

TWILIGHT FALLING

Book I
THE
EREVIS CALE
TRILOGY
PAUL S. KEMP

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The Erevis Cale Trilogy, Book I
TWILIGHT FALLING

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For Jennifer,

the love of my life,
whose light holds twilight at bay.

Save for some whisper of the seething seas,
A dead hush fell; but when the dolorous day
Grew drearier toward twilight falling, came
A bitter wind ...

—the bard Tennyson

PROLOGUE

Fact-finding

The young Tymoran priest lay unconscious on his side, bound hand and foot with thick hemp rope. A purple bruise was already beginning to form around his left eye. Vraggen eyed him coldly.

"Get him up," Vraggen ordered his agents.

Dolgan, the big Cormyrean, slung his axe and kneeled at the captive's side. He took the priest's face in his ham hand and squeezed.

"Awaken," Dolgan said.

The priest groaned, but did not open his eyes.

"Well done," taunted Azriim. He stood beside Vraggen with a smirk on his dusky-skinned face. "Very creative."

Dolgan looked at the half-drow with his typically thick expression and grunted, "Huh?"

Azriim, dressed in the green finery and high boots that he favored, flashed a smile at Vraggen.

"He never gets the joke, does he?"

Vraggen made no reply. To Azriim, everything was a joke.

"I don't?" Dolgan asked, still dumbfounded.

"Wake him up," Vraggen said to the Cormyrean warrior.

"And try not break him," Azriim added. "We need him capable of speech."

Dolgan nodded, turned back to the captive, shook him by the shoulders, and said, "Wake up! Wake up!"

The young priest groaned again. Dolgan lightly tapped his cheeks, and after a moment, the priest's eyes fluttered open.

"There," Dolgan said. He stood and backed away a few steps to stand beside Azriim and Vraggen.

The priest's bleary eyes cleared the moment his situation registered. He struggled against his bonds, but only for a moment. Vraggen waited until he saw resignation in the Tymoran's eyes before he spoke.

"What is the last thing you remember?"

The captive tried to speak, but found his mouth too dry. He swallowed, and said, "You abducted me from the streets of Ordulin." He looked around the cell. "Where am I?"

"Far from Ordulin," Vraggen replied.

Azriim chuckled, and the sight of a laughing half-drow must have unnerved the Tymoran further. His face went pale.

"What do you want?"

Vraggen stepped forward, kneeled at the priest's side, and said, "Information."

For the first time, the priest's eyes went to Vraggen's broach pin—a jawless skull in a purple sunburst—the symbol of Cyric the Dark Sun. Fear flashed in his brown eyes. He uttered a prayer under his breath.

"Is it reasonable for me to assume that you understand your situation?" Vraggen asked.

"I don't know anything," the Tymoran blurted. "I swear! Nothing."

Vraggen nodded and stood. "We shall see."

He beckoned Dolgan and Azriim forward. His agents stepped up to the priest, grabbed him by the arms, and lifted him to his feet.

"Don't! Please don't!" the priest pleaded.

Vraggen stared into the captive's fear-filled face. For effect, he let shadows leak from his hands and dance around his head. The Tymoran's breath audibly caught.

"You are a shadow adept," the priest whispered.

Vraggen didn't bother to answer; the shadows were answer enough.

"I'll tell you everything I know."

"Of course you will," Vraggen said. "The only issue is whether or not I feel I can trust you to tell me the truth without my having to resort to more forceful means. The resolution of that issue will determine whether or not your last moments are spent in pain."

The priest's lips trembled. He looked into Vraggen's eyes.

"I have a family," he said.

Vraggen was unmoved.

"No doubt they will miss you," Azriim said, smiling.

Dolgan too grinned and shifted from foot to foot, fairly giddy at the thought of bloodshed. The Cormyrean had a fetish for pain—administering it, and receiving it.

The priest's whole body began to shake. Tears began to leak from his eyes.

"Why are you doing this? I don't even know you. I don't know any of you."

Azriim scoffed, "What does that have to do with it?"

Vraggen patted the priest's cheek, as close as he would come to offering comfort, and said, "I am going to cast a spell that will subject your will to me. Do not resist it. I know that you will speak the truth under the effect of this spell. That is the only way I can be certain. Otherwise...."

He left the threat unspoken, but the priest took the point. He nodded in resignation.

Vraggen smiled and said, "You've made the right decision."

Beside the captive, Dolgan sighed in disappointment.

Vraggen ignored the Cormyrean, drew on the Shadow Weave, and pronounced the arcane words to a spell that would make the Tymoran his thrall. When he finished, the captive priest's eyes went vacant. Ever careful, Vraggen verified that his spell had taken hold of the priest by casting a second spell that allowed him to see dweomers.

The priest glowed a soft red in his sight, indicating that he was under the effect of a spell. Surprisingly, so too did Dolgan and Azriim. Vraggen looked a question at his lieutenants.

Azriim took the sense of that look immediately. He held up one long fingered hand, upon which hung a platinum band.

"Our rings, Vraggen."

Vraggen nodded. He had forgotten that each of his lieutenants wore a ring that warded them against scrying. He turned his attention back to the captive priest.

"About one year ago, your adventuring company looted a ruined temple in the Sunset Mountains. Do you remember?"

"Yes," the priest answered in a monotone.

The priest and his comrades, calling themselves the Band of the Broken Bow, had happened upon an abandoned temple of Shar that Vraggen had been seeking for months.

"Among the treasures you took from those ruins was a crystal globe of gray quartz, about fist-sized and inset with chips of gemstones." Vraggen tried to keep his voice level when he asked the next question. "Do you remember this globe?"

"Yes."

Vraggen shared a glance with Azriim. The half-drow smiled and winked.

"Where is the globe now?"

The priest's brow furrowed and he said, "After we left the temple, we disputed how to divide the plunder. The globe was a curiosity but not very valuable. Solin took it as a throwaway part of his share."

Vraggen kept his eagerness under control. The fools had no idea what they had taken from that temple.

"Solin?"

"Solin Dar," the priest replied. "A warrior out of Sembia."

"Where in Sembia?"

"Selgaunt," the priest answered.

Vraggen would have laughed if he'd had a sense of humor. He hailed from Selgaunt himself, had served with the Zhentarim there. It was almost as though the globe had been trying to find *him*. He decided to take the news as a sign of Cyric's favor.

"Thank you, priest," he said to the Tymoran. He looked to Dolgan. "Throttle him."

Dolgan grinned, grabbed the priest around the throat, and choked him. While the bound priest gagged and died, Azriim moved to Vraggen's side.

"At least we have a name now. Selgaunt?"

Vraggen nodded. They would use their teleportation rods to move quickly to Selgaunt, find Solin Dar, and subject him to the same technique as they had used on the Tymoran priest.

Soon, Vraggen would have his globe.

CHAPTER 1

Midnight of the Soul

Cale sat alone in the darkness of Stormweather Towers's parlor. He had not bothered to light one of the wrist-thick wax tapers that stood on candelabrum around the room. The darkness enshrouded him, which was well. It suited his mood. He felt... black. Heavy. The Elvish language had a word that perfectly expressed his feeling: *Vaendin-thiil*, which meant "fatigued by life's dark trials." Of course, in elven philosophy the concept of *Vaendin-thiil* never appeared alone, but was paired always with a balancing concept which the elves, in their wisdom or folly, deemed a necessary corollary: *Vaendaan-naes*, "reborn in life's bright struggles." For the elves, dark trials necessarily gave rise to bright rebirths. Cale was not so sure. At that moment, he could see only the darkness. The brightness of rebirth seemed impossibly distant.

Selune, trailed by her tears, peered gibbous through the parlor's high windows, casting the room in a faint luminescence. Artwork from the four corners of Faerun decorated the dim parlor: paintings from the sun-baked lands of the far south, sculpture from Mulhorand, elven woodcarvings from the distant High Forest. Suits of archaic armor, ghostly in the silver moonlight, stood in each corner of the large room: a suit of fine elven mail taken from the ruins of Myth Drannor, a set of thick dwarven plate mail from the Great Rift, and two suits of ornate Sembian ceremonial armor, both centuries old. That armor was the pride of Thamalon's collection.

Reflexively, Cale corrected his thought—the armor *had been* the pride of Thamalon's collection. His lord was dead. And the Halls of Stormweather felt dead too, a great stone and wood corpse whose soul had been extinguished.

Cale settled deeper into his favorite leather chair and brooded. How many evenings had he spent in that parlor with his nose in a tome, feeding his appetite for literature and languages, finding respite in the lore and poetry of lost ages? Hundreds, certainly. The parlor had been as much his room as were his own quarters.

But not anymore.

The books and scrolls lining the recessed walnut shelves held for him no comfort, the paintings and sculptures no solace. In everything Cale saw the ghost of his lord, his friend. Thamalon had been as much a father to Cale as an employer, and his lord's absence from the manse felt somehow . . . obscene. The heart had been ripped from the family.

Cale's eyes welled, but he shook his head and blinked back the tears. His blurry gaze fell on one of the last acquisitions Thamalon had made before his death. It sat on a small three-legged pedestal on an upper shelf, a solid orb of smooth, translucent, smoky-gray quartz the size of an ogre's fist, with pinpoints of diamond and other tiny gemstones embedded within it. The chaos of the piece was striking, a virtual embodiment of madness. Thamalon had taken a liking to it at once. He had purchased it only a month before, along with a variety of other oddities, from Alkenen, a wild-eyed, eccentric street peddler.

Cale had been at Thamalon's side that day, one of the last days of his lord's life. They had played chess in the afternoon, and in the evening shared an ale and discussed the clumsy plots of the Talendar family. Cale smiled at the memory. He resolved then and there to take the orb with him when he left Stormweather, as a memento of his master.

He didn't realize the full import of his thought until a few moments later. *When he left Stormweather. When had he decided to leave? Had he decided to leave?*

The question sat heavy in his mind, fat and pregnant.

He leaned forward in the chair and rested his forearms on his knees. He was surprised to see that he held between his fingers a velvet mask—his holy symbol of Mask the Lord of Shadows. Odd. While Cale always kept it on his person, he didn't remember taking it from his vest pocket.

He stuffed the mask back into his vest, interlaced his fingers, and stared at the hardwood floor. Perhaps it *was* time to leave. Thamalon was gone and Tamlin was head of the family. And Tamlin had little use for Cale. What else was there for him?

The answer leaped into his consciousness the moment he asked the question: Thazienne. Thazienne was there for him.

He crushed the thought, frowning. Thazienne was not there, at least not for him. Her heart belonged to another. Her arms embraced another. Another shared her—

He snarled and shook his head, struggling to control his anger. Anger did him no good, and he knew it. He had spent years loving her, though he had always feared it to be futile. She was the daughter of a

merchant noble, he but an assassin playing servant. But the rational understanding that she could never return his love had not quelled the secret hope—he could finally admit that to himself, that he had hoped—that somehow, *somehow*, they would end up together. Of course, his rationality had done nothing to stop the knife stab of pain he had felt when she had returned from abroad, smiling on the arm of Steorf. Merely thinking the man's name shot him full of rage.

The Cale of fifteen years past would have killed Steorf out of spite. The thought of that still tempted some tiny part of him.

But Cale no longer heeded that part of himself. And he owed that change to Thazienne.

It had been nearly two years since he'd left her a note containing the sum total of his feelings for her: *Ai armiel telere maenen hir*, he had written in Elvish. *You hold my heart forever.*

She had never even acknowledged the note. Not a word, not even a knowing glance. They had stopped meeting in the butler's pantry late at night for drinks and conversation. She had turned away from him in some indefinable way. When he looked her in the eyes, it was as though she didn't see him, not the way she once had.

She was not there for him, and it was time to leave. Stormweather Towers was suffocating him.

Once made, the decision lifted some of the weight that sat heavily on his soul. He did not yet know where he would go, but he *would* leave. Perhaps he could convince Jak to accompany him.

As always, the thought of the halfling rounded the corners of Cale's anger and brought a smile to his face. Jak had stood by him through much, through everything. They had faced Zhents, ghouls, and demons together. Perhaps most importantly, Jak had helped Cale understand Mask's Calling. Jak had taught him how to cast his first spells.

Of course Jak would accompany him. Jak was his best friend, his only friend, his conscience. A man—even a killer—couldn't go anywhere without his conscience. He and Jak seemed linked, seemed to share a common fate.

Cale smiled and reminded himself that he did not believe in fate. At least he hadn't. But maybe he had come to. Or at least maybe he should. How could he not? He had been called to the priesthood by his god and had defeated a demon through that Calling.

But I chose to accept the Calling, he reminded himself.

Korvikoum. That word—his favorite concept from dwarven philosophy—elbowed its way to the front of his mind. Dwarves did not believe much in fate. They believed in *Korvikoum*: choices and consequences. In a sense, fate and *Korvikoum* stood in opposition to one another, as much as did *Vaendin-thiil* and *Vaendaan-naes*, as much as did being a killer and being a good man who killed.

Cale reached for the wine chalice on the table beside his chair and took a sip. The five-year-old vintage of Thamalon's Best, a heavy red wine, reminded him of the nights in the library he and his lord had played chess over a glass. Thamalon had believed in fate, strongly so. The Old Owl had once told Cale that a man could either embrace fate and walk beside it, or reject it and get pulled along nevertheless. That evening, Cale had merely nodded at the words and said nothing, but ultimately he wondered if Thamalon had gotten it right.

Still, Cale was convinced that the choices a man made could not be meaningless. If there was fate, then perhaps a man's future was not fixed. Perhaps a man could shape his fate through the choices he made.

Fate delineated boundaries; choice established details. So fate might make a man a farmer, but the farmer chose what crops to plant. Fate might make a man a soldier, but the soldier chose which battles to fight.

Cale liked that. Fate may have made him a killer, but he would decide if, who, why, and when he killed.

He raised his glass to the darkness, silently toasting the memory of Thamalon Uskevren.

I'll miss you, my lord, he thought.

He would miss the rest of the Uskevren too, and Stormweather Towers, but he would leave nevertheless. From then on, he would serve only one lord.

He reached back into his vest and again withdrew his holy symbol. The velvet of the mask felt smooth in his hands. He held it before his face and stared at it, thoughtful. The empty eye holes stared back.

Fate or choice? they seemed to ask.

Cale considered that, and after a moment, he gave his answer.

"Both," he whispered, "and neither."

With that, he turned the mask around and put it on, the first time he had ever done so in Stormweather Towers. It did not bring the expected comfort. Instead, it felt wrong, as obscene as Thamalon's absence from the manse. He pulled it off and crumpled it in his fist.

"What do you want from me?" he whispered to Mask.

As usual, his god provided him no answers, no signs. Mask never provided answers, only more

questions, only more choices.

Months before, in an effort to better understand his Calling, Cale had scoured Thamalon's personal library for information about Mask and the Lord of Shadows' faithful. Unsurprisingly, for Mask *was* the god of shadows and thieves, after all, there was little to be found. He had finally concluded that serving Mask was different than serving other gods. The priests of Faerun's other faiths proselytized, ministered, preached, and in that way won converts and served their gods. Mask's priests did no such thing. There were no Maskarran preachers, no street ministers, no pilgrims. Mask did not require his priests to win converts. Either the darkness spoke to you or it didn't. If it did, you were already Mask's. If it didn't, you never would be.

The darkness *had* spoken to Cale, had whispered his name and wrapped him in shadow. And now it was telling him to leave Stormweather Towers.

He sighed, finished his wine, and stood. If he was to be reborn in life's bright struggles, he would have to do it elsewhere. It was time to go.

CHAPTER 2

The Dead of Night

"Well met, mage," said Norel, as he slid into the chair across the table from Vraggen.

"Norel," Vraggen acknowledged with a nod. He unfolded his hands to indicate the tin tankards on the table, each foaming with ale. "I purchased ales for us."

Suspicion narrowed Norel's eyes to slits. Obviously, he thought the ale might be poisoned. The thought amused Vraggen. As if he could be so ... banal.

As quick as the snake that he was, Norel reached across the table and snatched the tankard from in front of Vraggen, rather than the one set before him.

"Appreciated," Norel said, "but I'll have this one, if you please."

From the smug smile on his face, he seemed to think he had made a point.

Vraggen shrugged, took the ale in front of Norel, and said, "Well enough. This one will be mine then."

Vraggen immediately took a draw, grimacing at the watery taste of the indifferent brew. It reminded him of the swill he had endured as a mage's apprentice in Tilverton, before that city's destruction by agents of Shade Enclave.

Seeing Vraggen drink and not fall over dead, Norel grinned and gave an almost sheepish nod—the closest he would come to apologizing for his mistrust, Vraggen supposed—and took a long pull on his ale.

Vraggen watched him while he drank, smiling with an easy disingenuousness, but wondering if he would need to kill him later in the evening. Not with anything as vulgar as poison of course, but dead was still dead.

Time would tell, he supposed.

The two sat at a small table in a back corner of the Silver Lion, a mediocre taproom at the intersection of Vesey Street and Colls Way, a boisterous corner deep in Selgaunt's Foreign District. It was spring, and near the tenth hour. As usual for the Lion, a thick crowd of merchants, drovers, and caravan guards filled the tables and slammed back drink. The heavy aroma of the Lion's infamous beef stew—a thick, wretched concoction inexplicably favored by caravanners—hung in the air. When mixed with the ubiquitous smell of pipeweed smoke and sweat, it made Vraggen's stomach turn. Tankards clanged, plates clattered, and conversation buzzed. Everyone wore steel; everyone drank; and no one paid any attention to Vraggen and Norel.

Exactly as Vraggen required.

He had chosen the Lion as the location to meet Norel for two reasons: first, it was in the Foreign District. Zhent operatives like Norel considered the area a "hot zone," a high-trade area well patrolled by Selgaunt's Scepters, the city's watchmen. Norel would therefore consider himself safe, and not fear the meeting to be a pretense for a hit. Second, the noise of the crowd made eavesdropping difficult by all but the most skilled and determined spy. That was well, for Vraggen wanted no premature disclosure of his plans. Many Zhents thought him dead already, and he wanted them to continue to think as much until he was ready to move.

Vraggen took another draw on his ale. When he placed the tin tankard, engraved with the crude crest of a rearing lion, back on the table, he glanced casually into the crowd behind Norel, looking for his lieutenants.

There they were.

Azriim sat three tables away, his dusky skin gray in the light of the oil lamps, his long pale hair held off his face with a jeweled fillet. Only in Selgaunt's Foreign District could a half-drow like Azriim go unremarked. Sembians were notoriously prejudiced against elves of any type, but in Selgaunt coin spoke before race. And Azriim's taste in finery suggested great wealth. Had they been in the Dalelands, Azriim would have been arrested on sight, probably hanged.

Dolgan shared Azriim's table. The weight of the large Cormyrean, heavy-laden with axes, ring mail, and a round gut, bowed the thick legs of the wooden chair.

Vraggen brought his gaze back to Norel, though the Zhent made only occasional eye contact. "I thought you were dead," Norel said.

Vraggen smiled and replied, "You can see that I am not. I was merely away from the city for a time."

Norel gave a quick nod, and took a long pull on his ale. The Zhent operative was struggling to look calm, but Vraggen saw through the facade: the furrowed brow, the white-knuckled grip on his tankard. Norel was nervous.

Norel put back another long gulp of his ale, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and set the

tankard down on the table with a smack.

"You wanted me here, mage, and here I am. What you got? A side job?"

A side job—work beneath the attention of the Zhent leadership that an operative might do on his own time to fill his own pockets rather than the coffers of the organization.

"Of a sort," Vraggen replied, being deliberately vague.

That was mundane enough that it seemed to relax Norel. He leaned forward, an eager gleam in his dark eyes.

"Let's hear it then."

Vraggen folded his hands on the table and looked Norel in the face. The Zhent's initial response to Vraggen's next words would be important.

"There's a war brewing in the Network, Norel. It's time each of us picked a side and fought. Do you see that?"

Norel's eyes narrowed. He probably was still stuck on the idea of an ordinary side job. It took a moment for him to redirect his thoughts.

"War? You mean—" His eyes went to Vraggen's brass cloak pin, in the shape of a jawless skull in a sunburst, and his expression showed understanding. "You mean what I think you mean?"

Vraggen nodded but added nothing. He wanted to let Norel's thoughts run their course.

Norel's gaze returned to the pin, returned to Vraggen. The Zhent's thoughts were writ plain on his face. Bane, the god of tyranny, had returned to Faerun and the resurgent Banites were in the process of retaking their historic place amongst the Zhent leadership. The Cyricists, who had murdered many Banites while seizing power in the Network, found themselves the target of the Banites' vengeance. An internal schism had rent the organization. Mostly it was fought in the shadows with poison, assassinations, and the like, but of late, the Banites had grown confident, and the murders of Cyricists had become public and ritualized. Message-killings, really. Vraggen had heard that message and heeded it. That was why he'd left Selgaunt in search of the globe.

But Norel knew none of that, or little anyway. Like most Zhents who were not in positions of leadership, Norel wanted to stay neutral and weather the religious storm. But that day was past. Either he would side with Vraggen or he would die.

Ultimately, Vraggen planned to retake the Network with his own private war on the Banite leadership. For that, he needed soldiers—Zhents without loyalty to the Banites, Zhents like Norel—and power. He was in the process of gathering both. The risks were high, but if he were successful he would have taken the first step in eliminating the Banites from the Zhentarim. Surely Cyric would reward such a coup.

He returned his thoughts to Norel and asked, "Well?"

"Well? Dark and empty, man! Are you mad? It hasn't been a war. It's been a slaughter."

Vraggen could not deny it, though hearing Norel say it aloud brought a flash of rage. It *had been* a slaughter, at least so far. Cyric was culling his flock of the weak, Vraggen supposed. Unfortunate, but necessary.

Norel, warming to the subject, went on, "I mean, I haven't seen a priest of Cyric on a job for over a month. Not one that was alive at the end of it, at least."

Vraggen bit back the impulse to smack the smugness from Norel's face, and said, "I'm not a priest, Norel."

Norel's eyes flashed fear. He looked into Vraggen's face, only for an instant, and looked away.

"No. I guess you're not. But you're still a mad bastard. Seeking a fight with the Banites is ... is ..." He stuttered, obviously struggling for the right word, and finally settling on the rather unimpressive and repetitive, "... is madness."

Vraggen sighed and decided to give Norel one more chance.

"Consider the rewards, Norel. If I'm—if *we're*—successful, imagine the power, the wealth. What's your take per job, now? A twentieth?"

Norel nodded slowly.

"I'm prepared to double that. Think about it. A tenth."

Vraggen could be free with promises of coin because wealth meant nothing to him. This was to be a religious war, not the pursuit of lucre. But he knew coin would mean something to Norel.

"But the Banites ..." Norel said, shaking his head. "I mean, do you want to die?"

Vraggen knew then that Norel was lost. He stared daggers into the Zhent's face.

"No. Do you?"

Norel's gaze went hard, though Vraggen could see the fear behind the bravado.

"You threatening me, mage? You think that shadow shite will keep you safe from *this*?"

His hand went to the hilt of his short sword.

Calm as a windless sea, Vraggen leaned back in his chair and took a slow drink of his ale—using his left hand, the signal to alert Azriim and Dolgan.

"I find your attitude regrettable," he said softly.

Norel scoffed, but kept one hand on his sword hilt.

"Regrettable? You know what I find? I find you're a friggin' fool. Did you think I'd buy into this tripe? That I wouldn't go straight to Malix? There's the real coin, selling you out. I don't give a damn if Cyricists or Banites or the High Prince of the Ninth Hell is running the show, as long as I get my cut." He smirked derisively and added, "And I'll keep my twentieth. A dead man can't spend a tenth."

Azriim and Dolgan were cutting through the crowd, closing on the table.

Vraggen smiled softly and held Norel's gaze, so as not to alert him.

"I can't say I'm entirely surprised by your reaction," he said, "but I'd hoped you'd agree with my vision. I'd hoped that you'd see the potential in it for you. Of course, if you didn't, I realized you'd threaten to take it to Malix."

Malix was the highest ranking Zhent in Selgaunt, and a Banite. He'd pay well to know Vraggen's whereabouts and plans.

"Then you know I'm looking at a dead man, Cyricist. Unless—" Norel's eyes grew cunning—"you care to give me a reason why I *shouldn't* take it up the chain."

A play for coin. How common.

Dolgan loomed behind Norel's chair. Azriim, standing beside his big comrade, could not keep the smile off his face.

"I'll give you two," Vraggen said, and he nodded to his agents.

Norel sensed his peril a heartbeat too late. Before he could stand, before he could pull his steel, Dolgan planted a ham hand on each of the Zhent's shoulders, a hold that might appear innocuously friendly to observers, but that held Norel in his seat as effectively as a vise. In the same instant, Azriim slid gracefully into the empty chair beside the Zhent and put a dagger to his ribs.

"Mind your manners, now," Azriim ordered with a smile and a wink. His perfect teeth shone in the lamplight.

"One and two," Vraggen said, and he let Norel digest his situation for a few heartbeats.

The Zhent obviously understood his danger. His breath came fast, and he started to sweat. Flush, he spoke through gritted teeth.

"I've got friends. People who know I'm here. If you do anything, you whoresons—"

Azriim pricked him with the blade to cut him off, and said, "I said, 'mind your manners,' and that means no expletives."

The half-drow continued to smile, but the cold glint in his mismatched eyes left no doubt about how deep the dagger would go the next time. Azriim had a peculiar distaste for profanity, one of a number of the half-drow's idiosyncrasies. Vraggen didn't understand it, and didn't try to.

"I believe you're lying, Norel," Vraggen said. "No one knows you're here except the persons at this table."

"And we're not telling," said Azriim with a smile.

Vraggen continued, "Who would you dare tell that you were coming to a meet with a Cyricist? The leader of your cell? Malix?"

Norel's eyes darted around, seeking escape. Fear squeezed sweat from his pores. He spoke rapidly, his voice almost a hiss.

"I'm not being 'escorted' out of here, mage. You want to do something to me, you'll have to do it here, if you've got the stones. Someone will see. The Network will hear—"

He started to squirm but Dolgan held him fast. The big Cormyrean flexed his shoulders and fairly ground Norel into his seat. The Zhent folded over and gave a squeal of pain. Azriim chuckled softly, as though the whole affair was a grand joke. Norel tried to lunge at Azriim but could not escape Dolgan's grip. The veins of his neck stood out like a network of tree roots. When he spat his next words, strings of spit dangled between his lips.

"What's so godsdamned funny, you black skinned sonofa—"

A deeper stab from Azriim cut short Norel's tirade. This time, Azriim did not smile.

"I saved your life by keeping that curse in your mouth," said the half-drow. "Thank me."

"Bugger off."

"*Thank me.*"

Another prick of the blade. Another squeal of pain.

Norel gritted his teeth. Pain paled his face.

"Thank you, you son—" He stopped himself before Azriim cut him again.

The half-drow smiled with satisfaction.

Before things could get louder, Vraggen reached into his robes, removed a thin iron wand, and pointed it at Norel under the table.

"Be still," he ordered.

Those simple words triggered the magic of the wand. Norel went rigid, held immobile by the power of the wand's magic.

Dolgan, chuckling in his slow way, loosed his grip on the immobilized Zhent and took a seat at the table. The chair creaked under his weight. A few curious eyes turned their way, but Azriim laughed loudly and slapped Norel on the shoulder.

"You villainous rogue," he said with a gleeful snort, as though scolding an old friend for getting drunk and bedding a serving girl. "You didn't?"

Dolgan laughed along, pounding the table with false mirth. The prying eyes of the other patrons went back to their business. Azriim's laughter immediately died, and his eyes—one pale blue, one deep brown—recaptured their usual hardness.

"He has a foul mouth," Azriim said to Vraggen and Norel. "Doesn't he?" He looked at Norel. "You have a foul mouth." He took Norel's drink and had a slug. "And you drink swill."

Looking at the immobile Zhent, Vraggen sighed with disappointment. Norel would have made a fair addition to their crew. He'd shown backbone, there at the end.

Ah well, he thought, what had to be done, had to be done.

He stared across the table into Norel's unblinking eyes and said, "As I said, Norel, you've made a regrettable decision. You do know what comes next, don't—"

The *smack* of Azriim's asp-quick backhand across Norel's face stopped Vraggen in mid-sentence. Even Dolgan's dull eyes widened with surprise.

"I told him, 'no expletives,' did I not? I believe I did." The half-drow spoke in the same relaxed tone of voice that he used when ordering a meal. "You have a foul mouth," he repeated to Norel.

Vraggen glared. "Do attempt to maintain your self-control, Azriim," he said.

The half-drow sneered and said, "Do I appear to you to be out of control?"

Vraggen indicated Norel. A thick stream of blood flowed down the Zhent's face from the left nostril.

"I told him, 'no expletives,' yet he cursed nevertheless," Azriim explained. "My striking him was meant as a further rebuke for his disobedience. He deserved it." Before Vraggen could frame a reply, Azriim added, "And I don't take orders from you, Vraggen. I'm your partner, not your lackey. I can interpret the globe, and therefore know how to find what you seek. You're the adept who can gain entrance. That makes us equals."

Vraggen's fingers pressed into the soft wood of the table and he hissed, "Watch your tongue, fool."

He glanced around at the nearby tables, but no one seemed to have taken any notice of the half-drow's comments. Vraggen sometimes regretted his alliance with Azriim. The half-breed outcast of House Jaelre had a mouth that ran like the River Shining, and he too often took unnecessary risks. Still, Azriim spoke truth—they were partners. Inexplicably, the half-drow had a sage's understanding of the heavens—he had never explained to Vraggen how he had come by that education, and Vraggen didn't ask. Vraggen brought to the partnership knowledge of the Zhents and Sembia's underworld, and a mastery of the Shadow Weave and related arcana.

They had met years before, near Tilverton, when Vraggen had first received training in the use of the Shadow Weave. Since then, their partnership had solidified. Vraggen needed Azriim's knowledge to find the Fane of Shadows and plumb the secret that lay within, while Azriim needed Vraggen to help him establish a new criminal organization to replace the Zhents in Sembia, an organization with the half-drow at its head. Partners indeed.

Dolgan looked at Azriim with a vague, puzzled expression and said, "Hang on, then. You sayin' *I'm* a lackey?"

Azriim smiled. "I'm saying—"

"Shut up," Vraggen commanded, and they did. Partners or no, in the end Vraggen was in charge. "Clean up this mess. It's time to move on."

There were other Zhents to recruit, other Zhents to kill, and most importantly, the globe to locate.

Azriim looked surprised, and distantly pleased. "Clean it? Here?"

"How?" asked Dolgan, in that same puzzled tone.

"How do you think?" Vraggen said. "Bloodless."

He put back the rest of his ale.

"But—" Dolgan started.

"Just do it."

That seemed enough for Azriim, who took the initiative.

The half-drow scooted his chair nearer to Norel's, gave an apologetic shrug and said, "I told you to mind your manners."

With one hand he pinched the Zhent's nose closed; with the other, he covered his mouth. Unable to move, Norel could only stare wide-eyed while he was asphyxiated. Vraggen wondered distantly what thoughts were going through Norel's mind while he died. Nothing of worth, he was sure.

Presently, it was over.

"Interesting," Azriim observed with a smile and scooted his chair back. He wiped Norel's snot and blood from the tips of his fingers. "I've never killed a man with only my fingers."

"I have," Dolgan said. "Back outside of Ordulin. Rememb—"

"Do shut up," Vraggen said, and Dolgan did.

Norel's corpse, held rigid by Vraggen's spell, remained upright in the chair, staring across the table with eyes gone glassy. Vraggen looked around to see if anyone had noticed the murder. No one had.

"I'll animate the corpse," Vraggen said. "You two escort him out, as though he's drunk."

"Be serious," Azriim replied, shaking his head. "I'll not have his stink on my clothes. Even alive he stank. And dead, well...."

Vraggen bit back his frustration. As much as Azriim loathed profanity, that was how much he loved his tailored finery, almost always in one shade or another of green.

"Very well," Vraggen said, and indicated Dolgan. "You then."

The big man frowned, but nodded.

Vraggen withdrew a small, roughly cut onyx from the inner pocket of his cloak, reached across the table, and pushed it between Norel's dead lips. In a low voice, he dispelled the magic that held Norel rigid then recited the charged words to the spell that would tap the Shadow Weave and animate Norel's corpse.

"Place your hands on the table, Norel," he commanded, to test the efficacy of the spell.

Norel—or Norel's shell—did exactly that. Vraggen looked to Dolgan and said, "Walk it out of the inn, then lead it to the bay. Stab it in the lungs a few times so it will sink."

Dolgan nodded.

Vraggen looked at the corpse and said, "Rise and walk out accompanied by this man." He indicated Dolgan. "Allow him to lead you where he will."

Norel pushed back his chair and rose, awkward and shuffling. Dolgan wrapped one of his huge arms around the zombie and the two shuffled out. Norel's irregular stride was at least passable as the stumbling meander of a drunk. Dolgan began to sing as they made their way to the door.

After they were gone, Azriim raised Norel's tankard and gave Vraggen a mock toast.

"Well done."

Vraggen acknowledged the compliment with nod.

"What's next?"

"We find the globe. I believe that the time of the Fane's appearance is near."

Azriim nodded, swirled the tankard thoughtfully. He was silent for a time, then he said, "Remind me again why you're doing this?"

"Power," Vraggen replied. "Do you think the Network will cede us Sembia? We'll need every advantage we can get, and what I propose to do represents the pinnacle of what the Shadow Weave has to offer. You should consider it yourself."

In truth, Vraggen cared little for personal power, or at least cared little for power for its own sake. His plan to war with Sembia's Zhents had nothing to do with self-aggrandizement. As he saw it, he had no choice. He could flee the city and die a coward—something he could not live with—or he could stand, fight, and serve the god he had chosen to follow. At least the latter offered a chance for survival. But to maximize that chance, he had to maximize his own power.

Azriim smiled at Vraggen's offer, a secret smile Vraggen did not care for, and said, "You won't be human anymore."

"No," Vraggen acknowledged, staring across the table. "I'll be more than human."

Azriim seemed to digest that.

"Well enough," the half-drow said with a laugh. "I sure hope you don't die before we find the Fane. This, I really want to witness."

CHAPTER 3

Farewells

The light of the rising sun crept across the floor of Cale's quarters. Half his room was alight with the brightness of dawn, half cast in shadow. Cale thought it an apt metaphor for his life.

His purposeful movements about the small bedroom took him between the light and shadow. In the process, he stirred up the seemingly endless amount of unswept dust on the floor. The motes swirled in the sun's rays like dancing faeries. If anyone on his staff had left any other room in Stormweather Towers as ill kept as Cale maintained his own quarters, he would have dismissed that person summarily. Cale was a poor housekeeper—a strange fault in a butler, he acknowledged—but he forbade any member of his staff from entering his quarters.

And for good reason, he thought, eyeing the battered wooden trunk at the base of his metal-framed bed. He had never wanted to risk an overly curious member of the household staff jiggling the lock of the trunk and drawing conclusions about him and his past from the contents.

He keyed the lock and opened the trunk's lid. Within lay his enchanted leather armor, slashed and grooved from the many blades it had turned, and a leather pouch holding two of the three potions he had taken from the Night Knives's guildhouse before he and Jak had burned it to the ground. Two months before he had paid a gnome alchemist to identify the properties of the potions. The one that smelled of clover would turn him invisible for a time, and the cloudy azure one would allow him to fly for a while. He laid the potion pouch and the armor on the bed. At the bottom of the trunk were his weapons belt with his enchanted long sword and two balanced daggers. Those too he laid on the bed. He would no longer keep his weapons and armor hidden away.

Through his window, the great bells of the House of Song sounded the sixth hour. Tamlin—*Lord Uskevren*, he corrected himself—would be taking his breakfast. Lady Uskevren would be there as well. He would inform them first.

Shamur and Tamlin sat at a small table on a sundrenched balcony off of the main dining room, talking. Cale could not make out their conversation and would not be so impolite as to read their lips, though he could have.

Shamur wore a violet sundress, sandals, and only a few tasteful jewels. Her hair hung loose and cascaded down to her shoulders. To be dressed so casually, Cale deemed that she must have no appointments that morning. Tamlin, however, had already donned a formal doublet and hose. The lord of Stormweather had business that morning then. The fact that Cale did not know of Tamlin's appointments ahead of time showed just how small a role he played in the life of the new lord of Stormweather.

Cale walked through the dining room toward the balcony—deliberately loud, so that Tamlin and Shamur would hear him coming. They turned in their chairs to face him as he approached. Tamlin looked grave, but not displeased to see him. Shamur smiled. Cale nodded a greeting to Tamlin and gave Shamur a warm look. Cale and Shamur had reached an understanding while in the strange otherworld reflected in a magical painting. There, they had faced death together and saved each other's lives. Later, they had mourned Thamalon together. Cale had come to realize that his lady was no more a sedentary noble in her soul than he was a butler in his. He marveled at her ability to suppress what she was. He had never been quite able to do it.

Out of habit, he evaluated the table settings and fare with a professional eye. All appeared in order—the table services appropriately set, the meal suitable for a spring breakfast. Cora, one of the household staff, hovered on the far side of the balcony, within earshot and sight of the Uskevren if they required anything, but far enough away to give them privacy. Cale gave the young woman a nod of approval then waited to be acknowledged formally by his employers.

"Mister Cale," Tamlin said around a mouthful of poached egg.

"My lord," Cale said, though he still found it hard to apply the title to Tamlin.

"Erevis," Shamur said and smiled still more brightly. The sun reflected off the jewels in her hair, and sparkled in her eyes. She looked radiant. She gestured at a nearby chair. "How very nice to see you. Please sit down."

Tamlin frowned at Shamur's familiar use of Cale's first name, and her offer to allow a servant to dine with the lord of the House.

"Lady, you are gracious as always, but I must decline," Cale said. He smiled back at her, a soft smile but

genuine. Having come to know her, he thought he might miss her the most after he was gone, more even perhaps than Thazienne. He looked to Cora and said, "That will be all."

Tamlin and Shamur exchanged a glance at that. Cora looked surprised but made no protest before hurrying off.

Surprisingly, Cale felt no anxiety. In fact, he felt comfortable for the first time in months. He looked beyond both of the Uskevren and went straight to the point.

"Lord, Lady, some unfortunate events have befallen my cousin."

When he had first come to Stormweather, Cale had concocted a fictional cousin whose frequent problems required Cale's aid, and thereby provided cover for his guild activities. Tamlin and Shamur did not know that his cousin was non-existent. Even Thamalon had not known, though he may have suspected.

"I fear these events will require my long-term attention," Cale continued, "and will take me from the city. I must therefore request that you accept my resignation, which I offer now."

For a moment, the balcony stood silent.

At last, Tamlin said, "What? When?"

He did not look unhappy, merely surprised.

"Immediately, my l—"

"No." Shamur threw her napkin to the table, pushed back her chair, and stood. "Your request is denied."

"Mother..."

Tamlin reached for her hand, but she jerked it away. She had eyes only for Cale. And what eyes! For a fleeting, guilt-ridden instant, he thought how beautiful she looked, how much he wished he had known her in the days when she had been Shamur the burglar, before she had become the lady of House Uskevren.

"My lady ..." Cale began.

She strode forward, looked him defiantly in the face, and said, "This is nonsense, Erevis, and I will not suffer it."

"Lady—"

"You have no cousin!" she hissed. "Do you think I'm blind or do you think I'm stupid?"

Stunned, Cale could only stare. Her eyes did not hold accusations, just certainty. How long had she known? He had never even told Thamalon.

"Neither, my lady," he managed to mutter.

Tamlin rose from his seat and asked, "What are you talking about? Of course he has a cousin. Mister Cale has spoken of him often. Tell her, Cale. And now he needs to leave to attend to family matters. Surely we can understand that."

Shamur didn't turn around but her face darkened— first with anger, then with . . . disgust? Was she that disappointed in the man her son had become? Cale thought her face gave him the answer and made plain her thoughts: How will the House survive with Tamlin at its head?

For an instant, that thought made Cale waver, but only for an instant. He could not help the Uskevren anymore. He thought of Thazienne and knew it would cost him too much to stay.

He glanced at Tamlin—who stood with his hands on his hips and his head cocked to the side—then to Shamur, whose proud eyes blazed fire.

Cale smiled and said softly, "You'll still be here, Lady. That will be enough."

At that, her gaze softened.

"Perhaps," she said, "but the House needs you here. *I* need you here."

"What in the name of the gods are you two going on about?" Tamlin asked. "The man said he's leaving. That seems simple enough to me."

Shamur still held Cale's eyes.

"You don't have to bring this ken, nipper," she said.

Cale tried to keep the surprise from his face. Hearing her use cant astonished him more than if she had punched him in the stomach. She, a noblewoman of Sembia, spoke the thieves' tongue with the practiced ease of a veteran boxman. Cale knew she once had been a burglar of note, but hearing his lady speak the tongue Cale had once used to arrange assassinations ... it disquieted him.

"What did you say, Mother?" Tamlin asked.

Neither Cale nor Shamur even acknowledged that he had asked a question.

Thinking back, Cale better understood her happiness in that other world. Unlike Cale, she had never regarded herself as trapped there, even when they had been temporarily held prisoner by the elves. There, she had been free. For her, Stormweather was the trap, and one from which she could not even attempt escape.

He reached out a hand and brushed her fingers with his fingertips.

"My lady," he said, "if you can speak that language, then you of everyone understand why I can no longer stay."

Tamlin's eyes narrowed. Obviously he didn't like the familiar touch Cale had just shared with his mother.

"What language is that, Mister Cale?" he asked.

Cale did not look at him, instead keeping his eyes on Shamur.

Shamur considered Cale's comments, smiled sadly, and replied, "I do understand, Erevis." She straightened and backed up a step. "Sometimes the choices we make become too much of a sacrifice to continue them. Sometimes."

Cale gave her a nod and looked at Tamlin.

"I believe Lady Uskevren is now in agreement with us, my lord. I will inform the staff and see that all is put in order prior to my departure. I expect that will take a day, but perhaps two. I believe you will find Orrin more than capable of assuming my duties."

Orrin was the chief steward, an extraordinarily competent young man.

Tamlin nodded. He looked at his mother strangely while he walked up to Cale. He extended his hand. Cale took it. It was more callused than it had been once, harder.

"Cale, you've been invaluable to House Uskevren. You'll be missed." Cale heard sincerity in Tamlin's tone, and it moved him. "Of course, I will see to a suitable severance."

Cale shook his head. "Thank you, my lord, but a severance is un—"

Tamlin waved a hand dismissively and said, "I insist, Cale." He glanced at his mother. "It is the least we can do."

"Take it, Erevis," Shamur said.

"As you wish, my lord, lady. You'll say good-bye to Talbot for me?" he asked them.

The youngest Uskevren spent most of his time away from the manse, and likely would not return before Cale left.

"Of course," Shamur said. "And you'll speak to Tazi before you leave?"

Her tone dropped when she said that last, the way a person might speak a secret.

Cale's heart jumped at the thought of saying goodbye to Tazi.

"Erevis? She'll want to see you."

Cale nodded, mumbled something noncommittal, and began to walk away.

Before he reached the archway to the dining room, Shamur called out, "If I had it to do all over again, Erevis, I'd do it the same way. I understood my choice completely the day I made it. Make sure you'll be able to say the same years from now."

Cale heard the truth of her words and thought better of making a reply. Instead, he nodded and walked out.

Mairen Street, called Shop Street by Selgaunt's natives, bustled with late-morning activity. Merchant nobles, day laborers on morning repast, and farmers from the surrounding countryside all strolled the cobbled walkways, browsing the endless booths of goods and two-story shops that lined the street. Donkey carts pulling wagons of produce, and lacquered carriages bearing the rich, picked their way through the crowded street and rolled slowly down the road. Street vendors shouted into the sunny morning sky, hawking everything from apples and cabbage, to breads and sweet ices, to bolts of silk, candles, and scented spices. From the street's numerous open-air eateries and pastry bakeries wafted the pleasant aroma of cooking food—sausage and blueberry tarts. The smell reminded Vraggen that he had not yet eaten breakfast.

"That's him," Azriim said, nodding up the street. "Alkenen the peddler."

The half-drow, dressed in an intricately embroidered forest green cloak, finely tailored trousers, and polished black boots, indicated a vendor just up and across the busy street.

Vraggen and Dolgan tried to get a good look at him through the crowd without being obvious. Solin Dar, late of this world, had told Vraggen that he had sold the globe to Alkenen.

Alkenen straddled a stool before his small, road-worn peddler's cart. His crossed, goggle eyes watched the passersby as they browsed. Tufts of dull brown hair sprouted at wild angles from each side of his otherwise bald head. Even from a distance Vraggen could see that one of Alkenen's legs was shorter than the other, but even the good one looked spindly in its simple, homespun trousers.

"You had no problem tracking him down, I suppose," Vraggen said to Azriim. "His appearance is hardly unremarkable."

"Perhaps harder than you think," said Azriim. "He had been out of the city for the past tenday. He only recently returned to Selgaunt. From Cormyr, I understand. I was beginning to fear we would have to scour

the Heartlands for him." He paused before adding, "But you are correct—his poor taste does stand out, even among the Sembians."

Vraggen made no comment but Dolgan snorted a laugh. Unlike Azriim, the big man never seemed to change his clothes. His ring mail, sweat stained brown tunic, leather trousers, and calf high boots might as well have been a uniform.

As for Alkenen, he looked every bit an itinerant peddler of the Heartlands. His pockmarked, road-worn face sported a few days' growth of wispy beard. The sun and rain had long ago faded his weathered overcloak, once probably blue, to an indeterminate gray. His worn leather shoes had soles as thin as a vellum sheet. Perhaps he'd seen thirty winters, perhaps he'd seen fifty. Vraggen couldn't tell. Funny that such a fool could find himself in the middle of such important events.

Alkenen's cart looked much like most peddlers', a sturdy wooden box on four wheels. A "roadship," Vraggen had heard them called. Goods were stored for travel inside the walk-in main compartment, accessible from a narrow door in the back, and rotating slats were built into the cart's sides. When turned down and locked into place, the slats could serve as display shelves. Alkenen had already done so and upon his shelves stood a dizzying array of goods—glassware knick-knacks, statuettes of wood and bronze, sterling pendants, old clothing, leather goods, used weapons, tools, even kitchen pots.

"We gonna stand here all day and stare at the cripple, or take care of business?" Dolgan asked. "I'm getting hungry."

Vraggen didn't think Dolgan meant he was hungry for food.

"We'll try my way first," Vraggen said to the big Cormyrean. "No need to draw attention unnecessarily. If that doesn't work, we'll remove him to an isolated alley and you'll get your chance."

Dolgan grunted acquiescence, but obviously hoped the peddler would need convincing.

Vraggen said, "Let's go," and started across the street.

As they wove their way through the thick crowd, Azriim flipped a copper penny up to a fat apple vendor sitting on the driver's bench of his cart and plucked a green sour from the back. The vendor gave a nod and the copper vanished.

Alkenen saw them coming and must have sensed their intent. Perhaps he thought them guildsmen looking to chase him off. As they approached, he rose from his stool and tried to hobble into the safety of his cart. Dolgan and Azriim darted forward, intercepted him, and boxed him in against the side of the cart, near the driver's bench. Alkenen's draft horse, a road worn gray nag, idly chewed at a quarter-bale of straw set near it.

Wide-eyed and breathing fast, Alkenen swayed on his uneven legs. To maintain his balance, he steadied himself with one hand against the cart.

He looked fearfully at Azriim and Dolgan and asked, "What's this now? I'm an honest businessman. I'll summon the Scepters if need be."

He made wet sounds when he spoke, as though speaking caused his mouth to fill with too much spit.

Azriim took a loud bite of his apple, glared at the peddler, and said nothing. Dolgan took a step nearer Alkenen, fairly blotting out the sun. The peddler sank back and tried to meld with the wood of his cart.

Vraggen, ignoring the peddler for the moment, walked up and surveyed the peddler's goods, looking for the globe.

"What's this about?" Alkenen asked again, his voice quaking.

"Shut up," Dolgan said, in his deep, threatening voice. Alkenen did exactly that.

Vraggen looked carefully at each of the shelves in turn, but did not see the globe. He saw only the mundane wares of a mundane man, with the occasional item of modest value hidden in the mix—something Alkenen had fenced from a petty thief while in Cormyr, no doubt. Here a jade dragon figurine brought from the east, there a tarnished silver serving set lifted from a noble's manse.

"What is it that the sirs require?" the peddler asked, hopping awkwardly on his deformed leg and warily eyeing Dolgan. "Alkenen has wares of every sort." He nodded at Azriim. "Even clothes for the sir, who is obviously discerning."

Azriim took another chomp of the green sour and eyed the peddler darkly. After he swallowed, he said, "You'd have to pay me to wear your common trash, fool. You've been told to keep your mouth shut, so do so. And don't refer to yourself in the third person. It annoys me."

Dolgan smirked, though Vraggen doubted the Cormyrean knew what "third person" even meant.

Obviously discomfited, Alkenen swallowed whatever reply he had thought to make. The sucking sounds continued nevertheless.

After a time, the peddler asked in a very small voice, "Are you guildsmen?"

Vraggen snatched the jade dragon figurine from the shelf and turned from the wares.

"No," he said, trying to keep the distaste from his expression. Vraggen approached the wretch. "My name is Vraggen, and we are not working for any guild. What we require of you is a particular item. Failing that, we require information regarding its whereabouts. Provide us with that, and we can all be friends."

He held out the jade figurine, and Alkenen took it, eyes wide.

Vraggen indicated Dolgan and Azriim with his eyes then winked conspiratorially at Alkenen and said, "These are good men to have as friends, peddler. As am I."

He did not need to say that they were bad men to have as enemies. Alkenen understood.

"No doubt," Alkenen said, managing an uncomfortable smile. The dragon figurine vanished into the pocket of his trousers. "What item do you seek?"

Vraggen gave a satisfied smile and backed off a step.

"First things, first."

He nodded to Azriim and Dolgan and they seized Alkenen by the arms. Alarmed, Alkenen began to struggle against their grip; a feeble attempt.

"W-wait," he sputtered, spraying spit. "No!"

Vraggen began to incant a spell that would cause Alkenen to believe that Vraggen was a trusted friend, a trusted friend to whom he would not lie or tell half-truths.

It took only a moment to tap the Shadow Weave and complete the spell. When he finished, an immediate change came over Alkenen. He blinked and shook his head in confusion. Perplexed, he looked at Azriim and Dolgan, who still held him by the arms.

"Vraggen, what's going on? Call off the muscle, eh?"

Vraggen smiled as sincerely as he could manage and said, "Of course, old friend. My apologies." He looked pointedly at Azriim and Dolgan. He could not resist. "These two are thick, and often misunderstand my directives."

Azriim swallowed whatever comment he might have made, but his glare bored holes into Vraggen.

"Release him," Vraggen commanded, and they did.

Azriim bit into his apple, still staring. Vraggen ignored him and put an arm around Alkenen.

"Now, old friend. The item I'm looking for is a translucent globe of quartz, grayish in color. About so big, with many small gemstones inset. You would've purchased this item from a bearded warrior, a member of an adventuring company out of Cormyr who called themselves the Band of the Broken Bow."

Alkenen rubbed his scruffy beard and said, "I remember that warrior. A few months ago, right? Big fellow, lots of weapons, but needed hard coin. A drinker, I think. Sold that globe to me on the cheap."

"That's precisely the item," Vraggen said, and tried to keep the intensity out of his voice. "Where is the globe now? It's very valuable to me and I will pay you handsomely for it."

Alkenen sucked in some renegade spit dribbling down his chin and answered, "Sold it. If I'd a known you—"

Vraggen grabbed the peddler by the shirt and slammed him against the cart.

"*Sold it! Sold it? To whom?*"

Vraggen could hear the mockery in Azriim's voice when he said, "Do attempt to control yourself, Vraggen. I know I'm 'thick,' but isn't he your old friend?"

Vraggen shot Azriim an angry stare. The half-drow merely chewed his apple and smiled. Vraggen turned back to Alkenen. The peddler was wide-eyed and too stunned to breathe. Even the sucking sounds had ceased, and a stream of spit dribbled from the side of his open mouth. Vraggen came back to himself.

He released the peddler, patted him on the shoulders, and said, "Forgive me ... friend. I'm not myself." He took a deep breath. "Do you remember to whom you sold it?"

Alkenen smiled at that, a mouthful of stained teeth.

"Of course," said the peddler. "As I was saying, I put it together with some other unusual items I had obtained and sold the whole lot to the old man Uskevren. Walked by with his butler, he did. Took an immediate liking to that globe and an orrery. Bought the whole lot of items on the spot." Alkenen grinned and added, "I told him it came from Evermeet."

Vraggen breathed the name, "Uskevren."

He knew of the family, of course. Everyone with any familiarity with Selgaunt did. He also knew that Thamalon Uskevren had died recently—that news was the talk of the taverns—but something else itched at the back of his brain. Someone in the Zhentarim had once had ties to the Uskevren ...

"Drasek Riven," he said softly, and frowned.

"Who?" Alkenen asked.

Vraggen ignored him. Riven, one of the Network's top operatives in Selgaunt, had once had cause to surveil the Uskevren manse, but Vraggen couldn't remember why.

The answer came to him then, all in a rush.

Because Riven had tried for years to get the Zhents to put down the Uskevren butler, who had been a member of the now defunct Night Knives. Likely the same butler who had been with Thamalon Uskevren when he had acquired the globe.

"Cale," he said softly.

Alkenen's head bobbed up and down and he said, "Cale! Exactly! He was butler to old Uskevren. Tall prig, he was. Mean looking too."

Vraggen frowned. Had Cale and Riven allied? Had Riven's hostility been only a cover? Maybe this Cale had learned what the globe was. Maybe he and Riven had murdered Thamalon to take it for themselves. It seemed too coincidental that the Uskevren patriarch would buy the globe with Cale at his side and die soon after. That work stank of Drasek Riven.

Vraggen looked to Azriim and Dolgan and said, "This complicates matters." While a simple divination attuned to the Shadow Weave could reveal if the globe was in the family's mansion, dealing with Cale and Riven would not be as simple. "Cale and Riven are professionals," he said simply.

Azriim smirked and chewed his apple.

Dolgan gave a hard grin and asked, "Mean looking, huh?"

Vraggen faced Alkenen and gave an insincere smile.

"You've been of immeasurable help, friend Alkenen." Vraggen took ten platinum suns from his belt pouch, gave them to the peddler, and added, "For your trouble."

Alkenen stared wide-eyed at the coins, a small fortune by his standards.

"Take it. You've been a great help to me."

Alkenen said, "You're too generous, Vraggen. Anything else I can do—anything—you need only ask. I'll be in Selgaunt another few days, then I'm off to Marsember for the Festival of the Hart."

"Thank you, my friend. But nothing more for now." Vraggen forced himself to hold the smile. "Promise you'll spend the coin well, and soon. Otherwise, it'll chew a hole in your pouch."

Alkenen promised that he would and they parted ways.

When they had walked a block or two away from Alkenen, Azriim said, "Helpful fellow, your friend Alkenen. Maybe you two should get together for tendayly games of sava. Chess maybe. I suspect he'd give you a good game."

Vraggen resisted the urge to smack the smirk from Azriim's face, and said, "We'll track Cale and Riven for a few days. Once we've located the globe, we kill them and take it."

"Easy enough," Azriim replied.

"We'll need to involve a few more men."

"I know just the woman," said Azriim with a smile.

Vraggen looked a question at the half-drow. He wasn't sure this was woman's work.

"Don't worry," Azriim said with a laugh. "She's no lady. And she's only a woman when it suits her."

Vraggen nodded. He would trust Azriim's judgment. Azriim had brought him Dolgan, after all, and the Cormyrean mercenary had been a perfect addition to the core of their team.

"What is this globe anyway?" Dolgan asked. "What's it do?"

Azriim patted him on the broad shoulder and said, "You're only asking that now? Where've you been for the last three tendays?"

