

Under Fallen Stars

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1999

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Prologue

*Seros (The Sea of Fallen Stars)
15 Tarsakh, the Year of the Gauntlet*

Flyys raked his webbed hands through the water and kicked out with his finned feet. The young triton knifed through the shallows of the ocean but knew it wasn't enough to escape his pursuers. Even though he tried not to, he glanced over his shoulder.

The morkoth swam after him. There were six of them now; too many for him to try to fight in the ocean. All of them were vaguely humanoid in shape, with bulbous heads that reminded Flyys of locathah, except for the squidlike beaks that filled their faces. The huge eyes on either side of their heads focused on him, moving independently. The dorsal fins on their backs looked like knife blades on edge.

They each had four arms, two of those arms equipped with thick pincers that identified them as the morkoth warrior class. Six tentacles flared out from their lower bodies, then pushed against the water. They looked deep purple in the light of the shallows, and iridescence flowed over them where the light struck, turning them almost pearl pale. Every now and again, the morkoth pulled the ocean brine through their gills and used it to propel themselves in the same manner as squid.

Flyys knew they could have easily overtaken him but had chosen to wear him down. His only solace was that they were evidently loathe to die capturing him. He knew he couldn't get away unless Persana chose to favor him. The Guardian of the Deep, creator of the triton people, couldn't ride with every tide, though. Sometimes those tangled nets Persana cast upon the water required sacrifices be made by his people so that greater works might be wrought. Persana was a master architect, not only of structures, but of fates as well. The young triton's belief told him this was so.

Glancing desperately at the ocean floor less than twenty feet below, Flyys searched for inspiration. Here in the shallows the morning sunlight gleamed down to the brackish silt below. Colorful fish, their hues given more life by the sun, darted in all directions as he neared them, but all of them avoided the greenish-gray claw coral mounds sprouting from the ocean bed.

The surface dwellers called the claw coral "hydra's stone" because of the seven collective offshoots that grew from its center. Sharply edged facets covered every inch of those coral fingers and even the slightest touch could open flesh to the bone. A number of the undersea races in Seros used claw coral to make weapons.

Spotting a thick copse of the claw coral ahead, Flyys turned and swam for it. Ahead lay only open water and certain capture before he could ever get out of the shallows and into deeper Seros.

Little more than five feet long, the young triton knew he wouldn't be a match for the morkoth warriors. One on one he felt confident he could have held his own, but the morkoth didn't fight that way. Flyys had heard stories that the morkoth in the outer seas lived solitary lives, much different than the morkoth who dwelled in Seros. In the Sea of Fallen Stars, they lived in the Arcanum of Olleth, on the lowest reaches of the Hmur Plateau along western Seros, a community that fought and conquered together.

He grabbed fistfuls of water again, altering his swimming stroke into a finfirst descent in the middle of the claw coral he'd chosen as his impromptu fortress. He drifted down to the soft silt below, carefully avoiding the sides of the claw coral. He nestled quietly into the coral like a hermit crab taking on a new shell, then he waited.

He gazed up, wishing he wasn't so frightened. A warrior wasn't supposed to be frightened, but he'd barely made it through his training before he'd been sent on his first mission.

His shoulder-length dark blue hair was tied back in a ponytail to keep it from his brilliant blue eyes. His skin was only a few shades of blue lighter. He was broad across the shoulders from living in the sea, and wore a shell-covered cloth girdle fitted with a belt because he'd been in the shallows, where surface dwellers, uncomfortable with nakedness, might see him. Still, he had appreciated the pockets in the girdle for carrying some small shells he'd found along the way.

Flyys drew the tapal from his belt as the morkoth gathered overhead. The weapon was uniquely triton. Formed of crystal, it was shaped into a curve like a surface dweller's fishhook. Two handles, set in

the middle of the tapal and inside the curved end, allowed usage of either end of the weapon. A trained triton warrior could use the tapal as a long sword, dagger, or spear by spinning it around in his hands.

"Give up, longmane," one of the morkoth advised, "and your death will be mercifully swift."

Wishing he had a gallant reply readily on his lips, Flyys lifted the tapal in defiance. Sunlight caught the wide, curved end. "I know not to trust the word of kraknyth." Kraken were mortal enemies of the triton, and the triton considered morkoth to be kraken-kin.

The morkoth undulated in the water, their tentacles splaying out and curling reflexively in the currents. They carried spears, but Flyys knew it was the savage beaks and pincers he most had to fear. Sunlight gleamed over their bodies, creating hypnotic patterns on their purple skin.

"We'll have more time with you than we did with your fellow spies, longmane," the morkoth warned.

The death screams of the three tritons who had taken him with them echoed in the young triton's ears. They'd been discovered aboard a pirate ship near Dragonisle in the early hours of that morning. Junnas had immediately thrown Flyys overboard, instructing him to swim to Pumanath as quickly as possible and tell the nobles what they'd learned. Junnas and the others had stayed behind to die.

Flyys stared into the creature's eyes, having to switch focus often as it turned its head from side to side to view him. The morkoth drifted down closer. The claw coral extended beyond the young triton's reach even with the tapal.

"We can take time with your death," the morkoth promised, its gaze drawing him in.

The promise sent a chill down the young triton's back. Flyys remembered the stories he'd been told even as a child about the morkoth, about the ways they'd learned to rip flesh from their prisoners with their beaks and pincers, bringing death while extending the agony. They knew how an enemy's body was put together, and how best to take it apart.

"You've allied yourselves with the Taker," Flyys accused, glaring up at the morkoth. "According to the legends of Seros, there won't be much time for anyone if he makes his way here."

"He's coming," the morkoth said, shifting in the current again, "but the legends also say that the Taker will offer death only to those who stand against him. We shall stand with him."

"The legends say he will bring nothing but death and destruction to Seros." Flyys knew the legends, though he didn't much believe in them. Even though he'd been sent to investigate the morkoth interest in the Taker, the tritons had their own agenda. Persana had given them the task of watching over the great evil that slept at the bottom of Seros.

"Wrong," the morkoth said. "The Taker comes to reshape the destinies of everyone in and around Seros." The head continued turning from side to side, more slowly now.

Flyys felt himself going limp. He chose to go with it, knowing it might be his only chance. A warm lassitude crept through his limbs, relaxing his muscles. He kept his gaze locked on the morkoth.

"Your best choice is acceptance," the creature crooned. Its voice held a muted cadence that beckoned to the young triton.

Flyys relaxed his arms, letting the currents gliding between the edged fingers of the claw coral pull at him. The morkoth came closer. A tingle raced through the triton's legs, then they turned numb. Fear made his heart hammer inside his chest as he continued to take his chance against its hypnotic powers.

Swimming effortlessly, the morkoth descended till it could touch him. The creature slid its heavy pincer against the side of Flyys's face. He felt the hard chitin *graze* his cheek with almost enough force to break his skin. Still, it wasn't close enough. He stared into first one bulbous eye, then the other as the morkoth dropped down and seemed almost to embrace him.

Moving lithely, with all the skill he'd had the chance to acquire in his handful of years, Flyys gripped the tapal's center handle and spun the weapon around so that it lay along his arm. Before the morkoth could move, confident that it had him in its thrall, the young triton raised his hands with the keen blade wrapped around the outside of his arm.

Flyys punched forward with all his strength. He felt the tapal's blade bite into flesh, and blood swirled into the water around him, obscuring his vision. Still, he saw the morkoth's head leave its shoulders and float away. The head glanced off one of the claw coral spires, shearing away flesh in a long strip. Before it had a chance to settle into the silt, the nearby small scavengers were already at work.

The other morkoth gathered, drawing closer.

Flyys shrugged the tapal through the water to spread the blood cloud out farther and tried not to be sick. The morkoth was his first kill. The young triton had never expected to experience the nausea that filled him as his gills drew in the bloodstained water. The taint of old copper raced through his breathing passages. He glanced up at the approaching morkoth group and set himself. The numbness that had threatened to fill his body had left as soon as the morkoth died.

"Hold!"

The great voice filled the surrounding area. Immediately, the morkoth drew back, opening the way for another morkoth which descended upon the young triton's refuge.

Flyys studied the newcomer. The young triton's fear tripled when he noticed the human-shaped hands at the ends of the morkoth's four arms. Where the pincers signified the warrior class among the kraknyth, human-shaped hands nearly always denoted a morkoth mage.

Flyys's education included lessons in spellcraft as well as warcraft. So far he'd only learned the spell for identifying magical things, to better search the wrecked ships that the surface dwellers lost in battles and storms. All Serosian races that worked magic raided the fallen ships surface dwellers didn't ransack themselves, or lose in the currents. Flyys had been told his own magic was strong and that his potential would be marked by the mages in Pumanath.

"Ignorant whelping," the morkoth snarled in a voice hoarse with age. Taking a small piece of metal from the conch shell belted at its side, the morkoth mage gestured and spoke arcane words Flyys didn't know. The metal flamed despite the surrounding water, disappearing into a haze of blackened bubbles that roiled to the surface.

Flyys felt the spell slam into his body, vibrating along his bones. He couldn't move, couldn't blink. At first he thought he'd been struck dead, then he realized his heart still hammered in his chest and his gills still drew in water.

"Get him," the morkoth mage commanded.

One of the morkoth warriors swam down and wrapped two of its tentacles around Flyys's upper body. Though he fought against the spell, the young triton remained bound.

Frozen in place, he watched helplessly as the morkoth swam to the surface with him.

The shadow of a ship lay heavily on the turquoise water, sketching its shape along the surface. He recognized it as a cog, a craft well designed for trading along the shores of Seros. Turned to float partially on his back, Flyys saw sailors clustered along the side. A net was quickly lowered, then he and the morkoth mage were drawn up.

The young triton fought to regain the use of his limbs, but couldn't. He knew from his studies that the spell he was under wouldn't last long, but it lasted long enough for the sailors to secure him to the mainmast with loops of rope.

As the sailors finished their knots, feeling returned to Flyys's body. He pulled hesitantly against the ropes and found them too tight to escape. Under the glare of the morning sun and left out in the breeze, his skin started drying almost at once.

"Khorrch," a man bellowed.

The morkoth turned and gazed up to the ship's stern castle. "Yes, Vurgrom," it replied in the human tongue.

Flyys spoke the language himself. Everyone who traded in Seros learned the human tongue. With the enmity that existed between the undersea cultures at times over Seros's long past, it proved to be as common a tongue below the waves as above it. He also recognized the name.

Vurgrom the Mighty was chief of the pirates among the surface world. He was also the man Flyys and his companions had been sent to spy on. Though Vurgrom hadn't been on board the ship they'd invaded during the night, his minions had been.

"This is one of them?" Vurgrom walked down the steps leading up to the stern castle. He stood tall and broad, with a huge chest that sloped down to a massive stomach. Still, he moved lightly enough on the ship's rolling deck that Flyys knew the bulk would throw off most of his opponents. Vurgrom's reputation was fierce and savage, built on the number of deaths he'd ordered over the years. Many of

them he'd taken part in himself.

"Yes," Khorrch answered.

The wind stirred the wild red hair on the pirate captain's head, ruffled the long, untamed beard. He stopped in front of Flyys. "He knows where the Eye is?"

The young triton tried not to let the fear inside him show, but he knew that the morkoth mage and the pirate captain both sensed it in him. He swallowed hard, feeling his mouth and throat dry as his gills sucked in air instead of liquid.

"I believe he does," Khorrch said. "When the Taker was banished all those thousands of years ago by Umberlee, stories and tales of him were passed among those who lived in the sea. No one race got everything, and each was given something to protect-something that would keep the Taker from regaining his full strength. Our legends of the Taker tell us the longmanes were given some of the secrets of the Taker's missing Eye."

Flyys struggled against the ropes that held him but still didn't find any slack. Though he was not a great believer in the menace that the Taker represented-primarily because the evil his people guarded against was even larger-he preferred death to talking.

"Some of the secrets?" Vurgrom repeated irritably. "I thought they knew what we needed to find out."

The morkoth drew itself up to its full height on its six tentacles, but it still didn't stand as tall as the pirate captain. "They know where it is," Khorrch declared. "Without it, all the things we've gathered here in the Sea of Fallen Stars will be useless."

Vurgrom switched his glare back to Flyys. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to tell us on your own, would you, boy?"

Flyys wanted to answer but he didn't trust his voice. He felt certain it would crack and shake.

Vurgrom smiled, sunlight dancing from the gold hoops in his ears. "We could let you stay out here and dry out, boy." He hooked a thumb over his shoulder. "I got lads here wouldn't mind betting on how long it takes till your skin starts to peel off. Maybe we could even hang you out on the prow. The gulls, they get scent of you, they'd be down for a little snack."

Despite his best efforts not to, Flyys shivered at the prospect. He knew he wouldn't be the first triton to be treated in that fashion. However, it was preferable to being ripped apart by the morkoth.

"Time is of the essence," Khorrch stated.

Vurgrom crossed his huge arms over his barrel chest and said, "Aye, I know. Iakhovas is a harsh taskmaster."

"But his rewards are good," Khorrch pointed out.

Vurgrom smiled, a rictus of humor that belonged on a shark's mouth. "Get it done, then."

Expecting the morkoth to use its hypnotic powers or perhaps magically command him to speak, Flyys closed his eyes and prayed to Persana to deliver him from his fate quickly. One way or the other.

Khorrch spoke words of power that started small fires under Flyys's skin. The young triton's eyes snapped open, commanded by a force outside himself. He watched in swiftly growing horror as Khorrch took a small copper piece from the conch shell at his side.

The morkoth laid the copper piece on one of his human palms and continued his spellcasting. His voice rose, and he curled his fingers over the copper piece, holding tight. In the next instant the copper piece vanished in a brief burst of flame. Khorrch opened his palm, revealing unblemished skin.

Then Flyys felt as though someone had buried a spear in his head, bursting through bone and flesh. He screamed and shivered against the ropes.

"Tell me of the Eye," the morkoth ordered harshly. "Tell me of the Taker's Eye. Tell me where I may find it."

Gasping, fighting against the pain that filled his mind, thinking his skull must surely be peeling back like an onion against the creature's magical assault, Flyys tried to think of anything but the triton legends about the Taker's Eye. It proved impossible.

"The Taker's ... Eye," Flyys heard his own voice saying, "is . . . kept ... in Myth Nantar!" Once the words had been forced through his clenched teeth, the spell's force left him. He sagged weakly against

the mast, hung there by the ropes.

"Myth Nantar," Vurgrom said. "I've never heard of it." "You shouldn't have," Khorrch said. "The city is magical, something that wasn't for the eyes of the surface dwellers. If they had known, it would have been raided long ago."

"Aye, but who's to say this place hasn't been raided by another race?" Vurgrom demanded. "One that makes its home beneath these waters?"

The morkoth shook its head in a very humanlike gesture. "No. That's not possible."

"Why?" the pirate captain persisted.

"Because," Flyys croaked, feeling some of his confidence return, "Myth Nantar was lost to everyone thousands of years ago. It lies hidden and barred. No one may enter it. Now or ever."

"You're wrong, longmane whelping," Khorrch snarled. "There is one who may enter."

"Not the Taker," Flyys promised. "Our legends tell us the walls will hold against even his might."

"Not him," the morkoth mage agreed, "but there will be another who will bring its walls down. One whose destiny lies with the Taker's, their futures so intertwined that one may not live on without the other."

Flyys wanted to rail against the morkoth's words, but he didn't have the strength. He had lost his friends, betrayed some of the legacy that had been left to him. Only the dying remained. He was certain neither Vurgrom or Khorrch would suffer him to live.

As if some of the mental bond that had existed between them still remained, Khorrch gazed into the young triton's eyes and hissed, "Ah, longmane, there yet remains one service you may do for my people."

Flyys tried to summon up enough liquid to spit, but his throat was already too dry from exposure in the wind.

The morkoth mage crossed to the ship's railing where the net had brought them aboard. The creature gestured. A moment later the net was hoisted again, lifting yet another morkoth to the deck.

"Stay back from her," Khorrch warned the ship's crew.

Immediately the sailors stepped back from the new arrival, some of them making the signs of their gods and calling out their names.

Flyys stared at the morkoth. It was noticeably smaller than the mage, and possessed only tentacles instead of hands. It swayed drunkenly across the deck as it approached the young triton.

"No!" the young triton yelled. He wrenched against the ropes again, but it was in vain. Instead, he concentrated on Persana and prayed. He couldn't close his eyes even though he knew what was going to happen.

The female morkoth's abdomen belled out, looking as though the creature had just eaten a big meal. Flyys knew that wasn't true. It came closer, reaching out tentatively with all four tentacles. The rubbery flesh slid syrup-sticky across Flyys's face and chest as it investigated him.

The morkoth mage stood nearby, though obviously not in any proximity. It clutched a long-bladed knife defensively. "Don't be fooled by his age," Khorrch told the female. "He's young, but the magic is strong in him."

The female morkoth seemed to nod in agreement. Its tentacles continued to rove over Flyys.

The young triton had never seen what was about to happen, but there had been plenty of stories about it. The event was only one more reason to make war against the kraknyth.

Slowly, the female morkoth's abdomen flexed. Scaled flesh peeled back, opening like a mouth. A wicked appendage with a spike at the end slid free. It wavered for a moment out in the open as if uncertain. Female morkoth never had the opportunity to practice the maneuver. It was only done once, and it was guided by instinct.

Flyys tried to move but couldn't. In the next heartbeat, the appendage flared out and stabbed deeply into the young triton's abdomen. He screamed at the pain and felt warm blood seep down his midsection and thighs. The appendage writhed within him, seeking out the various internal organs, not damaging any of them.

The female morkoth held him as if in a lover's embrace. The appendage pulsed as it began laying her eggs, scattering them among his internal organs. Flyys tried to fight against it in vain. He gazed into the

female morkoth's black eyes, almost hypnotized, and watched as they dimmed, watched as life left it.

When all of the eggs were laid, the female morkoth fell backward, dead before she hit the deck. The appendage wrenched free of Flyys.

Filled with horror, the young triton gazed down at his wound. As he watched, it closed up and sealed, healing instantly as the final part of the cycle pumped into him. After all, it wouldn't do to have a host body die or become infected before the eggs could hatch.

"Get rid of it," Vurgrom commanded.

Reluctantly, his men came forward. They grabbed the dead female morkoth and heaved it over the railing. The splash barely carried above the ship's creaks and the sails snapping overhead.

Khorrh peered into Flyys's eyes. "You've been given a great gift, longmane."

"You've killed me," the young triton whispered hoarsely.

"Mayhap," the morkoth mage admitted. "Even should you live after the young hatch inside you and eat their way free, you would only be reimplanted with eggs or killed outright."

Flyys knew it was true. The morkoth young would feed on his flesh and tear their way out of his body. Even if he could get free of the morkoth, he knew of no spells or mendicants that would kill the morkoth young and let him live. Still, if he could get free, he might survive their birthing.

"You may know where the Taker's Eye is," the young triton said, "but you'll never get it."

"The Taker will."

"Your precious Taker," Flyys said, the certainty of his own doom freeing him from the fear that had filled him, "will turn on you in the end. He is only after those things that matter to him. You and the other kraknyth are only a means to an end."

Murderous rage gleamed in the morkoth mage's eyes. "You lie."

"You yourself said that no one undersea race knows all about the Taker's past or his future," Flyys went on, "but we know this. You will pay for your greed and for your mistakes.

Myth Nantar shall never reopen."

"Enough prattle," Vurgrom declared. "We've got leagues to go if we're to get where we need to be." He gestured at his men. "Take the triton belowdecks and stow him."

Flyys waited until they untied him, then tried to break free. He preferred death now to birthing the morkoth young, but everything he'd been through had left him drained. One of the pirates slammed the flat of his heavy cutlass against his head and consciousness abandoned the young triton.

I

*Claarteeros Sea (Trackless Sea)
17 Tarsakh, the Year of the Gauntlet*

"Meat is meat!"

The roar of sahuagin thumps, ticks, pings and whistles that served as their communication filled the walls of the open amphitheater, almost deafening Laaqueel as she stood in the sahuagin king's retinue. It was pure bloodlust, fired from their king's promise of the coming deaths in the amphitheater.

As a malenti, an accident of birth among the sahuagin caused from being born too close to a community of sea elves, she immediately stood out from the hulking sahuagin around her. Even though she was only a few inches under six feet in height, all of the sahuagin nearby were at least a foot or more taller.

She looked supple and slender, and knew from past experience that she turned the male heads of surface dwellers as well as sea elves. It was cruel injustice that the form she wore was so hideous to her, yet so pleasing to the enemies of her people. She wore only the simple sahuagin harness, making even more evident the curvaceous form that set her apart from the other priestesses allowed at the king's side.

Her coal black hair lay in a long braid at her back, bound up by artifice fish bones and carved bits of coral. Instead of the usual blue or green skin coloring granted a malenti, her deformity had cursed her even further. She had the pale complexion of a hated surface dweller.

Standing in front of her, King Huaanton towered almost nine feet and was built broad with muscles sculpted and hardened from hundreds of years spent living under the sea's constant pressure. Sahuagin

survived the harsh sea only by being the most feared predators there. Skin so green it was nearly black stretched across his back, showing a few scars from past battles. Rising to a kingship within the sahuagin culture was not without blood price. Keeping that office required even more blood be spilled into the salty ocean. The skin over his stomach was lighter green. The fins on his back, shoulders, arms, and legs were black, as was his tail.

He wore a combat harness with the seal of Sekolah, the sahuagin Shark God, decorated with shark's teeth and rare shells. His white gold crown flared up in four separate talons that cruelly hooked at the end. The crown rode low on his savage face, creating a half-mask that drew even more attention to the oily black eyes planted on both sides of his head. His mouth held razor-sharp fangs.

"Meat is meat!" King Huaanton roared again, lifting high the bone and inlaid yellow gold trident that was his seal of office.

"Meat is meat!" came the thunderous return cry from the hundreds of sahuagin seated out in the amphitheater. They shifted and waved their arms on the stone tiers that surrounded the center court of the structure.

"I bring to you," Huaanton went on when the response died down, "part of the spoils of our past victories against the surface world." The war against the surface dwellers along the Sword Coast was only two tendays old, but there had been many strikes, many triumphs. Waterdeep still reeled from the raid that had been their first blow. Huaanton gestured toward the center court with his trident.

Immediately, gates at the left side of the amphitheater opened, releasing a half-dozen humans. Laaqueel watched them with interest, noting the way they swam so clumsily. These, then, were true surface dwellers that had rarely entered the oceans. The malenti priestess knew several of the sailors who regularly crossed the Claarteros Sea didn't know how to swim at all. These creatures possessed no grace and precious little skill at cleaving through the water. They fought the sea as if it were an opponent instead of taking grace and speed from the currents that constantly swept through it.

The sahuagin in the amphitheater made their displeasure known by slapping their webbed feet against the stone and emitting more thunderous clicks and whistles. Even though the humans didn't know the sahuagin tongue, Laaqueel knew the intent behind the cries couldn't be misunderstood.

The surface dwellers swam uncertainly, staying within a group near the coral-tiled floor. The builders had designed the floor meticulously, creating a swirl pattern of light and dark coral pieces. At something more than three hundred feet below the surface, little light penetrated the depths. None of it held the colors that were available in the dry world, but the light and dark pattern of the tiled floor showed clearly.

A sahuagin guard glided effortlessly among the surface dwellers and passed out simple knives. Before they'd been released into the amphitheater, Laaqueel knew the humans had been exposed to an aboleth's mucus cloud. After they'd captured the humans, Huaanton had demanded that an aboleth be captured as well, then ordered the creature's mucus used to give the humans water-breathing ability that would last for at least an hour and maybe as long as three hours. Until then, the surface dwellers had been held captive in special dungeon cells that had air.

Either way, Laaqueel knew, the humans wouldn't live long enough for the temporary magical effects of the aboleth mucus to wear *off*. Normally, the sahuagin hated magic and anything resembling magic, but Huaanton had made concessions in that area to promote the torture he had in mind. After all, the aboleth mucus was found in nature, not forged from it by some arcane means.

After the sahuagin passed out the next to last knife, the young human he'd given it to attacked the guard the moment his back was presented. The young surface dweller swam well enough and fast enough, but the sahuagin's lateral line, the sensory organ that allowed him to detect vibration and movement in the water, warned him.

Even before the young human could strike, the sahuagin flicked his tail and clawed the water with his free webbed hand and both webbed feet. The sahuagin rose steeply, ascending over his foe and drawing the trident in line. Wrapping both hands about the trident's shaft, the sahuagin brought the tines down quickly, driving them through the human's back and into his heart and lungs, splitting the flesh easily.

Blood erupted from the wounds, spilling a dark cloud into the water. The human struggled, trying to get away from the barbed tines, but he was solidly hooked.

The sahuagin spectators cheered lustily and slapped their huge webbed feet against the stone seating tiers in appreciation. Clicks and whistles rose in anticipation.

Laaqueel watched closely, knowing she would have enjoyed the festivities more if she wasn't facing fears of her own. But she knew her own fate might be as dismal as that of the surface dwellers-unless a miracle did happen here tonight. After all, Iakhovas had promised Huaanton a divine sign from Sekolah himself to prove that the raids the sahuagin staged against the surface world were what the Shark God wanted.

The other humans stayed back instead of going to help their comrade. The sahuagin guard pulled the corpse along by the trident's handle, streaming dark bloody strings after it that twisted in the currents. He flicked out his claws and carved great gobbets of flesh from the dead man, then hurled them into the crowd. "Meat is meat!" he cried.

"Meat is meat!" the crowd cried in *joyful* acceptance of the offering.

Small sahuagin darted forth to claim the unexpected treats. Some of them were fast enough to get the pieces they were after, but others ended up locked in mortal combat while the adults watched on in approval. The sahuagin life was supposed to be hard, and they learned to kill their enemies by first killing each other. That vicious cycle started in the domed nurseries with newborn hatchlings. Only the best and strongest survived to carry on their fierce race.

After slashing the corpse to chunks, the guard saved the heart for himself, shoving it into his great fanged mouth as he floated above the amphitheater. Blood gushed from his mouth and nose as he choked down the impromptu meal.

Her senses as acute as any sahuagin's, Laaqueel smelled the blood in the water. The scent caused further excitement within her. Though her appearance masked her true nature, the malenti was sahuagin.

"And now," Huaanton stated, "I bring to you a champion!" He pointed again.

On the opposite side of the amphitheater, another set of gates released a huge diamond-shaped manta ray that streaked out into the open center court. The combined noises of displeasure from the sahuagin spectators were even louder. Manta rays closely resembled the sahuagin's sworn enemies, the *ixitxachitls*.

The sahuagin guards immediately backpedaled through the water, pulling back and above the amphitheater. Getting its bearings almost at once, obviously starved for days, the manta ray flipped its broad fins and closed on the group of surface dwellers.

The sea creature was among them before they could scatter. It seized one of the surface dwellers in its mouth, swallowing the man in a single gulp as it cruised through. Another man of the surviving four attacked, gripping one of the leather wings in one hand as the creature passed, then pulling himself to its back. The manta ray flicked out its stinger and barbed a man. In seconds the stricken man succumbed to the tail's paralytic effects and hung motionless in the water.

The man clinging to the manta ray's back dug in with his knife. Laaqueel admired the man's tenacity. He was meeting his death with a bravery and anger a sahuagin could respect.

Wounds reluctantly opened up in the manta ray's back. Blood gushed in threads behind it, curling and fragmenting in the wake. Flicking its wings again, the manta ray increased its speed, obviously hoping to shake its attacker from its back. Graceful and desperate, the creature planed through the water, curling back to where it had first encountered the humans. Blood spilled out in a fog behind it as the human kept sinking his blade home.

As they watched the deadly duel taking shape in the amphitheater, the sahuagin seated in the tiers cheered loudly and slapped their feet encouragingly. Even though they hated the surface dwellers, the humans were the underdogs in the battle, and the sahuagin respected that all too familiar position.

Pride and hope flared anew in Laaqueel, driving away the fear that Iakhovas's promise for the day had instilled in her. This *was* Sekolah's promise to his chosen people. Born and bred for battle, the death matches that played out in the amphitheaters of all the cities remained proof of their eventual destiny to conquer. She watched and prayed to the Shark God, begging for forgiveness for ever allowing even a shred of doubt to enter her heart. Whether Iakhovas's claim to be acting on the will of Sekolah was true or false, she would know in only a short time. However it turned out, she chose to put her faith in the

Shark God. She watched the battle in rapt attention.

The manta ray scooped up the paralyzed victim on its next pass, gulping him down effortlessly as well. It flipped its wings again and swam for the outskirts of the amphitheater. Before it could reach the edges high over the gathered crowd, four sharks under the control of the sahuagin guards swam to meet it. Reluctantly, the manta ray turned back.

Taking a fresh grip on the leathery wing he held, the human on the manta ray's back pulled himself forward while the creature turned. The human slithered over the manta's wing, still maintaining his hold. On the inside of the wing now, a safe distance from the fanged mouth, the human dug in with his knife again, ripping through the manta's softer underbelly.

Angry and fearful, driven by irrational hunger as well, the manta returned for the two humans who had gone to ground against the coral tiles. Laaqueel noticed that the manta's movements were no longer as sure or as quick as they had been. The wounds robbed it of constitution, continuing to leech its strength away.

The cavernous mouth scooped up a third victim as the man tried to flee. Evidently encouraged by his comrade's success, the last human grabbed the manta's wing as well, but he didn't have enough skill to do more than simply hang on.

Long minutes passed and the struggle continued, but in the end there could be no doubt. Starved and weakened by its captivity, further depleted by the blood loss, the manta gave in to the wounds. It struggled only weakly as it drifted down and came to a rest against one side of the amphitheater's coral-tiled floor. With a final flicker of wing movement, the great manta ray died, leaving only the ocean currents to stir it.

Immediately, a thunderous swell of appreciation and encouragement rose from the sahuagin spectators. They pushed to their feet and filled the amphitheater with their triumph.

Laaqueel chose to view the battle as a sign. It was not a sign from Sekolah-the Shark God didn't trouble himself with the affairs of anyone, including his chosen people-but the victory of the surface dwellers over the giant manta ray, the small versus the large, represented the backbone of sahuagin ideals. Still, her heart pounded inside her chest at the anticipation of Huaanton's introduction of Iakhovas.

Slowly, the surface dwellers disentangled themselves from the manta ray, partly hidden from sight by the cloudy blood swirling around them. They swam fearfully, uncertain of what to do next.

Huaanton raised his great trident again, then turned the tines down.

Immediately the sahuagin guards closed in, fanning through the water with their webbed hands and feet. The humans tried to flee, but they didn't have the speed and there was nowhere to go. With a practiced toss, the closest sahuagin to each man snared their prey with the barbed nets they carried. They pulled the nets tight, sinking the hooked barbs into flesh and binding their prisoners.

Even winners didn't make it out of the amphitheater alive. It wasn't the sahuagin way. The spectators cheered again, bloodlust filling them.

The human who'd first attacked the manta ray was brought before Huaanton. The sahuagin king regarded the bound figure at his feet with contempt. The human spat out curses that Laaqueel knew few except her understood. She listened as the man alternately called out to his gods for help and for vengeance.

Huaanton ripped away the barbed net in a practiced fashion. Small trickles of blood ran from the dozens of wounds covering the surface dweller's body and mixed with the sea, creating a sensory explosion to Laaqueel. She knew the king's Royal Black Tridents, his personal bodyguards, and the other priestesses were affected by the taste in the water they breathed.

In a show of amazing defiance, obviously knowing what was to become of him, the surface dweller plunged his blade toward the sahuagin king's broad chest.

Before even the hardened members of the Royal Black Tridents could move to intercept the strike, Huaanton lifted the royal trident. After deflecting the knife, the sahuagin king reversed the trident and swung the tines at the human's neck.

Blood exploded into the water as the jagged edged tines ripped through the pale flesh. Even as death claimed the surface dweller, Huaanton grabbed the man's head, cracked the spinal column with his

great strength, and finished the decapitation. Holding the head, he shoved the corpse back to the guards.

"Share the bounty of this brave warrior," the sahuagin king commanded. "Let his flesh impart to you his courage and cunning. Meat is meat."

"Meat is meat!" the crowd responded.

Huaanton stripped flesh from the head, savoring it with obvious gusto. He ate while the remains of both prisoners were distributed through the spectators. Other guards carved up the manta ray, then emptied the creature's stomach and disbursed the meat from its victims.

Laaqueel waited, but none of the flesh was offered to her despite the fact that nearly all of the king's personal priestesses got some. She bore her hurt and anger quietly. As a malenti she'd become accustomed to such treatment, but as senior priestess to a prince, there were few she'd accept it from these days. Joining with Iakhovas even though she had her doubts about him had benefited her in rank. Having to trust in Sekolah to guide her through the treacherous currents that lay ahead had made her even stronger.

Finishing with his impromptu meal, Huaanton threw the stripped skull from him. A shark hovering overhead glided down and snatched the skull less than an arm's length from the sahuagin king. Bone crunched as the shark bit its prize and swam away.

"We are come upon great times for our people," Huaanton stated. His clicks and whistles carried strongly to the amphitheater spectators. "Only two tendays ago, we staged the most magnificent raid ever in the history of our race against the hated surface world. Waterdeep, their prize gem, located in the stronghold of the humans, suffered our wrath. We killed them where we found them, burned their ships in the harbor, and-most of all-we taught them again what it is to fear We Who Eat."

Tridents rattled in the stone tiers, striking a syncopation and cadence that echoed through the water for a brief moment. Laaqueel felt the controlled revelry and took pride in her part in it. For good or ill, however events progressed with Iakhovas in the next few moments, she had helped bring these victories to her people.

"In past days," Huaanton went on, "we've continued raiding their ships and striking other small coastal villages and cities within our reach. Their sea trade has slowed and they no longer cross our waters as complacently."

More trident rattling punctuated by whistles and clicks followed.

"I chose these tactics," Huaanton said, "because I was compelled by the great Shark God, Sekolah, to go forth and spill the blood of our enemies, to eat their flesh and become strong again."

Another thunderous cheer sounded.

Huaanton looked out over the spectators. "I will ever do Sekolah's bidding that I might take my rightful place in the currents he has left for us to swim. I know these times will be turbulent and trying. We Who Eat were birthed to be tested under the harshest conditions, against the strongest of enemies. No weakness shall be permitted." He paused. "But now, I've had to consider where we go from here, and how far we should pursue our war."

Laaqueel saw a flurry of movement to the left of the king and knew instinctively it was Iakhovas. She started to move, but the cold quiver of the black quill Iakhovas had placed next to her heart when she had discovered him in the Veemeeros Sea all those years ago froze her in place.

Don't fret so, little malenti, his rough voice whispered in her mind as he confronted the Royal Black Tridents who blocked his path. Else your own uncertainties about Sekolah will threaten everything you hope to do here. Look into your own heart and seize those convictions you so pride yourself on.

Stung, Laaqueel stayed in place. Iakhovas's words challenged her uncertainty. As a malenti, she'd been cursed from birth, allowed to stay within the sahuagin city where she'd been born only because she could be raised as a spy. Her belief in Sekolah had been the only thing that kept her going through all those long years. Without her faith, she would be nothing.

"Do you think then," Iakhovas interrupted the sahuagin king, "that we should back down and fear retribution on part of the surface dwellers?" His words thundered over the assembly.

Instantly, the amphitheater grew quiet as death.

Huaanton turned to Iakhovas and waved the bodyguards away. Iakhovas walked up the steps. To Laaqueel, he appeared to be human, but she knew he wasn't. He stood a full head taller than her, but much shorter than Huaanton. He was broad, yet lithe, filled with long muscles that moved easily. His black hair hung past his shoulders, somehow unmoved by the ocean currents that cycled around the area.

Despite the scars that tracked his face, Iakhovas was handsome as humans considered themselves, but his features held cold cruelty. The short beard and mustache he wore covered part of his face and softened the effect of the scars. He wore a sleeveless deep green tunic that revealed the runic black tattoos that covered his arms, legs, and body. Laaqueel knew they covered his entire body because she'd seen Iakhovas naked the day she'd found him. Black breeches, boots, and a black cape completed his ensemble. A deep green patch covered his missing eye.

Although she'd tried for years to identify the bracelets, rings, and other adornments Iakhovas habitually wore and added to, Laaqueel didn't know anything more than that they were magical in nature. Most of them were weapons or defenses. Her own reticence in the matter had held her back because she was loath to touch them and didn't dare ask after them. All of them, she knew, had been recovered in the years since she'd found him. He and creatures in his service had sought them out. One of those items had been the sole reason Iakhovas had journeyed to Waterdeep.

If Iakhovas had appeared as a human to the sahuagin, Laaqueel knew they'd have killed him on the spot-or died trying. However, thanks to the spells he constantly wove around himself, the sahuagin saw him as one of their own, only slightly less in stature to Huaanton himself.

The malenti had even helped Iakhovas fake his own birth into her community after she'd brought him back. Once there, he'd quickly risen through the ranks by blood challenges and his sheer ferocity. Those traits, she'd decided, were as natural to him as any sahuagin, something no human she'd ever seen could match.

Now Iakhovas was prince among the sahuagin, a war chief they'd relied on heavily for the raid on Waterdeep. He still had his own agenda, and stopping the sahuagin raids conflicted with that intensely.

"Watch yourself," Huaanton warned softly. He flexed his muscles and intentionally set the trident between Iakhovas and himself. "You swim heavily over the largess I've granted you."

Iakhovas met the king's gaze directly, something no true sahuagin would do without starting a blood feud. Laaqueel was surprised when Huaanton didn't react to the obvious insubordination. She felt the fear ball up in her stomach and she started praying silently.

"Exalted One," Iakhovas addressed the sahuagin king in a voice that carried to the masses, "I am come here at this tide at your direction. A tenday ago, we discussed the possibilities of continuing our war with the surface dwellers. You challenged me to produce a sign from Sekolah that my words be proven true when I said the Shark God wanted us, We Who Eat and Sekolah's Chosen, to take the oceans back from the surface dwellers."

Low mutterings moved through the spectators and they shifted uneasily. Laaqueel continued her prayers, touching the shark-toothed necklace she wore. Her eyes flickered between Huaanton and Iakhovas.

"Yet now," Iakhovas continued, "I am here and I listen to you on the verge of canceling all further attacks on the surface dwellers."

"Our people shall not die needlessly," Huaanton announced.

"Sekolah has given me a vision," Iakhovas said. Only Laaqueel saw the mocking smile that played over his cruel lips. "There is a new tide upon us, a new time in which the sahuagin will be rejuvenated and made stronger than we've ever been before."

The spectators stamped their webbed feet in appreciation and yelled out their support.

"Words," Huaanton snarled. "You offer us only words. You carry on like some surface dweller who loves the sound of his own voice."

The smile dropped from Iakhovas's face, and deadly lights glittered in his single eye. "I offer only words of warning, Exalted One, because I was bade carry them to you as well. Sekolah has made me see the weakness in you."

Laaqueel stopped praying, knowing that Iakhovas had gone too far. Even an indirect accusation of

cowardice among the sahuagin was enough to trigger a blood challenge.

"I told you of Sekolah's will," Iakhovas went on. "I told you how we are to continue raiding the world of the surface dwellers. Yet, you concern yourself with thoughts of their retribution. Sekolah says let them come, and let We Who Eat stand against them."

The spectators roared their approval.

"The tide of the Great Cleansing is upon us," Iakhovas stated, "and it shall see the weak and cowardly driven from us or dead as Sekolah wills it. The true warriors of the Shark God shall prevail against our enemies. We shall be unstoppable even though we fill the oceans with blood and drench the dry lands beyond!"

Huaanton raised his trident, instantly quieting all the noise around him. "You talk brave words, but they're only words. They ring as hollow as an abandoned hermit crab's shell, and are as fleeting as gulls feeding in shark-infested waters. I've seen no sign from Sekolah."

"How dare you," Iakhovas said bitterly, his voice cutting as surely as a spinefish's fin. "Sekolah has never owed We Who Eat anything, yet you choose to view him as one who should be at your beck and call."

Laaqueel took pride in the fact that the spectators all sat up and took notice of Iakhovas's words. It didn't matter that he'd borrowed them from her from the time they'd last met with Huaanton. They were true, and the sahuagin sitting in the stone tiers recognized them for that.

Huaanton reacted hotly. "You're putting words in my mouth."

"No," Iakhovas said, cutting him off. "Laaqueel has prayed about this matter ever since that time. And she fought you regarding this issue, telling you how out of place your demands were. You were out of line asking for a sign that we're carrying on as Sekolah would have us do. We survive, and we survive strongly and in numbers. That's all he's ever asked of us."

"Yet, if we were to follow you, all we would find is our deaths against the surface dwellers."

Iakhovas looked at him, fire dancing in his single eye. "Only the inadequate fail!" he shouted.

That was one of the core beliefs for the sahuagin, Laaqueel knew. All of them had been trained since hatchlings that it was true.

"The brave and strong shall flourish," Iakhovas went on. "The tide of the Great Cleansing is upon us!" He gestured across the amphitheater. "Should you want your sign that you so inelegantly demanded of we who choose to follow Sekolah's true way, then behold and tremble at the power of the Shark God!"

Every eye was drawn across the amphitheater. Laaqueel watched as well, noticing the huge mass that took shape out in the distance. At first it blended in with the deep blue of the sea, then it paled as it came closer. In moments, the great albino kraken hovered above the amphitheater.

The kraken's two longest tentacles drifted out at its sides while the other six coiled restlessly beneath its body. The single baleful eye on the arrow-shaped head, reminding the malenti of her master's, glared red even in the dark waters. Its tentacles were over one hundred and fifty feet long, making it the largest of its kind Laaqueel had ever seen or even heard about.

The malenti recognized the kraken as the one that had guarded the tunnels leading to the king's palace. Brought there as a young creature, the kraken had been fed by the royal guards till it was too big to get out through the tunnels it had been brought through. The guards had kept it on a regulated near-starvation diet that guaranteed it would eat anything that came within its reach.

Only it hadn't acted like that with Iakhovas when they'd encountered it a tenday ago. With Iakhovas, the kraken had acted totally docile.

"There is your sign, Exalted One!" Iakhovas shouted, pointing at the great kraken as it continued to drift closer.

Huaanton stared up at the huge kraken in enraged silence.

Every sahuagin in the amphitheater knew the creatures possessed an uncanny intelligence. A kraken wouldn't normally approach a sahuagin community, Laaqueel knew, especially one that had kept it captive. It had also gotten too large to get out of the caverns below by conventional means, leaving her no choice but to accept that Iakhovas had used his magic to arrange it. The kraken's presence was proof

again of the arcane abilities Iakhovas wielded.

"Here is your proof," Iakhovas went on. "Proof that you demanded of our god."

"You stand there and claim the appearance of this beast is a sign from Sekolah," Huaanton thundered with deep clicks and thumps.

"Dare you claim it is not?" Iakhovas stretched his left hand upward. The kraken stretched one of its longest tentacles down at the same time, tenderly wrapping the huge, leaf-shaped pod around Iakhovas's arm. "Have you ever seen anything like this?"

Laaqueel knew the display left a distinct impression on the sahuagin community. Except for the guards who'd first seen Iakhovas with the kraken, no one else had ever seen anything like it either. The malenti priestess knew Iakhovas was treading a fine line between accreditation and accusation. Huaanton pushed it over the line.

"Magic," the sahuagin king stated. The charge echoed over the crowd, eliciting small clicks and whistles of quiet conversation.

Laaqueel's heart beat frantically in her chest. She took in fresh seawater through her mouth and flushed it out her gills. She held onto her belief in Sekolah with all her might.

Before the crowd had time to reach a decision on its own, Iakhovas raised his voice. "You try to denounce me? After all that you've demanded of Sekolah while giving so little of yourself?"

Huaanton shifted uneasily, knowing he was on dangerous ground himself. Laaqueel knew Iakhovas had led him there, carefully measuring each step.

"We've taken war to the surface dwellers for the first time in generations," Iakhovas said. "We've fought them and we've broken them. We challenged them in their greatest city and seen it burn, taken their ships and seen them flee from the seas. Now you seek to undo all that?"

"We've done enough," Huaanton replied.

"According to your will," Iakhovas agreed, "perhaps we have, but I've seen a vision of We Who Eat one day marching through the streets of Waterdeep and other coastal cities. The surface dwellers ran cowering before us, no longer able to claim any part of the seas." He paused, letting his words hang in the water. "That is when we've done enough."

"You seek to lead us to our deaths, Iakhovas," Huaanton said. "I know not why, but this I truly see. You were born less than fifteen years ago, yet you now hold the office of prince when most take three centuries to reach that position."

Laaqueel stood in silent panic, knowing if Iakhovas came undone, she came undone with him. Her prayers continued without cease, but as always in Sekolah's service, there was no true answer. Only the currents knew how things would sort out.

"Most of those positions," Iakhovas pointed out, "came from you."

"You fed off my own successes like a parasitic worm," Huaanton said. "I didn't see it then, but I see it now."

Iakhovas drew himself to his full height. Even in his human form as Laaqueel saw him, he was impressive. The Royal Black Tridents nearest him involuntarily drew back. The albino kraken hung over the group with its tentacles waving in the currents.

"Truly," Iakhovas said, "Sekolah does lay his hand upon our mission." Still only three steps down from the sahuagin king he turned to address the crowd. "I thought only one sign was going to be presented here today. Now, I see that I was wrong. In his generosity, the Great Shark has given his chosen people two." He gestured to the kraken. "We know that our war with the surface dwellers isn't over." He pointed at Huaanton. "And now we know that we have a king who is king of We Who Eat only in name and no true leader at all." He stepped toward Huaanton.

Instantly, the king's bodyguards moved to intercept Iakhovas. With a flicker of motion that ripped through the water, the kraken reached out and snatched up five of the guards in its tentacles, removing them from Iakhovas's path. Before the other guards could react, Iakhovas stood in front of the sahuagin king.

"Huaanton, false king of We Who Eat of the Claarteros Sea," Iakhovas said in a loud voice, "I charge you with weakness, finding you unwilling to lead your people in this cause, and with impropriety

for failing to carry out Sekolah's war against the surface dwellers."

The Royal Black Tridents closed in with their weapons raised, ready to chop Iakhovas down.

"As is my right," Iakhovas said, ignoring the weapons raised against him, "I claim blood challenge on behalf of the Great Shark."

Angrily, Huaanton waved his guards aside, brave enough to do so even in the face of the kraken as the gigantic creature cracked the bodies of his guards above him. "You lie," the sahuagin king said, taking a step forward, "and your death shall prove those lies."

"Your death," Iakhovas promised, "will prove your weakness and your failing."

Without warning, Huaanton exploded into action. He reversed the trident and thrust the cruel tines at Iakhovas.

Laaqueel watched helplessly as Iakhovas was caught off-guard. She didn't think such a thing was possible after having seen him in action against their enemies, but she remembered how she'd found him, trapped by magic and nearly dead. The scars were mute testimony that he wasn't as infallible as he acted.

The trident tines sank into Iakhovas's chest, drawing a spurting, murky cloud of blood. He screamed in enraged pain and reached for the trident's haft as Huaanton tried to shove it more deeply into him.

Watching on, Laaqueel knew it was a death blow. The tines had no doubt torn through Iakhovas's heart and only seconds remained before death claimed him. The black quill next to her heart quivered in response, signaling a cold flush of nausea that ran through the malenti. She wondered how tightly the quill tied to her Iakhovas, and whether she would die when he did.

A bloody grin warped Iakhovas's face, and touched even the dark hollow of his missing eye. He stood his ground and hooked his fingers between the trident's tines. Muscle rippled along his arms as he shoved the weapon back and pulled the barbed tines free.

Though the misting blood partially obscured her view, Laaqueel watched as the gaping wounds on Iakhovas's chest pulled back together, knitting the flesh, sinew, and bone. The ring she'd first placed on his finger when she'd discovered him glowed briefly, and she doubted that anyone but her saw it.

"Weak," Iakhovas taunted in a ragged voice that almost belied the injuries he'd sustained. He maintained his hold on the trident even against Huaanton's great strength.

The Royal Black Tridents stood back, unable to interfere in a blood challenge. It was one of the most sacred of the sahuagin practices.

Huaanton lifted a webbed foot and lashed out with the razor-edged talons on his toes. He ripped gouges across Iakhovas's face, narrowly missing his eye.

Fearful then, obviously in high regard of his remaining vision, Iakhovas reluctantly released the trident and stepped back. Still, the confident look never left his face as he set himself for another attack.

Huaanton launched himself up into the water, rising above Iakhovas. He was well within the kraken's reach, and Laaqueel knew the sahuagin king was no coward. He kept the trident before him. "Come, Iakhovas, come join me in our dance of death. Let the tides decide our fates."

Iakhovas leaped after the sahuagin king without hesitation. He eeled through the water with grace and speed that was totally unexpected. He slipped long-bladed knives from his belt and held them point down from his fists. Huaanton thrust the trident at him again. Iakhovas blocked the effort with one of the knives, then lashed out at the sahuagin king's midsection with the other.

Huaanton had to move quickly, but the knife slid harmlessly by. Before Iakhovas could recover, Huaanton swung a backhand at him filled with claws. Iakhovas got his arm up in time to save his face, but the claws sank deeply into his flesh, slashing to the bone. He maintained his grip on the knife, though, and brought it down and across in a move designed to disembowel the sahuagin king. The knife blade tracked a bloody furrow across Huaanton's stomach, but it wasn't deep enough to spill his guts.

Spreading the webs between his toes, Huaanton cut through the water, streaking behind Iakhovas. The sahuagin king levered an arm under Iakhovas's chin and popped his finger claws out. Before Huaanton could drag his claws across Iakhovas's throat, Iakhovas slashed the back of the sahuagin king's forearm, cutting through the ligaments that controlled the claws and fingers. Huaanton's claws recessed and his fingers unbent.

Iakhovas broke free of his opponent's grip while Huaanton was stunned by the severity of the

wound he'd been dealt. If Iakhovas had used his magic, Laaqueel knew, the fight wouldn't have lasted this long.

Still in motion, Iakhovas swam around Huaanton. As the sahuagin twisted to confront him, Iakhovas drove one of his knives home between Huaanton's ribs, trying for the heart. He left the knife in place, and foggy blood spewed out into the water.

Even wounded as he was, Huaanton didn't give up. Laaqueel felt pride fill her as she watched the sahuagin king. Despite the fact that he didn't trust in Sekolah as he should, she felt Huaanton epitomized everything that was strong and good about the sahuagin.

Lashing out with the trident, Huaanton caught Iakhovas in the legs. He put enough force behind the blow to send the tines completely through one leg just below the knee, then nailed it to the other. With both legs pinned together, Iakhovas couldn't move to escape Huaanton's attack.

The sahuagin king pulled on the trident's haft, not hard enough to rip the barbed ends free of Iakhovas's flesh, but enough to turn Iakhovas in the water. Moving quickly, his fighting skill apparent in the economical grace he used, Huaanton yanked the blade from his side, then buried it deep in Iakhovas's back.

The kraken fluttered in the water. For a moment Laaqueel thought the creature was going to interfere in the battle. If it did, it would undermine everything Iakhovas hoped to win.

Don't count me out of the running yet, little malenti. Iakhovas's pain-wracked voice filled Laaqueel's mind. Torn between a king who refused to give as much credence to Sekolah as the Great Shark demanded and a mysterious being she'd inadvertently staked her future on, Laaqueel instead turned to her prayers.

Iakhovas tried to reach the knife in his back but couldn't. He struggled to free his legs but didn't seem capable of that either.

Even though he still bled copiously, Huaanton's combat instincts took over. He held the trident at arm's length and pinned Iakhovas to the stone floor of the amphitheater below him. He whipped the barbed net from his side, spreading it out with a quick, practiced snap. He threw it and the weighted ends flared out to encompass his struggling foe. He wrapped Iakhovas expertly, pulling the net tight so that the embedded barbs bit deeply into his flesh.

"Now," Huaanton warned as he turned to grasp the trident's haft more firmly, "now we'll see whose truth speaks more strongly." He yanked the barbed tines free of Iakhovas's legs, pulling a roiling boil of blood and shredded flesh after them. Gripping the trident, the sahuagin king held the haft in both hands high over his head, preparing to run it down into Iakhovas's chest.

The black quill next to Laaqueel's heart stilled its beating, froze the cycle of water through her gills. She wanted to scream in denial, but she couldn't honestly say if it was because Iakhovas's doom looked imminent, or if it was the grin on Iakhovas's face, so filled with fiery cunning.

Huaanton brought the trident down, arcing it fiercely.

Iakhovas's movement was so swift that Laaqueel almost didn't see it. He thrust his right hand out, pushing against the constricting strands of the barbed net. His hand and arm blurred, becoming something else that was hard and sharp. The wedge-shaped appendage slashed easily through the net and plunged on into Huaanton's trachea and air bladder.

The impact staggered Huaanton's own attempt to stab the trident into Iakhovas. His life's blood poured out of him in a rush, flowing from the huge hole Iakhovas's blow had made.

When Laaqueel blinked again, Iakhovas's arm was back to normal. He fought the net as Huaanton's body went limp in the water near him. Barbs wrenched free of his flesh, leaving bloody tears behind. The malenti knew the effort hurt him; she felt part of his pain through the quill's magic that connected them.

Silence reigned over the amphitheater as the sahuagin spectators waited to see what would happen next.

Still only partially free of the ensnaring net, Iakhovas regained his feet and turned to face the amphitheater. He reached out and seized the trident from Huaanton's dead hand. He held it proudly thrust above him as the kraken spread out its tentacles and formed a loose but protective embrace around him, guarding his back.

"My people," Iakhovas said in a strong voice, "you have seen the Great Shark's will today. By right of blood challenge, and by right of Sekolah's ordained destiny for We Who Eat in our battle against the surface world to reclaim the seas, I name myself king! Let any who disagree with that stand and face me now!"

Laaqueel stared at the sahuagin, knowing none would come forward to stand against Iakhovas in his weakened condition. Sahuagin custom dictated against taking advantage of a wounded member of their community even for a blood challenge.

The response started, low at first, then continuing to gain power as the decision swept through the crowd. "Iakhovas, Exalted One of We Who Eat. Iakhovas, Exalted One of We Who Eat."

Iakhovas turned and grinned at Laaqueel. *Ah, little malenti, do you see the greatness we have wrought? We forge our new destinies from this point on. You and I, both castaways, have risen to the greatest positions among the largest and fiercest sahuagin in the Claarteeros Sea. No one may stop us now. No one!*

If it is what Sekolah wills, she replied.

His single eye burned into hers. You have doubts?

Not in the Great Shark. Perhaps in myself.

Then, little malenti, when you find yourself too weak to believe in yourself, believe in me. Iakhovas raised both hands above his head, holding the trident proudly. "I am king!" he roared. "None shall stand against us. The surface world shall quake in fear of We Who Eat, for they shall surely come to know that only their deaths await them in the seas we claim!"

The sahuagin cheered him, and Laaqueel watched as the fervor gripped her people. There was no turning back now, she knew. Iakhovas wouldn't allow it, and now he controlled everything.

"And our next victory," Iakhovas declared, "shall be at Baldur's Gate!"

The cheering rose in thunderous approval again.

Turning, Iakhovas hacked Huaanton's body to pieces and gave them up to the currents around him. The sahuagin surged from their seats, swimming to him rapidly to take part in devouring their last king.

"Come," Iakhovas invited as he continued to slash at the dwindling corpse. "We must be strong for our coming battles. Meat is meat!"

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3 Mirtul, the Year of the Gauntlet

"You're pushing yourself too hard, old friend. If I could, I'd like to talk you out of this present course of action."

Taranath Reefglamor, senior High Mage of Seros, the undersea world in the region known as the Sea of Fallen Stars, glanced at his companion and pierced him with his barbed gaze. Over the centuries, the look he gave the younger man was reputed to have withered even past Coronals who'd ruled over the sea elven kingdom where he lived. "If I'd wanted your counsel, Pharom Ildacer, I trust you know that I'd have requested it. As I'd have asked you to address me so casually, as if the station I've worked so hard to attain didn't matter."

Ildacer's round face blanched and his posture suddenly straightened. "Yes, Senior Reefglamor. If I've erred in any way, I offer my deepest apologies."

"Offer all you may," Reefglamor replied, "you cannot take back words once spoken. I know you learned that at my knee."

Inclining his head, Ildacer said, "It is indeed as you say, Senior Reefglamor."

Reefglamor leaned back in his chair, trying to find comfort in the seaweed padding it seemed he couldn't live without these days. He looked old and wizened, ravaged by time's ceaseless hand and the battles he'd undertaken while defending his people. The studies he'd conducted to become senior mage had been no less strenuous.

He possessed the thin build, pointed chin and pointed ears exhibited by so many of the alu'tel'quessir. The blue skin with white patches further marked him with his sea elven heritage. His silver-white hair was bound back by a beaten gold circlet with carved glyphs and hung down nearly to his

waist. Though shrouded by fatigue and red lines that seemed more like scars these days, his dark green eyes never wavered. He wore a pale blue diaphanous silken weave that bore the purple and black stripes of his office and the crystal clear dolphin that was the chosen symbol of Deep Sashelas for those few who didn't immediately know him by sight.

They sat at a round table in his sanctum. The room was generous but still filled to overflowing with the accoutrements and trappings of his chosen path. It was rumored, and rightly so, that he had almost as many volumes on magery in his home as were possessed in the temple of Deep Sashelas at Sylkiir. Shelves and bookcases covered every wall, designed to hold every tome whether it was inscribed on cut stone or on delicate gold foil. Round glass globes filled with luminescent pale blue lichens lighted the room.

Reefglamor ran his hand across the stone surface of the table. It hadn't always been smooth, but centuries of working at it, reading and studying, conversing with those few of whom he thought well enough to invite there, had worn away the roughness. Only his own contentious personality seemed to be unscathed by time.

That, he amended, and the ever-present threat of the Ravager.

"I shall need you at your best," Reefglamor said. "You may need to act with all the focus I've trained in you in order to salvage anything of this in case things go awry."

"Senior," Ildacer said quietly. He was rounder than most alu'tel'quessir because he had an appetite for food and drink that was legendary in its own right. His blue skin was paler than Reefglamor's and his silver hair still yet held strands of black. He wore a deep purple silken weave. "I know I risk your considerable displeasure by venting my own thoughts in this matter."

"You risk far more than that," Reefglamor warned.

"You asked me here, Senior, and I think that means you believe you can't do this without me." Ildacer's gaze met Reefglamor's glare and only flinched a little.

"And you think this gives you some sway over me?"

"No, but I hoped that it might influence you." Ildacer hesitated. "If only a little."

Reefglamor waved a hand at him. A few minutes of the junior mage's prattle wouldn't mean much in the scheme of dangers that faced them. "Speak, but cogently and with brevity, and always with respect in mind. I lack even more patience than usual."

"Thank you, Senior. I believe you should rethink your decision to try to summon a vision about the Ravager. We've gone all these centuries without success in that regard."

"I've never before attempted it," Reefglamor pointed out. However, he hadn't with good reason. It was only the great danger he felt now that prompted him to make this decision.

"But others have," Ildacer hurried on. "Six that I can think of. Four were driven mad. One slew himself, and the final one was drawn into a gate that had never existed before or ever existed afterward. There have been no successes connected with attempting to learn more of the Ravager. It was those attempts that brought the number of High Mages so dangerously low in these past years."

Reefglamor considered the younger man's words. They carried only the truth. He spoke softly, persuasive instead of demanding for the first time in centuries. "The Time of Tempering is upon us. We've done as much as we can do in every other avenue we've had open to us. There lies ahead only this way."

"But you've outlawed this spell's use against the Ravager."

"Yes."

Ildacer appeared surprised. "You made the law."

"So it's only just that I break it." Reefglamor paused. "No one else had better dare."

Shaking his head in regret, Ildacer settled back in his chair and reached for the wine bladder on the table. He drank from it quickly, glancing out the cut crystal window that overlooked Sylkiir.

Reefglamor followed the other mage's gaze. Most of the homes glowed with the luminescent lichens. Though only two hundred feet below the Sea of Fallen Stars, not much light got through to the depths, and when night fell even elven vision didn't help much.

His house was built on the side of the hill overlooking the underwater valley where the city had been built. From there he could see the twisted coral spires of Deep Sashelas's temple where he'd spent so

much of his life. He'd designed the god's temple, and helped shape the magics that had encouraged the coral growth that created the structure. Long-bodied fish and other sea creatures traversed the currents throughout the city, but no predators that would dare attack the sea elves finned through those depths. Sylkiir had been well warded against those.

"Do you remember how long it took us to grow the temple?" Reefglamor asked.

"Centuries," Ildacer answered. "And I remember all the hard work that went into the construction of it, all the mistakes that we made till we had it exactly right."

"It's beautiful."

"Yes."

"Yet," Reefglamor said, "the Ravager could come among us and destroy it in heartbeats. Nothing would stand to show the strength of our worship of Deep Sashelas. I find that intolerable."

"As do I."

"The Ravager's free again." Reefglamor looked back at the younger man. "You and I have both known it since we heard of the attack on Laakos' Reef in the Shining Sea nine years ago." The attack had taken place fourteen years ago, but the story of it hadn't reached Selu'Maraar and Sylkiir till five years later.

"That could have been a tale made up by the mermen," Ildacer objected. "An undersea quake, or perhaps they hadn't built their reef as well as they thought they had."

"The mermen went from there to Waterdeep," Reefglamor said.

"You never told me that."

Reefglamor knew the other mage was little surprised by that. He told his juniors only what he felt they needed to know when they needed to know it. "I only found out these past few days from a merman called Thraxos, who has his own mission here in Seros. A merman shaman named Narros sent him here to bring the message to me, but this Thraxos's journey was a dangerous one and he had to depend on a human girl to get the word to me. Remember, even our legends of the Ravager, handed down by Deep Sashelas, say that the mermen will be the first to discover the Taleweaver, the human singer who will unite the histories of the world above and world below. The one who will find the way into that which was lost to us."

"The City of Destinies," Ildacer whispered reverently.

"Yes. All that once was to us and one day will be again."

"That doesn't mean the mermen of Laakos' Reef were the ones meant to discover the Taleweaver. There are many others."

Reefglamor fixed his colleague with his stare. "Doubt if you wish, but you'll only be a hermit crab hiding in its shell."

"You don't have any doubts? It has been fourteen years since their city was destroyed."

"Of course I have doubts," the Senior High Mage responded. "Unlike yours, though, mine haven't gone away. They've only grown larger. That's why I want to pursue this course in spite of all the risks inherent in it."

"You've said from the beginning that attempting to work a divination on the Ravager would be risking certain death," Ildacer said, "and it has."

"The Ravager has many protections left to him despite the punishment he's been given in the past," Reefglamor agreed. "Seeking him out in this manner isn't something to be lightly undertaken. He may be able to strike back along the spell I use. However, we need to know something at this point."

"Chancing your own fate isn't a good idea."

Reefglamor regarded the junior mage coolly. "I should risk someone else then?" They both knew from past experience that he would-if he thought it worth the risk.

"That's not what I said," Ildacer said quickly.

"No, but given the parameters of your statement, that's what you meant. And I would. If I felt any were better equipped to attempt this than I." Reefglamor turned his gaze back out through the window. "We've already risked much by using the seluldira on Jhanra Merlistar, Keryth Adofaer, and Talor Vurtalis. The memory gems have wrought great magic to bring them up to the level of High Mages these

past thirteen years." Even then, that decision had not come easily, but the High Mages had wanted to be at full strength when the Ravager appeared.

"I know."

"You've done a good job with them," Reefglamor stated. Ildacer had been responsible for their training.

Surprise momentarily stole Ildacer's words. "Thank you, Senior."

Reefglamor faced him. "You know it is my way to seldom give praise."

"I know it well."

"Yet you overlook the obvious praise you're given this night. I trusted no one else with watching over me while I attempted this."

Ildacer nodded. "I understood that, Senior. I thank you for your trust, but I'm afraid that even I'm not good enough to protect you should anything go wrong."

"Argue though you may, I won't shirk from this. Events have been put into play. According to the merman Thraxos, the Ravager has already taken action against the surface world. Though it is not widely known yet, above water or below, sahuagin attacked Waterdeep two tendays ago. They were accompanied by all manner of sea creatures."

"You believe this to be the work of the Ravager?"

"Could it be anyone else?"

Ildacer held his gaze only a moment before looking away. Fear stamped into his features. "No. Of course not."

"That's why we need to know," Reefglamor said softly. "If there is any way to foretell where the Taleweaver may soon be, or discover who he is, I have to try. And if there's a way to discover the Ravager's whereabouts, I have to attempt that as well."

"There's nothing, then, that I may offer as argument in this?"

"Pharom Ildacer, I've argued with myself for days," Reefglamor said sternly. "Can you imagine a fiercer opponent?"

"No, Senior, truly I can not."

