ve had a chance to sleep. Tell them to be prepared to leave by tomorrow morning. Phathas, Gerwyth, Kaerion, and I will make sure that all of our provisions are stocked and ready to load on the wagons. Agreed?”

Majandra found herself nodding tiredly along with the rest of the group. Lack of sleep and fatigue had begun to take their toll. She smiled wryly at the probable reaction of the caravan masters, who would no doubt shriek and complain until more gold was thrown their way, but that experience would have to wait until she’d closed her eyes for just a few hours.

Stifling a yawn, she shuffled past Phathas, giving his shoulder a gentle squeeze, and was rewarded with a tired smile. Despite the old man's kindness, she found herself wondering, not for the first time, if he had the strength to complete the journey.

How much will this expedition cost us?

\* \* \*

"Unforgivable!" Durgoth shouted into the dimly lit room, noting with smug satisfaction the faces that flinched before the sound of his voice included those of the two thieves' guild members. In truth, he wasn't all that angry—any more. Anger had long since given way to pragmatic cunning, yet he still raked the assembled cultists and their newfound allies with the fiery edge of his gaze. Fear was a useful tool, and one he wielded like a master.

"But lord," Sydra replied in an uneven voice, "our targets possessed considerable strength. Rarely have I encountered such power as when I battled the old mage. He was exceptionally skilled—even for a master wizard."

He listened to the sorceress' pathetic excuses with an impassive mien. The fact that she addressed him with a noble honorific amused him greatly, but she needed to understand what the rest of his followers already knew: He wouldn't tolerate failure.

"I was under the impression," Durgoth said, his voice lashing out like a whip, "that the Guildmaster offered me his very best. Apparently, he was mistaken."

"Not so, blessed one," a voice spoke from the shadows.

It took Durgoth a few moments to locate Eltanel's black-cloaked form. The thief moved confidently forward, pushing past several cultists who stared wide-eyed at the man who so brazenly challenged their master.

Durgoth couldn't help but smile at their reaction. The thief continued forward, wounded pride evidenced in every motion, and for a moment the cleric wondered whether the man would be foolish enough to strike at him. He was about to signal the golem that stood ever vigilant at his back, but the dark-skinned thief stopped several paces away and stood with hands clasped behind his back, stance easy and open.

"What happened tonight was unfortunate," Eltanel said, taking a moment to glare at his companion, who returned his scowl measure for measure, "but it was not a complete loss." He brought one hand forward, holding several thin scroll tubes. "I managed to acquire these before our friends gained the upper hand." The thief shot another look at Sydra before handing the scrolls to Durgoth.

The cleric accepted the offering with a cold smile. This Eltanel was a cunning one. In a matter of moments, the thief had managed to distance himself from tonight's defeat, subtly place the blame on his companion, and allow himself to look like the only one who had succeeded in any way. He would bear watching.

"My thanks, Eltanel, for your efforts. Perhaps I spoke too hastily. It appears that Reynard was partially correct in his assessment." Durgoth watched as the sorceress' golden eyes flashed angrily at the other thief. There, he thought with satisfaction, with one phrase he had widened the gulf between the two thieves and insured that Sydra would kill herself to prove better than Eltanel.

Satisfied, Durgoth turned his attention back to the rest of his followers. “It is true that our enemies have great strength,” he said, pitching his voice so that it carried to the farthest corners of the room. “But the wise man may use the power of his enemies to his own advantage. This is what we will do. With the information we have gained this evening—” at this he cast a benevolent glance at Eltanel—“we will have a better idea of the location to which our foes will travel.”

“But what about the prophecy?” a voice shouted from the center of the assembled cultists, eliciting a supporting murmur from the group.

“The prophecy has led us here,” Durgoth snapped. He noted the identity of the speaker and absently reminded himself to have the man’s tongue cut out for his insolence. “I have faith in the will of Tharizdun, and it is his will that has guided us here.”

He glanced out at the assembly with satisfaction. Invoking the name of the Imprisoned One had brought them to silence. He could see the gleam of faith in their eyes. They would follow his lead unquestioningly.

“Our enemies seek the tomb of Acererak, as do we. There will no doubt be great danger on the journey, and we shall let our foes spend their strength overcoming these perils. They shall lead us to the tomb, and when they stand exhausted at the gates of the wizards resting place, we shall sacrifice them to appease the dark god’s hunger. Once our enemies have been vanquished we will be able to collect the key and release Tharizdun from his eternal prison.”

This last he delivered triumphantly, hands raised above his head in the traditional blessing. The group responded instantly, chanting the Eight Dark Names of Tharizdun. Durgoth lowered his hands slowly before him, and the assembled cultists fell to their knees in homage to the dark god.

The cleric watched as Sydra and Eltanel left the room, no doubt to report their findings to the Guildmaster. It was important for Reynard to know exactly with whom he had made a deal. It would make it that much sweeter when Durgoth bent his power to destroying the city—including the scum who lived in its shadows—in the name of Tharizdun.

Durgoth smiled in anticipation and closed his eyes as the prayers of his followers swelled over him in waves.

Everything was proceeding perfectly.

## Part 2

“Darkness shall be your Diocese,  
Night, Your Ministry ...”  
—*The Book of Nine Shadows*



Gray clouds hung like a shroud over the sweeping grasslands of Nyronnd, casting a chill shadow on the line of wagons and horses that crept along the rough road. Wet snow and freezing rain fell hard from the sky, driven by the bitter lash of the wind. Even the thick-skinned oxen, normally dull and placid as they pulled their wagons, bent their heads beneath the wintry blasts and let out deep-throated grumbles of protest.

Kaerion pulled the thick expanse of his winter cloak tightly about him, seeking in vain for some protection against the needles of ice that struck painfully against exposed skin. Cold beads of moisture ran down from his matted hair, gathering at the frozen tip of nose and beard. These he swept away with an angry mutter and a swift motion of his gloved hand, but he couldn't prevent the occasional drop from running down his neck and underneath the bulk of his chainmail. He shuddered once again and was forced to grab hold of the reins as his horse, a powerfully built roan stallion, shifted nervously beneath him, obviously sensing its rider's discomfort.

Not an auspicious beginning to their journey, Kaerion thought miserably, and ran a hand across the bulk of his saddlebag, absently checking the complement of filled wineskins he'd brought along. The group had awoken well before dawn and made their way from the University to the caravans staging area in the trade district. They spent most of their time during the pre-dawn gloom double-checking their supplies and making last-minute deals with the caravan merchant's agents, who were only too eager to sell any in-demand item or service for twice its price.

They left Rel Mord as soon as the gates were thrown wide against the unrelieved gloom of a forbidding winter sky—though the weather had been kind enough to wait until mid-morning before showering them with its gifts. Now, the expedition plodded forward, six wagons full of food, clothing, spare wood and nails for repairs, pick axes, shovels and other excavating equipment, empty chests for carrying Acererak's treasure, and all the sundry provisions and supplies required for such an undertaking.

Roughly a dozen drovers and an equal amount of caravan guards had joined them on their journey, sharing crude humor and a rough camaraderie as they went about their business. Kaerion noted the guards with interest. Though most of them seemed

like typical down-on-their-luck hired swords, their captain, a steely-eyed woman of indeterminate age, moved with the confidence and grace of a trained warrior. He watched as the woman, who called herself Landra, barked orders that sent the various guards stumbling into formation around the caravan. It was clear to Kaerion after a few moments that her tongue was as sharp as her wit, and he made a note to find out more about her.

Of the nobles who embarked upon this journey, Kaerion was pleasantly surprised to discover that only Phathas remained in the relative comfort of a wagon. Still recovering from his wounds from the battle at the Platinum Shield, the old mage had originally insisted in joining the rest of the group on horseback, and it wasn't until Vaxor had threatened the mage with bodily harm that he had finally relented.

Though there was little danger of being attacked so close to the capitol of Nyron, their recent battle had added a cautious element to the expedition. They did not want to leave anything to chance. Thus it was decided that Gerwyth would scout ahead of the caravan, alert for any danger, while Kaerion and a small complement of guards would lag behind, ready to discourage any pursuit. Vaxor, Bredeth, and Majandra wove themselves into the patrols of the remaining guards, roving on either side of the caravan train. Once they left the shadow of Rel Mord, it would be several weeks before they found themselves near the walls of a major settlement or city, and this area could hold dangers beyond that of simple brigands.

A sharp gust of wind blew across the grasslands. Kaerion gasped as its swirling fingers rustled through his cloak, sending shivers throughout his body. He cursed and reached for the edges of his wet cloak once again. He didn't know if he'd be able to survive the coming weeks and months. Between the bitter assault of the weather and the suspicious silence that had grown between he and Vaxor, Kaerion didn't know how long he'd be able to last.

He'd studiously avoided the Heironean cleric ever since the night of the battle, and it was fairly clear that the priest was doing the same. Kaerion thought the cleric might have discovered his secret, and the very possibility had kept him from sleeping ever since. He had shared his suspicions with Gerwyth, but the elf had quickly dismissed them. If what Kaerion had reported to his friend about the Heironean church was true, the elf had suggested, then Vaxor would have been honor bound not to offer any aid, comfort, or sustenance to Kaerion. Vaxor would not have allowed Kaerion to remain a member of the expedition. The elf's argument was a good one, but Kaerion couldn't shake the belief that Vaxor's silence implied condemnation. The strain of such belief, combined with nearly two days without sleep, had begun to wear upon Kaerion. Already his head ached with the need for strong wine—and it would only get worse. At least, he thought, his insomnia had kept the nightmares at bay.

By midafternoon, the falling rain and snow had eased up, and the grassland winds were, for the moment, held in abeyance. Kaerion sighed and cast a look behind him. Rel Mord still loomed in the distance, a brooding giant. He was surprised to note, however, that despite the brutal weather, the caravan had traveled a fair distance. Looking forward, he saw the undulating tide of grasslands stretch out before him. About a mile ahead, he saw the black line of caravan wagons. From this distance they looked like the great behemoths of the Aerdi Sea, their long bodies cresting across a



sea of grass. Patches of white snow dotted the landscape, and Kaerion recalled the whitecaps on the storm-tossed waters of his youth.

He reined his stallion to a halt and stood up in the stirrups, stretching tired legs. Around him, several guards had dismounted and were walking their mounts. Despite the calm in the weather, he couldn't quite shake the chill that had gripped him since leaving Rel Mord. His hands shook as he continued to watch the slow progress of the caravan in the distance, though he wasn't sure if his twitching muscles were due to the weather or his sudden thirst.

Deftly, the fighter dismounted and undid the knot in his saddlebag. He drew forth a skin filled with sweet Nyrondean wine and quickly took a draught. The weather-chilled wine filled his mouth with its crisp texture and he swallowed greedily.

"A bit early to start celebrating, wouldn't you say?"

Kaerion nearly choked at the sound of the sharp-toned voice. Spluttering, he drew his forearm across his mouth and turned to face the source of that voice. Majandra stood smiling beside the elegant bulk of her horse, a piebald mare with a graceful mane. The half-elf wore a thick green cloak clasped at the neck with a gold-wrought pin in the shape of a harp. A wool-spun doublet further protected her from the elements. Her riding leathers were worn but well made, and she moved easily across the slippery turf in high-topped leather boots.

Majandra shook her head at Kaerion's discomfiture, and the fighter noticed that for once, the bard's fiery red hair lay bound in tightly woven braids that lay about her head like a circlet of bronze.

"This is no celebration, Majandra," he said, indicating the uncorked skin. "It's a balm for this damned weather. Alchemists and wizards aren't the only ones who brew magic."

The half-elf laughed and reached for the wineskin. "Then perhaps you wouldn't mind sharing a little bit of this potion. My fingers are so cold I think they'd shatter on the strings of my harp."

Kaerion handed over the wine, watching in fascination as the bard took several long swallows and then wiped her mouth, quite improperly, on the sleeve of her doublet.

"What is it Kaerion?" she asked with a smile. "Have you never seen a woman drink before?"

The fighter shook his head, hoping that the red tint to his face would be seen as a product of the chill wind and not the embarrassment he felt. What was it about this woman that made him feel so off balance?

"Of course I have," he said, perhaps a bit too sharply. "I've just never seen a daughter of one of the noblest houses in Nyronde drink out of anything that wasn't made of gold."

If Majandra took any offense at his statement, she didn't show it. Rather, the half-elf cracked a thoroughly enchanting and all-too-knowing smile. "Well, now," she said, her eyes flashing with mischief, "it seems that you have forgotten the fact that you and I have already shared a drink, after a fashion."

Kaerion stiffened at the mention of his disastrous first evening in Rel Mord, but relaxed when the bard rolled her eyes and laughed in obvious good nature. He was

beginning to enjoy this woman's mercurial wit, even when its rapier-sharp point was focused on him. Perhaps, he thought, this journey wouldn't be too dull.

Majandra handed back the skin of wine, and the two stood in companionable silence, listening to the sound of the wind as it whistled across the grassland. In the distance, he could see that the caravan line had stopped for the final break of the day. After this, the wagons would push on until dusk, when they would finally make camp for the night.

"I actually came here to thank you for helping us the other night," Majandra spoke at last, breaking the silence. "I know you think our mission is a foolish one, but that didn't stop you from risking your life to save Phathas and the rest of us. Without you and Gerwyth, I doubt we could have overcome our attackers."

"You have no need to thank me," Kaerion mumbled. And that was the truth. Thinking back on the events of that evening, he recalled springing out of sleep and into battle. The rest had simply been instinct. It wasn't until they had regrouped in the ruins of the inn that Kaerion had realized exactly what had happened.

"And I don't think that your plans, all of this—" he continued, indicating the wagons in the distance with a wave of his hand—"are foolish at all. I tried to tell you that the other evening, but I guess I was a bit too deep in my cups."

He smiled ruefully and took another swallow of wine. "All of you have a tremendous amount of love for your country—and a tremendous amount of faith that the tightness of what you're doing will see you through."

"Is that so terrible a thing?" Majandra asked.

"No, I suppose not," Kaerion replied after a long moment. He moved closer to the half-elf, catching her arm gently with his free hand. "But things don't often work out the way we plan. Good doesn't always triumph over evil. And sometimes, the paths that seem the clearest are the ones that cause us the most pain."

This last came out in an uneven voice as Kaerion struggled to hide his grief—and failed. He released the bard's arm and abruptly turned his attention to his mount, checking saddle knots and stirrups with studious concentration.

The silence stretched out again, this time full of tension. Majandra moved to the other side of the stallion's head and gently rubbed the space between its eyes. "Why did you not seek healing after the attack?" she asked, suddenly changing the topic.

Kaerion continued with his ministrations, trying to find the right words. Despite his earlier comments, he did recall sharing a drink with Majandra. He'd almost confessed his guilt to her right there in the middle of the tavern, but fate had intervened. He had another chance now, if only he could figure out how to start. But try as he might, the words didn't come.

"I suppose I wanted to save the god's healing for those who truly needed it," he said after a moment, immediately cursing himself for his cowardice. He'd refused Vaxor's offer because he had been afraid of what the cleric would discover. Instead, he'd recovered his backpack and quaffed a healing potion while the others were deliberating their next move at the University.

He saw by the look on her face that she didn't quite believe him. The bard opened her mouth to speak again, but he quickly interrupted her, not liking the direction the conversation was likely to take them.

“I appreciate your thanks, Majandra,” he said as he tightened the stallions saddle straps with a quick tug, “but as I said, it’s not necessary. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I think I need to check in with Gerwyth.”

With that, he mounted his horse and urged it forward with a flick of the reins, kicking up a spray of ice and snow.

\* \* \*

Stiff-backed and angry, Majandra watched in stunned silence as Kaerion rode away. When his cantering form was no more than a distant blur, she let out a string of curses that would have shocked any elf that overheard. She had been so very close to drawing the reserved fighter out from behind the wall he had built up to keep most everyone away. She was sure of it. One wrong question, however, had sent him back behind his brusque defenses.

Not that she wasn’t truly grateful for his aid the other evening. Kaerion’s courage, skill with a blade, and poise under deadly attack had turned the tide of battle in the Platinum Shield. She was convinced more than ever that Phathas had made the correct choice when he called upon an old friendship in his time of need. Their group would need the skills of Gerwyth and his moody companion if they were to succeed. And so much depended upon their success, she thought, shivering in the chill afternoon air.

Majandra continued to stare out in the direction Kaerion had headed, pulling at her lower lip thoughtfully. What was it that drove this embittered man, that forced him to keep the world and everyone in it at a distance? She’d watched him closely these past two weeks, hoping for some clue. One thing was certain: something must have happened during the battle at the inn, something between he and Vaxor. It wasn’t just that Kaerion had quietly removed himself from the area when the Heironean priest was offering the healing of his god. The two men hadn’t exchanged more than a few words since that night, and Majandra could feel the tension growing.

Whatever the issue was, she was sure that it was tied up in some way to Kaerion’s impassioned comments about the “clear path.” Something had occurred in this man’s past, something truly tragic, and despite his best attempts, it occasionally broke through the mask he wore. The depth of his pain had surprised her today, but even more disturbing had been the strength of her need to understand him.

What had begun as an instinctive desire to uncover what promised to be an intriguing tale had grown into something much more. Thinking about it, Majandra nearly laughed out loud at the irony. She, a bard and master of many fables, legends, and sagas, felt trapped in a story not of her own making. The truth of the matter was, she finally admitted to the rolling plains and angry gray clouds of the grasslands, Majandra Damar, bastard daughter of one of the noblest houses in the kingdom, was falling in love.

It wasn’t until her mare gave a whuffle of displeasure that Majandra noticed the wet snow and icy rain, which had begun to fall once again.

\* \* \*

The caravan continued through the grasslands for several more days, followed by the blustering wind and freezing rain of the storm. Despite well-built fires protected from the dousing snow and rain by a judicious use of Phathas' magic, warmth eluded Kaerion. The days rolled by in miserable array, each one more uncomfortable than the last. Even though there were only a few weeks until Readyng and the spring thaw, winter still held a tight grip upon the land, unwilling to yield its dominion. After the fourth consecutive afternoon of sleet and hail, Kaerion found himself looking forward to the oppressive heat of the Vast Swamp.

He wasn't the only one affected by the continually dreary conditions. Spirits had dampened considerably since the expedition had left Rel Mord. The nights were spent in uncharacteristic silence around the fires, with many of the group's members huddled together for warmth. Even the caravan drovers and guards, whose curses and world-weary comments were usually delivered with professional detachment, had begun complaining in earnest; tempers were ready to snap.

In the late afternoon of the eighth day, during a nasty hailstorm, Kaerion found himself in the midst of a heated discussion. Gerwyth, who had continued to scout ahead of the wagons, had just returned, his winded black gelding blowing plumes of steamy breath in the winter air. The elf had spotted the remains of a burned wagon about a league farther ahead, probably the work of bandits, and was recommending that the expedition circle up its wagons for the evening and make camp, using the remaining light to fortify their position.

"Absolutely not," Bredeth said. "We still have a fair amount of light left, and I say we push on. We have a long distance to travel, and we shouldn't waste time. Besides, we have little to fear from a pack of bandits. The scum would be no match for us."

The incessantly poor disposition of the weather had brought about an equally irritating change in the young noble. The excitement of the journeys beginning had transformed Bredeth into a bearable, if not entirely pleasant traveling companion. He seemed to have left much of his arrogance inside the capital and would often undertake the necessary duties of traveling without too much protest. Unfortunately, the rigors of this trip had brought about the return of the all-too-familiar Bredeth, and Kaerion found himself clenching his fist with the effort of holding back the punch he wanted to deliver right on the highborn snob's face. Was it possible that many of the nobles he once called friend acted the same way around those they felt as their inferiors?

"Are you so ready to shed blood needlessly?" Gerwyth replied. The elf stroked one hand lightly along his mount's muzzle. Despite the whistling wind and the sometimes-painful fall of hailstones, the ranger appeared undisturbed by the fierceness of the weather. "If we are cautious and take the time to make camp here for the night, we reduce the chances that we will be attacked. Besides—" he pointed to the caravan drovers—"our team is tired. The men need a chance to rest, as do the animals. We have driven them hard under difficult conditions."

The young noble bristled as the elf spoke, but he offered no counter argument. Vaxor nodded at Gerwyth's words. He squinted beneath the wind's assault, motioning for the grizzled drover who was in charge of the collected wagons. "Tell

the rest of your team that we make camp here, and tell Landra to mount a double watch tonight.” He dismissed the drover with a curt nod.

Bredeth sighed and stalked off, no doubt ready to take his temper out on an unsuspecting guard. Kaerion was about to follow when he caught sight of Majandra, sharing a joke with one of the caravan’s teamsters. He had spoken very little to the bard since their brief conversation the other day, and he found that puzzling. Since he had arrived in Rel Mord, the half-elf had always seemed a ready companion, willing to share a tale or, more likely, ask questions that he’d rather not answer. Lately, however, he had seen very little of her—and was surprised by how much that bothered him. He had grown used to the bard’s presence and found himself wondering what she was doing. He’d have to apologize for his rudeness when he had the chance, and hope that she would have the grace to forgive him.

He was about to do just that, when a hand slapped his shoulder companionably. “Well, Kaer,” Gerwyth said, “how about you and I oversee some of the preparations for this evening and then enjoy the comforts of a warm fire?”

Kaerion turned and flashed the ranger a smile. “That sounds good, Ger,” he said. “I’m tired of this damned snow and ice.”

Kaerion cast a quick glance behind him at the red-haired bard before joining his friend, but not before the elf managed to spot the target of his gaze.

“Oh-ho,” Gerwyth said with an arch of an angled eyebrow, “it seems that our friend has found himself a worthy cause after all.”

Kaerion shot his friend a barbed glance. “Leave it alone, Ger. I haven’t found anything.”

The elf nodded, a half smile playing about his lips.

“So,” Kaerion continued, hoping to change the conversation, “how bad was the wagon you found?”

The hail had finally stopped, and the ranger threw back his hood to run slender fingers through his hair, combing out the knots.

“Heavily damaged,” he said after a moment. “Whoever attacked the wagon left nothing behind. The good thing is I don’t think they used magic. The damage to the wagon was extreme, but not enough to indicate the use of spells. There were numerous hoof prints. I tracked them for a while before they became obscured in the falling snow. There were about twelve of them, with another six or so on foot. Dangerous, but like our young whelp said, they’re nothing we can’t handle.”

Kaerion knew he could count on Gerwyth’s judgment. The elf had once tracked a small band of goblins that had overrun a hamlet over ten leagues before surprising them in their lair. He’d truly come to appreciate the ranger’s skill and fierceness.

“This will be the first of many dangers we encounter,” the elf said. “We’ll have to be doubly on guard once we head into Rieuwood.”

Kaerion caught a burst of red out of the corner of his eye and turned just in time to see Majandra talking with another teamster. She flashed him a bright smile, eyes sparkling. The bard’s smile unsettled him. Gerwyth was right. This was just the beginning. They would face many dangers on this journey. Kaerion only wished he knew which dangers would prove the greatest.



Blood ran into the silver bowl.

Durgoth sighed with impatience as the sorceress continued with her preparations. Scrying was never an easy task—especially when the target was a mage of the highest caliber. He understood the need for special precautions, but the woman had spent most of the morning locked away. The doddering mage and his foolish companions had left nearly eight days ago, fleeing the city earlier than expected. A thrill ran through Durgoth at the thought of his enemies and their rushed exit from Rel Mord, but now he needed to confirm their path.

A soft knock on the door to the small room presaged Jhagren's entrance. The monk bowed perfunctorily in his usual not-quite-insolent way and waited for Durgoth to acknowledge him. Durgoth allowed himself a small smile as he continued to watch Sydra and her arcane ministrations. He would let his esteemed companion wait—a reminder of who truly held the power. The ruddy-faced man had said very little since the battle at the Platinum Shield, and Durgoth did not trust the man's silence. Jhagren was a dangerous tool—perhaps too dangerous. Soon it would be time to cast away such an instrument before it had the opportunity to turn on its wielder.

Sydra's clear voice interrupted his ramblings. The sorceress had begun a soft chant as she poured more of the sacrificial blood into the ornate bowl that hung suspended from the ceiling by a thin chain. When Sydra was finished, she added a few more bundles of spiced wood to the brazier that burned dully about two feet beneath the bowl. The heat from the brazier would prevent the blood from thickening, thereby extending her ability to scry on their enemies. Frankly, Durgoth didn't care much for the details. He simply wanted the witch to give him the information he needed—and soon.

When it was clear that he would yet have to wait to fulfill his desire, the cleric turned to Jhagren and acknowledged the silent man with a wave of his hand. "Is everything in readiness?" he asked.

The monk nodded his head slightly. “Yes, blessed one. We have secured wagons and enough horses to carry everyone. The merchant we dealt with was more than happy to provide for our needs, once we explained the alternatives.”

“Excellent,” Durgoth replied, wishing for a moment that he could have been there to see the terror in the merchant’s eyes. “What of Eltanel?”

“The thief has arranged for provisions, though I’m told that the Guild Master was less than pleased to discover that he was funding our expedition.” The monk spoke softly, but Durgoth was sure he could detect a hint of amusement in the man’s voice.

“That old cur shouldn’t complain,” the cleric barked with laughter. “After all, he’ll be drowning in riches.” For all the good it will do him, he added silently, casting a glance at Sydra.

Durgoth turned from Jhagren without another word and rubbed his hands together, imagining the power that would flow through them. Once Tharizdun was free, nothing on Oerth would be able to stand against him.

“It is time, blessed one,” Sydra said suddenly, and for a moment, Durgoth forgot his dreams of power.

Quickly, he moved to stand by the sorceress, peering into the blood-filled bowl. The woman brought her hands together in a sharp clap and exhaled deeply. Durgoth felt the hair on his neck rise. Whatever else he thought of Sydra, the woman was gifted. Eldritch energy filled the room.

Eyes closed, the sorceress waved smooth-skinned hands over the bowl—once, twice. On the third pass, Durgoth saw the dark red liquid shimmer. In a few moments, the shimmering became a crimson radiance that pulsed like the beat of a heart. The cleric stared at the arcane display with great interest, the rhythm of his heart matching the pulsing incandescence.

Eventually, the light within the bowl grew brighter, and in a single powerful flash, resolved itself into startling detail. Sydra opened her eyes and rested her hands at her side. “It is done,” she said simply, and moved to the side, allowing Durgoth full view of the image in the bowl.

The cleric stared down at an image of an old man, wrapped in thick blankets. By the looks of his surroundings, he appeared to be resting within a small wooden structure. It was the mage, Durgoth decided after a moment. The old fool slept peacefully, never dreaming of the danger that haunted his every step.

“Could we not destroy him now, as he sleeps?” the cleric asked.

Sydra shook her head before answering. “There are a few spells I could cast through this mystic link. However, it is likely that a mage as powerful as Phathas would detect the arcane energy and erect a barrier.”

“It is just as well. The senile fool will prove useful to us before we destroy him. Once we are through with him, I leave his fate in your hands.”

The sorceress gave him a grim smile. “As you wish, blessed one.” Durgoth could almost hear the anticipation in her voice.

“I wish to see more,” he informed her after another moment spent examining the mage.

She nodded and stepped forward, this time whispering several words as she traced patterns into the surface of the steaming blood with a single finger. The scene shifted

with a disorienting lurch, resolving again into an image of several wagons slogging across a snow-covered landscape.

“Do you recognize where they are?” he asked Sydra.

“Yes,” she replied after spending a few moments peering into the bowl. “They are in the grasslands to the south and east of Rel Mord. It is as you said, blessed one.”

Yes, Durgoth thought. The scrolls that Eltanel had managed to pilfer from their room indicated this route. If they were headed for the Vast Swamp, which was a certainty according to their notes, they would avoid drawing too close to the coastline where the activity off Fairwind Bay would increase the ferocity of the winter weather. More than likely, they were headed for the confluence of the Harp and Lyre Rivers. From there, they would probably turn south, skirt the Bonewood Forest, and follow the river south into Rieuwood. It was a good plan, one that he would have created himself. Perhaps these nobles were not so foolish as he originally had thought. It mattered little, however, as he would make sure that they were all dead before he completed his task.

Durgoth was about to order the sorceress to end the scrying and prepare his followers for their journey when he caught a fiery flash of red. Looking closer, the cleric was pleased to discover that the distracting color was not the result of a torch or other such incendiary device, but it was due to the wind lashing through the hair of an enchanting woman. Her elven ancestry was apparent in the elegant cheekbones and slightly alien features, but these only served to heighten her beauty. Durgoth felt an unfamiliar warmth building in his loins. It had been quite some time since he had deigned to indulge himself in the pleasures of the flesh—perhaps too long. He would keep this one alive after he had dealt with the rest of her companions. He knew he would tire of her in time, but his nights would be filled with sport until then.

The fire-haired beauty turned suddenly and smiled, as if greeting a friend, but Durgoth could see no one else nearby. “What manner of trickery is this?” he asked Sydra.

The sorceress stepped forward and gazed into the bowl. She spoke a single command, and a gray cloud shimmered near the image of the half-elf, but no figure resolved. “I do not understand, blessed one,” Sydra said after a moment of tense concentration. “Something is blocking the effects of my spell, but only in a localized area.” She closed her eyes again, and sweat beaded on her forehead. “It is not a spell, blessed one, but whatever it is, it holds great power. I can feel it working against me.”

“I am not interested in your feelings, Sydra,” the cleric snapped. “I am interested in finding out exactly what this power is and who it’s protecting.”

Swallowing hard, the sorceress closed her eyes and cast another spell. Durgoth ran his fingers through his hair in agitation. They couldn’t afford to be surprised by anything else on this mission. Success was critical. He watched a few moments as Sydra continued her spell, then he turned to Jhagren. The monk had stood silently throughout this scrying. Perhaps he could shed some light on the situation.

Before Durgoth could open his mouth, Sydra screamed and threw her hands up to her temples. The scrying bowl exploded, sending silver shards and splatters of scalding blood across the room. Durgoth raised his own hands instinctively as the crimson rain poured down upon him.



Heavy footsteps came pounding down the hallway soon after, and the cleric could hear the frantic questions of his followers as they gathered beyond the closed door. He ignored the pain of his burns and turned to leave, only to find Jhagren quietly opening the door to address the concerned cultists beyond. Durgoth noted with irritation that the monk had avoided the burning spray and moved with complete calm. Left with nothing else to do, Durgoth surveyed the damage.

Sydra lay in the center of the room, covered in blood and the remains of the silver bowl. It was difficult to tell how much blood was her own and how much was the remains of her scrying medium. Durgoth felt little compunction to find out. The brazier underneath the bowl had somehow managed to remain upright, but the fire in it had been extinguished by the bowl's contents, which ran steaming down its sides.

So, Durgoth thought bitterly, there yet remains another mystery to be solved. Deep in his heart he knew that these obstacles were merely tests by which the Dark One measured the strength and the commitment of his servants. He would not be found wanting.

Slowly, he walked to the door of the room and opened it, sure of his next move. They would leave tomorrow on the trail of their enemies, and there would be nothing in this world that could stand in Durgoth's way.

\* \* \*

Kaerion slowed his horse to a trot as he neared the line of wagons that stretched before him. Even from this distance he could hear the hum of activity coming from the caravan. Drivers and teamsters exhorted their beasts of burden with sharp cracks of leather whips and equally sharp tongues. Occasionally, he heard the strains of their frank and good-natured banter, which still managed to bring color to his cheeks at its most outrageous points.

The weather had warmed a bit, offering the travelers a respite from the continuous assault of winter, and Kaerion was surprised to note the number of offerings left to Fharlanghn and his divine children before the caravan had started its journey for the day. Even so, the wind still carried a bite, and steam rose off the flanks of his stallion.

Earlier in the day, the expedition had passed the remains of the bandit-raided wagon. Both Gerwyth and Kaerion had decided to take a complement of caravan guards and patrol the area around their vulnerable wagons. Thankfully, there had been no sign of bandits or other dangers in the surrounding plain, and Kaerion made his way back to report the good news.

He slowed the stallion to a walk as he caught up with the caravan, weaving his mount expertly through the press of supply wagons, oxen, and teamsters. The horse snorted once and pranced forward, obviously disappointed that their morning exertions were over so soon. Kaerion smiled at this display of spirit and patted the stallion's neck.

"There'll be time enough for running free on this journey, eh Jaxer?" he said, addressing the horse by name. "No sense spoiling it by risking a broken leg on this gods-cursed snow."

Despite himself, Kaerion couldn't help his smile from turning bittersweet. Jaxer was a fine stallion with a long, powerful stride and a heart that was a match for any warrior, but thoughts of his qualities only invited comparisons to another steed—Kaerion's own war-horse, dead these ten long years, killed by the same cowardice that had shattered everything he had held sacred. Memories of the golden-maned stallion came unbidden to his mind, echoes of its grace and power, the almost total union of mind and body that allowed both steed and rider to anticipate the needs and movements of the other. All of it was gone now, lost like so much else.

"I thought druids and elves were the only folk crazy enough to talk to their mounts," a familiar voice broke through Kaerion's gloomy ruminations. He looked up to see Majandra flashing the dazzling light of her smile at him.

"How goes the patrols?" she asked as she drew closer.

"Uneventful, thank the gods and anyone else who is willing to listen," Kaerion replied. "There was no sign of the bandits anywhere within a league of our caravan. Whoever or whatever attacked the wagon has moved on."

"That is good news," the half-elf said, "though I fear Bredeth will be disappointed."

Kaerion was about to answer, but was surprised into silence when Jaxer bucked wildly. He grabbed the reins hard and fought for control of the stallion. Searing pain shot through his left thigh and he gasped with the force of it, nearly unseating himself in the process.

"Kaerion, what's wrong?" Majandra asked, but he could spare no attention to the bard's worried question. Every ounce of his skill and experience was turned toward gaining control of his mount.

The pain in Kaerion's thigh intensified, and he cried out. The distraction was enough to give Jaxer his head. The stallion reared up on his hind legs, sending its hapless rider tumbling to the ground.

Kaerion hit the snow-packed ground hard, knocking all of the wind from his lungs. He lay there doubled up, gasping for breath. Majandra started to run toward him and then stopped, her eyes wide with wonder. Dazed, it took the fighter a few moments to focus on the source of the half-elf's amazement. What he saw filled him with horror.

The contents of his saddlebag lay strewn about the snow—including Galadorn's jeweled scabbard, which had rolled free from the thick, oily cloth that hid its presence from the rest of the expedition. Worse, the precious stones adorning the scabbard each pulsed with an intense light, the first signs of true life he had seen from the blade in over a decade.

Kaerion wanted to reach out and grab the sword, return it to its humble wrappings and hide it away again, but his body would not respond. He heard Majandra say something, but the words slowed and elongated, as if they were spoken underwater, and Kaerion could not make them out.

He tried to turn his gaze to the bard, but the pulsating light of the scabbard drew his attention like a lodestone. The incandescent stones grew brighter with each rhythmic pulse, until he was sure that he looked upon a collection of fallen stars. The surrounding snow absorbed the illumination, magnifying it until it shone brighter than the sun. The pure white of the stones burned his eyes, searing through thoughts

and memories like a fiery blade. He was lost in a landscape of diamond brilliance.  
Lost and alone.

Until everything, at last, became the light.



The nightmare returned, and with it the temple—soaring arches and white marble walls arcing toward the heavens. He heard the singing once again, but this time didn't revel in it. He knew what was to come.

And it did. All too soon.

He saw the gray-robed procession marching solemnly toward the altar, saw an emaciated figure he knew to be himself kneeling helplessly on the ground. When he looked for the boy again, he found him lying face up on the stone altar. The clerics around him had shed their gray robes. He looked on in disgust as he saw the mottled skin, jagged scales, and oozing pus that made up their naked flesh. These demons wore twisted mockeries of the human form. Many of them sprouted leathery tails that twitched and caressed their infernal companions, while a few possessed great wings that beat in time to the bass rumble of their laughter. The demonic monks reveled in dark joy around the altar, alternately fondling themselves, each other, and the object of their rite.

From this distance, Kaerion could see the boy's face, frightened but expectant—sure that the paladin would summon forth his holy powers and rescue him. Kaerion reached for Galadorn, only to recoil as the sword's hilt stung his hand like a giant wasp.

"Heironeous," he accused the lofty balustrades of the temple, "why have you abandoned me?"

But there was no answer. He didn't really expect any. He ran toward the altar with a strangled cry as one of the fiends raised a sharply-taloned claw in the air and brought it down across the exposed throat of the boy. The young lad did not even cry out as the demon ripped out his throat.

Kaerion, jolted awake by the splash of cool water on his face, cracked open his eyes to twin slits and surveyed his surroundings. Several lamps burned fitfully, and though their dim light assaulted his vision like three suns, he was able to make out the familiar interior of a caravan wagon.

Boxes and supplies had been moved to make room for the makeshift bed that he currently found himself in. Though soaked with sweat, a deep chill sent aches and

shudders through his tired body, and he felt grateful for the pile of warm skins and blankets that covered him.

A shadowy figure moved softly in the wagon's space, and Kaerion opened his eyes as wide as their crusted lids would allow. Majandra moved closer to his bedridden form, bending forward to dab his sweat-slicked forehead with a rag. He tried to reach out and hold on to the bard's hand, but he felt entirely disconnected from his body, as if he floated in an empty space somewhere above his supine form; his hand did not respond. Frustrated, he could only lay still as the half-elf continued with her tender ministrations.

She smiled once and said something that resembled his name, but he could not make it out. A dull haze had begun to settle over his thoughts, and he felt himself falling back toward the waiting arms of sleep.

Memories of the events that had led him here washed over Kaerion in a rush, pulling him toward oblivion. He thought bitterly of the sacred sword that had betrayed him in a similar fashion to the way he had betrayed it. "Justice," he tried to say as the thick blanket of sleep fell over him, but the words never came out.

\* \* \*

Time passed as Kaerion drifted in and out of consciousness—though how much time was difficult to determine. He sensed rather than felt the wagon's movement, for the weakness and disembodiment he had felt earlier stayed with him. Once, he thought he heard the sound of rushing water, but it soon became difficult to tell, as the world around him swam in and out of focus, ending finally in familiar darkness.

He was surprised to notice the regular attendance of nearly every one of his companions. Even Bredeth came to sit with him. The young noble regaled him with his thoughts and hopes for the glorious battles and heroic deeds they would undertake on this journey, and though his visits tired Kaerion, he found himself oddly touched by the normally brusque noble's concern. Only Vaxor was conspicuous in his absence.

Thoughts of the Heironean priest only served to bring his true situation into complete focus. Surely the arch priest would understand the significance of the sword, and if he hadn't condemned him to the others yet, he had certainly passed judgment himself. Once his companions learned the true nature of his cowardice, he would be lucky if any of them would even speak to him again. For some reason, this caused Kaerion more sadness than he expected, and he lay there shaking with weakness and anticipated dread.

Kaerion awoke one morning to daylight streaming in through the now-open end of his wagon. A warm breeze blew softly through the space, carrying the perfumed scent of flower buds and grass.