The half-drow laughed at Dolgan's dull frown. "It doesn't *do* much of anything, my big friend. It simply is."

"Enough," Vraggen ordered.

There were people all over the street. Azriim's careless tongue was infuriating.

Dolgan continued to frown, obviously perplexed.

"Never fear, Dolgan," Azriim said. "There's a little man with a real brain hidden in that big body somewhere. I'm sure of it. He'll figure it out in time."

Dolgan gave the half-drow a good-natured thump on the shoulder.

Vraggen glanced back the way they had come. He could no longer see Alkenen's cart.

"The charm on the peddler will wear off late this evening. After that, his loose tongue will be a danger to us. Follow him. After he's spent the coin, kill him."

Azriim raised his eyebrows and stared at Vraggen. Was that respect in his mismatched eyes?

"Seems you're not such good friends, after all, eh?" said the half-drow.

Vraggen stared back meaningfully and asked, "Why would you say that?"

The staff took the news of Cale's departure well. Only Brilla the kitchen mistress had cried. Seeing

stalwart Brilla blubbering like a child had almost undone Cale. He had fled the kitchen with a knot in his throat and only some of his dignity.

Word had spread to the guards quickly, and many had come up to his room to wish him well. He would leave that very night.

Alone once more, Cale gathered a final bit of gear. Glorious orange light cascaded through his window. The sun was setting on Faerun, as the sun was setting on his time in Stormweather Towers.

He collected up a few necessities—some candles, a coil of rope, tindertwigs, flint and steel, a few favorite books—and placed them in his worn leather backpack. A peculiar numbness overcame him as he did so. It was as though his skin had grown thick.

With insensate fingers, he peeled off his butler's attire—hose, doublet, vest, tailored but still ill-fitting pants and shirt—and piled each article neatly on the bed. Next to them lay his leather armor, boots, weapons, and other traveling clothes. The two halves of his soul lay side by side on the bed: fine cloth on the one hand and worn leather on the other.

From now on, he vowed, he would wear only the leather, the clothes that fit the man.

He reached for his breeches, tunic, leather vest, and boots, and pulled each on in turn. After that he strapped on his armor. Each fastened buckle was a nail in the coffin of Mister Cale the butler. When he snapped on his weapons belt, he could not help but smile at the familiar, comfortable weight of steel on his hips. His coin purse, which was filled with the hundred or so platinum suns Tamlin had insisted he take as severance, he stuffed into an inner pocket of his vest.

Fully dressed and in his proper skin, Cale gathered up his cloak and backpack. He felt... true, for the first time in a long time. He would pick up the sphere from the parlor on his way out. Most of the staff would be involved with dinner preparations, so he would be able to exit the manse without further ado or commotion. That was how he wanted it.

He took a last look around his quarters.

A tentative knock on his door turned him around.

He composed himself then said, "Come."

Thazienne pushed open the door. She wore an informal, sleeveless green dress and a soft frown. As always, she looked beautiful. Her skin shone in the light of the setting sun. Cale fought down the pangs of hurt and desire that he felt when he saw her.

She started to say something, but stopped when her gaze took in his weapons and attire, the cloak and backpack he held in his hand. Her frown deepened.

"You weren't going to say good-bye? To me?" Her voice was soft, diffident, the timid voice of the uncertain teenage girl she once had been.

He could not look her in the eyes. His hands fumbled absently with the straps of his pack.

"I hadn't decided yet," he said.

That was true. For two days he had vacillated between a need to see her one last time and a fear of what he might say if he did.

She looked at him sharply, and her voice changed into that of the confident woman she had become.

"You hadn't decided? What is that supposed to mean?"

He returned her sharp look and snapped, "It means I hadn't decided."

She took a step back, surprised by his harshness.

Hurt made Cale's words sound more callous than he intended.

"We said good-bye months ago, Thazienne. You did, at least."

He thought of the day she had returned to the manse with Steorf, the dolt whose bed Cale was certain she shared. His knuckles whitened around the straps of the backpack.

She understood what he meant. They knew each other too well for her not to know. A flash of red colored her face from chin to ear, though from shame or anger, he could not tell. She spun as though to leave, but stopped herself, turned, and faced him.

She took a deep breath and said, "You were my friend, Erevis. My dear friend."

She could not have known that those words cut him more deeply than if she had said she hated him. Her friend? Only her friend? He swallowed the emotion that threatened to burst from him. He knew that he had misread her for years, that he had been a fool. He felt his own face color.

"Your friend." He spoke the words as though they were an expletive. "That's all?"

She started to reply but stumbled over her tongue.

Finally she said, "When I returned from abroad my mother ... told me something."

She looked up at him and he could see tears pooling in her eyes.

His legs went wobbly. He held his breath.

"She said... that before you went to find the shadow demon..."

She trailed off and looked away, blinking. It took her a moment to recover.

"She said you left me a note."

His mouth went dry. He reached for his reading chair, to steady himself.

Shamur had found the note; Thazienne had never seen it.

He could not form words.

"She told me what it said."

He felt his whole body flush red. His eyes found the floor. For a fleeting, wonderful moment, he thought she might throw herself into his arms. She didn't.

"And?" he said.

She spoke softly, but Cale heard the firmness behind her tone. She had already had this discussion in her mind, tens of times probably.

"And? Gods, Erevis. What did you think would happen? We had a special relationship, but—Did you think I'd read that note and swoon? Did you expect me to fall into your arms at the power of your words? Did you—?"

"I don't know," he cut in. "I wanted you to know, that was all. Damn it!" He clenched his fist at his side. "What I *expected* was to die! Nine Hells, woman, I went after that thing because of what it did to you!"

The moment the words came out of his mouth, he regretted them. It shamed him to have stooped so low.

Her face reddened, and her forehead creased with anger. She strode forward into the room, right up to him, and looked into his face.

"How dare you even suggest that, Cale. Do you think I'm obligated to you for that somehow? You do, don't you?"

He didn't answer. Mostly, he thought the answer was "no." But at least some small part of him thought the answer was "yes." She saw the hesitation in his eyes and smacked him. Hard.

"I'm not a treasure to be won, you bastard." She put a finger on his chest. "Besides, you didn't go after that thing because of me. You went after it because it hurt *you*. Make no mistake about it. It may have hurt you by hurting me, but it was you—*you*—it hurt. Don't ennoble your motivations by cloaking your need for vengeance with ..."

She stopped before saying "love," but Cale knew what she meant. The word hung between them, suspended in the silence, heavier than her perfume.

Cale did love her. He still loved her, despite it all. But now her presence only hurt him, and that hurt came out of him as anger, no matter how much he wished it didn't.

She went on, merciless, just as he had always told her to be: "You don't know what to do with yourself if you're not killing things, Cale. I know what you are. I heard how you fought that demon. How could you ever have thought—"

He didn't realize what he was doing until he had already grabbed her by the shoulders and started to fling her away. He stopped himself before throwing her to the ground.

Shocked, he looked at his hands as if they didn't belong to him. She stared into his face, wide-eyed. He released her as though she were white-hot. His gaze found the floor, and tears formed in his eyes. He wanted to pull her to him and whisper an apology into her hair, but he felt paralyzed.

She had always brought out the best in him, and he had allowed her to see the worst. Shame and anger burned in him, shame that he had dared put his hands on her and anger at her words, which hit too close to his own thoughts. She thought he was a killer. She might as well have stabbed him in the gut and split him down the middle.

Silence sat heavy in the room for heartbeats that felt like hours. When at last he looked into her face again, the face of the woman he loved, he saw that it too was red with shame. She knew she had hurt him. Like him, she had done something she regretted. And both of them knew that what they had done and said could never be taken back.

"Leave, Tazi," he said.

"I'm sorry, Erevis."

She reached out a hand. He dared not take it.

"Me too," he said. "Gods, me too. Now leave. Please."

Tears welled in her eyes. She cradled her hands to her chest. He had to look away. He felt her eyes on him but neither said anything. After a few moments, she turned and hurried from the room. The slam of the door echoed in his brain. He realized then that the last touch they would share would be his hands on her in anger. In that instant, he hated himself.

After a time, he wiped the tears from his eyes and sagged onto the corner of the bed. Only then did he realize how badly he was shaking. He had killed men without allowing his heartbeat to accelerate, but arguing with Thazienne had left him a trembling idiot with no self-control.

An eternity later, a knock at his door brought him back to himself.

For a wonderful, hopeful moment, he thought it might be Thazienne returning. But he knew it could not be—the knock was too forceful, too casual. He rose from the bed and composed himself. The knock repeated.

"Mister Cale?" Cora's voice sounded from the hall.

"Yes, Cora. Come in."

The young maid opened the door. Her eyes went wide when she saw his clothing and weapons. She had not been on staff when he had fought the demon in the great hall. She did not know that he was . . . what he was. He did not bother to explain.

She held in her hand a letter sealed with a dollop of dyed beeswax. She seemed to have forgotten her business.

"Cora, is that for me?" he asked, indicating the letter.

"Huh? Oh, yes. Yes, Mister Cale." She approached him cautiously, as though he was a dangerous animal, and she held out the letter. "This arrived by messenger less than a quarter hour ago. Your door was closed so I—"

"That's fine, Cora. Thank you for your consideration." He took the letter and said, "That will be all."

She fled the room without another word. Cale shut the door behind her, sat in his reading chair, and examined the letter. The wax was marked with the general seal of a licensed scribe-for-hire. He cracked it and unfolded the parchment. The letter contained only seven words:

Usual place. Tonight near midnight. Important. Riven.

Cale stared at the words without understanding their meaning. His exchange with Thazienne still preoccupied his mind. He replayed it again and again. His face still stung from where she had slapped him. His heart still stung from what he had done.

It took a few moments for the import of the letter to register.

Riven wanted a meet at the Black Stag. Why? Though the Zhents were in the midst of an internal religious war—Cale knew that the Scepters were pulling Zhent corpses from the bay almost daily; mostly Cyricists—Riven had left the Network months before. He would not be involved in that. What then?

He shook his head. He could not reason clearly. His mind seemed unable to focus on anything but Thazienne ... the look of shock on her face when he had put his hands on her, the sound of her voice when she had called him a killer.

Tired to his bones, Cale refolded the letter and placed it in a pocket—a letter written by one killer to another. He looked around, at the door through which Tazi had exited his room, at the door through which she had exited his life.

There's nothing more for me here, he thought.

Whatever Riven wanted, there was only one way to find out. And it could not be worse than being in Stormweather Towers.

He threw on his cloak and walked out the door. At least he had somewhere to go.

CHAPTER 4

The Black Stag

Cale exited Stormweather Towers through one of the manse's less-trafficked side doors. With the family at table and most of the staff occupied with dinner preparations, he managed to exit the house unseen by anyone. That was just as well. He had already said his goodbyes.

He walked a flagstone path through one of the manse's many gardens to the small gatehouse in the wall facing Rauncel's Ride. The two house guards on duty there, Velorn and Del, seemed surprised to see him. He reassured them that all was well, explained that he wanted to leave quietly, and bade them farewell. They understood. They opened the narrow wrought iron gate and reminded him to keep his blade sharp—an old military farewell.

When he reached the street, he did not look back. He dared not. He feared he would lose his resolve.

A brisk spring breeze blew from the direction of Selgaunt Bay. Even at a distance, Cale could taste the subtle salt tang in the air. The sun had nearly set and the city's linkboys had already done their work. Rauncel's Ride glowed orange in the light of the tall, charcoal-burning street torches. Carriages and pedestrians peppered the street, going about their evening business. No one paid him any heed, just another evening traveler about his affairs. He fell into step among them and wandered the streets until well into the night. Only after he had walked for hours did he realize that he had forgotten to take the sphere from the parlor. Dark! His parting with Thazienne had left him distracted.

He told himself that it didn't matter. He didn't need a token to remind him of Thamalon. He would always remember the Old Owl.

From Temple Avenue, the bells of the House of Song and the gongs of the Palace of Holy Festivals sounded eleven bells. Time to move. He headed south for the Stag.

Fewer and fewer torches lit the streets as Cale moved into the rental warehouse district. There, adventurers, cutthroats, and seedy merchants ruled the packed-earth avenues. Prostitutes stood on corners, opportunistic muggers and pickpockets lingered at alley mouths, and purveyors of drugs went quietly about their illicit business. As much coin moved through Selgaunt's underground economy as through the coffers of the legitimate trading costers, and everyone knew it. The late Hulorn and his Scepters had made no effort to stop the trade in drugs and flesh so long as the associated violence was kept largely out of sight. In Sembia, the economy of vice was respected nearly as much as trade in Chultan spices. *Business is business* was the canon of the Selgauntan trader, whether pimp or coppersmith.

Passersby traveled in the safety of pairs and trios.

Hired muscle sometimes accompanied the wealthy. The poor traveled without bodyguards but had little worth stealing. Out of professional habit, Cale kept an alert eye on everything and everyone around him, though not out of fear. He was not the prey, but the predator. The thieves and pimps must have recognized that, because none challenged him, and few held his gaze for long.

Ahead, he saw the Stag, a ramshackle two-story building at the corner of two narrow avenues. The wooden structure leaned noticeably, as though itself as drunk as its patrons. The open shutters, their black paint long since flaked away to near nothingness, hung crookedly from the window frames. Smoke, laughter and a fairly steady stream of profanity boiled out of the windows and into the spring air.

On the street outside the Stag, a thin stream of traffic filed past: carts, horses, carriages, pedestrians. Cale lingered for a time, in the darkness of an unoccupied alley, observing. Though he felt a strange connection to Riven—perhaps only empathy for another of Mask's pawns—he was not foolish enough to trust the assassin fully. Riven could have decided to try an ambush for his own reasons. After waiting for a time, Cale saw nothing that gave him cause for alarm. He exited the alley and walked for the Stag's front door.

He pushed it open and stepped inside. As usual, the Stag stank of sweat, smoke, and stale vomit. Blueleaf, an herbal incense, burned in a tin dish behind the bar but did little to obviate the smell. The haze of smoke hovering near the ceiling stung his eyes.

A crowd thronged the Stag, as thick as the dock market at noon—typical for the time of year. Adventurers of every stripe streamed into Sembia in the early spring, all of them looking to make quick coin, convinced that riches lay in their future. Most ended up taking work as mere caravan guards, just to keep enough ravens in their pockets to buy a few days of food and lodging. But Tymora always smiled on a lucky few. Those managed to make a fortune and a name. Bards later sang ballads of their victories, and more and more returned each spring, certain they would find similar success.

The Heartlands suffered no shortage of fools, Cale thought.

While he stood in the Stag's doorway, appraising eyes took him in, apparently saw nothing of interest, and looked away. Conversation hummed.

The Stag's owner coated the planked floor in wood chips to ease the clean-up of the inevitable blood and puke that accompanied the influx of adventurers. The serving girls hired on for the season weaved through the crowd with tankards and platters held high.

Cale pushed his way in and scanned the tables for Riven. Because Cale stood a head taller than most of the patrons, he spotted the assassin at once. Riven sat alone at a small table in a dark corner near the bar. As usual, Riven wore his scarlet cloak, his twin sabers, and an unhappy scowl. Though the Stag was overflowing with sellswords, no one lingered within arms' reach of Riven. Even adventurers, an imprudent lot in general, could see the promise of violence in Riven's one good eye.

The assassin noticed Cale too. He raised his tankard to draw Cale's attention. Cale nodded and began to pick his way through the crowd.

A man stepped from the crowd to Cale's right and bumped him—hard. In one motion, Cale's hand first found his coin purse—he still had it—then moved for his blade. He stopped himself just before he reached the hilt.

"Mind your manners, dolt," said the man.

The half-elf—the half-*drow*, Cale corrected himself, to judge from the long pale hair, narrow cheeks, and dusky complexion—had an unusual accent that Cale could not quite place. The fool stared a challenge into Cale's face. Though dressed in the expensive silk finery of a noble fop, the half-drow's features had a hardness Cale did not miss. His reckless smile and mismatched eyes, one the palest blue, one a deep brown or black, gave him an unbalanced look. His slim hands hovered near the steel that hung from his belt. Cale took in the hilt with a glance: well worn from much use.

Ordinarily, Cale would have ignored a fool like that, but his parting with Thazienne had left him in a foul mood. He grabbed two fistfuls of silk shirt, lifted the half-drow off his feet, and pulled him nose to nose. A few faces turned their way, but only a few. The Stag's patrons saw fights and violence most every night. A confrontation didn't get interesting until steel was drawn.

"And you mind your tongue, *irinal*," Cale spat into the half-drow's face.

He'd deliberately chosen to insult the half-drow with a word that surface elves used to refer to the drow. It meant "forsaken," and the drow were notorious for their dislike of the term.

Surprisingly though, the half-drow showed no anger. His expression didn't even indicate that he understood the word. Instead, he stared Cale in the face with crazed eyes, smiling hard. His hand moved to his sword hilt but he did not attempt to draw.

"If that blade comes a fingerwidth out of its scabbard, I'll split you right here," Cale promised.

The half-drow held his smile and said, "If you've ripped my shirt, I'll have first your tongue, then your heart."

Cale's knuckles whitened, and for an instant he considered tearing the half-drow's shirt intentionally, but thought better of it. The fool was likely just an adventurer with too much bravado and too little sense. Cale had seen his type before. Hells, Cale had killed his type before. But that night, he would let it pass. He had business with Riven.

"I don't have time to waste with you, *irinal*," said Cale. "Consider yourself fortunate."

He tossed the half-drow aside.

To his credit, the half-drow showed some agility by managing to keep his feet and avoid bumping other patrons. He did not look up at Cale, but examined his shirt with exaggerated care.

Cale put the incident out of his mind and began walking toward Riven's table.

Before he had taken five strides, above the thrum of the crowd he heard the half-drow call after him, "It's not ripped after all. Wrinkled though. Consider *yourself* fortunate ... Cale."

That stopped Cale cold. He spun around—

—and somehow the half-drow had vanished into the Stag's crowd. Cale went after him a few steps, pushing a few patrons out of his way while scanning the crowd. He did not see the half-drow.

The hairs on the nape of Cale's neck rose. How had he vanished so quickly? More importantly, how did he know Cale's name? Cale was certain he'd never seen the man before. He would have remembered a half-drow. And he had been careful to keep a low profile in Selgaunt's underworld. The last thing he wanted was a reputation. One of Riven's men, maybe?

Maybe. He turned and headed for Riven's table.

The assassin greeted him with his signature sneer. To Cale's surprise, he saw that Riven wore a featureless black disc, perhaps of carved onyx, on a silver chain around his neck. A holy symbol of Mask?

That tangible evidence of Riven's and Cale's service to the same god made Cale feel soiled.

Riven noticed Cale's gaze and his sneer deepened. He held the disk from his neck for Cale to see.

"Maybe it's exactly what you think, Cale. That make you uncomfortable?"

Cale stared in Riven's good eye and said, "No, but I'll wager it makes *you* uncomfortable." He pulled out a chair and sat. "I guess even Mask has lepers among the faithful."

Riven grunted an insincere laugh, took a pull on his tankard, and nodded at a spot behind Cale.

"I saw that bit with the half-elf," he said. "You stooping to picking fights with the itchies now?"

Professional assassins often referred to adventurers as "itchies"—as in, itching to prove themselves, itching for a fight.

Cale knew then that the half-drow was not one of Riven's men. That alarmed him.

"He's not one of yours."

Riven scoffed. He'd interpreted Cale's observation as a question.

"Are you jesting?" Riven said. "A little drip of piss like that? I'd as soon work with your boy Fleet."

He took another quaff of his beer.

Cale ignored Riven's barb at the halfling. Jak had once stabbed Riven in the back and the assassin had never forgotten—or forgiven.

Cale's mind turned to the half-drow. Who was he? If he was not one of Riven's, then for whom did he work? An uneasy feeling took root in his gut. His instincts told him to heed it. He resolved to hear Riven out, tell him to bugar off, and get the Hells out of the Stag as quickly as possible.

Riven eyed Cale over the rim of his tankard. Cale stared back. The silence stretched.

Riven lost patience first. "Well? I don't have time for more cryptic nonsense. What have you got? Your note was as clear as fog."

Cale's breath caught.

"My note?" he said. "You sent *me* a note."

They stared at each other for only a heartbeat.

"Dark!" Cale breathed.

"Damn!"

Both jumped to their feet, toppling their chairs in the process, and looked for the nearest exit. There! A large, open window.

Riven was off like a bowshot, dancing nimbly between the patrons. Cale, trailing a step or two behind and much larger than the assassin, had to shove his way through. He had no idea what was coming, but he knew it would be bad.

"Get out!" he shouted to the patrons as he ran. "Everybody out now!"

Eyes looked his way, questioning glances and furrowed brows, but no one paid his words any heed.

Riven hopped atop a table, scattering plates and startling the two mercenaries seated there. He dived through the window as the sellswords jumped to their feet and went for their steel. Before they could draw fully, Cale shouldered one to the ground and drove the other back with a punch in the chest.

"Get out!" he shouted at them.

He jumped atop the table and grabbed the window jambs. From out of the corner of his eye, he saw a tiny orange sphere streak through an open window on the wall kitty corner. He knew it for what it was.

He cursed and launched himself through the window as the pea-sized ball slammed into one of the Stag's crossbeams. It exploded into a hell of fire and heat. Screams erupted, but only for an instant before being cut off by the dull roar of the explosion. The pressure of the blast and the superheated air blew Cale through the window and sent him flying. He hit the ground with a grunt a full dagger toss away from the Stag, in the middle of the street.

It took him a moment to recover his wits. When he did, he rolled over onto his back and stared up into the night sky, breathing heavily. His pants below his knees smoldered and the fire had scorched his boots, but otherwise he was largely unburned. He patted at his trousers dazedly and slowly rose to his knees. His eyes went to the Stag.

Fire engulfed the first floor, and thick black smoke gushed from the windows of the second. The street was alight in orange. Waves of heat blew from the blaze, so intense they stung Cale's face. The Stag had gone up like kindling—wood walls, wood tables, wood chips ... and human flesh.

Cale had expected to see a flood of flaming people, screaming in agony and streaming from the doors and windows. He would have healed those whom he could have, but no one came out. The smoke and fire had done its work almost instantly. The only sound was the hungry crackling of the flames. The Stag had been reduced to an inferno in a matter of moments. So too the people inside. Dozens of them. A few charred corpses that the explosion had blown clear of the building lay smoldering in the street. He didn't see

Riven.

The second floor of the Stag began to give way. Timbers cracked, the sound like bones snapping. Great showers of sparks rose into the night as the building shifted.

Without warning, another orange sphere streaked from somewhere to his left, flew into the Stag, and exploded with a roar. Flames blew from every window in long streamers, as though the building was spitting fire. The upper floor, already weakened, collapsed with a crash into the first. Flames and sparks roared into the sky like a swarm of fireflies.

Cale traced the path of the second fireball back to two men standing in the shadows of an alley a block and a half up the street. In one of the men Cale recognized the slim build and finery of the half-drow who had bumped him on his way into the Stag, the half-drow who had known his name. The other, a tall, dark man with his brown hair cropped close to his scalp, wore a dark cloak. Oddly, the darkness of the alley seemed to cling to him. Streams of shadow swirled around him like smoke swirled around the burning Stag. Cale figured him to be the mage responsible for the fireballs. Neither of the two appeared to have spotted Cale. He had been blown too far from the building.

Moving quickly but keeping low, Cale crawled the rest of the way across the street and sunk into the darkness near a closed chandler's shop. He drew his long sword and started to move in the direction of the half-drow and mage.

They had lured him and Riven there with forged notes to assassinate them. That they had used a spell in a public place and not steel in an alley suggested that they were not professionals. But why? Cale had never seen them before.

Riven then. What had the one-eyed assassin drawn him into?

To find out, he decided he would kill the wizard quickly, then question the half-drow. He would find out later if Riven had survived the inferno.

Before he had cleared the chandler's shop, a hand reached from the darkness of the doorjamb, closed on his shoulder, and pulled him close—Riven

Out of instinct, Cale grabbed a handful of Riven's shirt and thumped him hard against the shop's door. Riven's sabers pressed into Cale's chest. Cale's long sword found Riven's jawline. They exchanged glares for a few heartbeats while the Stag burned behind them.

From behind the door, a man's voice sounded, tentatively, "Go away. I want no trouble here."

"Stay inside and you'll have none," Cale hissed.

The chandler said nothing more. Cale stared into Riven's face. The assassin had discarded his scarlet cloak and had a hard look in his eye.

"What in the Nine Hells are you into, Cale?"

Despite his desire to open Riven's throat, Cale heard the sincerity in the assassin's voice. He calmed himself and lowered his blade.

"I'm not into anything, Riven. You're not either, it seems." He released his grip on Riven's shirt, turned his back to the assassin, and pointed down the block to the half-drow and his comrade. "There."

Riven stared for a time, straining to see them in the light cast by the fire.

"The short one is that half-elf prig who bumped you," said Riven.

Cale nodded. "And the other is the wizard who torched the Stag—who tried to torch us." He turned to face Riven. "I've never seen either of them prior to tonight. You?"

Riven shook his head, but didn't look sure.

Cale went on, "This was a hit. On you, on me, maybe both of us. The half-drow walked out as I walked in, probably to signal the wizard that we were inside." Cale indicated the burning Stag. "Then that."

Riven shook his head and spat. "Friggin' amateurs. Steel, speed, and stealth for a hit. Never spells. And sure as Hells never fire. How can you confirm a kill with a burned body?"

Cale made no comment. He knew well the assassin's code, but he also knew well the efficacy of spells for either combat or assassination. Since Riven had not learned that lesson, perhaps he wore the symbol of Mask but could not cast spells. Somehow, that thought gave Cale comfort.

Riven started to head up the street.

"Let's go," the assassin said. "I'll take the wizard. Alive, if possible. If not...."

"Then not," Cale said. "I've got the half-drow. We'll take him alive."

Using the shadows and keeping low, both moved forward. As they did, Cale spared a glance behind them.

Spectators had already begun to gather around the burning inn. Passing carts and pedestrians stopped to stare. A few shopkeepers along the street had emerged from the rooms above their shops to watch the blaze from second story balconies. Soon the Scepters and dutypriests would arrive to contain the blaze.

That would leave Cale and Riven only a little time to put down the wizard and capture the half-drow before the street would be too crowded.

For the moment, the half-drow and wizard seemed content to observe their work from the shadows of the alley. Cale figured they were watching to see if either he or Riven had survived the blast. They would know that soon enough.

"Wizard's got a spell on him," Cale said softly. "See the way the shadows swirl around him?"

"I see it." Riven reached behind his back and pulled out a pair of throwing daggers. "I recognize him too, now that I see him more closely. Vraggen's his name—a shadow adept in the Network. I heard he was dead."

A shadow adept. Cale had heard of such mages. They seemed more common since the return of the city of Shade.

"Why would the Network want to hit us?" Cale asked.

"They wouldn't. Vraggen's a Cyricist."

Cale nodded. The Banites were driving the Cyricists out of the Zhentarim. Vraggen must have gone rogue, though that still didn't explain why he had targeted Riven and Cale.

"Payback for Gauston?" asked Cale.

Perhaps Cyric had sent his followers to put down Riven and Cale in the same way that Mask had used Riven and Cale to put down a Cyricist priest several months before.

Riven shrugged and said, "Maybe." He stared up the street. "No way to get all the way up before they see us. We open with missiles, then finish it in close."

"Good."

Cale had a pair of throwing daggers, but also had a spell he thought would work better. He pulled forth his holy symbol.

Moving more slowly, and using as cover building eaves, barrels, posts, and the flickering shadows cast by the fire, they continued to close. Gawkers jogged past them, shouting and pointing. No one spotted them. They kept their eyes on their targets.

When they got to within a long toss of Riven's daggers, Cale signaled a halt. Any closer and they'd risk being seen. Both scooted in behind some water barrels. Cale's keen ears caught the tail end of a heated exchange between the half-drow and Vraggen.

"... was reckless!" said the wizard. "I told you not to underestimate those two."

The half-drow waved a green-gloved hand dismissively and said, "I wanted to see his face and hear his voice. He suspected nothing. Nor did Riven."

"It was foolish and unnecessary."

The half-drow chuckled—a menacing sound with no mirth in it—and pointed a finger at the wizard's chest.

"I'll not argue with *this*, Vraggen. If you want to have a discussion with me, you come and look me in the eyes yourself."

Cale didn't know what that last meant, but he had confirmation that both he and Riven had been the target of the fireball.

"One may have escaped," continued Vraggen.

"Perhaps," acknowledged the half-drow with an enigmatic smile. "Watch, and we'll soon know."

That ended their discussion. They turned and watched the street near the Stag. Firelight lit their faces. Cale saw that the wizard wore a brass cloak pin in the shape of a jawless skull within a sunburst—the symbol of Cyric.

"See the pin?" Cale asked softly.

Riven spat. He saw it.

"Ready?" the assassin whispered.

"Ready."

Cale began his prayer to Mask. Riven stood to throw. The moment he rose, the half-drow looked directly at them and grinned. His expression showed no surprise. He had known the whole time, Cale realized.

Riven didn't notice, or didn't care. He threw anyway, one dagger, another, then leaped over the barrels and charged for the wizard.

Riven's first dagger pierced the wizard's throat, his second the wizard's chest, but both passed through him as though he was a ghost. The blades stuck in the wall of the building behind, quivering from the force of the throws. The wizard, or the image of the wizard, stared contemptuously at the onrushing assassin and began to cast.

In the midst of his prayer, Cale felt an itch behind his eyes, a splinter in his mind. He blinked and shook his head.

What the—?

A voice sounded in his brain. He recognized it immediately as that of the half-drow.

This is bigger than you, Cale. I'd stay incidental if I were you.

He saw the half-drow watching him, a feral grin on his face, a blade in his hand.

Cale gritted his teeth. Despite the uncomfortable feeling occasioned by the half-drow's presence in his head, he maintained his concentration and completed his spell. He mentally selected a location just behind the half-drow. There, a glowing long sword of magical force took shape and hovered in the air, poised to strike. At Cale's mental command, the blade slashed crosswise at the unsuspecting half-drow as though wielded by an invisible warrior. The blade sheared through the half-drow's silken pants, cut deep into his thigh, and erased his self-satisfied grin. Blood peppered the alley.

Uttering a surprised gasp of pain, the half-drow clutched at his slashed thigh and staggered. The magical blade continued to attack without Cale's further mental command, following up with another slash. Despite his wound, the half-drow whirled and managed to avoid a second blow. It took him only an instant to recover himself and parry the magical blade's next slash. The voice in Cale's head burned with genuine vitriol, though the subject matter was absurd.

These were new pants, Cale! For that, I'll tear off your head and eat it raw.

Cale put the threat out of his mind, stuffed his holy symbol into his vest, and ran for the half-drow.

Between his own bladework and the summoned sword, he figured to make short work of the white-haired swordsman.

The mage, paying no heed to either the wounded half-drow or the darting blade of force, completed his spell well before Riven could reach him.

He waved his hand and a field of dark energy formed around the assassin, crackling. It stopped his charge cold, and ...

Cale could scarcely believe his eyes. He faltered in his own charge. Riven's shadow, cast on the road before him by the light of the fire behind, rose up from the ground and tackled the assassin. Too late Riven whirled to avoid its grasp. Man and shadow went down in a heap, a tangle of limbs, blades, and swirling darkness. Though prone and scrambling, Riven lashed out with his sabers and tried to regain his feet, but the animated shadow, a featureless black copy of the assassin, anticipated every move and blanketed him like a dark cloud.

Cale shook off his surprise and ran forward to help, but before he could close, the shadow expanded and engulfed the assassin in an ocean of pitch. From within the darkness, Cale heard Riven shout faintly, as though from a great distance, but he could not make out the words. The darkness imploded. A soft *pop* sounded, and the road was bare. Riven was gone.

"Dark," Cale murmured.

He couldn't help it. He had never seen a spell like that before. Never even heard of one.

The wizard began to cast anew.

With Riven gone and the wizard free to cast, Cale changed plans. The wizard—or the *image* of the wizard, he thought, recalling the half-drow's words and the ineffectiveness of Riven's daggers—seemed immune to weapons, perhaps even to Cale's enchanted blade. And the half-drow, though engaged in a vicious, whirling duel with Cale's magically summoned sword, was clearly more than he seemed. Gods knew what else he could do in addition to telepathy.

Cale knew he had to get out of there.

With a mental command, he switched the target of his summoned blade from the half-drow to the wizard, hoping against hope that it might somehow affect the image and disrupt the mage's spellcasting. Cale turned and darted to his right, heading for the nearest alley.

The half-drow responded instantly. Free from attack by Cale's summoned sword, he limped after as quickly as his wounded thigh allowed. The wizard ignored the attacking sword. To Cale's frustration, even the blade of force passed harmlessly through the image of the mage, just as had Riven's daggers.

The alley was three strides away.

Before Cale reached it, the wizard completed another spell. A narrow beam of black energy streaked from the mage's extended finger and caught Cale in the ribs.

He felt as though he had been dumped into ice water. His breath left him, his body went cold, and he stumbled. His senses went dull. Several spells he had prepared vanished from his consciousness. Only adrenaline allowed him to keep his feet and remain moving.

From behind, he could hear the half-drow limping toward him, maybe ten or so paces away. Cale

glanced back to see the half-drow gaining speed with every step, as though the wound bothered him less and less. Cale groaned and staggered for the darkness of the alley.

Running? The half-drow's mental voice mocked. *Are you frightened now, little man?*

The alley stank of urine. Barrels and trash lay scattered in his way. Breathing heavily, Cale stumbled down the narrow alley a few steps, nearly fell, and caught himself against the right hand wall. Far enough, he deemed. Before the half-drow reached the alley, he fumbled out his holy symbol and whispered a prayer to Mask.

Magical darkness took shape around him, filling the alley almost to its mouth. To Cale, objects within the darkness looked gray and colorless, but otherwise appeared as they would in twilight. To everyone else, within or without the spell's area, the darkness was impenetrable. The half-drow would be blind if he entered the globe.

Cale leaned against the wall and tried to quiet his breathing and recover his strength. He wiped his hands on his pants to get rid of the sweat and awaited the half-drow. He didn't have to wait long.

Limping only slightly, the half-drow came into view. His leg had ceased bleeding. He stopped at the edge of Cale's magical darkness, frowning thoughtfully. He peered within the globe. Cale was again struck by the mismatched eyes and the precision with which he moved. Cale had heard drow were enemies to be respected, and he believed it.

I've got my own darkness to visit on you, Cale. The half-drow looked back in the direction of the wizard. *But not now.*

Cale quietly withdrew a throwing dagger and considered whether or not to throw. No. If he did, they would know he had not fled. He sheathed the blade.

The half-drow stared at Cale, as though he could see through the darkness. Who in the Hells was this man?

Questions, questions, the half-drow's mental voice mocked. *I'll consider giving you answers as I chew out your kidneys.*

The hairs on the nape of Cale's neck stood on edge. Could the half-drow read his mind?

The half-drow called back over his shoulder, "Vraggen, dispel this darkness. Cale and I need to talk in a more intimate way."

Cale heard the sound of casting from the road and his heart began to race. He wanted to run but knew he would only further exhaust himself. He would have to face the half-drow and wizard there, and he'd have to face them alone.

Whispering, he incanted a spell that would give him Mask's blessing in combat. Casting it brought him comfort. It reminded him that he wasn't alone.

He decided then to do what he had never before done—request something from Mask other than spells. He suspected that the half-drow would 'hear' his prayer, but he prayed nevertheless, prayed that Mask himself would bolster Cale's spell and resist Vraggen's attempt to dispel it.

The sound of Vraggen's casting ceased.

And nothing happened! The darkness remained. Cale gripped his holy symbol so tightly it made his fingers cramp. Mentally, he thanked the Lord of Shadows.

Now come down here and let's get intimate, he thought, for the half-drow's benefit.

The half-drow scowled and mumbled something unintelligible. Cale expected the wizard to appear presently, but he did not. Strange. Cale used the opportunity to cast another spell, a protective dweomer that would make him undetectable to divinations and hopefully keep the half-drow out of his head.

Passersby began to stream past the alley, followed by occasional troops of Scepters. The half-drow tried to look nonchalant as they passed, but the traffic was thickening. More and more people streamed past. Cale had never before been so happy to see the city's watchmen.

After a few more moments, the half-drow gestured at his pants, shot a hate-filled stare down the alley, and walked out of view. Cale didn't need to have a voice in his head to read that look.

This isn't over, it had said. Cale agreed.

He slid his sword back into his scabbard and incanted a healing spell. The energy warmed him, but otherwise did little to obviate the dullness he still felt from the wizard's spell. Time would have to heal that. He wondered again why the wizard had not pursued him. Perhaps the spell that had projected the image of the wizard could not move far from the location in which the spell had been cast? Perhaps.

He gave himself a few more moments to recover.

From down the street, he heard the calls and shouts of the men and women who were struggling to contain the fire at the Stag. Wanting to avoid the street traffic, he turned and scaled the rough wall behind him. When he reached the roof, two stories up, he mentally dispelled the globe of darkness in the alley

below. No one had seemed to notice it, but if he left it there too long, someone surely would.

Staying low on his belly, he slid forward to the roof's edge and scanned the street below. No sign of the half-drow or wizard. Up the block, smoke choked the air, and a full crowd milled in a semicircle around the Stag. He surveyed the crowd carefully but saw no sign of the half-drow or the wizard there either. They were gone. For now.

The Scepters, holding their glaives crosswise, had formed up a line to keep the crowd at bay. Priests of Milil, dressed in flowing burgundy robes, summoned water into the air above the fire and let it cascade down into the flames, all the while singing a soft dirge. Each such spell resulted in a hissing cloud of steam and smoke. Gondar priests in scale mail, obviously protected by fire wards, actually walked unharmed in the midst of the flames. Mindful of the smoke, which could still kill, they pulled bodies from the cinders and laid them in a neat row in the street. As Cale had feared, there appeared to have been no survivors.

The fire at the Stag had not spread to other buildings and seemed under control. The priests did their work well. Cale couldn't linger overlong. Given the number of deaths, he knew there would be an investigation. He did not want to get caught up in that.

He crouched on the roof and considered the night's events. The wizard was a rogue Zhent, but why target him and Riven? Riven was out of the Zhents and Cale had never been a member. In fact, Cale had not had any interaction with Riven since the events with Gauston. While it could have been vengeance for that, Cale doubted it. Gauston had been mad—even the Cyricists probably were pleased to be rid of him.

Why take the trouble to lure him there?

The answer came immediately and brought him up short—to get him out of Stormweather Towers. They had sent him a letter there to get him to leave. Getting him out of the manse, away from the Uskevren, had been the real goal. Why? Were they acting as agents of a rival family? They had known his name and his affiliation with Riven. That meant that they knew what he was and what he could do. No wonder they wanted him out of Stormweather.

They've got another team infiltrating the manse, he realized. Dark and empty!

He prepared to drop to the street, but before he did, doubt chinked the armor of his certainty.

If who or what they wanted was in Stormweather Towers, why involve Riven at all?

He shook his head. He couldn't see it, but he needed to get back to Stormweather.

With his mind made up, he hung from the roof's edge and dropped to the street. In his immediate vicinity the avenue was deserted. Everyone was up the block watching the fire. Cale turned and headed west at a run.

From behind, he heard a soft *pop* followed by a low groan. He turned around.

Riven lay sprawled in the street, flat on his back, loosely clutching a saber in each hand. Cale hesitated. He felt no particular sympathy for Riven and he needed to get back to Stormweather Towers, but finally he hurried to Riven's side. The assassin's good eye was open but obviously unseeing. His breath came rapidly, and his skin had gone gray.

"Riven?" Cale nudged him unsympathetically with his foot. "Riven!"

No response.

Cale knelt at his side, took out his holy symbol, and whispered the words to a healing spell. The moment the energy flowed into Riven, he gave a sharp gasp and sat up straight. Before Cale could pull away, Riven snarled and grabbed him by the wrist with one hand. His eyes were wild, his face contorted with rage and fear.

"Not anymore! I'll kill you—"

Cale grabbed Riven's forearm to keep him from inadvertently stabbing with his steel.

"Riven!" Cale repeated. "Riven!"

The assassin's gaze cleared. He stopped struggling and looked around, dazed.

"Cale? Where are they?"

"They're gone. I didn't get either of them." He looked up the street to the fire. "We need to move. Scepters are all over."

Though it took a conscious effort of will, he helped the assassin to his feet. He gazed into Riven's eye, the eye in which he had just seen fear for the first time.

"What in the Hells happened to you?" asked Cale.

The assassin stood on wobbly legs. His eye grew distant.

"I'm not sure," he said. "The spell... took me somewhere ... else. Somewhere dark. I—"

He seemed suddenly to realize what he was saying, and how he must look. He shook his head, pushed Cale's helping hand roughly away and recovered at least a semblance of his sneer.

"It doesn't matter what happened," Riven said. "We didn't get them, but they didn't get us. They're going

to wish they had."

That sounded like Riven. Cale gave him a nod.

"I need to get back to Stormweather Towers. Where are you staying?" said Cale. "Never mind, I'll find you later. In the meantime, see what you can find out. We know he was a Cyricist."

"Whoresons are everywhere. When do we meet?"

"I said I'll find you," Cale replied, and he sped off down the street.

CHAPTER 5

To Guard the Guardians

From Sarn Street, nothing appeared amiss at Stormweather Towers but that did not put Cale at ease. He sprinted up the slate-paved walkway to the main gate, breathing heavily and sweating. He held his blade bare. He must have looked a madman attempting to overthrow the House with only a single sword.

Two Uskevren guards, both young and unfamiliar to Cale, stepped briskly from the stone gatehouse, mail chinking, blades drawn, and shields ready. Two older guards followed hard after and took positions out wide, cocked crossbows leveled at Cale's chest. The oldest of the four, a paunchy, middle-aged warrior with a short black beard and mustache, gestured with his crossbow.

"Scabbard that weapon and cease your advance. Now!"

Cale stopped ten paces from the guards but did not sheathe his blade. In the dim light of the gatehouse torches, it took him a moment to place the speaker—Almor, one of the sergeants of the house guard. The old warrior had been with the family since the Year of the Wyvern.

"I said *scabbard that weapon*," Almor said again, and Cale could hear the threat in his voice.

Cale had caught his breath. Being near Stormweather, he automatically fell back into his role as House Uskevren's chief steward.

"I trust you do not greet all of our visitors who arrive after sunset with bared steel and challenges, Almor."

Almor slid sideways and grabbed a torch from the sconce on the gatehouse wall. He stepped forward, holding the brand before him and squinting. His crossbow, held steady in one hand, still marked Cale's chest.

"Step into the light."

Cale stepped a few paces nearer.

"Mister Cale?" asked Almor. "Is that you?"

"It is."

"By Tempus, man, what happened to you? You're all covered in soot. Lower your weapons," he ordered over his shoulder, and the other guards did. Almor looked back at Cale. "What's going on here, Mister Cale?"

Almor always called him "Mister Cale," though Cale had told him long before to drop the "Mister."

"I'll provide the details later, Almor. For now, find Orrin and organize some search teams. We may have intruders in the house."

Almor's mustache twitched and he said, "Intruders? Mister Cale, I assure you no one has passed this post and I've heard no alarm."

"The manse has many gates, Almor, and these intruders wield powerful magic." While Cale knew the wards on the manse proper prevented anyone from teleporting directly inside, an intruder could nevertheless transport himself onto the surrounding grounds and steal into the house from there. "Search the house first, then the grounds. Go in the main door in front. Gather the guards there. Check on the lady, Lord Tamlin, and Mistress Thazienne first. Leave men with each. Clear the second floor. Shout if you notice anything suspicious. Anything. Do you understand?"

Almor nodded and said, "Yes, sir."

"You and you," Cale said, pointing at the two young men. "You're with me. We'll start on the first floor, beginning at the rear of the house, and gather men as we go. Go, Almor."

Without another word, Almor and the other guard turned and ran for the main door of the manse as fast as their armor allowed.

Cale looked at the two men with him and said, "Stay close to me and do what I say."

They nodded, and one of them said, "Word was you'd left, Mister Cale. I'm glad to see it's not so."

Cale didn't take the time to correct the guard's mis-perception. He was back, but only temporarily.

He sprinted for the house. Burdened with their mail, the guardsmen struggled to keep up. The gardens were empty, the shrubs and dwarf trees ghostly in the darkness. Cale stopped.

"Where are the grounds patrols?"

The young guardsmen shared a confused look, and one of them said, "I don't know, sir."

Could all of them have been put down? Cale wondered. Probably not. After all, the Uskevren estate covered a lot of ground. Unless there was a special event or some reason for alarm, only twenty-five or so guards were on duty at any given time. Possibly, there were just no guards in the immediate vicinity. It was

dark and Cale couldn't see far. He hoped that was the explanation.

"You," he said to one of the guards. "See if you can find any of the grounds patrols. Alert them to what's happening and get them into the house."

Cale wanted to ensure the safety of the family foremost. The man looked unsure.

"What's happening, sir?" the guard asked.

"I'm not entirely sure. But be careful. I mean that. You call out if you see or hear anything. Do not try to deal with it alone."

The man nodded, turned, and sped off back through the gardens.

"Let's go," Cale said to the other.

They entered the house via a back entrance near the kitchens. Embers from the supper fires still smoldered in the three great hearths. Besides that soft glow, the kitchen stood dark and empty. Brilla and the kitchen girls were probably already asleep in the servants' quarters near the stables.

Heading for the door that led into the main hallway, Cale moved past the preparation tables, the butcher's block, and several stools.

"Stay close," he said over his shoulder to the guard.

The young man nodded, tightening his grip on his long sword. The clink of the guard's mail and the thump of his hobnailed boots on the wood floor sounded an alarm to Cale's ears. He should have come alone. Nothing for it now, though.

Without warning, the kitchen door flew open. The guard behind Cale gave a start and stumbled backward over a stool. Cale dropped into a crouch, blade ready. The dim light from the hallway beyond illuminated an armored figure with his blade held high to strike. Cale recognized him immediately—Almor.

"Almor!" Cale said in a sharp whisper. "It's us."

"Mister Cale?" Almor hissed, and lowered his blade a bit.

"Where are the other guards, man? Godsdamnit, I told you to gather your men."

Almor stepped through the doorway and spoke in a whisper, "I sent the guards stationed at the main door upstairs to check on Lord Tamlin and Lady Shamur. When I went to pick up the guards at the garden door, I thought I heard someone in the parlor. No one should be there, Mister Cale. I was on my way to check on it when I heard this one—" he nodded at the young guard—"clattering around in here like a drunk cooking maid. I thought you were more of them and figured I'd better do something."

The young guard mumbled something and looked sheepish. Cale thumped Almor on his shoulder.

"You did well, Almor. Now keep quiet and follow me."

Only a single oil lamp on a side table illuminated the hallway beyond the kitchen. The parlor was just down the hall. From there, Cale's keen ears caught a faint scuffling, like a boot dragged over the hardwood.

Blade held before him, Cale stalked down the corridor. When he reached the parlor, he peeked around the doorjamb and spotted two figures standing near one of the bookcases across the room. Both had their backs to him. In the darkness, he could discern no features, but the light from the hall glinted on steel.

Cale charged, shouting as he ran, "Almor, here!"

His call startled the intruders. They whirled around and Cale saw them more clearly—

They wore the blue and silver livery of House Uskevren.

Even as the implications of that realization began to register, Cale tripped over something meaty in the middle of the floor. He caught himself on a reading desk before he fell but....

Corpses. Three of them, all Uskevren guards with their livery stained dark. Cale looked at their faces—
This was impossible!

Almor was among the dead, his throat slit wide, his lips pulled back from his teeth in a grimace.

Then the other Almor ... ?

An imitator, Cale realized, disguised by magic.

Thinking quickly, Cale hurdled a desk to his left and put it between him and the two intruders, just as Almor—or the Almor double, rather—entered the room behind him. The imitator had disarmed the young guard and held a blade at the lad's throat.

"Say nothing and I won't open a new mouth in his throat."

The double still spoke with Almor's voice. Cale marveled at the accuracy of the disguise spell.

The young guard, Cale didn't even know his name, squirmed a bit and said, "Damn this prig to the Nine Hells, Mister Cale. Kill them! Almor, you trait—"

Faint pressure on the blade drew a thin stream of blood. The young man's protest ended in a grunt of pain.

"You hold your tongue too, boy, or the next one's deeper. And there's your Almor."

The double indicated the corpses on the floor. The young guardsman took in the corpses and went

wide-eyed. The double smiled languidly at Cale—an incongruously feminine gesture from Almor's grizzled face.

"Cale?" the impostor prompted.

The two other men advanced a few steps nearer to Cale, cutting off his lane to the far door. Both had blades drawn. Able to see them better, Cale saw that they looked like house guards he knew—Derg and Halthor—but he figured them to be disguised by the same magic as the Almor imitator. The real Derg and Halthor were probably dead. The Halthor lookalike held something in his hand. It took Cale a moment to recognize it: Thamalon's crystalline sphere, the one Cale had intended to take with him when he had first left Stormweather.

"Cale, I grow impatient."

For emphasis, Almor again nicked the captured guard. To his credit, the boy gritted his teeth and made no sound.

Cale had no choice, so he said, "All right."

Almor gave a satisfied smile and moved farther into the room.

"You won't get away," Cale said, and meant it.

"Of course I will," Almor replied. He sidestepped across the room, watching Cale the while. "You're an intriguing man, Cale, from all I've heard and seen. I suspect I might find you entertaining in another context."

When Cale heard those words and the innuendo registered, the realization hit him—a *woman* had disguised herself as Almor. A woman had led the attack on Stormweather Towers and killed the gods knew how many guards. For a terrifying moment, Cale had a mental picture of Tazi, Shamur, and Tamlin murdered in their beds—for clearly the Almor-imitator had not sent guards to protect the Uskevren bedrooms. The thought nauseated him, even while sending a hot rush of rage through him.

He forced his mind to focus on the three enemies before him. Perhaps they had attacked only to recover the sphere, and had only killed the guards in their way. He hoped so. But if that was true, what in the Nine Hells *was* the sphere?

He backed up until he felt the parlor wall behind him. If he had to fight all three, he wanted a wall at his back. He took care to ensure that as much furniture as possible stood between him and the intruders. With his combat mobility, he could use the furniture to his advantage if they tried to close.

He had few options. He considered casting another of his darkness spells but dismissed it because of the boy. The Almor double could kill him whether she could see or not. Cale was not prepared to sacrifice the young guard to save a piece of Thamalon's art. For the moment at least, they were in charge.

They had probably teleported into the courtyard and walked unchallenged right into the manse. It occurred to him then that possibly no one else knew the house to be infiltrated. No, he reminded himself. He had sent the other young guard to find the grounds patrols. They would be coming.

Cale eyed the sphere in Halthor's hand. It looked like . . . nothing more than what it was. An unusual piece of quartz with flecks of diamond and tiny gem-stones suspended within it. He wondered what in the Nine Hells he and Thamalon had purchased.

Almor slid near her two comrades, dragging the guard with a chokehold while staring at the bloody corpses in the center of the room as though they were a feast.

"You have it?" she asked of Halthor.

Halthor nodded and held the sphere up for Almor to see.

Almor smiled and said, "Excellent. Then we'll be off."

Halthor, broad and going to fat, eyed Cale with narrowed eyes.

"And him?"

Almor, still keeping the hostage guard between herself and Cale, said, "I suspect he's going to follow us out. Probably staring daggers with his eyes all the while. Isn't that right, Cale?" She fluttered her eyelashes, a grotesque display from Almor's scarred face. "I'll be disappointed if you don't." Seeing the disgust on Cale's face, she jerked the house guard's head to the side to expose the jugular. "But not too close. Or else slice-slice."

Cale said nothing, merely gritted his teeth, clenched his fists, and forced himself to stay focused. At that point, he could have darted out of the parlor and recruited help—could have, that is, were he prepared to sacrifice the house guard and let the intruders go. But he wasn't. If they made one mistake, he'd make his move.

Halthor frowned at him and said, "I heard you were mean. You ain't mean. You're as tame as a pussy."

Cale made no reply, but promised with his stare what would happen if they met in another context.

It was Halthor who looked away first, muttering something unintelligible.

"Well done, Mister Cale," the Almor double purred. "You are interesting indeed."

They started to move toward the main exit. Derg and Halthor led, with Halthor holding the sphere in one big hand and his long sword in the other. Almor brought up the rear, facing backward toward Cale and holding the young house guard between them.

Cale followed at a few paces, tense, coiled, ready to act at the first opportunity.

"The main door," Almor said to her companions.

They nodded over their shoulders. She kept her eyes on Cale as they moved down the hall. After a few moments, she shot him a grin.

"You're wondering how we did it, aren't you?" With her gaze, she indicated herself, Halthor and Derg, all the while keeping her blade at the guard's throat.

Cale knew how they had done it.

"Illusion," he said, and closed a stride closer.

Back on the street outside the Stag, Vraggen had used a sophisticated illusion to project an image of himself through which he could cast spells. A different but equally sophisticated sort of enchantment placed on these men and the woman could have altered their appearance and voices to look and sound like Uskevren guards.

She smiled enigmatically and said, "I suppose it is an illusion, of sorts."

Cale closed another half stride. Her gaze focused on him.

"Stay back, Cale, or he dies. He's just meat to me."

She pressed the blade so tight against the guard's throat that he gagged. The slightest motion would slit his throat. Cale backed off, seething.

The hallway beyond led through the Great Hall. From there, it was only a short distance to the high-ceilinged reception hall and the main door. Cale watched Almor carefully, hoping she would make herself vulnerable, even for just an instant. She didn't. She kept a hawkish gaze on him and a sharp edge at the guard's throat.

Cale could see the young guard growing increasingly nervous. Sweat pored down his clean-shaven face. His eyes looked wild. Cale realized then that he couldn't have seen more than nineteen winters. Despite his previous bravado, the tension had the young man close to breaking. If he did break, he might try something stupid and get himself killed. Cale tried to distract him.

"What's your name, guardsman?"

The boy's gaze focused on Cale. He blinked away the sweat dripping from his eyebrows into his eyes.

"Huh?"

Almor choked him off. "Shut up," she hissed, and glared at Cale.

Cale ignored her. If he could have, he would have dug out her eyes with his thumbs.

The guard twisted his neck to the right to free his windpipe and said, "Ren, Mister Cale."

Cale gave him a nod and said, "Stay calm, Ren. They don't want to hurt you. They just want to get out. It'll be over soon."

"Yes, sir," said the boy.

"Another word and I open him, Cale," Almor said. Her eyes were hard. She meant it.

Cale said nothing more.

They reached the reception hall. Wood-framed arches opened on all sides. Two dead house guards, stabbed through the chest, lay propped against the wall to either side of the closed main door. Cale knew them—Vondel and Mran. Good men. He resolved then and there that whatever happened that night, he would eventually find and kill the woman and her two lackeys.

Distant shouts from outside in the courtyard carried through the walls. The guard Cale had sent to find the grounds patrols must have rounded up some men and sounded the alarm. It would spread quickly.

As though to emphasize the point, from somewhere above them on the second floor, more shouts were taken up. The heavy thump of boots reverberated throughout the house.

"Outside! Now!" Almor commanded Derg and Halthor.

They hurried for the main door. Almor followed, dragging Ren across the reception hall, all the while keeping steel at his jugular. Cale kept pace. Though it might have, the raising of the alarm did not give him comfort. The tension level had risen. It showed on Almor's face. And tense people did rash things. Were the guards to appear, Cale thought it unlikely that he could get Ren out of it alive.

"They won't get here in time," he said, trying to reassure her. "Just let him go and get the Hells out."

Cale figured that the moment Almor and her team got clear of the wards on the manse proper, they could teleport out.

Almor sneered.

But I'll find you later, Cale silently promised. This isn't over.

At that, Almor gave an absent nod and replied, "I'll look forward to that, Mister Cale."

That almost stopped Cale in his tracks. Could Almor read his mind also?

