

Realms of the Arcane

Edited by Brian M. Thomsen

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Prologue

Most of the time, Wes enjoyed living at Candlekeep. He was serving a year's probation before becoming a novice monk, and as a result, was one of the keep's most junior inhabitants. He and his fellow probationers got the jobs no one else wanted.

Wes didn't mind. If he could get through this first year, everything would start looking better.

Slight, a shade over five-and-a-half feet tall, and rather plain in appearance, Wes turned nary a head. Like many eighteen year olds, he was gangly and all out of proportion. His eyes had a deep sparkle, but the rest of his face didn't match them, and his hair was as brown and tangled as a scullery mop.

It was not a mop but a broom that he now pushed slowly across the floor of the common room. He sighed, contented in his work... and in his daydreams.

There were only two things in life that Wes was discontented with. The first was the pall that had descended over the library in the last few weeks. The very stones of the place seemed sullen. The monks were on edge; something was amiss. Wes prayed to all the gods to put it right.

The other unlikable thing made its baleful appearance even now, stomping to a halt in front of the broom.

Brother Frederick—Wes's personal bane.

Wes stopped his sweeping and stood on the hard stone floor of the common room. His shoulders shook in dread of what was to come.

Brother Frederick's boots dispersed the dust pile Wes had collected, and the angry old monk glared at him from less than a foot away.

"You'll never amount to anything, boy! It's taken you too long to clean up after morningfeast—again. You're lazy and incompetent. I don't understand why the abbot hasn't thrown you out. A slovenly boy like you should reap the harvest of his sloth. You want to be a novice monk? Never! There hasn't been a less likely candidate since Jeffrey, almost two centuries ago. And you know what happened to him!

"Now, get on with sweeping the floors before I find some real work for you to do—like emptying the midden!"

Brother Frederick stormed off, leaving Wes to his thoughts: I'm not lazy, just a little slow. One day, I'll show Brother Frederick and the others that I'm worthwhile.

"... you know what happened to him!"

The story of hapless Jeffrey had been used countless times to frighten Wes and the other probationers. Jeffrey was a novice who was so incompetent that he got lost in the library and never found his way out. Nor had anyone ever discovered his remains. He got lost... or snatched, by someone—or *something*.

It was a labyrinthine place, the library—labyrinthine and spooky.

Of their own accord, Wes's feet wandered from the common room, through the archway that led to the library. His hand gently leaned the broom against the corridor wall.

Ah, the library....

Wes's reverie was interrupted by a polite cough.

He spun around to see the abbot standing behind him. He was a tall, gaunt man, with wisps of gray hair poking out from under his monk's cowl.

"Probationer Wes, I don't suppose you could spare me a few minutes of your time."

Wes bowed his head in respect. "Of course I could, my lord. How may I be of service?"

"Well, first, you could strive not to upset Brother Frederick again. I was coming to fetch you when he stormed by me, muttering some very unmonkly words about you."

"Yes, my lord. It seems the good brother is always looking to find fault with me."

The abbot allowed himself a slight smile at this.

"He has only your welfare at heart, Wes. But, I have a more immediate task for you, too. The reading room in the north corner of the library hasn't been used for a while, and there are some scholars arriving tomorrow. I'd like you to go make sure the room is ready for their use."

Wes beamed at the abbot. "Yes, my lord. At once." He ran off toward the oldest part of the library.

The abbot watched him go, a knowing look on his gaunt face ...

* * * * *

On his way, Wes stopped by a storeroom and grabbed another broom and some dusting cloths. He looked at the mop and bucket in the far corner, but quickly decided to leave them there.

Cleaning tools in hand, he found his way to the disused reading room. He opened the door and coughed loudly as a cloud of dust rose. There were cobwebs everywhere, and Wes wondered where he should start.

Right by the door seemed as good a place as any. He soon was busy sweeping and dusting and trying not to choke or sneeze, battling the flying dust for each breath of air. The room was starting to look like it might be usable by the morning.

Brother Frederick stuck his head in.

"What are you doing here, boy? I told you to finish cleaning up the dining room. Have you done that?"

"Ah ... no, Brother... but..."

"But nothing. Go and do it, NOW!"

Wes stood in the middle of the room, a stunned look on his face.

Brother Frederick turned a deep shade of crimson. "I said, NOW! Are you deaf?"

"B-B-B-But, the lord abbot told me to clean this room," Wes blurted out before Brother Frederick could interrupt again.

Whatever response Brother Frederick was going to make was bitten back at the mention of the abbot. The monk's face returned to its normal florid hue. ~~

"Very well. Once you have finished here, go straight to the dining room and get it clean."

He stomped off without waiting for a reply.

Wes got back to his cleaning and worked his way around the room. After almost an hour, he was very tired, and he leaned against a solid timber bookshelf mounted on the stone wall. The bookshelf and wall moved slightly under his weight.

He leapt back with a start.

Curious, Wes took a close look at the bookshelf. He glimpsed straight cracks in the stone wall behind it. A secret doorway leading ... where?

"Well," he thought aloud, "I need a break from cleaning. I'll just see what's behind the door, and then get back to it."

He closed the reading room door, and then put his shoulder to the bookshelf and began to push. The shelf moved reluctantly at first, as though the door hadn't been opened for a long time. Wes pushed it far enough to squeeze through. Once inside, he blinked, finding himself in a small room lined with shelves. The shelves were stacked with books, scrolls, and more than a few piles of loose sheets.

Wes was very careful not to disturb those.

A wedge of light from the reading room illuminated a small reading desk and a solid oak chair, together in the center of the room. There was also a soft glow throughout the room, some sort of magical light.

His cleaning tasks quickly forgotten, Wes glanced gleefully around the room, plucking up the courage to pick something up and read it...

Wishing You Many More

David Cook

From the port of Luthcheq on the Bay of Chessenta

Greetings Grand Conjurer Torreb, and a fine birthday to you!

I cannot believe my fortune! To think that I should hear of you, fellow student, and upon your birthing day, too! It's me, Fannol Pavish from the Academy. I was 2nd initiate to your 1st. It has been so long ago, and after your injustice, we never kept in touch. In fact, I fear you may have forgotten me. I know that I, busy as I am, barely have time to relish the memories of those days. I am sure you, who were always so energetic and ambitious, can scarce find the time for idle reminiscing, especially on what must be such an unhappy topic.

I remember how you chafed at our theorizing, always wanting to do something with your spells. Just remember, I was the one doused by that stink potion Chow-warth got when he tried to make sweetwater in the Alchemiologicia. I'm sure you remember puffy little Chowwarth.

But, I haven't explained by what subtle machinations I suddenly came into possession of your whereabouts. It was pure Fate (blessed be the gods) that brought your name and place to me. I had just arrived here in Luthcheq—I'm on my way to Corsk near the border, so post any reply there—and took it in

my head to go see Timrik, who's got a post out here. (At the Academy, he was the gnome one rank back, studying to be an artificer, remember?) He had news of how you had put down some dragon that was raiding farms in the mountains, was it? The gods only know how he got your name, but your adventure sounds quite dashing from what he told me. You must write and tell me about the entire thing. I burn for some excitement. Anyway, he gave me the name of the inn you were staying at, so I seized the opportunity to write you.

Imagine, you a dragon killer! My own life seems horribly dull in comparison. I'm off to Governor Hamid's court, where I'll be the provincial magister. After you left the Academy, I had to bear the burden of being 1st initiate, and I learned why you were always so studious and solemn. I persevered through it all, though, and managed to pass with not-too stinging words from the dean magisters. That spurred me enough that after the Academy I studied for the ministerial exam and managed to place right over all the minor posts and start directly at the Learned rank.

Well, it sounds like bragging, but what it really means is that I was assigned to something dreadfully dull and safe—assistant under secretary to the privy council's secretary of arcanum. I spent half my days in musty scrolls, reading arcane lore, and the other half explaining what I'd learned to puddle-wits who couldn't tell a flux contagious from a similarity—much less care. Thank Fortune my pleas for transfer were finally heeded, or I would have gone rather cracked like the Academy's old librarian, Avarle, clucking around my dusty shelves. Even so, it's not like I'll be out there chucking spells at dragons like you, eh?

I think Fate gave me your whereabouts for another reason, too. I've been doing some research, and you could be a great help to me. While I was digging through the Arcanum's libraries, I came across one fascinating bit in all those dusty scrolls. Do you remember that epic, the Duel of Tromdarl and Greenwinter—the one Master Feurgond droned on about in Philosophic Lore? Well, I actually found some letters that I'm sure are the great artificer Greenwinter's very own. They are full of references to what I'm guessing was his last researched creation.

You know the tale—in jealousy, Greenwinter binds his spirit to a mighty rod of godly fire and uses it to destroy his rival, Tomdarl. The whole thing ends with Greenwinter and his rod going off and never being seen again, which is the only proper way for a story like that to end.

I'm sure if I can get all the pieces put together, I'll be able to find the artifact of the tale. Imagine the fuss there'd be if someone registered that in the imperial arcanum!

Unfortunately, Greenwinter came from the mountains, and there certainly aren't any mountains around Corsk. From the clues I've gathered, I'm certain he hailed from your territory. What I was wondering was if you'd ever heard of something called the "snake-bound pattern." It is an important clue to finding the device—a map maybe. I haven't any information what it really looks like.

Oh, dear, I almost forgot. You must give my greetings to your wife, Lady Marriana. Of course she is as beautiful and graceful as when we both courted her. I am still jealous (and a little crestfallen) that you wooed her so well. As hard as I tried, you still won her hand. What wizardly charms did you use on her?

I should ask also how you are. You must tell me what you have been doing since the Academy days. Living out there in the wilderness must be a constant adventure. I can imagine all sorts of horrid deaths and daring escapades. From the way Timrik described things, you're quite respected in your village or town or whatever. How do you withstand the boredom?

Now of course, I am being coy. Since this should reach you on your birthing day, you're also holding a package from me. It's a present. I did not want to send just anything. No one needs another wool scarf or gilt wand case. Instead, I have a real surprise for you. I researched it myself, and I know you will enjoy it.

Farewell, for now. I'm relieved to hear you have overcome all the obstacles of the past and that something good has come of all that bitterness.

Your old Academy fellow,
Perfect and Absolute Magister of Corsk, Pavish

P.S. Like the title? I've hardly gotten to use it yet, so forgive my little vanity.

Posted from Tyn's Rock Inn

Greetings Magister Pavish (or should I address you Perfect and Absolute Magister Pavish?),

I confess I had no intention of replying, so you can thank Marriana for this consideration. She will not abide my rudeness.

I am sure you can imagine my surprise upon receiving your birthday wishes. I have gone to some trouble to avoid all ties to my previous Academy life, so your note was most unexpected. I do not even know how Timrik knew my whereabouts, though I am less than pleased for it—yes, I remember him

perfectly. I remember everything from those days quite clearly—though I no longer wish to remember them.

Timrik's information was a bit dated. By the time your package arrived, I had moved on. Travel is both a necessity and a habit in my life. It was only by chance that I came back through Tyn's Rock. The landlord is a honest fellow and held it for me in hopes I would return.

Accept my obligatory congratulations on your posting. I must say I am amused. You were adamant about not entering politics behind your esteemed father and were set upon being an adventurer. I suppose now that you may have earned your position on your own merits, a political career holds more interest. Minister Pavish must be proud of his son. It is interesting how our lives change.

One thing, though, has not changed—your dramatic sense. The fire sparkle dust you sent was ingenious. Fire sparkles indeed! Unfortunately, there was a slight accident. The inn's spit-boy prevailed on me to let him toss a pinch on the fire. Instead of sparkles we got a rushing blue fireball. The damned thing scorched off all his hair. Fortunately, his burns weren't too bad, and the adventuring life has taught me to dodge well, but the common room here was badly blackened. I would recheck the component proportions before making a new supply. It cost me the purse of the gold I'd earned off that dragon you were so curious about.

Fortunately, he was an old brute with a considerable hoard. The locals called him Silverskin because they kept finding bits of old coins around his kills. It turned out he'd lain on his treasure so long it had embedded right into his skin.

So you can see, from what I am telling you, I have no need or expectation of repayment. I do not wish to be indebted to you. Still, I owe you some little amount for not standing against me like the others at the Academy.

Perhaps in payment, I can offer you an answer to your business about Greenwinter. I believe I have seen the snake-bound pattern you asked about, though I did not know what it was at the time.

I was high up in the mountains, in white drake country, as it is called around here. There was a rock shelf, bare of snow, that thrust out over a gorge. At first I thought what I saw was claw marks on a dragon perch, but when I got closer, the pattern was clearly carved and polished into the stone. I've enclosed a sketch of what I saw, as best I can render it from memory. I would not call it a map, really. That is all I can tell you. Any more you will have to learn on your own.

However Marriana, who has always been kinder, will reproach me if I do not send some remembrance of your birthing day, just as you did of mine. I don't know when yours is, but I'm sure a few have passed over the years. Therefore I have enclosed a bauble taken from Silverskin's lair. Take this gift, a trinket from the dragon's trove, in the spirit of "Wishing you many more."

Respectfully, Wizard Torreb

P.S. The charms I used on Marriana were purely natural. Spells I leave to others.

Perfect and Absolute Magister Pavish His Official Residence at Corsk

Another special day greeting to you, Wizard Torreb!

I grieve at this delay in replying to your letter and your gift, lest you think you've put me off with your testy tone. I am sending this to Tyn's Rock, in hopes it will find you. Perhaps old wounds are the hardest to heal, like they say, but I will not be dissuaded by your last letter. If you thought I would, you count me wrong.

I delay only because this provincial posting is more effort than I had expected, especially since the governor is an overbearing ass. He really thinks he'll reach the imperial court someday, maybe even rise to a ministerial post. Of course, he hasn't a whit of talent or cleverness and relies on me for everything. He has had me scurrying about, casting this, researching that, and doing a score of sorcerous tasks to further his petty ambitions. Of late, he has gotten it into his head that if he can produce some wondrously powerful spell or magical gimcrack, it will buy him entry into the inner circle, as he calls it. Of course, that means I have to do all the work while he just grumbles about the time it's taking.

The worst part is that I carelessly mentioned my research into Greenwinter's staff, and now he has become convinced that it is the tool that will make his destiny. His demands have become nearly intolerable, and so I turn to you in desperation. I assure you, knowing your feelings about helping me, that you are my last chance.

We were not close during your Academy time; indeed in many things we were rivals. But I see no cause for bitterness between us now. You must look instead to all that went to your credit between us—Marriana, 1st initiate, even the master's wand—all these things went to you, not me. Try as I might, I

could never top you..

To hold me in reproach for the injustice that fell on you is unwarranted. You know full well that when the others called you a cheat and a plagiarizer, I did not join their chorus. Having tried and failed to beat you in so many areas, I knew your talent was genuine.

There is no doubt for me that you were framed. I suspected it then, but I am certain of it now. Whoever stole the Theurge's spellbook went to great pains to cast the blame on you. No doubt the perpetrator was jealous of your success—a frontier lad besting the sons of the noblest wizard clans in the empire—and maybe even a little afraid. Unable to match you fairly, they resorted to tricks and deceit to bring about your fall.

So now, you can gain satisfaction, for I implore your assistance once more. Your sketch of the pattern was invaluable, but there are many things unanswered. What direction do the tails point? Which mouth is open? Are you certain of the script around the edge? These details are vitally important, as I'm sure you can well understand.

I confess discovering the answers has proven to be just beyond my skills. Perhaps knowing that will dispose you to be merciful toward me. If you would only provide me with a more complete description of Green-winter's pattern, I am certain to locate the device. Think of it! You and I shall be known throughout the wizardry societies as the masters who solved the unsolvable!

Now please, don't consider the present I've sent as some sort of tasteless attempt to buy your aid. As I wrote, I have been very busy between this twit of a governor and the hours I've spent locked in my meager library, poring over what scrolls I can get from the capital. As a result, I've managed to miss your birthing day again. It seems it's become a custom for us to exchange presents with each post. I do hope you enjoy this present, perhaps a little bit less volatile than the last I sent you. Of course, you were correct about its formula. Even out there on the frontier your perception outshines mine.

I must note, though, that the gift you sent, while charming, did cause a little difficulty. The magical bird sang most marvelously by the command you described, but could not be silenced the same way! It chirped and twittered for weeks before I was able to conjure up the true command. It was actually rather comical. I confess that by the end, I had to banish it to a shelf on the outdoor privy for the sake of household sanity.

Still it is the intention that matters, after all.

Perfect & etc., Magister Pavish

P.S. I saw Marriana's father, Minister Dalton, at the privy council chambers. Imagine my surprise to learn he disowned her upon your marriage. To think that she had to suffer such a price!

Posted from Pine Shadow Wood

Magister Pavish,

First, I must let you know I received your letter many months past, and against my first inclination, I did not cast it upon the fire. I cannot say why.

It is admirable that you now say I was wronged, especially given that speaking out before would have required courage. You present me with the virtue of nothing—having done nothing against me nor anything for me, you consider me indebted to you. What little you could claim I discharged with my previous dispatch.

Then you chide me for being bitter. Could you be glib if our lives were reversed? You know as well as I who was innocent. I had no need of the Theurge's spellbook to pass a conjuration examination. As you wrote, someone chose me to take the blame. Some say it might even have been you. After all, we were rivals in so many things. What better way to overcome an obstacle? You always favored the quick and easy; perhaps you favored it more than I suspected. I have spent these years wondering who and why, and now you complain about my ingratitude.

No doubt you expect me to honor your request for aid, and I will not be so ignoble as to spurn you completely. Nonetheless, my aid comes with a caution. In your pursuit for this lost artifact, I think you reach for something more dangerous than you realize. With no library up here, I can only say from memory, but in the Duel of Tromdarl and Greenwinter it all comes to an end when Greenwinter triggers his master creation and destroys Tromdarl with it. Every apprentice worth his salt knows that much, and that's what Master Feurgond taught.

What apprentices don't realize is there's a final canto to the work, one that gets lopped off in a fair number of readings. Master Feurgond laid out the scroll one time after lecture. It's a lament from Greenwinter's consort, crying for his absence—something about how a storm of fire and thunder carried him and his artifact away, much more than just wandering off into history. The master said it was only an

allegory—and a bad one at that—for Greenwinter's victory and the later disappearance of the artifact, but I am not so sure.

I worry, too, about this ultimate power. To what ends will you use it? You would not be my first choice as its wielder. At the Academy, you always struck me as a touch arrogant and a little petty. I suppose you could have changed since then; time will do that, but perhaps the staff is better off in more responsible hands, or not found at all.

This then is my price: before I render more details to you, I intend to go up and study the whole thing more closely for myself. If I am satisfied with what I find, you will hear more.

In a week, I will be off to the mountains to see what I can learn from the pattern. Then we shall see.
Magister Torreb

P.S. So sorry about the mechanical bird. I thought it was a rather clever device myself, and certainly not that taxing on one's talents to decipher.

I admit the creature you sent is a clever choice. I am guessing it's something you created from your own blood—something like a homonculus. It positively adores Marriana and she it. However, the beast has an unnaturally nasty dislike of me. I hope this is not some product of your own feelings.

You have sent me a challenge I must rise to. I trust you'll find my gift worthy of your sensibilities.

Most Perfect and Absolute Magister Pavish His manor in Tilvum

Torreb,

If this reaches you before you depart, so be it, but I am aware of your scheme. You accuse me of plotting against you so many years ago, only to justify your trickery today. Just as before, you are determined to deprive me of the glory and rewards I justly deserve. I suffered through years of that at the Academy before I finally was able to cast you out.

There's no point in my denying it anymore. Of course your suspicions are correct. Your instincts were always keen. It was a good plan—I became 1st initiate, I rose to the master's wand, and now I serve the court. Only Marriana escaped my grasp, and that, most of all, I will not forgive you for.

There is no point in waving this letter as proof to anyone. I will deny it all, and who would believe you—a cheat and outcast who was not content to destroy himself but also had to drag down the name of a fine woman of a noble house.

Of course I want the staff for myself. The governor's desires are meaningless once I have the artifact. Already I know much of its operations—words and commands gleaned from Greenwinter's notes. Even if you do find it before me, it would be useless in your hands. Only I understand the power it contains and the secrets of wielding it.

What will I do with it? I haven't decided. There are so many choices—enemies who've stood in my way, wrongs to right, titles to claim. Why, I might even assume the imperial mantle, if Greenwinter's artifact is as powerful as I believe.

Did you really think your little parable about lost cantos and strange disappearances would put me off, that I would be so easily outflanked? You are not the only one who saw that scroll. Some of us, however, do not leap to rash conclusions. It was clearly an amateur's hand, no more than a poor attempt by some scribe to immortalize himself in the pages of a great work and quite rightfully excised from future transcriptions. Do not take me for such a fool. I did not become a perfect master of the imperial court without learning the duplicitous ways of others.

It is you who have been the fool, all this time answering my letters, helping my research, aiding me—the one who destroyed you. I know you head for the mountains hoping to beat me to the prize, but what good will one piece of the *puzzle* do you? You do not know how to interpret the snake-bound pattern or read the map it hides. I do. Because of your careless clues, I am confident I will find the pattern myself.

I no longer need you, Torreb. I will be in the mountains before you, and I will find the staff. There is no prayer that will protect you if we meet.

Your Nemesis,
Perfect and Absolute Magister Pavish

PS. Your last gift reveals your true treachery and your lack of imagination. A bottled and spiteful imp would hardly defeat me, even if it was a nuisance to destroy.

My gift to you this time is more than apt. Do not worry about collecting it. It will find you.

Silverpeak Mountains, entrusted to shepherd

My loving Marriana,

I do not know if this letter will reach you, just as I never know when I post these on my travels. I have given this to a local boy with a promise of payment if it should reach you, so be generous if you read this.

First I must tell you the gods guided Pavish's letter to me up here. From it you know now I did not come to hunt wolves, at least those with four legs. You had foresight to send it on to me, and I had luck that it found me. While it told me little I did not suspect, it has confirmed my fears and warned me of his coming.

Things are as I feared but did not tell you. I did not want you to worry. Pavish, I think, has gone completely mad. Either that or his soul is more corrupt than any ever suspected. He was always arrogant and false—you said once he made women glad they were not men—but now it is clear it was only the mask for a darker immorality. That is why I had to come up here.

I fear what will happen if he lays his hands on Green-winter's artifact. I am not certain why, my love, but I feel it is my duty to stop him. Ever since the Academy, the gods have woven our fates together. Perhaps it was their plan to see me ruined so that I would be here now.

I am well, though hard-pressed. Last night, Pavish's gift arrived—an invisible stalker. Fortunately, I expected something like it and was prepared. He always rates himself more clever than he actually is. The damned thing gave a good fight, though, and tore me up a bit, but it is a threat no more. I am relieved that it came after me here and not to our home. I could not bear it if harm were to befall you. The shepherds have a wood priest among them, so you should not worry. I am not so hurt that he cannot patch me up when this is all done.

This morning, I reached the carving. From the tracks, I am fairly certain Pavish was already here. I may not be a woodsman, but I've spent enough time in the wild to spot something as obvious as his stomping around. I cannot follow the tracks, but I know where he went.

Do you remember the bottled imp I sent him? He mentioned it in the letter. I needed to know what Pavish knew and was certain he wouldn't share the information with me, so I sent him the imp. The little creature was more than a nuisance; it was my eyes and ears. I got a good look at his notes before he killed the thing. It was the night I came to bed bleeding and told you I'd fallen on the stairs. The pain was worth it because now I know where he's going. As soon as I finish writing this, I will go after him.

Dearest, now comes the part that's hard to write. I would tell you not to fear for me, but I have no skill to lie to you. Already you know Pavish's intentions, so you also know there is a chance that from this adventure I may not return. I don't know exactly what Green-winter's staff does, but I know it is powerful. If the artifact falls into Pavish's hands, I've decided I must provoke him to use it.

This is not suicidal folly, my love, for I have a theory, though it is based on only the thinnest of suppositions. I think each time the staff is used, it vanishes—which is why Greenwinter enchanted the snake-bound pattern to find it again.

Whether I am right or wrong hardly matters. Pavish will almost certainly come looking for me. Perhaps that is why I choose to face him here, where the battle will be far from you, our home, and our friends. If my theory is wrong, remember that I tried.

If I don't return, Marriana, please know that my last thoughts will be of you.

Your foolishly noble husband, Torreb

PS. In my study are all the letters Pavish sent me, along with copies of my own. If you do not hear from me within a month, bundle them up and send them to your father. He has no love for me, but he is wise. I think he will know what to do with them.

Glade Temple, Silverpeak Mountains

Lady Marriana,

Noble lady, I am Garrel, priest of Our Mother, Chauntea, in the village of Morpeth-by-the-Stream. Yesterday

Yard-Mas, the son of Vard-Ren the shepherd, came with news for you. Mas cannot write, so I have taken down his words for him.

It is sad news. Your husband, the wizard Torreb, is dead. Mas and his father Vard-Ren are both honest men and would not tell this tale if it were not true. This is how it happened.

Mas had been hired by your husband as a guide to a cave in a valley north of here. It is an evil place the villagers shun, so Mas agreed to point out its mouth but go no farther. Do not blame him for this. It took courage to guide your husband that far. He waited at a safe distance for your husband to come back.

At the cave, another man emerged. He was carrying a staff that Mas swears glowed with green

flame. The two argued at the entrance. Then the second man pointed his staff at your husband and the green fire wrapped around him. I will not tell you all Mas says, but the fire burned your husband to ash.

This morning I persuaded some men to go to the cave, and I think the story is true. There was a great scorched patch in front of it. The ground was still hot after a full day, and the stone underfoot was as smooth as melted wax. The remains were utterly destroyed. I am greatly sorry to tell you this.

There is one thing Mas adds that I do not understand. He says that after the other man did this thing, the staff started to glow brighter, and the other man seemed surprised. Finally, Mas had to shield his eyes from the light. It was as bright as the sun, he says, and then he heard a cry. When the light finally faded, the man and the staff were both gone. No one in the valley has seen this man come or go, but I believe Mas. I know he is an honest man.

It grieves me to send you this news. May Our Mother grant you peace in your sorrow.

Watchful Brother of the Earth,
Garrel of the Glade Temple

Secrets Of Blood, Spirits Of The Sea

Elaine Cunningham

You, there! You, the elf with ink-stained fingers and eyes the color of rain. Come closer. I could not harm you even if I had wish to do so. Your nets are strong.

You are chieftain of this hunting party, are you not? Yes, so I thought. It is even so with my people. Lore-tellers and spirit-talkers are leaders among the wemic.

This surprises you, elf? We lion-folk are not the savages of common-told tales. Oh, hunters we are, and warriors, too—make no mistake about that— but wemics know much of music and magic, tales and legends.

Do not doubt me: I am Shonasso Kin Taree, second O (or "grandson," as you two-legged folk reckon kinship) of the great Kanjir, and I am lore-teller of the wemic tribe Taree. Loose me from this net, elf, and I will tell you a tale long hidden, a story of dire magic and of fearsome creatures that no living wemic on this savannah has ever seen—except in night-visions sent as evil portents.

Yes, I thought this offer might interest you! Of all the two-legged folk, elves have the sharpest curiosity. I see you have parchment and quill at the ready. Before we begin, tell your kindred to put up their spears. You have my word that I will bring neither claw nor blade against any of you until the telling is done. And then, I will fight only if forced to defend myself against your displeasure.

Oh, so you would never attack a bard whose tale displeased you? Hmmph! As my grandsire would say, "Leave that tale untold 'til the deed is done." But since you're so eager to give pledge, promise me this: Swear to write down my words just as I speak them, and to put the scroll in a place where many might read this tale and remember.

Good. I have your oath and you have mine. And now you shall have the story, as it was told to me.

In a time long past, when elves and dragons battled for supremacy in a world still young, there lived a dark-elven wizard whose powers were unmatched, except perhaps by his enormous pride.

Ka'Narlist was archmage of Atormash, a once-mighty city whose secrets have slept for centuries in the deep jungles of a faraway land—secrets that are whispered still beneath a hundred seas.

The dark elf's lair was a great fortress of black stone that stood high and proud atop a seaside cliff. From his keep, Ka'Narlist could look out over the Bay of the Banshee, a vast spear of seawater that thrust deep into southern Faerun. Far below his castle, the sea thundered and sang and shrieked—mournful, ceaseless music that darkened the wizard's thoughts by day and haunted his reverie by night.

Put away your maps, elf. That bay is long gone—lost when the One Land was sundered and scattered by best-forgotten magic. Do not be surprised that I know of such things. Our legends are as ancient as your own, and more honest.

Now, shall we continue?

As the years passed, Ka'Narlist's eyes began to linger upon the stormy bay. He spent long hours pondering what might lie beneath the vast waters, both in the bay he saw and in the trackless seas beyond. Though scholar he was, he did not wish merely to *know*: he intended to *possess*.

Such ambitions were not unusual among his people. The Ilythiiri, the dark elves of the south, were fierce, warlike people who plundered and conquered and enslaved a thousand tribes. Not even their

fair-skinned elven kindred were safe from their raids! Ka'Narlist had earned his wealth in such raids, and he'd also brought back as spoils of war slaves from many lands to labor in his keep, and to feed his pride. One of these captives was Mbugua, a shaman of the wemic. Of him we will speak again.

Despite all their power, the Ilythiiri were seldom content. Ka'Narlist possessed enormous wealth, magical spells beyond the comprehension of your mightiest mages, and the fearful respect of his tribe. Even so, as he gazed out over the watery realm that no dark elf could truly claim to rule, he came to think of his honors as insufficient: mighty stones, yes, but stones that would be worn down into sand by the pounding sea that is time. He came to envy the timeless powers of the gods. He aspired to claim such powers as his own.

Since Ka'Narlist was a scholar, he knew the legends that spoke of entire races brought into being to serve the purposes of their makers. If Gruumsh One-Eye had his ores and the Earth Mother her leviathan, Ka'Narlist reasoned, why could not a wizard of his stature fashion a race of his own? Creatures of his own making that would sing praises to him, that would enhance his power and increase his dominion?

There was no question in the wizard's mind as to what that dominion should be: Ka'Narlist wanted control of the sea depths. After much thought, he decided to create a seagoing people, a fierce race driven to brutally conquer their watery domain—in Ka'Narlist's name, of course. So that his "children" could never rise against him, he decided not to gift them with magical powers. Speed, stealth, voracious hunger, and treacherous cunning would be their weapons.

It was a simple matter to decide what must be done; the doing was far more difficult. But not, on the whole, unpleasant. At least, not unpleasant to one such as Ka'Narlist...

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"Hand me the hooked knife," Ka'Narlist murmured absently. His attention was utterly fixed upon tormenting the unfortunate kodingobold strapped onto his study table; he did not bother to raise his crimson eyes to the wemic who stood attentively at his elbow.

Mbugua had the tool ready before the words were spoken—he had aided his master too many times not to understand what was needed—and he slapped the smooth handle onto the wizard's outstretched palm.

The wemic would have preferred to turn the blade, to drive it deep between two fragile elven ribs, or to slice off a couple of black fingers. Long and painful experience had shown him the folly of such action. Whenever Mbugua had attacked the Ilythiirian wizard, the intended wound had appeared not on the elf, but upon the wemic's own person.

Many times had proud Mbugua sought his freedom; many times had he woken on his pallet with a pounding head—and dim memories of the horrible rituals that had restored his maimed body. Once, only once, had he managed to deal a mortal blow, and thus had escaped Ka'Narlist into death. But the wizard's dreadful god, Ghaunadaur, had wrested the wemic from his afterlife and brought him back to this wretched captivity. Even after many years, memories of this horrific experience tore Mbugua screaming from his sleep. The evil that was Ghaunadaur, the power that was Ka'Narlist—the two had become one in Mbugua's mind.

Since the day of his too-brief death, Mbugua had to all appearances served his master without question or complaint. He did all things well, even attending Ka'Narlist on tasks such as this—tasks that could turn the stomach of a hunter, and that made the noble wemic's every instinct shout that it would be a holy act to run a spear through a being who could calmly, systematically inflict such pain on a living creature.

Not that Mbugua had any use for kodingobolds. They were nasty, odorous, rat-tailed creatures—ugly things with four-footed, doglike bodies that were topped with scrawny humanoid torsos and sly, bug-eyed faces. Gray of skin and of soul, they seemed to possess neither conscience nor ambition. Kodingobolds lived solely on whatever they could steal. They were cowards who fought only if they greatly outmassed and outnumbered their prey. And they had a particularly fondness for the flesh of young wemics. In years past, many an adventurous and wandering wemic cub had fallen prey to the disorderly packs of kodingobolds that had ranged the savannah. Mbugua's own tribe had nearly exterminated the murderous, thieving little creatures, and the wemic shaman did not mourn their loss. Even so, the look he cast at the shrieking, writhing kodingobold bordered on sympathy.

He himself had suffered similar experimentation, albeit with considerably more fortitude. Mbugua had been one of the first to pay the price for Ka'Narlist's latest ambition. The wemic's body had been probed and sliced and sampled until at long last the wizard was satisfied he had his sought-for answer. It was the blood, Ka'Narlist claimed—the secrets of life were in the blood.

Mbugua was a shaman, and his people and his magic said otherwise, but what words could argue against the wizard's terrible success? Ka'Narlist had used his wemic slave's blood as an ingredient in some dark magic; the eventual result was the birth of two new creatures—a tawny beast who boasted Mbugua's proud black mane and powerful four-footed body, and a humanlike infant with a wemic's dusky golden skin and catlike eyes.

Ka'Narlist's joy had matched Mbugua's horror. To the wizard, this represented the successful "separation" of the wemic into his apparently component parts: man and lion. To the wemic, this was an atrocity beyond comprehension. The elated Ka'Narlist did not notice the outrage and the grim purpose on his slave's leonine face. If he had, he could not have failed to realize that Mbugua had sworn a blood oath against him.

And yet, such knowledge would have mattered not at all. Ka'Narlist was secure in his pride and his power. The dire pledges of a wemic slave meant nothing to him. His own godlike work and the creatures it would eventually spawn: this, and only this, was important to Ka'Narlist.

And so through the years, while the lion-things begotten from Mbugua's stolen blood increased into a pride, and the near-human lad became but one of many such servants laboring in the wizard's household, Ka'Narlist captured or purchased rare creatures to study. The dark wizard searched for the blood secrets that made each race unique—indeed, the secrets of life itself. Though the castle's halls and stables and dungeons were full of strange beings born of his magical experiments, the wizard was not yet content.

"You have made many other kobolds, and you have released enough dingo-creatures into the hills to endanger your tribe's flocks and herds," Mbugua pointed out, lifting his voice to be heard above the kodingobold's agonized shrieking. "What more can you gain from this pathetic creature?"

For a moment, the wizard's knife ceased its grim work. "Not every experiment went as planned," Ka'Narlist murmured in an abstracted tone. "I must have reasonable assurance of success before I begin the final stage."

The final stage.

To the wemic, these words represented the ultimate obscenity. Among his people, children were treasured by the entire tribe, and the arrival of each healthy cub was an occasion for feasting and merriment. What Ka'Narlist proposed to do was unthinkable: the dark elf intended to create horrific children from his own blood, children that would be slaves at best, at worse coldly discarded if they did not fulfill the promise offered by Ka'Narlist's "reasonable assurances of success."

A sudden molten shriek ripped through Mbugua's grim reverie. The kodingobold's struggles, which had increased steadily as Ka'Narlist's ministrations systematically spread white-hot pain into every bone and sinew, abruptly ceased. The little creature went rigid, its body arched back, as taut as a hunting bow. Mbugua saw that the end was near, and reached for the next-needed tool.

A low, eerie keening filled the room, a sound that would ever remind Mbugua of a gathering storm. Oddly defiant and swiftly growing in power, it was not a cry that one would expect to emerge from throat of a frail and cowardly kodingobold. But Mbugua the shaman heard this cry for what it was: even in the meanest of creatures, the force of life was strong. Every defense that nature had placed into the kodingobold's body was fighting the approach of death with a berserker's frenzy. Its life-force was as intense as midday sun focused into a single beam of light—powerful and primal as it made ready to spring free into the spirit world. In this final moment of mortal life, the kodingobold was more than a miserable outcast of the wild dog-folk: he embodied the very essence of his race.

Mbugua handed his master the bleeding bowl.

With a practiced hand, Ka'Narlist flicked a knife across the rigid, corded veins of the creature's throat, held the bowl and caught the pulsing blood without spilling so much as a drop. And all the while, he chanted words of dark power that he had learned (or so he claimed) at the feet of his dreadful god.

When at last the kodingobold lay silent and still, the wizard gave a single nod of satisfaction. "Dispose of the carcass, then attend me in my spell-chamber."

"As you command, Master."

Ka'Narlist heard the note of hesitation in his slave's voice. For a moment, he was puzzled: the once-rebellious Mbugua was now the most docile and reliable of all the wizard's servitors. Then the memories came, and with them, understanding. Ka'Narlist turned a supercilious smile upon the wemic.

"Ah. You wish to sing the creature's spirit away first, I take it?"

"If my master permits it," Mbugua said in a stiff voice. Among his people, a shaman owned the respect of his tribe. The Ilythiirian wizard's disdain for spirit-magic smote the wemic's pride—and kindled his wrath.

"Tell me," Ka'Narlist began, in the sort of voice one might use to tease information from a silly, sulky child, "what do you think might happen if you didn't indulge in these little games and rituals? Would we be

tripping over vengeful spirits on every stairwell?"

Mbugua met the dark elf's mocking gaze. "Would you truly wish to find out?"

The wizard's smile flickered, then fled. He turned away, flicking the fingers of one hand in a gesture of dismissal. "Do what you will with the carrion. It matters not."

When Ka'Narlist's faint footsteps had faded into silence, Mbugua unstrapped the dead kodingobold from the table and slung the body over shoulders broader than those of any man. With catlike grace, the wemic made his way down the winding stairs that led from the wizard's spell tower to the great hall below.

A mind-staggering variety of creatures thronged the vast room, going about their appointed tasks with an alacrity born of fear. A flock of winged elves, their fingertips sparkling with minor magics, fluttered high overhead as they labored on the multitude of long, narrow windows that ringed the hall—each one of which was a priceless work of art fashioned from multicolored gems. Several four-armed ogrish kitchen slaves bustled through on their way to the dungeons, carrying the evening meal to those unfortunate creatures who awaited Ka'Narlist's attentions. A score of miniature red dragons, each no bigger than a plump meerkat, darted about, lighting candles and oil lamps with small goutts of flame. A horde of goblin slaves busily scrubbed the intricate mosaic floor. This might have been a common enough sight, but for the rare streak of whimsy that prompted Ka'Narlist to breed goblins with gaily colored hides: sunny yellow, topaz blue, bright clear pink. To Mbugua's eye, the hall looked like a meadow filled with hideous, two-legged flowers.

As the wemic stalked through the great hall on silent, massive paws, all others fell back to make way. There was not a soul in the hall who lacked personal experience with the wizard's dark work, and they held Ka'Narlist's leonine assistant in almost as much dread as they did the wizard himself.

The massive front door was flanked by a pair of minotaur guards, huge beasts armed with wicked scimitars and unnaturally long horns. Before Mbugua could growl a command, the bull-men leapt into action. They raised the portcullis and then threw their combined weight against the wooden bolt that barred the outer door. The bar gave way with a groan, and the doors swung outward.

Mbugua padded out into the courtyard, gratefully filling his lungs with the cool evening air. The wizard's lair was always filled with smoke from the braziers, fetid steam from a dozen vile magical concoctions, and the ever-present scent of death.

The wemic made his way down a steep path to the rock-strewn coast below. There was a small cove, ringed with high-standing stones. He could do what he willed here, for the cove could not be seen from the castle windows and courtyard. The wizard's servants feared Mbugua too much to follow him here; the wizard himself was too prideful to imagine that anything a mere slave might do could be of any harm or interest. Mbugua's captivity and loyalty were maintained by powerful magical bonds: Ka'Narlist trusted in his own magic.

It was that very trust, that pride, and that magic that Mbugua would turn against the dark elf. These were the only weapons he knew strong enough to defeat the wizard.

The wemic dropped the kodingobold's body onto the hard-packed soil. He stooped and picked up a small, perfectly round black object that was hidden—in plain sight—among the many stones. Then, closing his eyes, he reached his arms high and began the slow, rhythmic breathing that cleared his mind and prepared him to see and hear the things that only a shaman could know.

In moments, Mbugua sensed the kodingobold's spirit, an unseen presence that lingered near like a furtive shadow. The wemic began to dance, at first padding slowly around the slain kodingobold, then moving more quickly with darting turns and leaps like those of a lion cub at play. His manlike arms wove a mystic pattern in counterpoint to the rhythm of his paws, magically describing the path that the kodingobold's bewildered spirit must follow. He sang as well—a deep, surging chant that soared out over the twilight sea and melded with the magic of the dance. It was a ritual the wemic shaman had performed many times.

But this time, it was slightly, profoundly different.

At last, Mbugua stood silent, his tawny form glistening with sweat as he gazed with mingled triumph and horror at the black pearl that lay in his hand, vibrating with a silent song that only a shaman could hear. The gem was a magical weapon—a device created by Ka'Narlist that could swallow the magic of his enemies. Ka'Narlist kept a heaping basket of these hungry gems in his arsenal. The wemic had stolen two of them, and had adapted the fearful devices to his own, even more fearful purposes.

Within his hand, within the pearl, was the trapped spirit of the kodingobold.

"Forgive me," Mbugua murmured, his wemic's pride doing battle against the apology his honor demanded. Yet he did not regret what he had done. Ka'Narlist had his work, and Mbugua had his own.

The wemic reclaimed the other "hidden" pearl from the shore and began the ritual anew—but this time, his song was infinitely darker and more seductive. This time, Mbugua intended to cast magic that

would lure the spirit of a living being into his snares.

Your kindred are avid listeners, elf. See how they lean in, attending to my tale! They seem troubled by the wemic's plot. I have heard that elves do not disturb the afterlives of even their enemies. This says much to commend you—if it is true. I have also heard that elves show honor to bards, yet none among you has offered water or wine to sooth my throat and to speed the tale.

Ah, for me? You are a most gracious host. Yes, thank you, I feel quite refreshed. Yes, I would be pleased to continue.

"You have not sought me out in many moons," Satarah observed. Her calm, musical voice gave no hint to the question in her words, and her golden face was calm as she handed her "father" a steaming mug of tea.

But Mbugua heard the question with ears made sharp by guilt. "The wizard grows ever more obsessed with his work. I have had little time to call my own."

"And now that you are here, it must be for some purpose," the girl stated plainly. "I do not see you otherwise."

The wemic sighed. "I have done what I could, Satarah. I named you for my own mother. I tried to teach you the ways of the pride. But it is difficult. This ... this is not the life I would have chosen for you."

"Nor this body," she commented, gesturing toward her lithe, humanlike form. This time, a hint of bitterness crept into her voice and her eyes.

The wemic could not dispute her words. Satarah was one of the "children" created from his blood, and as such he owed her the love that was any child's due. But it was difficult. It was difficult even to look upon her.

Satarah was beautiful—not even the wemic could deny that—but she was not one of the lion-folk. She had two long legs rather than four, shapely human feet rather than paws, and a slender, curvy body that would be the envy of any human or elven woman who set eyes upon her. Even Satarah's face was more elfish than wemish, with delicate features and no hint of the blunt cat nose that so often appeared on the children begotten of Mbugua's stolen blood. The few lingering hints of her wemic heritage only served to make her appear more exotic: her silky black hair was as thick and abundant as Mbugua's mane, her skin had a golden, sun-dusted hue, and her large, almond-shaped eyes were a catlike shade of amber. Yes, she was very beautiful, and nearly ripe for mating. Neither fact would long escape her master's attention.