"There he is," a voice said from somewhere near the opening, and Kaerion recognized Gerwyth's mocking tone instantly. "Glad to see you're finally awake long enough to appreciate the weather," he said, climbing into the wagon and taking a seat next to Kaerion's bed. "Care to stop lazing about and finally earn your keep?"

Kaerion smiled and looked up at his friend. A thousand retorts came to mind, but the parched desert of his mouth would not let any of these clever barbs escape. His

struggles must have been easily noticed, for the elf chuckled once and then produced a skin of water, which he held gently to Kaerion's mouth.

He drank greedily, letting the cold liquid linger in his mouth before swallowing it. He took several long draughts, surprised at the depth of his own need. Gerwyth let out another laugh and pulled back the skin all too soon.

"Easy, Kaer," the ranger said, all trace of his former mockery gone. "Phathas says you must not drink too much too soon."

Kaerion nodded and drew his hand across the cracked and dried tissue of his lips. "H-how long have I been sick?" he asked after a moment, his voice gruff and harsh from disuse.

"For some time," the elf responded. "It is currently the third day of Coldeven. You gave us all quite a scare."

Kaerion stared at his friend in shock. Six weeks. He'd been bedridden and sick for six weeks. No wonder the warm weather felt alien. It should still have been the end of winter, and here it was well into spring.

"How far have we traveled?" he asked.

Gerwyth looked at his friend for just a moment, and Kaerion could see the concern in his friend's eyes. "We traveled across the confluence of the Harp and Lyre rivers, turned south to skirt the Bonewood forest and made our way into the Rieuwood. We are currently about a week or so away from the southern border of the forest and Sunndi."

So much time lost, so much of their journey completed, and he had spent it lying on his back like an infirm old man.

"Kaerion," Gerwyth asked, interrupting his bitter thoughts, "what happened out there?"

Kaerion shook his head. "I don't know. One moment I was having a conversation with Majandra, and the next Galadorn burst into life." His voice became a whisper. "It hasn't done that since... since Dorakaa." Kaerion groaned and tried to roll over, the surprise at being able to feel his body overshadowed by his current situation. "Now that they've seen Galadorn, everyone must already know exactly what I am."

"And what are you?" Gerwyth asked.

"I am a traitor, a coward, and a betrayer. I was once beloved of a god, Ger, a commander of legions, and a hero right out of a bard's tale. I threw it all away. Turned my back on the god I served. I am nothing."

"You are my friend," Gerwyth replied, grabbing Kaerion's shoulder with startling intensity. "You are brave and strong and noble in every way that truly counts, and I would gladly lay down my life for yours."

Kaerion lay there, stunned by the deep sincerity present in the ranger's words and expression. Through ten years' worth of travel, he had rarely seen this side of the normally quixotic and carefree elf.

"That means more to me than you know, Ger," Kaerion said, "but now that the rest of them have discovered my secret, they will have to turn their backs on me. It is the Church of Heironeous that sponsors this expedition. Surely you see that."

"The rest of our companions have not discovered your 'secret', Kaer," Gerwyth replied. "They have seen a sword, nothing more."

"But they must suspect something, and Vaxor—"

“Suspicious are like goblins, or at least that’s what my mother always told me,” interrupted Gerwyth. “They breed almost everywhere, but fall to a single arrow easily enough. And do not trouble yourself about Vaxor.”

“The significance of Galadorn can’t be lost upon him,” Kaerion said. “He must know, and I’m sure that he will tell the others.”

“The priest has said nothing to the others,” the elf said, “and if he does, it will be your opportunity to confront the very thing you have been running from. That will be the true measure of your courage.”

Kaerion nodded. “Perhaps you’re right, Ger. Though what will the others think of me? I’ve grown used to the rudeness of strangers, but not—”

“Those you care about,” Gerwyth finished. “Is it really the others you care about? Or perhaps it’s the regard of a certain fiery-haired bard that you’re really concerned with.”

Kaerion shifted uncomfortably in his bedding, feeling a hot flush blossoming on his face. He ran pale fingers through his tangled and sweat-crusting hair, hoping the movement would mask the red tinge he was sure marked his cheeks and neck. “Wh-what are you talking about, Ger?” he stammered.

The elf smiled, obviously enjoying his friend’s discomfort. “Come on, Kaer,” Gerwyth said, “I can track a brownie across rock-strewn foothills. Surely I can see the obvious attraction between a man and a woman.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Kaerion said in clipped tones. “There is nothing between Majandra and I.”

“And I’m a priestess of Lolth,” Gerwyth replied. “Gods, Kaer, I have eyes. I can see it clearly. You two care for each other—though why Majandra would be interested in a brutish lout like you I’ll never know.”

Kaerion grabbed for the waterskin and took several more long swallows, ignoring the elf. When he was finished, he tossed the skin to the side. “Just leave it alone, Ger,” Kaerion said tersely. “Nothing is going to happen between Majandra and I—especially not now.”

Gerwyth shook his head. “But why, Kaer? You’ve never taken an oath of celibacy. Just tell her how you feel. You must know she cares about you. Besides, if you get your feelings out in the open, you two can stop mooning over each other like a couple of lovesick—”

Kaerion tossed back his blankets in frustration. “Just... leave it be, Ger,” he said between clenched teeth.

The elf looked as if he would say more, but suddenly threw up his hands and stood. “Now I know you’re on the mend,” he said.

“Why’s that?” Kaerion asked, still somewhat sullen.

“Because you’re getting more stubborn and pig-headed every day,” the elf replied. “Pretty soon you’ll be back to the mulish, dull-witted human I’ve come to know so well.”

His friend’s words brought a ghost of a smile to Kaerion’s face. “And don’t you forget it either,” he said after a moment. “Now go—” he waved an imperious hand at the elf—“and let me enjoy this beautiful morning in peace.”

“As you command,” Gerwyth said, offering a mock bow that made Kaerion laugh. “But tomorrow you and I are going for a walk. Phathas says that you should be

up and about more often, regaining your strength. Once we're out of the Rieuwood, it's a short journey to the borders of the Vast Swamp. I'm going to need the strength of your sword arm and whatever wits have managed to survive in your head if we're going to make it to the tomb safely."

Kaerion watched the elf as he stepped nimbly out of the wagon and into the bright spring day. The smile that played upon his face remained for a while, and he realized that his spirits felt lighter than they had in quite some time. Soon he would be out of this damned wagon, a useful member of the expedition again. After that... he grimaced. Well, only time would tell.

\* \* \*

Majandra sat enjoying the fire that crackled fitfully in the small clearing. Around her, the members of their expedition shared light conversation and an even lighter skin of wine as they finished up the remains of the thick stew that had sustained them through much of their journey. Occasionally, the sharp laughter of a teamster or the whispered words of passing sentries broke through the pleasant din of conversation, reminding her once again of the serious nature of their expedition. She was glad, however, that such a distraction existed. Though the elves patrolled the forested depths of the Rieuwood regularly, danger still lurked within the shadows of its leafy bowers—dangers that could have followed them all the way from Rel Mord. She felt comforted by the hushed tread of the guards as they stood watch against the night.

A cool breeze blew softly through the trees, rustling branches and limbs heavy with the rounded swell of leaf buds. Majandra closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, grateful for the early spring wind, so redolent with the fragrance of stem and flower and the blossoming scent of new life. A part of her felt deeply at home here in the wild heart of the Rieuwood, and she yearned to slip quietly away from the caravan and find a clear running stream where she could bathe beneath the soft moonlight and fall asleep on its mossy banks.

She opened her eyes and sighed, recognizing the familiar ache for what it was—the stirring of her elven blood. Away from the confines of city life and unrelenting din of civilization, it was easy to imagine herself living permanently under nature's roof. Not for the first time, she found herself envying her elven cousins. Her own half-elven heritage had often made her feel like an outsider. The elves of this forest, she knew, felt no such separation. Perhaps one day she would follow the call of her blood, but not now. The future of Nyronnd was at stake, and she could not deny its need.

Majandra reached for her harp, comforted by its familiar curves and the grain of its polished wood. Half of Luna's face moved slowly across the sky as the bard idly plucked at the strings of the harp, all the while listening to Phathas and Gerwyth regale the rest of the group with tales from their adventuring days. She enjoyed the distraction, weaving gentle melodies between the measured cadence of the ranger's voice and the answering retorts of both Bredeth and Vaxor.

It wasn't until the wineskin had been filled, passed around, and filled again many times that conversation drifted to the topic that had filled Majandra's mind for many weeks.



“So, Gerwyth, how fares our mysterious friend?” Bredeth asked in a voice roughened by too much alcohol. The young noble sat unsteadily on an old log, leaning across the glowing coals of the fire. In the dull light, his face looked flushed and puffy, the shadows adding years to his normally youthful appearance.

“Kaerion is doing well enough,” Gerwyth responded with a smile. “He grows stronger daily, and he should be strong enough to sit a horse in a few days.”

Majandra stopped playing at the sound of the dark-haired warrior’s name. She gave a quick look around and was glad to see that no one had noticed. The mundane needs of the caravan and the recovering fighter’s own forays into the forest with Gerwyth had kept her from visiting with Kaerion these past few days. Though she tried her best to control her thoughts, she was surprised at how often they had settled on the wounded fighter during that time. She bent graceful hands back to the silver strings and began to play once more.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Bredeth said, “though I’ll be even more glad when we lift the veil of mystery surrounding Kaerion. Exactly who is he, Gerwyth? We are trusting our lives and the success of this expedition to both of you. Don’t you think we have a right to know?”

Majandra hummed softly in accompaniment to her harp, hoping that the others wouldn’t see quite how interested she actually was in the topic at hand. Vaxor, she noted, sat stiffly on the ground, arms crossed before his chest, a grim set to his features.

“You know me, Bredeth,” Gerwyth said. “I have shared freely with all of you, but Kaerion—his story is his own to tell.”

Majandra nearly stopped playing again, for she was sure that the elf had cast a meaningful glance at Vaxor as he spoke.

“For now, he is simply a companion of this group, and hopefully a trusted one at that,” Gerwyth continued. “It was largely due to his efforts that we survived the attack on the inn.”

“He is a skilled warrior,” Majandra found herself agreeing—and nearly clapped her hand over her mouth in horror as Bredeth, Vaxor, and Gerwyth cast her a look. What was she, she thought bitterly, some lovesick serving maid?

“And a leader of men.” This from Phathas, who leaned forward, warming his hands over the glowing coals of the fire. “You can hear it in his voice,” the old mage continued, “he must have led many in battle.”

“Did you see that sword of his?” Bredeth said. “I’ll bet he stole it from some noble. I’ve never seen a blade quite like that. Certainly not in the hands of a commoner.”

Majandra nearly snorted. Before Gerwyth had scooped the sword up and wrapped it back in rags, she’d cast a good look at the blade, catching sight of some of the runes that ran along its shimmering length. Dwarven runes. Ancient ones, dating back from before the Invoked Devastation. It was a weapon crafted by a master smith, and no doubt intended for royalty. Such blades were not so easily stolen.

“Kaerion is many things, Bredeth,” Gerwyth replied, echoing the half-elf’s thoughts, “but he’s no thief.”

“No offense meant,” Bredeth replied to Gerwyth somewhat hastily. “But I don’t understand what he’s hiding.”

“He’s seen more things than most people have to deal with in several lifetimes,” Gerwyth replied. “Give him some time. Besides, you’ll have more important things to worry about in a few days.”

Majandra caught Bredeth’s questioning look.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked.

“He means that we’ll be out of the Rieuwood in a few days and well on our way to the Vast Swamp,” Phathas, who had quietly risen to his feet, said in a soft voice. “And that’s when things will become dangerous.”

Gerwyth offered the aging wizard a hand as he started back to his wagon. “Once we’re in the swamp, I’ll need everyone focused on survival. No distractions. Can you do that?” he asked the noble.

“Of course,” Bredeth said, and Majandra was startled by the solemnity of the young fighter’s tone.

“Good,” Gerwyth replied before he and Phathas disappeared beyond the firelight. “Do me a favor and make sure the sentries don’t need anything before you turn in.”

Majandra smiled as Bredeth mumbled a curse and stumbled off into the darkness, leaving her alone with Vaxor. The bard finished playing and wrapped her harp in its leather case. She had her own suspicions about Kaerion, based on her observations and Vaxor’s strange behavior, but nothing definite. The mysterious warrior’s story was beginning to unfold, she thought, but there was still a long way to go to reach the ending.

Majandra stifled a yawn and watched the cleric for a few moments before getting up and heading toward her pack. By the time she returned with her bedroll, Vaxor had left. As she lay beneath the shining dome of stars waiting for sleep to come, she thought about their journey. She did not know what they would find within the ancient corridors of the wizard’s tomb, but she was glad that they would have the protection of a certain dark-haired warrior.

The screech of a night owl echoed in the distance. “Good hunting, sister,” Majandra said softly, turning toward the remaining warmth of the fire.



Durgoth Shem sat in the cramped confines of the wagon, jotting down notes and commentaries on several scrolls that lay heaped upon the wooden crate that had functioned as his makeshift desk since he had left Rel Mord. A brass lamp sat on a crate to his right, casting flickering illumination throughout the rude space. Its thick oil burned smokily, filling the wagon with an acrid stench. A light rain fell outside, tapping steadily on the tarp that protected the wooden roof of the wagon.

The cleric put down his quill with a sigh and stretched fingers that were cramped and sweaty from long hours of writing. Deciphering prophecy was never an easy task. When the gods spoke, their words came as riddles, laden with metaphor and signs and symbols—nearly incomprehensible to the mortal mind. He stared for a moment at the collection of scrolls before him that contained the words of the crucified seer. Penned in the flowing, elegant script of young Adrys, the ultimate meaning of the seer's prophecy nevertheless lay shrouded behind a thick layer of riddles. Only the wisdom he had wrested from the *Minthexian Codex* had allowed him to pierce the veil even as far as he had, revealing the ultimate location of Acererak's tomb. Using the ancient codex as his guide, Durgoth struggled to unlock the prophecy's remaining secrets—the exact location of the key, the spells to wrest the artifact from Acererak's tomb, the ritual to unlock its powers. All of these things lay just beyond his reach, safely resting within the very words the crucified seer had spoken in his monastery.

Durgoth smiled as he stood up, relieving the strain on his back. They had journeyed for quite some distance in pursuit of this goal, and according to the scrolls they had managed to take from the grasp of those gods-damned nobles, their quarry was heading in the same direction as the prophecy was leading his group. It was only a matter of time before they met up, and then Durgoth would have the pleasure of stealing their triumph out from under their noses.

His smile grew broader. After the disastrous attempt at scrying several weeks earlier, the cleric had relied on more mundane methods of tracking the Nyronese fools' progress. Gold, he thought, loosens lips easier than any spell. It had been simple to flash some coins at travelers coming from farther up the trade road and

inquire after another caravan. So far, according to their sources, they had managed to stay about a week behind the Nyrondeese wagons. Once out of the Rieuwood, they would increase their pace until they were able to shadow the nobles through the Vast Swamp.

An urgent knock at the wagon's wooden doors interrupted Durgoth's thoughts. He spun and called out gruffly for whomever it was to enter. He had left strict orders not to be interrupted during this part of the day and was about to dress down the man who had dared intrude on his sacred work, when he caught sight of Adrys entering the wagon. The novice's sandy brown hair was matted to his head from the spring shower, and a mixture of sweat and rainwater ran down his face. The lad bowed once.

"Pardon my intrusion, blessed one," he said in a voice tight with urgency, "but we seem to have a situation."

"Speak then, lad," Durgoth said sharply, not willing to waste any more of his time than he had to.

"Sir, a patrol of elves has blocked the road ahead. We will reach them in just a few moments. Jhagren sent me to alert you. Though your followers are trying to pretend they are honest teamsters, many of them seem frightened and unsure of what to do. My master feels that they may attempt something rash."

Durgoth gave a soft curse. Elves. That's all they needed right now. They had traveled for several weeks within the Rieuwood and he had half hoped they would pass through the forest untroubled by these damned elven patrols.

"You've done well, lad," Durgoth said finally. "Go tell Sydra and Eltanel to prepare for an attack. And then go to the second wagon and quietly unlatch the door."

The boy nodded in understanding. Hopefully, the two guild members would provide enough protection for their caravan. If not, the golem sat quiescent within their other wagon. Even now, the cleric could feel its dark life-force brooding, waiting to spring into action. If they struck quickly, they could kill these damned elves and push hard for the edge of the Rieuwood before other elven patrols would find them out. If not, their next few weeks within the forest would be one bloody battle.

"Go *now*, Adrys," he said as he realized that the novice still stood before him. "I will go to Jhagren and see what is developing."

The boy moved with surprising speed. Durgoth placed the *Minthexian Codex* within its hidden resting place before wrapping his cloak tight about him and stepping out of the wagon and into the rain.

By the time Durgoth plodded through the mud-churned road, his wagons had already stopped. Seven figures in forest-green cloaks stood in the center of the trail, talking to the caravan master. From this distance, Durgoth could see the stamp of elven blood on these warriors. Each had long hair wound tightly into warrior's braids, and the silvery glint of polished mail peeked out through their cloaks. One of the elves, taller by almost a head than the rest of the band, stepped forward. His cloak was thrown back and secured by a clasp of silver oak leaves, and he wore a finely worked leather scabbard belted to his waist. Behind the elves, Durgoth could see the furtive movement of archers hidden within the trees. He moved closer to catch more of the conversation between the elf leader and his caravan master.

“But my lord,” the human protested, “we are simply a caravan bound for Sunndi. I can show you our trade manifests and merchant seals if you need them. We just—”

The elf cut the caravan masters explanation off with a sharp wave of his hand. “Save it, human. There is little room for pretense here.”

The elf’s voice was high and light, like most of his kind, but Durgoth could hear the menacing tones beneath it. They would probably have very little chance of talking their way out of this one.

“The forest has been uneasy for several weeks,” the elf continued, “and we have searched since then for the cause of its unrest.” He motioned with his other hand and two figures robed in white moved silently from the thick underbrush that hung closely on either side of the trade road. They flowed out of the underbrush as though emerging from water. Druids, most likely, Durgoth thought as he caught sight of the silver-white hair that fell unbound from their heads. Each carried a wooden staff tipped with a circle of holly leaf and berries. Silver scythes hung from their belt.

“The spirit of the forest recoils from every tread of your wagons,” one of the druids said. His voice, though soft as the spring wind that had followed their caravan through the Rieuwood, carried clearly to Durgoth.

“Whatever unnatural force you carry through our homeland,” the second druid said, “you will not be permitted to travel any farther. The spirit of this place and the will of Ehlonna bid you to begone.”

Durgoth crept closer, keeping himself out of sight of the elves. Silently, he prayed that the cultist he had placed in charge of the caravan would hold together just a few more moments—at least until he knew that Eltanel and Sydra were ready for an attack.

The leader of the patrol stepped forward once more. “You are instructed to turn your wagons and follow the trade road back the way you came. We will escort you to the borders of the Rieuwood. If you make no trouble and harm no living thing on this journey, we will allow you to live. Break this law, and we will kill you and drag your corpses out of the forest so that your taint will not trouble our homes. Is this understood?”

The caravan master stammered for a few moments, clearly too scared to answer the elf leader. Durgoth cursed, but stopped as he caught sight of Adrys. The young monk walked slowly and silently toward the front of the caravan, catching the cleric’s eye and nodding slightly. Durgoth gave a nod back, understanding that the guild members were in place. Moving forward swiftly now, he approached the gathered elves, his rain-soaked cloak trailing behind him.

“Perhaps we can come to some other agreement,” Durgoth said in a strong voice.

The leader of the elves turned at the sound of the cleric’s voice, obviously stunned by this new arrival, but he recovered soon enough as the second druid hissed something in his ear. Swifter than Durgoth thought possible, the elf drew the length of his gleaming steel sword from its scabbard.

“Archers in the trees!” Durgoth shouted as he drew his obsidian mace, trusting that Sydra would neutralize this threat.

He wasn’t disappointed. A fiery ball of energy flew out over the head of the patrol as Durgoth closed with the elf leader. A moment later, a vicious burst of flames exploded in the treetops where the archers lay hidden. Durgoth could hear

their screams as he parried a viper-quick thrust from his opponent. Both sword and mace hummed with power as they clashed.

Though the muddy ground around him churned and oozed with each step, it became clear to Durgoth that his opponent suffered no disadvantage from the terrain, moving with perfect balance and near blinding speed. Durgoth barely managed to raise up his mace in time to deflect a killing stroke. He cried out as the blade bit deeply into his shoulder, and in desperation, he called upon Tharizdun as he grabbed the elf's sword arm. The stench of burning flesh assailed his nostrils as the cleric withdrew his hand. The elf stumbled backward, clutching his arm and screaming in agony.

Durgoth took that moment to withdraw a few feet, turning his attention to the rest of the battle. The shadowy form of Jhagren leapt forward to engage the wounded elf. He was pleased to see that Adrys was harrying two elves with a flurry of kicks and punches; both of those beleaguered fighters seemed surprised at the ferocity of this human child, and neither was able to mount a serious attack.

"Durgoth, beware the druids!" Sydra shouted.

He turned his attention to the two druids. One of them had drawn his scythe and was laying about with the sharpened edge, cutting the throats and chests of several cultists. The second, however, chanted something in a sharp voice and struck the ground with his staff. For a moment nothing happened, and then the limbs, branches, and trunks of the surrounding foliage writhed and grew before his eyes. If he didn't do something soon, most of his forces would be trapped within a verdant prison. Quickly, Durgoth recalled the ancient gestures to his spell and summoned the dark power of his Master once again. As he clapped his hands together, a small bubble of energy sprang forth before him, growing swiftly to encompass the caravan and the combatants. Wherever the druids writhing foliage touched the bubble, the plants blackened and died.

Durgoth wiped the sweat and rain from his brow and cast about the battle. Though Adrys had felled one of his opponents, a new one had stepped up, and it was clear that the young monk would soon be overmatched. His master fared little better. Jhagren struck furiously at the elf leader, but even wounded, the elf managed to avoid the blows. Meanwhile, Durgoth noticed that the remaining elven warriors were quickly cutting down his cultists.

Durgoth called on the golem, knowing that the construct's power would turn the tide of battle. He felt clearly its answering acknowledgement a few moments before its dark-cloaked mass came running up to the front lines, crashing into the knot of elves that fought with his followers. The warriors stumbled back beneath the ferocity of the golems attack, and one fell to the ground, head split open by the tremendous force behind the monsters closed fist.

The cleric nodded, satisfied, and made his way toward the druids, smiling grimly at what he found there. Sydra had kept both priests off-balance by sending wave after wave of glowing missiles at them. This had allowed Eltanel to position himself for a clear shot with his crossbow. His first bolt struck one of the druids squarely in the back of the neck. Durgoth heard the elf's spine snap under the force of the blow as the druid fell to the ground. As the second priest turned to gaze at his fallen

companion, Durgoth moved forward and brought his mace down upon the druid's head. Blood and gray liquid splattered everywhere as the elf's skull splintered.

Durgoth turned to find the golem lifting two elves by the throat. The construct cast a dark gaze at the cleric before crushing the windpipes of his opponents and casting their bloodied corpses at the remaining two elves, who were still locked in combat with Adrys.

"Help Jhagren!" Durgoth shouted to the golem as he ran past to aid the young monk. The golem moved quickly to Jhagren's side, and Durgoth caught a glimpse of the elf striking desperately at the hulking mass of flesh.

Still a few yards away from Adrys, Durgoth watched as the novice dropped to the ground and lashed out with a booted foot at his nearest attacker, tripping the elf. The lad's second opponent swung his sword downward, hoping to spit the monk as he tried to get back up. Adrys clearly saw the attack and brought his left leg up in a snapping kick that knocked the sword from his attacker's hand. Durgoth closed in and finished off the elf who had fallen under the novice's original attack.

Confident that the monk could defeat his last unarmed opponent, Durgoth turned back to the elf leader. Bruised and bleeding from several gaping wounds, the valiant elf nevertheless continued to fend off both the golem and Jhagren. The cleric was even surprised to see several gashes in the golem's flesh, where the warrior's magical sword had managed to penetrate the golem's defenses.

While that battle continued, Durgoth motioned for Eltanel to take a contingent of cultists and make sure that the archers or any other remnant of the elven patrol did not survive. The thief nodded grimly and took off with several bloodied cultists to carry out his will.

A strangled cry made Durgoth turn back to the elf leader. Jhagren had finally managed to break the elf's sword arm, and his continuing attacks pushed the warrior into the waiting arms of the golem. The patrol leader struggled valiantly to free himself, but the creature's strength was too much. The elf made a few more feeble attempts before the golem's inexorable grip crushed the life out of him. His corpse slid noiselessly to the ground.

Durgoth stood in the center of the road, blood streaming from the cut in his shoulder. He felt lightheaded and more than a little battered. For a few moments, he could hear the short gurgled cries of the wounded as Eltanel and his group administered killing blows, and then a deep silence fell over the forest. The cleric looked around worriedly. It felt as if the silence bore down upon him, as if the forest impaled him with its ancient gaze.

And then, suddenly, he laughed. Softly at first, and then finally in explosive bursts of gut-heaving mirth that echoed wildly across the trade road. He caught several of his followers glancing at him with worried looks on their faces, and for some reason, he found this even funnier. The laughter held on to him for several more moments, until Jhagren moved toward him and stood silently, obviously waiting for his next command. Durgoth wiped tears from his eyes and began to exert control over himself.

"Jhagren," he spoke between gasps of breath, "gather all of the corpses and pile them into the second wagon. Make sure to hide, gather, or erase all signs of this battle. And be quick about it."

The monk nodded and ran off. Durgoth wiped a final tear from his eye and sent a prayer of thanksgiving to Tharizdun. They had to move quickly now. Once the elves discovered this treachery, they would send out patrols in force. But once free of this blasted place, there would be nothing that could stop him from retrieving the key.

He turned back toward his wagon and made his way through the carnage. The eyes of the dead stared at him accusingly.

He ignored them.





Steel burned with silver fire in the harsh sun as Kaerion raised his blade to meet the descending attack. He cursed as the shock of the blow jarred fever-weakened tendons and muscle. He stepped forward and slightly to the side of his opponent, allowing the attacker's sword to force his own toward the ground. At the last moment, he withdrew his blade and spun away, hoping to catch his breath.

Sweat that had only very little to do with the blazing sun overhead streamed down his face, stinging eyes and leaving a sharp salty taste on lips pursed in frustration. He had discarded his normal mail shirt in favor of a lighter armor made from leather, but Kaerion still felt as if he were parading around in a set of full plate. Knees and shoulders protested, and breath came grudgingly, in ragged gasps. It felt as if a giant had him in a deadly bear hug.

Damned convalescence, he thought, all the while keeping a careful eye on his opponent. During the days since they had left the sheltered confines of the Rieuwood Forest, his strength had returned, slowly at first and then with more speed. Walks with Gerwyth, begun so gingerly at first, had turned into long, bone jarring rides, as the ravages of nearly two months of bed rest gave way before the restorative properties of warm spring winds and the rugged beauty of the Sunndi countryside. As the caravan continued on its journey, finally wending down into the humid arms of the Pawluck River Valley and its lush basin of trees and thick green undergrowth, Kaerion had begun his weapons practice in earnest, first privately and then with anyone who cared to test his returning skills. And here it was, just a few days before the expedition would reach the border of the Vast Swamp, and he still wasn't at his best.

Kaerion grunted and shifted the grip on his sword. His wrists throbbed with an ache he hadn't felt since his first days of sword training as a squire. He only hoped that his returning strength would be sufficient to protect his companions.

"Pay attention!" Gerwyth shouted, obviously mimicking the tones of an arms master rebuking a nettlesome novice.

A chorus of laughter and catcalls erupted from the knot of guardsmen who had come, with surprising regularity, to these daily training sessions—some to test their

mettle against the recovering fighter, but most to watch two masters of the sword polish and hone their own breathtaking skills.

The weary fighter cast the guards a fierce glare, but they continued to jeer, some even offering him advice on his grip or his stance. He scowled again and shook his head. The early formality between the caravan guards and the rest of the expedition had dissolved beneath the tread of many miles and the assault of the elements, replaced now by an easy camaraderie. There were times, however, where he yearned for the quiet distance of those early days.

“Are you finally ready to yield, old man?” Gerwyth called out again. “I’ll understand if your rather delicate nature gets the better of you.”

This brought another round of laughter from the assembled guards—laughter that ceased as Kaerion summoned his last reserves of strength and launched a series of blinding attacks. The metallic clash of steel rang through the small clearing as the two combatants traded blows almost too fast for anyone to see.

Kaerion pressed forward, weaving a net of sun-kissed steel before him, trying to use his greater size and reach to his advantage. Sweat continued to pour from his brow, but he ignored it, concentrating only on his opponent. The elf crafted an almost perfect defense, meeting each of the fighter’s attacks with an economical grace. Kaerion could feel himself weakening past the point of his own endurance. He analyzed his opponent for any weakness, any misstep—for he knew that he had to end this fight in the next few moments.

He found his opportunity as he aimed a horizontal blow at the ranger’s head. Years of fighting alongside his friend had given him insight into the elf’s style; he knew it almost as well as he knew his own. Thus, it was easy to predict Gerwyth’s response to the head blow. The elf dropped to his knees—where he would aim a deadly thrust at his opponent’s unprotected belly.

Kaerion shifted his stance and redirected his attack as soon as he felt the elf commit to his defense. His blade slashed downward, meeting the elf’s outthrust sword and driving its point into the ground. Before Gerwyth could react, Kaerion lashed out with a booted foot and caught the elf in the chest. Gerwyth fell backward, his sword falling from his hands. The fighter moved forward quickly and laid the point of his sword at his friend’s throat.

Silence filled the clearing, broken only by Kaerion’s gasps as he forced air into his lungs. The two opponents held their position for a few moments, eyes blazing.

“Rather inelegantly done,” Gerwyth remarked after another moment, “but effective.”

A cheer rang out from the assembled guards, and Kaerion could hear the sound of money changing hands. Despite his own aversion to gambling, he couldn’t keep a wicked smile from his face. He wasn’t surprised to see that same smile appear on Gerwyth’s face as the elf motioned for some aid in getting up.

His smile never faltered as they pushed their way through the press of guards who offered their congratulations and good-natured sympathy to both victor and defeated alike. Kaerion accepted his accolades with shrugs as he fumbled with the straps that held his now sweat-soaked armor.

“You fought well,” Gerwyth acknowledged in a not-quite rueful tone. He led the exhausted fighter down a small path that meandered away from the clearing. “I’m thinking that you are almost fully recovered, my friend.”

Kaerion, distracted by the effort of walking and shedding his seemingly cursed armor, only grunted at the elf’s praise.

“I mean it, Kaer,” Gerwyth said, turning to assist him. “I don’t mind saying now that I was very worried about you while you were ill. I’ve never seen anything like it—not even magic seemed to help. And Galadorn, well let’s just say that sword of yours has stirred quite a bit of interest.” This last was uttered through gritted teeth as the elf wrestled with the final attachment.

Kaerion let out a contented sigh, as much to distract Gerwyth from talk of his ancient blade as from the sheer pleasure of shedding the thick leather armor and underpadding he’d worn the last hour. The ensuing weeks of sundrenched activity following his illness had darkened his skin to a rich, bronze hue, the even tan broken only by the puckered edges of battle scars that stood out angrily in the harsh noon glare. He stretched luxuriously, enjoying the cool sensation of wind across the sweat-covered expanse of chest, shoulders, and back, before clapping the elf companionably about the shoulder.

“I understand, Ger,” he said, “and I appreciate all that you’ve done for me. But—” Kaerion stopped, unable to put voice to his thoughts. He was indeed touched and grateful for the elf’s companionship. Even had he not recognized the elf’s deep affection for him long ago, the ranger’s actions since his illness made it very clear. But there was still part of him that ached with a grief so deep he’d spent the last ten years trying to drown it with ale and spirits. Though he was surprised that his other companions hadn’t yet called him out, he waited in dread for the moment of revelation, the moment when the discovery of what he had done would shatter the fragile peace he’d found, and his newfound friends would turn their backs on him. No. He wasn’t quite ready to face them.

The elf seemed to sense his mood and lifted one corner of his mouth in a smile. “It is I who understand, Kaerion,” the elf said softly, then in a louder voice, “Come my loutish friend! Let’s see if you can move that hulking human frame of yours as fast as you move your mouth.” He pointed down the path, where somewhere in the distance the burbling call of a swift-moving stream promised relief from the unrelenting heat of the afternoon. “First one to the stream fetches dinner for the loser,” he said, and then swiftly disappeared down a bend in the path.

Kaerion cursed and dropped his armor in an undisciplined heap on the rock-strewn trail. A few moments later, both he and the elf were wrestling at the edge of the stream, each declaring the other defeated. The ranger wrapped one leg around Kaerion and pushed, hoping to trip the less-agile human, but the stubborn fighter held on and both plunged into the stream.

“No fair!” Kaerion sputtered. The shock of the still-cool stream water on his sun-warmed body nearly made him gasp again, but he contented himself with sending a cascade of water into the surprised elf’s face instead. The sight of the normally immaculate elf, hair drenched and ears dripping water, sent him into paroxysms of laughter that continued for quite some time.

“It appears,” Gerwyth finally said after he’d attempted to quiet his giggling friend with a stern glare for the third time, “that the sun and spring wind have healed more than just an illness.”

Sobered by his friends words, Kaerion stared thoughtfully at the elf. “Leave it be, Ger,” he said after a moment, but smiled to soften the remark. He really wasn’t ready to talk about it, but it was difficult to stay angry at an elf who resembled a dried grape. His laughter soon returned, and with it, another round of splashing. Bush and tree alike were soon soaked as the combatants continued their heroic combat.

“So, I see now why Phathas insisted that we hire you two as our guides and guardians,” a voice broke through the sounds of battle. “We’ve nothing to fear with both of your prodigious talents to protect us.”

Kaerion stopped his attack and turned to stare in horror at the source of the voice. Majandra leaned indolently against a tree, arms crossed, one brow arched high. He opened his mouth to say something—anything—and nearly choked as Gerwyth sent another wave of liquid streaming into his face.

“Does the fair lady wish to join me in my battle against this grave evil?” the elf asked as Kaerion sputtered and wheezed, trying to clear his throat and lungs of water. He could hear his friend’s slightly wistful tone and fought back a wave of annoyance. He was surprisingly relieved when the bard begged off, citing duty.

“And that goes for you two as well,” she said, still with a trace of humor in her voice. “Phathas wants you both to recheck the supplies we’ll be taking into the swamp. ‘No sense coming all this way just to go into the Vast Swamp unprepared,’” the bard mimicked the old mage’s didactic tone perfectly, and Kaerion found himself smiling despite the water running down his face.

“We’ll be there in a few moments, Majandra,” he said, finally overcoming the last effects of Gerwyth’s surprise attack.

“See that you do,” she said with a smile and turned to walk up the path toward the clearing. “I wouldn’t want to earn Phathas’ scolding at the moment. He’s positively impossible when he’s this close to the object of his labors.”

Kaerion cast a final look at the bard’s retreating back, only to be surprised when she quickly spun and returned his gaze, her smile even deeper. Shaking his head at his folly, he turned from the bard and finally stood up. Gerwyth had already moved to the stream bank and had begun to don his soft leather boots. By the time Kaerion had joined him, the ranger was already fully clothed; he shrugged once in apology and made as if to wait for his friend.

Kaerion waved his friend on. “Don’t worry about me, Ger,” he said. “I’ll follow shortly.”

The elf nodded and shot Kaerion another wicked smile. “Just see that you don’t tarry too long. I don’t fancy having to root through those stifling wagons all afternoon by myself.”

Kaerion laughed and pushed Gerwyth playfully toward the path. “I’ll be there soon enough,” he said. “Besides, you’ll need someone to help you count past ten.”

The elf chuckled and headed up the path, leaving Kaerion alone. The fighter stood for a moment, inhaling the rich scents of the river valley. By the time he reached the place where he had thrown down his armor, the sun had nearly dried all of the stream water from his body, leaving his skin feeling tight and slightly itchy.

Bending down to scoop up his hastily discarded armor, he reflected on his friend's words. Perhaps the friendships that he had formed and the peacefulness of the past several weeks had done what the last ten years couldn't. As he had all but admitted to Gerwyth just a little while ago, he still grieved bitterly for what he'd done. And yet, he'd not even been tempted to drown his sorrows in cheap wine since his illness. He felt those old wounds clearly, but it was as if they were not quite so raw and open.

Most surprising of all, Kaerion had even caught himself unwrapping Galadorn from its ragged hiding place and staring at it—willing it to demonstrate some sign of life, anything that would help him explain what had happened across the Nyronese grasslands. The ancient blade represented everything he had lost, yet lately, he'd found himself absently tracing the hilt with his finger, eager to feel its great weight in his hands.

When Kaerion finally reached the camp, his mind was caught in bemused thought. He looked at the faces that greeted him and saw friendship, good humor, and even respect—something he hadn't ever dreamed of seeing again. Perhaps Gerwyth was right. Perhaps it was time for him to face his grief once and for all. The elf had proven a true friend and accepted him for all of his faults. Maybe his new companions would do the same. He walked toward the center of camp feeling more at peace than he had in a very long time—

Only to be brought up short by Vaxor's intense scowl. The Heironean priest had emerged from one of the caravan wagons and now fixed Kaerion with a furrowed gaze. His deeply lined face and set jaw reminded the fighter of the statue of Heironeous meting out justice in the High Temple at Critwall. In the grizzled cleric's eyes, he could see condemnation and judgment—anger at his impudence to try and hold a place in this company for which he wasn't worthy.

Kaerion shuddered beneath that gaze as if the coldest winter wind had swept through the clearing, and in one moment, he knew that all of his hopes and imaginings were just that. He nearly stumbled as the familiar, cold hands of despair clutched around his heart. Muscles strained from exertion and immersion in cold water sent aches all throughout his body.

Hastily averting his gaze, he threw on an old shirt, tucking it into his breeches as surely as if it were the finest of armors. He had been a fool to think he could be forgiven. A damned fool.

He would not make that mistake again.



Kaerion rubbed the thick beads of sweat from his face and stared at the broad expanse of the swamp that lay before him. Thick sheets of sawgrass carpeted the moist ground, and hummocks of pine and cypress erupted from the dense foliage that sucked greedily of the wetlands dank waters. Occasionally, he caught sight of the brightly colored leaves of the manga trees that were so prevalent in parts of the Tilvanot Peninsula. A ripple of movement drew his eye, and he found himself squinting against the angry glare of the sun as it reflected off the surface of a brackish pool.

Nothing.

