

Realms of the Underdark
(part of Demilich's Lair Project, OCR'ed by)

PREFACE

At the Publishing House

The offices of Tym Waterdeep Limited, the most successful publishing firm in all Faerun, had been fraught with tension for several weeks. Justin Tym, Faerun's most successful publisher, was worried about the upcoming list. It was common knowledge throughout the City of Splendors that TWL (as it was known to the bookselling community) was on the verge of publishing their two most eagerly anticipated titles yet.

Cormyr: A Novel had received numerous prepublication endorsements, and initial orders were at an all-time high for a first novel. Likewise, Volo's Guide to the Dalelands had all the earmarks of becoming the most successful volume in the guide series written by the gazetteer rumored to be the most successful traveler in all the Realms.

Without a doubt, TWL's current list was their best ever . . . yet Justin Tym was still worried. Unlike the common book buyer, seller, or reader, a book publisher seldom worried about the titles currently being released. His concerns were typically the next season's list, titles currently being edited and readied for publication; and next year's roster, those titles to be contracted to assure that the firm maintains the strength of its list in the times ahead.

Justin Tym was deeply concerned because, as of yet, no new surefire success had found its way to his desk and onto the list to follow up the current crop of titles.

Though a follow-up novel to Cormyr: A Novel was under discussion (perhaps a sequel, or perhaps something totally different, such as Evermeet: A Novel), the author in question, Greenwood Grubb, was beginning to show signs of becoming a prima donna, toiling over every word. Where Cormyr: A Novel was written over the course of the aged scholar's seasonal sabbatical, Grubb had already indicated that the new title would probably take at least thrice as long to write, commenting that artists need time for the creative juices to flow. Tym suspected that the juices that would be flowing were of the more distilled variety, that they would continue to flow until the advance from the earlier book had been completely spent, and that the scholar would not apply himself to his next opus until he absolutely had to: when the gelt ran out. Unfortunately this could be, depending on the extravagance of the author's tastes, several seasons from now. True, success for the next title was almost assured once it was published, but no one, particularly not TWL's creditors, expected the house to stop the presses until that time.

Weighing even more heavily on Justin's mind, however, were the curious set of circumstances connected to the other title.

TWL had always been sole publisher of the works of the legendary Volothamp Geddarm, and Tym had always considered the success of the numerous Volo's guides to be the product of a true publishing partnership. He thought Volo considered him more than just a publisher, maybe even a father figure (or perhaps an older brother, since their ages weren't really that far apart). Likewise, he considered Volo more than just a travel writer or some hack author; he was the house's cash cow, the goose that laid the golden volumes. He was that rare commodity: a bankable author.

Theirs was a relationship blessed by the gods; at least it was until a few months ago.

Justin scratched the top of his pate. It was long forlorn of hair and most recently the home of more than a few wrinkles, which had been creeping upward from his brow line. He still couldn't understand what could possibly have come between them.

A lunch meeting had been set, as was their custom, but Volo sent a message canceling the appointment due to some other more pressing commitment. Justin didn't think much of it at the time. He simply figured Volo was embarrassed by not having a new project ready to feed into the TWL publishing pipeline, especially since his Guide to Shadowdale was already about halfway through its production cycle. With a shrug, Justin decided to take the rest of the day off.

The next day, when he returned to the office, he discovered that Volo had come by that very afternoon demanding payment for some manuscript he claimed to have delivered that very morning. Had Justin been in, something might have been worked out; but an overzealous employee (who was later dismissed) ushered the star author rather rudely off the premises and

gave him a sound tongue-lashing for having stood up the venerable publisher for lunch. Not a word had been heard from the author since that day, and Justin was more than a bit worried.

"Where will I send the next royalty payment?" the publisher fretted. "And, more importantly, what will I do for a new Volo's guide? We had discussed doing the next one on the Moonsea area. Without it, my next year's list is as barren as the Battle of the Bones."

Paige Latour, Justin's latest in a long line of secretaries and the most curvaceous to date, entered the publisher's office, undetected by her preoccupied boss. "Justin, I mean, Mr. Tym," she said, interrupting him from his worrisome speculations while proffering a sealed parchment pouch. "A messenger just dropped this off for you."

"Probably just another wanna-be submission," the publisher offered absently. "Send it back unread. You know the procedure."

"But I think you might want to read it."

"Not now," he retorted curtly. "Just handle it, and don't bother me."

"But, boss," she insisted, "I really think you should read it. It's from some guy named Volothamp, and I figured maybe you could talk him into shortening his name and taking over those Volo's guides you've been worried about."

"Volothamp?" Tym inquired, jolted out of his preoccupations.

"Yeah, boss," she replied. Patting herself on the back, she added, "Pretty neat plan I've come up with, huh?"

"Give me the pouch," the publisher ordered.

"Sure thing," Paige replied. "Can I be an editor now? You promised you'd show me the ropes, but so far you've only shown me . . ."

Justin only had to glance at the writing to immediately recognize the penmanship.

"Miss Latour," Justin interrupted. "This isn't the ideal candidate for a pseudo-Volo."

"It's not?" she asked, puzzled by her boss's reaction.

"No, this is from the real Volo," he replied.

"Oh," she groused, not even trying to hide her disappointment. "I guess I'm not ready to be an editor yet."

Miss Latour quickly left Tym's office as he read the short missive.

Justin,

All is forgiven.

Moonsea guide is still in the works, but should be done on schedule.

We can discuss Magic volume when I return (dare I suggest over lunch?).

Till then, please spot me some gelt, care of the Shipmaster's Hall (you know my earned royalties will make good on it and more).

Best,

Volo

P.S. I'm working on another project that will make the Moonsea guide look like last year's WHO'S WHO AMONG THE ZHENTARIM, but have decided to keep you in the dark about it until it nears completion (Hee, hee!).

The publisher stared at the missive several times while mopping his brow with a recently untied cravat. He was happy the tension brought about by situations unknown seemed to have been defused, but he was still concerned about the upcoming schedule. Did this mean the Moonsea guide would be in on time or not, and what of this other project? Volo had always been fond of puzzles, puns, and conundrums. Perhaps there was a clue in the note, and maybe the solution would mean TWL's salvation as well.

Hmmmmm. ...

THE FIRES OF NARBONDEL

Mark Anthony

Chapter One

Weapons Master

There are a thousand deaths in the Underdark—a thousand different horrors skulking in lightless caverns and lurking deep in still black pools, each waiting to rend unwary flesh with fang, or talon, or caustic venom. In the overworld, far above, animals kill so that they might eat and live. But the creatures that haunt the dark labyrinth beneath the face of Toril do not kill to live, for life itself is

agony to them. They kill because they are driven to kill: by madness, by hatred, and by the foul atmosphere of evil that pervades every stone of this place. They kill because, only in killing, can they know release.

With the silence of one shadow slipping past another, Zaknafein-weapons master of House Do'Urden, Ninth House of Menzoberranzan, ancient city of the dark elves-trod down the rough-walled passage. He had left his lizard mount behind, clinging to the side of a massive stalagmite some distance back. Swift and soundless as the giant reptiles were, Zak preferred to rely on his own powers of stealth for the final twists and turns. It would not be far now.

Like a wraith, he plunged deeper into the Dark.

Dominion, the wild region beyond the borders of the underground city. His ebon skin and black rothe-hide garments merged with the dusky air, and he had concealed his shock of bone-white hair beneath the deep hood of hispiwafwi, his magic-tinged cloak. Only the faint red glow of his eyes-eyes that required no light to see, but only the countless gradations of heat radiated by stone and flesh and all things in between- might have belied that it was not a dark breath of air that moved down the passage, but a living being.

Zak cocked his head, pointed ears listening for the first telltale sounds. He had now passed beyond the farthest reach of the patrols-those merciless troops of dark-elf soldiers and wizards that kept the tunnels around Menzoberranzan free of monsters. Anything might lie beyond the next bend of stone, any one of those thousand waiting horrors. Yes, death could be found in endless variety in the Underdark. But what did he have to fear? Zaknafein laughed without sound, his white teeth shining in the darkness. Were not the draw the greatest horror of all?

He moved on.

Minutes later Zak came upon his prey: a band of pale, bug-eyed kobolds. Until that moment, he had not known he was hunting the stunted, dog-snouted creatures. It might have been bugbears, or deepspawn, or black crawlers, or any one of a score of different monsters. It made no difference. All that mattered was that they were evil. He had come upon the kobolds first. They would serve him well enough.

The ragged creatures huddled in a small cave, pawing over the spoils of their latest victim. Zak's red eyes detected the cold metallic outline of a horned helm and a stout warhammer. A dwarf. Dwarves were fierce fighters, and kobolds were cowardly creatures, but a dozen of them would not hesitate to swarm a lone wanderer. No doubt the dwarf had had the ill luck to find himself alone and too far from the underground home of his clan. Tufts of hair matted with blood still clung to the armor and weapons. The kobolds had jumped him and ripped him to shreds.

"Mine!" one of the creatures shrieked in the crude common tongue of the Underdark, its eyes glowing with lust. It snatched a cloak of fine cloth from one of the others, clutching it in grimy hands.

"Mine, it is!" the other kobold growled. "I it was who bit its filthy neck!"

"No, mine!" hissed a third. "Gouged its foul, sticky eyes with my own fingers, I did!"

The two hateful contenders tackled the first creature, snarling and biting with yellow teeth, tearing the cloak to tatters in the process. Quarrels broke out among the rest of the kobolds as they fought over the dead dwarfs goods. Zak knew he had to act now if there was to be any work left for him to do. Tossing back his concealing piwafwi, he stepped into the cave.

"Why don't I settle this little argument for you?" he asked in a ringing voice. A fierce grin split his angular visage. "How about if you all get-nothing?"

The kobolds froze, staring at the drow weapons master in surprise and dread, bits of cloth and jewelry dropping from their bloodstained fingers. Then, as one, the diminutive creatures shrieked in terror, scrambling and clawing past each other to escape the nightmare before them. There was nothing in all the Underdark that kobolds feared more than drow. For good reason.

With one hand, Zak drew his adamantite sword, while the other uncoiled the whip from his belt. In an almost lazy gesture, he flicked his wrist. The whip struck like a black serpent, taking the feet out from under the nearest kobold. His sword followed. Like a dying insect, the kobold squirmed for a moment on the end of his blade. Then Zak heaved the creature aside, turning toward the next. Kobolds were like candy. He could never kill just one.

Zaknafein's grin broadened as he cut a swath through the shrieking tangle. He was slender, like all elven kind, but his lithe form was as sharp and well-honed as his blade. In a city of warriors, Zak knew he was one of the best. It was not a matter of pride. It was simply fact.

Another kobold expired on the end of his sword, the evil phosphorescence of life fading from its eyes until they were as cool and dull as stones. Even as one hand wrested the blade from the dead creature, the other lashed out with the whip. Supple leather coiled around a fleeing kobold's neck, stopping it in its tracks. The thing clutched at its throat, fingers scrabbling in vain. . Zak gave the whip an expert tug, snapping the creature's neck.

Excitement surged in his chest. Zaknafein had been alive for nearly four hundred years, and he had spent almost all of those years mastering the art of battle. This was his calling. This was what he had been born to do.

Zak spun and danced easily through the writhing throng of kobolds, falling now into the trancelike rhythm of the fray. When killing things of evil, he felt a clarity he did not know at other times.

Unlike anything else in the tangled and devious world of the dark elves, this made sense to him. In Menzoberranzan, all life revolved around station. Each of the noble houses in the city was caught in a never-ending game of intrigue, alliance, and treachery. All of it served one goal: to win the favor of the dark goddess Lloth. Those who gained the blessing of the Spider Queen knew great power and prosperity, while those who earned her displeasure found only destruction and death. To Zak, climbing Lloth's Ladder was a pointless exercise. No family stayed in Lloth's favor forever. Each was doomed to fall eventually. He wanted no part of that meaningless game. The machinations, the deceits, the shadowed plots: all were beyond him. But this-another kobold died screaming under the swing of his blade-this he understood. Zak blinked.

The small cavern had fallen silent, save for the piteous whining of a single kobold that cowered before him. All the rest of the evil creatures were dead. Veins thrumming with exhilaration, Zak raised his adamantite sword to finish what he had begun.

That was when he saw it. It dangled from a silvery thread not five paces away and watched him with eyes like black, many-faceted jewels. A spider.

The sword halted in its descent. Zak stared at the arachnid. It was only an ordinary rock spider, no larger than the palm of his hand. But all spiders were sacred to Lloth. And all were her servants. The metallic taste of disgust spread across his tongue. He had slain the kobolds for himself, to quell his own needs. But the act served Lloth as well, did it not? The kobolds were the enemy of the drow, of her children. Their deaths could only please her.

His lips pulled back, transforming his grin into an expression of loathing. He turned away from the last kobold, and the creature squealed in surprise, thinking it had somehow escaped its worst nightmare. Without even looking, Zak thrust the blade backward, silencing the creature, ending its false hope. But there was no pleasure in the act. Not now. He glared at the spider, fingered the handle of his whip, and knew he could crush it with a single flick. But even he dared not harm one of Lloth's messengers. He let his hand fall from the weapon.

A gloom settled over him, even darker and more stifling than the oppressive air of the Underdark. After reluctantly harvesting the expected trophies, he started back toward the city of the drow. By the time he reached the edge of the vast underground cavern that housed Menzoberranzan, his gloom had deepened into despair. Sitting astride the broad back of his lizard mount, he gazed over the dwelling of the dark elves-his home, and yet not his home. Long ago, the legends told, the dark elves had lived in the overworld. They had dwelt along with their fair sylvan kindred, with no comforting roof of stone above them but only a vast emptiness called sky. As out of place as Zak felt among his people, the thought of living on the surface chilled his blood. So changed were the drow after dwelling for eons in the realms below that they could never live in the overworld again. They were creatures of the dark now. Lloth had seen to that. She had made them what they were, and for that he hated her.

Zak let his gaze wander over the eerie cityscape before him. Pale faerie fire, conjured by the wizards of the various houses, revealed the fantastic shapes into which the cavern's gigantic stalagmites and stalactites had been hewn. Slender bridges leapt impossibly between the stone spires. In the five thousand years during which the dark elves had dwelt in this place, not a single surface had been left untouched. Every piece of stone had been carved and polished and shaped to suit the needs of the drow. Everything that was, except for Narbondel.

The rugged pillar of stone stood, as it had for millennia, in the center of the great cavern. Here in the unending dark, where there was no alternation of day and night to mark time, Narbondel served as the city's clock. Once each day, Menzoberranzan's archmage cast a spell of fire upon the base of the pillar. Throughout the day the enchanted fire rose, until the entire column glowed

with the heat of it, before finally fading into cool darkness - the Black Death of Narbondel - upon which the cycle was begun anew.

Despite the magical fires that were cast upon it, each day Narbondel fell black again. Darkness always won in the end. Zak shook his head. Perhaps he was a fool to think he was different from the rest of his cruel and capricious kindred. He killed only creatures of evil, but it was the killing itself he craved, was it not? Maybe he was no different at all. That was, perhaps, his deepest fear. A faint humming sound broke his grim reverie. Something twitched against his throat. He reached into his neck-purse and pulled out the insignia of House Do'Urden. The adamantite disk was engraved with a spider that wielded a different weapon in each of its eight appendages. The coin glowed with silver light and was warm against his hand. It was a summons. Matron Mother Malice, leader of House Do'Urden, required the presence of her weapons master.

For a moment, Zaknafein gazed into the darkness behind him. He half considered plunging back into the Dark Dominion and leaving the city forever. The chance that a lone drow could survive in the Underdark was slim. But there was a chance. And he could be free.

The metallic disk twitched again on his palm, the heat growing uncomfortable. Zak sighed. Thoughts of fleeing evaporated. He belonged in the Underdark even less than he did here. Like it or not, this was his home. He nudged his lizard mount into a swift, swaying walk, heading through an arched gate into the city of the drow.

One did not keep one's matron mother waiting.

Chapter Two

Matron Mother

"Where is he?" Matron Mother Malice of House Do'Urden demanded in a voice sharp with impatience.

She paced with perilous grace before the adamantite railing that separated the compound's private upper chambers from the common levels below, her dark gown flowing behind her like shadows. The other nobles of the house-her five living children, along with her current patron, Rizen-watched from a prudent distance. None dared cross the path of her ire.

Malice muttered a curse under her breath. There was no doubt Zaknafein was the finest weapons master in the city, but that gave her little advantage if she could not control him. A servant-especially a male servant-did not make his matron wait. Several years ago, she had revoked Zak's position as patron and had taken Rizen in his stead, thinking that would show him the consequences of displeasing her. In the time since, though, he had become only more willful and unmanageable. Malice was growing weary of being embarrassed by Zaknafein. Useful as he was to her, she would not tolerate it much longer.

"Let me deal with Zaknafein when he returns, Matron Malice," offered Briza, Malice's eldest daughter. Unlike her lithe mother, Briza was a big-boned and round-shouldered elf. Recently anointed a high priestess of Lloth, she enjoyed wielding her new authority. "Males are not as intelligent as the rest of us. There is only one sort of instruction they understand." With fond fingers, she touched the writhing, snake-headed whip at her belt. The half-dozen snake heads hissed in anticipation.

"If I have wronged Matron Mother Malice, then punishment is hers to mete out, not yours, Briza Do'Urden."

All turned to see a feral form step out of midair and float over the adamantite railing. Zaknafein drifted to the floor before Malice, waving a hand to end the levitation spell of which all highborn drow are capable-a fact that accounted for the lack of stairs leading to the upper level of the house. Briza glared daggers at the weapons master but held her tongue. All knew that his rebuke had been correct, and that she had overstepped her bounds in her eagerness to punish him.

Malice folded her arms over her breasts, her expression cold. "I do not like waiting, Zaknafein. Tell me quickly why I should not give you to Briza and her whip."

"There is no reason, Matron Mother," Zaknafein replied, bowing his head and assuming a submissive posture before her. "But allow me to present you with these before you do what you will."

He laid a grisly bundle at her feet-a dozen hairy kobold ears bound together with twine. Malice raised a single eyebrow, impressed despite her anger. Kobolds were wretched creatures, but they were vicious when cornered, and slaying a dozen alone was no mean feat. Such an act

could only please Lloth.

She felt her anger receding. The gift was a good one, and Zaknafein was now acting suitably repentant. Perhaps his punishment should be to come to her bedchamber and serve her there. She knew she should resist the temptation. Zak needed to know how he had displeased her. And yet... She glanced at Rikken. Her current patron was handsome, yes, but so docile, so pliant, so utterly dull. Maybe it was her lack of control over Zak that made him desirable. Danger could be ever so alluring.

Whatever her decision would be, Malice decided to save it for later. Zaknafein's offering had mollified her for the moment. Besides, there were more important matters to attend.

Malice rested her pointed chin on the back of her hand, her dark eyes glinting. "You and I will consider the matter of your punishment later, Zaknafein. Alone."

At that last word, an expression of surprise crossed Briza's broad face. Rikken shot Zaknafein an open look of hatred, then remembered himself and averted his gaze, lest he attract his matron mother's wrath. Zaknafein only gave an emotionless nod.

Satisfied the matter was resolved, Malice decided it was time to tell the others why she had gathered them together. "I have concocted a plan," she announced in a bold voice. "A plan that, if it succeeds, will bring the favor of Lloth upon House Do'Urden."

Vierna and Maya, Briza's younger sisters, exchanged puzzled looks.

"But do we not already enjoy the favor of the Spider Queen?" Vierna asked in a tentative voice.

Maya's tone was more confident. "After all, we are Ninth House of Menzoberranzan now."

Malice's eyes narrowed as she regarded her two youngest daughters. Though both were nearly high priestesses, they were not such yet, and should not have spoken without her leave. Yet their words served her, and she chose to let the affront pass without comment.

"Yes, we are the Ninth House," Malice replied. "But is it not better to be eighth than ninth?"

A hot light ignited in the eyes of her daughters, and Malice knew she had chosen well. Being Eighth House meant gaining a seat on the ruling council—a seat that one of her daughters would one day inherit. A smile coiled about the corners of Malice's dark red lips. Desire was a stronger motivator than punishment. Now Vierna and Maya gazed at her with eager expressions.

Malice raised a hand to her throat. "I am thirsty. I require wine."

Throughout the discussion, her two sons had stood in silence to one side. It was not a male's position to speak concerning house affairs unless directly asked. At eleven years, and by far the younger of the two, Drizzt had only recently become page prince, and was not yet a true noble. Thus, serving the matron mother was his duty. However, the boy seemed not to have heard her words; he continued to gaze at his feet, as a page prince was taught to do in the presence of nobles. After an uncomfortable moment, Dinin, who was elderboy of House Do'Urden, boxed Drizzt on the ear, jerking the boy out of his stupor.

"You heard the matron mother," Dinin hissed. "She requires wine."

The boy Drizzt blinked and gave a jerky nod. He hurried to a gilded table upon which rested crystal glasses and a decanter of dark mushroom wine.

Malice did not wait, but went on. "The Festival of the Founding approaches, the day on which we recall the founding of Menzoberranzan over five thousand years ago. Do any of you know what is to happen on that day?"

"I know."

All stared in shock at the boy Drizzt. He stood before Malice, holding out the cup of wine. For Dinin, a full-grown elf, to speak without leave would have been a grave offense. For a page prince, it was unthinkable. However, before Malice could react, the boy continued.

"On the Festival of the Founding, the Spider Queen is supposed to appear somewhere in the city." Drizzt frowned as he thought out the details. "Only she appears in disguise. I suppose that's so she can see what the drow really think about her."

Briza was the first to recover. She lunged forward, gripping her snake-headed whip. "You idiot!" she snarled. "That's only an old story." She raised the whip. Drizzt stared at her in fear but did not flinch.

A hand shot out, halting the whip's descent.

"It happens to be a true story, you fool," Malice hissed, her rage now directed at her daughter.

Briza stared in dull astonishment.

Malice made a sound of disgust. "Perhaps you were given the mantle of high priestess too soon,

Briza, if a child - and a boy child at that - knows more than you."

Briza started to stammer an apology, but Malice turned away. She bent over the boy, gripping his chin tightly in her hand, lifting his head with cruel force. The cup fell from his fingers, and wine spilled across the floor like dark blood. She gazed into the boy's eyes, holding them by force of will, so they could not look elsewhere. His eyes were an unusual color. Lavender. As always, Malice wondered at this. What did they see that other eyes did not?

"Tell me what else you know about the Festival," she commanded.

The boy stared at her in mute terror. She tightened her grip, her fingers digging into his flesh.

"Tell me!"

Despite his fear, Drizt managed to speak. "I don't really know anything else," he breathed.

"Except that on the festival day, you have to be nice to everybody, even goblins and bugbears, because there's no telling what shape Lloth might put on. That's all."

She searched his strange purple eyes a moment more, then nodded, satisfied he spoke truth. He was peculiar, this youngest son of hers, and difficult to train in the most basic matters of behavior and respect. However, there was a power in him. She sensed it. Right now it was unshaped. But if she could forge it with her will and temper it with the proper experiences, he would be a powerful weapon in her hands one day.

Malice released the boy. Drizt stared in confusion until Dinin, face angry, motioned for him to return to his side. No doubt Dinin would punish the boy later for embarrassing him with disobedience, as it was his role to instruct the boy in the proper manners of a page prince. Malice would not intervene. That was Dinin's right. And it would only strengthen the boy.

Malice addressed her family then. "Child though he is, Drizt is correct. The tale is not simply a legend, though many believe it to be. On the Festival of the Founding, the Spider Queen will indeed appear somewhere in the city. And if she were to appear within a noble house that house would know great honor and would surely prosper in the coming year." Her voice dropped to a self-pleased purr. "And my plan will make certain it is House Do'Urden where Lloth chooses to appear." Zaknafein laughed at this. "With all due respect, you are very sure of yourself, Matron Mother." "As well I should be," Malice snapped. What had she done to be cursed with such precocious males? At least Dinin knew his place. "How do you intend to bring Lloth here?" Briza asked in meek tones, clearly attempting to regain her mother's favor.

Malice let Briza believe she had succeeded. "With this," she answered. From her gown, she drew out a small, dark stone carved in the shape of a spider. A single red ruby glistened on its abdomen. "This spiderjewel will lead whoever bears it to the resting place of an ancient and holy relic-a dagger once wielded by Menzoberra, she who founded our city in the name of Lloth so long ago. I have been assured by the one who gave me this spiderjewel that, were we to regain the Dagger of Menzoberra, Lloth would certainly grace us with her presence as a reward."

The others absorbed this information and nodded- except for Zaknafein, who again asked a skeptical question. "And how did you come by this information and this jewel?"

Malice gave him a flat glare. "I summoned a yochlol."

The others stared at her in horror and amazement- including, to her satisfaction, Zaknafein.

"Yes, I did it myself," she went on. "A great risk, but then Lloth favors those who take risks."

Despite her pleasure, Malice shuddered at the memory of the dark, secret ceremony. One did not summon one of the Handmaidens of Lloth on a whim. Though Malice was five centuries old and matron of the Ninth House, even she had trembled at the sight of the bubbling, amorphous being that had appeared in the midst of the magical flames she had conjured. Had it been displeased with her call, the yochlol might have turned her into a spider and squashed her with a shapeless hand. But the time had seemed propitious to risk the summons, and Malice had been right. The yochlol had been pleased with her obeisance, and had given her the spiderjewel and the answer to her question-how to increase her stature in the eyes of Lloth.

She approached the weapons master. "Zaknafein, I charge you with the spiderjewel, and with finding the Dagger of Menzoberra, in the name of House Do'Urden." She held out the dark gem. Zaknafein stared at the jewel but did not reach for it.

Rage warmed Malice's cheeks for all to see. "Do not defy me in this, Zaknafein," she warned in a dangerous voice. "I have been indulgent in the past, but I will suffer your embarrassments no longer. If you fail me in this task, it will be for the final time."

The others held their breath as matron mother and weapons master locked gazes. For a moment

Malice was not certain she would win. At last Zak lowered his gaze and took the spiderjewel. "I will find the Dagger, Matron Mother, or die trying," he uttered through clenched teeth.

Malice bit her tongue to keep from sighing in audible relief. She did not always enjoy being so harsh with her children and servants, but she was matron mother, and the well-being of the house took precedence over all else, even her own feelings. "A wise choice, Zaknafein," was all she said. After a moment, she spoke in a brisk voice. "Now, I wish to be alone with my daughters." At this, the three males bowed and retreated toward the adamantite railing. As one, they rose over the railing, then levitated to the ground below.

"Finding the Dagger cannot be so easy a feat," Briza said when the males were gone. "What if Zaknafein indeed dies in the attempt?"

Vierna and Maya looked at the elder women in concern, wanting to speak their own worries, but remembering their places this time.

Malice tapped her cheek, musing this over. "If Zaknafein dies in an attempt to gain the glory of Lloth, the Spider Queen will certainly consider it a sacrifice in her honor." Malice allowed herself a throaty laugh. "Either way," she crooned, "Lloth is bound to be pleased with House Do'Urden." Malice's daughters joined in her laughter.

Chapter Three

Page Prince

Never lift your gaze from the floor.

That was Drizzt Do'Urden's first lesson as page prince, and it had been one hard learned. He couldn't count the times he had felt the stinging bite of his sister Briza's snake-headed whip as punishment for breaking that all-important rule. It wasn't that it was so hard a thing to remember. Drizzt knew that he wasn't supposed to look up without permission. But knowing something wasn't as easy as doing it. No matter how hard he tried to stare at his boots, it seemed that something peculiar, or interesting, or wonderful always caught his attention, lifting his gaze before he even knew it was happening.

Unfortunately, more often than not, Briza would be lurking behind him, waiting for just such a transgression to occur. With an evil grin, she would uncoil her hissing whip and rake the fanged serpents across his back. Drizzt never cried out or tried to dodge the blows. To do so would only win him more lashes. He was page prince, and as far as he could tell, that meant he was the lowest form of life in all House Do'Urden.

"Page Prince, come here!" a voice called out across the house's main enclosure. "I have a task for you."

This time Drizzt remembered to keep his head down. He could not see the speaker, but he knew the voice well. It belonged to his sister, Vierna.

For the first ten years of his life, before he had become page prince, Vierna's had been the only voice he had known, save for his own. Vierna had been his word-wean mother. She had been given Drizzt as an infant, and as he grew she had taught him the language of the drow—both the spoken tongue and the complex system of hand signs that the dark elves used to communicate in silence. She had also taught him how to use and control his innate magical abilities: the power to levitate by force of will, and to conjure glowing faerie fire from thin air. More than anything else, however, she had taught him his place as a male in drow society. Females were his superiors, and he was always to defer to them. She had made him repeat this doctrine so often that sometimes he still woke at night to find he had been speaking it in his sleep.

Though Vierna's teachings had been anything but gentle, she had seldom used her whip on him, and when she did it was without the open relish Briza always displayed. However, in the year since he had become page prince, Vierna had resumed her studies at Arach-Tinilith, and would soon be anointed as a high priestess. As that time approached, Drizzt knew he could expect less and less kindness from his sister. High priestesses of Lloth were not known for their mercy. Keeping his eyes on the floor, Drizzt hurried in the direction of the voice, relying on his keen senses of hearing and touch to avoid objects he could not see. In moments, he stood before a pair of supple leather slippers he knew belonged to his sister.

"Listen well, Page Prince, for I do not have time to instruct you twice," Vierna said in curt tones.

"The Festival of the Founding is but two days hence, and the matron mother has ordered that the house be made ready for the Spider Queen's imminent visit."

"If she bothers to come at all," Drizzt mumbled under his breath before he could think to stifle the words. To his good fortune, Vierna either did not hear the statement or chose to ignore it.

"A green fungus has grown on the walls in the feast hall since the last revel was held," the young drow woman went on. "Briza wants you to clean all the stones. With this."

Into his hand she thrust a bent copper spoon. He gaped in astonishment at the small spoon. Clearly it was utterly inadequate for so large a task.

"I'm supposed to scrape all the walls in the feast hall with this?" he groaned, forgetting himself.

"Do not question me, Page Prince!" Vierna warned in an overloud voice. "Expect a lash of the whip for every speck of fungus you leave on the walls!"

Knowing better than to question her again, Drizzt started to bow in submission. Then, to his surprise, Vierna leaned over and whispered in his ear. "I have placed an enchantment of sharpness on the spoon, little brother, so perhaps the task will not prove quite so impossible. But I swear, if you tell Briza-or anyone-about what I have done, I will beat you until your skin slips from your flesh like a rothe-hide coat."

Drizzt shivered at her chilling words. He did not doubt that she meant them. Before he could answer, Vierna whirled around and disappeared through a side door. Drizzt studied the spoon in his hand, his thumb testing the magically sharpened edge. Perhaps the priestesses of Lloth at Arach-Tinilith had not yet bled all the mercy out of Vierna.

Not wishing to get caught with the enchanted object, Drizzt dashed down a stone passageway. At eleven years, he was much like other dark-elven youths- small and slender, but quick as Briza's whip. In moments, he reached the empty feast hall.

Unlike most of the noble houses of Menzoberranzan, which were typically built within a stalactite-stalagmite pair, House Do'Urden was set into the western wall of the cavern. The feast hall delved deeper into the surrounding rock than did any other room in the house, and so was damp and prone to mold.

Drizzt groaned in renewed dismay as he stared at the walls. The stones were covered with spongy growths of a fungus that exuded a noxious green glow. He sighed. Procrastinating would only give the fungus more time to grow. Gripping the spoon, he trudged toward one of the walls and started in on the task. Vierna had underestimated the power of her enchantment.

As Drizzt scraped the spoon across the wall, a strip of glowing fungus darkened and shriveled, falling to the floor, where it turned to dust. Not believing his eyes, he ran the instrument over the fungus-covered wall again. A swath of smooth, black stone appeared in its wake. A grin crept across the youthful drow's face. It looked as if the task Briza had concocted for him was not going to be nearly as horrid and tedious as she had hoped.

With buoyant energy, the young dark elf threw himself into the task. Concentrating briefly, he rose into the air, using his natural-born powers of levitation to reach the high walls and ceiling. Soon it became a game as he whirled and dived through the air, swiping at bulbous patches of fungus with the enchanted spoon. He imagined each was Briza's homely face as it shriveled and disintegrated, and soon peals of elven laughter rang out across the hall. After what seemed almost too short a time, Drizzt sank back to the floor, panting for breath and grinning. He surveyed the walls. Not a speck of fungus marred the smooth onyx surfaces.

A scrabbling sound reached his pointed ears. Drizzt looked up to see a rat scramble out of a crack in the dark stone. The small creature scuttled across the floor of the hall, its eyes hot and red as blood, making for a hole in the opposite wall. With a fierce cry, Drizzt sprang into the air and landed in the rat's path, brandishing the glowing spoon before him. The spoon wasn't exactly a sword, but then the rat wasn't exactly a fierce monster of the Underdark. Neither fact mattered much to Drizzt.

Sometimes, from a secret vantage point high above the main courtyard, he watched as the weapons master, Zaknafein, trained the house's three-hundred soldiers. For hours on end, Drizzt would watch them practice their weapons skills. He wasn't sure why, but a thrill coursed through his veins every time he heard the clanging of their adamantite swords, and the feral, dancelike offensive maneuvers of Zaknafein fascinated him. Drizzt was doomed to life as a page prince for five more years, but after that-if Briza hadn't managed to kill him with all her evil chores-he would become a noble proper, and it would be time to train in skills that would benefit the house. Drizzt knew that it was possible he would be sent to the towers of Sorcere in Tier Breche, to learn the dark secrets of magic. But in his heart he hoped that he would be given to Zaknafein, to study

with the weapons master. He wanted to learn to dance that dangerous dance. Performing his best imitation of the weapons master, Drizzt stalked around the rat. The creature hissed, raising its hackles and baring yellow teeth. Drizzt lunged forward with the magically sharpened spoon. Quick as he was, the rat was quicker. It scuttled past him, running from the feast hall. With a whoop, Drizzt ran after, careening down a corridor. He gained on his enemy, then sprang forward, landing in front of it. The creature backed into a corner, hissing and spitting, eyes glowing with hate. Drizzt closed in to finish off his foe. As he had seen Zaknafein do a hundred times, he raised his weapon, then spun around to bring it down in a swift killing blow. He froze, halting the spoon a fraction of an inch from disaster. Sensing its opportunity, the rat dashed between Drizzt's legs and disappeared through a crack. Drizzt did not watch it go. Instead, his eyes remained riveted on the object before his face. A web. The silvery strands stretched like gossamer across the corner of the corridor. In the center of the web, like a plump jewel, clung a small spider. Had he not halted his swing at the last moment, his arm would have plunged right through the fragile strands. With great care, Drizzt lowered the spoon. All spiders were sacred to the goddess Lloth. To disturb one's web would have earned him a long appointment with Briza's whip. But if he had accidentally killed the arachnid ... Drizzt let out a low breath. The punishment for killing a spider was death: quick, painful, and with no chance of reprieve. Despite the fatal nature of his near accident, Drizzt drew closer to the web in fascination, studying the spider in the center. "I don't understand this Lloth of yours," he murmured aloud. "Everybody seems to want her favor. My mother. My sisters. All the other noble houses. They'll do anything to get it. But they're terrified of Lloth, too. Sometimes I even think they hate her. But that only makes them worship her all the Harder. Why? Why is Lloth so important if she's so awful?" The spider only clung in silence to its web. Drizzt frowned in annoyance. "Well, I don't care what everyone else thinks," he decided. "I'm not afraid of spiders. If Lloth appears to me on the Festival of the Founding, I'll say so to her ugly face." Oddly heartened by this bold exclamation, he turned and strode down the hallway, back to the capricious world he knew as page prince, leaving the spider to spin its tangled webs alone in the darkness.

Chapter Four Into the Fire

Zaknafein did not want this mission.

The weapons master stood on a parapet high above the wrought-adamantite gates that guarded the entrance to House Do'Urden. Right now, the gates were only half raised, so that house nobles might levitate over them easily while goblins, gnomes, and other rabble could not. But in times of crisis the gates could be raised to cover the entire opening in the cavern's wall, so that none could pass through. Sometimes Zak wondered at the true purpose of those impervious metal bars. Perhaps they had been forged not to keep drow out of the house, but to keep them in. Zak glanced across the compound at the balcony, beyond which lay the private chambers of the house's nobles. He glimpsed shadowy figures within. What dark plans were Matron Malice and her daughters concocting now, he wondered?

Just as Zak was about to turn away, a small form hopped over the balcony and half fell, half levitated to the ground below. A second later, Briza reached the railing and leaned over, shouting as she brandished her snake-headed whip at the object of her wrath. The smaller figure, however, had already vanished into the mouth of a corridor. Her face twisted with rage, Briza turned and stamped back into the interior of the upper level.

Despite his bleak mood, a faint smile touched Zak's lips. So the young Do'Urden page prince—what was the boy's name? Drizzt?—was causing his eldest sister consternation once again. Zak would not have expected such bold character in one of Rikken's sons. Drizzt could grow up to be a strong and willful elf one day—if all that character were not crushed out of him first, as it was bound to be. Once Zak had held similar hopes for his own daughter, Vierna, but then the masters at Arach-Tinilith had sunk their pincers into her. Every day, she became more like Malice, more caught up in the matron mother's tangled plots to win Lloth's favor.

Ah, Malice. Zak thought back to the years when he had been patron of House Do'Urden. For a

time, he had thought that he loved Malice, and she him, until the day she had stripped him of his rank, and he had realized that all she cared about was station and the position of House Do'Urden in Lloth's Ladder. On occasion, Malice still beckoned Zak to her bedchamber, and he complied. A matron mother's orders were not to be refused. And it was not unpleasant. Still, Zak knew now that whatever feeling there was between him and Malice, it was not, and never had been, love.

A gigantic spider hewn of dark green stone rested on the parapet behind Zak. A jade spider. Dozens of them scattered House Do'Urden to serve as a defense against any who might somehow pass the gates. Such was their enchantment that, in the presence of an intruder, a jade spider would animate and attack with swift and fatal force.

"Why do you not assail me now, spider?" Zak hissed in a voice filled with loathing. "I am an impostor here. Can you not sense that I am your enemy?"

But the spider remained cold stone.

Zak felt a prickling against his neck. He did not need to glance back at the balcony to know that he was being watched. He could delay his mission no longer. A puff of warm air-heated by some deep and distant lava flow-sent his white hair streaming back from his brow. Zak stepped off the high parapet into the swirling zephyr, using his power of levitation to ride the gust of air over the gates and down to the ground below. Without looking back, he plunged into the labyrinth that was Menzoberranzan.

After a short distance he paused, drawing the spiderjewel out of his neck-purse. He laid the small onyx spider on his outstretched palm, then spoke the word of magic Malice had taught him, which the yochlol in turn had taught her. At once the ruby embedded in the spider's abdomen winked to scarlet life. Now animate, the spider scuttled across the flesh of Zak's palm. Only by force of will did he resist the instinct to clench his hand and crush it. Legs wriggling, the spider spun in a circle, then came to a sudden halt, facing to Zak's right. That must be the way it wanted him to go. He turned and moved down a side street.

Where the spiderjewel would lead him, Zak could only wonder. According to the yochlol, the Dagger of Menzoberra was hidden somewhere within the city. This was difficult to believe. After all, there wasn't an inch of this cavern that had not been explored by drow eyes, shaped by drow hands, and dwelt within by drow families for centuries. The Dagger's hiding place had to be remarkable for the relic to have remained lost for over five thousand years. Still, Zak had to hope that the spiderjewel would indeed take him to it. Malice had made her position clear. Whatever she felt for him still, failure this time would not be forgiven.

At first Zak thought the ancient Dagger of Menzoberra must be hidden in Qu'ellarz'orl. The spider seemed to be leading him toward the plateau on which perched the city's most powerful houses, including that of Baenre, First House of Menzoberranzan. Zak's heart sank in his chest. If the Dagger was hidden within one of the ancient houses, he had no hope of recovering it. He could hardly knock on the gates of House Baenre and ask if he might take a look around. The only answer he was likely to get was a bolt of defensive magic hot enough to roast his heart inside his chest.

Just as Zak neared the edge of the mushroom forest that demarcated the exclusive plateau, the spider scuttled to the left side of his hand, leading him back toward the heart of the city. Zak allowed himself a low breath of relief before continuing on.

He had nearly reached his destination before he realized where the spiderjewel was leading him. Zak had reached the very center of the great cavern that housed Menzoberranzan. Coming to a halt, he lifted his eyes from the spiderjewel. The enchanted arachnid had aligned itself with a massive stone pillar that loomed before him in the eternal gloom. Narbondel.

Of course. It made perfect sense. Of all the rock formations in the cavern, only one remained in its rough, natural state as it had for millennia, untouched by drow hands or drow magic. It was a monument to the cavern, as it had been when Menzoberra first led her people here five thousand years ago: the pillar of Narbondel. Only here might something have lain hidden so long without discovery.

Zaknafein approached the pillar, creeping along surfaces closest in temperature to his own skin, a feat which rendered him all but invisible to heat-sensing drow eyes. It was not forbidden to draw near to Narbondel, but few ever did. The pillar was the purview of the city's archmage, whose ceremonial duty it was to ignite the magical fires that traveled up the column once per day. Zak

doubted Gromph Baenre would take kindly to meddling, and the thought of being on the receiving end of an archmage's wrathful spells was not one Zak relished.

The weapons master clung to a concealing heat shadow at the base of a stalagmite and watched with crimson eyes. The spiderjewel wriggled on his hand, as if anxious to be nearer the relic that drew it onward.

"Patience," Zak hissed, though whether to himself or the enchanted spider he was not certain.

Even as he watched, the last remnants of magical heat faded from the massive pillar. The stone grew cool and dark once more. This was the Black Death of Narbondel. Midnight approached.

Now would be Zak's only chance. At this moment the archmage rested in his plush chambers in Sorcere, preparing himself to cast the spell of fire with which he would begin a new day. No gazes in the city would be turned toward the pillar while it was dark. He could move unseen. At least, so he hoped.

Leaving the safety of the heat shadow, Zak crept toward Narbondel. The surface of the pillar was irregular, crazed with cracks and crevices. A small knife could be stashed in any of them. Holding out the spiderjewel, he stalked around the gigantic column, trying to determine where the relic might be hidden. The enchanted arachnid whirled in circles on his hand but did not stop, as if unable to get its bearings. Zak frowned at the spiderjewel. Then a thought struck him. He craned his neck, gazing at the top of the pillar, which scraped the ceiling of the cavern high above. Of course. That was the one direction the spider could not point. Upward.

Zak could have levitated to the top of the pillar in mere seconds. However, using any magic released heat, making him more visible. He couldn't risk that. It would not do for any of the other noble houses to see him and grow curious concerning his actions. Gaining the Dagger would be hard enough without competition. Zak would have to reach the top of the pillar the mundane way. He did not pause to determine if anyone was watching him. Speed was his only hope. With swift, supple movements, Zak began scaling the surface of Narbondel. He shut his eyes, concentrating, letting touch alone guide his hands and feet to those cracks and protrusions he might use to force his body upward. Soon he was sweating with effort. He clenched his teeth and kept climbing. At last he heaved himself over a sharp edge of stone. For a moment he lay on his back, panting. Then he forced himself to his feet.

Zaknafein stood upon the summit of Narbondel.

A gasp escaped him. Menzoberranzan lay spread out below him like a vast web tangled beyond possibility. Pale faerie fire danced along the edges of the city's countless spires and stairways, emphasizing the darkness rather than driving it back. It was a glorious yet forbidding sight.

"What is this beautiful nightmare we have wrought?" Zak murmured in awe to the dusky air.

Distant specks of light caught the corner of his eye, breaking his trance. He turned to see several tiny blobs of purple magelight bobbing as they descended the long stairway from the academy of Tier Breche into the city. The archmage had left his chambers in Sorcere and was even now making his way toward Narbondel with his entourage. Zak did not have much time left.

Reaching back into his neck-purse, he pulled out the spiderjewel once more. To his surprise, the magical creature crawled to the edge of his hand and jumped to the rough stone at his feet. The little arachnid scuttled across the top of the pillar. Zak followed the winking light of the ruby in its abdomen. Without warning, the red spark vanished. Zak swore, thinking he had lost the spiderjewel. A second later he realized it had scurried into a small hole in the rock.

Kneeling beside the hole, he slipped a hand inside. His fingers brushed a smooth knob of some sort, and it sank beneath his touch. At the same moment, a hiss of dry air rushed upward, along with the sound of stone grating on stone. A circle of rock sank into the top of the pillar and vanished, leaving an opening large enough for an elf to crawl through.

A low laugh escaped Zak's lips. So the spiderjewel had done its work after all.

Ready for anything, the weapons master crouched beside the opening in the pillar. He peered within, but his preternatural eyes met only cool darkness: black, and black again. There was nothing to do but go down. Zak lowered himself into the opening, and his feet met stone steps. It was a staircase. At his feet, a spark of scarlet light glinted. The spiderjewel. He scooped up the gem and slipped it back into his neck-purse.

Alone, he descended the staircase, spiraling deeper and deeper into the heart of Narbondel. With every step, the air grew thicker, more stifling. Walls and steps alike radiated the same uniform coolness, so that all was a featureless blur to his drow eyes and he was forced to make his way

by touch alone. Soon he was certain he had descended farther than the height he had climbed. He must have been below Narbondel now. Still, the staircase plunged downward, through solid rock, delving ever deeper into the bones of the world.

Without warning the staircase ended at a sheer drop. Zak barely caught himself in time, teetering on the last step. Beyond was only emptiness and a faint blue phosphorescence, floating on the air. Blinking, Zak forced his eyes to see in the realm of light. A low path escaped his lips.

He stood on the edge of a vast web. Thick, silky strands formed a gigantic net over a bottomless chasm. It was from the cords that the faint glow emanated.

He glimpsed something resting at the very center of the gigantic tangle. A bundle of some sort. No, not a bundle. A cocoon. Purple light pulsed within. Something was inside. Zak had a hunch, but there was only one way to find out for certain.

Concentrating, Zak attempted to levitate, but his body felt strangely leaden. A ward against sorcery lay upon this place. Magic would not work here. He would have to reach the center of the web by other means. One of the web's strands passed within several feet of the last step. Zak judged the distance, then sprang from the staircase. He landed on the thread—no more than two fingers thick—with the ease of an acrobat.

Displaying the eerie grace known only to elvenkind, the weapons master moved along the web strand. The silken material pitched and swayed beneath even his slight weight, but this caused him no difficulty. Without glancing down, he danced along the interconnecting threads. Soon he reached the center of the web.

The cocoon was large, an orb of matted threads longer than his arm. Mottled violet light continued to throb inside, as though from a living thing. Drawing the knife at his belt, Zak slashed at the cocoon. The threads were tough and resilient, and the knife bounced back. He hacked at the cocoon again. On the third try, the adamantite knife snapped, but not before slicing a deep gouge in the cocoon. Zak tossed the broken haft into the chasm below, then reached into the slit in the cocoon. His fingers closed around something smooth and cool. He pulled back, staring in wonder at the ornate silver knife he gripped in his hand. The large jewel embedded in its hilt winked like a purple eye. The Dagger of Menzoberra.

Zak let out a whoop of victory. He rose, balancing on the web and gripping his prize. The cocoon was dark now. Even as he watched, the slit he had made in it grew and the tangled threads began to snap and unwind. Yellowed bones fell out of the cocoon, dropping into the chasm. So this had been a tomb, the final resting place of Menzoberra.

A sudden sound, like the cracking of a whip, echoed off the stone walls. At the same moment the strand beneath Zak's feet shuddered, nearly sending him tumbling into the depths below. The web was unraveling. Nearby, another of the ropy strands parted. Like a giant's whip, one of the broken ends hissed past Zak, tracing a line of fire across his cheek. Blood trickled from the wound. An inch nearer, and it would have struck his head from his shoulders. The entire web shuddered as more strands snapped and unraveled.

Thrusting the Dagger into his belt, Zak ran down an undulating thread, somehow managing to keep his balance. A high-pitched groan gave him a moment's warning. He leapt from the thread a heartbeat before it broke. Landing on another strand, he kept moving, toward the thread that passed near the base of the stairway. Three more times he was forced to jump from a thread just as it parted beneath his feet. Clumps of web were dropping into the chasm now. But he was almost there.

Zak paused on the strand, tensing his legs, ready to jump to the stairs. He was too slow. Before he could move, the cord snapped beneath him. Zak tried to leap to another strand, but there were none left. The last remnants of the vast weaving unraveled. Together, web and weapons master plunged into the darkness below.

Instinct summoned his levitation ability, and this time, power flooded through him. Zak rose through the air as the falling web vanished below. He laughed at his own foolishness. Of course! The aura of unmagic had come from the web. When the web had broken, so had the aura, and his magical powers had returned.

Zak landed on the bottom step of the stairs, then started climbing. He had ascended some distance before he heard, faintly but clearly in his sensitive ears, a voice.

"Midnight approaches. The moment has come. Let the fires be lit."

Zak froze. The voice could only belong to one: the archmage. Zak had climbed to the base of

Narbondel. By some trick of cracks and crevices, the archmage's words had reached the interior of the column, and their meaning renewed Zak's dread.

Let the fires be lit... .

Filtering through the stone, faint words of magic drifted on the air. A spell. Zak did not wait to hear the end of it. With redoubled urgency, he hurled himself up the staircase. He had gone no more than three twists of the stairwell when he heard the roar of fire. Orange light burst up from below, along with a blast of scorching air. Midnight had come. The archmage had cast his spell. The fires of Narbondel were rising.

Zak kept climbing. The parched air burned his lungs and nostrils, and tears streamed down his face. The orange glow brightened beneath him. It would take hours for the magical heat to spread throughout the pillar's stones, but in the meantime the spiral stairwell in the center of the column acted like a chimney. Enchanted flames coursed upward with the terrible speed of dragon's breath.

Zak was faster still. Choking for air, he reached the top of the stairwell. A circle of cool darkness appeared above him. The trapdoorway. He reached for the edge of the opening. The mission was a success. Malice would have her precious Dagger. . . .

Zak halted. Searing light welled up the stairway. A roar filled his ears. The magical fire was mere seconds behind. Despite this, the weapons master hesitated. He pulled the Dagger of Menzoberra from his belt and stared at it, filled with sudden, overwhelming disgust. He had risked his life to gain this relic, and for what? So Malice could please Lloth and win at her wicked little games of intrigue and treachery? The purple jewel in the Dagger's hilt glinted like an evil eye. Zak's lip curled back in loathing. No, he would have no part in gaining Lloth's favor. There was only one thing he could do, and damn the consequences.

"I will do nothing that pleases you, Lloth!" he shouted above the deafening roar. "If you want your precious Dagger, you can go look for it in the Abyss!" With that, Zak hurled the Dagger down the stairwell, into the heart of the rising fire. The relic flashed, then was lost in the roiling crimson flames. Zak's hair began to curl and crisp. Steam rose from his leather clothes. In another heartbeat he would be roasted alive. With a cry of rage and defiance, he heaved himself up through the opening and pulled the circle of stone shut behind him.

Fire and noise ceased. Zak sprawled atop the pillar, pressing his singed cheek to the cool stones. Only after a long moment did he realize he was still alive. With a groan, he pulled himself to his feet. Below, the procession of purple magelights was already winding its way back to Tier Breche. Only the base of Narbondel glowed with heat now, belying the fires that raged within. Zak drew in a deep breath, steadying himself. He stepped off the edge of the pillar and levitated to the street below.

By the time he reached House Do'Urden, Matron Malice was waiting for him.

"I have returned."

Zak drifted over the adamantite balcony and landed on the onyx floor. Malice whirled around, stalking toward him with dangerous grace.

"So I see." Her eyes were half-lidded, her expression unreadable. "Did you gain the Dagger?"

Zak could not hesitate if he was to have any chance of deceiving her. "I fear not, Matron Mother," he said, feigning regret. "The spiderjewel led me to a tomb beneath Narbondel. I have no doubt that it was once the resting place of the Dagger. But the relic was gone. Stolen by grave robbers long ago, I imagine."