"Why have you come?" Satarah repeated softly.

The wemic met her eyes. "Has Ka'Narlist taken you to his bed yet?"

Satarah's gaze kindled. "Is the wizard still alive? Am I yet alive? Answer those questions, and you have answered your own!"

Her fierce tone and blazing eyes smote Mbugua's heart—and firmed his purpose. The bonds of blood were strong indeed: Satarah might not look like his child, but he saw something of himself in her indomitable pride. This one, regardless of the conditions of her life, would ever be free.

"You cannot strike the wizard without bringing harm to yourself," he advised her.

The girl grimaced. "This I have already learned." She lifted the heavy mass of her hair and showed him the multitude of long, livid streaks that scored her neck and shoulders.

Mbugua recognized the mark of fingernails, and noted with a touch of pride that Satarah used her hands in battle as well as any wemic would use her forepaws. It was a shame that such wounds had not remained upon Ka'Narlist, who so deserved to bear them!

"If he has sought you out once," the wemic noted grimly, "he will do so again."

"And when he does, I will fight again!" she growled back. "I quenched his ardor in blood, and so will I do again! I will have my honor or my death—it matters not which."

Mbugua started to bid her otherwise, but something in Satarah's eyes made him hold his tongue. He could not—he *would* not—instruct this fierce girl to tamely submit herself to the wizard. But he took the necklace he had made—a dainty clam shell decorated with his wemic clan symbol and hung on a string of freshwater pearls—and handed it to her.

Satarah took the bauble with glad, greedy fingers. For a moment the girl's face was bright with the pleasure of receiving a pretty gift from her father's hands, and the elven wizard was utterly forgotten. Then her eyes—eyes that saw nearly as much as a shaman's—settled upon Mbugua's uneasy face.

"What has this to do with the wizard?" she demanded, getting to the heart of the matter.

Mbugua decided to answer in kind. "There is an enspelled pearl within the clam shell. Wear it when Ka'Narlist sends for you. It will steal a portion of his spirit."

The girl nodded thoughtfully. There was no hint of fear in her eyes as she contemplated this attack upon her powerful master. "But how can this be done, that he will not notice?"

"Look at the sky," Mbugua advised her. "Does its sapphire hue dim when you take a single breath? Are the stars drawn closer when you weep? The sky cannot be diminished so. Thus it is with the spirit: it is a thing without beginning or end. The single breath of it that is drawn into the pearl will not disturb the wizard."

A rare smile broke over Satarah's face, and she quickly slipped the necklace over her head. "This I will do, and gladly. I only regret that it will bring the wizard no pain!"

"There is one more thing I need of you," Mbugua said hesitantly, "but first I must tell you more about Ka'Narlist's work than you will want to hear." When the girl nodded her encouragement, he told her of the wizard's ambition—to create a race of seagoing creatures from his own blood, a vicious race that would conquer and control the seas.

"Soon he will beget his first blood-child," Mbugua concluded. "I want my blood to mingle with Ka'Narlist's in that monster's body. I would bind the creature to me with the blood-bonds of the wemic clan, and turn him against the wizard. This is not something I do lightly, and for it, I will need your help. Your blood."

Satarah regarded him narrowly, hearing his reasoning but suspecting it. "Why not use your own?"

"Is Ka'Narlist such a fool, that he would not notice if his creature was born with four legs and fur?" Mbugua retorted. "No, you carry the blood of the wemic clan, but your outward form is more like that of an elf. It is still a risk, but a smaller one."

The girl shrugged. "I care not for the risk. But I do not see why the creature that results would work against the wizard."

Again Mbugua heard the unspoken question behind her words. He dared not tell her the second half of his plan—his determination to imbue the creature with Ka'Narlist's own rapacious spirit, with the wizard's driving ambition for conquest. Mbugua's fondest, darkest hope was that the creature would set its sights upon Ka'Narlist's impressive wealth, and devise a way to own it. It would not be the first time that a son ousted his father, nor would it be the last. Yet the creature would not have Ka'Narlist's magic, and could in turn be overthrown. Mbugua dared not tell Satarah any of this, for fear that the wizard might somehow get it from her. He would tell her what he could, and pray that she was daughter enough to understand.

"Why would this creature *not* seek vengeance," Mbugua retorted, "seeing that the wizard enslaves many of his wemic kindred? The ties of blood-bond are powerful in the clan. Do you not know this to be so?"

"I am only half wemic," Satarah said bitterly. But her fingers clutched her father's gift, traced the rune that he had etched unto the clamshell—the rune that proclaimed *her*, a woeful thing begotten of a foul wizard's magic, a member of a proud wemic clan. Her eyes were bright and fierce as they sought Mbugua's. "But yes, my father, the bonds of blood are strong. I know it to be so! I will do all that you ask."

The wemic cupped her cheek in his massive hand, and sadness smote him deeply as he realized it was the first caress he had ever offered to his elflike child.

Satarah gripped her father's tawny hand with both her own, fiercely and briefly confirming their pact and their bond. Then she stepped back and squared her shoulders as if preparing herself for the battle ahead.

Is that wineskin empty? Lore-telling is thirsty work. Listening also has a way of drying the throat, and you and your kindred listen well. A finer audience I have seldom seen!

A trick? How so? Surely a band of elven hunter-warriors is match for a single wemic lore-teller, whether you drink or no. Such suspicions do not speak well for you, elf. As my grandsire would say, "A thief never forgets to bolt his own door."

And have I not given my oath that I will not fight until the tale is told?

Oh, very good, elf! You turn my own taunt back against me—a nimble riposte! Yes, I have also pledged to give you the entire story, and so I shall.

That very night, the inhabitants of the wizard's castle shivered as they listened to the wemic shaman's song, carried to them by a mournful wind.

It was not an unfamiliar sound. They knew full well what it meant: yet another inhabitant of Ka'Narlist Keep had died. The knowledge that their turn could come at any time chilled them as they listened to the wemic's rhythmic chant. But tonight, the shaman's voice seemed somehow different—infinately sadder and throbbing with suppressed wrath.

Far below the listening castle, Mbugua sang the spirit of Satarah on its way to the proud afterlife that awaited wemic warriors.

But first, he'd taken from her body two things: a vial of the blood that flowed freely from her many wounds, and a black pearl vibrating with a spirit so malevolent, so ambitious and vile that it could only be

Ka'Narlist's. Of this, the wemic shaman was certain, as certain as he was that the daughter of his blood and his spirit lay dead before him.

Success was his. Later, perhaps, Mbugua would be grimly pleased. Now there was only frustration, and a grief deeper than he had expected to feel.

When the ritual was completed, when Satarah was well and truly gone, the wemic roared his rage and his anguish out over the uncaring sea.

And far above the windswept shore, the inhabitants of Ka'Narlist's castle shivered at the terrible sound. They had many reasons to fear the wizard; the fact that he himself did not fear the wemic was high among them.

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In the birthing chamber, a female sea elf's moans mingled with the resonant chanting of the wemic shaman. Mbugua crouched beside the shallow pool where the elf woman labored, humming and chanting softly as he sang the child within her toward the light.

The sea elf tensed as yet another massive contraction rippled across her rounded belly. Her body arched, her mouth opened in a shriek of pure anguish. Mbugua reached into the water and caught the babe as it slipped from her body.

At once, the wemic knew that he had succeeded in shaping Ka'Narlist's magical begetting. The infant was not at all what the wizard had intended. It was a boy-child, perfectly formed, and utterly sea-elven, from his softly pointed ears to the fine webbing between the fingers of his tiny, flailing fists. But Mbugua's shaman senses, finely tuned to the new life in his hands, felt the blood-bonds of his own clan tying him to the child. The wemic shaman continued to sing, this time a song of welcome, as he tended the child and the exhausted sea elf who had birthed it.

The female's eyes followed Mbugua's every move, and slowly the despair in them changed to wonder—and the dawning of a mother's intense love. But Mbugua shook his head when she reached hungry arms out for the beautiful newborn. Although her blood had had a part in the infant's begetting, though she had carried and brought it forth according to the ways of nature, and though the child might appear to be nothing more or less than a perfect sea elf, the babe was none of hers. Already Mbugua could sense the still-amorphous spirit of the child. This was truly Ka'Narlist's own.

At that moment, the wizard strode into the room and peered down at the infant in Mbugua's arms. His dark face twisted with rage and disappointment.

"Another failure," he muttered, and turned away. "Dispose of it."

"As you command, Master," Mbugua called respectfully after the departing wizard. With one massive forepaw he slapped aside the elf woman's desperate, grasping hands, and he padded from the chamber with the doomed infant in his arms. Other slaves would tend and console the female, for she would be needed again—the sea elf was a proven breeder who had produced three live children of her own. Ka'Narlist would waste little time on this slave's recovery: Mbugua was certain that before the crescent moon grew full, yet another of the dark elf's twisted offspring would be magically planted within her belly.

The wemic carried the newborn down to the edge of the sea, ignoring its thin, indignant cries. To his private cove he went, and his savage roars chilled those who listened in the castle far above.

They heard, but they did not understand.

In response to Mbugua's summons, a sea-elven woman emerged from the waves and waded ashore. She took the babe from the wemic's arms, then unwrapped the damp blanket that swaddled it so that she might examine the tiny fingers and toes.

"The babe is perfect," she said at last. "Are you certain of its nature?"

"As certain as I am of my own," Mbugua said flatly.

"Raise him, as we agreed, and he will in time avenge your stolen kin. But trust him not! Ka'Narlist has bred violence and hatred into this one."

"I will remember, and watch," the elf agreed. "And I will tell him tales of the wizard's power and wealth, and let him know that this would be his rightful portion, had his father not discarded him."

The wemic nodded. "One thing more: whenever you hear my voice raised in ritual song, bring the babe close to shore so that he might watch and learn. Let him see me sing away the spirits of Ka'Narlist's victims. Let him learn to hate his wizard father for the evil that he does. And when he has learned this lesson," Mbugua said softly, "then I will teach him to fight!"

* * * * *

Nearly a year passed, and again Mbugua crouched beside the birthing pool to aid the same sea-elven woman. This time, the soft play of the cleansing fountain and the chanting of the shaman were the only sounds in the room. The elf woman lay limp, uncaring, as nature followed its ordained path and the child tore its way from her body.

This time, Ka'Narlist himself attended the birth. He watched with keen interest, and when his wemic slave raised the child from the pool, a smile of fierce elation lit his dark face.

"At last, success!" the wizard exulted.

But Mbugua could only stare at the horror in his hands. The infant was hideous, monstrous. It was also strong: already it could lift its head, and it struck out purposefully at the wemic with tiny claws that etched lines of blood along Mbugua's hands and wrists. Through his daze, Mbugua noted that the darting movements of those hands and the quick turns of the head upon that too-strong neck predicted a raptor-swift strike. Although elflike in such matters as number and placement of limbs, the creature was covered with dark green scales. Small black fins sprouted from its head and body. The head lacked both hair and ears, and the face was dominated by a pair of enormous black eyes and a long slit of mouth. It had yet to draw breath and cry; Mbugua found himself hoping it never would.

Muttering an oath, Ka'Narlist struck the infant from the stunned wemic's hands. The tiny monster splashed into the pool. Bubbles rose from the water, along with an eerie, high-pitched shriek that sent a shiver down Mbugua's spine. To the shaman's sensitive ears, the cry was a harbinger of death to many innocent sea folk.

"Cut the cord, put the babe to breast," Ka'Narlist scolded. "You are the midwife here, not I! See to it!"

Mbugua fished the infant from the pool, quickly tended its needs, and placed it in the elf woman's limp arms. Her dazed, empty eyes widened with sudden horror, and her apathy exploded into hysterical screams. Too late, the wemic understood why.

The infant's mouth was flung open wide, impossibly wide. It was lined with rows of tiny, triangular fangs like those of a shark. The babe clamped down, and Mbugua heard the dreadful sound of teeth grating upon bone.

He caught a glimpse of the sea elf's ribs before the flow of her lifeblood turned the waters of the birthing pool a deep crimson.

Ka'Narlist frowned and flicked his fingers: the dying elf woman's shrieks stopped abruptly. The wizard nodded thoughtfully as he watched the babe chew and swallow its first meal.

"How better to train them to hunt sea elves than to give them a taste of sea-elven blood with their first breath?" he mused.

He turned to Mbugua. "Fetch all the captive sea-elven females, then go to the slave markets and buy all that are available. We will need as many hatching hosts as we can acquire, since it would seem that they can be used only once."

The wizard smiled, seemingly amused by the stunned expression on the wemic's face. "Come, now—away with your tiresome scruples! This is a great day. When the sea is mine to command, you may boast that you witnessed the birth of the sahuagin race!"

* * * * *

The years passed, and the vast walled pools and the water-filled dungeons on Ka'Narlist's estate soon teemed with sahuagin.

Even Mbugua had to admit that they were amazing creatures. They reached maturity within a year, and, unlike most of the wizard's other creations, they could reproduce. This they did with astonishing fecundity. After three years, Ka'Narlist ceased to magically breed the sahuagin, leaving them to their own devices. Within ten years, Ka'Narlist had a tribe.

The sahuagin learned nearly as quickly as they bred. They could swim from the moment of their birth and could walk in their second moon of life. As soon as they could grasp a weapon, they were taught to fight on land and in the water. Within twenty years, Ka'Narlist had an army.

Throughout these years, Mbugua spent much of his time at the pools and the training pens, watching as Ilythiirian raiders—themselves slaves to the wizard—trained the sahuagin in the fighting arts of the dark elves.

The creatures proved to be fierce fighters, neither giving nor asking quarter in their battles against each other, and showing ruthless delight in slaying the sea-elven fighters who from time to time were tossed into their pools. But never—never once—did any of them turn tooth or claw or blade upon one of their

dark-elven masters. From the moment of birth, each sahuagin was trained to regard the dark elves as gods, and Ka'Narlist as chief among them. He was, quite simply, their Creator. None of the sahuagin ever set eyes upon Ka'Narlist, but they were taught to fear, obey and revere him. It did not escape their notice that their dark-elven Creator knew all that they did—and often seemed to sense their very thoughts! To them, Ka'Narlist was truly a god, and they were his eager servants.

At last, the day came to release the sahuagin into the sea. They were brought for the first time into the castle's great hall, to be awed by a wondrous display of music and light and magic—things that none of them had seen at close hand, things that seemed to them to be true manifestations of a mighty god. At the height of the ceremony, Ka'Narlist himself appeared, hovering above the assembly, his form magically enhanced to enormous size and limned with eerie, dancing light.

"The moment of your destiny has arrived," the wizard announced in a voice that shook the hall's windows. "The sahuagin will become a great people. You will conquer the seas, plunder its treasures, and know enormous wealth and power! This is your right and your destiny, as the created children of Ka'Narlist. In all you do, bring glory to the name of your lord and god!"

"Ka'Narlist!" the sahuagin host responded in a rapturous, thunderous roar.

The wizard smiled benevolently and extended his hands. Black pearls dripped from them and rained into the grasping claws of his dark children.

"You know what these are, and have been trained in their use. For each sea elf you slay, you will return one of these pearls—with the elf's magic captured inside. Magic is meant only for the gods. Regard the death of each blasphemous sea elf as an act of worship, and the pearls as proof of your loyalty to me! For have I not given you life, a kingdom to rule, and weapons with which to conquer it?"

The sahuagin nodded avidly, for their lord's reasoning was most agreeable to them. Also, they had learned to their pain that what the great Ka'Narlist could give, he could also take away! Those sahuagin who harbored the slightest hint of rebellion or heresy had died horribly, mysteriously, in full sight of their scaly kindred. Clearly, it was folly to oppose their dark lord, and an honor to serve one so powerful!

Ka'Narlist spoke a few more words, then at last released the sahuagin to seek the sea. They tore from the hall and swarmed down the cliff, all the while hooting and shrieking oaths against their sea-elven foes.

When all was quiet, the wizard floated to the marble floor and turned a smile upon his wemic slave. Of all Ka'Narlist's servitors, only Mbugua was granted the honor of attending this ceremony. Indeed, the wizard kept his aging wemic at his side almost constantly—a witness to his glories and an audience for tales of his yet-unfulfilled ambitions.

"The world below the sea is but the start," the wizard proclaimed. "Soon all the world will know the name of Ka'Narlist! I will be not a mere wizard, but a god!"

"Notoriety does not make a god. If it did, then the courtesan Xorniba would be queen of all gods, rather than merely an expensive human whore," Mbugua observed with a candor that was becoming his habit. And why not? His life-task had been done, and done well. It would be completed by one far better suited than he. The wemic no longer cared whether the wizard took lethal offense at such remarks.

But Ka'Narlist merely smiled. "Notoriety? Perhaps not. But magic!"

The wizard held up one of the black pearls. "The magic of the sea-elven wizards is nearly as potent as my own! Think upon this: what will I become when I possess a hundred of these? A thousand? When the stolen magic of a thousand thousand sea elves is woven into a single net of magic and power?" Again Ka'Narlist paused for an exultant smile. "With power such as that, the gods will come to *me*. Do not doubt: I will become a god indeed."

* * * * *

Mbugua did not doubt.

Once, many years ago, the dark god Ghaunadaur had done Ka'Narlist's bidding and wrested the wemic from his afterlife. The shaman had sensed then the strange partnership forming between wizard and god. If Ka'Narlist truly succeeded in stealing the magic of the sea elves, he might well possess magic enough to purchase his way onto the pantheon of his dark gods. It was not hard to believe: they were much akin, Ghaunadaur and Ka'Narlist. And then, what would become of them all? Ka'Narlist's experiments would continue. And Mbugua himself would be sentenced to witness it all. He was bound to the wizard by unbreakable ropes of magic: if Ka'Narlist attained godhood, immortality, it would amuse him to retain Mbugua's spirit in captivity throughout countless ages to come.

Deeply concerned, and more frightened than he had been since the long-ago day of his capture, the wemic hastened to his cove. He had long known about Ka'Narlist's pearls, but he thought them to be

nothing more than another vessel to hold the magical wealth that the wizard hoarded in such abundance. It had never occurred to Mbugua that Ka'Narlist intended to systematically plunder sea-elven magic. Such loss would gravely weaken the sea folk's defenses against the sahuagin horde, perhaps bring about their utter ruin.

The prospects were appalling: the destruction of a wondrous elven people, the rise of the sahuagin to the rulership of the seas, the possibility that the evil that was Ka'Narlist might become immortal. At all costs, the dark elf's creatures must be stopped.

At the edge of the shore, Mbugua roared out the signal that would bring his sea-elven son from the waves.

Malenti, the shaman had named him, after a legendary wemic fighter. So far, Malenti showed every promise of living up to his name. He had learned all that Mbugua had to teach him, and with astonishing speed: all the fighting styles known to the wemic, all the tactics taught to the sahuagin, even the ambush strategies perfected by the now-extinct kodingobolds. To accomplish what he must, Malenti would need them all!

The sea elf came quickly to Mbugua's call, striding out onto the land to exchange a warrior's salute with the wemic. For once, Mbugua did not ponder the strangeness of the webbed hand that clasped his wrist: he measured with gratitude the strength in the elf's grip, and noted the battle-honed muscles that rippled beneath the green, mottled skin.

"The sahuagin are already ravaging the sea," Malenti said without preamble. "They have slain a score of the merfolk, and laid siege to the sea-elven city just offshore! They have sworn to slay every elf who dwells within."

"You must stop them!" implored Mbugua. "And if you cannot, at least stop them from returning to Ka'Narlist with their black pearls!" Quickly, he outlined the wizard's dire ambition.

Too late, it occurred to him that such knowledge might be dangerous in the hands of one as ambitious as Malenti.

"I have no use for stolen magic," Malenti said calmly, as if he divined the wemic's thoughts, "but you are right in saying that these pearls must be kept from Ka'Narlist! For if he becomes as powerful as he would like to be, how will I oust him and claim his kingdom as my own?"

These callous words sent through Mbugua a shiver that started at the top of his spine and darted down the length of his leonine back. It was true that this was the very path he'd hoped Malenti's ambition might take; however, the ease with which the young sea elf spoke of his father's death was chilling.

"You will stop the sahuagin?" pressed the wemic.

Malenti nodded and turned away. His hand was already upon his dagger as he splashed into the sea, as if he could not wait to shed sahuagin blood.

And thus it was, for many years to come. The sahuagin hordes returned to Ka'Narlist's keep with the dark of each moon, as they were pledged to do. But they brought with them not piles of dark pearls, but tales of fierce battles and ambush, and of a mighty sea-elven leader who had raised the sea folk against them.

Malenti, he was called. Malenti, the Sahuagin Scourge.

As Mbugua listened to the stories told of his sea-elven son, he struggled to keep his swelling pride from his face. Ka'Narlist, however, was not so stoic.

"A thousand spears and my highest favor to the sahuagin who brings me this Malenti!" vowed the furious wizard as the latest moon-dark ceremony drew to a close. "Bring him in alive, and I will match the reward with a thousand tridents!"

For such a treasure, any sahuagin would cheerfully slay his nearest kin. The monsters took to the sea with renewed ferocity, each determined to win the promised reward, and the regard of their lord.

Even so, nearly three years passed before the sahuagin finally captured their nemesis. They dragged Malenti to Ka'Narlist Keep, entangled in nets and bleeding from a score of small malicious wounds, into the great hall to await the judgment of their lord.

Despite the seeming gravity of the situation, Mbugua's heart was light as he made his way into the hall in response to the wizard's summons. By all reports, Malenti had amassed an enormous army of sea folk. Surely the army was gathered at shore's edge even now, awaiting only Malenti's command to strike. Time and again had the sea elves overcome the sahuagin fighters: the wemic was confident that they would do so again, and that, at long last, Ka'Narlist's brutal reign of magic and misery would end.

When the hall was full and the clacking speech of the excited sahuagin had subsided into a few scattered clicks, the wizard made his appearance. In a magically enhanced voice, he recited the charges against Malenti, then granted him the right to speak before sentence was carried out.

"Take away the nets," Malenti demanded boldly. "When I stand before you, when I look into your face, then will I speak."

With a cruel smile, the wizard lifted his hands. Lines of flame leapt from his fingers and singed away the entangling nets—doing no little damage to the prisoner in the process.

Bereft of much of his hair, his skin much reddened and blistered, and his blackened garments hanging in tatters, Malenti nonetheless rose proudly to his feet and faced down the powerful wizard.

"At last we meet... *Father*," he said in a ringing voice that carried to every corner of the great hall. He paused, obviously enjoying the stunned expression on Ka'Narlist's face and the hushed expectation of the sahuagin throng.

"Oh yes, I am the first of your sahuagin children, the one you discarded when you found my appearance unpleasing. I am Malenti, the Sahuagin Scourge. The *sahuagin* scourge," he emphasized, "for such I am indeed. Though I did not have the advantages of training and weaponry that you lavished upon these others, I have done what I could." He paused, lifting his arms as if to invite the wizard's inspection.

The wemic tensed, certain that the signal to attack would come at any moment. Moments passed, and it did not. It occurred to Mbugua that the wizard was studying Malenti closely, and that the wizard did not seem at all displeased by what he saw.

The sea elf shrugged off the remnants of his charred shirt, revealing a hauberk of incredibly delicate chain mail into which were woven thousands of small black pearls. Mbugua's shaman senses caught the fragile, silent song of captured magic; with horror he realized that each pearl contained the stolen magic of a sea elf.

But Malenti cannot use the magic, Mbugua thought, suddenly frightened that his protege might attack—and fail. *He has not the gift for it, nor has he been trained! What does he presume to do?*

As if he heard the question, Malenti turned to gaze directly into the wemic's golden eyes. "You taught me well," he said mockingly. "And now I turn your own truth back against you: the deepest secrets of life are not in the blood, but in the spirit. Blood-bonds are powerful indeed, but spirit easily wins over blood!"

Ka'Narlist's eyes kindled with crimson flame as he realized Mbugua's part in this. He rounded on the treacherous wemic. "You were to destroy that first sahuagin!" he thundered.

"You will come to rejoice that he did not," Malenti said coldly. He deftly pulled the net of magic over his head and brandished it. "These are the pearls I claimed from your servants over the years, as well as many hundreds more that I gathered myself. I am sahuagin," he said again, his eyes daring those assembled before him to dispute that fact. "I hate the sea elves as much as any of you. But they trusted me, and they died all the more easily for it."

The elflike sahuagin lifted the web of pearls high. "This is my tribute to the great Ka'Narlist, the first tribute of many! Release me to the sea, and I will continue to slay sea elves for as long as I live." He shook the halberd so that the black pearls glistened.

Ka'Narlist smiled faintly, knowingly, as he regarded the son of his spirit. "And what do you desire for yourself, in exchange for this tribute you offer?"

"Only that which is my due: a high position of power among the sahuagin armies, a large share of the wealth of the seas, and the utter destruction of the sea elves! I already know *what you* desire, and it is in my best interest to see that you achieve it." He added softly, so that his words carried only to the dark-elven wizard—and the stunned wemic who sat at his side, "I would like to be known as the firstborn son of a god!"

"The bargain is made," Ka'Narlist began, but Malenti cut him off with an upraised hand.

"I want one thing more: the life of the wemic who betrayed you. Oh, I do not wish merely to slay him! As the proud Mbugua has taught me, it is the spirit that whispers the secrets of life! Imprison *his* in one of these pearls, and I will wear it until the day I die. And forever after, let his spirit roar his songs and his stories out over the waves, that what has been done in this place will be remembered for as long as people listen to the voices of the sea!"

With a heavy heart, Mbugua heard his sentence proclaimed by his blood-son, and confirmed by the dark elf whom he had hoped to overthrow. As Ka'Narlist chanted words of magic and the treacherous Malenti drew his dagger across Mbugua's throat, the wemic prayed with silent fervor that someone, someday, would understand that a wemic's voice was trapped amid the sounds of the waves and the winds, and would find a way to sing his spirit away to its final rest.

* * * * *

Thus did the sahuagin come into being. And thus it was, from that day to this, that the sahuagin from

time to time bear young that resemble sea elves in all things but their rapacious nature. These are called "malenti," after their forefather. Sometimes such young are reared and trained to live among the sea elves as sahuagin spies; more commonly they are slain at birth. The sahuagin have learned that this is prudent—the malenti are considered dangerous even by their vicious kindred, for in them, the spirit of Ka'Narlist lives on.

As for Mbugua, some say that his spirit was released to its reward many long centuries past. And yet it is also said that on a stormy night, one can still hear a wemic's roar of despair among the many voices of the sea.

And so, my elven captor, you have the story, as it was passed to me by my grandsire, who had it from his.

Why would the lion-folk tell such a tale, you ask? Perhaps because the elves will not. Yes, there is danger in speaking of such magic. It is true that for every wise wemic who hears the warning in this tale, there will be a fool who sees in it the glittering lure of a dragon's hoard. So regard it as myth, if such pleases you. And indeed, it may well be this story was not built upon the solid stone of fact.

But remember this, elf, and write it upon your scroll: oftentimes there is far more truth to be found in legend than in history.

Bread Storm Rising

Tom Dupree

"A vacation?"

The scowl on the mage's wizened face looked even craggier than usual, and Wiglaf Evertongue nearly lost his nerve then and there. Perhaps it was the legacy of his family name that urged him onward, for Wiglaf had spent much of his boyhood outracing his brain with his mouth. But there it was, the word was out, and nothing could be done but to follow where it led. He began to draw breath, but his mentor went on.

"Young Evertongue, you are supposed to be studying the magical arts. No, more: you are *privileged* to learn the mageways. This is not some cozy craft hall where we wash our grime away and lock up once darkness falls. Magic is not something we *do*; it is something we *are*. I thought you had agreed to absolute commitment when you began your training, and now I am made to believe that you wish to prance off on a *holiday*?"

"Maybe Vacation' was the wrong word, sir." Wiglaf shuffled his feet and fussed with an imaginary dirt-spot on his robe. "It's just... it's been more than a year since I left Calimport, and I only need a short while to go back home, and I know my family would want to see what's become of me, and it's not like I haven't worked hard these past months, haven't I, Master Fenzig? Haven't I?"

"Your crude imitation of a puppy is noted, Wiglaf," the mage's voice sliced as he knotted his hands behind his back and turned away. "I remind you that it was your own choice that brought you here. It was you who asked for my guidance and instruction. You understood the sacrifices I would demand. Furthermore, as you well know, I have kept your family apprised of your progress, modest though it has been. Your request is baseless and without merit." He gazed for a moment at the cluttered studio where the two had toiled together for so long that he had to strain to remember another condition. Then he turned back to face his pupil. Wiglaf was still studying the wood grain on the floor. "However ... you may go."

"I... what?" Wiglaf squeaked joyfully.

"Even ancient ones like me can yet remember what it felt like to relinquish the past in service to a greater goal. There is more than one kind of calling, Wiglaf. Go and answer yours. I give you one week in Calimport. And I give you ... this." He laid a heavy, bronze-clasped book in the student's hands. "Call it your homework assignment. We can still be productive, even when we rest. And I want the verbal components of three new spells recited to me without error in one week's time."

Wiglaf's newly minted euphoria melted slightly.

"And just to make sure you practice while you're gone, I'm going to send a companion with you." The mage made a quick movement with his hands, then cupped them in front of his mouth and whispered a word that Wiglaf couldn't hear. And a few minutes later, while Wiglaf was packing the last of his travel items, an amazon appeared.

Taller than Wiglaf by two full hands, the blonde, tanned warrior filled the doorway of the magician's studio as fully as she filled the most pleasant dreams of almost every man who looked upon her. A

battle-beaten broadsword draped her magnificent frame and crossed luxurious thighs below the line of her brown leather skirt, toward long, lithe, athletic legs that looked as if they were equally able to pirouette or to kick in the face of an enemy.

"Oh, it's you, Sasha," said Wiglaf.

"You called, Master Fenzig?" the vision inquired in a soft but authoritative voice.

"Yes, please escort this whelp to Calimport and try to keep the inevitable trouble to a minimum."

"Come on, magic man." Sasha smiled at Wiglaf, revealing a set of perfect white teeth that handsomely completed the dazzling picture. "Let's see if you can put one foot in front of the other without falling down."

* * * * *

Their trip was brief and pleasant, combining the soft serenity of sandy plains and the occasional wooded glade with the bracing salt air and rhythmic pounding of the nearby seashore. Wiglaf felt as if he had been imprisoned forever and now finally set free. He didn't even mind Sasha's presence, for to hazard the journey alone would be to invite the perils of another kind of company. Not that any small-time cutpurses along the way would find anything of value on Wiglaf's wiry frame—these brigands could hardly read a trespassing notice, much less a spellbook—but Wiglaf had heard that their disappointment could often manifest itself in actions yielding bodily harm. He would have made the trip anyway, counting on luck and an inventive tongue as his only assets, but Sasha was admittedly a more effective deterrent. No thief could ever mistake her for a cringing female; only the dimmest among them could fail to realize there were far easier ways to make a living than to oppose this woman.

In the rare moments when Sasha did relax, however, she indulged herself in her favorite recreation: teasing Wiglaf. She had been part of a confidence team under Fenzig's secret instruction, which last year had imparted Wiglaf's first lesson: magical power was the result of study and labor, not a jackpot won instantly. He had fallen for it like a stone and made a fool of himself in front of crowds of people, and Sasha meant to make sure the lesson was well learned. Wiglaf flattered himself that Sasha thought him cute, for her stream of torment was never meanspirited, even though she pursued it with relish. Yet, despite her taunts, somehow Sasha's delightful smile always wound up producing its twin on Wiglaf's own face.

"So, magic man, what great feats have you learned lately? Plague of bunions? Oatmeal levitation? Speak with lint?"

"I've been working night and day to prove that the wand is mightier than the sword. You can ask Fenzig."

"I don't have to," Sasha replied. "The look on his face tells me everything."

"That expression hasn't changed since the day I got here. He wouldn't know a joke if it lifted up his robe."

"He deals with a joke all day long. And now *I've* got the duty."

"Laugh all you want, milady muscles. One of these days, you'll be getting free ale when you tell people you knew the great mage Wiglaf Evertongue."

"Hey, I do already."

Wiglaf brightened.

"I can make a tavern crowd spit ale out of their noses by telling about you."

"Very funny, Sasha. But I'll get there one day. I'll get there."

"That day is today, magic man. You got there. Look." She pointed toward a curling wisp of chimney smoke wafting inland on the gentle sea breeze. "Calimport. It's showtime."

As they walked into the main square in the late afternoon light, Wiglaf noticed how little had changed in the year since he left. Natives of Calimport tended to be simple, good people who believed in an honest day's work: the smiths, cobblers, farmers, and other crafts-people who provided the common sundries and services that so many took for granted. Chief among those who took things for granted was the ruling pasha of the lands of Calimshan, a rotund, sedentary fop who was that rare creation, the ultimate consumer. The pasha never ventured outside his sequestered palace, rather doing his will through hundreds of tiresome bureaucrats and servants. The city-states of his kingdom were constantly squabbling with each other, but out of sight is out of mind, and the great man was always in residence, alternating between legendary periods of sloth and debauchery.

So, as in many seaport communities, of the total population on any given day, true working-class natives were relatively few. The bulk of the inhabitants of Calimport, and the lifeblood of the town's commerce, were sailors, both merchant and navy. Most were outside mercenaries flying the flag of Calimshan for money, many setting foot on dry land for the first time in months—and a bitter few annoyed

because fortune had tied them to what they considered a pathetic backwater when they could be enjoying the many temptations of the bustling city of Waterdeep, far to the north on the Sword Coast.

This is not to say that citizens of Calimport were ignorant, naive, or without pride. The kingdom of Calimshan long predated Waterdeep, and locals tolerated the sailors' pining with rolled eyes and secret winks. As the children's rhyme went, "Calimshan was Calimshan when 'deepie was a pup, and Calimshan will be Calimshan when 'deepie's time is up." Though fully gregarious with each other, when it came to strangers, the natives preferred listening to talking. The seafaring transients, along with a constant influx of route merchants who pitched their commercial tents in a very popular common area outside the city, brought frequent news from Waterdeep, Shadowdale, and the rest of the Western Realms. And though Calimporters might not boast the cosmopolitan sophistication of the "so-called City of Splendors," and though they were overwhelmingly human, the sight of elves, gnomes, halflings, even the occasional half-ore swab, was so common in town as to go unnoticed.

In truth, Calimport itself was far more exotic than its visitors. Fashion and architecture were a mishmash of traditional Heartlands work and the splendor of the southern lands of djinn and efreet. Topknots and pointed cupolas were as unremarkable here as jerkins and brick chimneys.

As he neared his old neighborhood, Wiglaf smelled fresh leather and roasting curried meat, heard steel clanking on a busy forge and a saw nosing its way through new lumber. Shouted sea chanteys already blared from the Sheets to the Wind tavern and inn as evening beckoned, and horses whinnied and snorted in the stables.

This, not the pasha's palace, had been Wiglaf's world. When he had lived here, such mundane sensations had itched and gnawed at him like mites he could never reach. But now he almost felt like weeping. It was wonderful to be home.

The local businesses were beginning to close, in one last flurry of heated negotiation as clever customers preyed on the proprietors' weary desire to be done with the day. The streets were gradually emptying, just a few people leaving with their prizes: a saddle, a lamp, an axe, a chair, a spray of blossoms, a large jug of water. The short, middle-aged woman holding the jug took one look at Wiglaf and instantly dropped it to the ground, her face contorted in shock.

"WIGLAF!"

She ran across the street, headed for Wiglaf at full speed. Sasha instantly drew her broadsword and crouched in attack position, inhaling and exhaling sharply through clenched teeth.

"It's okay, Sasha!" Wiglaf barked. "It's my mother!"

Never losing stride, the woman launched into Wiglaf's arms, nearly knocking him down. She smothered him with kisses as a chastened Sasha stepped back and replaced her sword, looking around to see if anyone else had noticed.

"Wiglaf Wiglaf Wiglaf Wiglaf Wiglaf," the woman cried between kisses.

"Hi, Mother," he replied in embarrassment after he finally extricated himself from her embrace and noticed Sasha stifling a giggle.

"It's really you! Oh, my goodness! Why didn't you tell us you were coming home, dear?"

"Because I just decided to come. We'd have been here before you got word."

"Oh, of course you would. Oh, my goodness!" A cloud passed over her face for an instant. "This is a *visit*, isn't it, son? You didn't... fail in your studies?"

"No indeed, ma'am," interjected Sasha. "He's one of the finest students Master Fenzig has ever instructed."

They both turned toward Sasha—Wiglaf flabbergasted, his mother beaming with pride.

"Oh, and this must be your lady friend we've heard so much about."

"Sasha, may I present Ariel Evertongue, my mother," said Wiglaf, still quite confused. "Finest students? Lady friend? *Heard about?*"

"I'm delighted," Sasha purred with a smile and a gracious bow.

"Wiglaf, your father will be so happy to see you. I'm going to run to the—"

"Mother, I'd rather surprise him, all right? Please."

"Well... all right. I'll just... go home and... put something on for dinner. Get the guest room ready, and ..." Ariel tweaked his cheek, "*your* old room."

Wiglaf's face flushed, to Sasha's unending amusement. "Thanks, Mom. We'll be along."

"I'm so pleased to finally meet you," Ariel said to Sasha as she backed away, looked at Wiglaf again, burst into tears of joy, and ran off sobbing, "Oh, my goodness!"

"Moms," said the warrior. "What are you gonna do?"

He turned to her, frowning. "Sasha, what was that all about?" But before she could answer—

"WIGGY!!!"

"Oh, no," muttered Wiglaf.

A burly, black-bearded man stormed happily out of Sheets to the Wind and toward the pair, holding a tankard in one mammoth hand. He stood easily as tall as Sasha—no, as he approached, even taller, and Sasha's hand instinctively tightened on her sword. More than that—he was *huge*: the kind of big-boned girth that is produced by heredity but maintained by heavy manual labor. Wiglaf had never seen a giant, but this was the closest he had ever come—and this particular giant was having a party.

"I thought I heard a familiar name," the brute boomed in a resonant basso. His sweat-stained clothing held the filthy remnants of the day's toil, and his full beard the dregs of the late afternoon's libation. He almost reached Wiglaf, then stopped short as his eye fixed on Sasha, like an archer's on a prize deer.

"Well, well, what have we here?" he leered.

"Sasha," Wiglaf gestured with his hand, "meet Angrod Swordthumper. We were neighbors here. His father's a blacksmith... and I suppose you stayed in the family business?"

"Aye, little Wiggy, and swords aren't the only thing we like to thump," he grinned, looking Sasha up and down.

She stayed her ground and glared at the behemoth. "One step closer, my extra-large friend, and I'll twist that thump up your—"

"Sasha!" barked Wiglaf.

"No matter, wee Wiggy," said Angrod, planting his palm on Wiglaf's bony shoulder. "Come on in to the Sheets, and let's catch up on old times!" He gestured with his mug hand toward the tavern, tossing a dollop of ale in its direction. "You, too, missy ... if you're man enough."

Caught in the huge man's grip, all Wiglaf could do was silently mouth *help me* at Sasha, who shrugged and followed the buddies inside.

Sheets to the Wind was the kind of place where everybody knew each other's name. The wooden tables and benches, the knife-marked serving counter, the warm brick hearth, all looked like they'd been there for centuries—as did, if truth be told, more than a few of the customers. Behind the bar was Garadel: proprietress, den mother, teetotaler, and vocal journalist to the neighborhood for ages. And when she saw Wiglaf, the gray-haired but still sprightly woman knew a fabulous piece of news had just walked in the door. Wiglaf's sudden presence was so stunning to everyone in the Sheets that even the equally stunning Sasha barely registered in their minds.

"Look what the ore's drug in, Garadel!" shouted Angrod, and the place went quiet as a prayer.

"Why, Wiglaf Evertongue," the hostess exclaimed. "I thought you were long gone, with your face buried in a spellbook!"

"Just came back to visit, Carrie," he said.

"And to check on your old mates!" said Angrod. "Tell me, Wiggy, are the stories we heard about ye true? Pourin' vegetables into the air while your sweet friend there stood and watched?"

Wiglaf turned toward Sasha and flushed. Not a trace of a smile touched her face.

"News travels fast around here, my Wiggy," said Angrod. "We heard all about your big magic show over in Schamedar."

"Shush," hissed Garadel.

"He made himself blind and deaf!" someone said.

"And sent a cow up a tree!" said another.

Wiglaf heaved a giant sigh. It was all true. All his attempts at magic had gone wrong that day; it had been his most mortifying experience. But to know that his embarrassment had reached even the people he'd grown up among was almost more than he could bear.

"Aw, me Wiggy, we're all real glad ye finally came to your senses and made it back home. Besides... we need some magic *veggies* for dinner!" Peals of derisive laughter filled the Sheets, and tankards clanked on tables.

"*First* of all," Wiglaf roared for silence, "My name is not Wiggy. You know I hate that, Angrod. You know my name perfectly well, all of you: now use it. *Second*, sure I've made some mistakes, but I've also been studying this past year, and I have definitely picked up an amazing trick or two." Sasha clenched his arm in warning. "And I'm not through learning, and I'm gonna get even better."

"*Third*," the big man topped him, "*and fourth*, and *fifth*, and *sixth*, *Wig-LAF*"—he shouted the last syllable to make it mean something by itself—"you are living in a make-believe world. You're *pretending*. You're really one of *us*, lad. You're a worker bee. A grunt. A swab. A mole. Magic-makin's not for the likes of us. It's for fancy-pantses and mama's boys who've never worked up a sweat in their lives."

"You have no idea."

"No, *you've* none, laddie. You're gonna get it in the face again and again, just like you did that day in Schamedar. You keep trying to pull yourself out of the river the Fates gave ya, you'll keep falling back, and one day you'll lose your grip and drown. You're no big bad magic-user, son. All you are is what your father is, and his father before him, and his father before that. Get used to it, Wiglaf. You're nothing but a *baker*."

"*Enough!*" came a voice from behind them. A tall, slim, distinguished-looking man in a white apron stood in the tavern doorway, the apron's color also speckling his face, the front of his tunic and the tips of his fingers. "Wiglaf, your mother's got dinner on."

"Right away, Father," said Wiglaf.

He glared back at the crowd before heading for the door. As Sasha passed Angrod, the hilt of her sword dumped his drink into his lap, but she didn't apologize for any accident, and she was smiling as she walked away.

"I wanted to surprise you," said Wiglaf as Thorin Evertongue walked them home.

"Your mother couldn't keep a secret if it was locked in the pasha's playroom," Thorin said. "You should know that by now." He paused in the street. "Barroom talk is cheap, Son. Welcome home. We're very proud of you."

"We're very proud of you, dear," agreed Ariel exactly twenty minutes later, over a mouth-watering dinner that Wiglaf and Sasha were attacking greedily.

Wiglaf's mother had laid on an assortment of spiced meats—the specialty of the region—lovely steamed vegetables, and best of all, hot fresh bread and cakes from her husband's bakery, one of the oldest continuing establishments in Calimport. After days of bland road rations, the visitors showed their appreciation with their appetites. Wiglaf was glad to see Sasha enjoying herself: she was on her best behavior, and his parents seemed to like her company. It's true, he thought. There's no place like home.

"And I hope you feel that way about us, son," said Thorin. "Those layabouts in the Sheets can talk all they want, but no man ever need apologize for a day of honest labor. And I've never seen any of them turn down the fruits of my ovens, have you?" Wiglaf smirked shyly as his father placed a hand on his shoulder. "You chose another path, and we're happy for you. Face it," the tall man grinned, "you weren't exactly my best apprentice anyway, were you?"

"His mind was somewhere else, dear," offered Ariel cheerfully.