A brooding silence lay over the swamp, pierced by the harsh shrill of a distant bird. The air hung thick and fetid, like an oily blanket he couldn't cast off. Somewhere in the dark heart of this terrible place lay the ancient tomb of one of the worlds most infamous wizards. Despite heat that almost seared the breath from his lungs, Kaerion shuddered. Sunndi's fertile river valley had been peaceful, almost pastoral in its spring splendor. He'd enjoyed the caravan's slow but steady progression across its verdant length, but this—he almost made a sign against evil—this was something else indeed.

“Beautiful, isn't it?” he heard Majandra's voice from behind him.

Turning to face her, he shrugged. “Beautiful wouldn't be the word I would choose, but then again, my lady,” he said with a smile on his face, “I'm not a bard, nor am I of elven blood.”

Majandra chuckled at the statement, and Kaerion could feel the smile stretch across his face. The half-elf's crows and exclamations of delight at the natural wonders that had presented themselves on this journey were the subject of much good-natured bantering. As were the long, solemn walks she'd often taken with Gerwyth, the two conversing deeply in Elvish. He felt an irrational surge of jealousy at this memory and expelled his breath sharply in an attempt to quash it.

He failed.

The half-elf looked at him for just a moment before her own smile crept across the delicate expanse of her face. Kaerion was surprised to notice that the constant

exposure to sun had tanned her face a golden brown and dusted her thin nose with freckles. Why hadn't he noticed that before?

"No, my dear Kaerion, you are indeed not a bard," the half-elf replied, interrupting his thoughts, "and you certainly are no kin of mine." She laughed a moment before continuing. "But even humans have their mysteries."

This last was said softly, almost questioningly, and Kaerion found himself once again staring into golden eyes almost piercing in their earnestness. He regarded the half-elf for a few moments more, caught between an urgent desire to reveal his true face to the bard and an ardent need to retreat from her presence.

Reason won out.

He coughed once and averted his gaze. Too much was at stake here for him to give in to foolish notions. The mood broken, he pushed past the questioning bard and mumbled something about returning to Phathas and the others.

Majandra stepped lightly out of his way. If she was offended by his brusqueness, she gave no sign. "Phathas is in the center of the camp by the wagons. Gerwyth and the others are with him," she said as she broke into stride with him. "The mage asked me to fetch you," she said unapologetically.

As the two approached the camp, Kaerion could hear the sounds of labor. Phathas had sent the entire party out in groups earlier that morning to fell the thick-trunked trees that filled the surrounding valley. The plan was to lash together the trunks with thick rope to form makeshift rafts. Kaerion smiled as he recalled his own observations. The rafts were a fine idea to transport their supplies across the more submerged parts of the swamp, but they would be next to useless over the wetlands roughly uneven and densely foliated ground. Upon voicing his concerns, the old mage had produced several smooth, rounded stones that he said would, once attached to the rafts, cause each of them to levitate a few feet above the ground.

Reaching the outskirts of the camp, Kaerion noted that work crews had indeed been busy. Several of the rafts had already been assembled, and more lumber was making its way into the camp at a steady pace. Caravan drovers and guards alike had both been drafted into service, and the laboring men and women moved about in ordered groups. Most of them had cast off outer tunics and shirts, sweat glistening off bare backs, and wrapped their heads with the light materials to protect them from the sun.

Gerwyth caught sight of Kaerion and Majandra and waved them over to the thin tarp pitched in the center of a small circle of wagons. When they reached the assembled group, they found Phathas hunched over the sturdy cloth map that had been their guide on this journey. The others nodded in greeting but otherwise stood silently, obviously waiting for the old mage to finish his examination. The silver-haired wizard mumbled softly as he traced a gnarled finger across the faded parchment, seemingly oblivious to the piercing heat.

"What's the status of the rafts, Vaxor?" the mage asked, not looking up from the object of his intense scrutiny.

The cleric finished taking a long swallow from the waterskin before replying. "Three rafts have already been completed," his deep voice rumbled, "and the remainder should be done before nightfall."

Kaerion stole glances at the Heironean priest. Despite the searing temperature, the cleric still wore the chainmail armor that was as much a badge of his office as the silver lightning bolt that hung about his neck, gleaming brightly in the harsh sunlight.

Unaware of the fighter's scrutiny, Vaxor continued. "Once the construction has been completed, I suggest we double the watch. I have an uneasy feeling. There's no telling what manner of beast will be about, looking for trouble." He turned to his companions. "Gerwyth, Bredeth, I'll leave it to the both of you to inform Landra of my orders and see to it that the watch is kept."

The elf nodded, but Kaerion almost laughed at the rebellious scowl that marred Bredeth's handsome features. The pampered upbringing of the young noble had obviously not prepared him for the rigors of this trip. Unlike the rest of the group, his skin had reddened and split under the unrelenting glare of the sun, and not even the thick salve that Vaxor had offered the peeling noble was enough to soothe the lad's burns—or his temper.

Phathas stood and cast a piercing eye around the assembled group. If he was pleased with Vaxor's report, he gave no sign. Instead, the tired mage rubbed a withered hand across the back of his neck and spoke his mind. "There is still plenty to be done before we enter the Vast Swamp, and not much time to do it. By my calculations, we still have about ten to fourteen days of hard travel before we're even near Acererak's tomb—and that's if we can avoid the worst dangers of this forsaken stretch of land." He pointed a finger at Majandra. "I need you to oversee the disbursement of supplies to the rafts. And see that you have mind enough to bring the herbs and poultices we've laid in to aid in case of injury. I'll not waste Heironeous' blessings on bug bites and those foolish enough to injure an ankle or leg because they were too lazy to watch where they were going."

Majandra gave the wizened mage a smile, and Kaerion, to his own annoyance, found himself wondering how to elicit such a response from the half-elf—a line of thought he abandoned once he heard the old mage call out his name.

"Yes, you," Phathas blurted as Kaerion once again gave the mage his full attention. "Pay attention, lad. I don't have all day to explain these things. I need you to take these stones—" he opened his hand to reveal the enchanted stones he had spoken about earlier—"and lash them securely to the underside of each of the rafts. If for some reason the rafts don't immediately rise into the air—"the mage's tone indicated to Kaerion that such an occurrence would only happen by his own mistake—"come find me immediately."

"Yes, sir," Kaerion found himself responding, and wondered just when he had started to feel like he was a squire back under Sir Trindan's tutelage. He caught Gerwyth's eye and realized by the wink that the elf gave him that his friend was highly amused by the whole situation.

Just then, Vaxor's gruff voice broke in. "Tomorrow, we enter the Vast Swamp. We'll leave the drovers and six guards behind to protect the wagons. Once in the swamp, our largest danger will come from the lizard folk who consider the lands as their territory. I've spoken with Gerwyth, and we both agree that if we keep to the general direction we've traced on our map, we're likely to avoid most of the danger. But be on your guard. And no heroics." This last was delivered with a grim eye toward Bredeth, but before the noble could spit out his protest, the cleric waved his



hand for silence, deftly sketching the traditional blessing of Heironeous in the air. “May the Valorous Knight watch over each of us,” he said in an oddly gentle voice.

Kaerion held himself completely still under the blessing, hoping that no one would notice his lack of response. It had been many years since he had heard the words of the Blessing Ritual, and many more since he had believed in them. As the group broke up to attend to their duties, he was once again conscious of the cleric’s gaze upon him. Had Vaxor seen his reaction? He hurried away in the opposite direction, eager to escape the cleric’s watchful eye.

There was indeed much to do before tomorrow’s journey began. And much to think about, he mused, recalling the smiling face of the half-elf. He pushed the image of the bard out of his mind. One thing at a time, he thought, and headed toward the first raft.

\* \* \*

Durgoth Shem cursed the heat and the elves—in no particular order—as he surveyed the encampment before him. Peering through the thick foliage, he could see the circular ring of wagons, spaced evenly to afford the camp’s inhabitants the greatest possible cover, and the regular sweep of sentries. Of their principal quarry there was no sign.

He let out another muffled curse and fought down the urge to send his golem down to kill the unsuspecting fools below. Their blood would do much to sooth his anger, but little to make up for lost time. His earlier encounter with those pathetic druids had set his own expedition back, but the whole situation was made worse by the seemingly endless array of elven strike patrols that tracked them well into Sunndi. Perhaps he would ask the Dark One to watch as he slaughtered the elves and their puny gods. Yes, he thought, that would almost make up for the inconvenience those gods-blasted creatures had caused him.

A slight rustling in the thick undergrowth to his left caught Durgoth’s attention, followed by the emergence of Eltanel’s shadowy form. The thief pulled back his black cloak and emerged into plain view, executing a bow that was ail-too perfunctory. Durgoth scowled once at the insolent man and signaled that he should proceed with his report.

“I have been to their camp, blessed one,” Eltanel said. His voice had the gentle intonation of one who is used to the furtive communications of the dark alleyways and rooftops of Rel Mord. “They have posted regular sentries and will likely remain on guard throughout the night.”

“I can see as much, you fool,” Durgoth hissed between clenched teeth, regretting, not for the first time, that he would no doubt need to rely on this wretch’s skills to bypass some of the deadlier surprises awaiting the unwary in Acererak’s tomb. “What of that cursed mage and his half-witted noble lackeys?”

Eltanel shifted his stance slightly, but regarded the cleric evenly. “I overheard two of the guards talking. Their expedition left but two mornings ago, heading south and then east into the Vast Swamp. With a small enough group, we should have no trouble catching up to them.”

“Good,” Durgoth replied. He was pleased by the news, but he had no intention of betraying his thoughts to the thief. Let the man guess as to whether or not he currently had Durgoth’s favor. Such tactics were useful when dealing with someone as cunning as Eltanel. “Return to our wagons and inform Jhagren that I wish to speak with him, and see to it that he prepares a small group of my followers to accompany us on our journey. We’ll have to hurry if we are to keep pace with those Nyrondeese fools.”

The thief nodded once and swept off into the undergrowth. Durgoth stared after him for a few moments, before turning back to watch the encampment, his gaze as intense as the deadly marsh panthers that were said to hunt the brackish heart of the vast Swamp.

By the time he returned to his own camp, he had calmed enough so that he no longer took the oppressive heat as a personal affront—though he couldn’t quite fight down his annoyance as he accepted Jhagren’s deep bow and noticed that the monk appeared unaffected by the brutal weather.

“You have received Eltanel’s reconnaissance?” he asked, wanting to end this conversation quickly so that he could slip out of his sweat-sopped clothes and affect some relief from the miserable heat.

“I have, blessed one,” the monk replied, “and I have consulted the Seer’s prophecy.” He unrolled a thin vellum parchment upon which was drawn the rough outlines of a crude map. “We can enter the Vast Swamp a day’s march east of here—” he pointed at a black mark upon the scroll—“and then travel south. If your translation of the Seer’s words is accurate, we should meet up with the Nyrondeese expedition within four or five days.”

Durgoth stroked his chin, ignoring the monk’s pointed barb at the possibility of his own fallibility. It was a good plan, and it offered the best chance of making up lost time. He would forgive Jhagren’s insolence this time—but not always. No, his devotion to the Scarlet Brotherhood would not save him when Durgoth’s Master laid the entire world at his feet. He almost shuddered with delight at the thought, but he knew that now was not the time to think about the victory to come. There was still much to do. Instead, he grabbed the vellum parchment from the monk’s hands and strode purposefully toward his wagon. “Finish the preparations for our journey,” he shouted to Jhagren without looking back. “We leave at first light. And send young Adrys to my wagon. I have need of relief from this gods-blasted heat.”

So intent was Durgoth on scuttling out of the harsh sun, that he never saw the scowl cut across Jhagren’s face, only to be replaced a moment later by the monk’s usual solemn gaze.

“It will be done according to your will, blessed one,” the monk said, but Jhagren had already closed the door of his wagon.



Majandra stumbled once again over the knotted clump of vegetation that covered the muddy ground. A quick grab of Vaxor's mailed shoulder steadied her before she landed face first in the muck—though she still managed to twist her ankle slightly. The pain brought a rather ignoble curse hissing forth from her lips. She smiled wanly at Vaxor and shrugged her shoulders in apology as the cleric turned a concerned gaze her way. The Heironean priest remained silent, for which the half-elf was grateful. She didn't think she had the breath to spare for conversation.

The expedition had spent the past several days slogging through the treacherous landscape of the Vast Swamp, carefully avoiding the mud traps, dragging sand, and carnivorous plants that were an essential component of the land's deadly geography. Twice they had fought twisted, misshapen beasts that resembled fanged alligators with thick, batlike wings, and once they'd had to rescue one of their party from the clutches of a choking creeper. Everyone was bone-weary, their eyes red from sweating and exhaustion. Days spent under the harsh glare of the sun pulling the levitating rafts behind them while avoiding patrols of lizard folk had taken their toll on the small group.

Even the normally tireless Vaxor had slowed his step. Looking at him now, Majandra could see the pinched lines of fatigue running like spider webs around his eyes and mouth. She was grateful once again that the cleric had prevailed upon Phathas to rest and ride on one of the rafts. The sharp-tongued mage had had a few choice words to say, but in the end, he had acquiesced. She hoped he was resting comfortably. This was not the best place for a man at the twilight of his life—even if that man was one of the most celebrated mages in all of Nyronnd.

The coughing hiss of a large predator echoed in the distance, sending an involuntary shudder through Majandra's body. It was clear yet again that they wouldn't have survived more than a day in the confines of this swamp without the guidance of Gerwyth. The elf was uncanny in his ability to choose the swiftest and easiest path through the maze of rank pools and twisted trees, and his expertise had already thrown one lizard folk patrol off their scent. Even now, she could make out the ranger's lithe form up ahead, tirelessly leading their expedition forward.

As usual, thoughts of Gerwyth summoned images of his raven-haired companion, and the half-elf felt a different kind of warmth spread through her limbs. It wasn't just the fighter's handsome face and muscled body—though she'd be lying if she denied her physical attraction to the man. Nor was it simply the promise of mystery that surrounded him. At least not anymore. Over the course of their journey, Majandra had watched Kaerion change. The volatile anger and self-loathing that lurked so close to the surface was softened, burned away perhaps by the man's mysterious illness, or the steadily growing companionship between him and the rest of the Nyronese expedition.

Not that the man had healed completely, or cast off the anger and grief that worried at him like the jaws of a blood-raged mastiff. Such quick transformations only occurred in the lines of the poorest sagas. But beneath his healing wounds, the half-elf felt as if she had glimpsed a spark of the man's true soul, and that spark held such purity that she was drawn to it like a glowbeetle to Lima's crystalline light.

A soft voice interrupted her thoughts. Majandra turned and saw one of the guards conferring with Vaxor. After a moment, the guard nodded once and moved farther back down the line. The half-elf fixed the cleric with an inquisitive gaze.

"Gerwyth has called a halt," the Heironean priest responded. "Apparently, there is a defensible rise about a quarter of mile farther south where we will make camp for the night."

Majandra sighed softly in relief and rubbed the sweat from her face. "Gods, but I'm tired," she said after a moment. "I could use a meal and a few hours of sleep."

"As could we all," Vaxor said, resting a gentle hand on her shoulder. "I think I'll take advantage of this respite and check on Phathas. No doubt the old fool has gone and ignored my advice." He smiled briefly and then took his leave.

Majandra uncorked the wineskin at her belt and took a few deep draughts of its contents. Despite its sun-warmed temperature, the tart liquid washed away the acrid sweat and metallic tang of her heat-seared mouth. Another swig and the skin was corked and placed back on her belt. With a sigh, she wiped her mouth and stared idly into the evening sky. The sun hung like a thick orange ball near the horizon, its steadily weakening rays creating pools of shadow among the gnarled, twisted trees and thick vegetation of the swamp.

To her left, the bent trunks and angled branches formed a spiny wall as thick and forbidding as any fortress, and beyond that, she could see the broad expanse of the stagnant lake whose edge they had been following throughout the day. In the fading light, its still surface burned with bronzed incandescence, like the glowing embers of an unbelievably large hearth fire. Even from this distance, she could smell the stench of its dank waters, redolent with the musky odor of decay.

The others had complained incessantly throughout the day about the unpleasant aroma, but Majandra hadn't really minded it at all. Beneath the acrid tang of rot, her refined elven senses detected the heady bouquet of life. What was occurring in and around the standing water was a continuation of a cycle so ingenious and complex, so delicate and yet so relentless that it pulled at her heart. What was, to humans, an awful assault on their senses, was to one of her blood a doorway into a communion with something far deeper and mysterious than words would allow her to express.

Out here, even in the deadly embrace of one of the world's most dangerous places, she felt free. What would life be like once they completed their quest and she returned to the cold, dead walls of Rel Mord? The answer did not come to her. She only knew she no longer hoped for a speedy end to their expedition.

A faint rustle in the undergrowth off to her left drew her attention back to the moment at hand. The sound repeated itself as the bard scanned the dense expanse of vegetation. Majandra caught her breath. For a split second, beneath the wizened height of a tangle of manga trees, she could have sworn she'd seen the burnished gleam of two large, round eyes reflecting the dying light of the sun. She peered intently at the spot again.

Nothing.

Cursing herself for a nervous child, the half-elf lifted her traveling pack and made her way toward the front of the line. A few moments later, Gerwyth gave the order to move out. Thoughts of food and a chance to sleep beneath the stars filled her mind as the expedition trudged relentlessly forward. Beneath the steady tread of the caravan, Majandra soon forgot the memory of those cold eyes peering out from the underbrush.

Above her, the stars flickered to life, shedding their cold fire upon the earth.

Durgoth Shem looked in disgust at the creature huddled before the small fire. The beasts mottled yellow skin shimmered and pulsed sickeningly in the firelight. Thankfully, rotting leather armor covered most of its humanoid form—though he could still make out the layer of mucous that covered arms, legs, and the creatures froglike face. Occasionally, gobs of the stuff rolled off the bullywug's body and hit the muddy ground with a stomach-heaving splorch.

“What ish it you want from ush?” the creature asked, its bulbous eyes regarding the cleric gravely. “Why have you not deshtroyed ush?”

The dark priest stared in sickening fascination at the bloated length of the creature's tongue as it lolled about in its wide, thin-lipped mouth. Even with the power of his spell allowing him to understand the frothing consonants, clicks, and squeals that the bullywug used for its language, his human ears had a difficult time comprehending the beasts thick-tongued words.

Finally able to tear his eyes away from its disgusting features, Durgoth looked around at the pile of broken, amphibious bodies that surrounded the fire. Around him in a circle stood Eltanel, Sydra, Jhagren, and Adrys—along with the fear-filled cultists who remained alive. The cleric cast another glance to the left of the firepot, where the golem stood, still holding the cracked and bloodied spine of a bullywug between its meaty hands.

The attack had come swiftly, without warning. At first, Durgoth thought it simply the predations of a hungry beast, for that was what had crashed into their lines. It had only taken a few moments for the defenders to react to this attack, and the furred creature was already put down when humanoid figures had erupted violently from the surrounding trees. More furred beasts had appeared in the fray, and Durgoth watched as these beasts had turned on the bullywugs, killing almost as many of them as he and his cultists. It hadn't been very long until the battle was over and several creatures, including the one that huddled before his fire, had been captured.

“I did not destroy you,” the cleric replied at last, “because I believe that you and your companions can be of some use to me.”

The creature nodded. “Yesh. Jusht tell Braggsh what it ish that you wish,” it said. “Braggsh will make sure that Braggsh’s pondmates obey.”

Durgoth’s lip curled at the bullywugs pathetic mewling. Disgusting creatures, he thought, half-considering whether he should just kill the ones who remained and be done with it. “That is good, Braggsh. I see we understand each other. Very well. There are other intruders to your lands, about a day’s march to the east. See to it that not a single one of them leaves this swamp alive.”

Braggsh’s eyes blinked slowly beneath the flickering light of the fire. “Yesh. Braggsh knows the intruders you shpeak of. They are led by a pointy earsh. It ish very shkilled. Pond deshide to let them passh. Too much trouble to kill.”

“I want them dead,” the cleric said again, nearly shouting at the vile humanoid. “Is that clear?”

The bullywug nodded once more, but Durgoth could hear the wet smack of Braggsh’s throat as the creature swallowed hard. “But the pond—”

“I care nothing for the whims of your stupid pond,” Durgoth shouted. “You will do exactly as I say, or I shall stake your entire pond on the driest ground beneath the heat of the noon sun. Do I make myself clear?”

He uncurled his fist and held it before him. With a whispered prayer, Durgoth channeled the smallest fraction of his god’s power through his upturned hand. Waves of darkness reached out to the frightened bullywug, and the creature writhed in pain, emitting a horrifying sound somewhere between a scream and a gurgle.

Durgoth almost groaned in pleasure as he felt the dreaded hooks of Tharizdun’s power tear into the creature’s spirit. He held the contact for a moment more and then, with a sharp wave of his hand, he released the tortured beast.

It rolled around on the muddy ground for quite some time before huddling once more at the cleric’s feet. “So,” Durgoth said as Braggsh shook with fear, “do we have a deal?”

“Yesh,” Braggsh said. “The intrudersh will be deshtroyed ash you command.”

Durgoth scowled at the pathetic beast. He knew that the creature’s first thoughts would be to betray him. Such base animals always did. He slowly let his scowl turn into a smile. “One more thing, Braggsh,” he said as sweetly as he could, “if you even think about betraying me, I will allow my master to feast upon your soul slowly, and the pain you felt just now will feel like the sweetest pleasure next to the Dark One’s kiss. Now begone, and take your pathetic pondmates with you.”

Braggsh let out another long, screeching gurgle—whether from fear, anger, frustration, or all three, Durgoth did not know or care.

He knew the disgusting creatures couldn’t destroy the Nyrondeese band. But, he thought, they will slow them down enough so that we might catch up. He turned his back on the bullywugs, closed his eyes, and smiled.

\* \* \*

The next five days passed in a haze of heat and almost constant motion for Majandra. Rest stops were infrequent and taken only as a necessity—mostly to apply herbs to

insect bites and treat the odd wound. Despite their precaution, the expedition was forced to battle its way past several more fanged alligators and even one vampire vine. Lizard folk were, thankfully, not in evidence.

Throughout the long days and seemingly instantaneous nights, the half-elf's fingers itched to pluck at the graceful strings of her harp. Unfortunately, her body's exhaustion forced her to throw herself into her bedroll as soon as the evening meal was complete, rousing only when prodded forcefully by the rest of her companions. As a result, Majandra's instrument remained silent, packed carefully away in its waterproof case.

On the ninth day since the expedition entered the Vast Swamp, dawn woke bright and clear. Majandra groaned as she extricated herself from the bedroll in what had become a regular morning ritual. After a sullen breakfast of hard biscuits and dried meat, she gathered her pack and set off after the third rank of travelers in the expedition. By midmorning, the heat had become a fist that pounded into her body with each step. Despite the oppressive temperature, the half-elf couldn't help but smile. The trees in this part of the Vast Swamp were thicker, their branches sprouting thick green leaves and colorful buds. Taking advantage of this bounty, more than threescore birds sat atop the tall trees, flitting quickly from branch to branch and filling the air with the melodic chatter of their song.

It didn't take long for Majandra to add her own voice to the ever-present music that swelled around her. Gently at first, and then with more confidence, she wove her rich alto tone around and beneath the nattering birds, providing a harmonic base that added depth to the natural chorus. She felt her step lighten. The oppressive weight of the marsh air lifted, and she was gratified to notice that those around her were feeling the same effects.

It wasn't until mid-afternoon that she noticed something was wrong. Cocking her ear to the side, she listened intently for whatever it was that had teased her intuition. She heard nothing. Silence filled the swamp, a brooding absence of sound. She realized then that it was this silence that had struck her as odd. Only a few moments ago, the area had been filled with the sounds of life. Now, the swamp seemed frozen, as if waiting for something to happen.

The hairs on the back of Majandra's neck stood almost straight up. The bard couldn't shake the feeling that somebody was watching her. She scanned the surrounding vegetation, shielding her eyes with her hand, but could detect nothing. Unbidden, the memory of her sighting the other day crept into her mind. Despite the heat, she shuddered. What if someone—or something—was watching them right now? There were far more dangers in this swamp than wandering lizard folk and the occasional alligator.

Majandra stood still, scanning the lush undergrowth, determined to discover this secret threat. The rest of the expedition walked past her, by now used to the half-elf's penchant for stopping and appreciating the grandeur of the Vast Swamp. She could make out the back of the last guard as he pushed through the thick branches of a thorn bush and disappeared down the path. Still, she watched—and listened.

There! She heard something off to her right, a rustling in the bush. Carefully, she crept toward the sound, padding lightly on her feet. With only a slight scrape of metal on leather, she drew her short sword and sent a vicious cut into the center of the

vegetation. A raucous scream met her attack, and she stumbled back as a brightly plumed bird exploded from the bush, taking flight with another harsh cry. Majandra swore as she sheathed her sword and tried to calm the pounding of her heart.

Still, the feeling of being watched grew. She spun around once—sure that there must be a hundred hidden eyes peering at her. With one last backward glance at the trees, she broke into a run.

It was time to find Gerwyth.

\* \* \*

By the time Majandra found the ranger, he was deep in conversation with Kaerion along the side of the path. The fighter had shrugged off his pack and was carefully donning his chain mail armor. The normally placid elf's face was turned into a frown, and Majandra could see the crease of worry lines around his mouth. She found her own mood equally as serious as she walked up to the two warriors.

"Gerwyth, I think something is behind us. It—"

The elf held up his hand. "I know," he said in a soft voice. "We have been followed for several days. I couldn't be sure, for whoever or whatever it is knows this land exceptionally well. This morning, I found traces of a viscous slime along the base of several bushes." He pointed down to the muddied ground, at a small smear of thick liquid hanging from the bottommost branches of a marsh bush.

"I will alert Vaxor and Bredeth," said Kaerion, his voice heavy with concern. "What about Phathas?"

"He already knows," replied the ranger. "I informed him of my concerns this morning. Kaerion, once we have alerted the rest of the expedition, we must be very careful not to let our guests know that we have discovered their presence. There is a stand of uprooted trees about a league south and east of here. I scouted it out earlier. It is the most defensible position I could see within a half-score of miles. If we can make it there, we have a chance of surviving whatever surprise is in store for us."

"Who could be following us?" Majandra asked, worried even more by the concern that filled the faces of the warriors. If the situation was tense enough to put Kaerion and Gerwyth ill at ease, then it was serious indeed. "I thought we had evaded most of the lizard folk patrols in the area."

The ranger shrugged. "It is difficult to say exactly how successful one can be in evading the lizard folk," he said. "Truth be told, I think that we led those tribes on a merry enough chase that they decided to let us pass. No, my guess is that we're dealing with another race of swamp creatures—most likely siv or bullywugs. If it's the latter, then we should pray we can reach the relative safety of our prospective camp tonight."

Majandra turned to help Kaerion adjust his mail. By the time she finished, Gerwyth had left to inform Landra and the rest of the guards. Kaerion thanked Majandra for her assistance and then flashed her a brief smile as he strode toward Bredeth, who was currently adjusting the straps to his own pack.

Fully aware now of the unseen enemy that dogged their steps, the expedition set out again at a brisk pace. Though no one gave any outward sign that possible death lurked just beyond the screen of vegetation rising up on either side of the rough trail,



Majandra couldn't help tossing a few glances backward, sure that she would see a spear or crossbow bolt arcing toward her unprotected back.

She saw nothing.

The group plodded on in silence, occasionally marking the sun's slow, lazy arc in the sky. As the evening shadows grew, so did the tension. Each step brought an image of fearsome swamp creatures jumping out of the growing darkness to rend the flesh of friends and comrades. When Gerwyth led the expedition up a sharp rise into the waiting arms of their campsite Majandra dropped her pack and let out an explosive sigh as she ducked under the twisted wall of roots that blocked the main approach to their site.

Gerwyth called the guards to unload the rafts and lash them up against several of the fallen trunks on the sides of the camp. Once completed, the group would have a makeshift fortress that would offer them additional protection against assault.

The entire camp hustled with purpose as first Gerwyth and then Kaerion issued orders. It wasn't long before Bredeth came by, enlisting Majandra's aid in gathering wood and starting the large watchfire at the center of the site. The half-elf could see Vaxor and Phathas conferring in quiet tones as she bent under the weight of her load, but the rest of the camp's preparations were lost to her beneath the countless repetition of snatching wood with deft fingers and scooping it into an orderly pile near the hastily dug fire pit.

Several hours later, Majandra sat bathed in soft light as the moons dangled in the night sky like jewels. With the camp's defensive measures in place and a solid network of sentries posted, the level of tension among the members of the expedition had dissipated somewhat, settling into an uneasy wariness. Dinner that evening consisted of a thick root soup and dried beef. Stomachs full and boots removed, most of the guards not on watch had already settled into their bedrolls.

The bard yawned once, stretched, and grabbed the leather case that protected her harp from the sting of the elements. She stifled another yawn. The unrelenting tensions and exertions of the day had definitely taken their toll on her. She had spent far too much time away from the instrument that had been her guiding passion for so many years. Gently, almost reverently, she unlaced the strings of the case and removed the harp. Its rich, stained wood melted into the evening darkness, but its strings caught the silvered moonlight, held it for a brief moment, and then cast it back like soft, jeweled fire.

The half-elf ran nimble, calloused fingertips across the glowing strings and winced at the jangle of sounds. Master Parvus would likely throw an apoplectic fit if he had heard what her neglect had done to the tuning of his harp. Deftly, she adjusted the tautness of each string with minute turns of the instrument's wooden pegs, until at last, a chord of almost heartbreaking purity thrummed from the vibrating strings.

Majandra smiled softly as she noticed several of the previously sleeping guards, as well as her own companions, angle their bedrolls toward her, eager expressions on their faces. Gently, she ran her fingers across the harp strings, loosening muscles stiff with fatigue and disuse. Music tumbled forth from the instrument like rain, falling in playful patches as the half-elf wove several different melodies together, tantalizing her listeners.

The bard smiled again as her fingers moved faster and faster across the strings. Still, she searched with a performer's covert eye for the one person for whom she really wanted to play this night. She found him, a hulking shadow patrolling the edges of the camp, implacable and tireless. Beneath the warrior's cloak, the links of a mail shirt gleamed brightly. Seeing this, Majandra recalled the words of a song made popular during the Greyhawk Wars.

Mantled still in light-forged mail,  
Whitehart held the crumbling line;  
Though thousands strong fell 'neath the touch  
Of Iuz's claws and demon throng.

The half-elf almost gasped out loud as the truth came crashing down upon her. How could she have been so blind? All of it made sense now: the mysterious presence of the sword, Vaxor's cold attitude, the warrior's own reticence. It fit perfectly.

Majandra's discovery brought a surge of emotion welling up, and she wanted to crow with delight. Instead, her fingers quickly strummed the opening chords to the song. Raising her voice only slightly, for they were still in the middle of a dangerous swamp, possibly surrounded by enemies, the half-elf began to sing the first stanza of "Whitehart's Hope." Knowing the power of this song, and knowing the depths of her own talent, the bard was unsurprised to see the rest of the camp caught up in the driving pulse of the music. Here, engulfed in a forbidding land, surrounded by darkness and an unseen enemy, the members of the expedition could take strength in the courage, nobility, and valor of the Whitehart, one of the most celebrated paladins in all the Shield Lands.

She smiled at the thought that this legend was even closer to them than they had dared realize, but the smile faded, replaced by the focused demeanor of a consummate musician—head cocked slightly to the side, eyes closed as if listening to a ratified stream of music undetectable by the normal ear—as she played through one of the most difficult passages in the song. Absorbed completely by the demands of the tune, still Majandra could sense the hope and courage rising in her audience, could feel the give and take, the marvelous interplay of energy as performer and listener were enfolded in the music, made one, however briefly, by the crystalline purity of each note.

It was only when a shadow fell over her and Majandra looked up into Kaerion's stricken face, eyes white with equal parts fury and agony, that she realized her mistake.

\* \* \*

"Calm night out there, isn't it?" the guard to Kaerion's left whispered, not quite masking his apprehensive tone.

Kaerion grunted and threw a thin cloak about his shoulders, fastening it with the metal clasp. Despite the heat, he had ordered all of the sentries to cover their armor. Moonlight on mail made for an inviting target. As sweat began to drip from his neck,

he once again cursed the necessity. If whatever was following them didn't kill them, the thick, humid air and unrelenting heat certainly would.

"It's calm enough," he said, "but you can rest assured that our friends are out there, waiting for their moment."

"What do you think they are?" another whispered. This time, surprisingly, from Bredeth, who had volunteered for second watch.

Kaerion shrugged and offered another grunt. "Gerwyth believes they're bullywugs, some type of swamp humanoid with a nasty disposition. Never fought against any myself."

"I don't care what they are," said the first guard, "as long as they bleed when I cut 'em." He punctuated his statement with a twist of his sword.

Despite the tension of the situation, Kaerion found himself smiling, and was even more surprised to note that Bredeth had also captured the mood. The young noble bore a fierce grin of his own. These are good warriors, Kaerion thought. I would hate too lose any of them to this cursed swamp.

A sudden morbidity, at odds with the spirit of the moment, crept over him. Shaking off his negative thoughts, he clapped Bredeth and the guard lightly on the shoulders. "Both of you spread out," he said softly, "but remain within each other's hearing. If either of you sense anything out of the ordinary, alert the other before going to investigate. I'll spread the word to the rest of the watch." With that, Kaerion moved silently away from the two men, confident in their training and skill to see them through.

As he wandered from sentry post to sentry post, Kaerion observed the camp, wondering how long the expedition could continue to function under the strain of ever-present danger. Looking at the camp from the perimeter, it was evident that the men and women within its bounds had undergone a forced march for several days. Exhaustion had finally taken its toll, and Kaerion could see by the weary way his companions stumbled into their bedrolls or hung their heads that they had reached the end of their endurance. Living under the constant threat of attack brought its own attendant dangers to morale, as well as tempers. It was only a matter of time before either frayed past the point of restraint. Someone would do something foolish; mistakes, possibly life threatening ones, would be made. If their enemies were going to attack, Kaerion thought, they had better do it soon.

The breathtaking sounds of a harp drifted lightly through the thick night air, and Kaerion smiled as he recognized Majandra's masterful playing. For a moment, his warrior's instincts objected to the superfluous noise that could draw unwanted attention to their camp. But they already had unwanted attention. It was unlikely that their pursuers didn't already know where they were.

A shift in the night air brought all of his senses to attention. Kaerion looked about quickly, searching for the source of this disturbance. His heart raced faster than a war-horse in a joust, and a feeling of dread crept up his spine. What in the Nine Hells could be unsettling him so?

And then he realized it.

It hadn't been the night air that had changed. It was the music. As he listened to the opening strains of a song he hadn't heard in over ten years, he felt as if a sharp arrow had imbedded itself deep in his chest. Someone had discovered his secret, and

now the bard was revealing it to the entire expedition. Panic gripped him, as the words to the song rang out with accusation.

Betrayer!

Coward!

Child-killer!

Out of the darkness, he could see leering faces appear, demons and demon-spawn as familiar to him as the unrelenting press of hatred and grief over his own cowardly actions. The healing scabs that had formed over his wounds during the past few months were ripped open, and he felt soul-tearing pain as the memories of his abominable disgrace poured forth. Kaerion knew that he was unworthy of the friendships bestowed upon him, and he prayed for the first time in nearly a decade, that the god he betrayed would strike him dead.

Even the great moon cast its judgment upon him, for in its face he saw the features of an innocent boy smiling expectantly down on him—a boy he knew now lay dead, his desiccated corpse rotting in a demon-cursed dungeon.

Oblivious to his own pain, the song continued. Each word was like a glass-tipped whip lashed against the raw wounds of his spirit. Kaerion closed his eyes and threw his hands up to cover his ears in an attempt to shut out the music—but to no avail. When he opened his eyes again, he was surprised to see Majandra’s face staring up at him from her seat on the ground. His own legs had betrayed him, carrying him to the source of his pain, like a sacrifice.

As he met the equally surprised and horrified gaze of the bard, Kaerion felt his anger build into white-hot rage. Not content simply to excoriate the shattered dregs of his own soul, his anger now found an external focus—the cause of his current pain. Unable to stop himself, the warrior felt his arm pull steel from its scabbard and raise up the blade for a killing blow.

Silence filled the camp as Majandra’s fingers stopped playing. Her wide-eyed gaze never wavered from his, yet Kaerion felt as if he were on a precipice. One simple motion would send him tumbling, irrevocably, down.

The bard’s eyes softened, moving from fear to that familiar compassionate look that Kaerion had often longed to have aimed at him. Still, his rage drove him on. Sword held high, he battled for control of his own body.

At last, it was the bard herself who saved him. Slowly, she stood, seemingly oblivious to the death that hung above her, and placed one hand gently upon his face. “I am so very sorry, Kaerion,” she said in a measured tone soft enough to reach only his ears.

The half-elf’s voice was warm, its timbre a rich, dulcet, earthy tone that absorbed the heat of his rage, enfolding him in its compassionate embrace. Kaerion knew now, in the part of his mind still capable of rational thought, that the bard had never intended this to happen, had never played “Whitehart’s Hope” as a means of exposing his shame.

With a heaving shudder, he sheathed the naked blade. As if this motion released them all from a powerful spell, his companions moved forward. Kaerion was surprised to see Gerwyth stand abruptly and bar their way.

Kaerion looked back at Majandra, whose gentle fingers now traced the curve of his jaw. The half-elf appeared as stunned as he felt. With a slow swallow, she spoke again, “Kaerion, I—”

“No, Majandra,” he growled. “Not here.” And with that, he pulled her, far less gently than he should have, away from the center of the camp, back toward the shadows and relative privacy of the supply rafts.

Once there, the thousand things he had wanted to say swirled around in his head, getting in each others way. Dully, he gaped at the half-elf, who regarded him with a slight smile upon her face. His own mouth worked absently, opening and closing despite the silence that issued forth from it.

When at last someone spoke, it was Majandra. “So, it’s true,” she said in a gentle voice. “You are the Whitehart.”

Kaerion wanted to deny the accusation. Instead, he felt his shoulders slump under the weight of acceptance as he nodded.

“But how is that possible?” Majandra asked. “You were supposed to have died during the expedition that was sent to free Earl Holmer from Dorakaa. There’s even a song of lament about how you sacrificed yourself so that the others could escape with the earl.”

Kaerion bowed his head at the bard’s pronouncement. When he finally found his voice, it was tinged with bitterness. “There isn’t a day that has gone past since that cursed expedition when I don’t wish I was dead,” he said, “but there was no heroic sacrifice. You of all people should know the unreliability of bard’s tales.”

Majandra’s brow wrinkled in confusion.

“No,” he spoke again, shuddering as the memories ripped through him, “that expedition was doomed from the start. We were betrayed. Iuz knew we were coming and he set a trap. He let the others go and... and prepared a special place for me.”

Majandra shifted in her place and placed her hand in his. “But Kaerion, you beat Iuz. You escaped from his clutches, and now you’re alive.”