"Then prepare your wards that we may begin." Reefglamor already had his own in place. He ran his fingers over the white pearls in the gold bracer adorning his right wrist, the hand he'd given in service to his god Deep Sashelas, also known as Dolphin Prince and Sailor's Friend.

Long moments passed as Ildacer prepared, digging items from the kit he carried. He marked different colored symbols on the stone floor with the selection of oily gels from the writing packs the alu'tel'quessir had created. Since they'd chosen to live in the Sea of Fallen Stars after the Crown Wars that had torn apart the empire of the elves they'd had to design many things that would help them with their undersea life.

When the younger mage was finished, he looked at Reefglamor. "What do you have to offer?"

Attempting a vision called for the sacrifice of an item the caster cared about. Reefglamor's hand almost trembled as he took a clamshell from a nearby shelf. He opened it slowly, revealing the contents. "This." He took out a common spined urchin's shell and placed it gently on the table.

"That?" Ildacer's effort to not sound disbelieving went unrewarded.

Reefglamor touched the spined urchin's shell. "This was given to me by my wife on the day I met her," the old mage said, his voice surprisingly tight despite the centuries that had passed. "She thought I was full of my own worth, pompous even."

Graciously, and perhaps wisely, Ildacer didn't comment.

"She gave me this shell, plucked from the ground at our feet, as a token that I should remember worth is only in the eye of the person who perceives it. Those who perceive it in themselves oft fool first themselves." Reefglamor smiled at the memory. Their time together had been short. She'd died at his side, fighting the enemies they'd found while questing for one of the legendary elven devices he'd learned of. For all the long lives of the elves, they'd had scarcely a dozen years together, a heartbeat in time, actually. He'd never loved another woman.

"I'm sorry I never got the chance to meet her," Ildacer said.

"She was a remarkable woman."

"Perhaps the gift you offer is too generous."

Reefglamor looked at the younger mage. "I treasure nothing above this simple shell. So common in Seros, yet there is not another like it in the entire world, above or below. Yet, at this moment, I can only hope that it is enough. This is strong magic I seek to employ, against a foe more powerful than we have ever known. The threat-by the fins of Deep Sashelas-the threat against all of Seros has never been as potentially devastating. You know that."

"Yes."

Reefglamor closed his hand briefly around the shell, then pushed it to the center of the table and left it there. "Make yourself ready. This should be done."

Without another word, Ildacer bent to the task. He took the needed items from the kit he carried with him, then inscribed a circle and powerful symbols on the floor around Reefglamor. The younger mage used the different colored oily gels and added the necessary basilisk eyebrow, gum arabic, and whitewash.

Finished, Ildacer put away his gear, then stood inside the circle as well. "The circle is as strong as I can make it, Senior.

Still, there is no saying how strong the Ravager's forces may be."

"We shall find out." Reefglamor bent to his own task, having his spell readied as well. He called upon Deep Sashelas, then followed his magic.

For a moment, Reefglamor thought the power of the spell had struck him blind. When he could see again, he studied the scenery around him. It was a surface city, but one he didn't recognize that bordered a river. He knew it was a river because he'd seen a few of them upon occasion.

Green sahuagin bodies looked almost black in the moonlight. Men, dwarves, and elves fought them. Ships were locked in combat out in the harbor.

This is Baldur's Gate, a quiet voice spoke quietly into Reefglamor's mind, sounding like the calm surge of an incoming tide riding over rock. *This is what will soon happen. The Taleweaver will be there.*

Excitement dawned inside Reefglamor. He didn't know if the voice belonged to Deep Sashelas, but he knew he was hearing it because of his god's will. "Can you show him to me?"

The battle continued, filled with the screams of dying men.

I cannot at this time. You've been told this so that you will know. Here, the Taleweaver will learn of where he is to meet you and come to the knowledge of the Sea of Fallen Stars.

The view faded from sight. Slowly, like a luminescent worm just coming to light, the second scene cleared. Reefglamor instantly recognized the cluster of clamshell-like buildings dug into the silt in the ocean floor.

This place you know, the voice said.

Telvanlu, the capital city of Naramyr, the Artisan State of Seros. The old mage had visited there a number of times. Because of the shared blood between the elven cities, Naramyr and Selu'Maraar maintained good trade relations.

The Taleweaver will be here soon.

When? Reefglamor asked.

No answer came at first. *The possibilities are hazy. Perhaps early in Heartsong. Perhaps later. Perhaps never at all if the Ravager has his way.*

What will he look like?

An image formed beside one of the clamshell buildings. Reefglamor knew the Taleweaver was human, but the man's advanced age was obvious and shocking. The Taleweaver dressed simply in brown breeches and a green doublet. His head was shaved, making the silvery eyebrows over his dark eyes stand out even more. His skin was nut-brown, carrying the mark of a man long used to the sun and the elements. He carried a backpack and a stringed instrument in one hand that was bowl-shaped on one end and stuck out straight and true on the other. Reefglamor thought he recognized it as a yarting. Strains of music, haunting and almost familiar, echoed around him.

Who is he?

The Taleweaver. That's all I'm given to know.

Accepting the vision's inability to render anything further, Reefglamor took another tack. *Can you tell me of the Ravager?* Instantly, Reefglamor felt an unaccustomed chill flow over him, filling his veins. Seros carried an even temperature year round despite the seasons. He'd never felt so cold in all his long years.

Choosing that path leads to danger.

Which is more dangerous? Reefglamor pressed. Trying to know, or living in ignorance?

The seer takes all the risks.

Then let the decision be mine. Show me when the Ravager will enter Seros to bring the death and destruction that are his companions that I may know when the time is come.

Oily black filled Reefglamor's vision. He started to suffocate, unable to draw sea water in through his gills. Then his vision cleared, revealing a section of ocean floor that he couldn't recognize. In the next instant, roiling red liquid flame burned through the depths. It washed over Reefglamor with cyclonic force and brought a rush of searing heat that cooked him. In that whirling maelstrom, he felt something else searching for him, but the effort was weak and Ildacer's spell brought him away.

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Gasping, choking on the sea water that flooded in through his gills, Reefglamor opened his eyes back in his sanctum. He glanced down at his hands, finding small blisters over his pale blue skin. The Ravager's power was incredible. Even from that time in the future, the Ravager had been able to strike back along the vision. Only his weakened state had prevented it from being lethal, but was the Ravager weakened now? Or was it from that time in the future?

Ildacer looked at him worriedly, crossing over to the older man. "What is it?"

"The sea," Reefglamor stated with hoarse effort. "The sea was burning!"

III

4 Kythorn, the Year of the Gauntlet

Jherek stood on the twilight-shadowed docks of Baldur's Gate and drew in the dank air from the River Chionthar. He missed the salty tang of the ocean, but it was the first time he'd felt close to home since leaving Athkatla.

He stood nearly six feet tall, a lean youth of nineteen heavily muscled in the arms and shoulders from years of hard work. Dust still covered his breeches and shirt under the cracked leather armor he wore. Sweat and grit had plastered his light brown hair to his head, causing it to hang heavily to his shoulders. Pale gray fire lighted his haunted eyes.

Baldur's Gate occupied a crescent shaped section along the river. Four dry-dock slips held skeletons of ships under construction. Normally the crews knocked off at evening-feast, only working occasionally on late jobs or specially commissioned ones.

Now, work crews filled all four slips. Jherek had heard they were working night crews by lanterns as well, trying to meet the demand for ships from merchants who'd lost vessels to sahuagin and pirate raids. The watch had taken over one of the slips as well, turning out ships for the navy.

The river lapped at the dock pilings and the cargo boats at anchor in the harbor. Men worked the ships steadily, cursing in loud voices while cargo chiefs and harbor masters yelled at them as well. The cacophony of sound made him feel homesick, made his heart ache, and twisted his stomach in sour bile.

His home lay upon the sea even more so than in the house where Madame Litaar read her divinations and had given an orphan boy hearth and love. He missed her, and missed Malorrie as well. Now, with the harsh traveling behind him for the moment and no threat of goblinkin roaring down on him, he felt that loss more strongly than ever. More than that, he felt lost.

As long as I have a home, you'll have a home.

Madame Litaar had told him that shortly before she'd sent him packing on *Breezerunner*, a cargo

ship bound for Water-deep. Only the ill luck that had marked him since his birth had continued to follow him, and events had gone awry in the City of Coin. He'd gotten kicked off *Breezerunner* for fighting with a crew member, and was forced to join up with a caravan to make his way to Baldur's Gate. All that to follow the destiny that lay before him. Madame Litaar had seen in a vision that he was supposed to go to Baldur's Gate. Now that he was here, he had no idea what to do next. In Athkatla, he'd had a goal. Now there was nothing, only the emptiness and uncertainty stretching before him.

He watched the boats plying the river. The smaller cargo vessels managed the docks with ease while barges worked the larger ships, off-loading the cargo then ferrying it to the docks. Lights from lanterns reflected from the dark waters, held by sailors moving across decks and hung from pole arms.

There weren't as many ships as Jherek remembered from other trips to Baldur's Gate. With the sahuagin activity still at a frenzied peak, though, that was to be expected. From the moment he'd arrived in the city with the caravan, he'd heard reports of ships that had been taken, and how Water-deep was rebuilding from the attack on her harbor. Everyone held the opinion that the sea was quickly becoming an unsafe place. Many people swore they'd never venture there again.

Jherek couldn't imagine never again sitting in a crow's nest or hanging in the rigging with an ocean spread out around him, being pushed by the wind while fighting it at the same time. Yet, for now, that seemed to be his fate. For a moment anger burned away the heaviness in his heart, but it didn't last. The anger was never enough to burn away the sadness that often filled him. There was no one save himself that he could blame for his misfortune.

"Ye're a sailor, aren't ye, lad?"

Jherek's hand strayed down unconsciously to the long sword he wore in a sash at his waist. He turned toward the voice. With all the overland travel now going on between the cities to replace the lost shipping lanes, goblin, doppelgangers, and raiders had infiltrated the cities and the wildernesses between. Opportunities abounded for those on both sides of the law.

"Don't mean ye no harm, lad. Just making conversation."

The dwarf stood at the railing to the left and behind Jherek. He leaned on his elbows, working a pinch of pipe-weed into the bowl of his pipe. He was short and broad, his face filled with unruly gray whiskers that stuck out in all directions. His breeches and shirt had seen better days, and the thin coat he wore against the night's chill had been patched repeatedly.

"My apologies," Jherek said. "I meant no disrespect."

He didn't take his hand from the sword. He was used to carrying a cutlass instead of the long sword, but Frauk, the caravan master, had insisted Jherek use the more conventional weapon because he'd wanted all his men armed similarly. Malorrie had schooled him in the long sword, but Jherek was most comfortable with the cutlass.

"None taken." The dwarf pulled a twist of straw from his pocket, shoved it into a nearby lantern on a pole, then used it to light his pipe. "Just noticed that hungry look on yer face. Mayhap I should have kept my big mouth shut. Sometimes a man don't need his thoughts interrupted."

"Not these thoughts," Jherek said. "I'm grateful for the interruption."

"How long since ye've been at sea?" the dwarf asked.

"Longer than I care to think about," Jherek admitted.

"Ye miss a ship. Ye get used to her, get used to the way she's always moving, always passionate with a wind that gets a sailor's blood up."

"Aye," Jherek said, immediately warming to the kindred spirit the dwarf exuded. "Are you with one of these ships?"

The dwarf shook his head. "Been a damn landlubber off and on for the last five years," he said, reaching down to slap his right leg. It thumped hollowly.

Jherek saw the wooden peg sticking out of the breeches.

"Lost it to a hungry shark what was a faster swimmer than meself, even properly spirited as I was at the time."

The dwarf grinned wryly and a chill that was more than the cool air coming in off the river ghosted across Jherek's neck and shoulders. During the trip up from Athkatla, he'd dreamed of a great shark that

had pursued him until each dawn had awakened him.

"I'm sorry," Jherek offered.

The dwarf flashed him a tight, practiced grin that lacked mirth. "I yet live. The sages say that while a man still lives all things are possible. Mayhap I don't ship out as often as I've a mind to, but I still get to go. Right now, I'm working on one of the ship's crews down in the dry docks. Me shift just ended and I thought I'd smoke a bit before finding a bite to eat."

Jherek's own stomach growled in frustration. He'd lost weight while hard traveling with the caravan. The work taxed him and he'd not had much of an appetite.

"Is the Elfsong yet open?" The dwarf asked.

Jherek remembered that famous tavern from past travels. On the first night *Breezerunner* had put in to Baldur's Gate with Jherek aboard, Finaren had treated him to dinner at the Elfsong. Ilmater's tears, but Jherek missed the old sea captain too.

"Aye," the dwarf answered. "Though it might be busy come this time of night."

"I'll stand you to a bowl of stew if you'd like," Jherek said.

"I'm no cripple, lad, and quite able to take care of meself, thank ye kindly."

Jherek felt flustered. "I only meant it as an offer." He hesitated, not wanting to admit that he wanted the company. He'd bonded with none of the hard men in Frauk's crew. "I don't like to eat alone."

The dwarf squinted up at him and asked, "Where ye hail from, lad?"

"Velen," Jherek answered.

"Aye, the city o' ghosts." The dwarf nodded and ran his fingers through his beard in contemplation. "Seen a few of them there on occasion meself. Ye are flesh and blood, ain't ye, lad?"

"Aye." Having grown up with the ghosts in the city, and having been schooled by Malorrie, a phantom himself, Jherek took them as a matter of course.

"Just checking. I've grown somewhat more careful in me old age. I don't like to eat by meself either, so I'll let ye stand me to a bowl of Lady Alyth's famous stew if ye'll let me stand ye to a drink."

Jherek stepped over, held out his hand, and said, "I'm Malorrie of Velen, journeyman shipwright and able-bodied sailor."

He hated to lie, but was afraid that stories of the young sailor Jherek, who bore the tattoo of one of the Sword Coast's most notorious pirate crews, might have beat him to Baldur's Gate.

"Khlinat Ironeater," the dwarf replied, clasping Jherek's arm in a viselike grip, "of the Daggerford Ironeater blacksmith clan. Able-bodied sailor and gemologist. Proud to meet ye, lad."

"Aye," Jherek said. "I've heard of the Ironeater clan. The cargo ship I crewed on transported clasps, hinges, shields, and other things they turn out in Daggerford."

"That's them," Khlinat stated proudly, puffing out his chest. "Near to busted my old da's heart when he found I'd fallen in love with the sailor's life. Seafaring is not something most dwarves would be about if they followed their natures, ye know."

Jherek nodded. He'd only heard of a few dwarven sailors and seen even fewer.

"Well, come on then, swabbie," the dwarf said. "Time's a-wasting and we're going to need to shoulder our way in amongst sullen and starved hostiles if we're to get our victuals this night. Men are working hard here as a result of them sea devil raids." Khlinat turned smartly on his peg leg, the wood thumping against the docks. He called out to a passing lamp boy who held a lit lantern at the end of a stout pole. "Lad, we'd be after hiring ye to guide us to the Elfsong Tavern."

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As Jherek followed the dwarf and the lamp boy through the dark streets of Baldur's Gate, he found he was looking forward to sharing eveningfeast with the dwarf.

Traveling with the caravan had been arduous work. They'd herded wagons through broken lands while racing the sun and pitching camp against the coming night. In between, they'd fought off the numerous orcs and goblin hordes that had come out of the Cloud Peaks and the Wood of Sharp Teeth to prey on the fat caravans that were overfilled with cargo and understaffed by mercenary warriors.

Frauk, the caravan master, had told them that two out of every seven caravans were taking huge losses or being captured by the raids. Pirating took the wherewithal to get a ship, by purchase or by capture, but anyone with a knife in hand could become a raider on the land. Fewer warriors wanted to take the risks inherent in overland travel because it was getting as dangerous as the seaways.

That was why the merchants had been so generous to Frauk when they'd reached Baldur's Gate. After starting out in Athkatla broke and leaving the last of his coin with the priests of Lathander there for tending his wounds, Jherek now found himself quite flush.

They followed Bindle Street south along the docks as the lamp boy weaved in among the laborers and night crowd that had gathered around the smaller offices where black market business was done between the large warehouses. An uneasy feeling draped Jherek, and he stopped to look back into the harbor to his right.

In the distance he spotted the old Seatower of Balduran thrusting up on the opposite side of the harbor. It housed a barracks and naval base, part dungeon and part fortress. Men moved along the ramparts. The twilight dusk still showed a few yellow tendrils that looked like curdled eggs under the gathering black storm clouds. Ships cluttered the harbor, their masts naked of sailcloth.

"What's the matter with ye, swabbie?" Khlinat asked.

Jherek shook his head, not knowing, but definitely aware of the crawling sensation moving along the back of his neck. Then, against the shadowed line of the river, he spotted ships. He guessed by the cut of their shape that they were the small cargo ships and cogs that plied the River Chion-thar. Their sailcloth didn't reflect the moonlight, colored black so they would be harder to see.

"Do you see them?"

"Aye," the dwarf growled. "These old eyes may not be what they once was, but they see them ships right enough." He hollered at the lamp boy. "Make haste, ye little vagabond, we've got to find a member of the watch."

The boy took the lead, saying, "They're keeping ships in the harbor." His quick steps left Khlinat behind.

The dwarf glanced at Jherek and said, "Have a smart step there, swabbie. Ifn the watch hasn't spotted them scoundrels and thought about the chance of trouble, somebody needs to tell them."

Jherek nodded and ran after the lamp boy, catching him easily. The lantern jerked at the end of the pole, throwing shadows to race crazily around them and warning people ahead of them to step aside. The troubled feeling inside the young sailor increased, becoming a gnawing in the pit of his stomach.

The lamp boy raced onto the next dock leading out into the harbor. Prowling cats scattered before him, yowling and hissing their displeasure.

"There!" The youth flung a hand forward.

Jherek spotted the black watch flag with its vertical red stripe in the stern of a converted cargo ship tied up at the dock. Warriors clothed in the black armor of the Baldur's Gate Watch occupied the deck. A few of them had already noticed the black-sailed ships.

"Halt!" a watchman cried, vaulting from the ship to the dock. His sword cleared leather with a sibilant *whisk*. The lamp boy's light flickered over his nervous features.

Jherek drew up at once, lifting his hands at his side, and said, "I mean no harm. I only came to tell you about the ships out on the river."

"We've already seen them," the watch guard said. "They'll be addressed before they're allowed to put in."

As Jherek watched, two other watch ships unfurled their sails and skimmed out into the harbor like low-flying geese. Ship's crew quickly passed out lanterns, lit them, and hung them from the ship to make it more visible. They drew shouted curses from a barge that was nearly swamped in their passing. Sword steel gleamed on the deck.

The uneasy feeling grew stronger inside Jherek, but he controlled it as the two watch ships sailed on an interception course.

"Cast away!" someone called from the ship in front of Jherek.

The watch guard raced to the stern to the mooring cleats. He unwound the thick hawser ropes while

another man unfastened the one holding the prow. Sailcloth cracked as it ran up the masts and filled with wind. The watch members threw themselves back at their ship and clambered aboard. The ship's crew quickly passed out lanterns, lighting their ship.

Jherek stood by and watched, feeling at a loss that he wasn't able to join the coming battle. If it came to that, he amended. He felt his sword already in his hand, though, hard and sturdy.

Khlinat thumped up beside him, his breath ragged from the effort. He carried two hand axes and scowled at the approaching line of ships. "Yonder blows an ill wind, I'll wager."

Jherek didn't disagree.

"At least them's good, honest pirates and not them scaled, black-hearted devils what's got the taste for man flesh."

IV

4 Kythorn, the Year of the Gauntlet

Glancing around the harbor, Jherek saw that most everyone nearby had spotted the black-sailed cargo ships. The vessels still ran dark, carrying no lanterns at all.

"Gives a man the shivers," Khlinat said, "them running in the black. Heard stories of the seas giving up their dead upon occasion, lifting ships up from the bottom and crewing them with corpses out to sacrifice them to dark gods thought long lost."

A crowd started to gather along the dock. Men brandished weapons. At the far end of the dock on the eastern side a barge towed across the huge chain that was used to block the harbor against unwelcome ship traffic. The massive links glinted in the moonlight and torchlight as they twisted and trailed through the water.

Even as the barge got the chain up across the mouth of the harbor and the watch ships closed on the black-sailed vessels, a gray cloud gathered suddenly and scudded in from the west like a heavy, fast-moving fog. The mass whirled and turned outward, continuing to spread as it came.

Jherek had seen plenty of fogs roll in from the sea while he'd lived in Velen, and he was certain this was no ordinary one. Before he could voice a warning, the sky exploded into harsh yellow flames that raced outward and dropped in sheets onto many of the ships in the harbor.

As the barge carrying the heavy harbor chain was about to reach the Seatower, a giant moray eel erupted from the water. Lantern light from the watch members aboard the barge illuminated the great creature. Nearly twenty feet long, though most of its body remained below the waterline, the moray eel was covered in thick, mottled, brown, leathery skin. Lighter spots showed along the broad chin under a mouthful of wicked incisors that overlapped its upper and lower lips in a cruel, merciless grin.

Despite its unexpected arrival, the moray eel still moved slowly. The watch members had a chance to ready their swords and get a few blows in as it lunged forward. The great jaws gaped open and seized a man's head and shoulders. Continuing its forward lunge, the moray eel overturned the barge then dived back below the surface with its prize.

Men flew into the water from the overturned barge. Some disappeared immediately beneath the black water. Others tried to swim but didn't get far as jaws or claws seized them and savagely yanked them under. Several screams drowned out in horrified gurgles.

Hoarse warning shouts rose all along the docks, but Jherek knew it was too little, too late. The invaders were even now closing the distance on the docks.

The sky flared again, spreading fire over the harbor. Some of it fell onto ships and set the sailcloth, rigging, and decks ablaze. More pools of fire fell into the harbor and floated on the water. A cluster of flames hit a small knot of people only ten feet from Jherek and fed on them greedily. Bystanders tried to beat out the flames but appeared to have little effect. Men died screaming in agony.

"Damned magery," Khlinat yelled, covering his face with one arm.

Another patch of flames hit the dock so close to Jherek that he felt the heat. He'd caught sight of the flames plummeting toward them out of his peripheral vision and shouted a warning. Khlinat had no problem getting out of the way, but the flames splashed across the lamp boy and caught his breeches on fire.

Panicked, the boy started to run back down the dock but the air only fed the flames. The deadly wreath climbed his pants.

Moving quickly, Jherek caught the boy, wrapping one arm around the youth. Wheeling, he threw both of them over the dock's side, making sure they had the necessary distance from the pilings.

They hit the water and went under. The dark water took only a moment to extinguish the flames that fought against the dousing brine. Jherek kept hold of the boy in case he couldn't swim. Still holding onto his sword, the young sailor kicked them back toward the surface.

Jherek whipped his head, slinging the water and hair out of his eyes. "Are you all right, boy?"

"Yes. I think so." His voice quivered.

Glancing up at the docks, Jherek watched the foggy cloud breaking up. The damage to the docks was already extensive, and the fires weren't being put out very quickly. The boy struggled in his grasp, pulling at his legs.

"Are you burned?" Jherek asked.

"I don't think so."

"If I let you go, can you swim?"

"Like a duck," the lamp boy promised.

Jherek let him go, watching for a moment as the boy kicked away and swam in a crude dog paddle that seemed serviceable enough.

The boy turned around, his face going pale and even more frightened. "Behind you!"

Jherek tried to turn, feeling the malignant darkness behind him as well as the water rippling against his back. Before he could do more than start the motion, he felt the scaly sahuagin arm snake around his neck and drag him under the water.

Even as he went down, Jherek heard a familiar roar that triggered a wash of fear that filled him. The loud scream of anger and challenge was artificial, but it sounded enough like a bunyip that there could be no mistake. The hoarse roar told him one of the black-sailed ships carried his father, Bloody Falkane, one of the most feared and vicious of the cold-blooded pirates of the Nelanther Isles.

Fear ran through the young sailor, not of the sahuagin who held him, but of the man who'd sired him. He bore his father's mark on his arm, indelibly put there with magic and ink, and carried the cursed fate that resulted from his father's sins.

The bunyip scream sounded again as the thickly muscled arm tightened around Jherek's neck and pulled him farther down.

* * * * *

Laaqueel tried in vain to shut out the keening roar of the bunyip. The malenti priestess stood in the stern of *Bent Tankard*, the cog the sahuagin had taken only two days ago under their new king's orders.

Wind whipped through the rigging and the sailcloth fluttered as the captain called out orders to his trimming crew while still others prepared to board the watch ships that had come to intercept them.

A few of the sahuagin weren't completely unversed in handling surface ships. They'd taken some and used them as decoys to attack other ships in the past.

The bunyip roar blared again.

Glancing across the distance separating them from the lead ship, Laaqueel made out Bloody Falkane's tall frame striding across the deck. The pirate captain was a striking man, tall and slender but packed with wiry muscle. Even now his oiled black hair was neatly combed back. He wore a mustache and goatee. Moonlight glistened from the silver hoop earrings he wore in both ears, as well as the other bits of jewelry. He wore a silk shirt of darkest blue and black breeches tucked into rolled boots that matched his shirt.

Laaqueel knew the bunyip roar came from a device Falkane had ordered made and carried on his own ship. The bunyip was a freshwater creature that was at first glance very sharklike in appearance, but the shaggy black hair that covered its body and the long, flowing mane set it apart.

The malenti didn't know why the pirate had chosen the bunyip as his standard, except for the

keening roar that instilled fear into most people who heard it.

She watched the fires scattered around the harbor spread only slightly. Baldur's Gate was constructed mostly of stone and usually stayed damp because of the climate. This city wouldn't burn as Waterdeep had, but it had less chance of standing.

The cog slid into the harbor, following Bloody Falkane's craft. Six other ships, all loaded with pirates from the Nelanther Isles, followed them. The deck didn't pitch much, but the movement was still foreign to her after spending nearly all her life working with the sea's currents instead of against them.

Sudden lightning flashed from the harbor, racing in a horizontal line until it touched the mainmast of Falkane's cog. Wood splintered with a thunderous crack and embers blew up in a flurry from the wood. Sheared, the mainmast started to topple toward the deck, then got caught up in the rigging and sailcloth.

"Cut that damned mast free!" Falkane roared, rushing up to the stern castle himself.

Sailors moved quickly to do his bidding, clambering into the rigging with long knives in their teeth. Leaping from the stern castle, the pirate captain caught hold of the rigging and climbed through it with the agility of a monkey.

Despite all the truly monstrous things Laaqueel had heard about Bloody Falkane, she had to admit the man was good at his chosen profession. She watched him hack at the rigging holding the mainmast, calling out directions to his crew. In seconds, the tall mast started toppling over the side, its descent controlled by the rigging the pirates cut expertly so that it didn't land on the deck.

An arrow thudded solidly into the railing, missing Laaqueel's hand by inches and drawing her attention back to her own affairs. She drew up the heavy sahuagin crossbow she held and sighted on the boatload of Baldur's Gate defenders bearing down on the ship she was on.

Carved out of whalebone and strung with braided gut, the weapon was cable of firing above or below the water. She gazed down the greenish-gray quarrel shaft that had been chipped from claw coral that grew in hard, straight lengths. Hard as the bronze the surface worlders used, it was also razor sharp even on the sides. The hollowed shark's tooth serving as the arrowhead was filled with poison and was designed to break off inside a target. Even if the sharp quarrel didn't hit a killing spot, the poison ensured the kill.

With the approaching boat less than thirty feet out, Laaqueel fired the crossbow. The quarrel flashed forward and filled a man's eyesocket. He screamed and went down, brushing at the blood gushing onto his face. When poison stilled his heart, his companions had to shove his dead weight from them.

"To me!" Laaqueel cried to the sahuagin behind her.

They bounded forward at once. Only a few of them had crossbows. The claw coral quarrels embedded in the boat and the men, snapped off in shields, breaking the staggered ranks the defenders of Baldur's Gate had tried to form.

Laaqueel had enough time to reload and get one more shot off, striking a man and piercing his leather armor. The impact of the quarrel twisted him sideways and threw him from the boat. Instantly, a dorsal fin cut the water, zooming toward the flailing swimmer. The malenti priestess didn't know if the poison or the shark got the man first.

The boats collided with a shattering thump that brought the smaller one up out of the water. Some of the men were already in motion. They stabbed spears upward, tangling the sahuagin tridents.

Braced as she was and expecting the collision, Laaqueel nearly fell. She regained her footing with difficulty and tossed the crossbow aside. She also loosened the thigh quiver of quarrels and kicked it away. Taking her trident up, she turned to face the invaders.

One of the other pirate ships raced past. The archers aboard unleashed a brief volley at the men in the watch boat. Then it went on by, closing on the harbor. Even at eight ships, the pirates weren't strong enough to take apart the defenses of Baldur's Gate, but they weren't alone. Iakhovas's magery had seen to that.

Rubbery ropes of arms shot up from the water without warning, wrapped around the watch ship, and yanked it almost to a full stop. Men tumbled from the ship, pitched clear by the unexpected seizure. A mast-mounted lantern smashed against the ship's deck and splashed a long blaze of fire that ate into the wood. Before the ship's crew recovered, sahuagin surfaced and slit their throats with long claws. Most of

the crew died without a chance to defend themselves.

On the docks, sahuagin slithered up from the port and ripped into the citizens gripped in the thrall of fear. In seconds they were walking over corpses, hunting out fresh kills. Their fierce cries of bloodlust and savage joy rang through the alleys of Baldur's Gate and over the port. Men raced forward trying to protect loved ones or friends, and died as sahuagin tridents knifed through their stomachs or ripped through their lungs. Other sahuagin threw fishhook-embedded nets over small groups, then pulled them into the water and beneath the surface to drown them like rats. Even as Laaqueel faced the men trying to swarm up the cog, the malenti was aware of the dozen or more giant crayfish that surfaced near the west docks around the Seatower and wreaked havoc among the Flaming Fist ships that tried to put out into the harbor. It was the mercenaries of the Flaming Fist who ran Baldur's Gate, and they were coming to the aid of the watch.

Fully eight feet long and equipped with huge pincers nearly a yard in length, the crayfish plucked men from the docks and the ships. Their hard, mottled brown, chitinous carapaces stood against sword blade, arrow, and spear. Their huge antennae whipped the air in a frenzy. The great pincers cut into their victims, sometimes sawing them in half. Other creatures Iakhovas controlled through arcane means swam beneath the river, working with the sahuagin to take the harbor.

Holding the trident in both hands, Laaqueel thrust the tines into a man's face, forcing him back off the side of the cog. Blood spilled across the deck from the man she wounded as well as sahuagin and other surface dwellers. The planks grew slippery.

A large man in chain mail armor and a thick helmet heaved himself over the railing. Scars decorated his arms and face. He carried a huge warhammer in one hand and a lighted lantern in the other. He scowled at the sahuagin, fixing his hateful gaze on Laaqueel.

"By the precious left hand of Tyr Grimjaws, I don't know how come you to be with all these deep devils, elf, but you're gonna regret it."

The warrior swung the lantern over his head, then brought it crashing down on the deck. The oil ran in a pool, and the flame from the burning wick chased it, starting a blaze that stood a foot high. Startled by the flame, already aware of the way it was quickly drying her skin, Laaqueel backed away. The other sahuagin did too, leaving enough room for seven other warriors to clamber onto the deck.

The big warrior took his hammer in both hands and said, "I'm Fyidler Tross, a sergeant of the Flaming Fist, and I'm gonna send you back into Umberlee's cold embrace myself!"

He came at her, the hammer raised high over his head.

* * * * *

Even as the water closed over his head and the darkness sucked him down, Jherek tried to get a grip on the sahuagin's arm. The creature's strength was incredible, but Malorrie's training had included ways to make joints work against their owners, and made the young sailor aware of the weaknesses of a hold.

The moonlight pooled silver against the harbor water overhead, allowing him to see the sahuagin's hand as the sea devil flicked out its claws. Clicking and whistling sounded in Jherek's ears, warring with the thumping of his own heart.

Two other shapes slid through the water, closing in.

The young sailor thrust his sword up, blocking the fierce sweep of claws at his face. The blade bit into the sea devil's forearm. Jherek brought the edge down, ripping into the flesh. Blood burst into the water.

The sahuagin whistled shrilly and clicked madly, giving voice to the agony that gripped it. Taking advantage of the moment, Jherek ran his empty hand down his side, then thrust up in the hollow inside the sea devil's restraining arm. The hold broke, allowing Jherek to go free.

The two approaching shapes glided into view, becoming trident-bearing sahuagin. They streaked for the dockside as they bore down on Jherek. One of them flipped in the water, making a full circle then coming down from above.

Jherek met the blow with his sword, angling it in between the trident's tines. He was aware of the second unwounded sahuagin streaking in for his stomach, intending to meet him if he avoided the attack of the first.

Holding the sword firmly, Jherek locked the blade against the trident and let the first sahuagin drive him down. The second sahuagin angled by overhead, moving quickly in his headlong rush. The trident missed Jherek by scarce inches.

At home in the water, twisting his body like a dolphin, the young sailor reached above and caught the passing sahuagin's harness. His fingers knotted in the woven seaweed strands. He kicked out as the sea devil's momentum carried him along, adding to his speed, disengaging his sword from the trident.

Before the sahuagin he'd caught hold of could turn, Jherek pulled on the harness and swam around behind the sea devil. He couldn't strike the sahuagin in the back, though. He couldn't bring himself to be so callous and so unfair. He waited for an opportunity.

His opponent clawed the water frantically, flipping over and stopping almost immediately. That turned out to be an even greater mistake. It allowed Jherek to plunge the sword into its stomach and rip upward. Still, as death claimed it, the sea devil managed to catch Jherek in the face with one foot.

The ebony claws raked fire along Jherek's face, narrowly missing his right eye. He recoiled, momentarily disoriented as blood swirled up and clouded his vision. The moon was nearly obscured by the dark water as it was, and the blood made it even harder to see.

The blood didn't blind the sahuagin, Jherek knew. They had the ability to sense movement. He kicked against the dead sea devil, pushing himself toward the surface. His lungs ached for air.

Past the blood cloud, Jherek spotted the wounded sahuagin trying fitfully to stop the flow of blood from its stump. The sea devil's shrieking whistles pealed through the water. The young sailor kicked out again, nearing the surface, glancing around to try to find the third sahuagin.

Only moonlight kissing the crystalline facets of the sea devil's chipped-coral trident saved Jherek's life. He spotted his attacker closing in from the right, shoving the trident forward. Knowing that grabbing the weapon would only lacerate his hand, the young sailor twisted violently in the water, knowing in his heart it was too late and he was about to feel the trident buried in his stomach.

The tines grazed his sodden leather armor, ripping through it and branding his stomach with cold pain. Jherek continued to move, wrapping himself around the sea devil in a wrestling hold with his legs twined around his opponent's. He looped his free hand under the sahuagin's arm and locked his palm behind the creature's head even as the sea devil locked his clawed fist around Jherek's sword wrist.

Instinctively, wanting to take advantage of the power it held in the water, the sahuagin dived, going deeper quickly.

Jherek's lungs burned from lack of air and everything in him cried out to let go of the sahuagin and swim for the surface. As fast a swimmer as he was, though, he was fairly certain he'd never make the distance before the sea devil overtook him. He bent to the task at hand, putting more pressure against the sahuagin's head. The neck bent slowly, like working iron, proof of the sahuagin's great strength.

The sahuagin's whistles became strained. Jherek felt his vision fading, knowing he didn't have much longer before the lack of air started draining his strength. He kept the pressure on, finally feeling the sahuagin's neck muscles give.

The sea devil's neck broke with a crack that echoed dully in the water.

Releasing the limp corpse, Jherek turned and swam for the surface. His vision closed in on itself, starting to blot out the patch of moonlight he aimed for. His hand broke through the water and he kicked himself after it.

Light swept toward him as soon as his face cleared the water. He had a brief impression of men standing along the dock, then a gaff pole shoved toward his head. He jerked away, letting the cruel gaff hook slice into the water near him.

"Umberlee take yer eyes, ye thickheaded mutton!" Khlinat roared.

Treading water, Jherek saw the dwarf push his way through the crowd.

A surly man with graying side whiskers shot the dwarf a nasty look and said, "I saw a sahuagin down there, I tell you."

"Mayhap ye did," the dwarf agreed vehemently, "but that there ain't no slithering sea beastie." He crouched, offering his hand to Jherek. "Come up here, swabbie, and let's be after having ye out of the drink now."

Jherek caught the dwarf's hand, then found himself almost lifted from the water by Khlinat's strength alone. He scrambled, finding his footing on the dock with his water-filled boots.

"You did see a sahuagin," Jherek told the man. "There were three of them."

"Three, swabbie?" Khlinat said, peering into the water and fisting his axes. "And ye did say *were*."

The crowd along the dock drew back.

Jherek nodded, locking his hands behind his head to get his breath back more quickly. He glanced out in the harbor and saw the scattered fires. The pirate ships had invaded the harbor now, fanning out in a practiced move that put their onboard archers within range of other ships as well as the docks. Fire arrows blurred through the air, striking ships and occasionally breaking through building windows to land inside. Twisting clouds of smoke above several of the buildings showed that fires had started inside.

The surly man with the gaff hook shook his head and said, "That's a pretty tale you weave, boy, but I'm not going to believe a stripling like you could kill three sahuagin-and in the water yet."

"Only two," Jherek replied. "I cut the hand off another."

He took a fresh grip on his sword. Out in the harbor, a giant water spider clambered up from below and attacked a dock crew trying to cast off lines. Twelve feet across, the spider reared up on its four back legs and seized two victims with the front four. Before it had a chance to completely devour its screaming prey, ten more spiders bobbed to the surface and scurried over the docks.

A squad of sahuagin warriors rose up from the water and grabbed hold of the pilings. They pulled themselves up while others treaded water and threw javelins into the crowd. Propelled by the powerful sea devils' muscles, the slim, chipped-bone javelins often penetrated more than one victim. Still more sahuagin leaped up from the water long enough to throw their deadly nets. Over a dozen people were pulled into the water and sank without a trace. Two of the nearby water spiders dived after them.

Pressing forward, Khlinat engaged the first sahuagin to place a webbed foot on the dock.

"Have at ye, then," the dwarf growled.

He whirled the hand axes before him, gripping them midway up the hafts. His furious onslaught battered through the sea devil's defenses and turned the trident aside. In another moment, he stretched up and buried one of the hand axes at the base of the sahuagin's throat. The lights dimmed in the oily black eyes, but there were plenty more to take that sahuagin's place.

Jherek joined Khlinat, lending his sword arm, feeling his wounds burn. Blood still flowed from the cut beside his eye, threatening to blind him. He wiped the blood from his face with his sleeve.

Khlinat kicked his peg leg up to the center of the dead sahuagin's chest, then pushed his opponent off the hand axe and back into the water.

"We can't hold this position," Jherek told him, blocking trident thrusts with his sword.

The motions came swiftly and certainly to him as they always did. Malorrie had trained him well, giving him one of the first instances of confidence he'd ever known.

"I know it, swabbie," the dwarf replied, "but we'll hold it long enough mayhap for them what's got heart to set up a skirmish line we can fall back to. Just don't go getting yerself killed afore we've got a chance to make our grand escape."

Jherek gave himself over to the battle, fighting past the homesickness and uncertainty. If the destiny he'd been given was to die here, this night, then he was going to see that it was done rightly and well. Malorrie had trained him to always sell his life dearly.

He batted a trident aside with a deft move of his wrist, setting himself up for a lightning riposte that spilled the sahuagin's life's blood from its throat. When the creature grabbed its throat, suddenly more interested in staying alive than in fighting, Jherek grabbed the dying sea devil and used it as a shield.

"Now, swabbie!" Khlinat yelled.

Taking a step back, getting a brief respite from the other sahuagin by hurling their dead comrade among them, Jherek glanced at the end of the dock where men had shoved cargo crates into a defensive line.

"Quick as you can!" Khlinat turned and followed his own advice, sprinting for the crates.

Jherek didn't hesitate. He deflected a pair of thrusts from two different tridents, took a step to the side, and cut the hamstrings of both legs on a third sea devil as the creature tried to turn and face him. Wheeling, drawing his blade back, he strode forward, putting a shoulder into the sahuagin's midriff and knocking it back into the others.

Slipping in the blood covering the dock for only a moment, Jherek got his feet under him and ran.

A dozen more sahuagin climbed over the railing behind him. Glancing down the quay, he saw the swarm of sea devils pulling up onto the docks. Weapons gleamed in the moonlight and from the fires that were spreading through the warehouses.

* * * * *

Praying to summon the power given her by obedience to Sekolah, Laaqueel held up her palm and thrust it toward the big surface dweller rushing at her with his upraised hammer. She felt the molten heat leave her hand. It only caused a slight visible ripple as it passed.

The spell struck Fyidler Tross with physical impact and dropped the big Flaming Fist mercenary to his knees. He screamed in pain, trying desperately to hang onto his warhammer. Huge blisters covered his flesh, bursting as they filled to capacity, then filling again the way the malenti had seen surface dwellers fry their eggs.

He called on his gods in a faltering voice, then crumpled to the deck, already dead. The other mercenaries gave his death no heed, absolutely fearless in their attack. They engaged the sahuagin with bloodthirsty enthusiasm, yelling curses and impugning their heritage.

Laaqueel set herself, regretting that the battle had to take place on the ship's deck. She was much more at home in the water where she had the opportunity to attack from above or below instead of merely in a horizontal line. Most surface dwellers never knew how truly intricate the act of battle could be.

Holding the trident in both hands, she blocked a swordsman's overhand sweep. The blade struck sparks from her trident haft while another man closed in from her left. He'd intended to take advantage of the diversion his comrade created. Instead, Laaqueel ducked under his sword swipe, tangled his legs with the trident haft, and pulled him from his feet unceremoniously. The first man thrust at her, putting all his weight behind his sword.

The malenti glided to the side, missing the familiar feel of the ocean around her. The sword slid through her hair. Before the man had a chance to protect himself, she spiked him with the trident, twisting viciously to tear the wounds open further.

Other mercenaries trampled over their fallen comrades in their zeal to get to her. Laaqueel retreated before them and reached into her harness pouch. She took out a straight piece of iron she kept there. She prayed over it as the men charged her, then released the energy through it. The iron dissolved, consumed by the spell.

Four of the attacking mercenaries froze in place, becoming a momentary blockade for their comrades. The four affected mercenaries fell like statues, their limbs locked around their weapons. Five mercenaries pushed over the other men, still not losing the courage they displayed.

They weren't like other humans, Laaqueel knew. After seeing the power she wielded, most other surface dwellers would have broken off the attack.

Those men you see before you are Flaming Fists, little malenti, Iakhovas said in her mind. Warriors tried and true. They make up fully a tenth of this city's population, and they'll give their life's blood to see Baldur's Gate stand. They'll gladly spill yours for the same reason.

Laaqueel blocked a sword slash, maneuvering to use the remaining five against each other so they couldn't all attack at once. She kept her trident before her in both hands, blocking rapidly, then burying it in one man's chest. Letting go of the trident, the malenti priestess popped her retractable claws from her fingers and toes. When it came to close-in fighting, few were naturally more dangerous than the sahuagin.

V

4 Kytnorrt, the Year of the Gauntlet

Dodging another sword thrust, a prayer to Sekolah already on her lips, Laaqueel reached into her pouch and removed a small portion of oak bark. As she finished the prayer, the bark was consumed in a small burst of heat. Instantly she felt the effects as her skin tingled. A sword she couldn't stop in time rattled against her side with the dulled thunk of an axe hitting a tree, but it didn't break her skin.

Confident of the new protection she'd summoned, secure in her belief in the Shark God, Laaqueel gave herself over to the blood frenzy that was her heritage as a sahuagin. She dived into the mass of surface dwellers, using their proximity to each other as a weapon. Hand and foot claws slashed at the five men, turning their flesh to ribbons. Daggers found her, and the occasional sword's edge, but none of them did any real damage to her.

In seconds it was over. She stood on the blood-spattered deck above the dead and the dying, her gills flaring as they tried to meet the increased demand of her body. She glanced around the deck, seeing that the other sahuagin had successfully beaten back the Flaming Fist attack. There were already other boats in the water streaking for that ship as well as the other pirate vessels. She saw their standards now, a red fist wreathed in yellow flames emblazoned against a red spearpoint.

The cog sailed on into the harbor, cutting through water filled with sahuagin, sharks, sea snakes, giant water spiders, dragonfish, giant gar, and smaller crustaceans that scurried across the ocean floor at Iakhovas's bidding.

"Where were you while we were fighting these men?" Laaqueel demanded, turning her gaze to the stern castle where the man stood looking out over the carnage spread before him.

Dressed in black and aquamarine, a long sable cloak drifting in the storm winds behind him, Iakhovas appeared pleased. The black sapphire circlet he wore had small shark figures chipped into it twining about each other. She knew it gave him the power he needed to control the sea creatures that had invaded Baldur's Grate.

Iakhovas turned his hard face toward her. A cruel, mirthless smile touched his lips and he said, "Little malenti, do not presume too much. I am and will be your master."

Deep within her, Laaqueel felt the black quill spin and prick her heart. Pain and nausea drove her to her knees and she voided her stomach.

"Favored one," a nearby sahuagin shouted, coming to her aid.

"No," Laaqueel said, holding up a hand to halt the warrior's attempt to reach her. She didn't know what Iakhovas would do to him for interfering. She regained her feet with difficulty, making herself remember that everything she was involved with was at Sekolah's bidding. She locked eyes with Iakhovas. "Forgive me. I spoke in haste."

The pain clutching her heart disappeared. She inhaled through her gills more easily.

"Never forget, little malenti," Iakhovas warned. "Too many things are coming together now for me to worry about you and your indiscretions. I am king of your people, and I suffer your presence only as long as it is in my favor."

"I understand."

"You will address me as Exalted One," Iakhovas commanded. "I am your king, and you will recognize that as well."

"Exalted One," Laaqueel said.

Arrows ripped through the rigging as archers at the Seatower of Balduran got the range. Sahuagin crossbowmen knelt and returned fire.

"Subservience in a menial is a good trait," Iakhovas said. "Don't forget it. As to helping you, remember that in helping you I am also helping myself. I've been giving aid in ways that will be known presently, and I've been inconvenienced over the last few tendays."

She knew he was talking about the injuries he'd suffered at Huaanton's hands when he'd become king of the sahuagin. Though he hadn't shown it at the time, Laaqueel learned it had taken more out of him than he would admit.

"I'm going," Iakhovas said.

"You're leaving the battle?" Laaqueel couldn't believe it. He'd done the same thing in Waterdeep, though, so it shouldn't have come as a surprise.

In the distance, a flaming warehouse collapsed in a rush of fire and smoke. People who'd taken shelter inside it from the invaders were crushed or burned to death. The high-pitched keening coming from the few survivors barely penetrated the agonized screams of fear that rolled over the docks.

"They don't need me here," Iakhovas said. "Man, dwarf, elf, sahuagin, and sea creature, they all know how to kill each other without any guidance on my part."

"But, Exalted One, you're their king. They'll notice your absence."

Iakhovas smiled. "I don't think so. Even should they look for me, little malenti, I am here for them."

He gestured, releasing something from his hand that suddenly swirled around on its own axis. In the blink of an eye, a huge, fierce looking sahuagin appeared beside Iakhovas.

Laaqueel understood immediately that the replica was how he looked in his sahuagin form to the rest of her community. Gazing at the harsh features, she realized Iakhovas had deliberately made himself handsome by sahuagin standards. He hadn't done that at Waterdeep, and Laaqueel thought it was mute testimony that his powers had dramatically increased since then.

"Now," Iakhovas said, "we can go."

"Where?"

"To pursue my own interests."

Iakhovas released a sea gull feather into the wind, then he leaped into the air and hung there for a moment. Fear ran like ice through Laaqueel's veins. If the sahuagin saw Iakhovas openly doing magic, he would lose their trust immediately. Even most warriors regarded a priestess's powers with suspicion.

"Don't panic," Iakhovas said. "I've taken precautions. None of those around you can see either of us anymore. Come."

He gestured again, pointing at a place near the malenti as he glided above the deck. He flicked his finger, and a silver blob was flung off. Laaqueel watched as the tiny silver blob sailed through the air, then splashed against an invisible surface three feet above the ground. It glimmered and disappeared, consumed by the spell.

"Get on, little malenti," Iakhovas ordered.

Hesitantly, Laaqueel moved in the direction of where the silvery blob had disappeared. Even though she guessed that it was there, she was surprised when she bumped into an invisible object. Running her hands around it, she discovered that it was circular in shape but only had two dimensions, curved slightly concave like a clamshell.

"Hurry," Iakhovas urged.

Only the fear of his disapproval made Laaqueel climb onto the magic platform. Her weight shifted it only a little as it floated, but it quickly righted itself.

Without another word, Iakhovas flew forward, staying low over the water as he aimed them northwest toward the city proper. Glancing below, she spotted another Flaming Fist ship as it was boarded by sahuagin. The ship's defenders held the line for a moment, then broke as the sahuagin grabbed them in claws and jaws.

Laaqueel stayed hunkered down on the platform, praying to Sekolah to guide her. She wasn't surprised that Iakhovas had his own agenda tonight—he always did—but Baldur's Gate hadn't been taken quite as much by surprise as Waterdeep had.

* * * * *

"We can make a stand here, damn ye!" Khlinat roared as he chopped at a sahuagin hand that reached across the crates blocking that section of the harbor. Sea devil fingers splattered to the dock.

Standing beside him, Jherek concentrated on his sword-play, batting aside the trident thrusts. Other men stood shoulder to shoulder with him, making a tight line to hold back the sahuagin attackers. So far they'd managed to hold their position despite the mass of sea devils on the other side.

Only now a bearded man in chain mail with the Flaming Fist standard on his tabard was trying to get them to break ranks. He carried a broadsword in one scarred fist.

"Stand down and fall back!" the man roared.

"Who the hell do ye think ye are to be giving us orders?" Khlinat demanded. Several other sailors echoed his sentiments, adding various curses.

"I'm Sergeant Hobias Churchstone," the grizzled man said, "of the Flaming Fist Mercenary Company."

Spotting a familiar shape at the base of the crates he defended, Jherek stooped and caught up the boat hook that had been abandoned there. It slid into his hand naturally, curving up from between his spread fingers.

"Get some oil!" one of the sailors yelled. "We'll get us a proper bonfire going."

Out in the harbor, the distinctive bunyip roar sounded again. A thousand fear-filled memories charged through Jherek's mind, whipping by like a school of startled fish, shaking him to his very core. Everything he remembered about his father scared him, from the memories he actually had of the man to what he'd later learned of him in stories.

He'd been four when his father had lashed a man to the mainmast then made Jherek stand by while he whipped him to death. The man had stolen from his bunkmate, a crime that Bloody Falkane didn't put up with. Steal from anyone else and it was all right, but never from *Bunyip's* crew. The only blood spilled aboard *Bunyip* had been with Bloody Falkane's blessings.

After the man had died, the pirate captain ordered the body hung from the mast by its feet, a grim reminder to all the crew about where their loyalties lay. It had taken weeks for the carrion birds that regularly followed ships at sea to finish stripping the meat from the corpse.

A sahuagin thrust at Jherek again, shoving a trident across the stacked crates. Jherek twisted and slipped the blow, then captured the trident's haft behind the fork with his hook. Yanking the sahuagin off-balance, he swung his sword, cleaving his opponent's skull.

"Fall back!" Churchstone ordered. "You can hold this position for only a few minutes more. They're starting to close in from the sides."

Glancing over his shoulders in both directions, Jherek knew the pronouncement was true. The sahuagin had battled across other boats and sections of the docks, climbing onto the mainland in front of the shops and warehouses that lined the harbor district. Fire claimed the interiors of more buildings.

"Where would ye be after leading us?" Khlinat roared.

"To the warehouse behind you," Churchstone said. "We're better prepared for them there."

Jherek risked a glance at the warehouse, noting its disheveled appearance and the open bay doors. The interior was dark and immense. He turned to the dwarf, knowing Khlinat had fallen into the leadership role for the group of dockworkers surrounding them through his prowess and loud voice. The Flaming Fist sergeant had recognized it as well.

"Khlinat," Jherek said, blocking another trident thrust and pinning the weapon against the crate. Before the sahuagin had a chance of pulling the trident back, the young sailor flicked the hook out and caught his opponent through the gills. Jherek gave a twist and a yank that tore the sahuagin's throat out. "Retreating does make sense. We made this line and we held them. Now it's time to fall back and meet them again."

The dwarf fought gamely, avoiding a thrown javelin, then batting aside a trident thrust and slamming home another hand axe into the sahuagin's thorax. "Aye, swab, ye have the right of it." He blocked another blow and missed one of his own. "At times, I'm a prideful man. I don't like backing away from no fight."

"By Tymora's favored smile and grace, you sawed-off runt!" Churchstone roared. "You're not retreating from a damned fight. You're moving to better wage it."

"Have a care as to how ye address me," the dwarf roared back. "Else, if ye should survive the blades of these sea devils, ye will soon have another fight on yer hands."

"Khlinat," Jherek said, wanting desperately for the dwarf to listen to him. Even though they'd fought the arriving sahuagin to a standstill, they were losing men.

The dwarf nodded. "Aye, swab, and I hear ye." He raised his voice from a roar to a bellow. "To the warehouse, damn ye lazybones! Regroup and let's show these beasts the color of their gizzards!"

Jherek hung the hook from the sash at his waist and reached out for a lantern hanging from a nearby pole. Holding it by the wire handle, he smashed it against the crates.

At his side, Khlinat did the same. Flames twisted up with a liquid *whoosh*. "Them what owns them crates," the dwarf said as they gave ground together, "ain't going to be any too happy seeing how we treated their goods."

"If they live after tonight," Jherek grimly pointed out.

"Aye, swab, and ye have the right of it."

Jherek turned and ran, spotting the two groups of sahuagin closing in from the sides. Another moment and their position would have been overrun.

They fled into the warehouse, going all the way to the back of the cavernous structure. The warehouse was two stories tall. Crates occupied space on either side, leaving the middle section clear. The scarcity of crates offered mute testimony about the way shipping had slowed since the attacks on Waterdeep and the sea lanes. On either side at the back, steeply angled wooden steps led up to the second floor.

"Don't stop till you reach the back!" Churchstone ordered.

Jherek and Khlinat ran at the back of the group with the Flaming Fist sergeant. The young soldier couldn't help noticing the grin on Churchstone's face. Glancing back over his shoulder, Jherek saw that the sahuagin had no compunctions at all about following them into the building. At least thirty-five or forty sea devil warriors ran after them.

Churchstone wheeled suddenly and lifted his sword. "Now!" he shouted.

Jherek only caught the flash of movement overhead, then a huge cargo net dropped down, snaring the sahuagin. Several of them dropped to the warehouse floor, hammered by the great weight of the thick hawser ropes. The sea devils struggled to get up. A few of them sawed at the ropes with bone knives fashioned with chipped edges. The ropes slid away greasily, twisting from the sahuagin's grip as well as against the knife edges.

Then a pair of flaming torches dropped from the overhead floor as well. From the way the cargo netting caught fire, running in rivulets as it greedily consumed everything it touched, Jherek knew it had been soaked in oil. The sahuagin whistled shrilly in pain.

It was a hard way to die, Jherek knew, and he felt bad for the creatures. It wasn't a way he'd have killed them. Malorrie had trained him to be a warrior, to fight the right fights for the right reasons. This was more like extermination. He felt the warmth of the flames against his cheeks as the men around him hooted in triumph and pleasure.

Jherek glanced away, catching Khlinat's eye.

"A bad bit of business," the dwarf commented. "But 'twixt a rock and a hard place, a wise man makes do and lives for the morrow."

"I know," Jherek replied.

Khlinat slapped him on the shoulder. "Buck up, swabbie, we've a city yet to save should the gods prove willing."

Out in the harbor, the bunyip roar pealed again.

The chill of dread raced through Jherek when he heard the sound. Resolutely, he steeled himself. Come what may, he knew he had unfinished business with his father. He followed the dwarf, skirting around the dead and dying among the sahuagin as they cooked. Archers on the floor above feathered any that appeared on the verge of escaping.

Out in the fresh air and clear of the smoke trapped inside the warehouse, Jherek stared across Baldur's Gate harbor. The battle ravaged the city along the docks. Flames twisted up through the roofs of buildings that would be nothing but ash by morning.

His destiny, he thought grimly, was supposed to be found somewhere in the chaotic debris, but he had no idea how he was going to find it.

* * * * *

"Pacys! It's happening-Baldur's Gate is under attack!"

Snarled in the layers of bedding, Pacys strove to come awake. As always, the bard reached first for his yarting. It lay on the floor beside the bed, barely fitting the hollow between the furniture and the wall in the small room. Until late, the yarting was the only thing of real value he'd carried in years. His fingers slid over the strings and the smooth wood out of habit, then he opened his eyes.

"What?" he croaked.

"We're being attacked by the sahuagin." Delahnane Kubha stood on the other side of the small bedroom and peered out the single open window. The flimsy pale green drapes blew over her naked body, illuminated by the lone taper on the small nearby table.

She was forty and still lushly curved, bursting with womanly charms that had warmed the old bard's bed for nearly a tenday. Her blond hair had strands of gray in it now, but her confidence in herself kept her from coloring it. She worked as a serving wench in the Blushing Mermaid tavern only a few streets back of the room she kept here. Pacys had enjoyed a friendship that was more than friendship with her the last twenty years whenever he was in the city.

Holding onto the yarting, not bothering to cover his nakedness, Pacys rushed to the window. His hard life was mapped across his lean body in scars and wrinkles, creating highlights on his nut-brown skin. He kept his head shaved, and went whiskerless as well. Jutting silver eyebrows arched over his light hazel eyes. He was thin, his long bones overlaid with stringy muscle.

Pacys had been in Baldur's Gate almost two tendays since arriving by ship. After the attack on Waterdeep and his talk with the merman Narros, he'd come to the city hoping to find more mention of the prophecy he'd been told of, more of the song he was chasing.

Since arriving in Baldur's Gate, he'd only experienced a few times when the song he searched so desperately for- had been promised-had come to him. They'd been troubling pieces, crammed with trepidation and the iron smell of blood.

Now, as he gazed out over the battling groups below and out in the harbor, the song filled his head. It was an extension of the piece he'd unconsciously played in Narros's home after having been invited to the merman shaman's dwelling. Pacys knew it was the piece concerning the hero of the tale.

The music was strong, vibrant, but there was a trilling uncertainty about it, a tremor that didn't ring quite true. Relieved and excited, he fit his hands to the yarting, then guided his callused thumb across the strings. The resonance between what he heard in his mind and what he produced on the yarting was perfect. The sleep fog that clung to him from too many late nights and too much wine lifted instantly.

"He's here," Pacys declared, smiling. The music filled the tiny room.

Delahnane glanced at him, light glinting in her eyes. "The hero you've been charged with seeking?" She wasn't as happy about the situation as the old bard was. There was every chance that someone she knew from the tavern, perhaps even someone she called a friend, would be dead before morning.

"Yes." The certainty that rilled him surprised Pacys. At his age, there seemed to be so many doubtful things. He'd seen seventy-six years come and go, and had learned much in his unceasing travels across Faerun as a wandering bard, not all of it good, but it all had fed his talent in one way or another. Every emotion he'd ever experienced had burned through his mind and into his fingers in thousands of bars, taverns, inns, and castles across Faerun.

He closed his eyes, concentrating on the music. His fingers moved fluidly across the strings, seeking the notes now without hesitation. He added to the small store he'd brought with him from Waterdeep. No matter what song he'd played or how long it had been since he'd last played it, the old bard had never forgotten a tune he'd written or borrowed.

He gave voice to the song, his smooth baritone filling the room.

"He stood with the men of Baldur's Gate,

"This boy not yet become a man.

"He followed his heart, not knowing the plan,

"Of his destiny to stand before the Taker's hate.

*"With naked sword steel tight in his hand,
"And fear filling his belly as he eyed
"The black-hearted sahuagin warrior pride,
"The Champion fought to keep the defenses manned.
"Steel rang and sparked as blood ran from wounds untended,
"As the Taker took up the malevolent war that had not ended."*

The words stopped coming, but the music didn't. It became repetitive. Unable to stand idly by while the city fought back against the invaders, or to miss the chance to meet the young man Narros had said it was his destiny to find, the old bard hurried back to the bed.

He pulled his plain brown breeches from the chest where Delahnane kept her personal things and quickly stepped into them. As a raconteur of duels, battles, and wars, he'd learned to keep clothing close to hand and to dress in a hurry. During a war, the battle lines moved even while men slept.

"What are you doing?" Delahnane turned from the window and faced him.

"Only what needs be done, fair lady," Pacys replied. "I'm no man to lay abed when there's fighting to be done." He pulled on the faded green doublet, then stepped into his boots. His feet slid into them comfortably. He hung the yarting by its strap over his back and picked up the wooden staff he'd carried with him almost as long as the instrument.

"You're going out there?"

"I have no choice."

"Men are dying out there," Delahnane said.

"Yes, and my place is with them."

"You're an old man."

The statement, even though it was true, hurt Pacys. He was well aware of his advanced age. Elves, mayhap, had all the time in the world, but not him. He crossed to the woman and took her by the arms, staring into her green eyes. "Ah, and if I had my choice of deaths, O vision, I'd choose to die by your hand, knowing your willing love and your tender caress upon my brow as you urged me to greater rapture."

A small smile lighted her face, followed by an instant blush.

"But, dear lady," Pacys went on, "I fear I don't have my choice of deaths, and I must follow my nature."

Delahnane pulled him to her and hugged him fiercely. Her bare skin brushed against his hand. "I know, dear Pacys, and even should that nature of yours damn you to die this night, I know it has ever made you the man I've loved when happy occasion permitted us to be together."

Pacys stroked her face with the back of his fingers. He felt a pang in his heart. He didn't think he would die, though he knew it was possible, but he did know that the loving times they'd shared, and the quiet hours he'd spent reciting poetry to her, thrilling to the way she'd responded to every verse, were over.

"Should we not see each other again this night-" he began.

She swiftly covered his mouth with her hand. "No," she whispered. "Do not speak of dying."

After a moment, Pacys gave her a nod. It hadn't been his intention, but he felt she knew he was about to tell her he wouldn't be back. It was her way of avoiding that. He'd left her many times in the past, and both of them knew that with his station in life what it was, there could only be pleasant interludes between them.

She removed her hand. "Do you really think the boy you're searching for could be out there?"

"I have to believe," Pacys answered. "All my life I've felt I was destined for greatness, to pen and sing a song that will forever be known as mine, to take my place among the bards whose works achieve immortality. That has never happened. Until now. Oghma's blessing upon me and my craft has seen fit to put me on that path now. I can't step away from that."

"I know." With genuine effort, she released him and took a step back.

Pacys leaned in for a final kiss, tasting the wine yet lingering on her lips. Of all the women he'd known in his long life, she was a favorite, but settling down and leaving the traveling bard's life was as

unthinkable as taking a wife to travel with him who wasn't a bard herself. The road was home only to those who could call no other place home.

He reached inside his doublet and took out the coin pouch he'd been saving. Deftly, with all the skill of a thief, he placed it in her hand and curled her fingers up over it before she saw it.

Delahnane didn't say anything. She already knew how generous he was from past times he'd stayed with her.

Whenever he spent time with Delahnane, he always filled his own coin purse and one for her from the fees collected in the taverns he visited. With the caravans bringing men into the city as well as the needed laborers for the shipyards and the usual sailors, the old bard had done well during his stay. Both coin purses held a lot of copper and silver pieces, as well as the occasional gold piece. He'd learned long ago never to get too attached to coin. Oghma had always found a way to pry it out of him by some means.

"Take care," she told him.

"And you." Pacys went through the door, memorizing the image of her standing there with only the candlelight blazing over her. His heart was heavy with the thought of leaving. At the same time, he was excited. The song played in his mind, nothing new yet, but he knew there would be something more.

Outside, he bolted and ran by the other apartment doors to the stairs leading down to the alley. He raced around the building and out toward the docks. The song thrummed in his head, growing stronger as he moved to the battle.

* * * * *

The tide of sahuagin flooding into the city seemed unbreakable.

Jherek stayed with Khlinat, aware that the dwarf knew the streets and alleys of Baldur's Gate much better than he did. If there was a stand to make somewhere, he trusted Khlinat to make it and to choose the proper place.

They raced down Bindle Street till it crossed Stormshore Street, then kept going. Few of the sahuagin had penetrated this far back the city as yet.

The peg leg coupled with his short stature helped Jherek easily keep up with Khlinat, but they moved quickly. Armed men, most of them evidently with the Flaming Fist, hailed citizens in the streets, urging them to join the efforts in the harbor. The young sailor guessed that less than half the efforts were successful. Men with families concentrated on getting those families to safety, not trusting that the sea devil invaders could be held.