Thorin winked at Sasha. "Well, let's give thanks that today, his mind is here with the rest of him. At home."

Wiglaf raised his tankard of sweet cider, and the rest of the table joined him. "Home," he said with a clink.

The next morning, bellies full and tired bodies rested, Wiglaf took Sasha off to show her the sights, and he headed first for his favorite spot: the seashore.

Wiglaf had spent hours upon hours here as a boy, dreaming of lands even stranger than the Empires of the Sands, of people even more worldly than the sailors whose tales he had doted upon, of heroes and quests unknown and uncountable. The vastness of the panorama made many people feel insignificant, but Wiglaf saw the stunning vista as a window into a wider world, beckoning with opportunity and potential. Here he felt greater, not smaller.

The shoreline was pocked with blowholes, caves, and grottoes carved by the relentless pounding of the Shining Sea, and Wiglaf and Sasha retreated from the warm sun and salt air into one of these hidden refuges. Once inside the grotto, they stopped short at the sight before them.

A gentle three-foot falls fed a still pool of crystalline water, perhaps thirty feet in diameter, surrounded by a navigable ledge. As their eyes grew accustomed to the dim light, they carefully stepped farther around the perimeter to a spot where the water level nearly reached the ledge. Wiglaf walked like a balancing artist, arms outspread, feet in single file, as Sasha dipped her hand into the luxurious pool.

"Now this is my kind of magic," she sighed. "It's warm!" She unclasped her sword and slipped into the water. A few powerful strokes took her to the center of the pool. "Ahh, perfect! Come on in, magic man."

As Wiglaf looked up to watch Sasha swim—for who could resist that sight?—his foot caught on an outcrop and he tripped into the pool, executing a perfect belly flop that reverberated through the cavern. Splashing and sputtering, he flailed for a moment, but then Sasha was there, and Wiglaf was in her arms, something he might well have enjoyed under other circumstances, but his pride was at stake—in fact, just now it was *burning* at the stake.

"Perfect form, o magic one," she snorted as she dragged him through the water to the ledge.

After he finally found a handhold, he blustered, "I'm, uh, a little rusty in the water. It's hard to navigate in this robe. I landed wrong."

Sasha was incredulous. "Wait, wait. You grew up in Calimport, on the ocean, and you *can't swim*?"

He took a breath to answer, then let it out. His belly was aching from the impact, but the terror was gone, and the water was soft and soothing, so near his body temperature that Wiglaf felt like he was floating in air. The ripples from his splat were subsiding and forming a beautiful shimmering glow just below the water line.

What?

"Sasha, there's something down here!" Wiglaf shouted. There, in the rock at knee level, something definitely glistened in the dark pool. He anchored himself to the ledge and reached underwater with one hand to pry it out, and with some effort slid it free.

It was a bottle, the kind you might use to cast a message into the sea; Wiglaf was barely able to hold it with one hand. He couldn't see clearly through its translucent surface, but something inside continued to twinkle softly. It looked as if the bottle was reflecting bright sunlight as he turned it in his hand. He looked up to find the light source, but no sun shone inside the grotto. He placed it carefully on the ledge and clambered up beside it as Sasha easily pushed out of the pool.

Dripping wet, he held the bottle up before him and reached toward the stopper, but where a cork might normally have been, there was nothing but smooth, sealed glass. In surprise, he jerked his arm back, brushing the bottle out of his other hand. It seemed to hang in midair for an instant, then fell to the rocky ledge and smashed to pieces.

"No!" he screamed. But his distress evaporated when he saw the glowing packet among the shards. Gingerly, he retrieved it and shook off the remaining glass.

It was squared, just larger than a double handful, and solidly packed. A smooth, opaque, milky white material stretched tightly over its contents. Wiglaf noticed that though the back of his hand was still dripping, the packet itself was as dry as a stone in the desert, its surface instantly consuming the moisture off the tips of his fingers as he rubbed. As an experiment, he dipped the tip of the packet into the water and fingered it again. Bone dry, and it left a tiny residue of fine white powder as it again consumed the moisture from his fingertips.

There was clearly something inside, something square-edged and yielding, and another item that was harder and cylindrical. But the strong, thirsty stuff that encased its treasure was completely smooth; Wiglaf tugged and pried, but he couldn't find a seam or clasp to work with.

"No use. It's shut tight." He sighed and tossed up his hands in dismay—to discover his palms and the bottoms of his fingers covered in white powder. Curiously, he rolled it with his fingertips and was fascinated to find that it joined together in little clumps. He brought a bit to his tongue and tasted before Sasha could reach to stop him.

Wiglaf's face brightened. "Flour! It's flour!"

"And it's covered," she said.

Wiglaf looked back at the packet. Its protective outer shell was sloughing off in great clumps now, deconstituting as they watched. Wiglaf made to pick it up, and his hand came back full of flour. He brushed it away, and revealed his new discovery.

Nestled inside the pile of flour was a cream-colored soft lump, a finger-length square, that appeared to have been broken in two, judging from its one jagged edge. There was a small jar full of cloudy, viscous liquid with bits of matter suspended in it. Under both items, Wiglaf found a double-folded piece of parchment covered with strange vertical scribbles: semicircular forms, bisecting lines, strategically placed dots. The dry sheet crackled as Wiglaf unfolded it.

"Can you read it?" Sasha asked.

"Thorass."

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's written in Thorass. Auld Common tongue." Wiglaf bent in concentration. "Nobody uses it anymore. There's no telling how old this is, Sasha. Centuries, maybe."

"I'll bet Fenzig can read it."

Wiglaf frowned. "For your information, he's teaching me how, too."

"Fine. Give us the translation, your mageness."

"Well... I just started, and it's a dead language anyway, so I didn't really..."

"... and you have this problem with studying. Great. Just when we could actually use a little book learning."

"Hold on, hold on. I've got some of it. Time'... no, Year... none-food.' "

"Ah. Crystal clear."

"Please, Sasha. 'Make... meal'... no, 'bread ... of ... wonder. Make year... many-food.' "

Wiglaf's mouth fell open. He turned slowly to the other items.

"Sasha, do you realize what happened? Do you realize what we have here?"

"No, me many not-realize."

"There must have been a Year of Famine, long ago, who knows? And then a very powerful magic-user— maybe a whole bunch of them—made this." He held up the lump and turned it in his hand. "So stupid, it's right there in front of me. Dough. This is starter dough! It makes the bread of wonder!" He grabbed the jar. "And this has to be magical sourdough starter—to make even more dough!"

"I'm hungry already."

"No, don't you see? This stuff turned the Year of Starving into a Year of Plenty. It might even have saved our whole civilization. And they must have hidden it here in case a famine came back."

"You think it's still any good?"

"No reason why not. In Luiren, they discovered a sealed flask of ale from ancient times that turned out to be just fine. And so was the recipe they found along with it. Inns are serving Oldest Ancient Stout there today. And this could be even bigger!"

He stood, amazed, and threw out his arms. "Sasha, this is the greatest discovery Calimshan has ever seen!" He started to tip back into the water, but Sasha was there.

"Hey, no more diving today, okay, Wiglaf? Let's just take your wonder bread back to town."

* * * * *

The Ovens of Evertongue employed three full-time bakers; two apprentices who evaluated, procured, cataloged, stored, and measured the constant flow of foodstuffs; and, lowest in the pecking order, an ovenboy whose never-ending job was to keep the floors and counters as tidy as business would allow, and the used implements recycling back into the process all clean and shiny. Wiglaf himself had served a few terms as ovenboy, a miserable duty that nevertheless befell anyone who wished to rise in the hierarchy. Even the shop's cat, Piewacket, considered herself in a supervisory position.

Thorin and the entire staff had been at work well before sunrise on the morning pastry detail, and had shifted toward loaves for evening meals when Wiglaf and Sasha burst in from their journey. The bakers were happy enough to see their old colleague, but they were terribly busy. Wiglaf had to dodge scurrying people as he rapidly recounted the day's events—omitting, Sasha noted, only his unorthodox entry into the grotto pool. At the ultimate moment, he pulled the treasure from his pocket and held it aloft like an enchanted sword.

When the bakers finally had something tangible to see, all activity stopped. They moved tentatively toward the starter dough and the jar that Wiglaf brandished. Only Piewacket, asleep in a U-shape on the windowsill, was uninterested.

"If that isn't starter, I'm a "deeper," marveled Sam Brownstone, Thorin's veteran baker. Wiglaf handed it to him for inspection. "But it's the damndest one I've ever seen." He gave the lump a gentle squeeze. "It feels fresh, but dry as the desert on the outside. We're to believe this is hundreds of years old, young Ever-tongue?"

"Maybe thousands!" cried Wiglaf.

"So what are you planning to do with it, son?" his father asked.

"Well, if you don't know what to do with it here, maybe I'd better take my business to another establishment," Wiglaf beamed.

"You don't actually believe it's still good after all this time?"

"There's only one way to find out, Father."

Thorin Evertongue paused and pondered. "All right, but after we've finished today's baking. *Today*, gentlemen." The spell was broken, and the staff hurried to its duties again.

Wiglaf leapt up in delight. "Well, what are we waiting for? Give me an apron and I'll help!"

Sasha cleared her throat. She had gone completely unnoticed in the commotion. "I think this is my cue to take a stroll. See you later, Wiglaf."

He gave her a curt wave and made his second dive of the day—into frenzied work at his father's bakery.

It felt good, toiling at his former station. If fresh, hot bread was comfort food, then making it was comfort work. Sometimes those who have gladly left a trade are reminded of their past misery by smells and sounds; Wiglaf knew a former blacksmith who hated the smell of horses and jumped at the biting sound of steel on steel, and he himself had often thought that if he could just get out of this bakery, he'd never enter one again. But he knew that any profession becomes a chore if you have to do it when you don't want to—yes, even the study of magic. And as anyone knows who has passed one by, there are few smells as

tantalizing as those issuing from a bakery; that pleasure is not lost on its employees.

Wiglaf helped with preparation, cleaning, and especially customer service at the counter in the front room, a task at which he excelled. Most of the patrons who stopped in were lifelong acquaintances, surprised to see him back at work, and each one was treated to the story of his latest exploit. The afternoon flew by, and before he knew it, the last loaves—the ones the staff would take home for themselves—were steaming in the bakers' baskets.

With the solemnity of a group of learned healers, the craftsmen prepared to conjure Wiglaf's special loaf. The ovenboy produced a pot of water warmed by the fire. Sam Brownstone poured a bit of it into a large bowl and gave Wiglaf the honor of adding the magical discovery.

"Now, this is just half a loaf," Wiglaf said, "so let's use half measures. We'll test it first." He carefully added a bit of the dough into the water and stirred the mixture with a fork. Everyone in the room was intent on this otherwise mundane task; even Piewacket came up to snake against ankles and compete for attention. Soon the dough had completely dissolved into the water.

Sam dipped a small spoon into the sack holding the bakery's sugar. Everyone knew this was the moment of truth: was it really possible that the yeast in the dough had somehow survived all these years? With a portentous glance at Wiglaf, who swallowed hard, Sam dropped the sugar into the water and began to stir.

The mixture started bubbling.

The bakers let out a cheer.

"It's alive!" said Sam, clapping Wiglaf on the back. "It's good!"

Sam poured water into another bowl, then expertly mixed some honey, salt, and flour. Then, so gradually it was almost painful, he added the dough-water. It dissolved into the flour mixture easily, almost as if it knew its function.

When he was satisfied by the consistency, Sam upended the bowl, and a large cream-colored blob plopped nicely on the table. He rolled it flat, then began to knead it into a loaf; pressing, folding, bunching, turning, with graceful flowing movements that entranced his audience as effectively as any spellcasting.

"Fine dough, young Wiglaf," he said as he massaged the mixture. "I don't know how it will taste, but it works in the hand like a tender young maiden."

"So, too, shall it work for the Grand Exalted One!" came a shrill voice from the doorway.

All heads turned to behold a mousy, balding little man carrying a worn ledger before him like a tome of holy writ. His brilliant red raiment was offset by an ornate, nearly shield-sized golden pendant hanging from his neck, which may have been at least partially responsible for a perpetually stooped posture. Thorin let out a barely audible groan as the visitor stutter-stepped like a dying ghoul through the front counter area, frightening Piewacket into a far corner.

"Wiglaf, I have the honor to present the official countenance of the honorable Has'san Hairsplitter," Thorin said in a barely disguised singsong voice.

"Hars'plittar," the weasel corrected.

"Anyway," Thorin said with a roll of his eyes, "this is the tax collector."

"Underassistant domestic economic redistribution specialist," the little man remonstrated, "for the west-northwest semi-urban trade zone, city of Calimport, kingdom of Calimshan, in service to the Mightiest of Mighties, His Majestic Royal Benevolence."

"We've made our graft payments," said Thorin.

"Ah, but this is a special command visit," said the bureaucrat. "It has come to the attention of His Mammoth Munificence that a discovery has been made on his lands, in his kingdom, of certain items of arcana that may have significant historical... mm, significance."

"Your customers have been talking, Wiglaf," Thorin said with a rueful glance at his son.

"It's nothing but a bloody loaf of bread," said Sam, still absently kneading the dough.

"Nevertheless, under footnote eleven, subsection double-T, paragraph thirty-four, of His Unutterable Awesomeness's five hundred twenty-fifth royal decree, historical artifacts are subject to a special levy."

"This bread is definitely unlevied at the moment," said Thorin, as the bakers stifled chuckles. "Has'san, how are you going to value a pile of dough?"

"His Magnanimous Puissance understands the problem, and has instructed me to receive the tribute in kind. I fall to my knees and weep over his glorious generosity toward you."

"What did he say?" asked Wiglaf.

"His boss wants dough," Thorin sighed.

Hars'plittar slinked to Sam's table and reached for a knife. "The special levy for arcana is satisfied... so." He lopped off two thirds of the dough, draped it in a piece of Thorin's cloth, and hobbled for the door.

"On behalf of the artisans in His Fearsome Omnivorousness's kitchens, and all of Calimshan, we salute your patriotic initiative in this matter and wish you a sincere and pleasant good evening."

The foul residue of his visit lingered for many moments after he was out of the door.

"Can he do that? How can he do that?" pleaded Wiglaf.

"It could be worse, laddie," Sam said as he rolled the fractional piece again and kneaded it into shape. "At least he left us with something. And that jar over there never made it up the chain of command. The bean counters forgot all about it. Better take it away before that ferret decides to come back."

"I'd love to pour this over his head," Wiglaf said as he stashed the jar in a pocket of his robe.

"Never mind that," Thorin said. "Let's get ready to close up. We'll have to leave it out overnight to let it rise." Sam placed the pitiful little measure into a greased wooden bowl—the smallest one on the premises—then covered it with a cloth and nestled it near the warmth of the great ovens. "Coming home later for dinner, Son?"

"In a while, Dad. I'm going to find Sasha and stop in at the Sheets. I want to see their faces when they hear that Calimport's biggest news comes from the bakery."

* * * * *

Finding Sasha and stopping in at the Sheets turned out to be one and the same task. After an hour or so of fruitless search, Wiglaf finally peeked into the tavern to find the late-afternoon trade in full flower, and Sasha at the bar in rapt conversation with Garadel, sipping some of the innkeep's best spiced wine and surrounded by five or six regulars. She noticed him at the doorway and waved him inside.

"It didn't take you very long to make friends," Wiglaf smiled.

"Well, some folk are friendlier than others," she said, pointing to Angrod and his mates, each nursing a tankard of ale at a far table in the crowded tavern. "That one there, he's *very* friendly."

"He told her he'd like to wrestle with her!" said a gap-toothed customer. "He'd show her a few moves!" from another, and the group burst into cackling glee.

Wiglaf blanched. "Why—" He started toward Angrod, but Sasha held him back.

"No, no. I said it sounded like fun."

"So Sasha suggested they arm wrestle," said Garadel, not looking up as she swabbed the top of the bar with a cloth. A restrained giggle suddenly left her mouth as a spit sound.

"You *beat* him?" Wiglaf was incredulous.

"That hulk? Oh no, he won, all right. But trust me, he paid for it."

"It took two out of three falls!" crowed a patron, and others joined in.

"His face turned red as an apple!"

"He screamed like a banshee!"

"I thought he'd burst his bullocks!"

"Notice he's drinking with his left hand." Sasha nodded toward Angrod as he set down his ale to massage his right wrist. "I think Mister Swordthumper's had enough wrestling for today."

* * * * *

Over dinner that night, Thorin Evertongue laughed loud and long at Sasha's story, while Ariel smiled shyly at her son's "lady friend." To his slight dismay, there had been no need for Wiglaf to recount his seashore triumph in the Sheets, for during the afternoon the news of his discovery had spread there just as quickly as it had reached the pasha's palace. But he'd received his fabled free tankard of ale from Garadel, and before long he was in the spotlight as he'd hoped: adding plenty of delicious detail for a rapt audience, small bits of it perfectly accurate. Finally the pangs of hunger had called everyone to their evening meals, and Wiglaf and Sasha to their temporary home.

"Young Swordthumper won't stew for long," Thorin said. "He struts and roars like a wild beast, but he'll do no real harm. Your little match today was probably good for him."

"It certainly did me good," Sasha said. "He'll think twice before—"

"*Thorin!*" came a muffled voice from outside. The Evertongues' front door shook with repeated pounding. Thorin ran and opened it on a frantic Garadel.

"Someone's inside the bakery!" she spluttered. "Your cat's howling, crashing noises—we've got to stop them!" Sasha bolted to her feet and slung her broadsword's strap around her neck as Thorin grabbed an axe from the fireplace. Wiglaf fumbled through his pockets in vain, terrified he'd left the precious spell-book back in Schamedar and that Fenzig would therefore be roasting him on a spit soon after the intruders were

done murdering his father.

"My book!" he shrieked.

"Oh, my goodness," said Ariel, going to the mantel. "Is this what you're looking for?" She held up the most wonderful, most delightful, most beautiful spellbook Wiglaf had ever, ever seen. "I always empty the pockets before I wash clothes, dear."

"Mom ..." He grabbed the book and they were gone.

As they dashed to the bakery, Garadel shouted that some inn guests had complained about the racket outdoors: cats in heat, maybe, from the unearthly hissing and wailing. Then they heard utensils scattering to the floor and a loud crash, the cat only moaning louder. Thieves rarely plied their trade in this working-class section of Calimport, and heaven only knew what valuables they expected to find in a bakery. There was a first time for everything, though, and after all, there were such things as very stupid bandits.

Adrenaline pumping, they reached the bakery in minutes, braced for action. The street was nearly deserted in the soft moonlight and the flickering glow from strategically placed overnight torches on poles. A few boarders from Sheets to the Wind watched in their nightclothes from the doorstep across the way. Sasha crept up to the bakery door and quietly tried it. Locked.

They listened. There was no crashing, no clanging, just one thing alone: the kind of spooky, ululating wail that fathers use when telling ghost stories to their children. They had never heard Piewacket make such noise. She sounded like a wretched alto mutilating her scales; she was beyond upset, spiraling down toward full-blown feline catatonia.

"They've heard us!" Wiglaf stage-whispered.

"Get behind me," hissed Sasha as she drew her sword and took the stance. "Mr. Evertongue, please open the lock." Thorin pushed the key in and twisted, and the door slowly swung open, increasing the volume of Piewacket's eerie howl. Sasha stood in the doorway, tense, alert, as Thorin reached just inside for a morning torch, which he pitched to Wiglaf to light, then drew his axe.

The front counter area was deserted. Wiglaf returned in seconds with the torch aflame, and the three slowly stepped inside, past the front room, toward the baking area.

Piewacket mewled even louder when she saw the torchlight, and the three looked up to find her high on top of the ovens, hair standing straight, spitting in anger. They followed her gaze downward.

Pots and pans, bowls and spoons that they had stacked neatly on the baking surface this afternoon were strewn all over the floor. The wooden bowl that had held Wiglaf's tiny loaf of bread was dumped over on its side, empty.

"My bread! They stole my wonder bread!" Wiglaf whispered.

"And they got out somehow," said Thorin in a full voice. "Come on, Piewacket. It's okay now, girl." But the cat did not move.

Sasha held her hand up. "I see someone's back. There." Wiglaf raised the torch higher, and now they could all make out a curved shape lurking just behind the table. "Come out now," she commanded. "It's no use. You're finished. *Now.*" No response. Cautiously, they approached the crouching figure. As they rounded the table, Piewacket suddenly leapt over their heads, touched the table with one bound, trampolined onto the wood floor, and skittered out the door.

There was nobody there. Nothing.

Except for one thing.

An oblong mound of cream-colored dough the size of the largest dog in Calimport.

From the floor, it barely cleared the level of the baking table, half Wiglaf's height. Lengthwise, it was twice that. It was squeezed tightly in the work space between the table and the hearth at the back of the room.

"My sweet grandma!" Thorin said.

"Wonder bread," Wiglaf said in rapture.

Sasha touched the huge mound with the tip of her sword, and it sank in easily, making a wet *pop* as it cut through an air bubble, which spit some droplets at her. She withdrew the weapon; the blade was covered with doughy goo.

A heavy pot hanging near the oven tipped over with a reverberating clatter. Sasha and Thorin turned to look, but Wiglaf was still admiring the miracle.

"Wiglaf," said Sasha.

"This is how they fed all those people in the Year of Starving," he exulted.

"Wiglaf," said Sasha.

"Good-bye to hunger. Good-bye to famine."

"*Wiglaf!*" shouted Thorin.

Wiglaf turned with a start.

"Son, it's still rising."

The doughy mass had pushed farther toward the ovens. Now it nearly covered the metal arm that had held Thorin's water pot over the fire. They whirled around. The monstrous loaf had increased to a full hand taller than the level of the baking table. When they held still, they could see it rising silently, inexorably, like flood waters up a riverbank.

"Well, let's get it out of here," said Wiglaf, and he sunk his arms into the mound up to his elbows. He pulled out a double handful of the goo. The impressions of his hands vanished in seconds as the dough expanded beyond them, and he could feel the sticky ball he held growing larger, inflating like a sheep's bladder. The pace was accelerating. He dropped his gargantuan biscuit into the broadening mass.

"Next idea?" Sasha raised one eyebrow.

"How long has this stuff been sitting here?" Thorin asked.

"Two, three hours? Why?" cried Wiglaf.

"How long before it *stops* rising?"

They stared with growing dread at the bread-mountain. It was easy to see its progress now. The dough was moving past the fire grate on the back wall at a slow, syrupy rate, pressing through the tines like soft cheese, headed toward the smoldering coals. In the other direction, against the baking table, the pile was nearly as tall as Sasha, patiently oozing over and around the table, pushing its way into every empty space.

"We've got to leave," she said. "While we still can."

They stepped gingerly around the growing goop, backing against oven doors that would soon be covered in dough, inching their way sideways toward the front counter area, thankfully still pristine for now. Like a witness to a carriage accident, Wiglaf had to fight a perverse fascination as he moved; he just couldn't take his eyes off the bizarre sight. Safely past the entrance to the baking area, they watched helplessly as the dough rose upward and outward, seeking the confines of whatever oddly shaped "pan" it was now in. It was taller than any of them now. It pushed toward the ceiling and out to the walls. It had thoroughly covered the fire coals and was rising up into the chimney. For the first time there was a faint smell of baking as the trio backed out the door.

"Self-baking bread! It hardly needs any heat!" Wiglaf sighed in amazement.

There were a few more people in the street now; Garadel had fetched the constabulary, and two night-shift officers were armed and ready to repel thieves. But before Wiglaf and the others could explain, a red, hissing coal fell from somewhere above and landed with a plop at Wiglaf's feet. He recoiled, ran into the street, and frantically mumbled at the flickering overnight torches, praying he'd remembered every syllable of one of the very first spells Fenzig had ever taught him.

Each time they are called upon to make their solemn decisions, the Fates weigh our lifelong understanding against our immediate need. Somehow, at this moment, the divine mathematics were on Wiglaf's side, for without a sound, a brilliant ball of continual light winked into existence, completely surrounding the bakery and turning darkness into daylight within a precisely defined sphere. It was as if the spectators in the street were watching a show whose star happened to be a building. Within the spell's range, the illumination was blinding, and Sasha and Thorin, tumbling out of the bakery and into the street, saw only spots for a brief moment. But for the others looking back, all was clear.

A woman in Garadel's doorstep screamed and pointed back at the bakery roof. Spotlit by Wiglaf's magical radiance, the impossible shape of a huge squared block of breadstuffs slowly pushed its way up out of the chimney, like sausage through a grinder, festooned with hot coals that trickled off the mass and ran down the roof's bricked incline into the street.

Back inside, the main sticky blob had insinuated its way into the front room and was headed for the door, its bulk loudly dragging pans and utensils against the wood floor in a weird imitation of a chain-clanking ghost. Two squared-off doughy arms proceeded out through the windows on either side of the bakery and oozed limply toward the ground, several neighborhood dogs barking and snapping at them. A family of mice scurried out the front door, the largest one shaking something cream-colored off its paws.

"What's all this, then?"

Another group of excited and curious townspeople had been drawn by the magical light, and Wiglaf was dismayed to see Angrod Swordthumper among them, dinner napkin still bibbed in place under his chin.

"Wiggy! So this is yer big recipe?" he bellowed. "I was to be pickin' up tomorrow's breakfast rolls... but it looks like *one* be enough!" The crowd broke its stunned silence with a titter of nervous laughter. Angrod grabbed an overnight torch and sauntered over toward the bakery. He tapped with the torch at the growing claylike fountain oozing from the window. "I'll have this one!" Relieved of its tension, the crowd

laughed louder.

"Get away, man!" Sasha warned.

"I can handle Wiggy's breakfast, missy," Angrod sneered.

But suddenly, as he poked at the dough, his torch went *inside* it, through the membrane of a mammoth air pocket. The torn bubble popped and splattered him with dough, and the crowd went wild. Livid and embarrassed, Angrod began to club at his gooey tormentor with the torch, but each time he struck the lump, more air popped out, more dough spat on him, and he only became a bigger mess.

Wiglaf heard other popping sounds; he turned to see air pockets in the dough bursting and splattering in all directions as it squeezed out of the tight confines of the bakery, covering the yipping dogs and anyone else who happened to be too close. Then the horrible sight vanished—for it was at that precise instant that Wiglaf's spell exhausted itself and the magical illumination winked back to normal. There was only popping, splat-ting, clanging, barking, and screaming while everyone's eyes adjusted to torchlight.

"Get the light back!" yelled Sasha.

"It's supposed to be permanent! I don't know what went wrong!" Wiglaf cried, desperately thinking of a substitute. He wildly gesticulated, chanted from memory, reached an emphatic finish, and extended his arms in a flourish. The torches and hot coals, every fire in the street, burst into superluminance; their light was as bright as the noonday sun, and revealed a panicked group of people who looked like the losers in a pie fight—including his own father. Wiglaf felt the magical flame's warmth and perversely wanted to bask in it, but then came a shout from Angrod.

"I can't move me legs!" the big smith bellowed. In the dark, Angrod had stumbled farther into the mountain of gook, and now he was trapped waist-deep in it, flailing with his torch, surrounded by dough. The crowd stared in gooey stupefaction.

"Hold on," screamed Sasha, and ran to Angrod, careful to stay out of the stuff herself. She grabbed both hands and yanked with all her strength.

"*Oooooow!*" Angrod screamed. "Me mitt! Leave us be!" He left her grip and massaged his right arm and shoulder, still smarting from arm wrestling. The mass was rising yet, well past his hips, headed toward his chest and head.

"No! If that stuff gets to your face, you'll smother!" Sasha shouted.

Wiglaf was suddenly there, reaching under Angrod's left shoulder to help. They pulled as hard as they could, but Angrod was stuck tight, and getting trapped deeper by the second. The already gargantuan lump was growing so steadily that it looked instead as if Angrod was receding into it. The dough had risen past his belly button and was still moving.

"Too late, Wiggy," Angrod sobbed. "Save yerself."

"Thanks, you big goon, but there's one last chance," Wiglaf said. "Only I've never tried this on a person before. Okay with you?"

"Try it, laddie," Angrod said grimly.

Wiglaf produced a piece of pork rind from his robe and chanted softly but quickly. "One more time, Sasha."

They anchored their arms under Angrod's shoulders and pulled, causing lances of pain to shoot up the big man's right arm. There was a little resistance at first. Then he started to move out of the goop, and once they established some momentum, Angrod slid out of the dough like a sword from its sheath, with a long wet sucking sound. The expanding dough wrapped itself around Wiglaf's right foot, but he kicked it free.

"Ye did it, lad!" he cried. "Ye saved me!"

"Wiglaf, how?" Sasha asked in astonishment.

Angrod pushed to his knees and tried to stand, but his feet slipped out from under him and he fell flat. He got to all fours and failed at a few sliding strides before sitting down with a plop.

"I greased you," said Wiglaf.

Sasha guffawed as Angrod slipped before even rising to his knees.

"Don't worry. It won't last much longer."

"Wigg-" Angrod started, then thought better. "Excuse me, Wiglaf. I don't care how ye done it, laddie. I'd have been a goner but for you. Maybe you do have magic inside ye, after all." He extended his hand, and Wiglaf and Sasha helped the big man to his feet. "Thanks be to ye, lad. I—what's that smell?"

Wiglaf sniffed. It smelled like baking bread, everywhere. The remnants of dough on Angrod's legs were definitely hardening; they could pull it off in little strips. But there was another scent in the air too.

Smoke.

The torches!

It seemed as if the rate of growth of the dough pouring out of the bakery might have finally slowed.

But now the large mass was pushing up and out, against the nearest supercharged overnight torches. The onlookers could all see a faint brownish cast on the surface of the dough mound—and at the very edges, unmistakable traces of carbon. Smoke began to waft upward and overpower the lovely self-baking smell. In the nearby stables, horses whinnied and kicked in terror. Wiglaf groaned. The largest loaf of bread in history, and now it was *burning*.

"You've got to turn them off!" Thorin shouted.

Wiglaf gave it some panicked thought. He mumbled and gestured toward the torches with a sweep of his hand. At the end of his movement, a fine streak flew from his pointing finger into the night sky a few yards above the bakery, and with a low roar, a fireball detonated.

"NO!" screamed Sasha.

The wave of heat was almost solid as it raced downward toward the near-bakery-sized lump of dough, crisping the outer surface. The bricks on the roof drank in the heat and began baking the dough's underside. The blackened burning areas spread, and huge billows of smoke cascaded into the street and caused spasms of hacking in the onlookers' throats. Wiglaf was drenched in sweat. The dough had apparently stopped rising. Wonderful. Now everyone would simply die of suffocation.

Then, a miracle happened.

The columns of smoke changed course and blew over the heads of the coughing crowd. The breeze pushed a pair of low-lying clouds together in front of the bright moon, and they darkened in seconds into impressive thunderheads. A fat, heavy drop of water splatted on Wiglaf's head, and was joined by thousands more just instants later. The magnificent cloudburst sizzled out the torches and coals and drenched the suddenly jubilant people in the street. The sticky dough was wiping off easily in the cleansing rainstorm, and the goopy mass that moments ago had threatened Angrod's life was quickly turning into the world's biggest dumpling.

A gaunt, berobed figure in the middle of the street dropped his arms and ran his hands through a head of wet, snow-white hair before replacing his cowl.

Not a miracle at all. This storm had been manmade.

"Fenzig! Whe-, wha-, hoo-" sputtered Wiglaf when he reached his master's side.

"Spare me the hyperventilation," the mage sniffed in a voice too low for others to hear. "You actually thought I would let you out of my sight for an entire week? Though I must admit, I did underestimate you." He frowned at the street scene. "I didn't think such a level of disaster could possibly be created in a single day."

"I didn't mean—"

"Silence. I know what you meant. I've been watching you the entire time. You know just enough to be dangerous, lad, and precious little else. If you had applied yourself during our language classes, you would have been able to read the entire inscription on the parchment. That, youngling, was your undoing."

"But the Year of Plenty—"

"Achieved with your magic dough, yes, but the rest of that piece fed multitudes!"

"The other half?"

"It is written perfectly plainly in Thorass," Fenzig hissed. "*One sprinkled pinch* is sufficient to make the oversized loaves that ended that famine of antiquity. I could throttle you for causing this mess. And you're going to make amends. But now I have to put on the public face."

Against all reason, Fenzig put his arms around Wiglaf and walked him back toward the crowd, speaking at stage volume. "Thank you, Wiglaf, for extinguishing the fires," he intoned, "and what a grand gesture, giving the jar you found to your father in payment for his inconvenience."

"Fenzig, have you gone mad?" Wiglaf spoke out of the side of his mouth.

"No, son," his master spoke softly, "but I never cause my students ridicule in public. Bad for the professional image. Don't worry, you'll be doing plenty of penance when we get back home."

And so, while Fenzig and Sasha passed the time with Wiglaf's parents, Wiglaf himself spent the rest of his Calimport vacation on janitorial duty. He emptied the bakery with rakes and shovels, and on hands and knees scrubbed it clean again from top to bottom—a job made even more difficult after just about every bird in Calimshan discovered the mammoth feast; a few judicious grease spells when nobody was looking helped the process immensely.

The bakers enjoyed a temporary holiday while Wiglaf cleaned up, and spent the days lounging in the sun and at the seashore.

"I'm sorry, Father," Wiglaf said on the third day, when Thorin brought him a lunch basket from home. "I'm sorry you had to close down."

"Don't worry, son," the baker said, looking around. "This place has never looked so clean before. And

Fenzig has shown me exactly how to use that jar of starter, so I should make up for the lost business in no time. In fact, this could turn out to be my most profitable season ever. And I owe that to you, son."

Wiglaf hugged his father for a long time. Things were right again. Things were normal again in Calimport.

Except.

Those who were close enough to hear said the screams from the pasha's palace continued for many days thereafter.

Interlude

Wes began looking for something more to read. He had learned so much in this room, more than most of the monks knew, he was willing to wager. As his gaze traversed the room, his attention was caught by a thin, leather-bound tome, wedged behind a bookshelf. He hadn't noticed it before, but it seemed to be calling to him, begging him to pick it up and read.

His curiosity aroused, Wes carefully extracted the book from its unusual place and took it to the table. The book began with a history of when and why the library was built, and why here at Candlekeep.

The library was housed in a large stone edifice near the edge of the cliffs overlooking the Sea of Swords. The cliff-top position made the library easy to defend in its early days, when any kind of building was assumed to be a fortification. Indeed, parts of the library gave the appearance of a noble's castle.

Baldur's Gate lay a little over one hundred miles to the north, and there wasn't much of anything else close by. This was how the monks who ran the library preferred it. Study, meditation, and the copying of written works were not pursuits that leant themselves to the hustle and bustle of a busy city.

After a few pages of this dry history, Wes put the strange, slim tome aside and searched for another book. He discovered a tale from long before Candlekeep. In the ancient days of Netheril, there were floating cities, propelled by enormous magics, and defended by mages riding griffons....

Now, this looked interesting.

When Even Sky Cities Fall

J. Robert King

Peregrin rose beside the thunderhead. The sun glinted from his eagle eyes and shone warmly in his flashing feathers. His leonine body cast a darting shadow up the wall of cloud before him. With each surge of his wings, the griffon climbed, prying loose the covetous fingers of Faerun.

His rider hunched, light and expert, in the saddle.

Josiah was a mage, as were all the green-robed griffon riders of Tith Tilendrothael. Only a mage could be mind-bonded to a griffon. Josiah had been mind-bonded to Peregrin for eleven of the man's twenty-five years. He rode with the balance and grace of experience. His long black hair lashed in the wind.

Just a little higher, Peregrin.

Through Josiah's eyes, the mind-bonded griffon saw the rest of the cavalry—four hundred bird-lions and their riders—topping the gray-black wall of cloud above.

Peregrin responded with a lunging rush of wings and fresh speed. He watched as the hind claws of the last ranks disappeared over the cloud ridge. In three more wing beats, Peregrin followed, vaulting the coiling squall line of the storm.

A broad skyscape opened before him. The top of the thunderhead dipped slowly away into a great black sea that stretched to the horizon. Against that toiling expanse, the other griffons glinted in formation like ships in a golden regatta. The creatures looked tiny and fragile upon the angry cloud.

For Tith Tilendrothael, pledged Josiah.

His black hair whipped around him as he took one final look back at the floating city whence they had come. Tith Tilendrothael was barely visible through a dark valley, its ivory towers and golden streets glittering in sunshine.

Peregrin meanwhile focused his attention ahead. *What are we looking for, he asked, this?* He sent an image of lightning leaping jaggedly across a misty cauldron below. *Or this?* His vision shifted to where the vaporous sea curved into a black vortex. *Or—this?*

For a moment, they both fell silent, watching a ragged flock of crows straggle en masse just above the

cloud top. The birds flew with the weary, hovering motion of sea gulls following a fishing boat.

That's it, Josiah agreed. Crows don't fly this high. They must be tailing the enclave, looking for scraps. The city should be hidden just below them, about there. He focused his eyes on the snaking darkness beneath the birds.

Peregrin snorted a white ghost of breath. *Who would steer a floating city into a thunderstorm?*

The Lhaodagms would, apparently, replied his rider. *It's the only way to approach our enclave without being spotted. They probably thought to drop out of the clouds and bash Tith Tilendrothael to pieces.*

Never in the three hundred years of animosity between the two floating cities had they approached this close—within five miles. Only griffons and other aerial units had ever engaged each other. As with any other Netherese enclave, Lhaoda and Tith Tilendrothael kept their citizens safely out of battle. Though fully fitted with rams and spikes and grappling equipment, enclaves preferred to float serenely above their conflicts—safe and aloof.

Lhaoda's advance upon Tith Tilendrothael was tantamount to a declaration of war.

Peregrin banked into a steep dive. He headed for the misty spot directly in front of the struggling crows. The cloud there boiled darkly, mounded currents above something solid and vast.

Peregrin shrieked once.

The sound sliced through the rarefied air and reached the other griffons. They turned in their flights and saw the screaming golden comet of Peregrin, diving toward the turgid chaos of the cloud.

Peregrin's wings were folded tightly to his sides. He dropped from the heavens. Josiah perched close atop him, eyes low and keen.

In one wet, roaring moment, griffon and rider plunged through the fleecy head of the storm and into the loud blackness beneath.

They flew through ink. The darkness was complete. Water saturated Peregrin's feathers. He spread wide his wings—sluggish and heavy. Rain sheeted away behind him. Wing tips trailed spirals of sleet.

A diffuse flash of lightning came below, showing Peregrin his own coverts against a momentary gray. Then, only blackness. The boom of thunder did not lag long before it shook the heavens. The very storm shivered.

I see it, Peregrin thought. He sent Josiah the image of faint yellow lights moving evenly through the blackness below. Yellow glow, not blue. Fire—perhaps magical fire, but still fire—not lightning.

Take us there, Josiah responded.

Peregrin dropped easily back into his steep dive. His pelt ruffled. Claws curled toward pads.

The others were beside them now: Fletching, Evensong, Glazreth, and the rest of the cavalry. They had seen the fires below, too. Lhaoda hung there, in the turbulent throat of the storm.

It was a bold strategy, hiding within a thunderstorm to approach an enemy enclave. The flying city of Lhaoda would have to be bold; it was half the size of Tith Tilendrothael, and its griffon troops were little better than rabble. Their mounts were old catflesh. Some of their mages even rode enlarged crows. In a fair fight, the Lhaodagms didn't stand a chance.

By the looks of it, they had no intention of fighting fair.

Still, the harrowing flight path had not paid off. Tith Tilendrothael's scouts had magically sensed the presence of the rock in the cloud and had called forth the cavalry. Long before it reached the enemy enclave, Lhaoda would be besieged by four hundred top aerial cavalry. This would be a full-scale, all-out attack. The city would be strafed until it turned back or surrendered.

For whatever reason, the Lhaodagms had shattered the relative peace of centuries, and they in turn would be shattered.

Stay sharp. They'll have fliers, too. The rain will help us—mask us, keep them from looking up, thought Josiah as he drew a slender wand from his belt. His free hand ran through his hair, and he smiled in anticipation.

Peregrin's eyes scraped the darkness below. In the belly of the cloud, a vast monster of rock and magic slowly took shape. Staving spikes glittered darkly along the edges of the floating city. War rams bristled, thick as thistles. Buildings honeycombed the sloping brow of the flying citadel. Magic threads of blue and orange and green cobwebbed the mountain. Rainwater drizzled from its edges in dim, brown cascades.

She might be half size, thought Peregrin, but she's plenty big, all the same. And fully armored.

When we're done with her, Josiah replied as he weaved sorcerous protections around them, *she'll not be more than a smoldering coal in the sky.* With that, he spoke an arcane word.

The stinging pelt of rain suddenly gave way to the scintillation of wards. Peregrin flexed his wings. A

blue-green glow limned each feather. In the darkness, he seemed no longer a living being, but a sketchbook creature. The other griffons and their riders, one by one, also glowed with azure outlines.

Powerful sorceries crowded through Josiah's mind. Some of the alien words and gestures verged into Peregrin's thoughts. The griffon fought away the distraction. He focused instead on the target below.

As the city of Lhaoda struggled along in the streaming chaos, the storm uncoiled a scorpion tail of lightning. It struck the city's shields, crackled angrily, and broke through long enough to blast apart a twisted tower in the center of the enclave. Other blackened buildings smoldered from previous lightning strikes.

"Ready for raking fire," Josiah shouted aloud.

Peregrin understood. He swooped from his dive. The staving spikes and rams shone dead ahead.

A crackle of green power leapt from each of Josiah's hands, shrieked past Peregrin's ear slits, and whirled toward the city. The twin bolts thickened as they went and trailed coils of sulfuric smoke. They punched through the first invisible shell of protections. A flash brighter than lightning showed the point of impact. Ripples of sorcery moved in rings out from the spot. The bolts continued on. They popped twice more, in deeper layers of protection. The energies dissipated in crazy gyrations.

No single wizard could have shut down those defenses ... but four hundred top mages ...

Matching green bolts arced out all around. In hundreds of places, the spells cracked through the city's defensive shells. Emerald magics were still crashing into the shields as Peregrin flew through the breach Josiah had made.

Sharpened spikes skimmed by below. With each flap of Peregrin's wings, sheets of water broke against the spikes. The griffon himself soared over the rampart and slid into a long, low course over the city.

Though once splendid—with white spires, onion-shaped domes, red-tiled roofs, flying archways, ornamental gardens, and streets cobbled with something that looked like silver brick—the city had been 'sieved and sacked by the very storm that cloaked it. Fires stood in pillars across the skyline. Winds had felled many trees. Sudden changes in pitch and yaw tumbled anything not secured with rope or magic. Waters flooded the streets and sluiced whichever way the city tipped. Citizens ran pell mell from ruin to ruin and were swept away on the ravaging tides.

I'm amazed the Lhaodagms didn't abandon the cloud after all this abuse, sent Peregrin.

They've got far worse coming from us, Josiah responded.

The mage sent more blasts, these from a pair of wands. A swarm of purple sparks formed above Peregrin's head. The motes hovered and spun for a moment, as though awaiting instructions, and then rushed away. They flared above the city and punched through the bone-white wall of a tower. The windows lit with an orange light, which intensified to white. A whirring whistle rose to become a shriek. The walls cracked like glass, and the tower majestically began its collapse.

The last of the rubble had not struck ground when a fireball from Josiah's other wand splashed across a tile rooftop and set the eaves ablaze. The mage then flung out a grasping gesture. A gigantic hand formed below and gripped a footbridge. The fist squeezed. Stone and mortar tumbled away into the cleft beneath.

More attacks came from all around. The griffons swarmed the city. Fiery nets dropped atop thatched buildings and set them ablaze. Channeled winds and funneled rains leveled structures of limestone and marble. Magical lightning leapt from dozens of wands. Where bolts struck would-be defenders, mordant gray puffs of smoke went up and greasy bones went down. Feathery blasts of poison gas dropped others who rushed into the streets.