“You call this living?” Kaerion shouted, shrugging off the bard’s attempt at comfort. “At first, I thought Heironeous would save me, but then that demon-spawned bastard buried me in an oubliette. I sat there in the stinking darkness for so long I lost track of time as his minions whispered their foul wisdom into my ear. At one point, I can remember trying to pray, and the words of my prayer tasted like ash in my mouth. I wasn’t sure if Heironeous was listening, and after a while, I wasn’t sure if he was even real. All I could remember was fear, and darkness, and a soul-numbing chill that sucked every last bit of heat from my body. I was alone for the first time in my life.”

“You’re not alone anymore, Kaerion,” the bard said, moving closer. “You have Gerwyth, Bredeth, the others—and me.” Majandra’s voice became tremulous. “You have me.”

Despite himself, Kaerion barked with bitter laughter. “And why would they want me?” he asked. “Why would you want me? Don’t you know what I’ve done? Can’t you see what I am? After all this time traveling together, Majandra, are you truly so blind?” The words spilled out of him, ugly, hateful, and yet he could not stop them, wasn’t sure he wanted to stop them.

“No, damn you. I’m not the blind one!” It was Majandra’s turn to shout, and despite his own anger, Kaerion was taken aback at the depth of the bard’s own feelings. “I’m not the one who clutches to this isolation all the while refusing the hand of true friendship and companionship being offered. So I don’t know what you’ve done. So what? If you want to put me to the test, then tell me what happened in Dorakaa. Give me the chance to make a decision about it, rather than constantly making one for me!”

She threw this last out like a challenge, and Kaerion found himself accepting. It wasn’t because he needed to share the burden of his grief with someone. Not by a long shot. Rather, he knew that he deserved to be reviled for his actions, and what better way than to be reviled by someone he truly cared about. Let Majandra feel the shock and disgust as he listed the details of his own sins. In a perverse way, he knew he would take pleasure in shattering the faith and trust she had placed in him.

They stood there for a few moments, breathing heavily in their anger, staring at each other. He could see the challenge still in the bard’s eyes. When he began, Kaerion held his voice steady, as if retelling a simple tavern story. “Eventually, they let me out of the circular hole that defined my world. I remember blinking hard at the light, as if I had never seen it before. I stank of fear and human waste. Several of Iuz’s servants led me to a large chamber, a shrine of some sort. Even now it is difficult to remember the details.

“As they marched me toward this chamber, the foul demons whispered to me again, but this time, they told me of the ways I would be used and tortured for Iuz’s own pleasure. At this point, I no longer recalled my life before Dorakaa. For me, there was only misery and fear. By the time we reached the door to the shrine, I was shaking in terror. Thoughts of escape were beyond me, but I knew, despite my misery, that I would do anything to avoid the horror that awaited me.

“When they opened the door—” Kaerion’s voice broke as he sputtered and choked on the memories.

Without hesitation, Majandra opened her arms, and he could feel the bard drawing him toward her. He didn’t resist.

“When they opened the door,” Kaerion continued, his voice a bit stronger, “I saw a pack of the foulest demons the Nine Hells had ever spawned. They surrounded a stone slab. As my captors drew me into the room, the hellspawn parted, revealing a boy, no more than eight years old, splayed out like a sacrifice. One of the beasts hopped toward me, its vestigial wings flapping wetly, and gave me a choice. I could either offer myself in the boy’s stead, exchanging my life for his, or they would spare my life and take the boys. I—”

Kaerion’s body nearly convulsed as heaving shudders racked his frame. He could feel hot tears scalding his cheeks and jaw as he relived that memory once again. “Don’t you see?” he nearly shrieked, pulling away from Majandra’s embrace. “I let them kill the boy. I watched as a demon claw ripped the child’s throat apart and the demon pack feasted on his blood. It was my fault! *Mine!*”

Majandra’s mouth hung open, but she did not leave.

“It was my fault!” he shouted, and then he collapsed in a sobbing heap.

He felt Majandra’s arms wrap themselves around him, her hands gently lifting his tear-stained face up. At first, he closed his eyes, unwilling to see the condemnation

he knew would be there, but at last, he forced them open—and was amazed to see compassion and forgiveness in the half-elf’s face.

“It was then I knew Heironeous had never forsaken me,” he said in a much softer voice. “It was I who had walked away from him.”

Tears continued to roll down Kaerion’s face, and he, powerless to stop it, let them fall unchallenged down his face. Gradually, the shudders lessened and the great heaving sobs withdrew, leaving him weakened and empty. Despite his emotional state, he was almost painfully aware of Majandra’s arms as they wrapped gently around his neck. His heart beat in an unfamiliar rhythm.

“Majandra, I—” he began, but was quickly silenced by the press of the half-elf’s lips to his own. He stiffened at first in surprise, but gradually relaxed as the soft touch of her tear-salted lips sent delicious warmth through his grief-spent body. For a brief moment, he felt weightless, suspended in a private universe beyond his own inner demons, a world whose boundaries began and ended in the arms that surrounded him.

Kaerion sighed and returned the kiss deeply—only to be flung out of his contentment by the gurgling scream of a dying guardsman. He looked at the equally stunned bard as shouts and other screams filled the camp.

The attack had begun.



The dark recesses of the swamp came alive with snarling, hissing cries. Kaerion leapt up from his comfortable perch near the half-elf and drew his sword. The final look he cast the bard before running into battle was all too brief, but he was relieved to see the same expression on her face. *Later*, it seemed to say, and he found himself grinning as he went to meet their enemies.

The camp itself heaved with the press of bodies and naked steel. Despite the seeming chaos, Kaerion's battle-trained awareness quickly recognized solid defensive tactics employed by the guards as they formed a ring around Phathas and Vaxor. Landra had obviously called in the remaining sentries and Kaerion felt some measure of relief at the captain's prudent command.

Beneath the red-gold glare of the watch fire, Kaerion caught glimpses of the heretofore-unseen predators that had stalked them through the swamp for days. Even as he neared the battle, he couldn't keep his gorge from rising at the site of their blunt, wide-lipped heads and bulbous eyes.

A cry off to his left broke Kaerion's forward charge. In the flickering light, he saw a slouching humanoid raise a steel-tipped spear at a fallen sentry. Three bounding steps brought the bulk of his body crashing into the bullywug, whose own slime-covered form went crashing into the underbrush with an angry hiss. A quick hand helped the guard to her feet before Kaerion turned and ran back to the center of camp.

"Kaerion, to me!" he heard Phathas call from the center of the ringed guards.

With a shout of acknowledgement at the mage's summons, Kaerion turned the swift thrust of a spear aside with his blade and ducked beneath the wild swing of another opponent's sword. Cursing, he realized his path was now blocked by three of the noisome creatures. Raising his sword, he charged into the center of his attackers, taking one through the eye and doubling another over with a sharp kick to the ribs. The third managed a sharp spear jab that caught Kaerion on the side. He cried out as the steel tip of the spear ripped through his cloak and rebounded off of the hard metal surface of his armor. Despite his luck, Kaerion knew he'd have a nasty bruise come morning—if he survived.



The ring of guards had drawn tighter now, collapsing inward with the growing press of humanoid bodies. In the circle's center, Kaerion saw Vaxor clap his hands together while uttering a sharp prayer to Heironeous. Golden light emanated from his joined fingertips, falling over the beleaguered guards. Kaerion felt a cold stab of guilt at this reminder of the god's power.

A moment later, an angry buzzing filled the air. One of the creatures gave out a gurgling hiss as an arrow struck it in the back. Four more streaks of death followed in quick succession, and Kaerion knew that Gerwyth lay somewhere in the gnarled trees above the camp, raining arrows upon the attackers. Six more fell dead or dying before Kaerion fought his way through the circle's center. A moment later, he was relieved to see Majandra's lithe form bound through the ring of soldiers.

Breathing heavily, he acknowledged Phathas' reassuring smile with a quick nod of his own. The mage reached out ancient, weathered hands, placed them gently upon his shoulders, and closed thin-lidded eyes in concentration. The hairs on Kaerion's neck prickled as a string of unintelligible words flowed out of the spellcaster's mouth in stately rhythm. The old mage's eyes flew open as he reached the end of his phrase. Raising a feeble hand, he struck Kaerion a surprisingly sharp blow upon the cheek, intoning a single harsh word as flesh struck flesh.

Kaerion blinked once in surprise and then felt energy course from the point of contact to cover his entire body.

"I have made your body harder than the hardest stone," Phathas said. "Go now and take the battle to our enemies." The mage gave Kaerion another smile before raising his hands above his head, obviously preparing to cast another spell.

Relieved by the had of arrows and god-wrought aid, the circle of guards was no longer merely on the defensive. Kaerion watched again with satisfaction as Landra, calmly dispatching two bullywugs with neat, economical strokes, held her charges to an even, ordered extension of their ring. Satisfied that the main body of their force had things under control, Kaerion burst from the circle, sword flashing in the firelight, and charged the knot of creatures still streaming into their camp.

A downward slash of his blade severed a spear tip from its wood body. Kaerion spun, letting his momentum carry him forward, and was gratified to feel the dull thunk as his sword bit deeply into the bloated neck of a bullywug, nearly severing its spine. Pulling the sword quickly from the shattered bone, he thrust his blade into the chest of a creature already hissing with outrage. As his opponent fell, Kaerion saw another opening and sent his sword slicing downward, laying open the stomach of a second bullywug.

Kaerion heard a now-familiar screaming gurgle off to his right and was surprised to see Vaxor laying about with his sword. In his left hand, the cleric held a shield embossed with the lightning symbol of Heironeous. Its metallic surface erupted into bright golden light, blinding the priest's opponents as he drew near. Kaerion could spare no additional thought to Vaxor's presence, for he found himself surrounded by a circle of bloodthirsty foes.

Ducking a hastily swung sword, Kaerion's fist lashed out, catching a bullywug on the side of its slime-covered head. The creature stumbled back, disoriented, but before Kaerion could press the attack, the remaining monsters thrust their bristling spears at him. He twisted sharply, nearly dislocating his knee, to avoid the first spear,

and deflected the second and third ones with an expertly timed slash of his blade. The final two attacks burst through his guard, striking exposed flesh—only to be repelled by the thin layer of spell-wrought energy covering his body.

The bullywugs stopped their victory scream in mid-gurgle as Kaerion stood in their midst unscathed. Taking advantage of their surprise, Kaerion quickly dispatched two before a rain of arrows killed the remaining ones where they stood, wide-lipped mouths gaping.

“A little late, don’t you think?” Kaerion shouted at Gerwyth, knowing full well that the ranger wouldn’t give away his position to reply.

A quick look at the unfolding battle made it clear to Kaerion that the defenders now had the upper hand, but before he could do more than catch a few breaths, an eerie ululation erupted from the swelling throats of the attacking bullywugs. Instinctively, Kaerion clapped a hand over one ear to shield himself from the effects of the piercing sound. Moments later, one of the rafts used as a makeshift wall shattered beneath the force of a thunderous blow. Splinters of wood flew out like cyclone-tossed darts. A moment of stunned silence settled over the camp as defenders and attackers alike gaped at the source of the disturbance.

Out of the mist-covered shadows of the swamp lumbered a giant, reptilian beast. Each step sent slight tremors through the gore-soaked ground. Two lizardlike heads raised themselves into the air, snapping tooth-filled jaws with an ear-splitting hiss. Before anyone could react, the monster darted out and snared the stunned body of a hapless guard in one of its mouths.

Majandra was the first to react as the screams of the beast’s victim crescendoed and then, just as suddenly, stopped. Bolts of blue energy lanced from her extended fingertips, striking the beast with mystical accuracy. The giant lizard roared in pain but continued its forward progress.

With a muffled curse, Kaerion leapt toward the monster.

It was then that he saw the figure riding upon the beast’s back. Nearly half again as tall as the other bullywugs, this snarling humanoid sat easily upon a saddle of horn and black leather. Thickly corded muscles ran from webbed foot to broad shoulder, hidden only by scaled armor that seemed to absorb the firelight. Kaerion could see the curving edge of a large, blood-red axe held confidently in each hand. Around its neck hung a chain of skulls, some animal, some human; each stared vacantly out of empty eye sockets.

Darting in between the snapping jaws of the slavering lizard, Kaerion aimed his sword for a deep cut to the beast’s shoulder—only to be forced to duck as one of its rider’s axes whistled just inches from where his had been. Moving faster than he could recover, one of the lizard’s heads rammed into Kaerion’s body, knocking him off balance. He cried out as the larger bullywugs second axe bit deeply into his own shoulder. Kaerion rolled away, eyeing his opponent warily. He had felt that blow even with the added protection of Phathas’ spell!

He caught sight of Vaxor preparing a spell of his own, and was about to guard the priest’s flank when Phathas shouted, “Kaerion, out of the way! Quickly!”

Without a moment’s hesitation, the fighter threw himself off to the left, rolling to his knees as he hit the ground. A bright flash of light filled the campsite, and the air hummed with tension as a bolt of electrical energy blasted at the lizard and its axe-

wielding rider. Though the beast reared up in obvious pain, Kaerion was amazed to see that the mounted bullywug had avoided most of the spell's effects.

Not wanting to waste the opportunity, Kaerion ran in and laid a deep gash across the now-reeling lizards front leg. As he raised his sword for another blow, Vaxor completed his own spell, and with the name of Heironeous on his lips, he raised his holy symbol into the air. A ray of golden light burst forth from the silver symbol with searing intensity. As it struck the giant lizard, the creature gave out a roaring hiss and then stumbled. At that moment, two arrows arced out of the darkness, both taking the creature in the right eye. It gave out another hissing cry before it crashed to the ground dead.

The beasts rider threw himself from the saddle before the giant lizard fell to the ground. Kaerion watched in amazement as the creature rolled gracefully to his feet and charged Vaxor. Such was its speed that the priest barely had time to raise his shield before one of the axes struck the metal device with a sharp clang. The second one snuck under his sword's guard and lodged deeply in his thigh. The cleric cried out as his attacker, heedless of the danger at his back, pulled out his bloodied axe and kicked the wounded priest to the ground.

Kaerion had started to run toward Vaxor at the first sign of the bullywug's attack, and he now had a clear shot at the creature's back. Nearly two decades of training, however, caused him to hesitate. Striking an opponent from behind was never an option—even when the opponent in question had just felled a companion.

The fighter's hesitation cost him dearly. Both axes free, the bullywug spun to face his latest attacker, lashing downward with both weapons faster than, Kaerion could react. The fighter grimaced as the twin edge's cut into the flesh in his left shoulder and chest. He would have to remember to thank the mage when this was all over, for those blows would have no doubt left him crippled if it hadn't been for the wizard's spell.

The bullywug advanced as Kaerion fell back, hoping to gain some breathing room. As he withdrew, he managed to cut the creature several times, but with no effect. Looking into the bullywug's eyes confirmed his worst fears—the creature was berserk. Kaerion would have to end this fight quickly.

Grasping his sword with both hands, Kaerion sidestepped one of the bullywug's axes and brought his sword downward, cutting the creature's shoulder and splintering its shoulder blade.

It kept coming.

Kaerion landed several cuts on the berserker's exposed side, but the hideous beast kept advancing. Twice more he felt the sting of its axe, as powerful blows bypassed his magical protection. He could feel Phathas' spell beginning to falter.

Exhausted and wounded, Kaerion was unable to avoid stumbling on an exposed root. As he fell, his opponent raised a blood-drenched axe into the air and gave a scream of pure hatred. Several arrows thudded into the berserker's chest, but to no visible effect. Kaerion rolled hard to the left as the axe descended, but he felt no pain from the blow.

Kaerion looked up at his opponent, only to see the bluish glow of Majandra's blade protruding from its throat. The creature looked as surprised as he—its long, bloated tongue lolling from the side of its gruesome mouth. The creature pitched

forward, quite dead, as Majandra removed her blade. Kaerion noted with grudging admiration that the bullywug hadn't let go of its weapon even in death.

At the fall of their hero, the remaining bullywugs let out a despairing wail and withdrew from the camp. Their amphibious forms melted back into the shadows of the swamp. Kaerion could hear the labored breathing of the defenders and the anguished groan of the wounded. Grimly, he accepted Majandra's aid in rising, and the two walked slowly toward the center of the camp.

Landra had, he noted, already sent several of her people to gather the dead and wounded, including Vaxor, who hobbled over to the knot of people surrounding Phathas. But it was the grim face of Gerwyth that caught everyone's attention as he melted out of the shadows, holding an object in his hands.

"We have a problem," he said simply, noting with a nod the elegantly fashioned blade he held between his hands.

"What now?" Kaerion responded, in no mood for additional surprises this night.

"They've taken Bredeth," the elf said, anger and bitterness apparent in his voice.

The companions greeted this announcement in stunned silence. All around them, the mist-filled night reached out its fetid tendrils.



“To the Nine Hells with you and your cursed creatures!” the arrogant noble said through swollen lips.

Durgoth Shem smiled cruelly as the Nyrondeese scion offered feeble struggle against his bullywug captors. The cleric drew close to their prisoner and ran the back of an immaculately groomed hand across the man’s bruised face—rough enough to elicit an involuntary hiss of pain.

He had been positively enraged when Braggsh and a contingent of his sniveling pondmates had burst into their camp, screaming and hissing about their defeat at the hands of those noble fools. He was halfway toward eviscerating the entire worthless group of the disgusting creatures when he had caught sight of the drooping figure two of the bullywug warriors held between them. All had not been lost. Now, as Durgoth probed their captive for information, plans upon plans swirled around in his head.

“Boy,” he said at last, contempt for the bastard’s misplaced arrogance dripping from every word, “when I am through with this world, the Nine Hells will seem like Beory’s own paradise in comparison.”

The warrior grinned. “Bold words,” he said, “for someone who needs talking frogs to do his dirty work for him.”

“Fool!” Durgoth shouted, immediately regretting his loss of temper. Then, in more measured tones he said, “You dare mock me, the bearer of Tharizdun’s will? For that, I will feed you to the Dark One myself... after you have served your purpose.”

“This for your pathetic godling,” the captive said, and then he hawked bloodied spittle into the dark cleric’s face.

Durgoth spun away in outrage, hastily wiping the spit from his brow. Such insolence! Anger building, he turned back toward the warrior with raised fist and was gratified to see the captured noble wince in expectation of the blow. A smile slowly spread across the dark priest’s features, and he held his attack.

“There will come a time,” he said to the glaring prisoner, “when you will remember my clenched fist, and your agony will be so great that you would trade your very soul to feel its weight upon your face rather than suffer for one more

moment. When that happens, I want you to remember that it was your blasphemy that brought you there.”

“Let me spend some time with the boy, Durgoth,” broke in a husky voice from behind him. “I’m sure I can loosen his... tongue and make him more amenable to cooperation.”

Durgoth turned and acknowledged Sydra’s offer with a nod. The sorceress lounged indolently against a fallen marsh tree, her hair bound off of her tanned shoulders with a silver cord that reflected the rays of the rising sun.

“You shall have your opportunity in a few moments, my dear,” the cleric said.

“I don’t see why we have to waste time on that,” Eltanel cut in. “It’s clear these nobles will come after their companion. Why not set a trap and kill them?”

Durgoth remained quiet a moment, carefully studying the two guild members. What had begun as simple competitiveness after their defeat in Rel Mord had grown into open antipathy. The discord pleased the cleric. While the two spent their energies against each other, they had less time to plot against him.

“You forget, my shadowy *friend*,” he said, his inflection leaving no doubt that he considered Eltanel anything but, “I require these fools alive until they bypass the tomb’s deadly traps. Then we shall dispose of them.”

Eltanel, obviously angered by his public error, spoke again. “They have proven difficult to kill on several occasions... blessed one,” he added hastily. “Surely an open assault would fail.”

Durgoth offered another in a seemingly endless array of silent curses to Reynard and his damned guild. Once the key was liberated from Acererak’s tomb, the priest’s erstwhile allies would find themselves paying for every snide comment and insolent remark—Eltanel in particular.

“Though your lack of faith is unfortunate,” Durgoth responded, “you are partially correct in that an open assault would be very dangerous. That is why we will have hidden weapons.”

The cleric looked around the gathered assembly until he caught the eye of Jhagren Syn. Motioning the monk toward him, the dark priest continued, “Our young friend here will be the unseen knife poised to strike at the backs of our enemies.”

“I will not betray my friends, you beggaring scum-spawn!” the captive warrior shouted. “I’ll die before I let you use me against them.”

Durgoth turned slightly toward the wounded warrior. “What you want or don’t want is irrelevant,” he said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Sydra, it is time.” He gestured toward the prisoner, who heightened his own struggles against the two bullywugs holding him fast.

“With pleasure,” the sorceress purred, as she knelt in front of the noble and placed elegant hands upon his head.

“What if he fails?” questioned Eltanel, the thief’s distaste for what was about to happen poorly concealed beneath his aggressive questioning.

Durgoth noted the guildsman’s weakness and vowed to remember it for future use. “Such questions, my dear Eltanel!” he responded with silken tones. “If he fads, there is another.”

With that, the cleric turned to face Jhagren Syn. The monk had gathered his apprentice and both stood calmly to his left. “Will the boy serve?” he asked.

“Yes, blessed one,” Jhagren responded evenly. “He will serve.”

Durgoth smiled down at the boy, who looked up at him with inscrutable blue eyes. “You know that he will need to look as if he’s been captured,” he said. “Are you prepared?”

“Yes, my lord,” the monk replied in his gravelly voice.

“Then proceed,” he said as he turned back toward the questioning thief. Durgoth didn’t flinch as the sound of snapping bone echoed sharply through the camp.

\* \* \*

Kaerion peered into the deepening gloom of the swamp, alert for any sign of their quarry. Below him, crouched low to the ground, Gerwyth examined the mud-soft path they had been following for most of the day. Twice now they had nearly lost the trail, for the creatures’ webbed feet ran lightly across the earth, and the foul beasts seemed to know every twist and turn of the gods-blasted swamp. Kaerion feared the worst as the elven ranger continued his examination, but he was too experienced to disrupt his friend’s concentration by voicing his suspicions.

Despite the gravity of their situation, Kaerion found himself settling into the familiar and companionable silence that had characterized most of the day’s journey. It had been several months since the two of them had traveled together with only each other for support and comfort. Though he had grown to appreciate the friendship and trust of the Nyronde—especially a certain fire-haired bard—there was a deeper bond that had grown between he and Gerwyth across their years of travel and struggle together. It was simple and almost elemental. Kaerion had not known how much he missed it until now.

Not that their current journey was simply a pleasure jaunt he reminded himself. The bullywugs had taken Bredeth, and somewhere in the deepness of the swamp, their companion was held against his will. There had been quite an argument as the remaining Nyronde nobles had discussed who should go after their friend. Kaerion still winced at Majandra’s words. The bard had a tongue as sharp as any blade when she wished it. In the end, it had only been Phathas’ surprisingly hard-edged insistence that the two guides should go and retrieve the captured noble that had convinced the bard to remain behind. He smiled briefly as he remembered the rebellious set of Majandra’s shoulders as she acquiesced to the old mage’s wishes. In fact, he had half-expected to see the bard waiting for them at a juncture of their trail several times during the day.

“Ahh, I see that your mind is focused completely on our task as usual,” Gerwyth said.

Kaerion, startled by his friend’s sudden speech, half drew his sword before realizing that he had not been paying attention for some time. The elf had risen from his crouch and now stood close behind him. Confusion quickly became anger and embarrassment at his own lack of attention.

“What have you found, Ger?” he snapped at the smiling ranger.

Gerwyth wiped the gathering sweat from his brow before pointing back toward the ground. “The bullywugs we’ve been following met up with another group in this area not too long ago,” he reported.

“Then we’re close,” Kaerion responded, eagerness tingeing his voice.

“Well, yes, we’re close,” Gerwyth said, “but there is a complication. After the two groups met here, they split up. One group headed south, and the other went north.”

Kaerion’s heart sank. With two separate groups, there was no way to know exactly where Bredeth was. He feared that time was running out. If they didn’t find the young noble soon, it would be too late to save him. When he relayed his thoughts to Gerwyth, the ranger smiled.

“I never said I didn’t know where Bredeth was,” he said.

Kaerion looked sharply at the elf’s face, noting the way the ranger’s eyes twinkled mischievously, and he soon found himself returning the smile.

Old times indeed.

“This group,” Gerwyth said after a moment, pointing to the trail heading north, “was carrying something fairly heavy, which you can see quite plainly by the deeper indentations of the prints left in the mud.”

“Yes, quite plainly. I agree,” Kaerion responded with more than a trace of humor in his voice as he looked at the barely visible—and to his eyes, completely inscrutable—indentations in the muck.

“Furthermore,” Gerwyth continued, obviously choosing to ignore the fighter’s sarcasm, “our friends have left something behind for us.” With that, the ranger bent down and plucked a small strip of bloodied cloth from the thin branches of a bush.

Kaerion easily recognized the material of Bredeth’s cloak. “How long ago did they pass, Ger?” he asked.

“Less than an hour ago, I’d guess, or I’m a blind son of an unwashed orc,” the ranger responded.

Kaerion nodded at his friend’s estimate and gazed at the sky. “Then we must hurry,” he said. “We don’t have too much longer before nightfall.”

After taking a few quick swigs from their waterskins, the two set out once more along the winding trail. Sweat poured freely down Kaerion’s face, and his breath came in even, deep rhythms as he followed the long-limbed ranger, who ran with easy, loping strides across the sawgrass and dark mud of the swamp floor. Around them, the twilight deepened. Kaerion’s hopes began to fall with each passing minute. Once full night fell, it would be exceedingly difficult for them to follow the bullywugs’ trail. They were so close. It would be painful to have to wait until morning to continue the search.

The first sentry took them by surprise. Movement off to his right sent a tingle of warning down Kaerion’s spine. He motioned for his companion to slow down and the two crept toward the watchful creature. With a quick lift of his chin, Gerwyth sent Kaerion clamoring off to the sentry’s left side. The creature spun as the fighter’s bulk crashed through the brush, but before it could sound the alarm, the ranger stood and threw two daggers in quick succession. The blades imbedded themselves deep in the creature’s throat, and it fell, choking, to the ground.

Gerwyth retrieved his daggers and caught up with Kaerion. The two crept forward, alert for any more guards. It was clear that they were close to the bullywugs’ camp. They would have to dispose of any opposition as quickly and silently as possible if they were to have any chance of rescuing Bredeth.



Twice more they encountered sentries, and twice more Gerwyth released steel in a deadly arc, silencing any opposition. Now, from the cover of thick brush, the two friends looked out upon a small, still lake. Several bullywugs lay upon the shore, eating sloppily or conversing in an indecipherable language. Kaerion watched a few moments more before he felt Gerwyth's hand on his shoulder.

"There," the ranger whispered softly, pointing to the opposite side of the camp. "Bredeth is over there."

Kaerion gazed in the direction the ranger indicated. In the gloom, he could just make out Bredeth, his sagging form bound to a thin-trunked tree. Kaerion reached into his belt pouch and withdrew the small silver vial that Phathas had given him before they left the Nyronde camp. Breaking the vial's thick wax seal, he smiled at Gerwyth and downed the syrupy liquid within. There was a brief instant of disorientation and then the world settled back into focus. A few moments later, the rangers nod confirmed that the potion had taken effect. Invisible to the naked eye, Kaerion would sneak into the bullywug encampment and free Bredeth, while the elf used his bow to create a distraction. With any luck, the companions would meet up the trail and then travel back toward their friends, who were even now closing in on the location of Acererak's tomb.

As silently as possible, Kaerion crept around the camp, heading with every step closer to the captured noble. As long as any remaining sentries didn't stumble onto the corpses of their mates, he should have enough time to untie Bredeth and spirit him away.

The sound of twigs snapping in the shadows brought Kaerion to a complete stop. He held his breath as a bullywug stumbled out of the brush. The creature stopped and peered with bulbous eyes into the growing darkness. The beast stood several feet away from Kaerion, and the fighter was sure he would be detected. He started to draw his sword, careful lest the sound give away his presence, but before he could free his weapon, the bullywug blinked twice and continued toward the stagnant waters of the lake.

Kaerion let out his breath slowly and took a few moments for his heart to resume its normal beat before continuing. Several more minutes of careful travel brought him nearly up to the imprisoned noble. He winced as he saw the deep cuts and bruises that marred Bredeth's body. Obviously, his captors had spent some time interrogating the noble. By the looks of things, the young man had not easily revealed what the bullywugs were looking for.

"Careful now," he whispered to Bredeth as he began to saw through the thick rope that bound him to the tree.

"W-what? Wh-who is it?" Bredeth asked through swollen lips and deeply bruised cheeks.

"Shhh," Kaerion warned. "It's me, Kaerion. Gerwyth and I are here to rescue you." His knife, sharp though it was, did not bite easily through the slime-covered rope. This would take a few minutes of work.

Bredeth made a soft sound, somewhere between a groan and a sob as Kaerion continued cutting the rope. "Never mind me," the noble whispered huskily. "Rescue the boy."

Kaerion studied Bredeth closely, sure that he was delirious. But the young man kept repeating himself. It wasn't until Bredeth, one hand finally free from the rope, pointed a mud-covered hand off to his left that Kaerion saw the small figure lying inert on the muddy ground. He cursed once and placed the knife gently into Bredeth's swollen hand before moving toward the figure.

Gently, he rolled the figure over and was surprised to see the battered face of a young lad, surely not more than fifteen years old. Unlike Bredeth, the boy was not tied to a tree, but Kaerion could clearly see that his arm hung at a gruesome angle. Carefully, Kaerion sat the boy up and dribbled a small stream of water into his mouth.

The young prisoner swallowed reflexively and blinked grime encrusted eyes open. For a moment, Kaerion found himself back inside the gruesome walls of an ancient shrine, looking down upon the piercing blue eyes of a trusting child. Terror gripped him—and guilt, but, as if from somewhere far away, he heard the thrum of arrows being loosed from a bow and the defiant ring of a familiar elven war cry. The sounds grew louder and he found himself crawling free from the clutches of the vision. As one who emerges from the utter blackness of a dungeon out into the bright light of day, Kaerion blinked quickly. The young lad still stared at him blankly, and Kaerion realized he was still invisible.

"Rest easy, son," Kaerion whispered. "I'm a friend. We'll be out of here soon. Just keep quiet."

The boy blinked but said nothing. With an almost imperceptible grunt, Kaerion gathered the boy in his arms, lifted him off the ground, and turned toward the original target of this rescue. Bredeth, though wounded and mistreated, had managed to grasp the knife in his free hand and carve through the remaining bonds that tied him. Rubbing his wrists to restore circulation, the young noble smiled at the wounded boy seemingly floating toward him. All around them, the bullywug camp filled with the sounds of chaos.

"We must hurry now," Kaerion said. "Gerwyth cannot distract them for too much longer."

He stepped into the darkness of the surrounding bush, confident that Bredeth would follow.

\* \* \*

Kaerion ran.

Beneath the lidless eyes of the gazing moons, the Vast Swamp was aglow with witchlight. Shadows limned with silver, a mingling of darkness and light so deep that every border blurred. Grass or wind or even stagnant pool—it made no difference to Kaerion. He ran upon them all—or the dream of them. Bathed in the crystalline light of the moons, everything bled into one single reality.

He ran.

Somewhere ahead, he knew Gerwyth watched over the wounded figure of Bredeth, who despite the hesitance of his own battered body, pushed on, refusing to be carried. The noble had courage, that much was clear.

Kaerion drew in a deep breath as his own body ached for relief. Beside him, the young boy, apparently freed from the stupor of his own wounds, matched his pace. Throughout the last several hours, the lad had kept up, and Kaerion was surprised to find him exceptionally fleet of foot.

They had discovered, during the infrequent and all-too-brief-rest stops, a little bit more about the former captive. Through heaving breaths he identified himself as Adrys, a merchants son from Sunndi. His fathers caravan had been attacked by the bullywugs near the swamps edge and he'd been carried off. He had no idea whether or not his family was still alive.

Kaerion stumbled once over the gnarled root of a tree and would have fallen had Adrys not thrown his good arm in front of the fighter for support. Not stopping, he gave the lad a brief smile of appreciation before returning his concentration to combat the fatigue and pain of their forced pace. Three times they had almost been discovered by patrols of bullywugs who now scoured the swamp in search of them. Only Gerwyth's consummate skill allowed the fugitives to escape detection. Even now, the Vast Swamp echoed with the hissing calls and screeches of the enraged bullywugs. Kaerion knew they were only one step ahead of their pursuers, and it would take every ounce of strength and endurance to see them safely to their companions.

Hours passed, and the moons fell lower in the night sky, and the shadows deepened. Kaerion felt danger lurking behind every tree or shaded bush. Doggedly he pushed on, memories of Majandra's lips on his mind, fueling muscles already pushed beyond the brink of exhaustion.

When Gerwyth called their next halt, Kaerion was surprised to see the rosy pink of dawn pushing up on the horizon. His lungs sucked in air greedily as he stood bent with hands on knees. Beside him, Adrys drank deeply from their waterskin, and even the normally unflappable elf looked exhausted as he examined Bredeth, who had collapsed in a heap.

Ahead, the path widened and descended at a fairly steep angle. Looking through the ragged wall of trees and brush before him, Kaerion could see that the trail dipped into a large plain of stagnant water. In the distance, several flat-topped hills rose out from the plain. But before he could take time to examine them in more detail, a triumphant gurgling hiss broke the silence of the dawn.

Kaerion cursed as he saw four bullywugs emerge from either side of the undergrowth ahead of him, blocking their way. Turning to warn his companions, he was reassured to see that Gerwyth had already identified their danger. The elf had drawn both of his short swords—though his hands shook with exhaustion. Kaerion was no better. He drew his own blade and stifled another curse at the weakness in his limbs. This would be a difficult battle. They'd have to push past these creatures before others could come and reinforce them.

With an incoherent battle cry, Kaerion launched himself at the bullywugs, the arc of his sword catching the newly risen sun. Confident that Gerwyth was no more than a few steps behind, he crashed into the nearest opponent, aiming a slash at the creatures neck. Exhaustion and lack of water had taken their toll, however. The bullywug knocked the feeble attack aside with its own spear and then brought the shaft of the weapon down hard on Kaerion's skull. The world swam as he reeled

beneath the force of the blow. His opponent connected a vicious kick to his stomach. Kaerion was knocked backward and rolled hard down the steep incline of the path. As he fell, he caught glimpses of his companions fighting their way past the bullywugs and running down the path.

The breath left Kaerion's chest with a whumph as he landed face first into the muck. Desperately, he tried to pull himself up and collect his sword, sure that death would soon follow. What he saw almost caused him to drop his weapon in surprise.

Along the top of the hilly path, the four bullywugs raised their own weapons in the air, hissing angrily at the intruders. Another line of bullywugs emerged behind them, covering the length of the hillside. One by one each of the creatures turned its bloated head to the dawn sky and emitted a horrifying cry. The ululation echoed wildly across the plain.

As Kaerion, still gasping for breath, stumbled toward his own companions, who now stared dumbfounded halfway up the path, he wondered why the bullywugs hadn't attacked. Surely there was no way that the four of them, wounded and exhausted as they were, could prevail in the face of such overwhelming odds.

Then, as the sun peeked over the horizon, Kaerion caught a glint of reflection from somewhere behind him. He turned and surveyed the scene. In the distance, along one of the flat-topped hills, he could make out a strange formation. Black rocks erupted like daggers from the top of the hill, forming the shape of a grinning skull.

Suddenly, Kaerion knew why the bullywugs refused to move any closer, knew why the entire plain before them lay silent and brooding beneath the newly risen sun. Kaerion shuddered at his discovery. He and his companions were safe for the moment.

They had found it.

Before them, marked with a gruesome symbol, lay Acererak's unholy resting place—the Tomb of Horrors.

## Part 3

“In cruelty there is strength; in power, pleasure.  
Compassion is the only true weakness.”  
—*The Book of Nine Shadows*



A ragged shout went up from the assembled guards. Majandra turned from the supply inventory she was taking—her fifth since they had arrived at the supposed site of Acererak’s tomb nearly three days ago—and sent a prayer to any god listening. She looked at the knot of guards scrambling with picks and shovels. It was clear they had found the collapsed remains of yet another tunnel. She only hoped this one would actually lead into the tomb.

Over the course of the last three days, they had found four such collapsed tunnels. After hours of backbreaking labor, they had unearthed each one and sent a contingent of guards into them. Three had proven to be useless, ending in walls of solid rock. The fourth had led to an ancient metal door and a trap so cleverly constructed that it had nearly killed three of the guards when huge sections of the tunnel crashed down upon them. Only the quick work of the remaining guards and a judicious use of Phathas’ magic had freed them quickly enough for Vaxor to call upon the healing power of Heironeous and save the wounded men.

Nor was it only their expedition that had suffered the sting of the cruel traps protecting the ancient tomb. During the course of their excavation, the guards had uncovered fragments of armor, bits of bone, even the cracked and shattered remains of almost whole skeletons—all of it a grim testament to the devilishly cunning construction of the tomb’s protection. Not for the first time, Majandra found herself wondering how many enterprising souls had braved the horrors of the Vast Swamp, only to die here at the doorstep of Acererak’s tomb.

These were truly dark thoughts, she realized, for one so close to completing a quest that had occupied much of her time these past three years. And yet, she found most of her thoughts taking dark turns ever since Kaerion and Gerwyth had set out in search of Bredeth.

“Worried, child?” asked a voice from somewhere close behind her.

Majandra jumped with surprise before recognizing Vaxor’s deep baritone. Turning, she saw that the cleric had walked up while she had been deep in thought. He now stood there solicitously, his deep-set eyes searching yet compassionate as they seemed to look through her. Often, when confronted by full-blooded humans

who insisted on classifying her as young—and therefore the target of patronizing discourses on life—the half-elf fought the urge to point out that she was, in all likelihood, as old, if not older, than they.

Somehow, the urge never manifested itself when she spoke with Vaxor. Nor did it do so now. Something in the man’s demeanor would have made any such statement seem crass and petty. Instead, she swallowed and said, “They have been gone nearly five days, Vaxor, and even Phathas’ attempts at scrying have not revealed anything. Of course I’m worried.”

The cleric placed a battle-roughened hand upon her shoulder. “I understand your concern, but Gerwyth is as skilled a ranger as ever I’ve seen. He has led us safely through danger countless times. If anything, I’d worry about those bullywugs. They are probably still trying to find out what army has swept through their tribal lands.”

In spite of everything, Majandra found herself smiling. What Vaxor said was most likely true. Yet for all of his comforting words, he had not mentioned Kaerion, and it was clear to the bard’s trained ear that the omission was deliberate. Despite all they had gone through these past several months, the fallen paladin stood as a barrier between Majandra and the cleric, as if Vaxor’s obvious distaste for Kaerion had now somehow extended to a part of her. She should have been angry at the priest’s uncompromising righteousness, his unyielding judgment. Instead, Majandra found herself profoundly saddened. That a good and noble man such as Vaxor should be so blinded by his own fanaticism was a cause for sorrow, not fury.

Her smile fading, the bard returned Vaxor’s steady gaze. The two stood in tense silence until the cursing shouts of several guards broke the deadlock. It was Landra, however, all cool efficiency and control, who actually approached the gruff Heironean priest.