The blood weeping from the cut beside Jherek's eye had finally ceased, leaving a hard crust that partially obscured his vision. It bothered him that they appeared to be running from the battle.

"Where are we going?" Jherek asked.

"Patience, swabbie, I've got a plan. Never ye fear." The dwarf's breath came in ragged gasps and he flailed his arms to keep up the pace. Two alleys further up, he pointed at a large building. "There."

The building stood three stories tall with a stone exterior. The bottom two floors contained what appeared to be a warehouse because there were no windows, while the third floor held personal living quarters with a large widow's walk facing the River Chionthar. A hand-painted sign stuck out from the building but it was too dark for Jherek to make it out.

Huffing and puffing from the run, Khlinat pounded the back of a hand axe against the door near the cargo bay. Hollow thumps sounded inside. The dwarf repeated his effort twice more, gaining intensity and frustration.

Suddenly a deep male voice called down from above. "What the hell do you want?"

Khlinat stepped back from the building and gazed up. "Yer city's under attack, Felogyr Sonshal, and there ye stand instead of taking up arms against them what attacks."

Sonshal stood in the shadows of the widow's walk, but Jherek could tell he was a big warrior who'd evidently enjoyed the successes of his life. Judging from his girth, he'd had several successes. Fierce mustaches stuck out from his lower face and dangled below his chin. He dressed well, but the thing that

drew the young sailor's attention most was the long shape in the man's arms. It was pointed directly at Khlinat. Moonlight glinted from the dark metal.

During his time in Velen, Jherek had only seen a few weapons like the one Sonshal carried. It was an arquebus, a weapon as rare as the most arcane magic that took advantage of the explosive nature of the smoke powder made by the Lantans. The arquebus fired round bullets much like those a sling threw, but with far more destruction than either a sling or a bow. Also, the bullets weren't as easy for a healer to take out as an arrow or quarrel.

The dim glow of a slow match burned orange across Sonshal's face. "I'm on my way to help. I only just woke."

"Pulled yerself out of yer cups, ye mean."

Consternation covered Sonshal's face. "Do I know you?"

"Khlinat Ironeater. Aye, ye know me. From a time or two a round was bought at the Blushing Mermaid or the Three Old Kegs. Stories was swapped and lies was told, but I've never done business with ye. That blasted smoke powder ye sell is much too uncertain for a one-legged dwarf who's learned the value of the sure-footed path."

"Then what are you doing here?" Sonshal demanded. "Unless you're beating on doors and raising help."

"More than that," Khlinat roared. "That harbor yonder's filled with all manner of foul beasties, including no few sea devils. I've got me a plan, desperate, aye, and mayhap a trifle foolhardy, but Marthammor Duin keeps foolish wanderers ever in his blessed sight."

"Get to the point."

"Ye sell smoke powder," Khlinat said.

"I sell fireworks," Sonshal argued. "And torches, lanterns, and beacon pots. Things a man determined to go adventuring needs."

"Aye," the dwarf agreed, "and ye stock smoke powder that the Lantans make. The reason the four Grand Dukes don't run ye out of business here is because yer choosy about who ye sell to, and the fact that yer a rich man in these parts. Makes ye a good taxpayer, I'm told."

"What do you want? Do you figure an arquebus is going to serve you better than those hand axes you carry?"

Jherek listened politely to the conversation, staying out of it because he trusted the dwarf, but every instinct in the young sailor cried out to him to be at the harbor, helping where he could. Fighting men died while they stood there.

"No," Khlinat said. "I need that smoke powder ye have put away in the warehouse." He glanced at Jherek. "Steady, swabbie."

Jherek gave him a tight nod. Glancing at the harbor, he saw flaming catapult loads streak through the sky.

"I don't sell smoke powder to just anyone," Sonshal stated. "If you've heard anything, I know you've heard that about me."

"I wasn't intending to buy it," Khlinat said. "Just use it."

"For what?" Sonshal asked.

A broad grin split the dwarf's face. "Goin' fishing."

VI

4 Kythorn, the Year of the Gauntlet

Laaqueel crouched lower on the invisible floating disc as Iakhovas guided her around a crowd of battling sahuagin and Flaming Fist mercenaries. Incredibly, the mercenaries were holding their own against the sahuagin, starting to push them back into the harbor in some areas. The sheer ferocity of the humans surprised her, and made her respect them as well.

Out in the harbor proper, ships burned. Three of them listed heavily in the water, burning down close to the water-line. Others were in the beginning stages of the same fate despite the efforts of dockworkers and sailors to halt it with water brigades.

The invisible disc stopped smoothly in front of a warehouse, Iakhovas alighted gracefully, pulling his cloak more securely around him. He drew his sword, revealing the runes carved into the shining blade. It was the first time Laaqueel had seen the weapon, making her realize the agents he had working around Faerun to recover objects he claimed were his were still bringing things to him.

He grinned at her, his scarred features and eyepatch highlighted by a flaming catapult load that streaked through the night sky. "Come, little malenti. We have only a short time remaining that we may complete the assignments I've planned for our evening."

She didn't argue and she didn't point out that the sahua-gin were dying behind them, shedding their blood for Iakhovas's machinations. Instead, she told herself that those were also Sekolah's machinations and followed Iakhovas to the warehouse.

The structure stood bleak and weathered, tortured by time, the elements, and ill use. The doors, leached gray by the sun working through the constant layer of moisture that hung over Baldur's Gate, stood only for a moment against Iakhovas's gesture. A thin green ray stabbed from his finger and caused the doors to glow briefly, then disintegrate into a whirling mass of fine dust.

Iakhovas strode into the warehouse. Laaqueel followed at his heels, marveling at the amount of magic he seemed capable of unleashing. She felt in her heart that he had Sekolah to thank for that. No matter what Iakhovas believed, she knew the Shark God's influence had put him back into the world and made him as powerful as he was.

"Hold!" someone shouted. "What in the Nine Hells do you think you're doing?"

Turning, Laaqueel gazed at the dozen agitated surface dwellers that came at them with swords bared. She saw them for only an instant, then Iakhovas stepped to her side and brushed her back protectively. He leaned forward, put a small bullhorn to his lips, and shouted with a deafening fury.

The shout drove the men back five paces, turning them like sediment stirred up from the ocean bottom. All of them survived, but they were injured and screamed in pain, clapping their hands to their bleeding ears.

"Hurry," Iakhovas said. He led her to the back of the warehouse, through stacked crates and shrouded items of all sizes and shapes. At the back wall he stepped into a small alcove and touched a panel. With a muffled creak, a section of the wall opened, revealing a long tunnel filled with shadows beyond.

Laaqueel held her trident ready, smelling old pain and death clinging to the tunnel. Iakhovas reached into his cloak and took out an amulet cut from a huge, flawless jacinth into a lens shape, six inches in diameter. The device was set in platinum with a dozen diamonds on the left and a rune across the top. Holding it in his hand, Iakhovas spoke arcane words Laaqueel couldn't understand.

The gem's face glowed with lambent blue light. Instantly a map with a compass rose appeared. Gazing at it, Laaqueel recognized the warehouse, and the entrance to the tunnel they now stood before.

"A moment, little malenti," Iakhovas said softly, "while I orient myself."

The soft blue glow died, collapsing in on itself. He put the amulet back in one of the cloak's hiding places, then took out a jade-colored globe that looked almost black in the pale light streaming in from the warehouse. He spoke another word. The globe lifted from his open palm and floated into place behind his left shoulder. It glowed pale jade, illuminating the tunnel.

Laaqueel blinked against the sudden light even though it was soft.

"Now," Iakhovas said, "let's reap the rewards of the bold move I've made." He started down the tunnel so rapidly his black cloak shimmered like a waterfall behind him.

Having no other choice, and always curious as to his real purpose and the events he orchestrated, Laaqueel followed.

* * * * *

"You're crazy, dwarf."

If Khlinat harbored any ill feelings toward Sonshal for his pronouncement, Jherek didn't see it. They worked hurriedly inside the warehouse Sonshal had allowed them to enter after Khlinat explained his

plan. "Hitch up them horses, swabbie," the little man said, "afore I have a chance to rethink much of what we're going to do."

Jherek brought the horses to the front of the wagon Sonshal had let them have as well. His hands worked quickly, buckling the traces into place. Khlinat continued rolling barrels of smoke powder into the wagon.

"You're going to blow yourself up is what you're going to do," Sonshal said, but helped the dwarf with the barrels. "That stuffs damned unstable if you don't treat it right."

"It's got me respect," Khlinat said dourly. "If I could think of some other way to handle this, I would. I'm only praying this works."

Finished with the horses, Jherek vaulted over the wagon's side and shoved the fifty-pound barrels up behind the seat. He handled them gingerly. Only three years ago in Velen, a local farmer had used smoke powder to clear stumps from some land he wanted to plow. Even Malorrie had been impressed by the carnage only a little of the smoke powder had done.

Khlinat shoved the last barrel into place.

"That's all of it," Sonshal said, twisting his mustache with one hand.

"Then I'll be off," Khlinat said, "and thank ye for yer kind donations." He offered his arm..

Sonshal took the arm, then shook his head. "Mighty Tempus watch over a thrice-blasted village idiot in the making, I can't let you go it alone, dwarf. If you've an extra seat, I'll be glad to accompany you. I may know more about fuse-cutting than you do."

Khlinat smiled broadly. "Aye, friend Sonshal, as long as ye keep in mind that one way or another, this is apt to be a oneway trip."

"I'll likely not forget." Sonshal took up a roll of fuse and a torch from the nearby stores.

Khlinat moved to the wagon's seat and grabbed the reins. "Have a ready hand there, swabbie," he said to Jherek. "Them sea devils see us coming, they ain't going to be very friendly about it. We start acting brave, they've to start asking themselves why."

Nervous about what the dwarf planned to do, Jherek sat on the bench seat beside him. Ever since he'd left Velen, his life had been turned constantly topsy-turvy, with certain death in every corner. The fear numbed him a little as he reflected on how he seemed to get caught up in the events spreading around Faerun. All he could guess was that it was the ill luck of his birthright. He kept the sword and the hook naked in his hands.

The warehouse doors were open, revealing the confusion roiling out in the street as more mercenaries arrived and had to fight their way through the fearful crowds fleeing their homes. Lightning speared the sky, but there wasn't a storm cloud to be seen.

"These barrels get wet," Sonshal called out as he clambered into the back and sat, "all we're going to be doing is riding to our deaths. They get hit by that damned lightning those wizards are throwing around, and we'll go even quicker."

"I hear ye." Khlinat laid the reins across the backs of the horses in a practiced snap. The team hit the end of their traces at once, starting the wagon off quickly.

Sonshal cursed, warning about the barrels.

"Gangway!" Khlinat called at the top of his voice. The horses' hooves struck sparks from the cobblestones and the thunder of their passage cannonaded between the tall buildings on either side of Bindle Street. "Wild horses! Clear the street!"

People dived to the sides of the street, some of them just ahead of being trampled. Khlinat handled the horses expertly, slapping the reins and urging them to greater speed. The ironbound wheels whirred against the cobblestones.

Jherek braced himself, holding fast to his weapons and praying to Ilmater that their headlong rush hurt no one, and that they arrived in time to save something of Baldur's Gate.

* * * * *

Pacys's fingers twitched for the strings of the yarting. The music crescendoed in the old bard's head.

He mapped the words and the rhythms, finding maddening pieces and partials of the lyrics that formed the song. The oppression and the sound of the battle didn't daunt his spirits or send fear into him at all. He felt more alive than he had in decades. His soul thirsted for the knowledge and the answers that he was certain lurked around the next corner.

He held his staff in both hands as he ran through the crowd in the street. He felt their pain of loss, their uncertainty of fear, and he worked it into the lyrics running through his mind as surely and skillfully as a silversmith working an intricate inlay assignment.

The music changed pitch, becoming the champion's song again when he heard the rough voice farther down the street.

"Clear the damned street, ye deaf lummoxes!"

The sea of people and mercenaries before Pacys parted. The music paralyzed him, stronger than he'd ever heard it before. He spotted the dwarf over the horses' laid-back ears as they pulled the wagon. Then his eyes rested on the young man beside the diminutive teamster.

Pacys knew he'd never seen the young man before in his life, but he felt he knew him with greater certainty than he'd experienced at any time in his long life. This was the one Narros had spoken of, the one who would challenge the Taker that brought death and destruction from the sea.

"Get out of the way, old man!" the dwarf roared, slapping the rumps of the horses yet again.

Getting his wits back about him, Pacys dived to the side, rolling to get more distance. The wagon thundered past him, and he memorized the cadence of the ironbound wheels across the cobblestones, figuring out how he could bring that sound to life with his fingertips against the yarting's bowl while strumming the strings with his thumb.

The wagon took the next corner and drove toward the harbor.

Pacys pushed himself up, watching as the wagon disappeared. Without a second thought, he pursued, running as fast as he could. When he turned the corner, he came face-to-face with the first of the sahuagin who'd battled their way farther into the city.

The bunyip roared out in the harbor as the lead sahuagin ripped trident tines toward Pacys's face.

* * * * *

Laaqueel followed Iakhovas through the darkness, the sounds of the battle out in the harbor far behind them now. She'd lost track of how many twists and turns they'd taken, how many other passageways they'd passed by, how many corpses they'd climbed over. She hated the enclosed atmosphere of the tunnels, especially the way she had to remain partially slumped over now that they'd wended their way more deeply into the undercity.

"Hold up," he ordered.

She froze in place, a prayer to Sekolah on her lips as she held ready the gifts the Shark God had given her as his priestess.

The globe floating behind Iakhovas's left shoulder pushed a dim jade glow across the distance, becoming brighter. At first Laaqueel didn't see the big man at the other end of the tunnel, then the glow crept over him.

He was tall and big-bellied, possibly the most massive surface dweller Laaqueel had ever seen. He looked even more so because of the way he was hunched over in the tunnel. Unruly red hair sprouted out from the sides of his head but nothing grew on top. He kept his beard shaved from his cheeks and upper lip, but it grew long and thick from his chin, hanging midway down his chest. He wore a dark red cloak over a sleeveless leather vest, high-topped boots and dark brown breeches.

"Lord Iakhovas," the big man rumbled.

"Captain Vurgrom," Iakhovas greeted, moving closer. Laaqueel was aware of the shimmer that took place around Iakhovas and guessed that he was altering his image again to fit the other man's perceptions.

"Quite a party you're throwing up above," Vurgrom said.

Laaqueel studied the man further, taking in the gruff manner and the tattoos that decorated his thick,

beefy forearms. She knew from the cut of his clothing and the boots that he was a seafarer, and she guessed from his presence in the hidden tunnels that he wasn't there for good reason. He reminded her a lot of the other pirates Iakhovas had recruited for the attack on Baldur's Gate.

"I trust everything went well," Iakhovas said.

Vurgrom shrugged, the casual gesture made even harder by the tight confines of the tunnel. "I never cared much for river travel. Give me the openness of the Sea of Fallen Stars every time. The overland trip from Ilipur is not something I'm looking forward to repeating."

"You have the device I asked you to get?" Iakhovas asked.

"Aye." Vurgrom reached under his vest and took off a silver necklace that held a leather pouch. "Kept it close to my heart for safekeeping." He took the pouch from the necklace and dropped it into Iakhovas's outstretched palm.

"What of the man who had it?" Iakhovas asked.

"I did for him," Vurgrom said. "Split him from wind to water and left him like a grand buffet for the fishes to feast on. They'll not find him."

Iakhovas poured the contents out into his palm. The light of the hovering jade globe revealed a twisted metal piece no longer than Iakhovas's forefinger and less than half that wide. He closed his fist around it, covering the runic markings before Laaqueel had a chance to see if she could decipher them. "Very good, Captain Vurgrom."

"I lived up to my end of the bargain," Vurgrom said. His piggish eyes were surrounded by thick scar tissue, and the reflected light in them gleamed shrewdly.

"As I shall live up to mine." Iakhovas put the trinket away in his cloak, then removed a heavy coin purse and tossed it to the captain.

Vurgrom caught the purse with an ease that was surprising for one so bulky. He unfastened the drawstrings and emptied it onto his thick palm.

The glowing globe heightened its illumination a bit more, but the change was so gradual Laaqueel didn't think human eyes would notice as quickly as she did. Sahuagin eyes were meant for dim lights, though hers handled bright light better than her kin's did.

Red, green, blue, and amber fires burned inside the gems Vurgrom held. "Cyric's blessed avarice," the captain said in a thick voice, "that's a king's ransom there, Lord Iakhovas."

"You may think so," Iakhovas said, "but remember you well that even those baubles are but a pittance against what I'm prepared to offer you should you maintain your loyalty to me."

A small man came around from behind Vurgrom and fitted a jeweler's glass to his eye. He picked up a ruby, sapphire, diamond, and emerald in quick succession, eyeing them against the light of the glowing globe. He gave a short nod, never taking any of the gems from Vurgrom's sight, then nodded again and stepped back.

Vurgrom closed his hand over the jewels and made them disappear, splitting them up and putting them in various areas of his clothing. "Aye, milord, and know that ever my blade shall serve your will in any way that I might aid you. Would there be any other way tonight?"

"No. Take your men and go," Iakhovas directed. "I'll meet up with you in the Sea of Fallen Stars."

Vurgrom smiled, but Laaqueel didn't like the way the effort fit the man's face. "I'll look forward to seeing you there, milord. I and my crews have worked long and hard to put everything into play as you have designed. Until we meet again, Cyric keep you safe in his shadows that you might smite your enemies through no risk of your own."

"And you," Iakhovas echoed.

Laaqueel had no idea how Iakhovas had arranged for Vurgrom to see him, but she noted the obvious deferential treatment. After Vurgrom and his group had gone, she addressed him. "You're planning on meeting him in the Sea of Fallen Stars?"

"Yes." Iakhovas offered no explanation. He continued down the passageway they were in.

The thought bothered Laaqueel. Though she knew of the Sea of Fallen Stars from talks she'd had with surface dwellers and maps she'd studied, the idea of being in a sea surrounded entirely by land was unnerving to her. She didn't know whether she hoped Iakhovas left her behind or not.

"Ah, little malenti, for someone who evidences her faith so strongly, there remains much weakness within you," Iakhovas taunted. "You shall accompany me to the Inner Sea, and there you will see the culmination of all the prophecies that you're helping come true."

There was just enough truth in his words to ease her mind somewhat, but the knowledge that Iakhovas looked after himself first and only never left her thoughts.

They followed the passageway a little farther and found the end of it. However, when the globe got close enough, it revealed a break in the wall on the right. Iakhovas stepped through without hesitation.

Laaqueel followed closely, reluctant to lose the light. The smell that hit her when she stepped through the opening immediately told her they were in a sewer. She remembered when she'd first learned of such things, having never thought of surface dwellers living out their two-dimensional lives and such bodily functions being any kind of trouble. She'd been further disturbed and horrified to learn that most of the coastal cities and towns poured their waste directly into the ocean.

She avoided the running water in the center of the duct and was grateful she was sucking air through her lungs instead of water because the stench would have been even stronger. The glowing globe caught the attention of the long-bodied rats creeping through the duct and placed jade fires in their eyes.

Only a little farther on, Iakhovas stopped again. He gazed at the wall to his left.

With some effort, Laaqueel spotted the rune marked there. It wasn't a glyph with any power, but it marked an area of some importance. Iakhovas stepped off a measured distance, then stomped his foot down, creating a hollow thump. Moving quickly, he reached down and seized the slab of stone. With a show of incredible strength, he lifted the man-sized slab and shoved it to the side. The glowing globe obediently moved, providing illumination that looked down into the opening.

Stepping around him, her nose wrinkling in disgust from the bitter stench that erupted from the opening, Laaqueel peered down into it. Fully six feet or more down, the jade light reflected against a white powder floor and walls.

"A lime pit," Iakhovas explained. "It took me some time to find out the things I needed to know that brought us here, but I did. In the doing of it, I learned of this pit. A man named Nantrin Bellowglyn owns the Three Old Kegs, an inn nearby, and he prospers by renting out this as well. Lime breaks a corpse down faster than anything expect carrion eaters." He chanted briefly, his voice carrying power.

A moment passed, and when he finished, he gazed into the lime pit. Laaqueel watched as well, wondering what magery he'd wrought. A low, pain-filled groan escaped from the lime pit. Then, incredibly, the malenti priestess watched as a sticklike figure pushed itself up from the white powder around it.

Skeletal, half-formed bones constructing the basic framework of a human being pushed through the lime powder body. The thing glared up at Iakhovas through the hollows of the half-dissolved skull that sat on the bony neck. The thing's voice when it spoke was a mixture of hoarse, raspy anger and disgust.

"What do you want of me?" the thing demanded.

VII

4 Kythorn, the Year of the Gauntlet

Jherek braced himself as Khlinat drove the wagon team into the irregular line of sahuagin blocking the mouth of the alley that let out into Baldur's Gate harbor. They'd passed most of them already, but the sea devils had taken refuge up against the buildings on either side of the alley, fighting hand-to-hand with citizens predominantly dressed in the Flaming Fist's colors.

The sahuagin group at the end of the alley was wedged too tightly to scatter, and Jherek knew if the dwarf slowed they'd be overrun in heartbeats. The young sailor blocked trident thrusts with his hook and hacked at heads and limbs that got close enough. He'd left at least four sahuagin lying behind the wagon.

The dwarf squalled in anger as a sahuagin grabbed hold of the wagon and tried to pull aboard. Sonshal's arquebus banged as Jherek went to Khlinat's aid. The big bullet cored through the sahuagin's head, punching it back off the wagon.

The horses kept to their pace, urged on by the dwarf slapping leather across their rumps. Their headlong run pushed the sea devils down before them, and their iron-shod hooves dealt grievous and

mortal injury. The sahuagin clicked and whistled in pain and surprise, but two of them reacted quickly enough to catch hold of the animals. They popped their claws out and set to their bloody work.

"Swabbie!" Khlinat yelled.

Jherek was already in motion. With sure-footed grace, he stepped out onto the horse's back like it was a deck pitching in a wild storm. He kept himself centered, then dropped onto the horse's back and locked his legs with the skill he'd acquired riding up from Athkatla with the caravan. He swung the sword, coming down and cleaving the sahuagin from crown to chin.

The body twitched and fell away, but the moonlight glinted on the blood streaming from the horse's neck. Jherek realized the animal was dead already and didn't know it. There was no way to staunch the blood flow.

The young sailor turned his attention to the other horse. He reached out with the hook and caught the sahuagin in the muscles that joined the head and shoulder, tearing the flesh cruelly as he found a hold. He yanked and twisted, pulling the sea devil from the horse. One webbed foot pushed against the ground, and the sahuagin sprang at the young sailor more quickly than he thought possible.

Reacting instinctively, Jherek whipped his other hand across and caught the sahuagin in the face with his fist. Pain shot up his arm, but the sea devil went down under the horses' hooves.

They broke through the sea devils at the harbor. Khlinat whipped the horses one last time, hauling them away from the dock, and the carcass of a small cargo ship that had burned nearly to the waterline. The horse beneath Jherek stumbled and almost fell, but fear drove the creature over the harbor's side.

The wagon followed, and Khlinat yelled hoarsely in rebellion and fear, covering over Sonshal's own shouts.

Laaqueel stared at the resurrected dead thing in the lime pit with revulsion so strong it nearly caused her to empty her stomach again. She stood through willpower alone.

Dead things weren't meant to walk. Sekolah's teachings were clear about that. Dead things were meant to be eaten as quickly as possible, whether they were from outside the sahuagin family or from in it. She'd heard stories about the dead being brought back to unlife, about vampires and ghouls, and she'd once been attacked by a group of drowned ones while scavenging shipwrecks with a band of humans she'd spied on and eventually handed over to Huaanton when he'd still been baron.

Iakhovas glared at her and gestured.

Instantly, the quill next to her heart twisted and the nausea went away. At least, the physical effects of it did, leaving her stomach resting quietly. Mentally, she still couldn't stand the sight of the thing waiting quietly in the pit. Surface dwelling priests and priestesses had the ability to turn the undead, as did the hated sea elves, but as a priestess for Sekolah, she had no such ability. The drowned ones had nearly killed her before one of the humans she'd been working with turned them back.

"I would have something from you," Iakhovas told the thing.

"I have nothing."

"It was yours at one time," Iakhovas argued. "I was told it still resided with your body."

The thing ran its misshapen hands over its body. "I was killed and robbed. I don't even remember being brought here."

"Your name," Iakhovas said, "was Cuthbert Drin and you were brother to Halbazzar Drin, the owner of Sorcerous Sundries here in Baldur's Gate."

"I'm in Baldur's Gate?"

"Yes."

The dead thing moved uncertainly. Its face took on features as the rest of it sharpened into shape as well. Laaqueel realized whatever magic Iakhovas had laid on it was continuing to work.

"Release me," the thing ordered, knotting its crooked fingers and hands into fists. "This hurts."

"No," Iakhovas said.

"The time *bij-rns!*" The dead thing suddenly broke into a frenzy of activity, pacing and scratching itself. In places, the fingers penetrated the lime-covered skin. Tendrils of old blood wormed out, marring the white luster of the lime in the glowing globe's glare.

"Of course it burns," Iakhovas said. "It's a struggle to keep you alive at all."

"You can't keep me like this."

"Yes," Iakhovas said. "I can."

The dead thing moved faster, almost up to a run in the small area. It clawed at the walls of the pit, seeking some way to get out. "What do you want?"

"The ship you had with you on the day you were killed," Iakhovas answered. "It's mine, and I've come to claim it."

"It was taken," the dead thing argued.

"No," Iakhovas replied. "I traced your steps, Cuthbert Drin, through the ordinary means of agents planted here at Baldur's Gate, and through scrying and divining into the past. After I had the facts, I found the moment in time you discovered the bottle high in the Orsraun Mountains near the Vilhon Reach. You and your brother, Halbazzar, found mention of the bottled ship in scrolls that came into your hands at the shop. Even twenty years ago, his rigorous adventuring days were behind him, robbed by the poisoned knife of an assassin hired to kill him. The damage was so great he never fully recovered from the attack. You had the bottled ship the day you died, and your murderers didn't find it."

"How do you know this?"

"I found two of your murderers," Iakhovas said. "I took the time to question them, and I made certain of the veracity of their stories as I stripped their lives from them one layer at a time. Both stories, in the end, were screamed out and agreed on the fact that the killers hadn't seen the bottled ship."

"You know the mystery of the bottle?" the dead thing asked, picking at the lime-encrusted shreds of flesh hanging off it. "Though I tried any number of ways, I never succeeded in opening it. Even the glass wouldn't shatter."

"I know the secret of the bottle," Iakhovas said. "I petitioned the elemental beings who created it, trading with them for their services." He narrowed his single eye and deepened his voice. "Now give it to me or I'll leave you there like that, unable to ever escape the fiery kiss of the lime that ate away your flesh and bones."

"No!" The dead thing slapped and massaged at itself, still walking, still uncomfortable.

"Then burn." Iakhovas started to walk away.

"Wait," the dead thing whined.

Laaqueel watched as the dead thing dug down into the lime ashes and found a small bottle. The dead thing tossed it up to Iakhovas.

Stretching out a hand, Iakhovas said a word. Instantly the lime-encrusted bottle stopped, hovering above and not quite touching his palm. He took out a cloth from his cloak with his other hand, then wrapped it around the bottle and put it away without getting burned.

"I've done what you asked of me, wizard," the dead thing said, wrapping its arms around itself and rocking with the pain. "Where is my release?"

Iakhovas gestured and spoke.

Immediately the dead thing disappeared in a cloud of whirling white lime.

Iakhovas replaced the stone slab that covered the hole. "Come, little malenti," he growled in anticipation, "we've tarried here long enough." He turned and strode back down the passageway in the direction they'd come, the glowing globe keeping pace with him.

Still unnerved by her experience and not wanting to confront any undead in the tight tunnel by herself, Laaqueel hurried after her master.

As the horses and wagon tumbled the eight or ten feet to the black harbor water, Jherek gathered himself and dived from the horse's back. He plummeted toward the water and hit it cleanly, going under at once. Kicking out, he swam for the thrashing horses, aware of the sahuagin and the other sea creatures filling the water around him. Some of them changed course and headed for him.

He shoved the hook in the sash around his waist and closed on the horses with his sword. Grabbing the traces, he dragged the heavy sword blade across them, parting the leather in seconds. One of the horses swam away, but the other gave in to the wounds the sahuagin had inflicted on it and went still in the water.

Turning his attention back to the wagon, Jherek gratefully saw that it was tight enough at the

sideboards and light enough to float-at least for the moment. Still, if the powder kegs had gotten too wet, Khlinat's plan wouldn't work.

The young sailor kicked out and swam to the wagon ahead of a pair of sahuagin. He grabbed the side with his empty hand and expertly pulled his weight aboard without tipping the wagon over. Sonshal worked among the kegs, stuffing fuses into their lids. The slow match coiled over his shoulder glowed orange more brightly when he blew on it to get the coal at its hottest.

Jherek dripped on the wagon. Two inches of water swirled around his boots as the impromptu craft took on water like a sieve. "We don't have much time," he told Sonshal.

"I'm aware of that, boy," the man said, "but if these fuses aren't measured off properly and cut right, we're not going to get the effect your friend is wanting."

Jherek glanced around. "Where is he?" He had to shout over the screams and hoarse yells of sailors and the men on the docks.

"I don't know." Sonshal took a brief respite to boot a sahuagin who was trying to climb onto the wagon, knocking the sea devil back into the water. "I lost sight of him when we hit the water and barely managed to stay with the wagon myself." He poked another fuse into the next barrel.

Concerned, Jherek peered into the water, uncertain if he'd see the dwarf for sure. Too many warring shades of light and darkness overlapped the dark harbor water, turning it alternately into a bright, reflective surface or into a dark and depthless one. Men died quickly out there, on sahuagin claws or tridents, broken and torn apart by the great creatures that had been summoned from the river.

A hand broke the surface only a few feet away.

Jherek reached out and caught the hand, then balanced his weight on the wagon as he took on the dwarf's weight and pulled him from the water. Khlinat's face was masked with fresh blood mixed with water that ran quickly down his chin and throat. He blew his nose noisily and freed his hand axes. Bellowing curses, the peg-legged dwarf hurled himself at their foes.

Jherek defended the other side, keeping the sea devils from Sonshal's back and from the wagon. He ignored the fatigue that filled him, and the throbbing pain that came from the laceration by his eye. In his mind, he imagined Malorie there, guiding his hand by voice control.

"It's done!" Sonshal roared in warning. "Get overboard!" He dived over himself, setting the example. Khlinat hit the water next.

Jherek took a final glance over his shoulder and watched the smoke streaming from the fuses tucked securely in the powder kegs. He didn't know if the dwarfs plan was going to work, but he knew nothing else that would either. He said a prayer to Ilmater and leaped as sahuagin pulled themselves up into the wagon where water was already halfway up the barrels.

Jherek went deep, swimming for the bottom of the harbor. Khlinat had said he'd seen men use small amounts of the smoke powder to fish with. With the explosions, the concussive force rippled through the water and overloaded the sensitive lateral lines that ran the length of a fish's body, stunning the creatures. Since sahuagin were reputed to have lateral lines as well, which made them so deadly in their home territory, the dwarf had hoped the blast would have the same effect.

Traveling through the water, the sound of the detonations came in rapid succession to Jherek's ears. He held his breath tightly, knowing the blast force would only be a second or two after.

A heartbeat later, it hit him like a brick wall. He struggled to hold onto his consciousness but everything went black.

* * * * *

Pulling back in the alley quickly, Pacys let the sahuagin's trident rip the air harmlessly in his face. The old bard moved with fluid economy, echoing the triumphant cadence of the song that echoed within his head.

Lifting the staff, he blocked the sea devil's second slash then slid the weapon to the side and slammed the iron-capped end into his opponent's face. While the sahuagin remained dazed, Pacys twisted the staff in the middle. Foot-long blades sprang out of either end. He took another step back, set

himself, and rammed one blade into the creature's thorax, penetrating the heart.

Still, the sahuagin remained determined to get to its opponent. It raked the air with its claws as Pacys held it back with the staff. The oily black eyes eventually dimmed and the sahuagin draped over the weapon.

Pacys shoved the corpse to the alley floor, aware that other sahuagin already crowded forward. He used the staff with lethal efficiency, clearing a space around him and winning the respect of his savage adversaries. Still, he burned inside to be moving, to pursue the young man he'd spotted on the wagon.

During a brief lull, he knelt down quickly and pinched up some sand from the cobblestones. "Oghma, grant that my spell be strong." He flicked the sand out as he said the words. When he finished, he thought he saw a shimmer wash over the combatants in the alley.

In the next instant, nearly two thirds of their number stumbled and fell, asleep by the time they hit the cobblestones. With the way much clearer, Pacys ran toward the docks.

At the end of the alley, the old bard spotted the sahuagin standing at the dock's edge and peering down, but he didn't see the wagon with the young man in it. The old bard went forward, drawn by the music that grew still stronger inside his head. Fearful of what might have taken place, he told himself that nothing could have happened to the young man without causing the song in his heart and his head to go away.

As long as the tune lived, so did the young man. He felt that had to be true, but he wasn't certain. Staying down from the clustered sahuagin, he raced to the edge of the dark quay and peered down into the water as they were doing. With the wavering light from so many of the nearby buildings and ships that had been torched, to say nothing of the docks in places, it took him a moment to spot the wagon.

It floated, although the amount of water it was taking on as its weight dragged it down testified that it wouldn't float long. The sahuagin jumping after it from the docks made that time even less. The old bard barely made out the gray streamers of smoke curling up from the small barrels in the back.

In the next instant, though, the barrels detonated one by one. The series of explosions threw up geysers of water, smoke, wood chips, and a wave of force that blew Pacys from his feet.

* * * * *

Live, that you may serve.

The cold, powerful voice filled Jherek's mind, snapping him back from the black void where his senses had fled. He woke in the harbor water, his lungs burning with the need for air and the cold claws of a sahuagin wrapping his neck.

Somehow he'd managed to hang onto his weapons. He let his anger at the disembodied voice that had spoken to him fill his mind. All his life, since he'd been a small boy, that voice had been a part of him. He didn't know where it came from, or from whom, or what he was supposed to serve.

He'd struggled for years to find out, thinking at first that he'd simply imagined it. But he hadn't imagined the dolphins that had saved his life that first time, nor the last time aboard *Finaren's Butterfly* when the unknown power had set him free from a sahuagin net during battle. Even Madame Litaar with her skill at divination and Malorrie with all his book learning and knowledge he'd picked up over the course of his life and death hadn't been able to tell him what it meant.

But there was no doubt how that voice had influenced and shaped his life.

The echoes of the voice and the command were still in his mind when he moved. Despite the water surrounding him he moved quickly, going through it as if it wasn't there to block the sahuagin before the creature could scissor the flesh of his throat. The move would have worked above water but shouldn't have now-only it did, and he guessed that it had to be because the sahuagin was partially stunned by the exploding powder kegs.

Pushing away from his attacker, seeing the evil glint in its oily black eyes, Jherek shoved his sword into the sahuagin's throat with a quick flick, then twisted. Blood muddied up from the wound.

Jherek glanced up, aware of a number of sahuagin bodies floating limply in the water all around him. Several of them were slowly surfacing. Fire burned on top of the water where the wagon had been, and a

spray of bright colors spread across the dark sky. He kicked past the dying sahuagin and stroked for the surface. Once his face was out of the water, he sucked in great breaths. He whipped the hair from his eyes and stared across the harbor.

The explosive force of the barrels had been considerable, greater than he'd expected, but he knew from Malorrie's teachings that water was denser and carried sounds more clearly. That was why a man swimming had to assume that anything in the water he tracked already knew he was there. The trick was to appear harmless. There was no slipping and hiding through the water unnoticed by one who lived there.

Sahuagin and sea creature bodies lay stretched across the harbor water, floating in islands of limp flesh. Some of them had been left conscious, though, and the ones on land hadn't been affected at all. However, those on the land suddenly experienced a lack of reinforcements and the Flaming Fist mercenaries noticed it. A rousing yell broke from the ranks of the citizens and the fighting began again in earnest as they recovered from the blast.

Not all of the concussive force had spread beneath the harbor. Several of the nearby buildings had only remnants of glass shards where windows had once been. Crates lay tumbled and scattered, and small boats used for servicing the cargo ships lay broken, overturned, or tossed out on the docks.

"Damn cure was almost worse than the disease," Sonshal growled from nearby. He gazed upward where the last of the fireworks spent themselves and winked out. "Couldn't resist that last touch. I've always prided myself on the quality of my fireworks."

"Where's Khlinat?" Jherek asked.

Sonshal shook his head. "Don't know, boy. I wasn't keeping track of things any too well there for a minute."

Jherek pushed past the limp body of a ten-foot long snake. He scanned the water hastily.

"Over here, swabbie." Khlinat sounded weak.

Tracking the voice, Jherek spotted the dwarf treading water with his face barely exposed. He swam to the little man. "What's wrong?"

"Can't feel me leg," Khlinat said hoarsely. "Marthammor Duin protect a silly old dwarf who's wandered so far from hearth and home to die alone." He cut his eyes to Jherek. "Swabbie, I think that blast done for me. I can't feel anything below me waist."

Jherek looked down at the water. The fires lighting the docks brought out scarlet highlights that floated on the surface. "What happened?"

"Don't know. Felt a powerful lot of pain after that explosion-then nothing at all." The dwarf's eyes rolled feverishly. "Getting awful cold, swabbie."

Sonshal swam up beside them, "Let's get him to shore."

"I've got him," Jherek said. He thrust his sword through the sash at his waist, then hooked an arm under the dwarf's chin from behind and swam for the docks. Khlinat's ragged pulse beat against his forearm. "Just hold steady, Khlinat. We're not going to let you go."

"Ye may not be given a choice," the dwarf croaked.

Reaching the dock, Jherek was challenged at once by the • Flaming Fist mercenaries who'd established a beachhead and were in the process of beating the sahuagin back. More mercenaries arrived, and still others were putting out into the harbor in small boats and slitting the throats of the helpless sahuagin and other creatures that had been stunned by the blast.

Some of them helped Jherek and Sonshal get Khlinat up onto the dock and laid out. Jherek seized a torch from a nearby man and held it to study the dwarf.

Khlinat held his hands over his lower abdomen. Blood spilled between his fingers. "Got me betwixt wind and water, swabbie. Unless we can get a healer damned quick, I ain't going to live to see the morrow."

Jherek knew it was true. He turned to the Flaming Fist mercenaries. "I need a healer."

A grizzled old warrior with blood soaking up through his right arm and dripping from his bared blade crossed over to them. He looked down at the dwarf and shook his head. "You'd have to be one of Tymora's most favored this night to find one, boy, but I'll put the word out."

" 'Tis no good, swabbie," Khlinat whispered. "Ye did yer best, and there's no complaints about that." He managed a smile that looked terrible against his graying complexion. "We gave them damned sea devils what-for, didn't we?"

"Yes," Sonshal said, kneeling beside the dwarf. He'd seized a cloak from one of the passing mercenaries who still had dry clothes and spread it over the little man. "That was a piece of risky business you did there, friend, and I'll not begrudge the tale in the telling. I'm proud to have been at your side."

"Ah, 'twas ye," Khlinat said. "Ye stood there and lit them fuses while them sahuagin were about climbing yer backside. Takes a brave man to do that."

Gently, Jherek pried the dwarf's hands from his wound, finding it much easier than he'd thought. Tears burned at the back of his eyes for the little man, though he'd known him for only a short time. The innate bravery and honor Khlinat had shown touched him deeply.

The wound was two or three inches across on Khlinat's abdomen, and there was an exit wound on the other side just as large. Khlinat's breathing slowed and grew shallower.

"Looks like he had a spear rammed through him," Sonshal whispered.

"A spear didn't do that," Jherek said. He guessed that it had been a shard from the wagon, ripped loose and propelled through the water by the smoke powder blast. The wound seemed clear. "We need to get the bleeding stopped. That way he'll have a chance of lasting till a healer gets here." He felt panicked and responsible for the dwarfs situation though he didn't know why. He'd been as much at risk as Khlinat had.

Yet nothing had happened to him even when he'd woke with a sahuagin's claws at his throat.

Live, that you may serve.

Tears coursed down Jherek's face, released by the pent-up pain of watching the dwarf die, the frustration of not being able to do anything about it, and the anger at all that he didn't understand. He pressed his hands to the dwarf's wounds, stemming the blood flow. "Go find a healer," he told Sonshal.

"There's not one to be had," the old man said gruffly. He rested a hand on Jherek's shoulder. "You've done what you could for him. Sometimes all that remains to be done is to be with them when the passing comes. No man should be alone when that happens."

"No!" Jherek said hoarsely. "He's not going to die!"

"There's nothing you can do about that," Sonshal said. "A man's life runs the course his gods direct it on, and no man may stay the hand of death when it arrives."

"No! I won't accept that!" It wasn't right that the dwarf should save so many, yet lose his life in the attempt.

Live, that you may serve.

Jherek reached for that voice, wondering where it came from and how it dared seem to choose him when there were so many others to pick from. He willed the dwarf not to die. "Pray," he told the dwarf, "pray to your Marthammor Duin that you live, Khlinat, then believe with all your might."

Jherek knew that he didn't believe that strongly himself. He'd chosen Hmater as his god because he most understood the religion. The Crying God based his ethos on enduring and persevering, things that the young sailor understood intimately. His whole life had been about those things.

Khlinat coughed and groaned in pain. Blood bubbled from his lips and ran down his cheek. Blue light dawned at his throat, partially obscured by his matted beard.

Without warning, Jherek felt a low buzz in his hands, like he'd brushed up against an electric eel. Smoky blue blazed under his palms pressed against the dwarf's side. He felt the changes taking place against his hands, but he couldn't move them.

The buzzing finished, and the blue light at Khlinat's throat winked out.

The dwarf's lungs filled in a rush, and he flicked his eyes open. "Swabbie, what have you done?" His voice sounded stronger, more certain.

"Nothing," Jherek said, as puzzled as the dwarf. He felt drained by the events of the last few minutes. His eyelids dragged as he scanned the little man.

Khlinat coughed. "Only if yer calling saving me life nothing, and I ain't ready to call it that. Whatever ye did, I feel better."

"It wasn't him," Sonshal said. "It was something at your throat."

Khlinat reached up and took up the shark tooth pendent at his throat, stretching it the length of the leather thong that held it. "This?" He shook his head. "This is nothing. A trinket left over from the shark what took my leg. Them teeth come out regular, and the healer what fixed me up found it in what was left of me leg. I've been carrying it as a good luck charm, nothing more."

"What else could be the answer?" Sonshal asked.

The dwarf looked at Jherek. "I don't know, but I do know I feel better. Let's have a look at me side."

Hesitantly, Jherek drew his hands away, afraid that the torrent of blood would begin again.

It didn't. Instead, the flesh appeared to have closed in both places. It remained raw and ragged looking, but it was obviously healing, reconnecting.

"Marthammor Duin save a wandering fool," the dwarf cried in astonishment. "Outside of a heal potion, or a healer's hands, I've never seen the like."

Jherek gave him a smile and settled back tiredly on his haunches. The blood was drying tight on his hands. "If I were you, I wouldn't loose that shark's tooth."

Khlinat reverently kissed the pendant. "I'll never feel as angry about that shark, I tell ye."

Glancing out at the harbor, Jherek saw that a rout of the sahuagin and their aquatic accomplices was in full swing. He had no wish in him to be one of the parties responsible for slitting the throats of the stunned sahuagin. Now that they were organized, the Flaming Fist mercenaries appeared to have things well in hand. He looked for his father's ship, but *Bunyip* was nowhere to be seen.

It was too late to save many lives, too late to save nearly all of the boats and much of the docks and some of the warehouses and buildings near them, but the docks thronged with men and women who fought enemies as well as fires.

He considered the battle. Madame litaar had sent him to Baldur's Gate after his heritage to Bloody Falkane's pirates was discovered on *Butterfly*. She'd had a vision that his destiny lay here in the city, but where?

He studied the narrow stone buildings and homes and tried to divine what he was supposed to find here. Dark thoughts intruded, and he had to wonder if it hadn't all been some kind of mistake. His life had never been simple or easy. He thought this could be a set of circumstances deliberately fashioned to lead him here and make an even bigger fool of him.

But who would do such a thing? And why?

He didn't know, but the voice he heard in his mind at such times was real. He had to believe at least that much because thinking himself mad was no option at all.

He heard someone come to a stop behind him and looked up to find a skinny old man with a bald head peering down at him with more interest than the young sailor had ever felt before. Carefully, he got to his feet.

"Can I help you?" Jherek asked.

"Mayhap we can help each other," the old man said. "My name is Pacys. I'm a bard. I wonder if I might have a moment of your time."

Jherek studied the old man but didn't feel in any way threatened by him. "Let me help my friend to a safe place, then I'll help you in any way I may." He couldn't turn down the anxious note in the old bard's voice, though he also didn't know why the man might think he needed him.

"Of course. Perhaps I could accompany you."

"Tis a long walk down some powerful dark streets," Khlinat said.

The old bard nodded. "I've seen hardships in life. Surviving this night has not been easy."

The dwarf harumphed as Jherek helped him to his feet. "One as aged as ye, I'll wager ye have seen some bad times."

The young sailor found aiding Khlinat in walking was an adventure in itself. The dwarf was too short to simply drape his arm across his shoulders, and too heavy to support easily.

"Well come on then," Khlinat growled. "I've a small place, but yer welcome to what I have. With Marthammor's sagacious blessing, mayhap there'll even be some victuals we can scrape together."

"Ye play a pretty tune on that thing."

Pacys glanced up at Khlinat, who lounged across the small table in the modest quarters he kept at a rooming house on Windspell Street just west of the Wide, the name of Baldur's Gate's bustling marketplace. "Thank you, my friend." His fingers strummed the strings casually, picking out the notes, making them ring true. The song lived inside his head, adding to itself by leaps and bounds. He was already working on the song of the attack on Baldur's Gate and the words came so easily.

A beeswax taper burned on the table between them, throwing up a thin streamer of smoke and illuminating the carving board with a loaf of bread and cheese on it. Felogyr Sonshal had begged off as soon as they'd reached the dwelling safely. The dwarf's fare on hand had been simple, added to by small journeycakes smothered in honey he'd had put away, a clutch of apples, and a jug of cheap wine.

The old bard had eaten, picking at the offered food mostly, and he'd watched Jherek of Velen, trying to see some sign that the young sailor was the one Narros had told him to look for. As he surveyed the young man, he tried to figure out how he was going to tell Jherek of the destiny that lay before him. How could one so young, so vulnerable, be expected to shoulder such a heavy burden as facing the wrath of the Taker?

Khlinat had eaten with the relish of someone who had recently ended a long fast, drinking the wine with zest. He cut up another apple with a small carving knife, glanced briefly out the window as a Flaming Fist mercenary group went by carrying lamps. "How came ye to know the swabbie?" he asked.

"I don't," Pacys said.

"Yet ye came over to him like ye knowed him." The dwarf's eyes narrowed in suspicion.

They spoke about Jherek because the young man had taken his leave of them only a few minutes ago. Pacys had been loathe to let him from his sight, but Jherek had been adamant about not leaving Khlinat to himself should something go wrong with the wounds. The young sailor had taken it upon himself to seek out an apothecary for balms to better treat and dress the wounds until a healer could be sent for.

Pacys put a hand over the yarting's strings, stilling their hum. "I was sent to find him."

Khlinat fisted the carving knife casually, but shifted in his chair to get into better position. "The swabbie's not wanted for anything, is he? I'll not harbor anyone saying bad things about him. He laid his life on the line for people tonight, meself included, and didn't say one word about it."

"I expect he wouldn't," Pacys agreed. He'd noticed Jherek's calm demeanor as well. "No, he's not wanted for anything."

"Good, for ye had me worried a moment." Khlinat stabbed the knife into the carving board. "I've not had blood spilt in me room before, but I'd not hesitate."

Pacys's fingers returned to the strings, playing the hero's tune that he identified with Jherek. "How long have you known him?"

"I only met him tonight."

Surprised lifted one of the old bard's eyebrows.

"He came up on a caravan from the south," Khlinat said. "I had that from him before them pirates sculled into the harbor and started their attack. He hails from Velen."

"I know the place," Pacys said.

"Lot of ghosts and such there," Khlinat mused.

"What do you know about him?"

The dwarf shrugged and popped a piece of apple into his mouth. "He's a sailor and a good man. Lot of sand in his craw, ye want my opinion. Not many would have stood up like he did tonight."

"You did," Pacys said. "Driving a wagonload of smoke powder into the harbor was no trivial thing."

"I had me reasons."

Pacys changed tunes, finding the one he'd selected for the dwarf as he wove his song about the attack on Baldur's Gate. It was somewhat hard and unpolished, much like the little man himself. "You

mean the Harper pin you wear?" The old bard had spotted it on the other man earlier back at the docks. It was clipped inside his shirt, out of the way of the most casual glances. Harpers didn't readily identify themselves except to others of their group.

Khlinat didn't answer.

"It's all right," Pacys said. "I know about Those Who Harp."

"Ye wear the pin yerself?"

Pacys shook his head. "I was asked. I chose not to." The Harpers were a group spread thinly across the face of Faerun that primarily worked for good. Individuals among the group also had their own agendas, though, and that was a problem at times and for some people.

"Being a Harper is an important thing," Khlinat stated.

"Some would call your group meddlers," Pacys pointed out.

"Mayhap, but we stand betwixt evil, them what would take away freedoms, and the common man." Khlinat returned his gaze levelly, the candle flame wavering in his eyes. "I can imagine no higher calling."

Pacys reworked the tune in his head, bringing out the true sound of it through his fingertips. "For myself, I can imagine no higher calling than my art. Belief is a harsh mistress, and you have to believe in one thing most of all in your life. Otherwise, you're compromised."

"Aye. Now that's the right of it." Khlinat drained the dregs of his wine cup. "Ye never mentioned what ye wanted with the swabbie."

Changing the melody again, going back to the piece he'd constructed about his visit with Narros the merman in Waterdeep harbor, Pacys told the tale in his best voice, trusting in the good nature of Those Who Harp, winning Khlinat over to his side. Also, he knew it would help to have Khlinat on his side if possible when he presented the story to Jherek. As he talked, the dwarf poured them both fresh cups of spiced wine.

* * * * *

"How can I help you, my son?"

Jherek looked into the priest's eyes and saw the fatigue there. "I'm looking for a healing balm for a friend if you've any to spare." He opened his coin purse. "I'm willing to pay."

The Rose Portal was a shrine to Lathander, also called Morninglord, who was god of the spring, dawn, birth, and renewal, of beginnings and hidden potentials. Like the other buildings along the north wall of Baldur's Gate, the temple was constructed primarily of stone but the windows inset in the walls were of the palest pink to reflect the dawn. Even the torch Jherek carried picked up the color in the night.

He'd tried the temple of Ilmater before coming here, but their resources had already been drained. He'd stayed long enough to say his prayers to the god and make his peace with the night's events. Remembering how well he'd been treated at Lathander's temple in Atkatla, he'd decided to try there when one of the people on the street he'd asked had mentioned it.

"Child," the old priest said as he stepped back from the door, "enter and we'll see what Lathander has seen fit to provide us. Even now new donations are being received to help with the victims." He was short and broad, with a belly on him that spoke of familiarity with wine casks. His red and yellow robes hung loosely about him, stopping just short of the smooth stone floor.

Jherek stepped into the foyer and felt some of the chill hanging over the city drain away from him. He hadn't taken the time to change his drenched clothing, and it clung to his body with the touch of ice and rough salt.

While the temple back in Athkatla had been modest, this place spoke of opulence. The decor was ornate, steeped in inlaid gold and silver, constructed of polished and burnished woods carefully fitted together. Beyond the foyer, rows of long benches filled the space, all turned toward the dais where a huge rose quartz disk almost ten feet tall occupied the back wall. Rendered in the glowing pink stone were rose-colored swirls centered around a pair of golden eyes.

Jherek flushed with embarrassment to think that the temple would need any or even all of the coins he'd been paid for the caravan work. Quietly, he followed the priest down the aisle.

Several people in agitated states sat in the benches. Many of them prayed out loud while others cried and wailed for lost loved ones. Other priests moved within the groups, offering solace or a healer's touch. As Jherek passed by one bench, he saw a young priest not much older than him on his knees reaching up to close the eyes of a Flaming Fist mercenary who'd stilled in death. Beside him, the dead man's wife and children clung to his legs and cried.

The young sailor quickly averted his gaze, not wanting to intrude on their grief. He knew none of the people, but he knew the anger and frustration and fear that filled them. In his life, he'd known little else until he'd escaped his father and reached Velen.

The priest led him to a back room where foodstuffs and other stores were kept. The room was large and generous, filled with well-stocked shelves and lit by candelabras. Priests worked with parishioners, sorting through the boxes and baskets of supplies that were being unloaded from a cart at the back door.

The priest called one of the acolytes and asked him to search for the things Jherek needed. In quick order, the young priest rounded up the necessary materials.

Jherek offered his coin purse. "Take what you feel is just."

The priest regarded him with renewed interest. "Pardon me for saying so, boy, but you look as though that pouch contains the last coins you have."

Jherek felt another sharp pang of embarrassment. The pouch in his hand looked pitifully slim, and he'd been so proud of it that afternoon when the caravan had arrived in Baldur's Gate. "If it's not enough, I'll bring more at another time if you'll trust me for it."

The priest shook his head, reaching out and curling the pouch back in the young sailor's hand. "You misunderstand me, boy. Lathander doesn't just take from a community; he gives back. Else how can he work the miracles with the new beginnings he speaks of?"

Still, Jherek felt bad. The priests at Ilmater's shrine hadn't dissuaded him of making a donation there, and he'd gotten nothing from them except apologies.

"Just remember Lathander, boy," the priest said. "The Morninglord knows the wheel turns. We all give and get alternately, each as to their needs. Every day is a beginning of some kind for everyone."

Jherek nodded.

"Stings your pride, doesn't it, lad?" an old man's voice croaked behind Jherek. "Taking things offered you is hard."

When he turned and saw the old man who'd addressed him, Jherek swallowed an angry retort. The young sailor couldn't guess how old the man was. Time had marched scores of hard years over him. The man's face sagged with thick wrinkles, and his fevered blue eyes peered up from gristled pits. A fringe of gray hair gnarled around his head. He wore deep scarlet robes that marked him as a priest. Both hands shook, whether from age or illness Jherek couldn't say, and provided him a precarious balance.

"Do you have something to say, lad?" the old man asked, his face stern in spite of the loose flesh on his face.

"Brother Cadiual," the first priest said, "what are you doing out of bed?" He sounded very concerned and walked over quickly to the old man's side. "I gave strict orders that you were not to be disturbed."

Jherek smelled the illness on the old man and breathed shallowly through his mouth to avoid it.

"I'm here doing Lathander's work," Cadiual snapped. "As I have ever done during my life."

"But you're not well."

"Ghauryn," the old man said in a hoarse whisper that stopped the other priest's objections immediately, "I was running this temple long before you ever suckled at your mother's breast. Ill not suffer your insubordination now."

The other priest nodded, taking a half-step back. "As you command and Lathander wills."

Cadiual eyed Jherek. "Who are you, boy?"

"I'm called Malorrie, a sailor from Velen."

The rheumy old eyes searched Jherek's face. "What brought you here?"

Jherek showed him the bandages and balms Ghauryn had given him. "I've got a wounded friend."

Cadiual waved the answer away in irritation. "No. Before that. What brought you to Baldur's Gate?"

"I came with a caravan from Athkatla."

"Yet you're not from Amn, and by your own professed statement, you're a sailor. What were you doing with a caravan?"

Jherek felt very uncomfortable, suddenly realizing he had the attention of many of the priests in the back room. "It was the only way I could get here."

"Again," the old man said in his cracking, hoarse voice. "Why did you choose to come here, at this time when the sea itself rises up against us?"

"I came because I wanted to learn more about myself."

"See," Ghaurn interrupted, "you've been under the influence of that fever again, Cadiual. He's given you your answer." He reached for the old man's shoulder.

Angrily, Cadiual swept his cane toward the other priest, making him step back again. He returned his attention to Jherek. "You came because you wanted to learn *what* about yourself?"

Jherek silently wished he'd never stepped foot into the temple of Lathander. He wished he could muster the ill manners it would take to simply walk away from the old man and his piercing gaze. "Where I should go from here."

"You were sent here, weren't you? By a divination that you couldn't possibly comprehend."

Jherek didn't reply, feeling that he was being the butt of some bit of humor he didn't understand. He tried to take a step and leave.

"You think I'm some foolish old man, don't you?" Cadiual said.

"No," Jherek answered politely. "I think perhaps you've got me confused with someone else."

"Nay. I was told long before you were born that you would one day find your way here. A sailor, I was told, shorn from the sea and bereft of home, a man hardly more than a boy who runs from the bloody shadow of his father. A boy seeking his future to outrun his past, who was needy, yet hated to take on any help from others. To accomplish his task, there was much help he'd have to take along the way. Learning to accept that would be only one of his lessons." He paused. "Though we think we live our lives alone, there is no one of us completely alone, boy. The gods overlook us all."

Astonishment froze Jherek in place. There was no way the priest could know all that, unless he truly was mad and his powers of divination were confused by his insanity.

"Still, there is one way to be certain." Cadiual reached inside his robe and took out a soft leather bag that showed decades of wear. He opened it and poured yellowed ivory bone splinters into his hand. "These are dragon bones. Lathander himself saw to it I was given these while still yet a child. They've guided me for years. Let me have your hand."

Reluctantly, Jherek stuck his hand out. When the priest's hand wrapped around his, he felt the shakes the old man was experiencing, and the thin finger bones as sticklike as the dragon bones the priest poured into his hand.

Cadiual gripped Jherek's hand in both his shaking ones, then closed his eyes and began praying to Lathander. The heat that suddenly flamed through his flesh surprised the young sailor. He tried to pull away, but the old priest gripped him more surely than he'd thought.

The old priest finished his prayer, and the priests around him echoed his final appreciative sentiments toward the Morninglord. The rheumy eyes gazed up at Jherek.

"You are the one," the old man said. "The one who has come to Baldur's Gate at the time the sea has risen up against all of Faerun. The one who will somehow find a way to stem the tide of dark reaping."

Jherek immediately shook his head, feeling trapped. "No. You've got me confused with someone else. That can't be right. You don't know who I am. Or what I am."

"I don't have to know," the old priest said. "All I have to do is believe in Lathander and let his hand guide mine. It's all I've ever needed. There is a final proof." He took back the splinters of dragon bones and put them back in the pouch, then he took from his robe an oval pearl encased in a gold disk nearly as large as Jherek's palm.

The gold was soft and buttery, showing numerous scratches and hard usage. As the old priest

turned the object in his fingers, Jherek noted that the flat side of the pearl had been cut, raising a trident overlaying a silhouetted conch shell from the gemstone.

"I was told by the man who gave me this all those years ago," Cadiual said, "to give this to the young man who appeared in this temple on the night the sea powers wended their way into Baldur's Gate to strike against us."

"Why?" Jherek asked.

"You must stem the tide." Cadiual held the half-pearl out for him to take.

"No," Jherek said hoarsely when he realized the priest meant to give him the gem. "I'm not who you think I am. I can't be."

"Take the gem."

"I can't." But Jherek wanted so badly he could barely restrain himself from plucking it up. Such a destiny must lie before the person that gem was truly meant for. He'd no longer have to be known as Jherek Wolf's-get, son of the bloodiest pirate of the Nelanther Isles. But to stem the tide of sahuagin that ravaged the Sword Coast? How was that going to be possible?

"It's yours," Cadiual said. "I felt it when I closed my hands over yours. You are the one." He grabbed Jherek's hand and placed the pearl in it.

Immediately, the young sailor thought the gemstone glowed soft pink but that could have been only a trick of the light. Still, it felt natural for him to hold it. He gazed into the pink-stained depths, trying to make sense of the trident and the conch shell emblazoned on the face of the pearl. If he were the one, wouldn't the secrets be unlocked for him? In the novels Malorrie had given him to read, things like that always happened to the heroes.

But he knew in his heart he couldn't take it. The gem-stone was obviously meant for someone other than him. Someone better. The old man had gotten unbalanced with his age and the responsibility given him.

"What am I supposed to do with it?" Jherek asked, thinking that his lack of knowledge would be a clear indication that the wrong person had been entrusted with it.

"I don't know," Cadiual admitted. "Nor do I know for sure where it came from. The man who arrived here came from the east. I had a gemologist look at it once, and he said perhaps it came from as far away as the Inner Sea. There was something about the way the pearl was constructed, about the layering."

"Then why bring it here?" Jherek asked.

"Because this was where you were going to be, of course," the old man snapped. "You have so little faith. Why is that?"

For a moment, Jherek was almost moved to tell the priest everything, from his childhood to the tattoo revealed on *Finaren's Butterfly* that had cost him the only good life he'd known, but he couldn't.

He offered the gemstone back to the man.

"No," Cadiual replied. "I've not made the mistake here. It's you and your lack of faith, and that's something between you and your god. I can only offer guidance."

"You've made a mistake," Jherek said in a level voice.

"No," the priest said confidently. "I've made no mistake."

He put his thin hand on Jherek's shoulder. "Go and find your destiny, young sailor. For though I don't know it, I feel it will be something truly grand. But the way will not be easy." The rheumy eyes locked with Jherek's. "Find your faith, boy, find your faith and cling to it so that it will make you whole." He turned and walked away.

Desperate, Jherek looked at the other priest, then offered the pearl to him.

"Ghauryn," Cadiual called without bothering to turn around, "I've carried that gemstone since before you were born and I've grown weary of its burden. I thought death was going to steal my life away before I had the chance to finish what I was given to do. Don't you dare touch it."

The other priest shook his head at Jherek.

Reluctantly, Jherek closed his hand over the gemstone. It felt warm and sure, and he was surprised at the confidence that seemed to radiate from it. He had no doubt that they'd given it to the wrong man.

Perhaps, though, he could return in the morning and the old priest would have had time to rethink what he'd done.

He thanked the priest for the bandages and salves and walked outside. He belted the healer's items in a bag at his side, but he kept the pearl out, not wanting to release it.

* * * * *

"Are you his woman?"

Startled by the question but wanting to buy herself some time, Laaqueel stood in *Bunyip's* stern and gazed at the western sky. The fires that had burned Baldur's Gate had dimmed somewhat, but an angry yellow glow like fresh broken seagull eggs still carved a pocket from the dark sky in the distance.

The malenti priestess kept her hands on the ship's railing, holding fast. The dark waters of the River Chionthar slid back from where she stood, cleaved by *Bunyip's* prow.

Behind her, Bloody Falkane came closer, till he stood right behind her. He kept his voice soft and low. "I asked you a question." His tone held command.

Immediately, Laaqueel rebelled against that authority. She turned to face him, a prayer to Sekolah on her lips and her hand resting on the long dagger at her hip. Her trident was only an arm's reach away, but she knew he could move quickly and intercept her.

"You have asked a question," she replied, "and I have deigned not to answer it."

Bloody Falkane stared at her with hooded eyes. His foul surface dweller's breath fell against her cheek. She knew he was handsome in the way that surface dwellers counted themselves so, and there was a cruelty about his dark eyes and mouth that a sahuagin could appreciate.

His oiled black hair was pulled back, but strands blown by the wind leaked down into his face. Silver hoop earrings caught the moonlight and splintered it. His mustache and goatee were carefully trimmed, leaving the tattoo of the bunyip coiled in mid-strike on his left cheek. He wore a black shirt trimmed in scarlet open to his chest, and scarlet breeches tucked into knee-high boots rolled at the top. A long sword hung at his left hip, balanced by the three throwing knives on his right.

Falkane smiled. "I could make you answer."

"You could die trying," Laaqueel promised in a cold voice.

"Ah, Laaqueel, that would be such a wondrous thing to see. My skills against your skills." Moving slowly, Falkane touched her hair with his fingers, stroking it.

Not knowing how she was supposed to handle this situation according to Iakhovas's strictures, Laaqueel allowed his touch. Never in her life had a man, an elf, or a sahuagin touched her so.

"Do not," she warned, "think to overstep your bounds with me."

"Or what?"

Laaqueel had no answer. Iakhovas had joined with the pirates of the Nelanther Isles without her knowledge, only revealing the fact to her shortly before he'd killed Huaanton and proclaimed himself king. She didn't know what those alliances entailed, or how she was supposed to handle them. She stared hotly back at Falkane, hating the fact that she couldn't speak on her own.

"Do you know what generally happens to people who threaten me?" the pirate captain asked.

Laaqueel didn't reply. She'd heard a number of stories about Bloody Falkane, the Salt Wolf. His whole past was spun of violence and fear.