Malice slipped her arms around him. Zak stared in amazement. Had she forgiven him so easily? Then she bent her lips to his ear, whispering a single word.

"Liar."

Zak stiffened in shock, stepping backward, fumbling for words. "It is no He, Matron Mother . . ."

"Silence!" she shrieked, her eyes alight with unholy fury. "I saw everything, you fool. Everything!" She reached a hand toward his shoulder. A small spider scurried up her arm to perch on her own shoulder, many-faceted eyes glistening.

Zak swore a silent oath. So she had sent one of her little spies with him. He should have guessed. Dread was replaced by chill resignation. He bowed his head. "I do not regret what I have done." "You will, Zaknafein," Malice hissed. "You will." She made a sharp gesture. Three forms stepped out of the shadows. Her daughters. Vierna and Maya grasped his arms while Briza bound his hands together with cruel leather thongs. Zak glanced up, hoping to see sorrow in

Vierna's eyes. Instead, he saw nothing at all.

"What are we going to do, Mother?" Briza asked, jerking on the bonds to tighten them further.

"The Dagger was to bring us the favor of Lloth. Surely this blasphemous act will bring the Spider Queen's displeasure instead."

"We are doomed!" Maya wailed in despair. "Not yet," Malice snapped. "Not if the crime is atoned for properly. Then Lloth will be appeased. Zaknafein must be punished for this heinous act. And there can be but one punishment."

"Death?" Vierna asked, her voice emotionless. Malice shook her head. "Death would not be enough to satisfy Lloth's anger." Her lips curled in a wicked smile. "No," she crooned, "Zaknafein's punishment will be something far worse than mere death."

Zak stared at her in growing horror. What could she mean? But even his darkest fears were nothing compared to the reality of her words.

"For your crimes against Lloth and House Do'Urden, Zaknafein, I sentence you to be made into ... a drider!" Zak reeled at this pronouncement. Even Malice's daughters gasped. There was no more terrible punishment known to the dark elves. To be made into a drider was to have one's body twisted into an accursed form that was half drow, half spider, a transformation that could never be reversed.

"Take him to the Cavern of the Lost," Malice commanded. "And let me look upon his face never again!"

Zak strained against his bonds, but it was no use. He was powerless as Malice's daughters dragged him off to meet his doom.

Chapter Five

Invitation to Glory

With white-knuckled hands, Matron Malice gripped the adamantite railing and gazed at the slaves working like insects in the compound below.

"Whither now, Daermon N'a'shezbaernon?" she murmured, using the ancient name of House Do'Urden. "Has your march to glory come to an end already?"

Hands reached from behind, caressing her shoulders, running down the smooth flesh of her back. She felt warm breath against the nape of her neck. "Come to bed, Malice. I will help you forget your troubles."

With a sharp jerk, Malice shrugged off the hands and whirled around. "That's Matron Malice to you, Rikken," she said in a venomous tone, glaring at her current patron. She had had more than enough that day of disrespectful males who did not know their places.

Rikken's eyes bulged in alarm. He fumbled over a clumsy apology.

Malice sighed then, dismissing his words with an annoyed wave of her hand. There was no point in taking her anger out on Rikken. He was weak and malleable, and he crumbled far too easily to give her any satisfaction. She shook her head. Had Zaknafein only been more like Rikken, this disaster would never have occurred. But then, had Zak been like Rikken, he never would have had the strength to gain the Dagger of Menzoberra in the first place. Zaknafein had always been her bane and her boon. But he would be neither ever again.

"Leave me, Rikken," she commanded.

Rikken gave a deep bow, backing from the room. Malice forgot him before he was even gone.

The matron of House Do'Urden turned her mind to the matter at hand. It was crucial to understand every possible implication, to foresee every possible consequence of what had occurred. She had to be certain her house had not been placed in a position of weakness by all this. If it were, some lower-ranked house could seize this opportunity to rise in station by launching a covert attack against House Do'Urden.

Again and again, Malice went over all the potential outcomes in her mind. At last she nodded, satisfied that House Do'Urden was safe, at least for the moment. Zaknafein had thrown Menzoberra's Dagger into the Fires of Narbondel. There was absolutely no hope now that Lloth would appear within the walls of House Do'Urden tomorrow, on the Festival of the Founding. However, for his blasphemous act, Zaknafein had been sentenced to the most dire punishment known to drow. Surely that would appease Lloth and tip the scales of favor back into balance. Malice had gained no ground for her efforts, but she had to believe that she had lost none, either. A shudder passed through her then at the thought of the judgment she had passed upon her weapons master. It was not something she had done with relish. Even as she had uttered the

terrible words, her heart had cried out for her to stop. To be transformed into a drider was a fate she would hesitate to wish upon even her worst enemy. By her order, Zak would become a monster: a tortured creature of hideous aspect, forced to live out his days in pain and madness and loathing, haunting the labyrinth of the Dark Dominion.

Yet what choice had Malice had? None. What she had done was done to protect House Do'Urden. She was matron mother. The prosperity of the house came before all else. She could not forget that. Still, the awful weight of her actions pressed upon her, dragging her to her knees. A moan escaped her lips. Most days she reveled in her power as matron mother of a noble house. But sometimes power was a terrible burden.

A low humming reached her delicate, pointed ears. Malice looked up in surprise to see a small disk hovering before her. The metal circle glowed with sapphire light as it whirled in midair. A message disk! But from whom?

She held out her hand, and the disk alighted upon it, warm against her skin. An image appeared, translucent but clear, hovering over the disk's surface. It was the visage of an ancient elf woman, her dark flesh withered, her hair yellowed and scraggly, but her eyes as bright as polished stones. Malice gasped. The image was that of Matron Baenre, leader of the First House of Menzoberranzan. To Malice's further surprise, the image of the dark elf crone began to speak.

"Greetings, Matron Malice." Matron Baenre's spindly voice emanated from the image.

"Greetings . . ." Malice started to reply, but the image continued to talk without pause; by that, Malice knew she was not really speaking with Matron Baenre. Rather, this was a prefashioned message embedded in the disk itself.

"The Festival of the Founding is nearly upon us," the image of Matron Baenre went on. "As you know, it is the tradition on that day for the nobles of two houses that do not customarily dine together to do so. If House Do'Urden would deign to host House Baenre on this holy occasion, I would be most grateful."

Malice's heart skipped a beat in her chest. Baenre wanted to dine with House Do'Urden on the Festival Day? What marvelous fortune! Malice's plot to win a visit from Lloth had unraveled, but without doubt this was the next greatest honor. Certainly this meant that Matron Baenre favored the recent rise in station of House Do'Urden. And once it was known that House Baenre had chosen to feast with House Do'Urden for the Festival, the status of Malice's clan could rise only further.

"Will Matron Malice accept this offer?" the image hovering above the disk finished.

Though it was phrased as a polite question, Malice knew that it was not really a request, but a demand. To refuse would be suicide. Not that she would ever do so.

Malice stood and spoke in a formal tone. "Please inform Matron Baenre that I am honored to accept her gracious offer."

The image of the crone nodded, then vanished. The disk rose from Malice's hand, then whizzed away to deliver her response to House Baenre.

By force of will, Malice banished thoughts of Zaknafein from her mind. It was better if she forgot him. Besides, she had other matters to concern her now. A smile parted her dark red lips. Defeat had turned into victory. Tomorrow would be a glorious day after all.

Chapter Six

Transformation

They had strapped him to an altar of dark stone, fiat on his back, his hands and feet bound with rothe-hide thongs to the slab's four corners. A scream of utter agony echoed around the dank cavern, underscored by the eerie sound of chanting. Zaknafein craned his neck, straining against his bonds, trying to see what was happening. He was not the only one sentenced to become a drider that day.

It was difficult to see anything. Noxious smoke hung on the air, rising from ritual fires the priestess had lit. The scent of fear was strong and sharp in his nostrils. This was an evil place. The chanting rose to a feverish pitch as another scream was ripped from drow lungs. For a moment, the smoke swirled, thinning, and Zak caught a glimpse of a gruesome shadow play.

To his right, eight priestesses of Lloth gathered around an altar to which was strapped a writhing figure. At the head of the stone slab, hovering in the garish green flames rising from a copper brazier, was a nightmarish form. The thing was a mass of bubbling flesh, snaking tentacles, and

bulbous eyes. A yochlol, one of the Handmaidens of Lloth, summoned from the depths of the Abyss to work its evil here. A wave of fear and revulsion crashed through Zak at the sight of the yochlol. He clenched his jaw, resisting the urge to vomit.

The priestesses raised their arms in exultation as their chanting reached a shrill peak. The yochlol extended its tentacles, wrapping them around the head of its victim. The hapless drow female screamed one last time, back arching off the altar. Then, with horrifying swiftness, the change began. Wriggling legs sprouted from the drow's waist as her belly swelled in grotesque distortion. Her scream turned into a weird chittering that was part anguish and part mad glee. The priestesses stepped away, and for a moment Zak saw, in perfect silhouette, a new form standing on the altar where the dark elven female had lain before. The thing was shaped like a drow from the waist up—now neither male nor female—but its abdomen and legs were those of a huge, misshapen spider. Then the smoke swirled once more, and the ghastly sight was lost from view. Twice more Zak listened to agonized screams and evil chanting as those who had dared to defy the Way of Lloth were punished for their crimes. Then the chamber fell silent. It was his turn now. He strained against his bonds, but the effort was futile. Tensing his body, he waited for the moment of his doom to come.

Before it could; a strange thing happened. A tiny form pulled itself up over the edge of the altar and walked in halting fashion across the stone slab. Zak stared, his fear replaced by puzzlement. What was this creature? It looked like a crude, clay figurine of an elf, no bigger than his hand. Only it was alive.

No, not alive, Zak realized then. Ensorcelled.

With jerky steps, the tiny clay golem approached Zak's right hand. It raised a stiff arm, and green firelight glinted off cold metal. A small knife had been fastened to the thing's hand. Zak's eyes widened as the golem slashed downward. The sharp knife struck the leather thong that bound his wrist, cutting it through save for a small thread of leather.

"We can rest when our work is finished, my sisters," spoke a voice out of the hazy air. "Come, let us see to the fate of our last offender."

With clumsy but surprising speed, the clay golem scuttled into Zak's pocket. Black-robed forms appeared out of the swirling smoke. Cruel smiles cut across dark drow faces. Emerald light pierced the gloom as a fire was lit just behind Zak's head. The flames roared, and something rose from them. Zak arched his head back and caught a glimpse of half-melted flesh and spongy tentacles. Unholy dread turned his guts to water. As one, the priestesses began their chant. A slimy tentacle brushed across his brow. Zak grimaced, feeling the first tug of pain deep inside his body. Now was his only chance.

In a single motion, he jerked his right hand upward, snapping the weakened leather, and snatched a ceremonial dagger from the belt of one of the priestesses. He made a slashing arc with the spider-shaped dagger, taking out the throats of two wide-eyed priestesses, and finished the action by slicing his remaining bonds. Even before the bodies had slumped to the floor, Zak leapt to his feet, standing atop the altar, brandishing the dagger before him.

He found himself facing the yochlol.

The nether being hovered in the magical flames of the brazier, mere inches from his face. It shrieked in fiendish outrage, reaching for him with glistening tentacles, ready to tear him limb from limb. Zak did not hesitate. He lashed out a boot and kicked the brazier, knocking it over. Sparks flew. The yochlol shrieked again, then disappeared in a puff of smoke, banished back to the Abyss as the magical fires that had summoned it were snuffed out.

Zak spun around. The remaining priestesses had recovered their wits. They lifted their daggers and whips, surrounding him. One raised her arms, speaking the words of a spell. Zak kicked out, crushing her jaw before she could finish uttering the enchantment. She fell to the floor, moaning. Another priestess raised a wooden rod that glowed with fell magic, ready to strike him down. Zak lashed out with the dagger, and the rod fell to the ground, still gripped by the priestess's severed hand. She clutched the bloody stump of her wrist and staggered away.

Despite himself, Zak grinned. They had sought to work their justice upon him. Well, this was his justice. Again he felt that clarity that came to him only when slaying things of evil. These were the ones who worked Lloth's wicked will, these priestesses of Arach-Tinilith. These were the ones who gave the Spider Queen her power. Maybe he was a killer. Maybe he was no better than they, than any drow. But if he was going to kill, at least let it be creatures of evil, like this.

His grin broadened as he plucked a second dagger from one of the corpses. The hilts hummed against his two hands. These were enchanted blades, wickedly sharp.

Terror blossomed in the eyes of the four remaining priestesses. To them he seemed a fiend, a fey thing, more terrible than a creature of the Abyss. They turned to flee, and two more died as Zak drove a dagger into each of their backs, piercing their hearts. He started to pursue the remaining two priestesses, but was brought up short by a quartet of male soldiers.

The first thrust out his sword. As he did, Zak performed a move he had invented himself long ago. He poised one dagger high, the other low, and both slightly offset. The torque wise, he called it.

As the soldier lunged forward, Zak brought the daggers together, catching the other's arm between. Bone shattered with a sound like glass grinding. The soldier went down screaming. Zak laughed, making quick work of the remaining soldiers with the magical spider daggers. In seconds, four corpses slumped at his feet. He leapt over them, no longer thinking, driven by instinct to pursue the evil priestesses.

Three shadowy forms loomed before him. The smoke swirled and parted. Zak halted, gazing up at the hideous creatures. Half drow, half spider. Murder and madness glinted in their red eyes. Driders.

The newly created monstrosities advanced, wielding weapons in drow hands, reaching out with barbed legs. Now Zak was on the defensive. He lashed out, and a severed spider leg fell writhing to floor. Again he struck, and another leg fell. But the driders kept advancing. In their bloodlust they seemed to feel no pain. They bore down on him until his back came up against rough stone. His breath grew short in his lungs. His arms ached. He could not keep the driders at bay much longer. The abominations grinned, green spittle running down their chins, as they sensed their imminent victory.

Zak looked around in desperation, searching for a way out. There was none. Then his eyes locked on something above. It was a long shot, but it was his only chance. Taking aim, he hurled a dagger with all his might at a clump of stalactites hanging from the cavern ceiling. The dagger bounced off the stone without effect. Zak dodged a spider leg, weighed his one remaining dagger, and threw. This one broke as it struck the stone. The blade burst apart in a spray of violent purple magic as its enchantment was released. The force of the explosion knocked loose several stalactites. The heavy stone spikes plunged downward. As one the driders shrieked in agony. Zak edged away from the dying creatures. Each of the driders had been pierced through its bloated abdomen by one of the stalactites. Foul ichor bubbled from the wounds. Even as he watched, the driders fell over, their spider legs curling up. The crimson light flickered in their eyes and went dark. Zak shook his head. He had done them a favor. Better to die than to live for centuries as monsters.

Zak gazed down at his blood-spattered clothes. A bitter laugh escaped his lips. "Ah, but are you not already a monster, Zaknafein?"

Distant shouts echoed off cold stone, approaching. The two surviving priestesses had gone for help. Soldiers would arrive soon. More than Zak could fight. Glancing around, his preternatural eyes detected the empty opening of a side passage. Levitating, so as not to leave any telltale warm footprints, he passed through the opening and plunged into the winding ways of the Dark Dominion.

Minutes later, Zak sank back to the stone floor of the tunnel, his powers of levitation exhausted for the moment. He listened with pointed ears but heard no sounds of pursuit. Weary, he leaned against a rough wall, and only then realized he was trembling. He had escaped spending the rest of his life as a drider. Yet now what would he do? He was an outcast, a pariah. He could never return to Menzoberranzan. And all that awaited a lone elfin the Underdark was death. It was a fate preferable to becoming a drider, yes, but not by much.

Something wriggled inside the pocket of his black rothe-hide jerkin-his peculiar, diminutive savior. He pulled out the clay golem. The crude figurine turned its head to stare at him with dull pebble eyes. Zak set the golem down and squatted beside it. He scratched his chin. Who had sent the golem? he wondered. To whom did he owe his escape?

Without warning, the golem started to shamble down the tunnel. The figurine made a jerky motion with its clay arm. Zak gaped in surprise. It beckoned him to follow. But to where? Perhaps to the answer to his question. Zak stalked after the golem. Though its legs were short and stiff, it moved with surprising speed, leading the weapons master through a tangled labyrinth of tunnels,

caverns, and natural passageways. He was beginning to think the golem was in truth leading him nowhere, but then it came to a sudden halt.

The golem stood on the edge of a circle of smooth white stone. The white disk stood in sharp contrast to the rough rock all around. Clearly, it was not a natural formation, but had been placed here in this dead-end tunnel. The golem continued to stand motionless. Zak supposed there was only one thing to do. He stepped onto the pale stone disk.

His surroundings blurred, then snapped back into focus.

"I see my little servant was successful," spoke a sibilant voice.

Zak swayed, clutching his stomach. For a moment, he thought he would vomit from the terrible sensation of wrenching he had experienced.

"My apologies," the voice went on. "Traveling by means of the disk can be disconcerting. But the feeling should fade in a moment."

Even as the other spoke these words, Zak found his dizziness receding and lifted his head. He stood on another circle of white stone, in the center of an octagonal chamber littered with parchment scrolls, glass vials, nameless metal instruments, and bits of mummified animals. Before him stood a figure swathed all in black robes, face hidden behind a shapeless gray mask. Zak tensed, ready to defend himself. "Who are you?" he demanded.

Muffled laughter emanated from the mask, mocking but not altogether cruel. "One who could have destroyed you a dozen times over in the last few seconds, despite all your prowess, weapons master. But be at ease, I beg you. I did not go to all the trouble of saving you from the foul priestesses of Lloth only to snuff you out with a fireball."

Zak eyed the other, still wary. "I am safe here then?"

Again the eerie, whispering laughter. "No, Zaknafein. You are anything but safe. But if you are referring to physical harm, none will come to you. It is your soul that is imperiled by being here." These words intrigued Zak. Despite himself, he lowered his guard, stepping off the white disk.

"You still haven't answered my question. Who are you?"

"I am Jalynefein," the other replied, "though few know me by that name. To most I am simply the Spider Mage."

Zak stared in renewed shock. This confirmed his hunch that he stood now in a wizard's chamber, somewhere within the towers of Sorcere, the academy of magic in Tier Breche. But this was not simply any master of sorcery. The Spider Mage was one of the most infamous and mysterious wizards in all of Menzoberranzan. It was said his power was exceeded only by his zeal to serve Lloth, and that in turn only by his madness. Yet the wizard before Zak seemed neither insane nor by his actions and words—a lover of Lloth.

Zak's interest and confusion were apparent to the Spider Mage. "Come," said the wizard, gesturing to a pair of chairs beside a table. "I will explain what I can. But we do not have much time. Her eye has turned away for the moment, gazing elsewhere, but it will turn back before long. She is always watching."

A shiver coursed up Zak's spine. He did not need to ask who she was.

Moments later they sat at the table, sipping pale wine, as the Spider Mage spoke on. "There is something I must show you, Zaknafein. You will not wish to see it, but you must in order to understand what I am going to tell you."

Without further words, the wizard reached up and removed his gray mask. Beneath was . . . not a face. Instead, it was a mass of writhing spider legs. Hundreds of them. Thousands. Zak gagged, turning away. When at last he dared to turn back, the mask was in place once more.

"How . . . ?" Zak croaked. It was all he could manage. "I will spare you the details," the wizard said in crisp tones. "Suffice it to say that a yochlol did this to me, one of the Spider Queen's servants. Now you will believe me when I tell you that I despise Lloth utterly." In the following fevered minutes, Zak listened in rapt attention as the Spider Mage spoke of his hatred for the Spider Queen. Jalynefein loathed Lloth not just for what she had done to him, but for what she had done to all the drow—for the wicked, hateful, heartless creatures she made them with her evil manipulations. The dark elves had been noble creatures once, beings of enlightenment and compassion. That was before they were driven into the Underdark and became tangled in Lloth's web of deceit, depravity, and lust. To the Spider Queen, twisting the drow was simply a cruel and capricious game, and one at which she excelled.

These words struck a deep chord within Zaknafein. He shook his head in dark wonder. "I had

always thought I was alone, that I was the only one who hated what the drow had become, what had become."

"No, you are not alone," the Spider Mage countered. "There are others who are . . . different. Others who believe that drow do not have to dwell in evil and infamy. I have brought some of them here, to speak with them, just as I have brought you. We are not many, but we are. Don't you see?" The wizard clenched a hand into a fist. "It means that Lloth's corruption of the drow is not complete. If it were, those who are different, those like us, would never be born into this dark world!"

Zak stared at the wizard as the import of these words sank in. Deep amid the shadows of his heart, a faint spark of hope ignited. "But how can we fight her?" "Not openly," the Spider Mage said in a sharp voice. "You have learned what one gains for openly defying the will of Lloth. Death or driderhood. No, if we are ever to defeat Lloth, it will be at her own game."

Zak didn't understand.

"Consider myself," the Spider Mage went on. "By posing as a loyal disciple of Lloth, I avoid her close scrutiny. Yet even as I pretend to serve her, I work against the Spider Queen. I use the power she grants me and turn it against her. I must be subtle, yes. Cautious. Patient. It may take centuries. But slowly, surely, we can erode her hold upon the drow."

Zak shook his head, his doubts rising. "I don't know, Jalynefein. I am a fighter. I am not trained to befriend my enemies, but to defeat them head on."

The wizard's voice was urgent. "You must trust me, weapons master. Return to your house. Serve your matron mother and her high priestess daughters. Give them no reason to believe that you are anything but a loyal and devoted tool in their hands. But while you do, watch and wait. When the opportunity comes to do some good, to thwart Lloth in her evil plots, you will see it." The Spider Mage reached out and gripped his shoulder. "By serving Lloth we can master her, Zaknafein. It is the only way."

"But even if you're right, I can never go back," Zak protested. "Yes you can."

The Spider Mage passed his hand over a crystal globe. Within appeared the image of a great column, the last glow of heat fading from its stone surface. Narbondel.

"You thought that you destroyed the Dagger of Menzoberra when you cast it into the fires, but that is not so. Even the magical flames of the archmage are not enough to destroy a relic as powerful as the Dagger."

A dangerous light ignited in Zak's eyes. If he were to regain the Dagger and present it to Matron Malice, she would have no choice but to grant him his place as weapons master once more. At that moment, he made a decision. Master her by serving her. Yes, it was the only way.

Zak stood in an abrupt motion. "I have to go." He shot the wizard a nasty grin. "I have a dagger to fetch for my beloved matron mother."

Perhaps it was only the shadows, but a smile seemed to touch the Spider Mage's gray mask.

"Farewell, Zaknafein. It would be too dangerous for us to ever speak again. So let me say that it has been an honor to meet you."

At a loss for words, Zak could only nod.

"Use the disk," Jalynefein finished. "It will take you to Narbondel."

Without further words, Zak stepped onto the pale circle, and once again the world blurred around him.

Chapter Seven

To Serve ...

Jalynefein sat in the silence of his chamber, deep in the heart of Sorcere. He gazed into the crystal, at the glowing pillar, thinking of the peril of which he had not warned the weapons master. To pretend to serve Lloth was the only hope of finding a chance to undermine her power. But there was a grave danger in it as well. In posing as a slave of the Spider Queen, an elf might one day wake to find he has actually become one. Time was their ally, but it was also their enemy. In time, all things—even a drow of good and true heart—could become corrupted.

"Each day we burn in the Fires of Narbondel, my friend," Jalynefein whispered to the crystal. "For each day brings a chance to do good, and a chance to become evil."

Jalynefein sighed. It was beyond his power now. He waved a hand, and the crystal went dark. The Spider Mage stood. It was time to go serve Lloth.

Chapter Eight

Relics

Drizzt knew he shouldn't be here. Briza had charged him with the task of polishing every doorknob in the entire house. She hadn't said anything about opening any of them.

The door clicked shut behind him. It was too late.

"Well, since I've already earned a whipping, I might as well look around," the young drow reasoned.

For a moment, Drizzt enjoyed the silence of the small antechamber. At present, all of House Do'Urden was astir with the final preparations for the Festival of the Founding, as well as for the imminent arrival of Matron Baenre and her entourage. Even by Briza's standards, the task she had assigned him was a tedious one. House Do'Urden was not the largest house in Menzoberranzan, but neither was it the smallest. After polishing a hundred knobs, Drizzt had lost count. Then he had come to the very last knob, set into a small door at the end of a seldom-trod hallway.

Drizzt wasn't certain what had first piqued his curiosity about the door. All of the other doors in the house were large and grand, graced by intricate carvings of webs and spiders and ancient drow heroes. This portal was so small and drab that he almost hadn't noticed it. Perhaps that was what had caught his interest. He hadn't even really meant to turn the knob, but as he buffed it one last time with the cloth, the knob had spun, and the door had swung open.

Now Drizzt gazed around the small chamber. After a moment he let out a sigh of disappointment. The room was empty, save for a few broken chairs and some rotting tapestries. Drizzt turned to leave. If he could slip out unnoticed, maybe he wouldn't get a beating after all. He reached for the knob.

That was when he noticed it. The walls of the chamber were all speckled with purple mold—except for a small circle in the center of the wall to his left. Drizzt frowned. That didn't make sense. Mold would grow on any surface that wasn't often disturbed . . .

In a second, he moved from door to wall, gazing at the circle of smooth stone. There was only one possible reason mold hadn't grown over that patch of wall. Testing his hunch, he lifted his hand and pressed against the circle.

He hadn't expected this, Drizzt thought as the floor dropped out beneath him. He tried to levitate but was too slow. With a soft, "Oof!" he landed on a heap of something cold, hard, and clinking.

Coins, he realized after a stunned moment. It was a pile of adamantite coins. He glanced up at the opening a dozen feet above his head. It would be no problem to levitate out of here. But first.

..

He pulled himself to his feet, shaking off a handful of coins, and gazed around. A gasp escaped his lips. His lavender eyes made out cool shapes wrought from silver, ruby, and pearl. He let his fingers run over ivory cups and jeweled scepters. Excitement rose in his chest. This was the house's secret treasure chamber! If his mother or sisters found him here, they would beat him within a hairbreadth of his life. Had he any sense at all, he would leave at once. But life as a page prince was dull, and everything his eyes found was so fascinating. Besides, he wouldn't stay long. Drizzt donned an emerald crown and lifted a pale sword, pretending he was a great king of some deep, dark realm. He spun, waving the sword, imagining the terrible creatures of the Underdark he would slay.

A glint caught his eye. Sitting on a marble pedestal was a bowl of beaten gold. The sword slipped from Drizzt's fingers as he approached. The vessel was unadorned, but something told him this was no ordinary bowl. He reached out and touched the golden rim. As he did, clear water—springing from no visible source—filled the vessel. He bent over the bowl. At first all he saw was his own reflection, but then the water went dark, blacker than the deepest crevices of the Underdark. A sound of fear escaped Drizzt's throat, but he could not look away.

Images began to appear. They floated across the still surface of the water, quick and fleeting. He glimpsed his mother talking to his sisters, their heads bent together as they schemed some wickedness. The image changed and became his brother Dinin practicing with his swords. Then, in quick succession, came a dozen scenes scattered around the city: faces and places Drizzt did not know.

At last he understood. This was a scrying bowl. He had heard Matron Malice mention such a

thing to Briza once, when she had not realized he was within earshot. This was one of the greatest treasures of House Do'Urden.

You should leave this place now, Drizzt, warned a voice in his head. The advice, however, was drowned out by exhilaration. The scrying bowl could show him anything he wanted! But what should he ask to see? Maybe he should let the bowl decide for him.

He gripped the rim. "Show me something important," he commanded. The metal seemed to hum beneath his hands.

For a moment he thought his request had confused the magical vessel, for the water went dark again, so black that it hurt to gaze upon. Then darkness turned into fire. The flames receded, revealing in their wake a dagger. It was beautiful. The dagger rested on what appeared to be a stone step. A purple gem winked in its hilt, and its blade still glowed with the heat of the fire.

Drizzt bit his lip. The dagger seemed so real-so real that, before he even knew what he was doing, he reached into the bowl, his hand slipping beneath the cool surface of the water. His fingers closed around hot metal.

With a yelp of surprise and pain, Drizzt snatched his hand back. The water bubbled, and there was a great hissing of steam. At last the vapor cleared. Drizzt stared in fear and wonder.

"What have I done?" he whispered.

In his hand he gripped the dagger, its metal now cool, quenched by the water in the scrying bowl.

Chapter Nine

Spiderjewel

Reality melted, flowed, then condensed again around Zaknafein. Once more he stood high atop the center of the tangled web that was Menzoberranzan. Narbondel. The stone was cool beneath his feet, but already the purple magelights bobbed through the streets of the city-the approach of the archmage. A new day was about to begin. The Festival of the Founding. Zak did not have much time.

The weapons master searched along the craggy top of the pillar until he found the small crevice. He snaked a hand inside, depressing the switch. As before, a dark hole opened in the stone.

Without hesitation, Zak lowered himself into the stairwell below. His elven eyes adjusted to their new surroundings.

In minutes, he knew the Dagger of Menzoberra was gone. It could not have fallen far down the stairway, and the bright jewel in its hilt would have stood out against the dull stone steps, making it easy to detect. Zak swore as he padded up and down the staircase one more time, just to be certain. But he knew he would not find the relic, and he was right. He climbed out of the opening, back to the top of the pillar, then slammed the portal shut in disgust.

"Where is it?" he rasped to the darkness.

The Spider Mage had said the Dagger was not destroyed, and Zak did not doubt the wizard's words.

"Jalynfein would not lie to me. We are kindred spirits, he and I."

Yet if the relic had not been destroyed, that left only one possibility. Someone else had retrieved it. But who? And where had it been taken? The Festival of the Founding was about to commence. He did not have time to search even a fraction of the city, let alone all of it. It seemed his quest for redemption had come to a premature and bitter end.

All at once, low laughter escaped Zak's throat. What a fool he was! Of course-he had possessed the power to find the relic all along. Reaching into his neck-purse, he pulled out the spiderjewel. He set the gem on his outstretched palm. The ruby embedded in its abdomen winked to life. The arachnid spun a moment, then stopped. Zak followed the spider's orientation with his gaze. West. There was no time to waste. Zak stepped off the pillar and into an updraft, wrapping himself in his piwafwi and letting the warm air conceal his body heat from prying eyes. He sank to the ground, vanishing into the city's streets, just as the regal procession reached the base of Narbondel.

The archmage laid his hands upon the ancient pillar. Fire welled forth. Stone glowed crimson. The Festival had begun.

Chapter Ten

A Goblin at the Gate

Matron Malice gazed around herself, eyes glittering with satisfaction. Everything was in place for

the Festival. On her orders, the servants had brought House Do'Urden's most opulent treasures into the feast hall: chairs fashioned of dwarf bones, onyx tables resting on dragon claws, crystal goblets colored crimson with a tincture of faerie blood-taken from the hated light elves in a raid on the surface world. Malice's was not the richest house in Menzoberranzan, but it could muster a remarkable display all the same. Matron Baenre could not help but be impressed.

Malice smiled, but the expression felt hollow. Despite her imminent victory, her satisfaction was marred. Something was missing. In chagrin, she realized who it was. Yet she was better off without the unruly weapons master, she told herself. She would find others to replace him, in her bed and in her heart. It was foolish to waste her thought on Zaknafein. This was to be her day of glory.

Dinin hurried into the feast hall and bowed low before her. "Forgive the intrusion, Matron Mother, but you asked me to inform you if anyone-anyone at all-came to the house's gate. A lone goblin has shown up, and it begs hospitality."

Briza let out a snort of outrage. "The brazen little worm." She gripped her snake-headed whip. "I'll take care of it, Mother."

Malice glared at her daughter. "And earn us the further disfavor of Lloth?" she sneered. "I think not. Put away your whip, Briza. You like the feel of its grip far too much. Perhaps it would do you good to remember what the other end of it feels like."

Briza stared in slack-jawed shock, then hastily coiled her whip, lest she feel its bite herself.

Malice stroked her jaw in thought. "The Spider Queen will appear somewhere in the city today, and there is no telling what form she'll take. We cannot take the risk of turning any stranger away." She turned to her son. "Dinin, bring the goblin here. Whatever it wants, it shall get."

Dinin stared in surprise, but had the sense not to question his matron mother. He returned minutes later with the goblin: a small, sniveling creature with green skin and a warty face. Malice resisted the urge to stick her dagger into the loathsome thing's throat. There were too many stories of families who had turned away some wretched creature only to learn it had been Lloth in disguise, even as they died from food turned into poison. Malice forced herself to smile.

"Welcome to House Do'Urden," she spoke. "Would you like some wine?"

The goblin nodded, rubbing gnarled hands together and baring yellow fangs in a grin. "Garn, but I love the Festival of the Founding!" it croaked.

Malice herself was bathing the goblin's crusty feet in a silver basin when the feast hall doors opened and Matron Baenre entered.

"Don't forget to wash between the toes," the ancient elf said in her rasping voice. "Goblins are not known for thoroughness in hygiene."

Malice leapt to her feet, wiping her hands against her gown. "Matron Baenre! I was only . . . that is, I was just trying . . ." Her cheeks glowed with warm embarrassment.

Baenre cackled, leaning on her staff. "Fear not, Matron Malice. I appreciate a matron mother who knows the value of tradition. But I think you have shown this goblin as much hospitality as tradition warrants this day."

The goblin looked up, eyes bulging as it realized its fun was at an end. Malice nodded to Dinin, and her son grabbed the goblin, dragging it kicking and screaming from the hall. Malice breathed a sigh of relief. Things had gotten off to an awkward start, but it seemed no harm had been done. Perhaps this was going to turn out well after all. Recovering her sense of protocol, she lowered her head in formal greeting.

"We are honored by your presence on this day of celebration, Matron Baenre."

With an impatient hand, the ancient dark elf waved the words away. "Well, of course you are.

Now, where is the mushroom wine? I'm thirsty."

"This way," Malice spoke, leading Matron Baenre toward a table. "I'm sure you'll find everything to your satisfaction."

"Oh, I'll be the judge of that." Matron Baenre cackled again, and this time the sound of her laughter was not quite so congenial.

Malice clenched her teeth. Maybe this wasn't going to be so easy after all.

Chapter Eleven

Intruder

Zak pushed back the hood of the ragged robe he had donned over his piwafwi. He glanced in

either direction down the corridor, but there was no one in sight. It had been easy enough to gain entrance to House Do'Urden by posing as a beggar. No one was turned away on the Festival of the Founding. Once inside, Zak had used his intimate knowledge of the compound to slip away. He had gone first to his old chamber, to retrieve his swords. Then he had begun his search. Opening his hand, Zak glanced at the glowing spiderjewel. At first he had been shocked when the arachnid had led him here, to House Do'Urden. Someone here had retrieved the Dagger of Menzoberra. Zak did not know how this could be, yet it was. He could only hope the relic was not yet in Malice's hands, or he would have no chance of regaining her favor. With silent speed, he moved down the corridor.

Soon the sounds of revelry reached his ears. The feast hall was near. And by the gleaming of the spiderjewel's ruby, so was the Dagger. Zak moved through an archway and pressed himself into the concealment of a heat shadow. A figure came into view, walking down the corridor, face hidden by a tray heaped with dishes. The enchanted arachnid spun in agitation.

This is the one, Zak realized. This is the one who has taken the Dagger. He thrust the spiderjewel into his pocket and gripped the hilts of his two swords.

He waited until his quarry was near, then leapt out, tripping. With a loud crash of breaking crockery, the tray struck the floor. Zak thrust his swords down in a crossed position, thinking to trap his quarry against the floor by the neck, but the blades bit only stone, not flesh. His foe was more wily than he had guessed. In the chaos, the other had rolled to the side and was even now trying to crawl past Zak's legs. Fast as his quarry was, Zak was still a weapons master. Before his prey could wriggle away again, Zak lashed out a boot, pinning his enemy in a prone position. He lowered his sword until the tip bit into the skin of the other's neck. At this, all wriggling stopped. "Turn over," Zak ordered. "Let me see your face. But do it slowly, or you'll lose your head in the process."

The other rolled over. Zak raised an eyebrow in surprise. This was hardly the foe he had expected.

"Hello, Master Zaknafein," Drizzt Do'Urden said in a polite voice.

Despite himself, a chuckle rose in Zak's throat. The boy was a good fighter, and even though he had been defeated, there was no fear in his eyes. The young drow had spirit. More's the pity, Zak thought, for it would only be ground out of him in the years ahead. But right now, Zak had other matters with which to concern himself. He hauled Drizzt to his feet and flipped back the boy's piwafwi. Tucked into Drizzt's belt was an ornate knife, a large purple gem winking in its hilt. The spiderjewel had not erred.

Zak gave the boy a sharp stare. "Tell me how you came by this. Now."

Drizzt nodded in quick compliance. In even tones, he told of stumbling on the treasure room and the scrying bowl, and how he had reached into the water to grasp the relic. Zak listened in growing amazement. He did not doubt the boy's words. It was clear he was no liar- another trait that would cause him trouble in the dark world of the drow.

"Are you angry with me, Master Zaknafein?" Drizzt asked when he had finished.

Zak did not know how to answer that one. For some reason, he wished to reassure the boy. Impossible as it seemed-this was one of Rikken's scions, after all- Drizzt reminded Zak of himself. He knelt and started to tell the boy that everything was going to work out now.

That was when he heard the chittering. Zak jerked his head up. A cold edge of dread sliced into his gut. He had forgotten about the jade spiders.

Two massive forms scuttled toward them, green and glistening, smooth stone made animate. The function of the house's jade spiders was to protect the compound against intruders. By attacking a scion of the house, Zak had made himself an intruder, and he had seen what jade spiders did to intruders. Usually there wasn't enough remaining to even identify the victim's race.

Smooth legs clicking against the stone floor, the jade spiders approached.

"What's happening?" Drizzt asked, glancing in confusion at the magical monsters. "Why are the jade spiders attacking us?"

"They're not attacking us," Zak growled. "It's me they're after. Now get back." He drew his swords, one in each hand.

A grim light flashed in the boy's strange purple eyes. "No, I'm going to help you."

Zak stared in astonishment, then shook his head. He started to tell the young drow to get back, but it was too late. The chitinous clicking sound crescendoed as the jade spiders attacked.

The weapons master was ready for them. His two blades formed a whirling barrier before him. The spiders reached out only to have their barbed legs beaten back. However, the swords did nothing more than keep the spiders at bay. Even the adamantite blades could not bite through enchanted stone. Zak continued to swing his swords in a dizzying pattern, fending off the spiders, but step by step, he lost ground, inching back toward the open archway.

He heard the chittering behind him almost too late. A third jade spider approached from the rear. He glanced over his shoulder to see it lumber through the archway, right toward Drizzt. In its attempt to get at Zak it would kill the boy. "Drizzt, run!" he shouted.

But the boy held his ground. He gripped the Dagger of Menzoberra in one hand, and with the other scooped up a carving knife from among the broken crockery on the floor. With an intent look, he waved the blades at the spider. His motions were wild and ineffectual, and the spider batted the knives aside, opening its pincers, ready to sink them into the boy's flesh. Zak tried to break away from the other spiders but could not disengage. The third spider lunged toward Drizzt for the killing blow.

It happened with such speed Zak almost didn't believe his eyes. Face grim with determination, Drizzt thrust out both knives in a distinctive position: one high, one low, both slightly offset. The higher knife descended even as the lower knife rose, catching one of the spider's hooked mandibles between them. As the two contacted, the Dagger of Menzoberra flashed with violet radiance. The stone mandible shattered to dust. The jade spider reared back, emitting a piercing wail of pain.

So amazed was Zak that he nearly let down his guard. A leg swiped at him, and he renewed his onslaught even as he glanced again at Drizzt. The motion had been crude and clumsy, but there could be no doubt. It was the torque vise. Zak had performed the move a thousand times himself on his enemies. But it was his signature trick. He had never taught it to another. How was it that this young boy seemed to have known by instinct just how to perform it?

Then the truth hit Zak. Of course. Why had he not seen it before? Drizzt's spirit, his instinctive skill with weapons, the light of defiance in his strange lavender eyes . . . Malice had lied to him eleven years ago. This was no child of Rizen's.

"My son . . ." Zak breathed in wonder.

The third jade spider was recovering. Even a blow from the Dagger of Menzoberra had not been enough to keep it at bay for long. Drizzt had the instinct of a fighter, but he lacked the experience. That first blow had been lucky. The second might not be.

Zak launched a furious attack at the jade spiders, driving them back for a moment. He jerked open the door of a side chamber and pushed a surprised Drizzt inside.

"Lock the door, Drizzt!" he shouted. "And don't open it until I tell you!"

Drizzt shook his head in protest. "But I want to help you fight!"

This was no time to be soft with the boy. "That's an order!" Zak snarled. "Do it!"

Drizzt hung his head, his expression wounded, then nodded, shutting the door to the side chamber. Zak waited to hear the heavy lock slide into place. Satisfied, he turned to engage his foes. The three jade spiders had recovered and scuttled toward him as one. A fierce grin spread across Zak's dusky visage as he raised his swords. He had something to fight for now.

"Come on, you magical vermin," he growled, and the jade spiders did.

Chapter Twelve

Dagger Bearer

"Hello, Drizzt Do'Urden," spoke a sultry voice.

Gasping in surprise, Drizzt spun around. At first the small storeroom appeared empty. Then the shadows unfolded before him. He blinked and found he was not alone after all.

She was the most beautiful drow lady he had ever seen. Her skin was as dark as onyx and as radiant as faerie fire, and her bone-white hair fell over her smooth shoulders in a single lustrous wave. She was clad in a trailing gown of what seemed thick black velvet. Her deep red lips parted in a small smile, revealing pearl-white teeth. Most remarkable of all were her eyes. They were purple, just like Drizzt's own.

Muffled but clear, Drizzt heard the sounds of battle outside the door. "I should be out there, helping him," he protested. "I'm going to be a warrior one day, you know."

The lady laughed-clear water on dark stone. "Oh, yes. I know. But your place right now is here,

Dagger Bearer."

Drizzt gazed at the ornate dagger in his grip. Its purple gem winked back like a secret eye. He looked up at the lady.

"How do you know me?" he demanded.

"I know many things," she replied. A breath of wind seemed to ripple the fabric of her gown, but Drizzt had felt no breeze. With a start he realized the truth. It was her dress itself that was moving. The gown was not fashioned of black velvet, but of tiny spiders, each clinging to another, weaving a living fabric.

Drizzt licked his lips. "I'm not. . . I'm not afraid of spiders, you know."

"Truly?" Her smile deepened, a perilous expression. "Then come closer, child."

The lady in the dress of spiders raised a slender arm, beckoning him, and Drizzt could not resist her power.

Chapter Thirteen

The Favor of Lloth

Matron Malice strode down the corridor toward the sounds of commotion, furious someone had dared disturb her celebration. Curious-or hoping to see blood-much of the feasting party followed in her wake, including, to her chagrin, Matron Baenre. Malice could only hope whatever she found would not embarrass her in front of the powerful matron of Menzoberranzan's First House.

Her hopes were dashed when she rounded a corner and took in the scene before her. A mixture of emotions crashed through Malice: astonishment, rage, and an inexplicable feeling of... exultation

The three jade spiders had him cornered. One of his swords had been knocked from his hand, and the other was broken a foot from the hilt. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. One jade spider he could have handled with ease, two with difficulty. But even for him, three was too much. They closed in for the kill.

"Is that not your weapons master, Matron Malice?" a voice croaked in her ear. Matron Baenre.

Malice shook her head in confusion. "No . . . yes. I mean ... he was, but I..."

"Make up your mind, Sister," Baenre crooned in a mocking voice.

Anger cleared Malice's clouded mind. She would not be made a fool in her own house. Not by her intractable weapons master. Not even by Matron Baenre herself. She raised her voice in command. "Stop!"

At once the jade spiders heeded her order. The ensorcelled creatures retreated, then folded themselves up, inanimate stone once more. Zaknafein leaned against the wall, chest heaving, clutching a small wound in his side. Briza's jaw dropped at the sight of the condemned weapons master, but for once she remembered to keep silent, as did the other members of the household. All held their breath as Malice approached him.

"How?" Her voice was flint: cool, hard, with a spark to its edge. "How did you survive the ceremony of transformation in the Cavern of the Lost?"

A roguish gleam touched Zaknafein's eyes. He bared his bloody teeth in a sardonic grin. "What can I say? Lloth's favor shone upon me."

It was a lie. They both knew it. But Malice did not dare probe deeper. He would only defy her, and she did not wish to reveal her lack of control over him in front of Matron Baenre. No one should have to suffer such a willful male. Whatever feelings for Zaknafein still burned in her heart, they were eclipsed at that moment by the dark blot of her outrage.

"If you are so favored by Lloth, you will be glad if I send you to her side in the Abyss!" Malice cried. She plucked a spider-shaped dagger from between her breasts and held it aloft.

To her astonishment, Zak did not resist. "As you wish, Matron Mother." He bowed his head before her, presenting her with his bare neck.

Malice hesitated, regarding the weapons master in suspicion. What was Zaknafein up to?

"It is your right to take my life," Zak went on. "Of course, I do happen to know where the Dagger of Menzoberra is at this very moment."

Malice drew in a hissing breath. So that was his game. Well, she would not be taken in by his trickery. "Prove it," she snapped. "Or die."

"Very well."

Zak stood and opened a side door. All gasped as a small form stumbled out, lavender eyes

vague and distant.

"Drizzt?" Malice snarled at this increasingly bizarre charade. "What does the boy have to do with this?"

Zak placed a hand on the young drow's shoulder. "Show them, Drizzt. Show them the Dagger." The boy blinked, his violet gaze coming into focus. A shiver passed through him. "I can't, Master Zaknafein. I don't have it anymore."

"What?" Zak cried. A look of horror racked his face. He gripped the boy's shoulders in desperation. "But what happened to it?"

Drizzt frowned, as if finding it difficult to recall just what had occurred. "It was a lady. In the antechamber. She took the Dagger from me."

Zak gave the boy a rough shake. "Who? Who was it who took it from you? One of your sisters?" Drizzt winced in pain, shaking his head. "No. No, I don't know who she was. I've never seen her before. But now she's gone."

Zak released the boy, shoulders slumping in defeat. Malice pressed the spider-shaped blade against the weapons master's neck. "You have lost, Zaknafein," she spat. "Whatever subterfuge you arranged to trick me, it has failed. You escaped your doom once. You will not do so again."

"Wait a moment, Matron Malice. The spider is swift in dispatching its prey, but it is never hasty."

Malice hesitated, holding the knife against the taut skin of Zaknafein's throat. She watched in surprise as, with stiff movements, Matron Baenre approached the boy Drizzt. The ancient drow reached out a gnarled hand, cupping his chin, raising his strange lavender gaze to hers.

"Tell me more of this lady to whom you spoke, boy." Drizzt squirmed under the crone's glare but could not escape her pincerlike grip. He gasped the words. "I already said, Matron Baenre, I don't know who she was."

"Oh? Then why did you give her the Dagger?" Drizzt bit his lip, as if puzzled himself. "She . . . she told me that I should give her the Dagger, that Matron Mother Malice would be glad if I did. Somehow, when she said it, it all made sense."

Malice could stand it no longer. All her carefully laid plans had been cast into ruin. These males had made an utter mockery of her. House Do'Urden would not gain station this day, but lose it. She would never gain a seat on Menzoberranzan's ruling council now. "Liar!" she shrieked, moving away from Zak to turn the knife on the boy.

"No, Matron Malice, the child does not lie," Baenre rasped in annoyance. "See? The truth is written across his face." She waved a stunned Malice back, and returned her piercing gaze to Drizzt. "Tell me, boy. What did this lady look like?"

A look of awe crossed Drizzt's face. "She was beautiful, the most beautiful lady I've ever seen. Only her dress. It was . . . it was made of spiders."

At this, a gasp of shock ran through the gathered drow. Matron Baenre nodded, as if this confirmed some suspicion.

Drizzt blinked, his expression of wonder gone, replaced by trepidation. "Did I do something wrong, Matron Baenre?"

The crone cackled. "No, child. Do not fear. You did very well." She released him from her grip.

"Now leave us, boy. We have important matters to discuss. Matters too great for small ears."

Drizzt gave a relieved nod, then scampered down the corridor, though not before flashing an impertinent grin back at Matron Baenre.

When he was gone, Malice shook her head, her anger replaced by confusion. "I don't understand."

"Nor do I," echoed Zak, approaching.

"So I see," Matron Baenre replied in a dry voice. "Let me be more clear." At this the wizened drow raised her bony arms, addressing the feasting party. "Rejoice, dark elves!" she cried in a high voice. "Let all in the city know that our mistress Lloth, Dark Queen of Spiders, Mother of the Drow, has appeared this day in House Do'Urden!"

"All hail Lloth!" the gathered dark elves echoed as they sank to their knees.

At last Malice understood. The lady in the dress of spiders . . . it could be none other. The last of Malice's rage vanished, replaced by sudden elation. Lloth had appeared in her house on the Festival! And Matron Baenre had been here to witness it. It was everything she had desired—everything she had schemed for. She turned toward Baenre, her eyes glowing.

The ancient drow woman nodded. "Yes, Matron Malice, you have scored a great victory this day."

Her voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. "But remember, the favor of Lloth is a two-edged sword. The Spider Queen will be watching you more closely now."

In her joy, Malice paid little heed to the crone's admonition. "House Do'Urden, Eighth House of Menzoberranzan," she murmured the words to herself as her daughters gathered around her. Yes, she liked the sound of that.

Briza chewed her lip with a glum expression. "It isn't fair," she sulked. "Drizzt is only a child, and a male child at that. Why didn't Lloth appear to me?"

"Shut up, you dolt," Malice snapped, but her annoyance was only half-hearted. Even Briza could not dampen her satisfaction that day, or for many days to come.

Epilogue

"Thank you for responding to my summons in such a prompt manner, Zaknafein," Malice said in a pleased tone.

Zak strode past Malice's children and knelt before her chair. "Of course, Matron Malice." The words came to him with ease now. He was already getting used to playing the role of obedient servant. Her deep red lips parted in a wicked smile. It was clear she liked him this way.

"I have had word from the council concerning your fate, Zaknafein," Malice spoke then. "Because you escaped becoming a drider, it is as if the sentence was never passed. You are absolved of your crimes."

A wave of relief coursed through Zak. He had feared that his sentence of driderhood might still stand, but he should have known better. In Menzoberranzan, if one could get away with a crime without being caught, it was as if the infraction was never committed. Such was the nature of drow justice. He gave a curt nod. "I am pleased I will be able to continue serving you, Matron. Will you be arranging any personal punishment for my lapse?" At this, Malice beckoned him nearer. He approached, and she whispered so that only he could hear. "I do not know what game you are playing, Zaknafein. It does not matter. Even though you tried to defy me, you gained me exactly what I craved." Her voice became a mocking croon. "You speak of punishment. Let this be your punishment, then-know that whatever you try to do, whatever your will, you serve me. You serve me, Zaknafein."

Even as she spoke this, Zak suppressed the urge to grin. Yes, he would pose as Malice's willing servant. He would play her-and Lloth's-dark and twisted game. And all the while he would wait for a chance to counter evil when Lloth's own tangled rules allowed it. Once again, the Spider Mage's words echoed in his mind. Master her by serving her. Zak would not forget.

Outwardly, the weapons master bowed his head. "As you wish, Matron Malice," was all he said. He took his position behind her chair, next to Rizzen, who shot him a scathing look, clearly unhappy Zak had regained the matron's favor. Zak ignored the patron.

Malice and her daughters began to concoct some new scheme to further House Do'Urden's rise in station. Zak did not listen. Instead, his eyes fell upon the boy Drizzt. My son, he thought in wonder for the hundredth time. The boy stood to one side of the chamber, eyes cast down at the floor as befit a page prince . . . and stifling a yawn. On Matron Baenre's recommendation, they had not told the boy the significance of his encounter or the true nature of the elf lady in the gown of spiders. The matron mothers had deemed Drizzt too young to understand. Zak knew they were wrong. But he was glad all the same. Better that the boy not yet realize that, like all drow, he was doomed to become tangled in Lloth's web. Zak sensed that the young drow was different, like himself. Lloth had not corrupted him-not yet. And if Zak had anything to do with it, she never would. Now Zaknafein did grin, and damn if anyone saw. Yes, he thought, perhaps there was some good he could do in this dark world after all.

