

Rising Tide

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Prologue

Veemeeros Sea (The Shining Sea)
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"You have followed a lie all these months, Priestess Laaqueel, or a figment dreamed up by your deformed malenti mind. We have had enough. We go no further."

The harsh words challenged Laaqueel's self-control as she stood in the mud covering the ocean floor. *Malenti*, uttered like a curse, still cut through her. Her heritage was all sahuagin despite her appearance. As fierce and hard inside as any of her people, her body and face came from the unfathomable tie between the sahuagin race and the sea elves. Only her unique mutation had further deformed her. Instead of the greenish-silver or blue skin of the aquatic elves, her skin took on the pinkish hue of surface dwellers, setting her even more apart and making her a target among her own people.

Little light from the surface world penetrated the murky depths around her and all that it touched held a bluish cast deepening toward indigo. Reds seldom penetrated the gloom at that depth. She stared at the abyssal hills surrounding the party, created from the line of volcanoes that still racked the savage land of Chult a hundred miles and more to the west.

Crustaceans roamed those hills, moving slowly under the great pressure of the depths. Every now and again one disappeared, seized and dragged into burrows dug into the mud by hidden predators. Manta rays and eels glided through the water, staying well away from the sahuagin party.

Somewhere out there, Laaqueel felt certain, lay the prize she'd come so far to claim. She took a deep breath through her mouth, flushing fresh saltwater into her system and the excess through her gills, and turned to the three sahuagin priestesses assigned to her quest.

"I am senior among you, Thuur," Laaqueel announced. "As long as I remain such, no one may speak to me the way you have."

At a few inches under six feet in height, the malenti was the shortest of the group. She wore her long dark hair tied back in a single braid. Besides her breasts, the long hair was the biggest difference between herself and her tribal sisters. She was cursed with the ugly body of a sea elf as well; all rounded and soft looking, wrapped in that pale complexion. If she spent too long under the sea without spending time in the sun, that color paled to the color of a frog's stomach. On this journey she'd chosen to wear only the traditional sahuagin harness to carry her gear. The decision further flaunted the differences between her and her kin, but she had learned over her long life that those differences couldn't be hidden. She had used them to make herself stronger in her faith and her convictions.

"Senior you may be," Thuur replied, "but you are no longer fit to command us."

Laaqueel felt the sahuagin priestess move through the water behind her. Even though she resembled a sea elf, much of her senses remained those of her own people. The lateral lines that ran from her neck to her hips picked up the motion, and she was already gliding into a defensive position.

"Beware what you say," Laaqueel warned harshly as she turned to face the other priestess. She tightened her grip on the metal trident she carried. "You've already said enough that your words might be construed as a blood challenge between us."

Thuur stood tallest among them. Her anterior fins lay back against her head, and her huge mouth was partially open to reveal her ferocious fangs. Her black eyes gleamed with cruel light. She wore the true colors of the sahuagin race, the nearly black green on her back that turned a truer green on her flat stomach. The fins on her shoulders, arms, and legs were black. Her tail was deep yellow, telling any sahuagin male that she was past the age for mating. As a female now, her worth lay in whatever office she laid claim to. For the last ten years or more Thuur hungered for the senior priestess position Laaqueel now held within the tribe.

Saanaa and Viiklee, the other two priestesses, held their own council, but they didn't stand with Laaqueel as they should have.

"I know what I say," Thuur said. Her broad, finned feet slid through the greasy black mud, assuming an attack stance. "I think we should turn back now." She touched the loaded crossbow hanging from her waist.

The lateral lines in Laaqueel's body turned more sensitive, reading every flicker of movement Thuur made. "We won't turn back until we've found what we've come for," she said steadily.

"You're dooming us to wander these forsaken hills forever."

"Has your faith been shaken, Sister?" Laaqueel made her voice harsh and challenging. With Thuur, she knew there was no way to speak of reason. "Sekolah guides this quest. You should trust that."

"I trust Sekolah, not some diseased abomination who has been given status by Baron Huaanton purely by accident of her birth."

"That status was earned," Laaqueel said, "not given as freely as you say. As a malenti, I was trained to be an assassin from the moment I was born. I've lived among the surface dwellers as a spy and helped our village grow. I've slain our enemies, and I've stolen their secrets. If High Priestess Ghaataag had not seen the promise in me to better serve Sekolah, I would still be among the hated elves as Haaanton's dagger."

In truth, the training spy was somewhat wasted. Laaqueel's deception among the surface dwellers had been limited to brief excursions. With her pale skin, she'd been forced to adopt disguises and pass herself off as a surface dwelling elf among the sea elves, or a sea elf among the surface dwellers. She'd been the least effectual of all the malenti in her tribe. Had Priestess Ghaataag not sensed Sekolah's blessed fin moving in her as a hatch-ling, she'd have been put to death the moment she'd been discovered among the newborn.

Thuur continued moving, turning Laaqueel to put the malenti's back to Saanaa and Viiklee. "You worked a glamour over the high priestess," Thuur accused. "She would never have granted you the position otherwise."

"Sekolah granted my position," Laaqueel argued. "High Priestess Ghaataag only followed his direction."

"You lie!" Thuur declared, sneering and throwing an accusatory clawed hand toward her. "Long have we known Sekolah as an uncaring god. He gave us courage and fierceness in battle, and fertility to make sure that our numbers would always be strong in our wars. How dare you even suggest Sekolah would care enough to intercede on behalf of an ill-bred malenti over his true children. It's sacrilege."

Laaqueel continued moving. The insult cut through to her heart, touching all the insecurities she'd carried for the long years of her life. If not for the calling of the priesthood and her belief in Sekolah, there would have been no place in all the world for her. "We can settle this when we return to our village."

Thuur laughed derisively, the effort causing her to expel bubbles into the surrounding ocean that quickly floated toward the surface. "If we continue on this insane quest, you know we'll never return home." She shook her great head, her black eyes steady on Laaqueel's emerald ones. "No, we'll settle this now."

"There can be only one way between us, then." Laaqueel crouched, her senses flaring. She brought her trident up, the three tines facing the other priestess.

"To the death, malenti," Thuur agreed, issuing the blood challenge. "I say that you are weak and unable to fulfill the duties of your office. Further, I charge that you have no business living among true sahuagin." She kicked free of the mud, taking to the water where her battle skills were most effective. "If you wish, I'll spare your life and you may live it among those elves you say you despise so much."

The offer was a further insult. Laaqueel expected no less. When Ghaataag had assigned Thuur, who was her bitterest rival, the high priestess had explained that the problem would take care of itself during the quest-one way or another.

Laaqueel expanded her trachea and air bladder to increase her buoyancy. Though her legs weren't jointed in two places as well as her ankle like a true sahuagin and she had no tail, her training and experience in underwater combat were extensive. She'd faced more combatants than Thuur and had slain a greater variety of them.

Opposite Thuur in the sea's cold embrace, she held her trident in one hand. "Let Sekolah take the weakest among us that the tribe may grow ever stronger."

Thuur reached for the crossbow dangling from her waist and brought it up. She snapped off her shot as soon as she had it level.

Laaqueel focused on the quarrel as it erupted from the crossbow. She reached into the water with her free hand, spreading her fingers so the webbing between them could be more effective. Her toes spread as well as she kicked her legs. Her body turned, allowing the barbed quarrel to flash past her, missing her by only inches.

Thuur dropped the crossbow as soon as she fired it, seizing her trident and swimming to the attack. Laaqueel met her, choosing not to use any of the spells she had available to her as priestess. There were greater things to fear in the ocean than a jealous rival.

Thuur shoved her trident viciously at Laaqueel's mid-section, intending to impale her. The malenti shoved her own trident at her opponent's weapon, interlocking the tines. Using the momentum of Thuur's

greater weight and strength in the water, Laaqueel bent her body and flipped over the junior priestess.

The malenti kept hold of her trident with one hand as Thuur managed to disengage the weapons. Before the other priestess could turn, Laaqueel slipped a broad-bladed knife free of her shin sheath. Coming down behind Thuur, she hacked at the priestess, slashing her across the back and cutting deeply into her dorsal fin. Blood filmed the water in a dark and murky haze.

Thuur screamed in pain and rage. She kicked the water, churning hard, and flipped around. Getting the trident in front of her again, she swam at Laaqueel.

The malenti used her trident to batter the other weapon away, and allowed Thuur to come close. When the priestess was within range, Laaqueel buried the broad-bladed knife between her opponent's ribs. She tried to draw it out, but the ribs and tough muscle trapped the blade.

Laaqueel released the weapon and swam away as Thuur turned on her again. Before she could get completely clear, Thuur landed a backhanded blow against the side of her face. Pain wracked the malenti, but she remained in control of herself.

"You'll die for that, malenti!" Thuur screeched. She tore the knife from her body, then flipped gracefully in the water and threw it at Laaqueel.

The knife sped through the water at the malenti's throat. She lifted the bracer that covered her left arm from wrist to elbow and deflected the knife. The impact still sent a shock wave that partially numbed her arm. She forced herself into motion, drawing the trident back as she flipped. When she came forward again Thuur had moved, but Laaqueel's lateral lines had already picked up the priestess's new position. The malenti hurled the trident with all her strength.

The three-tined weapon sped true, impaling Thuur through the heart. She jerked spasmodically as the blow sent death thundering through her system. Her eyes widened in disbelief as she stared at the trident that claimed her life. She wrapped both hands around it but lacked the strength to pull it free. Her mouth opened, gulping down water, and fresh blood streamed from the gills on the sides of her neck.

"Finish it," Thuur croaked as she held onto the trident's haft. "I deserve that much from you. Don't let me suffer."

"Your heresies condemn you," Laaqueel said as she closed on the priestess. "I am merely your judgment." She popped the retractable claws from her fingers, another physical difference that separated her from the hated sea elves. She stared into Thuur's black gaze.

"Your quest is true, honored one," Thuur gasped as she settled gently onto the ocean's mud floor, no longer able to stand or swim. Silt dusted around her in a small cloud. "May Sekolah grant that you find it."

"And may the Great Shark you take with him into the Wild Hunt that you may forever taste the fresh flesh of our enemies," Laaqueel answered.

"Meat is meat," Thuur said. "Let me make you stronger."

With great speed and care, she raked her claws across Thuur's throat. "Meat is meat. You will never leave us."

Blood misted out at once, spreading through the ocean.

Laaqueel smelled and tasted it even in the saltwater. Hunger pains vibrated in her stomach. She took the dead priestess's knife and began slicing.

"Come, my sisters," she invited. "Meat is meat."

The other two joined her, wolfing down the gobbets of flesh as she sliced them free. More blood stained the water, spreading outward. Even a drop of it in thousands of gallons of water, Laaqueel knew, would draw predators, and they came. Some crawled on multi-jointed legs while others slithered through the water and still more finned their way to the death site.

All stayed back from the sahuagin, acknowledging them as the strongest of predators.

Vibrations through her lateral lines told Laaqueel when the sharks arrived. She glanced up, watching five of the great creatures swim in a circle overhead. She reached out to the predators with her mind, sending out a danger message that would hold them at bay.

The sharks continued to circle until the sahuagin finished eating what they could of Thuur. Meat was meat, and a fallen sahuagin comrade became a meal for the others. That way, the essence of the individual never left the community.

When they were gorged, Laaqueel ordered her party away, allowing the sharks to descend to finish what was left of the corpse. They divided Thuur's possessions and the meager provisions they'd managed to put together three days ago between them. The dead sahuagin was the most they'd had to eat in weeks.

She swam, leading them further south, drawn by the promise of the story she'd discovered almost two years ago. With no other options open to her, the research she'd done offered her the only chance she had at

a true and productive future among her tribe.
She had no choice but to believe.

* * * * *

Hours later, Laaqueel stopped the group for the night, camping in the lee of a sunken Calishite sohar. The three-masted merchant ship showed signs of the battle that had sent it to the ocean floor. Blackened timbers thrust up from the dark mud, canting hard to starboard. Wisps of ivory-colored sailcloth still clung to the rigging of the two surviving masts.

Judging from the condition of the wreck and the way the skeletons were picked clean to the bone, the malenti guessed that the ship had been underwater for little more than ten years. Barnacles clung to the broken timbers and sea anemones clustered in small groups. Schools of fish hid inside the broken hold, taking cover from predators.

True dark filled the ocean when the sun sank around the curve of the world. The inky blackness restricted even Laaqueel's sensitive vision until she could see only a few feet in front of her. She sat with her back to the broken ship, her arms wrapped around her knees in a posture the true sahuagin could never manage. In the elf communities she'd infiltrated over the years, she'd learned that such body language in the surface cultures signaled a wish to be alone.

Saanaa and Viiklee maintained their own counsel, sitting apart from her. They'd not spoken to her since she'd slain Thuur.

Finally it was Saanaa, the youngest, who crossed the distance first. Only a few yellow spots showed in her tail. "Favored one," she said, "forgive our uncertainty."

"There is no forgiveness for weakness," Laaqueel told her coldly. "Uncertainty can be viewed as weakness."

Saanaa's gills flared in anger. "Make no mistake about my strength, favored one. Just as Thuur died for her convictions, I stand ready to follow you wherever you lead."

"Good." As sahuagin, she knew she didn't have to worry about the other two surviving priestesses joining together to kill her. Their culture provided for one-on-one fighting among the community, and no challenges could be made to one who was wounded.

"Neither of us have heard how you came to find the record of the one you seek."

"I don't need to explain myself to you," Laaqueel said. "It's enough that Senior Priestess Ghaataag saw fit to send you with me. You should have taken that as a compliment."

"I do, but I wish to know more for myself, that I may be stronger," Saanaa said. She crouched, folding her arms in on herself, fitting her fins in tight against her body.

Laaqueel thought briefly of ignoring the other priestess. Though Saanaa's argument had merit, the malenti still had that privilege. The months had worn on Laaqueel, too, though it didn't touch her resolve. After being raised as a malenti, trained to be a spy, and moving among the hated sea elves and surface dwellers the few times she was able to mask her true nature, she welcomed the hunt she was on. No matter how long it took her, where she had to go, or what she had to do to accomplish it, she'd never felt more like a sahuagin than during this quest.

"I found a record regarding Sekolah," she said, talking only because she wanted to hear it aloud again, to strengthen her own resolve, "that was older than anything I'd ever seen before."

"A sahuagin book?"

Laaqueel shook her head and brushed her hair back. It was an all too elven gesture she hated picking up, but the long hair often drifted into her face. If she'd had her way, she'd have hacked the hair from her head, but it was a necessary part of her permanent disguise.

"No," she answered. "I found it during a stay with the sea elves almost five years ago."

The sahuagin books were created of strung bits of stone and shell on knotted thongs, each tied to a ring of bone or sinew. The way the shells, knots, and stones hung together represented sounds in the sahuagin tongue. Just shaking the sahuagin book created a series of sounds that gave the title. That was why many referred to them as "singing bundles."

"An elven book, favored one?" Saanaa asked.

"It was written by a human."

"About the sahuagin?" Disbelief sounded in the younger priestess's voice.

"Yes."

"It had to have been filled with lies."

"Incredibly," Laaqueel said, listening to her own words to further her resolve, "it held many truths."

"The sahuagin who gave our history to whomever wrote this book must have been enspelled." Saanaa shuddered. All sahuagin had an innate fear of anything magical.

Laaqueel shared that legacy. Even her time among the sea elves, who had no magic of their own either, hadn't prepared her to see the things she'd seen in her roving. Humans bent the very elements to their will and threw fireballs through the air when they wished. She'd seen it done. Power granted by Sekolah, however, was never in question. The Great Shark wielded magic and gave it to his most favored and most faithful of priestesses.

"I think so too," the malenti stated. "There was much in there about our communities as they were thousands of years ago." Actually, the community life described in the book hadn't changed much even now, though the places that were described were no longer on any sahuagin maps Laaqueel had ever seen. "I found among the myths of Sekolah a story that captured my eye and my heart."

"It was not about Sekolah?" Viiklee asked. She sat watching, her black eyes gleaming with interest. She had crept much closer to share in the tale.

"No. The book was written by a man named Ronassic of Sigil. He'd already documented other ocean life and marine cultures. He carried forth a treatise concerning the origins of the malenti as being a bridge between the sahuagin race and the cursed sea elves. He held that one evolved from the other, suggesting that sahuagin were created from the time the first sea elves took to the oceans. I find that heretical. I believe that the malenti are Sekolah's chosen sacrifices, the claws to lay bare the throats of the enemies of the sahuagin."

Neither of the other priestesses saw fit to disagree.

"In his book," Laaqueel went on, "he gets a great number of things wrong, but in the creation myths concerning the Great Shark and how the sahuagin were given to the seas, he mentioned another being of power."

"Daganisoraan?" Saanaa asked.

"No," Laaqueel answered, pitching her voice low to fully hold the attention of her audience. Daganisoraan was a common figure in sahuagin tales, featured as both hero and villain depending on the myth. "This was before even Daganisoraan's time, and though I searched the book, the only name I ever found given to him was One Who Swims With Sekolah."

"Maybe," Viiklee said, "One Who Swims With Sekolah was the first sahuagin."

"No." Laaqueel shook her head. "He was someone . . . *something* ... very powerful."

"Why haven't we heard more about him?" Saanaa asked.

"I don't know. Perhaps he was there in the beginning but gone before Sekolah saw fit to put the first sahuagin into the oceans. Only the thinnest of whispers managed to survive concerning him."

"What happened to him?"

Laaqueel took the small whalebone container from between her breasts. The container was hollowed out, carved in the shape of a shark. She unstopped it and poured out six red and black stones into her palm. The red was so true, so inviolate, that it was visible even at this depth and in the gathering darkness. All of stones had holes drilled through them. "I don't know. The book mentioned that he was locked away from the rest of the world to be taught a lesson."

"By Sekolah?" Viiklee demanded.

"No. By another of the gods or goddesses that walked this plane of existence during that time. One Who Swims With Sekolah was imprisoned. He's never been seen since."

"Yet this book mentioned him?" Saanaa asked. "No sahuagin records remember him?"

"Our records," Laaqueel reminded, "don't tell of him. I have read them all and consulted with the other priestesses regarding this matter. None remember One Who Swims With Sekolah, but we don't have access to all sahuagin records."

"What makes you think you can find this being?" Viiklee asked.

Laaqueel ran a forefinger through the six red and black stones in her palm, revealing the runes inscribed on them. "I've given the last five years of my life to the search for the truth in this matter. Only a few months ago, I discovered these in a loremaster's keep at Baldur's Gate."

"Where the humans live." Viiklee spat a curse, roiling the water around her angular face.

"Yes. Magic surrounds these stones."

Saanaa and Viiklee drew back, making protective wards against the hated magic. "You should have destroyed them," Saanaa hissed. "To even carry them around with you is sacrilege." The sahuagin coiled restlessly, edging away.

"There is nothing foul about these stones," Laaqueel said, turning them in her palm. She deftly plucked a short length of worked sinew from her trident hilt and with practiced ease threaded it through the stones, making sure they were in the proper order and tying the correct number of knots between them as she'd learned.

"The runes mean nothing, a false trail laid for the surface dwellers," she continued. "Someone tried to discover the secret of the stones and assigned names to the runes, and some have even used magic to try to read them. Humans and elves don't understand the nature of the sahuagin written language, and none who tried ever learned the truth of the stones."

Finished, she held the ring of knots and stones out, then shook them. They clattered against each other.

The message, to a sahuagin's internal ear and lateral lines, was clear: "Seek out One Who Swims With Sekolah."

"You see?" Laaqueel asked. "Above water where a sahuagin's hearing doesn't operate properly even should one be there, the song of the stones wouldn't be clear. If the book I found hadn't mentioned the existence of the stones, I wouldn't have known. Even then, tracking down the stones was not an easy matter. They were part of a collection assembled by a historian from Skuld, a human city in the land of Mulhorand."

"I've never heard of this place, honored one," Saanaa stated.

Laaqueel knew she had them gripped by the story. If anything, the sahuagin definitely knew the value of a story. There were many concepts new to them, and the stones-with their curse of magic-lay before them.

"Mulhorand is believed to be the oldest continually inhabited human country," she said. "It's located in the ocean the surface dwellers call the Sea of Fallen Stars."

"I know of our home sea, the Claarteeros Sea, the one the humans call the Trackless Sea and the Sea of Swords," Viiklee stated. "I know of the Veemeeros Sea, which they've named the Shining Sea, but I have never heard of the sea you speak of."

"It's an inland sea." Laaqueel watched their eyes widen. As young priestesses, their view of the world was kept deliberately small to encourage strength in their beliefs. Trained as a malenti spy to go into the cities of elves, Laaqueel had been taught early about the geography of the world even beyond what the humans termed the Sword Coast. She remembered how she'd felt when she'd first been told of the Sea of Fallen Stars. The idea of a land-locked sea was frightening.

"How can such a thing be?" Saanaa asked.

Laaqueel turned her hands outward, exposing the webbing between her fingers to show even they were empty. It was a purely sahuagin gesture, not the spasmodic shrug she'd learned of the humans and elves.

"It must be Sekolah's will," Viiklee stated.

"Perhaps."

"Are there sahuagin there?" Saanaa asked.

"I don't know. I've heard stories, but nothing I was able to confirm. The sea elves living along the Sword Coast take very little interest in anything outside their own villages and trading needs. The humans I've had chance to meet were more interested in filling their pockets with gold and silver than in answering questions I might advance, and I was trained not to draw too much attention to myself."

"Living in such a fashion must have been hard," Saanaa said.

"I hated it," Laaqueel admitted. "Elven and human ways are not meant for sahuagin. They are too soft, too greedy. I welcome the day that we are able to push them from the sea and from the coastal lands and take back our world in the waters." She paused. "Still, Sekolah gave each sahuagin the currents of his or her life ..."

"... and it is up to each to swim with them," the other two priestesses finished the familiar phrase.

"As we swim with this one now," Laaqueel added.

"Did the book you read mention that Sekolah was within this Sea of Falling Stars?" Viiklee asked.

"As far as I know," the malenti answered, "Sekolah was never there, nor was One Who Swims With Sekolah."

"How did the stones get there?" Saanaa asked.

Laaqueel shook them again, causing them to repeat their message. "It's a mystery, one of many I hope to find answers for."

"How do you know One Who Swims With Sekolah is here?" Viiklee asked. "Why aren't we looking

for him in the Sea of Falling Stars?"

"Because the book mentioned that One Who Swims With Sekolah's final resting place was in the Veemeeros Sea. It wasn't called that in the book, but from the description of the land with terrible giant reptiles nearby, it could only be this place."

"If only the sea weren't so large," Saanaa sighed.

Uncoiling, filled instantly with anger, Laaqueel backhanded the younger priestess. An explosion of bubbles erupted from her gills. "Sacrilige! The sea is our life!"

Saanaa cried out in pain, covering her face. "I didn't mean it!" she cried. "Forgive me, favored one. I meant only that our task would be easier-"

"Sekolah never meant for sahuagin life to be easy," Laaqueel snapped, "else he would never have given the sahuagin so many enemies." She was going to add more, a sermon already on her tongue.

Before she could begin, the stones pulled gently from her hand, drifting into a current. Laaqueel watched them, feeling the old fear of magic twisting her stomach into knots around her last meal. Her abilities as priestess, she knew, rivaled those of some mages, but those abilities were given by the Great Shark, awarded to those whose prayers were truest, loudest, and strongest.

Viiklee and Saanaa drew back quickly, raising a murky cloud from the mud floor. They raised their tridents in defense.

The ring of stones rose just out of Laaqueel's arm's reach. They whirled through the water, clicking and resonating their message over and over. A pale scarlet glow gleamed from each of the stones, then grew stronger as the stones spun faster. The message became louder, and the lights turned into a blurred circle of luminescence.

Laaqueel steeled herself, then took a step toward the stones. Immediately, the stones retreated from her, moving the exact distance she did. The message was clear.

"Come," Laaqueel commanded, picking up her trident and adjusting her harness.

The sahuagin priestesses didn't bother to disagree.

Silently, the malenti guided them through the darkness, her eyes focused on the scarlet whirl of the stones. She gave herself over to the current, following her destiny.

* * * * *

Two days later, the whirling stones stopped and hovered over a mound of abyssal hills that radiated heat.

Somewhere below the surface, Laaqueel knew, volcanoes rumbled in uneasy slumber.

Over the last two days, none of them had slept. Their guide had never stopped, pulling them on with the allure of one of Sekolah's savants during a Wild Hunt. Thankfully, the stones had gone relatively slowly, considering how fast sahuagin could swim, allowing them to take turns darting out for prawn, fish, and oysters to provide for the others. A sahuagin's diet required heavy meals anyway to provide the necessary energy to maintain body heat and muscle tone, but the demands of the last two days had drained all their reserves. Even eating along the way, they'd all lost weight during the chase.

Laaqueel watched the wheel of spinning stones slow and glide into position less than a foot above the ocean floor. She knifed through the water, dropping to the mud within easy reach of the stones. Her bare feet slid through the loose silt and she felt the underlying rock strata. She also felt the heat of the volcanoes beneath the surface, warmer than the water around her.

The stones continued repeating their message. In the two days that the priestesses had followed it, the words had never stopped. Now, though, an echoing resonance came from the rock bed beneath the inches of loose silt.

"Nothing grows here, honored one," Saanaa stated quietly, "nor does anything linger."

The malenti gazed in all directions, moving slowly. Her muscles quivered from the continued strain of the last two days spent swimming. What Saanaa said was true: nothing grew within a hundred paces in any direction. Nor did any sea creature make a home or swim within the circumference. The water above her remained clear for the same distance as well.

An uncomfortable feeling, just below the threshold of fear, filled her. It manifested as a vibration that raced through her bones, chilling her to the marrow. Even the water she gulped through her mouth and washed through her gills felt tainted and heavy.

The stones clicked and repeated the message. She felt the words in her lateral lines, then felt them through her webbed toes as the rock beneath her picked up the resonance even more strongly.

Seek Out One Who Swims With Sekolah
SEEK OUT ONE WHO SWIMS WITH SEKOLAH
Seek Out One Who Swims With Sekolah
SEEK OUT ONE WHO SWIMS WITH SEKOLAH

The words drummed into her mind, demanding action.

"Favored one," Viiklee called. "The stones-"

"I hear them," Laaqueel replied. She knelt, dropping to her knees in the heated mud, finding it near scalding.

"Look." Saanaa pointed at the ribs of a giant lizard sticking up through the rock and mud.

Laaqueel was familiar with the creature from her studies and from her time among the sea elves and surface dwellers, knowing it had come from the nearby land of Chult. The creature's huge skull gleamed bright white against the dark water. A man's bones, crushed and twisted, hung in the huge mouth between the teeth. Whatever had killed the giant lizard had been quick.

Laaqueel listened to the savage beat of the command initiated by the whirling stones. She knelt in the mud, ignoring the heat, and bowed her head. She prayed with all her heart to Sekolah, knowing that the Great Shark seldom involved himself even in the affairs of the sahuagin, his children. He was a demanding and ungenerous god.

Saanaa and Viiklee knelt and added their prayers with hers.

SEEK OUT ONE WHO SWIMS WITH SEKOLAH!

Though involved in her prayers, Laaqueel also heard the hollow echo of the sound played in the rock strata beneath her. Her lateral lines echoed with it as well. Despite the sea above and around her, she knew that an empty chamber lay below her, a pocket created by the cooled magma from a volcano. Her knowledge of Chult, the primordial land to the southwest of her current position was slim, but she knew about the massive quakes and volcanoes that had shaped and reshaped the land. It was possible that the bones of the great lizard in the mud nearby had gone down with a piece of what had been Chult at one time; Possibly it was from a small island that had existed in a chain around the major continent.

The great lizard's death had been quick, too quick for it to even finish the meal it had caught. An erupting volcano could cause such a death, the malenti knew. The fires and heat created by some volcanoes could strip the meat from a body, even sour and poison the water.

The abyssal hills themselves were formed from volcanoes that had cooled. These dead volcanoes often left chambers and empty pockets located within them.

Laaqueel rose to her feet and walked away from the spot where the stones whirled. The reflected cadence coming from the rock strata lessened with each step she took. Twenty paces away, she couldn't feel it anymore.

She returned to the stones, feeling the cadence grow again. She experimented in the other directions as well, finding it to be the same with all three. The stones had marked the spot.

"Something lies below, honored one," Saanaa whispered.

"I know." Laaqueel knelt in prayer again, taking the circlet of shark's teeth from a tie to her harness at her waist. Like the singing bundles of her people, and the spinning ring of stones, the shark's teeth had been knotted and tied to reproduce sounds that were a prayer in the sahuagin language.

The shark's teeth rattled as she shook them, crying out Sekolah's name. She listened to the chant, pacing the words of her prayer with the cadence, growing faster as she summoned the power the Great Shark had given her. Feeling it reach its peak within her, she shoved her hand forward.

The power surged through the water from her hand, leaving a wake of brightly colored bubbles. When it struck the rock, a hollow booming gong sounded deep inside the cavern below. In seconds, the rock changed, softening, turning to loose mud. When the power had drained her, leaving her weak and gasping water in big gulps, Laaqueel swam to the site below the stones. She shoved her trident deep into what had once been rock, raking aside what was now mud.

It only took a minute to breach the outer shell of the chamber. Saanaa and Viiklee helped her widen the hole. Darkness gaped up at them, but the echoed resonance of the rattling stones sounded louder, echoing still more as the first chamber funneled the noise into another chamber further on.

When the hole was wide enough, Laaqueel waved the other priestesses back. Even their sahuagin vision couldn't penetrate the gloom trapped inside. She spotted a school of luminous fish out beyond the one hundred pace mark from the open chamber. They glowed pale blue-green. Gathering her trident in both hands, she swam toward the fish, bursting in among them too quickly for them to save themselves. The trident flicked out rapidly, impaling five of the fish.

She adjusted her air bladder and hung motionless in the water. For the first time she noticed that not even the perpetual ocean currents moved through the dead zone. She popped her retractable claws from her fingers and quickly gutted the fish. Saanaa and Viiklee swam close and snapped up the floating strings of intestines.

"Meat is meat," Saanaa said in appreciation. Still, she saved several choice bits of the fish for Laaqueel.

Reaching the light-producing organs of the fish, the malenti carefully freed them. When she had all five, she took a glow lamp from the bag of holding tied to her harness. Carefully, she nicked each of the organs with a claw to open them, then squeezed the liquid contents up into the neck of the translucent bladder of the glow lamp. All five fish barely gave up a handful of the luminous gel. Keeping the bladder tight, she brought it to her mouth and breathed in, further inflating the glow lamp and giving it some buoyancy. At that depth, it was hard breathing enough air into the bladder to inflate it.

Sealing the bladder, Laaqueel swirled the gel around, causing it to glow more brightly. It wasn't enough to hurt her sensitive eyes, but it would serve to illuminate the chambers below the ocean floor. She used a seaweed cord to tie the glow lamp to her trident.

"Here, favored one," Saanaa said, offering the fish pieces she'd saved.

"Meat is meat," Laaqueel acknowledged. She ate the repast quickly, then swam back to the rough-edged opening. She entered without pause, summoning her belief and her courage. There was nothing she wouldn't do to improve her standing among her people. Her findings, she felt certain, would empower the sahuagin race as it had never been before. The surface dwellers would live in fear even on land and never darken the sea with their ships again. That hope gave her more reason to go on than any.

The glow lamp illuminated the chamber, showing the rough, uneven walls created by the cooling lava. The interior looked like a patchwork of blacks and grays even with the light. A narrow fissure in the floor of the first chamber led down into the second. As Laaqueel surveyed it, pushing the glow lamp down inside with the trident, the glowing stones went into motion again. They whirled and clacked, and dropped through the fissure.

Seek Out One Who Swims With Sekolah

SEEK OUT ONE WHO SWIMS WITH SEKOLAH

SEEK OUT ONE WHO SWIMS WITH SEKOLAH

After only a brief hesitation, Laaqueel ventured through the fissure, a prayer on her lips. The light from the glow lamp reflected from the tiny bubbles streaming from her mouth as she prayed.

The next chamber was bigger, and the chant given off by the stones was echoed in basso booms. A tunnel that had been created by an explosion of trapped gases opened the wall to the malenti's right. She stayed alert for anything moving around her, but nothing lived in the chambers.

Eight more chambers came and went, each of varying size. Laaqueel was no longer sure of what direction she was headed in—save down, always down. The water warmed around her, conducting the heat from the trapped volcano around her.

She swam through the next chamber, arriving in an oblong cave that was larger than anything she'd been in so far. The illumination from the glow lamp wasn't strong enough to reach from side to side. She released air from her bladder, losing enough buoyancy to drop herself and the inflated glow lamp through the murk, straining her vision to spot the floor below.

Only a few feet up, she spotted the mosaic in the floor. Squares as long as her arm, reduced only to light and dark by the pale blue glow of the lamp, connected with each other. Even then, the squares were only a remnant of the floor as it had been.

Laaqueel held the glow lamp aloft and paced as she measured the section. Irregularly shaped, and twenty strokes by thirty, the floor section canted across the bottom of the volcanic chamber. Black charring scored the surface. Broken furnishings, furniture as well as crafted coral pieces, piled amid the broken clutter gathered at the lowest end of the floor section.

The malenti sorted through the debris, using the long knife from her shin sheath to shift the broken pieces in case anything dangerous lived in it. However, whatever enchantment kept living things from intruding above also kept them from below. She took four beautiful coral pieces that captured her eye, watching as Saanaa and Viiklee found treasures of their own.

"Beware," she told the other priestesses. "It may be that these are Sekolah's possessions and we'll have to give them back."

"Until then," Viiklee agreed covetously, "Taut only until that time."

The debris left no doubt that it had come from a civilized place, but whether it was carried a long

distance or still more of it lay under the rubble of the chambers, Laaqueel didn't know. She glanced upward, remembering the whirling stones. The constant chanted command had faded into the background of her hearing, but still throbbed inside her mind.

The stones circled above and to her right, waiting. "Come," she told the others, "we'll explore further later." She increased her buoyancy again and swam to the stones. She held the glow lamp before her, the trident still at the ready.

When she neared, the stones fluttered and took off again. They whirled through the water and through a long, narrow shaft. It led to a small room still and cold as a tomb despite the heat coming from the volcano trapped below. Primitive fear of the unknown prickled the malenti's skin as she neared the mouth of the shaft.

In the light given off by the glow lamp, a shadowy figure took shape out of the darkness. Instead of being illuminated, it seemed to take the darkness into itself, turning darker even than black pearl.

"What is it, favored one?" Saanaa called from behind.

"A man," Laaqueel answered.

"Not a sahuagin?"

"No." The malenti let the disappointment sound in her voice. She knew she'd spoken the truth, yet that didn't explain the fear that cut through her.

"Maybe we should look for another chamber," Viiklee said. "There must be others."

Laaqueel stared at the stones hovering over the top of the still figure of the man.

Seek Out One Who Swims With Sekolah

SEEK OUT ONE WHO SWIMS WITH SEKOLAH

They came to an abrupt stop, and the silence struck as forcibly as a whale sounding.

"No," she replied. "This is where we were led."

She forced herself to go forward. Once inside the room, the chill grew stronger, became an arctic cold. She couldn't fathom how the water wasn't frozen solid by whatever glamour possessed the room. She had no doubt that the room was enchanted.

She lifted the glow lamp and played it over the figure. Resembling a surface dweller, he stood a full head taller than the malenti, and inches above the other priestesses. His hair was pulled back in a cluster of tangles secured by carved bones with intricate runes. Harshness tightened his face, narrowed his single eye and turned it down at the corners. The other eye was a hollow socket surrounded skin puckered by the scar of a long-healed burn. He wore a mustache that ran down to his chin, then flared back up his jawline to join his sideburns, leaving his dimpled chin clean-shaven. Hollow-cheeked, he looked wasted and emaciated, that fact showing even more starkly since he was totally naked, starved yet wiry. In the pale light of the glow lamp, his skin tone was as pale as a bled corpse. Dark tattoos scribed in broad strokes covered his body, creating a mosaic of color and sharp lines on every square inch of skin.

His solitary eye stared through her.

Fearful but needing to know, Laaqueel reached out and touched him with her knife point. The sharp edge grated on the man's petrified skin, not even leaving a mark in its passage.

"He's dead, favored one," Saanaa said. "He's not the one we came for."

"Let's leave this tomb," Viiklee pleaded.

Laaqueel stepped closer to the petrified man who looked so unlike anything she had expected. "No," she commanded, "this is the one we came for."

"This can't be One Who Swims With Sekolah," Viiklee argued. "He looks like a-a surface dweller. A human, not even an elf."

She glanced up at them as they hovered over the petrified man, then back at the statue's hard face. "There in his cold grave" Laaqueel quoted from the text she'd read, "barren of life and bereft of the powers he'd once commanded, lost to the luxuries he'd once had, lies One Who Swims With Sekolah. Dead-yet undead, too, turned as hard and as cold as his heart that left love forsaken." The common tongue she'd learned as part of her training was sometimes less precise than the sahuagin tongue, so there was a margin for error, but the stones didn't lie.

"What love?" Saanaa asked.

"I don't know," Laaqueel admitted.

"Humans only know to love another human," Viiklee stated. "Their understanding of that emotion is pathetic. Wisdom dictates loving your race, not an individual. The race is what will persevere."

That was the sahuagin view, Laaqueel knew, and one seldom shared by the humans or elves. Those races tended to think individuals first and race second.

"If this is One Who Swims With Sekolah, who did this to him?" Saanaa asked.

"The book didn't say."

"What are we supposed to do with a dead human?" Viiklee demanded.

"He isn't dead," Laaqueel answered.

"The story said he lay in his tomb," Viiklee pointed out.

"It also said he was dead, yet undead. Maybe he can't be killed."

"He's dead," the younger priestess argued. "Even a hatchling would know that." Sahuagin knew about death; the weak died early, eaten by its fellow hatchlings.

"We'll see," Laaqueel said as she opened the whalebone container around her neck again and removed a ring. Cast in gold, the ring was a simple band studded with diamond chips that reflected the pale blue-green luminescence of the glow lamp.

"What's that?" Saanaa asked.

"A ring."

"I can see that, honored one."

"A very special ring." Laaqueel slid the ring onto the petrified man's forefinger. The magic in the ring caused it to adjust to the man's finger with an unsettling fluid grace. It slid into place, then began to glow. "This ring was mentioned in the book," she continued. "It took a year and a half to find. It's supposed to return One Who Swims With Sekolah to life."

"More magic," Viiklee spat in disgust. "Only the magic bestowed by Sekolah is trustworthy."

"I have prayed," Laaqueel said, "that these things be blessed in Sekolah's hungry gaze. We've been brought here without harm."

"Thuur died," Viiklee reminded.

"By choosing to thwart Sekolah's plan for us," the malenti reminded her companion. As Laaqueel watched, the petrified man took on a different pallor, adding color to the bone-hue he wore. She touched him, finding his skin slightly pliable now. "It's working."

"How long will it take, honored one?" Saanaa asked.

"However long it takes, we'll be here," Laaqueel said. "We're not leaving."

* * * * *

Sudden movement sensed through her lateral lines woke Laaqueel, letting her know something had moved in front of her. She blinked her eyes open and searched for the glow lamp. Hours after the discovery of the petrified man, she'd assigned shifts, taking the first one herself. Saanaa and Viiklee had protested, not wanting to stay in the cold tomb. Laaqueel had ignored them. The cold might be uncomfortable, but it wasn't harmful. Still, she'd surprised herself by being able to sleep.

"Saanaa," the malenti called out.

There was no answer, and she couldn't see either of the two priestesses in the illumination given off by the glow lamp.

Laaqueel pushed herself to her feet and leaned toward the glow lamp attached to her trident. Earlier, the luminescence had almost filled the room. Now it covered less than half of it. The gel hadn't lost its ability to illuminate so quickly.

The preternatural chill vibrated through Laaqueel again. Her lateral lines registered more movement, but it didn't feel like either of the two priestesses. She was attuned to their physical motions and would know them even in the dark.

This was different.

She pushed the glow lamp toward the area where the petrified man had been. He was gone, but the light played over the twisted corpses of the two junior priestesses. They lay in pieces across the cavern floor, shredded by a large predator.

Disbelief paralyzed Laaqueel. They'd been killed while she slept-without her waking. She had no clue why she'd been spared. Sensing the movement again, she turned quickly to face it, bringing her hands up to defend herself.

A hand, hard as stone and cold as ice, battered through her defenses and locked around her throat. Hooked fingers painfully invaded her gill slits to further choke her.

The man's face illuminated gradually at the other end of that impossibly thin arm, like he'd allowed the light to finally touch him. He smiled, and it was the cruelest expression Laaqueel had ever seen.

His words touched her mind without being spoken. They were cold and hard, singing like gong notes

inside her head, but came across as a whisper. *You thought to sneak quietly in here and steal from me, didn't you, little thief*, he accused. His words were heavily accented, lilting and almost musical.

Overpowered by the invasion in her mind, Laaqueel couldn't answer.

You couldn't understand the sacrifices I have made in order to insure my continued survival in that ineffectual mind you possess, the man said. *Even now, wasted as I am, I am the most powerful being you have ever been in the presence of. Now, by my grace, you will spend your life that I spare so generously that you may serve me, and then only as long as you serve me well, little thief. Long have I been gone from this world, for thousands of years, and I will have back that which was stolen from me. You will give me succor, or I will see you sacrificed toward that end anyway.* His single eye bored into hers, mesmerizing and horribly vacant at the same time.

Struggling against the glamour the man projected, the malenti fought, trying to break free of his grip. Her fingers and talons only scraped across the hard flesh, unable to break the skin. Her toe claws raked his chest but skittered harmlessly across.

He plucked an eyelash from his single eye, then said words unlike any Laaqueel had ever heard. The tattoos covering his body glowed with a dim, unearthly light. When it stopped, he held a thin sliver of a black quill in his free hand instead of an eyelash. He let her see it for just a moment, then his hand darted forward and he buried the quill in the tender flesh below her left breast. Laaqueel felt the quill penetrate her flesh, hot and cold at the same time. All resistance faded from her as her body went lax. None of her limbs were her own anymore. The man took his hand back from her flesh and gestured at the sliver's entry point. The malenti felt it move again, sliding more deeply into her body, coiling and nestling next to her heart like a poisonous worm. She stared at the man holding her so effortlessly with one hand.

I am Iakhovas, he told her in his deep, whispering voice. *You will call me master.*

I

The Sea of Swords

9 Mirtul, the Year of the Gauntlet (1369 DR)

"How much for a few hours of your time, boy?" Jherek stopped coiling the thin rope he was going to use to repair the ship's rigging and looked at the young Amnian woman who'd stopped in front of him. His heart seemed to hang in his throat. He'd watched her during the voyage, never dreaming such a wealthy and pretty woman would ever notice him, much less speak to him. Barely over nineteen, he stood nearly six feet tall and his lean frame was corded with muscle from the hard work he'd done since he'd been a boy. His light brown hair was threaded through with sun-bleached highlights from constant exposure to the salt and sun. He wore only an abbreviated leather ship's apron that hung to his mid-thighs and held numerous pockets for the tools he needed and a short-sleeved shirt. The sun had burned his skin a dark bronze and made the pale gray ice of his eyes stand out even more. He went shaven, not liking the facial hair worn by most of the other sailors. Gold hoop earrings hung from both ears.

"Lady," he said formally, after giving careful consideration to his words, "if there is anything you need, Captain Finaren and his first mate will see that you have it. You and your party have hired the best—"

"We've hired the best sea captain in all of the Duchy of Cape Velen. Yes, we've all been told that." The woman waved his words away, rolling her dark eyes skyward as if bored.

Jherek felt embarrassed and awkward, partly that she'd turned his words and made them sound small in that Amnian accent of hers, and because she was so incredibly beautiful.

He figured she wasn't much older than he was, surely no more than five years his senior. She wore a turban as was the custom of the Amnian wealthy, festooned with gold and silver coins and small jewels to further show her ranking even among the merchant class. Her hair was pulled up under the turban, leaving her delicate face uncovered. Her eyes were big dark moons of liquid fire and she had a nose that some might consider too short but that Jherek found attractive. Her red silk cape fluttered around her, caught by the soft southerly breeze coming across the Sea of Swords. Bracelets sewn into the cape kept it around her, but it didn't conceal her slender, womanly figure. Even that was barely restrained in a beaded bodice and gauze pantaloons over a matching girdle. Delicate slippers encased her feet.

"If I'd thought your precious Captain Finaren could have given me what I needed," the Amnian woman said, "I'd have gone straight to him."

She took a step closer to him and traced a line with her forefinger down from his lower lip, across his

chin, and down to his chest, toying briefly with the ceramic teardrop as big as her thumb that hung from a leather thong around his neck. Her hand continued dropping to the flat planes of his stomach.

Jherek stepped back before she could go any further. He was suddenly acutely aware of the other ship's mates halting their work to watch. Even the other Amnians aboard paused in their endless conversations of money and exchange rates to watch him.

"Instead," the Amnian woman said, "I came to you. You should be flattered."

"Lady," Jherek said helplessly. He felt certain that he was the brunt of some joke he didn't understand, but he had no idea what to do about it.

"I am called Yeill," she said. "I am the favorite daughter of Merchant Lelayn." She raised an arched eyebrow. "You are familiar with Merchant Lelayn, aren't you?"

"Aye," Jherek replied. "Of course." Merchant Lelayn had hired *Finaren's Butterfly* to take the Amnian party to Baldur's Gate for trading, then bring their cargo back home to Athkatla, also known as the City of Coin, in Amn. He wished he'd been quicker with the ropes and had gone back up into the rigging before the woman had caught him, but he had no one to blame but himself. Over the last few days of the trip she must have seen him gazing at her.

"Good," Yeill stated. "I thought there might be some brains inside that pretty head of yours, though they aren't all that necessary for what I have in mind." She placed a hand on his bicep, squeezing the muscles there. "You are in very good shape."

Jherek flushed red, feeling the burn across his cheeks, like he'd faced the wind for an entire shift at the tiller. He gazed past her, noting a small group of white heggims flying low around the cog. The birds kept pace with the ship, waiting for any garbage that might be thrown overboard.

Finaren's Butterfly skimmed smoothly across the water, rocking back and forth across the swells. The ship's colorful sails gave her her name and the few remaining that weren't damaged from the recent storm belled out, catching the wind. Other hands hung in the rigging, repairing the storm damage.

"So how much for a few hours of your time, boy?" she asked again. "I'm willing to pay you, though after the way I've seen you mooning after me, I know I wouldn't have to."

It *was* his fault. Jherek dropped his eyes from hers, no longer able to look at her even out of politeness. She had caught him gazing at her. It was his ill luck that had followed him all of his life showing itself again. There was never a day that he wasn't forced to remember that it dogged his every step. His tongue felt thick, and no words came to it.

"I have heard you called Jherek," she said. "Is that your name?"

"Aye, lady." Jherek struggled to get the words through his tight throat. "If I've offered you any affront, I apologize. The captain would have the skin from my back for such a thing."

She smiled. "I've no doubt that he would. Your Captain Finaren seems a man the Amnian can easily understand. His life revolves around his bottom line, and how well he can line his pockets, but you've offered me no affront."

Jherek felt relieved, only wanting to scurry up the rigging and get away from the woman's gaze. He'd fought pirates and sea creatures for the future of *Finaren's Butterfly*, but he felt naked and outmatched talking to the woman.

"Thank you, lady."

"Yet," she added, lifting both brows again. Curious lights, like embers, flew through her dark eyes. "Would you deny me the pleasure of your company then, young Jherek?"

"Lady, I have no way with social graces, and I lack in my education," Jherek said honestly. He knew he was lying, though. Madame Litaar and Malorrie had seen to his education since he was twelve, and they had both been demanding taskmasters.

"I'm not looking for a gifted conversationalist, Jherek."

Yeill swirled her cape around herself, revealing the lean body cloaked beneath. "My father has done well with his trading in Baldur's Gate. I can afford to be generous."

"There are many other crewmen," Jherek said.

"You are by far the most handsome."

Jherek flushed again. Never had a woman been so shameless in her pursuit. Even the scullery maids of the Figureheadless Tavern along the eastern dock walk in Velen were not so forceful.

"Perhaps you've not seen me in good light, lady," he said.

"Can it be?" she asked with obvious delight. "Handsome *and* modest?" She wrinkled her brow, then a smile dawned on her crimson lips. "Or is there more to it?"

Jherek shouldered the rope. "I have to get back to work, otherwise it will be the barnacle detail for a

month for me if the captain finds me dallying."

Yeill's voice sharpened. "You'll stay here till I say you can go, boy."

Part of the old resentment at being unfairly commanded and ordered welled up in Jherek, and it almost loosened his tongue before he seized control of it. "Aye, lady."

"My father hired this ship and all the men aboard it to see to our needs during our voyage," the Amnian woman stated. "That work won't be shirked."

Jherek bowed his head, using the motion to break the eye contact. "Aye, lady."

"How old are you, boy?"

"Nineteen."

"Yet you are only a deckhand, not a mate."

"I've not had the promise of potential."

"Then your captain lacks ability in picking his men. When the storm wracked this ship yesterday morn, you were the first to climb up into the rigging and cut the ropes to save at least some of the sails."

"I don't think I was the first." Jherek knew that he was, though. The rigging held no fears for him, even in the worst of storms.

She ran her eyes over him again, lingering on the apron across his narrow hips. "Tell me, boy, have you never been with a woman before?"

Jherek steeled himself and faced her. His answers had to be his own and truthful, and she was demanding them. "No."

She stroked his face with the back of her hand. "With your looks, that has to be by choice."

Jherek reached up and captured her hand in his, then slowly removed it from his face. "Aye."

"You *do* like women?"

"Not all of those I've met," Jherek told her, skating the thin line of insubordination, "but in the way you mean, aye."

"Do you find me unattractive then?"

"I think you're a very beautiful woman."

"So you're content to merely look at me?" Her gaze mocked him.

"I don't know you," Jherek said, "nor do you know me."

"I'm willing to get to know you," Yeill stated forcefully, "and pay you for the opportunity."

"I'm not for sale. Not that way." Jherek released her hand and took a step back, just out of her reach. Nausea touched his stomach in response to her offer.

"Ridiculous," the Amman woman snapped. "Everyone is for sale."

"Not me," Jherek said.

She raked him with her fiery eyes. "You tread in dangerous waters, boy. Maybe you don't remember who you're dealing with."

"I remember."

"Do you realize the insult you offer me, boy?"

"There's no insult intended. You asked for something that I'm not prepared to sell."

"You think so much of it, then?"

Jherek wished he could have said more. She would have understood had she been where he'd been, had lived on as little as he'd been given in his early life. There was so little left that was truly his.

"What you ask for can't be bought, lady, only given."

"You speak of hearts, boy."

"I speak of love."

She laughed at him derisively and asked, "You believe such a thing exists?"

"I want to believe," Jherek said. In truth, he didn't know, but he wasn't prepared to settle for anything less than the true love Malorrie's tales had told of.

"A fool believes in love."

He let some of the anger out then, in his own defense. "You would trouble yourself over a fool, lady?"

She smiled at him, prettily, but her eyes were hard and cutting as barnacles. "If he had a handsome face and a soft touch," she answered, "and I had the price. Trust me, boy, I do have your price."

Jherek settled the ropes more securely about his shoulder. "Lady, I mean no offense, but I must get to work." Behind her, he saw Captain Finaren step onto the main deck, leaning on the railing and looking down at him.

"You're a foolish boy," Yeill stated. "You'll regret this." Without warning, she slapped him.

Jherek saw the blow coming and chose not to dodge it entirely. Malorrie's martial training included

close-in fighting as well as the blade. Her open hand collided with his cheek and he felt one of her rings cut his face. Blood trickled down his cheek and he tasted it inside his mouth as well. She'd hit harder than he'd expected.

"Tell your fellow sailors that you made an improper advance toward me," the Amnian woman whispered roughly. "If you don't, trust me when I say that you'll regret it."

He met her gaze. "If you think that I would choose to dishonor you," he told her in an equally low voice, "you still show your ignorance of the kind of man I choose to be."

"You're no man," she said. "A man would have come to me himself, days ago." She turned sharply and walked away from him.

Jherek stood there, his face burning crimson, and listened to the jeering catcalls of the other sailors. Shaking a little with the anger and fear that nearly consumed him, he walked to the nearest rigging and leaped up into the ropes. He climbed swiftly, edging out to the area that he'd been assigned to repair.

When he showed no sign of responding to the catcalls and off-color comments, the other sailors gave up baiting him. High above the deck, feeling the morning sun soak into him, he let go of the emotions, pushing them out of his body. Madame Litaar had been the first to get him past the fear that had become his birthright. She had taught him to trust himself, and gradually a handful of others, but he was at his best when he was alone.

His fingers worked cleverly, almost without him thinking about it. He braided the new rope in with the old rigging, then cut away the frayed pieces. The cries of the hegrims, following after *Finaran's Butterfly* for the garbage that was dumped every morning and after every meal, soothed him. He chose a new piece of rope and paused long enough to gaze out across the water.

The ocean spread rolling and green. He loved the sea, loved the sailor's life, loved the autonomy of living aboard ship. Those things took him away from large groups of people. Interacting with others, especially when they didn't make sense, drained him and often left him dispirited.

He breathed in the salt air and felt invigorated. The Amnians would be gone soon, and they'd be home in Velen for a few days. He found he was looking forward to it more than usual.

"What happened betwixt you and that girl, lad?" Jherek sat in the rigging, tied in now as he worked the more narrow and more tricky spots on the mast. The storm yesterday morning had been unforgiving, ripping across the cog's decks and doing exterior damage that would be repaired at a later time.

"What's she saying?" Jherek asked carefully.

Captain Virne Finaren stood on the nearby mast arm, a short burly man of sixty and more years who hadn't given up any aspect of his duties to his ship. The captain still hand-trained the more capable of his crew. He'd taught Jherek the few things the boy hadn't known about ships.

"She's saying that you made improper advances toward her," Finaren said.

He wore a full beard the yellow color of Calim Desert sand, spotted now with winter silver. The sun had tightened his eyes, making them slits across copper pupils. His face was seamed from exposure to the elements and a dagger thrust had left a harsh scar above his right eyebrow. He wore a doublet, breeches, and boots. A red kerchief kept his long hair from his eyes.

Jherek didn't say anything, keeping his hands busy.

"I'm caught in a bit of a muddle," the captain admitted as he went on.

"Why?" Jherek asked.

"A crewman of mine making advances against a woman on my ship, he's a crewman going to get a taste of the cat."

Jherek knew Finaren was referring to the cat-o'-ninetails he kept for ship's discipline. "Very well," he said.

"Very well?" Finaren repeated after a moment.

"Aye," Jherek said.

"You'd let me take the hide from your back, and we both knowing that pretty little tramp is lying like a rug?"

"I didn't say she was lying," Jherek pointed out.

"Lad," Finaren said, "we both know she's lying. You've never offered any man or woman-or beast, that I know of-anything in the way of an insult. Even them that you've killed in a fight you've never slurred before, during, or after."

Jherek said nothing, feeling bad that his ill luck was affecting Finaren as well. "I was looking at her," he admitted. "Maybe if I hadn't been doing that, she wouldn't have embarrassed herself."

"Valkur's brass buttons, boy!" Finaren exploded. "You're a seaman. You spend a netful of your life

away from kith and kin, and the sight of a good woman. Even a sailor clinging to a sinking spar would gaze on Umberlee with favor, and her the cold bitch goddess she is that spares no man venturing out on the ocean. When we go out on the salt as a way of life, we know what we're giving up."

"I'm sorry," Jherek said.

A lump swelled in his throat as the confusion touched him. In every situation he truly believed there was a right thing to do, a fair thing. But for the life of him, he couldn't see what it was in this instance.

"Every manjack on this ship has been looking at them women," Finaren growled, "including meself. A fiery little wench like that, she gets a man's blood up. Trouble is, she knows it too, the little tart. She could've had any man on this cog, yet she went out of her way to reach for you."

"Captain, I didn't mean for any of this to happen," Jherek said. "I've tried to stay away from the Amnians as you suggested."

It had been easy, in fact, since the merchants had partied constantly since being aboard ship and Jherek had never liked being around loud, raucous people. Drinking seemed to blur the lines of polite society, and take away even the rules a lot of good people stood by when they were sober.

"I know, lad. We've just got a wicket of trouble to deal with. The girl's father is demanding some kind of recompense."

"I could offer him an apology."

"That's good of you, but he's looking for something more along the monetary lines. I'm loath to give it to him. I can be a tight-fisted old miser meself, and I believe he knows what really happened betwixt you and that little tramp. He also knows I daren't tell him off without proof of it." He looked away, turning his attention back to the ship he'd spent so much of his life on.

Below, two members of the ship's crew sat in chairs mounted on the aft deck. Most of *Butterfly's* supply of fresh fish was taken up in nets, but swordfish had been spotted running on the salt earlier. The meat was a delicacy, but the swordfish had a habit of tearing up nets. The sailors sat in the chairs and fished with hooks. It was a lot of work, but it saved the nets. The fishing had also become something of a pastime aboard ship, and men gambled over who would be the first to land a catch.

"Well, lad," Finaren said after a short time, "it's my problem to think on. I just wanted to get the right of it from you."

Jherek nodded, understanding full well the predicament the captain was in. "If there's anything I can do, let me know. I'll gladly do it."

Finaren looked at him with fondness, then dropped a heavy hand on Jherek's shoulder. "Aye, lad, I know that you would. You've been more honest with me than any man I've ever sailed with." He shook his head. "You've enough weight to bear, young Jherek, without dealing with the bilge offered by a selfish and conceited twit of a girl. No, I'll stand up and take care of this. Nobody's going to ramrod this ship but me. You just steer clear of any further encounters with those Amnians. I'll not have you spilling some young fop's guts and garters across my deck because he's trying to show out for Merchant Lelayn."

"Aye, captain."

"Have you had anything to eat, lad?"

"Not since morningfeast."

"The mid-day meal was an hour ago, lad."

"I didn't want to come down."

Finaren nodded. "I know. You stand steady up here. I know you like the solitude anyway. I'll have Cook put together a kit and have it sent up."

"Thank you."

"Faugh. It's nothing, lad. Not many men would have let that girl slap them and walk off the way you did. Nor would they have kept a civil tongue in their heads."

Jherek also knew of no other sailors who carried the dark secret he did. If that secret were to get out, it would see him clear of sailing-if it didn't get him killed outright. Captain Finaren had hired him on in spite of knowing the truth.

Yeill was wrong, Jherek knew, love did exist. He knew that because he loved the old sea captain for the way he accepted him in spite of the birthright that marked him. He watched Finaren nimbly descend to the lower decks, bellowing out orders to the ship's crew at once.

Some of the tense knot gripping Jherek's stomach released. He took a moment to himself and said a small prayer to Ilmater, the Crying God, asking for the strength to go on, then he returned to his work on the rigging.

* * * * *

By late afternoon, only an hour or so short of eveningfeast, the winds deserted *Finaran's Butterfly*. She slowed to the point of becalming, which was bad enough, but then the Amnians started drinking and partying again, deciding they were bored.

Jherek sat in the crow's nest, curled up with a novel of chivalric romance Malorrie had suggested. He'd also brought a treatise on civil disobedience that he fully intended to discuss with Malorrie when he reached Velen. The whole thought of civil disobedience, for the right reasons and under auspicious circumstances, was confusing. Jherek had read it twice during the voyage, and it still didn't set any easier on his mind. Right was right, and to suggest that it might not be right at times was too much for him to think on.

Taking a pause in the book, holding his place with a finger, he leaned over the edge of the crow's nest and looked down at the cheering and screaming Amnians thronging the ship's stern. His reading was getting increasingly harder as the roil of dark clouds coming in from the west took away his light. He wondered if they were in for another storm.

"Umberlee take the lot of them," Hagagne grumbled, climbing up the rigging to reach Jherek.

Hagagne was in his late thirties, a sallow man with loose skin that never seemed to quite brown enough and left him constantly reddened and peeling. He was bald on top and had an unruly fringe of hair around his head.

"What's going on?" Jherek asked the sailor.

"They've decided to fish," Hagagne answered, perching on the edge of the crow's nest as Jherek made room.

Jherek watched as deckhands brought the two fishing chairs out and set them up. Yeill and one of the Amnian young men sat in the chairs and belted themselves in with the leather restraint straps.

"They saw Marcle and Dawdre fishing earlier," Hagagne said, "and decided it would be great sport."

Jherek knew Marcle and Dawdre had done all right for themselves, bringing in ulauf and whitefish on the long poles as well as the swordfish. A lot of meat had been salted and put back in the ship's larder.

"They've even got a wager going on," Hagagne said with a harsh laugh.