He dropped his fingers from her hair, tracing her jawline.

The malenti controlled herself, not flinching from his touch. He held no power over her. If anything, he might be considered her equal. So she didn't drop her eyes and defer to him as was custom among the sahuagin so no insult might be implied. She returned his full gaze hotly. What surprised her most was how her body reacted to his touch. Warm vibrations thrilled through her, and a bitter ache dawned at the core of her. She didn't know how his touch had incited such a reaction unless it could be blamed on her cursed heritage.

He traced her jawline with his forefinger, then brought it back to rest at her chin just below her bottom lip. He was a few inches taller than she was and suddenly seemed to envelop her.

"People who threaten me," he said, still in that soft voice, "die-in the most horrible ways I can think of. I assure you, I'm quite practiced at it."

Laaqueel tried to keep her thoughts centered on Sekolah, remembering that the Great Shark wouldn't put anything before her that she couldn't handle. If she failed Sekolah's tests, she would only prove her unworthiness. That was totally unacceptable. She only wished that Falkane's touch didn't have the affect on her that it did.

She shifted her attention to the deck over his shoulder. His men moved through the halyards with grim efficiency, some of them sporting bandages from wounds they'd received in the attack. Still, it didn't keep her mind from his touch.

"I've watched you," Falkane said, "these few times that we've shared company since first meeting in Skaug, and I've puzzled over your relationship with Black Alaric."

Black Alaric was the name Iakhovas had chosen to wear among the Nelanther Isles. The first pirate to wear the name of Black Alaric had appeared fourteen hundred years ago, then reappeared time and time again during periods of unrest.

Since learning of Iakhovas's chosen identity, the malenti priestess had researched the legend in her books of surface history. She'd first studied those to become adept as a spy among the sea elves and surface dwellers. The last Black Alaric had been active a hundred years ago. Iakhovas had claimed to take over the present identity five years ago, and had been plotting his strategies since that time.

"There is nothing to puzzle over," she told Falkane.

The pirate looked at her and grinned. "Until that day I met you, I'd never seen you in Skaug before."

Until that time, Laaqueel had never been in the capital city of the pirates before.

"I know I didn't because I would have remembered you if I had," Falkane said. "Someone so beautiful as you."

"You mock me." Laaqueel let some of the anger she felt drip venom into her words before she could stop herself. It was bad enough she had to so resemble a surface dweller and the hated sea elves, but her disfigurement also included dealing with some of the emotions that plagued them.

"No," he assured her. "I don't. I think you're a most enchanting creature." His eyes blazed as he deliberately looked at her from head to toe. "You're a beautiful woman. Don't you know that?"

"No," she replied. Even though she was fully clothed, she felt naked for the first time in her life. It was an unsettling experience.

"You have no man sequestered away somewhere?" he asked. "No lover?"

"No." In the sahuagin culture, possessions were to be admired and fought over, not mates. The reproductive cycle was a necessary thing. They didn't even raise their own children, turning the eggs over to the creches responsible for rearing them.

"Where were you raised to be so uninformed about the power you have to turn a man's head?" he asked.

Laaqueel looked at him, thinking that she'd like to turn his head till it spun off his shoulders. She wished she knew where Iakhovas was. They'd taken passage on Falkane's ship when they'd fled the sewers under Baldur's Gate, Iakhovas had immediately demanded a cabin and went off to examine whatever treasure he'd captured from the lime pit.

"I've heard that Black Alaric is a satyr in bed," Falkane said. "I've paid women who've spied on him. They couldn't tell me much more because he's very secretive."

Laaqueel looked at the pirate captain in shock. Since she'd been with Iakhovas, she'd never seen that side of him. Among the sahuagin, he'd been uninvolved with the opposite sex, and among others he'd always been in control.

"You didn't know that?" Falkane taunted.

"No. He has a habit of keeping his business as his own."

"And what are your feelings about him?"

Laaqueel shook her head. "I have none. I follow him because I believe that's what I'm supposed to do."

"Don't you ever think for yourself?"

"Of course," she snapped.

Falkane tapped her chin with his forefinger, stroking her flesh. "Then what do you think about me?"

"Nothing," Laaqueel stated flatly, but she knew that was no longer true. His interest in her, even if it was for reasons of his own, could provide an advantage for her that she'd never had since entering Iakhovas's thrall.

"Then I'll make that my mission," he told her. "Starting at this very moment, I promise you that you'll have cause to never forget me."

"You'd only be wasting your time. Ill forget about you the second you walk away."

Before she could move, he slid his hand behind her neck with a quickness she hadn't expected. He cupped the back of her head and pulled her to him, crushing his lips to hers in a deep kiss.

IX

5 Kythorn, the Year of the Gauntlet

The streets of Baldur's Gate remained busy as wagons went to and fro. Crews gathered the dead and piled them in community graves so sickness wouldn't spread from the corpses. Other groups concentrated on clearing the debris. The forlorn cries of women and children, and even some men, filled the streets. Clerics walked at the head of the death wagons, speaking prayers and waving censers filled with strong-smelling herbs.

Jherek couldn't keep his thoughts from the carved pearl disk in his fist. Everything it represented hung in his mind. Madame Litaar and Malorrie had both felt his future had lain in Baldur's Gate, but he'd been offered no clue as to what it might be. He didn't even know where to go from here.

How was destiny found, or even pursued?

He had no clue, but holding the disk made him feel like achieving that was possible. He passed a group of men standing around a rose-red torch at a corner where the street he followed wound back toward the Wide. They talked quickly among themselves, voices high with emotion.

Earlier, he'd noticed the groups around the rose-red torches gathered for what seemed to be casual conversation. Cobble parties, Frauk had called them in a voice that gave no doubt how he felt about them. The caravan master wasn't a man to waste time.

The men had no light bantering of conversation between them now. Their voices reeked of angry frustration and pain. Jherek clung to the pearl disk a little more tightly, silently willing it to give up its secrets. Even though he knew he wasn't the one it was intended for, and that impression was very strong in him, he wanted to experience part of what it must feel like to be given something so important.

Instead, he remembered how *Bunyip* had looked out in the harbor. The lines remained as he'd remembered them, clean and tight except for the missing mast, and she'd looked defiant as ever.

Jherek wondered if his father would even recognize him now without seeing the tattoo on the inside of his left bicep. He became angry and frustrated with himself for even considering such a thing. His father had never cared about him, only about his own dark desires.

Black depression settled over Jherek, robbing him of even the small comfort the pearl disk had lent him. How could he dare to think even for a moment that such a thing might be intended for him, knowing where he'd come from?

No, what tonight had proven was that even the gods liked their cruel jokes. They'd placed the pearl disk before him, given him a hint of the legacy that lay ahead of someone more deserving, only to taunt him and make him recognize again the low station he'd been given in his life.

Despite the priest's words, the young sailor knew there was no escaping the past. His unmasking in Velen had proven that. He had been marked by fate as surely as Bloody Falkane had marked him with the sorcerous tattoo.

Jherek had been so deep in his thoughts that he hadn't noticed when the slim-hipped figure had walked by him, but he was aware when the person turned around. Jherek took a step to the side and his hand drifted down to the sword hung in his sash. Cold air chilled him through his wet clothing. He waited.

"Malorrie?" a feminine voice called out. Hands reached up and took away her cloak's hood, revealing the short copper tresses and wide-set eyes that he recognized at once.

In spite of the darkness that gripped him, Jherek's spirits lifted. A smile filled his face. "Sabyna?"

* * * * *

For a moment, Laaqueel was paralyzed by Falkane's sudden kiss. Nothing like that had ever happened to her. She felt the heat of him against her and her senses swirled, giving over to the otherness that had crept in with her deformity. Then she recovered, opening her mouth and intending to bite his lips, perhaps even chew them off before he could back away.

She felt the whisper of cold steel at her throat and knew he'd drawn one of his throwing knives. "No," he told her quietly. "Don't even try it."

She froze, knowing he could take her life between heartbeats. She closed her mouth, horrified to find only now that some instinct had compelled her to return his kiss. She breathed out, locking eyes with him. "From this day forward, watch your back, Bloody Falkane." Her voice sounded hoarse and uncertain.

He kissed her again, allowing her to flinch away but giving her no chance to escape. "From this day forward, lady, you'll think of me. I promise you that, and I keep my promises." He called over his shoulder, "Targ."

"Sir." Targ's brutish features, gray-green skin tone, sour odor, and nearly eight feet in height marked him as a half-ogre. The malenti priestess had noticed him around Falkane earlier, always hovering like a bodyguard. He wore a chain mail shirt over a leather rough-out vest and leather pants tucked into fishskin boots. Shells hung knotted in his stringy black hair. The hafts of the crossed short swords he wore on his back rose over his shoulders.

"Watch her," Falkane ordered.

"Aye sir." Targ's face split suddenly, revealing a mouth full of crooked yellow fangs. "Want her dead if she tries anything?" He raised a crossbow and aimed it at Laaqueel.

"No, but pain is just fine. She can always get a godspeaker and get it fixed." Falkane brought the tip of his knife to his forehead and saluted the malenti priestess. "Another time, beautiful."

Praying quickly, Laaqueel readied her power. When she loosed it, the air around Falkane would thicken and grow heavy, crushing him in seconds. She felt certain she could be over the railing before the half-ogre would know what was going on or could hit her with a quarrel.

No.

The quiet affirmation of power knifed through Laaqueel's mind, breaking the concentration necessary to launch the attack. It was echoed by movement of the black quill lying so near her heart. She looked to the cargo hold and saw Iakhovas come up the stairs onto the deck. *You-you saw what he did!* She wanted to spit the taste of Falkane from her mouth but she knew the pirate captain would only laugh at her.

Yes, but Falkane is necessary to me.

I will not be handled so by such filth! she told him.

My dear malenti, I know that part of you found that encounter quite stimulating. Iakhovas's dry chuckle rattled in her mind. I find it quite fascinating, actually, because I've never thought of you that way myself. It opens up whole new concepts.

Falkane walked by Iakhovas without even looking at the man, as if nothing had happened at all. The pirate captain moved confidently, as though he thought he was invulnerable. He called out orders to his crew in a loud, stern voice.

Targ gave a snuffling and disdainful laugh, then lifted his crossbow from her, turned, and walked away.

Laaqueel felt her gills flare in indignation.

You, Iakhovas told her, will do exactly as I tell you to do. Would you deny the wishes of Sekolah as he seeks to lead his chosen children into greater power over the seas of Toril?

Laaqueel had no answer. She had to believe that Iakhovas's way lay with the Shark God. It had been through Sekolah's direction after years of prayer that she'd been guided to the books that had given

flesh to the legend of One Who Swims With Sekolah. If she stopped believing in Iakhovas, where would the disbelief end? What would be left?

With great effort, she turned and faced back in the direction where Baldur's Gate lay smoldering. Her belief was all she had. If that was lost, she was lost.

Good, little malenti, Iakhovas told her. I need no further hindrances your lack of control might cause. I'll have enough problems justifying the loss of men and ships to these pirates. The Flaming Fist mercenaries got organized and held much more quickly than I'd thought they could.

Laaqueel remained silent in her shame. Her way had to be hard. She knew the Shark God would demand no less. Even now she'd risen much higher in her station than she'd ever believed possible, thanks to throwing in her lot with Iakhovas.

She bent her head and prayed, knowing by her belief that the prayers she gave voice to fell ultimately on deaf ears. Sahuagin priestesses she'd known had consorted with other dark gods as well as Sekolah to get their powers, always holding the Shark God in a position of prominence. She had never done that, never entertained the possibility of worshiping another. Sekolah was the only god she'd ever followed. She'd been more true than anyone she'd known. Since her earliest days she'd been taught that only the inadequate failed.

Don't be so hard on yourself, little malenti, Iakhovas said. You found me when no one else could, and I had been there thousands of years. Look at all we have wrought. The sahuagin are more feared than they ever have been.

More hated.

Ah, little malenti, you forget that hate is merely an investment of power. Even the surface dwellers have to respect power. Measure their hate and you measure their respect- and in turn you measure our power. They wouldn't fear the inadequate-only the successful.

She lifted her head, knowing he was right. They had been successful. It remained to be seen how respected, and how feared, the sahuagin were going to be.

* * * * *

"Captain Tynnel only told me that you'd decided to stay in Athkatla," Sabyna Truesail said.

Jherek walked at her side, accompanying her down Dock Street to the harbor. He still couldn't believe *Breezerunner's* ship's mage had ended up in the city at the same time he had. In a way, he supposed it was more a part of the cruel injustice the gods were determined to swing his way this night. There was no way Captain Tynnel would allow him back aboard the ship after the fight he'd had with some of the crewmen in Athkatla.

Though he had expected Tynnel to carry through on his offer to tell the ship's mage and let her see him briefly if she wished, a tightness centered in his chest when he thought he might never see her again after tonight.

The night's darkness wreathed the city and drew dense shadows through the street. She'd told him she'd been out searching for goods she needed to make repairs to *Breeze-runner*. The cargo ship had been at anchor when the sahuagin and pirates had attacked. They hadn't been able to get their sails up in time to do much because most of the crew had been ashore on leave. Luckily the damage the ship had suffered had been minimal.

"I suppose it's true that I decided to stay," Jherek said cautiously. He found he couldn't tell her that the fight in Athkatla had been over the coarse words Aysel had said about her. He would have been ashamed, and he'd given up much that she not ever hear about the incident or the caustic things Aysel had said. It would be self-defeating and braggartly to tell her now.

"Why?"

"Why what?" The rapidity with which she changed tacks in a conversation confused him. Partly, though, he had to admit it was her beauty that he found so distracting. During every night the caravan had trekked for Baldur's Gate, his thoughts had been drawn to her. It would have shamed him to admit that too, and probably shame her as well.

Ship's mage she might be, and self-admittedly no highborn lady, but she was far beyond the reach of a man who was no more than a pirate's-get. Especially the son of Bloody Falkane, who'd, killed her brother when Sabyna had been only a girl.

"Why did you stay behind?" Quick-witted and gregarious by nature, Sabyna never seemed to lack the ability to speak her mind.

However, that ability was now creating problems. When he'd first met her aboard *Breezerunner* he'd given her his name as Malorrie. It had been only the first lie. He'd lied about staying behind at Athkatla, and things seemed to get more convoluted the longer he knew her.

"I ran into a cousin," he answered.

"And you decided to stay and talk to him instead of voyaging on to Baldur's Gate with us?" Sabyna cut around a wagonload of burned planks, walking faster than the tired team could pull.

Jherek stepped up his pace to follow her. "He needed help. My help." He tried not to notice how tightly her blue breeches hugged her slim, womanly hips as her cloak flared. The sight made thinking hard, but he was aware that he made no real effort to draw even with her and lose that view.

"You could have come and told me," she said.

"He was sick." Oh Ilmater, this was turning out worse than he thought it could. Each lie piled more uncertainly on the other, all of them waiting to come tumbling down.

"So sick that you couldn't come tell me?" She glanced over her shoulder and caught his eye.

Luckily he hadn't been watching beneath the cloak's edge. "Aye. He had no one to stay with him."

Sabyna gave a very unladylike curse. "You're lying."

"Lady?" Jherek thought frantically, wondering which lie she'd caught him in.

"I live aboard a ship, Malorrie," she said, coming to a stop. "That makes for a very small world."

Breezerunner sat in the harbor over her shoulder. The sails were trimmed and men scurried about in the rigging with lanterns, repairing damage where they found it. They looked like busy fireflies moving through the upper sections of the ship. Jherek heard Captain Tynnel's voice crack orders.

"How long did you think I would go before I found out the truth?" she demanded.

Jherek wished he knew which truth she was talking about.

"Not long after we'd sailed from Athkatla," she went on, "I was told about the fight you had with Aysel-and why."

A burn of embarrassment spread across Jherek's face and he had to break the eye contact by pretending to check his pouch.

"What frustrates me," Sabyna went on, "is that *you* were taken from *Breezerunner* instead of Aysel."

"He's crew," Jherek said. "I wasn't." As ship's mage, she should have known that.

"You would have been crew once we made Baldur's Gate," she said. "You as good as had the job."

The thought pleased and excited Jherek. Traveling overland wasn't something he wished to do again. He shrugged. The fact still remained that Tynnel had made his choice.

"You also could have talked to me," she went on.

"I was told that wouldn't be possible," Jherek said.

"By who?"

Jherek hesitated, realizing that he'd said more than he intended. Evidently whoever had spoken to the ship's mage hadn't told her everything.

"Captain Tynnel told you that, didn't he?" she demanded.

Jherek considered his options. Lying again was something he was determined not to do. He stood close enough to her to smell the delicate lilac scent she wore. Most of it was gone, worn away by time and the smoke that wreathed the air, but enough of it remained that it stirred memories of dining on meals she'd prepared for them in her cabin.

"Never mind," she went on before he could reply. "I can answer that one myself. Tynnel *did* tell you to stay away."

She muttered another oath, more virulent and descriptive than the last.

It wasn't that Jherek had never heard the curses before, though they weren't casual ones most

seafarers would know, but rather the fact that Sabyna had called them out that stunned him.

"Look," she said, looking at him levelly, "first of all, I want to get a couple things straight with you. Then I'm going to see to Tynnel." She paused. "Don't get me wrong, I think the idea of you defending my honor is flattering, but I live at sea, a place where few women actually stay for long. When I became a ship's mage, my father protested, as did my mother. They both knew the coarse laxity of men at sea, and they knew how hard it would be to be the only woman on board a ship. Did you think Aysel's comments were the first of that kind that had ever been made?"

"I never considered it," Jherek said. Then he realized Sabyna must not have been told that Aysel was commenting on his feelings for her. He was quietly thankful.

"You should have," she said flatly.

A small group of Flaming Fist mercenaries approached them with drawn swords. The sergeant of the guard asked for their papers.

Before Jherek could explain that he had none, Sabyna produced hers, unfolding them with a flourish. "Read it and hit the cobblestones," she told the sergeant. "I don't have time for delays."

The sergeant held his lantern close to the papers as he read. Evidently he was chastised enough that he didn't bother asking for Jherek's. He thanked the ship's mage for her time and moved his group on.

"That wasn't the first time something like that has happened," Sabyna said. "I handle it when it does. That's how I maintain the respect of this crew. I won't put up with it, and I've got the means to make my displeasure known. If a sharp tongue won't get the message across, I have my magic. You stepping in like you did undermined that to a degree. By fighting you, Aysel now considers himself deserving of my attentions."

"I hadn't considered that." Jherek felt bad. He should have known the ship's mage could take care of herself. She'd faced pirates and storms at sea, and he'd discounted her independence. "I apologize."

"No," Sabyna stopped him. "There's no need to apologize. As I said, I found your defense of me to be very flattering. I wish I could have thanked you."

Jherek thought about that, feeling a little better. "You have a curious way of showing it." He'd seen Madame Litaar go through mood changes that had confused him. Even Malorrie hadn't been able to understand them. The phantom's only words of advice were to remain as quiet as possible and offer only a small target till it passed.

"That was then. Now I'm mad." A small smile twisted her lips. "I was afraid I wasn't going to see you again. Faerun is a big place, and so much is going on now."

Jherek played her words back in his ears again. She'd been afraid she wouldn't see him again. He worked hard to keep the smile from his own face. Unconsciously, he twisted the pearl disk in his hand, barely aware of it.

He was also unaware of the figures that had closed in on them until it was too late. He glanced up, noticing that Sabyna had seen them as well.

The ship's mage shifted, putting the dock and the harbor to her back as she moved to Jherek's left, leaving his sword arm free.

A dozen men surrounded them, all thick-bodied from indulgences in drink and food as well as hard work. Jherek marked them as sailors because of their dress, weapons, and the rolling gait that showed in their movements.

None of the Flaming Fist mercenaries were anywhere to be seen.

The leader was a huge man with fiery red hair that caught highlights from torches in the distance. He carried a battle-axe in one hand and wore a small shield on his other arm. The shield was featureless except for a score of scars from previous battles.

A smaller man stood at his side, cloaked and hooded, his narrow shoulders pinched and rounded together. He kept his hands in the voluminous sleeves of his cloak.

"Sabyna Truesail," the big man rumbled. "Ship's mage of *Breezerunner*."

"I don't know you," Sabyna said.

Jherek kept his hand away from his sword hilt, hoping he was overreacting. Still, he noticed Sabyna's hands moving, readying her spells.

The big man grinned. "I'm Captain Vurgrom, of *Maelstrom*."

"I don't know your ship either."

Vurgrom shrugged, the smile never leaving his lips and never quite touching his eyes. "It doesn't matter, lassie. It's a long way from here."

"What do you want with me?"

Jherek glanced around, but no one seemed to be paying them any attention.

"It's not you," Vurgrom said. "It's your ship I'm after. Piece of business turned nasty on us tonight, and we want to get out of Baldur's Gate before morning. Unfortunately, the ship we'd borrowed took a lot of damage. My crew noticed your craft fared better. Took a little bit of doing, but we found out about you. Figured your captain might be wishful of keeping you in one piece. I guess I intend to find out."

Leather hissed at Jherek's side. In the next instant, Sabyna held long-bladed knives in both hands. The young sailor hadn't made a move yet.

Vurgrom grinned. "You can come easy or you can come hard. If I have to, I can chop some pieces off and take your captain what's left. I'm still going to wager he'll be ready to deal."

"No," Sabyna answered.

Vurgrom waited just a moment, then nodded. He didn't wait for his men. He brought the battle-axe forward, holding well down on the haft so he'd get a full stroke.

The axe blade whistled as it cleaved the air and sped for Jherek's head.

X

5 Kythorn, the Year of the Gauntlet

Stepping to the side and twisting to avoid Vurgrom's battle-axe, Jherek slid his sword and hook free of his waist sash. His clothing still remained wet from his earlier dip in the harbor and constricted his movement. His muscles flared in protest at being forced to perform again without rest.

Vurgrom's axe missed him by inches, biting deep into the cobblestones and shattering some of them as the other men closed in. For the moment their numbers worked against them, though Jherek was sure that wouldn't remain so.

The young sailor moved aggressively forward, slashing at Vurgrom. The blade crashed fire across the mail shirt without penetrating. For a big man, Vurgrom moved surprisingly fast, bringing the shield around as Jherek hammered at him again. The sword struck sparks from the shield. While the young sailor tried to recover after expecting the sword to find a home in flesh, Vurgrom stepped forward and body-blocked him with the shield.

The massive blow slammed Jherek from his feet and knocked him back almost three feet. Shaken, the young sailor stumbled back and set himself again. Vurgrom lashed out with the shield again, expecting Jherek to still be off-balance. Instead, the young sailor slammed into the shield at an angle, rolling off it toward Vurgrom's front. He brought the sword around again, but this time barely succeeded in getting it up in time to block the battle-axe.

The impact rang along Jherek's arm.

Vurgrom came for him with the shield again. Anticipating the move, recognizing it as a favored one, the young sailor ducked and went low. The shield raked against his chest but lacked the force to knock him away. Reaching with the hook, he snaked it under the shield and hooked Vurgrom in the back of the leg. The big man yowled in pain.

With the hold secured, Jherek yanked. For a moment he thought the man's sheer weight would keep him from succeeding. If it had been strength against strength, Vurgrom might have held, but the hook was firmly embedded in the big man's flesh with tearing pain.

Screaming curses, Vurgrom stopped fighting the hook's pull. The leg came up and he went down.

Jherek didn't have time to capitalize on his success. One of Vurgrom's men came at him with a short sword. The young sailor abandoned the hook, unable to tear it free of Vurgrom's leg. Swiveling, he met the man's attack in a fencer's pose that Malorrie had taught him.

Steel rang on steel as the man sought to tear through Jherek's defenses. The young sailor gave himself over to his training, keeping his arm loose but strong, defending then attacking. The sword

became a live thing in his hand, compelled by countless hours spent under Malorrie's demanding tutelage. Jherek moved ceaselessly, small steps that kept them in a tight circle, using the man's own body and attack to keep the others from them.

A man staggered away, grasping futilely at the throwing knife protruding from his throat. Evidently Sabyna's skills with a knife were considerable.

"Skeins," the ship's mage called from behind Jherek when he'd deliberately tried to protect her. "Attack."

From the corner of his eye, Jherek watched as hundreds of scraps of cloth flew from the bag of holding the ship's mage held open. They whirled and flew as if trapped in the eye of a hurricane, stretching out and growing longer until they reached serpentine proportions.

Even though he'd seen it before, Jherek's first impulse was to get away from the creature, and it took a lot of control not to act on that impulse. It was a raggamoffyn, a sentient creature that could strike or simply wrap around a human and take over that person's thoughts. The young sailor had seen it in action before.

There were some who said raggamoffyns were a race unto themselves, while others said they'd been created by a wizard with only evil intentions. Sabyna had created this raggamoffyn to be her familiar, taking the scraps that made up its physical body from her dead brother's burial shroud.

The raggamoffyn rode the breeze, nearly nine feet long now, coiling restlessly. Its initial appearance startled the attackers, driving them back. Sabyna threw a second knife, piercing a man's leg and eliciting a sharp yell.

The noise of the battle attracted a nearby group of Flaming Fist mercenaries. The four warriors sprang into action, shouting to the pirate group to identify themselves as they ripped swords from scabbards.

The thin-shouldered man with Vurgrom turned and gestured at them, saying words Jherek couldn't understand. Three of the men staggered and fell limply to the ground. The fourth appeared disoriented but that lasted only until one of Vurgrom's men ran him through.

The raggamoffyn streaked through the air and broke into its myriad pieces. It plastered itself to the man, covering him from the waist up in seconds, each piece locking into place securely. The man's mouth opened as he tried to scream but no sound came out. He dropped to his knees, letting go his sword as he struggled to tear the cloth away.

More knives glinted in Sabyna's hands as she avoided an attacker and partially turned the blade aimed at her head with one of the knives. Razored steel edges whispered together for a heartbeat.

Beyond the battle, Jherek saw men standing in the shadows, unwilling to take part in any fight that wasn't their own or where they couldn't tell immediately who was in the right. The young sailor fought deliberately, parrying, blocking, then riposting quickly, escalating the speed until he went from the defensive to the offensive. The sword was a blur before him and he stared through it, concentrating on the man across from him. He beat the man's shield down, knocking it from his numbed hands and causing him to step back.

"Damn you, Pharan!" Vurgrom roared as he pushed himself to his feet. He threw the blood-covered hook away. "I told you I wanted that woman alive. If you hurt her, I'll kill you myself!"

Pharan drew back. Taking advantage of his withdrawal, Sabyna lashed out with one of her knives, scoring a bloody line on his face.

"Zensil," Vurgrom shouted. "I want this ended now."

The thin-shouldered man nodded. Arcane words spewed from his lips, and his hands traced curious designs in the air. He drew a long length of small-linked chain from a pouch at his waist, stringing it out with quick movements.

Pressing his own advantage, Jherek slapped his opponent's sword aside a final time, then put a foot of steel through the leather armor and into the pirate's heart. The dead man started to fall, taking the young sailor's sword as well. Jherek faced the mage, not knowing what the man planned to do with the chain. Placing his foot on the corpse, the young sailor yanked his sword free. He breathed heavily, perspiring from his efforts in spite of the wet clothes.

The pirates drew back as the mage worked his magic. Even Vurgrom hesitated.

Jherek stomped on the abandoned shield at his feet, flipping it up in a trick Malorrie had taught him. He caught the shield, managing to run his hand through one of the leather straps on the back. Pulling it over his arm, he ran for the ship's mage.

Jherek caught her around the waist with his sword arm, pulling her into the crook of his elbow and into a run. He lifted the shield to block the man who swung at them. The sword crashed into the shield, almost coming free of his grip. He asked Ilmater's blessing as he powered forward, knocking the man down. Then no one stood in their way. *Breeze-runner* remained before them.

"Run!" he told Sabyna. He gave her a final push to get her started, then turned to face Vurgrom and his men in order to buy her more time. He felt the weight of the pearl disk in his pouch and experienced a momentary pride. He might not have been the one the disk had been intended for, no hero with a lofty destiny awaiting his arrival, but he could sell his life with honor to protect the ship's mage if it came to that.

"Malorrie!" Sabyna called behind him.

"Go!"

"I'm not leaving you."

Jherek heard her shifting behind him, the leather soles of her boots grazing the cobblestones. "You've got a sinking ship here, lady, and naught but storm-tossed seas about you. Get clear while you're able."

The wizard wound the length of chain over his head, then threw it at Jherek.

The young sailor lifted the shield to block the mass of coiled links, thinking the chain was meant as a diversion more than anything. It clanked against the shield's metal surface. Instead of falling to the ground, however, the chain snaked over the shield and lunged at Jherek. It wound around him quickly, twisting and weaving to avoid the shield and the sword as he tried to block it.

The chain wrapped his chest twice, holding tight enough to squeeze the air from him, then it wound out and captured his arms, threading down to encircle his ankles as well, pulling them tight. Off-balance, Jherek fell. He watched helplessly as Vurgrom closed in and swung the battle-axe. His last thought was that he'd failed to protect Sabyna. Then the battle-axe hit him.

* * * * *

By the time Pacys had finished recounting to Khlinat Ironeater details of the battle of Waterdeep and his own meeting with Narros, the shaman of the mermen living in Waterdeep Harbor, the beeswax taper had burned down to its final inch.

"Ye have an incredible task ahead of ye, Pacys," the dwarf acknowledged, "but are ye sure there's no mistake about the young swab? Oh now, and he's a brave one, and some skilled at weapons. I've seen him in action this night, and I know how deadly he can be. I question whether ye have the right person even in spite of all the good qualities the swabbie exhibits. He's hardly more than a boy."

"I know," Pacys agreed. He glanced at the stub of the candle, the hot melted wax spilling over the sides of the holder. He turned and peered out the window, seeing the streets filled with people who were returning cautiously to their homes. Occasionally during their conversation there'd been cries of warning about sahuagin, pirates, or some foul creature lurking in the shadows. The old bard hadn't known if those really existed, or were the product of overactive imaginations. They hadn't seen any on the trek back to Khlinat's home. "How far away is the apothecary?"

"Not far," Khlinat said, "but I'll wager me good boot that the swabbie hasn't found anything there. The Flaming Fist would have descended on all them places and taken what they needed already. Maybe he's giving a look 'round and seeing what he can turn up. Betwixt ye and me, I think he needed some time to himself to think."

Pacys nodded. Still, the creeping feeling that something might have happened took root in his mind. He'd come so far to find the boy, and had so much riding on the finding of him.

"So why do ye seek the swabbie?" Khlinat stuffed the bowl of his pipe with pipeweed and set fire to

it. "Them mermen could have found anyone to deliver the message."

Pacys deliberately hadn't revealed his own part in the prophecy. "You mean someone younger." His fingers continued to stroke the yarting's strings, and to his great joy, he found additional chords as he sought them out. They were notes and measures that normally signaled traveling. It was confusing.

"If ye insist on being so indelicate," the dwarf said with an unabashed nod, "then aye."

Pacys smiled, showing he took no offense at the suggestion. "I don't know. All I can say is that I was told this was meant for me. Tell me, friend Khlinat, have you heard of Thoreyo?"

"Him who sang 'Short-Hafted Hammer and the Wizard's Tall Black Tower?'"

"Yes." Pacys had chosen the song deliberately.

"As a dwarf, how could I not know of that song? It is one of the most popular dwarven brawling songs-barkening back to the days when the dwarves warred with one another to build their empires across the Far Hills."

"What about Yhitmon?"

There was no hesitation in the dwarf. "Ah, 'Strangled Leaves of Lily-Grass and the Goblin-King's Betrothal.' I've hoisted a few pints of bitters and sang along with that one meself." He grabbed his cup and held it high.

"And would-be noble, himself a worthy warrior among goblinkin,

"In his own eyes,

"Did take upon himself to find a wife.

"So sword to hips

"And prayer to lips,

"He did ride, so boldly ride,

"To the House of the Rising Sin."

At the end of the stanza, the dwarf burst into laughter that turned into a coughing fit.

Pacys waited patiently till it passed.

"Now there, by Marthammor Duin's watchful eyes," Khlinat swore, "is a drinking song made for men who love the taverns."

"Yes," Pacys said, "and when you think of Pacys the Bard, what songs come to mind?"

Khlinat looked embarrassed. "Ye have caught me at a bad time, singer, otherwise I'm sure I would know of one."

"No," Pacys said quietly. "I've written songs, and good songs at that, but never a song that has captured the hearts of Faerun the way the ones we've mentioned have. I was drawn to the music early. Now I am in the winter of my years and I find I have no legacy to leave."

"Ye believe the story of the Taker is yer legacy?"

For a moment, Pacys felt uncomfortable. Part of him felt embarrassed ^about making something so grandiose about his part in the dark war rising from the seas of Faerun, and part of him felt silly for believing so easily. But the song had existed, so he believed.

"I've been told that it will be."

"And ye believe?"

Pacys hesitated only a moment before saying, "Yes."

Khlinat nodded. "Belief is a strong thing. And song, by the gods, there's something to forge a man's belief to his dream, make him reach for something that he never thought would be bis. There's such power in songs."

Pacys felt pride at the dwarf's description.

"I remember a tale," Khlinat said, "told me by me old grandda, and it twice-told at least a thousandfold ere he ever gave it to me. About Twahrm Kettlebuster, a hidden dwarf of the Far Hills."

"I've heard of it," Pacys said, remembering the little known song. He didn't play it much except in front of a select dwarven audience, and there had been few of those in recent years.

"Now mind ye," Khlinat went on, "old Twahrm weren't no trained bard, nor was he gifted in any way. Them what heard him sing said it was punishment should be set for only the most black-hearted of folks. But one day while wandering, scouting for a new vein of metal for his village where he smithed, he

come upon a hunting party of ogres."

Unconsciously, Pacys's fingers found the yarting's strings and played an accompaniment to Khlinat's words. The dwarf picked up on the rhythm, became trapped by it, and fell into cadence with it.

"They had him outnumbered, and surrounded in a trice. So Twahrm hit his knees and began singing of how he'd courted Haela Brightaxe, also called the Lady of the Fray, and goddess of dwarven warriors. She'd spurned his love, he said, and he was ready to greet death. He sang of how much he would love to die and how pleased he was to see them. Meaning that he wouldn't have to die alone."

The bard's plucked notes flowed through the room.

"And the strength of his song was such that the ogres believed him and grew afraid. When he finished and took up his great battle-axe, the ogres left. See, they believed him about him being ready to up and die, and they didn't want to get taken with him."

"It's a good tale," Pacys agreed, "and it's exactly what I was talking about. I've been chasing this song for fourteen years. I came across part of it the night Narros and the other mermen came to Waterdeep after the Taker destroyed their city. Since that time I've wandered what seems like all of Faerun pursuing it, never able to get more than a few scraps of it here and there."

"But now there's more."

"Every day," Pacys agreed. "It led me to Narros, and it led me here, to the boy."

Khlinat shook his head. "It's a powerful lot for a man to think on, but have ye given any thought to what if yer wrong?"

"No." Pacys, who was never at a loss for words because it was those words that kept food on the table, tried to find the right ones.

"The swabbie's just a boy," Khlinat said. "If he's to go up against this thing ye call the Taker as ye say, he's got a lot of growing up to do."

"I know," Pacys admitted, "but this search for him, and finding him here at a time when this attack happened, and him being part of the effort that turned the tide of battle, it all sounds right."

Khlinat's tired eyes sparkled with merriment. "Ye mean to say old Khlinat Ironeater's going to be in yer song?"

Pacys smiled gently back at him. "My friend, you're going to live forever."

"Hopefully well and handsome in them verses, singer." Khlinat raised his cup in a toast.

Pacys toasted him and they drank. He put his cup down and searched the yarting for any new chords for the song.

At that moment, the candle guttered, reaching the end of the wick and drowning in the pool of melted beeswax. Pacys thought again of the long time that Jherek had been gone and wondered if something had happened to the boy. Then, for the first time that night, he hit a discordant note. A chill settled over the old bard as he put a hand over the strings to quiet them.

"What is it?" Khlinat asked.

Pacys pushed up from the table and settled his yarting over his shoulder. He picked his cloak up from the peg on the wall. "I have to go find the boy. Something's happened."

The dwarf tried to get up, but the pain drove him back to his seat. "Damn me for a weakling. I'd go with ye, but I can't. Let me know, will ye?"

Pacys nodded and let himself outside, hurrying down the stairs. He paid attention to the sounds around him. If a person only listened to the noises around him, he'd know music was being made all the time.

Now, beyond the street noise made by the wagons and Flaming Fist mercenaries filling the city, a discordant resonance hung over all of Baldur's Gate. The old bard knew he was probably the only person who heard it, but it told him that no matter what efforts he made, he was already too late.

He felt the rift between himself and the younger man, but he quickened his steps anyway, trying to find the direction, frustrated because the young sailor's tune seemed lost to him, a distant whisper of what it had been.

"Have a care there, lad. You took a pretty good knock to your melon."

Rough hands steadied Jherek, holding him down. He knew from the weakness filling him that it didn't take much effort. The liquid motion beneath him told him he was on a ship, though that motion was somehow off. The movements were too quick and sharp. The stink of stale sweat and sickness filled the air he breathed. His stomach rolled and rumbled in protest.

"Easy there," the deep voice advised. "Else you'll be throwing up everything we've managed to put down you the last day or so."

The back of Jherek's throat was raw. He cracked his eyelids open, feeling a sticky and gummy substance binding them. Sunlight stabbed into his eyes and exploded with the ferocity of smoke powder, blinding him. He groaned and his stomach rolled again.

"You still live, lad, and Selune willing, that's a good sign. Come on around and let me see if you've still got your wits about you." A big, callused hand patted his cheek sharply enough to sting without jarring his head. "I've seen such blows as you've taken leave a man addled for the rest of his life, not knowing much more than a child."

Jherek tried his eyes again, squinting against the harsh light. Tears ran down his face but he kept them open. He quickly discovered he was on a ship, but he was in the cargo hold, in a portion that had obviously been set up as a makeshift brig. Iron bars above let the sunlight in but he couldn't tell if it was morning or afternoon. The sound of rigging creaking in the wind and someone calling out sharp orders reached his ears.

"Don't know if you remember me, lad, but the name's Hullyn." He was a short man, but nearly as broad as a dwarf, with thick sloping shoulders heavy with muscle. His skin carried a permanent windburn red from weathering the elements. He wore his graying blond hair tied back, letting his great beard and mustache roam free.

"I remember you," Jherek said. Hullyn was part of *Breeze-runner's* crew. That gave the young sailor some hope. "Where's Sabyna?" He sat up with assistance, putting his back against the bulwark for support.

Hullyn scowled. "She's topside with those thrice-damned pirates what's got our ship. They're using her as blackmail to keep us in line." He reached to a small bowl and took out a damp cloth, then pressed it against Jherek's head.

Jherek winced in pain, but he looked around the brig. From his previous experience aboard her, he knew *Breeze-runner* carried a crew of twenty men. All of them appeared to be there, including Captain Tynnel.

The captain stood leaning against the iron bars that separated them from the empty ship's hold. His arms crossed his chest and he looked disapprovingly at Jherek. He was short and had a small stature, but fierceness showed in every inch. Blond hair the color of bleached bone was tied back from his hatchet face. Bright blue eyes held the cutting edge of diamond. For the first time ever, his clothing appeared disheveled.

"You going to live?" Tynnel asked.

Jherek nodded, then regretted it immediately when pain shot down his neck and back. "Aye sir."

"You're a lucky man," Tynnel commented. "Vurgrom and his people were going to kill you, but Sabyna talked them out of it."

"They came looking for her."

"I know. From what I've gathered, they were in Baldur's Gate on bad business. Perhaps they even had something to do with the sahuagin raid as Vurgrom claims. I'm not certain."

"They took the ship?"

Tynnel blew out a short breath. "Would have been nine or ten of them against us, but they had Sabyna. If we hadn't cooperated, Vurgrom told me he would kill her. I believed him."

"Bastards like as not will kill us all afore it's over with. We'll have just put our necks in the

executioner's noose for nothing."

Jherek turned his head slightly, spotting Aysel against the left side of the brig. Large and hairy, Aysel resembled an ape trying to pass itself off as a sailor. He was broad shouldered and heavy bellied, covered in scars. His shaggy black hair hung to his shoulders, almost covering the finger-length daggers that hung from ear hoops. He held his hands one on top of the other, two digits missing from his left hand. A soft leather shoe encased his right foot.

Looking at the leather shoe, Jherek took small satisfaction from the knowledge that the fight that had cost him his berth aboard *Breezerunner* hadn't left Aysel unmarked.

"Is Sabyna all right?" Jherek asked. He tried not to think about Sabyna being alone topside with Vurgrom and his pirates, or what could have happened to her.

"Aye," Tynnel replied. "So far. She's a mage, though still fairly new to her craft, but enough of one that none of Vur-grom's curs has tried to touch her." The captain's hawk's face tightened, and white spots of anger showed in his cheeks. "She could probably have gotten away from them if not for us. Vurgrom told her if she left, our lives would be forfeit. Likewise, if we try to escape, she'll suffer."

"We're not at sea," Jherek said. He assembled the information he had, working through the pieces as Malorrie had always trained him to.

"No," Tynnel agreed. "We're on the River Chionthar, heading east."

"Why?"

A pirate walked by the iron-barred hold above, never even glancing down into the cargo area. All of *Breezerunner's* crew watched the man, and no few curses and epithets were muttered.

A sour look darkened Tynnel's face and he asked, "You've never heard of Vurgrom the pirate, self-styled Vurgrom the Mighty?"

Jherek shook his head. From his exposure while on his father's ship, he'd learned names and stories of most of the pirates of the Nelanther Isles. Vurgrom was new to him, as was any reason why a Nelanther pirate would head inland across Faerun.

"If you get a chance to talk to the arrogant son of a bitch," Tynnel said, "he'll tell you all about himself. As he tells it, he's the Pirate Lord of Immurk's Hold in the Sea of Fallen Stars. He's planning on taking *Breezerunner* as far east as she'll go."

"That's not possible," Jherek said. "The River Chionthar doesn't run all the way to the Sea of Fallen Stars. It branches out at the Reaching Woods, going on north and south and ending in the Sunset Mountains and the Giant's Plain, respectively. Both are still leagues from the Dragonmere and the Sea of Fallen Stars."

Tynnel eyed the young sailor with renewed curiosity. "You seem to be well aware of the lay of the land here. Most of the men aboard *Breezerunner* couldn't have told you anything more than that the River Chionthar was where Baldur's Gate was."

"I've never been there," Jherek said. "I had a harsh schoolmaster who had a love of cartography. He taught me how to find my way around by the heavens at night, and the places those star readings could take me."

"An education is a wonderful thing," Tynnel said. "If you've had one, I have to wonder why you've settled for the life of a sailor."

"Settled?" Jherek echoed. "Captain Tynnel, living out on the sea is all I've ever aspired to do."

"She's as harsh and demanding a mistress as ever was," Hullyn said, interrupting the tension that had come up between Tynnel and Jherek, "ain't she, Cap'n?"

Tynnel remained quiet for a moment, eyeing Jherek suspiciously. "Quite right, Hullyn."

The pounding inside Jherek's head was unrelenting. He cradled his head in his hands and wished the pain would subside while Hullyn continued ministering to him. A momentary lightness touched his senses. He waited it out, then took a deep breath, feeling some of the pain seem to leave when he exhaled through his mouth, controlling the pain the way Malorrie had taught him.

"Steady, lad," the big man said gruffly. "Now that you're awake and the bleeding seems to have stopped, let's see about getting you cleaned up."

Breezerunner suddenly came about, throwing everyone off-balance as she crested the river flow.

"She's against the wind," Jherek said. "He's tacking her from shore to shore to get any distance from her sails."

Tynnel nodded. "Aye, and she's fighting the magery Vur-grom's forcing on her."

"What magery?" Jherek asked.

"Using Sabyna to keep us in check was only one of the reasons Vurgrom kept her. He took us so we couldn't report to the watch in Baldur's Gate and maybe stir up some kind of pursuit. He knew he couldn't kill us outright because she'd have fought him, but Vurgrom's using her to power *Breezerunner*."

"Some damned demon device," Hullyn growled as he made the sign of Tymora over his chest.

"A chair," Tynnel stated. "I don't know where Vurgrom got it, but I saw it being set up before they put me in the hold. Sabyna and Vurgrom's own ship's mage take turns using it. The chair pushes *Breezerunner* far faster than any normal wind would. That's the strangeness you feel about the ship's movements. When we come to a sharp bend in the river, you can feel her shuddering through the turn, chopping across the water, but she doesn't slow down. Whatever course and destination Vurgrom's got laid out, we're going to get there damned fast."

Jherek thought desperately while Hullyn continued cleaning his head. "How far have we come?"

"We're two days from Baldur's Gate, boy," Tynnel stated gruffly. "You've been unconscious that whole time. It's anyone's guess as to how far we've come. I don't know this territory."

Jherek couldn't believe it. In two days time with the speed he felt the ship was moving at, they would be miles from Baldur's Gate even having to sail against the current. As he recalled, the shores along the River Chionthar inland were virtually empty of ports or towns. The countryside was infested with orc and goblin hordes who'd staked out territorial claims.

"Bastard could have died," Aysel said, glaring at Jherek. "Maybe should have." The big man sneered, shifting gingerly around his injured foot. "Always sensed something about you that reminded me of a bad copper that keeps turning up."

"Stow that bilge," Tynnel commanded sternly. "Whatever problems the two of you have with each other, they're not allowed on my ship."

"Begging the cap'n's pardon," Aysel said, "but things ain't quite the way they were aboard old *Breezerunner*. I'm thinking part of that is because of this snot-nosed pup here."

Tynnel glanced at the man with his burning gaze. "If I want any lip from you, Aysel, I'll let you know."

The man looked like he was going to say something further, then apparently thought better of it.

"That goes for both of you," Tynnel finished. "Whatever problems existed back at Athkatla stay at Athkatla."

Jherek nodded tightly, his thoughts centering on Khlinat and the old bard who'd appeared so mysteriously. He'd left them waiting back in Baldur's Gate. He wondered how the dwarf was.

"That's odd," Hullyn said, peering closely at the back of Jherek's head. "I looked at the split you took back here earlier and I could have sworn you'd needed some healer's stitches, but as I get it cleaned up now I see it's not bleeding anymore and seems to have closed up more than I'd have expected. You're a fast healer, lad."

Taking another breath, Jherek realized he did feel better. He attributed it to Hullyn's ministrations, then turned his attention to Tynnel. "So, what are they going to do with us?" Jherek asked.

Tynnel shook his head. "I don't know."

Sitting up straighter, Jherek went through his clothes, wondering if there was something he could use. Unfortunately, Vurgrom's pirates seemed to have been quite thorough. He'd been robbed, of course. They'd even found the fishing knife he kept tucked inside his boot.

Frantically, he searched his clothing again, having remembered the pearl disk the Lathander priest had given him.

"What's wrong?" Hullyn asked.

"There was a disk," Jherek said. "I had a pearl disk with a carving on it." Thinking about the priest's words, of how an important destiny was tied to the disk, made him grow even more afraid. He tried to remember if he'd lost it somehow during the fight on the dock.

"Aye," Hullyn said. "Them pirates went through your clothing out in the hold when they brought you down. They robbed us all, but I remember seeing that piece you describe. Vurgrom spied it himself as one of his men tried to be off with it without notice."

"Vurgrom has it?"

Hullyn nodded. "Was it worth much? Something that belonged in your family?"

Jherek wondered what destiny cost, what price could be placed on it. Some, like his, were cheap, but the one tied to that pearl disk he was certain was a great one.

He'd lost it when it wasn't even his to hold. Despair settled over him, made even worse when he scanned the heavy iron bars keeping them caged.

* * * * *

Pacys sat on a bench inside the Unrolling Scroll, the shrine in Baldur's Gate devoted to the worship of Oghma, the Binder of What is Known. The god was also known as the Patron of Bards, and Pacys had walked within his service ever since discovering his affinity for music. Always before, the old bard had found visiting the shrines, temples, and churches of Oghma to be an uplifting experience, but for the past three days, he'd known only darkness that had chipped away at him until he'd dwindled into the core of himself.

The boy he'd come to find was gone, disappeared into the night. Though he'd searched then, and had Khlinat's help in the following two days, there'd been no clue as to where he'd gone.

It had also been the day the music had gone.

Searching back, Pacys had found he could call up all the notes and fragments and tunes he'd pieced together over the years, most of it coming during the attack on Waterdeep and in the days that followed, but there was nothing new. Every time he went to the well of creation that had always been within him, it was dry. That scared him more than anything ever had in his life. To him, a bard didn't just live to play old tunes, tunes that had already been added to his repertoire. No, it was the search and the finding of new music that made life worth living.

He found himself unwilling and unable to work on even other pieces that had nothing to do with the epic he pursued so diligently. He held his yarting in his lap, but his fingers couldn't coax from the strings any series of notes that lasted for long. Nothing made him want to lift his voice in song.

"You seem distressed."

Blinking, surprised that the priest could get so close to him without his knowledge, Pacys looked up.

The priest showed signs of experience at his chosen vocation, deep-set wrinkles and faded gray eyes that had seen too much, but he was still little more than Pacys's age. His dark hair was shot through with silver, and his beard had gone mostly to gray. He wore a white shirt and trousers, and vest with black and gold braid. A small, boxlike hat sat atop his head.

"Pardon me for interrupting," the priest said, "if I am."

"No," Pacys said, "you're not. Actually I'm grateful for the company. Too much solitude is never good for a man with much on his mind."

The priest gestured toward the empty space on the bench next to Pacys. "May I sit?"

"Of course." The old bard put the yarting aside.

The priest sat and offered his hand. "I'm Father Duhzpin," he said. "I lead this temple."

"You've got a nice place," Pacys said, then introduced himself.

"Blessed Oghma does," Duhzpin agreed. "Though before the Time of Troubles things were much better."

Pacys knew that. He'd crafted songs about the Time of Troubles himself. During that time when the gods themselves had walked the lands, Oghma's chief patriarch Procampur had disappeared. As a result, the churches worshipping Oghma had splintered, no longer a cohesive whole.

"I've noticed you in here the last two days," Duhzpin said, "and though I don't recognize you as a regular parishioner, I felt moved to speak to you." He gazed around at the church. Modestly outfitted, the room was still near to overflowing.

Most of the people prayed for guidance, or for the souls of those who had been taken from them or were on the steadily shorter list of those that were missing since the raid. Great sadness had hung over the church both days Pacys had visited it.

"I appreciate the time," Pacys said, "but I know there are people in here who have much greater problems than I do."

"Maybe," Duhzpin said, "but I've learned to listen to the dictates of Oghma. He placed you in that seat for whatever reason, so I took my own seat. Why don't you tell me of your troubles? They always get lighter when they're shared."

Pacys considered the offer, knowing it was true and remembering how often he'd been the one listening. He knew from experience it was much easier to listen than to talk, though. "All right," he agreed.

He told of his troubles with skill, something he felt guilty about taking pride in as he went along. Oghma forgive him any vanity as he struggled to find the music within him.

"Now this boy can't be found anywhere?" Duhzpin asked when Pacys had finished. If he was shocked at the far-reaching impact of Pacys's tale and what it could mean to all of Faerun, the priest didn't show it.

Pacys figured the man thought he was the biggest liar he'd ever seen, or Duhzpin was so strong in his belief he could handle anything. "No," the old bard said. "I've looked for him."

"Do you think it's possible he's dead?" Duhzpin asked.

Pacys started to say he didn't know, then he changed his mind about the answer. "No," he said, "I don't think he's dead."

"Why? That seems to be an obvious conclusion to draw."

"Because it doesn't sound right," Pacys said.

The priest lifted his eyebrows. "Doesn't *sound* right?"

Surprised himself, Pacys nodded. "That's exactly what I mean."

"And what are you listening to?"

Pacys pondered the question. "Myself." He felt the ache of desire fill him, and the frustration of not knowing. "Father, all my life I've searched for the legacy I was destined to leave. I know this is it."

"Finding this boy and singing of the Taker and his war against the surface world?"

"Yes."

"What makes you so certain of this?"

"My faith."

"In what?"

"In Oghma," Pacys answered. "He's seen fit to give me what little gift I have for music."

"You expect Oghma to work great things with it?"

"Yes." Pacys considered his response. "That sounds vain, doesn't it?"

"No," Duhzpin answered. "That sounds like conviction."

"Conviction?"

The priest shrugged. "I'm in a business of convictions."

"I thought that was a judge," Pacys bantered, wanting to break the string of somber words, "or a lawreader."

"Or career criminals," Duhzpin added, proving himself worthy of the diversion. "However, in this business, I've learned to hear the truth that people say—the things they believe in—and sometimes those things they believe in aren't the same things other people see."

"Are you questioning my belief, Father?" Pacys asked. The possibility shocked him to a degree.

"No," Duhzpin replied. "That's what you're doing. It's all you've been doing for the last three days. In fact, not only have you been questioning it, you've been agonizing over it."

"That's not right." Pacys didn't want to argue with the man in the temple he was responsible for, but neither did he think the man was correct.

"Then what have you been doing?" the priest asked.

"I'm trying to figure out what to do next."

"All by yourself?"

Pacys became somewhat irritated by the man's constant barrage of questions. "I've prayed about it, several times, and made offerings."

"Good," the priest said in happy satisfaction. "We can always use anything we get, but what have you been praying for?"

"That I might know where to find the boy again," Pacys said, "before it's too late."

"I see." The priest smoothed his beard. "But what if learning the boy's location isn't exactly what you're supposed to do next?"

"That doesn't make any sense." Pacys watched the younger priests moving through the crowded seats, offering prayers and assistance with prayers. Suddenly he wished he'd gotten one of them instead. They tended to give answers rather than demand them. "What else would I be doing?"

The priest beamed like a teacher who'd gotten through to a particularly dense student. "Exactly."

The old bard started to object, then he realized what Duhzpin was getting at. Pacys leaned back in the bench, feeling a weight lift from his shoulders. He hadn't considered that. He'd locked in totally on finding the boy.

"If Oghma has put something before you as you believe," Duhzpin said, "then he will find a way for you to do it. That isn't within your realm. It's up to you to provide the faith and the strength to see it done, and Oghma will help you with the strength."

"You're right," the old bard agreed. "If now had been the time for me to find the boy—"

"—it would be done."

"I know he yet lives," Pacys said. "If he didn't, I'd know that too." He lifted his yarting and settled it across his lap. His fingers found the strings without hesitation. "Thank you for your time, Father."

"You're welcome," Duhzpin said. "Should you need a friendly ear again...."

Pacys shook his head, feeling some enthusiasm for the first time in days. "I don't think I'll be staying much longer."

"Probably not." Duhzpin stood, looking around the room, and said, "If I could ask something of you, I'd be in your debt."

"I'd be only too happy to answer any request you might have. I'm in *your* debt."

Duhzpin nodded at the room. "The other priests and I have been helping people for days. I fear we're running short on strength ourselves, and I don't know if our flagging reserves are up to handling today. Perhaps you could play something uplifting."

Pacys stayed where he was, but he pulled the yarting to him with the skill of an old lover and the passion of youth. The strings rang out, strong and true, and filled the room. He sang, reaching back through the years for a song of praise for Oghma, one that hopefully everyone in the room knew.

In short order, the church filled with the sound of voices lifted in praise. Pacys clung to the sound, letting it fill all the empty places he'd chiseled away inside himself for the last two days, knowing that response was the best a bard who truly loved his work would ever know. As his fingers found the strings, his mind found an answer.

The vision came to him in perfect color and crystal clear.

When he saw the gleaming black double doors equipped with white many-toothed gears that were the symbol of Gond Wonderbringer, he knew they could only belong to one place in Baldur's Gate.

He also knew he had to go there.

XII

7 Kythom, the Year of the Gauntlet

"The attack on Baldur's Gate didn't go the way you'd promised."

Laaqueel felt the weight of the accusation even though the words were spoken softly. The malenti priestess shifted uncertainly in Iakhovas's shadow. She prayed silently, pulling Sekolah's gifts to her, wondering if her power and his would be enough against the men that stood against them.

Iakhovas spread his hands. The illusion he wove over himself was so strong that Laaqueel couldn't even pierce it. As Black Alaric, he was a legend among the pirates, a man who'd lived for fourteen centuries and fought in every war that touched their shores.

In his present guise, Iakhovas was taller than any man there, dressed in azure and black garments complete with a cloak that carried the colors, black on the outside and azure on the inside. He wore rolled-top black boots that gleamed. A black crepe bandanna covered his lower face and his cloak hood was pulled tight so that only his eyes were revealed. It was the presence of those two eyes that let Laaqueel know the appearance was at least part illusion.

They stood in the spacious galley of *Grimshroud*, the flagship of the Nelanther Isles pirates. The sahuagin army Iakhovas had led into Baldur's Gate was already far from them, sent on ahead while Iakhovas ventured on to Skaug, the pirate capital of the Nelanther Isles.

"The attack didn't go as well as I'd hoped," Iakhovas admitted.

Laaqueel felt a chill when she heard that admission, Iakhovas wasn't one to admit mistakes. Not without someone else's bloodshed.

Bloody Falkane hung uncharacteristically back out of the limelight. The malenti priestess tried to keep her eyes from his, but they still touched upon occasion. It was awkward, and she got the sense that the pirate captain enjoyed her discomfort.

Burlor Maliceprow sat in an ornate chair at the head of the long table. He was the only person in the room allowed to sit. His given title was Portmaster of Skaug, but he was the controlling power of the Nelanther Isles. In his youth he'd been a wide man with hard lines that had gone to fat through his successes. His soft brown hair, sheared off at the jawline, carried gray streaks in it now. Hazel eyes glinted with the hardness of a newly minted coin. His clothes, despite his size, fit him well.

"You convinced us of this strike," Maliceprow said in his soft voice, barely heard above the ship's creaks and groans.

"I merely pointed out the opportunity," Iakhovas replied. "You convinced yourselves."

Maliceprow's eyes narrowed. "You say you don't accept the blame for this?"

Iakhovas reached out and pulled back a chair, ignoring the four guards around Maliceprow who moved to defend him. Iakhovas sat across from the portmaster, every eye in the galley on him. "I only accept my share of the blame. You knew there would be risks."

"I thought there would be less risk involved," Maliceprow stated, waving at his guards to stand down. He hadn't achieved his position by being afraid. "You said those damned sea devils and their creatures would chew up more of the city's defenses than they did."

Laaqueel felt her face grow hot at the disrespect the man obviously held for her people.

Easy, little malenti. You have even less respect for him.

Only the discipline Laaqueel had learned through serving Sekolah helped to keep her mouth closed and harsh words unsaid.

Iakhovas replied easily. "They incurred even greater losses than your pirates, Portmaster."

"And there's a balance to be struck here?" Maliceprow demanded.

"They went there to go to war with their enemies," Iakhovas said. "You went there out of greed to sack Baldur's Gate. Even with the losses you took, you made a profit."

Maliceprow said nothing.

"I'd call your attack a success."

"Except that every city and country along the Sword Coast is going to be more interested than ever in the Nelanther Isles," Falkane said.

Iakhovas smiled at the pirate captain. "I thought you took pride in the amount of the bounty offered for your head, Captain Falkane. Surely that amount will go up once the Sword Coast learns you were involved in the attack."

A smile spread across Falkane's thin lips. The yellow light from the lanterns mounted on the walls painted shadows on the wall behind him. He gave Iakhovas a small salute, fingers briefly touching his forehead. "A pirate's reputation is worth its weight in gold."

"Exactly," Iakhovas said. "After the attack on Baldur's Gate, all of your reputations have been enhanced, and you've made a profit."

"Not enough of one," Maliceprow growled. "I don't give a damn that you're supposed to be some kind of unkillable legend, Alaric. There will be an accounting here-or mayhap we'll see the evidence of

those myths."

"I'm not a man to be pushed," Iakhovas said quietly, maintaining his steady gaze on Maliceprow.

For a moment Laaqueel's breath caught. She felt certain that violence was about to erupt in the galley.

After a long breath, Maliceprow leaned back in his chair and said, "Your alliance with the sea devils is of benefit to us."

"Of course it is," Iakhovas replied. "So far none of the pirate ships from the Nelanther Isles have been attacked by the sahuagin, or any other creature from the sea."

Laaqueel watched as the threat rolled over the gathered captains. She saw that they understood Iakhovas wielded more power over them than they'd before believed.

"Our arrangement guarantees your continued safe passage on the seas," Iakhovas went on. "You're free to continue to plunder the Sword Coast, secure in the knowledge that whoever decides to pursue any of you will become targets for the sahuagin. You yourselves have no cause to worry about them."

Maliceprow nodded slightly, but Laaqueel knew he didn't like his position and perhaps suddenly realized how untenable it was.

"Surely that's worth something," Iakhovas pointed out.

"Maybe it is," Falkane stated, "but you have to ask yourself, what's it worth to you to walk out of this galley alive?"

Laaqueel's heart sped up at the bald-faced threat.

Turning his head, Iakhovas stared at the pirate captain. "Your absence wouldn't go unnoticed. You'd be a hard man to replace."

Silence stretched in the galley, filling it. Laaqueel watched Falkane, knowing the pirate captain was fully confident enough to act.

"We want more," Falkane said. "Your precious sea devils took things from Baldur's Gate as well. We want a share. They don't need all that they took."

Maliceprow glanced at the younger man in irritation, obviously unhappy at having his authority or decisions questioned.

"Perhaps," Iakhovas said smoothly, "it would be interesting to humble you."

"You speak as though it could be done," Falkane interrupted.

"But not today," Iakhovas went on. "There's still need of you." He reached under his cloak and took out a green velvet bag. "All of you will have your share." He loosened the drawstrings on the bag and poured.

Gold and silver coins spilled to the galley floor, bouncing and rolling when they hit. Gems and jewelry followed them. The bag was obviously magical because it continued to pour even though it had already emptied more than twenty times its own ability to hold.

The pirates scrambled forward, each searching through the treasures that cascaded across the floor. Only Maliceprow and Falkane didn't move.

Iakhovas tossed the bag to one of the nearest pirates. "Hire more pirates to take the places of those you've lost. Build, buy, or steal more ships to replace those sitting at the bottom of Baldur's Gate's harbor."

Disappointment marked the man's face when the bag appeared to have emptied at last. When he upended it again and more valuables tumbled out, he shouted out in glee, joined by others.

"I pay my debts," Iakhovas said, "but I also call in the favors that are owed me. Beware some of the items you find there. They're magical in nature." He smiled cruelly. "You wouldn't want to destroy your ship before you return home."

Laaqueel relaxed somewhat, surprised yet again by how easily Iakhovas manipulated those around him. Sekolah was surely watching over him, even though the Shark God had never watched over anyone.

Maliceprow watched the wealth spilling across his ship's floor and said, "I shall look forward to continued business with you, Alaric."

Iakhovas pushed himself up from the table and turned toward the door. "Of course you do, Portmaster. I knew there'd be no other answer."

As Iakhovas left the room, Laaqueel lingered. She told herself it was to guard Iakhovas's back, but she couldn't resist a final glance into Falkane's dark eyes. They haunted her, and she'd come to enjoy the slight shiver that look gave her.

Then she turned and went out the door as well. Despite Iakhovas's generosity, the malenti priestess knew no love was lost between Iakhovas and Bloody Falkane.

* * * * *

Jherek dreamed, trapped by fatigue and by the fever that gripped him off and on still. Part of him knew he lay in *Breezerunner's* hold and that Tynnel and most of the crew sat around him. They constantly moved and grumbled among themselves, ill at ease at being trapped in the ship's belly where no seafaring man would want to be. He felt sunlight across his legs where it streamed down from the bars overhead.

In the dream, he was five again, running across *Bunyip's* decks with a bucket of wet sand. The pirates had surprised a cargo ship that carried a surprise of its own in the form of a passenger who was a mage of some renown. It was the first time Jherek had ever seen fireballs shoot through the air. Fear filled him again, but it was more than just the fear he'd known as a five-year-old. Even though everything seemed the same, he knew it was subtly different.

The voices and sounds blurred as they sometimes did in dreams, but the images were clear, full of color. His father stood on the stern castle, calling out orders to the men working to cut the flaming rigging free to save the sails and to the men he'd assembled for the boarding party.

Jherek ran as fast as he could. Despite all the activity taking place on both decks, his father would know how he performed. Flames hugged the deck near the port railing in front of him, already blistering the finish. He threw his bucket of brine-soaked sand over it, then raced back to the large crate amidships where more was kept.

His bare feet slapped against the deck, hard and callused from not wearing shoes and working the ship. At five, he already knew how to mend sails and nets. He also worked on the cleaning crews and in the galley. Days went by in those times when he'd never spoken a word. Even then it was mostly a quickly bellowed, "Aye sir!" followed by the smart salute his father had taught him.

He dipped the bucket into the crate of wet sand, scraping it up, then hurried back to the fire. The first bucketful had smothered some of the fire, but it was still in danger of spreading.