“The men say the rock in the collapsed tunnel is too hard for them to break through with their tools,” the guard captain reported. “They’ll need some help, preferably of the arcane kind.”

“At once,” was all that Vaxor said, before hurrying off to find Phathas. As Majandra watched the cleric go, she couldn’t help but see Landra’s face twist into a grimace.

“Bit of an old lemon, if you ask me,” the weathered fighter said conspiratorially. “That man could use the largest wineskin this side of the Glorioles. Do him some good.” And then she, too, turned and walked back toward her charges. This time, Majandra’s face split into a wide grin, her spirits truly lifted.

Moments later, the bard watched as Phathas walked slowly up to the small passage the guards had cleared in the collapsed tunnel. Quietly, the sweat-soaked men and women assembled behind the mage as he raised thin arms above his head. Silence filled the camp as the old man’s dexterous hands wove complex patterns in the air. Again, the half-elf watched her former master with pride and not a little awe. Even bent by age and the weight of his long life, Phathas’ consummate skill was apparent in every gesture and motion. Here was a wizard who had dedicated his life to the pursuit of knowledge and the mastery of arcane forces—forces that gathered even now at his fingertips.

Majandra watched as the spell neared its completion. The hair at the base of her neck prickled with the strength of the latent power Phathas had summoned With a

final flourish and several short commands in the elusive and subtle language of magic, the wizard extended one fist sharply before him.

Nothing happened.

And then the world exploded in a cloud of dust and rock as large volumes of dirt and stone were obliterated. Another round of cheers rose up from the guards when the gentle wind blew the haze of detritus away, revealing the smooth worked stone of a passageway leading deeper into the hill. Cheers soon turned to cries of dismay, however, as a blast of fetid air erupted from the passageway, causing everyone in the assembly to fall to their knees retching. Even from her relatively safe vantage point among the supply rafts, Majandra gagged as the stench of corruption wafted toward her. If there was ever any doubt that something dark and evil inhabited the ancient tomb, it was put to rest by the foul odor emanating from the newly unearthed tunnel.

This time it was Vaxor who rose to his feet before the entrance. Covering his face with one arm, he raised his holy symbol before him and called upon the Arch Paladin for aid. A bluish-white glow suffused the silver symbol, flaring sharply as another gust of wind brought a rush of foul air up from the passageway. For a moment, Majandra thought the cleric would fall back before the blast, but instead he moved a step forward and called upon his god again. A peal of thunder erupted as Vaxor completed his prayer, and a gentle rain began to fall.

Majandra cried out in surprise as a familiar smell washed over the company. For where every drop of rain struck, there sprang the lush scent of roses. The rest of the expedition was equally stunned. Each member raised their arms in wonder at the sweet relief of the god's rain, and several burst into laughter. And then, just as suddenly as it had appeared, the misting rain stopped. And yet, the smell of roses lingered still, overpowering the rank air from the tomb.

The half-elf walked quickly over to where the priest was assisting Phathas to his feet. "That was wonderfully done, Vaxor," she said with more feeling than she intended.

The cleric offered her a courtly bow. "Though Heironeous is the Lord of War, there is beauty in his service, my lady," he said with only a hint of reproach reaching her ears.

Phathas, quiet during this exchange, placed a shaking hand upon Vaxor's shoulder. "Well done, my friend," he said. "Well done." And then to Landra, who had approached quietly—"Assemble your guards and have them gather the supplies we'll need for the rest of our journey. We will soon enter Acererak's tomb."

Majandra turned and walked back to the supply rafts, planning to assist the guards in their task. She very nearly stumbled when a familiar voice cut across the camp.

"How very much like humans," Gerwyth shouted to no one in particular, "leaving before the guests arrive!"

The half-elf cast a hopeful look in the direction of the voice and felt her heart lurch as she saw only the ranger helping the battered Bredeth down the path toward the encampment. Just as a sob welled in her throat, she caught sight of Kaerion, and, to her surprise, another figure—a young man, walking behind the elf. Somewhere inside the excited jumble that made up her thoughts, Majandra knew that she should be curious about the new arrival, but her feet had already begun to propel her toward



a certain black-maned fighter, and all questions evaporated as she threw her arms around him.

\* \* \*

Kaerion fastened the last catch of his armor before girding on his shield. The comfortable weight of the mail settled around him, and for the first time in several weeks, he felt truly protected. Though the early morning sun had already begun its relentless, burning assault against the land, he could feel the chill air emanating from the tunnel before him. At least he'd be able to wear the heavy chain without covering himself in sweat after the first three steps.

Around him, the rest of the expedition was making final preparations before descending into the dark depths of the tomb. Gently, he drew his sword from its scabbard and stretched out the muscles in his sword arm by practicing some basic drills. He felt refreshed after a long night's rest and was grateful that Phathas had decided to delay the party's entry into the tomb until Bredeth and his rescuers had a chance to rest.

Speaking of which, he had promised the young noble he would keep an eye on Adrys. Bredeth had been most insistent, to the point of not letting Vaxor tend his wounds until Kaerion had sworn an oath to watch over the lad. He would never have guessed that the formerly arrogant noble would have grown so protective of a commoner, but battles such as they had fought since leaving Rel Mord were enough to change anyone. Kaerion was grateful that Bredeth had changed for the better.

Searching the surrounding encampment, he spied Adrys in conversation with Landra. The guard captain seemed to be in the midst of lecturing him. He drew nearer just in time to see her hand the lad a short training sword. "Can you handle one of these?" she asked in that no-nonsense tone that Kaerion had come to identify with the seasoned veteran.

Adrys shook his head. "No," he managed eventually. "My da kept me away from guardsmen as much as possible. He preferred my learning how to keep his ledgers and accounts rather than any weapons work."

The guard captains slow clearing of her throat told Kaerion just exactly what she thought of that notion. He found himself smiling, just a bit, at Adrys' obvious discomfort.

"Well lad," Landra said, finishing her lecture with one final admonition, "see to it that you poke the sharp end into anything that tries to bite you, and stay out of everyone's way." With that, she clapped the boy hard about the shoulders and turned, barking several orders at her men.

Adrys held the sword awkwardly in his hand for a few more moments. Catching sight of Kaerion close by, he shrugged. "She doesn't like me very much, does she?" he asked in a despairing tone.

Kaerion's smile deepened. "She likes you just fine, lad. She just wants to see you come out of the tomb alive," he said as kindly as he could.

In fact, the very subject of Adrys accompanying the party inside the tomb had sparked a lively and heated debate within the company. Keeping Adrys out of the tomb meant weakening the expedition's strength, as they would be forced to post

some of their number as guards to protect him, while allowing him to accompany them meant that someone would always have to keep an eye on him. Personally, Kaerion was glad that Phathas had decided to allow the boy to journey with them inside the tomb. The oath he swore to Bredeth would have seriously complicated matters. As it was, the lad would be safest traveling in the protection of the entire party.

Just then, Gerwyth tapped him lightly on the shoulder. “It is time, Kaer,” the ranger said. “Phathas has ordered everyone to gather at the mouth of the tunnel. Three guards will lead in, with you and I following. We’re to keep an eye out for any sign of danger. Phathas, Vaxor, and Majandra will march behind us, with Bredeth, Landra, and the remaining guards bringing up the rear.” And then, turning to Adrys, he said, “You, my young friend, have the honor of walking next to one of the wisest mages I have ever known. Try and stay out of trouble there.”

The ranger smiled, taking the sting from his words, and then turned toward the crowd gathering at the mouth of the tunnel. Kaerion shrugged apologetically as Adrys rolled his eyes at the ranger’s retreating back, then he placed a gentle hand on the lad’s shoulder and guided him toward his place in the assembling line.

Vaxor was just finishing his benediction when Kaerion found his own place in the party’s order. Years of habit forced him to recheck his gear one final time. Countless lives had been lost, he knew, from carelessness. His would not be one of them. Armor, shield, pack—everything checked out, as he knew it would, but he shook his left leg gingerly as the unfamiliar weight of a second scabbard pulled at his hip. He had, with a great deal of silent cursing, decided to take Galadorn with him. Knowing the blasted curse he labored under, it would do him no good to try and leave the sword with the supplies on the rafts. At least this way he wouldn’t find the bulk of the sword suddenly tangling his pack when he least needed any distractions.

Kaerion gripped the pommel of his other sword, which rested lightly in its scabbard, as Phathas signaled the expedition forward. A man at ease with the gods would have breathed his own personal prayer as the guards in front of him descended into the tunnel—for they were about to despoil one of the deadliest tombs in all the Flanaess. Kaerion merely spit once and cast a quick smile at Gerwyth before heading down into the darkness of the tunnel.

Though Vaxor’s blessing the previous day had neutralized the worst of the tomb’s fetid stench, the air blowing up from the deeper recesses of the tunnel carried with it a hint of its former corruption. Breathing through his mouth, Kaerion avoided the remaining stink. The chill breath of the tomb touched something deep within him. He sensed, if such a thing were truly possible, the promise of malevolence within its dank passage—and something deeper, something that spoke of darkness and isolation, and a power stronger even than death.

Kaerion pushed on, ignoring the chill sensation that crawled up his spine to curl with icy tendrils around the warm stone of his heart. There was evil here, an echo of a presence so palpably corrupt that Kaerion felt as if the very earth were screaming in protest. But he was no simple villager who had gathered his courage among the ale cups and set out with a sword as dull as his wits. He had faced the very heart of evil itself, and though he had broken beneath its power, he survived. And while he lived, he would not grant it another such victory.

Through sheer force of will, he moved forward, breaking the paralysis that had unwittingly seized his limbs. He could see that the other guards were similarly affected, and he touched each gently about the shoulder, whispering words of strength and courage in their ears. However, it wasn't until Vaxor spoke the name of Heironeous, and blessed light bathed the tunnel, chasing away shadow and fear alike, that the rest of the stricken company could move again. As one, the companions let out a breathy sigh, each praising and thanking the Valorous One in his or her own way. Glancing quickly at the center of their line, he was surprised and not a small bit proud to see that Adrys showed no fear. The lad gazed about his surroundings calmly and even managed a wan smile as he caught Kaerion's gaze.

Turning back to the now-advancing guards, he noted the passage they had been following opened wider as it continued on into true darkness. Moving forward, Kaerion could see by the light of Vaxor's spell that the walls in the passage ahead were markedly different from the rough-hewn stone that had guided their travel so far—for these walls were smooth and straight. Reaching out a tentative hand, he ran roughened fingers across their length. Though he was no expert, it was clear that whoever had built this passage had flattened the wall with a covering of cement or plaster.

As the party moved deeper into the passage, Kaerion found out why—and nearly had to catch his breath with the discovery. Every inch of the walls were covered in elaborate murals and frescoes, and the ceiling, which soared almost twenty feet high, had been marked by the hand of a long-dead artist. In the circle of Vaxor's illumination, Kaerion could see kine grazing lazily amid a midsummer's sun, a pack of wolves gazing fiercely from between the trees in a forest copse, and a plethora of human and animal hybrids cavorting and fighting among the pastoral scenes. It was Bredeth, however, who called his attention to the most disturbing scene of all—a reminder of the true nature of the place in which they found themselves. For on one section of the wall, recreated with unerring accuracy, Kaerion saw a trail of familiar wagons plodding across the snow-covered fields of Nyron.

Despite this ominous discovery, it was the colors that had caused Kaerion's initial reaction. Ancient as the tomb might be, these paintings caught and reflected the party's light as rich in tone and color as the day they had been painted. By some working of magic, or more likely, some foul curse, the artistry in this bizarre passage had been preserved against the ravages of time.

Nor was the floor itself devoid of ornamentation. While the rest of the party examined the surrounding paintings, Kaerion knelt down and touched a mosaic of red stone. He was surprised to note that the red tiles of the mosaic made a small path, large enough for a single person to walk on, that wound its way farther into the room. Kaerion was about to call attention to this when he heard a muffled scream.

He whirled, only to see one of the guards, a man called Joran, tumble into a hole that had suddenly opened beneath his feet. Desperately, Kaerion ran to the now-revealed pit, calling the nearest guards to assist him. Lighting a torch of his own, he tried to peer through the darkness. What he saw caused his heart to sink. Thirty feet below him, at the edge of his torchlight, Joran's body lay in a broken heap, glistening spikes driven through chest and legs. Even from this distance it was clear that the man was dead. Kaerion let out a curse.

The tomb had claimed its first victim.



Majandra heard Joran's cry and Kaerion's subsequent curse as if from a distance. It was not that she was cold-hearted and indifferent to the man's death. In fact, as she continued to stare at the strangely constructed passage, a part of her mind recalled memories of Joran. Her brief glimpses into his life—the easy familiarity with which he joked with comrades, his interest in horses, the way he always requested the liveliest tunes from the hill villages of Nyronnd where he grew up—caused a dull ache in the pit of her stomach.

But the part of her that hungered after ancient lore and long-forgotten tales, the part that drove her to memorize every line of every poem and saga she heard, that turned the slightest hint of mystery into a driving quest for knowledge and every note played upon the strings of her harp another step in a complex dance of mastery—that part of her stood rapt and amazed at the handiwork of the long-dead wizard. She drank it all in, every brushstroke and whorl of color, every symbol and hand-carved rune. It all became a part of a tableau, a tapestry of history that was woven in the long-ago years, ancient before the Kingdom of Nyronnd was born in blood and fire. There would be time enough to remember the dead, Majandra knew. There was always time enough for that.

As Majandra surveyed the area around her, she noticed that Bredeth, too, had stayed behind and gazed with seeming fascination at their surroundings. This was yet another mystery. For as long as she had known the brat of a noble, he had been all fire and arrogance. Yet since his rescue from the bullywugs, the young man had been withdrawn and tentative—almost introspective. Majandra wondered exactly what could have happened to the noble to bring about such a drastic change. She had seen men and women return from war broken and twisted, but this was something else entirely. If anything, Bredeth seemed dulled somehow, blunted like a sword used to dig trenches and then cast aside.

The bard was about to question Bredeth about this when Vaxor's god-light illuminated something upon the floor—a pattern laid out upon the winding mosaic, one that was almost familiar. And then she knew: Runes. They ran along the path, intricate and spidery, flowing like molten silver. Her question to Bredeth forgotten,

Majandra recalled a spell that Phathas himself had taught her. In a quiet voice, she sang the notes that would activate the magic and floated gently toward the ceiling, propelling herself slowly in the direction of the path by pushing along the painted stone overhead. Dimly, she was aware of Vaxor, cradling Joran's broken body. The cleric intoned the final blessings upon the dead man, speeding his journey into Heironeous' arms, but the bard could make no sense of his speech, for the runes that she read burned in her mind. Without trying, Majandra found herself entering the bardic trance that preceded the telling of the longest tales. When her voice washed, unbidden, over the assembly below her, it was with the practiced timbre that had stilled even the rowdiest crowds.

“Go back to the tormentor or through the arch,  
and the second great hall you'll discover.  
Shun green if you can, but night's good color  
is for those of great valor.  
If shades of red stand for blood, the wise  
will not need sacrifice aught but a loop of  
magical metal—you're well along your march.

“Two pits along the way will be found to lead  
to a fortuitous fall, so check the wall.  
These keys and those are most important of all,  
and beware of trembling hands and what will maul.  
If you find the false, you find the true,  
and into the columned hall you'll come,  
and there the throne that's key and keyed.

“The iron men of visage grim do more  
than meets the viewer's eye.  
You've left and left and found my Tomb,  
and now your soul will die.”

It was Gerwyth at last who broke the silence that fell over the company. “That,” he said in a critical voice, “was truly dreadful, Majandra. I hope you didn't make that up yourself. I've heard better from a dockside drunk on a ten-day binge.”

Freed from the strange compulsion that had mastered her, the bard felt her anger rise. It was, she knew, irrational. Gerwyth had just attempted to break the growing mood of gloom that was plaguing the expedition, but something in his words stung her pride, and she found herself snapping a retort. “Of course I didn't make it up. It was placed here by Acererak and written in an ancient language. The words lose a great deal in translation—and in the interpretation by dense minds.”

“Peace, Majandra,” Phathas, silent since their entry into the tomb, spoke at last, his voice carrying in the smooth-walled chamber. The mage combed a dirt-stained hand through his unruly beard, lips pursed in thought. “It appears that Acererak left a map of sorts for those who would plunder his tomb.”

“But why would anyone do that, Phathas?” Kaerion asked. “Why would a wizard who knew that thieves would seek to disturb his resting place offer them assistance? It doesn’t make sense.”

It was Vaxor, much to Majandra’s surprise, who answered the question. The cleric gently closed Joran’s eyes and stood, regarding the assembled group with a grave expression. “It was said of Acererak that he enjoyed games, for none was as clever as he in all the world. Through riddles and such cruel games as he could devise, he demonstrated his mastery over those who sought to challenge him. At the last—” he indicated Majandra with an apologetic shrug—“the bards say that death was his greatest opponent, and no one is sure who emerged victorious from that final game.”

Gerwyth’s throaty chuckle sliced through the silence once again. Though still pleasant to hear, Majandra found herself unaccountably irritated by the rangers seeming mirth. “What in all the Nine Hells do you find so funny?” she asked in a voice intended to sting.

The elf merely continued to chuckle, seemingly undisturbed by her discomfort. That thought caused her temper to flare even more, and she was about to send a blistering retort his way when Gerwyth held up his hands in entreaty. “Please, my Lady,” he said as formally as he could between the laughter still present in his voice, “do not wound me further. I was merely thinking that if what Vaxor has said is true, then Acererak built this tomb hoping that foolhardy men and women would come to defile his resting place in search of hidden wealth. If this is a game, then we have played right into his hands.”

That thought sent the anger draining from her like water from a burst dam. With a sinking feeling, she realized that the ranger’s words were true. The tomb wasn’t simply a repository of ancient knowledge ready to be lifted from its hoary grasp. She had been wrong to think so. Rather, the bard and her fellow companions were playing pieces in a vast game whose board had been built by a long-dead wizard. And they had already lost one of their own in pursuit of victory. She looked around at her companions and saw, by the haunted look in their eyes, the same thoughts flash into each of their minds.

Phathas cleared his throat. “There is wisdom in your words, Gerwyth,” the mage said softly, “however bitter the humor that lurks behind them. Yet I believe that courage and cunning and, yes, a fair bit of luck, will see us through. If this is a game, we have been given a glimpse of the rules.” He pointed at the spidery runes inlaid on the mosaic. “So let us gather ourselves for the challenge and proceed. Perhaps we will find, at the end, that our strength and nobility of purpose will be the equal of Acererak’s fiendish traps.”

It was a good speech, Majandra thought—inspiring, impassioned, and with just the right inflections and oratorical nuances. Quickly, the party reformed, and she heard Kaerion’s voice booming out instructions.

“Landra, have your men break out the poles,” he said with that familiar note of authority. “We will follow along the mosaic path, but we must move carefully, lest we fall victim to more pits.”

In a few moments, the company began to follow the winding red path across the length of the chamber. Three times, the guards triggered pit traps with their ten-foot

poles, each one opening up to a thirty-foot drop and ending in spiked doom. At last, they drew near the end of the passage. Looming straight before them, set into the smooth stone wall, Majandra could see the leering face of a devil. Whoever had sculpted such a disturbing portrait must have had personal experience with these foul creatures, for every detail of the creature's face was rendered in horrifying complexity. Two great horns curled out from the top of the beast's scaled forehead, and its gaping mouth was opened, as if it were roaring its hellish curses upon the world. From this distance, Majandra could see that the sculpture took up almost an entire ten-foot section of wall, and the mouth itself opened to a diameter of almost three feet.

As the party approached the stone face, Majandra saw, somewhere off to her left, an archway covered entirely with a dense mist. In the dim light, the half-elf could see several shadowy forms weaving through the misty veil. She shivered as she drew closer to the bizarre sculpture and wondered if the others had noticed how cold it had become this close to the face. Several guards flanked Phathas, who had walked up in front of the gaping mouth. The mage drew forth a wand of bleached bone and passed it slowly before the face. The stone pulsed red in the wand's wake.

Phathas nodded once. "There is magic here," he said simply.

"Well," Gerwyth said, motioning toward the face and the arch with graceful hands. "It appears we have a choice. The hole inside the mouth could lead to another passageway inside the tomb, or we could walk through the mist and beyond that arch."

Majandra pulled at her lower lip, watching as the guards conferred among themselves. Bredeth, she noted with interest, had moved closer to the archway and was staring intently at the stonework. "If you believe the words of Acererak," she said after a few moments, "we should probably take the arch."

Kaerion threw her a questioning look, his brow knitted in obvious confusion, and the half-elf was reminded once again that not everyone had spent a lifetime perfecting the ability to memorize vast amounts of information.

"Go back to the tormentor or through the arch, and the second great hall you'll discover," she quoted.

"As you said, Majandra, the question is whether or not we can trust Acererak's words," Vaxor said from his place next to the old mage. "Perhaps the words laid out by the canny wizard are a trap, and we'll follow them to our doom."

"Then maybe we should divide into two groups, each covering one of these passages," said Bredeth, as he drew nearer to the swirling mist inside the archway. "That way we could cover more of the tomb within the same time."

There was a startled exclamation from the collected guards at this suggestion, and even Majandra found herself reacting instinctively to such a comment. Gerwyth, however, had moved quickly toward the young man, and the bard could see that he laid a companionable hand upon the noble's shoulder.

"I have traveled many paths in my long life, friend Bredeth," the ranger said firmly, "and the one thing that I have learned in that time, is that when it comes to exploring underground, never, ever split the party. Down that way lies death and madness—or worse."



Majandra watched in amazement as the noble, so quick to react to any hint of criticism, shrugged. "It was only a suggestion," he said mildly.

In the end, it was Adrys who decided their course of action for them. While watching the exchange between Bredeth and the elf, Majandra saw the merchant's son move swiftly toward one of the guards. Grabbing the long pole from the woman's grasp, he lifted it easily and thrust one end into the center of the gaping devil mouth. He held it there for a few moments, before quickly withdrawing it.

A gasp of astonishment rippled through the company, for the section of the pole that had entered the black circular hole had simply disappeared. Moving to examine the pole herself, Majandra found that the break was completely clean. It was as if the missing section had never existed at all. Such was the twisted fate for anyone who had thought to explore the area beyond the hole. The bard breathed deeply, trying to control her rapidly beating heart in the face of the death they had so narrowly avoided. All of them. Had Adrys not used the pole to check the safety of the circular passage, they might all have been killed. Gone without a single trace. And Nyron, the noble kingdom of her birth, might never be saved from the rot that was eating it from within.

She looked at the boy once again. Several of the guards were clapping him companionably on the shoulders, acknowledging the actions that had just saved their lives. Even Kaerion knelt before the lad and thanked him. Instead of showing the embarrassment that Majandra would expect from a boy his age, Adrys merely accepted the congratulations with a brief nod of his head and a wan smile. There was more to this merchant's son than met the eye, she thought, and vowed to keep a closer eye on their newest member.

Decided clearly on their course of action, Majandra and her companions gathered before the mist-filled archway. Absently, she noted that both Gerwyth and Kaerion had their weapons drawn and had asked Landra to position guards at the party's back. With everything that had happened to them since they entered the tomb, the bard realized she had forgotten about the potential danger from any creatures that had made the lost corridors of stone their home during the many years since Acererak's minions had constructed his resting place. She was glad that her companions had the presence of mind to keep watch. Perhaps Phathas was right. Maybe their commitment and their strength would prevail over the ancient evil lurking within these halls.

Once again, the wizened mage stood in front of the group. This time, however, he raised both hands, fingers slightly curled, in front of his eyes and spoke the words of power. When he was finished, the base stones on the left and right of the arch pulsed with a yellow and orange light, while the keystone within the archway flickered with a blue incandescence.

Majandra watched as the mage stood before the archway in silence, studying the mystic construction with eyes that had always seen far and deeply. "There is strong magic woven into the very heart of this stone," he said. "I believe that the arch itself functions as a teleportation device. The stones that are glowing are part of a key that will change the coordinates of the target area."

"Knowing what we have experienced so far," Vaxor said, "I would wager that the arch is currently set to send whoever walks through it to a particularly deadly location. The trick will be unlocking the right sequence for a safe journey."

“Who should attempt the sequence?” Gerwyth asked. “There could be further traps built into the arch that Phathas hasn’t detected.”

It only took a few moments for Majandra to make her decision. “I will,” she said with all of the confidence she could muster. “I have had some instruction in the ways of magic.” The bard smiled as she looked at Phathas. “And, if there are any physical traps—well, I have some experience dealing with those as well.”

This last she said with a great deal of nonchalance, hoping to slip that bit of information by her companions, who would no doubt be surprised by such a revelation.

She failed.

Amid the whispered murmurs of surprise, it was Vaxor whose voice she heard frame the question she had most wanted to avoid. “And how, my dear,” the cleric asked in the most colored of paternal tones, “did you come to possess such an expertise?”

The half-elf blushed, hoping that the pulsating lights of the archway masked her discomfort. “Well,” she said in an even tone, “you don’t think I spent all my time in Rel Mord poring over ancient parchments and rehearsing fragments of old songs, did you? Let’s just say that I had some colorful friends and leave it at that, shall we?”

With that, Majandra withdrew a small pouch of tools from within a hidden fold of her cloak and set about examining the stonework around the archway. A few minutes later, after she had poked and prodded and searched the area on and about the arch, the half-elf turned to the rest of the waiting company. “Seems clear to me,” she said. “I’m heading up.” And with a single note, she tapped into the still-active levitation spell she had cast when examining the rune-inlaid mosaic. Gently, the bard floated up toward the top of the arch. Gingerly, she pressed her palm against the pulsing blue stone and was rewarded as the incandescence solidified. Slowly she returned to the floor and touched the orange and then the yellow pulsing stones. Each in turn burned with a solid light until Majandra was finished.

Nothing happened for a few moments—and then, with a bright burst of light, each of the glowing stones pulsed once again.

“I sense no change within the magical construct,” Phathas said.

Majandra acknowledged the wizard’s comment with a sigh of frustration and then quickly tried a new sequence. Again, nothing happened. Determined to uncover the correct order with the least amount of time wasted, she kept trying. It wasn’t until her last attempt, when Majandra touched the yellow, blue, and orange stones in that order that the arch emitted a single sharp sound. Within seconds, the swirling mist faded, until Majandra could see a passageway heading off into darkness.

There was a collective sigh, as if the entire company had been holding its breath, waiting to see the outcome of her attempts. She turned and was rewarded by the mage’s beaming smile. “Well done, my child,” Phathas said, and she could hear the pride evident in his thin voice.

With the path clear ahead of them, the company resumed its former marching order and continued their march. The half-elf’s inability to see anything ahead of her should have offered a warning. However, flushed with her recent success, Majandra wasn’t paying much attention. She could do no more than scream when, with a sudden, deep lurching motion, she felt first the floor, then the walls, and soon the

entire tomb itself fall away from her, replaced by a blackness so impenetrable that she knew it had no end.



Kaerion felt a moment of disorientation as the darkness receded. The bard's scream had offered him a few seconds of warning before the complete and total annihilation of light, and so he was not caught in total surprise. As the spinning in his head gradually receded, he blinked, trying to make sense of what his eyes were showing him. The long hall had disappeared, and now the members of the expedition were crammed into a small room, holding their heads as if each nursed one of the hangovers that he had woken up with every morning for more than ten years. Wherever they were, the teleporting arch had clearly worked as designed.

He cast another glance over his companions. Satisfied that no one had suffered any permanent harm, Kaerion gave his surroundings a more thorough search. The room itself was no more than ten feet wide and, judging by the way Vaxor's pulsing light reached from end to end, it was less than twenty feet long. In the center of the room, glaring at him with an expression of hatred locked in solid stone, stood an imposing statue of a gargoyle. Though startled enough to draw his sword at first sight of the creature, Kaerion's heart settled as his eyes registered that one of the monster's four gruesomely muscled arms lay on the floor at its clawed feet.

"Careful, Kaerion," Gerwyth said as Kaerion slowly approached the statue. "Give a shout if it starts to move."

The fighter grunted his affirmative as he stalked silently over to the gargoyle, sword drawn and held ready for a sudden attack. The elf was right to warn caution. Both of them had seen enough animated statues in their time to be forever wary about stone constructions.

Vaxor's light grew brighter as he and the other members of the expedition drew closer to the statue. Satisfied that the looming block of worked stone before him was simply a statue and nothing more, Kaerion bent and picked up the gargoyle's splintered arm. Like each of the other three arms, the stone appendage possessed a round indentation in the center of the palm; its flint-gray claws curled slightly around it. As Kaerion called the others over to examine this new discovery, one of the guards shouted out her own find—a narrow tunnel that sloped away from the room at an angle.

“Landra,” he heard the cleric of Heironeous say, “take three guards and set them to watch the tunnel’s mouth. I don’t want any surprises.”

“A fearsome beast,” Gerwyth remarked as the guard captain signaled her compliance. “I’m just glad that we don’t have to face the tearing claws of this thing in battle.”

The elf was right, of course, Kaerion thought as he traced the gargoyle’s palm indentation with a calloused finger. The statue itself was over eight feet tall, and each of the beast’s teeth looked sharp enough to cut through the thickest armor. He’d settle for poking around an old statue any day.

“This depression looks deep enough to hold a large stone,” he said to the others, each of whom were poking and prodding the statue.

“A stone,” replied Majandra, whose hands, Kaerion could see, were sliding expertly across the ridged lines of the statue, “or a large gem.”

The half-elf rummaged through the leather pouches hanging from her belt until she produced several red-hued stones, each with many crystalline facets. The gems gleamed in the surrounding light. “Perhaps you should all step back,” the bard said as she reached out and gently placed one of the gems in the gargoyle’s upturned hand.

Kaerion fell back quickly, his long sword in guard position. Briefly, he wondered where the bard had come across such large gemstones. Full of surprises, that one, he thought, a brief smile flickering across his face—replaced quickly by a frown as he remembered where they were. There would be time for such idle speculation later.

Nothing happened.

Kaerion let out a breath he hadn’t known he was holding and saw the others do the same. Poised for flight before the statue, Majandra relaxed and held out a second gemstone. Again, she placed it in one of the gargoyle’s hands.

Again nothing happened.

Kaerion saw her cast Phathas a rueful grin as the wizard leaned on his staff, staring with interest at the stone monster. The half-elf placed a third gem into the creature’s hand, and Kaerion let out a cry of warning as he saw the gargoyle’s fingers twitch slightly. A moment later, the beast’s claws closed sharply about the stones. Running toward Majandra, Kaerion heard a loud grinding sound, and a spray of glistening red powder erupted from the statue’s hands.

Pulling the half-elf away from the gargoyle, he was surprised at the string of invective that issued forth from the bard’s mouth. Kaerion was certain he caught fragments of at least four different languages he was familiar with in the torrent of curses that poured out of her mouth, and at least as many languages that he had never heard before.

Stunned silence filled the room as Majandra finally brought herself under control. Several of the guards shifted from foot to foot, obviously amused in the wake of the half-elf’s blistering anger, but too respectful to comment on it.

“My dear child,” Phathas said at last, breaking the silence, “you do understand that our goal here is to collect treasure from this dreadful tomb and bring it back with us to Rel Mord, and not the other way around?”

Even in the pale light, Kaerion could see the tips of the half-elf’s ears turning red. Companionable laughter broke the tension and soon even the normally dour Heironean cleric chuckled at Majandra’s discomfort. Kaerion turned away from the

embarrassed half-elf, who had finally given up on trying to maintain any semblance of dignity and now wiped tears of laughter from her own eyes, to check on Adrys, who had remained silent through this entire exchange.

The boy was not there.

All levity leeches from Kaerion's body as he scanned the room, hoping that the merchant's son was merely lost in the press of bodies. His hope was crushed, as swiftly and as surely as the gemstones that they had so recently placed in the hands of the gargoyle.

"Has anyone seen Adrys?" he asked, his voice cutting through the surrounding laughter.

"He was just here a moment ago," one of the guards responded.

"Come on," Kaerion shouted to his companions, "we have to find him!"

He bolted from the room, lighting a torch and pushing past the guards who stood sentry at the mouth of the tunnel. If anything happened to the lad, the boy's blood would be on Kaerion's hands—hands that were already soaked in the blood of innocents.

The tunnel ran at an angle briefly and then straightened. Kaerion cursed as the area quickly narrowed and he was forced to crawl. The tunnel soon opened into a room of similar length and construction as the hall from which they had entered the tomb. Bright paintings covered the smooth walls of the room. Wild colors swirled and ran together with all the energy of a pulsing rainbow. Though different from the paintings that covered the entrance hall, the pictures depicted by the mad brush of the long-dead artist contained the familiar animal/human hybrids that were the subject of so much of the tomb's artistry. Some of these creatures, however, held globes of bright color between their hands.

Much to his relief, Kaerion found Adrys standing in the middle of the room, a torch held high in one hand. Running over to the lad, Kaerion checked to see that no harm had come to him. Satisfied, he knelt before the boy and cupped his thick hand beneath the boy's chin.

"Adrys, why did you wander away from us?" Kaerion said, trying to keep the anger out of his voice. Now that he had found the boy safe and unharmed, his relief was giving way to irritation at the boy's disregard for his own safety.

Adrys' face twisted into a worried frown, and Kaerion could see tears welling up in his eyes. The boy stared at him, lower lip quavering. "I'm sorry. I thought I heard someone calling my name," he said simply. "It sounded like my father."

A wave of tenderness crept over Kaerion, cooling his growing anger. The lad had been through a great deal and had lost much. It was possible that the cursed power of the tomb had reached out to capitalize on the boy's grief and loss. He had no right to be angry with Adrys. He was simply a child and had not meant any mischief.

"It's all right," he said gently. "It's all right, but I want you to promise that you won't go wandering off again. If you hear someone calling your name, tell me. We'll get to the bottom of it together. All right?"

The boy nodded once and gave Kaerion a brief smile, wiping at his eyes. "I promise. If anything happens again I'll come to you."

Satisfied with the boy's contrition, Kaerion turned to face the rest of his companions, who had burst into the room with startled exclamations. Each of them

stared in wonder at the bright, familiar paintings. They were about to spread out and search the room when Vaxor's voice boomed, "Hold! Remember the hidden pits. Before anyone moves, we should sweep the room."

It was solid advice, and Kaerion was disappointed that he had rushed in without thought. In his incautious haste to find the boy, he could have put them both in deadly jeopardy. It took quite a while for the guards to finish their check, sweeping and prodding the stone with the ten-foot poles, but at last they proclaimed the floor pit free. Unfortunately, their search had also turned up only a single entrance from the room—another mist-covered archway in the center of the room's southernmost wall.

"There may be other ways out of this hall," Gerwyth said to the group as they assembled near the tunnel's entrance. "I suggest that we move in pairs, keeping each other in sight, and check the walls for hidden doors."

The expedition split up, and Kaerion found himself happily partnered with Majandra. Despite their growing closeness and the experience they had shared on the night of the bullywug attack, events since then had prevented them from exploring their newfound bond. Although the peril that they currently found themselves in did not lend itself to lowering their guard and sharing intimacies, Kaerion had to admit that he felt a surge of emotions—all of them pleasant—when the flame-haired bard was nearby.

They had not been searching long when one of the guards posted to the western wall of the room shouted that she had discovered the outlines of a door. Kaerion turned, the words "don't touch anything" on his lips, when he heard a loud click. Kaerion desperately ran toward the pair of guards, diving the last few feet.

He was too late.

Moments before he reached the guard, her body shuddered. Twin spears, their wicked blades covered in blood, erupted from the hapless soldier's back. She fell to her knees and then, with a single gurgling breath, toppled to the floor. By the time Kaerion's momentum carried him to the body, a line of blood had pooled on the floor.

Vaxor was at the soldier's side instantly, placing a hand upon her throat. He shook his head, almost imperceptibly, confirming what Kaerion had already suspected—the woman was beyond the cleric's help. Nodding his own understanding, Kaerion rose to his feet as the priest began a softly spoken prayer to protect the soul's journey as it sped toward the Arch Paladin. Kaerion wondered if there would be anyone who would pray in such a way for his soul—not that someone who had betrayed their god so deeply would have any right to expect mercy or reward in the afterlife.

The cleric bowed as he spoke the final words of the prayer and rose slowly to his feet. "We must find a suitable resting place for the body," Kaerion heard him say to Phathas as the mage walked over, laying a heavy hand on the priest's shoulder. "Then, when we leave this accursed place, we will take the bodies of the fallen back to the temple of Heironeous to see what can be done for them."

"You are most generous," Phathas replied, motioning for two guards to do as the priest bid. Once that gruesome work was finished, the party returned once more to their search of the walls.

“I sure hope we find something else here, Kaerion,” the bard said as the two of them knelt below a lurid depiction of two hawk-headed humans. “I’ve no wish to step through another teleporting archway. I still can’t think straight from the last one.”

Kaerion tried to smile at Majandra’s words, but he succeeded in no more than a grimace. “I understand completely,” he said, “though I’d settle for a teleporting arch if it meant we could bypass all the tomb’s traps.”

The half-elf grunted her affirmative and then returned her attention to the section of wall before her. The two sat there in silence for a few moments more. Kaerion had just finished rapping on a block of stone with the hilt of his dagger when Majandra spoke again. “Have you noticed anything strange about Bredeth lately?” she asked.

Kaerion drew his attention away from the wall and looked at his companion. Even now, hundreds of feet below ground, covered in sweat and dirt, he admired the way the torchlight played in her eyes and among her hair. It took a few more moments for him to register that she had repeated the question.

“Hmm? Oh, sorry,” he apologized, feeling his face flush beneath the sudden heat there. He tried to avoid the bard’s eyes, but couldn’t help see the sparkle of amusement glistening in them. “Something strange about Bredeth?” he continued. “Well, he has been a bit subdued since the bullywugs kidnapped him, but experiences like that can affect a person deeply. I’m not sure I’d call that strange.”

“You’re right, of course,” the half-elf said. “He has been subdued, but it’s more than that. He’s been too... agreeable lately. It’s not like him.”

Kaerion nodded and followed her gaze to where the subject of their conversation stood before another section of wall, dutifully searching. He opened his mouth to reassure Majandra, but before he could speak, Gerwyth’s voice echoed across the hall.

“I think I’ve found something!” the elf said excitedly. “It looks like an illusion of some sort.”

Kaerion walked over to where his friend stood. On the wall was a painting of a heavily muscled human with the head of a jackal holding a sphere at his waist. Carefully, Gerwyth extended the shaft of an arrow and touched the brightly painted sphere. To Kaerion’s surprise, the wooden shaft disappeared as it pressed through the sphere. It was clear that Gerwyth remembered their experience at the demonic mouth earlier, for the ranger gingerly pulled the arrow shaft back out of the red circle.

It emerged unscathed.