Jherek looked the question at him.

"If the young bitch-"

"Please don't call her that," Jherek said, but his voice carried sheathed steel.

Hagagne shrugged, taking no offense. "If the young *lady*," the older sailor amended, "wins, she gets one of the dandy's breeding stallions, something he seems to be particularly proud of. If he wins, he gets to spend the night in her silks."

A cold depression settled over Jherek's shoulders.

"You liked her, didn't you lad?" Hagagne asked. "Even after that bit she done for you?"

"I don't even know her." Jherek watched the young woman with a heavy heart, knowing his words were more true than he'd thought earlier.

"You've a tender heart, Jherek. All you young brooding ones do." Hagagne pulled a pouch from his work apron and took out a pipe carved in the likeness of a sea horse. The sea horse's curled tail created the bowl. He filled it with pipeweed, lit up, and said, "Lucky for you it'll pass, and glad you'll be of it."

Once Yeill and her competitor were lashed in, the long fishing poles were attached to the chairs and locked in. As the hooks were baited, the gathered Amnians cheered again and passed around several bottles of the wine they'd been drinking since they boarded in Athkatla.

"Her father knows of the wager?" Jherek asked.

"Aye, and he was one of the first to encourage the competition. To hear him tell it, his daughter's luck is phenomenal." Hagagne grinned evilly. "Only we know about the one that got away, don't we, lad?"

Seeing no humor in the remark, Jherek refrained from responding.

Deckhands threw the baited hooks into the slight wake behind the cog. Yeill and her competitor worked the reels at once, letting more fishing line out. Another deckhand poured out a bucket of chum from the big barrel kept in the stern.

"What about the situation with the Amnians?" Jherek asked.

"You mean about the girl's da breathing down the cap'n's neck?"

"Aye."

"They reached an agreement."

Jherek felt even lower, wondering how much profit Finaren had lost because of him. Even

volunteering to give up his wages for the trip wouldn't cover the loss, he was sure. "Do you know what it was?"

"Aye." Hagagne relit his pipe and smiled broadly. "The cap'n said he thought that Merchant Lelayn would hate to try to make a raft of his precious cargo and float it back to Athkatla from the Sea of Swords. The Amman merchant, why, he agreed that was truly so."

"Why did he do that?"

"I got this story only secondhand, you understand," Hagagne said, "so I might not have the right of it, but I do know what was basically said."

Jherek waited impatiently. Hagagne was one to draw on his stories.

"Cap'n told Merchant Lelayn that he had him a crewman willing to take lashes from the cat over what that little bit-that daughter of his had done," Hagagne said. "Cap'n told him that he couldn't do no less than stand by his crewman, and he'd be damned if anybody was going to skipper this ship other than him. Also told Merchant Lelayn that he couldn't do any less than pay for ship's passage ahead of time now, what with all the confusion his daughter had caused."

"The fee was paid?" Jherek asked in disbelief.

Hagagne nodded, puffing on his pipe contentedly. "In gold. Neghram seen it himself."

Before Jherek knew it, a smile lifted his lips. Maybe his luck was finally changing.

"Not many cap'ns would have done what the cap'n done," Hagagne stated. His head was wreathed in pipe-weed smoke. "I might not have believed it myself if I hadn't been on the ship that done it."

"Still," Jherek said, not able to fully shake the doubt that had lived within him all his life, "standing up for me might not have been the best thing to do. The Amnians will get word of what Captain Finaren has done and *Butterfly* will be on their black lists."

"Kind of thought the same thing, lad. Seems Merchant Lelayn mentioned that to the cap'n. Said he didn't care to do business with a man who didn't keep his mind on business. Then the cap'n, he told the Amnian that an honest man was worth his weight in gold to a man in business for himself, and the passage to and from Baldur's Gate aboard this ship didn't come close to that amount. Said him not standing up for you might mean losing you, and that was his bottom line."

Jherek knew that wasn't true. Getting a berth on a ship's crew had been hard, even in Velen. If it hadn't been for Madame Litaar and his experience working in Shipwright Makim's yard, Captain Finaren wouldn't have given him a second glance. If not for *Butterfly*, he didn't know what ship he would have crewed aboard. There were too many experienced sailors in the Duchy of Cape Velen, and none of those bore his sins.

"In the end," Hagagne went on, "Merchant Lelayn agreed that the cap'n standing up for you *was* good business. Said when he got back to Athkatla, he'd put another cargo together and ship with *Butterfly* again."

"That is good news," Jherek said.

"Aye. With the cap'n and *Butterfly*, we'll do all right. Not many got the rep of either of those."

It was something to take pride in and Jherek did, even though the edicts of Ilmater preached against such feelings. He glanced back at the Amnians below. "I'll wish them good luck in their fishing."

"From up here," Hagagne suggested.

"Aye."

Hagagne gave him a side-long glance. "And hope that the lady wins so that she doesn't have to live up to her end of the wager?"

Jherek's face burned. Thoughts of the young woman sharing her bed silks with anyone didn't set easy with him even though she wasn't what he'd thought she was.

"Don't be so embarrassed, lad. Your heart's full of love at your age, and there's nothing wrong with it, but you could do with a little seasoning, if you'd allow yourself. I know some of the tavern wenches who wouldn't mind a tumble if you'd only ask."

Ignoring the comment, Jherek gazed up at the darkening clouds. The storm seemed more threatening than ever. The shadows had chased the green from the Sea of Swords, turning even the water dark. Off in the distance, pale flickering lightning knifed through the sky.

"You reading again?" Hagagne asked, picking up the book.

"Aye."

"Never found a knack for reading meself," the crewman said, "but I like being read to well enough. What's this book about?"

"A liege's man," Jherek said. "He joined the king's army to fight against the goblin hordes threatening the kingdom, only to find that he's falling in love with his liege's lady."

"Does she know?"

Jherek nodded. "The lady's marriage was an arranged one. She doesn't love her liege. She loves the warrior."

"Perhaps when you have time, you'd read this one to me." Hagagne picked up the thick volume. "I'd predict a short, unhappy ending, but I tell by the heft of this book that's not the case."

"No." Jherek loved the intricacies of the plot, loved the way the liege's man was at war with his own feelings and the rules he'd laid down for himself. He still didn't know how the story would end. "Aye, I'll read it to you if you'd like."

Hagagne clapped him on the back. "Now there's a good lad. I shall look forward to it."

Jherek replaced the volume in his kit, brought to him earlier by a crewman the captain had sent up. His eye wandered back to the cog's wake to study the fishing lines. He and Hagagne watched in silence for a few moments, then watched Yeill's line suddenly draw taut.

A cheer rose from the throats of the Amnians, showing the effects of the wine they'd been drinking. It died away when the shark's dorsal fin broke the water.

The triangle of cartilaginous flesh looked impossibly large. The brute's gray mottled head broke water next, the fishing line trapped in its snarl of teeth.

The cheers turned to a panicked chorus of fear.

Jherek rose to his feet, yelling down from the crow's nest. "Cut the line! Cut the line!"

The line was stout, unbreakable. *Butterfly* had a large crew and she had to feed them. The Sea of Swords held big fish, and the captain wanted none of them to get away once they were hooked. The enchantment on the lines he'd paid for kept them from breaking, though they could be cut. Still, two men had been pulled from *Butterfly's* deck before.

Captain Finaren himself moved first, shoving his way through the ring of Amnian wealthy. He drew his cutlass and pulled it back to swing.

Timbers groaned and screeched as Yeill's fishing chair yanked free of the deck and tore through the railing. She was gone in an instant, pulled under by the big shark she'd hooked.

Jherek stood in the crow's nest and drew his seaman's knife from his leg sheath. The knife blade was a foot long, thick and heavy, with a saw-toothed back for cutting through bone. The small handle barely filled his fist.

"Sea devils!" someone shouted.

Glancing to his left, Jherek saw a sahuagin manta surface on *Butterfly's* port side. The oblong barge used by the sahuagin to travel above or below water was much smaller than most of its kind that the young sailor had heard described. Like all of its kind that he'd heard about, the manta had been cobbled together from ships wrecked at sea or scavenged from shorelines. The boards were stained green with undersea scud from being submerged for so long, but fitted neatly into a wedge shape that made it very maneuverable. It rode low in the water, but the finned shapes of the sahuagin could be seen hunkered down on the benches. They paddled furiously, moving in response to a measured cadence, totally focused on their prey.

Jherek had heard stories about mantas that crewed as many as six hundred sahuagin, but firsthand stories were few and far between. Most men who saw them perished in the sea devils' attack. From his initial estimate, he guessed that there were forty or fifty sahuagin aboard, easily twice the number of crew aboard *Butterfly*.

Captain Finaren bawled out orders at once, calling his crew into action.

Jherek looked at the water where Yeill had gone under. He couldn't see her.

"Lad," Hagagne called from the ship's rigging, already moving down to the deck himself. He stopped when he realized what Jherek was about to attempt. "Leave her. She's probably already in that shark's belly by now and not worth your life even if she isn't."

"I can't."

Hagagne reached back for the young sailor, but Jherek avoided the other man's grasp. Without another word, he dived from the crow's nest, plummeting toward the dark water.

II

9 Mirtul, the Year of the Gauntlet

Jherek hit the ocean cleanly, holding his hands before him to break the surface tension and lessen the

chance of injury from impact. Still, the force of hitting the water nearly drove the breath from his lungs. The cold bit into him with jagged, angry teeth. The sahuagin manta was ahead and on the port side of *Finaren's Butterfly* so he knew he wouldn't immediately be seen by the sea devils aboard their barge.

He also knew that the shark that had taken Yeill's hook hadn't bitten by chance. The sahuagin ran with the sharks. He didn't doubt the danger that more sharks would be around as he attempted to save the Amnian woman.

The darkened sky above the ocean cut down on the visibility beneath the water as well. Pale colored sand covered the rolling ocean floor, and brain coral stood up in bunches, like tumors. A coral reef that housed dozens of multicolored fish hiding from the sharks ran in an irregular line to his right. As always, being below the ocean line filled Jherek with a sense of ease. Everything moved more slowly here, and it seemed more open to him than even the sky. He could feel the water, feel the pressure of it against his body, feel the current that mixed warm and cold water in layers. He felt at home there.

Jherek swam hard, the knife still clenched in his fist. The pressure on his ears told him he'd gone down thirty feet or more. He searched the water and spotted Yeill still in the fishing chair less than fifty feet from his position, sinking slowly. He turned toward her and swam hard.

Two sharks glided in sinuous circles around her, close but not closing in. One of them still had the fishing line in its mouth. Beyond the sharks, three sahuagin clutching spears kept watch. They spotted him and did nothing but spread out, assuming he was fool enough to swim to his own death.

Jherek looked at them, matching all the stories he'd heard with the sight of the monsters before him. The sahuagin were huge in build, their bodies massive with muscle across the shoulders. Their legs with the extra joint looked grotesque. Broad faces with flaring fins sticking out into the water on either side of its head held dozens of narrow teeth, the black lips curled back to expose them in a threatening grimace. Their bite, Jherek had been told, could rip gobbets of flesh from a man, and the sea devils literally feasted on their victims, often before they died. Their tails whipped back and forth to help them maintain their position. The webbing between their long fingers and toes made their hands and feet look impossibly large.

Fear filled Jherek as he closed on the circling sharks, yet he was drawn to the act of attempting to save the young woman's life as surely as a compass needle was drawn north. He couldn't leave the young woman to her fate. Despite the water around him, his mouth was dry. He estimated that Yeill was less than twenty feet below the ocean's surface.

One of the sharks pulled away from the other and sped at Jherek, mouth gaping to reveal its teeth.

Without hesitation, Jherek dodged, kicking out hard and twisting in the water like a porpoise. All his life the water had been his element, and even though he moved well in a ship's rigging and on the ground, it was nothing like the way he moved in the water. He'd won every swimming meet he'd ever entered at Velen as a boy, and he'd dived deeper and better than anyone in the town, including seasoned sailors.

Madame litaar had suggested that it was because Jherek was linked to the sea, but even her powers of divination couldn't tell her how. Jherek only knew that there was no place he'd ever felt more at home. The years as a shipwright's apprentice on land watching ships he'd repaired and help build put out to sea had been hard, and he could never imagine living in a landlocked city.

Stroking furiously, he glided under the shark, missing it by inches. He decided not to use the knife. There was too much of a chance it would get stuck in the shark's body and he'd lose it. He didn't want the sharks in a blood frenzy.

His move caught the sahuagin by surprise as well. Evidently they'd felt confident of their shark's kill. Their finned heads turned to him as he swam to Yeill's side, their black eyes glinting with malicious light. The woman struggled with the seat restraints, trapped in the chair.

Jherek's blade freed her at once, slicing easily through the leather straps. He grabbed the Amnian woman, pulling her from the chair and shoving her toward the surface.

An explosion of bubbles came from the mouth of one of the sahuagin. Immediately, both sharks turned their attention to Jherek.

His lungs burned as he watched the sharks and sea devils. He knew from his studies that the sahuagin controlled sharks and used them for war as well as security, though that control was a tenuous thing at times. He gripped the ceramic teardrop Madame litaar had given him when he set to sea.

Back in Velen, Madame litaar was known as a diviner and alchemist. She couldn't easily craft healing potions or some of the more exotic potions, but most things that related to the sea she could make without problem. She'd given him a shark repellent potion in the ceramic teardrop.

With the teardrop in his hand, he waited till the sharks were within ten feet, silent gliding death. He crushed the ceramic teardrop in his hand, releasing the strong potion inside. A yellow glowing cloud filled

the water around him, swelling out to envelope the sharks even before they were on him. He reached out with his free hand, catching the lead shark's blunt snout. The rough, sandpaper hide pressed against his flesh, but he used the shark's momentum with his own to slide above it.

By the time the shark slid under him, the potion took effect. Both sharks jerked spasmodically, reacting to the potion's unique alchemy. Madame Litaar had told Jherek the potion would create deep fear in the sharks, causing them to flee for their lives, and she was as good as her word. The sharks spun around and began to accelerate gracefully away. The sea devils tried to command them back into the cloud of repellent, but the sharks were more afraid of Madame Litaar's concoction than their sahuagin masters. As a result, the sharks turned on their controllers, recognizing them instead of the now fading yellow cloud as the source of the threat that filled their simplistic nervous systems. The sahuagin broke ranks at once.

One of the sharks succeeded in seizing a sahuagin in its jaws. A bloody cloud darkened the water, spreading outward. The second shark pursued one of the other sahuagin, leaving the third one free.

Lungs near to bursting from the time he'd been underwater and the effort he'd expended, Jherek stroked for the surface. He sensed the last sahuagin coming after him, cutting the distance in heartbeats, feeling the hate and excitement that it radiated, imagining he could almost read its thoughts.

He surfaced twenty feet from the young Amnian woman and drew in a deep lungful of breath. "Swim to the ship!" he ordered, gasping. "Now!"

He glanced ahead, seeing that *Butterfly* was coming about. Captain Finaren hadn't given up on them. Even though the cog turned hard about, filling the sails with the almost listless straight wind rather than the cross-breeze she'd been making do with all day, she kept her port side to the marauding sahuagin aboard the manta.

The young Amnian woman screamed and cried, and Jherek knew she was in real danger of causing herself to drown before she reached *Butterfly*.

He turned from her regretfully, aware now too that the sounds of combat came from the cog. He took a final breath, judging the sahuagin had to be almost on him, and dived beneath the water again. He blinked, trying desperately to clear his vision while the blood from the sahuagin and sharks clouded the water.

The third sahuagin swim-flipped and thrust its trident as Jherek sank into the water. It was less than fifteen feet out. Reacting quickly, knowing he had no chance to escape the wicked tines completely by attempting to dodge, he shoved his knife hand up. The blade connected with the trident, slipping unerringly between the tines and jarring against the base. The force of the blow vibrated Jherek's shoulder and elbow painfully. The scrape of metal on metal rang in his ears, though blunted by the water.

The sahuagin was on him, lashing out with talons from both hands and feet. Moving swiftly, faster than the wide-webbed foot that ripped up toward his midsection, Jherek grabbed the sahuagin's scaled ankle in his free hand while keeping the trident turned from him with the other. He used the foot's downward ripping action to shove himself down, gliding under the sea devil, then twisting to come up behind it. The unexpected move caught the sahuagin by surprise, but it moved to defend itself.

The creature slapped at Jherek with its tail, the gristled tip of it slashing a cut across his chest. Jherek ignored the pain of the wound and kicked hard, driving himself into position to reach out and capture the sahuagin's head with his free arm before it could move away.

The sea devil bucked and twisted, swimming in fear now instead of being so confident. Instinctively, the creature dived, heading for the depths that protected it from so much of the human race.

Struggling to maintain his grip against the pull of the ocean and his opponent's slick, scaled body, Jherek felt the pressure increase against his ear drums. Much past sixty feet, he knew, and he risked a case of the rapture of the deeps even if he survived to reach the surface. He'd seen men who'd survived the rapture, though their bodies had been bent and twisted forever by it.

Desperate, he located the sahuagin's sound chamber in back of its wide mouth by touch, then drove his blade through the thin membrane, up into its inner ear, and into the brain beyond. He didn't stop pushing until the hilt stopped against his opponent's jawline.

The sahuagin convulsed at once as death claimed it.

Spots spiraled in Jherek's gaze when he released the dead sea devil. Still jerking as its nervous system gave out, the sahuagin sank, disappearing into the lower reaches of the sea. The young sailor swam for the surface. He spotted the second shark, already floating belly-up, a silent testament to the deadly skills of the sahuagin. The sea devil that had slain it moved only feebly nearby, offering no threat.

After surfacing, Jherek allowed himself only two quick breaths to recharge his aching lungs, then struck out for *Butterfly*. He watched deckhands hang oil lamps along the starboard side of the cog, their

first line of defense against the sea devils. The sahuagin fear of fire held them back at first, and the brightness of the light hurt their eyes.

He overtook Yeill while she was still seventy yards from the cog. The young Amnian woman struggled, barely keeping her face above the water. When he came up on her from behind, she screamed in fear and turned around to swat at him with her hands. As a result, she went down at once.

Jherek grabbed her, wrapping an arm under her jaw as they both sank. He returned the knife to his shin sheath, secured his grip on her, and pulled them both back up. "Stop fighting," he commanded in a rough voice, hoping to get through her fear.

"Jherek?" she gasped, looking up at him.

"Hang on," he told her.

She spat water and snuffled as she cried, "There are fish men attacking the ship."

He felt sorry for her then, in spite of everything else she'd done to him that day. For all her posing and wealth, she remained yet a child. "They haven't taken her," he replied, "and they won't."

"Jherek!" a voice called from above as *Butterfly* bore down on them. She was coming fast enough that white caps rolled along her bow.

"Here!" he shouted back, blinking his eyes to clear them of the saltwater.

"Valkur's brass buttons, boy," the sailor yelled down. "Jumping in shark-infested waters like that, you must figure you got some kind of charmed life. I tell anybody that back home, they're going to chase me out of the tavern for telling tall tales. I hadn't seen it myself, I'd have called the man who told me about it a liar."

Jherek kept swimming. He'd never fully understood the things that moved him, but he knew what he couldn't do, and he couldn't have left the woman to die.

"Skiff's coming down, but we're keeping it tied up. Watch 'er as she comes down."

"Come ahead," Jherek said, treading water and watching *Butterfly's* approach, knowing it was going to be a near thing.

The skiff dropped down the side of the cog, the lines whirring through the pulleys. The little boat landed on the water with a flat *smack* that threw a wave of cold water over Jherek. Thinking she was going under again triggered another panic attack on Yeill's part. Jherek held her, speaking calmly to her as soon as their heads were above water again.

He reached out and grabbed the skiff's edge, feeling his bruised shoulder muscles writhe in agony as they took the sudden drag.

"I've got her, lad." Old Cowey, the sailor with the most seniority on *Butterfly*, took Yeill's wrist in his gnarled, scarred hand. He pulled her aboard the leaping skiff, dragged along through the cog's wake.

Jherek let the woman go, then caught the skiff's edge with his other hand and pulled himself aboard. He stepped over Yeill, who lay scared and shivering in the bottom of the skiff.

"Haul away," Jherek yelled up to the men manning the skiff's lines.

They started pulling at once, bringing the small craft up. They alternately railed against him and congratulated him on his success in saving the girl. The general consensus seemed to be that he'd gone insane, and everyone knew the gods favored those too stupid to save themselves.

Jherek didn't wait for them to tie the skiff off, knowing Cowey would take care of his charge. The young sailor leaped up and caught the hauling ropes and climbed. Level with the cog's railing, he swung his body out and landed lithely on the deck.

He scanned the opposite railing, seeing Finaren and the ship's crew hard pressed to defend against boarders. Despite the difference in height between the cog and the manta, the sahuagin attacked viciously.

"C'mon, you sea dogs!" Finaren bellowed at the rigging crew. "*Butterfly's* no pig to be wallowing in the trough! Make her fly or I'll have the hide off your backs when we get to Velen!"

The ship's crew reacted to their master's voice. Wind cracked in *Butterfly's* sails, creating distance from the sahuagin manta. The Amnian passengers stood balled up in the ship's prow, protective of their own circle.

Jherek raced across the pitching deck, pausing only long enough to take the cutlass and hook Hagagne "offered. He had no special weapons, comfortable with any that found their way into his hands. Malorrie had seen to it that he was trained in a cross section of them.

"Glad to see you made it, lad," Hagagne stated with relief as he fell in behind. "Thought I'd never see you again after you diving into them sharks like that. You do it again, though, you better hope them sharks have at you. I'll chomp on you myself if they don't."

Jherek ran the cutlass and hook through his work apron strap, then took the short bow and quiver of

arrows Hagagne offered. He was one of the better archers among the crew.

"Hawlyng!" Finaren yelled.

"Aye, Cap'n," Hawlyng responded.

"I'll want to be using that fire projector today, Hawlyng!"

"Aye, sir. I've got 'er up and ready. Just you say when."

"Now!" Finaren howled. "I'm up to my arse in these damned deep devils!"

Jherek stepped to the railing as the crew made room for him. He notched an arrow to the string as he surveyed the manta coming around. The sahuagin clung to the sides as well as manning the oars. Their scaled bodies writhed in the effort of propelling their craft along with the oars. With the darkening sky full of storm clouds, they were crouched in shadow, but Jherek could easily spot the silvery eyes that haunted many sailors' dreams.

A sahuagin drummer stood in the prow, croaking out a rhythm. Jherek recognized it as serving the same purpose as a drum beater on a trireme. Flaming arrows from *Butterfly's* crew fell into the water and occasionally sunk home in the manta, creating bright spots of yellow flame against the darkness as they flew. When they hit the sahuagin craft, the oarsmen pulled back from the fires, but one of them would always find a wave of water over it and put it out.

"You get that girl back?" Finaren asked.

"Aye." Jherek smoothed his wet hair back from his face, getting the measure of *Butterfly's* lunges across the uneven ocean. They were rising and falling little over fifty paces opposite each other, but at the distance, that fifty paces stretched out even further, making shots difficult.

"Good," the captain growled, "but that was a damn fool thing you did."

"I couldn't let her drown or get eaten by a shark."

"You ever stop and think you ain't got much choice in some of those matters, lad?" Finaren sounded angry, hotter than Jherek had ever heard him.

Irritation and insecurity stung the young sailor at the same time. "You mean you think it's possible the sahuagin out there are going to take *Butterfly* this evening?" He meant it to come out harder, but he really wasn't sure. There were a lot of sahuagin out there.

"Not my ship," Finaren answered. "Leastways, not while I'm able to draw a breath. Now be a good lad and put a shaft through that croaking monstrosity in the prow. They have us on speed, but they're a brute while *Butterfly's* a lady who knows how to dance. Still, they're going to run us down if we let them. Even this puny wind won't always be in our favor as we move around."

Jherek concentrated on his shot and loosed the fletchings. The arrow caught the sahuagin in the thigh, causing it to bark in pain. Still, it snapped the arrow off and went back to croaking cadence. The young sailor drew another shaft, watching the manta draw nearer. When the craft was less than thirty paces away, he released the second arrow.

The fletching suddenly appeared in the sahuagin's thickly muscled neck and the croaking halted immediately. It toppled over the side, clawing at its neck as it tried to dislodge the arrow.

"Hard to starboard!" Finaren shouted.

The boatswain yelled the order back and the ship's crew and helmsman made the adjustment. *Butterfly* came about regretfully, losing the wind and slowing immediately.

Jherek fired four more arrows, hitting targets scattered across the manta. The thick sahuagin hide turned two of his arrows as surely as chain mail when they didn't hit flush. At the distance, it was almost impossible to avoid hitting something.

Finaren held onto the railing as the ship crested a wave that slammed into her side. Quarrels from the sahuagin crossbows stuttered into *Butterfly's* side and ripped through her sails. A man screamed only a few feet from Jherek, clutching the quarrel that suddenly appeared in his chest.

"It burns!" he screamed, falling to his knees. "Selune watch over me." He lasted only a moment, praying fervently to his goddess before he passed out.

"Poison," Finaren noted. "Umberlee take them deep what use such things."

Jherek fired another pair of arrows before the manta closed on *Butterfly*. For a moment, he thought the sahuagin craft was going to strike the cog, then the manta cleared *Butterfly's* stern by inches, charging past. The sahuagin hurled spears and tridents as they went by, croaking angrily.

The cog's crew started to cross over to the port side.

"Stay, you dogs," Finaren shouted. "Helmsman, bring us around harder to starboard. I want a hundred and eighty degree turn."

"Aye, cap'n," the helmsman called back.

Butterfly came about. Sailcloth cracked overhead as the crew flipped the booms around. She caught the full breeze again in heartbeats. The spinnaker blossomed like a night rose in full passion and pulled the ship forward.

"Crafty though them creatures may be," Finaren said, "they still don't understand the wind and what a kind mistress she might be."

Jherek watched as the sahuagin struggled to bring their craft under control. Finaran was right about the speed the sea devils had, and they would have outrun *Butterfly* had the attack led into a race.

"Bring her around, helmsman, toward them sea devils," Finaran commanded. "I want to shear her oars off on the port side. In another minute we're going to wake them up to what a war at sea is all about."

The manta almost stalled in the water as the sahuagin struggled to regain control of their craft. They floundered, struggling to turn the manta around.

"They got no draw on that boat," Finaren said. "It sits flat on the water, and once they get it started in a direction, they can make it go fast, but maneuverability becomes an issue. Hawlyng ..."

"Aye, cap'n?"

"That fire projector, Hawlyng, are you ready with it?"

"Aye, sir."

Jherek glanced over his shoulder and saw the fire projector mounted on pivots come around to point at the stalled manta. The projector's maximum range was forty yards. At the moment, the manta was out of range, but the young sailor didn't doubt that it would come in again.

"Helmsman," the captain called out, "shear them oars. The rest of you dogs hold onto to whatever you got, and Umberlee take them beasties what's come upon us!"

III

9 Mirtul, the Year of the Gauntlet

Butterfly bore down on the manta, speeding closer. The sahuagin stared at her, their silvery eyes picking up light from the oil lamps swinging crazily from the railing. A renewed flurry of spears and quarrels thudded against the cog, finding few targets. A sailor went down with a trident through his guts, squalling in fear and pain.

Jherek held himself steady, an arrow pulled back. When *Butterfly* came down again, her prow nosing toward the manta, he fired arrows as quickly as he could draw the string. Even under Malorrie's tutelage, he didn't come close to the skills of an elf bowman in terms of speed, but he was deadly accurate at this range. He aimed at the sahuagin on the port side of the manta, driving them back into their shipmates when they fell.

A string of sharp thundering cracks followed *Butterfly* as she sheared through the sahuagin oars on the manta's port side, her prow cracking the paddles like kindling. When they finished the pass, Jherek saw that nearly every oar on that side of the sea devils' craft had been splintered and rendered useless.

A ragged cheer ripped free of the throats of *Butterfly's* crew.

"Hawlyng," Finaren bawled.

"Aye, Cap'n."

"Have you got that thrice-damned craft of fishy black-hearts in your sights?"

"Aye, Cap'n."

"Fire away and send 'em back to Umberlee's caresses."

The fire projector belched a thin stream of flaming, explosive liquid that served immediately to drown the cheers of the cog's crew. Most sailors didn't like the weapons. They sat like waiting death on a ship's deck, as able to work against a crew as for one. Jherek had seen them explode on ships' decks during battle before, ruptured by a catapult shot. Twice, damaged fire projectors had sent both ships to the ocean floor before any real salvage could be made.

Against the sahuagin, it was the most frightful weapon for the sea devils outside of magic.

The launched flames showered down over the manta, catching even the wet wood and the sahuagin unlucky enough to be standing there on fire. Sahuagin worked immediately to put the fire out, but oil-based as it was, they only spread it for the moment and made it burn hotter.

In the stern, Hawlyng shouted curses at the sahuagin from beside the fire projector. He didn't see the first of the sea devils climbing over the railing of the cog's squared stern castle. Before anyone could shout

a warning, the sahuagin threw a spear that caught the mate in the side, pinning him to the stern castle walls.

"Clear that stern, you flea-bitten rum dogs, and Umberlee take any that lags behind!" Finaren shouted.

Jherek tossed the bow aside and slid the cutlass and hook free. He ran for the stern, charging up the starboard side steps that led into the stern castle with the other sailors. The lead sahuagin thrust out with its trident, intending to impale Hawlyng again.

Swinging the hook, Jherek caught the tines of the trident and yanked them aside. They buried in the wooden deck. Before the sahuagin could recover, the young sailor thrust the point of his cutlass between the creature's open jaws. Fangs snapped off at the impact, and the sword slid through the back of the sahuagin's neck. Jherek twisted the blade savagely, making sure to cut the sea devil's spine. Even if it didn't die right away, it was paralyzed.

Butterfly's crew crowded onto the stern castle, and the sounds of battle swamped over Jherek. The young sailor pulled his cutlass free with effort, then kicked the sahuagin backward as Malorrie had taught him. The creature's dead weight slammed into two of his fellows and drove them all backward into the ocean again.

"Die human!" a sahuagin snarled in the common tongue as it stabbed at Jherek with a trident. Its voice out of the water, wrapping around unaccustomed words, sounded flat and out of breath, a nightmarish gasp of rage and hate.

The young sailor turned the trident with the cutlass, losing the sword's use for a moment while it was trapped in the tines. The sahuagin swiped at him with its free hand, the talons black and sharp as razors.

Unflinching, Jherek took the attack to the sahuagin rather than retreating. All the fear inside him was concentrated on survival, and Malorrie's training made sure each move he made was smooth as Dalelands spider silk. He swept the hook up, catching the sahuagin's hand and driving the curved point through the creature's palm, stopping it only inches from his face. Before the sahuagin could react either to the counterblow or the pain, Jherek headbutted it in the face.

Off-balance, the sahuagin stumbled backward. Still holding the impaled hand on the hook, Jherek slid back and freed the cutlass with a slither of metal on metal that threw off sparks. He swung with all his might at the sahuagin's corded neck. The heavy blade bit deeply into his opponent's flesh, almost cutting through. It dropped with a harsh gargling croak, then died.

Jherek freed his weapons, watching as Finaren swung an oil lantern into the face of another boarding sahuagin. The lantern shattered and oil covered the creature's head, wreathing it in flames. It screamed horribly, clawing at its face, then toppled back into the dark water. The scent of burned flesh clung to the stern castle, overwhelming even the fishy musk from the sahuagin.

"Hold us steady, helmsman," Finaren commanded. "Keep us into the wind and let's put this place behind us."

Jherek fought on, slashing at his opponents. Two sailors went down around him, both with grievous wounds. He kept himself poised, riding out the pitch and yaw of *Butterfly* as she sailed across the ocean. He cut and thrust, blocking a dagger thrust with the cutlass, then ripping a sahuagin's throat out with the hook.

One of the passengers at the top of the port stairs threw out his hands, thumbs touching. Jherek caught the movement from the corner of his eye. Flames shot from the passenger's fingers, arcing across the stern castle and splashing across three sahuagin. All three sea devils released their holds on the stern railing and dropped into the ocean.

Catching a trident thrust by another sahuagin with the hook, Jherek turned it aside and kicked the sea devil in the face. He followed with a thrust through the creature's heart. Thrusting the hook through the sahuagin's harness, he dragged the body to the railing to clear it from the stern deck. He sheathed the cutlass and grabbed one of the corpse's legs and levered the body over the railing.

A sahuagin net spun up at him from a sea devil clinging to the ship's stern. It settled over the young sailor before he had a chance to move. Cruel fish hooks woven into the net bit into his flesh. Blood flowed from a dozen small injuries as the net drew tight.

Jherek screamed in pain, instinctively pulling back against the net in an attempt to escape. The effort only drove the hooks more deeply into his flesh. Luckily, there was no burn of sahuagin poison, but the weight and the strength of the sahuagin at the other end pulled him forward. He caught the edge of the railing in one hand and with the hook, watching as the hooked bits of his skin stood out. The pain ripped another scream from his throat.

A cold voice entered his mind. *Live, that you may serve.*

Fire leaped from one of the burning sahuagin still on deck onto the net. The strands parted like hairs over an open flame.

Jherek stumbled back onto the deck. The pain from the hooks was sharp and tearing, almost blinding in its intensity, but he saw that the sailors had successfully broken the sahuagin attack. The manta still burned in the distance, looking like a single torch in the night. Sea devil corpses littered *Butterfly's* wake, catching the pallor of the lightning flashing through the wine-dark clouds overhead.

Claustrophobia tightened over Jherek more tightly than the net. He didn't like closed in places. Hooking his fingers in the net, he started pulling, hoping to dislodge some of the hooks.

"Stand easy, lad," Finaren ordered, striding close. "Damned nets are hard to get away from. Lucky that this one got burned the way it did."

Jherek took a deep breath and relaxed the way Malorrie had taught him. He distanced the fear, giving himself over to the peaceful pitch and yaw of *Butterfly's* rolling deck. Finaren hadn't seen the way the net had parted.

"Carthos, Himtap," Finaren called out, "get some snips and get the lad free of that net." The captain regarded Jherek. "You stay here, lad. I got the rest of me crew to look in on, and some of them need burying. I got to save them what I can."

"Aye, sir." Jherek started to nod, then stopped when the hooks pulled at his flesh. One of them had embedded in the back of his head.

Finaren walked away.

Jherek crouched and slid his knife free of the shin sheath. Hagagne joined him, working gently to cut away the strands of the net. The first thing to do was cut sections of it away, then go after the individual hooks.

Malorrie's training allowed him to ignore the majority of the pain, but it was still difficult. Cutting the strands became automatic, and he turned his thoughts to the cold voice that had whispered to him.

Live, that you may serve.

He'd heard the command before. The first time had been when he was a child, fallen from his father's ship during a battle and nearly drowned. The voice had been more gentle, then, but perhaps he only remembered it that way. At that time, a dolphin had swum close to him and nosed him to the surface. His life had been spared then, as it had probably been spared this night, and there was no clue why, or by whom.

It had been three years since he'd last heard the voice. He'd thought it might be gone for good, with no explanation of why it had involved itself with him. Even Madame Litaar with all her magic, and Malorrie with his insight, could offer no illumination concerning the voice. All of them, however, did what they had to, drawn together by whatever mystery linked them. Both his mentors had offered only the consolation that when the time came to know, he would.

Live, that you may serve.

But serve what? And why hadn't he been given more direction?

* * * * *

"You saved my daughter's life, and for that I owe you."

Jherek shivered as Hagagne poured whiskey from Captain Finaren's private stock onto the small wounds made by the fish hooks. Twenty-three of them had been removed from the young sailor's flesh. The process had been demanding and painful. Once free of the sahuagin net, the ends of the hooks had been snipped, then the barbs twisted around and pressed back out the flesh at a different spot than the entry point. The wounds had doubled in number. He stood in the stern castle, stripped to the leather work apron that had been proof against the net hooks.

"You don't owe me anything," Jherek replied, returning Merchant Lelayn's gaze full measure. "Captain Finaren takes care of his passengers."

"Take *something*?" Hagagne whispered hoarsely as he sloshed the whiskey over the wounds in the young sailor's back. "By Umberlee's eyes, you jumped into a sea of sharks to save the bi-girl."

Jherek knew he couldn't. Anything he took would only tie him to the memory of the young Amnian woman and what had gone between them, and he didn't want that. He'd been wrong about her and that confused him. His passion toward her, toward what he thought she was, had seemed true. Even if he'd chosen not to act on it, the memory of her face would have filled some of the empty nights he experienced these days. Now he would remember only her harsh words and the slap. The price was too high. He shook his head.

"I can be very generous, boy."

"I'm sure that you can, sir," Jherek said, "but there's nothing I need."

"You're a deckhand, for Lliira's sake," the Amnian merchant blustered. "Surely there's something you could use."

A turban covered his head and a fiercely forked beard thrust out from the bottom of his chin. He was a fat man dressed in silks, and Jherek smelled the perfumes and spices he wore on his body.

"No," he said softly. "I thank you for the offer."

Finished with Hagagne's ministrations and wanting to get away from Yeill's hostile gaze, not really understanding how she could be angry with him, Jherek picked up his cutlass and the hook. Both weapons badly needed cleaning.

Yeill and her father talked behind him, a frenzy of conversation that he chose to ignore. Four men had died in the sahuagin attack. The ship's crew had packed their bodies in the hold, to take back to their families in Velen. Wet sand covered the scorched places in the deck where the fire projector and the mage's spell had started brief fires. Finaren already had his ship's mage out assessing the damage, which appeared minimal to Jherek.

Hagagne followed Jherek. "You're a hero, lad, you should take something."

Jherek made his voice hard. "No."

"They'll view it as disrespectful."

Turning to the man, the young sailor said, "I can't take anything from them. Don't you understand?"

Hagagne looked back into Jherek's eyes, then gave a heartfelt sigh. "Aye, lad, I guess that maybe I'm not so old that I've forgotten how harsh that first bloom of youth can be. I've an alternative, though, if you're willing to hear it."

Jherek listened.

"Take something for the crew," Hagagne urged. "Saving Ulnay and Morrin used up the last of the healing potions the cap'n had on hand. He wouldn't admit it and doesn't know that I know that, but I do. Them Amnians, they took on a shipment of healing potions in Baldur's Gate. They can spare some to replace what we used defending them."

The option made sense, but Jherek still didn't like it. He wanted nothing more to do with the Amnians. He took a deep breath to collect himself, then turned back to Merchant Lelayn and Yeill and said, "There is something."

"Name it," the Amnian merchant stated.

Jherek noticed the reluctance in the man's demeanor, though. Merchant Lelayn didn't mind offering to give, but the giving left him cold. "Healing potion, sir."

"A smart lad could do all right by himself reselling it." The Amnian merchant nodded in grudging approval and said, "How much do you want for saving my favorite daughter's life?"

"Whatever you think you can spare, sir," Jherek replied. "I won't haggle with you."

The answer seemed to surprise the merchant. He snapped his fingers and one of his men came forward. "Take ten healing potions from our stores and see that the boy gets them."

Jherek bowed his head in thanks. At the price the potions could command, Merchant Lelayn was being quite generous.

Captain Finaren joined them, his blouse stained with burn holes from the fire that had splattered from the lantern he'd smashed. Soot and blood stained his beard and face.

Merchant Lelayn turned to the captain. "Do you know how the sahuagin came to attack this vessel out of those upon the sea today?"

Finaren's eyes narrowed. "Anybody who travels the Sword Coast knows that the sahuagin are a danger. A man making his living at sea, he's taking risks. I've never encountered them before today, and maybe I was well overdue."

"You profess it to be merely bad luck, Captain?" Lelayn challenged.

Jherek chose to walk away, not believing the Amnian merchant could waver between being so generous, then turning so petty. His wounds stung. In truth, some of them hurt badly and a couple needed stitches that Finaren had put in himself. Once he got back to Velen, he knew Madame Litaar would finish healing him properly.

He stood by the mast, watching Yeill. Even in her wet clothes, the merchant's daughter was beautiful. His wounds and the fatigue that always settled in after a battle dulled his senses. He was grabbed roughly from behind before he knew it, and someone slid a knife up under his chin.

"Don't you try anything," a gruff voice commanded. "Or I'll slit you from wind to water."

Jherek froze, the knife biting lightly into his flesh. He smelled the spice and perfume that covered the

man holding him, knowing at once that he was one of the Amnian party. His guess that the man was one of the sell-swords employed by the Amnians was proven correct when he saw the man's bracer with the house crest on it.

Finaren turned toward them, his bearded face brimming with anger. "What in the nine hells do you think you're doing?" His voice cracked with authority, and every sailor within hearing distance turned at once, their hands upon their swords and daggers.

"Our being attacked was no mere bad luck," the Amnian sellsword stated angrily. "We were set up, Merchant Lelayn, and here's the evidence of it."

Jherek realized for the first time that he'd been walking around without his shirt. That fact was brought home to him even more when another Amnian sellsword grabbed his left arm and twisted it viciously. The sellsword held a torch close to reveal the colorful tattoo inside Jherek's left bicep.

The tattoo featured a flaming skull wearing a mask of chains leaving only the eyes and fanged mouth unbound. It didn't look like anything human. It wasn't supposed to. It was part of the legacy left him by his father.

"Do you recognize this mark, Merchant Lelayn?" the sellsword asked.

"Falkane's claiming mark," the merchant spat. "There's a price on the head of any pirate from Falkane's ship." He turned back to Finaren. "Maybe you'd like to explain how you came to get one of the bloodiest pirates of the Sea of Swords aboard your ship ... as part of your crew."

Jherek's breath tightened in his throat. He glanced around at *Butterfly's* crew, seeing the surprised looks on their faces. None of them had known. It had been his secret, his and Finaren's. Now the secret was out and very likely to get him killed. His bad luck still claimed him, leaving him no one to turn to. The knife at his throat didn't waver.

IV

30 Ches, the Year of the Gauntlet (40 days earlier)

Laaqueel glided through the dark waters outside Waterdeep Harbor, staying in the shadow of the pentekonter on the surface above her and mentally preparing herself for the coming battle. She swam just under the ship, between the oars that swept the water on either side of it. Her pale skin made her stand out in the darkness, not blending in like her fellow sahuagin did or even a sea elf would. Below her, the ocean floor looked dark and was kept clean of debris. She knew the mermen who lived in the waters around Waterdeep helped keep the area orderly. They were also one of the major threats to the subterfuge they were attempting.

The unaccustomed cold of the northern waters chilled her. This early in the year, chunks of ice still floated whole through the Sea of Swords, frozen islands reminding her of how far from home she'd swam.

The cold numbed her body, but her mind ran unfettered by discomfort. Her thoughts were filled with grim doubts and she murmured a constant prayer to Sekolah that they might be granted success.

The pentekonter was sixty feet long and stood tall in the water. It had a rounded prow that made it look sluggish, but whether pushed by wind or pulled by oars, it moved quickly for a surface dweller's craft. Two banks of oars, one of them below the raised deck, allowed even greater speed when necessary. Hollow outriggers helped the ship maintain stability, and promoted the use of the second bank of oars.

Big as it was, the ship provided plenty of cover for the malenti and the dozen or so sahuagin that had needed to immerse themselves in the life-giving sea again for a short time during their voyage. Less than two hundred yards away, her sensitive vision picked up the underwater torches marking the boundaries of Deepwater Isle. Along with the warships that patrolled the nearby waters, it was Waterdeep's first line of defense.

In all of her life, she'd never been this close to the city. Waterdeep was called the City of Splendors, and from her vigil aboard the pentekonter, she knew the name was well deserved.

Some of the tall buildings in the different wards were impressive. They jutted up from the cityscape, possessing color and character that were unique. Those in the Castle Ward, especially Waterdeep Castle, were works of art even to her eyes. The daring plunge from the cliffs to the sea in the North Ward had taken her breath away even seeing the area from afar. Sahuagin villages were built close to the ocean floor, depending on tunnels to link them. In the water, heights only gave an enemy more area to attack. Gravity wasn't as forceful in the ocean as it was in the air.

At another time she thought she might have liked to walk along the winding and hilly streets of the city just to see what was there. It was a city worth exploring-after the surface dwellers had been driven from it.

That was what Iakhovas intended to do this very night.

She was certain that Iakhovas wasn't telling all he knew, or revealing all that he wanted in tonight's raid. He never did. Waterdeep had over one hundred thousand people in the city, more than four times the forces Iakhovas had gathered for the attack.

Thanks to the humans Iakhovas and his other malenti spies had paid off over the last three years in preparing for tonight, they had good maps of the city. Iakhovas had made certain of that. Even now thinking of him and knowing how he schemed and sacrificed her people made the obsidian quill lodged next to her heart grow too hot to be comfortable. Over the years of their relationship, she'd learned the quill allowed him to control her through pain and kept him informed on when she told truth or falsehood. Never a day had gone by that she didn't know it was there.

She breathed in through her mouth, taking the water and pushing it through her gills, flushing her system. For fifteen years, since that night in the underground tomb in the Shining Sea, she'd served him, watching him grow and take the power she'd wanted and was prevented from having by an accident of birth.

Still, there had been changes that benefited her. She was now High Priestess in her village. Iakhovas had made himself one of the nine princes, and that was only during the times he deigned to stay with the sahuagin. There were plenty of absences he had that were never explained. Nor was she in a position to demand answers, though at times she sorely wanted to.

"Most favored one," a nearby sahuagin called to her.

"Yes," she asked.

The sahuagin male bowed his head in deference and said, "Prince Iakhovas requests that you join him."

She dismissed him with a wave of her hand then swam toward the opening in the bottom of the ship above her. The sahuagin had captured the vessel in the Moonshae Isles almost two years ago then quietly sunk it so the repairs Iakhovas wanted could be done. One of those changes had been the construction of a water well amidships that allowed sahuagin entry to the ocean. They could stay out of water for four hours at a time, but immersion for an equal amount of time was required before they were back at full strength.

Swimming through the well, Laaqueel continued on through the submerged lower compartment where sahuagin rowers worked the massive oars to propel the craft. They all looked at her, respect in their silvery eyes. The pentekonter's outriggers were attached to the hull and had been specially modified to compensate for the hole in the ship's hull, letting the ship ride lower in the water.

Grabbing the ladder leading up to the ship's second level, Laaqueel pulled herself from the water, automatically feeling the dryness in the air even at sea level, and the extra weight from sheer gravity. She hated being out of the water, resonating with the fear that never quite left her no matter how much experience she had with being on the surface.

Her breath tightened as it ran through her gills. Breathing air was hard work, and she always remained conscious of having to inhale and exhale. In addition, her movements were no longer as fluid as they were in the water. She felt heavier on the surface. She was always acutely aware that her lateral lines no longer sent information to her. Water dripped from her as she walked, draining from her hair and body, and the sahuagin harness she wore.

Thirty men occupied the ship's upper hold. Short and thin, dressed in common clothing and carrying short swords, they didn't look threatening, but the sewer stench that clung to them made everyone give them a wide berth. All of them furtively stared after her with lust because of her near-nudity.

She ignored their interest. Choosing to dress as a sahuagin had been her choice, and she wasn't going to be bothered by them. They knew their place in the forces of Prince Iakhovas, and they knew their place around her after she'd killed the first one who'd touched her.

Iakhovas had assembled these men even as he had the four ships that made up their invasion force. All of them suffered from the curse of lycanthropy, changing forms between human and rat as easily as a sahuagin might strap on another harness.

Laaqueel would rather have taken the whole shipload of wererats to the bottom of the Sea of Swords and drowned them. She went up the stairs leading out of the hold onto the deck. Giving her sight a moment to adjust to the surface conditions, she turned and found Iakhovas standing in the prow.

"Laaqueel," he called out to her in that strong, whispering voice. He stood with his arms folded over

his chest, staring out over the port city. He sensed her without facing her.

"I'm here, exalted one," she said.

"Of course you are." Iakhovas turned to her, a smile on his hard face.

He'd grown since she'd found him those years ago. In fifteen years, he'd grown stronger as he found those things that had been lost to him. She accompanied him on some of those forays, following him to hidden places in the sea where they found objects that still remained mysterious to her.

One of the first had been a circlet that gave him control of some sea creatures, giving him the power to communicate and order them about. He'd taken that from some of the mermen who'd relocated to Waterdeep and now lived in underwater caves off Waterdeep Isle. Another had been the bloodstone globe that allowed him to control weather that Laaqueel had to assassinate a Calishite gem merchant for when he raised his price to something more than she could afford. She'd narrowly escaped with her life during that mission.

Iakhovas had never taken her into his confidence, though, never explained himself to her. Nor did he tell her much of the objects he had collected. Later, he'd employed groups that went out to retrieve the objects for him, using any who could be bought or bribed, including the morkoth who were lifelong enemies of the sahuagin. He still did.

One group of pirates worked in the Sea of Fallen Stars for him, gathering objects as well as information. When they had an object, they sent it through a dimensional door that connected the pirate's ship to the sahuagin palace. With those objects in his possession, Iakhovas had grown more powerful, and he'd grown physically. At first, Laaqueel hadn't been certain of the correlation, but she was certain now. Though she'd tried to spy on him, she couldn't. She even thought he'd been leading her on at times, letting her almost see, tantalizing her with his secrets only to take them away at the last moment.

At present he was head and shoulders taller than Laaqueel, and he no longer looked emaciated. His body had filled out, becoming broad and supple. The runic tattoos spread out to fill the extra skin, but still hadn't become any more legible to her. He wore a black silk blouse and black breeches with silver buckles and chains over black boots. A sea-green cloak hung from his shoulders to his ankles, more an affectation than any real comfort from the cool breezes swirling through the port city.

Laaqueel stopped in front of him and waited.

Only running lanterns glowed on board the pentekonter, enough to obey the Waterdhavian harbor rules. Little of the deck was occupied, but the sailors were more of the wererats Iakhovas had involved in the raid.

The weak light traced patterns across Iakhovas's face. He would have been handsome by human standards, Laaqueel knew, even with the scars that tracked his features. No matter what magic he'd worked over the past fifteen years to rebuild himself, he hadn't been able to remove those scars. He'd grown a short beard and mustache that covered some of them. A sea-green patch that matched his cloak covered his empty eye socket. Even his hair had grown, filling in the patchy areas and dropping past his shoulders now, turned coal black.

"How may I aid you, exalted one?" she asked.

"Why, little malenti, I merely wanted you to join me at the beginning of our triumph over the surface dwellers," he stated. He shifted, lithe as a dancer on his feet in spite of the moving deck. "You have your own desires for power, though it's remained somewhat elusive for you in spite of the fact I've raised your station in life and among your own people. I've recognized you for your worth though they didn't. For all of your years of support, you deserve that." He waved a hand at the port city, then clasped it into a fist. "I would offer you a kingdom, little malenti, if I ever cared enough to share."

Laaqueel knew him well enough to know that was the real reason. Iakhovas wanted an audience for his conquest—an audience who knew all of the truths, or at least knew more of the truths than the sahuagin tribes who'd listened to him did. He loved the complexities of his own plotting, and the layers of subterfuge he manipulated seemingly so easily, loved the way his whispering voice seemed to have a hypnotic effect on those who listened. He had the power to advance his ideas and make others believe they'd thought of them.

"Gaze upon Waterdeep, little malenti, which the surface dwellers descry and proclaim as the crown jewel of all Faerun," Iakhovas said. "I have been told that people journey to this place, expecting to enjoy pleasures they don't have at home, and feel safe and secure in their rented beds." He smiled, and the expression was filled with evil. "Ah, but tonight, tonight we strip that from them, never more to return, as we shatter the spine of her navy."

The Waterdhavian Naval Harbor lay farther to the north, managing two water gates of its own. The

navy was one of the chief concerns the malenti had about the night's raid. The Waterdhavian Navy had always defended the shores of the city well, and of course there were the mermen.

"We've not gotten the bulk of our forces past the harbor gate yet," she reminded.

Despite the power he held over her and the potential he offered, she couldn't always simply agree with him. He was no true sahuagin, even though the others believed he was. In the intervening years, she'd come to understand why the sahuagin of her own tribe hadn't readily accepted her even after Baron Huaanton had named her as a protected ward after her birth. Her own exterior was an accident of birth. Iakhovas only masqueraded as a sahuagin. In her heart, she was sahuagin.

She'd helped him manage that masquerade only through coercion, and even now it didn't set well with her. After she'd found him, he'd made her spend two years with him in the Veemeeros where she'd found him, teaching him about Faerun. Everything seemed new to him, but he was careful not to reveal anything about his own origins. Even Laaqueel's spy training hadn't helped her gather information about him.

Once they'd returned to her village, he'd used his powers to turn himself into a sahuagin hatchling, and she'd introduced him into a hatchling area. He'd maintained his own development in the village, but had kept contact with Laaqueel. She had named him in the brief ceremony after the surviving hatchlings were introduced into the tribe, giving him his own name at his request, though it wasn't a sahuagin name. Everyone in the village had believed it was because she was malenti, wanting to flaunt her difference, but Baron Huaanton had allowed the name to stand.

Now, though, Baron Huaanton was King Huaanton and Iakhovas, though only age thirteen in the sahuagin years, was a prince. Normally it took almost three hundred years to attain such a rank by serving the community and taking advantage of events that transpired, but he had used his magic and curried favor with Huaanton by maneuvering a duel with Huaanton's senior and killing the last prince in battle. Unable to take the position himself because of the sahuagin code regarding such advances, Huaanton had become prince. Huaanton had also realized how dangerous Iakhovas was for the first time and had stood behind Iakhovas's bid for the baronial vacancy. None of the other chieftains had tried to challenge his right to do that. When Huaanton had slain the last king and taken over the position, he'd promoted Iakhovas again. Laaqueel had never discovered if it was because Huaanton feared Iakhovas, or if the sorcerer had helped place Huaanton on the throne.

"Oh, little malenti, do you have such a small faith?" he asked.

"No," she admitted, choosing not to react to the insult. Her faith resided where it always had: with Sekolah. She had received no sign that she wasn't doing exactly as the Great Shark wanted her to, "but the forces arrayed against us are formidable."

He turned and gazed again out across the harbor. "Those forces are only formidable when pitted against a lesser opponent. Make no mistake, little malenti, I'm not that and never have been." He smiled, oozing confidence. "No one these days has ever seen anything like me. Even in my own day, no one was like me."

"But to take Waterdeep ..." Laaqueel said.

"Stand corrected, little malenti, we're not *taking* Waterdeep," Iakhovas said. "We're presenting the surface world their options, throwing down the gauntlet so to speak. The surface dwellers need to be put on notice that they're living near these waters only on my sufferance. I will take back that which is rightfully mine no matter how many of them have to perish." He touched the patch covering his empty socket unconsciously. "I will be made whole again, and I will reclaim my proper station as the oceans' master."

"If we can't take the city, why send all these sahuagin to their deaths?" she asked.

"More humans will die this night than sahuagin," he told her. "You have my promise on that."

The way that he always referred to the humans as their species, and a despised one at that, let Laaqueel know he didn't consider himself one of them. For awhile she'd thought he might be of elven blood, but he had the gills and webbed hands and feet of a sea elf and used magic as easily as a sahuagin spilled blood. The accursed sea elves knew no magic except for that granted to their priests and priestesses.

He offered no clue as to what he truly was.

His power of illusion was incredible, steeping him in layers of deceit and trickery. She wasn't certain if she'd ever seen the true being she knew as Iakhovas. The sahuagin recognized him as a fellow being, and the wererats and other humanoids saw him as one of their own, even when they were all standing in the same place, and no one questioned it.

"Why should any sahuagin die if it's not necessary?" she asked.

"Because, little malenti, I have need of their deaths, and they must prove their fealty to me if I'm to champion their cause in this world." Iakhovas surveyed the nearing warning lights of Waterdeep Harbor.

Anchored buoys clanged in the distance near Deepwater Isle, warning of the shallows there. "Sacrifices must be made. As I've learned, this is the last day in Ches, a time of holidays in Deepwater."

Laaqueel had learned that even as Iakhovas had. The Waterdhavians called the festival Fleetswake. During that time the mariners and the city gave homage to Umberlee, the dread sea goddess. Umberlee's Cache lay in the belly of the sloping bowl of Deepwater Harbor on the other side of Darkwater Isle. In years past, offerings to Umber-lee had been dropped on the harbor floor, then mermaid shamans had broken that floor open to the great cavern system below that no one had ever mapped out. Every now and again, the malenti spotted the magical beam of the lighthouse near Umberlee's Cache skate below the dark waters ahead of them. It was used to guide the merfolk that were part of Waterdeep's defense hierarchy.

"The promise and bounty of Fleetswake convokes ships from over all Faerun, giving the surface dwellers a dream of shared peace and prosperity," Iakhovas went on. "Traders, warriors, craftsmen, bards, and thieves, all will be represented on those cobblestone streets. There will be many in Waterdeep to tell the tale of the battle this night. They will spread that tale to the corners of all Toril, their wagging tongues making the story larger and more intense as it is passed along."

"The surface dwellers could be incited to hunt the sahuagin down."

Iakhovas laughed loudly. "Little malenti, let them come. Let them rise above their cowardice, strap their weapons about their loins, and sail out into these seas that I have marked as mine. If they sail out into the sea after us, they sail only to their deaths. In fact, it will only help my cause if part of this war is played out in our element. We can bare our teeth and our claws, and show them the foolishness of any sort of resistance. It will also serve to threaten the other sahuagin tribes who haven't seen fit to join our effort."

"The surface dwellers could unite."

Iakhovas shook his head. "Not according to everything I've studied about these jealous cultures," he told her. "These nations of surface dwellers have long histories of bitter feuds and rivalry over trade agreements, religion, and politics. What countries can hope to survive if they follow a path laden with those traps and snares? No, even should they endeavor to agree on a common enemy, we shall own the seas. In their limited intelligence and greed, the surface dwellers may have learned to cross the oceans, but they'll never master them, never the way I have."

Laaqueel had other doubts that she almost voiced. She didn't, though, since she knew Iakhovas would counter each of them with an argument of his own.

"Ready yourself, little malenti," Iakhovas ordered, pointing at the approaching small lateen-sailed galley bearing Waterdhavian colors. The galleys supported the navy rakers that provided protection for the harbor.

The malenti moved forward, standing *at* her master's side and holding her trident at the ready. She carried a sword belted at her waist. She didn't much care for the weapon, but she'd been trained to use it.

"Ahoy, *Drifting Eel*," a mariner wearing the uniform of the Waterdeep Guard called out. A dozen other men stood in the galley's prow, armed with heavy crossbows and swords. The crew aboard her matched speeds with the pentekonter easily, pulling alongside and remaining only a few yards out from the bigger ship's oars.

"Ahoy," Iakhovas called back.

"State your name, home port, and business within Waterdeep Harbor," the guard ordered, waving men into action who shined bulls-eye lanterns over the pentekonter.

"I stand before you, birth-named Iakhovas, captain of *Drifting Eel*. As for a home port, we hail from Snowdown, in the Moonshaes. Why we're here? Why, man, it's Fleetswake, a time of revel and a time of profit for a man who's got coin to be spent and a cargo worth buying. I'd not forsake Waterdeep's hospitality at this time for anything."

The guard smiled and looked tired. "You're getting here late," he said.

"Aye," Iakhovas replied, "and had the parsimonious storm we had the ill-favor to encounter and embrace two days ago had been more inclined than I, I'd not be here at all."

"How much damage did you take on?" the guard asked. A frown creased his face. "I don't want any lagging ships standing in the way of the shipping lanes. If you're not all together, you can moor up outside the harbor and pay passage on some of the service boats to get inside the city."

"Trust me," Iakhovas answered. "Should anything go wrong with this vessel, you'll be the first to know. I've seen to the repairs, and now I'm ready to make back the losses I've incurred."

The harbor guard shined his lantern at the pentekonter's water line. "You're riding low, Cap'n Iakhovas."

Even the modified outriggers hadn't been able to compensate for the ship's increased draw made

necessary to keep the sahuagin rowers aboard underwater. Laaqueel had hoped it wouldn't be as apparent when they arrived at night, but the surface dwellers knew their vessels.

"My dear fellow, the sheer amount of cargo we're carrying is justification enough to force us to sit low in the water," Iakhovas replied.

"You must have brought a lot."

"Everything we found we were able to pack into the hold."

"I'm Civilar Noth of the Waterdeep Guard," the man said. "Prepare to be boarded and present your manifests."

Iakhovas called out the order to lower the rope ladder. One of the wererats kicked it and sent the rope ladder bundle spilling down the side of the pentekonter. The bottom several rungs landed in the water with a flat splat.

The civilar and two of his people swarmed up the ladder with practiced ease. Laaqueel noted that they kept their hands on the hilts of their short swords, and something magical clung to one or more of them. Her priestess training had made her sensitive to magic auras. She considered invoking the gifts given to her from Sekolah but didn't. The spells the Shark God had given her needed to be held for a later time.