A SLOW DAY IN SKULLPORT

An Underdark Escapade

Ed Greenwood

Eyes blinked in the darkness, a prologue to a rare sound in Undermountain: a deep, grating chuckle. Xuzoun had not been this excited in a long, long time.

In the damp, chill depths of the vast subterranean labyrinth that is the infamous killing ground of Undermountain, in the winding ways not all that far north of Skullport, a certain passage has its

birth at an archway surmounted by a smiling, reclining stone nymph. The carving lacks the unearthly and deadly beauty of the real creature it represents, but is still strikingly attractive, and word of it has spread over the years. Some folk even believe it represents a goddess-perhaps Sune, the firehaired lady of love-and bow to it or pray before it... and who is to say they're wrong? There is certainly more to the statue than its lifelike beauty. Everyone who has attempted in earnest to dislodge it and carry it away has been found dead-in small, torn pieces-in the room before the arch. The bloodstained chisel one of them let fall has now been left behind as a mute warning to enthusiasts of portable sculpture who may happen upon the chamber of the arch in the future.

Who carved that arch, and why, are secrets still held by the mysterious builders of this stretch of Waterdeep. The careful-and lucky-adventurer can, however, learn what lies beyond the arch. A simple, smooth-walled passage, to be sure (so much can readily be seen by someone looking at the nymph). But for some reason, few walk far along this way.

Those who do will find that the passage soon narrows, descends sharply, and becomes a rough tunnel hewn through damp rock. In several places, the ceaseless murmur of echoes fill this route: fading but never silent remnants of distant cacophony that seems to involve loud speech ... in tongues not understood or identified by even the most careful listener.

As the intrigued traveler moves on, the grinning bones of human adventurers and larger, snakelike things adorn the deepening way, and pits begin to occur. Above several of these deadly shafts, palely shrouded in cobwebbed bones, hang dark, ancient tree trunks that end in sharp points. Years have passed since they fell like fangs to impale victims who are now mere twisted tangles of bone and sinew, dangling silently, their lifeblood spilled long ago.

Few explorers come so far. One may have to wait days for a crumbling bone to break free and fall into the depths with a small, dry sigh . . . and such sights are the only exciting action hereabouts. Any intruder who presses on past the area of pits- and manages to avoid personally discovering new ones-will soon meet the endless gaze of a skull taller than most men. A giant's head goggles down the passage, its empty sockets eerily lit by the glowworms that dwell within. Their faint, slowly ambulating radiances show what dealt death to the giant, waiting in the dimness just beyond: a boulder almost as large as the riven skull, bristling with rusted metal spikes as long as most men stand tall. The bands that gird the stone about and clasp its massive swing chain are still strong. The many-spiked boulder hangs in the passage like a waiting beholder, almost blocking the way, swinging slightly from time to time in response to distant tremors and breezes of the depths.

Only a fool-or an adventurer-would come this far, or press on past the gigantic trap in search of further perils. A bold intruder who does will soon come to a place where a band of glowstone crosses the ceiling of the rough-hewn way, casting faint, endless ruby light down on an old, comfortable-looking armchair and footstool. These stout, welcoming pieces stand together in an alcove, flanked by a little side table littered with old and yellowed books-lurid tales of adventure, mostly, with a few tomes of the "lusty wizard" genre-and a bookmark made of a long lock of knotted and berib-boned human hair.

A fortunate intruder will find the chair empty, and wonder forever how it came to be there, and who uses it. An unlucky explorer, or one rash enough to take or damage any of the items, will soon learn that it is one of the retreats of a certain old and mad wizard known as Halaster, called by some the Lord of Undermountain. Only he can call into Faerun the ghostly ring of floating, skeletal liches that surround the chair, which hurl spells at those who offer him violence. The fortunate visitor who found the alcove empty and lived to walk on would soon find a stretch of passage where human bones drift and whirl endlessly, awaiting a living foe to rake and bludgeon. These bones circle with a slow patience that stirs into deadly hunger when an intruder comes within their reach.

Beyond the bones the passage turns to the right and comes to its end in a vast emptiness-a cavern large enough to hold some cities of the world above. ...

A cavern where many eyes now blinked again, as a point of light winked into sudden life in the darkness.

The light pulsed, whirled about in a frenzied dance, and grew swiftly larger, blazing up into the bright, floating image of... a human woman, all long silken hair, liquid grace, fine attire, and dark, darting eyes.

The deep chuckle came again, and its source drifted close to the life-sized glowing phantom, peering with many eyes at the vision.

"Let us begin," a deep voice rumbled in tones of triumph, and a thing of dusty tentacles and flowing flesh rose almost wearily from the rocks of the cavern floor to approach the image. As it came, its tentacles fell back into a melting bulk that rose up, thinned, and shaped itself with frightening speed into a twin of the phantom lady.

Above the glowing image and the shapeshifting thing, the many eyes watched critically as one strove to match the other . . . many eyes on restless, snakelike stalks belonging to a sphere split by a broad, jagged mouth of myriad teeth. A huge, lone central orb in the floating sphere gleamed with excitement, and a deep rumble of satisfaction rolled around the cavern.

Xuzoun was old even as beholders go, but to its kind there comes a time when the patience of long years and cold cunning runs out. . . and for Xuzoun, that time had come.

The eye tyrant drifted with excited speed around its enthralled doppelganger, looking for the slightest difference from the conjured image . . . and emitting another rumble of satisfaction when it found none. Motes of magelight swirled in its wake as it went, working mighty magics.

If all went well, the shapeshifting thrall that now looked so beautiful and delicate-every inch the breathless, cultured, sheltered human noble maiden- would soon be wearing another shape: that of a certain Lord of Waterdeep. And thereby would Xuzoun, through eyes and shapeshifting hands unshakably linked to its will, reach at last into the World Above, and the rich, bustling city of humans too stupid even to notice when they were being manipulated. Waterdeep, City of Splendors, where gold coins flowed in rivers and folk came from all over Faerun-and beyond-to dip their hands in the passing riches. And more: to taste and smell power, wielded with subtlety or brute force.

Power. To be a part of it all, and shape ends and happenings to one's own desires. That was the lure Xuzoun could taste, even here in the hidden dark. With this thrall standing in the boots of the one called Durnan, master of the famous inn called the Yawning Portal, Xuzoun would be able to readily convey items and beings between Skullport and Waterdeep (for stiff fees) when desired . . . and at a stroke become a channel for those flowing coins, and a part of all the darkest intrigues of the Sword Coast.

To live again, after so much skulking and waiting in the endless dark!

A long, cold time ago, the Phaerimm had come, and the city of Ooltul had fallen. Beholders had been rent and hurled down its labyrinthine passages in spell-bursts until their gore-drenched husks choked the very avenues of the City of Tyrants. Ooltul had once bent purple worms and illithids alike into mind-thralled guardians, cut new passages and chambers out of solid rock with melting ease, and casually slaughtered drow war bands and whelmed dark elven armies alike, whenever they appeared. It had been the city of Xuzoun's birth. The beholder could still scarce believe it had fallen, even after a slow eternity of fleeing across the lightless Underdark from the relentless Phaerimm, to come at last to fabled Skullport, the Source of Slaves, the most famous of the places Where the World Above Met the World Below. ...

The place where Xuzoun had vowed to stay and flee no more. The eye tyrant looked again at its thrall, and with an impatient thought, blew the glowing image of the human maiden into a thousand dancing motes of magelight. They swirled in a brief chaos, and then sped to the cavern walls to cling and glow palely there, shedding the radiance necessary for the next spell to work.

Aye, the next spell. The lure that would bring the doomed Lord of Waterdeep to Xuzoun. The old hero would come warily down into the depths of Undermountain to rescue a young, pretty noble lady in need: Nythyx Thunderstaff, the daughter of Durnan's old friend Anadul, who was brother to Baerom, head of the noble House of Thunderstaff. And here he would die.

The beholder looked again at its doppelganger thrall, standing in the shape of Nythyx, and through the mind-link made it shrink back and put one delicate hand to its mouth in terror. A perfect likeness. Xuzoun smiled at the sight. Soon Durnan would be within reach.

Aye, soon ... if all went well. As things so seldom did when one had dealings with humans, Xuzoun thought wryly. Then it shrugged, eyestalks writhing like a nest of disturbed caterpillars, and a few motes of magelight obediently rushed together in front of it. They swirled briefly and became an eye-an eye that watched the fearful maiden as she spoke the words Xuzoun bid her to.

When the message was done, the beholder rumbled in satisfaction as the glowing eye circled it

once before flying forth to find the human called Durnan.

Durnan the Lord of Waterdeep. Durnan the Master of the Portal. Durnan the Doomed.

"And so our blades beyond compare ..." Durnan sang, breaking off to bend down and rummage in the bottom rungs of the rack. Selecting a bottle, he drew it forth.

"Did brightly flash through haunted air," he continued, and blew sharply on gray, furry dust that did not whirl up from the bottle's label, but merely slid reluctantly sideways and fell away.

Dantymers Dew, 1336. Hmm. No Elixir of Evermeet, but not a bad vintage. Azoun of Cormyr had been crowned that year . . . and who was to say that he'd fared better than this wine?

Durnan ran the end of his dust-sash along the bottle and set it in the silently-floating basket at his elbow. What else had he-? Ah, yes: Best Belaerd! Urrh. Why folk liked the black licorice whiskey from far Sheirtalar was beyond him, but like it they did, in increasing numbers, too, and one must move with the times.

Huh. A golden dragonshower upon that. Lads scarce old enough to shave swaggering into his inn night after night with loud, arrogant voices and gleaming dazzleshine-treated swords, which they eagerly waved around and bragged about. . . Were we ever that crass when we were young, that. . . unsubtle? I suppose.

Time is the great healer of hurts and the lantern of favorable light; no doubt it was making his youth brighter in his eyes even as it made his back creak, these days, and his bones ache in damp weather. They were aching now. Durnan hefted a brace of belaerd bottles into the basket and strode on, not bothering to look back to be sure it was following him.

Of course it was. Old Engult cast proper spells, enchantments to last, not fade and . . . die, as he had done, old and crabbed and feeble. They'd sung the spell dirge for him not a tenday ago.

Durnan shook his head, ducked through a low arch into the next cellar, and defiantly resumed the old battle song. "And a dozen dragons I slew there!"

That bellowed chorus echoed back at him from half a dozen dim corners, and he grinned and put some hearty volume into the next line: "Six old ores and a medusa fair!"

The words brought memories to mind, as the echoes rolled around him. This wasn't just the deepest wine-cellar of the Yawning Portal. It was also the home of many trophies of his sword-swinging days: that lich periapt glimmering over there, where he'd hung it up as a lamp; this pair of ore-tusks, from the only giant ore he'd ever met-well, if he'd lost that fight, it would've been the only giant ore he'd ever meet; and the swords of fallen foes, seized from lifeless, bloody hands on battlefields, or carried off as prizes from spectre-haunted tombs and dragon hoards. A score or more blades hung here, there, and everywhere about him, the pale gleams of their slowly failing enchantments marking the walls of these dusty chambers and anchoring his expensive web of spell wards.

Durnan looked around at them all, shook his head, and wondered how life had become so dull and routine. His thoughts leapt to blazing, pitching decks on ships that had sunk long ago, and dragons erupting out of ruined castles now fallen and forgotten . . . the faces of snarling foes and welcoming ladies . . . and around it all, the bright flash and snarl of swords, skirling in a deadly dance he'd always won. Absently, Durnan hummed the rest of the song, and took up another battle song of his youth as he strode on, the obedient basket in his wake. Just how many old helms and blades and suchlike had he stashed and well-nigh forgotten down here . . . ?

And then in the chamber before him, his wards flared into brilliant life, and the burly old tavernmaster hadn't even time for an oath before the magical defenses failed in a flash, and something bright burst out of a blazing gap in the suddenly torn air, spat deadly spell energies in all directions, and swooped toward him.

Durnan ducked low, snatching at the unseen basket behind him for a bottle to hurl, and drew his belt knife. The glowing thing was small and round, and . . . splitting open to reveal a scene within itself. As it widened into a magical frame and glided to a smooth stop in the air in front of Durnan, the wards repaired themselves with a last fitful snarl of magical fire, and peace returned to the cellar.

"Durnan? Lord Durnan?" The face of the lass in the sending was familiar, though he'd never heard that small, soft voice so atremble with fear before. Nythyx Thunderstaff was standing in a dark cavern somewhere, a smudge of dirt on her face and one bare shoulder gleaming above a torn and disarranged gown. Her dark eyes were wide with terror. "If this reaches you, please come to me. I'm in"-the noble maiden swallowed, bit her lip, and went on-"Undermountain. The

others have all run off, and . . . things are following me. I think I'm somewhere near your cellars, but I'm not sure . . . and my glowfire is dying down fast. Th-There's something following me. Please come."

The scene darkened, and dwindled away to nothing, leaving Durnan still staring at where those pleading eyes had been. The sending was genuine-it must be. Only certain nobles dared openly address him as "lord," and he'd seen Nythyx at a moonlit revel at the palace not four days ago. It was truly the lass, all right, and she was scared. The cavern behind her might be anywhere in Undermountain except nearby; around the Portal, the dungeon was all chambers and smooth-cut halls. Her statement that "the others have all run off" sounded like one of those daring forays by young noble boys with bright new swords or dashing cloaks, a few flagons of courage, and a pressing need to impress ladies. Such forays seldom ventured more than a few rooms through the uppermost level of the endless labyrinth of Undermountain before fear-or real danger-sent the hitherto-giggling participants hastening back to the city above.

So a little girl with whom he'd laughed and played courtier-dolls, and later talked of life and adventure and escaping the boredom of living as a dignified young lady of a great house-hmm, not all that different, it seemed, from the boredom of a retired adventurer- was lost and in distress somewhere in Undermountain. And he was the only competent source of aid she knew to turn to. Durnan sighed. His duty was clear.

Not that this was likely to rank with the daring deeds of his youth, but. . . The tavernmaster frowned and strode to a certain pillar. Now, was it the fourth stone down, or-?

The fourth stone held firm under his fingers, but the fifth stone obligingly ground inward, revealing a slot with a lever in it. He pressed that finger of stone down, and something unseen squealed slightly and clicked. He remembered to step back before the stones, swinging out, dealt his knee a numbing blow, and then glided forward again, feeling the old excitement leaping inside him. He peered into the dark niche within.

The quillons of a blade glimmered as if in greeting. Durnan took it out and slid it from its sheath-the long, heavy broadsword that had come from a tomb in a frozen, nameless vale somewhere north of Silverymoon, one desperate day when he'd been fleeing a band of ores. He'd hewn his way across half the northlands with it, and then from deck to pirate deck up and down the Sword Coast. There'd been a time when he could make a man's head leap from its shoulders. . . . The muscles under his arm rippled just as they always had when he swung the blade, narrowly missing the basket hovering behind him.

It cut the air with that sinuous might he loved so well . . . but seemed a lot heavier than it once had- gods, had he run around waving this all day and all night? Durnan brought it down to set its tip to the floor, and leaned on it as he thought of where Nythyx might be . . . lost somewhere in the dark and dangerous ways beyond the walls of his cellars.

For a breath or two, the tavernmaster fingered the sword's familiarommel and grip, and then shrugged and did something to the plain ring on the middle finger of his left hand. A tiny pinwheel of silver motes arose to silently circle the ring; he bent over the swiftly fading, rushing radiances and whispered, "Gone into Undermountain to rescue Nythyx Thunderstaff, old friend; I may need help."

The last motes of magelight died. Durnan looked at the ring, sighed, and hefted the sword again. His second sigh was louder. He shook his head grimly at his failing strength, hung the sword back in the pillar, and went down the room to where a shorter, lighter blade hung on the wall. This one had felt good in his hand, too.

It slid out of its sheath in swift, eager silence. He tossed it in the air, caught it, and instantly lunged at an imaginary opponent, springing up without pause to whirl around and slash empty air just a hair or two above the bottles in the basket floating behind him. It seemed to shrink away from his leaping steel, but Durnan didn't notice as he bounded through an archway that his wards would let only him pass through, and down the steep dark steps beyond. For the first time in long, dusty years, he was off to war!

The floating basket of bottles, forgotten behind him, tried to dart through the wards in his wake. There was a flash of aroused magic and a reeling rebound.

The basket seemed to sigh for just an instant before it crashed to the floor, shattering at least one bottle of belaerd. Dark whiskey gurgled out to run across the floor . . . but no one was there to hear it.

"Transtra? I know you're in there! Come out and fight, all the gods damn you, or I'll-"

The speaker did not wait to finish his threat, but dealt the door a heavy blow. It shuddered sufficiently that neither occupant of the chamber beyond the door needed to see the bright edge of the axe blade breaking through on the second blow to know that the door would not withstand a third strike.

The fat, red-faced man in the room broke off his muttered negotiations and stood hastily back to give his business associate the room she needed. Serpentine coils slithered around his feet as she drew herself up, swaying slightly, and frowned in concentration.

Transtra's flame-red hair and beautiful, unclad upper body remained unchanged; the string of rubies she wore still winked between her breasts. Below her slim waist, however, the scales melted away, and her tail shrank into long human legs. Mirt stepped firmly forward between them, the magic that protected him from her touch flaring into life, and swept her into an amorous embrace just as a splintering crash heralded the collapse of the door.

The shrieks and cart-rumbles of bustling Skullport flooded into the room. A minotaur's long-horned head ducked through the wreckage of the door, warily following the huge broadaxe. Its nostrils flared as it roared, "Transtra?"

Mirt lifted his head from yielding, cherry-flavored lips and rumbled in testy tones, "Ye've got the wrong room, hornhead . . . and I've paid for this one."

The minotaur bellowed its anger and lurched forward-but came to an abrupt halt as a slim blade rose smoothly from between the floorboards in front of it, rising up with deadly stealth. "The next one'll rise between your legs," the fat moneylender growled, "unless they walk on out of here right swiftly. Hear me?"

The minotaur glared at him, stared hard at the woman Mirt held, muttered, "Sorry," and withdrew. The stout moneylender held up a hand and let the second ring on it do its work, enshrouding the open doorway and the walls all around them in a cloaking mist. The sounds of Skullport died away abruptly as the ward took effect, and in the sudden stillness a steely voice close by his throat said firmly, "My thanks for your quick-witted courtesy, Mirt. You can let go of me now and step well clear, grinning-faced codpiece and all."

"Anything to avoid unpleasantness-and gore," the moneylender quipped, complying. "Ye make a fine lass, Transtra."

"Not for you, I don't," the lamia noble replied sharply as scales began to reappear on her lengthening legs. "Let us keep to matters of trade-bars and importation, shall we? I believe we'd gotten to six score casks of belaerd and ten strongchests of heavy chain."

"Ye don't want to throw in a ruby or two?" Mirt rumbled in reply, raising an eyebrow.

The lamia regarded him coldly. "No," she said shortly, "I don't."

"Ah," Mirt said airily, "then I've something of thine to return, it seems." He held out a string of rubies in one stubby-fingered hand.

Transtra frowned at it, and then looked down to where her unbound hair cascaded over her bosom. The bottom three stones on her string were missing. She snarled in anger as she raised blazing eyes to his.

Mirt bowed gravely to her as she snatched her rubies back, and with his chin close to the floor, he looked up and flashed her a momentary, rolling-eyed idiot's grin.

Transtra's tail lashed the floor for a perilous moment or two thereafter before the lamia's hiss of fury slowly relaxed into a rueful, head-shaking chuckle.

"You've never played me false yet," she said in quiet surprise, watching the shaggy-haired man straighten up with a grunt and wheeze. "How is it, then, that you make any coins at all?"

"My boundless charm," Mirt explained nonchalantly, "leaves rich women swooning in my arms, anxious to make gifts of their baubles to one so attentive and-er, gifted-as I. 'Tis what has brought me all this grand way, to where I am today."

"A rented upstairs escort's chamber in the worst brothel in Skullport?" Transtra asked sardonically, gliding toward him.

Mirt stuck hairy thumbs in his belt and harrumphed. "Well, lass, 'tis no secret that my discretion-" "Has slipped indeed if you dare to call me 'lass,'" was the acidic reply. The lamia noble folded her arms and drew herself up, tapping the floor with the tip of her tail in irritation.

Mirt waved a dismissive hand. "If ye think a little assumed pique will make me remorseful and somehow beholden when we talk more trade, think awhile again, little scaled one."

"Little scaled one?" the lamia noble hissed, truly angry now, bending toward him with blazing eyes. "Why, I've a-

She reared back, startled, and hastily raised her hands to hurl a spell as a pinwheel of tiny lights suddenly appeared in midair in front of her. Transtra's angry gaze went to the merchant, but saw that this apparition was no doing of his; Mirt was as surprised as she. The lamia backed silently away, hands raised in readiness.

From those circling lights arose a whisper familiar to Mirt. "Gone into Undermountain to rescue Nythyx Thunderstaff, old friend; I may need help," it said. The first ring on his hand quivered in response, silently tugging Mirt in the direction of the Yawning Portal, Durnan's distant inn. Mirt followed that urging, striding in his battered, flopping old boots across the floor and toward the shattered door. Transtra drew smoothly aside to let him pass; he seemed to have forgotten she was in the room. The wards parted soundlessly at the frowning old merchant's approach, and he stepped out into the passage, finding it unencumbered by minotaurs. A few steps took him to the nearest window.

The fat merchant looked out and down over the walled, warded courtyard of Bindle's Blade, the newest tankard house in dark and dangerous Skullport. On his arrival, he'd glanced at the tables there and had seen . . . aye, he had. . . .

A recent venture in Skullport were guide torches, which could be hired for an evening and were carried about wherever one willed by floating, disembodied skeletal hands. Many of these flickering innovations were bobbing and glimmering among the carefully spaced tables of the Blade right now, and one of them shone quite clearly on the face of Nythyx Thunderstaff. She sat calmly with several slave-dealing women. A long, tall flagon of amberjack was in her hand, and a slim long sword at her hip. As he watched, she laughed at someone's jest, slid back in her chair, planted one delicately booted foot atop the table, and raised her flagon in salute to the slaver who'd amused her.

If that was a woman in distress, Mirt thought he'd hate to see a confident and contented one. Mirt watched the young woman stretch in her chair, catlike, and glance around. He drew back before she might happen to look up at the window, and shook his shaggy head. "Well," he said slowly, "Well, well."

"This . . . thing that has befallen," the lamia noble said from close behind him. "It has put an end to our trade talk for now, has it not?"

Mirt turned to look into eyes the color of flame, and noticed-not for the first time-just how beautiful Transtra was. "It has," he said almost sadly, and his business associate gave him a little smile . . . as the flickering fire of a ready spell faded from one slim, long-nailed hand.

"There'll be . . . other evenings," she said, and slithered past so closely that her leathery scales brushed along his arm. Mirt watched her go down the stairs into the darkness before he stirred, harrumphed, and shook his head. It was a pity he was so stout, and that lamias ate human flesh. He'd started to want that little smile to mean the other thing.

He stepped back into his room and did something to the first ring. A tiny pinwheel of silver motes obediently arose to silently circle it. He bent over them and whispered, "Gone out into Skullport to answer Durnan's call for aid in rescuing Nythyx Thunderstaff; I've seen her safe here, so suspect a ruse."

The magelight faded. The fat, aging Harper and Lord of Waterdeep muttered something over his other ring, drawing the tatters of his ward in around him so he'd be cloaked against flying death on his walk through Skullport. Shops and faces in the undercity changed with brutal rapidity, but the place grew no more tolerant of the weak and unwary. Mirt looked all around and took something small from his belt pouch to hold ready in his hand as he trudged along the passage, toward a hidden stair out of the House of the Long Slow Kiss. He left the door of his room open behind him so that Hlardas would know he was gone and could turn off the foot-treadle blades. He'd best shout a reminder as he passed the kitchens. One could lose good chambermaids that way.

Asper hurled herself into a somersault over the startled guard's head and spun around as her bare feet bounced to a landing on the cold flagstones. The city guardsman turned with smooth speed, magnificent in his splendid armor-in time to see the gleaming pommel of the young lady's poniard a finger's width from his eyes, where its wicked point should have been. He'd barely begun to gape at it when he felt the pommel of her reversed long sword nudge his ribs, in just the

place where it would have driven all the breath out of him had this fight been in earnest. He stared into the sweat-slick face of the grinning ash-blond girl and shook his head in surrender, drops of his own sweat flying from the end of his nose. "I see ye do it," he growled, "but I still don't believe it."

"Consider yourself slain, Herle," said the guardcaptain from behind him, "and next time, try not to turn like some sort of sleeping elephant. She could have put her blade through your neck and been gone out the door before you were well into your pivot!"

"Aye, Captain," Herle said heavily. "Just once, I'd like to see y-"

He fell silent, gaping at a pinwheel of tiny lights that were silently appearing in midair in front of his leather-clad sword-foe, one by one. In wary silence, Asper watched them spin into bright solidity. She held up a hand to bid the guardsmen keep still.

A hoarse whisper she knew well arose from those circling lights. "Gone out into Skullport to answer Durnan's call for aid in rescuing Nythyx Thunderstaff; I've seen her safe here, so suspect a ruse."

The motes of light then faded until only Asper could see them, thanks to Mirt's magic. They drifted into a line leading north-and sharply downward. Into Undermountain, below even this deep, dank cellar of the castle.

Asper frowned at those tiny points of light. She knew her man had sent her the message in case Durnan's call had been false-a ruse to lure Mirt himself into danger. And, ruse or not, unless either of the old Lords of Waterdeep had changed a goodly amount in the last few days, they'd sorely need her aid in some way, ere long. She turned and bowed to the watching guardsmen.

"It's been a pleasure breaking blades with you, as always, gentlesirs," she told them, wiping the sweat from her brow with one leather-clad forearm as she stepped into her boots. "I must go; I am needed."

"Is it something we should know about?" the guard-captain asked, frowning.

Asper shook her head. "Lords' business," she said, and ran lightly out of the room, leaving all the arms-men staring after her.

"How can one woman's blade--even that woman's- matter to the Lords of Waterdeep?" one guard asked in tones of wonder. "What is she, that they need her to aid them so often?"

"Friend," Herle replied, "you try to best her at blade-work next time, and then come and ask me that again." He casually cast the blade in his hand end over end down the length of that vast chamber, into the glory-hole in the far corner-an opening no larger than his fist. The blade settled home to its hilt with a rattling clang, and all his fellows of the guard turned to look at him with whistles of awe. Herle spread his hands, without a trace of pride on his face, and added, "You all saw what she did to me. However good one is, there's always someone better."

Another guard shivered. "I'd not like to meet whoever is better than she."

"And now for the other working," the eye tyrant breathed, turning an eyestalk toward a certain shadowed cavity high in the cavern wall. Obediently, something small and glossy rose into view and drifted smoothly out into the greater emptiness of the main cavern: a shining sphere of polished crystal, the size of a large human head. It winked and sparkled as it glided toward the beholder, and then suddenly grew brighter, a pale greenish glowing awakening within it.

"Yessss," Xuzoun gloated as an image became apparent in the depths of the globe. A scene of woodlands, wrapped about a young, slim human female who was turning smoothly in her saddle to laugh, unbound blonde hair swirling about her shoulders. Her mirth and unheard words were directed to a young man riding into the scene, humor dancing in his own eyes. The watching beholder's mouth twisted in what might just have been a sneer.

"Shandril Shessair within my power, and knowing it not," the eye tyrant purred. "Only a few enchantments more, and then . . . ah, yes, then spellfire will be drawn forth from her at my desire, to be hurled at any who defy me! Many shall pay the debts they owe me, very shortly thereafter." A stalactite elsewhere in the cavern yawned, and then muttered, " 'Only a few enchantments more' before I rule the world? How many times have I heard that before, I wonder?"

A black bat, hanging upside down from a nearby stalactite, turned its head and blinked.

"Elminster?" it asked. "It is you ... is it not? You felt the weaving too?" "Of course, and of course," the rocky fang replied. "I can feel all bindings laid on the lass. If Halaster did more in his domain than just watch the free entertainment, I'd not be here, but. . ."

"Watching is almost always best," the stalactite beneath the clinging bat's claws said coldly, and

quivered slightly. "You always did act too swiftly, and change Faerun too much, Elminster." The bat took startled wing, beating a hasty flight across to the rock that was the Old Mage. "Halaster?" it asked cautiously as it alighted and turned to look back. "The same, Laeral," replied the dagger of rock where it had first clung. "Are we agreed that this Xuzoun should never wield spellfire?" The other two murmured, "Aye," together. "Then trust me to foil this magic, in a way that will leave Shandril and the beholder both unknowing," Halaster replied. "I keep my house ordered as I see fit . . . though you, Lady Mage of Waterdeep, are welcome to dabble; your touch is more deft than most."

The bat looked from one stalactite to the other, aware of a certain tension in the air that felt like the two ancient archwizards had locked gazes and were staring steadfastly into the depths of each other's souls. Silence stretched and sang between them. And then, because of who she was, Laeral dared to ask, "And what of Elminster? Is he also welcome in Undermountain?"

"What little sanity I have I owe to him," Halaster replied, "and I respect him for his mastery of magic- and his compassion-more than any other living mage. Yet, for what he did to me . . . what he had to do to me ... I bear him no great love."

Two dark, hawklike eyes were fading into view in the rock, and they flickered as the Master of Undermountain added quietly, "This is my home, and a man may shut the gates of his home to anyone he desires to be free of."

The stalactite that was Elminster said as gently, "I have no quarrel with that. Know that my gate is always open to you."

"I appreciate that," the dark-eyed stalactite told him grudgingly before it faded silently away. He hadn't used this passage for years, and had almost forgotten the trip step and the ankle-break holes beyond. The battered old coffer was still on the high ledge where it should have been, though. Durnan lifted out the string of potions and gratefully slid them onto his belt, tapping the metal vials to be sure they were still full. Then he took out the wisp of gauzy black cloth that had lain beneath them, and bound it over his eyes.

All at once, the clinging darkness receded, and he could see as clearly in the gloom as any creature that dwelt in the World Below. After a moment of thought, he took the gorget out of its clip on the inside coffer lid and slid the second night mask into its sleeve before he buckled it around his throat. After all, it just might be needed.

The tavernmaster caught himself wondering what else he should bring along, and sighed, banishing an image of himself staggering along under the weight of a generously pot-and-flask-girdled pack larger than he was. It had been a long time since he'd leapt into battle with only a sword in his hand and fire in his eyes. It had been even longer since he'd felt that invulnerable. Durnan drew a deep breath, shrugged his shoulders once or twice to break the tension that had been building there, clapped a hand to the hilt of his sword to be sure it rode loosely in its scabbard, and set off down the narrow passage. Two secret doors ground open under his hand to let him pass, and he closed them carefully behind him. Beyond the second was a room in Undermountain that he knew well.

Standing just inside it, Durnan peered around to make sure nothing had changed since he'd last seen it, then stepped carefully around the falling-block trap and across the chamber. It was thick with dust, cobwebs, and the crumbling skeletons of several unfortunate adventurers, still stuck to the tattered webs of a long-slain spider. Shoving these husks aside with his blade, Durnan strode softly out into the vast dungeon where so many creatures had died.

Undermountain was the abode of the mad wizard Halaster, and the graveyard of thousands of fearsome monsters and foolhardy men alike. Once it had been Durnan's playground, a place to stay limber after a long day standing behind the bar listening to young nobles and would-be adventurers from afar boast of what they'd do and win, down in the lightless depths. All too often, he'd come across their bodies too late to save them from traps they should have been anticipating, and predators they should have been ready for.

Thinking of which . . . He drew his blade and stabbed upward as he leaned through an open doorway. The sword slid into something solid and yet yielding, and Durnan drew back to avoid the falling body. The thing that had awaited him above the door crashed heavily to the flagstones. It was a kobold, with a strangle wire still clutched in its convulsing hands.

Durnan put his sword tip through its throat, just to be sure, as he kicked the heavy stone door hard, sending it smashing back against the wall of the chamber. There were some wet cracking

sounds and a bubbling gasp from behind it, and something fell to the floor. Something koboldish. A third of the sly, yammering little beasts moved into view at the far end of the room, and Durnan brought his sword up to strike aside the javelin it hurled. The bracers he wore protected him against missiles that bore no enchantments, but 'twould be a little late, for instance, to discover that this particular javelin was magical, once it was in his throat.

The throw was wide, and a smooth sidestep took him completely out of the whirling weapon's path. Even before the javelin crashed off stone somewhere behind him, the old warrior was moving.

Durnan caught hold of the door frame as he charged through, and swung himself around hard to the right. As he'd expected, a line of three kobolds was waiting along the wall there, their spiked clubs and wicked blades raised. The tavernmaster had a glimpse of their startled faces before his blade found the face of the foremost. He kept rushing, driving the dying creature back into its fellows, tumbling them all to the floor. He kicked, stomped, and thrust ruthlessly with his blade, knowing how vicious kobolds could be, and spun from the last fallen victim to face the one who'd hurled the javelin.

It was snarling at him and backing away, fear in its eyes as it saw all of its fellows dead or dying. Durnan advanced a step. It spat in his direction and suddenly turned and fled through the archway at the far end of the room. Durnan knelt, plucked up a kobold blade, and flung it as hard as he could.

There was a heavy crash, clang, and moan down the passage beyond the arch, but Durnan was already running after the kobold he'd felled. The wise man leaves no foes alive behind him in Undermountain.

A thrust ended the kobold's feeble crawl, and Durnan picked up its bleeding body and hurled it into the next room. As he'd expected, something greenish-yellow flowed swiftly down the wall toward the corpse. Durnan peered into the room-paying particular attention to the ceiling. Satisfied that it held only one carrion crawler, he sprinted across the chamber and through the right-hand door at its far end, pulling the heavy stone barrier closed behind him. Something far off and in agony screamed in the dark distance ahead.

The passage in front of him formed the only link between the warren of rooms around his cellars and the rest of Undermountain. It was always a place to watch warily for oozes, slimes, and other silent, hard-to-see creeping things.

Scorch marks and unpleasant twisted and bubbling remnants on the stones around told him that the kobolds had recently cleared this way of at least one such peril. Durnan stalked cautiously on, wondering how Mirt was faring, and how soon they'd meet. It felt good to be in action again, though the glory days of the Four were long gone.

Once the brazen, impudent band of adventurers he and Mirt had led together had been the toast of Waterdeep, and a common headache of honest merchants up and down the Sword Coast-the heroes of impudent tales that men roared at in half a hundred taverns. The years had passed, though, and such things had faded ... as, he supposed, they always did. All that was left of those times were some happy memories, the deep trust they yet shared, and the linked message rings all of the Four still wore.

Durnan saw Mirt and Asper often, but Randal Morn was off fighting in the distant hold of Daggerdale, to keep his rightful rule over that fair land. And the ranger, Florin Falconhand, who'd stood in for Asper on a foray or three, was a Knight of Myth Drannor these days, and seldom seen on the Sword Coast. There were even whispers that he'd spent time in Evermeet recently. Durnan was still recalling splendid victories the Four had shared when sudden motes of magelight welled up all around him in the empty passage. He'd just time to feel disgusted-taken by sorcery again?- when his world was overwhelmed with whirling lights, and there was nothing under his boots anymore . . .

"Beshaba's kiss!" he swore disgustedly. The tavern-master knew a teleport was whisking him away to somewhere worse.

They always took you somewhere worse. . . .

Transtra stood in a room that few in Skullport knew was her own, eyes narrow and face frowning. Old Mirt's ring had spoken, and that meant one of the Four had called on him for aid. And when the Four called, it always meant trouble for someone-and sooner or later, if that fat old merchant didn't lose some weight and gain some prudence in trade for it, the recipient of the trouble was

going to be him. Perhaps on an occasion sooner than he expected . . . such as this one. The lamia stirred into sudden life, tossing her flame-red hair so that it cascaded down her back like languid fire, and glided across the tiles like a gigantic, upright snake. The soft, ever-shifting spell lights she loved dappled her gleaming flesh in a pattern that made her slave-a thin and dirty human male cowering on his knees in a corner of the room-swallow and turn his eyes swiftly away. Transtra was apt to be cruel when his more lusty thoughts became apparent. . . and her cruelty often reached its climax in enthusiastic floggings with well-salted whips. The slave shivered involuntarily at the memories of his last one.

The dry slithering of her scales on the tiles drew closer, and then stopped. The man kept his gaze on the corner, trying not to tremble as cold fear rose in his throat, and he wondered just what she might do this time. "Torthan," she said, almost gently, "get up and go do a thing for me."

Torthan reluctantly raised his eyes to meet hers. "Great lady?"

"Open the gate that brings UliSSs, and then go to your room," Transtra told him.

As he hastened obediently away, Torthan could hear her muttering the first words of one of the web of spells she used to lay unshakable commands on the behir.

When the twelve-legged serpent thing glided with deadly speed into the room, raised its horned head, and gaped its jaws at her, Transtra faced it with both of her hands held over her head, spell flames circling them.

UliSSs lowered its head in a gesture of submission and sighed in disgust. One day it would catch its cruel mistress in a moment of weakness and slay her . . . but not this day.

Transtra let the fires rage up and down her arms as she slithered up to the huge serpent and embraced its head as if it were a pet, stroking it behind its horns just where UliSSs best loved her touch.

Under her caress, warily tense muscles relaxed with a quivering surge, and iron-hard scales slowly, reluctantly, began to rub against her as the monster purred. Transtra let a spell image of Mirt flow into the slow, dim mind of UliSSs, and said softly, "Hearken, oh scaly beloved, for I have a task for thee. Follow this man- aye, his girth is amusingly enormous-and . . ."

As she whispered on, the behir's eyes grew brighter and more golden with wicked hunger and excitement- and when she released it, it slithered off on its mission with eager haste.

Transtra swayed upright, folded her arms across her breasts, and watched it go. Though there was a dangerous glitter in her eyes, the smile that crept slowly onto her face was catlike in its anticipation.

She readied the spell that would let her watch both Mirt and UliSSs and spy on what befell from afar, and her tongue curled out between her lips in private mirth. The possible loss of a business associate was a small price to pay for the grand entertainment to come.

"What can go wrong? The plan is perfect," Iraeghlee said testily, its mouth-tentacles whipping and curling in irritation.

"You're not the first being down the centuries to say those words," Yloebre remarked dryly, twirling the slim glass of duiuin in its fingers so that the luminous golden bubbles deep in the black wine winked and sparkled. The illithid leaned toward its compatriot. "Any number of things can go awry."

"Such as?" Iraeghlee challenged. "Not even the Merciless Ones Beneath Anauroch know of our whisperer. The beholder's no fool, and yet has no inkling of its presence ... or, thus, our influence."

"That may be so only because we've not awakened any control over it yet," Yloebre told the depths of the glass it held. The small worms there curled and uncurled in their endless undead dance, which kept the oily black wine from thickening into a syrup.

"Do you doubt my skill?" Iraeghlee spat, leaning forward in its chair with a hissing of rippling silk sleeves. "It ate the whisperer, which in turn ate its way into what little Xuzoun has of the paltry things eye tyrants are pleased to call their brains! I felt it take in beholder blood, and grow! I felt it through the linkage my magic made-a link I can make anew whenever I desire! Do you doubt me, younger one? Do you truly dare?"

"Untwist thy tentacles and hiss less loudly," Yloebre responded calmly, sipping more wine. "I doubt nothing as to your ability to establish control over the eye tyrant-only as to our shared ability to escape the notice of the powers hereabouts. The whisperer is a brain node, linked to you by magic . . . and the Place of Skulls above us, and the city above that, seem to be fairly

crawling with wizards and priests able to see magic use, and themselves governed-nay, driven-by that appalling human fault known as 'curiosity.' What is to keep us from coming under attack within a breath or two of your crushing Xuzoun's will?"

Iraeghlee's mauve skin was almost black with anger. Its voice quivered with rage and menace as it said slowly, "Hear this, feeblewits, and let one hearing be enough: no drow nor human, from matron mothers to archmages, can detect our whisperer, or us while we remain here."

Yloebre glanced at the stone walls around them, adorned by a single glow-shift sculpture that chimed softly from time to time as its shape altered. The chamber they sat in held only their floating chairs, several floating tables (including the palely glowing one between them), and the fluted and many-hued array of flasks and glasses that its current sample had come from. Unseen runes of power crawled and twisted on the undersides of the tables, awaiting a call to life from either illithid, but there were no other defenses save what they could personally cast or wield. Not that such things were likely to be needed. They were six shifts away from a cesspool under the gambling house known as the Blushing Bride's Burial Pit, in southern Skullport-a chain of trapped teleports that should be long enough to fool or slay even the most persistent and powerful of nosy wizards.

It was at about that moment that the table between them grew two dark, grave eyes-and exploded into blazing shards that hurled both mind flayers, broken and sizzling, against the walls of their hideaway.

The last words Yloebre ever heard, as it struggled against searing, rising red pain, was a man's voice saying disgustedly, "Stupid illithids. Must they always meddle?"

The crushed, half-melted bodies of the mind flayers slid like slime down the walls of the chamber; neither of them survived long enough to see Halaster Black-cloak's eyes blast their tables and flasks to dancing sparks and flying dust.

When his gaze had roved about the entire chamber and he sensed no other mind-signatures on the whisperer in the beholder's distant brain, the wizard sighed and turned to pass through the teleport once more ... only to pause and glare with renewed energy at the chiming glow-shift sculpture.

It had escaped-or resisted-his destructive gaze unharmed. Halaster's black eyes narrowed, and then hardened into rays of darkness that leapt and stabbed through the air-only to strike the sculpture and be drained away to somewhere else, leaving the chiming construct unharmed.

"Who-?" Halaster snarled, shifting into a more tangible, upright form.

The sculpture cleared its throat and said mildly, "Why, me, of course. We agreed that action in thy house was undesirable if not of thy doing . . . but we said nothing of mere watching. 'Tis how I learn things, ye see."

"Elminster," Halaster said softly, fading back into a darkness studded with two eyes as sharp as spear points. "One day you'll overstep the marks I set. . . and then. . ."

"Ye'll try to slay me, and fail, and I'll have to decide how merciful to be with ye," the sculpture replied merrily. "Those who set marks, know ye, are usually better employed doing something else."

"Do not presume to threaten me," Halaster's voice answered him, as if from a great distance, as the darkness that was the Master of Undermountain began to whirl about the unseen teleport.

"That was not a threat," the sculpture said mildly. "] never threaten. I only-promise."

The reply that came back out of the teleport sounded very much like the rude lip-flapping sound known in some realms as a "raspberry."

Durnan was still swearing when the whirling blue mists faded and the world returned: a darkly cavernous world lit by many lamps and torches, sharp with the smell of a recent spell blast.

Smokes curled lazily past him as he stumbled on uneven, shifting rubble for a moment, and then crouched, blade up, to look all around.

There was a murmur off to his right. Durnan looked that way first and found himself regarding an interested crowd of mongrelmen, hobgoblins, bugbears, orcs, and worse. They were standing on a torchlit street making bets and excited comments - as they stared right back at him.

Skullport. He was in Skullport. The surprise on some of the faces and the sudden energy of the betting suggested that his arrival hadn't been expected. Wherefore this crowd had gathered to witness something else. Durnan glanced left and right into the dark, smoking ruin around him. Ah

hah. Indeed.

A beholder hung in the air off to his left, its eyes gleaming with malice as it glared at him and through him, at ... a mauve, glistening creature with a tentacled face and white, pupilless eyes. It stood in dark, ornate robes, well off to his right - and was raising its three-fingered hands in clawing, spell-hurling gestures as it coldly hissed an incantation. A mind flayer . . . and an eye tyrant. Dueling with magic. And he was between them.

"Thank you, Beshaba!" the tavernmaster snarled in sarcastic thanks to the goddess of misfortune. He dived headlong onto the rubble, framing a scene in his mind of opening a certain ivory door with the dragonscale key. The mental vision grew clear, the door swung wide-and Durnan remembered to close his eyes just in time.

The white light in his mind was nothing to the blinding flash that marked the breaking of the dragon rune he bore on his left wristlet. As that broad metal band crumbled, giving his forearm an eerie tingling sensation, Durnan rolled over a low stone wall, dropped onto a sunken floor, and found his feet. There was a hubbub of new excitement from the crowd as the tavernmaster started his sprint through the pillars and tumbled stones, and got his eyes open again.

The white ring of radiance that marked the rune's release of power was still rolling outward, moving with him in a flickering, expanding dome of protection. Spell rays and gaze attacks alike would be shattered by its touch ... for an all-too-short time.

"Tymora aid me!" he gasped as he ran, dodging between two blackened stubs of stone wall that stood like frozen fingers, reaching vainly for the cavern ceiling overhead. If Lady Luck smiled on him, the dragon rune would guard his back from the beholder's eye powers long enough for him to reach the mind flayer. Aye, if...

Dark robes flickered ahead as the illithid dodged this way and that, trying to glimpse its quarry darting through the ruins. Durnan snatched out his belt knife as he ran, dust sash flapping, and the mind flayer spat one loud word somewhere ahead of him.

There was a flash, a roar of tortured stone, and one of the walls ahead burst into fist-sized chunks of rubble. Durnan spun around behind a pillar until the worst of the crashings were done around him, and then sped on. If a certain old and overweight tavernmaster could just move well enough, there'd be no time for the thing to work another spell!

He snarled at his own slowness as he leapt on over the rubble. By the pillar he'd had a momentary glimpse of the beholder, drifting along after him, but keeping well back. It must not be hungry ... or at least, not very hungry.

He was close to his foe now, stones rolling underfoot in his haste as he burst through a doorway into a room that had been blasted away, and saw the mind flayer beyond the crumbling wall ahead. Its glistening, slime-covered hands dived to its belt and plucked forth a broad-bladed hooked sword. A blade? Usually they were too eager to flail at one's head with those brain-sucking tentacles to bother with steel.

The squidlike growths around the thing's mauve mouth were writhing in excitement, Durnan saw, as he came around one last jagged end of wall and rushed down on his foe.

A boot coming down wrongly on loose rubble now could mean his swift death, he reminded himself grimly, and hunkered down as he ran to keep his balance, skidding deliberately when he reached a knob of stone he could hook one boot around.

Eagerly, the mind flayer pounced on the seemingly off-balance human, its four tentacles stabbing greedily out. Durnan raised one arm to fend them aside, hooked the edge of his knife around the nearest one, and slashed viciously at their roots.

The mind flayer's sword came up rather clumsily to clang against his blade, and he used the speed he'd built to smash it aside with one shoulder and dive past the thing, lashing out with one boot to kick it in the chest.

There were shouts from the watching crowd, and the fast-paced chatter of changing bets as Durnan rolled to his feet, bounced off a spar of stone, and charged back at the thing. He dare not turn his back on it and try to run for the street-not only would it have time to hurl a spell at his back, but the crowd might well draw steel on him, or bar his way for its own amusement, to force him to turn and fight.

The mind flayer's body seemed misshapen; it wavered as it rose from the rubble where it had fallen- just in time to quail and hiss under the bite of Durnan's sword. Once, twice, the true steel slashed, hacking tentacles away . . . and the blood that splattered forth was not the milky ichor it

should have been, but a dark, reddish-green gore!

Frowning, Durnan cut away the last tentacle and drew back his blade for a final thrust through one of those furiously glaring white eyes. It melted away before him, slumping down into something like a long, reddish worm or clump of worms that slithered and flapped its wet, fast-sprouting wings in haste to escape. He hacked at the glistening thing in disgust, backing away to keep an eye out for tentacles heading for his ankles.

There was angry shouting from the crowd: the shapeshift had told them the thing Durnan faced was no mind flayer, but something else . . . and who could bet on an unknown shapeshifting thing that was swiftly being hacked apart by this hard-breathing human?

Amid curses, & tankard flew through the air to rattle among the tumbled stones not far away. It was shortly followed by another. Enraged bettors were venting their feelings. Luckily, the state of things in Skullport was such that few would dare throw daggers when a ready knife might be needed nearer to hand.

"Well, thank the gods for such grand favors," Durnan muttered aloud at that grim thought as he ducked away from a part of the worm-thing that had suddenly grown bony spurs and was flailing at him.

He took one numbing gash high on his arm, near his left shoulder-and then he and his foe both staggered. Someone in the crowd had hurled at them both a blasting spell strong enough to rock the ruins around them-and the dragon rune's dome had flung it straight back at its source. The packed throng of spectators was suddenly a screaming, fleeing mob generously sprayed with blood; pulped, boneless things struggled weakly on the slick stones around a ring of cleared space at the center of the lane.

Durnan lunged under his foe's bony, flailing arm and caught hold of the wormlike coils, lifting them with a sudden grunt of effort. There was a horrible shifting and wriggling in his hands as slashing teeth and talons struggled to be born, and then the tavernmaster set his teeth and heaved, the muscles in his shoulders rippled once, and the shapeshifting thing was flung away through the air.

It landed with a heavy, wet smack, and flopped spasmodically once or twice-but could not lift itself off the row of iron spikes that stuck up through its flowing flesh like a line of blades. It sagged, burbled forth a whistling sigh, and hung limp. Dark gore dripped slowly onto the stones beneath it. Useful things, sword-blade fences.

A deep blue glow flickered and faded around the corpse as it melted back into the ungainly limbs and bare-brained, fanged head of a doppelganger.

Durnan's eyes narrowed as a small white flare marked the passing of his own dragon rune defenses. Someone-in the crowd?-had been feeding that beast spells, and probably controlling it, too.

"I am Xuzoun," a deep voice rolled out from close behind him, heavy with confident menace, "and you, Durnan of Waterdeep, have just slain my most loyal servant."

Durnan spun around to find-as he'd expected-the beholder looming over him, great and terrible. Its huge, lone central eye gloated coldly as the stones all around him erupted into conjured, questing black tentacles.

"The teleport that brought me here was yours, then?"

Durnan asked. "And this . . . duel staged for my benefit?" His face and voice showed no fear as his sword and knife came up smoothly to face the eye tyrant-and the tentacles grew around him like swaying, upright eels.

"Of course," the beholder told him silkily. "I've gone to much trouble to take you."

Durnan cast a quick look around at the slowly and carefully closing ring of tentacles. "And why would that be?" he asked softly.

"I desire to wear the body of a Lord of Waterdeep for a time," the fell monster said with a smile that showed him a row of jagged fangs, some of which outstripped his sword for length. "And-unfortunately for the sometimes-famous and often beloved-of-the-gods man called Durnan-I've chosen you."

Strange sights in plenty are seen in Skullport, and folk who survive there long have learned not to stare overmuch, nor linger long in one place, lest they be marked for dealing with later. So it was that no lizard-man or scurrying halfling moved more than a wary eyeball as a little line of drifting, dancing sparks of radiance came out of the darkness, heading down a certain alley that was

narrow and noisome even for the Source of Slaves. A sorceress out ahunting from the great city above, perhaps, or a fetch sent by a noble's pet wizard ... or a brood of will o' wisp younglings? It was better not to speculate, but merely to observe without being seen to look, and mark where the lights went.

More than a few of those watchful eyes widened as they recognized the shuffling, wheezing bulk that trudged along in the lights' wake, worn leather boots flopping. A Lord of Waterdeep, now . . . Many folk skulking the streets of Skullport would fain be seeing the sun over Waterdeep above, were it not for the lords' decrees. Mirt specifically had made rather more than a hand-count of personal foes down the years, too. Some of them had offered much coin for his delivery to their feet, alive and more or less whole, or failing that, just his head, gogging on a platter.

So it was that the distinctive rolling walk and bristling mustache was noticed by many in the circumspect crowd, and excited whispers and hurryings followed those recognitions. It was not long before a dagger spun out of the night, thrown hard and unerringly, coming fast at the old Harper's left eyeball. Mirt ignored it, keeping his gaze instead on the stones underfoot, bodies that might move to block his path, and the guiding trail of motes.