Nine Hells!

"Who are you?" he asked.

She made no reply, only smiled.

"Let's go," she said to her team.

Derg reached for the large main door—

—and it flew open, smashing into Derg and knocking him back a step. Three house guards, no doubt one of the alerted grounds patrols, poured through, blades bare. Upon seeing what appeared to be three of their comrades holding another hostage and standing over the two dead guards at the door, they stopped in surprise—

"D-Derg?" one of them said, haltingly.

Before he could say any more, before Cale could shout a warning, Halthor stepped forward and stabbed the speaker through the chest. He went down immediately, bleeding and gasping. The two others bounded backward toward the doorway, confused, weapons held in uncertain hands.

"Bastard," cried Cale. He whipped one of his throwing daggers free from its belt sheath, and with a flick of his wrist, hurled it underhand at Halthor. It tore a gash along the side of his throat. Blood fountained to the floor. Halthor staggered, dropped his blade, and clutched at the slash with his empty sword hand.

At the same moment, Derg leaped over the dying guard and unleashed a powerful overhand slash with his falchion at the smaller of the two remaining guardsmen. The house guard tried to parry with his shield, but too slow. Derg's heavy blade split the links of his coif and opened his skull. His eyes went white and he started to fall.

Cale drew another dagger, but before he could throw, before the small house guard had even hit the ground, Derg jerked free his blade, spun three hundred sixty degrees, and slashed low at the last guard. It took him below the knee, nearly severed his calf, and swept him from his feet. A stab through the chest finished him. The whole combat had taken the space of two breaths.

Halthor, still bleeding from his throat, shot Cale a glare. Cale took a step toward him, blade ready. He would gut the man.

Unarmed, Halthor snarled and advanced, raising the sphere above his head as though he meant to bludgeon Cale with it.

"Stop!" ordered Almor. She threatened the boy with the blade. "There's five dead here already, Cale! You want another? I'll kill him. I promise you. Dolgan! Put that down."

With effort, Cale stopped his own advance, but didn't lower his blade. Halthor—*Dolgan*, Cale corrected—also stopped. The big man lowered the sphere. Blood poured from his throat. He seemed unconcerned.

Cale struggled to keep his anger under control. Five men lay dead at his feet. He ought to kill every one of these sons of whores. But he could not simply sacrifice Ren, and he could not get to Almor before she could slit Ren's throat. So he fought down his instincts and did nothing. They would let Ren go when they got outside. It was the sphere they wanted.

Halthor continued to stare hate at him while stanching his wound with a fat hand. Surprisingly, the bleeding stopped. Halthor grinned. Cale returned a stare, promised with his eyes that their next combat would be fatal. Cale knew his real name—Dolgan. He would not forget it.

"As I was saying, Mister Cale," Almor said. "We'll be leaving now."

She glanced at the five corpses on the floor and again somehow twisted a warrior's face into a feminine smile. Cale wondered what *her* real name was. He wouldn't have forgotten that either.

"You've been most hospitable," said Halthor, then he spat on the body of one of the guards. "Thank you."

"Whoreson," Ren said.

"Shut up," Almor ordered.

It was all Cale could do not to attack. Everything in him screamed for him to gut Halthor, to slit Almor's throat and tear her head from her shoulders. But he held on.

From back in the parlor, Cale could hear house guards rushing toward them. They'd be too late, he knew.

Halthor picked up his sword and stumbled through the doorway. Derg kicked one of the dead guards and followed. Still holding the boy to keep Cale at bay, Almor backed through the doorway.

To Cale, Ren mouthed the words, *Kill them*. Cale made no reply. He *would* kill them, but not there, not then.

He followed them through the door onto the large porch overlooking the lawn and courtyard. In one hand he held his sword, in the other, his last throwing dagger.

"More coming," Derg said to Almor. He didn't sound alarmed.

From across the courtyard, another patrol was rushing toward them. Cale couldn't see numbers in the darkness, only torches. Shouted voices rang out. More shouts answered from within the manse. House guards were closing from both sides.

"Halt! Halt!"

Cale figured maybe six or seven men. He looked to Almor.

"You're out," he said. "Let him go."

She grinned at him, winked, and said, "Good-bye, Mister Cale. Don't forget your promise to me, now. I'll look forward to seeing you again."

With a free hand, she removed a small bronze rod from her belt. Gold runes swirled around it, and parts of it rotated. She began to manipulate it, with difficulty though because she could use but one hand.

To her men, she said, "Go."

In Cale's head, a woman's voice said, *Nice to have met you, Erevis.*

Hearing her "speak" his name made him feel soiled.

"You won't think it's so nice, next time," he said.

He'd never killed a woman before, though he had come close once. She would be his first.

Each of her men removed a similar device from a pocket and began to turn its parts.

Cale could do nothing but grit his teeth and stand there. She still had Ren.

Almor winked at him and said, "I'll keep him, Cale. Just to make sure."

Without any sound, without even a flash of magical light, Almor simply disappeared. And took Ren with her. One instant they were there, the next they were gone.

"Godsdamnit!"

In the next breath, Derg was gone.

Cale raised his dagger to throw. Halthor, his thick fingers slicked with blood, fumbled with the teleportation rod. Cale hurled the dagger and charged.

The sliver of steel took Halthor in the stomach and nearly doubled him over. Cale charged forward. Halthor pulled the dagger from his flesh and tried to parry with his sword. Cale would have none of it.

Using the force of his momentum, he swept Halthor's blade out wide, then suddenly reversed his motion and slammed the hilt of his sword into the man's face. Squarely. Bone crunched, and blood sprayed. The big man's head snapped back and he groaned in agony, a sound lost in the gurgle of blood pouring into his mouth. He dropped his teleportation rod and staggered back, reeling.

"Still seem tame, you bastard?"

Halthor muttered something, but a mouthful of blood, a split lip, and several dislodged teeth made it unintelligible. He still gripped Thamalon's sphere in his hand. Cale knew that if he could stop Halthor, the Almor lookalike would come back for it.

From behind, he could hear the guards charging into the reception hall. Behind Halthor, the grounds patrol closed in. They had him surrounded. They could take him alive if they wished.

No.

Cale decided that Halthor would be dead before the guards arrived. If they needed to speak with his corpse, the Uskevren could hire a priest. If he'd had time, Cale would have killed the man painfully for what he'd done.

He advanced, blade held low.

Though bleary-eyed and wounded, Halthor did not back away. Instead, he stood his ground and began to laugh. To Laugh. Not at Cale, it seemed, but as though he found being wounded and about to die exhilarating. His illusionary fat stomach bounced with his mirth. Blood frothed in the mess of his mouth.

Cale was disgusted, but lunged forward anyway and chopped downward, a blow that would split Halthor's fat, balding head right down the middle.

Stunningly quick for such a big man, Halthor raised his arms and interposed the sphere before Cale's slash, still smiling. Cale's enchanted sword rang off the quartz—

—and sound exploded in Cale's ears, as loud as the braying of a thousand Cormyrean bass shawms. A shower of sparks flew from the sphere, raced up Cale's blade, and danced around his arms. His hands went instantly numb. His sword fell from his grasp. A wave of concussive energy erupted outward from the sphere and blew him back toward the manse. He crashed into the doorjamb and sank to the floor with a groan.

The explosion knocked Halthor flat onto his back and drove him a full handbreadth into the ground. He

recovered more quickly than Cale. As he sat up, he left the outline of his body imprinted in the soil.

Bleeding not only from his nose and mouth but also from his eyes and ears, Halthor still somehow wore a twisted smile. He got to all fours and crawled forward toward his teleportation rod.

The guards were coming, Cale knew, but would not get there in time. The explosion had knocked them to the ground as well. He struggled to get up. His legs would not respond. He fell to his side, helpless as a babe.

Halthor fumbled with the teleportation rod, still grinning like a jester.

"Halt!" shouted the house guards.

They had regained their feet. The concussive energy must not have affected them as severely. Crossbows twanged, and bolts stuck in the earth beside Halthor. He ignored them.

"Wondafa," he managed to say to Cale through his broken mouth. "Wondafa."

It took Cale a moment to understand: Wonderful, he had said. Dark! Who in the Hells were these people?

Seemingly satisfied with the setting on his teleportation rod, Halthor leered at Cale. He tried to raise the sphere as though it were a trophy but was too weak to lift it. To Cale, the sphere looked wrong, as though the explosion had left it misshapen, though Cale's muddled brain did not quite register how. So instead of lifting it, Halthor settled for cradling it to his side. One more twist of the rod and he was gone.

Guards rushed forward moments later. Voices filled Cale's ears but he could not distinguish words. He stared at the ground near where Halthor had fallen. He stared for a long while, trying to focus on what lay there. When it finally registered, when he finally understood what it was, he began to laugh.

The guards helping him to his feet shot him perplexed looks. Cale did not bother to explain.

Wonderful indeed, he thought and laughed still more.

The sphere had not been misshapen, and Halthor, the fat dolt, had not teleported out with it. He had teleported out with only *half* of it. Cale's blade had split it cleanly down the middle, exactly what he had intended to do to Halthor's skull. The other half lay in the grass, inert.

They'd be after it, Cale knew. And next time, he would be ready.

CHAPTER 6

Aftermath

The fire in the great hearth crackled angrily, mirroring Vraggen's mood. In his barely controlled rage, shadows clotted around his head and fingertips. His pulse thumped in his temples. He had expected to be on his way to the Dragon Coast.

He took a few moments before speaking, to get his anger under control.

On the other side of the reception room Azriim reclined on a velvet upholstered divan. For their base of operations, the half-drow had leased a luxurious villa on the north side of Selgaunt. The noble family who owned it had decided to remove to the country early that year. Either that or Azriim had murdered them. Vraggen didn't care which, though he would have been just as happy with an inconspicuous flat in the warehouse district. Azriim, of course, would have none of that. The half-drow required his luxuries.

Already Azriim had changed out of the clothing that had been ruined in the fighting outside the Black Stag. He wore a pale green silk overcoat, fitted breeches, and polished black boots. He seemed only passingly upset at the team's failure in Stormweather Towers. His calm drove Vraggen to still greater heights of anger.

Azriim caught Vraggen looking at him and gave his infuriating grin.

"I cannot tell enough from only half the globe, Vraggen. There are too many variables."

Vraggen didn't need the half-drow to tell him that. Half was useless!

"I know that," he snapped, and instantly regretted the outburst. Azriim had been goading him.

He paced about the far end of the great room, glaring at each of the team in turn—Dolgan, Elura, Serrin. None of them would look at him.

"I require an explanation," he said to no one in particular, with as much calm as he could manage.

No one spoke. Elura, seated in a chair near the hearth, stared into the fire. Serrin ran his thumb along the edge of his razor-sharp magical falchion and did not look up. Dolgan, who had fairly collapsed on the floor in the middle of the room, breathed noisily through his broken nose but otherwise said nothing.

"I said that I require an explanation!"

Vraggen strode across the room to where the big man sat. As Vraggen approached, Dolgan clambered to his feet, though he looked as though he would not stay upright for long. The front of his jerkin was soaked in blood—his own.

Vraggen had no sympathy for his injuries. Dolgan had failed. The whole team had failed. When they had returned with only half the globe—*half!*—Vraggen had almost killed all three of them.

He stared into Dolgan's broken face, which grew paler with every passing moment, daring the big man with his eyes to say something insolent. He did not; he just stood there and bled. Vraggen figured he would bleed out before much longer. He toyed with the idea of letting Dolgan die, as a lesson to the others. But no. Though Dolgan was the most easily replaced of his team, the big man had his uses.

He stared into Dolgan's swollen face and said, "You brought back only half of the globe. Explain."

The big man looked back at him with glassy eyes. Incongruously, the dolt smiled—he had lost a couple teeth—then he began to chuckle. When he did, his shattered nose made gurgling sounds. Vraggen thought the Cormyrean must have gone mad.

"There's a funny story there—"

"*Half* the globe," Vraggen interrupted, glancing at the hemisphere Dolgan still clutched in his ham fist. "You were instructed to bring back the globe. The *entire* globe." He looked over his shoulder to Elura. "As were you, Elura."

"I'm aware of the instructions I received, Vraggen," Elura snapped. "I followed them. And I still expect to be paid. This dolt's mistake is his own."

She sat in a chair near the stone hearth with her legs crossed. The firelight made her pale skin look translucent, which contrasted markedly with her raven black hair. Even Vraggen, normally without a weakness for women, had to acknowledge that her features were striking. Azriim had recruited Elura to lead Dolgan and Serrin into Stormweather Towers while he and the half-drow dealt with Riven and Cale. Azriim had assured him that she was an experienced infiltrator but Vraggen had his doubts. Still, he had to rely on Azriim for elite manpower. Vraggen's attempts to recruit Zhents had brought in a fair number of operators, but he didn't want to use them until after his return from the Fane of Shadows. At that point, he would be ready to declare open war on the Banite Zhents.

Dolgan's broken face twisted into a look of confusion and he asked, "Is she calling me a dolt?"

Vraggen ignored the question and put a finger on Dolgan's chest.

"Did *you* understand your instructions?" Vraggen asked.

"Of course I did," replied Dolgan, but instead of looking contrite, he looked past Vraggen to Azriim and laughed. "I was that close to dead," he said to the half-drow, holding two fingers only slightly apart. "It felt wonderful! You should—"

Vraggen snapped his fingers in front of Dolgan's doughy face and shouted, "Half the globe is useless to us! Idiot! Did you hear your friend? Do you hear me?"

Dolgan kept smiling, kept bleeding, and said, "I hear you. It's useless then."

With an exaggerated gesture meant to irritate, Dolgan dropped the half-globe to the carpeted floor.

That bit of insubordination freed Vraggen's anger from the cage of his control. He hissed the words to a spell and black energy flew from his hand, blasting Dolgan in the chest. The enervating ray blew the big man from his feet. He hit the ground like a toppling tree, groaning. He lay there, only semi-conscious, with his breath coming shallow through his thick lips and broken nose.

"Impressive," said Azriim from behind, and he applauded softly. "You've knocked down a man who could barely stand."

"You could be next," Vraggen said over his shoulder, and he meant it.

Azriim took the point. He ceased his applause.

Vraggen straightened his robes and looked around the room.

"I will not abide insubordination," he said, "from anyone. Is that understood?"

No one replied and Vraggen took the silence for acquiescence. He knew he would get no better. In truth, he rarely took issue with the subtle acts of defiance endemic to his crew. It came with the territory. He had taken care to recruit and ally himself with highly competent professional killers and infiltrators. Men and women like that came with a price—they were not lackeys, and he had to give them space to be who and what they were. But only up to a point.

Vraggen kneeled and picked up the half-globe. He whispered the words to a cantrip to clean it of Dolgan's blood. To his magically attuned senses, it pulsed with the Shadow magic used by the priests of Shar in its making. He examined the break—a clean shear exactly down the middle, perfect. None of the tiny, symbolic gems within it had been disturbed, except that the emerald of Toril in the center had been split. If he could recover the other half of the globe, Azriim could still use it to determine how to find the Fane of Shadows.

He looked to Elura and said, "Tell me exactly what happened, woman. And tell me where the other half of the globe is."

Her eyes met his and there was no fear in them.

"As I told you before," she said, "I'm not certain what happened. Cale appeared and alerted the house guards. You and Azriim were to eliminate him, were you not?"

Vraggen could do nothing but endure that little rebuke.

"He escaped us," Vraggen said.

"Obviously. But we were able to escape him ... and the guards. When I teleported out, Dolgan had the globe, as you had instructed. And it was intact. If you had trusted me to keep it in my possession, you'd have it now. I don't know what happened after I got out."

Vraggen digested that.

"Perhaps the lumbering one can tell us himself," Azriim said from his couch.

To Vraggen's surprise, Dolgan had recovered enough from the enervating spell to have sat up. He looked dazed, but still wore that stupid grin. He climbed awkwardly to his feet, swayed, and tried to recapture as much dignity as he could.

"You needn't have done that," he said to Vraggen. "I wasn't laughing at you."

"If I thought you had been, I'd have turned you to dust."

To that, Dolgan gave a half smile, as though he was unsure whether Vraggen was making a joke or a threat.

Vraggen left him with the ambiguity and let the room remain silent for a time. His people needed to know that he was in charge.

"You're bleeding on the carpets," Azriim said to Dolgan, his nostrils pinched in distaste.

Dolgan looked to the dark stain on the colorful Thayan rug under his feet. The villa was decorated throughout with expensive rugs from Thay and farther east.

"So?" the big Cormyrean said. "I got stabbed in the stomach. And the throat. And my nose is broken." Vraggen thought he sounded almost proud of his injuries. "And they aren't your carpets, Azriim."

Azriim reached into his tailored overcoat and removed a glass vial.

"Drink this, dolt," said the half-drow. "Of course they aren't my carpets. But your bleeding on them offends me nevertheless."

With surprising dexterity, Dolgan snatched the vial from the air. He grinned in his stupid way and drank the potion. His bleeding stopped immediately, and the swelling in his face diminished. His skin went from pale to ruddy. He dropped the vial on the floor.

"I really was that close to dead," he said, again holding thumb and forefinger apart by only a bladewidth.

"Quite an accomplishment," said Azriim dryly. "You should be proud."

Serrin pulled out the whetstone he always carried and began to run it along his falchion's blade. The sound grated on Vraggen to no end.

"Enough," said Vraggen. He glared at Dolgan, then at Serrin. "Do you believe this is a game? Either of you?"

Neither replied.

Vraggen stared a hole into Dolgan's face and said, "This Cale would have left you gutted on the ground. Do you find that amusing? Do you think *that* would be a feeling worth experiencing?"

Dolgan tried to frame a reply, stuttered, and fell silent.

Azriim rose from his chair and walked to the wine service.

"We all take your point, Vraggen," the half-drow said. "Dolgan doesn't think it's amusing anyway. And Serrin doesn't know what a jest is. He hasn't even so much as smiled since he ate his mother."

The easterner looked at the half-drow with raised eyebrows. Azriim only smiled.

"None of us think this is funny. But all be damned if it isn't *fun*. It's danger that makes this affair interesting." He glanced at Vraggen sidelong, his mismatched eyes all innocence. "And that's well. For surely the company doesn't."

Dolgan guffawed, walked to a chair, and collapsed into the cushions. Even Serrin smiled, the prig.

Vraggen endured the insolence. He had made his point earlier. Besides, he needed the half-drow. Only Azriim knew how to interpret the globe. He would not, however, tolerate Dolgan's laughter.

"Did I give you permission to sit, oaf? Stand up."

Dolgan leaped up from his seat as though it was on fire.

Vraggen clasped his hands behind his back and glared at the man.

"I told you that I required an explanation. Begin."

Dolgan nodded and said, "Before I could activate my rod, Cale attacked. I lost my weapon and he came at me. It was either the globe or my head. I opted for the globe and he split it."

"Split it how? With a weapon?"

Vraggen knew the globe to be protected by certain wards tied to the Shadow Weave. A strike from a weapon should not have been able to split it.

"Split it with his sword," Dolgan said. "It exploded. Knocked us both senseless. I got out of there before the whole of the house guard arrived. I didn't realize the globe had been split until I got back here."

Vraggen was intrigued. Possibly, Cale's blade could have been created with Shadow Weave magic. That might explain its ability to affect the globe.

"Was the sword unusual in some way?" he asked.

Dolgan shook his head. "Not that I could see."

Vraggen pondered that. After a few moments, he remembered that he had left Dolgan standing.

"Sit," he said.

Dolgan gave a relieved sigh and fell into the chair.

"We need the other half," Vraggen said to Azriim. "The break was clean. The globe seems otherwise undamaged. You'll still be able to read it."

Azriim nodded and sipped from his wine as he walked back to the divan.

Vraggen turned his gaze to Elura, and walked over to stand beside her chair.

"We'll need to go back and get the other half of the globe. How did you get into the Uskevren manse?"

Elura looked up, startled. She looked to Azriim, as though for support.

Finding none, she said, "My methods are my own. That's why you pay me."

Vraggen bent at the waist, grabbed her by the chin, and made her look him in the face.

"We need to get back into that house, woman. They'll be ready this time for whatever stratagem you used before. We'll need to do something else. I'll ask again—How did you get in?"

Elura's eyes blazed. She removed his hand from her face—she possessed surprising strength—and rose from her chair. Rather than erupt in rage, she smiled. It made her look feral. Vraggen saw that she, like Azriim, had perfect teeth.

"My methods are my own."

Vraggen wanted to slap her but restrained himself.

"Dolgan?" he asked over his shoulder.

The big man stuttered for a moment, as though searching for the right reply. At last, he said, "I'm not sure exactly. She cast a spell on us that made us look like guards."

"Crude," Vraggen said into Elura's beautiful face.

She reddened and said, "But effective. And we don't need to go back, mage."

Vraggen raised his eyebrow in a question.

"Cale will exchange the other half of the globe for the prisoner."

The prisoner. In his anger, Vraggen had forgotten the young house guard. When the team had returned with a captive, Vraggen had immediately used spells to render the man unconscious and undetectable by magic. They stowed him, bound, in a closet.

"Nonsense," he said to Elura. "No one would make that trade, not even in this nation of fool merchants."

Elura kept her gaze on Vraggen and smiled more broadly.

"Dolgan?" she prompted.

"He did seem fond of the guard," the big man said.

Elura left off Vraggen, walked over to the wine service, and poured herself a glass.

"Why would he trade the globe for a mere guard?" Vraggen asked her.

Elura laughed—a hard sound, with no mirth in it—and said, "Why? Because he thinks it's the right thing to do. And because no one in that house knows that the globe is valuable. It was sitting on the shelf like a paperweight."

That gave Vraggen pause. Could they be so ignorant? Could Thamalon Uskevren have bought it by chance and never learned what it was?

Possible, he had to acknowledge. Because it was crafted with Shadow Magic, a normal user of the Weave would have difficulty discerning its purpose. The more he thought about it, the more he thought it to be true. If so, that meant that he had unnecessarily involved Cale and Riven. Blast and burn! He probably could have *bought* the thrice-damned globe! He rebuked himself for seeing schemes where none existed. Too much time in the Network, he supposed.

"Vraggen?" Elura said.

Vraggen took a seat in the wing chair that Elura had abandoned, thinking. It wasn't in him to laugh at his mistake, but he came close.

"You may be right, Elura. Let's find Cale and arrange an exchange."

Elura nodded and drained her chalice in a single gulp.

"We'll still kill him if possible?" Azriim asked.

"Of course," Vraggen said.

To his relief, Cale learned quickly that all of the members of the family were unharmed. As he had suspected, the infiltration team had put down only those house guards whose identities they had taken or who had gotten in their way. They had never even ventured upstairs to the Uskevrens' personal suites. Professional work. Impressive really. Had Cale not escaped the ambush at the Stag and returned to the manse, they would have been in and out before anyone knew of it.

The attack had exacted a high toll on House Uskevren: nine guards dead and one missing—Ren. And all for nothing more than a piece of art, albeit a piece of magical art, which Cale had cloven in two and about which he knew virtually nothing.

After seeing to the security of the house, Cale, Tamlin, Tazi, and Shamur—Talbot was away on family business—gathered in the main dining hall. It was sometime in the small hours of the night, but everyone was fully alert and awake. Tamlin sat at the large, polished dining table with a hastily donned cloak thrown over his nightclothes. The light from the twin candelabras set on the table danced on the lord of Stormweather's young face. He did not wear a weapon, of course, because he no longer needed one. Since the events in the otherworld, Tamlin had become a sorcerer of no small ability. His spells protected him, protected the family, protected the manse. But that night, his wards had not been enough and the realization obviously troubled him.

Shamur and Tazi sat opposite Tamlin. They could have been sisters. Both had changed into their leathers, both had pulled back their hair, and both wore slim swords at their belts. They sat closely beside each other, as though for comfort—something that would not have occurred a year earlier, when they could hardly be in the same room together. Thamalon's death had brought all of the Uskevren closer together, including Tazi and Shamur, while at the same time pushing Cale away from them.

Cale paced near the head of the table, Thamalon's traditional seat at family meetings. Tamlin

deliberately had not taken the head chair, and the vacant seat was conspicuous. Thamalon's absence was conspicuous. Were Thamalon still alive, his bass voice would be barking orders.

Still, Cale fancied that he could feel the Old Owl's presence in the room. It inspired him, comforted him, brought him some much-needed calm. He had not yet taken the time to clean himself. Dried blood, Halthor's blood, *Dolgan's* blood, caked his trousers and vest. He reached into his vest pocket and rubbed his holy symbol between his fingers while he paced.

The half-sphere Cale had recovered from the courtyard sat in the middle of the table. It looked like nothing more than an unusual chunk of translucent gray quartz, albeit shaped as a perfect hemisphere. Cale's sword had sheared it as clean as razor. The innumerable gems within it sparkled silver in the candlelight. At Cale's urging, Tamlin had already cast a spell on the half-sphere that would prevent divination spells from locating it.

"They attacked this house—my father's house—for this?" Tamlin asked, gesturing at the half-sphere.

"Indeed, my lord," Cale replied. "The sphere seemed their only target. They knew the house and they moved straight for it. Other than the attempted ambush on me, they appeared to have no other interest in Stormweather or the family."

Tamlin drummed his fingers on the table and asked the question everyone was thinking: "What is it?"

"I don't know, my lord," Cale answered, "but I intend to find out."

Tamlin leaned forward in his chair and looked up at Cale with hooded eyes.

"And why did they single *you* out for an attack, Cale? Are you withholding something from us?"

"Tamlin!" Shamur exclaimed.

"It is a fair question, my lady," Cale said. Rather than make him angry, the question actually pleased Cale. At least Tamlin was thinking through the problem. He chose his next words with care. "I know only what I've already told you, my lord."

That he *guessed* much more than he knew was a fact that Cale kept to himself.

"Then why the ambush?" Tamlin repeated.

Before Cale could frame another answer, Thazienne spoke up in that patronizing tone of voice she sometimes took with Tamlin when he frustrated her: "Because they wanted him away from the house, brother. Isn't that obvious?"

Tamlin nodded and said, "Of course. But why Cale? Why not you? Or me? Or mother?"

Thazienne gave an audible sigh. She had never had patience for her brother's lack of acumen.

"Because he's the most dangerous," she said, "and they know it. We all know it, but no one ever says it. Gods, everyone in the city knows what he did with the ... demon." When she said those words, Cale could feel her eyes on him. "They knew he'd stop them if he was here. He almost did anyway."

For the first time that night, Cale met Tazi's gaze and tried with his eyes to apologize for their unfortunate parting. The corners of her mouth softened. In that moment, Cale felt his love for her grow but at same time felt his spirit separate from hers. He thought he could wish her happiness, even if it was not with him. He turned to Tamlin.

"My lord, it may also have to do with the fact that I was with Lord Usk—your father, when he purchased the sphere."

At that, Tamlin looked thoughtful. That was something he could grab onto. He folded his hands before his face.

"Possible," said Tamlin. "From whom did you buy it?"

"A street vendor," Cale replied. "Alkenen is his name. An itinerant peddler."

"Father always did have peculiar tastes," Tamlin muttered, and pondered.

"How can we not know what this is?" asked Shamur. She reached out and brushed her fingers along the half-sphere. "It must be valuable, or highly magical for them to have dared attack our house for it. Have you examined it, Tamlin?"

"Of course. It detects as only moderately magical—warded with minor protective spells—but nothing to indicate its purpose. Nothing to indicate what happened in the courtyard. I'll send for a sage in the morning."

"Perhaps the explosion expended its magic," Thazienne offered.

She looked at the sphere with wide eyes. Magic had always intrigued her.

"Perhaps," Tamlin agreed.

Cale did not agree but kept his thoughts to himself. Whatever the sphere was, its magic was buried deep. The split from his blade was too clean, too ... contrived. He saw Mask's hand in it, but then he seemed to see Mask in everything. Still, he was certain that the sphere was not destroyed, it was merely in two pieces. He knew that he had not seen the last of the half-drow and his allies.

Tamlin pushed back his chair from the table and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Will they come back for this half of the sphere? Cale?"

"They will, my lord," Cale replied, "if it remains here." He let that sink in. "But they will not return tonight. And probably not tomorrow. They are methodical and plan extensively. That takes time. And they would expect us to be prepared for another attack."

Indeed, the house *was* prepared for another attack, if it came. Cale had seen to that himself. The off-duty reserves had been contacted and guards patrolled the grounds outside and stood at every exterior door, always in teams of not less than four. Cale had informed the guard leaders of the attackers' use of illusions to disguise themselves. They were to respond with force to any suspicious activity.

In addition, Tamlin had placed several alarm spells at strategic areas of the grounds. The attackers would not be able to teleport in again without triggering a magical alarm.

Cale went on, "Besides, they don't need to attack. They have a hostage. They can negotiate."

Tamlin frowned and asked, "A hostage? He's only a guard."

"Tamlin!" Shamur and Thazienne exclaimed at once. Both wore looks of surprise and disgust.

Cale too stared daggers at the young man. It was all Cale could do to not walk over and punch Tamlin in the face.

"His name is Ren, *my lord*, and he is a loyal servant of this house. As am I."

Under that onslaught, Tamlin wilted like an arctic lily in the summer sun. His face flushed; his gaze found the table.

"But you're different. I only meant... I mean ..."

Cale said in a cool tone, each word a hammer, "This house is only as good as its men, my lord. To keep good men, you must treat them all as your family. Your father would have paid a king's ransom to retrieve one of his guards. Treating your servants as if they are—"

Shamur rose from her seat and cut him off.

"That's enough, Erevis."

Cale turned to face her with angry words on his lips, but when he saw her, saw the disappointed look in her eyes—at him or Tamlin, he couldn't be sure—he held his tongue.

Shamur looked him directly in the eyes and said, "Tamlin is not his father. And you've made your point."

Cale was not so sure, but still he held his tongue. His words had been harsh, true, but Tamlin needed harsh. The young lord of Stormweather's life had been too soft, too insulated, and it affected his decision-making. Tamlin seemed to regard his men as interchangeable commodities. If the men came to know that, House Uskevren would soon have no men, or at least none with loyalty. Despite Tamlin's growth over recent months, Cale still found him too weak.

The word was hard, but Cale thought it accurate. He could never serve such a man. It was well that he was leaving.

Shamur, still standing, stared at him, awaiting his acknowledgment.

He gave it, saying, "My apologies, my lady."

He felt Tazi's gaze on him but did not look at her.

Shamur nodded and sat.

In a softer tone, she said, "Erevis, I would ask that you reconsider your resignation until this matter is resolved."

To his credit, Tamlin immediately added, "Yes, Cale. Your advice is needed and would be welcome."

Tamlin's words surprised Cale. It could not have been easy to make that request after the rebuke Cale had just given him. It showed maturity. Cale sighed. When it came to his perception of the young lord, he seemed to careen at random between contempt and hope.

Shamur must have read his face. She smiled at him and nodded, obviously proud of her son. Perhaps Tamlin *could* preserve House Uskevren. Perhaps he was just young, and would learn with time.

Cale decided that he would think so. He gave Tamlin a deferential nod.

"As always, my lord is gracious with his praise. Please forgive my harsh words. I spoke in haste, still flush from combat. I—"

Tamlin waved a hand dismissively and said, "No apologies . . . Erevis. I deserved it. You're right about ensuring the return of our man, of course. Please, continue."

Tamlin had never before called Cale by his first name. Cale thought that might mark a step forward in their relationship. It pleased him to think so.

"My lord, lady, I appreciate your offer but I believe my presence here only adds to the family's danger. I would propose another way."

"And that is?" asked a wary Shamur.

"I propose that I take the half-sphere and leave Stormweather."

Tamlin and Shamur both began to shake their heads.

"My lord, lady, the presence of the half-sphere in the house only ensures another attack here."

"Let them come," said Shamur.

"Yes, let them," added Tamlin.

Cale ignored them and went on, "I have contacts that I might call upon. We can keep it hidden until our attackers make contact. In the meantime, I can attempt to learn more of the sphere."

He was, in fact, desperate to learn more of the sphere.

"Where will you go?" Thazienne asked, softly. The concern in her voice touched Cale.

"It's better that none of you know. I will allow them to make contact with me after I've learned the nature of the sphere. When they do, I will handle the negotiations for Ren's return."

Tamlin stood, turned, and walked to the large window that overlooked the gardens. He stared into the darkness, his hands clasped behind his back.

"You'll give them our half of the sphere?" the young lord asked.

Cale hadn't made up his mind about that yet. It depended on what he learned of it.

"If necessary, my lord."

"And if it's valuable, or dangerous?"

"My lord already knows that it must be both." It had to be, else why risk a direct attack on Stormweather to get it? Cale approached Tamlin and looked him in the face. "I'll find out all that I can before I make any exchange. If it's such that I cannot risk turning it over, I'll so inform you and get Ren back another way. Afterward, we can discuss what to do with this half."

Tamlin sighed, turned toward the window, and considered Cale's words. In the dim light, his posture and expression looked eerily like Thamalon.

From behind, Shamur asked, "Why alone, Cale? Why you?"

Tamlin too seemed interested in Cale's answer to that question. He turned to look at Cale. Cale could not tell them that he thought his god was involved, and that his internal code demanded that he personally avenge the attack at the Stag.

"My lord, lady, I believe that I am best equipped to resolve this problem in the manner safest to the House." He looked Tamlin in the eyes. "My lord, I told your father once that I worked best alone and that remains true today. He understood that. I know that you and Lady Uskevren wish to give me aid, and that it is difficult for you to let this unfold out of your sight. Rather than aid, I ask that you give me your trust. I will see it done and will allow no harm to come to House Uskevren in the process."

The room was quiet. Tamlin studied Cale's face.

"My father loved you, you know," Tamlin said. "As much as he did me. As much as any of us."

Cale knew. He bowed his head and said nothing.

After a time, Tamlin cleared his throat and extended his hand.

"Luck to you then, Cale. You've always had our trust. We'll leave it in your hands."

Cale took Tamlin's hand and shook it, genuinely grateful.

"Tamlin—" Shamur said.

"Enough, Mother. We've left more delicate matters in Mister Cale's hands before. It is done."

Shamur said nothing else, and that was that. With the exception of Cale, everyone began to leave to return to their beds. As they filed out, Cale stared out the window with his back to the room, thinking.

"Good luck, Erevis," Shamur said, as she left the room.

Cale didn't know what to do next. Find Jak, certainly.

Then? Tamlin's sage idea was a good one, he thought. Perhaps Jak knew of a sage or academic of the arcane that they could trust. Cale certainly did not.

From behind him, Thazienne softly cleared her throat.

His breath caught. Instantly, his heart leaped in his chest. His legs went weak. She didn't say anything but her mere presence....

He took a breath and turned to face her.

Before he could say a word, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him softly on the mouth.

"Good-bye, Erevis." Her eyes were wet and her tears streaked his cheek. "Please take care of yourself."

Her hair smelled like chrysanthemum. He resolved never to forget that smell.

"I will," he said.

Without another word, she turned and ran from the room.

He stood there a long time. Perhaps she did love him after all, at least in a way. Perhaps things would have been different if she had known of the note before so much time had passed.

Perhaps.

He remembered the many good moments they had shared: the first time they had touched; the night she drank too much brandy and he'd carried her to her bed; the first time he'd made her laugh. He would savor those memories.

As he stood there, an elven proverb came to him: "Part well, regret nothing." He and Thazienne had parted well. He was content.

CHAPTER 7

Uneasy Alliances

This time, when Cale left Stormweather in the cold, dark hours before dawn, he did not slink out the back. Instead, he walked out the front door, the same front door where, hours before, five house guards had been murdered. Already the blood had been cleaned and new guards posted. They nodded respectfully to him as he passed. Cale returned the nod. The respect was mutual. Uskevren house guards had once again fought and died in service to the Uskevren. They, along with Cale, had once again driven an invader from the house. Cale had already discussed with Tamlin the necessity of providing for the families of the slain guards and the lord of Stormweather had readily agreed.

Cale inhaled deeply as he walked across the night-shrouded grounds. The air was cool. The verdant gardens from the manse to the main gate smelled of lilac and lavender. He caught the aroma of chrysanthemum and it reminded him of that last embrace he had shared with Thazienne. Crickets chirped in the grass.

Despite the dark events in the house, Cale felt a peculiar lightness. He and Tazi had parted as they should, and in leaving the manse he was not abandoning his family but serving them—the same thing he had been doing for years. His personal *Vaendaan-naes* had begun, perhaps.

Only his concern for Ren and his simmering anger over the slain Uskevren house guards kept his mood somber.

When he reached the main gate, he bade farewell to the six guards on duty there. Seeing them reminded him of Almor. The grizzled old warrior would be buried the next day, at Uskevren expense. Cale wished his soul a speedy journey.

He exhorted the guards to stay alert and walked down the stone-lined walkway for what he knew with certainty to be the last time. The guards closed the gate behind him with a clang, the sound as final as a funeral gong. At the end of the walkway, he turned around to view the manse from the street one last time. The squat turrets barely topped the walls, and Cale thought for the first time that the architecture of the home properly reflected the family within—strong, low to the ground, and as immovable as a mountain. The Uskevren would abide. Shamur and Tamlin would see to it.

Smiling, he headed down the street.

Selune had already set, but her glittering tears cast in silver the path she had taken through the heavens. The blocks of coal in the street torches had nearly burned through, leaving only glowing embers. Darkness covered Sarn Street. Due to the hour, the broad avenue stood empty, the shops closed and shuttered.

Wrapped in burlap in his pack, the half-sphere felt as heavy as a lodestone. He had cast non-detection wards on his person and the half-sphere but knew that the spells would grant him only a few hours reprieve from magical scrying.

And that only maybe, he reminded himself. He suspected that a caster more powerful than him might be able to pierce the wards. And he had no doubt that the shadowy mage who had accompanied the half-drow *was* a more powerful caster. Still, Cale had deemed it worth the effort. If the spells worked even for a short while, those hours would provide him time to prepare. He would contact Jak, locate a scribe or academic who could tell them about the sphere, and figure out the play to retrieve Ren.

It pleased him that Ren's well being came first to his mind, rather than vengeance for the attack. Thazienne's rebuke in his quarters had caused him to doubt his motivations. He might be a killer at his core, but he still sometimes *acted* good, and that pleased him.

He had considered attempting to magically track the other half of the sphere in the possession of the half-drow and his crew but had decided against it. Likely the wizard would have it warded with more powerful spells than Cale could hope to pierce. He also feared that they might be able to use his own spell against him and somehow track it backward to find him. Besides, even had he located it, he would not have moved to retrieve it until after he made contact with Jak.

He headed west, for the Foreign District, to find his friend.

With each step farther from the manse, his mood darkened. The lightness of spirit that had possessed him in Stormweather's gardens disappeared, replaced by the weighty realization that he was alone. At that moment, he was at his most vulnerable—on empty streets, with no allies at his side.

He moved rapidly but stayed alert to his surroundings.

To Cale, the chill air seemed unnaturally still, the silence of the street ominous. He knew that the attackers must have watched Stormweather Towers for days before they attacked, possibly with magic,

possibly with spies on roofs. Conceivably, operatives might still be lurking nearby in the darkness, waiting for someone to leave the manse. Though his spells protected him from magical scrying, he had only his wits and skills to guard against ordinary spies. They could have been watching him even then.

Nothing for it, he thought, gazing up at the dark rooftops. In for a dram, in for a drink. If they were out there, he would face them—alone. He loosened his blade in its scabbard.

Out of professional habit, he avoided the dim light cast by the nearly exhausted street torches. A man backlit by torchlight at night presented a perfect target for crossbowmen. Instead, Cale darted through the darkness on one side of the street. Run, stop in shadow, listen, and watch. Even while sprinting his footfalls only whispered over the flagstones. And when he wished, shadows cloaked him like a shroud. Not even the stray dogs sleeping in the shop doorways and alleys stirred at his passing.

As he moved, his gaze went from likely ambush point to likely ambush point—the shadows of doorways, the darkness of alleys, rooftops. He struggled to find the calmness that usually came over him when he was working, but it remained elusive. Despite his precautions and his better sense, he perceived potential ambushers in every shadow. He realized the feeling was likely the result of too little sleep and too much stress. Nevertheless, the feeling remained. Knowing it to be irrational did nothing to obviate its hold on him. It had been a night of irrational experiences, after all—a man with a shattered face and a gut wound had grinned, had thought it "wundafa," and illusionary disguises had perfectly imitated house guards down to their voices. A half-drow with mismatched eyes had invaded his mind and become irate over ruined trousers, and an incorporeal Cyricist mage surrounded by shadows had actually managed to frighten Riven.

Cale could only imagine Ren's state of mind. The boy was not yet twenty and was caught up in something that he likely couldn't understand. When Cale was twenty, he'd been embezzling from the Night Masks and killing men for coin. Ren had made the right decisions, taken legitimate work, and still Beshaba, the goddess of ill-luck, had cursed him.

Fate is a fickle bitch, Cale thought, and he grinned without mirth.

As he moved, he considered his opponents. He knew that he had not yet taken the measure of the mage, the half-drow, and the rest. They were an unknown, and that worried him. He didn't like fighting unknowns. As an assassin, Cale had always preferred to study his targets for days before making his move. He didn't have that luxury though, not if he wanted to get Ren back alive. He wondered again about the half-sphere wrapped in burlap in his pack. It had to be more than it seemed. It—

A high-pitched wail from up ahead, inordinately loud in the night's heavy silence, brought Cale up short and set the dogs in the street to barking. In two hammering heartbeats, Cale had his long sword and holy symbol in hand. The weapon felt lighter than usual in his grip. Darkness seemed to flow along the blade—a trick of the flickering street torches, he supposed. He sunk deeper into the shadows.

Nothing for a moment, then the wail repeated. He tensed.

A dagger toss ahead of him, a gray alley cat sprinted across Sarn Street, screeching. Another darted after it.

Cats. Only cats.

He realized that he was holding his breath. He blew it out in a sigh.

I'm too on edge, he thought. I need to get off the street.

He decided to take to the rooftops. It would be harder work, especially for a tired man, but safer. He would take the heights for as far as Selgaunt's architecture allowed—a long way usually. In all but the Temple and Noble Districts, the city was amazingly uniform. Two story brick and wood buildings with gently pitched, tiled roofs predominated. A skilled man could cover a lot of ground in Selgaunt without ever putting his feet on the street.

Cale turned off the main avenue and jogged down an alley, startling a handful of cats. The damned things seemed everywhere. There, he melded into the darkness, blade ready. He waited a few moments to ensure that he was not being trailed. Nothing. He whispered a prayer to Mask and a globe of the darkness through which only he could see formed around him. A spy, even one with magically augmented vision, would not be able to penetrate it.

Casting the spell brought him the calm that working had not. He held the mask in his hand and remembered that he was not truly alone, even if his god generally *was* a bastard.

He ran his hands over the brick and wood walls behind him, found his grip, and climbed to the roof of the nearest building. The exertion further cleared his mind.

As he crested the top of the wall and slid onto the roof, he disrupted a roost of eave-doves. They cooed in aggravation, flapped angrily, and paced about, but did not fly away. He avoided stepping on any of them, crossed the roof and surveyed the street below. Still nothing and no one.

Feeling more comfortable, Cale headed uptown at speed. Sometimes he leaped across alleys, sometimes

he was forced to descend to street level for a time before re-ascending another building. The process brought him back to himself. Anyone attempting to follow him would have had to have been very good or very airborne.

In less than half an hour, he reached the border of the Foreign District. Below him, an ancient stone wall, only thigh-high, separated the district from the rest of the city. From the rooftops it looked exactly like what it was: a granite line that symbolically divided the "inferior" foreigners from the native Selgauntans. Despite their thirst for commerce, most Sembians still regarded foreigners as backward and uncultured. Cale thought the Sembians had it exactly wrong. While Sembians, especially "noble" Sembians, worked hard to maintain a veneer of cultural sophistication, at their core they were little better than orcs. Cale had experienced firsthand the cutthroat politics of the "civilized" Selgauntan elite. At least orcs were forthright enough to put an axe in an enemy's chest. The Sembians smiled and stuck a punch dagger in a kidney.

Uskevren excepted, of course, he thought with a hard grin.

The streets in the Foreign District were wide enough to accommodate the larger ox wagons necessary to move shipboard goods from the wharves into the city. The alleys too were wider. Though even there Cale could have stuck to the rooftops, the longer jumps across the alleys would have been riskier. Instead, he descended from the roofs, hopped over the short, symbolic dividing wall, and took to the stone paved streets.

Unattended carts dotted the roads. Painted signs, designed to attract the attention of newcomers to the city, hung from shop fronts, the words barely distinguishable in the light of guttering street torches. Periodic reminders of the recently deceased Hulorn's strange artistic tastes loomed out of the darkness like malformed ghosts—here a bronze statue of a rampant chimera on a raised pedestal, there a stone fountain of a hydra spitting dyed water from the mouths of its many heads.

As Cale walked onward, the sky began to gray. Dawn. The dung sweepers would be about their business soon, collecting dried dung from the street and reselling it in the outlying villages for fuel and fertilizer. Lights started to peek through the slats of shop shutters. Sunrise was only a couple of hours away and the city's merchants were preparing for a new day.

Within a quarter hour, the smell of baking bread started to fill the still air—a wholesome smell. Cale savored it. In a few hours, the stink of horses, crowds, and fresh fish would overwhelm the tantalizing aroma of the city's bakeries.

Cale had always enjoyed the pre-dawn hours, both back in Westgate and in Selgaunt. Cities felt different at that hour. With night still hiding the filth, the quiet streets seemed almost pristine. For the few hours before dawn, the whole of the city belonged to the bakers, the fishermen, and the dung sweepers.

And the assassins, Cale thought.

He had killed more than a handful of sleeping men in those quiet hours. More than a handful....

With a shake of his head, he put the past out of his mind and headed for the flat that he and Jak rented.

Jak didn't maintain a permanent residence in the city and was notoriously difficult to find from day to day—a necessary trait in an independent thief operating in a guild-dominated city. After their encounter with the demon lord Yrsillar, Cale and Jak had established a system by which they could easily and quietly contact one another, in case the need arose. The device was a simple one. They had rented a small room in a two-story, wood-framed boarding house in the Foreign District and paid the landlord, a retired sailor from the Dragon Coast as old as the Netherese Empire and as scarred as a butcher's block, a bit extra to leave it and them undisturbed. He never asked questions as long as they paid. Neither Cale nor Jak ever actually stayed in the room, of course—it wasn't a residence or a safe-house. Instead, it was what professionals termed a "lighthouse." It provided a signal, nothing more.

In this case, Cale and Jak kept the shutters closed at all times unless they wanted a meet, in which case, they opened the shutters on at least two windows. Both were to pass by the flat at least once every two or three days. If the shutters were open, the other wanted to meet at the designated time in one of the three designated locations. The time was always sunset. The locations, in order of preference, were a quiet alehall and inn in the Foreign District called the Gilt Lizard; the Scarlet Knave, a gambling den on the wharves; or a dry well a bowshot outside the north gate of the city.

Currently, the shutters were closed, just as they had been two days before when Cale had walked past. He had not seen Jak in over two tendays.

From the street, the boarding house stood dark. Cale wasn't sure if the other six rooms were even rented. Even if they were, the type of tenants who took rooms there were not likely to rise with the dawn.

He crossed the street and trekked silently up the rickety exterior stair that led to their rented room. He stopped at the door, kneeled, and listened. Nothing. He examined the lock to see if it showed signs of tampering. It didn't. He took out his key, drew his blade—it still carried that odd, dark cast in the steel—and

he opened the door.

The room was empty, just as he and Jak had left it. It smelled musty from the recent rains, like an old root cellar. Cale struck a tindertwig on the wood-planked wall and the room took shape in the light. It was a small square without furnishings or even a hearth. Had he actually stayed in the room, a hotpot would have been necessary to heat it in the winter.

Cale moved to the windows, opened the shutters, and secured them against the outer wall. When Jak saw them open, he would come in, close them, and head for the Gilt Lizard.

Being there reminded Cale of the room he'd kept as a young letters man and assassin back in Westgate. He'd had a different name then, been a different man. That room had been in a converted storehouse behind the Black Boot Inn, he remembered, near the stables and the inn's kitchen. The place had always smelled of stew or manure, he thought with a smile, depending on the time of day. He had kept his stash of skimmed coin beneath the floorboards. No one had ever found it, though the Night Masks had eventually deduced that he was embezzling guild proceeds and forced him to flee the city.

The thought of hiding the half-sphere there, beneath the floorboards maybe, tempted him. He really felt the thing to be an invitation to an attack. But he resisted. The half-sphere would be safest on his person. Besides, once he met up with Jak, he *wanted* it to attract the half-drow and his crew. That was the only way Cale could negotiate for Ren's return. He didn't know how to find the half-drow, so he needed the half-drow and wizard to find him. He just wanted it to occur on a timetable that allowed him to learn first what in the Nine Hells the sphere was.

Thinking of the half-sphere reminded him again of his sword—the sword that had sheared the sphere neatly in two, the sword that had shadows dancing along its length. Had its contact with the sphere changed the blade? More importantly, had contact with the sphere changed *him*? He didn't feel different ... did he?

Cale shook his head. He didn't have time to worry about it. He snuffed the tindertwig and headed out.

He would take a room at the Gilt Lizard and await word from Jak. There was nothing else for it. He hoped the halfling checked the flat later that day and saw the open shutters.

Cale headed down the stairs, hit the street, and headed east for the Lizard, which sat deep in the Foreign District.

On the way, his growling stomach reminded him that he needed to eat. Within three blocks, he found a small bakery with an open door and a staff busy at work. It took only the flash of two silver ravens to get Cale a loaf of day-old meatbread—mincemeat and various slaughterhouse leftovers pre-boiled, salted, and baked into wheat bread, a cheap Foreign District staple that he hadn't eaten in years. Afterward, he took a seat in a public plaza, in the shadow of one of the late Hulorn's gorgon-statue fountains. He needed to pass an hour or so. The innkeeper at the Lizard didn't answer knocks until the sixth hour.

The sixth hour... the time was ominous. Soon after that, Cale figured his ward on the sphere would expire.

At that point, he would be carrying a magical beacon in his pack. He had no illusions about what would happen then.

Unfortunately, he could not cast the ward again until he refreshed his spells with meditation, and that he could not do for over eighteen hours. Mask answered Cale's prayers for spells only at midnight. He hoped he could pair up with Jak before the ward expired. If the half-drow and wizard showed, he would like to have the halfling at his side.

Of course, they might not show. Divination spells were not exact, and had limits, even when cast by a wizard of power. In truth, Cale didn't even know if the sphere *could* be magically scried. Tamlin's divinations had revealed no magic of substance and that was obviously wrong. Perhaps—

Cale shook his head, put all of that out of his mind, and focused on the meatbread. First things first.

With dawn approaching, the birds began to sing. A few starlings alit near the fountain, chirping and fluttering in the water. Cale watched them while he chewed. The meatbread tasted as poorly as he remembered—he had grown spoiled by Brilla's cooking, he thought with a smile—but it did fill his stomach.

After he finished Cale wished he'd bought two loaves. He stretched out his legs and allowed himself to relax for a moment. Resting on a full stomach reminded him of how exhausted he felt. The drone of the fountain's magically driven flow relaxed him, the birds' songs lulled him. He had not slept in well over a day. His eyes felt heavy. He blew out a sigh, crossed his hands behind his head, leaned back, and closed his eyes for just an instant—

—and he awoke with a jolt. Instinctively, his hand went for his sword hilt. His heart thumped. He looked around and ...

Nothing. Just the birds and the fountain. He cursed under his breath and let his heartbeat slow.

How long had he been asleep?

Not long, he figured. Probably less than a quarter hour. Dawn still had not broken. He shook his head and rebuked himself for his carelessness. He had been lucky, nothing more. Falling asleep on the street! Dark and empty! A child could have put him down while he dreamed away.

He bent over the fountain, scattering the birds, and splashed water on his face. The cool water shocked him awake. He shook his arms, stretched the stiffness from his legs, and headed out. He would take his chances that the Lizard's innkeeper was up a bit early. He needed a defensible place to rest, at least for a few hours.

The sky lightened further as he walked, but his spirit did not. He knew he could be attacked at any moment. He also knew that he could not stay sharp every hour of every day. Sooner or later he would make a mistake.

Like falling asleep on the street, he thought angrily.

He needed help and he knew it. For an instant, he wondered if he had done the right thing by leaving Stormweather. Perhaps he should have accepted Tamlin's offer of aid.

He shook his head. No. He'd had to leave. The presence of the sphere put the Uskevren at risk. Besides, he could no longer stay in the same home as Thazienne. Also, he saw Mask's hand behind recent events. He didn't think it a coincidence that the wizard who had accompanied the half-drow had worn a holy symbol of Cyric—a rival deity hated by Mask. The Lord of Shadows had used Cale before to thwart the Cyricists. Cale accepted that as one of the duties of his Calling. While he didn't always do exactly what his god dictated, in general their interests were aligned. After all, Cale had no love for the followers of the Dark Sun. But to return to Stormweather might involve the Uskevren in one of the many battles in the divine war between Mask and Cyric. Cale alone had chosen to heed Mask's Calling. He could be a soldier in that war, but he would not conscript the Uskevren.

He reached into his pocket and ran his fingers over the velvet mask that served as his holy symbol.

This fight is ours alone, he thought to Mask.

As though in response, a low whistle sounded from a side street to his right. Cale lowered into a fighting crouch and sought the source.

Riven stepped from the shadows of a covered porch. He had eschewed his scarlet cloak for a more practical gray. That gave Cale pause. Riven rarely discarded his cloak. Was this another illusionary imposter? Cale hesitated.

Riven's mouth twisted in impatience. He waved Cale toward him.

Cale kept his hand near his blade hilt as he walked toward the assassin. He called to mind the prayer that allowed him to see magical dweomers and whispered it under his breath. If the spell showed a dweomer on Riven, Cale would cut him down and determine its accuracy after the fact.

Riven's sabers glowed blue with magic, as did his armor, a ring on his left hand, and something in one of his belt pouches, but not Riven himself. Cale breathed a bit easier. Riven was Riven. Cale should have known. Even the most sophisticated illusion would be hard pressed to mimic the arrogance of Riven's sneer.

Riven nodded at Cale's blade hand and asked, "You nervous, Cale?"

Cale ignored the barb but took his hand off his sword hilt.

"I said I'd find you," said Cale. "You tailing me?"

It concerned him that Riven had tracked him down. If the assassin could do it, so could the wizard and the half-drow.

"You look like the Ninth Hell," Riven said, and grinned through his goatee.

"I asked if you were following me."

"Not exactly," Riven said, and he pulled the chain that held his holy symbol out from behind his blue tunic. The onyx disc looked like a hole in the assassin's callused palm. "A mutual friend told me where to find you."

Cale stared at the symbol, nodded. Mask had probably spoken to Riven in a dream, or a vision. The Lord of Shadows had often so spoken to Cale.

Looking at the holy symbol, Cale wondered again, with a pang of jealousy that surprised him, if Riven could cast spells. After a moment's thought, he decided not. Riven was smart, but his intelligence was more of a practical street wisdom. Cale thought spellcasting required a kind of insight that Riven lacked, a sort of philosophical introspection.

Or at least he would choose to think so.

He wondered too why Riven and he served the same god but used different holy symbols. For that, he had no ready answer, but it somehow comforted him. Mask distinguished between them. Cale liked that.

"What else did he tell you?" Cale asked.

"Nothing."

Riven's sneer softened, and he replaced his holy symbol behind his tunic. Cale nodded knowingly.

"Get used to it," Cale said. "That's his method. He reveals only what he thinks you need to know to serve his purposes. You know why?"

"Don't care."

"Because to him, you're only a tool," Cale answered anyway, though he could tell from Riven's face that the assassin wasn't listening. "You think you're more than that, don't you?"

Riven's one eye narrowed and he said, "You be a tool, Cale. I'll be a weapon."

That made Cale wonder what promises Mask had made to secure Riven's loyalty.