Iakhovas's magic seemed to know no bounds, though. The malenti remembered in the beginning, after she'd found him, that his powers had been so scarce she'd nearly escaped him half a dozen times. Now he commanded large amounts of magic easily, and that seemed to grow with each item he recovered.

The glamour Iakhovas had cast over the pentekonter held, making *Drifting Eel* look like a normal ship with a normal crew.

The civilar crossed the deck and took out the blank sheet of paper Iakhovas handed him. "Everything here's satisfactory," he declared after a moment. "I'd like to take a look at the hold."

"Of course." Iakhovas raised his one-eyed gaze to Laaqueel. "My associate will show you the way, if you please."

Laaqueel nodded, but remained silent. She didn't know if Iakhovas's spell rendered her as a male or female and she didn't want her voice to betray it, if that was possible. The sorcerer's abilities had never failed. She led the Waterdhavian Guardsmen down into the hold, readying her own spells if she needed them.

If the civilar and his entourage noticed her duck away from the lantern's bright light when they brought it close, they didn't give any indication. She paused at the bottom of the hold, looking out over the sahuagin still working at the oars. They kept up the cadence, seated in the murky water that lapped over their heads.

The civilar and his companions halted on the steps, held back by the illusion Iakhovas maintained over the pentekonter. "You people worked hard to get all these things in here," he said appreciatively.

Laaqueel only gave him a slight nod, not having a clue what the man thought he saw.

"May Tymora smile on you and bless you with her favors," the civilar said. He turned and went back up the steps.

"I presume all below decks was found to be in good standing?" Iakhovas asked when they walked back on deck.

"It was fine," the civilar said. "I'll get you clear of the East Torch Tower gate."

Iakhovas glanced at the man, fixing his single eye upon him and making a gesture with two fingers. "You mean the Stormhaven Island gate."

"Of course I do," the civilar responded.

"Passage for all four ships," Iakhovas went on.

"Aye. Passage for all four ships."

"And you'll stay with us to make sure we get through."

"I'll stay with you," the civilar said. "In the last few hours our orders were to take everyone through the East Torch Tower gate except under special circumstances."

"Good," Iakhovas said in a quiet, low voice. "Signal your men and secure passage for us."

The civilar took two torches from a waterproof pouch on his back. They reeked of oil. He struck a flint and the sparks leaped onto the first torch, catching immediately. He lit the second torch with the first.

Laaqueel took an involuntary step back when the combined torches blazed up. The acrid smoke dried the back of her throat and irritated her gills. Smoke made breathing in the open air even less tolerable.

Waving the torches in a brief pattern, the civilar stepped back. "You can proceed, my lord."

Laaqueel didn't miss the address. She could tell from Iakhovas's cruel smile that she wasn't supposed to.

None of the other members of the Guard said anything, just stood at military attention.

"Puppets," Iakhovas stated. "They say what I want and hear only what I want them to, and never a thought enters their heads unless I place it there myself."

The wererat crew milled on the deck as *Drifting Eel's* pilot brought them around to the Stormhaven Island gate. The gate was strategically located for Iakhovas's plan. The Waterdhavian Naval Harbor lay immediately to the northwest of the outer gate. Once the outer gate was taken down, the full thrust of the waiting attack would begin. By that time the sahuagin warrior groups circling Waterdeep by way of the mud flats to the north would attack the West Gate and split the city's forces.

North of the naval harbor, the great, bald craggy mountain where Waterdeep Castle had been built stood overlooking the entire city. Lights burned in various places along Piergeiron's Palace, announcing only some of the City Watch secured areas. Closer to the shore along the Dock Ward, the Watching Tower, the Harborwatch Tower, and Smuggler's Bane Tower all looked out over the Great Harbor. A grim fortification occupied the right side of Stormhaven Island gate.

Despite the iron control she'd developed as a sahuagin, a spy, a priestess, and as the only one who knew more of Iakhovas's secrets than anyone else, Laaqueel's stomach fluttered as she watched the huge metal nets that served as gates lower out of their way to the sea bed below. When they were up, getting a ship through was almost impossible.

Surface dwellers occupied the fortifications and towers above the harbor waters. Mermen, mermaids, and sea elves kept patrol in the depths. The proof of the attack, Laaqueel knew, would be learned in the next handful of minutes.

"It's time, little malenti," Iakhovas said, "assume command of your forces and insure that these gates remain open so that the rest of our *navy* will be able to join us. Do not fail me."

She nodded, her eyes meeting his solitary gaze. "I won't."

The Waterdhavian Guard members gave no notice of having overheard the conversation.

Laaqueel left the deck and went down the stairs. The sahuagin warriors gathered in the hold looked up at her expectantly. "It's time. No one lives. Only our enemies are around us."

"We are ready to slay in the name of Great Sekolah, most favored one," a four-armed chieftain roared. "Meat is meat. Our enemies will regret meeting We Who Eat."

The malenti remembered his name as Bouundaar, an aggressive male who'd worked his way up in rank quickly. The overly aggressive ones always did under Iakhovas's watchful eye. "Three teams, Chieftain Bouundaar, quickly."

"It has already been done, most favored one."

"Then come. You and your team are with me. The others go to attack the defenses at the bottom of the harbor and the fortification to the east."

"It shall be as you say, most favored one."

Laaqueel dived into the cold water without another word, and the battle for Waterdeep Harbor began.

V

11 Mirtul, the Year of the Gauntlet

The dream overtook Jherек while he lay in *Butterfly's* brig, filling him with the same cold dread that all memories of his father did when they haunted his sleep.

He swam in the blue-green of a sea. He didn't know which sea it was, nor did he care. He was free. He'd spent days in the brig at the insistence of the Amnian merchant.

He took joy in the feel of the warmth of the sea against his skin, at the currents that brushed against him. He knew at once it was a dream because he could breathe underwater. Looking up, he couldn't see the surface, and looking down he found a sea bed scattered with coral and fish.

He swam for a time, racing fish and finding that he was faster than them. Exuberant, he flashed through the water, diving and twisting and rolling through the ocean in great loops.

Only a short time later, he spotted the largest clam he'd ever seen. It was ten feet across, nearly that deep, and possessed a ridged alabaster shell. Curiosity gripped him and he was drawn to it. As he watched, it started to slowly open.

Jherек floated in the water, mesmerized by what was happening. Even before the clam was halfway open, he spotted the woman inside.

She was beautiful, close to his age, and had platinum blond hair that framed a nut-brown complexion. Since she wasn't dressed, he could see all her generous curves and womanly gifts.

Jherek was embarrassed, but somehow he felt it was right to simply gaze at her.

She smiled at him and waved. "Jherek," she cooed.

He heard his name plainly. Even his unconscious mind knew it was a dream, but he couldn't ignore that siren call. He swam down to her, realizing that she was a mermaid, her lower body that of a fish, all sheathed in iridescent green scales.

Instead of being appalled, he found her nature made her even more attractive to him. He stopped just short of her, gazing in wonder as she sat on the pink bed of the clam.

She reached out to him, laying her palm along the side of his face. Her touch was warm, soft. A string of shaped fire coral figurines lay between her breasts.

"Lady," he said in a thick voice.

"*Shhhh*," she admonished him, "I'm here to talk to you, to warn you."

"Warn me of what?" Jherek asked. "I've already been locked in *Butterfly's* brig. When I get back home, I'll probably be hanged in the dockyards."

"No," she told him. "That's not going to happen. You've made friends, Jherek, and they'll stand you in good stead. You must not lose heart or hope. Things have been given to you, but you must seek out the key that opens the understanding you need."

He shook his head. "No. This is only a dream. Something my mind has culled from one of Malorrie's romantic stories."

"Dear, sweet Jherek," she rebuked softly, "so much doubt."

He felt guilty at her tone. "Aye," he agreed, "but I've got reasons."

"You'll understand in time," she assured him. "You've been given the burdens you carry only so that you may become who you should be. Running water shapes stone but it doesn't do so overnight."

"I don't understand."

"You will. You must trust that."

The look she gave him drew the promise, "I'll try."

Her face took on a more somber look. "Know, too, that there are those who would stop you in your journey," she said. "They fear you, fear what you will become, and with good cause because your life will touch the lives of many. I came to you in this dream so that you may take heart in this time of despair. There is a darkness out there, greater than any darkness you've known. It has already moved against part of the world you know, and it will be your crucible. Should you live, understanding and more will be yours."

"And should I die, lady?"

She looked at him, gave him a small smile, and said simply, "Don't."

Jherek wanted to talk to her further, to explain things as he saw them and to tell her of the ill fortune that had been his birthright, but she looked away from him. Cold horror now shaped her features.

He looked up instinctively, his attention drawn to whatever she saw.

At first, it was only a dim shape lost in the horizonless vast of the sea, then it came closer with astonishing speed. He realized it was a shark when it was still a distance away, recognizing the dorsal fins. He'd dreamed of sahuagin and sharks a lot since the recent attack on *Butterfly*. Reaching down to where he normally carried his shin knife, he found only bare skin. He had no weapons.

He reached for the girl. "Come, lady," he said, "while there is yet time."

She resisted, pulling against him, and said, "No, Jherek. This is not a thing that can be fled from. This is something that you must face."

He grabbed her wrist, desperately wanting to pull her to the sea bed below. The great shark was bigger than he'd thought, swelling into sight. Fear took him then when he saw that it was thirty, forty, or more feet in length.

Its skin was a stained gray, like ivory that had been rubbed with charcoal, the black coloring worked into the veins and scratches. When it came closer, he saw that the veins and scratches were tattooed runes and old scars. One eye was liquid black, malignant, magnetic. The other was only a puckered hole, dark with the hollow and the scarring around it.

Without warning, the girl slipped through Jherek's fingers. The clam closed over her again, a fort protecting her from the approaching dreadnought.

Before Jherek could move, the shark was on him. It opened its fanged mouth and swallowed him whole. Trapped in the shark's teeth, he discovered whatever ability had let him breathe underwater was now gone.

Death came for him.

* * * * *

Jherek fingered the scabbed and itching cut along his throat, remembering the Amman sellsword's blade from three days ago. Nightmares had continued to plague him the previous nights, and he knew there'd be no relief tonight either. They'd put in at Athkatla two nights before, then made the journey on into Velen.

He sat at a back table in the Figureheadless Tavern and looked out the dirty window at the eastern dock walk over the waves lapping up onto the beaches of Velen. His stomach knotted and clenched repeatedly as he considered all his ill luck of the past few days.

It would have been better, he thought dismally, if Captain Finaren had let the sellsword slit his throat that day. *Butterfly's* captain had talked with the Amnian merchants, explaining that Jherek had never been a true part of Falkane's crew aboard *Bunyip*, only a captured youth pressed into service on the pirate vessel who'd managed to escape with his life.

Lelayn had reluctantly accepted the story. There was no proof to the reports that Captain Falkane was in league with the sahuagin, but the Amnian merchant had demanded that Jherek be held in the ship's brig. Though Finaren hadn't been happy about complying with the order, the brig was where the young sailor had found himself.

Jherek had lain on the hard bed with no light to read his books and no company. The ship's crew had been busy with repairs, and probably no one wanted to speak with him now anyway. With nothing to occupy his hands or mind, the darkness that always waited to consume his soul had riven him, tearing at him with the gale fury of a summer squall and as persistent as the seasonal rains. His grip on the world around him had come loose, freeing many of the old demons that he'd walled away with Madame Litaar's and Malorrie's help and guidance. He hadn't forgotten the old fears that lived with him, but he had been surprised at how fierce they seemed now. Where the nightmares had come from was no mystery, but the one with the shark continued to gnaw at him.

Even Captain Finaren hadn't come to see him. The Amnian sellswords had rotated at guard duty over the brig as well on Lelayn's orders, insuring that Jherek hadn't been working with anyone else aboard *Butterfly*.

He hadn't seen Yeill again either, and he'd had mixed feelings about that, which surprised him. Both father and daughter had conveniently forgotten that he'd risked his life to save her's and he couldn't bring himself to remind them of it. That kind of chest-thumping behavior didn't sit well with him.

After the Amnian trading party had been unloaded in Athkatla, Finaren had released him from the ship's brig. The captain had apologized, saying he'd had no choice in the matter. Jherek had accepted the declaration stoically, with not a word said other than thanks for releasing him. Finaren had also ordered the crew not to be asking a lot of questions. He went on to tell them that all of them had stories and secrets they'd rather not have out in public without a couple drafts of mead to cushion the experience.

Finaren went on again to tell them that Jherek had never been a pirate, only someone captured by Falkane's vicious crew. That had been a bald-faced lie, though, and Jherek knew they both were aware of it.

Rather than face the crew, the young sailor had retreated to the crow's nest, pulling extra duty there, and spending the rest of his time mending nets and sleeping out on the deck in a hammock. No one talked to anyone mending nets. Finaren had a standing rule aboard *Butterfly* that men who could talk to someone mending nets could join in. A wagging tongue didn't stop fingers from working.

Jherek had wanted things to heal aboard *Butterfly*. He also knew that he'd have to take steps to make sure that happened, but he couldn't. That tattoo upon his arm marked him as different from those men in these waters. Falkane and his men had reputations as being the fiercest, blood-thirstiest pirates in the Sea of Swords, and they had some of the largest bounties offered for them. Rumor had it that even other pirates of the Nelanther feared Falkane and *Bunyip's* crew.

After Athkatla was behind them and the wind filled *Butterfly's* sails again, Jherek had hoped that things would return to normal aboard the cog. When they didn't, he was saddened but not surprised. Bad luck ran in his blood, showing in that flaming skull tattoo. Just before they'd docked at Velen, Finaren had told him not to help with the loading and with the rigging and to meet him at the Figureheadless Tavern later.

Finaren's choice of meeting places fit Jherek's mood. The tavern was a dive, queen among the cheap diversions that took the coppers and silvers from a working sailor's purse. He knew that Finaren had been

aware of the tension among the crew. Even Hagagne had been quieter than normal, and he'd mentioned nothing more about having Jherek read to him.

The young sailor sat at a back table and nursed a mug of hot tea. He didn't really favor the tea, but he didn't drink mead or the liquors the tavern served. The barkeep kept watch on him. The Figureheadless was a place where pirates met, and where honest work on the sea was discussed at a table where a murder might have been plotted only moments ago.

The walls held no decor except stains from drink, oily hair, and blood. Sawdust covered the heavy walkways and looked like it should have been changed days ago. The tavern's three serving girls had already been by and offered themselves-for a price. He'd politely declined, and his thoughts had wandered inadvertently back to Yeill, wondering how someone so beautiful could look at life the way she did. For the tavern girls, it was just another means to make a couple silvers, and though he couldn't condone it, he at least did understand.

How was it that having wealth and not having wealth so often put the people who had and didn't have it in the same camp? he wondered. He realized it wasn't so much like a camp as it was like the table in front of him. People had to fill the seats on both sides, one giving and the other taking, each in turn, to fulfill the business between them.

In its basest terms, he supposed it was business, like Finaren sitting across from merchants who needed goods shipped to and fro.

It was still no way to live life. Coins were a means, not tools of war and not some counting system in a game. What mattered about life was the way a man lived it.

There were those, he knew, who would never get the chance to live a decent life at all no matter what was in their hearts. He felt immediately guilty at that, thinking of the time Madame Litaar and Malorrie had spent with him these past years. Closing his eyes, he lowered his head and folded his hands, praying to Ilmater that he have the strength not to find fault with others for his own troubles and that he wouldn't slight what he had been given.

When he blinked his eyes open, he found Finaren standing there. The captain had his hat in his hands as he waited quietly.

"I didn't mean to intrude on your prayers, lad," the older man said in his deep voice.

Jherek pushed himself from his chair and turned up a hand to offer the seat across from him. "You're not intruding, sir."

"I'm not one to get between a man and his god," Finaren said, easing himself into the chair.

Jherek gave him a small smile and took his own seat. "Did you get the repairs set up for *Butterfly*!"

"Aye, and rogues that they are, they're going to charge a man an arm and a leg to have them done." Finaren waved to one of the serving girls and called, "Wench, you've got a restless man here dying of thirst. Bring me a bottle of your harshest who-hit-Nate and be damned quick about it."

Jherek was surprised at how demanding the captain was. As rough and prickly as he was at sea, he remained the epitome of good manners around children and women.

Finaren looked at him, then sighed. His shoulders slumped. "Being hard on the lass, aren't I?"

The young sailor shrugged, feeling even more nervous than he had when Finaren first sat down. The captain could bluster and yell louder than any man Jherek had ever known, but only in its proper time and place.

"I am and I know it, lad," the captain added. "There's no excuse. Rest assured that she'll see a healthy stipend for any troubles I might offer."

The serving girl brought a bottle and thick glass and put them before Finaren.

The captain thanked her and pulled the cork from the bottle. "Care for a libation, lad? Trust me, I think we're both going to need it."

Jherek's stomach flip-flopped, and he had to force the words out. He'd often seen Finaren take a drink and knew the man kept a ship's keg tapped, but he'd never seen the captain in a drunken stupor. He noticed for the first time the stink of liquor already on Finaren's breath and said, "No, thank you."

Finaren filled the glass in front of him and put the bottle away unstoppered. "Me, I'm going to get royally pissed back at *Butterfly*, lad." He drained off half the contents of the glass, then had a coughing fit that ended with, "I've damn sure earned it."

Jherek said nothing, already not liking the turn the conversation was taking.

"Valkur's brass buttons, lad, would that you were not who you are." Finaren met his level gaze, and Jherek saw the pain in the older man's eyes.

"But I am," Jherek whispered, barely able to get the words out.

"It's one thing for me to tell my crew a white lie for a good reason," Finaren said.

"I never asked that," Jherek said.

"I know that, lad. Hell, I'm not blaming you for me putting me own head in a noose on that one. You came to me and told me about that tattoo, same as you told Shipwright Makim who you were, and it was my choice not to tell the crew about it."

Jherek remembered that decision. Even though Finaren had made the choice, he'd hated living that lie around men who on occasion trusted him with their lives.

"They wouldn't have stood for it," Finaren said. "Me, I don't know how I'd agreed to let you ship with me."

Jherek opened his mouth to speak, not sure what he was going to say.

"You just shush, lad," the captain cautioned. "I'm here to make my peace, and I'll not have you taking blame on yourself where there's none. I could have done it another way, but I knew there'd be some of them men wouldn't stand for having you aboard. Selune grant me some good fortune here that they never find out who you *truly* are."

Shards of hot tears stung the backs of Jherek's eyes but he wouldn't let them fall. He grew angry at himself, knowing how the conversation was going to end, and frustrated with himself that he could have believed even for a moment that it was going to go any other way.

There was no way to escape his heritage. The flaming skull tattoo marking him as one of Falkane's pirate crew had been magically administered, put on by Falkane himself. Falkane had picked his crew, taking the hardest men a reaver's life could turn out, and he tied them to him for the rest of their lives by the tattoo. Nothing could erase that tattoo once it had been inscribed. Jherek had tried everything. Even before Madame Litaar had attempted to remove it with her magic, he'd even tried to cut it from his flesh, leaving the scars that marked it.

"Lad, one of the most unfair things in life is the fact that a man can't pick the man who fathered him." Finaren's voice took on an unaccustomed thickness. "That day you came to me, why that's as clear in my mind as if it were yesterday. You were only a lad. Hell, you still are, but then you didn't have all the muscle and height you've picked up these past few years. You were just a spindly boy, not even shaving."

Jherek remembered, too. He'd thought Madame Litaar was punishing him for wanting to go to sea and had set his interview up with the crustiest captain that operated out of Velen to discourage him. Finaren's demeanor had been hard to take.

"I thought I'd have you out away from the city a half day's journey and you'd be crying for your ma," Finaren went on. Even though he knew Madame Litaar wasn't Jherek's natural mother, he'd always referred to her that way, "Taut I saw that look in your eyes when you talked about the sea, and I knew it came from the fire in your belly a man always has when he's fallen in love with the briny blue."

"There's no other place I'd rather be," Jherek said.

"I know, lad, and a man with that kind of passion, he's going to find the way of it. That's why, even after you told me who you are, and showed me the tattoo when I doubted, that I let you sail old *Butterfly*. I turned down grown-up men to put you on her deck."

Jherek knew it was true. Malorrie maintained contacts among the docks and had relayed the stories to him.

"Damn your father's eyes, lad," Finaren said, "I can't be taking you with me any more. We've had a good run of luck these past few years. I tell you now, I've never had a finer man crewing aboard *Butterfly*. Umberlee take me now if I'm lying."

"No one said anything to me these last couple of days," Jherek protested, knowing that was just as damning as anything. He just wasn't ready to let go.

"I know, lad, but plenty's been said to me since then. Your birthright has almost split my crew. Some are for you and some are against you. Almost had guts spilling out on ship's decks tonight when the matter was brought up, and I can't have that. I've got to have a crew like the fingers on a hand, always together and always working to stay that way. Otherwise I'm out of business and someone else'll be owning *Butterfly*. That's a thought that makes the blood run cold." Finaren shook his head sorrowfully and finished his glass. "What if they learned the *real* truth of the matter?"

"I don't know," Jherek whispered. Even then, it hurt to get the words out.

"You aren't just a boy who escaped impressment," Finaren stated. "You're Bloody Falkane the Wolf's son!" He paused and made a brief luck sign in Selune's name. "There are those who'd kill you hoping to get back at that man."

Jherek leaned back in his chair, defeated. He looked at the table, suddenly realizing what it meant:

one man giving and one man taking. Only there were no deals he could make and he knew it.

"You hate me, don't you, lad?" Finaren asked gruffly.

"No," Jherek answered honestly.

Finaren looked away for a time, then gradually met his eyes again. "I hope you mean that, lad. It'd break me heart if you did."

Jherek tried to get around the hurt and loss that filled him. During the last few years, other captains had offered him employment after learning how good he was aboard ship and how skilled he was with marine craft as well as weapons. He'd turned them all down, even the offers that came with more wages attached. For a moment he resented the fact that he hadn't accepted them, hadn't left Finaren and gone his own way, but he knew if another captain had discovered the truth about his birth, he'd have been hung from a yardarm if he hadn't had his throat slit first.

"Maybe I can get a ship somewhere else," he said.

Finaren nodded. "Aye, there's a thought, but try somewhere far from the Sword Coast where the flaming skull tattoo won't be as heatedly remembered."

"Could you give me a letter of recommendation?"

"Aye, that I could, lad, but are you sure you want to ask me for one? Someone asks around down here, they're going to find out about this. By morning, this whole town will know and tongues will still be wagging."

Jherek knew he was right.

"Maybe the Sea of Fallen Stars," Finaren suggested. "You find a captain, tell him your da was a fisherman, that you learned the trade from him. They see what you can do, you'll move up smart enough."

Shaking his head, Jherek said, "I can't lie. I didn't lie to you, and I'm not going to lie to someone else. There'll be another captain out there willing to take a chance on me."

Finaren hesitated for a moment, then shook his head sorrowfully. "I hope you're right, lad, but you're going to be looking for one few and far between. You're no stripling boy now. You're almost a man full-grown. Most men will look on you as more of a threat. Valkur's brass buttons, Jherek, how many of them sahuagin did you kill in that battle? How many pirates and other creatures before that?"

"I couldn't tell you."

"Look for a way to get rid of that tattoo," the captain advised. "That'd be the first thing to work on."

"Madame litaar couldn't get rid of it."

"Meaning no disrespect whatsoever, lad, but your ma don't know everything that's under the sun. Mayhap you'll find a mage in one of them countries around the Inner Sea who'll know just what to do."

Jherek nodded, not knowing what he was going to do. The only true home he'd ever known was here in Velen. Leaving it while on a ship, knowing he was going to return, was one thing. Moving was an entirely different matter.

"I do know one thing, though, lad," Finaren stated. "Traveling around and hiring mages, that's going to cost some money."

Jherek nodded. That was another problem that he was going to have to think on.

"There," Finaren said with a small smile, "I *can* help." He took a leather bag from under his blouse and pushed it across the table.

Jherek hefted it, surprised at how heavy it was.

"Go on," Finaren said, "take a look."

Untying the strings, Jherek peered in surprised to see a collection of gold pieces and gems. He looked up at the captain. "What's this? If this is charity-

Finaren held up an authoritative hand and interrupted, "Hold your water, lad. Charitable I may be, foolish I am not. What you've got there you've rightly earned. When I hire a man onto my ship, I set aside a bit of the wages I pay him that he don't know about. Bonuses, you might call them, for every voyage we take together. I know men living on ships don't always put back for them rainy days. So when I got a man laid up by illness or injury, or I got a man don't come back to his family, I can see to it he don't go hungry or homeless. Or unburied if it comes to that. That there's the coin I've been putting aside for you, and I managed to scrape together a little over two thousand gold pieces worth of gems to pay for them healing potions you got from the Amnians. Unless you'd rather have the draughts and try to sell them yourself."

"No. I know you've been generous." Jherek also recalled that the ship didn't have any healing potions aboard, and for every one he tried to sell, he'd be forced to think about Yeill again. He didn't want that either.

"You might be able to double your money on those potions," Finaren pointed out.

"One of the things you always taught me was to take the money up front if I wasn't sure where I'd be the next day."

"Good lad," the old captain congratulated. "I kept the crew aboard *Butterfly* till just before I came to meet you here, but they'll be telling tales up and down the docks tonight. You might warn your ma that some angry people could show up at her house."

For the first time, the cold realization that he might not have a choice about staying in Velen struck Jherek. The town had been Madame Litaar's home for dozens of years. She'd buried a husband there, and other family as well. Malorrie had been buried there himself. Neither of them might be willing to move.

Finaren read the look on his face. "You hadn't thought about that, had you, lad? About the fact that once this is out in this town, you might be forced to move?"

"No," Jherek replied honestly. He looked out the dirty window and tried to imagine living anywhere else. He couldn't. The only life he'd known before Velen was his father's ship.

"Even if someone here don't try to kill you," Finaren warned, "didn't you say Falkane might come looking if he knew where you were?"

The possibility seemed small now, but Jherek remembered how much it had frightened him when he was younger. "I don't know."

"Get out of town, lad," Finaren said. "That's my advice. For what it's worth."

"I'll think about it." The stubborn streak that had helped Jherek survive the hardships he'd experienced up to now surfaced.

Finaren started to argue. Jherek could tell by the way the captain's lips jerked and his eyes narrow. Then the older man shrugged. "As you think, lad." He stoppered his bottle. "As for me, I've got to go so you can be going."

Jherek nodded, not wanting the man to walk away from him, but knowing there was no way to hold him.

"You put that purse away and keep it safe," Finaren ordered as he rose from his chair.

"Thank you."

"Know something else, Jherek: if there's ever a time I can be of help to you-in any way-you don't hesitate to come to me. Right now, I've done all I can."

"I know."

"Come here, lad, that I can say a proper good-bye."

Jherek stood, hugging the old man back as fiercely as Finaren hugged him. He didn't know if it was Finaren's tight hold or his throat swelling with emotion that shut off his wind.

Finaren cuffed him on the back of the head and stepped back. Tears gleamed in the old man's eyes and ran down unashamedly into the rough crags of his weathered face. "I want you to know something else, lad," he said in a thick, hoarse voice. "If me wee boy that Umber-lee had taken from me so long ago had turned out to be anything like the kind of man you are, there wouldn't have been a prouder da in all of Faerun."

"Thank you," Jherek said with difficulty. His heart felt like lead in his chest, stillborn and heavy. He hadn't even known Finaren had lost a son or even been married. He watched helplessly as the captain grabbed his bottle from the table and turned around. He walked away, his legs still bent from all the days at sea.

Jherek tucked the purse inside his shirt and left a couple silvers on the table for the serving girl. He wiped his face and walked outside. The smell of the sea hit him more strongly when he walked outside. Full dark had descended on Velen while he'd been waiting in the tavern. Several ships occupied the small port, their rigging beating rhythmically against the masts in the strong breeze.

His steps turned automatically toward the alleys he'd often traveled to the docks from Madame Litaar's house. When he'd worked for Shipwright Makim, he'd spent most of his evenings watching the ships put out to sea. When he'd gone to Madame Litaar's to live after being hired to repair her roof, he'd often stolen away when she wasn't looking to spend time at the docks. When he'd put together enough money to buy a small skiff, he'd sailed it every evening and every free day he had.

He paused on a familiar promontory on a hillock in back of Hient's Glass Shop. The breeze cut across from the east, coming in over the Drake Gate that lead overland out of the city. He thought about traveling through the forest, knowing he might not be safe on any ship. He disliked the idea immediately. The sea was his life. It had birthed him and held an attraction he couldn't shake.

A woman's scream cut through the night from the east. He turned at once, tracking the scream as the echoes died around him. With all the noise coming from the docks, he doubted anyone else heard. He

moved through the alleys, unable to ignore the plea for help, dreading the place he was sure it was taking him to.

VI

30 Ches, the Year of the Gauntlet

Laaqueel felt grateful *as* the salty sea closed over her when she dived into the ocean through the hole in bottom of *Drifting Eel*. She didn't even mind the terrific cold. She took a deep draught in through her mouth and blew the excess out through her gills, soaking them. Sahuagin warriors filled the water around her.

She swam toward Smuggler's Bane Tower quickly, following the retreating line of chain nets. The nets left streamers of bubbles in the water that helped mask her approach. She took what cover she could, knowing the glamour Iakhovas had over the ship wouldn't extend much past the hull of the pentekonter.

The next few minutes would tell the success of the invasion or the death of thousands of sahuagin. The malenti thought it would be worth it if Iakhovas's own death could be guaranteed. The ebony quill near her heart quivered, as if the sorcerer was letting her know he could sense her traitorous intentions. She regretted the thought immediately. Sekolah had never indicated that Iakhovas's quest in any way went against the desires of the Great Shark.

When she reached the sandy beach on the inside of the great harbor, she unfurled one of the hook-filled nets from her side and shook it out. She raced up onto the beach without breaking stride. The harsh clanking of the steel nets filled the air.

Five men wearing the uniform of the Waterdhavian Guard lounged at an open area talking and filling pipes. A small lantern hung from a pole overhead, providing them a small light to congregate by. One of them spotted the malenti as she ran up onto the beach. He started to yell a warning to his companions.

Still in motion, Laaqueel moved smoothly, drawing her trident back and letting fly. She was as skilled with the weapon above water as she was below. Her weapons masters had seen to that.

A heartbeat after leaving her hand, the trident slammed into the guard's chest and drove him backward against the stone wall.

Trained and efficient, the guard members went into action at once. Having both hands free, Laaqueel whirled her net over her head and threw it. The net splayed out, the lantern light reflecting from the dozens of sharp barbs tied in the mesh. It hit the man in front, then the weighted ends swung around the man nearest him, trapping them together. Both men went down screaming as the other's struggles only set the hooks more deeply.

A sahuagin spear took a fourth man high in the chest, entering from the side and ripping through his lungs. He didn't have enough breath left to scream in pain.

The fifth man made it up the short flight of steps carved into the stone at the base of the Smuggler's Bane Tower. A quarrel fletched his back as he dashed through the doorway at the top of the steps. His yells for help were audible even above the clanking retreat of the nets.

The door slammed shut as Laaqueel freed her short sword and started up the stone steps. She turned to Bounndaar, raising her voice so she could be clearly heard. "Get crossbowmen along the shoreline. Those men in the tower are going to know about us in a moment."

"At once, most favored one." Bounndaar turned and yelled orders to his men.

Laaqueel faced the door, standing on the small porch area before it. The windlass controls to raise and lower the nets occupied the lower section of the tower. Two narrow, winding staircases led to the floors above. Saying a quick prayer and calling on Sekolah to allow her power to be strong, she threw her open hand against the iron-bound wooden door blocking entrance to the tower.

She felt the magical wards protecting the door resist her spell, then felt them collapse on themselves. Immediately, the door warped, sprung out of its hinges by her magic. She said another prayer when she took up a small hammer from her harness, using up another of her spells. Concentrating hard, not as familiar with this spell because she seldom used it, ignoring the bustle of activity on the other side of the door, she imagined the glowing force around the hammer, making herself see it in her mind.

Bracing herself, she swung the hammer wrapped in magical force against the warped door. The door tore free of its moorings at once, exploding back into the foyer beyond and striking down half a dozen human guardsmen.

Laaqueel, her strike force gathering behind her, stepped through the door, her sword naked in her fist. "Boundaar," she croaked in a dry voice. The effort necessitated by maintaining the hammer of magical force gave her a headache, knotting muscles through her shoulders and back. The headache was made worse by the lanterns clinging to the walls. She slitted her eyes against the brightness as she sought targets for the hammer.

She struck without mercy, knowing the Great Shark would approve. Every time the hammer landed, guards died and their blood spattered over her. She spared none of them. Boundaar, seeing that she was weakened by her efforts, placed himself directly in front of her and ordered two sahuagin warriors into place on either side of her. They kept the humans back with tridents and spears.

Feeling the hammer fading from her, slipping through her mental grip, she flung it one last time, knocking a surface dweller from the circular staircase. He flew backward, then smashed against the torch and the wall behind him and dropped lifeless to the floor. The torch sconce dropped from the wall, showering him with sparks and filling the foyer with the stink of burned hair.

Laaqueel regretfully let go of the hammer offeree, feeling it disappear from the physical plane. She started another prayer and pushed her way through Boundaar. She pointed at the staircase, telling the chieftain to put sahuagin on guard there. By the time she reached the flight of stairs leading down into the area where the windlass that controlled the nets was, she had her next spell ready.

The windlass room was large, forty feet by forty feet, she estimated. The device was in the center of the room, constructed of several ratcheting gears that clanked hurriedly as the three men operating it tried to raise the nets again. The nets held wards that normally repelled most fish from the harbor, allowing no sharks or other predatory marine creatures, but they wouldn't stop the sahuagin forces.

"Damned fish-heads!" one of the men bawled in warning.

Laaqueel heard the *thrum* of crossbows behind her and watched as the short quarrels buried their vicious barbs in flesh and wood. She thrust out a hand and the magic spewed from her palm, plunging the room into total blackness. With their greater night vision, the sahuagin weren't totally blinded. The light spilling in the door leading down to the windlass area was enough.

The crossbow quarrels put another man down at the windlass. Laaqueel vaulted to the floor, silent as her own shadow, and swung her sword. The keen edge hamstrung the man trying desperately to turn the ten-foot tall wheel. He screamed and reached for his injured feet. The malenti ended the screaming by slashing his throat.

Without remorse, she grabbed one of the Waterdhavian Guardsmen on the floor, locating him by the string of curses and pained cries that came from him. She levered the man up in one hand, then unerringly shoved him into the grind of gears operating the nets.

The man screamed anew as the big gears bit into him, but the sounds quickly went away as the gears drew him in. Bone crunched and the metallic strain of the gears trying to mesh filled the basement.

The gears stopped.

Boundaar's men worked efficiently in the darkness, talking to each other in their own tongue as they covered the floor and tracked down the last of the surface dwellers. All of them were dead by the time Laaqueel reached the top of the stairs.

More sahuagin held the bottom of the dual stairwells. Nets stretched above them, blocking entrance into the room.

Laaqueel ran back out onto the sandy beach in front of Smuggler's Bane Tower. Her gaze raked across Waterdeep Harbor and spied *Drifting Eel* at once. Mermen attacked the vessel, some of them riding the giant sea horses they used as mounts. Thankfully there weren't as many of them as Laaqueel had feared. The advance party group had struck the mermen hard, as Iakhovas had planned.

The one-eyed prince remained standing in the prow of the pentekonter, his massive cloak billowing in the breeze behind him. The other three ships followed sedately behind, disgorging more sahuagin into the great harbor.

Suddenly the malenti's vision cleared even more and she saw the sorcerer plainly. *Ah, there you are, little malenti*, her master's voice sounded in her mind. *You've endeavored so fiercely these past years to always keep me in your sight, do not give up the race now.*

She knew he mocked her. Even diligent as she'd been about her spying on him, he had managed to hide so many things from her.

Iakhovas stretched a hand out at her before she could move.

Nausea twisted through Laaqueel, and it felt like her air bladder had burst. Her vision blanked for a moment and she took a step back even though she knew what was going on. When her foot touched down

again, it wasn't on sandy beach, but on *Drifting Eel's* wooden deck. The quill implanted so close to her heart gave the sorcerer such power over her.

Civilar Noth and his Waterdhavian Guardsmen stood at attention behind the sorcerer.

"Now," Iakhovas said, a malevolent spark in his single dark eye, "now I will educate the surface dwellers in the poignancy of true horror, a skill at which I am unparalleled. I've forgotten much more than they've ever had the misfortune to experience."

He reached into the folds of his cloak and brought out an ornate headband chipped from a single black sapphire. Long labor had gone into the creation of the circlet. Not only did it have a perfect circumference, but tiny sharks had been chipped into it in his relief, creating a twisting serpentine of figures.

Laaqueel recognized the headband as the one he'd forcibly taken from the mermen fourteen years ago, bringing total destruction to their village and sending the few survivors fleeing for their lives. Laaqueel had traveled with him then, knowing that Iakhovas had somehow managed a magical link with the headband and with the other items he searched for so diligently.

The malenti's attention was drawn to the mermen trying to encircle *Drifting Eel*. A crossbow shaft leaped from one of them, speeding toward her face. She turned slightly, letting it go past, not caring that it struck one of the wererats. The creatures could only be harmed by silver or magical weapons. The quarrel that buried itself in the creature's back was only a momentary inconvenience that drew a squeal of pained rage.

Twisting again and moving across the deck, Laaqueel continued praying, putting her skills to use. Taking a pinch of sulfur from one of the waterproof pouches on her harness, she directed the spell at the merman who'd shot at her. A luminescent column formed in the air before her, not even as bright as a glow lamp. It leaped at its target.

Hit by the magical stream of scalding heat, the merman cried out, his skin drying out and blackening. His corpse tumbled through the water, disappearing.

Casting again, knowing how much danger the mermen represented, Laaqueel touched the shark talisman that represented her faith to Sekolah and cast her next spell. She threw a hand outward and a pale lavender stingray burst into being. It sailed through the air and took to the water, attacking the mermen at once. Most of those it touched succumbed to the magic, freezing up in fear and disappearing beneath the water. The remaining mermen were routed, chased off by the crossbows in the hands of the wererats.

Iakhovas put the circlet on and turned to face the open Smuggler's Bane Tower. Laaqueel wasn't sure of the extent of the power the headband gave the sorcerer over those he chose to influence, but she'd seen that the effect could be all-consuming, uniting those with intelligence as well as animals who normally didn't get along well.

"Come," he crooned, "obey my words and destroy my enemies. Unite with We Who Eat in our labors."

Laaqueel knew he was projecting his voice, making sure it reached the hearing of the army he'd amassed for the night's raid. Even Huaanton and the other sahuagin didn't know the extent of the destruction Iakhovas planned. They knew only about the joined sahuagin tribes. They knew nothing of the aboleths, giant turtles and dragon turtles, eyes of the deep, giant crabs, and dozens of sharks, more than any sahuagin could ever hope to control. She was sure there were others even she didn't know about.

With the presence of all those creatures she knew the sahuagin would assume Sekolah was aiding in their attack, Iakhovas would become even more favored among her people for being aided by the Great Shark, while she was only tolerated while he looked upon her with generosity. Part of the small hope she'd nurtured inside herself for the last fifteen years, that her own position among her tribe would improve, died then. Every advance she got was at Iakhovas's behest. She would forever be his puppet. As long as Sekolah willed it, so she would remain alive.

Fatigued from the spellcasting, she gazed out through the open gates, aware of the Waterdhavian Watch galleys and rakers converging on the area. In the dark distance beyond the reach of the harbor lights, Iakhovas's navy moved in. She saw the flat shapes of the sahuagin mantas break water near the naval harbor, followed by the sleek heads of giant creatures that broke the surface behind them. Even more creatures, Laaqueel knew, swam beneath the harbor's waves.

Conch horns echoed across the harbor, sounding a general alarm. A Waterdhavian raker plunged across the harbor, aiming itself at the sahuagin flagship. Slender and top-armored, the battle vessel carried fire-pot catapults and large deck-mounted crossbows. Less than a hundred yards away, the raker crew opened fire with one ballista.

The six foot shaft sped through the air and ripped into the pentekonter's side. Vibrations shuddered through the vessel as it penetrated just above the waterline. From the location of the damage, Laaqueel was sure some of the sahuagin rowers below had been injured or killed.

Iakhovas threw out an arm and said something that arcane language of his that Laaqueel had never understood. His tattoos glowed and his arm changed, becoming a hard-ridged fin almost four feet in length. Her feminine intuition told Laaqueel this shape was closer in truth to the real nature of the sorcerer than any she'd seen him use.

He slashed the jointed fin at the three Waterdhavian Guardsmen, slicing their heads from their bodies. The fin changed back to his arm as he turned to the malenti.

"Do not forget yourself here, my little malenti," he said, "I've a battle to win. Hie you below and inspire those rowers to work harder. We're found out now and time works against me. I want to make the shoreline before this vessel is seized."

She ran to the hold and got the drum beater's attention.

"Yes, most favored one?" the warrior inquired.

"As fast as you are able," she ordered. She saw the damage the giant crossbow bolt had done, impaling the two sahuagin who'd shared an oar. Their bodies still twisted on the shaft as they continued dying.

"Yes, most favored one."

She returned to the deck, following Iakhovas as he ran back to the stern. The wererats scattered before the sorcerer, snarling in their high-pitched voices. Iakhovas held onto the railing as the pilot brought *Drifting Eel* around.

"We're leaving the harbor," Laaqueel said.

"Good. You are not as blind as I sometimes feared." Iakhovas seemed distracted, concentrating on the small bloodstone globe nestled in his palm.

Wererat archers stood at the railing and exchanged fire with the crew aboard the Waterdhavian raker.

"But leaving the harbor means leaving our forces here," Laaqueel protested.

Iakhovas gave her a harsh look. "Little malenti, you fear for your warriors when in truth Sekolah bred them and birthed them to die," he told her. "They are not alone in this struggle; it's my war and I've found them shield mates and comrades. I've done what I can do. There are matters that demand my attention. You're welcome to remain here if you so choose."

She looked at him, knowing he was certain she wouldn't stay. She would lose her chance to see what he was up to. "No," she said.

"So be it," he replied, "but you will allow me the necessary time to work the spells I've set up. I'll not suffer any interruptions. Even from you, my little malenti."

Iakhovas placed his other hand on top of the small bloodstone gem, then drew it slowly back. The gem enlarged like a bubble, the surface becoming even less stable.

One of the wererat archers staggered back from the railing, transfixed by one of the giant crossbow bolts that had crashed through his thin chest. Bone shards glinted in the moonlight.

Iakhovas tossed the bloodstone bubble into the air and it promptly disappeared. Laaqueel noticed the harbor breezes died suddenly. A moment more and a sudden wave erupted from under the harbor's surface and drank down the Waterdhavian raker. There were no survivors.

The spell was subtle in other respects, spreading out across the harbor without giving away where it had started. Laaqueel knew none of the magic-fearing sahuagin would attribute it to Iakhovas, only to Sekolah.

Storm winds and crashing waves continued striking the Waterdhavian crafts as *Drifting Eel* pushed toward the Dock Ward shoreline. The battle in the harbor had reached the docks. Mariners bolted from taverns and from the Helmstar Warehouse, the Mermaid's Arms festhall, and Arnagus the Shipwright's building. Lights blossomed up and down Dock Street. The streets started to fill, and sahuagin were filling them as well.

Some of the Fleetswake revelers had pitched tents along the docks and others had even gone so far as to place tents across their boat decks. Lanterns blazed at some of them, throwing shadows across the tents as the drunken sailors and merchants tried to rally against the invading sahuagin forces.

Drifting Eel raced for an empty loading berth among the docks as lantern lights from ships at anchorage played over the deck. Iakhovas called down the hailing tube himself, ordering the sahuagin rowers to reverse direction. The sorcerer dropped the anchor himself with a wave of his hand that sent the man-sized weight spinning through the air, stopping the play of chain as soon as the anchor touched the

harbor bottom. *Drifting Eel* halted too late, slamming into the dock pilings and knocking them loose from their moorings.

Laaqueel fell but rolled to her feet while the wererat deckhands went sprawling. She brandished her sword as she pursued Iakhovas, who hadn't lost his footing at all, standing as surely as an outcropping of coral.

The sorcerer bolted over *Drifting Eel's* side and dropped four feet to the splintered dock. He reached inside his cloak and drew out a rapier with an ornate handle fashioned from an impossibly large shark's tooth.

The malenti hesitated only a moment before following the sorcerer. She dropped to the dock, trailed immediately by two dozen wererats. Iakhovas was already in motion, leaving her no doubt that he was already moving on whatever hidden agenda he'd planned for the night.

She turned and glanced back out into the harbor in time to see the first fiery catapult launches from Water-deep Castle high overhead. The flaming loads arced across the black sky like comets, then crashed down amid the three sahuagin ships with uncanny accuracy. Two of the ships broke under the onslaught and started sinking as Waterdhavian rakers closed in.

The storm created by Iakhovas's spell continued growing, gathering force. Four foot waves rippled up on the harbor water, then cascaded over the side of Dock Street in spite of the ramparts. The sea wall around the harbor also served as a breakwater against storms that traveled inland from the Sea of Swords. Against a storm that started within the harbor itself, there was no protection.

A raker bore down on the surviving sahuagin ship. Before it could reach its opponent, a dragon turtle rose up from the depths and capsized the raker. The creature was over fifty feet long from its snout to its tail. The shell alone was thirty feet around and was dark green in color with sections that came to sharp points. The huge clawed feet spread over two yards with the webbing between the toes. Horned ridges stood out on its wattled neck. Fierce orange eyes glowed in the dark, and its mouth was a curved, cruel sword slash. Its attention drawn to the Waterdhavian sailors, the monster turtle's head darted out and it gulped down three in quick succession.

Men shouted around Laaqueel, but none tried to attack her as they manned posts along the harbor. She assumed that the illusory glamour Iakhovas was using remained in place. Turning, she sprinted to catch up to him, making it easily since he wasn't traveling fast.

"What are we here for?" she demanded when she drew even.

"Fear not, my little malenti, my reasons for being here coincide with your own," he answered. "To properly fight a war, weapons require careful choosing. In my studies, I have unearthed the fact that one is here, one that I desire greatly."

"You staged this invasion, sacrificed my people, to get something that belonged to you?" Laaqueel, even after the fifteen years she'd seen him in action, couldn't believe it.

He turned his dark eye on her, glaring. "Don't ever presume to question my methods or my reasons, little malenti, otherwise you'll never grow to be the sahuagin you want to be so badly. I no longer require your services these days as much as would benefit you. Do not be foolish enough to disregard that. It is a true fact." He continued walking, turning onto an alley off Dock Street and heading east.

She fell into step at his side and slightly behind him, following in silent protest. It wasn't the first time he'd intimated that he could change her into a sahuagin. Judging from his power, she assumed it was possible.

Possible, but only if he didn't get them all killed while foraging through Waterdeep. She tightened her grip on her sword and trailed him into the waiting darkness of the alley.

VII

12 Mirtul, the Year of the Gauntlet

Jherek's heart hammered as he poised on the balls of his feet, the cutlass naked in his fist. The heavy humidity from the sea left a sheen of sweat across his body from his run. No one else had responded to the woman's shrill screams for help, but it was possible no one else had heard her over the noise from the docks.

Seven Cuts Court occupied a wide space in the street leading to Drake Gate and to the wooded coastal trails to Murann and Tordraken. Sandwiched between a building that had once housed a bakery but now

stood vacant since a string of unsolved murders had begun there and a leather goods shop specializing in used overland travel gear, Jherek gazed out at the court. The only sound now was the gurgle of the fountain, fed by the artesian well, in the court's center.

Shadows draped the area. No lights burned there after the sun went down. Every mayor to hold office in Velen since the murders started tried to find a means of lighting the court and ending the curse there, but none had ever been successful. Torches and lanterns were lit, but mysteriously extinguished as soon as full dark had claimed the city.

The curse began when a severed foot was found in the court. Most in Velen believed the foot was placed there as a warning to someone, but the stories varied as to who the warning was for. Some said it concerned a Shadow Thief who'd failed in his assignment. Some said it was a warning to Hieydll, the old baker whose son had moved the family business, over an affair of the heart. The foot, over the years, ended up belonging to hundreds of people in the stories that circulated.

There was one truth about Seven Cuts Court in all of Velen: no one went there alone at night. Since the morning the foot had been discovered in the court, people who foolishly ventured into the court at night alone ended up dead-all of them from seven similar deadly slashes- and the victim's right foot was always taken.

Most believed it was the work of a vengeful ghost. For all its acceptance of its ghosts, Velen also housed a number of poltergeists that had to be banished from time to time. None of the clergy or professional ghost-chasers had been able to exorcise whatever haunted the court after dark.

Jherek didn't know what he believed, but he'd always stayed away from the place. Now he had no choice. He took a fresh grip on the cutlass and moved into the shadows of the court.

The attack came without warning and faster than Jherek thought possible. Only his keen hearing saved him when he heard the rustle of leather armor to his left. Instinctively, he went down and to the right. At sea a sailor had to stay low. Losing contact with the deck or the rigging during a storm or an attack often meant death.

He rolled on his shoulder and pushed up on his knees.

The cutlass came on line in front of him, and he squared himself up behind it as Malorrie had always taught him.

The leather-clad attacker bolted from the shadows, following up his immediate strike confidently, expecting to overpower his victim before he could get to his feet. A sword's steel splintered the weak moonlight, sweeping toward Jherek's head.

The young sailor turned the sword blow with the hook, feeling the impact shiver down along his arm. His attacker's strength pushed the hook across, making Jherek use the cutlass to block as well. Even then, the sword stopped scarce inches from his throat.

The man roared a curse, his dark face hidden by a scarf wrapped around his face. His breath smelled like he'd spent the night in a tavern.

As the man yanked his sword back, Jherek put his weight on one knee and lashed out with his other leg. He hooked his foot behind the man's ankle, tripping him.

Jherek got to his feet as the man fell backward. Even big as he was, the attacker shoved himself to his feet with surprising speed.

"Tricky whelp, eh," the big man said. "Won't be enough." He charged forward, swinging his blade with all his might.

Jherek met the blow with his cutlass. Sparks leaped from the roughened metal and rained down over the young sailor's clothing. Driven back by the impact, Jherek stumbled for his footing, his boot soles sliding across the cobblestones. He barely got the sword up in time to defend himself again.

Though fear filled him, coiling through his guts like a rabid mouse, Jherek focused his mind and skills. He kept his arm hard and relaxed at the same time, parrying the big man's raw attack with skill and strength, forced to give ground before it. Twice he got the cutlass in for blows to the body, but the edge wasn't able to bite through the leather armor. Metal clanged, filling the court with unaccustomed noise. The young sailor couldn't help wondering how many ghosts they were attracting as an audience, and he knew not all of them were benign.

"Gonna die this night, whelp," the big man promised. "Gonna spill me some cursed pirate's blood in the bargain, maybe lay claim to that bounty on that tattoo you're sporting so high and mighty on your arm." The big sword came down again.

Hearing the man's words stung Jherek, touching off the unforgiving anger that lay inside him. Malorrie had always taught him that the anger he felt was his greatest weapon, and his greatest weakness.

The difference lay in control, and in whether that anger was directed inward or outward.

Jherek parried the sword blow with his cutlass, ducking down and to the side to turn it away from him and to the right. Before the big man could move, the young sailor whipped in with the hook and buried it behind the man's knee. He yanked, setting it deep.

The big man roared in pain, trying desperately to get away. He bent down to grab for the hook.

Jherek straightened, unable to bring the cutlass's blade into play. Instead, he slammed the hard metal of the basket hilt into his attacker's face, breaking his nose and sending blood in all directions. Close as he was, he felt the warmth of the man's blood splash across his own face.

The big man squalled in renewed agony, and fear was in there now as well. He put out a big hand and gouged at Jherek's eyes with hard-taloned fingers.

The young sailor went backward automatically, protecting his vision. He let go of the hook, twisting as he did so. If the man didn't have access to a healing potion or a cleric, he'd have a permanent limp. Breathing hard, Jherek moved backward two more steps, getting the distance he needed to finish the fight.

The big man stood with effort, hobbled by his injured leg. He worked at rubbing the blood from his eyes with his free hand. He kept hold of the long sword, pushing it out in Jherek's general direction.

Jherek hesitated. It was one thing to take a man's blood in the heat of battle, but another to take it when the man was so obviously helpless.

"Vyane!" the big man called.

Realizing the man wasn't alone, Jherek whirled. He brought the cutlass up to a ready position as his eyes scanned the shadows around the court. He saw the woman standing in the darkness gathered at the opposite end of the court, below the hand-lettered sign that advertised Blackthorn's Brew, the most popular festhall in all of Velen.

She was slim-hipped and long-haired, as small as the man was large. Her face looked elven, but Jherek wasn't sure. She wore dark clothing, a rider's outfit, one used to rough handling. A light breeze lifted her hair from her shoulders in a fluttering halo, and wiggled the fletchings of the quarrel nestled in the groove of the crossbow she held.

Jherek saw her hand clench, letting him know she'd fired. With Malorrie's training, he knew there was a chance of avoiding the bolt as it leaped from the bow. A speeding quarrel couldn't change course in mid-air unless it was magical in nature. All he had to do was move, but when he did, it was already too late.

The woman's beauty surprised him, making him wonder how anyone so pretty could cold-bloodedly feather someone she didn't even know.

The heavy bolt crashed into his chest, burying deep just below his left shoulder. His arm went numb at once even as his chest seemed to catch on fire. The impact knocked him backward and he stumbled as he tried to regain his balance. The numbness spread down his spine, stilling his legs. He fell.

"Vyane!" the big man yelled again.

"Silence, Croess," the woman said with an accent that Jherek couldn't place.

"The little bastard nearly killed me. Look what he's done to my leg."

Jherek lay on his back and tried to breathe. He couldn't. It was like the crossbow bolt had nailed his chest closed. He lay still, staring up into the sky, at the stars he'd gotten so accustomed to while on watch in *Butterfly's* crow's nest. He couldn't even blink or move his eyes as he watched the woman approach.

"Your own fault," she told the big man without sympathy. "You moved on him from out of the shadows. He should have been dead before he even knew you were there."

"You saw how quick he was," Croess protested. "Fanged demons take me if I'm lying, but he's hardly more than a boy and he fights like a damned whirlwind."

"You knew he would be something different. We were told that." She stared down at Jherek with empty eyes and said, "A crossbow bolt did for him just fine." She glanced across Jherek and added, to someone, "You said there was gold?"

"Aye," a man said.

Jherek strained to hear better, but the numbness filling his body seemed to affect his ears as well. He was certain he knew the voice.

"Old Finaren, he's soft on his people. Always puts something aside for them. Knew he'd give it to this boy even with him being what he is."

The elf woman knelt and went through Jherek's clothing. Her practiced fingers found the leather pouch Finaren had given him. She tossed it, seeming to weigh its worth in that single motion. "So young," she said, standing. "Pity."

"We should take his head," Croess said. "Prove to that damned wizard that we did what we set out to

do."

"No," the woman replied. "He'll take our word."

"His foot, then," the big man said. "We'll make it look like the ghost that's supposed to haunt this place was responsible for killing him."

"After you've gone and bled all over the place?" the woman taunted. She shook her head. "No, I'll not have him mutilated. The old woman who raised him will be allowed to bury all of him."

"Maybe that's not your choice," the big man grated. "It was me that got hurt. I'll do as I damn well please."

"Try, and he won't be the only one who dies here tonight," the woman promised.

Silence filled the court for a moment, then Jherek heard the big man limp away. His hearing dwindled, making it impossible for him to hear anything else that might have been said. His vision blurred, then finally turned dark. He felt stilled, buried in the icy core of his own shadow, wearing it like a shroud.

Through it all, even though the fear and anger burned through him, he wondered where the voice was.

Why wasn't it commanding him again, telling him to live so that he could serve?

The darkness crept in and stole even his thoughts away.

VIII

30 Ches, the Year of the Gauntlet

Laaqueel paused at the top of the wooden steps leading up to Fishgut Court. The battle taking place out in the harbor was drawing all of Waterdeep's attention. More sailors and shopkeepers ran toward the harbor. Several of them brushed past Iakhovas and his wererat group, letting her know his spell still masked them. She studied the harbor, amazed that the attack had made it this far. Even when Iakhovas had made his plans, she'd had her doubts.

Another fiery salvo came from Waterdeep Castle's catapults, painting flaming lines through the dark sky for a moment, then splashing down in the water in a violent flash of sparks and hisses that overrode even the screaming fear and rage and disbelief coming from the surface dwellers. Fingers of oily fire splayed out over the waves stirred up by Iakhovas's wizard's storm. The waves crashed ten feet high now, sloping over the sides of many vessels at anchor and shoving them into each other.

A Waterdhavian Watch wizard rode a flying carpet out over the harbor toward a floundering raker besieged by sahuagin boarding from the water. The malenti watched the wizard start his gestures to unleash a spell. Her instinctive fear was of fire, knowing how quickly her people perished when fought with that element. She said a quick prayer to Sekolah to spare the sahuagin warriors because the dead could not fight and she knew the Great Shark would understand that. The sahuagin didn't see him, and she wished she could call out a warning.

Despite the howling winds being stirred up by the storm, the flying carpet held steady. It even held steady when the brine dragon's head erupted from the uneven water. The dragon was nearly thirty feet in length and had a triangular, wedge-shaped head filled with sharp teeth. Covered with ridged and craggy scales that didn't fit well together, the creature was a virulent green. Yellow tufts ridged its head, running from between its eyes and becoming standing scales as they went on down its back. It had flippers instead of claws. Snapping its wide mouth open, it clamped down over the wizard, swallowing him and the carpet whole. The dragon disappeared below the surface again just as quickly.

"Laaqueel," Iakhovas called in a harsh voice.

She turned to face him.

"We're not here to *win*, little malenti," the wizard told her. Lightning suddenly savaged the skies, a forked white-hot sword that sheathed itself in purple umber, then winked out. In the brief, eye-stinging flash of light, Iakhovas's tattoos stood out harshly against his skin. "But neither then shall your people lose more than the surface dwellers."

Knowing it was the best she was going to get, she nodded. As she turned to take another look at the action in the harbor, a dragon turtle surfaced. It stretched his ponderous head out, unveiling the scaled armor protecting its neck, and breathed a cloud of scalding steam over sailors manning a nearby cargo ship. The men died instantly, their corpses throwing off gray smoke as they cooled in the night. Maybe the sahuagin wouldn't win this battle, but the malenti knew that this night would never be forgotten in the history of the City of Splendors.

"Haste, little malenti," Iakhovas told her. "Even now, with all the strength I've gathered, I'm not without limits. Should I not get what I've come for this night, the sahuagin sacrifices will indeed be for naught. I am their savior whether you wish it so or not."

Laaqueel tightened her grip on her sword. Was he lying, or was he telling the truth about his limitation? She didn't know. She gazed into his black eye, knowing the patch over his other eye was a silent promise that he wasn't infallible, unless it was a sacrifice he'd willingly made at some time in exchange for something he wanted more.

She also knew that he wouldn't tolerate her questioning him. She hurried up the steps after him, moving around the sign at the top of the stairs that advertised Fishgut Court's attractions and businesses.

Iakhovas moved with confidence, working his way through the maze of streets that had Laaqueel lost almost immediately. In the sea, she'd always been able to get a perspective on the sahuagin communities by simply swimming above them. Here on land she was locked in with only two dimensions open to her. Despite her limited familiarity with coastal towns, she didn't feel comfortable straying out of sight of the sea.

They left sight of the harbor almost immediately, though, and she tried to remember the streets as she saw the signs. Adder Lane came first, clearly marked. Ahead and on the left, a number of lanterns with different colored glass illuminated the full-sized carved creature out in front of an inn called the Rearing Hippocampus. Bouncers stood watch over the doors, their hands never far from their swords.

As Laaqueel passed them, a small group of sailors ran toward the inn, bellowing about the attack in the harbor, Iakhovas led his group down Adder Lane onto Gut Alley, cutting across to Snail Street, then turning left there. When they reached an intersection with Shesstra's Street, Iakhovas turned right onto Book Street.

An older man with two young women stepped from a small shop. The painted letters across the boarded over bay window declared the place to be an herbalist's. The business looked like it had fallen on hard times. The man and women were dressed in ill-fitting clothes that had seen better times.

Without warning, one of the young women screamed and grabbed the older man's arm, pointing at Iakhovas and the wererat group.