By now, the rest of the expedition had gathered around. Phathas moved forward and studied the illusory sphere intently. After a few moments of soft muttering, he raised a single gnarled finger and pointed at the vivid picture. There was a bright flash that nearly blinded Kaerion. He cried out, throwing an arm across his face. The others must not have been as quick, for he heard their cursing continue.

Blinking the last of the pulsing circles from his vision, Kaerion peered at the wall once again—and was surprised to find that the full-length painting of the jackal-headed human had disappeared, replaced by the uneven expanse of a rocky tunnel. He could see that, like the tunnel that lead from the gargoyle room to this one, the passage before them rapidly shrank down to a crawlway.



Kaerion made sure his shield was securely fastened to his back and then called for a torch. “Gerwyth and I will head down the passage first,” he said to the group. “We’ll call back if it looks safe.” He nodded once to the elf and then entered the passageway.

The walls here were rough and unadorned. In the light of his torch, he could see tiny rivulets of water running down the sides. We must be underneath the swamp, he thought, and wondered how long the tomb’s ancient stonework had kept out the press of mud and water above their heads. Kaerion’s morbid speculation was interrupted as both he and the ranger were brought up short by a blank wall.

“Dead end,” he said unnecessarily and let out a sharp curse. “We’ll have to go back and tell the others.”

“Not so fast, Kaer. Look here,” Gerwyth said, pointing to the left side of the wall.

Kaerion peered into the flickering corner of the wall and saw the faint outlines of a door, cleverly hidden in the stone. He’d forgotten how much he counted on the rangers sharp elven eyes.

“Should be easy to open,” Gerwyth said. “Just press here and—” the ranger’s words cut off as the floor space he was kneeling on cracked and tilted forward wildly, spilling the elf through the now-opened door.

“Ger!” Kaerion shouted as his friend’s lithe form disappeared. Crawling carefully to the edge of the unstable section of the floor, Kaerion peered through the door, relieved to see the normally graceful elf pulling himself slowly up from the floor where he had been dumped in an unceremonious heap.

“I’m all right,” the ranger said as he adjusted the straps of his pack. The elf gave a slow whistle a few moments later. “I think you should bring the others, Kaer. They’re going to want to see this.”

Kaerion nodded. “I’ll be right back, Ger. Be safe.”

“I’m not planning on going anywhere,” the ranger said, a crooked smile forming on his face. “Now use that human penchant for haste and gather the others, you orc-brained lummo.”

By the time Kaerion informed the others of their discovery and the entire group had navigated the trapped door, the ranger had set torches into several empty iron sconces that dotted the walls of this room. It wasn’t the sconces’ ancient craftsmanship, however, that currently captured the attention of everyone in the large chamber. Kaerion made his way through the press of bodies that gathered in the center of the room. In the now-bright light, he could see three large chests, one made of gold, another of silver, and the third of sturdy oak bound with thick iron bands. Majandra had already declared the area around the chests free from traps, and several guards had tried to lift them—but to no avail. Each of the chests was inexplicably bound to the floor.

Kaerion watched as the half-elf walked over to the gold chest, intent on bypassing its ancient lock. A premonitory warning, or perhaps it was merely a surge of overprotectedness, sent a frisson of warning up his spine. Quickly, he motioned for two of the guards to flank Majandra as she bent her skills toward opening the chest. He also placed himself in front of Adrys, who, he was unhappy to note, had moved to a position far too close to the only objects of interest in this room.

“A few moments more,” the half-elf said as she manipulated two small metal tools inside the chest’s metal lock. True to her word, a few moments later, Kaerion heard the lock click.

Majandra gave the assembled group a wink. “See,” she said as she deftly placed the tools back into a hidden fold of her cloak. “Nothing to it. Now all we have to do is lift the lid, and we’ll see what this chest has been hiding from—”

The rest of the bard’s words were cut off by the piercing shriek she let out as the top of the chest flew open, disgorging a tumble of black, serpentine shapes.

“Asps!” Vaxor shouted above the din of angry hissing coming from the released snakes.

Kaerion watched in horror as the writhing mass of scales and fangs struck out at Majandra and the two flanking guards. In desperation, one of the guards drew forth his sword and stabbed in to the attacking asps, while the other fell to the floor holding his hand, which already looked black and swollen with venom.

As Kaerion rushed forward, bringing his shield from its resting place and drawing his own blade, he could see that Gerwyth had already drawn his bow. It was clear to Kaerion that the elf’s firing line was hampered by the press of bodies that stumbled away from the mass of snakes.

“Kaerion,” he heard Phathas shout, “clear Majandra and the others away! I can deal with the asps myself.”

The mage’s words were all the impetus he needed. Concern for the guards and, more importantly, his fear for Majandra, had already drawn him close to the battle. Sheathing his sword, Kaerion leapt toward the half-elf, who was quickly stumbling back from the snapping fangs of the asps. He slammed his shield into the press of snakes just as his forward momentum knocked Majandra away from danger. Rolling quickly to his feet, Kaerion was forced to bring his shield up again and again to parry the enraged asps as their mouths darted in at amazing speeds, seeking the soft flesh of his arm or shoulder. One snake, untangling itself from the others, had managed to crawl underneath Kaerion’s guard. He felt a slight pressure against his abdomen as the asp’s fangs met the coiled steel rings of his mail. Realizing he had become as much of an obstacle as Majandra had to whatever Phathas had planned, Kaerion kicked at the snake with his boot, and then shouldered the unwounded guard out of the way.

As he collapsed in a heap on top of the beleaguered soldier, Kaerion saw Phathas step forward and spread both his hands, joining them at his thumbs. The mage shouted another eldritch phrase, and a sheet of crackling flames erupted from his outstretched hands, engulfing the asps. Their angry hissing grew even louder as the barrage of flame continued, until Kaerion couldn’t distinguish between the asps’ sounds and the sizzle of burning flesh. When Phathas finally withdrew his hands, only a pile of ash remained where the snakes had been.

Kaerion rolled off of the guard and helped the winded man to his feet. He was relieved to note that Landra and a few of her charges had pulled the wounded guard out of the battle and carried him over to Vaxor. The cleric now knelt by the stricken man’s side and laid a hand upon the swollen length of his arm. A blue glow suffused the priest’s hand, and wherever it touched, the black puffy flesh returned to a more natural size and hue. In a few moments, the wounded guard was completely healed.

Though he was happy for the man, Kaerion felt uncomfortable at the reminder of Heironeous' power.

"The polite thing to do before you knock a lady over is to warn her first," Majandra's smooth voice interrupted his thoughts.

"My apologies, lady," he said in his most chivalric tones. "I will endeavor to warn her ladyship whenever the need arises again to knock her on her petticoats."

Kaerion felt his mood lighten as the bard smiled, her eyes twinkling with laughter and something else—something far deeper and sweeter than amusement. Unbidden, something that Gerwyth had tried to tell him in all the years they had traveled together flashed through his mind. Though he had suffered through his own imperfection and weakness, there were still things for which life was worth living. He would never have guessed that one of those things would be an enchantingly beautiful daughter of a Nyronde noble house.

The satisfaction of his newfound revelation lasted only a few moments, for as soon as the expedition fully regrouped after the asp attack, the bard returned to the gold chest. She examined it carefully, tapping its inner walls, and then shook her head. "Nothing inside here at all," she informed the assembled group, "except some old asp scales."

Kaerion could hear the disappointment in the collective sigh that went through the group. Still, he knew that the setbacks they experienced so far would not deter the Nyronde from their goal. They had planned and sacrificed so much for this journey. He could see in the set of every shoulder—including Majandra's—that giving up was not an option. He had to admire that kind of conviction.

Although somewhere along the way he had come to view these nobles as his companions and not merely his employers, he still felt that, for the most part, their expedition was foolish. He had risked his life at first because of the promised money, and then simply because that was what one did for companions—even if at that time he felt like a complete outsider, in danger of his secret guilt becoming exposed. Kaerion knew now that, with the probable exception of the Heironean priest, whose faith and commitment to the ideals of his god would not allow him such weakness, the rest of the nobles had accepted him into their company as an equal, a valued companion, despite who he was.

Kaerion now stood at the brink of believing in their goal—the resurrection of an entire kingdom—not simply because of his growing love (yes, he had to admit it for what it was) for Majandra, but because there simply was too much evil and destruction in the world to allow Nyronde, a once bright and powerful nation, to die without a fight.

The click of another lock brought Kaerion back to his present situation. Majandra had moved on to the silver chest, apparently disposing of its lock as easily as she did the first one. He was relieved to see, however, that the half-elf moved quickly away from the unlocked chest. She relieved a long wooden pole from one of the guards. Carefully, she extended the pole toward the silver chest, and with a deft move of her wrists, she lifted its hinged top open with the awkward instrument.

Nothing happened.

Slowly, the half-elf walked toward the open chest, and with her came several guards, including Landra, their swords drawn. “Nothing here but a crystal box,” one of the guards said, sheathing her weapon and reaching into the chest.

“No!” Majandra shouted and flung herself at the guard, but it was too late. As the soldier withdrew the crystal box from the chest, Kaerion heard the soft *snick* of a releasing catch. Small darts shot out of the chest, buzzing in all directions. Kaerion heard several cries of pain from the group standing before the chest. He raised his own shield just in time—

And nearly dropped it as he watched a sharp-tipped dart cut easily through the air toward Adrys’ unprotected neck. To his amazement, the boy stepped forward and brought his left hand up and at an angle before his face, striking the wooden shaft of the flying needle and knocking it aside.

“Adrys, how did you do that?” he asked, running to the boy’s side.

“Do what, sir?” Adrys asked with a bewildered look on his face.

Kaerion stared at the boy for a moment, confusion stealing over his own features. Perhaps the nearness of danger caused him to see something that wasn’t there. Surely the untrained son of a merchant would be unable to deflect a dart with his hands. There were few seasoned warriors he knew who could do such a thing, unless...

Unbidden, flashes of a pockmarked man in a blood-red robe, hands weaving deadly arcs in a shadowed alley, appeared in Kaerion’s mind, but they were quickly replaced by concern as he heard Majandra shout his name.

Running toward the sound of her voice, the events of the last few moments forgotten in his haste to reach the half-elf, Kaerion never saw the look of cruel satisfaction that passed over Adrys’ face.



Majandra held the ring up to the torchlight. A clear jewel set delicately along the ring's onyx band caught the light, reflecting sparkles like brilliant pixies along the plain stone walls of the room. She concentrated briefly and hummed a single low note. With her now magically enhanced senses, she could see the telltale nimbus of power surrounding the ring—it gleamed golden, albeit weakly. The years of Phathas' lecturing came back to her in a flash, and she quickly identified the type of spellcraft. It was protective magic, imbued into the ring with consummate skill.

The half-elf was still holding the ring up to the light when Kaerion appeared amid the press of bodies surrounding the opened chest. "Majandra, what's wrong?" he asked, casting careful glances at the surrounding area with what the bard identified as his professional soldier look. She would never have thought that she'd find such a cold glance appealing, but Majandra had to admit that Kaerion's concern for her was quite comforting.

"Nothing is wrong, Kaer," she replied. "I just wanted you to see what I'd found inside the chest. It's quite exquisite, really." She held the ring so that he could have a closer look.

Relaxing, Kaerion peered at the piece of jewelry she held within her hand and whistled appreciatively. "I'm no gem crafter, but I'd say that the stone is a diamond of uncommon quality."

"Yes," she agreed, "but it's also magical and will help protect its wearer from harm—" she paused, looking around. "Where's Adrys? This would be perfect for him."

Intrigued by the ring, the others pressed in to have a look. Thus, it took her a few seconds to locate the boy in the midst of the confusion. "Adrys," she called out to where he sat, lounging idly against a wall and talking softly with Bredeth, "come here."

"Majandra," Kaerion broke in, "I think we should have a talk about Adrys. I'm concerned."

"I agree," she replied, shooing away the last of the curious. "Which is why I think that giving him the ring makes the most sense, given our current circumstances."

“Yes, but maybe we should wait until we’ve had a chance to talk with the others before you do this?” he suggested.

“Nonsense,” Majandra said as she turned to the subject of their conversation, who stood before her with a questioning look upon his face. Though nearly five times his age, the half-elf stood only a hand taller than the boy. She smiled at the lad before holding out her hand, the ring gleaming brilliantly in the center of her palm. “This is for you,” she said, and brought her hand closer when it appeared that the boy would be too shy to take it. “It will help protect you while we’re in the tomb.”

After a few more moments of steady prodding, the boy took the ring. Slowly, he placed the item on his finger and flexed his hand. At last, a smile beamed on his face. “Thank you,” he said, and Majandra was sure she caught the gleam of a tear in his eye. “My pa was supposed to give me a lifeday gift when we made it back to Pitchfield, only...” he paused, “only we never got there.”

Majandra ran an affectionate hand through the lad’s hair. What had happened to the boy was tragic, and she cursed the ill luck that stranded him here—crawling through the dusty corridors of an evil wizard’s tomb.

The bard gave Adrys’ shoulder a squeeze before she let him go back to where he had sat quietly, out of the way of danger. She watched him go for just a moment before turning back to Kaerion. The fighter wore a frown upon his face.

“What is your problem with Adrys?” she asked, unable to fathom his sudden concern. Hadn’t he been one of the few people who had argued for allowing the boy to accompany them into the tomb? “Can’t you see he has been through enough without having you looming about him with a dark cloud of disapproval?”

“It’s not that, Majandra,” Kaerion replied. “Really it isn’t.”

“Then what is it? Tell me.” She was frustrated and let the emotion bleed into her voice.

Kaerion opened his mouth to reply, but his answer was cut off as someone nearby cleared his throat quite loudly.

“We must not dally here any longer, Majandra. There is still another chest to be opened, and we must continue on our way.”

She recognized Vaxor’s low voice. Despite its commanding words, the bard could hear worry and concern coloring the cleric’s deep timbre. She spun to face him.

“The chill of this dank place is taking its toll on Phathas,” the priest said, pointing a rough-skinned finger at the mage, who huddled against his staff in the corner of the room, coughing. “I’d like to explore some more before we have to rest for the day.”

Concern for her old teacher filled her—and guilt for forgetting to consider how he might be faring in this accursed place. “Clear away from the last chest,” she said, “and prepare the group to head back up the crawlway.”

She didn’t wait to see if anyone followed her orders, but moved quickly to the chest and, running practiced hands across its length, checked for any traps.

Satisfied that the chest itself was trap free, she withdrew the picks she used for sensitive locks and began to coax the steel catch that held the chest closed. By the time the half-elf had counted to one hundred, the lock gave a soft click and fell open. Not taking the time to bask in her success, she retrieved the long pole that she had used to flip open the previous chest. Standing against the far wall beneath the

crawlway that had led to this treasure room, she carefully lifted up the lid of the chest.

A bright flash of red light almost blinded her, but before she could throw up her arms to protect her eyes, the floor of the room rocked wildly—and then just as suddenly stopped.

That was when she heard the first scream.

Before her, standing amid the crushed remains of the wooden chest, loomed a horrifying creature devoid of skin. Nearly twice the size of Kaerion, the skeletal monster held two large scimitars, one in each bony hand. The beast's eyeless sockets regarded her with uncanny perception, tracking her every move. She could see that one of the skeleton's scimitars was already stained with blood, and her own blood ran so cold at the sight that she feared it might stop altogether. Below the beast's arm, Kaerion's sword waved unsteadily, as he desperately tried to recover from the force of the monster's initial attack.

The notes of a spell rose from Majandra's lips, and she cupped her hands, waiting for the release of mystical energy. Absently, she noted that Phathas had moved out from where he had been resting and moved his own hands in the familiar rhythmic gestures of spellcasting. Thus, she was not surprised when the pulsing blue length of her arcane missiles met the blinding electrical force of the mage's lightning bolt as they reached the creature simultaneously—

Only to wash over it as if they had never existed.

"Ware the monster!" Phathas yelled. "It's impervious to magic!"

Majandra cursed as the arch-mage confirmed her fear. Something protected the beast from arcane attack. Most likely this was another of Acererak's tests.

"Protect the boy!" she heard Kaerion shout to the three guards who rushed forward to assist him. "I'll distract the creature from here."

As Majandra moved to assist Phathas in retreating from the center of battle, she was pleased to note that the soldiers had obeyed instantly and now surrounded the boy in a ring of steel.

Two other guards struck at the skeleton from the left side, and as the creature brought one of its scimitars cutting downward, Kaerion leapt up and delivered a double-handed blow to its exposed wrist. Bone chips sprayed in all directions, but Majandra was dismayed to note that the fighter's attack had little effect on the skeleton. It lashed out with its second scimitar, faster than one would think possible for its size, and the bard cried out as Kaerion sidestepped the attack by inches. The scimitar struck sparks from the stone floor where it rebounded with a screeching crash.

It was then that Vaxor stepped forward, holy symbol held like a shield above his head. As the cleric walked toward the skeleton, she could hear his baritone rumble like the heart of the earth itself, calling upon the power of Heironeous. His holy symbol pulsed with a golden glow, suffused with the energy of the god.

The skeleton paused in its attack and turned toward the cleric. To Majandra, it seemed as if the cleric grew taller with every step, his voice deeper. The monster threw up one arm before its face and took a single step backward.

Suddenly, a cold wind blew through the room, rumbling with the force of a mighty storm. The bard felt the chill pierce through her leather armor and into her

skin, like needles of ice. Unbelievably, she saw the incandescence of Vaxor's holy symbol sputter and die, and she marveled at the silence, knowing that the words to the priest's prayer had died upon his lips.

The skeleton threw down its arm and moved forward to attack once again, its mouth opening and closing as it did so. The monster was laughing silently!

Unwilling to foul up the concerted defense being mustered by her companions in the relatively close quarters of the room, Majandra pulled out the leather bag that held her harp and quickly unwrapped it. Not bothering to tune, she struck a major chord and began to sing an ancient elven battle song, willing the courage and strength in each word and note to find a home in the hearts of her companions.

Two guards fell quickly beneath the renewed onslaught of the creature, leaving only Bredeth, Kaerion, and Vaxor to face the foe directly. Just as the part of her mind not involved with singing wondered where the ranger could be, an arrow flew out from the crawlway above. She watched as it flew somewhat erratically before striking the creature in the chest and shattering several of its ribs in the process. Another missile followed the first, and this time Majandra saw that the head of this arrow was nothing more than a rounded mass of metal, a flying mace. This one hit the creature near its shoulder, cracking a thick clavicle. Encouraged by the success of Gerwyth's attack, the bard modulated her song into a major key, and poured the emotions she never had the opportunity to share with Kaerion into the song.

Several steps away, the inspiration for her current song had readied his shield and, deflecting a swift strike by the skeleton, reached down and grabbed a fallen guard's warhammer. Striking at the creature's hips, Bredeth and Vaxor covered Kaerion while he adjusted his new weapon. They moved aside with perfect timing as Kaerion gave an incoherent cry before launching himself at the skeleton. Two mighty swings of the hammer against the creature's leg shattered its tree-trunk of a femur, and it fell to one bony knee.

At that moment, Gerwyth loosed two more blunt-arrows. One tore the creature's left arm from its socket, and the other caught it squarely in the jaw, knocking the skeleton's skull from its shoulders with a sickening crack. The monster flailed its remaining arm wildly for a few moments before falling to the floor with a loud crash and splintering into multiple pieces.

Majandra stopped playing at that moment and drew her stinging fingers to her mouth. She was surprised to note the copper-taste of blood in her mouth.

"Well done, my friends!" Phathas said as he inspected the now lifeless bits of bone that littered the floor of the room. "Well done indeed."

Vaxor and Landra were already seeing to the wounded, and the bard was relieved to know that neither of the guards who had fallen was dead. She was doubly relieved to discover that Kaerion's wounds, while bleeding profusely, were not life threatening.

"That was fancy shooting, Gerwyth," Majandra said as she watched a guard bind the tear in Kaerion's arm with a thin cloth.

"Thank you," the ranger replied, dropping down lightly from his perch in the crawlway above. "I had those arrows made special by a master fletcher. They don't fly worth a damn, but they sure do the job once they hit." The elf turned to where



Phathas and Vaxor stood, conferring. “Well,” he said in loud voice, “I’ve had about enough of this room. I think it’s time we made our way back to the main hall.”

Majandra agreed wholeheartedly and was collecting her gear for the brief ascent when she heard a small voice from somewhere opposite the crawlway. “Wait, everyone.” it said. “I think I’ve found something. It looks like a trapdoor.”

The bard looked to the source of the voice and found Adrys standing near the mass of the giant skeleton’s skull. She moved quickly to his side and examined the area he was pointing to. Sure enough, the level plane of the floor was broken by a thin seam, which lay several inches below the surrounding stone.

“It certainly is a door,” the half-elf said. “It looks as if the force of the skull falling in this area triggered it open. Good eyes, Adrys.”

It only took a few moments to clear the skull away from the area and finish the job that it had begun. Below her, Majandra could see the uneven stone walls of yet another tunnel.

“It looks like it’s you and me again, Gerwyth,” Kaerion said as the rest of the group prepared for the descent.

“I’d like to go, as well,” Bredeth interjected. “You could always use another sword at your backs.”

Majandra heard the familiar eagerness in the noble’s voice, tinged with a touch of uncertainty at the two companions’ possible response. At least that sounded more like the Bredeth she knew. Idly, she hoped that Kaerion took him up on his offer. The noble was always easier to deal with when he got his way.

“No problem,” Gerwyth said at last, clapping the noble on the arm. “Another sword could definitely come in handy—especially the way Kaerion swings his around like an apprentice butcher trying to kill turkeys with a meat cleaver.”

Majandra’s laughter covered the black-maned fighter’s response, but she could see by the man’s rueful smile that he was not offended. Within moments, the three were in the tunnel and out of sight.

This was, she reflected, the hardest part of adventuring—waiting for someone else to do the job. The fact that this someone else was also someone that she cared for deeply only made it worse. Thus it seemed like ages before she saw the light grow brighter in the tunnel. A moment later, she heard Kaerion’s voice.

“It’s a safe passage,” he said, his words echoing slightly in the expanse of the tunnel. “But it simply leads back to the hall where we first entered the tomb.”

She could hear the others cursing at the news and starting to pull their gear over to the original crawlway, but she didn’t move. Thus, she was the only one in the treasure room to hear the sound of shouting that echoed faintly down the tunnel.

“Get Vaxor and the others!” Kaerion said seconds later. “Gerwyth and Bredeth are in trouble!”

Majandra barely had time to reply before the light receded rapidly down the tunnel, leaving the passage blanketed in darkness.

\* \* \*

Kaerion’s breath echoed as he crawled through the narrow tunnel as fast as his armor and gear would allow. Visions of horrifying monsters and gruesome traps filled his

mind as he tried to imagine the danger that his friends now found themselves in. He cursed once as the tunnel turned sharply and he scraped the skin of his hand raw on a jagged rock. Another few feet and he was free of the tunnel. Heedless of his protesting muscles, Kaerion drew his sword and charged into the main hall.

The telltale flicker of torchlight emerged from a shadowy indentation along the east wall—a depression that hadn't been there when the group had first entered the confines of the tomb. A cry of pain threw all thoughts out of Kaerion's mind as he ran toward the passageway. The familiar sound of combat spurred him onward. With a rush of speed, he pushed past the splintered remains of a gruesome painting and ran through an open door.

The broad swoosh of wings alerted him to danger just moments before a black shadow loomed overhead. With a cry, Kaerion dived forward, rolling hard across his wounded arm. Three arrows hissed out of the corner of the room, striking his mysterious opponent. As he raised his own blade, the blood-red torchlight revealed a familiar figure. Above him, suspended by the awkward flapping of its stone wings, hung the gargoyle whose statue loomed in another part of the tomb. Only now the four-armed monstrosity was not an artist's representation. It was all too real.

Holding his shield at an angle to protect his left side, Kaerion darted in for a quick slash with his sword. His opponent opened its stony mouth wide, revealing rows of needle-sharp teeth, as it brought the gray bulk of its left leg forward to block the attack. Kaerion fell back hastily as the gargoyle sprang forward and cut at him with four swift slashes of its hooked claws. He managed to deflect two with a sweeping move of his shield, but the third attack caught him a glancing blow near his neck, knocking him slightly off balance. He spun, letting his momentum carry him away from the creature, putting him out of range of its final attack, which would have caught him square in the chest.

A shout from the corner of the room distracted the creature enough for Kaerion to widen the gap between them. Seconds later, another arrow came winging out of the darkness, this time its steel head pulsed with a red glow. The magic shaft caught the gargoyle on its wingtip. The beast let out a hollow-throated howl of protest and flew back up into the shadows of the room.

"Gerwyth," Kaerion shouted between great gulping breaths of air, "what happened here?" Desperately, Kaerion searched the ceiling, watching warily for another attack.

"I'm not sure," came the ranger's reply. "I was waiting for Bredeth at the mouth of the tunnel, when all of a sudden I heard a cracking sound. By the time I saw the shattered plaster near the entrance of the tomb, our young friend had already thrown open the door. Within seconds I heard his cry for help and called for you before I came running."

Kaerion nodded. "Where is our noble warrior?" he asked, catching sight of the elf as he nocked yet another arrow to his bow.

"I'm right here," said a voice roughened with pain.

Kaerion spun at the sound, catching sight of Bredeth's stumbling form. The noble's armor was dented and torn in several places, and blood streamed freely from his open wounds. A gleam of light caught Kaerion's eye as he ran to the hurt

nobleman. With a gasp of surprise, Kaerion noted the thick leather collar, studded with a cluster of blue gems, clutched tightly in Bredeth's left hand.

"I pulled this off the creature's neck before it sliced into me," Bredeth said before slumping heavily against the raven-haired fighter. "Do you think Majandra would approve?"

Kaerion had no time to reply. The air above his head swirled with the flapping of stone wings.

"Incoming!" Gerwyth shouted, moments before the gargoyle fell like a terrible missile out of the ceiling's shadows. More concerned with Bredeth's safety than his comfort, Kaerion pushed the wounded nobleman to the floor and stepped back sharply. Razor-sharp claws sliced the air just inches from his face, but not before Gerwyth's arrow struck the creature sharply in its back.

Taking advantage of its momentary disorientation, Kaerion planted his feet and swung his blade in a deadly arc, twisting his hips to add more power to the blow. His sword met the creature's stone skin with the force of a hammer striking an anvil, and Kaerion nearly lost his grip on the blade. Bits of stone cracked and fell from the monster's hide, and it roared in pain. Withdrawing the blade, Kaerion gave silent thanks to Phathas, who had imbued the blade with magic after their battle with the demon in Rel Mord.

Wounded as it was, the gargoyle was still a severe threat. It lashed out twice with its upper claws, catching Kaerion across the face and at the juncture of shoulder and neck. It was, however, the monster's lower claws that did the real damage. Forced to raise his shield to block an attack from the beast's claw-tipped leg, Kaerion was unprepared for the twin thrust of its hands as they raked the unprotected length of his chest. Kaerion's armor shredded into thin strips beneath the force of the gargoyle's strikes. He fell back, unable to muster an effective defense against the evil creature's tremendous strength and speed.

At that moment, twin bolts of energy flew from the open doorway, catching the creature in the face. It screeched once and turned to face this new threat. Grievously wounded, Kaerion withdrew, confident that the flares and flashes of arcane energy he saw emanating from the doorway would keep the gargoyle busy for the moment. Reaching a sure hand into a pouch at his belt, Kaerion withdrew a vial of green liquid. With one swift motion, he uncorked the container and brought it to his mouth, swallowing the sweet-tasting potion inside. Immediately, the pain of his wounds receded and some measure of strength flowed back into his limbs. Smiling in anticipation, Kaerion withdrew another glass container and prepared to quaff its contents.

A muffled explosion caught the fighter's attention. To the left of the entranceway, he saw that Vaxor had called upon Heironeous for help—and the god had answered. Three arrowhawks appeared in a blaze of light and circled the gargoyle, their powerful wings and arrow-like bodies offering them greater maneuverability. Two opened their sharp beaks and shot a ray of energy at the gargoyle. The beast evaded the first blast with a sweep of its wings, but ran headlong into the other mystic bolt. The third arrowhawk, however, misjudged its flight and flew too close to the gargoyle. Angered by the wounds it was receiving, the stone-skinned monster

concentrated its attacks on the hapless creature. It disappeared in a flash of light, its last sound a screech of pain.

Energized by his brief respite and the application of the healing potion, Kaerion raised his sword and swallowed the second potion. Time seemed to slow as the magical liquid took effect, and the fighter could feel his blood quickening. He gave another cry before launching himself into battle, delighted at the speed in which his feet carried him. Within moments, he had delivered two swift cuts to the gargoyle's side. The beast, in turn, lashed out at the circling arrowhawks with its upper claws and then spun toward Kaerion, intent on disemboweling him with its remaining attacks.

Kaerion's magically enhanced reflexes acknowledged the danger and wove a seamless defense. His blade flashed in the torchlight, knocking back each of the gargoyle's attacks. Obviously enraged by its ability to harm him, the monster ignored the attacking arrowhawks that darted in and out of its reach, concentrating all of its attention on Kaerion. Secure in his ability to parry the gargoyle's claws, the fighter was caught unawares as it lashed out, grabbing hold of him with implacable strength and launching itself higher in the air. Briefly, Kaerion caught sight of his companions nearly thirty feet below, as he hurtled toward the far wall of the room. Just before it seemed as if the gargoyle would slam itself against the wall, it let out a deafening roar and released its grip on Kaerion. Gracelessly, the fighter plunged downward, striking the wall with bone jarring force before crashing to the ground. His sword flew from fingers suddenly gone nerveless and skidded several feet away.

Above, the gargoyle had completed its turn and now flew right at him, claws extended for a final attack. Out of the corner of his eye, Kaerion saw Adrys huddled behind a thin pillar of stone. For just a moment, he wondered how the boy had slipped past the guards to get this far into the room, but his speculation disappeared as the gargoyle's shadow loomed larger.

"Adrys!" he shouted as loud as his stunned body would allow. "Throw me my sword, lad—and hurry."

Moving swiftly, the boy stood over the sword and looked at the fallen fighter.

"Quickly, lad!" Kaerion shouted again. "I don't have much time." A quick glance in the air confirmed his fears. The gargoyle would reach him in seconds.

An evil smile creased Adrys' face as he bent to pick up the sword—

And threw it even farther away. "It's time for you to die," the boy said in a voice too innocent for such words, and then melted into the shadows.

Shock and desperation warred within Kaerion's breast. He was going to die now. Betrayed by a child even as he himself had betrayed a child. There was a certain rightness to this act, a testament to the simple and brutal poetry of Heironeous' justice.

The razor claws of the gargoyle descended upon him like an executioner's axe—

Only to be met by the bulk of Vaxor's body as the cleric threw himself between the monster and its intended target. Horrified, Kaerion watched as the beast's diamond-sharp claws ripped through armor and skin, slicing open the priest's belly. Defiantly, Vaxor brought his own sword slashing against the creature's neck, the movement pulling apart the remaining string of muscle that kept his entrails inside his body. Blood and organs spilled out onto the floor as the force of the noble's final

attack severed the monster's stone head from its body. Bereft of its head, the rest of the monster shattered into a thousand pieces.

In the ensuing silence, the cleric cast a single glance at Kaerion before he coughed up a gout of blood and fell to the floor.

"No!" Kaerion shouted as he stumbled toward the fallen cleric.

Vaxor lay on his back in the center of a widening pool of blood. Amazingly, he was still clinging to life, his breath coming swift and shallow, rattling ominously in his blood-gorged chest. Oblivious to the gore, Kaerion knelt, cradling Vaxor's head in his hands. The cleric stared sightlessly at the ceiling.

"F-forgive me," the priest said roughly, a thin bubble of blood and saliva forming at the corner of his cracked lips.

"Forgive you?" Kaerion said incredulously. "You saved my life, Vaxor. What have you done that I must forgive?" Behind him, Kaerion heard the others gather. He could feel their sorrow, like a knife-edge of grief it left his own heart exposed. Bitter tears stung his eyes.

The cleric coughed weakly, bringing up more blood. "I failed," he said simply, his voice growing weaker. "In Rel Mord... at the inn. The god... spoke... to me."

"Heironeous spoke to you," Kaerion repeated, dread beginning to rise in him.

Vaxor nodded his head and swallowed a few times before continuing. "The god... spoke to me. Told me... who... *what* you were."

Kaerion held his breath, watching as the cleric's features twisted in pain. The wounded man's body gave a violent shudder.

"I... was supposed to... forgive you," he continued. "To bring you... back to... to the fold. But I could... n-not. My—unnhh—pride wouldn't let me. I failed."

"Nonsense," Kaerion replied. "You shouldn't talk of such things. It's just the pain. A few healing potions will take care of everything." The words came out fast—an attempt to deny the revelation contained in the cleric's confession. Vaxor was obviously delirious. The cleric needed help now, and perhaps he'd forget the words he'd just spoken.

"Someone reach into my pouch," Kaerion shouted at the assembly of guards behind him. "I have some healing potions."

With surprising strength, Vaxor reached out a blind hand and grabbed hold of Kaerion's arm. "No, my son. It's too... late for that. Save them... for when... they'll do some... good."

"You're talking nonsense, Vaxor. You'll be up and walking through this tomb with the rest of us in no time at all." Kaerion turned his head to face the others. "Someone grab the healing potions!" he shouted, tears rolling down his face. "Please!" This last came out as more of a heaving sob than anything else—though truthfully Kaerion did not know whether it was the cleric's words or his impending death that broke the dam of emotion he had been carefully constructing ever since he fled the dungeons of Dorakaa.

"Enough..." Vaxor's voice cut through Kaerion's grief with an echo of its former power. "I have... battled death... long enough to not... shrink from it... when it comes for me. However... I ask... two things from the Arch Paladin's greatest... living servant... before I...surrender."

“Anything, Vaxor. Ask anything and I shall grant it to you if it lies within my power.” The words spilled from Kaerion’s mouth without thought.

Another shudder racked Vaxor’s body, this one greater than the previous one. The cleric took a moment to recover before continuing. “Grant me... your forgiveness,” he asked, his voice little more than a gasp.

“Freely given, Vaxor,” the Kaerion said, still cradling the dying man’s head.

A thin smile creased the cleric’s face. “Then let me... place my hand upon... Galadorn... once b-before the... the darkness...claims me. I would... feel its light before I die.”

Without a word, Kaerion unbelted the leather scabbard that held the holy sword. With infinite care, he extended the sheathed weapon, pommel first toward the cleric. Vaxor reached out blindly for a few moments before clasping the hilt with trembling hands. Incredibly, Kaerion watched as the central diamond set within the pommel glowed with a soft, white incandescence. It let out a single pulse, and then another as a third tremor struck the cleric’s frame. Gradually, the ghostly gleam of the diamond faded into nothingness. With a final breath, Vaxor released his grip upon the blade and died.



The screaming wouldn't stop.

Despite himself, Durgoth grimaced at the shrill sound. Even with their ability to see what those Nyrondeese fools had done, some of his followers still fell victim to the tomb's diabolical traps. This situation, however, came about through the man's own stupidity. Sydra had given the cultists explicit instructions on how to open each of the secret doors, information she had gleaned from the nobleman she controlled as completely as she did secretly.

The man curled in a bloody heap before Durgoth, the wicked barb of a spear imbedded in his stomach. The fool had simply misunderstood Sydra's direction.

The screaming stopped for a moment as the wounded cultist noticed his master's presence. "H-help me," he pleaded, and Durgoth noticed with distaste that blood flecked the man's lips and chin.

"I shall, my child," the cleric replied in his most soothing tone, conscious of the other cultists watching this exchange. Gently he laid a hand upon the now-whimpering man's forehead. Closing his eyes, he whispered a dark prayer to Tharizdun. With a final hiss, the cleric sent the power of his god arcing through the cultist. The man screamed one final time and then lay still, the life burned out of his body.

Durgoth rose and made a simple gesture of blessing on the corpse. Stupidity, he knew, should never be rewarded.

It was Eltanel, emerging from the shadowy length of the passage ahead, who finally broke the ensuing silence. "The way ahead is clear, blessed one," he said. "I have marked the passage that the Nyrondeese party has taken. I recommend that we rest for a bit, or else we risk coming too close to them."

Durgoth nodded at the man's report, noting with interest the sweat covering the thief's dark brow and the small wet circle along the man's right thigh—no doubt blood. Whatever Eltanel had discovered, his passage through the tomb had not been as easy as he tried to pass off.

Durgoth offered the thief a knowing smile and was about to turn away when Jhagren spoke. “What of Adrys?” the monk asked, not quite hiding his concern. “Did you see any sign of him?”

Durgoth blinked in surprise. In all of their time together, this was the first time he had seen a chink in the monk’s armor of emotional detachment. So, he noted, the man does care for his apprentice. This was useful information—information that could serve as a weapon in the future.

“No, Jhagren,” the thief replied at last. “I did not see any sign of Adrys.”

“Come, my friend,” Durgoth said, offering the monk a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. “Adrys is a clever lad—and trained very well. He will find his way back to us, and when he returns, I shall reward him greatly for his service.”

Truth be told, Durgoth had been enraged by the pup’s presumptuous actions. The boy had specific instructions yet chose to ignore them. It was only when it became clear that his involvement had caused the death of that cursed Heironean priest that Durgoth had calmed down. The loss of Vaxor weakened the Nyrondeese expedition considerably. Adrys may have handed them the key to an easy victory. In light of that fact, it was easy to view the boy in a more charitable light. If only he could pry Adrys out from under the tutelage of that damned monk. He’d make an excellent servant of Tharizdun.

Obviously not reassured by the cleric’s words of encouragement, Jhagren turned without a word and stormed off in silence. It took a great deal of self-control not to blast the impudent monk as he skulked about. It was only the fact that they were so close to their goal that stayed the dark priests hand. When the Dark One was finally free, Jhagren and all his cursed brethren would be crushed beneath his heel.

“Blessed one?” a tentative voice asked interrupting his thoughts.

Durgoth spun to face the owner of the offending voice, irritation scribed in every muscle of his body. “What is it, now?” he asked.

“Pardon the intrusion,” replied a scar-faced cultist, “but the others were wondering what we should do with the body.” He indicated his recently deceased companion who still lay upon the floor, a pool of blood surrounding his body like a scarlet halo.

Durgoth thought a moment before responding. He had no use for the blasted corpse and would just as soon leave it to rot. However, he had no desire to spend any length of time near the soon-to-be-decaying mass of flesh and, if Eltanel was correct, they’d have to spend a good deal of time here before moving on. In another instant, the cleric made his decision.

“I’ll take care of it,” he said to the cultist, who bowed obsequiously before retreating back to the safety of his brethren. Durgoth sent a silent command and was rewarded a few moments later by the hulking presence of his golem. As the construct regarded him with its cold, eyeless sockets, the cleric pointed to the dead body on the stone floor and said simply, “Dispose of this.”