"We'll see," Cale replied. "But I'll do you a favor and tell you something: he's as much your tool as you are his."

He realized how arrogant it sounded the moment the words left his mouth—A god his tool? But, yes. Foolish or not, he regarded Mask as serving him as much as he served Mask. Jak had once described it as a confluence of mortal and divine interests. Cale thought that put too nice a dress on it. It was mutual utility, nothing less and nothing more. Because Cale realized that, he could resist Mask's imperatives and stay his own man. He wondered if Riven could do the same.

"You going to tell me what's going on?" Riven asked.

Cale looked him in the eye and said, "You want in on this? All the way? It's ugly."

Riven's mouth was a tight line, but he said, "I've been in this since those sons of whores blew me out of the Stag. I'm in it all the way."

"Well enough. Let's keep moving."

They fell into stride together, heading for the Lizard. As they walked, Cale filled Riven in on what had occurred at Stormweather.

"So there are at least five of them," Riven said afterward. "That'd be manageable. Where's this sphere then?"

"Half-sphere," Cale corrected. "It's safe. And we're not handling this alone. I'm bringing in Fleet."

Riven stopped cold and pulled Cale around by the shoulder to face him. Cale stared at his hand. Riven removed it.

"That little prig halfling bastard?" Riven sneered. "He's a liability, Cale. You and I can handle this alone. We've taken down Cyricists before."

Cale remembered. They *had* worked together well. Too well.

"True," Cale acknowledged.

"So why bring in Fleet?"

Because he's my friend, Cale thought but didn't say.

Instead, he stared evenly at Riven and said, "Because I can trust him." He paused before adding, "And I don't trust you."

Riven looked angry for a moment, then recaptured his sneer.

"Pleased to hear it," said the assassin. "I thought you were getting soft."

Cale decided to resolve a few things right then and there. He knew that Riven despised Jak. Several months before, the halfling had nearly killed Riven with a stab through the back. That had been business though, and Cale thought Riven could put it aside as such. After all, he and Riven had scarred each other previously too. But Cale knew that it must have galled the assassin that he had been split by a halfling. Cale had to set some rules. He put a finger on Riven's chest and looked him in the face.

"Fleet's my first choice on this, Riven. It's us, and it's you. You're along for the ride, nothing more, holy symbol or no. We can use your blades, but we can get by without them." He waited for a reply but Riven made none. Cale went on, "If you can't handle being around the little man, then walk away now. You move on him and I'll put you down without a second thought. Clear?"

Riven stared at him, his good eye unreadable, his other an empty hole. A long moment passed. When he spoke, his voice was low and dangerous.

"You know, Cale, you've threatened to kill me before, yet here I stand. You're losing credibility. And one day your threats are going to make me angry."

Cale tensed, let his hand glide near his blade hilt. If he had to, he would take Riven down right then.

Through his goatee, Riven smiled a mouthful of stained teeth and said, "But not today. I hear you. Fleet keeps breathing. But I want in on this, all the way through."

Cale heard the sincerity in Riven's voice. The assassin owed the shadow mage a blood-debt for whatever that spell had done to him in the street.

"You're in then," said Cale. "All the way."

They started walking, the tension still thick. For a time, they said nothing and the silence stretched.

At last, Cale said, "What's it like to have no one to trust, Riven?"

Riven surprised him with laughter—a genuine laugh. Cale didn't think he'd ever before heard the assassin really give vent to true mirth.

"For being so smart, Cale, you sure are a stupid bastard." His laugh gave way to a dark, knowing chuckle. "You don't have anyone you can trust either. You're just blind enough to think you do."

Cale could think of no reply to that. But as he walked, the words "mutual utility" again floated to the front of his consciousness.

Fortunately, the innkeeper at the Lizard, a slim, efficient man named Preht, was up early that morning. His wife and daughters had already begun breakfast preparations. Cale could smell the aroma of cooking sausage coming from the kitchen.

Cale and Riven purported to be travelers from Cormyr. Preht looked doubtful—he obviously wanted no trouble. But when Cale prepaid for a full tenday's lodging, the innkeeper's smile returned tenfold. They declined breakfast. Cale needed rest more than food. After asking Preht to keep an eye open for a halfling who was to meet them there, they headed upstairs to their room.

The room had two cots with clean linens, a night table with a few candles, a chair, a washbasin, a chamber pot, and one small window. Riven closed and latched the shutters. A few beams from the rising sun leaked through the slats.

"You take a few hours," Riven said. "Gods know you look like you need it. I'll watch. Afterward, I'll take a couple myself."

Too tired to argue, Cale only nodded.

Riven took a seat in the chair, his magical sabers drawn and laid across his knees. His eye burned a hole through the door.

Cale laid his bare blade beside him and stretched out on one of the cots. Given their situation, he felt obliged to be honest with Riven. Even the assassin deserved to understand the risk. He did not bother with a preamble.

"I've got the half-sphere in my pack."

The assassin didn't even look at him when he said, "Of course you do. Where else would you have it? A safehouse? I know you too well."

Cale ignored the tone and continued, "The ward I put on it to keep divinations from locating it will expire soon. I can't renew it. Not yet."

Riven stared at him, his eye cold, and asked, "And?"

"They'll be coming for it."

"If anyone other than the innkeeper or Fleet walks into this room, Cale," Riven said with a hard, mirthless grin, "they don't walk out."

Cale gave a nod, and after a moment he said, "You haven't yet asked the play."

It surprised him that Riven had not asked him what was the plan. Had their situations been reversed, Cale would have asked back on the street.

Riven ran a thumb along the blade of one of his sabers and said, "That's because I don't care, just so long as I get to put a handbreadth of steel through that wizard. That part of the plan?"

Cale chuckled.

"All right, then," Riven said. "That's all I need to know. Now, get some sleep."

Cale did just that. As he drifted off, it occurred to him that he ought to be concerned to have a former Zhent assassin sitting with drawn blades only a few paces from where he slept. Inexplicably, he wasn't, and the hours passed too fast.

Riven shook him. Cale came instantly awake.

"I'm drifting, Cale. Give me two hours, then let's get some food."

Riven was asleep almost instantly. Cale kept watch, tense, but nothing untoward occurred. Except Riven's dreams.

Less than half an hour after falling asleep, Riven began to toss about. His brow furrowed and he muttered in an alien tongue, "*Nirtfel caul ir vel...*"

The words, alien and vulgar, spilled from between Riven's lips. Though he had been a letters man back in Westgate, even Cale had never before heard a language like that. It called to mind moonless nights and blood sacrifice.

Riven grinned fiercely in his sleep, clutched at the disc that hung around his neck, and in that moment, Cale realized that Mask was speaking to Riven in his dreams, showing him, teaching him.

But what?

And why does it bother me so much? he wondered, though he knew the answer.

It bothered him because it meant that Mask saw him and Riven as equally worthy, *as peers*. Cale didn't like to think he shared much in common with Drasek Riven.

Except that both were killers, through and through.

In his dream, Riven laughed softly.

Cale put Mask out of his mind. He had more immediate concerns than his god's fickleness. He knew Vraggen and the half-drow had to be scouring the city for him. It was only a matter of time before a spell latched onto the half-sphere.

Riven ceased muttering and the next hour passed slowly.

Cale touched the assassin lightly on the shoulder. Riven came awake in an instant.

"You were dreaming," Cale said. "Speaking in your sleep."

He wondered if Riven remembered what Mask had shown him. Riven grunted, sat up, and sneered.

"Oh?" said the assassin. "Did I say anything interesting?"

"Nothing I understood."

Riven nodded and the effort replaced his sneer with a wince.

"My head feels like I took a dwarf's warhammer to the temple."

Cale saw significance in Riven's choice of the word "temple" but said nothing.

Riven tucked his holy symbol under his tunic and the two of them headed downstairs to eat whatever might be leftover from breakfast. Afterward, they moved outside to wait. Neither of them wanted to get caught inside a common room again. Vraggen had already shown a willingness to torch an entire establishment to get at them.

Riven ducked down an alley and climbed atop the roof of an eatery two buildings down from the Lizard. From there, his crossbow marked the whole of the street as well as the Lizard's entrance. Cale could barely see his head above the roof edge.

Cale stayed at street level, eyeing the steady stream of passersby, moving randomly along the block, but always keeping the Lizard in his sight. He saw nothing suspicious. That put him at ease. Perhaps the wizard and half-drow were not as hard on his trail as he suspected.

Jak showed up late that afternoon. He approached from the northeast, moving easily through the street traffic, a lightweight blue cloak thrown over his green pantaloons, gray shirt, and embroidered green vest. As always, a feathered cap topped his head. When Cale saw him, he sighed in relief. He had feared the halfling would not show for days. He could always count on Jak.

Cale signaled Riven, who nodded and left off his post. Then Cale moved to intercept the halfling. Before Jak spotted him, Cale considered invoking the spell that would allow him to detect illusions but decided against it. His enemies used illusions, true, but they could not have learned of Jak and the Lizard so quickly. If they had, they would have already attacked.

Besides, he would not, he *could not*, stay suspicious of everyone. It drained him, made him edgy, made him Riven. Riven's words from the previous night sounded in his mind: *You've got no one you can trust either. You just think you do.* Cale rejected that. Jak was Jak and he could trust no one more.

He separated from the crowd and walked toward the halfling. Jak spotted him immediately, smiled, and gave a hail. Cale walked up to him quickly. Jak must have seen the urgency in his face and stride. The halfling's smile vanished.

"Trickster's toes, Cale, what is it?"

"You got here fast. I just left the signal today."

Jak smiled and doffed his cap.

"I check the lighthouse every day, Cale," the halfling said. "You get in more scrapes than my drunken uncle Cob. Now, what's going on? You look pale, even for you."

Cale grinned, took the halfling by the arm, and turned him around.

"Let's walk, Jak. We don't want to stay in one place any longer than necessary."

To keep up, Jak took two or three strides to each of Cale's.

Cale went right to the point: "I've got something sought after by some powerful people, Jak. And they've got something—someone—I want to get back alive."

"One of the Uskevren?" Jak asked.

"No, but one of the house guards. A boy." Cale paused before adding, "Riven's involved."

Jak nodded knowingly and said, "No surprise there. That murdering basta—"

"No," Cale interrupted. "Riven's with us, Jak. He'll catch up with us in a few moments."

Jak stepped in front of Cale and put up a hand for Cale to stop.

"What did you just say? Riven? *Drasek* Riven?" He looked around for the assassin, didn't see him, then

stared into Cale's face, bristling. "Riven's an indiscriminate killer, Cale. Did you fall asleep in a mistleaf den or something?"

Cale couldn't help but smile. That seemed to round the edge of the halfling's anger. Jak raised his eyebrows and looked at him uncertainly.

"It's a long story, my friend," Cale said. "For now, Riven's with us. But he and I have already had a talk. He crosses you, I put him down."

Jak harrumphed and crossed his arms over his chest.

"He crosses *me* and *I* put him down," said the halfling.

"Fair enough," Cale said, still smiling. He put a hand on Jak's shoulder. "We've got a room in the Lizard. Let's head back and go up."

They did. In the room, Jak took a seat on one of the cots, leaning forward and resting his forearms on his knees. Riven arrived moments later.

Jak stared at the assassin. The assassin stared at Jak. Neither said anything.. Cale let it go. If this partnership was to work, Jak had to establish some of his own rules. Cale knew the halfling knew that, full well.

Riven swaggered across the room to stand over the halfling, a sneer on his face. Jak continued to stare, unflinching.

"Jak Fleet," Riven said, with sarcastic courtesy. "Well met indeed. I'd hoped to see you under ... different circumstances."

Riven held out his hand, a disingenuous offer of peace, and Jak stared at it contemptuously.

"You better put that back where it belongs before it gets lighter by a few fingers."

Riven gave a cold, hard smile and teased, "Yap, yap, little dog. Do you ever bite? I haven't forgotten anything, you know."

Jak stood up, hand on his short sword hilt, chest puffed out, and said, "Neither have I. You still wearing a scar in that kidney?"

Riven's intake of breath was as sharp as a razor. He glared down at Jak, hands on the hilts of his own blades.

"You pull them," Jak said, "you'd better be ready to see it through."

The halfling's lower lip noticeably twitched, and his green eyes blazed.

Riven held Jak's gaze for a moment longer, chuckled, and backed off a step.

"He's got backbone, Cale, and no denying that," Riven said. "Maybe I'll see it sometime."

Still chuckling, he turned and took a seat on the other cot.

Jak followed him with his eyes, sitting only after Riven did.

That was that, Cale thought, and made sure not to smile. Well done, little man.

Jak glanced at Cale, his cheeks red under his bushy sideburns, and said, "These people after you must be something for you to partner up with him." He jerked a small thumb at Riven, who only sneered. "What is it they want?"

Cale took the half-sphere from his pack, unwrapped the burlap, and showed it to the halfling. Jak hopped to his feet and walked over to Cale.

"This?" the halfling asked as he took the half-sphere in his hands, eyeing the tiny, colored gemstones set within the quartz. "Gems are valuable, but other than that, it doesn't look like much. I'd probably bypass it on a second story job." He pulled out his holy symbol, a jeweled pendant he had lifted from somewhere, and intoned a prayer to Brandobaris, the halfling god of rogues and tricksters. "It's not magical either. You sure this is what they want?"

"I'm sure," Cale said.

Riven, seated on the cot, leaned back against the wall and guffawed. He was sure too.

Only then did the implications of what the halfling had said hit Cale.

"Wait, you detect no magic at all?"

"No. Should I?" While he spoke, Jak removed an ivory bowled pipe from one of his belt pouches and fished around in another for his tin of pipeweed.

"I don't know."

At Stormweather, Tamlin had detected protective spells on the sphere. Could it be losing its power? More alarming, could it be *masking* its power somehow?

"Jak," said Cale, "we need to know what this thing is... or was. You know anyone who can help? A Harper maybe?"

Jak had once belonged to the Harpers, a broad-reaching organization that sought to do "good," whatever that meant.

Jak filled his pipe, and struck it with a tindertwig. He blew out a smoke ring in Riven's direction and nodded.

"I know someone," Jak said, "but he's no Harper. He's ... well, you'll see. He is discreet, though, in his way, and I've used him before. It'll cost us."

"I've got the coin," Cale said.

"I've got coin too," Riven said, surprising them both.

"Well enough," Jak said, with a raised eyebrow directed at Cale.

After that, Cale filled the halfling in on the details of the past night, including the use of illusions, the half-drow's and Almor's telepathic abilities, and the way splitting the sphere had seemed to affect Cale's sword.

Riven leaned forward on the cot and listened intently throughout. It was the first time Cale had mentioned the change in his enchanted sword and the attackers' use of telepathy. Jak took it all in. When Cale finished, the halfling blew out another smoke ring.

"A mental mage?" he asked. "That might explain the 'illusion.' You might have only *thought* they looked like the guards."

Cale hadn't considered that. Mental mages—psionicists—were so rare that he'd never encountered one before. He had no idea what one might be capable of doing.

"Possible," Cale said. "I don't know. They didn't manage their weapons like mages, though, mental or otherwise."

"How would we fight psionicists?" Jak asked the ceiling, thoughtful.

"Same way as anything, little man," Cale said, and put his hand on his sword hilt.

"Damned right," added Riven. He picked his teeth with his little finger. "I knew a psionicist once. Little different than an ordinary wizard. Nothing special."

Cale thought Riven's words sounded forced but did not comment.

"I hope not," Jak said. He looked to Cale. "You think they've kept the guard—Ren—alive?"

Cale shook his head. He didn't know, but he sure hoped so. He felt responsible for Ren being captured. He'd told the young man it would all work out. It hadn't.

"He's alive," Riven said. "Else why take him? He's a contingency. If they'd gotten away with the whole sphere, he'd be dead already. They didn't, though, so he's not. Yet. But that doesn't mean they won't have a go at us anyway."

Neither Jak nor Cale took issue with Riven's reasoning. It made sense.

"Now what?" Jak asked the room.

Cale answered, "Now you take us to your contact, and we find out what this is."

"You have a ward on our half?" Jak asked Cale. "To prevent magical tracking?"

"I did. Not anymore. You?"

"Of course," Jak said, and gave him a wink. The halfling again took out his holy symbol and incanted a prayer, all the while holding his pipe in one corner of his mouth. "That ought to keep it for a while."

Cale smiled. He should have known the halfling would have a warding spell available. A good thief could always shield his swag.

CHAPTER 8

Confrontation

Vraggen had been attempting to track the other half of the globe all morning without success. He knew that neither it nor Cale was still in Stormweather Towers. Yet he had heard nothing from Elura, who was supposed to be watching the mansion. His greatest concern was that Cale had simply fled the city with the globe. The fact that his spells had been unable to locate the half-globe heightened that concern. Either Cale had warded it, Beshaba had afflicted Vraggen with exceeding bad luck, or Cale was gone. If the last, tracking him would be difficult and time consuming. Vraggen didn't have that much time. The Fane of Shadows would appear soon. He could sense it.

Once again, he closed his eyes, cast his spell and focused his consciousness. In his mind's eye, he pictured the other half of the globe. His spell diffused his perception, extended it a few hundred paces in all directions around him, through walls, seeking, seeking...

There. Praise Cyric! He sensed the globe!

His glee almost broke his concentration. He could not stop himself from smiling.

He narrowed the location. It was not far. Right, then maybe a block or two up—

"No!"

He lost contact with the globe. Countermagic sheared off his spell-enhanced perception as cleanly as a vorpal blade through flesh. Cale must have enspelled the other half of the globe. But Vraggen knew enough. He let his concentration slip.

Around him, the sound of the street returned and filled his ears: the cllop of horse hooves, the clatter of carriages, the shouts of vendors. He opened his eyes.

"What is it?" Azriim asked.

The half-drow stood beside him, resplendent in a fine-fitting green cloak, polished boots, and tailored shirt. Immediately behind him stood hulking Dolgan and quiet Serrin. Dolgan wore his axes and ring mail. Serrin's leather armor peeked out from under his cloak, and his hand sat on the hilt of his falchion.

Vraggen tried to keep the frustration out of his voice when he said, "I had it for a moment. It's close."

"How close?" Azriim asked. His mismatched eyes looked grim.

"Close."

They stood to one side of Wide Way, one of the main thoroughfares in the Foreign District. The crowd of passersby flowed around and past them at a marked distance. Serrin and Dolgan eyed each as they passed, the way raptors might eye doves. Both men looked ready to gut anyone who looked at them askance. Of course, no one did. Dolgan was too big, and Serrin too sinister. Vraggen's men were eager, ready. He needed to give them their prey. They looked to him for orders.

"The other half of the globe is nearby. A block or two up and to the right. It's probably in Cale's possession. Keep your eyes open. If he's on the street, he shouldn't be hard to spot."

Both nodded and started heading up the street.

"Wait," Vraggen ordered.

They stopped and turned to look back at him. Both had an eager gleam in his eyes. Both wanted another chance at Cale. Vraggen knew their failure at Stormweather had tweaked their professional pride.

"Azriim and I will follow. If you spot him, and he can be killed without risk to the globe, you may do so. Otherwise, we negotiate."

Dolgan gave a hard grin at that and said, "Negotiate ... right."

Serrin only nodded, still gripping his falchion.

They turned and hurried up the street. Azriim and Vraggen trailed several paces behind, scanning the crowd. Cale, tall and bald, would be easy to spot if he wasn't in disguise.

"They want to kill him," Azriim observed with a grin.

"Of course they do," Vraggen agreed. "Hold a moment."

He took out a small glob of gum tree sap from a belt pouch and incanted a spell that rendered both he and Azriim invisible. Some nearby passersby exclaimed at the sudden vanishing of two men from the street but Vraggen didn't care.

"Stay close," he said to Azriim. "The spell only operates close to me."

"Nicely done," Azriim's disembodied voice said.

Vraggen gave a tight smile. He would soon have his globe.

Cale, Riven, and Jak exited the Lizard and hit the street. The three spaced themselves a few paces apart and moved quickly through the crowd. Jak led, and with his small frame darted deftly through the sea of colorfully dressed pedestrians, wagons, and carriages. Cale, however, could not avoid the occasional bump or jostle from the throng. He eyed everyone with suspicion, alert to the street around him, to the rooftops, the alleyways. A few paces behind and to his right, Riven did the same, thumbs hooked on his belt, near his saber hilts. While Cale took some comfort from the fact that the half-sphere again was warded, he was not foolish enough to think that made them safe from attack.

Jak had told them that his contact, an eccentric loremaster of Oghma, lived alone across town on the outskirts of the Temple District. With luck, they could get there within half an hour.

Staying on the main thoroughfares, they made rapid progress. As was typical for Selgaunt, morning traffic crowded the streets. Booth vendors, peddlers, noble carriages, farmers' wagons, adventurers, and merchants all moved along and tended to their business. Cale actually welcomed the passing horse patrols of black-armored Scepters.

Out of habit, Cale occasionally shot an unobtrusive glance behind to check for tails. At first, he saw nothing out of the ordinary, but after a time, he began to suspect that they were being followed. Block after block he saw one or the other of two men—one small, one large—on one or the other side of the street. They avoided eye contact, but that avoidance was a bit too affected. They were good, but Cale was better. He took a few quick steps nearer to Jak so that the halfling could hear him.

"Trouble, Jak."

The halfling didn't turn around but nodded once. Surreptitiously, he signaled in handcant, *I know*.

Cale let the crowd pull him back a few strides, slowly, so as not to alert their tails.

He drifted near to Riven, and asked, "You see them?"

"Saw them, you mean? They picked us up a few blocks back. Two men. Big one on our side of the street, smaller man on the other side. They switch every block or so." Riven casually loosed his sabers in their scabbards, one then the other, and asked, "How do you want to handle it?"

Cale thought about it. They had marked two men, but likely there were more they hadn't seen. Sooner or later, the tails would make a move. They could be setting up an ambush ahead. Cale made his decision. He would force them to act. If he was to fight, it would be on his terms.

"We fight," he said to Riven. He called up to Jak in the halfling's native tongue, "*Find a spot to make a stand, little man.*"

Jak nodded, and began scanning the side streets for an unoccupied alley.

To Riven, Cale said, "I suspect there's more of them we don't see."

"Probably," Riven agreed.

Casually, Cale loosened his blade in its scabbard.

"At least one needs to live," he said. "We'll need him to find out where they're holding Ren."

Riven, his mouth an emotionless line, gave a single nod and said, "*Only* one needs to live. And I'll question him. Well enough?"

Cale knew what Riven meant by "question."

"We'll question him together," said Cale, "but otherwise, well enough."

"They could just be hired muscle," Riven said, "or street thugs."

"Could be," Cale agreed, "but I'm skeptical of coincidences. Too much skill for muscle too."

"Agreed," said Riven.

They picked up their stride a bit to move them closer to Jak. Trying not to be obvious, they communicated the rudiments of a plan.

Jak said to Cale out of the side of his mouth, "Up ahead. Narrow street on the right, just after the warehouse."

Cale saw it. Between two two-story warehouses ran a narrow dirt packed alley. They wouldn't have to cross the street to get to it. Good.

"I see it," Cale said.

"I've got it, too," said Riven. "Narrow. That's thinking, Fleet. That big whoreson's going to have trouble managing an axe in there."

Jak smiled crookedly, obviously surprised at Riven's praise.

He shook his head and said to Cale, "I go invisible the moment I turn the corner."

Cale nodded and said to Riven, "You come in last and draw them into the alley. Take the first man. I'll take the second. I've got a potion. I'll go invisible too. Jak, you make sure to put down anyone else who shows. Otherwise, help where it's needed."

Riven sneered, "I won't need any help, Cale."

Cale didn't expect to need help either, but he believed in being prudent.

"At least one needs to live," Cale reminded them both.

Jak nodded. Riven did not.

They headed for the alley. As they walked, they spaced themselves out a bit—Jak, then Cale, then Riven. Cale saw that Jak, in anticipation of casting, already held his holy symbol pendant in his hand. Cale reached into a belt pouch and palmed his potion. With his other hand he clutched his own holy symbol and whispered a prayer that would give them Mask's blessing in the combat.

Jak reached the alley first. He turned down it as though that was what he had intended all along. He was already invisible by the time Cale, only several paces behind him, turned into the alley.

"I'm on the right, just inside the alley, against the wall," said Jak's voice.

Cale nodded and walked past.

"Stinks," Jak said, and he giggled.

Cale imagined Jak pinching his nose while waiting in ambush and smiled despite himself. The halfling had spoken the truth, though. The alley reeked of manure and rotting garbage. Perhaps three or four strides in width, it extended the length of the block, bounded on both sides by tall, crumbling brick walls. Shapeless piles of trash lay piled on the ground at intervals. Near the alley's far end, two stray mongrels pawed at one such pile. They seemed disinterested in Cale's arrival.

A few doors backed to the alley. The rear exits of shops, probably, but none were open.

With his thumb, Cale popped the wax seal on his potion vial and gulped it down. Immediately, his body began to tingle. He held out his hand and watched as it, along with the rest of him and his gear, faded from sight. Invisible, he backed against the wall on the side opposite that of Jak, maybe five paces into the alley. He drew his blade.

Riven turned into the alley.

"Here," Jak said, to let Riven know where he was.

"Here," said Cale.

Riven nodded as he passed each of them. Ten paces in, he turned, drew both blades, and waited. Down the alley the stray dogs gave a growl, startled, and ran away.

Several moments later—they must have taken time to pair up—the two pursuers entered the alley. Cale quickly appraised them. The smaller, swarthy-skinned man in leather looked to be an easterner. His precise movements, compact frame, and narrow face reminded Cale of Riven. A falchion hung from his belt. The other stood nearly as tall as Cale but was much heavier. He wore hand axes on his belt and a mammoth battle-axe across his back. With his thick nose and heavy-lidded eyes, he looked a bit like a stunted Ogre. Both stopped a stride into the alley when they saw Riven waiting for them. Cale figured Jak could probably reach out and touch both of them.

"Let's dance, prigs," challenged Riven.

The big man grinned and said, "Dance indeed."

His ring mail jangled as he unslung his axe.

The smaller frowned, looking around the alley as though for Cale and Jak, while he absently whipped free his falchion.

"Just us," said Riven, and he whirled his sabers. "Come on."

Riven beckoned them forward. The two spread out as much as the alley allowed and advanced on the assassin.

"Mind that axe, Dolgan," said the smaller.

Dolgan. When Cale heard the name, a red rush of anger flooded him. The man must have paid for healing. He showed no signs of the wounds Cale had given him.

Cale eyed the man's ribs and picked his spot—through the left lung and into the heart. Dolgan would not walk out of that alley.

As they closed on Riven, they unknowingly closed on Cale.

Cale tensed, waiting for the moment, but before he could act, the small easterner exploded into motion. He sped past Cale and lunged at Riven, blade low. Riven, though obviously surprised by the easterner's speed, managed a parry with one of his sabers, slid to his left, and loosed an overhand slash at the easterner's head. Sidestepping neatly, the easterner spun three hundred sixty degrees and slashed at Riven's thigh. Riven managed to jump backward, slamming himself into the wall.

Dolgan, still a few paces back, must have thought to take that opportunity to rush in. He bellowed and charged, axe held high for an overhand slash, the only swing possible for that axe in the narrow alley. Before he had taken two steps, Cale stepped in front of him, dropped to one knee and impaled him through the chest. He became visible the moment his long sword penetrated flesh.

Dolgan's bellow gave way to a scream of pain. His would-be charge served only to impale him on Cale's sword, nearly to the hilt. The blade slid between ribs and grated against bone before bursting from Dolgan's back.

The big man glared surprised rage at Cale. He opened a mouth flooding with crimson. He roared with pain and anger, soaking his beard in blood and spit, and tried as he began to die to bring his cumbersome axe to bear. Not possible. Cale was too close in, and Dolgan already too weak. When the big man attempted to shorten up on the haft, the weapon fell from his grasp.

Cale stared coldly into Dolgan's dull eyes and twisted his blade half a turn before jerking it free.

That's for the guards, whoreson, he thought and hoped that Dolgan too could read his mind.

Dolgan's eyes rolled. He staggered, fell to his knees, bleeding, coughing, and . . . grinning? Cale controlled the disgust that rushed up his throat and smashed the hilt of his sword into Dolgan's temple. He groaned and crashed to the street. Cale turned around to help Riven with the easterner.

"That one lives, Riven," he said, because Dolgan certainly would not.

The little easterner responded quickly to Cale's sudden appearance. He maneuvered himself against the alley wall so that he could face both Riven and Cale without exposing his back.

Not waiting for Cale, Riven lunged forward and unleashed a flurry of slashes. Preternaturally quick, the little easterner danced left, ducked below a cross slash, and stabbed low with his falchion. The blow nicked Riven's forearm near the elbow. The assassin grunted, slashed high, and managed to open a slit in the easterner's shoulder.

Cale started to rush in on the easterner's blade side, his own sword gripped in both hands, when a voice from behind cut through the melee like a razor.

"Cease now or the halfling dies!"

Cale stopped in mid-stride, blade held before him. Riven and the easterner, not more than a pace and a half apart, stopped too but kept blades at the ready. All eyes turned to the speaker.

The half-drow and Vraggen stood at the mouth of the alley. The half-drow, smiling and dressed in a flamboyant green silk shirt and cloak, held Jak by a handful of his red hair. With his other hand, he held a long sword at the halfling's throat.

"I don't know how they saw me, Cale," said the halfling.

"There are many things you don't know," Azriim said, and he gave a hard smile. "Now, speak again and you die."

Jak bit his lip and said nothing.

Beside the half-drow, dressed in a gray cloak and skullcap, stood the dark-eyed wizard. He held an iron wand in his left hand.

For a moment, everyone simply stared at everyone else. The only sound in the alley was that of the combatants' respiration and Dolgan's gurgling. Cale glanced down at Dolgan in contempt. He was surprised the man was still alive.

Vraggen broke the silence. "The globe," he said, his voice a low hiss.

Cale made eye contact with Jak. With his eyes, the halfling indicated his hand, then signaled in handcant, *I'm ready*.

Cale understood.

"The globe," Vraggen repeated. "Or your friend dies right now. Followed by your other friend ..."

Riven scoffed at that.

"... followed by you."

"It's gone," Cale said. "I destroyed it."

He could think of no better lie on short notice.

The wizard sighed with impatience and said, "A lie. Azriim."

The half-drow jerked Jak's head back to expose his throat. The halfling grunted. His fists clenched. The half-drow's—*Azriim's*—forearm tensed.

Decide quickly, Cale, said Azriim's voice in his head.

"It's in my pack," said Cale, low and dangerous.

Azriim stayed his hand and looked to Vraggen.

"Of course it is," said the wizard with a smug smile. He tapped his wand in his palm.

"Here," said Cale as he slowly unslung his bag, catching Jak's eye as he did, and he fished out the burlap sack containing the half-sphere.

The wizard's eyes blazed as Cale peeled back the cloth to unveil the half-globe. The half-drow gave a satisfied smile. For a moment, Azriim's sword arm relaxed. Cale saw the tendons slacken.

Jak burst into action.

In a single motion, the halfling grabbed the half-drow's blade with his left hand—grimacing as it sliced open his palm—and held it at bay while he lifted his foot slightly, drew a small punch dagger from a boot sheath with his right hand, and used a reverse strike to stab the half-drow in the thigh. Azriim howled and clutched at the wound with his free hand. Jak ducked under the half-drow's attempt to muscle his sword into the halfling's jugular and tumbled away, leaving Azriim holding nothing more than a clump of his hair. Jak regained his feet in an instant and brandished the dagger.

Pressing his bleeding hand against his thigh, he said, "C'mon, you drow bastard!"

Azriim's mismatched eyes burned. Ignoring the bleeding thigh wound, he brandished his blade and advanced on Jak. The halfling, hugging the opposite wall of the alley, backed off toward Cale.

Cale started to step to Jak's aid but stopped. He didn't want leave the sphere unguarded.

Just behind Cale, the easterner unleashed slash after slash at Riven. Riven parried his blows and answered with his own sabre cuts. Their exchange brought them both within arm's reach of Cale, who stood over the sphere, looking this way and that. In the meantime, the wizard leveled his wand.

Things were going bad fast. Cale stopped the combat the only way he could. Gripping his blade in both hands, he held it over the half-sphere. Shadows danced in the air between the half-sphere and the steel.

"Stop, or I'll destroy it right now!"

He raised the blade, and for a heartbeat, all motion in the alley stopped. Vraggen's eyes went wide. He continued to point his wand at Cale but held up his other hand, palm outward.

"Do not," he said, as though he was in a position to give orders. "Do not, Cale."

Jak took advantage of the pause in the combat to back farther away from the half-drow and nearer to Cale. Azriim eyed him throughout.

"This is the blade that split it in half, mage," Cale said. "I'll turn it to shards this time."

"I'll kill you slowly if you do," Vraggen said.

Cale heard the worry behind the mage's bravado. Vraggen wanted the half-sphere badly.

"Perhaps. Or perhaps I'll split you groin to gullet. Either way, you'll not have what you want."

Vraggen's jaw tightened. His fingers whitened around the wand. A halo of shadows swirled around his head. Cale could fairly see his mind churning.

"Destroy the globe and the guard from Stormweather Towers will die. Painfully, I promise you. Will you be able to live with the knowledge that you caused him so much pain?"

The mage spoke in such a matter-of-fact tone that Cale knew the threat to be no bluff. Azriim looked to Cale and chuckled.

Cale would have torn out his tongue if he could have. From behind, Riven, breathing heavily, said, "Bugger these whoresons, Cale. Do it."

He lunged at the easterner—a bluff designed to elicit a start. The easterner didn't move a muscle, merely eyed him coolly.

"Quiet your dog, Cale," said Vraggen, his eyes still on Cale's sword.

Riven said nothing but Cale could imagine the hateful sneer he shot the mage.

Cale reached a decision quickly. The mage was right. He would not be able to live with himself if he brought harm to Ren. That left only one course: he would arrange for the trade he had anticipated all along. But he wanted to know what the sphere was before he turned it over—if he turned it over.

"This," Cale said, and lightly tapped the half-sphere with his sword, an act that elicited a wince from Vraggen, "for the guard. Two days from now, at the eighth hour, at the Twisted Elm north of the High Bridge."

A common location for meetings, the Twisted Elm was a well known landmark along the north road, not far out of Selgaunt and surrounded by an expanse of flat plain. It would be easy to avoid an ambush there. Rumors said the Elm's roots craved blood; Cale suspected the rumors had their origin in meetings gone bad. A lot of blood had been spilled under the Elm's eaves.

Vraggen's brow furrowed. He fiddled with the wand, as though trying to decide if he could use it on Cale before Cale could strike the half-sphere.

"You are not in a position to be requesting terms, Erevis Cale," he said at last.

Cale knew he had the advantage then. He almost smiled ... almost.

"I'm not requesting anything, mage. I'm telling you how this is going to unfold. You want this half of the sphere much more than I want the guard safely returned."

That was a lie, but Vraggen wouldn't know it.

"If that was true, you'd have destroyed it already. Do you take me for a fool, Cale?"

"Try me then," Cale challenged and again raised his blade.

For a moment, Vraggen said nothing, but Cale could see his mind racing behind his emotionless eyes,

could almost hear him grinding his teeth.

"Two days hence, then," Vraggen managed to say without anger.

Cale allowed himself to exhale.

Indicating Azriim and the easterner, he said, "And if I catch sight of these errand boys in the meantime, I destroy my half on the spot. Then I come for you."

At that, Vraggen gave a tight smile. Azriim too grinned broadly, and Cale saw that he had perfect teeth. From behind and just to Cale's right, the easterner spat a glob onto Cale's boot.

Cale looked at it, looked at the easterner ...

Quick as an adder, Cale lashed out with his right hand, grabbed the easterner by the cloak, and jerked him in close before he could bring his falchion to bear.

"Next time those are teeth you're spitting," he said, and he shoved the man, stumbling, past Jak and toward the mage.

The easterner quickly recovered his balance, if not his dignity. He whirled around and started to advance on Cale, snarling. Vraggen reached out a hand and held him back. The man stared hate at Cale.

It was Riven's turn to chuckle.

"Leave," ordered Cale. "We're operating on my terms now, and this little party is over."

"For now," Azriim said, and his smile disappeared.

With exaggerated care, Vraggen replaced the wand into the folds of his cloak.

"We shall do this your way for now, Erevis Cale," the mage said, "but before we part, let me leave you with a reminder of the price the guard will pay if you do not turn the remainder of the globe over to me."

He nodded to Azriim and the half-drow's grin returned.

You will love this, said his voice in Cale's head.

Slowly, so as not to give alarm, Azriim reached into an inner pocket of his cloak and withdrew something wrapped in a silken handkerchief. Cale's stomach churned.

When Azriim unveiled the severed fingers that lay within, the half-drow's grin widened. He cast them to the road, near Cale's feet. The easterner smirked, though his gray eyes remained hard. Vraggen showed no emotion but his cloak pin, shaped like a jawless skull, seemed to leer.

"Those are three of his fingers, Cale," the mage said. "Next time, it shall be his tongue. After that, only Savras can say. But you should know that I can maintain his life for some time even while removing substantial amounts of flesh, which I will do, if necessary. And after that, I will come for *you*." Vraggen fixed his gaze on Cale. "Do not trifle with me, Cale. Is it clear to you that I am in earnest?"

It was, but Cale would not give the bastard the satisfaction of an acknowledgement.

"You were leaving, I believe," said Cale.

Vraggen looked past Cale to Riven and said, "You could join me, Drasek. We were both Zhents once, allies even. I could use you now, and I can pay you well."

Riven sneered, "You couldn't pay me enough. Self-important dolts like you are the reason I left the Network in the first place."

Vraggen's eyes went hard. His lips twisted into a contemptuous smile.

"I frightened you the last time we met, did I not, Riven? Probably left you teary eyed in the street, bawling like a babe. Next time you won't come back from that place."

Riven started toward the wizard and said, "Frighten? Let me show you how frightened—"

Cale grabbed Riven's cloak and stopped the assassin's advance. Riven didn't take his eye off the wizard.

"Take your hand off me, Cale."

Cale could feel the tension in the assassin's body.

"Not now, Riven." He shook him once, hard. "Not now. But that time will come."

Riven looked at him, let his body relax, then looked back to Vraggen.

"You're already dead, mage," the assassin said. "And you'll never see me coming. After this little bit with the sphere is over, you'd better sleep with one eye open."

Vraggen stared holes at them and said, "After this is over, I won't sleep at all."

Cale had no idea what that meant, but he'd had enough.

"Leave," he ordered.

Vraggen looked to Cale, smiled, and nodded at Riven.

"It is well that you can control your dog, Cale," he chuckled. "But, as you said, we were leaving. Azriim, gather up *our* dog and let us be on our way."

Cale thought Vraggen wanted Azriim to retrieve Dolgan's corpse, but to Cale's utter amazement, Dolgan was still alive. The big man's leg twitched. He gave a wet groan. His armor and tunic were stained dark with enough blood to fill a well bucket but somehow he still breathed. Cale couldn't believe it. His blow

would have felled an ogre.

"Trickster's hairy toes," Jak breathed, and he shrank away from the big man.

Azriim sheathed his blade, stepped forward without a hint of wariness—Cale or Jak could have stabbed him through the chest—and helped Dolgan to his feet. Inexplicably, the wounds Cale had dealt the big man had already stopped bleeding.

"Hurt?" Azriim asked him.

"Yes." Dolgan gave Cale a leer. Blood caked his teeth and mouth. "But it's a good hurt."

"Mind the clothes," Azriim said, and he held the big man at arm's length to keep Dolgan's bloodstained tunic away from his finery.

In that moment, Cale thought with certainty that Dolgan must be insane, or a worshiper of Loviatar, or perhaps both.

Azriim and Dolgan backed off—Azriim eyeing Jak darkly—until they stood beside Vraggen and the little easterner near the mouth of the alley. Jak slid nearer to Riven and Cale.

"Two days, Cale," Vraggen said. "For the guard's take, do not be late and do not attempt any trickery."

"You bring him to the Twisted Elm—intact—and you'll have your sphere, intact."

Vraggen nodded. Azriim gave a graceful bow.

"A pleasure, gentlemen," said the half-drow, "and I use that term casually. I'll look forward to our next meeting."

"As will I," said Cale, and promised violence with his gaze.

Riven pointed his swords at the easterner and added, "And if you step between me and your pet wizard again, maybe we'll have our dance after all, eh?"

The easterner said nothing, merely spat, sheathed his blade, and glared.

"Until then," Vraggen said, and he removed from his robes a teleportation rod similar to that used by the attackers in Stormweather Towers.

Each of the mage's team removed a similar rod. A few turns of the bronze devices and all but Azriim were gone.

The half-drow delayed a fraction of a heartbeat, and in that moment, his laughing voice sounded in Cale's head, *What do you think of my new pants?*

Then he too was gone. But for Dolgan's blood on the ground of the alley, the combat might never have occurred.

Cale, Riven, and Jak stared at one another in silence for a long moment.

After a time, Jak summed up all of their thinking.

"Dark," he cursed. "Dark and empty."

Cale agreed. Who were these bastards?

"Your hand," he said to Jak.

"Huh? Oh."

Jak sheathed his punch dagger, took out his holy symbol, and intoned a prayer to Brandobaris. The skin of his hand closed completely. He flexed it, seemed satisfied.

"Now I need a smoke," the halfling said. He took out his pipe and popped it in his mouth, though he didn't light it.

"You?" Cale asked Riven, and indicated the slash the assassin had taken on his forearm.

"It's shallow. Save the spell."

Cale didn't argue. The thought of using a healing spell on Riven made him uncomfortable anyway.

The assassin held the sleeve of his cloak against the wound and pressed hard to stop the bleeding.

"Let's get out of here," Cale said. "Nothing has changed. We still head for Jak's contact." He kneeled, repacked the half-sphere in his pack, and used a handkerchief—he habitually carried one; once a butler always a butler, he supposed—to pick up Ren's fingers. They would serve as Cale's talisman until he brought the young man back safely.

"Your sage is going to have two days," Cale said to Jak. "I want to know what this sphere is before the meet at the Twisted Elm." He looked at each of Riven and Jak in turn. "Whatever it is though, our priority remains getting Ren back safely. Agreed? He's just a boy, caught up in this by Beshaba's own ill luck."

"Agreed," said the halfling.

"Agreed," said Riven, managing to sound only a little reluctant.

Cale sheathed his blade.

"That doesn't mean we're giving Vraggen the sphere," he added. "That only means we're getting Ren back alive. Either way, we hunt them down and kill them all afterward. Agreed?"

Riven sheathed his sabers, smiled hard, and said, "Agreed."

Jak said in a softer tone, "Agreed. But..."

Cale looked at him and asked, "But?"

"Did you see how fast they healed, Cale?" Jak tapped the stem of his pipe on his chin the way he did when thinking hard. "Both the half-drow and the small one. And that big one with the axe? No one should have lived through that. Look at all the blood."

Cale looked to the pool of blood congealing on the cobbles of the alley—Dolgan's blood. He thought the same thing.

Riven spat. "So they're hearty whoresons. I've seen men like that before. Takes more to put 'em down, is all. But we saw that they bleed; they'll die."

"That's more than hearty," Jak said, shaking his head. He lowered his voice. "Those aren't mental mages. In fact, I... I don't think they're human."

"Dung," cursed Riven. "You're mad, Fleet. They're as much men as us."

Cale ignored Riven. He knew Riven lacked subtlety, in manners as well as thought, and he knew of the assassin's distaste for things magical. Riven would not consider the possibility that Vraggen and his team might be other than they appeared because he didn't *want* to consider it. Strange for a man who had gone so far in the Zhents, an organization rife with wizards.

To Cale though, Jak's point seemed well taken. All of Vraggen's crew had demonstrated a lack of concern with wounds. Nine Hells, Dolgan seemed to *enjoy* being wounded! And all had healed rapidly—too rapidly. Azriim and the woman had shown telepathic powers, and they had the ability to look like other men.

"Shapeshifters," Cale breathed. "Dark."

He'd heard of creatures who could take the form of men—doppelgangers and their ilk—but he'd never encountered any, though rumors to that effect had swirled around the Faceless One back in Westgate. No wonder then that their imitations of the house guards had been so perfect.

Jak nodded and popped his pipe in his mouth.

"That's what I was thinking," the halfling said.

He pulled out a tindertwig, struck it on the cobbles, and lit up.

"Dark," Cale oathed again.

Riven scoffed, but Cale heard the doubt in it.

"That makes it all the more important that we learn what this sphere really is," Cale said. "I want to know what in the Nine Hells is going on."

Vraggen's remark about not needing sleep seemed more ominous. What was the mage after?

Riven shifted from foot to foot, as though full of anxious energy. He still had not sheathed his blades.

"Then let's stop standing around in this damned alley and get to where we're going," said the assassin.

"Take us to this loremaster, little man," Cale agreed.

"All right, but . . ." Jak said, pausing to blow out a cloud of smoke. "There's something else, Cale. Your sword. Did you see how it made some kind of connection with the sphere."

"I did," Cale said.

He could no longer deny that his blade's contact with the sphere had changed it somehow.

"So?" asked Riven.

Cale put his hand on the blade's hilt and said, "That's a question for later, not now."

For now, all he needed to know was that its edge could still draw blood.

CHAPTER 9

Revelations

Moving quickly through the broad avenues and daytime street traffic, Cale, Riven, and Jak made their way uptown. Before long, the two-story brick and wood buildings of the Foreign Quarter gave way to the more elegant and architecturally varied worked-stone residences near the Temple District.

While far from the manses of Selgaunt's Old Chauncel, the homes near Temple Avenue, mostly those of academics, artists with wealthy patrons, and priests, nevertheless indicated the relative wealth of the owners. Cut stone facades, glass windows, covered gardens, lacquered carriages, and gated, well-tended patios and walkways were the rule. Sculptures of magical beasts loomed in every plaza and perched on the corners of most roofs, often carved from the black veined marble imported from the nearby Sunset Mountains. Even the sewer grates, into which the road channels drained, were of cast bronze, with stylized dragons as lift handles.

Selgaunt soared skyward on all sides of the neighborhood. Against the skyline to the north, Cale could see the octagonal bell tower of the House of Song towering over the cityscape. Near it stood Lliira's Spire, the elegant, limestone-faced tower of the Temple of Festivals, festooned as always with long, streaming pennons of green and violet.

To the north, on a high rise overlooking Selgaunt Bay, stood the many-towered, sprawling palace of the Hulorn. The complex looked as twisted and warped as the late ruler's mind. The palace was slowly being abandoned by the dead Hulorn's staff, while agents of the Old Chauncel looted its secrets and argued over who would be its next tenant.

"Nearly there," Jak said. "That's it. At the end of the road."

Ahead, alone in a cul-de-sac, stood a stone house of the Colskyran style, called such after the mage-architect who had pioneered the style two decades earlier. Characterized by elaborate, magically-shaped stonework around the doors and windows, stylized downspouts, and colorful tiled roofs, Colskyran buildings could look as grand as any manse. Not so that home, where there were gaps in the roofing—broken tiles that had never been replaced—unrepaired cracks in the stone scrollwork around the windows, and crumbling mortar between the river stones in the low wall that surrounded the property. Broken statuary lay untended in the courtyard. Shrubs, creepers, and ivy had overgrown the lot. Cale thought that the flora must have grown wild and untended for years.

"This is where you Harpers keep your sage, Fleet?" Riven sneered. "Small wonder your people never knew what was going on."

Jak turned on the assassin and his green eyes flared. "You keep your mouth shut, Drasek Riven." In a softer voice, he added, "And I'm not a Harper anymore."

Surprised, Riven looked as though he wanted to say something further but held his tongue.

In truth, Cale too wondered what sort of sage lived in a house like that.

"Jak," Cale asked, "who is this loremaster?"

Jak pursed his lips. His hands went to the pockets of his trousers and he said, "His name is Sephris. Sephris Dwendon. He assisted the Harpers sometimes ..."

Riven chuckled at that.

"Didn't I tell you to shut up?" snapped the halfling.

Cale interposed before Riven could make a reply.

"Assisted?" asked Cale. "He doesn't anymore?"

"No. Listen, Cale." Jak took a deep breath and said, "He's was a priest of Oghma ... until they forbade him from performing services."

Riven smiled and opened his mouth to speak, but a fierce glare from Jak kept him from saying whatever he'd been contemplating.

"Why?" Cale asked, increasingly dubious.

Jak shifted from foot to foot and said, "Well ... he holds to some unusual ideas. About numbers, mostly, but other things too. I think they think he's insane. Healing spells didn't help him, though."

Cale squatted down to look Jak in the eye and asked, "Numbers? How do you mean?"

"You'll see."

Cale was doubtful, but kept it from his face so as not to hurt Jak's feelings. Still, perhaps Jak's loremaster was not their best play. Maybe Elaena at Deneir's temple would remember them and would help.

"Little man—" Cale began.

Jak shook his head and put a small hand on Cale's shoulder.

"Cale," he said, "I wouldn't have brought us here if I didn't think he could help. Just trust me. I don't think he's insane. I mean—" Jak's eyes found the ground—"he might be, but . . . he's a genius, Cale. Really. The church still takes care of him, despite his illness. It's because he's such an asset to them. He knows things."

Cale looked past Jak to the poorly maintained house. His doubt must have shown on his face.

Jak went on, "He doesn't care about things like the house, and the church doesn't want to pay for a groundskeeper. He doesn't even see people much anymore, but he'll see me. We were friends a long time ago, before he ... started to think the way he thinks."

"And this loremaster is expensive?" Riven asked, amusement in his voice.

Jak stared daggers at Riven. "*He* doesn't charge, Zhent. But the church requires a 'donation' to see him."

Riven's one eye narrowed and fixed on Jak.

"I'm not a Zhent any more than you're a Harper, Fleet."

"And I believe that as much as I believe that black is white," Jak spat.

"Believe what you will," Riven said, low and dangerous.

"Enough," Cale ordered, before the argument went out of control.

Riven eyed Cale and said, "If I cared what this sphere was—and I don't—I'd tell you you're both fools to consult this so-called 'loremaster.'"

Cale looked him in his one good eye and replied, "And if I cared what you thought, I'd ask."

To that, Riven only stared.

Jak looked at Cale, awaiting a decision.

Cale made up his mind quickly—they really had no other option. He had no reason to think that Elaena could help them, even if she was willing. He would trust the halfling's judgment.

"Let's see what he has to say," said Cale. "It's only coin. If it's a waste of time, we'll know it soon enough." He looked to Riven and added, "You can wait here if you like."

"Oh, no," Riven sneered. "I wouldn't miss this."

With that, the three of them strode for the house. The small gateman's shack stood empty and overgrown, the iron gate unlocked and rusted. They walked a cracked flagstone path through the overgrowth and approached the house. If Cale hadn't known better, he would have thought the place abandoned. He wondered if the loremaster might have died some time before, unbeknownst to Jak.

Before they reached the porch, the heavy wooden door creaked open and a tall, balding man with a wreath of brown hair exited. He wore a pinched frown and dark green robes, the raiment of a priest of Oghma. A bronze holy symbol in the shape of an unfurled scroll hung from a chain around his neck. He took in their weapons and armor, still frowning, and crossed his arms over his chest.

"I don't believe—"

Jak cut him off. "We have come to see Sephris Dwendon. We're prepared to make a donation to the Lord of Knowledge."

The priest pursed his thin lips, obviously perturbed by Jak's interruption. Cale was pleased to see that the man was not the sage, as he had at first thought.

"Sephris is indisposed," said the priest, but he didn't turn to leave.

Cale well understood the game, priest or no priest. He would have smiled but for the bad taste it left in his mouth.

"We're prepared to make a *large* donation to the Sanctum of the Scroll," Cale said. "We will not require much of Sephris's time, or yours."

The priest took that in and gave them an appraising look, as though evaluating their capacity to pay what Cale had promised.

After a moment, he said, "Very well, then. I shall see if Master Sephris is receiving visitors."

He turned to reenter the house.

Jak called after his back, "Tell him Jak Fleet is here to see him. Jak Fleet."

The priest did not acknowledge that he'd heard.

They waited, Riven smirking all the while.

"They rotate priests as caretakers for him," Jak explained. "It's not a highly regarded job. Sephris can be difficult."

"That explains him then," Cale said, referring to the priest.

After a few moments, the priest returned. In his hands, he held an open silver box lined with red velvet.

"Sephris will see you, but I must collect the donation first, of course."

Riven sneered, but Cale wasn't surprised by the request. In Sembia, even religion was business.

"Of course," Cale said.

He took from his belt the pouch of platinum suns given him by Tamlin, counted out ten, and placed them in the donation box.

The priest gave a tight smile and snapped the box closed. Cale wondered how much of that coin would actually find its way to the church's coffers.

"Follow me," the priest said. "Sephris is in the library, as always."

They entered the tiled foyer of the home and walked down the main hall. The windows, screened by the overgrown trees and shrubs outside, let in only scant light. No paintings hung on the walls, only scrawled numbers and equations, written floor to ceiling in Elvish, Dwarvish, and Chondathan. Cale stared at them uncomprehending. The mathematics were either very advanced or utterly nonsensical.

"We erase them," the priest explained, nodding at the numbers, "when Sephris moves on to another room. The whole house is this way."

Cale shared a glance with Riven. Rather than smug, as Cale had expected, the assassin looked ... coiled.

Did evidence of madness make him uncomfortable? Cale wondered. A still more uncomfortable thought surfaced in Cale's mind—did serving a god ultimately render all priests at least a little insane? Cale had encountered at least two before: the Righteous Man, and Jurid Gauston.

The priest led them to a pair of walnut double doors, notable for the lack of numbers written upon them.

There, he turned and said to the three, "He may have already forgotten that I told him of you. After announcing you, I will await you here in the hall. Do not unnecessarily agitate him. Do you understand?"

Cale realized then that he didn't know the priest's name, and that the priest didn't know his. It was better that way, he supposed.

They all three nodded. The priest opened the doors.

The circular, high-ceilinged library smelled of ink and esenal root, an herbal paper preservative. Books, scrolls, and papers were crammed so tightly into the wall shelves that the room appeared built of books rather than wood and stone. Thamalon's collection was paltry compared to it. The single room alone rivaled the temple of Deneir's borrowing library. Books and papers, covered in numbers and equations, lay strewn haphazardly across the floor as though blown by a whirlwind. Small teaching slates, similar to those used by Cale's language instructors back in Westgate, lay here and there around the library, filled with chalked formulae written in a tiny, precise script.

Sephris sat at a huge, ornate oak desk in the center of the library, furiously writing with a stick of chalk on another such slate. His thinning brown hair, neatly parted on the side, sprouted from a round, overlarge head. He could have seen fifty winters, he could have seen forty. He wore a heavy, embroidered red robe, and where his arms peeked out of the sleeves, Cale could see numbers inked on his skin. The man had covered his body the same way he'd covered the walls.

The priest cleared his throat and said, "Sephris, the men I spoke of are here."

Sephris looked up at them, though his hand continued to scribble on the slate, as though propelled by another mind. His brown eyes, piercing and thoughtful, narrowed.

"I see them," Sephris said. "You may go."

The priest nodded and excused himself from the room, closing the door as he departed.

"I knew you were coming," Sephris said to them. His eyes looked at them but didn't seem to focus. "See?" He held up the slate upon which he had been scribbling. It was covered in various mathematical formulae. Cale could make no sense of it. Sephris must have sensed their confusion. He tapped a number in the lower left hand corner of the slate. "Three heroes. See?"

Cale didn't. Neither did Riven, it seemed.

"This is madness, Cale," muttered the assassin. "He thinks scribblings told him we were coming. How? Madness."

Cale heard tension in the assassin's voice.

Sephris smiled softly, set down his slate, and rose from his desk. He dusted chalk from his robe and looked at Riven.

"You wonder how?" the loremaster asked.

Riven made no response but took half a step back.

"How many heavens are there?" Sephris asked him.

Riven fidgeted uncomfortably. He looked to Cale and Jak as though for help. Cale had none to give.