The dagger struck his invisible shields and spun away with the faintest of singing sounds, heading back at the hand that had flung it. So, too, did a stone that leapt out of the darkness at the back of Mirt's head- and another; the band of slayers-for-hire hight Hoelorton's Hands were known to be deft hands with a sling.

Or a cudgel. Mirt heard the faint scraping sound of a rushing boot on stone, and spun around like a wary barrel, his belt dagger gleaming in one fat fist. Two rogues were almost upon him, running fast. One swung his stout club in a deadly arc as he came.

The fat moneylender's hairy fingers plucked at the battered wood as it whistled past, and pulled. Overbalanced, the startled man had barely time for an apprehensive grunt as the pommel of Mirt's dagger came up under his chin. The blow sent him swiftly into the arms of the ladies who whisper softly to warriors in slumber: he crashed over like a felled tree, spitting teeth from his shattered jaw, eyes already dark.

The second man had to dance around the falling body, and met Mirt's roundhouse left while still trying to raise his cudgel. Mirt let his knuckles take the man's head into the nearest wall, hard, and felt something break under them before he spun away to follow the drifting lights again, wheezing along patiently as if nothing had befallen. The two slumped forms in the alley did not rise to follow.

Another dagger flashed out of the darkness, and a bucketful of stones plummeted from the air as Mirt trudged under one of the many catwalks that crisscrossed the emptiness above most streets and passages of Skullport. His shields sent both offerings back whence they'd come, journeys marked by strangled, gurgling cries.

Mirt sighed in reply-Faerun certainly seemed to breed no pressing shortage of fools these days- and hunched his shoulders to pass under a particularly low catwalk.

A garotte slipped down and around his throat as he emerged into the torchlight beyond-but the fat old lord paid it no apparent heed, striding deliberately on. Only the corded muscles rising into view on his thick neck betrayed the effort it took to walk on without slowing, as the waxed cord skittered over the hard, smooth steel of the gorget that covered his grizzled throat.

It took less than a breath before the wheezing merchant reached the full stretch of the deadly cord and the skilled arms that wielded it. With a startled oath, their leather-clad owner pitched forward out of the darkness above, hauled down into the street like a grain-sack from a loft. A casual swing of one thick arm brought a belt dagger solidly into the masked man's temple, and the garotte fell to the cobbles alongside its limp and crumpled owner. Mirt did not even bother to look down; this was Skullport, after all. Moreover, business awaited him ahead . . . and if he knew Durnan, 'twould be hasty business.

Three masked figures stepped out of a side alley, down the passage ahead of him, but Mirt showed no sign of slowing or drawing the stout sword at his belt. He forged on steadily into waiting death, and after a tense moment one of the three stepped back and waved at his fellows to do likewise.

"Your pardon, Mirt," he growled. "You're looking so well, I almost didn't know you."

"Prettily said, Ilbarth," Mirt grunted, turning suddenly to glare at one of the others, who'd sidled

just a step too close to the fat old man's back. "So ye can live, all of ye."

"Generous, White-Whiskers," that man said softly, "when it's three to one."

"I'm known for my open-handed generosity," Mirt said, baring his teeth in a grin without slowing, "so I'll let ye live a second time, Aldon. Take care ye don't use up all thy luck and my patience, now."

Aldon took one uncertain step in pursuit of the wheezing man. "How'd you know my name?"

"He knows everyone in Skullport," Ilbarth said with a nervous grin. "Isn't that right, Mirt? I'll bet cold coin you've lived all your life down here."

"Not yet," Mirt grunted, turning to fix him with one cold and level gray-blue eye. "Not quite yet."

He turned away from them and went on down the alley without looking back, but the three men did not follow. They stood watching him for a time, and soon had cause to be very glad they'd not proceeded with more violent activities.

The old moneylender strode past a tentacle that slid down from an upper window to pluck aloft a man who'd summoned it, stepped around an ore sprawled on its face in a pool of blood, a spear standing up in its back- and found his way suddenly blocked by a dozen or more lithe, slim black figures, whose skin was as jet black as the soft leathers they wore. Almost mockingly, the guiding motes of light winked and sparkled in the distance beyond them.

"How now, old man?" one of the drow hissed. "Care to buy your life with a careful and verbose listing of all your wealth, where it can be found, and just how it's guarded?"

"No," Mirt growled, "I'm in a hurry. So stand aside, and I'll let all of ye live."

Cold, mocking laughter gave him reply, and one of the dark elves sneered, "Kind of you, indeed."

"Indeed, but I won't tarry," Mirt growled. "Stand aside, now!"

"Giving us orders, old man?" the drow who'd first spoken responded tartly. "For that, you'll taste a whip!" Slim gloved fingers went eagerly to a thigh sheath.

"Or three," another of the drow agreed, as other hands made the same movement, and slim black cords curled and cracked.

Mirt sighed, opened his cupped hand to reveal the thing he'd taken from his pouch in the House of the Long Slow Kiss, and murmured a word.

The battered metal chevron in his palm erupted in a ringing, leaping sparkle of steel-and the old moneylender stood, calmly watching, as the magic he'd unleashed became a hundred slashing, darting swords that flew about the alley in front of him in a deadly whirlwind. Drow leapt desperately for safety, anywhere it might lie ... but died anyway, amid screams from open windows above. Someone paused on a catwalk to watch-and someone else smote that watcher from behind, contributing a helplessly plunging, senseless body to the flashing carnage below.

"Enough!" Mirt growled, as he watched the unfortunate falling man get cut to ribbons. The moneylender spat a second strange word, and the blades obediently melted away, leaving the alley empty of menacing forms in his path. He strode on.

His next few steps were in slippery black blood, but the motes were still twinkling in the gloom ahead, heading for a sudden, distant flash of spell light. In its flare, Mirt saw many folk gathered to watch something off to the left, crowded together to enjoy-a fight? a duel? Bets were being placed, and the more belligerent were jostling for a better view.

There was another flash-which resolved itself into the blue pinwheel that marked the appearance of someone using an old catch-teleport spell-and out of its heart stumbled Durnan, moving fast.

Mirt's old friend was in some sort of ruin, caught in the midst of a spell duel between-gods blast all!-a beholder, and someone ... a mage? Nay, mauve skin; that could only mean a mind flayer. Ye gods. Hasty business indeed!

"Idiot!" Mirt described Durnan fervently, and broke into a trot, feeling in his pouch for some handy small salvation or other.

"Hearken, all!" he panted, to the uneven stones ahead of him as his shaggy bulk gathered speed, "and take note: 'tis the Wheezing Warrior to the rescue- again!"

Something cold struck the back of his neck, and clung. Durnan snarled and chopped at it, even as a pair of black tentacles twined about his blade and pulled, trying to drag it down.

Durnan slashed out with the dagger in his other hand, seeking to free his sword. The chill at the back of his neck was spreading, cold caressing fingers spreading along his shoulders. "What, by the bones of the cursed-?" he snarled.

The beholder smiled down at him. "Your memories will be mine first. . . before I take the tiny

candle that you call a mind-and blow it out!"

Durnan rolled his eyes. "You sound like a bad actor trying to impress gaping nobles in North Ward!" And then the point of his dagger found the pommel of his sword. He pressed down firmly, and hissed a certain word.

The gem in the pommel burst with a tiny blaze of its own-and slowly, in impressive silence, all of the black tentacles faded away. "So much for your spell," the tavernmaster grunted, throwing the dagger hard into the beholder's large, staring central eye.

The world erupted in a roar of pain and fury. The eye tyrant bucked in midair like a wild stallion trying to shake off ropes, shuddered, and then rolled over with terrible speed, eyestalks reaching out to transfix Durnan in many fell gazes.

Nothing happened.

"Mystra grant that this my spellshatter last just a trifle longer," Durnan prayed aloud, hands stabbing down to his boots for more daggers. That great mouth was very close now, and the roaring coming from it was shaking the tavernmaster's body. Teeth chattering helplessly, Durnan watched those fangs gape wide. . .

Not far away, a black cobweb quivered and seemed to stiffen. Then a hoarse, dusty voice issued from it-a voice that squeaked and hissed from long disuse. "Someone is using a spellshatter," it told the empty darkness of the crypt around it.

Not surprisingly, there was no reply.

After a moment's pause, the cobweb shot forth an arm like the tentacle of a black octopus, and plunged it into the stone of the far wall-as if the tentacle were a mere shadow, able to freely drift through solid things. Then the entire cobweb shifted like a gigantic, ungainly spider and followed the tentacle, sliding into the stones of the crypt wall.

A breath later, the black tentacle emerged from a solid wall in Skullport, wriggled out across an alley, and turned to probe up and down the narrow, reeking way. A rat paused in its gnawings and scuttlings to watch this new, probably edible worm or snake-but sank back down behind a pile of refuse when the tentacle grew swiftly into a spiderlike growth that covered most of the wall. This spiderlike thing then became a flapping black cloak . . . from which grew the shuffling figure of a robed, cowed man, whose eyes gleamed in the darkness as brightly as the rat's own orbs. The man's robe swished past the cowering rodent. He stepped out of the alley, looked out across a blackened, tumbled area of devastation where a building had burned or been blasted apart, and said clearly, "Hmmm."

A beholder was bobbing above a lone human, the magelight of carelessly crafted spells streaming around it, but was constrained from reaching its human by some invisible shield or other. The spellshatter, no doubt.

"Hmmm," the man said again, and stepped backward into the wall, sinking smoothly into the solid stone until only two dark, watchful patches remained to mark where his eyes must be.

Wisely, the rat scuttled silently away. With archwizards, one can never be sure. Halaster Blackcloak was known to be both one of the most powerful arch wizards of all, and more than a little . . . erratic in his behavior. He seemed to be settling into the wall to watch whatever was going on in the ruins, but-if one could ever be safe in Skullport-it was better to be safely away from him ... far away from him.

Asper slid to a stop on a high catwalk and clutched its rail for a moment to catch her breath. It had been a long, hard run, and more than one foolish beast had tried to make her its supper along the way. The blade in her hand was still dark and wet from her last encounter. The leap from the end of a little-known tunnel-which wound down through the heart of Mount Waterdeep to end in a sheer drop, high in the ceiling of the cavern that held most of Skullport-down to the dark roofs below was always a throat-tightening thing.

Gasping for air, Mirt's lady tossed her head. Sweat streamed down her face despite her frequent wipes at it, plastering ash-blond tresses to her forehead and dripping from the end of her nose. Asper sighed air deep into her lungs, shook her head to hurl away more sweat, clipped the ring on her sword-pommel to the matching one at her throat, spun the ribbon around so the still-gory blade would bounce along at her back as she traveled on, and peered out over Skullport, waiting for her breathing to slow.

The often-deadly place seemed somehow quiet tonight. The mysterious guardian skulls-or whatever they truly were-drifted here and there through the gloom high above the streets, where

the stone fangs of the cavern ceiling made a silent forest close overhead. Asper loved this world of flitting bats, occasional screams, and muttered conspiracies. She enjoyed a leisurely prowl among the crumbling roof gargoyles, silently glowing wards, and wrought iron climb-nots, where crossbows waited for sneak thieves to trip their lines and folk seldom opened shutters covered with rusting crazy quilts of overlapping, battered old shields, whose owners no longer needed them-or anything.

But this journey had been anything but leisurely. Asper clung to the rail as if it were a lover, and peered north. There had been something ... a flicker . . . there!

Spell light flashed in a place of darkness-some sort of ruin, it seemed, liberally endowed with rough heaps and pillars of blackened stone. In this second flash, Asper saw the unmistakable sphere of a beholder, eye-stalks writhing in pain or rage, quivering in the air low over some sort of foe . . . probably a man. It was the sort of trouble Durnan or her beloved were almost sure to be drawn into.

Asper vaulted lightly over the rail and fell through the cool air, ignoring the oath uttered by a startled face at a window as she passed. Her boots found a second catwalk, slipped for a moment on damp boards that danced back up under the weight of her landing, and then held firm. Asper crouched low as the catwalk's tremblings grew gentler, the fingertips of one hand just touching the boards in front of her, and looked again at the beholder. The problem was, Skullport was all too apt to be crawling with this sort of thing: the kind of strife Mirt and Durnan would get caught up in ... but had they chosen this particular strife, or found amusement elsewhere? Then her eyes fell on what she'd been searching for- far ahead of her, along the narrow alley that ran from beneath her catwalk to the ruins where the beholder danced. A familiar lurching form, portly where he wasn't burly, shambled and wheezed along with that bluff, fearless unconcern she loved so well. Mirt the Moneylender, the man whose heart drove and carried the Lords of Waterdeep, was lumbering like a hopping hippo over the heaped rubble where the alleyway emptied into the chaos of the ruin-trotting up to an enraged beholder to rescue his friend. This was their fight, then. Asper frowned. She quickly undid her belt, plucked something from behind its buckle, and set it down carefully on the boards beside her. It would not do to be touched by the sort of magic a beholder's eyes could hurl while carrying that little bauble. She buckled up her belt again, bit her lip in thought, turned smoothly, and ran a little way along the catwalk. There, someone bolder than most had strung a line of washing from the high, hanging way to a balcony. Though the cord was old and soft where glowmold had been washed away many times, it held one hurrying, catlike woman in leathers long enough for her to reach the balcony. Asper got one boot on the balcony rail and kicked hard; the aging iron squealed in protest as she leapt away into darkness, fingers straining for the lantern line she sought. It was barred to keep unscrupulous folk from winning down the iron basket of glowworms that served some fearful merchant as a back door lantern. The gloves Asper wore ended in middle-finger rings, leaving her fingers and most of her palms bare to grip things unhampered-but she shed only a little blood as she caught hold, swung, and let go again, heading feetfirst for another catwalk.

Her eyes were on the battle ahead. The eye tyrant seemed to be trying to bite Durnan, who was ducking and rolling among stubby fingers of stone wall. As Asper's feet found the boards of the catwalk, slid in something unpleasant, and shot her right across it into empty air beyond, she saw the beholder bite down. Blocks of stone crumbled, and Durnan dived away, a dagger flashing in his hand. Mirt was getting close now, and beyond them all-as she brought her feet together to crash down through the rotting roof of a bone-cart-Asper could see a few warily watching creatures. A minotaur and a kenku were among them, pointing at Mirt disgustedly and shouting to each other. Wagers were being changed, it seemed.

Then Asper's feet plunged through silk that was gray with age, and into brittle bones beyond. She shut her eyes against flying shards as she sank into a crouch, letting her legs take the force of her landing.

A rough male ore's voice snarled, "What, by all the brain-boring tentacles of dripping Ilseine's sycophants, was that?"

"Special delivery," Asper told the unseen merchant, as her sword flashed out. Silk fell away like cobwebs, and she sprang past startled, furious eyes and gleaming tusks onto the street beyond. "Grrrenarr!" The ore's roar of rage echoed off the buildings around, and Asper dodged sharply

toward one side of the alley, bringing her sword up and back behind her without looking or slowing. A heavy hand axe rang off its tip and rattled along an iron gate beside her. Asper ran on into the darkness, calling back, "Pleasant meeting, bloodtusks!"

The ore term of respect was unlikely to mollify a merchant whose cart-top had just been ruined, but she was in a hurry. Up ahead, the beholder shook the air in a roaring frenzy that far outmatched the snarls of the ore behind her. Rays lashed out in all directions from its writhing, coiling eyestalks. Those that stabbed down met some sort of shield and faded away, and one that lashed out toward Mirt had a similar fate. The others were causing spectacular explosions, bursts of flame and lightning-and in one spot, the stone was melting like syrup and slumping down upon itself in a slow flood.

Magelight flashed and curled around the eye tyrant as it poured forth spells in a display that had the audience scrambling for cover. The shouted adjustments to wagers rang back hollowly from windows, balconies, and corners all around as the ground shook, stone shrieked, and the last of the ruin's blackened walls toppled, with slow majesty, down atop the struggling tavernmaster. Dust rose slowly, the heaving underfoot subsided, and the ringing that had risen in Asper's ears was not enough to drown out Mirt's roar of challenge.

"About! Turn about, ye blasted lump of floating suet! I'll look ye in all yer eyes and stare ye down, and there'll be a blade-thrust into every one of 'em before ye'll have time to flee! Turn about, I say!"

Asper winced at her lord's imprudence, even as a rueful smile twisted her lips. This was her Mirt, all right.

Winded by his shouting, the fat old Lord of Waterdeep puffed and wheezed straight at the beholder. His old boots flopped as he scrambled up a shifting pile of rubble. At its top, he made a show of drawing his stout old sword and raising it in challenge. "Do ye hear me, ball of offal? I-" "Hear you quite well enough," the beholder said with menacing silence, "Be silent forever, fat man." Beams of deadly radiance flashed from its eyes.

Something unseen in the air blocked the rays, which struck with such savage force that the very emptiness darkened. The fat moneylender staggered to keep his footing, thrust back under the weight of the magic that clawed and tore at his shields.

The eye tyrant screamed in fresh rage - was every puling human protected against all his powers? - and lashed out repeatedly with spells and thrusting eye beams. The ground shook anew, and Mirt disappeared down a sliding mound of rubble as stones broke free from buildings all around and plunged to the streets. As Asper crouched low and scrambled forward, a balcony broke off a large mansion to her left and crashed to its iron-gated forecourt, splitting paving stones.

A stone shard whirled out of nowhere and laid her cheek open with the ease of a slicing razor. Asper hissed at the close call and put a hand up to shield her face, spreading her fingers to see Mirt struggling along like a man battling his way into the face of a gale-force wind. Blackness sparked and roiled around him as his shields slowly melted away - soon they would surely fail, and he would be blasted to a rain of blood . . . and she would lose him, forever.

There was only one way she could help, and it might mean her life. Thrown away vainly, too, if she fouled up the lone chance she'd get. Asper swallowed, tossed her head to draw breath and blow errant hairs from her eyes, and slapped the hilt of her sword so that the rune carved there would be smeared with the gore still leaking from her torn fingers. She felt its familiar ridges, slick and sticky with her blood, and nodded in satisfaction. Turning herself carefully to face the raging eye tyrant, she firmly whispered two words aloud.

The sword shuddered in her hands and then bucked, and she clung to it grimly as the rune's power was unleashed. It blazed away into nothingness as the sword dragged her up into the air and flung her forward. Eerie silence fell.

She was invisible now, she knew, springing up into the air on a one-way vault that would end in a bone-shattering encounter with the cavern wall or a sickening plunge to the ground if she judged wrongly.

The beholder hadn't noticed her; it was still lashing her lord with futile gazes and hurled spells as she rose out of the flashing and trembling air, passing up and over the monster-now!

The rune's power winked out in obedience to her will, and Asper found herself falling, sword first, as Mirt's roars and the excited shouts of the watching Skulkans rushed back around her. Straight

down at the curving, segmented body of the eye tyrant she plunged, headed for just behind the squirming forest of its eyestalks. Asper spread her legs and braced herself for the landing-she'd have only a bare breath to strike before it flung her away.

She'd mixed the stoneclaw sap and creeper gum herself, and spread it on the soles of her boots more thickly than most thieves, miners, and sailors would. It had seen her through more catwalk and rooftop landings on this foray than she cared to think about just now, and if it served her just once more . . .

With solid thumps, Asper's boots struck the beholder's body, and the blade in her hands flashed once and back again before she'd even caught her balance. Almost cut through, an eyestalk flopped and thrashed beside her, spattering her with stinging yellow-green gore as another eye turned her way. Her boots found purchase on the curving body plates, and Asper lunged desperately, putting her sword tip through the questing eye and shaking violently to drag the steel free before another orb could bathe her in its deadly gaze.

Three of the eyestalks were turning, like slow serpents, and the beholder was rolling over to fling her off. Asper kicked out at one eye, as her balance went, and flailed with her blade at another. She fell hard on the bony plates of the monster's body, arm wrapped around an eyestalk. She clung to it with one hand and drove the quillons of her blade into the questing orb that came curling at her. Milky fluid burst forth, drenching her. Spitting out the reeking slime, Asper grimly slashed at another eye. Then she was falling, the beholder's bony bulk no longer under her. Stones rushed up to meet her, and Asper tucked herself around her sword, trying to roll. There was no time, and with numbing force, she crashed into what was left of a wall, and then reeled back helplessly. Mists swirled in front of her eyes, and a new wetness on her chin told where she'd bitten through her lip.

Mirt was roaring out her name and sprinting toward her, arms spread to embrace her. Would his failing shields protect them both?

Not from this death.

The beholder's large central eye was a rent, shriveled ruin, milky liquid dripping from a slash in the sightless bulge, but the smaller eyes on their stalks glittered with maddened rage. They stared at her, growing swiftly nearer. The charging monster would either ram her into the stones and crush the life from her, or roll over at the last instant to shred her with its fangs- teeth adorning a jagged mouth quite large enough to swallow her.

Asper shuddered, shook her head to clear it, and raised the gore-streaming blade she still held. Mirt came gasping up to her, stout sword raised-and the beholder's eyes vanished behind its own bulk. It rolled over to reveal the gaping maw that would devour her.

A giant among its own kind and armed with spells that they lacked, magic enough to overmatch many a human mage, Xuzoun had been contemptuously overconfident. It was always a mistake with humans, he vaguely remembered an older tyrant telling him once.

It would take many spells and long, long months in hiding to regain what had been lost in a few moments of red, reaving pain . . . but first to still the hands that had done this, forever!

Mirt fetched up against Asper, panting. "Are ye mad, lass? Yon-"

Asper shoved him away, hard, spun about, and dived away. Mirt staggered backward and, with a roar of pain, sat down hard on bruising stone. The beholder crashed into the stones where they'd stood, snapping and tearing with its teeth.

Rubble sprayed or rolled in all directions as the beholder raked the heap of stone apart, teeth grating on rock. The impact sent it cartwheeling helplessly away through the air-and uncovered a battered, unsteadily reeling tavernmaster.

Durnan found his feet and climbed grimly out of the heaped stones, growling at the pain of several stiffening bruises. He'd been buried long enough to know the first cold touch of despair and was in a mood to rend beholders.

"Urrrgh," Mirt snarled, waddling awkwardly to his feet. "What's this the earth spits forth?"

Tavernmasters gone carelessly strolling through Skullport?"

"Well met, old friend," Durnan said, grinning and clapping Mirt on the shoulder with fingers that seemed made of iron.

Mirt's mustache made that overall bristling movement that betokened a smile. "I saw the little minx ye came seeking, sitting as cool as ye please in Bindle's Blade, tossing down amberjack-so I came in haste, knowing ye'd be avidly hunting down a trap!" He cast a look at the beholder as it

thudded into the wall of a stronghouse, where pale faces had just suddenly vanished from view.

"So what did ye do to get a tyrant mad at ye? Refuse to kiss it?"

"Your wit slides out razor sharp, as always, Old Wolf," Durnan said with a sly smile that belied the light, innocent tone of his words.

Mirt gestured rudely in reply, and added, "Well?" "Nothing," Durnan said flatly, as they watched the beholder reel, steady itself, and begin to drift their way with menacingly slow, careful speed. "I came out of the Portal to aid a noble lady-and strode straight into a spell that snatched me here." He grinned suddenly. "Well, at least it saved me a bit of walking."

Mirt harrumphed. "Pity it didn't do the same for me." Rock shifted behind him, and he whirled around, sword out and low-only to relax and smile. "Lass, lass, how many times have I told thee how much I hate being sneaked up on from behind?" he chided Asper halfheartedly. She gestured past him with her sword.

"You'd better turn around again, then, my lord," she told him calmly, as a plucking at his belt told him that Durnan had snatched one of his daggers. Mirt grunted like a walrus and heaved himself around, puffing-in time to see the beholder rushing down at them again, beams of reaving light lancing out from its eyes.

"Keep behind me, both of ye!" the fat moneylender roared. "I'm shielded!"

"Against teeth like those? That's a spell you'll have to show me some time!" Durnan said, standing at Mirt's shoulder with a dagger in either fist. He'd lost his blade under all the rocks, and one eye had swollen almost shut, but the tavernmaster seemed content-even eager-as death roared down at them again.

With the ease and fluid grace of a prowling serpent, Asper slid up to stand at Mirt's other shoulder. "It seems strange to be worrying about a beholder's teeth," she said, "and not its eyes, for once."

"Get back, lass!" Mirt roared. "As if I haven't worries enough to-"

The beholder crashed into them, snarling and snapping. They hacked and slashed ineffectually against its bony body plates.

Its hot breath whirled around them as they jumped and hewed vainly and ducked aside-only to be struck and hurled away by what felt like a fast-moving castle wall. Durnan grunted as the tyrant smashed him down like a rag doll, and then rolled away into a gully as the beholder tried to crush him. Asper could not keep her feet when the jaws reached for her. She slid out of sight beneath the monster, only to duck up again, stab at it- and be thrown end over end across the ruins, sword flying from her numbed hands to clang and clatter to its own fall. With a gasp and a moan, she fetched up against a broken-off pillar, but Mirt was too busy to hear her.

He was scrambling and cursing and flailing away against persistent fangs, sword ringing off bony plates and fangs alike. In the end, he managed to avoid losing an arm only by setting his sword upright against the closing jaws and letting go. The eye tyrant's jaws caught on the blade, bent it, and spat it out. By then, the three battered, wincing companions were rising out of the rubble widely scattered about the ruin. The bettors yelled fresh wagers in the distance.

"Oh, by the way: this is Xuzoun," Durnan said formally, indicating the eye tyrant with a flourish.

"Ill met," Mirt growled, struggling to his feet. "Damned ill met."

Then the faint, everpresent singing of his shields fell silent: his defense against the beholder's eyes was gone.

"Gods blast it," the old moneylender muttered. "To die in Skullport, of all places, and win someone's wager for him . . ."

"Keep apart," Asper said warningly from the rocks off to his right, "lest it take us all down at once."

"Cheerful advice," Durnan commented, watching Xuzoun as it turned slowly to survey them all, unaware no shields remained to foil its magic. "Anyone still have magic to hand?"

"That'll help us against this? Nay," Mirt growled, watching death slowly come for them. All it would take now would be for the beast to lash out with one eye, on a whim, and discover they were defenseless.

Xuzoun had sent forth much magic against these humans and seen it all boil away harmlessly, or come clawing back to harm its hurler. Lords of Waterdeep were tougher than most mortals, it seemed. How to defeat these two-perhaps three, if the woman was one, too-without destroying their bodies?

The doppelganger was dead, so preservation of these humans-their bodies, at least-more or less

intact was important. They foiled all magic with ease, and there seemed no way to overcome their wills. And yet, to flee from battle with them now, before an audience of Skulkans, galled.

The beholder's advance slowed, and then stopped. It rose a prudent distance above the ruin and hung there, considering.

"Right, then, I'm off," Mirt said heartily, turning to go. "It's not the season for beholder-hunting, anyway, and I've business to see to, that I left."

One of Xuzoun's eyes flashed. A stone the size of a gauntleted fist rose from the rubble and flashed toward the old moneylender, flying as hard and straight as any arrow. These humans might have shields to foil magic, but what if the stone were flying fast enough, and aimed true, when the magic that flung it was stripped away? Turning slowly end over end, the stone shot on. "Old Wolf-down!" Asper screamed, seeing it. Mirt had heard that tone from her a time or two before in his life, and flopped to his belly without delay. The stone whistled past close overhead and shattered with a sharp crack against a wall beyond.

The beholder was descending, and at the same time a slab of stone the size of a small cart was rising above Durnan. He ducked away, but it followed, lowering itself with care, chasing him. The Master of the Yawning Portal spat out a curse and started a sprinting scramble across the rocks of the ruin. The beholder smiled as it drifted after him.

If the great weight of the stone pinned the running lord without having to strike him down and do harm, he'd be trapped and helpless-a prisoner until Xuzoun was ready to steal his mind and take over his body. If it worked with the one, why then there were stones aplenty here, and only two humans more.

Wheezing to his feet and regarding the stone pursuing Durnan with horror, Mirt was startled by a loud rattling of rock behind him. He wheeled around with a snarl-was one of those watching gamblers trying to change the odds?-and found himself staring at a scaly blue monster that looked like a huge and sinuous crocodile. Its head reared up to regard him as it raced over the broken rubble on a small forest of fast-churning legs.

It was a behir, a man-eating lizard-thing that could spit lightning bolts!

"Ah, just what we need!" Mirt snarled despairingly, raising his belt dagger and knowing what a useless little fang it was against such onrushing death. "Some right bastard of a mage must be toying with us!"

Setting himself the same way a weary bull lowers its head to face a fast-scudding storm, the fat old Lord of Waterdeep prepared to fight this new foe. The behir opened its jaws impossibly wide as it came, so that Mirt was staring into a maw as large as a spacious doorway. A forked tongue wriggled in its depths in a fascinating dance that plunged at him more swiftly than any man could run.

Asper screamed out Mirt's name and sprinted toward him, a small knife from her boot flashing in her hand- but she was too far off to do more than watch. The reptile snapped its jaws once, tilted its head toward Mirt to deliver what he could only describe as a wink, and surged past the astonished moneylender to spit lightning into the open mouth of the beholder.

Xuzoun screamed-a high, sobbing wail like too many cries Mirt had heard human women make-and spun away over the ruins, lightning playing about its body. Its eyestalks jerked and coiled spasmodically, and it was trailing smoke when it struck a leaning pillar and crashed heavily to the ground. The rushing behir was upon it in a breath, coiling over its foe as it snapped its jaws and tore away eyestalks in eager, merciless haste. The three humans watched, a little awed, and then in unspoken accord came together in the center of the stony devastation to watch the beholder die.

"Is there any hole here small enough that we can get into it and hold off that thing?" Asper asked softly, watching the scaly blue head toss as it tore away beholder flesh. A last bubbling wail from the thing beneath its claws died away.

None of them saw a crystal sphere materialize silently beside the riven eye tyrant, flicker with the last vestiges of a spell glow . . . and then crumble to dust, which drifted away.

"A few, no doubt," Durnan replied grimly, watching the carnage, "but none of them would shield us in the slightest from its lightning."

Asper sighed, a long, shuddering sound, and tossed her head. Her eyes were very bright as she said softly, "I thought so," and raised her little knife as if it was some great magical long sword.

When the crocodilelike head turned from its feasting, it saw the little knife, Mirt's belt dagger

beside it, and the similar dagger Durnan held ready, and its eyes flashed golden with amusement. The great jaws opened, and a hissing roar came out. The jaws worked and rippled with effort, and for a moment, Asper thought it was trying to speak. Then it tossed its head in disgust, drew in a deep breath, and tried again, turning its eyes on Mirt. They all heard its rattling roar quite distinctly: "Thank Transtraaaa . . ."

Then it lowered its head, folded its legs against its body, and slithered away. They watched it wind its snakelike way out of the ruins into the street beyond. The audience of surviving gamblers shrank back to make way for it. It vanished around a corner-Spider-silk Lane, Durnan thought-and left them alone with a torn-open, quite dead beholder.

"I wonder what she'll ask you in payment?" Durnan asked the Old Wolf.

Mirt growled a wordless reply, shrugged, and then turned to his lady as if seeing her for the first time. "Hello, Little Fruitbasket," he leered, extending his lips in a chimplike pout to be kissed.

Slowly, Asper stuck her tongue out in eloquent reply, and made the spitting-to-the-side mime that young Waterdhavian ladies use to signal disgust or emphatic disapproval.

And then she winked and grinned.

Mirt started to grin back, but it faded quickly as he saw the danger signal of Asper's eyebrows rising, and the accompanying glitter in the dark eyes boring into him. A moment later she asked softly, "Just who is this 'Transtraaaa' woman, anyway?"

Mirt gave her a sour look. "Pull in the claws, little one: she's no woman, but a lamia."

It was the turn for Durnan's eyebrows to rise. "Slave-trading, Mirt?"

The fat moneylender gave him a disgusted look, and turned to start the long trudge back up the alley. "Ye know me better than that," he rumbled. "Slaving's work for those who've no scruples, less sense, and too much wealth. Nobles, for instance."

Durnan groaned. "Let's not start that one again. We rooted out all we could find, and Khel set spy spells . . . there'll always be a few dabblers, no doubt, but nothing we can't handle"

Lightning roared across the ruins to split the stones at his feet.

"Oh? Care to try to handle me, tavernmaster?" The voice echoed and rolled around them, made louder by magic: the taunting voice of an arrogant young woman of culture and breeding.

The three lords looked up whence the lightning had come and saw a lone figure standing on the catwalk where Asper had inspected a line of washing not so long ago: a slim, haughty figure in a dark green cloak whose folds showed the shape of a long sword beneath it. The uppermost part of the figure was all flashing eyes and curling auburn hair, piled high around graceful shoulders.

"Young Nythyx," Mirt roared, "Come down from there!"

In reply, two gloved hands parted the cloak from within to reveal the glowing, deadly things they bore: Netherese blast scepters, crackling with simmering lightning. "Come up and get me, 'fat man,' Nythyx Thunderstaff sneered. "I don't take orders from drunken old commoners."

Durnan looked up at her, eyes narrowed. "You're a slaver, then?" He strode calmly toward the mouth of the alley, and after a moment Mirt and Asper followed.

The scepters were leveled at them, and the young woman who held them shrugged and said almost defiantly, "Yes."

Durnan kept on walking, but shook his head in smiling disbelief. "You've never shackled men, or dragged ores out of carry cages. If you tried, they'd toss you around like a child's ball!"

Lightning stabbed at him, in wordless, deadly reply.

An unclad woman whose hair and eyes shared the color of leaping flame leaned out of a window at the mouth of the alley and stiffened. "Blast scepters!" she hissed.

As her eyes blazed even brighter, she flowed forward out of the window. Her lower body was human to the hips, but from there down it was the scaled, sinuous bulk of a serpent. She slithered along the wall, drawing herself upright, and raised her hands to weave a spell.

A dark, chill hand caught at her shoulder.

She spun about, hands growing talons with lightning speed. "Who-?"

"I am sometimes called Halaster Blackcloak," the wall told her. A cowed face melted out of its stones to join the arm that held her. Flame-red eyes met dark ones, and after a moment Transtra shivered and looked away. The hand released its hold on her, and Halaster's voice was almost kindly as he added, "They'll be fine. Watch. Just watch."

Lightning spat down at the tavernmaster, slashing aside lanterns and washing. Durnan calmly leapt aside, rolled to his feet, and resumed his steady walk a dozen paces ahead and to the left of

where he'd been walking.

He looked up through smoking rags and swaying ropes and remarked, "Ah. You cook every slave who says something you don't like, eh? This may be one reason why we've never heard of your stellar slaving career."

Lighting cracked again. In its wake the young noblewoman shrieked, "Don't you dare mock me, tavern-master! My master would have killed you, all of you, if it hadn't been for that-that snake-thing! You're very lucky to be alive to toss smart words my way right now!"

"Ye really should practice with that toy," Mirt growled, wagging one large and hairy finger her way, "if ye harbor any fond hopes of ever hitting someone with it."

At his shoulder, Asper frowned. "You served . . . the beholder?" she asked the woman aloft.

They were close enough now to clearly see Nythyx Thunderstaff's slim lips draw into a tight line. The young noblewoman stared down at them, pale and trembling with rage, and said, "Yes. With Xuzoun, I wielded power and influence. Great lords poured me their best wines in hopes of gaining just the slaves they desired. You've ended that, you three, and will pay for doing so. This I swear."

"I've heard of consorts that fathers disapprove of," Mirt rumbled, "but lass, lass, how could ye be so foolish?"

"Foolish?" Nythyx shrieked, thrusting forth the scepters she held to point almost straight down at their upturned faces. "Foolish? Who's the fool here, Old Wolf?" She triggered both blast scepters. Asper had been muttering something under her breath-and at that moment the catwalk bucked and broke apart as the blast star she'd left behind on it obediently exploded.

"Ye are, if ye know no better than to let us walk right up when ye had the power to torch us all,"

Mirt told Nythyx as the young noblewoman tumbled helplessly down, down to the cobbles at their feet. Futile lightnings sputtered forth to scorch the buildings on either side, but found no way to slow her killing fall.

Or-nearly killing fall. A scant few feet above the stones, Durnan rushed forward, leapt high to meet her, and cradled her deftly in his arms, crashing down into a crouch that took the force of her descent.

Nythyx stared at him for one astonished moment. Her face twisted, and she raised the one scepter she'd managed to hang on to, aiming at his face. The tavernmaster, however, brought one expert fist down across her chin in a swipe that left her slack-jawed and senseless. Durnan watched the winking and sputtering scepter fall slowly from her hand. When it clattered on the cobbles, he kicked it to Asper, looked for a moment at the now-empty face of the woman in his arms, then swung her onto his shoulder for the long carry back to her father's arms in Waterdeep. Just what, he wondered, was he going to tell Lord Thunderstaff. . . ?

Rubies caught his eyes as her long, ostentatious earrings dangled down beside his chest. Durnan stared at them, shook his head, and said wearily, "I'm getting too old for this. What a day!"

Mirt shrugged as one of his arms found its way around Asper's shoulders. "Eh? What say ye? 'Twas a bit of a slow day in Skullport, I'd say!"

The words had scarce left his mouth when the front of a nearby building burst with a flash and roar out into the alley, shattering shutters across the way and sending another catwalk into dancing collapse. Flashing fingers of blue-white fire spat from the curling smoke of the riven building even before the flung stones of its walls had finished falling. On those fiery fingers were borne two writhing bodies.

The three Lords of Waterdeep watched the pair struggling vainly against the magic. They were women of greater age and much more lush beauty than either Asper or Nythyx-beauty revealed through the tatters of their smouldering robes. They shrieked past the three lords, pulled in a sharp curve along the front of a butcher shop, and continued on down the alley, propelled by the raging magic that held them captive.

The lords turned to watch, in time to see a black flame rise suddenly into being along one wall, partway down the alley. It was a dancing shadow without fuel or heat, which seemed neither to die nor rise higher, but merely to continue.

From behind its concealing veil, Transtra watched a shadowy hand rise from the cobbles behind Mirt's boot, deftly close on the forgotten blast scepter-which lay fallen and still sparking feebly on the cobbles-and draw it down through the solid stone. A moment later, the hand reappeared beside her and offered her the scepter.

"You see? Patience does bring rewards," Halaster murmured. The lamia noble looked at him in wonderment, then at the scepter, and slowly stretched forth her hand for it. The wizard smiled thinly. "There's no trap; take it."

Transtra regarded him, eyes unreadable. "Why have you given me this?"

Eyes as black as a starless night looked back into hers. "I have few friends, Lady, and I'd like to gain another-as you gained yonder moneylender."

Transtra looked at the two sorceresses clawing and sobbing against the unknown magic that was carrying them inexorably down the alley, drew in a deep breath, looked back at Halaster, and stretched forth her other hand.

"I'm willing to gain one, too," she said steadily, and the smile that answered her was like a wave of warm spiced wine that carried her along unresisting.

The wizard replied, "Then trust me, and come."

Cool black fingers closed on hers, and drew her toward the wall, into the chill embrace of the stones. Transtra swallowed, closed her eyes, and kept firm hold of the fingers that took her on, into silence, away from the alley.

The black flame along one side of the alley was suddenly gone as if it had never been, revealing a dirty stone wall broken by one dark, open window. As the two struggling sorceresses flew past that spot, their splendid bodies wriggled, lengthened-and turned warty and green.

"Trolls?" Asper asked, frowning.

Her two companions nodded.

The forcibly transformed women plunged across the ruins into darkness, tumbling in the grip of the magic that propelled them.

A moment later, on the far side of the great cavern whence they'd gone, two gigantic orbs blazed open, and a thunderous voice rumbled, "Who dares-?"

There followed rumblings that shook even so large a cavern as this, which marked the stirring of a huge, long-quiescent body. Something larger than several buildings rose up on the far side of the ruins.

As the black dragon raised its scaly bulk higher than the roofs of Skullport, to glare down the alley, Asper whispered something over the Netherese scepter. A nimbus of blue-and-gold fire surrounded her hand. "Touch me, both of you," she said, "and bring the not-so-noble lady's hand against mine."

Durnan touched Nythyx's limp hand to Asper's, and she whispered something. The scepter began to whine and pulse, brighter at each flare.

"What have ye done, las"?" Mirt rumbled.

"Used this thing to power the little carry-stone you gave me, so as to whisk us all back to Mirt's Mansion," she replied. As she spoke, the familiar blue mists of teleportation began to rise and swirl all around them. Asper smiled and turned her head to face Durnan. "I must agree with my lord," she said sweetly to the tavernmaster. "A slow day, in truth."

"May there be many more of them," Durnan said, breathing his heartfelt wish.

The dragon's charge made the stony pave of the alley buckle and heave under their boots.

The mists rushed up to claim them, spinning them back to a place where there'd be a fire and a warm bathing pool, ready wine . . . and no dragons. What more could a retired adventurer ask for?

Those who like to know their players, and have searched in vain for a program, take heart-and hearken! The bold players featured in the preceding escapade are as follows:

ALDON: The strongest and most slow-witted of a trio of human thieves who style themselves the Masked Mayhem, Aldon and his comrades hold absolute rule [over about six yards' worth of two alleys in Skullport.

ASPER: The onetime ward of Mirt the Moneylender, I who rescued her as a young child from the ruins of a burning city, Asper has become his ladylove, sword companion, and (all too often) rescuer. A deadly, acrobatic swordswoman, she was the real brains of the stalwart adventuring band known as the Four-and is now I one of the real brains among the Lords of Waterdeep. I Mirt loves her more than life itself-and several score I of city guardsmen dream of her kisses ... in vain, of J course (sigh).

DURNAN: This laconic, unruffled, weather-beaten I man is well known in Waterdeep as the master of the Yawning Portal, that famous tavern whose taproom holds the entrance to the vast

and deep dungeon of Undermountain. Durnan's thews, fearless manner, and cool handling of belligerent adventurers have won him admiring glances from young ladies. Few, however, know that this burly philosopher was once an adventurer, whose blade let sunlight into the innards of more monsters of Faerun than several dozen chartered adventuring companies combined. A onetime member of the Four, Durnan is now one of the most practical and widely-respected father figures in the city-and in secret (oops), one of the most capable Lords of Waterdeep.

ELMINSTER: Known as "the Old Mage" to a generation, and the Sage of Shadowdale to the overly-formal, this white-haired, impressively bearded old rogue should need no introduction to Faerunians. One of the Chosen of Mystra, he is an archmage mighty enough to make more than one world tremble-and he paid me handsomely to say this, too.

HALASTER BLACKCLOAK: A legendary villain in Waterdeep, "the Mad Mage" is a lurking figure used to frighten children into good behavior. Not a few of them down the decades have had nightmares about the sinister Lord of Undermountain, whose very gaze can kill, who skulks the cellars and dark dungeon passages beneath the city, and hurls spells with crazed brilliance, slaughtering beholders, rending dragons . . . and sending bouquets of flowers walking up to startled young Waterdhavian ladies at their coming-out revels.

HERLE: "Best Blade" of the Black Falcon Patrol of the City Guard of Waterdeep, Herle is a tall, courteous man-deadly with a sword and with his flashing eyes and skillful tongue. Ask any noble Waterdhavian lady he's been assigned to escort-when you're out of earshot of her husband.

ILBARTH: This quick-tongued leader is the master strategist of the Masked Mayhem thieving band of Skullport. Ilbarth is one of those lovable rogues who's almost as handsome as he thinks he is, knows folk almost as well as he thinks he does, and with much luck might avoid his grave for a season or two longer. Place no bets on this.

IRAEHLEE: This illithid (mind flayer, of that mauve-skinned, mouth-tentacled race who like to suck; out the brains of humans who have any) might have had a longer career of manipulation and multifold intrigue if his arrogance had been a trifle weaker, and his foresight a trifle stronger-flaws not unknown, I fear, to many human mages and adventurers.

LAERAL ARUNSUN SILVERHAND: The Lady Mage of Waterdeep is consort to the famous Khelben "Blackstaff" Arunsun (Lord Mage of Waterdeep), who rescued her from the fell artifact known as the Crown of Horns. Laeral is one of the Chosen of Mystra and one of the Seven Sisters watched over by Elminster. She serves as the understanding, worldly representative of the Lords of Waterdeep in Skullport (often in disguise), and was once the leader of an adventuring group known as the Nine. Her grace and beauty are outstripped only by her mastery of magic.

MIRT: It is untrue to say that Mirt the Moneylender outmasses a horse. A pony, now . . . This shrewd, grasping, sarcastic old rogue is beloved by all who don't owe him money. He is sometimes called "the Wheezing Warrior" by those too young to remember his days as Mirt the Merciless, a mercenary general feared from the quays of Calimport to the stony gates of Mirabar. Later he was the Old Wolf, canniest of all the pirate captains to plunder the Sword Coast. These days, he must content himself merely with being a senior Harper, a not-so-secret Lord of Waterdeep, and the city's busiest critic of newly opened taverns and houses of revelry.

NYTHYX THUNDERSTAFF: One of the young, pretty, and ruthless noble ladies with which Waterdeep abounds, Nythyx is a daughter of Anadul Thunder staff, an old friend of Durnan. While he lived, Anadul was brother to Baerom, head of the noble House of Thunderstaff. Nythyx has a taste for danger, feeling important, wielding power, and indulging in cruelties. She may well wind up ruling the city someday . . . if she doesn't get trampled in the rush of all the other young beauties of similar tastes and skills. Watch her; if you keep hidden, the entertainment's free.

SHANDRIL SHESSAIR: This young, heart-strong lass is pursued by half of Faerun (the evil, magic-wielding half) because she happens to possess the rare and awesome power of spellfire, with which she may someday just reshape the world . . . if she survives the almost daily attacks of those who want her spellfire, that is.

TORTHAN: A human male slave of the Lady Transtra, Torthan worships his mistress almost as much as he fears her. His tale is a sad one to date, but is a long way from ended. "Torthan's lineage will surprise some, when at last 'tis revealed" (or so Elminster has said, in what I believe was an unguarded moment).

TRANSTRA: This cruel, worldly-wise lamia noble belongs to that deadly race of man-eating

creatures. A slaver of some prominence in Skullport, "Lady" Transtra is a sometime business associate of Mirt. . . and of some far more unsavory folk who thankfully don't appear in this tale.

ULISS: A behir bonded to Transtra, Uliss is one of a race of reptilian, snakelike carnivores that have many legs, can spit lightning, and devour many unwanted warriors and adventurers. Hatred and love for Transtra war within Uliss; they both know that hatred will win out some day ... in the form of a treachery that Uliss fears Transtra is all too ready for.

VOUNDARRA: This young sorceress is met only briefly, on her helpless flight down an alley in Skullport to an unwanted meeting with Vulharindauloth. The spell that sent her on that journey, and the one who cast it, are secrets to be revealed elsewhere and else-when ... as is Voundarra's fate.

VULHARINDAULOTH: A gigantic elder black dragon, Vulharindauloth is peacefully asleep in a wall of the cavern that holds the corner of Skullport we visit ... or at least, is peacefully asleep until the dying moments of this tale (and I do mean dying . . .). How Vulharindauloth came to be there, and what he'll do in his awakened rage, are matters to be explored at later time-and from a safe distance. On the far side of) Selune, a century from now, perhaps.

XUZOUN: This beholder (eye tyrant) is old enough to know better, but too impatient with skulking not to try to place several mind-controlled doppelganger slaves in the places of Durnan and other important Waterdhavians, so as to set itself up as the true ruler of the city. There are graveyards full of folk who've coveted that position . . . but Xuzoun did keep more of an eye on things than most of them. (Sorry.)

YLOEBRE: An illithid (mind flayer) and fellow schemer of Iraeghlee, Yloebre shares his business partner's shattering fate. It's possible Yloebre might have a future career-but, knowing Halaster, not likely.

ZARISSA: The second and even more lushly beautiful sorceress we see plunging helplessly through the murky air of that alley in Skullport, Zarissa is on her unwilling way to awaken a black dragon. It's possible we'll learn about the spell that sent her along with Voundarra, its caster, and Zarissa's fate, in some other tale. And then again-perhaps not.

RITE OF BLOOD

Elaine Cunningham

Chapter One

Journey into Darkness

There were in the lands of Toril powerful men whose names were seldom heard, and whose deeds were spoken of only in furtive whispers. Among these were the Twilight Traders, a coalition of merchant captains who did business with the mysterious peoples of the Underdark.

There were perhaps six in this exclusive brotherhood, and all were canny, fearless souls who possessed far more ambitions than morals. Membership in this clandestine group was carefully guarded, achieved only through a long and difficult process that was monitored not only by the members, but by mysterious forces from Below. Those who survived the initiation were granted a rare window into the hidden realms: the right to enter the underground trade city known as Mantol-Derith.

An enormous cavern hidden some three miles below the surface, Mantol-Derith was shrouded with more layers of magic and might than a wizard's stronghold. Secrecy was its first line of defense: even in the Underdark, not many knew of the marketplace's existence. Its exact location was known only to a few. Even many of the merchants who regularly did business there would have been hard pressed to place the cavern on a map. So convoluted were the routes leading to Mantol-Derith that even duergar and deep gnomes could not hold their relative bearings along the way. Between the market and any nearby settlement lay labyrinths of monster-infested tunnels complicated by secret doors, portals of teleportation, and magical traps.

No one "stumbled upon Mantol-Derith;" a merchant either knew the route intimately or died along the way.

Nor could the marketplace be located by magical means. The strange radiations of the Underdark were strong in the thick, solid stone surrounding the cavern. No tendril of magic could pass through-all were either diffused or reflected back to the sender, sometimes dangerously mutated.

Thus, any attempt at magical inquiry into the mysteries of Mantol-Derith was fated to end in frustration or tragedy.

Even the drow, the undisputed masters of the Underdark, did not have easy access to this market. In the nearest dark-elven settlement, the great city of Menzoberranzan, no more than eight merchant companies at any one time knew the secret paths. This knowledge was the key to immense wealth and power, and its possession the highest mark of status attainable by members of the merchant class. Accordingly, it was pursued with an avid ferocity, with complex levels of intrigue and bloody battles of weaponry and magic, all of which would probably earn nods of approval from the city's ruling matrons-if indeed the priestesses of Lloth were inclined to take notice of the doings of mere commoners.

Few of Menzoberranzan's ruling females-except for those matron mothers who maintained alliances with this or that merchant band-had much interest in the world beyond their city's cavern. These drow were an insular people: utterly convinced of their own racial superiority, fanatically absorbed in their worship of Lloth, completely enmeshed in the strife and intrigue inspired by their Lady of Chaos.

Status was all, and the struggle for power all-consuming. Very little could compel the subterranean elves to tear their eyes from their traditionally narrow focus. But Xandra Shobalar, third-born daughter of a noble house, was driven by the most powerful motivating forces known to the drow: hatred and revenge.

The members of House Shobalar were reclusive even by the standards of paranoid Menzoberranzan, and they were seldom seen outside of the family complex. At the moment, Xandra was farther from home than she had ever intended to go. The journey to Mantol-Derith was long-the midnight hour of Narbondel would come and pass perhaps as many as one hundred times from the outset of her quest until she stood once again within the walls of House Shobalar. Few noble females cared to be away for so long, for fear that they would return to find their positions usurped. Xandra had no such fears. She had ten sisters, five of whom were, like Xandra, counted among the rare female wizards of Menzoberranzan. But none of these five wanted her job.

Xandra was Mistress of Magic, charged with the wizardly training of all young Shobalars as well as the household's magically gifted fosterlings. She had a great deal of responsibility, certainly, but there was far more glory to be found in the hoarding of spell power, and in conducting the mysterious experiments that yielded new and wondrous items of magic. If one of the Shobalar wizards should ever have a change of heart and try to wrest the instructor's position away, the powerful Xandra would certainly kill her-but only as a matter of form. No drow female allowed another to take what was hers, even if she herself did not particularly want it.

Xandra Shobalar might not have been particularly enamored of her role, but she was exceedingly good at what she did. The Shobalar wizards were reputed to be among the most innovative in Menzoberranzan, and all of her students were well and thoroughly taught.