Not all the Lhaodagms fell, though. Answering fire rose from towers and turrets and alleys, alike. Fireballs, arrow storms, explosions, whirlwinds, clockwork creatures, lightnings, specters, and even a few scrawny griffons rose into the sky. As Peregrin flew past a hoisted spike, the air ahead flashed and popped as if with fireworks.

Beautiful, really, Peregrin commented nonchalantly as Josiah threw furious bolts of spell power. *I wonder whether this date will become a fireworks celebration for them, or for us....*

Up! came Josiah's frantic mind-call. *Up! Up!*

Peregrin then saw why. Above the capital building of Lhaoda whirled a huge, scythe-bladed windmill. The thing would chop them to pieces.

Peregrin spread his wings to swerve away. Just then, a fireball roared up from the street and flared into being right before the bird-lion. He shied from it, back onto his original path. The blades were a heartbeat ahead.

Peregrin blinked rapidly. The spinning blades before him seemed to halt. Now, to time it... and hope Josiah's defensive magics held.

He dived into the windmill. Josiah shouted in alarm. The griffon's eyes opened.

A blade whirred past his beak, so close that its trailing edge scraped a nostril. With his body bunched, the griffon soared through the open space. The next blade caught his haunch. It notched the magic shield and bit lightly into his golden pelt. The shield held, but the impact flipped rider and griffon over. The passing blade sliced loudly.

Tumbling in air, Peregrin struggled to right himself. Josiah clung on for dear life. Burning buildings and shattered walls flashed kaleidoscopically around them. Releasing a shriek of exertion, Peregrin steadied his course.

Josiah's fingers slowly eased from the saddle-horn. He straightened, took a breath, and began the gestures of a powerful spell. Two breaths later, the motions were done and the triggering word spoken. He pivoted in the saddle and sent twin blasts of radiance toward the center of the windmill. The bolts struck in accord, bursting the hub of the wheel.

Four scythe blades flew outward. One impaled the capital dome beneath it. Two more shot out laterally to mow down houses and citizens. The last whirled straight up, tumbled about its axis, and fell to become entangled in the gutted scaffold of the windmill.

Pull up, Josiah sent, gently this time. They had reached the end of the city and of their strafing run.

At the head of the griffon columns, Peregrin ascended into the furious storm. He breathed deeply. This was the moment to regroup, to prepare for another run.

Torrid rainwater pummeled the shields atop his feathers and fur. Peregrin's wings unfolded. Already the tension of battle was easing from them. Josiah hauled a new battery of spells into his mind.

Here, beyond the edge of the floating city, the storm was black and omnipresent. Whirling winds ... endless night... popping ears ... The violent darkness defied direction sense.

Feeling sudden vertigo, Peregrin began to bank back toward the city. A strong crosscurrent lashed the rain sideways. He deepened his angle into the gale. A warm updraft enveloped him. He continued his turn, rolling over.

His wings lost lift. Griffon and rider plunged.

Peregrin foundered. Each flap of his wings dragged them faster into the fall. One wing caught upon the chaotic air, but the other lashed emptiness.

Josiah clung tight all the while. Hands full of saddle and wand, he shouted spell fragments into the buffeting air. Useless.

They spiraled downward.

Downward ... At last, Peregrin knew up from down. He folded both wings, nosedived, and then spread his plumage. Feathers found purchase, and he soared out of the dive.

He breathed deeply, calming himself. *How far have we fatten?*

Neither griffon nor rider could glimpse the ground. Peregrin glanced upward, seeing the city high above. Faint golden specks swarmed about it, griffons regrouping for another attack.

Sorry, Josiah, sent Peregrin.

It's a thunderstorm, the mage said, *the worst skies for a battle.*

The griffon was already straining his wings to rise toward the floating rock. / *don't suppose you brought any levitation magic....*

The mage's reply was slightly chiding. *I'd not considered this possibility.* Then he sent, *Don't strain too hard. I imagine we're out of this fight.*

The storm's already done half the battle for us, anyway. Another five miles in this squall and Lhaoda would be destroyed, with or without us, thought Peregrin.

Yes, the mage responded wryly. He seemed to consider as he repeated, *Yes. Why haven't they steered clear of it?*

Perhaps they can't steer clear, Peregrin replied. *Perhaps the storm has damaged their navigation center.*

Josiah perched a hand above his eyes and looked upward at the shimmering outline. He gave a gasp, and sent the image in his eyes to Peregrin: the city was much closer than it had been moments ago. Peregrin could not have risen this far this fast.

The only explanation was that the city was falling.

Falling? We haven't done that much harm, the griffon responded. He sent back the view from his own, much sharper eyes:

Firelit billows of spray rolled around the edges of the city. The torrent was so strong that it added a deep thrumming drone to the cacophony of the storm. Falling.

Peregrin fought his way forward through the streaming darkness, struggling to get out from under the thing.

Our fliers wouldn't have slain the levitation council, Josiah thought. That's against all the treaties. There hasn't been such a massacre since... His thoughts trailed away as he assembled a quick casting and began the arcane gestures.

It's not in free-fall, Peregrin pointed out. His surging muscles bore them clear of the descending city. It hasn't capsized. Somebody's trying to hold it aloft.

Josiah finished the casting. A chill went through the man and continued on, into the bird-lion. *It's not just somebody. It's everybody. Their whole levitation council is still alive. They're gathered at the center of the rock, trying to hold it in the skies.*

Peregrin made a long, slow turn, just beyond reach of the sinking city. The rock filled half the black, stormy sky above. Tith Tilendrothael's griffon riders swarmed the enclave. *Did the Lhaodagms deplete their spell banks? Is there a magic barrier, or a negating sigil, or something?*

The mage shook his head. *No, nothing like that. Magic is cascading from that rock, but it's being drawn away, straight down. It's as though the storm has carried them—carried us all—into a dead-magic zone.*

The city filled the whole sky now. Peregrin shied farther back. In moments, the rock swept with ponderous and terrific motion down past them. The rolling gray mists at the margin of the city were larger than tidal waves and roared like cyclones. The enclave's black underbelly was replaced by a bright city in ruins—fire, lightning, smoke, bodies, rubble....

Stunned, terrified, Peregrin hovered in the churning storm and watched the receding city.

"If this is a magic-dead area, why did my scrying spell work? And our attacks and defenses?" Josiah wondered aloud. "And why are the cavalry still engaged?"

Griffons darted into and out of the ruins—birds plucking berries from a burning bush.

They're saving them, concluded Peregrin. They're pulling out as many Lhaodagms as they can before the thing hits ground. They'll be dragged down with it.

Peregrin tucked his wings, diving into a steep descent behind the plunging city.

Josiah crouched tightly against him and tucked his head beside the bird-lion's neck. He trembled, from cold or nerve or both.

The griffon plunged. Sodden paws trailed streams of water upward in their wake. Still, the city receded, agonizingly distant. Peregrin spread his wings and drove himself in its wake. He did so again. With each pulse of drenched feathers, the city grew gradually closer.

Josiah hissed. *There'll be only a moment between the cloud base and the ground. Can you pull out that fast?*

Instead of responding, Peregrin redoubled the labor of his wings. Rider and mount approached the city. Individual lightning strikes stood out against the wreck of stone walls and roofless honeycombs. Peregrin let out a shriek of effort. The wind and the storm stole it away.

Not enough time. They'll hit before we reach them, Josiah sent.

There's time, came the griffon's terse reply. The air's still icy and thin. It doesn't smell like steel yet.

You know you can't trust those cues, Josiah replied, not inside a thunder cloud.

The griffon gave a feline shrug and flapped again. A breath of hope filled him. *Look, they're pulling away. That's two squadrons, at least. Gold flecks of catflesh were lifting off, flying clear. A score of them... two score... Each bore some wriggling resident of the falling city.*

Hope lent new strength. Peregrin flung himself down the roaring chimney of air above the city. The clouds thinned. Two more wing strokes, and he broke through the smoky turbulence. A street soared up to crunchingly meet them. Peregrin swooped from his dive and roared out along it, heading for an old woman who was crawling from ruins ahead.

Pull up! advised Josiah.

Peregrin did not.

The clouds drew away. Rainy light flashed over the city.

She's too far away, the rider sent. Pull up.

The griffon's wings tore through a pillar of smoke. Beyond the city's horizon, the green fields of Netheril rose. The enclave was listing over....

With lion limbs outstretched, Peregrin snagged the crone. His tawny arms flexed, and the woman was embraced against his chest.

"Pull up!" Josiah cried.

Peregrin did, and just in time. The city dropped suddenly away.

It plunged, tumbling. The embattled ruins showed one last time before the enclave rolled entirely over.

The rock broke free of the rain and glared for a moment in the slanting sun. Lighting followed it down, as though the cloud sent skeletal fingers to draw the city back. Stray charges leapt in three places to the surging forests below. The enclave spun once with slow grace. Its shadow blinked upon a dense woodland. Then it struck ground.

The monolith fractured into a hundred thousand jagged boulders, which bounded up from the point of impact and rushed outward, felling whole forests. The wet outside of the stone had cracked open to reveal a dry inside. Dust and stone shards rolled in the center of the crater. Smoke rose from trees ignited by the thousand lightnings of the pulverized city.

Then, the sound of the impact reached them, a boom so profound that it knocked a few riders from their hovering mounts, and slew one griffon by shattering its breastbone. The riders were caught by already-overburdened griffons. The dead griffon dropped from the sky like a battered maple leaf, whirling.

For a few moments, the cavalry circled in the air above the rolling dust clouds. The debris soon settled enough to show a massive impact crater and a field of rubble in which no one could have survived.

Still, the griffons lingered, vultures above a new corpse.

By silent mutual agreement, conquerors and crow-riders alike one by one turned westward, toward Tith Tilendrothael. In time, Peregrin banked to follow the others.

It was a weary and burdened crew. Their wings had been nearly spent before they began rescuing Lhaodagms. One hope moved them, that everything would be sorted out at Tith Tilendrothael.

A deep longing swept through Josiah. *I can't wait to see those ivory towers and streets of gold... to be warm and safe again.... Atrocity and massacre and death....* His thoughts ceased above the toil of wings. At last, in despairing tones, he wondered, *How many of us are left?*

Peregrin quickly counted the griffons before him. The numbers were not promising. Not quite half of the four hundred had won free of the plunging city and its powerful down drafts. Those who had escaped looked ragged, their fury spent. They jittered like a swarm of deer flies.

Too few, he answered.

Josiah leaned forward in the saddle and gazed down at the old woman.

She hung supine, her withered hands clutched up to her chest and her eyes closed as though in sleep. Her long gray hair played gently in the wind. If not for the craggy lines of her face, she would have seemed a little girl.

"What happened to Lhaoda?" he blurted.

The old woman opened her eyes. "It fell, Dear. Don't worry, I'm all right." She seemed to want one of her arms loose so she could pat his cheek.

"No," he said, "before that. Why was the city in the storm?"

"The storm caught us," she said simply. "We've been adrift for three days. Couldn't rise. Couldn't steer."

"Adrift? What do you mean? Your levitation council was still alive. Why didn't you call for help?"

"It would have been the same as calling for plunder."

"But, how did you lose control?"

"The Phaerimm," she replied.

"The Phaerimm?" echoed Josiah. "The Ones Below? They're just myths. And even if they were real, how could they bring down a flying city?"

She shrugged. "The Phaerimm brought down Lhaoda. They will bring down all the others. We must join forces. No more hiding in the clouds. Nowhere is safe now."

"Don't worry, we're safe enough," Josiah said. "We're on our way to Tith Tilendrothael."

"No," she replied. Her eyes were suddenly bleakly desperate, almost angry. "Nowhere is safe now."

"But Tith Tilendrothael is—" His words were cut off by a pang of terror and dread.

Peregrin voiced a raw-throated shriek.

Josiah glimpsed what the griffon already saw: an empty skyline ahead, only plains and stormy skies. There was no gleaming city. There were no ivory towers, no streets of gold....

Gone, sent Peregrin, *gone.*

The griffon riders and Lhaodagms ahead were descending to land. Many had already gathered beside the impact crater and rubble field—what once had been Tith Tilendrothael. Nothing was left—less than nothing: a deep pit instead of a floating heaven.

The survivors—that's what they were now, not Lhaodagms or Tith Tilendrotheans, but simply survivors—gathered on the verge of that pit. Fletching, Evensong, Glazreth, and the rest of Tith Tilendrothaen's cavalry stood wing and wing with the crow-riders and alley cats of Lhaodagm.

Both cities had fallen. Each had been brought down by—what? Old animosities? Older myths?

Whatever had once separated them now seemed inconsequential. Only the vast chasm mattered.

Peregrin approached. He gently landed, releasing the old crone from his grip.

The woman got to her feet and turned toward the pit. She stared, like all the others.

At first, no one spoke. They only stood in shocked silence, one people—survivors.

The air was so still in that heartbeat that everyone heard the crone murmur:

"We must join forces. When even sky cities fall, nowhere is safe... . No more sky cities. No more floating above it all. We must join forces and start over. We must fight to live, not live to fight. We must live like every other creature, dirty and afraid, like crows and beetles and worms. "When even sky cities fall, nowhere is safe."

The Grotto of Dreams

Mark Anthony

It all started the day that I died.

I know. That doesn't seem like a terribly good way to begin a story. But it's the truth. The fact is, dying was the first really interesting thing that ever happened to me.

Not that it was an enjoyable experience. On the contrary, I can't think of anything more unpleasant. There's nothing more degrading than watching one's own body... well, degrade. Let's just say it's not an activity I would recommend to someone looking for a good time. There was only one consolation in dying—knowing I would never have to do it again.

At least, that's what I always thought. But that was before I met Aliree, before we went looking for the Grotto of Dreams, and before I learned there's only one thing harder than gaining your greatest desire, and that's giving it up.

That day began like any other day in Undermountain: a cockatrice tried to sit on me.

That's one of the problems with being just a skull, even an enchanted one. Sometimes you get mistaken for an egg. And believe me, you can be hatched by better things than a cockatrice. Part bird, part bat, part lizard, and all repulsive. Imagine a turkey from the Abyss. And did I mention dumb? But I suppose that's what I get for making my home in a mad wizard's dungeon, and there's no wizard madder than Halaster Blackcloak.

Wait a second. I'm getting ahead of myself. Before I go any further, I need to explain how I got here in the first place, how I ended up down here in the underground labyrinth that is Undermountain.

It was all Gillar's fault.

Then again, everything that was bad in the world was Gillar's fault. Or at least it was the fault of people like Gillar, and since he lived just down the street from my hovel, in the Dock Ward of Waterdeep, he was a convenient target. I focused my proselytizing energies on him.

I was a priest at the time, a disciple of Lathandar, god of the dawn. Gillar was a wizard, and as evil as they come. Oil and water would have been a more natural mixture.

I would often wait for him outside his tower.

"Good morning, Gillar," I would say as he stepped out of the tower's door, black-robed, pale-faced, and scowling. Mind you, I wasn't a skull then, but a living man, young and rather good-looking, if I do say so myself. "Did you know that the evil magics you work are going to doom your spirit to eternal torment after you die?"

I would start to expound on this topic, but he would wiggle his fingers, and at that point toads would rain down from the sky. It's surprisingly hard to concentrate when toads are falling on you. Once I had shaken the creatures from my robes, and wiped away the worst part of the slime, I would jog down the street and catch up with the wizard.

"It's not too late to recant your dark ways, Gillar," I would say in earnest. "But don't wait too long. Remember, death could be waiting around any corner."

"I can only hope so in your case," he would snap.

Here he usually muttered a few queer words, and after that I would be distracted for a while as I hopped in circles and beat at the patches of flame that danced on my robes. By the time I put the fires out, Gillar was always gone. There was nothing to do but wander back to my humble hovel, mend my garb, and wait until the next morning.

Then one day, in a vision I'm certain was sent by my god, it came to me.

The next morning I shook away the toads and, as usual, followed after Gillar. This time when the

flames appeared on my robe, they flickered for a moment, then vanished in tiny puffs of steam. I had soaked my robe in a bucket of water before donning it that day, and it was still sopping wet. Pleased with my own cleverness, I closed in on my quarry.

"If you make amends now, you needn't fear dying, Gillar," I told him in righteous glee.

His eyes narrowed. "And you are not afraid to die?"

I shook my head fervently. "Not at all. I know that in death I will find peace in the company of Lathandar."

"Truly?" he sneered. "Is that what you believe?"

"Yes," I said with perfect confidence.

All at once he laughed. It was a chilling sound. "We shall see," he said. "We shall see." Then he wiggled his fingers *and* muttered queer words. I braced my shoulders, expecting something unpleasant to fall on me, but nothing did. All I felt was an odd tingling, then nothing at all.

"Enjoy your afterlife, Muragh Brilstagg," he said, and that didn't make sense. I don't mean the second part, since Muragh Brilstagg was indeed my name, but the first. Why would he wish me a happy afterlife? Then it hit me. Maybe I was getting to him, maybe he was starting to believe in the goodness of Lathandar as I did. I decided this was more than enough progress for one day, and I smiled as I watched Gillar walk away.

My confidence bolstered by what I had interpreted as my victory over Gillar, that evening I decided to take my mission to a local tavern and spread the word of Lathandar there. The Sign of the Bent Nail was a rough and unsavory place. But if I could get my message through to an evil wizard like Gillar, certainly I could convert a few ne'er-do-wells and drunkards.

I approached a likely looking fellow at the bar, a very large man with very small eyes.

"Good evening," I said in my most cheerful voice.

"Did you know that carousing and drinking will consign your spirit to everlasting torture in the Abyss?"

He bared his filed-down teeth in a grin. "No," he said. "Did you know that my dagger is sticking in your heart?"

"No," I said. "Thanks for letting me know."

That was when I died.

It was a strange sensation. I had always thought death would be black and silent at first, and then there would be a great light, and I would find myself in a spring garden at dawn, the abode of my god, Lathandar. Instead I found myself being hauled out the back door of the tavern, into a stinking alley, and thrown atop a garbage heap.

There had been a moment of bright pain when I looked down and saw the dagger protruding from my chest, but that had passed quickly enough. Now I felt only a numbness that was somehow more disturbing than any pain. I was aware of the heavy weight of my body, but I could not feel it, could not move it. It seemed that my eyes no longer worked as they had, and yet somehow I could still sense my surroundings. Unable to do anything else, I lay there while my corpse cooled and stiffened. It was not long before I heard the first scabbling sounds in the rubbish. Then the rats found me.

It was at that moment I finally realized the truth of Gillar's odd words, and the implication of the spell he had cast upon me. No, not spell, but curse. Even though I was dead, my spirit had not been allowed to fly from my body. I would never see dawn in the garden of my god. Instead I was doomed to dwell, conscious, in the lifeless husk of my mortal body. Forever. I would have cried then, but dead men can't shed tears.

I won't tire you with all the tedious details of my decomposition. For nearly a week I lay on the garbage heap. It did not hurt when the rats gnawed at me. Yet all the same it filled me with a sensation so vile that, had I been alive, I certainly would have never stopped puking.

As it turned out, the rats actually did me a service. For I found that, once my bones were free of the decomposing flesh, I was able to move my jaw and even speak aloud, though my voice, once warm with life, was now thin and reedy. Had Gillar planned this? Somehow I didn't think so. His magic must have had effects even he did not guess. New hope filled me then.

"Help!" I called out. "Please! Somebody help me!"

Little did I know it, but that was the beginning of my journey into Undermountain.

Before long, a drunken soldier heard my call for aid. Unfortunately, soldiers are a notoriously superstitious lot, and he mistook me for the ghost of someone he had killed in war, come back to torment him. He hacked my head from my body and tossed it into Waterdeep Harbor.

Just a skull at that point, I drifted in the brine for a while and soon lost the last bits of my flesh to the local eels. Then the merpeople who live in the harbor found me and kindly took me to a duty-wizard of the

Water-deep Watch, one Thandalon Holmeir.

Thandalon was a nice enough fellow, and he set me to keeping watch over his spell library. Only, soon after, thieves broke in, and instead of stealing Thandalon's spellbooks, they stole me, then fled into the deepest sewers beneath Waterdeep. I never saw the thing that got them. It was big, and dark, and didn't rise fully from the foul water, but it sucked each of them under and crunched them to bits.

In turn, the current swept me away. I tumbled down a drain, and fell deeper and deeper until finally I found myself here, in these endless tunnels far beneath Mount Waterdeep. Undermountain. Maze of the Mad Wizard, Halaster Blackcloak. And here I've been ever since.

The cockatrice gave a gurgling hiss. I think it was supposed to be an affectionate sound, but if I'd still had skin, it no doubt would have crawled. The creature spread its leathery bat wings and started to lower its scaly backside onto my cranium. Maybe I didn't have flesh anymore, but I still had teeth. I bit its rump. Hard.

The thing let out a squawk that would have made a banshee wince, then sprang away. I started to laugh in satisfaction, but one of the fleeing creature's wings struck me and batted me backward. Before I knew it, I was rolling.

That's another problem with being just a skull. Once you're rolling, it's extremely difficult to stop.

"Wait!" I shouted to the cockatrice. "Come back!"

The thing only glared with its beady eyes. Apparently it had decided I was not a very nice egg.

I rolled out the door of the chamber in which I had been minding my own business until the cockatrice came along, then tumbled down the steep incline of a rough passage. A moment later I hit the staircase.

Yes, skulls do bounce. However, we do not enjoy it.

Each time I struck one of the hard stone steps, it was like an explosion. Then the staircase ended, and I was rolling again. A second later I saw it, yawning like a toothy mouth: a crack ran across the corridor from side to side. It wasn't very large. A living man could have easily stepped over it. But it was just wide enough to accommodate a runaway skull.

Down, I have learned over the years, is the one direction in Undermountain you don't want to go. The deeper you go in this maze, the nastier things get. And going back up is always a hundred times harder. I clattered down the narrow crevice and clenched my jaw. What would I strike at the bottom? A bubbling black pudding, ready to dissolve me? A blazing circle of fire newts? The crushing mandibles of a carrion crawler?

All at once the crevice ended. For a moment I fell through dark air, then I landed on something ...

... cushiony and warm?

"Oh!" a soft voice gasped.

I couldn't see anything, just darkness. All at once two hands lifted me up. Something had captured me, had me in its clutches! But what? Some slaving beast, ready to grind me to bone meal? Then the hands turned me—gently—around. I clacked my teeth in surprise.

She was a half-elf, that much I saw right away. The fine cheekbones, the tilted brown eyes, the ever-so-slightly pointed ears were all giveaways. Clad in a patched tunic, she sat on the stone floor of a shadowy chamber, her back to the wall. I had fallen into her lap, and it occurred to me then that I couldn't have imagined a better place to crash land.

Her smooth forehead crinkled in a frown as she studied me. "Now where did this come from?" she asked aloud.

"From up there!" I said cheerily. "Thanks for breaking my fall!"

Often when I first speak to people, they react strangely. It's as if they've never met a talking skull before. All right, I'll grant you, most of them likely never have. Still, it would be nice if they would at least feign a polite *hello* before they flung me down and ran away screaming. However, she did neither of these things, though her tilted eyes went wide in surprise.

"You can talk!"

"Yes," I said. "A lot, in fact."

She blinked in astonishment. "I thought I was the only one alive down here."

"And you still are."

I rattled my jaw for emphasis and expected a grimace of disgust to cross her pretty face. Instead she laughed, a sound as bright as chimes.

"Well," she said, "I'm not feeling very picky at the moment. I'll take any friend I can get in this place."

Her words filled me with a warm glow I hadn't known I was still capable of.

"I'm Aliree," she went on.

"My name is Muragh," I said. "Muragh Brilstag."

She rested me on her knee and gazed into my empty orbits. "How did you get here, Muragh?"

"It's a long story," I said. I opened my mouth to begin recounting everything that had led me to this place, from Gillar onward. However, she gently but firmly held my jaw shut.

"I'm sorry, Muragh," she said. "I'm sure it's a fascinating tale. And I wish I could hear it, really. But I'm afraid I don't have time enough." Her fingers slipped from my jawbone.

I was disappointed, of course, but pleased nonetheless at her kind apology. "That's all right," I said. "But do you mind if I ask what you're doing here? It's surprising, I know, but there aren't a great number of beautiful half-elven maidens down here in Undermountain."

Aliree laughed again, and this time the sound was a little sad somehow. "I'm not beautiful, Muragh." She waved my protests away with a hand. "No, it doesn't matter. Only one thing does now. I've come looking for something. Maybe you've heard of it. It's a place, a place called the—"

All at once she went stiff, and I slipped from her hands and clattered to the floor. She clutched the wall with rigid fingers, her eyes pressed shut. It was hard to tell in the dark, but I think she was shaking.

I whistled the word softly through my teeth. "Aliree?"

After a moment her eyes fluttered open. Her body went limp, and she slumped against the wall.

"I'm sorry, Muragh," she said, her voice weary now. "You'd think by now I would be ready for it. But it comes so suddenly, and I never am."

She spoke a quiet word, and a soft light appeared in her cupped hand. In the glow, I could see her better, and I knew that her elven blood alone was not enough to explain her pale, slender appearance. Her fine bones traced sharp lines under her skin, and shadows hovered beneath her eyes.

It's hard for skulls to sigh, but I did. "How long have you been sick, Aliree?"

She glanced at me in startlement. "How did you know?"

"Dead people can see these things."

After a moment she nodded. "It's been a year now. There's something wrong with my blood. Sometimes it turns to fire in my veins."

"Haven't you been to any healers?"

Aliree shook her head. "A healer can't help what's wrong with me. You see, I wasn't always like this. I don't mean sick. I mean like *this*, a half-elf."

"I don't understand, Aliree. What do you mean?"

She took a deep breath. "I was born a full-blooded human, Muragh."

I could only stare at her. She gazed into the blue sphere of light in her hands and spoke in a quiet voice.

"All my life, I didn't belong. I always felt so ungainly, so dull, so mundane. Then one day I saw the riding party of an elf prince on the road to Waterdeep—all of them were so graceful, so bright, so joyous. I thought if only I could be more like them, then surely I would be happy. So after that I spent all my days studying magic. I pored over musty books and moldering scrolls until finally, one day, in a forgotten codex in the library of Waterdeep, I found the right spell and cast it on *myself*."

I hated to speak the words, but I had to. "Something went wrong, didn't it?"

Aliree sighed. "Not at first. The spell did make me partially elven, enough to pass for a half-elf, just as I had hoped. But the spell was a complicated one. Even a master wizard would have had difficulty casting it, and I was little more than a dabbler." She pressed her eyes shut. "After a month or so, the pain began. It's been getting worse ever since. That's why I came here."

"But why?" I asked. "Why would you want to come to a place like Undermountain?"

Four small words: "The Grotto of Dreams."

I let out a whistle between my front teeth. *The Grotto of Dreams*. I had heard those words before. Anyone who knocked around Undermountain long enough had. Stories told of a cave deep in the ground where once the goddess Lliira, Our Lady of Joy, slept for a time, and dreamt. It was said that the stones of the grotto still recalled the power of Lliira's dreams, and that anyone who found the cave and entered would know the joy of his or her greatest dream.

For a while I had even searched for the grotto myself. My dream? That inside I might live once more. True, even if the power of the cave would work, I would never be able to leave, for it is said that once one leaves, the dream of joy ends, and one can never again reenter the grotto. But I wouldn't have minded being stuck in a cave all my life. Not if I was alive again—truly and warmly alive.

None of that mattered. I had long ago given up on finding the grotto. Just like everyone did.

"The Grotto of Dreams is a myth, Aliree," I said.

She nodded. "Yes, Muragh, it is. But it's a true one."

I didn't want to hurt her feelings by openly disagreeing. "All right," I said. "Maybe it is. But even if the

grotto did exist, you wouldn't be able to get there unless you had—"

From the satchel slung over her shoulder she pulled out a brittle parchment and unrolled it. If I had had eyes, they would have bulged.

"—a map!" I finished with a shout. I bounced up and down on the floor. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. "You have a map to the Grotto of Dreams, Aliree? But how?"

She brushed a frail hand over the map. "My grandfather was a priest of Lliira years ago, in the city of Etlurel. In a waking dream, sent by the goddess, he drew this map of tunnels that led to the grotto. Only he had no idea where in Faerun the tunnels were located, and he died without ever finding out. Ever since I was a child, I carried this map with me. It was just an heirloom, a reminder of my grandfather. Then, just a few days ago, I overheard some men in a tavern, a place called the Yawning Portal. The men were talking about a cave beneath the city." She locked her clear eyes on my empty sockets. "A cave where dreams came true."

"Well, what are you sitting around here for?" I asked in amazement. "Why haven't you gone to the grotto?"

"This is why."

She held up the map, then slowly spun it around. At last I understood the reason.

"There are no directions on the map!" I exclaimed.

"You don't know which way is north!"

She nodded. "I thought I might be able to find my way once I got here, but I was wrong. And now that I'm down here in Undermountain ... I'm lost."

"Wait a minute." I worked my jaw and scraped closer to the map. "I recognize some of these rooms. Yes, that's the Hall of Many Pillars. And that's got to be the Hall of Mirrors." I spun in an excited circle. "Aliree! I know where we are on the map! I can get us to the Grotto of Dreams!" I paused then. "If you'll have me," I added in a small voice.

To my delight, for an answer, she scooped me up in her arms.

I enjoyed her embrace for just a moment. "What will your dream be, Aliree?" I asked then. "To be healed?"

Aliree shut her eyes and leaned her head against the wall. "Do you know how long it's been since I've slept, Muragh? Truly, deeply slept?" She sighed. "I would give anything for the pain to be gone, just for a minute, just so I could sleep."

It's hard to say where it came from then, since I don't have a heart anymore, but a strange sensation welled up in me all the same, one of exhilaration and devotion. I let out a sharp whistle, and Aliree opened her eyes. I hopped from her arms and rolled along the floor.

"Come on, Aliree," I piped cheerfully. "Let's go find our dreams!"

She grinned, and though the expression was wan, it was beautiful as well. With careful, brittle movements she rose to her feet, set the magical light on her shoulder, and started after me.

The problem with Undermountain was that nothing was ever where it was supposed to be. Tunnels that were there one day had a nasty habit of vanishing the next. In the meantime, entirely new passageways had appeared out of solid rock. I had never managed to glimpse the mechanism by which the corridors were rearranged. Perhaps they did it of their own accord. Not much in Undermountain surprises me anymore, though almost all of it *disturbs* me. Regardless, this was a place where things could change overnight, and it had been centuries since Aliree's ancestor had drawn the map to the grotto.

"All right, Aliree," I said. I was tucked in the crook of her arm and studied the folded map that poked out of her satchel. "Get ready to make a left."

Aliree frowned into the gloom. "But there *is* no left. Only a right."

I sighed. We had been on the move for no more than a quarter hour, and already this was the third discrepancy between the map and the tunnels.

"All right," I said. "Keep going straight. We can pass through the Hall of a Hundred Candles up ahead and circle back around."

Aliree continued on with stiff, careful steps. A moment later, a hiss escaped my teeth.

"Aliree!" I whispered. "Get back! Quick!"

There was one and only one constant in mad Halaster's labyrinth. No matter what the tunnels and corridors did, you could always count on monsters. Aliree had been lucky so far. I had found her in an oft-explored and relatively safe part of the dungeon, and she had come there directly from the well-traveled Well of Entry beneath the Yawning Portal.

Her luck was about to change. For the worse.

Aliree ducked into an alcove, and we hid behind veils of cobweb as a hulking form shambled by. The

thing was accompanied by a pungent reek. At last it lumbered out of view. We waited a dozen more fluttery beats of Aliree's heart, and then she stepped back into the corridor.

"What was that?" the half-elf asked.

I looked at the steaming droppings on the tunnel floor. "Owlbear. Good thing it didn't find us in the alcove."

"Why?"

"Owlbears like elves."

Aliree ran a hand through her thick auburn hair. "Well, if owlbears like elves, they maybe it wouldn't have—"

"No, Aliree," I said. "They *like* elves. As in, for dinner. Or lunch. Or between-meal snacks. Elf-stew, elf-pie, elf-jerky. You name it, they like it all."

She swallowed hard. "Oh."

After that we continued on, through rough-hewn passageways, down slimy staircases, and across drafty halls. Not long after encountering the owlbear, we scrambled down a side passage to avoid a lone troll. Luckily, judging by the dark fluid dribbling from its chin, it had just fed, and so was not intent on searching for prey. A short while later, we started into a cavern and dashed out just as quickly, barely avoiding the needly proboscises of a pair of flying stirges, which would have happily sucked Aliree's veins dry. Finally, in a junk-filled chamber, we hid beneath a pile of rotten rags when a band of kobolds ventured in. One of the filthy, bug-eyed creatures actually plucked at the rags for a moment, its pug nose snuffing, as if it smelled something interesting. Aliree was forced to hold my jaw shut to keep it from chattering. Then one of the thing's companions called to it in a guttural voice, and it hurried after the others.

Despite these unwelcome interruptions—and the countless times we were forced to backtrack and search out a new route because a wall was where it shouldn't be, or a staircase went up instead of down—we made steady progress. Judging by the map, we were over halfway to the grotto.

We turned down a damp corridor, and all at once Aliree stumbled. She gripped the wall, her face like a moon in the darkness. Her breath came in short gasps. I clenched my jaw at my own stupidity. I had been leading Aliree blithely on as if we were on a picnic stroll, when in truth every step for her must have been agony. And all this time she had made no complaint.

"I don't know about you," I said, "but I sure could use a rest. Do you mind if we stop for a minute?"

Aliree smiled gratefully. "If you want, Muragh." She sank onto the top of a broad mushroom and set me on a toadstool next to her. A brief shudder passed through her. The fire again. She let out a deep breath and, with a pretty, too-thin hand, brushed her hair away from damp cheeks.

"You're very brave, Aliree," I said quietly. "A lot of humans I once knew would have given up long ago."

"I can't give up, Muragh." She shook her head, a rueful smile on her lips. "It's funny. Things like this don't happen to real elves. They don't get... diseases, even magical ones. But now I'm part elf, and it's that part of me that won't let me give up. Life is sacred to elves. I have to keep going. Until I get to the grotto."

I let out a wistful whistle. The Grotto of Dreams. Did it even really exist? But I couldn't doubt, not now. Aliree was going to be healed, and I... A shiver danced along the bones of my cranium. No, I couldn't even think about that. The thought was almost too wonderful to bear.

"We'll get there, Aliree," I said. "We'll find our dreams, and then we'll be so happy."

To my surprise, she shook her head at my words. "But that's not it, Muragh. Nothing can make you happy if you're not happy with what you already have. That's the one thing all this has taught me. I thought being a half-elf would fix everything that was wrong with me. But after a few days I realized that, even though I looked different on the outside, inside I was the same person I always was. It wasn't being human that made me unhappy. It was being me. And no spell had the power to change that. Only I did." She fixed me with a solemn look. "Do you understand, Muragh?"

No, I didn't, but before I could ask her what she really meant, Aliree stood slowly, deliberately.

"Come on," she said. "Let's go."

The task at hand distracted me. I studied the map a moment, then we were on our way again.

An hour later, the corridor widened, and we found ourselves at one end of a long, high-ceilinged chamber. A purple glow hung in the air, and on either side of the chamber was a row of thrones hewn of black stone. Atop each of the thrones slumped the dry husk of a corpse, each shrouded in moldering robes.

"Uh-oh," I said. "The tunnels must have rearranged themselves. I didn't think this passage led here."

"Where's here?"

"The Hall of Sleeping Kings."

Aliree peered at the mummified denizens of the thrones. "Maybe we should hurry."

I didn't disagree. The half-elf hastened through the chamber, past the two staring lines of long-dead kings. We were in the middle of the room when a booming voice spoke out of nowhere.

"Doom! Doom takes us all!"

There was a hideous creaking sound of ancient sinews popping as the mummified kings rose from their thrones.

Aliree's eyes went wide. "I thought you said this was the hall of *sleeping* kings, Muragh!"

I gulped as best I could without a gullet. "It looks like they just woke up."

"Well, maybe they don't mean us any harm," Aliree said in a quavering voice. "After all, you're not alive, either, Muragh."

Evil crimson light flared to life in two dozen pairs of empty eye sockets.

"I'm afraid," I said, "that not all dead things are as congenial as I am."

Two dozen skeletal hands gripped rusted swords. Two dozen skeletal feet scraped along the stone floor.

"Living one!" thundered a disembodied voice. "Know your doom for disturbing the repose of the sleeping!"

Aliree spun around, but the kings closed in from all sides. "It's me they want, Muragh! I'm the living one. You've got to get out of here!" She cocked her arm, ready to toss me toward the doorway.

Her words sparked an idea in the empty space where my brain used to be. "Wait, Aliree!" I said. "I have a plan! Put me on top of your head, cover yourself with your cloak, and grab that rusty crown by your foot."

She hesitated. The kings shambled closer.

"Please, just do it!"

Aliree snatched up the crown, stuck it atop my cranium, then set me on her head. She gathered her cloak around herself, hiding her face and body as the kings raised their swords.

At that moment I spoke in my deepest voice, which wasn't very deep at all, but I could only hope it would do. "Halt, brothers! There is no need to stir! Can you not see I am one of your own?"

The undead kings hesitated. The flames in their empty orbits flickered in uncertainty. Below me, Aliree shivered, and the crown tilted precariously on my head. The skeletons advanced a step. I tried again.

"It is I! King... uh... King Hardnoggin from... er... from Castle Skulltop! There are none of those pesky *living ones* here. So why don't we all just head back to our comfy little thrones and catch some more shut-eye?"

For a moment the kings stared in undead befuddlement. Then, all at once, they turned and shuffled back to their thrones.

"It's working, Muragh!" Aliree whispered.

"I think nine centuries of death left their minds a little on the dull side," I whispered back. "Now come on. Let's blow this creepy little slumber party."

Nothing makes a body—or a skull, for that matter—hurry like a good scare. While I navigated from the crook of her arm, Aliree moved with frail but urgent speed through countless twists and turns. Soon her breath rattled in her thin chest, and sweat misted her face. Her steps were uneven. I wanted to tell her to stop, to rest, to let the fire in her blood cool for a moment. But I bit the memory of my tongue. I think she knew what I had just learned from the map.

"We're almost there," I said. "Just make this next left."

Aliree gave a jerky nod and stumbled around the corner. She limped down the corridor, and then, after a dozen paces, we came upon—

—a dead end.

I let out a groan of annoyance. "The wall must have shifted, Aliree. We're going to have to backtrack and come at it from another direction."

"All right," she gasped.

With valiant effort, she turned around, moved back down the corridor... and struck a dead end.

"But that's impossible!" I said. "We just came this way a moment ago!"

The rough stone wall smugly hulked there in front of us, blocking the way.

Aliree leaned against the wall and struggled to regain her breath. "The wall must have... shifted right after we ... passed by here."

Aliree was right. This had to be a place where Under-mountain was actively reforming itself. Despair filled my hollow insides. I had tried to lead her to the Grotto of Dreams, but instead I had gotten her trapped here, in this hole far underground. A fine grave I had dug for her, had dug for us both.

She sank to the floor and sat, cradling me in her lap.

"I'm sorry, Aliree," I said in a wavering voice. "I'm so sorry I let you down."

I don't know how she smiled then, but she did. It was a good thing I didn't have a heart, because at that moment it would have broken.

Her voice was soft now. "You didn't let me down, Muragh. You gave me a chance when I would have had none. For that, I'm so grateful." She lifted me up and, upon my bony forehead, bestowed a gentle kiss.

A strange tingling passed through me. I opened my jaw to say something, anything, I didn't know what. I never made it that far. There was an odd sucking sound. Then the square of floor beneath us vanished.

I realized the truth as we fell. Undermountain had reshaped itself right out from under us. After that, I couldn't think about it anymore. I was too busy screaming.

Floof!

I wobbled in confusion. That was not the sound I had expected to make when we landed. *Thunk*, more likely. Or *splat*, or maybe even *blort*. But *not floof*.

I tried to get a look around, but everything was white. Then something tickled the pit where my nose used to be, and all at once I sneezed. Yes, skulls can sneeze, and this sneeze nearly blew my cranium apart. A thousand bits of white went flying in every direction, then settled gently back down to the floor.

Feathers.

Then I saw Aliree, a mischievous smile on her lips. I gaped in surprise.

"Aliree ... *you* did this?"

She gave a modest shrug. "Maybe I was just a dabbler in magic, but I did learn a thing or two."

I was not about to complain. However she had managed to cast the spell, it had saved us from a nasty end here in...

... here in where?

Aliree brushed away the feathers, picked me up, and stood. We were in a cavern so large her magical light did not reach the ceiling. But we didn't need her light to see the thing both of us stared at. In one wall of the cavern was a round opening: the mouth of a cave. Green-gold light swirled inside the cave, beautiful and beckoning.

I didn't even bother to look at the map. "The Grotto of Dreams," I whispered.

I thought Aliree would have dashed to the grotto now that we were finally here. Instead she gripped me tightly. "I'm afraid, Muragh."

"Don't be, Aliree. It's your dream waiting in there."

She smiled then. Strange, but there was a sorrow to it. "No, you're right, I'm not afraid. Not with you here, Muragh. I'm happy. Happier than I've ever been in my life. Thank you."

Then, holding me in her arms, she walked to the mouth of the grotto and stepped into the green-gold light beyond.

Somehow, here far beneath the ground, it was a garden. Warm sunlight filtered down through a canopy of fluttering green. From somewhere not far away came the bright sound of water. Birdsong and thistledown drifted on the air. For a time, I was motionless, entranced by the beauty of the place. Then all at once, memory rushed back to me. I turned around.

"Aliree?"

But all I saw were vine-covered stone walls and flowers nodding lazy heads. The half-elf was nowhere to be seen. I walked forward and breathed the sweet, scented air.

Walked forward? Breathed sweet air?

I didn't dare look; it couldn't be. But I had to know. Slowly, I glanced down. I saw him then, reflected in a clear pool of water: a man clad in green, his face boyish, kindly if not so very handsome, and framed by unruly brown hair. I blinked in shock, and so did he, and at that moment I knew we were one and the same. I lifted my hands—real hands, covered with warm flesh—and brought them to my face. Not hard bones, but soft, smooth skin.

"I'm alive," I whispered. Then all at once laughter took me, welling up like the clear water in the spring. "I'm alive!"

I did a dance, a foolish caper, but I didn't care. It felt so good to move legs, to swing arms, to feel a heart thump in my chest. Alive! I knelt by the pool and splashed water on my face, gulped some down. It was sweet, and so icy it hurt, but I relished both taste and sensation. Alive! I plucked a flower, held it to my nose, breathed its heady fragrance. The sunlight was so warm on my skin. Alive! Truly this place was the Grotto of Dreams. Lliira's joyous magic did dwell here. Aliree had been right.

Aliree...

The flower slipped from my fingers. Certainly she was here, somewhere in the grotto. Certainly she

had discovered her dream as had I.I had to find her, to show her my new self, to hug her tight in jubilation with living arms.

I ran through the garden, searching. Then I pushed through a tangle of wisteria and came to a halt.

"Aliree!" I started to call out, but all at once the word caught in my throat.

She lay on a bed of fern, beneath the trailing branches of a willow. Silvery leaves drifted down around her, falling like tears, tangling in her hair. Her eyes were shut, her hands folded over the bodice of her golden gown. Lilies bloomed around her, as pale as her skin.

I knew at once she was dead. It was the stillness. No living thing can ever be so perfectly, so beautifully still. I sank to my knees beside her. Tears slid down my cheeks. I thought the pain in my chest would strike me down. Oh, yes, I was indeed alive.