Bunyip caught a wave crossways, wallowing in the trough of rough water for a moment. Jherek stumbled at the railing, nearly spilling the bucket of sand overboard. He fought to keep hold of it, knowing his father would punish him if he didn't.

The pirate ship bore down on the merchantman. *Bunyip* closed rapidly when she got behind the other vessel and stripped the wind from her. Jherek's stomach twisted when he realized the killing would start soon. They had more buckets of sand for any blood that was spilled on *Bunyip's* deck, and a stiff-bristled brush to scrub it away before it dried in.

Jherek tossed the sand over the fire. As he turned, *Bunyip* slammed into her prey with an explosive, hollow boom that splintered wood. *Bunyip* heeled over from the impact, then caught another crossways wave that tossed her high for a moment.

Without any chance to save himself, Jherek went over. He plummeted, splashing into the ocean. As he went under, he saw the shadowy shapes of the two ships come together again above him. Another boom, this one altered by its passage through water, crashed around him.

He kept his hand locked around the bucket. If he lost it, Bloody Falkane would whip him. Out of reflex, he tried to swim, but he was caught in an undercurrent, one of the vast movements that constantly shaped the undersea. Unable to use his other hand, he couldn't make any headway in the water.

In *Breezerunner's* brig, Jherek felt the fever cover him in a sheen of perspiration. He struggled to wake from the dream, but was trapped by it. Waiting in the back of his mind, he knew what would happen next. At five, he'd given up, unwilling to release the bucket.

Bubbles streamed from his mouth as his vision darkened.

Still, he kept himself from breathing. Then, in the distance, he saw a gliding gray shape streaking toward him. All those years ago, that shape had belonged to the dolphin that had turned up out of nowhere and saved him. He'd heard the mysterious voice for the first time in his life then.

Live, that you may serve.

Now, it wasn't a dolphin. Even though part of Jherek knew it was only a dream, part of him also knew what he was experiencing was something else as well.

The shape came closer, dolphinlike in its first appearance. It knifed through the water, and Jherek saw the hard lines of it. He remembered seeing it before, when he'd been held prisoner in *Butterfly's* brig after the Amnians had discovered the tattoo he wore.

The shark was at least forty feet long, hard-muscled and gray as three-day-old death. Black lines etched its body, looking like scars at first, then becoming runes carved deep into the flesh. One eye glared at him coldly, but the other eye was gone, ripped away by claws or teeth. Still, the hollow raked him savagely with its gaze. The shark stopped, hanging motionless in the sea, the silhouettes of the two ships farther away as they continued sailing.

Don't think to fool yourself, boy, the shark told Jherek in a cold and malevolent voice that echoed inside his head. *I know about you. I've always known about you. Turn back while you still can.*

Jherek wanted to ask the shark what it was he was supposed to turn back from, but he couldn't. The dream had him in its thrall and fear closed his voice. He still held the bucket, unable to let it go even now. His father's rules still controlled him.

The shark opened its mouth, revealing rows of sharp teeth eight or nine inches long. It flicked its tail, speeding around him in a circle. Without warning, the shark dived for him, letting him know it was going to take him in one gulp.

Then die, boy, the shark said, *that you might be eaten!*

Blackness blotted out Jherek's consciousness.

* * * * *

Coming to in the brig, Jherek wheezed and fought for his breath, drawing in great rattling draughts. He sat up, drenched in sweat from the fever. He blinked at the sunlight, finding everything too bright.

Across the brig, Tynnel looked at him but didn't say anything.

"Are you well, lad?" Hullyn asked gruffly, leaning forward to drop a big hand across the young sailor's shoulders.

"Aye," Jherek croaked. "Fever took me. I'll be fine." The chills settled in then, racking his body. He wrapped his arms around himself.

"Here you go, lad. Have a sup of water." Hullyn handed Jherek a metal dipper filled to the brim.

"Thank you," Jherek said, taking it gratefully. With them traveling along the River Chionthar, freshwater wasn't a problem. Over the days of their travel, they'd kept a barrel of water in the corner. Vurgrom's pirates topped it off every day. Everyone knew they wouldn't have done it on their own so the general consensus was that Sabyna had something to do with the arrangement.

"Damn blackhearts," Hullyn grumbled. "What you need is a decent meal and some rest abed. Your melon's coming along right fine, but being down here in this pestilence hole isn't doing you any good."

Jherek silently agreed. He drank the water slowly, enjoying the clean taste of it, but afraid his stomach would rebel if he gulped it down.

Food was another problem. The pirates weren't as generous with it. *Breezerunner's* crew complained about the lack of meals, but Jherek knew Vurgrom was intentionally half-starving them to keep them weak. All they got was a thin gruel twice a day. It was lowered in a big pot from topside, and the men used cups they'd been given to drink it. Even at that, there was never enough. Tynnel rationed it out himself, seeing each man got his share.

After slaking the fever-induced thirst, Jherek thanked Hullyn again and passed the dipper back. He tried not to think about the dream, but there was nothing else to think about. He'd dreamed about sharks before-every sailor did-but this was twice he'd dreamed about this monster shark.

Silently, he rested his head and forearms on his folded knees while he prayed to Ilmater, seeking solace in the Crying God's words. Only there was no solace. He sat trapped, and that was unbearable.

The despair in the brig soaked into him, ground into him with the filth that had accumulated after days of captivity. A large kettle from the galley served as the communal chamber pot and the smell from it pervaded everything. None of them had been allowed baths.

For some, Jherek knew, that was no real hardship because they didn't bathe often anyway, but he did. After having escaped his father's ship when he was a boy and making his way to Velen, he took pride in his cleanliness and manners. Those had been acquired things, things the wolfish boy who had run *Bunyip's* decks with sand buckets had never possessed.

The shark's voice echoed in his mind again. Why had it warned him? And turn back from what? There wasn't anything he could do about his present course.

He pushed the thought out of his mind but found himself occupied with the missing pearl disk. He'd been wrongfully given it and hadn't made sure the old priest had taken it back.

Then he'd lost it.

"Hey," someone said, "look."

Attracted by the prospect of a diversion, Jherek glanced up. Above them, a rat clung to one of the iron bars covering the hold. Short black fur covered it except for the pale pinkish-gray tail, resembling any of the rats that were the bane of cargo ships. It wasn't unusual to see them aboard ship after spending any time in a city. Most of the time they crawled along the hawser ropes and onto the vessels.

"Foul creature," Aysel snarled as he stood.

The rat only eyed him curiously instead of running. The behavior gained it even more of Jherek's attention.

Aysel limped over to the center of the hold and took off one of his dagger earrings. Gripping it in his hand, he leaped up the short distance and caught hold of the bar with the other hand. Jherek already knew first hand how strong the man was, so he wasn't surprised when Aysel was able to hang onto the bar and prepare to strike the rat with the tiny dagger.

"Leave it alone," one of the men said.

"To hell with you," Aysel spat. "That there's meat on the hoof, way I look at it."

The thought almost turned Jherek's already feverish stomach.

Aysel swung the dagger, but the rat hopped to another bar and avoided the blow. Instead of running, it stuck its nose down to the bar and walked along its length in agitation.

A chill touched Jherek as he realized what must be going on. Fighting the weakness and the fever that clung to him, he pushed himself to his feet and slammed into Aysel as the man prepared to strike again.

Aysel fell off-balance and started cursing. He pushed against the wall and came back at Jherek with the small knife clenched in his fist.

Jherek blocked the blow. "Don't! You don't understand."

"I understand plenty!" Roaring in rage, Aysel tried another blow, this one coming from underneath.

Jherek stepped outside the blow and slapped Aysel's hand away. From the corner of his eye, he spotted one of the pirates approaching the hold. The man had a cutlass in his hand. When he spotted the rat, the pirate swung the blade.

"Jump!" Jherek said.

The rat flung itself from the iron bar, dropping into the brig. The pirate's sword knocked sparks from the iron. Reaching out, Jherek caught the rat in his arms.

The pirate leered down into the hold. "See you bastards are keeping proper company, ain't you?" He cackled at his own joke and walked away.

Aysel came at Jherek again, but Captain Tynnel caught the man roughly by the neck and yanked him off his feet. Aysel fell against the wall, squalling in anger.

"Don't move," Tynnel ordered Aysel.

"Bastard took my rat," Aysel said.

"That's no rat," Tynnel said calmly.

In the next instant, Jherek had both arms full of lithe feminine flesh.

XIII

7 Kythorn, the Year of the Gauntlet

"Leaving, are ye? And just like that? With no fare-the-well?"

Pacys looked up from securing his backpack and saw Khlinat standing in the doorway. The dwarf had been generous enough to loan him the couch while they searched for the boy. The old bard had put the bedding away and packed his things. "Yes. I was going to leave a note."

Khlinat's eyebrows climbed. "Oh, and ye are in a hurry too."

"Yes."

"Do ye know where the swabbie is?"

"No, but I've found out where I'm supposed to be," Pacys replied. He pulled the backpack up and settled the straps over his shoulders. "I have to trust that our paths will intersect again as they're supposed to."

"I've continued poking me nose into places around the city, but I've yet to find a solid lead."

Pacys shook his head. Music raced through his mind again, traveling chords. "I don't think you will. However he got out of the city, he's not here any longer."

"Aye, and I know that's true enough." He looked troubled. "Where are ye off to?"

"I don't know. While I was at the church, I got a vision. It told me where to go, but not where I'd be going. I guess I'm supposed to figure that out after I get there."

"Ye make this sound mysterious."

"The gods do tend to move in that manner," Pacys said.

Khlinat ran a hand through his tangled beard. "Ye going to be all right on yer own?"

"I always have been." Pacys rummaged in his coin purse, trying not to notice how light it was for a man possibly traveling a great distance. "I know you've not been able to work at the shipyards since you've been injured. Let me pay you for letting me bed here."

"Faugh, and that would be a laugh. Don't think yerself so high and mighty, old bard. I'm a steady working man and no traveler from place to place depending on the generosity of strangers. I've got silver enough to do me awhile."

Pacys closed his purse, knowing it would be better to keep his meager coin as long as he could. As long as he stayed within a civilized area he had no doubts about being able to sing for enough to eat and put a temporary roof over his head, but if he was out in the wilderness things might be different.

"I got a question to ask ye," Khlinat said, looking a little uncomfortable.

"Yes."

"While ye are out and about, who's going to watch yer back? I mean, it's going to be powerful hard to find the swabbie if yer fertilizer for some lonely patch of forest."

"I've always watched out for myself," Pacys answered.

"Aye, but things seem to have greater stakes at the moment. I've a mind to go with ye meself, kind of keep ye out of trouble and it away from yer door. If ye would have me."

Pacys looked at the dwarf, realizing the warrior's nature that resided in the short, powerful frame. Despite missing a leg and the wounds he'd suffered only three days ago, Khlinat seemed prepared to leave during the next drawn breath.

"I don't know how far I'd have to go," the old bard stated. "Nor how long I'll be gone."

Khlinat nodded. "Something put me there where that boy was. I still feel its pull on me now. I never been a coward, no dwarf worth his salt is, but that night with that boy, I felt like I was fighting the good fight, the kind a warrior would want to sell his life at if blood price was demanded for participation. I ain't too willing to let that feeling go. Losing me leg, I've felt like half a man for a lot of years. With him, facing them sahuagin claws and jaws, a true axe in me hand, I felt like me old self. I want that back." He paused to clear his voice. "I ain't one to go begging, but if ye will have me, I swear by the anvil and hammer of Moradin to look over ye, be the shield over yer back should ye need it till I see ye clear of this mess."

Emotion choked the old bard. Riffs of music, carried on the unmistakable basso that marked many

dwarven songs, echoed inside his head. "You truly feel that this is what has been put before you?"

"With all me heart," Khlinat responded. "I went down to the apothecary and bought meself a dram of heal potion to get meself more right for if ye should have need of me. Don't be telling me I wasted me coin."

"Get your gear together," Pacys said. "I've already wasted two days when I was supposed to be doing something."

* * * * *

Pacys led the way into the Hall of Wonders, between the black doors that floated in the air in front of it. The white many-toothed wheels on the doors looked exactly as they had in his vision.

The Hall of Wonders sat on Windspell Street, across from the High House, its parent temple. Stone gargoyles clung to the roof on clawed feet. The building stood three stories tall and ran straight back, a hall as its name implied. It was immaculately clean and the windows were scrubbed, shining glass.

A watchpriest greeted them dressed in a wheeled hat and a robe with a sash at the waist that contained gears, locks, hooks, and bits of tin, steel, and wood. Pacys paid the priest eight silvers, the entry fee for Khlinat and himself.

The old bard's feet made only slight noise against the waxed stone floor. Tall stone pillars ranged on either side of them under the vaulted ceiling. Between the pillars, display cases held the inventions and instruments for sale. Duplicates were kept and manufactured in the building's cellar.

"Have ye been here before?" Khlinat whispered, overtaken with the expansiveness of the hall and the tidy surroundings.

"Many times," Pacys replied. "I've purchased some musical instruments here over the years. While functional, I found them to be lacking in intrinsic quality. There's nothing like an instrument you've made yourself."

"Aye, and a certain satisfaction as well."

Despite the attack on Baldur's Gate only a few days ago, the Hall of Wonders still held numerous gnomes openly gawking at the displayed devices. Even Khlinat's attention was captured by some of them.

"Ah, the Ironeater clan I'm from would like to see this place," the dwarf said. "If they haven't already."

Halfway down the Hall, Pacys found what he was looking for.

The mirror was perfectly made, nine feet wide and nine feet tall, framed in red lacquered wood. The unblemished surface gleamed, offering a faultless reflection of the old bard, the dwarf, and the section of the Hall behind them.

Khlinat scowled at his image, running fingers through his tangled beard. "Ooch, now there's an ugly brute for ye."

"Gond Wonderbringer's blessing be upon you," an unctuous voice stated. "Is there any way I may be of service to you?"

Pacys glanced at the young priest that approached them, then looked back at the mirror. Except for its size, he didn't see anything out of the ordinary about it. For a moment he doubted the vision he'd been given in Oghma's temple.

"Tell me about this mirror," Pacys requested.

"It is beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yes," Pacys replied, "but Gond isn't known for his taste in beauty."

"I could disagree," the young priest pointed out. "The beauty of the gifts Gond bestows upon us is not inconsiderable."

"My apologies," Pacys said. "Forgive me for being so blunt, but what I referred to was the fact that Gond never built anything that wasn't functional in some way."

"And you're wondering how this is functional?"

"Yes."

The young priest approached the mirror. "It was ground as all mirrors are, and polished to its present sheen here. The sand it was made from came from a fallen star in the Inner Sea. Chosstif, one of the High Initiates of the Mysteries of Gond here, paid mermen in the Inner Sea for its recovery, then had it shipped here fourteen years ago."

"Fourteen years ago?" Pacys asked. The time frame fit in with Narros's story of the Taker destroying the merman village. "I don't recall seeing it when I was here before. The last time I visited was less than two years ago."

"It was only just finished less than ten weeks ago," the priest said. "It's surely one of the largest undertakings we've ever done. Chosstif was moved by a vision from Gond himself and made to carry out the construction of this mirror. It has very special properties."

"Like what?" Khlinat asked doubtfully.

The priest walked to the mirror and put his palm against it. "A mirror this size is usually hard to get from place to place. Yet, once you have one in your home, you must admit how much it brightens up the place. Purchasing a mirror this big is not much of a problem, but the transportation is. With Chosstif's collapsible mirror, transportation is no longer as difficult." He pushed gently.

Seams formed and tiny hinges revealed themselves. The mirror seemed to come apart, folding in on itself in foot-sized sections. The *clink-clink-clink* of the sections landing on each other produced a noticeable rhythm inside Pacys's head. In less than a moment the mirror had been reduced to a two-foot square that was only a little less than that in depth. It stayed hooked on the wall. A slim length of black cord hung down from the mirror. The young priest pulled on the cord and kept pulling until all the tiles once more appeared as a single, seamless unit nine feet square.

"Amazing," Pacys said. "I've never seen the like before." He stared into the mirrored depths.

"Yes. As you can guess, it's one of our more popular items. Well worth the price. Though you will have to wait for it, you understand."

"Actually," Pacys said, "I'm not here to purchase a mirror."

The priest appeared surprised and perhaps a little disappointed. "By the way you approached it, I was certain you'd heard of it or seen it and come to purchase one."

"No." Pacys reached out to the mirror. It was cool to the touch, almost liquid.

"You'll find none like it and none finer," the priest guaranteed.

"Mayhap." Pacys was puzzled. The mirror remained yet a mirror, though in his vision it had been something else entirely in addition to being a mirror. He took his hand back and studied the fingerprints he'd left there.

"Is something wrong?" the priest asked.

"I don't know," the old bard answered, more to himself than the other man. He studied the mirror from different angles, drawing irritated glances from the priest who looked like he'd rather be somewhere else.

"What is it?" Khlinat asked.

"I was shown this mirror in my vision earlier," Pacys explained, "yet now it appears I was mistaken."

"Don't let yer faith be shaken," the dwarf said. "If ye were given a vision of this thing, then there's a reason. Think about why it would be shown to ye. I think ye have the key. Ye just have to find it."

As he concentrated, Pacys also heard the rhythms around him. People's voices, the sounds of feet moving on stone, the clink and clank of items being picked up and put down, all blended. Unconsciously, he found the rhythm of the noises, and another piece of the song he pursued so diligently came into his mind. He pulled his yarning forward and strummed his fingers across the strings as he gave vent to his voice.

"There they stood, Taleweaver and dwarven warrior,

"Who'd pledged his life against the Taker.

"They faced mirror-bright mystery,

"Flashing,

"Clouded,

"And empty of answers.

*"Yet the mirror shone its truth,
"Crowned under stars
"Forged
"From the bottom of the Inner Sea.
"Gond Wonderbringer's desire and power
"Guided the hand of the High Initiate,
"Imbuing his work with
"Additional magic
"That worthy didn't know about.
"The Taleweaver captured
"The cadence
"From the crowds that fitted the House of Wonders.
"And when he did,
"When his voice reached the perfect pitch,
"A way was made."*

Holding the final note, Pacys stretched out his hand to the mirror. For an instant, he touched the glass again, but the surface quickly gave way to a wet fog that dissolved and became a forest.

The priest of Gond stepped back and made a sign of his god, a prayer already on his lips.

The music and the certainty of what he was doing filled Pacys. Slinging the yarting once more from its straps about his shoulders, he told Khlinat, "Follow me," and strode into the mirror.

He felt a brief resistance, then the mirror accepted him. Coldness swirled around him but quickly went away. He felt the dwarf moving behind him, heard the prayer he breathed. The music stayed alive in Pacys's head. A moment more and he stepped from the stone floor in the Hall of Wonders in Baldur's Gate into the forest. Turning, the old bard saw the nine-foot square of shimmering space that represented the mirror. It opened, like a window, back into the Hall of Wonders.

The priest was shouting, and other priests and potential buyers ran to join him, staring in awe.

Khlinat stepped from the window, shivering. "Ooch, but that was cold on these old bones." He gazed in wonder at the forest around them. "Do ye know where it is we might be, me friend?"

The opening vanished like morning mist before a harsh sun, taking away the vision of the Hall of Wonders and leaving only the forest.

"Where we're supposed to be, praise Oghma." Pacys took a deep breath and scented the brine hanging in the air. "Do you know that smell?"

Khlinat snuffed the air, then a broad grin split his craggy face. "The sea, by Marthammor Duin's wandering eye! And it's not far here. We've come a long way."

"Yes," Pacys agreed, "but there's more."

Khlinat snuffed again. "Are ye sure? All I smell is the sweet breath of the sea, but not that of the Sea of Swords or the Trackless Sea where I've spent all me sailing days."

Pacys moved through the tall trees and dense vegetation, coming upon a well-worn trail winding down through the hilly country. "Your nose is sharper than mine when it comes to that, but I learned a long time ago to pick up the scent of a cookfire. Let's go find whoever owns it."

* * * * *

"You can put me down now."

Dazed by the events happening so quickly and by the young woman fitting so comfortably in his arms, Jherek blushed furiously. A few of the sailors around them snickered. If their situation hadn't been so dire, Jherek knew he would have been made the fool of mercilessly.

"Shut up," Tynnel ordered.

While the crew quieted, Jherek carefully placed the ship's mage on her feet. "Lady," he apologized, "I didn't mean to be so familiar. I'd thought to release you while you were still a rat." His face was crimson, he knew, and the heat he felt wasn't all from the fever. "I mean, while you were still-not

yourself."

Sabyna stepped away from him, taking refuge against the wall where she wouldn't be so easily seen from the deck. "You're all right?"

"Aye. Thank you for asking." Jherek noticed Captain Tynnel shift in irritation and felt the man was somehow angry with him.

"I thought they'd killed you," Sabyna said, grabbing his arm and pulling him toward her. Despite his protests, she parted his hair and looked at the wound. "It's infected and needs to be cleaned out." She wheeled on the men around them. "Why hasn't anyone been taking care of him?"

Jherek felt angry and embarrassed all at the same time. "Lady," he said respectfully, "I'm able to take care of myself."

"Right," Sabyna said sarcastically. "That's why you've got a head full of pus and you're burning up with fever."

Jherek sensed she was angry with him already and that knowledge kept him from making any kind of retort. He wasn't exactly clear why she was angry. Her fingers continued to poke around on the tender parts of his head, maybe with a little vengeance included. Still, he made no sound.

"I've been taking care of him," Hullyn objected. "I saw that it was infected. I've been keeping that scalp wound like that on purpose. Like my old da always taught me. You get infection set in like that, you let flies get to it. Then maggots will eat out the rotten meat so it'll heal up proper."

Jherek's stomach lurched. Malorrie's instruction had covered such things, but those methods were to be used only under harsh and difficult circumstances, when no recourse to a healer was available.

"That way would leave a terrible scar," Sabyna said.

"Lady," Jherek said patiently, "I bear scars from past times. There's no-"

"You're not bearing this one on my behalf," she stated with determination.

"I gather that shape-shifting ability you've suddenly developed isn't going to last forever," Tynnel growled. He was angry too, Jherek noted, but the captain's disfavor appeared to be shared between Sabyna and himself.

"No," Sabyna answered, turning to face the captain, "it won't."

"Then I suggest you use this time you've taken to risk your life. How many men are there aboard *Breezerunner*?"

"Twenty-seven," Sabyna answered.

"I never saw that many," Tynnel said.

"You never saw all of them," the pretty ship's mage replied.

Tynnel pulled a face. "How well versed are they in ship's craft?"

"They know their way around a ship," Sabyna said, "and they're all heavily armed."

"Do you know where they're going?"

"To the end of the Chionthar. After that Vurgrom plans on making his way back to the Sea of Fallen Stars. He came to Baldur's Gate to deliver an item to the man responsible for the attack on Waterdeep and Baldur's Gate."

"You mean the *sahuagin* responsible-" Tynnel started to say.

"The man," Sabyna repeated. "He's called Iakhovas."

The news slammed into Jherek. It was one thing to think of the sea devils rising up to strike along the Sword Coast in concert, but it was even more stunning to learn that a man had orchestrated those strikes.

"I've never heard the name," Tynnel said.

"I've got the feeling you will. Vurgrom rails on about what Iakhovas is going to do to the Sea of Fallen Stars."

"Vurgrom's making you use that chair he brought aboard, isn't he?" Tynnel asked.

Embarrassment flushed Sabyna's face with color. "I've never seen its like. When I'm sitting there, *Breezerunner* feels more alive than ever. She moves when and where I tell her."

"Then stop her," Tynnel commanded. "On your next shift in that chair, stop her dead in the water."

Sabyna shook her head. "That would only get us all killed."

They tie me in that chair under guard when it's my shift. As soon as I did that, they'd slit my throat, then come kill the lot of you."

"They won't let us live anyway," Tynnel said. "Not when they're done with us and *Breezerunner*."

"Then I'm the only chance we all have," Sabyna declared. She swept the crew with her gaze and Jherek saw the care she held for them and the distress she felt for them in that glance. "I would have been here sooner to check on you but they won't let me near the cargo hold. I finally had the chance to get into my room and get one of the potions I had. Unfortunately, it was the only one I had. I'd intended to trade it in Lantan to a mage there who hasn't been able to learn the spell himself. This will be the only time I can get down here like this."

"Can you open the door?"

Sabyna shook her head. "Vurgrom keeps the key with him at all times."

"Can't you magic him, lass?" Hullyn asked. "Put him to sleep or fry him with a lightning bolt?"

"I've already considered that," Sabyna said. "The problem is if I fail, Vurgrom will execute two of you. If I get caught in here now, I'm sure two of you will be killed."

"Then what the hell are you doing in here risking our lives like this?" Aysel demanded.

"Because I don't know if your lives won't be forfeit anyway if I can't get you out of here," she told him.

Aysel gaped at her, then turned away angrily. "We put our necks in the noose for a petty little twit like her. Umberlee take her into the dark and deep. We should have took our chances back at the dock."

Jherek started forward and Aysel turned toward him, a malicious grin on his brutal face.

Before Jherek could get close, Tynnel seized Aysel by the shirt collar and yanked him into the wall. Aysel's head slammed into the hard wood with a dulled gonging sound. Stunned, the big man dropped to his knees.

Tynnel shifted his hold to Aysel's hair and yanked the man's head back. The captain ripped the sailor's other dagger earring out, splitting the fleshy lobe, and held the keen little blade against the corner of Aysel's eye.

"Another word out of you," Tynnel promised in a tight voice, "and I'll carve you a face to frighten young children with during Moonfest. Do you understand me? Nod carefully."

Slowly, Aysel dipped his chin. "Aye, sir."

"Another thing, when we get to the next port of call, civilized or not," Tynnel said, "you're no longer part of this ship's crew. I stand by those who stand by me, and I've given you considerable leave of your responsibilities."

"You can't do that," Aysel blustered. "I'm a hell of a sailor."

"Aye," Tynnel replied. "That you are, but you're not much of a man. Keep your mouth shut till I tell you to speak."

Aysel dropped into a crouch against the wall and glared heated rage at Jherek.

Tynnel kept the small dagger. He turned back to Sabyna. "While you've got this ability I want you to get clear of *Breezerunner*."

"You *want* me to?" Sabyna narrowed her eyes at him. "Since when do I listen to what you want?"

Tynnel appeared somewhat taken off-balance, but he recovered quickly, staring hard at her. "Consider it an order, then."

"Were it an order while you were in command of this ship, and it made sense to me, I'd think it over. Neither of those is true at this moment."

"Damn your eyes, Sabyna, get off the ship like I told you to." Tynnel took a step forward.

Unconsciously, Jherek took a step forward too, setting himself to intervene on behalf of Sabyna if it looked like Tynnel was going to get physical with her. Both of them noticed his approach at once. Tynnel made an effort to calm himself and didn't move any closer.

"And if I do get off this ship," Sabyna challenged, "Vurgrom will start killing all of you down here."

"Lass," Hullyn said softly, "Cap'n's right. This ain't no place for a young lady like yourself. If you have the chance to get clear of this stumble, you should take it."

"There's nothing out there to go to," Sabyna said. "Give me the sea and I could live off it, but not those plains and sparse forests. The river might offer a better chance, but I'm not happy with that either." She plucked a tiny hourglass from her necklace and checked the swift-moving sands.

"It would be safer there than here," Tynnel argued, "and if we didn't have to worry about you, Vurgrom's hold over us wouldn't be as tight."

"Says you. There's safety in numbers, Cap'n. Or did you forget that?"

Hot spots of color flared on Tynnel's cheeks. "You're getting really close to insubordination."

"Draw a line," Sabyna told him, "and I'll step over it just to make sure we both know."

"Gods, you can be so stubborn at times."

"Only when I'm right, and you know that." Sabyna turned to Jherek. "I'll need help getting back up there."

"As you wish," Jherek said.

A smile dawned on her face as she heard his words, and the sight of it shot pain through Jherek's heart. She was so beautiful and independent, yet she was so far from anything he could ever hope to attain. If she saw the tattoo of Bloody Falkane that he bore, it would be enough to trigger undying hatred on her part.

"As you wish," she repeated softly. "I'll try to get some heal potion down here, or at least some salve you can put on that head of yours."

Jherek nodded. "Thank you, lady, but don't trouble yourself overmuch. I'm holding up fine," he said, though he knew he wasn't. He felt broken inside, and wanted nothing more than a bowl of the soup Madame Litaar used to make for him when he was ill back in Velen.

Sabyna said something unladylike, which shocked Jherek. Curse words from the other sailors he was accustomed to, but not from the pretty ship's mage's tender lips.

In the next instant, she blurred. Her size reduced and her form changed until only a rat ran toward Jherek's boots. Unsteady from the fever raging inside him, Jherek leaned carefully down and picked her up. Gently, he grabbed the iron bar overhead and tried to pull himself up, but his strength failed him.

"Here you go, lad." Hullyn came forward and laced his hands together into a makeshift stirrup.

"Thank you." Jherek stepped into the big man's hands and felt himself lifted until he could reach the iron bar. In her rat form, Sabyna quickly scurried away, hesitating at the edge only a moment.

Vertigo seized Jherek as Hullyn lowered him. If not for the big man's hand on his shoulder, he would have fallen.

"There's something I want you to keep in mind," Tynnel told him in a dark voice. His eyes blazed as he regarded Jherek. "If you do anything that makes her choose to step in harm's way, you'll answer to me."

Some of the anger and fierceness that Jherek had come to know in Athkatla and during the caravan trek to Baldur's Gate hit the young sailor. "I wouldn't do anything like that, sir."

Tynnel seemed on the verge of contesting the statement, then he blew out a great breath and turned away. "We'll see."

Unwilling to let the man walk away so calmly, Jherek addressed him. "Captain Tynnel, back in Athkatla you told me you'd tell Sabyna that I wouldn't be coming with the ship. I knew you wouldn't tell her about the fight, but you explained it so that it sounded like I didn't even take time to tell her good-bye."

"And what did you tell her?"

Jherek hesitated. "I carried on with your lie, sir."

"Why?"

"Because I didn't want to tell her the truth."

"Neither did I," Tynnel told him. "I knew if I told you different you might feel you had to see her again."

Jherek knew it was true.

"Also," Tynnel went on, "I think somewhat like Aysel in that you *are* a bad copper that keeps turning up. If you hadn't been here today, and hadn't gotten wounded trying to save her, I might have

been able to convince her to jump ship and save herself."

Jherek didn't agree. He didn't believe Sabyna would have left any crew member aboard *Breezerunner*. He didn't understand why Tynnel laid so much of the responsibility for Sabyna's actions now on his shoulders.

Weak and shaking, the young sailor walked slowly back to the place he'd been sitting before Sabyna had arrived. His head throbbed and the light lanced his eyes. He closed them and laid his head on his arms, feeling the heat and oily slick-ness that clung to his skin.

Jherek suffered in silence, from the physical discomfort as well as the mental anguish he subjected himself to. He remembered Malorrie's teachings, part of the platform he'd built for himself to get him through the dark years since leaving his father's ship. The phantom had always told him to do what needed doing when it needed doing, not to borrow trouble, and to plan for what could be accomplished and not for what couldn't.

After a time, he slept, and the shark haunted Jherek's dreams, hunting him ceaselessly.

XIV

9 Kythorn, the Year of the Gauntlet

Laaqueel swam in Iakhovas's shadow, having trouble keeping up with him. In the last month since healing after his fight with Huaanton, Iakhovas seemed to become even stronger. The malenti priestess suspected that newfound strength came from one of the items his spies and lackeys constantly searched for. No human could swim as fast as a sahuagin, or a malenti, and no sahuagin could swim as fast as Iakhovas.

She continued to struggle as they arched through the tunnels beneath the sahuagin palace. Sahuagin homes always had numerous entrances, following tunnels that branched in all directions. Mazes were an entertainment as well as a defense for the sahuagin, and the most complex labyrinths were those constructed under the palace.

The malenti struggled to remember the route. Iakhovas never took the same one twice, and she knew there was some deliberate overlapping and repetition in his routes. It was a constant reminder that, though they were joined by Sekolah's will and the quill next to her heart, Iakhovas would always go his own way.

Make haste, little malenti, Iakhovas taunted. I don't want to keep my people waiting. It would be unseemly if the Royal High Priestess wasn't at her station when I made my announcement.

What announcement? Laaqueel swam harder, flaring out the webbing between her toes and fingers to better catch the water. Still, she couldn't close the distance. It was unsettling seeing him in his human form easily setting a pace she found grueling.

Patience, little malenti. I know events in Baldur's Gate sapped some of our reserves and even the savage nature of the sahuagin is daunted. I've made preparations to fix that. Trust me, they will be re-inspired today.

Suspicion shot through Laaqueel. Since his meeting with the Nelanther pirates, Iakhovas had been brimming with energy and mystery. He took a final turn in the tunnel he was following, waiting until he was almost upon it.

Drawn by the wake he'd left, Laaqueel strove to make the corner but couldn't. She slammed into the rough wall, abrading her skin. Biting back a cry of pain, she pushed off the wall and continued her pursuit of Iakhovas.

Another turn and he shot straight up, coursing through yet another tunnel. Laaqueel watched him leave the opening above, flashing swift as an arrow.

As soon as he cleared the opening, Iakhovas spread his arms. Knowing he looked like a sahuagin male to her people, Laaqueel recognized the bit of posturing on his behalf. A sahuagin's fins would have flared out, standing briefly at attention. His arrival was graceful and impressive, showing that he was every inch the predator.

Laaqueel left the tunnel and entered the large chamber behind the amphitheater throne. She heard the clicks and whistles of the crowd and knew that the gladiatorial games that had been scheduled were

underway. She'd been informed of them but had chosen to stay in her chambers until she'd been sent for.

Iakhovas alighted on his feet. Instantly the Royal Black Tridents closed in around him, barely giving Laaqueel room to take her place at his side. Iakhovas glanced at her with his single eye. Down in the dark pit of the empty socket, she thought she saw something metallic.

"You've changed your attire since our raid," Iakhovas said.

"Yes." Laaqueel didn't explain why she'd started wearing the hated human clothing. She couldn't really explain it to herself. Most of it had to do with how Bloody Falkane had flaunted his sexual aggression, and how it had affected her. It had, however, served her to notice that Iakhovas was aware of her nudity even though he'd never tried to act on it. The feeling was extremely awkward. She'd never before experienced any of the emotions or confusion the two men now generated within her.

There was something about Bloody Falkane, though, that had stayed with her. Sometimes at night she felt his lips still on hers, burning like the poisonous touch of a vinanquelt. It wasn't enough to cause pain, but it had disrupted her sleep patterns. Only prayers had ever done that before.

The possibility of an alliance with him was never too far from her mind. It could put her on more equal footing with Iakhovas. Though she knew attempting such an alliance would anger Iakhovas, she also thought the cunning and cruel part of him would respect her efforts.

Iakhovas led the way out to the terrace overlooking the amphitheater. He took his seat and the Royal Black Tridents spread out around him. Laaqueel stood at his side.

Below, on the swirl pattern of the amphitheater floor, nine captured surface dwellers fought an afanc. The blue-gray beast had a vicious wedge-shaped head and a mouthful of teeth, made even more distinctive by the long whiskers. Resembling a fish in structure, it was nearly fifty feet long and often was mistaken for a whale because of its size.

Laaqueel knew Iakhovas had chosen nine humans on purpose. The number meant much among the sahuagin culture. There were nine barons, and power was assumed to come from that number.

The humans fought because they had no choice. Armed with tridents, they tried to stay low to the ground. If they'd tried to swim up, the afanc would have easily picked them off.

Finning itself into a frenzy, the afanc began swimming in circles above the group. Faster and faster it sped, until a whirlpool took shape in the water. The funnel danced across the checkerboard amphitheater floor, twisting with quick, darting leaps that scoured the tiles. Debris formed bands inside the whirlpool.

The humans tried to flee, seeing the danger too late, but the whirlpool caught them. The suction ripped them from the floor, pulling them up into the open. As the humans whipped around the outer edges of the dancing whirlpool, the afanc swam in quick lunges and ripped them free in its jaws. When the creature crunched its prey, blood flowed into the water. In less than a minute, all nine surface dwellers were gone.

The sahuagin in the stands shouted out in savage glee.

Iakhovas let them have their moment, then he stood and held his hands out for attention. He waited until every eye was on him, then said, "My people, long have I prayed over our future. I have asked not for mercy from Sekolah for We Who Eat, for that would be foolish. I have asked for strength. We need to be strong, stronger than we have ever been before. Our destiny lies before us, shrouded in human flesh and human death. It is from them that we must rip what is our due according to the will of the mighty Shark God."

His words carried powerfully over the amphitheater. Laaqueel felt moved by them, and was certain that no matter what Iakhovas thought he was doing, Sekolah was working through him.

"Our losses were great at Baldur's Gate," Iakhovas said. "Many of our warriors fell in battle, but that, too, is the way Sekolah wills. Our path cannot be easy, not if we are to remain worthy of our heritage. Sekolah found us and shaped us into warriors." He paused. "No, he molded us in his wisdom into the *best* warriors."

A resounding cheer went up in the amphitheater. Laaqueel watched her people, knowing Iakhovas had them in the palm of his hand.

"We strike fear into the hearts of any who dare stand in the way of We Who Eat," Iakhovas continued. "As we should for now and for always. We took their lives that night, just as we did in

Waterdeep, and we've become stronger because of our losses."

Out in the amphitheater, the afanc finished chasing down the stray bits of bodies left floating in the water. None of the sahuagin guards ventured forth for any of the choice morsels so tantalizingly close.

"Some of you may think we should halt for a time in our war against the surface dwellers," Iakhovas said, "but that would only be giving in to weakness."

Silence reigned in the amphitheater, and Laaqueel knew no one dared dispute Iakhovas's words.

"We were born to fight and die." Iakhovas looked out over the gathered sahuagin. "To do any less would be forsaking all that we know. So now I tell you that I've been told to guide you to a new battleground, a place where we can strike even more terror into the hearts of the accursed surface dwellers."

Laaqueel listened, trying to guess where Iakhovas would next send them. There were always the lands of the Shining South and the Empires of the Sands. Both of those regions conducted a lot of sea trade.

"I was given a dream," Iakhovas went on, "of a sea far from here. An inland sea held hostage by the hated humans."

Consternation spread throughout the ranks of the sahuagin. Laaqueel felt her heart slow, but the quill pricked it and it resumed its normal rhythm.

Be at ease, little malenti. I know what I'm doing.

"And in this inland sea, called Seros by those who live there, I have seen thousands of our people held captive in subjugation. It falls to us to find them and free them from the trap the humans laid for them."

More noise erupted through the ranks, and Laaqueel knew Iakhovas was dangerously close to losing the crowd. Hardly any of the sahuagin had ever heard of an inland sea. To hold the very sea itself captive was unthinkable, an aberration they would struggle to even understand or believe.

"It's true!" Iakhovas roared. "No one may doubt my word, the word of your king!"

Instantly, most of the noise died away, but Laaqueel knew the implied threat didn't quell the confusion within her people.

"I will lead you there," Iakhovas said, "and we will find our people. A way will be made for us to achieve this, our greatest of destinies. Once again, our people will be made whole, no longer separated by the ignorance the hated surface dwellers would wish on us. I give you this, my promise, and I stand on it in the blood of combat to prove to you that Sekolah watches over our actions."

Before anyone knew what was going on, Iakhovas leaped from the terrace and swam out into the amphitheater. The afanc noticed him at once and began finning toward him.

The royal guards mustered quickly to go to his aid. Laaqueel reached for the gifts Sekolah had bestowed upon her, wondering if any of them would truly be enough to stand against the monster even now gliding toward Iakhovas.

"No!" Iakhovas shouted. "Do not interfere. Trust in the will of Sekolah."

Laaqueel rushed forward to the terrace railing. Fear pounded through her as she wondered what would happen to her when Iakhovas was killed by the afanc.

Iakhovas hung motionless in the water, floating well above the tiled courtyard. He spread his arms out, claws wide on his hands and feet.

The afanc streaked straight for him. It opened its mouth, knowing its prey couldn't escape.

* * * * *

Jherok woke from a troubled slumber, never free of the nightmarish shark that pursued him. Pale moonlight streamed through the iron bars of the hold overhead, letting him know it was still in the dark hours of the night. The familiar creak of *Breezerunner's* rigging and planks sounded around him. Two men's voices talking casually to each other came from above.

Nearly all of *Breezerunner's* crew were asleep around him, rolled tightly into themselves against the chill of the night that filled the hold. Only Tynnel was awake, sitting across the hold and staring up at the

iron bars overhead. Jherek made brief, uncomfortable eye contact with the man, glancing quickly away. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the bulwark. Since their confrontation a few days ago, they'd had little to say to each other.

Slight fever still coursed through Jherek, but it wasn't as bad as it had been. At least now it burned and kept his sleep erratic, but it didn't leave him shaking all the time. The chill bit into him with jagged fangs, though, and he wished he had a blanket so he wouldn't wake up feeling stiff all the time.

Breezerunner still sailed through the River Chionthar as it had every night that Jherek had been aware of. Old Captain Finaren, who'd never liked even the idea of river travel, told him that normally a ship tied up at night on a river. There were too many dangers, unseen shoals that could rip a keel out from under a ship, or twists that could be missed in the night that would leave the ship run ashore, to risk sailing in the dark. Even the merchantman's necessary four-foot draft could prove challenging for the ship's pilot. The young sailor knew there must have been some reason for Vurgrom's haste, and he wished he had some clue as to what it was.

The fever left his mouth dry. Quietly, not wanting to disturb those around him, Jherek made his way to the water barrel. He used the dipper hanging on the side and drank deeply.

"Malorrie."

The whisper drew the young sailor's attention up. For a moment, he thought he'd imagined Sabyna's voice, a product of wishful thinking and the fever.

"Malorrie."

He glanced up, thinking perhaps he saw a slight shimmering against the star-studded night above. "Sabyna?" he said softly.

"I have the key to the brig lock." Her voice seemed to come from the air itself.

"How did you-"

"Vurgrom sleeps occasionally. I waited till his mage was deep in his own studies, then took my chances."

"That was foolish," Jherek said. "You could have been hurt."

"Quiet. I've heard them talking that we'll reach the end of the river tomorrow. If we're going to have a chance at all, it has to be tonight."

Jherek nodded. "I agree, lady. Once you give me the key, get yourself off the ship."

"I can do more good here."

"No," Jherek said softly.

"We don't have time to argue. Even invisible, if any of the pirates look in my direction at the right time they could figure out what's going on. If Vurgrom should wake up and find his key missing, all hell will break loose."

"Of course."

"Stretch your hand up."

Jherek did, standing on tiptoe. The hard metal key brushed his fingertips for a moment, and he seized it. He felt the warmth of Sabyna's hand close around his briefly, and he wished the touch could have lasted longer. He felt an immediate wash of shame and guilt. He was in no way deserving of her. His face burned and he hoped it was too dark in the hold for the ship's mage to see.

"As soon as you are ready," Sabyna said, "you should make your move. It's only a couple hours before dawn now, and most of the pirates are asleep."

"Aye, lady."

"I told you not to call me lady," Sabyna admonished.

"As you wish."

"'As you wish,'" she repeated. "I do like the sound of that."

He heard the smile in her voice, and his heart ached that he wasn't able to see it. When he realized how selfish he was being, both for wanting to see her and for keeping her there any longer than she had to be, he whispered, "You should go before you're spotted."

"All right. Tymora's favored blessings of good fortune to you and the crew, Malorrie of Velen, that you may be seen safely through this night."

"And you, lady." He didn't know if she'd heard him. Even though he didn't hear her footsteps, he felt that she was no longer there.

"Let me have the key, boy," Captain Tynnel said in a rough voice.

Jherek crossed the floor and gave the key to the man. Whatever slight friendship that had existed between them when they'd first met seemed to have vanished. The young sailor still didn't know how or why that had happened.

Tynnel pushed himself to his feet. "Let's rouse these dogs. Quietly. We've got my ship to take back, and in one damned piece, Selune willing."

In moments, they had the crew awake. All of them were full of fear and nervous energy when Tynnel slid the key home and twisted the lock. The tumblers instantly fell into place.

They went through the door and into the pitch black filling the center of the hold, moving by memory and by feel. Jherek went first among them, followed by Tynnel. He breathed rapidly, from fear and the fever filling him. He ran his hand along the wall, located the steps leading up to the main deck, and started up toward the lighted rectangle of the hatch.

Tynnel gripped the young sailor's wrist. "Once we get up top, things are going to get confusing. No matter what else, we have to seize control of the tiller-else *Breezerunner* will be run aground."

"Aye, sir." Despite the tension between the captain and himself, Jherek knew he'd carry out the orders to the best of his ability. He continued up the steps, going slowly, rocking his weight smoothly so the steps wouldn't be as likely to creak underfoot. His heart pounded and he was drenched in the sweat of the fever.

He peered out at the deck before his head ever cleared the hold. He glanced only briefly at the dark shore speeding by, almost overwhelmed by the actual sight of *Breezerunner's* magically enhanced speed. He turned hurriedly away.

Two pirates were talking at the nearby railing. From their conversation, Jherek knew the subject was Sabyna and how Vurgrom had promised the ship's mage to them once they reached the end of the river in the Sunset Mountains.

The young sailor's anger came upon him full strength at the graphic nature of their discussion, but he kept himself in check. Malorrie had always instructed him in the dangers of anger, and Madame Litaar had never put up with it.

Two more men stood at the stern castle manning the rudder. Vurgrom's ship's mage occupied the bronze-colored chair mounted there. Moonlight glinted darkly against it. Sailcloth above moved and cracked occasionally, but left great wells of shadow that a clever and surefooted person could use to his benefit.

The land on either side of the River Chionthar here bore scrub growth, short, stocky trees and an abundance of brush. Only a few trees of any real height lined the bank and leaned out over the water. The ship's mage piloted *Breeze-runner* in the center of the river, and she glided smoothly along against the sedate current even with all the arcane speed she mustered.

"Move," Captain Tynnel ordered.

Jherek pushed out of the hold and stayed hunkered down as he crossed the deck. He placed his feet rapidly but carefully, staying within the pools of shadows created by the sails overhead. He heard the crewmen behind him, though, as they came up on the deck, and so did the pirates.

"Hey, what the hell?" someone yelled.

Giving up all pretense of getting across the deck unheard and unseen, Jherek sped for the stern castle. He pushed the fever and the uncertainty to the back of his mind. Live or die, it all came down to the next few minutes.

The man standing beside the seated ship's mage came forward, peering down at the deck and trying to find the source of the commotion.

"The prisoners have escaped!" someone screamed. "Sound the alarm!"

Swords hissed from leather. Halfway up the steps, Jherek lunged for the man leaning over the railing, catching him by the shirt front. The young sailor pulled as hard as he could, yanking the man over the railing and toward the deck below.

As the pirate screamed and fell, Jherek stripped the cutlass from the man's hand. The young sailor heard the bone-splitting crunch of the man impacting against the deck at the time he had his foot on the top rung of the steps leading into *Breezerunner's* stern castle.

He raced toward the ship's mage, grimly aware of the battle that had broken out behind him.

XV

9 Kythorrt, the Year of the Gauntlet

Incredibly, at the last moment before the afanc reached him, Iakhovas moved enough to avoid the beast's jaws. He buried a handful of claws in the side of the afanc's face, locking himself onto it. While the afanc swam faster, startled by the effrontery of the creature that dared challenge it, Iakhovas used his hand and foot claws to pull himself to the great creature's back.

Seated behind the afanc's wedge-shaped head, Iakhovas locked his foot claws into the creature's body, then began rending it with his hand claws. Great strips of flesh peeled from the creature, floating away in ribbons. Iakhovas didn't toy with it, going for the kill immediately.

Watching him ride the giant creature to its death, Laaqueel was reminded of the stories of Daganisoraan, the hero and villain of so many sahuagin tales. She knew that was exactly what Iakhovas was after.

Working in a frenzy, Iakhovas raked through one of the afanc's eyes. The creature whipped back and forth, giving vent to screams of pain that sounded very humanlike. Laaqueel had heard the afanc had learned to speak some human tongues and often lured sailors to their own deaths.

Once the eye socket was empty, Iakhovas shifted on the afanc's face. He clung with his toe claws and one hand, reaching his other into the bloody socket. He ripped past the soft tissues that did little to protect the vulnerable brain beyond. He had to shove his head and one shoulder into the socket to get the depth he needed to reach the brain, but he didn't flinch in doing it.

Laaqueel had never seen such savagery, and she knew Sekolah had chosen well his instrument of war against the surface dwellers. The sahuagin in the stands roared in savage anticipation, no longer fearing for their king. They cheered him on instead.

The afanc's movements became erratic, evidence that Iakhovas had damaged the brain. A shudder ran its full length and it died. Withdrawing from the wound he'd made in the eye, Iakhovas leaped from the corpse and swam high into the space above the amphitheater.

"I am Iakhovas!" he roared. "I work the will of Sekolah, the Shark God, to strike fear in the hearts of the enemy of We Who Eat! I will not be denied!"

The sahuagin stood in the stands and slapped their finned feet against the stone. Thunder, spread even more quickly in the water, crashed all around the amphitheater.

"Come eat," Iakhovas invited. "Sekolah has seen fit to give us this bounty. Meat is meat!"

The sahuagin swam from their seats, so close together they looked like a school of fish. The dim light shone from their wriggling scaled bodies as they closed on Iakhovas's kill and fed in a frenzy.

Laaqueel felt moved to join them, to revel in her heritage, but she knew that could never be fully a part of this world. She would always be an outsider, a freak among the sahuagin, but she took pride in them nonetheless.

Iakhovas floated above the scene for a moment, then swam over to join her.

What do you think now, little malenti? he asked as he swam down to stand beside her.

I think you follow the currents given by the Shark God more closely than even you would admit.

Iakhovas laughed. *Ah, little malenti, you profess such faith, yet you have so many doubts. I will teach you to believe.*

Laaqueel considered telling him that he was the only thing she doubted, not the will of Sekolah. She chose not to. The way looked hard before them. She was convinced they were being divinely led. The sahuagin were going to take back the sea coasts, including the abomination of the inland sea.

Join me, Iakhovas said. *I would call others to our cause.* He lifted his voice then, launching into the deepsong that the sahuagin used to communicate over enormous distances. He sent forth a song of

vengeance and bloodlust, of battle and victory, drawing forth sahuagin as well as all manner of creatures that could heed the sound of his voice.

Normally a deepsong wasn't entered into so easily. Time was required to set up the message, to arrange the way it was sung, but Iakhovas's song was simple. It was an invitation to a slaughter, to a bloodletting that would make histories above and below the waterline of Faerun.

Laaqueel joined him, lending her power to his. The royal guard followed suit, then all the voices out in the amphitheater joined in. As she sang, joy thrilled through the malenti. Usually a king and Royal High Priestess would lead five hundred singers in deepsong, and the words would reach as far out as fifteen hundred miles, but now there were thousands. The whole village sang. Laaqueel knew it was impossible to guess how far the deepsong could be heard, but she knew those who heard it, those for whom it was intended, would answer.

* * * * *

"Friend Pacys, what is it that ails ye?" The old bard blinked, staring at the forest around him. When he and Khlinat had first arrived, he hadn't known exactly where they were, but the woodchopper whose fire they'd found had told them they were in the Gulthmere Forest north of the Orsraun Mountains. The forest was on the western coast of the Sea of Fallen Stars, with Turmish to the southeast and Starmantle and the independent city of Westgate to the northwest. They had begun trekking toward Starmantle rather than crossing over the Orsraun Mountains.

Khlinat stared at him in consternation, backlit by the glow of their campfire.

"What's wrong?" Pacys asked, not understanding.

"Ye were moaning and groaning," Khlinat told him, "like a man being pulled to his grave by a pack of hungry ghouls."

Reluctantly, Pacys sat up. In his older years, he knew sleep no longer returned so casually as it had when he was younger. Some nights sleep had to be wooed like an uncertain lover, and this night he was certain it wouldn't return at all.

"A dream," he told the dwarf.

"'Tweren't no dream, I'll wager," Khlinat said. His hair hung in shaggy disarray, leaves twisted among it from sleeping on the light pallets they carried.

"A nightmare then."

"Come over here and sit by the fire," Khlinat entreated. "Warm up yer bones a bit and it'll get rid of them nightmares."

Pacys moved a little closer to the fire they kept burning to stave off the chill of the night. Khlinat threw a few more of the branches they'd gathered onto the fire. Stuttering yellow flames licked up anxiously for the dry wood.

"Maybe a bit of that stew I made earlier," Khlinat suggested. "Get your innards warmed up a bit too."

"No, thank you," Pacys said. "The fire will be enough." He held his hands out to the fire, marveling again that they were still in such good shape after all these years. He'd known several bards who'd lost their skill to arthritis or accident.

"So what was this nightmare?" the dwarf asked.

Pacys shook his head. "There were no images. At least, none that I can remember." He hesitated. "There was a song, though, something I could barely understand."

He reached for the yarting in its protective cover beside his pallet. Despite his age, he sat with crossed legs. He'd spent decades on the ground, on tables in taverns, on hassocks in royal chambers, and on ships' decks. The position was natural for him.

Khlinat sat silently beside him, his hands never far from the axe hafts. The rough country had been hard on the dwarf because of his peg leg, but he'd never complained.

It was good, Pacys knew, to be in stouthearted company when the things that lay ahead appeared so uncertain. He slid the yarting from its cover, stroked the strings and tuned it briefly, then reached out

for the song.

He closed his eyes, surrendering himself over to it. Since they arrived in the Gulthmere Forest the songs had stayed constantly in his thoughts, almost too many of them to keep track of, yet when he fitted them together, they wove tightly. His fingers found the notes easily, and he wasn't surprised that some of them were new. It was like mining a mountain shot through with veins rich with ore. Despite how many new things were coming to him, he knew there was much more that was not yet his.

Eyes closed in concentration, the old bard smelled the sweet scent of Khlinat's pipe as it smoldered. Though he hadn't thought of it before and didn't know why he hadn't, Pacys reached out for the scent, felt the smooth, wispy nature of it, and blended it into the song as well.

"That's me part," Khlinat said in surprise.

"Yes," Pacys told him, smiling. The music was so vibrant and true, even after hearing only brief pieces and snatches of it in the middle of so many others, the dwarf was able to remember the different verses. He cut out the other music for a moment, leaving only the notes he'd blended for the pipe-weed smoke.

"Me pipe?" Khlinat asked.

Pacys smiled and opened his eyes. "You knew?"

"How could I not?" the dwarf asked. "By Marthammor Duin's long strides, how can ye capture pipe smoke in a song? I've heard bards doing that for people's voices and animals and the like, but not this."

Pacys shook his head. "It's as I've said, my friend, this song is truly meant for my hands and ear alone. I am come into my own." The old bard's heart trip-hammered as he recognized the truth behind the bold statement. He calmed himself through the music, playing out his excitement until he brought it to a steadier place.

The only thing that bothered him was knowing what he was supposed to do next. Narros's story hadn't included that. He paused in his playing, watching embers caught up in the rising smoke die only a short distance above the flames. Moonlight kissed the breakers rolling against the shoreline only a short distance away. He pulled their sound into him and made it his.

"Oghma help me," Pacys whispered to the dwarf, "but I have never in my life felt so alive. It should be sinful to feel this good."

"Aye," Khlinat agreed. "But ye and me, we know the truth of life, songsmith. That every day you trod upon this earth, a bit more of ye dies. Ye soon run out of new things, new places, new people. A wandering man, that's what I always wanted to be, but I've stayed in one place for far too long. This quest ye be upon, now there's a true calling for the measure of a man. That's part of why I wanted to tag along with ye, to sup the dregs from your adventures. Marthammor Duin willing, there'll be no few of those."

Pacys touched the yarting's strings, exploring all that was new to him. "I only wish I knew better where we were supposed to go. Starmantle is the closest city of any size."

"Ye worry too much about things that will take care of themselves," Khlinat said. "When it's a quest ye be following, why ye are the compass rose on the map. Ye can't help but go in the right direction no matter how wrong it may seem at the time. Ye mark me words, songsmith, and mark them well."

The old bard believed in his new friend's confidence, melding it with his own, but a cold tingle touched him as well. With a sense long born of traveling and being on his own, Pacys knew they were being watched. He caught the dwarf's eye and said, "We've attracted attention."

The dwarf slid one of his hand axes free and ran a thumb across the sharp blade. "I thought I felt something nosing around. Maybe I'll go take a look."

Pacys put a hand on the little man's arm. "No. I don't think that will be necessary."

A shadow stood in the forest, lean and somehow regal, part of the dark landscape, yet somehow apart from it as well. Moonlight flashed from the shiny surface of what Pacys believed to be the man's clothing.

When the man first stepped forward and his dark skin and silver-white hair glistened wetly in the campfire light, Pacys thought they'd drawn the attention of a drow elf. The man had the easy, liquid movements all the elves exhibited. He went naked save for a harness that supported a brace of knives

and shiny leggings. He carried a long-bladed spear in his right hand.

Khlinat swore fiercely and bounded to his foot, swiveling on his peg as he set himself with axes in both hands. "All right, ye black-hearted backstabber, let's have at ye!"

XVI

9 Kythorn, the Year of the Gauntlet

As Jherek rushed the mage in the enchanted chair, the pirate behind him leaped forward and went for the sword scabbarded at his waist. He had it out before Jherek reached him.

The action attracted the ship's mage's attention. The man threw himself from the chair. Abandoned without a strong hand at the keel, *Breezerunner* listed out of true, wallowing against the river current now instead of cutting through it cleanly. The wind and sails warred with the push of the river, rocking the ship with bigger and bigger swings.

Jherek moved easily with his stolen cutlass, parrying the helmsman's blow and listening to the yells of the pirates as they woke the ship. Still not quite back to his fighting trim, the young sailor moved too slowly to get his return blow back on time after a successful parry. The pirate blocked it inches from his face.

Swearing, calling on darkest evil to descend on Jherek, the pirate slid his steel along the young sailor's and stepped inside his guard. Before Jherek could anticipate it, his opponent headbutted him in the face. Blood streamed from Jherek's nose, leaking the salty taste down into his mouth, and it felt like the back of his head was exploding all over again.

Jherek staggered back, barely able to get his cutlass up in time to keep from having his leg hacked by a foul blow that he wouldn't have tried himself. Steel rang, clear and strident.

"Get that damn rudder, Malorrie!" Captain Tynnel roared. Two pirates blocked his way up the stairs to the stern castle. He fought them with a belaying pin he'd taken from the ship's railing. "If you don't get control of her, *Breezerunners* going to end up as a pile of kindling on one of those river-banks!"

Jherek knew it was true, and the thought filled him with fear. He didn't know where Sabyna was, but he thought first of the ship's mage. He wouldn't allow himself to fail. He leaned into his swordcraft, pulling up all the tricks and shortcuts Malorrie had taught him.

His fever and his weakness felt like they put him a half step behind what he tried to do. Perspiration burst out on his body from his efforts, and it made the night chill ghosting across the ship's decks even more harsh. A flurry of furious clangs sounded across the deck and the river, held in close by the overhanging trees. *Breezerunner* listed again, starting to come broadside into the river current. If it did, Jherek knew the ship could be lost from control forever until they ended up smashing somewhere.

Redoubling his efforts, Jherek concentrated on his foe, fighting the other man's skill as well as the effects of the fever. Everything from the waist up was a target. The young sailor allowed himself no foul blows, fighting his battle fairly and with honor. He tried a slash of his own every fifth blow, turning aside the pirate's frenzied attacks. His forearm and shoulder ached with the effort, then gradually warmed, responding better.

He stepped up his own pace, cutting now once for every three parries. He circled the deck, staying in close to his opponent, forcing the man to keep his blows short and not use his strength. When the man tried for the young sailor's head, Jherek dropped to the deck. His senses reeled enough that he had to catch himself on his empty hand. He brought the cutlass around in a sideward slash under the man's elbow that cleaved into his ribs.

The pirate yelled hoarsely, gazing down at the cutlass buried in his side. Blood spilled down his waist. Jherek locked eyes with the man, both of them knowing the mortal blow had been struck. The young sailor stepped back and pulled his cutlass free, feeling ribs grate along the sword. Holding his blade before him, he circled around the dying pirate who struggled to stay on his feet.

"By all the pirate's blood in me, and all the blood of my forefathers before me," the pirate croaked in a hoarse voice, "I curse you to never know peace, to never know a time when death isn't lurking at your door."

A chill fear raced down Jherek's back as he moved to the stern and captured the tiller. As a

seafaring man, the young sailor knew to give credence to a pirate's curses.

Still, it wasn't as frightening as it might have been. He already wore his father's tattoo on his arm. "You're too late," he told the pirate. "I was cursed at birth by a man much more powerful than you."

With a howl of rage, the blood loss already weakening him, the pirate rushed at Jherek and swung his blade. Jherek hauled on the rudder, trying to pull *Breezerunner* back to true. The ship fought him, rising and falling like a wild animal. He held the rudder in the crook of his left arm so he could put all his weight into the effort. He parried with the cutlass, standing his ground as the pirate rushed into him.

The pirate's weight slammed Jherek back into the railing, knocking the wind from his lungs. The man clamped his free hand around the young sailor's throat and forced him back over the railing.

"Die!" the pirate screamed, drawing his blade back. Moonlight shimmered along the length of the sword as he raised it high and readied himself to bring it down.

Shifting, Jherek shoved his sword arm under the man's grip, hooking him solidly in a wrestling hold. He swept the man's legs from him with a foot, twisting at the same time to lever the pirate over the railing.

The man fell with a great splash into the River Chionthar. The dark water, trimmed in whitecaps trailing after *Breeze-runner*, sucked the man down.

"Cut the damn ship hard to starboard," Captain Tynnel roared. "Cut her now!"

Turning back, Jherek watched as the rough and rocky riverbank on the port side came up fast on *Breezerunner's* prow. Branches from the overhanging trees clawed at the rigging. Rope shrieked with the pressure, then parted with loud snaps as a cacophony of breaking branches accompanied the sounds. Limbs and leaves showered the cargo ship's deck, while other branches ripped through the sailcloth.

Jherek dropped his cutlass and grabbed the rudder in both arms, aware of the two pirates streaking up the starboard steps leading to the stern castle. The young sailor set himself, pulling at the rudder with all his strength, getting his back against the railing. The ship, the current, and the wind all fought him, and *Breezerunner* twisted violently like a live thing. She crested the current, then listed wildly on the other side, throwing everyone on deck from their feet.

Hanging on fiercely, Jherek manhandled the rudder, keeping it in the river by standing up with it. Grudgingly, *Breezerunner's* prow came starboard, away from the river-bank. Branches and leaves continued hitting the deck, and sections of sailcloth came spilling down. A lantern slid from the mainmast and smashed against the deck, igniting a pool of fire that whirled up in blue and yellow flames.

"Fire!" someone yelled, and Jherek didn't know if it was ship's crew or pirate.

The young sailor pulled hard on the rudder, knowing he couldn't let go or he'd lose the ship. He watched the two pirates running up the steps, hoping that they'd see the danger all of them would be put in if they attacked him and knowing it was in vain.

The pirates topped the steps, rushing onto the stern castle deck and coming right at him.

* * * * *

Sabyna Truesail raced across *Breezerunner's* main deck. She'd planned on finding Vurgrom and his wizard, thinking that she stood the best chance of interfering with the man's spellcraft. For days she'd helplessly watched the mistreatment of the crew she'd sworn to defend and care for as ship's mage, telling herself that biding her time was the best decision to make.

Now there was no waiting, no need to hold back, and everything she cared about was at risk.

She pulled her power close to her. Most of her training and learning she'd done on her own centered around the care and upkeep of ships, not waging war against other mages. She loosed the bag of holding at her side. "Skeins," she commanded, "guard."

Immediately, the raggamoffyn spewed free of the bag of holding in a flurry of cloth pieces and took shape in the breeze that flowed across *Breezerunner*. The creature formed a serpentine shape, coiling restlessly around her.

She stood against the cabin under the forecastle. Normally Captain Tynnel lived there, but Vurgrom had seized it upon taking over the ship. Fear clawed at her stomach, turning it slightly sour but she mastered it and kept her wits. The battle raged across the deck, and swords reflected the wavering light

from the fire charring into the wood.

She ran to the railing near the fire and lifted the top from the water barrel. It was half full, sloshing with the ship's uneven movement. She glanced at her familiar. "Enter," she ordered.

Obediently, the raggamoffyn sailed into the water bucket and thrashed in the water.

"Out," she commanded.

Unable to float on the wind now, the waterlogged familiar crawled out of the bucket and plopped onto the deck at her feet.

Sabyna concentrated on the fire. The raggamoffyn's intelligence was about that of a well-trained dog, so complicated instructions were impossible. "Attack," she told it.