These included the children-both female and male-of House Shobalar, a few second- and third-born sons from other noble houses, which Xandra accepted as apprentices, and a number of promising common-born boy-children that she acquired by purchase, theft, or adoption-an option that usually occurred after the convenient death of an entire family, rendering the magically-gifted child an orphan.

However they came to House Shobalar, Xandra's students routinely won top marks in yearly competitions meant to spur the efforts of the young drow. Such victories opened the doors of Sorcere, the mage school at the famed academy Tier Breche. So far every Shobalar-trained student who wished to become a wizard had been admitted to the academy, and most had excelled in the Art. Even those students who learned only the rudiments of magic, and went on to become priestesses or fighters, were considered formidable magical opponents.

This high standard was a matter of pride, which Xandra Shobalar possessed in no small measure.

It was this very reputation for excellence, however, that had caused the problem that brought Xandra to distant Mantol-Derith.

Almost ten years before, Xandra had acquired a new student, a female of rare wizardly promise. At first, the Shobalar Mistress had been overjoyed, for she saw in the girl-child an opportunity to raise her own reputation to new heights. After all, she had been entrusted with the magical

education of Liriel Baenre, the only daughter and apparent heiress of Gromph Baenre, the powerful archmage of Menzoberranzan! If the child proved to be truly gifted-and this was almost a certainty, for why else would the mighty Gromph bother with a child born of a useless beauty such as Sosdrielle

Vandree?-then it was not unlikely that young Liriel might in due time inherit her sire's title. What renown would be hers, Xandra exulted, if she could lay claim to training Menzoberranzan's next archmage! The first female to hold that high position!

Her initial joy was dimmed somewhat by Gromph's insistence that this arrangement be kept in confidence. It was not an impossibility, given the reclusive nature of the Shobalar clan, but it was brutally hard on Xandra not to be able to tout her latest student and claim the enhanced status that Baenre favor conferred upon her House.

Still, the Mistress Wizard looked forward to the time when the little girl could compete-and win!-at the mageling contests, and she bided her time in smug anticipation of glories to come.

From the start, young Liriel exceeded all of Xandra's hopes. Traditionally, the study of magic began when children entered their Ascharlaxten Decade-the tumultuous passage between early childhood and puberty. During these years, which usually began at the age of fifteen or so and were deemed to end either with the onset of puberty or the twenty-fifth year- whichever came first-drow children at last became physically strong enough to begin to channel the forces of wizardly magic, and well-schooled enough to read and write the complicated Drowish language. Liriel, however, came to Xandra at the age of five, when she was little more than a babe. Although most dark elves felt the stirrings of their innate, spell-like drow powers in early childhood, Liriel already possessed a formidable command of her magical heritage, and furthermore, she could already read the written runes of Drowish. Most importantly, she possessed in extraordinary measure the inborn talent needed to make a magic-wielding drow into a true wizard. In a remarkably short time, the tiny child had learned to read simple spell scrolls, reproduce the arcane marks, and commit fairly complex spells to memory. Xandra was ecstatic. Liriel instantly became her pride, her pet, her indulged and-almost-beloved fosterling.

And thus she had remained, for nearly five years. At that point, the child began to pull ahead of the Shobalar's Ascharlaxten-aged students. Xandra began to worry. When Liriel's abilities surpassed those of the much-older Bythnara, Xandra's own daughter, Xandra knew resentment. When the Baenre girl began to wield spells that would challenge the abilities of the lesser Shobalar wizards, Xandra's resentment hardened into the cold, competitive hatred a drow female held for her peers. When young Liriel gained her full height and began to fulfill her childhood promise of extraordinary beauty to come, Xandra simmered with a deep and very personal envy. And when the little wench's growing interest in the male soldiers and servants of House Shobalar made it apparent that she was entering her Ascharlaxten, Xandra saw an opportunity and plotted a dramatic-and final-end to Liriel's education.

It was a fairly typical progression, as drow relationships went, made unusual only by the sheer force of Xandra's animosity and the lengths she was willing to go to assuage her burning resentment of Gromph Baenre's too-talented daughter.

This, then, was the succession of events that had brought Xandra to the streets of Mantol-Derith. Despite her urgent need, the drow wizard could not help marveling at the sights that surrounded her. Xandra had never before stepped outside of the vast cavern that held Menzoberranzan, and this strange and exotic marketplace bore little resemblance to her home city.

Mantol-Derith was set in a vast natural grotto, a cavern that had been carved in distant eons by restless waters, which were even now busily at work. Xandra was accustomed to the staid black depths of Menzoberranzan's Lake Donigarten, and the deep, silent wells that were the carefully guarded treasures of each noble household.

Here in Mantol-Derith, water was a living and vital force. Indeed, the cavern's dominant sound was that of moving water: waterfalls splashed down the grotto walls and fell from chutes from the high-domed cavern ceiling, fountains played softly in the small pools that seemed to be around every turn, bubbling streams cut through the cavern.

Apart from the gentle splash and gurgle that echoed ceaselessly through the grotto, the market city was strangely silent. Mantol Derith was not a bustling bazaar, but a place for clandestine deals, shrewd negotiations.

Nor was it particularly crowded. By the best reckoning Xandra could get, there were fewer than

two hundred individuals in the entire cavern. The soft murmur of voices and the occasional, muted click of boots upon the gem-crusted paths gave little evidence of even that many inhabitants.

Light was far more plentiful than sound. A few dim lanterns were enough to set the whole cavern asparkle, for the walls were encrusted with multicolored crystals and gems. Bright stonework was everywhere: the walls containing fountain pools were wondrous mosaics fashioned from semiprecious gems, the bridges that spanned the stream were carved-or perhaps grown- from crystal, the walkways were paved with flat-cut gemstones. At the moment, Xandra's slippers whispered against a path fashioned from brilliant green malachite. It was unnerving, even for a drow accustomed to the splendors of Menzoberranzan, to tread upon such wealth.

At least the air felt familiar to the subterranean elf. Moist and heavy, it was, and dominated by the scent of mushrooms. Groves of giant fungi ringed the central market. Beneath the enormous, fluted caps, merchants had set up small stalls offering a variety of goods. Perfumes, aromatic woods, spices, and exotic sweetly scented fruits-which had become a fashionable indulgence to the Underdark's wealthy-added piquant notes of fragrance to the damp air.

To Xandra, the strangest thing about this marketplace was the apparent truce that existed among the various warring races who did business here. Mingling among the stalls and passing each other peaceably on the streets were the stone-colored deep gnomes known as svirfneblin; the deep-dwelling, dark-hearted duergar; a few unsavory merchants from the surface worlds; and, of course, the drow. At the four corners of the cavern, vast warehouses had been excavated to provide storage as well as separate housing for the four factions: svirfneblin, drow, duergar, and surface dwellers. Xandra's path took her toward the surface-dweller cavern.

The sound of rushing water intensified as Xandra neared her goal, for the corner of the marketplace that sold goods from the Lands of Light was located near the largest waterfall. The air was especially damp here, and the stalls and tables were draped with canvas to keep out the pervasive mist.

Moisture pooled on the rocky floor of the grotto and dampened the wools and furs worn by the surface dwellers who clustered here-a motley collection of ores, ogres, humans, and various combinations thereof.

Xandra grimaced and pulled the folds of her cloak over the lower half of her face to ward off the fetid odor. She scanned the bustling, smelly crowd for the man who fit the description she'd been given.

Apparently finding a drow female in such a crowd was a simpler task than singling out one human; from the depths of one long tentlike structure came a low, melodious voice, calling the wizard properly by her name and title. Xandra turned toward the sound, startled to hear a drow voice in such a sordid setting.

But the small, stooped figure that hobbled toward her was that of a human male.

The man was old by the measure of humankind, with white hair, a dark and weathered face, and a slow, faltering tread. He had not gone unscathed by his years- a cane aided his faltering steps, and a dark patch covered his left eye. These infirmities did not seem to have dimmed the man's pride or hampered his success; he displayed ample evidence of both.

The cane was carved from lustrous wood and ornamented with gems and gilding. Over a silvered tunic of fine silk, he wore a cape embroidered with gold thread and fastened with a diamond neck clasp. Gems the size of laplizard eggs glittered on his fingers and at his throat. His smile was both welcoming and confident- that of a male who possessed much and was well satisfied with his own measure.

"Hadrogh Prohl?" Xandra inquired.

The merchant bowed. "At your service, Mistress Shobalar," he said in fluent but badly accented Drowish.

"You know of me. Then you must also have some idea what I need."

"But of course, Mistress, and I will be pleased to assist you in whatever way I can. The presence of so noble a lady honors this establishment. Please, step this way," he said, moving aside so that she could enter the canvas pavilion.

Hadrogh's words were correct, his manner proper almost to the point of being obsequious-which was, of course, the prudent approach to take when dealing with drow females of stature. Even so, something about the merchant struck Xandra as not quite right. To all appearances, he seemed

at ease-friendly, relaxed to the point of being casual, even unobservant. In other words, a naive and utter fool. How such a man had survived so long in the tunnels of the Underdark was a mystery to the Shobalar wizard. And yet, she noted that Hadrogh, unlike most humans, did not require the punishing light of torches and lanterns.

His tent was comfortably dark, but he had no apparent difficulty negotiating his way through the maze of crates and tables that held his wares.

A curious Xandra whispered the words to a simple spell, one that would yield some answers about the man's nature and the magic he might carry. She was not entirely surprised when the seeking magic skittered off the merchant; either he was astute enough to carry something that deflected magical inquiry, or he possessed an innate magical immunity that nearly matched her own.

Xandra had her suspicions about the merchant's origins, suspicions that were too appalling to voice, but she did not doubt that this "human" was quite at home in the Underdark, and quite capable of taking care of himself, despite his fragile, aged facade.

The half-drow merchant-for Xandra's suspicions were indeed correct-appeared to be unaware of the female's scrutiny. He led the way to the very back of the canvas pavilion. Here stood a row of large cages, each with a single occupant. Hadrogh swept a hand toward them, and then stepped back so that Xandra could examine the merchandise as she would.

The wizard walked slowly along the row of cages, examining the exotic creatures who were destined for slavery. There were no shortage of slaves to be had in the Underdark, but the status-conscious dark elves were ever eager to acquire new and unusual possessions, and there was a high demand for servants brought from the Lands of Light. Halfling females were prized as ladies' maids for their deft hands and their skill at weaving, curling, and twisting hair into elaborate works of art. Mountain dwarves, who possessed a finer touch with weapons and jewels than their duergar kin, were considered hard to manage but well worth the trouble it took to keep them.

Humans were useful as beasts of burden and as sources of spells and potions unknown Below. Exotic beasts were popular, too. A few of the more ostentatious drow kept them as pets or displayed them in small private zoos. Some of these animals found their way to the arena in the Manyfolks district of Menzoberranzan. There, drow who possessed a taste for vicarious slaughter gathered to watch and wager while dangerous beasts fought each other, slaves of various races, and even drow-soldiers eager to prove their battle prowess or mercenaries who coveted the handful of coins and the fleeting fame that were the survivors' reward.

Hadrogh could supply slaves or beasts to meet almost any taste. Xandra nodded with satisfaction as she eyed the collection; indeed, she had been well served by the informant who'd sent her to this half-breed merchant.

"I was not told, my lady, what manner of slave you required. If you would describe your needs, perhaps I could guide your selection," Hadrogh offered.

A strange light entered the wizard's crimson eyes. "Not slaves," she corrected him. "Prey."

"Ah." The merchant seemed not at all surprised by this grim pronouncement. "The Bleeding, I take it?"

Xandra nodded absently. The Bleeding was a uniquely drow ritual, a rite of passage in which young dark elves were required to hunt and kill an intelligent or dangerous creature, preferably one native to the Lands of Light. Surface raids were one means of accomplishing this task, but it was not unusual for these hunts to take place in the tunnels of the wild Underdark, provided suitable captives could be acquired. Never had the selection of the ritual prey been so important, and Xandra looked over the prospective choices carefully.

Her crimson eyes lingered longingly on the huddled form of a pale-skinned, golden-haired elven child. The hate-filled drow bore a special enmity for their surface kindred. Faerie elves, as the light-dwelling elves were called, were the preferred target of those Bleeding ceremonies that took the form of a raid, but they were seldom hunted Below. Captured faeries could will themselves to die, and most did so long before they reached these dark caverns.

Accordingly, there would be great prestige in obtaining such rare quarry for the ritual hunt.

Regretfully Xandra shook her head.

Although the boy-child was certainly old enough to provide sport-he was probably near the age of the drow who would hunt him-his glazed, haunted eyes suggested otherwise.

The young faerie elf seemed oblivious to his surroundings; his gaze was fixed upon some

nightmare-filled world that only he inhabited. True, the boy-child would command a fabulous price; there were many drow who would pay dearly for the pleasure of destroying even so pitiful a faerie. Xandra, however, was in need of deadlier prey.

She walked over to the next cage, in which prowled a magnificent catlike beast with tawny fur and wings like those of a deepbat. As the creature paced the cage, its tail-which was long and supple and tipped with iron spikes-lashed about furiously, clanging each time it hit the bars. The beast's hideous, humanoid face was contorted with fury, and the eyes that burned into Xandra's were bright with hunger and hatred.

Now this was promising! Not wishing to appear too interested-which would certainly add many gold pieces to the asking price-Xandra turned to the merchant and lifted one eyebrow in a skeptical, questioning arch.

"This is a mantichore. A fearsome monster," wheedled Hadrogh. "The creature is driven by a powerful hunger for human flesh-though certainly it would not be adverse to dining upon drow, if such is your desire! By which," he added hastily, "I meant only to imply that the beast's voracious nature would add excitement to the hunt. The mantichore is itself a hunter, and a worthy opponent!"

Xandra looked the thing over, noting with approval its daggerlike claws and fangs. "Intelligent?" "Cunning, certainly."

"But is it capable of devising strategy and discerning counterstrategy, to the third and fourth levels?" the wizard persisted. "The youngling mage who will face her Blooding is formidable; I need prey that will truly test her abilities."

The merchant spread his hands and shrugged. "Strength and hunger are also mighty weapons. These the mantichore has in abundance."

"Since you have not said otherwise, I assume it wields no magic," the wizard observed. "Has it at least some natural resistance to spellcasting?"

"Alas, none. What you ask, great lady, are things that belong rightfully to the drow. Such powers are difficult to find in lesser beings," the merchant said in a tone that was carefully calculated to flatter and appease.

Xandra sniffed and turned to the next cage, where an enormous, white-furred creature gnawed audibly on a haunch of rothe.

The thing was a bit like a quaggoth-a bearlike beast native to the Underdark-except for its pointed head and strong, musky odor.

"No, a yeti is not quite right for your purposes," Hadrogh said thoughtfully. "Your young wizard could track such a beast by its scent alone!"

Suddenly the merchant's uncovered eye lit up, and he snapped his fingers. "But wait! It may be that I have precisely what you require."

He bustled off, returning in moments with a human male in tow.

Xandra's first response was disgust. The merchant seemed a canny sort, too knowledgeable in the ways of the drow to offer such inferior merchandise. Her scornful gaze swept over the human-noting his coarse, dwarflike form, the pale leathery skin of his bearded face, the odd tattoos showing through the stubble of gray hair that peppered his skull, the dusty robes of a bright red shade that would be considered tawdry even by one of the low-rent male companions who did business in the Eastmyr district.

But when Xandra met the captive's eyes-which were as green and hard as the finest malachite-the sneer melted from her lips. What she saw in those eyes stunned her: intelligence far beyond her expectations, pride, cunning, rage, and implacable hatred.

Hardly daring to hope, Xandra glanced at the man's hands. Yes, the wrists were crossed and bound together, the hands swathed in a thick cocoon of silken bandages. No doubt some of the fingers had been broken as well-such precautions were only prudent when dealing with captive spellcasters. No matter. The powerful clerics of House Shobalar could heal such injuries soon enough.

"A wizard," she stated, keeping her voice carefully neutral.

"A powerful wizard," the merchant emphasized.

"We shall see," Xandra murmured. "Unbind him-I would test his skills."

Hadrogh, to his credit, did not try to dissuade the female. The merchant quickly unbound the human's hands. He even lit a pair of small candles, providing enough dim light so that the man

could see.

The red-robed man flexed his fingers painfully. Xandra noted that the human's hands seemed stiff, but unharmed. She tossed an inquiring glare at the merchant.

"An amulet of containment," Hadrogh explained, pointing to the collar of gold that tightly encircled the man's neck. "It is a magical shield that keeps the wizard from casting any of the spells he has learned and committed to memory. He can, however, learn and cast new spells. His mind is intact, as are his remembered spells. As are his hands, for that matter. Admittedly, this is a costly method of transporting magically-gifted slaves, but my reputation demands that I deliver undamaged merchandise."

A rare smile broke across Xandra's face. She had never heard of such an arrangement, but it was ideally suited to her purposes.

Cunning, quickness of mind, and magical aptitude) were the qualities she needed. If the human passed these tests, she could teach him what he needed to know. That his mind could be searched at some later time, and its store of magical knowledge plundered for her own use, was a bonus. |

The dwarf quickly removed three small items from the bag at her waist and showed them to the watchful human. Slowly, she moved through the gestures and spoke the words of a simple spell. In response to her casting, a small globe of darkness settled over one of the candles, completely blotting out its light. |

Xandra handed an identical set of spell components) to the human. "Now you," she commanded. The red-clad wizard obviously understood what was expected of him. Pride and anger darkened his face, but only for a moment-the lure of an unlearned spell proved too strong for him to resist. Slowly, with painstaking care, he mirrored Xandra's gestures and mimicked her words. The second candle flickered, then dimmed. Its flame was still faintly visible through the gray fog that had suddenly surrounded it. |

"The human shows promise," the Shobalar wizard admitted. It was unusual for any wizard to reproduce a spell-even imperfectly-without having seen and studied the magical symbols. "His pronunciation is deplorable, though, and will continue to hamper his progress. You wouldn't by chance have a wizard in stock who can speak Drowish? Or even Undercommon? Such would be easier to train." 3

Hadrogh bowed deeply and hurried out of sight. A moment later he returned, alone, but with one hand held palm-up and outstretched so that Xandra could see he had another solution to suggest. The faint light of the fog-shrouded candle glimmered on the two tiny silver earrings in his hand, each in the form of a half-circle.

"To translate speech," the merchant explained. "One pierces the ear, so that he might understand, the other his mouth, so that he might be understood. May I demonstrate?"

When Xandra nodded, the merchant lifted his empty hand and snapped his fingers twice.

Two half-ore guards hastened to his side. They seized the human wizard and held him fast while Hadrogh pressed the rings' tiny metal spikes through the man's earlobe and the left side of his upper lip. Immediately the human gave off a string of Drowish curses, predications so colorful and virulent that an astonished Hadrogh fell back a step.

Xandra laughed delightedly.

"How much?" she demanded.

The merchant named an enormous price, hastening to assure Xandra that the figure named included the magical collar and rings. The dwarf wizard rapidly estimated the cost of these items, added the potential worth of the spells she would steal from this human, and threw in the death of Liriel Baenre.

"A bargain," Xandra said with dark satisfaction.

Chapter Two

Shades of Crimson

Tresk Mulander paced the floor of his cell, his trailing scarlet robes whispering behind him. It had not been easy, persuading the Mistress to provide him with the bright silk garments, but he was a Red Wizard and so he would remain, however far he might be from his native Thay.

Nearly two years had passed since Mulander had first encountered Xandra Shobalar and begun his strange apprenticeship. Although he had not once left this room-a large chamber carved from

solid rock and vented only by tiny openings in the ceiling, well above his reach-he had not been badly treated. He had food and wine in plenty, whatever comforts he required, and, most importantly, an intense and thorough education in the magic of the Underdark. It was an opportunity that many of his peers would have seized without a qualm, and in truth, Mulander did not entirely regret his fate.

The Red Wizard was a necromancer, a powerful member of the Researcher faction-that group of wizards who were content to leave Thay's boundaries as they were and who instead sought ever stronger and more fearsome magics. Utterly devoted to the principles of the Researchers, Mulander was still somewhat of an oddity among his peers, for he was one of a very few high-ranking wizards whose blood was not solely that of the ruling Mulan race.

His father's father had been Rashemi, and his inheritance from his grandsire was a thick, muscled body and a luxuriant crop of facial hair. From his wizard mother had come his talent and ambition, as well as the height and the sallow complexion that were considered marks of nobility in Thay.

Mulander's cold, gemlike green eyes and narrow scimitar nose lent him a terrifying aspect, and although he conformed to custom and affected baldness, he was rather vain of the thick, long gray beard that set him apart from the nearly hairless Mulan. In all, he was an imposing man, who carried his sixty winters with ease upon his broad, proud shoulders. He was strong of body and mind and magic; the passing years had only served to thin his graying hair, which he regretted not at all, for it made the daily task of shaving his pate less onerous.

Mistress Shobalar had indulged him in this, as well, providing him with incredibly keen-edged shaving gear and a halfling servant to do the honors. Indeed, the drow female seemed fascinated by the tattoos that covered Mulander's head. As well she should be: each mark was a magical rune that, when activated with the appropriate spell, could transform bits of dead matter into fearsome magical servants. Provide him with a corpse, and he would produce an army. Or could, were he able to access his necromantic magic!

Mulander grimaced and slipped a finger under the gold collar that encircled his neck-and imprisoned his Art.

"In time, you will be permitted to remove that," said a cool voice behind him.

The Red Wizard jolted, then turned to face Xandra Shobalar. Even after two years, her sudden arrivals unnerved him-as they were no doubt intended to do.

But today the implied promise in the drow's words banished his usual resentment.

"When?"

"In time," Xandra repeated. She strolled over to a deep chair and, in a leisurely fashion, seated herself. Two years was not a long time in the life of a drow, but she was well aware of the human's impatience, and she intended to enjoy it.

Enjoyable, too, was the murderous rage, barely contained, in the Red Wizard's eyes.

Xandra entertained herself with fantasies of seeing that wrath unleashed upon her Baenre fosterling.

At last, the long-anticipated day was nearly at hand.

"You have learned well," the Mistress began. "Soon you will have a chance to test your newfound skills. Succeed, and the reward will be great."

The drow plucked a tiny golden key from her bodice and held it high. She cocked her head to one side and sent the Red Wizard a cold, taunting smile. Mulander's eyes widened with realization, then gleamed with an emotion that went far beyond greed. His intense, hungry gaze followed the key as Xandra slowly lowered it and tucked it back into its intimate hiding place.

"I see that you understand what this is. Would you like to know what you must do to earn it?" she asked coyly.

A shudder of revulsion shimmered down the Red Wizard's spine. He fervently hoped that his flowing robes hid his instinctive-and potentially fatal- response. He knew immediately that it had not; Xandra's smile widened and grew mocking.

"Not this time, dear Mulander," she purred. "I have another sort of adventure in mind for you."

The Mistress quickly described the rite of the Bleeding, the ritual hunt that each young elf was required to undergo before being accounted a true drow. Mulander listened with growing dismay.

"And I am to be this prey," he said in a dazed tone.

Anger flashed in Xandra's eyes like crimson fire. "Do not be a fool! You must prevail! Would I

have gone to such trouble and expense otherwise?"

"A spell battle," he muttered, beginning to understand. "You have been preparing me for a spell battle! And the spells you have taught me?"

"They represent all the offensive spells your young opponent knows, as well as the appropriate counter-spells." Xandra leaned forward, and her face was deadly serious. "You will not see me again. You will have a new tutor for perhaps thirty cycles of Narbondel. A battle wizard. He will work with you daily and instruct you in the tactics of drow warfare. Learn all he has to teach during the course of this session."

"For he will not live to give another lesson," Mulander reasoned.

Xandra smiled. "How astute. For a human, you possess a most promising streak of duplicity! But you are among drow, and you have much to learn about subtlety and treachery."

The wizard bristled. "We in Thay are no strangers to treachery! No wizard could survive to my age, much less reach my position, without such skills!"

"Really?" The drow's voiced dripped with sarcasm. "If that is the case, then how did you come to be here?"

Mulander responded only with a sullen glare, but the Mistress of Magic did not seem to require an answer. "You possess a great deal of very interesting magic," she said, complimenting him.

"More than I would have guessed a human capable of wielding, and judging from your pride, more than most of your peers have achieved. How, then, could you have been overcome and sold into slavery, but by treachery?"

Not waiting for a response, Xandra rose from her chair. "These are the terms I offer you," she said, her manner suddenly all business. "At the proper time, you will be taken into the wild tunnels surrounding this city-as part of your preparations, you will be given a map of the area to commit to memory. There you will confront a fledgling wizard, a drow female marked by her golden eyes. She will carry the key that will release you from that collar. You must defeat her in spell battle-do whatever you must to ensure that she does not survive.

"You may then take the key from her body, and go wheresoever you will. The girl will be alone, and you will not be pursued. It may be that you can find your way to the Lands of Light-if indeed there is still a place for you there. If not, with the spells I have taught you, as well as the return of your own death magic, you should be able to live and thrive Below."

Mulander listened stoically, carefully masking the sudden bright surge of hope that the drow's words awoke in his heart. For all he knew, this could be an elaborate trap, and he refused to display his elation for this wretched female's amusement.

Or did she perhaps expect him to show fear?

If that was the case, she would also be disappointed. He knew none. The Red Wizard did not for one moment doubt the outcome of this contest, for he knew the full measure of his powers, even if Xandra Shobalar did not.

He was more than capable of defeating an elven girl in spell battle-he would kill the little wench and set himself up in some hidden cavern of this underground world, a place surrounded by magics of warding and misdirection that would keep even the powerful dark elves from his door. This he would do, for the Shobalar wizard was right about one thing-there was no welcome awaiting Mulander in Thay, and no welcome for Red Wizards in any land other than Thay. Another of Xandra's thrusts had found its mark, as well: he had indeed been undone through treachery. Mulander had been betrayed by his young apprentice, as he himself had betrayed his own master. It occurred to him, suddenly, to wonder what treachery Xandra's young prodigy might have in store for her mistress!

"You are smiling," the drow observed. "My terms are to your liking?"

"Very much so," Mulander said, thinking it prudent to keep his fantasies to himself.

"Then let me add to your enjoyment," Xandra said softly. She advanced upon the man and reached up to place one slim black hand against his jaw. His instinctive flinch, and his effort to disguise the response, seemed to amuse her. She swayed closer, her slim body just barely brushing against his robes. Her crimson eyes burned up into his, and Mulander felt a tendril of compelling magic creep into his mind.

"Tell me truly, Mulander," she said-and her words were mocking, for they both knew that the spell she cast upon him would allow him to speak nothing but truth. "Do you hate me so very much?"

Mulander held her gaze. "With all my soul!" he vowed, with more passion than he had ever before

displayed-more than he knew he possessed.

"Good," Xandra breathed. She raised both arms high and clasped her hands behind his neck; then she floated upward until her eyes were on a level with the much taller man. "Then remember my face as you hunt the girl, and remember this."

The drow pressed her lips to Mulander's in a macabre parody of a kiss. Her passion was like his: it was all hatred and pride.

Her kiss, like many that he himself had forced upon the youths and maidens apprenticed to him, was a claim of total ownership, a gesture of cruelty and utter contempt that was more painful to the proud man than a dagger's thrust. Even so, he winced when the drow's teeth sank deep into his lower lip.

Xandra abruptly released him and floated away, suspended in the air like a dark wraith and smiling coldly as she wiped a drop of his blood from her mouth.

"Remember," she admonished him, and then she vanished as suddenly as she had come.

Left alone in his cell, Tresk Mulander nodded grimly. He would long remember Xandra Shobalar, and for as long as he lived he would pray to every dark god whose name he knew that her death would be slow and painful and ignominious.

In the meanwhile, he would vent some of his seething hatred upon the other drow wench who presumed to look upon him-him, a Red Wizard and a master of necromancy!-as prey.

"Let the hunt begin," Mulander said, and his bloodied lips curved in a grim smile as he savored the secret he had hoarded from Xandra Shobalar, and that he would soon unleash upon her young student.

Chapter Three

A Grand Adventure

The door of Bythnara Shobalar's bedchamber thudded solidly against the wall, flung open with an exuberance that could herald only one person. Bythnara did not look up from the book she was reading, did not so much as flinch. By now she was too accustomed to the irrepressible Baenre brat to show much of a reaction.

But it was impossible to ignore Liriel for long. The elfmaid spun into their shared bedchamber, her arms out wide and her wild mane of white hair flying as she whirled and leapt in an ecstatic little dance.

The older girl eyed her resignedly. "Who cast a dervish spell on you?" she inquired in a sour tone. Liriel abruptly halted her dance and flung her arms around her chambermate. "Oh, Bythnara! I am to undergo the Bleeding ritual at last! Mistress just said!"

The Shobalar female disentangled herself as inconspicuously as possible as she rose from her chair, and she looked around for some pretense that would excuse her for wriggling out of the younger girl's impulsive embrace. On the far side of the room, a pair of woolen treads lay crumpled on the floor; Liriel tended to treat her clothes with the same blithe disregard that a snake shows its outgrown and abandoned skin. Bythnara was forever picking up after the untidy little wench. Doing so now allowed her to put as much space as possible between herself and the unwanted affection lavished upon her by her young rival.

"And high time it is," the Shobalar wizard-in-training said bluntly as she smoothed and folded the discarded garment. "You will soon be eighteen, and you are already well into your Ascharlexten Decade. I've often wondered why my Mistress Mother has waited so long!"

"As have I," Liriel said frankly. "But Xandra explained it to me. She said that she could not initiate the rite until she had found exactly the right quarry, one that would truly test my skills. Think of it! A grand and gallant hunt-an adventure in the wild tunnels of the Dark Dominion!" she exulted, flinging herself down on her cot with a gusty sigh of satisfaction.

"Mistress Xandra," Bythnara coldly corrected her. She knew, as did everyone in House Shobalar, that Liriel Baenre was to be treated with utmost respect, but even the archmage's daughter was required to observe certain protocols.

"Mistress Xandra," the girl echoed obligingly. She rolled over onto her stomach and propped up her chin in both hands. "I wonder what I shall hunt," she said in a dreamy tone. "There are so many wondrous and fearsome beasts roaming the Lands of Light! I have been reading about them," she confided with a grin. "Maybe a great wild cat with a black-and-gold striped pelt, or a huge brown bear-which is rather like a four-legged quaggoth. Or even a fire-belching dragon!"

she concluded, giggling a bit at her own absurdity.

"We can only hope," Bythnara muttered.

If Liriel heard her chambermate's bitter comment, she gave no indication. "Whatever the quarry, I shall meet it with equal force," she vowed. "I will use weapons that correspond to its natural attacks and defenses: dagger against claw, arrow against stooping attack. No fireballs, no venom clouds, no transforming it into an ebony statue!"

"You know that spell?" the Shobalar demanded, her face and voice utterly aghast. It was a casting that required considerable power, an irreversible transformation, and a favorite punitive tool of the Baenre priestesses who ruled in the Academy. The possibility that this impulsive child could wield such a spell was appalling, considering that Bythnara had insulted the Baenre girl twice since she'd entered the room. By the standards of Menzoberranzan, this was more than ample justification for such retribution!

But Liriel merely tossed her chambermate a mischievous grin. The young wizard sniffed and turned away. She had known Liriel for twelve years, but she had never reconciled herself to the girl's good-natured teasing.

Liriel loved to laugh, and she loved to have others laugh with her. Since few drow shared her particular brand of humor, she had recently taken to playing little pranks for the amusement of the other students.

Bythnara had never been the recipient of these, but neither did she find them particularly enjoyable. Life was a grim, serious business, and magic an Art to be mastered, not a child's plaything. The fact that this particular "child" possessed a command of magic greater than her own rankled deeply with the proud female.

Nor was this the only thing that stoked Bythnara's jealousy. Mistress Xandra, Bythnara's own mother, had always showed special favor to the Baenre girl- favor that often bordered on affection. This, Bythnara would never forget, and never forgive. Neither was she pleased by the fact that her own male companions had a hard time remembering their place and their purpose whenever the golden-eyed wench was about.

Bythnara was twenty-eight and in ripe early adolescence; Liriel was in many ways still a child. Even so, there was more than enough promise in the girl's face and form to draw masculine eyes. Rumor had it that Liriel was beginning to return these attentions, and that she reveled in such sport with her characteristic, playful abandon. This, too, Bythnara disapproved, although exactly why that was, she could not say.

"Will you come to my coming-of-age ceremony?" Liriel asked with a touch of wistfulness in her voice. "After the ritual, I mean."

"Of course. It is required."

This time Bythnara's curt remark did earn a response- an almost imperceptible wince. But Liriel recovered quickly, so quickly that the older female barely had time to enjoy her victory. A shuttered expression came over the Baenre girl's face, and she lifted one shoulder in a casual shrug.

"So it is," she said evenly. "I faintly remember that I was required to attend yours, several years back. What was your quarry?"

"A goblin," Bythnara said stiffly. This was a sore spot with her, for goblins were as a rule accounted neither intelligent nor particularly dangerous. She had dispatched the creature easily enough with a spell of holding and a sharp knife. Her own Blooding had been mere routine, not the grand adventure of which Liriel dreamed. Grand adventure, indeed! The girl was impossibly naive!

Or was she? With a sudden jolt, it occurred to Bythnara that Liriel's last question had hardly been ingenuous. Few verbal thrusts could have hit the mark more squarely. Her eyes settled on the girl and narrowed dangerously.

Again Liriel shrugged. "What was it that Matron Hinkutes'nat said in chapel a darkcycle or two past? 'The drow culture is one of constant change, and so we must either adapt or die.' "

Her tone was light, and there was nothing in her face or her words that could give Bythnara reasonable cause for complaint.

Yet Liriel was clearly, subtly, giving notice that she had long been aware of Bythnara's verbal thrusts, and that henceforth she would not take them in silence, but parry and riposte.

It was well done; even the seething Bythnara had to admit that. If adaptability was indeed the key

to survival, then this seemingly idealistic little wench would probably live to be as ancient as her wretched grandame, old Matron Baenre herself!

As for Bythnara, she found herself at a complete and disconcerting lack for words.

A tentative knock on the open door relieved Bythnara of the need to respond.

She turned to face one of her mother's servants, a highly decorative young drow male discarded by some lesser house. In perfunctory fashion, he offered the required bow to the Shobalar female, and then turned his attention upon the younger girl.

"You are wanted, Princess," the male said, addressing Liriel by the proper formal title for a young female of the First House.

Later, the girl would no doubt be accorded more prestigious titles: archmage, if Xandra had her way, or wizard, or priestess, or even-Lloth forbid-matron. Princess was a title of birth, not accomplishment. Even so, Bythnara begrudged it. She hustled the royal brat and the handsome messenger out of her room with scant ceremony and closed the door firmly behind them.

Liriel's shoulders rose and fell in a long sigh. The servant, who was about her own age and who knew Bythnara far better than he cared to, cast her a look that bordered on sympathy.

"What does Xandra want now?" she asked resignedly as they made their way toward the apartment that housed the Mistress of Magic.

The servant cast furtive glances up and down the corridors before answering. "The archmage sent for you. His servant awaits you in Mistress Xandra's chambers even now."

Liriel stopped in midstride. "My father?"

"Gromph Baenre, archmage of Menzoberranzan," the male affirmed.

Once again Liriel reached for "the mask"-her private term for the expression she had practiced and perfected in front of her looking glass: the insouciant little smile, eyes that expressed nothing but a bit of cynical amusement. Yet behind her flippant facade, the girl's mind whirled with a thousand questions.

Drow life was full of complexities and contradictions, but in Liriel's experience, nothing was more complicated than her feelings for her drow sire. She revered and resented and adored and feared and hated and longed for her father-all at once, and all from a distance. And as far as Liriel could tell, every one of these emotions was entirely unrequited. The great archmage of Menzoberranzan was an utter mystery to her.

Gromph Baenre was without question her true sire, but drow lineage was traced through the females. The archmage had gone against custom and adopted his daughter into the Baenre clan-at great personal cost to Liriel-and then promptly abandoned her to the Shobalar's care.

What could Gromph Baenre want of her now? It had been years since she had heard from him, although his servants regularly saw that the Shobalar were recompensed for her keep and training and ensured that she had pocket money to spend at her infrequent outings to the Bazaar. In Liriel's opinion, this personal summons could only mean trouble. Yet what had she done? Or, more to the point, which of her escapades had been discovered and reported?

Then a new possibility occurred to her, one so full of hope and promise that "the mask" dissipated like spent faerie fire. A bubble of joyous laughter burst from the elfmaid, and she threw her arms around the astonished-and highly gratified-young male.

After the Bleeding, she would be accounted a true drow! Perhaps now Gromph would deem her worthy of his attention, perhaps even take over her training himself!

Surely he had heard of her progress, and knew that there was little more for her to learn in House Shobalar.

That must be it! concluded Liriel as she wriggled out of the servant's increasingly enthusiastic embrace. She set out at a brisk pace for Xandra's chambers, spurred on by the rarest of all drow emotions: hope.

No dark-elven male took much notice of his children, but soon Liriel would be a child no more, and ready for the next level of magical training. Usually that would involve the Academy, but she was far too young for that. Surely Gromph had devised another plan for her future!

Liriel's shining anticipation dimmed at the sight of her father's messenger: an elf-sized stone golem that was only too familiar. The magical construct was part of her earliest and most terrible memory. Yet even the appearance of the deadly messenger could not banish entirely her joy, or silence the delightful possibility that sang through her heart: perhaps her father wanted her at last! At Xandra's insistence, a full octate patrol of spider-mounted soldiers escorted Liriel and the

golem to the fashionable Narbondellyn district, where Gromph Baenre kept a private home. For once, Liriel rode past the Darkspires without marveling at the fanglike formations of black rock. For once, she did not notice the handsome captain of the guard, who stood this watch at the gates of the Horlbar compound. She even passed by the elegant little shops that sold perfumes and whisper-soft silk garments and magical figurines and other fascinating wares, without sparing them a single longing glance.

What were such things, compared with even a moment of her father's time?

As eager as she was, however, Liriel had to steel herself for the first glimpse of Gromph Baenre's mansion. She had been born there, and had spent the first five years of her life in the luxurious apartments of her mother, Sosdrielle Vandree, who had served for many years as Gromph's mistress. It had been a cozy world, just Liriel and her mother and the few servants who tended them. Liriel had since come to understand that Sosdrielle—who had been a rare beauty, but who lacked both the magical talent and the deadly ambition needed to excel in Menzoberranzan—had doted upon her child and had made Liriel the beloved center of her world. Despite this, or perhaps, because of this, Liriel had not been able to bring herself to look upon her first home since the day she left it, more than twelve years before.

Carved from the heart of an enormous stalactite, the archmage's private home was reputedly warded about with more magic than any other two wizards in the city could muster between them. Liriel slid down from her spider mount—a distinctively Shobalar means of conveyance—and followed the silent and deadly golem toward the black structure.

The stone golem touched one of the moving runes that writhed and shifted on the dark wall; a door appeared at once. Gesturing for Liriel to follow, the golem disappeared inside.

The young drow took a deep breath and fell in behind the servant. She remembered, vaguely, the way to Gromph Baenre's private study. Here she had first met her father, and had first discovered her talent for and love of wizardry. It seemed fitting that she begin the next phase of her life here, as well.

Gromph Baenre looked up when she entered his study. His amber eyes, so like her own, regarded her coolly.

"Please, sit down," he invited her, gesturing with one elegant, long-fingered hand toward a chair.

"We have much to discuss."

Liriel quietly did as she was bid. The archmage did not speak at once, and for a long moment she was content merely to study him. He looked exactly as she remembered: austere yet handsome, a drow male in his magnificent prime. This was not surprising, considering how slowly dark elves aged, yet Gromph was reputed to have witnessed the birth and death of seven centuries.

Protocol demanded that Liriel wait for the high-ranking wizard to speak first, but after several silent moments she could bear no more. "I am to undergo the Bleeding," she announced with pride.

The archmage nodded somberly. "As I have heard. You will remain here in my home until the time for the ritual, for there is much to learn and little time for preparations."

Liriel's brows plunged into a frown of puzzlement. Had she not been doing just that these past twelve years? Had she not gained basic but powerful skills in battle magic and drow weaponry? She had little interest in the sword, but no one she knew could out-shoot her with the hand bow, or best her with thrown weapons! Surely she knew enough to emerge from the ritual with victorious and blooded hands!

A small, hard smile touched the archmage's lips. "There is much more to being a drow than engaging in crude slaughter. I am not entirely certain, however, that Xandra Shobalar remembers this basic fact!"

These cryptic words troubled Liriel. "Sir?"

Gromph did not bother to explain himself. He reached into a compartment under his desk and took from it a small, green bottle. "This is a vial of holding. It will capture and store any creature that the Shobalar Mistress pits against you."

"But the hunt!" Liriel protested.

The archmage's smile did not waver, but his eyes turned cold. "Do not be a fool," he said softly.

"If the hunt turns against you and your quarry gains the upper hand, you will capture it in this vial! You can spill its blood easily enough, and thus fulfill the letter of the ritual's requirements. Look—" he said as he twisted off the stopper and showed her the glistening mithril needle that thrust down

from it.

"Cap the vial, and you have slain your prey. All you need do is smash the vial, and the dead creature will lie before you, a dagger-the transmuted needle, of course-thrust through its heart or into its eye. You will carry an identical dagger to the opening ceremony, of course, to forestall any possible inquiries into the weapon that caused the creature's death. This dagger is magical and will dissipate when the mithril needle is blooded, to remove the possibility that it might be found discarded along your path. If pride is your concern, no one need know the manner of your quarry's death."

Feeling oddly betrayed, Liriel took the glass bottle and pressed the stopper firmly back into place. In truth, she found this unsporting solution appalling. But since the vial was a gift from her father, she searched her mind for something positive to say.

"Mistress Xandra will be fascinated by this," she offered in a dull voice, knowing well the Shobalar wizard's fondness for magical devices of any kind.

"She must not know of the vial, or of any of the spells you will learn in this place! Nor does she need to hear of your other, more dubious skills. Please, save that look of wide-eyed innocence to beguile the house guards," he said dryly. "I know only too well the mercenary captain who boasts that he taught a princess to throw knives as well as any tavern cutthroat alive! Though how you managed to slip past the guard-spiders that Matron Hinkutes'nat posts at every turn, and find your way through the city to that particular tavern, is beyond my imagination."

Liriel grinned wickedly. "I stumbled upon the tavern that first time, and Captain Jarlaxle knew me by my House medallion and indulged my wish to learn-of many things! But it is true that I have often fooled the spiders. Shall I tell you how?"

"Perhaps later. I must have your blood oath that this vial will be kept from Xandra's eyes."

"But why?" she persisted, truly perplexed by this demand.

Gromph studied his daughter for a long time. "How many young drow die during the Bleeding?" he asked at last.

"A few," Liriel admitted. "Surface raids often go wrong-the humans or faerie elves sometime learn of the attack in time to prepare, or they fight better than expected, or in larger numbers. And it is likely that from time to time a drow dagger slips between a youngling's ribs," she said matter-of-factly. "In those rites that are taken Below, sometimes initiates become lost in the wild Underdark, or stumble upon some monster that is beyond their skill with magic and weapons."

"And sometimes, they are slain by the very things they hunt," Gromph said.

This was a given; the girl shrugged, as if to ask what the point was.

"I do not desire to see any harm come to you. Xandra Shobalar may not share my good wishes," he said bluntly.

Liriel suddenly went cold. Many emotions simmered and danced deep within her, waiting for her to reach in and pluck one free-yet she truly felt none of them. Her tumultuous responses remained just beyond her touch, for she had no idea which one to chose.

How could Gromph suggest that Xandra Shobalar could betray her? The Mistress of Magic had raised her, lavishing more attention and indulgent favor upon her than most drow younglings ever dreamed of receiving! Apart from her own mother-who had given Liriel not only life, but a wonderful five-year cocoon of warmth and security and even love-Liriel believed that Xandra was the person most responsible for making her what she was. And that was saying a great deal.

Although Liriel could not remember her mother's face, she understood that she had received from Sosdrielle Vandree something that was rare among her kindred, something that nothing and no one could take from her. Not even Gromph Baenre, who had ordered her beloved mother's death twelve years ago!

Liriel stared at her father, too dumbfounded to realize that her churning thoughts were written clearly in her eyes.

"You do not trust me," the archmage stated in a voice absolutely devoid of emotion. "This is good-I was beginning to despair of your judgment. It may be that you will survive this ritual, after all. Now listen carefully as I describe the steps needed to activate the vial of holding."

Chapter Four

The Bleeding

The Bleeding ritual took place on the third darkcycle after Liriel's meeting with her father. She was

returned to House Shobalar as the day grew old, for all such rituals began at the dark hour of Narbondel.

When the great timepiece of Menzoberranzan dimmed to mark the hour of midnight, Liriel stood before Hinkutes'nat Alar Shobalar, the matron mother of the clan.

The young drow had had few dealings with the Shobalar matriarch, and she felt slightly unnerved by the dark and regal figure before her.

Hinkutes'nat was a high priestess of Lloth, as befitted a ruling matron, and she was typical of those who followed the ways of the drow's goddess, the Spider Queen. Her throne room was as grim and forbidding a lair as anything Liriel had ever seen. Shadows were everywhere, for the skulls of many Shobalar victims had been fashioned into faintly glowing lanterns that threw patterns of death upon every surface and cast ghastly purple highlights upon the dark faces assembled before the matron's throne.

A large cage stood in the middle of the chamber, ready to receive the prey for the Bleeding ceremony. It was surrounded on all four sides by the giant, magically bred spiders that formed the heart of the Shobalar guard. In fact, giant spiders stood guard everywhere- in every corner of the chamber, on each of the steps that led up to the throne dais, even suspended from the chamber's ceiling on long, glistening threads.

In all, the throne room was a fit setting for the Shobalar matriarch. Cold and treacherous, the matron resembled a spider holding court in the center of her own web.

She wore a black robe upon which webs had been embroidered in silver thread, and the gaze that she turned upon Liriel was as calm and pitiless as that of any arachnid that ever had lived.

She was spiderlike in character, as well: even among the treacherous drow, the Shobalar Matron had earned a reputation for the tangled nature of the deals she spun.

"You have prepared the prey?" the matron inquired of her third-born daughter.

"I have," Xandra said. "The youngling drow who stands before you shows great promise, as one would expect of a daughter of House Baenre. To offer her less than a true challenge would be an insult to the First Family."

Matron Hinkutes'nat lifted one eyebrow. "I see," she said dryly. "Well, that is your prerogative, and within the rules set for the Bleeding ritual. It is unlikely that recourse will be taken, but you understand that you will bear the brunt of any unpleasantness that might result?" When Xandra nodded grim acceptance, the matron again turned to Liriel. "And you, Princess, are you ready to begin?"

The Baenre girl dipped into a deep bow, doing her best to dim her shining eyes and school her face into expressionless calm.

Three days in Gromph's household had not quite destroyed her eagerness for this adventure.

"This, then, will be your prey," Mistress Xandra said. She lifted both arms high, and brought them down to her sides in a quick sweep. A faint crackle vibrated through the damp and heavy air of the chamber, and the bars of the cage flared with sudden fey light. Every eye in the room turned to behold the ritual quarry.

Liriel's heart pounded with excitement-she was certain that everyone could hear it!

Then the light surrounding the cage faded, and she was equally sure that all could feel the hard, cold hand that gripped her chest and muffled its restless rhythm.

Within the cage stood a human male garbed in robes of bright red. Liriel had seldom encountered humans and had few thoughts concerning them, but suddenly she found that she had no desire to slaughter this one. He was too elflike, too much like a real person!

"This is an outrage," she said in a low, angry voice. "I was led to believe that my Bleeding would be a test of skill and courage, a hunt involving some dangerous surface creature, such as a boar or a hydra!"

"If you misunderstood the nature of the Bleeding, it was through no fault of mine," Mistress Xandra retorted. "For years you have heard tales of surface raids. What did you think were slain-cattle? Prey is prey, whether it has two legs or four. You have attended the ceremonies; you know what has been required of those who have gone before you."

"I will not do this thing," Liriel said with a regal hauteur that would have done justice to Matron Baenre herself.

"You have no choice in the matter," Matron Hinkutes'nat pointed out. "It is the part of the mistress or matron to choose the prey, and to name the terms of the hunt."

"Proceed," she said, turning to her daughter.

Mistress Xandra permitted herself a smile. "The human wizard-for such he is-will be transported to a cavern in the Dark Dominions that lie to the southwest of Menzoberranzan. You, Liriel Baenre, will be escorted to a nearby tunnel. You must hunt and destroy the human, using any weapon at your disposal. Ten dark-cycles you have to accomplish this; we will not seek you before this time is up.

"But you must take this key," Xandra continued as she handed a tiny golden object to the girl. "I have strung it upon a chain-keep it on your person at all times. It is not our purpose that you come to grief: with this key, you can summon immediate aid from House Shobalar, should the need arise. You have much talent, and you have been well trained," the Mistress added in a less severe tone. "We have every confidence in your success."

The older female's apparent concern for her well-being gave Liriel a glimmer of hope.

"Mistress, I cannot slay this wizard!" she said in a despairing whisper, letting her eyes speak clearly of her distress. Surely Xandra, who had trained and fostered her, would understand how she felt and would lift this burden from her!

"You will kill, or you will be killed," the Shobalar wizard proclaimed. "That is the challenge of the Bleeding, and it is the reality of drow life!"

Xandra's voice was cold and even, but Liriel did not miss the glint in the wizard's red eyes.

Stunned and enlightened, Liriel stared at her trusted mentor.

Kill or be killed. There could be little doubt which outcome Xandra preferred.

Liriel tore her gaze away from the vindictive crimson stare and did her best to attend to the ceremony that followed. As she stood silently through the matron's ritual blessing, the girl was struck by a strange and very vivid mental image: somewhere deep within her heart, a tiny light flickered and died-a harbinger, perhaps, of darkness to come. A moment of inexplicable sadness touched Liriel, but it was gone before she could marvel at so strange an emotion. To a young dark elf, such a vision seemed right and fitting-a cause for elation rather than regret. Soon, very soon, she would be a true drow indeed!

Chapter Five

Kill or Be Killed

On silent feet, Liriel eased her way down the dark tunnel. One of the gifts her father had given her were boots of elvenkind, wondrous treasures crafted of soft leather and dark-elven magic. With them, she could walk with no more noise than her own shadow.

She also wore a fine new cloak-not a piwafwi, for that uniquely drow cloak was usually worn only by those who had proven themselves by this very ritual. Of course, there were exceptions to this rule, and Liriel did indeed possess one of the magical cloaks of concealment-it played a significant role in her frequent escapes from House Shobalar-but youngling dark elves were not permitted to wear them during the Bleeding. The advantage of invisibility removed most of the challenge, and was therefore deemed inappropriate for the first major kill.

Thus Liriel was plainly visible to the heat-perceptive eyes of the Underdark's many strange and deadly creatures, and therefore in constant danger.

The young drow kept keenly alert as she walked. Yet her heart was not in the hunt. She was not entirely certain she still had a heart: grief and rage had left her feeling strangely hollow.

Liriel was accustomed to betrayals both large and small, and she was still trying to assimilate her realization that she must shrug them off and move ahead - albeit with caution. So it had been with Bythnara, whose snippy comments and small jealousies had once pained her deeply. So it had been even with her father, who twelve years earlier had wronged Liriel more deeply than any other person had before or since.

But it would not be so with Xandra Shobalar, Liriel vowed grimly. Xandra's betrayal was different, and it would not go unremarked - or unavenged.

Vengeance was the principle passion of the dark elves, but it was an emotion new to Liriel. She savored it as if it were a goblet of the spiced green wine she had recently tasted - bitter, certainly, but capable of sharpening the passions and hardening resolve. Liriel was very young, and willing to accept and overlook many things in her dark-elven kindred. This, however, was the first time she had seen the desire for her death written in another drow's eyes. Liriel understood instinctively that this could not go unpunished if she herself hoped to survive.

But at a deeper, even more personal level, the girl bitterly resented Xandra for forcing her to disregard her own deep instincts and act against her will.