"How many?" Sephris asked again.

"How would I know?" Riven snapped.

"There are seven," said Sephris, and he clicked his tongue. "How many Hells?"

Riven scoffed—nervously, Cale thought—and gave no answer. Sephris waited, fingers twitching.

Cale answered, "Nine. Nine Hells."

"Correct. And there's your answer. That's how I knew."

"What?" Cale asked.

But Sephris's mind had already moved on. He stared hard at the halfling, as though trying to remember who he was.

"It is good to see you, Sephris," said Jak slowly. "Do you remember me? Jak Fleet. We met through Brelgin."

Sephris nodded, smiled as though he had just remembered a truth, and said, "It is good to see you, Jak Fleet." He snapped his fingers. "You are one of the three. Servant of the eighteenth god. You remain a seventeen. That is well."

His eyes went vacant. Hurriedly, he bent over the desk and scribbled something on the slate, muttering to himself.

Cale, Jak, and Riven shared a look. None knew what to do or say.

Sephris completed his calculation, or his mad scribbling, examined the result, and nodded.

He looked up at them and said, "I'd offer you a seat, but as you can see, I have none to offer. Zero."

He focused his gaze on Cale, a studied look that made Cale uncomfortable.

"You're the first," Sephris said. "One of the five. Were you aware of that?"

"One of the five what?"

Sephris ignored him and studied Riven in the same way.

"You," he said to the assassin, "You're the second of the five. Two blades, one eye. Your soul is dark. Do you know why you lost your eye?"

Cale felt Riven tense beside him.

"Easy," Cale said to the assassin under his breath.

"You don't know anything about me, old fool," Riven said, his voice low.

Sephris sighed, the long-suffering sound of the misunderstood. He stepped out from behind his desk and walked across the library, hopping to avoid stepping on any of the papers and books, and stood in front of them. Cale readied himself to prevent Riven from doing the old man violence.

"Ten words, thirteen syllables."

"What?"

Sephris signed in exasperation and said, "The words you just spoke. Ten words, thirteen syllables. Do you believe that to be chance? Choice?"

Riven said nothing, which didn't seem to trouble Sephris.

"Not so. Not choice. The *necessary* answer. Two and two are always four."

For a reason Cale could not explain, hearing those words from Sephris reminded him of his attempt to articulate Fate.

"I see what you cannot," Sephris said to Riven, to all of them, "and I know what you do not." He gestured with his arms to indicate the papers on the floor. "Numbers ... formulae. The universe is an equation. Did you know that? Each of us is a sub-equation. Every question a function. Each, therefore, solvable." He looked Riven in the eye and asked, "You don't want to be solved though, do you? Fearful of the answer?"

Riven looked like he wanted to spit. His hand hovered near his blade.

"He's mad," the assassin said, but sounded unsure of himself.

"No," said Jak, "he just knows things. He just . . . thinks differently."

"Indeed," said Sephris softly, and he smiled at Jak. "Differently." He turned and walked away from them, again careful to avoid stepping on any papers or tomes. "Sit where you like. It does not matter."

None of them moved. They continued to stand just inside the door, as though fearful that to enter the library would immerse them in the same mad world in which Sephris lived.

"Do you know why we've come?" Cale asked him.

Sephris folded his hands behind his back and looked up to the ceiling.

"Many variables, of course ..."

He trailed off, muttering to himself, pacing the library, studying nothing. Cale wondered if he should ask the question again.

"Variables," Sephris muttered, "variables." He stopped walking and turned to look at Cale, his gaze sharp. "You've brought me something."

"That shows nothing," Riven said. "A Turmishan palm reader could—"

"You've brought me a half," said Sephris with a smile, "but you wish the whole."

Cale felt the hairs on his nape rise. Beside him, Riven stuttered to a stop.

"Didn't I say so?" Jak said, and shot an *I told you so* look at Riven. "Show him, Cale."

Cale unslung his pack.

"You require an answer within two days," said Sephris, nodding. "Two. Hmm. These formulae are complex. You three present quite the problem. Interesting...."

Cale, wondering how in the Nine Hells Sephris seemed to know what he knew, removed the half-sphere from its burlap blanket. He held it up for the loremaster to see. The gems within the quartz sparkled in the candlelight.

"We need you to tell us what this is," Cale said.

For the first time since they'd entered the library, Sephris seemed to give something his full attention. He stared at the half-sphere—hard. He seemed to have stopped breathing.

"Place it on my desk," he said. "Careful of my papers."

After a moment's hesitation, Cale walked across the library, mindful of the debris on the floor, and placed the half-globe on Sephris's desk. As he did, he looked at the slate on which Sephris had been writing. The numbers and symbols on it were written in half a dozen different languages, at least two of which Cale didn't recognize. Probably Sephris had invented his own branch of mathematics to symbolize his thinking.

"*How many languages do you speak?*" Cale asked in Chondathan.

Sephris waved a dismissive hand and answered in Turmishan, "*There is only one, young man, and it is not written with letters.* Now, move away from my desk."

Cale did.

Staring at the half-sphere throughout, the loremaster walked to his desk and sat. He put his chin in his palms and stared at it, transfixed, his eyes drinking it in, whispering to himself all the while. Cale realized as he backed toward the door that the loremaster was actually counting the flecks of gemstones within the half-sphere. Dark and empty! There were hundreds, at least—perhaps thousands.

"Is he counting the gems?" Jak asked in a whisper, when Cale had retreated back to the door.

Cale nodded, watching.

When Sephris looked up some moments later, he seemed surprised to see them there.

"You, still?" the loremaster said. "This changes everything. Everything."

He picked up his slate, wiped it clean with the sleeve of his robe and began to write furiously.

"A dominant variable," he muttered. "Dominant."

Cale, Riven, and Jak could do nothing but stand and wait while Sephris scratched his head and studied what he had written.

"No," Sephris muttered, and again he wiped the slate clean. He started anew to write but stopped and looked up at them. "Return to me in eighteen hours. I will provide you with your answer then."

"No, Sephris," Cale said. "We cannot."

He couldn't leave the half-sphere unprotected.

Sephris looked taken aback; he must not often be refused. He eyed Cale shrewdly.

"It will be safe here with me. Look." Sephris hurriedly scribbled a formula on the slate that filled it only halfway. He held it up for Cale and said, "Do you see? It will be safe until at least the nineteenth day of this month."

The scribblings meant nothing to Cale, but he needed an answer, and that meant abiding by Sephris's rules. They could keep watch from the street.

"Eighteen hours then," he agreed.

"Excellent. You may go."

At that, Riven scoffed. Under his breath he said, "By your leave, milord."

Cale said nothing. They turned, opened the door and exited. The priest-caretaker greeted them in the hall.

"Did you find what you sought?"

Cale deflected the question. "We'll return tomorrow evening."

"Very well," said the priest, content not to press. "I'll expect you then."

And that was that.

When they reached the street, Cale eyed the nearby buildings. One of them, a three story stone tallhouse, had a roof with only a slight pitch.

Cale pointed and said, "There. We'll keep watch in shifts, in case Vraggen makes another grab for the half-sphere."

In truth, Cale didn't think the mage would risk another attack, but he wanted to be certain. The tall-house roof offered a nice vantage of the entire street.

"Good," Jak said.

"I'm in," Riven said, "but there's something I need to tend to first. I'll be back before nightfall."

"Describe the something," Cale said.

"My concern, Cale."

They exchanged glares. Cale knew it would be pointless to press.

"Act as though you're being watched," he said.

Riven sneered and laid a hand on one of his enchanted sabers.

"I always do," the assassin said. "I'll be back near sunset."

As Riven walked away, Jak said, "I don't trust him, Cale. Not as far as I could throw a troll."

Cale made no comment, just stared into Riven's back. He was not sure if he trusted the assassin either. Obviously Mask did, but that gave Cale no comfort—Mask was a bastard, after all, and always had his own agenda.

"Let's get situated on that roof."

Riven hurried through the streets, his left hand on a saber hilt, heading for the Foreign District. After he'd left the Zhents a few months earlier, he'd purchased a nondescript flat there. It still felt strange to him to have somewhere to go, somewhere he considered his home. While in the Network, he had made a habit of changing the location in which he slept at least twice per tenday, more out of a sense of professional caution than genuine fear. Riven rarely left enemies alive, and the dead didn't often carry grudges.

After he'd left the Zhents, he hadn't seen the point of moving around so often. In truth, after he'd resigned he hadn't seen the point of much at all. He had saved enough coin to keep him in whores and luxury for years, but that kind of life didn't appeal to him. If he'd been a weak man, he might have turned to a weak man's vices—drink and drugs—but those things had never held a draw for him either. So for a time, he'd felt aimless.

To his surprise, that had changed the day he found his girls, and changed still more when he had heard the Lord of Shadows's Call in his dreams.

Riven reached under his tunic to touch the onyx disc that hung from the chain around his neck. He had taken it from the corpse of the last hit he'd performed for the Network: a fat merchant who had run drugs into Cormyr for the Zhents, but had compromised an operative when he was captured by the Purple Dragons. For Riven, the disc symbolized two things: the end of his relationship with the Zhents, and the beginning of his relationship with Mask.

While he wasn't a priest like Cale—Nine Hells, the mere *thought* of that made him sneer—he also wasn't the man he once was. His mind was opening, he knew; something was happening, though he didn't yet know what. He knew only that he served Mask, and for the time being that knowledge was enough. That his service made Cale uncomfortable only made it more satisfying. Riven respected Cale, but didn't like him.

Still, Riven knew the Lord of Shadows had a purpose for Calling him and Cale almost simultaneously. Mask whispered that purpose in his dreams. Riven understood it when he first awakened, when his skull felt as though it was filled with squirming snakes, but the basis for that understanding fled from memory as the dreams faded out of his consciousness. Still, the understanding remained, the certainty, and Riven didn't question further.

He supposed it was faith, and that thought made him laugh.

For most of his life, Riven had thought that faith made men weak, made them dependent upon the divine rather than their own resources. He had held men of faith in contempt, even those in the Zhents. Especially those. In fact, the return of the Banites to authority in the Network had been the very reason he'd left it. The Zhents under the resurgent Banites would not be the Zhents in which Riven had flourished. The new Church of Bane was too fanatical. But Mask had taught Riven to make distinctions among faiths. Faith didn't have to make a man weak or mad, though it often did—he thought of Gauston, The Righteous Man, Verdrinal, and that fool Sephris. In Riven's case, faith was making him stronger. He could feel it changing him. Mask didn't make demands of Riven. Mask said to him, *Here is a way to strength. Take it if you will.* Riven had taken it, for he respected strength—those who had it, and those who shared it with him.

When he neared his flat, Riven circled the block a few times to determine if he had a tail. He didn't. Satisfied, he headed for home.

His flat shared half the space in a one-story wooden building with a scribe-for-hire's shop. The scribe—Riven had never bothered to remember his name—owned the building and had let it to Riven only because he was afraid to refuse. The scribe made his living notarizing bills of lading and shipping contracts, and drafting documents for the illiterate. He also sold paper, ink, and writing quills. He and Riven had

exchanged exactly one sentence since Riven had taken the flat and that suited Riven fine. Riven made the scribe so nervous that the man's ink-stained hands visibly shook anytime Riven walked in his direction. That too suited Riven fine. No conversation meant no questions.

The building stood at the corner of Mal's Walk and Drev Street, both narrow, dirty little cart roads near Selgaunt's western wall. Most Selgauntans held those who lived "under the wall" in contempt, but Riven felt at home there. He could have afforded a much nicer location, of course, but denied the urge. Luxury made a man soft, he knew, and needed only look to Cale for an example of the phenomenon.

The thought of betraying Cale and that little bastard Fleet had entered his mind, of course, but he had dismissed it. Mask clearly wanted him and Cale to work together, and Riven still owed Vraggen a handwidth of steel in his gut for that spell. More than a handwidth. He thought of the dark place that spell had taken him, full of shadows....

He shook his head. In any event, the surest way to get a go at Vraggen was to pair up with Cale, and if the half-drow and the rest of his crew got in his way, all the better.

He strode past the door to the scribe's shop, past his own door, and ducked down Mal's Walk. He didn't see the girls—they'd be along—and no one else was in sight. He pulled a slim dagger from a boot sheath, slid the blade between the shutters of his only window, and carefully lifted the latch. Silently, he pulled open the shutters and slid through the window.

Good habits, he told himself. Unless absolutely necessary, he tried to avoid obvious entrances and exits. With all the corpses he'd left in his wake, it paid to stay sharp.

No one was inside the two room flat. Riven's spartan furnishings took up little space. In the front room, a plain wooden table and chair stood near the hearth. An oil lamp and a water jug sat upon the table. Other than the hardware for the hearth and the girls' buckets beside the door, the room contained nothing else. His bedroom contained a wood framed bed with a feather mattress—his lone indulgence—with a wagon-trunk at its foot. That trunk held most of his personal belongings.

Around the room he had secreted the wealth he'd accumulated throughout his career in the Network: several diamonds behind a loose stone in the chimney, and four separate coin caches under the floorboards. He went to each in turn, removed the contents, and put them in his coin purse.

He was leaving; he knew that. Possibly, he would not return. Cale didn't see that yet, but Riven did. Whatever they were involved in, whatever Vraggen and this half-drow were scheming, it was bigger than Selgaunt. It had to be. Riven's dream visions had become more frequent, the pain in his skull upon waking more intense. Mask was preparing him for something....

A scratch at the door drew his attention, a chuffing at the gap between the bottom of the door and the floor.

"Here I come," he said, smiling.

He rose and glided across the room. He checked the buckets—one filled with water, one filled with the boiled scraps he regularly purchased from a butcher on Tenderloin Street. Typically, he pre-paid by the month, and a butcher boy delivered the buckets of scraps every day or two.

He opened the door and the girls thundered in, tails wagging and tongues lolling.

He kneeled down to receive their charge and they nearly bowled him over. He rubbed each behind her ears.

"Hey, girls, hey. Good dogs, good dogs."

They licked him in greeting, fairly covering him in dog spit, while their tails wagged furiously. He fought through their affection to shut his door. The smaller of the two, a short-haired brown and black mutt with bright eyes, flopped onto the floor and showed Riven her stomach. Riven obliged her with a belly rubbing.

The larger brown hound with the gentle eyes, obviously the smarter of the two, left off Riven's affection and went for the buckets while the other was distracted with the belly rub. The smaller caught on fast, though. She rolled onto her feet and scampered over to the food. The larger made a hole and the two began to eat in earnest.

Riven slid near them and patted their flanks as they ate. He marveled at how gentle they both were. Most strays would squabble over food, and growl if they were disturbed while eating. Not his girls. He thought they might be a bitch and her daughter but he had no way of knowing for sure.

"I'm thinking I'll be gone for a bit, girls," he said, surprised at how sad those words made him.

He'd grown attached to his girls, as attached as he got to anything. They looked back at him, meat and drool hanging comically from their mouths. He scratched each behind the ears again. The smaller licked his hand.

"But I'll make sure you're cared for."

He had encountered the girls on his way home one night, perhaps two months before. Both dogs,

obvious strays, had been as weak as infants and as thin as reeds. When Riven held out his hand and softly called to them, they had approached him timidly. But when he gently rubbed their muzzles and flanks, their diffidence vanished and they fairly overwhelmed him with licks. Since then, they'd been his girls, and they returned to his flat almost every day. He suspected that they lived in the alley nearby.

He'd never bothered to name them. He wasn't sure why. Maybe he would someday.

Riven had loved dogs since boyhood. Back in Amn, in a life that was so far removed from the present that it seemed to be someone else's past, he had been a kennel boy for Lord Amhazar, an insignificant but sadistic nobleman with a taste for women and violence. Riven's hours with the dogs had been the only happy moments in an otherwise harsh boyhood typified by episodic beatings and chronic hunger.

One morning, that nobleman had beaten him senseless for a reason Riven still did not understand. It was Amahazor's signet ring that had popped Riven's eye. Afterward, he'd left Riven for dead on the side of the road. But Riven didn't die. A passerby, a slaver out of Calimshan, had taken him in and for reasons still unclear to Riven, nursed him back to health, and trained him with weapons. Looking back, Riven realized that he owed that slaver much. He might have told him so if he hadn't put a punch dagger into the base of his skull over a decade before.

When Riven reached early manhood—even then he was already a highly efficient killer—he'd returned to the Amhazar estate in the night, murdered his former lord and the entire Amhazar family, then burned the place to the ground. He'd spared only the serfs and the dogs from the slaughter.

You can always trust dogs, he thought, looking at his girls as they licked the bucket clean. Dogs were utterly guileless. Dogs always stayed loyal. Not so with men, as Riven knew well from experience.

Absently, he rubbed them each in turn. They lay on their bellies on either side of him, full and content. He would not betray the trust they had given him.

"Stay," he said to them, and he rose.

They gave no sign they understood, but both their tails drummed the wood floor.

"I'll be back."

He opened the door and walked next door to the scribe's shop.

The door was ajar so Riven walked in without knocking. The small shop was crammed full with shelves covered with parchment rolls, inkpots, quills, paperweights, and a host of other paraphernalia that Riven, who could not read and write, didn't recognize. The scribe, a thin, plain looking man with squinty eyes, sat behind a huge walnut desk on one side of the room. He was writing something on a piece of parchment and had not yet looked up at Riven.

"Hold just for a moment," he said. "Let me finish this thought." He thumped the paper with his quill point. "There." He looked up. "Now—"

When he saw Riven, his gaze went in rapid succession from Riven's scabbarded sabers to the window that looked out on the street, to Riven's face. His squinty eyes went as wide as fivestars.

"You! Ah—I mean, how can I help you? Is something wrong with the flat? Or do you want to purchase something?"

Trying to get out from behind his desk, the scribe tripped over his feet. When he caught himself on the desk, he toppled his ink pot and spilled ink over whatever it was he had been writing.

"Oh, dark! Dark and empty!"

He tried to sop up the dark fluid with some spare paper, succeeding only in staining his fingers black.

Hearing the scribe curse in anger almost brought an amused smile to Riven's face. Instead, he adopted his professional sneer and stalked toward the desk.

"I do want to purchase something" he said. "Your services."

The scribe wiped his fingers with the parchment.

"You n-need something written for you?" the scribe said, his voice shaking.

Riven eyed him coldly and replied, "No. Something else."

The scribe's eyes moved around but not once did they settle for more than a heartbeat on Riven's face. He dropped the ruined paper and wiped his hands, still shaking, on his trousers.

"Wh-what then?"

Riven leaned forward and rested his fingertips on the desk. He knew he had to tread carefully—create enough fear to ensure compliance with his request, but not so much that he frightened the scribe into fleeing town.

"Two bitches scratch at my door in the late afternoon or evening. You've seen them?"

The scribe's mouth hung open slightly. He nodded.

"I'll be leaving for a while. I won't be returning to the flat for a time."

The scribe started to speak, but Riven cut him off.

"You are not to re-let it. No matter how long I'm gone. Here."

He reached into his cloak, removed a diamond—a small fortune, more than the scribe earned in a year, perhaps two—and placed it on the desk. The man's eyes went wide.

"Take it. That is advance rent for the next twelve months. It's also advance payment for the service you are to perform for me."

The scribe eyed the diamond but did not reach for it. He met Riven's gaze.

"The dogs?" he asked.

Riven nodded. At least the man wasn't stupid.

"A butcher's boy delivers a bucket of meat scraps to my place daily. I feed the scraps to the gir—dogs. I also provide them with water. They rely on me for that. I will make arrangements with the butcher for the deliveries to continue while I'm away. You will see to it that the dogs are fed and allowed entry into the flat. That's all."

The scribe didn't dare refuse but Riven thought he looked less than enthusiastic. The assassin decided to make things perfectly clear.

"Hear what I'm about to say, scrivener. You hurt the dogs, or don't abide by my request, and I'll find out. When I'm back in town, I'll look in on you for a while. I'll watch you from the shadows, for days. You won't know when."

He let the import of that sink in then added, "I've killed over fifty men, scribe, and some of them died ugly. It's work to me. Business. You cross me on this and you're just another number. Clear?"

The scribe's eyes showed white. He nodded rapidly. "Yes. Clear."

Satisfied, Riven shot him one final glare, spun on his heel, and walked back to his flat. The girls' tails thumped the floor when he entered. He smiled at them.

"Taken care of, girls," he said.

For a time, an hour or two maybe, he sat on the floor between them and gave them his full attention. The smaller wanted to play but Riven had no play in him. When the flat began to darken, he stood.

"Time to go, girls." He stood and opened the door. He gave them one last pat as they trotted out. "See you tomorrow," he said out of habit, then realized that he probably wouldn't.

Watching the girls trot back across the street to the alley, he felt concerned. What would happen to them if he were to die?

He blew out a breath and shook his head.

You're getting as soft as Cale, he chided himself.

He pulled the door closed behind him and hit the street. He would make a stop off at the butcher and head back to the Foreign District, to Cale and Fleet.

He shot only a single glance back as he walked—to the alley, where his girls lived.

As promised, Riven returned before dark. Their perch atop the rowhouse afforded a nice panorama of Selgaunt and the setting sun cast the city in fire.

Cale and Jak nodded a greeting, and Riven returned the gesture.

"Anything?" the assassin asked.

"All quiet," Cale replied.

"Too bad," said Riven, and the three shared a chuckle.

Rotating one man out for breaks, they sat atop the rowhouse while the sun set, night fell, and Selune rose. As Cale had suspected, nothing happened. At midnight, Cale sat apart from Riven, regularized his breathing, closed his eyes, and silently prayed to Mask for his spells. The Lord of Shadows heeded Cale's request, and the holy words burned themselves into his brain, words of power that Cale could actuate with his will and his holy symbol. He felt Riven's gaze on him throughout, but they didn't speak of it afterward.

Otherwise, the night passed with nothing more interesting occurring in the street below than a carriage throwing a wheel. Each of the three managed to get at least a few hours of sleep.

The next day, the gongs and bells of the Temple District sounded the dawn and began to count down the hours. Sephris had told them to return in eighteen hours—not tomorrow afternoon or evening, but *exactly* eighteen hours. Cale figured that Sephris meant what he said. They would return between the fourth and fifth hour.

Like the night, the day passed without incident. The caretaker-priest exited Sephris's home in the morning to retrieve two buckets of water from a nearby city well.

Otherwise, they saw nothing but the occasional passerby. The time passed—slowly, but it did pass.

About half an hour after the Temple of Song rang the fourth hour, Cale stood.

"Let's move," he said to Riven and Jak.

The three descended the row house on the alley side and hit the street. As before, the caretaker-priest, dressed in green robes, opened the door to Sephris's house before they reached the porch. Cale figured he must have some kind of alarm spell triggered by the opening of the wrought iron gate.

"Gentlemen," the priest said, managing to inflect the word just enough to make it an insult. "Sephris is expecting you. He has been awake all night." From the circles under the priest's eyes, Cale thought that he too had probably been up all night. "Follow me," he said.

Riven grabbed Cale's shoulder and said, "I'll wait."

"What? Wait?" asked Jak.

Ignoring the halfling, Riven kept his gaze on Cale.

"I don't care what the sphere is," the assassin said. "You know my terms."

Cale looked into Riven's face. Indeed he did know Riven's terms—the death of Vraggen—but he also knew the real reason for Riven's reluctance to enter the house: Sephris made him uncomfortable. No reason to make an issue of it. He gave Riven an out.

"That's a good thought. Watch the street in case anyone else shows."

Riven nodded.

Cale and Jak turned to follow the priest. As he walked, Cale realized that he was beginning to regard Riven as something more than an assassin. He was beginning to regard him as a man, with human weaknesses and fears. That made him uneasy. It could make hard decisions more difficult if their relationship went bad later on. He put it out of his mind as they entered Sephris's house.

New formulae covered the plaster walls of the hallway. To Cale, they looked hurried. Sephris's precise script had given way to a barely legible scrawl, as though the thoughts had come too fast for his hands to record.

"As you can see," the priest said, "Sephris has been very busy since you left."

Cale nodded. He and Jak shared a pensive look.

The priest led them to the library doors. Before he opened them, he turned to face them, lips pursed.

"I fear that your perception of what is happening here, with Sephris, may be ... incorrect."

Jak began to interrupt with a protest but the priest held up a hand and cut him off.

"I can see it in your face. To someone from outside the church, it may appear that we treat Sephris as an oddity, or perhaps a sort of mascot."

Here he looked at Cale with hooded eyes. Cale managed to hold his gaze, though his thoughts tracked the priest's words. It seemed to him that Oghma's church displayed Sephris the same way a Cormyrean sideshowman displayed his freaks. That the church required a "donation" to see Sephris only solidified the perception.

The priest gave a tight smile and nodded, as though he had read Cale's thoughts.

"I assure you that is not the case," the priest continued. "Without a caretaker, Sephris would not eat, drink, or bathe. Caring for him is not always pleasant, yet my brethren and I regard it as an honor."

"An honor?" Jak exclaimed. "I thought—"

"You were mistaken," the priest interrupted. "You see, Sephris is not insane. He is blessed, one chosen by the Lord of Knowledge, and is so regarded by all in Oghma's orthodox church."

Disbelief must have shown on Cale's face.

The priest nodded. "I know how it must appear to you, but it is not so. Oghma has blessed Sephris with a unique gift—an ability to think in a way that no one else can think, to know what no one else can know." Sadness, or awe, dropped the priest's voice. "It is a wondrous gift, but a gift from a god can be a difficult burden for a man to bear." The priest looked at them and gave a soft smile. "Such is the case with Sephris."

The priest seemed to be waiting for a response. Cale could think of nothing to say. He didn't know why the priest had just told them what he had. He merely nodded.

The priest looked from one to the other, his face emotionless, then he turned and opened the doors. As he did so, his words stuck in Cale's brain: *Sometimes a gift from the gods is a difficult burden for a man to bear.* Cale reached into his vest pocket for his holy symbol but stopped before touching it.

"Sephris," the caretaker-priest said, "the petitioners from yesterday have returned."

The priest turned and nodded to Cale and Jak, then exited the library, pulling the doors closed behind him.

To Cale, the library appeared even more disorderly than it had the day before. Papers and workslates lay strewn about everywhere, all covered in Sephris's urgent scrawl. On the desk, set upon a stack of papers, stood an intricately crafted bronze orrery. Beside it sat the half-sphere. Sephris hovered over both, staring. He looked the same. He hadn't changed his red cloak and Cale doubted that he had eaten. Despite the frantic nature of Sephris's writings, the man himself appeared calm and composed, at least at the

moment. Cale supposed that even those fueled by divine knowledge could not maintain a fervor forever.

Without looking up, Sephris said, "Only two of the three on this seventeenth day of the sixth month."

"Sephris?" Jak asked hesitantly. "Are you all right?"

Sephris looked up. Dark circles colored the skin under his eyes.

"Indeed, Jak Fleet. Better than I have been in some time." He put his hand on the half-sphere and grinned. In that smile, Cale saw madness, or conviction. "I can't see it," Sephris continued. "It is a dominant variable, but so dominant that I *don't know*. I cannot solve it."

Cale's heart sank as the import of those words registered. Sephris didn't know what the sphere was. They had wasted a day.

"Come here," Sephris said, and waved them toward the desk.

Cale and Jak walked across the library, each careful to avoid stepping on any of Sephris's work papers.

"Never mind those," Sephris snapped. "Come here."

The half-sphere sat on the desk, inert, inscrutable even to Oghma's Chosen. Cale stared at it. He didn't know what he would do next.

Sephris smiled at them. His eyes were bloodshot and intense. His hair stuck up at odd angles. He nodded at the half-sphere.

"I cannot solve it! You have presented me with a premise for which I cannot craft a proof. For that, I thank you."

"Thank us?" Jak asked.

Sephris nodded and said, "Indeed. I have thought for some time that there was nothing that I could not solve, given time. I am pleased to be wrong."

Cale picked up the half-sphere. The gemstones within the quartz caught the light and twinkled, taunting him. He was glad for Sephris—since Sephris seemed to be glad—but he was also disappointed that they knew nothing more than they had the day before.

"We're pleased for you, old man," said Cale, "but we'd hoped for more. We need to know what this is, and if you can't—"

"I know what it is, Erevis Cale," Sephris cut in, smiling broadly. "I simply do not know its fate. Except that it is entangled, infinitely entangled, with you two."

Cale stared at him hard and asked, "How do you know my name?"

"Because I solved you, First of Five."

"What—"

Only then did Sephris's words register.

He knew what the sphere was!

Cale held up the half-sphere and managed to keep the emotion out of his voice when he said, "Tell us."

"Yes, tell us," Jak echoed.

Unlike Cale, Jak's voice betrayed the excitement he felt.

Sephris held out his hands for the half-sphere and asked, "May I?"

"Of course," Cale answered and handed it to him. Cale was surprised to see that his own hands were shaking.

"Imagine the sphere intact," Sephris said, and he pointed to the green gem—cut in half—set in the exact center of the half-sphere, "and note the emerald set in its center."

"All right," Jak said, smiling, eager. "Go on. Go on."

Cale nodded.

"Imagine that the emerald is—" Sephris tapped one of the planets represented by his orrery, the one third from the sun—"Abeir-Toril. Our world."

Cale's arms went gooseflesh.

"What?" Jak asked. "What?"

Cale cleared his throat as the implications of Sephris's statement hit him. "Then the other gems are ... ?"

"Stars," Sephris said. "And planets ... other celestial bodies. Including some that are visible in our sky only once every few centuries."

Jak reached out a hand for the half-sphere though he did not touch it.

"How can you be sure, Sephris?" the halfling asked. "It doesn't look like anything."

The loremaster—Cale thought that Sephris had earned the title—chuckled at that.

"Jak Fleet, the motion of the heavens can be represented by a mathematical model as easily as... the volume of a sphere. I'm certain. Observe."

Sephris turned the small crank on the orrery. The bronze gears of the mechanism turned and the eight planets began to circle the sun.

"You see? Their motion is predictable, understandable, *solvable*." Sephris's voice turned wistful as he continued, "The movement of the heavens is applied mathematics in its purist form." He looked down at Jak, who stared wide-eyed at the orrery. "And so I am certain. I suspected that the sphere might be a representation of the heavens when first you showed it to me, but some of the unusual heavenly bodies represented by gems in the sphere caused me to doubt, but I resolved those."

"Unusual?" Cale asked, intrigued.

Sephris nodded and said, "Indeed. As I mentioned, some of the celestial bodies represented in the sphere appear in our sky to the unaided eye only rarely."

Cale thought he understood. If he imagined himself standing on the emerald, the gems in the sphere represented the celestial heavens surrounding Toril.

"So it's a map," Cale concluded.

"Trickster's toes," Jak oathed, and snapped his fingers. "A map. Of course. But a map to where?"

Cale's mind raced. Why would Vraggen and Azriim risk so much for a map of the stars? They could simply look up at the night sky with a spyglass and obtain the same information. The sphere would tell them little more than Sephris's orrery.

"It *is* a map, at least of sorts," Sephris acknowledged, but gave a secretive smile. "The most elaborate, complete representation of the heavens that I have ever seen. It must have taken months to craft." He indicated his orrery and added, "This is paltry in comparison. But the sphere is more than a mere map."

In a rush, it all came together in Cale's mind. Sephris had described the motion of the heavens as predictable, but he had also said that some of the celestial bodies represented in the sphere appeared only rarely. In that instant Cale knew what the sphere was: It was a picture of the sky *at a particular point in time*.

"It's a timepiece," he breathed.

Sephris looked at Cale with raised eyebrows, obviously surprised that he had made the connection.

"Indeed," said the loremaster. "It could be nothing else."

Jak frowned and asked, "A timepiece? Like a Neverwinter clock? How?" Before Cale could explain, realization dawned on the halfling's face. "Because then-movement is predictable, because some of the gems—some of the celestial bodies, I mean—appear only rarely." He looked at Cale, smiling. "So it's not a map to a where ..."

"It's a map to a *when*," Cale finished, and could not keep the excitement from his voice. He looked to Sephris. "When?" he asked, but knew the answer the moment the words came out of his mouth.

Sephris shook his head, frowned, and said, "I cannot tell with only half of the sphere."

Cale should have realized that, of course.

Sephris sank into his desk chair with an audible sigh. Exhaustion showed on his face. Cale realized that the loremaster had hardly mentioned numbers at all since they'd entered the library. Fatigue must have quelled his mania.

"Can you determine anything, Sephris?" Jak asked. "Does it show a time in the past?"

Sephris shook his head and answered, "The future, I believe, Jak Fleet. The future."

The halfling looked at Cale with raised eyebrows. Now they knew that Vraggen wanted the sphere to tell him when something would occur . . . but what? Cale looked at Sephris.

"If we had the other half of the sphere," he asked, "you could tell us the time?"

"Easily."

Cale nodded. That was something.

"Cale ..." Jak began.

"Let's discuss it outside," said Cale.

He picked up the half-sphere and put it in his pack. Sephris watched it vanish into the pack the way a man might watch his lover's back fade into the distance.

Cale looked at Sephris, then looked at the halfling and said, "Jak, let me have a moment."

Surprised, Jak looked a question at him but nodded. Without a backward glance, he exited the library.

Before Cale could say anything, Sephris said, "You are a priest, aren't you, Erevis? I could calculate the answer but I'm very tired and it would be easier if you would simply tell me."

Cale nodded and asked, "How did you know?"

Sephris chuckled, "I can see the abhorrence on your face."

Cale started to protest but Sephris held up his hand and shook his head.

"I'm all too familiar with it," Sephris said. "You see in me what you fear you may become. Only another priest has that fear. Only priests are wise enough to fear, rather than covet, the gifts the gods may give."

"The little man—Jak—is also a priest," said Cale. "You didn't see the same fear in him?"

Sephris waved his hand dismissively. "He is a seventeen. A seventeen is prime, evenly divisible by only itself and one, at least among whole numbers. Do you see? A seventeen is not divided in his soul. He is at peace because he already knows what he is. He is not *becoming*. He is what he is supposed to be. Do you want to know what number you are?"

Cale knew that whatever he was, he was not a prime number, but some number divisible by two. Cale's soul and his loyalties were divided, and he knew it. Light and darkness warred in him, man and god, faith and independence.

"No," he said, a bit more harshly than he had intended.

Sephris accepted that without a word.

Cale had planned to ask Sephris what he meant when he had called him the "First of Five," but he decided then and there that he didn't want to know. He didn't want to plumb any deeper into Sephris's thought processes. He did not want to plumb any deeper into his own nature. Except....

"Was it worth it?" Cale asked. "Oghma's gift?"

Had Mask granted Cale a "gift" of the sort that Oghma had bestowed on Sephris, Cale would have hated him for it.

Sephris nodded. He took Cale's meaning.

"That is a fundamentally flawed question, Erevis. Do you know why?"

Cale shook his head.

"Because it implies a choice."

Mentally, Cale rejected Sephris's statement. He insisted on believing that at some point choice entered into the equation.

Cale said, "I'm not a determinist, Sephris."

Sephris smiled softly. "Then let me answer you this way. Serving a god brings many rewards, but it also demands a price, always a price. The price I paid—" he sighed, a sound both contented and fatigued—"is simply more apparent to you than the price you have paid ... and will pay."

To that, Cale could think of nothing to say. He found that his hand was in his pocket, clutching his mask. He released it as if it was white hot.

Sephris leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and said nothing further. Cale took that as an invitation to leave.

"Thank you for your help, loremaster. If we get the other half of the sphere ..."

Sephris smiled, though he still kept his eyes closed, and said, "Then we will speak again."

Cale turned to go. The library didn't appear as disorganized before.

When he laid his hand on the door handle, Sephris called to him, "One last piece of advice, Erevis. Listen carefully, for here is the key to understanding Fate." He paused before he said, "Two and two are four."

Cale gave a smile. If only it was that simple.

"I don't believe in Fate, loremaster."

Sephris opened his eyes then and said, "That is only because you cannot yet do the math."

Outside, Jak didn't ask Cale what transpired between he and Sephris. Instead, the halfling and Cale filled Riven in on events. The assassin took it in without a word.

Afterward, he said, "So the sphere tells the time that something will occur. But we don't know what the something is and we don't know where it will happen."

Cale nodded. Almost involuntarily, all three glanced skyward, though no stars were visible in the daytime sky.

Jak took out his pipe and tamped it.

"But we can be sure it's not good," the halfling said.

At that, Riven scoffed. Cale suspected that the assassin didn't care if what Vraggen sought from the sphere was good or otherwise. He only wanted to kill the wizard whose spell had made him afraid. Cale would just have to use that.

Jak struck a tindertwig and puffed on his pipe. The pipeweed's aroma filled the overgrown yard.

"Cale," Jak said, "we can't give them the sphere."

"Still thinking like a Harper, Fleet?" Riven asked with a sneer. "What do we care what this sphere signals? Worried about the innocent?"

Jak blew smoke in Riven's direction. He started to frame a reply, but Cale's hand on his shoulder cut him off.

"Little man, he's just goading you," Cale said. "It's his way. Just leave it alone."

Cale shot Riven a contemptuous glance.

"We can't turn over the sphere," Jak repeated. "They aren't human, at least some of them aren't, and we don't know what they plan to do." He shot a heated glare at Riven and added, "And burn him if he won't think about innocents. Wearing a pin didn't make me what I was, Drasek Riven, and resigning from the Network doesn't change what you are."

Riven only sneered.

Cale found that he too was concerned about innocent lives, and that realization pleased him. But there were more selfish reasons at work. He wanted to stop Azriim and Vraggen—*kill* them—for personal reasons. They had invaded Stormweather Towers, murdered guards, kidnapped Ren, and tried to incinerate he and Riven at the Stag. They had earned his wrath. For that, they would all die.

Cale patted Jak's shoulder and said, "We're not giving them the sphere, little man, or at least we're not letting them keep it. We get Ren back safely and kill them all, under the leaves of the Elm. That solve your problem?"

"Solves mine," Riven said, and he winked at Fleet.

Jak blew smoke rings at him and said, "You couldn't solve two and two with an abacus, Zhent."

Jak's choice of words gave Cale gooseflesh.

"We've got a day," Cale said. "Let's get ready."

CHAPTER 10

The Twisted Elm

Cale sat in the chair in their room at the Lizard, preparing for communion with his god. Jak and Riven were already asleep in their cots. Cale was to wake Riven before dawn, but doubted he would. He knew he would not be able to sleep that night.

No candle lit the room but Selune's light through the shutter slats cast silver lines on the floor. Cale waited. Though Selgaunt's churches stopped tolling after the tenth hour, Cale knew intuitively when the midnight hour began. A benefit of serving the Lord of Shadows, he supposed.

He calmed himself, and cleared his mind. Time passed. When midnight arrived, a cloud passed before Selune and cast the room in utter darkness. A sign from Mask.

The darkness mirrored Cale's mood. Dark thoughts filled in his mind, violent, bloody thoughts. He reached out his consciousness to his god and requested spells that would harm his enemies. Mask answered. Cale's mind filled with power, the power granted him by the Lord of Shadows.

At that moment, Riven began to toss in his sleep, muttering in the strange tongue Cale had heard him speak previously. For a fleeting instant, Cale thought he understood the words—an ancient tongue once used by worshipers of the Lord of Shadows in the deep of night—but the meaning danced just out of reach of his understanding before dispersing like smoke.

Jak's voice, jarring in the dark, gave Cale a start.

"You all right, Cale?"

Riven's muttering must have awakened the halfling. Jak was sitting up in his cot, looking at Riven.

"I'm fine, Jak," Cale replied. "Go back to sleep."

The halfling nodded at Riven and said through a yawn, "What in the Nine Hells is he dreaming about?" Cale didn't answer.

"Probably don't want to know anyway," Jak said, chuckled, and lay back down to sleep.

Cale didn't bother to wake Riven for his watch. Instead, he spent the night murdering the last of the butler in his soul. From then on, he wanted nothing in him but the killer.

A steady rain fell, soaking Cale's cloak. The gray clouds turned the dusk of evening into the darkness of night. The surface of the Elzimmer churned in the downpour. Before them rose the High Bridge. Wide enough to accommodate three wagons abreast, the great span had stood for hundreds of years, withstanding countless battles and mage duels. The thick oak footings of the span rose from the river's waters like the legs of giants. It looked as immovable as a mountain, but Cale knew better. The Uskevren had fought a battle there months before against the summoned horrors of Marance Talendar. The magic released during that combat had set the bridge to shaking and nearly brought it down.

Guard sheds stood at each end of the bridge, and a larger barracks complex sat in the center. Pitch torches sizzled in the wind and rain, the flames dancing as though to avoid the downpour. Just outside the near shed stood four Scepters, each armed with poleaxes and dressed in the green weathercloaks of the Scepters. They eyed Cale, Riven, and Jak suspiciously as the three approached. Cale knew the High Bridge guards to be notoriously difficult to bribe. He didn't bother to try. Instead, he presented his Uskevren house badge and announced the three to be on Uskevren business. The bedraggled bridge guards let them pass without further inquiry.

The rain thumped a drumbeat on the wood beams. Probably due to the weather, Cale, Riven, and Jak were the only traffic on the bridge. The river flowed under their feet.

From the far side of the bridge, the Twisted Elm stood perhaps a half hour or so up the road. Ordinarily, Cale would have been able to see it from the bridge, but the rain and darkness made visibility poor. They stalked down the muddy road. The eighth hour approached.

"Near enough," Cale said. "Let's prepare."

He took out his holy symbol, traced an invisible symbol in the air before him, and recited a prayer that would ward him against fire. He cast the same ward on Jak, but when he turned to Riven, the assassin held up a hand.

"Save it, Cale."

Cale shook his head and insisted, "Take it. To the Hells with your professional pride. This is about getting the work done. Remember the fireball Vraggen used at the Stag?"

Riven hesitated.

"This will ward you against fire," Cale said. He hesitated before adding, "It is a blessing from Mask." That last seemed to help convince the assassin.

Riven nodded once and accepted the spell without another word. When Cale finished the incantation, Riven pulled his holy symbol out from beneath his cloak and wore it openly.

Still holding his mask, Cale continued his prayers, asking the Lord of Shadows to bless their efforts in the battle to come.

Jak too began to pray and cast: a ward against divinations and the half-drow's mind-reading on each of them, a ward against detection on the half-sphere, a spell to protect each of them against lightning, and finally, a request for the Trickster's own good fortune in the battle to come.

Afterward, the halfling looked up at Cale and said, "It's as good a plan as any, Cale, but there's no guarantee that they won't see me, even invisible. A powerful caster may be able to penetrate my non-detection ward. And I still haven't figured out how the half-drow saw me back in the alley."

"There's never any guarantees when steel is drawn, Fleet," Riven said as he ran a thumb along each of his blade edges in turn. "Not ever."

Cale looked the halfling in the eyes and tried to communicate an assurance he didn't feel.

"They won't see you," Cale said. "Not this time."

To that, Jak said nothing, but Cale could see he was still bothered. Cale kneeled down and looked him in the face.

"You all right with this?" Cale asked. "What you have to do?"

The plan required an invisible Jak to take down an unsuspecting target.

Jak looked sidelong at Riven before answering, "I'm all right."

Cale held his gaze. "Little man, these whoresons killed nine guards when they attacked Stormweather, and they tried to kill me."

"And me," Riven said, though Cale doubted that helped convince Jak.

"The gods only know what they've done to Ren," Cale continued. "They deserve worse than a sword in their back. They need to be put down, and pity should not cause you to hesitate even a heartbeat. Understood?"

Jak nodded—slowly, but Cale saw conviction in his green eyes.

Riven spit and sneered, "You're wasting words, Cale. We already know Fleet doesn't have any qualms about sticking steel in a man's back. Do you, *little man*?"

They all knew the assassin was referencing that night when an invisible Jak had driven a short sword through Riven's kidney.

"Keep your mouth shut, Riven," Cale spat over his shoulder.

Jak eyes narrowed but he laughed without mirth.

"No, he's right, Cale," the halfling said. "I won't hesitate to put a blade in a back. In the backs of certain men, at least." The halfling stared meaningfully at Riven. "I haven't yet done it and regretted it. I haven't yet stuck someone who didn't deserve exactly what he got."

Riven's sneer deepened. He shot Jak an unfriendly wink.

Jak spat in Riven's direction before turning back to Cale.

"I'm ready," he said.

Cale smiled, thumped him on the shoulder, and said, "Then let's do this."

He reached into his belt pouch, removed his potion of flight, and handed it to Jak.

Before drinking it down, the halfling incanted the words to another prayer. When he finished, his body and gear faded from sight. Even the falling rain didn't reveal his location.

"Our priority is Ren," Cale said. "After that..."

"Anything goes," Riven said, unsmiling.

From somewhere in the air above them—the potion must already have taken effect—Jak's disembodied voice said, "My spell and the potion will only last a limited time. We ought to hurry."

With deliberation, Cale put on the velvet mask that served as his holy symbol and drew his blade.

"Let's move," he said to Riven.

Before they had taken three strides, Jak's voice sounded from just behind Riven, "Watch your back, Zhent. Never know if someone's about to stick it."

Riven's one eye narrowed in anger and he muttered a soft curse. Cale couldn't help but smile.

Jak hovered a dagger toss above Cale and Riven. He experimented a bit to get accustomed to the flight granted him by the potion. Thought controlled movement. If he willed himself forward, he flew forward; if he willed himself up or down, he moved up or down. And he could hover. The sensation felt. . . fun, and he

would have enjoyed it if the situation had not been so dire. He drew his short sword and dagger.

"Space yourselves," Cale said from below, his voice muffled by the mask he wore.

Jak nodded. It would not do for all of them to be caught by surprise in one of Vraggen's spells. He distanced himself from his comrades, eight or nine paces ahead and a dagger toss above. Riven and Cale walked abreast, but fully five strides apart.

Cale held his long sword in one hand and the half-sphere in the other. Jak thought his friend looked sinister in the mask. He wondered why Cale had donned it.

Riven stalked down the road on Cale's left, a magical saber in each hand. To Jak, the Zhent always looked dangerous. Working with Riven reminded Jak of something his father had said when Jak had brought a stray dog back to the burrow: *We can't keep it because it's feral, and you never know when a feral animal will turn on you. You just always know it will.*

In truth, the thought of putting his blade in Riven's back tempted him, but only for an instant. He would kill when necessary and deserved, but he was not a murderer.

In moments, though, he would come as close to murder as he cared to.

But they deserve it, he told himself, and he clutched his holy symbol. Cale had said as much and Jak believed it.

From below and behind, Cale said, "We go when you go, little man. Unless they force us to go sooner."

"I hear you," Jak said.

When Jak attacked, all of the Nine Hells would break loose.

"And don't dally, Fleet," Riven growled.

"Piss off," Jak said, but was not sure the Zhent heard him.

They continued up the road. Jak considered scouting ahead, but decided against it—he couldn't be sure that Vraggen and Azriim wouldn't see through his invisibility, and he didn't want to prematurely alert them. Instead, he stayed in position above Cale and Riven. The rain continued, soaking the ground. Soon blood would join it.

A long bowshot ahead, the Twisted Elm materialized out of the dusk. The huge, magisterial tree could not be missed. It dominated the otherwise flat plain. Its canopy was wide enough to shade a hamlet. Lines in the bark of its trunk spiraled up the bole in an unusual pattern that gave the tree its name. It looked like the threads of a giant carpenter's screw, as though a god had reached down from the heavens and twisted the tree as it grew.

Below those stately eaves, Jak saw four figures. He could not make out features, but from their respective clothing, size, and bare weapons, Jak marked them as Vraggen, Dolgan, the easterner, and a woman. Probably the woman who had led the attack on Stormweather Towers. Behind them, perhaps ten strides farther up the road, stood two other figures: one bound and standing perfectly upright and rigid—an enspelled Ren, Jak figured—with the other, Azriim no doubt, guarding him with a bare long sword.

Jak quietly reported all that to Cale and Riven. Cale nodded. He and Riven picked up their pace. Jak followed suit, going high and praying to the Trickster that any divination spells Vraggen or the half-drow might have in effect would not penetrate his non-detection spell.

When Cale and Riven neared the tree, the woman, the easterner, and Dolgan stepped a few paces out in front of Vraggen. Dolgan's axe was longer than Jak was tall. The easterner said something to Vraggen and the wizard began to cast. Jak knew why. They saw only Cale and Riven. They were looking for Jak.

Jak whispered another prayer to the Trickster, tried to will himself undetectable to Vraggen, and circled around behind them. Closer, he could see that the wizard's outline was shifting and blurred, the result of an illusion that made it difficult to determine where the wizard ended and the spell began. Jak didn't need a spell to know that other magic, without visible effects, probably also protected the wizard.

After Vraggen completed his divination, his gaze swept the area around the elm, though not the air. Dolgan and the woman did likewise, though they had no spell to assist them. They showed no sign that they noticed Jak.

Jak could not contain a fierce smile. He descended a bit and hovered in the area between Azriim and the tree. From there, he had a good view of the entire field of battle.

Cale and Riven stopped ten strides from the Twisted Elm. Cale set the half-sphere on the ground and rested the edge of his blade against it. Riven stared at the easterner. The rain continued to fall. For a few heartbeats, no one spoke. Each side simply evaluated the other.

Cale broke the silence.

"You begin to cast a spell, and I destroy it," he said.

"Where is the halfling, Cale? I instructed you not to trifle with me."

Riven spat and sneered.

Jak couldn't see Cale's face from behind the mask but could imagine his scowl.

"I don't take instructions from you, mage," Cale said. "And the halfling is out of this." He tapped the half-sphere with his blade. "Now, bring forward Ren and you'll have the other half of your sphere."

Vraggen smiled. "The fact that you refer to him by name tells me all I need to know. Toss the rest of the globe to me, then you'll have your ... Ren."

"No," Cale said. "You have a five count." He raised his blade a handwidth above the half-sphere. "One."

"I'll kill him where he stands, Cale. Then you. Do not—"

"Two."

Even in profile, Jak could see Vraggen's narrow face twist in frustration. His hands clenched into fists.

"Very well, Cale."

When he turned his head to call back to Azriim, Jak's breath caught. The mage looked right through him to the half-drow. He showed no sign of having noticed Jak.

"Azriim," he said. "Proceed."

Jak exhaled.

Without hesitation, the half-drow took Ren's left hand, already missing three fingers, and rapidly sliced off the rest, one by one. The careless manner in which the half-drow performed the mutilation, like a butcher with a beef shank, made Jak's stomach churn. Blood poured from the fingers. Ren said nothing, moved nothing. To Jak, the silence was worse than screams.

Azriim stepped on the fingers and ground them into the grass with his boot toe. He looked at Cale with his mismatched eyes and grinned.

Jak turned to see Cale's body go rigid with tension.

Just give him the sphere, Jak silently pleaded. Give it to him.

Cale's plan called for Jak to kill Vraggen after Ren was safe, but Jak feared Vraggen would take the lad apart piece by piece first.

"He is held immobile by my spell, Cale," Vraggen said, "but I assure you, he sees, hears, and feels all that is transpiring. Imagine the agony he felt when his fingers were severed, the pain only compounded by his inability to scream."

"Three," Cale said. He gripped his blade tightly and stared holes into Vraggen.

The mage stuttered in surprise, but managed to recover quickly.

"V-Very well." He called over his shoulder, "Again, Azriim. His hand."

Jak didn't want to watch but found himself transfixed. Dolgan, Serrin, and the woman also seemed enthralled by the war of wills in which Ren's flesh was the battlefield.

The half-drow grabbed Ren by the wrist and extended his arm, as though he meant to chop it off at the elbow. Ren remained exactly as Azriim posed him. His appearance brought tears of sympathy and rage to Jak's eyes. His face was bruised and swollen. He had been badly beaten and the stumps of his fingers pointed accusingly at Jak, seeping blood.

Azriim raised his blade high. His mismatched eyes looked through Jak and asked the question of Vraggen.

Just as the mage was about to nod, just as Azriim's shadowed eyes glowed bright with the thought of doing violence, Cale, as calm as the Dragon Sea doldrums, stated above the rain, "Four." He raised his blade.

Vraggen blinked and froze. In that instant, Jak knew that Cale had won. Jak wondered how far Cale would have let it go.

The mage whirled to face Cale squarely.

Cale's expression was veiled by his mask, but Jak suspected it was tortured. Ren had paid the price for Cale's victory. Jak knew why Cale had donned the mask in the first place.

"Don't you dare do it, Cale," Vraggen commanded, and he signaled Azriim to stand down.

With a disappointed sigh, the half-drow lowered his blade. Jak exhaled—he had not realized that he'd been holding his breath—but softly, so that the sound of his breathing would not give him away.

Cale too lowered his blade, though he set its edge on the sphere. Shadows danced between the crystal and the steel.

"Now that we understand each other, mage, bring me Ren. Now!"

"Bring him," Vraggen said to Azriim, his voice tight.

With surprising strength, the half-drow wrapped his arm around Ren and dragged him forward. Jak scrambled aside, eyeing him as he passed. He could have buried his short sword in the half-drow's neck.

When Azriim brought Ren up near Vraggen, the mage held up a hand adorned with two silver rings.

"That's as far as he goes," Vraggen said, eyeing Cale. "No more negotiations. Give the half-globe to Dolgan or Azriim will slit the guard's throat right now."

For a moment, Cale said nothing. Under the eaves of the Twisted Elm, it seemed as though the world was holding its breath. Rain pattered through the leaves.

"Done," Cale said at last, and Jak knew that Cale was counting on him to do something. Cale kneeled and picked up the half-sphere. "Riven, get Ren."

The assassin started forward, both sabers at the ready.

"The globe, Dolgan" said Vraggen.

The big man, his ring mail chinking and his axe in hand, moved toward Cale.

Riven and Dolgan gave each other a wide berth as they passed, but each eyed the other darkly.

Jak flew closer to Vraggen. The mage's blurry, shifting outline made choosing a vital spot to strike less than exact, but Jak did the best he could. As soon as Riven secured Ren, Jak would make his move.

As Riven strode past the easterner and the woman, he locked eyes with the man and shot him a sneer.

"We'll get our dance yet, dog," Riven said to the easterner. "Never fear."

The little easterner only smirked and ran a thumb along his falchion blade.

Riven reached Ren at the same moment that Dolgan reached Cale.

"Take your hands off him," the assassin said softly to Azriim, "or I'll take your hands off you."

Azriim grinned and unhanded Ren. Riven glared at Vraggen. There was no fear in his one eye.

At that moment, Jak loved Riven.

Dolgan took the half-sphere from Cale in the same instant.

Gracefully, with his eye on the half-drow and Vraggen throughout, Riven sheathed one saber, bent at the waist and scooped the mutilated guard over a shoulder. He staggered under the burden.

"Heavy?" asked Azriim.

"Sod off," Riven hissed.

Glaring at the half-drow, he slowly began backing off. The woman and the easterner slid out wide as he approached.

With only a passing glance at the sphere, Dolgan turned, threw it to Vraggen, and backed a step away from Cale. The mage caught it and spoke a word of power. Instantly, the other half of the globe materialized in his free hand. He placed the two together and held them up to Azriim, who stepped to his side.

The half-drow studied the whole globe for only a heartbeat or two before he nodded.

"I have it now," Azriim said. He looked up and took a step toward Riven, then another.

Dark! Jak knew then that this was going to go bad. He alit on the ground only a short distance behind Vraggen—he wanted the leverage afforded by solid earth under his feet. He stalked forward, as silent as a tomb.

Riven sensed it too, but he was caught in the no-man's-land between the easterner and the woman on the one hand, and Vraggen and Azriim on the other. Jak saw that Riven's knuckles were white around his saber hilt.

The easterner and the woman also took a step toward him, cutting off his avenue to Cale.

Dolgan looked at Vraggen, looked at Cale, looked back to Vraggen. He reminded Jak of a Calishite racing shorthorse waiting to lunge from the stable.

Jak continued to close on the mage. Five strides. Four.

Vraggen smiled mirthlessly—a tight hard line that looked nearly a grimace—and said, "Our business is concluded, Cale."