Without a sound, the golem laid a single meaty hand upon the corpse and lifted it up, walking back the way the group had come, following their original path into the tomb. Despite his initial worries that the creature would slow the group down once inside Acererak’s trap-filled lair, the golem had proven exceptionally useful—both in resisting the deadly force of spears, sliding walls, darts, and other nefarious devices



meant to kill intruders, and in cowering the rest of the cultists in continuing on when fear would have caused them to retreat.

Once again Durgoth had cause to be grateful for finding the *Minthexian Codex*. Even now, the codex called out to him, promising power and dark wisdom in its ancient pages. With a start, he realized that it had been several days since he had looked upon its flowing script and hoary symbols. He was surprised at how deeply his mind yearned to wrestle with its secrets once again.

When he looked around, Durgoth was surprised to find himself standing before his own pack, the box that held the codex out in front of him. Dazedly, he called out to Sydra, who sat nearby, concentrating her powers upon a certain nobleman.

“Where are they now?” he asked.

It took a few moments for the sorceress to respond, and when she did, her voice was thick, almost husky, as if she were waking from a deep sleep. “They are in a chapel of some sort. Someone just set off a trap, unleashing a lightning bolt that killed several of their guards. The nobles are conferring as to what they should do next.”

Durgoth smiled at the news. “Excellent. And how is our very own noble?”

The cleric saw a brief frown cross the sorceress’ face. “He resists my presence, blessed one,” Sydra replied. “He is strong, but he cannot break free.”

“That is good,” Durgoth said as he settled in to peruse the vellum pages before him. “I hope that you can maintain control. I have important work for Bredeth.” He looked up from the text. “Important work indeed.”

\* \* \*

The pungent tang of electrified air filled the room.

From her position to the left of the altar, Majandra regarded the smoking corpses with tears in her eyes. The lightning bolt had left nothing but charred flesh in its wake. She gave in to the wave of dizziness that swept over her and dropped to her knees with a gut-wrenching sob.

Death. Everything in this gods forsaken tomb stank of death. Every twisted mural and every corrupted holy symbol in this demented chapel reinforced her perception. She felt death worrying at the bright core of her spirit, like a feasting jackal. It was inside of her now, and with every breath she felt as if she were exhaling a bit more of her own life. If she were anywhere else in the Flanaess, she might have prayed. But not here. Not at the site of Acererak’s twisted power. She was afraid of what dark being might hear her plea.

Instead, she let tears flow down her dirt-streaked face, a silent tribute to the two guards who had given their lives in this tomb. Never mind that they were both dragging bags full of gold and silver coins—thousands of them if their quick count was in any way accurate—before the lightning bolt had arced down the center aisle of the chapel, striking them both. The guards would find little use for the riches now.

As Gerwyth and Kaerion ran toward her from either corner of the room, she wondered if any of them would have use for the tomb’s treasure. Majandra knew in her heart that all of the gold in the world wouldn’t make up for the lives lost in this

trap-riddled dungeon. Even if they made it out of the tomb with every last bit of treasure, she doubted if the sacrifice would ever be worth it.

Majandra felt strong arms lift her up as a soft voice spoke into her ear. “Peace, little sister,” the soothing words said, though they came to her as if from a distance. Elvish words, her mind registered at last, and then she recognized Gerwyth’s scent, made slightly muskier by the elf’s sweat-laden exertions in the tomb. The odor was pleasant and, more importantly, familiar. She felt her body relaxing, the aching knot of grief in her chest easing. She trembled a few times before gaining control of herself.

The bard saw Kaerion’s worried gaze and tried to smile her reassurance. Surely, she would have given in to despair long before this had it not been for the fighter’s solid presence. Vaxor’s death had been a cruel blow, one that had cut unexpectedly deep for both of them. Yet somehow, though they had said only a few words in private since that tragic moment, she felt Kaerion’s strength beside her, and knew that their grief was bearable because it was shared.

“We must try and push on, Majandra,” Kaerion said to her after a moment. “This chapel is especially evil, even for Acererak’s tomb. I’d rather not spend any more time in here.”

She nodded and drew in a deep breath, trying to keep it from turning in to a sob. Gently, she placed her hands upon the ranger’s shoulder and tapped. Gracefully, Gerwyth withdrew his arms from around her.

“Thank you both,” she said, and then stepped down from the altar area. As soon as she moved, she noticed that the once opalescent blue stone of the altar had turned a fiery blue-red.

“Gerwyth—”

“I see it,” was the ranger’s whispered reply. “Just keep moving away.”

The bard backed away slowly, grateful that the elf was taking his own advice. Once clear of the fiery stone, Majandra let out her breath and cast a quick look around the chamber. The chapel itself was over sixty feet long and sixty feet wide, sculpted carefully from the surrounding stone of the tomb. Like other areas of the tomb, the walls of this chapel were covered in mosaics depicting scenes of everyday life. To her dismay, however, the people depicted in these scenes were horribly corrupted. Rotting flesh, skeletal faces, worm-ridden skin—each scene was more ghastly than the last.

Worse still, the whole area was set up like the temples she was familiar with in Rel Mord. Wooden pews filled the east and west portions of this room, while the whole layout drew the observer’s eye to the imposing stone altar in the center of the south wall. Beyond the angry colored stone, the bard could see a tiered dais. Resting on top of the dais was a simple wooden chair—the ceremonial seat of the presiding cleric. Two large brass candelabra stood to either side of the dais, and Majandra could almost see the smoky flame coming from the five unlit white candles that sprouted from the candelabra like skeletal hands. She shuddered at this image, for every detail of the room spoke not only of evil, but also of goodness corrupted. Even the holy symbols on the walls, many representing the good gods and goddesses of the land, were not exact images. Each had some slight imperfection, and many were twisted to demonstrate the reverse of its intended meaning.

Worried, she scanned the room for signs of Phathas. She caught sight of the old mage leaning his bent back against the wood of the pew closest to the tunnel from which they had entered the tomb. She also saw the three remaining guards carefully searching the skeletal figure that lay upon the floor to the west of the altar, its outstretched hand pointing toward the mist covered expanse of another archway. Landra, the guards' captain, conferred quietly with Kaerion, who had settled himself carefully near the edge of one of the pews.

"Well," one of the guards said, "it looks like our next step is clear. This archway is our only way out."

"It would seem that way," Phathas said, turning from his examination of the wooden pews, "but I would be very careful following through on such an assumption."

The old mage's voice quavered across the chapel's distance. Majandra thought that he sounded tired—more tired than she had ever heard him. A wave of sadness washed over her. She knew that as deeply as she grieved for those who had died, their loss would have cut the mage deeper—especially the loss of Vaxor. The two men had been close friends for decades, and now it looked as if the weight of those deaths bore down upon the mage with an implacable force. Majandra could see just how much the wizened mage leaned upon his staff as he made his way toward the center of the chapel.

"I agree," the bard found herself saying. "The skeleton pointing toward that archway seems too obvious a clue. I say we split up and give the room another search. But be careful not to touch anything."

Choosing the area behind the wicked altar, Majandra lost herself in the close examination of the stone wall. She had begun to lose track of time when a shout went up from the opposite area of the chapel. Turning, she saw one of the guards pointing to a small section of the wall, several feet in front of a large, stoppered urn. She made her way toward the guard but waited for the others to arrive before giving the indicated area a close examination.

Before her, about four feet off the ground, Majandra could see a small slot in the stone. Above the slot, the letter O was etched faintly into the gray wall. While the others congratulated the sharp-eyed guard, Majandra tugged at her lower lip, deep in thought. Something about this slot triggered her bardic memory, and she chased that elusive trigger through the twists and turns of her "inner library." Around her, she could hear the group debating their next course of action. Voices rose and faded, points of view were exchanged, but she heard it all from a great distance.

At last, she honed in on the memory—and nearly shouted in her excitement. "I've got it," she said with such conviction that it stopped all conversation.

"Got what, little sister?" Gerwyth asked in a wry tone.

"I have the answer," she responded. When she saw the blank faces staring at her, she intoned, "'If shades of red stand for blood the wise; will not need sacrifice ought but a loop of magical metal—you're well along your way!'"

"Don't you see?" she continued. "It's in the poem. That circle is in the shape of a ring—a 'loop' of metal. All we need to do is place a magical ring on to that circle and something will happen."

"Yeah," one of the guards asked, "but do you know exactly what will happen?"

“Well, not exactly,” Majandra admitted. “But the poem has guided us correctly so far. I say we risk it.”

The group conferred for a few moments before unanimously opting to follow her hunch. Grateful for their trust, she rummaged through her pouches, but found nothing. She turned to the assembled group. “I gave the ring we found in the room with the three chests to Adrys,” she said. A knot formed in her throat as she said these words. Kaerion had tried to warn her, but she had ignored him, and now Vaxor was dead—quite possibly because of her unwillingness to listen.

Thankfully, Kaerion laid a gentle hand upon her shoulder. “No one’s blaming you,” he said softly. “We just need a ring so that we can get out of here.”

“And I have just the thing,” Gerwyth said, breaking the tension. They turned to find the elf holding a small silver band in the palm of his hand.

“I don’t know what it’s called, but it helps keep me comfortable in temperature extremes,” the elf said. “I think it will do nicely.”

“Thank you,” Majandra replied, unsure why Kaerion glared open-mouthed at his friend.

“Why, you goblin-eared excuse for an elf!” Kaerion shouted. “After all these years... *that’s* how you’ve done it. I thought your unflinching endurance in the face of the direst of elements was an elven trait and the sign of a courageous spirit, and all this time you were magically protected. Why I should—”

“Don’t bother finishing that thought,” Gerwyth interrupted with a devilish smile upon his face. “You might overtax that lump of clay you call a brain. Besides,” he finished with an injured look, “every elf worthy of the name has a few secrets.”

“Enough, both of you,” Phathas scolded—though the bard could see a smile splitting the mage’s weathered face. “Let Majandra concentrate.”

Letting her own lightened mood shine through, she bent toward the slot and gingerly placed the metal ring against the etched O. She heard a click and then, seconds later, a deep rumble filled the room. Two of the guards jumped back, eyes searching for signs of danger. But the rest of the group simply waited.

Majandra’s patience was rewarded as a large section of the eastern wall sank slowly into the ground, revealing a dark passage.

“After you,” she said with a pleased smirk upon her face.

She followed Kaerion into the darkness.

\* \* \*

Kaerion yawned as he adjusted his chainmail shirt. Four hours of sleep before his turn at watch was too little, considering the events of the past day. It was difficult to believe that so many people had died inside this horror-filled tomb in a single day. He could see each of their faces, remember the laughter and companionship they had shared during their journey to the swamp. All of that had ended abruptly at the tip of a spear, the edge of a pit, or the claw of some fearsome beast.

None of the faces haunted him as much as Vaxor’s—a quiet and peaceful expression at odds with the brutal way the cleric had died. Kaerion had slept fitfully on the hard ground of the tomb soon after Phathas called the first true rest during their exploration. He had watched idly as the other guards set up the perimeter of

their makeshift camp, but the rigors of the day had soon overcome him. Muscles sore and joints aching, he had curled up against a wall and was asleep before his head had fully rested on his bedroll.

Cool darkness enveloped him. Like a potent balm, the cradled nothingness of sleep eased his burdens. There was no grief, no pain—simply the vast darkness of sleep. Then the first image exploded in his brain. Images of a gray stone claw rending vulnerable flesh plagued his dreams. He heard Vaxor scream as the gargoyle’s claws shredded the tender flesh of his abdomen; the cleric’s skin parted like vellum beneath the cutting knife of a scribe, entrails and gore spilling out onto the floor. Kaerion had woken with such violence that the two guards standing watch rushed over to see what had occurred.

He would have remained awake, but Majandra had made her resting place beside his. Even now, hours later, he could feel the soft touch of her fingers as they ran gently along his cheek while she hummed a quiet tune. It had only taken a few minutes beneath her ministrations before he had returned to sleep. But the images returned—and he had tossed and turned beneath their horrifying clarity. Thus, he had gratefully taken his place at watch when one of the guards shook him awake.

But that had been several hours ago, and now his exhausted body demanded more sleep. Kaerion shook his head to stifle another yawn. The others were stirring. There would be no time for rest until they had pushed farther into the tomb. Surveying the surviving members of their expedition, Kaerion felt his heart soften at the sight of Majandra rubbing sleep-encrusted eyes. Both she and Phathas had risen earlier than the rest of the party and poured over their spellbooks under the flickering light of a lantern. As he watched the half-elf’s fingers deftly rework her thick, sleep-ruffled hair into a manageable ponytail, Kaerion fought down the urge to work the knots out of her neck and back with the palms of his own hand. Although he knew he was still unworthy to use words like duty and honor, he had a purpose here, and he would not compromise the group’s safety to yield to his own desires.

There were enough deadly things to contend with inside these walls. He didn’t want to chance losing another person to carelessness—or betrayal. He saw the cruel smile play across Adrys’ face as clearly as if the lad was in front of him. He had been sorely misled by the boy’s act. There would be a reckoning. Until then, Kaerion would stand his watch, vigilant as the others ran through the rest of their morning preparations. About a half-hour had passed, and he found himself wondering just what time it was on the surface.

“The sun has just peaked over the horizon,” Gerwyth informed the group, as if reading Kaerion’s mind. The ranger finished his announcement with a muted growl as he reached toward the ceiling and stretched out his muscles.

Kaerion smiled at his friend, used to the elf’s accurate predictions. The smile faded quickly as he watched Phathas push himself to his feet. The mage, thin to begin with, had lost even more weight during the recent weeks. Skin that was paper thin hung gaunt and tight to the wizard’s skull. Kaerion could see new lines of grief and pain etched into the maze of creases already in existence. Wrapped in the dirt-stained expanse of his gray-cowled cloak, the mage resembled nothing so much as one of the undead that no doubt haunted the grim corridors of this dungeon.

Only his eyes showed signs of life. Like twin sapphires they blazed with ferocious intensity. Whatever drove the mage, each step must surely have been an act of indomitable will. It was clear that after their experiences these past few months, the wizard would not tolerate any failure. Animated by such implacable commitment, the wizened spellcaster rose unsteadily from his resting place.

“It is time to continue,” Phathas said with a tired gasp. “We are nearing the resting place of Acererak. I can feel it.”

Their preparations complete, the group assembled at the base of the passage, before the secret door. Previously, the party had followed the passage created by the sliding wall in the cursed chapel. Kaerion found himself once again thanking the bard’s recollection of Acererak’s poem, for it had saved them a great deal of time. *Two pits along the way will he found to lead to a fortuitous fall so check the wall*, she had quoted to them as they made their way down the stone passage. Sure enough, they had encountered a number of pits, cleverly placed behind closed doors. Careful in their observation, they had discovered a concealed door at the base of one of the pits. It had led them to a descending stairway and yet another secret door. This one had been blocked by powerful magic, and it had taken Phathas several tries to bypass the door’s wards. Exhausted, the mage had walked through the door and signaled that the party should rest.

Now, somewhat refreshed from their rough encampment, the group set out. A brief look down the turning passageway had revealed a short hallway ending in a door. Together, the party marched toward that door and, at an all-clear signal from the bard, they threw it open.

From his vantage point at the front of the party, Kaerion saw into a large room. The sting of dried herbs and dust assailed his nose and eyes before he had even taken a single step. The others coughed as Kaerion took several shallow breaths through his mouth and entered the room. In the light of his torch, he could see lines of shelves covering every foot of the wall. Clay pots, jars, and other containers cluttered each of the shelves, some of them lying on their sides, broken or cracked. A large desk and four tables were spaced evenly throughout the room. Carefully, Kaerion kicked aside the soiled wrappings that lay strewn about the floor and made his way toward one of the tables. In the center of the room stood three barrels, each filled with a dark liquid that reflected the flickering torchlight like the eyes of a waiting predator.

Phathas moved toward one of the tables and poked his staff through the cloth wrappings, broken pots, and bits of cracked and powdered bones that littered its scarred wooden top.

“A preparation room of some sort,” the mage said, and Kaerion found himself straining to listen to the wizard’s rheumy voice. “No doubt where Acererak’s servants prepared the dead who were to be buried with their evil master.”

“Looks like dirty water to me,” said one of the guards who had moved quietly toward the first barrel and now leaned over its top. “Smells like someone’s been using it as a middens,” he said, wrinkling his nose.

Gerwyth’s twisted expression confirmed the guard’s opinion. “Smells like Kaerion after an all-day binge,” he quipped. Ignoring the fighter’s growl of protest, the elf continued, “Well, only one way to find out what’s in it.”

With a quick word of warning, the ranger kicked over the barrel. It spun twice, overbalanced by the moving liquid within it. With a crash, the wooden container tipped over, spilling rank liquid on the floor.

“Empty,” Majandra said, as she peered into the fallen barrel.

“This one’s too full to tip over,” Landra said, eyeing the second barrel distastefully.

One of her guards came forward, carrying the splintered end of a pole that had been cut in half by the swinging door of a pit. Gently, he dipped the pole into the barrel and began to stir. Kaerion watched apprehensively as the man continued his experimentation.

“Hey,” the guard said, “I think something’s in here.”

Hand easing toward his scabbard in case of trouble, Kaerion approached the barrel. Bredeth did the same. After several tries, the guard managed to ease whatever the barrel was hiding up along its side and, with a deft twist of his wrist, knocked it out of the barrel.

The object hit the floor with a metallic clatter. Golden metal flashed in the light. Kaerion was relieved to see what looked like a section of a gold-wrought key lying on the floor. He was about to bend down and pick it up when he heard Majandra’s cry of warning.

Straightening quickly, he managed to see the guard withdrawing the pole from the barrel. Thin smoke writhed off of the pole’s edge. Faintly, Kaerion could hear a sizzling sound, as whatever fluid was in the container started eating away at the wooden implement.

“Acid,” Bredeth said, and Kaerion could hear the man’s distaste for the gruesome trap. “I bet whatever’s in the third barrel is equally as dangerous.”

“Indeed,” Phathas said, moving slowly toward the object in question. “I suggest that the rest of you stand back.”

Kaerion obeyed the mage and took several steps backward. The others did likewise, until the mage stood alone before the third barrel. Grasping his staff in one hand, the spellcaster raised his other hand, palm up. A faint hum filled the room, and Kaerion watched in amazement as the thick, gelatinlike substance floated toward the ceiling. When the floating mass hung safely in the shadows of the room, Majandra moved forward and looked into the now-empty barrel.

“Here is the other section of the key,” she said as she bent over and scooped up the golden mass.

Quickly, she brought her section of the key over to where the first piece lay. Standing over her, Kaerion watched as she placed both sections together. With a single bright flash of light, the two sections fused together. Smiling, the bard stood up, holding the remade key in her hands.

“We’ve stumbled onto the next section of Acererak’s poem,” she declared, as Phathas lowered the floating jelly back into the barrel. “These keys and those are most important of all,” the bard intoned. “That means there are probably a number of keys we’ll find hidden in various places before we get to Acererak’s crypt.”

“But what do we do once we’ve collected them?” asked Bredeth, as he gazed in distaste at the gruesome remnants of the preparation room.

“I have no idea,” Majandra admitted. “But the poem has steered us straight so far.”

“Unless Acererak’s words have been guiding us just to lead us to a gruesome end,” Bredeth said.

“A possibility,” Kaerion broke in, unwilling to have the party’s energy and focus distracted by another argument, “but so far following the ancient poem has kept us safe. It’s only when we explore areas of the tomb not written of by that mad wizard that we encounter danger. Given a choice between a passage earmarked in the poem and one not, I would take the one called out by Acererak.”

“Agreed, friend Kaerion,” Phathas said, as he drew closer. “Let us follow the mage’s twisted words as we’ve done, and deal with the consequences as they come.”

With that decision, the group assembled into their regular order, with Kaerion and Gerwyth in the front, and proceeded out of the arched opening. The dark passage quickly turned and the party descended a long set of stone stairs. Their passage disturbed centuries of dust, kicking up clouds of moldering particles that stung Kaerion’s nose.

Beyond the stairs, the passage turned once again, and Kaerion brought the group to a sudden halt. Before them, soaking up the light of their torches, loomed a wide pit. Kaerion moved to the edge and looked down. Thick spikes jutted up from the floor of the pit, glinting in the illumination like the razor sharp jaws of a predator.

Gerwyth moved up beside him and whistled appreciatively at the sight of the trap. “This will take some doing to get around,” he said.

“Not really, Gerwyth,” the bard said. “I can easily levitate over to the other side and rig a rope that the rest of you can use to avoid the pit.”

“There is another solution, my dear,” Phathas said smiling. “Rather than risk triggering any other traps Acererak built into the pit, why not simply walk?”

Kaerion saw the bard’s lips turn up in an answering smile. “That is an altogether satisfactory solution,” she said, and then beckoned the others away from the pit.

Once again the mage made his way forward. Leaning upon his staff, he thrust one hand forward, fist closed, while the words of his spell tumbled forth in a torrent of rhythm and twisted cadence. Phathas whispered the final word of the incantation and opened his fist, palm facing down. Immediately, the area directly above the pit shimmered. Gradually, the energy coalesced into a solid stone block that completely covered the pit.

Kaerion took a tentative step forward. Satisfied that the new stone would hold, he walked forward, head shaking in amazement. For all of the mage’s physical frailty, Kaerion was completely in awe of the amount of power the wizard had at his disposal. Without Phathas’ assistance, the whole expedition might have met a gruesome end long ago. It was a testament to the wizard’s commitment and skill that they had made it this far.

With the others following, the group made its way over the pit and walked another hundred or so feet before the passageway ended abruptly. Confident that this wasn’t simply a dead end, Kaerion asked the others to break up and search for any hidden exits. This time, it was Majandra who spotted the secret door in the north wall of the passage. A quick twist of a loose stone in the wall, and the door swung open, revealing a small antechamber—and another door opposite.



Motioning Majandra up to check on the door, Kaerion drew his sword and was relieved to find that Gerwyth had already fixed an arrow to his bow. The half-elf's search revealed nothing unusual about this portal. Conveying her discovery with a simple sign, the bard opened the door.

Kaerion could see that the room beyond was simply appointed with tapestries along the walls. As the party moved in for a better look, it soon became clear that the room had been used mainly for storage. Dented urns and chipped vases littered the floor of the room, while four rotting sofas and several garish, throne-like chairs lay in a heap in the room's center. Motioning for the others to join him, Kaerion moved to a collection of trunks and coffers that lay strewn about a small area of the room.

Within minutes, the entire party had fanned out. Unwilling to turn a blind eye to the potential hidden dangers lurking in this room, Kaerion kept a watchful eye on everyone, even as he opened trunk after trunk—each containing only air.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Landra and another guard investigating one of the coffers, while a third one gazed at the tapestries hanging from the walls. Even from his vantage point, Kaerion could see that the tapestries depicted underwater scenes. Dyed with rich greens and blues, the kelp-covered rocks and coral beds stood out in stark relief to the gray stone of the room's floor.

He was about to call over to Majandra and enlist the half-elf's aid in opening another of the trunks when a dull groaning sound filled the room. The floor of the chamber rocked violently, throwing Kaerion to his knees. As the room continued to tremble, several of the others lost their balance as well. Kaerion watched in horror as a few of the coffers tipped on their sides, disgorging asps.

A cry of pain distracted him from the advancing snakes. Looking toward the source of the cry, he saw that the guard investigating the tapestry had grabbed hold of the thick cloth to try and remain upright. The top of the tapestry had torn and, as the material fell to the floor, it transformed into a thick mass of green slime. Kaerion nearly disgorged his morning repast as the guard's skin bubbled and melted beneath the viscous slime, adding to the creature's prodigious size.

The hiss of angered snakes brought his attention back to his own danger. Hastily, Kaerion scrambled to his feet and was surprised to find that the floor had stopped shaking. Landra and the remaining guard were hemmed in by a rapidly closing serpentine circle. Without hesitation, Kaerion launched himself at the attacking snakes, calling out to Bredeth for help. The two fighters cut a swath of death in their wake as gleaming swords bit deeply into scales. Though he had little time to spare for the other members of their group, Kaerion could see that Gerwyth, Majandra, and Phathas stood just outside the reach of the now-advancing slime. A moment later, a wave of light and heat burst over the room, as both the mage and the half-elf finished shouting words to their spells.

Kaerion ignored the blast, confident that his three companions had their situation under control. Two asps whipped their head around, striking out at his arm. Both sets of fangs rebounded sharply off of his mail shirt. Thankful that he had taken the time to adjust his armor this morning, Kaerion sent both heads whipping across the room with a single downward slice of his sword.

The next few moments became a rhythmic exchange of sword blows as Bredeth, Kaerion, Landra, and the last guard dispatched the asps with their blades. Silence

descended upon the room once the last serpent had been killed. Kaerion looked over to the corner, breathing heavily, and saw that Majandra and Phathas stood near a smoldering lump of green slime. Gerwyth had maneuvered near the stone wall that the tapestry had previously covered. The elf was running his fingers lightly over the area.

“There’s something here,” the ranger said. “I think it’s the outline of a door.” He pressed the stone, and a door swung open. “There’s a passage here! I think we better—”

Kaerion couldn’t make out the rest, as another loud groaning reverberated throughout the room.

“Run!” he shouted, not waiting to see if anyone listened, and bolted for the door. Tripping and stumbling as the floor of the chamber once again trembled, Kaerion made it out of the room behind Majandra and Phathas. They stumbled into a small curved passage. Kaerion turned to help the rest of the group escape the trapped room and let out a relieved sigh as the last of the party emerged from the quaking chamber.

He closed the door and leaned heavily against it while his companions caught their breath. “It... was right... there,” he heard Majandra say through deep lungfuls of air.

“What was there?” Bredeth asked.

The bard held out her hand for a moment while she struggled to regain her composure. Kaerion could see more tears brimming in her almond-shaped eyes. “The warning,” she said at last. “‘Beware of trembling hands’... It was right there for us in the poem. If only I had—”

“Don’t,” Phathas scolded the elf in a sharp tone. “There was no way you could have known what ‘trembling hands’ meant. Remember: despite the help we’re receiving from Acererak’s little riddle, its meanings are intentionally left clouded. We’re not supposed to survive this expedition.”

“I agree,” Kaerion added with a sympathetic squeeze of her shoulder. “You’re being too hard on yourself. And I should know,” he continued with a rueful smile, “I’m an expert on such matters.”

Kaerion was rewarded with a half smile. Gently, he wiped the tears from the bard’s eyes and gave her a gentle kiss on the forehead. “Peace, Majandra. We’re almost finished.”

“Or we will be if you two would stop mooning over each other,” said Gerwyth, who softened his tone with an exaggerated raising of his pointed eyebrows. “Now let’s get moving. We have a job to do.”

The group moved out, this time at a slower pace. Though not injured in the trapped chamber, Phathas had still not quite recovered his breath. As a result, it took the party quite a bit of time to navigate the next set of descending stairs.

The passageway eventually reached a four-way crossroads, and Kaerion soon found himself thankful for the slow pace. Taking one step into the intersection, he turned to check on Phathas’ progress, and the simple maneuver saved his life. The floor beneath his extended foot gave way, opening up into a deep pit. Not quite overbalanced, he hung suspended on the lip of the hole, windmilling his arms before Gerwyth pulled him from the precipice.

Though not quite as imposing as the pit they had traveled over earlier, this obstacle slowed the party's progress even more. After a brief consultation as to the direction they should move, they decided that Majandra, easily the lightest member of the expedition, would jump over the corner of the trap into the passageway. Bredeth would follow, and the two would function as anchors for a safety line of rope tied to the other, less deft members of the party. All in all, the crossing took several minutes.

Once across, Kaerion paused to light a new torch and surveyed the passageway. Although the tunnel continued off into the darkness, he thought he could see a door at the extreme limit of his vision. Calling the group together, he led the way. As expected, the passage ended in a thick stone door. Used to this procedure by now, Majandra walked toward the door without any prompting and gave it a careful examination.

"It's free from any traps I can see," she said when she had completed her search.

"That's comforting," Bredeth said. "What about the traps you can't see?"

Kaerion could see that the dour noble's tongue was beginning to erode the bard's temper. The half-elf's lips puckered in a sour expression, and Kaerion could almost see the stinging retort forming behind her lips. "If Majandra hasn't discovered any traps, that's good enough for me," Kaerion said simply and opened the door—

Only to find himself staring at a blank wall.

The curses that followed took the form of several different languages, and Kaerion was surprised to hear the old mage mumble something indignant under his breath. It didn't make any sense. They had been following Acererak's riddle and it had led them true so far. Perhaps they were supposed to have taken another passage at the intersection. It seemed like the most logical thing to do, but something nagged at the back of his mind.

The others had already started to head back toward the intersection when he called out. "Hey! Didn't the riddle say something about a false door?" he asked.

As one, the group turned and cast expectant glances at Majandra. Kaerion watched as the bard's face assumed the slightly distant look he had come to associate with her ability to memorize words and information.

"Yes," she replied, her voice rising with excitement. "'If you find the false, you'll find the true.' Quick, Gerwyth!" she said in a voice worthy of a battlefield commander. "Take a look at the wall beyond the false door. You have the sharpest eyes among us."

Kaerion watched as the elf gave Majandra an abbreviated bow and walked toward the dead end. The ranger ran his fingers along the surface for a few minutes, peering deeply at the stonework.

"Sure enough," he said finally, "there's a door here."

The party let out a sigh of relief. Once more the riddle was guiding them true. Quickly they formed up as Majandra declared the door free from traps and pulled it open. The door grated heavily upon the raised stone of the floor, sending deep echoes down the corridor. Despite the chill, Kaerion felt sweat trickling down the small of his back. With an unconscious movement, he shrugged away the discomfort. They were closer than they had ever been to piercing the heart of this devilish crypt.

Shouldering his shield, Kaerion raised a flickering torch and walked through the doorway.



Majandra stared at the room in awe. Around her, to the limits of the groups torches, stone columns reached up into the darkness, a forest of stonework as far as the eye could see. The party gathered in a knot by the entrance, their combined breathing echoing softly in the shadowy chamber. It had taken several minutes and the loss of three sword blades to gain entrance to this room, but the half-elf was sure they were heading in the right direction.

This must be the columned hall, she thought, before relaying her surmise to the rest of the group. Around her, she could feel her companions tension like a palpable itch at the base of her neck.

“If this is the chamber Acererak spoke of, then where is the throne?” Bredeth asked from somewhere behind her.

Her response was cut off by the sound of the adamantite door they had walked through only a few minutes ago slamming closed. Majandra spun around at the noise, ready to offer whatever assistance she could, but by the sound of Kaerion’s cursing, she doubted that there was much she could do.

“It’s jammed shut,” Kaerion said, confirming her fears.

It took a few moments for Gerwyth and the mage to investigate the sealed portal. After several attempts, both magical and mundane, at prying the door open, they gave up.

“The door only opens one way,” Phathas informed the group. “It appears that our path has been decided for us.”

Unwilling to waste energy cursing a situation about which she could do nothing, the bard gave the vast hall another look. Bredeth was right. If they had stumbled upon the columned hall, then they should be within bowshot of Acererak’s throne. Majandra shook her head in frustration as the chamber’s shadows defeated even the sensitivity of her half-elven eyes.

Gently, she hummed a succession of notes and sent a trio of bluish-green lights dancing about the hall. Around her, Majandra heard startled exclamations of wonder as her arcane illumination shredded the hall’s stubborn shadows as easily as a vorpal blade cut through bone. Beneath the pulsing glow of her lights, the columned hall’s

true scope was revealed. Larger even than the royal throne room in Rel Mord, Acererak's hall would have dwarfed even the tallest giant. Row upon row of columns rose up into the chamber's vaulted heights, each one engraved with symbols and decorative stonework set off with colorful accents and bright jewels that would have made a master artisan cry out in pure delight. From where she stood, Majandra could also make out three simple stone doors spaced evenly across the north wall. The farther corners of the room also contained duplicates of the horrifying devil-face that had been carved into the stone of the tomb's entrance chamber.

But it was the silver throne sitting atop a flawless ebony dais in the center of the southern wall that truly captured her attention. Moving carefully toward the object of her interest, she could see that the throne was composed of the same obsidian as the dais itself. Silver inlay glinted masterfully from every possible angle of the throne, and upon the edge of its back and along its wide armrests, ivory-carved skulls leered back at her.

It was Gerwyth who first saw the crown and scepter lying crosswise on the seat of the throne. Majandra caught sight of the glinting, jewel-encrusted crown after the elf's exclamation. The others had spread out to search the rest of the room, but she called them back with a shout. "The throne is the key!" she explained as her companions drew closer to the throne.

Phathas waved a single hand before the throne and Majandra was forced to step back at the blast of bright light that pulsated from the crown and scepter. "Magic," he warned as the group drew closer. Carefully checking the steps up to the dais for traps, the half-elf was relieved to signal that all was clear.

Kaerion and Bredeth had begun to ascend the ebony steps when Majandra heard a muffled curse behind her. Turning, she saw that the last remaining guard, a brown-haired woman named Keeryn, had brushed against one of the hall's columns as she was approaching the throne, and now hung suspended in the air about ten feet off of the ground. As Majandra rushed to her, the guard floated higher into the air.

"Phathas!" the half-elf called to the mage. "Help!"

By the time the mage, Landra, and Gerwyth joined her, Keeryn had floated nearly thirty feet into the air. By now, the guard's concerned look had transformed to one of alarm, and Majandra could see the color draining from her face.

"Try and hold on to something!" she called out to the unfortunate woman, but as the guard hastened to obey her, she began to drift toward the far corner of the room.

"She's heading for the devil mouth!" Landra cried out as Keeryn, clearly frantic now, reached wildly at every column she passed.

"Gerwyth, I need your help!" the half-elf said, trying hard to keep herself beneath the trapped guard, but Keeryn had begun to pick up speed and was only about fifteen feet from the devil's stone mouth.

To her relief, Majandra saw that the ranger had strung a thin rope to the shaft of one of his arrows and now aimed carefully for the wall near Keeryn. The shaft impacted hard against the thick stone, sending up a sharp cloud of dust as its glowing head bit deeply into the rock. Keeryn was close to the carved stone face when she reached out and grabbed the rope, stopping her forward motion. Majandra's relief was shortlived, however, as the guard gave a strangled cry. A deep blue glow emanated from the devil face, surrounding the trapped woman. The half-elf watched

in horror as the glow deepened, suddenly exploding into cobalt brilliance, and when Majandra could see once more, Keeryn was gone.

Numbness swept over the bard, and a familiar ache that she had come to associate with this evil place. She had little time to reflect on their loss, however, as Bredeth gave a sudden shout. The half-elf looked in his direction, terrified of what she might see. To her relief, both Kaerion and the young noble were still alive—though Bredeth held the gleaming scepter gingerly in his hand. Both of them stood gaping at the throne, which had begun to sink beneath the dais.

“There’s a passageway beneath the throne!” Kaerion shouted.

Wiping the burgeoning tears from her eyes, Majandra walked toward them, wondering just how many of them would have to die before they reached their goal.

\* \* \*

Durgoth watched the Nyrondeese from the shadows of the stair’s landing, a cruel smile playing upon his face. The fools had no idea how close they were to their doom—not even that overly perceptive elf. Only Bredeth, their unwilling accomplice, seemed to sense the presence of his party. The young fool kept glancing behind him, peering into the darkness. Having witnessed the power of the link forged into being between the nobleman and Durgoth’s pet sorcerer, he didn’t doubt that the pitiful man could in fact detect their presence. He was confident, however, in Sydra’s ability to silence the man’s tongue.

Beside him, wrapped in deep shadows like a cloak, Eltanel observed their enemies with a practiced eye. “Should we attack now, blessed one?” the thief asked, his voice barely a whisper. “They are completely unaware of us. It wouldn’t take much for us to kill them now.”

Durgoth shook his head, belatedly realizing that the thief could see his reaction. “No, Eltanel,” he whispered. “I need them alive just a little while longer.”

Which was a shame, he thought, for the thief had been correct. Ever since the Nyrondeese had dropped into the passage beneath the throne, they had given little thought to their own protection. Durgoth and his followers had been only tens of feet away when that damned bard had scooped up a large cylindrical key from the steps leading farther down.

Now, the fools stood before a set of imposing doors over twenty feet high. Even from here Durgoth could see that the portal was composed entirely of silver, catching the torchlight and sending shimmering waves of illumination cascading throughout the room. Beyond that door, however, the cleric could sense a brooding presence. It beat against his mind even now, threatening to rip away thought and sanity in a wave of darkness. Durgoth steeled himself against its power, recalling a defensive spell, and managed a small smile as the pressure in his head receded.

A cry of pain from the assembled Nyrondeese drew his attention. The fire-haired bard stood to the left of her oafish warrior, who had fallen to his knees. In the fighter’s right hand, Durgoth could see the cylindrical key, still glowing from whatever spell had activated when he had pressed it to the door.

“I’m all right,” he heard the man say as he rose unsteadily to his feet, “but I don’t think this is the right key.”

“Perhaps we should use the first key we found in the preparation room?” This came from the elf.

The bard shook her head. “I don’t think so,” she said.

Durgoth ground his teeth in frustration. It was impossible to imagine how these fools had managed to penetrate so far into the tomb. He watched the assembled Nyronnese as they debated their next course of action, and he was almost as surprised as they when Bredeth gave a cry of anger and swung his blade at the door. The door gave out a sonorous peal when the sword rebounded off its face.

And then it began to bleed. At first, the deep crimson liquid trickled from the spot of contact, but it soon increased its flow until a steady stream of blood shot out from the door. Durgoth watched as the party recovered from its initial shock, but it soon became clear that, despite their efforts to staunch the bizarre wound, the blood would continue to stream out of the door. Already, it covered the steps and pooled thinly around the cleric’s feet.

They were arguing now, heatedly trying to determine their next move. This time, Durgoth found himself fighting the urge to order an attack, but he needed them to bypass the tomb’s remaining traps and summon the presence of Acererak. Once that had been accomplished, he would kill each one of them with impunity.

“Enough, all of you!” shouted the bard, and to Durgoth’s great surprise, they all listened. “I think I’ve found out how to bypass this door,” she said. “Acererak’s riddle speaks of the throne that’s key and keyed. Well, we know that the throne itself was keyed. Bredeth used the scepter to unlock the passage beneath it.” She cast a grateful glance at the young noble. “What if the scepter is also the key for this door?”

“You speak wisdom,” the decrepit mage responded, turning to the rest of the group. Durgoth, still hiding in the shadows, shook his head. A part of him longed to snap the patronizing nobleman’s brittle neck. Only a few more minutes, he thought, and I can rid myself of all of them.

“What side of the scepter did you use to unlock the throne?” the wizard asked.

“The side with the silver knob,” the young man responded.

The mage nodded and took the scepter from the bard. Durgoth watched as the old man placed the implement’s gold ball against a depression in the doors. There was a moment of complete silence. The stream of blood slowed to a trickle and finally stopped.

Durgoth watched with barely contained excitement as the doors swung silently open. He crept to the back of the passage where the remainder of his followers waited expectantly. In a short while, his quest would be complete. Years of patient struggle and endless plotting would finally pay off.