Liriel rebelled bitterly against the need to submit to her Mistress's demands, yet what else could she do if she was to be accounted a true drow?

What else, indeed?

A smile slowly crept over Liriel's dark face as a solution to her dilemma began to take shape in her mind. There is much more to being a drow, her father had admonished her, than engaging in crude slaughter.

The painful weight on the young drow's chest lifted a bit, and for the first time she realized a very strange thing: she did not fear the dreaded wild Underdark. It seemed to her that this wilderness was a wondrous, fascinating place full of unexpected turns and twists. There was danger and adventure and excitement in the very air and stone. Unlike Menzoberranzan, where every bit of rock had been shaped and carved into a monument to the pride and might of the drow, out here everything was new, mysterious, and full of delightful possibilities. Here she could carve out her own place. Liriel fell suddenly, deeply, and utterly in love with this vast and untamed world.

"A grand adventure," she said softly, repeating without a trace of irony the words of her own discarded dream. A sudden smile brightened her face, and as she bestowed an affectionate pat upon an enormous, down-thrust spire of rock, she added, "The first of many!"

Without warning, a bright ball of force rounded the sharp corner of the tunnel ahead and hurtled toward her.

The battle had begun.

Training and instinct took over at once: Liriel snapped both hands up, wrists crossed and palms out. A field of resistance sprung up before her an instant before the fireball would have struck. The girl squeezed her eyes shut and tossed her head to one side as the brilliant light exploded into a sheet of magical flame.

Liriel dropped flat and rolled aside, as she'd been taught to do in such attacks. The magical shield could not withstand more than one or two impacts of such power, and it was prudent to get out of the line of fire. To her astonishment, the second blast came in low and hard-and directly toward her. Liriel leapt to her feet and dived for the far side of the tunnel. She managed to put the large stalagmite between herself and the coming blast.

The explosion rocked the tunnel and sent a shower of rock fragments cascading down upon the young drow. She coughed and spat dust, but her fingers darted undeterred through the gestures of a spell.

In response to her magic, the dust and the sulfurous smoke swirled to a central spot of the tunnel and gathered into a large globe. Liriel pointed grimly in the direction of the unseen wizard, and the floating globe obediently rounded the corner toward its prey.

She waited, hardly daring to breathe, for the next attack to come. When it did not, she began to creep slowly and cautiously around the bend. There was no sound in the tunnel ahead, other than the distant drip of water. This was promising: the globe of hot, smoky vapor had been enspelled to seek out and surround its source of origin. If all had gone well, the human wizard would have been smothered by the sulfurous by-products of his own fireball. Liriel picked up her pace. If this were so, she would have a limited amount of time to find and revive him.

The tunnel grew ever brighter as she made her way down its twisting length. Suddenly the path dipped dramatically, and Liriel saw laid out before her a cavern that was stranger than any she had ever seen or imagined.

Luminous fungi covered much of the stone and filled the entire cave with a faint, eerie blue glow. Stalagmites and stalactites met in long, irregular pillars of stone, and large crystals embedded in them tossed off glittering shards of light that stabbed at her eyes like tiny daggers.

At once, a brilliant ball of light flashed into being in the center of the cavern. Liriel reeled back, clutching at her blinded eyes. Her keen ears caught the whine and hiss of an approaching missile; she dropped flat as yet another fireball blazed toward her.

The fireball missed her, but barely. Heat assailed Liriel with searing pain as it passed over her, and the smoke and stench of her own scorched hair assaulted her like a blow to the gut.

Coughing and gagging, she rolled aside. She blinked rapidly as she went, trying to dispel the lingering sparks and flashes that obscured her vision.

Think, think! she admonished herself. So far she had only reacted: along that path lay certain

defeat.

To give herself a bit of time, Liriel called upon her innate drow magic and dropped a globe of darkness over the magic light ahead of her. That leveled the field of battle, but it did not steal the human wizard's visual advantages: there was still plenty of light in the cavern to allow him to see. She had not yet seen him, however.

A suspicion that had taken root in Liriel's mind with the wizard's first attack suddenly blossomed into certainty. He had anticipated her responses; he seemed to know precisely how she would react. Perhaps he had been trained to know. Setting her jaw in grim determination, Liriel set out to learn just how well he'd been prepared.

Her hands flashed through the gestures of a spell that Gromph had taught her—a rare and difficult spell that few drow knew of and fewer still could master. It had taken her the better part of a day to learn it, and now the effort was repaid in full.

Standing in the center of the cavern, ringed and partially shielded by a circle of stone pillars, stood the human. A stunned expression crossed his bearded face as he regarded his own outstretched hands. The reason for this was all too apparent: *apiwafwi*, which should have granted him magical invisibility, appeared suddenly on him and hung in glittering folds over his red-robed shoulders. He had not only been prepared, but equipped!

The human wizard recovered quickly from his surprise. He drew in a deep breath and spat in Liriel's direction. A dark bolt shot from his mouth, and then another. The drow's eyes widened as she beheld the two live vipers wriggling toward her with preternatural speed.

Liriel pulled two small knives from her belt and flicked them toward the nearest snake. Her blades

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tumbled end-over-end, crossing the viper's neck from either side and neatly slicing the head from its body.

The beheaded length of snake writhed and looped for several moments, blocking the second viper's path long enough for Liriel to get off a second volley.

This time she threw only one knife. The blade plunged into the viper's open mouth and exploded out the back of its head with a bright burst of gore. Liriel allowed herself a small, grim smile, and she resolved to properly thank the mercenary who'd taught her to throw!

It was a moment's delay, but even that much was too long. Already the human wizard's hands were moving through the gestures of a spell—a familiar spell.

Liriel tore a tiny dart from her weapons belt and spat upon it. In response to her unspoken command, the other needed spell component—a tiny vial of acid—rose from her open spell bag. She seized it and tossed both items into the air. Her fingers flashed through the casting, and at once a luminous streak flew to answer the one flashing toward her. The acid bolts collided midway between the combatants, sending a spray of deadly green droplets sizzling off into the cavern.

The human flung out one hand. Magic darted from each of his fingertips, spinning out into a giant web as it flew. The weird blue light of the cavern glimmered along the strands and turned the sticky droplets that clung to them into gemlike things that rivaled moonstones and pearls. Liriel marveled at the web's deadly beauty, even as it descended upon her.

A word from the drow conjured a score of giant spiders, each as large as a rothe calf. On eldritch threads, the arachnid army rose as one toward the cavern's ceiling, capturing the web and taking it with them.

Liriel planted her feet wide and sent a barrage of fireballs toward the persistent human. As she expected, he cast the spell that would raise a field of resistance around himself. She recognized the gestures and the words of power as drow. This wizard had indeed been trained for this battle, and trained well!

Unfortunately for Liriel, the human had been schooled too well. The drow had hoped that her fireball storm would weaken the stone pillars surrounding the wizard, so that they might crumble and fall upon him after the magic shield's power was spent. But it soon became apparent that he had placed the magical barrier in front of the stone formation, thereby undoing her strategy! His shield did not give way before her magic missiles: rather, it seemed to absorb their energy, and it grew ever brighter with each fireball that struck. This was a drow counterspell, Liriel acknowledged, but it was one that she herself had never been taught!

Finally Liriel lowered her hands, drained by the sheer power of the fireballs she had tossed into

Xandra's magical web.

At that moment, the drow girl understood the full extent of the Shobalar wizard's treachery.

This human had been trained in the magic and tactics of Underdark warfare, and moreover, he knew enough about his drow opponent to anticipate and counter her every spell. He had been carefully chosen and prepared - not to test her, but to kill her! Xandra Shobalar did not content herself with wishing for her student's failure: she had planned for it!

Liriel knew that she had been well and thoroughly betrayed. Her only hope of defeating the human - and Xandra Shobalar - lay not in her battle magic, but in her wits.

Liriel's nimble mind flashed through the possibilities. She knew nothing of human magic, but she found it highly suspicious that this wizard cast only drow spells. He had to have had prior training in order to master such powerful magic; surely he possessed spells of his own. Why did he not use them? As she studied the human, the reason for this suddenly became apparent to the drow girl. Her fingers closed around the key that Xandra had given her, and with one sharp tug she tore it from the thin golden chain she'd tied to her belt.

Wrath burned bright in Liriel's golden eyes as she reached for the green vial that her father had given her. Trapping the wizard would not be easy, but she would find a way.

Liriel pulled off the stopper and dropped the key inside. But before she put the cap back into place, she snapped off the mithril needle and tossed it aside.

Kill or be killed, Mistress Xandra had said.

So be it.

Chapter Six

Recurring Nightmares

Tresk Mulander squinted through his glowing shield toward the shimmering image of his young drow opponent. So far, all had gone as anticipated. The girl was good, just as Mistress Shobalar had claimed. She even had a few unanticipated skills, such as her deadly aim with a tossed knife. Well enough. Mulander had a few surprises of his own.

It was true that Xandra Shobalar had raped his mind, plundered his vast mental store of necromantic spells. There was one spell, however, that the drow wizard could not touch: it was stored not in his mind, but in his flesh.

Mulander was a Researcher, always seeking new magic where lesser men saw only death. Moldering corpses, even the offal of the slaughterhouse, could be used to create wondrous and fearsome creatures utterly under his control. But his strangest and most secret creation was waiting to be unleashed.

In a bit of unliving flesh-a tiny dark mole that clung to his body by the thinnest tendril of skin, he had stored a creature of great power. To bring it into existence, he had only to make that final separation from his living body.

The wizard worked his thumb and forefinger beneath the golden collar.

Ironically, the enspelled mole was hidden beneath the magical fetter!

Mulander twisted off the bit of flesh, reveling in the sharp stab of pain-for such was a miniature death, and death was the ultimate source of his power. He tossed the tiny mole to the cavern floor and watched with sharp anticipation as the contained monster took shape.

Many of the Red Wizards could create darkenbeasts: fearsome flying creatures made by twisting the bodies of living animals into magical atrocities. Mulander had gone one better. The creature that rose up before him had been fashioned from his own flesh and his own nightmares.

Mulander had begun with the most dreadful thing he knew-a replica of his long-dead wizard mother-and added to it enormous size and the deadliest features of every predator that ever had haunted his dreams. The tattered, batlike wings of an abyssal denizen sprouted from the creature's shoulders, and a raptor's talons curved from its human hands. The thing had vampiric fangs, the haunches and hind legs of a dire wolf, and a wyvern's poisoned tail. Plates of dragonlike armor-in Red Wizard crimson, of course-covered its feminine torso. Only the eyes, the same hard green as his own, had been left untouched. Those eyes settled upon the drow girl-the hunter who had suddenly become prey-and they filled with a brand of malice that was only too familiar to Mulander. An involuntary shiver ran through the powerful wizard who had summoned the monster, a response engraved upon his soul by his own wretched, long-gone childhood.

The monster crouched. Its wolflike feet tamped down, and the muscles of its powerful haunch

bunched in preparation for the spring. Mulander did not bother to dispel the magical shield. The monster retained enough of a resemblance to his mother for him to enjoy its roar of pain as the force field shattered upon impact.

Enjoyable, too, was the wide-eyed shock on the face of the young drow. She regained her composure with admirable speed and sent a pair of knives spinning into the monster's face. Mulander knew a moment's supreme elation when the blades sank into those too-familiar green eyes.

The monster shrieked with rage and anguish, raking its face with owl-like talons in an effort to dislodge the knives. Long bloody furrows crisscrossed its face before the drow's knives finally clattered to the cave's floor. Blinded and enraged, the creature advanced toward the dark-elven girl, its dripping hands wildly groping the air.

The drow snatched a bola from her belt, whirled it briefly and let fly. The weapon spun toward the blinded creature, wrapped tightly around its neck. Gurgling, the monster tore at the leather thongs. A sharp snap resounded through the cavern, quickly followed by a grating roar. Sniffing audibly as it sought its prey, Mulander's monster dived with outstretched talons toward the drow girl.

But the drow rose into the air, swift and graceful as a dark hummingbird, and the monster fell facedown upon the cavern floor. It quickly rolled onto its back and leapt up onto its feet. A thunderous thumping rush filled the cavern as its batlike wings began to beat. It rose slowly, awkwardly, and began to pursue the drow.

The young wizard tossed a giant web at the monster; the creature tore through it with ease. She bombarded it with a barrage of death darts, but the weapons bounced harmlessly off the creature's plated body.

The drow summoned a bolt of glistening black lightning and hurled it like a javelin. To Mulander's dismay, the bolt slashed downward through one leathery wing.

Shrieking with rage, the monster traced a tight spiral to the cavern floor and landed with a stone-shaking crash.

No matter: the magical battle had taken its toll on the young elfmaid. She sank slowly toward the cavern floor, and toward the jaws of the wounded but waiting monster.

Her golden eyes grew frantic and darted toward Mulander's gloating face.

"Enough!" she shrieked. "I know what you need-dispel the creature, and I will give you what you want without further battle. This I swear, by all that is dark and holy!"

A smile of malevolent satisfaction crossed the Red Wizard's face. He trusted no oath from any drow, but he knew that this one's battle spells were nearly exhausted. Nor was he surprised that she had lost heart for the battle. The girl was pathetically young- she looked to be about twelve or thirteen by the measure of humankind. Despite her fell heritage and magical prowess, she was still a callow lass and thus no match for such as he!

"Toss the key to me," he told her.

"The monster," she pleaded.

Mulander hesitated, then shrugged. Even without the magical construct, he was more than the equal of this elven child. With a flick of one hand, he sent the monster back into whatever nightmares had spawned it. But with the other, he summoned a fireball large enough to hurl the drow against the far wall of the cavern and leave nothing of her but a grease spot. He saw by the fear in her eyes that she understood her position.

"Here-it's in here," the girl said frantically, reaching into a pouch at her waist and fumbling about. Her efforts were hampered by her own fear: her breath came in exhausted little gasps and sobs; her thin shoulders shook with terrified weeping.

Finally she took out a tiny silken bag and held it high. "The key is in here. Take it, please, and let me go!"

The Red Wizard deftly caught the bag she tossed him, then shook a small glistening sphere into his palm. It was a protective bubble-a bit of magic easily cast and easily dispelled-which contained a delicate vial of translucent green glass. And within that was the tiny golden key that promised freedom and power.

Had he glanced at the drow child, Mulander might have wondered why her eyes were dry despite her weeping, why she no longer seemed to have any difficulty maintaining her ability to levitate.

Had he taken his gaze from that longed-for key, he might have recognized the look of cold

triumph in her golden eyes. He had seen that expression once before, briefly, on the face of his own apprentice.

But pride had blinded him to treachery once before, and had lured him into a mistake that had condemned him to a sentence of death, a sentence that had been commuted into lifelong slavery. When the understanding of this finally came, Mulander knew that this mistake would truly be his last.

Chapter Seven

Ritual

Liriel Baenre returned to Menzoberranzan after a mere two days, battered and bereft of a bit of her abundant white hair, but grimly triumphant. Or so everyone assumed. Not until the ceremony was she required to give formal proof of her kill.

All of House Shobalar gathered in the throne room of Matron Hinkutes'nat for the coming-of-age ceremony. It was required, but most came anyway for the vicarious pleasure to be had in witnessing the grisly relics, and to relive the pride and pleasure of their own first kills. Such moments reminded all present of what it meant to be drow.

At Narbondel, the darkest hour, Liriel stepped forward to claim her place among her people. To Xandra Shobalar, her Mistress and mentor, she was required to present the ritual proof.

For a long moment, Liriel held the older wizard's gaze, staring into Xandra's crimson orbs with eyes that were cold and fathomless-full of unspoken power and deadly promise. This, too, was something she had learned from her dreaded father.

When at last the older wizard's gaze faltered uncertainly, Liriel bowed deeply and reached into the bag at her waist. She took from it a small green object and held it high for all to see. There were murmurs as some of the Shobalar wizards recognized the artifact for what it was.

"You surprise me, child," Xandra said coldly. "You who were anticipating a 'gallant hunt,' to trap and slay your prey with such a device!"

"A child no more," Liriel corrected her. A strange smile crossed her face, and with a quick, vicious movement, she threw the vial to the floor.

The crystal shattered, a delicate, tinkling sound that echoed long in the stunned silence that followed-for standing before the Mistress of Magic, his green eyes glowing with malevolence, was the human wizard. He was very much alive, and in one hand he held the golden collar that had imprisoned him to Xandra's will.

With a speed that belied his years, the human conjured a crimson sphere of light and hurled it, not at Xandra, but at the dark-elven male who stood guard at the rear door. The hapless drow shattered into bloody shards. Before anyone could draw breath, the bits of elven flesh whirled into the air and began to take on new and dreadful shapes.

For many moments, everyone in the throne room was busy indeed. The Shobalar wizards and priestesses hurled spells, and, with arrows and swords, the fighters battled the winged creatures that had been given birth by their drow comrade's death.

At last, there was only Xandra and the wizard, standing nearly toe to toe and blazing with eldritch light as their spells attacked and riposted with the speed and verve of a swordmasters' dual.

Every eye in the throne room, drow and slave alike, was fixed upon the deadly battle, and all were lit with vicious excitement as they awaited the outcome.

Finally, one of the Red Wizard's spells slipped past Xandra's defenses: a daggerlike stab of light sliced the drow's face from cheekbone to jaw. The flesh parted in a gaping wound, deep enough to reveal the bones beneath.

Xandra let out a wail that would have shamed a banshee, and with a speed that rivaled that of a weapon master's deathblow, she lashed back. Pain, desperation, and wrath combined to fuel a blast of magic powerful enough to send a thunderous, shuddering roar through the stohe chamber.

The human caught the full force of the attack. Like a loosed arrow, his smoking body hurtled up and back. He hit the far wall near the ceiling and slid down, leaving a rapidly-cooling streak on the stone. There was a hole the size of a dinner plate where his chest had been, and his sodden robes were a slightly brighter shade of crimson.

Xandra, too, crumpled, utterly exhausted by the momentous spell battle, and further weakened by the copious flow of blood that spilled from her torn face. Drow servants rushed to attend her, and

her sister clerics gathered around to murmur spells of healing. Through it all, Liriel stood before the matron's throne, her face set in a mask of faint, cynical amusement, and her eyes utterly cold. When at last the Mistress of Magic had recovered enough breath for speech, she hauled herself into a sitting position and leveled a shaking finger at the young wizard. "How do you dare commit such an outrage!" she sputtered. "The rite has been profaned!"

"Not so," Liriel said coolly. "You stipulated that the wizard could be slain with any weapon of my choice. The weapon I chose was you."

A second stunned silence descended upon the chamber. It was broken by a strange sound, one that no one there had ever heard before or had ever expected to hear:

The Matron Mother Hinkutes'nat Alar Shobalar was laughing.

It was a rusty sound, to be sure, but there was genuine amusement in the matron's voice and in her crimson eyes.

"This defies all the laws and customs," Xandra began angrily.

The matron cut her off with an imperious gesture. "The rite of blooding has been fulfilled," Hinkutes'nat proclaimed, "for its purpose is to make a true drow of a youngling dark elf. Evidence of a devious mind serves this purpose as well as bloody hands."

Ignoring her glowering daughter, the matron turned to Liriel. "Well done! By all the power of this throne and this house, I proclaim you a true drow, a worthy daughter of Lloth! Leave your childhood behind, and rejoice in the dark powers that are our heritage and our delight!"

Liriel accepted the ritual welcome-not with a deep bow this time, but with a slight incline of her head. She was a child no longer, and as a noble female of House Baenre, she was never to bow to a drow of lesser rank. Gromph had schooled her in such matters, drilling her until she understood every shade and nuance of this complicated protocol. He had impressed upon her that this ceremony marked not only her departure from childhood, but her full acceptance into the Baenre clan. All that stood between her and both these honors were the ritual words of acceptance that she must speak.

But Liriel was not quite finished. Following an impulse that she only dimly understood, she crossed the dais to the place where a defeated Xandra sat slumped, submitting glumly to the continued ministrations of the House Shobalar priestesses.

Liriel stooped so that she was at eye level with her former mentor. Slowly she extended her hand and gently cupped the older drow's chin-a rare gesture that was occasionally used to comfort or caress a child, or, more often, to capture the child's attention before dictating terms. It was unlikely that Xandra, in her pain-ridden state, would have consciously attached this meaning to her former student's gesture, but it was clear that she instinctively grasped the nuance. She flinched away from Liriel's touch, and her eyes were pure malevolence.

The girl merely smiled. Then, suddenly, she slid her palm up along the jawline of Xandra's wounded cheek, gathering in her cupped hand some of the blood that stained the wizard's face. With a single quick movement, Liriel rose to her feet and turned to face the watchful matron.

Deliberately she smeared Xandra's blood over both hands, front and back, and then she presented them to Matron Hinkutes'nat.

"The ritual is complete; I am a child no more, but a drow," Liriel proclaimed.

The silence that followed her words was long and impending, for the implications of her action went far beyond the limits of propriety and precedence.

At last Matron Hinkutes'nat inclined her head-but not in the expected gesture of completion. The Shobalar matriarch added the subtle nuance that transformed the regal gesture into the salute exchanged between equals. It was a rare tribute, and rarer still was the amused understanding-and the genuine respect-in the spidery female's eyes.

All of which struck the young drow as highly ironic. Although it was clear that Hinkutes'nat applauded Liriel's gesture, she herself was not entirely certain why she had done what she did. This question plagued Liriel throughout the celebration that traditionally followed the rite of passage ceremony. The spectacle provided by her Blooding had been unusually satisfying to the attending drow, and the revelry that it inspired was raucous and long. For once Liriel entered into festivities with less than her usual gusto, and she was not at all sorry when the last bell signaled the end of the night.

Chapter Eight

Her Father's Daughter

The summons from the Narbondel district came early the next day. This time, Gromph Baenre sent word that Liriel's belongings were to be packed up and sent after her.

The young drow received this information stoically. In truth, Liriel did not regret her removal from House Shobalar. Perhaps she did not understand the full meaning of her own Bleeding ceremony, but she knew with certainty that she could no longer remain in the same complex as Xandra Shobalar.

Liriel's reception at the archmage's mansion was about what she had expected. Servants met her and showed her to her apartment—a small but lavish suite that boasted a well-equipped library of spellbooks and scrolls. Apparently her father intended for her to continue her wizardly education. But there was no sign of Gromph, and the best the servants could do for Liriel was to assure her that the archmage would send for her when she was wanted.

And so it was that the newly initiated drow spent her first darkcycle alone, the first of what she suspected would be many such days and nights. Liriel found that the solitude was painfully difficult, and that the silent hours crept by.

After several futile attempts at study, the weary girl at last took to her bed. For hours she stared at the ceiling and longed for the oblivion of slumber. But her mind was too full, and her thoughts too confused, for sleep to find her.

Oddly enough, Liriel felt less triumphant than she should have. She was alive, she had passed the test of the Bleeding, she had repaid Xandra's treachery with public humiliation, she had even devised a way to keep from slaying the human wizard.

Why was it, then, that she felt his blood on her hands as surely as if she'd torn out his heart with her own fingernails? And what was this soul-deep sadness, this dark resignation? Though she had no name to give this emotion, Liriel suspected that it would ever after cast a shadow upon her blithe spirit.

The hours passed, and the distant tolling of Narbondel signaled that the darkest hour was once again upon Menzoberranzan. It was then that the summons finally came; a servant bid Liriel to dress and await the archmage in his study.

Suddenly Liriel was less than anxious to face her drow sire. What would Gromph have to say about her unorthodox approach to the Bleeding hunt and ceremony? During her three days of preparation, the archmage had repeatedly expressed concern about her judgment and ambition, pronouncing her too trusting and carefree, and he had wondered at the strange bias of her character. It seemed likely to her that he would not approve.

Liriel did as she was bid and hastened to her father's sanctum. She had not long to wait before Gromph appeared, still wearing the wondrous, glittering piwafwi that held an arsenal of magical weapons, and that proclaimed his power and his high office. The archmage acknowledged her presence with a curt nod and then sat down behind his table.

"I have heard what transpired at your ceremony," he began.

"The ritual was fulfilled," Liriel said earnestly—and a trifle defensively. "I might not have shed blood, but Matron Hinkutes'nat accepted my efforts!"

"More than accepted," the archmage said dryly. "The Shobalar matron is quite impressed with you. And more importantly, so am I."

Liriel absorbed this in silence. Then, suddenly, she blurted out, "Oh, but I wish I understood why!"

Gromph lifted one brow. "You really must learn to speak with less than complete candor," he advised her. "But in this case, no harm is done. Indeed, your words only confirm what I had suspected; you acted partly by design, but partly by instinct. This is indeed gratifying."

"Then you're not angry?" Liriel ventured. When the archmage sent her an inquiring look, she added, "I thought that you would be furious upon hearing that I did not actually kill the human."

Gromph was silent a long moment. "You did something far more important: you fulfilled both the spirit and the letter of the Bleeding ritual, in layers of subtle complexity that did credit to you and to your house. The human wizard is dead—that much was a needed formality. Using Xandra Shobalar as a tool was a clever twist. But washing your hands in her blood was brilliant!"

"Thank you," Liriel said, in a tone so incongruously glum that it surprised a chuckle from the archmage.

"You still do not understand. Very well, I will speak plainly. The human wizard was never your enemy; Xandra Shobalar was your enemy! You recognized that, you turned her plot against her,

and you proclaimed a blood victory. And in doing so, you demonstrated that you have learned what it is to be a true drow."

"But I did not kill," Liriel said thoughtfully. "And why is it that, although I did not kill, I feel as if I had?"

"You might not have actually shed blood, but the ritual of the Bleeding has done its intended work all the same," the archmage asserted.

Liriel considered this, and suddenly she knew her father's words as truth. Her innocence was gone, but pride and power, treachery, intrigue, survival, victory- all of these things she knew intimately and well.

"A true drow," she repeated in a tone that was nine parts triumph and one portion regret. She took a deep breath and looked up into Gromph's eyes-and into a mirror.

For the briefest of moments, Liriel glimpsed a flicker of poignant sorrow in the archmage's eyes, like the glint of gold shining through a deep layer of ice. It came and departed so quickly Liriel doubted that Gromph was even aware of it; after all, several centuries of cold and calculating evil lay between him and his own rite of passage. If he remembered that emotion at all, he was no longer able to reach into his soul and bring it forth. Liriel understood, and at last she had a name to give the final, missing element that defined a true drow:

Despair.

"Congratulations," the archmage said in a voice laced with unconscious irony.

"Thank you," his daughter responded in kind.

SEA OF GHOSTS

Roger E. Moore

The disaster went unrecognized that evening by all who dwelt on the plains of the Eastern Shaar, who heard only the rattling of pottery on wooden shelves or soothed only the skittishness of tethered horses. A hunter lowered his bow, head cocked to catch a rumbling that frightened off his prey. A sorceress in a stone tower frowned, distracted from a mildewed tome by a vibration that caused the candle flames in the room to dance. An old shepherd sitting cross-legged on a rock looked up from the flute he had carved, surprised by distant thunder from an empty red sky. The sun flowed beneath the horizon.

An hour later, all was forgotten.

Far beneath the lazy grass of the Eastern Shaar, unseen by the rising moon, was a measureless maze of dripping caverns and dusty halls. Through this stupendous realm, a subterranean river hurled along a passage it had carved through a thousand miles of cold rock. Called the River Raurogh by dwarves who, over long centuries, had mapped its dark twists and turns, the channel descended through layer after layer of stone at a steady pace toward an unknown end.

Cautious dwarves slowly charted the river's course, probing for whirlpools, low ceilings, rapids, flesh-eating emerald slime, and unwholesome beasts that welcomed a change in their diet of blind, transparent fish. Foolish dwarves cast off in heavy rafts with magical lights fore and aft, determined to learn the river's secrets in a fraction of the time. Four out of five cautious dwarves came home to make their reports; only one in three foolish dwarves did the same. The cautious dwarves drew reliable maps. The foolish dwarves gave birth to legends.

It was a foolish dwarf, battered and wet, who returned to tell of the Deepfall at the Raurogh's end, which had claimed his eight companions and their raft. It had undoubtedly claimed many rafts before theirs. Other dwarves soon dug out a passage from a nearby cavern to the Deepfall, where they put down their tools and marveled at the sight. The long tunnel carved by the River Raurogh here opened into a titanic domed chamber splashed in scarlet and ocher hues. A thousand long stalactites and glittering mineral curtains hung from the dome like diamond chandeliers in an emperor's palace. The ancient silo, well over two hundred feet across, dropped away into nothingness. No sounds arose from the black depths to indicate that the cascade had found its bottom.

Seeing a natural ledge leading into the silo by the chiseled opening, a foolish dwarf soon edged out on hands and knees, bearing a short staff upon which a light-bearing spell had been cast. He looked up first, noting that between the brilliant formations on the ceiling was a dense network of narrow cracks looking a bit like a crude giant spider's web. Most of the cracks were filled in with mineral draperies, but their cause was still apparent. The entire ceiling, to an unknown height, had begun to separate from the rock above it.

The dwarf judged after a minute that the roof was still centuries away from yielding to gravity, and he worried about it no more.

The dwarf then looked over the ledge, his illuminated stick held aloft, and stared down into the abyss. His wisdom overcome by curiosity, he cast the enchanted staff over the edge and watched it fall until it was a spray-dimmed twinkle that was gone from view between one eye blink and the next. He lost track of the time over which the light fell; the depth into which he peered was beyond imagining. When the dwarf returned to his companions, it was deemed best to depart from the region in haste, in case an unwelcome being far down the shaft made its way up to investigate the source of the falling light. Nothing ever did, for which all were thankful, but the legend of the Deepfall spread and bewitched many a dwarf who heard of it.

In a short time, a hundred dwarves migrated from the crowded caverns of Glitterdelve, discontent with local taxes, and chiseled out new homes near the great shaft's dome. Coarsely woven nets strung across the river caught blind fish and crustaceans for the dwarves' food. Wastes and offal were cast into side passages where edible fungi and molds for potions were cultivated. Magical lights of golden hue soon filled the colony of Raurogh's Hall, as the cave village came to be known, though all light was carefully shielded from the silo's top to avoid alerting anything living far down the falls. The surrounding rock was solid, local predators were quickly dispatched, and the river's bounty was endless. Life was good for seventeen years and a hundred twelve days. The derro waited for Wykar where they had agreed, toying silently with a long knife among the blue glow-fan fungi.

Wykar stopped and did not move a muscle after he eased around the entrance to the blue-lit cavern chamber and saw the derro. The hunched gnome warily embraced the chamber with his senses to discover if Geppo had unwisely brought friends along to the hidden garden of luminescent fungi, but he sensed nothing amiss. He nonetheless kept his gray hands free, ready to seize from his vest, belt, or boots whatever weapon was called for.

Geppo noticed the deep gnome after a few moments but did not seem startled. Head bowed in concentration on his knife, he peered up at the little intruder through his thick, pale eyebrows. A smile tugged at his thin lips. With skin as white and dirty as a toadstool cap, Geppo could easily pass for a true dwarf's corpse in his sleep. The orbs of his large, milky eyes each showed only a black dot for a pupil, little holes in moist white stones. His emaciated face was framed by long, matted hair of a filthy sulfur hue. An unkempt beard and mustache hid his sunken cheeks and narrow lower jaw.

Though Geppo was a head taller than the three-foot gnome, he seemed much the weaker of the two. The derro's skeletal frame had not fleshed out after his long, hard-lived enslavement by the drow. Except for a change of clothing and a few obviously scavenged tools and weapons now strapped to his person, he looked exactly the same as when Wykar had known him as a fellow prisoner. The faint blue light from the glowfan fungi added an air of unreality to the derro's presence, as if he had recently left his own grave.

Geppo wore a dark, muddy tunic of rough fabric, under which a darker outfit showed at the collar. Wykar guessed that leather or hide armor lay beneath. A finely tooled black belt bearing many small pockets and pouches was pulled tight at his thin waist. It looked like a drow's belt, but it was unlikely the derro had taken it from the bodies of their former masters. The Underdark held the remains of many failed plans and dreams, and one could get anything if one knew where to look. After a long moment, Geppo's gaze dropped. He resumed scraping the edge of his long knife across the scar-crossed back of his right hand. "Late," he grunted, his voice as rough as a broken rock.

Wykar saw the butt of a weapon lying within reach of Geppo's left hand, almost hidden by the curled edge of a glowfan fungus. The bent gnome stepped closer, his movements relaxed and slow. The weapon looked like a crossbow, a little two-shot repeater type favored by the drow—a lucky find. When he was ten feet from Geppo, Wykar crouched on the balls of his boots and rested his elbows on his thighs, letting his thick hands dangle. "Long walk home," he replied. Geppo snorted faintly, as if he recognized the lie. He lifted the knife blade, eyed its bright edge, then carefully slid it home in a crude sheath strapped to his belt. His thin arms then rested on his knees, hands limp. After a short glance around Wykar, he nodded. "Alone," he rasped approvingly.

"Alone," agreed Wykar. He detected no heat-glow but Geppo's, heard no sound but Geppo's

breathing, smelled nothing other than the earthy scent of the glowing fungus and a sour, unwashed body odor that had to be the derro's. Didn't they ever bathe? It must be easy for Underdark predators to track them; little wonder most derro were so insanely paranoid. Geppo nodded and seemed to relax. He reached over and gently broke a piece from a nearby glowfan. He popped the luminescent tidbit into his mouth and chewed. Wykar saw disease-blackened teeth through the forest of filthy whiskers. The gnome swallowed and covered up his disgust. He never touched glowing fungus, much less ate it; many species of it were poisonous. Geppo seemed to enjoy fungus of any sort, though. The drow had fed him nothing else.

Wykar let it go. He inhaled slowly as he looked the derro over. "I was surprised to see you here," he said at last. "I didn't know if you would make it very far after..."

The derro smiled with the look of a wicked boy who is proud of something. "S'prise you, s'prise Geppo," he said. "You run much, walk much? You strong, hey. Geppo . . . mmm, no. Not strong." He held out his thin arms and turned them over, shaking his head and frowning in disapproval. "Not strong, hey? Sick much, sick much." He dropped his arms and shrugged, then leaned forward and stared into Wykar's cool gray eyes, a smirk on his ravaged face. "Hey," he whispered, his white eyes narrow. "Geppo sick much but"-his voice dropped further, as if telling a little secret-"laughing ones sick more now, hey?"

He pulled back before Wykar could reply. "Laughing ones sick more," he repeated with a quick nod. "Sick more than Geppo." The derro thumped his chest with a bony fist when he spoke his name.

Wykar's cheek twitched as he nodded in response, remembering. "Very sick," he said softly. He shivered, though he was not cold in the slightest.

Geppo's smirk faded. After a moment, he nodded and made a gesture of dismissal. "Laughing ones no laughing, all good. You say, see me here, then you run. You here now." He stopped, waiting.

The deep gnome looked into the derro's white eyes. This could work, he thought. He's still the same, or looks it. If he's the same old Geppo, this could really work.

Wykar swallowed. He sensed that he should speak only the truth at this point. Being caught in an important lie would lead straight to serious trouble, especially with a derro-even this one.

"When we ... escaped, we left some unfinished business behind us," he said, making no pretense of talking down to the derro. Despite the derro's pidgin-talk, Geppo was intelligent and caught on to whatever was said to him. Some kind of innate derro trait, Wykar guessed. "I came here because I want to finish it. I need your help with things." Wykar swallowed, risking a small untruth. "I will ensure that you are well rewarded for whatever assistance you can give me."

The derro smiled again but did not look Wykar in the eye. "Ah," he said casually. He seemed to have anticipated the topic. He inhaled deeply as his left hand drifted up to his throat and gently rubbed the skin there. "Need Geppo's hel-" he began, but his voice suddenly broke before he could say more. He coughed and tried to clear his throat, then began coughing again, grimacing with pain.

Wykar could not see Geppo's neck through his rat's nest of a beard, but he doubted the derro's old wounds had healed yet. A fun-loving young drow had tried to strangle him as a joke, using a long, thin metal wire. The gnome waited for Geppo to recover his voice, wondering if the wounds had become infected from the filth that was encrusted over the derro's faded hair and skin. It would not be surprising.

The derro made a hand gesture of apology-something he had learned from Wykar during their captivity-then pointed at the gnome. "You," he wheezed faintly. Wykar's large ears could barely catch his tortured words. "You tell me what you do, hey?"

"Yes," said Wykar. It was time to face the issue and see what came next. He thought about the crystal-nosed darts just inside his vest, and the speed at which he would have to get to them if things went badly-if Geppo reverted to the derro norm, that is, and tried to threaten or kill him. "I came back because of that egg," he said. "I want to destroy it. I need someone to go along with me for protection. You can have whatever gold and gems they brought with them, but I want to see the egg destroyed. That's all I want." That and the death of every drow alive, but I can be reasonable, he thought.

The derro straightened and looked at Wykar in surprise. "Egg?" he said, his large eyes wider

now. "You want big egg in chest, not-?" He shook his head with disbelief and stared at the gnome without further comment. Then he shrugged acceptance, and his eyes slowly narrowed, another topic obviously on his mind. He actually seemed to be considering the proposition then and there, with barely an argument. Several minutes passed. Wykar was patient but alert.

Geppo leaned forward again, absently running thin fingers through his beard. He regarded Wykar with a murky smile. "Golds and gems," he said, his voice stronger than before. "Golds and gems good for Geppo, hey, always good. But egg . . ." He frowned, then pulled at his tattered beard and nodded solemnly, a ragged king accepting the plan of an underling. "Egg not for Geppo. Egg, you wreck it. You wreck egg, yes. But-"

The derro held up a bone-thin finger. "You think good plan for us get golds and gems, wreck egg, hey? You not see Geppo if you think no plan, think bad plan. You think much, hey? Good, good think much. Geppo take golds, gems-help you wreck egg." The finger lowered, pointing at Wykar's head. "You tell Geppo good plan first, then all go, you wreck egg."

Wykar swallowed and took a deep breath. "I have a plan, but I need to keep it secret for now. You will have to go with me and trust me that I know what I am doing." His voice almost failed for a moment-I must not be weak, he thought-but he recovered and went on. "We must go back to the place where the golds-where the gold and the egg are, if they are still there, and I will tell you there how we are going to get the treasure out of there and destroy the egg. All that I ask of you otherwise is that we look out for each other on the way there and back."

Geppo grunted in skepticism, obviously unhappy. "Not tell Geppo plan? You keep plan secret?" He pressed his lips together and shook his head. "Not good," he murmured, eyeing the gnome. Then, to Wykar's surprise, he shrugged as if the matter were of no consequence. "Geppo go.

Geppo get golds, you get egg-if golds and egg not gone, you say. We . . . look out for each other, hey." He gave his twisted smile again and clapped his hands softly together as if sealing the agreement. "We do."

Wykar blinked. He hadn't expected the derro to capitulate so quickly and with so little trouble. Wykar had been prepared to argue, plead, bluff, threaten, swear oaths, and even offer Geppo a little treasure up front, giving up a few tiny rubies he had hidden within his vest and belt. Geppo's agreeability was almost breathtaking. Derro were so befouled with greed and ambition that no one expected anything good from them.

Then again, Wykar had been imprisoned with Geppo for over two hundred sleepings, not long in a deep gnome's life but long enough to become familiar with most of the derro's personal quirks. Geppo's quirks hinted that he was not a normal derro.

For one thing, Geppo never lied. He exaggerated a bit at times, but he never lied. Geppo was also rather talkative, even after the drow youth tried to garrote him, going on about how hungry he was, what his father would have done with these drow, or his beliefs about the personal habits of the drow priestess who owned both Wykar and Geppo. Most strangely for a derro, Geppo had never threatened Wykar with anything more than words when they grabbed at the rotting scraps tossed into their cramped stone prison by their priestess-owner. Geppo had reserved violence only until the moment their escape was within reach; even then, it was directed only at his captors.

Wykar had become puzzled by Geppo's basically mild behavior, given that every other derro displayed far worse. The only reason he had impulsively asked the derro to meet with him and join him on this mission was that the gnome had a gut feeling Geppo would be pliable enough to go along with the strangest demands. Maybe Geppo was stringing Wykar along, pretending to be a partner while plotting betrayal, but Wykar didn't think so.

Every hero needs a fool, went a saying in the Underdark. How very true.

Wykar took a deep breath. There was only one thing more to do. It guaranteed nothing, but Wykar had always been a firm believer in having a contract. Sometimes you even found someone who would actually stick to it.

Wykar reached down and pulled his long blade free of its sheath. He did it slowly, noting Geppo's startled movement for his own blade. The polished metal of the gnome's weapon was stained red with protective oils and gleamed even in fungi-light. The blade had been forged by the gold dwarves, many sleepings ago and far away. Its handle was a yellow foot bone from a minotaur lizard, set on either side with a small but flawless ruby. Wykar took the long, heavy dagger by the tip of its blade, fingers away from its edge, and set it on the ground, its handle pointing toward the

derro. Geppo looked down as he gripped the hilt of his own blade.

"We must trade weapons," Wykar said. "So long as we have each other's blade, we are sworn not to kill or harm each other. You and I both must swear to this by all the gods. Then we will go together and do our work."

Geppo stared at Wykar's weapon, lips parted in mild surprise. He looked up at the deep gnome several times, bit his upper lip, then slowly made a decision. He pulled his long dagger free of its poor sheath and gently tossed the blade so that it landed on the stony ground next to Wykar's dagger, its hilt aimed in the gnome's direction. In the glowfans' light, Wykar saw that the derro's weapon was old and had been much used-recently scavenged from a body in the Underdark, no doubt. Dark flakes clung to the steel blade, which showed signs of rust and corrosion. The handle once had had an elaborate inlay, now fallen out, and the very tip of the blade was broken off. But the notched edge was keen and bright-sharper, likely, than Wykar's own blade. The derro knew his way around a whetstone.

The derro waited in anxious uncertainty. Wykar noticed that the pale dwarf kept one hand close to the crossbow butt at his side. Well, that was to be expected. This was new for them both. The deep gnome touched his forehead, nose, right ear, and heart, then carefully named a host of five deities and their spheres of interest in gnomish life. Not a one of them was real, but a derro wouldn't know that. It was then his turn to wait.

Licking his lips, Geppo mumbled his way through a short litany in a deep, guttural tongue. All the while, he stared down at the blades. Wykar knew a smattering of Underdark tongues, the derro tongue among them, but he recognized only a few words: bapda for father, gorin for oath. The derro stopped when he was through, uncertainty still crossing his face, and looked up at Wykar. The gnome nodded as if well satisfied, concealing his real thoughts on the matter. For all he knew, the derro had just taken a blood oath to kill the gnome like a rat. It was irrelevant. The act bought a little time of peace between them, and that was the real heart of the issue.

At a nod from Wykar, the derro and the gnome reached down and took each other's weapon. As they did, Wykar conjured up a complete mental picture of how he could snatch his own knife first and cut through the muscles of the derro's white arm in less than an eye blink; then he would thrust the weapon forward into his opponent's face and end the life of this miserable creature. The picture was perfect and clear, and Wykar instinctively believed the derro was thinking the very same thing.

But this was Geppo, the odd one, Geppo, who never lied-not a real derro foe. Wykar easily thrust all thought of treachery aside. There was still much left to do, and he desperately needed the derro. If there was to be treachery, he was content to let the derro make the first move-at least for now.

A thin white hand and a small but thick gray one quietly lifted each other's weapon from the ground. Each creature looked over his partner's blade, then carefully sheathed it and checked the fit. The deed was done, for whatever it was worth.

"We must leave now," said Wykar.

Seventeen years and a hundred twelve days passed under the golden lights of Raurogh's Hall, far above the gnome and derro, and peace was at an end. A fisher dwarf mending a net by the riverside heard the first crack of rock shifting and splitting.

She froze in her work, startled, then dropped her net and lay flat, placing her ear to the ground as she held her breath. Even through the roaring of the falls and the tremor the cascade sent through the earth, random clicks and pops could be heard in the stone. And the air above the rock had a new smell, a broken-stone and lightning odor that the fisher dwarf had never before sensed but had often heard tell of in old legends of horror. She clumsily got to her feet and ran to seize an iron-headed gaff beside a metal pot.

The other dwarves of Raurogh's Hall had ceased their work to look about uncertainly for the source of the sharp crack they heard come from all directions around them. A moment later, a high, rhythmic clanging of metal against metal was heard. Some dwarves recognized the ancient signal and shouted the alarm. The others heard and as one flung down their tools in rising panic, quickly awakening those who were still abed. Without delay, the hundred dwarves packed themselves into sheltered corners or beneath narrow doorways, their backs pressed tight to the stone and teeth clenched in preparation. The broken-rock odor was everywhere now; disaster was certain. The dwarves' lips moved in prayer to their ancient gods. Mere seconds later, the

earthquake struck.

The garden of glowing fungi had come to Wykar's mind when he had asked Geppo to meet with him later, after their unexpected escape from the drow. The fungus garden was reasonably close to the Sea of Ghosts, where the gold, the egg, and their former masters now lay, and the garden could be reached only through a high narrow tunnel that could not be seen from the main cavern passage known as the Old River Path. Wykar grimaced as he remembered that he had been captured only a mile down the great corridor while on his way to see the garden again, which he had discovered in his youth. The silent dark elves had then taken him to a small drow enclave about three sleepings away by fast march. It was unlikely the drow had known of the garden; they had never mentioned it.

Wykar now descended the rough cave wall down from the tunnel to the garden, rappeling quickly by rope. When he again set foot on the sandy floor of the Old River Path, Wykar stepped back and scanned his surroundings for danger. No new smells, sounds, or sights-excellent.

Luminescent fungi on the ceiling cast a faint green light over all. The wide hall had held a river many thousands of sleepings ago, but some race had rechanneled the water miles back to form the Sea of Ghosts. Many kingdoms, wars, and slaughters later, someone else had channeled the water away from the great sea, and the sea had slowly drained ever since then through cracks in its bed or walls. At some point many sleepings in the future, the Sea of Ghosts would itself be a ghost, a monstrous dry chamber miles and miles across, where albino fish and uglier things had stirred its black surface. It would be interesting then to see how many bones-and whose- the sea had hidden over the long years.

Once the derro had descended from the fungus garden and the rope was flipped loose and put away, Wykar took the lead toward their destination. Geppo agreeably followed a dozen paces behind, saying nothing and studiously ignoring the lethal advantage his position gave him over the gnome. Instead, he tested the heft of the gnome's blade and practiced a few shallow swings with it, then slid it back in his ragged sheath and prepared his crossbow instead. That done, he watched the walls and ceiling for possible targets as he walked. The gnome noticed this and gave himself a mental pat on the back. Maybe Geppo would adhere to the contract after all. He was certainly an odd fellow.

Wykar walked on with confidence, not particularly worried about being shot or stabbed in the back. He had long ago prepared for that in other circumstances, and he did not question his current defenses. Still, he would be disappointed if Geppo turned traitor just now. He would hate having to kill Geppo, even if he was just a derro.

The gnome's mind wandered as they walked. In the time they had been slaves, Geppo had said nothing about his past or how he had come to be held by the drow for what was likely many thousands of sleepings. He sometimes mentioned his father, but always as a powerful figure, always in the past tense, and always in a way that rang a little oddly to Wykar. Wykar had eventually asked about Geppo's father, but his questions were met with sudden silence, a cryptic shrug, or a change of subject.

It was getting dark again; no glowing fungi clung to the walls in this part of the tunnel. The deep gnome opened his vest wider to have a clear grab at the crystal-nosed darts stuck through loops on the outside of his leather armor. As soon as the weak light from the high fungi had faded, he carefully pulled a flexible left-hand glove from his belt, put it on, and plucked a hotstone from inside a thick side pouch. He held the hotstone aloft, testing it. The heat radiation from the magical stone reflected brightly from the surrounding rocks, well past the distance that Wykar could throw a war dart. The gnome's ultrasensitive eyes easily caught the infrared light; it was as good as a torch, but any creature lacking heat-sensitive vision would see only darkness.

Wykar glanced back and saw Geppo squinting around but making good headway over the sand and stones nonetheless. The eyes of derros, Wykar had heard, were poorly adapted to seeing heat; their visual range for that was as far as a child could pitch a pebble. Hardly tragic, considering their other flaws.

Wykar's mind spun on as they made their trek to the Sea of Ghosts. If Geppo had been a true person, another svirfneblin, Wykar thought, we would have grasped each other and wept for joy in that glowing garden. He shook his head. No, that's wrong. We would never have parted after our escape. We would have been inseparable. It's as if I were cheated by the gods. If it weren't for having to get rid of that egg . . .

The deep gnome shook himself. What he had to get rid of were dark thoughts like these. They weren't doing the situation any good. His thoughts did not encourage talk between the two as they walked, but too much talk would have been unwise anyway. They were in a large, open area, and the more quietly they moved, the longer they would live. Silent hours passed. They rested and ate only briefly, not stopping for long at any point.

Wykar was meditating on the negative aspects of his plan to get the egg and destroy it when he heard the derro cough and whisper, "You close here to home, hey?"

The gnome slowed and waited for Geppo to catch up while swiftly signaling for him to speak more softly. They then walked on, side by side, with only a couple of yards between them. Wykar decided he could put up with a little conversation with a weird derro; they were still two hours from the side tunnel to the sea.

"No," said Wykar truthfully, then thought and added, "I had to run to get there and back in time.

Didn't mean to be late."

Geppo said nothing in return.

Wykar glanced up at the derro and took a chance. "Is your home around here?" he asked.

Geppo looked at him blankly, then away again. He shrugged. Wykar had seen that shrug a hundred times.

"Well, you asked me," said Wykar. "What did you do when I left? Did you find your people?"

Geppo shrugged again. "Stayed here, blue food cave. Sharp up sword, eat, sleep, wait you."

Wykar looked up in surprise at the ragged white ex-slave. "You didn't just stay here, did you?" he said.

The derro waved at the air as if brushing away a fly, but he didn't respond.

Wykar sniffed and rubbed at his large nose. "I thought you would go home and see your family, your father. Maybe lead a war party back and kill some drow. Have a little fun."

The derro frowned and shook his head. He took a breath to say something that seemed to be difficult to get out, then exhaled and shrugged. "Not anything ... nothing to do," he finally said.

Wykar gave a humorless laugh. "You say you stayed here for ten sleepings and did nothing but wait for me?" he asked. "No, don't shrug it off. Tell me. Where did you get the crossbow and your clothes?"

Geppo shot Wykar a brief look and licked his lips. "Dead ones," he said quietly. "Dead from fight long time ago, close to blue food cave. Geppo find them, get things."

Wykar nodded. There was nothing wrong with looting a forgotten body. It was standard practice if you were out on your own and needed every advantage. It was proper to give a prayer for the spirits of the dead, of course, and sometimes even thanks for their "gifts," but that was up to the taker.

"Two drow dead," Geppo continued. "One dwarf. Two . . . two gnomes."

The deep gnome blinked and stared at the derro in a new way. "Two gnomes-like me?" he asked. His voice was cold and flat.

The derro actually appeared frightened, though it was hard to tell. He nodded once, not looking at Wykar. Then he slowed down, trying to drop back behind Wykar again, crossbow aimed at the ground as if in shame.

Wykar let him go, but only after sending him a look that should have killed the derro. The ugly white bastard was looting svirfneblin dead? Wykar stalked on ahead, enraged and heedless of what Geppo might be doing. He looked back once in time to see the derro turn his head to the side, as if he'd almost been caught looking at the gnome.

It was half an hour before Wykar gained control of himself again. He should have let it go. He himself had looted dead svirfneblin, so what did it matter that a derro did? Well, it did seem to matter in a way, but there was no point in dwelling on it. Wykar forced himself to stick to watching his surroundings.

Few interesting formations were about. Legions of past visitors to this region had chiseled away anything of value, and the natural oils from their hands and feet had ruined further mineral growth. The wide, oval-shaped tunnel was rather drab, though quite serviceable as an underground road, but it was little used now. The creation of the Sea of Ghosts had brought the wicked kuo-toa, the two-legged fish-folk, and their presence had discouraged traffic along the Old River Path and its surrounding region. Wykar counted on meeting more than a few fat kuo-toa shortly, but his infrared-vision was better than theirs—he'd see them long before they saw him. He

didn't doubt that his combat skills would be better than theirs, too. They were mediocre warriors, though big enough to be hard to kill.