Three strides. Two. One.

"So now you die," said Vraggen.

The mage grabbed an iron rod from an inner pocket of his cloak and began to incant.

Jak drew back his blades to strike.

"Now!" he shouted, and drove his steel with a snarl into the blurred image of the mage.

His invisibility spell instantly dispelled as he attacked. His dagger found only air, but his short sword bit into flesh and grated against ribs. Jak shoved it home, burying half the blade into Vraggen's ribcage. The magical words on the mage's lips gave way to a surprised gasp and a grunt of pain. He collapsed to his knees, dropping the sphere. Jak pulled back his dagger and stabbed hard for the spot right beside his short sword—

—and Vraggen vanished with a soft *pop*. Air rushed to fill the void the mage had just vacated. The momentum from Jak's stab sent him off balance but he caught himself with a fist on the wet ground.

Contingency spell, his mind registered. Vraggen must have pre-programmed a transport spell to teleport

him away if he was badly wounded. Blast and burn!

Combat exploded around him.

Riven tossed Ren to the ground and jerked his other saber from its scabbard, just as the easterner and the woman rushed him with blades held high. Riven, not waiting to be flanked, bounded left and met the woman's charge with one of his own. His blades whirled so fast they hummed.

Taken aback by Riven's onslaught, the woman tried to abort her charge. She slipped on the rain-slick grass and fell. Riven took one cut at her but she rolled aside with only a nick. Before he could try another, the easterner was upon him.

Meantime, Dolgan lunged forward, axe held high, and took an overhand swing at Cale that could have split a fence post. Cale thumped the axe's haft with his long sword and knocked Dolgan's blow off line, all the while mouthing the words of a spell. The axe buried itself in the wet grass and soil.

Dolgan recovered quickly, released one hand from his axe, and flashed a punch to Cale's chest. The blow knocked Cale back a step but he somehow managed to finish his incantation and grab Dolgan by the wrist with a hand glowing red and charged with power.

The big man's arm seemed to explode from the inside. Gashes erupted on his skin and blood poured from the holes. The bones of his forearm twisted and broke. He screamed, dropping his axe and clutching his spell-wracked arm. Cale stepped past him, stabbing him through the side as he did.

Eyeing the woman as she regained her feet, Cale began again to incant.

Jak caught motion from the corner of his eye—Azriim. He spun to face the half-drow just in time. Azriim's long sword cut a path for Jak's throat. Jak leaped back, deflecting the blow with his short sword. Iron rang on iron. Azriim lunged forward, dropped low, and stabbed for Jak's gut. Jak barely managed to slap the stab aside, though it skinned his ribs. Wincing, he danced backward and tried to open some space to allow him to cast, but the half-drow followed up immediately. A stab. A slash. Another. Another. Jak's arm went numb. Azriim was far stronger than his size would indicate.

Desperate to buy himself a few heartbeats, Jak threw his dagger. The half-drow dodged aside but the small blade nicked him in the abdomen. If it harmed the half-drow, he showed no sign. Jak pulled his holy symbol and hurriedly incanted a spell that would hold Azriim immobile.

Nothing!

The half-drow grinned at him with those perfect teeth and rushed forward, blade high.

Jak backstepped as fast as he dared on the wet grass. He shot a glance to his right.

"Cale!" the halfling called. "Help!"

Cale was just finishing his own spell and he showed no sign of having heard Jak. He pointed a finger at the easterner dueling Riven. The easterner emitted a grunt and suddenly froze in mid-lunge, knees bent, falchion thrust forward. Jak saw that both Riven and the easterner already had taken and given several slashes.

"End it," Cale commanded Riven, and in his cold voice Jak heard no pity.

Without a moment's hesitation, Riven swatted the easterner's falchion from his grasp and stabbed him through the chest with both sabers. He jerked them free with a flourish. Blood fountained from the wounds.

Cale moved to engage the woman and Jak could watch no more. Azriim was upon him again. The half-drow unleashed an overhand slash at Jak's head. Jak stuck his short sword in its path but the impact of the blow drove the edge of his own blade back into his face and opened a cut above his eye. Blood flowed down his face. He grunted, spun aside, and lashed out with a vicious stab. Azriim sidestepped it and swung his blade in a crosscut. Jak ducked beneath it just in time and danced back, but too slowly. Azriim's boot clipped his forehead and a stab took him in the shoulder. Sparks exploded in his brain, pain in his arm. His vision went blurry and he went down, flat on his back and looking up at the sky. Rain pelted his face. He wanted to jump to his feet but his body wouldn't answer.

In that moment, Jak knew he was going to die.

The half-drow appeared over him, his mismatched eyes devoid of emotion. He took a two handed reverse hold on his long sword—an executioner's grip. Jak tried to call for Cale but the blow to his head had left him able only to inaudibly mouth the words.

He forced himself to keep his eyes open. He would see death when it came.

Azriim lifted his blade high, held it for a half a heartbeat, stabbed down—

—Riven appeared from nowhere and at a full run slammed his shoulder into Azriim's unprotected ribcage. Jak heard bones crack. The half-drow grunted and his breath blew from his lungs. The stab that would have killed Jak instead pierced only the earth beside him.

Though the blow from Riven should have flattened Azriim, he somehow kept his feet, rolled with the impact, and tossed the assassin from him with a strength that his slight frame should not have possessed.

Riven landed five strides away, rolled, and leaped up. He shot the half-drow a hard grin and whirled his blades.

"Try something a little bigger, prig," Riven challenged.

Azriim, bent and gasping from the broken ribs, looked to his left to where Cale fought with the woman. Jak followed his eyes.

Without the easterner's speed or Azriim's strength, the woman was no match for Cale's bladework. Already she bled from several wounds. Cale lunged in, feinted high, drew her blade up, and abruptly stabbed low. The steel skinned her hip and she stumbled. Cale followed with an overhand blow that would have opened her throat had she not stuck an arm in its path. Cale's blade sank deep into her forearm. She screamed and as she did, her voice deepened, became more bestial.

She began to change.

Her body grew taller, and thickened. Her nose and mouth expanded and she offered a mouth full of fangs. Her hands lengthened, and her fingers birthed claws. Her alabaster skin turned darker, and began to grow ridges, scales.

"Let us begin again, *Erevis Cale*," she spat.

Wide-eyed, Cale took a step back.

"Elura!" Azriim shouted. "Don't!"

In mid-transformation, she whirled to look at the half-drow, a question on her metamorphosing face.

"Don't!"

She cocked her head and a long, forked tongue licked the ridges of her lips. Jak felt certain that an unspoken communication passed between her and the half-drow.

"Leave him," commanded the half-drow, indicating the easterner.

Simultaneously, each of them quickly pulled out their bronze teleportation rods, twisted them, and disappeared. Dolgan clambered to his feet, leaking blood from his side and arm. Again he had survived seemingly mortal wounds. He too removed his teleportation device, manipulated it, and vanished.

Jak, still dazed, took a few moments to whisper a healing prayer to the Trickster. The battle was over.

CHAPTER 11

The Inexorability of Arithmetic

Cale went first to Ren. He would have uttered a spell of healing to close the seeping stumps of the young man's fingers, but in his hunger for violence he had requested from the Lord of Shadows only spells suitable for combat. He regretted that, and wondered if there wasn't a lesson in it.

So instead, he used his dagger to cut off strips of his cloak and with those wrapped Ren's hands. He then traced a symbol of power in the air with his fingers and intoned the prayer that would free Ren from his magical paralysis.

The moment the spell took effect, Ren fell forward, gasping, cradling his hand. Cale caught him under the armpits and kept him from falling.

"My hand, Mister Cale! My hand!"

To his credit, Ren managed to hold back the tears. When it seemed the young guardsman had gathered himself, Cale held him at arm's length and looked him in the eyes. Ren's face was pale, his eyes sunken. He had been through a lot.

"Can you walk?" Cale asked softly.

It didn't please him, but he had to send Ren back to the city alone. This business was far from over.

Ren looked up from his hand and met Cale's gaze, obviously disconcerted by the mask Cale wore.

"Yes, Mister Cale."

Cale nodded, gave him a gentle shake, and said, "Good man. Listen to me. We can't take you back to Selgaunt and it's dangerous for you to remain here with us. Can you make it back alone? Now?"

For a moment, Ren looked as though all of Toril lay on his back, but he rallied quickly. He stood up straight and gave Cale a nod. His severed fingers made him wince.

Cale thumped him on the shoulder and said, "Good. Go directly to Stormweather. Tell Tam—Tell Lord Uskevren what happened to you, what you saw." Cale debated what else to say. "Also tell him that I now have the entire sphere and that there's no further danger to the House. But also tell him the task is not yet done and that I have to see it through. Do you understand?"

"Understood," Ren answered. He released his wounded hand and held out his other.

Cale clasped it.

"Thank you, Mister Cale." He looked beyond Cale to Riven and Jak and added, "All of you."

Cale could say nothing. He didn't feel as though he deserved thanks.

With a final nod, the young guardsman turned and trudged off into the night.

Cale watched him go. He thought Ren would be all right. At least, he hoped so.

He turned to Jak, who sat on the wet grass nearby, his blades lying beside him. The halfling had a cut above his eye where Azriim's long sword must have nicked him. He still looked a little dazed.

"Trickster's toes, Cale," Jak said, shaking his head and forcing a crooked grin, "that was near one."

Cale nodded and tried to return the grin; he couldn't.

The sphere lay in the grass near Jak. Cale walked over to it, kneeled down and picked it up. To his surprise, he saw that the two halves had somehow fused back together. Only a thin seam around the center, like a scar, evidenced its former split. He studied it for a moment before placing it in his pack.

"All this for that," Jak said.

Cale nodded. He turned to Jak and extended a hand.

"You gonna stay on your arse the rest of the night or find your feet?" Cale joked.

Jak smiled, took Cale's hand, and pulled himself to his feet.

Cale put a hand on his shoulder and asked, "You all right, little man?"

"I'm all right," Jak said, but Cale thought he sounded shaken. "How's Ren?"

Jak indicated the direction Ren had walked, but the night and rain had already swallowed the guard's silhouette.

"I don't know," Cale replied. "He'll be all right eventually."

Jak nodded. He kneeled and picked up his weapons. As he did, he looked sidelong to Riven, who was tending the shallow wounds he had received.

"Riven," Jak said, and Cale could see the halfling was embarrassed. "I owe you."

To Cale's surprise, Riven didn't offer his sneer, didn't even look at the halfling.

"You owe me nothing, Fleet," Riven said as he began to rifle the easterner's cloak. He threw coins to the ground, but when he located the bronze teleportation rod, he examined it for a moment before putting it in a

pocket of his own. "I've got one rule when blades are drawn—my side walks away. Everyone else—" he thumped a fist into the easterner's chest—"you leave bleeding in the dirt. It's that simple."

"Understood," Jak said. "And that's mutual." The halfling looked at Cale. "Take off that mask, eh? You're both starting to make me nervous."

Cale had almost forgotten that he had it on. He had fought with it on only once before. Wearing it made him feel anonymous, as though he had moral permission to kill. He didn't care for the feeling. He took off the mask, put it in his vest, and patted Jak on the shoulder. For an instant, he wondered what kind of man he would have become had he not met Jak Fleet. The halfling was his conscience, he knew. Jak had softened the edges of his nature almost as much as had Thazienne.

"I don't think Vraggen's dead," Jak said. "I hurt him bad, but not bad enough."

Cale nodded. He didn't think Vraggen was dead either.

"We'll find him again, little man," Cale said. "But first we get the sphere back to Sephris. He can tell us when Vraggen plans to do whatever it is that he plans to do. We'll just have to find out the where and the what some other way."

Jak nodded. He reached for his pipe, remembered that it was raining, and let his hand fall to his side.

"Did you see the woman start to change?" the halfling asked. "There at the end?"

Cale nodded.

"What are these things?" Jak asked. "Not just shapeshifters, and that's certain."

Cale had no answer, but he knew that whatever the woman was in her natural form, it was big, with jaws large enough to eat a meat shank in a single bite.

"Look at this," Riven said, and Cale and Jak turned.

Riven had his ear to the easterner's mouth.

"This one's still breathing," he said. He stepped back and eyed the chest wounds he had given the easterner. "The wounds are already closing." Riven gave Jak a frown, then looked a question at Cale. "We passed an abandoned barn about halfway between here and the High Bridge. Did you see it?"

Cale took Riven's meaning right away and said, "I did."

Cale watched the halfling and waited for the import of Riven's comment to settle in. It didn't take long. Jak's eyes went wide. He grabbed Cale's hand.

"You're not—Cale, we can't. No."

"Jak..."

Jak shook his head emphatically. "No." His voice lowered to a whisper. "You're talking about torture, Erevis. That's not us."

Cale shook his head.

"I'm talking about interrogation," he said, but the words sounded insincere even to himself.

Jak scoffed, put his back to Riven, and said in a low hiss, "I've seen the result of Zhent *interrogations*, Cale. That one—" he indicated the easterner with his thumb—"might even be human. He didn't change. We don't know." He crossed his arms over his chest. "No. I won't do it."

"I'm not asking you to do it."

Jak looked up into Cale's face and said, "Yes you are, Cale. Don't try to dodge it that way. Asking me to stand by is the same as asking me to sanction it. Don't."

Cale hesitated but only for a moment. They had little choice.

He kneeled down to look Jak in the eyes. He could feel Riven's gaze heavy on him.

"We need to know what they plan to do with the sphere, little man, and where they plan to do it. I'll try not to let it come to that."

"Try?"

Cale sighed and said, "You said yourself that innocent lives may be at stake." While that was true, innocent lives factored into Cale's thinking only partially. He wanted payback, pure and true. He took Jak by the shoulders. "Listen, now. Sometimes good people have to do hard things. This is one of those times, Jak. If good people won't do the hard things, evil people will *always* win, because evil people will do anything."

Jak shook his head. His green eyes were troubled.

"So we do evil to stop evil?" the halfling asked. "That's what you're saying, you know."

Cale nodded slowly and replied, "If you like, but what I mean to say is that we must be pragmatic, Jak. And pragmatism is a merciless bitch. We can stand on principle and accomplish nothing, or we can grit our teeth and do what needs to be done."

He stood up, took a step back, and waited for Jak to decide.

"I'll try not to let it come to that," Cale repeated, and meant it.

Jak looked forlorn, and Cale wondered what his friendship with Jak was doing to the halfling. Jak pulled Cale up. Cale worried that he was dragging Jak down.

The halfling eyed Cale, looked at Riven, rubbed the back of his neck. Finally, he nodded.

"I hear what you're saying. Innocents are at stake. I know it." He looked at Cale sharply and added, "But I can't be near it, Cale."

"I know," Cale said, and he felt dirty.

He turned away but Jak grabbed his sleeve and pulled him back around. His green eyes burned with intensity.

"Don't lose yourself in this Erevis. Don't turn into Drasek Riven. You're not that man anymore."

That gave Cale a start. How many times had he told himself those very words?

He looked down at Jak and said, "I know. I won't." He put a hand on the halfling's shoulder. "This is just me learning to do the math."

"What?"

Cale smiled softly. Jak couldn't understand because he hadn't heard Sephris's words.

"Nothing," said Cale. "Forget it." He turned to look at Riven, who had already begun to bind the easterner. "Let's get him to that barn."

Riven nodded and grinned a mouthful of stained teeth. He stepped close to the easterner and looked him in the face, nose to nose.

"I told you we'd get that dance, prig. And I don't care if you're human or not. You know why?"

The easterner, of course, said nothing.

Riven's gaze was dark, his voice low. "Because everything feels pain."

The dilapidated barn sat a bowshot off the road, at the edge of an overgrown field. The farmers must have farmed out the soil and moved to better lands years before. To Jak, the decrepit building looked sinister, but perhaps that was because he knew what was about to happen within.

The rain had picked up. Riven and Cale carried the bound easterner between them. They had gagged him and wrapped him in so much rope and cord that even if he could change his shape, he could be killed easily before he could complete any metamorphosis.

As they neared the barn, the easterner, free of the immobilizing effect of Cale's spell, began to struggle against his bonds. He must have deduced what was coming, must have seen it in Riven's cold eye. Riven cuffed him a few times in the face—hard enough to split a lip.

"It only gets worse after this," the assassin promised, his voice as hard as stone. "You'll have a chance—one chance, when we get in there—to tell us what we want to know. After that...."

He stared and let the threat dangle. The easterner glared hate. Riven sneered.

Cale grabbed the easterner by his hair and said, "Anything about you starts to change, and I start cutting off limbs. Hands, then arms. I'll get creative after that."

Jak figured Cale was acting but still felt nauseated.

"I'll wait out here and keep watch," he said.

"Suit yourself," Riven said.

Cale nodded at him and said, "Stay alert. I don't think they'll be back, but we can't be sure."

Jak nodded, feeling numb while he watched Riven and Cale carry the struggling easterner into the barn. He thought Riven might actually have been whistling.

He hoped it was an affectation to unnerve the easterner, but Trickster's Toes if he could be sure.

Cale struck a tindertwig, shot Jak one more glance, and pulled the doors shut behind them.

Jak moved away a bit and sat atop an overturned feeding trough, careless of the rain. He tried not to think about what might occur only a short distance away.

He prayed that Cale could get the information without resorting to torture. In his mind's eye, he imagined the screams. Chills ran along his spine. The rain did nothing to wash away the filth he felt clinging to his soul.

From within the barn, he heard voices. He closed his eyes tightly and tried to abide.

"Sometimes good people have to do hard things," he muttered. "Sometimes good people ..."

A few rusty farm implements and barrels lay strewn about the otherwise empty room of the farmhouse. Riven propped the bound easterner on a barrel in the exact center of the room. Exposed. Vulnerable.

Cale stared holes into the man.

Riven pulled another barrel over and placed it in front of the easterner. The assassin pulled a black leather bag from somewhere. Looking at the easterner meaningfully, he began to remove the

contents—blades, wedges, nails, tongs, a poker, a hammer—and placed them atop the barrel. The easterner's eyes went as wide as coins.

Seeing those tools made Cale's legs go weak. To Riven, he said in Amnish, *"That's not the play, Riven."*

The assassin smiled evilly, as though Cale had suggested a use for the implements.

"We'll see. How do you want to go at him?"

"Ask and answer," Cale replied. *"I'll ask."*

Riven gave a nod, picked up one of the blades, and ran his thumb along its edge.

"I'll answer," the assassin said.

He glared at the easterner with ice in his eyes and a razor in his hand.

Cale could see the fear in the easterner's face, though he tried to hide it.

Riven walked around the easterner, out of his sight. Cale could imagine the fear that must have instilled. The man tried to squirm around, but his binding held him fast.

Cale looked into the easterner's face.

"I don't know what you are," he said.

Riven was suddenly at the man's side, whispering in his ear, "Doesn't matter."

"I only know the situation you're in," Cale continued.

Riven let the razor play along the easterner's face, just below his eye.

"And it ain't good," he said with a smile.

Cale paced in front of the man, keeping his voice cordial. "You can heal, we know that." He stopped pacing, as though a thought had just occurred to him, and he looked into the easterner's face. "Do you know what that means?"

Cale could see from his expression that he did.

"It means we can cut you," Riven said. "And cut you, and cut you, and you won't die." He nicked the easterner's face below his eye. The man winced, but bled only for a heartbeat before the wound closed. "Not ever."

Cale had to turn to keep the disgust from his face. He could see that Riven was enjoying it, and he knew what would happen if he turned Riven loose on the man. He didn't know if he could allow that. He prayed that he would not have to make the decision. For the time being, though, he had to play it out.

"You know who we are, so you know what we'll do," said Cale. "There will be no end to the pain until you tell us what we want to know."

Riven reached out, and took another tool from atop the barrel. The easterner's eyes followed his every move.

"Flay," he whispered into the easterner's ear. He put that tool back and chose a saw-edged blade. "Slice." He picked up a pair of tongs. "Rip."

Cale let the easterner's imagination work, let him feel Riven's presence beside him. The room smelled of fear. He decided that the time was right to make himself the easterner's friend, the only thing standing between him and a madman with a knife.

"I've seen him work before," Cale said apologetically, indicating Riven. "If you won't talk to me ... then you'll have to talk to him."

Riven grinned, circled the easterner the way a vulture circles a dying man.

Moving methodically, staring at the easterner throughout, Cale removed his mask from his cloak and donned it.

Outside, thunder rolled.

Cale spoke the words to a spell that would allow no lie to be spoken within the room.

"If you attempt to lie," he said. "I will know."

The easterner strained against his bonds. Riven, behind him, took his head between his hands and squeezed. The easterner froze. Riven looked to Cale expectantly.

Cale cast a second spell, one that would magnify the fear the easterner already felt. The instant Cale voiced the final syllable, the easterner's eyes went wide and began to dart around. Cale advanced on him. The man grunted, nearly fell over in his terror. Caught between Cale and Riven, he put his chin in his chest, moaned, and began to rock.

Cale hoped that he was coherent enough to answer. He felt uncomfortable putting the man into a state of terror but figured it was better than turning him over to Riven.

"You will have only one chance to answer my questions. Do you understand?"

The easterner grunted acquiescence around his gag.

"Remove his gag," Cale said.

Riven did, but said, "Say a word that even suggests a spell, and I take your tongue."

Cale knew that Riven meant what he said. His spell would not allow a lie to be spoken.

Cale stood over the easterner and asked, "What is the sphere?"

"I don't know," the easterner blathered. "I don't know."

Riven cuffed him in the head and asked, "Why does the mage want it?"

"To transform himself."

"Into what?" asked Cale. "How?"

"A shade," the man said. "By binding with the shadowstuff at the Fane of Shadows ... Shar's temple."

Cale and Riven shared a look. Cale had never heard of the Fane of Shadows.

"Where is this Fane?" Cale asked.

Terror kept the easterner's tongue loose. "At the Lightless Lake, in the Gulthmere, not far from Starmantle."

Cale did not know the Lightless Lake, but he knew of the Gulthmere—a brooding, ancient forest on the Dragon Coast.

"Why does he wish to become a shade?"

The easterner looked at him as though he was stupid, even through the fear.

"To make himself ageless," the man explained, "immune to disease, able to regenerate wounds. Why else?"

Cale understood. Vraggen was prepared to trade his humanity for power. It didn't surprise Cale. He had seen men behave as less than humans for much less than immortality. For the moment, he put it out of his mind, knelt down, and stared the easterner in the eyes.

Cale asked, "What are you?"

The question hung in the air. The easterner's mouth twisted, he bit down on his tongue so hard it bled. He shook his head, sweating, breathing heavily.

Abruptly, Cale's spell ended. He knew it because the easterner's eyes cleared; his expression turned from fearful to defiant.

Cale grabbed him by his cloak and shook him.

"What are you?" he pressed.

"The abyss take you," the easterner said.

Riven slammed a dagger into the man's hand, pinning it to the barrel and eliciting a scream of agony.

"Wrong answer," the assassin hissed. He replaced the gag and reached around to pick up a hammer and several nails from his black bag. "I'll begin with your kneecaps."

Cale halted him with a hand on his wrist and a shake of his head.

Riven glared at him, his eye hard, and said, "He knows more, Cale."

Cale knew, but he couldn't get it, not that way. He shook his head again.

Riven gave way. With an angry snarl, he turned to the easterner and thumped him in the temple with his hammer. Not a killing blow. The man groaned and sagged, unconscious.

"You'll regret this," Riven said, and began to gather up his implements.

Maybe, Cale thought. But he knew he would have regretted the alternative more.

When he and Riven emerged from the barn, he saw that the rain had stopped at last. Behind them, the bound easterner lay unconscious on the wood-planked floor. Cale was pleased that they had not resorted to ... other methods. The spell-enhanced interrogation had revealed enough.

The halfling saw them coming. He hopped off the trough upon which he sat. Even in the dark, Cale could see that the color had drained from Jak's face.

"Is he ... ?"

"No," Cale said. "Just unconscious."

Jak started to walk past them for the barn. Cale stopped him.

"It didn't come to that, Jak."

Jak looked him in the face, judging the truth of Cale's words. He nodded.

"What would you do anyway, Fleet?" Riven spat, contempt heavy in his tone. "Comfort him?"

"Ignore him," Cale said. He guided Jak back to the trough, sat him down, and sat down beside him.

To get the halfling's mind on other things, he went right into what they had learned.

Jak's eyes went wide.

"Shade!" the halfling exclaimed. "Like the Netherese? Burn me, Cale! Those dark hearted bastards aren't even human. I've heard ..." He stopped and shook his head. "Why?"

Cale shrugged. "Immortality. Power. Something else. We don't know. In the end, it doesn't matter. This

isn't over just because we got Ren back. We're going to stop the mage, and we're going to kill him."

Jak nodded, pulled his pipe from a belt pouch, and twirled it between his fingers. His eyes went to Cale's pack.

"How does the sphere fit into this?" the halfling asked.

Cale shook his head and answered, "Not sure of that either. Maybe it tells him when to enter the temple, or when to perform the ritual. Maybe something else altogether. But at least now we learned the where and the what. We know where to start looking. And in the morning, we take the sphere to Sephris and find out the when."

"The morning . . ." Jak said, nodding, and his gaze went distant. He sat silent for a time. "What about him?" he asked at last, indicating the barn.

"It, you mean," Riven said. "That's not a man, Fleet. His wounds start to close the moment they're made."

Jak looked at Cale sharply.

"Only a couple," Cale explained. "Just to knock him out."

Jak accepted that.

Riven said, "Only one thing to do with a creature like that. We cut him into pieces and burn the remains. Not even a troll comes back from that."

Riven said it so matter-of-factly that even Cale blanched. Jak went pale.

"That a problem for you, Fleet? The Harpers didn't teach you how to get your hands dirty?"

"Piss off," Jak barked. "I know what you wanted to do in there. I know what you are."

Those words reminded Cale of Tazi's rebuke. *I know what you are*. He felt covered in filth and was not sure that he could ever get it off.

Riven stepped toward Jak and eyed him coldly.

"You don't know a thing, *little man*. You never leave enemies alive behind you. Never. You'd see that if you stopped thinking like a woman."

Jak bristled. His hand went to his short sword.

"Enough," said Cale, and he grabbed Jak's wrist.

In his heart, Cale knew that Riven was right. They couldn't leave the easterner alive. Jak couldn't yet see that, but he would. He just needed some time. Cale was going to have to cover Jak's soul in filth too.

"Let me think about it," Cale said, and he put a subtle emphasis on the word "me" while he eyed Riven. To Jak, he said, "You do the same."

"Cale ..." Riven said.

"Leave it alone," Cale snapped, and Riven did. Cale took a deep breath. "We can't take him back into the city, so we'll have to sleep here tonight.

"In the barn?" Jak asked, obviously appalled.

Riven sneered.

"No," said Cale. "The rain has stopped. Outside. Here. Find a dry spot and we'll light a fire. We've all done it before. We keep a watch on the easterner throughout the night. We'll decide tomorrow what to do with him. Agreed?"

He looked each of Jak and Riven in the eye, saw no overt disagreement, and decided to be satisfied with that.

The dying embers of the fire provided Serrin's current form little warmth. He lay on his side on the damp ground, his arms and legs tightly bound with cord, his mouth gagged with a strip of cloth. Through slitted eyes, he watched the halfling. The little creature watched Serrin wearily through bloodshot eyes. The other two humans slept nearby—the one-eyed assassin and the bald priest. They had threatened Serrin with pain; soon he would teach them all the true meaning of the term. Already he could imagine the sticky sweetness of their heartsblood on his tongue. He savored the thought of the taste. He had fed on humans before. Like most of his broodmates, he preferred the creamy consistency of brains.

For a time he feigned sleep and listened to their breathing—deep and regular. He knew that the time to stop that breathing was approaching. After that, he would return to Azriim and his brood.

The fact that Azriim had abandoned him bothered him little. Serrin would have done the same. He and Azriim were broodmates, nothing more. Their kind did not waste time on idle sentimentality. Existence offered only two alternatives, Serrin knew: pleasure and pain. Power was the sole means of gaining the former and administering the latter. There was nothing else to life. The emotions supposedly "felt" by humans only obscured that basic truism.

Besides, saving Serrin would have taken time, created risk, and possibly compromised the Sojourner's

cause. And Serrin and Azriim's ultimate loyalty—indeed, the ultimate loyalty of the whole brood—was to the Sojourner. It was the Sojourner who had bred them from chaos. It was the Sojourner alone who could give them what they craved: freedom from service and the transformation to gray. In short, the Sojourner offered them power.

But first, Serrin thought, he would administer some pain.

He opened his eyes wide and stared at the halfling. The small creature returned his gaze without blinking but Serrin could smell the unease in his sweat. He grinned around the gag and the halfling went pale. His hand went to his paltry blade. He started to stand.

With only a thought, Serrin effected a spell that would hold the halfling immobile. The small creature gave a muted squeak and went rigid. He would have used the spell in the barn but it could affect only one person. He listened carefully. The others slept on without stirring. The stink of the halfling's fear increased. Serrin inhaled deeply, savoring the aroma.

Another thought, and he brought into being a magical force, a physical manifestation of the power of his mind. With that invisible mental "hand," he reached out and slowly unsheathed the dagger at the halfling's belt. The halfling's increasing terror was palpable.

Serrin lifted the blade to the halfling's throat, let its edge linger there for a time, then hover before his eyes. The little creature's heart was racing, Serrin knew.

But not for long.

Sweat beaded on the halfling's brow. He was desperate to slip the immobilizing effect of Serrin's spell, but to no avail. Serrin's magic was too strong, the halfling's mind too weak.

Serrin removed the blade from before the halfling's face, floated it through the air, and brought it near his own bound body. Ever mindful of the other sleeping humans, he used the blade to silently slice through the cord and rope that bound him. He kept his unblinking gaze on the halfling throughout, promising with his eyes what he would do in only moments.

When he was free, he lay silent and still for a moment, letting the fear build in the halfling, letting the blood flow return to his pathetic human limbs. He kept his eyes on the little creature throughout. The sweat on the halfling's face glistened in the dying embers of the fire.

Serrin took the halfling's dagger in his hand and slowly sat up. The air was pungent with the stink of the halfling's terror. He could fairly feel the mind of the little rat struggling to slip free of the spell.

Vain. Vain. All vain.

Serrin unfolded himself and stood up, his movements as silent as a whisper. He stared down at the horrified halfling. Three strides away, the would-be torturers slept. Serrin cocked his head, studying the one-eyed human, so vulnerable....

But no. The halfling would make for amusing sport first. His terror had whetted Serrin's appetite.

He turned back to eye the little creature. He stepped forward, the dagger bare at his side. Sweat poured down the halfling's face. Veins pulsed in his forehead. Serrin knelt down and took the halfling's face in his hand.

He pushed himself into the halfling's mind and found it a jumble of terror and frustration. Not a coherent thought to be found.

You're frightened, he projected into the halfling's mind, and savored the creature's shock at the telepathic contact. *I smell it.*

He leaned forward and ran his tongue along the halfling's jawline, just above the jugular, drinking in the sweat.

I taste it.

The pathetic little being actually tried to control its fear by praying. Serrin smiled. No god would help this one.

All at once, he decided to let the halfling see him, the real him, in his true form.

He mentally recited the words that allowed him to take other forms, and with that, he began to change, to grow. When his feeble human fingers had once more become his claws, when his mouth had once more become his maw, he gave the halfling a grin wide enough to swallow the little creature's head.

When the halfling's prayers turned to mental screams, Serrin smiled. He enjoyed the fear for a moment, then began to administer pain.

Cale knew that he was dreaming but could not wake himself. He sat in his favorite chair back in his quarters in Stormweather Towers. Strangely, flames consumed his bed, but he warmed his hands before the blaze as though it was a campfire. A chill breeze blew through his only window, sealed not with his usual shutters but with draperies—red curtains with green ovals. Odd, he thought. He had never had

draperies in his room.

The breeze gusted, grew harsher, colder, and the curtains began to tear. Strips peeled off and blew around the room. He thought he could hear the whisper of a scream as they shredded. He pulled his cloak tighter around him and held his hands before the dancing flames.

"Chill wind blowing," said Riven from beside him.

Cale turned with a start. He had not noticed Riven before. The assassin sat in Thamalon's favorite rocking chair, the one made from Archendale walnut. Strangely, Riven's right eye was the scarred hole. Cale would have sworn it was Riven's left eye that should be gone. This could not be Riven, could it? Tiny stars seemed to twinkle in the blackness of the empty socket. Cale leaned in closer to better see—

—and without warning, Riven leaped from the chair, grabbed him by the shoulders and screamed into his face, "*Wake up!*"

Cale snapped open his eyes, heart racing. Beside him, the campfire had burned down to embers. He lay still and stared up at the cloudy night sky. What had the dream meant?

He heard a sound, like wet fabric being slowly torn, like curtains shredding in the wind. His skin went gooseflesh. He propped himself up on an elbow and looked across the campsite to Jak....

A horror stood over the halfling, flaying him alive.

"Jak!" Cale leaped to his feet, blade bear, holy symbol somehow already in his hand.

The creature uttered a surprised hiss and dropped into a hunched crouch as it whirled to face him.

To Cale's right, Riven awakened with a gasp, his hand going immediately to his unsheathed sabers, which lay beside him. He took in the scene in a breath.

"Dark!" he cursed, and scrambled to his feet.

Even hunched the creature stood taller than Cale, with warty green skin as creased and rough as old leather. Beside it Jak—held immobile by some spell, Cale assumed—looked as small as an infant. Arms as thick as Cale's legs ended in long, black nails; legs as wide as a man's waist ended in splayed, clawed feet. Veins, muscles and sinew pulsed and flexed with each movement of its powerful frame. A flat head, dominated by a wide mouth and row upon row of teeth, sat on a short, thick neck. Its face struck Cale as vaguely amphibian. Somehow, it reminded him of a toad. Its eyes were merciless gray slits—the easterner's eyes.

This was the easterner's true form, Cale intuitively knew. And he also knew, as he had known when he had faced the shadow demon Yrsillar, that this creature was not of Toril.

Jak's blood, black in the firelight, glistened on its clawed fingers.

"Everything feels pain," the creature croaked, and winked at Riven.

It stuck its blood-soaked fingers in its huge mouth and slobbered them clean.

Cale roared and charged. Riven bounded over the campfire to join Cale's attack. As he did, the assassin shouted a word that recalled to Cale the syllables the assassin sometimes spoke in his sleep: "*Vredlaul!*"

The utterance of the word staggered the powerful creature. It stumbled backward a step as though it had been punched in the chest. Cale closed, raised his blade high—

—and the easterner croaked a word of power and darkness fell. Utter pitch. Cale could see nothing. He swung his blade anyway but struck nothing. He froze, dropped into a crouch, and listened.

"Here," he hissed, so he and Riven could get an idea of where each stood.

"Here," answered Riven, from his left.

Cale advanced a step, blade held ready for a quick stab in any direction, ears peeled. He had an idea of where Jak was and stayed in that vicinity.

"Here," he said again.

"Here," answered Riven, a few steps ahead of Cale but still to his right.

Cale heard nothing. Where was the blasted thing?

As abruptly as it fell, the darkness suddenly lifted. Cale and Riven stood a few paces apart. The creature was gone.

Cale kept his gaze from Jak, at least for the moment. He could not allow himself to be distracted.

He signaled Riven in handcant, *Invisible. Move on my signal.*

Riven nodded understanding.

Cale waited only a heartbeat before giving the signal.

Both men exploded into action around the campsite. Leaping, lunging, blades cutting the air. Neither struck anything.

"Gone," Riven said afterward, sweating and breathing heavily.

"Stay alert," Cale said, and he went to Jak.

The spell still held the halfling immobile. The easterner had broken all of his fingers. They twisted and

jutted at angles that made Cale's stomach turn. Too, the creature had bared Jak's chest and flayed the skin and muscle above his heart. Cale could see the white of bone peeking through that shredded mass of red. The easterner had done to Jak what Riven had threatened to do to the easterner.

Cale held his breath as he held his ear to the halfling's mouth. There! Breath. Jak still lived, despite the torture he had endured. Cale could hardly imagine the pain Jak had felt, was still feeling. Tears threatened but he held them back.

"I'm sorry, little man. I'm sorry."

They should have killed the easterner! They should have cut him up and burned him to ash, just as Riven had said. Cale would never make that mistake again. Not with any of them. Two and two were four, bastards.

He had prayed for spells from Mask earlier in the night—at midnight, during his watch—and had requested spells of healing. Mask had granted his request, and had also granted Cale knowledge of another prayer that Cale had never before cast. Fortunately, that spell was not necessary.

Eyes blurry with tears, Cale recited prayers of healing, pouring into them all of his concern for Jak. One spell. Another. Another.

The wounds in Jak's flesh slowly closed, shrank to only white scars. Bone reknit. His breathing grew more regular. His body was healed. His soul... ?

"Hang on," Cale said.

He clutched his holy symbol, and whispered a spell that would free Jak from his paralysis.

The moment the spell took effect, Jak gasped and fell forward. Cale caught him and pulled him close. He could feel the halfling shaking, crying. Cale said nothing, only held his friend and waited for him to gather himself.

Jak could say nothing, only cried and quietly vented into Cale's cloak the pain and rage that his immobility had prevented him from expressing previously.

"I'm sorry, Jak," Cale said finally.

"What in the gods' names are you sorry about?" Riven said, his tone as cold as Deepwinter. "If Fleet wasn't so averse to doing what needs done, this never would have happened."

Cale shot the assassin a look so heated that even Riven wilted. Had he been within arm's reach, Cale would have killed him.

"You keep your godsdamned hole shut or I'll put my blade through it and out the back of your head. Then I'll cut you to pieces and burn you to ash. You understand? *Do you understand?*"

Riven took a step back.

Jak shook his head and leaned back. He pulled away from Cale, wiped away his tears, and examined his fingers. He didn't make eye contact with either Cale or Riven.

"No, Cale," Jak said. "He's right."

Cale started to protest but Jak cut him off. "No!" Jak looked Cale in the eyes and Cale saw something in his friend's gaze that he had never before seen there: hate. "He's right. I put down the pin. I'm not a Harper anymore. It's time I got my hands dirty."

Cale could think of nothing to say. He didn't know whether to take Jak's change of heart as a good or a bad thing. He remembered that Sephris had called Jak a "seventeen." He feared that the equation had just changed.

CHAPTER 12

The Ghosts of the Past

Dawn did not lift the weight from Cale's soul. The thick clouds kept the landscape cast in a dull gray, which mirrored his mood. The three comrades said little as they walked the road back to Selgaunt. To Cale, Jak seemed conspicuously grim. The halfling had covered his bloodstained tunic with his travelling cloak, but that only hid the damage. Seemingly of their own accord, Jak's hands from time to time went to his chest, to the scars. He often flexed the fingers that the easterner had methodically broken, blinking at the memory of the pain.

Seeing that, and recalling Jak's hard words from the previous night, Cale despaired for his friend. He knew that certain actions, once taken, irrevocably polluted a man's soul. Cale had taken such actions long before, as had Riven. Jak never had, but Cale feared that he soon would. He blamed himself. His own words to Jak haunted him—*Sometimes good people have to do hard things*. He had known even when he'd mouthed the words that they had been a rationalization, a seductive invitation to walk a gray path. The first step down that path was always the hardest. But Cale knew too well that after that first step it became harder and harder to take another path. Jak seemed to have made up his mind to walk it.

Riven walked a few strides ahead. Cale drifted near Jak.

"You all right?" he asked softly.

Jak looked startled, as though he had not noticed Cale beside him.

"What?" the halfling said. "Yes. I'm fine."

Cale nodded, and walked beside his friend for a while longer.

"You're not that kind of man either, Jak," Cale said. "You never have been. Don't forget that. Don't lose yourself."

Jak merely nodded, his mouth grim. Cale said nothing more, only walked next to his best friend and tried silently to offer his support.

They re-entered Selgaunt with only a cursory questioning by the gate guards. Cale explained away their appearance by stating that they had been caught without shelter in the rain and that was that.

Despite their fatigue and hunger, they moved briskly through the streets, already crowded with farm carts and carriages, and headed directly for Sephris's residence. Each grabbed a sweetmeat from a vendor and ate on the run.

When they arrived at the overgrown lot of the eccentric sage and opened the squeaky iron gate, the caretaker priest didn't emerge from the house to greet them. Cale's stomach tightened. He and Riven shared a glance. The assassin put his hands on his saber hilts.

They hopped up on the porch and rapped on the door. Nothing.

"Dark," Cale softly swore.

He drew his blade. Riven and Jak did the same. Cale held up three fingers and counted them down. Three, two, one—

He kicked the door, splintering the jambs and knocking it from its hinges, then charged into the house. Riven and Jak followed hard on his heels, blades bare.

They rushed through the foyer to the main hallway. Smearred blood, already hardening to a brown crust, covered the walls and obscured Sephris's scrawling. The wild blood pattern reminded Cale of the way a child might gleefully cast pigment on a blank canvas. The perpetrator, Azriim or Dolgan, probably, had reveled in the bloodshed.

In the main living room, they found the body of the caretaker priest, flayed and gutted, with his intestines draped around his neck like a shawl. Cale had to control a sudden rush of nausea. The body was only just beginning to stink. Jak stared at the tortured priest with haunted green eyes. Cale put a hand on his shoulder.

"Come on," Cale said, and he headed for the library.

He moved without urgency; he already knew what they would find there.

The library looked much the same as the last time they had visited, except that Sephris lay slumped over his desk in a pool of blood. His throat had been torn open by a claw as large as that of bear. Sticky, blood-soaked papers covered the desktop. There was no sign of a struggle. It appeared as though the loremaster had sat at his desk impassively while his throat had been opened.

Cale simply stood and stared. The sphere sat heavy in his pack. Too many had died for it, and all in vain.

For who could tell them the time it tolled?

"Now what?" Riven asked, echoing Cale's thoughts but in a tone devoid of emotion.

He kicked at some of the papers on the floor, a careless gesture that somehow offended Cale.

"Leave those be," Cale snapped. Two people had been brutally murdered, no doubt to keep Sephris from telling them any more about the sphere, and the assassin spoke of it without sensitivity. "And keep your mouth shut."

Jak walked to the desk. Cale followed.

"Look at him, Cale," Jak said. "He must have seen them coming." Jak touched some of the blood-soaked papers, each covered in Sephris's equations. "He must've *known* they were coming. Why didn't he run?"

Because two and two are four, Cale thought but did not say.

Instead, he said, "I don't know, Jak."

He looked at the slates on the floor near the desk and wondered if one of them predicted the loremaster's own murder.

Jak looked to Cale and asked, "Riven was right to ask. What now?"

Cale thought of the unusual prayer Mask had put in his brain for the first time the night before. It made him uneasy to think about it but they had nothing else.

He took a deep breath before answering, "We ask Sephris."

Cale and Jak gently removed Sephris's corpse from the desk chair and arranged it on the floor of the library. Riven did not assist, instead keeping his distance. Cale thought that he understood why. Speaking with the dead reminded Riven—reminded Cale too—that the souls of the men they had each murdered in the past lived on still in Kelemvor's realm. It made Cale's skin crawl to think that so many angry souls awaited him beyond the void. The thought of opening that door made his heart race, but he knew he had no choice. They had to speak with Sephris.

"Ready?" asked Jak.

Cale's dry mouth would not form sounds so he simply nodded. Jak thumped him on the shoulder, stood, and backed off a few strides.

With unsteady hands, Cale donned his mask and sat on his knees beside Sephris. The sphere sat on the floor beside him, sparkling in the candlelight. Cale placed his fingertips on the loremaster's chest and forehead, took a breath, and began to chant the prayer that would open the door between the realm of the living and the planes of the dead. The words poured from his lips as though eager to be spoken, and his voice gained volume as he went on. A roar filled his ears, a sound like the crashing of Uktar waves in Selgaunt Bay. Cale continued the chant, bent against an invisible spiritual storm that he could not see but could sense.

A soft, violet glow suffused Sephris's corpse. It took all that Cale had to keep his fingertips on the loremaster's body. The glow grew brighter. Brighter. Cale could feel a space opening up. The line between the living world and the dead opened with a soft *pop*. Cale's flesh went cold.

Sephris's ghost, his soul, rose up from the corpse.

To Cale, Sephris seemed both there and not there, surrounded by a gulf that was not so much seen or felt as it was implied.

He was staring into eternity, Cale realized. He felt tiny.

And somewhere in that gray limitlessness that extended forever behind Sephris's shade lurked the souls of the men that Cale had killed, ghosts haunting a ghost. Cale couldn't quite see them, but he could sense them, could feel the heavy accusations contained in their empty eyes. There were many, he knew. Too many. Some of them had deserved death, but many had not. As a young man, Cale had never cared to make the distinction, and that failure haunted him. He kept his gaze on Sephris and tried not to think of his past, though it literally stared him in the face.

Sephris's soul, translucent and limned in violet light, hovered in the air above his body. With disturbingly empty eyes, the loremaster looked down on Cale.

"We led them to you, Sephris. I'm sorry for that."

Sephris smiled enigmatically. His empty sockets made it threatening.

"Two and two are four, Erevis Cale."

"I understand that now," Cale said softly, and thought he actually did.

"Do you?"

Cale realized then that Sephris seemed calm. His gaze was steady, his mind focused. Death seemingly had stripped Sephris's soul of Oghma's "gift." For the first time, the loremaster seemed at peace. Cale saw before him the man Sephris must have been before losing himself in his faith. He realized then that service

to a god effected a metamorphosis in the believer so gradual that the believer himself couldn't see it.

He wondered how much his own service to Mask had changed him.

With effort, he put all of that out of his mind. He knew that he didn't have much time. His spell couldn't keep Sephris in the living world for long. And the eyes of those he'd murdered, still lingering at the edge of his perception, bored holes into him. He wanted to end it.

"We have the sphere, Sephris," said Cale. "The whole sphere." Cale held it up for the spirit to see. He felt as though he was a supplicant making an offering. "Tell us the time."

Sephris's empty gaze focused on the glittering sphere.

"This is the dominant variable of your life, First of Five," the ghost said. "By this, you will be changed."

Cale didn't like how much those words echoed his own thoughts.

"It bespeaks the time of the appearance of the Fane of Shadows," Sephris said. "A temple that journeys through the worlds on the currents of the secret Weave." Sephris studied the sphere for a few moments then added, "The Fane will appear in the deepest darkness of the night twelve days from now."

Cale found that he had been holding his breath. He blew it out in a gust.

"Thank you, Sephris."

"There are more variables in this equation than you now see, First of Five."

That alarmed Cale. Things already seemed complex enough.

"What variables?" Cale asked.

But Sephris provided nothing further.

"Release me now, Erevis Cale," said the ghost. "My time on Toril is complete. It has not summed to zero."

Cale tried to find the sense of that, then nodded and said, "Find peace, loremaster."

He let the magic of his spell unravel and the door between realms closed. The library stood silent.

Assuming good weather, the Dragon Coast was eight days away by ship. Cale would have to arrange their passage and leave a message for Tamlin telling the lord of Stormweather that he was leaving Selgaunt. He gathered himself, stood, and looked Jak and Riven in the eye.

"We've got twelve days to reach the Dragon Coast."

"Close," Riven growled.

"Other variables?" Jak asked, with one eyebrow cocked. "What do you suppose that means?"

"Who in the Hells knows," Riven said. "He didn't make sense when he was alive."

Cale smiled despite himself while he returned the sphere to his pack.

"We'll find out soon enough, little man," said Cale. "In the meantime, we've got a ship to catch."

CHAPTER 13

The Dragon Coast

Brine covered Cale's clothes in powdery patches, but he didn't care. The clean smell of the Dragonmere and the brisk westward wind made him smile. He stood with his hands on the aft rail of *Foamrider* and watched the deep blue of the sea trail behind them. He had lingered there most of the trip, listening to the crying gulls, the drone of the waves, and the snap of the ship's sail. To his right, barely visible above the line of the horizon, rose the grassy plains of the Dragon Coast. Behind them, only a dark line on the horizon, stood the pines and cedars of the Gulthmere Forest. The merchant cog *Foamrider* and her captain, Mrs Liis, had carried them all the way across the Inner Sea.

Looking thoughtfully at the calm sea, Cale realized that he had probably sailed over those very same waters over a decade before, when he had fled Westgate for Selgaunt. While *Foamrider* hadn't sailed far enough west for Cale to have caught sight of the Dragon Coast's largest city, seeing those seas and thinking of his time there brought back a host of memories—some good, some bad. Literally and figuratively, he felt that he was returning to his roots.

It felt surprisingly good. It felt honest. And the truth was, Cale enjoyed being aboard ship. He remembered a favorite saying among Inner Sea sailors: *A wild sea calls only wild souls*. He supposed that he must possess a wild soul, because despite the open-sea squall of three days before, the sea spoke to him.

Not so for Jak, he thought with a smile. Or if the sea did speak to the halfling, it didn't say anything the halfling wanted to hear. Jak had spent the first five days of the journey sending puke over the railing. The squall had made the seasickness worse. Only when their journey was near its end did he seem to have found his sea legs at last. That, or his stomach simply had nothing more to offer Umberlee and her waves.

Unlike Jak, the voyage hadn't bothered Riven. Cale thought that he probably had been aboard ship before. The assassin had spoken little during the journey. Instead, he had daily donned his aloof sneer and his holy symbol, and practiced his bladework on deck. The challenge of maintaining his combat balance on a listing deck seemed to interest him. Cale and he had sparred twice, both to a draw. Even the hard-bitten sailors had watched those combats with admiration. They had hung from the rigging and hollered encouragement to one or the other. Other than that, though, the crew had kept their distance from the three comrades and asked no questions.

Exactly as Cale wanted it.

"Starmantle to fore!" shouted the boy from the crow's nest above.

Reluctantly, Cale turned from the sea and made his way off the aft deck to forward. From there, even without a spyglass, he could see Starmantle's spires and towers rising above the horizon line. The features of the cityscape grew clearer as *Foamrider* drew closer.

It was far smaller than Selgaunt, Cale saw, but seemed to have a lot of temples. Strange for a city with Starmantle's reputation.

Jak must have heard the call of the sailor announcing Starmantle. He emerged from below deck, hopped up on the foredeck, and followed Cale's gaze across the sea.

"So that's Starmantle, eh?"

"That's it," Cale said. He looked at the halfling sidelong. "You look better. Eat anything?"

Jak grimaced and replied, "I'll wait until we've got earth under our feet, thank you. When I was a boy, my father had a dwarf friend—Uncle Korik, we called him. Well, Uncle Korik said that a man could only keep his feet and his sense if he was standing on something solid. He'd never set foot on a ship. That's wisdom, Cale."

Cale grinned.

Jak chuckled and added, "Besides, these sailors have got nothing but salt pork and dried fruit. I need a piping hot stew." He snapped his fingers. "And speaking of pipes." He pulled out his ivory-bowled pipe, tamped, and lit with a tindertwig. After a time, he blew smoke at Starmantle and said, "I haven't heard good things about that city."

"You've heard right."

Though Starmantle had a reputation as one of the least violent cities along the Dragon Coast, it still made Selgaunt look as peaceful as a hamlet of halfling matrons. Thieves, pirates, orcs, and worse were as common in Starmantle as the rats.

"I've seen worse," Riven said, suddenly beside them. He spat over the railing and into the sea.

Cale had not even heard the assassin approach. Dark, but he was good! Almost as good as Cale.

"I don't doubt it," Jak said as he blew smoke rings into the air.

Riven sneered but said nothing.

In silence, the three watched the city approach. The marble facades of the many temples gleamed in the afternoon sun. Ships of all kinds, from galleys to caravels to longboats, filled the harbor.

The voyage had taken nine days. They had only three days to get into the Gulthmere, find the Fane, and stop Vraggen.

"We'll need to find a guide who knows the forest," Cale said.

"Shouldn't be a problem to find a guide," Jak observed, and he blew another smoke ring. "Just a problem to find one we can trust."

"I know one," Riven said. "Or did, if he's still alive. Magadon Kest. He knew the southern Dragon Coast well."

"A Zhent," Jak said, and managed to make the word not sound like an expletive.

"No," Riven said, and nothing else.

Cale looked the assassin in his one good eye and asked, "You trust him?"

"No," Riven said, and spat. "But he's a guide. And a good one."

Well enough, Cale thought, and looked back out to sea. At least they had a lead.

Jak blew smoke into the sky.

Riven turned to Cale and said, "You know that if the mage has spies in the city, he'll know when we arrive. These sailors will sell us for coppers."

Cale knew that, but there was nothing for it.

"It's a big city," he said, and left it at that.

They would have to hope that the crowds would make them anonymous.

Riven cleared his throat and drummed his fingers on the rail.

"We could kill them all," said the assassin, "scuttle this tub, and take a dinghy in."

Cale and Jak both eyed him in shock, and the assassin's sneer gave way to a grin.

"I'm jesting, Fleet. Close your mouth before a gull drops a turd down your gullet."

It took a moment for that to register. When it did, Cale couldn't help but smile. Even Jak chuckled, after he'd recovered himself.

"Drasek Riven making a joke," the halfling said, shaking his head and looking at Cale wide-eyed. "That, I thought I'd never see."

"You'll see everything if you live long enough," Riven said.

"Let's make sure we do, then," Cale said, turning the mood back to serious. "Gear up. We debark the moment we dock. First me, then Jak, then you."

He didn't want them getting off the ship as a group. If Vraggen did have spies watching incoming ships, they would be looking for a trio.

He turned back to the sea and watched as a four-man guide boat separated from the mass of ships in the harbor and oared for *Foamrider*. It would direct her to a pier. Behind them, Mrs started barking orders. Above them, the sailors in the rigging began to furl the mainsail. *Foamrider* would float into dock under only the foresail.

Cale watched as the city grew larger and larger in his sight. He knew that beyond it were the Gulthmere Forest, the Lightless Lake, and Vraggen.

All they could do was hope that Brandobaris and Mask favored them with some luck.

"This place is a pit," Azriim said.

Vraggen wasn't sure if the half-drow meant their room at the Bent Chalice Inn or the city of Starmantle in general. Either way, he had little patience for Azriim's complaints. Time was short.

"Silence," he ordered. Though healing the hurt given him by the halfling had been a trifling thing, his wounded pride left him irritable.

He whispered the words to a scrying spell as he poured a ewer of water into the shallow silver basin he'd brought with him from Selgaunt. The surface of the water began to shimmer with color. Vraggen willed the scrying basin to show him the Lightless Lake, and an image formed in the water.

"There," he said. "Observe, Azriim."

The half-drow stepped forward and stared into the basin. Dolgan too crowded in to see.

The basin showed a still lake, its waters the color of slate, set in the midst of a reed-filled lowland. Cypress trees loomed on all sides. That was where the Fane would appear.

Vraggen willed the image to move eastward until it fixed upon a simple settlement.

Sod huts with woven reed roofs surrounded a communal fire pit. Goggle-eyed, froglike humanoids about

the size of a large man, hopped about the settlement. Their smooth, green skin glistened with slime. The warriors among them wore reptilian scale armor and bore wooden spears with fire-tempered tips. Their females wore nothing and probably lived their lives in service to the males.

"Bullywugs," Azriim observed with distaste.

Vraggen nodded. He had scried the bullywug tribe several times before. They lived in the lowland swamp surrounding the Lightless Lake and numbered about eighty or so. The tribal chief and his shaman aide commanded obedience through a combination of physical strength and religious awe. Central to that religion was the Lightless Lake, which the bullywugs believed to be a manifestation of the mouth of their frog god, Ramenos.

Vraggen smiled. The lake *was* holy, but not for the reasons the bullywugs believed.

Vraggen continued to scan the settlement until he located the chief—a towering bullywug, grossly fat, dressed in scale armor and adorned with a crown of polished turtleshell.

"They're near the lake," Azriim said. "They'll interfere with the ritual."

Vraggen nodded. He knew.

"You'll obliterate them, I assume?" asked the half-drow.

Beside Azriim, Dolgan grinned and licked his lips.