The raggamoffyn slithered across the deck toward the fire, wriggling through men's feet. Reaching the oil-based fire, the creature unfolded its myriad pieces and sloshed across the flames. The water and the creature's own mystical nature served to keep the raggamoffyn from harm. Gray smoke curled up from the fire as the flames were extinguished.

Sabyna heard Tynnel's shouted commands to Malorrie. She glanced up and saw the young sailor in the stern, fighting the rudder, then she spotted the two pirates climbing the starboard steps to the stern castle. She knew he couldn't handle them and steer the ship.

"Skeins!" she called, running for the ship's mainmast. She knew she'd never get through the men fighting across the deck in time.

The raggamoffyn sped across the deck, leaving oily black residue in its wake. It reached her by the time she got to the mainmast. She extended an arm down and Skeins curled around it. The creature was already partially dried from exposure to the fire and the wind.

As the raggamoffyn spread its weight across her shoulders, Sabyna climbed the mainmast. Her feet slipped in the rigging twice as *Breezerunner* rocked from side to side, but she kept pulling herself up.

When the two pirates reached the top of the stern castle, the ship's mage stopped halfway up the mast, hoping she had enough room to maneuver. Holding onto the mast with one hand, she slipped the leather whip from her side. She uncoiled it with a flick of her wrist. Drawing the whip back, she cracked it forward, aiming for the rear mast rigging.

The whip snaked across the distance and curled around a yardarm. Pulling it tight and saying a quick prayer, fully aware of the twenty-five foot drop that might land her on the ship's deck or in the river with the way *Breezerunner* was swinging, she grabbed the whip handle in both hands and leaped. Her father, Siann Truesail, had never approved of her mode of travel in ship's rigging, considering it not only risky but too showy as well. Her brothers were envious because none of them had ever quite mastered the skill.

She dropped almost three feet, then the give in the leather and the yardarm played out. She arced toward the stern, pulling her feet outward and forward to gain more momentum. At the apex of her swing, practiced in the maneuver, she popped the whip and relaxed the hold on the yardarm. The whip came loose immediately.

Sabyna somersaulted in the air, letting her momentum carry her, and gained an extra two feet that placed her securely on the stern castle. Still, she'd missed her chosen mark by a good eight feet or more.

The pirates closed on Malorrie, who still hadn't given up his death grip on the rudder. Only the young sailor knew she was there.

"Attack," she told her familiar.

Skeins uncoiled from her shoulder, breaking apart into a swirl of pieces that glided toward the pirate on the left. The creature was on the man before he knew it, wrapping around his upper body and stripping his self-control, reducing him to a zombie state.

The other pirate raised his arm to strike the young sailor, who ducked around the rudder for protection and set himself to attack. Sabyna cracked the whip, coiling it around the pirate's sword wrist. Grabbing the whip in both hands, she pulled it taut, then yanked the pirate from his feet before he could react.

The pirate's face darkened with anger as he pushed himself to his feet again and cursed her. He tried to shake the whip from his arm, but Sabyna yanked on it again, pulling him off-balance. Jherek took one

step forward and kicked the man in the head, sprawling him unconscious to the deck.

"Sandbar!" someone shouted.

"Where away?" Jherek yelled, getting a fresh hold on the rudder.

There was no time for an answer. In the next instant, *Breezerunner* ran aground. Forced up and out of the river by the current, the wind, and the magic that pushed her, the cargo ship heeled over hard to port. Men tumbled from her deck, some into the water and some onto the long, quarter-moon shaped sandbar.

Sabyna tried to grab the railing but missed. She fell only inches, dangerously close to getting pulled under the stern section as it whipsawed around. She felt a hand wrap around her wrist, tightening and halting her fall.

"I've got you, lady."

Looking up, Sabyna saw that Malorrie had grabbed hold of the railing with one hand and her with the other. She watched helplessly as *Breezerunner* shifted and jolted across the sandbar. The deck hammered Malorrie and her mercilessly, and she didn't know how the young sailor managed to maintain his hold, but he did, even pulling her in close to him. She grabbed him around the waist, fisting the sash around his slim hips and helping him hold her weight from dangling. He still supported both of them from one arm. His pale gray eyes, gleaming like new silver, met her reddish brown ones.

"Lady, I'm sorry," he said. "I did my best."

"I know," she told him. "No one could have done any more."

He looked like he wanted to say something further but couldn't.

With a shriek of tortured wood, *Breezerunner* came to a rest on her side on the sandbar. The river current slapped at the mired ship, and the sound echoed inside the empty cargo hold.

"Lady," Malorrie said quietly, "I fear I can't hold any longer."

Her arms wrapped around his waist, her cheek pressed to his stomach, she felt the tremors vibrating through him. Yet, somehow she knew he wouldn't release the hold until she told him she was ready. "It's all right," she told him. "Let go."

"As you wish." He released his hold and they dropped into the river.

XVII

9 Kythorn, the Year of the Gauntlet

The elf looked at the dwarf in obvious disdain, dismissing him in a glance. Upon closer inspection, Pacys realized the elf's skin color wasn't ebony as a dwarf's was, but a very dark blue with infrequent white patches.

"You're him, aren't you?" the elf asked. "The one who will come to be called the Taleweaver?"

Pacys listened to the accent the elf used, finding it like none other he'd ever encountered. As a bard, he'd trained his ear for dialects and accents. They were part of the most colorful tools a bard had, able to carry emotion and character in a monologue. It was softer and more sibilant, as if used to carrying great distances with very little effort.

"I am Pacys the Bard," he replied, "and I've been called many things."

"But soon to be the Taleweaver."

"Maybe. No man may know exactly what lies in his future." Pacys played his cards close to his vest. Narros had also spoken of those who would try to prevent him from attaining his goals.

"No," the elf replied, "but a few are sometimes chosen by the gods to get a glimpse of those possible futures." He paused, then added, "You have no need for alarm."

"Aye, and ye speak prettily," Khlinat spat roughly, "but meself, I've found a man sometimes talks differently when he gets the chance to hold a knife to yer throat."

"I heard your song," the elf said. "I knew I had to come see you for myself-to discover if you were the one."

"You knew me from my song?" Pacys asked.

The elf nodded. "I'm something of a minstrel myself, and I was brought up on the lore of my people. Your presence has been predicted in our histories."

"Whose histories?" Pacys asked.

The elf smiled at him haughtily. "I am Taareen, of the alu'tel'quessir. More directly of late, I am of Faenasuor."

Pacys laid a hand on the dwarf's shoulder. "This is my good friend Khlinat Ironeater, a sailor and traveling companion on this journey."

Taareen inclined his head slightly. "A pleasure to meet you, warrior."

"Aye," Khlinat replied gruffly. "I guess we'll be after seeing the truth of that, eh?"

The elf took no offense. "May I come closer?"

Pacys gestured toward the campfire.

Taareen smiled. "Not too close. The flames can be hazardous to one who dwells in the embrace of Seros."

"Seros?" Khlinat asked. "I thought ye said ye were of Faenasuor."

"Seros," Pacys told him, digging into the lore he knew of the Sea of Fallen Stars, "is what they call the Inner Sea."

"Actually, it's the term for the world under the sea," Taareen stated as he sat on the ground across the campfire from them. "It came into use after Aryselmalyr fell-over a thousand years ago. In our language it means 'the embracing life.'"

"Aryselmalyr was the empire of the sea elves," Pacys told Khlinat when the dwarf looked up at him with suspicion on his broad face. "Several of the elves took up the sea life after the Crown Wars."

Harumphing in obvious displeasure, Khlinat sat apart from Pacys, giving himself a clear field of action should it become necessary. He laid his axes on the ground in front of him.

"Do you know of Faenasuor?" Taareen asked.

"I've heard of it," Pacys replied. "The city was thought lost when Aryselmalyr was destroyed."

He had heard songs of the elven empire's destruction when an undersea plateau shoved up without warning from the sea bottom and killed nearly eighty thousand inhabitants. The city lay covered over at the bottom of the Sea of Fallen Stars for a thousand years, until it was excavated seventy years ago.

"I've never been there," Pacys said.

"No," Taareen replied. "As a culture, the sea elves are friendly enough to humans, but only relate to them when there is need."

"Doesn't sound much different than elves anywhere ye go," Khlinat offered.

"I wouldn't know. I've never left Seros." Taareen's eyes fell on Pacys's yarting. "May I?"

Pacys nodded, then rose and passed the yarting over.

The sea elf took it gratefully. His hands searched out the strings a little unconfidently, then he fit his fingers into the frets and stroked the strings. Music filled the campsite, and it was clear and true. After a moment, evidently feeling more at home with the instrument, Taareen lifted his voice in song.

The words were alien to Pacys's ears. He knew some of the elven dialects and languages, but this one wasn't familiar to him. Still, the emotion of the song was raw and throbbing, speaking of loss and redemption, of brighter days ahead. He finished quietly, but the words still echoed through the trees, vanishing the way the bright orange embers from the campfire did when they tried to touch the sky.

"That was beautiful," Pacys said.

"Aye," Khlinat said, tears glittering in his beard. "I've not had the pleasure of hearing the like before. Ye may be an elf, Elf, but ye have the heart of a dwarf."

Taareen bowed his head in thanks, then glanced up at Pacys. "That was your song, Bard Pacys. The song of the Taleweaver's arrival in Seros."

"You just composed that?" Pacys asked in astonishment.

"No. I've but mean skills, and songcrafting takes me a long time. That song is ancient," Taareen said. "It is one of the few things that was carried from Aryselmalyr when so much of our history was lost."

A feathery chill touched Pacys between the shoulder blades. "How could they know all those years ago?"

"How could they not?" Taareen asked. "The Taker existed thousands of years before that. Knowledge of him has not come to us only recently, as it has to you."

"You said you knew me by my song." The thought troubled Pacys. "Does that mean the song is not new as I thought it to be?" The possibility of him simply rewriting a song that had already been in existence ate at his confidence.

"No, your song is new," Taareen answered simply. "In our stories, it was said the Taleweaver would appear near reclaimed Faenasuor. Imagine the horror of those who lived then who realized that Faenasuor would first have to be lost in order to be reclaimed."

Pacys did, and the weight was staggering.

"When the empire was lost, it was believed that by leaving Faenasuor buried beneath the rubble the Taker wouldn't be allowed to return to the world." Taareen shook his head and his fingers began to pick out a soft, low tune on the yarting. "As if that would seal him in whatever limbo he'd been in."

"They realized in the end it was a false hope at best," Khlinat said.

"Yes, but the Taker wasn't the only reason they left Faenasuor buried. Part of it was because no one wanted to see what had been lost. They didn't want to remember. After a thousand years, the realization that if Faenasuor *didn't* exist, if the archives that were buried there *weren't* reclaimed, the Taleweaver would never be able to arrive there."

"But just hearing my song," Pacys said, "that couldn't be the only thing that led you to believe I was the one legend names as Taleweaver."

"Do you have your doubts about who you are?" Taareen asked.

Pacys thought about the question. To answer no was almost egotistical, but to say yes was to acknowledge the possibility existed that Narros had been wrong. The song Taareen played echoed in his head, summoning up images of Waterdeep and Baldur's Gate, and the young sailor he and Khlinat had only just met who'd had such considerable influence on their lives.

"No," he answered finally. "I don't doubt."

"And neither do I," the sea elf said, handing the yarting back across. "In the legends, we were told the Taleweaver could swim beneath the oceans as easily as he strode across the land. It was the only way he could witness all the battles to come. I see that you're a surface dweller."

"I have a gift," Pacys said, extending his arm and displaying the emerald bracelet Narros had given him back in Waterdeep. While wearing the bracelet, Pacys could breathe underwater, never feel the pressure of the depths, and move as easily as he would crossing a room.

"And your friend?"

"Has none," Khlinat growled. "And why would something like that be necessary?"

"Because," Taareen answered, "I must take you to Faenasuor that you may learn the legends of the Taker as we know them. It has been foretold."

Excitement flared through Pacys. If there had been any humans ever to enter the city of Faenasuor, there had been precious few.

"We can take care of your friend," Taareen offered. "Some of the things we trade with the surface world are potions which allow surface dwellers to breathe underwater. It would be our honor to aid you."

"When could we go?" Pacys asked.

Khlinat shifted uneasily, obviously not happy about the thought of visiting an undersea city.

"We can continue on to Starmantle by land," Taareen said. "I know a man there who deals in such potions. It won't be hard to strike a deal for one. After we are in Faenasuor it won't be a problem to keep your friend well supplied."

"Then let's break camp," Pacys said. "I know I won't be getting any more sleep tonight anyway, and dawn can't be more than an hour away."

He was left with the feeling that time was running out. How much difference did days, weeks, or months make when faced with an opponent who had thousands of years to plan?

XVIII

9 Kythorn, the Year of the Gauntlet

Jherek kept his eyes on Sabyna when they hit the water. Both of them went under at once. The

current wasn't overly strong and wasn't a real challenge that would keep them from the riverbank. He knew the ship's mage was a strong swimmer, but the possibility remained that *Breezerunner* might rip free of the sandbar and become a danger.

Despite the fatigue and dizziness that filled him, he waited underwater until she had her bearings, then followed her up. He broke the river surface little more than an arm's reach from her. "Lady, are you all right?"

"Aye," she replied, blinking water from her eyes. "A little worse for the wear, but I'm holding my own."

Treading water, Jherek glanced around, seeking out *Breeze-runner's* crew and the pirates. Men scrambled through the water like rats trying to escape drowning. A lot of ship's crews, the young sailor knew, had few men who could swim well, and even a good number of them that couldn't swim at all.

He spotted one man flailing nearly twenty yards away. The young sailor struck out at once, slicing through the water like a fish. He grabbed the man from behind, sliding his arm under his chin. "Lie still," Jherek ordered. "I have you."

The man choked and spat, and clung desperately to Jherek. "Don't let Umberlee take me, lad." He kicked frantically, spitting automatically whenever water touched his chin.

"Save your breath," Jherek advised. Fighting the current and the man was difficult. The young sailor swam backward, pulling the man after him toward the riverbank. In a short time, he could touch bottom. He got the man on his feet, then turned to survey the river again.

"Those that made it are already here," Captain Tynnel said as he walked up to Jherek. "The others washed down the damned river. Maybe well get lucky and they'll make their way back to us by morning, and maybe they'll wash all the way out to the Sea of Swords." He turned on Jherek. "Didn't you see that damned sandbar out there? It's as big as an island."

Jherek looked at *Breezerunner* tilted over nearly sideways on the huge sandbar. White-capped water rushed around her. From here, the sandbar did look impossible to miss.

"No," he said. "I didn't see it." He knew it was his own ill birth at work again. He had a chance-for a moment-of being the hero, but it had been stripped from his fingers.

"Never sign onto a ship to be a pilot, boy," Tynnel advised coldly. "Takes too long to build a ship for them to be sunk so quickly."

The words bit into Jherek, but he didn't argue. He deserved them.

"It wasn't his fault, Tynnel."

Jherek turned, surprised that Sabyna had approached in his defense.

The captain gave her a dark look and shook his head. "I should have guessed you'd be taking up for him."

"Taking up for him?" Sabyna looked about to explode. "He almost gave his life hanging onto that rudder. Two pirates were practically on top of him when I got there, and he hadn't turned loose of the rudder."

"She's right, Cap'n," Mornis, *Breezerunner's* first mate, said. "I saw the lad standing there myself. Tried to get to him, but there wasn't anything I could do. If Sabyna hadn't reached him, I think he would have died holding onto that stick."

A muscle worked in Tynnel's jaw, but arguing with both his ship's mage and first mate didn't appear profitable enough for him to continue. He said nothing further and turned away sharply.

"You didn't have to do that, lady," Jherek said quietly after Tynnel had gone. "What the captain said was true. I should have seen that sandbar."

"No one could have seen that sandbar from back there," she replied angrily. "I didn't. Or are you going to tell me I should have seen it too?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I wouldn't do that."

"Then don't do it to yourself."

"She's right," Mornis said. "Cap'n's just not himself right now with everything that's going on. Hell be better come morning when he gets a chance to look at *Breezerunner* and know she's not hurt as bad as she could be. If you hadn't straightened her up like you did and we'd hit that sandbar side-on, like as not

that ship would be kindling by now, and us down the drink with it." He laid a hand on Jherek's shoulder. "You did a fine job of it, a job to be proud of."

Jherek listened to their words, but the voice in the back of his head that he'd fought with all his life didn't let up on him. Guilt filled him. He'd grounded *Breezerunner* and he'd lost the pearl disk.

When memory of the disk slid into his mind, he glanced around the riverbank. "Where are the pirates?"

"Ran off into the forest," Mornis rumbled. "We got numbers on them. While you was pulling Torrigh from the drink, they took to nose-counting and realized they'd come up short in a free-for-all. They hit the brush like a covey of quail."

"We've got to go after them," Jherek said. Maybe Vur-grom's lead wasn't too extensive yet.

"No," Sabyna said. "There's nothing to be had in that." She glanced out at the river. "Our job now is to get *Breezerunner* secure before she tries to drift off that sandbar and ends up smashed somewhere farther down the river, then we need to fix any damage that's been done to her."

Jherek scanned the dark forest, feeling the pull in him to go after Vurgrom and the stolen pearl disk. Guilt filled him to the bursting point. The disk had to be returned to Lath-ander's church in Baldur's Gate.

"It's too dark, lad," Mornis said quietly. "If those pirates don't set up and take you down somewhere, there are things out in that forest stalking the night that will. It'll be a lucky man who gets through that of a piece."

Quietly, Jherek let go of any hope of finding and overtaking Vurgrom. He joined the others as they gathered around Tynnel and listened to the plans the captain had for securing *Breezerunner*.

* * * * *

"Lad, that's some rough country you've got ahead of you."

Jherek gathered the ends of the cloth he'd been given, tucked the rations he'd been parceled out from *Breeze-runner's* stores, and tied them together to fashion a crude pack. "Aye, but I've got it to do."

Mornis looked uncomfortable. "I feel guilty about letting you go on alone."

"I lost something that wasn't mine to lose, my friend, and I've got to return it if I can."

"Like as not," Mornis warned, "you may be spending your life foolishly."

"Dying with honor isn't a foolish death." Jherek told him sternly.

"No, lad, but any kind of dying is still dying. Myself, I'd rather keep both oars in the water as long as I'm able. A man going with the sea stays afloat a lot longer than a man going against it."

"I was told," Jherek said, "that it always matters how you go against it."

Mornis nodded. "Mayhap, but if you ever find yourself around *Breezerunner* again and in need of a berth, come see me. If the Cap'n won't take you on, I'll help you find a ship."

Jherek smiled and took the man's arm in a strong grip. "Till we meet again."

"Aye," Mornis said. "And may Selune always favor you with her good graces."

Jherek took a final look around. Most of the ship's crew were aboard *Breezerunner* already working on the broken rigging and ripped sails. A few others stood in the river filling water barrels. It had been a hard, full day's work getting the ship off the sandbar and secure in the water again. Jherek's hands still burned from the work he'd done with shovels and picks, both freeing the ship and burying her dead. His legs were dotted with the red welts left by leeches.

He noticed Sabyna striding purposefully toward him down the riverbank, the early morning sun shining from her hair. Tynnel walked at her side, his jaw working fiercely.

The ship's captain turned his hard gaze on Jherek. "Talk her out of it."

The young sailor looked at them both. "Talk her out of what?"

"I'm coming with you," Sabyna said calmly.

Jherek glanced at her, noticing she'd changed clothes. She had no pack, but he knew she had a bag of holding she kept the raggamoffyn in. "Lady, you can't come with me."

Sabyna's eyebrows shot up. "I can't? So now *you're* going to try to tell me what to do?"

Hastily, sensing the rough waters he was venturing into, Jherek changed tacks. "No, lady, I wouldn't

dare to presume to do that, but coming with me isn't a a good idea."

"Neither is going after Vurgrom and his pirate crew by yourself."

"I have no choice." Jherek looked deep into her eyes, feeling like everything was suddenly beyond his control.

"Everyone has a choice," she told him. "You've made yours and I'm making mine."

Tynnel glared at Jherek. "This is your fault."

Sabyna wheeled on him, blood dark in her face. "No. None of this is his fault. He got caught up in this whole situation because he was talking to me in Baldur's Gate, taking care to walk me back to *Breezerunner*. I'll not see him suffer for his kindness and care."

"So you'll suffer for yours?" Tynnel asked.

"This isn't kindness. This is a debt."

"No," Jherek said in a stern voice. "There'll be no debts between us, lady. Especially not something like this."

"Stay out of this," Sabyna told him, then turned her attention back to Tynnel. "You left him in Athkatla and didn't tell me the real reason. You lied to me. If I'd had a voice in the matter, I'd have cut Aysel loose instead."

"It wasn't your choice to make," Tynnel said coldly. "I'm master of that ship."

"And you still are," Sabyna agreed, "but you're no master of me. Not then. Not now. Not ever."

Tynnel lifted his head and glared at her more severely.

Sabyna glared back at him hotly. "I signed on with you because I felt I could make a difference on *Breezerunner*."

"Begging your pardon," Mornis interrupted hesitantly, "but you do make a difference on her."

"Stay out of this, Mornis," Sabyna ordered sharply.

The big man took a step back. "Yes, ma'am."

"I felt that I owed you something for taking me on," Sabyna told Tynnel, "because there were other ship's mages better trained than me. But no matter what, you owed me the truth, Captain. Somewhere in there, you obviously forgot that."

"You're not going," Tynnel said.

Sabyna drew herself up. "You can't stop me."

"Yes," Tynnel said, reaching out suddenly to grab Sabyna by the arm, "I can, and I will if I have to. I'm not going to let you squander your life so foolishly."

Sabyna struggled to get free but the captain's grip was too tight. Pain tightened her eyes.

Before he was aware of moving, Jherek stepped forward and seized Tynnel's thumb, breaking the grip the captain had on the woman's arm. Continuing to pull on the man's arm, the young sailor pressed it back against Tynnel's chest, shoving him back and making space between him and Sabyna. Jherek stepped into the space between.

Out of control, Tynnel swung a fist up.

Jherek didn't try to defend himself, and he didn't duck because it would have put Sabyna at risk. The blow caught him on the chin, snapping his head around. Dazed, he dropped to one knee for just an instant, but pushed himself back up immediately. He stood a little uncertainly, but he felt Sabyna at his back, trying to get around him. He put out an arm and didn't let her get past. He faced Tynnel. It went against ship's contract and conduct for a captain to strike a crewman without just cause, but Jherek knew he wasn't part of *Breezerunner's* crew.

Tynnel stepped back and drew his sword. "Pick up a sword, boy!" He brandished his blade.

"I won't fight you," Jherek said calmly, not believing things had spun so wildly out of control.

"Then you're an even bigger fool than I thought. I'll cut you down where you stand!"

"No," a calm, stern voice filled with thunder interrupted. "If you try to touch that boy again, Captain, you'll deal with me. And by Lathander's sacred covenant, you'll not find me an easy man to deal with."

The speaker sat on a horse just beyond the treeline that surrounded the riverbank where they stood. The horse was a large, handsome animal covered in copper-colored barding. The man was in his middle years. A bronzed face, framed by a short-cropped black beard, peered through the visor opening of his

helm, and his plate armor held the same copper color as his horse's barding. A scarlet cloak flared out behind him, flowing out over the horse's rump. A shield bearing a scarlet hawk in mid-flight hung over his left arm.

"Who are you?" Tynnel demanded, turning to face the man.

"You can address me as Sir Glawinn, a paladin in the service of Lathander, the Morninglord," the man said proudly. "Now step away from that boy and that young woman or I'll run you down where you stand." He kicked his heels into the horse's sides, urging it forward.

Reluctantly, Tynnel gave ground.

XIX

10 Kythorn, the Year of the Gauntlet

Jherek stood in the cool shade of an elm tree and looked back at the sparkling blue River Chionthar snaking through the hilly terrain. *Breezerunner* had vanished from sight hours ago and he found he missed the ship.

He was dressed in his leather armor, which stank badly. He hadn't been able to care for it while in *Breezerunner's* brig and it hadn't quite dried out from its earlier drenching. While they'd walked the remaining hours of the day, the wet leather had chafed him. He worked at the sore spots, trying to find some degree of comfort.

"You'd be better served taking those things off, young warrior," Glawinn said. "They'll take longer to dry with you wearing them, and we've a long way to go tomorrow. If you press on too much like today and ignore that chafing it's giving you, you're going to get blisters and sores."

"I don't know that I'd be much more comfortable out here without armor," Jherek said, turning toward the paladin.

Glawinn had shed his helm and upper armor, hanging it from a rack one of his two packhorses carried. He'd fed and cared for the pack animals first only so he could devote more attention to the great war-horse he rode. While the big animal crunched noisily in the feedbag over its head, the knight painstakingly scrubbed the horse down with a currycomb. Without his armor and next to the horse, the man looked smaller than Jherek would have expected a paladin to look.

"It's a wise man who plans for tomorrow while taking care of today," Glawinn said.

"Meaning you think I should take the armor off?"

Glawinn faced him, a good-natured twinkle in his green eyes but steel in his voice. "Meaning I insist that you do exactly that."

"No disrespect intended," Jherek said, curbing his anger and surprised at his own impertinence, "but I hardly think you're in a position to tell me what to do."

Glawinn put the currycomb in one of the saddlebags near the tree he'd claimed as a sleeping area for the night. "Ah, now there's anger. That can be a warrior's truest weapon, you know, provided he makes it serve him instead of him serving it. A man who's righteously angry ignores pain and guilt and second thoughts, and glories himself in doing the right thing."

Jherek swallowed hard. "I'm sorry. I was out of line. After all, you've been nothing but generous with us."

Glawinn started stripping out of the rest of the armor. "Actually, you weren't out of line," he said in a softer voice. "I know it's the woman that you worry about most. You don't know me, yet you and she find yourselves somewhat dependent on me."

"We didn't mean any hardship for you," Jherek quickly said. "If we're imposing, I know we can make it on our own."

After the paladin had intervened between Tynnel and him, Jherek had readily agreed to the knight's offer to accompany them for a time, and he'd even lent one of the pack-horses for Sabyna to ride, having to sacrifice some of the supplies he'd carried with him. Jherek had kept up walking, but only just, and he'd had to argue with Sabyna several times about sharing the pack animal. She'd stubbornly insisted on walking beside him a few times, but she didn't have the strength or stamina he did.

"Nonsense," Glawinn said, sitting down and putting his back to the tree. He crossed his legs and sat

with his broadsword resting across both knees. "If I'd thought you were going to be that much trouble, I'd never have offered."

Jherek sat across the campfire from the man and lifted an eyebrow in doubt. "Leaving a woman out in the forest to fend for herself? That doesn't seem very knightly."

Glawinn laughed, and the honesty of the sound made Jherek feel good, safe despite the forest surrounding them and twilight coming on.

"And what would you know of knights, young warrior?" Glawinn asked.

"I've read about them in books."

"What books?"

Jherek named some of the books Malorrie had given him to read over the years. For a phantom, Malorrie had always seemed to have an extensive library.

"Ah, the romances," Glawinn said when he finished. "I've meandered through some of them myself. I find them very prettily written and good for a few evenings' entertainment but as far as training a paladin how to think?" He shook his head. "No, young warrior, a knight listens with his heart, the greatest gift his chosen deity has seen fit to equip him with. Have you ever read 'Quentin's Monograph?'"

Jherek nodded. That had been one of the first things Malorrie had put before him. "It speaks about the virtues a paladin should have."

"Yes, and it's a very concisely written piece, with some practical information on the care of weapons and animals, and a few of Quentin's own adventures." Glawinn ran his fingers down the spine of his sword blade, hardly touching it. "Modestly expressed, of course."

"Aye."

Glawinn smiled. "But you prefer the romances, of course?"

Jherek grinned bashfully. "Aye."

"No worry, young warrior, there's no shame in holding to an ideal. I just hope that you aren't too disappointed by the things you see outside those books."

Jherek nodded. "I know the difference between the books and real life." He tried to keep the bitterness out of his voice. Almost everything in life was different than what was shown in those books.

"I can tell by the markings on your face and body that you've been traveling the rougher side of life for the last little while."

"Aye. I was at the battle of Baldur's Gate."

"Baldur's Gate?" Glawinn sat up straighten "I am only lately come from Cormyr. I've no news of Baldur's Gate."

Jherek glanced toward the copse of trees not far distant from them where Sabyna had gone to study her spellbook. He'd been hesitant about letting her go off but in the end he hadn't had a choice. She'd been adamant about not missing her studies, though Jherek also thought she wanted to be alone to deal with what had happened with Tynnel and *Breezerunner*. He quickly brought the knight up to speed on the events at Baldur's Gate and Waterdeep, and the ships that had been taken in that time as well, because Glawinn hadn't heard of that either.

"The sahuagin are uprising?" the knight asked when he finished. "Does anyone know why?"

Jherek shook his head.

"Surely no one believes these are unrelated events?"

"I don't know," Jherek answered. "Sabyna and I were kidnapped from Baldur's Gate the night of the attack."

Glawinn gazed into the campfire for a moment, obviously thinking about what he'd been told. "You and your mates only just escaped the pirates from the Inner Sea who took part in this attack?"

"That's what Captain Tynnel told me the pirate captain Vurgrom said. You could probably ask Sabyna for more in-depth information."

"Have you ever heard of Vurgrom before?"

Jherek shook his head.

"So he could be telling the truth and he could be telling a lie?"

"Aye, and I wouldn't know the right of it."

"Then why do you pursue him?" Glawinn asked.

"Personal reasons."

"With the demeanor and focus you're wearing, I wouldn't have thought it was any less," the knight said sagely.

Jherek didn't feel comfortable not telling the knight all of it, so he did. He tried to trim down the way he'd felt about being the recipient of the pearl disk, but he found he couldn't do that completely either.

"So you don't think the old priest was right in giving that disk to you?" Glawinn asked.

"No."

"Why?"

Jherek shook his head and forced a smile he didn't feel. "If you knew me better, Sir Glawinn, you wouldn't even need to ask that question." He felt the burn of his father's tattoo on the inside of his arm.

"Ah, the wisdom of youth."

"What do you mean by that?" Jherek asked.

"To be young and think I know so much again," Glawinn said. "That would be properly painful. I'd much rather know for certain there is much I still yet need to learn." He looked at Jherek. "Meaning no disrespect, young warrior, but you've hardly put in enough years to give any real weight to the guesses you make about what the gods would or wouldn't do."

"One thing I do know and am sure of," Jherek said, "is that they wouldn't have anything to do with me."

Still, Jherek remembered the voice that had haunted him since childhood. He almost asked the knight about it, but stopped himself. Once he'd dealt with one fantasy, he didn't need to start working on another.

Glawinn let the topic slide. "So now you pursue Vurgrom to the Inner Sea?"

"That's where he's got to be headed. He told Tynnel he was from the Pirate Isles, and even claimed to be the pirate king of Immurk's Hold."

"Oh, I agree entirely, young warrior. Have you ever been to Westgate?"

Jherek shook his head.

"That will be the first city Vurgrom heads for," Glawinn said confidently. "He may pass through Teziir, but it'll be Westgate that's his destination. It's a pirate's haven, and he's sure to have men waiting for him there."

"You've been there?" Jherek asked.

"A number of times. None of them pleasant or particularly long. Nor were they in any way uneventful." Glawinn fixed him with his green-eyed stare. "Which begs the question of how you think you're going to get something back from Vurgrom if he doesn't want to give it back?"

"I don't know," Jherek admitted.

"The trip to Westgate is at least a tenday's ride, young warrior, even at the pace we've been pushing these poor horses and with the shortcuts I know from having journeyed there before. You'd better give your actions some thought."

"I will," Jherek said, then added: "I am."

"And Westgate is no place for a lady."

"Aye," Jherek replied. "I tried to get her to listen to reason and go back with *Breezerunner*, but she'd have none of it."

"I gathered that from the way she was acting toward the captain when I arrived."

"I still don't understand Tynnel's behavior."

"You don't?"

"No."

"And you read those fantasies?"

"What do those-"

"It's as obvious as the nose on your face," Glawinn said. "Captain Tynnel is in love with her."

The paladin's words hit Jherek like physical blows. Now he understood better why Tynnel hadn't told Sabyna about the events in Athkatla. He tried to let nothing of the sudden aching pain and fear that

threatened to consume him show on his face. He tried to understand why he felt the way he did. Images of the voyage from Velen to Athkatla flashed through his mind. He remembered the times and conversations he'd shared with the pretty ship's mage, and the meals.

"I see you have some feelings for the girl yourself," the knight said.

Jherek forced himself to speak. "I like her."

"And that's all?"

"It's all I know," the young sailor said.

"But you enjoy reading those fantasies of yours," Glawinn said. "How can you not want to be in love? How can you say only that you like her?"

"Because it's all I dare," Jherek answered. "I'm no highborn prince or liege man or warrior of high renown."

"You're a warrior. You stood at the battle of Baldur's Gate, and you stood up to that ship's captain without a sword in your fist."

"I'm no warrior," Jherek said, uncomfortable with any confusion that placed greatness on anything he'd done. "I'm just a man who's fought for his life."

"Most soldiers feel the same way."

"As for Tynnel, I couldn't have fought him."

"You would have let him kill you?"

"I don't think he would have."

Glawinn reached into his saddlebag and took out two apples. He tossed one to Jherek and kept one for himself. He polished the fruit on his shirt, then took a bite. "He would have killed you," the knight stated flatly. "Men in love sometimes do foolish things."

"I could not have fought him," Jherek said. "He wasn't my enemy."

"Tynnel saw you as his because you were taking away the woman he loves."

Jherek felt uncomfortable. He rolled the apple between his palms, but the anticipation of taking a bite had already tightened his mouth. "I didn't take her away."

"You were the reason she left."

"I didn't ask her. I asked her to stay."

"And if you did," Glawinn said, "that had to have angered Tynnel even further."

"She's stubborn," Jherek said. "And willful."

"Qualities that can work for good or ill in a man or woman."

"If she loves him," Jherek said, "she should have stayed with him. She owed me nothing that would come between them."

Glawinn bit *off* a piece of his apple and offered it to the war-horse. The animal took it daintily from his palm and whickered in satisfaction. "You don't listen very well. I said that he was in love with her. I said nothing about her being in love with him."

Hope flew in Jherek's heart, but it only took remembering that it was his father who slew Sabyna's brother to quash it. Even if that had not stood between them, what did he have to offer her?

Glawinn hesitated. "Perhaps I presume on territory that I don't belong in, but have you told the lady that you ... you *like* her, young warrior?"

Acting on the small amount of irritation he felt, Jherek asked, "Why do you keep calling me that? I have a name."

"Malorrie?" Glawinn shook his head. "That's not your name."

Jherek's face colored and he felt shamed by his continued lie. Perhaps he could have told the knight his real name if they'd met alone, but Sabyna was there. She already knew he hadn't told her the truth about his name, but he couldn't give it, either, in case she'd heard about him being unmasked as one of Bloody Falkane's pirates.

"It's the name I choose," he replied.

"Yet hide your true name? I have to wonder what else you hide."

Jherek returned the man's level gaze. "I must ask you to judge me on what you see, not what a name may contain. If you choose not to trust me, I ask only that you take the lady to safety."

Glawinn held up a hand. "I'll not desert you, nor her. For all I know, you're why I'm here."

"Why are you here?" Jherek gladly shifted the conversation away from him.

"I'm on a quest, commanded by Lathander himself."

"He speaks to you?"

"Not in words," Glawinn admitted. "He found me when I was lost and brought me into his temple. I was not always as you see. As a young man I was uncertain and lacking. My love and understanding of the Morninglord, and my eventual dedication to him has made me what you see now. Not that you should be impressed. A paladin's life isn't exactly what you read in those romances." He chuckled.

"But to serve a god," Jherek said. "That would be—"

"A humbling experience, let me assure you. Though I serve him with my convictions, my teaching, and my sword arm every day, we don't converse. He fills my heart with a wanderlust that is as true as any compass, and I ride. When I arrive, then I discover where I'm supposed to be. It doesn't take long before I figure out what it is I'm supposed to do."

"Now you're bound for Westgate."

"Yes, and perhaps beyond. I don't know yet. I only know that I itch to travel, and that's the direction I must go."

Jherek tried to fathom that. "But you don't know why?"

"Not yet." Glawinn gave more of the apple to his horse. "What are you to do then?" Jherek asked, not really expecting an answer.

"I'm no teller of fortunes, young warrior. I'm much more a man of action. Like yourself."

Jherek shook his head. "I'm no man of action."

"Sure you are," Glawinn said. "I can see it in the way you hold your eyes, the way you balance yourself on your feet when you move. You're no stranger to the sword, are you?"

"I've had some training," Jherek admitted.

"You must have to have survived the wounds I see on you now."

"I've only a mean skill at best." Jherek felt bad about that because it undercut all the training Malorrie had given him over the years.

"Then strip out of that wet armor and let's have a look at it." Glawinn got lithely to his feet.

"Now?"

The knight took a long sword from his saddle and tossed it to Jherek. "Of course now. There's no better time. When we arrive in Westgate either your quest or mine may see us crossing sword blades with others. Perhaps I'll even need someone to stand at my back."

Jherek flushed with the honor he was being given. He took off the leather armor and hung it carefully from a tree so it would better dry. He also took off his wet shirt, not wanting it to slow his movements and so that it wouldn't get torn any more than it was because he had no other clothes. He also took off the kerchief he'd had tied around his head, being careful not to let the paladin see his tattoo when he lifted his arm.

"You've a wound on your head," Glawinn said. "Have you had it tended?"

"Aye."

"It doesn't appear to be healing well."

Jherek felt self-conscious, remembering that the wound was the reason Sabyna was there. "Circumstances haven't allowed it to heal at its best."

"Let me see it." Glawinn crossed over to him and examined it more closely. "It's healed some, but I can help still more if you'll allow me."

Jherek remembered the tales he'd been told, of how a paladin could heal and cure diseases with but a touch. He smiled and said, "I guess not everything in those romances are fantasy."

"A gift from Lathander, young warrior, and no doing of my own." Glawinn placed his hands on Jherek's head.

The young sailor experienced a moment of disorientation, a flicker of pain, then he immediately felt better than he had in days.

Glawinn stepped back. "How's that?"

"Good," Jherek answered. "Thank you."

"Your thanks may be premature, young warrior." Glawinn grinned and paced back to the center of the clearing. He raised his broadsword into an en garde position. "Move too slowly or awkwardly and I may bequeath you another rap on the skull for your trouble."

Jherek saluted him, then cut with the long sword to get the heft of it. The balance was good and it moved well, like it had been made for his hand. "All right," he said.

The paladin came at him without a word, and the sound of steel on steel rang out. Hesitant at first, Jherek held up a defense, then he started in with his attack, pushing at Glawinn's defenses.

After long moments, the knight stepped back, a smile on his face. He saluted the young sailor. Jherek saluted back, startled by the sound of clapping. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Sabyna standing there. Her copper-colored eyes held the glitter of excitement.

"Very good," she complimented.

"Lady," Jherek said, bowing slightly. Then, aware that he was shirtless, he went to the tree to get his clothes. He pulled his shirt on with his back to her, covered with sweat and breathing hard from his exertions.

"The boy is good," Glawinn said, sheathing his sword with a flourish. "With the proper training and time, he stands a chance of becoming an accomplished swordsman."

"I see. While the two of you were *so* gainfully engaged, did either of you happen to think about dinner?"

Jherek glanced up, noticing the deep plum color darkening the eastern sky where Westgate lay. "No, lady, I'm sorry. I'll take care of it straight away." He felt embarrassed, knowing he should have remembered how hungry she would be after getting no sleep last night and traveling all day.

"Actually," Sabyna said mischievously, "there's no reason to worry. I've already taken care of it." She held up a stringer of catfish. "I took a little time off from my studies."

A grin split Glawinn's short-cropped beard. "And a profitable time it was too, lady. You have our humblest appreciation."

"I caught them," Sabyna announced, "but I'm not cleaning or cooking."

"I'll take care of it, lady," Jherek offered.

He studied her face as he took the fish, noticing the fatigue clinging to her features. She hadn't said anything about Tynnel's actions or what they meant to her. She and Tynnel had been together for awhile. He couldn't help feeling that he'd torn them apart. If he hadn't shipped aboard *Breezerunner* none of the resulting confusion would have happened. He carried bad luck with him, just as Aysel and Tynnel had said.

"Are you all right?" she asked him.

Jherek smiled at her. "I'm fine. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"I could help. I really don't mind cleaning fish."

"No," he said. "You've done enough, and I'd like some time to myself. Maybe when no one's looking I could grab a quick bath."

She nodded, and turned away from him, walking back to the knight and the campfire.

Too late, Jherek realized he might have hurt her feelings by rejecting her offer. She'd just walked away from everything she'd known out of a debt she felt she owed him. He thought of calling out to her, then decided not to. If she grew angry with him, maybe she would accompany Glawinn while he pursued Vurgrom the Mighty. Maybe he could even persuade the paladin to see her back to the River Chionthar and find a ship that would take her back to the Sea of Swords.

He walked down the hillside where the stench of the fish cleaning wouldn't overpower the campsite. One thing he was certain of: Where he was headed was no place for a woman.

XX

17 Kythorn, the Year of the Gauntlet

"Come, little malenti, you wished to see what your people spent their blood on. Now I will show you."

Hesitantly, Laaqueel crossed the throne room of the sahuagin palace, walking past the throne carved of whalebone, its jaws distended to hold the seat. Images of sharks and sahuagin stood out in bas-relief on the limestone blocks that made up the walls. She'd stood gazing through one of the windows overlooking the amphitheater.

Sahuagin warriors had assembled there to work on the fliers they'd gathered and built to undertake Iakhovas's latest mission. The fliers were seventy-five feet across at their widest and two hundred feet long, tapering at the ends. Salvaged wood from shipwrecks and surface dweller buildings on shore contributed to the construction. Each flier could hold up to six hundred sahuagin. Currently, there were fourteen fliers in various stages of preparation, and more were supposed to be coming soon. The deepsong had reached sahuagin everywhere-and they had come.

Iakhovas strode to the opposite end of the room where the huge image of Sekolah meeting the sahuagin occupied the wall. The image showed the Great Shark with the clamshell that had contained the sahuagin in his teeth, shaking out the sahuagin and releasing them into Toril's oceans for the first time. When Iakhovas touched the image, it shimmered and vanished.

Fear filled Laaqueel as she watched it vanish. Though she'd never been to the palace before the last year, she knew it had existed for thousands of years. "What have you done?"

"Relax, little malenti. Do not overconcern yourself. Your precious wall is intact. I'm merely using it at the moment for other purposes. Now come."

Woodenly, Laaqueel joined him, watching him step through the wall and vanish. Her gills flared as she drew in more water, then she pushed it through and calmed herself. She took a step forward, and in the next moment she was high in the shallows. Harsh sunlight glimmered silver across the sea surface only a few feet overhead.

"Where are we?" Laaqueel asked.

"Above the sahuagin city," Iakhovas answered. "Don't worry, little malenti, I haven't taken you far from home yet." He reached inside his cloak and took out the bottle the dead thing in the lime pit under Baldur's Gate had given him. "This is our prize."

Curious, Laaqueel swam closer to better see the bottle. It had been cleaned since she'd last seen it, the surface now bright and shiny. Brass capped both ends, gleaming in the sunlight penetrating the shallow depths. Inside was a tiny model of a great galley, one of the long ships the surface dwellers used for trade and war. The three sails were unfurled to catch the wind and tiny oars stuck out the sides in double rows.

"A ship in a bottle?" Laaqueel let acid drip into her words. Before she could say anything more, Iakhovas gestured angrily. In the next instant they both flew out of the water and came to a stop hovering forty or fifty feet above the surface.

"Do not mock me, little malenti," Iakhovas snapped.

He turned from her and threw the ship-in-the-bottle out toward the sea. It twirled and sparked sunlight as it descended. Before it touched the water, Iakhovas shouted a single word. The bottle burst into a spray of a thousand gleaming shards. In the next instant a full-sized great galley floated on the ocean below. Purple and yellow striped sails flared out from the three masts.

"Not just a child's amusement, little malenti. This is a weapon, a weapon I'm going to use to bring the surface dwellers of the Sea of Fallen Stars to their knees."

He gestured again and they floated to the deck. Laaqueel touched down lightly, feeling the ocean rub up against the ship.

"A great galley," Iakhovas stated, walking around the deck. He stroked the butt of one of the large crossbows mounted on the railing on the port side. The starboard side had them too. Racks held the harpoon-sized quarrels the weapons used for ammunition. "One hundred thirty feet long and twenty feet wide, it's a fortress, a place where I can command armies and rain destruction down upon my enemies. It takes one hundred and forty oarsmen, and can comfortably carry another one hundred fifty warriors. There are various other additions I mean to make."

"What?"

"Surprises," he told her, walking the length of the deck.

Despite the fact that she didn't want to, she followed him. She had no way of knowing how long the ship-in-the-bottle had been in the lime pit under Baldur's Gate, but it had weathered the time well. The wood grain of the deck was finished and smooth, showing no signs of warpage or wear.

"She's a mudship, one of only seven in all of Toril. Her name is *Tarjana*, which translates from an old and almost forgotten tongue to 'Fisherhawk on Wing.'"

Fisherhawks were oceangoing birds of prey. Equipped with a fourteen- to sixteen-foot wingspread, sharp talons, and fangs like a snake, fisherhawks were known to raid seabound vessels of small children, women, halflings, and the occasional dwarf as well as the fish it stripped from the sea.

Iakhovas pulled back his sleeve and revealed the gold bracelet he wore. Laaqueel had seldom seen it, but most of the slots on it that had been empty now appeared to be filled. Iakhovas plucked free the diamond and pink coral talisman they'd gotten in Waterdeep. "And this bauble that I got from Serpental Jannaxil gives me control over her."

Laaqueel tried to get a better look at it, but he put it away quickly.

"*Tarjana* is able to run on land and sea," Iakhovas said proudly, "above and below the water. This will be the flagship of the navy I'm going to take into the Sea of Fallen Stars."

"You can't take the sahuagin there," Laaqueel said, unable to stop herself from speaking.

His single eye narrowed to a thin line of malevolence. Despite the patch he wore over his empty eye, something golden shone in its depths for an instant. "Don't presume to tell me what to do. I can lead the sahuagin there, and I will. They're mine to do with as I please. Or haven't you noticed?"

"They think you're working the will of Sekolah." Laaqueel made herself stand her ground as he approached. She squeezed her fear into her belief in the Great Shark, but she trembled inside.

Iakhovas placed a long-nailed finger under her chin, tilting her head back to face him. "Ah, and little malenti, how can it still be that you have any doubts at all that I'm not working the will of Sekolah?"

"Because I don't understand," she told him, wanting desperately for an answer. "Nothing in my training taught me about any of this."

"Your training led you to the legend of One Who Swims With Sekolah."

"Yes."

"It led you to me."

She had no answer.

"Now you falter, when you should be enjoying your greatest success. After all, it was through your efforts you became royal high priestess, a position you would never have attained without your efforts to find the truth your training led you to. You doubt, yet there is more now than ever that should offer you conviction."

"I don't understand why we should involve ourselves in the Inner Sea. Our place is here."

Iakhovas hooked her chin with his talon hard enough to nearly bring blood. "Because it is Sekolah wills. You're a hypocrite, little malenti. You took Huaanton to task because he wanted a sign from the Great Shark that what we were doing was as Sekolah willed it. Now, here I am, proof of that sign, and yet you refuse to believe. You want still further proof."

"I don't see what the Inner Sea-

Enough! Iakhovas roared in her mind.

Laaqueel's knees buckled from the pain of the mental shout, and she fell to the deck.

"Do you want proof?" Iakhovas demanded. "Or do you want to believe? One is not the same as the other."

Tears came to Laaqueel's eyes because she knew what he said was true. The difference between knowledge and faith was the first lesson Senior Priestess Ghaataag had taught her when she took her into Sekolah's temple. So often as a child Laaqueel had drawn Ghaataag's wrath for doubting.

"You can have proof standing before you, little malenti, and still doubt what you see. As for belief, once you can weigh it and measure it, that belief becomes knowledge. Belief is something that can't be proven in this world of physical restraint, but it can't be broken either. Yet it is the strongest of things that exist in the world. Believing is much stronger than knowing."

Laaqueel continued crying silently, remembering all the times Ghaataag had made her go pray on her

knees on a bed of broken coral until she was able to excise the doubt that had touched her then. She was so, so weak.

"No, little malenti," Iakhovas said more gently. "You're not weak. You're stronger than you know, but you're fighting yourself and you're finding yourself to be a more formidable opponent than any you've ever known. You stood the test of your priestesshood, and you found answers to questions that no one even knew existed until you came along." His voice grew fierce with pride. "How dare you call yourself weak."

His words calmed her a little, and they gave her back a measure of self-respect she'd been missing.

"I saw you stand up to Huaanton when he doubted in Sekolah. He could have taken your head then, claiming you to be mentally unbalanced by the aberration of your birth. You believed Sekolah would spare you then because you were right and you were standing up for him."

"I didn't know that he would."

Iakhovas smiled down at her. "That's what I said, little malenti. You didn't know. You believed. I only ask you to believe now." He offered her his hand and helped her to her feet.

Laaqueel regained control over her emotions with effort. Despite the fact that she wanted him to be wrong, Iakhovas was right. Belief was all she had in her life.

"I am the source of your greatest strength, little malenti," he told her softly. "I shall push you and goad you and shape you into your belief. Because I, by my very nature and the things we must accomplish together, will strip away everything in you that does not believe. Every weakness in you will be worn away by my actions, by the things Sekolah would have us accomplish. Your doubt shall forge us both into our destiny. Mark you that I only mentioned one such destiny. We shall arrive there together, and it will be glorious."

It was so easy to believe his words, but she had no choice really. What was she without her belief? She had the gifts Sekolah had given her, powers that no male sahuagin would ever know. What was there to doubt, except the man who stood before her?

He reached for her, touching her cheek with the back of his hand. It felt smooth and strong, and she found herself drawing away out of embarrassment. The feeling wasn't just out of the familiarity with which he chose to approach her, but because of the feeling his touch stirred within her.

"Ah, little malenti, you find the hungers of the alien flesh you wear have awakened." Iakhovas smiled darkly. "Bloody Falkane must have had quite an effect on you."

"What do you want?" she asked.

"From you, little malenti? Only your assistance. I find myself invulnerable to the charms you possess. Unlike Bloody Falkane, I find myself in no need of a spy within my ranks."

"I don't think his interest was purely for those reasons. He has loathsome habits."

"His reasons, whatever they are, I can guarantee you are anything but pure. So beware his charms, little malenti, because I'm told they're quite considerable."

Angry and embarrassed, Laaqueel turned away.

"Now I've offended you."

"No."

"You can't hide your true feelings from me. You should know that by now." Iakhovas spoke a word.

Instantly, the ship disappeared beneath them and Laaqueel dropped into the ocean. The water closed over her, taking her down and holding her close, the truest and only companion she'd ever known.

Across from her, Iakhovas caught the ship-in-the-bottle again and swam down. "Let's go check on my navy, little malenti. I've got an invasion to get underway."

XXI

19 Kyttora, the Year of the Gauntlet

"Something I can help you with, boy?"

Jherek bridled at the man's tone but calmed himself quickly. Emotion wasn't going to get him any closer to his objective. "I'm looking for someone."

The bartender set down a mostly clean glass and picked up another one, treating it to a quick bath in the dirty water in front of him, then drying it with the threadbare towel over his shoulder. He was broad and thick, with muscle that had marbled to fat over the years. A long gray fringe surrounded his gleaming pate, and an axe blade scar dented his forehead.

Behind him on the wall were rows of bottles containing different colored liquids. Two tapped ale kegs lay on their sides on rolling carts, and gruesomely displayed above them were seven koalinth heads. They'd been poorly mounted, and the piggish faces and floppy ears of the marine hobgoblins wrinkled and stretched hideously. The light green skin flaked off in several patches.

"This someone's got to have a name before I can help you," the bartender said. "That's how it usually works best."

Jherek flushed with embarrassment. Subterfuge was something new to him and he wasn't very good at it. He guessed he'd about strained his limit while keeping his identity secret from Glawinn and Sabyna.

"He calls himself Vurgrom," the young sailor said. "Vurgrom the Mighty."

The bartender looked at Jherek thoughtfully. He picked up a wooden splinter from the counter and worked it between his teeth for a moment. He never blinked.

Jherek met the man's level gaze, knowing he and his companions were in danger.

The Bent Mermaid had the reputation of being one of the worst taverns in Westgate-both in provender and clientele. It stood three stories tall and looked out over the neck of the Lake of Dragons. Docks stabbed long fingers out into the sea and ships from a dozen and more countries occupied the slips and stood at anchor out in the harbor.

"What business do you have with Vurgrom?" the bartender asked.

"Personal," Jherek said.

The bartender looked over the young sailor's shoulder. "Him too?"

Without glancing back, Jherek knew the man was talking about Glawinn. The knight stood out in the dark den of the tavern. When he'd first entered, sailors standing close to the paladin had drawn back and found other tables and places to stand.

"Aye," Jherek answered.

The bartender shook his head. "Don't know no Vurgrom."

Jherek looked the man in the face, hard, knowing it was a lie. "We were told he'd be here."

"By who?"

Jherek ignored the question. The old sailor who'd given them the information had no love for the pirate leader. "We were told Vurgrom arrived here three days ago."

According to the old sailor, the pirate captain had taken a ship in from the River Tun, sailing in from the Storm Horn Mountains while Jherek and his companions had been forced to cross the distance overland.

"Somebody told you wrong," the bartender said.

Anger flared through Jherek. The journey had been hard and made even harder by the tension that seemed to exist between Sabyna and him. Glawinn had noticed it, the young sailor had been sure, but had refrained from making comment.

The only times he'd really felt relaxed during the journey had been when he and the knight had practiced swordcraft. The young sailor had gotten sore from the daily exertion at first, but had quickly come up to speed, surprising the knight with his skill. Still, there were skills and tricks that Glawinn had taught him and continued to teach him.

"Malorrie."

Jherek heard Sabyna's voice at his side, then felt her touch upon his arm. "Aye, lady," he said, turning to her because he didn't want to be disrespectful.

"Leave it."

The young sailor thought briefly of arguing. Returning the pearl disk was his task to accomplish, and no matter how she felt about helping him because of what he'd done for her, she obviously didn't feel as strongly about it as he did. He knew the pirate was inside the tavern.

"Please," the ship's mage said in a soft voice. Her copper-colored eyes held his.

Jherek let out a deep breath. "Aye. I'm done here, anyway."

"You going to be drinking anything?" the bartender asked.

"Not if I wiped those glasses myself," Jherek told him, venting a little of the hostility he felt.

"Then you need to clear out of my tavern," the man told him. "I got a rule about people coming in to take up tables and not spending any coin."

"Do you have any rules about the clientele you serve?" Jherek asked. "I definitely see no scruples." He was aware that his words drew the attention of a dozen men around the front of the bar.

The sailors shifted in their chairs, taking offense. Jherek didn't feel badly because he knew no honest sailor would patronize the Bent Mermaid, but he was afraid for a moment he'd overstepped his bounds and endangered Sabyna recklessly.

Glawinn strode forward and glared harshly at the men. The paladin carried his shiny helm in the crook of his arm, but his hand rested casually on the hilt of his broadsword. "I'd not," he said in a low, steady voice.

For a moment, the group of sailors held his gaze, then they turned away and hunkered back over their drinks.

"I only got one rule," the bartender said, deliberately looking Jherek from head to toe, making the young sailor aware of his shoddy appearance. "I don't serve vagrants."

The men who'd backed down from Glawinn laughed contemptuously, slapping the table. Jherek's face flamed in embarrassment. Glawinn had offered clothing, but none of the knight's fit the young sailor's bigger frame. Jherek wished he had something clever to say, a cutting remark that heroes in the romances always seemed to have at the tips of their tongues, but he didn't.

Sabyna tugged on his arm and he went, suddenly aware how she looked leading him away. Gently, he tried to disengage himself but she kept her grip fast. Glawinn covered their backs as she led them from the tavern. She didn't stop until they were half a block away, standing at one of the railings overlooking the docks and cattle yards below.

"The man back there was lying," Jherek said.

"Aye," Sabyna answered. The wind blew her jaw-length copper tresses around her face. She had her arms crossed, standing an arm's length away from him to create distance even though they were close. "And what were you going to do? Beat it out of him with a whole room full of men watching on?"

Feeling himself willing to visit some of his anger on her, Jherek got control of himself. "Lady," he said softly, "I apologize for my behavior. You deserve my thanks. You probably saved me from making a serious mistake."

"Yes," Glawinn agreed, "she did."

Jherek looked back at the Bent Mermaid, feeling angry at the obscene sign that hung so large and proudly over the door.

"Vurgrom is inside," Sabyna asked. "He has ten men with him. They're waiting on his ship, *Maelstrom*, to arrive."

"How do you know that?"

The ship's mage smiled. "I asked one of the serving girls. If you want to know something, ask someone who has the most reason to tell it. The bartender's major profits are made from the pirates, but most of the girls despise Vurgrom and his ilk. None of the women work there very long. If you've been around taverns like the Bent Mermaid, you know that,"

"Aye," Jherek said, feeling chagrined. He hadn't been around taverns much, not good ones or bad ones, and not even the ones in Velen more than enough to be marginally social with *Butterfly's* crew. "I hadn't thought of that."

"It doesn't make it any easier," Sabyna said. "Vurgrom's on the third floor and I was told he has it sealed off. He's conducting some kind of business there."

"What business?" Glawinn asked.

"The girl I talked to didn't know."

Jherek studied the building, feeling the anger he'd dissipated as he recognized the new course of action open to him. "The building next to the tavern is as tall," he pointed out.

"You're thinking of crossing over to get Vurgrom now?" Sabyna asked.

"Aye," Jherek answered and saw Glawinn smile.

* * * * *

"Do it," he said.

Glawinn prayed to Lathander, gesturing Jherek to bend his head as well, then inscribed designs in the air. When the paladin finished, Jherek felt as though he'd suddenly gone deaf.

He looked up and tried to speak but no words came out.

The paladin shook his head and drew a hand across his throat, letting the young sailor know verbal communication was no longer possible. The spell even took away all the sounds coming from the docks, the pinging of rigging against masts, shouted commands, and the slap of the surf against the shore and pilings. Glawinn waved toward the other building.

Gathering himself, Jherek leaped across the distance from the flophouse roof to the Bent Mermaid next door. When his feet hit, there was no sound at all. He turned and watched as the paladin, then the ship's mage jumped across the distance as well. The roof trembled beneath his feet, but there was no noise.

He hunkered down and went around the roof to the harbor side. Clinging to the roof's edge, forty feet above where the ocean smashed up against the side of the Bent Mermaid, he lowered himself and peered through the windows along the wall.

A dozen men sat around tables inside the large room that ran the length of the building's harbor side. Pitchers of ale sat on tables burdened with platters of food. Jherek recognized Vurgrom at one end of the center table.

Confusion spread throughout the room as the pirates stood, each gesturing widely and trying to clear their throats. Jherek understood that Glawinn's spell of silence was affecting the pirates as well, and he knew he had to act swiftly while surprise remained a possible weapon.

The young sailor glanced over his shoulder at Glawinn, finding the paladin in the process of knotting a climbing rope around the chimney sticking up from the center of the peaked roof. The knight gave it a final pull, then stood and nodded.

Without another word, Jherek flipped lithely over the roof's edge, holding the rope in one hand, and grabbing on with the other as he dropped. He turned his downward momentum into an arc, holding tight with his hands, and drove his boots through the window in front of him. He followed the broken glass inward, releasing his hold and throwing himself forward to regain his balance.

There was no sound of the shattering glass, only the sight of it spinning away in shards. Jherek landed on one knee, drawing attention only from the men who were looking in his direction. They opened their mouths, probably shouting warnings, but no sound came forth.

Jherek pushed himself to his feet and filled his hands with the cutlass and hook at the same time Glawinn broke through another window and landed only a few feet away. The paladin swept the broadsword from its scabbard, and the room became a battlefield.

Jherek blocked a long sword with the cutlass, feeling the shock of the blades meeting but hearing none of the usual clangor. The pirate drew back quickly, seeking to draw the young sailor after him so one of his companions could slip behind him.

Instead, the young sailor swung his hook toward the floor, biting into the stained rug across the wooden floor but not the floor itself. He yanked hard, pulling the rug from under the other man and sending him tumbling back.

Sliding to the side, Jherek dodged a cutlass blow that would have taken his head from his shoulders. He set himself and turned again, cutting forward with his own cutlass and splitting the pirate's chest open.

The mortally wounded man's face writhed in a scream, but Glawinn's spell blanked out the sound. The pirate dropped to his knees, trying to hold himself together.

Across the room, Vurgrom moved his huge bulk toward the only exit.

Already in motion again, Jherek sprinted to the nearest table. He blocked a sword thrust with the

cutlass, turning it aside only inches from his leg. The young sailor threw himself into the air, skidding feet first across a buffet table and knocking dishes, food, and candelabras from it. He caught the table's edge with the hook, tipping it over after him.

The table was big and heavy, a thick oaken slab that had been crafted well but not treated with respect. Still, it held up.

Sliding the hook around the side, Jherek caught the end of the table, then put all of his weight into the pull-then-push that sent it skidding across the floor toward the exit. Uninterrupted, the table slid in front of the door, blocking Vurgrom's departure.

The pirate captain pulled the battle-axe from over his shoulder and slammed the bit into the table. The force split the table asunder and he kicked his way through the two halves. He yanked the door open and hurried out, obviously working on the theory that discretion was the better part of valor.

Jherek stood, glancing back at his companions. Glawinn, broadsword in one hand and shield in the other, held his own, staking out a whole corner of the room. One of the pirates rushed him, battle-axe held high. The paladin dropped slightly and stepped forward into the charging man. Catching him on his shield and avoiding the axe head as it came across with the intention of hooking onto the shield and pulling it away, Glawinn twisted and stood. The motion hurled the pirate through the smashed windows high over the harbor.

Sabyna's knife flashed out, driving an opponent back. Her lack of formal training in swordplay held her back some, but her skill with her throwing knives was deadly. She blocked another sword slash and stepped inside the blow, then raked her blade across the man's face. Blood flew as the pirate threw himself backward. At her side, the raggamoffyn swirled into a sudden mass of whirling cloth fragments and sped at another pirate.

Parrying a sword thrust, Glawinn screamed soundlessly at Jherek, yelling at him to *go*.

Hesitation held the young sailor only for a moment. He didn't want to desert his friends, and didn't like the idea of leaving Sabyna to fend for herself at all, but in the end if he didn't reach his objective, he'd risked their lives for nothing.

A pirate came at him, sword splintering the afternoon light. Jherek parried with the hook, then brought the cutlass down onto the man's head, splitting his skull. He kicked the dead man backward into another pirate, knocking them both clear of the door. At a dead run, the young sailor caught the doorway's edge with the hook and pulled himself around it.

On the landing outside, Jherek peered over the railing and watched as Vurgrom bounded around the second story landing where the steps switched back the other direction. With the surefooted grace of a man used to navigating rigging in hostile winds and blinding, storm-driven rain, Jherek leaped over the edge and landed on the railing slanting down toward the second story.

When he hit, the wood cracked ominously and he knew it wasn't going to hold him even as he realized he was past Glawinn's arcane silence. He fell forward, caroming off the second story landing wall only a few feet behind Vurgrom. He heard voices then, people calling out to one another from the tavern proper downstairs.

A bare-breasted serving wench carrying a platter of food and a pitcher of ale cursed at Vurgrom as he went by, then she turned into Jherek. Already a victim of his downward momentum caused by the treacherous railing, Jherek couldn't stop. He thought quickly enough to throw the cutlass and hook out to the sides so he didn't endanger her, which left him going face first into her.

There was a moment of confusion as they fell in a tangle at the foot of the landing. The platter of food went flying while the ale pitcher shattered against the wall. Jherek ended up face first against the serving wench's well-cushioned charms. He managed to prevent his full weight from falling on her by catching himself on his knees and the fist around the hook handle.

He pulled his head up from her breasts, the fragrant rose scent of them filling his nose. His face flamed in embarrassment.

"Lady," he apologized as he pushed himself up, "I'm truly sorry." Awkwardly, knowing there wasn't any time for anything else, he pushed up and resumed his chase, drumming his boots against the steps.

At the base of the stairs, Jherek ran through the coral shell stringers that made a partition from the

steps leading into the main tavern. Vurgrom stood near the entrance, his face showing agitation and the fact that he recognized Jherek. The pirate captain leveled a thick forefinger in the young sailor's direction and shouted, "A hundred gold to the man who guts that bastard!"

Instantly, nearly every man in the tavern surged to their feet and drew weapons. Vurgrom grinned, the effort like a rictus in his round moon face.