Iakhovas's attention swiveled onto her at once. "Execute the woman!" he ordered. "Damn her and the rudimentary skill she has for the true seeing. Humans should never have been allowed magic!"

His words hammered into Laaqueel. For the woman to have seen through the illusion Iakhovas wove with his magic, she had to have used magic of her own, but what magic was that?

What did she see when she saw Iakhovas as he really was?

The wererats broke ranks quickly, giving chase at once. Laaqueel pushed herself, feeling incredibly sluggish on the surface, but letting her desire to know more about her master push her to greater speed.

Obviously knowing that they weren't going to be able to outrun their pursuers, the man barked orders to the screaming women to keep running, then turned to face the first of the wererats. He slipped a long, slim club from his belt and called out in a harsh voice.

The lead wererat grinned in anticipation. As he moved to the attack, Laaqueel watched the creature's human features drop away, becoming increasingly ratlike.

The shopkeeper swung his club with precision and skill, slipping past the wererat's sword. When the club reached the wererat's skull, it crashed through bone and brain, killing the creature at once.

From her studies, Laaqueel knew the wererats could only be harmed in any form other than their human ones by silver or enchanted weapons. The club represented a definite threat. She pulled up a step, allowing the pack of wererats to overtake her.

"Afraid?" one snarled at her as it changed into a rat man.

Laaqueel ignored the creature, feeling no disgrace at allowing it to attack the shopkeeper. Three wererats leaped at the man, driving him backward as they swung their short swords and snapped their vicious teeth.

A cold shiver prickled through Laaqueel as she took up the chase again. The young woman's own abilities for magic had been revealed when she saw through Iakhovas's illusion and the man's by his club. The malenti knew it probably didn't end there, but she gave chase, skirting around the snarling bodies of the wererats taking the shopkeeper to the ground by force. Still the man fought them, even knowing he was going to die. Every time the hand-carved club landed, wererat bones broke.

The extra effort required simply to breathe above the surface drained Laaqueel. Her gills flared open in an effort to compensate. The two women ahead of her grew closer, though, and none of the residences around them threw open their doors to help. Book Street remained deserted.

The women rushed into an alley to the left.

Laaqueel caught the corner of the building with her free hand and whipped her body around. The alley surprisingly turned sharply, almost switching back on itself to the right.

The woman who'd seen through Iakhovas's illusion reached for a perilously stacked pile of refuse at the side of a fishmonger's shop. Standing taller than a man, packed with fish tripe and bones from a few days' business as well as rotting vegetables and other garbage, the pile came down in a wet rush.

Battered by the garbage coming down on top of her and swarming underfoot, Laaqueel nearly fell. She caught herself on one hand and kept going forward. Huge rats came down in the refuse as well. One of them whipped through her hair in its fright, and two others clung to her body. She swept the one from her hair, then hurled herself up against the side of the building to knock the ones off her back.

The women continued to scream fearfully.

Hoarse voices shouted overhead, and a few lights came on. No one came to investigate and no one peered too closely from the windows above ground level.

The malenti caught up with the second woman first. She swung her sword, bringing the flat of the blade down hard. The woman stopped running at once, dropping to the ground and laying stunned.

Still in full stride, Laaqueel grabbed the other woman by her hair and yanked her from her feet. The woman came down hard on the muddy cobblestones. The breath left her lungs in a rush.

Breathing hard, her gills not quite able to meet the demands being made on them, the malenti held her sword under the woman's throat. She looked into the surface dweller's eyes, seeing the fear there and relishing it. Fear meant power.

Tell me-" Laaqueel gasped, "-tell me-what you saw!"

The young woman cried, tears flowing freely from her eyes as she shook her head and panted, "I can't."

Knowing the wererats were going to be on them within minutes, Laaqueel yanked the woman up and dragged her back to where she'd left the first woman. The malenti laid her sword on the ground and held the woman with one hand. She laid her other hand on the unconscious woman's face. She prayed in her tongue, the sahuagin clicks echoing in the alley even over the continued shouts by the people inside the houses.

In answer to her prayers to Sekolah and to the power she wielded in the Great Shark's name, the unconscious woman's face writhed with sudden infection-filled weals. As she finished the prayer, the weals erupted in bloody pus. The woman moaned with the pain even though she was unconscious, barely clinging to her life.

Laaqueel fixed her hot gaze on the woman and shook her. "Tell me!" she roared. "Tell me what you saw or she'll die in agony!"

It took two attempts for the woman to get any words out. "I can't!" she cried finally. "Tymora help me, what I'm telling you is the truth. I was doing a true seeing, looking at an object brought to us by a sailor who wanted to know if it had any magic about it. When we heard the screams coming from the harbor, I went outside. I didn't mean to see you."

"What did you see?"

She shook her head. "The rat men," she said. "You, and-"

"What about the other man?"

She struggled to make her mouth work.

"Better you welcome Umberlee's dark caresses than leave yourself in my hands, child," Laaqueel promised.

"I can't tell you," the woman said, "because I've never seen anything like it."

"What?" the malenti demanded. She heard the slap of feet on the cobblestones, coming closer. Whether they were wererats or Waterdhavian Watch, she was almost out of time.

"It was huge. Fearsome. All fins and teeth and-evil of the darkest sort. It *hungers?*"

Before Laaqueel could ask anything further, a green glow surrounded the woman. In the next instant her body came apart in thousands of flying sparks.

The malenti leaped back, startled and fearful of getting burned. The green sparks held neither fire nor heat, though, swirling into the air and winking out in a matter of heartbeats. Nothing remained of the woman. Laaqueel forced herself to her feet, seeing Iakhovas at the alley's mouth.

He gave her a baleful glare with his single eye.

The creaking wheels of a wagon drew Laaqueel's attention. She shifted to face the alley, spotting the black plague wagon rolling toward her at once. Ebony sheets fluttered in the wind.

No driver held the reins, and no draft animals pulled the wagon. It rolled slowly at Laaqueel, and the

malenti knew she was looking at more of the hated surface dweller magic.

IX

12 Mirtul, the Year of the Gauntlet

"Wake up, boy!"

The stern voice scratched Jherek from the comfortable womb of darkness that had settled over him like a shroud. He wanted to tell Malorrie that he was dead, but he knew it wasn't true. The quarrel still burned deeply in his chest.

"Who did this to you?" Malorrie demanded.

Jherek ignored the question as he opened his eyes. "What are you doing here?" His voice carried a whistle with it, and he knew it was caused by his left lung filling up with blood from the puncture wound. It already felt like rocks had been shoved into his chest, making it harder to breathe.

"You were late home to sup, boy," Malorrie said. "Madame litaar sent me to bring you home. She knew when *Butterfly* put into port and how long she takes to off-load." He made a sour face. "From the looks of things, she's going to be properly vexed that she didn't send me sooner."

"It's been kind of inconvenient for me as well," Jherek told him honestly.

"You'll not die."

Jherek didn't disagree. If anyone knew death, it was Malorrie. The old phantom had never admitted when he'd died, nor given any details on the how of it.

He knelt over the young sailor, concern etched in his translucent eyes, his gaze as always made somewhat confusing because he could be seen through. He was dressed as he always was in warrior's chain mail with a deep scarlet tabard that hung to his ankles. It carried no coat of arms, no insignia of any kind. He carried a broadsword sheathed at his hip, stripped of any ornamental designs that might have offered a clue as to the phantom's background. His face belonged to that of a man in his middle years, and his nature made it hard to tell the color of his skin or hair or the thin mustache that stained his upper lip, but Jherek always felt the phantom's eyes in life had been the blue of the seas.

"Mayhap you should lay here, boy, until I get some help."

"No," Jherek croaked. "This is Seven Cuts Court, remember? It's a wonder I'm not dead already."

"That arrow sticking out of your chest. . . it's possible the ghost that haunts this place thought you were already dead." The statement was Malorrie's attempt at a joke, but he spoke truth as well.

The likelihood traced cold fingertips along Jherek's spine. He had no idea how long he'd lain there after he'd passed out. It was still night, and his lung hadn't completely filled up, so he knew it couldn't have happened long ago. There was no sign of the elven woman or her partner.

The young sailor rolled over, then used his hands and knees to push himself up into a crawling position. It was awkward with the quarrel sticking out of his chest. Still it was short. If he'd been pierced with a cloth yard shaft, he might not have been able to get to his feet at all.

Standing, he swayed dizzily. He felt Malorrie clamp a hand on his elbow, helping steady him. He also knew the cost the old phantom had to endure himself with the contact. Where a true ghost had no problems touching a living being and doing harm, the geas that had been laid on Malorrie to prevent his rest in the afterlife also kept him from making contact with many of those still living. If he did lay hands upon them, the whisper of life-force that maintained him was drained by the living.

When Jherek had first come to Velen seven years ago, he'd fallen and broken a leg. Malorrie had been the first to find him. The phantom, ever considerate, tried to care for Jherek only to find to the consternation of both that touching a wounded person drained his life-force even more rapidly. Malorrie had never told Jherek how he'd happened to be in Velen, or why he'd decided to befriend him as a young boy, but Jherek had learned then that the price the old knight had paid had been high. In all his years, both alive and while dead, Malorrie said he'd never met or heard of another like him.

At times, even conversation with other flesh and blood people outside of Madame litaar and Jherek left Malorrie weakened. It was a hardship for the phantom, the young sailor knew, because Malorrie was one of the most sociable people he'd ever met. Over the years, Malorrie had always been there with a story, a comment, or simply a kind word.

"Easy does it, boy. Walk before you run," Malorrie advised.

Jherek wrapped his hand around the quarrel and steeled himself.

"What are you planning to do?" Malorrie asked.

"I'm going to pull the bolt out," Jherek said in a hoarse, weak voice. Truthfully, the thought of yanking the quarrel out of his chest unnerved him.

"No," Malorrie said, placing a hand over Jherek's. "Leave it in."

"It hurts," Jherek protested. He tried to take a deep breath and couldn't. The tightness in his chest almost panicked him. "It's hard to breathe."

"The wound's making it hard to breathe, boy," Malorrie said, "not the quarrel. Most likely it's helping block some of the bleeding. Leave it for Madame Litaar to handle."

Jherek was only too willing to leave the quarrel in place.

"Feel ready to try a few steps?"

He nodded, noticing the black spots on Malorrie's arm. As he watched, another formed, wrapping itself around the phantom warrior's wrist. "Let me go," he rasped, realizing the contact was rapidly draining Malorrie's afterlife.

"Why?"

"I won't have your second death on my hands," Jherek gasped. He pulled weakly, trying to escape the phantom's grip. With the appearance of the black spots, he knew Malorrie had to be in pain as well. Yet the old warrior said nothing about it.

"You can hardly stand, and Madame Litaar's is further up Widow's Hill."

Jherek pulled his hand from the phantom's weaker grip. Fever gripped him, causing perspiration to coat his face. "My death if I can't make it, Malorrie, not yours. I've cost too many people too much in this life already."

Malorrie drew himself up to his full height, standing inches over the young sailor. "Damn you for that pig-headedness, boy. Accept help when it's offered."

"Not when it costs so much."

"That's my choice to make."

"Aye," Jherek agreed as he gathered his cutlass and hook, then took his first step toward home, "and mine. Can you tell me that you'd make it up that hill while helping me?"

"I can."

Jherek took another trembling breath, getting even less air this time than the last. The left side of his chest had gone completely numb, and a coldness spread across his shoulders. "Swear it to me, and remember that we've never had any lies between us."

"I can't."

Jherek nodded, moving slowly. "Don't be so quick to speak against my pigheadedness either. It's going to get me to the top of that hill." He looked up before him, seeing the incline swell dramatically upward. He'd never thought about how high Widow's Hill was in years. Even as a youth he'd flown up and down the trails to the harbor like a bird. He focused on the two-story house at the top of the hill, feeling its pull. That was home, the only home he'd ever known.

"Just you see that it does," Malorrie commanded, "because the first time you falter and fall, I'm going to drag you by the hair to that house if it kills us both."

Jherek didn't doubt for a moment that the phantom would do exactly that. Malorrie's word was his bond. As he walked, the young sailor tried not to think of the wages that had been stolen from him. It was gone, as was his job aboard *Butterfly*. He didn't dwell on those things, though, but on Madame Litaar, who'd raised him for the last handful of years and more, who'd shown him the only mother's love he'd ever known.

In his eyes he was a failure, but he knew she wouldn't see it that way. Madame Litaar had always shown hope for him even though he was sure he would only break her heart.

X

30 Ches, the Year of the Gauntlet

*... and salty diamonds stained the maiden's cheeks,
as she laid the sod o'er her gallant knight.
Though the battle claimed her man,
Her heart stayed forever true."*

His eyes closed, Pacys listened to his voice echo in the large room and knew that he'd fully claimed his audience. His fingers dwelled upon the strings of his yarting for a few beats more, mourning the loss of the lady for the man. Except for his song and the last fading chords of the yarting, silence filled the room.

Taking a deep breath, the old bard opened his eyes. Men wept openly, their voices hushed so they wouldn't reveal their pain and out of deference to his voice. The candles illuminating the room showed the emotions on the faces of the priests and the other faithful of Oghma. Shadows and candle smoke clung to the large beams showing through the ceiling.

Even large as it was, the room was near to overfilled. Fifty men and more sat around the plain pine board tables or stood along the unadorned walls of the meeting hall. Plates and cups scattered over the table were the only remnants of the fine meal they'd enjoyed before he'd started singing.

"I stand corrected, old man," a young priest said, rising to his feet. "Your voice has seasoned like fine whiskey." Tears mixed freely in with his beard. "Ill gladly stand the price of a tune such as that." He picked up an unused bowl and dropped a silver piece onto it. He passed it to the man on his left, who added more coins.

"There's no need for the bowl," Pacys said with a smile. "Tonight, in a much honored tradition for those in my trade, I sing for my supper," He hoisted a tankard of ale that had warmed during the ballad, "and for the drink afterward." He sipped the ale and found it warm, but he'd gotten used to drinking it just like that over the years of his long travels.

The bard was old, had seen seventy-six winters in his time, and showed his hard life in wrinkles and the stringy meat that clung stubbornly to his bones. He shaved his head these days, giving in to the baldness that had claimed him in his fifties. The sun had darkened his skin to the tone of old leather and turned his eyebrows silvery. He went clean-shaven and wore the newest breeches and doublet he'd had left in his kit. His clothing was serviceable, not gaudy as some in his calling preferred. His voice and his tales kept him employed, not a costume. He sat easily on one of the round dinner tables that filled the room, his legs crossed despite his years. Thick beeswax candles burned on either side of him, placed by him so that their light fell across his face.

"Another song," a man at one of the nearer tables pleaded.

Pacys smiled, loving the sound of the passion in the man's voice. His fingers carelessly caressed the yarting's strings, plucking melodious notes that haunted the large room. "Another song, gentle sir? And what would you have? A ballad of great daring in which fair Kettlerin reversed the schemes of Thautcir Black-Eyed to gain back the heart of her lover? An epic poem of grand adventure of Derckin and Dodj and how they found the lost treasure of Gyschill, the Topaz Dragon of the Far North? Or a seafaring lyric of ghost ships that plunder the Sword Coast still?"

"Enough, good Pacys," Hroman said, standing at a table to the bard's left. He was a short man like his father, Pacys knew, but broad shouldered and good-natured. It was strange to see him as he was now, well into his forties when the bard wanted only to remember the boy as he recalled him. "You've entertained these layabout priests of Oghma well for the past three hours."

"And only whetted our appetites for more," another priest lamented. He was an older man among those around him, but Pacys felt he was still ten years his junior. Looking around the crowd, the bard knew he was probably the oldest man there.

Hroman laughed, and he sounded a great deal like his father, Pacys discovered. He was also full of the same fire of command. Sandrew the Wise, the high priest of the Font of Knowledge in Waterdeep, had proven his name by lifting Hroman to a place of command within the temple.

"Yes, and he'll be here tomorrow night as well," Hroman said, "unless you strip the voice from him tonight with your demands."

"Will you be here tomorrow, Pacys?" a priest roared.

The bard's fingers still moved across the yarting's strings, instinctively plucking out a soft tune that underscored Hroman's words and lent them even more weight. Part of his magic was in lending his music to words and making them more commanding. "Yes. I plan on being in Waterdeep for a tenday or more this trip."

"We want to hear all your songs and your tales," one of the younger priests said.

Pacys only grinned in appreciation, then reached down and snuffed the candlewicks between his fingertips. The hard calluses from playing the yarting for sixty years didn't let the heat through. "As many that we are able to share," he promised.

Hroman chased them out of the big room.

Pacys unfolded his legs, feeling the knee joints pop back into place and creak in protest. The legs

were always the first to go, from too many miles spent walking, too many hours spent on a table or in a chair. He took a moment to place the yarting in its leather and brass case, then hooked his boots up by their tops in his free hand.

"Oghma has truly blessed you, old friend," Hroman said.

"I fear I played for a captive audience tonight," Pacys said. "With all the building that is still going on here, I suspect they've seldom seen much in the way of entertainment."

"More than you think," Hroman said. "Tallir, the lad who first started the singing tonight, had thought of becoming a bard before Oghma touched him and brought him into our fold."

"Pity," Pacys said, meaning it, "the boy has a rare and golden voice."

Hroman smiled. "I'll tell him you said so. It took a lot of nerve for him to get up in front of the group tonight, knowing you were going to perform."

"I hope I did not offend him."

Pacys took his travel kit from under the table where they'd eaten. It was tattered and scuffed, showing signs where he'd repaired it himself, serviceable but with no art about the stitching. Shouldering the kit and the yarting case, he gathered the iron-shod staff that lay under the bench.

"You didn't," Hroman said. "I saw young Tallir with a quill and parchment, writing furiously in that bastardized symbology he's developed for himself to take notes. He's skillful with it. I'd dare say he's written down every word you uttered tonight and will add it to his own repertoire."

"Those songs and tales aren't mine," Pacys said. "They've been given to me on the road, things that anyone can pick up. Though, in truth, I should give him the names of the bards who first arranged them." It was the only way a bard achieved fame and a certain kind of immortality, the old bard knew. It was something that had escaped Pacys for all his years.

"You'll have time to set him right tomorrow." Hroman grabbed their plates and headed for the kitchen. "Let me drop these off with the cook staff and I'll show you to your room."

"I'd planned on supper," Pacys admitted, "but I hadn't intended to beg a room as well."

"Pacys," Hroman said, "it's by High Priest Sandrew's will that you will always be a guest within this temple."

"He's a generous man," Pacys said.

"I'll send word to him in the morning that you are here. I know he'll want to come, and it would do him good to be away from his projects for a time."

"You mean the building of the Great Library?" Pacys asked.

Hroman handed the stack of dishes to a priest in a stained white apron in the kitchen. Hroman took a candle from a box on one of the tables and lit it from the stove. He guided Pacys back to the large room and out into the hallway leading back to the personal quarters. The rumble of voices and bits of song, good-natured teasing and prayer filled the hallway as the bard walked by the doors.

"You know about the library?" Hroman asked.

"Of course," Pacys said. "Besides songs and tales and physical comedy a bard claims as his bag of tricks, there is always the news."

Hroman nodded and said, "Of course ..."

He said something more, but Pacys couldn't hear him, lost in the aching melody of the music that had been drifting through his brain for the last few months. The strains and chords were clearer now than they had been in years. He paused, listening for more, but the music was taken from him, leaving only what he'd learned this time. He looked up at Hroman, who gazed at him with concern.

"... you all right?" the priest asked.

"I'm fine."

"Perhaps the wine," Hroman suggested, "or the lateness of the hour. I didn't even think to ask how many days you'd been traveling to reach Waterdeep."

"It's not that," Pacys replied. He hesitated, not wanting to say too much. Hroman was the son of one of his best and truest friends, though. "Come. Show me to my room and we'll talk."

Hroman looked indecisive for a moment, then walked further down the hallway. "We've not got an extra room at the moment. With the building of the new temple and the additional clergy Sandrew has put on, we're packed into these rooms like tuna in a fisherman's hold."

The current Font of Knowledge was located in a row house on Swords Street. They hoped to have the new temple finished this year. "I can take a room at an inn, or sleep outside."

"No," Hroman said with some force. "Even if I could be so cold-hearted, Sandrew would give me a tongue-lashing that would shame me for weeks. I'll give you my room."

He pushed open a door on the right. Weak candlelight flickered over the room, revealing the narrow bed under the only window, a small bookshelf against one wall next to a small fireplace, a wardrobe, and a compact desk.

"Where will you sleep?" Pacys asked.

"We've a common room."

"I could stay there," the bard protested.

"As could I," Hroman said. "Please take this room. As a priest, there's not much I have to offer in the way of tangible assets, but I can make a gift of this. I have earned it with my work, and it's mine to give."

Pacys saw the earnestness in the younger man's gaze and nodded. "As you say," he said humbly as he laid the yarting gently on the bed and sat. "Take up a chair and well talk."

Hroman pulled the chair out from the desk, then took a wine bottle from the book shelves. He smiled as he sat. "I've been saving this for something special, if you've a stomach for it."

"For wine, I'll always have the stomach," Pacys said, smiling, "though not always the head."

"Isn't that the way of it?" Hroman said. "This is from our own press. One of our best vintages."

"Maybe we should save it for another time."

"When you're leaving?"

"That would seem a more appropriate time."

Hroman's face darkened. "I'd rather say hello over a bottle of wine than good-bye. I've said enough good-byes of late." He unstopped the bottle and handed it to the bard.

Pacys took it. "I heard about your father," he said. "I'm sorry. If I'd known, I'd have been here."

"I know." Hroman took a deep breath and looked away for a moment. His eyes gleamed and he said, "He left a letter for you. It took him a long time to write it. Lucid moments were very few ... very hard for him at the end."

A chill touched Pacys. Last year when he'd died, Hroman's father had been five years Pacys's junior. Death didn't scare the bard, but old age, infirmity, and mental loss did. It was hard not to grow more terrified with each passing year.

"Then I shall read it with pleasure," Pacys said.

"I've not read it," Hroman said, "so I don't know what he had to say, or if any of it makes sense."

"Your father was a good man," Pacys told him. "He'd not leave anything behind that didn't reflect that. I need only look at you to know that."

"Kind words," Hroman acknowledged.

"And truly meant." The bard held up the wine bottle. "To your father. One of the best men I ever knew. Fearless in heart and strong in his faith." He drank deeply from the bottle, then passed it back to the priest. The wine was sweet and dry.

Hroman drank deeply too. "What brings you to Waterdeep, old friend? A simple longing to see the Sword Coast again?"

"Compulsion," Pacys admitted. "My end time lies not too far before me now, and I'm not fool enough to believe any other way."

Hroman started to object and Pacys shushed him with a raised hand. "Kind words lie out of kindness, young Hroman, that's why numbers were invented."

Hroman passed the wine bottle back across.

"I come on a quest," Pacys said. "Of sorts."

"Of sorts?"

"I can't say that it's a true quest," the old bard admitted. "I can only hope for divine intervention." He drank again, passed the bottle back, then pulled the yarting from the bed and opened the case. He took it across his knee and strummed the strings. Even though it was in perfect pitch, he twisted the tuning pegs, gradually returning them to the positions they were in. "Listen." His hands glided across the strings, fingertips massaging the frets.

Music, beautiful and as true as rainwater, filled the room.

"Dear Oghma, but I've never heard the like," Hroman said when Pacys stopped playing.

"Neither have I," the old bard said. "Not outside of my head."

"What is it?"

"I don't know." Pacys's hands worked the yarting, underscoring their conversation with the lyrical sound. "Fourteen years ago, when last I saw you and your father here in Waterdeep, I was given that piece of a song. It came to me in a dream. That was the same night the mermen first came to live in Waterdeep Harbor."

"The ones who claimed that a great horror had risen in the seas to the south and destroyed their village," Hroman said. "I remember. Piergeiron kept the City Watch on double shifts for a time afterward."

Pacys nodded and asked, "Do you think I am a good bard?"

Hroman seemed surprised by the question. "Of course. Any time you showed up in Waterdeep, taverns requested you. Lords and ladies. You had a hearth and a home anywhere you wanted. Why you chose to spend so much time with a poor priest of Oghma used to astound my father."

"Your father and I were kindred spirits," Pacys said. "A slight tilting of the past of either one of us, and it might have been us filling the other's shoes. Your father had an excellent voice, but he chose to serve Oghma more directly than I, though I felt the pull of the priest's robes as well. Felt it most strongly."

"I didn't know."

"Now you do, and now you'll know why I see that I am not the bard everyone believes me to be." Pacys kept strumming the yarting, playing the melody over and over, wishing more might come to him. "Any bard might sing the songs of another, or tell the tales once he has heard them. It's a bard's gift to tell any tale, sing any song that he's heard. Most can even offer their own rendition of that tale or song, but none may approach the original singer's or teller's power for that song or story." He plucked the strings, gathering the crescendo that lurked in the back-beat of the tune he played. "To know true power as a bard, there must be a tale or a song that is always and forever acknowledged to belong to the composer."

Hroman nodded. "It's like that with treatises written by those inspired by Oghma."

"Yes." Pacys turned his melody to bittersweet memory. "I've covered the lands of Faerun, sang and orated in castles and palaces, relayed bawdy tales in the crassest of coast dives among the harshest of men, and given voice to some of the most spiritually uplifting music in temples scattered across those lands. I've traveled and seen things that most men only dream of, had adventures that fire a young boy's heart as he listens to the tales his fathers and kin tell around a campfire at night, or by the safety of the home hearth, but never-*never*-in that time have I crafted a song that will be remembered as mine."

Hroman remained silent.

"What about you?" Pacys asked. "Are there treatises in Sandrew's Great Library that you have authored? New ways of thinking about old things? Or old ways of thinking about new things?"

"Yes."

"Then you have been gifted," Pacys said in a dry voice, "and you should never forget to give thanks for that. In some distant time, a young priest will open a scroll you have written and know your thinking."

"That doesn't mean he'll agree with it."

In spite of the darkness that threatened to quench his spirit in the night of the city and after all the miles he'd walked that day, Pacys smiled. "Whether they lay accolades at your feet or descry everything you've put on paper, they'll remember and know you. That's immortality of a kind."

"You feel that's what you're missing?"

Pacys broke the bittersweet melody and went back to the haunting one again. They were part of the same thing, he knew that in his heart and in his talent, but how to bind them? What words went with the music, he had no clue.

"How much did your father write, Hroman," he asked, "that's going into Sandrew's Great Library?"

"Tomes."

"Exactly. Your father was a man of letters, a man who thought well and deep, a man I treasured as a friend. I could lay my soul bare on several levels and trust him to have a care with it." Pacys paused a moment, listening to the music he made. "I wanted to talk with him again and see if he could offer any direction for this melody that haunts me so."

Hroman waited in silence a moment before saying, "Would you mind talking of it with me?"

"Over a bottle of the temple's finest vintage?" Pacys asked. He shook his head. "I'd not mind at all. I couldn't imagine better company."

"When you played tonight, during a couple of the old songs I remembered from times past when you were here, I could almost see my father sitting in the shadows. Your music always soothed him."

"I worked very hard for it to."

"Then why isn't it enough that you brought so much happiness to people?"

"Because," Pacys said, his voice thickening in spite of his skill, "I want a part of me to live forever. I want bards years from now to say that they have this song, whatever it is, by way of Pacys the Bard. I want it to be a song of such magnitude that it brings tears to the strongest of men and brings strength to the weakest of men. I want a story of love so pure and unfulfilled that it will truly hurt all who hear it. I want to fill the listeners with fear when they hear of the villain."

"That's a difficult request."

Pacys smiled gently. "I could settle for no less."

"You've written songs before, written tunes."

"Nothing like that," the bard said wistfully.

"You said a quest drew you back to Waterdeep."

Pacys drank from the bottle again, wetting his throat with the wine. "Fourteen years ago, I felt the touch of Oghma on me. When I watched those mermen swim into the harbor, I knew. The first notes came to me then and wouldn't leave my thoughts. Your father was at a table with me down on Dock Street."

"And nothing has happened since?"

Shrugging, Pacys said, "A chord here, a note there. In the early years, I followed my heart, desperate to find out why I'd been given that much of the song but nothing else. I traveled more than ever, going into places I'd never thought I'd go, and into countries I'd never even heard of at all. I increased my repertoire considerably."

"Never finding the song?"

"No. A tenday ago, I was in Neverwinter as a guest of Lord Nasher. I was talking to him, strumming my yarting as I am doing with you now, and a large section of one of the bridging sequences was given to me." Pacys turned his attention back to his instrument and played it. He knew the power of the piece when he saw Hroman sit back in slack-jawed amazement.

"I have never," the priest whispered, "heard *anything* so beautiful."

"Nor have I." Stating the truth almost broke Pacys's heart because the music was unfinished.

"Can't you finish it?"

Pacys shook his head. "I've tried. Everything I've tried to graft onto it sounds false."

"Why come here if you were given that piece in Neverwinter?"

"Lord Nasher's interested in magic," Pacys said. "That's no secret. Of late, he's been counseling with a young woman who's caught his eye and claims some clairvoyance through a deck of cards she uses to tell fortunes. She laid out a pattern for me and told me I'd find the next piece of the secret of the song back where it first began for me."

"Waterdeep?"

Pacys nodded. "There can be no other place."

Hroman was silent for a time. "The music you played, it was beautiful, but it spoke of war to me. Of violence and anger, and men dying by the handfuls."

"Yes," Pacys agreed reluctantly.

"That can't happen here. This is the safest place along the Sword Coast."

"That's what I thought too, Hroman, but this music is like no other I've ever encountered. It's mine, crafted by the gods and given to me."

The priest hesitated. "Which gods, my friend? Have you stopped to ask yourself this?"

"I've prayed," Pacys said. "Since I first heard that music fourteen years ago, I've prayed every day to Oghma to reveal the secrets of it. The pattern the girl laid out for me in Neverwinter showed Oghma's hand in what was going on. There's no evil working here. Not in my part of things."

"Then I will pray for you as well, and for this city should such a thing ever touch her shores." Hroman drank from the wine bottle and passed it back.

A hurried knock sounded on the door as Pacys drank down the dregs of the bottle.

"What is it?" Hroman asked.

"The city's under attack," a young, bearded priest announced as he stuck his head around the door, "out in the harbor. Sahuagin and sea monsters have been called in from the deeps. A storm the like of which no one has ever seen before. They're saying . . . I'm told the guard are all but decimated out in the harbor. There's a fear that the sahuagin will push on into Waterdeep herself."

Pacys pushed himself from the bed. "Do you have horses?" he asked Hroman.

"Yes." Hroman gave orders at once, striding out into the hall. His voice crackled like thunder through the hallway, waking priests and clergy from their beds.

The old bard trailed after the priest, his heart beating with excitement. He took only his yarting at first, then reached back for the staff that had been his constant companion almost as long as the instrument had been. The fragments of the song filled his mind, pushing out the fear and wonderment of the attack. For the moment, nothing else mattered but the song.

XI

12 Mirtul, the Year of the Gauntlet

"Can you make it?" Malorrie asked.

"Aye." Jherek took another shuddering breath, straining against the blood-bloat in his injured lung. Crimson spilled over his chin now as well and stained the back of his hand where he wiped it away. "Just need-a moment-get my second wind."

Widow's Hill, like Captain's Cliff, separated the affluent from the common in Velen. The houses in the area ranged in all sizes and architecture. Madame litaar's home, and Jherek always thought of it as such even though it was also his home, stood two stories tall, with a widow's walk stretching out from the top floor to overlook the harbor. A high-peaked roof with a handful of different surface slants juttied up toward the dark skies. Lights burned behind the multi-paned glass windows but the house remained dark. The shutters still hung on the house because of the seasonal storms.

He stumbled along the partially overgrown trail made by children sneaking back and forth to the harbor without knowledge of their parents. At times the grade grew so steep he had to lean into it with his hands and force his way up. His blood-filled lung weighed him heavily.

Malorrie followed along at his side. As usual, the phantom's feet never even stirred the grass. He didn't try to help. "Gods, but you're an obstinate boy."

Jherek ignored him and grabbed a sapling. He pulled himself up further, then seized branches and used them to make his way. Spots swam in his vision by the time he reached the crest.

A four foot high wooden fence painted a pristine white surrounded Madame litaar's front yard. Upkeep of that fence had been one of Jherek's first chores after he'd gone to live with the woman. Over the years, he'd painted and mended it several times, taking pride in what he'd been able to accomplish. Rose bushes and flowers filled crushed clamshell beds, and a small pond occupied the northeastern corner. Tall steps led up to the front porch where handmade rocking chairs looked out to sea.

Jherek staggered across the narrow and rutted wagon road that wove up through Widow's Hill. He paused at the gate, unable to focus enough to work the simple lock that held it closed.

"Allow me." Malorrie flicked it open, then shoved the gate aside.

As Jherek walked past the small pond, a watery coil slithered up from the mossy depths and thrust itself in his direction. Instantly the cold chill he always got when the water weird's full attention settled on him cut through him like a knife. He'd never liked the creature, but Madame litaar maintained it as a guardian against footpads. He kept his eyes on the creature's wedge-shaped head as it stared at him while he went up the steps to the porch.

Perspiration filmed his face by the time he reached the top step. His vision was so blurred that he thought he was seeing things at first. In the shadows laying across the expansive porch, the table and chairs weren't immediately noticeable.

His travel kit sat on the table, neatly packed and squared away. The backpack beside it bulged. Over the years, he hadn't bothered to collect many personal things because anything that didn't fit in a pack couldn't go with him if he had to leave. He didn't doubt that all of his possessions had been gathered on the table.

Seeing them there took away the last of his flagging strength and he sat numbly on the porch. His breath rasped hollowly in his ears.

He'd always thought of his stay with Madame litaar as transitory at best. He supposed he should have been surprised that his stay had lasted as long as it had. Obviously, now it was over.

Word from Finaren's crew had already climbed Widow's Hill.

XII

30 Ches, the Year of the Gauntlet

Laaqueel stared at the approaching black plague wagon, her heart hammering in her chest. She clenched the short sword in her fist as she said a prayer and prepared one of the spells that had been given her by Sekolah.

"Do not waste your fears or spells on that thing, my little malenti," Iakhovas growled behind her. "What you see before you in all its gaudy trappings is an apparition, a bad dream without substance. This

alley was named for that worthless abuse of power."

Laaqueel drew back uncertainly. The wagon unnerved her, but so did Iakhovas's knowledge of it. She'd helped prepare him regarding Waterdeep and she'd never heard of it.

"My time is wasting away," the wizard told her. He waved an arm, drawing his wererats to him. "You've already stepped over the line this night by questioning that damned woman, little malenti; have a care not make another such mistake. Tolerance is a virtue and I am not a champion of virtues. I judge you on your worth, and it's only outweighed by your frivolity or incompetence."

Ducking her head to avoid the cold gaze of his eye, Laaqueel remained still as the plague wagon passed her. She thought she saw the bones of the dead littering the wagon bed, but it might only have been a trick of the moonlight. When the wagon reached the end of the alley, it shimmered once and disappeared, taking with it the mournful creak of the wheels.

Iakhovas took the lead again without hesitation. He passed the first building across the alley on the left and stopped in front of the door to the second.

Laaqueel stopped behind him. She felt the dryness of her eyes as the lids dragged across them. Her skin felt tight as the harsh winds from the storm out in the harbor whistled up through the narrow streets and alleys leading up the inclines. She glanced back at the harbor. From her position, she could barely see the harbor, but it spread out from the Dock Ward, the flatness of the water contrasting sharply with the rolling pitch of the hills the city had been built on.

Several griffons from Waterdeep's air corps filled the air over the harbor. Their distinctive eagle wings and heads on their lions' bodies made them stand out against the smoke-filled night sky. Catapults still threw flaming missiles into the water inside the harbor and further out to sea where more sea creatures had gathered. Fire spread along the Dock Ward, burning buildings as well as ships at anchor. Laaqueel knew Iakhovas had spoken the truth when he said Waterdeep would bear the scars of the night's attack for years to come. It would become a symbol to her people that the hated surface dwellers could be driven from their own territory.

It would strike fear into the hearts of the humans.

She didn't delude herself, though. She knew she wasn't sure that Iakhovas was there because of Sekolah. The wizard had never denied knowing the Great Shark, but neither had he spoken of what relationship might exist between them.

The glyphs on the doors and wall surrounding them suddenly blazed with lambent emerald light. Laaqueel turned, raising her free hand in her defense with a spell at the ready.

"Be still, little malenti," Iakhovas commanded.

He centered himself in front of the door and spoke in that language Laaqueel had never been able to identify. Tattoos on his cheek, neck, and left forearm glowed with a matching green light, then shot out in beams no wider than a forefinger. The tattoos' beams touched the guardian glyphs built into the door and calmed them to dim glows.

Intrigued, Laaqueel glanced up at the battered sign hanging overhead: Serpenti Books & Folios. Constructed of sandstone, the shop's exterior showed signs of suffering through harsh weather conditions and dozens of years. The wares window where goods were normally displayed to attract passersby was crudely boarded over, leaving her with the impression that the business had been closed for a long time.

Iakhovas gestured at the door. In response, it opened with a creak and a flash of hot, bright light. The stench of burned clams swirled through the air for an instant. Without hesitation, the wizard strode into the building. He waved the wererats into position at the doorway.

"Come," he ordered Laaqueel.

The malenti followed him carefully, aware of the warning prickles running through her nervous system. The room was filled with books. Deep-hued bookshelves lined the wood-paneled walls and stood in stacks across the floor. Laaqueel had never seen so many books in her life. Only a few of the titles were visible to her, formed of raised gilt letters in gold, silver, and brightly colored thread. All of them seemed to concentrate on the hated field of magic.

A soft glow of blue light intensified in the back of the long room.

"You dare enter my sanctum unannounced?" a raspy voice challenged.

Turning, bringing her short sword up into the ready position, Laaqueel stared through the weak blue light.

A man sat at the other end of the long room. Piles of books occupied the shelves staggered all around him and stood in stacks across the rectangular table in front of him. The light came from glowing globes that floated behind him, leaving him only a featureless silhouette. Two empty chairs sat across the table

from him.

"You know me, Serpentil," Iakhovas offered, "and it will be your mistake if you do not. I scheduled this meeting with you at this time." He walked closer to the table.

The silhouette sat silent and dark for a moment. Laaqueel noted the thin-fingered hand that rested lightly on a slim black volume closest to the man, then the man pointed at the glowing globes behind him. Obediently, the globes floated higher and forward, shedding more light over the table and the man sitting there.

He was dark complexioned and long faced like a sea horse. Hooded eyes halfway concealed a burning gaze. His long black hair hung to his shoulders and his chin sported an aggressive tuft of beard. His clothing was simple and unadorned. He indicated the chairs across from him.

"You may sit."

Iakhovas ignored the chairs and remained standing. "I've not time to be taken liberties with. If you're Jannaxil Serpentil then we should conclude our business with haste."

"I'm Jannaxil," the man said. He kept the slim black volume in his hand, stoking it absently. "What business is that?"

"I've never found coyness becoming," Iakhovas warned.

"And I've never found admitting guilt to someone who could be with the Waterdhavian Watch to be especially profitable," Jannaxil stated. His eyes narrowed. "I don't know you."

Iakhovas reached into his magical cloak and brought out two heavy books. "Then let your greed recognize these and provide me all the introduction I require for this transaction." He laid them on the table. Jannaxil immediately reached for them, larceny in his darting eyes.

Laaqueel recognized the books. She had been wondering about them for the last month. Three months ago, she'd succeeded in attacking a surface dweller cargo ship and taking the ship's scribe prisoner. It had been at Iakhovas's request. Back in the sahuagin village where Iakhovas ruled as a prince, the wizard had put the scribe to work copying two of the ancient texts they had found in different places over the years at his direction. The malenti hadn't seen the use in any of them because she couldn't read them, much less in duplicating their contents. A month ago, Iakhovas had killed the scribe and fed him to the sharks that had been charmed into watching over the village.

Jannaxil flipped through the texts with a practiced eye. "These are not the originals."

"No," Iakhovas agreed. "You don't have the price for the originals."

"If these copies exist, there could be others," the book dealer replied shrewdly.

"After I deliver these to you," Iakhovas agreed, "even more copies could be made, each of which you could sell. Do not make the mistake of trifling with me."

Jannaxil closed the books and leaned back in his chair. His eyes flicked to Laaqueel and she felt him evaluating her. She was aware of the way he held his right hand protectively, and of the old knife scar that showed there. He cut his gaze back to Iakhovas. "Tell me something of the nature of the thing I'm trading you for these."

"The nature?" Iakhovas repeated. "What you have is mine. I've come to claim it. Be glad that I'm willing to give you anything for it instead of just taking it and your life."

"Perhaps taking it wouldn't be as easy as you believe," Jannaxil said. "It may look like I'm here alone, but trust me when I say this place is safeguarded."

"Not against me," Iakhovas whispered in his cold, malevolent voice, getting closer, threatening the other man by his sheer size. "Never against me and all that I could bring to bear on you, human. The war that's going on in the harbor I delivered it unto Waterdeep's door. I control forces and powers that you've yet to see in your shallow life. Give me the talisman while you still have a bargain laid before you."

The book dealer looked ready to argue more, then grew deathly quiet as he stared at Iakhovas.

Though Laaqueel didn't see the wizard change, she noticed that Iakhovas's shadows on the wall of shelves behind them suddenly swelled to gigantic proportions. There was a symmetry to the new shadow, but it possessed harsh angles as well. The overall shape seemed familiar, but it was gone again before the malenti could figure out the pattern.

"I'll not trouble myself to ask for it again," Iakhovas warned.

Pale and contrite, Jannaxil said, "Of course." The book dealer tapped a section of his desk three times with a forefinger. In response, a drawer opened up in the table top, looking much deeper than the table was thick. The book dealer called out a name. "Wonvorl." A triangular talisman of diamond and pink coral floated up from the magical drawer. He took it from the air and tossed it to Iakhovas.

The wizard caught the talisman easily. He rolled his left sleeve back, revealing a gold-worked band

that encircled his arm above his bicep. In the weak light of the floating globes, Laaqueel couldn't make out the details of the scrollwork cut into the band. There appeared to be a number of slots cut for different items. Some of them had been filled, but nearly all were empty. The triangular talisman fit into its appointed slot easily. A bright spark flashed against Iakhovas's palm, then quickly died away. He rolled his sleeve back down.

"What is that?" Jannaxil asked hoarsely. "That talisman was without a doubt one of the oldest things I've ever seen. And that band, I've never seen workmanship like that."

"Nor will you ever see its like again," Iakhovas stated. He turned and walked from the book shop. Laaqueel fell into step behind him.

Outside, Iakhovas headed back down Book Street, retracing their path to the docks. The wererats formed a loose perimeter around them. The streets were filled with Waterdhavian citizens with weapons, all running frantically in the direction of the harbor.

"We came here for that?" Laaqueel asked after a short time.

"Yes." The wizard glanced at her, a cruel smile on his face mocking her. "Don't be misled by the talisman's size, my little malenti. Even small keys are known to open big doors."

Laaqueel's anger ignited within her. "What is it?"

"Perhaps, someday, I'll let you know, if it amuses me to do so."

She spoke again without pausing to think. "My people have fought and died this night for that thing. We should at least know-"

Iakhovas wheeled on her, using his size to tower above her. "You think perhaps you should at least be allowed to know what they've fought and died for? Is that what you're trying to say?"

Laaqueel felt her face tighten even further under the rampant emotions that surged through her. She tried to speak but couldn't.

"You have to learn your place, little malenti," Iakhovas grated in his harsh whisper. "I am giving you and your people the means to wipe the surface dwellers from the seas of Toril, and even drive them back into the interior that the sahuagin can claim the coastal lands as well. Ill even protect you from whatever enemies would try to take this empire from you."

"For what?" Laaqueel demanded.

He shook his head. "Once, my little malenti, I ruled the seas of this world, and I choose to do so again."

"Sacrilege!" Laaqueel said. "Sekolah-"

"-Has more pressing matters than paying attention to one puny world out of all those open to him," Iakhovas finished for her. "Why else have the sahuagin had to rely more on themselves than on their god?"

"Sekolah teaches us to be unmerciful, trains us to be strong through hardship. Self-sufficiency is valued above all things."

"If your people were truly self-sufficient," Iakhovas said, "they wouldn't need me now, would they? They would have already dealt with the hated surface dwellers, but they haven't. The success we've had here tonight will only lead to more successes in the future." Laaqueel searched for a reply, but none came readily. Her attention shifted to a Waterdhavian Watch group that raced down the walk across the street. Two of the men wore wizard's robes showing the watch's colors of black, gold and green that were apparent even in the moonlight. She watched their heads turn as they came across from Iakhovas.

"Hold there!" one of the watch wizards ordered. He pulled a red glowing wand from his robes. The other guardsmen came around like a school of fish, turning as one.

Laaqueel appreciated their training but knew it made them dangerous if they saw through the illusion Iakhovas had cast. "Who are you people?" the watch wizard demanded. Citizens trapped between the two groups on the street quickly thinned around them, leaving them facing each other.

"We have a ship out in the harbor," Laaqueel replied after realizing Iakhovas wasn't going to answer.

"I want to see your papers," the wizard said, gesturing to one of the men around him. Several of the other watch members had drawn heavy crossbows.

"They have the sense that something is wrong," Iakhovas said. "They smell the sewer scent of the wererats. Even I couldn't disguise that from those who are magically adept. Stand ready."

Laaqueel wished they were closer to the harbor. There she would be at least *near* her element.

"Slay the man who approaches us," Iakhovas commanded quietly, "as soon as he's near enough to make sure of the kill."

Laaqueel stretched her empty hand down, hiding it behind her leg. She flipped her retractable claws out and waited. When the man stood across from her and reached out for her papers, she struck. Her claws

flashed across his throat, opening his jugular in a crimson rush. He fell to the street clutching at his torn throat.

The watch wizard pointed his wand. A bright flare shot from the end of it, wriggling like an eel and the color of fire coral. The mystic bolt streaked at Laaqueel's face. Before it could reach her, Iakhovas stretched out a hand. Tattoos along his arm glowed. In the next instant, the bright flare disintegrated into a shower of purple sparks, like a candle that had been snuffed out.

"Attack!" Iakhovas ordered. He dropped a hand in front of Laaqueel. "Not you, little malenti. The wererats possess a resistance to any weapons that aren't silver or have magical properties. You will remain with me."

The wererats shrugged forward, cluttering in a semi-human language mixed with high, piercing squeaks. They brandished their swords, shapeshifting into their hybrid forms. The watch members held their ground, immediately moving shield men forward while the heavy crossbowmen fired at Laaqueel and Iakhovas. All of the arrows struck an invisible barrier and shattered, the pieces dropping into the street.

Iakhovas gestured at the wizard in an intricate pattern and spoke only a few words.

The human screamed in fear and pain as the spell took him. His arm holding the wand changed into limestone and the transformation kept moving, petrifying the whole man in seconds. He lost his voice in mid-yell.

The crossbow quarrels pierced the flesh of the wererats but didn't slow them in any way. They hacked into the guards, killing a few at first, then barely held their ground as the superior swordsmanship of the watch members ground them to a standstill.

The second watch wizard flung an arm forward. When it was out in front of him, a roiling mass of flames leaped from his hand and streaked toward Iakhovas and Laaqueel.

Instinctively, the malenti cowered away from the fireball. The basic fear of fire ingrained in her people proved too strong to resist. Iakhovas turned his hand out again and the tattoos glowed once more. Before the fireball could gather power and explode, it was snuffed out.

Wind rose around her, gathering strength quickly, then pressed outward across the street, picking up dust and loose debris and hurling it into the tangled knot of wererats and Waterdhavian Watch members. Small stones gathered up and flung by the wind broke the windows of the buildings behind the combatants.

Iakhovas stepped forward, drawing an imaginary bow as he spoke a lyrical incantation. When he released the make-believe string, a gossamer arrow that looked like glazed white pearl with a foul reddish undercast streaked across the street and pierced the second wizard's stomach.

The watch wizard shrieked in pain and fell to his knees. His hands gripped the shaft protruding from his belly, and smoke curled up from his flesh. Just as the other watch members started to beat the wererats back, dozens of black and gray furry bodies charged from nearby alleys. The rat horde responding to the calls of the wererats swarmed over the watch members, penetrating the weak spots in their armor, getting underfoot, and dropping from the eaves overhead.

Threatening yells grew louder from the surrounding citizens, and Laaqueel recognized that the danger their party was in was far from over. A man came at her. She beat his sword aside, then ripped the side of his face open and kicked him back into the street.

"Let us take our leave," Iakhovas said. "They will attempt to shut the harbor down soon, and I've no wish to be here when they do. We've little time left to effect our escape." He turned and fled into the shadows of the nearest alley.

Panic vibrated in Laaqueel as she realized if she lost sight of Iakhovas she wouldn't be able to find her way back to the harbor. She ran after him, followed by the wererats.

After a moment, the surface dwellers took up the pursuit, staying well back of the party of invaders. Still, Laaqueel knew their courage would grow as their numbers did.

XIII

12 Mirtul, the Year of the Gauntlet

"This is going to hurt."

Jherek looked up into Madame Litaar's watery brown gaze and wanted to tell her that nothing could hurt more than finding his belongings packed when he returned home. He said nothing, though why he should respect her feelings at the moment was something he didn't understand. What was really confusing

was the way Madame litaar seemed so concerned about him now, after she'd packed him out of her house.

"I know," he said instead. He had trouble speaking around the tightness in his chest, caused from the blood-filled lung and his own inner turmoil.

"You're going to be all right, though, Jherek," the old woman promised.

Once, Jherek had been told, Madame litaar had been the most beautiful woman in all of Velen. Vestiges of that beauty still showed in the square lines of her face, in the broad forehead revealed by the way she wore her gray hair pulled back in a long braid. Her half-elven heritage showed in her pointed ears and the lines of her face. She didn't wear any of her accustomed jewelry due to the lateness of the hour. The cerulean blue bodice and long leather skirt she had on looked fresh, as if she'd dressed only a short time ago. She was usually early to bed, but tonight she'd been up waiting.

The young sailor sat on the porch as she'd directed, his legs splayed straight ahead of him. She'd cut his shirt from him in order not to jostle the quarrel embedded in his chest any further. Dried blood smeared his chest and stomach and stained his breeches. Streaks of it turned the hardwood floor of the porch brown in places. He regretted that; he knew how Madame litaar treasured a clean porch for her guests.

"Aye, ma'am," he gasped.

The pain in his chest had died away to a dull throb, but the increased pressure in his wounded lung was frightening. Even when everything around him had been out of his control, he'd always been able to control himself, his body. Now, not even that existed.

"Before I can give you a healing potion to cure your wounds," Madame litaar said, "I've got to get that quarrel out of you."

"Aye, ma'am."

She touched the feathered shaft carefully. Despite her advanced years, her hands remained steady. "I can't pull that quarrel out."

Jherek tried to talk, but his voice seemed caught for a moment. "I know."

She held his face in her work-roughened hands. "I could give you a sleep draught, Jherek, but I wouldn't be able to rouse you before dawn." She hesitated. "There's a ship you must catch tonight."

Jherek stared into her eyes, not knowing what to say. Madame litaar wasn't just kicking him out of her house, she was banishing him from the city.

"She's called *Breezerunner*," Madame litaar said. "Do you know her?"

"Aye, ma'am. She runs north, along Sword Coast." Jherek broke into a coughing fit and fresh blood bubbled up from his injured lung.

"She leaves port in only a few hours," the woman said. "I've paid for passage for you under another name. They won't know you. Do you understand?"

"Aye, ma'am."

Questions filled Jherek's mind, pricking at the hurt her words caused him. Before he could utter any of them, Madame litaar shoved an open hand at the quarrel, stopping less than an inch short of actually touching it. The young sailor thought he saw blue sparks flare from her fingertips, but he couldn't be sure because in the next moment pain ripped through his chest. He tried to scream but couldn't.

The arrow jerked inside him as if it had been shot yet again. He felt it pierce his back and come out the other side, propelled by Madame litaar's magic. He jerked, trying to escape the agony, but Madame litaar wrapped her arms around his shoulders and held him to her until it passed. He made himself be still, not wanting to accidentally hurt her. Shudders quivered through his body like he was a tuning fork. Perspiration broke out along his brow and upper lip. Fresh blood spilled down his chest and back.

He tried to speak, but blood gurgled up from the wounded lung, a new torrent unleashed. He started drowning then as the other lung filled as well and couldn't find the heart to break free of Madame litaar's grip. He'd always feared he'd be alone when he died, and no one would care. At least here, in her arms, he could hold onto the illusion of family.

XIV

30 Ches, the Year of the Gauntlet

"Oghma grant us mercy."

Pacys hung onto the wagon seat as Hroman prayed and steered the pulling team along Dock Street beside him. The intersection to Ship Street lay just ahead, but the bard knew there'd be no passing along it.

The sahuagin had risen from the waters of the harbor and taken their battle into the Mermaid's Arms festhall and to the shipbuilding shed of Arnagus the Shipwright, filling the streets there. Men ran with torches, but the light from the fires spreading uncontrolled across the harbor lit the area up. The storm out on the water lashed high waves over the docks, well above the normal waterline.

Looking further out into the harbor, Pacys looked across the burning husks of ships in the docks. Sailors ran the decks with buckets of wet sand and water, but Pacys knew it would never be enough to save them all.

Mystical lightning lit up the savage sky, streaking down from on high to targets in the water below. The electrical display looked at home in the whirling storm.

"Oghma damn all sahuagin for their black hearts and insatiable, hellish appetites," Hroman cursed. He pulled his team up short, causing them to whinny in protest. They reared and bucked in their traces, eyes rolling white.

"It isn't only the sahuagin," Pacys said in disbelief. He watched the heads of huge creatures breaking the water of the harbor and identified only a few of them. Never had he seen so many of them gathered in one place. "There's something very wrong here. The sahuagin alone could never bring all these creatures together."

A flaming catapult load from Castle Waterdeep flared through the night sky and burst against a giant turtle's shell. The huge carapace shattered and the dying creature sank beneath the water. The giant turtle had pushed its way through the temporary structures that had been built over the waters of Smuggler's Dock to celebrate Fair Seas Festival, leaving only carnage in its wake.

Griffon riders patrolled the sky armed with bows and arrows. Only a few had thought to arm themselves with pitch-pots to fire their arrows. The Waterdhavian air corps proved merciless in their attack, swooping out over the harbor as well as the dock area to track down their quarry. When a flaming arrow embedded in a sahuagin, the sea devil dropped at once, torn by painful convulsions.

A cog with its prow burned nearly to the waterline finally gave up its struggle to remain afloat. The ship went down with several hands aboard. None of them had a chance to make it back to shore. A savagery of sharks lay in wait below the water. The storm-tossed waters roiled even more when the marine predators attacked the men.

Hroman bellowed at his priests, urging them into the battle. He was as quick thinking as his father, Pacys noted, listening to how the younger man broke the priests off into groups, charging each with taking control of the other wagon loads of priests arriving from the Font of Knowledge. Some were told to aid in fighting, while others were commanded to set up communication lines and medical treatment centers.

A cold chill ran through the bard as he watched the priests. Pacys knew it would be too little too late. Corpses of the Waterdhavian Watch and Guard members littered Dock Street as far as the eye could see. Mixed in with them were sahuagin, aboleths, mermen, sea horses, men who were trapped in near-rat bodies or near-wolf bodies with flippers instead of hands, marine trolls, and even the twenty foot mottled green body of a giant bloodworm stretched halfway out of the harbor water. Pacys didn't know if the heaving waves had thrown the worm ashore or if it had followed its prey there.

He left Hroman's side as the priest led his people into battle. The bard took his own path through the world as he'd always done, even though doing that had taken him so far from the lands he'd known and the people he'd loved.

Waterdeep was a favorite place, filled with precious memories and merchants who'd had deep pockets for a bard who could sing or tell a tale properly. He grew more afraid that even should the city withstand the current aggression, it would never be the same again.

The yarting hung down over his back, and he carried the staff in his right hand. Pacys made for the pilings lining the docking berths. Fleetswake had drawn ships from all over Faerun. With the light given off by the burning ships, he spotted the different flags easily. From the way it looked in the harbor at the moment, they'd all come to lose their ships and cargo, maybe even their very lives.

Another wave crashed over the pilings, throwing water across the old bard's robes. Half a body came with it, thudding heavily onto the wet cobblestone street. The upper torso of a man rolled drunkenly on the street with the water splashed out away from it. The dead man lay facedown, his left arm ending in splintered bone where his hand and forearm had been.

Despite the roaring wind that followed the lashing waves in, Pacys heard another sound. Music echoed in his head, harsh, unforgiving notes that spoke of pain and confusion, of an evil darkness that wanted only to consume. It was the most hurtful and fearful thing he'd ever heard.

Drenched as he was, standing at the edge of the harbor where so many still fought for their lives, the

old bard opened himself up to the music, memorizing it note by note. Even though he kept his eyes open, his vision blanked out before him and the slap of running feet against wet cobblestones around him muted to silence. Acrid wood smoke from the burning ships still singed his nose and burned his lungs. He ignored the irritation, marking the notes, choosing the pitch of the voice that would accompany it.

The words, Oghma help him, the words came so easily to his lips.

"O City of Splendors who stands so steep,

Taken by a black-hearted horde from the deep.

Sahuagin fangs, sahuagin jaws,

Shark-kin,

Wedded to darkest evil with power so old.

Black storm-tossed waters, yellow fire that gnaws,

Thought lost to the world of men,

Tempered to anger that burns so cold.

He comes, riding on a black wave,

Looking for a world to enslave."

Moonlight splintered through Pacys's vision, drawing him away from the intoxicating music. He wanted to scream in frustration, knowing he'd been so close to the song, then he spotted the marine scrag crawling over the pilings in front of him.

The trollkin snarled its rage as its dark eyes locked with the bard's. It heaved itself from the splash of the waves overtaking Dock Street and landed on its wide, webbed feet. Seaweed colored hair hung limply to the broad, sloping shoulders. Green scales made up the thick skin that covered it, and the smell it exuded almost made Pacys gag. It hurled itself at the bard in a rush, without warning. A handful of claws cut the air toward the old man's face.

XV

12 Mirtul, the Year of the Gauntlet

"Open your mouth and drink," Madame litaar commanded. "Drink if you would live."

Jherek opened his mouth automatically, obeying the woman. He wanted to tell her there was no way he could drink; he couldn't breathe. He wanted to tell her that he didn't want to live. She was kicking him out of her home. Why would she care?

He tasted the minty flavor of the special healing potion that she brewed in her home roll across his tongue. She'd used it before, to cure a fever that had nearly claimed his life after he'd moved in with her six years ago, and again to heal his broken leg. Some of the pain filling his head vanished as the potion worked its magic, spreading out through him in warm vibrations.

"Swallow," Madame litaar instructed.

Jherek held the potion in his mouth. Even as it cleared his thoughts and took the pain from his head, he knew it wouldn't remove the ache in his heart. It was better to be dead, he decided. Still, he was surprised how much of him wanted to live. It took every bit of control he could muster not to swallow the healing potion even with the rising blood gorging his throat.

"Jherek," Madame litaar said, sounding more concerned, "I'm no priest to work a heal spell with nothing but my hands. You have to swallow if I'm to save you." She stroked his throat, the way she'd done when he was twelve, lying abed so sick and scared.

He wanted to tell her there was no fear of death for him now. Leaving was the best thing, and it would be so easy. His vision dimmed.

She shook him. "Jherek."

Then the voice thundered in his head. *Live, that you may serve! The time is near!*

Stunned by the proclamation, Jherek swallowed the potion. He tried to speak, to ask more, but couldn't. The elixir ran down into his stomach, gathering speed like the falling wave of an incoming tide until it crashed inside him, then spread throughout his body like water coming down off a snowcap, filling in every crack and crevice. He felt like his body was on fire, burning to a cinder. His muscles writhed against each other, and the torn ones in his chest knitted, leaving only a curious itch.

He drew in a hoarse breath, filling his mended lungs. As he breathed, shamed by what he'd thought and what he'd wanted to do in spite of Madame litaar's efforts, he opened his eyes.

She stood in front of him, her face as angry as he'd ever seen. "What did you think you were doing?" she asked.

Jherek couldn't have answered if he'd wanted to. He couldn't even meet her eye. He looked out across the yard beyond the porch.

"Answer me, Jherek," she ordered, "and look at me when you do."

Reluctantly, he swiveled his gaze toward her. "I was thinking," he said in a halting voice choked with his pain, "that perhaps it would be easier if I died. I didn't think that it mattered, as long as I left this house."

"Is that what you think? That I'm chasing you from this house?" Madame Litaar lifted her gaze to meet Malorrie's. "Didn't you talk to him?"