Vraggen turned to look upon both of his lieutenants with measured contempt.

"Violence is a tool to be used sparingly," the mage said. "These are simple creatures. It's unnecessary to destroy them. Instead, I will turn them into our allies."

Dolgan's crestfallen expression evidenced his disappointment. Azriim pursed his lips.

"Fine," said the half-drow. "As long as they don't touch my clothes."

For the next few hours, Vraggen studied the bullywug chieftain, waiting for him to be alone in his hut. When he was, Vraggen quickly prepared a series of spells. First, enchantments that allowed him to speak and understand the bullywugs' croaking tongue. Second, a spell that rendered him invisible.

When he was ready, he pulled his teleportation rod from his cloak.

"I will return apace," he said to Azriim and Dolgan.

Vraggen turned the dials of his teleportation rod, felt a brief wave of nausea, and found himself standing in the hut of the bullywug chieftain.

The stink was abominable. A mixture of organic decay and fish. From outside the hut, Vraggen could hear the steady chirp of insects and the irregular croaks of the bullywugs. Several guards stood just outside the doors, he knew. The chieftain sat in a woven-reed chair—a throne of sorts—with his arms crossed over his belly, snoring.

Vraggen wasted no time. He whispered the words to an enchantment that would make the chieftain believe him a trusted friend and ally. He became visible the moment he began to cast. The bullywug slept throughout.

When Vraggen finished the spell, he cast another minor spell that allowed him to see dweomers. The bullywug chieftain glowed in his sight. Good. The charm had taken effect. Vraggen laid a hand on the slimy skin of his "friend."

The chieftain's goggle eyes flew open. He reached for his spear, saw Vraggen, and croaked a greeting. His fat jiggled when he moved.

"Indeed it is me, my friend," Vraggen said in a low croak, so as not to alarm the guards standing outside, "Vraggen. And I bring news. Ramenos the Sleeping Maw wishes to show the tribe favor. But first, he must feed upon a sacrifice."

The chieftain's eyes clouded. His long tongue swiped across his lips nervously.

"Feed?" he chieftain asked. "How came you to this news?"

Vraggen looked suitably mysterious and answered, "Signs and portents, mighty chieftain."

The bullywug, implicitly trusting Vraggen's words due to the enchantment, seemed to accept that explanation.

"What does the Maw demand?"

Vraggen smiled and said, "He is to accept me and two other manlings into his jaws. Three days from now, when the Lightless Lake glows with his presence."

The bullywug grinned with relief and patted his fat stomach.

"He demands manling, of course!" the bullywug said. "It has been too long. After that, the maw will be sated for many seasons. The fish will be plentiful!" He thumped Vraggen on the shoulder, unable to contain his glee. "To be food for the maw is an honor indeed."

Vraggen accepted the compliment with a humble nod of his head. He wondered how such a stupid creature had risen to the top of the tribe.

"I will return with the other manlings in several days," Vraggen went on. "We shall stand before the maw until the sign is given. You must prepare the tribe. To earn the favor of Ramenos, you and your warriors must prevent any interference with the offering."

The chief nodded eagerly, his chins wobbling hither and yon.

"Eglos should know of this."

Vraggen assumed the chieftain was speaking of the tribal shaman.

"Indeed, my friend," the mage said. "Please bring Eglos here, to me, and I will deliver Ramenos's message to him directly."

Vraggen sank into the shadows while the chieftain shouted orders to the guards outside. They poked their heads in, received confirmation to retrieve Eglos, and hurried out. In a short while, Eglos appeared.

The shaman stood a head shorter than the chieftain, and his widely spaced eyes looked slightly to the side of whatever he was looking upon. He wore a brace of humanoid skulls as a sign of his office.

The moment Eglos walked into the hut, Vraggen surreptitiously cast a spell similar to that which had enthralled the chieftain. Eglos greeted him cheerfully and raptly listened to his explanation of Ramenos's plan for the tribe.

"May the maw devour you painlessly," Eglos croaked.

Again, Vraggen humbly accepted the blessing.

"Prepare the tribe for my return," he said, then he teleported out as the chieftain and shaman watched in awe.

Back in his room at the Bent Chalice, Vraggen smiled at Azriim and Dolgan.

"A quarter hour of subtlety and deception has won us over thirty bullywug warriors as allies. Force has its place," he said, enjoying the lecture, "but it is not always the answer."

Azriim stared at the ceiling and said, "I can smell you from here. Perhaps you should bathe?"

Dolgan guffawed.

Vraggen, in a generous mood, let the insult pass.

"Azriim and I will journey to the Lightless Lake," the mage said. "Dolgan, you remain in Starmantle. If Cale somehow manages to track us, kill him. We'll leave Elura to watch the road."

His lieutenants nodded, though Vraggen could see the distaste in Azriim's expression. The half-drow did not relish the thought of spending any time with bullywugs in a fetid swamp. Vraggen smiled.

All of the pieces were in place. He needed only to wait for a new moon, and the appearance of the Fane of Shadows.

CHAPTER 14

Starmantle

Unlike Selgaunt, which had grown up at random around an earlier Chondathan settlement, Starmantle was a planned town. Straight, brick-paved streets and alleys radiated out at right angles from the large bazaar in the center of the city. Booths, tents of all colors, and tables laden with merchandise filled the bazaar. The smell of cooking fish, southern spices, mistleaf, and horse dung filled the air.

Founded centuries before as a commercial rival to Westgate and the Night Masks, Starmantle held its gates open to all races in the name of mercantilism. While it had never managed to match its rival city in size, it nevertheless attracted a diverse population. All manner of men and monsters filled the city's seething inns, eateries, festhalls, and markets. By day, lizardman tribesmen, half-ogre mercenaries, and bugbear woodsmen from the Gulthmere walked the streets beside human corsairs, merchants, and whores. By night, orcs, drow, and worse haunted the alleys and side streets. Cale marveled at the various creatures. In Selgaunt, half-ogres and bugbears would have been thought raiders and attacked on sight by the Scepters.

Starmantle had only a few streets as wide as Selgaunt's trade boulevards, but each of those was packed full by a seemingly endless train of merchants, porters, carts, wagons, crates, and barrels. A steady stream of merchandise moved day and night along the main trade arteries, flowing between the harbor, the city gates, and the bazaar. Despite the difference in size, in Starmantle as much as in Selgaunt, King Trade ruled the realm.

Still, Cale couldn't get over the feeling that the city was overcrowded with people and overstuffed with goods, as swollen and ready to burst as a waterlogged chest. Starmantle seemed to Cale nothing more than a miniature Westgate—a violent, dirty boil growing on the arse of the Dragonmere, with little to offer other than brisk trade. The fact that several towering temples dominated the skyline and looked down on the filth seemed more a joke than an aspiration.

They had arrived in the city a day and a half before, and Cale had yet to see any sign of an organized city watch. Instead, the inhabitants of Starmantle seemed to police themselves. Street violence was commonplace, but not wide-scale. Bystanders remained exactly that, and street brawls never escalated into riots. Cale had seen six knife fights since arriving—four of them had left one of the participants dead.

In that environment, Cale knew that the best way to avoid trouble was to appear capable of handling any that might come. Accordingly, Cale, Riven, and Jak wore their weapons and scowls openly.

Still, despite the lawlessness and violence, trade continued in earnest. Merchants managed to buy, sell, barter, and prosper. Cale figured anything could be bought or sold in Starmantle, from flesh to mistleaf. For his part, Cale wanted to purchase but one thing—the services of a guide who knew the Gulthmere and could take them to the Lightless Lake within—then get the Nine Hells out of that place.

To that end, he and Riven had made discreet inquiries after Magadon. No success. It seemed Riven's former comrade was out of town on other work.

Running short of time, they had put out through a handful of bawds notice of their desire to hire another guide—any guide—who knew the northern reaches of the Gulthmere. A full day had passed without a response, but finally they had at last gotten a name through one of Riven's inquiries—Gaskin Dreeve. Riven had arranged a meet and was away at it. Cale and Jak expected his return shortly.

They sat in a corner table of the Stone Hearth Inn with untouched ales on the table before them. Only a few other patrons shared the common room and all of them were human, a rarity for most establishments in Starmantle.

"I don't like Riven doing this alone," Jak said in a low voice.

He took a pull on his pipe and rubbed his whiskers thoughtfully. Cale swirled his ale but didn't drink.

"We're past that, little man," Cale replied. "He's in this now, as deep as us."

Jak didn't look convinced.

"One of us could have went with him," the halfling pressed.

"True," Cale acknowledged, "but that would risk tipping our presence to Vraggen or his agents."

Cale had deliberately chosen to keep the three of them, or even two of them, from appearing together in public other than in the inn. Until they retained a guide and were ready to leave town, he wanted them holed up. They ventured forth from the Stone Hearth only individually and in disguise. Riven was the best among them at disguise so it fell to him to handle the initial negotiations with Dreeve.

Time was short, Cale knew. They had a day and a half, and all he and Jak could do was wait on Riven's return and hope for the best. Tackling the Gulthmere without a guide didn't appeal to Cale. He was no

woodsman, and neither was Riven or Jak.

After a time, the assassin entered the Hearth, clad in a nondescript gray peasant's cloak with the hood pulled up and drawn. When he saw Cale and Jak, he made his way over to the table. Disguised as an elderly man, he stood stooped and walked only with the aid of an oaken stave. Wordlessly, he pulled back a chair and slid in. When he threw back his hood, Cale saw that he had colored his goatee gray as well.

A spell or a dye? Cale wondered. The assassin was almost a shapeshifter himself.

"Well?" Jak asked.

Riven frowned, shrugged, and said, "Hard to say. We've got nothing else, and this Dreeve says he knows the Gulthmere. He also seemed to know of the lake when I mentioned it..."

He trailed off when the plump, dark-haired bar wench started to head over to their table. Riven waved her away. Cale took the opportunity to ensure that none of the other patrons appeared interested in their conversation. None did.

He turned back to Riven and asked, "But?"

"But he's a gnoll," the assassin replied. "And a mist-head. Our bawd failed to inform us of that little bit of information. I trust him about as much as I can tolerate his stink."

"A gnoll?" Jak hissed. "Are you mad? Tricksters hairy toes!"

Riven glared at the halfling and said, "You have a better idea, Fleet? He said he knows the forest."

Cale ignored them both and considered. Like Jak, he didn't like the thought of working with a gnoll. The powerful canine humanoids were notoriously ill-tempered and savage. Still, they had nothing else at the moment. He eyed Riven.

"This gnoll is legitimate?"

"I verified that independently," Riven said. "He's done guide work in the wilds around Starmantle since the Year of the Sword. I didn't mention any temple. Just that we wanted to get to a lake in the northern Gulthmere. He seemed to know the place I meant. I figure he gets us to the lake safely, then you and Fleet locate either the temple or Vraggen with spells."

Or with dreams, Cale thought, but didn't say.

Instead, he said simply, "Good."

"Wait a—" Jak began.

Cale cut him off with a look and said, "It's all we've got, little man. In two nights, Vraggen's going to have what he wants, unless we stop him."

To that, Jak said nothing, only took another pull on his pipe.

Cale looked to Riven and said, "I want to meet him before we commit."

"Now?"

Cale nodded. He wanted to take the gnoll's measure himself, and use a few divinations to ensure that he was no shapeshifter in disguise. It would have been easy enough for Vraggen or the half-drow to have paid off many of the bawds in the city. This could be a set-up just as easily as it could be legitimate.

Riven pushed back his chair and rose.

"Let's go," he said. "He's probably still in the Underworld."

"The Underworld?"

"You'll see," Riven replied. "Keep your steel loose in the scabbard. And don't worry about your appearance. Just draw up your cloak. No one's looking for a tall man with an elderly cripple."

Riven flashed his stained teeth, and Cale rose and looked down on Jak. Sephris's ghost had told them that the sphere denoted a time the very next night, at the point of deepest darkness. Cale took that last to mean midnight.

"Stay here, little man," he said. "Get our gear together. Guide or no guide, we're leaving tonight. We're out of time."

What was the Underworld once had been ... something else, and the something else had burned to the ground, along with several adjacent buildings. The stones of the burned building's foundation still demarcated its former borders. Blackened wood and loose rocks lay in piles around the large, otherwise vacant lot. A clear path through the charred debris led to a large hole in the earth—probably once a basement, or a large cellar. Smoke and the occasional snatch of conversation leaked out of the hole.

"That's it," Riven said, indicating the hole. "Down there. Caters to gnolls, orcs, and the like."

Cale gave a nod. He figured the current owners had bought the charred property cheap, expanded the cellar of the previous establishment, and held it out as a tavern. Shrewd, really. Something a Sembian might have thought of.

"Let's go," he said, and they did.

Twenty-five or so stone flagged stairs descended to a single large room dug out of the earth. Thick

timbers lined the walls and stood at intervals throughout the room to prevent collapse. Some holes had been bored in the ceiling through to the outside to provide ventilation, but smoke still clouded the air and stairwell. The place had an animal stink, like a kennel.

A huge bugbear wearing a shirt of studded leather and a pair of spiked gauntlets sat on a stool to Cale's right. His hairy-knuckled hands rested on the leather wrapped hilt of a short, thick club. The bugbear's pugnacious jaw and the teeth that filled it looked fit to tear raw meat. The creature leaned forward and its bloodshot eyes fixed on Cale.

"Everyone drinks, manling," it grunted in Common. "Everyone pays. And no one fights."

Cale held its gaze for a moment before nodding.

"I hear you," he responded in the harsh goblin tongue, which he knew bugbears to understand.

The creature's eyes registered surprise. It leaned back, gave what Cale thought might have been a grin, and waved them in with the club.

There was no bar in the room, just some swollen, tapped hogsheads set on a table in one corner. The unkempt human "barkeep" slept in a chair beside the table, his hands folded over his ample belly and filthy burlap apron. Tallow candles burned wanly on the five or six thick-legged tables set around the room. Ten or fifteen half-orcs and gnolls populated the tables, each holding drinks in mismatched tankards. Some threw dice; others conversed with comrades in their guttural tongues. Conversation lulled for a moment as hard, bestial faces coldly eyed Cale and Riven, but quickly restarted with renewed vigor.

Mindful of the bugbear's words, they headed for the barkeep and the drink table. A few of the half-orcs glared challenges at Cale but he ignored them.

As they walked, Riven leaned on Cale as though for support and whispered, "How did you speak to that bugbear, Cale? How many languages do you know anyway?"

"Nine," Cale answered. "But not the gnolls'." He looked around the room at the many gnolls. "Are one of these Dreeve?"

Riven looked out from under his hood.

"There," he said. "Alone at the table to our left. Big bastard with the long mane, mail shirt, and piercings."

Cale saw him. Dreeve sat alone in the corner, eyeing them with feral black eyes while sipping—lapping, really—from a ceramic tankard. Even sitting, he looked big: a full two heads taller than Cale, probably. Dark, yellow-brown fur covered light green skin. Muscles and veins bulked under his mail shirt and green travelling cloak. Three iron rings hung from each ear and the fur around his canine muzzle was stained black, the telltale sign of a habitual mistleleaf root chewer.

Cale took an immediate dislike to him, but reminded himself that they had little choice.

"Drinks first," he said to Riven.

When they reached the table with the tapped hogsheads atop it, the barkeep, without ever looking up or opening his eyes, said, "Three coppers a tankard. Serve yourself."

Cale laid a silver raven on the table—he had only Sembian coins—took two dirty tankards from the haphazard stack near the taps, and filled each with the watered-down swill.

Without another word, they turned and walked for Dreeve's table. As they did, Cale surreptitiously whispered the words to a divination spell that detected dweomers. Neither the gnoll nor any of his items showed as magical. Cale felt relieved. Unless the gnoll was warded, he was no shapeshifter.

Dreeve eyed them as they approached. When they got close, he chuffed the air, as though sniffing for spoor. His lips peeled back from yellowed fangs.

To Riven he said, "You return, old *human*." He put enough emphasis on the last word to suggest it was an insult. He looked at Cale and licked his lips. "And you bring another of your pack, eh? Dreeve's offer is good, not so?" he asked Cale. His voice was strangely high-pitched, but deep growls punctuated every third or fourth word. "Did you bring the coin? Three hundred gold?"

Cale ignored the question.

"You told this granther—" he nodded at Riven—"that you know the Gulthmere?"

Cale deliberately made himself sound skeptical.

The gnoll snarled at him, "You suggest that I lie, *human*? I know the forest." He growled, low and dangerous. "You leader of your pack?"

His fetid breath made Cale want to gag, but Cale merely stared at him. The gnoll leaned back in his chair, causing it to creak.

"You seek the Moonmere," the gnoll said, "the Lightless Lake. This I know from him."

Dreeve waved a huge hand at Riven. Cale held his tongue.

"No light in that water," the gnoll continued. "The sky cannot be seen. My pack not go to that place. I

only show you where to go. You go alone."

"You ask for much and offer little," Cale said, and made a show of considering. After a moment, he leaned forward. "Done. Three hundred gold, but only if we leave tonight and move fast. We need to be there before midnight tomorrow."

"I can get you there then," the gnoll said, "if you're ready to run. My pack does not ride."

Cale nodded and said, "We'll keep up, Dreeve."

The gnoll smiled as though he didn't believe it.

"Payment," he said, and held out his hand.

Cale shook his head.

"You're paid when we're there," he said. "Not before."

Dreeve snarled, clenched his hand into a fist, and slammed it on the table.

"Half now," the gnoll demanded.

"None now," Cale said and dared the gnoll with his eyes to challenge him. He did not.

Dreeve glared at Cale and said, "How many in your pack? All old, like him?"

"Three. Myself and two others," said Cale. "Not him."

Dreeve growled, and his eyes narrowed in satisfaction.

"Nine in mine, human. All warriors."

Cale stared at him, as cold as Deepwinter, and said, "Numbers are not strength, Dreeve."

The gnoll either laughed or snarled, Cale couldn't tell. But either way, the deal was done. Cale took Riven by the arm, as though to assist him, and rose.

"We'll meet you and your pack after sunset on the road outside of the western gate," Cale said, "an hour outside of the city."

"We will be there, human. Night's darkness is good time for my pack."

Cale smiled without mirth and said, "Mine too."

Riven chuckled as they walked out.

CHAPTER 15

Pack Hunting

That evening, Cale, Riven, and Jak walked through the torchlit western gate of Starmantle. Even at night, the city's gates stood thrown open. Two lax guards in scale mail and armed with spears watched the comings and goings with disinterest. They didn't even bother to ask the trio their business.

Inns, taverns, farms, and tilled fields lined the road in the area immediately outside of town. After only a short while of walking, though, the buildings and worked earth gave way to uninhabited scrub and intermittent copses of gnarled ash. Selune was waning and nearly new, and though her tears still glittered in the sky, they provided little light. Looking into the star-flecked night sky reminded Cale of the sphere that he still carried, the sphere that had set him on this course. Cale had left his family and home and found himself on a dark road beside Drasek Riven, who served the same god as he.

Fate was a fickle bitch, indeed, he thought. That, or Mask was more calculating than he could comprehend. Either way, Cale supposed, he was where he was.

For each of them, Cale had purchased bedrolls, road-tack, and two waterskins. The added weight in his backpack felt awkward. It took him the first half-hour of the trek to adjust his balance.

Jak's halfling blood allowed him to see the best in darkness, so he took a point position ten strides or so in front of Cale and Riven.

After about an hour, Jak waved them to a stop.

"Just ahead," he softly called back to them. "Nine of them."

"We see you too, humans," Dreeve called out from ahead. "And have for some time. Come forward. Your halfling scout sees no better in the night than the blindest of my pack."

Growls and high-pitched yips greeted Dreeve's taunt.

With nothing else for it, the three fell back into line together and walked forward.

"It's strength they respect," Cale said to his comrades in a hissed whisper. "Let's set the rules early. I'll lead."

Jak and Riven nodded, and spaced themselves for combat.

The gnolls stood gathered in a loose group, watching them approach. They carried no torches, for they obviously saw well at night.

Each towering member of Dreeve's pack wore a ring mail shirt, had a bow slung over a muscular shoulder, and carried an axe larger than Jak over its back. They yipped and snarled amongst themselves as the trio approached. Crude tattoos, earrings, and leather vambraces were common.

Even among his own kind, though, Dreeve's height and musculature caused him to stand out. He took a step forward and made a cutting gesture with his hand. The rest of the pack fell silent.

"Humans, I feared the night frightened you away from our deal."

At that, the other gnolls yelped with laughter. Cale feigned a smile while he scanned the pack. He picked the gnoll standing to Dreeve's right, the second largest of the pack, and stalked up to him. He let his smile fade.

"Amused?"

The other gnolls' laughter fell silent instantly, replaced by surprised grumbling. Ring mail chinked as stances were shifted. Beside Cale, Dreeve watched with a grin.

"Ware, human," Dreeve said. "Gez has tasted of manflesh before."

The big gnoll, Gez, stared Cale in the face and said, "Step back from me, human, or I'll tear out your throat and take your gold. The pack will have the scraps of your flesh."

Cale needed nothing further.

He took a step back, drew his blade, and said, "A threat from the mongrel son of a cur bitch? Try what you say."

Gez snarled and jerked his axe off his back, eyeing Cale all the while. The big gnoll looked to Dreeve, who barked something in his native tongue. The gnoll looked back to Cale, grinned, and howled into the moonless sky. The rest of the pack, excepting only Dreeve, began to yip in excitement.

Cale waited, balanced on the balls of his feet. Gez obviously surpassed him in strength, but probably not in skill.

At least Cale hoped not.

The gnoll's hackles stood on end, making him look bigger still. He crouched low, snarled, and advanced.

Cale waited, waited ...

The moment Gez reared back his axe to strike, Cale exploded into motion.

He lunged forward, feinting with his long sword at the gnoll's throat. Surprised by Cale's speed, Gez stumbled backward and attempted an awkward parry with his axe haft. Cale pulled the stab up short and slammed a heel-kick into the gnoll's knee. Gez let out a pained yelp. His leg, backward jointed like a dog's, buckled. He managed to thump Cale in the ribs with his axe haft, but before he could regain his balance and bring his axe head to bear for another stroke, Cale spun a close half-circle around him and landed a reverse elbow on the back of his neck. The gnoll groaned and toppled to all fours.

Cale had his blade at Gez's throat before the gnoll could rise.

Gez snarled, "I'll kill you, hu—"

Cale cut off the threat by pressing his blade edge against the gnoll's throat—hard.

"Another word and I bleed you out here and now."

The gnoll, breathing hard—whether from exertion or shame, Cale couldn't tell—said nothing further. The rest of the pack went into an uproar, howling, snarling, gesturing violently at Cale. Dreeve tried to maintain order but failed. Another gnoll, tattooed and missing several teeth, stepped forward from the pack with violence in his eyes.

Before that gnoll ever got his axe off his shoulder, Riven had sabers at the creature's throat and Jak had a short sword at its groin. The gnoll froze in his tracks, eyes wide. Cale would have sworn the tattooed creature was holding his breath.

The rest of the gnolls fell silent except for some muted growls. None drew weapons.

Cale, Riven, and Jak had made their point.

Cale eyed Dreeve first, then the rest of the pack in turn. Dreeve returned his gaze with a mixture of anger and respect.

Cale said in a tone fat with the calm promise of violence, "Any one of you breaks our bargain, any one of you makes a move against any in my pack, and it goes ugly for every one of you. Understood?"

Dark eyes found the road.

"Do what we've asked," Cale added, "and you'll all get paid."

With that, Cale removed his blade from the prone gnoll and let him stand. The creature eyed him hatefully but his hackles lay flat. The other gnolls chattered at him with what Cale took to be laughter.

Dreeve advanced on Cale threateningly, but Cale held his ground.

"Do not harm another of mine," Dreeve said. "Or you will answer to me."

The other gnolls growled appreciatively at that.

Cale decided to let the comment pass. He knew that Dreeve had to re-establish his dominance with his own kind. Both of them knew what would happen if it really came to blows between them.

Cale scabbarded his blade and said, "We're ready to move when you are. We need to reach the Moonmere by tomorrow night. No later."

Dreeve stared at him a moment longer before nodding, turning away, and barking orders to his pack.

Riven and Jak came up beside Cale while the gnolls shouldered their packs. The creatures eyed each of them with respect as they readied for travel.

"Guess this makes you top dog," Riven observed with a hard smile.

Even Jak chuckled at that.

Over that night and the next day, the gnoll pack made rapid progress. With great, loping strides, they ate up the miles. Cale, Jak, and Riven kept the pace only with difficulty. Two of the pack always ran point, circling the main body and watching the surrounding area for danger. Cale marveled at the endurance of the creatures. About four hours out of Starmantle, the pack veered off the westward road and headed south for the Gulthmere.

With the dawn, they rested and took a quick repast. The gnolls, sitting apart from the humans, tore into thick chunks of dried meat. Cale, Riven, and Jak tried to catch their breath while eating handfuls of trail mix and cheese.

Dreeve separated from the pack and walked over to them.

"If we're to reach the Moonmere by tonight, we must continue through the day." The gnoll looked with disdain on Jak and asked, "Your pack will keep up?"

Before Cale could answer, Jak said, "You'll have to do better than this to tire me, you mangy son of a mangy bitch."

At that, Dreeve and the rest of the pack barked laughter. The gnoll guide turned and walked back to his comrades.

Cale merely smiled and chewed his food.

The next day was a blur of pain and exhaustion. By sunset, Cale thought his legs had turned to stone. In the distance stood the outer eaves of the Gulthmere, a dark line above the plains. Cale watched the sun vanish. He knew they had only hours to stop Vraggen.

While they ate, Dreeve again walked over to them.

"In two hours, we will reach the edge of the forest. After that, it is not far to the Moonmere."

Cale could hear the dread in Dreeve's voice when he mentioned the Moonmere.

"We need to be there before midnight," Cale said.

"We will get you there," Dreeve snapped.

With that, he turned his back to them and walked back to sit among his own.

"Rude," Jak said, from around a mouthful of cheese.

Riven scoffed.

Cale smiled. Calling a gnoll rude was like calling a halfling short.

At that moment, one of the two perimeter scouts sprinted into camp. His breath came hard. His tongue lolled from his mouth. The rest of the pack rose to meet him, uttering alarmed growls. The scout stopped before Dreeve and the two held a hurried conversation in their native tongue. From time to time, the scout gestured at Cale, Riven, and Jak. Dreeve eyed them darkly.

"Stand ready," Cale said in a low tone, and pulled his holy symbol from his pocket.

When the scout finished his report, Dreeve quieted the murmurs from the rest of pack and walked over to Cale.

"We are being tracked," Dreeve announced, and made it sound like an accusation. "Two humans on horseback, less than an hour behind." His lips peeled back from his teeth. "You have enemies that you did not tell me of."

It was a not a question.

"No one knew we were in the city, Dreeve," Cale said.

"A lie," Dreeve shot back.

Cale struggled to keep from punching the gnoll in his muzzle.

"Perhaps these trackers are following *you*," he said, but didn't really believe it.

The trackers could be nothing other than agents of Vraggen and the half-drow.

"I think not," Dreeve retorted. "None in Starmantle would dare follow this pack. They track you." His eyes narrowed. "Perhaps we should leave you to them?"

The rest of the pack voiced agreement. Sensing a fight, they began to creep forward, growling and brandishing their axes. Beside and behind Cale, Riven and Jak spaced themselves and put hands to their weapons.

Bolstered by his men, Dreeve took another step forward and bent down to put his toothy muzzle right before Cale's face. His voice was a growl.

"You did not speak of pursuers, human. The danger is bigger now." His expression twisted with cunning and he added, "So too is my price. Or we leave you here."

Behind Dreeve, the rest of the gnolls growled agreement.

Riven scoffed and spat at Dreeve's feet. The gnoll spun on him and growled dangerously. Riven merely sneered.

Cale could barely keep the relief from his face. It was nothing more than a negotiating ploy. He hurriedly stepped between Riven and the gnoll. He didn't fear for Riven's safety, of course, but killing Dreeve would leave them without a guide to the Moonmere. Besides, Dreeve was behaving exactly as any good Sembian would—new facts required new negotiations. Cale could appreciate that. Still, he had to play it out to keep the new price within reason.

"We've already negotiated a price, Dreeve," he said, and he waited for the gnoll's predictable retort.

"This new information would have affected price," Dreeve growled.

Cale had to keep from smiling.

"A fair point," he acknowledged. For a time, he feigned deep consideration. "All right. Four hundred gold then. Our final offer. Well enough?"

Dreeve flashed his fangs in a smile, blew out a satisfied sigh, and crossed his arms over his chest. The rest of the gnolls too uttered a round of satisfied growls.

Dreeve turned from Cale and raised his voice for the benefit of his pack.

"And now we will deal with those who dare track us."

The rest of the pack barked enthusiastic agreement.

Cale didn't think it was Vraggen himself who was pursuing them, and that made the pursuers but a distraction. Cale could not afford a distraction. Vraggen had to be at the Moonmere already. He jerked

Dreeve around by the shoulder.

"Ignore them," Cale ordered. "You're being paid to get us to the Moonmere. Nothing more. We don't have time to waste on whoever is tracking you."

Dreeve growled, "Tracking *you*, human. And none follow this pack and live, gold or no gold."

The rest of the gnolls snarled agreement and thumped their axe hafts in the earth.

Cale let his hand glide to his blade hilt. He spoke low enough that only Dreeve and Riven could hear him.

"Listen to me, you stinking son of a bitch. You've played your little game and gotten your price. Fine. We'll pay it. But if you push any further, I'll split you wide open out of spite. We do not have time to spare. You show us to the Moonmere and you do it now. Otherwise...."

He let the threat hang.

Dreeve's hackles rose; his ears flattened. His hands spasmed near his axe haft but didn't touch it. His breath came fast. Behind him, the other gnolls sensed his anger and they too began to snarl, low and dangerous.

Cale held both his ground and the gnoll's gaze.

"You'll be the first to die," Cale promised in a whisper. "Then the rest."

Cale's certainty seemed to take Dreeve aback. He stared at Cale for a moment, considering. Abruptly, his hackles sank and he took a deep breath.

Without releasing Cale's gaze, he called back to his pack, "Gez and Nurm, circle back, find the she-dogs chasing us, and kill them both. The rest of you, break camp. We take these humans to the Gulthmere and the Lightless Lake. Let the demons there have them."

The gnolls did as they were told.

"Well enough?" Dreeve asked Cale.

Cale turned his back on the gnoll guide without answering.

After Dreeve walked away, Riven chuckled.

"That's quite a bark, Cale," the assassin said, "but the time's coming with that one when you're going to have to bite."

Turning to look at Dreeve, and seeing the pent-up anger in the bunched muscles of the gnoll's back, Cale knew that Riven spoke the truth.

"Those two trackers aren't the mage," Riven said.

"Agreed," Cale said. "Vraggen's already at the Moonmere."

"The half-drow?" Jak asked.

"Perhaps," Cale said. "But at this point it doesn't matter."

He looked at the stars glowing in the moonless sky. He thought of taking the sphere from his pack and comparing it to the sky but decided against it. The sphere had become irrelevant. They knew where they were going and they knew when they had to be there.

"We need to get moving," Cale said. "We're almost out of time."

Gez smelled horseflesh in the wind—faint, but it was there. He knew the two human riders were less than quarter hour's run upwind and closing. Surprisingly, night hadn't stopped them from tracking the pack. Gez figured them both to be very skilled.

But, he reminded himself, they were but two, and mere humans at that.

He and Nurm had backtracked from the rest of the pack a little less than an hour before, if Gez was any judge of the stars' movements. Dreeve and the rest of the pack already would have reached the Gulthmere.

Thinking of Dreeve and the pack reminded Gez of the humans, and his lips peeled back in a silent snarl. The bald headed human mongrel had embarrassed Gez before his packmates. Gez would have to fight hard to maintain his status as Dreeve's second. Gez had no doubt that Dreeve had sent him on a cur's errand to make that very point. Likely, he would have to kill and eat the heart of one of his packmates just to reestablish his place.

For the tenth time, he wished Dreeve had killed the three humans back in the camp and taken their gold. Gez would have feasted on their flesh and lived high on their coin. The thought of what might have been brought a grin to his face. He licked his lips, imagining the taste of human flesh—

—and stopped.

Was that Nurm's scent in the wind? Yes, but...

What was that pup doing?

The two had split up a quarter hour before. Gez, too angry at his fallen fortunes to listen any longer to Nurm's incessant chatter, had sent the younger gnoll ahead to find an appropriate location from which to

ambush the humans. Nurm should have been over ten spearcasts away, not nearby. Gez resolved then and there to vent his anger on the impudent pup.

He stood up to his full height and scanned the plains for Nurm. Even in the darkness he could see clearly as far out as a spearcast.

He saw nothing. Only the wind over the thigh-high grass. He let out a signal bark, a sharp, quick yip.

Nothing.

Only then did it hit him. The night was still—too still—as though a predator was nearby and on the hunt. Even the insects had fallen silent.

Gez's hackles rose and he uttered a growl so low that only another gnoll would hear it. He unslung his axe, dropped into a crouch, and put his nose in the breeze.

No predator, but Nurm smelled close, not far to Gez's left.

Gez crept forward, clutching his axe and prowling through the tall grass. His instincts told him that something big lurked nearby, something deadly. He moved as quietly as he could and kept his senses attuned to his surroundings.

He smelled it before he saw it—the sharp, coppery tang of blood, intermixed with Nurm's ordinary scent. Voicing a low snarl, he loped forward.

He found Nurm's body lying in an area of flattened, blood soaked grass. Gez knelt and examined the corpse. Nurm's entire head had been bitten off. It was nowhere to be seen. Nurm's unslung axe lay on his shoulder. He hadn't even had time to get his weapon drawn.

Gez rose into a crouch, keeping his head below the grass line, and sniffed the wind. Nothing but the far off smell of the humans and the horses. Still, the plains were too quiet. Something was near.

Moving quickly, Gez removed Nurm's belt purse, took his quiver of arrows, and wolfed down as much of his trail tack as he could. The pack didn't waste resources. Often, they ate their own fallen, but Gez didn't have time for that.

A rustling sounded in the grass near Nurm's corpse.

Gez uttered a surprised snarl and lunged forward, axe held high.

A field lizard darted out of the grass. About the size of a cat, the brown-spotted reptiles were common in those plains. Carrion eaters. It must have smelled Nurm's blood too and come to feed.

Gez let out a relieved series of yips. He toed Nurm's corpse toward the lizard.

"Feed well, little frie—"

A low croak sounded from behind him. His hackles rose instantly; his heart threatened to burst. He whirled around with his axe at the ready.

Terror froze him.

A horrible, bipedal, toadlike creature stood behind him, taller and broader than even Dreeve. A strange tingling flashed through Gez's brain, as though the creature was looking into his mind, knowing what he knew. He caught only a flash of warty green skin, claws, and merciless eyes before it pounced on him and knocked him to the ground near Nurm's corpse. Gez's breath blew from his lungs. His ribs snapped under the impact. He mouthed a silent scream of pain and fear.

Crouched atop his chest, the thing croaked something in a foul, alien tongue that Gez could not understand. It opened its mouth impossibly wide. A mouthful of shark teeth surrounded the black hole of its gullet. Gez wanted to scream, wanted to whimper, but with no air he could make no sound. Pain blurred his vision.

That horrible mouth descended for his head, engulfing it entirely. Teeth tore into the skin of his neck and snapped closed on his spine. Gez felt a flash of excruciating agony before his world ended in darkness.

Elura cracked the gnoll's skull between her back teeth, took the creature's head out of her mouth, and split the skull the rest of the way open with her claws. When the brain lay exposed in her hands, she slavered it up with her long tongue. She found them a creamy delight, especially when lightly spiced with the tart tang of fear. Since she and her broodmates' arrival, she had come to enjoy the brains of lesser sentient creatures.

After licking the skull case clean, she methodically removed the gnoll's weapons and earrings. She studied what remained of the gnoll's body. Satisfied that she had a reasonably close mental image of the creature, she invoked the magical ability of her kind to change shape. With a wet, squishing sound, her natural body metamorphosed into a smaller, thinner form—that of the gnoll. She put the gnoll's earring through her new ears, slung its axe over her shoulder, and smiled in satisfaction.

With Vraggen's "approval," Azriim had instructed she and Dolgan to remain behind and watch for Cale. Dolgan had remained in Starmantle. Elura had patrolled the approaches to the Gulthmere. Nothing was to

interfere with Vraggen's opening of the Fane.

Elura smiled darkly when she thought of Vraggen. The arrogant shadow adept had no idea of how he had been used. When she imagined how his expression would appear when he learned of she and her broodmates' true purpose—of the Sojourner's true purpose—she could barely control her laughter.

But first matters firstly, she reminded herself.

Late the previous night, Dolgan had telepathically informed her of the gnoll pack. She had been surprised and distantly delighted to learn that Cale, Riven, and the halfling were among them. The humans' resourcefulness intrigued her, though it would not avail them. The threatened torture of Serrin had been a masterstroke. Most humans balked at such methods, but not those three. For an instant, she regretted that she would not once share Cale's bed before killing him. She always gave her human lovers a unique experience before showing them her true form and murdering them. She would have enjoyed providing such an experience to Cale. She also would have enjoyed hearing his screams as she flayed him alive.

But that is not to be, she thought with regret, for she and Dolgan would kill Cale that very night.

She had picked up the trail of the gnolls earlier in the night, and had waited for an opportunity to kill and take the form of one of the pack. Dolgan, she knew, was only a short distance away. He had learned of Cale's presence in Starmantle only after Cale and his comrades had left the city with the gnolls, but had ridden so hard after them that he was already near. Together, they could kill Cale, his comrades, and the pack.

With the telepathy bred in her and her broodmates by the Sojourner, she sent her mental voice over the plains to Dolgan.

Dolgan?

From somewhere to the north, Dolgan's mental voice answered, *I am here, Elura. Less than two hours behind the gnolls.*

I am in the form of the gnoll creature Gez, she said to him. *I will return to the pack and tell them—tell Dreeve,* she corrected, referencing the information that she had stolen from Gez's mind—*that we have killed the trackers and that Nurm died in battle. Alert me when you are near. If I have not done so beforehand, upon your arrival, we will kill them all.*

CHAPTER 16

The Gulthmere

In the darkness, the towering cedars, pines, and elms at the edge of the Gulthmere looked as impenetrable to Cale as a siege wall. It looked ... foreboding. Cale spared a glance skyward—the last time he would be able to see the stars after entering the tangle of the Gulthmere, he supposed. He wondered whether they would arrive at the Fane in time to stop Vraggen.

"We're in time," Jak said softly, as though reading his mind.

Cale nodded. He knew it wasn't yet midnight. Mask allowed him to know intuitively when that hour arrived. But he didn't think they had much more than a couple of hours.

Dreeve had recalled the perimeter scouts but Gez and Nurm had not yet returned. The remaining gnolls arranged themselves into two skirmish lines. With Cale, Jak, and Riven sandwiched between the lines, they entered the Gulthmere.

The fragrance of the pines hung thick in the air. Needles and deadwood crunched underfoot. The forest felt old.

Each step in created more and more tension in the gnoll pack. Cale could sense it, could see it in their furtive gazes, quickened respiration, and slightly raised hackles. They feared the Gulthmere. Or the Fane.

Their pace slowed markedly as the terrain forced them to pick their way through the undergrowth. Cale quickly lost his sense of direction, though he did feel the ground descending and growing softer as they progressed. He could see only two or three paces before him.

"Jak," Cale said. "Your wand. We need light."

Dreeve whirled on him and hissed, "No light, human! You will draw attention to us."

The rest of the pack softly growled alarmed agreement.

"We need to be able to see," Cale said. "This light is not visible from far off." He looked to Jak. "Little man."

Jak pulled out his bluelight wand and uttered, "*Inil*," the word in the halfling tongue for "light". The wand's tip emitted a soft, blue glow. Shadows danced at the edges of the wand's illumination.

"You see?" Cale said to Dreeve.

The gnoll captain grunted something in his own tongue that Cale felt certain was an expletive, then he turned on his heel and started off. They followed.

After a short time, the ground leveled off and the air began to feel strange: thick with moisture and something else, something oily.

"You feel that?" Jak asked Cale quietly.

Cale replied, "We're getting close."

Riven only grunted.

Cale called up to Dreeve, "How much farther?"

The gloom seemed to dull his voice. The shadows swallowed sound.

Dreeve said over his shoulder in a low hiss, obviously perturbed by Cale's loud call, "Another hour—"

Abruptly, the gnoll captain dropped into a crouch. His hackles rose. His lips peeled back from his fangs. Growls sounded from the rest of the pack.

"What is it?" Cale asked in alarm, scanning the forest around them.

Beside him, Riven and Jak drew their weapons and went back to back. Jak covered his bluelight wand with his cloak.

"Something comes," Dreeve said.

The gnoll captain hurriedly whispered orders to his pack. Several circled out wide and took cover behind the boles of trees. Others knocked arrows, took a knee, and drew. Cale followed their aim with his eyes.

Nothing but the forest and darkness.

Then he heard it: something moving through the woods, cracking twigs, crushing leaves.

The gnolls tensed. Bowstrings creaked in the darkness. Cale sank into the gloom, withdrew his holy symbol, pulled his blade, and took a step nearer Riven and Jak.

The sounds drew closer ... closer. Something big.

Near Cale, Dreeve audibly sniffed at the air. After only a moment, he rose from his crouch and barked something to his pack. The rest of the gnolls immediately stood down.

"Gez," the gnoll captain explained to Cale.

"Light, Jak," Cale said, and the halfling unshielded his bluelight.

Gez sprinted into the clearing and stopped cold upon seeing his comrades. His tongue lolled from the side of his mouth and blood covered his cloak. The rest of the pack barked a greeting. Gez returned the greeting absently while he stalked up to Dreeve. The two held an intense conversation. The rest of the pack listened intently. Cale couldn't read their expressions and wished again that he could understand the gnoll tongue.

When they finished, Dreeve nodded and thumped Gez on the shoulder. Gez shot Cale a hateful glance, turned, and called for a waterskin. One among the pack provided him with water while the rest swarmed around him and peppered him with questions. Dreeve approached Cale, Riven, and Jak.

"Gez and Nurm encountered your trackers and killed them both," the gnoll said. "Gez was wounded, Nurm was killed."

Cale was doubtful but kept it from his face. He had seen firsthand the ability of Vraggen's agents to live through and quickly heal wounds that should have killed them. Gez might genuinely think that he and Nurm had killed the "human" trackers, but Cale thought not.

"How did they kill them?" he asked, looking past Dreeve to Gez. "What did they do with the bodies?"

Dreeve's eyes narrowed with suspicion. His ears went flat against his head.

"They left their corpses in the grass," Dreeve said. "Why does it matter, human? Who were these trackers?"

Cale had no intention of telling Dreeve anything. If the gnoll understood the danger, Cale knew he and his pack would abandon them.

"Who they were doesn't matter," Cale said. "They're dead. Now, get us to the Moonmere. Quickly. After that, you'll have your payment and we'll part our ways."

The gnoll captain sniffed the air as though he smelled the lies in the air.

"We're not far," Dreeve said, then he turned and returned to his pack.

Slightly more than an hour later, the drumming began. From somewhere up ahead, a deep, rhythmic beat carried through the torpid air and shook the leaves from the cedars. The gnolls whimpered amongst themselves nervously, whining and sniffing at the air.

"They're summoning the Fane," Jak whispered to Cale.

"Or acknowledging its arrival," Cale said.

Eerily, the drums reminded him of a heartbeat, as though the heart of something old, huge, and dark had awakened. The air itself seemed to be vibrating. Jak's bluelight cast more shadows than it should.

Cale called up to the gnoll, "Dreeve, we need to move more quickly."

The rest of the gnolls cringed at the loudness of his voice. Except Gez. Gez stared at Cale with something akin to hunger in his dark eyes. Cale remembered Dreeve's words regarding Gez—*He has tasted of man-flesh*. Cale stared the gnoll down. Gez licked his lips, winked, and looked away.

Dreeve stalked back to Cale, obviously agitated.

"Do not raise your voice, fool human." He looked from side to side and added, "The lake's demons are about."

"Then we're near?"

Dreeve nodded and said, "Come."

Cale, Riven, and Jak followed. The rest of the pack trailed them at several paces, ears flat and hackles up.

"This is probably as near the lake as they've ever been," Jak whispered.

Cale only nodded.

Dreeve led them forward through the undergrowth. He signaled a halt near a line of stones. Intuitively, Cale knew it to be a border.

"Look," Dreeve said, and he gestured beyond the line of stones. "Once, a large lake covered much of this area. Humans regarded it as holy. A great temple-city stood near here at the edge of the water." He kicked the nearest stone with his foot. "Worked stone. This was a wall."

Cale kneeled down and examined the stone. Age had left it pitted and cracked, but its sharp corners and smooth face did suggest worked stone. Perhaps a wall, perhaps something else. The area beyond the stones, while otherwise similar to the rest of the forest, looked dimmer, as though the darkness was thicker there. Jak's bluelight seemed to be shining through fog.

"You see that?" Cale asked Jak.

The halfling nodded and kneeled beside him to run his hands over the stones. Cale withdrew his holy symbol and whispered the words to a spell that allowed him to see dweomers. The stones glowed a faint blue in his sight, as did the air beyond them.

"Magical," he said to Jak. "The whole area. Only slightly, but it's there."

"Old, probably," Jak said.

The drumbeats stopped. A cold breeze stirred the trees. Cale and Jak shared a look; they both sensed it. They were nearly out of time.

Cale leaped to his feet and said, "Dreeve, lead us to the lake. Now!"

Dreeve snarled, backed up a step, and held up his hands.

"We go no farther, human," said the gnoll. "None of mine cross those stones. The lake is a few miles ahead, through the trees. I've done what you asked. Now, pay as agreed."

The rest of the pack snarled agreement, while they eyed the forest nervously.

Cale didn't want to waste time arguing. He figured that he, Riven, and Jak should be able to locate the Lightless Lake from there.

"Very well," he said to Dreeve.

He reached for his belt pouch—and froze in mid-gesture.

Seven or eight paces behind Dreeve stood Gez, and the gnoll's entire body glowed blue in Cale's magically augmented eyes.

Their gazes locked, and in the eyes of the gnoll, in the eyes of whichever one of Vraggen's agents had taken Gez's form, Cale saw understanding dawn. The gnoll realized that Cale knew. Gez grinned, made a little half-curtsey, and that feminine gesture told Cale all he needed to know: it was the woman who had first invaded Stormweather Towers and taken Almor's form.

Cale whipped free his blade and holy symbol.

Dreeve, understanding nothing, and seeing only that Cale had drawn, snarled, leaped backward, and unslung his axe.

"Cale," Jak began.

"Treachery!" shouted Gez in Common, and he howled.

"You'll die for this, human," barked Dreeve, who brandished his axe.

He barked orders in his own tongue.

Behind Cale, Jak and Riven pulled their steel.

The rest of the pack, hackles up, pelted forward, goaded on by Gez.

Cale saw immediately that the situation could only go from bad to worse. Clutching his holy symbol, he whispered a hurried prayer to Mask. Impenetrable darkness cloaked the area, darkness through which only Cale could see.

The gnolls arrested their charge, but Dreeve, undeterred despite his blindness, lunged forward and swept his axe in a semicircle. Cale dodged out of reach, got behind Riven and Jak, and grabbed both by the cloaks.

"It's me," Cale said above the growling gnolls, to stop Riven from slicing open his chest.

He pulled both of them beyond the border stones and out of the darkness.

Rapidly, Cale said, "Gez is one of Vraggen's shapeshifters; the female from Stormweather. Jak, stay back and counter any spell she attempts to cast. She shows that teleportation rod, incapacitate it."

Jak shook his head and replied, "No, Cale! I—"

"This isn't the one that hurt you, Jak," Cale told him. "I need you to do this."

Jak held his gaze for a moment before nodding and taking his holy symbol in his hand.

Cale turned to Riven and said, "This one doesn't get away. Understood?"

Riven gave a hard smile and readied his sabers.

"I've no problem with that," the assassin said. "Get rid of that darkness and let's work."

Within the globe of darkness, the gnolls, too stupid or untrained to stop moving and listen, instead snarled and hacked about with their axes. It was pure luck that they hadn't yet killed each other. Dreeve alone maintained his calm. He stood in a defensive crouch, sniffing, and barking for quiet, but his pack did not heed. The Gez imitator edged away from the rest of the gnolls toward the left of Cale's sphere of darkness.

"To our right," Cale said to Riven.

Riven crouched, whirled his blades once, and said, "Do it."

With a mental command, Cale dispelled the darkness. For a fraction of a heartbeat, the gnoll pack stood confused. Cale and Riven leaped the stones and sped past them at Gez.

The woman in Gez's form saw them coming and her lips curled back from her teeth. Surreptitiously, she made a pass with her hand and began an incantation.

From behind, Jak's voice rose in answer, chanting a counter spell, and when the impostor finished whatever spell she intended to cast, nothing happened.

Just a pace or two away from Gez, Riven's voice rose and he shouted a word of power in the dire tongue Cale sometimes heard him utter in his sleep. The pronouncement caused vomit to rush up Cale's

throat, slowing him, but he swallowed it down. Gez recoiled as though struck, grimacing.

Following up on the opening, Riven bounded forward. Sabers whirled, stabbing and slashing. Gez, still partially stunned, could not parry them all and the assassin opened a gash in the false gnoll's side and forearm. Cale lunged forward to attack from the other side, a low stab, a reverse slash, and an overhand chop. The impostor took wounds in her thigh, chest, and shoulder. She careened backward.

"Show yourself, bitch," Cale taunted.

The wounds they had inflicted began to close. The false Gez recovered herself, grinned, and winked.

From behind them, Jak shouted, "Look at his wounds, Dreeve! See how they heal? Look! That's not one of yours, but a shapeshifting demon from the lake!"

With surprising quickness, the impostor pounced forward and went on the attack. Spinning and ducking, she slammed her axe haft into Riven's ribs and forced Cale backward with a flurry of vicious swings. When the false gnoll had a moment to catch her breath, she shouted something in the gnoll tongue and gestured at Cale and Riven, no doubt an attempt to convince her packmates to assist her.

The rest of the gnolls hesitated, pointed, muttered. Cale didn't need to understand their tongue to know what they said. Gez didn't fight like a gnoll, and his wounds healed too fast.

More muttering. Still the gnolls did nothing. Cale could sense their fear.

Seeing the hesitation in the eyes of his packmates, the false Gez no longer tried to hide her true nature. She held up a hand, pointed it at Cale, and began to mouth arcane words.

Again Jak's voice rose in answer, a counter to whatever the creature had intended. The shapeshifter's spell fizzled in a stream of impotent black energy that leaked from her fingertips.

That was enough for the gnolls. Seeing one of their own casting spells told them all they needed to know. They backed farther away from the combat, looking to Dreeve for guidance. The gnoll leader seemed too surprised to act.

Hoping to catch the impostor off-guard, Cale lunged forward, blade low. Preternaturally quick, the shapeshifter danced backward, knocked Cale's long sword out of position with her axe, and punched Cale in the nose. Warm blood washed down his face. Eyes watering, he stumbled backward, keeping his long sword in a defensive position as best he could.

The creature might have finished him then, but Riven bounded forward and stabbed the false gnoll through the side with both sabers, halfway to the hilts.

"Let's see you heal that," the assassin hissed.

The impostor's legs buckled, and she growled in pain, but still she managed to smash the base of her axe haft into Riven's jaw. Blood flew from the assassin's mouth. He staggered backward and fell, leaving both blades buried in his enemy's flesh.

The shapeshifter roared, jerked Riven's blades free, and began to change form.

Gez's body contorted and twisted, growing broader, more muscular. Fur shrank and vanished into leathery green skin. The head expanded while the muzzle shortened, finally exploding into a huge mouth filled with teeth. Clawed fingers and splayed feet sprouted from the elongated arms and thick legs.

That was too much for the gnolls, who had been watching the combat from a distance. As one, the pack barked its terror and began to flee back the way they had come. Even Dreeve ran.

Moments later, more shouting and the sound of metal ringing on metal sounded from the woods in the direction the gnolls had fled.

Cale and Riven, both bleeding, shared a look. What new foe was this?

They had no way to know. Cale gripped his holy symbol tightly.

The creature didn't appear surprised by the combat happening in the woods behind her. She looked at Cale with dark eyes.

"You wished to see me, Erevis Cale," she said. "See me now."

With that, she leaped at him, quick as a viper, and knocked him to the ground. Her weight pushed the air from Cale's lungs and cracked several ribs. He tried to bring his long sword to bear but she pinned his arm in a vise grip. Her other claw raked his throat—only the stiff leather collar of his armor kept him alive. He punched at her with his offhand.

With an almost casual bite, she snapped off Cale's hand just above the wrist and devoured it whole.

Pain exploded in his brain. He screamed in agony, and thumped at her with a stump spraying blood. She tore at his chest, his arm, his throat.

From behind, Cale heard Jak exclaim in a rage, "Bitch!"

And the halfling was upon her, trying to get her off of Cale. He stabbed with his dagger and his short sword. Twice, three times he punctured her skin.

Cale was losing consciousness. He couldn't breathe. Blood poured from his arm with each beat of his

heart. Through eyes gone blurry, he watched her rake Jak across his face. The power of the blow sent the halfling sprawling to the ground.

Cale tried to speak but nothing came out.

Riven was there, shouting something, his sabers whirring. He must have retrieved them. Still she remained on top of Cale, holding Jak and the assassin at bay with claw and tooth. Cale, helpless and dying, could do nothing.

It occurred to him then: she had devoured his holy symbol. He had failed his friends—was Riven his friend?—and his god. His vision began to go dark. He gasped for breath. He tried to shift his chest free of her weight but was too weak.

Then, somehow, Jak was on her back, straddling her the way he might a horse. He was shouting, his face flushed and contorted with rage. Tears poured down his face.

As though from a great distance, Cale heard him screaming, "Die! Die!" and with each word, he stabbed her—in the side, in the throat, in the back. Again and again.

The creature roared, showing Cale a mouthful of teeth, and reared up.

Strangely, when she got off of Cale, he felt no relief. His chest still felt as though a hundredweight sat atop it. He knew then that he would die. A rib had pierced a lung. He was breathing through blood.

The creature drove Riven back, plucked Jak off of her back by the scruff of his neck, and brought him around to her face. One, twice, she cuffed him about the face. He went limp, and she opened wide her mouth.

A sabre blade burst from her chest, spraying blood. She looked at it in surprise, dropped Jak, and whirled—

—to receive a cross cut from Riven's other sabre, clean through her throat. Her head flew from her body and her huge frame crashed to the ground, missing Cale by a handspan.

The assassin wasted no time. He spared Cale only a glance before he went to Jak and kneeled at his side. He tapped the halfling's cheeks.

"Fleet! Godsdamnit, Fleet!"

Jak's eyes fluttered open. Riven pulled him roughly to his feet and dragged him over to Cale. Cale tried to speak but couldn't manage it.

"He's dying, Fleet," Riven said. "Heal him. Now."

The assassin looked over his shoulder at the forest. The combat there had ceased. Or at least Cale could no longer hear it.

Jak nodded but his eyes welled. He kneeled, put his hands on Cale, and whispered a prayer to Brandobaris. Cale's pain eased some, but his forearm continued to bleed. His lungs still barely functioned.

Jak looked him in the eyes and mouthed the words, *I'm sorry*.

Cale understood. Jak had used his spells to counter the creature's spells. He had no more healing to give.

"Another, Fleet!" Riven demanded. "Another!"

Jak shook his head and muttered, "I don't have another. It's not enough." His voice broke when he said that last.

Cale tried to smile but could not. He was fading.

Voices from behind.

Jak jumped to his feet with a snarl, blades in his fists. Riven too whirled around. Cale couldn't see but he could hear:

"... tracking you for days. You missed me in Starmantle so you hire curs? They were running as though the Hells had been emptied behind them. What are—"

"Magadon," Riven said. "Come here!"