"Been nice knowing you, boy, but you signed your own death papers coming here after me." He made an obscene gesture, then pushed through the door out onto the street.

Nearly half the tavern got up and followed Vurgrom, letting Jherek know the pirate captain had stationed men downstairs as well as upstairs. At least forty men came at Jherek with drawn swords, eager to cash in on the pirate captain's offered bounty.

Jherek watched helplessly through the paned windows as Vurgrom disappeared, heading down the incline toward the harbor. Stubbornly, the young sailor held his ground with the beaded strings covering the doorway at his back.

A woman to his left cursed and stood suddenly, sweeping back the hooded cloak that had covered her face. Tall and slender, her silky black hair hacked off evenly just below her shoulders, her pointed ears visible, she wore a rough green shirt that was loose enough to disguise her sex, and scarred leather breeches tucked into high-topped boots.

She grabbed the chair she'd been sitting in and hurled it toward the front of the crowd gathered in front of Jherek. The chair hit two men and knocked them backward into the others.

"Back, you damn slime-sucking bottom-feeders, or I'll fillet you myself!" she cursed as she drew a scimitar and dirk, then rushed toward Jherek.

The young sailor turned to face her, lifting his cutlass.

"Not me, you brain-dead ninny," she told him sharply. "I've come to take a stand with you, though by Fenmarel Mestarine's kindness, I don't know why. You've cut yourself enough trouble for a small army, much less one sailor boy."

Jherek kept his blade up, wary that she could be attempting to trick him to get close enough to put a blade between his ribs." Ware now, lady," he warned. "I don't trust so easily."

"Azla!" someone in the crowd shouted. "Azla of *Black Champion* is here!"

"Kill her," another man roared. "Vurgrom's bounty on her head is a thousand gold pieces!"

The half-elven woman's brows arched in anger. "You'd better pick sides quickly, boy." A half-grin played on her face, but it was cold as a moneylender's heart. "I'm worth more dead than you are and I don't intend to die without trying to escape. You're standing in the way."

"Aye," Jherek replied, watching as the crowd regrouped, "but there was a mess left upstairs as well."

Azla glanced back at the tavern crowd and knocked a thrown dagger from the air with the flat of her scimitar. "Our chances of escape have got to be better there than here."

Jherek nodded, hating to lose Vurgrom and not certain what they were going to do even if they made it back up the stairs. He pulled the beaded strands to one side.

"No," Azla said. "You first." She spoke like one used to command.

"Aye." Jherek turned and raced back to the steps, waiting for her.

Azla reached for the pouch at her side and stuck enough of her arm inside it that Jherek knew it was a bag of holding. She removed a small flask, handling it carefully.

"Keep moving," she ordered, then flung the flask at the doorway as two men shoved their heads through.

The flask tumbled end over end and struck the floor, shattering and spreading slow moving oil in spots and a pool. Immediately, the oil caught fire. The flames spiraled up at once, and the spots that had landed on the two men charred holes in their clothes. They yelled in terror and pain and began beating at their clothing, but it only served to spread the flames. The fire in the doorway rose up four feet high.

"Run," Azla directed. "I don't have any more of that ensorcelled oil with me."

She sprinted after him as they ran up the first set of stairs. Three pirates were coming down, fleeing from Glawinn. The lead pirate raised his sword, yelling hoarsely to warn his mates of the danger.

Jherek reached the corner of the landing first and blocked the man's sword with his cutlass. The other two men ran into the first, and all of them struggled to keep their balance. The young sailor kicked the first man in the chest, pressing his own back against the wall to get everything into the effort he could.

All three pirates slammed against the railing, snapping the supports off and tumbling amid screams to the floor below. They'd only just landed when the first of the pirates from the tavern area burst through the oil, stopping only long enough to slap the few flames from his clothing. Now that the oil had nearly exhausted itself, other pirates followed.

Glawinn *gazed* down through the maze of switchback staircases. "Company?" the paladin asked calmly.

"Aye," Jherek answered, breathing hard from his exertions, "and plenty of it."

"Who's she?" Glawinn asked.

"A friend," the young sailor said, glancing at Azla again. Despite her unexpected appearance, he got a good feeling about her. "For now, at any rate."

The half-elf smiled and shook her head. "From the looks of things," she said, "I may be the only friend you people have in Westgate."

"Not the only," Glawinn snapped. "Begging your pardon for my abruptness, lady."

"That's *Captain* Azla," she growled.

"I stand corrected."

Jherek glanced back down the stairs and watched the pirates getting themselves organized. "Maybe we should sort that out later."

"The boy's right," Glawinn said. "What's your plan?"

"The harbor," Azla answered. "We jump."

* * * * *

"I've been pursuing Vurgrom for years," Azla told them.

Jherek sat in *Black Champion's* galley nursing a cup of hot tea. For the moment, Glawinn, Sabyna, and he were guests of Azla. After jumping from the third floor of the tavern, they'd been pulled from the water by some of Azla's crew, who had been waiting in a small skiff for just such an eventuality. They sat at one of the long, rectangular tables where her crew messed. All of them had dry clothes from supplies the ship's captain had on hand.

Glawinn sat at one end of the table working on his armor. It was a job he'd told them couldn't be put off, and a job he didn't want anyone else doing. Jherek didn't blame him. A knight lived and died by the care he showed his weapons and armor. Having to pull it off quickly to keep from drowning after jumping into the water, made Glawinn even more thankful it wasn't lost to the harbor bottom.

"Why?" the young sailor asked. He'd been impressed by the caravel. *Black Champion* was a tight-run ship, and one of the cleanest he'd ever seen. That effort was reflected in the galley's spotless floors and cooking area. Three cooks were already at work on the next meal and the smells made his stomach rumble in anticipation.

Azla sat across from him, dressed in a somber black that seemed to fit her mood. "Vurgrom and I have been at odds with each other for years," she explained. "He's declared himself king of Immurk's Hold, while there are no few who think I should hold that office."

Jherek almost choked on his tea, realizing for the first time that he'd accepted the invitation of a pirate. He glanced at Sabyna. The ship's mage had a personal vendetta against pirates since her own brother was slain by Bloody Falkane. No emotion at all showed on Sabyna's face, nor did she return Jherek's look.

"Vurgrom has seen me as a threat ever since, and taken steps to eliminate me and my ship," Azla said. "I've returned the favor upon occasion. Lately, through spies I've got in Westgate and other ports, as well as in Vurgrom's crew, I found out he's been stealing and buying artifacts scattered all across the Sea of Fallen Stars. He's made deals with traders in all the nations, as well as bargains with some of the undersea races."

"Do you know what that's about?" Glawinn asked.

Azla shook her head. "I've heard that he's got a contact on the Sword Coast that he sells them to regularly. Now you tell me he was in Baldur's Gate the night it was struck by the sahuagin attack. It makes the whole situation I've been following even more suspicious."

Jherek silently agreed.

"I'd found out from my spies that Vurgrom had been out to the west and was going to be returning through the Lake of Dragons sometime during the last week. It was the first time he'd been off the sea in months. He owns over half of the Bent Mermaid and I thought to take him there."

"Until we showed up," Glawinn said, brushing at the fittings on his chest plate.

"Aye," Azla said. "I had a team of men waiting outside. If Vurgrom had been with a much smaller group, we could have taken him outside the tavern and spirited him away through the sewers under the city till we got him back to *Champion*." She scowled darkly. "With a little time, I'd have found out soon enough what he was up to."

"And now?" Jherek asked.

"Now," the half-elf captain said, "I'll have to do it the old-fashioned way. Follow him until I get an opportunity to find out what he's up to and move against him when I can."

"I'd like to accompany you if I could," Jherek asked.

"To get back the trinket he took from you?"

Jherek grimaced. "Aye, but I'd prefer it if you didn't talk about it so casually."

"From what my spies tell me, Vurgrom was quite pleased to get that pearl disk. It was one of the things they'd hoped to acquire in Baldur's Gate."

The announcement shocked Jherek, and it must have shown on his face. How had Vurgrom even known about the disk if it had been hidden away for so many years? And what was it?

"I have room aboard for extra crew," she said. "If you'd like, you're welcome. As long as you understand that I'm captain of this ship."

"Aye," Jherek said.

"There must be one other stipulation," Glawinn stated, turning to face her. "As long as we're aboard, there is to be no taking of prize ships, no piracy."

"Making demands like that goes against the acknowledgement of my being the captain," Azla stated.

"Yes," Glawinn admitted, "but you don't know yet how we may help you in your own agenda. As you've seen from the disk and all that this boy has been through to get it here, our fates are tied up in it. I'd think it's better that we worked together."

"You're shipless," Azla pointed out.

"Today," the paladin said, "but not in a day or so. There are some here in Westgate who claim Lathander as their deity. I would be able to find a ship, I promise you."

"Then why want to join me?"

"Because I think you know Vurgrom better than anyone else we'd likely find. If anyone can keep up with him, I'm betting that it'll be you."

Azla pushed her tea away and stood. "All right," she agreed. "You have your bargain. A combination of our talents, skills, and destinies. I won't take any ships while you're aboard, but what do I get in return?"

"If we can manage it," Glawinn answered, "Vurgrom's head on a pike."

"I'll hold you to that," Azla said, then turned and walked away.

XXII

26 Kythorn, the Year of the Gauntlet

Pacys sat on an outcropping of rock overlooking the sea elf city of Faenasuor. The old bard gave no thought to the two hundred feet of ocean above him, nor to the bluish hue it seemed all the world had taken on. The folk of Seros called all depths between one hundred fifty feet and three hundred feet the Gloom. The Sea of Fallen Stars itself served to stratify civilizations and undersea worlds.

A few tall towers, mute testimony to the hubris of the elves of the ancient empire, stood up from the

sea floor, rising over the other recovered structures and the new dwellings that had been built. The city sprawled unevenly across the irregular seabed the elves called the Hmur Plateau. Despite seventy years of reclamation efforts, much of the city yet remained in a state of disrepair. Excavation teams harnessing pilot whales, narwhals, and giant crabs worked to clear more debris in an effort that had been ongoing during the days Pacys had spent there. Brackish clouds of debris and silt, exploded upward from avalanches of resettling rock, sifted constantly in the currents, eventually drawn away.

Besides being an acknowledged center of sea elven history, Faenasuor was also surrounded by oyster beds. Pacys watched sea elves out harvesting pearls from the oysters, clams, and other mollusks that created them. They worked in groups, gathering the sea's bounty, then used the pearls to trade with other undersea races and surface dwellers. The last few days spent there had been highly instructional regarding all of Seros and some of the Taker's legend, but it had also served to remind Pacys of just how much he didn't know.

He turned his attention back to the instrument Taareen had given him. Despite the magical bracelet he wore, he couldn't play the yarting underwater. Communication was fine, but the yarting's notes all suffered. So he'd put the instrument into his bag of holding and decided to wait until he returned to the surface to play it again.

The song kept coming together in the old bard's head. Thankfully, his musical skills weren't limited to the yarting. Over his life he'd found nothing he couldn't play with some skill.

Taareen had given him a saceddar, an alu'tel'quessiran musical instrument Pacys had never seen before. Mounted on a chest plate that hung over the player's neck and shoulders, the saceddar had thirty crystals of various sizes and thicknesses across it. To play it, Pacys wore platinum finger and thumb caps on both hands. The metal was more durable than gold and struck a truer note.

He played the saceddar by striking his fingers and thumbs against a single crystal or a combination of crystals at the same time. Striking a new crystal or combination broke the vibrations of the last ones, effectively silencing them and providing for long and short notes.

When Taareen had given it to him, Pacys had been fascinated. That fascination had grown even more when the old bard discovered how easily playing the instrument came to him, and how parts of the song he'd been working on seemed to knit themselves to the new medium. He'd composed new parts over the past days, as well as learning the songs from Taker legends.

Scrabbling to his right, the sound dimmed by the water reached Pacys's ears at the same time as the vibrations from the stone shelf he sat on. He turned and saw Khlinat pulling himself up through the twisted coral growth.

"Ye got up early this morning," the dwarf commented as he settled himself across from the bard. The potions the sea elves kept him supplied with allowed him the same free movement and breathing ability as Pacys had from his enchanted bracelet.

"I couldn't sleep," Pacys said.

Khlinat wiped at his face, and the old bard knew it was because even though the potion protected him from the harsh nature of the sea, it left the dwarf feeling like he was wet the whole time. "I didn't rest too well either, songsmith, but I know it's 'cause I ain't never going to get acclimated to this way of living. What's yer excuse?"

"Restlessness, I think." Pacys pulled on the saceddar and fastened the straps. He took the finger and thumb caps from the small fish bladder bag that hung around his neck and fitted them on.

"Oh, and ye mean yer through prowling through them sea elf books, then?" Khlinat asked hopefully.

"I don't know that I could ever be satiated with that, my friend. The wisdom of the ages resides in those tomes. Magic, history, travel, philosophy, worlds await any adventurer with the skill to read."

"Aye," the dwarf said, "and a goodly pouch of gold, I'm thinking, for any man clever enough and brave enough to make off with some of them books. Like as not, nobody's ever seen anything even kin to them topside."

"I'd say you're right. Even skilled as I am in languages, when trying to read ones that should be open to me, I found them hard to decipher."

Most of the books were written in special pastes that hardened and adhered permanently to pages

that were cut from the shells of giant clams. A lot of time went into the creation of each book, so they were highly prized. Some of them were even tonal books, pieced together with crystals like the sacedder and designed to be struck by a tiny mallet in order to be read. Still others were merely books ensor-celled to withstand the sea.

Khlinat waved irritably at a small school of fish that seemed determined to find hiding places in his beard and hair. With the constant immersion of living beneath the Sea of Fallen Stars, his peg had started to show signs of distress. Taareen had asked a local smith to help out, and the dwarf had been issued a new peg made of green-gray coral Taareen had called claw coral and hydra's stone.

"So what are we to do?" the dwarf asked.

"I don't know." Pacys's fingers wandered across the saced-dar's surface, pinging crystals. Before he knew it, he'd started a new song weave. The notes from the struck crystals cut through the water like a knife, pouring out into the sea.

The music surged through him, building, and he gave himself over to it. The sound was haunting and evil, at turns strident and threatening. It stabbed Pacys deep within his heart with an icy finger, yet he found he couldn't let go the song.

Sharp, poignant notes echoed across Faenasuor and floated toward the surface. Movement, barely sensed in the currents and then only because the old bard had attuned himself to listen for vibrations because of the saceddar, swirled around him. He knew from the feel that it was something large.

In front of him, Khlinat's eyes rounded in horror. "Get down, friend Pacys!" The dwarf pushed up quickly, reaching out for the old bard's robes and yanking him to one side.

Pacys flailed in the water, recovering quickly as he remembered to swim instead of trying to walk. He turned as Khlinat threw himself at the monster that swam up from the murky depths behind the rocky shelf.

The creature was a wide-jawed fish eighteen feet in length and nearly half that in width. Gray-blue, iridescent scales covered it, darker at the top and lighter at the bottom so it would gray out against the surface when looked at from underneath. Most sea predators possessed similar coloration for exactly the same reason.

Already in attack mode, obviously about to seize Pacys before the dwarf yanked him out of the way, the giant fish swam for Khlinat. It opened its mouth, blowing out fist-sized chunks that whirled around the dwarf.

Khlinat gave vent to a dwarven war cry and attacked the giant fish with both hand axes. Before he had the chance to land a blow, though, the giant fish opened its mouth, darted forward, and gulped him down whole.

Pacys watched in disbelief as his friend disappeared without a flicker of movement, then he noticed that the fist-sized chunks the creature had vomited up were swimming in his direction. Their bright teeth caught his attention first. Fully a dozen of them, as vicious looking as their parent, closed -within striking distance.

Acting quickly, Pacys spoke a command word and gestured at the approaching fish. A shimmering filled the water in front of him just before the first of them reached him.

The fish smacked up against the invisible shield that formed in front of him. It stopped the next two as well, but the fourth one got through. Finning close to the old bard, the fish sank sharp teeth into his flesh.

Watching the blood stream into the water from his wound, Pacys voiced another word, traced a ward with his forefinger, and touched the fish attacking him. Electricity sparked in the fish's eyeballs. The predator released its hold and rolled over on its side, floating limply.

Pacys retreated, watching as the fish battered against his shield. He summoned his magic around him again and crafted another spell. Throwing his hand straight out to the side of the shield, he released energy bolts that darted from his fingertips.

Five greenish bolts of light streaked through the water away from the invisible shield, then curved back around and struck five of the remaining eleven fish, tearing their bodies to pieces. The others descended upon the spilled entrails and ripped flesh in a frenzy.

Taking advantage of the moment, Pacys swam to the bottom and stood on the rocky shelf. He took his staff from his back and flicked the razor-sharp blades out. He glanced at the parent fish, seeing that it had turned to face him. His heart was torn over Khlinat's fate.

One of the fish found its way around the invisible shield.

Pacys swept, the staff around and neatly sliced the fish's head off. The pieces floated in separate directions for a moment, then were seized by its brethren.

Blood streaming from the giant fish drew the old bard's attention for a moment. Crimson mist poured from the creature's gill slits and it moved as though in agony. Pacys whirled the staff again and gutted another one of the fish. Shifting, he spotted movement in the distance, recognizing it as sea elves riding giant seahorses. They sat crouched down over their undersea mounts, barely skimming above the kelp and seaweed lining the ocean floor.

The next fish through the shield evaded the old bard's staff and sank its teeth into the flesh just below his ribs. He groaned in pain and elbowed the fish away, but it was on him again, tearing savagely, before he could take a full step.

The old bard drew a knife and drove it through the fish's head, through the gaping jaws and stilling the biting teeth. Though the tiny brain refused to accept the idea of death, it could no longer tear at him. It bumped him, rubbing its rough scales over his side, enveloped in the blood clouding the water.

More crimson suddenly spilled from the giant fish that had belched its offspring to the attack. Its jaws widened again, revealing Khlinat striking at the creature's upper mouth with both hand axes. Chunks of bloody flesh floated out of its mouth.

"Khlinat!" Pacys cried. "Get away from that thing, that I might aid you."

Spinning, the dwarf looked for Pacys and found him. Almost reluctantly, as if he had his terrible foe exactly where he wanted it, Khlinat swam from the creature's mouth in the ungainly dog paddle he'd managed over the last few days around Faenasuor.

Pacys dug his hand into the small meal pouch he'd taken from the sea elf city after deciding to spend the afternoon getting to know the sacedder better. One of the tidbits the elven chef had foisted upon him was octopus tentacle. It had been good, but the woman had been overgenerous with her portions, and there was some left.

The old bard pinched a portion off, said another command word, gestured, and pointed at the giant fish only twenty-five yards away. The octopus tentacle chunk disappeared from his hand, consumed by the spell.

Instantly, a mass of black tentacles formed under and around the giant fish. Over ten feet in length, the tentacles coiled in exploration, finding the giant fish almost at once. They ensnared and wrapped the fish, constricting around the creature and pulling it to within reach of still other tentacles.

One of the tentacles snaked out and wrapped around Khlinat's good leg. Reacting quickly, the dwarf swung both hand axes repeatedly, finally cutting through the rubbery flesh and severing the tentacle. He swam toward Pacys. Overcome by his wounds and the effort of easting the spells, the bard watched helplessly as the magic shield ceased its shimmering and went away. The remaining three fish swam for him eagerly, their jaws open wide in expectation.

Pacys covered up as best as he could, protecting his throat, face, and eyes with his arms. The fish went for the soft tissues of his stomach and under his arms. The old bard tried to knock them away with his elbows, but he'd run out of spells he could easily cast, and the staff didn't give him the room or time to use it that he needed to protect his face and throat.

In the next moment, Khlinat was there, roaring great dwarven curses and calling on his god. Pacys felt the shudder of the hand axes cleaving flesh through the connection he had with two of the fish that'd sunk their teeth into him.

The dwarven warrior threw his arms around Pacys protectively, holding the old bard up. "Speak to me, songsmith! Don't ye dare be dying on me shift. Not while ol' Khlinat's got his eyes peeled and made ye the promise I did!"

Pacys opened his eyes, fighting the exhaustion and pain that threatened to consume him. "I still live, my friend. You've not gone back on your promise yet."

"And I won't either," the dwarf declared fiercely. "Ye will see I'm a man of me word." Blood seeped from wounds on his body as well, mixing with the bard's in the salty water.

Taareen arrived foremost among the elves mounted on seahorses. He flung himself off the creature and swam toward Pacys.

"Taleweaver!" the sea elf cried, eeling toward him in the particular undulation the sea elves used for cutting rapidly through the water.

"I'm here," Pacys said.

Taareen surveyed him, taking in the damage done with a grimace.

"It's not as bad as it looks," Pacys said, though he felt that it was.

"We should have had guards over you," Taareen said. "We knew how important you were, and that the Taker would strike at you if he could. Now that he's found you here, we're going to have to move you somewhere else."

The other elves mounted on seahorses rode around the giant fish struggling against the black tentacles Pacys had summoned. They fired repeated crossbow bolts into the giant fish, taking care to stay well away from the reach of the tentacles.

"What makes you so sure the Taker has found me?" Pacys asked.

"The ascallion isn't a normal Shallows or Gloom predator," Taareen said, pointed at the creature that had attacked the bard. "Usually that monster is only found in the Twilight depths."

Pacys knew from his understanding of the stratification of Seros' depths that the Twilight was the depth between three hundred to six hundred feet. "Maybe it found its way up here by mistake."

The black tentacles disappeared in the next moment as the magic sustaining them became exhausted. The ascallion tried only a feeble escape. More than a dozen quarrels stuck out of its face, and more were shot into it as the old bard watched.

Taareen shook his head. "There's no mistake. The Taker found a way to send that creature here, and we're lucky that you escaped with your life. By the Dolphin Prince, the things we would have lost had we lost you."

XXIII

26 Kythorn, the Year of the Gauntlet

Laaqueel stood on the deck of the royal flier as it glided through the ocean, powered by sahuagin rowers. She'd never traveled on one of the craft for long distances before, and never at all until Iakhovas had become baron.

She felt proud as she watched the four hundred rowers working in rapid tandem, pulling the sahuagin craft through the underbelly of the ocean at a normal pace that more than doubled anything a surface vessel could do, even with rowers and a favorable wind. A two hundred forty-mile day was a normal average for the fliers. The other two hundred sahuagin that made up the rest of the crew rotated in, taking a shift at the oars as well while spelling another team.

Laaqueel scanned the deep blue of the ocean around them, looking back at all the fliers that followed. Though she couldn't see them all because even her eyes couldn't penetrate the gloom, she knew there were more than two dozen in all.

Satisfied that there was nothing she could do to make the journey more safe, she tried not to think about the possible dangers waiting at the Lake of Steam, where Iakhovas had said they were headed. With a final prayer offered up to Sekolah, she turned and walked the length of the flier to the cabin Iakhovas had ordered constructed in the stern as his personal quarters. None of the other fliers had such a thing.

She stood before the door and raised her hand to rap on the door.

Before she could touch it, Iakhovas's voice rumbled, "Enter, little malenti."

She let herself through the door, having the brief but certain feeling that it would not have opened at all if he hadn't allowed it.

Iakhovas occupied a chair constructed of whalebone that was thronelike in its dimensions. Seaweed draped it, creating a cushion. Lucent algae hung in irregular strips across the ceiling. Shelves held some of

the items his spies and troops had gathered since the attacks against the coastal lands had begun.

Laaqueel could sense the power that clung to most of them but didn't know what any of them were.

A crystal brain coral sat in the middle of the table, as tightly furrowed as its namesake. Though she was familiar with all the corals that formed along the Sword Coast, the malenti priestess had never seen anything like it. Motion slithered and twisted in the brain coral's depths.

Iakhovas sat back in the seat, his attention riveted on the crystal brain coral. Some of the glitter on the crystalline surface reflected through the patch covering his empty eye socket.

"What do you want?" he asked, sounding distracted.

"Only to see what it was that took up so much of your attention," she told him. "Our people need to see their king out among them more if they're going to follow him into areas not meant for We Who Eat."

Iakhovas fixed his single eye on her, but she felt something else—a cold and alien glare—settle on her from his missing eye.

"Not meant for We Who Eat?" He shook his head. "Little malenti, there are sahuagin in those waters, and we are on our way to set them free. Come. Let me show you." He gestured toward the brain coral.

Moving closer, Laaqueel stared into the brain coral's depths. Lights spun and glittered there. She knew it was an underwater location from the color around the figures revealed to her. No sky ever held that shade of blue, and no patch of land ever looked like the silt bed of the ocean floor.

One of the figures was an old surface dweller riding in front of a sea elf on a seahorse. They rode toward a city that had parts that looked as ancient as anything Laaqueel had ever seen. Even though she knew she shouldn't involve herself, the malenti priestess couldn't help asking, "Who's this?"

Iakhovas considered her question for a moment. "In all your studies about One Who Swims With Sekolah, did you ever hear the name Taleweaver?"

"No." She didn't remember reading the name, but something turned over in her memory.

"The sea elves have legends about me too," Iakhovas said. "All marine creatures that had a means of recording history when I was last in these waters had stories of me." He laughed, and the sound echoed within the cabin. "All of them are lies. Lies built on misconceptions and prejudiced hatred. Some of them I even started myself through various agents."

"This man is the Taleweaver?" Laaqueel asked.

"Yes," Iakhovas admitted.

Laaqueel scanned the man again, trying to find anything of significance about him. "What part is he supposed to play in all this?"

"In the little drama the sea elves are trying to establish?" Iakhovas asked. "He is supposed to find their savior."

"Their savior?" Laaqueel felt a little uneasy talking of saviors. Her own beliefs were strong, and she knew that other religions, other gods, exercised considerable power across Faerun as well.

"Someone who will stand against me and defeat me," Iakhovas explained. "You know how these legends are. Humans and elves all believe in these great romances of men and elves that are able to triumph against great and overwhelming odds."

"Is it true?"

"Their myth of the savior?"

For a moment, Laaqueel hesitated putting voice to her reply because she didn't know how Iakhovas would react. "Yes."

Iakhovas shook his head and laughed again. "Little malenti, I helped create the myth of their savior. There is no savior. Any human they find who believes he is this one is only a fool one heartbeat away from death."

"Why did you do that?"

Iakhovas raked a talon against the crystal brain coral, causing a tiny, high-pitched ring and said, "Because I could. Because it amused me. Most of all, because it served me. If they didn't have the legend of their hero, they wouldn't do the things I need them to that will insure my success."

"What do you need from them?"

He raked her with his harsh gaze. "You know more than any other at this time, little malenti. Don't get any greedier than I can tolerate."

Laaqueel felt a surge of anger thrill through her. Only days ago he'd helped her rebuild her faith, now he was pushing her at arm's length again.

"At ease," Iakhovas told her. "I only want you to remember your boundaries for your own benefit. Not mine."

Carefully, Laaqueel pushed water through her gills and dropped her eyes in deference to his authority. In many ways he was correct. She had her faith, and that would be enough. That strength would serve her as she served Sekolah.

"And to answer your question, the elves believe the Taleweaver will help them rebuild their histories and allow them some measure of a chance to defeat me once the savior is found. However, as the Taleweaver moves to the ripples they feed him, so does he serve the undercurrent I've had in play for thousands of years."

Listening carefully, Laaqueel filed the information away in her mind.

"There are, in the Sea of Fallen Stars-or Seros as they call it there-beings who are unlike any of those elsewhere in all of Toril. They can prove to be somewhat difficult to deal with. And if I-if we-do not move cleverly while we are there, the Sea of Fallen Stars can become a trap. I have no intention of allowing that to happen."

Laaqueel tried to listen to any sign of fear or anxiety in his voice, but there was none. Only the confidence he always exuded sounded in it.

"Now come, little malenti, and let me show you the brethren to We Who Eat that I've spoken of. They are there, and they are kept behind a wall that is meant to keep them from taking over all of Seros, as is their right."

"Sekolah would never allow such a thing," Laaqueel said. The idea of sahuagin penned up, being made to stay in one spot was unthinkable.

"The Great Shark will tolerate it no longer," Iakhovas said. "That's why you and I were brought together here and now. We will bring them their freedom, and the people of Seros will know what it means to have doom suckled to their breasts like a vampiric child."

Curious and a little afraid to find what he was saying was true, Laaqueel peered into the crystal brain coral.

The image of the sea elf and the old surface dweller astride the seahorse floating down into the ancient city faded from the crystal's depths. In seconds it was replaced with the image of a sahuagin hunting party armed with nets and tridents.

"They are different," Laaqueel breathed, surprise filling her and driving away her own fears and doubts. Their anterior fins radiated from the sides of their heads as did the ones in the outer seas, but they flowed longer, reaching back along the skull until they merged with the dorsal fin at the top of their shoulder blades. Also, their coloring tended more toward blue shades than green. In fact some of those Laaqueel saw were teal and turquoise colored. A great number of them had speckles and stripes, like the markings they had as hatchlings.

Iakhovas touched the brain coral and the image changed again. When it cleared once more, it showed a massive wall lying under a stretch of ocean, only a short distance from the surface. The wall looked smooth, obviously manmade and constructed with care. She knew how massive it was from comparing the fish and the hated sea elves swimming nearby.

"We Who Eat of Seros are held captive in a tiny portion of all that is available. The elves and surface dwellers call the area the Alamber Sea. None of the sahuagin trapped inside it have ever been allowed to leave that area in any great numbers. Only hunting groups in twos and threes have escaped through the sea elf guards that man the wall."

Laaqueel was horrified. "But if they're not allowed to migrate, how do they live? If they're not careful, they could over-hunt an area-"

"And die?"

Laaqueel said nothing. It was too ghastly to put into words. When sahuagin over-hunted a

region-which was seldom-there were whispered stories of how they'd turned on each other, eating the young and the weak until the region repopulated and the hunting was good again. It was one thing to eat another after death, or after a blood challenge, but preying on each other as a food source wasn't permitted except under the harshest of circumstances.

"Yes, little malenti. Those of your brethren have had to be careful over the years. The horrors you imagine, they've had to live through. That wall is over a hundred miles long, sixty feet tall, and a hundred feet thick. The sea elves and their allies have kept garrisons along it two miles apart to patrol. They call it the Sharksbane Wall."

Laaqueel burned the name into her memory, knowing it would forever live in infamy among the sahuagin.

"Until now, the elves and their allies have believed that wall to be impenetrable, but no more. I'm going to change that."

"You must tell the others," Laaqueel said, knowing the outrage would fire the blood of the warriors.

"I will. When the time is right. Now I am telling you."

"When we free them, what then? They will be hunted."

Iakhovas nodded. "Yes, they will. Probably more hunted than anything ever before in the history of Seros. The sea elves and most of the other underwater races fear nothing more than We Who Eat."

"That is as it should be," Laaqueel stated proudly, "but they will have many enemies."

"Only the inadequate fail, little malenti."

Laaqueel looked at the long wall revealed in the crystal brain coral. "It is as you say, as Sekolah wills."

"Don't be so taken aback," Iakhovas suggested. "I've not come this far merely to free them from their prison that they might be killed. I've arranged allies for them. Other races in Seros who would like to see the haughty sea elves brought to their knees. The elves have a city there-Myth Nantar."

Cold dread closed in around Laaqueel. She'd heard of the city, and of the dangers that lay there. "The lost city of the elves?"

"One of them," Iakhovas acknowledged. "Myth Nantar is special to the Serosian sea elves. What have you heard of it?"

"That its elves were driven from it by wild magic they and their allies unleashed during one of their wars."

Iakhovas gazed into the brain coral. "When Myth Nantar began its fall and the magic ranged out of the sea elves' control, the sahuagin who are now trapped behind that wall raided there often. They helped drive out the last of the sea elves and claimed many treasures as their own."

"Still, they fell against the greater numbers of the sea elves and their allies."

"Yes, but then We Who Eat stood alone. It's not that way now. According to the prophecies of the sea elves, Myth Nantar will be returned to them in time to usher in a new period of greatness for their culture. They even believe they have a weapon there that will defeat me."

"Defeat you?" Laaqueel asked, trying to absorb everything she was being told. "We have no reason to journey to Myth Nantar."

"We will, little malenti. You'll see." Iakhovas gazed at her, resolutely and calm. "We can't free our people without taking the war we'll be waging to Myth Nantar. The sea elves must be broken again."

"What about the weapon they have?"

"That weapon . . ." Iakhovas mused. "I depend on that weapon of theirs, little malenti, and I depend on their faith to use it against me."

Laaqueel controlled her fears through discipline learned in her calling. Her lack of faith in Iakhovas himself was lessened as he revealed everything to her so calmly. He was undertaking the effort to free the other sahuagin in spite of all the odds against him. There could be no greater task that Sekolah would put before him.

Or her.

The realization of that made her proud. The Great Shark had tested her in the past, given her a birth defect that should have caused her death either as a hatchling or at any time growing up, and he'd given

her all her massive doubts to overcome. Now that she knew what it was all for, she realized it had only been to make her stronger--strong enough to go to a land-locked sea and free those who'd never known freedom, to fulfill the future of her people while shattering the prophecies of the hated sea elves.

"Most Exalted One," Laaqueel said, assuming the open and defenseless stance of a sahuagin facing another in a position of authority, spreading her arms out to her sides to leave herself open to attack. She kept her eyes down out of deference to him. "In the past I've been doubtful and borderline rebellious toward you. I now pledge to you my complete allegiance and my promise never to work against you."

"And your doubts? Will those continue to plague you?"

"I swear by Sekolah the Uncaring that I will struggle with those," Laaqueel said. She stared at the wall, and her hatred grew anew for all the surface dwellers. This wall was blasphemy.

"That's good enough for me," Iakhovas said. "In return, I promise that through us the Great Shark will find a way to destroy that wall and free those who have been trapped there for so long." He touched the crystal brain coral.

Slowly, the image held inside dimmed, but Laaqueel knew she would never forget that hateful wall.

Iakhovas pushed himself up from his chair. "Come, Most Sacred One."

The malenti was surprised to hear him use the title with such respect. She straightened herself, accepting the responsibility of the office she'd been thrown into. Her doubts could no longer confine her, no longer take away her strength. She was a child of Sekolah, and the Great Shark had designed a grand current for her to ride. She would follow it with straight fins and without hesitation. Anyone who tried to stop her would die.

"Let us allow our warriors to see us in our coming glory that their hearts may be strengthened before we take them into the land of fire. We have many plans to make."

She followed him, certain with every stroke that she was going toward her destiny.

XXIV

28 Kythorn, the Year of the Gauntlet

"Your lady doesn't approve of you working on this ship. I think she believes you should only be a passenger."

Jherek felt a flush of embarrassment when he realized Azla was standing beside him. The ship's captain wore tight black breeches with flaring cuffs over boots and a black leather vest with silver embroidery. Her scimitar and dirk hung at her side.

"She's not my lady," Jherek replied, "we're merely friends."

He glanced up at the stern castle where Sabyna stood and felt guilty. Sabyna definitely didn't like the idea of the young sailor working around the pirate vessel. However, Sabyna had been working with Azla's own ship's mage, an old man named Arthoris who'd spent his entire life on the Sea of Fallen Stars. It took both their efforts to keep *Black Champion* racing after Vurgrom's pirate ships. The small pirate fleet consisted of four vessels, headed up by *Maelstrom*, Vurgrom's personal ship. So far, none of the pirate vessels had seemed to spot them. *Black Champion* trailed out of sight, locked onto its prey by a spell Arthoris had cast.

Azla crossed her arms over her breasts and glanced up in irritation at Sabyna. "Aye, I hear you," she said, "but that's not the understanding I get when I look at her. Either I'm wrong or you're mistaken." She turned her dark gaze back on him. "Would you care to put a wager on which likelihood is more correct?"

Jherek flushed again. "No, lady."

He tried to return his attention to the sail he was mending. The cloth was in fairly good shape, showing some definite time put to hard use at sea, but it was serviceable. At least, it would be after all the great rents were repaired.

"No, *Cap'n*," Azla corrected without rancor but with definite steel in her voice.

"No, Captain," Jherek said. He drew more of the thick thread for his needle, measured off a length, then knotted the end of the twin strands. He returned his attention to his sewing.

"I'll tell you now," Azla said, dropping a hand to her scimitar, "I've never suffered the presence of anyone on my ship who made me feel ill at ease."

"She doesn't mean anything by it." Jherek fumbled for words, desperately seeking some answer to the problem the two women had presented him. Over the past few days, both women had sought him out and talked to him about the other. When he'd asked Glawinn for advice, the paladin had only smiled at him and lifted his sword to begin Jherek's training anew. The young sailor had been thankful for the swordplay. At least for a time it had taken his thoughts from the friction between the two women, even if it left him bone-tired afterward.

"I don't see how that could be true," Azla snapped. "Her disapproval of me isn't unintentional."

Jherek blew out a tight breath, wondering if he was about to make matters worse. "It isn't you she disapproves of, Captain. It's pirates in general. Her brother was killed by one."

Azla returned his gaze.

"Sabyna was just a child when it happened," Jherek explained. "She saw the whole thing. She'll never forget that."

Surprisingly, Azla's face softened. She looked away from Jherek and back up at the young woman standing in *Black Champion's* stern. "Aye, then she'll never forget or forgive."

"No," Jherek said, knowing it was true. "I don't think she will."

Azla was quiet for a moment, alone with thoughts that captured all of her attention. She shook her head slightly and grimaced. "Who was the pirate?"

Jherek focused on mending the sail again. "A man named Falkane. He's called Bloody Falkane and the Salt Wolf."

"I've not heard of him," Azla said.

"Falkane's well known along the Sword Coast." Jherek took up another stitch, pulling the sailcloth neatly together. The spacing was important if the sail was to fit correctly again.

"He's still alive?"

"Aye." Jherek remembered seeing *Bunyip* in Baldur's Gate, and the eerie wail echoed again in his mind. He shivered in spite of the balmy heat that lay over the Sea of Fallen Stars.

"That must be a hard burden to carry," Azla commented, then called out briefly to her crew, ordering sails trimmed.

"Anything associated with Falkane is a hard burden."

Jherek tried not to let too much bitterness sound in his voice, but knew he failed. He hadn't even intended to speak his thoughts, but they'd been too strong to remain mute. Thankfully Azla seemed so busy with her crew for the moment that she didn't notice. He took out more of the thick thread.

"You've got a steady hand with that needle," Azla told him a moment later.

"Thank you." Jherek took up another stitch, gathering the material. *Black Champion's* speed increased and she slid across a large swell that lifted her up and set her back down quickly enough to roll the young sailor's stomach slightly.

"You're a sailor then?" she asked him. "Not like your paladin friend?"

"Aye. Nearly all I've known is the sea."

"And you like it here?"

"More than any other place I've been."

Her line of questioning made Jherek believe that she hadn't always known the sea. Yet, with the grace and certainty she displayed on the deck, he couldn't imagine her not in command of a ship. As Finaren often declared, ships' captains were born and made, hammered into shape by events rather than through book learning.

Azla nodded and said, "But you're young. There are probably few places you've actually been."

Jherek tied off another stitch as he gave consideration to what she'd said. "I've been up and down the Sword Coast a number of times. I've been to Waterdeep, Baldur's Gate, Athkatla, and a number of cities to the north. I've seen my share of things."

"And now you're here in the Sea of Fallen Stars to see yet more."

"As the gods will it."

An icy chill touched Jherek again as he remembered the great voice that had haunted him upon occasion since he was a child.

"Personally," Azla informed him in a flat tone, "I don't believe the gods take an interest in anyone."

Jherek shrugged, then touched the praying hands of Il-mater hanging on the thong around his neck. "I have my beliefs."

"Do you find your god shading the luck and opportunities you have in your favor?"

Jherek considered the question gravely. Religious matters were important and he wanted to answer the question most correctly. "At times I have thought so."

"But you don't know?"

"No."

"Then how can you profess to believe?"

"Because believing is different than knowing," Jherek answered. "Once I know, how can I believe? Knowledge isn't faith."

Azla regarded him in silence. "You've been talking to soothsayers far too long."

Jherek shrugged, taking no offense. "Captain, I learned a long time ago that each man has to build within himself the things he'll need to get through life. Part of that is a way of thinking, certain skills that are meant to put food on the table and a roof over his head, other skills that keep him free from the tyranny of other men. Belief has to be in there as well, to shape a man's destiny and lead him forward."

"And what if that destiny is a bent or broken one?" Azla asked. "Where does belief fit in then?"

The question lit a new fire under all the doubts that Jherek tried to keep buried within him. He hesitated for a moment, then gave her the answer Malorrie had always given him. "A man's belief helps him through, helps him remain himself in spite of the trials around him."

"What about you?" she asked him. "Is your belief helping you so far?"

"Aye." Jherek's answer was given with far less confidence than he would have liked to admit.

"Good, then maybe it'll be enough for us all."

XXV

1 Flamerule, the Year of the Gauntlet

Laaqueel stood on *Tarjana's* deck and looked out at the Lake of Steam. Thick, heated gray mist hung over the lake and clouded the surrounding lands with perpetual fog. Ahead of them in the distance, she could barely see Arnrock Island, which was the major source of all the volcanic activity in the area. Gray-white smoke with searing orange embers belched continuously into the air, creating the black cinders that swirled endlessly over the lake and filled the water with dark speckles.

She wrapped her arms around herself, already feeling her skin drying out from exposure to the steam. The other sahuagin stayed underwater on the mantas. Even there, the temperatures were hot enough to be uncomfortable and would tend to encourage parasitic growth inside gill tissue. For some of the spells Iakhovas had to do in order to open the gate for them that would take them to Seros, he needed to be out of the water.

He'd also needed the things he had stored aboard the mudship. He'd summoned it after they'd entered the lake, praising it to the sahuagin as an item taken in battle from Baldur's Gate.

Laaqueel prayed constantly, clinging to her belief so much easier now that she'd discovered why Iakhovas had come among them. Freeing the captive sahuagin had preyed upon her mind since he'd told her about them, allowing her to focus on something more than her own doubts.

"Priestess."

Laaqueel turned, hearing unaccustomed fatigue in Iakhovas's voice. "Yes, Most Exalted One."

He walked out onto the deck from the cabin where he'd been working. "It's done. All the preparations have been made. The gate will open as soon as Vurgrom has his piece in place in the Alamber Sea"

"Is there anything I can do, Most Exalted One?" Looking at him, Laaqueel wished she could take away some of the tiredness that clung to him. He'd worked hard for the last week, never stopping even to sleep.

"No, but thank you for your kindness, priestess. Now all that may be done is the waiting."

Despite the low burning that covered her skin, she went to stand beside him.

* * * * *

"He's dropping his sails," Jherek said, staring through the telescope he held.

He stood on *Black Champion's* foredeck, the bright blue-green of the Alamber Sea spreading out around him. Vurgrom's flagship, *Maelstrom*, dropped anchor after another few moments, flanked by the three smaller craft floating around it. They all flew the skull and crossbones on a field of black. In the distance behind the pirates, the volcanic island that was called the Ship of the Gods spewed vile smoke into the air.

"That's foolish," Azla snapped, looking irritated. "Sitting out here like this, he'd be a target for any sahuagin who chose to attack. This is the Alamber Sea, and it literally crawls with them."

She scanned the sea in all directions, as if expecting some proof of her statement. The farther Vurgrom had led them from Westgate, the wilder their speculations had gotten about where he was going and why. They tried guessing at possible allies the pirate had in the coastal nations around the Alamber Sea. Finally they'd had to give up and admit defeat. None of the nations Azla could name would have aligned themselves with the sahuagin.

"What now?" he asked.

The half-elf shook her head. "I don't know." She turned and gave the order for her own crew to strike *Black Champion's* sails. "I'm not going to get close enough that they can overtake us before we get the wind behind our sails again. All we have over Vurgrom's ships is speed."

Glancing back amidships, the young sailor saw Sabyna and Glawinn standing close together and talking. A pang went through his heart as he thought about how little he and the ship's mage had seen each other during the trip out from Westgate. He'd spent every morning and every evening practicing swordcraft with Glawinn. The paladin seemed to be made of iron.

His absence from Sabyna, Jherek knew, was because he took an active part in the care and maintenance of *Black Champion*. The ship's mage chose not to do anything other than give aid in summoning the winds that kept them at *Maelstrom's* heels. The young sailor hadn't known how hard the trip was going to be on Sabyna.

"There he is," Azla said.

Jherek spotted the big pirate captain walking across *Maelstrom's* deck. Even at this distance, the young sailor could see the glint of gold in Vurgrom's hand. The pirate captain threw the object out to sea. It twinkled in the air and vanished below the surface. Jherek had no idea what the thing was, but anxiety spread across his shoulders and shot up the back of his neck.

* * * * *

It's time.

Laaqueel glanced up at Iakhovas, watching as he rubbed the token that gave him command over *Tarjana* between his fingers.

Iakhovas walked back to the great galley's steering section and took the wheel. Under his command, the mudship dived, gliding beneath the heated waters. Even as she felt the too-hot caress of the currents closing over her, Laaqueel was grateful for them, too. They soaked tissues that had gotten too dry from exposure to the heat.

With Iakhovas at the helm, *Tarjana* sped to the front of the sahuagin armada. The fliers rested on the bottom of the lake amid the kelp fronds. When they saw the mudship gliding forward, powered by the rowers that Iakhovas had ordered aboard, the fliers lifted from the lake floor and started after it, having no problem matching the slower craft's speed.

Laaqueel peered through the murky lake depths, uncertain how Iakhovas had known it was time to start the voyage. She stood beside him, holding onto the nearby railing, Iakhovas guided the craft to within feet of the irregular bottom with more skill than she'd known him to have. As she watched his hands upon the wheel, she noticed that some of the tattooed scars inscribed on his forearms and chest

glowed, showing through his clothing.

"Relax, priestess. No one else can see what you can see. You of all people see me most clearly."

They sped toward the base of Arnrock Island. Thinking perhaps a cave somehow existed in the thick column of rock, Laaqueel peered more closely, but only craggy rock remained in view. Even if there had been a cave, she couldn't imagine it being anything but superheated.

Still, Iakhovas maintained his course. The rowers aboard *Tarjana* hesitated. The malenti priestess felt the decrease in speed.

"They cannot stop," Iakhovas commanded. "We need the speed if we're to get through the gate in time for all the others to follow."

"I will attend to it," Laaqueel promised.

Staying low, she hooked her toe claws into the deck as she made her way down the railing and to the main hold opening into the rowing compartments. She went down the ladder, stepping out of the current.

One hundred and forty sahuagin manned the oars, and all of them looked up at her expectantly, only going through the motions of, rowing instead of pulling with all their strength. Laaqueel glared at the sahuagin on the timing drum sitting on a deck up above the rowers and said, "You've slowed the beat."

"Most Sacred One," the sahuagin said, "I've been told we're speeding for the volcano itself."

"You're questioning the will of Sekolah?" Laaqueel's eyes flashed with anger. Gathering her power around her, she touched the Great Shark symbol she wore between her breasts and prayed quickly. She threw out her hand.

Bones snapped as a paroxysm seized the drum beater. Within a twenty-foot cube around him, the pressure in the water had suddenly increased to what it would be two thousand feet down. Without having a chance to acclimate, the sahuagin's air bladder exploded in his chest, followed quickly by the other soft tissue areas including the eyes and inner organs. The drum he'd been beating also caved in. Blood pooled up and spread out above the crumpled sahuagin. His corpse floated away from the deck and rose to the ceiling above the rowers.

Priestess, Iakhovas said into her mind.

"Row!" Laaqueel ordered. She struck the side of the ship with her trident's hilt, creating a bonging noise. She repeated the effort, setting the cadence for the rowers. "Fear is not for We Who Eat! Succeed or fail! Live or die! Row!"

The sea devils bent to the oars, pulling them lustily, and Laaqueel felt the difference at once. She pointed at another of the sahuagin in the hold who'd been responsible for spelling those rowers who needed it. "You are the new beater. By Sekolah's unkind smile, don't make me find another to replace you."

"No, Most Sacred One. We shall row for the Great Shark, and for you. We shall not fail." The man took up his trident and started beating it against the wall, keeping up the rapid cadence the malenti priestess had started.

Satisfied, Laaqueel climbed the steps back to the main deck.

"Now, priestess," Iakhovas said. "Now it begins!"

She looked forward and saw the trunk of Arnrock Island filling the view before the prow. They were too close now, going too fast to avoid cracking up on the rocks and coral. Only a small twinge of fear twisted through Laaqueel's stomach, but she quickly put her doubt away. The quest they were on was real. Even Sekolah the Uncaring would want his chosen children free as he'd first freed them so long ago.

"There, Laaqueel! Do you see it?" Iakhovas stood at the wheel, the tattoos all over his body lighted by lambent green fires.

A shimmering took place in front of *Tarjana* just as her prow reached out for the rock. A portal opened in the rock, tall enough and wide enough for the fliers that trailed after them.

"Hold on!" Iakhovas warned. "With all your might, hold on or you'll be forever lost and even I won't be able to protect you!"

Still gaining speed, *Tarjana* flew into the portal.

* * * * *

"They've raised their sails again," Jherek said as he watched the crews aboard *Maelstrom* and the other pirate vessels work their rigging with all due speed.

The sailcloth spread along the yardarms, then belled out, greedily catching the wind. Azla gave the order for her own crew to run the sails up. Rigging whined and creaked overhead as they hurried to follow her orders.

"They're doing something else, too," she said. "Can you make out what it is?"

Jherek strained to see through the spyglass, riding out the rise and fall of *Black Champion's* deck. He spotted the coarse leather tarps the crew was spreading out across the decks.

"Tarps?" Azla repeated, pushing herself to the railing and hanging onto the rigging above. "What in the Nine Hells would they do that for?"

"Look!" Sabyna called from below. She pointed. "Something's happening to the volcano."

Jherek turned his attention to the smoldering tower of rock behind *Maelstrom*. Thicker and darker smoke, filled with fiery debris that could be seen even at the distance they were at, belched from the Ship of the Gods.

"It's going to blow," Azla stated quietly, and Jherek didn't doubt that for a moment.

T'Kalah, royal guard of Ring Kromes who ruled Aleaxtis, the kingdom of We Who Eat beneath the Alamber Sea, stalked his quarry with a patience born of relish for the kill.

He stood just over nine feet in height and was built broad and strong, a warrior who was feared by his own people as well as the surface dwellers. His scales held a deep emerald green so dark it was almost black. Legend said that was once the color of all sahuagin before they'd been trapped in the Alamber Sea and put in such close proximity to the sea elves of Seros. Those same sea elves were reputed to have been different colors in ages past, but they had passed on their skin changes through the malenti and their proximity to the warriors of Aleaxtis.

Despite his size, T'Kalah slid quietly through the kelp lining the ledges where he'd spotted the sea elf only moments before. He'd been quietly occupying a cave in the area that overlooked Vahaxtyl, the sahuagin capital of Aleaxtis, dreaming of the day when he would be king.

Of course, that wasn't going to happen unless opportunity manifested itself. Still, it was a good ambition, and one that he'd pursued. After all, he'd waited and watched, made blood challenges as they became possible, and killed his way into a position as captain of the royal guard of King Kromes.

Success or failure had been the driving force in his life, the thing that had driven him to live in the hatcheries when so many of his brothers and sisters had been out to eat him. Yet sitting in the cave, thinking of that day, had ignited the black rage that often consumed him because he didn't think of patience as a virtue.

The amputated stub of his lower left arm served to remind him that patience was sometimes best given some degree of heed. But then, he still had three more arms. He'd been marked from birth as a four-arm to follow stronger currents than most of his people could fin. Since losing the arm, he'd worked to make the other three even stronger.

Thank Sekolah's uncaring grace that the sea elf had wandered into the area to provide him some distraction. T'Kalah undulated through the water, gliding through the kelp. From the changes in pressure along his lateral lines, he knew exactly where the sea elf was. The sahuagin royal guard closed the distance, knowing from the lack of movement that the elf had come to a stop. Whether because he'd seen T'Kalah or just wanted to observe the city wasn't clear.

T'Kalah parted the kelp with two of his hands while holding a trident in his third. He spotted the sea elf ahead of him, hunkered down behind a ridge of rock and sparse growths of gold-and-brown striped tiger coral. He was blue all over, with only a few white patches. T'Kalah guessed that the elf was there trying for one of the shipwrecks in the area that had been left by his people.

The sea elves often tried to raid the shipwrecks in the area controlled by We Who Eat. King Kromes had even taken to seeking out magic items himself, identified by the priestesses, and hoarded

them as further temptation to the sea elves and surface dwellers alike. T'Kalah knew for certain that the number of magic items stored at the palace was considerable.

Spreading his fingers and toes so the webbing would better catch the water, T'Kalah swam for the sea elf.

Something must have given away his approach because the elf tried to turn and bring up a bone knife. "Black Claws!" the elf said, calling the big warrior by the name the surface world knew him by.

T'Kalah showed the elf no mercy, placing the trident before him and shoving it into the sea elf's chest. It was a quicker death than T'Kalah had intended. He would have preferred to make the elf beg for a time, taste the salt of his tears mixed in with the ocean before he'd ever tasted his victim's blood. Still, he held the elf at the end of the trident and shook him viciously until his death was apparent.

Climbing to the top of the rocks overlooking Vahaxtyl, T'Kalah shoved the end of the trident into a crack so that it supported the elf's corpse. He sat on a rock beside the dead man, popped his claws, and cut chunks from his unexpected feast.

T'Kalah shoved the gobbets of flesh into his mouth and swallowed them nearly whole. The blood scent in the water would draw other predators soon. Though the sharks knew better than to bother him, it was the little fish with all their darting around that annoyed him most. No matter how quickly he tried to eat a meal, they were always there scrounging for whatever they could get. He ate the soft parts first, knowing the little fish would go for those first as well.

His lateral lines picked up the changes in pressure even though he didn't immediately recognize what it was. He did know it came from the direction of Vahaxtyl.

The city was built on a shelf of rock it shared with the volcano the surface dwellers called the Ship of the Gods. His people called it Cliitaan, Cursed Fire. Besides the changes in pressure, his delicate olfactory senses also picked up the stench of sulfur. Scents spread quickly in the water much as sound did. As he watched, a red glow seemed to center midway up the Ship of the Gods. It grew rapidly, turning redder.

T'Kalah watched, mesmerized, wondering if Sekolah had started a new current-one that would change his life.

* * * * *

Laaqueel lost her footing when *Tarjana's* prow slammed into the left side of the opening at the bottom of the Lake of Steam. Though the ship itself wasn't hurt by the collision, she was lifted from the deck and tossed into the current that hurled her toward the stern.

All around her, filling the tunnel the mudship plunged through, molten lava glowed orange-yellow. The heat crisped fish that had been unlucky enough to be sucked in after them. Her senses were moving so quickly that even while she was turning in the vicious current herself she could see the flesh peeling back from the fish while they still lived, baring the skeletons beneath.

Just as she thought she was lost forever and about to share a similar fate as the fish, a strong grip wrapped around her left ankle.

"I've got you, my priestess." Straining, the effort pulling horribly on Laaqueel's ligaments and muscles, Iakhovas drew her beside him. He kept her curled protectively in his arms when he returned her to the deck. "Are you well?"

Overly aware of Iakhovas's body next to hers and its effects on hers, Laaqueel said, "Yes. Thank you." She didn't try to push away from him, letting him shelter her in his embrace.

Iakhovas remained standing, facing the wild current and staring into the heart of the liquid fire tunnel they followed. "We're traveling through the lines of volcanic fault. It was the fastest and truest way to gate into Seros. When we reach the end of this tunnel, we'll be in the Alamber Sea."

Glancing over his shoulder, Laaqueel saw the line of fliers speeding after them. The sahuagin aboard them were shielding their eyes from the bright magma swirling around them.

"Will this gate remain open long enough for all of them to get through?" she asked. She'd never before heard of the mode of travel they were using now.

"Probably."

Laaqueel thought of what it would be like to be suddenly boiled alive when the lava closed in.

"If that should happen," Iakhovas told her, "be assured that it will be over before they know it. There are some risks that we must take, and some losses that we must endure."

"To become stronger," Laaqueel said, "as Sekolah has so designed."

"Yes."

Looking ahead again, Laaqueel kept herself strong in her faith, not thinking about the potential for failure, but for the promise of success. At the other end of the tunnel, made bright by the whirling lava walls, she saw the dead end. A roiling mass of lava and hard rock blocked the way.

"Isn't it supposed to be open?" she asked.

"Yes." Iakhovas's tattoos glowed deeper green, looking like they were burning into his flesh. "It will be."

Tarjana bore down on the blockage and Iakhovas kept his hand steady on the wheel. Laaqueel felt the rush of heat when the ship collided with the end of the gate.

XXVI

1 Flamerule, the Year of the Gauntlet

Pacys the Bard sat in the small sea elf tavern down in the heart of Telvanlu and almost felt at home. The sea elves, he'd found, were a quieter lot than he was used to, but as it turned out they appreciated his music.

The bar was like a lot he'd played in on the surface world and the crowd wasn't that much different, but none of the sounds were the same. Voices echoed through the water much more easily so the listeners had to be more polite, and there was no shuffling sound of feet across a sawdust-covered floor. After having been in the water for so long he was getting accustomed to feeling the currents change around him, and how someone passing nearby could affect them.

He sat, at the owner's invitation, at the end of the bar. The bartender passed out drinks packaged in fish bladders treated so they were clear enough to see the contents. A patron drank from the bladder by squeezing the bottom and opening the seal at the top. It had taken some getting used to when he'd first arrived in Faenasuor, but now the bard drank quite easily. Learning not to lick his lips afterward still took concentration, though.

Telvanlu was the capital of Naramyr, the sea elven lands in the Lake of Dragons in Serds, and was located two hundred feet down and forty miles southwest of Suzail. The city was moderately sized as elven dwellings went, but the architecture was definitely inspired by the sea.

Clamshell-like buildings hugged the silt, deliberately low to avoid the shipping that took place constantly between the coastal cities overhead. The architecture hadn't been all that agreeable to the elves. Some of them wanted taller buildings so they wouldn't have to be spread out. Many of them didn't like the fact that they had to live more or less two-dimensionally as the surface dwellers did. The trade with the surface dwellers was good, so though a lot of complaining was done, none of the buildings went any taller.

One of the things that surprised Pacys most had been the laws regarding weapons and armor. None were allowed in the elven city, and it was strictly enforced. Aravae Daudil, Coronal of Telvanlu, made sure her guards carried out her orders to the letter.

Pacys tapped the crystals of the saceddar, picking out the notes for "Lady Who Shed Golden Tears," an old elven song about the flight from Cormanthyr after the fall of Myth Drannor. Despite whatever cultural differences now separated the surface elves from their aquatic cousins, the song found favorable response among the listeners by tying into their common history.

As the last note faded away, passing through the open windows cut into the coral walls, they hooted their appreciation. Clapping took up too much energy to fight the water and stirred up currents that moved wildly within a contained area.

"Another song, Taleweaver," someone called from one of the tables.

"Nay," the bartender interrupted. He was pale and thin, with only a scattering of blue speckles

across his body. His silver-white hair floated around his face, kept back by a band chipped from pink quartz. "The man has sung long and strong, and he's entertained you layabouts for free long past time enough. Now I'm going to stand him to a drink that he may rest his voice. What will you have, Taleweaver?"

"An ale, my kind friend," Pacys answered, stripping the saceddar from his body. "Nothing heavy, for I'll not be early to bed tonight."

Since Taareen had accompanied Khlinat and him there after leaving Faenasuor, the old bard had stayed busy with Telvanlu's lore-keepers, learning as many of their legends of the Taker as he could. He was only taking a short break now to rest his mind and gain some perspective on what he'd learned.

He took the ale bladder to a back table where Khlinat had camped out. From where he sat, the dwarf had a full view of the tavern and the street outside. The streets, Pacys had discovered, were there primarily for the surface dwelling traders that visited and didn't feel comfortable with a three-dimensional world.

"Ye sang well," Khlinat greeted. "Hard to see any of 'em crying in this watery deep, but ye could see the painful joy in their faces as ye called up the ghost of Cormanthyr past."

"It's a favored song," Pacys said.

"To yer health," Khlinat said, hoisting his ale bladder.

Pacys unsealed his own ale bladder, fixed his lips over the opening, blew the remnants of salt water from his mouth, and squeezed. The ale tasted bitter and strong, a Cormyrean brew that he was readily familiar with. Evidently the balance of trade included beverages.

He swallowed, then nearly choked as a convulsion tightened his body. Harsh music created a cacophony of strident songs in his mind, making his head feel like it was about to split open. The refrain remained steady in his mind, hammering as viciously as a dwarven blacksmith marking out the preliminary shaping on a hard piece of metal. The song gave form to the smell of rankest sulfur and savage heat.

"Pacys?" Khlinat asked worriedly.

Understanding what the song meant, the old bard looked at his friend and said, "He's here, Khlinat. The Taker has arrived in the Sea of Fallen Stars!"

* * * * *

The wind kicked into *Black Champion's* sails, driving the caravel into motion. Her prow slammed into the white-capped waves, burying down, then moving to rise again over the next trough.

Jherek clung to the rigging in frustration, unable to bring the spyglass into use when the ship was fighting the ocean so much. At his side, Azla continued to yell orders, putting up some sails and trimming others.

Vurgrom *said Maelstrom*, accompanied by the other pirate vessels, sailed at them. Jherek was beginning to believe that the pirates weren't chasing after them so much as they were fleeing something else. The tarps pulled tight across their decks still intrigued him.

Behind them, the Ship of the Gods increased the volume of smoke pouring out of the volcano. Thunder rent the air, slamming hammer-like blows that took away all other sounds. The concussions reached Jherek, rocking him in the rigging.

In the next instant, the volcano spat flames and burning rock into the air. They spread like fireworks, coloring the blue sky and blue-green water with reds and yellows. The sky faded, quickly lost in the thick black smoke that streamed from the volcano. Around the island where it projected above the waterline, the ocean boiled.

Even as another explosion rocked the area, throwing more burning debris skyward, the first of it started descending. Huge chunks of flaming rock slammed against the ocean, sending up twisting spirals of water. Other rocks hammered against *Black Champion's* deck, shattering and skittering crazily when they didn't penetrate. More of the barrage knocked holes in the deck.

The falling rock smashed through the sails and set them afire in places. Two men went down, battered by the rock and sprawling out dead or unconscious.

Sabyna went to the aid of one sailor, grabbing him by the arm and dragging him to the relative safety provided by the prow castle. Glawinn joined her, holding his shield up over them and protecting her and the sailor. A large rock rolling in yellow flames and trailing smoke struck the shield but the paladin's strength held and it flew away in fragments.

Black Champion wallowed through another trough, but her gait wasn't as sure. She turned crossways, leaning hard over to port. She stuttered as she went over, loose and not working with the pull of the wind powering her.

Jherek glanced back at the wheel. The pilot lay stretched out on the deck, blood staining the wood around him and a gaping hole in his chest. Without a steady hand at the wheel, the young sailor knew *Black Champion* would be at the mercy of the cruel sea stirred by the raging volcano. He considered dropping to the deck and trying to get back to the wheel but he knew he'd never get there in time.

While he hung in the upper rigging, one of the large flaming boulders rolled into view without warning. He heard the sizzling heat of the boulder as it passed ponderously by.

Tumbling end over end, the boulder slammed into the mainmast only three or four feet up from the deck. The treated wood, hardened by processing and spells, shrieked as it exploded from the impact. The boulder sunk into the deck, burying itself in the wood and smoldering.

Sheared in two, the mast fell heavily to starboard, tangling itself in the suddenly slack lines of the rigging. Jherek fell with the slack, his fingers still hooked in the rigging. He hung on, watching the deck come up, knowing if he fell all the way and hit he'd be gravely injured if not killed outright. Even trying to angle for the sea beyond the sides of *Black Champion* would only leave him either in the water or at the mercy of Vurgrom's cutthroat pack.

When he hit the end of the slack hard enough to almost wrench his shoulders from their sockets, the young sailor said a brief prayer of thanks that he'd had the strength to hold on. He got his bearings quickly and started climbing through the rigging again, aiming for another section as the mainmast continued to roll around, threatening the other sails and rigging. He already felt *Black Champion* slowing, losing speed as readily as she lost her sails.

"Cut away!" Azla ordered from below.

Glancing down, his fingers cramped from the agony of keeping his hold and from the drop, Jherek saw the ship's crew lurch across the deck to follow their captain's command. Knives glinted in their fists as they sawed at the ropes holding the rigging. A small group of men lifted the broken end of the mast and guided it toward the port side of the ship, intending to slip it over the side.

The rigging Jherek had hold of alternately tightened and loosened as the crew cut the mast away. He kept climbing, knowing Azla wouldn't order them to stop while he got clear. Every heartbeat the broken mast stayed tangled up with the rest of the sails and rigging put *Black Champion* at risk.