"Lady," the phantom said, "when I found the boy, he already had the quarrel in him and he was bleeding to death. There was no time to explain things."

Her face softened further. "So the first thing you saw when you reached this house," she said, "*your* house, were your things packed on that table?"

Jherek didn't answer. He didn't know what to say. The shock of the voice speaking to him twice over such a short time, losing his employment on *Butterfly*, finding his things packed, and being so close to death had left him empty-headed.

"Come inside," she said more gently. She took him by the arm, guiding him with the surprising strength she'd always had. "I've got a kettle of stew on. We need to talk, and you need to catch *Breezerunner* before she sets sail. There's not much time and you must hurry."

XVI

30 Ches, the Year of the Gauntlet

Pacys ducked beneath the marine scrag's open-taloned blow, scuttling out of the way with a quickness learned over decades fighting for his life. His muscles and bones were no longer those of a young man, but he knew how to use what he had, and it didn't take much to kill, not if a man knew where to strike.

His feet moved across the soaked cobblestones as surely as an acrobat's or a dancer's. He stood again as the scrag's talons whisked by his head. Folding his staff under his arm and taking a fresh grip on it, he lifted the iron-shod pole and swept the opposite end into the scrag's head with all his strength.

The iron cap at the end of the staff rang against the scrag's head. Mottled green skin split and ichor oozed out, streaking the creature's face.

The scrag grunted in pain, staggered only a little by the blow. It turned quickly, ripping the other hand across at Pacys's stomach.

The old bard reversed his staff and speared it down toward the cobblestones at his feet. He had it braced by the time the scrag's blow came and used it to block the talons away from his body. The end of the staff braced against the cobblestones skidded only a little from the impact, but the blow missed him. Then he was in motion again, stepping back and to the scrag's left. The creature snarled in frustration and anger. It reached for the bard, trying to get hold of him.

As his attacker stepped forward, Pacys lifted his staff between the scrag's legs, tangling them. The creature fell, yowling in surprise, and landed on the cobblestones three yards away. It recovered quickly, pushing itself to its feet. The blood that had splattered its face made it look even more menacing.

Breathing faster than he knew he would have been in his younger years, Pacys twisted the middle of the staff. Foot-long steel blades suddenly flared from the ends of the bard's weapon and locked into place.

The scrag saw the blade too late. Before it had taken three steps, it impaled itself on the staff.

Knowing that trolls in general were hard to kill without fire or acid, Pacys used the leverage afforded by the staff. He planted the other staff blade against the cobblestones and prayed the steel was tempered strong enough to hold. Using the power of the scrag's charge and his own strength, the bard flipped the ten foot tall creature over, throwing it onto one of the nearby burning boats still tied up at the dock.

When the scrag hit the blazing ship, its skin popped and crackled, turning black immediately and splitting open to reveal the red meat below. The creature died before it could scramble off the ship into the water.

Breathing hard, Pacys scanned the nearby water again, looking for further enemies. He twisted the staff once more and withdrew the hidden blades. Mist whipped in from the storm brewing out in the harbor, making him narrow his eyes. He reached for the song, hoping that more of it was there for him.

Some words came to mind as he attempted to describe what was happening, but they were disjointed fragments of the song he'd been weaving together. The battle for the harbor continued. Savvy sea captains mustered their crews and managed to repel some of the boarders. A dragon turtle breathed out steam and burned a griffon and its rider from the sky. The blackened corpses tumbled into the dark water, then the turtle in turn was attacked by a group of mermen mounted on sea horses. The mermen darted at the huge creature, throwing javelins into it. When the turtle had enough, it dived underwater, but the mermen didn't give up the chase and dived on their mounts as well.

A woman's shriek drew the bard's attention. He whipped his head back to look toward the Mermaid's Arms. The festhall had become a bloodbath as sahuagin fought with the patrons. A mass of other fights still filled the street and intersection in front of the festhall. Pacys couldn't help wondering about how many would die before morning.

He drank in all the sights, feeling guilty at being so greedy to see all the carnage. He knew there were other bards in the city, and he knew they'd all have their tales to tell of the battle for Waterdeep Harbor. Realization of that made a small kernel of doubt grow inside him. A wave of heat washed over him from the burning ships at the nearby docks, pushed by the howling winds blowing across the harbor from the Sea of Swords. The stench of brine, tainted with smoke, interspersed with blood, filled the air.

Knowing he could go no further down Dock Street, Pacys turned and went back the other way, back toward Asteril's Way. He saw the guild hall of the Order of Master Shipwrights and noticed the large group of Waterdhavian Guard that had gathered there. Evidently someone had decided to use the two-story guild hall as a staging area.

Pacys ran hard, feeling the familiar aches and twinges start in his knees, and the shortness of breath that plagued him these days. He didn't give in to the infirmity.

Another wave broke over the top of the pilings to his left and cut his feet out from under him. He got to his feet with effort, hacking and coughing as he tried to clear the brine from his lungs.

A loud smack sounded behind him, too loud to be anything human sized. Remembering the dead giant worm he'd seen, the bard turned and stared behind him, raising the staff to defend himself. He thought he had a momentary glimpse of a twenty foot long fish that started pulling itself along by four tentacles, but he saw instantly that his mind must have been playing tricks on him.

Ardynn stood before him, her brunette hair falling past her shoulders in a wavy mass of curls. She stood as tall as him, but had the full glow of a womanly body scarcely concealed by the white gossamer pantaloons she wore over a crimson body suit that left her arms and legs bare. Gold bracelets adorned her wrists and ankles, and the small ruby he'd given her all those years ago dangled from the fine gold chains wrapping her forehead. Her teeth were clean, white, and even. The barest trace of cinnamon scent clung to her as she came closer.

"Have you forgotten me so soon, young minstrel?" she asked in that mocking way she had.

"No." Pacys answered. There was no way he could forget her. The memory of when the bard had arrived at Maskyr's Eye had inspired a number of songs he'd written in his youth and later disguised for presentation in his travels. He'd been seventeen at the time, already tired of the life of farmer and horse breeder, and she'd awakened in him the wanderlust that followed him throughout his life.

Ardynn had been then as she was now, just as beautiful, and her voice sounding like elf-made honey. She'd sung at the Wizard's Hand, one of the finest inns in all the Vast. At the time, she'd been four years older than he was. She'd come to see the village because she'd heard of it and had never been there. When she'd left three days later, Pacys had gone with her despite his father's wishes. He could count on the fingers of one hand how many times he'd returned to the village in the decades since.

"Come kiss me, fool," she said. She lifted her arms out to him.

More than anything, Pacys wanted to go to her, but he didn't. He'd traveled with Ardynn for two years, learning the craft of the bard first, then learning of love, from her. At the end of two years, she'd left him. Ardynn had never been one to be tied down or responsible for too long. For Pacys, there'd been other teachers, other lovers, as he knew there had been with her. His heart, however, refused to feel the pull of any other as much as it did Ardynn.

The bard steeled himself, gathering his wits. The clamor of battle still echoed around him, but it sounded far away, in another place. It was hard to think, and somewhere in the back of his mind he knew there was a reason for that. "Where-" His voice locked up on him. "Do you love me?" He knew that hadn't been the question he'd meant to ask.

She laughed at him and the sound reminded him of sunlit waters trembling through a pebble bed on a distant and early morn. "Of course I love you," she answered. "I could love no other. If you won't come to

me, I'll come to you." She walked toward him.

He felt the staff in his hands, but his hands were curiously numb, the familiar grain of the wood hard to touch. He concentrated against the thickness in his mind as the roaring wind pushed against him.

"Where-where was the last place you saw me?"

"Tell me," she entreated.

"It was in Thar," Pacys said. "We'd both heard through our respective sources of the archeological dig going on there by Fannt Golsway. He'd been hired by Thusk Tharmuil to investigate stories of the ogre empire that had been there before Beldoran killed the creatures out a hundred years before."

"I remember," Ardynn said.

"In those days, Golsway was at his apex," Pacys went on, warming to the bones of the story. "He actively pursued knowledge and legend, finding out where the two met and where they parted."

"Yes." Her hand was only inches from his face.

"We both went there, hoping for a song or a tale, thriving on the same adventure that drove Golsway. He was a tight-mouthed man, but when he was ready to tell you of things, he held nothing back and had much to give. I've got a dozen and more songs and tales that I've woven from his experiences."

"I remember." She smiled more broadly.

"Golsway found his legend to be half true," Pacys said. "I got the song of his discoveries, and you, dear sweet Ardynn, you *died*."

He knocked her hand away with the staff, certain that he'd just saved his own life. The thing that called itself Ardynn drew back, her eyes narrowing in hatred and anger.

Pacys marshaled his strength against the thickness trying to fill his mind. Gradually, he pushed it away, allowing him to remember other things. He found the spell he sought and got himself ready to use it.

"You died when we were attacked by an ore horde drawn by Golsway's success, as were we. I tried to save you, but I couldn't. I prepared your grave myself, carrying you to the top of the coldest mountain I could find . . . where predators wouldn't find you, and I buried you."

"It was a bad dream," Ardynn said.

"No, you're only a memory, stolen from my mind," Pacys said in a harsh voice. "I buried the real Ardynn high on that mountain with my own hands. It took me eight days to leave her side, to find the strength inside myself to go. I'd been three days without water. It was winter and all the streams at the top of the mountain were frozen and snow-covered. I was the only one to come down from that mountain."

Ardynn lashed at him with her arm.

Pacys blocked with the staff and unleashed the magical energy pent up inside him. Over the years, he'd developed an ability toward things magical in nature and had added to his cache of skills.

Ardynn's image melted away, leaving the bulk of an aboleth. Twenty feet long and resembling an overfed trout with its bulbous head and fluked tail, the creature was blue-green with gray splotches. Four ten foot tentacles grew from its head. One of them was coiled up in pain, but the other three flicked out toward the bard.

Fool, the aboleth called out in its mind speech. *Your reflexes have only afforded you a small respite. I will have you, and once having you, I'll add your thoughts and memories to those I've already ingested.*

Pacys blocked the stabbing tentacles as they whipped toward him. Water slopped over the pilings again, almost toppling him from his feet. He completed his spell and felt the tingle run through his body as it took effect. Once he was certain the spell had worked, he stepped to the side, noticing the way his feet still splashed through the pools of water spread across Dock Street.

The aboleth used its tentacles to turn itself. The slitted purple-red eyes stacked one atop the other on its big head slid in their orbits as they searched for him. The tentacles flailed out for him, missing by inches.

Being able to turn himself invisible over the years had proven both entertaining and a good defensive strategy. The old bard twisted the staff again, baring the hidden blades. He breathed like a blacksmith's bellows pump, and the brine stung the back of his throat. As always, anything that bothered his throat concerned him. If his voice was damaged in any way, his career was over.

Pacys the bard, the aboleth called out, / *know you're still here. I can feel you, feel your thoughts in my mind.*

What good does it do you, O rancid beast? Pacys asked without speaking. He moved quietly and quickly, circling around behind the large fish. Carefully, he avoided any pools of water. His foe was intelligent enough to pick up the signs of an invisible person's passage even if it couldn't see him.

I'll find you, the aboleth threatened. *I'm much smarter than you.*

Who's brought you here? Pacys continued circling, gaining ground on the large creature as it pulled itself about with its tentacles.

The promise of a feast.

The sahuagin?

No. Another. The aboleth made a contented belch with its gills. *I've already eaten three humans this night. By morning I'll know what they were, who they were, and in the days that follow, I'll assimilate all.*

The thought chilled Pacys. The fact that aboleth were capable of absorbing the knowledge of those they'd eaten was known to him. Not all of that knowledge was useful to the aboleth. They lived beneath the water and couldn't do the manual labor of a human. Tentacles didn't replace hands. The old bard knew that the creatures maintained humans as slaves as well. He'd heard the stories of those few who had escaped.

You, old bard, would be a pearl to cherish, to be shown and to be coveted among my people. Even from the brief mind touch I made with you, I know you've lived a long time and know much. The aboleth continued turning. *I also know what you're afraid of. You're old, Pacys, and you haven't many years left. The song you're searching for will never happen, unless, after I eat your brain, I compose it myself. I could offer you that immortality you seek so desperately.*

Cold, hard laughter hammered Pacys's mind. He took a fresh grip on his staff, prepared his spell, and leaped to the creature's back.

The aboleth bucked at once when it felt him land on its side. Slime and muck covered its scaly skin. Pacys worked hard to pull himself up into position. Thankfully, the four tentacles streaking toward him all at the same time behind the creature's head got in each other's way.

He raised the staff and plunged it down into the aboleth's topmost eye, planting it deep.

Immediately, the aboleth mind screamed in pain. It flopped, pushing itself up on two of its tentacles while two more flailed for the embedded staff. One of them seized it and pulled.

Holding tight and staying low, Pacys hung onto the wooden shaft of the staff and got to his feet. He leaped from the aboleth and readied himself for the coming fall, keeping his body loose. He pointed a forefinger at the embedded staff and unleashed the mystical energy he'd summoned.

A jagged lightning bolt jetted only a few inches from his fingertips and lanced into the staff. Drawn by the metal under the staff's outer wooden surface, the electrical charge ripped down into the aboleth's brain, sundering it in a fiery explosion of sparks. It died screaming.

Even prepared and skilled as he was, Pacys hit Dock Street's cobblestones hard. The impact knocked the wind from his lungs and, from experience, he thought he felt a rib crack. He rolled as best he could and pushed himself to his feet, saying a quick prayer to Oghma with his thanks. He recovered his staff from the tort and charred aboleth's corpse, breathing shallowly through the stench of it.

Gazing out into the harbor, he noticed that some of the surviving ships and Waterdhavian Guard rakers had managed to gather in a small flotilla. Flaming arrows sped from the ships' decks but the distance was too great for Pacys to know if they were hitting their targets. Still, it was a good sign they were able to assemble.

Though the ships out in the harbor numbered perhaps a third of what they had in the beginning, the number of griffon riders continued to grow as more of the aerial garrisons flew in. More of the air corps seemed to be wizards or joined by wizards. Spells flew through the air, sizzling, sparkling, and flaming, seeking down through the storm-tossed waves to their targets.

Hurting and unable to draw a full breath with the damaged rib, Pacys trotted toward the gathering of watch and guard at the Order of Shipwrights' guild hall. Many of the men carried torches, and the bard guessed it was because the sahuagin's natural fear of that element. As he saw them standing there, though, the song returned to his head. He sought for the words, putting the pain out of his mind, shelving it with the fatigue he'd feel later.

"Halt!" a guard warned, stepping out from the crowd in front of the guild hall. He raised a crossbow to his shoulder and peered over it. "Who goes there?"

Pacys raised his hands high over his head, holding onto the staff. He scanned the young soldier's face with a poet's eye, noting the fear and the disbelief, the pain and the courage that fired the soldier's eyes. They were the untroubled blue of a calm sea, the color of true sapphire, and Pacys knew they would never again view the world the same way. Soot stained the young man's tanned face, and dark blood from a cut along his temple wept down his cheek.

"I am Pacys, a bard."

A grizzled sergeant stepped from the pack of Waterdhavian defenders, pressing his hand gently against the young man's crossbow. "Take that thing off him, Carthir. That man's no enemy. Did you see

what he did to that damned aboleth?"

"No sir," the young man replied. "Things haven't looked the way they were supposed to at all tonight." He lagged a little in removing the crossbow's threat.

"Stay back," the sergeant told Pacys. He was a short, blocky man with gray in his hair and beard. From the markings on his uniform and the scars that showed on his hands, arms, and face, the bard knew the sergeant was a career soldier. He'd already seen his share of hard times, but the night's battle was leaving its mark on him as well. His left hand was swathed in blood-stained bandages. "Only the Watch and Guard are allowed past this point."

"I understand," Pacys said. "How bad are things around the rest of the city?"

"Damned sea devils have attacked all along the coastline of the city," a junior civilar said, brushing burned hair from his shoulders. His right eye had swelled shut, or maybe it was gone entirely and he was standing there by a miracle of will. "Not as much as they have the harbor- everything here is more at sea level-but they've been there all the same."

"Will the city stand?" Pacys asked.

A crowd that had gathered along the sidewalks and streets just past the line the watch and guard had made pulled closer, and several men took up the same question the bard had asked. In seconds, the question became a cry that swelled until it echoed over the crash of the incoming waves and the storm.

The sergeant growled out an affirmative. Pacys saw rather than heard the man reply. He'd learned to read lips a long time ago. None of the crowd heard the answer, and the bard didn't know if the man felt comfortable enough to make the announcement in a louder voice.

The crowd came forward, no longer held back by the authority the uniforms brought with them. "Tell us!" a spokesman cried out. "Will Waterdeep stand?"

"Get back! Get back!" a senior civilar ordered, pushing at his own men to clear a circle ten feet across. Almost immediately, an azure star dawned in the circle five feet above the cobblestones in front of the guild hall.

Pacys turned and stared at the star, captivated by the color and the way it appeared out of nowhere. The azure star exploded suddenly, blossoming out to fill the ragged ten foot circle. The powerful flash temporarily blinded all who were watching, and the booming crackle of thunder that followed it quieted the fearful cries and questions of the townspeople.

When the azure starlight died back, a silhouette of a man on horseback took shape in the circle. As Pacys's vision returned, he recognized the man on the huge white horse.

Even a horse, the man looked tall and heavily muscled in his upper body and legs. Full plate armor covered him, primarily a silver that gleamed in the moonlight and reflected the burning fires and torches around him, but the black and gold colors of the watch and guard striped it as well. A white tabard with his family crest covered his chest and he carried his helm under one arm. His face was strong and square and solemn. Gray touched his temples but his youth and vigor were evident. A shield covered his left arm as he reined in the stamping war-horse.

After a moment, he raked his fierce gaze over the enlisted men and civilians. "I am Piergeiron!" he roared in a loud voice that echoed from the buildings and over the water. "Called Paladinson and Known Lord of Water-deep." He drew his great sword Halcyon and held it aloft so it gleamed. "As long as I can fight, this city will remain standing and be free!" He lifted the sword, and as if in answer, a salvo of flaming rock seared across the sky from Castle Waterdeep's catapults. They splashed down in the harbor around the bloodworms and dragon turtles, the biggest targets immediately available.

A frenzy ripped through the crowd of soldiers and townspeople alike. Pacys wasn't immune to it himself, feeling lifted immediately by the presence of the Waterdhavian lord.

The war-horse Dreadnought stamped restlessly, causing its full plate barding to ring. Piergeiron kept the animal under control. "I came here tonight to take the battle to those who dare raise arms against this, our city, our home! Now who stands with me?"

A triumphant cheer sounded around the guild hall and must have carried down Dock Street. In seconds, men down at Ship Street picked up the rallying cheer as well. Piergeiron Paladinson's name quickly became a battle cry.

The big man clamped his helm on his head and put spurs to his horse as his men cleared the way to Dock Street. Dreadnought reared as lightning split the sky asunder, casting livid purple light over the silver armor of man and horse. Then he was off, and the crowd of soldiers and townspeople followed in his wake, an army raised where only fearful men had stood before.

Gasping and in pain, Pacys followed. His nimble mind pushed and pulled at words, jerking them into

the order and cadence he wanted, smithing them into his song, polishing the ones that felt right. He knew Piergeiron had chosen his means of appearance, and the salvo of catapult loads that had followed. If they lived, if Waterdeep survived, Oghma be merciful and just, but what a song the bard would have to leave as his legacy.

XVII

12 Mirtul, the Year of the Gauntlet

"Live, that you may serve," Jherek said in frustration. "Madame litaar, I don't understand."

He sat at her table, finishing up the meal she'd prepared. As she'd promised, the venison stew was thick and hearty, filled with vegetables cut up fresh from the garden she and the household cook maintained.

Located in the front of the house, the dining room looked seaward. The ships in the harbor were visible from the height up Widow's Hill. Jherek knew which one was *Butterfly* even from this distance, and he caught himself looking wistfully at the ship more than he was comfortable with.

As with the rest of the house, the dining room kept mementos of its mistress's long and involved life. Jherek only knew a few of the stories behind the many objects that lined the shelves or occupied wall space. Madame litaar rarely talked about them, and he wasn't ill-mannered enough to ask. The table was round, hand-carved by her late husband from a great tree he'd felled. That same tree had also given him the lumber he'd needed to build the eight chairs for the table, her bed, and her bedroom suite. All of those, Jherek knew, had been wedding gifts he'd made for her before they married.

Madame litaar looked at him from where she sat at the head of the table. "Jherek, there's a reason for you being here."

"In your house?" the young sailor asked bitterly, thinking of his traveling kit packed outside. He felt good again, thanks to the healing potion and the hot meal. "That seems to have come to an end tonight."

She shook her head. "No. We've been through a lot together these past years. This will not break us. As long as I have a home, you'll have a home. That I swear to you on my husband's grave."

That, Jherek knew, was her firmest promise, and there was no arguing with it. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Live," she answered simply, "which is why I've arranged to send you on *Breezerunner* tonight. You must take it to Baldur's Gate. The vision I've had recently indicates that you'll find more of your destiny there. That ship is new to these waters, so no one aboard her will know you. Possibly they've heard of you while they've been in port, but they don't know you by sight."

"Running off in the middle of the night isn't being the kind of man I want to be," Jherek said stubbornly.

"You go so that you may see more clearly," the woman said. "That's something about you I've seen in my dreams of late. In order to grow, you must first leave Velen."

Her words struck a chord within the young sailor, and he remembered the dream of the mermaid in the clam. She had said something along the same lines, but with that memory came the image of the great shark, and that left him feeling cold.

"How many challengers do you think you'll find in Velen when the cock crows on the morrow?" Malorrie demanded.

As usual, the phantom leaned against the window overlooking the harbor, his arms crossed over his chest.

Jherek paused, knowing Malorrie was right. "I don't know." He used a knife to cut a hunk off the bread loaf on the wooden platter in the middle of the table, then used the bread to sop up the soup from his bowl. He guessed the incredible hunger he felt was one of the side-effects of the potion.

"Well, boy, there'll be plenty of them, I can assure you."

"I could fight."

"And be killed, perhaps," the phantom agreed. He looked at Jherek sternly. "I know that's unfair to say, but who's to say you'll only face one foe, or that they'll come at you where you can see them?" He shook his head. "Perhaps you'll kill one of those boys you've grown up with since you've been here. Would that be better?"

"No," he admitted, "but I don't want to be driven from home."

"I'm glad you feel that way," Madame Litaar said with a small smile. "I guessed that was the way you felt, but you've never said so, not in so many words."

"This *is* your home," Jherek said, hastening because he felt like he'd overstepped his bounds, "but I've enjoyed the time I've spent here."

"Good, but you need to realize this isn't the only home you'll know," the woman said. "Your home was also *Butterfly* and the sea. That will always be your true home, Jherek. I've seen it in the castings I've done concerning you. In the future, you're never far from the oceans."

"Everything now seems destined to keep me from the sea," Jherek said. "I couldn't sail with-" His voice faltered. He couldn't bring himself to say the word 'father.' "-with the crew of *Bunyip*."

"The river always finds its way out to sea eventually," Madame Litaar stated. "The ties that bind you to the sea are as strong as any of those in nature."

"'Live, that you may serve.' But serve who?" he asked. "For what reason?"

She looked at him and shook her head. "I don't know, but I know I've had a part in this. In all the years I've lived here, my home has never been harmed by the weather. Some thought it was because of the location, and others thought I managed a weather control spell. The same year the wind ripped the shingles from my roof, I'd also learned about a young boy who worked for Shipwright Makim who was good with wood and his hands. As you know, I went to Shipwright Makim and made a bid for your time since all the other roofers in Velen were busy, too busy even for me. It wasn't long after that I found out you were renting space in a stable for a bed and asked you to move in here. That's not behavior I'm accustomed to."

"Then why did you do it?" Jherek demanded.

"After I saw you, I was given a dream that you would be the one to repair the roof on my house. As you know, I never ignore my dreams. They all come true."

Jherek put sweet butter on another piece of bread. He didn't really feel like eating, but his survival instinct made him eat. When he'd first come to Velen as a homeless boy, before he'd gotten the job with Shipwright Makim, there'd been several hungry nights. He'd learned to eat his fill whenever he could since he didn't know when the next opportunity would occur. Thinking of leaving Velen inspired the same kind of fear in him, especially when he remembered how the wages Finaren had given him had been taken.

"Whoever-whatever-I am to serve, is it good or evil?" he asked.

Madame Litaar shook her head. "I can't say. As you know, those things don't touch me the same way they do others. I look at the person and how I relate to him or her. Even the best person is capable of an unkind word or thought, and even those who're considered evil by others are capable of gentleness and mercy. I judge them by their dealings with me and with what I see."

The answer didn't sit well with Jherek. It never had.

Growing up as he had in the wild and lawless abandon of pirates, unnourished by a mother's hand or gentle kiss, he'd known no security. When he'd arrived in Velen, fleeing for his life, he'd lived in absolute fear that had left him paralyzed for days before his meager store of stolen rations had given out and he'd had to find a way to eat. Even then, he knew he'd never steal. He'd made rules for himself, starting out with the things he knew he would never do. Working hard at the jobs he'd found, especially on *Butterfly*, he was just starting to figure out what he *could* do.

"You have a choice," Malorrie put in, turning to better face Jherek. "When the time comes, you'll have a choice whether or not you serve whatever has marked you."

"How do you know?"

"Because I know you," the phantom said. "I've trained you, boy, and so has the lady. We know what's in your heart. No one will lead you where you don't want to go."

"How can you be so sure I'll have a choice?"

"Because I did." Malorrie paused, reflecting. The window behind him showed through him. "I'd been dead a long time, boy, when I was asked to seek you out and train you."

Jherek was too stunned to speak.

Malorrie smiled in that wry way of his, drawing himself up to his full height. "You thought your meeting me was simply a chance encounter?"

"Velen is filled with ghosts."

"Not mine. I was summoned here from somewhere else."

That was news to Jherek, who'd always assumed the phantom had been a native. He knew Malorrie's body was buried on Widow's Hill. "Summoned by who?"

"A man I once knew and trusted. A man who'd died for me when the time came. When he asked me to look after you and train you in the ways of thinking and swordsmanship, I agreed."

"Did he know me?"

Malorrie shook his head. "This man died long before you were born, boy. He couldn't have known you. He was asked to contact me by someone else."

"Why you?"

"I don't know. There was a chance I wouldn't have been able to train you, I suppose. Phantoms and ghosts, even here in Velen, are usually not taken up with."

Jherek paused, trying to take it all in. "Why haven't you ever told me all this before?"

Malorrie shrugged. "I'd always assumed there'd be a right time to go into all of it, boy. Now, there's no more time. You're leaving and you'll be given your choice soon enough."

Jherek finished mopping up the last of the soup with the bit of bread he had left. "What if I'm not given a choice about whether I serve this-this thing?"

Malorrie gave him a dark glance and said, "Trust me, boy. With life, there's always a choice."

"Come, Jherek," Madame Litaar said. "If you're going to be at that ship on time tonight, you have to be going."

"Thank you for the meal," he said as he always did when she cooked for him. He cleared the dishes from the table and took them into the kitchen.

After a few unbelievably fast moments, he stood again on the porch, ready to leave everything he'd ever truly known and ever trusted. The brine in the air from the harbor filled his nostrils.

"I've put aside a few silvers for your trip," Madame Litaar said, folding a coin pouch into his hand. "Be careful. Should you need anything, the captains along the Sword Coast trade routes will be able to get a message to me."

"Thank you, lady," Jherek said graciously, "for all that you have done for me these last years."

The old woman's eyes brimmed with tears and she reached for Jherek with strong arms, pulling him close and holding him tight for a moment. "It was my pleasure, Jherek, and it will be again. This I know to be truth." She pushed him back, holding him at arm's length to take a final look at his face. She touched his cheek lightly. "By Azuth, how you have grown and yet how young you yet remain in spite of everything. Come back home as soon as you can, son."

Tears streaked Jherek's cheeks as well, and for once, he didn't feel shamed by them. "I will," he promised.

Malorrie cleared his throat, and said, "I'll do my leave-taking here as well, boy. If I followed you to the dock and someone aboard *Breezerunner* spotted me, it might draw unwelcome attention to you." He extended a hand.

Jherek took the phantom's hand, feeling the strength in the grip. "Thank you, too," he said. "I would never have survived at sea without your training, nor would I have completed myself as much as I have without your guidance in reading."

"Just you remember," Malorrie said, "love is more powerful than any magics. It'll make a strong man weak and a weak man strong. Don't be afraid to give of yourself when you're asked and you believe in the cause."

"I won't."

"There's my boy," the phantom said, tousling Jherek's hair.

Jherek shouldered his travel kit and turned his steps toward the docks. His mind was numb with all the changes he'd been through, all the things he'd lost, but the smell of the brine in the air reminded him he still lived. He paused only once in his journey, stopping in the tree line to gaze back at the house that had offered him the only security he'd ever known.

Live, that you may serve.

The words nestled coldly in his thinking, like a serpent coiled in the early dawn. He went down the hill, losing sight of the house as he entered the lower reaches of the city.

XVIII

30 Ches, the Year of the Gauntlet

Pacys joined the battle in front of the Mermaid's Arms festhall as soon as he caught up with the group Piergeiron Paladinson led. The guard and watch members spearheaded the charge after their commander. The great war-horse showed no hesitation about rushing into the sahuagin ranks, breaking them down with

his weight and ferocity. Dreadnought reared and brought iron-shod hooves down on the heads of the sea devils within reach, crushing them. Piergeiron swung his sword and chopped into the sea devils.

It was bloody work, and the bard followed the carnage. His feet, legs, and arms grew slippery with the coppery blood of men and sahuagin. He swung the staff with skill, avoiding the tridents of the invaders, and slashed them with the concealed blades.

Piergeiron wheeled his mount around in a half circle that knocked a small group of sahuagin in all directions.

"Put fire in front of the building," he roared. "Use the lanterns!"

Watch members grabbed the lighted lanterns from the festhall's entrance and broke them on the ground in front of the building. The lanterns' reservoirs carried over a gallon of oil each, enough to burn through most of the night. More decorative lanterns had been added for Fleetswake, and those were taken as well. In seconds, a line of oil was laid before the festhall then fired. Black smoke coiled up from it, making it hard to breathe. The sahuagin cowered at once, though, breaking from their assault on the festhall.

Pacys whirled with more skill than speed, using his hands and wrists to deflect the trident shoved at his face instead of jerking his body out of the way. In a continuous motion, he whipped the staff back and slit the throat of the sahuagin standing in front of him.

"Stand back!" a man nearby warned.

Turning, Pacys spotted a broad shouldered dwarf running from the festhall's interior only half dressed. The dwarf carried a flaming sahuagin high over his head. He threw the burning sea devil into a small group of its fellows and all the sahuagin when down, struggling to get away from the flames.

The dwarfs face radiated hatred. "Try and interrupt Ol' Waggitt's night of fun after all them days at sea, will ya?" he shouted. "Scare them girls what smell so nice and be so willing? Gonna give you a taste of Bloodrazor for your trouble, you damn beasties!" He reached back over his shoulder and freed a double-bitted broadaxe. With a harsh cry of challenge, he hurled himself into the group of sahuagin.

Pacys recognized the dwarf's name. He was a fierce pirate from the north, but now his axe was turned in the service of defending the city. All surface dwellers, upstanding citizens as well as rakehells, depended on Waterdeep.

The sahuagin broke and retreated back to the pilings, trying to hold their position amid crates and barrels that were in the process of being off-loaded from the docked ships.

Piergeiron wheeled his mount again, yanking his sword from the skull of the sahuagin he'd just killed. He got his horse steadied under him and the light from the line of fire defending the Mermaid's Arms festhall gleamed across his broad face when he lifted his visor.

Pacys painted the man's look in his mind's eye, knowing he'd forever have that image. Strong pictures stayed with him. He looked past Piergeiron and saw that Arnagus the Shipwright's building still stood. Men fought from the warehouse doors, holding their own. The half-finished ship that had stood in dry dock was now wreathed in flames.

The Waterdhavian lord rallied his troops around him, then spurred his horse, calling out for archers to strike. Arrows feathered the cargo and the sahuagin, killing some while driving the rest to cover. Pacys joined the charge, following the watch and guard members.

Before they reached the sahuagin, a monstrous head lifted from the ocean still lapping over the pilings. Piergeiron held the charge up, but Pacys knew it would be too late.

The giant sea snake towered twenty feet out of the water, well within striking range of Dock Street. The wedge-shaped black and green head split suddenly, revealing large fangs and a forked tongue. The snake lashed out at once, and Piergeiron spurred his horse again, raising his shield high to intercept the strike.

Less than a yard's length from the Waterdhavian lord, the sea snake was seized by a giant disembodied hand that reached down from the sky. The thumb and fingers wrapped around the neck. The hand stopped the snake's strike just short of Piergeiron's shield. In a show of incredible strength, the hand yanked the sea snake from the harbor and held it high overhead amid the circling griffon riders.

Pacys judged the snake close to seventy feet long, the biggest of its kind he'd ever seen. As he watched it coil and try to constrict the hand holding it, he didn't doubt that the snake would keep some would-be sailors from ever going to sea again. The snake's presence reminded every watcher of how unknown the depths were and how much of them covered Toril.

The giant disembodied hand squeezed more tightly, holding the snake high overhead with ease despite the creature's struggles to escape. All of the fighting nearby that Pacys could see came to a halt as

combatants stared at the strangling snake.

Piergeiron turned in his saddle and lifted his helm. A small smile twisted his lips and his eyes lighted with fire. "Maskar Wands," he said, "hail and well met."

Pacys turned quickly. In all his wanderings through Waterdeep and the rest of Faerun, he'd never met the man, one of the Sword Coast's greatest wizards. He moved away from the men around him, seeking a clearer view.

Maskar Wands stood in a flying chariot drawn by a pair of red firebrakes whose claws struck sparks from the sky as they ran. Though not six feet tall, Maskar appeared regal and grave. The wizard's hairline had receded over the years to reveal his broad forehead, but silver hair still flowed in the wind. He wore the robes of a wizard, with a family crest—three gold stars on a field of purple with a black sleeve—worked into the chest of the garment.

"Hail and well met, Lord Piergeiron," Maskar called back. His dark gaze never left the strangling snake in the sky above the harbor. "I came as quickly as I was able."

Excited murmuring drifted through the crowd Piergeiron had led into battle. Maskar Wands, though one of Waterdeep's most famous residents, didn't put in many public appearances, but when he did, it was to let everyone know his opinion on the ways magic was being abused. He and Khelben Arunsun had argued extensively on the subject, and bards scattered across Toril waited lustfully for the war everyone was certain would inevitably take place between the two wizards.

Piergeiron turned back to his command. "I want this street secured," he ordered. "Take your men down to East Torch Tower, find those who yet survive there, and get them organized. I want whatever ships are there to be appropriated and used to retake this harbor."

One of the watch captains nodded, then led his command across the intersection of Dock and Ship Streets, through the tangle of corpses.

Maskar gestured at the chariot and firebrakes and they disappeared. From all the legends Pacys had heard about the man, he knew Maskar Wands disapproved of any abuse of magic. The wizard gazed blackly at the snake hanging from the huge hand he'd conjured.

"Now," he said sternly, "now we show these invaders that Waterdeep will *never* bend, much less break."

He gestured at the fire consuming the building beside the Mermaid's Arms and the flames stopped reaching across the building, bending to the mage's will. Pacys watched as the fire gathered itself, then shot skyward in a whirling mass of colorful pyrotechnics that spread across the dark heavens around the sea snake constricting around the giant, disembodied hand. The pyrotechnics limned the struggle, making it visible for miles, drawing all eyes.

The bard saw Maskar speaking, but his voice seemed to come from high overhead, a thunder of threat. "You've made a mistake in attacking the City of Splendors this night," the mage roared. "Retreat while you can. There will be no mercy."

Even before the echoes of his voice died away, the disembodied hand closed more tightly. The *crack* of the giant sea snake's vertebrae snapping echoed over the harbor. Still, the great creature struggled, its body refusing to admit defeat or death.

The hand disappeared at a spoken word from the arch-mage. As the writhing mass of coils plummeted toward the water, the wizard pointed again. A fireball scored a direct hit on the snake, wreathing it in flames that burned with white-hot intensity. Only ashes drifted down to hit the storm-tossed water.

"No mercy!" Maskar repeated in that booming voice.

Pacys glanced around him, looking at the smoke-stained, bruised and battered faces, and saw renewed hope glow in the eyes of the Waterdhavians around him. They tightened their grip on their chosen or confiscated weapons. The battle for the city wasn't lost, but it was yet to be won.

* * * * *

Laaqueel stood in the mouth of a sewer drain, the vile water trickling through a channel to her left. After the confrontation with the watch group and citizens had begun filling the city's streets, Iakhovas had guided them into the maze of sewers beneath Waterdeep. The wizard showed an unsettling familiarity with them and brought them quickly to one overlooking the harbor from Coin Alley.

She watched the charred ash from the burned sea snake cascade onto the roiling water of the harbor. Her eyes still ached from the explosion of light only a moment ago.

"Ah, little malenti, that man," Iakhovas declared, "could possibly prove a worthy opponent should the

opportunity present itself. There are so few humans who are." He smiled rakishly. "Another time, perhaps."

"When we try to get back across that harbor," Laaqueel said coldly, "you'll get your opportunity then."

Iakhovas shook his head. "See, this is why I've planned everything, why I am the master and you serve me. We're not adventuring out into the harbor any more this night."

"How do you propose to leave?"

In reply, Iakhovas handed her a thin medallion from his cloak. "I've taken care to make my own doors and egresses, little malenti. I give you this and an escape route that goes with it. Accept this, a token of my appreciation for your efforts thus far, and a down payment on those you'll provide again in the future. Say your name when you close your fist on it and you'll be transported back to my castle."

Laaqueel took the medallion and looked at it. About the size of a silver piece and constructed of cut crystal, it bore a compass rose on both sides. "Magic?" she asked derisively.

"Yes."

She let her look of displeasure let him know how she felt about magic.

"Of course, you can always choose to stay here and die," Iakhovas suggested, "but I don't think that will serve Sekolah."

"How do I know this will work?"

"Because I crafted it, little malenti."

One of the wererats strode forward out of the shadows. They'd assumed their hybrid forms while in the sewers to enhance their vision. Laaqueel recognized him as Manistas, the leader of the pack Iakhovas had made his deal with.

"What's going on here?"

Iakhovas faced the wererat leader. "I'm taking my leave," he said. "Your services are no longer needed and your people can go."

"Go where?" The wererat's pink and gray tongue slithered out of its mouth nervously. "There's no place for us to go in this city. Two of us were recognized by members of the Watch. They know we were with you."

"Then I suggest you take your departure of Waterdeep at your earliest convenience," Iakhovas said without sympathy, "or slay the two among you who were recognized. Either way, I've delivered you your gold for tonight's bit of business."

Manistas unsheathed his sword, fell back into a defensive posture, and said, "You're not going to just leave us here."

"Attacking me will be your last mistake," Iakhovas assured him in a low voice, "should you choose to act so unwisely."

Reluctantly, the wererat backed away, but kept his sword out.

"What you do here won't be forgotten," Manistas promised.

"You hired on for mere gold with nothing of yourselves at stake except that which you were willing to risk in your greed," Iakhovas said. "Your loyalty was fleeting at best. You and your people live off the surface dwellers, Manistas, as did your ancestors. You have no love of the sea for what it is. As the humans do, you live in spite of the sea, taking from it what you will with no thought to the needs of the deep. If I have need of you or your people again, I'm sure your greed will let you forget this transgression, or mayhap someone else's will."

The wererat leader tightened his grip on his short sword and said, "If you do contact me again, know now that the price will be higher ... much higher."

Iakhovas laughed, and the sound of it trapped in the sewer chilled Laaqueel's blood. Looking at her, he said, "Do not tarry long, little malenti. I do fear I shall leave you in unkind company."

He broke the medallion and spoke a word of command. Blue vapor coiled from the two halves of the medallion and wreathed him. A sharp crack of thunder filled the sewer and he disappeared. The broken medallion pieces hit the ground where he'd been standing.

Laaqueel felt the smooth edges of the medallion in her fingers and thought about the magic power inherent in it. Her stomach rolled in nervous fear. What she'd been through with Iakhovas had been terrifying enough, but to trust herself to the spell locked in the medallion was the most fearful consideration she'd ever been forced to make. It would have been better to face an enemy in combat.

Even the deep shadows trapped in the sewer weren't enough to blind her to the small hand gestures Manistas made. In response, the wererats slowly fanned out before her, blocking her way back into the sewer channel. Dozens of red glints from true rats covered the underground tunnel behind them.

"We know you don't like magic, priestess," the wererat leader stated. "He used you as he used us. Perhaps together we might be able to turn the tables on him." He took a step forward, the short sword dropping to his side.

"So you would offer me a partnership?" Laaqueel demanded.

Manistas nodded, his rat's eyes never leaving her face. "Yes. It's more than he offers you."

Laaqueel considered unleashing one of her spells on him, to show him the true error of his ways and his poor judgment, but she was already tired, needing the embrace of the sea around her to return her strength. The other wererats closed in, getting well within springing distance.

"Maybe I'd even offer you more," the wererat leader said. "You're a very beautiful woman, and I can afford to be generous."

Hollow booms sounded outside the barred sewer shaft, and the stench of lightning filled the air, prickling Laaqueel's skin. She didn't respond and tried to break the medallion, only her fingers wouldn't obey her will.

The wererat to her right sprang, a short blade glinting in his pawlike hand.

Afraid then, knowing the wererats would pull her down with their sheer numbers, Laaqueel hurled the crystal medallion at her feet. It shattered against the stone and the blue smoke curled up around her, bringing the strong salty scent of purple seaweed with it. She screamed her name and she was gone, ripped away by Iakhovas's magic.

* * * * *

"There!" a man in a guard's uniform yelled, pointing.

Pacys turned, watching as the sahuagin manta bobbed only inches below the surface. The silvery black eyes of the sahuagin hanging onto their underwater craft gazed up at the humans aboard the great galley the Waterdhavian Guard had appropriated as a staging platform for the battle.

"I see them, I see them!" a sailor yelled. He grabbed a lantern from a peg on the railing and quickly started up into the rigging. "I'll signal the warning!"

In response to the first man's yell, the senior civilar in charge of the group aboard the galley called his men into position. They lined the railing alongside the bard.

Glancing at their faces, knowing the past hour since the battle had begun hadn't been easy, Pacys saw the pride and the dedication on the faces of the men. He'd heard prayers as they worked, from men calling on their gods to protect not only their families and them, but for protection to be offered to friends and neighbors as well.

A steel fishing net stretched between the galley Pacys was on and the one a hundred feet away. Though the storm had finally started dying down, the waves hammered unmercifully against the ship's hull. The deck shuffled erratically beneath Pacys's feet.

The cable supporting the top part of the net remained slack, creating a big U-shape into the harbor. The man in the rigging waved his lantern. A lantern on the other ship waved back in response.

"They see us!" the captain yelled up at his mate. "They have the wind working for them. Tell them to circle around and come into us. We'll scoop these damned sea devils up before they can run!"

Pacys hung onto the railing, not believing the sahua-gin would run. They'd attacked the harbor with the intention of destroying all they could, but there appeared to be no real objective other than destruction. Thinking that way bothered the bard. No military exercise was conducted without some kind of end in mind, and the sahua-gin had to have known they couldn't completely destroy Waterdeep.

The sea creatures had quickly lost interest in the attack during the last several minutes. They'd deserted in earnest, hurried on their way by the Waterdhavian Guard and the wizards and sailors who'd joined their ranks. The huge corpses of dragon turtles, sea snakes, eyes of the deep, sharks, and even a giant jellyfish floated in the harbor and required negotiation by ships. A dead giant squid had even washed up onto Dock Street, taking the defensive line that had been set up there out of the battle until a sufficient number of sturdy draft animals could be used to haul it away.

The other galley's sails filled with wind and it sped up, cutting a half circle through the water as it surrounded the manta. The huge net slithered into place around the sahuagin craft.

"Pull 'em up, boys!" the captain bawled. "Kelthar!"

"Aye, sir!" the first mate called back.

"Prepare that oil and heave it when I tell you."

"Aye, sir."

Pacys watched the silvery shimmer of the steel net as it rose up under the sahuagin manta. The craft was one of the large ones, fully seventy-five feet wide and two hundred feet long. The net couldn't get around all of it, but it settled around two-thirds of it.

The net seized the manta and brought it the rest of the way to the surface. Sahuagin clung to it, looking like crayfish babies that clung to the mother's tail, so thick on it they were crowded in on each other. There were more than he expected.

"Tymora stay with us," one of the sailors cried out. "There must be four, five hundred sahuagin on that craft!"

The galleys each normally carried a crew of a hundred and fifty, but almost twice that number were on them now as the fighting men of Waterdeep took the battle to their enemy. The numbers between sahuagin and Waterdhavian forces were roughly equal, Pacys guessed, but the sea devils pound for pound were the fiercest fighters.

Knowing their craft was tied up in the net, the sahuagin started swarming up the net toward the crews. Tridents flashed in their hands, and several of them loosened the throwing nets they carried. They navigated the steel net easily, their wide feet allowing them to climb with no threat of slipping through.

One of them stopped, hands raised in a beseeching posture. Pacys studied the shells and skulls the sahuagin wore on chains around her body and knew from stories that she must be a priestess. The bard turned to the captain.

"She's preparing a spell," he warned.

"Nonsense," the old man yelled back gruffly. "Damned sea devils don't believe in-"

"She's a priestess," Pacys said. "That kind of magic they understand just fine."

"Galm," the captain called, looking troubled.

One of the guardsmen turned.

"Put a shaft through that one," the captain instructed. "Man here says she could be calling something nasty up our way."

The guard nodded and pulled his bow back. Before he could fire, light around the ship suddenly extinguished, and the night's full darkness descended again, no longer held back by the galley's lanterns. The captain cursed loudly and ordered his men to the railing.

Pacys stared hard into the gloom, unable to detect more than a slither of occasional movement. The vibration of the sahuagin warriors clambering along the steel net lashed through the galley. A slaughter was coming, the bard knew, and the defenders aboard the ship would be fighting among themselves before it ended.

"Hold them back, boys!" the captain bellowed. "You may not be able to see them, but you can by the gods smell them when they come aboard."

Pacys steadied his staff, leaving the hidden blades in place so he couldn't offer too much threat to his companions. His stomach heaved in fear and his hands slid on the staff.

Without warning, the lights of the ship became visible again while the sahuagin were only yards away, scrambling up the net as quickly as they could. Glancing skyward, Pacys spotted a flying carpet above them.

"Maskar Wands," the captain called up, "thank you for your help. Hail and well met."

"Hail and well met," the wizard called down, then he gestured again and a great font of flames speared from his fingers and rained down over the sahuagin on the net. Most of them died in that instant, but a wave crawled up over the galley's railing.

Like the other men, Pacys was forced back by the desperate sahuagin. He wielded the staff with grim certainty, breaking open heads and tangling the sahuagins' legs where he could. A trident laid his arm open during the battle, but he kept fighting. Men died around him, but sahuagin died in greater numbers.

Incredibly, the sahuagin faltered in their charge and were driven back. Only a few escaped back into the harbor.

Breathing hard, his limbs shaking with effort, Pacys gazed out at the harbor. Only a few skirmishes remained within the breakwater walls, and the guard was making short work of them. He drew in the air deeply, smelling the salt and not knowing if it was from the sea or from the blood, his or someone else's, that covered him.

The torches at the guard stations along the breakwater blazed more brightly, probably magically enhanced. They threw light over the harbor, driving back the darkness that had tried to consume the city.

The bard turned and looked back at Waterdeep, listening to the splashes made as the galley's crew threw the dead sahuagin over the side. Mount Waterdeep soared above the harbor, standing tall and

majestically proud.

The melody that had haunted Pacys for the last fourteen years rose inside his head again. He listened to it, not surprised to find that it was still incomplete. If this battle were to be granted to him as his song, his legacy to leave the world, none of the other bards would have been witness to it. He believed now, more strongly than he'd ever believed, that he was meant to make an enduring song with his craft, a song that would fire the hearts and stir the souls of men. It was his destiny, and his life had been spared tonight because of it.

This was only the opening movement, though. There had to be much more to come. Somewhere, the malign being that had put the invasion together was planning and plotting. Oghma granted Pacys the intelligence to know that, just as he was sure the rest of Waterdeep's leaders must be thinking the same thing: what had been gained here tonight? The city had stood.

He shook his head, knowing he wasn't going to understand everything yet. He trusted that he'd be guided further.

Looking around, he saw the faces of the men as they gave aid to the wounded, gave comfort to the dying, and made peace with the dead. It was hard, harsh work, and would leave more scars than physical wounds ever would.

Pacys wished he had his yarting, but it was back at the Font of Knowledge. Still, he didn't let the lack of an instrument stop him. He sang a cappella, his voice sweet and true as it flowed over the galley's deck and out into the harbor. The song was an original of his that he called "Bind My Wounds and Fill My Heart." It had been written on a battlefield, conceived in the heat of war, and nurtured to fruition that same night as so many fought their final battle with death and loss.

As he sang he found that the song gave him strength and relief as well. A few of the men even knew the song and joined him on the chorus.

There was nothing, he knew, that would ever take away the losses that Waterdeep had suffered tonight.

XIX

15 Mirtul, the Year of the Gauntlet

"You don't have to do that."

Jherek looked up and spotted *Breezerunner's* ship's mage looking down at him. He hung down the side of the ship from two ropes, trussed up in a leather harness, using a barnacle spade to work on the ship's hull. "I like working with my hands," he told her.

"I couldn't think of much harder work." She waved at the hot sun blazing down over the becalmed water and added, "Or much harsher conditions."

She wore her copper colored hair short, hardly any longer than his. Her skin was browned from the sea and sun, but freckles stippled the bridge of her short nose. Her eyes were reddish brown, wide and full. She seemed friendly and liked to smile. Her mouth was generous and full-lipped, and he'd yet to see a displeased look on her face. From her position in the crew, he guessed that she was a few years older than he was. In the three days he'd been aboard *Breezerunner*, he'd never talked to her.

Jherek nodded. He couldn't think of much harder work either, which was why he'd chosen it. Perspiration covered him and the leather straps chaffed at him. He'd stripped down to knee-length breeches and a short-sleeved blouse. Both were drenched from the slight sea spray and sweat. Neither improved the way he smelled. "I'm not used to being a passenger."

"You're a sailor?" she asked.

"Aye." He took time to inspect the barnacle spade's edge again. He'd found that he liked looking at the ship's mage, but after the experience with the Amnians aboard *Butterfly* he'd taken pains not to allow himself too many glances in her direction. Still, staying in his cabin hadn't been an answer he could live with. When he'd seen the ship's crew ordered to scrape barnacles from the hull that morning he'd gone to the ship's mate, volunteered, and been grudgingly allowed. The mate had thought him deranged for even asking, even more so when he'd actually shown up for the work detail.

"Where's your ship?" she asked.

He glanced up at her, shading his eyes with his free hand as the sun came over the bow when *Breezerunner* dipped into the water, and said, "In Umberlee's arms." He hated telling the lie, but there was

nothing else to do.

"You crewed aboard *Silver Dassel*!"

"Aye." The lie went against Jherek's nature. It felt like a wedge between them. He'd never forget he'd lied to her. Telling her the truth, though, was out of the question. *Silver Dassel* had gone down nearly a tenday ago, pulled down by a sahuagin raiding party not far from where *Butterfly* had been attacked.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It must have been hard."

Jherek let his silence be his only answer. Most of *Silver Dassel's* crew, including her captain, old Vinagir, hadn't come back. Many of the rest had scattered, trying to find new ships that would take them.

"I didn't know you were working on the hull till this afternoon when I did my inspection," she told him. "When Creil told me you'd volunteered for this and had booked a passage, I had to come see for myself."

Jherek smiled at her and shrugged. "I'm sure you've seen barnacles scraped off a hull before, lady." He studied the clean wood he'd left behind and said, "Unless I'm doing something wrong."

"Call me Sabyna. I'm no high-born to be flattered with titles."

"All right," he agreed, but the familiarity didn't feel comfortable to Jherek.

"The job you're doing," Sabyna said, "is probably better than any of the crew that Creil put together." She passed down a capped jar full of water at the end of a net pole.

"Thank you, lady." He drank the water, tasting the cool clean of it, then sent the jar back up.

She leaned her elbows on the railing and gazed down at him. She wore a long-sleeved dark green blouse tucked into loose-legged white breeches that showed off her womanly figure, and knee-high black leather boots that matched the wide black leather belt that supported a small bag and a brace of throwing knives.

"There's more work to be done about this ship if you've a mind," she said.

"Aye. I'd like that very much."

"Captain Tynnel says you're bound for Baldur's Gate."

"Aye."

"Hoping to find another ship there?"

"If I can."

She raised an eyebrow. "Impress the captain during the rest of the journey as you already have, maybe you'll find a berth here by the time you reach Baldur's Gate."

Jherek nodded. He didn't think a berth on *Breezerunner* had been what Madame Litaar had in mind, but he felt stubborn about what he was supposed to do. *Live, that you may serve*. Perhaps he could do that best aboard *Breezerunner*. It felt good to think about.

"I've been ship's mage aboard *Breezerunner* for five years," she told him. "I've got some influence of my own."

Jherek didn't know how to respond to that, so he didn't.

"I've also taken the liberty to talk to the captain on your behalf regarding the work you're doing on *Breezerunner*. Keep working and you'll be compensated. It won't be a full hand's pay—our budget won't allow it—but you should see a good return on your booking passage."

"You don't have to do that, lady."

"Sabyna."

She remained quiet, waiting till he looked her in the eye.

"Sabyna," he repeated.

"I've also noticed that you usually take a meal to your cabin and eat by yourself."

"Aye. You seem to be quite observant, la-Sabyna." Jherek felt a little irritated with her attention. He hadn't noticed that she'd been observing him, and it unnerved him to think that she might be watching him so closely.

"I'm ship's mage," she stated simply. "It's my responsibility to keep *Breezerunner* seaworthy and in good repair. I also log our charts for navigational purposes, check up on our pilot, and keep track of where everything is on this ship. I've developed a good eye for detail and I'm not easily distracted."

"You sound like you're very good at what you do."

"Thank you. I am."

Despite the unease he felt, Jherek had to smile at the confidence the woman projected.

"You're laughing at me?" she asked.

"No, lady."

"Sabyna."

"Aye."

"You *are* laughing."

Amazed at the lightness in his heart in spite of the depression that had clung to him over the past three days, Jherek looked up at her again. "Maybe a little."

Her thin brows arched over her eyes. "Over these next few days if you stay interested in helping out with ship's chores, you'll find out exactly how good I am."

"I look forward to the challenge."

"That's good, but for the moment, I'd be interested in knowing whether you'd look forward to having evening-feast with me tonight, as part of your repayment for the work you're doing."

The offer took Jherek totally by surprise. He swung along at *Breezerunner's* side as she cut through the nearly flat waves, feeling more at home hanging from the ropes than in dealing with the ship's mage's question.

"Is there a problem?" she asked.

"No."

"I don't think you're in a position to tell me that you've got a previous engagement," Sabyna said. "I'm not one to tolerate lying."

Her words stung Jherek, knowing he'd lied to her already and there was no way to take it back.

"So if you tell me anything other than yes, or that you'd rather *not* dine with me, I'd be inclined to cut these ropes and see how long you can float." She sounded gruffly threatening, but merriment lighted her eyes.

Jherek felt the pressure close in around him. The recent experience with the Amnians burned in his mind. Yell's selfish and temporary interest in him had changed his whole life. He didn't want to think something else bad was going to happen, but it wouldn't have surprised him. A polite refusal was on his tongue when it betrayed him. He glanced up at the ship's mage and said, "Aye."

"Good," she exclaimed. "I'll come around to your cabin this eve and collect you."

He nodded, feeling like a boulder had lodged at the back of his throat and he just couldn't swallow it. His stomach turned flips.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Malorrie," he replied, choosing the phantom's name because it was seldom heard and he knew he'd always react to it, but it was another lie between them. It seemed he couldn't stop telling them.

"I've got a further warning then, Malorrie."

He shaded his eyes as he looked up at her, wondering if she'd be able to see the lie in his gaze.

"I cook my own meals, and I like exotic, spicy dishes. We may find out how strong your stomach is."

She smiled at him, then she was gone and Jherek found himself even more drenched in sweat than he'd been before. He forced himself to concentrate on the job at hand and not dwell on the things that might go wrong that evening.

* * * * *

Back on deck with the sun setting out in the Sea of Swords, looking like a molten gold ball settling into the flat azure of the ocean, Jherek waited his turn in line at the community water barrel bolted into the railing. The man in front of him took out a large dipperful of fresh water and poured it over his own head, washing away some of the accumulated dried salt that had come from the sea breeze.

The men in line behind Jherek complained, some of them loudly.

Jherek didn't blame them. Fresh water when a ship got becalmed was worth its weight in gold. It wasn't meant to be wasted on a voyage.

The man took another dipperful and splashed it over his head again, ignoring the complaints. He was a big man, broad shouldered and heavy bellied, easily weighing a hundred pounds more than Jherek. He had shaggy black hair that fell below his shoulders, a full beard that reached to his chest, and enough body hair to make him look even more like an ape. Small daggers as long as a finger hung from earrings in both ears. He wore a cutlass in a sash and had two fingers missing from his left hand.

"Damn it, Aysel," someone growled, "back away from the water and stop wasting it."

Aysel muttered a curse and tossed the dipper back into the barrel. He ran his thick fingers through his wet hair and walked to the side.

Jherek took the small cloth from his kit, wet it in the barrel, then wrung it out and stepped away. Working carefully to conserve the water in the cloth, he washed the salt from his face, then worked on the

rest of his body that had been exposed to the spray.

"You pay attention, Aysel," a harsh voice used to command barked.

Drawn to the voice, Jherek looked up to the forecastle. Captain Tynnel stood there, arms crossed over his chest. He was a short man of small stature, but Jherek had heard nothing but good of the man while he'd been aboard. His hair was the bleached blond of old bone and he had a hatchet head for a face beneath his plumed, tri-corner hat. His piercing blue eyes belonged on a falcon. He pointed at Jherek and said, "There's a man knows how to treasure water. I don't see you having some of that same respect, you're going to be a long time between ships when we reach Baldur's Gate. Understand my drift, sailor?"

"Aye, sir," Aysel responded with a clenched jaw. He shot Jherek a murderous glare then stomped off. Several of the sailors called out jeers behind his back.

"You," the captain said, pointing his bony chin at Jherek, "boy."

"Aye, sir."

"Come up. I'd have a word with you if I might."

"Aye, sir." Nervous, Jherek ascended the narrow stairs leading up to the forecastle.

"There's nothing to be worried about, boy," the captain said when Jherek stood before him. "Just wanted a word with you."

"Aye, sir."

"Sabyna's mentioned you to me today, the work you'd done, and the fact that she'd like to give you more of it till we reach Baldur's Gate. That would be acceptable to you?" "Aye, sir."

"I'll return some of the money you paid for your passage, but I won't be able to return it all. I've got a profit to make, investors to keep happy." "I understand, sir."

"I thought you might. Did she mention you might be able to find a berth on *Breezerunner* when we got to Baldur's Gate?" "Aye, sir."

"I guessed that she might. I told her I wanted to tell you myself. She's always been headstrong." Tynnel narrowed his eyes. "Where're you having eveningfeast tonight, boy?"

"With the lady, sir." "Lady?"

"Ship's Mage Sabyna, sir."

"I must admit, that doesn't entirely surprise me either. That girl's got a good head on her shoulders, but she's impulsive too. Makes her damn good at her job. Most of the time."

Jherek remained quiet, not knowing where the conversation was headed. A captain had the right to question his crew's behavior aboard ship.

"She comes from good stock," the captain said. "Her father's a ship's mage, and one of her brothers. Another's a ranger in the Moonshaes, all of them good people." He took out a pipe and filled it with pipeweed, then lit it with considerable effort. "She's been crewing aboard *Breezerunner* for a few years. When her da let her come take this post, I gave him my word I'd see nothing come to harm her. I stand by my word." He looked up at Jherek through the haze of smoke. "In all those years, she's had only a few other men to eveningfeast. She shows a lot of discretion."

The revelation didn't surprise Jherek, but it did turn him a little cold wondering what the statement implied.

"Those men I knew," the captain went on. "I can't say that I always approved, but I did know them. I don't know you at all."

"I can cancel on her invitation," Jherek offered.

In fact, he thought it would take some pressure off if he was told not to go. He hadn't been able to turn the invitation down on his own. It wouldn't have been the right thing to do, especially to a lady.