Old kuo-toa were often covered with battle scars, as ugly alive as they were after a week dead. Wykar looked down at his wiry, muscular arms, lean but growing strong once more. Even with his heat-vision, the gnome could see that his hairless gray skin was crisscrossed with healed-over scars. His back and legs were worse, and lash marks itched all the time under his armor, especially beneath the thin iron plate that protected his back and neck. Physically, he would heal completely; he had no broken limbs or deformities from his captivity, so he counted himself lucky. At least no damned drow kid had tried to strangle him. But healing was not so quick for his mind and spirit. Even seeing the death of his former masters firsthand did not quench his rage at his captivity, nor did knowing those deaths had been hideously painful for the screaming drow. There was no forgetting or forgiving. A thousand deaths like theirs would not be enough for Wykar. Destroying their precious egg would be a welcome if minor revenge. They had cared for that egg for many sleepings; whatever it was, if it was precious to a drow, it deserved to be smashed before it hatched.

Their march went on for four more hours, unbroken by talk, until Wykar recognized landmarks that indicated they were close to the Sea of Ghosts. He signaled another break in the walk, just below the stumps of three stalactites that had formed in a perfect equilateral triangle. Sand crunched softly under their boots as they shuffled to a halt.

Wykar sighed. He had gotten over the derro's admission of body-robbing, and he hoped nothing would further strain things between them.

"We have about two hundred feet to go," he whispered, making sure the echo would not carry to unwelcome ears. "The side tunnel is ahead, around the corner to the right side of the hall. There are likely to be kuo-toa around, and we'll have to hit them as hard and quickly as we can unless we're too outnumbered. We've been lucky so far, but we'll have to-"

A loud crackling noise shot around them, echoing throughout the broad corridor. They both jumped, taken completely by surprise, and instinctively looked up at the ceiling. Wykar curled his gloved fingers down around the hotstone and cut off the heat-glow. They stood in the blackness and listened.

"I heard it," came Geppo's hoarse whisper. "Dragon. Big dragon sound. My father-"

"Shhh." Wykar shivered. "No, it's not-"

A broken-rock and lightning smell entered Wykar's nostrils. He knew about lightning from the spells that a few deep-gnome wizards and kuo-toan priests were able to cast. But if no lightning was around, and the rocks smelled broken, then-

He suddenly knew. He gasped and sprinted forward, hard and fast. His gloved fingers opened around the hotstone and held it up as his feet pounded the sandy ground. The corridor again leapt into bright monochromatic view, infrared shadows jerking wildly.

"Hey there!" Geppo called behind him. Wykar heard the derro start to run, too.

"Earthquake!" Wykar shouted back at the top of his lungs. It didn't matter now if anyone or anything heard him. He jumped over a large rock in his path and almost lost his footing when he came down on loose debris, hurtling on. "Run!"

There was a second cracking sound, much louder than the first. Not yet! Not yet! begged Wykar in prayer. Dust and rock bits rattled down from the cavern ceiling. Shadows shifted and jerked in the deep gnome's hurried vision. Perhaps it was a trick of the poor light, a trick of the dancing shadows as he ran, but Wykar didn't think so. Heartbeats, heartbeats left, he thought. The tunnel to the underground sea was narrow enough for shelter, well supported at its entrance.

He saw the final bend in the cavern ahead before the tunnel came to the Sea of Ghosts. The air was thick with the frightening broken-rock smell, the ceiling dust drifting slowly about now like Ghost Sea mist. There were new smells, too-moisture, dead fish, rich fields of fungus. The Sea of Ghosts. He might make it. The fishy odor was particularly strong.

The narrow tunnel to the sea appeared around the corner.

Something tall and warm was in front of the tunnel already, half visible and obviously waiting for him. That something stepped out and made a windmilling motion with its arm in Wykar's direction. It had seen his infrared-bright hotstone and heard his shouts.

Wykar threw himself forward into a roll. Bits of sharp floor debris stabbed into his back and neck. He lost the hotstone. An object whispered through the air over him, clattering hard against the far

wall. Harpoon, Wykar thought.

Wykar came up on his knees from the roll, snatching two darts from inside his vest. He hurled them, right hand and left. The hotstone, on the floor three yards away, revealed a tall, fat figure less than thirty feet ahead as it hurriedly raised another spear. The darts struck it first and burst into sprays of crystal fragments, releasing a pale gas.

The tall creature hissed like a steam vent, staggering back as it coughed sharply on the gas. The kuo-toan waved its long arms in an effort to clear its vision and throw its next harpoon. Wykar reached for his blade, but hesitated when he realized he was grabbing the weapon belonging to Geppo. It didn't matter; he pulled it out, got to his feet, and charged. If he could just close before- There was a whiz to Wykar's left, and a soft thump from the tall creature's stomach. It stepped back with a long wheezing sigh, a crossbow bolt protruding from its midsection. A second thump put a bolt right between the creature's goggle eyes. The kuo-toan shook violently, mouth open impossibly wide, then fell forward with a heavy crash to quiver softly on the ground.

Wykar halted and looked back. He saw Geppo lower his short crossbow and hurry toward him. The derro's broad, black-toothed grin was visible even at a distance.

"All-damn kuo-toa!" the derro roared gleefully as Wykar quickly seized his hotstone again. "Eat that, all-damn k-" The derro was seized with a spasm of deep, racking coughs, and his run slowed into a halting gait. Wykar reached out to seize the derro's arm and propel him toward the cavern to the Ghost Sea.

A rumbling sound, louder and deeper and longer than a thunderclap, shook the cave floor like a drum. It crescendoed and did not stop. Geppo and Wykar staggered and almost fell.

"It's the-" began Wykar.

With a cracking groan so loud it filled the world, the cave walls rippled and shifted and rocked back and forth. Stony layers split open, clouds of dust sprayed, boulders tore free of ceilings and walls. Wykar clearly saw it all in the heat-glow, though he was deafened and momentarily paralyzed with a terror that surpassed anything in his worst nightmares. He caught the derro's arm in his right hand and ran for the two-yard-wide side tunnel. He almost reached it.

A sheet of ceiling rock slammed flat against the ground to Wykar's left, the impact blowing him over like a leaf. Sand and dust fell through the semidarkness. Wykar got up and staggered forward over shattered rock, falling twice more. Geppo was gone. Wykar no longer cared.

The battered gnome was on the verge of entering the tunnel mouth when he fumbled and dropped the hot-stone again. Near darkness enveloped him. He staggered on, shielding his eyes from flying debris. His outstretched fingers touched a cold cavern wall; he turned right. Something warm was close to him, he saw that, but dust got in his eyes and pain stabbed his corneas, blinding him. A heartbeat later, he smelled the unmistakable odor of rancid fish-and ran nose-first into the wet, slimy stomach of an enormous live creature-another kuo-toan.

Wykar stabbed at the creature blindly. He wasn't even aware that he had pulled a dagger out of his boot. A moment later, the kuo-toan was gone. He lurched forward on the trembling ground and tripped once more, falling flat and banging his large nose hard on sharp, broken rocks. The pain caused him to scream; his stinging eyes ran anew with tears. The dagger fell and was gone. Then Wykar took a deep whiff of something that filled his lungs like smoking magma. He hunched up on the ground, coughing and gasping as each breath stabbed his lungs with fire. A crystal-nosed dart on his armor had broken open when he had fallen, choking him with its gas.

Deep gnomes are a pragmatic people. That does not keep them from cursing the unfairness of death, and Wykar gasped out a string of curses himself as he waited for a crushing blow from a quake-loosened stone to strike the life from him in the bleak hell of the earthquake. He hoped death would be quick. The gas from the broken dart was the pits.

* * *

The short, violent shock rocked every floor, wall, and ceiling of Raurogh's Hall, as if the earth had come to life and breathed in for the first time. Ragged cracks burst open in walls facing the direction of the shock, then closed as the earth swayed back and split the opposite walls wide with deafening roars. Carved ceilings crumbled; walls of bas-relief broke. Rock fragments fell over all, and the air was a cloud of choking dust that clogged noses, mouths, and lungs.

The fisher dwarf slipped and fell on damp rock when the shock hit, dropping the gaff with which she had banged out the alert. Scrambling fingers seized the fishing net she had flung aside as she slid on her stomach toward the river; the net snagged itself on a foot-long iron bolt driven into

the cave floor. This saved her life.

In the next instant, the River Raurogh sloshed over the fisher dwarf's head and carried her off with it, flooding the riverside tunnels as the shock flung it sideways out of its ancient bed. Clinging to the net, the dwarf collided painfully with a stone bench in the hall. Then, as the earth jerked in the opposite direction, she was washed back out again onto the stone bank of the river, and the water rushed back into its channel.

It was then that the fisher dwarf heard a monstrous roar tear through the river tunnel from the direction of the falls, a sound as great as if the cavern were the throat of a wild beast. She turned her head to look. It was the moment when the Eastern Shaar hunter far above lowered his bow, when the sorceress in her tower glared, when the old shepherd looked up from his knife and flute. A magical lantern had been washed out into the river from the dwarves' hall, and in its light the fisher dwarf saw the entire ceiling of the silo break free, a monstrous plate of rock twenty yards thick. It dropped swiftly past the top of the falls and out of sight. The dwarf looked on in amazement. She remembered the legend of the foolish dwarf. Her lips moved. "One," she whispered. "Two-"

An enormous, screaming wind awoke around her. It hurled water, tools, buckets, lanterns, and nets toward the falls, everything it could seize in its shrieking teeth. The wind savaged the dwarf as she gripped the fishing net with gnarled fingers; she felt the net's worn strands give and break apart. Freezing rain whipped at her face. The river danced and shook in the fury. Four, she thought, head down, eyes shut. Five. Six.

The hurricane blast eased and faded as swiftly as it had come. The partial vacuum created by the ceiling collapse was filled. Chilled to the bone, the fisher dwarf shivered and clung to the ruined net, unable to pull herself up. The wind's last howls echoed in her ears, following the great rock plate down into the light-lost abyss of the Deepfall.

The fisher dwarf was oblivious to all but her numbers, waiting for the great stone to reach the end of its endless fall. She had been cautious every day of her life. She would not lose her place in the legends now.

Eleven. Twelve. Thirteen . . .

The thunder dwindled slowly from every direction. Wykar heard himself shouting hysterical pleas and prayers to Garl, chief god of the gnomes. His pleas turned into sobs and coughs, then ended as he got control of himself again. He lay exhausted on his stomach, arms covering his head, and did nothing but cough on the thick dust and the overpowering stench of rotting fish.

A distant boom rolled down the great cavern corridor as part of a wall or ceiling split off and collapsed far away. The deep rattling of a rockslide could be heard afterward as the ground trembled slightly. Then the noise died into real silence. A few seconds after that, Wykar realized that the earthquake was over.

The gnome reached up with his right hand and gingerly felt his injured nose. Touching a particularly sore spot brought more sudden tears to his eyes, but a careful examination revealed that his nose was only bleeding and dirty, not broken. Thank you, Garl, he thought. He couldn't imagine life with a broken nose. It was too awful to conceive; better to be crippled. He sighed with relief and began brushing bits of rock off his nose and face.

Something groaned and stirred in the debris, very close to him. Wykar wiped his eyes on his right arm and sat up. Loose debris fell from his head and back. "Geppo?" he called.

He smelled rancid fish. Damn, he thought, fumbling for his blade hilt.

The heat-glow of a huge, pudgy creature arose from the thick dust and debris, barely two yards away. Wykar scrambled back, ignoring the pain. Though its skin was lukewarm, the creature was bleeding profusely, and its warm blood illuminated it clearly in Wykar's heat-sensitive vision. The being rose up on its hands and knees to survey the ruins of the great corridor. It hissed as it did. It was the kuo-toan Wykar had stabbed only a few moments before. The creature sucked in a great lungful of air, its gills slapping wetly against the sides of its goggle-eyed head. One of the huge eyes rolled in Wykar's direction and fixed on him. The kuo-toan hissed again, louder and sharper. Its mouth opened as it turned; it was so close that Wykar could see the individual needle teeth in its lower jaw.

The kuo-toan lurched at the gnome, mouth opened to bite. Wykar threw himself to the side at the last moment and swung his right fist at the kuo-toan's head in a roundhouse punch. He hit it squarely in its huge left eye.

With a loud gasp, the fish-creature jumped back, one long webbed hand clutching at its injured eye. It lunged forward to grab the gnome, but by then Wykar had seized the handle of the derro's long blade and pulled it free. He swung for the monster's thin-boned arm and connected with a solid thump.

With another gasping scream, the kuo-toan jerked back, waving the stump of its severed right arm. Wykar swiftly got to his feet. The derro's knife was incredibly sharp. He knew he would have to kill the stupid fish-man now, though. He bit his lower lip and steeled himself, then moved in to finish the job.

Fast as the gnome was, he had not even touched the kuo-toan when the creature shuddered violently, its back arched in a spasm and its head reared back to give the ceiling a pop-eyed stare. It wheezed out a long, final sigh as it fell backward. As it did, Geppo adroitly stepped out of its way. His left fist was clenched around the hilt of Wykar's blood-covered blade.

Geppo was panting and bleeding profusely from a scalp wound, but seemed unharmed otherwise. His blood was warmer than the kuo-toan's, so he was much brighter; his face shone like a lantern. Wykar lowered his weapon and looked around. A rumbling ran through the great corridor in the distance; the cave floor vibrated slightly through the sand. Aftershock, thought Wykar. It would be best to leave the open cave quickly.

The deep gnome produced a second hotstone from his belt pouch and held it aloft. He and Geppo paused to survey the damage to the main passageway. The floor was littered with split rocks and boulders torn from the cave walls. The dust had settled; the air smelled of shattered stone and stirred earth. Going back the way they'd come would be hard, indeed. Wykar hoped the trip hadn't now become one-way. He then looked down and saw only an arm and a foot were left of the first kuo-toan they had fought, the rest of the creature messily flattened to the thickness of a mica flake beneath a thick stone slab.

Wykar checked the narrow passage toward the Sea of Ghosts. It seemed solid even now, though the floor was a foot deep in debris and most of the tiny ceiling formations were broken off. He could see only a half-dozen yards into the narrow passage before it curved around a bend. Surprises were certain to lie beyond.

He muttered a dark curse. The only other tunnel to the Sea of Ghosts was two sleepings away by foot, and time was against them. He considered calling off the whole thing and fleeing for his life. How did he know the earthquake hadn't buried or broken the egg now? And the sea would be in violent turmoil after the shock.

If the vast, arched roof over the sea had held-and there was good reason to think it had, since the sound of its falling would have been quite noticeable through the tunnel-the kuo-toa there would be more active than ever. Wykar and Geppo had just fought two gogglers who had walked out of the tunnel; a thousand more might await them on the shoreline on the other end. The whole plan was ruined.

He tapped the derro's battered weapon against his bare leg, then thought better of it and stopped before he cut himself badly. Everything was quiet now. Perhaps it wouldn't hurt to just take a peek and see what was going on, for curiosity's sake. He motioned to the derro, who had finished cleaning his blade, and with great care and many looks at the ceiling, they stepped into the side tunnel.

The tunnel had survived in good condition. It curved back and forth for two hundred feet, once an outflowing stream from a formerly higher Sea of Ghosts. Inch-wide cracks showed all the way through the tunnel, legacies of the quake. At one point, the gnome and derro were forced to climb over the crushed remains of another three kuo-toa, half-buried when the ceiling gave way over a three-yard section. Wykar nearly gave up at that point, but he steeled himself and moved on, steadily avoiding a close look at the smashed skull of an unlucky kuo-toan. The fishy stench was incredible, and he swallowed several times to keep from vomiting.

A few yards past that point, only a bend away from the opening to the great chamber of the sea, Wykar felt a cool breeze against his face. He stopped short, taken aback. No wind had ever stirred the Sea of Ghosts, as far as he knew, but now he was certain he could feel one. A rumbling noise in the distance that Wykar had ignored was now louder, too. It might be a short aftershock, but the ground was not trembling. Something else was going on. Wykar suspected he was in great danger. He felt it by instinct rather than by reason, but the sense was too powerful to shake off. He looked back at the derro, who merely frowned and stared back in puzzlement.

Wykar couldn't think of anything to say that would make sense. He turned again and took a few steps toward the tunnel opening.

The sharp crack of breaking rock sounded through the entire tunnel. It came from directly above the gnome's head. Wykar's nerve broke. He threw himself into a dead run for the open sea cave. Cold mist settled on his nose, cheeks, and the exposed skin on his arms and legs. It was Ghost Sea fog, stirred by a rising breeze.

Wykar saw a kuo-toan with a harpoon at the tunnel mouth. It had turned to look back at the Ghost Sea, surprised by the loud rumbling throughout the great cavern. Its body was clearly outlined by green light falling on it from above. The kuo-toan had only enough time to turn back and see Wykar before the gnome's sword chopped into the goggler's right leg. The creature gasped and twisted as it fell facedown, thigh muscles cut down to the bone. The inhuman cries ended with its next breath as the derro jammed a blade into the creature's back, through its lung and heart.

Thunder and gusts of wind now flew all across the sea from every direction. A chorus of goggler cries arose downslope at the water's edge, barely fifteen yards from the tunnel exit that Wykar had fled. Wykar heard them but ignored everything that didn't contribute to his immediate escape. He ran to the left and went upslope the instant after he attacked the kuo-toan, weaving his way around numerous large boulders. His boots pounded uphill at a rapid pace beneath his short, stocky legs. Geppo would have to keep up or defend himself alone.

Wykar recalled that the tunnel opened about two-thirds of the way down a great slope that ended at the edge of the dark sea. Thirty yards up the slope at its top was a narrow path through the many rocks that had fallen over the ages from the cavern ceiling. The path had probably been created by deep gnomes many thousands of sleepings ago. If the earthquake had not damaged the area severely, Wykar and Geppo could use the path to escape the area by running around its perimeter, and thus reach their final destination. The ceiling was low along the pathway, too, and would slow pursuit by the tall fish-folk.

The gnome ran low to the ground, so hunched over he seemed bent in half. Hurrying up the slope and almost panting now, he saw a familiar rock that marked part of the high trail. He looked back just long enough to see Geppo stamping up rapidly behind him, only four yards back. The gnome then fled off along the path.

Visibility was only fair. The ever-present fog on the Sea of Ghosts usually clung to the surface of the black underground lake, rarely traveling inland. However, green tendrils of the mist now whirled in the fungus-lit air ahead of the gnome. Wykar had heard tales that the thick mist came from a broad silo in the ceiling over the center of the sea, perhaps a mile away. A river or lake far above apparently drained into the silo, perhaps as far up as the world's true surface. The vast quantities of water turned into a heavy spray over the long fall. The kuo-toa were said to enjoy the cool fog there, and sometimes things from above fell into the sea and were swiftly taken as treasure or food.

"Wait!" The desperate voice barely carried to Wykar's ears as he ran. He dared to stop and look back. Geppo had fallen farther behind him and appeared to be tiring. The derro suddenly banged his head on a low place in the overhanging ceiling and fell to his knees, grabbing at his injured forehead with a whimpering cry.

Wykar swore aloud. He ran back, grabbed one of the pale dwarf's arms, and dragged him to his feet. "Run!" he shouted in Geppo's ear. Fresh streaks of hot blood streaming down his face, the derro wheezed and stumbled forward.

It was harder now to negotiate the path. Wykar banged his left knee and shin repeatedly into rocks. He fought down the pain and struggled to keep the derro on his feet. A gust of wind then blew a thick curtain of fog over the pathway and the two runners. Wykar slowed too quickly, got his right leg entangled in the derro's left leg, and the two fell in a heap among the rock chips and dirt on the pathway.

Cursing angrily, the deep gnome forced himself back to his feet. His hands reached down and snatched at the groaning derro's prone body.

A sudden crackling of thunder swept rapidly over the two; then an explosion of noise burst against Wykar's eardrums, a stupendous sound different from all others and many orders of magnitude louder. Wykar's head jerked toward the source of the almighty racket, somewhere across the Sea of Ghosts. Then he slapped his hands to the sides of his head and ducked, ears ringing with pain. His teeth were clenched as tight as the jaws of a vice. Echoes of the explosion

crashed and rolled everywhere. He could see nothing now but a churning riot of cold green mist, whipped by howling winds.

What was happening? What was going on?

Wykar suddenly knew for sure that he had made a fatal mistake. He should have abandoned the trip at its start, fled to his real home instead of trying to play hero or get revenge. It was too late now. It was probably going to be very unpleasant to die, he knew, and he probably wouldn't have to wait long for it to happen.

Blinking stupidly, Wykar let go of his aching ears and shuffled forward, squinting through the mists. He had the oddest sensation of being completely carefree. Geppo called for help from the ground, but Wykar ignored him and strained his senses to their limits, searching for any clue of what was to come.

He did not have long to wait. Even with the blast ringing on in his ears, he could hear death approaching. It was a sound he had never heard in all his years of traveling the Underdark around the Sea of Ghosts. It was like thunder but lower in register. It made his bones tremble.

"Wave's coming," said Wykar. He tried to remember how high the slope was here, how far it was down to the shore. The blowing green fog, high winds, and lack of landmarks made him give up. He looked down at Geppo, who was slowly getting to his hands and knees. Wind whipped at their clothes, moaning like an army of ghosts.

Wykar took Geppo by an arm again, gently this time. "We have to hurry," he said aloud, above the wind's blast. Geppo muttered something into the stray hairs of his beard. One of the words sounded like hooret. Wykar had heard the word years ago during his long explorations of the Underdark. Hooret was the derro word for poison.

With the gnome's assistance, the two walked on at a quick pace. The path ran upward in a shallow grade from here, which the gnome was glad to see: the higher, the better. The low rumbling was very loud now. Wykar could feel a steady vibration through the packed soil of the path. Cold droplets ran down his face and arms from the thick mist settling on his skin.

Higher, the gnome prayed. Higher. Higher.

Now to the sound of the low rumbling was added a new noise, that of water crashing on water.

The wave was almost at the shore. Wykar stopped and released Geppo; the derro fell to the ground again. Snatching at the tools hanging from his belt, Wykar swiftly drove a steel T-headed spike into the largest rock he could find within reach. Throwing the mallet aside, he pulled his climbing rope free from his belt and looped the small noose at one end around the T-head of the spike, pulling it tight. He reached down and grabbed the woozy derro by his black belt just as the water-on-water crashing sound turned into water-on-rock. With hardly any time following that, a foaming wall of cold, black water burst up through the green-lit fog and slammed into both of them.

Wykar was thrown wildly by the churning, stinking flood. His left arm was nearly pulled from its socket when the wave hit, and the rope tore at his numb fingers. The derro was a dead weight that stretched his other arm almost to breaking. The freezing water stank abominably of dead things and goggler slime. Some of it got into the deep gnome's mouth and nose; he choked violently, almost letting go of the rope and Geppo both.

Then the churning water rushed back over the rocks, cascading downslope again to the sea.

Wykar's right arm was pressed so hard against a rocky edge that he was forced to let go of Geppo. He let go of the rope next, unable to grip anything through the sea slime. Instead of being washed away, he merely thumped down against the top of a flat rock. Coughing, he tried to roll over on his back but fell off the rock instead, dropping several feet to the ground. There he choked and vomited up foul water until he had the dry heaves and could barely breathe at all. The sea thundered in his ears, waves crashing into rocks and each other. The echoes rang from every direction, even from above. He could barely hear his own gasps for air.

Enough, he thought, enough throwing up already.

Panting and on his last reserves of energy, the gnome managed to get up on his wobbly hands and knees. He then sat upright to get a look around at his immediate vicinity. It came to his mind to call for Geppo, and he opened his mouth to form the word.

It never happened. The blood ran from his head. His eyes rolled up; he fell over backward and knew nothing more.

Something slapped Wykar's face. He was so numb that he hardly felt the blow. Clumsy hands

tugged on his leather clothing and pulled at his belt and tools. He lifted a hand feebly, and the tugging ceased.

He lurched into partial consciousness and almost immediately threw up again. He started to choke, but turned on his side, just in time. When he finished coughing and sputtering, he looked around, taking short, shallow breaths. He was shivering from cold.

A thin, dwarflike figure stood out in his heat-vision. Wykar saw a relieved grin on the figure's thin, bearded face.

"Not dead yet, hey?" said Geppo shakily, voice rising above the roaring of the sea. His rotting teeth were clenched together as he spoke. The derro looked down briefly at an object in his trembling left hand, then tossed it to the rocky ground in front of Wykar's face. It was one of the gnome's combat darts, its glass head broken away. "Water broke gnome throw-toy," he finished, the grin a bit broader. "Broke Geppo crossbow, lost arrows. But Geppo have gnome sword!" He patted the hilt of Wykar's weapon, still safe in its sheath.

Wykar managed to sit up, leaning back against a rock with his back facing downslope. He left the useless dart where it had fallen. No doubt all of his stun-gas darts were broken by now. He resisted the urge to check over all his possessions to see if the derro had stolen anything. "Good for you," he said hoarsely. He tried to stop shivering.

Geppo jerked his head in the direction from which they had been fleeing. His ugly grin disappeared. "Geppo not hear fish-heads talk. Water push them away, kill them, maybe. We go red place and run home fast, hey?" His colorless eyes flicked toward the noisy sea, over Wykar's shoulder.

Wykar absorbed the news and half turned to peek at the sea. His view was blocked by other rocks, and he sat back against the stone, hugging himself. "We should get out of here," he agreed. "We'll dry out if we keep moving and build up more body heat."

With an effort, he pushed himself up on unsteady feet, still careful to keep his head low in case some kuo-toa were around. He carefully checked his gear, though he was unsure if it really made any difference now. "You know," he said conversationally, "you could at least thank me for saving your life."

Geppo stopped checking his own gear and stiffened. He eyed the gnome in puzzlement, then anger. "You say Geppo give you golds now, hey?" he snarled, voice rising. He suddenly spat on the sea-washed ground. "There are golds for you. Take and spend them. Geppo not owe you golds for save life. Have no golds, not for you." The derro stood back, legs and arms trembling curiously. His left hand strayed near the hilt of Wykar's blade, sheathed at his side.

Wykar stared back in confusion and his own rising anger. He realized the derro had completely misunderstood him. Maybe derro regarded gratitude as some kind of monetary debt that they extorted from others of their kind. He snorted in disgust, his own self-control slipping. So the derro wanted to threaten Wykar because he didn't know what "thank you" meant? Fine. Barbarism was all that could be expected from brainless derro scum. "Forget it," he muttered, looking down again at his belt equipment. He threw away two other darts with smashed crystal noses. He had one good one left. "I don't want any damn gold from you. That's not what giving thanks means, you stupid . . ."

He suddenly seized the last good dart, jerked it free from his armor, and threw it out toward the sea as hard as he could. "All the gods damn your kind! Damn them all!" he shouted as he did. He fought down the urge to add another dozen pithy comments, very personal ones. He drew a ragged breath instead, and wiped his face and nose with a cold, wet hand. "Just forget it," he said tiredly, turning away. "Forget everything. Just come on."

He walked off, face burning with buried rage. He marched about fifty paces before he looked back in anger, hearing nothing behind him. Geppo stood in place with an astonished expression, hands now limp at his sides. The tremor in his thin limbs seemed more pronounced.

"Let's move!" Wykar hissed, sweeping a hand toward their goal. "I want no thanks from you! Just move!"

Geppo's hands twitched. His head suddenly bowed, and he began walking in Wykar's direction as if he had suddenly aged by a century. Wykar turned and set off on the path again himself, the steam cooling on his anger. It took many long minutes for Wykar to regain control of his temper and think clearly again. He then became angry with himself. What if some kuo-toan or sea monster had overheard him? He would have regretted his outburst then. And he couldn't afford to

lose the derro for anything if he hoped to get to that egg. He could not afford to throw a fit at every quirk in the derro's behavior. It was hard not to take things personally, as badly as the impulsive journey had turned out, but only a clear head had a chance to win anything good from this.

Wykar rubbed his face until he thought he would take the skin off. He eventually relaxed and let most of the tension go by breathing deeply and focusing on listening for enemies in the landscape ahead. He looked back and saw the derro marching on behind him, not looking up.

That derro has to be the most stupid one alive, he thought. But I guess that was what I needed, wasn't it? This plan had better work.

They walked on over rough terrain for about six miles until it was long past sleeping again, but Wykar was too wound up for rest.

The remainder of the journey had not been uneventful. The great wave had washed the bodies of many creatures onto the rocky shoreline, once-living things of the sort that should have remained hidden from view. Some of the creatures were still in the process of dying when Wykar and Geppo carefully and quietly skirted their quivering, obscene bulks. Several monsters slapped at the rocky shore with weakened fins, straining uselessly to drag themselves back into the sea, or exposed huge mouths of dagger teeth as they gasped out their lives with water only yards away. Wykar noted as well, a few mangled body parts from unfortunate kuo-toa, who had probably been ground against rocks or even the cavern ceiling by the great wave when it started out. He bit his lips and turned his head away, feeling no sympathy for them.

A second, smaller wave, quickly followed by a third, soon roared up the bleak shoreline, but neither wave had the power or reach of the first. After that, the sea cavern was filled with the rumbling of rough water, which went on without end. Worse, the violent sea had stirred up its two-legged inhabitants. Twice, the pair was forced to charge and fight through small groups of live kuo-toa that blocked their way. The fish-folk were confused and often injured, but there was always the danger that a lucky throw with a harpoon or random slash with a long knife would leave the gnome or derro as badly off as the writhing monsters they had passed on the shore. In the pair's favor, the thick, drifting mist from the sea enabled the gnome and derro to make an escape without fear of being followed. The kuo-toa, still stunned from the earthquake and sea wave, were also not inclined to pursue, hurling only two or three badly aimed harpoons before subsiding in confusion.

In time, Wykar saw a faint reddish-purple glow far ahead as he rounded a bend in the wall to his left. He knew immediately that the journey was almost over. The glow illuminated a region where the rocky shore swung inland away from the sea, perhaps two hundred yards or more, to end in a high wall marked by several vertical rifts from floor to ceiling. The Red Shore, the drow had called it.

Wykar stopped, signaled Geppo to take cover behind a fallen rock, and began scouting the area before them. Nothing registered as important-but that was exactly what the drow slave masters had thought as well, eleven sleepings ago. They had missed a critical thing and had died for their omission,

The red-purple glow came from a large colony of wall fungus, many yards square, that coated both sides of a broad, wet fissure large enough for a group of drow to gather inside. An underground stream leaking down from above kept the area moist.

Memories came to Wykar at once. Eleven sleepings ago, a group of drow had chosen a spot deep within the vertical fissure to bury the large chest that they and their two slaves had brought with them. They had handed Wykar and Geppo each a small pick and told them to dig. The smirking drow then stood around the ragged pair and prodded them with boot tips and sword points, urging them on with their work while describing their individual ideas on how each slave should die when the job was finished. The drow had been perfectly serious; they intended for no one to reveal the hiding place later on. After time-consuming tortures and a slow execution, the derro and gnome would be animated by magic as undead guardians, to be buried with the chest and its egg for eternity-or until the drow elected to move the chest to another spot.

Wykar rubbed his eyes and pushed the memory aside. After a few moments, he reconsidered and deliberately brought the memory of those last moments back to the surface, focusing on its details with all the detachment he could summon. He had to think his way through what had happened next, break it down and study every piece, if he was to finish the task he had set for himself.

Silently, Geppo crouched down a short distance from the deep gnome and also surveyed the land ahead. The two had not spoken for many hours, but the earlier argument was already pushed aside. It was not the time and place for quarreling now.

"I was trying to remember what happened before the moaning sound started," murmured Wykar, frowning. "They were making jokes about opening the chest and spitting on the egg and locking us inside with it, and I didn't understand why that was so funny to them-the spitting part." He glanced at Geppo, who said nothing.

Wykar shrugged and looked back at the reddish-purple glow. "Then that sound started, that loud, piercing groan that went on and on and on, and it dug right down into my gut. I saw the drow clap their hands over their ears and shout at each other, and one or two drew swords, but they dropped them. I couldn't see what was making the noise. I was sick to my stomach to be listening to it. My hands shook so much that I dropped the pick, and I was terrified the drow would kill me for dropping it. But I couldn't help it. My stomach was cramped up like I was going to vomit. I covered my ears, but that didn't help me, either."

He paused and swallowed before continuing. "A male drow, I think it was Deriander the wizard, fell down over me, screaming like a banshee. We were all screaming by then. I got up again and saw that Deriander had gone rigid and was shaking. His muscles were like iron ropes, hard as rocks. They all looked like that, all six of the drow. But I could still move. I couldn't figure it out."

Wykar turned to his companion. "That was when you hit Sarlaena with your pick. You hit her in the legs several times before she fell down, and I had this strange thought that she couldn't feel a thing you were doing. I thought she was screaming from something else." He looked back at the unearthly glow. "I fell over the lesser priestess and was getting up to escape when the cloakers got us."

The gnome's hands trembled at the memory. "I saw one of the cloakers fall from somewhere up on the ceiling. It looked like a white square. I knew what it was from stories that my people used to tell, but I had never seen one before. I knew then that cloakers were making the moaning noise that we heard, paralyzing and trapping the drow. Then I saw a large mouth open in the middle of the cloaker where nothing had been, a mouth with teeth, and two glassy eyes opened above it. It landed on Xerzanein's back and wrapped around him while he was still standing up, screaming and holding his ears. It was like a living cape, black as jet, squeezing Xerzanein so tightly I could see each of his fingers trying to claw through. Xerzanein had his mouth open, but I couldn't hear him through the cloaker cries all around."

The gnome swallowed again, his voice even quieter. "I could see the cloaker's mouth on Xerzanein's back, biting into his shoulders and neck. Every drow had a cloaker then. Sarlaena had one wrapped around her that was biting through her gut, chewing at her as she kicked and kicked, trying to scream. She flopped and twisted on the ground like a fish. Then something touched me on the back-" Wykar shivered violently and rubbed his shoulders, looking down at the ground.

Distant thunder rolled over the Sea of Ghosts.

"It's strange," he said, "but I don't really remember running away. I remember talking with you afterward, a bit of it anyway. I had it in mind even then that we had to go back and destroy the egg. If the drow thought it was so valuable and wanted to hide it, then it was too important to leave alone. They would have broken any egg that would hatch something good. I knew we had to destroy it, but I had no idea how we were going to go about it. I didn't want it to sit there for some other drow to find. But I didn't want to talk about things then; I just wanted you to meet me later when we could talk about it. I just wanted to get away and run and run."

"You ran to your people," said Geppo after a pause.

Wykar slowly shook his head, mildly surprised he would admit to this. "No. I didn't go back. I lied about that. I stayed away and hid by myself. My people are miles and miles off. I hid by myself and raided some caches of weapons, armor, food, and clothes I'd made for myself long ago. I just hid. I don't know what I was thinking for a while." He flashed an empty smile. "I just wanted to be by myself, to get myself back together again. I was never very close to anyone. I'm an orphan. I always kept to myself and did what I wanted to do. I explored places, and that was enough for me. Exploring and being alone."

He looked back at the red-purple glow. "That was how the drow caught me, you know. I was exploring, and they ambushed me with nets and clubs. Beat me until I was almost broken,

dragged me back like a food lizard to their commune. You probably remember what I looked like then. You were already there." He chewed on his lower lip, squinting at the glow, then suddenly turned to Geppo. "How did they ever catch you?" he asked.

The derro blinked, then looked away. He covered his mouth with one hand, stroking his scraggly mustache. Wykar looked away at the glow again.

"My f-my people sold me," Geppo said suddenly. He started to say more, but stopped. He didn't look at Wykar.

"Sold you?" Wykar said, stunned. "Sold you to the drow?"

Geppo stroked his mustache and nodded. The heat from his face increased visibly. He made an odd brush-away gesture with his hand, then kept toying with his mustache.

"Why?" Wykar asked.

Geppo's face seemed to sag like melting wax. He bowed his head and blew out heavily. He smiled as if the news were of no consequence and spoke slowly. "Geppo not. . . Geppo have no . . . no magic like True-Masters-what you say derro. No magic in Geppo, all empty. Lose magic when born, maybe. Geppo, True-Masters not know why. Geppo not know how make magic go from hands, go from head. True-Masters, they have magic, magic for conquer, kill, but . . ." He shrugged and spread his hands. "Empty," he said.

Wykar swallowed. "Your clan sold you for that? Didn't your father stop-" The truth dawned. He bit off his words, too late.

Geppo coughed, then held his thin hands up to his eyes, surveying his fingers and palms as if they were keepsakes of no value. "Father," he said, smiling again. "Father very angry. He say, Geppo shame upon all clan for have no magic. Father say, Geppo slave now. Geppo talk like slave. Geppo tell truth like slave. Geppo work, be slave, then Father angry more and say, out! He sell Geppo. Drow slave." He shrugged, his voice a monotone. His eyes glistened as he looked at the ground. "True-Masters, drow, all gone now. Geppo have no magic, but Geppo here, all good, hey." He sighed, all the wind going out of him. "Get golds now," he said, his voice tired. "Tell me now how we get golds and egg. Tell secret plan now. Talk too much."

Wykar looked away, the sound of the Sea of Ghosts in his ears. "Well," he said at last, "I thought we would just walk into that crack in the wall there and take them."

The derro stared at Wykar and snorted in disbelief, his face heating with anger once more. Before Geppo could say a word, however, Wykar reached back and dug his fingers into a slit on the inside of the back of his belt. The rings were still there, the rings he had taken from the body of a long-dead svirfneblin. He fished them out. The derro was a terrible looter, if that was what he had been doing earlier.

Wykar handed one ring to the derro. As he did, a sudden heat arose in Wykar's face and stung his eyes. He fought against it, refusing to acknowledge it at all. He almost took back the ring. His fingers trembled as if they knew what they were about to do.

"Don't put this on yet," said Wykar, struggling to keep his voice as steady as before. He did not dare look Geppo in the face. "These rings will make us invisible. The cloakings won't see us at all. Whatever we pick up will disappear, too, so we can carry things off, right out from under them. If the cloakings come after us, just run back here. They won't be able to see you, but you have to move carefully over loose stones, or they can find you that way. They can still hear you even if you are invisible. Do you understand?"

He dared to look at the derro's face. White eyes huge, Geppo stared down at the plain golden band in his thin fingers. Something was going on in his mind, though. Wykar could see that clearly.

Even through the fires of his shame.

Geppo's hand closed over the ring. He looked up, eyes avoiding Wykar's, then he looked down at his fist again.

"Yes," whispered Geppo. Then: "Thank you."

No, don't say that, Wykar thought in horror. No. Think of the egg. This is the only way. It is the only way.

Wykar held out his right hand, fingers spread. His hand shook as if it were cold, but he pretended not to see it. "I'm going to put my ring on," he said hoarsely. "Your people are like mine, a little, because we are resistant to magic more than other folk. Sometimes these rings work for us, sometimes they don't. We have to keep trying until they do." With that, Wykar slid his ring on the

middle finger of his left hand.

And he vanished. Invisible. He shivered when it happened. He would never get used to that.

Geppo flinched and, with what looked like open fear, watched the spot where Wykar had been. It was fear of abandonment, Wykar instinctively knew, not fear of magic.

"It's okay," said Wykar softly. "I'm still here. I'm invisible. You must have seen magic like this before somewhere. This is our magic now. Okay, now, you put your ring on."

Geppo looked around for the source of the bodiless voice, as if he thought Wykar were going to reappear. When that didn't happen, he looked down at his own ring, then carefully put it on.

Wykar continued watching the derro, who examined his still-visible hand in confusion. "Try it again," said Wykar, gaining his nerve by talking. "That's your natural magic resistance. Take the ring off, put it down on the ground, then pick it up and try again."

Geppo did as he was told. As he put the ring on the second time, he gasped aloud in amazement, mouth open wide. He turned his hands over in front of his face, marveling at the sight of them, then looked at the rest of his body and possessions. His face radiated purest awe.

Wykar watched invisibly, face burning and chest tight. The derro was just as clearly visible to Wykar now as he had been before the ring was put on.

But that was not surprising, given the sort of magical ring that Geppo wore, a wondrous ring that fulfilled the wearer's most secret and desired wish.

A cursed ring of mental delusions.

"Excellent," said Wykar shakily. "It worked that time. Don't wander off. I ... I can't see you, and we have to go. Stay within hearing of my voice, though. When we get close enough, just move in on your own. Get whatever gold you want, then come back here. Don't take your ring off until then.

The cloakings will never see us."

Geppo nodded. A new expression filled his ravaged face. It was beatific joy. Wykar knew he had done something terribly wrong. He was no fool when it came to the gods. They saw everything, even this. Maybe they would forgive all of this because of the egg. The egg was the evil thing, not Wykar. He told himself this over and over, but somehow he did not believe it anymore.

He shook it off. He was tricking a derro, not a child or a god's holy avatar.

If I am to be damned, then let us get on with it, Wykar thought angrily. "Let's go," he said, getting to his feet.

Keeping the derro in the corner of his vision, Wykar began to walk toward the red-violet glow from the distant wall, still shrouded by blowing fog from the rumbling Sea of Ghosts. Geppo walked along carefully beside him, grinning like a big fool who could not get enough out of trying to see his hands. Wykar looked away from that black-toothed grin.

The deep gnome felt inside his open vest for his final weapon and his final defense. Both were safely there, strapped into a deep, crude pocket. He removed them and gritted his teeth. He had thought long and hard about what was coming next. It would hurt terribly, but sometimes there was no other way out but through, the svirfneblin often said. No way out but through.

The two had marched to within two hundred feet of the glowing rift when Wykar whispered, "Stop." Geppo halted, looking around in mild confusion. Wykar leaned closer, but was careful to be out of the way in case Geppo drew his weapon. "Listen to me," he said. "We're going in there together. Move very slowly. If you pick something up, do it slowly and make no sound. These rings don't hide the noise you make, so be careful." Why am I saying this? Why am I saying this?

"Thank you," whispered Geppo, nodding. He set off for the glowing rift, walking in silence.

Wykar stood for a moment, staring after the derro with an empty expression. Then he took a deep breath and put a corner of his vest between his teeth, filling his mouth with the vile, fishy-tasting fur. He ground his jaws together tightly, readying himself for what came next.

He carefully lifted his final defense, unable to see it but feeling it roll between his fingers. It was a long, bronze needle.

He put the needle in his left ear, then pushed it in. Boiling pain exploded deep in his ear, pain a thousand times worse than anything the derro had given him. His head felt as if it would burst. Quickly, before he could think better of it, he transferred the needle to his other hand and jammed it into his right eardrum, destroying it as well. He dropped the needle after that and doubled over in mindless agony. He felt his teeth almost close together through the thick fur in his mouth. Hot blood ran from his ears and down the sides of his bare cheeks.

He lifted his head, eyes streaming tears. Geppo was halfway to the rift. Wykar had to go after

him, to destroy the egg. It was all for that egg. He heard nothing but an endless scream from his ruined ears. But his eardrums would heal in time. There had been no other way to block the cloakers' moaning, no way to keep them from claiming him. His ears would heal, and he would be a hero and have his revenge on the drow.

Wykar saw Geppo stop and look back in puzzlement. The gnome realized he was running and probably making a lot of noise. He forced himself to stop and concentrate through his pain, then walk more carefully and quietly. Geppo relaxed at that, then went on toward the glowing rift. The air turned bad. Wykar now smelled dead things, rotting things. The ground was covered with bits of stinking algae, like everywhere else, but a dark lump that looked like a body was just ahead. It was a drow, most of its flesh and muscle eaten away; one leg was missing. It lay in a peculiar, loose-limbed position, untouchably foul. Its filthy bones were draped with algae and ripped, soaked clothing.

The face and long hair were still recognizable. It was Sarlaena, who had once owned him. Wykar averted his streaming eyes. He tried not to inhale the air. He was close to throwing up again; he bit down harder on the fur. More long, thin, dark bodies lay ahead, scattered around like forgotten dolls. The wave, Wykar remembered. The first wave must have come up all the way to flood the split in the wall. Something about that bothered him, something bad. He shook off the feeling and trudged on. The pain burned bright as a lighthouse beacon in his head, sending its agony out to the world.

Geppo, now only twenty paces ahead, was cautiously peering into the rift. The sight and stench from the wet, rotting bodies did not seem to affect him. Geppo looked over the bodies carefully, then looked up, saw no threat, and continued on into the rift.

The final weapon was in Wykar's hands. The black wand would have to work the first time. There would be no chance for a second time. He spit out the corner of his vest and some loose fur fibers with it. He had control of himself now, in these final moments.

Geppo was in the rift. He kicked aside a severed limb, perhaps a drow's arm. He looked down at the ground now. He toed something, a sack or piece of clothing. He bent down to pick it up. Then he straightened up fast, and his bony hands clamped tight over his ears. He seemed to be screaming, his eyes shut. It was the moaning attack of the cloakers.

Something white fell from the cavern ceiling high above the derro.

Wykar raised the black wand and said the three words that would make it work. He never heard the words he spoke. He only felt them vibrate his chest. Moving his jaw tore the wounds in his ears open again, and he almost forgot the words. The pain was horrific.

White light burst out, filled the world in a flash. Wykar saw afterimages of the entire cave imprinted on his retinas like a gigantic, detail-perfect painting. A white arm of sunlight, over a hundred feet long, perfectly connected his wand tip to the falling cloaker. The cloaker was in flames, dying the instant the burning light struck it. The wand of sunfire, taken from an ambushed drow wizard and hidden away among the deep gnome's caches long ago, worked perfectly.

Wykar ran forward. There would be more, at least five more. But he was half blind, and his feet caught something, and he fell.

He dropped the black wand of sunfire. He kicked at the thing holding his legs, looking back and blinking at the afterimages.

A dead drow lay at Wykar's feet, his boots entangled in its blood-darkened arm bones and clothing.

Wykar kicked and screamed. Each scream renewed the bolts of agony in his deafened ears. The limp arms lost their grip on him and fell away, unmoving and dead. Wykar crawled away from the drow, limbs shaking with fear. He saw the wand, grabbed for it, looked up again.

Another white thing was falling from the ceiling. Geppo was below it, clutching his head. The cloakers were singing to him as they had sung to the drow.

Wykar raised the wand and shouted out the three words.

Nothing happened.

Your people are like mine, a little, because we are resistant to magic more than other folk.

"NO!" Wykar screamed. He threw down the wand, then snatched it up and aimed.

The cloaker had Geppo in its folds.

"NO!" Wykar got up and ran, waving the invisible wand like a sword. "NO! NO!"

Geppo was trying to get out. Wykar could see his thin fingers pushing out against the black folds.

The derro's narrow mouth was open and screaming and making absolutely no sound. Wykar screamed as he ran. He pulled off his ring, his invisibility ring, and threw it at the cloaker entrapping Geppo. "Look at me," he screamed. "Look at me." Something white fell from the ceiling. He saw it just before it got him. The wand went up, aimed, the three words said. A staggering white spear of light set the cloaker ablaze; it curled up and fell to the side. Wykar saw in the great flash that a dozen dark things hung from the ceiling above him. A nest of monsters. They pulled loose when he saw them, a dozen white sheets falling at him with huge mouths and glassy eyes and fangs. Wykar screamed three words, wand out, and shut his eyes. He screamed them again and again and again, over and over, white flames roaring now from the wand and heat searing his hands, a litany of fire in the darkness. Something caught him by the foot and pulled. Wykar lost his balance and fell, unable to see anything through the maze of afterimages and agony in his head. He struck blindly with the wand at the thing that had grabbed him, but the thing only tightened its grip. It didn't feel like a hand. Wykar swiftly rubbed his eyes on his short sleeve. In the red-violet light of the rift, he then saw what gripped his foot, even through the afterimages in his eyes and the fire in his ears and the bodies of flaming cloaklers scattered across the rift floor. He saw it clearly. The egg in the chest had hatched. It held his foot in one of its thick, dark tentacles. Wykar screamed and heard himself scream even with no eardrums. The sea wave had hatched it, of course. Wykar realized that even in his madness, as he screamed out the three words and pointed the wand at the three liquid-black eyes only a yard away. He knew why the drow thought it was so funny, the idea of spitting on the egg, which they did not dare do. Water would hatch the egg and set the baby free. Not even a drow would want that. The scaled newborn raised itself up as Wykar said the last word. He could not shut his eyes to block out the sight of it. Hot, so very hot, and so blind after, though he saw everything. In the flash of pure light that filled the rift, he saw the tentacled creature with three eyes impaled on the white-hot lance in his hands. Smoke flew from it in that instant, smoke black as a nightmare, and the creature and the wand blew up. Almost half the population of Raurogh's Hall fell victim to the earthquake, injured or killed. When the surviving dwarves reached the shivering fisher dwarf, her eyes were closed but her blue lips were still moving. "One hundred sixty-five," she whispered aloud, hearing their approach. "One hundred sixty-five." The rescuing dwarves heard the fading thunder from the Deepfall's silo and understood. One hundred sixty-five seconds from top to bottom. They pulled her to safety. Her place in the legends was assured. Wykar's hands were blistered and burning. He held them up and wept, pushed beyond his limits. His mangled hands glowed like fires in his heat-vision. He was on his feet, staggering around on the body-strewn shore outside the rift with the red-purple glow. He remembered nothing after the explosion, neither what happened nor how he got there. He went back inside the rift. "Geppo!" he cried. He heard nothing, not even the tortured whine from the remains of his eardrums. "Geppo! Geppo!" He found Geppo pulling himself from the folds of a limp white sheet. The red-splattered mouth on the sheet was slack and open, and its yellow gaze saw nothing. Geppo reached out to Wykar, bathed in the heat of his own blood. The derro spoke words the gnome could not hear. Wykar caught his hand and leaned close. "Ring not work very long," Geppo's lips said. "Not very long, but cloaker not kill Geppo, hey?" The derro managed a black-toothed grin. "Geppo think good plan. Eat blue-glow plant in cave. Hooret, poison in blood, but not kill Geppo. True-Masters eat blue-glow plants always. Plants make all very sick when they try eat True-Masters, even Geppo." The derro gripped Wykar's hand tightly. "Geppo smart, hey? Cloaker very sick, hey?" "I used you," Wykar said. He clutched the derro to him. "I used you to get the cloaklers out. I betrayed you. Gods forgive me, Geppo, I did you evil. I did you evil." The derro merely smiled. "You lie," he said. "You give Geppo magic. You give Geppo real magic. Not work very long, but was real . . . magi - " He stiffened. "Thank . . . " The light went out in the colorless eyes.

"No," cried the gnome. He clutched the derro to him. "Geppo. Gods above hear me. No. No." Only silence heard him.

On the starlit plains of the Eastern Shaar, the hunter stirred the dying embers of his campfire, thinking of his dead wife. The sorceress in the tower closed the mildewed tome and rubbed her eyes, unsettled by the book's implications. The old shepherd, warm in his cottage and his flock in its pen, played a soft tune on his flute, then began a bedtime tale to his grandson about ghosts.

VOLO DOES MENZO

Brian M. Thomsen

In a Dive in Skullport

"Where's my Skullport Special?" roared the foul-mouthed dwarf. "I ordered it over an aeon ago!"

"You ordered it less than five swipes of a dragon's tail ago," answered Percival Gallard

Woodehous, the efficient and supercilious maitre d'/waiter/cook of Traitor Pick's, one of Skullport's grimier and grimmer grog-and-grub spots, ". . . and here it is."

The dwarf, whose name was Knytro, dived in with both hands, filling his cheeks with the aromatic mush while commenting, "Better than last time. Best slop in all Skullport." Then, looking up, stew dripping from his beard, he added, "You ain't much to look at, Pig, but you know how to cook."

"I live to serve," Woodehous answered with a touch of sarcasm he knew was lost on the dwarf, who was busy delighting in his dinner du jour.

Knytro began to lick the bowl of any of the stew's residue that had managed to escape his mouth, beard, and shirt front during the scant seconds it had taken for him to empty the vessel of its contents. The foul-mouthed dwarf then belched a further message to the long-suffering Woodehous.