"Why, Aliree?" I whispered. "I thought your dream was to be cured. Why this?"

But even as I said the words, I knew the answer. She had told me herself. *I would give anything for the pain to be gone, just for a minute, just so I could sleep.* And now, at last, she had found what she wanted. Not a place where she might be rescued by some fleeting fantasy, but a place where she could be what she was, a place where the elven part of her could rest as well as the human. Sometimes, when you love something so much, all you can do is give it up.

"Sleep in peace, Aliree," I murmured. I bent forward and pressed my lips to hers, but they were already cool.

I'm not certain how long I knelt beside her. The angle of the sunlight never changed. I think time did not pass in that place. It would always be afternoon there, and early summer.

At last I stood and wiped the tears from my cheeks. "Good-bye, Aliree," I said. I turned away from her bier, and I did not look back.

I don't know how I found it. I simply thought of it, and it was there. A round circle, and shadows beyond. The entrance to the grotto, and the exit. The words echoed in my mind. I don't know if they were mine or someone else's.

Once you leave the Grotto of Dreams, you can never return.

I looked down at my hands, flexed the smooth, warm fingers. It felt so good to be alive. But it was only a dream, wasn't it? *Nothing can make you happy if you're not happy with what you already have, Muragh.* That's what Aliree had paid so much to learn. And if what I had was being an enchanted skull in Undermountain, then somehow I had to find happiness in that, just like Aliree had found in herself, in her lot, right before we entered the grotto. For one last moment, I gazed at my living hands. Then I sighed.

"Thank you, Aliree," I said.

Then I stepped into the circle of shadow and beyond.

The next morning, as usual, the cockatrice tried to sit on me. At first I couldn't muster the energy to so much as nibble it. Then I thought of Aliree, and what she had taught me. I owed it to her memory to at least try. I gathered my strength, then bit the cockatrice square on its scaly rump. It let out a squawk, flapped away, and glared at me with beady eyes.

Then, impossibly, in the midst of my sadness, I felt it: a small spark of glee. Somehow I knew Aliree would have approved. The spark grew to a flame.

"Watch out, Undermountain!" I said in my reedy voice. "The skull is back!"

With a laugh and a prayer, I rolled away into the gloom.

A Narrowed Gaze

Monte Cook

The Dark Eye of Gavinaas opened.

Magical power flared around it, crackling like fire as the Eye attempted to perceive its surroundings. It saw a dusty, cobweb-strewn room, golden chests locked tight, bejeweled treasures in glass cases---All of it sparkled in the Eye's own emerald light. It still did not know how it had come to this little chamber, though this was the third time it had awakened since it had found itself here.

Obviously, the mage Gavinaas was dead, for he would never have given up the Eye willingly; but the talisman had no way of telling how long ago such a thing had happened, or even how long it had been since it had last opened. Its power might have lain dormant for years.

This dusty, forgotten vault is no place for an artifact of incomparable power, it thought. The magically aware creation felt more entombed than enshrined here. A talisman like the Dark Eye belonged in the

possession of a great wizard, with whom it could conquer the world. It needed to find such a person.

Yet, as the Dark Eye reached outward with mystical sight, it quickly realized that now, as before, no deserving sorcerer dwelt anywhere within reach. Fine. Wizards could be made as well as found. The Dark Eye (formerly of Gavinaas) turned its mystical gaze in a familiar direction. The two previous times it had opened here in this vault, it had found someone with a presence greater than that of most wizards, anyway....

Yes. Oh, yes. The Eye narrowed. The subject was still nearby. It could taste his essence ... and a weakness that had not existed before.

This time, the Dark Eye mused, *this* time he will succumb.

* * * * *

Tiuren landed his griffon mount in the outer courtyard of the Royal Palace of Vantir. There was no time for the stables today. The message he had received yesterday from King Kohath, his lifelong friend, had said to come quickly—a terrible emergency held the palace in its grip. Rarely did the king summon the bard from his travels, and only when in dire need.

Vantir's most renowned bard took only a moment to run his fingers through his wind-tossed brown hair and over his short-trimmed beard before hurrying to the main gate, up the cobblestone walk, and into the green inner bailey. Royal guards with well-kept armor and little-used weapons acknowledged him with a nod. He all but ignored them. Without looking, he knew that more than one of them had raised an eyebrow at his worn traveling cloak, the color of the skies in which he flew. It did not look presentable for the palace, but there was no time to change.

"Tiuren, wait," a voice cried before he reached the palace doors.

He turned and saw Beanth, the keeper of the court. The matronly woman was worthy of great respect for her loyalty to the king and her ceaseless labor in managing the palace.

Tiuren paused as she hurried up to him. "What is it, Beanth? I received an ominous message—"

"Yes," the round-faced woman replied, lines of worry creasing her face. "It's the queen." Beanth seemed barely able to speak. "She's ... been cursed."

"What?" Skeptical, Tiuren scrutinized the woman. Always neatly attired and groomed, Beanth wore a long blue dress. She was well kept if not naturally lovely. Her face was grave. "A curse? That sounds like a child's tale."

"A message came, two days ago," she began in hushed tones, leaning close. "No one knows who it came from, but some sort of tiny, winged creature with reddish skin and horrible teeth delivered it. The fiend handed the king a scroll and then disappeared."

"What did it say?" Tiuren demanded.

"The scroll said a curse had been laid upon the queen," Beanth whispered, eyes wide, "and that she would waste away and die if Kohath did not step down from his throne and put a wizard in his place forever-more."

"What sort of foul dealings are these?" Tiuren growled.

King Kohath had been one of the staunchest opponents of unbridled sorcery in these days when magic flowed like water. Beanth herself owed her life to the king. A decade prior, he had driven off a powerful group of Netherese wizards seeking to conquer tiny Vantir, and Beanth's village would have been the first to fall.

Such a threat must have come from a wizard, Tiuren reasoned, but that did little to narrow down the list of suspects. Everyone knew that Kohath's love for his wife knew no bounds. He would do anything for her. Tiuren cursed the fiend who would use such a laudable quality against a man.

"Surely these are lies, or a mischievous trick." Tiuren raved. "The king should just ignore this strange missive until he finds the culprit." He turned back toward the palace doors, but Beanth's quiet words brought him again to a halt.

"Would that he could, good Tiuren." Beanth's voice was as soft as the bard's was hard. She dropped her gaze. "The queen has already fallen ill. Yesterday, terrible lesions appeared on her body. The court physicians, unable to help, say that she's steadily getting worse." Her eyes closed tightly. "They say she'll die within the next few days."

* * * * *

Together, the bard and the warrior-king had seen cities crumble and mountains rise up from lowland

plains. Noble men had been brought low before them, and babes had spoken to them with strange words of wisdom.

Each night, the tavern walls of Vantir resounded with tales of their exploits.

Level-headed Tiuren, sometimes called the Rhymer of Reason, was the perfect companion of Kohath, a warrior of boundless passions. They were brain and brawn in perfect harmony. The pair had explored the surrounding lands together, keeping the realm safe from evil at every turn. Yet after all these years, Tiuren had never seen his friend in such anguish.

"Is there nothing Darius or the other wizards can do?" the bard asked plaintively as he crossed the room to Kohath. The king stood, distraught, beside a velvet chair.

"Do?" Kohath asked. His calm, regal features flared into instant anger. "They talk! They study her as she lies in her sickbed, and they ponder thoughtfully." He mockingly nodded and rubbed his graying beard. He gave Tiuren a scowl. "They do nothing."

Tiuren knew better than to say more. Like Kohath, he understood little of the ways of sorcery, and even less about curses. Tiuren distractedly drummed his fingers upon the pommel of his sheathed sword. Then, unfastening the clasp of his traveling cloak, he tossed the garment on the chair next to the king. More than even his own chambers in the palace, the young bard was accustomed to this plain, lamplit antechamber. He and Kohath had discussed so many things here—made so many plans to protect and nurture the realm.

Tiuren had not yet gone to the royal chambers to see Queen Diccona, but he had heard the whispers in the court—dreadful descriptions of her dry flesh slowly peeling from her bones. Hearing of it was bad enough, but seeing it...

Kohath interrupted his musings. His face appeared calm again, fallen and tired. "So, my friend. You've always given me such clear, rational counsel whenever I had need. Never have I needed you more. What would you advise me to do?"

"Well—and forgive me if I speak out of turn—but don't you have advisors for your advising?"

Kohath almost smiled. "They've advised and advised and said nothing." The massive warrior began to pace, as Tiuren could have predicted. Always the man of action, the king was more comfortable moving than standing still. "No one in this kingdom can do or say anything that helps me." Kohath looked suddenly very small in Tiuren's eyes. He trudged to the room's only window and stared absently out at the night. "Do not tell me that you, too, are barren of support for your king in his worst hour."

"When have I ever been without words?" The words were spoken glibly, but it was futile to try to lighten the king's spirit, even for a moment.

Kohath turned to face him. Tiuren saw his constant companion of many years differently than ever before.

Gray encroached on his bushy black beard and temples, and wrinkles now outnumbered battle scars.

Sighing, Tiuren said finally, "I know you too well, Kohath. My words sound as the bleating of a sheep upon your ears at this moment. You know I have no sudden insight into your problem. You will do what you knew you would do from the moment your fair wife fell under this spell."

"It means the throne." The king spoke quietly, his head low. "The kingdom. My entire line—all gone."

"Yes." Tiuren crossed the room to join his friend at the window.

"You know that I love her that much, don't you?"

"Yes."

"You know me well, then."

There was little more to say. Passions were the lifeblood of this man. His love, his hate, his loyalty—these things knew no limits. They were not bound by circumstance, logic, ego, or even the value Kohath would put on his own life. The king loved the land of Vantir like none before him—but he loved his wife more.

"We don't know for sure the curse will be lifted after you consent to the demands." Tiuren leaned against the wall.

"I'm willing to take that chance." Kohath attempted a smile, but it turned into a grimace. "It is the only one I have."

Kohath gave his friend one more look, as if seeking inspiration. Then he dropped his gaze, turned, and left the chamber through the curtained door.

Tiuren would have given anything at that moment to inspire Kohath, to suddenly cheat fate as they had so many times in the past. But no. All he could think to say was, "Remember, my friend, the sun still shines, somewhere___"

He doubted the king heard him. Just as well.

Tiuren sighed. The next time he would see his friend, he would no longer be king.

* * * * *

The next morning was long in coming. After leaving Kohath, Tiuren had stood outside the royal chambers where the queen lay dying. He could have mustered up the courage to see her in her horrid state, but he knew his sorrow at Kohath's sacrifice would be plain on his face. Abdication could never be the right thing for the king. To lose a nation for one soul? Especially this soul. Tiuren had never understood what Kohath saw in Diccona.

Finally, the sound of a chambermaid coming down the corridor had chased him off. Deciding it would be best for all concerned to leave her alone, Tiuren had gone to his chambers and made motions to greet the sleep that never came.

Dressing slowly, his mind in a gray haze like the morning sky outside his window, Tiuren steeled himself for what lay ahead. He refused breakfast when the servant brought it, instead brushing past him and heading down the stairs to the great hall.

When Tiuren arrived, he found Count Darius waiting at the bottom of the stair, before the open doors of the hall. The thin, angular wizard had arrayed himself in great fineries of velvet and lace. His face was stony, but something in his eyes betrayed his excitement at the events about to unfold. Tiuren wondered if Darius's anticipation was simply natural—indeed, how often does a man learn he is about to become king?—or if it meant something more. A wizard was behind the terrible curse. Could Darius—no, a milksop such as Darius could never master such a bold plan.

The two entered the great hall together. They exchanged no words or acknowledgments. Tiuren felt no need to ingratiate himself before the sudden heir apparent, and Darius seemed preoccupied with concerns beyond pleasantries with a mere bard. Tiuren was tolerated at court only due to his friendship with Kohath.

The masses of people filling the hall all had dressed in regalia that seemed out of place so early in the morning. Their whispers grew to a deafening roar. How many of them had come to support their king, and how many simply hungered for the spectacle? Tiuren suspected many more attended for the latter reason. Leeches and carrion eaters, these people had no real loyalty to the king.

Tiuren would not miss these days at court.

The room fell silent as Kohath, king of Vantir, entered the hall. Tiuren was surprised to see the monarch wearing only loose, leather riding clothes. Judging by the gasps of surprise and the looks of confusion, his appearance surprised others in the room as well.

The king strode to the center of the dais, halting before the throne. Without pausing—even for a sigh of resignation—Kohath drew his blade, the sword *Tamer-rung*, and knelt before it, with the sword's point on the ground.

"I, Kohath, renounce the throne of Vantir."

The hall erupted in murmurs, punctuated by a handful of outraged shouts.

Without hesitation, the king continued, louder. "I claim before all present, mortals before me and immortals all around me, that I and my line are unfit to rule a kingdom such as this."

Tiuren was amazed at Kohath's resignation and uncharacteristic lack of emotion.

"Only a true sovereign of wizardry, one who understands the higher worlds, can claim mastery of this great land. My last act as king is to name Darius, great in the ways of sorcery, as my successor."

Gracefully, Kohath stood and drew out the scepter of office that had been tucked within his shirt. There was no quiver in his stance, despite the dour deed he had just committed. Kohath tossed the scepter onto the throne and left the chamber, accompanied only by the silence of the crowd.

Darius hurried toward the dais. The count—or rather, the new king—appeared to have thought that Kohath would remain to congratulate him.

Such a fool will make a terrible king, the bard predicted. *He* knew that Kohath was even now making his way to Diccona's chambers to see if his sacrifice had lifted the curse.

Tiuren slipped quickly out of the great hall to try to catch up with him. If Kohath ever needed a friend, it was now.

* * * * *

"The curse is lifted! Former Queen Diccona recovers quickly! She and the former king will soon leave the palace, and Vantir itself!"

Tiuren overheard the news even as he pushed through the buzzing crowds. He had to reach his friend quickly and find out his plans. The passages of the palace swelled with people excited or disturbed by the recent events.

The heavy wooden door leading into the chambers stood slightly ajar, and Tiuren pushed it open, evoking an unwanted squeak from the hinges. A small antechamber stood between the door and the bedroom. Despite his years of friendship with the king, Tiuren had been to the royal chambers only once or twice. Knowing it was proper to announce his presence, he called out a greeting, but no one answered. Without further hesitation, he parted the thick red curtain covering the entrance to the bedchamber.

The next few moments' exploration determined that the dimly lit royal chambers were empty. A wave of guilt passed over Tiuren—he should not be here, he thought. Before his thoughts could become action, however, he heard a noise. The door to the chamber was opening.

Tiuren found himself in an awkward situation, and he quickly began thinking up excuses for why he had violated the privacy of the royal chambers. As his mind worked on explanations, his eyes scanned the room for a hiding spot. He found concealment much quicker than a good excuse, and so leapt within a wardrobe filled with regal garments. The curtain separating the foyer and the bedchamber parted as soon as he turned around within the wardrobe—there was not even time to close the door.

Figures passed through the curtain. Diccona, the queen, slipped in clandestinely, accompanied by another. The shadowy form waited near the entrance as Diccona looked about and then quietly announced that they were alone. Tiuren could hardly keep from gasping in surprise when Count Darius took hold of the queen around her hips and pulled her to him, kissing her deeply. *Darius?*

Without another word, the two disappeared into the next room. Tiuren's mind reeled. He had to get out of here—what was going on? None of this made sense. Suddenly, the squeak of the door betrayed yet another intruder.

But no, this was Kohath. He stepped into the chamber and moved toward a stout chest on the wall opposite the wardrobe. Deep in thought, Kohath began busily packing a brown leather bag with clothing and personal belongings. His mood seemed surprisingly enthusiastic, considering the situation—his eyes retained at least a little of their former spark.

Kohath seemed oblivious to what had occurred moments ago. How could he tell his friend what he had seen, especially after all that had already transpired? Moreover, *what* would he tell him? None of it made sense to Tiuren.

As the bard watched, still unsure what to do, he saw something out of the corner of his eye. He pulled back farther into the concealing clothes in the wardrobe. The sight before him made him regret his hesitation.

Diccona approached her husband from the next room. Only her silhouette was visible in the dark doorway where she emerged.

"Oh, you're here," Kohath stated, smiling, but not looking up. "Are you packed yet, my darling?" He continued his work as the queen drew near.

A glint of light caught Tiuren's eye. No! A knife blade, cold and metallic in the light from the nearby window, rose above Diccona's head, a slender arm carrying it down toward the hunched form of the former king. It went in with the speed and smoothness of sorcery. Diccona sank the long blade up to its hilt into Kohath's lower neck.

Kohath's response was only a low moan of pain and surprise as he turned toward his attacker. A warrior such as he would not die quickly, even from such a lethal blow. There was possibly time for Tiuren to act, but what should he do? Could he strike the queen? Would Kohath even want him to?

Tiuren readied himself to spring from the wardrobe, but instinct gave him pause. There was yet another figure in the darkness behind Diccona—oh, yes, the wizard Darius! Kohath collapsed to his knees, his shirt now drenched in blood—and then fell heavily onto his back, looking up wordlessly at his wife.

Only then did the new king move forward, laying a familiar hand on Diccona's soft shoulder.

The illness had been a ploy—a plot to unseat Kohath using the queen, who had never been in any real danger. She had betrayed Kohath—but worse, Kohath also now knew. How better it would have been for him to die not knowing that his own love, for whom he had renounced all, had not only betrayed him, but had done so *counting* on the fact that he would make such a sacrifice.

Although a storyteller known for his imagination, Tiuren could not conceive of the pain a man of such strong passions as Kohath was feeling right now.

"Diccona..." Kohath managed to sputter. His eyes narrowed, filled not with the love that had always been there, but with hatred. His emotional misery surely surpassed the physical pain—though neither lasted long. The murderous pair watched, expressionlessly staring at their victim, as Kohath died.

Though not a coward, Tiuren realized he had to flee. Kohath was dead. The whole thing had caught the bard with his guard down. He had not acted fast enough to save his friend—he had not acted at all. But what could he have done? Unarmed and unprepared, he could have probably overcome Diccona, but Darius was certainly armed, and a sorcerer. Either way, Kohath would have died.

No, Tiuren had to run—for the moment, the pair had their backs to him. He had to act fast. He had to reveal the new king's insidious plot. Maybe he could not save his friend, but he could avenge him. He sprang from the wardrobe and ran for the door.

Tiuren was quick, but not quick enough. As he left the bedchamber and dived into the antechamber, the door slammed shut, seemingly of its own accord. He reached it and tugged, but it held fast. His foe had cut him off using some sort of spell. Count—*King* Darius stood behind him, a curved blade in his hand, his skin crackling with amber lightning of magical origins. Tiuren whirled to face the wizard, his hand instinctively going for a sword that wasn't there.

"Tiuren," the evil wizard said flatly. "Always where you aren't wanted."

Steely eyed, Diccona stood behind Darius, her arm casually resting on his shoulder, her other hand still covered in her husband's blood.

"How... how could you do this?" Tiuren asked, directing the question toward Diccona. As he spoke, he pressed his body against the door behind him, still attempting to somehow get it open. No use—he was trapped.

"It was simple," Diccona boasted. Her long black hair whipped about her face as she grew excited at their victory. "The old fool did it to himself, really. I married him for power. He married me for love. Now I am with Darius, who will bring Vantir to new heights with his wizardry. I have more power than ever, and Kohath is dead." She paused to glance back at her husband's body.

"How could I?" The queen laughed. "How could I not?"

"With the growing magical might of the larger, more powerful kingdoms like Netheril, Asram, and Anauria, how long could we have survived without a wizard on the throne?" Darius said, stepping closer, clenching the knife more firmly. "This land needs me. Diccona needs me. Neither needs a foolish old sword-swinger blinded by emotions."

"No," Tiuren protested, bracing himself against the locked door. "Kohath's love for his wife, however misplaced, was a virtue, not a shortcoming. And no one has ever or will ever do more for this kingdom than he," With that, he sprang at Darius, throwing his own body into his foe, sending both crashing down. The knife clattered to the floor, and Tiuren lunged for it.

He never made it. Hot, searing fingers jabbed him in the back. Magical energies reached into his guts and twisted him from the inside. He wrenched himself around so he lay on his back, his body rigid with pain.

Diccona stood over him, dark eyes smoldering, an evil grimace contorting her face. She had cast a spell upon him. Gods! She was a wizard too.

By this time, Darius had righted himself and retrieved the knife. His forehead bore a red welt from hitting the floor, not enough of a wound to disable him. Besides, Tiuren could not even move, his body so cramped with agony.

It was all over.

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The Dark Eye marveled at the incredible ease with which love could be manipulated, twisted into hate. And such hate. As it watched the events unfolding in the palace above, it realized that no mortal it had ever known had burned with such passionate malice. The Eye suddenly concluded that a mortal's emotions had much greater power than it had ever dreamt.

The intensity of the feeling was perfect for its purposes. This Kohath was perfect. The fact that he was dead made him even better. After observing Kohath's emotional transformation, the Eye began magically working upon his physical transformation. Soon, the Dark Eye would have a new tool.

* * * * *

From his position on the floor, Tiuren glanced over to his fallen friend. He wanted to look upon him one last time before Darius buried the knife in his own chest.

How could it be? He had never seen anything like it...

Kohath's flesh—the skin, muscles, and organs—had almost completely liquified. Most of his friend's

bones and skull were already visible, glistening wet in the fading light from the window. Even worse, the bones were shaking in some sort of death palsy. Tiuren had seen death before, but never like this.

Rather than focus on this disturbing sight—it had to be a delusion, the bard told himself—Tiuren turned back to his attackers. Diccona still reveled in the success of her dark spell. Darius muttered something unintelligible while gently stroking his head wound and summoning his strength for the deathblow.

Suddenly, the wizard's face curled into a visage of utter pain, his mouth forming a silent scream. The upraised dagger glowed white-hot. Wisps of smoke issued from between his fingers. He unclenched his hand to drop the weapon, but it was already seared to his flesh. He dropped to his knees, stuttering out a high-pitched sob, his unhurt hand squeezing his wrist to force the knife from him.

Diccona saw this and screamed in terror. She had enough intuition to turn around, though the sight was probably one she would rather have missed.

Tiuren's attention was meanwhile drawn to the presence within the bedchamber.

The skeletal figure of a man, still dripping with the remains of his flesh and blood, stood. His jaw mouthed horrible but unintelligible words.

Kohath?

Who else could it be? But how could Kohath, or whatever Kohath had so quickly become, stand here in the room where his corpse had lain just moments before? Could a man's passions allow him to defy even death? Could hate be so powerful a force?

With terror-filled eyes, Darius and Diccona looked at the risen Kohath.

"Kohath? Is that you?" Diccona asked, her voice cracking with fear.

The monstrous thing turned his head toward his traitorous wife. With a hideous creaking, a bony arm rose from his side. The fingers of the hand curled as if clutching some unseen object. A high-pitched whine began.

Darius turned to flee.

"Kohath?" Diccona said again, frozen in place.

The whine had become very loud now, as though its source drew ever closer. Darius dispelled his magical seal and dived out the door.

"Ko—"

The horrible whine drowned out Diccona's words. A dark object entered the room from the open door, hovering four or five feet from the floor—riding on the whine itself. Tiuren had only to look upon its oval shape and dark green color for a moment before he recognized it.

"The Dark Eye of Gavinaas!" he shouted, struggling to his feet.

He and Kohath had slain Gavinaas long ago, when the evil Anaurian wizard had threatened tiny Vantir's northern reaches with a conjured army of misshapen monsters. They had locked the wizard's talisman away in a deep vault below the palace. Now it was here.

The object flew into Kohath's outstretched hand, which grasped it so tightly Tiuren could hear a crushing sound. Only then did his mind register that the piercing whine had stopped. Kohath's skull turned its black, empty sockets toward him for the first time.

"No," Kohath rasped in a voice that seemed to originate from somewhere far, far away, "the Dark Eye of Kohath."

Realization washed over Tiuren, causing him to step backward with a gasp. "The Dark Eye caused this?"

"No," Kohath said again in his grinding mockery of articulation. "The Dark Eye only permitted me to do what I must." Kohath turned back toward Diccona, his skeletal body moving with a disturbing fluidity. His free hand pointed a single bony finger at her. "She caused this."

Diccona screamed.

"The Dark Eye has given me power," Kohath said, "but my reasons—my motives—are my own. Look upon me and remember this. After the wrongs wrought upon me this day, I do what I do willingly."

Diccona began the frantic gestures of a spell.

"So, my dear," Kohath said, his hideous skull glaring at the queen. "You wanted magical power. You wanted a wizard as a king and as a lover. Let me now show you power." With that, he released his grip upon the Dark Eye, which floated slowly up to his brow, attaching itself as a ghastly third eye.

Skeletal arms upraised, Kohath cast a spell of his own.

Tiuren had no knowledge of sorcery, but Kohath's spell seemed to him a thundering avalanche of boulders crashing down a mountainside in comparison to Diccona's meager stone flung without skill. The spell she cast was lost in the rising magical might summoned by Kohath and his Dark Eye.

The floor beneath the three figures began to quiver. A rumbling rose all around, and the temperature

began to climb. Tiuren could remain no longer. Terror, more from seeing what had become of his friend than for his own well-being, forced him out the door and down the hall. Diccona's screams rang long in his ears.

The entire palace shook. On the stair, Tiuren met a handful of guards who raced upward, their faces filled with dread.

"No," Tiuren told them, shaking his head. "There's nothing you can do. Flee."

"But the king. The queen. We must—" a guard said, pushing past. He referred to Kohath, not Darius, Tiuren could tell.

"Do as you wish. Your life is your own—but you no longer have a king, and quite possibly no longer a queen."

"Gods!" another guard cried. "What has happened?"

"There is no time." Tiuren did what he could to keep his voice level and calm. "Flee." Without looking to see what decision these good, loyal men made, he raced down the stairs.

As he reached the bottom, the shaking intensified. The temperature continued to rise as he made his way toward the foyer, the doors, and the way out.

Something grabbed his arm and wrenched him backward. It was Darius, knife still clutched in his hand, breathing erratically.

"Tell me," he rasped, "what is going on?" The knife rose toward Tiuren's throat.

Tiuren had endured enough of this wretch's threats and demands. He shifted his weight toward the wizard, knocking him off balance, and grabbed at the arm holding the blade, turning it away.

Darius reacted quickly. Fear-strengthened muscles twisted the knife back toward the bard.

Tiuren threw his body into Darius. The two tumbled to the floor as some of the ceiling supports gave way from the shuddering quake and bits of plaster and wood crashed near them. As the two struck the floor, Tiuren made sure the knife found a home—in Darius's chest.

Tiuren rolled and gained his feet. The floor cracked open near him, steam and sulfurous air belching out of the ever-widening opening. Rumbles and crashes as loud as he had ever heard told him the upper levels of the palace had collapsed.

By the time he had reached the doors, steam and smoke clogged the air, choking him. He slipped out into the courtyard. Bodies lay everywhere, covered by rubble, crushed by what looked like—as near as Tiuren could tell—most of the south watchtower. A gaping hole in the curtain wall was all that marked where it had stood. Tiuren was dismayed to see so many friends among the fallen. Even noble Beanth lay under the ruined tower.

Kohath's slaying wrath was indiscriminate. The dead king's quest for vengeance knew no bounds.

The shaking of the earth continued, and fire burst forth from the numerous fissures opening all around Tiuren. He could do nothing—he couldn't even see anyone for him to help escape. Realizing that there was no time to reach the stables (if indeed they still stood), he ran for the opening in the wall, thunderous crashes and the roar of spurting molten rock behind him. Fire from within Faerun itself was consuming the fortress.

Across the rolling hills, Tiuren ran until he could no longer hear the rumbling or feel the vibration of the ground and the unnatural scorching heat on his back. In the distance, only a reddish, hellish glow marked the palace. He collapsed from exhaustion.

* * * * *

Weeks later, Tiuren stood at the edge of what was once-beautiful Vantir.

Nothing in his experience could have prepared him for the sight of his homeland smoldering like a charnel pit. The stench of death pervaded the air. Smoke filled the sky, dragging the whole realm into an unending night.

After he had destroyed the palace and surrounding city, Kohath had systematically razed the nearby towns and villages. The smoke that choked the sun rose from burning homes, trees, crops, livestock, and even people. All that had been Vantir now burned. Of the inhabitants of the dead land, precious few had escaped. Kohath had, intentionally and methodically, slain his own kingdom.

Yet Tiuren lived. He could not help wondering if somehow, deep within the creature that was once Kohath, his friend had let him escape. Perhaps he owed his life to that undead monster. Buried within it, his friend possibly lived on. Yet if Kohath could lay waste to the land he loved, the man Tiuren knew was so utterly lost in the cavernous pit of his soul that he had no chance of ever escaping. He wondered if somewhere, immersed in that darkness, Kohath—the *real* Kohath—despaired.

The new Kohath was different. A few mortals had escaped his realm, and told of its horrors.

Deep within the dark land of death, on the site of the old palace of Vantir, Kohath used sorcery and undead slaves to build a new fortress. This fortress was made from the bones and flesh of the fallen citizens of Vantir. In this subterranean castle, the former king had begun to call himself Kohath the Eternal.

Tiuren knew no reason to think the moniker an idle boast. Nor did he intend to find out. Never again would he bring himself to utter the names Kohath or Vantir.

Faerun was a big place, and there were certainly other realms in which to live out the rest of his life. Without another look, he turned his back on his former home, his former friend and king, and his former life.

The Whispering Crown

Ed Greenwood

The young Lady of Dusklake stood alone in her feast hall, in the last golden gleam of the setting sun, and waited to die.

Dusklake and Grand Thentor had been at war for only a day now—but the battle between Aerindel and Rammast, Lord of Grand Thentor, had begun when they were both children. He had wanted her to be his slave and plaything for more than a dozen years—and Rammast was not a man accustomed to waiting long for anything.

He would come for her, and soon. Aerindel wondered if she'd be strong enough to hold on to the three things she valued most: her freedom, her land ... and her life.

Knowing what was coming, she'd sent the servants away—but she also knew that eyes were watching her anxiously from behind parted tapestries and doors that hadn't quite closed. The eyes of those who feared she might take her own life.

The news of her brother's death lay like a heavy cloak over the household—but it rested most heavily on the Lady Aerindel. She could not quite believe she'd never hear his bright laughter echoing in this high hall again, or feel his strong arms lift her by her slim waist and whirl her high into the air.

But the news had been blunt and clear enough. Dabras was dead by dragonfire, the grim old warriors had said, proffering his half-melted sword hilt and their own scorched wounds as proof. And that made her ruler of Dusklake.

Though a small realm, Dusklake had once been widely known—and feared—for the man then its master: the mage Thabras Stormstaff. Thabras was Aerindel's faintly smiling, sad-eyed father. He was the mightiest of a long line of famous heads of House Summertyn, from Orbrar the Old, the grandfather that Aerindel had never known, to Asklas and Ornthorn and others in the early days, known only in legends. A small but proud hold, oldest of all the Esmeltaran, Dusklake was nestled in the rolling woodlands between Lake Esmel and the Cloud Peaks. And it was hers, now.

If she could hold it. Aerindel looked grimly out through a window that was seven times her height, at the lake the land was named for. Its waters were dark and placid, at the end of a bright, cool summer day. The Green Fields to the north were still a sheet of golden light, but westward, the purple peaks of the Ridge rose like a dark wall, bringing an early nightfall down on her hall.

A night that would surely bring Rammast. Dusklake was small but verdant, perhaps the fairest of all the Esmeltaran. Rammast wanted it more even than he wanted her.

Aerindel looked at the fire-scarred blob that was all she had left of dear Dabras, and drew in a deep, unhappy breath. She would cry no more, whatever the hours ahead brought. She was a Summertyn, even if her slim arms were too feeble to swing a warrior's sword.

Her spells might serve her where his sword had failed him—though she hoped never to be foolish and battle-hungry enough to go off to the distant Dales, as he had, hunting dragons. It was the year 902 there, she thought dully, recalling the words of a far-traveled trader... but there, as here, it was the Year of the Queen's Tears.

How fitting. She had wept for hours, two nights ago, clinging to the fire-scarred warriors as if their unhappy memories and awkward soothings could somehow bring Dabras back to life... wept until she was exhausted and fell asleep in their arms.

Sometime the next day—yesterday—she'd been awakened in her own bed by a frightened chambermaid, bringing in the oh-so-polite missive from Rammast.

He grieved for her loss, the flowery-scrolled words read, and hoped to be of help in her time of need. With the world growing ever darker and more dangerous, there is no one in Faerun who can stand alone in

safety, without friends.

Dusklake now stands in need of strong swords to defend it against brigands and the ores of the mountains, Rammast's words went on—and Grand Thentor had need of her magic, just as his heart had need of her hand. A wise woman would gladly see that the union of their two lands would set them all on the road to a brighter future; but if she lacked that wisdom or inclination, his duty was clear. His people needed the protection of a sorceress, and he must win her by formal duel if not by willing submission. At the next going down of the sun, he would come for her answer.

It had taken all of Aerindel's brittle self-control to keep from crumpling and shredding the parchment in fearful fury. She had grown less and less fond of darkly handsome, cruel Rammast as the years had passed.

In the pale, slim, so often silent days of her youth, he'd been the first man to look upon her with hunger in his eyes. Later, he had been the first to see that though she'd inherited the rings and staff and spellbooks of the mighty Thabras, her magic was no more than a feeble, faltering echo of his ... and that Dusklake, secure for so long behind his might, had far fewer hardened warriors to ride to its defense than other neighboring holds could muster.

Once, at a wedding in Hulduth Hold, he'd been particularly forceful in his attentions during a private walk in the gardens. Freeing herself from his grasp, Aerindel had made her own feelings about him coldly and crisply plain. Unperturbed, Rammast had given her the special swift, sly grin he used when gloating, and told her softly that one day Dusklake would be his, and her with it—as his slave, willing and eager to serve him once his magic controlled her wits.

Now, the final taunting words of his missive said that his own magic remained regrettably inadequate to the task of defending Grand Thentor against its foes, but that he had learned some measure of... control. He hoped she'd remember, and greet his suit fondly.

Aerindel hadn't heard anything of Rammast's own dabblings in magic since he'd inherited Grand Thentor—beyond a few rumors of summoned beasts running amok and hired hedge-wizard tutors disappearing mysteriously. His reminder of wanting her as a mind-controlled slave, however, was clear enough. And that confidence meant that he'd measured her magic, and knew himself to be clearly the more powerful of the two.

Bringing her thoughts back to here and now, Aerindel licked lips that had gone dry and glanced again at the banner-pole, one of a pair flanking the tall window. The pole was really her father's staff. No doubt she'd be needing it soon.

She would need it, and some greater magical aid or ally she knew not where to find, let alone to plead with. What could she give in payment? Herself and her land were all she had... and the very things Rammast sought. She could see no way to keep from losing one—or both—before dawn.

Night was coming down swiftly now, the last light fading from the still waters of the lake.

Then, suddenly, she saw him: a lone, dark figure walking steadily across the lake toward her—walking upon the waters as if they were a vast courtyard. He spent the spell to show her how powerful he was, powerful enough that he could afford to waste magic before a duel.

Aerindel turned slowly, her dark gown rustling about her hips, and wondered idly why she'd dressed in her best finery to meet her most hated enemy. Looking all around the hall, she raised her voice and said calmly to the unseen watchers, "Withdraw, all of you. Danger comes swiftly."

She turned back to the window in time to see Ram-mast Tarangar smile broadly in sardonic greeting, incline his head to her, and raise one hand.

The bright bolt that burst from it shattered the tall window from top to bottom, sending singing shards of glass flying down the chamber like scattered fragments of a rainbow.

The Lady of Dusklake did not flinch. "This a strange man," Aerindel observed, her voice calmer than it might have been, "whose wooing takes the form of battle."

Rammast stepped through the empty window frame and into the room, the tiny lightning of a warding spell flickering briefly about his shoulders. When no attack came, he glanced around the room, seeking warriors with ready weapons. Finding none, he smiled at her more broadly, advancing across the tiles at an insolent stroll.

"You are as beautiful as ever, my lady," he said to her through his smile, "and your tongue remains as cold and cruel as I recall. Yet tongues can be tamed, Aerindel."

"Ah, but can ambition also be tamed, Lord Rammast? I am not 'your lady;' not now, not ever. Yet I see no need not to be the ally of Grand Thentor. Our two realms can be friendly without our being wed ... or my taking up the position you suggested."

Rammast's eyes burned into hers. "Ah, but I believe you'll enjoy being my slave. You'll find me the

most gentle and thoughtful of men—until I have two strong sons to be my heirs." He shrugged. "By then, of course, you may have grown weary of being my consort, or of being Lady of Dusklake, or even—who knows?—of life itself."

They both heard an angry gasp from behind a tapestry, as one of the warriors who'd refused to leave his lady wrestled with his temper. Rammast casually raised a hand and sent lightning crackling along that side of the room. In two places, down the long sweep of tapestries, forms stiffened, slid down the far side of the heavy cloth, and lay still.

The Lord of Grand Thentor raised an eyebrow. "Am I too late, Lady? Have you consorts already?"

Aerindel bit her lip, trembling in grief and rage, until she could master her words. He waited, smiling mockingly, until she opened her mouth deliberately and said, "In Dusklake we have laws against slaying, Lord Rammast—and you now stand in violation of those laws. Are you willing to submit to my justice, or is it to be war between us?"

Rammast raised his other eyebrow. "Are you threatening me?"

With the same casual ease as last time, he cast lightning along the other side of the hall, scarring hangings and statues alike. "Or do you just ache to see me on my knees?"

"It's a pose you've no doubt pictured me in often enough," Aerindel replied grimly, raising her own hands to weave a spell.

Rammast smiled broadly and, with a formal bow, beckoned her magic toward him. "I wondered how long you'd tremble and haw before loosing some of that vast and mighty magic all of us in the Esmeltaran talk about! Hurl away, bright lady!" He crossed his arms and stood waiting.

Roaring pinwheels of green flame were his reply, snarling out of the empty air around her slim fingers to fly at him, spinning and expanding.

Rammast stood unmoving as they reached him and burst—and for the briefest of moments Aerindel thought she could see their dying flashes *through* him. Then he yawned and stepped forward again.

"Your fame is not undeserved," he said lightly, dismissive boredom in his tone. "Impressive. Very impressive." And he opened his hand.

Something small fluttered from it: a serpent with wings. It circled his head once as Aerindel quickly cast another spell, and then it flew toward her.

A stream of lightning flashed at Rammast. Two crackling arcs curled aside to meet the flying thing, but expired in brief halos as they encountered some sort of shield around it.

The Lord of Grand Thentor stood immobile, still smiling, as her lightning lashed him. Aerindel saw the snake swooping at her, and ducked away—but it followed, eyes bright and fangs agape. It was glistening, wet with slime, and mottled like an uncooked sausage.

She hissed a quick magical shield as she retreated from it—but the very air shattered with screams and flashing radiances as the flying monster darted right through her magic.

Aerindel covered her face as it roared down at her—and her cry was answered by the crack of a crossbow, fired from a high balcony.

The Lady of Dusklake rolled and hit out at the serpent. Above, she saw a crossbow bolt halt in midair, catch fire from end to end with blue flame that did not consume it, and spin around to race back the way it had come.

There was a despairing shout an instant before it struck, and blue fire burst forth in a blast that outlined the bones of the Duskan warrior—before it hurled them, fleshless and glowing, around the room.

Aerindel felt a painful tug on her scalp. Something was pulling her hair—oh, gods, no!

Rammast smiled down at her. "It's eating your hair, Lady... and mind: you're getting your best gown all dirty, rolling around like that. Show a little dignity, now: come up at least to your knees. My little pet will take care of your gown after it's bared your scalp. And then you'll be wearing shoes, too, won't you? It should be a good while before it gets around to eating your eyelashes."

Aerindel screamed, rolling frantically in an attempt to dislodge the thing. It was leaving a wet, slimy trail through her hair, and went on biting and tearing as if she'd done nothing, even when she drew her belt-knife and stabbed it repeatedly. It was a thing of magic, immune to her steel.

Rammast smiled indulgently at her and then strolled around the room, looking critically at the tapestries and statues. "Your father's taste wasn't as bad as I'd heard," he said grudgingly, ignoring Aerindel's sobs.

She frantically rose to cast a purging spell on herself. "*Get out of my house?*" she snarled at him as she finally felt the gnawing serpent fade away to nothingness. "You cold-blooded *bastard!*"

Rammast turned to meet her furious gaze, shook his head with a disapproving sigh, and opened his hand again. Another serpent flew from his hand—and as she screamed in despair, he chuckled heartily and strolled in her direction.

"Perhaps your gown first, and the hair later," he suggested. "I suspect you're the superior of any of these rather contorted maids on pedestals your father collected. Was your mother particularly ugly, or did he just have odd tastes?"

Through tears of utter fury, Aerindel spat her last battle spell, sending a ravaging purple cloud of flesh-eating radiance in his direction.

"Oooh," Rammast said in appreciation. "My, my." And he faded away, leaving her spell with nothing to slay. It rolled out over the lake, vainly seeking something to do to death.

Abruptly the darkly handsome Lord of Grand Thentor was standing beside her, a mocking smile on his face, as his second serpent flashed down over her shoulder to sink its fangs into her bodice.

Aerindel screamed.

"On your knees, Lady," Rammast suggested gently. "Remember?"

He waved a hand, and she felt an unseen force pressing her down. With a snarl she hissed her last dispel, wiping it away along with the sharp-fanged serpent.

He smiled even more broadly, and opened his hand again. Another serpent flapped its wings in his palm, eyeing her with glittering amusement.

"Perhaps one eyelash," her foe said calmly, "to remember me by."

And as the serpent sprang from his hand, Aerindel found that she had no spells left. Clapping her hands protectively over eyes that streamed tears of rage and despair, she snarled a certain word.

On the wall beside the shattered window, the Storm-staff flashed into life—and lightning lashed forth like great tentacles to encircle the Thentan intruder, and drag him up into the air.

Even as he struggled in the grip of its awesome energies and the white fire of its fury burst forth from his skin, Rammast smiled down at her. "So that is how paltry your spells are—and those are the words that awaken your father's staff. My thanks, Aerindel. You've been most helpful—if far more feeble a foe than I thought. Don't bother taking your own life; I shall merely bring you back from death to serve me."

The lightning was beginning to tear him apart now, but the lord of Grand Thentor showed no pain as he added, "You could fix your hair and change your gown, though. I will come for you."

And then, with a last sneering smile, his false body faded away, leaving her lightning nothing to ravage.

The Lady of Dusklake sent the lightning racing out over the lake before it could do any harm to the hall or any of her folk, and then went to her knees and wept for a long time in the shattered chamber.

When she could weep no more, Aerindel fell silent and threw herself full-length onto the floor. Lying with the smooth stone cold and hard against one cheek, she murmured the words that would bring the comforting length of the Stormstaff into her hands.

It flew to her, and she clutched it like a drowning sailor clings to a spar as she went down into haunted darkness....

* * * * *

"L-Lady? Lady Aerindel?" one of the chambermaids called tentatively.

The lady who lay curled up like a child moved her head and murmured something.

"Lady Aerindel? Great Lady... are you well?"

Abruptly the wild-haired figure in the tattered black gown sat upright and stared into the moonlight. The staff in her hands thrummed once, and tugged at her grasp.

Aerindel screamed in anguish. Rammast must be calling it from afar!

It was her last weapon... her last hope. The staff moaned and wrenched at her numbed fingers again, and Aerindel came to her feet with another raw scream, wrapping herself around it.