Magadon. It took a moment for the name to register. Riven's guide from Starmantle.

Magadon stepped forward and appeared in Cale's sight. Clad in woodsman's garb—weathered green cloak, calf high leather boots, broad belt and wide-brimmed hat—he looked every bit a guide. He wore a bow over his shoulder and held a long sword in his fist. He looked to the corpse of the creature beside Cale and his eyes went wide.

"Slaadi," he said.

Riven grabbed him by the shoulder and made him look at Cale.

"Forget that," the assassin said. "Help him."

Shaking his head sadly, Magadon said, "He's done for, Drasek."

In a blink, Riven had a blade at Magadon's throat.

"Not so," Riven hissed. With his other blade, he pointed back across the clearing to someone that Cale

couldn't see. "Hold your ground or he dies, then you. Fleet."

Jak, though obviously confused, interposed himself between Riven and Magadon's comrade, blade bare.

Magadon must not be alone, Cale dimly realized. It occurred to him then that Magadon and his comrade must have been the riders who had tracked Dreeve's pack from Starmantle.

"It's all right, Nestor," Magadon said over his shoulder.

"Godsdamned right," Riven hissed. "Now do it. I've seen you do it before."

Looking down at Cale, Magadon said, "He's too far gone."

"You better hope not. Do it!"

Cale saw the struggle on Magadon's young, cleanshaven face. The man couldn't have seen more than thirty winters.

"You don't know what you're asking," he said at last.

"Yes, I do," Riven said, and he pressed his blade into Magadon's flesh.

The guide stared at Riven's eye, found nothing, and slowly lowered himself beside Cale. Riven's blade stayed at his throat the while.

"I suppose you do," Magadon said, and grim humor tinged his voice.

Riven put his mouth next to the guide's ear and whispered, "If he dies, you're dead too. I don't need a guide without him."

At that, Magadon actually smiled.

"I see you haven't changed, Drasek."

He removed his hat and looked Cale in the face for the first time. Cale saw that his eyes lacked color. They were solid white except for his dark pupils. Ridiculously, those eyes called to Cale's mind knucklebones that had just come up adder's eyes. The most unlucky of rolls.

"This won't hurt," Magadon said to Cale. "Not you, anyway."

Despite the attempt at levity, Cale heard the dread in the guide's voice. Magadon put two fingers to Cale's forehead and two fingers to his own. Instantly, a charge ran the length and breadth of Cale's body and he felt his mind connect to Magadon's, conjoin. The feeling would have frightened him had he not been so weak. For a fraction of a heartbeat, he was not his own man.

Almost as quickly as it had begun, their minds began to separate. As Magadon's mind pulled away, he drew Cale's pain after him. Cale's vision cleared, ribs righted and reknit, slashes closed and sealed, and the stump of his wrist stopped bleeding.

And with each step of the healing process, the wounds that had healed in Cale manifested on Magadon. The guide groaned as his ribs shattered, and he gritted his teeth as his skin split.

The entire process took only moments.

Afterward, Cale was whole but for the stump of his hand. Magadon was ruined.

The guide collapsed beside him, eyes squeezed shut, face contorted with pain. Cale would have healed him if he had had his holy symbol. With nothing else for it, he sat up, put a comforting hand on Magadon, and looked up at Riven.

"What have you done?"

"Saved you," Riven said unemotionally, and nodded at Magadon. "Watch."

Cale watched, wide-eyed, as Magadon visibly gathered himself and attempted to concentrate. Before Cale's eyes, the slashes in the guide's flesh faded, and his ribs healed.

"Dark," Jak whispered from behind him, watching with one eye while keeping the other on Magadon's comrade.

Cale too was amazed. He had seen Magadon cast no healing spell.

"How?" he asked Riven.

Riven's mouth twisted with distaste.

"Back in Selgaunt," the assassin said. "I told you I once knew a mind mage. Now you do too."

"Psionicist," Magadon corrected, groaning as he lifted himself into a seated position. "Mind mage sounds ridiculous."

Riven scoffed.

Cale helped Magadon to his feet and asked, "You healed me with your mind?"

Magadon looked him in the face with those knucklebone eyes and replied, "I established a sympathetic bond between us and took your wounds as my own. I healed *myself* with my mind."

Cale absorbed that, still astounded.

"So you can only heal yourself?" he asked.

Magadon nodded.

A thought occurred to Cale and he asked, "Can you pass the wounds to another?"

A guarded look came over the guide's face.

"Only if the other were willing," he said. "It's not a weapon."

Cale considered that, nodded, and extended his remaining hand.

"I'm Erevis Cale," he said, "and I'm in your debt."

Magadon took his hand.

"Magadon Kest. And that," he nodded to his comrade, a large man in studded leather armor, armed with bow and a greatsword, "is Nestor."

The big man nodded his balding head in acknowledgement. His wide-eyed gaze lingered over the corpse of the slain creature.

Magadon went on, "Perhaps you'd consider calling off the halfling? Nestor looks intimidated."

"Piss off," said the big man.

"Jak," Cale said with a smile.

The halfling sheathed his blades and gave Nestor an apologetic shrug.

For the first time, it registered that both Jak and Riven were wounded. Cale reached for his holy symbol—

And realized again that he had no holy symbol. And no hand. He looked at the stump. Strangely, it felt as though he still had a hand, as though he could still flex his fingers. He felt no pain, just loss. He looked to the corpse of the creature.

"What did you call her?" he asked Magadon.

"Her? How in the Hells would you know it was a 'her'?"

Cale gave no answer, and Magadon shrugged.

"She's a slaad, I think," the guide said. "Creatures of chaos. Not of this world." He looked at Riven. "Not enough enemies in Faerun for you, Drasek?"

Riven sneered.

Nestor, standing over the slaad's corpse with a haunted look, poked at the body with his greatsword. Cale figured Nestor had never before seen anything like her.

"Cut her up and burn her," Cale said. "Then we move."

Nestor whirled on them.

"What?" he asked, horror obvious in his eyes.

"They heal," Riven said. "Faster than a troll. It's the only way to be certain. Fleet, start a fire. Keep it low. We don't need the whole forest seeing it."

Jak nodded and set to work. Afterward, while Magadon, Jak, and Nestor chopped the slaad's body into manageable pieces, Cale pulled Riven aside.

"How well do you know him?" Cale asked, indicating Magadon.

"We go back a bit. I'd trust him as much as you. He's been a guide out of Starmantle for years. Did some work for the Zhents years ago. His comrade is unknown to me."

"Get him over here."

Riven called Magadon over while Nestor and Jak put the slaad to the flames. The creature's flesh shed greasy black smoke as it burned. It smelled like eggs gone bad. Of course, Cale knew that somewhere in the flames his holy symbol too was burning. He watched the flesh char and peel away from the bones, hoping that somewhere the flames warmed the departed souls of the Uskevren house guards she had murdered.

When Magadon walked over, Cale asked him, "Can you get us to the Lightless Lake by midnight?"

Magadon frowned and said, "That'll be tight. The marsh is hard going. But I know the way." He paused, then added, "What's in it for me and Nestor?"

"Three hundred fivestar—gold pieces each," Cale said. "You'll have to take my word for payment, at least for now." When Magadon didn't balk, Cale went on, "There's likely to be danger there. And more of those." He indicated the roasting slaad with the stump of his hand. "Innocent lives may be at stake, but you should understand that this really is a personal matter."

The guide stared him in the face, his expression unreadable.

"There aren't any innocent lives, Erevis," Magadon said, "and I wouldn't trust a man who was out to save 'em. A grudge, now that I can understand. We're in for three hundred wheels."

He gave Riven a look then walked back to help burn the slaad to ash.

After he'd gone, Riven indicated Cale's stump and asked, "How is it?"

Coming from Riven, the question surprised Cale. He remembered the thought that had occurred to him as he lay dying: Was Riven his friend?

"I'll manage," he said. "Lost the mask, though. No spells until I get a new symbol."

He managed to keep his tone level, but in truth he had no idea how he would obtain another holy symbol. The mask had come to him by ...

Fate, he thought, and almost smiled. Almost.

Riven's hand went to his own holy symbol, then he wiped the slaad's black blood from his sabers and scabbarded them.

"Let's find this prig of a mage."

CHAPTER 17

Summoning Shadows

Behind Vraggen, the bullywugs ceased beating their drums and fell silent. The hushed air was rich with anticipation. The bullywugs seemed to be holding their breath beneath their torches. Eglos, their shaman, had represented to his faithful that the expected appearance of the Fane of Shadows would be a sign that the tribe was favored by Ramenos. Worked into a religious frenzy, the gullible creatures now would tear to shreds anyone else who attempted to set foot in the area.

"I'll never get this stink off of my clothes," Azriim said, beside him.

Vraggen made no reply. He stood on the edge of the Lightless Lake with the half-drow and Serrin to either side.

The Lightless Lake was a small body of water, but Vraggen knew its depths to be infinite. Like a well in the world, it had no shallows. Stepping into even the edge of its waters meant sinking to depths beyond measure. No starlight, no glow from Selune's tears reflected on the pitch waters. Ripples did not mar its surface. It was a darkened mirror, a perfect reflection of the night.

It was a holy place.

Vraggen waited, increasingly anxious. The midnight hour approached. If Azriim had correctly deduced the time from the star globe, soon the Fane would appear, soon he would be transformed.

The Fane was a gift of the gods of shadows to their faithful, a sanctuary that journeyed through time and worlds. It was a bastion, an armory for servants of the twilight. Only one who understood the shadow could enter it safely and bypass its guardians.

A cold breeze stirred, whispering through the stands of cypress. As one, the bullywugs uttered a low croak of awe. They sensed the growing presence of the Fane, but dared not approach nearer than a spearcast to the water.

Ochre light began to pulse from deep in the depths of the lake.

"Look," Vraggen said.

"I see," Azriim said softly, and Vraggen heard the anticipation in his voice.

The green light grew brighter, fuller, but somehow did nothing to dispel the darkness of night.

Beside him, Azriim shook his head sharply, as though to shed an unpleasant thought.

"There is a problem," he said, softly.

What problem could there be? Vraggen's triumph—*Cyric's* triumph—was at hand.

"Speak," the mage commanded.

Azriim looked him in the eyes. The ochre light from the lake cast the half-drow's face in a sinister light.

Azriim said, "Cale is coming."

Vraggen couldn't believe it so he asked, "Why do you think this?"

Azriim hesitated a moment before answering, "Elura and Dolgan were to transport themselves here at this hour. Something must have prevented that. It can only be Cale. He must have tracked us from Selgaunt."

Vraggen whirled on Serrin and spat, "You—!"

Azriim held up his hands and interposed himself between Serrin and the furious mage.

"They left Serrin for dead at the Twisted Elm, Vraggen," the half-drow said. "He told them nothing. If it were otherwise, I would know. Cale probably tracked us by magical means."

Vraggen stared into Azriim's mismatched eyes and knew the half-drow was right. Besides, it didn't matter how Cale had tracked them. To Vraggen, Cale was nothing more than another obstacle to overcome in his quest to glorify Cyric. He recovered his calm.

"The bullywugs will have some sport, then. Excellent." Vraggen turned back to the lake and looked across its still surface, into the glow in its depths. He pointed and said, "Behold, Azriim. The Fane of Shadows."

Azriim and Serrin leaned forward to see.

Deep below the surface of the lake, the diffuse ochre light pierced the pitch to illumine marble columns veined in black, graceful arches, thick pillars, obsidian sculptures of a hundred world's gods of the night—a temple, the Fane. Living shadows swirled around the columns, danced through the arches. The waters of the Lightless Lake blurred the image but the beauty of the Fane was undeniable. It seemed to hang suspended in the depths, like a star in the heavens.

Within, Vraggen knew, was power.

"Open the way," said Azriim.

Vraggen nodded. He held up his arms, uttered the arcane words to a spell of opening, and powered it by tapping the Shadow Weave. He sent the shadow magic spiraling into the lake. In answer, the waters seethed and hissed.

Behind them, the bullywugs croaked in unison, caught in a religious ecstasy.

The waters of the lake parted, solidified, and formed a narrow, step-lined, hollow shaft that pierced the lake's depths all the way to the Fane. It appeared as though the invisible finger of a god had penetrated the lake to point Vraggen's way.

"Well done," Azriim breathed.

Vraggen couldn't help but smile as he said, "Only one who wields the Weave behind the Weave can do what I have done."

"I know," said Azriim.

Vraggen turned to the bullywugs and in their tongue, which he could speak only through the power of his magic, he shouted, "*Ramenos shows his favor to this tribe and I am consumed in his maw. Remain until the sign has passed, then go with the blessing of the Maw. Kill any others who appear.*"

The shaman and fat chieftain echoed Vraggen's words and the tribe croaked agreement.

"Come," Vraggen said to Serrin and Azriim. He turned to look down the shaft. "The Fane remains in each world for only a short while. What we seek is within."

"Indeed," Azriim said, and he smiled with his perfect teeth.

Despite the steep angle of the shaft, the footing within it was firm, the water somehow solid. Far below them, the Fane beckoned, itself seemingly situated on an invisible platform and surrounded by a dome of air. Its shadow guardians lurked at the bottom of the shaft, in the statue-littered courtyard before the great iron doors of the Fane's entrance. As they descended, the shaft closed behind them, and the shadows swarmed toward them.

"They will not harm us," Vraggen said to Azriim and Serrin as he led them downward. When they neared the bottom of the shaft, Vraggen announced to the guardians, "I am a servant of the hidden power, the Weave behind the Weave, Shar's darkness to Selune's light and Mystra's folly. I will pass."

The shadows parted as had the water. They stood on an invisible disc, surrounded by a dome of air. Vraggen savored the moment. Around them, the statues of a hundred gods from a hundred worlds looked on.

Vraggen walked through the courtyard to the doors. He put his hand to the iron pull ring and heaved open the door.

The forest floor sloped downward and grew increasingly soft as they moved through the Gulthmere. After a time, the thick stands of pines and cedars gave way to brooding cypresses. Pools of stagnant water dotted the undergrowth, increasingly common as they moved along. A pungent organic smell wafted from the water.

"It is well for you that this was a dry spring," Magadon said. "Otherwise, these ponds would be more like lakes, and the ground nothing but a muddy swamp."

Even in the scant illumination from Jak's bluelight wand, Cale could see that the swamp was no real swamp at all. Rather, it was just a lowland area within the forest that was dotted with pools—the Gulthmere's drain.

Still, the air felt different, thick, oily. Some evil slept there, Cale was sure of it.

Jak pulled at his sleeve and said, "Your sword."

Cale nodded. He knew. He held his blade unsheathed in his good hand and wisps of darkness played along its length. Ever since they'd passed the border stones, it had been bleeding shadows.

"The sphere ..." Cale began

". . . transformed it," Jak finished, nodding. He eyed the wisps of shadow swirling around Cale's hand and forearm. "They don't hurt, do they? Do you feel yourself?"

Cale went to put his hand on Jak's shoulder and instead thumped him with his stump. Jak grimaced, but Cale forced a smile.

"What's left of me feels like myself, little man."

Jak's eyes were pained. "There's magic that can fix that, Cale," he said, indicating Cale's wrist.

"That's for later," Cale said. "For now, let's do what we came to do."

Jak nodded and they continued following Magadon and Nestor.

Midnight arrived—Cale felt it—and still they had not reached the Moonmere. He feared they would not arrive in time to stop Vraggen.

"Magadon," Cale prodded, "we need to move!"

The guide, standing with Nestor atop a low rise about half a spearcast ahead, hissed for silence and sank to the ground. He lowered himself to his stomach and waved everyone down. Cale, Jak, and Riven hit the earth and crawled forward.

When he reached the top of the rise, Cale saw what had given the guide alarm: torchlight in the distance, and a strange, pulsing ochre glow. With each pulse of the light, Cale felt a pressure on his ears.

"Do you feel that?" he asked Jak.

"I feel it."

Due to distance and intervening stands of cypress and undergrowth, Cale could make out no more.

"The Moonmere is just beyond the tree line," Magadon said. "Those torches burn near its shore. Your enemies are on guard, it appears."

"Where is the temple?" Cale asked Magadon.

Magadon looked at him strangely and said, "There is no temple here, Cale."

Cale didn't even pause. "Yes there is. Jak?"

"I'll scout it," the halfling said as he took out his holy symbol.

Cale gripped him by the shoulder and warned, "As fast as possible, little man. Midnight is past. Find Vraggen. If not, find the temple and find us a way in."

"Not more than a quarter hour," Jak said, and he vanished into the forest.

As promised, the halfling returned in less than a quarter hour.

"It's me," he said, and stepped from the shadows.

Already, he had his pipe in hand. Shielding the flame with his palm, he lit it with a tindertwig.

"Well?" Riven asked.

Jak blew out a smoke ring and said, "About thirty bullywugs, arranged in a line about forty paces from the lakeshore. They've got a priest with them. They appear to be waiting for something."

"Did you find the Fane?" Cale asked.

"Yes," Jak answered, and his brow furrowed. "But that's the problem. It's in the lake."

"There's nothing in that lake," Magadon said. "It's a pit."

"It's there," Jak said, and he took another pull on his pipe.

"So we'll swim to it," Riven said.

"No," Jak replied. "I mean it's *in* the Lake. Underwater. Deep underwater. That green glow is coming from it. You can see the Fane down there if you look from the shore right in front of the bullywugs. It's like it's just... hanging there, surrounded by a giant bubble."

"Even if we could swim to it," Nestor grumbled, "and even if it's got a bubble of air around it, how can we hold our air long enough to swim down there? The halfling said it's a long way down." The big human looked to Magadon. "Mags, this cannot be done. Let's take our payment and go."

Cale said nothing. He couldn't blame the big man but would welcome Magadon's presence. Riven stared contempt at Nestor.

Magadon considered. He looked to Cale and Riven.

"Why not wait?" the guide asked. "If you seek someone who is within, he'll come out sooner or later. You can move on him then."

Cale replied, "No. The mage we're after must be stopped before he gets what he seeks. Besides, this quarry does not need to exit through doors. If we don't stop him now, we may never see him again."

Magadon still looked uncertain.

"They got in," Cale said to him. "And they need to breathe. So there's a way. We'll find it." He paused before adding, "With or without you."

Magadon looked up sharply, but his hard look quickly gave way to a smile.

"With us, then," he said. "Come, Nestor. You need to bathe anyway."

Cale couldn't help but smile at that. Jak chuckled. Nestor looked angry.

Of Jak, Cale asked, "You scout a way past the bullywugs?"

Jak took another pull on his pipe then answered, "Easy. All we need to be is quiet and I'll get us right to the shore."

"Good," Cale said. "Let's move."

Crouched at the edge of the tree line, Cale eyed the bullywugs. At least thirty strong, they stood in a ragged line about a spearcast from the Lightless Lake. The green skin of the froglike humanoids glistened in the light of their torches. Except for an occasional croak, they stood in near silence, watching the lake, watching the glow from the Fane. Their shaman, adorned about his neck with a brace of humanoid skulls

and wearing a shirt of reptilian scales, swayed to music that only he could hear.

"A distraction?" Riven asked.

Cale shook his head and answered, "Not going to pull enough of them away. They're worshipping. No, we go one at a time, at a belly crawl, as Jak suggested. We make for that." He pointed to a large cypress at the edge of the lake, near the point from which the green glow lit the waters.

"A lot of space," Riven observed.

Cale couldn't deny it. If he'd still had his holy symbol, or if the halfling hadn't exhausted all of his spells, they would have had more options. As it was ...

"It's all we've got," he said. "The undergrowth will give us some cover. Me first. Then Jak, then you." He looked to Magadon and Nestor. He felt obliged to give them one more chance at an out. "You can remain—"

Magadon grinned and shook his head. Cale was struck again with how incongruous that smile looked under his knucklebone eyes.

"I said we were in, Erevis," the guide said, "so we're in. Right, Nestor?"

The big human only grunted.

"Well enough," Cale said. "You follow after Riven, then Nestor. Let's do it."

Wasting no time, Cale mentally prayed to the Lord of Shadows to shield him from the bullywug's goggle eyes and crawled out of the tree line. He moved as rapidly as he could while staying flat to the ground. While the soft earth muffled the sound of his movements, his breath and heartbeat sounded as loud as a warhorn in his ears. With every croak from the bullywugs, he felt certain they had spotted him. But they did not. Covered in mud and sweat, he reached the cypress and sank into the shadows near its bole.

Unable to resist, he spared a glance into the lake. There, deep beneath the otherwise pitch waters, he saw the Fane of Shadows suspended in a hemispherical bubble. Viewed through the water, it looked like a picture drawn deliberately vague. He made out statues, arches, columns, but somehow it still looked insubstantial, surreal. He drew his sword and felt it being pulled toward the water, as though the lake was a lodestone. The shadows bleeding from the blade swirled off the metal and into the Lightless Lake. He knew it wanted to go there. Intuitively, he knew it would take him.

He turned away, determined to see to the safety of his comrades first.

The halfling came next. With skill, he crawled through the muddy undergrowth toward Cale. When he reached the cypress, Cale put a hand on his shoulder.

"Your sword," Jak said right away. "It's worse."

"I know," he said, and signaled Riven.

The assassin moved rapidly across the clearing, a shadow among shadows. When he reached the safety of the cypress, he looked into the lake and his good eye went wide.

"Dark," he oathed. "That *is* deep."

Cale signaled Magadon. With surprising grace, the guide made his way across the clearing to the cypress. He too looked upon the lake wide-eyed.

"I trust you have some ideas," he said to Cale.

Cale did, but made no reply. Instead, he signaled Nestor.

The big human rolled from the tree line and began to make his way across the clearing. Slowly. He didn't share Magadon's grace or skill.

"How long have you worked with this oaf?" Riven hissed at Magadon.

The guide hesitated a moment before answering, "Not long."

He left it at that.

Nestor stopped about halfway to the cypress.

"What is he doing?" Jak hissed.

Cale shook his head. He had no idea.

One of the spindly-legged bullywugs on the near side of their line shook its frog head, staggered, and croaked. Others croaked in answer. Cale could hear the question in their tone.

Cale held his breath. Nestor, the dolt, continued to move. Cale willed him to stay still. Eyes were drawn to motion, even in the dark. But the big fighter continued his crawl.

The bullywug that had staggered suddenly pointed in Nestor's direction and croaked loudly. Thirty pairs of bulbous eyes focused on the human. The shaman ceased his ritual swaying, stood, and looked in Nestor's direction. Spears were brandished. Loud croaks ran up and down the line. The bullywugs started to hop toward Nestor.

"Dark and empty," Cale oathed.

With nothing for it, Nestor jumped to his feet and ran for the cypress. Thirty bullywugs led by their

shaman hopped after. Spears whistled through the air.

Just as Cale and Riven prepared to rush to his rescue, two, then three of the spears thumped into the human. He staggered and fell, disappearing in the mud and undergrowth.

Cale held his ground, strained to see the fallen man but could not. It was as though the earth had swallowed him up.

"Nestor!" Magadon shouted.

The guide started back but Riven blocked him with his blade.

Ten or more of the bullywugs swarmed the area in which the human had fallen and their spears rose and fell. The rest, having heard Magadon's cry, croaked loudly and hopped for the cypress. Their shaman began a rhythmic chanting that Cale knew could only be a spell.

Jak grabbed Cale by the arm and said, "Whatever you're going to do, do it fast!"

Cale knew what he had to do—follow the shadows, the same as he had done his whole life.

He followed the mist swirling off his blade, stepped to the water's edge, and shoved his sword in, all the way to the hilt. The shadows leaking from the iron hissed when they hit the water, as though the blade was hot. For a moment, the lake churned and foam sprayed. A heartbeat later, a depression formed in the water around the sword. A hemisphere as large as a merchant's wagon. A bubble of air. He withdrew his blade and the depression remained.

"Here!" he called. "Here!"

His comrades ran to him, with Magadon covering their retreat with bow fire. The air was filled with spears and croaks. Spears thumped into the cypress's trunk and splashed into the lake.

"Get in," Cale urged. "It will support us."

He was guessing on that last but it proved to be true.

Riven, Jak, and Magadon jumped into the hemisphere, Magadon still firing. Cale followed, and it began to sink.

"Burn me," Jak whispered, as the depression began to descend. It formed into a perfect sphere as the water closed above them.

By the time the bullywugs reached the shore, the lake had already swallowed Cale and his comrades. Looking up through the lens of the sphere, the bullywugs appeared blurry and indistinct. Their croaks, muffled. A few spear tips poked into the water, but none reached within the sphere.

Cale put a hand on Magadon's shoulder to comfort him on the loss of his friend. Magadon looked him in the eyes and gave a nod. He took a deep breath.

"Here," the woodsman said. "Do not resist."

While Cale, Riven, and Jak shared a confused look, Magadon closed his eyes, touched two fingers to his temple, and visibly concentrated.

Cale felt a tickle at the base of his skull, followed by Magadon's "voice" in his head: *We now are all linked telepathically, at any distance.*

"Nice," Jak said. *I mean, nice*, he said again, mentally, and grinned.

How long? Cale asked, more and more impressed with the mind mage.

More than an hour, Magadon responded.

Better than handcant, Cale said to Riven and Jak.

The bubble descended rapidly. Its sides felt leathery, though it was perfectly transparent. Below them the Fane glowed eerily, itself contained within a much larger hemisphere suspended in the depths. Try as he might, Cale could see no bottom to the lake. A field of statuary, not unlike the garden topiary in Stormweather, surrounded the temple building itself. Shadows darted amongst the statues.

See them? Cale said.

I see them, Riven said.

Jak nodded, as did Magadon.

Ready yourselves, Cale warned. *I doubt they're friendly.*

CHAPTER 18

The Fane of Shadows

Their sphere stopped at a point adjacent to and just touching the larger sphere of air that contained the Fane. Like soap bubbles, the two instantly joined to form one larger bubble. The eerie green light, seemingly emanating from everything and nothing, provided a surreal illumination. Cale felt a strange sense of solitude, as though he was floating through the cosmos, as though he was suspended within the starsphere in his pack.

From the statue-filled courtyard, the host of shadows streaked toward them with an unearthly moan. They appeared vaguely humanoid, with a deeper darkness where their eyes ought to have been. Menace went before them.

Cale and Riven stepped forward to meet them, blades bared. Jak followed, holy symbol brandished in his hands. Magadon, in stride beside the halfling, closed his eyes for a moment and a ball of white fire took shape in his hands.

Form up, Cale ordered, as the shadows swooped in. *A tight circle.*

Just as the comrades prepared to receive the onslaught, the shadows stopped.

They hovered in a semicircle three paces away. For a moment, nothing happened, then they began to moan. Those dire voices cast more chill than an Alturiak gale.

In answer, Cale's sword vibrated and cast off more wisps of darkness.

I don't know, Cale said to his comrades, to cut off the questions he felt forming in their minds.

"Trickster's toes," Jak said.

The moaning abruptly ceased, and Cale's sword stopped vibrating. A silent communication seemed to pass between the shadows and they parted like a curtain to allow Cale and his comrades passage.

Jak's voice sounded in Cale's head, *Whatever was in that starsphere went into your sword.*

Cale nodded, and hoped again that whatever had transformed his sword had not transformed him, too. Cale looked at his blade. The dull steel still emitted streamers of shadow. He thought of the strange language that Riven had learned in his dreams, the speaking of which struck like a physical blow. He saw Mask's hand in both the sword and the words.

Sephris's voice sounded in his memory: Two and two are four.

Cale led his comrades through the shadows, which dispersed after they passed.

The statues that littered the courtyard were of extraordinary craftsmanship. Carved from black veined marble, basalt, obsidian, or ebony, all depicted what could only be a god or goddess of night. Many appeared as old and worn as the multiverse. Others likely had seen only a century or two. Intuitively, Cale understood the deities represented there to be gods and goddesses of darkness, night, or shadows on a hundred different worlds.

Who sculpted these? Jak asked, and even his mental voice held a touch of awe.

Cale wondered the same thing.

A metal plaque on the pedestal of each set forth the name of the represented deity. Most were in tongues or alphabets that even Cale had never before seen, but—

He stopped before a towering blacksteel sculpture of a long, dark-haired woman in a flowing cloak—the largest, most conspicuous sculpture in the courtyard. A cowl partially hid her features, but her mouth smiled knowingly. The plaque at the base was engraved in Thorass, an ancient form of common on Faerun—*Shar*, it read. *The Dark Maiden, Keeper of the Secret Weave.*

Beside and slightly behind the statue of Shar, nearly hidden in its shadow, stood another statue, smaller and carved from black hematite: A one-legged human male in thieving leathers, with a cowled cloak pulled up to reveal only the lower half of his face. He seemed to be looking up at Shar from the shadows and sneering.

The expression reminded Cale of Riven.

In its hand, the statue held a long sword that looked strikingly similar to Cale's own. Cale's heart raced as he read the plaque: *Mask*, it read, and nothing more, as if any more than that one word was unnecessary.

"Dark and empty," whispered Jak, repeatedly eyeing Riven, Cale, and the statue.

Who are you two? asked Magadon, trepidation evident in his mental voice.

For the only time in his life, Cale wasn't sure of the answer to that question. He shared a look with Riven—the assassin's face had gone pale—then averted his gaze. He looked to the statue's missing leg,

then to the stump of his wrist.

Who am I? he thought to the Lord of Shadows, echoing Magadon's question. The statue only answered him with a sneer and silence.

He took a deep breath.

"Cyric is Vraggen's god and he is not represented here," Cale said. "The mage has been allowed passage only because he wields Shar's Shadow Weave. But he still is not welcome." He looked to Riven and said, "This is more our temple than his."

Riven nodded and said, "Let's end it."

Together, the four comrades sprinted for the doors of the Fane.

Vraggen uttered a word of opening and the double doors to the sanctum flew open. In the Grand Hall behind them, they had passed many gifts, many weapons. None of them interested Vraggen. If he was entitled to take only one prize from there, as the caretaker had told him, he would take only what lay beyond these doors.

"Come," he said to Azriim and Serrin. "Time is short."

With that, he walked through the doors. They closed behind them.

A domed ceiling soared above the circular floor of the sanctum. The black, gem-encrusted ceiling was a representation of Faerun's moonless night sky, exactly as the sky appeared in the star globe, exactly as the sky appeared on the surface above. It seemed to shimmer, as though it was made of water rather than stone. Vraggen knew that the ceiling changed to reflect the sky of the world in which the Fane currently existed. A marvel, really.

A border of inlaid amethyst circumscribed the polished slate floor, giving the whole the look of a black sphere bordered in purple: Shar's symbol. Though the Fane served the dark gods of many worlds, it was one goddess—Shar—who had first created it, who had first created the Shadow Weave; Shar, whose beautiful, dark house this was.

In the center of the sanctum sat a basalt, horseshoe-shaped altar inlaid with dusky opals and black pearls.

A purple altar cloth, marked with the symbol of Shar, lay draped over it.

That altar was where Vraggen's transformation would occur.

In the area of the ceiling directly above the altar, no stars glittered in the sky. Instead, a small circular area, devoid of light, yawned like the mouth of a beast. Shar's "moon." Vraggen found it hypnotic. It was a hole in reality, an eye into shadow. The transforming energy would emerge from that emptiness.

Candelabrum stood about the sanctum, though the wrist-thick tapers set therein did not burn. The diffuse, sourceless green light provided the only illumination.

Black velvet curtains lined the entirety of the walls except for the wall directly behind the altar. There, a lifelike depiction of a sapling tree decorated the wall. With smooth black bark, a few gray leaves, and three oval fruit of glistening silver, it was unlike any tree Vraggen had ever before seen. Azriim and Serrin seemed taken with the representation. They stared at it, unblinking.

Vraggen put a hand on each of their shoulders and said, "The altar."

He moved into the room. They followed.

Unlike the rest of the floor of the sanctum, a black crystalline substance covered the floor within the horseshoe of the altar's pulpit. A charge raced through Vraggen as he stepped upon it. Azriim stood near him. Serrin stood before the mosaic of the tree, lightly tracing the wall with his fingertips. In a generous mood, Vraggen allowed the easterner his fascination. He looked back to Azriim.

"Let us begin," he said, and began the ritual that would grant him the greatest of gifts offered by the Shadow Weave.

Cale pulled open the doors to the Fane. A long, wide hallway beckoned. Shadows played in the green light along its entire length. Paintings and mosaics covered the walls, each shifting and melding when Cale tried to focus on them. He thought them a representation of chaos, or reified deception.

Alcoves lined the hall at intervals. In each stood a small table or pedestal, and upon each of those sat an item, displayed as though the Fane were a merchant's shop: here a staff of power, there a sword; here a cloak, there a ring. Cale could feel the magic in the room— shadow magic. The hall terminated in a pair of black double doors.

"Don't touch anything," Cale said, and he stepped into the Fane.

The moment he broached the archway, a husky female voice spoke aloud, in perfect Chondathan, "Take one thing of what you would, servant of the secret, leave what you can, and extend the darkness thereby."

Cale turned to his comrades with raised eyebrows.

"Strange that she would speak in the tongue of Luiren," Jak said.

"Amnian, you mean," said Riven.

Cale realized then that the voice was nothing more than a phantasm. The magic must have let each listener hear it in a familiar tongue.

Ignore it, Cale sent. Keep moving.

When they had all stepped into the foyer, the doors of the Fane slowly closed behind them. They shared a look, readied their weapons, and advanced down the hallway. Cale steadfastly kept his eyes from the tempting items in the alcoves.

Before they'd taken ten strides, the shadows before them swirled threateningly. Cale leaped backward, dragging Jak with him. White fire took shape in Magadon's hands. Riven circled out wide.

The shadows amalgamated, whirled, and formed into a humanoid shape.

Hold, Cale ordered distantly, feeling strangely unthreatened.

He let his blade drop.

The shadows tightened, took on more definition, and finally assumed the shape of an elderly man in a gray cloak. His eyes were solid black, and in them Cale could see the twinkling of stars. Those eyes reminded him of a dream he had once had....

"More visitors?" the black-eyed man said.

He looked at Cale, and took a step closer.

Watch him, Jak said.

Riven slid around and behind the old man, sabers bare.

"You," the old man said. He smiled and his body momentarily dissipated into shadows, instantly reforming with his back to Cale and his eyes on Riven. "Oh, and you."

Cale started to speak. Before he had completed the first syllable, the old man was again face to face with him.

"Do you know me?" Cale asked.

The old man chuckled.

"As well as you know yourself. And you," he said to Riven.

"Who are you?" Riven asked, echoing Cale's thoughts.

"I am the caretaker."

"*What* are you?" Cale asked.

To that, the caretaker smiled softly, and answered, "A servant, like you. But perhaps a more willing one."

He held up a hand as though to touch Cale, but Cale backed off. Fast.

"You do not yet understand what you are," the caretaker said, then turned to Riven. "Nor you. But you will. Both of you. The darkness called you, and each of you answered. As have I, in my way. Your duty, like mine, will become clear in time."

Jak stepped protectively in front of Cale and Cale couldn't help but smile.

"What is this place?" the halfling demanded.

The caretaker stared down at Jak, thoughtful, and replied, "The darkness has called you too, not so? Recently. Ah, but you have not answered."

Jak said nothing but Cale saw him shiver. He thought of the halfling's face the day after the slaad had tortured him. It pleased him to hear the caretaker say that Jak had not answered the darkness.

Jak is a seventeen, Cale thought, recalling Sephris's words.

"Answer my question," Jak insisted.

The caretaker shrugged and looked up and down the hall.

"This place has many names, in many tongues. The Temple of Night. The Fane of Shadows. The Umbral Shrine. For my part, I consider it a toolbox. It, and I, travel the worlds, offering assistance to the servants of the night."

Silence settled over the hall until Cale asked, "A toolbox?"

The caretaker replied, "Indeed. You," he said to Cale, then turned to Riven, "and you, may take from this place one gift. One tool."

Riven started to spit but stopped himself.

"I'll take nothing from this place," he said.

The caretaker nodded, unoffended, and replied, "As you will."

"A mage entered here before us," Cale said.

The caretaker nodded, indicating the double doors behind him.

"He is within the sanctum, even now claiming the gift that he came seeking."

Cale looked down the hall to the double doors but resisted the urge to charge down there.

"We know what he seeks," said Cale.

Smiling cryptically, the caretaker said, "What he desires is slight compared to what those who are with him seek."

That took Cale aback. Did Azriim have his own agenda?

"And what is that?" Cale asked.

"The Weave Tap of the Dark Maiden."

The words meant nothing to Cale. He looked to Magadon and Jak. Both shrugged and shook their heads.

"What is that?" asked Cale.

The caretaker frowned and said, "Knowledge you ask for." He extended his hands and a tome as large as any wizard's spellbook took shape there. Black, scaled leather covered gilded vellum pages. "Then knowledge shall be your gift. This is a history, of sorts. The answer to your questions lies within these pages. Take it."

After a moment's hesitation, Cale took the tome. Surprisingly, it felt ordinary in his hands. He placed it in his pack, deliberately showing it no reverence.

The caretaker merely smiled.

"May we pass?" Cale asked.

"Of course. I am a caretaker," he replied, "not a guardian."

I doubt that, Jak said.

Cale nodded.

"Let's move," he said to his comrades, and brushed past the caretaker.

Already, the old man was dissipating into his component shadows.

"It was my honor to meet you both, the First and the Second. Farewell."

With that, he was gone.

Cale put the caretaker's reference out of his mind as the comrades jogged down the hall for the double doors. Before they reached them, a pulsing sensation, so deep that Cale felt it more than heard it, assaulted their ears. They gritted their teeth and ran on.

Jak, running at Cale's side, said in a mental voice that Cale knew was directed only at him, *Erevis, whatever's happening here is bigger than that sphere. That statue. Your sword. Calling you the First. Do you see that?*

I see it.

This is not just a Calling by Mask, it's something more.... Don't lose yourself, Cale.

Cale looked at him sidelong and sent, *I won't. That's why I've got you.*

They reached the landing before the double doors of the sanctum. The pulsing had grown in intensity, the intervals between pulses shorter. They originated behind those doors.

Cale gripped one door, Riven gripped the other, and they readied themselves to pull them open.

CHAPTER 19

Transformations

The pulses accelerated. The sky-ceiling of the sanctum grew blurry and began to swirl around the starless hole above the altar. Slowly at first, then faster. Faster it spun; faster it pulsed. Energy was building to a focused crescendo. Azriim could sense it. Vraggen stood at the altar with his back to Azriim and Serrin. His head was thrown back and he held his arms out from his sides as though he was awaiting the embrace of a lover.

Enjoy it mage, Azriim thought, for it is doomed to be a short love affair.

Dolgan's voice sounded in Azriim's mind, *I am within the Fane. They are past the caretaker.*

Azriim nodded and silently replied, *We are locating the Weave Tap. The human has begun his transformation.*

Azriim knew that Dolgan had entered the Fane under cover of one of the rings provided to the brood by the Sojourner. Dolgan's ring rendered him invisible, silent, and undetectable to divinations.

Remain unseen until the moment is right, Azriim ordered. The caretaker cannot observe you.

Dolgan sent a mental acknowledgement.

Azriim returned his attention to the mage and watched, mildly curious, as black, arm-thick tendrils erupted from the hole in the spinning sky-ceiling and squirmed down toward Vraggen. The human tensed as they approached, screamed when they pierced his skin, and sighed in ecstasy as they began to throb, drawing away his mortal lifestuff and replacing it with that of shadow. The process was unstoppable.

Unless the participant was killed.

Here, Serrin's mental voice said.

Azriim blocked out the sounds of Vraggen's transformation and turned to see his broodmate standing before the representation of the tree—the Weave Tap. Serrin cautiously traced his fingers along its bark.

Azriim attuned his vision to see magic. Other than Serrin, nothing near the representation glowed in his sight.

Where? the half-drow asked. *I do not see it.*

Serrin tapped the image of the tree with a finger and sent back, *You do see it, but it is masked. Look again, as though you were looking from the corner of your eye.*

Azriim did so and—

There. The representation was no representation at all! It was a small alcove aglow with magic, in which stood a sapling tree, in appearance the same as that of the illusionary representation. Shadow magic, magic that Azriim's senses could not easily detect, had hidden the Weave Tap in plain sight by disguising it as a representation of itself. Ingenious.

The best lies always contained a hint of truth, he thought with a smile.

The Weave Tap seemed to hover in the air. While it didn't have roots that Azriim could see, he knew it did in fact have roots of a sort. Those invisible roots could grow anywhere, entwined as they were in the weft of the Weave itself.

It is warded, Serrin said, unnecessarily, for Azriim could see the magic plainly.

The Sojourner had provided Azriim with the tool for that. He pulled from his cloak a straight, finger-thick rod of duskwood. An opalescent pearl capped its tip. Instilled with the power of the Sojourner's magic, the wand could destroy the spells of virtually any other mage on any world.

He pointed it at the alcove and willed the wand's power to dispel the wards surrounding the Weave Tap. One after the other, the wards fell. The Weave Tap lay exposed.

Azriim couldn't help but smile. The Sojourner would be pleased, and might consider his transformation into gray as a reward. Also satisfying, he knew that he no longer needed Vraggen. The seeds sown years before had finally birthed a harvest. Serrin looked a question at Azriim. Azriim nodded, and Serrin took the living artifact in his hands. He held it away from his chest, as though its touch would drain him.

To Dolgan, Azriim projected, *We have located the Weave Tap.*

Dolgan's excitement was tangible. He too hoped for a transformation to gray.

I wish to kill one before we return to the Sojourner, Dolgan sent.

Azriim eyed the mage and considered. As of that moment, the shadow adept, whose arrogance Azriim had endured for far too long, had become superfluous. With his magic-sensing vision attuned to shadow magic, Azriim saw that Vraggen was aglow with protective spells.

He pointed the Sojourner's wand and willed it to destroy the spells on Vraggen's person. Soundlessly,

unnoticed by Vraggen, they winked out.

Well? Dolgan asked.

Azriim grinned. How could he deny Dolgan the same pleasure that he was himself about to take?

Kill one then, he projected, and he and Serrin began to change back to their natural forms.

Vraggen felt the strands of shadow drawing away his mortality and pumping him full of shadowstuff. Immortality; regeneration; agelessness. All of those words danced through his brain. All of those words were made manifest in his rapidly transforming flesh.

In his mind's eye, he was already planning his next steps. He would take Cyric's war to the Banites in Selgaunt. After disposing of them, he would do the same in Ordulin. Cyric and his servants would rule the underworld in all of Sembia! He—

Huge, leathery hands took his head between them and lifted him from his feet. Claws as long as a man's thumb sank into his cheeks, scraped against his skull. He tried to scream but the hands kept his mouth clamped shut.

He uttered a muffled wail of agony. Through the pain, he realized that his protective spells, including his teleportation contingency, had not functioned. He could cast no further spells without the ability to speak. He squirmed and kicked futilely.

A voice sounded in his head—Azriim's voice, *Cease your struggles, fool. Even you must realize that this is at an end.*

Terror ran up Vraggen's spine. Azriim! It dawned on him then.

Azriim was not Azriim.

Incoherent images raced through his brain. Azriim's grin. His perfect teeth. His wild eyes. His sly comments. His manipulation.

Azriim was a shapeshifter. He had never seen it.

Ah, Azriim's voice said, and Vraggen could hear the satisfaction in it. *You see it now, don't you?*

Vraggen saw it all clearly. He had been a pawn, and the realization hit him that he had failed, both himself and his god. Despair washed through him, soaked him to his soul. He stopped even trying to fight. He felt as though he might cry. He went limp in Azriim's inhuman grasp. Mindlessly, the strands of shadow continued to fill him with shadowstuff, but Vraggen knew the transformation would never finish.

See me now, before the end, Azriim said, and turned him around.

Vraggen caught a flash of green skin, muscle, teeth, and mismatched eyes. A slaad, his mind registered distantly, Azriim was a slaad.

Why? he thought. Why?

But Azriim provided him with no answers.

Pray that your mad god is merciful to fools, Azriim said, and he opened his mouth wide.

A tremor shook the Fane as Cale and Riven jerked open the double doors. For an instant, the entire temple seemed to waver, to grow as insubstantial as a phantasm. Cale knew then that the Fane would not long remain in Faerun.

Cale and Riven stepped into the sanctum. Cale took in the scene in only a heartbeat.

In the center of the circular sanctum stood a dark altar. There, a hulking green slaad stood. It clutched Vraggen's headless corpse in its clawed hands. The slaad shot them a grin and swallowed whatever it held in its jaws: Vraggen's head, probably. Blood darkened its shark's teeth. Cale noticed the slaad's eyes then: one blue and one dark. It was Azriim.

"Dark," Riven cursed, and Cale knew he was angry because he wouldn't be able to kill the mage.

In the ceiling directly above Azriim was a circle of darkness about which spun a sky full of stars. The whole reminded Cale of a child's pinwheel, but its motion nauseated him. Shimmering, pulsing tendrils of shadowstuff reached from the hole, feeling for Vraggen, feeling for anything. Cale felt the pull of those tendrils on his sword.

In a flash of insight, Cale understood it all. Azriim had duped Vraggen into opening the Fane then murdered the mage in the midst of his transformation to a shade. But why?

Near the back of the sanctum stood another slaad. Leaner than Azriim, with eyes of gray, it was the slaad who had tortured Jak. In its hands, it held a tree—a sapling with black bark, gray leaves, and small silver fruit the size of walnuts. Strangely, the tree had no roots, though it somehow suggested roots.

Intuitively, Cale realized that it had all been about that tree—the Weave Tap. The slaad with the tree held in its other hand the brass teleportation rod. Without even looking at Cale and his comrades, he twisted it once, twice, and vanished with the Tap.

"No," Jak said through clenched teeth

Casually, Azriim tossed aside Vraggen's corpse, detaching the last of the tendrils.

"You're too late," the slaad croaked. "The Sojourner has his prize."

"We'll see," Cale and Riven said in unison. To Jak and Magadon, Cale projected, *Use missiles, Jak, and your magic, Magadon. Don't let him use the teleportation rod.*

He and Riven charged.

Before they had taken three strides, Azriim spoke an arcane word and vanished from sight. Cale and Riven arrested their charge and went back to back. Cale couldn't hope to hear Azriim's movement above the pulsing in the room.

Again, the Fane wavered.

We've got to get out of here, Cale, Riven projected.

Cale made no answer. He couldn't let it end that way.

Azriim's voice sounded in Cale's head, *I would love to linger and kill you slowly, Erevis Cale, but time is short and my work completed. It satisfies me that you now understand your failure. I'll allow that as vengeance for my ruined pants.*

Cale could hear the smile in his voice.

Magadon's voice sounded in Cale's brain, *He is standing near the far wall, directly in front of the alcove. He has the teleportation rod in his hands. Follow me.*

Without waiting for Magadon, Cale dropped his blade, drew a throwing dagger, and hurled it at the corner at about the height of the slaad's chest. Beside him, Riven too fired a dagger. Both sank into flesh with a dull thud.

Azriim's pained croak could be heard even above the pulsing. Magadon streaked past them, white fire blasting from his hands. The smell of charred flesh filled the room. Riven sped for the corner, blades bare. Cale retrieved his own blade and did the same.

Stay away from those tendrils! he "shouted" as he ran.

Jak's scream stopped them cold. Cale whirled around to see Nestor, halfway through his transformation into a slaad, standing behind Jak with the tip of his blade sticking through Jak's chest.

Nestor completed his change as he pulled his blade free. Jak collapsed face-down to the floor of the sanctum, a pool of blood expanding from his body. Nestor, fully in slaad form but still holding his blade, again stabbed Jak through back.

Cale ... the halfling projected, then fell silent.

Nestor! Magadon's mental voice screamed.

"Jak!" Without a moment's hesitation, Cale put Azriim out of his mind and raced for Jak. Nestor—no, Dolgan—grinning, dropped his sword, pulled his teleportation rod, twisted it, and disappeared with a grin.

Cale sank to Jak's side, soaking his cloak in the halfling's blood. Cale turned him over. His green eyes were open.

"Jak! Jak!"

"I can't see, Cale," the halfling whispered. His eyes were vacant. Cale had seen that look on the faces of corpses.

Cale cradled his head, tried to hold back the tears but failed.

"I know," he said. "I know."

Another shudder shook the Fane. Again it wavered, flickered out of reality for a heartbeat. Cale too felt insubstantial. He was losing his best friend.

Riven and Magadon ran up behind him.

"Let me help carry him," Riven said, and put a hand on Cale's shoulder. "We've got to go, Cale."

Cale couldn't even nod.

"The slaad used his rod to flee," Magadon said. After a pause, he said, "I'm sorry, Jak. I didn't know. I didn't know."

Cale wanted to tell the guide that it was not his fault, that he could not have known, but no words would come.

The pulsing of the sanctum continued. Cale heard it like a distant heartbeat. Jak's breathing slowed, slowed. He tried to wipe Jak's brow with his stump—

—and knew what he had to do.

Cale looked up at Magadon and said, "Take his wounds."

The mind mage backed up a step and said, "Cale, he's—"

"Take them, and give them to me."

Riven looked a question at Cale. Magadon looked horrified.

"It will kill you," the mind mage said.

"Do it," Cale pressed. "Now!"

"No. I—"

"Do it," said Riven, in a tone that didn't allow for refusal.

Magadon stood there with his mouth open. Another tremor shook the temple.

"Now, godsdamnit!" Cale shouted.

Magadon fell to the ground beside Jak. He took a deep breath, touched two fingers to Jak's forehead and clasped Cale's hand. After a moment, Cale felt their consciousnesses meld: Magadon's fearful, Jak's barely there. Cale braced himself.

Pain! Excruciating pain!

His heart fairly exploded in his ribcage. Blood began to fill his lungs. Holes opened in his chest and back. Blood poured out, soaking his cloak. His breath left him. Agony wracked him. Through blurry eyes, he looked upon Jak, whose eyes already were clearing.

Using Magadon as a crutch, he climbed to his feet. He took two steps, staggered, and would have fallen, but Riven caught him.

"Lean on me," the Zhent said.

Cale did.

"The altar," he said, and blood welled in his throat. "Hurry."

"I hope you know what you're doing," Riven said.

Together, the two servants of Mask walked to the altar of shadows. At his belt, Cale felt his sword too pulling him toward the darkness.

The Fane shook, faded from sight. They stood alone in a bubble of air in the depths of a pitch lake.

No!

The Fane returned.

Cale eyed the tendrils as they approached. They squirmed toward him, eager, hungry. Words raced through Cale's brain, the easterner's words, spat between his teeth while Riven threatened torture—*Vraggen's transformation would render him ageless, immune to disease, able to regenerate wounds.* Able to regenerate wounds.

Cale remembered Jak's words too: *A shade isn't human.*

Cale pushed Riven away and stepped within the altar. He had to lean on the sides of the pulpit to keep his feet. The tendrils sank into his flesh but it caused him no pain. Surprisingly, he felt at home. The tendrils throbbed as the Fane shook. Shadowstuff flowed into his veins, filled his organs, drained his humanity.

In that instant, Cale embraced the darkness. He knew then that the shadow had always been part of him, but he had long fought to hold it at bay. No longer.

As the transformation progressed, he felt the wounds in his chest heal. From somewhere distant, he heard Jak crying.

"No! Cale, don't! Not for me!"

But Jak didn't understand. It wasn't just for Jak. It was Cale becoming what he was meant to be.

Strangely, as the last of his humanity drained away, the only thing he could think of was Tazi's face, and her eyes were filled with horror.

All went dark.

Cale groaned and collapsed to the floor. The tendrils detached from his flesh with a sucking sound and squirmed back into the "hole" in the ceiling. The pulsing began to slow. So too the spinning ceiling-sky.

Riven rushed forward and slung Cale over his shoulder. He felt cold, and his skin had gone dusky.

"Let's go!" Riven shouted to Jak and Magadon as he stood.

Another tremor shook the Fane. The structure vanished again, leaving them standing in the empty air bubble. Riven realized for the first time that he was standing in ankle deep water. Dark!

The Fane reappeared around them, but dimmer.

Magadon rushed forward and helped him carry Cale. All three sprinted from the sanctum. Fleet ran at their side, healed of his wounds.

"Is he alive?" Fleet asked, indicating Cale. "Is he breathing?"

Riven had no time for Fleet's sentimental nonsense.

"I don't know!" he grunted. "Run, damn you!"

"Trickster's Toes! His hand!"

Riven saw it then too. Cale's severed hand had regrown. The assassin had no time to consider that marvel. If they wanted to live, they had to run.

They burst through the double doors and sprinted down the hall outside the sanctum. The caretaker was nowhere to be seen. The hallway stretched before them, its many treasures still untouched in the alcoves. The doors leading from the Fane looked far away, too far.

"Go!" Riven shouted, and they did.

Before they had gotten halfway down the hall, the Fane shook so hard it knocked them to the floor, sent them sprawling in the shallow water. Riven and Magadon lost their grip on Cale. He groaned when he hit the floor.

Around them, the Fane shimmered like a mirage, wavered, and vanished.

Somehow Riven knew it wasn't coming back.

The four comrades sat in an empty hemisphere of air. And it would not last long. From several places in the top of the dome, water dribbled in. Even as they watched, the dribbles turned into a rush. The dome began to sag inward in places, crushed by the weight of the Lightless Lake, as though a huge hand was pressing against it.

Riven drew Cale's sword, and touched it to the water. Nothing.

It was over, he knew then.

He replaced the sword in Cale's scabbard—the man ought to die with his own weapon. Cursing under his breath, he climbed to his feet. So too did Fleet and Magadon. All of them shared a look of resignation.

The water was knee deep. In moments, the entire dome would collapse.

Riven struggled with himself for a moment before pulling from his cloak the two bronze teleportation rods he had taken from the slaadi. Fleet's eyes went wide with surprise, then darkened with suspicion.

"Two of us can use these," Riven said.

He handed one to Fleet and the surprise in the halfling's face almost made their plight worthwhile. He handed the other to Magadon. Riven couldn't leave Cale. They were bound together by their god.

"Take them," he said, "and go."

Fleet took the rod, looked at it, then looked at Cale. He shook his head and held the rod back out to Riven.

"I'm not leaving him," he said.

"Don't be an idiot, Fleet!"

"I'm not leaving him," Fleet said again, with that same mettle that had long ago ceased to surprise Riven. "Besides, we don't even know where these will take us."

"Anywhere is better than here," Riven replied.

Jak merely smiled and shook his head.

Magadon too smiled and handed back the rod.

He looked to Cale and said, "I told him I was in this, and I am. To the end."

Riven stared at them both and wondered how Cale managed to inspire such loyalty in his comrades. Only then did he realize that he too was prepared to die at Cale's side.

There was a lesson in there somewhere. Too bad he had to die to learn it.

"Then we'll all die fools," he said, and tucked away the rods.

They gathered up Cale, sloshed through the water a ways, found a suitable spot, and waited. Riven saw that Fleet held his holy symbol in his hands. His teeth were chattering. Riven considered praying to the Lord of Shadows but didn't; it just was not in him, not then. He worshiped Mask for power, not comfort. Still, he was surprised to find his hand over the onyx disc at his throat.

"Riven ..." Fleet began.

Riven shook his head and replied, "I know, Fleet."

Fleet looked him in the face, nodded, and went back to his prayers.

Together, they sat in the cold water and waited for death. All of them watched the dome sink farther, watched the dribbles turn to torrents. More and more water filled the bubble. It would be only moments before it burst and the lake crushed them.

Fleet took Cale's regenerated hand in his own and said, "It's been fun, my friend."

Cale, with his eyes still closed, made no reply.

Magadon surprised them all with a chuckle.

"You know," the guide said, "you still owe me three hundred gold pieces."

"That'll have to wait," Riven said, as the bubble finally gave way.

A roar louder than a thousand warhorns sounded in Riven's ears. Millions of buckets of water poured down, foaming, churning. Riven stared up in defiance.

His mind turned to his dogs, his girls, and he wondered what would happen to them after he died. The water washed away any tears he might have shed.

A peculiar darkness surrounded him and he knew no more.