The captain looked at him in disbelief. "You'd cancel eveningfeast with Sabyna on my say so?"

"Aye, sir. I'm just looking for passage to Baldur's Gate. I wouldn't want to cause any trouble."

Shaking his head, the captain laughed slightly. "Every manjack aboard this ship has tried to get close to her and she won't have any of them, and you were asked by her."

Jherek didn't see what that had to do with anything so he kept quiet.

"No," the captain said. "You go on to eveningfeast and have a good time, but I won't suffer to see that young woman hurt in any way."

"No, sir. Not by me."

"Prepare yourself for a treat. Sabyna is a good cook."

Dismissed, Jherek walked away, but he couldn't help wondering how the captain knew.

* * * * *

"Can I get you something to drink?"

"Water, please," Jherek replied, fidgeting.

"I've got a meager selection of wines," Sabyna offered.

"Water will be fine."

He stood just inside her doorway and gazed around at the tiny room that was her personal quarters. A small bookshelf covered one wall, filled with tomes and knickknacks that he felt were more personal items than magical ones. A miniature fold-out desk was built into another wall and pigeonholes held correspondence, files, and paper. At the moment, the desk doubled as a dining table. The chair was on one side of it instead of in front of it, and the bed was within reach of the desk on the other.

"Water it is. Have a seat," Sabyna invited.

She worked over a large food tray sitting on the floor. Dressed in breeches and a sleeveless yellow blouse, she looked more feminine than ever, and she smelled of lilacs.

Jherek took one look at the neatly made bed and felt as out of place as he'd ever felt before. He wore a long sleeved shirt to hide the tattoo, and his best breeches.

"Thanks," he said, and took the chair.

"Do you like spicy food?" she asked, removing covers from dishes on a tray she'd brought from the galley.

"Aye," he answered politely.

Food was food, and it got a man from one meal to the next. Madame Litaar's dishes, made from the vegetables and fruits from her garden, had always been particularly pleasant, though.

"I got some of these recipes from another ship's mage who'd traveled to Maztica. Spices are part of the prime ingredients to any meal prepared there, she told me."

"It smells good."

"Thank you." Sabyna served out, putting portions of the different dishes onto plates and placing the plates on the desk. "Have you ever had Maztican food?"

"No."

"Then be careful."

Tense because of the closeness forced by the size of the room, Jherek followed her lead, taking a flat, thin piece of bread and mixing some of the vegetables she'd prepared with a cheese concoction. He wrapped it all in the bread then ate. He was surprised at how hot it was, but after the curry Hagagne and some of the others used aboard *Butterfly* he found it wasn't anything he couldn't handle. A sailor's palate wasn't a cultured thing, but it was sturdy enough.

"I saw the captain speaking to you."

"Aye."

"Did he warn you about me?"

Jherek worked at building another bread sandwich out of the ingredients, adding the spiced chicken chunks as well, and said, "Aye."

"There's not much I miss on this ship," Sabyna said. "I can't afford to and do a good job." She picked at her food. "So what did he tell you?"

"To watch my manners around you," Jherek said honestly. "To keep in mind that you're a lady and to treat you as such."

"As if I would allow myself to be treated any other way." Her voice carried a strain of sarcasm and anger. "If he hadn't sailed with my father, I'd not put up with his interference. Overly long noses are never welcome."

"He cares about you," Jherek pointed out. "That's not necessarily a bad thing."

She regarded him in silence for a moment. "I can look out for myself."

"Aye. I understand. I think the captain just wanted to remind me that others were looking on as well." Jherek continued eating slowly, matching her pace and her movements. Thankfully, his hunger overpowered his feeling of ill ease and she proved to have as big an appetite as he did.

Her conversation drifted, and she skillfully probed his background. He replied to her questions and to the broad statements she made, but kept his answers brief without seeming to be secretive. For the most part, he told her the truth, just not all of it.

His concerns never went away, but he found himself enchanted with her company. Loquacious as she was and as taciturn as he remained, she told a number of stories. After dinner was finished and he'd helped her put the utensils away, she took a flask of spring water she said came from Icewind Dale and guided him

back up to the main deck.

Jherek thought briefly of claiming to be tired, but he knew it would have been another lie to add to those he'd already told. He'd also found he enjoyed the ship's mage's company. The last three days of being alone in a group of strangers with his future so uncertain had been hard. When he was with her, he found he didn't worry about the future quite so much.

* * * * *

Sabyna, daughter of Siann Truesail, sat on the prow of *Breezerunner* only a little later, within easy speaking distance of the young sailor who'd so caught her attention. She watched him as he sat cross-legged and gazed out at the sea, surprised at how comfortable she felt with him.

Still, he remained an enigma, and her wizard's mind constantly pried at the why and how of things, not tolerating mysteries of any kind. Exactly what the young sailor who called himself Malorrie represented, she wasn't sure, but she knew he'd lied at least about his name.

She'd used a light spell to read his surface thoughts when she'd talked to him earlier in the day and had gleaned that. The spell wasn't something she was especially proud of, but as ship's mage, information meant profit and often survival for the ship and crew. However, there was no indication that he meant *Breezerunner* or her crew any harm.

He watched the star-spattered sky overhead, rocking easily with the ship's motion. The prow lifted and descended across the rolling waves, and the rigging creaked as it was pushed along by the prevailing winds.

"You love the sea, don't you?" she asked, knowing it was true even before her spell confirmed it.

"Aye," he answered without hesitation. "I can't imagine having a life without it."

From his tone and from what she was able to pick up from his thoughts with her magic, she got the impression he was feeling pressure to make some kind of decision. "How long have you been at sea?"

"All my life, lady. I was born at sea."

That was unusual in these days, Sabyna knew. A good midwife could tell when a babe had dropped into position to be born, and women didn't take to sea at that time unless the need was great.

As if realizing he'd told too much, the young sailor said, "I was born almost a month premature, on a long voyage in harsh seas. Luckily, I survived it."

"What about your mother?"

He shook his head, his eyes picking up pale fire from the gibbous moon. "I lost her."

"I'm sorry."

"Aye."

"I was raised on a ship myself. My father's a ship's mage."

"So the captain said."

That irked Sabyna. Her business was her own. As she thought that, she felt a twinge of guilt for trying to pursue the young sailor's secrets herself.

"Tynnel was being awfully generous with his information," she said. "That's not like him."

The young sailor shrugged. Sabyna noted the dark circles under his eyes and felt bad for keeping him up so late when he'd obviously been worn out by his previous journey. She knew that wasn't right. He looked healthy, not worn down, so whatever strain he was under was mental, not physical.

Still, she wasn't ready to part company with him yet. "My mother kept after my three brothers and me to study our lessons," she told him. "When we were young, we looked on ship's chores as great fun. It wasn't until we were older that we learned we were supposed to resent work like that."

He laughed and she decided she liked the sound of it. His laugh was low and gentle, like it was something he wasn't used to doing.

"In ports where we traded, some folk made comment that a ship was a small place for children to grow up- dangerous even-but we had the sea, wide and deep and beautiful, filled with wondrous things, and no reason to fear it or anything in it till my brother Dannin was killed in a pirate raid fourteen years ago."

He nodded, suddenly somber for no reason that she could explain.

"I'm sorry for your loss," he said.

Despite all the years that had passed, Dannin's death still hurt. Tears brimmed in her eyes, feeling hot against the cool breeze drifting in from the sea. She got angry at herself momentarily for the loss of control, but there was something about the young sailor that reminded her of her lost brother. Dannin had barely been sixteen, younger than either of them now. She remembered and missed her brother's smile most of all.

Dannin was always the most easygoing of her siblings.

The look in Jherek's pale eyes suggested that he wanted to say more but he didn't.

Sabyna sensed that whatever stilled his tongue was wrapped up in one of the secrets he kept to himself. "Besides scraping barnacles," she asked him, "what else can you do?"

"I've worked for a shipwright and built ships from the ground up, from dry dock to harbor."

"I've *got* a list of repairs I'd like made over the next few days," she told him. If he accepted, she knew she'd be seeing more of him, and maybe she'd get a solution to the enigma he presented. At the very least, he made enjoyable company. "Most of them are only cosmetic, but I'd like them completed. We've only got a couple men who're decent carpenters. If you've got skill, maybe I can get Tynnel to pay some extra wages."

"I'd be happy to look at the repairs, and whatever you can pay would be fine."

He looked like he was about to say something else, but his eyes cut away from hers.

"It could be Tynnel's offered purse would be so small that I'll have to supplement your pay with meals." Part of Sabyna cringed when she was so bold as to say that. She knew her mother wouldn't have approved at all.

"I'd enjoy that."

She gazed out at the horizon, where the wine-dark sky descended and touched the flat surface of the Sea of Swords. "So what is it that draws you to the sea?"

"I don't know, lady," he answered politely, "but I do know that I've felt the pull of it every day of my life."

"Would you like me to foretell your future?" she asked.

He paused, as if weighing the risk, then said simply, "Aye."

"Give me your hand."

Hesitantly, he offered it.

She took his hand in hers and studied it in the pale moonlight. It felt rough and hard, a working man's hand. A few scars from fish knives, nets, and other sharp instruments crisscrossed the natural lines in his palm, making it confusing in the shadows.

"Wait here. I'll need more light."

"If this is going to be trouble for you, I'd rather not."

"It's no trouble," Sabyna said.

He gave her a short nod, but clearly didn't look happy about the extra effort.

She pushed herself up and walked to the railing to get one of the spare lanterns tucked away there. She lit it from the one already burning a few feet away, and returned. She concentrated on his palm, trying to divine what she could of him and the possible futures that waited on him. The divination she attempted wasn't part of a spell, but was based on simple teaching about the lines on the palm. At least it was an excuse to speculate and talk about those speculations.

"You have a long life line," she said, reading the automatic signs, "but there are breaks in it, indicating a change in location or your view of the world." She felt him try to pull the hand away, but maintained her hold. "The breaks in your heart line show that you've had disappointments in your life."

Without warning, a jolt of electricity sizzled through her mind. Her vision glazed over, suddenly filled with the sight of a great sea battle involving dozens of ships. She stood on a deck, and the vision was so strong that she felt the movement of the ocean. She smelled blood and the salt of the sea, different in some regard from the Sea of Swords.

She looked around in the vision, knowing she was seeing it from the young sailor's eyes, but not knowing how it came to be since none of her magic would enable her to do this. Whatever the source, it came from outside her and forced her to see. The ship rocked suddenly and she turned in the direction the force had come from in time to see a boarding party swinging aboard the ship.

A tall man with wild black hair and fiery brown eyes dropped onto the deck before her. A short, thrusting goatee and mustache covered his cruelly handsome face. He was dressed in black, tight breeches tucked into buccaneer's boots and a black shirt with belled sleeves left open to reveal the tattoo of the flaming skull wearing a chain mask that left only the eyes and fanged mouth uncovered. Another tattoo on his left cheek showed a shark-like creature with a black haired mane twisted in mid-strike.

Selune help her, she recognized the man at once, and she prayed him dead in the same instant.

The man attacked at once, and she wielded her sword to parry the heavy-bladed falchion he swung. Afternoon sunlight glinted from the blades. He drew back immediately, setting himself to swing again.

The vision was rudely interrupted and Sabyna's senses returned to her own body, to her own time.

The young sailor held her, steadying her as another shudder passed through *Breezerunner*, shaking the whole ship as the dulled *thud* of impact echoed up through the hold.

"We've run aground," the young sailor said, helping her to her feet in spite of the way the ship jerked and tossed. "We'll be lucky if we haven't torn the bottom out of her!"

XX

15 Mirtul, the Year of the Gauntlet

"Impossible," Sabyna said, pushing her way free of the young sailor. "We're miles from land." She had trouble standing as *Breezerunner* continued rocking while its length cleared the obstruction. Rushing to the railing, she peered down into the dark water, knowing the obstruction had to be underwater or the pilot and lookouts would have seen it.

Jaxx in the crow's nest sounded general quarters on the conch shell kept there for that purpose. The mournful wail filled the night. Men erupted out onto the ship. Many of them were half-dressed, and the night shift carried lanterns that threw dizzying ellipses across the deck.

"What in the three by three hells's going on here?" Tynnel yelled. He stood in the open doorway of his cabin under the stern castle, a cutlass naked in his fist.

"Hit something, cap'n!" Jaxx called down.

"What?"

"Don't know, cap'n. Didn't see anything then, and don't see anything now."

"Mornis," Tynnel shouted.

"Sir," the first mate called back.

"Get down into that hold and let me know what kind of shape we're in." The captain strode across the deck, glancing in all directions suspiciously. He closed on Sabyna. "I thought you kept a spell on this vessel that would warn us in the event of a possible collision."

"I do," the ship's mage said. "I renewed it this afternoon." She faced the captain with certainty. "Whatever we hit, it's less than thirty feet in length and underwater." The spell she'd managed to put on *Breezerunner* would notify them of anything bigger than that, or any stationary object above the water line. "Probably it's drifting as well."

Mornis reappeared at the top of the hold, gasping. He was a man in his middle years, his head shaved bald though he wore a forked gray beard. "We appear to be whole, cap'n, not taking on any water that I could find."

Tynnel waved him off, glancing briefly at the young sailor standing beside Sabyna, then back at the ship's mage. "I want to know what kind of shape my ship's in," he told her in a harsh voice.

Sabyna felt a momentary flicker of fire at the tone in his voice, but she pushed it out of her mind, clearing her thoughts so she could work her spells. She wasn't going to forget the treatment, and they *would* talk about it later. Just because she was occupying herself with company didn't mean she was letting down on the job.

She also didn't blame Tynnel for his gruffness; his ship was his life and his freedom. Without it, he'd be land-bound or working for someone else. Even independent ship owners relied on investors to a degree, and bringing a cargo in late or not at all risked financial disaster.

Pushing out her breath to further relax, she headed for the hold. The spell came easily to her lips and she took a one inch unflawed steel disk from her belt pouch that she kept with her. She rubbed it between thumb and forefinger as she descended into the hold.

"May I accompany you?" Jherek asked.

Glancing to her side, Sabyna saw the young sailor stepping in to match her pace. She looked past him, further down the stairs leading into the hold and saw Tynnel's face lit by the lantern he carried. The captain didn't look happy about what he saw there.

"Yes," she said. "That'll be fine."

A little bit of score settling now wouldn't hurt, she thought. She'd been doing her job and Tynnel would have to admit that. She seized the lantern one of Mornis's men held, then walked the prow through the narrow corridor formed between the crates and huge wine flasks they intended to trade and sell along their route.

The air inside the hold was damp and fetid. It always was this time of year and so near the Shining

Sea. Moisture clung to the oaken beams in places, gleaming under the lantern light.

At the prow she passed the young sailor her lantern, then spoke her spell. At the end of it, she tossed the steel disk into the air. Instantly, it burst into bright, hot flame and charred to nothing. Even before it finished burning away, her mage's senses had increased. She could feel the striations and pressures within the ship's structure like it was a second skin over her own bones. Even the cool of the sea lapped at her, and the wind sweeping *Breeze-runner's* deck prickled along her skin.

She walked the length of the ship. When she reached the other end, her spell-enhanced senses died away. Perspiration trickled down her cheeks and her head hurt from the stress and strain. "The ship's fine," she announced.

Tynnel didn't look any happier. "What did we hit?"

"We could go back and look," Sabyna suggested. She was curious herself, and she hated not at least making the effort to find out.

The captain led the way back to the main deck and shouted out the order to change the sails and bring *Breezerunner* around. "Can you pinpoint the area?" he asked her.

"I can give you my best guess," Sabyna answered.

Slowly, the ship came around, working with the wind. After only twenty minutes' searching, one of the sailors called out, "Found it, cap'n! Sunken ship by the looks of it!"

Sabyna felt a chill shoot through her stomach. A ship sunk this far out from Amn, there'd be no chance for any survivors that hadn't made the lifeboats or a rescue ship. It was too far to swim and the ocean was filled with savage creatures. She followed Tynnel to the starboard side and gazed out at the water as *Breezerunner* slowed from a crawl to a gentle bob fully stopped on the ocean's surface.

Three men handled lanterns in the prow, lowering them over the side by ropes. As clear and as clean as the sea was, even the lantern light at full night was enough to reveal the outlines of the small cog listing nearly upside down in the water. The stern area wasn't visible at all.

Tynnel gave orders to lower a rowboat with Mornis in charge. Shrill squeals whined around the deck as the block and tackles were used. The first mate quickly picked his people.

"Probably a damned waste of time," the captain said angrily as he peered at the stricken ship, "but we've got to investigate and see if there's any potential salvage value."

"She's not resting on the bottom," Sabyna said. "She's drifting. That's why we passed over her instead of her ripping our bottom out. There won't be any salvage. I've never seen a cog less than thirty feet long, and if it was longer than that, my alarm would have sounded. What we're seeing out there is *part* of a ship. Something broke it in half."

"We'll see."

"I'd like to go with the rowboat crew," she said.

He glanced at her with a sour expression. "I'd feel better if you stayed aboard *Breezerunner*."

"My magic will allow me more salvaging time and ability than anyone else you could send," she pointed out. "In these currents, that ship could be gone in moments, taken completely to the bottom."

Tynnel gave a short nod. "First sign of trouble, I want you back here."

Sabyna joined the rowboat crew, scrambling down the rope ladder that had been thrown over *Breezerunner's* side. Her feet reached the rowboat and Mornis guided her to secure footing.

"Lady."

She looked up at the young sailor who lied about his true name. "What?"

He held a lantern and the illumination turned the bronze of his face to smooth butter. "I've some experience in salvage work," Jherek said. "If I could be of assistance?"

"We don't need some wetnose along on something that could be a dangerous bit of business," Mornis stated gruffly. "Assuming there's nothing nasty waiting in that ship's carcass, if it goes down, there could be a hell of an undertow."

"He's worked as a shipwright," Sabyna said. "He could be of help." She glanced to the right and saw Tynnel standing there. "Captain?"

"Let him go," Tynnel said. "It's Sabyna's call."

Sabyna knew he was giving her back some of the authority and respect he'd stripped from her earlier. She kept the smile from her face and nodded to the young sailor.

Jherek joined them in the rowboat, hardly causing any rocking. Seating himself, he took up an oar and shoved it into an oarlock, then awaited commands.

Sabyna deliberately distanced herself from him and watched him as she sat in the middle of the rowboat. The slat felt hard and unyielding.

Mornis bawled out orders, getting the rowing groups into action. The rowboat came about smartly in the water, cutting through the gentle waves to the area marked from above by the lanterns.

Reaching into the bag of holding at her waist, Sabyna seized the hunk of ivory and off-white cloth inside and unfurled it into the air before her. All of the rowboat's crew except the young sailor drew back.

The cloth resembled a patchwork quilt without the stitching. When Sabyna released the cloth, the scraps fluttered and flew, twisting as if caught in a gentle hurricane. Then they bunched into a serpentine figure that wafted gently in the breeze six feet above the boat and the cowering sailors.

"Guard," Sabyna ordered.

The serpentine shape stretched out and flattened, riding the winds just above and in front of the rowboat.

"What is that?" Jherek asked.

Sabyna looked at him, searching for any reproach in his gaze. She didn't find it and guessed that he'd never heard of the creature. "That's a raggamoffyn," she told him. "My familiar."

"Some say those are creatures of evil," Jherek said, and several of the sailors quietly agreed with him.

Sabyna watched the raggamoffyn change its shape as if luxuriating in the freedom. Since it wasn't well received aboard *Breezerunner*, she didn't often let it out of the bag of holding except in her cabin.

"Some are evil, I suppose," she agreed. "Some are only pranksters and don't know anything of accountability. Pretty much, they're whatever they want to be. The raggamoffyns known as shrapnel are evil to the core. There are those who say that they're a race of creatures unto themselves, and still others who say they are the minions of a faceless wizard with a black heart. I don't know what to believe about all that, but this raggamoffyn does what I ask it to."

"I see."

The rhythmic sweep of the oars through the water provided an undercurrent to their conversation. Sabyna held her lantern aloft, searching the water ahead of the row-boat. The raggamoffyn involuntarily flinched away from the flame, creating a momentary bow in its present linear shape. "Its name is Skeins. I created it when it came time for me to take a familiar. The cloth it's made of is the shroud that covered my brother Dannin for his funeral service. I was ten when he died and I saved it, knowing exactly what I was going to do with it. When it was time, I sought out another raggamoffyn and made it perform the rites necessary to give life to Skeins."

"Ship the oars," Mornis ordered. "Get ready to pull away."

Sabyna stood in the rowboat's prow, gazing down into the water where the cog lay. The ship twisted and turned a little, rocking with the currents that held it. The wreckage appeared lifeless, white wood showing where some of the hull had been splintered and cracked under pressure.

Something thumped the inside of the ship, the hollow gonging noise echoing through the water was barely heard above the creak of the rowboat.

* * * * *

Jherek listened to the thumping coming from inside the wrecked cog. It sounded across the flat sea, and stopped after less than a minute.

"All right," Mornis said, "I need two volunteers to investigate the wreck."

None of the sailors raised their hands.

"I'll go," Jherek said.

"An" you're a damn fool if you do," Aysel said from further back in the stern.

Jherek had seen the big man come aboard when the rowboat had been loaded, but had ignored him. He ignored him again and rose easily to his feet. He pulled off his boots and shucked his cutlass, keeping only the hook and a knife in a scabbard on his shin.

"Anyone else?" Mornis asked.

No one volunteered.

Jherek didn't blame them. If someone else had volunteered to go, he'd have let them. The water was dark, the illumination wouldn't travel very far into it, and there was no telling what lay below. He walked to the rowboat's edge and started taking deep breaths to completely fill his lungs for the dive.

"Brave bunch, aren't you?" Mornis challenged. He pulled off his own boots, then his shirt. He kept a long saw-toothed knife. He flicked his gaze to Jherek. "You might want to take that shirt off too, lad."

"I'll be all right," Jherek replied, not wanting to chance the tattoo being seen. "The water will be cold."

The first mate chuckled. "About to dive into something like that," he gestured at the sunken cog, "and you're worried about a little chill." He shook his head. "You ready to do this?"

"Aye." Jherek marshaled his control, pushing away the fear that filled him. He didn't know any of these people, much less whoever might be in the sunken cog. He had no business jumping into that water, but he couldn't pass it up either.

"I've got a candle here that's got a bit of magic in it," the first mate said, rummaging in the pouch he kept at his waist. "Once it's lit, it'll burn underwater as well. Mage who sold it to me called it a candle of everburning. Cost me a lot, but a man at sea in the dark, light gets to be a most precious thing, you know?"

"Aye," Jherek said. He knew from experience how hopeful lights, even along an unknown coastline, could make a crew feel.

Mornis lit the candle and it caught with no problem even in the breeze blowing over the rowboat. He stepped to the rowboat's edge and dropped into the water.

Jherek followed the man, cleaving the water cleanly, not leaving the rush of bubbles behind the way *Breezerunner's* first mate did. He focused on the candle in the first mate's hand. The soft yellow glow belled out almost ten feet in all directions before the darkness of the water absorbed it.

The dulled splash of another body diving into the water sounded behind Jherek. He turned and looked up, watching as Sabyna swam toward him. The raggamoffyn took to the water as well, eeling through the ocean with more grace than the young sailor would have credited the creature with. He paused and waved the ship's mage back. She shook her head at him and kept swimming.

Turning his attention back to the cog now that he was near enough to see it, Jherek knew from the way it had broken in half that the ship had been sheared by its enemy. Arrows jutted out along the hull above where he believed the waterline would have been. A man's body, bloated and swollen from its time at sea and showing signs of having been attacked by small marine predators, twisted in the ship's rigging that dangled down from the broken deck.

With the way the cog was tilted, Jherek knew nothing survived in the cargo hold. It had been broken open to the sea and all compartments filled. That left only the stern cabin.

Evidently Mornis had the same thought because the first mate swam for the cabin at once. The cabin's door was tucked away under the ladder leading to the stern castle. On its side as the ship was, the cabin door faced down.

The thumping echoed through the sea, sounding eerily displaced and more immediate in the water. The first mate put his shoulder to the door and pushed but couldn't budge it.

The thumping repeated, suddenly showing more vigor, and Jherek knew someone was still alive on the ship. He swam to the first mate's side. Mornis moved the candle, showing the gaps between door and frame had been pressed together by the structural damage done to the cog and the depth's pressing in at it. The lock inside held it closed.

Desperate, his time to stay underwater with the oxygen in his lungs already growing short, Jherek used his knife to pry out the hinge bolts, letting them drop to the ocean bed hundreds of feet below. He sunk his hook into the wood beside the door to give himself more leverage, then flipped around so he could slam his feet into the door.

When he kicked out the third time, already going lightheaded from lack of oxygen and from the effort he was expending, the door turned sideways in its frame.

Mornis reached up and yanked it away, then swam inside with the candle leading the way.

Jherek went after him, trusting that some kind of air existed inside the cabin if someone was still alive. If there wasn't, he felt he could still make the surface before he passed out.

Books and other debris swirled around in the murky water, lit up by the candle. Even as he neared the surface inside the cabin, he glimpsed the boy standing there against one wall, immersed up to his chest.

The boy couldn't have been over nine years old, Jherek knew as he surfaced. Small framed and lean, the boy clung to the sconce mounted on the wall with fading strength. He held onto a brass candlestick with the other, using it as a weapon. His black hair was plastered against his head, and his eyes and nose were reddened from crying.

Jherek took a deep, shuddering breath and waited, giving the boy space. Mornis knew the boy was panic-stricken and stayed back as well.

"Easy, lad," the first mate said softly. "We're here to help you. Heard you knocking. You look like you're about all done in."

"They're all dead!" the boy screeched, fresh tears wetting his face. He held the candlestick threateningly.

"I know, lad. We seen 'em." Mornis swam forward, offering his hand. "I need you to come with me. We've got to be getting you out of here."

"Stay away!"

"Lad, you've been trying to save yourself for a long time from the looks of things," Mornis said, "but you can't hold on much longer. This old ship, she ain't going to last much longer neither."

"I don't know you," the boy shrilled. "I want my father!"

Jherek felt helpless, watching the boy trapped between grief and fear. It was a bad place to be. He knew from personal experience. His father's voice haunted him. So, *are you gonna be a pirate and take your place proper on Bun-yip, or ain't you? Live or die, boy. The choice is simple.* He forced the words away, tucking them back into that piece of his mind where the nightmares hid.

"What's your name?" Jherek asked softly and calmly.

The boy refused to answer, drawing big gulps of air as he frantically looked from one face to another.

"My name's Jherek." Too late, he remembered that he was supposed to keep his identity secret. If Sabyna or Mornis noticed, though, they kept it to themselves. He didn't think he'd even been introduced to the first mate. "Tell me your name."

"Wyls," the boy said. "My father put me in here and told me to stay. Where is he?"

Jherek shook his head and kicked with his feet to take some of the distance away between them. "I don't know, but we can try to find out."

"He should be coming for me," the boy cried. "He told me he'd be back."

Jherek took another deep breath, maintaining eye contact with the boy. He willed both of them to be calm. His heart hammered in his chest, though, and he knew his lungs were struggling with the trapped air in the cabin. The ship must have been underwater for hours. Maybe there'd been more air trapped in the pocket earlier, but what was left was fouled from being breathed again and again.

"Let me take you to him."

"Will you help me find him?"

Jherek looked at the hungry, desperate gaze. "I'll help you if I can." He lifted his hand from the water, offering it to the boy. Water dripped from his fingers, making concentric circles across the ocean surface trapped in the room with them.

"Liar!" The boy struck out with the candlestick.

Jherek barely had time to draw his hand back before the instrument smacked into the water. From the corner of his eye, he saw Sabyna wave her hand.

In response, her raggamoffyn familiar shot up from the water in his serpent's shape. Before anyone could react, the raggamoffyn exploded into hundreds of wet fabric pieces that flew through the air. They hovered around the boy like a bee swarm, twisting and turning like gulls gliding through storm weather. The fabric pieces covered every inch of the boy's body, including his eyes, nose and mouth, slamming into place with wet splashes. When the raggamoffyn finished, the boy looked like a mummy. He screamed, his voice thin and hollow, echoing in the limited space. The raggamoffyn held fast, following every movement with its shape. The boy clawed at the fabric pieces, trying to rip them free.

"Foul beast," Mornis exclaimed, drawing back fast enough to make even the magic candle gutter for an instant.

Jherek started forward, his knife already in hand. "Leave him alone," Sabyna said.

Torn by what was going on, feeling guilty for even being a part of it, he glanced back at her. The boy's screams continued unabated. "This isn't right. He's going to be more scared than ever."

She looked at him and didn't flinch from the accusation in his eyes or the whimpers the boy had been reduced to. "This way he'll live," she said. "We all will. Can't you feel the currents changing?"

Now that she'd mentioned it, Jherek did feel it, and he knew what it meant. "It's getting colder," he said. "We're sinking again."

"Aye," she said. "If we'd waited for the boy to get calm enough on his own...."

"She's right," Mornis said. "I don't like that thing either, but it's saved us some time." He took a deep breath and disappeared under the water until only a faint glow from the magic candle was visible.

The boy fell silent suddenly, then lurched free of the scone and waded into the water after Mornis.

As the light left the cabin, Jherek looked at the ship's mage. Her face remained calm, but there were unshed tears in her eyes.

"It was the only way," she told him in a shaky voice.

"Skeins will keep him safe enough till we reach the surface. The raggamoffyn is controlling his body now."

"Aye," Jherek replied. "You did what you could."

"You don't think I should have done this."

"Lady," Jherek said, "I only know what I should do. I wouldn't dare to presume to tell another what to do."

"You're so young," she said. "How'd you get to be so judgmental?"

"I'm not."

"You are," she said. "Maybe you don't realize it yet. You're going to have a hard, narrow path ahead of you." Without another word, she dived beneath the rising water that claimed the interior of the cabin.

Jherek followed her, feeling the whole cog slide deeper into the ocean. He felt confused about her, about what she'd said. He didn't know what he was going to do about that, or why he felt he had to do anything at all.

XXI

15 Mirtul, the Year of the Gauntlet

The boy sat inside Mornis's cabin less than an hour later, wrapped tightly in a blanket now instead of the raggamoffyn. He ate warmed-over chowder greedily from a beaten metal bowl, pausing only to chew the chunks offish.

"Do you know who the pirates were that attacked your ship?" Captain Tynnel asked.

The boy shook his head, still chewing. "No, sir."

One of the few *Breezerunner's* captain had allowed into the room, Jherek stood near the doorway, watching the boy. Wyls was educated and mannered, the son of a merchant who'd hired the cog as transport. He'd had a good life ahead of him, the young sailor reflected. Now all that had been lost, unless there was family he could get home to.

Wyls stared into the chowder bowl. "They came out of nowhere and attacked our ship," he said. "The captain tried to run, but they had a faster ship. My father locked me in the cabin before they got on our ship, but I heard the fighting." His breath seized up in his throat.

"Easy, lad," Tynnel said, dropping a hand to the boy's head. "You just take your time. I only need to know a few more things, then you can sup till you've a full belly and cover up in those blankets."

The boy nodded and continued holding the bowl in both hands. After a moment, he asked in a broken voice, "What else do you need to know?"

"When did the pirates attack the ship?"

"It was early, soon after morningfeast. I remember because I'd only been out on deck a short time before my father locked me away."

"When did they break the ship up?"

"After the fighting stopped and they looted the cargo hold. I remember hearing the winch creaking. I unlocked the door and lay under the bed. When the room was searched, they were hurrying so much they didn't find me. I locked the door again after they left."

"Then they broke the ship?" Tynnel asked.

"Yes. I was looking out the window when they sailed their ship over ours." Wyls looked up at the captain and asked, "Will you help me find my father?"

"Aye, we'll search, lad. Maybe they were put off in a lifeboat."

The boy nodded.

Even though he knew why Tynnel had said what he did, it sickened Jherek to hear the lie. If the boy's father yet lived, he'd have demanded sanctuary for his son as well. Jherek left the cabin, satisfied the boy was going to be taken care of.

Back on the main deck, he stopped at the railing and breathed deeply. He still carried a chill from swimming even though he'd changed clothes. Glancing at the prow, he spotted Sabyna sitting there alone. She was swaddled in a heavy woolen blanket.

Uncomfortable with how things had been left between them after the encounter over the raggamoffyn, Jherek went to the ship's galley and got two bowls of chowder from the cook. A pot was generally kept going for the men taking the night shift.

He carried the bowls of chowder to the prow. "I thought maybe you'd like some soup," he said quietly, extending one of the bowls.

She looked up at him, then took it graciously. "Thank you." She put the bowl in her lap, gray tendrils wafting around her as *Breezerunner* sailed in ever-widening circles in the attempt to find other survivors of the pirate attack.

"May I join you, lady?" he asked, feeling uncomfortable and afraid that she'd tell him no.

"You'd want to sit with me after what I did to that boy?"

"Aye."

She shook her head. "Then sit."

He did, folding his legs. The wind had a chill bite to it now. He ate the chowder in the silence that stretched between them.

"Are you cold?" she asked, setting her bowl aside.

"I'm fine."

"You're shivering."

"Only a little."

"Here," Sabyna said, stretching the blanket out, offering him part of it.

Hesitantly, Jherek took the blanket and wrapped himself in it. Immediately, he became overly conscious of her body heat saturating the blanket, and of the way she smelled of lilacs in spite of the swim.

"Is the boy all right?" she asked.

"He's eating, and from the look of him, he'll be sleeping soon. He told the captain that Skeins scared him, but he understands why it had to be done."

"Good." Sabyna pushed wet hair from her brow. "He'll start to feel the real pain in the next couple of days, when he realizes he's survived and his father hasn't."

Jherek knew that was true, and that there was nothing he could do to spare the boy that pain. Living hurt was a fact he'd learned early, and one that had stayed with him the longest. "What will Tynnel do with him?"

"The best he can," Sabyna answered. "He'll post for the boy's family and leave him with a temple in Athkatla when we reach the port for care. He'll check on him, but that boy could well end up being an orphan. It happens. This is a hard world."

"Aye." Jherek hunkered in the blanket for a time, wishing he felt more like sleeping. He felt drawn to the woman. In the three days aboard ship, he'd watched her and liked what he saw. Rescuing the boy the way she had, though, had shown him some of the differences that lay between them. He wished it would have made him like her less. The attraction, however, remained.

"I heard the boy tell Tynnel that pirates took the ship," Sabyna said.

Jherek nodded.

"Pirates killed my brother," she went on in a voice so quiet it was almost a whisper, "but I told you that, didn't I? My father was ship's mage on *Glass Princess* back then."

The ship's name struck a chord in Jherek's memory. Something moved restlessly in his mind and he instinctively shied away from it. Anything that far back couldn't be good.

"We were attacked by Falkane's ship, *Bunyip*."

Jherek's heart skipped a beat.

"I remember it well," Sabyna continued. "My mother and I had just put away the remains of morningfeast, and a fog swelled up from the south as it sometimes will during this time of year. Only on that day, *Bunyip* was following it in. We ran a race for a time, our sails filled with the wind."

Jherek remembered the ship then, and the chase. He'd been five, clinging to the ship's rigging as his father had commanded. It was his job to put out any fires that might start on the deck when the boarding began. Merchant ships who knew they were going to be taken often retaliated by trying their hardest to make taking them dangerous to the pirates. He always stayed near the wet sand barrels that he used to put out any fire arrows that struck *Bunyip*. The pirate vessel's namesake, a creature of the seas half seal, half shark, was known for the characteristic roar it unleashed before it took its prey. Falkane had ordered a specially made klaxon created to make the same roar, only much louder. Jherek remembered it ringing in his ears that day.

"In the end," Sabyna went on, "*Bunyip* closed on us. The boarding crew was more merciful in those days than they are now."

"I know," Jherek said hoarsely.

"Falkane ordered the captain and most of the crew killed. It was butchery, but he spared my father and a few other men, my other two brothers who were still yet children themselves. He also spared my mother and the women on the ship."

Images flickered through Jherek's mind of that day, more details available than he'd ever been able to remember in the past. He'd clung to the railing, scared and crying as he always did when he saw the vicious bloodletting that happened on a ship *Bunyip* had grappled onto.

"My brother Dennin was sixteen, still a boy, but with a man's growth. His magic could have been strong, but he denied it, called to the blade. Before my father could stop him, he challenged Falkane to a duel." Sabyna shook her head. "It was no duel. It was an execution."

Jherek didn't remember that. At the time he'd been standing by the railing, sure even as a child that he could no longer endure the fear and the sheer evil that radiated from his father and the pirate crew. Men and women had been murdered-and worse-on *Bunyip's* deck, and his father had made him witness most of the atrocities.

During the boarding then the two ships had gotten off tandem on a wave and knocked forcibly together. He'd fallen over the railing and into the ocean between the two ships. Though he was a good swimmer, he couldn't overcome the undertow created by the ships and the sea. In the end, he'd given up, accepting death as a respite from the harsh and unloved life he'd been forced to live.

He remembered floating downward, looking up at the keels of the two ships over him, watching as the turquoise world around him slowly faded to black. On the brink of drowning, he'd heard the voice for the first time.

Live, that you may serve. Nothing more, but the voice had left him feeling enraptured, stronger.

A pair of dolphins had swam under him, nosing under his arms and swimming with him back to the surface. One of his father's pirates had spotted him and leaped in to save him. Afterward, he'd been more hopeful for a time, but that had faded as the days of waiting for more direction had turned into months and years. Now with the way events had gone in Velen, Jherek felt it had only been to prolong the agony of his life.

"After he finished with the ship," Sabyna went on, "Falkane burned it to the waterline. He gave my father Dennin's body, as a token of respect he'd said, because my brother had died well."

"I'm sorry," Jherek said, the cold touching him again, but coming from inside this time. Still, his mind whirled. Perhaps Madame Litaar's divination was correct. It wasn't just mere chance that had placed him on the same ship as a woman who'd been there at the time the dolphins had rescued him. Or was it? He wished that he was more certain.

Live, that you may serve.

But serve who?

"I'm not telling you this because of the boy," Sabyna said. "I did what I had to down there even if it did frighten him more than he should have been, and we both have to live with that. Nor am I telling you this because I want you to understand how I feel about pirates. I'm telling you these things because I want you to know me."

Jherek remained silent, knowing part of her talk was from the aftermath of the risk they'd taken. Talking at such times, Malorrie had assured him, was a natural thing, a way of putting things behind a person.

"If I could," she continued, "I'd kill every pirate on every sea, on all of Toril, and stretch their bodies out for the gulls to feed on."

The tattoo on the inside of Jherek's arm seemed to catch fire. It marked him indelibly for her, made him a part of what she most hated. There was no denying his heritage, and his bloodline only made it worse.

"Tynners stand on pirates is the chief reason I signed on with *Breezerunner*?" she said. "He's got a reputation for taking the fight to pirates, and he keeps the extra men on board to handle any encounter with them that may come along." She turned to him. "I've a harsh side to me, one that surprises a lot of people. Is that too much for you to handle?"

He hesitated, trying to figure it out for himself. His head rebelled from what she was saying, thinking that her logic was skewed. It was one thing to stand against an evil, but another to stalk it as much like a predator as the evil itself. In the end, he went with his heart.

"No, it's not too much for me to handle."

She looked at him, her eyes searching his. "Good, because I find myself liking you-maybe more than I should-and if I'm too honest for you too quickly, I can only offer my apologies."

Her revelation shocked Jherek and he didn't know what to say.

"Surprised?" she asked.

"Aye," he croaked.

"Surprised that I'd be so forward?"

He shrugged.

"I live on a ship, as you have. It's a small world. Things will pass you by if you don't reach out for them. Do you understand?"

Jherek nodded, realizing that her talk was there to bolster her courage in revealing so much of herself.

"There's not much time to get to know someone you feel-*drawn* to," she continued. "I've learned that I have to deal with my feelings quickly to make sure of where I stand. I can't afford distractions in my job, and I've found you've become very distracting. If I don't deal with it now, I fear it's only going to get worse. I don't want that, but neither do I want to confuse you, and I know from other times that I'm capable of that. I'm trying to be fair to both of us. It would be easier if I felt you weren't interested."

Jherek understood. Finaren had kept *Butterfly* operating in the same fashion. If men didn't get along, they admitted and confronted each other, and truces were worked out. If talking didn't settle it, they fought, though no killing was permitted. If the one fight didn't settle matters, Finaren picked one of the men and helped the other, if he was a good worker, find another ship.

He tried to think of something to say, but no words came readily to his lips. Luckily, she continued, making an effort to fill the uncomfortable silence that had threatened to come between them.

"When you put a woman on a ship," Sabyna said, "you affect ship's morale. I can't afford to get close to any man on this ship. Such a thing has a tendency to split the crew. Yet, I'm a woman still, with womanly desires. It's one thing to entertain myself on shore leave, but those are transitory things. *Breezerunner* is my home, and it makes me feel good about myself to invite someone into my home and fix a meal for them, share a conversation. Do you understand?"

"Aye, I think that I do," Jherek answered, looking into her impassioned gaze, knowing what she felt in part. He'd never had what he considered a home to himself, except maybe the loft over the barn he'd rented before Madame Litaar had taken him into her home. He'd never allowed himself to get close to others, not even *Butterfly's* crew, because of his secret.

"I'm no common woman to be treated in a casual manner." She looked away. "Should you get a berth on this ship when you get to Baldur's Gate, things between us would change. I don't fraternize with crew, and you need to know that as well."

He nodded. Her honesty felt much different from the Amman woman's from three days ago. There were no demands being put on him, only an interest evidenced.

Strangely, he found that it frightened him more than the Amnian woman's bold advances.

"What's on your mind?" Sabyna asked.

He looked away from her, not knowing what to say.

"Tell me if I've completely embarrassed myself," she said in a contrite voice, "but I know no other way to let someone know what I'm thinking other than to tell them."

Hearing the uncertainty in her voice, Jherek turned back to face her. "No, lady, you've not embarrassed yourself. I think you show great sense and have courage to speak your mind."

"Then what?"

«T___»

She waited, which made it even harder to speak.

"I thought eveningfeast tonight was just in appreciation for the work I'd been doing," he stated finally.

"You accepted because you liked the idea of a meal cooked only for you, or being seen with the only female on the ship's crew? If that's the case, then I was wrong about you." She wrapped up more tightly in her part of the blanket.

"No, lady, that's not it. I took your eveningfeast invitation because I wanted to get to know you more."

"You didn't think I'd invited you for the same reason?"

"No, I didn't."

Sabyna laughed softly. "In some ways, for a sailor, you're very naive," she said. "Why wouldn't you think I'd be interested in you?"

"I'm very common, lady."

"You work hard, yet you keep to yourself. You're opinionated, but you keep those opinions to yourself. You're brave and caring. Tonight has shown me that. Those are all traits a woman could be interested in." She paused. "You said you'd wanted to get to know me better. What about me made you feel that way?"

Surprisingly, Jherek found the answer to that easy, if somewhat disconcerting to admit. "I liked your

smile," he told her, "and I liked the way you handle yourself. You walk this deck confidently, lady."

"My beauty didn't turn your head?"

Jherek faced her, not believing he hadn't thought to comment on her beauty. In all the stories he'd read, the heroes always talked of their lady love's beauty. She wasn't his lady love, he reminded himself, and life didn't always have a happy ending the way it did in the romances.

"Lady, as you've said, I'm naive about some things, but one thing I have learned is that beauty can be deceptive."

"Touche," she replied, looking into his eyes. She smiled at him.

Jherek became even more aware of the way the blanket enfolded the two of them, and of the scent of lilacs. The moonlight ignited copper flame highlights in her damp hair. She *was* beautiful.

"You lie as well," she replied calmly, without accusation. "I don't know if your name is Malorrie or Jherek."

"Lady-" Her words tore at Jherek's heart. He'd never wanted to lie to anyone.

She placed her fingers against his lips. "Shush. I feel I know you. I think you believe you have reasons for lying about the things you lie about. I won't have you lying any further to me, not if I'm going to get to know you, and I won't push you to tell me anything you're not ready to say."

He waited, smelling the lilac softness of her fingers.

"Do you understand?"

"Aye, lady," he said softly.

She stared at him in silence for a moment, then broke the eye contact. "You need to get some sleep," she said, "as do I. Tynnel will keep a crew out searching for any more possible survivors, but I don't think there'll be any. We can talk more tomorrow."

"As you wish."

She smiled at him. "As you wish," she repeated. "I like the sound of that."

Jherek flushed. At the moment, looking into her eyes, the response had seemed so appropriate, culled from the pages of books he'd read, of the romances in the stories, but aloud like that, with Sabyna drawing attention to it, it seemed to strike a false note. "I only meant-"

"It's all right. I meant what I said, I do like the sound of it. I've grown up around the sea and seafaring men all my life. Men's lips often move before their brains have full sails up. I'll warn you now, if you start coming across as a dandy, I'll have none of it. The man I had dinner with, the one who was polite and kind and thoughtful, and maybe a bit flustered, that's the one I enjoy. If he turns out to be a bit of drama or a flummery, I warn you now I'll be greatly disappointed." She took her blanket back and stood.

Jherek stood as well, and he was surprised how chill the wind felt now after being wrapped in her blanket. He took the empty bowls, intending to drop them in the galley after they parted.

"Are you still interested in helping out with the work *Breezerunner* needs?"

"Of course."

She started to go, then turned back to him. "There's one other thing I want to mention to you."

"Aye."

Her manner turned even more darkly serious. "When I read your palm earlier, I had a vision. I've never had one before, but I know that's what it was. It was interrupted by the collision."

Jherek felt his stomach turn small and cold, wondering what she'd seen. After living with Madame Litaar as she gave divinations all those years, he believed in such magic, "I don't know how far in the future, but at some point, you're going to cross swords with Falkane the Salt Wolf. It will be at sea, but it's a sea I've not seen."

Suddenly dizzy, feeling like the deck itself had dropped out from beneath him, Jherek made himself remain standing.

"That surprises you?" she asked.

"Aye."

"Why?"

"I'm just a sailor, no king's man or corsair to pursue the pirates of the Nelanther."

Her eyes examined his face. "It might not come true," she said finally. "The vision felt like it was sometime in the future, but the events aren't set. If you stay on your present course, I feel it will happen, but visions aren't written in stone. Good night. I'll see you in the morning."

Jherek watched her walk away, reveling in the sight of her while at the same time feeling more wary than ever. After leaving the dishes with the cook, he took himself amidships and hung out a hammock. He'd stayed in the cabin below decks for the last three nights, sharing the space with other travelers and some of

the ship's crew. Tonight, though, he wanted to sleep out under the stars, hoping it would clear his head.

He laid on the hammock and draped the heavy blanket Madame Litaar had made and he'd gotten from his traveler's kit over him. The wind slipped across his face. He wondered about the ship's mage, wishing he had Malorrie there to talk to him about the way she made him feel and the confusing things she said and did.

He thought about the vision of his father she'd said she had. He didn't doubt that she'd had the vision, but he did question whether it was going to come true. There was no reason his path would cross his father's ever again. If it did, he had no doubt that blood would be spilled and one of them might die.

The last thought he had, though, was of what might be waiting for him at Baldur's Gate.

XXII

7 Tarsakh, the Year of the Gauntlet

Seated atop the royal flier, skimming through the depths at top speed, Laaqueel looked out over King Huaanton's village. It was spread across the rocky seabed three hundred feet and more below the surface, located between the Nelanthers and the Moonshaes, as the surface dwellers termed the ground above water. By Huaanton's reckoning, those areas were still part of his domain, just held by invaders. Iakhovas, Laaqueel knew, had promised to bring those regions under Huaanton's control soon.

The terrain was broken, peaking and gliding in mismatched sections that left troughs and valleys scattered over it. The deepest section of it was the canyon that ran through the ocean bed. Perpetual murk hung over the area, masking the pale blue light that actually made it to that depth. Surface dwellers, even with their magic potions and items that allowed them to breathe underwater and withstand the crushing depths, wouldn't see the village with their weak eyes unless they were on top of it. By that time, sharks, sahuagin guards, and traps all stood ready to kill them.

The village was huge, lining both sides of the immense canyon. Buildings crafted of great blocks of stone sat barnacle-covered on both sides. Despite all the killing that had gone on by each sahuagin king who'd held court at the site, there still existed the rumor that the buildings had once been on the surface, and that immense changes had shaken all of Toril in the past.

The flier, propelled by sahuagin swimmers gripping the t-bars underneath, changed its glide approach to a steeper angle and slid down into the canyon. Dozens of sahuagin dwellings, looking like bumps and abnormalities, clung to the canyon walls. Sharks and sahuagin guards lounged in the cracks and crevices leading into tunneled labyrinths that honeycombed the village. More tunnels, likewise filled with traps and guards, twisted and threaded through the canyon walls and beyond on both sides. Over seven thousand sahuagin lived there.

The sahuagin tiller guided his craft down to the bottom of the canyon, then cut sharply into a defile that looked like a shadow against the uneven floor. They burst through into the darkness. Even with her vision, Laaqueel was hard-pressed to see through the gloom. It would take a little time for her eyes to fully acclimate to the new darkness. Even attacking sahuagin would be at a disadvantage to the palace guards inside.

The flier leveled out and slowed, easing into the tunnel the manta almost filled from side to side. The tunnel walls were slick from usage. Dozens of guards filled the receiving chamber, and Laaqueel knew traps covered every inch of the area. The water felt colder inside the passage. In all her life, she'd only been to the king's village once before, and never through the tunnels that led to the main palace.

Iakhovas sat beside Laaqueel in the flier, concentrating on another of the artifacts that his search parties had brought to him of late. The wizard didn't appear to be impressed by being invited to the royal village at all. The attack on Waterdeep was six days in the past, and Iakhovas was already planning his next steps.

The malenti was aware of how much the surface world was talking about the attack because Iakhovas had assigned her to gather information. She'd resented being taken from the village. From so far away she couldn't watch the wizard as closely as she wanted to. She was getting the feeling that Iakhovas was spending more time away, too, maybe on the surface. His casual disregard for all the history surrounding them now made her angry. "You should be more respectful," she said. He lifted his head from the object he was studying, fixing her with his one-eyed gaze. "I bid you to take care in what you choose to say, little malenti. It doesn't take much effort to detect a note of insubordination in your voice." She swallowed her anger but

didn't break eye contact. "A true sahuagin would feel reverent about this place. It was the first home of the sahuagin." "How came you to this belief?" "It's what I've been told."

"Then it would probably shatter your certitude to know that everything you've heard about that is a fabrication." The announcement was like a sudden, unexpected slap across the face. Before Laaqueel could figure out how she wanted to reply and still ensure her own survival, the tunnel took a sudden turn to the left and up. At the end of the new tunnel, the largest clam Laaqueel had ever seen opened at their approach.

Fifty or more sahuagin guards, dressed in harnesses bearing the royal seal, a white shark set against the dark blue of the ocean, filled the area. Their tridents were black, cut from the shafts of obsidian that were mined from the veins created by underwater volcanic eruptions in the area hundreds of years ago. Serviceable and distinct, the weapon of each sahuagin guard of the Royal Black Tridents was never out of the bearer's hand from the time he was given it to the time he died. Even then, it passed from the guard to his hand-picked successor. They were ruled only by the king and the nine official Royal Tridents.

The sahuagin guards bristled, flanking the flier as Iakhovas gave the command for it to stop. In a heartbeat, the flier pulled to a full halt and hung suspended in the air, the fins of the sahuagin below maintaining the distance above the cavern floor.

One of the guards moved forward and set his trident deliberately on the front of the flier. He was one of the most fearsome sahuagin Laaqueel had ever seen. Scars lined his powerful torso and one of his ears had been bitten off in battle. Bite marks from another sahuagin pinched up his right cheek, giving him a mocking, cruel smile that revealed a few fangs. The flesh had turned dead white from the injury.

"I am Soothraak, First Honored among the Royal Black Tridents. No one goes any further without my leave," the sahuagin challenged.

Iakhovas stood and stretched to his full height, answering the challenge with his own. Due to his glamour, Laaqueel knew the sahuagin viewed him as one of their own. "I am Iakhovas, a prince of We Who Eat, and you will address me as your superior or there will be a promotion within your ranks, First of the Nine." His voice rolled over the assembled guard.

For a moment Laaqueel believed the guard leader's pride was going to be too much for him and he would attack, Iakhovas didn't back down, almost leaning toward the other in anticipation.

The guard took his trident from the flier and backed away, spreading his arms out away from his body, baring his vulnerable stomach and throat to attack. "In the Exalted One's name, I bid you welcome, Most Honored One."

"Meat is meat," Iakhovas responded. "I come with the preparations of a feast."

Soothraak stood at attention again. "So we have heard."

Many of our people died in the attack on the surface dwellers."

"They were inadequate and Sekolah found them wanting, ever reaving the weak from our blood," Iakhovas responded. "I bid you make certain to tell the other side of that tale. There were also a number of We Who Eat who successfully completed their mission, proving their worth. We have bared our fangs and claws, and we have tasted the surface dwellers' blood. A new fear has been installed in them, and they will pass that fear onto their children and their children's children."

The guard started to say something else, but Laaqueel interrupted him, putting the teeth of the office of priestess into her words. She'd come too far with Iakhovas to allow him to be brought down. Her future was directly tied to his, and there was no denying that, as well as Sekolah's guidance. "Do you think the Most Exalted One would like to know you wasted the time of one who waits to eat with him?"

"No, More Honored One," the guard said. "Do not dare be insubordinate at this moment," Iakhovas commanded. "Address this female as Most Honored One and show her the respect she is due as my high priestess. Know that not only is she my high priestess, but she is One Most Favored by Sekolah. She speaks his wishes, and to stand in their way is to bare your throat to the Great Shark himself."

When Laaqueel saw the chastised look appear on Soothraak's face, pride flared through her. After all her long years of devotion, Sekolah was seeing to it that she was properly honored. Iakhovas's demands that she be so honored offered proof that the Great Shark had put the currents before her. She felt ashamed that she'd had doubts. Even the attack on Waterdeep had gone exactly as Iakhovas had promised. Shipping from that city had all but stopped.

"Meat is meat, Most Honored One," the Black Trident said. "My address from this moment on shall be more adequate."

Soothraak lifted his hand and the Royal Black Tridents broke ranks around the flier. Iakhovas sat and ordered the craft forward again. The giant clam waited, open-mouthed, then the pealing tone of a great bell echoed through the chamber. Slowly, the clam closed, revealing the tunnel mouth above it that the open

shell had hidden.

The flier barely fit through the tunnel, and the way became even darker. The dim blue glow of lichens stained the walls, allowing an ease in navigation. Twice, the flier nudged up too close to a wall, and the sound of the wood scraping against the rock echoed painfully in Laaqueel's ears. She felt the increased pressure of the current that overtook them before she realized what it was.

In the current's grip, the flier twisted through the tunnel, having no real choice about what direction it traveled or how fast it was going to get there. The flier came out of the tunnel in a rush, emptying into a great basin lined with white limestone rock. The rock along the bottom had merely been dropped into place, the rocks in the walls and ceiling of the enclosed space had been affixed.

Laaqueel knew the purpose behind the rock. Purely defensive in its design, the white limestone backlit anyone who entered the chamber, stripping away shadows that invaders could normally hide in. The next line of defense was the huge net that spanned the mouth of the other tunnel leading from the basin. Metal glinted, mixed with the dulled brightness of old bone, letting her know that hundreds of barbed hooks had been woven into the net.

More members of the Royal Black Tridents stood on the rock shelf protruding from the other tunnel. Most of them carried crossbows, bone shafts tipped with fish fins lay in the grooves.

Sudden motion touched Laaqueel through her lateral lines. Whatever had moved was huge, immediately threatening. She turned, pushing herself up from the flier's seat to find the source.

A white cloud seemed to lift and separate from the limestone wall on her left. Even with her vision, she found it hard to discern what the motion belonged to.

The drifting white cloud shifted again and a red eye flared into focus, fully ten feet across. Once she had the eye, Laaqueel recognized the rest of the creature as an albino kraken.

Laaqueel stood, immediately frightened. The kraken was the largest of its kind she'd ever seen. From the tip of its triangular head to the ends of its two longest tentacles, it had to be over one hundred fifty feet in length. All eight tentacles wavered in the water around it, floating on the constant current that eddied through the chamber. Still, they moved with frightening speed, slithering around the flier.

Besides the power the gigantic creature wielded with its tentacles, Laaqueel knew from experience that it squirted a poisonous ink cloud. There were other abilities as well, and the creature possessed a superior intellect. She'd only seen two before. Both those had ruled the regions they'd been in, allowing no habitation by aquatic elves or anything near human.

She eased into position, bringing her trident up in line with the creature. It wouldn't do much good against the kraken, she was sure, but having the weapon there made her feel a little more secure.

The kraken glided into position above the flier, dangling over it. The tentacles whipped languidly through the water, curling and almost brushing against the craft. The sahuagin bristled with weapons as they faced the creature.

"Ah, little malenti, this is truly a fascinating specimen."

Laaqueel glanced at Iakhovas, surprised to see the look of absolute joy that crossed the wizard's scarred face.

"I knew not if they yet lived, hadn't dared to dream that it would be so."

"Yes," she said, "and they also kill."

"This creature will not harm me," he told her confidently. "Once, when I was young and the world was too, I knew them all."

"Even so, this won't be one of those."

"Given the life spans the creatures have, there's no chance," he agreed, shaking his head, "but I guarantee you, little malenti, this creature will know me."

She looked at him, wondering if he told the truth. Kraken didn't stay anywhere near each other, much less near any creature that they didn't rule. She knew this one had to have been kept captive, forced to serve the sahuagin king. It was one of the secrets of the sahuagin royalty she was now privy to.

The sahuagin guard at the other tunnel hailed them.

Iakhovas gave the flier pilot orders to take the craft closer. The sahuagin swimming beneath surged forward, wanting to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the kraken, but the kraken drifted effortlessly in their wake, spreading out wide and resembling a net not quite closing around them.

King Huaanton stood at the forefront of the Royal Black Tridents. Almost nine feet tall and still growing slowly these days, the sahuagin monarch carried a body sculpted in wide and hard planes of muscle. He was old enough that his scale coloration was almost black, a natural camouflage at the deepest levels of the sea. His combat harness bore the shark seal of Sekolah and was festooned in shells and shark's

teeth. He carried the ornate shark bone trident with inlaid gold that had been handed down for centuries from king to king. That trident, Laaqueel knew, was a guarantee that the sahuagin holding it would fight to the death to hold his station. Huaanton had stripped it from his dead predecessor after a challenge battle not far from the sahuagin city.

"Iakhovas," Huaanton called out.

The wizard turned at last, drawing his gaze from the kraken, but Laaqueel knew the observance of the command had been too slow. Huaanton wouldn't let that go.

"Exalted One," Iakhovas called back. "At your behest, I have returned to your august presence that I might serve you."

Laaqueel grew more afraid as the kraken continued closing the distance. Iakhovas didn't seem to care. The net stretched tight before them, the kelp laced with bone shards to prevent anyone from easily cutting through. Until it was lowered or removed, it trapped them with the kraken.

"You find yourself on the wrong side of the net," Huaanton stated with the hint of a threat. "One of my predecessors found that creature and captured it while it was young, then it was walled in here until it grew too large to escape. Now the beast is deliberately kept hungry. Only the fact that it knows we'd starve it to death if it attacked you unbidden keeps it from eating you now."

"Perhaps, Exalted One," Iakhovas said, "and perhaps there is more to this creature's behavior than you know."

He sprang from the flier, cleaving the water and streaking upward. He moved like a born swimmer, instinctively knowing how best to move his body.

The kraken's tentacles rippled in response to Iakhovas swimming closer. For a moment, it looked like the gargantuan creature was actually going on the defensive.

Laaqueel watched, hypnotized by the sight of the man looking so diminutive against the kraken's huge mass. She forced herself to stand in the flier, but she had a spell at the ready, willing to strike the creature with a scalding jet of heated water. If Iakhovas died, her ambitions and privileges died with him, and so did her ability to better serve Sekolah.

The kraken floated upside down, its arrowhead-shaped body pointed down toward the cavern floor so its tentacles splayed out around it. Iakhovas floated near one of the eyes, looking like he was locked in some kind of conversation with the giant squid.

Without warning, the kraken started glowing, outlined by a soft purple-blue light that shifted and moved like fiery flames. Iakhovas reached out and placed a hand next to the kraken's huge eye. The wizard grinned as he turned to face Huaanton.

"Just as I perceived," Iakhovas said confidently. "I, and my mission, have been given Sekolah's blessings.

Laaqueel has brought me the message and kept me in line with the Great Shark's desires."

Laaqueel believed the wizard was magically controlling the kraken. She didn't want to believe that he had some kind of bond with them that had existed before he'd been turned into stone and left for dead, or that Sekolah had offered the wizard protection. She wished she didn't have her doubts.