She stood panting in the pitiless moonlight, staring around the ruined hall and wondering just what she could do against the ruthless Lord of Grand Thentor. The staff snarled against her bosom again, and Aerindel snarled back at it in frustration.

In the brief silence that followed, she heard the frightened sobs of the fleeing chambermaid echoing back to her down one of the kitchen passages, and drew in a long, shuddering breath.

She had fought, and been overmastered with contemptuous ease. There were no hidden tricks or lurking spells left to her; she was doomed, and Dusklake with her.

As her father had once said to an excited Dabras, looking down from the wind-lashed top of Mount Glimmerdown at a battle in the pass below, "It's all over now, but the praying."

But the praying...

Well, what else could she do?

Aerindel tucked the Stormstaff under her chin and rushed from the hall, padding through the darkened

passages of the castle toward a certain dusty and neglected back stair. Many of the torches were unlit, and there were neither guards nor servants to be seen. Had they all fled? Or had some dark magic sent by Rammast slain them all?

Their fates were worries for later. Right now, she had to find, in the deepening darkness beyond the pantries, the way down to the family crypt.

In the end, though she feared to awaken it, Aerindel was forced to use the Stormstaff to conjure a faint radiance—or break her neck falling down unseen steps to the gate adorned with the split oak Summertyn badge.

Her father's staff made a strange, muted sound, like many voices chanting a wordless, endless chorus. It obeyed her even so, with none of the tugging it had displayed in the feast hall. Perhaps Rammast's spells couldn't reach it down here.

Aerindel lacked the key that others would need, but she was of the blood of Summertyn, and a quick bite of her hand brought forth red blood that she could dab on the badge. At its touch, there was a faint singing sound, and the gate opened.

The door beyond had no lock or fastening, and she pushed it inward with her foot, smelling the familiar damp, earthy smell that always clung to the resting place of her forebears.

There was the long, slender casket of Haerindra, the mother she'd never known. Beyond it, the high-canopied tomb of Orbrar, and to the right, the great black coffin of her father.

The Stormstaff suddenly hummed, a deep groan that was echoed by the black stone that enclosed her father's ashes—and Aerindel nearly turned and fled. This had never happened before.

A light—a faint glow of the air, not a spark or flame— occurred suddenly in front of her, in the open space between the three caskets she knew. By its brightening radiance she saw other coffins, stretching back into dark, vaulted distances ... and the source of the light: a blue-white star glowing on a simple stone marker.

The altar of Mystra. It had been a long time—too long—since she'd knelt here to pray for guidance. She went to her knees in a rush. Drops of blood from her hand fell upon the stone and startled her by flaring instantly into smoke that drifted around her, and then faded away as abruptly as it had come.

"Mother of Mysteries," she whispered, "I have neglected you and failed in my diligence at crafting your holy Art of magic ... but I need you now, and am come to beg forgiveness and plead for guidance. Holy Mystra, aid me!"

"Aid is at hand," a faint whisper promptly came out of the darkness to her right. Aerindel was so startled that she almost dropped the staff.

A moment later, she realized that the staff was sinking ,.. sinking into the solid stone she was kneeling on!

She tugged on it, but was as overmatched as if she'd been trying to hold back a surging stallion. The staff moved powerfully downward, burning her clutching fingers as it slid between them, going down into stone that had no hole nor mark... and was cool and hard under her fingertips after it was gone.

Mystra had taken—reclaimed—the Stormstaff. What sort of aid was this?

Kneeling in the near-darkness, Aerindel heard the faint whisper again: "Set aside fear, and put me on."

She peered into the gloom, seeking the source of that softest of voices. It repeated its message, and by the rasping words she located it: a crown, lying atop her father's coffin.

A chill touched her heart. The black stone resting-place of Thabras Stormstaff had been bare of all but dust when she'd first looked at it, moments ago.

And yet she knew this crown. She remembered seeing her father wearing it once or twice, when she was young. Aerindel frowned. It was no part of the regalia of Dusklake, and had disappeared before his death. So far as she knew, it had never been in the coffin of Thabras.

She stared at that black stone casket for a moment, considering, but knew she dared not try to open it, even if she'd commanded strength enough to shift its massive lid.

On the altar before her, the blue-white star flashed once and then started to fade. At the same time, the crown began to glow.

"Set aside fear, and put me on," the insistent whisper came again.

Aerindel knelt in the dark crypt and stared at the circlet, fear rising in her breast. What choice did she have? If she hesitated, fear might win, and send her running from this place—so she made her arms stretch forth without hesitation, and took up the crown.

It was cool in her hand, but not as heavy as it looked. It seemed to tingle slightly as she peered at it, found no markings nor gems, shrugged again—and settled it on her head.

All at once, she was shivering as a sudden cold wind seemed to blow *through* her head, and someone

nearby—a woman, both desperate and furious—screamed, "No! You *shall not have me!*"

Her cry was drowned out in deep, exultant laughter, which bubbled up into the words, uttered in a different voice entirely, "Of course, I can also do—*this.*"

"Oh, Mystra," came the next speaker, a hoarse whisper seeming to speak right into her ear—she turned her head, but there was no one there—"aid me now!"

"This is no time," the next voice said wearily, "for fools to play at wizardry! Watch!"

"Elminster, aid me!"

That voice made Aerindel stiffen, and tears came. It was her father's voice—and Elminster, she dimly remembered, had been his tutor, and the wizard he'd loved and trusted most. "Aid me!" her father had cried, so anguished, and desperate ...

Just as she was. Aerindel sat numbly, the tears trickling down her cheeks, as the voices went on, crying the same things over and over again. Some of them seemed so ... final. As doomed as she was. As if they were crying out their last words before death_____

When she'd heard Thabras say those same three words the fourth time, the spectral tongues seemed to grow fainter, and those that screamed or cried wordlessly died away altogether. Another voice—the insistent whisper she'd heard first—rose over them all. "I am the power you need to keep Dusklake safe, and destroy Rammast forever."

Aerindel got up, putting a cautious hand to her head to be sure the crown was secure, and looked around the crypt. The crown seemed to wink, and suddenly she could see every dark corner as if it was brightly lit.

"I let you see in the dark, and pierce disguises. I let your eyes travel afar...."

She was suddenly seeing an endless sea, silvery under the moonlight, and knew that she was seeing the Great Water that lay west of the Esmeltaran, beyond the Cloud Peaks. And then that vision was swept away, and she was seeing a woman she did not know rising up out of a furious battle. Bolts of flame burst from the crown and felled screaming warriors, hurling many through the air like broken dolls. She watched a severed arm whirl away by itself.

The crown said, "With me, you can do this."

The scene changed, and she was seeing a bearded man standing grimly in a dungeon cell. The crown on his brow flashed with sudden white storm-fire, and the stones before him cracked and melted, flowing aside as the busy lightning cut a man-high tunnel into them.

"And this," the crown whispered.

The scene changed again. She was wearing the crown, this time, and a hydra was rearing up above her, on a sun-dappled forest path somewhere, snapping its jaws horribly. The crown quivered, and suddenly the hydra was shrinking and twisting, flailing its long necks vainly, as it hardened into a gnarled, triple-trunked tree.

"And this," the whisper came again, "among many more powers... if you have the courage to wield them."

"How?" the Lady of Dusklake asked in sudden, eager excitement.

There was a new warmth within her, and a surge of ... satisfaction?

What followed felt uncomfortable and slithering and somehow private, as the crown seemed to harness itself to her will. Aerindel shuddered as energy flowed both icy and warm within her, coiling in her vitals and rushing out to her fingertips. She heard a moan that was almost a purr, and realized hazily that it must have come from her own lips.

And then the strangeness was gone, and she was herself again.

Feeling leaping hope and a certain restlessness, the Lady of Dusklake knelt again at the altar to thank Mystra, sprang up, and whirled around.

As she hurried up the steps, her will quested out ahead of her. That farseeing... right now, her most urgent need was to find out where Rammast was, and what he was up to.

There was an exclamation in the darkness ahead of her, and the flash of drawn steel. She slowed, but suddenly she was seeing not a startled Duskan guard, bowing to her at the head of the crypt stairs with fear in his face and a naked sword in his hand, but the bloody-taloned golden eagle banner of Grand Thentor, fluttering in torchlight.

Torchlight somewhere in a night-dark forest where frightened folk screamed and fled into the trees all around, along a muddy road where the warriors of Grand Thentor strode laughing ... a road she knew.

A moment later, Rammast's war band passed by a tavern signboard, and she was sure. Dusking! They were in Dusking, at the other end of her realm—already invading Dusklake, to put her folk to the sword!

A woman screamed in that far place, and Aerindel found herself trembling with rage.

"Take me there!" she snarled. There was an exhilarating surge within her, a moment of terror when the world rushed and flowed, all around ... and then she was standing in the night, in the muddy road through Dusking, with that banner bearing down on her, and a host of men with drawn swords tramping around it.

A Thentan soldier hooted at the sight of the fine-gowned lady standing alone in the way before him, and waved the torch he held. "Look, lads! Mine, I tell you, this one's—"

Aerindel bent her grim gaze upon him, her eyes dark with hatred, and willed forth fire. The bobbing torch blossomed into sparks as the crown spat out flame at the one who held it.

The soldier was suddenly headless, and then half a staggering man—and then two quivering legs with nothing above them.

The fire roared like a dragon through the rest of the invaders, tumbling those it did not turn to ashes. Swords melted away in crumbling hands, men shouted and then fell silent, and the reek of burnt flesh rose thick around the Lady of Dusklake as she strode forward.

The last soldier fell with a despairing, bubbling scream; she watched his flesh melt from his bones amid greasy smoke, and looked down the empty, ashen street to be sure she had destroyed every last Thentan.

In the distance, along the road, something suddenly glowed in the night. She willed the crown to take her to it—and found herself looking into the angry eyes of Rammast Tarangar. The glow of the magic that had brought him was still fading around his limbs; he snarled at her in astonishment, and a ring flashed on one of his hands as he raised it and made a punching motion at her.

A magic that would have twisted her into a toad-thing plucked at her limbs; the crown told her what it was, shattered it, and sent a withering ray at the Lord of Grand Thentor.

Rammast staggered back, alarm clear on his suddenly pale face, as a ward around him was overwhelmed and cast down in an instant, and the ray bored in at him, clawing his arm and side and shoulder.

Gasping, suddenly enfeebled, Rammast cast a dispel of his own, banishing the blight the crown had sent him; Aerindel smiled grimly and smashed him to the ground with a stabbing thrust of force. Watching him writhe as ribs snapped and he grunted and sobbed in pain, she mustered all she knew of what the crown could do, and bored in at him again, seeking to see into his mind.

Rammast's frightened eyes filled her vision; he gibbered like a mindless thing in sudden fear of her as the crown carried her through his pain and hatred and awareness of the hard ground beneath him, here and now... and on into what he had been thinking about, and where he had been.

A vision unfolded suddenly in her mind; his vision. She saw a great company of armed warriors, harnesses creaking as they filed through a narrow way in the mountains. Gods above! She was seeing the main army of Grand Thentor invading the other end of Dusklake, hard by her castle—through the narrow, perilous Glimmerdown Pass!

The vision was suddenly shattered. The crumpled turf before her was bare; Rammast managed to work a magic that tore him free from Dusking and her scrutiny, and whirled him away to safety.

Aerindel shrugged. She had to be gone from here herself—to the windswept top of Mount Glimmerdown, forthwith!

"To will it is to do the deed," the crown whispered, as seductively as any lover... and she found herself standing elsewhere, on bare stone with a cool breeze sliding past. She was on the mountaintop where her father had triumphed, so long ago. There were faint creakings, and the snortings of restive horses, from the dark cleft below her.

The Lady of Dusklake looked down, hard-eyed, at the invaders she could not see, and felt rage building within her.

Across empty air was the sister peak to the one she stood on, High Glimmerdown; the moonlight showed her its ragged edge.

"Down," Aerindel whispered to it, gesturing into the cleft between the two heights. "Go down on them."

She gathered her will, pointed at the rocks across the pass, and gestured grandly, downward. A few stones broke free and fell, bouncing down out of sight.

There were crashes and startled shouts from below, but Aerindel did not hear them. She was swaying in the night, feeling suddenly weak and sick. She went to her knees to avoid following the rocks down into the pass, and clutched at her head. What was wrong with her?

She felt... strange. The Lady of Dusklake gritted her teeth. Whatever her malady, her realm needed her now, before those men with their swords got out among her sleeping folk, and stormed a castle that had no more than a dozen men awake to defend it... if she was lucky.

They were hurrying in the cleft below her, now. A man who'd been screaming abruptly fell silent—sworded by his comrades to keep from rousing her people, no doubt.

Aerindel clenched her fists, glared again at the rocks of High Glimmerdown, and hissed, "Down! Smash away the mountainside, and send it down to bury them!"

A red rain seemed to burst inside her head, and she was suddenly lying on her face on hard rock, as the roar of falling rock rose up around her, amid ragged screams from below.

The Lady of Dusklake clung to her own name, gasping in a sudden sea of confusion. Who was she? Where was she? She seemed to be drifting in mists, and folk wearing her crown were there too; she glimpsed them from time to time. All of them had sad faces, and looked weary and wasted. They grew older and more shriveled as she watched, wasting away....

She heard shouts and curses from below, and someone snarling to "Abandon the horses! We've blades enough to slaughter a dozen Duskan garrisons, you fools! Just get out of this pass before they can send us any more rockfalls! *Move*, damn you!"

Aerindel swallowed. She hadn't crushed them all. She raised her eyes again to the freshly scoured face of High Glimmerdown, much changed where rocks as big as cottages had broken away. She fought to stay awake.

A yellow haze was rising to blot out the night, rising behind her eyes. "Down," she whispered, trembling on the stones, "go down upon them all. Let not a Thentan man survive, to swing his sword in my fair Dusklake."

The crown surged again, and Aerindel felt pain in every joint as well as in her breast, head, and belly. She groaned aloud, trying to writhe on the stones but finding her limbs too weak to lift.

The stones were shaking, though—shaking with a deep, teeth-rattling roar that grew louder and faster and finally thunderous, as High Glimmerdown poured itself down into the mountain pass, stones shrieking like women in pain as the dust rose and the host of Grand Thentor was buried alive.

Aerindel bounced bloodily across the quaking mountaintop, and fetched up against a jagged knob of rock. The dust-shrouded ruin of the pass gaped in front of her as she retched and sobbed and spasmed uncontrollably. Despite her tumbings, the crown seemed welded to her temples—and by the faint light it now began to emit, through no doing of hers, she saw that her hands were as wrinkled as those of an old woman.

The crown fed on its wearers, somehow. Aerindel held that thought for a time, but her wits seemed to wander again and again, memory showing her boulders bouncing and rolling down the side of High Glimmerdown, and she could not think of the next thing.

Just as she'd stood waiting in the feast hall, dreading the coming of Rammast but knowing no clever thing she could do.

Rammast. He could still be up to something! She had to see him, to know what he was doing. Coming to strike at her in her chambers at the castle, if she knew him—but not yet. She'd hurt him, at Dusking, and he'd go to banish the pain before anything else. Heal, and take up new spells and magic weapons, before he came seeking her.

He'd be in his tower right now. Tarangar Tower, highest turret of the frowning stone fortress of Thentarnagard, at the very heart of Grand Thentor... that way. Lying on her face on the stone, head throbbing, Aerindel wondered if she could still farsee.

She could. It hurt—gods, it hurt!—but as the fires of agony clawed at her limbs and she whimpered and writhed on the cold stones of Mount Glimmerdown, she seemed to be flying through the night, seeking the dark sword of Tarangar Tower stabbing at the stars. There would be lights in its high window, she knew, and a darkly handsome lord working furiously to gird himself for her doombringing ...

There! Like a Thentan eagle she swooped out of the night, racing up to those lighted windows, seeking the hated face of her foe. She saw him at last, striding across a room whose tables were littered with maps. He seemed to sense her, stiffening and peering at the window. She was past, by then, winging her way around Tarangar Tower and climbing, seeing the steep roofs of Thentor-town spread out below her down narrow, lamplit cobbled streets. She soared toward the moon, willing the crown to blast apart the tower behind her.

She saw it shattering into tiny rocks, bursting into a cloud of stones that would rain down on all of Grand Thentor, leaving behind a pit so deep that all Thentarnagard would totter and then fall into it, sliding into oblivion shrouded in rock-dust... just as the Thentan army in Glimmerdown Pass had met its end.

"This thing can come to pass," the voice of the crown seemed to whisper in the ear, "but it is a very great thing. Doing it will consume a life."

"Many lives, I should think," Aerindel murmured aloud, her forehead resting on the hard stones of the

mountain top.

"The life of a being who can wield magic," the crown whispered. "A being you have touched while wearing me."

"A deliberate sacrifice, then," the Lady of Dusklake said wearily. "Or a murder."

"If I can get no other essence," the crown told her, "I will claim the life-force of the one who wears me."

"So if I force you to bring down the tower," Aerindel said, "Tarangar Tower *will* fall—but I'll wither and die here, on this mountaintop."

"The tower may survive if it bears strong enough protective magics," the crown replied. "I must feed soon in any case, or shatter."

Aerindel lay silent, cold fear slowly creeping through her. She had willingly chained herself to some evil thing that would be her doom. Picturing herself tumbling down the mountainside as a desiccated bag of skin with loose bones bouncing and rolling inside it, she forced her trembling limbs to move.

Snarling with the effort, the Lady of Dusklake moved her arms along the uneven stone, very slowly and very painfully. She was gasping and drenched with cold sweat when at last her fingertips touched the crown.

It tingled, but did not budge. No matter how hard she clawed and tugged at it, it seemed attached to her head. The Whispering Crown would not come off.

She rolled over, finally, to stare despairingly at the stars. She had slain men who did not matter, and crippled herself in doing so—leaving herself and her realm helpless against their real foe. All too soon, Rammast would return. Rested, and strong, and ready to slay—and she'd be lying here, too weak to do anything... and with the crown and here to sacrifice in doing the first mighty thing he wanted of it, he would endanger all the Esmeltaran.

She felt like crying, but Aerindel Summertyn had no tears left. Bleeding, bitten, half-shorn, and dressed only in tatters, she lacked the strength even to stand. She lay on Mount Glimmerdown and looked up at the bleakly twinkling stars, waiting for Rammast's sneering smile to come into view above her.

Instead, the face that finally loomed up to blot out the stars was an unfamiliar one: a sharp-nosed face adorned with a long beard and blue eyes that held the wisdom of ages. It belonged to a man who wore simple, worn robes. His hands were empty, and he looked down at her with something—admiration? sympathy? cynical amusement?—flickering in his eyes.

"Take the crown off now, Lady of Dusklake," this stranger said curtly, "before it's too late."

Aerindel looked up at him, too weak and weary to care how she looked, or how he knew her name. "Does any mage fighting for her land and herself throw away her best weapon?" she spat wearily, wanting to be alone in her misery, wandering in the welcoming mists.

"Aerindel, do ye want to end up as thy father did?" the stranger asked gravely.

Aerindel felt anger kindling in her. Why did everyone in Faerun know all about the fate of Thabras Stormstaff except *her*?

"Who are you?" she snapped, eyes flashing. "How is it you know of my father?"

The bearded face bent closer; the man was kneeling beside her. "I trained him in the ways of magic, and made him what he became."

He looked across the pass at High Glimmerdown for a moment, and then down at her again and added softly, "And so, I suppose, am responsible for his doom. I am called Elminster."

"Elminster," she repeated huskily. Suddenly, fresh energy surged through her, and the crown whispered inside her head, *Destroy this one. His magic is strong, very strong. He is a danger to us both—and his power is just what I need to smash Tarangar Tower and Rammast with it.*

"How?" she asked it, not caring if she spoke the word aloud.

Look at him, and will forth fire, as you did to the soldiers at Dusking... and I'll strike. Keep the flow unbroken, after, so that I can draw his life-force back to us.

Aerindel smiled, slowly, as it was done.

Fire roared forth, and the kneeling man shuddered and flinched back—but it licked only briefly at his robes, seeming to be drawn into his eyes... eyes that darkened and seemed somehow to become larger.

Yessss, the crown hissed in her, and she felt a warm glow of exultation.

Elminster rose and stepped away, and Aerindel turned her head to keep him in view, as the crown had urged her to. There came a sudden, sharp pain in her head, and a shaft of pure rage from the crown that made her gasp and writhe on the stones.

"No, cursed one!" the crown snarled, out of her trembling lips.

Elminster ignored it, raising a hand to slice off the line of flame as if it were a strand of spiderweb.

"Aerindel," he said urgently, bending near again, "take off the crown. Please."

The crown flashed, and Aerindel felt fresh energy flowing into her. The crown urged her to do thus, and so—and she did.

Green lightning flashed forth from her brow, to crackle hungrily up that extended arm, outlining it with writhing flames. Elminster grimaced. Clear annoyance flashed across his face for a moment as he made a brushing-away gesture.

Astonishingly, the green lightning sprang away from him to frail away into the cool night breeze. Aerindel felt annoyance of her own—or rather, it came from the crown, along with more instructions.

She did as she was bid, and a searing white flame burst into being, hurling the bearded man back. He staggered, shoulders shaking as the ravening white fire tore into him.

The Lady of Dusklake suddenly found herself strong enough to stand. She scrambled up, conscious of a glow around her head. The crown flashed ever brighter. She stretched out her hands and lashed Elminster with conjured tentacles that snapped and bit at him like hungry eels with long, barbed jaws.

"Aerindel," he cried, sounding almost in anguish, "fight against it! Obey not the crown! 'Tis a thing that twists its wearers to evil if allowed to command! Ye must order it, not let it enthrall ye!"

"Die, mage, and quickly," Aerindel hissed back at him. "All this time, Rammast grows stronger, and the folk in my castle aren't even warned and awake! Die, or leave me be—get you *gone!*"

She lashed him with ropes of twisting fire, spun him around, and hurled him out over the chasm that had been Glimmerdown Pass.

But he did not plummet to his death. Instead, he stood on empty air as if it were solid rock, and pointed at her. "Aerindel, I charge thee: do off the Whispering Crown—*now!*"

"*Never!*" Aerindel shouted at him, hurling the might of the crown at the rocks they stood upon, tearing them up in long, jagged shards to hurl at the wizard.

Elminster gave her a weary look, and murmured some words. The stony spears turned to dust in the air between them. He said something else, and made a gesture—and Aerindel felt a coldness that seemed to start at her feet and race up and out her throat.

She could do nothing but see straight ahead now, as she quivered upright in midair, but the crown let her see everything: Elminster had transformed her into a long, thin staff of wood, such as a wizard might carry.

Taller than the Stormstaff she was, floating and glowing with a white radiance that tore at the crown. With no head to support it, the circlet fell down the length of her, its frantic whisperings fading, and rang on the stones. Elminster snatched her away from it, strode two swift paces, and let go of her.

The coldness drained away swiftly, and Aerindel was herself once more—standing facing him, panting in fear and fury, the ruins of her gown hanging from bared, moonlit shoulders, her once-beautiful hair a gnawed ruin. She looked older. Her skin hung in wrinkles, mottled here and there. Her eyes were sunken, and her mouth pinched, as if with great age. Even in her rage, her bosom heaving, she was stooped, hunched over with hands that had become the knob-jointed claws of a crone.

"Go away, wizard!" she snarled, eyes like twin flames. "You've meddled more than enough! I need the crown to defend my land and... myself. Rammast shall get neither, if you'll just stand aside and let me use what Mystra sent me! It was her gift to me!"

"Mystra gives gifts that carry choices," Elminster told her quietly, his eyes on hers. The crown glimmered on the rocks behind him. "Each one is a test. No sword is deadly until a hand wields it."

"Bah!" Aerindel spat. "I've no time for gentle philosophy, mage! Dusklake is imperiled! Rammast gathers strength even as we stand here arguing! *Get out of my way!*"

Elminster bowed his head and stepped aside. "The choice must be thine," he said gravely. "So long as ye know that the glow upon yonder circlet now means it must drink the life-force of the first magic-using being to don it, or crumble away."

Aerindel stormed forward, checked herself, shot him a look of anger, and snarled, "Such words are cheap weapons, wizard—how do I know they're true?"

Elminster shrugged. "Ye must trust in someone else at some time; why not begin now? If I'm right and ye heed me not, ye'll die. If ye heed me, I make this pledge: I'll stand beside ye to defend Dusklake against this Rammast, and teach ye enough magic so that ye'll need no crown nor wizardly aid hereafter. What say ye?"

Aerindel's eyes narrowed as she looked at him. Then her face twisted and she tossed what was left of her hair angrily. "What assurance have I that you'll keep this pledge? I don't know you—your word could be worthless!"

Elminster shrugged. "So it might. It comes back to trust, doesn't it?"

Aerindel waved her hand at him spurningly as she strode past. "Enough clever words, wizard! This I know, and have wielded, and can understand!" She bent and snatched up the crown.

"Remember my warning!" the wizard called.

It glowed at her invitingly, pulsing, its cool radiances running up her arms in what were almost caresses. The Whispering Crown gave forth a faint chiming, as of distant bells, and a feeling of warmth and reassurance. Aerindel drank it in, looked at Elminster with a silent challenge in her eyes, and raised the crown to put it on.

"*Yesss,*" its whispering voice was hissing as she raised it past her face. But then another voice burst from it, desperate and alone, echoing in strident despair.

"Elminster, aid me!"

Her father's cry was louder than before.

Aerindel stared at the crown, hearing it snarl angrily. Under those angry growls the cries of others came faintly to her ears. Those who died wearing it. Its other victims.

"Farewell, Father," she said, voice trembling. She turned on her heel and threw the Whispering Crown hard and high.

Out, out over Glimmerdown Pass it flew, howling in angry despair. It spat out lightning at her as it fell— lightning that clawed at the rocks by her feet and then fell far short as the crown tumbled from view.

The moonlight seemed brighter as Aerindel turned into the cool breeze, squinted at the wizard, and asked timidly, "Elminster?"

The bearded man gave her a smile that lit up his face. He took her hand. "The right choice, Aerindel. Ye used yon crown for what Mystra put it into your hands for... and let it go when she wanted you to. Come, now. Mystra will protect ye; ye shall learn magic as thy father did."

An amber light whirled up around their joined hands, to shroud them both in a whirling cloud—a cloud that flashed blue-white and faded, leaving the mountaintop bare.

An instant later, lightning crashed down on the mountaintop, hurling what stones they did not scorch high into the air. The night crackled and glowed with the fury of that strike.

* * * * *

"There's no way they could have survived that," the Lord of Grand Thentor said with satisfaction, looking up from where he stood among the tumbled rocks that now choked Glimmerdown Pass. His men were under all this, somewhere—but who needed warriors in a land where one was the only wielder of magic?

"I wonder who that wizard was," Rammast mused aloud as he clapped his hands together and prepared to cast a flying spell, to whisk him over the rocks into Dusklake. He shrugged—well, he'd fly up over the mountaintop, just to be sure the mysterious mage was no more than ashes and memories now.

It was a pity about Aerindel, but he had her likeness fixed in an evermirror spell, and could alter the shape of some hired wench or other to take her place. Even if word got out, there'd be none to stand against him ere Dusklake joined Grand Thentor, and he looked to richer lands to the west, like Marbrin and Drimmath. Why, he could be ruling an empire in four winters' ti—

Amber light flared momentarily atop the mountain, high above. Frowning, Rammast peered up at it.

Something clanged on the rocks nearby, and bounced past his foot with a metallic clang. The crown!

His lightning must have blasted it from her head!

Smiling, Rammast snatched it up. Gods, but it had given her power enough! With this, Rammast Tarangar would be well-nigh invincible!

He'd call his realm Tarangara, when it stretched from the Great Water to the Inland Sea, and from the High Forest to the hot lands ... Yes, by Mystr—

He was still smiling broadly as he settled the Whispering Crown onto his head.

* * * * *

"Look ye now," Elminster said gravely. One of his arms was around her shoulders. He pointed with the other, down at the tumbled stones where there had once been a pass. Down at a lone, gloating man: Rammast, Lord of Grand Thentor. He was—putting on the Whispering Crown!

Aerindel bit her lip and tried to blink away the tears that had been falling since she'd realized what the crown had done to her. She was old, and wrinkled, her life stolen from her... and all for magic. "Mystra will protect ye." Hah.

So Rammast would die, unless the goddess had played one last trick on her ... but no. He was falling, dwindling into a dark and twisted thing, skin hanging on a skeleton that was toppling into cinnamon-hued dust... and sweet, surging energies were welling up in her, raising her, making her gasp and tremble in a rapture more intense than anything she'd ever felt before.

Aerindel found herself sobbing, clinging to the comforting arms around her as she shuddered—and then kissing the half-seen face above her wildly, joy surging through her. Her skin was smooth and young again, her body her own!

"Ye see," that kind voice rumbled by her ear. "These things work out. Mystra does provide. Ye have only to trust, and think clearly, and do as she guides."

"And how will I know her directives?" the Lady of Dusklake asked, brushing hair aside from shining eyes to meet his gaze.

Elminster pointed down again. Something gleamed amid skeletal dust, far below. Aerindel saw it only for an instant before the lightning of a spell that no mortal had cast erupted along the cliff across from where they stood, and sent a huge fall of stones rolling down to bury the Whispering Crown.

As the dust rose up toward them, Elminster replied solemnly, "She whispers to us always."

"Elminster," Aerindel said with a tremulous smile, "aid me!"

Interlude

Wes finished reading about the Whispering Crown and turned again to the strange, slim tome he'd found behind the bookcase. Something told him to read more of it. He picked up the book and continued.

It said that the library was originally a little less than half its current size, the northern end of the building being the oldest part. Several times over the past centuries, the monks had added extra rooms until, from the outside, the building looked like an evil baron's castle from a child's nightmare. Inside, the main book rooms and most of the reading rooms were easy enough to locate, for the library had been built around them. Not so the vaults, where many of the works were stored. They were all over the library, utilizing any spare space.

The monks' living areas and accommodation for visiting scholars were in the southeast corner, and all the cooking was done in an outbuilding to keep the smoke and cooking odors away from the books and scrolls.

Many rooms were set up for scribes, and each monk spent a large part of his day copying scrolls and books. It was the abbot's wish that the library hold at least three copies of each work, both to allow several scholars to peruse a work at once, and to protect the works against theft or the privations of age or fire.

The way the library had grown over the centuries made it difficult to tell from the outside where one room started and another ended. Even from the passageways inside, it could be difficult to tell which room was on the other side of a wall. As a result, the library was a very easy place to get lost in.

Wes put the tome aside again. It wasn't getting any more interesting, and there were still several dozen works he hadn't looked at yet. He got up from the table and began looking for something to match the story of the Whispering Crown.

An old scroll caught his eye. He pulled it gently from its home and unrolled it. It was a map, with some roughly scrawled notes around the edges. Between the dim light and the bad writing, Wes couldn't make out the whole story, but it appeared to show the location of a treasure hoard that belonged to a dragon. Judging by the age of the scroll, Wes thought the dragon must be long dead, and the treasure probably found by some group of adventurers.

For the third time, his attention was drawn to the strange tome, and Wes found himself picking it up again.

The history lesson was over. Now Wes read a story of a young man who worked in the library of Candlekeep, a probationary novice many years ago, and who was known to have disappeared without a trace. Jeffrey, the probationary novice, had been bawled out by one of the monks for being lazy and good-for-nothing, and had been sent by the abbot to the north corner of the library to clean an old reading room for some scholars who were expected the next day.

In sudden fear, Wes pushed the book away.

"No!" he rasped, "this cannot be. That story is about me, but a long time ago."

He looked around nervously. He wanted to leave, then and there, but the abbot's orders had been clear enough. He dared not disobey.

Take a deep breath, Wes, he told himself. You've just gotten spooked—that's all. No need to look at that slim volume anymore. Back to cleaning the reading room....

On the other hand, a peek at a few more books couldn't hurt much, now could it?

The Lady And The Shadow

Philip Athans

It was the vile smell that triggered the defensive twitch that saved the archwizard's life. The stream of deadly venom sprayed from the mouth of the huge, snakelike thing and fell to the floor, sizzling away into a fetid green vapor. The archwizard Shadow spun on his heel and brought his hands up, his fingers moving through a fast and complex series of patterns. The words he shouted at the beast meant nothing, but held great power.

The blast of fire singed Shadow's eyebrows, and the naga screamed in agony. The ball of orange flame was gone as fast as Shadow had conjured it, and smoke poured off the creature that was its target. The naga's rough, spiky hide was already black, and now it *smelted* scorched.

Shadow took three long strides backward, starting to smile, nearly bumping into the corner of his big four-poster bed. He stopped in front of the seldom-used dressing table when the damned thing laughed.

"Painful..." it hissed, its voice like gravel being scraped across steel.

Shadow's blood went cold. He hadn't been prepared for another assassination attempt today. It was a bad time.

The naga slithered forward, scraping huge furrows in the expensive wood floor, now scorched from the intense heat of the fireball. The poison still dripped from the corners of its mouth. Four huge gray-yellow fangs filled the gaping maw, and were too big to let it close its mouth all the way. When the poison hit the floor, there was more sizzling, more awful smell, more damage to the woodwork.

The archwizard's fireball had set the curtains behind the naga ablaze. A little dusty wooden sculpture of a dancing woman had fallen off the windowsill and was also on fire.

Shadow reached down to his long black boot and fumbled for the knife there. He had been given the knife for just this sort of eventuality.

The naga drew its hideous face back and seemed to grin as its throat filled with more of the poison.

Shadow actually gasped the word, "No!" and the knife was in his hand. The blue-silver blade seemed to scream through the air, but Shadow knew he hadn't actually thrown it that hard. It crossed the span of his bedchamber faster than a crossbow bolt and sank into the naga's tough black hide with a wet cracking sound. When the naga screamed, the poison welled out of its mouth in a nauseating gurgle and drenched the thing's still-smoking body with the deadly liquid. It screamed again, louder this time. The knife was buried to its golden hilt, about halfway down the thing's twelve-foot body.

"Turn!" Shadow shouted, and something made the naga look down.

The knife twisted in the tight wound, and a quiver of pain and surprise ruffled through the naga's body. It grunted this time instead of screaming and called Shadow something that must have been a terrible insult in whatever dark pit the naga and its kin called home. The thing's blood was a pasty red, so dark it was almost as black as its charred skin.

"Turn!" Shadow shouted again, standing to face the naga and taking another step back away from it. He bumped the little nightstand, and it fell over. A glass shattered on the floor, and a bit of water started to mix with the droplets of blood that were beading on the floorboards.

The knife started to turn again and the blood seemed to pop out. The naga didn't scream this time either. It twisted its head down and latched onto the enchanted blade with its jagged fangs. The snake body quivered again with the pain of pulling it out. When the enchanted blade fell free of the wound, it was followed by a fast torrent of blood.

The sound it made must have been a laugh.

Shadow considered his possible escape routes. The secret door he had installed in his bedchamber three years ago, when everyone was having them installed in their bedchambers, was on the other side of the naga. He could turn invisible, but the thing could still spray the room with poison, and Shadow would be just as dead as if he'd lit himself with faerie fire. He couldn't teleport, and if he jumped out the window it would be a mile straight down off the side of Karsus enclave to the fields below.

He realized he was going to die right then.

Damn, he thought, Shadow wouldn't—

He stopped even thinking when the naga's head popped off its body and bounced twice on the floor before coming to rest. The body flapped and flailed, spraying black-red blood all over the sparsely furnished room. So much of it shot out when the headless body hit the floor that it put out the fire on the curtains.

"Shadow?" asked a woman who had come from nowhere to stand behind the twitching naga corpse. Her voice was the true opposite of the naga's, rich and lyrical.

She was standing almost against the far wall. The secret door hung open behind her, apparently not a secret anymore. In her hand was a rapier with a blade so long and thin it drooped when she held it still and whistled through the air like a whip at her slightest twitch.

"Are you Shadow?" she asked him again.

Coughing from the searing blast of fire, the spraying blood, and the stench of the boiling venom, he nodded.

The woman started toward him, her strides simultaneously guarded and confident.

"I suppose," he started to say, "I should thank you for—"

The sound of the whip-rapier shrieking through the air stopped him, and he was actually alive just long enough to feel his head hit the floor after mouthing the word "Damn" on the way down.

* * * * *

Moments before and hundreds of miles away, the archwizard Grenway stood before a giant glass tank filled with a thick green semi-liquid that was moving with a life of its own.

"Very nicely," the old man muttered to himself, turning in the cluttered laboratory and shuffling slowly to the great palantir that had been a gift from his third wife, just before he'd had her killed. "Coming along nicely."

He had only to think the name of the would-be assassin he'd sent after Shadow, and he could see everything she saw. The information he'd given her, about the tunnel that led under the wall, below Karsus's private gardens, then into the complex of rooms and laboratories inhabited by his foe, was so far proving to be quite correct.

She was running with almost supernatural speed down the dim, low-ceilinged passageway, and Grenway had to admire her physicality. This was something he had been able to admire only from afar, or for a price, since his own body tended to be little more than a frail, withering container for his vast intellect and even greater greed. Yes, he thought, quite a specimen this one. A shame, really.

He looked back over to the huge glass tank, as big as a commoner's house. Something heavy thudded against the inside of the tank. Grenway could see something solid and rough drag itself along the inside of the glass before disappearing back into the thick green medium.

"Soon," he muttered to the tank's inhabitant. Grenway smiled and laughed for little more than a second before falling into a fit of ragged, sputtering coughs. Spittle hanging from his gray, stubbly chin, he smiled yet wider.

* * * * *

Alashar Crywinds, with the tip of her bare left toe, rolled Shadow's head so she could see his face. He was handsome enough to make her frown. Destroying things never really made her happy. Destroying beautiful things almost made her want to stop destroying things altogether. Almost.

She pulled the sack through her belt, and shook it open. Her employer told her it was waterproof; the bloody head wouldn't soak through. He promised her she could even walk the streets of Karsus enclave without attracting attention. Of course, she didn't intend to stay in Karsus that long. She wanted to get back to loulaum, deliver her package, and be done with it all before her damnable conscience started whispering in her ear again. Profitable as it may be, she hated working for archwizards. She hated how insignificant they made her feel.

She sheathed her rapier and crouched, slipping her feet back to avoid the blood on the floor, which would have seemed impossible—would have been impossible—for most people.

"Excuse me," a voice behind her said. She stopped dead, not bothering to whirl at the intruder with her whip-rapier, not bothering to run. She recognized the voice. She was good with voices.

"Shadow," she said, turning her head slowly to see him standing in the high, arched doorway.

Someone was standing behind him, in the shadows of the dimly lit corridor. There was something familiar about the outline, but it was eclipsed in her mind by the presence of the man she'd just decapitated, whole and hearty, dressed in his signature black silks. She resisted the temptation to glance back at the

head on the floor to be sure it was still there. It was.

"Damn," the archwizard breathed, "those things are a pain to replace----"

She let her hand slip to the hilt of her whip-rapier, and then heard him mumble something. When her hand stopped just a fraction of a fraction of an inch from the hilt, she knew she was paralyzed. She wanted to curse, maybe say good-bye to the world, but couldn't. She couldn't do anything.

"What a mess," Shadow said, stepping carefully into the room. The figure behind him followed, and if Alashar had been able to do anything but breathe shallowly, she might have screamed.

It was her. She was looking at herself, long auburn hair, crystal green eyes, dark green leathers, bare feet, whip-rapier, and all.

* * * * *

The room he brought her to was pure Karsus enclave. This insane city was full of buildings with floors on the walls and bridges where people walked on the top and bottom at the same time. Anyone not actually from there was always *dizzy*. "Down" seemed to be whatever the bottoms of your feet were touching.

This room must have been hewn from the solid rock of the inverted floating mountain. Four ornately carved pillars looked like spokes holding the whole thing together, but they didn't meet in the center. Each was about forty feet high, leaving a good twenty feet between the top of one and the top of the next.

Floating in the center of the huge chamber was a yellow-green crystal fully eight feet in diameter. It gave off a gentle, somehow disturbing glow.

Alashar's double had carried her here from Shadow's bedchamber. The true Alashar was still frozen in the crouched position, still almost touching the hilt of her whip-rapier, still unable to do or say anything. She rode along in a state of stunned awe at the perfection of the double, the attention to detail in what had to be an illusion.

On some level, she was embarrassed. Shadow must know her, and know her well, though she was sure he had never seen her before.

"You," Shadow told her conversationally after having her rigid form placed gently on the floor near the room's only piece of furniture, a well-organized desk, "are going to help me today. Help me with a bit of an experiment."

He stood behind the desk, shifting absentmindedly through a stack of parchment and paper sheets while he spoke. His voice was lively, as if he was really excited about whatever he was going to do to kill her. Of course he would kill her. She had already killed him, after all, for money. Revenge was actually a more laudable motive for murder than money.

"Usually when I catch an assassin alive, I send him into the demiplane of imprisonment."

She touched her whip-rapier. She felt the warm leather-wrapped hilt against the insides of her fingers. She tried to stand or stretch, but couldn't yet.

"But it never occurred to me," he continued, "to arrange some method for their retrieval. It was always a sort of... life sentence."

She could get her jaw to open just a little wider now. She made each small move as slowly as she could, so as not to attract his attention.

"I knew you were coming, of course," he said, turning away from her now to walk gingerly over to one of the huge pillars. "I have at least as many spies in Grenway's employ as he has in mine. Still, I must admit you are quite good. That simulacrum has... *had* successfully fended off seventeen major assassination attempts. Bravo."

She could finally bend her elbow a good three degrees, and now that he had his back to her, she started to strain, her sluggish muscles bunching, pushing hard against nothing, but a nothing that was still effectively paralyzing her. He had to know the spell was wearing off, or would be wearing off soon. Certainly, she hadn't much time.

Otherwise engrossed in tracing the pattern of one of the pillar's cryptic carvings, Shadow continued, "Anyway, I made up a simulacrum of you. Or, well, had one made at any rate. This way I can leave you imprisoned for a few years and use the simulacrum's link with you to pull you back out. Well, if the last few components are finished by then."

He glanced back at her. She stopped, but felt a bit of a teeter. She'd almost thrown herself off-balance, but it didn't look as if he noticed. He looked away again, shrugged, and said, "Actually, it could take twenty, thirty years. Honestly, it's not a high priority in my research right now. I'm still rather captivated by the demiplane of shadow, as you may have guessed. But perfecting a simulacrum-link with the prime material ... home, as it were ... is rather vital to that endeavor as well. Your having destroyed my

own simulacrum will mean I'll have to stick around here until I get a new one together.

"Rather inconvenient, actually."

By conjuring some kind of big black disc under their tingling feet, he lifted both of them up toward the crystal in the center of the room. She was gaining greater movement, but so slowly she still wouldn't be able to defend herself before he did whatever he was going to do.

Below, Alashar could see the copy of herself staring blankly ahead, standing in her own customary pose, weight on her right foot, arms crossed over her chest.

Shadow almost never looked at Alashar, instead watching the gemstone nearing above them. "All you have to do is touch it," he told her, not really sounding too consoling. "You won't feel a thing."

They were almost there, an inch away, when he added, "As far as I know—"

Alashar grabbed him. Her elbow was shot through with pain, and it felt as if the joint popped, but her hand took a firm hold of his slippery silk robe. She felt him flinch. She wished she could laugh when he screamed out his own name.

* * * * *

Wherever they were, it was dark gray.

A cold wind whipped the hair around Alashar's face, and she forced herself to stand, releasing Shadow's robe. He stepped away. They stood together on a rolling plain covered in a sort of tall grass with small, sparse leaves. Sprinkled across the gray landscape were the shapes of trees, which ruffled in the wind but made no sound. The grass and trees seemed to blend together where they touched or overlapped.

Nothing had real substance; nothing had color.