"I beg your pardon?" Woodehous inquired.

"Whatsa matter?" the dwarf replied, getting a little hot under the collar. "I said it in Common, Pig. You deaf?"

"I must have been distracted by the bovine exuberance you manifested in the inhalation of your meal," he replied, confident of the limited vocabulary of his customer.

"I said 'Good slop,' " the dwarf repeated, this time without the benefit of the gaseous accent.

"I live for your praise," Woodehous replied, turning to head back to the bar.

The dwarf, having sated his appetite for food, had obviously not yet reached his fill of conversation. He left the table and followed the waiter, taking a place on the stool in front of the bar and motioning that he was ready for a post-dinner nightcap of grog.

Ever efficient, Woodehous accommodated him immediately. The customer is always right, he thought to himself, no matter how uncouth, foul-smelling, or barbaric. Dignity must be maintained in service at all times.

"You know, Pig?" the dwarf continued.

"What, good sir?" he replied, grimacing as he once again heard the unfortunate moniker that had become his common hail of recent.

"In all the years I've spent excavating around these here parts, I've never come across a better slop jockey than you. I have a mind to put a good word in for you with the management around here."

"Why, thank you, good sir," Woodehous replied, hoping that enough of these endorsements would return him to managerial favor and convince the powers that be to return him to his previous assignment back at Shipmaster's Hall in Waterdeep or some other equally prestigious establishment. He refilled the dwarfs mug one last time.

"No problem, Pig," the dwarf replied, draining the draught immediately. "Wouldn't want to lose you. You're the best cook Traitor Pick's has ever had-well, at least in the close to fifty years I've been coming here.

You can certainly work up an appetite opening up and closing down tunnels all day. I know the manager, and he knows me-me being a steady customer and all."

The dwarf got off his stool and headed for the door, adding, "I'm sure one word from me, and you'll never have to look for another job again. Your position here will be secure forever."

"What a depressing thought," Woodehous muttered, mostly for his own benefit, as none of the customers seem to be paying him much attention.

Percival Gallard Woodehous had been on the Waterdhavian taverns managerial fast track when

an unfortunate incident had derailed him. Having been trained in hostelry and cuisine at some of the best taverns in Suzail, the then young majordomo-in-training had set his sights westward, and traveled to Waterdeep in search of a position befitting his abilities. Once there, he contracted his services to a catering consortium, which arranged for him assignments at various affairs in Waterdhavian society. As his expertise increased with the demands, he soon found himself in a position to control his own destiny. He resigned from the consortium and landed a position at the Shipmaster's Hall, a private inn and supper club that catered to the upper crust of the sailing community. In no time at all, he was running the place with more than twenty different employees under his supervision. Woodehous felt it was the perfect time to take a break from his fast-paced climb up the social ladder and settle back for a few months of treading water among the nautical set. The next opportunity for advancement would surely present itself soon enough.

Then, one day, he had the misfortune of being on duty when a very important person checked in with his entourage. It was none other than the master traveler in all Faerun, and the best-selling guidebook author Volothamp Geddarm himself. Quickly seizing the opportunity to add yet another feather to his cap, Woodehous offered Volo and his party accommodations "on the house," fully expecting a rave review for the establishment in the next edition of Volo's Guide to Waterdeep. Unfortunately, the traveler and his entourage skipped town during the night, leaving neither a rave endorsement nor a monetary settlement for services rendered. When Woodehous informed his superiors of the situation, they were enraged. Their rationale was twofold, each reason equally damning. First, if the traveler wasn't really the legendary Volo, Woodehous had been taken advantage of by a con man (perhaps the renowned rogue and imposter Marcus Wands, aka "Marco Volo") and, therefore, was ill suited for the responsibilities of his managerial position. Second, if the traveler was really the legendary gazetteer, Woodehous had either done something to offend him or Volo had found his accommodations inadequate for even a full night's stay, thus assuring the establishment an abominable review in the guidebook's next edition. Either way, his superiors saw dismissal as the only appropriate action, and Woodehous was fired. Woodehous returned to the catering consortium in hopes of restarting his societal upward climb, only to find himself blacklisted. The restauranting powers that be were more than a little indignant over his striking out on his own, and hoped to teach him a lesson. As a result, the only position he was able to obtain was in the employ of a nouveau entrepreneur whose acquaintance he had made back at the Shipmaster's Hall.

Denver Gilliam—a former seaman and, by his own reckoning, a veteran of one shipwreck too many—had recently struck it rich and bought out a block of taverns in the dock district of the City of Splendors. After the buyout, the taverns each maintained a distinctive ambience; even the Lords of Waterdeep couldn't tell they had a single owner, despite the fact that the establishments stood side by side on both sides of the street.

(The few patrons who were in the know had nicknamed the block "Gilliam's Aisle.")

Gilliam offered Woodehous a position, which he quickly accepted, signing a contract for no fewer than three years of exclusive hostelry services. Upon starting work, however, Woodehous discovered that the tavern to which he had accepted assignment was far from the newly fashionable, newly renovated Waterdhavian dock district. Its location wasn't even in Waterdeep, and thus the gentleman hostler found himself maitre d'/cook/waiter at Traitor Pick's in Skullport, where walking upright immediately designated one a member of the intellectual upper crust. Woodehous had lost track of the time since he had last ventured out into daylight, and was quickly approaching despair as he realized he had not even reached the halfway point in his contract.

When the dinner trade reached its close, Woodehous locked the front door behind him and set out to the Gentleman's Groggery for his evening repast, leaving a sign on the door that simply said, "Out to Sup."

At the Gentleman's Groggery

Though it was true that the cuisine and service at the Gentleman's Groggery did not even come close to the level expected at Traitor Pick's, let alone one of the more fashionable Waterdhavian establishments, when it was Woodehous's turn to dine, he considered one thing requisite: he would be served and enjoy the amenities of any other paying customer. The niceties at the Double G (as the locals called it) were scant, true, but the food was at least digestible, the service less than threatening, and the locale relatively convenient. By default, the Double G had become

Woodehous's regular dining spot.

"Hey, Pig," Wurlitzer, the orcish bartender, called as

Woodehous entered the establishment, "how's the trade at Traitor's?"

"Typical," Woodehous replied, taking a place at the bar to avoid a rather raucous group gathered at the tables. He requested, "The usual, please, my good fellow."

The bartender snorted in agreement and poured the fallen-from-grace society caterer a glass of wine. "Have you heard about the new place opening down the street? I think it's called the Cup and Lizard, or something."

"You mean the Flagon and the Dragon," Woodehous corrected.

"That's right," Wurlitzer agreed, setting a plate in front of the recently arrived customer. "I believe they're looking for experienced help. You want me to put in a good word for you?"

"You're the second person today who has offered to 'put in a good word for me,' and though your kindness is appreciated, I prefer to decline at this time. My next position must certainly be as far away as possible from this hellhole we call home," Woodehous replied.

"Skullport's not such a bad place," the ore responded defensively. "I've lived here me whole life, and although it's a slight comedown for the upper-crust likes of you, I have a feeling things are beginning to look up."

"Oh, really?" Woodehous replied sarcastically, immediately afterward hoping that he hadn't hurt Wurlitzer's feelings. The ore was the closest thing he had to a friend. "How so?"

Wurlitzer immediately began to brim with excitement.

"I was hoping you'd ask," the ore replied. "Guess who we have as a guest tonight?"

"I have no idea," Woodehous replied, in no mood for guessing games.

"It's an old friend of yours," the ore prodded. "C'mon, guess."

Realizing the bartender wouldn't give up until he did, Woodehous swallowed the sustenance that was in his mouth, wiped his lips with a napkin, and, with a shrug, named the first person that came to mind.

"I really have no idea-" he said, then offered "-the legendary gazetteer, Volothamp Geddarm?"

A look of puzzlement seized the ore visage.

"Does he also like to be called Volo?" Wurlitzer asked, obviously not familiar with the great author's full name.

Woodehous was taken aback in shock.

"You mean Volothamp Geddarm is here . . . tonight?" he asked incredulously.

Wurlitzer scratched his head, trying to spur on his meager mental faculties. "If you mean the guy who does those guidebooks and likes to be called Volo and was supposed to give you a good review at the Shipmaster's Hall, well, yeah."

"Where is he?" Woodehous demanded.

"Over there," the ore replied, gesturing to the raucous group at the tables. "He seems to be holding court or something. He started out telling a few really neat stories about his travels and attracted a crowd."

A cry of "Yeehah!" was heard from the other side of the room, followed by peals of laughter from various revelers.

"And the next one's even better," the same voice bellowed, an alcoholic slur evident in his voice.

"He seems to be a bit in his cups already," Woodehous observed out loud.

"Sure does," Wurlitzer agreed. "I like it when a newcomer sees fit to enjoy all of the Double G's empties."

"You mean amenities," Woodehous corrected, leaving his barstool to take a place at one of the tables along the periphery of the VIP's audience.

The ore watched in puzzlement, unaware of his own propensity for malapropisms.

Woodehous quickly scanned the numerous empty chairs that surrounded the legendary gazetteer; more than a few of the supper club's clientele had gotten their fill of the entertainment provided by the jaunty and boisterous fellow who claimed to be the greatest traveler in all Faerun. With the exception of the expensive clothes and the drunken dishevelment of his bearing, the travel writer looked just as Woodehous remembered him. A neatly trimmed beard, a jaunty beret, and a prosperous paunch, all wrapped around a gift for gab, a sly wink, and a smile. This was Volothamp Geddarm, the same gentleman whose earlier unexpected departure from the Shipmaster's Hall had cost Percival Gallard Woodehous his job, as well as several ranks on the

Waterdhavian society scales. This was the man directly responsible for his current social banishment to Skullport.

"... And then there was the time I flew to the Horde-lands in a jerry-rigged Halruaan skyship ..." the fellow rambled.

Oh, great, Woodehous thought, I guess I'm going to have to sit through a full set of the amazing adventures of Volo. It might be worth it if I get the opportunity to talk to him alone later on. If I play "the good audience," he just might intercede on my behalf back at the Shipmaster's Hall.

"... And then there was the time I was abducted by a group of dopplegangers off the streets of Waterdeep...."

I guess I'll just have to bide my time, Woodehous thought.

The crowd further thinned as the self-absorbed storyteller rambled on. The once-dense mob of fans and admirers had considerably dissipated itself. All were gone save for a few star-struck ores; a pair of foul-smelling dwarves, who freely helped themselves to massive quantities of the gazetteer's libations; an inebriated ogre, who had nodded off in an upright position; and a pair of thuggish drow, who listened to the storyteller like panthers listening to approaching prey.

". . . And my next book is going to be really different. ..."

The drow pair continued to stare unblinkingly.

"... Imagine a travel guide that is so exotic . . ."

He really loves the sound of his own voice, Woodehous observed silently.

"... so mysterious, why I bet it's safe to say that there are some who would stop at nothing to prevent this manuscript from being published. . ."

Yeah, really, Woodehous thought sarcastically, nothing but hype.

"... And I think I'll call it Volo Does Memo. . . ."

At the mention of the title, the two drow quickly exchanged hushed words, rose from their chairs, and hastened out of the tavern, flipping a guinea to Wurlitzer to cover their tab.

"... It will be the first book with directions to and from the great city of Menzoberranzan, a virtual travelers' guide to the Underdark."

A smattering of applause followed as the audience took advantage of the traveler's pause to quaff the remainder of their brew and quickly dispersed before the storyteller could begin to rant again.

I guess the crowd knows when it has had enough, Woodehous thought, watching them disperse to the far corners of the supper club. When he turned back to the place where the storyteller had been sitting Woodehous was shocked to see that Volo had already gathered up his pack, flipped a salute and a guinea coin to the bartender in thanks for his gracious hospitality, and was already out the door, and on his way to Ao-knows-where.

"Oh, no," Woodehous cried out loud, hastening in fast pursuit of the key to his possible redemption. He was almost out the door when an orcish arm grabbed him by the collar.

"Pig, old boy," Wurlitzer said in a friendly tone that didn't mask an implied threat, "aren't you forgetting something?"

The erstwhile maitre d'/waiter/cook of Traitor Pick's quickly took half a second to fish from his pouch the first coin his fingers touched, flipped it to the bartender, and continued on his way, in earshot long enough to hear the bartender remark that three guineas in a row in tips wasn't bad for a midweek evening without paid entertainment.

Glancing in both directions down the nocturnal alleys of Skullport-and seeing his quarry neither way-Woodehous quickly chose a likely course and set off in search of the traveler. He cursed his own haste and the misfortune that had just cost him his dinner allowance for the whole week, and wholly disregarded the fact that the allotted time for his dinner break had long since expired.

After more precious time had passed, Woodehous wondered aloud, "Which way did he go?" The question was born more out of exasperation than practicality, since Woodehous had long since given up noticing any of the other alley wayfarers of the Skullport twilight scene.

"Which way did who go, Pig?" inquired a voice from behind.

The now-former maitre d'/cook/waiter of Traitor Pick's quickly turned around and was confronted by the tentacled visage of one of his now-former patrons.

"Oh, it's you, Malix," Woodehous replied.

"Correct," replied the mind flayer mage, who had taken a fancy to Woodehous's recipe for duergar deep-dish. "I repeat the question. Which way did who go?"

"Volothamp Geddarm."

"You mean the loudmouthed storyteller from the Double G? He went thataway," Malix replied, one of his facial tentacles pointing down a dark alley. "Just follow the path of glowing dust. He must have stepped in something along the way. And beware! He was being followed by two unsavory-looking drow."

"Thanks, Malix," Woodehous replied, taking off into the shadows in the indicated direction.

"Don't thank me," Malix instructed, calling after him. "Just finish up your business and get back to work. I have a hankering for some dessert, and the faster you finish, the sooner my craving will be sated."

Woodehous raced down the narrow alley even though he couldn't see the path of glowing dust Malix had indicated. His diligence was soon rewarded. The alley ahead made a sharp turn to the right, narrowing down to a single body's width, and then right again, and opened onto an apparent dead end shrouded in total darkness.

He barely heard someone cry out "No," before he felt a sharp blow to the back of his head, upon which he was immediately drowned in the pitch-black ocean of unconsciousness.

Walking in Darkness

Woodehous had no idea how long he had remained unconscious, and barely noticed coming around. He was poked and prodded to his feet, and then partly led, partly dragged through a narrow tunnel of darkness. The passage was lit occasionally by four marbles of purplish glow that bounced in step with his apparent captors.

Soon he felt the tunnel widen around him, and noted the absence of Skullport's telltale sea breeze. They seemed to be following a steady incline downward. His wrists had been tied together in front of him, and connected to a noose that had been cinched tight around his neck. The noose was in turn connected to some sort of leash, with which he was being led as he stumbled forward into the darkness.

Woodehous soon realized he was not the only unwilling member of the subterranean party.

"C'mon, you guys," implored a voice Woodehous recognized as Volo's, "can't you give us a break? We've been walking for hours. Can't we rest a bit?"

"All right," replied a mouth located just below two of the dancing purple orbs. "Skullport is now far behind us, and it would be foolish of you to imagine you could find your way back, anyway. You may sit and rest a bit."

"May I reach into my traveling pouch?" the famous gazetteer requested. "I have a gem that gives off a bit of illumination, which might make things a little easier for those of us not gifted with such acute night vision."

"All right," the voice replied, "but no funny stuff. Though I have every intention of taking you alive to Menzoberranzan, that does not preclude me from certain nonlethal treatments of your person that I am sure you would find quite unpleasant."

"Funny stuff? I wouldn't think of it," Volo replied.

Woodehous heard a rustling like fingers fishing in a purse, which was followed by a flash that required him to quickly shut his eyes. Slowly he reopened them, squinting toward the illumination. He turned away from the source of the light and took a few seconds to gaze at the surroundings, which slowly came into view as his eyes grew accustomed to the luminescence.

The group was in a cavern with walls formed of what appeared to be black glass, smooth and flat. If the telltale shadows of their party of four hadn't been cast upon the walls, there would have been an illusion of infinite darkness, the void of starless space.

"You look kind of familiar," Volo said to his fellow captive. "Do I know you?"

Woodehous returned his attention to the source of the illumination, realizing that the question had been directed at him. The light showed that Volo's hands and neck were similarly bound. "You probably don't remember me, but..." the former maitre d'/cook/waiter started to answer.

Volo snapped his fingers and quickly interrupted.

"You used to work at the Shipmaster's Hall back in Waterdeep," said the gazetteer. "I never forget a face. What in Ao's name were you doing in Skullport?"

Woodehous was at a loss for words. He wanted to blame the writer for all of his woes: his loss of social status, his banishment to that culinary pit in Skullport, the besmirching of his reputation. . . . But such accusations would have all been for naught, given their current situation.

"I worked there," Woodehous replied, "at Traitor Pick's ..."

Volo snapped his fingers, once again interrupting. "You must be Pig. I've heard wonderful things about your cooking. I can't wait to try it. How did you wind up working there?"

"Thanks for the compliment," the beleaguered gourmet replied, now resigned to the fact that he would probably be known by that horrible moniker until his dying day-whose possible proximity was beginning to cause him great consternation."My full name is Percival Gallard Woodehous. I lost my job at the Shipmaster's Hall through circumstances beyond my control, and I needed a job."

"Quit your yammering!" one of the drow captors ordered, kicking Woodehous in the side and cuffing Volo alongside the head. "Rest while you can, and you'd best do it quietly. It's a long walk to Menzoberranzan."

"Sorry," the gazetteer apologized. "I just figured that since it was going to be such a long trip, we might want to get to know each other a bit. Now I assume both you and your equally dark-skinned companion are probably two of Lloth's famous warriors."

"We will be, once we bring you in," the captor boasted proudly. "Soon everyone in Menzoberranzan will know the names of Courun and Haukun as the lone protectors of the privacy of the Spider Queen. No surface dweller has ever dared violate the sanctity of her domain, let alone document such visitations in a travel guide."

"You caught me red-handed," Volo conceded. "I hadn't even had the chance to turn the manuscript over to my publisher yet."

"And you never shall," said the drow known as Courun. "You are our ticket out of exile."

"And what am I?" Woodehous inquired, quickly receiving another kick to the ribs.

"Just another slave bound for the work pits," said the drow known as Haukun, "and believe me, it's not a pleasant place."

"That's why we left," Courun inserted. "Had we stayed around, that would have been the most favorable fate available to us."

"Slavery still beats being turned into a drider," Haukun added. "But all of our past faults will be forgiven when the matron mother hears how we saved the day."

"Not to mention preserved the Spider Queen's honor," added Courun.

"What exactly did you do to fall out of favor?" Volo inquired, with a tone of such sincerity and caring that both drow warriors continued to let their guards down.

"They thought we were inept," Haukun confessed.

"And not suitable for becoming warriors," Courun added.

"We returned from a surface raid without any captives. . . ."

"And worse still, there was a trace of broken spider-web on our boots...."

Volo nodded in understanding. Among the drow, to fail as a warrior was almost unforgivable, but to be suspected of having caused harm to one of Lloth's chosen children was a far greater crime. Still, even offenses of such magnitude could be forgiven after a great act of fealty or heroism.

"But that's all in the past now," Haukun proclaimed proudly, then ordered, "Back on your feet! The sooner we get to the beloved place of our birth, the sooner we shall be vindicated."

Quickly, the two captives regained their feet and set off down the passageway, farther into the bowels of Toril. The captors did not seem to notice that Volo had not returned the stone of luminescence to his pouch, instead attaching it to a thong that hung around his neck, thus providing a helpful torch for both himself and Woodehous.

The Road to Menzoberranzan

Much later, after endless hours of walking, the party of four stopped to rest by an underground pool. The two drow captors offered their captives some leathery jerky made from a long-dead lizard of undetermined species.

"Eat," Haukun instructed. "We have no intention of dragging your starving carcasses the rest of the way. This should sustain you for a while."

The jerky tasted awful and was far from filling, but both captives realized that eating it was better than going hungry. They tried their best to ingest the leathery sustenance. Woodehous also noticed, with some consolation, that neither of their captors seemed to enjoy the meal either.

"Too bad there aren't any fish in this pool," Volo said matter-of-factly.

"Why do you say that?" Courun inquired just as an eyeless trout broke the surface with a flick and splash.

"Well," Volo replied, "I've always heard that drow are excellent fishermen, and given that my

compadre in captivity is one of the best chefs in all Waterdeep-let alone Skullport-I don't see why brave warriors such as yourselves should have to make do with inferior field rations. ... I guess that sort of self-denial is what makes you such great warriors. I, on the other hand, could really go for some fish stew. Then again, I've never claimed to be a great warrior, let alone the equal in fortitude of the noble and great drow."

Courun and Haukun looked at each other for a moment, and then said something in the drow tongue. Haukun turned to Woodehous and said, "Are you really a good cook?"

"The best," Volo answered in his stead, adding for agreement, "right?"

"Well, I don't like to brag," Woodehous responded, seeing the opportunity for a better meal than the rancid jerky, "but, well, let me put it this way, all of Waterdeep can't be wrong."

"Let alone Wurlitzer of Skullport," added the gazetteer. "He's a noted connoisseur."

The two drow looked at each other in puzzlement.

"That means he likes good cooking," Volo quickly explained.

A quick exchange of words between the two, and Haukun took to his feet, grabbed his spear, and positioned himself on the pool's ledge, eyeing the water for a trout. Courun meanwhile arranged some rocks in a pile and said a drow incantation.

In no time at all, the rocks began to glow fiery hot, and a sizeable trout had been freshly speared.

Both Woodehous and Volo's hands were unbound, and instructions were given.

"Cook!"

Volo whispered to Woodehous surreptitiously.

"Okay, Percy," the gazetteer said, "do your stuff, and you better make it good."

"I need a pan or a pot of some sort," Woodehous replied.

"But of course," Volo agreed. "Courun, can he borrow your breastplate?"

"Sure," Haukun replied.

As Courun undid the fastening from his tunic, the chef gazed around the subterranean chamber as if looking for something in particular.

"What are you looking for?" Haukun demanded. "You have a pan now. Why aren't you cooking?"

Woodehous prepared to place the trout on the breastplate. "It's just that pan-roasted trout is so bland," the maitre d'/cook/waiter explained, still looking around. "Would you do me a favor and fetch me some of the moss from that half-submerged rock over there, and perhaps some of the hanging fungus from that stalactite as well?"

"Why?" the drow demanded.

"You'll see," Volo assured.

The two drow once again exchanged gazes of puzzlement, and then, with a shrug, Courun set off to fetch the requested ingredients.

Expertly, Woodehous the chef gutted the trout and removed its innards, replacing them with some of the recently obtained hanging fungus. He then added a little water to the breastplate pan and sprinkled some of the fungus into it. The water began to simmer with a truly delicious odor of spice. While the water was heating up, Woodehous rubbed the moss against the outside flesh of the fish until little flecks of vegetation had permeated the meat. He then added the thoroughly seasoned trout to the pan, carefully turning it every few moments so that it cooked both completely and evenly.

The cavern was soon filled with the tempting and savory aroma of a gourmet's delight, and in no time at all, the four travelers were enjoying a nourishing and delicious meal.

"See," Volo attested, "I told you."

"No complaints here," Haukun agreed. "If you can cook this well all the time, my partner and I might be willing to let you continue the journey with your wrists unbound, that is, provided you don't try to escape."

"Where would we go?" Volo reminded him. "We'd just get lost and die in the dark without your expert guidance."

"You'd better believe it," Courun replied, his mouth half full of the gourmet's delight.

Once the meal was over, the foursome rested while Courun allowed his breastplate to cool. Once it was back in place, they recommenced their journey, following the stream that evidently fed the pool that had been the source of their splendid repast. In a little while, they decided to make camp to rest a bit, and get a little sleep. Woodehous quickly realized that the concept of day and night no longer really existed. He had quite lost track of the time that had passed since he had

first spotted Volo back in the Double G and raced after him through the alleyways of Skullport. He had also not realized how tired he really was, and quickly found himself fast asleep.

"Percy, wake up!" Volo urged in a hushed tone.

Woodehous stirred from his moments with Morpheus, and opened his eyes.

Sometime during their rest, their two drow captors had been confronted by a pair of kuo-toa-tall, nasty, pot-bellied amphibians-and harsh words were being exchanged. During the course of what had started as a cordial though wary meeting, the conversation between representatives of the two dominant subterranean species had quickly deteriorated into a heated argument.

"The tall kuo-toan," Volo explained, "claims he can smell the blood of his people on Courun. No doubt he really smells the residue of our dinner on our captor's breastplate."

"One would have thought that he would have washed it off before putting it back on," Woodehous observed.

"No doubt," Volo replied, "but then again, neither of our captors have shown much evidence of common sense or brainpower. If their superiors back in Menzoberranzan thought they were incompetent, the odds are that they really are. Drow matrons are usually keen judges of competence and potential."

The disagreement was quickly turning into a shoving match between the two pairs.

"What are they saying now?" Woodehous inquired.

"He just called Haukun a son of an illithid," Volo translated. "They should come to blows any moment now."

The drow and the kuo-toa began to use their spears as quarterstaves in a battle that had not yet escalated to lethality.

"I foresee a few bruises and contusions exchanged, but no death blows," Volo observed. "We can go back to sleep."

A thought crossed the maitre d'/waiter/cook's mind.

"Why don't we take this opportunity to escape?" Woodehous asked with great urgency. "Our captors are distracted, and we never know when another opportunity will present itself."

"Don't worry about that," Volo replied, returning his head to the pillow of his pack. "You could never find your way back to the surface on your own, and my mission is nowhere near completed yet."

"What mission?" Woodehous blurted, his voice a trifle too loud.

"Hush!" Volo demanded, quickly looking over to make sure that their captors had not heard him.

Luckily they were still beating each other with the shafts of their spears.

No doubt, hair pulling and scale scratching would soon follow.

"Just trust me for now," the master traveler instructed. "I assure you I have no intention of spending my remaining days as a slave or worse in some Ao-forsaken city of the drow, nor do I intend to abandon you to that fate. Just trust me. I have a plan. Now go back to sleep."

Volo turned over, closed his eyes, and was soon snoring, leaving a puzzled Woodehous, wide-eyed and wide awake to contemplate this recent revelation of facts.

The following morning, the drow captors were far from gentle in bringing their captives to consciousness so they could resume the long trek beneath the surface of Toril. There was no sight of the kuo-toa, and Courun and Haukun looked the worse for it, their deep ebony skin mottled with bruises and swelling.

"What happened?" Volo asked innocently. "You look as if you've been attacked."

"The Underdark is laden with danger," Courun replied. "Haukun and I had to fight off an entire army of fierce kuo-toa warriors to save your sorry skins."

"Thank you," the gazetteer replied.

"We didn't save them for you," Courun replied churlishly. "Lloth prefers to render her punishments and torture. It was our responsibility to save you for her, rather than let you fall into the fishy hands of her enemies."

"Or fins, for that matter," Volo replied under his breath.

"What did you say?" the drow captor demanded.

"I said, 'Unto the finish, you are the master,' " the quick-thinking gazetteer replied.

"Well, let us be off," the bruised drow ordered. "We still have many days' journey ahead of us."

"As you wish, Master" Volo replied. He helped Woodehous to his feet as they proceeded onward along the road to Menzoberranzan.

The words day and night lost all meaning to Volo and Woodehous as their journey continued. Darkest night bled into darkest night as they traveled onward between infrequent stops for rest and nourishment. No matter where they chose to dine, the former maitre d'/cook/waiter always rose to the occasion, fixing the foursome a meal fit for a lord of Waterdeep. Subterranean moss salad, fermented fungus casserole, and even spiced filet of cloaker (courtesy of an extremely lucky Courun, who happened to accidentally run one through with his spear before it had managed to attack the group) kept their bellies full and spirits incongruously high for a party of captors leading their captives to their doom.

Volo quickly became aware that the drow were actually beginning to feel sorry for Woodehous and himself. What sorry dark elves these two had turned out to be.

"You know," Courun confided, "if it were solely up to us, we would probably let you go, but you understand, of course. . . . You are the only means we have of clearing our names and restoring our reputations to their rightful grandeur."

"Of course," Volo replied, "a drow has to do what a drow has to do. I bet you're looking forward to going home again. Menzoberranzan is probably filled with pleasant memories for both of you."

To himself, Courun recalled his childhood and adolescence, the sense of inadequacy, the beatings, the taunting by his sisters, and the third-class existence of a lowborn male in a maliciously matriarchal society, then said out loud, "Uh, sure. There's no place like home." Woodehous could not fail to notice the lack of conviction in his captor's voice, and quickly stole a look at Haukun, whose face exhibited a similar cast of remembered oppression.

"During one of my travels, I met a drow in exile ... a fellow by the name of Do'TJrden," Volo offered.

"The house name is familiar," Courun offered. "I believe it is one of the minor ones."

"He was a very melancholy fellow, and probably also missed his home. How long have you been away?" Volo asked.

"I've lost track," Courun replied absently. "Many years, maybe longer."

"Well," Volo noted, "a lot of things can happen in that long a time. I'm sure things might have gotten better."

"That's right," Haukun replied righteously, "and we are returning as heroes, and devoted champions of Lloth."

"No, we mustn't forget that," Volo agreed. "We mustn't forget that, indeed."

Hoping to break the melancholy mood, the master traveler of the Realms began to regale his companions with tales of his exploits, including the time he circumnavigated the globe.

Unfortunately the two drow captors showed little interest. Their entire existence had been spent in the Underdark, and they had little inclination toward places outside their own spheres of influence.

"We can sample the best you surface dwellers have to offer in Skullport," Haukun boasted.

"Beyond that, I see little reason to expose myself to the damned sun and daylight."

Volo tried a different tack to distract the captors.

Drawing on his research for his famous suppressed work, Volo's Guide to All Things Magical-and fully aware that all drow were required to take part in some magic training-the gazetteer tried to regale them with stories of different enchantments, artifacts, and phenomena that he had come across.

"Wait a minute," Courun interrupted, "do you mean that you are a wizard?"

"Well, no," Volo answered carefully, cautiously, and deceitfully, "I've just done a lot of research on it. That's all."

"It's hard stuff," Courun admitted. "I never was much good at those classes."

"If it hadn't been for our cheating on tests," Haukun added, "Courun and I would have been drider bait, for sure."

Not wishing to further tip his hand on his innate abilities, Volo once again changed the subject.

"Well, I bet you two are plenty expert on other things," the gazetteer observed.

"Like catching nosy writers," Courun said smugly.

"Uh, yes," Volo agreed. "But I was thinking more specifically of the goings-on in the Underdark itself. I did a lot of research before my first trip down here, and I am telling you, nothing beats firsthand experience."

"You can say that again," Woodehous agreed, trying to reenter the conversation. "It's like trying to

learn how to cook without ever setting foot in a kitchen."

The maitre d'/cook/waiter's simile was lost on the two drow captors, so Volo continued his train of conversation.

"When I started studying the Underdark," Volo explained, "I had no idea there was so much going on. I had never even heard of a duergar, or a svirfneblin, or of thaalud, or of the great cities of Eryndlyn, Llurth Dreier, or Sshamath, and, of course, Menzoberranzan. I just knew I had to go there."

"And you did," Woodehous inserted.

"Uh, right," Volo continued with a quick glare at his fellow captive, signaling him to hold his tongue, "and that's why I felt I just had to do the Guide to the Underdark."

"I thought you were going to call it Volo Does Memo," Courun interrupted.

"Well, yes, and as I was . . ." Volo struggled to continue.

"So which is it?" Haukun demanded.

"And where is it?" Courun insisted.

Quickly regaining his composure, Volo calmly explained. "I don't get to pick the title," he asserted, "the publisher does . . . and as to the manuscript, don't worry about it."

"Well, give it to us," Haukun demanded.

"I don't have it with me," Volo continued, "but don't you worry. It's well hidden. No one back in Skullport will ever find it."

The two drow would-be warriors once again looked at each other and conversed in their native tongue. True, their entire retrieval of the interloping journalist would be for naught if the manuscript ever fell into another surface dweller's hands, thus undercutting the validity of their great deed and threatening their chances of vindication. The two talked for a few minutes, and finally nodded in agreement.

"If anyone asks," Haukun instructed boldly, "Courun and I destroyed your only copy of the manuscript."

"All right," Volo replied.

"And if either of you contradicts us," Courun added, "it will go extremely bad for you."

"We wouldn't think of it," Volo assured, "would we, Percy?"

"Of course not," Percy choked out, though he was quite unsure how his own fate could be made any worse than it already was.

"Fine," Courun said with a certain degree of finality. "Then let us proceed onward. I believe we're almost there."

"But of course," Volo agreed, once again helping Woodehous to his feet.

"Do you know any stories about drow maidens?" Haukun inquired as they set off down the tunnel.

"I do believe that back in Skullport I heard something about a young girl named Liriel, but I'm afraid the details have escaped me for the moment. Perhaps you would care to hear about a little intrigue that took place around Undermountain not too long ago. It was a virtual comedy of errors, an escapade of adventure, and involved two fellows by the names of Mirt and Durnan, and ..."

Woodehous discreetly tried to ignore the latest tale being told by the gazetteer, who so loved the sound of his own voice. It was almost as if there were two Volos: the gregarious fool who didn't mind being captured by drow buffoons, and the savvy traveler whose exploits were legendary. Woodehous believed he had only observed this more capable fellow on the night their captors fought with the equally inept and juvenile fish-men, and he realized his only hope for escape lay with the assurances that he had been offered on that night. If they had any hope of escape, this more capable side would need to resurface . . . and really soon.

But, perhaps, it, too, was only some long-winded piece of fiction.

At the City's Edge

As Woodehous and Volo were roused from their sleep to begin another day's journey, the master traveler of all Faerun noticed a difference in their captors' demeanor.

"We're close to the city, aren't we?" Volo observed.

"I'm afraid so," Courun replied, a leather thong held in his outstretched hands. "I'm going to have to retie your hands now."

"We understand," Volo assented, "but, please, not too tight."

Dark slender fingers did their work, and the two captives were returned to their state of bound

captivity in as painless a fashion as was possible.

Volo looked at the maitre d'/cook/waiter, and said out loud, "Now, that's not too bad, considering the circumstances." Then, in a softer voice, he added, "Whatever happens, stick with me, even if the alternative presented to you seems more desirable."

"What do you mean?" Woodehous whispered back.

"If they ask you to choose between a life of slavery, and the chance of being tortured right alongside me, choose the torture."

"Why?"

"I can only assure you of your deliverance back to Skullport if you remain by my side. By any means necessary, you must remain at my side," the master traveler insisted, biting off his last word sharply as he heard one of their drow captors once again approaching.

"You know, Pig, or Percy, or whatever you call yourself, I am really going to miss your cooking," Haukun admitted.

"Well, I appreciate the compliment," Woodehous replied, trying to maintain some dignity despite his current situation.

"You know," the drow continued, "once we turn Volo over to the matron mother, we might be able to put in a good word for you with one of the ruling households, and perhaps get you a kitchen position rather than farming duty or worse."

"Why, thank you," the maitre d'/cook/waiter replied, quickly making eye contact with his fellow captive, "but if it's all the same to you, I think I'd rather stay with my friend Volo here. Companions to the end and all that rot, if you know what I mean."

"No, not really," the drow replied, scratching his ebony forehead in puzzlement, then running his delicate digits back through his flowing white mane of hair. "But if that's what you really want, far be it from me to stand in your way. Just seems like a damned shame waste of a good cook."

"I'm sure Menzoberranzan has plenty of good cooks," Volo offered.

"Not that I recall," Haukun answered, "but it has been a long time."

The party had no sooner resumed their journey to the city when they came into contact with other travelers, the only time since the encounter with the pair of kuo-toa. A detachment of drow warriors traveling in the opposite direction waved them on, and a drow merchant with a lizard bearing his goods passed by, hardly even noticing them, lost in a conversation with an illithid companion.

"I wonder if he knows Malix," Woodehous said out loud.

"Not likely," Volo answered. "Though mind flayers are fairly common around here, not many of them maintain contact with others who have decided to make their lives on the surface."

"Oh," the former maitre d'/cook/waiter replied, wondering from which dull, boring text his fellow companion in captivity was quoting this time.

"Keep your heads down as we enter the city," Courun instructed, "and try to look oppressed and sullen."

"No problem," Woodehous replied in all sincerity.

Glancing back at the mind flayer and the merchant, Volo noticed that they seemed to be pointing to the path from which the foursome had come.

"I almost forgot," Volo said to himself. Then, out loud, he said, "Courun, I think Percy and I have to take our boots off before we get into the city."

"Why?" the captor inquired.

"Custom, I think," the gazetteer explained, making it up as he went along, "at least that's what I heard, and we wouldn't want to get things off on the wrong foot, I mean, just when you and Haukun are on the verge of returning to respectability."

Courun turned to Haukun, and asked, "Do you remember anything about captives having to be brought into the city barefoot?"

"No," Haukun answered, "but you and I have been away for a long time, and he does seem to know a lot about these types of things."

The two drow helped their captives off with their boots while the puzzled Woodehous looked at his companion for assurance.

"Believe me," the gazetteer asserted, "it's important."

Woodehous realized this last comment was strictly for his own reassurance.

Luckily for the two bound captives, the road ahead was smooth, posing little threat to the delicate

soles of their feet. The former maitre d'/cook/waiter noticed that Volo took more than a passing interest in their surroundings, as if he were trying to memorize everything in a matter of seconds.

The road opened out into a huge cavern, within which the city was situated.

All four travelers were momentarily speechless in awe of its magnificence.

"Aurikaurak," Volo mouthed, his eyes wide in wonder.

"No," Courun corrected, "Menzoberranzan."

"I was just using its dwarven name," Volo replied, adding absently, still in awe of its splendor, "It's just as I pictured it."

"You mean, as you remembered it," Woodehous corrected, asking, "don't you?"

"Whatever," the master traveler replied absently, ". . . and I am here now."

Menzoberranzan

The city itself filled the entire cavern. Volo had been slightly mistaken when he called the city Aurikaurak. In reality that was the name of the cavern, quite literally translated from dwarven as Great Pillar Cavern. Legend had it that the entire open area was formerly the lair of a gigantic spider, but given the proclivity of the drow for adoration of all things arachnoid, the validity of this legend was more than open to discussion.

From their vantage point just outside and above the city, they were able to look down on the wonders of the entire subterranean complex.

Woodehous noticed a lake at the lower end of the cavern, and whimsically asked, "I wonder how the fishing is?"

"If you are lucky, you might find out," Courun replied. "That's Donigarten, where the slave pens are maintained. In the nearby dung fields, I am sure you would find ample fungi and mushrooms to season the nautical fare you'd fish."

From this distance, the former maitre d'/cook/waiter could just make out some of the slaves paddling around the lake on rafts, some leading beasts of burden, others little better than beasts of burden themselves. This was not an existence to be envied.

At the highest part of the city floor stood the Tier Breche, home of the Academy, where drow received their training. The prospects of life in the slave pens for

Woodehous was every bit as abhorrent to him as the memories that flooded back to the two drow warriors upon once again seeing the place of their education.

To the other side of the city floor was the Qu'ellarz'orl, a plateau separated from the lower city by a grove of giant mushrooms. This was where the noble houses were located, and where Courun and Haukun expected to regain their rightful places. Numerous flashes of faerie fire in the houses indicated that there were several parties going on, commemorating various celebrations of one sort and another.

"Soon, they will be throwing parties for us," Courun replied with a haughtiness that was quite unbecoming.

Looming above the entire city cavern was the pillar Narbondel, whose change in glow indicated the passing time of the day. Its smooth yet rough surface gave an appearance that could not have been fostered by means other than the pure refining forces of nature itself. This was the only structure in the entire city that had not been remade by the skillful digits and sure hands of drow artisans.

Volo stood in awe of the exotic beauty of the place. Though he had traversed the entire world of Toril, he had never looked upon a city to compare with this one. True, he had never been to Netheril or Cormanthyr, whose beauty was the stuff of legends, but both of those cities were long dead before he had been born. Menzoberranzan was still very much alive and in its glory, even if that glory was pervasively evil.

The four travelers lost track of how long they had been standing on the ledge, and probably would have continued to stare off in awe had they not been interrupted by two representatives of the Dark Dominion, who prided themselves on knowing how to deal with unwanted interlopers.

"What are you doing here?" the senior patrolman demanded in clipped Drowish, which Volo was barely able to understand. "What are you doing with these two surface dwellers?"

"They are our prisoners," Courun and Haukun replied in proud unison. "And we have come to turn them over to the matron mother."

Pointing at Volo, Courun continued his spiel. "This one here," he stated with pride, "is a blemish to the honor of our beloved Lloth. He has dared to violate her domain and would have made it the

object of mockery for all the surface dwellers had we not stopped him."

The two patrolmen looked at each other and exchanged signals in the silent language of the drow. Neither was amused, nor did they know what to do with the party at hand. Finally, the senior one returned his attention to Courun and Haukun.

"Of what house do you belong?" the patrolman demanded.

"House Salato," the two proud drow warriors replied, once again in unison. [

The guards laughed, and Woodehous distinctly heard Volo murmur, "Uh, oh," under his breath. ;

"That house hasn't been around in over a century," the senior patrolman advised. "It was wiped out after an unsuccessful bid for power. You'd better come along with us."

A look of panic raced across the two drow warriors' faces.

"Salato . . . gone?" they cried. In unison, they screamed, and then took off in opposite directions.

Woodehous felt Volo's suddenly unbound hand grasp his tightly.

"We'll let the jade spiders track them down," the older patrolman decided. "Let's bring in these two surface dweller prisoners and take any credit that is due i for their capture for ourselves."

"But where did they go?" the other patrolman inquired, for the two prisoners were no longer there, as if they had both just vanished into thin air.

Back to the Double G

"Pig, where have you been?"

Woodehous immediately recognized the voice as belonging to Wurlitzer, the orcish bartender.

"What are you doing here?" Woodehous asked in amazement.

"Working," the ore replied, "just like you used to do before you were fired from Traitor Pick's for not showing up for work after your dinner break."

The former maitre d'/waiter/cook quickly looked around, and to his astonishment found himself back in the Gentleman's Groggery in Skullport, his companion, the legendary Volothamp Geddarm, by his side.

"How . . . ?" Woodehous tried to sputter out a question.

"... long have you been away?" the ore completed. "A while. Long enough for Traitor Pick's to get a new cook. He's not bad either, but I'm sure everyone will agree that he's no Pig Woodehous."

"No ... I ..." Woodehous continued to sputter, not fully understanding what must have happened.

"Why don't you bring us two mugs of your finest, my good fellow," Volo interrupted.

"Of course, good sir," Wurlitzer replied. Remembering the guinea tip that Volo had left during his last visit to the Double G, he quickly set off to fetch the requested refreshments.

"What happened?" Woodehous demanded, relieved to be back in civilization, but confused, nonetheless.

"We're back in Skullport," the master traveler replied matter-of-factly.

"I know that," Woodehous said, ". . . but how?"

"We teleported," Volo explained. "I picked up a few tricks on my last trip around Toril, and one of them involved the teleporting properties of necromancer gems."

"Necromancer gems?"

"Yes, thank you," the master traveler replied, interrupting his explanation to acknowledge Wurlitzer's drink service. "Necromancer gems are wonderful travelers' aids. Large ones act as temporary portals, such as the one I left here when our journey began, and the one I carried with me. Smaller ones, on the other hand, ; can be ground into a dust that will leave a luminescent I trail that is only visible to the eye of a trained mage."

"That's why we had to take our boots off before entering the city," Woodehous observed. :

"Of course," Volo concurred. "After all, it would have been absurd to expect all drow to be as dense as Courun and Haukun."

"But why did you want to leave a trail?"

"So I could find my way there and back again."

"But what about your first time? The one you wrote your book about... the book that got us into this mess?" ;

"This was my first trip to Menzoberranzan," the master traveler confessed. "I'd never been there before. The book was just a hoax-bait to rile the righteous demeanor of some drow and make him take me to the great city, to satisfy Lloth's honor."

"There is no Volo Does Menzo?"

"Well, not just yet," the gazetteer replied, ". . . but soon there will be. Let us finish our drinks, and I

will ; fill you in on my plans."

The two travelers finished their drinks, and then followed them up with two bowls of stew and another mug of grog, each. When they were both feeling reasonably comfortable, Volo paid the bill, and directed Woodehous to accompany him for the rest of the explanation. i

"Now we must retrace our steps from that memorable night not too long ago," the traveler instructed. "Observe."

Volo removed the gem of luminescence from its place in the thong around his neck, attached another multi-faceted gem to its base, and then returned it to its resting place in the pocket on the thong.

"Certain trained mages can follow this trail with a naked eye," Volo lectured, immediately reminding Woodehous of Malix's reference to a path of glowing dust, "but I prefer to use this."

Volo focused the gem's luminescence on the path before him. What had once been bare and unblemished rock was now adorned with a pair of glowing footsteps.

"Now, after a good night's rest, I can journey back to the city of the drow, in disguise, of course, complete my research, and-poof!-VbZo's Guide to the Underdark becomes a reality, complete with directions there and back again from Skullport. Do you want to join me on this little trip? I assure you it will be much easier than last time."

"No, thank you," Woodehous replied. "I've had my fill of adventure for a lifetime."

"Well," replied the master traveler, "the least I can do is give you a letter of recommendation. If I recall correctly, you were a victim of circumstance back at the Shipmaster's Hall in Waterdeep. I'm sure a letter from me could smooth things over with the powers that be. Restauranting genius such as yours should not go to waste. Though I am sure I've lost some weight these past few weeks, I've never felt less than gastronomically satisfied, and I owe it all to you."

"Thank you, good sir," the pale thin gentleman replied, realizing that what he had sought at their journey's beginning, he had just obtained without even asking for it, perhaps making the whole escapade worthwhile after all.

Think nothing of it, "the gazetteer replied. "Come, let us find ourselves a room for tonight.

Tomorrow, I will provide you with your letter, and I will be on my way."

The two travelers feasted like boon companions, and slept late the following morning. True to his word, Volo gave Woodehous a letter addressed to the proprietor of the Shipmaster's Hall, before he made his way back down the alley from whence their adventure had started. The former soon-to-be maitre d'/cook/waiter decided to accompany the greatest traveler of all Faerun to the outskirts of Skullport to bid him one last farewell before he recommenced his journey through the Underdark.

With gems in hand and disguise in his pack, Volo set off down the alleyways. Woodehous followed close behind.

Woodehous remembered the narrowing passageway, and the sudden series of sharp right turns, and was equally surprised as Volo when they found themselves facing a dead end.

"I don't understand," the master traveler said. "The footprints just stop here. There is no evidence of a portal, or a secret passageway, or anything-just a blank wall."

Just then, a voice vaguely familiar to Woodehous piped in. "Looking for something?" the voice asked. "Oh, it's you, Pig. Long time no see." The voice belonged to Knytro the dwarf, Woodehous's former patron from Traitor Pick's.

"We're looking for a passageway out of town," Volo replied. "I'm sure there used to be one here."

"Oh, indeed there was," Knytro replied, "up until a few days ago when I filled it in. A quake farther down the line made the whole tunnel unstable, so I closed it down. I dug it, so it's my right to fill it in, and I did. But don't worry, there are plenty of other subterranean roads leading out of town. One is pretty much as good as another."

Woodehous felt sorry for his companion in captivity. True, other tunnel trails existed, but none of them were marked with the glowing dust to lead the way. Volothamp Geddarm was left back at Square One.

"Oh, well," the master traveler replied. "Maybe this volume was just not meant to be. I still have Volo's Guide to the Moonsea to complete, and I'm a little behind on that, so I feel a little guilty about leaving Justin-my publisher-in the lurch after having promised him a surprise best-seller for his next list."

"Oh, well," Woodehous concurred. "There doesn't seem to be much you can do about it. Let's go

back to the inn we stayed in last night. Maybe they'll let me borrow the use of their kitchen so I can fix you a conciliatory dinner."

"Can I tag along?" the dwarf requested. Tve really missed your slop. For my guineas, there isn't a better cook in the entire Underdark."

"Indeed," replied the master traveler, "that sounds like a cracker of a solution. Who needs the Shipmaster's Hall. Certainly not you. You should return to Waterdeep for a position more befitting your talents. Rip up that letter. I will give you another one in its place, one that will be far more profitable for everyone involved."

"After we eat, of course," Knytro clarified, having inserted himself into the soon-to-be dining group.

"Of course," the master traveler replied. "Of course."

Woodehous was excited by the apparent zeal of the master traveler, and paused just for a moment to reflect on their adventure together. "What do you think will happen to Courun and Haukun?"

"I don't rightly know," the master traveler admitted. "As the sole survivors of an overthrown house, both of them are marked by drow law for extermination. Still, some say Ao does watch out for simpletons, and I have to believe that applies to the drow as well as to surface dwellers. But enough dwelling on the past. Great plans await, for me in Mulmaster, and for you in Waterdeep. But, first, a meal!"

"That's what I've been waiting for," Knytro interjected. "No one makes slop like Pig."

"That's Percy," Volo corrected.

"Whatever," Woodehous added with a chuckle as they all set out for the inn.

The End (Almost).

POSTSCRIPT

Back at the Publishing House

Justin Tym had every reason to be joyous. Volo's Guide to Shadowdale was outperforming all of the previous books in the series, perhaps helped by an unexpected introduction from the mage of Shadowdale himself, causing more than just the publisher to wonder what his favorite gazetteer had on Elminster, to elicit a favor of such magnitude. Cormyr: A Novel was also selling through at an exceptionally nice rate, despite the efforts of rival publisher Delbert Reah to cause confusion in the marketplace by releasing an inferior volume called Cormyr: A History by Green Grubbwood (an alias if there ever was one), with a cover treatment more than a bit similar to the one on Justin's volume. TWL's sale were at an all-time high, and its position as the top publisher in all of the City of Splendors-if not all of Faerun, for that matter-was safely assured for yet another year. All was rosy, Justin thought to himself as he looked out over the irregular rooftops that stretched along the labyrinthine corridors of the city, a single floor below his office's window. Still, there was no word from Volo.

"Uh, boss?" said Miss Elissa Silverstein, an exceptionally youthful flaxen blonde who had recently replaced Miss Latour as Tym's right hand. "There is someone here to see you."

Justin turned his chair away from the window to face his nubile assistant.

"Send whoever it is away," he ordered in a gruff yet disinterested tone. "I have work to do, and I do not wish to be disturbed."

"But, boss," she insisted, "he claims to have a message from one of your authors."

"Who?"

"A Mr. Geddarm."

Justin chuckled to himself, thinking, it's about time!

"All right," the publisher assented, "send him in."

Miss Silverstein hastened out of the publisher's private office and returned in nary a minute with a pale-skinned fellow who looked as if he hadn't seen the sun in a long time. The man handed him a parchment pouch that had become the signature of a Volo correspondence.

Quickly opening it, Justin read:

Justin,

Your gracious indulgence has been appreciated.

I am off to Mulmaster to finish the Moonsea guide.

Before you stands your next "great find," with an idea for a surefire best-seller. Work your

traditional marketing magic on him, and success is assured for all.

Talk to you soon. Keep the gelt coming, care of my friends at the Shipmaster's Hall.

Best, Volo

Justin chuckled in gentle amusement. Volo was okay, the book would soon be on the way, and, therefore, all was right with the world. He quickly scanned the missive again, and then turned his attention to the pale gentleman standing before him.

"Volo's usually a pretty good judge of the marketing potential for a new book idea," Justin conceded out loud. "What's the hook?"

Percival Gallard Woodehous took a breath, as if to call upon all of his stores of courage, and started his pitch. "It's a cookbook, you see, involving a variety of subterranean fungi. Highly nutritious, tasty, and perfect for those interested in losing a few pounds. I've tentatively titled it The Underdark Diet."

Justin fought to hold back a smile and not give away any unnecessary enthusiasm that might drive the pale fellow's price up.

"I see," said the publisher in as even a tone as he could muster. "Continue," he instructed, leaning back and savoring the relief of having found the savior for next year's list.

The End (Really).