With a lightning quick flick, the kraken reached out a tentacle and stripped one of the sahuagin warriors from the flier. The warrior never had a chance, although he succeeded in burying his trident in the creature's flesh. While the warrior still struggled, the kraken brought him to its mouth and bit down, shredding the sahuagin's legs. Blood clouded the water, running in black swirls against the white limestone background.

The royal guard surged forward, hooking their webbed hands in the net separating them from the kraken and the dying sahuagin. They shouted out at the giant squid in anger and fear while the men in the back instantly surrounded Huaanton, urging him back into the tunnel.

The king shook them off, chasing them back from him with warnings. The guards pulled back reluctantly, caught between the need to do their job and their responsibility to obey the king.

The kraken chomped again, biting the dying sahuagin in two at the waist. Hunks of meat and entrails spilled out into the water. Slowly, the kraken raised Iakhovas toward its mouth.

Laaqueel shifted, getting ready to loose the magic she had awaiting her command.

As you were, little malenti. Do not try to take any part in this upon pain of death. Iakhovas's voice spoke into her mind. *Huaanton has grown over bold these past few years and must be reminded of his true place in the events that are unfolding. I will not suffer him threatening me and undermining my authority while I go off to fight his wars.*

Laaqueel forced water through her gills, flushing her body. She didn't act, but her spine became as

tight as a bowstring. The wizard's insubordination was going to be the death of them both.

The kraken stopped moving the tentacle holding Iakhovas within a few feet of its maw. The wizard slashed out with a hand that resembled a hard ridge of bone for a moment. The bone ridge sliced through one of the chunks of meat from the sahuagin warrior.

Laaqueel knew the illusion of being a sahuagin that Iakhovas maintained on himself probably translated to using his claws.

Iakhovas opened his mouth wide and ate the goblet of flesh he'd hacked off. "Meat is meat," he declared.

The royal guard stared at him in awe. The story, the malenti knew, would spread throughout the kingdom, then into the other villages. In the telling, as with all stories, it would grow, making the wizard a creature of myth. The truth itself was incredible, a tale that sahuagin everywhere would enjoy: a warrior prince of their own, held in the embrace of a half-starved kraken, and eating choice bits of a meal almost out of its mouth. She glanced at Huaanton.

The sahuagin king's features gave nothing away even to her practiced eye, but Huaanton had to have known the position the showdown had pushed Iakhovas into.

Iakhovas grabbed an arm that had been torn free of the dead sahuagin's torso and was floating nearby. He offered it to the kraken, feeding it the arm out of his hand. Carefully, the kraken took the gift of food, not even grazing the wizard's skin with its fangs. Once the rest of the sahuagin had been eaten, the kraken brought Iakhovas down to eye level again. A brief communication took place, then the kraken stretched forth its tentacle and replaced Iakhovas on the flier.

Laaqueel stepped back from the white tentacle, barely able to control the fight or flight instinct that filled her. She prayed to Sekolah to grant her the strength she needed and to not let any of her emotions show.

The kraken withdrew its tentacle but remained close, rippling in the currents that filled the huge chamber, Iakhovas turned to face Huaanton, and Laaqueel recognized the challenge the wizard had engineered. Huaanton had used the threat of the kraken against Iakhovas, hoping to show the power he had over him. Instead, Iakhovas had stripped that threat away and converted it into a threat of his own. Everyone in the chamber knew he was protected by Sekolah's blessing, and they knew he had some degree of control over the kraken.

Now it remained to be seen if Huaanton had the courage to drop the net that held the kraken back.

Facing Iakhovas, Huaanton lifted an arm and gave the order. Immediately, the net separated down the middle, drawn in two opposing directions by pulley systems that looked like they'd been salvaged from the ships of surface dwellers. The shrill of the support lines being taken up on the pulley drums echoed through the water with piercing harshness.

Iakhovas deliberately waited until the opening was larger than he needed. Although the royal guard shifted nervously around him, their tails twisting through the water, Huaanton let the net be drawn back even further. He stood, solid as stone, a sahuagin who exemplified the core of all that his people were taught to revere. There was a ferocity that clung to him in defiance of his own mortality.

Another moment passed, then Iakhovas gave the order to the flier's tiller. The flier surged forward and joined Huaanton and his group on the rocky ledge. Even the flier's crew quickly spread out, some of them swimming up to fill in the space in the water above the ledge. All of them held their weapons tightly and faced the kraken.

Swimming from the flier, Iakhovas never glanced back. The shrill of the pulleys sounded again as the net crews drew it closed.

Reacting a little slowly, her own attention divided in three different directions, Laaqueel swam to join Iakhovas. She dropped into place beside him only a heartbeat behind the wizard's own landing. She felt the hard stone of the ledge beneath her feet, worn smooth by centuries of usage.

"Well talk," Huaanton said.

"Of course, Exalted One," Iakhovas agreed. "I'd have this no other way."

Turning, the sahuagin king launched himself upward, his webbed hands and feet catching the water at once. He swam for one of five sahuagin-sized tunnels above him. Iakhovas followed.

Laaqueel joined them, swimming behind three of the royal guard who trailed Iakhovas. Only one of the tunnels would lead to the royal palace, and even it would only provide an entry to the maze of tunnels that eventually took a knowing swimmer there. The sahuagin mind loved mazes, and learning complicated ones was a challenge. The other tunnels led to other places, and some of them would lead only to certain death by traps or creatures. Underwater races knew to fear sahuagin mazes.

She followed their lead, marking each turn in her mind, knowing that she was swimming even deeper into Iakhovas's own maze of treacheries. Those, she felt certain, she'd never learn completely.

XXIII

17 Mirtul, the Year of the Gauntlet

"Waterdeep was all but destroyed, the way I hear it."

Jherek's attention was riveted to the speaker in spite of the press of people crowding the marketplace around him. He carried a bag of packages over his shoulder, items Sabyna had purchased for the ship or for her own personal use.

"I hear all her ships went down, and all those gathered for Fleetswake," another man said.

Jherek couldn't believe it. A cold tendril of fear arced out from his spine across his shoulders despite the sweltering heat of Athkatla's Waukeen's Promenade. Though not overly far from the Sea of Swords, the fifty foot walls of the marketplace enclosed the stadium and trapped the heat from the noonday sun inside despite the entry arches at ground level.

"What's wrong?" Sabyna asked, looking up at him from the table covered with spices, baking goods, and cooking utensils. She'd wanted to try a new dish that evening while they were in port. Cooking for two had seemed to make her even more adventurous.

Jherek craned his head toward the two seamen standing near one of the supports that held the next level above. The terraced levels were seventy-five feet across and packed with merchants hawking wares of all kinds at tables and booths. Uniformed guards occupied the marketplace in impressive numbers, which helped drive up the cost of the goods being offered.

"Did you hear that?" he asked her.

"What?"

"Those two sailors ... they're talking about ships sinking at Waterdeep."

Jherek nodded at the two sailors. Both men were dressed down, looking like they'd just stepped from their ships. Already other sailors were starting to collect around them, eager to hear more.

Quickly, Sabyna made her selections and didn't bother haggling with the merchant, paying his price when she could have easily talked him down. Today the market had belonged to the buyer. Now Jherek knew why. Waterdeep did a lot of trading with the Amnians, and if ships had been destroyed, usual markets could no longer be counted on.

Sabyna placed her hand on the inside of his arm and guided him toward the sailors, covering the pirate's tattoo that he desperately kept hidden from her beneath his shirt. Despite the haze of vegetable and fruit scents, the strong smell of cured meats, and the herbalist burning incense only a few tables down, Jherek could still smell the lilac scent that clung to her. Her fingers gripped his arm tightly and she stayed at his side, doubling their size against the ebb and flow of the crowd.

He'd dined with her every night for the last three nights since the boy had been recovered from the sunken wreck, but she'd never come this close to him in all that time. Their conversations had been good, of experiences and humor, but she'd never asked him what his real name was or why he was in hiding. Each night, after each meal, it became harder not to tell her, harder not to remove the lie that existed between them, but the tattoo branded him as a pirate. He felt certain she'd never be able to accept that, especially since it had been his father who'd killed her brother. For the moment, he enjoyed the warmth of her fingers against his arm even with the sweltering heat that assailed them.

The sailors looked up at her approach.

"Hail and well met," she addressed them.

"Hail and well met, lady," a white-haired sailor in Amnian dress responded. He touched the tips of his fingers to the triangle of copper coins attached to his blue turban. His beard was white like his hair, and so was the fierce mustache that flared straight out at the sides.

"You've news of Waterdeep?" Sabyna said.

"Aye," the sailor replied, "but only bad news, I'm afraid. You're from there?"

"No. I'm Sabyna, ship's mage of *Breezerunner*, helmed by Captain Tynnel. We've traded there and I have a few friends who live there."

One of the other sailors glanced at the old one. "*Breezerunner's* a good ship, Narik. Heard of her. And her captain's a good man."

Narik nodded. His rheumy eyes regarded Sabyna, then flicked over Jherek. "Are you bound, then, to Waterdeep, lady?"

"Not on this trip," Sabyna said. "We're only going as far north as Baldur's Gate."

"Tell your captain what I tell you. There'll be plenty of gold for a man willing to take his ship into Waterdeep for the next few months. If he's willing to chance the risk to his life and ship."

"Hell probably already know," she said, "but tell me why."

"You've heard nothing?" Narik asked.

Sabyna shook her head. "We only got into the harbor this morning. We were becalmed for a time since leaving Velen."

"Waterdeep was invaded," Narik said.

"By who?" Jherek asked.

He remembered the City of Splendors from the trips he'd taken there with Finaren. During his visits he'd never been daring enough to go very deeply into the city. Most of *Butterfly's* crew had their usual haunts along the Dock Ward, rarely venturing out of the festhalls and taverns, places where Jherek had never felt overly comfortable. He'd spent mornings in *Butterfly's* rigging just watching the sun come up behind the towering mountain where Castle Waterdeep stood. As tall as the mountain was, the shadow of the heights hung over the harbor long after the sun rose in the morning. Sunlight came into the coast from the water as the sun climbed, making it look like the morning light came in on the tide.

"The sahuagin. There were thousands of them, over a month ago at the end of Fleetswake, and they got into Waterdeep Harbor before the guard knew it. Her navy proved no defense against the invaders' forces."

"What forces? Ships?" Jherek asked. He'd watched the Waterdhavian Guard on maneuvers. Very few crews could hold a candle to what they could do with their rakers, and that wasn't even taking into account the other defenses that lined the city's shores.

"Oh, the sea devils had no few of those," Narik confirmed.

"From the stories I've heard, the sahuagin had captured fifteen or twenty vessels, then sailed them right into the harbor slick as the snot from a dung-eating camel," another man stated.

"The guard would have caught that," Jherek objected.

"They didn't, boy," the man said testily, one hard knuckled hand fisting on the curved dagger in his waist sash.

"Sorcery was involved," Narik said, soothing his comrade's temper. "We know that for sure. Besides the guard missing those ships full of sahuagin, a storm summoned by some sorcerous intent whipped over the Dock Ward and tore down a number of buildings."

"Aye," a black sailor interrupted. "I heard Arnagus the Shipwright even lost a vessel that he was building in dry dock when the water lifted it out to the harbor. I've been told the waves were twenty and thirty feet tall."

"The sahuagin don't have anything to do with sorcery," Sabyna pointed out.

"Well, they did this night," Narik told her. "In addition to the thousands of sahuagin and the storm, there were all manner of sea creatures who fought side by side with the sea devils."

"How was that possible?" Jherek asked.

"That's what the mages in Waterdeep are asking right now," the sailor answered. "The city's properly defended and warded, but that attack, even with the extra manpower in port, was disastrous."

"Does Waterdeep still stand?" Sabyna asked.

"Aye," Narik replied. "By the grace of the gods and the strength of Lord Piergeiron's arm, and Maskar Wands's and Khelben Arunsun's magic. Many lives were lost, but the sahuagin were turned. In the meantime, shipping's all but stopped coming out of Waterdeep. Merchants are sitting in the ruins of the Dock Ward offering princely sums for any ship that would take their goods out. The only news we've got out of there has been from caravans traveling overland."

"In part, most cargo captains fear the return of the sahuagin," a skinny sailor with a wandering eye said, "and they have been responsible for bringing a few ships down. They sail those cursed mantas and attack any ship alone at sea."

Jherek remembered the sahuagin attack on *Butterfly*, feeling a chill rattle through him now that he knew that assault had been part of a larger agenda.

"Most cargo ships don't carry a crew big enough to repel a manta complement of sahuagin," the sailor with the wandering eye went on. "I've heard they've taken twenty ships over the last five days, and mayhap more than that since these stories were given only by survivors of attacks."

"The sahuagin haven't ever meant to leave survivors,"

Narik said, "not unless they were planning on torturing them later."

Jherек couldn't believe the numbers of ships the sailors were talking about, or the fact that the sahuagin were acting together so well. For the moment, he forgot his own problems, forgot even that Sabyna had not taken her hand from his arm. His mind wandered, wrestling with the problem of how the attack had taken place and what it must have been like to be there. He wished Malorrie was there to talk to. Though Madame Litaar was familiar with history and battles and even politics, Malorrie relished in such discussions. He silently wished he'd been there, able to lend his blade to Waterdeep's defense.

"What the sea devils haven't claimed," Narik went on, "the pirates have. They seem to have gathered in the Nelanther and decided that Waterdeep's ill luck was their good fortune. They've taken a dozen and more ships that we know of that's been bound in either direction in the Sea of Swords."

"That's why there are so many fighting men gathered in Athkatla today," the black sailor said. "The festhalls and taverns are filled with mercenaries and sellswords waiting to be picked up by captains who're courageous enough to brave the waters north of here."

"Lady," Narik said, "if you're bound to Baldur's Gate, talk to your captain if he hasn't already heard. Those are dangerous waters these times. There are some tongues wagging that during Fleetswake in Waterdeep that someone tried to rob Umberlee's Cache and all of this is part of a curse the Bitch Queen has put on Waterdeep."

"They blame the actions of the sahuagin as well on her?" Sabyna asked.

Narik shrugged and said, "Lady, who else could summon up storms and cause the sea creatures that were seen in the invasion of Waterdeep to align themselves with the sea devils? Many sailors have seen Umberlee's hand in this. There's no other explanation."

Sabyna thanked them for the news, then headed out of the marketplace, threading through the large crowds.

"We've got to find Tynnel," she said to Jherек. "I'm sure he already knows, but if he doesn't, he needs to know now, and we need to make plans for the trip to Baldur's Gate. If we're going to make it at all."

"Aye," Jherек replied.

An eagerness moved through him, though, along with the fear. Memory of the pirate-stricken vessel they'd found the boy in filled his mind. He wasn't afraid for himself, but for the pretty ship's mage.

"You try the festhalls and taverns," she went on as they exited the marketplace and walked out onto the street beyond, "while I try the mercantile houses where we normally do business. We'll meet back on *Breezerunner*."

"As you wish," he told her.

She turned and gave him a fleeting smile, but it didn't quite touch the worry he saw in her eyes. "Be safe," she said, "until I see you again." She gave his arm a final squeeze, letting him know she'd been aware of the prolonged contact as well, then hurried across the busy street.

Jherек stood and watched her, admiring the smooth roll of muscle shown by her breeches and the easy way that she moved, not showing much of a sailor's rolling gait when on land. Apprehension flared through him, though, when she disappeared from sight down an alley leading deeper into the Amman city. It was like a small, cold voice had whispered that he'd never see her again.

He almost went after her then, but he stopped himself. He'd given his word he'd try to find the captain. He turned and went down the street toward the docks where the festhalls and taverns thrived.

XXIV

7 Tarsakh, the Year of the Gauntlet

"We need to make another attack."

Huaanton regarded Iakhovas silently after the statement. The sahuagin king's stance made it clear to Laaqueel that wasn't something he wanted to hear.

The malenti waited tensely, knowing Iakhovas should have reacted to the king's unspoken displeasure. For the last twelve years he'd lived among them as one of their own and the wizard knew enough to recognize the body language. By rights, he should have avoided eye contact at any cost and perhaps even swum up over Huaanton's head, baring his midriff to possible attack as a rebuke and a show of his loyalty.

Iakhovas merely stood there, his back to one of the four thick crystal windows that peered out over the sahuagin city in the chasm. In fact, he not only appeared unrepentant but mutinous, and Laaqueel was certain that attitude ran over into the illusion he wore for the king.

Huaanton's throne room and audience chamber was huge. Thousands of years had gone into the planning and construction of it. Made of limestone blocks each over an arm span wide and more than that tall, the sahuagin castle looked like another bump on the canyon wall from the outside. It was seven stories tall inside, the lower three sunk into the ledge of outthrust rock spurring from the chasm side, and the other four looking like a natural rock projection.

The throne room was on the second floor down, below Huaanton's personal quarters and treasury. A massive throne carved from whale bone in the shape of a shark leaping from the water with its jaws distended occupied one end of the room. The open mouth contained the seat, large enough even for Huaanton's massive girth.

Images of sharks and sahuagin were cut in bas-relief on the limestone blocks of the walls. The largest stones depicted battles from sahuagin history, myth interwoven with truth until it was all memory. The largest piece, on the opposite end of the room from the throne, showed the meeting of the sahuagin and Sekolah, whom they chose as their god.

The carving of Sekolah, the Great Shark, held a shell in his teeth, shaking it. Tiny sahuagin finned away from him in all directions, coming from the shell. According to history, Sekolah had been victorious in chosen battle against a behemoth of the deep. The Great Shark had gone forth, singing his song of joy and been pleasantly surprised to hear other voices singing back to him. The shell containing the sahuagin had floated up to him on a spray of bubbles, drawn by the joy coming from Sekolah. Once the Great Shark had spread them across the sea, the sahuagin had prospered and multiplied even further.

"More than two thousand sahuagin died in the attack on Waterdeep," Huaanton stated.

"Easily twice that many surface dwellers perished," Iakhovas said. "The sahuagin who died served their purpose in killing the enemy, but they were weak. The strong members of our people came back from that war, and our race will be the stronger for it. The next hatchlings will all be of true warriors' blood, a legacy wrought by the testing of our mettle in battle."

Huaanton's magnetic black gaze pinned Iakhovas, but the wizard didn't flinch from the eye contact.

Laaqueel silently prayed that Iakhovas wouldn't overstep his bounds. If he did, he'd bring swift and certain death down on them both. Twenty sahuagin guards ranged around them, their faces impassive, but the malenti knew they'd act at once if their king rightfully called them into action.

"They died," Huaanton agreed, "and by that proved they were inadequate to survive, but another strike against the surface dwellers right now might not be the wisest thing we could do."

"Would you have them think they've broken the sahuagin spirit?" Iakhovas asked.

Laaqueel respected the wizard's ability to choose his words well. They were borderline on accusing Huaanton of cowardice, but they were presented so that the perception was on the part of the surface dwellers, not Iakhovas.

"We still take their ships," the sahuagin king pointed out.

"Only because they foolishly continue to believe they maintain control over the seas," Iakhovas replied. "In this we need to be thankful for their own egotistical designs. We do not have to take the fight to them; they bring it into our home territory with every ship they sail. Still, they must be broken of this inflated view of themselves."

"But the ships appear in less numbers than before."

"In what they call the Sea of Swords," Iakhovas said, "your summation is true. However, even that is too much. All that is needed is for a few ships, or perhaps only one, to brave the sea successfully and they will forget the message that has been delivered to them. A human's memory isn't as long or as gifted as that of a sahuagin's. A human will forget and believe again that they can venture out onto the sea. We need to raid their shores, raze their communities, and see them run broken and splintered before us." He paused. "Sekolah demands no less of his children if they are truly to be his children."

"You claim the ear of Sekolah," Huaanton said, "when none of my priestesses claim any such contact."

"Not his ear," Iakhovas responded, "his voice. He speaks to me through my priestess. I seek only to obey, as should any true sahuagin."

The sahuagin king turned slowly toward Laaqueel, his tail flipping through the water in annoyance. That slight gesture was enough to emphasize the difference between him and her.

Huaanton spoke slowly, giving his words weight. "Why speak through such a ... flawed vessel?"

Laaqueel instantly dropped her eyes as was the sahuagin custom. She let her arms drift away from her body at her sides, leaving herself defenseless. "I don't know, Exalted One," she replied, and that was partially the truth. As Iakhovas had pointed out, how could she have found him without Sekolah's intervention? Why hadn't another found the story of One Who Swims With Sekolah? What had made him choose her over the two true sahuagin priestesses who had been with her?

"Have you heard the Great Shark?" Huaanton demanded.

"No," Laaqueel answered, "though I have been given visions."

Those visions of combat and strife, of the sahuagin killing surface dwellers at the sides of massive beasts, had been constant for the last year. It could have been nightmares, brought on by listening to Iakhovas's plans for the sahuagin, but they could have been visions as well.

"Do you believe in these visions?"

Next to her heart, the black quill Iakhovas had inserted under her breast stirred in warning. A chill ran down her spine and her face went numb. "Yes," she replied. She knew to answer in any other fashion would have meant sudden death. She believed in Sekolah and she believed in her place in the Great Shark's plans.

Wherever Iakhovas led, she believed it would only strengthen the sahuagin. He was a harsh taskmaster, and his chosen war would only strengthen her people.

She felt Huaanton's eyes on her, but she knew he could go no further without opening the way to a challenge from either herself or Iakhovas.

"I live only to serve the will of Sekolah," Iakhovas stated. "Should anything try to stand in the way of that, I would be honor bound to see that thing-that person- destroyed as one of the Great Shark's enemies."

When her lateral lines signaled that Huaanton had turned from her, Laaqueel glanced back up and saw Iakhovas squarely meeting the sahuagin king's gaze.

"Since you've been among us," Huaanton said, "you've been overly ambitious."

"You lay that ambition so easily at my fins," Iakhovas replied slowly, "but I claim no part of it. The ambition, as you incorrectly call it, is merely the doctrine I've been given by my god to obey. I will not turn away from it."

"Twelve years of age," Huaanton said, "and you're already a prince."

"I've taken on the challenges Sekolah has laid before me, and they led me into those positions as the currents dictated," Iakhovas replied. "I rose from warrior to lieutenant, to baronial guard, to chieftain, and then baron because there was a need and because the Great Shark expected no less of the tool he would shape me into."

"You challenged and killed everyone who stood in your way."

"Fairly," Iakhovas said, "and obviously with Sekolah's blessing or I would not have survived. Three years ago, when Slaartiig came to your village where you then ruled as baron and laid claim to the crystal ball your warriors salvaged from a surface vessel they'd sunk, I challenged him for you because his claim to your property was unjust, as fits the rules that Sekolah has handed down to our people. No one expected me to live against such odds as that. Yet I did."

That wasn't all the story, Laaqueel knew. Iakhovas had actually targeted the surface vessel for the sahuagin raiders, then helped them take it. They'd later used the ship in the raid against Waterdeep, but it also had something on board that he'd laid claim to without the warriors seeing. Only she'd known, and then only because he'd told her, relishing his victory.

The crystal ball had been an additional find, one that Iakhovas hadn't been overly interested in. It allowed the viewer to see many places, but they lacked the magic phrases to unlock all its secrets to make it into the weapon Huaanton had hoped it would be. If Iakhovas knew the secret of the crystal ball, he never told.

"You killed Slaartiig," Huaanton said.

"And my actions justified my reasons for defending you in the eyes of the Great Shark and our people," Iakhovas pointed out. No matter what the illusion his spellwork painted for the sahuagin, Laaqueel saw the anger in his scarred face. "You challenged the old king over a matter of cowardice, and you yourself ripped free the trident that you now hold as a sign of your office from his dead hand, proclaiming yourself king. None of the other princes challenged for your position. They recognized your right to be king, read in the currents of everything that had happened that it was what you were destined for."

The other eight sahuagin princes also, Laaqueel remembered, recognized that Iakhovas had been the first to lay his trident at Huaanton's feet, swearing to defend him against all enemies. They already knew what kind of fighter the wizard was.

"You yourself appointed me prince," Iakhovas said, "with every confidence that I'd carry out the

demands of that position and support you in every way, which, if you'll review my actions since that time, I have done. Why hesitate to believe in me now, when another victory is within our reach?"

"We fight our battles to win," Huaanton stated. "The one you seek to set before us is unwinnable."

"We fight to sharpen our claws and prove our worth to Sekolah," Iakhovas said, and his words rang true in Laaqueel's ears. "Waterdeep was only the first step. There need to be many more."

"What would you suggest?" the sahuagin king asked.

"Again you confuse the issue before you, Exalted One. These are the wishes-nay, the commands-of Sekolah himself. He speaks through my high priestess."

Huaanton turned to Laaqueel and asked, "How does he instruct you?"

"He doesn't say anything, Exalted One," the malenti said, hating her part in the present subterfuge. "He gave me a vision of a human city called Baldur's Gate."

"Where is this city?"

"Along what the surface dwellers call the Sword Coast," Laaqueel answered. "It's south of Waterdeep."

"This place is important to the surface dwellers?"

"Yes."

Huaanton shifted, his tail lashing out restlessly. "How so?"

"Between Waterdeep and the country they call Amn, Baldur's Gate is the last city of any size that the surface dwellers can use as a stronghold," Iakhovas stated. "It lies almost sixty miles inland, on a flow of moving freshwater they call Chionthar."

"We can't go into fresh water," Huaanton argued.

"The priestess has had the vision," Iakhovas said. "We cannot deny Sekolah's wishes. When we put an army there, we have to trust that a way will be made."

"That army would also be exposed to the surface dwellers. Waters trapped by land don't run as deeply as the sea."

"We shall strike at night, at a time when their defenses will be most relaxed. The surface dwellers won't see us clearly but we will see them easily. Also, Baldur's Gate lacks the size and protection that Waterdeep possessed. They are as a hatchling to a full-grown warrior. It will not be a battle, it will be a ruination."

Huaanton appeared to consider Iakhovas's words, but Laaqueel knew enough about the sahuagin king to know that he wasn't overjoyed at them either. A lot was at stake.

"You're asking too much," the king said finally.

Iakhovas grimaced. Laaqueel felt certain that the illusion he was projecting to the rest of those in the room didn't show the anger. "Exalted One," he said carefully and quietly, "I need to remind you I'm not the one doing the asking. It is more along the lines of a command than any conjecture requiring sufferance on your behalf."

Kicking across the room, Huaanton sat in the open shark's mouth throne. He kept the inlaid gold and shark bone trident upright beside him.

"I want a sign that this is what Sekolah wants," he demanded.

"*Sacrilege!*" Laaqueel exploded, moving toward the sahuagin king with enough fire in her voice and menace in her approach that the royal guards moved quickly to intercept her.

Her emotion came out of the conviction of her office. Born a malenti, an automatic outcast from her own people, she'd been given nothing but the Great Shark to believe in, and she did believe. Even with the involvement of Iakhovas, she believed that there had been some reason she'd been allowed to glimpse the truth of the legend and find the ancient wizard, though she couldn't recognize that reason at the time.

"Sekolah freed the sahuagin into these waters and gave them the strength and the ferocity to go forth and take what they needed," she said. "*That* is the only sign a true believer should ever need!"

Huaanton swiveled his great head to her. The guards' tridents stopped within inches of the high priestess.

She raised her hand in warning, the sound of her praying voice loud enough to carry on the currents that filled the room. Their instinctive fear of even her magic made them drop into nervous defensive positions, but they readied to charge, obviously wanting to deal with her quickly.

"Stop!" Huaanton ordered.

Reluctantly yet relieved, the royal guard stepped back, but they didn't put their weapons away.

"You run the risk of insult, priestess." The sahuagin king glowered at her.

Laaqueel thought quickly. "I run that risk only to keep you from blaspheming, Exalted One. Our two

positions- the warrior's to lead the sahuagin race, and the priestess's to guide the sahuagin in their beliefs- are both necessary. A warrior keeps the sahuagin alive in the now, and a priestess keeps the sahuagin alive forever. Our two paths must never work at cross purposes."

"I agree," Huaanton said. "That's why I want Sekolah to give some sign to my priestesses before this next battle takes place."

"Sekolah is not a god you can put demands on."

Laaqueel assumed a level stance, no longer subservient to the sahuagin king. Her eyes met his. The Great Shark would demand no less. In the past, the warrior's way and the priestess's way often conflicted. Both drew on the same resource of followers, but during most of those times compromises could be worked out.

"He doesn't want parasites as his worshipers; he wants warriors."

"I agree," Huaanton said, "but I see before me a malenti, a birth defect, claiming to be a conduit for a god. Wouldn't *you* question that?"

The insult hit Laaqueel like a physical blow. She didn't trust herself to speak until she'd dealt with the anger that filled her.

"Then, at your own peril, you'll have your sign," Iakhovas said.

Huaanton looked at the wizard as if wanting to question whether the statement had been a threat. Instead, he asked, "When?"

Laaqueel didn't dare look at Iakhovas, afraid that her doubt and fear would be apparent to everyone. How could Iakhovas promise something like that?

"A tenday from now," Iakhovas went on. "It will be here, in your city, for all sahuagin to see." He paused, his eyes rebelliously focused on Huaanton's. "When that sign is delivered, there will be no doubt about what is to be done."

"I will look for you here," the sahuagin king said. "You'll be guests at the palace."

For Laaqueel the offer translated simply that they'd be *prisoners* of the palace. She watched numbly as Iakhovas excused them *from* the sahuagin king's audience chamber. They were accompanied by the royal guard through the maze of tunnels, swimming back to where the flier was tied up.

I perceive my error now, little malenti, Iakhovas said in her mind.

By promising a sign from Sekolah? she asked. *If we don't come here in a tenday, Huaanton will rightly have us hunted down and brought to him. We'll be thrown into the gladiatorial amphitheater and used as sport. Should we show up and there's no sign, we'll end up in the same place.*

Little malenti, Iakhovas mocked, *you concern yourself overmuch with matters that are entirely trivial. I have cared for you fifteen years, elevated you into the position of high priestess for a prince from being a junior priestess and spy for a baron. Miracles are easy to accomplish if you have those who wish to believe in them.*

Laaqueel resented the words, but knew they carried the strength of truth.

No, he said confidently, *there will be a sign. My chief oversight lay in reasoning that I could accomplish everything I need to as anything less than king.*

She stared at him through the darkness filling the maze tunnel. He smiled, and his single eye blazed with conviction.

XXV

17 Mirtul, the Year of the Gauntlet

Jherek pushed in through the double doors of the Copper Coronet in the row of festhalls fronting Athkatla's docks and opened his eyes to their fullest against the darkness that clung to the tavern's interior. Raucous voices in a dozen and more languages spilled over into the street beyond the doors, beaten back only by the street vendors hawking their wares to wandering ships' crews.

He waited a moment, letting his eyes adjust to the gloom. Even at midday, the tavern's darkness appeared to be an inviting cool, a place where secrets and guilt could be shared. Pipeweed smoke, dimly lit from candles on the scarred tables and wall sconces, curled toward the stained ceiling. Sea-roughened men reached for waitresses, cracking off-color jokes or making half serious offers given the benefit of graphic gestures. The waitresses for their part flirted with the men, working for the small tips that came their way.

The Copper Coronet was one of Athkatla's many dives. Pirates and smugglers met there to arrange

business, and journeymen cutpurses gathered there to find victims. Sawdust covered the floor, sopping up spilled ale or blood as the need arose.

Jherek breathed shallowly through his nose. He'd never felt at home in such a place. Even the taverns in Velen had never become overly familiar or comfortable. He'd gone because Finaren had often concluded ship's business there, and sometimes to briefly share in celebrations he'd been invited to.

Men stood at the sturdy bar that lined the other side of the room, hoisting tankards of ale and laughing at witticisms or stories told by others. The bartender was a short, broad man with a bald head and flaring mustache. He regarded Jherek with a flat, uninviting gaze as he wiped an ale tankard out with a frayed and stained towel. A copper crown, evidently the item the tavern took its name from, rested haphazardly on the yellowed ivory skull of a crocodile jutting from the wall behind the bartender. A handful of teeth were broken in the reptilian grin.

A slim waitress approached Jherek, balancing a tray on one bony hip. Her skirt was cut short enough to embarrass the young sailor, and he kept his eyes on hers. She smiled at him, showing a missing front tooth. Dark sandy hair flared out across her shoulders.

"Can I get something for you, sailor?"

"No," Jherek replied. "I'm looking for the crew of *Breezerunner*."

"I think I noticed them earlier," she admitted, moving close enough that Jherek could feel the heat from her body.

Involuntarily, he took a step back. Dropping his eyes from hers, he couldn't help glancing at the long legs revealed by the short skirt. They were white from not having seen enough sun but still held the roundness of youth.

He glanced up at her again and saw she was smiling even more broadly.

"I need to find them," he told her.

Beyond the waitress, other men in the tavern were starting to look at him, evidently noticing his distress at handling her and her attentions. One old sailor with a peg leg slapped his leg with glee, watching intently.

"I'll give you a hand," the waitress replied. She reached forward, dragging her fingers across his stomach.

He felt the heat of her touch through his shirt. Taking another step back, he broke the contact.

"I thought you wanted my help," she challenged. Above her smile, he noticed her eyes had taken on cold, calculating lights.

"Aye," Jherek answered nervously. "Could you point me in the right direction?"

"Yes. I can get you pointed in the right direction."

Her hand dropped to the front of his breeches, seizing his belt and pulling him forward till their bodies met. Before Jherek could decide how he could easily break out of her grip without hurting her or appearing too rude, she leaned in and kissed him, biting gently at his lips.

"Enough!" he said with iron in his voice.

He took her wrist in his hand and broke her grip, lifting her arm between them to use as a lever to keep her away.

"Are you sure?" she taunted. Her smile seemed brighter and colder than ever.

Blood pounded in Jherek's temples. He was embarrassed and angry, not understanding what he'd done to deserve such treatment at the serving girl's hands. Over the roar of anger that filled his ears, he also heard the rollicking laughter of the sailors.

"Unhand the woman," the bartender growled.

Jherek glanced at the big man and saw the oaken club he rested easily across the bar top. Reluctantly, the young sailor complied, stepping back again out of the woman's easy reach.

She closed on him at once and a fresh wave of braying laughter filled the bar.

Nimbly, Jherek pulled out a nearby chair and placed it between them, creating a momentary barrier against the woman's unwelcome attention.

Without hesitation, she stepped up into the chair. The tavern patrons hooted and shouted their support. She flung her arms wide, preparing to throw herself at Jherek, sensing that the young sailor wouldn't let her hit the floor.

"Essme!" the bartender called in his thunderous voice.

The waitress hesitated.

"It's enough," the bartender told her. "You've had your fun. Get back to work."

Reluctantly, the serving girl stepped down, away from Jherek. "Another time," she promised throatily,

and blew Jherek a kiss.

Face flaming with humiliation, Jherek almost turned and fled the tavern. Only a recognized voice stilled him.

"What's wrong with you, boy?" a man gruffly demanded.

Jherek turned toward the man stepping out of the shadows behind him. He recognized Aysel from *Breezerunner's* crew, and the three men that stood behind him as the sailor's cronies.

"You too good for women a regular sailor has to bed down with if he's to know something warm and willing?"

The small daggers hanging from Aysel's ears glinted in the dim light. His thick mane of black hair was held back in a rawhide thong, but his beard was unkempt, frosted with ale foam. His open shirt revealed the pelt of dark hair that coiled on his massive chest and covered his big belly.

Jherek guessed at once that Aysel and his companions had put the waitress up to her performance. He felt shamed that he'd reacted as he had, letting the deceit get to him. He should have thought more clearly and found a way to stop the serving girl without obviously rebuffing her. Malorrie, he knew, wouldn't have reacted in the same fashion, but the woman's advances had been too bold, too blatant, and somehow Aysel had sensed what effect they would have on him.

"You stand in a tavern filled with seafaring men who know how to appreciate a real woman's charms," Aysel stated. "Every manjack here probably feels insulted at the way you disrespected that woman." He glanced around and got the support, halfhearted as it was, of the rest of the sailors in the tavern.

"No disrespect was meant," Jherek replied. His voice sounded tighter and higher than he'd intended. He glanced at the serving wench, watching her move easily through the tables, back to business as usual. "Nor do I think any was taken."

Aysel raised his voice. "How about that, Essme? Do you wish to let bygones be bygones? I stand ready to take up arms in your defense."

He shifted, revealing the battle-axe at his side. The haft was four feet long, and the double-bitted head rested on the spur jutting from the top on the sawdust strewn floor, in a position to be easily swept up into action.

Jherek altered his stance, taking in air as Malorrie had instructed. He wasn't sure what was going on, but he knew that Aysel had borne him enmity since their first meeting on *Breezerunner* at the water barrel when Tynnel had called the man down for his behavior.

"I'm here on business," the young sailor stated easily.

"What business is that?" Aysel demanded.

"I need to speak with the captain."

"Cap'n's not here," Aysel said. His eyes remained flinty hard with challenge and anger. He raised his voice even louder. "Essme!"

The serving girl looked back at the broad sailor, and every head in the tavern snapped around to watch what was going on.

"What?" she asked.

"I asked if you wanted me to stand up for you in this matter of ill charity. A man should not be so cavalier as to spurn a woman's offered charms."

The serving girl appeared hesitant, then finally waved the offer away. Jherek got the impression she wasn't sure how much of the action was still play.

"It's no bother," she replied. "I claim no foul. After all, he's just a boy, not like one of the real men that fill this room."

The tavern goers shouted in glee, banging their empty and not-so-empty tankards down on their tables. A number of jests and curses filled the air at Jherek's expense.

Clamping his jaw tight, Jherek struggled to rein in his anger. Since being driven from Velen, having his identity and home stripped from him by circumstance, he'd been aware of the dark anger that had filled him, but it had been mixed in equal parts with the sense that he'd somehow deserved every bad thing that had happened to him. Evil clung to blood. That was believed by most people, and even Jherek admitted there was some truth to it.

Maybe he didn't deserve a home as other people did, and maybe one of the most feared and hated pirates of Faerun was all the family he'd ever had, but he didn't deserve Aysel's treatment. The man was more on his level. Jherek rested his hand on the worn hilt of his cutlass.

"Is Captain Tynnel here?" Jherek asked, pushing himself above the anger that swirled within him.

"Why?" Aysel demanded.

"I was sent to get a message to him."

"By who?" the big man asked. "Sabyna? She seems to be the only one you talk to these days. Always running after her with your nose up her skirts."

A tremor filled Jherek's arm and he barely stilled himself from drawing steel against the man. "Have a care," he said softly. "I'll not have her honor trampled while I'm standing nearby."

"Her *honor*?" Aysel guffawed, seeming genuinely amused. "She's a damned ship's mage, boy. She's used to men of the sea, *and* their ways. You jump on deck with your manners and your baby face and think she's just as virginal as you?"

Thunder crackled ominously in the back of Jherek's mind. He felt the precious control Malorrie had trained into him coming unhinged. His fingers felt like wire meshed around the cutlass's hilt. He tried to ignore Aysel's coarse words.

"If you see the captain, let him know I was looking for him."

He took three steps back, out of reach of the big man's battle-axe, stepping around a table to put between them as well, then turned and walked away. He made himself release the cutlass.

"She's known men before, boy," Aysel called after him, "better men than you."

Every word cut into Jherek. He tried to force them from his mind.

"These past few days," Aysel continued, "I've tried to understand what it was she sees in you besides that courtly manner and those smooth features, but damn me if I've been able."

Jherek walked, breathing deeply, searching desperately for the control that Malorrie's training had given him.

"One thing I want to know, boy," Aysel roared.

Jherek was almost to the door, but not out of earshot.

"I want to know if she's as good looking naked as I've thought she was," Aysel said.

Anger took Jherek then, snapping to life the way a candle wick took to flame. He made himself reach for the door as his breath tightened and turned cool in his throat.

"I look at her," Aysel said, "sometimes with the sun behind her and you can just about see through some of those clothes she wears. I see enough, then I go back to my hammock and think about her."

The tavern crowd urged him on, asking rude questions and making ribald statements.

"I imagine how she looks," Aysel croaked, "all sweaty from being used hard, and the way she smells. Like a woman instead of those fragrances she wears. And then I-"

The sailor got no further.

Jherek turned, slipping through the distance separating him from Aysel like a barracuda. He left the cutlass sheathed because he didn't think the big sailor would have time to bring the battle-axe up to defend himself. In fact, Aysel seemed stunned, barely beginning to react as Jherek vaulted to the tabletop and threw himself at the man. He flung his arms wide, taking in all of Aysel's broad frame. The bigger man wrapped his meaty arms around the young sailor as they slammed backward.

Aysel's breath whooshed out of him when he hit the floor, and his grip on Jherek broke. The young sailor pushed himself up and drew back a fist. Raw emotion burned through him. He seized Aysel by the hair with his free hand, knotting his fingers securely.

"Poke your fun at me, Aysel, and talk of me without respect, but not the lady. A lady's honor is her own, and I won't stand by while you defile it with your words." He hammered the man in the face, putting all his strength into the blow.

Aysel's head snapped to the side and blood gushed from his split lip. He roared with inarticulate rage, shoving against the floor with his hands and feet in an effort to dislodge Jherek.

Drawing his arm back, Jherek set himself to strike again. Before he could, rough hands wrapped around his arms and face, pulling him off Aysel. Jherek struggled against the three men that held him, tearing free of their grip. He turned to face Aysel again.

Aysel recovered quickly, pushing himself to his feet and fisting the haft of the battle-axe. Blood dripped down his swelling lips, turning his smile crimson. He wiped them with the back of his free hand and looked at the bloody smear.

"By the gods, you little bastard," the big man declared, "now *that* you're going to die for!"

XXVI

8 Tarsakh, the Year of the Gauntlet

"Your song is beautiful."

Turning from the westering sea spreading out from Waterdeep, Pacys looked down at the speaker.

The priest Hroman looked up at him. A sling held his right arm, broken in the raid on the city. A healing potion would have quickly righted it, but even Waterdeep's vast stores had been hard pressed trying to save lives. Even Hroman's own abilities to heal himself through prayer had been given to the makeshift hospitals scattered throughout the city.

"Thank you for your kindness," the bard replied. His fingers caressed the yarting's strings, making bridges and notes soundlessly, though his ear could hear every one through the touch of his fingers. "It's only one of the many songs that will be sung about the battle for Waterdeep . . . nothing unique." He felt bad about sounding so bitter. "Forgive me, my friend. I must sound very selfish in light of all that these people have been through."

The streets around the Dock Ward teamed with a number of extra wagons pressed into service on behalf of the Dungsweepers' Guild. Debris filled several of the big carts, and their drivers headed them toward the Rat Hills while others came back for more. Their wheels clattered across the cobblestones, a constant undercurrent to all of the other activity filling the dock.

Out in the harbor, fishing vessels plied the waters with nets, sieving in the dead and the wreckage left from broken and burned ships. Not as many of the ships as had at first been feared had been lost during the attack. Even the damage to the waterfront along Dock Ward was reparable once new wood was brought in.

Most of the city's dead had been reclaimed, but a large knot of people still gathered at Arnagus the Shipwright's where the watch brought any corpses they recovered. So many were still missing, and many more than that were gone.

Hroman shook his head. "After something like this, it's only natural to start acting human again. It makes the world small again, and you only have to think about your own troubles-which don't seem too large for a time."

Pacys nodded. "You've grown wise, like your father. He'd be proud."

"I hope so."

The bard sat at the edge of a badly listing dock. Over half of it had broken off during the attack and rough splinters shoved out from the end. He noticed the dark circles under the priest's eyes. "Have you eaten?"

"Not yet. I've been working the night shift at the hospital, giving aid where I could, and last rites for those that needed them." Tears of frustration and near-exhaustion glittered in Hroman's haunted gaze. "We seem to lose so many more of the weak ones during the night."

"Yes," Pacys replied. "I think it's because the night is more tender, more accepting. A dying man doesn't seem to fight quite so hard when death is disguised as sleep."

"It's still death."

"Each man has his own race to run, Hroman. Even you can't stop that."

"No, but Oghma willing, I'll interfere with it whenever possible."

"Come," Pacys said gently, gesturing to the dock beside him. "Sit and share morningfeast with me. Several of the festhalls and taverns have remained opened night and day since they were able. Piergeiron, Khelben, Maskar, and several others of the city's officials and wealthy have opened their own larders to stock the kitchens of every establishment willing to serve a meal to those who are helping clear the city."

"I suspect a lot of graft is going on through the city while such generosity is being shown," Hroman said sourly. Still, he sat beside the old bard, stretching out awkwardly as he struggled to find comfort.

"The guard is policing the streets with a heavy hand, and even the most arrogant of nobles and merchants are rumored to be helping keep the distribution paths open and safe," Pacys said, removing the cloth that covered the basket he'd been given a few minutes ago. He'd played the yarting, trying to soften all the destruction and sadness that he'd toiled in for the last few days.

On the first day he'd helped remove most of the debris that clogged Ship Street and the nearby streets fronting the harbor. On the second day, since he was one of the eldest and suffered wounds of his own from the battle, he'd helped wash the corpses that had been recovered, getting them ready for burial. Most funerals were small things handled in the other wards. In the days since, the tasks had alternated between clearing away and recovering the dead.

"And how are you?" Hroman asked. "I'm forgetting my manners."

"Well."

"What about the wound in your side?"

Pacys stretched gingerly. A sahuagin trident had gouged his side, requiring a number of stitches, and there was the wound in his arm. Still, he appeared to be mending, though slowly.

"Troubling," the old bard admitted, "but not disabling."

Hroman glanced around at the battered and broken shops and taverns. "So many people lost everything they had."

"At least they live," Pacys pointed out, "that those material losses may be grieved over. They'll rebuild."

"In time," Hroman agreed. He scratched at a dried blood stain on his shirt. "So is this the song that you believed you were called for to sing?"

Pacys hesitated, searching his feelings again for the answer himself, finding mostly a brittle, hollow ache left over from the raid. He shook his head. "I don't know."

"I listened for a time just now," Hroman admitted, "before you knew I was there."

Pacys didn't refute the statement. He'd known the priest was there. A man living on the road, singing for his meals and lodging, such a man learned more than just pretty words and a lively tune.

"Your song truly is beautiful, old friend," Hroman said honestly. "I felt the pain of this city and the people who live here, and I felt the fear that still hangs about in the shadows." "There are too many songs like it already, and more coming."

Pacys drew a knife from his boot and cut slices from the small half loaf of bread he'd been given in the food basket. He covered the slices with ham spread made fresh that morning, then passed a sandwich to the priest.

Hroman accepted it with thanks.

"On every street corner," Pacys said, "you'll find a bard. They're all composing songs about the raid, even those who weren't in Waterdeep that night. They've come from far and wide, trailing word of the story back."

"This is what you believed you were called for?"

"Yes," Pacys said, "and I still believe that, but there is something missing."

"What do you mean?"

"I've worked on the song about the raid for days," the old bard replied, "and have it shaped much as I want it, but there's more."

"More? You're sure of that?"

"Yes. Even as much work as I've done on it, the song yet remains unfinished."

"How do you know?"

Pacys smiled at the younger man. "How do you know a prayer is left unfinished?"

"Every priest is trained on the elements of a prayer," Hroman replied. "There's the invitational, the declaration-, the body of the message, and the closing."

"Sadly," Pacys said, "many bards believe it's the same with a song or a tale. Jokes, however, may be so mechanically inclined, but even within that art there are a number of allowances. In your vocation, my friend, the mind trains the ear, but in mine it's the ear that trains the mind."

"You remain hopeful, then."

Pacys smiled. "I yet live, and my song is undone. I've been following it for fourteen years. I can't allow myself to believe that I've been led this far and there will be no crescendo."

Quietly and efficiently, Hroman bowed his head and asked a blessing on the meal. Pacys joined him, finding his spirits even further lifted by the sincere belief in Hroman's words as he asked for peace and healing to descend on the city.

When the priest finished, the bard glanced up and out at the harbor. The morning sun was nearer to noon now, and the water glinted with diamond-bright highlights. He watched as a small group of mermen surfaced beside a large fishing boat with a boom arm hanging out over the water. Ropes led down into the harbor, letting the bard know they were going to attempt another underwater salvage.

"We're missing so many things," Pacys mused.

"They'll be replaced," Hroman stated. "Oghma willing, and if the need for whatever's been lost is strong enough."

"I'm not talking about city things." The old bard offered the small cup of cherry tomatoes that had been packed in the basket. They were exotic, grown in Maztica, and proof that the most exclusive of larders

had opened to feed the people who worked in the city. Hroman took a couple with a nod of thanks. "I'm talking about the song. We don't know who arranged the attack on Waterdeep, or why."

"It was the sahuagin," Hroman pointed out. "We all saw them. As to why, the sahuagin have never gotten along with people living on the surface."

"The sahuagin don't use magic," Pacys pointed out. "They don't like it, and they don't trust it. That night, of all things that can be said about it, was filled with magic. It's more than the sahuagin. There's an enemy out there who has aligned himself against Waterdeep . . . maybe more than just Waterdeep."

"I can only pray that you're wrong," the priest said.

Pacys nodded. "I pray that as well, but in my heart I know I'm right. This song is far bigger than any I've ever done. When I finish, we'll have to know who has commanded this thing and why."

"Not all songs are as neatly sewn," Hroman objected. "In Temdarc's Folly' the hero is kept constantly in the dark as to who's controlling the events in his life, as is the audience. Likewise with 'Lillinin' and 'The Calling of Three Shadows.' There are dozens of songs that don't fit the criteria you're saying exists."

"Not epic songs," Pacys objected in a soft voice. He popped one of the cherry tomatoes into his mouth and chewed. The fruit was pulpy and delicious. "Those all have the same ingredients."

Hroman was silent for a moment, as if hesitant. "Not all of those songs are finished, old friend. 'Cask of Torguein' remains incomplete to this day because the bard who wrote it--"

"Tweul Silverstrings," Pacys said automatically. A bard was trained to give every master his due. Otherwise, how would a true bard worthy of the mantle gain fame?

"--had his heart ripped out by a peryton up in the Cloud Peaks. 'Onyx Eyes' is unfinished because the bard--"

"Lohyis Tautsham," Pacys supplied.

"--was found drained of blood in a spider's web in Un-dermountain. 'Sandcastle Kings In Flight' is only a fragment left by the composer--"

"Harbier Funnelmouth."

"--who hasn't been seen in one hundred and twenty years." Hroman frowned. "I could go on."

"Because your father, Oghma rest his soul," Pacys said, "saw to it you had a good education without being cloistered away in priest's vestments."

Hroman took another bite of his sandwich. "All I'm saying is that we were fortunate to live through the bloodletting the other night, and there are enough people jumping at shadows in this city."

Pacys knew that was true. In response to the attack, all the land-based entrances into Waterdeep had been battened down with a siege mentality. The guard's rakers patrolled well past the harbor. There would be no more surprises.

Yet with all the might and ferocity that earmarked the attack, Pacys knew that whatever enemy the city faced didn't have to depend on surprise. The sahuagin could only come from the sea, but there were no guarantees that the sea devils hadn't aligned themselves with the ores or goblin hordes that occupied the hill country and forests beyond Waterdeep.

Carefully, Pacys steered the conversation onto safer ground, discussing the events and people of the last few days that weighed heavily on Hroman. Several of the junior priests leaned on him for guidance. Few had experienced such a vicious attack before and it left many with their faith shaken.

During the talk, the bard sliced up the small loaf of sweetbread he'd been given in the basket and added grapes and chunks of apple to the repast. His wineskin, thankfully, was plentiful. When the meal and the conversation was completed, Hroman excused himself, nearly asleep as he sat there.

Pacys bade his friend good-bye and took up the yarting again. He decided to allow himself only the small luxury of a few more minutes of playing before he returned to the work he'd volunteered for.

As he walked out to the splintered end of the dock, he noticed a small skiff putting in at Arnagus's. The crowd awaiting news of their loved ones hurried down to meet the skiffs crew, and the wailing and weeping of the grief stricken ones who learned the final fate of family members and friends rolled over the bard. Their sadness and despondency struck a chord in him. Effortlessly, his fingers plucked the strings, finding the resonance in himself that matched their grief. He wasn't surprised when new notes and chords emerged, tying in with those that had already come to him.

He sat on the end of the dock and gave himself over to the music, building what he'd already figured out to the new sections. Words came to tongue quickly, and he sang of the trouble Waterdeep faced, of the fears and the uncertainties that lie ahead.

His mind searched ahead as his eyes roved over the harbor. He'd been speaking truly to Hroman: things were missing. The song was epic in scope, but it wouldn't be complete without all the ingredients.

To be epic, the song had to have the touch of darkness, the schemer who'd designed the raid and marshaled the magic against Water-deep had to be known. But where did this darkness lie? There had to be a hero, someone who took the fight to that encroaching darkness. Waterdeep, he knew, was filled with heroes of every stripe; adventurers and warriors who dared and risked their lives countless times. It was those people who were even now rebuilding all that had been lost, promising that the city would flourish again. Still, as his fingers massaged the yarting's strings, none of their names rang true. He felt certain it would be someone no one had heard of, but where was this person? He shook his head in an effort to clear it. His heart felt leaden. He'd spent fourteen years of his life chasing this song, yet it seemed destined to remain just out of his touch. "Tale-spinner."

The voice was so soft that Pacys at first didn't realize it had been spoken. He quieted the yarting with a palm pressed against the strings, then approached the dock's edge.

A merman swam in the water in the shallows. His upper body was well developed, broad from swimming beneath the waters and from the hard life such a being lived, but his waist and below belonged to a fish. Faded pink scars striped his torso, cutting through the tan skin of his upper body and leading down to the silver scales that covered his lower half. He flicked his tail casually, keeping his head and shoulders above the waterline. Dark brown hair trailed wetly down his back, matched by a full beard. A necklace of coral and shells matched the ones wrapping his wrists, each piece carefully selected to match elegantly. He carried a trident in one hand.

"You know me," the merman said, sweeping his tail with just enough energy to remain atop the water, "from a night fourteen years gone."

"Yes," Pacys replied. It wasn't hard to remember the merman. Pacys had helped save his life when the merman came into the harbor fleeing some great evil that had pursued them from the Sea of Swords. "I'd thought you were going to die back then."

The merman nodded, a grim smile on his face. "I almost did, and I had the chance again only a few nights ago."

"All of us did."

"I recognized you from your song," the merman said.

The old bard knew the merman treasured songs as part of their culture. He'd borrowed some of their music and tales for his own over the years and was no stranger to their race.

"You played some of that song the night we arrived," the merman said.

Pacys was genuinely surprised the merman remembered. He'd sat quietly on the shore those many years ago, watching as the injured mermen were pulled from the water for treatment, asking for asylum from whatever had pursued them. He'd discovered the first of the song then.

"Yes," the old bard said. "You've a good ear for music."

"You are part of this," the merman said.

Pacys didn't deny the charge.

"I am shaman to my people," the merman said. "I'm called Narros."

Pacys gave his own name, then sat at the edge of the dock so they could be closer. None of the sailors around them paid any special attention to their conversation, but they remained wary. Over the last few days, the sailors in the harbor had accidentally attacked the mermen and other underwater denizens living in the shallows, fearing them to be returning sahuagin. So far there'd been no deaths on either side, but tensions and suspicions were running high.

"It won't end with the attack of a few days ago," Narros said.

"I know," the old bard replied. "Many of these people think it will. The rest all hope so."

The merman shook his head, flicking water from his hair. "It's already escalating. My people have been foraging along the Sea of Swords, seeking out information as Lord Piergeiron requested. More and more ships are being taken at sea." "By the sahuagin?"

"And other things," Narros answered. He hesitated for a moment. "There are few survivors."

Pacys waited impatiently, wondering what had brought the merman to him. Usually they didn't have much to do with humans or other surface dwellers past whatever trade they needed to do.

"The evil reaching out now," Narros said, "was prophesied by my people. We knew when it rose against us fourteen years ago, despite the warding we created, that it had arrived. Now it has grown even stronger."

Intrigued, Pacys focused on the man. "Could I hear that prophecy?"

"Yes," Narros replied. "You have to. In my prayers of late I've discovered that you are part of it."

XXVII

17 Mirtul, the Year of the Gauntlet

Jherek watched Aysel draw the double-bitted battle-axe back with both hands. Blood still poured down the sailor's chin from his split lips.

The floor around the fight cleared immediately. Even Aysel's cronies must not have trusted their companion's anger or aim. They released Jherek even as he worked one of his hands free.

He pushed himself back, narrowly avoiding the battle-axe slashing horizontally across his chest. The spiked tip of the axe head cut through his shirt and striped him with sudden, burning pain. Warm blood spilled down his chest. His anger melted somewhat then as he gave himself over to survival.

Still off-balance from his release from the men who'd been holding him, and from the effort at escaping the first axe blow, Jherek couldn't move quickly enough to attempt closing with Aysel. The big sailor moved at him immediately, drawing the axe back again.

Grasping a wooden chair, Jherek heaved it up in time to intercept the axe coming down at his head. The axe blow shattered the chair to splinters in the young sailor's hands, but it gave him time to spin away. The axe thudded home in the tavern's wooden floor, sending up a spray of sawdust. "Get him!" Aysel bawled, yanking the axe from the floor. "Hold him and I'll have the head from his shoulders!"

A man leaped on Jherek from behind, forcing him forward over a nearby table. The side of the young sailor's head slammed against the tabletop and scattered tankards in all directions.

"Get him now!" the man shrilled in Jherek's ear. By the time Jherek got his legs under him properly, the axe was already whistling toward his head. He pulled back with all his strength, slipping under the man's weight.

The axe thudded into the table only inches in front of Jherek's eyes. There was enough power in the blow to split the tabletop, and splinters dug into the young sailor's cheek.

Hooking a foot behind the leg of the man holding him, Jherek pulled and lunged back at the same time. He went down backward on top of the man in a tangle of arms and legs. Already in motion, he came to his feet in a smooth roll. One of Aysel's companions reached for him, whipping a dagger forward.

Jherek raised an arm and blocked the dagger thrust, catching the man's wrist on his forearm with enough force to crack the small wrist bones. Even as the man cried out in pain, the young sailor grabbed a metal serving pitcher from another table and slammed it against his attacker's head with a deep *bong*. The man's knees buckled and he went down screaming.

"Are you still willing to die for Sabyna's honor now, boy?" Aysel didn't waste any time stepping across the man's unconscious body and unloading with the axe again.

Jherek shifted, shuffling to the side, feeling the wall behind him come into contact with him unexpectedly. He dropped into a crouch with his back to the wall. The axe thudded into the hard wood, wedging in tight.

Aysel tugged on the haft, struggling to free his weapon. It came loose, ripping wood from the wall in long splinters.

"Not die," Jherek replied hotly, "but I'll stand for her."

"Because she's shared her body with you?" Aysel taunted. "Is that anything to die for?"

Jherek felt the anger in him turn to ice, and he knew that emotion peaked higher in him than he'd ever thought it could. Even with everything that had happened to him in his life, he'd never felt that way, not at his father, nor at fate, both of which had conspired against him since he'd been born. He ripped the cutlass free of his waist sash, pushing himself up and away from the bigger man.

With a final yank, Aysel pulled the axe from the wall. He saw the cutlass in Jherek's hand, then spread his own hands along the four foot haft of the battle-axe. He grinned wolfishly, full of confidence.

"I've chopped up bigger men than you, boy, and them better armed and armored."

A small movement at Jherek's side alerted him to the man slipping up on him. He whirled and kicked, blocking the man's sword swing with a booted foot and whipping the cutlass's pommel into the man's forehead, stunning him. Even as the man fell away from him, Jherek continued his spin, raising the cutlass blade to block Aysel's axe blow, sliding it over him, then past.

Sweat, blood, and sawdust covered him as he set himself more properly behind his sword. His lungs labored from his exertion and the emotion that filled him.

Aysel drew back, setting himself with his weapon as well. The axe danced in his hands. The fact that he was missing two fingers on his left hand didn't seem to bother him at all. The battle-axe twirled end over

end, creating what seemed to be a constant barrier in front of the big sailor.

"I wasn't always a sailor, boy. I've been fighting men longer than I've been at sea."

"I'm not surprised," Jherek said. "Only two things draw a man to the sea and a sailor's life. The love for the sea itself, or crimes committed on dry land so bad that staying there is no longer an option."

Without warning, the battle-axe twisted in Aysel's hands, the blade licking out at Jherek's throat.

Jherek batted the axe head aside with the flat of his cutlass. Metal rang out in the tavern. Seeking to enlarge on the opening he thought he'd created, Jherek stepped forward. In the close confines, the four foot axe haft could be unwieldy in the hands of most.