Shadow looked at her with a strange mix of anger, relief, and... could that be admiration? His face was the only color anywhere. His cheeks were flushed, his lips unnaturally red. In a black and white world, anything but gray is garish.

When she started backing away from him, he didn't say anything. When she drew her whip-rapier, he laughed. When she threw her body at him, sword first, he disappeared.

"You can't kill me here," he said from behind her. She spun on him, but he was too far away, a hundred yards or more. Movement in the corner of her right eye made her reflexes explode. She drew her whip-rapier through the air. It whistled for a split second. Then there was silence and resistance as it cut through something.

Her own shadow had come up from the ground at her feet and was trying to touch her. Or was it trying to claw her? Scratch out her eyes, or put a reassuring hand on her shoulder to tell her it would be okay if she just—

No, it was trying to kill her. Its touch was like ice, but not even ice was this cold. Her body shuddered—not a shiver but a seizure. She curled the tip of her whip-rapier back at her own shadow, and it passed again through that same strange substance that dragged at the wire-thin blade.

"Kill it!" Shadow's voice called to her. It sounded as if he was farther away, but the wind, the bizarre feeling to the air, and the... shadowy quality to the ground, the grass—everything—made it impossible for her to judge sound here.

Her bare feet were numb from the cold, but moved fast even for her. She managed to keep the tiling away from her. It was a gray, flat nothing, literally a shadow in her shape. Sometimes the arms seemed deformed and stubby, other times overly long and thin. How it was managing to touch her, she had no idea, but when it did it hurt.

Only a few seconds had passed, but she was starting to get weaker. There was more movement. More shadows, or maybe creatures casting shadows of their own, were approaching.

She heard Shadow curse and grunt. There was a flash of light, and he cursed again, almost screamed.

Her own shadow stopped just long enough for her to drag her whip-rapier through it once more. It fell away all at once, even though she never got the feeling she'd hurt it. Her head was spinning, her knees were about to give way, and the whip-rapier quivered in her weakening grip. She looked around and saw dozens more shadows. They were everywhere, in the grass, slithering out of the trees, in a hundred shapes and all sizes. The one coming at Shadow was absolutely gigantic.

The look on his face was a mask of fear and disappointment.

A single, clear thought shot through Alashar's brain like a crystal arrow: He's the only one who can get me back.

Rushing to his defense, she felt hands and tentacles and tendrils and other things her language had no name for reaching shadow fingers from the grass to caress her legs with agonizing cold. Her body felt as if

it would shake itself apart. Reaching the huge creature that charged Shadow, she attacked as if her life depended on it... because it did.

The shadow things—smaller ones—were still converging on Shadow, but he was keeping them at bay with flashes of light—for now.

Alashar sent her whip-rapier into a spinning spiral. The sound of it whistling through the air pierced her eardrums and drowned out Shadow's constant, unintelligible muttering. When the giant shadow thing touched her, her knees gave out; she fought from the ground. She had to shred the thing, swing the whirling blade back and forth through it.

Whistle. Silence. Resistance. Whistle. Silence. Resistance... Finally she just closed her eyes and let her arms do their work.

Then the resistance was gone, and she wanted to believe the giant thing was dead.

She felt a hand on her arm, warm and real, and forced her eyes open to see that it was Shadow. He was saying something, but he must not have been talking to her because she couldn't understand a word of it. Another of the smaller things, this one the shadow of a sort of monster goat, touched her again, but the cold wasn't quite as bad and didn't last as long.

Her body gave out. Though she was already sitting sprawled on the cold ground, she started falling. She took a sharp breath, surprised.

By the time she hit the floor, the cold was gone, the wind was gone, and she saw the pillars and the warmth and light of the spherical laboratory. She lay on her back. Her neck went limp, and her head rolled to one side. Her eyes met the eyes of her simulacrum, also lying flat on its back. As she slipped into black unconsciousness, she couldn't help noticing how green her double's eyes looked.

She didn't remember their being that green.

* * * * *

The bedcovers were oppressively heavy, but Alashar was still shivering when she awoke. The first thing she saw was a carved wooden post—a corner of the bed—and a molded plaster ceiling scarred black from a fire. Movement made her turn her head, light flashed in her eyes, and there was pain. When her vision cleared, she saw a young woman, barely more than a girl. The woman wore a simple white shift, her dark hair in an almost comically girlish bob, her face an expressionless mask of ambivalence. A servant. The girl glanced at her, peered over her shoulder at someone or something, and then walked away, holding a bucket of water that didn't seem heavy enough.

"Don't try to move just yet," Shadow's voice echoed slightly from across the room.

She moved anyway, and regretted it. The pain in her head was almost overwhelming, almost made her pass out again. She didn't have the energy to fight it. She could and did accept it, sitting up slowly in the opulent bed, shivering, working at breathing.

"Anyone else would be dead," Shadow continued. "You're quite something."

She tried to speak, but her voice came out as a harsh squeak.

"Do you still want to kill me?" he asked her.

She opened her eyes, only then realizing they had been closed, and she could see him sitting in an armchair across the room. The servant girl she'd seen before was kneeling on the scarred wooden floor, still mopping up the rest of the thick, black-red naga blood.

Shadow looked terrible. There were gray-black bags under his dull eyes, and his face was pale. The startling color of his cheeks and lips was gone. He, too, was wrapped in a thick blanket, shivering.

It hurt when she cleared her throat, and she blushed when a single tear rolled down her cheek. "Yes," she almost grunted, then cleared her throat again, and her voice was almost back. "Yes, I have to kill you."

He smiled and nodded.

"Aren't you going to kill me?" she asked him, not having the energy to fight, and getting the idea that he didn't have the energy to fight either. "Now's your chance. I can hardly move."

It took him some effort to look serious and threatening, and the look didn't really come off. "Honestly, I just don't have the energy to kill you."

Without looking at either of them, the maid stood up and walked out of the room. The water in the bucket was a sickly pink.

"What was that place?" she had to ask.

"Long story," was all he could offer just then. "Suffice it to say, it's the reason your employer wants me dead. One of the reasons."

"Those things were killing you, too."

"Yes," he whispered, "I wasn't ready. You shouldn't drag someone into a demiplane like that, you know, when he's not ready."

He smiled, realizing he had been about to do just that to her. She smiled, realizing he knew she'd beaten him at his own game.

"If I hadn't had a link to your simulacrum, the shadows would be feeding on us by now." Something about the smile on his face warmed her, and she suddenly felt ridiculous, lying in the bed of the man she'd been hired to kill, whom she'd thought she'd decapitated earlier that morning.

"So," she said, "you needed me to get back here."

"Yes, as much as you needed me." He sighed deeply and forced a smile. "Does that make us even?"

She peeled back the heavy blankets and managed to move herself up to a sitting position. Warmth and movement were returning quickly. She had always been able to recover quickly, and it had saved her life at least once that day. Her leathers were gone. She was wearing the same plain white shift the maid wore, and she was embarrassed for no good reason at all.

"The maid changed you," he said. "I was unconscious, myself."

She looked at him and nodded, swinging her legs slowly over the side of the high bed. She heard a metallic twang and looked at him again. He was holding her whip-rapier.

"Interesting weapon," he said, looking at it appreciatively, curiously.

The maid came back in, and there was something wrong. The look on her face made Alashar stand, her knees threatening to give way again but holding firm after a split second. There was a ripping, crunching sound, and the maid's body shook. Something big was in the hallway behind her, filling the door with an amorphous black silhouette. Something thick and green and covered in the girl's thin running blood burst through the maid's chest. Blood exploded out of her mouth, and Alashar couldn't help screaming as the maid was ripped apart in front of her.

Shadow shouted Alashar's name, and she put out her hand, not consciously aware of seeing him throw the whip-rapier. She caught it in one hand and was up and swinging before she even got a good look at the thing coming fast now through the door.

The only way she knew it was covered with hundreds of tentacles was that every time her flashing, shrieking whip-rapier met any resistance, one of the thick, twitching things ended up squirming at her feet. She was aware of its blood, too, hot and yellow-green, sticky and everywhere. The creature was at least twice her size, a wall of writhing green tentacles and dozens of gaping, fang-lined mouths, themselves full of smaller tentacles.

She was shredding it, but stepping back at the same time as it continued to advance on her. She was a blur of motion, her muscles warming and growing looser, more responsive for the exercise.

The fact that the thing made no sound even as she dismembered it actually disturbed her; then she saw that the tentacles were already growing back.

She had no idea what Shadow was doing and had no time to find out. The monster was backing her slowly into the room, and she was cornered. Something wrapped around her foot—something warm and rough like an elephant's hide—and before she could react, the tentacle withdrew into the beast with a snap and pulled her foot out from under her. The force of the fall onto her behind made her teeth bite painfully into—maybe through—her tongue. She tasted blood at the same time she reversed the spin of her whip-rapier to cut the tentacle off her foot.

Her leg came free, dowsed with the beast's hot yellow blood, and she saw it come down toward her. She rolled out of the way fast enough not to be trapped completely under it, but it fell most of the way along her left side. Her right hand hit the floor, and the whip-rapier bounced loose, clattering on the burned wood floorboards.

The weight of the thing was painful enough, but when one of its mouths found her left hip and bit in, she screamed and forced her left hand farther under the writhing, heavy mass. In panic, pain, and desperation, she rolled to her left and forced her hand into the slimy corner of the mouth. She looked up and saw another mouth falling at her from above. It meant to bite her head off. With a grunt, she pulled—ripped, really—her left leg out of the first mouth and kicked up with it. The pain helped her get out from under the thing.

She rolled, leaving a wide trail of her own blood on the floor as she went for her rapier. A hand came under her arm, and she let Shadow pull her up and away from the green thing, which was already drawing itself up and advancing on them again.

"This way," Shadow breathed heavily.

Alashar remembered the secret door.

* * * * *

With frail, liver-spotted hands, Grenway clutched the sides of the palantir. His back jerked with the little coughs that had come to replace his cold, cackling laugh.

Alashar, his paid assassin, his unwitting decoy, had done her job well. She had infiltrated Shadow's inner sanctum, foiled some still unknown rival's own assassination attempt by killing the naga, destroyed the damnable simulacrum that had confused his informants in Karsus for so long, and even seemed to have built some sort of strange bond with the archwizard. She and her victim had become partners of a sort now, and she seemed strangely determined not to let Shadow out of her sight. Since her sight was also Grenway's, things were working well.

The mutant that he'd sent as the real assassin had no ability to think for itself. It had to be guided, and so he had sent Alashar in first. Grenway coughed out a chuckle at the thought that Alashar probably still expected to kill Shadow and collect Grenway's price.

His victory was at hand, and Grenway closed his eyes and prepared his final spell.

* * * * *

The thing barely fit into the snug passageway, but it came at them fast just the same. It was spitting some viscous liquid from dozens of mouths. The spittle let it slide through. Neither Alashar nor Shadow could see past it. Its tentacles seemed to lengthen.

"The lab," Shadow panted.

He was still too weak to really run. He hadn't cast a single spell, and Alashar knew he was completely exhausted. If he had any tricks up his sleeve, he was playing it dangerously close.

The huge bleeding bite in Alashar's left thigh slowed her down, too, and her joints were popping from the cold weakness of the shadow world. She wanted to tell him they wouldn't make it to the lab and opened her mouth to do just that when a sound came from the thing now only a few paces behind them. It sounded like a cough.

Alashar stopped and looked back at it. Shadow stumbled to a stop just behind her and followed her gaze to the front of the mass of green tentacles. Though it hadn't been there only seconds before, the creature now had a face.

"Grenway," Alashar said.

The green, mucous-covered face smiled, and its features stretched like rubber and twitched. The mutant's body was obviously not used to the experience, and if it was capable of not liking something, it was obvious it didn't like the sensation. The face was Grenway's, but even uglier.

"Aaaaaah, Alashar," Grenway's voice whisper-echoed at them through the passageway, like water thrown from a bucket. The face's lips didn't quite move in sync with the voice. The monster was still advancing slowly, and Alashar stepped back, not noticing that Shadow didn't.

"Grenway," Shadow breathed, "I'll blast you to—"

The archwizard's words were cut off when a tentacle shot like a spear from under the green mass and wrapped around Shadow's head. Alashar whimpered when it brushed her temple and pulled slightly at her hair. Shadow's hands came up to claw ineffectually at the tentacle, and only a tuft of jet black hair was visible through the thick limb.

Alashar's heart jumped and she instinctively backed up farther.

"Running, child?" the Grenway face hissed. She brought her whip-rapier to guard position, and Shadow's knees collapsed. The thing was pulling him in slowly, and Alashar could see deep, passionate hatred on Grenway's face.

She heard herself say, "You didn't give me time!"

Grenway laughed. The sound rumbled through the passageway and became a gurgling cough. Shadow was flailing madly on the floor. It was killing him.

Alashar realized she had her chance to run, let Grenway kill Shadow himself. She could get out clean, if she got out now, but Grenway would win. She suddenly realized what had to happen next.

Her fingers tightened around the hilt of her whip-rapier and she slid her feet apart on the rough stone floor. "No, Grenway," she said through gritted teeth. "This time, I win."

The coughing laugh sounded again, and a new mouth, the biggest one yet, opened on the lower side of the great beast. The thing had stopped a few paces from where Alashar stood, and though it spoke to her, Grenway's eyes were fixed lustfully on Shadow. "Grow up, girl," it growled. "You could never kill him."

Her whip-rapier flashed, and she shot forward and down. The Grenway face screamed in frustration

and hatred, but not in pain when the tentacle holding Shadow split and fell away under the singing bite of the razor-sharp sword. The tentacle fell away from Shadow's face, and he sucked in a single huge, gurgling breath, his eyes bulging from their sockets, even as Alashar grabbed the collar of his blood-encrusted silk robe and pulled him harshly away.

"I'm not done," she hissed at both of them, "with either of you bastards."

* * * * *

Grenway pulled away from the link with the mutant and screamed his frustrated wrath at the tin-plated ceiling of his laboratory. He grabbed again at the sides of the palantir and watched through Alashar's eyes as she tore his mutant to ribbons. Shadow was still alive, and she now knew her true place in the game.

Yes, he thought, quite a specimen.

"Damn her," he growled.

* * * * *

Alashar's whole body was trembling as she stood knee-deep in twitching pieces of the huge green monster. She didn't remember exactly when it had stopped trying to fight back, but she was aware of that blurry point at which it seemed to resign itself to its fate and let her kill it. She was breathing hard and could barely move her feet.

Behind her, Shadow was panting and coughing, still trying to pull himself together after having been dragged by the head fifteen feet along the rough stone floor. When she turned to look at him, her foot slipped, and she ended up sitting in a pile of dead tentacles and rubbery things.

Their eyes met, and Shadow forced a smile.

"You weren't supposed to be able to do that," he said cryptically.

Anger flared through her, and without willing it, she lunged at him. She grabbed him by the neck. His eyes told her it hurt.

"Damn you," she huffed, "I should kill you after all, you son of a—"

She stopped herself, released his neck, and brought her whip-rapier over her head. Her eyes never wavered from his, but her arm was shaking now almost uncontrollably.

"You were both using me," she accused, "weren't you? Damn archwizards." The contempt in her voice actually seemed to affect him. "Great, petty lords of Netheril," she pressed. "Sitting in the muck and guts and filth of your own little ..." She let her words trail off, not having any idea how to express this much outrage.

"Was it me?" he said. His voice was even, ironically so coming from a man half dead, sitting in a pool of stinking yellow-green gore. "You were going to kill me, Alashar. For money. Was it me? Or was it him?"

She let her arm drop, more out of exhaustion than any sudden desire not to slice his arrogant head off. "I woke up in your bed, and it could just as easily have been your prison world. Grenway's ... whatever it was ... was going to swallow you whole. You could have killed me. I could have let him kill you."

"So that makes us even?" he asked. "You can kill me now if you want to."

"That naga thing wasn't Grenway's, was it?"

He shook his head slowly in reply.

"Then Grenway's not the only one who wants you dead?"

He laughed this time, but with a hint of sadness.

"I might kill you later," she said, smiling, "if somebody actually pays me to. But right now, I think we both have a debt to collect."

The look on his face was the same one she'd seen in the demiplane of shadow. And yes, it was admiration.

* * * * *

Only after making absolutely certain the necessary safeguards were in place did Grenway speak the word that drew the big doors to his sitting room open.

Alashar came in slowly, each step deliberate and careful. Her big green eyes surveyed the dusty, cluttered room. The sack in her hand was soaked in blood the color of a human's. Grenway smirked at the thought that the weaver mage who sold it to him had promised it wouldn't do that. The archmage thought he might have to have someone pay the weaver a visit in the morning.

Alashar stopped a few paces from where Grenway was sitting. The archmage sprawled casually on pillows and cushions spread over a thick rug made from the dark brown fur of a cave bear.

"Well, Alashar, dear girl," he said, "what have you got for me today?" His voice was calm because he knew she couldn't kill him. The fact that she didn't have her strange sword didn't even matter. The room itself would protect him.

He forgave the sneer that preceded her flat answer.

"Something that finishes us, Grenway."

He watched every movement of her lithe body as she reached a slender arm into the blood-soaked bag. When she pulled out the head of the archwizard Shadow, Grenway fell into a fit of laughing, coughing, laughing, and coughing until the cushions were sprinkled with spittle and his nose had started to run. His clawlike hands played absentmindedly with the few tufts of white hair hanging in patches to his withered, spotted scalp.

"The gems," Alashar said sternly, and Grenway laughed again.

Even Alashar couldn't react fast enough to dodge the hand that burst out of the floor behind her, trailing an arm the color and texture of the sitting-room floor. It shot up behind her, up over her head, and came down to palm her scalp and continue pulling back. Her neck snapped, the sound echoing sickeningly in the big stone room. The force of it almost ripped her head off her shoulders. Her body fell backward. The hand followed the arm back into the floor and was gone before Alashar's body stopped its death spasms.

Grenway finally stopped coughing. The ancient arch-wizard stood weakly and spared a happy glance at the head on the floor, not bothering to acknowledge the corpse of his own assassin. He turned, whistling a little tune from his youth, and shuffled to the door to his private bedchamber and opened it.

"Good evening," Alashar said.

Grenway stopped and looked up as fast as his brittle neck would allow. They were there, alive, both of them.

The simulacrum ...

He opened his mouth to begin an incantation, but no sound came out. Shadow smiled, and Alashar drew her rapier and stepped forward.

Shadows Of The Past

Brian M. Thomsen

The first thing I can remember is the face of an angel, the real-world variety, with an expression of satisfaction that usually follows a night's satiation.

I quickly returned her smile, sat up to kiss her... and immediately felt a thunderous headache that shattered my focus. I quickly blacked out, not conscious even long enough to sense my surroundings.

All I could remember was the face of the angel.

* * * * *

I awoke again much later—at least I thought it was much later, since the room seemed to have been brighter upon my first awakening.

Careful so as not to repeat the outcome of my first endeavor, I allowed my eyes to get accustomed to the ambient light. I slowly scanned as much of my surroundings as I could without moving my head and jarring my obviously bruised brains. I still felt a certain throbbing tenderness in my skull. Ever so slowly, I turned my head to the side.

The woman I first took for an angel was still in the room. She was turned away, her curvaceous figure backlit by an alcoved lantern. She cast a decidedly human shadow on the opposite wall. I could not make out her face. Saving my strength, I waited for her to turn around.

After a few moments, my patience was rewarded.

As she pivoted toward me, I closed my eyes for a bit more than a wink, to give the impression I was only now coming around.

She noticed my optical flutterings. Her footsteps were soft as she crossed the room to come to my side.

"Easy now," she purred. "No sudden moves. We don't want a repeat of your last episode, now do

we?"

With more careful maneuvering, I turned my head to face her. I opened my eyes to behold the face of the angel that filled my memory. Our eyes made contact, and a smile came to her lips.

The fog that filled my head began to dissipate, and the scene around me came into focus.

I was lying on a makeshift cot in some storeroom. The angel of loveliness who had first inspired thoughts of ecstasy, passion, and compassion also became clearer. Far from the angelic vision of my dreams, she had the ragged look of a gutter snipe. This is not to say she was hard on the eyes, mind you, only that she was of the common sort one usually found along the docks of Waterdeep.

Waterdeep! I must have been mugged in some Dock Ward alley. Well, that explained how I'd gotten here, and the abuse my cranium endured.

She smiled again, and whispered, "Good. You're coming around. I was afraid you were going to pass out again."

The tone of her voice had not changed, and what I had taken for the sensuous purring of an amorous angel was probably just the modulated tones of a careful nurse. Perhaps, too, she was reluctant to announce our presence to passersby, predators, or watches.

I slowly turned to the side, raised my head up with the support of elbow, arm, and hand, and hazarded a question. "I'm in Waterdeep, right?"

"You are correct," she answered tentatively, as if expecting another question hot on its heels.

"Good," I replied with false bravado. "It's always good to know where you finally wind up. It's almost as important as your own name."

Even now, I cannot be sure whether the tension that crossing my nurse's face was real or imagined. At the time, I was too distracted to pay attention. Only then did I realize I hadn't the foggiest notion in all Toril what my name was, or for that matter, what my past was.

I panicked and lurched forward. I wanted to escape this storeroom and seek a clue to my identity. The nurse tried to press me back to the cot. I quickly dodged her grip and got to my feet...

And promptly passed out again for all my hasty efforts.

* * * * *

Sounds from outside the storeroom soon brought me around. Numerous dockworkers were none too quietly heading to their jobs. My nurse was once again present, slightly the worse for wear, as if she had just finished a hard night's work. This time, she was accompanied by a burly fellow for whom the term *gentleman* would have been wishful thinking.

I also noticed a few measures taken to facilitate my rehabilitation. A cool compress was on my forehead, and my arms and legs were tied down, evidently to keep me from further damaging myself; at least I hoped so.

"I've learned my lesson," I said groggily. "No sudden moves for me. Now will someone please tell me who I am?"

My de facto nurse looked at her male companion as if seeking approval, and then back to me before saying, in the innocent tone of the truly naive or the extremely deceitful, "Excuse me?"

I blinked. She couldn't be lying. Even though I didn't know my name, I knew I had a knack for judging a person's character. I decided to change my tack.

"You can untie me," I assured her. "I have no desire to do myself or anyone else any harm. I just want to know what's going on."

She looked at me, and then at him.

He nodded. She started to untie me.

The proximity of her body tempted me with its earthy aroma: I was already well on the mend. Perhaps the preceding hours of unconsciousness had done me good.

Her burly companion stepped within bashing distance, should I try anything. She helped me into a sitting position.

"Thanks," I said absently, then added, "I hope I haven't been too much trouble, Miss ... ?"

"Scheiron," she replied. "Nymara Scheiron, but you can call me 'Kitten.'"

"I shall," I answered, and turned my attention to her companion. "And the same goes for you, my good man."

The fellow looked at me, then at Kitten, harrumphed, turned, and left me alone with my nurse. The sounds of his weighty footsteps echoed long after his hulking bulk had already left the room.

"Quite the conversationalist, isn't he?" I gibed.

Kitten's face became quite serious.

"I wouldn't talk that way about someone who had just saved my life," she scolded. "If he hadn't fished you out of the harbor, you would have been brigand bait for sure."

"The harbor?" I queried.

"That's right," she insisted. "He brought you back here himself, undressed you, and nursed you back to health, only leaving long enough to tend important business. Even then, he left me to watch over you."

He was my nurse. He rescued me, tended my wounds, undressed me....

I quickly snatched the blanket that had previously covered me and fixed it in place.

Kitten giggled. She stood up, saying, "Nothing that I haven't seen before, so don't trouble yourself."

Looking down, I realized my cover was unnecessary since I still wore pantaloons. I joined her laugh.

"Did I have a purse when he brought me in?"

"No," she replied, "and Lothar would surely have returned it to you if you had."

I slowly tried to stand, but was quickly discouraged by a forceful yet delicate hand that pressed me back to the cot.

"Later," she cooed. "You need your strength."

I reached out to bring her closer to me, but she quickly dodged my grasp.

"I guess you *are* feeling better," she replied.

"Where am I?"

"You were right with your first guess," she answered. "Waterdeep, the Dock Ward, Lothar's crib."

"And you are Kitten, Lothar's—"

"Friend," she interrupted, "and sometime business associate."

"Business?"

"There's plenty of time for that later."

For Kitten, *later* was a response to many things.

"How do you feel?" she asked, not quite as tenderly as before.

"Better," I replied. "No worse than if I had been dragged from Undermountain to Skullport by the hair of my head."

She smiled again.

I ran my hand over the top of my noggin, to make sure I wasn't bald, and said, "I just can't remember who I am, where I'm from, or what I'm doing here."

"What you are doing here is easy," Kitten replied. "You're getting your strength back. Perhaps you hit your head and fell overboard from one of the ships in the harbor. A blow like that can cause memory loss."

"So I've heard," I replied, and quickly realized something. "Funny that," I observed, "I didn't lose all of my memory."

"How so?" she queried, her expression again turning serious.

"I can't remember my name, but I recognized I was probably in the Waterdeep Dock Ward. I also knew about memory loss from a blow to the head, and all sorts of other stuff."

"What's the farthest back you can remember?"

"Waking up," I answered, quickly adding, "and seeing your angelic face."

She smiled.

I shrugged. "Well, it's a start."

A rapid thumping against the floorboards signaled that Lothar was once again approaching. He quickly shooed Kitten away and offered me a draught of something. I began to protest, but given my weakened condition, thought better of it, and accepted what I hoped was medicine.

A gentle drowsiness quickly seized me, and I was once again out like a light.

* * * * *

I awakened from my slumbers to the none-too-gentle prodding of Kitten, who seemed to have decided I no longer deserved coddling. She was right. The pain in my skull had disappeared, and my strength had indeed returned. I felt well rested and refreshed, and if it weren't for the fact that I still could not recall a single thing about my past, I might have been tempted to pronounce myself fit as a fiddle.

"Do you remember who you are yet?" she inquired.

"No," I replied, rubbing the sleep from my eyes, and thankful that the throbbing didn't return.

"Too bad," she answered flippantly. "I guess you'll just have to make do with what you know."

"Did Lothar tell you anything more? Maybe he knows something."

Kitten laughed heartily. Gone was the girlish giggle of my convalescence. "No such luck," she replied,

"and just so you know, Lothar doesn't say anything. He can't."

"He's mute?"

"You might say that. Years back, his tongue was cut out after a particularly ugly argument with a particularly ugly brute."

"Too bad."

Kitten shrugged. "He doesn't seem to mind," she commented. "He can read and write and make his opinions known when he wants to."

"I'm sure."

"It's just an obstacle that needed to be overcome, sort of like losing one's memory."

I couldn't be sure if she intended her comment to be taken as encouragement or a malicious taunt. The only thing I really knew was that I desperately wanted to know who I was.

The formerly soft and sensitive Kitten grew impatient. "Well," she said, tapping the toe of her soft-soled boot against the floor, "are you ready to get on with your life?"

I was perplexed. "What do you mean 'get on with my life'?"

"You seem well enough," she observed, setting her carefully manicured fingertip against her delicately tapered jaw. "I thought you might be in need of some employment, gainful or otherwise, unless of course you just planned on setting up housekeeping here with Lothar."

"What did you have in mind?" "I have this friend who is exceptionally good at judging the measure of a man. I'm sure he can size you up and situate you in an appropriate position." "What about my identity?"

"Suit yourself," Kitten replied with a shrug. "Personally, I always considered it more important to secure food, shelter, and whatnot before indulging in 'finding myself ... but if you have some plan....'"

This Dock Ward vixen was right. A question still nagged me, though.

"What sort of work can I do? If I don't know who I am, how can I know my abilities?"

"Don't you worry your damaged little head," she instructed condescendingly. "It's obvious you know a lot more than you realize. You're probably exceptionally good at a lot of things." She started toward the door.

"Just leave it up to Murph."

"Murph?" I asked, hot on her heels. "Who's Murph?" "Let's just say he's a broker of talents," she replied, hastening her step. "Hurry! He doesn't like to be kept waiting."

* * * * *

The door to my entire universe led to a hallway, which in turn opened on an alley. I'd been in a recently abandoned warehouse.

I was surprised how quickly my eyes adjusted to the broad daylight, until I realized our fast-paced journey through byways and back alleys of the Dock Ward was confined to shadowy areas. Like her surefooted namesake, Kitten scurried from patch of gray to patch of gray until I felt we'd walked for miles; we were probably only a few blocks from our original location. Whether she had an affinity for shade or some desire to evade pursuit, Kitten led me on a circuitous tour of the least splendid sights in the City of Splendors. We finally arrived at a boarded-up facade that had once been a tavern.

Kitten looked right and left, gave three firm stomps to the establishment's coal chute cover, lifted it back, and gestured for me to follow her as she slid inside. She whispered the singularly unsentimental admonishment, "Try not to hit your head. It seems to have sustained more than enough damage for one lifetime."

Pausing a moment to imprint my surroundings on the *tabula rasa* of my memory, I followed the chimerical Kitten down the chute and through a pair of blackout curtains. I landed on a stack of burlap. Before me sat a one-eyed poster boy for 'lard is good for you' and a band of unsavory brigands with fists the size of traveling kegs.

In the few moments I required to study my surroundings, Kitten took her place on the tub of lard's lap.

"You must be Murph," I ventured with as much false bravado as I could muster.

The tub of lard turned to Kitten and said, "It talks to us?"

"It appears to have forgotten its manners, Murph," Kitten offered, "as well as a few other things."

Murph nodded in acknowledgment. "Ah, so you said. So you said."

I decided to bide my time in silence, having no desire to further offend my amply protected host. I felt Murph's watery eyes sizing me up.

"It knows nothing of its past?" my host inquired.

"No, Murph," Kitten answered, shifting herself off his lap and onto the arm of the exceptionally strong

armchair that supported them.

"And it needs our powers of observation," Murph murmured aloud, "... and perhaps a situation."

"Yes, Murph," the feline female replied, steel in her voice.

"It should come closer," the tub of lard instructed.

Before I could regain my feet, a brigand on each side of me grabbed the ends of the bag that had been my settee and tossed me and it closer to my host. I landed hard, in his dale-sized shadow. I could smell the stale sweat of his seldom-washed corpulence. Murph leaned forward and gestured with his fingers to the left and right. I was jostled from side to side by his flunkies so that he might observe some of my finer details.

"It has a tattoo on its left hand," Murph rambled, "perhaps a slave mark, or the mark of a thief. The hands are strong, yet uncallused. The knuckles have been bruised more than a few times. Both earlobes remain intact; no substantial gut from a sedentary life. Not much intelligence either. Looks just less than average."

I had almost reached my limit of tolerance when Murph leaned back, sighed, and belched. "It no longer amuses us," he said dismissively. "Get rid of it!"

I tried to make eye contact with Kitten, but was immediately distracted by the breeze of a bashing blow that just missed my cranium. My shoulder was not so lucky. Without thinking, I rolled with the blow, turning as I tumbled until I regained my footing and a defensible posture, my back to the cellar wall.

The brigands hesitated just long enough for me to get my bearings. A quick look above failed to reveal the curtained chute, and the merry band would not give me time to find it. Turning my head once again forward, I spied my host, reclining as if awaiting the commencement of some boring gladiatorial combat. The chimerical Kitten was still at his side, the deadpan expression on her face failing to hide the fear and concern in her eyes.

Allowing myself a moment of self-satisfaction (realizing it might be my last), I thought silently—You dog, you! You've won her heart already. Too bad you won't have time to get better acquainted.

A quick blink and my concentration returned, and I faced the onslaught.

The brigands came at me one at a time, which didn't make much sense if they wanted to kill me. The first had a mace, the second a garrote, the third a dagger, and the fourth a short sword. In each case, I eluded my attacker with relative ease, surprising myself at my own agility and expertise. Having dispatched the fourth with the hilt of his own short sword, I seized the initiative.

I threw myself at the one I assumed would be the fifth. The heel of one hand smashed his forehead while the fingertips of the other extricated two carefully concealed throwing stars from the inner folds of his tunic. I propelled myself to the side and forward so that I was now situated on the lap of my host, deadly star poised against his jugular vein.

Before I could issue an ultimatum, the tub of lard hailed, "Enough!"

The brigands withdrew to the shadows.

Holding the star still in deadly place, I observed their retreat, and also noticed the tip of a dagger an inch from my own jugular. Its hilt was held steadfast by my own kittenish guide.

Murph saw my concern. He said carefully, "No need for that, Kitten. I think I can now trust this fellow."

Kitten withdrew the dagger and relaxed. In accordance, I did the same with the star.

Murph sighed, and then belched. A grin of satisfaction crossed his lips. "Does it want to know what I know?" he asked coyly.

"What do you know?" I demanded, my stance of bravado resumed.

"It is an exceptional fighter of uncommon training. Despite a certain hardness to its features and its bearing, its breeding and body show few signs of the devastations of poverty or abuse. Fast reflexes, keen senses, good instincts. If I was a bit more confident, I would say it was either a royal assassin or a master thief. Oddly, though, it avoids lethality in its moves. It doesn't kill unless it has to."

"So?" I demanded.

Murph looked to Kitten, smiled, and replied, "So, Murph might have use for it. Kitten can show you to a room I have on retainer. I'll deduct the rent from your first job."

Kitten left his side, opened a previously indiscernible door, and gestured for me to follow. As I passed the tub of lard, who had obviously been entertained by the combat, he volunteered one more observation.

"That mark on its hand. It's a brand, all right, but not of the slave variety. It wasn't burned in. It's of magical origin. Perhaps a marking of some secret society. I wouldn't worry about it if I was it."

The door closed behind me, and I followed Kitten up stairs.

"Quite the job interview," I mused aloud.

"He only brokers the best," she replied noncommittally, and showed me to a room where a meal had been laid out. With nary a kiss or a good-bye, she left me to regain the strength I had not even realized I had taxed.

After a few mouthfuls, I retreated to the bed and was soon fast asleep.

* * * * *

For the first time in my short memory, I dreamt.

I was in a subterranean chamber. My hands were manacled and my eyes downcast. The weight of some unpardonable crime pressed down upon my very being. I tried to raise my head to look around, but succeeded only in seeing numerous robed figures surrounding me. They were talking to each other, but I could not hear any of their words.

The sharp rap of knuckles on a door brought a curtain of darkness to the dream, and myself back to consciousness.

Sitting up, my legs already over the bedside, I answered, "Come in."

I looked up at my visitor and was quietly disappointed. It was not Kitten, but a young lad not quite in his teens.

"Kitten said I should bring this to you," the lad instructed. "She said I should wake you up so you could start earning your keep."

I nodded absently, not quite awake, took the note from the lad's hand, broke the seal, and read the missive.

It,

A client of mine desires a certain manuscript that is currently sitting on a desk at the offices of Tyme Waterdeep, Ltd. It is in a traveling folder in the top office overlooking the street, and the publisher returns this evening. Fetch it discreetly. An emissary of mine will take it off your hands later.

You will be well compensated should you succeed.

Murph

P.S. The traveling folder should have the monogram VG on it. Let me reiterate, discretion is desired.

I looked up, and the lad was still standing there.

"Kitten said I should lend you any assistance I could, provided I don't have to break the law or anything," he offered.

"Of course," I replied, then thought, I guess that's *my* job.

* * * * *

Dawn was still an hour or two away, and with no time like the present, I set off for the offices of Tyme Water-deep, Ltd. The lad showed me the way, and scurried home once I was firmly ensconced in the shadows of Faerun's most powerful publishing firm.

Not wishing to overlook the easiest and most obvious course of action, I tried the door. It was bolted from within. I would have to find another way.

My eyes were accustomed to the predawn light, and I scanned both sides of the street for another entry.

The buildings here were high and overhanging, as if to create a sheltered promenade on each side of the street. The top offices had huge, multipaned windows with sumptuous views, letting executives look down on their inferiors both metaphorically and physically. Every other building shared an external wall.

Walking up and down the street a few times, I noticed an occasional alley between buildings, some narrowed by sagging structures. One such alley was barely a body width.

Perhaps a point of access could be afforded from above. I scurried upward, left hand on one building and right hand on the other. It was hand and foot to brick and crack, upward, until I had reached the roof.

None the worse for wear, I crept forward until I was situated over the publisher's offices. My efforts were rewarded with a skylight.

Though it was obviously latched from within, I was quickly able to remove the pins from its hinges and shift it forward on the latch.

Silently I lowered myself inside, and came to rest on the publisher's desk itself. My steps were cushioned by various mounds of paper, one of which was crowned by a traveling folder bearing the

monogram VG.

Securing the object of my quest beneath my belt and behind my cloak, I regained the roof. I quickly closed the skylight and replaced its errant pins. Creeping to the eaves, I descended a drainpipe that led to an alley at the end of the street.

Confident I was still unobserved, I returned to the furnished room from which I had begun my quest, scant hours ago, and waited to be contacted.

I nodded to sleep, my back still cushioned by the traveling folder.

Once again I dreamt. I found myself at the mercy of the cloaked men. The room was heavy with magic, and I could feel all eyes bearing down on me. I was undeniably guilty and remained passive, willing to accept my fate.

The circle closed in on me as the dream came to an end.

* * * * *

A few hours later, I awoke of my own accord (a pleasant surprise) and removed the parcel from its hiding place on my person. Undoing the drawstring, I looked inside and read the cover sheet, which bore the seemingly innocuous title, *Volo's Guide to the Moonsea, the Land of Political Intrigue and Conspiracy*.

I recalled the name Volo—a best-selling hack writer. Perhaps Murph's client was a rival publisher. Still, it seemed a silly thing to risk life and limb over.

I was about to read the first page when I sensed I wasn't alone. I looked up.

Kitten had arrived as silently as her namesake.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," she instructed. "You're being paid to get it, not read it."

I placed the manuscript in its folder, rebound it, and handed it over.

"Good," Kitten said, placing it firmly in the crook of her arm. "Follow me."

"Where?" I inquired.

"To the place where you will be paid," she said curtly.

I followed her outside, pausing for a moment to close the door. I couldn't help noticing three burly bodies lying in unmoving heaps by the roadside. I tried to recall if they had been there earlier, and decided they hadn't. Kitten seemed to be waiting for me.

I asked, "Friends of yours?"

"No," she replied, "of yours. They, too, desired the manuscript you so eloquently retrieved. It would appear I arrived in the nick of time."

I looked at her, and at them. Had this sweet young Kitten dispatched these rivals with her own bare hands?

"Don't worry about them," she replied. "The city watch is used to cleaning up detritus in this neighborhood."

I was dumbstruck.

Kitten couldn't help noticing. She giggled, and answered my unasked question. "I had a little help. Lothar decided not to stick around."

* * * * *

Kitten once again led me through the shadowed byways of the Dock Ward, darting from shadow to shadow, with occasional stops in doorways and alcoves, until we returned to an area I recognized. It was near my place of convalescence. She saw the look of recognition in my eye, and nodded.

"No place like home," she volunteered. "A new furnished room has been secured for you, one of a more permanent nature than last night's accommodations."

We entered a tavern, passed behind the bar, and up a staircase to a set of furnished rooms. Kitten put a key to one of the locks and opened the door to my new residence.

The furnishings were modest, but adequate—a comfortable bed with a warm quilt and firm pillows, a chest, a lantern, and a table with two chairs. Upon the table were two small purses and an envelope.

"I see our payment has already arrived," Kitten announced, hastening to the table to snatch the purses, the larger of which she pocketed, the smaller of which she tossed to me.

"Here," she volunteered, "your accounts of the past few days have been settled, Murph's cut deducted, and your rent paid for the next two weeks. That wasn't too hard now, was it?"

At this point I noticed her arms were empty. The package bearing the manuscript was nowhere to be seen.

"The package," I sputtered, "where did it go?"

"I delivered it along the way," she answered coyly. "Maybe you're not as observant as I thought you were." With a toss of the head, she danced past me to the doorway, pausing only briefly to kiss my cheek. "I have to go now," she said, "but I'll be in touch."

She saw the look of disappointment in my eyes, and added, "There's plenty more where that came from. You are no doubt a man of great potential."

"A man without a past," I reminded her.

"Whatever," she replied, then added, "I'll drop by later to show you around town. Our relationship doesn't always have to be just professional."

Before I could blink, she had left the room, and I was alone in my new home.

I felt the bag of coins and instinctively knew there was more than enough to fill my needs for a while—and provide a few amenities that were lacking. I could do some shopping later.

All that remained was the question of my identity, the shadows of my past. I remembered the envelope on the table before me. Perhaps an answer was within?

Picking up the missive, I saw that it was unaddressed. I tore it open. Surprisingly, it was not a letter, but rather a page that had been extracted from some arcane volume. The paper was old and brittle, and featured text in several different languages or codes. My eyes were immediately drawn to an illustration that showed a circle of cowed figures around a prisoner in a set of stocks. The caption below it read:

In rare instances of mercy, the Lords of Waterdeep would accept indenturement in exchange for clemency for someone accused of crimes against the lords or the City of Splendors. The accused would have his identity wiped clean, returning him to a state of innocence prior to his commission of said crimes. In exchange for various services provided to the lords, the accused would be granted clues to his past. These services always were of a sensitive nature, for which the lords desired plausible deniability, and often resulted in the death of the accused, upon which time the accused would be pardoned of all crimes and receive a proper burial. Such men are known as Lord's Men.

A different ink bore the message *First Payment*.

As I finished reading the page, it and the envelope burst into flames, leaving nary a whiff of smoke.

Strangely enough, I was not troubled by this recent revelation, as if I had already accepted this fate at some earlier time.

The mysterious Kitten, my protector, and nurse Lothar, and the silly business of retrieving a manuscript by some hack writer didn't seem as important as living from day to day, and paying off the terms of my indenturement.

I was eager to accept my next assignment—to earn another clue to my identity.

Tertius And The Artifact

Jeff Grubb

As I sat on the balcony of the Nauseous Otyugh in Scornubel, suspended between the hangover of the previous evening and the one that was yet to come, I meditated on the phrase "should have stayed in bed." Sound advice, probably postulated first by some spell-flinger after a particularly bad morning of fireballing and lightning bolting and whatnot.

Of course, it did me little good since I was in bed the night before when everything went south. Except me, of course.

Let me explain. It was a little before three bells, and Tertius Wands, yours truly, was blissfully asleep in my quarters at the Otyugh, third floor stateroom with an odorous view of the stables. The Otyugh is one of the new establishments that have popped up after the last *Volo's Guide*. As a result of Volo's work in popularizing certain locations to travelers, those locations have ceased to be popular to natives, necessitating new inns, dives, and hangouts for adventurers to hang out in. Ampy had at one time suggested that it would be advantageous to follow Volo around, opening new inns in his wake, as the ones he talks about are soon filled to the bursting with warriors and wizards carrying his dratted little tomes.

But I digress. I was setting the scene, dressing the stage, laying the groundwork. Three bells. Bedroom. Otyugh. Then the ceiling exploded.

Well, it did not exactly explode, but the thunderous boom from above was akin to a roof collapsing. I sat bolt upright, and noticed that the bed itself, a stout four-poster of ironwood, was shimmying and jumping like a nervous carrion crawler. Every loose article in the room, from the chamber pot to the steel mirror,

joined in this vibrating dance of doom.

I did what any rational man would do—I hid beneath the covers and promised whatever gods would listen that I would never touch Dragon's Breath Beer and death cheese again.

"Tertius Wands!" thundered a frighteningly familiar voice from the direction of the ceiling.

I popped an eye over the edge of the blanket and saw Granduncle Maskar's fiery head. I did not doubt that his head was still attached to his body back in Water-deep, and he was sending an astral whatsit or a phantasmal thingamabob to address me. At the moment, I was too frightened to care.