And the killing would begin.





Kaerion entered the imposing chamber with his sword drawn, ready for an attack—and nearly dropped the weapon as a bright wave of illumination assaulted his eyes. Blinking hard to adjust his vision, he called out a warning to the rest of the party. They entered slowly, cautious of the dangers that might lay hidden in this room.

Unlike the halls within the rest of the tomb, this square chamber contained elaborately crafted gold sconces spaced regularly along the walls. A bright yellow flame burned hotly within each of the gilded holders. Like the ceiling in the foyer from whence the party had come, polished silver covered the roof of this room, reflecting and magnifying the light from each sconce so intensely that it took Kaerion a few moments to realize that the flames burned with an unearthly power. They neither flickered nor reacted to the passage of the party in any way.

A few more steps carried him into the center of the chamber. What he saw nearly took his breath away. Kaerion stood, not upon the familiar gray stone that had made up most of the tomb, but on top of a floor composed of a semi-precious material—agate from the look of it—crafted and polished to gleaming perfection. A granite sarcophagus rested on the floor against the far wall, and even from his position Kaerion could see the slant and whorl of ancient glyphs inscribed about its surface. In front of the burial mound stood an oversized bronze urn. The unmistakable flash of gold filigree caught his eye as the object’s decorative swirls reflected the light. Kaerion watched warily as a thin stream of bluish-gray smoke issued forth from a vent near the urn’s brass stopper.

“Will you look at that,” a voice from behind him said. Kaerion looked at the speaker and was surprised to find himself regarding Landra. The guard captain had moved forward with the rest of the party and stopped in the chamber’s center. She gazed intently at the two massive iron chests that sat to either side of the sarcophagus.

“This must be Acererak’s treasury,” Landra said in a hushed voice. If this were any other place at any other time, Kaerion might have smiled. This was the first time he had seen the veteran awed by anything.

“Be careful about what you touch,” Phathas wheezed. “I don’t think we’ve reached the heart of this tomb yet.”

Concerned but mindful of the mage’s pride, Kaerion watched as the old wizard walked unsteadily toward the sarcophagus and lifted his staff above its granite lid. Phathas muttered a few words and then took a step back, a look of surprise stamped clearly upon his wizened face. “Nothing!” the mage exclaimed.

“There are no spells on the sarcophagus?” Gerwyth asked as he walked gracefully up to the man.

“No. I mean that I felt nothing,” the mage explained in a tone so exasperated that Kaerion winced in sympathy for his friend’s innocent question. “My spell didn’t work!” Phathas began to cast another spell. Again nothing happened. “It appears that something is interfering with my magic,” the old man said. “What about you Majandra?”

It only took a few moments for the bard to determine that she too was affected by this strange occurrence. “Well,” she said in a tone so similar to Phathas’ earlier exclamation that Kaerion had to fight off the urge to smile, “whatever wards are blocking our magic don’t seem to be affecting the tomb itself.” The bard pointed to the wall sconces.

“Shouldn’t we open the sarcophagus?” Bredeth asked. “It might be Acererak’s final resting place.”

“No,” Kaerion found himself saying. “Acererak is close, but he isn’t here.”

The others looked at him, but he merely shrugged. He didn’t know how he knew, but he did. He could feel the evil wizard’s presence like a canker in his mind. He’d felt it before—briefly, when they had first entered the Vast Swamp. There, however, it had been merely a trickle of premonition. Here, close to the heart of Acererak’s damned crypt, the force of it nearly made him ill. He hadn’t felt such things since Dorakaa—and the implications of that were almost more terrifying than the palpable sense of Acererak’s presence.

“Anyway,” Majandra said, interrupting his thoughts, “with the wards in this room counteracting our magic, it’s too dangerous to go fooling about with things. We might activate a trap we have no power to overcome.” Kaerion watched as the half-elf’s gaze raked the room. “Besides,” she continued, “there is still more to Acererak’s riddle, and I think that something is in this room. It’s—”

“The statues,” Gerwyth finished, sounding very pleased with himself. Kaerion sighed as his friend pointed to the hulking iron statues that guarded each corner of the room. The metal figures stood over eight feet tall, and each wielded a vicious-looking black iron weapon. Turning to face Majandra, the ranger composed his features in a mock imitation of the half-elf. “The iron men of visage grim do more than meets the viewer’s eyes,” he intoned ominously, and then stuck his tongue out at the bard. “And you thought no one ever listened to what you had to say.”

Majandra offered the elf her most dazzling smile, and Kaerion found himself once more feeling uncomfortably jealous. Concentrate on the matter at hand, he chided himself. “Let’s spread out and search those statues,” he said to the rest of the group. “And be careful not to spring any traps!”

It took a short while for the group to examine each of the statues. Only one, the image of a hulking fighter wielding a spike-studded mace, looked different enough to

warrant further investigation. After carefully checking it for traps, Majandra signaled to Kaerion, Gerwyth, and Bredeth. The three of them each grabbed a portion of the statue and pushed. Within moments, they all heard a loud scraping sound as the mass of black iron moved slowly backward, revealing a chute that spiraled down into darkness.

Kaerion clapped his two assistants on the shoulders heartily as they rested from their recent exertions. Though the elf offered him his usual smirk, Kaerion could see that something was troubling Bredeth. The young noble's face was twisted into a grimace. "What bothers you, Bredeth?" he asked. For a moment, Kaerion didn't think that the nobleman would answer, but eventually the man's face composed itself.

"N-nothing, Kaerion," Bredeth said. "I... I think I might have twisted something in my back."

Kaerion nodded. He didn't quite believe the young man, but he wasn't willing to pry. Whatever troubled the nobleman, he'd share it when he was ready. Kaerion's experience had taught him that lesson.

"Well, then," Kaerion said, "I'll go down first. When I signal that everything is safe, I want the rest of you to come down slowly. Is that clear?"

There was no dissent as the fighter sheathed his sword and crawled feet first into the stone shaft. Before he slipped down into the darkness, he gave Majandra a crooked smile. The bard smiled in return and said nothing—but Kaerion heard everything he needed to hear in that silence.

With a final wave of his hand, he slid down the chute.

The stone door sank noiselessly into the floor, revealing a dust-filled room beyond.

"Congratulate yourselves while you can," Durgoth said, feeling a frisson of anticipation work its way up his spine as the Nyrondeese slapped each other heartily on the back. After a few unsuccessful attempts at opening the door, Majandra had tried the first key—successfully. That woman was as intelligent as she was beautiful. Briefly, he remembered catching sight of her in Sydra's scrying, and he also remembered what he had planned for her.

Durgoth pushed his excitement away and concentrated on following the Nyrondeese silently. At his command, the sorceress had cloaked all of them with an invisibility spell. Though he couldn't see them, he knew that his followers lurked somewhere behind him, ready to attack when the time was right.

He entered the chamber protected by the sinking door just a few moments after his enemies. The nearness of Acererak's spirit nearly crushed his mind. The protective wards he had woven like a castle wall around him were fraying and ready to split.

Swirling dust caught his attention as the Nyrondeese party fanned out to explore the room. Within moments the dust had formed into the semblance of a man and approached the tomb's defilers. Looking at the creature through senses that were stretched to their breaking point beneath the dark wizard's metaphysical assault, it was clear that the mystic construct offered no real danger. The true presence of Acererak lingered somewhere within this room, cleverly hidden.

Phathas too must have realized this, for the mage commanded the rest of his party to ignore the insubstantial creature. Instead, he ordered the bard to place a cylindrical

key within the indentation that marked the center of this high-peaked vault Durgoth watched as the fiery-haired half-elf carefully inserted the key and turned it three times. The floor trembled mightily.

Durgoth watched in amazement as the south section of the room rose into the air, disgorging centuries of dust and powdered stone. He fell back quickly as his enemies each backed away from the moving floor. When the dust cleared, he could see a vault, composed entirely of silver, now filled the latter half of the room. Beyond that door he could sense Acererak's spirit rising in power, eager to be set free upon the world once again.

After a brief hesitation, the elf walked up to the door, grabbed the inset ring in the vault's center, and pulled. The vault door swung open slowly, revealing a veritable king's ransom in treasure. The glitter of gems, jewelry, and countless thousands of coins mesmerized the eye as light entered the vault's interior for the first time in innumerable centuries. Durgoth nearly jumped as he heard a slow whistle of appreciation behind him. He cast an angry glance at his followers, knowing that they couldn't see him, but wishing that he could kill them all now. Thankfully, the Nyrondeese were engrossed in their own examination of Acererak's burial vault and hadn't detected them—yet.

His anger dissipated as he watched Bredeth jerk violently forward, like a rag doll responding to the commands of a cruel owner. The prophecy had been explicit about the steps needed to summon Acererak and retrieve the key. Durgoth had made sure that Sydra knew what she needed to have Bredeth do once they had stumbled upon the wizard's crypt.

Durgoth smiled as the noble's companions called out to him. Heedless of their cries, the young man reached out and touched the top of a small skull that lay in the back of the tomb. Durgoth fell to his knees as he felt Acererak's spirit respond to the touch and phase into this plane of existence. Waves of dark energy filled the room, and the last of Durgoth's spiritual defenses crumbled.

"Now!" he shouted to his followers—and watched calmly as their shimmering forms winked into existence moments before they reached the confused knot of Nyrondeese nobles.

The battle had begun.

\* \* \*

Kaerion spun at the sound of the unfamiliar voice, hastily raising his shield as shadowy figures appeared out of nowhere. Among them, he recognized the familiar shape of a red-cloaked man, moving with unearthly speed toward him. Anger warred with disbelief. Their attackers from Rel Mord had returned. But how?

He didn't have time to answer. The robed figure leapt the remaining few feet between them and aimed a vicious kick at Kaerion's head. Kaerion brought up his shield, blocking the kick, but the force of the blow knocked his shield a few inches to the left, offering the monk's follow-through punch no resistance. Kaerion rolled with the blow, letting some of its force dissipate as his momentum carried him toward the vault's far wall.

The monk continued forward, pressing the attack. Though Kaerion was armored and relatively unhurt, he still had difficulty parrying the flurry of kicks and strikes the pock-faced man was delivering. Desperately, he ducked beneath a roundhouse kick and sliced viciously with his sword. Obviously surprised by the maneuver, his opponent didn't quite dance out of the way in time. Kaerion's blade cut deeply into the man's calf.

Kaerion would have pressed his sudden advantage, but he stumbled as an explosive wave of frost-chilled air enveloped the room. At the same time, needles of hot fire stabbed into his brain. He tried to close himself off to the agony, to find a center of focus in the maelstrom of pain, but he was unsuccessful. The fetid presence of Acererak pressed in on him. He could feel the corruption that was the ancient wizard's spirit surrounding him—a miasma of pollution and evil that sucked the air from his lungs. He knew that Bredeth's hasty actions had somehow summoned the creature back from beyond the grave.

Kaerion forced open eyes that he did not remember closing, trying to blink away the pain-wrought tears that threatened to blind him. He scanned the immediate area for his opponent, wondering why the monk hadn't finished him off when he had the chance. He found the man standing completely still, gazing up above Kaerion's right shoulder. Carefully, lest it prove some trick, Kaerion looked in the same direction.

Bands of ice pressed round his heart at what he saw.

Behind him, floating idly in the air, a bleached white skull, a terrifying intelligence alight in its ruby eyes, gazed upon the scene of battle. The skull's eyes pulsed with an unearthly glow, and Kaerion saw the wicked delight shining in their depths. This perception was heightened by the row of diamonds inset into the creature's jaw, forming an array of teeth that were exposed in such a way as to resemble a cruel smile.

From the waves of pure evil that flowed from this thing, Kaerion knew that the skull must be the focal point for Acererak's spirit. It continued to survey the battle that still raged around it. As if searching for something, Kaerion thought, but what?

Dimly, Kaerion saw Majandra, Gerwyth, and Landra battling a hulking figure that lashed out with large, misshapen fists. Kaerion cried out as he saw, in the light of the party's torches, that they battled nothing less than a golem. Its disfigured mass made each of them look like a small child in comparison. Gerwyth ducked underneath a powerful swing and sliced the creature's chest twice with his gleaming short swords, while the light of Majandra's spells slammed into its puckered flesh. Landra aimed a devastating blow at the monster's neck that might have had an effect if the golem hadn't knocked the blade aside as if it were a gnat and launched the veteran against the wall.

He had to do something, but trapped between the awful presence of the skull and the coiled power of the monk, Kaerion felt a moment of indecisiveness. If he attacked the skull, surely the monk would strike at his back. Yet, he couldn't allow the demilich to perpetrate whatever foul plan it had in mind. And where in the Nine Hells was Bredeth? Kaerion hadn't seen the nobleman since he had ignored the party's warnings and touched the skull. Wherever he was, Kaerion thought angrily, he'd better appear soon. His companions couldn't stand against that golem too much longer without some aid.

Just then, he felt a warning tingle flash down his back. Turning slightly, he saw that the skull had fixed its gaze upon Phathas, who was currently unleashing spell after spell, with surprising speed, at the blond-haired sorceress who had attacked them in Rel Mord.

“Phathas, look out!” Kaerion shouted, and had to duck as the monk sprang back into action.

Without turning his back upon his arcane adversary, Phathas looked in the fighter’s direction. The mage held one hand forward, summoning blue-tinged energy that streaked toward the sorceress, while he raised his staff in the air with his other hand and shouted a single word. A bubble of white force cocooned around the ancient mage. Kaerion winced as he saw a ray of pure darkness shoot out from the ruby eye of Acererak’s skull. The two opposing forces met with an explosion that rocked the room. Looking past his opponent, Kaerion watched in horror as the mage’s shield collapsed under the assault. To his relief, however, the mage emerged unscathed.

“The skull, Kaerion!” Phathas shouted. “You must destroy the skull! It’s the key to Acererak’s power!”

Kaerion nodded in understanding. He feinted high with his sword and then reversed the attack, stabbing at the monk’s thigh. Quicker than a tiger, the man jumped back, offering Kaerion an opening.

Time slowed as the fighter placed both hands upon the hilt of his sword and, turning hard along his center, using the movement of his hips to add force to the blow, brought his blade down along the side of Acererak’s skull.

The blade shattered, exploding into a host of small metal needles that shot across the room.

Kaerion fell back, weaponless except for the familiar weight of Galadorn, which he could not draw. The monk moved forward, a cruel smile upon his face. “Let’s see how good you are without your little weapons,” he challenged.

Out of the corner of his eye, Kaerion saw Phathas raise his staff, ready to come to his aid. The mage stumbled forward, however, a look of surprise and pain upon his face, before he fell to the ground with a sword lodged in his back. Kaerion cried out as he saw Bredeth, a look of horror drawn across his noble features, bend down and pick up the sword that he had just plunged into the back of his own companion. Bloodied sword now raised in the air, the nobleman screamed once and brought his other hand to his head.

“Get out of my mind!” he shouted fiercely.

Kaerion couldn’t see any more as he thrust his shield up to block two kicks that would have surely connected with his head. Concentrating, mostly unsuccessfully, on avoiding the blows that rained down upon him, it wasn’t until he heard another scream, this time coming from Majandra, that he spared a glance from his opponent.

And stopped dead in his tracks.

The bard stood transfixed by a black beam, a look of agony upon her face. Within moments, her body began to dissolve. Kaerion shouted once and then sprang into action, hoping to get past his red-robed opponent. A palm strike to his neck blasted all feeling from his body. Kaerion’s limbs would no longer obey him. He was forced to watch in horror as the black beam consumed Majandra.

In moments, there was nothing left of her at all.

“No!” Kaerion screamed, a wave of despair washing over him. It had happened again. He had failed, and people who he cared about had died. The rest of his friends were dying even now, and he couldn’t do anything about it.

*Some protector*, a voice in his head whispered. Anger, fear, and grief threatened to overwhelm him, but the voice offered release. *You know where there is safety*, it said in a honeyed tone. *You know where you can find peace*.

Images flashed through his head: A dark hole, covered in shadow—the slime-covered wall of a dungeon. Darkness called out to him, wanted to wrap him in its arms. He could feel the pain easing as it drew near. He wanted to go to it—to lose himself in its endless embrace.

*Yes*, the voice said. *Here there is freedom from your burdens. You can forget your pain*.

Another image appeared suddenly, this one of a red-haired woman whose nose had the tiniest dusting of freckles. She smiled.

And Kaerion knew with sudden clarity that there were things he didn’t want to forget. Ever. Majandra had taught him how to live again. In the shelter of her arms, he had relearned the power of forgiveness and trust. And he saw now that pain and grief could be gifts, their presence a reminder of exactly how precious are the things that we have lost.

No. He didn’t want to forget his pain at all.

Shaking his head, Kaerion ignored the voice. It’s dulcet tones transforming into shrieks of fury at his actions. He tried to pull back from the hole and the darkness that flowed out of it like burnt molasses, but he couldn’t. The comforting embrace became bands of iron that closed about his arms and chest.

He felt as if he were falling from a great height. Above him, he could see the image of Majandra, growing more and more distant. Helpless, still reeling from his loss, Kaerion uttered words he hadn’t spoken in over ten years.

“Heironeous!” he shouted into the darkness. “Help me!”

His world exploded into light.



Vision, nightmare, or reality—Kaerion couldn't decide. He sat on a high-backed chair, its carefully carved frame forming a canopy over his head, and stared in wonder at the familiar interior of the temple. On both sides of him stood the comforting mass of statues, weapons raised high, while a long aisle stretched out before him, leading out toward what he knew to be the richly appointed narthex.

He was alone—or at least it appeared that there was no one else in the temple. The deep recesses of the chamber held pools of shadow, though these didn't give off a sense of evil. Kaerion breathed deeply, feeling as if a great knot had been released within his chest. In fact, Kaerion realized with a start that he no longer felt the oppressive weight of Acererak's presence.

But there was more to this feeling than merely an absence of evil. Separated for so long from his constant connection with Heironeous, it took him a few moments to recognize the power of his god. It was like that moment in Rel Mord when Vaxor banished the demon, except the presence was less concentrated and more pervasive. It was everywhere, flowing through each stone and marble block of the temple. The very air hummed with the strength of it, and Kaerion wondered how he could have missed such a Presence when he first arrived here—wherever "here" was.

"Ahh, I was wondering when you'd get around to noticing me," a light voice said from somewhere behind him.

Kaerion whipped around, startled by the intrusion, only to find himself looming over a young boy. Piercing blue eyes gazed into his. Kaerion's knees trembled as he recognized the familiar face. Standing before him with a cherubic smile upon his face was the object of his nightmares these past ten years—the boy he had betrayed in the dungeons of Dorakaa.

"W-who are you?" he asked, surprised to hear his voice sound so firm. Nothing was making any sense.

The boy's smile faded, replaced by an expression of purest innocence. "Why, you called upon me," he replied, closing the distance between them.

Kaerion shook his head in disbelief. This wasn't possible. "You... you can't be him."



“And who are you to tell me who I can and cannot be?” the boy said harshly.

Kaerion could feel the hint of power beneath the child’s treble, like the sense of a storm’s raging power moments before it unleashes its fury. He would have cast down his eyes in shame, but the boy—god, really, Kaerion thought with wonder—stood right before him, not releasing his gaze.

“Where am I?” Kaerion asked, not wishing the moment of silence to stretch on further.

“You are where you need to be,” the boy said with maddening vagueness.

“But my friends,” Kaerion replied, unwilling to abandon them even now, “they need my help.”

The boy-god smiled “Loyalty is a noble trait,” he said. “Fear not, for if you return to your companions, not a single moment of time will have passed.”

Kaerion nodded, a little unnerved by the boy’s use of the word *if*. “Then what do you want of me? Why am I here?”

The boy said nothing, still gazing at him with those bright piercing eyes. “Why did you not call on me sooner?” the god asked, all trace of levity gone from his face. Kaerion could hear sadness and a slight tinge of reproach in the child’s voice.

This time, Kaerion did hang his head in shame. “I betrayed you—the child—in Dorakaa,” he explained. “I let fear for my life take precedence over the protection of the weak and innocent.” Familiar emotions churned within Kaerion’s heart. This time, he did not retreat from them. “I failed you,” he said finally. “I was not worthy to call upon your name.”

“And you are now?” the boy asked in a chilling tone.

Kaerion had no response. Cautiously, he raised his head to meet the god’s gaze once more. To his surprise, the boy was smiling. “I want you to watch something, Kaerion—if you have the strength.” With a wave of his tiny hand, the air before Kaerion’s face shimmered, gradually resolving into an image.

It was the very heart of his nightmare. A young boy lay tied to an altar, while demonic figures cavorted around him. With a muffled curse, Kaerion realized that he could see himself in the image, emaciated and dirty, kneeling a few feet from the altar. He fought down a wave of nausea as he watched his kneeling figure decline the demons’ offer to exchange his life for the boy’s. Tears were streaming down his face by the time the demons were finished with their sacrifice.

But Kaerion did not look away. He relived every second of that event, recalled every sight, sound, and emotion, both through the god’s power and the strength of his own memory. Still, he found the courage to experience it all again.

He watched as the demons dragged his sobbing body from the room, but the image continued. He stared in horror as the boy’s bloodied carcass writhed and undulated on the altar. Shredded muscle and puckered flesh joined. The boy’s body elongated. Broken bones knitted together. Kaerion’s horror grew as the boy’s hands twisted into claws, and scales grew upon his flesh like thick moss upon a swamp rock. Wings sprouted from the creature’s back, and it raised itself off the altar with a single thrust of its new appendages.

Kaerion looked at Heironeous’ avatar in disbelief. “What—?” He couldn’t continue.

The avatar nodded once at Kaerion's confusion. "Yes, you see it now. There never was any innocent boy in Dorakaa. You were tricked. Even in Iuz's seat of power I protected you. His servants couldn't kill you unless you gave yourself to them freely."

"But even if it was an illusion, I thought it was real," Kaerion protested. "I still believed that either the boy or I would die. I chose to live."

"No," the avatar persisted. "You sensed something was wrong, and even though you were half mad, you wouldn't let Iuz triumph. Remember?"

"No," Kaerion said. "No! It was my fault. Mine!"

"Remember," the avatar said, and this time it was not a question. The god's word exploded in Kaerion's mind, and Kaerion did remember. It was a thing almost completely forgotten, a recollection buried deep within the hole that was Dorakaa. He had sensed something wrong, but his guilt at his own weakness had hidden this from him.

"If I didn't fail you, then why have I not sensed you these past years?" Kaerion did not know whether to shout or cry. He was a tangle of emotions, both new and old.

"My son," the avatar said in a child's kind voice, "you thought that you escaped Dorakaa, but you have carried that dungeon within you these many years, refusing to be free of it. I could not reach you until you called out to me for help."

"But the curse," Kaerion said, indicating his sheathed holy sword. "Why did you torment me with Galadorn's presence?"

The avatar smiled once more. "You know the strength and power of that sword. Galadorn chooses its own wielder, and not even I will command it otherwise." At Kaerion's blank expression, the avatar continued, "I never cursed you with its presence. Had I truly condemned you, I would have tried to persuade it to choose someone else. Fortunately—" the boy's voice began to deepen, word by word—"the sword simply refused to leave your side."

Kaerion would not have believed it if Galadorn hadn't pulsed with energy at that moment. All of this was too much to comprehend. He needed time to think things through.

"Time is what we do not have," the avatar said, responding to his thoughts. Kaerion turned at the deep, resonating bass of the god's voice. Gone was the wide-eyed, innocent boy. He had been replaced by a muscular warrior in pure, golden plate armor. The man's face was handsome, and nobility and strength flowed from every pore.

"Will you serve me?" the Arch Paladin said, holding a gleaming silver sword over Kaerion's head. Without thinking, Kaerion dropped to his knees, tears streaming down his face. In a voice far sturdier than he would have thought possible, he accepted the yoke of Heironeous once again.

"Then rise, Kaerion, known as the Whitehart, best and brightest of my champions," the avatar's voice thundered throughout the temple and, Kaerion suspected, beyond the planes, "and carry my justice to the world!"

Kaerion stood, surrounded by a nimbus of pure white light. The nimbus intensified, expanding to fill the temple.

And beyond.

\* \* \*

The light faded. In its place Kaerion saw a calloused palm, fingers hooked like claws, heading straight for his throat. He backed away furiously, tripping over a mound of gold coins. The avatar had been correct. No time had passed at all—which meant that he was still too late to save Majandra. The ache in his heart throbbed at that realization, yet he felt something else burning within his chest—the power of Heironeous.

With a cry born of grief and triumph, Kaerion unsheathed the blade that had lain quiescent for a decade. Galadorn burst into life with an explosion of white heat. The runes running along its blue-steel length flared with coruscating energy. Raising the sword high, Kaerion called on the protection of Heironeous. The blade sang with power.

*At last, we are reunited!* it shouted within Kaerion’s mind, sending forth a burst of energy that knocked the monk from his feet. Already, Kaerion could feel the blade’s holy might pushing back Acererak’s dark presence.

*I ask your forgiveness, Galadorn, for denying you so long,* Kaerion said to the sword.

*There is nothing to forgive,* came the reply. It took a few moments for Kaerion to realize that the sword’s voice in his mind seemed . . . different somehow. He had little time to think about such oddities, however, for he felt the righteous anger of his god rising within him. Acererak’s skull had turned from the battle and now regarded the paladin with a deadly gaze. Black energy shot out from the demi-lich’s eye—only to be swept away by a single cut from his holy sword.

The skull’s presence throbbed like a cancerous blight to his god-enhanced senses. Everything inside Kaerion screamed for the abomination’s destruction. Breathing deeply, he charged the demi-lich.

“Heironeous lend me strength!” he shouted as he drew nearer.

Slowly at first, and then with increasing speed, he felt the Arch Paladin’s power filling him—white and hot and potent. Every fiber of Kaerion’s being drank in the holy energy, until his bones vibrated with the strength of it.

The paladin swung his sword with a cry, barely able to contain the divine fury that swelled within him. There was a moment of resistance—and then Galadorn struck the demi-lich. Heironeous’ power rushed out of him. Fueled and magnified by the holy sword, it detonated against the skull, causing it to explode in a hail of powder and dust. The roiling darkness of Acererak’s spirit fled with an unearthly shriek.

“No, you fool!” he heard a voice shout from somewhere near the vault’s door.

There was no time to explore the source of that voice. Glancing at his companions, Kaerion could see that the golem had almost vanquished them. Landra stood before it, bruised and bleeding, barely able to hold up her sword, while Bredeth charged in and out of the creature’s reach, slicing at it like a hunting dog might worry the heels of a giant boar.

Gerwyth had retreated a few steps and was firing arrows repeatedly at the monster. Several had managed to pierce its flesh, but it was nowhere close to being hurt. Kaerion ran forward, eager to bring Galadorn to bear on the situation, and was

surprised to hear a soft whispering sound coming from the elf's bow. He recognized the familiar lilt of Elvish, but, not being fluent in that language, he could not understand what it was saying. He had heard Gerwyth speaking to the weapon in battle before, but had never dreamed it was sentient.

Galadorn's influence must be allowing me to overhear it, he thought.

The golem reached out a meaty hand to grab at Landra just as Kaerion swung his blade at the monster. The force of his blow cut deeply into the creature's flesh. Kaerion heard the crack of bones as Galadorn cleaved through its shoulder, nearly severing the golem's arm from its body. Through it all, he could hear the blade's triumphant song ringing in his head.

Another arrow struck the golem, lodging in the constructs throat, but that did not slow down its counterattack. Hastily, Kaerion slid to the creature's left, raising his shield to block the forearm that threatened to snap the bones in his chest. The paladin grunted under the impact as his shield bent awkwardly around his arm. He was about to throw the useless instrument to the ground when Galadorn shouted, *Kaerion, behind you!*

Kaerion turned but was not quick enough to dodge the attack. He screamed in agony as a black-clad figure thrust a blade deep into his back. Kaerion cursed at his own stupidity. He had completely forgotten about the thief that had stolen some of Phathas' maps during the attack on the inn.

*You are badly wounded,* his sword declared—somewhat unnecessarily, for Kaerion could feel that the damage was extensive. The thief's blade had sliced through his kidney and probably punctured his stomach.

*I will heal you,* Kaerion's holy sword said, and the paladin could indeed feel his wounds knitting together. Strength once more flowed into his arms. Kaerion threw himself back, unwilling to remain flanked a second longer.

*But you've never been able to do that before,* he said to Galadorn. *This is new.*

*Indeed,* was the blades only reply—and suddenly Kaerion realized what was different about the sword's voice.

*Vaxor?* He asked. *Is that you?*

*We are here,* came the reply. *Thank you for your gift.*

A movement off to his right stopped his next question. There, rising up from a pool of blood, was Phathas. The mage's breath came heavy and labored, but he struggled to his feet. "Kill the cleric," he wheezed, and pointed at a balding figure who held a black object in one hand. "Let the others handle the thief."

"What of the golem?" Kaerion asked.

"Leave... to me," was all the mage said. Kaerion was taken aback at the fierceness of his tone. "Do it!"

Shaking his head, he moved away from the deadly construct and searched the room for signs of the thief.

"Remember me, my friend," the mage said softly, moments before he lunged at the golem. Before the monsters muscled arms could enclose him in its deadly embrace, he took his staff and broke it in half. Eldritch energy exploded from the item with concussive force. The power from the staff's destruction beat against Galadorn's wards, but the sword's protective magic held.

Kaerion ran toward the evil cleric, but before he could reach him, a red robed figure blocked his path. “This ends here,” Kaerion growled at the monk, who merely nodded in response. The paladin lashed out with a diagonal slice of his holy sword—and barely saved the blade from flying from his hand as his opponent delivered a spinning kick that struck the weapon. His effort to hold the blade securely left an opening for the monk to strike, and strike he did. Two vicious open hand blows struck Kaerion in the face, one nearly smashing the cartilage in his throat. Reeling, Kaerion could not raise his battered shield in time to block the monk’s snapping kick—which knocked him to his knees.

*He strikes like the wind*, Kaerion said to the presence lurking within his blade. *If I don’t wound him soon, this battle will be over.*

The response from Galadorn was instantaneous. The sword glowed brighter for just a moment, and Kaerion felt his blood quicken as holy power increased his own mortal reflexes beyond their natural speed. He rose to his feet just as the monk launched a blinding flurry of blows—and Kaerion managed to avoid every one of them. The fourth time he blocked the monk’s knife-edged hand attack, he had the satisfaction of watching his opponent’s eyes widen in surprise.

Not wishing to delay the battle any longer, Kaerion launched his own offensive, his holy sword weaving a trail of purest energy as he struck out at the monk. His first strike missed as the red-robed man danced nimbly out of the way, but his second stroke caught his opponent across the ribs. Galadorn flared in response as the monk’s blood spilled on to the floor.

Sensing victory, Kaerion closed the distance and thrust forward with his blade. The monk stumbled in his attempt to avoid the attack and, summoning the power of Heironeous once again, Kaerion brought his sword down and to the side for a swift, killing blow. Energy flared along the blade’s length in response to the white-hot power that flowed through him. The monk leapt to avoid the strike, but he could not evade Kaerion’s attack. Righteous anger and grief strengthened the paladin’s sword arm.

“For Majandra!” he shouted as his blade pierced the monk’s chest. Blinding light erupted from the weapon, as Kaerion felt the powerful release of god-energy. When the light dissipated, he could only see bits of his opponent’s body scattered across the room.

\* \* \*

Durgoth watched in horror as the paladin’s blade disintegrated Jhagren’s body. In any other situation, he would have felt a wave of satisfaction at the monk’s demise.

But not now.

With the demi-lich’s skull destroyed and his own construct defeated by the mage’s cursed heroics, the cleric knew that the careful plans he had spent years building were falling down around him. He knew that his mistake had been in trusting in the skills of others. Even now, he could see Eltanel slinking into the shadows, and he had no doubt that the damned thief was in the process of skulking back to Rel Mord.

And Sydra, whose sorcerous powers were quite formidable, now found herself battling for her life against the very pup she had so recently controlled. The young nobleman was bloodied and bruised, but he attacked the sorceress with near-mindless intensity. A powerful bolt of lightning arced toward the man from Sydra's outstretched hand. To Durgoth's surprise, the fool didn't even try to avoid it. The blast caught him full in the chest, but he simply stumbled forward and thrust his sword through Sydra's throat, only to collapse himself a moment later.

Durgoth cursed this turn of events. He could feel the paladin advancing, the force of Heironeous' power drawing closer to strike at him like a storm of bees. With a wave of his hand, Durgoth sent a column of flame roaring down from the ceiling to strike at the damnable fighter.

"Burn, you damned lackey of a cowardly god!" he shouted.

But the paladin didn't burn.

Instead, the holy fighter raised his god-powered sword and advanced. The flames passed harmlessly over him. Durgoth could almost hear the triumphant song of the holy sword as it deflected his spell.

He knew there was no hope of escape. Instead of filling him with fear, the realization crystallized the cleric's resolve. He may have failed to release his Master, but there was still something he could do.

Raising the *Minthexian Codex* above his head, Durgoth began the words to the ancient book's most powerful spell, a ritual that would completely annihilate a large area around the tomb. He would die, but he would take these cursed nobles with him. Power built within him like a raging river. He bent his will toward it, controlling and directing the roiling force of Nothingness as the paladin drew closer.

Durgoth was about to utter the words to release the spell and destroy his enemies when he felt a sudden shift within the Nothingness. The codex, his source of power these many years, flared once with purplish incandescence—and then disappeared. Unbelievably, he felt the raging energy he had recently summoned slough off like a riverbed whose water was diverted. No longer a conduit of a vengeful god, Durgoth was simply an empty channel, bereft of any power. As the paladin advanced, blade burning with holy fury, Durgoth Shem knew he had paid the price for his failure.

Tharizdun had abandoned him.

"Who are you?" he shrieked at the man before him.

The paladin hesitated only a moment before replying. "I am Kaerion Whitehart, servant of Heironeous," he said. "I condemn you in the name of the Valorous One. May you spend eternity chained before His Throne."

The man swung his holy sword.

White-hot light exploded into Durgoth's vision. He drew back, trying to avoid the fiery incandescence. It grew brighter, knifing into his brain, laying bare the dark places of his soul. He screamed once in agony—

And then surrendered to the light.

\* \* \*

Kaerion slumped to the ground.

He felt, in the wake of the god's anger, a bone-deep weariness. The last of his tears spilled to the blood-spattered ground as physical and emotional exhaustion took their toll. The treasure of several kingdoms lay strewn around him, gold and platinum coins gleaming in the range of Galadorn's ever-present light. The sight did little to cheer him. They had won, succeeded in their quest, but at what cost?

He was conscious of Gerwyth and Landra, the only other survivors of their expedition, gathering up the bodies of the dead. Memories of his companions filled his mind. Phathas, Bredeth, Majandra—all of them were gone. Silently, Kaerion lifted them up in prayer to Heironeous. He felt an answering pulse from Galadorn and knew that the Arch Paladin watched over them.

A shout from Gerwyth brought Kaerion struggling to his feet. Bruised muscles protested the action, but he managed to ignore them. "What is it, Ger?" he asked as he walked to where the elf stood, holding something in his hand.

He watched as his friend regarded him with a searching look. Kaerion felt, rather than saw, Gerwyth's uncertainty, and realized that the ranger had never known him before he had left Heironeous' service. He smiled gently at his friend. "It's all right Ger," he said. "We have much to talk about you and I."

The elf regarded him for a moment more. "Perhaps more than you think, Kaer. Look." Cupped in the palm of his hand was a multi-faceted diamond, one of the ones that had been set inside Acererak's skull, Kaerion realized with a start. The heart of the stone gave off a soft red glow and, for a brief moment, Kaerion heard the whispered chord of harpstrings.

"Do you think—?" Gerwyth began, but Kaerion quickly cut him off.

"I'm not sure," the paladin said, his voice rough with emotion. He dared not voice the thought he knew his friend was entertaining. A glowing diamond could mean anything. It could simply be a precious stone imbued with magic, or perhaps even the last refuge of Acererak's essence. But Kaerion's newly restored senses and his heart told him otherwise. Hope rose with him. If some part of Majandra was somehow still alive, he would move the heavens and all of the planes to bring her back to him. Gently, he took the glowing diamond from the elf and wrapped it in cloth before placing it in one of his pouches.

A groan from the corner of the vault brought both of the companions running. There, in a pile of coins and other jewelry, lay Bredeth. The young man's body was broken, his legs twisted at an unnatural angle. Long angry burns covered most of his exposed skin, and his face was a mass of blistered and bubbling flesh. He coughed once and gazed upon Kaerion out of the wreck of one eye.

"S-sorry, Kaerion. I.. tried to resist," Bredeth gurgled, "but th-they captured me, and—" a fit of coughing brought a spray of blood to his lips.

Kaerion knelt down and gently pushed a clump of tangled, burnt hair away from Bredeth's mangled face. There was so much sorrow, so much regret in life, the paladin thought. Images of Vaxor, the cleric's body also horribly violated, superimposed itself upon his vision. And yet, he knew that the gods were there to help and support the mortals who toiled beneath life's hard yoke. The last few months had taught him many things. There was beauty and joy in living—however fragile. And he would be there, armed with the power of Heironeous, to protect it.

“No one blames you, Bredeth,” Kaerion replied at last. “Without you, we would not have been able to defeat the cowards who attacked us.”

The nobleman drew in a rattling breath. “I... I saw Adrys...and the thief. They... they crept into... the shadows... and fled. Tried to... to stop them—” Another cough shook the noble’s twisted body. “But...couldn’t.”

Kaerion felt the muscles in his face harden. “Do not worry yourself on that account, Bredeth,” he said. “There will be a reckoning, and nothing will protect them from Heironeous’ justice.”

Bredeth gasped as a shudder wracked his frame, and Kaerion saw him glance wildly out of the corner of his eyes. Death was upon him, and the man knew it. He groaned and tried to turn his head. “The vault... ?” he managed to force out his question between wheezing breaths.

“It is secure,” Kaerion said “Your country shall have its treasure. I will deliver it personally, and because the Arch Paladin has moved me, I will offer Nyronnd my service as well.”

A peaceful smile stole over Bredeth’s features, smoothing the burns that crisscrossed his face. “That is good,” he wheezed, and then closed his eyes.

Kaerion felt Gerwyth’s hand upon his shoulder and knew by the strength of the elf’s grip that he had heard the paladin’s promise to the dying noble and would honor it alongside him. Courage and sacrifice had broken Acererak’s dark power. These were ideals the world needed in no small measure—ideals that Kaerion would embody in the name of Heironeous. Turning to look at Gerwyth, he could think of no greater companion with which to carry out this mission.

With a final glance at his friend, Kaerion placed a hand upon Bredeth’s chest and blessed the man’s spirit as it journeyed to the realm of the Valorous One. The power of his god filled the once shadowy room with the scent of roses.

The tomb of horrors had claimed its final victim.

Scanning, formatting and  
proofing by Flandrel,  
additional formatting and  
proofing by Undead.