Aysel was fully aware of his weapon's strengths and weaknesses, though, and the big sailor didn't try to strike with the axe head again. Instead, he hammered the haft into Jherek's face.

Jherek had only enough time to turn his head and pull his chin down. The heavy wooden haft, sheathed in steel, connected with his forehead and the ridge of bone over his right eye instead of his nose. Pain thundered into his head, and his vision went white for a moment. His jaw snapped shut.

"Foolish move, boy, trying to take a seasoned axe man like that," Aysel crowed with sadistic delight. The axe spun in his hands again as he readied himself to take advantage of his success.

Jherek stepped back, quickly and automatically raising the cutlass to cover his retreat, and stepping so that his good eye was turned more toward his opponent. However, the stance also left him with a shorter sword reach. He blinked hurriedly, guarding against the pain that assailed him and trying to clear his vision. Doubled images of Aysel drawing the axe back for another swing moved before him.

Jherek moved the way Malorrie had taught him, reading the big man's body movements rather than trying to keep track of the axe. He leaped up, pulling his legs high to avoid the sweeping axe blow aimed to cut his ankles from under him. When he landed on the floor again, he launched a back-handed slash with the cutlass, aiming it at Aysel's face, guessing the man would step backward to avoid it.

Instead, Aysel lifted the end of the axe haft and blocked the cutlass. Sparks flew from the steel sheath, and the hard wooden shaft held. The big man flicked the sword away, then stepped in and buried the axe haft in Jherek's stomach.

Bright comets of pain ignited in the young sailor's skull as his breath fled his lungs. He was certain the blow broke ribs, and he remained on his feet out of sheer defiance. Aysel closed again, stumbling, surprised maybe that Jherek hadn't fallen. His breath burned hotly on the young sailor's neck.

"Had enough, boy?" Aysel snarled.

Twisting, keeping his body contact against the bigger man to keep him off-balance so he couldn't bring either end of the battle-axe back into play, Jherek balled up his left fist and smashed it into Aysel's throat.

The big sailor stumbled backward, grabbing for his injured throat with one hand. His breath came in harsh gasps.

"No," Jherek grated out. "You're still standing."

He wiped at his injured eye with his free hand, finding some of the blurred vision was caused by blood. He wiped his eye clear on a shirt sleeve, aware that the swelling had already half closed it. Still, he could see better. He lifted the cutlass and slashed.

Aysel grabbed the axe with both hands again and blocked the blow.

Warming to the task, pushing the pain away, Jherek moved the cutlass confidently. He remained on the attack, deliberately aiming blows that he knew Aysel could block and had no choice but to do so, beating back any opportunity for offense. The big man held his ground for a moment, wavering, but in the end he was forced back.

Despite Aysel's claim to the tavern crowd at the beginning of the fight, Jherek's courage and skill in the face of greater numbers arrayed against him won over the watchers. They howled at him, supporting him, demanding Aysel's blood.

Jherek didn't intend to kill the man if he could help it. Aysel's lack of manners didn't mean he should be killed. Senses alert, and the combat skills Malorrie had drilled into him functioning at their peak with the adrenaline rushing through his body, Jherek swept the cutlass forward too fast for Aysel to dodge. At the last minute, he turned the sword so the flat of the blade thumped solidly into the big man's jawline.

Stunned, Aysel stumbled back, working hard to keep the battle-axe up.

Before Jherek could take advantage of his success, a chair crashed into him, breaking across his back and shoulders. The young sailor went down to his knees, doubling over on his fiery ribs. He tried to catch his breath and couldn't as he turned to face Aysel's cohort.

The sailor tossed the shattered remains of the chair away, then stepped in and kicked Jherek in the

face.

The man's foot caught Jherek on the chin, snapping his head back. The young sailor didn't try to fight the force, working to roll with it as much as possible. He gripped the cutlass, stubbornly hanging onto it. The man came at Jherek again, stamping his feet down at him viciously, snarling curses.

Avoiding the kicks when he could, blocking them with his arms when he couldn't, Jherek rolled across the sawdust covered floor under a table. The man reached for the table and ripped it away, spilling tankards and platters over the side.

Jherek tasted blood in his mouth, realizing his lips had been split by the kick to his chin. He surged up with the overturned table, setting himself. His opponent hadn't expected him to attack and was caught unprepared. Jherek swung the cutlass, thudding the sword's heavy-cast knuckle bow into the man's forehead. The shock of the impact shuddered all along Jherek's arm.

The sailor's eyes glazed and his knees buckled. He let out a long breath and crumpled to the floor, unconscious.

Spotting the movement of the tavern crowd shifting around him, Jherek turned as Aysel came toward him. Growling in rage, the big sailor swept the battle-axe at Jherek.

The young sailor lifted the cutlass to his defense, managing to catch the broad axe on his blade for an instant before it slid off. The axe's keen edge razed across his left arm, slicing his bicep open and sending fresh blood cascading down his arm. It went partially numb at once, and a burning fear raced through him that the axe blow had permanently damaged his arm.

Aysel's power and weight knocked him from his feet. Unable to use his wounded arm well, Jherek fell awkwardly, slamming down on his back across the remnants of a chair. Aysel gave him no respite, closing his hands together at the end of the battle-axe and swinging hard.

Forcing his wounded arm to work, Jherek grabbed the cutlass's broad blade and blocked the descending axe. The impact felt like it tore his shoulders free, and he couldn't hold the axe back. Instead, he turned it aside. The move also cost him the cutlass, tearing it from his hands. Desperate, every move agony, Jherek kicked the big man in the crotch as he tried to pull the axe back. Aysel screamed in pain.

Pressing his slight advantage for all it was worth, Jherek slipped his fishing knife from his boot. He twisted, holding the knife tightly, then plunged it through Aysel's foot. Sharp and driven forcefully, the keen knife cut through the boot leather and slipped between the bones of the big man's foot. It thudded home solidly in the hardwood floor.

"Umberlee take you for your dark cowardice, you little bastard!" Aysel shouted. He pulled at his axe, bringing it up.

Ignoring the burning pain that filled his body and the salty taste of blood filling his mouth, Jherek forced himself to his feet. He stepped into Aysel, seizing the man's left arm in a hold Malorrie had taught him. Moving in close to the bigger man, holding the arm in a controlling position, Jherek pulled with his upper body and twisted at the same time.

Aysel left the floor, his foot tearing free of the floor with the knife still in it.

Jherek brought the big sailor down hard on the floor. Aysel reached for him, but Jherek slid away. As the big man hobbled to a standing position, grabbing dazedly at the knife impaling his foot, Jherek grabbed a broken chair leg from the floor and swung it from his shoulder.

The chair leg crashed into Aysel's temple with a dulled *smack*, turning his head.

Incredibly, the man remained standing for a moment.

Jherek watched uncertainly, fighting to sip his breath past the broken feeling in his ribs. If Aysel continued fighting, he wasn't sure he had anything left. Still, he kept his grip on the chair leg, then Aysel fell, pitching face forward onto the floor. Sawdust gusted up when he hit.

Kneeling with difficulty, Jherek felt the man's neck, relieved when he found a pulse. He'd never killed a man in anger before, and after the close call today, he knew he never would. Challenging Aysel's affront to Sabyna's honor had been a natural thing for him, something he knew he'd never be able to walk away from, but next time, he promised himself, he'd have a clearer head.

Hurting all over, his breath coming in short, painful gasps, Jherek stood. He surveyed the tavern, surprised at the destruction that had been wrought. Aysel's companions were unconscious as well, laying tumbled in the wreckage.

"Now, by Tyr," a grizzled old man at the front of the tavern crowd shouted, "that was a damn fight!"

Several of the other tavern goers loudly agreed. They came around Jherek and pounded him on the back.

Jherek's knees buckled from the impact and he almost went down. The man caught him, wrapping an

arm around his shoulders and laughing at how expended the young sailor was.

"Gave 'em all you had, didn't you, boy?" the old man asked.

"Aye," Jherek croaked, "maybe more." His vision still swam and his injured eye had swollen totally closed. Despite the pain that filled him, he felt proud. His cause had been just, and he'd won. At the same time, he realized how prideful and arrogant that thought was. He didn't think Malorrie would have approved. Madame Litaar would have given him one of those reproachful looks that Jherek had always felt could have peeled paint.

The old man took part of Jherek's weight and hauled him to the bar. "A man willing to fight like that against such odds, I'll stand him to a drink. Even if I have hold him up at the bar!" The rough men around them broke into laughter.

The bartender thumped a tankard of ale in front of Jherek, then pointed at the serving wenches. "Go through their pockets," he told them, "and take enough gold to pay for the damages." He looked at Jherek. "House rules: loser always pays the damages ... one way or another."

Jherek struggled to cling to his senses, but he didn't reach for the ale. Still, it felt good to be standing among the rough crowd, momentarily accepted as one of their own. He felt guilty too. The fight wasn't something to be proud of.

"Drink up, boy," the old man said, slapping Jherek on the back. "It'll wash the blood out of your mouth and prevent infection. Hell, you drink enough, you won't even feel the pain."

The crowd laughed, yelling enthusiastically.

Jherek shook his head politely, then regretted it instantly when a new wave of pain fired through his skull. It felt like pieces of it were missing. "Don't drink," he said.

"What?" the old man asked.

"I said I don't drink," Jherek replied.

The old man passed the knowledge on to his comrades flocked together at the bar. "A fighting man always drinks," the man said, turning back to Jherek.

"Can't," Jherek said, thinking quickly, not wanting to offend his newfound friends. "It's my belief."

The old man drew back in wry surprise. "Now there's a piss-poor god for you-one that doesn't allow a man an honest drink now and again." He suddenly slammed his sword arm across his chest in benediction. "May Tyr protect a warrior who speaks his own mind so carelessly."

"No offense taken," Jherek said.

"What will you drink?" the man asked.

"Water, please."

Hrumphing in displeasure, the bartender said, "I've got some I keep around here for cutting drinks I sell to the young Amman fops who come around wanting to talk it up later that they've been to this place." He rummaged under the counter and brought up a bottle. "Here it is." He poured a quick tankard and sat it before Jherek.

"Thank you." Jherek took up the tankard and drank, tasting the coppery salt of the blood in his mouth. His wounded arm throbbed dully. Glancing at it, he pulled the sliced cloth away.

"You're going to need a few gathers in that one, boy," the old man said. "I know a cleric who does such work out of his temple. He'll expect a few silver pieces to be donated to his god in return, and a couple gold if you want him to bless it."

Jherek nodded and sipped his water again. Nausea swamped his stomach and he fought to keep its contents in place. He'd never felt that way when he'd fought the sahuagin, nor when he'd fought pirates out on the open seas, but Aysel wasn't as bluntly evil in his ways as they'd been. The big sailor had only been a man with an undisciplined tongue and low manner.

Standing there, swaying slightly, Jherek knew the fight could have easily ended with any one of them dead, and it would have been his fault.

Malorrie had always taught him never to strike in anger, and to fight only when fighting would save a life.

Jherek knew he could have walked out of the tavern, but he'd chosen not to. At the same time, though, he knew he couldn't allow Sabyna's honor to be bandied about so lightly. It would have offended him to stand there and let the comments be aired.

"Get out of my way!"

Recognizing the voice at once, Jherek turned and watched as Captain Tynnel strode through the tavern's double doors. He watched Tynnel survey the makeshift battlefield and felt even more uncomfortable about what he'd done. The serving wenches ceased looting the pockets of the unconscious

men and backed hurriedly away, hiding the coins they'd taken in the pockets of their skirts.

"Who did this?" the captain roared. His fist knotted around the sword he wore. His gaze challenged every man in the tavern. A dozen *Breezerunner* crewmen stood behind him. All of them looked ready to fight.

The tavern crowd separated, revealing Jherek. The young sailor stepped forward on trembling legs. "I did," he answered.

XXVIII

8 Tarsakh, the Year of the Gauntlet

"The story was given to my people generations ago," Narros said, "at the same time we were given custody of the headband that was to be kept under our protection."

"Headband? From whom?" Pacys asked. He sat on a pile of moss on the floor across from a low table made of gathered stones in the middle of the small underwater cave out in Waterdeep Harbor that the merman shaman made his home.

The cave was ten feet tall and only slightly wider than that. Mosaics of shells, stones, and bits of colored glass gleaned from trading with the merchants in Waterdeep and crafted into pictures of mermen fishing the depths occupied prominent places on the walls. Out of deference to the bard's weaker surface vision, a small glow lamp gleamed on the table.

Pacys was able to survive underwater due to the emerald bracelet he wore. The merman shaman had given it to him at the dock. The magical powers of the bracelet let him breathe the water as air, turned away most of the cold, and removed the pressure from the depths. If it hadn't been for the flotsam and jetsam that occasionally floated through his view and the inquisitive fish that came up to him, the bard would have noticed the difference between the submerged cave and the surface world even less.

"Our stories say that the first of our group was given the prophecy and the headband by Eadro the Deliverer, Lord of the Sunlit Shadows."

The bard easily recognized the name of the mermen god. Eadro was also worshiped by the locathah, though the means of worshiping the god differed wildly among the races as well as the regions.

"There was a time," Narros went on in his deep voice, "generations and generations ago, when a great evil was inadvertently loosed upon the world."

Unconsciously, Pacys's hands strayed to his yarting. The magic of the bracelet, he'd discovered, had extended to his clothing and his instrument. Delicately, his fingers plucked at the strings, sorting out the rhythm that came into his mind as the merman spoke. "What was the nature of this great evil?"

Narros shook his head and his beard and hair floated through the currents that swept around him. The motion was disconcerting to Pacys even though he'd experienced the deep before.

All of the adult merfolk were engaged in helping with the salvaging efforts going on in Waterdeep Harbor and beyond. On their way down from the docks Narros had encountered half a dozen or more of his kin and sent each one away in turn with different orders. Some were asked to help with salvage, others to patrol for the many stray sharks still trapped in the harbor and feasting on Water-deep's dead. One, an impressive merman warrior named Thraxos, had come to Narros to tell the shaman he'd received his orders and was ready to go.

"Be off with you then, Thrax," Narros had said, respect evident in his tone and expression. "It's a long swim, my friend, and I fear we'll never see each other again."

Thraxos had only nodded and turned, swimming away. It seemed that the City of Splendors was still sacrificing her finest in the war that had come upon them so suddenly.

Quick movement darted at one of the doors carved into this part of Waterdeep Isle. Narros had two small children in the house with him that he'd chased to rooms in the back of the dwelling. One of them was a little girl, scarcely longer than three feet from the top of her head to the bottom of her fins. The other was a boy old enough to wear an adult's knife strapped to his upper arm.

"I'm sorry for the interruption," Narros said. "Alyx has her mother's curiosity."

"It's quite all right," Pacys said and gave the merchild a smile. "I've always loved children. I don't mind them being here."

"Well enough." Narros spoke in his own tongue, then slapped his powerful tail fin gently on the floor.

The little merchild arced through the water, fast as a dolphin. In the blink of an eye she twisted and

managed to come to a thumping rest tucked safely inside her father's arms. Contented, she thrust a thumb into her mouth and watched Pacys with wild-eyed innocence.

"I apologize," Narros said. "She's never seen a human this close before."

"Don't apologize," Pacys replied. "I've made most of my living by my own curiosity, or teasing it out of others."

The young merboy entered the room more cautiously, maintaining his distance from the bard.

Pacys continued plucking the yarting, listening to the refrain that had popped into his head. The melody fit so completely with the part of the song he'd figured out regarding Waterdeep he knew that he was on the right path. The confirmation excited him, making him forget some of the aches and pains he suffered from over his last few days of hard labor.

Narros picked up the thread of his tale effortlessly, a born storyteller himself. "The evil is a creature," he said, "the like of which has never been seen. Our legends have it that once he swam with gods in the world of the seas, though not a god himself. Once, he was a predator, with not much more in his life than his nature. At that time he swam with Sekolah."

"The sahuagin shark god?" Pacys asked.

"Yes. Our tales hold it that this creature was one of the first in the waters of this world. Mermen had not filled the seas, nor had Sekolah shaken the sahuagin from their shell as yet. This abomination curried the favor of the gods, lusting after more power for himself. It's said that Umberlee herself evidenced an interest in him for a time, then took him as a consort."

"Of all the tales I've learned in my life," Pacys said, "I've never heard any about this."

"Listen to the stories of the sea people again," Narros said. "Sometimes he's referred to as a being or force called the Taker. In others he's confused with the Trickster. I believe Umberlee removed herself from the tales, though a sorceress is sometimes referred to in her stead. He fell out of favor with her hundreds of generations ago, and she sentenced him to death. Her rage was so great that she moved oceans in her effort to kill him, only he didn't die. He's been lying dormant, like anemones that are caught in a tidal pool that evaporates, waiting to be revived. Now he lives again."

Pacys continued listening, his mind whirling with the possibilities. More than anything he remained cognizant of the music he strummed on the yarting. The tune was cold and distant, threatening, and when played properly he knew it would be commanding in the piece he was writing. The sheer force of the tune left goosebumps pebbling his flesh. It belonged to the evil that had attacked Waterdeep, stronger even than the notes he'd picked out for the sahuagin.

"As Umberlee's pet," Narros said, "he gained an image of himself as increasingly powerful, as he was. The Bitch Goddess saw to that. She gave him powers, trained him in sorcery, and gave him magical instruments that he used to build an empire in what your people call the Shining Sea. He's not yet what he was, but our prophecies say he will be again."

As Pacys continued playing involuntarily, an image of a vast labyrinth rising above the sea floor appeared in his mind's eye. It wasn't the first time that such a thing had happened. He'd experienced other clairvoyant times when the music surged strongly in him. He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to fix the structure more clearly.

*"Alabaster walls, blued by depths and age,
Hugged to the sea floor with Umberlee's blessing,
Lighted only by darkest evil,
Fired by jealous rage."*

The words resonated in his head, and he stopped himself short of giving voice to them. He opened his eyes again, focusing on the shaman. "Do you have a name for him?" he asked.

Narros shook his head. His little girl reached out unexpectedly, floating free of her father's arms. Her soft, webbed hand reached out and caught Pacys by the chin. Going with the child's gentle but insistent push, Pacys twisted his head and bared his neck.

"Alyyx has noticed you don't have gills," Narros said. Gently, he captured his daughter and pulled her back into his arms.

Reaching into his pocket, the bard took out the small leather bag that contained the colorful marbles he used to exercise his fingers and keep them limber for the musical instruments he played. The merchild took them with obvious delight and began inspecting them.

"We were given no name for him," Narros said, "and we were bade never to speak of him except as the Taker or the Trickster. He was to be given no real identity. We've always believed that once his name was known, his power would grow again and he would be called forth from his deep slumber."

"What about the circlet?" Pacys asked. "What did it do?"

"I don't know, but he came for it fourteen years ago and wiped out over half our village taking it." A somber look filled Narros's face. "Our dead were scattered around us, torn limb from limb as if in the jaws of some great sea creature."

"Did you see him?"

"Only as a shadow," the merman shaman answered, pain filling his gray eyes, "the greatest, largest shadow anyone had ever seen, and like nothing we'd ever seen before."

The hurt distraction in the merman's eyes testified vividly to how well he remembered the night.

"Were the sahuagin with him?" Pacys asked after a moment.

"No. The Taker came alone, in the dead of night when even the sea is dark. I lost two of my sons in that battle."

"I'm sorry," Pacys said.

Narros gave his daughter a brief hug.

"Eadro willing," the small merboy stated in a serious, quiet voice, "one day I'll be strong enough to avenge my brothers."

Pacys glanced at the boy, suddenly realizing he wasn't old enough to have known his deceased brothers. The family's loss and hurt had already spanned a generation in the merman's own family.

"The prophecy," Narros went on, "told us that we might fail in protecting the circlet from the Taker, but it never mentioned at what cost. After it was over, we cared for our dead, then we swam for Waterdeep."

"Why Waterdeep?" Pacys asked.

"Because the prophecy told us the Taker would arise again, soon after his first appearance, and the place he would first strike terror into the hearts of the surface dwellers would be in their greatest city."

"Waterdeep," Pacys breathed. He was aware of the tune changing on the yarting.

"There could be no other," the shaman agreed. "Great detail was given in the prophecy of the city that would be attacked. Its towers and great heights, the fact that it was wrapped in magic and was home to champions."

"So you came here," Pacys said, "seeking asylum from Lord Piergeiron and the others."

"Yes."

"You never mentioned that Waterdeep would be attacked."

Narros eyed the bard honestly. "Do you think any would have believed us? And that was fourteen years ago. There was no guarantee that it wouldn't have been a hundred and fourteen years after we lost the circlet. It could have been the next day." He paused. "We just wanted to be here, to give an accounting of ourselves and to get a chance to avenge our sunken. We'd hoped to make a difference during the battle."

"I'm sure you did." Pacys had already heard stories of the mermen's valor during the battle for Waterdeep, and of the extra effort even the wounded had gone to while trying to save the men in the harbor.

"Even if we'd told the lords of Waterdeep about the attack, they wouldn't have been prepared. They wouldn't have given much credence to our fears."

"No," Pacys agreed. "They might not have believed you, and even the ones who did wouldn't have been any more prepared than they were after fourteen years. But why did he want to attack Waterdeep?" Unconsciously, he drifted over into the piece he'd written for Waterdeep, the music gentle to his ear.

"The prophecy is vague about that," Narros admitted. "Part of it is a warning to the surface dwellers and to bind the sahuagin further to his cause. A few lines suggest that he went into the city itself to reclaim one of his lost weapons to use in his conquest of the surface world."

"Was there any hint about what this weapon was supposed to do?"

Narros patted his daughter on the head. "With it, he's going to sunder a land, fill an ocean with fire and fury, and free a trapped people who live for evil as he does. Waterdeep was only the first of the cities that are going to learn to live in fear of the ocean. He is going to come to power in the outer sea, then in the inner one, and when it is revealed, all are going to fear his name."

Pacys absorbed the story, amazed by the depth and complexity that it offered. Prophecies were powerful things; not just for the people who believed in them, but the world itself was forced to deal with them.

"How are we supposed to stop him?" the old bard asked.

"I don't know," the shaman answered. "Our own prophecy hints that the prophecies of other undersea races are linked to the reappearance of this creature, and each will have other pieces to the story. One man

will weave all of those stories together, spin them into a tale that will live forever in the history of this world." He locked his gaze on Pacys. "That man is you."

Hope fired through Pacys's heart, but he reached for it and held it down. "You can't know that," he whispered hoarsely.

" 'A human tale spinner,' " Narros quoted, " 'old enough to be at the end of his life, yet still living on the edge, seeking to fill the emptiness that his own self-imposed quest has laid upon his soul, all his days given to the perfection of his craft. The music of his great song will replenish him till he is near bursting, like a deep water fish that streaks unwisely toward the shallows. Once he has gathered the song and given it to the worlds above and below, he'll be forever remembered as Taleweaver, he who sang of sand and sea and united the history of all peoples who have the sea in their blood.'" He pointed at the yarting, the strings still ringing in the old bard's hands. "I heard the song you played that night when my people arrived in this harbor. You couldn't know it, it is a sacred song, given only to my people at the time Eadro gave us the circlet. He told my ancestors then that the song would be given to the Taleweaver, and that was how we'd know him."

"If you knew then," Pacys protested, "why didn't you say something?"

Narros shook his head. "We were bound to silence. Remember? No one could speak of the Taker ... not until after he reappeared."

"How can you be so sure I'm the one?"

"Since we've been here, your hands have ever been busy, made slave to the music that now holds you in thrall. Truly, you are the one. I was guided to you this morning because you still have your part to play."

"What part?" Pacys's heart hammered inside his chest. The song was one thing; he could commit to that, but what else remained before him?

"There is a man-hardly more than a boy by your counting of years, one who has always lived with the sea in his heart despite being abandoned to land-who will find a way to confront the Taker," Narros said. "He will find the weapon and he will find the way, but it will be only after he finds himself, discovers what he truly is. To do that, you'll have to seek him out and touch his heart. He's been shattered by his experiences, and others have worked to make him whole, given him much of what he needs, but he'll never be able to become what he needs to be without you. If you're not there for him, it could be that our very world will fall." The merman smiled comfortingly. "Take pride in the fact that he will be one of the very best of your kind."

"What do I need to do?" Pacys asked.

"Find him," Narros answered, "and help him find himself."

The sheer enormity of the situation put a righteous fear in Pacys. How to find one man in all of Faerun when not even a name existed was beyond him.

"But where do I start looking?"

Narros shook his head. "Our prophesy says it will be in a city on a great river that stands as a door to the above and below worlds."

Pacys's mind raced and only one city came to mind though he knew of dozens. "Baldur's Gate," he said.

"I have thought so too."

"I'll find him there?"

"You'll see him there," the merman answered. "As to what takes place, I can't say. You'll have to find a way and trust the bond that exists between you."

Suddenly, Pacys noticed his wandering hands had moved on to a new piece, one that he'd never played before, one that he'd never heard played before. It was uplifting, a light in the darkness, a fragile mixture of bravery and fear, and he recognized it at once.

Alyyx slapped her tail against her father's torso happily. The smacking sounds somehow intermingled with the piece Pacys played, bringing hope.

"That's the hero's song," she cried out enthusiastically, turning to her brother. "Don't you hear him coming, Shyl?"

The merboy nodded, a small grin turning his lips.

Despite his own doubts and fears about everything the merman shaman had told him, Pacys couldn't help smiling. It *was* a hero's song. His fingers moved across the strings with growing confidence, seeking out the melody.

Narros reached out and clapped him on the shoulder. "You'll find him, Taleweaver," he said. "Wherever he is, it's your destiny to find him. Go first to Baldur's Gate and seek him there."

XXIX

17 Mirtul, the Year of the Gauntlet

Tynnel's eyes narrowed as he walked toward Jherek. He gestured at Aysel and his fallen comrades. "Get them on their feet."

Crewmen split up and helped the fallen men to stand. Aysel remained hard to rouse. One of the serving wenches approached and spilled a tankard of ale into his face. Aysel woke, spluttering and cursing, instantly flailing around for his weapon. Three crewmen restrained him. When Aysel realized Tynnel was there, he quieted immediately.

"Why did you fight them?" Tynnel asked.

Jherek had no ready answer.

"Because of that damned woman," one of Aysel's comrades called out. "Having women aboard a ship, Cap'n, that's always been—"

Tynnel quieted the man with a steely glance, then shifted his attention back to Jherek. "You fought them over Sabyna?"

"Aye," Jherek admitted, but he was reluctant to repeat the terrible things Aysel had said.

"Was she here?"

"No, sir. She's been looking for you."

"I know that," Tynnel said in a clipped voice. "I just came from her when I heard one of my crewmen had been involved in a brawl here. I don't allow fighting in the ports we ship in, not if you're a part of my crew. I could have lost three crewmen in this debacle that I can presently ill afford to lose."

"He started it, Cap'n," Aysel shouted. "Raised his hand against me, and I had every right to defend myself. My mates were there to make sure he didn't slit my gullet before I had a chance to defend myself."

Surprise lighted the captain's eyes. "Is that true?" Tynnel demanded of Jherek. "Did you strike the first blow?"

Before Jherek could answer, the old man spoke up. "It wasn't the boy, Cap'n," he said. "The big man there had a foul mouth on him, goaded the boy into the fight."

Tynnel's eyes never left Jherek's. "Thank you for your comments, sir, but I live in a world where fights are fought with words or with swords. If you find yourself outclassed in either, that's fine, but they are to remain separate on my ship, and swords are not allowed." His words carried an edge.

"It was the big man," the old warrior said, "who threw the first blow. I saw him, and so did most of those in the tavern."

Confirmation of the old man's statement echoed in the tavern as the others took up the young sailor's defense. Jherek looked around them, totally surprised.

"Don't you worry none, boy," the old man whispered. "A scrapper like you with his heart in the right place, even rogues such as these will come around and stand up for him. Your cap'n's a tough but fair man, but his rules are his own and he sticks by 'em."

"Is that what happened, Malorrie?" Tynnel demanded.

The captain's use of the alias Jherek had borrowed for the voyage underscored the liberties he'd taken with the truth already. He didn't hesitate about his answer. "No, sir. It was I who made the argument physical."

Tynnel's harsh gaze softened a bit then, and his voice as well. "That's too bad. When I hired Sabyna on as ship's mage, we were both aware of the complications a woman brought to a ship of men. There's a rule about—"

"I'm not a crewman," Jherek interrupted, "nor was this fight over her."

"If nothing had been said about Sabyna, would you have fought these men?"

Jherek took a deep breath in through his nose. Even with only one eye, he saw there was no arguing with Tynnel's position. The fear that rode him clawed its way through his stomach, tightening his muscles so his ribs pained him even more. "No, sir."

"I say that the argument was over her," Tynnel stated. He reached into his coin purse and took out coins. "I'm returning your ship's passage, and I'm adding what I think is a fair price for the work you did aboard."

Jherek listened to the captain's words, not believing he'd just been thrown off the ship. It wasn't right,

but the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach told him Tynnel wouldn't entertain any arguments about the matter. Despite everything, his ill luck held true, the most constant companion he'd ever had.

"Keep the coins," Jherek said in defeat. What silver he had wouldn't leave him much to buy another berth on a ship bound for Baldur's Gate, but it was only fair.

"I can't keep it," Tynnel said.

"You didn't have a hand in this fight," Jherek said. "You earned your pay."

"I won't keep the passage fare," Tynnel stated, "and you earned the extra."

Jherek saw the determination in the captain's eyes and respected it. "Then keep it for the boy we rescued from the shipwreck. Even the orphanage here in Athkatla can use a donation while they try to find his family." It was as close as he could figure to balancing the score between them.

Tynnel stared at him a moment longer, then put the coins away. "I'll do as you ask." Tynnel lowered his voice then, speaking so he could be heard only by Jherek. "I'm sorry this has to happen," he said, "but I have rules for a reason."

"I know," Jherek said. "I understand."

Rules were a big part of Jherek's life as well. They'd offered security for him that his upbringing and early years hadn't allowed. From time to time, they'd even held his bad luck away, and he knew no one rule could be broken without sacrificing all the others.

"I'll have your things sent here," Tynnel said, "you can't come back to the ship."

Jherek nodded, grimly accepting the judgment, and asked, "You know about the dangers along the Sword Coast? The sahuagin attack on Waterdeep?"

"And the other ships as well," Tynnel said. "We've sailed dangerous waters before."

An image from the dreams he'd had about the great shark surfaced in Jherek's mind, sending a cold shiver down his spine when he thought of Sabyna out on the Sea of Swords. "Perhaps not as dangerous as these," he said. "Sail safely."

"And you." Tilting his head, Tynnel nodded. "I'll tell her you're here, and I won't stop her from coming to see you if she wishes." He turned and walked away.

Aysel brushed free of the crewmen herding him out the door. "This ain't over, boy!" the big man roared, pointing at Jherek. "Me and you and her, this little jig ain't heard the final tunes yet."

Jherek almost said something, but he refrained. Tynnel wouldn't allow anything to happen to the ship's mage. Still, he could warn her if she came to see him before she set sail. The possibility that she wouldn't left him feeling empty. He also had no clue what he was supposed to do next.

Live, that you may serve.

The words haunted him, taunted him, and-by turn-tormented him. If some greater power had taken an interest in his life, why wasn't it making its desire more clear? Why make every step increasingly difficult? Had whatever destiny that had been laid before him somehow gotten tangled up with the bastardized birthright that was his? The gods weren't infallible. Perhaps he'd been chosen wrongly. Even a small mistake made by a god might stretch across mortal lifetimes before it was caught.

"C'mon, boy," the old warrior said, taking Jherek gently by the arm. "Best have that wound tended to. The longer it stays open, the greater chance for infection to settle in."

Reluctantly, Jherek went with the man. He had no answers to any of the questions or problems that plagued him. He drew the attention of the serving wench who'd taken part in Aysel's scheme.

"If a woman should come searching for me____" he said.

The serving wench bobbed her head. "I'll tell her straight away where to find you." Moisture glinted in her eyes. "I'm sorry for the way things turned out. I thought it would only be a joke. You deserved to be treated better than this."

"It's not your fault, lady," Jherek said softly. "The ill luck was mine. It always has been." He touched her shoulder gently and managed a small smile, then he stepped out into the harsh Amnian sunlight, smelling the sea so near, yet so far away.

He considered the ships out in the harbor, his eyes drawn to one in particular.

XXX

13 Tarsakh, tike Year of the Gauntlet

Laaqueel surveyed her image in the mirror with growing distaste. Iakhovas's magic had woven an

illusion over her that even she couldn't pierce. She held her hand up to her reflection. Looking at her hand, she saw the webbing between her fingers, but the mirror image didn't have it. Her fingers looked clean and smooth, grotesquely human, without any means of real defense. The hated tan color that marked her as different from the aquatic elves she was supposed to resemble most took on a hue that was more brown in the reflection. Cosmetics adorned the totally elven face she spied in the mirror, emphasizing her eyes and making them suddenly seem too large, her lips too full. Rose blush touched her pronounced cheekbones.

Thankfully, she wore the combat leathers Iakhovas had bade her wear while they were in the city. After they'd arrived, he'd ushered her into the suite, telling her there was not much time. The garments were of dark brown leather that was creased and worn, supple in its age. They covered her trunk and legs, leaving her breasts partially bared. Knee-high boots with flaring sides encased her feet too tightly. A long sword hung at her hip, almost touching the hardwood floor. A russet-colored cloak hung to her ankles, heavy with all the throwing knives, caltrops, and garrotes that she'd stored in the secret pockets she'd discovered.

"Despite what you yourself might think, little malenti, you look ravishing."

Keeping her expression neutral, not wanting to show the anger she felt or the unrest caused by the fact she hadn't heard him enter, Laaqueel turned to face her master and said, "I only hope to look satisfactory."

Iakhovas nearly filled the door opening into the large suite. He looked like himself to her, and she wondered if he was covered by an illusion as well. He was taller than most men, taller even than the occasional Northman she'd encountered in her spying efforts along the Sword Coast.

"Wearing a true human's guise is hard," he said, "especially when you know you are so much more."

His garments were azure and black, the colors bold and striking. His two-toned cape held the color scheme, black on the outside and azure on the inside. For once, he looked as though he had two eyes, and she knew the intensity of his illusion was deeply layered but built on the way she was normally allowed to see him. It reminded her again that she might not have ever truly seen his real face.

"Trust me when I say you look more than satisfactory." Iakhovas walked to one of the room's many windows and pulled the curtain back. Beyond the glass a cityscape spread out, the streets and alleys seen below their position stringing out to reach the sea. Wagons and dray horses lined those streets as the deckhands and sailors went about their business.

"Where are we?" she asked.

He kept his back to her and lifted one of the windows.

The salty ocean breeze wafted into the room, washing out the stench of incense that had made it hard for Laaqueel to breathe. She hadn't been able to lift the window herself and guessed that he'd used his magic to ward them closed. Wherever they were, the increased power of his illusion and the security he was maintaining told her he didn't entirely feel safe there.

Nearly a tenday had passed since the confrontation with Huaanton. Iakhovas had not spoken of the sahua-gin king any more, but he'd been absent from her much, not telling her where he'd traveled, and acting even more driven than she'd ever seen him. Every day he'd been gone had been agony for Laaqueel, not knowing what he was doing but knowing how tightly her fate was woven with his. The time when he was supposed to deliver the "miracle" to the sahuagin king was only five days away.

Laaqueel had seen no miracles on the horizon.

Then, this morning, he'd stepped back through one of the dimensional doors he kept in his sahuagin palace and commanded her to come with him. He'd given no explanation of where he'd been or what he'd been doing. Having no choice, Laaqueel had stepped through the dimensional door and ended up in this city only an hour ago.

"We're in Skaug," he replied.

The malenti knew of the city from her travels above the sea, but she couldn't imagine what would bring them there. "The pirate capital of the Nelanther Isles?" she asked.

The mainlanders along the Sword Coast feared the place, and merchant ships lived in dread of the pirates who found a home port in Skaug. Only the most vicious and fearsome claimed the city as home, and the Skaug Corsairs protected the shores viciously from even those who pursued the pirates for crimes committed at sea and in their own countries. The Skaug Corsairs turned them all back, charging fees to those who stayed there.

"Yes," Iakhovas said, turned, and grinned. "Little malenti, you've never known a time when you kept pace with any and all of my plans and machinations, but you're going to learn more now. I'm feeling generous." He grinned again broadly, full of self-confidence and purpose. "You're not to know everything, but more than you have been allowed to know in the past."

She refused to react to his statement because it was true. Of late, she'd been constantly reminded of how true that was. A newborn hatchling still trapped in its nursery with its voracious siblings had more control over its future.

"What are we doing here?" she asked.

"I, little malenti," he rebuked her in a voice that sounded as gentle as steel encased in silk. "What am I doing here?"

She bowed her head, breaking eye contact in true sahuagin fashion. "Of course," she said. "Forgive me."

"Now you may ask me your question more properly."

Anger flooded through the malenti priestess, but it wasn't enough to quench her fear, or to make her forget that she'd have nothing without him. "What are *you* doing here, most honored one?"

"Marshaling the forces of yet another army I direct," he told her expansively. "The sahuagin aren't the only ones who follow me, nor only the creatures of the seas. There are dark cults spread around this world, among the surface dwellers, that know aspects of me. I've spoken with them of late, given notice to those as well to help me recover all that was taken from me. My war is escalating, my little malenti, and I shall break and shatter the surface dwellers."

Laaqueel recognized it as the truth even as he spoke the words. She knew he'd had dealings with the druids of the Vilhon Reach, gathering more information in his dark quest and striking bargains. He also had an agent of sorts in the Sea of Fallen Stars, a pirate called Vurgrom. She had seen Iakhovas talking to the blustering pirate a handful of times through a crystal ball kept at the sahuagin palace. Most of the conversations had revolved around another pirate captain, a half-elf woman called Azla, who seemed determined to work at cross purposes to Vurgrom. Laaqueel had never been part of those conversations, though. Vurgrom had also delivered some of the items Iakhovas searched for by way of dimensional doors.

Iakhovas had a number of maps of the Sea of Fallen Stars in his private quarters. The few times she'd been allowed to view them only briefly, she'd seen notations scattered across the charts.

"Time to go," the wizard announced. "They're waiting for us and these are not men to be kept waiting." He gestured to the door.

Laaqueel went, but she kept the gifts bestowed upon her by Sekolah close to hand, fearing she would have to use them. Iakhovas followed closely behind her.

A carriage awaited them at the front of the inn. The inlaid wood and the draped windows advertised the presence of wealth. The driver was clad in sky blue and crimson finery and wore a cap. His eyes never met Iakhovas's or Laaqueel's. Two crossbowmen stood at the back of the carriage, their weapons naked and ready.

Laaqueel hesitated when the driver opened the door. Riding in the carriage would mark them instantly as wealthy targets in the pirate city. She didn't like the idea of being trapped in Skaug's streets in terrain that she was so unused to.

"My lady," the driver said, offering his hand like a proper gentleman.

"Get into the carriage," Iakhovas commanded. "No one who lives on this island will dare attack it."

Reluctantly, Laaqueel allowed the driver to help her into the carriage. She sat back on one of the plush seats and gazed out the window. Taverns, festhalls and boarding houses lined the street, rubbing shoulder to shoulder with trade shops and mercantiles that offered services and goods. The promontory the inn was on provided a good view of the docks, showing the general portage offered to the pirate vessels as well as the private docks for the corsairs. Many of the sailors and passersby gave the carriage a lot of attention, but none seemed willing to draw attention themselves. The malenti closed her hand around the haft of her long sword.

Iakhovas sat across from her, arms spreading across the backrest of the bench. He appeared relaxed and totally content.

The carriage tilted slightly on its springs as the driver pulled himself up into the seat. A moment more and the carriage rocked forward. The horses' hooves rang against the rocky street.

"Who are we going to see?" Laaqueel asked.

"A man named Burlor Maliceprow," Iakhovas answered. "He's called the Portmaster of Skaug, and even though this island empire knows no official ruler, Maliceprow's word bonds everyone who lives here. He's assembled the men we're to meet."

"Who are these men?" Laaqueel asked.

"Pirates," he answered. "The fiercest bunch of men I've been able to rally to my standard. Maliceprow has relationships with all of them."

"When did you arrange this?"

"Years ago." Iakhovas smiled at her with that disconcerting, two-eyed gaze. "I've been known, little malenti, by a number of names throughout my life. Some of the undersea races know me as 'the Taker.' You know me as Iakhovas, or One Who Swims with Sekolah. The sahuagin know me as a prince. Here I have adopted the identity of Black Alaric."

Laaqueel shook her head, struggling to believe everything he told her, yet knowing it was true.

"I must tell you, Black Alaric has had almost as many lives as I." Iakhovas looked out through the window. "The first Black Alaric died in the Year of Giant's Rage, over fourteen hundred years ago. He was the pirate king and captain who brought the pirates to the Nelanther after they were turned away from the Velen Peninsula, then there was the Black Alaric that brought down House Ithal in the Year of Scarlet Scourges. Other Black Alarics followed, each purporting to be the original and the legend continued to grow until it was believed he's a man who cannot die. He has united the pirates in seven major wars along the Sword Coast in the last fourteen centuries."

"You propose to become this Black Alaric?" Laaqueel asked.

Iakhovas took a black crepe bandanna from his pocket and tied it over his lower face. He pulled his cowl over his hair and the top of his face, cinching it tight so that only his eyes were revealed. "Little malenti, I *am* Black Alaric."

Laaqueel remained silent, thinking, realizing that his masquerade had them both at risk here in the pirate stronghold.

"It had been nearly a hundred years since the last Black Alaric was heard from," Iakhovas said. "Five years ago, after I'd decided what I was going to do about the Sword Coast and knew that the item I got from Serpentil was somewhere in that area, I found the newest man who dared to wear this mask and killed him." He smiled, cold and evil. "Not only am I a sahuagin prince, little malenti, but I am a pirate king."

The carriage came to a stop. Hurrying, the driver climbed down and opened Iakhovas's door.

The wizard stepped out in the mask, and the driver moved back in fear. "Black Alaric," he whispered before he caught himself.

Laaqueel climbed out of the carriage behind him, her hand never far from her long sword. She gazed in wide-eyed wonder at the great house before her.

It was set on a slope on the east side of the port. High walls surrounded the estate, enclosing grounds that had been well tended. Flowering shrubs and trees of every color covered the landscape, leaving room for inlaid brick walks that effectively divided the estate into various areas. From where she stood, Laaqueel saw one such meeting place that contained stone benches and a large stone table.

Standing four stories tall, the house loomed over the estate, carefully crafted so that many of the rooms had views out over the sea. Where most of the houses in Skaug had been built of wood, Maliceprow Manor and its stables and outbuildings had been constructed of cut stone elegantly laid. Guards stood at their posts.

Iakhovas led the way up the stairs to the main house, showing an easy familiarity with the place. Having no choice, Laaqueel followed, feeling out of her depth. She had no business there and felt the wizard should have left her at the palace where she could have gone about the preparations she needed to make for the upcoming battle.

"Alaric, join us over here, if you please."

Turning on the verandah, Laaqueel spotted the speaker. He was a wide man with hard lines and a life of luxury that had let him go to fat, but the way he moved to stand from the small table where he'd been sitting let Laaqueel know he was still quick on his feet. His hair had been soft brown but was now going to gray in streaks, cut squared off at his jawline. Hazel eyes swept over the malenti daring enough to almost make her blush, something she hadn't experienced in decades.

She thought perhaps it might be because she was aware of the illusion Iakhovas had wrapped around her with his glamour, knowing how her clothes revealed her upper body.

"Laaqueel," Iakhovas said in the politest tone the malenti had ever heard him use, "may I introduce you to Portmaster Burlor Maliceprow, our host and the controlling power behind Skaug."

Maliceprow smiled at the introduction and took Laaqueel's hands in one of his. The other hand, the malenti noted, had been replaced by a mithral hook that gleamed with a razor's edge.

"Such a charming lady you have with you, Alaric." Maliceprow kissed the back of Laaqueel's hand then released it.

"Thank you," Laaqueel said, but she'd not prompted her voice. Such courtly manners didn't come naturally to her. She realized her behavior had to have been caused by Iakhovas's glamour.

"I have someone for you to meet as well," Maliceprow announced. "Please sit and I'll be back with him, then we can get to our meeting."

Iakhovas sat at the table all laid out with meats and cheese and wines. Laaqueel followed his lead, sitting next to the verandah railing so she couldn't be trapped against the house. She looked at the sea, judging it to be close enough to, run to.

"Relax, little malenti," Iakhovas said quietly. "You'll come to no harm here."

"What are we doing with these people?" she asked. "I didn't know you were going to be affiliating with surface dwellers."

He gazed at her with both his eyes, but she could occasionally see behind the missing one into the hollow where it had been. "Little malenti, I'll deal with anyone who can help me reach my goals. For now, that happens to be, in part, these pirates." He picked up a bit of meat and ate it. "In four tendays, I'm going to take Baldur's Gate, and these men are going to help me. When we leave that city, it will not be as Waterdeep. I will destroy everything in that city that touches the river, and a message will be sent that no one is safe. At no time, at no place."

Laaqueel heard the chill of menace in his words but she was still concerned. She didn't see how he planned on mixing the sahuagin and the pirates. Before she could ask any of the questions that were on her mind, Maliceprow returned with another man in tow.

The newcomer was a tall man dressed in a scarlet blouse tucked into charcoal gray breeches. A long sword hung at his hip, counterbalanced with three throwing knives on the opposite hip. His black hair was carefully combed, pulled back and held in place by garnet and ivory combs. Silver hoop earrings hung from each ear. His brown eyes returned her gaze with fire. The cruel turn of his features were partially disguised by the short goatee and mustache that were fastidiously trimmed, but left in plain view the tattoo on his left cheek. It depicted a sharklike creature with a black haired mane twisted in mid-strike.

"I've added another ship's captain to our roster and increased our strength," Maliceprow said with pride. "I'd like to introduce Captain Falkane, also called the Salt Wolf. His ship is *Bunyip*. I'm sure you've heard of it."

"Bloody Falkane," Laaqueel said, knowing the pirate for who he was.

Falkane took no offense at the use of his sobriquet. He smiled at her. "A name I've fairly won and proudly carry, wench. Make no mistake."

"Falkane," Maliceprow said, "will be joining us on the raid on Baldur's Gate, Alaric."

"Fine," Iakhovas said, "then join me in a toast." He picked up one of the wine bottles from the table and poured drinks all around. He raised his glass and waited until the others followed suit. "To the death of Baldur's Gate, by sword and by fire!"

XXXI

22 Mirtul, the Year of the Gauntlet

Jherek sat in the morning sun in the small court off the temple of Lathander that overlooked the Athkatlan docks. He felt empty, totally dispirited. The low stone wall he sat on, already soaking up the sun, felt warm. His body was still filled with aches and pains from the fight in the tavern half a tenday ago, but he didn't give much thought to them. Only some of the swelling and little of the bruising had gone away.

Sabyna, despite Captain Tynnel's words, never came to see him. *Breezerunner* sailed that same afternoon. The ship's mage hadn't even left a note. That dealt Jherek a harsher blow than he had expected. Her absence, and the lack of a response about his lost passage, struck a hollow resonance inside him that he'd never before experienced, but there was nothing he could do about it.

Even when he knew *Breezerunner* had been about to leave, he hadn't been able to try to contact Sabyna. He'd hobbled down to the dock and watched in silence as the ship had sailed away, his new stitches tight in his flesh.

Now he watched the activity at the docks with a mixture of emotions, working hard to keep them all in check. If he failed to control any one of them: pain, rage, or confusion, he was certain he'd be lost. He felt homesick and thought often of returning to Velen and facing whatever awaited him there.

Live, that you may serve.

Those words, that command, belonged to someone else. He'd convinced himself of that. Perhaps a someone he might have been had the fates not conspired against him. His birthright was the tattoo on his

arm, not some ghostly voice that echoed in his head.

The deckhands labored night and day, but they weren't just loading ships, they were packing goods onto barges and wagons that would be part of the numerous caravans traveling along the Alandor River or the River Road trade way to Crimmor. From there, the barges would off-load onto more wagons for the trip up the Bitten Road between the Fangs, into the Cloud Peaks, and on to Nashkel. Then began the increasingly dangerous trip north along the Coast Way, an overland trade route that had been only seldom used since the sea trade had opened. During his days of convalescence, Jherek had learned a lot about the overland trade routes that had become so heavily trafficked of late.

News continued drifting into Athkatla about the vessels and cargoes that were lost at sea, going down to sahuagin attacks and to leviathan creatures that erupted from the ocean bottom. Few ships reportedly reached Waterdeep or came from there. The other points north along the Sword Coast were just as dangerous. Paperwork, which had been only given lip service at many of the smaller ports, had become more sternly enforced.

More and more investors were starting to put their cargo on caravans. The losses at sea were too much. The overland trips took longer and grew increasingly dangerous as well. Ores and goblins, and all too human bandits, passed information along about the caravans. Few, if any, reached their destinations unscathed.

A few cargo ships still attempted the sea trade north. Primarily ones that couldn't take the loss on the goods they'd agreed to deliver, and weren't able to find someone else to deliver it for them.

Jherek didn't like thinking about Sabyna traveling into those hostile waters, but he couldn't help himself. He'd failed her. If he hadn't gotten into the fight with Aysel, he'd have made the journey with her, could have been there to protect her.

He got frustrated with himself for thinking that one man could make such a difference. That only happened in the romances Malorrie started him reading. He heard footsteps glide softly along the stone courtyard.

"How are you feeling this morning?"

Jherek turned, finding Fostyr approaching. The priest wore the robes and vestments of Lathander, the Morninglord. Colored in bright yellow taken from a dawn morning, the robes had seen better days, and so had the temple. Lathander's beliefs weren't a prime pursuit in Amn.

"Better," Jherek answered. "Thank you for asking."

The courtyard held a small wicker table and three mismatched chairs. Berries grew along the south wall, against the small rooms where the four priests slept. Although he'd been invited in, Jherek had slept outside all five nights, wanting to be in the open and in the salt air.

The bedroll and pack that contained all of Jherek's possession was neatly packed and sitting in the corner of the courtyard. The priest's eyes flickered over them, and he sat in one of the chairs. He was a small man with skin the color of buttered rum. Only in his thirties, he kept his head shaved. His quick, dark hazel eyes surveyed Jherek.

"You've had morningfeast?" the priest asked.

"Aye."

"And your appetite, how was it?"

"Good," Jherek answered.

"You have to eat to keep your strength up."

"I know, Fostyr, and thank you for being so attentive."

"I worry about you, my friend. Kythel told me you were working in the gardens yesterday, and you washed your own clothes when we could have seen to it."

"I feel I have to earn my keep," Jherek said. "I'm not a man to sit idly by."

"Still, you have been wounded and should rest. You're here at the temple as our guest."

Jherek curbed his impatience. It wasn't the priest's fault that he hated lying fallow. Ilmater forbid that he should ever become a burden on anyone.

"Aye, I know that, and I thank you for your hospitality."

"But you will not simply accept that hospitality?"

Jherek shook his head. "I can't."

Surprisingly, Fostyr only smiled and said, "Such responsibility in one so young."

"Not so responsible," Jherek disagreed. "Otherwise I'd have never gotten into that fight in the tavern. That wasn't the course of a responsible man."

"According to my friend who brought you here you fought for a lady's honor."

"Aye, I suppose I did."

"Another responsible act."

"I'm not so sure," Jherek said. "What Aysel said were only words. I could have walked away."

"But where do I draw the line?" Fostyr mused. "That is your question isn't it?"

"Not mine," Jherek replied.

Fostyr nodded, then took another tack. "I saw you at the service this morning," the priest said.

"Aye."

"What drew you there?"

Jherek shifted positions gingerly, mindful of the aches and bruises he'd received. "I wanted to pay my respects to Lathander. You could have turned me away when I was brought here bleeding, covered in ale-reeking sawdust."

"Do you know of our religion?" the priest asked.

"Some," Jherek admitted. "I'm a follower of Ilmater."

"He is a good god to study, but Lathander might have something to offer as well. Lathander is the god of spring and the dawn, of birth and renewal, of beginnings. I've heard the nightmares that plague you, my friend, when you were in the grip of the fever that took you the first two nights you were here."

The priest hadn't mentioned that to Jherek before, and his face burned hotly. "What did I say?" he asked.

"You mean did you mention that you're the son of Falkane, one of the most feared pirates along this coast? Yes, you did."

Jherek shook his head in wonderment. "There's a price on the head of any man who sailed with Falkane," he told the priest. "You could have turned me in."

"No, I couldn't have," Fostyr said. "I prayed for you, that you might find peace and happiness, and that the fear in your life will depart."

Jherek didn't mean to sound harsh, but his voice was tight. "You've seen the tattoo on my arm?"

"Yes."

"It's a brand, Fostyr, and there's no getting rid of it. As long as it's with me, I'll be forever marked and my life won't be my own."

Fostyr was silent for a time, letting Jherek have time to regain his composure. "I just wanted to point out the possibilities," he said.

"At the temple?"

"Yes."

Jherek almost wanted to laugh in spite of the heartache that filled him. He shook his head and asked, "A pirate for a priest?"

"Stranger things have happened."

"No, Fostyr. What I need is a ship bound for Baldur's Gate."

"Why?"

Jherek thought about his answer, considered telling the priest about the voice that had plagued him, about the vision Madame Litaar had concerning that city, but he didn't. "Because I have to," he said. "I've been told that whatever calling I have in this life will be found there. At least some part of it."

"You seek the truth of that?"

"Aye."

"And if you find that it's not true?"

Jherek looked out at the rolling blue sea and said simply, "I don't know."

"The north is dangerous country now, along the trade routes."

"I know. Have you found a ship I can travel on?"

"No." Fostyr sighed. "Even with all the contacts I know, no one is willing to take a man on without papers. There's talk that some of the pirates are getting conspirators on board some vessels to sabotage them. If you're not known, they won't take you on."

The only people who'd know him, Jherek realized, would be sailors from Velen. They would have heard all about his heritage by now. That was no answer, either. He turned to the priest and said, "I've got to go."

"Now?"

"Aye. I feel as though I'm getting behind now." That feeling had been nagging at Jherek since the fever had broke.

"You're in no shape to travel," the priest protested.

"I suppose there's only one way to find out." Jherek stood and took up his pack and bedroll. The cutlass hung on his hip.

Fostyr watched him silently for a moment. "You're very driven, aren't you?" he asked finally as he too rose to his feet.

"Aye," Jherek answered, "only it's more like . . . haunted." He was relieved the priest wasn't going to try to argue with him further.

"Then I'll wish you godspeed," Fostyr said, offering his hand, "and provisions."

"No," Jherek replied. "I'll not take any more charity."

"You can't eat pride."

Jherek gave him a crooked grin, but didn't feel as brave as he tried to sound. "Pride's all I've got left, Fostyr, and not much of that. I'll have to work with what I've got." He took his coin pouch out and dumped all the coins inside onto the table, knowing the priest would never accept them.

"What are you doing?" Fostyr asked.

"I'm making it harder on whatever's driving me," Jherek answered, knowing the truth of his words. "All my life my ill luck has kept me from having things no matter how hard I worked. Well, now I have nothing but the clothes on my back. I've been told that if a thing is supposed to happen, a way will be made." He folded the empty coin pouch up and put it away. "I'm going to test that."

The priest nodded. "You may be surprised, my friend," he said. "Know that the door will always be open here should you need us." He offered his hand.

Jherek shook the priest's hand. "There's one other thing," he said, reaching into his pack and pulling out a folded sheet of paper. "I've written a letter. I'd appreciate it if you could have someone send it to Velen."

"Of course."

"Thank you for your hospitality. Tell the others goodbye for me." Jherek didn't think he had the courage to go through any more good-byes. They were getting to be a habit.

He walked out of the temple courtyard and turned his steps toward the docks.

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Less than an hour later, Jherek stood in a ragged line with two dozen other men down by the docks, waiting as the caravan master walked toward them from the wagon he'd just drove up in. He stood as straight as he could, knowing that his face was still marked and his eye nearly swollen shut. At least his vision didn't appear to be harmed.

The caravan master was a big man, beefy and broad, burned by years of travel in the hot tropical sun. His clothing was sweat-stained and covered in grime. He wore a two-handed broadsword over his back. His leather armor showed signs of repair and of battle. Scars covered his body and marked his face.

"Listen up," he barked. "My name's Frauk. I got a caravan going out by evening so we can avoid most of the heat of the day. We're going to be traveling all night, so any man that don't think he can make that, step out now."

Three of the men swapped looks, then stepped out of the line, drifting back toward the taverns where most of them had come from.

"I just got back from a caravan coming out of Water-deep," Frauk said, "and I want you to know what you're facing. Since the shipping's gotten so dangerous along the Sword Coast and the overland trade routes have opened up again, you might think you'll be traveling well-traveled roads. Well, I'm here to tell you that the ores and goblins are traveling those roads too. You might be able to figure out which end of a horse is which, but if you don't know how to fight, if you're not *willing* to fight, you might as well cut your throat here before we leave and save the ores and goblins the trouble."

Five other men left, grumbling to themselves, trying to act like the caravan master's words hadn't frightened them.

"Those of you still interested," Frauk said, "I can promise you long hours, short pay, and little patience. We're making a profit by getting shipments up and down the coast on time. I'll be dogging every step you make if you lag." He paused. "Now before I get a good look at you, are there any questions?"

Jherek looked at the man and asked, "How far north is this caravan going?"

"As far north as Baldur's Gate, boy," Frauk replied. "If things look prosperous enough, maybe on into Waterdeep. That suit you?"

"Aye, sir."

Frauk narrowed his gaze. "Aye, sir?" Are you a damned sailor, boy?"

Jherek hesitated, knowing that his bad luck was already showing again. Anger stole over him, giving his tongue a sharper edge than he'd have liked. "Aye, sir, and a good one."

"What the hell are you doing trying to sign up on a caravan?"

"I need the work, sir," Jherek replied.

Frauk came closer, taking long strides. "Can you sit a horse, boy?"

"Aye, sir."

Frauk stopped less than a foot from him, glaring at him with cold blue eyes. "Have you been in a fight, boy? It looks like you've been in a fight lately."

"Aye, sir."

Frauk glared at him and put his hands on his hips. "Do you know how to fight, boy?"

"Aye, sir."

Frauk spat on the ground and shook his head in derision. "From the looks of you it don't look like it. Bruised up, beat up ... I need men who know how to handle themselves. Grab your gear and get the hell out of my line." He turned smartly on his heel and walked down the line to a big man. "Now you, you'll do just fine. Go put your gear on that wagon."

Embarrassment and anger flooded through Jherek. He shouldn't have been surprised. His luck had doomed him from the start. There'd never been a chance. He'd only made a fool of himself. He reached down for his packs and took them up, turned, and walked away.

Two other caravans had offered to hire him, but they'd both been bound for the south. None of the ones he'd found going north so far had needed men.

He trudged away from the line, listening to the caravan master hire another man. He tried to think of what else he could do, but he was out of options. The anger inside him grew until he couldn't stand it any more. He hadn't been fairly judged and he knew it. He rated more than an offhand dismissal from the caravan master, and he meant to have it. He wasn't just going to quietly go away this time. If that voice wanted to push him, then he was going to push back.

"You'll do too," Frauk told another man. "Go put your gear on the wagon."

Shouldering his pack, Jherek turned and walked back to the caravan master. The man stopped, watching as Jherek came closer.

"I've shipped with a captain who knew manners and who knew men, and had no dealings at all with someone like you, so maybe I'm out of place here," the young sailor said in a hard voice that could be clearly heard, "but I want you to know something. I've fought sharks and I've fought pirates. I've even fought sahuagin. I've fought in the day and in the night, on a ship's deck, on land, and in the sea. My face is marked up right now because I've been in a fight, but that was a fight I *won*. If you speak to me with such disrespect like that again, you're going to find out firsthand how well I fight."

Without another word, Jherek turned and walked away. His pulse was pounding in his head and he knew he should have been feeling guilty about his behavior, but he didn't. He'd stood up for himself and it felt good. He even thought Malorrie would have understood.

"Hey, boy."

Slowly, Jherek turned back to face the caravan master, thinking maybe the man intended to fight him after all.

The caravan master stood looking back at him.

"Aye, sir," Jherek answered.

"You still want that job?"

"Aye, sir."

"Then go put your gear up on that wagon. I'm hiring fighters today."

For a moment, Jherek stood frozen, not realizing for sure what the man had said. Then he nodded and said, "Aye, sir." He crossed to the wagon and tossed his bedroll and pack into the back.

Baldur's Gate was a long way off overland, but at least he was headed in the right direction. He tried not to think of what may lie ahead of him, taking comfort in this small victory.