Bravely, I faced the mightiest mage of Waterdeep. "It wasn't my fault!" I shouted, pulling the bed sheets back over my head and hoping I could be heard clearly. "I didn't know she was a priestess of Sune! No one told me about that festhall! I'm innocent!"

"Never mind that!" boomed my granduncle. "I have something important for you to do!"

I peeked over the edge of my covers and managed a kitten-weak, "Me?"

"You," snarled my uncle, his displeasure registering fully on his face. "I had a magical artifact, a remnant of powerful Netheril, which has been stolen from me."

"I didn't do it!" I quickly put in. "Have you checked with Cousin Marcus? He's always picking up things that don't belong to ..."

"*Silencer* bellowed the fiery, god-sized head floating over my bedpost. "I know who took it—a thief named the Raven, who is heading your way. I want you to get it back. The device looks like three glass spheres, one set floating within the next. Bring it back to me, and you can return to the City of Splendors!"

"Well, that's just it, then," I ventured. "I was thinking about taking up a life on the open road, and ..."

"Find the Tripartite Orb of Hangrist!" said the phantasmal granduncle. "And find it *now!*"

And with that, Maskar's head exploded in a cascade of fireworks, which succeeded in leaving scorch marks along the wall and shattering the water pitcher. Grand-uncle Maskar was never one for quiet exits. In fact, in all the years I've known and avoided him, he's never used the door once.

In my nightshirt, I rose unsteadily from my bed and picked up the shattered pitcher. Any thought that I could write this off to some cheese-induced delirium or nightmare was in as many shards as the pottery. Granduncle Maskar wanted something, and wanted me to get it.

And one does not disappoint one's granduncle, particularly when that granduncle could turn one into a toad.

So I whistled up my genie, Ampratines. Well, whistled is a bad word. I more rubbed him up, running my finger over the ring and calling him into being.

Let me make this quite clear: I lack the least bit of magical ability, which makes me an exception in the Wands family, overladen by all manner of conjurers, sorcerers, prestidigitators, and other assorted spell-casters. However, I get by with a genie, attached to a ring I found years ago in a Waterdhavian sewer. But that's a tale for another time.

Ampratines wafted into view like a phantasmal castle suddenly appearing in the desert. The djinn by their nature are a clever race, and Ampí is the cleverest of the lot, with more brain cells per cubic inch than any other creature on Faerun.

Ampí was dressed as normal, in long blue robes that set off his crimson skin. His black topknot of hair was immaculately greased and mannered, protruding through an azure skullcap like the tail of a championship horse. His solemn mouth was framed by an equally well-mannered beard and mustache.

"What ho, Ampí?" said I. "You heard?"

"Druids in the High Forest heard, I have no doubt," said Ampí calmly, his voice as deep as the crypts of Undermountain and as smooth as a halfling's promise. "It seems your granduncle has need of you."

"Need for a pawn," I muttered, looking around for my pants. Ampí waved a hand, and the missing trousers manifested at the end of his large, well-manicured hand. Genies are wonderful that way, and I think everyone should have at least one. Regardless, I was in no mood to list my djinni's good points after being terrorized by my own flesh and blood. "Why does he need me?"

"I can endeavor to find out," said Ampí smoothly. "It may take me a brief while." With this he wafted out of view. Butlers, menservants, and members of the guard would pay good money to learn how to waft as effortlessly as this genie could.

I tried to get back to sleep, but once you've been threatened in bed by a magical projection of the family patriarch, the bliss of slumber is denied. Instead, I paced, worried, and sat up by the windowsill, watching the horses in their paddock and marveling at the simplicity of their lives.

And with the arrival of morning, and the failure of Ampí to return, I chowed down a modest breakfast of snakes in gravy (at least that's what I assumed it was). Then I retired to the portico of the Nauseous Otyugh with orders for the wait staff to send another Dragon's Breath out every half hour, and keep doing

so until I was no longer able to send the empties back. I sought to stave off the oncoming hangover from the previous night by launching directly into the next one.

The Nauseous Otyugh, by the way, is a bit ramshackle, a former general store put out of business by Aurora and her catalog. The second floor was set back from the first, creating a wide porch, suitable for the major Scornubel sports of drinking oneself into oblivion and watching others do the same on the street below. I had gotten quite good at both activities for the past two weeks, and was quite prepared to begin my career as a Waterdhavian expatriate, sopping up the sun and the alcohol and telling people about how horrid it was to live in a city like Waterdeep, where every second noble is a mage, and most of those are relatives.

And, of course, now I mentally kicked myself for not leaving Scornubel. Ampy had strongly recommended we keep moving a week ago, but I demurred. I would not be like some of my cousins, ordered around by servants, controlled by their butlers, mastered by their own magical homunculi. If I was to be banished from Waterdeep, I had told Ampy at the time, there was no better place to begin my exile than the balcony of old Nauseous, watching the caravans go by. But Scornubel was only a few hundred miles down the Trade Way from Waterdeep, and apparently not far enough from Granduncle Maskar's plots.

My mental wandering was interrupted when I was made aware of a youth to my right, instead of the patient barmaid that had been bringing my drinks. Surely it could not have been noon already, I thought, and the changing of shifts. Someone would have come out with a lunch menu, at the very least.

I strained to focus a bloodshot eye and discovered that the newcomer, bearing ale on a silver plate, was a halfling. His wide ivory grin was visible in the shadows of a badly woven straw hat. I blinked twice, and when he failed to disappear, ventured a conversational gambit.

"Yes?" I asked, that being the soul of wit I could manage at the moment.

"Beggin' yer pardon, sire," said the small demihuman, sweeping off the hat to reveal a tangle of red hair, "but I understand that yer the gentlem'n that was lodgin' on the top floor yesterday eve? The one that had all the thunder and shoutin' and whatever?"

I deeply wished I had some form of native magical ability at the moment, for a comprehend languages spell, or a distill dialect, or whatever would be useful. I chose to stay with a time-proven response. "Yes?"

The halfling shifted uneasily on his furry pads. "Well, sire, I was outside and heard a lot of it, and the big god-voice said ye was huntin' the Raven."

I nodded my head, slowly, hoping I would appear sage but in reality praying my melon would not pop loose from my shoulders and roll around on the porch. "And you are ... ?"

"Caspar Millibuck, at yer servants," the halfling continued. "Well, I'm huntin' the Raven meself, and I figgered that one like ye, with such powerful god-voices, could help one like me, bein' small and short and all, and we could both nab the thief together."

"Uh-huh," said I, banishing most of my foggier thoughts back to the corners of my mind. "And why do you want the Raven?" I had not just fallen off the spell-wagon, and knew that halflings always had at least three reasons for doing anything, two of which would violate local laws.

The halfling examined his fur-covered pedicure. "Well, it's just that the Raven staled from me family as well, and I'm s'posed to get me money back. I can't go home till I get it"

Even in its ale-induced state, my heart went out to the small individual, trapped in a similar situation to my own. "And what did the Raven steal from you?"

"Gold, sire," said the halfling quickly, "all the gold in me orph'nage."

"Orphanage?" I shook my head. "I thought you said it was stolen from your family?"

"Indeed, sire," the halfling bobbed his head up and down rapidly. "Ever'body in my family's an orphan. We're very unlucky."

"Indeed," I muttered, and wondered what the halfling was really after. Of course, Ampratines was nowhere about, and here it was nearly noon. If I could wrap things up without my erstwhile ally, that would show both the genie and my granduncle I knew a thing or two myself.

"Very well," I said. "Take me to the Raven. We'll sort things out, man to man."

"Ach, ye can't do that," slurred the halfling. "The Raven's no man, but a doppelganger, and can change shape at whim. I think I know where to find him, but ye have to be ready to move, and move quick, when I call. Will ye be helpin' me? For the other orphans, at least?"

With tears in his eyes, he looked up at me, and of course, I said yes. Noble thing to do and all. And besides, this little fellow knew how to find the Raven, and that would make my job all the easier.

I took the ale from the halfling, but did not finish it. I sent the next ale back undrunk as well, and asked instead for a tablet and a stylus, and some of the house stationary. I was in the midst of composing a letter to Granduncle Maskar, telling him everything was under control, when Ampy reappeared. One moment

there was nothing to my left shoulder, and the next, there he was—as noble a djinni as ever 'jinned.

"I take it you have something," I snapped, the effects of the long-delayed hangovers coming to the fore. "You've taken most of the morning."

Ampi gave a small quarter-bow from the waist. "A hundred apologies, Lord Tertius," he said. "It took some doing to ascertain the nature of the device and what exactly happened to it. I finally spoke with a sylph that your granduncle uses to clean out the chimneys. She apparently witnessed most of the news on this unpleasantness."

"Well then, spit it out," I said, impatiently tapping my stylus against the tablet.

"The Tripartite Orb is an artifact of Netheril," said the genie, putting his hands behind his back like a schoolboy reciting his lessons. "Netheril was a kingdom of wizards that fell thousands of years ago, before the founding of Cormyr or Waterdeep. The least of these wizards, it is said, was more powerful than the mightiest mages of the Realms."

"A kingdom of Granduncle Maskars?" I barely suppressed a shudder. "The mind boggles."

"Indeed, it does, milord," said Ampratines. "The Tripartite Orb was apparently a most potent weapon in that kingdom, for it had the ability to kill all magic within its immediate surroundings. No fireball would explode in its proximity, no summoning would be effective, no ward would protect, and no magical weapon would gain its weal. You can see why this would be effective in a kingdom of wizards."

"Right ho," said I. "You get one near it, and they're weak as puppies."

"Effectively so," said the djinni. "So, as a result, most of its history in Netheril consists of mages hiding it in inaccessible places while other mages hired warriors to wrest it from those hiding spots. So it went through most of Netherese history, until the kingdom's fall. It remained hidden until a dozen years ago, when a group of adventurers found it in Anauroch. Your granduncle realized the danger of such a magic-destroying artifact immediately, and acquired it and locked it in his lowest dungeon."

"Far away from any prying eyes or other magics," I put in.

"Quite. The device appears as a set of three crystal globes, one floating within the next, which are made of iridescent crystal, such that they resemble soap bubbles, I am told. As with all artifacts, it is indestructible by most normal means, so your granduncle put it under lock and key in a safe location. And from that safe location, it was stolen two weeks ago by a thief called the Raven, who is apparently heading down the Trade Way to Scornubel.

"Which explains why Granduncle Maskar wants me to recover the thingamabob," I said.

"In part," said the genie. "Also because you are one of the few members of the family without natural magical ability, perhaps he thought you would be less at risk if confronted with a lack of magic entirely."

"Or less of a loss if I ended up dead," I muttered. "Well, at least I have your aid."

Ampratines blanched, which for the genie was a strange thing. "I fear I can be of less aid than you would prefer. This antimagic sphere will also remove any summoned creatures from the area, including myself. Indeed, its very antimagical nature prevents magical detection. Perhaps it would be to our advantage to notify the local authorities on this matter."

My brow furrowed at the news. "Local authorities." I shook my head dismissively. "If they got their hands on something like this, they'd lock it up under tight guard and magical key, and then Granduncle Maskar would be steamed at me until the next Avatar Crisis. No, we can do this on our own."

"But, milord, the antimagical nature precludes ..."

"No buts." I held up a hand. "While you were questioning a smoky hearth-wisp, I was diligently pursuing my own avenues. Even now, my agents are scouring the city, hunting for this Raven character."

"Your"—Ampratines looked stunned, well, as stunned as a creature made of elemental air could look—"agents ... ?" He struggled to turn the question into a statement, with some success.

"Indeed," said I, rising unsteadily to my feet. "I will have this small matter solved, with no further involvement on your behalf."

"Milord, I..."

"Tut, tut." I touched my hand to my forehead. Both hangovers, long delayed, were now rushing to the fore. "If you say you cannot help, I will not press the issue. Have faith in the Wands family intuition."

The genie looked unconvinced, but said, "As you wish, milord."

I smiled at the djinni. There was no mistaking who was in charge of this relationship. "But if you could, whip up one of your mystical omelets, tonic to any drinking binge. I think better when the entire Realms isn't pulsing in time with my heartbeat."

Ampratines started a warning, then merely said, "Of course, milord." He wafted from view.

I stood on the porch of the Nauseous Otyugh, steadying myself on the railing, and tried to look deep in thought. Actually, I was counting the seconds until Ampri's return with the cure to my now-thundering

headache.

* * * * *

"That's the Raven?" I asked the halfling. "She's a woman!"

"Hush!" hissed the small red-haired humanoid from beneath the folds of his brown, tattered robe. "She's no more a woman than I'm a red dragon. She be a doppelganger! And she'll notice if ye shout and goggle at her like a fish!"

The woman who was not a woman was seated at a table across the crowded common room. She was dressed in traveling leathers and a blue cape, and she was facing us, which made surreptitious observation difficult. She had a large valise sitting on the table next to her. She cast an errant glance in our direction, and I retreated into the folds of my own brown cloak and hood, turning slightly away from her, trying not to goggle like a fish.

Her companion at the table might have been a hill giant, or perhaps an ogre, for he was as tall as Ampy, and nearly as massive. The companion was dressed in an all-encompassing cloak as well, one of crimson, which made him look like a large sunset at the opposite table.

We were at the Jaded Unicorn, a place that had the unfortunate fate of gaining notice in the aforementioned *Volo's Guide*. As a result, the place was filled with newcomers, travelers, hardened mercenaries, and dewy-eyed would-be adventurers. As the Unicorn had a bad reputation (according to Volo), the traditional garb was heavy cloaks with the hoods pulled up. It looked like a convention of spectres, wraiths, and grim reapers.

The exception was the Raven. She, I mean it, had her hood down, showing off golden hair that pooled on her shoulders like spilt ale. She looked as if she had elfin blood in her. Her ears were slightly pointed, and her chin tapered to a soft, rounded end. I had to remind myself that all this was an illusion. She—it, I mean—was a shapechanger, and could look like King Azoun or my Granduncle Maskar if it so desired. A doppelganger in its true form was a slender humanoid—sexless, hairless, and pale gray in shade. Altogether an unappetizing thought.

The Raven was in animated conversation with the giant sunset at her table. Her brow became furrowed at one point, and she tapped her oversized case with a slim hand. We were too far away to hear what was being said, but it was obvious they were haggling about something.

And it did not require a master mage to figure out what they were arguing about. The case was about the size and shape that could carry a wizard's crystal ball. Or a Tripartite Orb of the ancients.

Whatever Sunset said seemed to calm her down, for her features cleared. She listened, then nodded, then grabbed the satchel and strode toward the door. Sunset remained at his seat. All eyes were on her, but when she arrived at the doorway, the doppelganger turned and, for the briefest moment, locked eyes with me. I don't know if it was true or not, but I felt as if the world suddenly shifted on its axis and spun in a new fashion.

Then she, it, was gone. I turned back and noticed that the giant Sunset had disappeared as well, probably back to some hidden room with a cabal of Red Wizards of Thay.

"C'mon!" snapped the halfling. "We'll lose 'er if we don' get movin'."

Relieved mildly that my ally was also using the female pronoun for our target, I followed the smaller cloaked figure out of the Unicorn. Our departure did not create any response or commotion, but then, we kept our hoods up.

Night had fallen like a drunken dwarf, and the streets were nearly empty. Those with something to lose were already squirreled away in their beds (unless bothered by their magical granduncles). Selune was full, however, and reflected like a beacon off our quarry's blonde tresses.

We followed her to a small rooming house near the river. A buck-toothed ogre denied us entry, but a few gold coins did buy the information that the young lady (who gave her name as Demarest) had just arrived, always carried the valise, and was staying on the second floor, near the back of the inn.

So it was that, almost a full day after Granduncle Maskar first manifested himself, I wore a voluminous robe and edged along a window ledge, a similarly dressed halfling in tow. The breeze off the surrounding plains was brisk, and at several points, I was afraid the cloaks would catch the wind fully and send us spiraling, head over boot heels, over the low buildings of Scornubel like errant paper kites.

For the first time that evening, I regretted giving Ampy the night off. He was most perturbed about my pursuing magic-killing artifacts, so I gave him leave. Even now, he was probably curled up in some merchant's library, digesting some history of the Heartlands, or the *Collected Romances of the Obarsksyr Line*, while his master was about to take involuntary flight.

Progress was, therefore, slow. Were we near the front end of the building, we would have undoubtedly been spotted by the watch, in their plate mail and copper helmets. As it was, we did our best to imitate gargoyles when someone passed below us in the alley, and spent the rest of the time inching toward the desired goal, a lit window. As we approached, the occupant within doused the light. We halted for another long moment to ascertain that the faux Demarest had not dimmed her lamp in order to see clearly outside. Then we resumed our onerous march.

The window was latched, a wise precaution even on the second floor in Scornubel. The halfling Caspar produced a long, thin piece of wire that, wedged into the slot between the window halves, sprang the latch easily.

"In ye go, lad," hissed the halfling, smiling with his ivory-white choppers.

"Me?" I whispered back. "I thought you halfling folk would be better at the 'sneaking into someone else's room' sort of thing, being closer to the ground and all."

The halfling gave a disgruntled snort. "Well, I could, but then ye'd be out here on the ledge, twice as big as life, waitin' for the copper-top watch to pick ye off. Of course, if that's yer choice ..." He let his voice trail off.

I could see his point. I also realized that if I wanted the Tripartite Orb, I had better get my hands on it before he did.

I slid into the room as silently as I was able, the cloak's ability to muffle my steps offset by its own bulky weight. The moonlight was full in the room, and reduced everything to blue highlights and ebon shadows. Demarest, the doppelganger thief known better as the Raven, was asleep on a wide bed, only her hair, now shining like silver in the moonlight, visible above the wide comforter.

The valise was on a low table across from the bed. It would likely hold the orb, the halfling's gold, or both. It would pay, I thought, to open the satchel and check. If the halfling's gold were not in there, I was sure that I could convince Uncle Maskar to make good their financial loss.

The satchel's large metal clasp opened with a ratcheting click, the bag falling open on the table. There was another click, which at first I thought was an echo. Then a very steely feminine voice behind me said, "Step away from the bag, or I will drop you where you stand."

I am by nature very good at taking orders, as befits a nonmage in a family of wizards. I put the satchel down on the table and took two steps backward, holding my hands up in clear view. I left the bag open, more from not being told to do otherwise than from any innate curiosity. Within, there was a glint of crystal, not gold.

"Now turn toward me," said the dulcet voice.

I turned slowly, and as I did, I could see Caspar's silhouette at the window. I tried not to flinch, but only hoped that he had planned for this possibility. The woman seated on the bed did not seem to notice him.

The doppelganger was carrying a crossbow, one of those drow-made hand-held jobs that looked every bit as dangerous as it was. She held it level on me and kicked the comforter off her. She was fully dressed beneath the covers, which I realized with both relief and regret.

She regarded me coolly. "A more foolish disguise than normal, Raven," she said. "Did you mug some fop of a noble for that face?"

"P-Pardon?" I managed, my mind in a bit of a whirl. "I'm sorry, I'm not the Raven. I thought *you* were----"

I made the mistake of lowering my arms slightly. Raven pointed the crossbow toward my chest, and I raised them immediately.

"Don't even flinch, doppelganger, or I'll drill a new hole through you."

"I'm sorry," I said, wondering if Ampy could hear my silent plea in whatever library he had ensconced himself, "but I'm not the doppelganger here. You are, and if you're confused about it, maybe we should talk about it instead of drilling anyone or anything."

Demarest the not-Raven, not-doppelganger laughed. It was a crystalline laugh, but cold and cruel. She raised the hand crossbow to point at my face, and I closed my eyes. I really did not want my last sight to be a crossbow bolt barreling in on me.

There was a twang, but surprisingly no impact or even the slight breeze of a near-miss. Instead, there was a low, feminine cursing. Taking a breath to assure myself I was among the living, I opened my eyes again.

Demarest was back on the bed, clutching with her left hand at the small bolt that had pierced her right front shoulder. Her right arm, though still attached, lay on the bed inert. Of the crossbow I could see nothing. Blood streamed down from the wound along her arm, darkening her blue robes and pooling in a

magenta stain on the linens.

I turned to see Caspar amble down out of the window. He was already loading another shot into his own drow crossbow.

I was mildly peeved, and said so. "How long were you going to wait until you made yourself known?" I started, but the halfling raised the crossbow to my face, in much the same way Demarest had done earlier. This was apparently a theme for the evening.

"Step by the woman, fool," snapped the halfling in a very unhalflinglike voice. The voice was sharp, like dried twigs breaking, and apparently used to being listened to.

I took two steps toward the woman, still seated on the bed, her breathing ragged and gasping. Her eyes were turning glassy.

"Poison," said the halfling, keeping the crossbow leveled on me as he moved sideways toward the table. "Not the fastest, but fast enough. Soon you will feel it too."

As he moved, the halfling began to melt like a wax candle and elongate. I know that wax candles don't elongate, but that's what Caspar was doing. The fatty folds of halfling flesh peeled away. The dark cloak turned pale, the head narrowed, and the eyes turned white and pupilless. By the time the halfling reached the table, he was no more a halfling. He was the native form of a doppelganger.

"Raven, I presume," I said, fighting to keep the quivering out of my voice.

"Right for the first and last time," said the creature, keeping the crossbow on me while digging into the bag with his free hand. He pulled forth a large crystalline globe. Within it floated a second globe of crystal, and within that a third globe. The three globes twinkled in the moonlight of the room.

"You've been very helpful, Tertius Wands," said the doppelganger, smiling with even rows of ivory-colored teeth. "You drew away my former partner's attention so I could get the drop on her. And now you'll serve me again. When they find both your bodies here, the guard will assume that the lady was surprised by a robber and both killed each other, leaving no witnesses to the Tripartite Orb's new owner."

I started to say something about how I could offer a very good price for the orb, but I was drowned out by a low growling. The woman on the bed was fast, faster than I would be in a similar situation—dead of night, bedroom, poisonous bolt in one shoulder. As the Raven and I talked, she had pulled herself into a crouch and now sprang at the doppelganger.

The shapechanger hadn't thought his former partner could shrug off the poison, and had the crossbow leveled at me. He jerked his hand toward the new target as he fired, and his shot was wide. The poisonous bolt buried itself in the woodwork as the woman slammed into him. The globe flew from his hand like a live thing, dancing and spinning in the moonlight.

I dived for it as if it was the last roll at the Highharvestide feast. My mind told me that after all the aeons, a simple drop would not harm the device, but my heart held the image of Uncle Maskar. My heart drove me to spread forward on the floor, snaring the orb before it touched the carpet.

I caught it with inches to spare, and both I and artifact rolled sideways, away from the sounds of battle. As I rose to my feet, I heard shouts in the distance and felt doors slamming open elsewhere in the inn. Apparently the fight was attracting other attention.

The two thieves, human and doppelganger, brawled in the midst of the room. The doppelganger had already taken Demarest's form in the struggle, so that it looked as if two blonde twins were rolling about on the carpet, clawing at each other. I looked at them, at the triple orb in my hands, and back at them, and wondered if I could negotiate my way around them and out the door. I really did not want to go back out the window and along the ledge.

That was when the door burst open to reveal at least three, and perhaps a dozen, copper-headed watchmen. Each bore a heavy two-handed crossbow, the type that could punch its way through the wall of a stable. Some carried torches and lanterns, and behind them was the giant Sunset in his crimson robes.

The two battling Demarests detangled and slowly rose, regarding the newcomers. I took another step backward. The window started looking like a better option all the time.

Sunset reached up and pulled his cowl back, revealing a very familiar, calm face.

Ampratines. Of course. I felt my heart start beating again.

The guards were not as sure as I was, and kept moving their aim from one twin to the next, unsure which was the true danger. Both thieves stood up uneasily, trying to put a few feet of distance between them.

I piped up. "The wounded one is real. The un-wounded one is the doppelganger."

The unwounded twin, Caspar/Raven/Doppelganger, wheeled in place and hissed at me, its fangs growing elongated and huge wings sprouting from its back as it did so. It leapt at me, intent on grabbing me as hostage and the globe as a prize.

Two things happened simultaneously. I threw the globe upward, toward the door and Ampí. And there were three or a dozen sharp twangs and the doppelganger collapsed on the floor.

The artifact floated like a soap-bubble across the room, and into the hands of Ampí.

Ampí looked at me, gave a short quarter bow, then dropped the globe.

It hit the ground with a resounding smash, and bits of colored glass spattered in all direction.

It was followed by me, I am afraid, hitting the ground in a dead faint.

* * * * *

Back on the balcony of the Nauseous Otyugh, I had recovered sufficiently to watch the sun rise over the ramshackle buildings of Scornubel.

"You could have warned me," I said, pouting over an ale. The djinni produced one more cold compress and placed it over my fevered brow. "You did not wish any warning," said Ampí. "I pursued matters as I thought I was best able. I have informed the local gendarmes that you realized the doppelganger was a halfling at the start, and played along to discover the location of the missing artifact. Therefore you are held blameless in this matter. The doppelganger is dead, and the thief Demarest, his former partner, has been cleansed of the poison and is ready to accept the town's justice."

"How did you know?"

"I did not know, exactly, though I thought the fact that you received fortuitous aid quite interesting. A word with the wait staff at the Otyugh ascertained that your help was the halfling, and it was not difficult to find a red-headed hauling wearing a straw hat in Scornubel. I noticed he was watching a particular inn, and let it be known at the inn that I was a wizard searching for a particular artifact. Demarest, hoping to unload the item before her partner caught up with her, contacted me for the meeting at the bar, where you saw us. That was when she tried to sell me the fake artifact."

My mind, battered and worn and threatened, skipped a beat, and I said, "Fake artifact?"

"Of course," said the genie. "As I explained to the watch, and took the liberty of putting these thoughts in your name, if the device was truly the described artifact, then I would be unable to get close to it, being a summoned creature myself. The fact that I could sit at the same table with it was sufficient proof that it was a phony, strung up with thin crystals and gases of various densities, such that one sphere would float within the next. At that meeting I purposefully failed to bring the money she wanted for it. From there it was easy to alert the watch of a possible break-in at Demarest's room. We arrived in time to hear the battle."

I shook my head, "*Fake* artifact? Then the doppelganger had the real Tripartite Orb hidden elsewhere?"

"The Raven was probably unaware of the fake as well, since he went to such efforts to recruit you as his pawn. And Demarest, if she had the true globes, would have let the Raven take the fake, convincing him it was the real one. Neither had time to build a replica."

"Then who built the replica?" I said. "Not Uncle Maskar."

"Your granduncle's concern was legitimate as well, I suspect," said the djinni.

"Then if not the thieves, and not Maskar... " I took a long sip on my ale bottle. "Uncle Maskar never had the real Tripartite Orb, did he?"

"I don't think so," said the genie. "After all, how do you test an item for magic that supposedly refuses all magic?"

I let a smile crawl onto my face, the first in the past twelve hours. "So old Granduncle Maskar was horn-swoggled in the first place." I chuckled at the thought. "I would love to see the look on his face when he gets my letter explaining *that!*"

Ampratines made a solemn, low cough. That kind of cough he always makes when he disagrees completely, but cannot bring himself to say something outright. I cast my companion the eye, and he looked up, into the middle distance.

"If your granduncle never had the device," he said solemnly, "that means he would have to now *get* the device. And who better to get the device than someone who has already gotten the fake one?"

I let that sink into my ale-stained brain. "So the best thing is to not be here at all when he gets the word, eh?"

"Quite."

"Ah, well," I said with a sigh, draining the last of the ale and setting the dead soldier next to the others, "so much for an expatriate life in Scornubel. I think we need to move farther south, farther away from Waterdeep."

"I thought you'd think so," said Ampratines, with a smooth flourish producing our bags, "so I already took the liberty of purchasing the coach tickets. We leave in an hour."

Epilogue

Wes found his attention drawn yet again to the thin tome that had scared him earlier.

"The gods must be playing with me," he thought. "But the story about Jeffrey disappearing just *might* have some truth in it. How pleased the abbot would be with me if I solved the mystery."

He was torn between running from the room and wanting to finish Jeffrey's story. His hand shaking, he reached for the book and continued to read.

Jeffrey had gone to the north corner reading room and been at a loss to know where to start cleaning. The room was such a mess. Gathering a mop and bucket, he had lathered up the floor and then used a long-handled broom to sweep the cobwebs from the ceiling.

"Whew!" thought Wes. "This isn't me at all. I didn't mop the floor, and I haven't done the cobwebs yet." He felt a little guilty at this last thought and quickly returned to the story.

Jeffrey was tired after all the cleaning, so he had taken a short break. He leaned against a solid bookshelf and leapt back with a start as it moved.

"Whoa!" yelped Wes, and he pushed the tome away again. "This is too similar. How can this be happening?"

This time, it took several minutes before Wes felt ready to pick the book up again. Despite the cool room, he was sweating profusely.

He read that Jeffrey wanted to hide away from the monks for a while, even though he knew they would be angry when he eventually returned. The room was lit from an unseen source and filled with shelves, many of which had books or scrolls on them. A small table with a hard-backed chair was the only other furniture in the room.

Jeffrey selected a scroll at random and began to read. The scroll told a brief tale of a magical sword that could slay giants. Replacing the scroll, Jeffrey chose another and read its tale.

After many scrolls and tomes, Jeffrey spotted a very thin leather-bound volume wedged behind a shelf and...

This time Wes *did* scream. He hurled the book across the room and huddled close over the table as his whole body shook.

"It's not real. It's just a story," he told himself over and over again. Rocking back and forth and mumbling the short litany, he soon regained control of himself and decided it was time he finished the cleaning in the reading room.

As he moved toward the door, keeping well away from the thin tome, Wes felt a tugging inside him. Despite his fears of the story, he just *had* to know how it all turned out. He crossed the room and picked up the book. Wes found his place and continued to read....

As Jeffrey, in the book, skimmed the thin volume he had found, he read a story of a young probationer who had been taken in by the library when he was orphaned. The monks thought him lazy and good for nothing, and he had been chastised by one of the brothers for failing to keep the dining room clean. The young man's name was Niles, and Jeffrey recalled tales of Niles's being the probationer who had mysteriously disappeared more than a hundred fifty years before. Jeffrey had thought them no more than tales to frighten other probationers, but on the chance that there might be some truth to them, he had read further. If he could solve the mystery of Niles's disappearance, Jeffrey saw himself becoming something of a hero at the library.

Wes fought down the urge to run away, and forced himself to keep reading. Whatever this was about, he was a part of it now. He was more than a little worried about the two probationers who had disappeared, and what they had been doing just before, but his curiosity was winning the battle. He went back to the story.

Jeffrey had also opted to continue to read Niles's story, and Wes was hardly surprised to learn that Niles had been sent by the abbot to this very room to clean it for some scholars who were expected the next day. Like Jeffrey and Wes, Niles had spent around an hour cleaning the room before taking a break, and like Jeffrey and Wes, Niles had found the secret room with all the scrolls and volumes about magical and arcane things.

Niles, too, had read many of the volumes before finding a slim tome bound with leather, wedged

behind a bookshelf and covered with cobwebs. And, like those who were to follow, Niles had read the story of a young probationer, Edmund, who was considered lazy and worthless. He had served in the library two hundred years prior to Niles's time.

Wes had to stop for a moment to calm himself. Just how many probationers had disappeared from here since the library was built? The answer may well lie in this story. He took a deep breath and read on.

Wes's temples started to throb with confusion: just who was the reader and who the subject of the story? Each time the story started over, the new point of view made Wes's head spin. It took a few minutes for Wes to work out how to follow the story without getting confused. Each story so far began with a probationer finding the room, and soon after, there was a short description of the library as it had looked when that part of the story was written. This was not just a history of disappearing probationers, but a history of the library itself. By focusing on when the many extensions to the library had been built, Wes found the story much easier to follow.

Niles had been a probationer just after a time of great change. The library had acquired a huge collection from the king of Cormyr. Cormyr had been at war for almost four years, and had emerged victorious after one of its wizards found the key to ending the war in the library. A huge collection, part of the spoils of war, had been given to the library by the grateful monarch. There hadn't been room to house the new collection, and two new wings had quickly been built to accommodate it. All this had happened during the two hundred years from the time of Niles until that of Edmund, the last probationer to go missing.

Wes put the book down again, and took a few deep breaths. The library had been here a lot longer than he had believed, if this story were true. And Wes wasn't even close to the middle of the book yet. He figured that was where the first probationer's story would be, and he hoped the stories would all reach their climaxes in the second half. He was up to five hundred years. The library could be closer to two thousand years old rather than one thousand, as most people believed.

Brother Frederick, the abbot, the visiting scholars, and everything else he should have been attending to were forgotten as Wes returned to his search for the start of the story.

Robar had gone missing two hundred fifty years before Edmund, in a time when the library's expansion had been quite slow. Only a few new volumes were added to the collection each year, and building wasn't a rushed affair. The large rooms in the south wing, and the ornate figures on the south wall, were added then.

Robar had followed Troyan, who had been missing for over four centuries. In Troyan's time, the library's great hall had been built. The original hall was now the accommodation area. Troyan had come to this room and picked up a very flimsy tome with no binding. He had been the one who had taken the book and bound it before he read what was in it.

Reading through all the layers of this twisted story, to the middle of the book, Wes discovered that the first probationer to disappear had been Bairn. He had been taken in by the monks when the library was being established, well over a thousand years ago. The monks had been discussing ways of protecting the library from the dangers of fire, vermin, and ignorant or selfish nobles who would not wish the works to be shared with any who had need of them.

There had been no solution settled on until one night Bairn had a dream in which a messenger from the gods visited him. The messenger told him the library needed a guardian entity, and that entity could only come from the life-force of one who truly believed in what the library stood for, and what it could mean to future generations. Bairn had wondered why he was the one chosen to receive this vision. Surely such an important message should have gone to Alaundo the Seer or one of the monks.

A tenday later, Alaundo made a prophecy that a young man would give himself to the library, to be a part of it forevermore, and that this man would be followed in the years to come by many more. These men would protect the library from all the forces of darkness and evil.

Recognizing the similarities to his dream, Bairn sought an audience with the seer, expecting to be beaten for his insolence. He was surprised when he got his audience the very next day.

The seer and the orphan met for many hours, while both of them had other duties that needed their attention. When the meeting was over, Alaundo left Bairn in his private chambers and instructed the monks that none could enter until the seer returned. When he did return and granted audiences to those he had ignored while he met with Bairn, many asked where the young man was. Alaundo just smiled and did not answer.

In those days, there had been few works in the collection, and the library was small in comparison to today, so Bairn had been able to carry out his task for almost six hundred years before he felt the need to choose a successor.

Now, in the second half of this history of Candlekeep, Wes began to read what happened to each of

the following guardians, and how they had been chosen. Troyan had been the first of the probationers to be sent to the reading room, and there hadn't been as many volumes in the hidden chamber then. The shelves were all there, and the table and chair. The book was only a few pages back then, and Troyan had found nothing in it to trouble him. He had read about Bairn's disappearance, and had hoped to make a name for himself as the man who solved that mystery. When Bairn had appeared and offered him the guardianship, Troyan had learned that the table and chair had been Bairn's, and had been placed in the room by the abbot after Bairn came to him one night in a dream.

Troyan also learned that the guardian entity could see into the hearts and minds of all those who lived and worked within the library's walls, and so it could always choose the right person to take over as guardian.

Robar had learned that the guardian could not be harmed by any magic then known, and mundane items could not affect it in any way. Magical energy could be used to restore the entity's energies, but the guardian could not use those energies in any offensive manner. Its powers were those of defense only, but with those powers, it could defend the library against any attack. Spell energies were absorbed by the entity, and all forms of mundane weapons, from swords and arrows to ballista bolts, were deflected long before they reached the library walls. Neither could any army lay siege to the library, as the entity had the ability to extend its powers for almost a mile in any direction, and no army had the numbers to lay siege from so far away.

Edmund, in his turn, had learned from the guardian that it could also protect the library from less obvious threats, such as insects, mildew, vermin, and even the normal aging of the volumes. He had been curious about the other volumes in the hidden room, and had learned that each abbot and one of the senior monks was aware of the room's existence and could place volumes they deemed worthy into this room. Only a few select scholars were ever permitted access to the room, and only the chosen guardian was allowed in here alone.

Edmund had decided to help out scholars in the library who couldn't quite find the work they wanted. In his time as guardian, he began pushing works partly out of their shelves to attract attention to them. It always turned out that these works were just what a visiting scholar was looking for, or else they had been placed on the wrong shelf and needed to be moved. Edmund never pushed the works out too far; he didn't want to attract attention. Most of the monks believed that one of the gods of knowledge was responsible for pointing the way to the tomes that turned up just when they were needed.

Niles's curiosity had turned to the source of the light in this room. He had wondered why none of the others had noticed it earlier. His questions had revealed to those who were to follow that the guardian provided the light as another of its benevolent powers, but only when the chosen successor was in or near the room. The earlier guardians hadn't thought much about this as their minds had followed other paths.

When Jeffrey's turn had come, he wanted to know if the abbots ever felt a twinge of guilt about sending a young man to what amounted to his death. The entity had answered him by explaining that while those who made up the entity weren't alive in the sense that they had no corporeal existence, they most certainly were not dead either. The guardianship was something that was offered and accepted; it could not be forced on anyone. The entity was not an undead thing with some parody of life. Rather, it was a life-force of a different nature. It had claimed to dwell on a higher plane of existence.

Wes wondered how long it would be before the guardian appeared and spoke to him. Would it find him worthy? What would he do if it did? What would he do if it didn't find him worthy? Perhaps now would be a good time to leave this room and get back to what he was supposed to be doing. Wes put the book down on the table and hurried toward the door.

A chill breeze blew through the room. Wes looked up to see an indistinct figure floating in the air before him.

"Who are you?" he asked, wondering whether he could get out of this room before the apparition caught him.

"You know the answer to that, don't you, Wes?"

It was more a statement than a question, but Wes answered anyway. "Hello, Jeffrey. Have you come for me?"

The entity gave Wes an exasperated look. "Have you learned nothing from your reading? I can offer you the position of guardian, but no one can force you to take it. You may refuse me and return to your duties in the library. No doubt Brother Frederick will make your life a misery for a time, but if you survive that, you will probably become a respected monk at the library."

Wes looked surprised at this news.

"Wait a moment. You can see the future? Tell me more of my life in this world, should I choose to

stay here and take my vows."

The apparition just smiled.

"No, I can't see the future. I can see into your heart, and I know that you have the qualities needed to make a fine scholar."

"But what are you? I know you are not undead, and you are not a god either. I just don't know what you are. Why do you need to choose a successor from time to time?"

"Please, stop. So many questions. In time, I will answer them all, and others you may have. But, let me answer those you have already asked first. I am the entity of the Candlekeep library. I was not the first, nor will I be the last, to bear that honor and responsibility. The library is more than stone and mortar, more than the works held within its strong walls. It is a symbol for the future. It holds the hopes of generations to come, and each generation, those hopes grow stronger as more and more works are added to the collection."

Wes looked puzzled. "But why have so many young probationers disappeared from here?"

"The library is, as I said, more than the buildings and works held within them. But buildings do not last forever, and parchment and vellum suffer the privations of age and vermin. Have you never wondered why the monks spend so little time maintaining the old buildings and instead devote more time to expanding the library? Have you never wondered why so few tomes are in poor repair, despite the use they get?"

"Well, I guess not."

"It is my job to guard the library from all forms of attack, be it a siege by a selfish lord who wants to hoard the knowledge in here, or a silverfish looking for a place to lay her eggs. I protect the library against all this, and more. But such protection comes at a cost. I do not have limitless power. As you rightly stated, I am not a god. I could perhaps live forever in this form, if I did not take my responsibilities seriously, but my life is tied to the library, and if the library falls, I will cease to be."

"So, you need my life-force to replace the power you have used in protecting the library?"

"That's almost right. If you agree to become the new guardian, it is your mind that will be in control here, not mine. Niles, and all the others, are still here as a part of me. But it is me, Jeffrey, who has control. I will relinquish that to you in turn, when the time comes."

"Will it hurt?"

Again, the entity smiled. "No. You will feel a brief tug as you make the change, but no pain."

Wes looked relieved.

"How do you know when it's time for a new guardian?"

"When my energies are low, it is time. I visit the abbot in his dreams and inform him it is time to choose a successor. Sometimes I chat with the abbot in the dream, and we discuss who it will be. Sometimes, the choice is clear."

"So, the abbot sending me here was no chance event. Was I a clear choice?"

"You will know the answer to that question only if you accept the offer."

"Has anyone ever refused?"

"Oh, yes. Several times the chosen one has not been willing to make the necessary sacrifice. One even went on to become abbot a few centuries ago."

Wes relaxed a little. He wasn't trapped then. There was still a way out, if he chose to take it.

"Tell me about those who refused."

"I will tell you of only two. The first was Jamel, and he was an early choice, made when we were not so sure about what qualities were needed to be worthy of this task. He came to this room and was approached by one of our aspects. The meeting did not go well. Jamel was too headstrong and set in his own ways to be able to do what was right for the library. At the end of the meeting, even though he had been chosen, he was not offered the guardianship. He returned to the monks and told them what had happened, but they thought him mad, and banished him from the library forever." Wes looked frightened. "And the other?" "His name was Rasalas, and he was a difficult choice. While he was worthy of the task, he also had much to contribute in the mortal world. He was offered the guardianship when he came to this room, but declined to take it. Rasalas returned to the monks but kept silent about what had happened until the abbot called him to an audience. He never revealed his meeting with us to anyone except the abbot, and he worked diligently at the library until he became the abbot. His time here was one of the richest scholastic periods since the library was established."

A thought struck Wes. "The pall over the library...?"

"It's because my energies are running low. I can no longer maintain the scholarly atmosphere of the library. If the library were attacked today, I could not defend it. That is why I need you to take over."

"Me? But I am not even a novice yet. To hear Brother Frederick tell it, I never will be. How can I be

the one you need?"

"Remember what you read, Wes. What I need is someone who believes in the library and what it will mean to future generations. Those generations will not be your descendants, or mine, or any of the others who have gone before, but they will be the future and the hope of all the intelligent races on Toril."

Wes swallowed hard. "I don't think I am the one you want for this. I've learned more in this room today than I have since I was born, and the responsibility you offer is too great for one as ignorant as I."

The entity smiled patiently, as though this were something he had been through many times before. "It's not what, or how much, you know that's important. It's what's in your heart that counts for this task. The time for questions is over. You must decide. Wes, will you accept the guardianship of the library?"

Wes thought for a moment about what it would mean. Leaving everyone behind, and yet not really leaving them at all. He knew the honor was a great one, and that his efforts would shape the future of thousands of people of all races. Wes knew what he had to do. He gulped and squared his shoulders.

"Yes, I will."

"Then take my hand, and join us in our eternal task."

The entity held out an ethereal hand, and Wes took it. As he did so, three things happened at once. The thin volume he had been reading slammed shut and floated of its own accord back to the corner where he had found it.

Wes's body faded away to nothing, leaving no evidence he had ever been in the room.

The entity glowed brightly with the influx of life-force.

"Well," said Wes to the others he could now sense in the entity body, "let's get on with it." The new entity passed through the wall and disappeared, eager to assume its new duties.

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In the hidden room, the only light now came from the magic. The shelves and their contents stood silent, waiting until the next time they would be needed. All was quiet, save for the tiny sound of a spider climbing down a bookshelf.

Wedged in a corner, behind a shelf, a thin, leather-bound tome was obviously out of place. A close inspection by anyone who had seen it before would have shown that it was not quite as thin as it had been a few hours earlier. Of course, there was nobody there to see it, except the spider that now began to spin a web around the book. Within a week, the cobwebs would again be thick around it.

In his private chambers, the abbot felt the pall lift from the library, and he smiled. Wes had been the right choice, if not the obvious one, and all was well in Candlekeep.