He knew there wasn't enough time to go down, and the nearest rigging was still too far away to make the jump possible. Even as he realized he was running out of options, he spotted one of the smaller pirate ships racing up on them from starboard.

"Ware the ship!" Jherek called out in warning, listening as *Black Champion's* surviving crew rapidly took up the cry.

But the warning came too late. Pirate bowmen let fly and arrows found targets among Azla's crew. The second volley that raked the deck had fire arrows among them that started blazes in a handful of areas in the deck and in the surviving sails.

Jherek positioned himself at the edge of the sagging rigging, feeling *Black Champion* foundering beneath him. The ship turned sideways, floating loosely with no hand at the wheel. In the next instant, the ship heeled over the top of a deep trough stirred up by the exploding volcano. Her masts dipped, raking the tips through the advancing wave curling over to replace the trough.

Water swamped *Black Champion's* deck, washing away at least two screaming sailors. Jherek felt certain the ship was going to disappear beneath the waves as well.

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T'Kalah stood on the ridge overlooking Vahaxtyl and stared in disbelief as heat washed over him. Red-hot lava burst from the Ship of the Gods to consume the city where he'd been born, fought, and lived. It flowed, a heavier liquid than the sea around it, and settled over the city. The lava was tens of feet thick, perhaps even hundreds.

The extrusion kept coming, piling deeper. As the chill of the sea settled into the lava, it cooled and turned solid, becoming gray. Still more flowed from the broken mouth.

Currents whipped across the seabed, ripping kelp free of the silt and sending it rushing away. T'Kalah stood against it, battered unmercifully, seeing if it meant to take his life as well. He embraced it, knowing if it didn't kill him it would only make him stronger.

XXVII

1 Flamerule, the Year of the Gauntlet

Miraculously, *Black Champion* caught a gust of wind that righted her long enough to pull out of the downward plunge the caravel had taken in front of an approaching wall of water. Jherek held onto the rigging as the wave overtook the ship. The caravel shuddered when the wave slammed into her, twisting violently. Men's screams echoed over the crashing thunder of the impact. Azla snarled orders, trying desperately to rally her crew to meet the challenge of the pirate vessel that stalked them so easily now that *Black Champion* had lost over a third of her sails.

A ragged line formed along the starboard side. Only three men had bows and they struggled to bring their weapons to bear while trying to hold onto the railing as well. A curling wave peaked and raked brine fingers over them, tearing one of the bowmen from his feet even as he loosed a shaft. The cascade of water shoved the sailor across the deck and hammered him up against the stern castle then carried him on.

Only Glawinn's quick grab and strength prevented the man from being washed overboard.

The salt spray from the waves crashing into *Black Champion* drenched Jherek and burned his eyes. The rough rope of the rigging sawed into his fingers and felt slick and unsure at the same time as it sagged.

Thankfully, the high waves smashed against the pirate vessel as well, stripping control from her for a time. Azla continued calling orders as she took up her own bow. She put a shaft to the string and threw a leg over the railing, threading it into the railing with her foot braced to hold her steady. *Black Champion* rode high on the next wave, towering over her pursuer. In that time, the half-elf sea captain put two shafts through pirates.

Black Champion dropped again, fast enough to trigger a feeling of vertigo in Jherek's stomach. The young sailor turned his attention back to the stern deck and started clambering through the rigging.

Below, Sabyna made her way across the slick and treacherous rise and fall of the deck toward the stern as well. Skeins slid across the wooden planks near her, darting out to smother flaming arrows that stood upright from the deck. With the sea spray whipping over the railing, Jherek doubted that any fire would take hold above decks, but the threat remained to the belowdecks. *Black Champion* would remain wet outside, but her belly could turn into a firepit.

The caravel plunged downward again, riding out the back side of the fast-moving wave and dropping into the trough it left. Without warning, the pirate ship slid down the wave as well, careening down the slanted water.

"Ware the ship!" a man bellowed. "Ware the ship!"

Jherek, locked into the rigging, watched helplessly as the pirate ship sped on a collision course with the caravel. "Sabyna!" he yelled, not knowing if his voice would carry through the violent sea lashing around them.

The ship's mage whipped her head around. Spotting the approaching vessel, she sprinted toward the rear mast and locked her arms around tightly. Her raggamoffyn familiar blew apart into hundreds of pieces, then flew after her. When the creature reached her, the whirling pieces reformed and wrapped around her, helping secure her to the mast.

The pirate vessel slammed into *Black Champion*, its prow riding hard against the starboard side

and sending Azla's crew scurrying for cover. Wood splintered and Jherek prayed that it was the other ship or the railing and not anything below the waterline.

The shudder of impact rippled through the caravel, knocking it loose from the death grip the sea had on it for a moment. Choosing the moment of opportunity or perhaps torn free from their own ship, a handful of pirates leaped aboard *Black Champion*. Even as the pirate ship slid away and the caravel rose from beneath the other vessel's weight, a clash of swords surged up from the deck as well. A crashing wave splashed over the combatants before they barely had time to cross blades. They spun away, tumbling head over heels, grabbing onto whatever they could.

Before any of them could get to their feet, another onslaught of fiery rocks cannonaded against the decks with hollow, thunderous booms and pelted the ocean around them. White-capped water spiraled up from the impact areas.

Black Champion turned sideways in the following trough, completely out of control. Jherek knew the ship was a wreck waiting for the brine to drink her down. He turned in the rigging and waited while the ship righted herself again. Timing the slow roll back to starboard, he threw himself out toward the rear mast, free of the rigging in an all-or-nothing gambit.

Jherek slammed against the taut sail covering the rear mast's midsection. He skidded down almost immediately and narrowly missed a section of sailcloth on fire from one of the rocks. He pushed off again and hooked his fingers in the support rigging above the steering section. Rigging strands parted and sagged as more rock sliced through the ropes.

As *Black Champion* briefly rose again, the young sailor spotted *Maelstrom* and *Vurgrom's* other ships in the distance. They were well separated from each other, evidently not taking any chances of being thrown together by the storm lashing the Sea of Fallen Stars. All of them seemed to be faring well.

Swinging his body to get momentum, Jherek swung forward again and released, sailing through the distance and dropping on the stern castle near the wheel. A large wave sluiced through the railing and washed across the deck, fast enough and strong enough to take the dead pilot's body across the planks to the railing on the other side. Debris continued peppering the caravel, filling the air with punctuations of thuds and pings.

Jherek was hit in the shoulder hard enough to knock him down. He glanced at his arm and saw an eyeball-sized rock smoldering in his flesh. Fighting back the pain and shock, he slipped his knife from his boot and pushed the rock from his arm with the blade. He tested his grip and found he could still make a fist, but most of his arm was numb.

He got to his feet with effort and launched himself at the spinning wheel as *Black Champion* wallowed in another trough. He seized the wheel as they went over into the trough, fighting the ship and the sea. The young sailor's muscles strained and burned with agony, but no matter what he did, the caravel seemed determined to founder. The ship fell hard to starboard and looked like it was going under.

Sabyna lurched to the top of the stairs leading up to the stern castle, holding on again as *Black Champion* slid across another water wall. To Jherek, it felt like the ship had suddenly hit a patch of ice. The caravel seemed determined to race to her doom.

This time the ship's prow pointed straight down into the black water at the bottom of the next trough and the wall of water rushing up from behind her seemed destined to push her end over end. The young sailor felt certain they were going to plunge into the unforgiving heart of the dark sea like an arrow finding its mark.

There'd be no survivors.

Jherek lacked the wind he needed to straighten her up and he wanted to cry out in frustration, knowing there was no way he could save Sabyna from the harsh death that lay before them all.

Then the cold, powerful voice filled his mind. *Live, that you may serve.*

A wind blew hard and clean from behind him, coming from a different direction than it had only a moment ago. The surviving sails filled, twisting *Black Champion* from the deadly course she was on.

Jherek pulled the ship into the wind, guiding her with an unforgiving hand. His injured arm burned and ached and felt numb all at the same time, hardly giving him any strength at all. But *Black Champion*

came around into the wind, her holed and flaming sails capturing enough of it to pull her on course, turning her to face the oncoming waves. She met the next wave with her prow and cleaved it cleanly. The new wind stayed with her, pulling her out of the wallows, and it seemed as though less debris struck her.

An awestruck look filled Sabyna's face as she gazed around.

"Who are you?" Jherek shouted into the wind. "Who are you and what do you want?"

He felt scared and mad all at the same time. Despite all the good the voice had done over the years, he felt certain he was at risk and had taken his friends there with him because that voice wanted him there. Whoever owned that voice had saved him only to take a firmer hand in his destiny. Was he pawn or prisoner?

Only silence answered him above the creak of the rigging and the crashing waves.

Then an answer did come. *Soon, my son.*

"Tell me who you are!" Jherek shouted again.

"Who are you talking to?"

Jherek glanced to port and saw that Sabyna had joined him at the stern castle. Her short-cropped hair lay plastered against her skull, and a half-dozen bloody scratches covered her left cheek. Her eyelids blinked tightly against the salt spray continuing to come over the railing. The young sailor only shook his head, having no words-only the frustration that filled him.

Skins coiled protectively around the ship's mage, barely holding its pieces together.

Jherek gazed at her, taking in the wounds he saw.

"I'm all right," she told him.

Black Champion continued to pitch and plunge across the uneven ocean, but the supernatural wind that had captured her guided her safely through the troughs. Startled shouts rang across her decks. The sailors cheered as they felt the ship come about under her own power despite the duress she was under.

Without warning, sails punched up into the sky, cresting the next roiling wave that was spurred on by the volcano. At the top of the mainmast, the skull and crossbones on a field of black crowned the pirate ship as it continued its pursuit. The cheers turned to dismay.

"I'll take the wheel," Sabyna said.

Jherek stepped back, breathing hard. He drew the cutlass from his sash and pulled the hook into his free hand. Pushed by a full complement of sails, the pirate ship closed quickly. Red-eyed pirates clamored for blood as they stood at the railing. They clanged their swords together and sang a sea chantey. Jherek only heard a few words, but he recognized it for what it was.

"They're ensorcelled," Sabyna yelled out to be heard.

Jherek nodded. No sane man would take the risks those dozen pirates had lined up for. The young sailor set himself, pushing the pain in his injured arm from his mind as well as he could.

In the next moment, catching the crest of the wave that overtook them, the pirates sprang from their ship. Propelled by magic, the men spanned the twenty feet separating them from *Black Champion* and landed on the caravel's deck: Immediately, the pirates pushed themselves to their feet and rose to do battle.

"Go below!" Jherek yelled at Sabyna, knowing he couldn't hold a dozen armed pirates back.

"If I let go this wheel, we'll go down!" she shouted back at him.

Knowing it was true, Jherek felt torn. She stood in harm's way, and yet he couldn't protect her if she abandoned the wheel. He concentrated on the possessed pirates who moved at them with single-minded purpose. With the way the stern castle's steering section was left so open, the pirates would surround them quickly. The red-eyed men already moved to flank them.

Jherek swung the cutlass, feeling the impact of blade meeting blade when the pirate automatically blocked. Before his opponent could withdraw his weapon, the young sailor reached out with the hook and caught the man in the shoulder.

The curved hook bit deeply into the man's flesh, skidding for just a moment across the shoulder blade before sinking into his back. Under the spell that held him, the pirate didn't make a sound, but tried to pull his weapon into Jherek's exposed arm.

Shifting quickly, Jherek blocked the weakly aimed cut, then stepped to the pirate's left and yanked

on the grappling hook. Getting his weight into the motion, the young sailor pulled the pirate over his hip in a wrestling throw Malorrie had taught him.

Off-balance and at the mercy of the brutal hook, the pirate stumbled over Jherek's hip and sailed into the next man behind him. With a crashing thrash of limbs, the two pirates tumbled over *Black Champion's* stern railing and splashed into the dark sea below.

Pulled nearly off his feet by his own efforts, the hook lost to him because he hadn't been able to free it from the pirate, Jherek caught himself on his free hand and pushed up. He blocked a cutlass blow that had been intended to take his head from his shoulders, then launched a kick that caught the pirate wielding it full in the chest.

Bone snapped and the pirate stumbled back, knocking down two others.

"Well met, young warrior," Glawinn growled as he stepped in at Jherek's side. The paladin's blade gleamed despite the darkness of the sky. "Now let's rid ourselves of these vermin."

As the paladin and the young sailor engaged the pirates, Skeins blew past them in a violent flutter. In heartbeats, the raggamoffyn chose a victim and covered him, possessing him even in spite of whatever spell had already claimed him. The pirate lifted his blade against his brethren and attacked from the rear.

Jherek's breath burned deep in his lungs, gusting out in uncontrolled bellows. His trip through the rigging had taken a lot from him already. He fought fiercely, stepping into the rhythm Glawinn set up. Or maybe the paladin stepped into the rhythm Jherek had established. The young sailor wasn't certain. All the days they'd spent as sparring partners stood them in good stead now.

Ducking low beneath a wildly swung cutlass, Jherek saw Glawinn rip a backhand blow across a pirate's throat. Blood dribbled down the man's chest as he fell backward. Jherek surged up, holding tight to the hilt of the cutlass as he drove it into the chest of the pirate in front of him. Though the cutlass wasn't normally a thrusting weapon, it split the man's heart and killed him instantly.

Jherek shoved the corpse from his weapon, aware of Azla racing up the stern castle steps to join them. Her scimitar rang, a death song hammered out in steel. Jherek fought fiercely, defending Sabyna from the pirates who tried to take the fight in her direction. The footing became even more treacherous than the storm had made it, as blood spilled quickly across the brine-stained deck.

Despite his efforts and the fact that his life hung on the eyeblink of time between the slashing and parrying of the cutlass, Jherek played over the voice's words.

Soon, my son.

There'd been no promise of how soon, and no indication again of whom the voice belonged to. The young sailor was only dimly aware of the fight ending. He'd known the odds were lessening, but he didn't know the battle was over until Glawinn grabbed his arm.

"Easy, young warrior," the paladin advised. "It's over."

Jherek struggled against the man for just a moment, then realized the caravel's crew was even now beginning to throw the dead pirates overboard. The young sailor took a deep breath, feeling his heart hammering at his ribs and his body shake with exhaustion. Blood streamed down his face and from half a dozen other cuts across his body where his armor hadn't protected him. He let the cutlass hang like an anchor at the end of his arm.

He glanced at Sabyna as Azla assigned a man to relieve her. The ship's mage met Azla's eyes briefly, then Sabyna turned and walked away.

Jherek wanted to go to her, but he knew it wasn't right. Sabyna was capable of standing on her own, and if she wanted his company, she was capable of asking for that as well.

She didn't.

Uncaring of the debris that occasionally struck the deck around him, he walked to the railing and watched the pirate ship that had trailed them break off pursuit as the supernatural wind continued pushing *Black Champion* away. In moments, it was tacking back toward Vurgrom's other ship.

Jherek stared back at the spewing volcano in the distance, watching as more lava poured into the Alamber Sea. He didn't understand the forces that had pulled him there. He reached out for the voice inside his head, opening himself up to it, wanting it to fulfill its promise.

Only emptiness rang inside his skull.

Jherek gazed down at the deck, watching Sabyna walk away. The ship's mage had her arms wrapped tightly around herself. She never looked up at him. A heaviness he'd never felt lay on the young sailor's heart. He couldn't make sense out of anything, and in that moment, knowing how little control he had over anything that happened to him, he let go the faith he'd tried to cling to for so long.

Ilmater the Crying God, the god to whom the young sailor had given himself, shed no tears for Jherek Wolf's-get. The young sailor's heart turned cold and hard. No matter what happened, he promised himself silently, once he got the pearl disk from Vurgrom, he would be free.

Covered protectively in Iakhovas's grasp, Laaqueel watched the fiery red of the volcano channel give way to the cool blue of the sea again. Huge boulders spun through the water, wreathed in flames that wouldn't die, until they dropped out of sight.

Iakhovas gripped the wheel sternly, altering his course. "See, priestess. We are arrived hale and whole. If you have faith, all things become possible."

"You have my thanks, Most Exalted One. If not for you, I would have died."

"You cannot die. I won't let you. Our fates are strongly wound together-as long as you acknowledge them."

Laaqueel stepped away from him, no longer feeling the pull of the currents sweeping *Tarjana's* deck. She stood easily on her own. "Where are we?"

"In the Alamber Sea."

The water around *Tarjana* roiled with boiling bubbles that raced for the surface. They were so thick, so tightly compacted together, that they created a misty curtain that limited visibility to no more than a few feet. Only the magic surrounding the mudship yet protected them.

Laaqueel looked behind, making sure the fliers trailing them had made it as well. Miraculously, the cone of protection that extended over *Tarjana* weaved back through the roiling water. She couldn't see if all of the fliers were there, rowed from the belly of the volcano that had burst underwater, but she got the sense that most of them had.

"Where are we going now?" she asked.

"There is much to do now that we are here," Iakhovas said. "First, we will find a place that will serve as our base of operations. If I'm to free the forgotten clan of We Who Eat from this place, I must find the tools to do it."

"Do you know where these items you need are?"

"Yes. There is an ancient place that lies far from here. It's called Coryselmal, a broken city that once housed the cursed sea elves. I shall reap from its corpse all that I need to destroy the Sharksbane Wall, then I shall recoup all that is mine."

Laaqueel gazed at the water, knowing the titanic forces that warred in the ocean were somehow kept separate from them. She started her prayers to Sekolah, asking that their voyage be successful, and that it try the spirits of the sahua-gin so the Shark God's chosen might become even stronger.

It was better, she knew from her experience as a priestess, to pray for the things that were sure to happen. It helped to remind her that those trials weren't unexpected or without reason.

She knew her, people would pay in blood.

XXVIII

2 Flamerule, the Year of the Gauntlet

"Are you sure you want to do that, young warrior?"

Glawinn's quiet words startled Jherek. He hadn't known the paladin was there. Immediately, he felt guilty about what he was doing. He'd thought he was going to be alone long enough to do what he planned.

"Aye," the young sailor replied, his voice thick with his own doubts and fears. "It's what I have to do." He peered at the long black sea stretching out to the east as *Black Champion* made her way west again.

Vurgrom and his pirates had lost sails during the volcanic eruption stemming from the Ship of the Gods, but they'd brought extra sails. After the turbulence had finally died down in the Alamber Sea,

Vurgrom's pirates had simply rehung their rigging with the new sails and continued on with their journey. The pirate captain had paused to throw a few taunts Azla's way first. Azla had ignored him, but in stony fury. The half-elf obviously had a long-standing feud going with the pirate that wasn't going to end until one or the other was dead. Evidently *Black Champion's* captain and crew were too well respected for the pirates to think they could take them without loss.

In the hours since the eruption, Azla and her crew, with help from Jherek, Sabyna, and Glawinn, had worked to repair the sails. However, there was no replacing the lost mainmast, not at sea. Jherek had sewn and cut and spliced sailcloth until his hands ached, but he hadn't complained. Neither had he talked with Sabyna. He'd also avoided Glawinn's offer of lessons with the sword, working on the sails until it was well past dark.

"Why do you think you have to do this?" Glawinn asked in a soft voice.

Jherek listened to the man's words but found no challenge in them, nothing he could take offense at and use to leverage an argument that would end the unwanted conversation. "Because I'm tired."

"We're all tired."

"It's not the work," Jherek snapped, his voice almost breaking with the emotion that filled him. With all the rage inside him, he felt like demanding that someone understand what was going through his mind. "It's the hope, Glawinn. I'm tired of all the hope."

"A man can't live without hope."

"Well," the young sailor challenged, "I'm going to have to see about that."

Glawinn stepped closer, coming within Jherek's peripheral vision. The young sailor didn't turn to face him. "You have no thoughts of a future?"

"I have no future," Jherek declared.

"You're not dead."

Jherek clung to the cold rage that had filled him since the voice saved the ship. "I was born dead, and I've died a little more each day, till I owe Cyric at least three or four other lives." A chill touched him when he mentioned the god of death's name. In all his life, he never had.

"You really believe that?"

Turning, Jherek glared at the paladin. "You don't know anything about me."

Glawinn crossed his arms over his chest and drew himself up to his full height. "Such wisdom in one so young, to be knowing all these things that you do."

"You taunt me." Jherek's eyes blazed, but he restrained himself. Glawinn didn't deserve his wrath and he knew it, but that emotion was so ready to be released.

"The opposite," Glawinn disagreed. "I marvel at you."

"This is my decision."

"I've not tried to alter it."

"You asked me if I was sure about doing this."

Glawinn let out a slow breath. "I only thought that someone should. I've known something was bothering you. I waited, thinking you might come to me for help. Or talk to Sabyna about it."

Jherek's throat hurt when he tried to talk, and his eyes burned from the effort it took to keep his words from breaking. "I can't talk to her about it."

"Why?"

"Because it would hurt the friendship I have with her."

"Is it so bad, young warrior?"

Jherek looked past the paladin, making sure none of the sailors were close by. Troge, the first mate, was making his rounds, checking his night crew and the lanterns that hung from *Black Champion's* yardarms and masts to light her and to mark her for other ships in the water at night.

Closing his fist over the object in his hand, Jherek pulled up his left sleeve, baring the flaming skull tattoo masked in chains. "Do you know what this is?" he asked.

Glawinn only had to glance at it briefly. "It's the mark of Bloody Falkane the pirate, also called the Salt Wolf."

"Aye," Jherek said bitterly, "and known widely abroad enough that even someone from the

Dalelands has heard of him."

"You're not old enough to have been one of his crew."

"No," Jherek agreed. "My fate is worse than that. I'm his son."

Glawinn didn't let any surprise show. He said, "I never knew he had a son."

"It wasn't," Jherek replied, "something he seemed especially proud of." He rolled his sleeve back down. "And what do you think of me now, Sir Glawinn, when you think back on those nights you've spent training me with a sword? Did you ever think you might be training a pirate captain's son who might someday hold that sword and all that skill at your throat?" >

The paladin's eyes narrowed. "That's not something you'd ever do."

Jherek shook his head. "How can you be so sure about that?"

"I know you."

"You don't know me. The tattoo proves that."

"I know you," Glawinn said, "I admit the tattoo is something of a surprise. Tell me about it."

Standing there gripping the railing, his fist tight about all that he was about to abandon, Jherek did. He told the story of his life on *Bunyip*, and of what little he knew about his father. He spoke of the sea battles he'd seen, the deaths he'd watched, and the tortures he'd seen inflicted.

And he told of the time when he was twelve and his father had first placed a cutlass in his hand and told him he was going to be part of a boarding crew. He'd escaped in the night and somehow made the long swim in to Cape Velen fourteen miles away.

"When I got to Velen I was starving," Jherek said, "but I couldn't even steal food. Instead, I lived on berries and eggs I found down by the beach. I hired myself out first working the docks to move cargo, then any job I could get in Velen. Eventually I got a job with a shipwright. I love working wood, and I've got a talent for it. That's what got me the job of repairing Madame Litaar's roof."

He told the paladin of Madame Litaar, how she'd taken in an orphan boy who was sleeping in an extra room in the shipwright's building during the months it took to repair her roof.

"Months?" Glawinn asked. "For a roof?"

"It started out as the roof but it moved on to other things. A new fence. A new porch, front and back. New tables and chairs. Madame Litaar has a list of projects she always wants done. I'm a good woodworker."

"You must be."

"I lived in her house for years, and she wouldn't have treated me any better if I'd been her own son." As he said that, Jherek was surprised to find that he still believed that.

"Why did you end up in Baldur's Gate?"

Jherek told him of *Breezerunner* and the Amnians, and how Madame Litaar seemed certain that whatever destiny he had lay in Baldur's Gate. "Even Malorrie thought so."

"Malorrie's the man who taught you your skill with the blade?"

"Actually, Malorrie's a phantom," Jherek replied. So he told of how Malorrie had been the first to really find him living on the beaches. He'd broken his leg a short time after arriving in Velen and it had been the phantom that'd taken care of him. He told of the nights they'd spent in the shipwright's building learning all the combat skills the phantom knew.

"You don't know who this Malorrie was when he was living?" Glawinn asked.

"I never asked. It's like that between us. We just accept each other for the way we are. Without trying to change anything." Jherek's voice turned bitter. "You don't get that out of many people."

"I know. So why give up now?"

Jherek glanced at his fist, thinking of the object inside it, what it had meant then and what it had ceased meaning since. "I'm not giving up. I'm acknowledging my inability to control whatever destiny I may have."

"It sounds like quitting to me."

Jherek shook his head and laughed. "Call it what you will. I've had enough."

"Enough of what? Disappointment? Everybody faces disappointment."

"Not disappointment," Jherek answered. "I've been betrayed."

"By whom?"

"I don't know."

Glawinn let him have some time, then asked, "How have you been betrayed?"

"What does 'Live, that you may serve,' mean to you?" the young sailor asked.

"Nothing. Should it?"

"Probably not, but for years I've been wondering what it meant for me."

"Why?"

"Because I've been told that."

In a shaking voice, Jherek told of the voice, how it had said that the first time and he'd been saved by a dolphin. He also told him how the voice had spoken again earlier that day, just before the freak gust of wind had powered them out of capsizing.

"For all my life," he finished, "I've wondered what that's supposed to mean."

"Maybe it's not time," Glawinn replied.

"No," Jherek said in a loud voice. "I'm tired of waiting. Ill tell you what I think now. I think whoever that voice belongs to has been trying to destroy me, to destroy my hope. I've fought it. I lived when I wanted to die. I escaped my father, risking my life against the sea, rather than take up a blade against an innocent man. I starved because I wouldn't steal. I worked because I had to take care of myself and not throw myself on the mercy of others. I've lived, but I've had no life." His voice broke.

Glawinn, thankfully, kept his distance and let Jherek regroup on his own.

The young sailor spoke carefully when he could. "The closest I've ever come to a life was in Velen. In risking my life to save a rich, spoiled girl, I saw all that taken away from me. My reward. No, it should have been 'Live, that you may suffer.'" He shook his head. "I'm done with that, and I'm done with this."

The young sailor opened his hand and revealed the small pair of white clay hands bound at the wrists by a blood-red cord that lay on his palm.

"You follow Umater the Crying God's teachings," Glawinn said.

"Aye. I did."

"He teaches endurance and perseverance. Good qualities for someone who's had to learn to accept."

"I've accepted," Jherek said. "I had accepted—even the voice—but I'm not going to accept any more."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

Glawinn paused for a moment, then his eyes opened wider. "You're afraid that the voice belongs to something or someone evil, but that could never be, Malorrie. You aren't an evil person."

"I'm not?" Jherek laughed bitterly. "You just called me Malorrie. Don't you understand that was my teacher's name? I've never told you my real name. I lied, and I would never have done something like that until now. As it is, I'm not even able to live my own life. That's been stripped from me as well."

"Maybe you're only being shown to your new life." Glawinn shrugged. "I don't know how these things work, young warrior. I only trust the weave that I follow."

"I can't," Jherek said. "Not any more. I only fooled myself into believing that I could."

"Have you spoken with Sabyna?"

Jherek said nothing, the pain in his throat growing larger and harder to swallow. "No."

"Why not?"

"Why should I?"

"Because she seems to have a vested interest in you."

"She's under the mistaken impression that she owes me something."

"Ah, young warrior, there are so many things you still don't see in life."

Jherek's anger turned him hot even in spite of the cool night breeze blowing around him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Only that time will make you wiser, but I can see that the learning won't come easily to you in certain matters."

"I can't tell Sabyna."

"Even though you love her?"

Jherek shook his head. "You don't know that I love her. I don't know that I love her."

"You were willing to abandon your quest for the pearl disk because of her."

"It's foolish for her to die for my mistakes."

"She didn't let you walk away. She cares about you."

"I know," Jherek said thickly, "but I'm afraid to let that happen either. If I foolishly ever thought that it might. She deserves someone much better than me."

"Why haven't you told her about your past?"

"Because," Jherek said, "my father killed her brother, and I was on *Bunyip*, hanging in the rigging and watching when he did it."

Glawinn cleared his throat. "I see. That does present some difficulty."

"And there again," Jherek said, "is the ill luck that has been bequeathed to me in this life. I find a woman and feel something for her that I've never known, never allowed myself to feel except in the occasional fantasy of a story I was reading, and my father has murdered her brother. That's why I've made my decision."

He curled his fist around Ilmater's symbol, then threw it far out to sea. The white clay hands caught the light for a brief moment, then disappeared from sight. Jherek felt empty, but he filled it in with the newfound cold rage that had claimed him earlier that day. Live, that you may suffer. From here on, any suffering he experienced was going to be on his terms.

"Now what, young warrior? You have no hope and no god. What are you going to do with yourself?"

"Hope only got in my way," Jherek replied. "I'm going to be a realist. I have no god because I've never had one. I'm going to get that pearl disk from Vurgrom or die trying because I don't know what else to do."

"Is that it? Or is part of it because you still believe returning the disk to the temple of Lathander in Baldur's Gate is the right thing to do?"

"Azla pursues Vurgrom," Jherek said. "Ill ship with her and see that my part of it is done. When everything in my past life is dealt with, I can begin anew."

"Then where will you go?"

"I'm not even going to think about it," Jherek declared, trying to imagine such a time. "I'll eat when I'm hungry. Ill sleep when I'm tired. Ill work when I have to. Ill settle with that out of life until I'm dead."

"What a bleak, hard life you've set for yourself."

Jherek shook his head. "There'll be no false expectations."

"So you choose to believe in nothing?"

"Aye."

"We'll start with small beliefs, then," Glawinn said, drawing his sword. "Get your weapon out and I'll begin with trust with your eye and your sword arm, young warrior. Your eye and your sword arm-and well let your heart take care of itself." He waved his broadsword about in invitation.

"It's dark."

"Do you think every fight you're going to wage will be well lighted?"

"No." Jherek already knew that.

"Then draw your sword and show me your best. Or do you think you have anything better to do?"

Jherek stepped back and drew the cutlass from his sash. His left arm still hurt and was healing slowly. Dark shadows limned the paladin's face. In the next instant, the sound of steel ringing on steel filled the deck and echoed over the Alamber Sea.

Glawinn pressed him hard, driving him backward, coming closer than he ever had in practice to actually cutting him. "Come on, young warrior, show me what you have. Or has your disbelief exhausted your strength and skill as well?"

Growing angry but tempering it with the cold rage that filled him, Jherek beat back the attacks, stepping up his own retaliation.

"You'll believe in your eye and your arm," Glawinn promised again. "The heart will take care of

itself. You'll see."

Jherek drove him back, circling closely to turn him to his weak side. He wished Glawinn would shut up.

They fought until Jherek's arm trembled and he was covered in sweat. The young sailor tried to beat back the paladin's offense, tried to chew through his defense, and tried to overpower him at every turn. Jherek fought until the rage filled him and slipped past his control. His blade moved faster. He no longer thought of any restraints.

"That's it, young warrior," Glawinn said softly. "Get it out. Let it all out."

"Shut up!" Jherek said.

"Get it all out. All the frustration and fear and anger. Give it to me. Once you get rid of it, you'll fill up again. You'll see."

Glawinn fought even more fiercely, his blade moved like a live thing hammered into the steel. Jherek couldn't even see the blades any more, only the red fog of anger that clouded his vision in the darkness. He was vaguely aware of the crowd of sailors that had been attracted to the duel.

"Give me your anger," Glawinn coaxed.

Jherek swung harder, faster, and sparks shot from the blades. His legs quivered from the strain of keeping up with his arm as they moved him across the deck. He concentrated all his hate on the paladin, just wanting the man to shut up.

Then, without the least indication of what he was going to do, Glawinn dropped his sword point to the deck, leaving himself totally defenseless. Jherek checked his swing with difficulty, missing a diagonal cross-body slash that would have cut Glawinn from right shoulder to left hip if it had landed.

"What are you doing?" he shouted. "I could have killed you!"

"Proving to you that you can trust your eye and your arm," Glawinn stated calmly.

"And what if I hadn't been able to stop myself?"

"Then I'd have been wrong."

Suddenly overcome with emotion, Jherek threw the cutlass down and turned to walk away.

Glawinn sheathed his own weapon and grabbed him by the shirtfront. "Where are you going?"

"Away," Jherek answered. "Away from you and this madness." He tried to push away, but the paladin held him too tightly.

"No. You must realize what you were able to do. What skills you have."

"I could have killed you," Jherek said hoarsely, not believing the man couldn't understand him.

"But you didn't. Don't you see that?"

"No," Jherek answered. "No, I don't. You took a fool's chance with your life."

"I trusted your skill so that you could trust it too. Your eye and your arm, Jherek. I'll teach you to believe, but we'll begin there."

"I could have killed you."

The image of the knight with his chest and belly split open filled Jherek's head and made him sick. Nausea boiled up inside him and Glawinn helped him over to the railing. Later, when he was finished and there was nothing else to give up, Glawinn pulled him back. Jherek's mouth was filled with the sour taste.

"And what if you had killed me, young warrior?" the knight asked in a ragged whisper. "Would it have mattered?"

"Aye"

"If you're so empty of caring, it shouldn't have. You may think your heart's empty, but it's not." Glawinn held him at arm's length, both of them breathing hard and covered with sweat. "It's not completely empty. Trust what's within your reach and the rest will come." Tears ran down the knight's face as he held the young sailor's face between his callused hands. "I give you my promise."

Jherek wished desperately that he could believe, but he couldn't. There'd been too many lies.

XXIX

2 Flamerule, the Year of the Gauntlet

Tarjana cleaved steadily through the water, deep into the territory of Aleaxtis. Vahaxtyl, the

sahuagin capital, lay in ruins less than five hundred yards away, riven by the volcano's explosion the day before.

Standing on the enchanted mudship's prow, Laaqueel stared out at the destruction scattered over the bed of the Alamber Sea. It was worse than she had expected. For a time she'd feared none of the sahuagin community had lived through the fiery blast.

Huge, jagged rocks lay strewn across the blasted terrain. Dead fish floated in the dappled turquoise water and glistened silver where the weak sun's rays touched them. Small scavengers that had finally returned to the area worried frantically at the unexpected feast, concerned that larger predators would come at any moment. More rubble covered the skeletal remains of ships that had fallen to sahuagin savagery, battles, and deadly storms.

Dozens of sahuagin bodies floated in the currents as well, prey to the flesh-eaters also. The malenti priestess knew that those weren't all that had been killed. Many more corpses had surely remained trapped inside their dwellings when they caved in. Other bodies had been swept away by time and tide.

The living sahuagin worked among their dead, sharp claws and huge teeth stripping meat from the corpses for meals. The scent and taste of scalded blood and boiled meat hung in the water, constantly touching Laaqueel's nostrils.

"You are troubled, priestess?"

Slowly, not knowing how to properly broach the subject, Laaqueel turned to face Iakhovas. Her eyes met his even though she still wanted to show him deference. No matter what, she knew she couldn't lie. He would know and she didn't want that between them.

"Yes," she said simply.

Iakhovas walked to the railing and closed his hands over it. His face remained stern and hard. "Why?"

"So many lives of We Who Eat have been forfeited." She gestured out at the seabed. "They have lost their homes."

In the distance, the Ship of the Gods still simmered. White, foamy bubbles from superheated water spiraled to the surface. The currents threaded hot waves in with the cool ones that coiled around Laaqueel. Still, the volcano appeared to be in little danger of spewing deadly lava again.

"Ah, little malenti, your perception of things is off and you don't even know it."

A sudden flush of anger flooded Laaqueel. She turned to him.

"You forget, my priestess," Iakhovas continued before she could speak, "they didn't choose to make their lives here." He gestured at the heaps of rubble. "That's no home, no village lying out there strewn about and destroyed. This parcel of unwanted land is what the sea elves and mermen grudgingly gave this tribe of We Who Eat after the First Seros War over ten thousand years ago. They drove them here, then penned them in, and they've kept them here ever since." He held her eyes with his solitary one. "This was no home, priestess. This was a prison."

In her heart, Laaqueel knew he spoke the truth. Everything around her, including the Alamber Sea, was a cage. The Serosian sahuagin had lived very small lives.

"I had not intended for so many to die," Iakhovas stated quietly. "In truth, I didn't know that our arrival here would cause such an upheaval."

Despite his flat tone and the fact that she knew he wouldn't have wanted her to know much of his private thoughts, Laaqueel believed the note of regret she heard in Iakhovas's voice was genuine.

"It was not your will, Most Exalted One," she said, speaking with the certainty of faith. "It was the will of Sekolah. These deaths are the result of the fury of his claws and teeth reaving the weak from the tribe, making his mark on his chosen people."

He stayed silent for a moment, not looking at her, as if weighing her words carefully. It was the first time Laaqueel could ever remember him doing that. "Do you truly think so, Most Sacred One?" His voice was almost a whisper.

Laaqueel shoved aside the tiny seed of doubt that stayed relentlessly within her. Even by Iakhovas's own admission he hadn't known the explosion was going to happen, but it had. Her training taught her that it had to be by the Great Shark's will.

"Yes," she said. "The sahuagin who lived here have stayed in one place for so long, it would have been hard to convince them to leave."

"Or to convince them to challenge the sea elves and mermen who sentenced them." Iakhovas glanced at her, a small smile twisting his lips. A dim golden light gleamed in the hollow of his missing eye. "I find your words, your thinking, very comforting, my priestess."

Laaqueel bowed her head, not prepared for the onslaught of emotions that whirled within her. She had never thought in her whole life that she'd be completely accepted. She was too much of a freak to expect that. She could only hope, and even then that hope was always dim. A surge of embarrassment filled her, one of the few times that it came from something she'd accomplished instead of something she'd fallen short on. She tried to think of an appropriate reply but couldn't.

"Thank you, Most Exalted One," she said simply.

Tarjana floated closer to the destroyed sahuagin city, powered by the oars of the rowers below. The ship's approach had drawn attention in the form of a dozen fliers that suddenly skimmed from hiding on the sea floor. All of them carried sahuagin warriors.

"Ready yourself," Iakhovas warned. "We won't be greeted gratefully."

Laaqueel knew it was true. As she'd been trained, she pushed her emotions away. It was so hard this time, though, because there was so much pleasure in how she felt as a result of Iakhovas's unexpected praise. That confused her because generally her emotions were filled with pain. Bloody Falkane had left her feeling the same way.

Tension twisted her stomach as she watched the fliers quickly flank *Tarjana*. The fliers the Serosian sahuagin used were smaller than the ones the malenti was accustomed to, but they moved quickly and powerfully through the sea.

Iakhovas called orders out to stop the mudship. Quietly, *Tarjana* sank to the sea floor, settling deeply into the loose silt, crunching against the lava rock thrown out from the volcano.

The smaller fliers rode the currents above them. Coral spears and tridents bristled over the railings of all the Serosian fliers. Crossbowmen peered over their weapons.

Iakhovas stood before them all, his arms at his sides. He took no cover and he offered no outward threat. Laaqueel glanced at him, then had to turn quickly away. Whatever spell he was using to disguise himself as a sahuagin had gained power. Even though she normally saw him as human, the malenti's vision clouded painfully, giving different views of human and sahuagin that overlapped so quickly one blurred into the other.

Occasionally, the view was of something else—something she couldn't clearly recognize.

The sight of Iakhovas's other self sent fear thrilling down Laaqueel's spine. Nausea twisted her stomach relentlessly. She wasn't certain if the ill feeling came from the spell or the sight of his misshapen other self. Her curiosity made her want to look again in spite of her reluctance.

Instead, her attention was riveted to the large sahuagin who strode to the forefront of the closest flier. He wore a prince's insignia, recognizable even though the markings were different than what Laaqueel was used to. He held a royal trident in one gnarled fist. A three-armed sahuagin in a royal guardsman's war halter flanked the prince on his left.

The royal guard beside the prince held Laaqueel's attention. The guardsman gazed at her with bold viciousness, no hesitation in him at all.

"Who are you?" the guard bellowed.

Silently, the other sahuagin aboard *Tarjana* who weren't at the oars swam up to take a stand behind Iakhovas. They bared their weapons as well, but Iakhovas waved them still.

Even with all the fliers they'd brought with them, Laaqueel knew they didn't have a chance if the Serosian sahuagin attacked. Despite the awesome destruction the volcano had unleashed, Iakhovas and his followers wouldn't have been able to stand against them. Unless Sekolah wills, the malenti amended to herself. She kept her gifts at the ready, certain Iakhovas was doing the same.

"I am Iakhovas." His voice thundered through the water, punctuated by the shrill clicks and whistles of the sahuagin tongue. "I am king of We Who Eat in the Claarteeros Sea."

"Liar!" the black-clawed royal guard roared. "That place exists only in myth."

"Most Exalted One," a sahuagin baron among *Tarjana's* crew said quickly, "let me claim the right of blood challenge against this offender. I swear by Sekolah's blessed fins that I will bring honor to your name."

"No," Iakhovas answered calmly. "No blood will be shed unless I command it. They need every warrior they can muster." His words resonated and carried through the water.

Laaqueel quivered inside. Not responding to the royal guard's accusation could be construed as cowardice. It was an open invitation to attack.

A four-armed sahuagin, missing one of his arms, who floated next to the Serosian prince opened his mouth to speak.

"Silence, T'Kalah," the prince commanded without looking at the warrior.

TKalah swung on the other man, displeasure evident in his body language. Laaqueel knew if the prince had noted the movement he would have punished the warrior for insubordination.

The prince studied Iakhovas with his measured gaze. "You are a king."

"Yes," Iakhovas answered shortly but politely.

Laaqueel watched T'Kalah, feeling that if any attack was launched it would come through that sahuagin first. During her inspection of the royal guard, she noted the fact that the anterior fins on the sides of his head flared back over his skull and merged with the dorsal fin on his back. The anterior fins of the sahuagin in the outer seas didn't connect. His different coloring had already been noticed. Even as strange as the Serosian sahuagin looked to her, she knew they fit in more securely with her own people than she did despite Iakhovas's influence.

"Among your own people, perhaps," T'Kalah growled, "but not here."

Iakhovas pinned the sahuagin warrior with his glance. "I made myself king through blood, three-arm, and if need be, I will remain so by spilling more. Make no mistake about that."

TKalah's black eyes burned with hostility and he stared hard back at Iakhovas. It was not something most sahuagin would ignore. Instead, Iakhovas looked back to the prince, dismissing the sahuagin warrior as if he were nothing. Laaqueel watched the muscles bunch across T'Kalah's chest, and the amputated stub of his arm jerked involuntarily.

"No," she stated forcefully. She held her hands up before her, feeling the power of her gifts. "I am a priestess of Sekolah, warrior, and you would do well to heed my calling and the authority of the Most Exalted One."

The prince looked at T'Kalah as well, then moved his trident to face the other sahuagin. "If you move, you shall have to get through me as well."

"I seek only to protect you," TKalah argued.

"Then do it by serving me," the prince ordered.

Angrily, T'Kalah held his trident upright in one hand, then folded his other two arms across his chest. "These are ill currents, Maartaugh."

"If so," Maartaugh said, "we shall swim through them." The prince turned his attention back to Iakhovas. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see your king," Iakhovas said.

"King Kromes is dead. He died when the volcano exploded."

Iakhovas remained silent.

"His death," Laaqueel stated to fill the uncomfortable void that followed, "was by the will of Sekolah."

"Liar!" T'Kalah cried. "He's dead by your hand! Killed when you came through the volcano!"

Maartaugh looked at the royal guard. "They couldn't have come through the volcano."

"I tell you, Exalted One," T'Kalah stated, "it is as I say. Would you call me a liar?" He took a step away, setting himself into a fighting stance. "I won't take such an accusation without demanding blood honor."

"We came through the volcano," Iakhovas told them.

The sahuagin prince faced Iakhovas again. "How?"

Laaqueel heard the uncertainty and fear in the prince's voice. She knew Maartaugh was thinking of

the magic involved with such a thing. "We were brought here by the Great Shark's will."

"They spout still more lies," T'Kalah said. "All true sahuagin know that Sekolah doesn't meddle in the affairs of his chosen. He expects them to fend for themselves."

Maartaugh's face grew stony. Laaqueel felt the prince slipping away from them, saw it in the way he folded his arms and closed in on himself.

"Why," Maartaugh asked, "would Sekolah do such a thing?"

Laaqueel stepped forward, taking her place beside Iakhovas. She lifted her voice and made it strong. "The Great Shark has established certain currents within Most Exalted One Iakhovas. Sekolah started a ripple within the Claarteeros Sea, and through the strength and forethought of Iakhovas, that ripple has spread even unto Seros."

"Brave words," T'Kalah snarled, "but words are cheap."

"He brought an army here," Laaqueel said.

"And killed our king." T'Kalah stepped toward her. "Tell me why the Great Shark would choose a malenti to speak for him."

The words stung Laaqueel.

"Because," Iakhovas snapped, "her faith is stronger even than your thick-headedness."

T'Kalah swam up from the flier's deck, cutting through the water swiftly. The currents he started slammed against Laaqueel.

"Most Sacred One," Iakhovas said softly, "don't kill this one yet."

T'Kalah arrowed toward them, disregarding the prince's commands to return to the flier.

Summoning her power, Laaqueel shot out a hand, praying to the Great Shark that her control be strong and sure.

Little more than halfway between the vessels, T'Kalah's smooth stroke suddenly shattered. His arms and legs twisted in a vicious convulsion. He flailed out against the sea as if it was closing in on him.

Laaqueel held the sahuagin warrior in the spell's thrall, knowing the pressure she'd created was so great he wasn't able to breathe properly.

"Enough," Iakhovas said.

Silently, Laaqueel dismissed the spell, feeling terribly fatigued. It was one thing, she knew from experience, to unleash a spell, and quite another to attempt to curtail it and shape it once it had been loosed.

Released from the crushing pressure, T'Kalah finned weakly in the ocean, barely able to control himself. Weakness showed in every move he made. Angrily, he retreated back to his flier.

"What do you want?" Maartaugh asked.

"If your king is dead," Iakhovas asked, "who leads?"

"The remaining princes. We serve as council. For the moment."

"How many are you?"

"Five," Maartaugh answered.

"Then I will speak to them."

Glints of anger stirred in Maartaugh's black eyes. "Why should I allow it?"

"You would be foolish to try to stop me," Iakhovas declared. "I've come from an ocean, a world away, and I've come here for one thing only. I've traveled to Seros to free you from your prison."

* * * * *

Laaqueel stood at Iakhovas's side as he spoke at the public forum he'd demanded. She felt the currents eddying around her, tracked by the lateral lines that ran through her body. She watched the five princes gathered at the makeshift table that had been hastily cobbled together by laying a section of flat rock over two stacks of rock in one of the cleared areas in the center of Vahaxtyl. The table was more a show of authority than any furnishing. The princes wore their halters of rank and held their tridents.

All of the princes were grim-faced. They didn't even talk among themselves at Iakhovas's announcement.

The malenti priestess knew they were of one mind. Maartaugh had already spoken to them. Even then, Iakhovas had agreed to come to their offered meeting unarmed, with only Laaqueel and a dozen Black Tridents as a token show offeree.

If the princes voted against Iakhovas's offer, Laaqueel had no doubt that they would all be dead before the sun stabbed down into the water again. She averted her gaze from the princes' table out of deference, and more nervousness than she wanted to admit.

Most of the populace of Vahaxtyl ringed them, sitting on broken terrain over the underground sections of the city.

Huge gray lava rocks piled high all around. She knew Iakhovas's voice carried well in the water, but messengers were on hand to relay what was spoken. She heard Iakhovas's words passed on again and again.

Most of the sahuagin crowd's body language registered disbelief and anger. They knew that the outer sea sahuagin had come through the exploding volcano and had emerged unharmed while so many of their city died. That crowd was only a step away from reaching out for vengeance. The rubble of the city lay scattered around them, and the twilight gloom of the depths filled the water above them.

Laaqueel didn't know what Iakhovas had been thinking to agree to the princes' terms. She drew water in through her gills, held it for a moment, then flushed it out again.

Steady, my priestess, Iakhovas stated calmly in her mind. Trust in your faith. Everything is going to be as it should.

As it should for them, or for us? she asked.

Iakhovas didn't answer.

Toomaaek stood at the center of the table. He was tall and thick, his body covered in scars from sharp edges and flames, testifying to how closely he'd fought the surface dwellers over his years. "You are responsible for the deaths of our people," he said.

"Am I?" Iakhovas demanded. His voice was hard and cutting as coral. "In my belief, only the weak die in mass graves, and those are taken by Sekolah's sharp fins and ferocious fangs. He wants his people strong."

"You twist our beliefs," Toomaaek said.

"No." Iakhovas's denial was flat, unarguable. "I only embody them with my actions. Sekolah sent me here, gave me the ship that made this possible. He destroyed the inadequate among your people to leave those who would be willing to die fighting for their freedom."

A rumble of angry clicks and whistles echoed in from the crowd. Laaqueel studied the sahuagin around them. She'd already overheard several comments about her own heritage and the fact that she was a malenti. Iakhovas's words struck the crowd harshly, fanning the anger in them to fever-pitch intensity.

Though the sahuagin didn't believe in the same concepts of family as the surface dwellers and sea elves did, they did stand for the community as a whole. Refusal to accept the loss and make someone else responsible was natural to them. She felt Iakhovas should have known to handle things better. Silently she prayed, knowing they were only inches away from death.

"You dare!" Toomaaek thundered.

"By Sekolah's blessed wrath," Iakhovas roared back, "I do dare!"

Toomaaek slammed the butt of his trident against the stone table. The sound echoed harshly, racing through the water.

"I dare to stand up for your people against those who would keep them in shackles," Iakhovas said, finning toward the princes' table. "I dare to travel here in a manner that I don't understand, listening to the guiding hand of the Great Shark as he speaks to my priestess, and trusting in the fact that I'm doing Sekolah's will."

"We don't know that." Toomaaek remained gruff.

"I do." Iakhovas kept swimming.

Laaqueel fell into motion automatically behind him. The guards around the princes started forward. One of them lowered his trident level with Iakhovas's chest.

With blinding speed, Iakhovas snatched the trident's tines away from his chest, then shoved the sahuagin guard back half a dozen paces. The show of strength caught the attention of everyone watching.

"Where are you guiding your people?" Iakhovas demanded. "What plans do you have for We Who Eat in Seros?"

Toomaaek tried to speak after a moment, but Iakhovas spoke loudly over him.

"For ten thousand years and more," Iakhovas said, "you and the barons, princes, and kings before you have let your people languish in this prison built by the hated sea elves and mermen."

Another guard stepped forward and thrust his weapon, ordering Iakhovas to halt.

As if shooing away a bothersome fingerling perch, Iakhovas shoved the trident aside with one hand and caught the sahuagin warrior by his war harness with the other. Iakhovas yanked, and the guard spun back into two sahuagin behind him, knocking them all off their feet so they floated out of control for a moment.

"Why have We Who Eat not been freed from this place?" Iakhovas demanded.

"There is no escape," Toomaaek stated.

Laaqueel heard the buzz of conversation streak through the crowd of onlookers.

Iakhovas sounded as if he couldn't believe it. "Have you not looked at the Shark God's teachings? Sekolah teaches us that all things are possible if enough blood is shed. They happen more quickly if most of the blood belongs to the enemies of We Who Eat."

Toomaaek stood his ground but clearly wasn't happy about it. Iakhovas leveled an accusatory finger at the table of sahuagin princes.

"With that kind of thinking," he said, "*you've* become the jailers of your own people. Not the sea elves and the mermen. You teach your young not to struggle against that perversion of our nature called the Sharksbane Wall." He shook his head in rage. "Our very natures cry out for struggle and adversity to test us and shape us into the most deadly warriors we can be. We're supposed to teach our own lesson in turn: that We Who Eat are meant to be the most feared creature in any of the seas."

"We have fought against those that man the Sharksbane Wall," Maartaugh argued. "For ten thousand years, we've shed blood over that construction."

"And still you've not shed enough," Iakhovas accused. "When has Sekolah ever declared the price too high to improve the sahuagin people?"

Unbelieving, Laaqueel listened as some of the anger started to drain away from the crowd's murmuring. They sounded more interested in what Iakhovas had to say.

"Instead of tearing that accursed wall down," Iakhovas went on, "you and those rulers before you have chosen to accept it and live with it as though it were meant to be. It wasn't! We Who Eat were born free and meant to die free."

A few scattered cheers sounded from the crowd. Laaqueel drew in a deeper breath and took heart in the reaction. No matter what else, Iakhovas was right about the sahuagin heritage.

"The Sharksbane Wall can't be torn down," Toomaaek declared. "The sea elves and mermen guard it without reservation. The sea elves use their magic to make it strong."

Iakhovas stood across the table from the sahuagin prince. "It can be torn down."

Toomaaek shook his head. "It's been tried."

Iakhovas gazed at him fiercely. "Not by me."

Pride at Iakhovas's display of courage and conviction whipped through Laaqueel. He stood before the whole city, sounding as if he was prepared to take them all on. She held onto the feeling as she watched him, praying the whole time to Sekolah. Awe filled her at the audacity Iakhovas showed. He was more sahuagin than any she'd ever met before.

"You can't break that wall," one of the other princes stated.

"I can," Iakhovas replied hotly, "and I will. I won't sit back and quietly be a coward while pretending to be a prince."

"You go too far!" Toomaaek roared.

"I'm going far enough to tear that wall down," Iakhovas promised, "and I won't stop short of that. Any sahuagin warrior who wants to take up arms and follow me to freedom is welcome."

"The sea elves are too powerful," Maartaugh said. "They have magic and numbers and allies."

"Then we'll get our own magic and our own allies." Iakhovas didn't move away from the table, but Laaqueel knew he was no longer talking only to the princes. His words were for the ears of the crowd. "Those things are out there. Sekolah gives power to his priestesses, and there are others out there who resent the sea elves controlling so much of Seros with their machinations. The sea elves have grown fat and lazy, complacent in the inability of We Who Eat of the Alamber Sea to do anything other than send a few groups of warriors across the Sharksbane Wall every now and again."

Hoarse, ragged cheers started up from the crowd intermittently. Laaqueel struggled to keep a smile from her face. The knot of fear still sitting sourly in her stomach made it easier.

"I will raise up an army," Iakhovas vowed, "an army the likes of which Seros and the lands around it have never seen before. That army will spend its blood and that of its enemies, and the sea will run red because of it." He turned and raked his eye over the crowd, his posture proud and erect. "For those of you who will follow me, I will lead you to greater glory than you've ever known. I will teach you again what it means to be a warrior, to truly be one of the Great Shark's chosen."

The crowd came alive, and the cheering clicks and whistles echoed everywhere. Sahuagin picked up fist-sized rocks and slammed them together to make even more noise. The poundings punctuated the cheers.

The smile broke through Laaqueel's defenses and spread across her lips. She gazed across the crowd in wonderment. Surely this was a sign. No one could have walked into Vahaxtyl and claimed the city's populace in so short a time.

Iakhovas flung a hand back toward the princes' table. "Warriors, blood of Sekolah's chosen, up until now you have been robbed of the heritage to become true members of We Who Eat as the Great Shark would have wanted. These princes and others like them have held you captive here like prawns in sea elf farms."

Toomaaek tried to silence the crowd but failed. Laaqueel watched as the sahuagin whipped themselves into a frenzy. Fresh anger fed off the fear and confusion that had been left over by the destruction of their city. Iakhovas offered them enemies and a chance to strike back at those enemies at a time when they felt the need to do something. War came naturally to the sahuagin.

"If you continue to follow them," Iakhovas went on, "you'll overpopulate these waters in time. Or you'll curtail the population so that won't happen, kill your young yourselves and deprive yourselves of the army you will need in the future to conquer Seros."

The cheering turned thunderous, but somehow Iakhovas could speak over it even though the Vahaxtyl princes couldn't.

"Sekolah found the sahuagin," Iakhovas said, "and he freed them from the shell that was their prison then. Do you think he freed you to find another prison in which to live?"

"No!" filled the water from the throats of thousands of sahuagin.

"We Who Eat were born free," Iakhovas said. "Our heritage is to die free, cleaving the hearts of our enemies and gnawing the flesh from their broken bones!"

The cheering drowned out all other sound. Toomaaek swam over the table and finned down beside Iakhovas, stirring silt with his splayed feet. The prince raised his trident in an open threat.

Instantly, the cheering started to subside.

Slowly, Iakhovas turned to face the Vahaxtyl prince. He stared at the warrior and waited silently. All voices from the crowd had died away when Toomaaek spoke.

"I say you speak lies, Iakhovas of the Claarteros Sea. Whatever brought you here, it wasn't Sekolah. Your purpose isn't to guide We Who Eat to a greater destiny. You seek only to make our people throw their lives away."

"I speak the truth," Iakhovas replied.

"Then pick up your weapon and defend yourself," the sahuagin prince ordered. "I claim blood combat against any champion you care to name."

Iakhovas regarded the warrior. The sahuagin prince was head and shoulders taller than Iakhovas and weighed nearly half again as much. His skin was dark blue with places that looked almost black.

Since someone of lesser rank was challenging him, Laaqueel knew according to sahuagin custom that Iakhovas could pick one of his guards to fight for him. The priestess waited tensely, knowing how Iakhovas was going to handle the situation.

"I will stand as my own champion," Iakhovas said, "that the truth of my words be more accurately measured."

"Then pick up a weapon." Toomaaek stepped back, his great feet raking up silt in small clouds from the ocean floor.

Iakhovas raised his hands. Bony claws fully six inches long protruded from his fingers. "The only weapon I'll need are these."

"Fool!" Toomaaek snapped.

He backed out into the center of the impromptu meeting area. Without hesitation, Iakhovas followed, gliding up a few feet above the ocean floor with the grace of an eel. He smiled.

"I'm proud of you, Prince Toomaaek," Iakhovas said. "You're a fine sahuagin warrior. My only regret is that you can only die once, but it will be for the good of your people."

Toomaaek didn't waste words. He became an explosion of action. Pulling his barbed net free of his hip, he expertly flung it out at Iakhovas. The net splayed out and sailed true, wrapping around its target. Toomaaek pushed the trident forward and swam after it, driving it before him.

For a moment Laaqueel thought Iakhovas was dead. Her heart almost stopped its frantic beating. Iakhovas hooked his fingers in the net that had wrapped around him. He'd protected his single eye with one arm. Tugging fiercely, he ripped the net off him, tearing the barbed hooks from his flesh at the same time. He screamed in rage and pain.

Toomaaek closed quickly, the trident aimed directly at Iakhovas's heart. In motion almost too fast to be seen, Iakhovas shoved his feet against the water. He shot up, curling gracefully over his attacker as the trident tines missed him by inches. Continuing the roll through the water, Iakhovas flipped behind Toomaaek as the sahuagin prince passed. Cruelly, Iakhovas dug his claws lightly across his opponent's neck, leaving bloody scratches. The claws also sliced through the anterior fins, freeing them from the dorsal fin.

Blood streamed out into the water from the superficial cuts.

Toomaaek threw out his free arm and kicked hard, finning himself into a roll of his own. He tucked forward and under, coming up with the trident again as he faced Iakhovas. The move was designed to catch an enemy from underneath, driving the trident deep into the stomach or crotch.

Either would have been a debilitating wound.

Turned as he was from his own flip through the water, Iakhovas had his back to Toomaaek. Though he didn't see the sahuagin warrior's move, Laaqueel knew Iakhovas must have sensed it in some fashion. As the trident sped toward his back, Iakhovas swept out a hand and pushed himself sideways in the water.

The trident tines missed him again by inches. As Toomaaek swam by, already aware he'd missed his opponent, Iakhovas raked claws across the back of the sahuagin prince's lower leg. The sharp edges cleaved flesh easily, drawing blood in a gust.

Laaqueel watched Toomaaek as he tried to turn. His leg was obviously hamstrung, the foot flopping loosely as the current pushed it. Stubbornly, the sahuagin prince turned in the water again. He appeared surprised to see that Iakhovas hadn't pursued him.

"You're wounded," Iakhovas said, still floating in nearly the same spot he had been since the fight had begun. "Stop now and live to help me set your people free."

"No." Toomaaek shook his head. "I'm going to kill you to show them the lies you've promised them."

Laaqueel watched the sahuagin prince. She felt certain it was obvious to the crowd that Iakhovas had deliberately stopped short of tearing Toomaaek's head from his shoulders on the first pass. She watched Iakhovas, marveling at the strength and skill he displayed. When he'd killed Huaanton, Iakhovas had struggled in that fight. Toomaaek was even bigger than Huaanton had been, and Iakhovas was handling him easily.

"They're not lies," Iakhovas told him. "There is greatness coming to We Who Eat. A rebirth. You can be part of it."

"No one can do what you say." Toomaek finned toward him again, more slowly this time because of the injured leg.

"You have time to reconsider." Iakhovas stood his ground, finning down a couple feet to stand in the silt. "You can heal and still fight the battle that should be yours."

Toomaek adjusted his approach and sped at his opponent.

Iakhovas ran out of time to move, standing loosely before the sahuagin prince.

Cheers and shouts of anger battered Laaqueel as she watched. She couldn't believe Iakhovas was doing nothing to defend himself. He couldn't use his magic, not without turning away the sahuagin crowd he'd won over.

At the last moment, Iakhovas raised his hands and grabbed the approaching trident. He hooked his fingers over the tines and rocked back slightly as the impact pushed against him. He dug his feet into the ocean bed and shoved as hard as he could.

The trident stopped no more than a finger's width from Iakhovas's chest, but the haft knifed through Toomaek's heart, spearing him. Blood clouded the water. Triumphant, Iakhovas lifted the quivering corpse on the end of the trident above his head. He gazed at the princes' table in open challenge. "Is there anyone else who wishes to dispute my words?"

None of the princes answered.

"Then, by the power of blood and combat," Iakhovas said, "I declare myself Deliverer of We Who Eat of Seros."

Sporadic cheering came from the crowd at first, then grew in intensity until it filled the area. Laaqueel was surprised when Iakhovas simply didn't declare himself king. The malenti knew he could have and also knew that no one there would have challenged him for that right after seeing what he'd done to Toomaek. The decision seemed to shock the four remaining princes as well.

When the cheering died down a little, Iakhovas swam up, pushing the corpse at the end of the trident above him. "I will deliver you from this captivity," he shouted. "I will find you allies to fight your most hated enemies. I will teach you and mold you into the fiercest army Seros has ever seen."

The cheering started again, but somehow Iakhovas was able to speak loud enough to be heard.

"I also promise you glory." Iakhovas held steady in the currents, high enough in the water to be seen by everyone. "I will give you the chance to live and die as true sahuagin warriors. Blood will demand blood, but we will drink our fill of it from the skulls of our enemies."

Laaqueel watched Iakhovas, feeling as mesmerized as the Serosian crowd. He'd won them over and made them his, just as he'd done with her own people. He truly was a gift from Sekolah. The Shark God had answered all her prayers from the time she'd been a little girl to this very day. She *was* something important to her god and her people.

"I *will* break the abomination that is the Snarksbane Wall!" Iakhovas shouted. "You will be free, forever free, to run the course of Seros."

Laaqueel noticed even Maartaugh was shouting his support, caught up in the tide of what was happening to the crowd. However, T'Kalah stood in the shadows of the rubble, a dark scowl on his face. Still, she didn't let the royal guard's presence touch her celebratory mood. Iakhovas had triumphed, and she was part of it.

"Born free!" Iakhovas yelled.

The crowd took up the chant. "*Born free!*"

"Die free!" Iakhovas followed.

"*Die free!*"

"I will take you from this prison that is the Alamber Sea," Iakhovas shouted. "Together we will descend upon the sea elves and destroy them where we find them. I will see Myth Nantar, the sea elves' most sacred city, razed and driven deep into the ocean floor before we are done!"

"Destroy the sea elves!" someone yelled. The crowd took up the chant. "Destroy the sea elves! Raze Myth Nantar!"

"We are *born free!*" Iakhovas screamed to the crowd, using both hands to wave Toomaaek's corpse at the end of the trident haft like a banner.

"We will die free!" the crowd screamed back at him.

"Born free!"

"Die free!"

Laaqueel felt Iakhovas's voice inside her mind. *What do you think, Most Sacred One? Do we have an army?*

Yes. Laaqueel looked around at the thousands of sahuagin standing around them cheering.

I will break Serds, Iakhovas declared, *and I will forever change the lands of the surface dwellers. No one will avoid my touch or the carnage I will have wrought. I am their destiny!*

Laaqueel knew with certainty that his statements were true. Iakhovas reached up and used his claws to shear Toomaaek into bloody gobbets. He flung the flesh chunks outward, drawing up the closest sahuagin sitting around him.

"Come and eat, warriors. Let us take Toomaaek into battle with us. He stood for what he believed, though he believed wrongly. He can still nourish us. Meat is meat!"

"Meat is meat!" the crowd roared back. "Born free! Die free!"

As Laaqueel watched Iakhovas stripping the flesh from the dead sahuagin, then swimming out to feed the crowd, she knew there was no turning back. Iakhovas had raised his army.

And the Sea of Fallen Stars would fill with blood to pay the butcher's bill.